

This is a fascinating story on several counts. Its theme is a durable one: aliens threaten mankind; scientist analyzes aliens; soldiers battle aliens. The difference here is that this is a 19th century writer's account of a battle that takes place a thousand years before the beginning of ancient civilization. With all that, it is more than a curiosity; it is a compelling and exciting story.

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THE SHAPES

by J.-H. Rosny aîné

Translated from the French by Damon Knight

IT WAS A THOUSAND YEARS BEFORE the beginning of that center of civilization from which Nineveh, Babylon and Ecbatana were later to spring.

The nomadic tribe of Pjehu, with its horses, asses and cattle, was crossing the wild forest of Kzur toward the west, through a slanting curtain of light. The edge of the setting sun swelled, hovered, dropped from its graceful perches.

Everyone being weary, they were all silent, searching for a

good clearing where the tribe might kindle the sacred fire, prepare the evening meal, and sleep in safety from wild animals, behind a double line of red-hot coals.

The clouds turned opalescent; illusory countrysides trailed away to the four horizons; the gods of night breathed their cradle song, and the tribe was still on the move. A scout came galloping back with word of a clearing and water, a pure spring.

The tribe gave three long shouts; everyone moved faster.

Childish laughter rippled out; the very horses and asses, trained to recognize the nearness of a stopping-place by the return of the scouts and the nomads' cheers, raised their necks proudly.

The clearing came into view. Here, where the delightful spring had hollowed out its bed among mosses and shrubs, a phantasmagoria met the nomads' eyes.

It was, first, a great circle of translucent bluish cones, point uppermost, each nearly half the bulk of a man. A few clear streaks, a few dark convolutions were scattered across their surfaces; each one had a dazzling star near its base.

Farther distant, equally strange slabs stood on end, looking rather like birch bark, and spotted with varicolored ellipses. Other Shapes, here and there, were almost cylindrical—some tall and thin, others low and squat, all of a bronzed color, tipped with green; and all, like the slabs, having the characteristic point of light.

The tribe stared in amazement. Even the bravest were frozen with superstitious fear, increasing still more when the Shapes began to sway in the twilight of the clearing. And suddenly, their stars wavering, flickering, the cones stretched higher, the cylinders and the slabs hissed like water thrown upon a flame, all of them moving toward the nomads with mounting speed.

Spellbound by the sight, the tribe did not move, but kept on watching. The Shapes fell upon them. The shock was terrible. Warriors, women and children fell in heaps, mysteriously struck down as if by lightning. Then the terrified survivors found strength to flee. And the Shapes, breaking their closed ranks, spread out around the tribe, implacably pursuing those who fled. Nevertheless, the frightful attack was not infallible: it killed some, stunned others, wounded none. A few red drops spurted from the nostrils, eyes and ears of the dying; but others, unhurt, soon arose and rejoined the fantastic rout.

Whatever might be the nature of the Shapes, they behaved like living creatures, not like elements of nature, having, like living creatures, an inconstancy and diversity of motion, evidently choosing their victims, not confounding the nomads with trees or shrubs, or even with animals.

In a short time the swiftest of the tribe noticed that no one was pursuing them any longer. Exhausted and in tatters, at last they dared retrace their steps toward the Mystery. Far away, between the tree trunks flooded with shadow, the resplendent chase went on. And the Shapes, seemingly by choice, ran down and massacred the warriors, often disdainfully attacking the feeble, or the women and children.

Seen thus at a distance, in the night which had now fallen, the scene was more supernatural, more overwhelming to barbarian minds. About to take up their flight once more, the warriors made a vital discovery. It was this: whatever the fugitives did, *the Shapes abandoned the pursuit at a fixed boundary*. However weary and powerless the victim might be, even if he were unconscious, once he had crossed that invisible frontier, he was out of danger.

This reassuring discovery, soon confirmed by fifty observations, calmed the fugitives' frantic nerves. They dared to wait for their companions, their wives and their children who had escaped the butchery. One of them, indeed, their hero, who had been stunned at first, regained his spirit and lit a fire, blew on a buffalo horn to guide the fugitives.

Then one by one the pitiful survivors came. Many, crippled, dragged themselves by their hands.

The mothers, with indomitable maternal strength, had protected, gathered, and carried their children through the wild melee. And many asses, horses and cattle reappeared, less frightened than their masters.

A dismal night followed, passed in sleepless silence, while the warriors felt shivers run up and down their spines. But the dawn came, stealing pale through the heavy

foliage; then the auroral fanfare of colors, of echoing bird cries, exhorted them to live, to cast off the terrors of darkness.

The hero, the natural leader, formed the crowd into groups and began counting the tribe. Half the warriors, two hundred, were missing. The loss of women was much less; of children, almost none.

When the counting was finished and the beasts of burden had been reassembled (few were missing, due to the superiority of instinct over reason during a crisis), the hero formed up the tribe as usual. Then, ordering everyone to wait for him, he walked, pale and alone, toward the clearing. No one dared follow him, even at a distance.

He went to where the trees were spaced out widely, a little inside the limit observed yesterday, and looked.

Far across the clearing, in the cool transparency of morning, flowed the pretty spring. Around the edges, reunited, the fantastic troop of Shapes shone resplendently. Their colors had changed. The Cones were more compact, their turquoise tint having turned greenish; the Cylinders were streaked with violet, and the Slabs looked like virgin copper. But each had its blazing star, dazzling even in daylight.

The outlines of these phantasmagorical Entities had also changed. The Cones tended to en-

large into cylinders, the cylinders to flatten and spread, while the slabs curled slightly.

