Vance Aandahl is now nineteen, a sophomore English literature major at the University of Colorado, and plans to teach college English himself, while continuing to write. His THE ZARL MAN has appeared in New World Writing #18 (Lippincott), and ADAM FROST was scheduled for this April's Playboy. He is a basketball- and chess-player as well, and a cartoonist: "At the ripe age of twelve I nearly ran away from home to seek employment in the Disney studios." His other interests include debating, philosophy, folk songs, and literature of all sorts. With each story of Vance Aandahl's that we see, we grow increasingly amazed and impressed. Only new readers will need to be told that he is the author of THE MAN ON THE BEACH (F&SF, Jan. 1961) and COGI DROVE HIS CAR THROUGH HELL (F&SF, Aug., 1961). Rarely has such talent been matched with such youth, surely the Walt Whitman quotation-title provides each of us with the opportunity of saying to Mr. Aandahl—as Emerson did to Whitman on the publication of LEAVES OF GRASS—"I greet you at the beginning of a great career;" to agree that "this sunbeam were no illusion, but . . . a sober certainty." So many thoughts of Whitman's poem does this story evoke, that we were moved to read it once more, and in that great and beautiful dirge, that lovely lament, line after line seemed to presage elements of this striking (but of course utterly different) story. The ever-returning spring, the shades of night, the cruel hands that hold powerless the helpless soul, the long black trail, and—ever again—the strong perfumed lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green . . .

WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOORYARD BLOOMED

by Vance Aandahl

Standing kneedeep in prairie grass, Robert Smith lifted his hands to the blueness of the sky, as though to touch the clouds or catch the wind, and knew that he was the last man to leave the city.
Purple mountains stood to the west, and rivers ran down the piney slopes into the prairie, bringing life to the soil where they wandered. Life was everywhere, in the kaleidoscope of flowers that grew at his feet, in the angry murmur of summer locusts, in the hot silent gliding of three hawks that soared overhead. But Robert Smith knew that he was alone.

For many days, after it had found him, he had been cajoled and tempted and frightened by the inescapable buzz of its messages. He had run from the city, which was an empty place, and as he had run, it's maddening words had followed him far into the country before finally fading away. He did not know where it was. He did not know what it was. He only knew that it wanted him, just as it had wanted the others. He was alone, and he was frightened.

In the city, he had lived with three others. Each day they had hunted together, and they had been happy. But it had come and conquered his three friends; and they had gone, one by one, walking slowly away, their eyes as bright and blind as coins. He did not know where they had gone, but he knew that they were dead. It had fed upon them.

Robert Smith lowered his arms and gazed in despair toward the mountains. Already his stomach was cold with hunger. He could not live on the prairie, but in the foothills he might find fruit. With the ironic smile of one who senses death but hardly cares, he began to shuffle through the vast field of waving grass.

He was a tall man, strong and leathery, with broad shoulders and lean limbs. He wore tattered rags, stiff with sun-baked grime and sweat. His hair and beard mingled into a black cascade of filth across his chest and shoulders. Only his green eyes seemed to be alive.

He walked for hours, watching the sun pass overhead, drop toward the mountain, and paint the plains with their dark shadows. The sensuous glow of dusk filled the sky, and with it came the eddying night winds of summer. White clouds drifted near from the west and hung over the peaks, where they were suffused with lavender and gold by the dying sun. As darkness came, the wind grew cold and fast, the clouds tumbled in swollen rage across the sky, and the earth hovered in a silent moment of fear.

Suddenly, the night was very black. Robert Smith moved on, seeking some protection from the coming storm. Before he could find shelter, lightning severed the sky, the clouds opened, and he was lost in a grey torrent of rain. It pounded at his shoulders and stung his face; stunned by the impact, he staggered numbly to one side, sank to his hands and knees, and shook
his head stupidly. Through the throbbing ache of his mind, passing as easily as a knife through cheese, came a strange but familiar buzzing. He rolled onto his back and clutched at his temples. But the buzzing only grew louder... 

...Come to me. Where I am, it does not rain. Where I am, there is only happiness. Come to me. I am strong and good. Come to me. Come to me...

"No!" screamed Robert Smith, writhing in the mud. "I don't want to die!"

Slowly, the words faded, drifting away as casually and easily as they had come, leaving him exhausted and trembling with terror. He forced himself to his feet and wandered blindly through the storm until, with a windy moan, it passed on to the east, leaving him alone. He stepped forward once and fell to the ground.

