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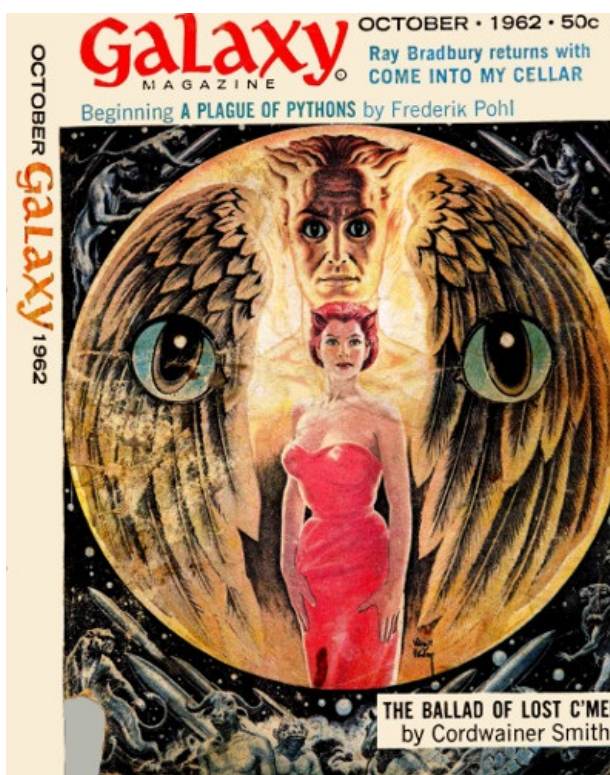
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A CITY NEAR CENTAURUS \*\*\*



# A CITY NEAR CENTAURUS

By BILL DOEDE

Illustrated by WEST

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***The city was sacred, but not to its gods.  
Michaelson was a god—but far from sacred!***

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Crouched in the ancient doorway like an animal peering out from his burrow, Mr. Michaelson saw the native.

At first he was startled, thinking it might be someone else from the Earth settlement who had discovered the old city before him. Then he saw the glint of sun against the metallic skirt, and relaxed.

He chuckled to himself, wondering with amusement what a webfooted man was doing in an old dead city so far from his people. Some facts were known about the people of Alpha Centaurus II. They were not actually natives, he recalled. They were a colony from the fifth planet of the system. They were a curious people. Some were highly intelligent, though uneducated.

He decided to ignore the man for the moment. He was far down the ancient street, a mere speck against the sand. There would be plenty of time to wonder about him.

He gazed out from his position at the complex variety of buildings before him. Some were small, obviously homes. Others were huge with tall, frail spires standing against the pale blue sky. Square buildings, ellipsoid, spheroid. Beautiful, dream-stuff bridges connected tall, conical towers, bridges that still swung in the wind after half a million years. Late afternoon sunlight shone against ebony surfaces. The sands of many centuries had blown down the wide streets and filled the doorways. Desert plants grew from roofs of smaller buildings.

Ignoring the native, Mr. Michaelson poked about among the ruins happily, exclaiming to himself about some particular artifact, marveling at its state of preservation, holding it this way and that to catch the late afternoon sun, smiling, clucking gleefully. He crawled over the rubble through old doorways half filled with the accumulation of ages. He dug experimentally in the sand with his hands, like a dog, under a roof that had weathered half a million years of rain and sun. Then he crawled out again, covered with dust and cobwebs.

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The native stood in the street less than a hundred feet away, waving his arms madly. "Mr. Earthgod," he cried. "It is sacred ground where you are trespassing!"

The archeologist smiled, watching the man hurry closer. He was short, even for a native. Long gray hair hung to his shoulders, bobbing up and down as he walked. He wore no shoes. The toes of his webbed feet dragged in the sand, making a deep trail behind him. He was an old man.

"You never told us about this old dead city," Michaelson said, chidingly. "Shame on you. But never mind. I've found it now. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, beautiful. You will leave now."

"Leave?" Michaelson asked, acting surprised as if the man were a child. "I just got here a few hours ago."

"You must go."

"Why? Who are you?"

"I am keeper of the city."

"You?" Michaelson laughed. Then, seeing how serious the native was, said, "What makes you think a dead city needs a keeper?"

"The spirits may return."

Michaelson crawled out of the doorway and stood up. He brushed his trousers. He pointed. "See that wall? Built of some metal, I'd say, some alloy impervious to rust and wear."

"The spirits are angry."

"Notice the inscriptions? Wind has blown sand against them for eons, and rain and sleet. But their story is there, once we decipher it."