But suddenly, as on the night before, the Shapes swayed, their stars began to flicker; the hero, slowly, retreated beyond the borderline of safety.

The tribe of Pjehu halted at the doorway of the great nomad Tabernacle, where only chiefs might enter. In the starry depths, under the virile image of the Sun, sat the three high priests. Below them on the gilded steps, the dozen under-priests.

The hero stepped forward and recounted at length the fearful journey through the forest of Kzur; the priests listened very gravely, astonished, feeling their power dwindle before that inconceivable adventure.

The supreme high priest demanded that the tribe sacrifice to the Sun twelve bulls, seven onagers, three stallions. He recognized divine attributes in the Shapes, and, after the sacrifices, he resolved upon a hieratic expedition.

All the priests, all the chiefs of the Zahelal nation, were to take part. And messengers were sent out over the mountains and the plains, for a hundred leagues around the place where later would rise Ecbatana of the magi. Everywhere the dark tale made men's hair stand on end; every-

where the chiefs responded quickly to the priestly call.

One autumn morning, the Male pierced the clouds, flooded the Tabernacle, reached the altar where the bleeding heart of a bull lay smoking hot. The high priests, the under-priests, fifty tribal chiefs raised a cry of triumph. A hundred thousand nomads, standing in the dew outside, took up the clamor, turning their tanned faces toward the miraculous forest of Kzur and shivering a little. The omen was favorable.

Thus, with the priests at their head, a whole people marched through the trees. In the afternoon, at about the third hour, the hero of the Pjehu halted the throng. The great clearing lay spread out in its majesty, glowing with autumn, a torrent of dead leaves covering its mosses. On the banks of the spring, the priests saw the Shapes which they had come to worship and appease. They were pleasant to the eye, under the shade of the trees, with their trembling color changes, the pure flames of their stars, their tranquil movements at the edge of the spring.

"We must make the offering here," said the supreme high priest, "that they may know we submit to their power!"

All the graybeards nodded. One voice was raised, nevertheless. It was Yushik, of the tribe of Nim, the young star-counter, the pale

prophetic watchman, of recent fame, who boldly demanded to go nearer the Shapes.

But the old men, white haired in their wisdom, prevailed: the altar was built, the victim led forward—a dazzling white stallion. Then, in the silence of the prostrate people, the bronze knife found the animal's noble heart. A great moan went up. And the high priest intoned:

"Art thou appeased, O gods?"

Over there, among the silent trunks, the Shapes still moved in a ring, brightening themselves, preferring places where the sunbeams were thickest.

"Yea," cried the enthusiast, "they are appeased!"

And snatching up the stallion's warm heart, before the high priest could say a word, he flung himself into the clearing. Shouting, other fanatics followed him. The Shapes gently swayed, crowding together, skimming the grass, then suddenly hurled themselves on the daring ones, in a massacre that stunned the fifty tribes.

Six or seven fugitives, hotly pursued, managed to reach the boundary. The rest were dead, Yushik among them.

"These are relentless gods!" solemnly spoke the supreme high priest.

Then a council was held, the venerable council of priests, elders and chiefs. They decided to put up a row of stakes round the boun-

dary line. In order to determine this line, they would force slaves to expose themselves to attack by the Shapes at one part of the perimeter after another.

And this was done. Under the threat of death, slaves entered the ring. So careful were the precautions taken, that few of them perished. The boundary was firmly established, made visible to all by its line of stakes.

Thus the hieratic expedition ended successfully, and the Zahelals believed themselves safe from the enemy.

But the preventive system advocated by the council was not long in showing its flaws. The following spring, the tribes of Hertoth and Nazzum, carelessly passing near the ring of stakes, suspecting nothing, were cruelly assaulted and decimated by the Shapes.

The chiefs who escaped the massacre told the great Zahelal council that the Shapes were now much more numerous than they had been the preceding autumn. Their pursuit was still limited, but the boundary had been enlarged.

This news dismayed the people; there was great mourning and many sacrifices. Then the council resolved to destroy the forest of Kzur by fire.

In spite of all their efforts, they could burn no more than the borders of the forest.

Then the priests, in despair, consecrated the forest and forbade anyone to enter it. And many summers passed.

One October night, the sleeping encampment of the tribe of Zulf, ten bowshots from the forbidden forest, was invaded by the Shapes. Three hundred more warriors lost their lives.

From this day a dark, mysterious tale went from tribe to tribe, a thing whispered by night, under the wide starry skies of Mesopotamia. *Man was going to perish.* The others, constantly expanding, in the forest, across the plains, indestructible, day by day would swallow up the overthrown race of man. And this dark, fearful secret haunted the brains of men, sapped their fighting strength and the confidence of their youth. The nomad, thinking such thoughts, no longer dared take pleasure in the lush pastures of his fathers. He turned his weary eyes upward, waiting for the stars to halt in their courses. It was the millennial year of this childlike people, the world's knell.

And in their distress, these thinkers turned to a bitter cult, a cult of death preached by pale prophets, the cult of Darknesses more powerful than the Stars, the Darknesses which would engulf and devour the holy Light, the resplendent fire.

Everywhere at the edge of the wilderness were seen the emaci-

ated, immobile figures of the inspired ones, the men of silence, who, passing from time to time among the tribes, told of their terrible dreams, the Twilight of the great Night to come, of the dying Sun.

Now in those days there lived an extraordinary man called Bakhun, a member of the tribe of Ptuh and brother to the supreme high priest of the Zahelals. In his youth he had abandoned the nomadic life, had chosen a place in the wilderness, between four hills, in a narrow green valley where a spring poured out its pure song. He had built a fixed tent of stones, a cyclopean habitation. With patience and with the careful management of his horses and oxen, he had achieved the opulence of regular harvests. His four wives and thirty children lived the life of Eden there.