When Robert Smith slept, he dreamed...

He was a child again. Spring had come, and the whole world was dewy with life. He ran down an alley, kicking one tin can after another, stopping to pet a laughing collie, climbing onto an ashpit and scanning the neighborhood for the pure joy of seeing. Then he came to the place where the lilacs grew. It was someone's yard—he did not know whose—and it was full of lilacs, like a jungle, like the greenhouse he had once visited, so dense and green that all he had to do was stand quietly and no one would know he was there. He crawled under the foliage, burrowing through leaves and dirt until he came to the trunk of the largest bush; once there, he rolled onto his back and gazed solemnly at the vast field of green leaves that hung six inches above his nose. Through this field crept a score of tiny dust motes, each one illuminated by a thin ray from the sun, each one dotting his face with a freckle of light.

For a long time, in his dream, he did not move. It was enough to be alive, to feel the soil with his hands, to see the greenness of the leaves, to smell the perfume of the flowers. It was enough to watch a spider move from leaf to leaf, lifting one leg with care, and then another, and then leaping to another leaf. It was enough to breathe the sweet air, to watch his chest rising and falling, pulsing with the slow laconic confidence of life.

There was dew on the lilacs, and he found himself looking into one droplet that hung like a pendant from the very tip of a petal. It was faintly lavender, yet clear as glass; it shone with a strange light. Gazing at it, he saw himself mirrored in its gentle curve, smiling with the wide-eyed curiosity of any child. He was content; he was happy to be himself. The past and the future were nothing, and only he and the lavender mirror that hung over his face really mattered.
Suddenly, the leaves blackened and curled and drifted away; the flower turned to ash and fell into his eyes. Suddenly, he was dashing across a burning lawn, running among bonfire trees, hiding his eyes from the great white ball of flame that had engulfed the sky. Suddenly, he was only a man, running and screaming, trying now to forget, trying to find water, trying to escape, trying to escape from the flames and the strange, terrible buzzing that now came with the flames—the hideous buzzing that shrieked its message again and again.

...Come to me. You are mine, and I am yours. I am good. I can help you. Come to me. Come to me ...

Robert Smith awoke, shouting wildly and covering his face with trembling hands. For a long while, then, he lay quietly, peering through his fingers at the night sky above. Then he arose, and marched on toward the mountains.

After two or three hours, he reached the first swell of the foothills, climbed it slowly, and descended into the little valley between it and the next. Here he found a stream and three cottonwoods. He washed himself in the cold water, scraping the mud from his clothes, and lay down in a grassy pocket between two of the trees. Like a child, he watched the breeze moving through the foliage overhead, and then fell asleep.

When he awoke, the faint warmth of sunlight was on his face. For a moment, he did not open his eyes, but only lay quietly, savoring the last luxurious moments of dreamless sleep. Then, when he parted his eyelids with the drowsy languor of one who does not want to see everything at once, the first thing that came into view was a milky flower of light—the sun, raising into the cloudy morning sky, half-hidden behind the solid wall of white that stretched from the far eastern horizon to the mountains. The next thing he saw was a hawk, soaring high in the sky, black as night against clouds. The third thing he saw was a face.

She was standing ten feet away, one hand touching the rutted trunk of a cottonwood—standing as slender as a reed, even in the heavy deer-hide clothes that she wore. Her face was slender too, like a thin oval, and circled with an aura of coiling black hair. Her eyes were large and darkly hued, like thunderheads; they seemed to glow with a purple light. Her nose was as gentle and perfect as her hands, but her mouth was strangely twisted by a single scar—a white scar that curled across her sun-browned cheek, cut through both lips, and furrowed to a halt at the tip of her chin. It was as though some great sculptor had fashioned her, and then, dissatisfied at having not attained complete perfec-
tion, had struck the beautiful face with his chisel.

Robert Smith turned his head and gazed at her. He had not seen a woman for three years, and he had never seen one like this. His fingers moved in the grass.

She touched her throat with one hand, seeing that he was awake. Suddenly, she ran from the tree to the top of the nearest hill, some hundred feet away. There she stood, once more like a statue, returning his unbroken gaze.

Robert Smith was neither good nor evil, for he lived in a world where morals had died with civilization; rising from the ground, he was faced with no ethical dilemma, only with a tactical problem. Could he catch the girl? Did she have friends nearby? Heedless of the possible danger, he began to ascend the slope of the hill, whistling through his nose and watching the girl with strangely sensitive eyes.

