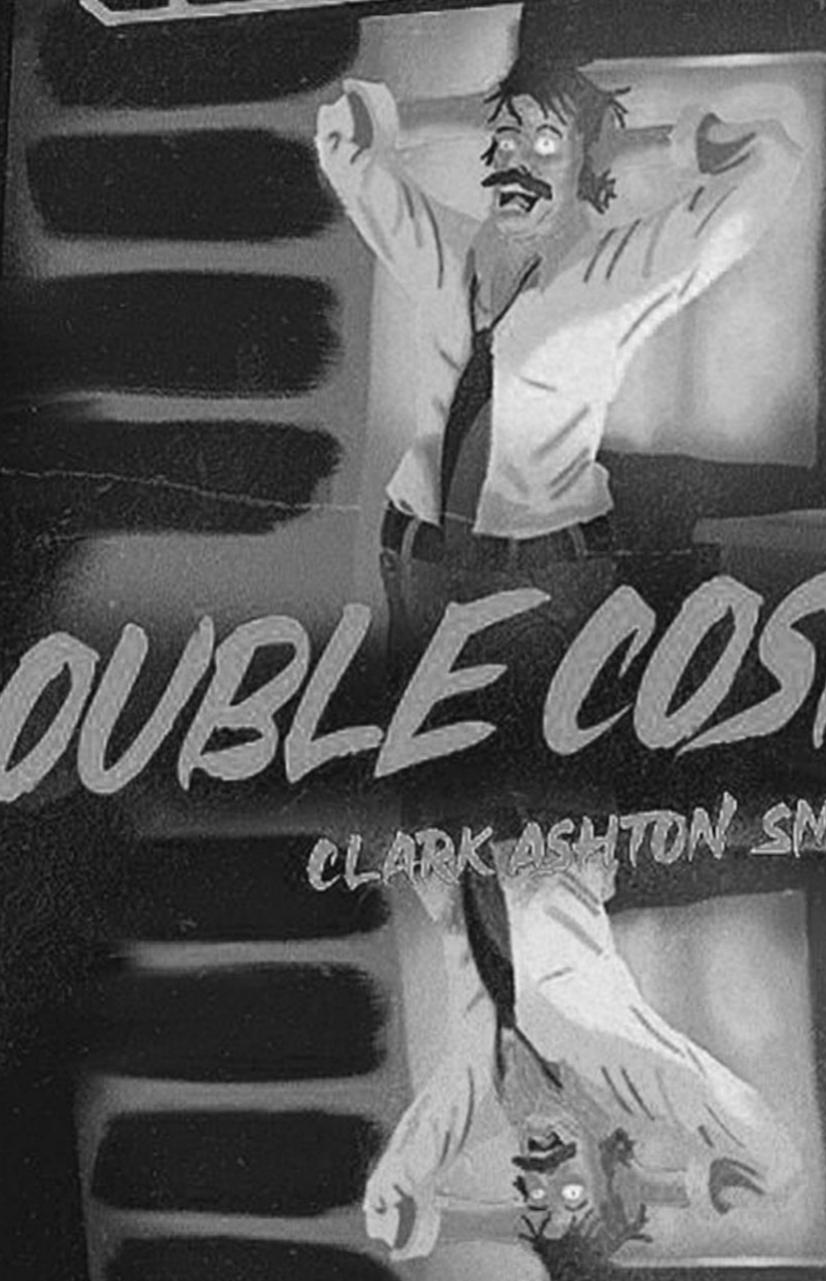


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DOUBLE COSMOS

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

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Double Cosmos

Written by
Clark Ashton Smith

“Double Cosmos” is a short science fiction story written by Clark Ashton Smith, one of the great authors of the Weird stories circle. Published in Crypt of Cthulhu, 1983.

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It is for the reader to decide how much importance can be attached to the manuscript left by Bernard Meecham. Doubtless few will consider it anything more than a record of delirium induced by the strange drug that Meecham had compounded. Even from this standpoint the record possesses a certain medical interest: for it throws a startling light on the possibilities of human sensation. And if one accepts Meecham's experiences at his own valuation, it will be seen that the veil of a new and heretofore unsuspected world has been lifted.