Bakhun professed unusual beliefs, for which he might have been stoned, save for the respect of the Zahelals for his elder brother, the supreme high priest.

First, he declared that the sedentary life was better than the life of the nomads, conserving man's strength to the profit of his spirit.

Second, he believed that the Sun, the Moon and the Stars were not gods, but luminous masses.

Third, he said that men should really believe only in those things tested by measurement.

The Zahelals credited him with magical powers, and the most daring of them sometimes risked consulting him. They never repented it. It was said that he had often helped unfortunate tribes by distributing food to them.

Now, in this dark hour, when men were faced with the melancholy choice of giving up their green lands or being destroyed by the inexorable gods, the tribes thought of Bakhun, and the priests themselves, after a struggle with their pride, sent to him a deputation made up of three of the greatest among them.

Bakhun listened with close attention to their accounts, asking them to repeat certain parts, asking many detailed questions. He asked for two days to meditate. When the time was up, he announced simply that he would dedicate his life to the study of the Shapes.

The tribes were a little disappointed, for they had hoped Bakhun might be able to deliver the land by sorcery. Nevertheless, the chiefs expressed their happiness at his decision, and hoped that great things would come of it.

Then Bakhun took up his station at the edge of the forest of Kzur, leaving it only when night fell, and all day long, mounted on the swiftest stallion in Chaldea, he watched. Soon, convinced of the splendid animal's superiority over the most agile of the Shapes, he

was able to begin his bold and painstaking study of the enemies of man, that study to which we owe the great ante-cuneiform book of sixty tablets, the finest stone book bequeathed by the nomadic age to modern civilization.

In this book, admirable for its restraint and its patient observation, is the description of a form of life absolutely distinct from our animal and vegetable kingdoms, a form which Bakhun humbly admitted he had been able to analyze only in its grossest and most superficial features. It is impossible for a man to read without shuddering this monograph on the beings Bakhun called the Xipehuz; these dispassionate notes, never forced to fit into any system, of their actions, their modes of locomotion, of combat, of procreation—these notes which demonstrate that the human race was once on the brink of Nothingness, that the Earth nearly became the patrimony of a *Kingdom* every trace of which has been lost.

The book should be read in Dessault's marvelous translation, full of unlooked-for discoveries in pre-Assyrian linguistics—discoveries unfortunately more admired in foreign countries, in England, in Germany, than in the author's native land. The eminent scholar has graciously made available the salient passages of this precious work, which are given in the following pages, and it is hoped that

these passages will inspire the reader to look further into Dessault's superb translation.¹

The Xipehuz are evidently living beings. All their motions reveal the free will, impulsiveness, cooperation and partial independence which distinguish the animal from the plant and from non-living matter. Although their mode of progression is impossible to describe in comparative terms—being a simple gliding motion across the ground—it is plain that it is under their voluntary control. We see them stop suddenly, turn, pursue one another, stroll together by twos and threes; they display preferences which will make them leave one companion to join another at a distance. They are incapable of climbing trees, but they succeed in killing birds after *attracting them* by undiscoverable means. They are frequently seen to surround forest animals or to lie in wait for them behind a bush; these they invariably kill and consume. It may be stated as a rule that they kill *all animals without distinction*, whenever they can catch them, and this without any apparent motive, for they do not devour them, but merely reduce them to ashes.

In doing so they make use of no

¹The Precursors of Nineveh, by B. Dessault (Calmann-Levy). In the interests of clarity, I have converted the extract from the Book of Bakhun into modern scientific language.

funeral pyre; the incandescent point which each has at its base suffices them for this purpose. They form a circle of ten or twenty around the carcass of a large animal, and cause their rays to converge upon it. For small animals, birds for example, the rays of a single Xipehuz are sufficient to cause incineration. It should be noted that the heat they produce is not instantaneous in its effect. I have often received the irradiation of a Xipehuz upon my hand, and the skin began to feel warm only after a certain time.

I do not know if it is correct to say that the Xipehuz have different forms, for any one of them can successively transform itself into a cone, a cylinder and a slab, and this in the course of a single day. Their colors vary constantly, a fact which I believe can be attributed in general to the changes in the quality of the light from morning to evening and from evening to morning. Nevertheless certain variations seem to be due to the impulses of individuals, and in particular to their *passions*, if I may be permitted this term, and thus constitute genuine expressions of physiognomy, of which, in spite of ardent study, I have been utterly unable to identify any except by hypothesis. Thus, I have never been able to distinguish between an angry tint and a calm one, which surely would be the primary discovery in this field.

I have spoken of their *passions*. I have also remarked earlier upon their preferences, which I might term their *friendships*. They also have their *hatreds*. One Xipehuz continually keeps his distance from another, and vice versa. They seem to experience violent rages. They hurl themselves upon one another with movements identical to those observed when they attack men or large animals, and in fact it was these combats which taught me they are not immortal, as I had been at first disposed to believe, for two or three times I have seen Xipehuz succumb in these encounters, that is to say *fall, shrink, and petrify*. I have carefully preserved some of these bizarre cadavers,¹ and perhaps at some future time they may serve to reveal the nature of the Xipehuz. They are yellowish crystals, arranged irregularly, and streaked with blue filaments.

From the fact that the Xipehuz are not immortal, I was able to deduce that it should be possible to attack and defeat them, and at that point I began the series of martial experiments of which I shall have to speak later.