She let him come close, then laughed and ran down the far side of the hill, weaving through a field of red boulders at its base. Too excited to think, Robert Smith ran after her, his arms and legs jerking against the wind, his face locked in a tragicomic mask of desire. Through the boulder field he ran, dodging and stumbling, falling once to his knees, rising again, falling again, falling through the grass and into a pit, where he collapsed like a fallen puppet. He knew instantly what had happened. Clawing upright, he jumped for the edge of the pit; but it was out of reach. He fell to his knees, sobbing, ashamed of being trapped, afraid to die. In the midst of his anguish, a gentle buzzing was born. It lapped at his mind like the tide, growing with each pulse, surging forward with more power, tearing at the dykes of sanity.

. . . Come to me. You will not suffer with me. You can rest, you can sleep with me. Where I am their is no trap, no death. Come to me. Come to me . . .

Convulsed with horror, he shrieked. Then, slowly at first, but finally with a horrid rapidity, he began to writhe, moving rhythmically from one side of the pit to the other, floundering back and forth like an earthworm caught in the sun. At last he stopped. Only his fingers moved, twitching among the leaves, burrowing into the soil, locking and unlocking with terrible frequency.

Overhead, gazing down at him from one lip of the pit, four men shuddered at the sight, lowered their spears, and touched each other's foreheads. Kneeling on the other side, the girl with the scar trembled once and began to cry.

. . .

When Robert Smith awoke, his hands and feet were bound and he was lying on his back in the darkness of a hut. The only opening was a small airhole in the roof, which dropped a slanting cone of
sunlight across his torso, firing the fine hairs of his chest with a reddish-gold luster. For a long while, he gazed at the airhole; it seemed to be a blue moon in the night sky of the hut, casting its magic beams across the earth, his flesh. Somehow, it reminded him of a lilac bush, a place of the long past, a place where one could lie on one’s back and look upward, just as he now did.

Then, the door opened, and through it hulked a great beast of a man. Silhouetted against the sunlight, his body was like the trunk of an oak tree; but his head was no larger than a grapefruit. He moved forward, dragging one useless, shriveled leg behind him, balancing the weight of his body on his left foot and the knuckles of his right hand. With his left hand, he pulled curiously at Robert Smith’s beard. He himself was without hair—his sunbrowned skin was as smooth as wax.

Robert Smith had heard of such things. Certain people of the city, who had ventured into the countryside, were wont to whisper of fearful creatures, hairless and scarred, their flesh burnt with strange colors—creatures who walked like men and sang their hunting songs to the skies. He had never believed such tales, nor had he cared for the men who told them—bright-eyed youngsters who thought that words were worth food. But now he saw, with growing fear, that the stories were true.

The intruder grabbed him by an ankle and laboriously began to pull his bound body toward the door, puffing through waxen nostrils, squinting both eyes, and shaking his soft lips with each jerk. Within a few seconds, he had pulled Robert Smith into the sunlight.

Lifting his head, Robert Smith saw that he was in a village of some sort: about twenty huts, all identical, were arranged in a circle, each one facing into the center. In the compound which they delineated, there was a scattering of crude looms, tanning racks, and stone ovens, around which clustered women and children. At the very center of the compound stood three stone pillars, circled by a hedge of boulders. Flowers grew within this hedge, and words had been carefully engraved in each of the three stone pillars. Robert Smith could not read them, so he let his head drop back in the dust and looked longingly at the clear blue sky above.

Presently, he heard two voices arise from the village murmur and become distinct. Glancing sideways, he saw that two men had joined his jailer. Both wore buckskin clothes; both, unlike the jailer, had hair, which they wore in long braids. One of them was tall as the trees and thin as the wind, with a black spot, the size of a man’s eye, which seemed to be branded on his forehead. The other was of a nor-
mal height, also thin—but not as lean and hungry as the other, and graced with the most marvelous purple eyes—eyes like those of the girl with the scar.

"Is he a nomad?" asked the tall man, pursing his lips and touching the captive's ribs with his toe.

"He wears a beard," said the other. "He's not a nomad."

"Then what is he?"

They seemed perplexed. Crouching by his side, they studied Robert Smith's features. Disdainfully, he rolled his head over and watched the women cooking.

"His hands seem soft for a nomad's," said the tall man.

"My daughter has said that his soul is possessed by the Devil."

"What does she mean?"

"When they caught him, he screamed with agony. He fainted."

