Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

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BLACK MEDICINE by Arthur J. Burks

Stories by MURRAY LEINSTER, SEABURY QUINN *and* OTHERS



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BLACK MEDICINE

by Arthur J. Burks



Author of "Strange Tales From Santo Domingo," "Luisma's Return," etc.

THE late night air which hung over Port au Prince, weird capital of the Black Republic, seemed laden with the still breath from a smoldering furnace. Lloyd Chandler's white duck trousers clung to his perspiring body in a way that made him think of the gentle massaging of clammy hands. Quite without purpose at the moment, bored to death with the silly round of gayety which seemed the sole aim of the American colony, Chandler had sallied unobtrusively forth from the American Hotel for a jaunt across shadow-bordered Champs de Mars. A fat stogie between his teeth, the smoke rising lazily to blend with the darkness overhead, Chandler would have felt quite content had he been almost anywhere in the world except in Port au Prince.

Perhaps it was the three rounds of coffee cocktails which had caused his present feeling of irritation. An old man whose yellowing cheeks spoke of many years in the tropics had given the recipe for the cocktail to the ebony automaton behind the counter at the hotel, and Chandler had been persuaded to drink one of the concoctions. They were excellent and had seemed to have little or none of the "kick" with which *rhum d'Haiti* is usually invested. Chandler had taken three of them before he stopped to realize that the effect might be a trifle late in coming. The black boy behind the counter had done weird things to those drinks—not that he hadn't copied the recipe with meticulous care, for his precarious position behind the counter was dependent upon the whims of the hotel's patrons; but something had gone into those drinks that had filled Chandler's brain with all sorts of strange imaginings. He had gone forth to cool his perspiring body and to scatter the cobwebs in his brain.

This was why he soon found himself on the eastern edge of Champs de Mars, standing in the shadow of the bronze statue of Dessalines, and looking across at the lights which illuminated Haiti's executive building, Borno's presidential palace. As he stood in this shadow the statue was between him and the eery glow of the single street lamp on the corner he had just passed. And, looking toward the palace, his eye fell upon the shadow of Dessalines' upflung arm. The shadow was just a black, silent smear, with the thinner shadow of the sword upthrust through it like a

gruesome horn of some evil beast. How true to character was it when one knew some of the history of the monster whom this statue, its natural dusky color camouflaging the real color of this black brute, had been erected to commemorate! As Chandler stood there and the smoke from his cigar spiraled upward, something of the awesome and menacing spirit of the Black Republic seemed to enter into him. He visualized back country jungles which had never known the touch of a white man's boot, and in which ebony people, blacker even than the "raven tresses of midnight", stalked silently on bare splay feet, red-rimmed eyes searching the jungle, broad nostrils twitching like those of a questing feline—searching forever for answers to strange questions which no white man has ever asked and no white man may ever answer.

CHANDLER shuddered as though the edge of a cold machete had touched his back between the shoulder blades.

"Just across there," he mused, pointing with the end of his cigar, "is Haiti's White House. What manner of beasts have not walked up those steps since its erection? What maniacal dreams have not had their birth beneath yonder dome, passed on down the black blood-stream by other black presidents who never even dreamed that their successors would be invested with such grandeur? What monsters, fashioned in the Creator's image, have not held this fertile country within the hollows of their bloody hands, knowing no law except that dictated by their own brute intelligence, administered by their black butchers whose hands were always red? Monsters who, believing in their hearts that they followed the way of the Cross, caused paintings of the Christ and the Virgin Mary to be placed in the churches throughout the land — paintings which showed the divine Madonna as a negress and the Son as an ebon pickaninny, yet who, down in their tiny souls, followed in secret the ghastly cult of the Great Green Serpent! Ugh-h-h-h!"

The shudder was real and came from Chandler's innermost being. As one with many another normal American, just to think of Haiti's short and bloody past was to be filled with horror and a nameless dread. The deadly weight of that past seemed to sag down upon him, pressing him into the dust with its sheer brutish power.

With a glance over his shoulder at the statue as he faced about for the return journey, he hurled his cigar aside and saw it fall on the driveway in a shower of tiny sparks, coming to a stop in the gutter and glowing like a spent firefly that had crept aside to die. Chandler quickened his steps and knew not why.

Where he should have turned to the left to return to the hotel he came to a halt in sudden indecision. Up the short half block to where he stood came the tones from the hotel proprietor's radio, recently installed and equipped with a loud speaker, as it ground out a bit of latest jazz as interpreted by East Pittsburgh. The loud laugh of a female who had had one cocktail too many—the scraping of feet on wooden boards as several couples struggled through the mazes of a fox trot.

Muttering an imprecation indicative of disgust, Chandler continued on up the street past his turning-off place. He had never before gone in this direction and hadn't the slightest idea what might lie ahead of him. Nor did he much care. He could walk around a bit, he thought, and perhaps the merrymakers in the hotel would get tired of it all and retire by the time he had walked off his fit of unreasoning depression. Chandler

was not one much given to depressing thoughts, and his musing words, as he had gazed across at the palace from the shadow of Dessalines immortalized, had been merely by way of cynical comment. The feeling of dread which had been upon him for a moment back there had gone of its own accord by the time he had arrived at the street corner and heard that laugh which had come out to him from the hotel. Chandler feared neither Haiti's past nor her present, and held her dusky inhabitants in the contempt which he felt they merited. Niggers, all of them! Nothing but niggers, and blacker than any others he had ever seen, that was all.

Chandler paused abruptly. He had come to the outskirts of the city without realizing that he had done so. He had passed the last lone street light some minutes ago and, wrapped up in his thoughts, had failed to notice. The concrete sidewalk ended here and the dirt walk began—a twisting black serpent, created by bare splay feet, which slithered away ahead until it vanished into the darkness at the edge of the jungle.

"If I should decide to follow that trail," mused Chandler, "clear through to the final stopping place, what would I find at Journey's End? And what would I learn about Haiti along the way? Enough to give my friends a thrill when I came back to tell about it, I'll wager. Bah! My friends! I haven't any friends, or I wouldn't be in Haiti now!"

He stood irresolutely there in the blackness revolving in his mind certain pictures of weird imagery which that ribbon of trail had caused to be born. Without knowing that he did so, so powerful is habit, he felt around in his pockets for the mate to the stogie he had discarded beneath the bronze effigy of Dessalines, found it and thoughtfully lighted it, cupping the flame of his match with his hands. Even the flame seemed to suggest odd pictures to Chandler. For, looking through it and a little above, he seemed to see a brutish black face against the night shadows—a black face set in an expression of dumb stolidity, topped by white-irised eyes that were round and staring. Thick black lips, loose and sensual—always hungry for food such as a white man hesitates to name.

Chandler blinked his eyes, but the face persisted in staying there—and staring, stolidly staring, in dumb, animal-like curiosity. Thinking it a figment of the imagination drawn from the depths of those unusual cocktails, Chandler turned his eyes away and flipped the match straight ahead of him.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a darker shadow against the gloom and, as the flaming match described a parabola to the ground, he saw the dirty, leather-sandaled shapes of two huge splay feet—the largest feet he had ever seen. He faced farther away, unwilling to admit that a strange feeling of unreality had fallen upon him with the view of that black face through the match-flame.

Then his eyes swung upward in the direction of Petionville and came to pause—not on Petionville itself, but on the blacker hills which lay beyond it, farther inland, a huge cone of blackness, dotted here and there without pattern or design, with spots of flame. Far away he knew them to be, many miles inland; yet he knew them to be wood fires kindled by the dusky children of the deeper jungle. Phantom fireflies at rest, gigantic fireflies, winking at him across the miles of mystery, jungle and darkness. Had Chandler believed in witches he would have half fancied that aged harridans, black of visage and of raiment, were squatting out there beside those distant fires, stirring brews of hellish potency against their master's need.

Chandler came to himself with a jerk.

"Bah!" he snorted to himself, "I'm letting this Haitian midnight steal my angora! I act like a wee sma' babe who fears the shadows in the corner of the bedroom."

He whirled as though he had been struck when an odd chuckle came to his ears from the edge of the shadow across the narrow street. He unbuttoned his coat swiftly in order that his little automatic might lie the easier to his hand, and fairly leapt in the direction of the unexpected sound —and came up with a shock as his body struck forcibly against another body in the darkness, a black shadow that was just as dense as the eery shadows of the night itself.

An indefinable thrill shot through him as he realized, in that instant of contact, that the person he had struck was a negro. A native, by the musty odor which enveloped him like a filthy garment.

"So the face I thought I saw was a real face after all," he muttered, and then, raising his voice a trifle and speaking in the gibberish of Haiti—that language which is supposed to be French, but which smacks more of the Congo and the Dark Continent: "Who are you, and why have you been watching me?"

The man did not answer, but kept his place in the shadow. Chandler struck another match and held it up before him. The negro fairly towered above the stalwart American—ragged, hatless, hair matted to prove that it had never felt the caress of a comb. Bony kneecaps showed through holes in what had once been blue denim trousers. The black's arms were partially akimbo, with the right forearm pointing upward and the horny hand curved about the oddly shaped bowl of a native clay pipe. The air was redolent of the biting fumes of that native tobacco, than which there is no viler weed in all the earth.

ANGERED by the fellow's impassivity, Chandler thrust forth a hand and seized the black's shoulders, intending to shake the man into speaking. He might as well have attempted to shake the statue of Dessalines. The black chuckled again. Chandler subsided, reading in that chuckle no menace toward himself. He stepped back a pace, however, and waited.

Finally the negro spoke.

"It is not well for the *blancs* to be abroad when the people of the hills are brewing black medicine," he said softly, "for those people do not like to be watched."

Chandler jerked his head around once more, and stared again at those distant fires which blinked and wavered against the conelike hillside. He lifted his right arm and pointed. He could not see the arm himself, but he fancied that the negro could—that the black could see in the dark because it was his natural element.

"Is that what they are doing out there?" he demanded. "And what *is* 'black medicine', anyway?"

The black did not answer. Chandler sensed that he had drawn slightly away as he asked that question. He repeated it.

"What *is* 'black medicine'? And why do they brew it at night?"

The chuckle came again, having in it a certain note, now of sinister malevolence. And it was farther away. The black was leaving. Chandler raised his voice in a shout. No answer came to him out of the night. The black had indeed gone and Chandler was alone on the edge of the Black Republic's capital, wondering why he had so suddenly become afraid. Afraid of what? Of the darkness? Of the weird fires on the hillside? Or just of the menacing

black spirit of Haiti itself after nightfall?

He walked back to the curb he had just quitted, and paused a moment, facing back the way he had come, wanting with all his heart to retrace his steps without delay. And he knew in that instant that, if he really followed his inclinations, he would, ere he had gone fifty yards, have broken into a run, plunging at last into the foyer of the hotel, spent and panting, drawing the startled eyes of the merrymakers who frequented the place. And he hated himself for even allowing such a picture to possess him.

He looked back at the fires again. Black medicine! What was it?

After all, why should he return to the hotel at all? He would not be missed if he never went back. Had he not just said that he hadn't a friend in the world?

With an oath of exasperation, Chandler dropped his cigar, ground it flat beneath his heel, and strode rapidly away—straight out toward the black jungle, following the ribbon of trail, moving with rapid strides as though the lights of the people who brewed 'black medicine' were beckoning him onward!

2

In a very few minutes Chandler had left the capital behind him. The roar of the city died gradually away as the path led upward into the foothills, circling Petionville, heading into the jungle toward the east. Chandler kept to the trail by a sixth sense which he did not know he possessed—he couldn't see his hand before his face after the lights had dropped away behind him. And he was ready to repent of his hasty decision, knowing it for a foolish whim. Who really cared whether he sought the jungle and tried to fathom the reason for those fires which dotted the distant hillside? Was he going just because he did not wish to be known, even to himself, as a chap who feared the shadows? Perhaps. For he could think of no other reason—except that those lights seemed beckoning him—promising strange tales such as he had never heard before. Fascinating fingers of red mystery!

Chandler looked back after a time at the city he had left. He was high above it, the faint sounds of passing motor cars coming to his ears but faintly. Down there was the habitat of ordinary men—semi-civilized, it is true—here was the jungle which seemed to hint of faintly whispering secrets of dread, seemed to rustle with the passing of unseen feet—the splay feet of black brutes. Chandler paused for a moment and wiped his steaming brow with his handkerchief.

What was "black medicine"? The black man had not told him. Yet he had before heard it mentioned—smilingly, by white people who had sojourned for a time in the Black Republic. It had something to do with secret preparations to arise and cast the white invaders into the sea. When one spoke of "black medicine" one thought, not of potent drafts of liquid medicine, but of mystic spells woven of bestial lust and brute superstition. Woven in the darkness of the inland jungle in the dead of those nights when the face of the moon was darkened.

What was that catch sentence which the originator of the coffee cocktail had repeated to him?

"And the niggers say that when the point of the sword of Dessalines points straight out toward the water of the Gulf of Gonaives, there will begin the bloodiest uprising in the history of bloody Haiti; the whites will be slaughtered and their bodies hurled to the sharks which patrol the gulf!"

Chandler had stood within the black shadow of Dessalines but a short time since and had noted the

sword upheld by the bronze arm of the effigy. Had he only imagined it because of the passing of a cloud overhead, or had that sword-point, now pointing skyward at a forty-five degree angle as though the monster harangued a black multitude, settled almost perceptibly downward? As though the insensate soul of the metal monster were striving to give the signal mentioned in the prophecy which some unknown prophet had uttered! Did those black men of the jungle know? Was that the reason for the brewing of the "black medicine"? Or were those cocktails he had imbibed playing weird tricks upon him?

Stubbornly he faced eastward once more, resolving to see his strange adventure through. come what might. Might he not be an important cog in the invisible wheel of destiny? Urged forward by the hands of the Three Old Ladies who sit at their looms forever spinning the threads of Fate? Fantastic, it is true. But stop and consider, placing yourself, in imagination, on the corner of the street where Chandler had just stood. With those weird signal fires beckoning with silent fingers, would you have sought within your mind for sensible reasons for following the lure which calls always to the adventurous? Or would you, too, have started briskly forth on an uncharted voyage of discovery? By merely reading this tale you answer the questions! I, too, would have gone, as Chandler did.

And the fact remains that people have gone forth to learn the meaning of those fires. One of them lies at this moment in a distant cemetery, buried now for so long that time has wiped the look of horror from his face. Just what he saw before the end came no one may ever know. And one hopes that the end was more merciful than the evidence tended to show, for his nude body was found on the hillside which supports Petionville, mutilated as though it had been torn by the remorseless fangs of wild beasts, and within a half hour's walk of Port au Prince and the soldiers of Uncle Sam. Perhaps he was trying to get back before the end came—for he had been one of those soldiers, and it was a hunting squad of his buddies that found him!

Chandler had forgotten this. It had been told him by one of the soldiers who had found the body, and Chandler had felt nauseated when he heard the gruesome details. The horror in the face of the soldier who would never forget what he had seen had been imprinted on Chandler's consciousness. He would remember it for always, he had thought at the time. Yet it had slipped from him as he had stayed on in Haiti and had, later, listened to other stories as bloody and gruesome. He had even become hardened, so that he was wont to listen to those stories with a cynical smile on his lips. Bogey tales to frighten the chicken-hearted!

Fifteen minutes later and a bend in the trail as it circled the hill hid the city from sight. Only a glare against the sky marked the site of the Black Republic's capital.

Chandler stopped once more for a breathing space—and silence, black and awesome, took possession of the jungle. Only at intervals did he catch the sound of vagrant and silky rustlings. Stooping low, in the hope of seeing silhouettes against the skyline, he strove to pierce the eery gloom with anxious eyes—without avail.

Then Chandler remembered. It was about here that the mutilated body of the American sergeant had been found! All at once it seemed to the startled man who was just remembering, that the jungle was peopled with living shadows of the night! The rustlings, caused by a gentle breeze perhaps, seemed to multiply,

sounding like the slithering of serpents' bellies through rotting mold!

And when, muffled with distance, there came to his straining ears the measured beatings of several tom-toms, he closed his lips against a cry of fear! Throbbing out into the night, sending forth their weird messages which were old when Thebes was young, they seemed to ripple against Chandler's eardrums like the beating of tiny wings. What did they mean, and where were the ears that listened?

Striving to throttle the dread which tugged at his throat, Chandler hesitated once more, half minded to go back to the city after all and to return on the morrow. Yet common sense told him that tomorrow the hillsides would be bare, the jungles silent and deserted. Uncle Sam, before now, had sent out searching parties to investigate, and his khaki-clad minions had always returned to report failure, and to tell of weary hours of beating the savage bush, seeking for creatures that had fled with the rising sun.

Chandler half turned as though to retrace his steps when, out of the jungle on the hillside below him, there came a repetition of that chuckle which had caused the ants to creep along his spine when he had heard it at the edge of the lights which illumine Port au Prince. Chandler had heard the ghastly laugh of a hyena, had listened to the cackling of maniacs in the *Manicomio de Padre Billini* at Santo Domingo City; yet neither of these had affected him as did this single chuckle from the darkness. There was in that chuckle a muted strain of mockery, blended with something which he had not sensed when he had heard the sound before—a note of beastly gloating!

Chandler wiped his brow anew. The chuckle was repeated. Then it was broken off as a stream of words—the odd gibberish of Haiti—floated up to him:

"The *blanc* is brave! But he is a fool, too! He shouldn't forget that Chal David warned him! If you have the heart of a young fowl, turn and flee! If you are brave beyond the transient courage which comes from the flowing bowl, follow on in the trail you have chosen! It will lead you to—ah, *mon blanc*, but follow on and you will learn!"

Angered at the effrontery of the unseen baiter, Chandler fairly shouted a curse upon him. The sounds of his own voice, with words in his own language, seemed partially to dispel the weird feeling that had possessed him. It seemed to indicate the vast gulf which separated him, a white man from the civilized country across the blue waters to the north, from the black who skulked like a wild animal in the brush below—like a cowardly beast of prey paralleling a spoor.

The man in the shadows below chuckled again, as though he had read the mind of Chandler. The latter turned back and started once more along the trail. He had a feeling that the unseen black man kept silent pace with him through the black jungle—moving along on huge splay feet. Yet no sound came up to him.

TEN minutes, fifteen minutes passed. Then a long-drawn scream, like the wind-driven wail of a banshee, split the night! It came from near the spot where the unknown trailer had paused to hurl a taunt at the white man who hesitated. Chandler stopped again. He listened, waiting for that signaling scream to be answered. No sound for a long minute except the rolling boom of the distant tom-toms. Then in the middle distance ahead the scream was repeated. Somewhere along the trail ahead another watcher waited in the darkness, standing like a black statue,

immovable in the gloom. The tom-toms ceased abruptly and, far away this time, he heard the scream once more. Then it was repeated behind him, then a pause, then a longer scream, barely broken thrice. The man who had called himself Chal David was sending some sort of message ahead of Chandler and, when the scream was passed on by the man in the middle distance and faithfully repeated by the voice away yonder by the tom-toms, Chandler knew that the message had been heard and understood.

Chandler, standing still for the moment, allowed his eyes to sweep the hillside where the medicine fires were. Two of them, halfway up the mountain, went out like wicks that have been snuffed, leaped into view again, vanished—flamed—vanished—flamed! Chandler knew that, whatever that signal had been, it would be known throughout southeastern Haiti within two hours. From Tumiseau to Bois Tombe—from Anses-à-Pitre to Jacmel, a weird telegraphy which no white man has ever decoded.

Angered and exasperated now beyond all thought of self, Chandler resolutely set his feet squarely in the outgoing trail once more, straight ahead toward the spot whence came the rolling of the tom-toms, with the fires of those who made black medicine waving at him from the hillside which now slumbered in the awesome darkness in the eastward, to Chandler's left. He resolved not to stop until he had come to the place of the tom-toms and had seen who played upon them. And, except for those eery screams, there was no other sound in the jungle—the screams had come no more. The tom-toms had begun again and every minute their rolling sound seemed to draw nearer.

Two hours passed and, far ahead, Chandler could make out a glow in the sky which told of great bonfires, hidden from view because of surrounding hills. And from this spot the sound of the tom-toms seemed to come—still beating out their measured meaning. Nearer and nearer strode Chandler, all fear gone now, his lips set in a grim line indicating that a fighting white man had come to the end of his tolerance, and that whatever happened to him he would give a good account of himself.

Then he stopped aghast on the crest of the mountain's shoulder and gazed down into the pocket which sheltered the bonfires. Five score blacks he counted, naked every one of them as at the day of birth, ranged in a huge circle about the largest of the fires, the others kept alight solely because they forced the spirits of the night to keep their distances, tended by half-grown girls with white teeth and fearful eyes.

Inside the circle of black and stolid faces four other negroes sat, cross-legged, before four tom-toms. Mechanically, as though no commands went from their brains to their hands, the four men raised their knuckles and brought them down upon the tight-stretched skins which formed the heads of the rude drums—while the rolling booms went forth in unison to make the night hideous and cause the birds in their tree homes to crouch lower in their flimsy nests, little eyes searching the gloom, mother birds twittering with mock-courage to still the sleepy, frightened cheeping of the little ones. And the faces of the four players stared stolidly toward the wall of blackness, the black bodies motionless except for the beating hands.

The blacks who formed the larger circle glanced fearfully behind them at intervals, and Chandler wondered what was in their minds that caused their seeming restlessness. Or for whom they waited! The fires winked on the hillside and the tom-toms kept up a ceaseless, barbaric monotone.

CHANDLER stepped aside from the path and crouched at the base of a large tree—eyes focused on the dark circle below, trying to read its silent menace, every muscle tensed for what might be in store for him.

He started to turn his head as a sickening odor came suddenly to his nostrils. He whipped his swerving gaze back to the circle below. Not a negro in the circle, not a girl who tended the fires, was smoking—yet, so strongly as to be unmistakable, he caught the odor of native tobacco! Somewhere near him in the darkness another watcher, undoubtedy a negro, studied the scene in this hidden pocket in the hills!

Could it be Chal David, he of the huge splay feet and horrid chuckle? Chandler set his teeth grimly as he imagined that the black man, perhaps, knew of his presence, could even see him there, crouched at the base of the tree. Was the black man testing him again, waiting like a black buzzard of the night for a sign of breaking? Chandler resolved that one Chal David would have a long wait ere he, Chandler, would gratify his brute vanity by showing fear again. He chose to ignore what he knew to be near him, keeping his gaze stedfastly upon the blacks beside the bonfire below. Even so, he held himself tensely, his ears strained for the slightest sound, expecting momentarily a blinding rush of musty-smelling bodies or the biting slash of a war machete across his neck. The minutes wore on, each adding to the suspense which weighed Chandler down. He would, after a time, almost have welcomed a rush in the darkness, would have felt heartened by the feel of a human body beneath his hands. This would be far better than the utter silence with its weight of imminent menace—and that sickening odor which came from the oddly shaped clay pipe of the unseen smoker.

Then a gentle rustling sound off to his left told Chandler that the unseen one had shifted his weight. The rustling continued as though a heavy body moved downward over slipping leaves toward the circle about the bonfires.

Chal David broke into the circle of light like a great black giant out of a cavern. And the blacks arose to greet him with cries of pleasure.

What was that greeting?

"Papa Lou! Papa Lou!"

CHAL DAVID stalked into their midst as though he were their overlord. A black man who sat in his pathway was kicked aside as of no account, and he arose after Chal David had passed, only to bend and press black lips to the ground upon which those huge splay feet had trodden! The black maidens who tended the lesser bonfires ceased from their labors and crept closer, timidly, to hear what the big man might say. Quaveringly, they blended their voices with those of the naked men:

"Papa Lou! Papa Lou!"

Chal David raised a massive hand for silence. His words, when they came, were weighted with an awesome dignity, as though he who gave them voice were the sole arbiter of black humanity's destiny.

"Where is he?" he demanded "I do not see him here! Yet I know that he came this way! For did not I, Chal David, chief *Papa Lou* of Bois Tombe, cunningly taunt him into daring the spirits of the night? He was a fool who thought to prove himself a brave man! Where is he? Belema Guigua, you were stationed in the jungle to pass on the signal agreed upon should a white man come to our net. Did you see him pass?"

Another black man, large almost as Chal David the high priest, arose from the circle about the fire, only to fall on his knees and press his curly head to the ground before Chal

David. In this awesome moment Chandler wondered, irrelevantly, if the smoking of native tobacco were a luxury which Chal David granted himself only when alone, in order that he might not lessen his dignity in the eyes of his followers. If this were so it seemed, somehow, to humanize this representative of the most ghastly cult in the world. The pipe was gone now and the once ragged Chal David was naked except for a strange girdle which covered his loins. His body was huge, yet made horrible from the fact that his skin seemed to hang on him in odd ridges, as though he had once been fat and had grown thin from fasting, causing his body to shrivel inward toward the bony framework. But the black known as Belema Guigua was speaking:

"Know, oh *Papa Lou,* that I did not see him of whom you speak. Yet I followed the trail that he must have followed. I ran because I was afraid, for all men know that you consort with the spirits of the jungle places and that the spirits hover near you! So, knowing that you, too, were coming, I fled after I heard and repeated your call—fled here to the great fires into the light of which the spirits may not follow!"

Slowly Chal David inclined his head toward the kneeling man. Deliberately he pursed his huge black lips and spat upon the cringing wretch at his feet.

"Coward!"

Just the one word, freighted with sinister meaning. The heads of the other blacks bent lower, while a low murmur, which caused the ants to creep anew along the spine of Chandler, swept around the circle. Chandler congratulated himself that fate had stepped in and caused him to hide. He was satisfied that there was no one else in the woods who might spy him out against the glare of the bonfires, and kept his eyes glued to the eery scene below. Chal David had mentioned no other watcher except the cringing Belema Guigua.

Then, swift as the striking of a serpent, Chal David's right hand swept upward and down, and Belema's black head leaped from his body and rolled grotesquely toward the big fire, severed by that one blow from a machete which Chandler, though watching closely, had not detected upon the person of the high priest. He looked again after that blow, and raised his hand to rub his eyes. The machete had disappeared once more, and Chal David stood there with his arms akimbo, looking disdainfully around upon the black circle, as though looking for anyone who dared to question his act of jungle justice. The murmur about the circle grew louder, but no man moved from his place. Chandler caught a gleam as the firelight touched an ever-widening spot near the body of Belema Guigua. And the gleam was the color of blood!

Chal David partially turned his back. The men in the circle moved slightly, like beasts crouching for a spring. Chal David turned again and every man sank down. A travesty of a smile touched the broad lips of the high priest. Then he turned away and the circle closed in, hiding the headless body from sight. And from the beastly sounds which came up to where Chandler was hidden, he was glad that he could not see.

Then he noted that the black maidens had ceased from their labors. They were standing at the edge of the firelight, as though waiting. The leaping flames began to die down. One by one the black men moved back from where Belema's body had been, and Chandler shuddered as those who moved back wiped their mouths with dirty wrists!

Then that scream came once more from the lips of Chal David. The

blacks straightened in their places. Chal David spoke.

"Since that dog has allowed the white man to slip out to freedom, there is nothing for us to do but move ahead into the jungle. He knows by now that something is afoot out here in the darkness and may return tomorrow with a party of soldiers. But do not lose heart! For I stood tonight in the Champs de Mars, and I swear to you that the effigy of Dessalines is falling, leaning slowly forward in the direction of Gonaives! The time is coming, after the words of the prophecy! But not yet! The medicine is not yet ready. But the fires are burning and the signal has gone forth. I lead you tonight into the jungle toward Bois Tombe, where the women will complete the brewing. The medicine lacks but one ingredient, which only a white person may furnish! Bois Tombe is on the Dominican border, and beyond it live natives whose fair skins cry aloud because they are tainted with the color of the white oppressors!"

Leaving the fires to die away as they might, the whole party, led by Chal David and the women, headed eastward into the night, unconscious that a white ghost flitted from tree to tree, keeping the party always within sight or hearing, looking to the rear for possible spies, and praying to the God of the white people for a thunderbolt to descend upon the curly poll of the high priest.

3

PERHAPS you wonder why Chandler, having witnessed this murderous crime perpetrated by the black who called himself Chal David, did not draw his pistol and slay the high priest, rather than pray that an all-powerful Diety might see fit to take the matter into His own hands; but remember that, by now, Chandler was a long way from the usual haunt of white folks and that, did he even expose himself to view, he would place himself at the mercy of jungle brutes who thought nothing of killing and who delighted in torturing the victim. For what horrible purpose had Chal David dared him into the wilderness in the first place? Chandler could not guess, but he was now remembering with little difficulty the tale of the American sergeant, whose mutilated body, scored by what had seemed to be the fangs of wild beasts, had been found on the hillside below Petionville. And, remembering, he had no trouble in deciding that something terrible had been in store for him.

When the group of blacks had vanished into the jungle, heading eastward, Chandler had waited long enough for them to get well away before he set out to follow, when he had hurried past the bonfires in the pocket, casting a shivering glance at the bundle of bones which was all that was earthly remaining of Belema Guigua. Then he, too, had stepped into the jungle on the trail of the high priest and his coterie of biped carnivores.

When he had first entered the jungle he had had little or no purpose mapped out. Now, however, since he had heard those significant words anent the leaning of the statue of Dessalines, and recalled the words of the old prophecy, he felt that here something was taking place that the whites in the capital city should know. It had been given him to see a bit of what was afoot and he knew that did he return without more exact information, although he was a civilian and not responsible to the uniformed authorities, he would be morally responsible did anything happen to the American colony.

Had the blacks power enough in truth to hurl the whites into the sea? Ask the descendants of those French colonists whose blood ran red in the gutters of Cap Haitien when the

blacks arose to cast off the yoke of slavery! Look into history and read of the pitiful remnant of French soldiers that finally returned to France to carry Le Clair's report of ghastly failure to Napoleon! But the blacks had had skilled leaders in those days. True enough! And who may say that, in a country which boasts a population of more than two million souls, another Christophe or a L'Ouverture may not be born? Haiti has had her great men. Look up the significant facts regarding the immortal Dumas.

Well out beyond the light from the bonfires in the pocket, the blacks who followed Chal David, keeping time with the monotonous droning of the tom-toms which the four mannikins were still pounding, suddenly broke out into that weird chant of the Haitian negro which, once heard, is never forgotten:

"AI! ai! AI! ai! AI! ai!"

Meaningless when seen on paper, yet alive and throbbing with meaning when heard in the heart of a trackless jungle after nightfall. A monotonous rising and falling of barbaric sound which, whatever may be its effect upon the sensibilities of a white man, seems to fill the negro with a sort of insane frenzy.

AS THE negroes, following in the wake of Chal David and the tom-tom players, chanted the weird melody, they ever and anon, as though suddenly stricken with some nameless urge, broke into odd capers beside the trail, rolling their heads from side to side, waving their arms, performing obscene gestures that seemed to fill the other negroes anew with a strange sort of madness. The girls, too, took their part in the ghastly pantomime. Thank God that no such women are born of white mothers!

Only Chal David, seemingly oblivious of the antics of his followers, walked straight to the front with long and tireless strides. An hour passed and the fires were still on Chandler's left as he followed the blacks; but he knew that they were really circling the fires and that these were now to the north. And the fires were steadily drawing to the rear.

Then, between himself and the marching negroes, Chandler saw a shadow, just a bit denser than the blackness itself, detach itself from the jungle on the left and hurry forward to join the marchers. Another negro, whether man or woman Chandler could only guess, had left the signal fires to join the men with Chal David. Another shadow and another. Then in groups of two, three, four and five they came, each group being greeted with a rising inflection in the monotonous *"AI! ai!"* of the larger group. And the newcomers, upon joining, raised their voices with the others in the weird chant that must have come to Haiti from the Dark Continent:

"AI! ai! AI! ai! AI! ai!"

From the other side of the trail, too, shadowy groups separated themselves from the jungle gloom and joined this nucleus of marching blotches. Chandler dropped farther to the rear, knowing that at any moment some one might be a trifle late in joining and discover that a white man was spying upon the group which was fast growing into a small army. The ceaseless *"AI! ai!"* was now growing louder moment by moment, until Chandler wondered if even the dancers at the American Hotel did not at times lift their heads to listen and wonder. He wondered, too, if the blacks were really ignorant that he followed. Perhaps they knew and with diabolical cunning were merely enticing him farther into this Haitian wilderness!

He gritted his teeth and refused to think what such knowledge might mean.

So on through the night, until a rosy glow in the east signaled the approach of a new day and Chandler sensed that the little army was preparing to call a halt. When he felt absolutely sure of this he climbed a tree which was clothed with heavy foliage at the top, and hid himself against discovery, peering through the branches until the blacks had disappeared into another hollow between the endless hills. They were soon out of sight; but when their shouting came back to him and the weird chanting ceased, Chandler knew that they had halted. When he saw faint wisps of smoke against the dawn's gray haze, he was sure.

Ignoring the pangs of hunger which tortured him when the first odor of cooking meat came to him with the morning breeze, and attempting to counteract this torture by assuring himself that the meat was probably human flesh anyway, Chandler stretched out as well as he might on his uncertain perch and tried to sleep. He was very, very tired. And thirsty! But he conquered thoughts of his thirst with an iron will and presently fell asleep, lulled by the voices which came to him from the little hollow ahead.

As the day crept forward until the sun was high above his sleeping place, Chandler stirred restlessly in the heat which, even through the curtain of leaves, seemed intent upon seeking him out. A merciful breeze rustled the branches and Chandler slept on.

Then evening again and Chandler awoke to find himself weak from the lack of water and food. He knew that, were he to follow this weird adventure through, he must have water, and very soon. His danger had increased. For he must, if no water were encountered along the way, attempt to steal a water gourd from one of the blacks. That meant that he must kill the black, too. For the fellow would report his loss, and the man with the cunning which Chandler believed Chal David possessed would not have to ponder long to put two and two together and get the right answer. He would know, if he did not already know, that the white man had not, after all, slipped through his fingers and fled back to Port au Prince. Upon which he would undoubtedly give the word which would scatter his black minions to the four winds with orders to bring in the thief. On the other hand, a dead negro might not be missed at all, unless Chandler were so unfortunate as to pick out some fellow whose near relatives or friends among the little army might miss him and begin to wonder. But there would be a chance, even then. Your true Haitian does not dwell long on puzzling happenings. He is too dull and stupid—which makes him all the more dangerous when directed by the smooth words of a master-rogue of his own race.

DARKNESS fell and, as though its falling had been a signal, the queer chant of the Haitians began once more, mingled at first with those screams which Chandler had likened to the wail of banshees, and which were answered from various points outside the camp. Chal David was calling in his stragglers. And in a few minutes, from the receding sound, Chandler knew that the black army was once more on the move.

Noiselessly he slid down from his cramping perch and followed. He reached the camp of the day and, even had there been no embers of dying fires, he would have recognized the camp by the strange effluvium which always cries aloud of the presence or recent presence of a Haitian.

Holding his breath in disgust Chandler hurried on, following the sound of the tom-toms and the barbaric chanting. And just beyond the camp he paused abruptly at a

certain welcome sound—the rippling of water over a pebbly bed. And, although he was not ignorant of how a Haitian pollutes the streams which he encounters, he knelt and drank deeply, feeling sure that he would be back in Port au Prince, among white doctors, ere he would feel any of those ghastly consequences of drinking unboiled water, which are visited upon white people, and concerning which any person who has ever been afoot in inland Haiti or Santo Domingo can tell you. Walking along, your tongue shriveling with unnatural thirst, you encounter a stream. You know that terrible diseases lurk within the clear, cool depths—and sometimes the depths are neither clear nor cool—but you would drink if you knew that you would be stricken down the next moment, as long as you knew that your terrible thirst would first be satisfied!

The march was not a long one this night. For, when Chandler judged that it was about midnight, the chanting army came to a halt. That they were far away from the abode of the nearest white people Chandler knew at once; for the stop was made at the crest of a hill, from which the bonfires which were soon alight could be seen for miles in all directions. Chandler, seeing that every person now in that army which had grown so large, was engrossed in the huge figure which stood alone among the fires—moved up until he could hear what was said. The blacks were eating and talking in low tones. They were scattered over the hillside in huddled groups, eating cooked flesh. A dead goat, apparently freshly killed, lay near one of the fires, and Chandler was racked with pangs of hunger when he realized that it was goat meat which these jungle children now enjoyed. If only he could bear up until they had gone to their sleep, when he could slip in and steal enough meat to still those pangs in his stomach!

Then Chal David uttered that cry which Chandler had heard several times before. Curly heads were raised, white-irised eyes turned in the direction of the high priest. Silence fell upon the hill crest. Only the fires crackled and flamed, sending the knowledge of their presence far and wide across the forests.

CHAL DAVID raised his right arm and pointed into the east.

"Across there lies Bois Tombe," he said, "Bois Tombe, which was once a populous city—until the brother peoples in Santo Domingo, tainted with the blood of the oppressors, fell upon the city and slaughtered its people because these people had dared to torture and slay a hated *blanc!* Those dead cry out for vengeance! Not only against those who were our brethren, but against all who have the blood of *blancs* in their polluted veins! Bois Tombe lies at the edge of the border between the two countries. What could be easier than to slip across in the dead of night and return with a white child? Remember, my children, that the black medicine still lacks its most powerful ingredient! *The sword of Dessalines is falling! The time is coming when the whites must be cast into the sea!* Shall we fail to heed the divine signal, cowering instead like whipped curs because we have become accustomed to the white man's heel atop our necks? What Haiti has once done, Haiti can do again! There are more than two millions of us in this little republic, while you could almost count the white folks on the fingers and toes of one of the groups about those bonfires! *The time is coming swiftly!*"

A low murmur of assent, welling swiftly into a many-toned and many-tongued shout, greeted this bit of oratory, every word of which Chandler understood, and, understanding, he

shivered at the pictures which came and went across the retina of his mind.