¹The Kensington Museum in London, and Professor Dessault himself, have in their possession certain mineral fragments, similar in every way to those described by Bakhun, which under chemical analysis have been found impossible to decompose or to combine with other substances, and which, in consequence, cannot be assigned a place in any conventional nomenclature.

Since the Xipehuz' radiance is always sufficient to make them visible through underbrush and even behind large tree-trunks—a wide halo emanates from them in all directions and warns of their approach—I was able to venture often into the forest, trusting myself to the speed of my stallion.

There, I tried to find out if they built shelters, but I confess to having failed in that research. They move neither stones nor plants, and appear to be strangers to any form of *tangible* and *visible* industry, the only sort which can be distinguished by human observation. Consequently they have no weapons, in the usual sense of that word. It is certain that they cannot kill at a distance: every animal which has been able to flee without coming into *direct* contact with a Xipehuz, has invariably escaped, and I have witnessed this many times.

As the unfortunate tribe of Pjehu has already observed, they cannot cross certain intangible barriers; thus their movements are limited. But these limits continually expand from year to year, from month to month. I had to try to discover the cause of this.

Well, this cause appears to be nothing other than a phenomenon of *collective growth*, and like most Xipehuzian things, it is incomprehensible to the human mind. In brief, the governing principle is this: the limits of Xipehu-

zian movement enlarge in proportion to the number of living individuals, that is to say that when new beings are propagated, the frontiers are extended; but so long as their number does not increase, each individual is totally incapable of leaving the habitat determined—by natural forces?—for the race as a whole. This principle suggests a closer correlation between the individual and the group than that observed among other animals and men. Later we saw the reciprocal of this principle in operation, for when the numbers of Xipehuz began to diminish, their frontiers shrank in proportion.

Concerning the phenomenon of propagation itself, I have little to say, but this little is characteristic. To begin with, this propagation takes place four times a year, a little before the equinoxes and solstices, and only on very clear nights. The Xipehuz join in groups of three, and these groups draw together little by little until there is only one, tightly amalgamated and arranged in a very long ellipse. They remain so all night long, and until the Sun reaches the zenith on the following day. When they separate, vague forms arise, vaporous and enormous.

These forms slowly condense, dwindle, and transform themselves at the end of ten days into amber-tinted cones, considerably larger still than adult Xipehuz. It

takes them two months and several days to reach their maximum development, which is to say diminution. At the end of this time, they become similar to other members of their race, their shapes and colors variable according to the weather, the time and the mood of the individual. A few days after their development or diminution is complete, the boundaries enlarge. Needless to say, it was shortly before this redoubtable moment that I kicked the flanks of my noble Kuath, in order to establish my camp farther away.

It is impossible to say whether the Xipehuz have senses as we understand the term. They certainly have organs which serve the same purpose.

The ease with which they detect the presence of animals, men above all, over great distances, makes it evident that their organs of perception are at least as efficient as our eyes. I have never seen them mistake a plant for an animal, even under circumstances in which I might well have fallen into this error, deceived by the light filtering through leaves, the color of the object, or its position. Their use of twenty to consume a large animal, whereas one alone incinerates a bird, indicates a correct understanding of proportions, and this understanding seems even more perfect when one considers that they make use of ten, twelve, fifteen, always in keeping with the

relative size of the carcass. Still a better argument, either for the existence of sense organs analogous to ours, or for their intelligence, is their manner of attacking our tribes, for they give little or no attention to women and children, while they mercilessly pursue the warriors.

Now, the most important question—do they have a language? I am able to reply without the slightest hesitation, "Yes, they have a language." And this language is composed of signs, some of which I have even been able to decipher.

Suppose, for example, that a Xipehuz wishes to speak to another. For this, it suffices for him to direct the radiation from his star toward the other, a thing which is always perceived instantly. The one who is hailed, if he is in motion, stops and waits. The speaker then traces rapidly on the very skin of the listener—and it makes no difference on which side—a series of short luminous characters made by directing the radiation from his base, and these characters remain fixed a moment, then fade away.

The listener, after a short pause, responds.

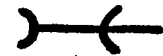
As a preliminary to any action of combat or ambush, I have always seen the Xipehuz employ the following characters:



When I myself am in question—and this happens frequently, for they have done everything possible to exterminate us, my noble Kuath and me—the signs



have invariably been exchanged—among others, such as the word or phrase



above. The usual calling sign is



and this makes the receiving individual hasten up. When the Xipehuz are invited to a general meeting, I have never failed to observe a signal of this form



representing the triple appearance of these beings.

In addition, the Xipehuz have more complicated signs, not relating to actions similar to ours, but to a completely extraordinary order of things, and these I have been unable to decipher. One can hardly entertain any doubt of their ability to exchange *ideas* of an abstract order, probably the equivalents of human ideas, for they are capable of standing motionless for long periods, doing nothing but conversing, which indicates real accumulations of thoughts.

In spite of their metamorphoses (whose laws differ for each, only very slightly, but characteristically enough for a determined observer), during my long sojourn among them I learned to know a number of Xipehuz rather intimately by recognizing the peculiarities among their individual differences . . . should I say among their characters? I have known taciturn ones, who almost never traced a word; voluble ones who wrote veritable discourses; attentive ones, gossips who spoke at the same time, one interrupting the other. Some were of a retiring nature and preferred a solitary life; others obviously sought company; some were fierce, constantly hunting birds and beasts, and some merciful, often sparing animals and letting them live in peace. Does not all this open an enormous avenue to the imagination? Does it not lead us to imagine diversities of aptitude, strength, intelligence, analogous to those of the human race?