"Leave!"

The native's lined, weathered old face was working around the mouth in anger. Michaelson was almost sorry he had mocked him. He was deadly serious.

"Look," he said. "No spirits are ever coming back here. Don't you know that? And even if they did, spirits care nothing for old cities half covered with sand and dirt."

He walked away from the old man, heading for another building. The sun had already gone below the horizon, coloring the high clouds. He glanced backward. The webfoot was following.

"Mr. Earthgod!" the webfoot cried, so sharply that Michaelson stopped. "You must not touch, not

walk upon, not handle. Your step may destroy the home of some ancient spirit. Your breath may cause one iota of change and a spirit may lose his way in the darkness. Go quickly now, or be killed."

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He turned and walked off, not looking back.

Michaelson stood in the ancient street, tall, gaunt, feet planted wide, hands in pockets, watching the webfoot until he was out of sight beyond a huge circular building. There was a man to watch. There was one of the intelligent ones. One look into the alert old eyes had told him that.

Michaelson shook his head, and went about satisfying his curiosity. He entered buildings without thought of roofs falling in, or decayed floors dropping from under his weight. He began to collect small items, making a pile of them in the street. An ancient bowl, metal untouched by the ages. A statue of a man, one foot high, correct to the minutest detail, showing how identical they had been to Earthmen. He found books still standing on ancient shelves but was afraid to touch them without tools.

Darkness came swiftly and he was forced out into the street.

He stood there alone feeling the age of the place. Even the smell of age was in the air. Silver moonlight from the two moons filtered through clear air down upon the ruins. The city lay now in darkness, dead and still, waiting for morning so it could lie dead and still in the sun.

There was no hurry to be going home, although he was alone, although this was Alpha Centaurus II with many unknowns, many dangers ... although home was a very great distance away. There was no one back there to worry about him.

His wife had died many years ago back on Earth. No children. His friends in the settlement would not look for him for another day at least. Anyway, the tiny cylinder, buried in flesh behind his ear, a thing of mystery and immense power, could take him home instantly, without effort save a flicker of thought.

"You did not leave, as I asked you."

Michaelson whirled around at the sound of the native's voice. Then he relaxed. He said, "You shouldn't sneak up on a man like that."

"You must leave, or I will be forced to kill you. I do not want to kill you, but if I must...." He made a clucking sound deep in the throat. "The spirits are angry."

"Nonsense. Superstition! But never mind. You have been here longer than I. Tell me, what are those instruments in the rooms? It looks like a clock but I'm certain it had some other function."

"What rooms?"

"Oh, come now. The small rooms back there. Look like they were bedrooms."

"I do not know." The webfoot drew closer. Michaelson decided he was sixty or seventy years old, at least.

"You've been here a long time. You are intelligent, and you must be educated, the way you talk. That gadget looks like a time-piece of some sort. What is it? What does it measure?"

"I insist that you go." The webfoot held something in his hand.

"No." Michaelson looked off down the street, trying to ignore the native, trying to feel the life of the city as it might have been.

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"You are sensitive," the native said in his ear. "It takes a sensitive god to feel the spirits moving in the houses and walking in these old streets."

"Say it any way you want to. This is the most fascinating thing I've ever seen. The Inca's treasure, the ruins of Pompeii, Egyptian tombs—none can hold a candle to this."

"Mr. Earthgod...."

"Don't call me that. I'm not a god, and you know it."

The old man shrugged. "It is not an item worthy of dispute. Those names you mention, are they the names of gods?"

He chuckled. "In a way, yes. What is your name?"

"Maota."

"You must help me, Maota. These things must be preserved. We'll build a museum, right here in the street. No, over there on the hill just outside the city. We'll collect all the old writings and perhaps we may decipher them. Think of it, Maota! To read pages written so long ago and think their thoughts. We'll put everything under glass. Build and evacuate chambers to stop the decay. Catalogue, itemize...."

Michaelson was warming up to his subject, but Maota shook his head like a waving palm frond and stamped his feet.

"You will leave now."

"Can't you see? Look at the decay. These things are priceless. They must be preserved. Future generations will thank us."

"Do you mean," the old man asked, aghast, "that you want others to come here? You know the city abhors the sound of alien voices. Those who lived here may return one day! They must not find their city packaged and preserved and laid out on shelves for the curious to breathe their foul breaths upon. You will leave. Now!"

"No." Michaelson was adamant. The rock of Gibraltar.