Chal David continued:

"Remember that black Haitians were the instruments by which the vast army of France, 35,000 men headed by Le Clair, own brother-in-law to the great Napoleon, were sent back to their own land, a mere defeated remnant of 5,000 men! Thirty thousand soldiers left their bones to rot on the soil of Haiti, while most of the blacks who opposed them remained alive to die in their own homes of white-haired old age! We are the children of those who won this great victory! Shall we be less brave than those who went before us? Tonight, far from the haunts of the white oppressors, you shall see how our forefathers overthrew the French. You can go and do likewise! Some of you will die; but you will die with the sure knowledge that you have left a free country behind you for your children to enjoy in their own way, which is not the white man's way; to worship as they wish, which is not the worship of the white man! No longer will you be compelled, outwardly at least, to conform to the tenets of the white man's god; but will be able to follow, without let or hindrance, the precepts of the Great Green Serpent as interpreted by his chosen *Papa Lou* and *Maman Lou!*"

Chal David turned slowly about until he faced toward the center of the encampment. His right arm pointed skyward, as though he invoked the blessings of the spirits of the upper air. It was a dramatic moment as all eyes turned toward the center of the huge circle which was ringed with bonfires — a circumstance which Chandler had, until now, failed to notice. The center of that circle was bare of verdure, bare as though all vestige of green had been trodden out by countless bare feet. And it was brighter than the day because of the redness of the bonfires. A ghastly stage in a mysterious forest—set by a primitive people which had never learned self-control. Silence fell again while Chal David still kept his arm upraised.

Chandler, watching closely, could not have sworn whence came the woman. At one moment that great fiery circle was bare, the next moment and a black woman whose scraggly hair hung in ragged wisps about her face stood silently among the fires and waited. The breathless silence held for a long brace of minutes. Then a murmur went around the circle of blacks, a murmur which grew momentarily louder until Chandler could make out the words:

"Maman Lou! Maman Lou!"

This woman was the high priestess of the cult of voodoo!

A shriveled, insignificant black woman, whom any white person would have passed on the streets of Port au Prince without a second glance; yet Chandler grew cold at the feeling as of a loathsome presence which flowed out and enveloped him with invisible waves! The high priest wielded power immeasurable among the blacks; yet his power was nothing beside that of a true voodoo priestess. An evil man is a common thing, for there are many such, and of various degrees of evil. Yet it seems that there are no depths too deep for a woman who has penetrated the veil of evil. For that reason an evil woman seems to typify unmentionable horror —especially if she be a voodoo priestess, amplifying her evil with knowledge of the black magic which is hidden within the pages of the mysterious Black Book of Haiti.

Black Book! Black Magic! Black Medicine!

Three ghastly synonyms!

THE woman stood still for a moment among the fires. Chal David's right arm lowered and his eyes slowly

swept the faces of his black minions. A slow, terrible smile came for a moment and fled across his black face. The effect was all that could be desired. Chal David had set the stage well!

The woman thrust her hand forth from her long gown of flowing colors —red, white, blue; a weird travesty, for the colors, covered with unutterable filth, were barely distinguishable as colors—and swept a skinny hand around the black circle. As one man the negroes, men and women, arose and fell back as though a powerful force were compelling them—fell back until they stood outside the circle of firelight. Chandler, too, perforce, fell back to safety—although he felt sure that, with the subdued excitement which pervaded the black people, he could have walked forth among them and no one would have heeded him.

The woman began to speak—in a low voice that somehow sounded like the vicious snarl of a beast. The negroes had squatted on their haunches beyond the firelight and, as their priestess spoke, gradually raising her voice, the blacks began to sway slowly from side to side in unison, as though they were a vast instrument upon which the black woman played as she willed. Faster and faster they swayed, and their heads began to roll; but their eyes remained fixed to that scraggly-haired figure inside the firelight. The woman, repeating something of what Chal David had already said, paused for a moment; but the blacks still swayed and their heads rolled on their shoulders as they gradually worked themselves into a frenzy. In the pause in the woman's speaking a weird note broke from the lips of a single black on the opposite side of the bonfires. Chandler could not see him, or her, but he could hear the voice. So could the other blacks; for another took up the chant—another and another. Faster grew the swaying:

"AI! ai! AI! ai! AI! ai!"

The woman's hand raised again for silence. Silence came on the instant, but the black bodies kept up their swaying.

"Tonight," screamed the woman, "you are to see how your forefathers vanquished the French hordes of Le Clair! For I, the greatest *Maman Lou,* have called back the spirits of those forefathers and the ghosts of the vanquished to re-enact the victory as an inspiration to Haiti of today!"

The coming of an earthquake would not have forced the eyes of the blacks away from the woman who held the primitive stage. Chandler, however, although later he could not have explained why he did it, had turned his gaze partially aside until it came to rest upon the squatting figure of a black woman who was a little in the rear of the others. Her eyes were glued to the face of the priestess and Chandler noticed that, when the woman began to speak, the crouching Haitian woman had taken from her lips and placed by her side a half gourd filled with some sort of liquor she had been drinking. She set the gourd aside unconsciously. And at that precise moment Chandler felt the pangs of thirst grip him once more.

Regardless of the fact that the gourd had but just left the black lips of the Haitian woman, he knew that he wanted to drink of the liquid in that gourd. Slowly, keeping in the shadow, his eyes swinging back and forth between the priestess and the squatting black woman, Chandler approached the latter. Right behind her he paused and sank slowly to his knees, holding his breath lest he betray his presence. His hand went forth and touched the gourd. The women did not heed. Swiftly Chandler drew back the hand holding the gourd, and lifted it to his lips.

He drank about half of the concoction before he realized that it was neither water nor coffee. It was ter-

rible to the taste, and seemed to burn his throat like liquid fire as it went into his stomach; but it seemed to satisfy his craving. What was it? Not rum—nor any other liquor he had ever tasted.

Keeping his eye on the woman for a moment, Chandler tilted the gourd, holding it before him against the light from the fires, and poured some of the liquid out, bringing his eye back to watch it as it fell.

Against the firelight the liquid looked as black as rainwater which gathers in the bottom of a charcoal bed!

A startled oath came from Chandler's lips against his will.

"Black medicine!" he muttered, and again: "Black medicine!"

The squatting woman looked around and right into his face—but it was patent at once that she did not see him, or seeing him, her dumb mind did not grasp the significance of his presence. For, shaking her head impatiently, she turned her eyes back toward the priestess.

Chandler dropped back and gained his previous vantage point.

He looked at the bonfires and the standing woman and saw that the whole picture had begun to blur. A queer tingling went through his body, not nauseating, but gently soothing and vaguely pleasing.

What had been in this black concoction which he had imbibed?

CHANDLER blinked his eyes and tried to make out the features of the priestess. Her words came to him dimly, as though through a curtain of heavy fog:

"Come forth," the woman seemed to mumble; "*Maman Lou* calls to the spirit of the dead to come forth!"

And, as though in answer to her bidding, the many bonfires seemed to blend into one huge sheet of flame, in which the *Maman Lou* suddenly vanished, and against which great red canvas a ghastly picture began to appear! It seemed to Chandler as though he looked from some great vantage point into an open place bordered by shadowy trees of a vast forest. And at the moment the open space seemed devoid of life, plant or human.

Then, as though growing out of the very soil in the center of this weird canvas, a slender white pole thrust slowly upward into the heavens, narrowing gradually as its height increased. And when the top came into view and Chandler saw the flapping rag fastened there he gave a gasp of horror and amazement! *For in that flapping rag he recognized what had once been the proud tricolor of France!*

From this moment the picture grew rapidly. The open space seemed suddenly to fill with men in uniforms—uniforms which are now no longer seen except in art galleries and between the pages of history—the soldiers of older France. Tents dotted the space at intervals, soldiers lolled in groups in the sunlight. In the distance, at the edge of the weird jungle, Chandler could make out the form of a house that had been roughly builded of logs. And, by a strange sort of necromancy, he could see through the logs and into the room—across the room to where, at a rough table, sat a stern-faced man wearing the proud epaulets of an officer. The officer's head was bowed in his hands, his elbows resting on the table, and his cheeks were lined with care and worry, while his hair was prematurely streaked with gray. He sat there, motionless, silent, waiting. He seemed to have upon his broad shoulders the weight of all the troubles of the world. Back to the soldiers who lolled outside, Chandler swerved his all-seeing gaze to find the reason. He noted then that the once bright uniforms of the soldiers were ragged, torn, and smeared with mud and stains of blood.

And ever and anon members of the group would start up and stare fixedly at the encroaching menace of the surrounding jungle. Others would sprawl in the sun as though they sought to sleep for a moment against their cares to come—and those who strove to sleep would leap suddenly to their feet as though an inner voice had aroused them; cries of fear would come from their lips as they, too, searched the walls of the impenetrable jungle so close at hand. Then they would fling themselves down, only to leap up again in a few minutes to repeat that searching glance toward the jungle.

What did it mean?

Chandler's gaze swerved again to another, and larger, wooden house, where, looking through its thick walls, he could see row on row of motionless figures covered with rough quilting. Over these figures busy men hovered and ministered with skilful hands. The hospital attached to the encampment! And ever and anon one or another of the figures would start up and cry out, looking around toward the walls as though, even through the logs. the startled one could see the jungle outside with searching eyes.

WHAT strange fantasies haunted these people?

Seeking an answer to this question Chandler looked toward that jungle wall. No necromancy was there to aid the soldiers, but Chandler, blessed with weird vision because of something outside of himself, could see into and pierce the jungle with his eyes. He saw, then, the reason for the hideous unrest of the French soldiers.

For the forest was peopled with a whole army of black, human beasts, resting there, sitting on their haunches, looking into the camp with drooling lips half opened.

Then Chandler understood!

It did not really need that other view to tell him. But he watched it come and go, just the same. He saw for an instant another open space on a hillside—an open space which was thickly dotted with rough wooden crosses, and connected with the encampment by a narrow trail through the woods. And through that trail at this instant wended a ghastly caravan—a group of soldiers bearing on their shoulders the silent and motionless body of a buddy who had died. The slow, funeral march of the burial squad! Time seemed to pass swiftly for a while, and Chandler watched those crosses multiply as though a lavish hand had planted them. And as they grew, Chandler looked back at intervals into the ghostly encampment to see that the little army in the woods was dwindling inversely as the number of crosses grew.

Chandler knew!

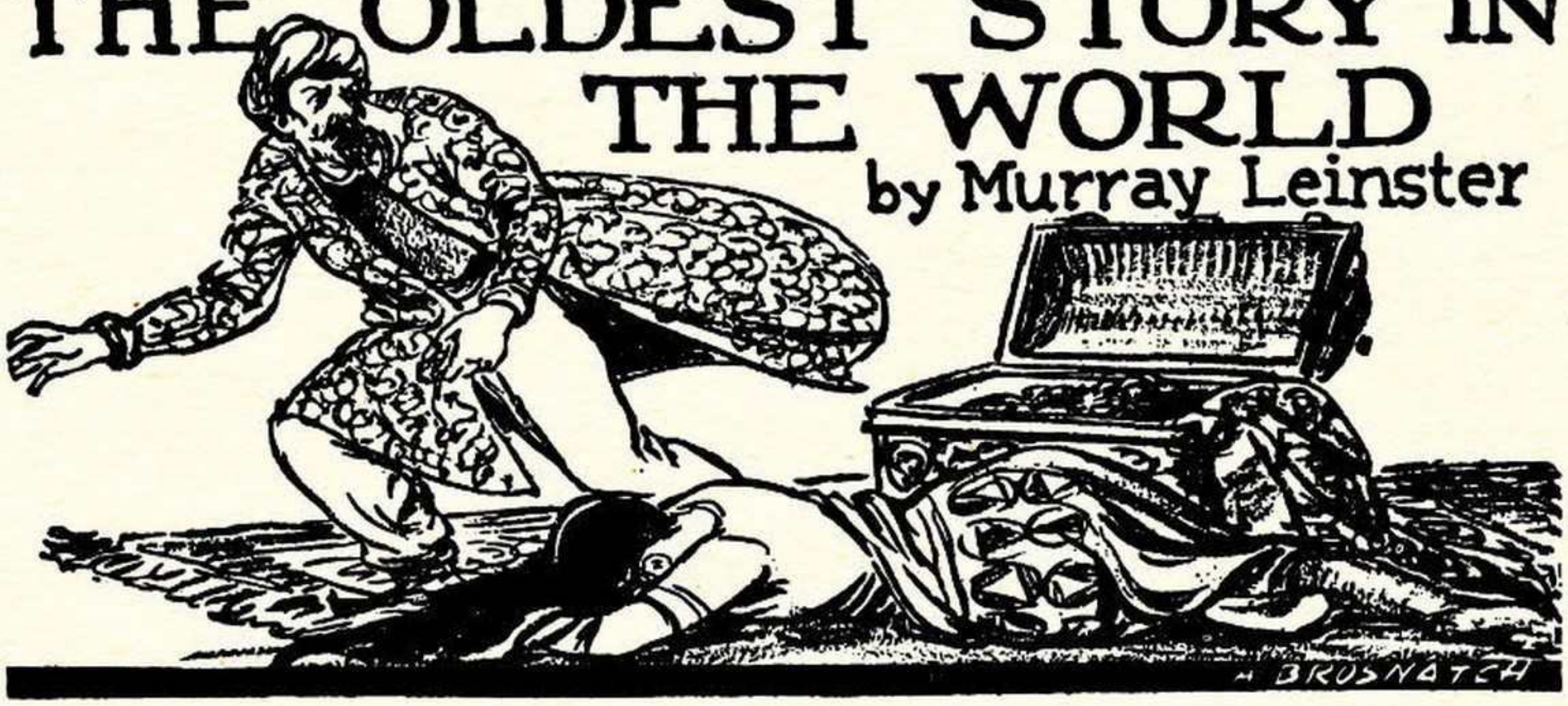
This army of soldiery was the ghostly army Le Clair had brought to Haiti under orders from the great Napoleon, and he was being granted a vision of that army's passing! He had been told, or had read, how this army could have wiped the negroes off the island had it been able to close with them in battle; how the negroes, evading the soldiers during the long hot days, luring them into the wilderness and losing them, wearing them down to utter exhaustion, had always returned on their heels at nightfall, to make the night hideous with their screams, their tom-toms, and their chanting, denying to the white man that one necessity without which man may not exist—the God-given boon of healthy sleep!

Denied their sleep night after night, growing more and more nervous as their fevered brains saw in the jungle the shadows of weird pictures which did not really exist, as they read in the chants of the negroes ghastly messages of promised tortures—is it any wonder that the bulk of Le Clair's little army sickened and died off? Until,

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THE OLDEST STORY IN THE WORLD

by Murray Leinster



THE man who told me this story said that it was the oldest story in the world, and that it happened a hundred thousand years ago. But somehow, I disbelieve him. He was very drunk and his eyes were a trifle too bright and his hair was quite remarkably disheveled, so it is possible that he was somewhat mixed in his statistics.

He came over to my table in the Jardin de Paris, which is a place in the city of Rangoon some thousands of miles from the real Paris, and as many leagues removed from anything Parisian. For one thing, the stench of the Guleh-Wat is all too near, and it is a mingled odor of incense and stale lotus and nipa blossoms and very, very unwashed human beings who come there to worship. And then, too, one may look out over the river and see the sandbars, with an occasional vulture perched there, critically inspecting some especially unattractive thing that has floated down with the current. And of course there are snub-nosed British tramps, and very natty and not quite clean Japanese cargo-boats, and pot-bellied Chinese junks, and the river craft of Siam, who deserve an adjective all to themselves. The Jardin de Paris is, moreover, some two continents removed from and a hundred years behind anything French, and it is two shillings rickshaw fare from the British legation.

He came over to my table and begged me not to finish the drink I had before me, because the grenadine made it red. He told me that one could have green drinks, made with absinthe, or white ones made with gin and limes, or purple ones and yellow champagne, but that I should not drink red drinks because they were like rubies and in consequence abominable beyond the imagination of men. They had been cursed for a hundred thousand years, he said, ever since the raja of Barowak laughed. And therefore, if I would have a waiter take my red drink away, not spilling any of it, being especially careful not to spill any of it, he would buy me thousands of green or white or purple drinks, and he would sit down beside me and tell me the oldest story in the world.

And naturally, I listened.

TO GET to Kosar in the old days (so the man with the disheveled hair told me) one went by Bitab and Pulat through the Molanasian Pass, which led to the country of the Sakai where it was necessary to travel very care-

fully because they used poisoned arrows and lay in wait for strangers. And one would begin to hear tales of Kosar by the campfires somewhere around Ghal, and the tales would become quite definite in the bazars of Talt. There you would hear of the raja of Kosar, of his falling-down palaces and his half-starved guard, of his two mangy elephants and the exaggerated penury of the whole tiny kingdom—save for the jewels he wore on occasions of state. And they were worth more than the whole of his realm. They were rubies, and the largest was as big as a man's closed fist, and the next were as large as a man's thumb, and there were rubies of all sizes from thence on down to small, glittering red stones no bigger than a grain of sand. Very precious were the rubies, and very carefully guarded. It was death to come within ten paces of the raja when he wore them, and no one save only the raja and the ranee, his queen, knew where they were hid.

It was in Talt that a certain man came to believe that they actually existed. He was a white man and had fled from the seacoast because he had killed a man over a gambling game and feared the law of his nation. He was in Talt, living with a dancing girl who was very proud to belong to a white man, and in consequence gave him all her earnings. He lived in her house because she loved him, and he felt safe from the laws of his nation, and had no worry over the means of living so long as her love continued. At ease, then, he spent much time in the bazars learning to pass as a native of the country he lived in, in case he needed disguise for farther flight. And in the bazars he heard tales of Kosar, and of the rubies, and from the dancing girl he learned many other strange things. In particular, he learned the language which is spoken in Kosar and Barowak and the states between them. It is a cursed language (so the man with the bright eyes told me) which wise men take care to have no knowledge of. But the white man was not wise.

He had much knowledge of sorts it is not well for a white man to have, however, and he had a plan which made him desire to have more. He knew, for example, of the secret cult of Khayandra, the god of the elephant's trunk, which is knowledge that only princes and ranees may possess. The god Khayandra is one of the two gods of birth and causes male children to be born, while Visayana causes females. The knowledge of this secret is confined to princes, of course, because otherwise their people might worship successfully and there would be only men-children born in their domains and no women to bear yet other men.

The secrets of this cult seemed to promise much to the white man, a hundred hundred centuries ago, and so he began to make his preparations. To rid himself of the dancing girl he resorted to a drug, and sold her to a merchant on his way to China. She had loved him, and for months she had kept him in her house because of her love, but he needed to be rid of her before he could go on to Jolun, and Halak, and through the mountains to Kosar.

He journeyed in that direction for a matter of weeks with the mark of Khayandra on his forehead, and that mark is something like a worm, and something like an elephant's trunk, and two of them joined together make a perfect circle.

He came to the city, then, and saw its walls falling, and men nearly naked in the streets from poverty, and children fighting with dogs for bits of food. Kosar was decayed from her ancient splendor, and vultures perched upon her ruined ramparts, and grass grew in many abandoned streets, and the palace of the raja was

growing up with weeds save for the small part that was still inhabited.

The white man reached Kosar on a day when the raja showed himself to his people, and saw twenty horsemen upon stunted spindling steeds driving away the people from a street that was lined with once magnificent palaces that had belonged to the nobles when Kosar was a mighty kingdom. And then there came possibly a hundred soldiers, ragged and unkempt, struggling to make a show with faded finery. And then two elephants, mangy and uncared for, with the raja on the second. All else in the city and the kingdom was poor and mean and faded, even the howdah of the raja's mount, but the jewels gleamed the more brightly for the tawdriness of their surroundings.

They glittered like blood, they sparkled like flames, they were a blaze of sheer magnificence upon a small, weary, dark-skinned man who extracted some weak, vain satisfaction from the looks his people cast upon those rubies. There were no guards near the raja, because it was death to come within ten paces when he wore the jewels of state. And it was possibly due to the lack of guards that a child, barely toddling, escaped from its mother and advanced with curious steps toward the ponderous bulk of the slow-moving elephant. The raja saw it coming near. It was ten paces, seven, five, from his sacred personage.

He nodded negligently, and a spearman darted into the circle that was about the jewels. The scream of the mother was very terrible. . . .

THE man with the disheveled hair, who was telling me this story in the Jardin de Paris, in Rangoon, stopped suddenly. He looked across to another table where a man I knew was taking a seat. A waiter was coming with a glass in which was the counterpart of the drink I had discarded. It is one part limes and one part gin and one part grenadine, with ice and carbonated water, and it is very satisfying.

"He—he is going to drink the red drink!" cried the man with the disheveled hair, in distress. "And the red drink is the color of rubies!"

The man I knew caught my eye, and I beckoned him to come over. His name was Gresham, and he was officially a superintendent of constabulary under the Siamese government, but he was as British as it was possible for a man to be, and I know that he made his reports in duplicate, one copy of which went to his legation.

"Gresham," I said coaxingly, "won't you join us and have a drink? My friend here is telling me about Kosar."

Gresham slipped into a seat and nodded brightly.

"I know Kosar," he said unexpectedly. "Had to go up there and argue with the raja. Beastly tumbledown place. The raja was spearing people that came within a certain sacred limit of his person. Silly stunt. Had some amazin' rubies, though. You've been there?"

He was talking to the man with the disheveled hair, but that person was looking fearfully at the waiter who had followed Gresham with his drink. I explained gently to Gresham, and he sent the drink away. He began to look very thoughtful, suddenly.

"You say you've been to Kosar?" he repeated slowly.

I interrupted, and told him that I was hearing the oldest story in the world, which was a matter of some consequence to a man of my profession. Other things could wait.

The man with the disheveled hair had lost the thread of his story by this time, however, and I had to prompt him to get him back on the track.

THE white man prospered in Kosar. There were those who knew of the meaning of the mark on his forehead, and they paid court to him because he could dispense the favors of Khayandra. He had horses and slaves and food waiting for him when he received a secret summons from the palace. It was from the ranee, the wife of the raja, and she met the white man with tears in her eyes and something of fear upon her countenance.

"You must pray to the god Khayandra," she told him, wringing her hands. "You must implore the god to be merciful."

The white man knew what she had to say, because it had been a part of his planning that she should say just this. But he feigned ignorance. In his pretended character of a priest he asked, "What do you wish of the god Khayandra, whose name not many know?"

And she told him. The raja was growing weary of her, and she loved him. He had no son to carry on his name and was debating within himself the purchase of other and younger wives. He would even sell one or more of his rubies to secure young and fruitful girls of great beauty. The ranee wept as she told the white man of this, thinking him a priest of the god of births.

"The god will hear you," said the white man, pointing to the mark on his forehead. "By this mark he will hear you,—if you make proper sacrifice."

And she wept again, and told of her poverty, of the poverty of all the whole realm where the raja's palaces fell to ruins for lack of revenues to keep them in repair, while the raja clung close to his rubies, in worth more than the whole kingdom.

"Those rubies," said the false priest of Khayandra, his eyes glittering strangely; "show me those rubies. Let me touch the mark upon my forehead with the greatest of all the rubies, and the god will grant your prayer."

"But it is death to approach them," cried the ranee, again wringing her hands, "save only for the raja himself."

Here the false priest turned away, and the ranee flung herself upon the floor before him, pleading. And he was obdurate.

With a cloak flung about her and a single taper in her hand, she led him down deep and dark damp passages, where molds grew upon the walls, and where the air was heavy with the scents of decay. Once she crept softly past a sleeping guard. Twice she pressed secret things and seeming solid blocks of stone opened before them. Twice she shuddered as she led the way within.

And then they came to a place where there was a moldy European carpet upon the floor of a tiny, rock-walled room. And there were rickety chairs there, and a table that was falling to pieces from the damp. And in a chest, quite unlocked, she showed him the rubies.

They glowed and gleamed and glittered by the ray of the single taper. The white man, disguised as a priest of Khayandra, caught his breath as he looked at them. They were men's lives, and women's honors, and war, and famine, and pillage. They were all luxuries, and all things desirable, and they were things that caught at a man's heart and held it fast, so that he coveted them fiercely and could not rest until he possessed them.

"Here," said the ranee, catching her breath in a sob, "here is my sacrifice to the god Khayandra. I have betrayed my lord through love of him, that the god Khayandra may grant my prayer for his honor."

And the white man, in his strange robes of a hidden priesthood, threw back his head and laughed.

"Come here, then," said he, "and I will show you proof of the god's reward."

And she stood before him, hopeful that her prayer would be answered, yet unhappy because she had betrayed a secret of her lord. And the white man made a sudden movement, and a knife glinted momentarily in the dim light of the taper. She did not cry out save once, but the taper fell from her fingers and was extinguished. And then in the darkness there was no sound save the suddenly stealthy movements of the white man as he groped in the chest and hid things away in corners of his robe, and in his head-dress. He was suddenly very much afraid, because the rubies were his, now, and he was in a strange panic lest other men hear of it and kill him for them.

He made his way back through the damp and moldy passages, feeling the walls with his fingers. When he came to the place where there was a guard, the man was stirring drowzily beside his light, and the white man leaped upon him suddenly from behind.

He felt queerly secure, then, and wiped his knife carefully before he made his way unseen out into the ruined streets of the fallen city of Kosar.

MY GLASS was empty, and I rapped on it as a signal for the waiter to bring another drink. The man with the too-bright eyes and the disheveled hair was leaning forward upon the table. His expression was curious—that of one who sees incredible things. I began to suspect that he had the horrors, but Gresham was listening intently. He yawned, however, when the man stopped.

"Beastly unpleasant yarn, this," he remarked casually.

"Which happened," I commented skeptically, "a hundred thousand years ago. And I still don't see why rubies are accurst."

"That was because the raja of Barowak laughed." The man with the disheveled hair shivered uncontrollably, and his eyes, which were too bright, began to look rather alarming. I was growing rather bored, and it began to be apparent to me that the man only had the horrors.

Certainly there was no other reason why one dressed so carefully and so well should have his hair in a tangled, matted mass on his head, as if no comb had been through it in weeks or months. And I guessed at the horrors because they are not infrequent in hot climates with strong liquors, and they often make a man have queer aversions to some small thing. I knew a man once, who would not cut his nails for a year and a half and could do no work in consequence until he sold his nails to a Chinaman who wanted to send evidence home that he had prospered. But that, after all, has nothing to do with this. It was Gresham who prodded on the stranger to the rest of his yarn.

"I know the raja of Barowak," he commented sympathetically. "He has an odd sense of humor. Had some pigs, once, put in china jars—"

He laughed. The stranger shivered again. "It was a hundred thousand years ago. . . ."

The scents from the Guleh-Wat came over the wall as he went on, mingled odors of incense and stale flowers and cooked food and particularly unwashed humanity. A colossal temple bell clanged slowly, far over the city. Sunset was upon us, and the big moths that flutter in the tropics began to fly about, clumsily, because it was still light. The man with the disheveled hair clutched firmly at his glass. It was full of a green liquid.

THE white man went swiftly away from Kosar (so he told us) only anxious to get beyond the reach of the raja's half-starved guard. He was

very much afraid. He was terrified by his own shadow, and it seemed to him that everyone who passed him must know of the jewels he had hidden about his garments. He fled hurriedly through Raman and Khota to Barowak. And constantly he became more and more afraid. In Raman there were few who knew what the mark on his forehead meant. In Khota there was none. He ceased to be regarded with profound respect, and he considered that as a sign of suspicion.

When he saw the walls of the city of Barowak below him, he was in terror. He ordered camp to be made, and the slaves who had been given him in exchange for his prayers pitched his tent and watched over him while he slept, or seemed to sleep. Actually, he was making a hiding place beneath his bed for the jewels. He buried them deeply, and in the morning he went on to the city of Barowak alone, leaving his slaves to guard his tent. He was a clever man, the white one, and he knew that they would never suspect that he had left about them a treasure more precious than the kingdom of Kosar.

He went down into the city, and by means of his knowledge of the languages they speak in Barowak he mingled in the crowds and listened to the talk in the bazars. And he heard no word of Kosar save of the rubies of the raja and his falling-down palaces, and the people hungry while the raja wore jewels, in value greater than his whole domain beside. And then a great contentment settled upon the white man. He knew that no word of his most marvelous theft had preceded him through the kingdoms. He became intoxicated with security, and knew that he had only to travel onward to China where in a certain city there was a man who would buy of him whatever he chose to sell, when he could go far from the sea and build himself a secret palace with many dancing girls and much wine and live in endless delight from thence onward.

He was a great man, and a wise man, so he felt, and it was already time for him to begin the enjoyment of his treasure. He began to look hungrily at the wines and sweetmeats, and to think obscure and evil thoughts concerning the women he saw about him. He debated on the purchase of dancing girls. He had been so long among dark races that he had almost forgotten that he was a white man.

Surely it was not the thought of a white man that made him throw back his head and laugh aloud in the bazar of Barowak. He had heard that the ranee of Barowak was most beautiful of all women. And it was no more than fitting that he who had taken the jewels of Kosar should likewise take for himself the pearl of Barowak. His garb had been perfect for the first of his purposes, and was no less adapted to the second.

He went and held a secret consultation with an old female slave of the palace. . . .

THE mark on his forehead was a sign to make the doors of women open to him, and to make women anxious to please him. He could grant or withhold the favor of the god Khayandra, the mark told those who were wise enough to understand it. And women desire that god's favor, and in particular, the wives of rajas desire it.

She gave him cooling drinks with her own hands, and watched him anxiously as he sat at ease beside a small marble pool, all ringed about with marble, while a scented fountain played in the stillness. She was desirous of making him well-disposed toward her, but she seemed a little frightened, too.

"Why have you fear?" he asked, as she listened apprehensively to some retreating footsteps.

"My lord knows not the worship of Khayandra," she told him. "But if I may please the god in any way . . ."

The white man was drunk with his power, which lay hidden in the ground among the hills that looked down on the city. His power was in small red stones, the largest of which was the size of a man's fist, but they glittered very wonderfully, and most men would have sold their souls for one of the smallest of them. The white man, disguised as a priest of Khayandra, thought of those stones glittering in the dark damp earth, waiting for his coming, and the thought intoxicated him. He looked upon the woman before him and found her pleasing. She was proud of carriage, and small of foot, and graceful. And her lips were very, very red, almost as red as the rubies the white man had stolen, and her eyes were like other jewels he did not possess.

"The god Khayandra," he murmured, looking at her obliquely, "desires to show you his favor. And I am his priest."

Had he been a wiser man, he would have seen that the light that came upon her face was from a thought of another than him, but his own heart was puffed up with pride, and full to bursting with vanity. And there was much evil in his eyes, which blinded him. He did not see stealthy figures creeping up behind him, nor read aright the sudden terror that overcame her as he reached out his hand to touch her.

An arm crept about his throat and tightened. And a cold, wavy blade pressed against his side, and then two men flung themselves upon his feet before he could more than gasp from a sudden very terrible fear. Then he saw small, monkeylike eunuchs fling themselves upon the ranee Sahnya, and bind her fast. Then they grinned at him while one more monkeylike than the rest squatted on his haunches and made signs to the white man. The monkey-like man could not speak, because his tongue was cut out,—which told with horrible clarity of tortures that were in store for the false priest of Khayandra.

THE white man had forgotten that though he might be very powerful, because of certain red stones hidden in the damp earth, he had ventured from pride and lust into the palace of the raja of Barowak, and that the raja was jealous of his honor, besides being possessed of a peculiar sense of humor. The white man went pale to his very liver, from certain foreknowledge of what was to come to him. He had forgotten the mark on his forehead.

One of the eunuchs vanished, bearing a message, and presently returned. He made signs to the others, and the white man was lifted up and carried for a long distance through gloomy corridors of stone, while those who carried him giggled to themselves at what was to befall him. He could only writhe. But the ranee Sahnya made no struggle.

They brought him at last to a little courtyard where there was a fountain, and the raja of Barowak sitting on a divan, half asleep, while a pallid, plump man with spectacles read to him from a book. It was a curious book to be in such a place. It was printed in English, and the *babu* was reading from it with great unction, and then translating what he had read into the accurst language which is spoken in Barowak.

The raja of Barowak looked up sleepily when the white man was flung down upon the stone floor.

"How did he find entrance?" he asked drowzily. "Slay those who let him in."

And then he nodded again to the plump man with the spectacles, and he went on with his reading. The raja listened only half-attentively. Behind his sleepy eyes thoughts were moving slowly. After a long time he smiled to himself.

"Stay. What is the name of that book?"

The *babu* puffed out a little.

"It is the *History of the Spanish Inquisition.*" He read the title in English, and then translated.

The raja grinned like one who is very drowzy.

"And what was that other one, from which you read this morning?"

The *babu* picked up a volume which was lettered: *Arthurian Legends.* Truly those were strange books to be in such a place, but the white man who lay bound there, waiting to learn in what fashion he was to die, did not think of that. He was remembering tales he had heard concerning the various unpleasant things a man may endure before death comes to him. He had heard that with care an expert torturer could keep one alive for four, even five days, in torment that would make hell a haven of infinite repose by contrast.

The ranee still was silent. The raja looked at her without particular malice, but rather as one who is meditating upon some jest.

"What is your excuse, O Sahnya?" he asked mildly. "Doubtless you love the man."

"Nay, my lord. But he is a priest of the god Khayandra, and I had supplication to make of his deity."

The raja said nothing whatever, but he looked very carefully at the mark on the white man's forehead. The white man took courage and spoke loudly, threatening the raja with the wrath of Khayandra. And the raja smiled again, seemingly half asleep.

"But the priests of Khayandra," he murmured softly, "have that mark indelibly upon their foreheads, and yours is running down your face from the cold sweat of terror." He began to laugh suddenly. "O white man, you have had your skin stained brown for many months, but the nails have grown out from your fingers, and the base of your nails is like the nails of the white men. This is a jest. I shall judge you by the laws of the white men."

The white man would have groveled in the earth, then, but that he was tied. The raja laughed, rocking his body back and forth.

"The raja Arthur, with his *tuans*, had many strange customs. There was that notion of the ordeal. I shall put you two to the ordeal. One of you shall live. And the other . . ."

The ranee spoke very softly, and very quietly. She was pleading for her life, but she spoke very softly. The raja waved her aside.

"This white man's custom of chi—chi—." He looked at the *babu*, and the *babu* puffed out and said, "Chivalree, sar." The raja chuckled and murmured, "Chivalree. It means that a man always dies for a woman. It is very foolish. You two may decide which is to die, and which is to go free."

The white man began to plead in an agony of pleading, struggling with his fear-stiffened tongue until the froth welled from his lips, begging, imploring the raja to slay the woman with many tortures, but to let him go free.

But the woman merely said, "If he is a false priest, kill him."

The raja looked disappointed. He had perhaps looked for a comedy wherein each would beg for the other's life. This matter convinced him against his will that the woman was innocent, but he had no mind to lose his jest.

"Then you may buy your freedom, or she may buy hers," he said, still hopeful of diversion. "And the one who fails to pay the greater price shall test out some of the things that are in this book."

He indicated the fatter of the two books, from which the *babu* had been reading.

"It is vairy instructive, sar," said the *babu*, lapsing into English in his excitement. "This feeding a man powdered diamond, sar. He lingers for months, with many peculiar pains, sar. I—I was jeweler's clerk in Bombay, sar, an' I could fix—"

He began to rustle in the pages of the book and read excitedly, while the raja listened drowzily. The rack was there described in detail, and the torment of thumbscrews, and of the boot, and the other devices with which the Inquisition had operated upon men's religious convictions.

He read on and on, his translations growing more and more enthusiastic as he described the tortures that had been devised by holy men. He was especially pleased by the device of clipping off the eyelids and staking a man out in the sun.

But the raja merely drowzed, until presently he said suddenly:

"Let them name the prices they will pay for mercy."

And then there was silence for a long time, while the white man's soul writhed. On the one hand, the prospect of staring with lidless scorched eyes up at a pitiless tropic sun for days or weeks or months, with other tortures yet to follow, the rack, and the boot, and flame, and water dripping until death came. And on the other hand, the giving up of his rubies, his priceless, precious rubies that glittered with a red fire that was neither of land nor sea.

He gave an agonized cry at the thought, but terror drove him, and he offered rubies for his life. The largest was the size of a man's fist and those next in size as large as a man's thumb, and so on down to tiny glittering stones no bigger than a grain of sand. He offered them all, despairingly, for his life.

And the raja looked sleepily at the woman.

"And what is your price that you will pay for life?"

And she said just two words, which the white man did not hear.

Then the raja smiled very curiously, and bade his servants go and dig up the rubies that the white man had described, and as he saw them go, all the anguish and bitterness in the white man's heart turned to venom against the woman whom he had coveted to this loss, and he made a bargain with the raja that if the rubies were as he said, that he should be able to ask one demand.