When they had finished studying his features, the two men arose and turned to the jailer.

"Nomad. Is he one of your people?"

The jailer glanced slyly at Robert Smith. He rubbed his wrists and licked his lips, but did not speak.

"Do you know?" asked the tall man.

The nomad shook his head, neither in negation nor affirmation, but rather with a quivering motion, as though it were a melon on a stalk.

The man with purple eyes laughed. "The nomad is brainless. Let us ask the man himself."

"Why? He would only lie."

Robert Smith continued to stare at the women cooking. Without moving, he said, "I am from the city."

For a moment, there was silence.

"The ruined city?"

"Yes."

"Why did you come?" The man with purple eyes frowned savagely.

"To rape our women?"

"I was driven out."

"Who did it?"

Robert Smith rolled his head over and smiled laconically at his captors. "I don't know. Something."

The two men looked at each other in solemn curiosity.

"He's mad," said the tall one.

"What do we do?"

"I don't know," said the other.

"We should probably ask the Rev."

"That means a long wait."

"Yes, Joseph, but we mustn't act rashly."

Once again, the tall man turned to Robert Smith.

"Do you know the Faith? Is the Savior's Word known in the city?"

During all this while, Robert Smith had been trying to seem calm and disdainful. In the city, only cool pride could save a captured man from death. In the thirty years that he had lived there, Robert Smith, with great showings of hateur, had saved himself from torture three times. But now, a bound captive in a strange village, he was suddenly assailed
with doubts. He did not understand these men. Their words were nonsense.

"Come," said the man with purple eyes, "attest to your beliefs."

"Are you a Christian?" asked the tall man, smiling gently now.

Robert Smith, bewildered by these seemingly kind yet meaningless questions, could only shrug his shoulders and smile back.

"Yes," said the man with purple eyes. "We had best wait for the Rev."

"What do you think? Is he truly ignorant? Or is he trying to hide his animal sins behind . . . behind a shield of innocence?" The tall man smiled, proud of his words.

"The Rev shall know."

Together, they departed. As soon as they had gone, the hulking jailer arose from the dust, where he had been playing with a handful of dried grass. Grunting ferociously, he dragged Robert Smith back into the hut and locked the door.

For many hours, he lay quietly, sometimes pondering the strange questions that he had been asked, sometimes thoughtlessly watching the blue moon of the airhole above, sometimes sleeping fitfully. His stomach was cold and knotted with hunger, but he knew that they would not starve him. When the moon had darkened to cobalt, and the far wall of the hut was lined with cracks and chinks of smoldering red sunset, his jailer entered, carrying a bowl of gruel. With him came the girl, almost pale with fear. Motioning for the nomad to leave, she took the bowl and lifted it to Robert Smith’s lips. When he was through, he rolled over on his side and tried to ignore her: presently, though, she spoke.

"What is your name?"

"Robert Smith."

"They say that you come from the city."

He grunted.

"Please talk to me."

He rolled over. "Why?"

"I thought that you would ask me why I came."

"Why did you come?" He spoke listlessly, aping her words without emotion.

"I came to help you. You tried to hurt me, so now I must help you."

"What?" He was curious.

"That is the way. I must teach you."

"Do you really want to help me?"

He spoke cautiously.

"Yes."

"Would you free me?"

"Oh, no. Then you would only try to hurt me again."

"No," he said, licking his lips.

"No. not at all. I just want to escape."

"I shall help you in another way. I shall teach you about God."

"Who’s he?"

"He is your Father."
"Oh."
"He is my Father too."
Robert Smith sighed and lay back in the dust.
"Please," she said, "listen to the words of my people." She arose, went to the door, and called for the nomad. He came and pulled Robert Smith to the open door of the hut. The girl sat next to him.
"Look."

All the men of the village, some thirty of them, had gathered around the little wall that circled the three stone pillars. Each one fell to his knees and crossed his hands on the wall. For a while, they kneeled there, doing nothing. Then a middle-aged man, rather nondescript in the fading light of dusk, appeared from behind one of the huts. Dressed in a long brown robe, he walked to the wall, stepped solemnly over it, and raised his right hand to his forehead. Then he kneeled before each of the three pillars, mumbling strange words to himself.

"Isn't it beautiful," said the girl, touching her forehead as she spoke.
"I don't understand," said Robert Smith. "What are they doing?"
"Watch."

