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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OMEGA, THE MAN ***

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Illustrated by MOREY

OMEGA, the MAN

By **LOWELL HOWARD MORROW**

THE silver airship cut swiftly through the hot thin air. The noonday sun blazed down upon it and the desert world below. All about was the solemn silence of death. No living thing appeared either in the air or on the drab, gray earth. Only the aircraft itself displayed any signs of life. The sky, blue as indigo, held not the shadow of a cloud, and on the horizon the mountains notched into it like the teeth of a giant saw.

The airship finally came to a hovering stop, then dropped rapidly toward the salt-encrusted plain. It came to rest at last on the bottom of a great, bowl-shaped hollow situated at the end of a chasm whose gray, rock-strewn sides rose in rugged terraces for miles back into the sky. In a few moments a panel in the vessel's side rolled noiselessly upward, disclosing a brilliant light, and from the interior of the airship soon appeared two figures who paused at the aperture and gazed out over the parched earth. Then without fear or visible effort—although they were



seventy-five feet above the ground—they emerged from the ship and floated down to earth.

These two humans—the sole survivors of all earth's children—were man and wife—Omega and Thalma. They were burned a deep cherry by the fierce rays of the sun. In stature they were above the average man now on earth. Their legs were slender and almost fleshless, because for many centuries man had ceased to walk. Their feet were mere toeless protuberances attached to the ankle bone. Their arms were long and as spare as their legs, but their hands, although small, were well-proportioned and powerful. Their abdominal regions were very small, but above them were enormous chests sheltering lungs of tremendous power, for thus nature had armored man against the rarefaction of the earth's atmosphere. But the most remarkable parts about this truly remarkable couple were their massive heads set upon short, slim necks. The cranial development was extraordinary, their bulging foreheads denoting great brain power. Their eyes—set wide apart—were large and round, dark and luminous with intelligence and their ears were remarkably large, being attuned to all the music and voices of life. While their nostrils were large and dilated, their mouths were very small, though sensuous and full-lipped. They were entirely hairless—for even the eyebrows and the eyelashes of man had entirely disappeared ages before. And when they smiled they betrayed no gleam of teeth, for nature had long discarded teeth in man's evolution.

The great, silver ship of the sky now rested in a deep pocket on the floor of an ancient sea. Millions of years, under the sucking energy of the sun and the whip of many winds, had sapped its waters, until only a shallow, brackish lake remained. Along the shores of this lake, which covered scarcely more than a hundred acres, a rim of yellowish, green grass followed the water's edge and struggled against the inevitable, and here and there among the grasses flowers of faded colors and attenuated foliage reared their heads bravely in the burning sunshine. And this lone lake, nestled in the lowest spot among the mountains and valleys which once flooded the Pacific, now held the last of earth's waters. Barren and lifeless the rest of the world baked under a merciless sun.

NOW clasping hands, like children at play, Omega and Thalma approached the lake. They glided over the ground, merely touching their feet to the highest points, and finally stopped with their feet in the warm, still water.

Omega ran his cupped hand through the water, then drank eagerly.

"It is good," he said in a low, musical voice. "And there is much of it. Here we may live a long time."

Thalma laughed with sheer joy, her large, red-rimmed eyes aglow with mother light and love.

"I am glad," she cried. "I know that Alpha will be happy here."

"It is so, my love, and—"

Omega checked and stared out over the glassy lake. A spot in its center was stirring uneasily. Great bubbles rose to the surface and eddied to one side, then suddenly huge cascades of water shot into the air as if ejected by subterranean pressure. As they stared in silent astonishment the commotion suddenly ceased and the surface of the lake became as tranquil as before.

"There is volcanic action out there," said Omega fearfully. "At any time the ground may open and engulf the lake in a pit of fire. But no, that cannot be," he added, staring at Thalma with an odd light in his eyes. For he suddenly recalled that no volcanic action or earth tremor had disturbed the surface crust for ages.

"What is it, Omega?" she whispered in accents of awe.

"Nothing to fear, my dear, I am sure," he replied, averting his eyes. "Likely some fissure in the rock has suddenly opened."

And then he embraced her in the joy of new-found life. For long ages mind had communicated with mind by telepathic waves, speech being used for its cheer and companionship.

"We will make ready for Alpha," said Omega joyfully. "In very truth he may be able to carry on. Moisture may return to earth, and it is more likely to return here than elsewhere. Remember what the Mirror showed last week over the Sahara plains—the makings of a cloud!"

They cheered each other by this remembrance how, just before they had consumed the last of the water in their recent home and buried the last of their neighbors and friends, the reflecting Mirror had brought a view of a few stray wisps of vapor above the Great Sahara which once had been reclaimed by man, where teeming millions in by-gone ages had lived their lives.

"The inclination of the earth's axis is changing as we know," he went on hopefully as they turned back toward the ship. "The moisture may come back."

His was the voice of hope but not of conviction. Hope, planted in man's soul in the beginning, still burned brightly in these last stout hearts.

Alpha was still unborn. Omega and Thalma had willed a male child. In him was to be the beginning of a new race which they hoped with the aid of science would repeople the earth. Hence his name, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, of which "omega" is the last.

"I am afraid, my love," said Thalma, looking back over her shoulder at the placid lake. "I wonder what heaved the water about that way."

"Don't worry about it, my dear," he said as they paused beneath the ship and he put his arm protectingly about her. "As I have said, it probably was the shifting of a rock on the bed of the lake. It is nothing to worry about, and I feel that we have nothing to fear for a long, long time. And we have so much joy to look forward to. Remember Alpha is coming, and think of his glorious future! Think of his changing all this!" And he swept his hand toward the grim, gray hills. "Just think of again gardenizing the world!"

IT was indeed a dreary view upon which they gazed. On every side, upon the mountains and hills, over salt-encrusted plains and upon the rocks, were the skeletons and shells of departed life. Fossils of the animal and the vegetable kingdoms greeted one on every hand. Great fronds of palms of the deep, draped with weird remains of marine life long extinct, stood gaunt and desolate and rust-covered in the hollows and on the hills. Long tresses of sea weed and moss, now crisp and dead as desert sands, still clung in wreaths and festoons to rock and tree and plant just as they had done in that far-off age, when washed by the waters of the sea. Great forests of

coral, once white and pink and red with teeming life but now drab and dead, still thrust their arms upward, their former beauty covered and distorted by the dust of the ages. Whales and sharks and serpents and fish of divers species and sizes, together with great eels and monsters of the deep, lay thickly over the land, their mummified remains shriveled by the intense heat, their ghastliness softened by the ashes of the years.

Millions of ages had rolled away since the struggle began—the battle of life on earth against the encroachments of death. And now death stalked everywhere, grinning with malicious triumph, for he had but one more battle to fight. Already his grisly clutch was closing on the standard of victory. Man had mastered life but he had not conquered death. With the magic wand of science he had reached out into space and viewed the life of far-off worlds. He had routed superstition and fear and selfishness. He had banished disease and learned all nature's secrets; had even visited other worlds and had come to know and understand his God, but still death had marched grimly on. For even the abysmal moment of creation had marked the world for his prey. Slowly but surely death had closed his cold hands about the earth. The sun flung forth his hot rays and drew more and more of the earth's moisture and dissipated it in space. Gradually the forests vanished and then the streams and lakes dwindled and disappeared. By this time the atmosphere had thinned almost imperceptibly—and only by the aid of his scientific instruments had man been able to detect its thinning. Less and less rain fell, and finally even the ice-caps about the poles trickled away. Cold and gaunt and shadowy those regions lay silent and lifeless throughout the long nights, and loomed like gray ghosts in the hushed light of the summer. The sun blazed on relentlessly and the shores of the seven seas receded age after age, but with his science and his machines man had doggedly followed the retreating waters, husbanded and harnessed them and thus retained his grip on life.