And he lay bound in the sunlight, full of an unspeakable anguish at the loss of his rubies, until the men came back with his treasure.

The raja looked at them sleepily, and allowed the *babu* to touch and finger them. He made no move to examine them himself. But the white man, seeing all his wealth passing forever from his hands cried out horribly.

"My demand! I make my demand!"

And the raja gazed at him, drowzily.

"The life of that woman! Kill her with torments!"

The white man sank back upon the stone flooring and moaned with anguish at the red stones going from him forever.

And then the *babu* looked up and smiled very placidly and said, "These are the rubies of the raja of Kosar, sar. I took them to him from Bombay, sar, when I was jeweler's clerk. He was very poor an' could make no display, so he had these jewels made

for state occasions, sar, an' they are made out of glass."

Through the stunned horror of the white man there came a curious sound. It was the raja, laughing. He was laughing at the jest of a man trying to buy his own life and the death of a woman with bits of colored glass which were paste and not precious stones at all. He was particularly amused at the white man's trying to buy the death of a woman who had offered a very great price for her life. She had offered him a son, concerning whom she had wished to make prayers to the god Khayandra. It diverted the raja of Barowak to think of a man trying to exchange trumpery bits of trash for so priceless a gift, and he was minded to carry out the jest to its only fitting conclusion, with the aid of the *Arthurian Legends* and the *History of the Spanish Inquisition*. He gave orders, laughing uncontrollably . . .

THE man with the disheveled hair was staring, now, as if he saw terrifying things. He drank of his green drink and shuddered. Gresham was listening very intently, and perhaps for the first time in his life did not notice that we were becoming a bit conspicuous. The voice of the man with the disheveled hair had grown louder, toward the last.

THE raja of Barowak gave orders, laughing, and men departed swiftly north and south and east and west to scour the whole world for red things. They brought red cloths and red woods and red stones and red dyes. And they took whole rivers and made them red with the dyes that they had brought. And then they took the white man and sat him in a red chair, binding him very securely, and so that he could not move, nor even open his jaws to scream. And then for a hundred years they left him.

They did not touch him. They did not beat him. They did not harm him in any smallest way, but from some spot far overhead a tiny drop of red-tinted water fell down upon his head. Once every second it fell, deliberately, inexorably, never late, never early, never varying by the thousandth fraction of an inch from the one spot where it fell.

From taps the blows rose to hammer-blows and then to mighty, horrible collisions that jarred his brain to its very foundations. The inevitable monotony of it grew terrible, horrifying, of a sort to drive away sanity. The white man began to make noises in his throat by the end of the first year. By the hundredth year he was screaming through forcibly closed lips.

Then they took him away, and he slept for a day. And then they took him back for another hundred years, but he was forgotten, and they left him for a thousand generations, while he screamed and screamed and the water fell remorselessly, drop by drop, drop by drop, upon the one same spot upon his skull.

And then he was released for a single day, while he knew that the raja and all his descendants must have died and been forgotten, and hoped that they had forgotten the cause of his doom, or the length of it. But they put him back again and again, and yet again, until he knew that he must wait patiently until all the armies of the world could find no more red dye with which to tint the rivers, and the rivers had run dry, and there was no more water in the earth. He sat on his reddened throne and screamed endlessly because a tiny drop of water fell drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . upon a single tiny spot upon his skull.

And he stayed there for a hundred thousand years.

(Continued on page 285)



THE BEARDED MEN—

by Adam Hull Shirk

Author of "Mandrake," "Into the Fourth," etc.

I HAD come to the end of my rope. The statement lacks originality, I am aware. Many men have made the same admission before me; many others will make it after I am forgotten. But to every man his own troubles seem magnified tenfold. I felt entirely blameless, a victim of circumstances, of the folly or perfidy of others, but this fact did not help me. Considered from whatever angle the fact remained—I had come to the end of my rope.

I do not think I am a coward, but I had almost decided to take the coward's way of escape—the only way, I argued.

I strolled aimlessly along Riverside Drive, taking a northerly course for no other reason than because I had turned in that direction on leaving home. Home! I smiled bitterly at the word. For by what possible stretch of the imagination could I term that miserable little apartment where I had existed since my collapse and the desertion of one upon whom I had counted, home?

The thought strengthened my half-formed determination to have it over and done with. As I walked, already more of a ghost than a living man, among the chattering crowds, hearing, without understanding, the words that floated to my ears, seeing, without taking note of it, the placid river with its pleasure craft and fast moving steamers—as I strolled aimlessly, head bent, my soul involved in the darkest reflections, I realized quite suddenly that I was followed.

It was not that I heard or saw anything to indicate a shadow, but the conviction was positive. Then, out of the void, someone called my name. I did not hear the word spoken; I *sensed* it.

A feeling of awe, almost of superstitious fear, gripped me. I had been summoned—but for what purpose and by whom? I walked on, forgetting temporarily my crushing load of despair, until I realized that I was weary. A sign on a tall electrolier told me that I had reached Ninetieth Street. An empty bench invited me and I sat down. Again the cloud of troubles rolled back upon my soul. My decision to die took definite form.

I took my revolver from my pocket and looked carefully about me. I had gone beyond the more crowded portion of the drive; indeed, in one of those odd lulls of traffic, I had the spot momentarily to myself. It was my fate playing her last card! The

way to death was opened to me. I raised the weapon to my head.

"Gordon Hunt! Gordon Hunt!"

I lowered the revolver and sat rigidly, for again I had been called, and now the call registered upon my brain rather than upon the tympanum of my ear. It was imperative, brooking no disobedience. I became aware of a figure standing behind my bench —the figure of a man with a heavy beard. His oddly luminous eyes were fixed upon me with a steady gaze.

He came around the end of the bench and sat down beside me. He moved with a stiff, almost decrepit action, as of extreme age. Yet he did not seem so old. His beard was dark, his eyes bright, and his skin, where it showed, but little wrinkled.

I wanted to get up, to leave, but something, possibly curiosity, held me.

"Did you call me?"

"I did," he finally answered, in a voice slightly high and suggestive of age, but which at the same time possessed a dominating quality. "You are Gordon Hunt?"

"Why should I deny it? You have been following me; why?"

He hesitated, and I could feel his bright eyes burning into my brain.

"This is no place to talk," he said, finally. "This much I may say—you are in trouble."

I groaned.

"You had planned to kill yourself."

He pointed to the revolver, which I had still clasped in my hand.

"Put it away. And if you want to escape your troubles without dying to do so, come with me."

"But—"

"Wait! A moment ago you contemplated suicide. You can, therefore, have few scruples. A few hours more or less can not matter to you. If you still wish to die, after our talk, I will not try to prevent you. If not—"

"Who are you?"

He shook his head. "I can tell you nothing here. Will you come?"

Again I was conscious of that insistent call. I knew that I must obey. And after all, why not? What did it matter? What did anything matter to me—now?

HE AROSE and I did likewise. Then he started off with peculiar swiftness and silence. Certainly his years had not affected his activity, though I still noticed that stiffness of movement.

He led me away from the drive up the hill toward Broadway. Along this street we hastened for perhaps a dozen blocks, and then my guide suddenly darted down a cross street toward the drive again. Midway of the block he stopped before an old house in the center of a sizable yard. It was a house that had escaped the fate of its neighbors of old, which had been torn away to prepare for the erection of an apartment house on either side.

The stranger entered the yard and led the way up the tumble-down front steps and inserted a key in the lock.

"Come," said he, and I obeyed. The door he closed softly behind us and I followed him along a narrow and dark hallway, up a flight of stairs, and presently was ushered into a small but over-furnished room which was quite evidently a study, for there were books without number and a cluttered desk.

"Sit down," directed my companion, indicating a comfortable chair.

I sank into its depths, watching with some renewal of interest as he removed his hat and hung it, with the crooked stick he carried, in a corner. Then he came over and sat down facing me. In the better light I could see that he was not so old, though his beard was certainly dyed. He had no hair whatever. His head was like a billiard ball, or, apter simile, the shape suggesting it, the egg of some

colossal bird, say a roc. But his eyes! They scintillated, snapped, or burned with a steady glare, burned into my very soul, it seemed. They were young eyes; they had not aged with their owner.

"You are Gordon Hunt," he remarked.

"You have already named me," I answered, a bit sharply.

"Until recently," he went on, unruffled, "you were vice-president of the Gotham Trust Company, which failed through, as announced, the unwise speculations of the president, James Q. Moffitt, who afterward committed suicide."

"All that is public property," I snapped.

"By the failure of the company many poor persons lost all they possessed."

I could not repress a groan. That was, indeed, the tragedy of it all.

"Moffitt is not dead!"

"What?"

I sprang from my chair, but he motioned me back, a bit impatiently.

"It is true—he planned very cleverly. After accumulating all the funds, turning all available securities into cash, he arranged the suicide carefully by means of a body obtained from a professional dealer in cadavers. Perhaps you did not know there is such a man in New York? It is so. Well, the face was disfigured by a pistol shot so as to be entirely unrecognizable. Otherwise the resemblance to Moffitt was marked. He had no close friends or relatives to tell the difference. The body was buried—and the brunt of the whole business fell upon you—and crushed you!"

It was true! God, shall I ever forget those days and nights of agony? The sound of the pistol shot as one man killed himself before his wife's eyes when he learned that all their little savings had been swept away; the crying of widows whose pittance had been lost—these will ring in my ears forever.

"If this is true—"

The man with the beard nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on mine.

"It *is* true. Moreover, Moffitt still lives in New York City. He bears an assumed name, of course, and not even you would recognize him if you should pass him in the street. He has lived a double life for years. As James Moffitt, he had, as I have explained, few friends. You know that. As William Bowers he is well known. This coup had doubtless been planned for some time."

"William Bowers? Surely you don't mean—?"

"Bowers of the Hemisphere Life Insurance Company—yes."

"But man—I know Bowers, not intimately of course, but there must be others who—"

"He is shrewd. As Moffitt, he was retiring, almost diffident, keeping aloof from his associates. He also wore a heavy beard like mine; he complained of weak eyes and covered them with dark glasses. He spoke gruffly—and seldom. As Bowers, he is smooth-shaven, debonair, and his eyes are perfect. He talks much and lightly; he is a favorite with the fair sex, a frequenter of cabarets, what is known as a 'good spender'. In short, he is a rounder. There you have it. Bowers is the real man; Moffitt was the unreal. The latter is dead—in that sense. But Bowers is very much alive—and he is the robber of widows and orphans, the man who ruined your career—"

I jumped to my feet again. I raised my arms to heaven and cried out to God, if this were true, to let me get my hands upon the fiend.

"Why do you tell me this? What is your motive? How can I believe you?"

The stranger got up and came closer to me.

"You believe because I tell you. I have told you because I intend to take you to this man."

"You will—take me to him?"

"Yes; but there must be no violence. He will be punished. But not by your hand. And that is not the only thing I shall require of you."

"If this man can be brought to book," I returned earnestly, "you may ask what you will of me. I will be your slave if necessary."

"I may require even that," he answered in a low tone. And something in his eyes sent a chill to my heart; I was afraid, that was it. But with my fear was a fierce exulting joy. Despite his words, I might gain the opportunity I coveted: to exact from the wretch who had ruined me and many others, the payment that was due!

"Tomorrow will be time enough," he went on, "and tonight you shall be my guest. I will introduce you to some of my friends."

I wondered silently, but made no demur as he asked me to follow him to another and even smaller chamber, which seemed a sort of dressing room.

He took from a drawer a false beard.

"I must ask that you wear this," he said, almost apologetically. "I will explain why later."

Astonished, I seemed unable to refuse even this singular request and adjusted the beard to my face. It was a complete disguise.

He surveyed me approvingly.

"Good," he remarked, with a chuckle. "Now we will go in."

I followed him downstairs and into a large room, brilliantly lighted, at the rear of the house. In it, to my surprize, I saw that a number of men and several women were gathered. And each man wore a beard, similar to mine, or else of natural growth, while the women were masked. It was like a theatrical green room or some grotesque masquerade.

My guide was greeted with every indication of deference. I noticed that those present moved with a sort of mechanical precision and seemed to be going about their various pursuits—playing cards, smoking, talking, like so many automaton figures. Only one seemed an exception to this peculiarity—a woman, young, as I could easily determine by the smoothness and beauty of her neck and shoulders gleaming from the black evening gown she wore. She seemed nervous, watchful, alert.

The room was richly furnished, like a club lounge; there was a piano, and a woman played with that queer lack of expression characteristic of the mechanical instrument.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said my guide, "allow me to introduce to you, Mr. Black."

The guests bowed stiffly. Only the woman in black made no move, but watched me, furtively, from the eyeholes of her domino mask.

Suddenly as I stood there, I felt (that is the word) I felt my name called. I turned involuntarily and met the eyes of my host. They were bright, like two pinpoints of light. And then I ceased to know anything.

2

I RECOVERED myself in a small room, sparsely furnished and with white walls unrelieved by a single picture. I was lying on a couch, and it was dusk, for though there was a high window, no light came from it. I sat upright, and in doing so flung out an arm which tipped over a chair standing by the couch. In response to the sound, apparently, the door opened and a woman entered. She was the one I had noticed when I first entered the mysterious house, where, I now suspected, I still remained. She still wore the domino mask but had discarded the evening gown for a charming negligee.

"It is all right," she said soothingly, as she replaced the fallen chair.

She glanced at her wrist watch.

"Nine o'clock," she muttered. "It never fails."

"What has happened to me?" I blurted, and got up from the couch.

My head was a trifle befuddled; I recalled the incidents imperfectly.

"Nothing," she returned. "You have been asleep—that is all."

"Where am I—on One Hundred and Ninth Street?"

She nodded.

"Where is he—who is he—the man who brought me to this place?"

"He will be here presently. I can't tell you who he is—now."

I put my hand up to my face. The false beard was still there. I started to remove it, but she stopped me.

"He wouldn't like it," she explained softly.

As she spoke her face paled at a sound of approaching footsteps.

"He's coming—lie down," she whispered; and so evident was her fear that I obeyed.

She sat down a distance from my couch and was reading when the queer man entered. He came in with that same active, yet stiff-jointed movement I have mentioned and stood looking down at me. Apparently satisfied, he turned to the girl.

"Freda," he said, "you may go."

I watched from beneath half-closed lids as she darted one fearful glance at me and then hurriedly left the room. When the door had closed behind her, he turned to me again. For a full minute he stood looking at me. Then he said:

"You are awake. I am not to be deceived. I have something here to show you."

I opened my eyes and then sat up. From his pocket he took a part of a newspaper and I saw that it was dated June 11, the second day following that upon which I had first heard him calling me out of the void. He pressed it into my hand, pointing with a long, bony finger at a marked article. With bulging eyes I read the headline:

WELL-KNOWN CLUBMAN MURDERED.

William Bowers, Man-About-Town, Noted as Raconteur, Found Slain in his Apartments.

The article went on to tell how, the evening before, a servant had discovered Bowers with a knife-thrust in his heart, and no trace of the assassin had been discovered. Robbery, it said, might have been the motive, since there was nothing of value found in the room, and a small strong box let into the wall was open and empty.

I finished reading and looked at my queer host.

"What does it mean?" I gasped.

"That you killed Bowers—or Moffitt," he said slowly.

"I killed him? But I don't remember anything."

"You went with me to denounce him as we had planned. He turned over the contents of his strong box—two hundred thousand dollars in banknotes — to me. Then without warning you picked up a jeweled dagger used as a paper knife, from the table and stabbed him. I got you away—"

"It's a lie!" I cried. "How could it be true? I've no recollection of anything of the kind—you're trying to frighten me—you can't prove it."

"Oh, yes, I can," he chuckled. "There was a witness—Freda, my foster daughter, accompanied us. She waited in the other room. But she saw the murder—"

"I can't understand—this is terrible—he deserved death—but I—I—"

"You must have gone temporarily insane," he said, soothingly, "from your worry. However, you're safe with me—you were in disguise—the beard—and there was no clue. It will

be another 'unsolved mystery.' But you must understand one thing—*you are in my power.* Unless you do as I wish—I will tell the police."

"The money," I cried, suddenly remembering; "what will you do with it? It belongs to those poor depositors."

"Half of it has already been sent to them—that is, to the receiver of the defunct Gotham Trust Company. The other half I shall retain as my share. After all, that is fair enough: but for me, they would have got nothing."

I sat down again on the couch from which I had arisen in the excitement of his revelations. I bowed my head in my hands. It was maddening. My brain refused to act with its usual quickness. I seemed unable to think clearly. He continued talking:

"If you try to escape, you will be arrested. In the meantime consider yourself my guest. Here you are free to do as you wish. But you must not go out without my permission. Do you understand?"

I nodded weakly. Why was I unable to pull myself together? Why did my brain seem clouded? If only I could remember—

"Who are you?" I said suddenly.

He started at the abruptness of my question. Then he frowned slightly.

"There is no need," he declared, "that you should know my name—I may tell you that few do. I am called—by my guests—by the members of the club—the Chief."

"The club? What club?"

"Oh, you did not understand? We call it the Club of Bearded Men—the ladies are merely auxiliary members—"

"But what is it for?"

"That," he returned, as he left me, "you will find out later."

I WAITED until he was out of hearing and then tried the door quickly. I had half expected to find it locked, but it yielded to my touch and I emerged into the hallway, only to be confronted by the girl—Freda he had called her.

"Where are you going?"

"He told me I had the freedom of the house. I am tired of that stuffy room."

"Please come back—I want to talk with you."

Her tone was so filled with pleading that I obeyed wonderingly. She closed the door and sprang the latch.

"Now we can talk undisturbed for a while," she added.

"What is it?"

"This: I am tired of this life—this has been the last straw, this affair of yesterday."

I remembered, and eagerly I questioned her. But she would say nothing of the killing of Bowers.

"Did you see me strike him?" I asked.

"Don't ask me," she murmured. "We must get away. I tell you I'm tired of it all."

"Won't you remove your mask? I'm going to take off these absurd whiskers."

I suited the action to the words and tore the false beard from my face. For a moment she seemed uncertain and then followed my example, stripping the domino from her face. I had made no error in my surmise. She was beautiful.

"What is all this masquerade?" I exclaimed, petulantly. "What is this club?—tell me."

"If I tell you what I know, will you swear not to betray me to him?"

"I betray you? Heaven forbid!"

"Well, then, I am the daughter of a woman whom I never saw, for she died when I was born. I am told she was one of the auxiliary members of the club. I don't even know that I have a name except my given name, Freda. He claims to be my foster father. Perhaps he is really my father. I don't know. I've lived here always. I've gone about very little

and then always with one of the elderly women. We are always veiled, even in the warm weather. It is dreadful."

"But who is he? What is it all about?" I persisted.

"He is called the Chief," she said, with a little shudder. "I don't know any more about him than that he is the leader of this crowd of men and women who appear always masked and bearded. They meet every night here. But they talk of nothing in particular. Then, frequently, he takes one of them aside, as he did you the other night. What happens then I don't know, except in your case, when he compelled me to go along—as a witness, he said."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw—I saw you go up to that man, after the talk you three had—and which I only heard a part of—and raise a knife to strike him—and then, I—I forget."

"You forget?" I repeated in astonishment.

"I remember nothing more until we started homeward. He said you had killed Bowers."

I groaned in my own effort at remembrance. But I could recall nothing. I walked across the little apartment and then turned back upon the girl, who stood, trembling, near the door.

"Why do you tell me, a stranger, that you have sickened of this life of yours? Why didn't you decide to escape long ago?"

"Because," she answered slowly, "I was afraid. I am afraid now—horribly afraid. But I had vowed that the next time a new member came I would confide in him, if he was of a sort to whom I might speak."

"You believe me of that sort?"

"Your face shows it—you are good—"

She broke off quite suddenly and her eyes overflowed.

"Oh, take me away—take me away! I shall die if I stay here another night!"

I went over and patted her upon the shoulder gently.

"Don't be afraid any more," I said soothingly. "We'll get out of this, somehow."

"Oh, thank you—"

"But listen: you must tell me all you know, if you haven't done so already. Who are these people, these members?"

"I don't know. They may be criminals. Or they may not. Strangers come; sometimes the old ones disappear. None are called by name. There is never any talk of their business. That is, I never hear it."

"Have you a weapon of any kind? A revolver?"

"Only a knife!"

She produced it from her bodice. I shuddered as I thought of that other knife with which, I had been told, I had struck down a fellow creature, a man who certainly had deserved death, but not at my hand. For after all, despite my desire for revenge, I was a God-fearing man, and I believed that he should have been punished by Providence.

"Give me the knife," I said.

She handed the weapon to me and at that moment we both heard the queer footsteps of her foster father approaching.

"Stand behind me," I ordered. She obeyed and I unlocked the door and stood ready, my knife poised.

THE door opened and the queer man came in. In a moment I had pinioned him against the wall, my knife at his throat.

"I am going away from here," I gritted, "and neither you nor anything else will stop me. And Freda is going with me."

He gurgled and stuttered in incoherent rage and I pricked him slightly with the knife point.

"Before I go," I added, "you will tell me what and who you are, and the truth about Bowers—or I will kill you."

He stopped struggling and his eyes burned into mine. I felt that insistent calling of my name, knew my senses were leaving. She saw it, and cried out:

"Don't let him look at you; stop him or it will be too late."

With a frantic effort I drew my eyes away from his and pinned him closer to the wall. And now the absurdly simple truth came to me. He was a hypnotist! But I was warned now. He should not again obtain the mastery over my will. I pressed the point of the knife against his throat.

"Stop," he cackled finally. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

He was a feather in my hands, for beneath his clothes he was a mere bag of bones. I carried him bodily to the couch and laid him down. I held him firmly and, my eyes averted, told him to go on.

"You did not kill Bowers," he muttered. "He died by his own hand. I tried to make you kill him, but not even I have the power to make a man do while under my influence what he would under no circumstances do naturally."

"I do not believe you," I said; "you killed Bowers yourself."

"You lie," he panted.

Suddenly he writhed out of my grasp, and with a burst of strength entirely unsuspected threw himself, clawing, tearing with nails and teeth, upon me. I was taken by surprize and almost overcome while Freda, a prey to her old terrors, fell back against the wall and stood with staring eyes. But all at once the grip relaxed and the creature dropped from me like some loathsome spider and lay writhing on the floor.

It was a fit of some sort, and I believed it was likely to prove fatal. Presently he lay quite still and I knelt down to feel of his heart. It fluttered feebly and he opened his eyes, which now, however, had lost their unwonted brilliance.

"I'm dying," he gasped, faintly. "Look in my desk—the secret panel—the paper explains—"

His voice broke off abruptly and his eyes closed. A tremor went over his body and he died very quietly.

I arose: "Come," I said to the girl, "let us get out of here. But first, where is his desk?"

She cast a last, frightened look at the body and then led me to the room I had entered when I came first to the house. An old-fashioned desk stood by the wall. A search revealed a small button which, when pressed, released a small panel and disclosed a folded paper. This I thrust into my pocket, and with Freda at my side I slipped quietly from the house into the night. Not until we were far from the place did I take the document from my pocket. And together, Freda and I read this queer statement:

"To be read after I am dead: I am the founder of the Club of Bearded Men, otherwise the Lost Men's Club. Every member is a man or woman who has found it advisable or imperative to drop out of sight of the world. It was my idea, conceived years ago. I watched carefully, and when through some event I knew that a certain person must find it essential to vanish, I went to that person in one guise or another, and gained the mastery over him by my hypnotic power. In the club, the men wore beards to insure that they should not recognize one another. Sometimes they have temporarily been released from the trance, but usually I have kept them partly at least under my control. They have done my bidding and remembered nothing, because that has been my will. None of my subjects has ever been apprehended; I have seen to that. Many mysterious crimes

(Continued on page 287)

If a Werewolf Is Slain as a Man, Then
His Half-Soul Will Haunt His Slayer Forever

IN THE FOREST *of* VILLEFÈRE

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

Author of "Spear and Fang"

THE sun had set. The great shadows came striding over the forest. In the weird twilight of a late summer day, I saw the path ahead glide on among the mighty trees and disappear. And I shuddered and glanced fearfully over my shoulder. Miles behind lay the nearest village—miles ahead the next.

I looked to left and to right as I strode on, and anon I looked behind me. And anon I stopped short, grasping my rapier, as a breaking twig betokened the going of some small beast. Or was it a beast?

But the path led on and I followed, because, forsooth, I had naught else to do.

As I went I bethought me, "My own thoughts will rout me, if I be not aware. What is there in this forest, except perhaps the creatures that roam it, deer and the like? Tush, the foolish legends of those villagers!"

And so I went and the twilight faded into dusk. Stars began to blink and the leaves of the trees murmured in the faint breeze. And then I stopped short, my sword leaping to my hand, for just ahead, around a curve of the path, someone was singing. The words I could not distinguish, but the accent was strange, almost barbaric.

I stepped behind a great tree, and the cold sweat beaded my forehead. Then the singer came in sight, a tall, thin man, vague in the twilight. I shrugged my shoulders. A *man* I did not fear. I sprang out, my point raised.

"Stand!"

He showed no surprize. "I prithee, handle thy blade with care, friend," he said.

Somewhat ashamed, I lowered my sword.

"I am new to this forest," I quoth, apologetically. "I heard talk of bandits. I crave pardon. Where lies the road to Villefère?"

"*Corbleu,* you've missed it," he answered. "You should have branched off to the right some distance back. I am going there myself. If you may abide my company, I will direct you."

I hesitated. Yet why should I hesitate?

"Why, certainly. My name is de Montour, of Normandy."

"And I am Carolus le Loup."

"No!" I started back.

He looked at me in astonishment.

"Pardon," said I; "the name is strange. Does not *loup* mean wolf?"

"My family were always great hunters," he answered. He did not offer his hand.

"You will pardon my staring," said I as we walked down the path,

"but I can hardly see your face in the dusk."

I sensed that he was laughing, though he made no sound.

"It is little to look upon," he answered.

I stepped closer and then leaped away, my hair bristling.

"A mask!" I exclaimed. "Why do you wear a mask, *m'sieu?*"

"It is a vow," he explained. "In fleeing a pack of hounds I vowed that if I escaped I would wear a mask for a certain time."

"Hounds, *m'sieu?*"

"Wolves," he answered quickly; "I said wolves."

We walked in silence for a while and then my companion said, "I am surprized that you walk these woods by night. Few people come these ways even in the day."

"I am in haste to reach the border," I answered. "A treaty has been signed with the English, and the Duke of Burgundy should know of it. The people at the village sought to dissuade me. They spoke of a—wolf that was purported to roam these woods."

"Here the path branches to Villefère," said he, and I saw a narrow, crooked path that I had not seen when I passed it before. It led in amid the darkness of the trees. I shuddered.

"You wish to return to the village?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "No, no! Lead on."

So narrow was the path that we walked single file, he leading. I looked well at him. He was taller, much taller than I, and thin, wiry. He was dressed in a costume that smacked of Spain. A long rapier swung at his hip. He walked with long easy strides, noiselessly.

Then he began to talk of travel and adventure. He spoke of many lands and seas he had seen and many strange things. So we talked and went farther and farther into the forest.

I presumed that he was French, and yet he had a very strange accent, that was neither French nor Spanish nor English, nor like any language I had ever heard. Some words he slurred strangely and some he could not pronounce at all.

"This path is not often used, is it?" I asked.

"Not by many," he answered and laughed silently. I shuddered. It was very dark and the leaves whispered together among the branches.

"A fiend haunts this forest," I said.

"So the peasants say," he answered, "but I have roamed it oft and have never seen his face."

Then he began to speak of strange creatures of darkness, and the moon rose and shadows glided among the trees. He looked up at the moon.

"Haste!" said he. "We must reach our destination before the moon reaches her zenith."

We hurried along the trail.

"They say," said I, "that a werewolf haunts these woodlands."

"It might be," said he, and we argued much upon the subject.

"The old women say," said he, "that if a werewolf is slain while a wolf, then he is slain, but if he is slain as a man, then his half-soul will haunt his slayer forever. But haste thee, the moon nears her zenith."

We came into a small moonlit glade and the stranger stopped.

"Let us pause a while," said he.

"Nay, let us be gone," I urged; "I like not this place."

He laughed without sound. "Why," said he, "this is a fair glade. As good as a banquet hall it is, and many times have I feasted here. Ha, ha, ha! Look ye, I will show you a dance." And he began bounding here and there, anon flinging back his

head and laughing silently. Thought I, the man is mad.

As he danced his weird dance I looked about me. *The trail went not on but stopped in the glade.*

"Come," said I, "we must on. Do you not smell the rank, hairy scent that hovers about the glade? Wolves den here. Perhaps they are about us and are gliding upon us even now."

He dropped upon all fours, bounded higher than my head, and came toward me with a strange slinking motion.

"That dance is called the Dance of the Wolf," said he, and my hair bristled.

"Keep off!" I stepped back, and with a screech that set the echoes shuddering he leaped for me, and though a sword hung at his belt he did not draw it. My rapier was half out when he grasped my arm and flung me headlong. I dragged him with me and we struck the ground together. Wrenching a hand free I jerked off the mask. A shriek of horror broke from my lips. Beast eyes glittered beneath that mask, white fangs flashed in the moonlight. *The face was that of a wolf.*

In an instant those fangs were at my throat. Taloned hands tore the sword from my grasp. I beat at that horrible face with my clenched fists, but his jaws were fastened on my shoulder, his talons tore at my throat. Then I was on my back. The world was fading. Blindly I struck out. My hand dropped, then closed automatically about the hilt of my dagger, which I had been unable to get at. I drew and stabbed. A terrible, half-bestial bellowing screech. Then I reeled to my feet, free. At my feet lay the werewolf.

I stooped, raised the dagger, then paused, looked up. The moon hovered close to her zenith. *If I slew the thing as a man its frightful spirit would haunt me forever.* I sat down waiting. The *thing* watched me with flaming wolf eyes. The long wiry limbs seemed to shrink, to crook; hair seemed to grow upon them. Fearing madness, I snatched up the *thing's* own sword and hacked it to pieces. Then I flung the sword away and fled.

Stallions of the Moon

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

Under granite ledges,
Over phantom sands,
Race the milk-white horses
From the Umber lands.

Under granite ledges—
Hoofs of golden sheen
Flashing in the twilight,
Purple cliffs between.

Mystic beasts of Sibyl,
Fed on golden oats,
More than Spartan finish
On their moonspun coats.

Argent waters check them:
Now they take the air,
Snorting hippogriffins
Speeding starward there.

See them in the gloaming,
Bridles flying free!
Underneath the red stars
Mounts for you and me!

Fearful Was the Mirth of This Criminal and Dreadful the Laughter That Rolled Through the Dark Corridors of the Prison

The Man Who Laughed

By B. W. SLINEY

Author of "The Room of the Black Velvet Drapes"

A SICKLY yellow light filtered through the bars of the cell door and projected an oblong of brightness, cross-sectioned with shadows cast by the bars and cross-bars, over the floor and wall. Everywhere silence. The great prison was asleep, with its condemned men and their keepers. A few guards might be awake, a few night wardens, but they made no sound. Overpowering, this silence. Wadson laughed at it, though. He was not afraid; not of the silence, nor of anything else. Not even of death, which came tomorrow at midnight. The electric chair, at midnight . . .

Wadson was not afraid of death, but he had not expected to face it so soon. No, that part was disconcerting; the suddenness of it, for there were so many things that he had planned to do. He had always wanted to travel, for one thing; he had promised himself a trip to Egypt and to India. But he had delayed too long; his game was up, and now he was to die. All because he had trusted one person too much—his wife. Trusted her because he loved her, and now, by dying, he was to pay for it. The newspapers had it differently, of course; they said he was to die for the murder of Allison Kemp, but they were all wrong. Kemp was merely incidental; he was to die no more for Kemp's murder than for the murder of Hastings, Sidway, or Roberts. He had killed them all, cold-bloodedly, too; but he had gotten away with it. He would have escaped this time, too, except that he had trusted his wife and told her his plans. Everything had pointed to Tibbets when she had turned state's evidence, squealed on him. And, as it happened, it was his wife who sent him to the chair; no one else. Trusted her, and this was what was to come of it—a damned fool to trust anyone! Certainly, everyone must be crooked, potentially at the best; and the lack of opportunity to be so is but little to praise a man for . . . Oh, a great comedy, indeed! Wadson laughed sardonically; a horrible, mirthless laugh which echoed up and down the long corridors, and returned to him, more horrible than ever. At first he was startled by the sound of it; and then he felt proud that he could laugh so demoniacally.

Presently footsteps sounded on the iron floor of the long corridor. It was the night warden, either aroused by the laughter or on one of his periodic inspections. Wadson remained still; the man passed on and the prison was again quiet. Wadson yawned and closed his eyes, for the yellow light annoyed him, with its unpleasant color and the suggestive shadow it cast. He decided to go to sleep. It would be the last rest he was sure of, and he'd need to be steady if his plans succeeded. If

they didn't, it would be rather trying, anyhow, going to the chair and all. He yawned once more, and slept.

They brought him his breakfast. It was a tasty meal, and Wadson ate it with relish. The man who brought it had a pitying glance for the prisoner. Wadson noticed it and laughed at him. It was the same laugh he had discovered during the night. The attendant paled and hurried away. Later, the warden came to see him, and asked if there was anything he wanted, any last request he wished to make. Wadson asked only that he might see his wife before the end. The warden seemed doubtful, and Wadson pleaded, eloquently. He wished to forgive her; he wanted to see her just once more. The warden looked as if he might feel sorry, too, and promised to speak to the superintendent about it. This time Wadson did not laugh at the pitying glance, but watched the warden hopefully as he hurried away. Much depended on his success, but when he returned Wadson knew that he had gained permission.

"The superintendent says you may see your wife at 4, provided that she will come."

Wadson thanked him; touchingly, the warden thought. But he had forgotten how good an actor Wadson was supposed to be. The kind of a prisoner the warden admired, was Wadson; untroublesome and cheerful. Too bad that he had to die; the warden liked him quite well. It would have been better, for instance, if Wadson were only up for life. But there was no chance of any kind of a pardon; the case was clear against him, and Wadson had himself pleaded guilty. Funny case, altogether, when Tibbets, the other chap, had only gotten twenty years. Must have a terrible temper, this Wadson, but he was likable, anyhow. It was too bad he had gone crooked, for he had a charming personality with which he might have accomplished much. Even the most obdurate people could be persuaded by him, even as he had just now persuaded the warden.

WADSON was quite happy, considering everything—not because he was going to die, of course, but because his plan was working successfully. It was doubtless the most difficult thing he had ever attempted, and he felt that it would be a suitable climax to his life, which had been ever full of climactic scenes. The plan might fail, but more than likely it would be successful, now that he had gained permission to see Mrs. Wadson. Mrs. Wadson! His violent declaration in the courtroom that he would have revenge had, of course, been foolish. However, if he should succeed, the instance would be recalled and marveled at. The prison authorities had been warned to keep Mrs. Wadson away from her husband's sight. But Wadson had apparently repented; and, if he had not, what could he possibly do? There would be an attendant present, as usual, during the brief interview the visitor would be granted; and even Wadson's strength, which was above that of an average man, would have no effect on the heavy bars which would interpose between him and his wife. So the authorities thought; they had great faith in their iron and stone.

All in all, things were developing with unexpected smoothness. Wadson did not doubt that Tibbets would keep his word and play his part. Tibbets was at least truthful and trustworthy, whatever else he might be, for he had kept quiet about the Allison Kemp murder. He knew, he knew everything, for he had assisted to such an extent that he was equally guilty, although Wadson had committed the actual crime. They had agreed, however, should one of them be caught, that he would say nothing of the other, for the most either could gain by betraying his friend would be a

companion in death, which might be consoling, but hardly satisfactory. It was Tibbets who was caught, and Tibbets had heard his sentence in silence —the chair. Wadson had not been suspected of being connected with the crime, until his wife—his own wife, Nita, whom he sincerely loved—had told the whole truth. Everything. Got up in court and spat out the whole story. It was at once seen to be true, for she had provided herself with indisputable proof of her husband's guilt; and before Wadson had fully realized his betrayal, he had been tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death; while Tibbets, now being favored by the sympathy of the court, was given twenty years imprisonment.

When Wadson heard his sentence he realized for the first time the full significance of his wife's behavior: she loved Tibbets, and had sacrificed her husband to save him. It was then that he denounced her, and promised with a calm, grim curse that he would make her pay.

Some newspapers called it the most spectacular case ever in the American courts from the viewpoint of unexpected developments. Wadson smiled at that; it was an accomplishment, he said, of which he had never dreamed . . . Yes, Tibbets would keep his word. Now, if Nita would only come —and he was confident that she would, for she was temperamental— Wadson felt assured of success.

It had been a task to plan punishment for his wife, for the scheme required much consideration, demanded nice fitting of detail. But it was worth it! A pleasant way to pass the time . . . And what business had she to betray him? Why, she had ignored his love for her; she had gone so far as to make his death a certainty. But she would pay . . . and Tibbets, too, would pay, a thousand times in the suffering he would feel when he knew what he had helped Nita's husband do. It was an admirable arrangement, Wadson concluded, and he felt regret that he was to die just at the time of his life when he could plan such a perfect atrocity.