The man in brown robes had turned. Facing the men of the village, he touched his forehead; they arose together, and each man touched the forehead of the one to his right. Then they began to speak, chanting in unison.

"I believe in the great holy Father, Who has made me and the flowers.

"And I believe in the great holy Father's holy Son, Joseph Christ, Who was born of a flower, Who suffered the pain of the fires for two hundred years, Who died in the Greatest Fire, Who returned to his great holy Father in the blue skies, where He may watch me live among the flowers.

"And I believe in the holy Flower, the holy Flowery Church of Christianism, the forgiveness of sins, the transcendence of the body, and the holy eternal life."

Then they dropped to their knees and bowed their heads—all but the man in the brown robes; he stooped and picked a handful of flowers. Going to the wall, he walked from man to man, placing a petal in the hair of each, mumbling quietly to himself. When he was through, he took three flowers and placed one at the base of each pillar. Then he turned and touched his forehead; each man arose and touched the forehead of the one to his right. Once again, they began to chant.

"I believe in the great holy Father . . ."

"They've already done that," said Robert Smith, perplexed by the ceremony.
"Quiet," whispered the girl.
"They must do it three times."
"Why?" he asked. "What does it mean?"
“It means everything,” she murmured. “Those words are the most beautiful words men have ever known. Good men have spoken them for thousands of years, even before the great fires, and they are far older than that.”


“The great holy Father and the holy Son and the holy Flower—they are God.” Her purple eyes shone in the last rays of the sun. “Watch and listen. That is all you need to do.”

In the morning, after eating another bowl of gruel, Robert Smith was visited again by the two men who had questioned him. With them came the girl, still shy and frightened.

“Robert Smith,” said the tall man, “did you think carefully last night?”

He grunted noncomittally. During the night, his bonds had cut into the flesh of wrists and ankles. He was cold and stiff with pain.

“You told us that you know nothing of God. But they say that you are possessed by the Devil. How can that be?”

“I don’t know.”

“They say that you rolled with agony in the pit—that your mouth foamed with madness and your eyes burned with the light of the great fires.”

For a long while, Robert Smith stared at his captors. When he finally spoke, his voice trembled.

“Who is the devil? What is he like?”

“He is the source of all man’s sin, the destroyer of life.”

“Does he talk . . . talk to men?”

“He tempts all men.”

“Does he tell them to come to him?”

“Yes, yes, of course. The Devil is the great tempter.”

“If men go to the devil, does he hurt them? Doesn’t he kill them?”

“Yes. You are right.” The tall man spoke with somber certainty. “The Devil will destroy you.”

“But how can one fight the devil?”

Suddenly, the girl pushed forward. “You must go to God instead! If only you have faith, you will be saved!”

“But, but who is this god?”

“He is the great holy Father and the holy Son and the holy Flower. He is Salvation.”

“Can he save me from the devil?”

“Yes. He can save all men, even you.”

“Then I must go to him.”

“Yes,” cried the girl. “You must come into the Light of God!”

“Just a minute,” said the man with purple eyes, who seemed to be the girl’s father. “We can’t do anything until the Rev returns.”

“But father,” cried the girl.
"Can't you see? He wants to save himself! Can't we teach him to worship with us?"

"Yes," said the tall man. "I think that we must take some sort of action. The Rev won't return for at least a week, and we certainly won't hurt this man by leading him to God."

"Perhaps not," said the girl's father. "But remember, he tried to rape my child. Perhaps he's just another nomad. It would be a great sin to allow a nomad to worship God."

"I only want him to know," said the girl. "We won't allow him to worship with us, or to walk freely through the village. But we can teach him about God! Besides..."

"Quiet," said the tall man. He turned to Robert Smith. "Are you truly possessed by the Devil?"

Robert Smith swallowed hard. He didn't understand these people, nor did he like them. But they seemed to know about It; they seemed to think that they could save him.

"Yes," he said. "The devil talks to me; and in the city, I have seen all of my friends destroyed by the devil."

"Oh!" the girl cried out. All three of them touched their foreheads.

"Do you truly wish to renounce the Devil?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"And do you wish to embrace Christianity instead? Do you wish to enter the kingdom of God?"

For a moment, Robert Smith hesitated. Perhaps god was no better than devil; perhaps this was some kind of trap. Then he remembered the look he had seen in the eyes of his friends—men who had gone quietly to It. He knew that he had no choice.

"Yes, I wish to do those things."

"Well," said the tall man, "he seems sincere enough. But he knows nothing. It will be like teaching a child."