But now at last life on earth had come to its final battlefield. The plans of the battle were sharply drawn, but there could be no doubt of the issue. No one knew this better than Omega, for the sun shone on with undiminished power. Yet the rotation of the earth had slackened until twenty-five hours constituted a day, while the year was 379 days and a fraction in length. Man, gradually adjusting himself to the new conditions and environment, had triumphed even in the face of a losing fight. For he had learned to smile into the hollow sockets of death, to laugh at the empty promises of life.

BACK in their ship Omega and Thalma gazed out over the dead world, where the salt crystals gleamed and sparkled in the sunshine.

"Will all this ever become green again and full of joy and life?" asked Thalma wearily.

"Why not?" asked Omega. "Although the race has come to its last stand, water is here and before it is gone who knows what may happen?"

Omega spoke only to please his wife, for well he knew in his heart that the star of hope had forever set. And always he was thinking of that commotion in the waters of the lake. What could have caused it? What did it portend? He was sure that the answer was to be one of tragedy.

"We know that for uncounted ages the world was green and beautiful, was vibrant with life and joy," he went on. "And why may it not be so again, even though now it is garbed in the clothes of the sepulchre? Let us trust in the power of our son."

Thalma did not answer, and Omega, seeing that she was terribly depressed, fell silent. So they sat in their great airship, strangely dejected despite the close proximity of the life-giving water, while the sun flamed through the cloudless sky and set in a crimson flood beyond the lifeless plains. Night fell but still they sat brooding. The stars shone out in the purple heavens, but they noticed not their glory. The ship was wrapped in an awful silence. No night wind whispered its message nor warmed the cold, desolate earth, stretching down from the poles, nor cooled the hot wastes about the equator. The naked mountains rose stark and forbidding into the sky, which hung like a great, bejeweled bowl over the sun-scorched plains, where the dust of many ages lay undisturbed. The shadows lay deep and dark over the valleys and among the streets of cities dead and silent for many ages, and searched out deep chasms which when the world was young had felt the surge of the restless seas. No form of life winged its way through the darkness and called to its mate. No beast of prey rent the air with its challenge. No insect chirped. No slimy shape crawled over the rocks. Dark and solemn, mysterious and still, the earth sped on through the night.

MORNING found them in much better spirits. Over their breakfast, which consisted almost wholly of food in tablet form, they discussed their plans. After which they went to the lookout in the bow of the ship and gazed out at the gray world. There was no change. The same heart-breaking monotony of death confronted them. But despite it all they finally smiled into each other's eyes.

"It is home," said Omega proudly. "The last home we shall ever know."

"My God, look!" suddenly gasped Thalma, clutching his arm and pointing a trembling finger toward the lake. "What—is that?"

Following her gesture he stared in terror and stupefaction. Rising above the center of the lake where the day before they had beheld the agitated waters, was an enormous, scale-covered neck

surmounted by a long, snake-like head whose round, red eyes were sheltered beneath black, horny hoods. The horrible creature's head was swaying back and forth as its black tongue darted in and out between wide-open jaws displaying single rows of sharp teeth. Fully fifteen feet above the lake the awful eyes looked toward the land. And as the neck moved in unison with the swaying head the scales seemed to slide under and over one another a perfect armor for the neck.

"A plesiosaurian!" exclaimed Omega, leveling his glasses at the beast. "No—how can that be?" he added in bewilderment. "Those monsters were supposed to be extinct ages ago. And they had a smooth skin, while this thing has scales, like those of a brontosaurus, which was really a land animal. This must be a cross between the two that through the process of evolution has been developed. Anyway it is the last of the species and it has come here—to die."

"Like us it has followed the water and come here to die," said Thalma as she also leveled glasses.

For several minutes they watched the swaying head which every little while twisted from side to side, as the blazing eyes seemed to be searching for prey, while a whitish saliva dripped from the jaws. The body of the beast, which they knew to be enormous, was hidden beneath the water, but the agitation on the surface showed that powerful feet and legs were stirring.

"Yes, it has come here to die," repeated Omega, "to fight for the last drop of earth's water. It now has possession of the lake, and unless we kill it, it will kill us or drive us away."

Almost with the words Omega seized an atomic gun and pointed it at the brute's head. But before he could sight the weapon and pull the trigger the monster, as though sensing danger, suddenly jerked down its head and a moment later it had disappeared beneath the surface.

"It has gone!" cried Thalma. She was trembling as with a chill, and her eyes were wide with terror.

"It will appear again," said Omega, "and then we will kill it, for the water belongs to man. Doubtless that huge beast is all that remains of life on earth save ourselves. To-night while you sleep here in the ship, I will take a gun, take position behind a rock on the shore of the lake and watch for its appearance. I think shortly after nightfall when the rocks are cool it leaves the water and comes on land in a vain search for food, for beyond a doubt it has devoured everything in the lake, save marine mosses and the like. Yet as it has survived all contemporary life except man, it may live for centuries unless we destroy it."

"But there are not centuries of water out there," Thalma said. "As to your hunting this monster alone, I will not hear of it. I shall go with you. Together we will destroy this menace of our new home."

ALL Omega's eloquence could not dissuade her. So, after the sun had set and the dry cold had chilled the hot rocks, they set out along the shore of the lake and looked eagerly out over the still water for a sight of their enemy. Nothing disturbed the silvery surface of the water. Crouching behind a mass of coral they waited, but throughout the long, still night they watched without reward, for nothing moved within their range of vision. The stars, wonderfully large and brilliant in that rarefied atmosphere, seemed to be the only link between them and the unknown. Only their own hurried breathing and the muffled thumps of their wildly beating hearts broke the silence. And as the sun rose again above the dead plains, weary and discouraged they returned to the ship.

While keeping up a bold front for Thalma's sake, Omega's heart was sad, for he well knew that unless they could vanquish that marine monster they were doomed. That such a dreadful creature had come to them from the mists of antiquity, as it were, was incredible. Yet he had seen it, Thalma had seen it, and it resembled some of the sea-monsters he had heard of in the past. They could not doubt its existence and must prepare for the worst.

Omega's name had been conferred on him by an ironical whim of fate. When he was born there were still many people on earth inhabiting the low valleys of the Pacific's floor where much water still remained. But the droughts had increased with the years, and before Omega had reached middle-life all rain had ceased to fall. The atmosphere became so rare, even near the ground, that it was difficult for the people with the aid of their machines to draw sufficient oxygen and nitrogen from it to prepare the food which had been man's principal sustenance for ages.

Gradually the weaker peoples had succumbed. But the remnants of the nations gathered about the receding waters, all foreseeing the end, but all determined to defer it as long as possible. There was no recourse. For ages before Omega was born the nations, knowing that the earth was drying up, had fought one another for the privilege of migrating to another planet to fight its inhabitants for its possession. The battle had been so bitterly contested that two-thirds of the combatants were slain. By the aid of their space-cars the victors colonized other planets in our solar system leaving the vanquished on earth to shift for themselves. There was nothing for them to do but to fight on and await the end, for no space-car that man had ever devised was able to penetrate the cold, far-reaches of space. Only among the family of our own sun could he navigate his ships. And now, like the earth, every member of that once glorious family was dead or dying. For millions of years, Mars, his ruddy glow gone forever, had rolled through space, the tomb of a mighty civilization. The ashes of Venus were growing cold. Life on Mercury, Jupiter and Saturn already was in the throes of dissolution, and the cold, barren wastes of Uranus and Neptune

always had forbidden man.