Meecham, a brilliant young chemist, had made from the beginning a special study of narcotic drugs. He had been freed by an ample inheritance from the necessity of commercializing his knowledge and his talents, and was thus able to give his whole time to the specialty which absorbed him so deeply. A recluse, he was incommunicative regarding the aim of his researches; and the revolutionary theory he had conceived was not known to his colleagues. This theory, as well as the outcome of his experiments, he confided only to the manuscript written and dated shortly before his unexplained disappearance. The manuscript was found lying on his laboratory desk. It is now published in accord with a brief, unaddressed note of instructions also left behind by Meecham.

The Manuscript

Even in my childhood, I began to suspect that the world about us was perhaps only the curtain of hidden things. The suspicion was born following my recovery from an attack of scarlet fever attended by intervals of delirium. In that delirium, recalled dimly afterwards, I had seemed to live in a monstrous world peopled by strange misshapen beings whose actions were fraught with terror and menace; or, when not menacing, were wholly cryptic and unearthly. This realm of shadow had seemed no less real than the world perceived by my normal senses; and during my convalescence I believed that it still existed somewhere beyond the corners of the familiar room; and I feared that its horrible specters might reappear at any moment.

My nightly dreams, which were often very strange and vivid, also served to confirm my intuition of other spheres and secret aspects of the known world. Each night it seemed to me that I stepped across the border of an actual land lying conterminous with the lands of day, but accessible only in sleep.

Such beliefs, whether pure fantasy, or fantasy mingled with an obscure truth, are no doubt more or less common to imaginative children.

However, as my faculties matured, I did not wholly dismiss them but was led into speculations concerning the enigmas of human perception and the workings of the sense-mechanism. It soon occurred to me that the five classified senses were very poor and doubtful channels for the cognition of reality; in fact, that their testimony regarding the nature of our surroundings might well be partially or wholly erroneous. The fact that all so-called sane and normal people, possessed of sight, hearing and the other senses, agreed substantially in their impressions of outward phenomena, might prove only the existence of common flaws or limitations in the sensory apparatus of the species. The thing called reality, perhaps, was merely a communal hallucination; and certainly, as science itself had tended to prove, man could lay claim to no finality of perception. The imagery discerned by the human eye was not that beheld by the multi-faceted eye of an insect; the colors that man saw were not perceived by the bird. Where, then, was actuality?

Inevitably, following this line of thought, I became interested in the effect of drugs, especially those narcotics which modify sensation so profoundly and in such varied and fantastic ways. I read with absorption such books as De Quincey's *Opium Eater*, The *Artificial Paradises* of Charles Baudelaire, and the almost forgotten *Hashish-Eater* of Fitzhugh Ludlow. This literary interest soon led me to study the chemistry of narcotics as well as their physiological action. Herein, I felt, were profound mysteries and a clue to secrets which none had yet unraveled.

Thus began the ten years of research and experiment which have left me a nerve-shaken wreck at twenty-nine. The earlier stages I must summarize briefly, for little enough time remains in which to record that inconceivably awesome discovery on which I stumbled in the end.

My laboratory was equipped with the finest and subtlest apparatus, and I procured for analysis all narcotic drugs familiar to modern chemistry, together with certain others found by explorers in remote savage regions. Opium and all its derivatives, the extract of hashish and the dried plant itself—mescal, atropine, peyote, kava—these and numerous others were the subjects of my experimentation. From the very first I had conceived an inkling of a strange and seemingly unauthorized theory; and to prove the theory it was necessary to study the effect of drugs on my own sensory system. Also, I was compelled to invent an incredibly delicate photo-electric device, a graph for the tracing and registration of obscure neural impulses.

My theory was, that the visions, the so-called hallucinations induced by drugs, were not due to a mere derangement of the sensory nerves, but sprang from the excitation of some new and undeveloped sense. This sense, though more complex and esoteric than the others, was akin to sight; and I suspected that its organ was one of the glands, probably the pineal. I did not disregard the function of growth-regulation assigned to the pineal gland by endocrinologists, but merely surmised a secondary function wholly latent under the conditions of everyday life.