First the plan, and then the difficulty of getting his message to Tibbets—Tibbets, who was in a cell at the other end of the corridor, near the steps, there for twenty years—that had to be solved. And it had been somewhat difficult to persuade Tibbets to help him, but when Tibbets understood that all he wanted to do was to kiss his wife farewell, he consented readily enough to do all he could.

But then Tibbets did not know the whole plan; no indeed! All of it had been done a word at a time; a word at a time, carried between them by unsuspecting wardens and attendants. How could they know that the nonsense Wadson asked them to repeat to Tibbets contained a message? And if they did suspect? Wadson and Tibbets were helpless as far as benefiting each other was concerned. Wadson took care to have the messages always short, so that there would be little danger of confusion. The fourth word of every message. Tibbets knew; they had used the code before. The keepers discussed the messages once in a while, and got as much enjoyment from them as they thought the prisoners were getting. They were usually funny . . . no objection to letting the men have a little harmless amusement. . . . And Tibbets had consented, very foolishly consented. He was rather sentimental, yet this did not give him the right to love Wadson's wife. Not at all; and that was the root of the trouble—of Wadson's trouble.

That afternoon he was visited by newspaper men, and by several nice religious workers. Wadson tolerated them all; it would do no good to hurt their feelings. Wadson did not believe in a God, of course; that was all so much superstition. He did not even bother to form an atheistic doctrine. There was life, and that was

all. Future happiness or future agony—"God" and "Hell" were only curses to him, and then only because people, who believed in them both, used them that way. Properly speaking, he could not curse . . . Well, he would soon find out what it was all about—if the knowledge-after-death part of it had anything in it—even though he felt no particular curiosity.

THE great prison bell mournfully boomed the hour 4. It would sound eight more times before he died. Wadson wondered why prison bells were always mournful; he had heard others. It was time to expect Nita. It was hardly likely that she would refuse his last request. She would come, dressed prettily, and very sad . . . A very great comedy! The thought passed through Wadson's mind: "Who, other than myself, will there be to laugh at this comedy?"

Presently he heard voices in the distant end of the corridor, and footsteps sounding on the iron floor, gradually growing louder and nearer. He counted the time, and knew precisely when they were passing Tibbets' cell; in fact, they paused for a moment there, and Wadson knew that Nita was talking to Tibbets. In a little while they came on, and Wadson went to the iron-barred door of his cell; not, however, until he had rubbed his eyes vigorously to make them red. He assumed an eager, expectant attitude, one mingled with affection and a bit of sorrow. His wife and one attendant came into view, but both of them avoided looking at him. Wife dressed elaborately, looking sad; attendant, looking sorry.

"Nita!"

A single, emotional exclamation would be most effective.

Mrs. Wadson looked at her husband reluctantly. She seemed to be rather ashamed of herself; Wadson could read a certain remorse in her expression, and he managed to force a tear—it looked well, and very sincere. Nita did not answer him; she stood silent and nervously twirled her purse. The attendant stood back on the farther side of the corridor and watched them closely.

"Do not go nearer than you are," he warned the visitor; "regulations."

"Nita, I am glad you came. I wanted to see you so much . . . otherwise my last wish would have been disappointed."

"Even after . . . You still want to see me?" Nita spoke slowly, unbelievingly.

"Nita! Forgive me! Let me forgive you. It has all been a horrible mess . . . everything . . ."

"I have nothing to forgive, Wadson. You were always square with me . . I am the one to be forgiven."

"No. When you know all, you won't say that. And you will know, soon. Say that you will not blame me for anything you might learn from now on! Say that you will never blame me!"

"I . . . I can never blame you for anything. . . ."

"A kiss!"

The attendant interposed hastily. "You cannot."

"Please, please!—just one—the last!"

"No!"

"Nita!" Wadson screamed the word. "Nita, a kiss! Nita!"

The scream . . . it was the signal for Tibbets. The attendant was startled by the suddenness of the cry, but in an instant he was more startled, still. From the far end of the long hall came terrible shrieks and cries. Tibbets. Tibbets on the job! Screaming for all he was worth; throwing a veritable fit. All so that Wadson could kiss his wife farewell.

Wadson did not seem to notice the uproar. He hung his head and leaned against the wall. The attendant glanced at him; he seemed quiet and

harmless, and he could do nothing—iron and stone, iron and stone . . . And it was as much his duty to be with the raving man as with the visitor. With a final glance of doubt, he left Nita and ran down the corridor.

WADSON was at the bars instantly, pleading again for a farewell kiss. Eloquently he pleaded; passionately, wildly. Nita came a step nearer to him. Another. She was within reach, for how perfectly Wadson knew the distance his arms could stretch through the bars. Still closer she came, and now no longer hesitant. Gone was all doubt of his sincerity . . . her face was at the bars. Her beautiful, lying face! Wadson pressed her to him, even through the bars, and felt a keen exultation at her sobs. He kissed her, almost fiercely; and, at the same time, he put his arms about her neck, caressingly at first; and then his fingers closed about her throat. . . Before Nita realized that her husband was choking her, her breath had been cut off, and she could not even cry out. Her face became horribly contorted, her delicately tinted skin turned red, and from red to a nasty purple; her eyes widened and protruded hideously . . . Wadson pressed his thumbs farther . . . felt a sickening caving-in under them . . . Nita's body became quite limp. He stared at her; she didn't look sorry any more . . . no, she looked like a thing—some dreadful thing.

Then Wadson began to laugh . . . that horrible, mirthless laugh which he had discovered in the night. It roared through the endless corridors of the prison; it penetrated every corner and every room; it echoed and reechoed in the passages, and came back to him, amplified unbelievably, and even more terrible . . . They took Nita from him, and still he laughed—on and on and on—and nothing they could do would stop him. The whole prison went into a frenzied uproar at the continuance of that nerve-racking sound, but he could not be stopped. The law forbade gagging, and Wadson laughed on . . . a high, penetrating laugh which became low and roaring, and again ascended with awing inflections that suggested unthinkable things . . . Always the laughter. Just laughing at the great comedy . . .

When they strapped him in the chair and placed the copper-mesh headpiece on him, he stopped laughing. But he looked about the chamber sardonically, and winked at the doctor and minister who stood before him. He gave one scornful glance at the reporters, the witnesses, and the medical students in the room, and then he began to laugh again. Laughing at everything: at the chair, at the men, at the whole world, at Nita—would *she* join him?—and he would have laughed at God, except that he did not believe . . .

Suddenly the laughter stopped—with awful suddenness it stopped . . . The men in the room looked with fascinated horror . . . He did not laugh again.

The melancholy prison bell boomed one doleful note.

One!



THE PURPLE CINCTURE



by H. Thompson Rich

Author of "Little Island," "The Crimson Crucifix," etc.

IT WAS a day in midsummer, I remember. I had been tramping over the densely wooded and desolate hillside the greater part of the morning, getting with each mile farther and farther from the tawdry haunts of man and nearer and nearer the rugged heart of nature.

Finally (it must have been after noontime) I paused and made a light lunch of the sandwiches and cold coffee I had brought with me from town, sitting on the edge of a great slab of granite rock, swept clean and smooth by ages of winds and rains and snows.

All about me was a veritable garden of great projecting rocks, jagged and broken, flat and polished, needle-like, giant flowers of earth in a thousand different forms.

Here and there a short, dwarfed pine or spruce tree struggled for a footing amid its rocky friends, and the resistless undergrowth surged up through every crack and crevice, while energetic mosses and lichens clutched at the granite walls and crept bravely up. One had a feeling of awe, as if in the presence of elemental, eternal forces. Here, I thought, if anywhere, one might commune with the voiceless void.

Suddenly my eyes chanced to fall upon a fissure in the rock to the left, and I sprang up with a low exclamation. What I had beheld was to all appearance a human skeleton!

Advancing reluctantly, yet with that insistent inquisitiveness which surrounds the dead, I bent, and peered into the fissure. As I looked, a cry escaped me. The object I beheld was indeed a skeleton—but what a skeleton! The head, the left hand, and the foot were entirely missing, nor was there any sign of them at first sight.

Thoroughly fascinated by the morbid spectacle, I began a search for the missing members, and was finally rewarded by unearthing the head some twenty feet away, where it lay half buried in the soft loam of decayed vegetation and sifted chole. But a painstaking and minute hunt failed to reveal the missing hand and foot.

I was successful, however, in finding something immeasurably more important—a manuscript. This I found by the side of the mangled skeleton.

It consisted of several pages of closely written material, in a small pocket notebook, which fact, in con-

nection with the partial shelter afforded by the crevice where the body lay, doubtless accounts for its preservation through the years that have passed since its owner met his hideous fate.

PICKING up the notebook with nervous fingers, I opened it and turned the damp and musty pages through, reading it at first hastily, then slower and more carefully, then with a feverish concentration—as the awful significance of the words was riveted into my brain.

The writing was in a man's cramped, agitated hand, and I give it to you just as I read it, with the exception of the names and places, and a few paragraphs of vital scientific data—all but a few words at the very beginning and end, where the manuscript had been molded into illegibility by the gradual action of the weather. Here follows:

——— "as strange. I had a sense of apprehension from the start, a vague, indescribable feeling of doubt, of dread, as if someone, something, were urging me out, away, into these sullen hills.

"I might have known. The law of retribution is as positive as the law of gravity. I know that now. Oh irony!

"But I was so sure. No one knew. No one could know. She, my wife, heart of all, until the end. And the neighbors, her friends, never. She had merely pined away. No one dreamed I had poisoned her. Even when she died, there was no thought of autopsy. She had long been failing. And had I not been most concerned? None in the little town of ———, but who sympathized with me. And I mourned. Oh, I mourned! So it was that she paid the price of her infamy. Ah, but revenge never was sweeter!

"And he? Oh, but I despised him—even as I had formerly admired him, even as I had once loved my wife—so I despised him. And despising him, I killed him—killed him, but with a poison far more subtle than that I had used to destroy my wife—killed him with a poison in effect so hideous, so harrowing, that I can scarcely think of it without sickening even as I write.

"The poison I inculcated into his veins was a germ poison—a disease I, a physician of no small repute, had discovered and bred—a disease I had found existed only in a particular and very rare species of virulent purple and orange-banded spider—the genus ——— [here follow in the original manuscript seven paragraphs of elaborate scientific data, of no particular interest to the average reader, but of incalculable import to the scientific world. These paragraphs I have omitted from this account for very significant reasons, but I hold them open to scientific examination at any time, and as I have said before, I will welcome investigation by reputable scientists]—a disease which was responsible for the extreme rarity of this particular species.

"By careful investigation I was able to learn the exact manifestation and workings of the disease—which by their frightful ravages upon the system of the unfortunate victim fairly appalled me.

"By segregating and breeding diseased members of this particular species of spider, I was able to produce the disease in the young in its most virulent form. You can well imagine the care I used in handling these spiders, to prevent infection. Briefly, the symptoms were as follows: The spider about to be stricken apparently first experiences a peculiar numbness of the first left foreleg, to judge from its inability to use or move the affected member. A day or so later the leg, which in a healthy condition is a dull brown, turns a pale, sickening shade of yellow, which deepens

rapidly until it has taken on a flaming orange hue. Then, in a few hours, a deep, vicious-looking blue cincture, or band, appears just at the first joint of the affected member. This cincture rapidly deepens to purple, which seems somehow to sear its way into the flesh and through the bone, so that in a surprizingly short time the whole leg is severed at the joint where the cincture has been.

"The spider then appears to regain its normal condition of health, which it maintains for about a week; then once again the hideous disease manifests itself, this time in the left feeler, or antenna, which in turn becomes yellow, then orange, whereupon the same blue cincture appears and deepens to purple; then, in about the same period of time as in the case of the leg, the antenna drops off, seared as if by some hellish flame.

"Once again the spider appears to regain its health—then in about a week the whole *head* of the stricken insect turns slowly yellow, then orange—then the cincture appears—and as a last manifestation, the head is seared off in flaming agony—and the spider dies in horrible convulsions.

"That, briefly, is the process—as I was able to note after weeks and months of tireless research and observation.

"So what more perfect punishment for the man who stole from me my wife, while pretending to be my friend?

"LOVING her as I did, I had not the heart to kill her in this hideous way: so I put her to death with a painless and insidious poison.

"But for ——— I had no mercy. In fact I gloated as I worked over my vile and diseased spiders, breeding them together until I was convinced that I had the germs of the disease in its most virulent form. Even then I was not sure what their effect would be on a human being—but that much at least I must hazard.

"So having finally made all my preparations, I invited him to my house and placed one of the diseased spiders upon his forehead one night as he slept.

"It must have bitten him, for he awoke with a cry, and I had barely time to close his door and get back to my room before I heard him rise and turn on the light.

"Then he called me, and I came to him, burning with a fiendish satisfaction. 'Something has bitten me, horribly,' he said. 'I feel as if I were going to be ill.'

"I managed to reassure him by telling him that it was very likely nothing but one of our uncommonly large mosquitoes, and he returned to bed.

"But he did not sleep. All night I heard him moaning and tossing. And in the morning he was very pale.

" 'I do not know what is the matter with me,' he said, and I thought he looked at me queerly, 'but I feel as if a little rest would do me good. I feel choked. I think I will pack up my knapsack and go off to the hills for the week end. Want to come?'

"I longed to go with him, to see the dread disease work, but I feared its deadly contagion, and was anxious to get him away before I myself became contaminated. So I said no—and he went.

"That was the last I ever saw of him—but once.

"HE WENT away, as he had promised, and he seemed apparently well—all except the curious little inflamed spot on his forehead, whose significance I knew so well.

"He went away—and he failed to come back. Days passed, and there came no word from him. People began inquiring. It was odd that he should have left no address. His business suffered.

"Weeks went by—and no word. Search parties were sent out. The river was dragged. The morgues of near-by cities were searched. And all the while I laughed. For who would think of turning to those far-off hills?

"And yet, as the days went by, I found myself turning to them again—wondering, wondering, wondering. I grew nervous, agitated. I got so I couldn't sleep.

Finally, on a day in late summer (it was the 8th of August—date I shall never forget!) I packed a few things and set off. In search of him? God knows. I tried to tell myself not—but at any rate I found myself strangely, magnetically drawn to those distant somber hills—and thither I went.

"It was one of those gorgeous mornings that only August can produce, and the exhilarating air would have lifted my spirits, but instead I walked along depressed, and the knapsack strapped to my shoulder served only to intensify the feeling.

"In spite of all I could do, I found my mind reverting to the hideous revenge I had wreaked on my wife and her lover, and for the first time repentance stole in upon me.

"I walked along slowly, and it was well toward noon before I left the beaten road and started at random off over the hills, following a narrow and little used path.

"Progress now became doubly slow and painful, leading often up steep inclines and hard descents, with the aspect momentarily becoming more and more rugged, as I left the lower hills and climbed toward the mountain.

"By this time, however, I had got a kind of exhilaration sought in vain during the earlier hours of the morning, and climbed on and on, glad to free body and mind thus of the poison of brooding and lassitude. I would return to the town at night and take supper at one of the small inns that abounded thereabouts. This would give me some hours yet before I turned back. For the time being, the thought of searching for ——— was forgotten. I had freed my mind of him entirely.

"Presently the path I had been following branched, and the right half narrowed into an all but obliterated trail, leading up a laborious slope. Forcing my way over dry, snapping underbrush and under low-hanging spruce boughs, occasionally starting an indignant partridge from its hidden nest, often put to a wide detour to avoid some hazardous gully cut deep by centuries of spring and autumn freshets, I at last emerged upon a small, circular clearing, evidently the work of some lone woodchopper.

"Here I sat down, tired by the climb, and refreshed myself with a sandwich from my knapsack. Then I pushed on to the summit, pausing frequently to examine some uncommon species of insect life with which the hills abounded.

"So much was I enjoying myself and such scant notice of the time did I take, that sunset came upon me unawares and I found myself, with darkness settling in on all sides with a startling rapidity, still on the summit of the mountain, with a good three mile descent before me. Indeed, the prospect was not altogether a cheering one and I reproached myself for my heedlessness. But I had found a species of spider for which I had searched in vain for months, so, somewhat reassured by its precious body in a pill-box in my pocket, I started down.

"In spite of my best speed, however, night shut in on me before I had made one quarter of the return, leaving me to grope the rest of the way in utter darkness, with not even the light of a dim star to go by. Vague fear

awoke within me, but I shielded my eyes and stumbled to the bottom, sliding, falling, clutching here and there at some projecting tree-limb to check my headlong descent. Finally, torn and disheveled and shaking, I emerged upon the clearing. Pausing only for breath, I plunged on into the dark. Fear was growing—growing—that peculiar fear of the dark which is the heritage of those who have taken human life.

"What was that? Something lay gleaming queerly ahead, with a dull phosphorescent glow. I stooped and picked it up—and flung it from me shuddering. It was the skeleton of a human foot!

"I groped on, my every heartbeat choking at my throat. Of a sudden I came forcefully against a barrier of rock. I tried to feel my way around it, to get beyond it, but could not. It seemed continuous, a solid wall that would not let me by. Had I fallen into a trap in the darkness? Terrified, I turned—and there lay something else gleaming with that same weird phosphorescent glow! Sick with terror and dread, half fearing what it might be, I sprang on it and picked it up—*picked it up*—the rotting hand of a human being! With a stifled gasp I flung it from me, reeled, tripped through some vines, and fell swooning.

"WHEN I came to myself, I struck a match and looked about me. Its feeble flame revealed a pair of damp, rocky walls, low and vaulted. I was in some sort of cavern.

"Later on I crept out, collected an armful of sticks, brought them back, and soon had a fire started. By its light I observed that the rear of the cave was still in darkness, and judging that it must extend back indefinitely, I gave my attention to my immediate surroundings—when with a shock I saw, directly in front of me, a granite slab. On it lay several loose sheets of manuscript, scrawled wildly on odd scraps of paper.

"With a prophetic dread I bent forward and gathered the loose sheets together. Holding them near the fire, I peered closer. Then I think a cry must have escaped me. The writing was in ———'s hand, curiously scrawled and scraggly, but still recognizable.

"So fate had brought me to my victim!

"For the rest, there is little more to say. I am doomed as I deserve, even as he was doomed. His words speak all that can be spoken. They follow:

APRIL *4th—I had meant to spend only the week-end in these hills, yet here I am, after two weeks—still here, and suffering the pains of hell. What has come over me I cannot imagine. And yet—can I not? I am not so sure! Perhaps — perhaps* ——— *has in some devilish way managed to poison me. He is insanely jealous. He thinks there was something between his wife and me. Verily I believe he harassed her to death on the subject. And, having thus brought her to her grave, he wishes to send me there.*

Perhaps he will succeed—if it is true that in some fiendish way he has got some of his germs into my blood. That bite, at his house that evening. I am not so sure. It was a most unusual bite. It seemed upon the instant to sour all my blood.

And yet, if he accomplishes my death, how vain it will be—for as God is my witness I swear I never harmed his wife. We were the best of friends, nothing more. And she loved him with a wholeness, a passion that any but a man maddened by groundless jealousy must at once have seen.

How he has wrecked his life! A mind so brilliant—and yet, with her dead, a closed room.

However, I may be wrong. I will wait. By the symptoms I will know. I write this down, for I must do something.

APRIL 5TH—*It is he now, his hellish work. I am sure of it. Today my left leg, which for two weeks has felt positively numb, turned a sickening yellow, from the ankle down, which began at once to deepen, until it now flames orange. And oh! the pain is hellish! Yes, I am sure it is ———'s work. But I will still withhold judgment.*

APRIL 6TH—*Today a deep, virulent blue cincture has appeared just at the ankle of the affected leg. What a hellish contrast to the orange!*

It is ———. I am sure now. Oh, what a fiend!

APRIL 7TH—*The cincture has deepened to purple, and seems to cut into the very flesh. It seems sometimes as if the pain would drive me mad.*

APRIL 8TH—*My flaming foot* dropped off *tonight, seared at the ankle by the purple cincture, and I flung it outside the cave. I wonder. Perhaps I may yet live to return to the world. Ah, I will be avenged for this!*

MAY 23RD—*I am cursed,* cursed! *Today, just as I was beginning to believe the hellish thing had left me, it returned, this time in my left hand. Oh, I can see it all: tomorrow and the next day and the next,* for just two weeks, *my hand will be numb; then will come that frightful yellow; then the orange; then—then the purple cincture!*

Curse the man who discovered this hellish disease—and turned it into me! I could tear him limb from limb. Oh, I pray to return! I would go now, yet I fear my malady is of a vilely contagious nature. I have not the heart to menace a whole community, perhaps a whole nation, perhaps humanity itself—merely to avenge myself on one man.

JUNE 6TH—*I was right! This morning I awoke with my hand that death-yellow. Oh, it is too regular, too certain—too cruelly certain!*

JUNE 9TH—*Thank God! My hand is gone—out there where my foot went. It happened tonight. Perhaps I may yet return! Perhaps I may yet be avenged. I wonder.*

JULY 21ST—Doomed! *That fearful numbness again—this time in my head. I cannot think—I cannot write—I can scarcely breathe. Oh, the pain—the pain—*

"HERE it ended in a sputter of ink. Trembling in every limb, filled with a horror and anguish and remorse no man can know, spellbound by the awful tale those few sheets told, I sat there motionless.

"So I had been wrong. Oh, my jealousy, my insane jealousy! As I sat there, all desire of life suddenly left me, and I thrilled with joy at the remembrance of the hand and foot I had come upon, outside the cave. They were his. I had touched them. I was contaminated with the dread disease.

"What was that? I listened, straining every nerve. From the back of the cavern had come a sound.

"Five minutes passed—ten—fifteen (I was oblivious of time)—but it was not repeated. Slightly I relaxed my aching nerves and tried to think. Already I fancied I could feel the fearful poison of the diseased spider working in my veins.

"Suddenly the significance of that last entry in ———'s diary burst upon me, and I sat shivering as under a sudden deluge of icy water. *'July 21st'.* Two weeks more would make

it *August 5th*, and three days more would bring it to—*August 8th!*

"'Great God!' I cried aloud, 'tonight is the night!'

"'*Yes, tonight is the night!*' echoed a sepulchral voice from the cavern's inner darkness.

"In an agony of dread I looked, and the blood within me paled to water at the sight that met my gaze. Something—*something with but a single hand and foot*—emerged from the shadows of the back of the cavern and began to come forward, leaning heavily upon a rough staff for support.

"'Stay back—*stay back!* For the love of God!" I shrieked. But the terrible thing came on and on, and the awful eyes fastened themselves upon my person and suddenly recognized me—and it smiled a hideous smile.

"When it drew nearer, I could see that all above the shoulders flamed orange, while around the neck a livid purple cincture seemed actually to be searing its way into the flesh.

"'This is your revenge,' it spoke 'And this is mine,' raising the hellish stump of its mutilated left arm and panting heavily at me: 'My suffering is over—but yours is all to come. And to the bodily pains of hell will be added the mental tortures of hopeless remorse—knowing your wife was innocent. With that I curse you.'

"Even as it spoke, the eyes rolled out of sight behind horrible lids, the tongue protruded itself in flaming agony, and the whole head, suddenly severed at the neck, thudded the cavern floor.

"I came to my feet with a mad cry, that, shattering the silence beyond the deepest shadows, swelled up in a thousand echoes, from the wail of a soul in torment to the screech of a crucified demon. Then I rushed headlong out.

"For the rest ——"

THE last page was illegible, as the first had been, worn and corroded by the slow action of years of decay.

I put the notebook slowly in my pocket and sat there thinking, sickened and awed by the astounding manuscript.

Again I went over to the skeleton there in the fissure. Now I understood why the hand and foot were missing, and why I had found the head many feet from the body.

There it lay, mute evidence that the retribution was complete.

In Next Month's WEIRD TALES

THE TEMPLE

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A tale of Atlantis—and a German U-boat.

On Sale at All News Stands August 1st

THE WHITE QUEEN

A TWO-PART NOVELETTE

THE STORY SO FAR

Ware and Stillwell, shipwrecked off the coast of Africa, penetrate into the wilderness and encounter Zema, white queen of the Corolans, with her sister Maleta and a loyal black, Vespar, who have fled from the city of the Corolans. The forces of Mitsu, the usurping black queen who has overthrown Zema, recapture the white queen and take the party to the city to be torn by wild beasts in the arena. Ware and Stillwell destroy the lions with their rifles, and are led away from the city by Zema through a secret tunnel while the Corolans are repulsing an assault upon their walls by the Morians. The white queen and her friends join Carno, leader of the Morians. Ware and Stillwell help Carno drive the chariots of the Corolans back to the city gates, but when, after the battle, they look for Zema and Maleta in the thicket where they had left them, the two girls have disappeared.

8

WHEN Zema waved her last farewell to Ware and Stillwell, she grasped her sister by the arm, and the two walked rapidly toward the jungle border. They selected a large tree at a point that she had indicated to Ware, near which the latter could find her after the oncoming battle on the plains.

When they arrived at the place, they turned their gaze across the open stretch of sandy country and watched the progress of events. They viewed the attack of the horsemen with misgivings, but their fears turned to elation when they saw the wild riders of the Corolans beaten back with terrific losses.

Zema's eyes flashed with excitement as she saw the horses drawing the royal chariot fall after the report of Ware's rifle. She viewed the attendant runaway and grasped Maleta by the arm.

"The black queen may be killed in her own chariot," she exclaimed.

A movement in the adjacent underbrush of the jungle went unnoticed by the two girls, so absorbed were they in the tragic events taking place before them.

A half hour before, the remaining warriors of the Corolans crouching in the thicket near the secret exit from the city, saw the girls leave the two white men and the warriors who had accompanied Carno to meet them.

Spaga, the chief of the company, watched the two white women as they halted.

"We will creep across the plain to the jungle and carry the white queen and her sister again into the city," he announced to the warriors remaining with him.

When the attack of the wild horsemen against the ranks of the Morians started, Spaga and six of his men crept across the plain, taking advantage of every small bush and thicket to conceal their actions. They reached the border of the jungle and walked through the undergrowth, until they could see the two girls standing at the edge of the bushes, their eyes riveted upon the distant battle.

When Zema turned at the sound of a closer movement near the jungle border she found herself looking into the black, beady eyes of Spaga.

OF THE COROLANS

By ARTHUR THATCHER

"Do not move," cautioned the latter; "to do so means that the spear of Spaga will tear your heart asunder."

The other warriors followed Spaga and seized the two girls. Through the jungle growth they bore them, and retraced their way across the open plain until the secret exit was reached, while the battle on the plain was at its greatest pitch.

Into the mouth of the tunnel the warriors forced them. For a time the men halted to conceal the mouth of the exit with rocks and brush from the thicket. Then they continued toward the underground courts of the palace of Mitsu.

WARE and Stillwell searched the border of the jungle for a long time. They attempted to call the girls, but the only response to their summons was the chatter of several monkeys which had entered one of the large trees at the jungle border.

"They have been seized by some of the enemy," suggested Ware, "and taken back into the city, possibly through the same entrance by which we gained our exit."

"They may have fallen prey to a wild beast," Stillwell ventured.

"I hardly think that such has occurred," reasoned Ware. "The beast would have seized but one of the girls. They have become the victims of some scouting party of the enemy."

"Possibly the ones who were guarding the entrance of the secret exit," Stillwell interrupted. "The ones in question could have seen the girls start toward the jungle border and have followed them while we were occupied with the battle against the Corolans' main force on the plain."

"It possibly happened as you have suggested," Ware agreed. "If we are to find the girls and rescue them, we must again enter the city, either in secret or with a large force of the Morians to aid us."

"Can we find the outside entrance to the tunnel?" queried Stillwell.

"That should be easy," replied Ware, "unless the guards have removed their dead. We can locate the entrance by the bodies of the ones we killed when making our escape from the city."

"I had almost forgotten that incident, since the excitement of the major battle," said Stillwell. "Let us make an effort to find the opening.

"Better confer with the general of the Morians," suggested Ware. "We can inform him regarding the secret entrance into the city. If the Corolans have not guarded it carefully, we can fight our way through the tunnel into the lower courts of the palace of Mitsu and march the entire army of the Morians into the city of the Corolans. The capture of the place can then be effected, and if the girls are still alive, we can rescue them."

With this decision, the men retraced their steps across the plain to the main forces of the Morians. They sought out Carno and laid their plans before the chieftain. The latter was delighted with the information regarding the secret entrance into the city.

"We shall wait until darkness falls," he decided. "At that time it will be possible to move great numbers of our army without arousing the suspicions of the enemy. We will do

that before the moon rises, and be on our way through the underground passage into the city before the orb of night rises above the jungle trees. Carno will send a number of his best warriors to assist you in locating the opening so that we shall know, when night comes, where to move without any delays.''

10

THE warriors leading Zema and Maleta through the tunnel toward the underground courts of the palace of Mitsu encountered a new company of Corolans on their way to guard the secret exit in case of its discovery by the Morians.

The men accompanying the two girls halted for a moment to converse with the outgoing fighters.

''Mitsu feared that by chance the outer exit might be discovered by the enemy,'' explained the leader of the new company.

''The danger is small,'' returned Spaga, his enormous hand clasping the arm of Zema to prevent any effort on her part to leave his side. ''The enemy would take the entrance to be the opening into some cave and would never suspect that it led for such a long way under the city walls into the palace of the queen.''

''The white males escaped through the tunnel, though,'' warned the other, ''and they could tell Carno and his Morians, for the latter speak the same tongue as we do, and the white males can talk in our language and show the entrance to the Morian chieftain.''

''Spaga has concealed the entrance with rocks and brush,'' replied the ingoing leader. ''The enemy will have much trouble to ever find the place. Anyhow, Blato and his men can hold it and send for reinforcements if they need help.''

The two companies continued on their respective ways through the darkness of the tunnel. Spaga with his warriors accompanying the two girls finally emerged into the lower court of the palace where the secret exit toward the plains began. A score of black warriors challenged their approach but at the reply of Spaga again resumed their former attitudes of ease on the floor of the court.

Spaga with the others of his company continued into the outside corridor leading to the flight of stone stairs by which the upper courts of the palace were reached.

Two of the warriors hurried ahead of the others to notify Mitsu's attendants of the recapture of Zema and Maleta; and when the first of the upper courts was reached, the party halted to await the return of the messengers.

The two who had been dispatched to carry the news of the recapture returned hurriedly, and announced that the captives were to be brought into the queen's room of the palace.

The group advanced into a corridor and quickly reached the entrance to another court. They went in.

Mitsu was sitting in a large chair fashioned from wood and ornamented with various carvings. A smile of delight played over the coarse features of the black queen.

''Spaga and his men have done great things for Mitsu this day,'' she spoke. ''The white queen and her sister shall die in the morning from the fangs of the leopards. Mitsu will view their death, and Spaga and his men alone shall accompany Mitsu. There will be no white males with their firesticks to slay the beasts this time. The lions are dead, but the leopards still live and are more ferocious than ever. Untill morning, let the white women be confined in one of the prison chambers of the arena. In the morning Spaga shall lead them into the arena, and Mitsu herself will pull the trap that releases the leopards into the pit to tear the flesh from their bones. The white captives shall battle the beasts with only the weapons that nature has

provided—their hands! Until morning comes, let Spaga and his men keep watch over the prison chamber where the white queen and her sister are confined. Mitsu will come to the arena early in the day.''

At the conclusion of her statement, the black queen raised the short spear that she carried with her constantly, to indicate that the sentence she had pronounced was final.

Spaga and his ten men withdrew from the room of the queen and later left the palace. They proceeded immediately to the prison chambers, where they opened the same room where Zema and the others had been confined before. The two girls were thrust into the place and the heavy door was closed across the entrance.

A movement in one corner of the darkened chamber attracted their attention when the door had closed. The figure of a man approached them, assuming an attitude of humility. It was Vespar, and the poor fellow was suffering from hunger and thirst.

Zema raised her arm above her head in the manner of greeting of the Corolans, and Vespar responded.

"I have remained here since you were taken out,'' he explained, "without food or water. This is the first time the prison chamber has been visited since you departed.''

"We escaped from the city,'' Zema explained, "but were recaptured, and Mitsu has again sentenced us to death in the arena pit for her private gratification.''

"Yes,'' said Maleta, viewing the haggard face of Vespar with pity, "tomorrow death comes to us.''

11

DARKNESS had fallen upon the plain before the city of the Corolans when a heavy movement of the army of the Morians under Carno began toward a point at the right of their old position.

Ware and Stillwell, with the men sent to accompany them on the scouting expedition, had returned early in the evening and announced to the Morian leader that they had been successful in locating the outer exit without being detected by any of the guards who were present in the vicinity.

"We will advance through the darkness of the place with spears forward in mass formation,'' planned Carno when he had received the information. "We will prepare and carry a number of great torches of wood coated with rosin gum. In that way our men can see to fight the enemy without danger of killing one another.''

Preparations immediately began for the movement into the city through the secret exit as soon as darkness should gather. Ware and Stillwell, accompanied by Carno and fifty of his greatest fighters, led the advance.

A number of the men attacked the rocks and brush with which the exit had been camouflaged, but encountered no resistance. The march into the tunnel began under the light of the flaring torches of burning gum.

A hundred yards had been traversed before their advance was discovered by the men of Blato lounging on the floor of the tunnel. Blato immediately dispatched a runner through the tunnel to summon reinforcements. The warriors of Carno rushed forward in mass formation with their long lances thrust before them. The Corolans retreated slowly before the bristling spear points, many of them dying in their efforts to retard the onward march of the Morians. When two-thirds of the distance had been traveled toward the lower courts of the palace, the resistance stiffened as reinforcements from the palace guards arrived. The width of the tunnel was not sufficient to permit more than ten men to fight on one

front, and progress was slow, although the Morian advance continued.

Ware and Stillwell mounted to the shoulders of two of the giant Morians in order to shoot above the heads of the spearmen who led the advance.

They began pouring a deadly fire into the opposing Corolans and by so doing greatly facilitated the advance through the tunnel.

Step by step the Morians forced their way until the entrance into the lower court of the palace was reached. Here resistance to the uttermost was offered by the Corolans.

The men of the Morians gradually formed a semicircle about the exit and slowly extended the width of their incoming numbers, forcing their opponents from the court into the outer corridors and slaying all that were unable to reach the exit. Then the final effort to clear the court was made. The entrance into the corridor was immediately barricaded from a counter assault by the Corolans, with a solid barrier of men presenting bristling spear points. The Morians paused for a brief rest before resuming their efforts to capture the palace.

12

WHEN Zema and Maleta were led from the chamber of the black queen to be returned to their former prison room under the arena gallery, Mitsu rose and walked about the place. She spent the next hour gloating over the events she pictured as taking place in the arena pit the next morning. For a time, she was tempted to go to the arena and order the two girls thrown into the pit at once, but hesitated, under the impression that to extend the fear of approaching death for the girls would greatly add to their miserable condition. Then, too, she delighted in imagining what was going to occur. Mitsu delighted in the bloody practise of her people as exemplified by the slaughter of their criminals and enemies in the pit of the arena. When Zema had been queen, nothing but athletic contests ever occurred in the place. Since Mitsu had become ruler, the blood lust of herself and the majority of her followers had been continuously gratified.

She finally decided to postpone the slaughter of the girls until the early morning. She dismissed them for the time from her mind, and turned her attention to the condition of siege in which her city had been placed by the defeat of the army of the Corolans during the day. She visited the defenders of the walls and encouraged them to stand firm against any attack that the Morians might attempt.

She returned to the palace and ordered Blato and a company to go to the mouth of the outer exit and reinforce the guards at that point. When night came she retired to her lion-skin couch and fell asleep.

The moon was high in the tropical heavens when Mitsu was roused from her slumbers by a messenger who had entered her chamber.

"The Morians have forced their way through the secret tunnel into the lower courts of the palace," the latter exclaimed. "The queen of the Corolans must flee to a place of safety in another part of the city while her warriors try to confine the enemy to the palace."

Mitsu roused from her couch. Hurriedly donning her costume of the day, she followed the messenger from the chamber and rushed to the outer exit of the palace.

Her mind reverted to the fact that her former rival was again a prisoner subject to any of her whims of mentality.

"We will go to the arena," Mitsu announced. "The night is almost as light as the day. The white queen, Zema, and her sister shall be rent

asunder tonight by the great leopards of the Corolans."

13

AFTER a brief wait in the lower court of the palace, from which the secret exit to the outer plain began, the forces of the Morians began another ferocious attack to gain the stairway leading to the upper courts. An irresistible charge cleared the corridor, and the foot of the stone stairway leading into the courts above was reached.

The sudden clearing of the corridor cut off some fifty of the Corolans in one of the courts adjacent to the long hallway. Warriors of the Morians poured into the place and cut down the enemy in the room. The army of Carno thus found itself in possession of the lower part of the palace.

Reinforcements constantly arrived through the tunnel and the battle for possession of the stairway began. An unusually powerful warrior of the Corolans took a position at the head of the stairway, and his heroic defense in itself began to prove a stumbling block to the advance of the Morian warriors. Carno took in the situation at a glance and immediately sent one of his aids to call Ware and Stillwell forward.

The latter responded and took up a position from which they could pour a fusillade of bullets into the ranks of the Corolans defending the head of the stairway. The giant Corolan fighter crumpled from a bullet fired by Stillwell. His fall threw temporary consternation into his companions, and they fell back before the dashing advance of the Morians, who gained the head of the stairs and began pushing their way with great ferocity toward the front entrance of the palace in an effort to reach the opening and cut off all the Corolans gathered in the upper courts for the defense of the building.