So it seemed that the name, Omega, had been fittingly bestowed. More than ever the stark truth made him shudder with apprehension, and he felt that only the coming of Alpha would give him strength to carry on.

"Now we must make ready for Alpha," said Omega, even while thoughts of the sea-monster chilled his heart. "We will make our servants prepare the way. Here in this valley must be born a new race of men. Life must come from death. Come, Thalma."

SHE smiled back at him, reassured by his confident manner, and together they entered a lower compartment of the ship. This compartment contained the servants of which Omega had spoken—divers machinery and other marvels of man's construction. Omega touched several buttons and a section of the ship's hull rolled aside. He pressed other buttons and whirled wheels. Then great sections of mirror slid out into the air and without apparent direction or control they ranged themselves far up on a steep hillside. Yet all were under perfect control. With invisible, atomic rays Omega made all do his bidding. For countless centuries man had mastered the atom, divided it, harnessed its electrons. Following the discoveries of the great French scientist, Becquerel, man had learned that the potential energy of all atoms—especially that of radium—is almost limitless. And as the disintegration of the atom carries an electrical discharge, man had learned to control this energy. Omega's machines, utilizing atoms from everywhere, even the ether, split them by radio-activity through electromagnetic waves, and utilized the energy of their electrons which always move in fixed orbits. There being forty radio-active substances, Omega took advantage of them all, and equalizing the atomic weight of the atoms—whether those around a hydrogen nucleus or a helium nucleus—he broke the atoms down and directed the charges of their electrons. Then his motors amplified the discharges and, through the medium of an electric current, projected them in the form of invisible atomic rays which he could control and direct against any object and sustain and move at will by means of oscillating currents.

Soon upon the hillside, perfectly arranged and adjusted, appeared a giant, parabolic, refracting mirror with which he could obtain a view of any portion of the earth's surface by sending vibrating currents around the world and reproducing impressions already recorded on the ether, on the surface of the mirror. And beneath its center was a receiver, through which he might have heard the minutest sound around the world, had there been any to hear.

The small, atomic motors—which drew their energy both from hydrogen nuclei, the ether of space and the radio-active substances of all metals—now were placed on the hillside near the great mirror. These motors were capable of creating and focusing light, without bulb or other container, whenever and wherever needed. All were operated with scarcely any effort by Omega.

In a measure it seemed strange that the Greek alphabet and all the classics of the ancients had survived antiquity. But the latest inventions of man explained it all. For man with his machines had reached far back into the shadowy past and proved the immortality of all thought and action. All the records of history, all the triumphs and defeats, the joys and sorrows and aspirations of humanity, came out of the past and marched across the screen of his historical recorder. As nothing is ever lost, all sounds and impressions occurring on earth since the dawn of its creation, being already impressed on the sensitive plastic and all-pervading ether, the same as a photograph is recorded on its film or plate, man had developed a machine for drawing on these impressions until at will the history of the world was before him. Even the varied life of the ancients came out of the past. Saints and sinners, slaves and masters mingled. Confucius sat before him in humility; Guatama counseled his followers to be humble; Christ died upon the cross. Warriors and statesmen shouted their triumphs and bewailed their defeats. Philosophers expounded their wisdom and Socrates drank the hemlock. Hannibal and Caesar and Alexander fought their battles, and Napoleon marched gory and unafraid from Austerlitz to Waterloo. All came back at the call of Omega's science.

AS has been stated it was a giant craft on which Omega and Thalma had come to this last retreat of man. Within its interior were all the latest marvels of man's ingenuity and skill. These instruments of almost supernatural power not only reached back into the past but also penetrated the future. There was a great atomic-electric motor used in creating and controlling climate as long as there was any to control. Sending forth electromagnetic waves it massed and directed the atmospheric pressure, sending heat waves here, cold ones there, thus causing droughts and rainfall at will. But now, as with the case of most of the other machines, Omega needed it no longer. He kept it because it linked him with the joy of the past. Besides, there was the mind-control appliance by whose aid man's mind might visit other worlds. This was done through the development of the subconscious and the discipline of the will. But Omega was weary of these pilgrimages, because his body could not perform those far-off flights. As time went on he realized that the earth was his natural home. Even the earth's neighbors, dead and dying, offered him no haven.

Yes, Omega and Thalma had garnered the gist of the world's treasures before commencing this last trek. Gold and precious stones were common objects to them, because for countless ages man had made them at will, but around those they had brought clustered sacred memories of loved ones gone before. The biological machine in the chemical laboratory of the ship—the

machine that brought forth life from nature's bountiful storehouse—was of little use now that both atmosphere and moisture were nearly gone. Yet Omega cherished this machine, and aside from its associations with the past, it held for him a fascination that he could not understand.

Having set the Mirror and other mechanical servants in position, Omega and Thalma returned to the ship, and slept throughout the day, for with the descending sun they must again go forth to hunt that scaly demon which had taken possession of the earth's last water.

The night was moonless, but the bright starlight brought all objects into plain relief against the dark rocks. Taking position on the slope several rods above the beach, Omega and Thalma watched the lake eagerly, but nothing disturbed its mirror-like surface. As on the preceding night the awful silence appalled them—even though they were accustomed to the vast solitude. It was so calm and still, so full of death and mystery, that it seemed they must cry out in the agony of their emotions. As the very silence was crushing their spirits so the knowledge that only one form of life on earth stood between them and the water to which their last hope clung, was maddening. How they longed to battle the hideous monster! But the hours dragged on with nothing to disturb the dead, heart-breaking silence. At last the Great Dipper had swung so far around that dawn appeared. Yet there had been not a ripple on the lake. Omega concluded that his guess was wrong—the beast did not leave the water at night to search for food. Perhaps it had learned the futility of such a search in a dead, dust-covered world.

WEARIED by their long and fruitless vigil they must have dozed, for suddenly Omega, who sat but a yard or two from Thalma, was aroused by a padded footfall and the exhalations of a noisome breath. Looking up he was horrified to see the monster towering above him, its head swaying gently to and fro, as its great, awkward feet sent it lunging forward and backward for many feet, its spotted, scale-covered body trailed over the rocks. By suddenly rounding the shoulder of the rock, sheltering Omega and Thalma, its head held high, it seemed not to have seen the two humans, for its terrible unblinking eyes were fixed ahead on the water. However, Omega, paralyzed with fear and astonishment, and being directly in the beast's path, believed that his hour had come. This was to be the end of all his plans—to be crushed by the enormous weight of the monster which challenged his right to live. But in that tense moment when he thought that it was all over, the lithe form of Thalma reached his side and in a frenzy of terror pulled him away. But even then the sloping belly of the onrushing beast tore him from her frail hands and dashed him against the rock.

While he lay there stunned and unable to move, Thalma discharged her weapon at the monster. Three times she fired in quick succession but the shots went wild, and in another moment the great brute struck the water with a resounding splash and disappeared from view. For a few minutes a trail of surface bubbles marked its rapid course toward the lake's center, then all was motionless and still as before.

"Are you hurt, Omega?" Thalma cried anxiously, kneeling by his side.

"Just shaken up a bit," he returned, sitting up with an effort. "Great hunters are we," he went on with a laugh. "We almost allowed the game to catch the hunters! Well, let's go back to the ship. We'll get him next time."

But their narrow escape had shaken their nerve. All day long they remained safely in the ship and kept their guns trained on the lake hoping that the beast would show himself. How or when it had left the lake they could not surmise, but that it was more formidable than they had thought now seemed certain, and Omega concluded to bring science to his aid. In this way he was sure that he would soon exterminate the monster.

So the next day he lay a cable carrying a high voltage all around the lake and connected it with traps of various designs both in the water and on the land. No more would they risk their lives hunting the beast in the open after nightfall.