Under the terrific stimulus of drugs, this third eye was partially awakened, affording distorted, broken glimpses of that larger reality which the outward senses failed to mirror. Through it, perhaps, one could behold dimensions higher than the three to which our perceptions were limited. Small reliance, however, could be placed on the testimony of the organ; for I felt sure that no known drug was powerful enough to rouse it into full consciousness. It was like the untaught eye of a newborn babe, which beholds its surroundings without any true perception of the form, distance, perspective and relationship of objects. Thus the mad variety, the wavering, ever-shifting fantasy, of narcotic visions; thus their alternations and minglings of horror, splendor, grotesquery, obscurity. Yet through them infinite vistas of untold realms were shadowed darkly upon the mind of man.

I shall say only that I succeeded in demonstrating, through the graphic device that I had invented, the direct influence of narcotics on the pineal gland, and the temporary activating of that gland as a sort of optic organ. The reactions recorded by this instrument while I was enduring the effect of hashish were unusually strong, and markedly similar to those which the graph had detected in the human eye during the reception of sight-images. Thus was confirmed my thesis of an objective world behind the teeming phantasmagoria evoked by drugs.

It remained now to invent or compound a drug sufficiently potent to stimulate the new eye into full and mature awareness of this hidden world. I shall not record here the details of my many trials and failures with complicated mixtures of strange alkaloids. Nor shall I record the elements of the composite super-drug through which I attained eventual success at the cost of a fatally shattered nervous system—or perhaps something worse. I do not wish others to pay the price that I have paid.

My first sensations under the new drug were similar to those induced by a strong dose of Cannabis indica. There was the same protraction of the time-sense, by which mere minutes were stretched out into ages; and the same spatial expansion, by which my

laboratory walls appeared to recede to an immense distance, and my own body, as well as the familiar objects about me, extended themselves to prodigious height and length. The legs of my chair were tall as the famed sequoias. My hand and arm, reaching up to make sure that the graph was correctly adjusted on my forehead over the pineal gland, seemed to scale a gulf like that of some profound canyon. A carboy loomed like a giant monument.

All this was familiar to me, and I felt somewhat disappointed. Was the new compound a failure, like the others?

I closed my eyes, as I had often done before, to shut out any ordinary sight-impressions that might obscure the vision of the third optic. Certain details disappeared and others were added but the imagery on which I peered remained fundamentally the same. Then, gradually, there was a change, and the scene before me divided itself into what I can only describe as two different planes or levels, distinct from each other as water and land.

The first plane was composed of my immediate surroundings, the laboratory and its fixtures, which had now become transparent as if permeated by some sort of radioactive light. My own body shared in this transparency, but, together with all the objects around me, retained clearly separate outlines.

Beyond this immediate plane was the second, in which everything seemed to possess a comparative solidity and opaqueness. I gazed on a medley of strange-angled forms that might have materialized from a geometrician's nightmare. These forms were immense, complicated, mysterious. Then, slowly, I perceived that they were an apparent extension of the forms in my own plane, thus accounting for my original impression that everything about me had stretched itself out to inordinate length and distance.

It is hard to describe exactly what I saw, since my vision doubtless included an extra dimension. My limbs and body, my chair, the tables, shelves, bottles and littered chemical apparatus, all seemed to protract themselves at incredibly oblique angles into the medley of super-Euclidean shapes that crowded the new world. My eyes, like those of an infant learning to see, gradually began to distinguish detail and establish proportion and perspective where all had seemed meaninglessly blurred and chaotic at first glance.

My attention centered itself on a figure that seemed to correspond to my own. This figure, seated on a vaguely chair-like structure, was of colossal size. It presented a hundred strange facets, convexities, concavities. However, I made out the various parts equivalent to human head, torso, arms and legs. The figure appeared to sit facing me, for

there was a multi-angled suggestion of eyes, mouth and other features in the immensely proportioned head.

Was this, I wondered, a living entity like myself? If so, what was my relationship to this being in a world never before penetrated by human vision? (Had the super-drug revealed to me the doppelganger of my own self, in a fourth dimension?)

At length a very simple experiment occurred to another, there was the same apparent reversal that a reflection would present.

Now I rose to my feet and began to walk around the laboratory, tottering a little at first from that loss of control I have mentioned. The other-dimensional figure also rose and walked, with the same shaky and uncertain steps. I picked up a beaker.

The entity took in his hand a baroquely shaped vessel and raised it aloft. From sheer weakness, the beaker slipped from my fingers, crashing into many fragments. The vessel held by the being dropped at the same moment, and its shards littered that otherworld floor.