They practice education. How many times have I not seen an old Xipehuz, seated in the midst of many young ones, irradiating them with signs which they then repeated one after another, and which he made them do over when their repetition was imperfect!

These lessons were indeed marvellous to my eyes, and in all that concerns the Xipehuz, there is nothing that has more often fixed

my attention, nothing that has preoccupied me more during my nights of insomnia. It seemed to me that here, in the morning of the race, the veil of mystery might open, that some simple, primitive idea might spring forth and illuminate for me a corner of this profound darkness. No, nothing discouraged me; year after year I watched that education, and I tried innumerable interpretations. How many times have I thought to grasp a fugitive glimmer of the essential nature of the Xipehuz, an invisible light, a pure abstraction, which, alas! my poor flesh-burdened faculties could never follow!

I have said previously that for a long time I believed the Xipehuz to be immortal. Having abandoned this belief, after seeing the violent deaths which followed some encounters between Xipehuz, I was naturally led to seek their vulnerable points, and devoted all my days from that time forward to the search for means of destruction; for the Xipehuz were growing in numbers, to such a point that, having emerged from the forest of Kzur in the south, west and north, they were beginning to encroach upon the plains in the direction of the levant. Alas! in a few cycles they would have dispossessed man from his earthly abode.

Accordingly, I armed myself with a sling, and whenever a Xipehuz emerged from the forest with-

in my range, I took aim and hurled my stone at him. I obtained no result in this way, although I had struck my targets on every part of their surface, even including the luminous point. They appeared entirely insensible to my blows, and none ever turned aside to avoid one of my projectiles. After a month's trial I could only conclude that nothing could be done against them with the sling, and I abandoned that weapon.

I took up the bow. With the first arrows I shot, the Xipehuz betrayed an intense fear, for they turned aside, stayed out of range, and avoided me as much as possible. For a week I did not succeed in striking one. On the eighth day, a party of Xipehuz, carried away I suppose by their enthusiasm for the hunt, passed fairly close to me in pursuit of a fine gazelle. I quickly shot several arrows, *without any apparent effect*, and the party dispersed, I pursuing them and using up my ammunition. I had barely shot my last arrow when they all turned back at full speed, from different directions, surrounding me on three sides, and I would have lost my life if not for the prodigious speed of my valiant Kuath.

This adventure left me full of hope and uncertainty; for a week I did nothing, lost in the oceanic depths of my meditations, in a subtle, absorbing, sleep-dispelling problem which filled me with joy

and anguish. Why did the Xipehuz fear my arrows? Why, again, among the great number of projectiles with which I had struck the hunters, had none produced any effect? My knowledge of my enemy's intelligence ruled out the hypothesis of a terror without cause. On the contrary, everything I knew compelled me to believe that the *arrow*, under the proper conditions, must be a formidable weapon against them. But what were these conditions? What was the vulnerable point of the Xipehuz? And suddenly the thought came to me that it was the *star* that I must strike. For a moment I held this as a certainty, a blind, impassioned certainty. Then I was seized by doubt.

With the sling, had I not aimed at and struck this point many times? Why should the arrow be luckier than the stone . . . ?

Now the night had come, the measureless abyss, with its marvelous lamps strewn above the earth. And I sat lost in thought, my head in my hands, my spirit darker than the night.

A lion began to roar, jackals were running across the plain, and once again a spark of hope was born. It had just come to my mind that the sling-stone was relatively large, and the Xipehuz' star so tiny! Perhaps it was necessary to penetrate deeply, to pierce with a sharp point, and then their fear of the bow was understandable!

But Vega was turning slowly around the Pole, dawn was near, and for a few hours weariness conquered my thoughts with sleep.

In the days that followed, armed with the bow, I was in constant pursuit of the Xipehuz, as deep in their territory as prudence would permit. But they all avoided my assault, keeping at a distance, out of range. Lying in ambush was not to be considered; their mode of perception enabled them to detect my presence behind obstacles.

Toward the end of the fifth day, an event occurred which in itself proved that the Xipehuz, like men, are fallible and perfectible creatures. That evening, at twilight, a Xipehuz deliberately approached me, with that constantly accelerating speed which they use in the attack. Surprised, my heart beating fast, I drew my bow. He, steadily advancing, like a column of turquoise in the growing dusk, came almost within bowshot. Then, as I made ready to loose my arrow, I was stunned to see him turn his body, hiding his star, while he continued to hurtle toward me. I had barely time to put Kuath into a gallop, and retreat out of the reach of this formidable adversary.

Now this simple maneuver, which no Xipehuz appeared to have thought of before, in addition to demonstrating once more the individuality and personal inventiveness of the enemy, suggested

two ideas: the first, that it was probable that I had reasoned correctly about the vulnerability of the Xipehuz star; the second, less encouraging, that the same tactic, if adopted by all, would render my task extraordinarily difficult, perhaps impossible.

Nevertheless, having labored so long to learn the truth, I felt my courage grow in the face of this obstacle, and I dared to hope that my ingenuity would be great enough to surmount it.¹

I returned to my wilderness. Anakhre, the third son of my wife Tepai, was a potent maker of weapons. I ordered him to carve a bow of extraordinary size. He took a branch of the tree Waham, hard as iron, and the bow he made of it was four times stronger than that of the shepherd Zankann, the mightiest archer of the thousand tribes. No man living could have bent it. But I had thought of an artifice, and Anakhre having wrought according to my plan, it came about that the immense bow could be bent and loosed by a woman.