The hot, still days that followed were anxious ones for these last children of life. Not a trap was sprung. The beast did not drag his slimy body and tail across the heavily charged cable. The last of his kind, fighting the last battle of existence, it seemed that nature had endowed him with uncanny cunning. There was the life-giving water for whose possession no human kind challenged them, but this enemy was more terrible than any man, savage or civilized whom the earth had ever known.

DURING these anxious, watchful days Omega and Thalma went often to the Mirror and gazed into it in search of vapor clouds. And more than once those gossamer-like formations appeared over different parts of the world to gladden their hearts only to fade away before their vision. The reflections of those embryo clouds became less frequent as the days wore on. Omega and Thalma knew that they had no right to hope for the return of water vapor. Their instruments, so finely attuned as to appear endowed with intelligence, the records of the past and their own common sense told them that. But nature and life in the upper reaches of the air were dying as hard as their own hope. They knew that the aerial manifestations they witnessed were but symptoms of the death struggle. And yet a real cloud, dark and pregnant with moisture, suddenly appeared in the Mirror. Consulting the chart they saw that it was hovering over a great land of plain and mountains which formerly had been a part of the United States of America.

"We will go and examine this gift from heaven," said Omega. "It moves over a once beautiful land, which the voices of history tell us, harbored a race of the free millions of years ago."

"Yes, we will go," agreed Thalma. "It may be after all that Alpha will first see the light far from this dreadful hollow and—and—that monster out there in the lake."

Omega hung his head. Well he knew that the presence of the monster was slowly killing his beloved. She complained not, but her dreams were disturbed with frightful visions, and often Omega awakened to find her at a window staring out over the lake with terror-stricken eyes.

This new cloud was thousands of miles to the east but with fond anticipations they entered the ship and plunged toward it. But although they reached the spot in one hour, the last remnant of vapor dissolved before their eyes, and they turned sadly homeward, once more beaten by the inexorable decrees of fate.

So having decided at last that this deep valley must remain their home forever, Omega looked about for a suitable building site, for although the ship was safe and comfortable they longed for a home on the earth. But the ever present menace of the sea-monster saddened them and filled them with misgivings, despite the fact that Omega could guard the cottage electrically. But Omega wondered whether electric safeguards would keep this creature from coming some night to the cottage and sticking his loathsome head in at door or window. Omega shuddered at the thought, but refrained from mentioning such a possibility to Thalma.

Having selected a site under the branches of a great coral tree standing within the shade of an overhanging rock, Omega erected a cottage. It took him but a few days to build and furnish this building from supplies on the ship. It was complete in every feature, even to running water from the lake. Grass was brought from the lake and a lawn laid out about the cottage in the shadows of the rock. The grass was kept watered for Thalma's sake, even though the water was needed for other purposes and the lake was diminishing steadily. But she was sacred in his eyes—she the last mother the old earth ever was to know.

The interior of the cottage was embellished like a palace, for treasures were brought from the airship to grace its walls. The richest rugs, curtains, tapestries and silks the world had ever known were there for Thalma's pleasure and comfort. Paintings of green verdure, of forests and plains of waving grass, of tumbling mountain streams and cool, placid lakes, Omega drew from the young days of the earth. The power to portray nature's moods and beauties had increased in many men with the passing of time. He placed these scenes before Thalma's couch that their cool and inspiring presence might comfort her while she awaited the coming of the child.

ONE morning being weary of the stark monotony of the valley, whose eastern wall was distant many miles, Omega and Thalma determined to scale the heights above. For sometimes in the sinister aspect of the chasm's walls, it seemed that the rocks would close together and crush out their lives. They concluded not to take the air-car, but to go on a rambling picnic with the ever present hope that they might discover another oasis of life.

Hand in hand they rose into the air, up and up for miles past frowning cliffs and dark caverns, yawning like grinning skulls above the outposts of death. There was no visible effort in their flight. They but took advantage of nature's laws which man had long understood. At last on the highest peak they paused to rest on a dust-covered rock.

The red sun rose above the cheerless horizon and blazed on them from a deep azure sky slashed across by bars of purple and gold. More than nine miles beneath them spread the deep gorge, where nestled their little home, looking like a doll-house, and above it shone the great, silver ship. The lake shone like a speck of silver on the drab rocks. They gazed down upon it in an attitude of worship, for it alone in all that vast realm of peaks and plains and valleys symbolized life. Then suddenly a dark speck appeared on the surface of the lake. Omega looked at Thalma apprehensively, for well he knew the meaning of that speck. Her face was pale and drawn, and she clung to Omega as they pointed their glasses at the water.

The monster was again disporting himself. He threshed the water into foam with his long, sinuous body, while his head wagged and his terrible eyes looked toward the land. It was the first sight they had had of him since the night he almost killed Omega.

"Look!" breathed Thalma, "it is coming ashore. Oh, I did hope that it was dead!" And trembling violently she clung closer to her lord.

"Never mind, dear," consoled Omega as he watched the great beast waddle toward the shore. "We will get him this time," he went on exultingly. "Watch—he is going to get into the trap!"

But they were again doomed to disappointment. Within a few rods of the shore, with its great, spotted body nearly all out of the water, the monster stopped, lifted its head and looked slowly around in every direction. Then apparently scenting danger, it turned, floundered back to the center of the lake and submerged.

"I—I—am afraid," shuddered Thalma.

"There is nothing to fear," reassured Omega. "The beast cannot get to our home, and one of these days he will either get caught in a trap or we will get a shot at him."

Although Omega spoke bravely he was really worried about the beast and the influence it was having on Thalma. He realized that he must at once devise a better method of extermination. Even though he did not fear it so much personally its presence was disturbing, and it was daily absorbing so much water needful for themselves.

THIS great gash in the earth's crust stretching for many miles below them had been the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean when its blue waves still lapped the shores of continents, and that little lake, far down in the earth's bosom, was the pitiful remainder of that once mighty sea. Far to the north-west, showing plainly against the sky in the focus of their binoculars, were great ridges of mountain and table land, rising gaunt and desolate from the ancient bed of the sea—the site of the ancient empire of Japan. Round about them on every hand were the mute remains of marine life, for the spot where they sat had been far below the surface of the sea. Silent, mysterious, hopeless and dreary, the prospect appalled even their stout hearts. How they yearned for the sight of some living thing there upon those high peaks. Silence supreme and dreadful, in which even their voices, hushed and tremulous, sounded profane, cowed them by its unending solemnity and the relentless grip. Gray and nude save for their pall of dust the mountains rose into the sky, eternal in their ghostly majesty. And the dark valleys between with their gray lips of death looked like the gaping mouths of hell.

"Death! death! eternal and triumphant death, thou art everywhere!" cried Omega, springing up and gazing with hopeless eyes about over the desolation.

Thalma rose and touched his arm. A smile of faith and confidence shone on her face. He looked at her in wonder.

"Nay, death is not everywhere," she reproved gently. "Remember Alpha, our son. In him life does and will live again."

"Forgive me, Thalma," said Omega, taking her in his arms. "You speak truly. With your loyalty and courage I know we will win."

And so as it had always been from the beginning of time, even so in these last days it took woman's love and devotion to sustain man.

Now Omega gazed around on the abode of death with an expression of disdain. He challenged it and dared it to do its worst. Life still triumphed, for he had Thalma and Alpha was coming soon. He would not surrender. He would fight the dark forces of death—even that horrible monster down there in the lake—and conquer them all. He would again 'gardenize' the world. The stubborn power of hope, that heritage from his atavistic ancestors, was surging through his blood.

"We will change all this," he went on, waving his hand toward the far rim of the sky. "We are still masters of life. But now let us descend," he added in answer to her approving smile.