Maota hit him, quickly, passionately, and dropped the weapon beside his body. He turned swiftly, making a swirling mark in the sand with his heel, and walked off toward the hills outside the city.

The weapon he had used was an ancient book. Its paper-thin pages rustled in the wind as if an unseen hand turned them, reading, while Michaelson's blood trickled out from the head wound upon the ancient street.

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When he regained consciousness the two moons, bright sentinel orbs in the night sky, had moved to a new position down their sliding path. Old Maota's absence took some of the weirdness and fantasy away. It seemed a more practical place now.

The gash in his head was painful, throbbing with quick, short hammer-blows synchronized with his heart beats. But there was a new determination in him. If it was a fight that the old webfooted fool wanted, a fight he would get. The cylinder flicked him, at his command, across five hundred miles of desert and rocks to a small creek he remembered. Here he bathed his head in cool water until all the caked blood was dissolved from his hair. Feeling better, he went back.

The wind had turned cool. Michaelson shivered, wishing he had brought a coat. The city was absolutely still except for small gusts of wind sighing through the frail spires. The ancient book still lay in the sand beside the dark spot of blood. He stooped over and picked it up.

It was light, much lighter than most Earth books. He ran a hand over the binding. Smooth it was, untouched by time or climate. He squinted at the pages, tilting the book to catch the bright moonlight, but the writing was alien. He touched the page, ran his forefinger over the writing.

Suddenly he sprang back. The book fell from his hands.

"God in heaven!" he exclaimed.

He had heard a voice. He looked around at the old buildings, down the length of the ancient street. Something strange about the voice. Not Maota. Not his tones. Not his words. Satisfied that no one was near, he stooped and picked up the book again.

"Good God!" he said aloud. It was the book talking. His fingers had touched the writing again. It was not a voice, exactly, but a stirring in his mind, like a strange language heard for the first time.

A talking book. What other surprises were in the city? Tall, fragile buildings laughing at time and weather. A clock measuring God-knows-what. If such wonders remained, what about those already destroyed? One could only guess at the machines, the gadgets, the artistry already decayed and blown away to mix forever with the sand.

I must preserve it, he thought, whether Maota likes it or not. They say these people lived half a million years ago. A long time. Let's see, now. A man lives one hundred years on the average. Five thousand lifetimes.

And all you do is touch a book, and a voice jumps across all those years!

He started off toward the tall building he had examined upon discovery of the city. His left eyelid began to twitch and he laid his forefinger against the eye, pressing until it stopped. Then he stooped and entered the building. He laid the book down and tried to take the "clock" off the wall. It was dark in the building and his fingers felt along the wall, looking for it. Then he touched it. His fingers moved over its smooth surface. Then suddenly he jerked his hand back with an exclamation of amazement. Fear ran up his spine.

*The clock was warm.*

He felt like running, like flicking back to the settlement where there were people and familiar voices, for here was a thing that should not be. Half a million years—and here was warmth!

He touched it again, curiosity overwhelming his fear. It was warm. No mistake. And there was a faint vibration, a suggestion of power. He stood there in the darkness staring off into the darkness, trembling. Fear built up in him until it was a monstrous thing, drowning reason. He forgot the power of the cylinder behind his ear. He scrambled through the doorway. He got up and ran down the ancient sandy street until he came to the edge of the city. Here he stopped, gasping for air, feeling the pain throb in his head.

Common sense said that he should go home, that nothing worthwhile could be accomplished at night, that he was tired, that he was weak from loss of blood and fright and running. But when Michaelson was on the trail of important discoveries he had no common sense.

He sat down in the darkness, meaning to rest a moment.

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When he awoke dawn was red against thin clouds in the east.

Old Maota stood in the street with webbed feet planted far apart in the sand, a weapon in the crook of his arm. It was a long tube affair, familiar to Michaelson.

Michaelson asked, "Did you sleep well?"

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"How do you feel?"

"Fine, but my head aches a little."

"Sorry," Maota said.

"For what?"