It seemed that every movement I made was duplicated in perfect synchronism by this amazing alter ego.

An obvious but startling question now occurred to me. I went over to the table and took up the graduated bottle in which I kept my supply of the new drug. I measured out a fifth of the amount I had already taken, feeling that it would be reasonably safe to add this much to the dose. Dissolving the powder in a little water, I swallowed it.

Using vessels of more complex geometric form, the being in that other laboratory reproduced my every motion.

Was he too an experimenter, seeking to pierce the manifold veils of the cosmos? Did he see me, I wondered? Was he experiencing a revelation similar in kind to the one I experienced? Was he performing the acts that I performed, to test the correspondence that existed between us? Did all the objects, entities, causes and effects of his world possess their counterparts in mine?

Perhaps, I thought, the relation between the worlds was one of cause and effect. But if so, which world was primary, which secondary? Did my actions determine those of that alien self? Or did his determine mine?

I felt that my new visual sense was being sharpened by the small additional dose of the drug I had taken. The details of the strange dimension grew clearer, more distinct. Hitherto it had all been colorless, like the grey tones of a photograph. Now I began to

distinguish hues that were quite indescribable, since they did not belong to the known spectrum.

Feeling a little light-headed, I went over and stretched myself on a couch that I had placed in the laboratory for use during my experiments. Synchronously, the being in that other laboratory reclined on a vast, many-cubed object that corresponded to the couch in mine.

We lay facing each other, motionless. At length the vision blurred, becoming once more chaotic and distorted. Finally it faded, leaving only the familiar details of the room about me.

During my next experiment, I risked going out on the street while the drug's influence was at its height. Step by step, as I went, the vision changed with the shifting scene about me; and step by step I was accompanied in the vision by that being whom I had grown to regard as an other-cosmic self.

It was a double city that I beheld—the city of our own world, traversed by autos, by street-cars, by throngs of pedestrians—and a city of that alien plane, with vehicles, people, buildings, all corresponding to ours in movement or position, but vaster and more complex in their geometric forms.

Absorbed in that astounding revelation, I forgot the danger to which I was exposed. An auto, driven slowly, struck me with its fender as I stepped from the sidewalk at a crossing. As I fell, I saw that my visioned companion had been struck by one of the vehicles in his city, and was also falling.

I had sustained no injuries apart from a few slight bruises. Passersby helped me to my feet, while, in that other city, pedestrians performed the same service for my strange double.

I repeated the experiment under varying conditions, in city and country. Always I saw my ultra-dimensional double, in an equivalent situation, duplicating my actions. It seemed that there was no person, animal, plant, machine, building, landscape, in our world which did not have its counterpart in the other. All happenings occurred coincidentally in the two spheres.

Then came the astounding change. I had deferred taking the drug for some days, realizing that my health had suffered too heavily from its use and that death might soon follow if I persisted in further experiments. During that time I had experienced some strange mental states, which I could not recall clearly afterwards. Also, there had been several odd lapses of consciousness, lasting for several hours, which were always

preceded by mental confusion and a preoccupation with thoughts remote from my usual trend. In particular, there would come to me the thought of an absolute vacuum, between the worlds, apart from time and place. Through superior, godlike will-power, it seemed to me, a being might enter this vacuum and thus insulate himself from the cosmic laws that would otherwise control his destiny. Such insulation seemed desirable to me, and I would find myself willing it intently just as consciousness deserted me. Thus alone could I divorce my actions from those of the otherworld being, and escape the doom which menaced us both through repeated use of the powerful compound drug.

Feeling still too weak and ill to go out, I made the next experiment with the drug in my laboratory, lying on the couch. The drug acted as usual, the vision clarifying itself till I saw once more the vessels and furniture of that alien laboratory beyond my own. But, to my amazement, the vast, many-cubed couch, on which I had thought to see a reclining figure, was vacant! I looked everywhere about the place, but in vain, for the companion of my visions.

Then, for the first time in my use of the super-drug, I experienced the sensation of hearing. A voice began to speak, low, toneless, coming from no direction—and yet from all directions. Sometimes I thought it spoke in my own brain, rather than from any point in space. It said:

“Can you hear me? I am Abernarda Chameechamach, your twin in the four-dimensional cosmos you have visioned.”