Agan, who had arrived to command the forces of the Corolans battling in the palace, noted the intention of the Morians and ordered his forces to abandon all but the front courts of the palace but to hold these until death cut them down.

Great numbers of the Morians poured up from the underground courts, and the din of the battling became deafening. The Corolans defending the courts before the front of the palace fought with determination, and time after time threw back the assault. After each assault, the Morians returned to the attack with renewed efforts.

Carno entered the ranks and took the lead in the offensive. At the sight of the great fighter, the men of the Morians exerted superhuman effort, and the warriors of the Corolans were forced backward step by step to the last of the front courts. Here a tremendous advance cleared the last impediment to the city.

When the entrance had been cleared, the men of the Corolans began a rapid retreat to various strategic buildings from which they might continue their defense. The forces of Carno outside the palace threw away their torches, for the moonlight flooded the scene.

Carno halted the advance of his warriors for a minute to instruct them to keep their lines of communication with the palace forces intact.

Ware and Stillwell emerged from the front entrance of the palace. Across the open grounds from the palace of Mitsu rose the high walls of the arena. Forces of Morians were pushing rapidly forward in the moonlight toward the structure.

"If the girls are not dead," said Ware, "we may expect to find them some place in the prison pits below the arena gallery."

"We'll go there first and help to clean it of the Corolans," Stillwell suggested. "We can at least release

Vespar if he is still living in the prison pit where we left him. There is no reason why he should not be alive, for the Corolans have been too busily occupied to take any time off to kill prisoners."

14

WHEN Vespar in the prison pit had finished telling of his captivity since the removal of the four white people from the place, Zema and Maleta, who were exceedingly weary from the strenuous activities through which they had passed, lay down on the rocky floor of the place.

They rose later when one of the guards entered with a quantity of food and a vessel containing water. The two girls refrained from eating until Vespar quenched his thirst and appeased his long-standing hunger.

The three again lay down on the floor and slept, the girls from exhaustion, and Vespar from habit.

They were awakened about midnight by the opening of the prison door. Spaga and three of his men entered the place.

"The time has come sooner than you anticipated," said the chief—addressing Zema. "Mitsu, the black queen, is in the gallery of the arena, and will watch the leopards spring upon you in the moonlight. The Morians have entered the city by fighting their way through the tunnel into the lower courts of the palace. They will come no farther than there for Agan and his men will stop their farther advance."

Zema prepared to follow Spaga, for she realized that resistance was useless. Maleta held back, but two of the men grasped her arms and forced her forward.

They were led into the arena, and as they approached the center of the place, Mitsu, sitting in the gallery with the other warriors of Spaga's command, jeered at the girls.

"Tonight the leopards will feast!" she cried. "Tonight will the vengeance of Mitsu find completeness! The white queen has been the curse of the Corolans. May her death be painful and long drawn out! Sharp be the fangs of the leopards which Mitsu will now release!"

As she spoke, the black queen drew the sliding door from the mouth of the pit that housed the leopards.

Zema and Maleta retreated from the center of the arena toward the wall at a point opposite Mitsu and her consort. Three gigantic leopards slunk from the prison pit and sniffed the moonlight air.

Two of the beasts halted and sat upon their haunches. The other proceeded toward the center of the arena and sniffed the earth where the girls had been standing. The beast followed their tracks toward the other side of the arena.

At the approach of the great beast, Maleta fell to her knees by the side of Zema. The latter assumed a position where she might protect her sister and receive the first onslaught of the savage animals slinking stealthily toward them. The leopard rushed to a point a few yards from the terrified girls and crouched for the final spring.

The crack of a rifle, followed closely by the report of another gun, broke upon the stillness that had pervaded the arena, and brought consternation to the handful of spectators viewing the leopard stalking the girls in the center pit.

The great beast was struck as its body started to launch forward in the final spring. It rolled over and over, clawing wildly at its sides, mortally wounded.

"The white males are here!" exclaimed Zema, raising Maleta to her feet. "We are saved!"

The forms of two men letting themselves into the arena pit were discernible to the girls, who rushed to meet

their rescuers. A thousand Morians began pouring into the gallery immediately after them.

Mitsu and her handful of guards attempted to flee from the place, but were cut off. The guards were slain, but the black queen was held as a prisoner.

Ware and Stillwell assisted the girls to reach the hands of the Morians in the gallery above.

When the two had been lifted out of the danger of the place, the two white men grasped the lances that were thrust downward to them and also regained the gallery above.

"We have come," announced Ware, taking Zema by the arm, "to restore the white queen of the Corolans to her inheritance, the throne of the city of the Corolans."

"The throne of this place means nothing to Zema now," she replied, looking upward into his face. He caught the gleam of moonlight in her eyes and pressed her closer to him.

"If not the queen of this place, where will you go?" he questioned.

"To live with the Morians if there is no other place," she said. "Carno has taken this city, and it is his henceforth by right of conquest. Long may he reign over it. Zema is through with the Corolans. They would prove treacherous always to her."

"We had better return to the palace," Ware suggested, as they arrived at the main exit from the arena gallery.

"Yes, let's do so," urged Zema. "I want to visit my old quarters. Zema left some treasures in the palace, when she was deposed as queen, which she hopes remain there yet."

THE four proceeded from the place and started down the stairs leading from the arena gallery. As they descended, Zema told Ware that Vespar was still confined in the prison pit. Ware imparted the information to a number of the Morian warriors and these rushed into the lower part of the arena to release Vespar. They returned later, accompanied by the Corolan.

Vespar accompanied the four white people toward the palace, following the route which had been taken by Ware and Stillwell when they came to the arena.

The fighting had ceased for the time being, as Carno did not desire to extend his lines too far before morning arrived. The forces of the Corolans showed no intention of counter-attacking, and quiet reigned within the city as the five walked across the moonlit stretch of open country.

The palace was reached and the five entered. The night was fast passing, and the early dawn was coming in the east. A torch was borrowed from one of the warriors in the front court, and Zema led the way through the upper courts to the chamber of the black queen.

"This was my room," she announced, as they entered. "In the center is a small open place covered by one of the stones of the floor. It is in there that Zema kept her greatest treasures. Zema hopes they are still there."

Zema led the way to the stone, and Ware, assisted by Stillwell and Vespar, removed the portion of the floor from its position. Stillwell removed his flashlight from his pocket, and turned it into the place as Zema knelt and bent forward over the opening.

The light disclosed a small tin box in the bottom of the hole under the floor.

Zema drew the article from its place of concealment and opened the lid. Ware and Stillwell gazed in amazement at the contents of the box. In the receptacle were a small Bible, a volume on natural history, and several folded written documents.

"These were kept for me by Chalci, who succeeded my father as ruler of

the Corolans until I became older," Zema informed them. "I do not know the meaning of the many little black tracks, though Chalci told me that my father used to study them for hours at a time. He made a lot of the tracks on this parchment before he died, and gave it to Chalci to keep for me until I got big. Chalci was faithful to his trust, and here is the document."

Ware took the folded parchment which she held toward him. He unfolded it and found that the writing was in English. He read aloud while Stillwell and the others listened.

I am dying. For a year I have been living as the ruler of this race of savage people known as the Corolans. I was wrecked on the African coast with my wife and two baby daughters. I must leave them, so very, very young, in the care of one of the chiefs of the savages, who has been my loyal friend. My family alone escaped the shipwreck. My wife's escape from death was but temporary, for she died two months after we arrived in this place. I have ascended to the throne of these people by teaching them how to conquer their enemies. I bequeath to my daughters, Zema and Maleta, all of my estate in the County of Sangamon, State of Illinois, U. S. A., and pray that they may through some chance of fortune be returned to America, to come into the possession of their rights.

JOHN BENTON.

"Then you are not a savage after all," said Ware as he ceased reading the document, and looked at Zema, who was staring at him with a puzzled expression. "You and Maleta are of the same race of people as ourselves."

"I understand it all now," she replied slowly. " I have very faint recollections of my father and the things he told me. Many of them recur now since you have read the parchment to me."

A wild cheering in the outer courts of the palace suddenly interrupted the conversation, and the five hastened from the place, Zema bearing the little box under her arm.

An inquiry was directed to an approaching Morian as to the cause of the commotion.

"Agan has surrendered!" the man exclaimed. "The war is ended. The Morians are masters of the city of Corolans."

"What has become of the black queen Mitsu?" questioned Ware.

"She was killed a short time ago by one of her guards, while attempting to escape," was the reply.

15

THE morning had passed when Carno, with a number of his chief captains, entered the palace and proceeded to the room where Zema and the others were resting. The Morian chieftain raised his arm in salutation as he entered.

"I come to the white queen," he announced, "to offer her again the rulership of the city of the Corolans. Carno will maintain a force of his fighters to keep the Corolans in peaceful subjection."

Zema stood before the Morian chieftain and replied: "Zema's heart is filled with gratitude, for it is to Carno and his army that she owes her life. But Zema no longer desires to be the queen of the Corolans. She desires to go to the far country whence the white males came. There is the land of her fathers."

"Then Zema may name the successor to the black queen Mitsu," said Carno.

Zema waited for a brief time before replying. Then she spoke.

"If such is to be the privilege of Zema, then she will name one whose loyalty to me has stood the test of every circumstance. Zema names Vespar, the last of the native Corolans who were faithful to her."

A shout of approval went up from the gathered company of chieftains.

"Vespar then it shall be," said Carno, advancing toward the latter

and raising his arm in salutation. "The throne of the Corolans is yours by the gift of Carno who conquered it and Zema the white queen to whom it formerly belonged. All the forces of Carno are at your disposal, to enforce your laws, and reconstruct your citizens into loyal subjects. Long may you reign!"

16

AT DAWN of the following day, Zema rose early and left the queen's room of the palace of the Corolans. She took her way to a spot at the rear of the palace where great trees bent low toward the earth. It was there that Ware found her later, near two small mounds of earth.

"I could not go without telling them farewell, too," she said, turning tearful eyes toward Ware. "My father and mother are resting here. Though I scarcely remember them, yet there is a chord of memory that still sounds within me at the thought of them, and my heart aches at leaving."

For a brief time she stood, and then she raised her shapely white arm after the fashion of the Corolans in saying their greetings and adieus.

"Farewell, mother; farewell, father," she said, and turned toward Ware, who had been standing in respectful silence, his head bared to the sunshine of the tropical morning.

Together they returned to the entrance of the palace. As they approached, a large warrior drew near.

"I have been detailed with one hundred others to accompany the white queen and her companions to the lands of the far north, which they are about to seek," he informed. "When you are ready to march, we will be prepared to go with you."

Zema re-entered the palace, and later Stillwell issued from the building with his rifle, his pack strapped again to his back in preparation for the march before them.

Shortly thereafter, Zema and Maleta emerged from the building. Zema carried the treasured tin box under her arm.

The detail of warriors approached and joined the four. The march northward began. The plain from the city of the Corolans to the jungle border was traversed.

"I am leaving the scenes of my childhood," said Zema, as the jungle was approached, "or at least the scenes that I remember best, for any others are lost in the hazy past."

"Do you regret leaving?" Ware asked, glancing down at her. "Do you regret your decision to return to the land of your birth?"

"I have some regrets," she admitted. "Here I have known the savage life, there I know nothing of the ways of the women of your civilized country of which you have told me. I shall be alone in the land that gave me life."

"Not alone, Zema," he said, his hand touching her arm. "I care for you, and want you for my queen in the land of your nativity."

She hesitated before replying, her eyes fastened on the long row of warriors in advance. Then she raised her eyes to his.

"But might not you have regrets in taking so savage a queen as I?"

"Never," he said, and as they entered the tall underbrush of the jungle, his arm stole about her, and he held her to him for one brief moment.

When he released her, she turned and looked through an opening in the undergrowth, across the plain toward the city of the Corolans. Her eyes grew misty as she raised her right arm above her head in salutation of farewell.

"Farewell forever," she spoke. "Farewell, land of the Corolans!"

A Five-Minute Tale of Maritime Superstition

THE JONAH

By GUY PAIN

ASULLEN, shrouded gloom hung over the *Meandering Margaret*, a bark of 15,000 tons en route for the West Indies. She was lying in the midst of a sweltering calm. Scarce a breath, a capful of wind, disturbed the sails which hung idly downward from their masts in loose folds. An oily sea washed lightly against the sturdy sides of the bark, so gently that it assumed a heaving motion repellent to the eye and the stomach. Not a flicker of a white-capped roller, never a splash as a tiny wave overtopped itself to break up in confusion. Just a regular, smooth rise and fall.

The crew of the *Meandering Margaret* lounged idly about, except under the direct glance of the first mate, whose watch it was, when they carelessly continued their work with a pretense that deceived no one. The watch off lay about on the foredeck. Below it was stifling.

The calm had lasted a week now, and during that time the ship had made a progress of one hundred and twenty nautical miles. The oppressive heat seemed worse each day, while discipline became correspondingly slack.

The captain was below, feverish. The second mate had died under the influence of the heat the day before, and so the first mate and the bosun divided up the watches between them.

Superstitious to the last degree, the crew were hourly expecting tragedy, horror, death. The voyage had commenced badly. When the men signed on, they found as bosun the notorious Jim Green, Jonah of Jonahs. Jim Green had thrice been wrecked, twice on the cruel rocks of the Cornish coast, and once off South Africa. Each time most of the crew had lost their lives.

Once a boat he was on caught fire. It was a privately owned windjammer and uninsured—there was a subsequent suicide when the news of its total loss reached London.

He had seen four burials at sea—and he was cross-eyed.

The sum total made him one of the most feared men at sea, and no sailor ever willingly slept in the same ship as he.

That was the first of bad omens. Three days out the ship's cat, black as coal, after giving birth to white kittens, jumped overboard. Then Miller, the second mate, died.

JIM GREEN fished for sharks during his off time. He could not sleep, so to while away the time he trailed a line behind. There had been a certain shark following the ship for days. Another evil omen.

Pickled pork is a tasty piece, but though the line had hung down from the aft-deck for three days it was still untouched, while the shark still haunted the *Meandering Margaret*.

"Mark 'e my words, lads," grumbled old Amos, a bearded, grizzled old seaman who had sailed the seas nigh on sixty years, "that shark's a-waiting for 'uman food."

"Ye'r right, and I says so too," agreed 'arry Bodley. 'Arry Bodley was a rat-faced, ferret-eyed, cockney sailor, a typical inhabitant of the sunless, insanitary, crowded tenements of the East End of London. A vivid scar ran down his face, making its appearance evil. Its sinisterness was farther enhanced by the cunning expression set deep back in his eyes. "Yus, old Amos, this 'ere ship is curst, that's wot I says. Wot can yer expect with a blasted Jonah on board?"

There was a murmur of assent from the rest of the men, and a muttered growl. The watch off sat round, blackened pipes in blackened teeth. One bell went; that is, a quarter to eight bells. In another quarter of an hour eight bells would chime, and the watch would change.

Bodley, with one eye on the bosun to see that he caught no word of what he was saying, continued his discourse, while the remainder listened to him with an eager attention, every now and again interrupting with an imprecation, signifying agreement, or expectorating skilfully a mouthful of tobacco-tainted spittle.

THE sun had sunk, a blazing ball of fire, and night had fallen. Still the *Meandering Margaret* lay wallowing, creaking at every joint, where the tar had melted and oozed out.

The bosun was leaning over the side of the ship watching the fish leaping in and out of the water, leaving behind a sparkling shower of phosphoric drops which glowed as they fell back to the surface.

Night had brought no appreciable difference in the temperature, and Jim Green felt as if he were slowly melting away. He wore no shoes and stockings, only a pair of pants, and a shirt, rolled up above his elbows and open at the chest. Listlessly he gazed overboard.

Behind him there crouched a shadow which turned its head this way and that to see whether it was observed, then it crept slowly, noiselessly toward the unconscious figure of the bosun. Other than the faint splash of the leaping fish, the creaking timber, and the helmsman, who was whistling "Home, Sweet Home" in anything but a tunely key, the night was silent.

The shadow sprang forward. There was a thud, and Jim Green sank to the deck. Instantly the shadow, the rat-faced, ferret-eyed cockney, lifted the body up and flung it overboard.

The helmsman ceased his monotonous tune, cocked his head to one side and listened. "*Some* fish!" he muttered to himself. Before he had more time to cogitate on the sound of the big splash, he heard something else. There was a low, cooing, sibilant whispering, and suddenly the gaff topsail cracked like a pistol shot, the bark jerked forward, the sails billowed with a series of slight explosions. There was wind—*wind!*

THE disappearance of the bosun was scarcely a nine days wonder. five days being its limit, for on the fifth day the *Meandering Margaret* reached its destination.

Enquiries had been made, and the only clue to Jim Green's disappearance was the splash which the helmsman had heard, and which significantly had preceded the sudden wind by a matter of a minute, or less. The crew looked at each other queerly. No sooner had the Jonah fallen overboard, which was the assumption arrived at, than the prayed-for wind had arrived.

Only the cunning cockney knew the real truth, and he metaphorically hugged himself. He had paid back the beating up the mate had given him for slacking, and disposed of the Jonah, with successful results, in one

blow. Therefore he was pleased with himself.

Arrived in harbor the crew decided on a swim. With a boat to keep off unwelcome sharks, six naked men disported in the transparent blue water.

"Cum on, wot abart a race?" yelled out Bodley. "I uster swim the old Thames. Round the boat and back fer a tot of stout and tonic." The men accepted the challenge, and twelve powerful arms commenced to cleave the water.

Bodley lagged behind. He knew he could beat any one of the swimmers. In his younger days he had been the accepted champion of the urchins who used to swim in the muddied waters of London's great river. He had a spectacular temperament, so he meant to give them a start, then beat them.

As they rounded the stern he was two yards behind. The occupants of the protecting boat watched the race. Bets passed.

"My Gawd!" shouted one suddenly. "Look."

The placid calm in which Bodley had been swimming a second past was now a turbulent mass of heaving water. "Shark," hazarded one of the crew. "Octopus," guessed another.

Quickly they pulled toward the struggling cockney, but as they reached within three yards of where the helpless Bodley vainly kicked his arms and legs to free himself of whatever was clutching him, he sank beneath the water. A few bubbles rose to the surface.

The limpid water held no secrets. Some way down in the clear water they could see the body of Bodley, still and motionless. What puzzled the men, however, was some black, inert, seaweedy substance that was curled round him.

"Blimey," muttered one; "looks like as 'ow Bodley got caught in some seaweed."

Helplessly they peered down, stupidly doing nothing to rescue the cockney, who could not possibly be living. Presently the swimmers returned. They heard the story, and one voluntecred to dive below.

His white body flashed beneath the surface, and within thirty seconds he returned with Bodley—and "something."

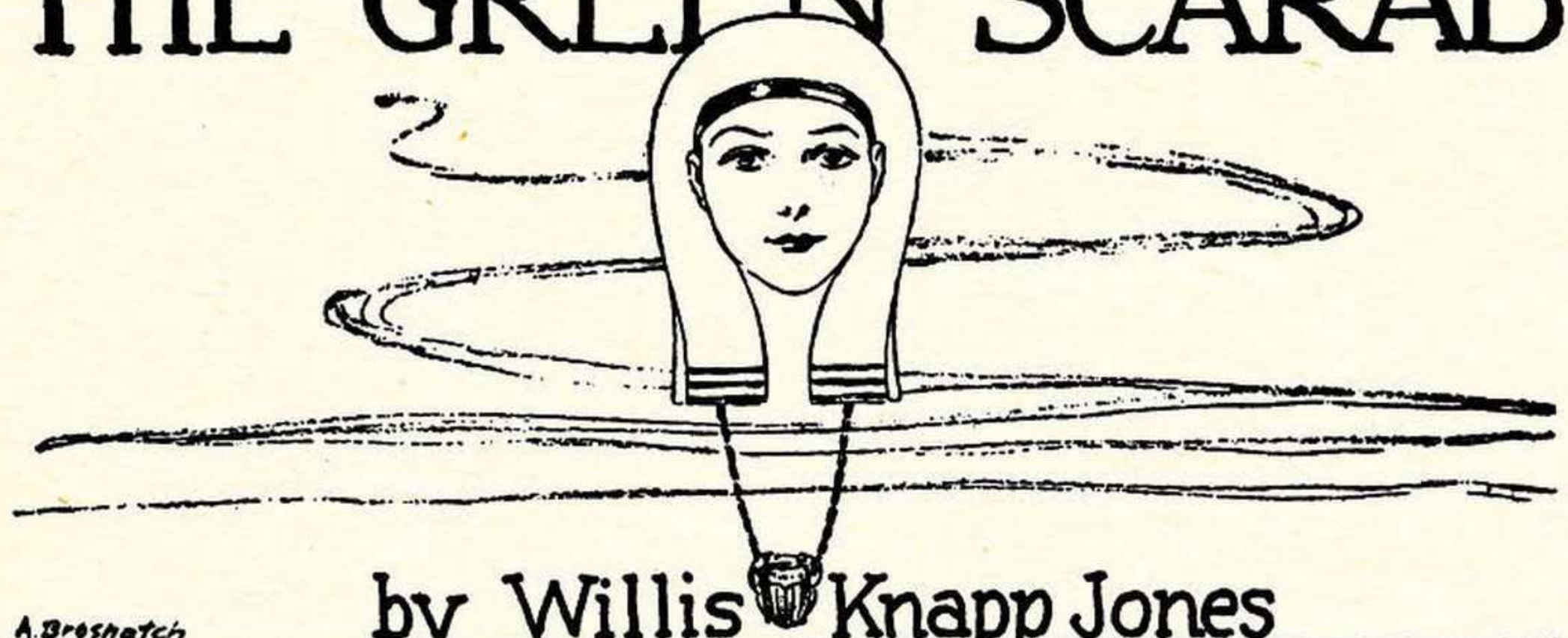
The first thing that the crew saw was the horror depicted on the rat-face of the late cockney. Terror, fright—nameless, indescribable horror was writ on his features.

Then old Amos suddenly vomited over the side, and with shaking fingers pointed to the "something" that was entwined round the dead body.

Stuck on a hook attached to a long line, which trailed from the ship and had once been used as a shark hook, was a slimy, seaweed-covered body, decaying and mortifying, the face of which, however, was just recognizable as that of Jim Green, the Jonah of the *Meandering Margaret*.



THE GREEN SCARAB



by Willis Knapp Jones

Author of "Bright Eyes of Adventure"

"SO THAT'S the kind of fellow you are, Gil, killing me with curiosity when I let you smear paint all over my room. When are you going to let me see your picture?" Manchester nodded toward the easel that faced the window.

"This morning—no, not yet!" the artist shouted, but he was too late. Manchester had already thrown off the cloth covering the painting.

"Oh, pretty nice! Who is she, Gil?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know." Burgess was slipping off his street coat.

"Don't know?"

"No."

"I mean, who was the model?"

The artist was silent for a minute. "Maybe I can make you understand. After our four years of college together, you ought to know me fairly well. I haven't any model. You see, Dick, for about a year I have been seeing this girl in a hazy sort of way. A while ago—a month ago yesterday, to be exact—she suddenly became so vivid that I felt I must paint her."

"Sort of a dream girl, eh? But what's this? The King Tut craze has struck your lady, apparently. It's clever. The little spot of green exactly balances the mass of shadow above."

"What do you mean?" Burgess was putting on his sketching jacket without paying much attention to the picture.

"Why, this necklace and the pendant."

"She hasn't any necklace." He came across the room, the coat dangling from one arm. As he saw the painting, he stopped in astonishment, then rubbed his eyes. "Well, I'll be darned!" he gasped. "Where did that thing come from?"

"How should I know?" It was Manchester's turn to be surprized.

"But what is it? Looks like one of those bugs you brought back from Egypt last year."

"Certainly. It's a scarab. But I didn't know you were interested in Egyptology."

"I'm not, particularly. The only time I go through your museum is when you are around to explain things."

"Then where did you get the details for the scarab? You're wasting your talents in this line. You ought to be a miniature painter, for I can even read the inscription: '*REDET-*

N-PTAH', eldest royal daughter. Where did you get it?"

"I don't know," replied Burgess in a daze. "I never saw the thing before. Last night I was having the devil's own time with the neck of that girl. It was either too flat or it looked as if she had a swelling. Finally I gave up and went home intending to finish it before you saw it. Now look at it. I'm sure I don't know who did it."

"Probably the scrubwoman painted it while she was resting," observed Manchester dryly.

The canvas was filled by a life-size portrait of a young girl, a brunette whose eyes had something magnetic about them. In fact, the whole picture gave the impression that the painted girl was about to step, Galatea-like, into life. To one looking more attentively, the face seemed to be that of a sleeper suddenly and rudely awakened.

But it was not the face which held their attention. They were occupied with a chain which the picture girl wore about her neck, a golden chain from which dangled a green oval pendant.

Burgess stared at the chain as if he doubted his own eyes. He stretched out his finger and touched the dry color. "Well, I'll be darned!" he ejaculated.

"Are you trying to tell me you don't know who painted that scarab?" his friend demanded.

"I never saw it before you told me about it."

"Of course I believe you, implicitly! Any other stories you want to unload? My credulity is unlimited."

"But is it really there?" The artist was struggling into his coat now.

"Are you crazy, Gil?"

"It's been here again, then."

"What's been here?"

"The *thing*."

"The what?"

"I don't know what it is. Once I was having difficulties with one of the eyes, trying to make it match the other. It wouldn't come out right. In the morning I found that someone had corrected it. I searched the studio then. Only through your room or through the museum can anyone get in here. I know you are not an artist. This isn't the kind of thing a person would do as a joke. It gave me the shivers. Sometimes as I work, I feel a presence behind me. Once, when I was doing this drapery, I know someone had hold of my hand, guiding the brush. I couldn't go on. I ran from the room, and when I came back—look at that fold! Nobody but a great artist could have done it."

"Which of the *Arabian Nights* stories have you been reading lately, Gil?" Manchester gazed with real alarm at his chum.

"I know it sounds like a fairy tale. I wish I could think it was. Do you remember the night I slept here? You wanted me to come in with you. Well, that night I arranged an alarm to go off at the slightest movement of the cloth covering the picture. Then I slept in the corner. About 2 it went off. I lit the light. The cloth was just as I had left it, but the air had a touch of the most curious perfume. Tell me that I'm crazy, that I'm dreaming, or explain it somehow. I'm just about frantic."

"Did you ever consider the idea that you yourself painted those parts that you mention?"

"I? I wasn't here. Don't you think I'd know if I did them?"

"I'm not sure. By the way, do those noises from the unpacking room of the museum next door annoy you while you are working?"

"No, I never hear them after I begin."

"That proves my point." Manchester gestured with his finger. "When you start painting, you for-

get everything. Why, I don't believe you even know you are painting. I came in here yesterday afternoon and you were sitting there scowling and talking to yourself. You didn't answer me when I spoke to you. You artist chaps are so temperamental that you almost go into trances when you are working."

"Of course I saw you. I was worrying about this neck, and you said some silly thing that didn't deserve to be answered. Besides, even if I agreed about the trance, can the sage explain how I could paint an Egyptian scarab, a thing I know nothing about, and do it so accurately that you can read the inscription?"

"That's just the point that sticks me. But your painting is done and ready for the exposition. You need a rest. Why don't you learn something of Egyptology? That stuff that we've had in the storeroom for a couple of weeks is to be unpacked after supper. Dr. Sheridan, the man who directed the excavations, will be in charge. And if you want wild stories, I'll stir up the Egyptian excavators."

"Thanks, I'll be there."

"All right, Gil, and if you can think up any additional details to make your story more convincing, I'll be glad to hear them." And with this Parthian shot, Manchester went out.

For a long time, Burgess stared at the door through which his friend had disappeared. Then he turned to his canvas and picked up his palette. After one glance at it, he rushed to call Manchester back. He had the final proof of the truth of his story, and he was all agog with eagerness to impart the information to his friend. Of all the colors on his palette, there was not the slightest trace of that peculiar blue-green of the scarab.

THAT evening when Gilbert Burgess entered the receiving room of the museum he was faced by pile upon pile of boxes and crates. Three of the foremost Egyptian scholars of their day were unpacking the treasures. Manchester introduced him to them as an artist, and whispered that they were going to unwrap one of the mummies a little later. Burgess made himself as unobtrusive as possible and listened to their talk, most of which he did not in the least understand.

When they had uncrated six mummy cases, Dr. Sheridan turned to the visitor. "We want to show the public just how a mummy is preserved. Would you like to choose the one? It makes no difference to us. Here is one of about the Sixth Dynasty, perhaps 4000 B. C. This one is of the Eighteenth, two thousand years later. Here is a recent one, 1000 B. C. He is a king and might be most interesting."

Burgess pointed to one. "Who is that?" he asked.

"I don't know, exactly; somebody in the royal family, perhaps a queen or her daughter. But it was before the Middle Kingdom, and they had not learned the most perfect embalming."

"Yet, I'd like to see that one, if you don't mind." He could not tell what strange impulse made him go against the suggestions of the authority.

"Just as you like. We'll open the Sleeping Beauty, then," and the men started on the seals of the heavy case. The priest who had prepared her for burial had evidently meant to preserve the body forever. It was some time before the mummy proper could be lifted out.

"Your choice was evidently a beauty," laughed Dr. Sheridan, holding up a small cube of stone. "Here is her vanity case. It was in this mortar that she ground up the green

malachite which she put under her eyes. And look at the scarabs!" he caught up several. "Indeed your choice was good. Usually the outside wrapping is poor, but this is fine stuff." Indeed it was, unusually soft, and creamy yellow from age. The bandages were about eight inches wide.

The other men, who had seen too many mummies unwrapped to be interested, worked on other packages. Only Dr. Sheridan and his assistant and Burgess witnessed the removal of the burial garb of this princess nearly five thousand years dead. They worked in silence, unwinding the linen.

Finally Dr. Sheridan pointed to the head. "One more turn around will uncover the face. That was a superstition the Egyptians had. Sometimes in their elaborate ceremonies, the feet would be wrapped a month before the head. Only when they were ready to put the body into the case would they cover the mouth. Ah! There's her Highness!" Her face was entirely visible.

Where had Burgess seen that face before? It was like none of his acquaintances. Then with startling suddenness it came over him. The girl, except that she had an olive complexion, was identical with his painting!

"Take off some more," he commanded. "I must see the scarab around her neck."

"Oh, there'll be no more scarabs, Mr. Burgess. Nothing now but the opening on the left side, made by the embalmers. This is too early in Egyptian history for the pectoral scarab. That did not come until—What?"

His exclamation came with the appearance, after the removal of more bandage, of just the scarab of which Burgess had spoken.

"This is very unusual," Dr. Sheridan was muttering to himself. But Burgess had forgotten him. "Dick!" he shouted; "come quick!"

Urged to haste by his tone, Manchester hurried over.

"Well?" Burgess waited.

"It is! It's the image of your painting, Gil!" burst from the astounded man. "But this makes it worse than ever!"

The others clamored to hear the details. When Burgess had finished, they were as puzzled as Manchester had been. "If you had not proved part of your story," observed Dr. Sheridan, "I should be inclined to call you a second Munchausen. Where is the picture?"

"The other side of that wall, in the studio. I'd like to bring it over tomorrow when the light's good, simply to see how nearly alike they are."

Manchester, who had been examining the pectoral scarab, looked up. "You remember, Gil, I translated your scarab this morning. If this is not the identical inscription, I don't known Egyptian. When you bring it over tomorrow you'll see."

DR. SHERIDAN was the only one in the museum the next morning when Burgess brought in the canvas. The receiving room did not seem so mysterious now with light creeping into every corner. Burgess looked for the mummy.

"It's moved to the Egyptian room," explained the scientist, interpreting his questioning glance. "Bring your picture there."

The Egyptian Room was fitted like a huge tomb. Draperies and vessels adorned the walls. In the corner stood several mummy cases. One of them Burgess remembered seeing the night before. "All this is new," Dr. Sheridan explained. "They've been here only a couple of weeks."

"Can you tell me how long, exactly?" the artist asked, struck by a sudden idea.

"No, but I can find out. I just got back myself. But there's your princess."

In the center of the room a standard held the body of the partially unwrapped princess, upon her forehead the gold uræus of nobility.

There was something weird about the atmosphere. Burgess sniffed. "What's the odor?" he asked. "It's like the perfume in my studio the night I almost discovered the painter of my picture."

"It is the spice the Egyptians used for embalming. The body remained in it for seventy days. It is natron, mostly. But let's see the picture."

Except for the costume and the difference of complexion, point for point they were identical. There was even a similarity in the arrangement of the hair. It was a puzzle that the Egyptian authority could not solve.

While they were talking, one of the assistants came in to ask about the disposition of some of the material, and Dr. Sheridan excused himself. "I'll be back in a moment," he said.

ONCE alone, Burgess made a more careful comparison of the painting and the princess, even taking measurements. The more he contrasted, the more he was sure that they were the same. "Well, it's got me!" he ejaculated, sitting on a mummy case to await the return of his friend.

The air seemed very heavy. He rubbed his eyes. He felt drowzy. He looked at the canvas leaning against the side of the tomb, and then at the dead princess.

Suddenly he started up. Was she breathing? There was surely a slight movement of her breast.

Finally, like a sleeper awaking, she stirred. An instant later she opened her eyes. Her face had the suddenly-awakened look of the girl in the painting. Her listless gaze wandered around the room, settling with a start upon the portrait. She sat up and stared at the canvas. Then she shook her head as if angry. The presence of the artist seemed to puzzle her for a moment, but she waved her hand with an imperious gesture. Her meaning was very evident, though Burgess could not understand why the one who was responsible for it should want the picture destroyed. He laid it to a woman's whim, and shook his head, smiling as he refused.

The princess suddenly arose and, taking no notice of him, glided to one of the mummy cases. The linen windings had somehow disappeared, and she was dressed in a long flame-colored robe. Remembering the difficulty the men had had in opening a case, Burgess was astonished at the ease with which she turned back the cover. A few blocks of color fell to the floor as a young man stepped out, carrying in his hand several artists' brushes.

Burgess gave a gasp of surprize. If the princess resembled the portrait, the young man was a perfect duplicate of himself, several shades darker.

The young Egyptian seemed momentarily astonished at seeing Burgess, but before he could do anything, the princess touched her companion's arm, and they talked earnestly together. Several times they looked at the canvas. Finally the Egyptian nodded assent, holding out his brushes. He then took a step toward the portrait. Burgess, however, had other ideas about the destruction of his exposition picture, and rushed to intercept him.

The lady stretched her hand toward him. To Burgess, it seemed as if a claw of ice had clutched his heart. He stood still. His breath came in gasps. The room was making dizzying circles. His head pained. Then all grew blank before him.

Suddenly the princess struck him and shouted in his ear, "Wake up!

You must have been asleep for half an hour." Or was it Manchester?

Burgess opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the princess lying on the standard as she had been placed. "I know who painted that picture!" the artist shouted. "Look in that case."

"That reminds me," Manchester remarked as they were breaking the seals. "Sheridan asked me to tell you that these mummies came a month ago, day before yesterday. He's sorry he couldn't come back, but some of the men are in trouble about a vase that came broken, and he has to help them."

"But a month ago," mused Burgess; "the very day I began my picture. Do you see any connection?"

They opened the stone lid.

"Why, he was an artist, Gil," Manchester exclaimed as several color pots rolled out. "And of the same period as the princess. You and he, if you really believe he helped you, did a good job. I'm interested in seeing how the portrait compares with the original."

He looked around. The canvas was lying face down on the floor. Manchester lifted the picture. His face grew white and he dropped it again.

Burgess sprang to catch the painting. Then he, too, uttered a cry as he set up the huge frame. It was absolutely blank, except that in the canvas, a third of the way from the top, was a small, accurate reproduction of a little green scarab.

In WEIRD TALES for September

THE TERRIFIC EXPERIMENT

By HURLEY VON RUCK

This is probably the most sensational story ever written on the subject of hypnotism—a gripping, moving tale, with a breath of horror that chills like an icy blast from the tomb.

On Sale at All News Stands August 1st

A Poetic Fantasy, About Old Yin Wen and His Forty-Year Love for Taki

The LANTERN-MAKER

By FRANK OWEN

Author of "Black Hill," "The Wind That Tramps the World," etc.

THE gray, gloomy shop of Yin Wen, the lantern-maker, lay up one of the narrow filthy alleys of Canton as though it were a bit of refuse swept from one of the main highways by some monstrous boom. It was a mere shell of a shop, completely open in the front, and so many cracks did it have between its paperlike board walls it was practically open in the sides as well.

As shops are reckoned, it was of little account, until one gazed on the countless lanterns stacked about on every side and hanging from the dust-festooned rafters overhead. Here were lanterns of splendor, lanterns for every country and every clime, for pauper and for prince; lanterns of magic, of wonder and of awe. Yet more interesting than any of the gaudy lanterns was Yin Wen himself, creator of vast beauty even though he was as ugly as a toad. Ugliness in a broader sense is merely a comparative term. Even a toad becomes attractive when compared to a slimy octopus or watersnake, or some soft-creeping, death-cold night terror that haunts our dreams.

Yin Wen looked old enough to have been the first historian of all China. He suggested a mummy suddenly endowed with life. He was very short, his feet were very large and his toes turned out. He walked in a toadlike manner, almost by leaps, and his eyes bulged watery and staring from their sockets. The skin on his face was like shriveled brown parchment. His eyebrows were gone; gone also was his hair, leaving his bronzed pate polished like glass, a shininess unrelieved except by a great purple-red mole in the direct center.