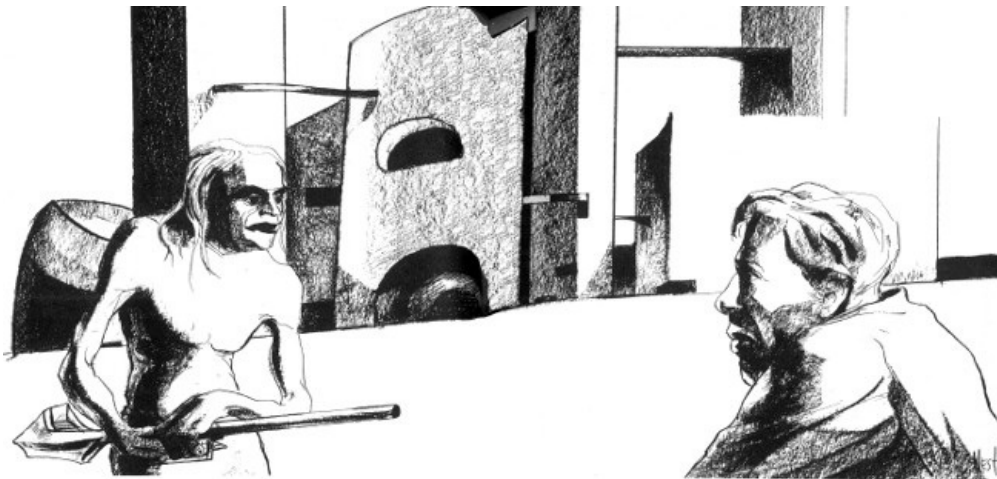
"For hitting you. Pain is not for gods like you."

Michaelson relaxed somewhat. "What kind of man are you? First you try to break my skull, then you apologize."

"I abhor pain. I should have killed you outright."

He thought about that for a moment, eyeing the weapon.

It looked in good working order. Slim and shiny and innocent, it looked like a glorified African blowgun. But he was not deceived by its appearance. It was a deadly weapon.



"Well," he said, "before you kill me, tell me about the book." He held it up for Maota to see.

"What about the book?"

"What kind of book is it?"

"What does Mr. Earthgod mean, what *kind* of book? You have seen it. It is like any other book, except for the material and the fact that it talks."

"No, no. I mean, what's in it?"

"Poetry."

"Poetry? For God's sake, why poetry? Why not mathematics or history? Why not tell how to make the metal of the book itself? Now there is a subject worthy of a book."

Maota shook his head. "One does not study a dead culture to learn how they made things, but how they thought. But we are wasting time. I must kill you now, so I can get some rest."

The old man raised the gun.

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"Wait! You forget that I also have a weapon." He pointed to the spot behind his ear where the cylinder was buried. "I can move faster than you can fire the gun."

Maota nodded. "I have heard how you travel. It does not matter. I will kill you anyway."

"I suggest we negotiate."

"No."

"Why not?"

Maota looked off toward the hills, old eyes filmed from years of sand and wind, leather skin lined and pitted. The hills stood immobile, brown-gray, already shimmering with heat, impotent.

"Why not?" Michaelson repeated.

"Why not what?" Maota dragged his eyes back.

"Negotiate."

"No." Maota's eyes grew hard as steel. They stood there in the sun, not twenty feet apart, hating each other. The two moons, very pale and far away on the western horizon, stared like two bottomless eyes.

"All right, then. At least it's a quick death. I hear that thing just disintegrates a man. Pfft! And that's that."

Michaelson prepared himself to move if the old man's finger slid closer toward the firing stud. The old man raised the gun.

"Wait!"

"Now what?"

"At least read some of the book to me before I die, then."

The gun wavered. "I am not an unreasonable man," the webfoot said.

Michaelson stepped forward, extending his arm with the book.

"No, stay where you are. Throw it."

"This book is priceless. You just don't go throwing such valuable items around."

"It won't break. Throw it."

Michaelson threw the book. It landed at Maota's feet, spouting sand against his leg. He shifted the weapon, picked up the book and leafed through it, raising his head in a listening attitude, searching for a suitable passage. Michaelson heard the thin, metallic pages rustle softly. He could have jumped and seized the weapon at that moment, but his desire to hear the book was strong.

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Old Maota read, Michaelson listened. The cadence was different, the syntax confusing. But the thoughts were there. It might have been a professor back on Earth reading to his students. Keats, Shelley, Browning. These people were human, with human thoughts and aspirations.

The old man stopped reading. He squatted slowly, keeping Michaelson in sight, and laid the book face up in the sand. Wind moved the pages.

"See?" he said. "The spirits read. They must have been great readers, these people. They drink the book, as if it were an elixir. See how gentle! They lap at the pages like a new kitten tasting milk."

Michaelson laughed. "You certainly have an imagination."

"What difference does it make?" Maota cried, suddenly angry. "You want to close up all these things in boxes for a posterity who may have no slightest feeling or appreciation. I want to leave the city as it is, for spirits whose existence I cannot prove."