"Yes," said the girl, her purple eyes flashing with excitement. "I know. Like a child."

The days that followed were full of monotony and frustration for Robert Smith. After living in the ruined city all his life, he was fascinated by the beauty of the countryside; he longed to run across the grassy meadows, to climb the piney mountain slopes, to hunt with the men of the village. But he was kept under a close guard. During the nights, they bound him with ropes and locked him in the hut. When morning came, he was brought food. Then the nomad untied his feet and led him to the top of a hill, a few hundred feet from the village, where he had to sit quietly and listen to the incessant chatter of the girl. She told him nothing. She spoke only in riddles.

"Has the Devil talked to you?" she would ask, eyes full of anxiety.
"No," he would answer, gazing thoughtlessly across the rolling green fields. "Not since the time in the pit."

She would laugh then, and clap her hands.

For one entire day, they talked about God.

"He is your Father," she said. "He is my Father, and your Father, and all men's Father. He is the Father of the world, for He made everything when there was nothing. And He has given us the flowers. They are our comfort and protection."

"How could anyone do all that?"
"God is perfect. He knows everything. He is everywhere. He can do anything."

"But why can't we see him?"
"You can," she cried. "You must! If you only open your heart, you will see all His divine goodness and mercy!"

But Robert Smith could not see God. Sitting on the hill, gazing across the land or into the sky, he would try with all his strength to see the divine Father. He could see the green summer grass, undulating in countless waves toward the horizon; he could see a river, wandering in aimless beauty, eddying into little ponds and lakes, where trees grew and birds sang; he could see the colors of the great mountains, whose purple peaks, even under the summer sun, and clean from horizon to horizon, dotted with a fleet of far distant clouds. But he could not see God, no matter how hard he tried.

They spent many days on the hill, talking about Joseph Christ and the holy Flower, speaking of sin (which he did not understand), or merely exchanging information about each other's childhood. One day, he told her about the lilacs.

"Why, that's wonderfull!" she cried. "And it proves something, too: even you, Robert, who never knew about God—even you could see Him when you were an innocent child!"

"No. I just liked flowers. Lilacs. I just liked to lay down under the lilacs and forget about everything."

"But it made you happy?"
"Yes.

"Then you must have known, somewhere in your heart, that God had given you those lilacs."

He smiled at her. The scar that crossed her mouth no longer bothered him, as it once had. And her eyes were like the lilacs, only darker—like lilacs after sunset.

"Perhaps," he said, "I did."

She laughed gently. "I know where lilac bushes grow. Down by the river."

"Really?"
"Yes. But they aren't in bloom now."

"Can we go? May I see them?"
She shook her head. "No, Rob-
ert. The Rev would not approve."

"Who is the Rev?"

Suddenly, she became very grave. "He is God's leader among men. He teaches us the songs of God; he helps us find true faith. He is a very wise and very good man."

"Why isn't he in the village?"

"He and ten other men went to the north, a month ago, to look for nomads and new kinds of flowers."

Robert Smith wrinkled his brow. "We use the nomads for slaves. But the new flowers—the new flowers will make our poor lives happier."

They sat in silence. Then she glanced excitedly at him.

"When the Rev comes back, I'm sure he'll let you worship with us! Soon you'll be one of the village!"

"Will I be free to go?"

"Yes. But... but you won't want to go." She looked sadly away, toward the river. Then she leaned back and rested against the slope of the hill. "Maybe we can go to the lilac bushes—sometime soon. Would you like that?"

"Yes," he said, smiling.

The next day, when they went once more to the hill, she began whispering to the nomad. At first he seemed confused, but then he nodded his melon head, sat down in the grass, and began to hunt for pebbles.

"Come," she said, turning to Robert Smith. "We can go to the lilacs. The nomad won't tell anyone."

For the first time in weeks, Robert Smith felt free. He stood up and looked at her; then he laughed gently and smiled. Together, they ran down the far slope of the hill until they came to the little stream that wandered there; together, they ran along its bank, sometimes stopping to gasp for breath, sometimes slipping in the grass. Laughing at each other, she in her buckskin jacket, he with his hands tied behind his back, they raced around a curve in the course of the stream green wall—a wall of lilacs, so thick and high that it hid the mountains, so wide that it seemed to be the ramparts of an entire fortress.

"It's a forest," he cried. "It's a forest of lilacs!"

"Yes," she said, giggling at his childish joy. "Do you like them?"