When his face was in repose he looked like one of the idol monstrosities which dot China as thickly as beggars. Always as Yin Wen worked, he kept muttering to himself bits of verse from ancient China legends and forgotten songs.

One morning as I loitered near his shop, I heard him crooning a song written more than two hundred years ago by the immortal Yuan Mei.

In spring for sheer delight
I set the lanterns swinging through the trees,
Bright as the myriad argosies of night,
That ride the clouded billows of the sky.
Red dragons leap and plunge in gold and silver seas,
And O my garden gleaming cold and white,
Thou hast outshone the far faint moon on high.

There was enchantment in the verses and I could not help but comment on it.

"One would imagine," said I, "to hear you sing, that there was witchery in lanterns."

At my words, he dropped his tools. He came toward me, his face convulsed with emotion. "And is there not?" he demanded tensely. "You wise men of the West gloat in your imagined knowledge, but some of the greatest facts of earth are still closed books to you. A lantern is as impor-

tant as the path down which we walk. What good is the path without the light of a lantern to show us the way? Have you time for me to tell you a story? It matters little in any case. You must stay. Nothing could be of vaster importance. Listen then to my story."

He drew me into his shop and motioned me to be seated upon a rude bench at a table, a table piled high with lanterns, and he took up a position on the farther side.

"LANTERNS," he began, "are like opium. They can be a force of good, or conveyers of frightful evil. One should indeed be careful in selecting a lantern. For a lantern lights one's path, and sometimes the path is of the lantern's choosing."

He drew his hand across his eyes as though striving to bring the pictures of memory out in sharper detail.

"You must know," he continued presently, "that for thousands of years the family of Wen have been lantern-makers. It is a great art that has been transmitted from father to son for ages. The making of lanterns is not merely artizan work. Great lanterns are not turned out as though they were stamped from a machine in a mill. There is much of mystery and romance in their manufacture. Some I will tell you, but more is a closed book, a locked book of which only those who are of the family of Yin have the key. The original lantern-makers were men of great prominence. Through the dark channels and streams of old China they sent their bright and cheerful lanterns, like great fireflies darting about in a garden. It was as though additional moons had been given to China by the illustrious family of Yin.

"With all the great spirits of the earth and sky and also within the waters of the sea my family was in great favor. Even the dragons and serpents which lie beneath the great grim mountains of West China never even thought of harming us. We were people greater than other people. We were creators of light and beauty; and as a token of respect and appreciation it has been for centuries the custom of the Great Spirits which guide the universe to pour forth blessings on the family of Yin.

"I was no exception. To me they gave a girl more marvelous than any maiden born before in all of China. She was my very own, more precious even than my lanterns, and lanterns are more precious than pearls. Her name was Taki. She was born one night when the moon was at the full. It looked that night as though it were a lantern and she gazed at it and made faint sounds as though in adoration. It was a prophecy. Sixteen years later she chanced to pass my shop and paused. She uttered a little cry of joy as she gazed at the lanterns, just as at birth she had gurgled joyfully at the moon. That pause was the turning point in both our lives. It marked the beginning of an epic of happiness such as all the flowery poets of the East would be powerless to tell of. Love, they say, is unknown in China. But what they say does not agree with facts, for love took root in my heart and flamed more brightly than any of my lanterns, and I was fortunate in kindling an answering flame in hers.

"Then followed a period of my life fraught with dreams and romance and soft-tinted lights. It was an existence to dream of, not to tell. This girl of peerless beauty was my very own. If you have the slightest imagination you can conjure up what that meant to me. We planned our marriage with as much enthusiasm as though we were not chained down by all the rusted traditions of old China. But fortunately a thing that is rusty is easily broken. It was not necessary for me to secure the consent of her

father to our wedding, for all of her people were dead. She talked about them vaguely. She never told me anything of her past except the incident of her crying for the moon. Nor did she tell me whence she had come. She chose to enshroud her past in secrecy, and I was content. It was sufficient that she was actually with me in the present.

"THEN came the eve of 'The Feast of Lanterns'. The Chinese calendar, as you must know, is regulated by the moon, and the start of the New Year is a period of great rejoicing. It is then that the Spirits are in a most amiable mood, and the Chinese celebrate by the world-renowned festivities which are known as 'The Feast of Lanterns'. At that period China ceases to be a land of mystery and groping shadows. It becomes a veritable fairyland of riotous colors and thousands upon thousands of lanterns. So many lanterns there are, there is no place for shadows and they flee moaning and groaning out to the desert places. China then is more fantastic than ever and the very air, always foul, is filled with poetry and soft-blowing incense. No wonder the poets of China have gone into ecstasies over those riotous, gorgeous feasts, riotous, you understand, only in the clashing and blending of colors.

"At this particular 'Feast of Lanterns' I was very happy, for Taki was with me. Together, hand in hand (an unheard-of mode of walking in Canton, we ambled about the bazars eating rice cakes, sipping tea and munching the sweetmeats which were held out temptingly on every side. That night Canton was a city of purple dreams, of love, of glory and enchantment. I longed to place my hands upon the moon, arrest it in its course and hold it so it need never pass again. It was the zenith of my happiness. What more could be added to it? And Taki too was glad.

"But there is something sad about crossing the zenith of anything, for then whatever it be must begin to wane. So was it with my happiness that night, for there chanced to be abroad in Canton a rich merchant named Ching Ling. He carried a gorgeous golden lantern which stood out in prominence among all the pageantry of light and color. Taki beheld it and her expression changed. Even as she had cried for the moon, and been attracted by my lanterns, she could not resist the golden snare of Ching Ling. She looked at him with eyes that were brilliant with desire. Her lips trembled. For all the world she was like some exquisite Lantern Spirit.

"Ching Ling noticed her expression and beckoned to her. When my attention was diverted elsewhere she followed him into one of the veinlike alleys which are etched endlessly throughout the native quarter of Canton. Shrieking as though my head had collapsed I sped after them through all the alleys nearest to me, but to no avail. They had vanished as utterly as though they had dissolved into the very air."

Yin Wen paused in his story. His head was shaking as though he were palsied. His parchmentlike yellow-brown face was as haggard as a death's head, and he was drooling at the lips.

"And now," he said, when he had succeeded somewhat in getting his emotions under control, "she has gone from me, but it is only for a little while. The Lantern of Gold took her from me but the Love Lantern which I am making will bring her back again."

As he spoke he rose wearily to his feet. From a back room he fetched and lighted a lantern the like of which had never been seen in all the world before. What color it was, I cannot say. It was of all colors and of none. It seemed to have been painted with

dreams and poetry, mixed with subtle perfumes. Surely this wondrous maze of brilliance which scintillated and reflected, changing every second, made of all the glory of the sun, could not have been colored with coarse dyes and paints mixed by the hand of man. In that lantern there was hypnotism and mysticism, and more, there was enticement—a sensuous loveliness hard to understand in an inanimate thing.

"The lantern is not yet done," declared Yin Wen. "When it is completed it will draw her back to me."

Abruptly as he finished speaking, he went back to his work. And though I sat there without moving for perhaps an hour, or it may have been longer, he told me no more. At last, reluctantly, I rose to my feet and walked from the shop. As I did so, old Yin Wen was crooning over his work:

In spring for sheer delight
I-set the lanterns swinging through the trees,
Bright as the myriad argosies of night.

IT WAS like living in a dream. I wanted to go to some quiet spot where I could meditate. Fortunately not fifty feet away there was a tiny tea shop and to this shop I retired. I felt in an extremely poetical mood and I could not wonder that the Chinese have almost made tea-drinking a religion.

When the little shopkeeper had brought me my tea I made no effort to drink it. I could not help thinking of Taki. How could a girl of such wondrous beauty have fallen in love with the toadlike, shriveled, ugly old Yin Wen even for a single moment? Taki was as lovely as the caress of sunrise upon a coral beach, while Yin Wen was uglier than a night storm in the mountain solitudes.

The keeper of the tea-shop seemed desirous of conversing with me. He hovered ever near. So at last I spoke. I repeated to him in substance the story which Yin Wen had told to me.

When I had finished, he said, "The love of Taki for Yin Wen is not such a puzzle as you have concluded. In his youth the lantern-maker was a comely boy. All that he has told you happened forty years ago. He lost Taki then, nor has he ever seen her since. At the moment of her going his brain stopped, like a run-down clock. And it has never gone on again. He lives the moments he spent with her on the eve of 'The Feast of Lanterns' every hour of every day. For him time has ceased to exist."

"But the Love Lantern," said I, "will he not use it some day?"

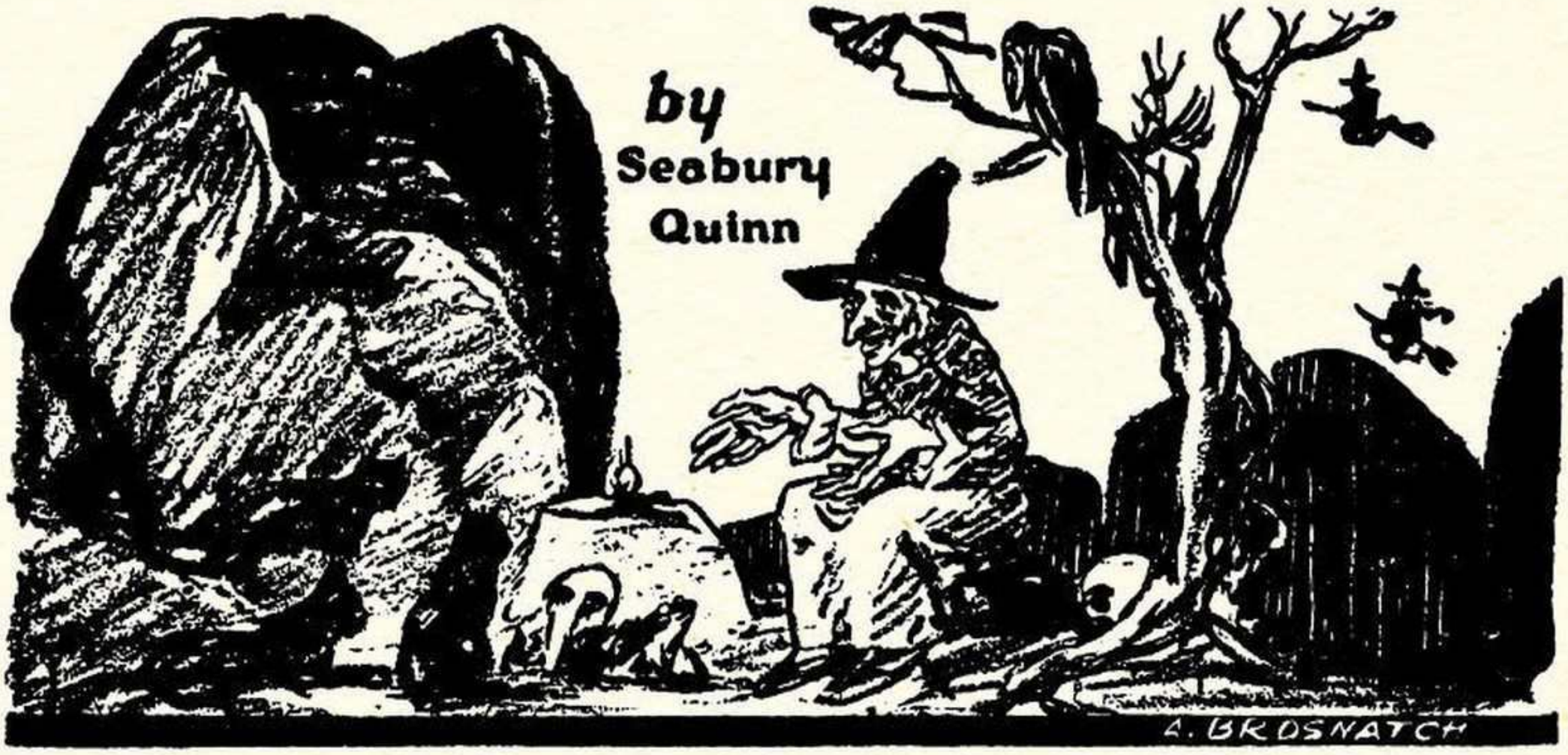
The keeper of the tea-house shrugged his shoulders. "And if he does," said he, "it will avail him little. He still thinks of Taki as a gorgeous, graceful girl. Now, if she be living, she is probably an old hag almost as ugly and withered as himself. Even if they met he would, undoubtedly, not know her."

"It is a very sad case," I said thoughtfully.

"I think not," was the reply, "for he still has the memory, and ofttimes a memory is sweeter than the thing itself."



SERVANTS *of* SATAN



No. 6. Maria Schweidler

THE village of Coserow drowzed indolently in the May sunshine. A breathing spell had come in the war which had racked all Germany for a generation; Wallenstein, the adventurer-general of the Emperor Ferdinand's armies, had failed to make good his blasphemous boast that he would take the town of Stralsund "though it were fastened by chains to God's own throne", and Gustavus Adolphus, the Lion of the North, had swept the imperial troops from Pomerania.

Suddenly the noonday calm was rent by such a clangor of bells as had not been heard since the alarm heralded the approach of Pappenheim's Walloons. Women rushed to their doors with infants clinging to their breasts and older children clutching their skirts, boys ceased their games in the streets, men looked fearfully about, uncertain whether to rush indoors and arm or take incontinently to the woods.

"Pish!" laughed a huntsman in a coat of green stuff decorated with gold lace, "calm your fears, silly ones. 'Tis but the signal for a wolf hunt." He stuck his tongue in his cheek as he let fall the latest gossip from the castle.

Three weeks before, the Count Wittich, *graf* of the district, had followed a fisherman's daughter into a coppice of fir trees. Those who knew the count best could testify his favors never aided a maid to gain a husband, and it had gone hard for the pretty fisher's daughter if two great wolves, one of them with a single, glaring eye, had not burst from the underbrush and chased his noble worship up the nearest tree.

Returning good for evil, the little maid had hastened to the castle and raised the alarm, so the count was rescued from his undignified perch before nightfall. But though his skin was untouched, his vanity was riddled, and he had sworn by all the Catholic and Protestant saints and martyrs indiscriminately that he would exterminate every wolf in the district, though the devil himself took

them under his special protection. Wolf hunts had immediately been organized, and four of the beasts fell into the huntsmen's nets, but no one-eyed brute could be found, either in field or thicket or forest, and Graf Wittich had sworn to kill the wolf which cheated him of his flirtation with the fisherman's child.

This much the huntsman told with a loud guffaw at his master's discomfiture, then abruptly set spurs to his horse and galloped away, for Graf Wittich Applemann himself, accompanied by no less persons than the sheriff and high constable of the district, came thundering down the village street, bawling aloud for the village folk to arm themselves and join the hunt without delay.

As the cavalcade of gentry clattered past the village parsonage a young girl came to the door, looking with interest at their splendid raiment, their tossing plumes and their flashing gorgets and swords.

"Ach, Wittich," the sheriff exclaimed, nodding toward the parson's daughter, " 'tis a pretty wench we have here; methinks there may be better sport than hunting wolves in Coserow!"

"Body o' Judas!" the *graf* answered testily. "Take her and be damned to you. If so be I can but kill me these pestilent wolves, you may have half the maidens—if, indeed, there be any such—in the countryside. I've come to hunt wolves, not women."

"So; so?" chuckled the sheriff, reining in his horse. "Do you hunt your wolves, *Mein Herr*. As for me, —we shall see what we shall see."

He removed his feathered hat and bowed to the girl. "Good morrow, pretty one," he greeted. "Would'st care to enter the service of the count? He did but now inform me there is a situation open at the castle."

"I thank you, sir," the maiden answered as she dropped a demure curtsy, "but I have no wish to leave my father's home. My mother is dead and I keep the house."

"Ah? So, so," the sheriff answered musingly. "A little *hausfrau*, eh? That is good; that is very good." He bowed again to the girl, as though she had been of the quality instead of only one step above the peasantry, smiled softly to himself and remounted his horse.

MARIA SCHWEIDLER stood in her father's door and watched the man who was to bring so much sorrow into her life gallop after his companions.

She was, in truth, a pretty thing, as the sheriff had remarked. Her hair was fair with the rich, burnished-metal sheen the ripened wheat stalks have at harvest time, and her skin was white with soft, creamy whiteness which many a fine lady might have envied. Eyes blue as the cornflowers that dot the fields when the grain is ripe for cutting looked out upon the world with a trusting frankness which told the beholder her spirit was as pure and virginal as her slim young body. For seven of her sixteen years she had ruled her widowed father's home, the Pastor Abraham Schweidler having lost his spouse in one of the periodical outbreaks of plague which afflicted the war-torn country, and though she could read the Scriptures in their original Greek and Hebrew, her knowledge of the world was as scant as that of a six-year-old child.

Such was Maria Schweidler, daughter of the pastor of Coserow, whose sweet young face had attracted the notice of the dissolute sheriff.

THE sheriff joined his friends, the hunt went merrily on, and in due time the one-eyed wolf was surrounded by the count's dogs and captured. Graf Wittich and his two friends had rare sport blinding the poor brute's remaining eye and torturing him to

death. They flayed him, and, with pieces of his pelt fixed to their spears like banners, rode back to the castle and went to bed as befitted gentlemen of their station—drunk.

On the following Sunday, after service, Johannes Kust, the count's chief huntsman. appeared at the parsonage door and made formal request for Maria's hand in marriage, seeming not too greatly downcast when the old pastor peremptorily refused his suit.

Perhaps the reverend gentleman would have regarded the count's servant more favorably as a prospective son-in-law had it not been for young Rüdiger von Neinkerken, son of the powerful Baron Hans von Neinkerken, whose castle stood near Gützkow, and who would one day be one of the country's greatest landed proprietors in his own right. This young man had met the Schweidlers while they were on their way to the Gützkow horse fair, and found it convenient to call frequently at the parsonage for discussions on theological doctrine with the pastor and on less abstruse matters with the pastor's pretty daughter.

At any rate, the huntsman's suit was rejected and young Rüdiger lingered at the parsonage till May matured into June, when he was called to the bedside of his father, promising to return as soon as circumstances permitted. But though Maria started up expectantly at the sound of every horseman riding before her father's door, the days grew into weeks and the weeks into months with no word from her absent lover, no message, even, that he remembered her or his promises of undying affection.

And now a new cause for gossip pushed the subject of the parson's forsaken daughter from the villagers' thoughts. The pigs and cattle of the neighborhood began to sicken and die in the most mysterious manner. Epidemics of cholera had visited the vicinity before, and the peasants were familiar with the symptoms of that scourge of the livestock raiser, but these deaths were without explanation, seemingly without cause. Gradually, however, one circumstance began to be noticed, then whispered, finally openly talked of. The cattle shed and pig sty which had last been passed by Maria Schweidler was the scene of the latest outbreak of the strange malady. Old Frau Seden, wife of Heinrich Seden, a tenant farmer of the count's, was first to whisper the suspicion, and later to point out instance after instance of the girl's visits being followed by death among the stock.

On July 12, 1630, the high constable—bosom friend of the count and the sheriff—appeared at the parsonage door and commanded Maria Schweidler to accompany him.

"What for?" asked the startled girl.

"That you will learn soon enough," the constable answered with a grin. "Aforetime you were too high and mighty to go to the castle; we shall see whether you will refuse now. Come."

Accompanied by her aged father, the girl went to the castle, finding the sheriff in his insignia of office, and a court composed of three stern old clergymen, awaiting her.

"Why have your worships summoned my innocent child?" the father asked in a quavering voice as he and his daughter stood before the tribunal.

"To inquire into certain matters of witchcraft which have been plaguing the good people of this district," answered the court's president. "Maria Schweidler, stand forth and declare whether you be a witch or no."

"I? A witch?" the girl stammered in horrified surprize. "Surely your worship is pleased to jest! Never in all my life have I done aught that is

condemned by the laws of God or man."

"Say you so?" replied the president of the court. "Perhaps you will say otherwise when—" he motioned to the constable, who stood, grinning, at the fair prisoner's elbow.

GERMANY of that day had a system of criminal administration which differed radically from that of other nations. In England and her colonies persons accused of crime were first presented to a justice of the peace or special magistrate's court, confronted with their accusers, and given a chance to refute the accusations against them, if they could. They might not lawfully be compelled to testify against themselves, nor could they be tortured into confessing their guilt.

German justice suffered from no such scruples for the defendant's protection. A preliminary hearing was held before an inferior court known as the *Untersuchungs Richter*, testimony of the accusers being taken at one session, that of the accused at another. The defendant did not know what testimony had been offered against him, or even who his accusers were, and if he were backward in acknowledging his guilt the courts possessed means of persuading him.

"LET her look upon the instruments," the justice ordered; "perhaps her sinful tongue will be loosened at their sight."

Beneath the floor of Pudgla castle was a vault reached by a stairway of a hundred and thirty steps. No window let the light of day into it, no openings communicated with the outside sunshine. In its dark recesses a tormented woman could shriek and shriek until her soul fled forth from her quivering flesh, yet no one in the upper castle knew what went on beneath. It was to this dungeon that the constable led the trembling girl.

By the light of torches fastened in wall-links he showed her the ladder on which stubborn persons were bound while the thumbscrews were fastened to their hands or the boots fitted to their legs, the rack by which a suspect's limbs were stretched until they dislocated at hip and shoulder, a table with an oblong opening in its top through which a spiked roller rose to rasp the flesh from the prisoner's bones as horseradish is grated from the root. Last of all he clapped his hands to summon two old women from an inner chamber, and when they appeared with a seething kettle between them, he dipped a feather into its contents. The quill shriveled and writhed as he flung it upon the torture chamber's floor.

"There's brimstone—the very fuel of hell's own fire—in that caldron, girl," the constable told her. "Anon I'll pour it on that soft breast and those white limbs of yours. Your flesh will wither and burn, even as that feather. Say now whether you be a witch or no!"

"No!" cried the girl. "As God is my judge, I'm no more a witch than you are a wizard."

"Ah; so?" replied the constable. He turned to the hags who had brought in the kettle, and commanded, "Dress her for the bridal bed."

The crones seized the girl and hustled her into the farther room, stripped her stark naked, let down her hair, and clothed her in a neckless, sleeveless garment which reached barely to her knees, then, lashing her wrists together so tightly that her hands turned blue and puffed with congested blood, they led her back to the constable.

"Come, stubborn wretch," he exclaimed, winding his hand in her flowing golden hair, "show thyself to the court. Let them see what an impenitent sinner we have in our midst."

Unable to steady herself with her hands, forced to walk backward by

the bully who tugged at her hair, half fainting for shame at the scantiness of her single garment, Maria Schweidler was dragged up the winding stairs and led before the court.

"Alas!" the chief justice cried as he smote himself on the breast in token of his sorrow. "She hardens her heart against our mercy. Was not the sight of the implements enough to loosen thy stubborn tongue, wretched girl? Must we proceed to the ultimate question? Look,—" he pointed to several rust-colored stains on her black smock—"those be the blood of others whose wilful tongues were oiled by torment. Cannot you profit by their sufferings? Are you, in truth, not a witch?"

"No," the girl answered, though her lips trembled so she could scarcely form the words of her denial; "I am no witch at all, but a sinless maid who craves your worships' mercy; and though you torture me ten times over, I can only say the same."

"Enough!" answered the chief justice as he rose and bowed to his associate justices. "I hereby make known to this worshipful court that the question ordinary and the question extraordinary of the stubborn and blasphemous witch, Maria Schweidler, is about to begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

With this he took up an hourglass in one hand, and, gathering his ecclesiastical robes in the other, descended from the judges' dais. But he could not bear the steady, reproachful scrutiny of the prisoner's eyes. He lowered his own glance, and, so doing, missed his step and stumbled, letting the hourglass fall from his hand to the floor, where it shattered into a myriad fragments.

"See, see!" cried judges and court attendants together. "She calls upon her master, the devil, to keep her in her hour of need. 'Twas the devil who threw down the glass."

Preceded by the judges, the prisoner was dragged by the hair to the torture vault and bound securely on the ladder of torment.

"What first, your worships?" asked the constable as he knotted the cords about her wrists and ankles.

"Thumbscrews," ordered the president.

Two clumsy iron instruments, somewhat similar in appearance to the braces with which cabinetmakers hold a joint of wood in place while the glue is setting, were brought by the old women and adjusted to Maria's hands in such a way that pressure from their threaded screws would crush her finger joints as the handles were gradually tightened.

As she felt the cold metal against her delicate flesh the poor child turned her eyes upward toward the smoke-blackened vault of the torture chamber and cried in agony of spirit, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*"

It may have been excitement and superstitious dread, perhaps it was abysmal ignorance which prevented the reverend president of the court from recognizing the piteous quotation from the Gospel of St. Matthew. In any event, he cried out, "She calls upon her hellish master in a heathen tongue! Apply the screws!"

As her bones bent beneath the pressure of the instruments of torture, Maria's spirit failed. "I confess; I confess!" she screamed wildly. "God forgive my weakness; I am a witch—a wicked witch! Do ye direct me what to say, worshipful judges, and I will say it, only, for gentle Mary her sake, torment me no more, I beseech you."

And then the "humble and holy men of God" commenced their examination of this innocent sixteen-year-old child while the constable stood hard by, ready to turn the torturing thumbscrews if she faltered in her answers.

Had she abjured God and all His holy saints and bound herself by oath to Satan, to be his servant forever and ever?

"Yes."

Did she possess a familiar spirit which did her bidding and killed her Christian neighbors' pigs and cattle?

"Yes."

Had Satan set his mark upon her?

A pause—"Apply the screws, constable!"

"Yes; yes! Ah, mercy, mercy, your worships—see, here is the fiend's mark, on my bosom!"

The black torture shift was slit with a knife at its upper hem, and between her breasts was found a tiny mole, scarce larger than the eye of a fine needle.

"Proceed, the devil's mark is found."

Had she lived with the devil?

"No, your worships, I have never lived anywhere but in my father's house, save two nights we spent at the inn at Gützkow."

"Trifle not with us, woman; you know what we mean. Have you lived with the fiend as his mistress? Apply the screws, constable, the witch grows stubborn."

"Ah, ah, mercy; mercy! Yes, I have been Satan's mistress. Oh, release me, sirs, release me, forbear the torture. Oh. . . ."

Water to bathe her brow was brought, and a cup of sour wine was forced between her lips. When she had revived, the court proceeded:

"Have you borne the fiend any imps?—Apply the screws!"

Yes, yes; she had borne a brood of half-breed imps to her hellish paramour.

"How many?"

"Three."

"What were their names?"

"They were nameless."

"Enough. The scarlet woman has confessed her abominations. Unbind her and put her clothes upon her."

THE court which took testimony did not consider the evidence. Depositions of witnesses, including the confessions of the accused, were reduced to writing and the whole record of the case referred to a central court for adjudication. The members of this tribunal read the testimony and applied the law to it, then certified their findings back to the court of original jurisdiction.

Along with the examining judges' record of the testimony was sent a written argument in defense of the accused, if he had money enough to employ an advocate, for, though the accused himself was not allowed to hear the testimony against him, his lawyer was permitted as much time as he desired to peruse and digest the transcripts and pick the prosecution's case to pieces in his brief.

Pastor Schweidler secured the services of a Latin-spouting, pedantic clergyman in his daughter's defense, and this learned old dotard prepared a lengthy screed, full of scriptural passages and highly moral precepts and quotations from the classics, but bearing not at all on the facts in Maria's case.

In the meantime, too, Pastor Schweidler wrote a frantic appeal to young Rüdiger von Neinkerken, imploring his intercession, and that of his august father, in his unhappy child's cause. Just before the testimony was certified to the central court a note came from Rüdiger saying that as Maria had seen fit to be untrue to her love vows, preferring to wanton with the devil rather than marry a Christian man, she might burn to death in earthly fire and thereafter burn forever in hell-fire, for all he cared.

As it was in Salem in 1692, so it was in Germany in 1630. The result of the witch's case was foregone. The last of August, 1630, Maria Schweidler was led into court to hear the chief justice pronounce:

"We do hereby direct that the self-confessed witch, Maria Schweidler, be duly torn four times across each breast with red hot pincers and after that burned to death by fire.

"Given at the castle of Pudgla, 30th August, 1630."

As he announced her doom, the president of the court picked up a light willow wand and snapped it in two pieces, flinging the halves at the prisoner's feet. This was to signify that, as the wood was broken in twain, so should her soul and body be separated from each other. Had the girl been found guilty of theft, murder or any other crime meriting death, the sentence would have concluded with the pious wish, "And may God have mercy on her soul," but she had confessed to witchcraft under torture, so there was no hope for her on earth or yet in heaven. The tearing pincers and the crackling flames with which her young life was shortly to be ended were but the momentary prelude of the everlasting torture reserved for her by the mereiful God who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believed on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

There was no *locus poenitentiae*, or opportunity for repentance, permitted the condemned witch under the German code. "What thou hast to do, do quickly," were the executioner's standing orders, and Maria was led from the courtroom to the cart which waited to carry her to the stake.

The sheriff mounted his tall gray horse; the constable, with his sword drawn—lest the witch work Christian folk an injury!—took his station in the cart beside the prisoner; and, surrounded by a guard of the *graf's* varlets, the girl set out for the spot where the fagots were already piled high about the stake and the hideous old women heated the executioner's pincers white-hot in a charcoal furnace.

Led by the sheriff, the little procession trotted down the unpaved roadway, clattered across the plank bridge above the mill-stream and brought up at the spot of execution. A hundred yokels, gathered in hang-jawed amazement to see a young girl mutilated and burned, set up a cheer as the cart horse, frightened by the fumes from the charcoal stove, pranced and reared on its hind legs, all but oversetting the cart in which the constable and his prisoner stood.

The executioner seized the condemned and tore her bodice open, exposing her white breast to the gazing throng, then pulled on his heavy cowhide gloves and took up his red-hot tongs.

"HALLOO, halloo! Stop!" The shout echoed faintly across the fields from the patch of forest land beneath the castle hill, and the notes of a hunter's horn sounding the "view" followed close upon it. Bent low above their horses' necks, riding like the good St. Hubert himself, came a party of twelve men in the maroon and silver liveries of the house of Neinkerken, the sunbeams playing bravely on the glistening tips of their boar spears.

"Do your duty, headsman!" cried the sheriff as the *graf's* justicer paused uncertainly at sight of the onrushing riders. "Do your duty; carry out the sentenee!"

And to the approaching huntsmen the sheriff announced, "We do but put an impious witch to death, my lords."

"Thou liest, dog and perjurer, and likewise thou diest with the lie in thy throat, or I am no son of Neinkerken," answered the foremost rider as he brought his spear to the charge and drove its razorsharp head through the sheriff's breast.

"Ho, some of you, hold these swine in play!" he shouted as he leaped from his jaded horse, tore off his hunt-

ing coat and threw it over the violated bosom of the trembling girl.

"Now God and all His saints be praised, my love, my only love, that we arrived in time!" he panted, for he was spent with three hours' break-neck riding.

And there, before the throng come forth to see Maria Schweidler die by fire, Rüdiger von Neinkerken put his arms about the condemned witch and kissed her on the lips.

"Ha, villian, would'st thou?" He evaded the thrust the constable aimed at him, drew his short sword and struck out with such berserk fury that his assailant went down upon the fagots with a gaping wound in his breast.

"Mercy, mercy!" the constable besought as Rüdiger would have slit his throat. "Have mercy, my lord, and I will tell all!"

It was a sorry tale the dying man sobbed out. Inflamed with passion, the sheriff had first conceived the scheme of luring Pastor Schweidler's daughter to the castle where he could seduce her at his leisure. Failing that, he had sent Johannes Kust, the count's chief huntsman, to seek her in marriage, for therein lay a chance to gratify his lust lawfully. By the ancient law, the *graf* might claim the privilege of occupying the bridal chamber of any of his vassals, or he might delegate the privilege to whom he chose. Had Maria consented to marriage with the huntsman she would have been his wife in name only, actually the plaything of the lecherous count and his bestial friends. Her marriage would have been but the mask to cover her shame.

But the hope of marriage to Rüdiger had saved her from this infamy, and the sheriff, balked in his villainous scheme, had sought revenge by bribing old Frau Seden to poison the peasants' pigs and cattle, then raise the cry of witchcraft against Maria.

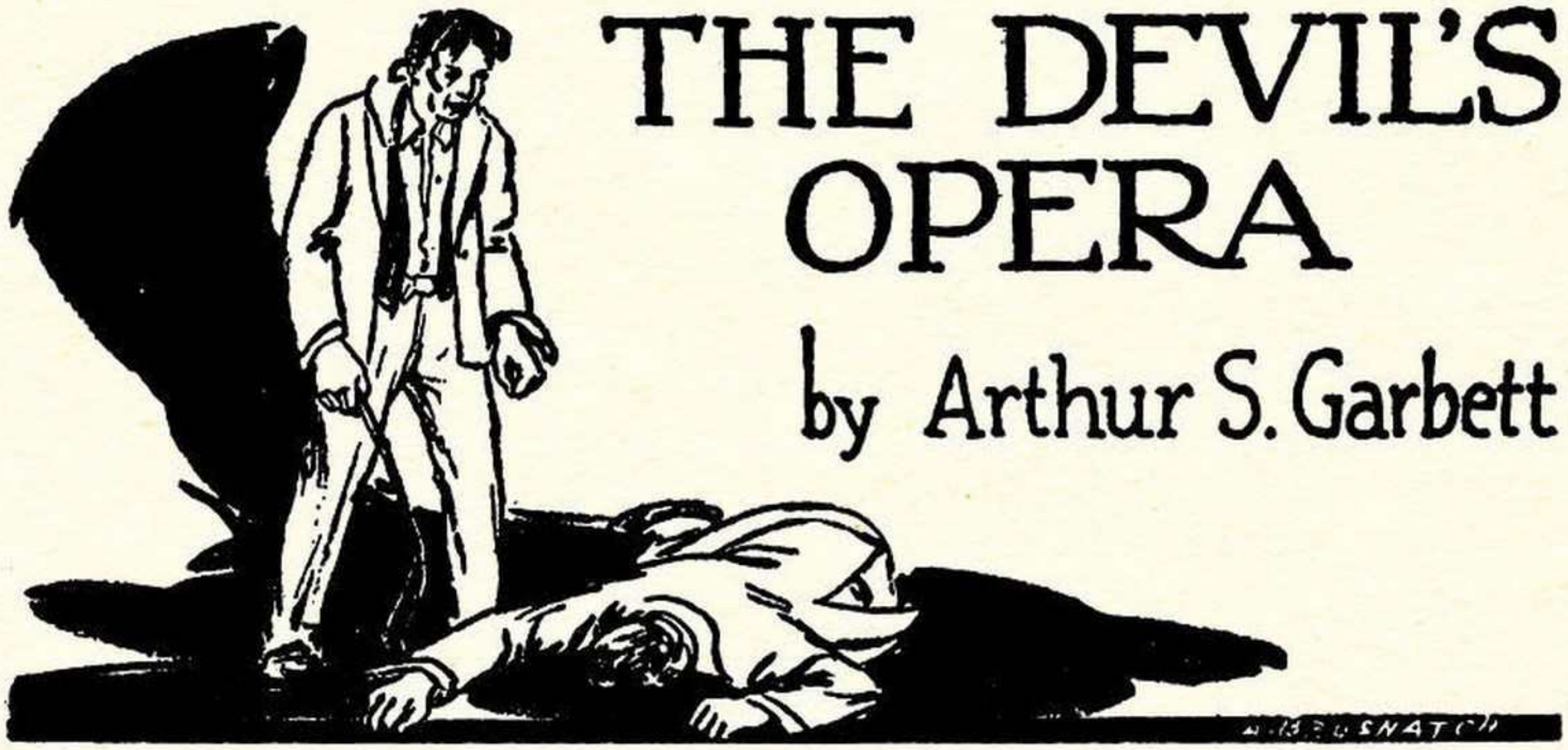
Rüdiger's seeming forgetfulness was soon explained. Summoned to attend his father's supposed sickbed, he had been locked in the castle by the proud old baron and told he might stay there until he rotted if he would not agree to give up all thought of marriage with the humble village pastor's daughter. The heartless reply to the pastor's letter was written by the baron and signed with his son's name.

Only the day before, the old baron had died in his cups, and Rüdiger, now Baron von Neinkerken in his own right, was released from his prison. Hearing of his beloved's plight only that morning, he had deserted his father's bier, summoned eleven of his stoutest retainers, and ridden as though pursued by all the fiends of pandemonium to effect her rescue.

Maria's father performed the marriage ceremony in his own church, and Rüdiger, Baron von Neinkerken, whose influence with the mighty Gustavus Adolphus was great, had little difficulty in securing a full pardon for the beautiful baroness.

SUCH is the story of Maria Schweidler. Together with a great many other facts of much less interest—records of births, christenings, marriages and burials of unimportant folk—it is spread on the records of the parish of Coserow in the crabbed German script of her father, the Reverend Abraham Schweidler, who closes the romantic story of his daughter's trial and deliverance with these pious words: "Thus was my child delivered out of the hands of the oppressor by the Lord, yea, even by the most high God. Amen."