The old man's eyes were furious now, deadly. The gun came down directly in line with the Earthman's chest. The gnarled finger moved.

Michaelson, using the power of the cylinder behind his ear, jumped behind the old webfoot. To Maota it seemed that he had flicked out of existence like a match blown out. The next instant Michaelson spun him around and hit him. It was an inexperienced fist, belonging to an archeologist, not a fighter. But Maota was an old man.

He dropped in the sand, momentarily stunned. Michaelson bent over to pick up the gun and the old man, feeling it slip from his fingers, hung on and was pulled to his feet.

They struggled for possession of the gun, silently, gasping, kicking sand. Faces grew red. Lips drew back over Michaelson's white teeth, over Maota's pink, toothless gums. The dead city's fragile spires threw impersonal shadows down where they fought.

Then quite suddenly a finger or hand—neither knew whose finger or hand—touched the firing stud.

There was a hollow, whooshing sound. Both stopped still, realizing the total destruction they might have caused.

"It only hit the ground," Michaelson said.

A black, charred hole, two feet in diameter and—they could not see how deep—stared at them.

Maota let go and sprawled in the sand. "The book!" he cried. "The book is gone!"

"No! We probably covered it with sand while we fought."

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Both men began scooping sand in their cupped hands, digging frantically for the book. Saliva dripped from Maota's mouth, but he didn't know or care.

Finally they stopped, exhausted. They had covered a substantial area around the hole. They had covered the complete area where they had been.

"We killed it," the old man moaned.

"It was just a book. Not alive, you know."

"How do you know?" The old man's pale eyes were filled with tears. "It talked and it sang. In a way, it had a soul. Sometimes on long nights I used to imagine it loved me, for taking care of it."

"There are other books. We'll get another."

Maota shook his head. "There are no more."

"But I've seen them. Down there in the square building."

"Not poetry. Books, yes, but not poetry. That was the only book with songs."

"I'm sorry."

"*You* killed it!" Maota suddenly sprang for the weapon, lying forgotten in the sand. Michaelson put his foot on it and Maota was too weak to tear it loose. He could only weep out his rage.

When he could talk again, Maota said, "I am sorry, Mr. Earthgod. I've disgraced myself."

"Don't be sorry." Michaelson helped him to his feet. "We fight for some reasons, cry for others. A priceless book is a good reason for either."

"Not for that. For not winning. I should have killed you last night when I had the chance. The gods give us chances and if we don't take them we lose forever."

"I told you before! We are on the same side. Negotiate. Have you never heard of negotiation?"

"You are a god," Maota said. "One does not negotiate with gods. One either loves them, or kills them."

"That's another thing. I am not a god. Can't you understand?"

"Of course you are." Maota looked up, very sure. "Mortals cannot step from star to star like crossing a shallow brook."

"No, no. I don't step from one star to another. An invention does that. Just an invention. I carry it with me. It's a tiny thing. No one would ever guess it has such power. So you see, I'm human, just like you. Hit me and I hurt. Cut me and I bleed. I love. I hate. I was born. Some day I'll die. See? I'm human. Just a human with a machine. No more than that."

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Maota laughed, then sobered quickly. "You lie."

"No."

"If I had this machine, could I travel as you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll kill you and take yours."

"It would not work for you."

"Why?"

"Each machine is tailored for each person."

The old man hung his head. He looked down into the black, charred hole. He walked all around the hole. He kicked at the sand, looking half-heartedly again for the book.

"Look," Michaelson said. "I'm sure I've convinced you that I'm human. Why not have a try at negotiating our differences?"

He looked up. His expressive eyes, deep, resigned, studied Michaelson's face. Finally he shook his head sadly. "When we first met I hoped we could think the ancient thoughts together. But our paths diverge. We have finished, you and I."

He turned and started off, shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Michaelson caught up to him. "Are you leaving the city?"

"No."

"Where are you going?"

"Away. Far away." Maota looked off toward the hills, eyes distant.

"Don't be stupid, old man. How can you go far away and not leave the city?"

"There are many directions. You would not understand."

"East. West. North. South. Up. Down."

"No, no. There is another direction. Come, if you must see."

Michaelson followed him far down the street. They came to a section of the city he had not seen



before. Buildings were smaller, spires dwarfed against larger structures. Here a path was packed in the sand, leading to a particular building.

Michaelson said, "This is where you live?"

"Yes."