So saying again hand in hand they stepped off into space and floated easily down toward their last home.

Omega knew that his first important task was to get rid of the beast. The fear-haunted expression in Thalma's eyes brooked no delay. Accordingly they went to the ship, and each taking a small sack they filled them with depth bombs. Thus armed they floated out over the lake in quest of their enemy. But although quite shallow the water was opaque for the most part being discolored by vegetable matter stirred up by the monster, and the transparent portions were too deep for them to see bottom. Long and carefully they searched at a safe distance above the water, but no sight of the beast could be seen. Then hoping that a chance shot might reach and destroy him they passed to and fro over the lake's center and dropped their bombs. Great columns of water were sent high in air deluging them with spray. That was all. Still, they had no way of knowing whether a bomb had struck home. In spots the water was so violently agitated as to suggest that the monster writhed in a death struggle. But at last all became as quiet as before.

IT now occurred to Omega to surround the lake with an invisible wall of electricity of such power as to electrocute the beast should he attempt to go over or through it. This was accomplished by increasing the power of his motors and by automatic controls projecting a high voltage potential through the air around the lake. And then in addition to other protective appliances already installed Omega put a similar wall about the cottage, much to Thalma's relief and delight.

One night they had retired early, Thalma being weary and her time but a few weeks away. To the sweet strain of music which had been in the air for ages, they soon fell asleep. How long he had slept Omega could never guess, but he was awakened suddenly. He sat up bewildered and stared into the darkness, because for some reason all lamps were out. And then he became aware of a peculiar sound coming from afar. It was a queer noise combining the roar of the surf upon a rock-bound coast, the sigh of the night wind through a forest and the rumble of thunder. Suddenly it seemed to him that earth and cottage were trembling, and the walls of the room swayed and buckled as though smitten by a great wind.

Frantically he rubbed his eyes, convinced that it was all a dream. But the noise drew nearer, thundered in his ears. In terror he got to his feet, tried to cry out. The words froze on his lips, for

just then the wall before him crashed in as though struck by an avalanche. Then came a grinding, splitting jumble of sounds, the solid ground shook under the passage of some mighty force which increased for a moment followed by a piercing scream.

Frozen with horror Omega stared around the wrecked room whose tottering walls seemed about to fall upon him. Where was Thalma? In a frenzy he stared into the darkness, felt over the couch. She was gone!

In some way he got outside and there in the direction of the lake he saw the monster, its great bulk looming high above the ground, its head swaying with the swing of its legs as it lumbered along. And, merciful God—held in the grip of the monster's jaws was Thalma!

The awful sight galvanized Omega to action. With a hoarse scream he launched himself at the beast, passed rapidly through the air above the monster and reached out for his wife. Scream after scream rent the still air as he pressed forward and the beast lurched on in its haste to reach the lake with its prey. But now Omega was close to his beloved, and he reached out to grasp her as once more he screamed right into the ears of his enemy. Then perhaps in sheer terror at the audacity of man, the great jaws of the monster relaxed and Thalma fell limp and unconscious to the ground.

As the beast lumbered on Omega knelt by her side.

"Thank God," he breathed, "she lives!"

Then he took her in his arms and turned back to the ruined home just as a great splash informed him that once more the monster had entered his element to challenge them for its possession.

THALMA soon revived, but she clung to Omega and gazed about fearfully. How she had wandered out of doors and had been snapped up by the beast she could not tell, but Omega said that she must have been walking in her sleep. They went at once to the ship and there spent the remainder of the night.

Every light, including those about the Mirror, had been extinguished by the beast breaking the circuit. Yet it appeared that the latter's passage through the electric wall had caused no harm. Omega explained that likely its bony scales had acted as an insulator against the action of the invisible wall.

While the cottage was being repaired they remained on the ship. But despite their recent harrowing experience, they went back to the cottage when the repairs were complete. It was more home-like than the ship, and Thalma had learned to love it, for it was to be the cradle of a new race. But before they again took up their residence there Omega had erected a high fence around the cottage yard. This fence was built of heavy cables securely fastened to huge posts, and each cable carried an electric charge of 75,000 volts. Omega was confident that the beast could never break through. His confidence was shared by Thalma, but as an additional precaution she suggested that Omega place a similar fence about the lake. He did so, and when the last cable was in place they stood back and surveyed the work with satisfaction.

"We have him now," exulted Omega. "He can never leave the lake alive, much less reach the cottage. Despite his tough armor of scales this high potential will penetrate to his vitals."

"It is well," said Thalma as they turned away.

As they neared the cottage they knew that a crisis was at hand. Forgetting the dead world about them and subduing the fears that sometimes clutched their hearts, they lived in the joy of anticipation and made ready for the advent of a new soul.

Night came down moonless and dark save for the light of the stars. In the recesses of the rocks and in the bottoms of the valleys intense darkness held sway. But the grounds and the home of Omega and Thalma were ablaze with a thousand lamps, and on the near-by hillsides giant searchlights, which seemed to have no basis, which were born in the bosom of the air and blazed without visible cause, shot their rays into the sky for miles. Yet the powerful lights about the cottage were so tinted as to be restful to the eye. Thus silent and with clock-like regularity the agents of Omega performed their functions. Man had mastered all the elements of life. All were his friends and servants, and none was his master save one—death.

In a perfect setting and exactly at the time set for the event Alpha came into the world, the child thrived from its first intake of earth's air.

Three weeks from birth Alpha partook of solid food in tablet form drawn chiefly from gaseous sources. At two months his speech was perfect, and at six months his education began. By glandular control Omega nurtured both his body and his mind and developed them rapidly. Small wonder that this child—the last to grace and bless the world—became his parent's only joy and hope. They guarded him from all dangers, instructed him in the great part he was to play in the world's future and set about to conserve that element on which all depended—the waters of the lake.

BUT during all these long, hot days and frigid nights, the close proximity of the monster cast a shadow over their souls, marred their happiness by day and terrorized their dreams by night.

Often, when the sun beat down upon the lake, they saw his hideous head rise high above the water and regard them with baleful eyes. Twice while at play Alpha had seen him and had run screaming to the protection of his mother, who had great difficulty in persuading him that there was no danger. This seemed to be true, for the monster made no attempt to force the fence. Endowed with more than the cunning of its remote progenitors, it seemed to realize that it was trapped. Many nights Omega and Thalma, armed with their ray guns and other implements of destruction, watched for the beast to attempt to come on land. Sometimes he would raise his head and look at them so long and steadily that icy chills ran along their spines and their hands shook so that they could not sight their weapons and therefore shot wild. Then the head would sink out of sight again.

Secure as they felt against his horrible presence it finally began to sap their courage. Besides, the lake fascinated Alpha, now but three years old but large and strong. He loved to wander by its shore and dabble in the water, but so long as the beast remained, an ever present danger was in this play. Besides there was the fear that he might escape the watchfulness of his parents and come in contact with one of the high tension cables.

And then Omega determined to try another plan—he would electrically charge the water of the lake. He hoped that this would reach the monster in his watery lair and kill him instantly. So he constructed two giant magnets and placed one on each end of the lake. Then harnessing all the electrical energy at his command he sent a tremendous current through the water with high potential, alternating it at ten second intervals for an hour.

Two weeks later he watched for the carcass of the beast to rise. He felt now that his problem was to get rid of it so that it would not pollute the water, but it did not appear.

With fear and trembling Omega observed that the water of the lake was receding inch by inch. Then by chemical action on the coral beds and on the rocks, he created a dense cloud and caused it to form over the lake, thus in a measure protecting it from the sun's rays. But day by day, despite the sheltering cloud, the water receded. Day after day Omega moved his gauges hoping against hope that somehow and somewhere nature would again awaken and bring water upon the earth.