Note.—This series of true tales of witchcraft began in the March issue of WEIRD TALES. *The first five tales described the horrors of the witchcraft craze in New England during the Colonial period. Copies of the magazine will be sent to any address, postpaid, by the publishers for 25 cents a copy.*



THE DEVIL'S OPERA

by Arthur S. Garbett

THEY shake their heads over me, the fools, and say, "Is it not a shame that such a man of genius should be a lunatic?" But I tell you, my friend, it is false. I am not insane. It is not true that I killed Ailsa Corliss. Ailsa died at the hands of her husband, Ronald Corliss. I tell you, in spite of all they say, that this jealous, earthbound clod choked the life out of her body as surely as he would have strangled her soul had I not prevented it—or tried to.

For her sake I must speak, though even you do not believe me. The stories told in the papers that I went back to Mallingham to renew my acquaintance with her are false. My old boyhood love for her was dead. I had forgotten her.

Then why did I return to Mallingham? A whim; no more. I had to go to some place where I could work on my opera, some place that was quiet. Why not back to the town where I had run barefoot as a boy, and been jeered at, flouted, despised, because I loved my music better than the silly games and uncouth follies of schoolboys? I wanted to show these fools who had grown up into shopkeepers that I had beaten them even at their own silly game of money-making.

I give you my word, I had forgotten Ailsa Freyne until I met her one day at one of those teas the women were giving to lionize me after my success in London and Paris. They told me she was no longer Ailsa Freyne, but had married Ronald Corliss, the lawyer and politician, who was a grown man when I was a boy. It needed but a glance to tell me that marriage had ruined her. I could see it in her eyes; for while she had lost little of her grace and her former dusky beauty, the elfin spirit was gone from her eyes and she was pale and—oh, how shall I say it?—the soul of her was dying. I am sensitive to the occult. I could tell. . . . I could tell.

She did not surprize me when she took an early opportunity to speak to me alone.

"I waited that year—the whole year and you never wrote," she said, half jokingly, half in earnest.

I laughed. Surely that will convince you that I had forgotten her, forgotten the foolish boy-and-girl flirtation that the papers have made so much of. I had forgotten our compact, forgotten even that she could

sing—in the old days. I think that was why as a boy I loved her. She sang better for me than for anybody else, and gave me my first realization of the magnetic power that has made me a great opera director—that power not only to make beautiful music myself, but to compel others to yield their will to mine so that music flows from them as from a fountain.

We talked a little, she and I, recalling old days. And then I asked her, flattering her: "Do you sing as divinely as ever?"

She shook her head, sighing.

"Alas, no; not a great deal. My husband does not care for music and I have lost interest. He is not very strong, and it excites him too much."

"It is a pity," I told her, and soon I left her, half promising to go and see her.

I really had no use for her. You must understand, my friend, that when I see a woman possessed of the divine gift of a beautiful voice throwing her gift away to please a stupid husband, I become annoyed. Husbands are common as dirt, and any woman can be a wife; but great singers are rare.

NEVERTHELESS, I went to see her, for old times' sake. She had a big house on what used to be Maple Avenue but has now been rechristened Radnor Heights by some real estate man. Only in America would any such low-rising ground be dubbed "heights". But it is a quiet, well-wooded section near the Country Club, not far from where I was living, and where most of the élite have their residences. The élite of Mallingham, my friend. It is to laugh!

She had a fire lighted, for already it was autumn, and it had rained. How dismal your Middle West can be when it rains!

We talked again of old times, and presently, "Are you happy," I asked, "now that you are married?"

"Why, yes," she said. "Of course; why do you ask?"

I looked at her and, reading her eyes, knew that she lied without knowing it.

"Do you love your husband?" I ventured.

"What a question!" she answered; and there was a touch of defiance in her eyes as she spoke. The absurdity of it! How could she love a man twenty years older than herself?

I continued to look at her and she was compelled to beg for mercy.

"Don't look at me like that," she pleaded. "You are trying to frighten me as you did in the old days. You know, I was fond of you; but at times I was terrified of you."

At that I laughed. How could I help it? It amused me to find that I still retained some of my old power over her. There was a piano in the big room and I went over to it.

"Don't play," she pleaded. "I—I don't think I want to hear you play. You frighten me when you play."

At that I only laughed again, and began to play a tune we used to be fond of—Ethelbert Nevin's *Oh That We Two Were Maying*. You know it? A saccharine, sentimental thing, but not bad.

It was funny the effect it had upon her. I kept my eyes on hers, and noticed that she was trembling all over. She was standing near the fireplace when I began, but she drew insensibly nearer and my eyes held her, though unwillingly. She was fighting my will.

Suddenly, as if in spite of herself, she began to sing. At first her voice was soft and breathy; but gradually it strengthened. She seemed to yield herself more and more to the music. Her voice grew in richness and volume. She did not sing loud, you understand, but—oh, how can I express it?—with beauty! That strange, subtle quality of unlimited power

held in reserve which only true artists obtain.

To say I was thrilled is putting it mildly. For you see, my friend, I realized what had happened. It was as if I had hypnotized her and my will dominated hers. It was exactly as if my spirit had entered her body and was using her voice as an instrument—the rhythm, the phrasing, the nuances of light and shade: they were mine—all mine! I was playing upon her as upon a violin.

I did not dare break the spell. It was too wonderful. I kept my eyes fixed on hers as she stood there, at the other end of the long, polished black piano, and modulated almost insensibly from one tune to another, being careful to select those melodies we had sung together in childhood. It was amazing, fascinating; and it lasted I know not how long.

The end, however, was as unexpected as the beginning. Somehow—I can't pretend to explain how except that I am unusually subjective, and feel instantly the occurrence of any change in the psychic atmosphere—I knew that I was losing my control over her. I was aware of tension, of combat. I felt that some strange, inimical force was at work compelling me to relax my hold upon her even before I heard the click of the latch, saw her eyes waver and wander from mine, and knew that somebody stood upon the threshold of the room.

I did not look behind me as Ailsa stopped singing, for she swayed as if she were falling and went pale as death. My hands fell with a crash on the keyboard and startled her back to reality as her husband, Ronald Corliss—for he it was—came dashing into the room and caught her as she stood clutching at the piano. She went off into hysterics, laughing and crying all at once in the strangest way, and he led her to a chair.

Corliss paid no more attention to me, until she had quieted down, than if I were so much dirt on the carpet. It was humiliating.

When at last he had calmed her, he turned on me—that is the only expression I can use, for he was veritably snarling at me. He was a huge brute of a man, you remember, with broad shoulders, square face and tousled fair hair.

"What in blazes have you been doing to her?" he demanded.

I shrugged.

"We were having a little music," I told him. "She was absorbed by it and your abrupt entry frightened her."

He glared at me; but I was not afraid. You see, with my quick intuition I had already perceived the heart of the matter. Dominated by his gross, earthbound strength, Ailsa had ceased to sing; indeed she had lost the power. But my coming had broken the spell, and I had resumed my old dominance over her. The soul of an artist, my friend, may be crushed, but it cannot be killed.

This was the first time I had ever seen Corliss close at hand, for in the old days he had moved in what then seemed to me the lofty region of Mallingham's highest social circles, but he evidently remembered me, or perhaps Ailsa had spoken of me.

"Now look here, Kenworthy," he said. "I don't know what you've been doing to Ailsa; but we don't want any of your music here. What's more, I won't have you hanging around this place, either. So get out; and stay out."

Ailsa made a natural movement of protest at this unheard-of rudeness. But he motioned her to keep silent.

"Sit still," he ordered, "while I chase this little beast out of the house."

There was, you see, no pretense between us. To do the brute justice, he was not usually lacking in the cruder

manifestations of politeness current in America; but his resentment against me was—shall I say it?—psychic. It swept him off his feet.

I was irritated, but I kept my temper and left with what grace I could muster. I meant to see no more of Ailsa in that mood, my irritation having caused me to forget the subtle yet powerful bond that had formed between us.

Ah, my friend! You may laugh; but in your grossness you fail to realize the subtle power we musicians possess to respond to magnetic impulses far beyond your ken.

WHEN I left Ailsa Corliss that day, I was angry. I meant to forget her and her cloddish husband; but it was beyond my power, as I soon found in a strange and beautiful way.

I had, as I explained, gone to Mallingham to work on my new opera, but hitherto I had done little. Now, however, I began to write with a sureness of touch, a feverish energy, which convinced me that my faculties had received a tremendous stimulus. The act of creation is for a composer beyond all earthly joys. The music wells up in his soul until he is possessed by it. His pen flies over the paper for hours at a stretch until for very weariness he falls asleep where he sits. At least that was the ecstasy that came to me. And it was Ailsa's voice I heard in my creative dreams. Her voice, as she had sung to me that day under my hypnotic influence, lured me on hour after hour, day after day.

I did not go to see her in all that time. I did not need to; for her spirit was with me, guiding me. It was Ailsa who came to me, not I who went to Ailsa. And for a strange reason, indeed!

One late evening, while I was in a highly nervous condition, having worked all day and kept myself going on cigarettes and black coffee, I was startled to hear a knock at the door.

My studio, as you know, was an isolated building some distance from the house where I lived with only a deaf old housekeeper to wait on me. It is, in fact, a converted barn, surrounded with trees and bushes to screen it from the road. I had fixed it up so as to ensure myself uninterrupted seclusion and freedom to play the piano at all hours of the day or night. Orders were strict that I was on no account to be interrupted; therefore the knock at the door jarred my nerves.

I went to the door with angry words on my lips, but they remained unuttered, for it was Ailsa who stood before me in the yellow glare of light that streamed from the door.

"Ailsa!" I cried. "What does this mean?"

She did not answer in words; she entered swiftly, looking behind her as though fearful of being seen, and motioned me to close the door. I did so in wonder, and she leaned, panting and trembling, against the wall. Her eyes had dark rims under them and she was pale and exhausted-looking.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered wildly. "I think I am going crazy. My husband is away, at the state capital, and I had to come to you. You are killing me, Francis."

"Killing you?"

I don't remember what she said in answer; but she began to babble in the strangest way, talking wildly, incoherently. I gathered that in some way she had been music-haunted since my visit.

"All day and all night," she complained, "the music whirls and eddies in my brain. And it is you, Francis, you, who are responsible."

I was too startled to speak, and could only gaze at her with startled incredulity, which apparently she

understood, for suddenly she darted to the piano.

"Listen," she cried. "I will show you."

She began to play, somewhat clumsily and inaccurately, for she was no pianist, yet in a way that turned me to stone where I stood. For, my friend, whether you believe me or not, *it was my own music she was playing.*

Incredible as this sounds, it is true. Remember, not a soul had heard this music, for I use the piano but little in actual composition, writing my thoughts straight down on paper as all good composers do, referring to the keyboard only occasionally.

I was struck dumb with astonishment. I scarcely breathed. And presently she stopped, and leaning her elbows on the keyboard, covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

"But this is amazing, incredible!" I cried at last, endeavoring to explain to her, and to calm her.

"But what are we going to do?" she demanded, when I finally convinced her of how matters stood by showing her the manuscript of my opera. "It can't go on like this. My husband hates music, and I can't keep from playing and singing. It infuriates him. I think he knows you have something to do with it and he is jealous."

"I can't help that," I answered, angrily. "The music comes to me. I must write it. What do I care about your husband?"

"But I care for him," she cried. "He is not strong, and music excites him so. And just now there is his political campaign—"

At that, heaven forgive me, I think I swore. For you must know that I was very tired, and what had politics to do with my masterpiece?

She cowered before my anger, and I thrilled to find it was I who dominated her, not she me. But I was merciful. I promised that I would not work so long at a stretch, for when we came to compare notes, we found that she suffered most acutely at the time I was actually engaged in composition, and especially in her husband's presence. When he was absent at the state capital, some eighty miles away, she surrendered more completely to the spell, and even derived from it a certain ecstasy, though it drained her emotionally.

IT ANNOYED me to find that my work was subject to the comings and goings of this oaf, but so it turned out; for it transpired that the days of his absence when she yielded herself freely to my influence were the days on which I myself worked most happily. I promised to adapt myself to these circumstances. There is in musical composition much mere note-writing, filling-in of details and revision, which I could do without any special creative effort. I promised to devote myself to this work for a while so as to give her a rest, and so it was arranged when she finally left me.

Of course I went to see her often after that. How could I help it? But I chose only those days when her husband had gone to the state capital, some eighty miles away. I found that by seeing her, consulting with her, my work progressed better. She had, of course, no suggestions to offer; the creative energy was all mine. But she had the gift of stimulating me to a powerful degree. I was able to work more calmly after visiting her; and it affected her much less unpleasantly to have me there in person than it did for me to subject her to the hypnotic spell which brought her astral body to mine when I worked alone.

You may remember that Richard Wagner, the greatest master of us all, wrote his opera *Tristan und Isolde* under much the same condi-

tions, finding his inspiration in the person of Frau Wesendonck, with whom, in spite of all the gossip, I believe his friendship was purely platonic, as was mine with Ailsa Corliss.

But you know how it was with him; and still more was it the case in this small, midwestern town with its obtuse incomprehension of all things artistic. People began to put a wrong construction upon my frequent visits during Ronald Corliss' absences. Nor was the gossip lessened by the fact that under the new arrangement Ailsa was benefited physically. The old elfin look returned to her eyes. She was gayer, more light-hearted, more alive, her old self. Her soul had been sleeping, my friend, and I had awakened it.

I must confess that as time went on, we became careless. We met frequently and were seen together a lot. Both of us were blind to the gossip, so pure and so beautiful was the union between us.

THE awakening came one day when I received a visit from Ronald Corliss himself. I don't care to speak of that interview even now. He became purple with rage when he spoke of what he called my "damned diabolical musical hypnotism," and threatened violence if I visited his house again. I fear I was equally indignant and violent in speech. We nearly came to blows. He left finally after saying that if I did not leave Ailsa alone he would run me out of town—me, Francis Kenworthy, whose birth and subsequent residence there conferred the only distinction on the town it ever deserved or enjoyed.

That upset me greatly, my friend; but what upset me more was the discovery that so long as Corliss was in town my control over Ailsa was greatly diminished. His stubborn will, now fully aroused, was fighting desperately against mine, and all my energy that should have gone into creating divine music was expended in fighting him. It was a strange battle, and Ailsa suffered perhaps worst of all, for she was, as it were, the battleground.

Finally I was compelled to communicate with her, and we patched up a sort of arrangement for clandestine meetings distasteful to us both. There is in town a wretched voice-teacher and organist named Borman who was forever fawning upon me, and upon whom I exerted, grotesquely enough, a hypnotic power similar to that I wielded over Ailsa herself. I persuaded her to go to him, ostensibly for voice-lessons, during which this loathsome creature made himself scarce. In this way we resumed our strange intimacy and things progressed well for a time. Ailsa recovered her spirits and I continued happily in my work.

But this wretched Borman talked, and thanks to his gibbering the scandal was greater than ever. I received another visit from Corliss. Of the wretched vulgarity of this visit I speak with loathing. As you know, my friend, he brought a horsewhip with him and actually attempted violence.

I do not look strong, my friend, but like many musicians I have extremely powerful wrists and arms; and I can move with catlike swiftness. Against this heavy, over-fleshed creature I was omnipotent. I wrested the whip from his hand, slashed him with it, flung it away, and gave him a violent body-blow with my fist that sent him panting and heaving into the corner of my studio. I was afraid I had killed him. His face went ashen-gray and he gasped and choked as though he were going to have a fit. He recovered eventually, however, and left, muttering curses.

Of course news of the encounter leaked out, and there was terrible gossip. I was obliged to leave Mall-

ingham under threats of violence which even the police advised me not to ignore. Such, my friend, is the freedom of this land of liberty!

STRANGE to say, my work progressed during this period. I had found a new inspiration, my friend. And will you believe me when I tell you that it was hatred? It was nothing else. My disgust and loathing for this wretched Corliss drove me to composition in a way that was at first gratifying and afterward alarming.

It was alarming because, to my consternation, I found the music was bad. I don't mean technically; I mean spiritually. It was wicked music, distorted, cacophonous, diabolical, the child of hate. I could not believe that this loathsome thing was my own brain-child.

At first I did not realize this. But gradually the truth dawned upon me. This hideous, earthbound creature had dragged me down to his own earth-level. My genius was being trailed in the mud.

Worse than that, I found myself consumed by new physical passions to which I had hitherto been a stranger. I longed, physically, to choke the man's throat with my fingers. And worse still, I found that my feeling toward Ailsa was changing. Hitherto my feeling for her had been purely platonic, apart from the strange musically creative passion that bound us together. Now I felt less and less of that and more and more of a much less desirable longing.

My friend, I cannot begin to tell you the horrors I went through. My desire for her was no longer sublimated into divine music; it was gross, earthly. It haunted my dreams, so that I loathed her even while I longed for her, just as I began to loathe myself.

Always I could feel the strong will of her husband dragging me down to the crude level of his own debased passions. Always in my dreams he came between us. The thought of him obsessed me, compelled me to write music which was, I verily believe, dictated by the devil himself.

I could not stand the strain. I longed to go back to Mallingham, to see her again, feeling that by a resumption of our old intimacy alone could I regain my true self, purified, sublimated. Otherwise I and my music would perish. Yet I resisted the temptation for her sake.

In the end, it was she who compelled me to go. Just as she came to me that first night, so she wrote a letter of such anguish that I should have been inhuman not to return to her for just the one meeting she demanded.

"The suspense is killing me," she wrote. "I feel myself the battle-ground between you, and you are wearing me down. Ronald does not understand. He is jealous, fearful, suspicious, and will hardly leave my side, yet at all times I feel you tugging me. You at least have intuition enough to understand my state of mind. Come to me, I beg of you, before you kill me."

What could I say to that? What else could I do but go? And fate conspired to help us. It seemed that the country was again to undergo its quadrennial political orgy known as a presidential election, and Corliss was due to speak at a convention in the state capital the following Wednesday night. I had only to send her a key to my studio, and we could meet late at night without a soul being the wiser. As I have explained, my studio was isolated and screened from the road.

ACCORDINGLY, on the night Corliss was to speak, I went back to Mallingham, half frightened at the desire I felt to see Ailsa once more, and yet confident that once in her pres-

ence the older, purer feeling for her would return.

I arrived, as you know, late at night, passing unobserved from the railroad station and walking the two miles out to my studio, soaked to the skin, for it was raining, and clutching my manuscript under my arm.

She must have been there some time, for she had a fire lit in the stove, and had coffee ready. Also, to my amusement, she had started the clock, as she explained, to cook my eggs by, having forgotten her watch. I laughingly set it right while she put the eggs on. I should not mention this fact but that it has a certain significance, as you will see.

Just as I had supposed, now that I was with her, the ugly, sensual feeling I had had for her vanished, and I felt toward her as I had always felt, and we talked of music—nothing else. And as we talked the old elfin light came back to her eyes, and the drawn look left her cheeks. I told her of what had happened, as clearly as I could.

"I know," she said. "I felt that something of the sort was going on in your mind. Oh, it has been awful—awful! I have been torn between you and Ronald. I tried to make him understand just what our true relations were, but it only made him the more jealous, and—oh, I must not speak like this, for I love him!—indeed I do, Francis. You must believe that—I do love him."

You will not believe me, perhaps, but to hear her say that made me actually happy. I wanted nothing from her but the inspiration for my opera.

"You must play me what you have composed," she went on; "I am dying to hear it—even if it is bad, as you say it is."

For the first time I felt a misgiving.

"It is late," I said, pointing to the clock.

It was, in fact, nearly midnight. She insisted, however, and though I felt that it was dangerous to play that diabolical music to her, I was by now so sure of myself that I felt no risk; yet I hesitated.

"It's devil's music," I warned her. "I'm afraid of it."

"Then I'll exorcise the devil," she said, gaily.

So I went to the piano and began to play. And then—the worst happened. As I played that cacophonous, insidious music, I felt the old evil passions rising within me. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. The music possessed me with its infernal power. I fought against it, tried to lift my hands from the keyboard, but I could not move them.

She must have seen from my eyes what was going on, for an expression of horror came over her face. "Stop! Stop!" she cried; but I was powerless. It was as if diabolical hands were holding mine down to the keyboard, forcing me to go on playing though I revolted with every ounce of will-power.

She rushed toward me, and put her arms about me, trying to draw me away from the keyboard. But her touch inflamed me. I stopped playing, indeed, but I do not dare to think what madness was in me at that moment.

Yet strangely, as soon as the music ceased, the feeling began to pass. Though I struggled with her in my arms, and for all I know, may have kissed her, yet I felt that my strength was returning, and I was regaining control over myself.

IT WAS while we were still struggling that the final catastrophe happened. Ronald Corliss came into the room. No, my friend, it is useless for you to look at me like that. He entered the room as sure as I'm alive, and my arms dropped to my side. I was powerless, frozen stiff. I heard

Ailsa gasp, and knew somehow that she had dropped into the armchair beside the stove, weeping and panting.

Ronald Corliss spoke no word as he entered, and his eyes were fixed upon her alone. I was frozen stiff, paralyzed, yet I was sharply aware of details that seemed inconsequential. I noticed, for instance, that his double-breasted suit of blue serge was dry. I glanced at the clock, which seemed to be ticking unnaturally loud. It was a few minutes after midnight.

There was no train at such an hour. He must have traveled in a closed car at a furious pace; but he could have made it in an hour and a half, and it seemed reasonable to suppose his speech was over by 10:30. It seemed reasonable; but I felt that something was wrong in my reasoning. I can't explain this, but I felt it.

He swerved a little as he came forward, and his hand shot out as he passed the piano. He grabbed my manuscript from the piano, and to my astonishment, still glaring at Ailsa and ignoring me, he flung it into the stove, before he went to her and stood before her, implacable, menacing.

His action restored my senses. I cried out and ran to the stove, intent on saving the manuscript from the flames; but as I passed him, his hand shot out once more, and I was flung to the ground. I must have swooned. I remember nothing more, save that as my senses reeled, I saw his great hands reaching out clawlike toward Ailsa. . . .

WHEN I awoke, it was to find the sunlight creeping into the room, mingling with the still-burning electric light, though the shades were drawn. The three of them were standing over me—the police officer, the newspaper reporter, and the deaf woman from the house who had noticed the light burning when she woke in the morning.

Ailsa was all crumpled up in the armchair before the cold stove in which were the charred remnants of my opera. I could only guess what had happened to her.

"Did you get him?" I asked, spluttering, for they had thrown water in my face to revive me.

"Get whom?" demanded the police officer.

"Corliss," I answered. "Ronald Corliss, her husband. It was he who killed her."

The two men stared at each other curiously, and I was puzzled to interpret their looks.

"He's plumb crazy," said the police officer.

"Looks that way," answered the reporter.

The deaf woman stared uncomprehending from one to the other.

I tried to rise up, hot with indignation; but the policeman gripped my shoulder. And then the newspaper man shoved the newspaper under my nose and I saw the huge headline.

"CORLISS DEAD!" ran the headline, and beneath in heavy type: "Immediately after finishing his speech to the Republican convention shortly after midnight last night, Ronald Corliss, of this city, succumbed to a heart attack. He appeared to be smitten with a fit of some sort, for he plunged forward and struggled violently with those who ran to his aid before death put an end to the attack. He has been ailing for some time, and domestic worries may—"

I read no more.

WEIRD STORY REPRINTS

*No. 2. Dr. Heidegger's Experiment**

By NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

THAT very singular man, old Dr. Heidegger, once invited four venerable friends to meet him in his study. There were three white-bearded gentlemen, Mr. Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, and Mr. Gascoigne, and a withered gentlewoman, whose name was the Widow Wycherly. They were all melancholy old creatures, who had been unfortunate in life, and whose greatest misfortune it was that they were not long ago in their graves. Mr. Medbourne, in the vigor of his age, had been a prosperous merchant, and had lost his all by a frantic speculation, and was now little better than a mendicant. Colonel Killigrew had wasted his best years, and his health and substance, in the pursuit of sinful pleasures, which had given birth to a brood of pains, such as the gout, and divers other torments of soul and body. Mr. Gascoigne was a ruined politician, a man of evil fame, or at least had been so, till time had buried him from the knowledge of the present generation, and made him obscure instead of infamous. As for the Widow Wycherly, tradition tells us that she was a great beauty in her day; but, for a long while past, she had lived in deep seclusion, on account of certain scandalous stories, which had prejudiced the gentry of the town against her. It is a circumstance worth mentioning, that each of these three old gentlemen, Mr. Medbourne, Colonel Killigrew, and Mr. Gascoigne, were early lovers of the Widow Wycherly, and had once been on the point of cutting each other's throats for her sake. And, before proceeding farther, I will merely hint, that Dr. Heidegger and all his four guests were sometimes thought to be a little beside themselves; as is not unfrequently the case with old people, when worried either by present troubles or woful recollections.

"My dear old friends," said Dr. Heidegger, motioning them to be seated, "I am desirous of your assistance in one of those little experiments with which I amuse myself here in my study."

If all stories were true, Dr. Heidegger's study must have been a very curious place. It was a dim, old-fashioned chamber, festooned with cobwebs and besprinkled with antique dust. Around the walls stood several oaken bookcases, the lower shelves of which were filled with rows of gigantic folios and black-letter quartos, and the upper with little parchment-covered duodecimos. Over the central bookcase was a bronze bust of Hippocrates, with which, according to some authorities, Dr. Heidegger was accustomed to hold consultations, in all difficult cases of his practise. In the obscurest corner of the room stood a tall and narrow oaken closet, with its door ajar, within which doubtfully appeared a skeleton. Between two of the bookcases hung a looking-glass, presenting its high and dusty plate within a tarnished gilt frame. Among many won-

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** From "Twice-Told Tales", by Nathaniel Hawthorne.*

derful stories related of this mirror, it was fabled that the spirits of all the doctor's deceased patients dwelt within its verge, and would stare him in the face whenever he looked thitherward. The opposite side of the chamber was ornamented with the full-length portrait of a young lady, arrayed in the faded magnificence of silk, satin, and brocade, and with a visage as faded as her dress. Above half a century ago, Dr. Heidegger had been on the point of marriage with this young lady; but, being affected with some slight disorder, she had swallowed one of her lover's prescriptions, and died on the bridal evening. The greatest curiosity of the study remains to be mentioned; it was a ponderous folio volume, bound in black leather, with massive silver clasps. There were no letters on the back, and nobody could tell the title of the book. But it was well known to be a book of magic; and once, when a chambermaid had lifted it, merely to brush away the dust, the skeleton had rattled in its closet, the picture of the young lady had stepped one foot upon the floor, and several ghastly faces had peeped forth from the mirror; while the brazen head of Hippocrates frowned, and said, "Forbear!"

Such was Dr. Heidegger's study. On the summer afternoon of our tale, a small round table, as black as ebony, stood in the center of the room, sustaining a cut-glass vase, of beautiful form and elaborate workmanship. The sunshine came through the window, between the heavy festoons of two faded damask curtains, and fell directly across this vase; so that a mild splendor was reflected from it on the ashen visages of the five old people who sat around. Four champagne-glasses were also on the table.

"My dear friends," repeated Dr. Heidegger, "may I reckon on your aid in performing an exceedingly curious experiment?"

Now Dr. Heidegger was a very strange old gentleman, whose eccentricity had become the nucleus for a thousand fantastic stories. Some of these fables, to my shame be it spoken, might possibly be traced back to mine own veracious self; and if any passages of the present tale should startle the reader's faith, I must be content to bear the stigma of a fiction-monger.

When the doctor's four guests heard him talk of his proposed experiment, they anticipated nothing more wonderful than the murder of a mouse in an air-pump, or the examination of a cobweb by the microscope, or some similar nonsense, with which he was constantly in the habit of pestering his intimates. But without waiting for a reply, Dr. Heidegger hobbled across the chamber, and returned with the same ponderous folio, bound in black leather, which common report affirmed to be a book of magic. Undoing the silver clasps, he opened the volume, and took from among its black-letter pages a rose, or what was once a rose, though now the green leaves and crimson petals had assumed one brownish hue, and the ancient flower seemed ready to crumble to dust in the doctor's hands.

"This rose," said Dr. Heidegger, with a sigh, "this same withered and crumbling flower, blossomed five-and-fifty years ago. It was given me by Sylvia Ward, whose portrait hangs yonder; and I meant to wear it in my bosom at our wedding. Five-and-fifty years it has been treasured between the leaves of this old volume. Now, would you deem it possible that this rose of half a century could ever bloom again?"

"Nonsense!" said the Widow Wycherly, with a peevish toss of her head. "You might as well ask whether an old woman's wrinkled face could ever bloom again."

"See!" answered Dr. Heidegger.

He uncovered the vase, and threw the faded rose into the water which it contained. At first, it lay lightly on the surface of the fluid, appearing to imbibe none of its moisture. Soon, however, a singular change began to be visible. The crushed and dried petals stirred, and assumed a deepening tinge of crimson, as if the flower were reviving from a deathlike slumber; the slender stalk and twigs of foliage became green; and there was the rose of half a century, looking as fresh as when Sylvia Ward had first given it to her lover. It was scarcely full-blown; for some of its delicate red leaves curled modestly around its moist bloom, within which two or three dewdrops were sparkling.

"That is certainly a very pretty deception," said the doctor's friends; carelessly, however, for they had witnessed greater miracles at a conjuror's show; "pray how was it effected?"

"Did you never hear of the 'Fountain of Youth,'" asked Dr. Heidegger, "which Ponce de Leon, the Spanish adventurer, went in search of, two or three centuries ago?"

"But did Ponce de Leon ever find it?" said the Widow Wycherly.

"No," answered Dr. Heidegger, "for he never sought it in the right place. The famous Fountain of Youth, if I am rightly informed, is situated in the southern part of the Floridian peninsula, not far from Lake Macaco. Its source is overshadowed by several gigantic magnolias, which, though numberless centuries old, have been kept as fresh as violets, by the virtues of this wonderful water. An acquaintance of mine, knowing my curiosity in such matters, has sent me what you see in the vase."

"Ahem!" said Colonel Killigrew, who believed not a word of the doctor's story; "and what may be the effect of this fluid on the human frame?"

"You shall judge for yourself, my dear Colonel," replied Dr. Heidegger; "and all of you, my respected friends, are welcome to so much of this admirable fluid as may restore to you the bloom of youth. For my own part, having had much trouble in growing old, I am in no hurry to grow young again. With your permission, therefore, I will merely watch the progress of the experiment."

While he spoke, Dr. Heidegger had been filling the four champagne-glasses with the water of the Fountain of Youth. It was apparently impregnated with an effervescent gas, for little bubbles were continually ascending from the depths of the glasses, and bursting in silvery spray at the surface. As the liquor diffused a pleasant perfume, the old people doubted not that it possessed cordial and comfortable properties; and, though utter skeptics as to its rejuvenescent power, they were inclined to swallow it at once. But Dr. Heidegger besought them to stay a moment.

"Before you drink, my respectable old friends," said he, "it would be well that, with the experience of a lifetime to direct you, you should draw up a few general rules for your guidance, in passing a second time through the perils of youth. Think what a sin and shame it would be, if, with your peculiar advantages, you should not become patterns of virtue and wisdom to all the young people of the age."

The doctor's four venerable friends made him no answer, except by a feeble and tremulous laugh; so very ridiculous was the idea, that, knowing how closely repentance treads behind the steps of error, they should ever go astray again.

"Drink, then," said the doctor, bowing. "I rejoice that I have so

well selected the subjects of my experiment."

With palsied hands, they raised the glasses to their lips. The liquor, if it really possessed such virtues as Dr. Heidegger imputed to it, could not have been bestowed on four human beings who needed it more wofully. They looked as if they had never known what youth or pleasure was, but had been the offspring of nature's dotage, and always the gray, decrepit, sapless, miserable creatures who now sat stooping round the doctor's table, without life enough in their souls or bodies to be animated even by the prospect of growing young again. They drank off the water, and replaced their glasses on the table.

ASSUREDLY there was an almost immediate improvement in the aspect of the party, not unlike what might have been produced by a glass of generous wine, together with a sudden glow of cheerful sunshine, brightening over all their visages at once. There was a healthful suffusion on their cheeks, instead of the ashen hue that had made them look so corpse-like. They gazed at one another, and fancied that some magic power had really begun to smooth away the deep and sad inscriptions which Father Time had been so long engraving on their brows. The Widow Wycherly adjusted her cap, for she felt almost like a woman again.

"Give us more of this wondrous water!" cried they, eagerly. "We are younger,—but we are still too old! Quick,—give us more!"

"Patience, patience!" quoth Dr. Heidegger, who sat watching the experiment, with philosophic coolness. "You have been a long time growing old. Surely, you might be content to grow young in half an hour! But the water is at your service."

Again he filled their glasses with the liquor of youth, enough of which still remained in the vase to turn half the old people in the city to the age of their own grandchildren. While the bubbles were yet sparkling on the brim, the doctor's four guests snatched their glasses from the table, and swallowed the contents at a single gulp. Was it delusion? Even while the draft was passing down their throats, it seemed to have wrought a change on their whole systems. Their eyes grew clear and bright; a dark shade deepened among their silvery locks; they sat around the table, three gentlemen of middle age, and a woman, hardly beyond her buxom prime.

"My dear widow, you are charming!" cried Colonel Killigrew, whose eyes had been fixed upon her face, while the shadows of age were flitting from it like darkness from the crimson daybreak.

The fair widow knew, of old, that Colonel Killigrew's compliments were not always measured by sober truth; so she started up and ran to the mirror, still dreading that the ugly visage of an old woman would meet her gaze. Meanwhile, the three gentlemen behaved in such a manner, as proved that the water of the Fountain of Youth possessed some intoxicating qualities; unless, indeed, their exhilaration of spirits were merely a lightsome dizziness, caused by the sudden removal of the weight of years. Mr. Gascoigne's mind seemed to run on political topics, but whether relating to the past, present, or future, could not easily be determined, since the same ideas and phrases have been in vogue these fifty years. Now he rattled forth full-throated sentences about patriotism, national glory, and the people's right; now he muttered some perilous stuff or other, in a sly and doubtful whisper, so cautiously that even his own conscience could scarcely catch the secret; and now, again, he spoke in measured accents, and a deeply deferential tone, as if a royal ear were listening to his well-turned periods. Colonel Killigrew all

this time had been trolling forth a jolly bottle-song, and ringing his glass in symphony with the chorus, while his eyes wandered toward the buxom figure of the Widow Wycherly. On the other side of the table, Mr. Medbourne was involved in a calculation of dollars and cents, with which was strangely intermingled a project for supplying the East Indies with ice, by harnessing a team of whales to the polar icebergs.

As for the Widow Wycherly, she stood before the mirror curtsying and simpering to her own image, and greeting it as the friend whom she loved better than all the world beside. She thrust her face close to the glass, to see whether some long-remembered wrinkle or crow's-foot had indeed vanished. She examined whether the snow had so entirely melted from her hair that the venerable cap could be safely thrown aside. At last, turning briskly away, she came with a sort of dancing step to the table.

"My dear old doctor," cried she, "pray favor me with another glass!"

"Certainly, my dear madam, certainly!" replied the complaisant doctor; "see! I have already filled the glasses."

There, in fact, stood the four glasses, brimful of this wonderful water, the delicate spray of which, as it effervesced from the surface, resembled the tremulous glitter of diamonds. It was now so nearly sunset, that the chamber had grown duskier than ever; but a mild and moonlike splendor gleamed from within the vase, and rested alike on the four guests, and on the doctor's venerable figure. He sat in a high-backed, elaborately-carved oaken armchair, with a gray dignity of aspect that might have well befitted that very Father Time, whose power had never been disputed, save by this fortunate company. Even while quaffing the third draft of the Fountain of Youth, they were almost awed by the expression of his mysterious visage.

But, the next moment, the exhilarating gush of young life shot through their veins. They were now in the happy prime of youth. Age, with its miserable train of cares, and sorrows, and diseases, was remembered only as the trouble of a dream, from which they had joyously awoke. The fresh gloss of the soul, so early lost, and without which the world's successive scenes had been but a gallery of faded pictures, again threw its enchantment over all their prospects. They felt like new-created beings, in a new-created universe.

"We are young! We are young!" they cried exultingly.

Youth, like the extremity of age, had effaced the strongly marked characteristics of middle life, and mutually assimilated them all. They were a group of merry youngsters, almost maddened with the exuberant frolicsomeness of their years. The most singular effect of their gayety was an impulse to mock the infirmity and decrepitude of which they had so lately been the victims. They laughed loudly at their old-fashioned attire, the wide-skirted coats and flapped waistcoats of the young men, and the ancient cap and gown of the blooming girl. One limped across the floor, like a gouty grandfather; one set a pair of spectacles astride of his nose, and pretended to pore over the black letter pages of the book of magic; a third seated himself in an armchair, and strove to imitate the venerable dignity of Dr. Heidegger. Then all shouted mirthfully, and leaped about the room. The Widow Wycherly—if so fresh a damsel could be called a widow—tripped up to the doctor's chair, with a mischievous merriment in her rosy face.

"Doctor, you dear old soul," cried she, "get up and dance with me!" And then the four young people laughed louder than ever, to think

what a queer figure the poor old doctor would cut.

"Pray excuse me," answered the doctor, quietly. "I am old and rheumatic, and my dancing days were over long ago. But either of these gay young gentlemen will be glad of so pretty a partner."