Maota went inside. Michaelson stood in the entrance and looked around. The room was clean, furnished with hand made chairs and a bed. Who is this old man, he thought, far from his people, living alone, choosing a life of solitude among ancient ruins but not touching them? Above the bed a "clock" was fastened to the wall, Michaelson remembered his fright—thinking of the warmth where warmth should not be.

Maota pointed to it.

"You asked about this machine," he said. "Now I will tell you." He laid his hand against it. "Here is power to follow another direction."

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Michaelson tested one of the chairs to see if it would hold his weight, then sat down. His curiosity about the instrument was colossal, but he forced a short laugh. "Maota, you *are* complex. Why not stop all this mystery nonsense and tell me about it? You know more about it than I."

"Of course." Maota smiled a toothless, superior smile. "What do you suppose happened to this race?"

"You tell me."

"They took the unknown direction. The books speak of it. I don't know how the instrument works, but one thing is certain. The race did not die out, as a species becomes extinct."

Michaelson was amused, but interested. "Something like a fourth dimension?"

"I don't know. I only know that with this instrument there is no death. I have read the books that speak of this race, this wonderful people who conquered all disease, who explored all the mysteries of science, who devised this machine to cheat death. See this button here on the face of the instrument? Press the button, and...."

"And what?"

"I don't know, exactly. But I have lived many years. I have walked the streets of this city and wondered, and wanted to press the button. Now I will do so."

Quickly the old man, still smiling, pressed the button. A high-pitched whine filled the air, just within audio range. Steady for a moment, it then rose in pitch passing beyond hearing quickly.

The old man's knees buckled. He sank down, fell over the bed, lay still. Michaelson touched him cautiously, then examined him more carefully. No question about it.

The old man was dead.

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Feeling depressed and alone, Michaelson found a desert knoll outside the city overlooking the tall spires that shone in the sunlight and gleamed in the moonlight. He made a stretcher, rolled the old man's body on to it and dragged it down the long ancient street and up the knoll.

Here he buried him.

But it seemed a waste of time. Somehow he knew beyond any doubt that the old native and his body were completely disassociated in some sense more complete than death.

In the days that followed he gave much thought to the "clock." He came to the city every day. He spent long hours in the huge square building with the books. He learned the language by sheer bulldog determination. Then he searched the books for information about the instrument.

Finally after many weeks, long after the winds had obliterated all evidence of Maota's grave on the knoll, Michaelson made a decision. He had to know if the machine would work for him.

And so one afternoon when the ancient spires threw long shadows over the sand he walked down the long street and entered the old man's house. He stood before the instrument, trembling, afraid, but determined. He pinched his eyes shut tight like a child and pressed the button.

The high-pitched whine started.

Complete, utter silence. Void. Darkness. Awareness and memory, yes; nothing else. Then Maota's chuckle came. No sound, an impression only like the voice from the ancient book. Where was he? There was no left or right, up or down. Maota was everywhere, nowhere.

"Look!" Maota's thought was directed at him in this place of no direction. "Think of the city and you will see it."

Michaelson did, and he saw the city beyond, as if he were looking through a window. And yet he was in the city looking at his own body.

Maota's chuckle again. "The city will remain as it is. You did not win after all."

"Neither did you."

"But this existence has compensations," Maota said. "You can be anywhere, see anywhere on this planet. Even on your Earth."

Michaelson felt a great sadness, seeing his body lying across the old, home made bed. He looked closer. He sensed a vibration or life force—he didn't stop to define it—in his body. Why was his dead body different from Old Maota's? Could it be that there was some thread stretching from the reality of his body to his present state?

"I don't like your thoughts," Maota said. "No one can go back. I tried. I have discussed it with many who are not presently in communication with you. No one can go back."

Michaelson decided he try.

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"No!" Maota's thought was prickled with fear and anger.

Michaelson did not know how to try, but he remembered the cylinder and gathered all the force of his mind in spite of Maota's protests, and gave his most violent command.

At first he thought it didn't work. He got up and looked around, then it struck him. *He was standing up!*

The cylinder. He knew it was the cylinder. That was the difference between himself and Maota. When he used the cylinder, that was where he went, the place where Maota was now. It was a door of some kind, leading to a path of some kind where distance was non-existent. But the "clock" was a mechanism to transport only the mind to that place.

To be certain of it, he pressed the button again, with the same result as before. He saw his own body fall down. He felt Maota's presence.

"You devil!" Maota's thought-scream was a sword of hate and anger, irrational suddenly, like a person who knows his loss is irrevocable. "I said you were a god. I said you were a god. *I said you were a god...!*"

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