Now I had always been skilled in casting darts and arrows, and in a few days I learned so perfectly the use of the weapon made by my

¹In the following chapters, of a narrative character, I have adhered closely to the literal translation of Professor Dessault, without, however, feeling bound to follow the tiresome division into verses, or the needless repetitions.

son Anakhre that I never missed a target, be it as small as a fly or moving as swiftly as a falcon.

Having done all this, I returned to Kzur, mounted on my flame-eyed Kuath, and once more began to prow around the enemies of man.

In order to give them confidence, I loosed many arrows with my customary bow, each time one of their parties approached the frontier, and my arrows fell far short of them. Thus they learned to know the exact range of the weapon, and from this to believe themselves absolutely out of danger at a certain distance. Nevertheless they remained mistrustful; this caused them to be mobile and agitated when they were not sheltered by the forest, and to hide their stars from my view.

By dint of patience I wore out their suspicions, and on the morning of the sixth day, a troop of them took up a position facing me, beneath a great chestnut tree, at a distance of three ordinary bowshots.

At once I loosed a cloud of useless arrows. Then their vigilance lessened more and more, and their movements became as free as in the earliest days of my sojourn.

It was the decisive moment. My heart beat so loudly that at first I felt myself strengthless. I waited, for the future hung upon a single arrow. If it failed to strike its target, never again, perhaps, would

the Xipehuz offer themselves to my experiments, and then how would it be possible to know whether they were vulnerable to the blows of men?

Nevertheless, little by little my will triumphed, quieted my heart, made my limbs supple and strong and my eye steady. Then, slowly, I raised the bow of Anakhre. There, in the distance, a great cone of emerald stood motionless in the shade of the tree; its sparkling star turned toward me. The enormous bow bent; the arrow flew whistling across space . . . and the Xipehuz fell, shrank and petrified.

A resounding cry of triumph burst from my lips. Stretching out my arms in ecstasy, I gave thanks to the One.

So, then, they were vulnerable to human weapons, these terrible Xipehuz! We could hope to destroy them!

Now, without fear, I let my heart murmur, I gave myself up to the beating of the music of gladness, I who had so greatly despaired of the future of my race, I who beneath the stars in their courses, beneath the blue crystal of the abyss, had so often calculated that in two centuries the vast world's limits would have burst before the Xipehuz invasion.

And yet when it came again, the well-beloved night, the pensive night, a shadow fell over my happiness, the sorrow that man and Xipehuz could not exist together,

that the annihilation of one was the grim condition of the other's survival.

The priests, the elders and the chiefs had listened marveling to my story; couriers had carried the good news into the depths of the wilderness. The great Council had ordered the warriors to gather in the sixth moon of the year 22,649, in the plain of Mehur-Asar, and the prophets had preached a holy war. More than a hundred thousand Zahelal warriors came, and many members of foreign races, Dzums, Sahrs, Khaldes, came to offer themselves to the great nation.

Kzur was surrounded by a tenfold ring of archers, but all their arrows failed against the tactics of the Xipehuz, and incautious warriors perished in great numbers.

Then for several weeks great fear prevailed among men. . . .

On the third day of the eighth moon, armed with a sharp-pointed knife, I announced to the multitudes that I would go to fight the Xipehuz alone, in the hope of laying to rest the doubts which had begun to arise concerning the truth of my story.

My sons Lum, Demja and Anakhre were violently opposed to this project, and offered to go in my place. And Lum said, "You cannot go, for once you are dead, all will believe the Xipehuz are invulnerable, and the human race will perish."

Demja, Anakhre and many of the chiefs having echoed these words, I found their reasons good, and withdrew.

Then Lum, taking my horn-handled knife, crossed the frontier. The Xipehuz hastened up. One, swifter by far than the rest, was about to rush upon him, but Lum, more agile than a leopard, sprang aside, circled the Xipehuz, then with a giant bound closed in again and stabbed with his sharp point.

The waiting throng saw his adversary *collapse, dwindle and petrify*. A hundred thousand voices rose to the blue dawn, and already Lum was returning, crossing the frontier. The glory of his name spread throughout the armies.

The year 22,649 of the world, the seventh day of the eighth moon.

At daybreak the horns sounded; hammers beat brazen bells for the great battle. A hundred black buffalo and two hundred stallions were sacrificed by the priests, and my fifteen sons and I prayed to the One.

The globe of the sun was engulfed in the red dawn, the chiefs galloped in the forefront of their armies, the clamor of the attack swelled in the headlong rush of a hundred thousand warriors.

The tribe of Nazzum was first to encounter the enemy in bitter combat. Powerless at first, mowed down by invisible lightning bolts, the warriors soon learned the art of striking the Xipehuz and de-

stroying them. Then all the nations, Zahelals, Dzums, Sahrs, Khaldes, Xisoastres, Pjarvanns, roaring like oceans, invaded the plain and the forest, everywhere surrounding the silent enemy.

For a long time the battle was in chaos; messengers came continually to tell the priests that men were dying by hundreds, but that their deaths were being avenged.

In the heat of midday my swift-footed son Surdar, sent by Lum, came to tell me that for each Xipehuz destroyed, a dozen of ours had perished. My spirit was dark and my heart weak, but my lips murmured, "Let it be as the Father wills!"

In recalling to my mind the numbers of the armies, which added together gave a sum of a hundred and forty thousand, and knowing that the numbers of Xipehuz amounted to about four thousand, I told myself that more than a third of the vast army would perish, but that the earth would belong to man.

"It is a victory, then!" I murmured sadly.

But as I pondered on these things, the clamor of the battle shook the forest more violently; then great masses of warriors reappeared, all, with cries of distress, fleeing toward the frontier.