During all these days and months the monster did not raise its head above the surface of the lake—Omega was certain of this, for had the water been disturbed ever so little his water seismograph, as well as his cameras, would have recorded it. The monster was dead at last and they were profoundly thankful. They were the undisputed masters of the earth's last water! Now Alpha could play about the shore and swim in the shallow water in peace and safety. So the dangerous fence was removed.

OMEGA knew that in the beginning the Creator had made man master of his own destiny. He had endowed him with reason and given the earth into his keeping. Omega thoroughly understood the Ruling Power of the universe. He read aright His commands, blazoned across the breasts of billions of worlds, and by the same token he knew that humanity on earth was doomed. Yet he was urged on by that unconquerable spirit which had made man king of all. He set up his rain-making machinery with the smile of a fatalist. For hundreds of miles its sinuous beams sprang into the sky, writhed about like great, hungry serpents with their tremendous sucking and receiving maws, then coiled back to earth bringing not a drop. But one day the Mirror again showed small, faint clouds upon its surface. They were scattered over various parts of the world and their presence made Omega wonder. There appeared to be no reason for them.

"I do not understand those clouds," he said to Thalma as he sat with her and Alpha in the shade of the coral tree. "Perhaps there are hidden places of moisture, that have escaped the receiving rays of this mirror."

"Let us go and see," exclaimed Thalma, her eyes a gleam with a new hope. "Let us make another voyage around the world. Alpha has never been far from home."

"That is so," he agreed. "We will go at once."

So they entered the silver ship and sailed away over the hot, dry wastes, on and on over the cities of antiquity. The ruins of New York, London, Paris and other marts of the ancients were visited in their melancholy quest for life. But even the sites of these cities were hard to find. Only the tops of the tallest structures, such as the tip of the Washington monument and the towers of office buildings stood above the ashes and sands of centuries. But not even the shadow of a cloud was seen. Still they sailed on—even skirted the dark wastes of the poles and stopped in deep valleys to test for water. Twice around the equatorial regions they voyaged in search of a new and better haven, but in vain. The insistent cry for water burned in their souls and led them back to the little lake—the last sop nature had to offer the remnant of her children.

ALTHOUGH the days were still hot and blistering, the nights were cold, ice often forming on the lake near the shore and lingering until touched by the advancing sun. Omega understood, and again a cold fear clutched his heart. Unless by some miracle of the heavens sufficient moisture should come back to the earth, no human soul could long endure the heat of the day and the freezing temperature of night.

To still further conserve the precious water of the lake, Omega now extended the folds of the cloud curtain down to its shores thus completely enclosing it. And as this further reduced the evaporation to a remarkable extent the hopes of Omega and Thalma took on new life. Here they visioned Alpha and his children living and dying in peace, now that the monster was no more. With the help of additional safeguards Omega reckoned that the water might be made to last many more years, and, before it could become wholly exhausted, some whim of nature might again shower the earth with rain.

Now to pass the time—for there was nothing to do except to direct the appliances about them—this last trio of mortals loved to leave the shelter of the cottage, now that they had nothing further to fear from the sea-monster, when the westering sun was low, and ramble among the shadows of the cliffs and commune with the past, until the chill of night drove them indoors. Sometimes sitting there in the dusk Thalma and Alpha would listen to Omega's rich voice as he recounted an epic story in the life of long ago. So to-day seated together on a cliff above the airship, they watched the sun descend. Thalma and Alpha had asked for a story, but Omega refused. For some time he had sat silent, his great, brilliant eyes on the flaming sun as it sank toward the rim of the earth. A great loneliness had suddenly seized him. He recognized it as a presentiment of disaster. It was beyond the analysis of reason, but for the first time in his life he longed to hold back that sun. Somehow he feared the advent of the night. It seemed to him that before the morning light would again flood the earth a dire calamity would befall them.

"Why so sad?" asked Thalma fearfully, and Alpha, at his father's knees, looked up in wonder.

"It is nothing," replied Omega with forced composure as he caressed the boy. "Some foolish thoughts of mine. Now as it is getting chilly I think we had better go down. Oh, how I dread this awful cold which is creeping steadily and mercilessly over the world!" he added softly, his eyes lingering on the sun.

With her usual sweet smile Thalma agreed. So they rose and floated down. When they reached the floor of the valley they paused and regarded the cloud that screened the lake.

"It does well," remarked Omega. "It will make the water last into the years."

"Yes, and all for our boy," said Thalma proudly. Alpha had left them and was playing along the shore.

"It is now time that a mate for him be on the way," went on Omega wistfully. "He must have a sister, you know."

"It is true," she agreed with a glad smile.

Omega had spoken truly. Without a mate Alpha could not perpetuate the race. And so it was arranged that before the rising of the morrow's sun a new life should begin.

Science had steadily advanced the span of life. When Alpha was born Omega was two hundred years old, but that was only middle age. Thalma was twenty-five years his junior. The human birth-rate had decreased with the passing of the centuries and nature now demanded the most exacting conditions for the propagation of the human species. Thalma at her age could not afford to wait longer. Alpha's mate must be provided forthwith.

"Alpha wants to play a while before going in," Thalma continued presently. "I will remain with him."

"Very well, dear," said Omega. "I will go on and prepare dinner."

So saying he set his face toward the cottage, but before he had taken a dozen steps he was startled by a piercing scream from Thalma. He turned swiftly, then stood paralyzed with terror and amazement. Out of the cloud curtain surrounding the lake protruded the ugly scale-covered head and neck of the monster he had believed dead! And the horrible, swaying head was darting down toward the playing boy! The monster's jaws were spread wide, its black tongue was leaping out and in like lightning, the sickening saliva was dripping upon the sand, and its awful eyes were blazing like coals. And then in a twinkling the huge jaws seized the child, the head reared back, the jaws closed, stifling the lad's screams, and it started to draw back into the cloud.

BUT, after the first onrush of horror, life came again to Omega's numbed senses. He darted forward with a mad cry, and as he swung through the air rather than ran, he seized a stone and hurled it at the brute's head. His aim was true and the stone struck the great brute on the bony hood above the right eye. It did not harm, but it maddened the monster. Hissing horribly it swung Alpha high in the air and with a fling dashed him down upon the rocks. Then with a hoarse bellow it turned upon Omega. With its first forward lunge it seemed about to crush Thalma, who was between it and its intended victim. But the sight of her mangled child and the danger to her lord roused all the latent fury and courage in her soul and made of her a fighting demon. Like Omega she grabbed the first weapon at hand—a stone the size of a man's fist—and with the hot breath of the monster in her face she hurled the stone with all her strength straight into the red, gaping mouth.

With a blood-curdling scream the brute halted, reared backward, then ran its head back and forth over the rocks. Its loathsome body thrashed about in the lake, throwing water far up on the beach. Then in its contortions it wallowed up out of the lake as it swung its terrible head about in

agony, all the while hissing its challenge.

Terror-stricken, unable to move, Omega and Thalma watched it and could not understand its writhings. But as it continued to writhe and groan they understood at last—the stone had lodged firmly in its throat and was choking it to death.

Then they sprang to Alpha's side. Omega gathered him up in his arms, but he saw with one agonized glance that he was dead. His skull was crushed and it appeared that every bone in his body was broken.

Omega's heart was bursting, but he did not cry out. Holding the crushed body of his son, he raised his eyes to that God who throughout the ages had hidden His face from man, and smiled a brave smile of humility and resignation. While Thalma, understanding all, looked on dumb and dry-eyed.