“Yes, I can hear you,” I replied. “Where are you?” Whether I spoke aloud, or merely thought the words, I am not sure.

“I have isolated myself in the vacuum of super-space,” was the answer. “It is the only way in which I can break the rapport between our existences—which must be broken if I am to escape the death that threatens you. In this vacuum, all laws and all forces are inoperative, except those of thought and will. I can will myself into the vacuum and out of it again. My thoughts can pass to your world and become audible to you in your present state under the influence of the drug.”

“But how can you do these things independently of me?” I asked.

“Because my will and my brain are superior to yours, though otherwise identical with them. Our worlds are twin, as you have realized; but mine, which has one more dimension than yours, is the primary one, the world of causes. Yours is the secondary world of effects. It was I who invented the super-drug, in my efforts to stimulate a new sense that would reveal cosmic reality. Your invention of it was the result of mine, just as

your existence is the result of my existence. I alone of the people in this world, through the drug, have learned that there is a secondary sphere; and you alone, in yours, have visioned the primary sphere. My knowledge, through a law of the higher dimension, enables me to act now upon the secondary world through thought alone. Insulating myself in this vacuum, I have willed that you should perform actions from whose necessity I myself am exempt. Several times the only result was a loss of consciousness on your part, corresponding to my stay in the vacuum. But now I have triumphed. You have taken the drug, while I stand aloof between the worlds, invisible, and apart from the chain of cause and effect."

"Since you have not used the drug," I asked, "how is it that you are conscious of me? Can you see me?"

"No, I cannot see you. But I am aware of you through a sense not dependent upon the drug: a sense that my very knowledge of your existence enables me to use. It is part of my superior mind power. I do not intend to use the drug again; but I wish that you shall continue to use it."

"Why?" I queried.

"Because you will soon die from the effects of such use. I, abstaining, will escape death. Such a thing, I believe, has never before happened in the history of the double cosmos. Death, in your world, like birth and everything else, has always been the concomitant of a like happening in mine. What the outcome will be, I am not quite sure. But, by breaking the nexus between us, and outliving you, it may be that I shall never die."

"But is my death possible without yours?" I questioned.

"I think that it is. It will result from the continuation of actions that would also cause my death, if I did not choose to interrupt them in myself. When your death approaches, I shall enter the vacuum again, where no cosmic cause or consequence can follow me. Thus I shall be doubly safe."

For several hours past, I have been writing this account at my laboratory desk. Whatever happens to me—whether death or something stranger than death—a record of my incredible experiences will at least remain when I am gone.

Since my conversation with the being who calls himself Abernarda Chameechamach, I have tried to abstain wholly from the super-drug and have several times delayed yielding to the impulse that makes me continue its use. I find myself

wishing, willing intensely that Abernarda Chameechamach should take the drug while I refrain, and should perish in my stead.

During my few recent experiments with the drug, I have seen only the empty laboratory of my trans-dimensional twin. Apparently, on each occasion, that being has absented himself in super-space. He has not spoken to me again.

However, I have a strange feeling that I am closer to him than at any time during our mutual visions or our one conversation. My physical enfeeblement has progressed pace by pace with a remarkable strengthening and enlargement of my mental faculties. It seems, indescribably, that another dimension has been added to my mind. I feel myself the possessor of senses beyond the normal five and the one activated by the drug. I believe that the powers of Abernarda Chameechamach, though directed against me, have to some extent passed into me through a cosmic law that not even he is able to abrogate from his station beyond time and place. There is a balance that must right itself, even though temporarily disturbed by the unknown forces of a four-dimensioned mind.

His very volition had transferred itself to me, and has turned back against him, though I am subject to him in ways already indicated. I am possessed by the image of the cosmic vacuum in which he isolates himself. More and more I feel in myself the desire, the will and the power to project myself bodily into the vacuum, and thus escape the chain of consequences that began with the discovery of the super-drug. What, I wonder, will happen if I should escape in this manner before the drug kills me? What will happen to me, and to Abernarda Chameechamach, if we should meet face to face in that void between the worlds of our double cosmos?

Will the meeting mean annihilation for us both? Will we survive as two entities—or a single entity? I can only wait and conjecture. Does that other also doubt and wonder while he waits? Are there two of us—or is there only one?