"Yes. But where are the flowers?"

"They aren't in bloom. They soon will be, though. You can see the buds."

Going closer, he saw a thousand points of soft purple appear in the wall of green; where the light of the sun fell on them, they glowed like tiny eyes. He ran forward and eagerly sniffed at them.

"Untie my hands," he cried.

For a moment, the girl hesitated.

"Please!"

"First you must promise," she said, "not to run away."

"I promise," he cried, turning his back to her so that she could untie his hands.
“No,” she said, smiling gently. “You must promise with a flower.”
“Yes,” he said, “with a flower.”
She went to the riverbank and found a tiny yellow flower there, which she picked carefully and brought to him.
“You must hold it in your mouth when you promise, and then you must swallow it.” She put it on his tongue.

His reverie shattered and dissolved. He was standing by a stream with a girl, and in his mouth was a flower.
“Yes,” he murmured, “I promise. I promise not to run away . . .” Then he swallowed the flower, quickly, so as not to taste it. She stepped behind him and untied the ropes that held his hands. When they were free, he held them in front of him and flexed his wrists.
“Come,” she said. She led him into the forest of lilacs. He followed her slowly, only half conscious, only half aware of the world he was in. His mind went struggling back into the past, trying to reconstruct the momentary image that he had seen, trying to grasp something that now seemed terribly important.

They sat down in a clearing. She picked a leaf and brushed it against her lips; but he did nothing.

“Why are you so quiet?” she asked, her eyes suddenly widening with fear.
“I think,” he said slowly, “that I have . . . have worshiped God before—when I was very young . . .”
“When you were young? In the city?”
“Yes . . .”
“Oh! But . . . but how do you know?”
“I remembered . . . something . . . when you made me promise with the flower.”
She did not speak, but there was a question in her gentle smile.

“IT was inside; and it was dark. There was a man in robes. But . . . but instead of flowers there were candles . . .”

“Candles! But candles burn! Candles mean flame!”

“Yes, but . . . .”

“And flame means the Great Fire! You weren’t worshiping God! You were . . . you were worshiping the Devil! You were damning yourself to the eternal flame! You . . . .”

“Quiet!” he shouted at her, angry for the first time. “I don’t care what you think! I don’t care what you say! It was . . . it was good. The candles were good.”

“Stop talking like a nomad! You act . . . you act as though you knew about religion! I’m teaching you!” Her hands trembled. She leaned forward and touched his forehead; then she touched hers. “You must be patient,” she said. “You must believe what I tell you.”


Suddenly the buzzing came to him, entering his mind, as it always did, when he was in anguish, heightening that anguish to madness, twisting him with torment . . . .

. . . Come to me. There are no “whys” where I am. Where I am, there is only rest and peace. Come to me. Come to me . . .

He writhed on the ground until It left him. When he opened his eyes, the girl was crying.

“It is the Devil! You’re nothing but a creature of the Devil!”

He leaped to his feet and grabbed her. She struggled to escape, but his arms pulled her against him, and his mouth closed on hers. Then, with the strength of fear, she shoved him away and disappeared into the bushes.

“Come back!” he cried. “Come back! I don’t want to hurt you! I don’t, I don’t . . . .”

He rushed after her, ripping his clothes on the branches that seemed to hold him back. Then he burst into the sunlight, and saw her running along the stream, already far ahead of him.

“Come back!” he cried. “I love you! I don’t want to hurt you!”

He ran after her, along the stream and up the hill, where he found her huddling behind the broad bole of the nomad’s body.


As she rushed down the hill, toward the village, the nomad clumsily lifted his spear and giggled at Robert Smith. There was a moment of hesitation, and then the spear hissed by his ear; he darted past the nomad and sprinted down the hill. For only a moment he paused,
and then he rushed into the compound, where the girl was standing proudly beside her father. In a moment, Robert Smith was pinned to the ground by three young men of the village.

Above his face hovered a spear. Drowning in sudden fear, he could only faintly hear the voice of the girl's father:

"Robert Smith! You have sinned again! You have turned upon the innocent child who tried to help you! The Rev has returned, and he shall be your judge."

They lifted him to his feet. Trembling, he looked into the great, shaggy, leonine face of the man they called the Rev—a man who stood nearly seven feet tall, a man whose eyes gazed down at Robert Smith with frightening confidence.

"You have sinned at the very feet of God," he said, murmuring softly through two craggy lips. "You must be made to repent for the evil in your soul. You must be made to suffer seven times the suffering of death . . ."