Leaving the monster floundering about in its death agony, they took their beloved son to the cottage and there injected those chemicals which would forever arrest decay. Then they placed him on his cot that he might be with them to the end of life. It was then that Thalma, broken in spirit, found refuge and relief in tears which have always been woman's solace and savior.

And Omega, gazing out toward the lake, saw that the monster lay still. They had won their long battle, but at an awful cost. Omega realized that the gigantic creature, probably deep in a water cavern, had been only stunned by the electric charges.

THALMA refused to be comforted. Day after day she wept above the lifeless form of her boy. All Omega's words of consolation, all his reasoning and faith in the wisdom and justice of all things, failed to soothe her torn heart. Nor did the promise of another child, rouse her from her sorrow. She steadfastly refused to consider another child. Life had lost its last hold on her soul, and now she was ready to surrender to that cruel fate which had given them mirages of promise and mocked their misery. In vain Omega explained that it was their duty to fight on; that they, the last of a once noble race, must not show the white feather of cowardice. He mentioned the great consolation they had of having their beloved son ever near them, though lifeless. But Thalma longed for the presence of the soul, for those words of endearment and love that had thrilled her mother heart.

Before the embalment it would have been possible for Omega to restore life to his boy. Man had mastered all the secrets of biology and life. He could have mended the broken bones and tissues, revitalized the heart and lungs and cleared the brain. Alpha would have walked with them again. But his personality would not have been there. That mysterious something, men call the soul, had fled forever, and so far mankind had not been able to create its counterpart. To have brought life again to Alpha would have been a travesty on the brilliant mind they had known. Omega recalled many pathetic examples of such resuscitation where the living had walked in death.

Omega foresaw the end, but he smiled in the face of it all. He was the same kind and loving companion Thalma had always known, her every want his command and law. But no more she realized its inspiration and love. He seldom left her side any more, but sometimes overcome with sorrow he would soar up above the peaks and commune alone with the past.

So to-day he had risen higher than usual. The red sun beat upon his body as he hovered in the hot air, his eyes fixed on the distant sky line. He gazed like a famished animal, for it seemed to him that at last a cloud must appear above that hopeless shore of land and sky and bring renewed life to him and his. Yet he fully realized the impossibility of such a thing. Slowly his great, dark eyes roved around the horizon. He loathed its dreary monotony, and still it fascinated him. Beyond that dead line of land and sky lay nothing but ghastly death. His many voyages in the airship and the reflecting Mirror told him that, but still he hoped on.

When at last he glided down to the cottage the sun was low. Having registered the time in his mind when he left Thalma—for countless generations man had dispensed with time-keeping devices—he realized that he had been gone just three hours. Reproaching himself for his negligence he entered the doorway, then stared aghast.

Upon Thalma's wide couch facing a painting of the ancient, green world, she had placed the body of Alpha, then lain down by his side. Her glazed eyes were fixed upon the picture, and for the first time in many weeks there was a smile about her lips.

Omega knelt by her side, took her cold hands in his and feverishly kissed her brow. With a grief too deep for tears he smiled at death, thankful for the love she had borne him. Nor did he censure the Plan of the Creator, the Plan that had led him, Omega, scion of the world's great, up to the zenith of life and now left him alone, the sole representative of its power. Thalma had passed on, and in the first crushing moments of his agony Omega was tempted to join her. Without effort and without fear or pain, his was the power to check the machinery of life.

CRUSHED and broken, Omega sat by his dead, while the shadows of night entered the valley and wrapped all in their soft embrace. When would his own hour strike? He might retard or hasten that time, but the real answer lay in that little lake out there under the stars, daily shrinking despite the cloud curtain. There was nothing more to live for, yet he determined to live, to go down fighting like a valiant knight of old, to set an example for the sons of other worlds.

But despite his brave resolution his grief for a while seemed likely to master him. Heart-broken he finally went out into the cold dusk and gazed up at the heavens appealingly.

"Alone!" he whispered as an overwhelming sense of his isolation tore his spirit. "Alone in a dead world—the sole survivor of its vanished life!"

He slumped to the ground and buried his face in the cold dust. His thoughts were jumbled in a maze of pain and sorrow. He could neither pray nor think. Gasping, dying a thousand deaths, he lay there groveling in the dust. But at last he rose, dashed the dust from his eyes and again faced the sky. He would accept the cruel mandate of nature. He would live on and try to conquer all—even death.

He cast his eyes along the shore of the lake, and there in the starlight loomed the form of the dead monster which, but for Thalma's unerring aim, would have been the last of earth's creatures. Omega sighed and turned back to his dead.

But despite his resolution to live the loneliness was sapping Omega's spirit. During the following weeks in a mood of recklessness and despair he allowed the cloud curtain to dissolve above the lake. Once more the sun's hot rays poured down unhindered and the lake receded rapidly.

As time went on Omega grew more restless. Only by taking many voyages around the world was he able to endure the appalling silence. He was the last traveler to visit the ancient marts of man, he was the last hope and despair of life. Sometimes he talked aloud to himself, but his words sounded hollow and ghostly in that deep silence, which only added to his misery.

And then one day in a fit of desperation he rebelled. He cursed the fate that had selected him to drink the last bitter dregs of life. In this desperate frame of mind he evolved a daring plan. He would not drink those dregs alone!

IN the chemical laboratory of the ship were all the elements of creative force and life known to man. From the four corners of the earth they had been garnered, and some had come from sister planets. Here were the ingredients of creation. For thousands of years man had been able to create various forms of life. He had evolved many pulsing, squirming things. He had even made man-like apes possessing the instinct of obedience, and which he used for servants, and much of his animal food also had been created in this manner.

Being skilled in all branches of biology and chemistry Omega would create a comrade to share his long wait for death. So he set to work and the task eased the pain in his heart. He placed his chemicals in the test tube and watched the cell evolve until it pulsed with life. Carefully nursing the frail embryo he added other plasmas, then fertilized the whole with warm spermatozoa and placed it in the incubator over which glowed a violet, radio-active light.

The young life developed quickly and soon began to take form within the glass walls. In a month it half-filled the incubator, and at the end of six weeks he released it, but it still grew amazingly.

At first Omega was appalled by the monstrosity he had created, for it was a loathsome, repulsive creature. Its head was flat and broad and sat upon its sloping shoulders without a connecting neck. Its legs were short, but its arms were long, and when standing erect it carried them well in front of an enormous torso. Its short hands and feet were webbed like those of a duck. It had no visible ears, and its nostrils were mere holes above a wide, grinning, thin-lipped mouth, which was always spread in a grin. Its large, round, red eyes had no gleam of intelligence, and its hairless skin, covered with minute, sucker-like scales, lay in loose, ugly folds across its great chest. Most of its movements were slow and uncertain, and it hopped about over the floor like a giant toad, uttering guttural sounds deep within its chest. Omega had set out to create an ape-man, but this thing was neither man nor beast, bird or reptile, but a travesty on all—an unspeakable horror from the dead womb of the past.

Yet hideous as this creature was Omega looked upon it with a certain degree of gratitude. It was a companion at least, and it seemed to reciprocate the respect of its creator by fawning upon him and licking his hand. Its red tongue always hung from its slavering mouth like that of a panting dog. Omega named it The Grinner, because of its habitual and ghastly smile. He took it to the cottage that it might wait on him through the long hours of solitude. That night it slept by his side, content and motionless. But the next morning after this first night of incongruous companionship Omega was awakened by its stertorous breathing and the touch of a cold, clammy sweat which was oozing from its pores and dropping upon the floor.