Then I saw the Xipehuz emerge at the border, not separate from one another as they had been in the morning, but in groups

of twenty formed into circles, with their stars turned inward. In this array, invulnerable, they advanced on our helpless warriors and massacred them.

It was defeat.

The boldest warriors thought of nothing but flight. Nevertheless, in spite of the sorrow that weighed down my spirit, I patiently observed the fatal encounters, in the hope of finding some remedy in the very heart of misfortune, for often the venom and the antidote are found side by side.

For this confidence in the power of thought, destiny repaid me with two discoveries. I remarked, first, that in places where our tribes were massed in multitudes and the Xipehuz were in small numbers, the slaughter, immeasurable at first, lessened by degrees, that the strength of the enemy's blows grew *less and less*, many of the victims rising again after a moment's dizziness. The strongest resisted the shock completely, continuing to flee after repeated blows. The same phenomenon being in evidence at various parts of the field of battle, I dared to conclude that the Xipehuz were growing weary, that their powers of destruction were not unlimited.

The second observation, which aptly complemented the first, was furnished to me by a group of Khaldes. These unfortunate men, surrounded on all sides by Xipehuz, and losing confidence in their

short knives, pulled up bushes and made clubs of them, with which they tried to beat their way to freedom. To my great surprise, their attempt succeeded. I saw the Xipehuz topple by the dozen under these blows, and about half the Khaldes escaped through the hole they had opened in this way; but, curiously, those who made use of bronze implements instead of bushes (as in the case of several chiefs) killed themselves in striking the enemy. I must point out further that the blows from these clubs gave no apparent hurt to the Xipehuz, for those who fell rose again promptly and took up the pursuit. Nevertheless, I considered my double discovery of the greatest importance for future battles.

Meanwhile, the rout continued. The earth resounded to the flight of the vanquished; by nightfall, only our dead remained within the Xipehuz boundaries, and a few hundred warriors who had taken refuge in trees. The fate of these latter was terrible, for the Xipehuz burned them alive, concentrating a thousand fires in the branches which sheltered them. Their frightful cries echoed for hours under the vast firmanent.

The next day, the tribes counted their survivors. The battle had cost nine thousand human lives or thereabout; a moderate estimate put the loss of Xipehuz at six hundred. Thus the death of each enemy had cost us fifteen men.

Despair settled in the hearts of the tribesmen, many crying out against the chiefs and talking of giving up the terrible enterprise. Then, under these complaints, I strode into the middle of the camp and loudly reproached the warriors for their faintheartedness. I asked them if it were better to let all men perish, or to sacrifice a part; I showed them that in ten years the Zahelal country would be invaded by the Shapes, and in twenty the country of the Khaldes, the Sahrs, the Pjarvanns and the Xisoastres; then, having reawakened their conscience in this way, I reminded them that already a sixth of the disputed territory had been reconquered, that on three sides the enemy had been driven back into the forest. Finally I told them of my observations, and made them understand that the Xipehuz were not tireless, that clubs of wood could topple them and force them to expose their vulnerable points.

Silence fell across the plain; hope returned to the hearts of the multitude who heard me. And to strengthen their confidence, I described the contrivances of wood which I had thought of, suited both for attack and defense. With renewed enthusiasm, the people applauded my words, and the chiefs laid their scepters of command at my feet.

In the days that followed, I had a great number of trees cut down,

and displayed a model of a light, portable barrier, of which a brief description follows: a framework six cubits long and two cubits wide, fastened by crossbars to an interior framework one cubit wide and five long. Six men (two porters, two warriors armed with heavy, blunt wooden spears, two others also armed with wooden spears having sharp metal points, and furnished in addition with bows and arrows) could stand within it comfortably and could roam the forest, protected from the direct attack of the Xipehuz. Once within range of the enemy, the warriors armed with blunt spears were to strike and overturn them, force them to expose themselves, and the archer-spearmen were to aim at the stars, with bow or spear according to circumstance. Since the average height of the Xipehuz was a little more than a cubit and a half, I had arranged the crossbars in such a way that the exterior framework, while being carried, would reach a height above the ground of no more than a cubit and a quarter, and for this it sufficed to incline somewhat the supports by which it was attached to the interior framework. In addition, since the Xipehuz were unable to surmount any steep obstacle, nor to move in any way except upright, the barrier thus devised was sufficient to give shelter against their direct assaults. Undoubtedly they would attempt to

burn these new weapons, and in some cases they would succeed; but since their fires were almost ineffective out of bowshot, they would be forced to expose themselves in order to do so. Besides, since these fires did not take effect instantaneously, it would be possible to avoid them in many cases by rapid movement.

The year 22,649 of the world, the eleventh day of the eighth moon. On this day the second battle with the Xipehuz took place, and the chiefs gave me the supreme command. Then I divided the people into three armies. Shortly before dawn, I sent against Kzur forty thousand warriors armed with the barrier devices. This attack was less confused than that of the seventh day. The tribes entered the forest slowly, in small bands disposed in good order, and the encounter began. During the first hour the advantage was entirely ours, the Xipehuz being caught off guard by the new tactics; more than a hundred Shapes were slain, while only a dozen of our warriors perished. But, once over their surprise, the Xipehuz applied themselves to burning the barriers. In some circumstances they were able to do so. A more dangerous maneuver was the one they adopted toward the fourth hour of the day: taking advantage of their swiftness, groups of Xipehuz, tightly pressed together, hurled themselves at the barriers

and succeeded in overturning them. In this fashion great numbers of men perished; so many that, the enemy having regained the advantage, a part of our army fell into despair.