"No!" cried Robert Smith, dropping to his knees and groveling shamelessly at the feet of the huge man. "I didn’t hurt her! I didn’t want to . . ."

As his eyes misted with fear, he suddenly felt it touch his mind once again, pause for a moment, and enter with a buzzing fury . . . . Come to me. You must come to me. All of you must come to me, for I am God. I am God. Come to me . . .

When it had faded away, he lifted his weeping face from the dust and looked at his captors. They stood like statues, captives themselves, neither moving nor speaking. Their eyes were strangely dead, like the eyes of the blind, like strange gray stones . . .

"You’re dead!" he screamed. "It killed you, It killed you!"

"Quiet!" thundered the Rev, breaking their silence with a majestic toss of his great head. "It is our God. He has called us." He paused, lifting his face to the blue skies above. "Come, my people, come with me to God." He turned, and as he turned, the people of the village turned with him. Slowly, his open hand left aloft, he began walking toward the east; with him, like an army of the dead, went the people of the village.

"Stop!" cried Robert Smith, staring in horror. "It wants to kill you! Stop!"

They did not hear him. They were lost in Its power.

"Help me," cried Robert Smith, turning to the half dozen nomads who stood watching him. "Help me save them!"

One of the nomads giggled and lifted his spear. "Kill," said another.

Robert Smith wheeled and ran. Behind him, the nomads squealed
and wheezed with excitement; he could hear them lumbering in pursuit. Rocks and a spear sailed over his head. With each step, he widened the distance between himself and his sluggish pursuers, but before he could reach the army of villagers, he felt his left shoulder burst open with sudden, flaming pain. He stumbled once, but kept running until he reached the people of the village.

Behind him, the nomads had ceased their pursuit. Looking back, he saw one of them lift a spear from the dust—a spear whose crude stone point glistened red in the sun.

Robert Smith staggered on. Vaguely, he realized that two of the men were helping him. Then, as darkness flooded the gray spinning haze before his eyes, he felt them lift his sagging body and bear it aloft . . .

He awoke to the stars. They swam through the night sky with each pulsing wave of pain, dancing the mad, chaotic dance of his own death. Then a silhouette blotted them out, and he saw that the girl who loved him as a child and hated him as a man, gazing into his face with eyes that no longer glowed purple, eyes that now were dead.

"Robert Smith," she said, "we have come to the Gates of Heaven. When the sun rises, we shall go to God. Are you ready? Have you repented?" She spoke with toneless disinterest, like some kind of machine.

"Help me," he whispered. "I'm dying . . ."

"God will help you," she said, "if you repent." Then she was gone, and all he could see were the stars spinning through the night sky.

When next he awoke, the sun was hot on his face, and he was alone. The others had left him to die. Somehow, the pain was gone; but half of his body was numb and senseless. Struggling to his knees, he saw that he was on a hill, not far from the ruined city. Twenty feet away two great boulders formed the portal of a cave—a cave made by the hand of man, a cave whose depths emitted a strange light. Instantly, he knew that he had come to the gates of heaven—to the den of the creature that tormented him; and as soon as he knew, it came easily into his mind. He had no strength to struggle, no strength to battle the power of Its buzzing commands . . .

. . . Now you must come to me. Now you must join me . . .

It took control of his body, making him stumble forward, forcing him into the cave, directing him down a long, winding passage, through door after door of dull lead, each of which It opened before him and closed behind him, pushing him relentlessly on, into the depths of Its lair. He finally came to the largest door, twenty
feet in height, that slid open with the slow grandeur of death, revealing, as it opened, a room that had no visible limits, a room that stretched as far as he could see.

Even in his stupor, he knew what It was. It was not what he might have expected, neither the creature of his nightmares nor the devil of the Christians. It was something less mysterious, yet something far more terrible—It was man, yet more than man . . .

Without thinking, without caring, Robert Smith walked forward. It had prepared a chair for him, and there he sat. He could see thousands of others, each in his own chair, each gray and shivered, each half hidden in the spiderweb of wires and feeding tubes that stretched from chair to chair. All of their minds were joined, welded together by the same ingenious science that had nearly destroyed mankind with its flaming bombs. Each man was a neuron, and each wire was a synapse . . .

Robert Smith could faintly feel a thousand tiny needles pierce his forehead and drill into his skull. But before It consumed him, before It digested him for Its own inscrutable purposes, he had time to scream one word . . .