THROUGHOUT the day Omega marveled at this phenomenon. He noticed that the weird thing went often to the drinking fountain and wrapped its tongue about the water jet. That night he awakened at midnight to find The Grinner gone. He did not bother to look for him and mid-forenoon he returned. His rotund form seemed to have grown even larger, and as he ambled about on all fours the sweat trickled from his repulsive skin and trailed across the floor. It was a strange thing and Omega was at a loss to account for it, but his wonder was eclipsed by his appreciation of The Grinner's companionship. The Grinner was often absent for hours at a time, but he always returned of his own free will. Omega often saw him ambling among the rocks or stretched out in the sun on the beach. He formed the habit of letting him have his way, which was that of extreme laziness. But during all this time he was growing prodigiously. In three months he had become a monster weighing well over half a ton, but he still retained his amiable nature and

affection for his master.

OMEGA seldom left the cottage. Determined to live as long as possible—for the age-old urge of life still persisted—to do nothing to hasten his end, he, nevertheless, was doing nothing to defer it. His soul in the past, he desired only to be near his dear ones. For hours he would sit gazing on their peaceful features, pouring into their heedless ears the love songs of his heart. Living for them, patiently awaiting the day when he, too, could enter into rest, he paid less and less attention to The Grinner, only noticing that he grew more horrible and repulsive as his size increased.

Lonely and despondent Omega at last left the cottage only to go to the airship for supplies. He seldom even looked toward the lake. It was a long time since he had walked about its shores, but one afternoon the impulse came to wander that way again. He was amazed that the water was disappearing so rapidly. The body of the monster now lay more than fifteen rods from the water's edge, though it had been killed on the edge of the lake.

With an indifferent and melancholy gaze Omega looked across the lake. Suddenly his stare became fixed and wild, like that of one stricken dumb. About twenty rods out the water was suddenly agitated as though by the movement of some great bulk along its bottom, and then for a fleeting instant he glimpsed a dark, shining form heave above the surface, then sink out of sight before he could grasp its details.

"My God," he exclaimed hoarsely, "there is another sea-monster! Likely it is the mate of the one Thalma killed. I might have known there would be a mate. We were dealing with two of the beasts all that time. And now this thing disputes my right to the water!"

Omega's face grew grim and stern as he glared out over the water and his heart-beats quickened. The latent combativeness of humanity was once more aroused in him. He had considered himself the last representative of life on earth. He should remain the last. No beast should claim that honor. He would kill it.

Then for two weeks he waited and watched for it to reappear, waited with all the terrible atomic weapons at hand, but he saw it no more. The Grinner sleeping in the sand was the only form of life to be seen, and at last he became weary of the hunt. He figured that some day he would charge the lake, but there was no hurry.

At last Omega lost all interest in the things about him. The Grinner came and went unhindered and almost unnoticed. He continued to grow, but Omega gave him little thought. Even the treasures in the airship had lost their lure for him. Disconsolate and hopeless, yet clinging grimly to life, he passed his time in the company of his dead.

He had not left the cottage for several weeks, when one cold morning after a sleepless night, something impelled him to go in search of The Grinner who had been absent all night. As this had become a frequent occurrence during the past two months Omega's curiosity was aroused. As he glided toward the lake he wondered why his interest in his surroundings had been aroused by thoughts of The Grinner, and once more he thought of killing that other sea-monster in the lake. The lake! He stopped and stared and stared. The lake was gone! Only a pool of an acre or two remained, and in its center, disporting himself in glee was—not the monster he was looking for—but The Grinner! The bloated creature was rolling about in the water with all the abandonment of a mud-wallowing hog.

OMEGA gazed in astonishment, then a shrill laugh escaped him. He had mistaken The Grinner for another monster of the deep. It was the last joke of life, and it was on him.

Then he realized that this grotesque child of his hands, having in its system the combined thirst of the dry ages—man, animal, plant, bird and reptile—was sucking up the lake, absorbing it through his pores, then sweating it out only to repeat the process. Water was his element and food. From the dim, dry past had come nature's cry for water to find expression in this monster of Omega's making. That which he had created for a companion had grown into a terrible menace, which was rapidly exhausting his remaining stronghold of life. But, somehow, Omega did not care, and as he watched the monstrous thing finally flounder its way to the shore and lie down panting in the sun, he was glad that it was not another monster of the deep.

For a moment Omega's eyes rested on the drying form of the dead beast on the slope above him, then with a shudder he turned to The Grinner.

He went up close and stared into its terrible eyes which blinked back at him as its mouth spread in a leer. Already the sweat was coursing along the slimy folds of its skin and dripping off to be swallowed by the thirsty ground. It was a huge water sucker. It took water in enormous quantities, fed upon its organisms, then discharged it through its skin. Assisted by the rays of the sun it was rapidly drying up the lake.

Now, as Omega stood regarding it in awe and wonder, it showed signs of distress. It began to writhe and utter hoarse cries of pain. Its eyes rolled horribly, its great, barrel-like body heaved and trembled, and it waved its long arms and threshed its feet upon the ground. Omega realized that it was the victim of its own abnormal appetite. With the relish of a gormandizer it had taken more of its peculiar food than even its prodigious maw could assimilate. Soon its struggles

became fiercer. It rolled over and over in contortions of agony, the sweat streaming from its body, while a pitiful moaning came from its horrid mouth. But at last it became quiet, its moanings trailed off into silence, it jerked spasmodically and lay still.

Omega approached and placed his hand over its heart. There was no pulsation. The Grinner was dead.

With a sigh Omega turned back to the cottage. Although he was now alone once more, he did not care. All he had to do was to prepare himself for the Great Adventure, which despite all man's god-like achievements, still remained a mystery.

Now that the lake was almost gone it again drew his attention. The sickly grass had long since given up trying to follow the retreating water and now was only a dead and melancholy strip of yellow far back from the shore. Every day Omega went to the little pool and calmly watched it fade away, watched without qualms of fear or heartache. He was ready. But even now, hot and weary, he refused adequately to slake his thirst. He must fight on to the last, for such was the prerogative and duty of the human race. He must conserve that precious fluid.

AT last there came a morning when Omega, gazing from his doorway, looked in vain for the shining pool. Nothing but a brown expanse of rock and sand met his view where the lake had been. Already the salt crystals were glinting in the sun. A long, lingering sigh escaped him. It had come at last! The last water of those mighty seas which once had covered nearly the whole earth, had departed leaving him alone with the dead of ages.

Hot and feverish he glided over the dry bed of the lake. Finally in the lowest depression on earth he found, in a little hollow of rock, a mere cupful of water. Like a thirst-maddened animal he sucked it up in great gulps, then licked the rock dry. *IT WAS THE LAST DROP!*

Omega rose, his face calm and resigned. With a smile of gratitude he looked up at the sky. The water was bitter, but he was thankful he had been given the final cup.

Then he went to the airship and shot up into the blue and on around the world in a voyage of farewell. In a few hours he was back. Reverently he set the airship down on its landing place. He was through with it now. Its usefulness was gone, its great, pulsing motors forever silent, soon to be covered with the dust of ages, he would leave it a monument to mankind. For a little while he wandered among the treasures of the ship. Sacred as they were they still mocked him with their impotency to stay the hand of death. But he loved them all. Thalma had loved them and they had been Alpha's playmates, and their marvelous powers had been his hope and inspiration. With loving caresses and a full heart he bade good bye to these treasures of his fathers, soon to become the keepsakes of death.

At last having completed the rounds he let himself out into the still air. Resolutely he set his face toward home.

The hot noonday sun, beating fiercely down on the dead world, entered the cottage and fell in a flood of glory about the couch where Omega, the last man, lay between his loved ones. His great eyes were set and staring, but on his features rested a smile of peace—the seal of life's last dream.

"The rest is silence."

THE END

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OMEGA, THE MAN ***

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