Toward the fifth hour, the Zahelal tribes of Khemar, Djoh, and part of the Xisoastres and Sahrs began to flee. Wishing to avert a catastrophe, I sent messengers protected by strong barriers to promise reinforcements. At the same time, I disposed the second army for the attack; but first I gave new orders: the barriers were to cluster in groups, as thickly as movement in the forest would permit, and to arrange themselves in compact squares whenever a large band of Xipehuz approached. This was to be done without giving up the offensive.

After this, I gave the signal, and in a short time I had the pleasure of seeing the battle turn in our favor. At length, toward the middle of the day, an approximate reckoning, which brought the number of our losses to two thousand men, and of the Xipehuz to three hundred, decisively showed the progress we had accomplished, and strengthened the hearts of all.

Nevertheless, the proportion changed somewhat to our disadvantage during the fourth hour, the tribes then having lost four thousand warriors, and the Xipehuz five hundred.

It was then that I sent in the

third army. The battle reached its greatest intensity; the warriors' enthusiasm rose from minute to minute, until the hour when the sun was about to sink into the West.

At that moment, the Xipehuz took the offensive again to the north of Kzur; a retreat of the Dzums and Pjarvanns gave me uneasiness. Judging that in any case the darkness would be more favorable to the enemy than to us, I signaled the end of the battle. The troops returned calm and victorious; much of the night was passed in celebrating our successes. These were considerable: eight hundred Xipehuz had succumbed; their sphere of action was reduced to two thirds of Kzur. It is true that we had left seven thousand slain in the forest, but these losses were much smaller, in proportion to the result, than in the first battle. Thus, filled with hope, I dared to conceive the plan of a more decisive attack against the two thousand six hundred Xipehuz still living.

The year 22,649 of the world, the fifteenth day of the eighth moon.

When the red star rose over the eastern hills, the tribes were in battle array before Kzur.

With my heart full of hope, I gave my last instructions to the chiefs; the horns sounded, the bells set up their brazen clangor, and the first army marched against the forest.

Their barriers now were stronger and somewhat larger, enclosing twelve men instead of six, except for about a third which were constructed according to the old design. Thus they were more difficult either to set on fire or to overturn.

The beginning of the battle was promising; after the third hour, four hundred Xipehuz had been exterminated, and only two thousand men. Encouraged by the good news, I sent in the second army. The fury of the battle on both sides grew appalling, our warriors being flushed with triumph, their adversaries resisting with the stubbornness of a noble kingdom. From the fourth to the eighth hour, we sacrificed not less than ten thousand lives; but the Xipehuz paid with a thousand of theirs, so that only a thousand remained in the depths of Kzur.

From this moment, I knew that man would possess the world; my last misgivings faded.

Nevertheless, at the ninth hour, a great shadow fell over our victory. At this time, the Xipehuz appeared only in enormous masses in the clearings, concealing their stars, and it became almost impossible to overthrow them. In the heat of the battle, many of our warriors hurled themselves upon these masses. Then, with a rapid movement, a party of Xipehuz would detach itself, overthrowing and slaughtering these men.

A thousand perished thus, without any perceptible loss to the enemy; seeing which, the Pjarvanns cried that all was lost; a panic began which put more than ten thousand men to flight, many being so imprudent as to abandon their barriers in order to run faster. It cost them dear. A hundred Xipehuz, pursuing them, cut down more than two thousand Pjarvanns and Zahelals: terror was beginning to spread throughout our lines.

When the messengers brought me this dismal news, I knew that the day was lost unless by some swift maneuver I succeeded in retaking the abandoned positions. At once I gave the chiefs of the third army the order to attack, and I announced that I would assume command. Then I quickly brought these reserves to the place from which the others had fled. Shortly we found ourselves face to face with the pursuing Xipehuz. Carried away by the passion of their slaughter, they did not regroup quickly enough, and in a few moments we had surrounded them: few escaped; the great acclamation for our victory went far to restore the courage of our men.

From that time on, I had no trouble in re-forming the attack; our methods were limited to detaching segments of the enemy groups, then surrounding these segments and annihilating them.

Soon, realizing how greatly

these tactics worked to their disfavor, the Xipehuz once more took up the assault in small groups, and the massacre of the two kingdoms, neither of which could survive except by the annihilation of the other, redoubled dreadfully. But all doubt of the final issue had vanished from the faintest hearts. By the fourteenth hour, there remained hardly five hundred Xipehuz against more than a hundred thousand men, and this small number of the enemy was more and more hemmed in by narrow frontiers, about a sixth of the forest of Kzur, which greatly facilitated our movements.

Meanwhile, the red light of sunset streamed through the trees, and I broke off the battle.

The immensity of our victory swelled every heart; the chiefs talked of offering me the kingship of the nations. I counseled them never to confide the destinies of so many men to one poor fallible creature, and to take *Wisdom* for their earthly master.

The Earth belongs to Man. Two days of combat have annihilated the Xipehuz; the whole domain occupied by the last two hundred of them has been razed, every tree, every plant, every blade of grass has been cut down. And I, aided by my sons Lum, Azah and Simho, have finished inscribing this history upon tablets of granite for the instruction of future nations.

And now I am alone, at the edge of Kzur, in the pale night. A coppery half-moon hangs over the West. Lions are roaring at the stars. The brook wanders slowly among the willows; its eternal voice speaks of time passing, of the melancholy of perishable things. And I have buried my face in my hands, and my heart mourns. For, now that the Xipehuz are no more, my soul laments for them, and I ask the One what Fatality demanded that the splendor of Life be tarnished by the Shadow of Murder!