"Dance with me, Clara!" cried Colonel Killigrew.

"No, no, I will be her partner!" shouted Mr. Gascoigne.

"She promised me her hand, fifty years ago!" exclaimed Mr. Medbourne.

They all gathered round her. One caught both her hands in his passionate grasp,—another threw his arm about her waist,—the third buried his hand among the glossy curls that clustered beneath the widow's cap. Blushing, panting, struggling, chiding, laughing, her warm breath fanning each of their faces by turns, she strove to disengage herself, yet still remained in their triple embrace. Never was there a livelier picture of youthful rivalship, with bewitching beauty for the prize. Yet, by a strange deception, owing to the duskiness of the chamber, and the antique dresses which they wore, the tall mirror is said to have reflected the figures of three old, gray, withered grandsires, ridiculously contending for the skinny ugliness of a shriveled grandam.

But they were young: their burning passions proved them so. Inflamed to madness by the coquetry of the girl-widow, who neither granted nor quite withheld her favors, the three rivals began to interchange threatening glances. Still keeping hold of the fair prize, they grappled fiercely at one another's throats. As they struggled to and fro, the table was overturned, and the vase dashed into a thousand fragments. The precious Water of Youth flowed in a bright stream across the floor, moistening the wings of a butterfly, which, grown old in the decline of summer, had alighted there to die. The insect fluttered lightly through the chamber, and settled on the snowy head of Dr. Heidegger.

"Come, come, gentlemen! — come, Madam Wycherly," exclaimed the doctor, "I really must protest against this riot."

They stood still and shivered; for it seemed as if gray Time were calling them back from their sunny youth, far down into the chill and darksome vale of years. They looked at old Dr. Heidegger, who sat in his carved armchair, holding the rose of half a century, which he had rescued from among the fragments of the shattered vase. At the motion of his hand, the four rioters resumed their seats; the more readily, because their violent exertions had wearied them, youthful though they were.

"My poor Sylvia's rose!" ejaculated Dr. Heidegger, holding it in the light of the sunset clouds; "it appears to be fading again."

And so it was. Even while the party were looking at it, the flower continued to shrivel up, till it became as dry and fragile as when the doctor had first thrown it into the vase. He shook off the few drops of moisture which clung to its petals.

"I love it as well thus, as in its dewy freshness," observed he, pressing the withered rose to his withered lips. While he spoke, the butterfly fluttered down from the doctor's snowy head, and fell upon the floor.

His guests shivered again. A strange chillness, whether of the body or spirit they could not tell, was creeping gradually over them all. They gazed at one another, and fancied that each fleeting moment snatched away a charm, and left a deepening furrow where none had been before. Was it an illusion? Had the changes of a lifetime been crowded into so brief a

space, and were they now four aged people, sitting with their old friend, Dr. Heidegger?

"Are we grown old again, so soon!" cried they, dolefully.

In truth, they had. The Water of Youth possessed merely a virtue more transient than that of wine. The delirium which it created had effervesced away. Yes! they were old again. With a shuddering impulse, that showed her a woman still, the widow clasped her skinny hands before her face, and wished that the coffin lid were over it, since it could be no longer beautiful.

"Yes, friends, ye are old again," said Dr. Heidegger; "and lo! the Water of Youth is all lavished on the ground. Well,—I bemoan it not; for if the fountain gushed at my very doorstep, I would not stoop to bathe my lips in it;—no, though its delirium were for years instead of moments. Such is the lesson ye have taught me!"

But the doctor's four friends had taught no such lesson to themselves. They resolved forthwith to make a pilgrimage to Florida, and quaff at morning, noon, and night from the Fountain of Youth.

Just a Whiff of Mignonette
Was the Ghost in This Tale

The FURNISHED ROOM

By
O. HENRY

This sweetest and most pathetic of ghost stories will be published in next month's WEIRD TALES as the third in the monthly series of "Weird Story Reprints."

O. Henry rarely turned his pen to occult subjects, but when he did so he achieved his best work. This touching short story of suicide and spirit return takes rank as one of the very finest of his tales.

In WEIRD TALES for September

On Sale at All News Stands August First

The GRAVEYARD SKUNK

By Harry Harrison Kroll



Author of "Fairy Gossamer" and "Bloody Moon"

OUT in the hills of Mississippi a superstition exists among the negroes that a certain species of skunk is a cross between a spirit and a polecat. The skunk inhabits graveyards, old deserted barn lots, and sometimes may be found denned up in the dilapidated buildings of abandoned sawmill sites; but for the most part it clings to the gruesome companionship of moss-grown tombs and sunken graves. The blacks call it the graveyard skunk, and some maintain that it feeds upon the dead, although no negro ever fooled around one long enough to discover exactly the sort of food it does eat. It's a bad sign, the blacks say, even to look at one, or be caught meeting it in the road. Unless the hoodoo is broken by some superstitious ritual, the formula of which they never divulge to a white man, the one meeting the graveyard skunk is doomed to die within the year.

But the average catalog of fur houses has a different tale to tell about the graveyard skunk. It is listed under the name of "Mississippi skunk," and the quotation attached to the description and habits and methods of trapping says "$125 up." The description adds that in color the little animal runs from a dark brown to black, sometimes, but not often, with two inches of white tip at its tail. It is the white tipped pelts which command the premium contained in the word "up" in the quotation. Of the half dozen pelts sold in the open market last season, one brought more than $1,000.

Had any one asked Pete Springer about the graveyard skunk, he would have told still another story about it, and one interesting enough. He would have said that the Mississippi skunk is a beautiful animal, exceedingly rare, wonderfully gentle, and of no little economic importance, could it be raised in any numbers. Its food is mostly snakes and rats, although at times it eats eggs and young chickens, and even quails and whippoorwills, these birds being ground nesters. But usually it eats snakes and rats. He would have said that it lives in graveyards no more than any wild animal does that has found out the tendency of humans to stay away from these localities of nights, and the consequent security.

But he wouldn't have told any more, nor would he have shown his skunks. How many he had, what he did with the pelts, whether he raised many or few, how he took care of them—these were details that the

queer little man never mentioned. People used to badger him, and try to tease him into telling something about his fad, but he never opened his mouth. The niggers might have been right, after all, about the graveyard skunk, for only one who had associated with something uncanny like them could have been like Pete Springer. He was small and insignificant, like a skunk; he had a funny way of twisting his mouth instead of answering back in words, and he never stayed around people any longer than he had to.

When he was found dead in his little cabin off the dusty road in the fall of the year, just at cotton-picking time, it was the buzzards sitting on the roof that announced his passing. The neighbors—the hardiest of them—took him to Mt. Zion Baptist Church, out in the piney woods, and buried him. There was little found in his room. A pine bed, with a lumpy, musty mattress; two old hide-covered hickory chairs; a few clothes; a stove and some cracked dishes—that was all. The whole perhaps was worth less than ten dollars.

They found no skunks, although it was reputed about the countryside that Pete had raised a lot of them and kept them hidden in strange places about his cabin. They found no money, although he was supposed to have been somewhat of a miser. Nor did they find any evidence of how he came by his death. Murder, with robbery as a motive, was suggested, and this explanation appeared reasonable; but the body showed no marks. A horse doctor living down the road advanced the theory that the cause was heart failure, and this became the accepted explanation.

SPRINGER and his curious ways might eventually have become a local tradition, practically forgotten except by old settlers who like to spin queer yarns, but for the fact that Mose Sloss, a plantation negro, returning from church one night by the short cut along the edge of Mt. Zion burying ground, found himself fearfully wool-gathered by a little animal that crossed his path at the corner of the graveyard. At first he fancied it was a possum, and licking his chops in anticipation, he broke down the rusty barbed wire supposed to protect the burying ground and started in pursuit. Probably nothing but a possum, or maybe a tender young frying-size chicken, would lead a nigger into a graveyard at night when the moon is low and dim. Anyway, Mose was not dangerously close to any graves, for the yard contained several acres, and most of the dead slept over on the other side.

Just as he came out into a little opening in the broom sedge, where he was certain he could knock the possum in the head with a pine knot, he saw his horrible error. It was not a possum at all, but a white-tipped graveyard skunk! And it was headed right toward the new red mound where Pete Springer was laid away.

Mose removed his hat and released the brakes. He overtook (so it was reputed) a flivver going in his direction, and ran over two calves, and fell, his tongue lolling out like an ox's, at the front step of his white man yelling like a madman. His story was pried out of him, and after that the plantation blacks caught a screech owl and made a poultice of its meat and feathers, and applied it to the lower end of Mose's backbone, and managed to break the hoodoo. Two of the white boys belonging to the family for which Mose worked, went to the graveyard that very night, and while they found tracks and a small burrow into the grave, they could find no white-tipped Mississippi skunk.

The black's story had its effect, however. People began to talk. They recalled a great many things which otherwise would never have been

thought of again. Springer did have money. He had a great deal of it. For one thing, he often did odd jobs, picked cotton, piddled about, traded and trafficked, and so on. With no one but himself to take care of, he must have saved this money, for certainly he never spent any of it except for a very few clothes and the barest of food. For years he had been doing this, and he must have hoarded up a thousand dollars. And certainly he must have sold the pelts of his skunks, for he trapped a good deal up and down the creeks in the winter, and shipped these, and when he got the returns from the post office, in form of checks, he went off thirty miles to Clarkesdale to cash them. Somebody went to the trouble, while this talk was going the rounds, of visiting Clarkesdale, and there at one of the banks they found that Pete did have an account, and that he had taken out all his money—more than five thousand dollars—a week before he was found dead.

When this information came to light, the breath of talk became a cyclone. There could be no doubt now. The poor cracked fellow had been killed and robbed.

But here the folks interested in the matter stood baffled. Suppose Springer had been murdered and robbed? What difference, so far as catching the murderer, did this make over his having died a natural death? For nobody had the remotest idea how to go about running the guilty person down. Not a soul could devise a single scheme, or point the finger of suspicion at a single person. Everyone in the community was known to everyone else; every man had lived in it from his babyhood up; mostly they were good, honest, hard-working poor folks; those who were not honest and hard-working were too lazy to be mean. No one, so far as anybody could think, ever spent any time with Springer; had any grudge against the poor crank. Nor did a soul in the community give evidence of possessing five thousand dollars—or five hundred, for that matter. Certainly, on the face of things, a man who had that much money in his possession would forget presently and spend a few dollars of it. That was human nature. And nobody in the Mt. Zion settlement had the indiscretion to draw suspicion to himself by spending any unusual amount of money, either at the cross-roads stores, or with the catalog houses.

WHEN the matter was about to be dropped again, for sheer lack of clues, Uncle Benny Whittle, a sometime trapper of renown, but now retired from active service, had an idea.

"I used to know something about these yer graveyard skunks," he said meditatively. "Lemme see, now. In my day they didn't fotch no hunnerd to a thousand dollars a hide. I thought I war doing a hellish business when I sold one fur five. But now lemme see. The old folks used to tell me that this yer skunk could be tamed, and hit would foller hit's moster jist like a dog—would take up with a body, and stick through thick and thin, jist like a dog. And folks used to say the skunk would sometimes take up with strangers—sorter stray off, like a pup will at times. Now, I dunno whether thar's any truth to this or not. But if there is, then the skunk that nigger Mose seen like as not was going back to Springer. And the man that killed Springer must have visited thar often enough to find out a good deal about him—whut he done with his money, how much he had, and things like that."

The group that was listening to the old man around the store stove wagged their heads in approval of this reasoning.

"Follow that skunk," concluded the old man. "That thar skunk

knowed Springer, and that thar skunk knows the man that killed him!"

A murmur of approbation went round the group. A man rose—Dave Vickers—and withdrew himself, but nobody paid any attention to the fact. He had wagged his head along with the rest, and murmured as loudly as any other; besides, he had a shrewish wife, and never clung about the stove late of nights.

Three of the men, Miles Wilkes, Sam Cobb, and Martin Spinks, who had trapped a little themselves in their younger days, borrowed a lantern from the storekeeper and set off down the road to Mt. Zion burying ground.

"Old Uncle Benny ain't as crazy as some folks says he is," observed Spinks. "If the old man had started out sooner in life, he mout have become a grand detective. We'll go look at Springer's grave, and see what's gone of that skunk. Then we'll trail that bird, we will."

They emerged presently from the pine timber into the drab expanse of graveyard. They put out the lantern now. Craftily—for they knew the timid way of wild things—they pushed along the sodded ground to within eye-shot of the mound. Their eyes were keen, and they could see the small round spot of black against the lighter tone of soil that marked the mouth of the burrow. In spite of themselves they had made considerable noise, and in a moment were able to see the faintest movement at the opening. A dim form presently emerged into the open.

"I' grannies, thar she is!" whispered Wilkes.

"S-s-s-h!" cautioned Spinks. "The durned thing's going to take a stroll. Fellers, we'll foller it!"

"We'll shore have to do some keerful trailing, then. I never in *my* life tried to trail a skunk with the expectation of hit keeping in the direction it started off on. But we can try. Nothing like making an attempt."

THE little animal moved off through the tall grass, and the men followed as stealthily as they could. The evening was cloudy, but a full moon drifted out occasionally, and in this wise they were able to keep within sight of the skunk. Whether it knew that it was being followed the men could not determine. Anyway, as they well knew, it was a pet, and likely it did not object seriously to the surveillance.

After leaving the broom sedge in the graveyard, it got into the big road, keeping mostly along the side, in the dusty grass. Whenever there was a rail fence to follow, its natural instinct must have told it to utilize this protection, for it went in and out of the lower rails, gracefully, leisurely. The general direction was that of the cabin where Springer had lived, and the men were quick to see this. Now they were not so disturbed about losing momentary sight of the varment, for clearly it was on its way home. After passing through a section of mixed hardwood and pine timber, the skunk, still followed craftily by the three men, emerged in the open stretch of road by which Springer's cabin stood. And, truly enough, the tiny beast went in at the gate, across the yard, and disappeared in the rear, where were located the smoke house, hen roost, and stables and crib.

In goose file the three crept silently across the yard in the animal's wake. They were able to discern where it went in and out of the rear by way of the paling fence, for certain wide spaces between the individual pickets were worn smooth, besides having a faint odor of musk; but the polecat itself they had lost sight of. They could not decide which building it had gone under, although, as well as they could make out, it was in the

habit of occupying none in particular, but just any one that happened to suit its fancy.

"Reckon we'd better not try to skeer it out," reasoned Wilkes. "But I tell you whut we kin do: we kin git down here in the shadow of the crib and wait a while, and see whut happens. Skunks prowl around a lot, and apt as not it'll be out purty soon, and then mebbe we kin trail it a little farther. I ain't well read up on polecats, but I think they is apt to be in several places the same night."

They acted upon this suggestion, and entered the little-used crib, where a load of hay gave them a comfortable rest, while they could at the same time command a general view of the skunk's stamping grounds. They had not been settled very long before a sound smote upon their ears—the footfall of a human. The moon was hidden completely at the moment, and the outside was almost black; they could hear the oncoming steps, but could make out no form in the gloom. Then, with the characteristic suddenness of the moon on speckled nights, the world brightened, and the men inside the crib saw Dave Vickers.

"Whut the—" began Cobb.

"Shut up!" whispered Spinks.

VICKERS stood for a minute or two at the palings, peering over toward the cribs and outbuildings. Then he came into the lot by way of the rickety gate. Here he stopped again, scanning the ground, especially at the base of the building. He, too, was looking for the skunk.

He did not wait long. Presently the animal came out from under the crib where the three men lay in the hay, and ambled in a friendly manner over to Vickers, while the man was looking in another direction; and, not unlike a spoiled cat, it gently rubbed its bowed back against Vickers' overalls legs. The fellow gave a grunt, which turned immediately into a curse. In an instant the polecat had leaped back under cover. Some sure instinct told it that Vickers, who evidently had been a friend until this moment, was such no longer.

At the same instant it appeared that Vickers realized his mistake and set about rectifying it by an assumption of gentleness.

"Come yer, Cutie, Cutie!" he called. "Come on out, Cutie. I ain't goin' to hurt you." He added an enticing whistle.

But the skunk remained under cover. For some minutes Vickers called and wheedled patiently, occasionally making a round of the crib, but Cutie was not to be taken in by these wiles. Presently Vickers lost his temper and changed his tactics from mild to violent. He gathered old cobs and clods from the petrified bottom of an old pig pen and began a bombardment under the crib calculated to dislodge the hardiest varment that ever found a refuge. He cursed loudly and eloquently; the men within could see that he was perspiring freely, although the late October night was frosty.

At the end of a half hour Vickers gave up in disgust. With a farewell heave of a pine knot under the floor, he went off toward the yard gate, but with occasional backward looks over his shoulder to see if perchance the polecat might not emerge.

The animal did just this. While Vickers was still lingering at the gate, the little beast sidled out from under the crib and maneuvered slantwise in the general direction of the man. Its manner was that of a fawning kitten, although it was observing the utmost discretion by hoisting its white-tipped tail high in the air and keeping within leaping distance of some of the lot buildings. When Vickers saw it, and fell back upon his gentle methods, it continued cautiously to go forward; but immediately the man showed the faintest intention of approaching it, the skunk shot back under the floor.

The curious drama began all over. Vickers raged and swore, and getting a fence rail, prodded vehemently under the building.

"I'll git you, by God, if it takes me till sundown Monday-a-week!" he cursed. "You think you're going to foller me and tell off on me! I'll show you. I wisht to the devil I had thought to fetch my gun! I'd mess you up in short order then."

He went round and round the crib, prodding and pulling and hauling. The men inside were hard put to keep from being found, for the cracks were large, and once Vickers peered through one of them to see if by any possibility the skunk had crawled inside. But being intent upon the polecat, he could not see so large a thing as three men in a pile.

After a long interval, exhausted by his efforts, Vickers rested, then started away again. He waited at the gate for a minute, then went around the corner of the house, the shadows of the pecan trees and china-berry brush swallowing him up.

"I reckon now's a good time fer us to clear out of here," suggested Spinks. The others agreed.

They crawled out of the hay, stretched their cramped legs, and one after another drew themselves through the battened window to the ground. As they did so, they saw a tiny form disappearing through the paling fence in the wake of Vickers.

"It's follering him, shore as sin!" whispered Spinks.

None of them gave voice to the thought which entered their minds simultaneously. With one accord they became immediately silent and crafty, and set swiftly but silently in pursuit. When they emerged out of the front gate, still clinging within the denser gloom of the tree-shadows, they could see, far down the road, the belligerent form of Vickers. The fellow had seen the skunk, and was swearing vividly again, and beating the adjacent clumps of bushes with sticks and chunks and pine knots.

When he was satisfied that he had routed the pestiferous animal, Vickers started off again. Spinks and Cobb and Wilkes drew in the slack distance between themselves and him. The pursuit continued without event for a half mile. Here, in a strip of timber that crossed the road, they heard Vickers begin swearing again; then a clatter in the brush and tall weeds. By dodging from one tree to another, the three observers were able to get close enough to the scene to be obliged at times to dodge Vickers' shell-fire. But still blinded by the mote, he could not see the beam; so they watched with intense interest. Vickers was beside himself now. In his frantic efforts, he once or twice got almost near enough to the skunk to dash out its brains, but each time the agile animal sidestepped, ducked behind a log or into some brush, and saved itself.

"I'll git you, I'll git you, if it's the last thing I do!" Vickers kept saying over and over. He was almost weeping now. "I'll kill you, I will! I'll git my gun, and then you'll foller me, I reckin!"

He set off at a dead run, and when he was safe out of sight, the three started after him. They had lost sight of the skunk, but they were certain it would appear again. So they trailed Vickers until they reached his house, over on the ridge; and here they concealed themselves in the cotton beside the road and waited. In a few minutes a serene shadow flitted along the gray thread of sandy road. The skunk was still on the job.

VICKERS reappeared on his doorstep after a short time, shotgun in hand, and scanned the yard and road. Presently he went to the gate, bending an eager eye in the direction he had just come. The three men in the cotton could see that he was agi-

tated, trembling, still beside himself, and muttering under his breath.

Diagonally across the road from them stood a skinned-pole cotton house. An arm of timber from a swamp growth stuck up the slope to its rear, and they began watching this spot, certain that the skunk had taken to its cover. Vickers was also watching the same place; he now came out of the gate and went tip-toeing in a lumbering fashion along the road sand in that direction. He carried his gun in readiness, and when the moon suddenly shone forth, the watchers had a vivid impression of his distorted, determined face, with a strange fleck of slobbers at the sagging lower lip. Besides being worried about the possible consequences of this trailing, for he knew that old Uncle Benny Whittle's suggestion was going to be acted upon, he must have been troubled by the saying of the negroes that the graveyard skunk is a cross between a spirit and a polecat. The three men in the cotton had heard the odd superstition all their lives; they would not have denied a certain amount of credence in it. Under the stress of his fear and guilt, Vickers, they knew, believed that he was being pursued by Pete Springer's ghost, which had crept into this infernal pest to trail him to justice.

Suddenly the frosty night was shattered with an explosion of the shotgun. They saw, while yet the echoes went up and down the timber runs and water course, Vickers stagger back with the rebound of the buckshot load. In an instant the polecat showed itself, unhurt and apparently not sorely frightened, around a clump of brush on the side of the cotton pen opposite Vickers.

The chase began again, Vickers loading as he made the round. He shot a second time. His aim being wide, he commenced to curse in frantic oaths, and lunged desperately to and fro in the futile way of a madman. At last the polecat leaped from under cover and started off across the road into the yard. It was in the act of passing through the palings when Vickers discovered it. He came from behind the cotton house with staggering determination, and the gun belched forth its contents. The three men rose as high as they dared to see what had happened; they saw the skunk make a leap forward, then drop into its almost placid amble. It was unscathed.

The moon came out now in a long patch of clear sky. The yard and cabin and surroundings were white and brilliant. Vickers had dashed around the house, with the evident intention of heading off the skunk when it came out from under the floor on the rear side. The gun rang out again. Then all was silent. The three men waited. A minute went by; two, three, finally ten. The night was as soft and silent and peaceful as a dream.

They stretched their legs, making tentative plans to come out of the cotton and see what had happened. After assuring themselves that it would be safe to creep out of the cotton patch, they crouched low, got into the road, kept within the shadow of the pickets—scant protection though it was—and finding nothing to hinder, worked eventually to the rear of the house.

A dark hulk lay upon the ground half way beneath the back steps and door of the smokehouse. There could be no doubt of what had happened. While they stood at the fence looking upon the conclusion of the tragedy, they saw the polecat creep out from under one of the lower rotten logs of the smokehouse, go over and sniff at the silent form, circle about it two or three times, then trot quietly out of the yard into the road, and off back in the direction of Mt. Zion burying ground.

A Ghastly Ride With Death

THE LAST TRIP

By ARCHIE BINNS

THE driver congratulated himself on having only one more trip to make that night. It was nearly 11:30 when he brought the long-backed car up to the bus station on Pacific Street and let his passengers out. When he got back to Lewis he would turn in for the night. And it was high time.

A group of men stood waiting at the edge of the curb, and almost as soon as the bus had been emptied it was full again. Butler looked around. Eight men occupied the eight places in the tonneau.

"One more for the emergency seat, and we're off," he thought. And while he was thinking it, the ninth man came to the curb and took the seat beside him.

"That's the way to get passengers," he told himself as he took up the fares. "Just the right number and no waiting." It was something that had never happened before in his long experience as a driver.

In less than a minute after arriving, he was jockeying the long-backed bus out through the traffic. He climbed the H Street hill, gathered speed on the lever and slipped into the overdrive without disturbing the clutch.

It was a dark, windless night and there was nothing to see but the pool of headlights on the road. In the darkened tonneau eight passengers sat like shadows without speaking, nodding slightly with the motion of the car. Beside the driver the ninth man looked steadily and silently into the darkness. Butler was annoyed.

"Anyone would say that I was driving them to a funeral," he thought.

The light in the last house slipped by and they rushed on between the dark walls of scrub pines that bordered the road. And no one had spoken a word.

"What a gang of passengers!" he breathed to himself.

Suddenly the buzzer vibrated through the silence. And for some reason the man at the wheel started.

"Driver, I want to get out here," a voice called from the darkness of the tonneau.

Obediently he put his feet on the pedals and brought the bus to a full stop with the hand brake. A man climbed out and disappeared into the blackness.

"The devil," the driver thought as he started on; "I never saw a crossroad here!"

Again the big car whined along in the overdrive. And not a word had been spoken except by the man who had gotten out. A nice party!

Three minutes later the buzzer broke through the silence.

"Driver."

Again his feet reached for the pedals.

"I want to get out here."

The car came to a stop, a man got out, closed the door; and they rolled on.

"Is there any place for that man to go?" Butler wondered. "Anyway,

it was too dark for him to see where we were."

A SMALL car, traveling rapidly, hummed by. And in some way it gave him a feeling of relief. He glanced back. In the moment of light he saw the six remaining passengers in the tonneau, sitting like so many shadows, nodding slightly with the motion of the bus. When the other car had passed, the night and the road seemed darker and uglier than before.

Hardly a minute later he started again at the harsh noise of the buzzer.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

The same voice, and the same blackness of scrub pines. As the man got out, the driver put his head into the darkness and looked about. There might or might not have been some trail through the woods. He could not see.

He used the throttle a little more.

"It may be some game that they are up to," he told himself. "But if they want to rob me, why do they get out before they have their money's worth out of their fares?"

Now the bus was fairly swallowing up the road.

"Half an hour more of this and we're—"

B-r-r-r! The buzzer again.

"Driver, I want to get out here!"

Butler did not put out his head to look this time. It seemed safer not to. Besides, he knew that there was no crossroad of any kind. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at the man beside him in the emergency seat.

"Is he in this, too?" the driver wondered. "Why can't he say something?"

But the fellow was still looking out into the darkness, without ever having moved his head.

"What a cursed, black road," he muttered inside his chest. When the buzzer growled again he started violently because he had been listening tensely.

"Driver, I want to get out here," he mimicked to himself. And his skin prickled all over when the words were repeated, in exactly the same tone, from the darkened tonneau.

The fifth man got out. Butler drove on and did not look around. Without being fully conscious of it, he was driving faster than he had ever driven before. The lightened car rocked as it plunged on over the road.

"Why is it that the fewer there are, the more scared I am?" he wondered.

He listened intently for the buzzer, nearly starting out of his seat at the first harsh vibration.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

And the sixth man disappeared into the blackness of the pines, where there was neither house nor trail. The two remaining men in the back of the car were silent as shadows. In the emergency seat the other man had never moved nor turned his head.

"I wish we could meet some more cars," the driver thought. He put on the brakes as the buzzer snarled again.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

The repeated sound of the buzzer and the voice was maddening. Again he stopped between the ugly walls of darkness, letting the seventh passenger out.

"Seven from nine makes two," he told himself as the bus lunged on. "If they start anything, I might be able to handle the two of them. If only the one beside me would turn around, or get out, or say something!"

And the long car shot rocking through the darkness, with only the driver and the one shadow in the great tonneau, and the man who was looking intently into the blackness of pines and the night. Butler gript the wheel and felt his hair prickling on his head. The one in the back was moving about. Perhaps he was reaching for the—

B-r-r-r—!

The buzzer seemed attached to his nerves, racking them with its harsh vibrations.

"Driver, I want to get out here."

It was spoken in the same tone that the others had used. But each time it was repeated it became more hateful and uncanny.

He let the eighth man out.

"Good-night."

"What!" the driver exclaimed. The two words had startled him unbelievably.

THE door had no sooner closed on the empty tonneau than the car was in motion again. Why had he started so when the man said "good night"? Passengers often did that. But spoken by the last of the eight, the words seemed to have a strange meaning.

"Eight from nine makes one," he reassured himself, slipping into the overdrive again. "But who is the one, and what is he up to?"

As if in answer, the man in the emergency seat took a deep breath, like a sigh, and turned from studying the darkness. It was a face that the driver had never seen before, smooth and pale, with dark, luminous eyes. The man folded his arms over his breast and spoke for the first time.

"How far is it to the Woodland Cemetery?"

Butler started violently and pressed the throttle.

"Five miles." Then he added, "We're having a nice ride, aren't we?"

The passenger laughed:

"Ha ha! You are driving fast, Mr. Butler."

He flinched at the weird sound of the laughter mingled with the rush of the car; and the mention of his name made him tremble. Because he felt that he must do or say something, he observed: "Well, better introduce yourself, since we are riding together."

"If you wish," was the cool reply. "My name is Death."

"I didn't quite get it."

"Death!"

The bus driver put his feet on the pedals.

"This has gone far enough to suit me," he thought.

"Better not," the man beside him remarked. "Do you see anything under my elbow?"

In the dim light that was shed from the instrument board he made out the muzzle of an automatic pistol, protruding slightly from under folded arms.

"As you like," he agreed. "Where were we? Your name is Death, I believe. I suppose that is why you are going to the cemetery."

"Exactly, that is why we are going to the cemetery."

The driver felt a horrible chill coming over him.

"*We?* I didn't know I was invited."

"You were invited when I planned this ride."

"So you planned it, eh, with the others getting out along the road?"

"Exactly, so that we could go alone."

The passenger began tapping on the foot-boards with his feet, keeping time with the swaying car. Butler tightened his grip on the wheel, shivering and snarling like an animal in a cage.

"If you are Mister Death, then it's the cemetery for you. But you might tell me what's the idea of taking me along. By God!" he burst out; "if you carried a scythe, as you are supposed to, instead of that pistol, I would take a chance on seeing if we both went there!"

"Death has tricked people before," the passenger observed coolly. "And hadn't you better think a minute and

see if there isn't a reason for your going there?"

"What the devil are you driving at? What have I done?"

"You should remember."

"Remember what?"

The driver's heart pounded so that he could hear it above the roar of the motor; and the car that raced over the road seemed to be standing still in the horrible darkness.

"So you don't remember?"

"No. What is it?"

"How far is it to the cemetery now?"

"About three miles. Why?"

"And still you don't remember?"

"No. Who the devil are you?"

"You have forgotten!" the passenger cried, his eyes shining like those of a cat. "God, I wish I could forget! And you don't even remember!"

"But what is it I don't remember?"

"Listen. When you were a bus driver here in 1918, did you once crowd a woman's car into a ditch?"

"What is that to you?"

"So you did?"

"Yes," the driver admitted sullenly. "What is that to you?"

"What happened to the woman?"

"The car turned over and she died. But who—what was she to you?"

"Everything!"

The passenger stared with mad intentness. Then he continued:

"I would have died long ago if it hadn't been for her. I was blown up and shot to pieces. But I wouldn't die. Then, when I was ready to come home, I heard that you had killed her."

"But it wasn't my fault! I had to keep on schedule. That day—"

He turned his face away from the wild, unnatural light in the man's eyes. Before him there rose the scene that he had never let himself think of since the day it happened: the crowded bus tearing over the road to make up time, the gray roadster pushed to the edge of the ditch by the heavier vehicle, the gasp of the passengers, followed by a shriek that went up and up, as the small car turned over and crumpled, the bus sliding to a stop with smoking brakes, the white-faced passengers crowding round, the delicate, drooping face of the girl, and the blood—blood all over her white dress! The driver pressed the throttle as far down as it would go, trying to get away from the fearful picture.

"So you killed us both. It was too much to stand. They brought back what was left of me, and put me away. I waited my chance until tonight, when I came to find you."

Still the picture floated before his eyes, while the shrieking pierced him through. And this madman or ghost was making him remember every detail.

"How far is it to the cemetery now?"

"A mile," Butler said between chattering teeth.

"Good, we shall be in time!"

THE bus lumbered swiftly down the hill, through the valley, and roared up the other slope, with the passenger beating time to its rhythm. As he neared the crest, the driver saw a faint light in the sky. Soon they would be on the open flat, in sight of the cemetery—

"Quick, how far is it now?"

"A quarter of a mile."

His staring eyes were ready to burst and the hair bristled on his head. The drooping face, the blood all over the white dress, and the shrieking, filled his eyes and ears.

"If I can only get past without stopping," he repeated to himself.

The black iron fence came in sight; the dim gravestones flitted by like ghosts. Just ahead, at the bend in the highway, the dark gateway of the cemetery rose against the sky. If he

kept on the road at that turn, he would be safe in sight of the lights of the town.

Butler winced fearfully as the car rocked over an unevenness of the road. The dark arch of the gateway seemed to draw his eyes toward it, like a magnet.

"We are here!" the passenger cried, rising in his seat.

The wheel twisted in the driver's hands, and the long-backed car careened and banked sharply. Then it plunged toward the cemetery, where the white gravestones stood waiting, row after row, like ghosts, to welcome his arrival.

One side of the stone entrance leapt up before the car. And at the moment of the crash that sounded to the sky, there was a wild, triumphant burst of laughter, either from the mad passenger—or the dead who were waiting.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

By JOHN KEATS.

(Reprint)

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
  Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge is withered from the lake,
  And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
  So haggard and so woebegone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
  And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
  With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheek a fading rose
  Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
  Full beautiful, a faery's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
  And her eyes were wild.

I set her on my pacing steed,
  And nothing else saw all day long;
For sideways would she lean, and sing
  A faery's song.

I made a garland for her head,
  And bracelets too, and fragrant
    zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
  And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
  And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
  "I love thee true!"

She took me to her elfin grot,
  And there she gazed and sighed
    deep,
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—
  So kissed to sleep.

And there we slumbered on the moss,
  And there I dreamed, ah! wo be-
    tide!
The latest dream I ever dreamed
  On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
  Pale warriors, death-pale were they
    all;
Who cried—"La belle Dame sans
    merci
  Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starved lips in the gloam
  With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
  On the cold hill side.

And this is why I sojourn here
  Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from
    the lake,
  And no birds sing.

THE VULTURE of PIGNON



by W. J. Stamper

Author of "Lips of the Dead" and "Fidel Bassin"

IT WAS in that season of the year when the blistering tropical sun had singed the grassy plains of northern Haiti to a sickly yellow, when all the waterholes about the isolated village of Thomassique were but stagnant and malaria-breeding pools, and all the cattle had slunk away to feed along the green stretches of the Artibonite River some twenty miles distant, that Captain Felix, commandant of the town, realized he must get a message through to Hinche and request medicine, for more than half of his command was suffering from malaria and he anticipated an attack of the Cacos at any time.

He accordingly sent for Corporal Levenz, one of his bravest and most dependable men, who he believed could carry out this hazardous mission if it lay in the power of mortal man.

Presently Levenz entered and stood at salute before his superior.

"The time has come," said the captain in a worried tone, "when we must have more men and medicine. I must tell you that in sending you to perform this mission, I send you into a seething nest of Cacos, where death will be lurking behind every bush, every stone, and by every watering place. Take two men with you and deliver this message to General Fauche at Hinche. Read it over carefully and commit it to memory so that if capture seems imminent you can cast it away. If Norde were aware of our present straits he would lose no time in attacking."

It was written on a faded leaf of paper. The corporal read it:

General Fauche, Commandant of Hinche:

Half my command unfit for duty with malaria. Norde, the Caco chief, reported to be at Cerca-la-Source. Expect attack at any time. Send quinine and three squads at earliest practicable date.

FELIX.

"How soon can you bring me an answer?" asked the captain as the corporal finished reading.

"Before sunset of tomorrow," Levenz replied, "if my horse does not fail me"; and he smiled just enough to show the gold tooth which he, as a true Haitian, considered his most excellent ornament.

"That is all. Good luck," said Felix, as the corporal tucked the message into the inner pocket of his blouse and hurried away to prepare for the journey.

It was 4 o'clock of that afternoon when the three horsemen, dusty and tired, rode down the yellow banks of the Artibonite. As they drew rein and dismounted beneath a giant cottonwood, they were not aware that now, as all day, their every move had been seen and noted by the wary scouts of Norde. After drinking of the cool waters and washing their begrimed faces, Levenz and one trooper stretched themselves upon the ground in the shade for a nap, while the other sat down near by as a sentinel, with his carbine in the hollow of his arm.

Through the vines and shrubbery not fifty yards from the guard, dark and sinister forms glided noiselessly from cover to cover, and in their crouched circlings drew nearer and nearer to the trio. The flashing and murderous eyes of these black minions of Norde gleamed exultingly at the three carbines and the bulging bandoleers of ammunition. This capture would be a wonderful stroke for their chief, who each day felt the necessity of procuring more serviceable arms and ammunition before he could make his long desired attack upon Thomassique.

The sentinel, exhausted by the journey and attacked by that failing so common to the Haitian, the urge to fall asleep in the sun, forgetting that the lives of his comrades and the safe arrival of the message rested entirely upon his vigilance, at length laid his rifle aside, and instantly fell into a heavy and senseless slumber. This was exactly what the scouts had anticipated, and like two lithe, black panthers they stalked the victim. Now they were crouching above the guard. There was the bright flash of the deadly machete lifted high, a sickening, crunching noise, and the hapless sentinel lay a bloody, gurgling corpse, with his skull cleft to the chin.

In spite of the noise of the blow, Levenz and the other trooper still slept. But they were soon aroused by kicks and curses, to find themselves disarmed, bound and looking up into the flashing eyes of the Cacos, those brutes whom they hated and feared. They well knew the truth of that vague tradition among the Federal soldiers, that at some remote period a squad of troopers had been trapped, captured, led away to the mountains, and but one had returned to recount a horrible tale of torture and death at the hands of Norde, better known as the Vulture of Pignon.

With the legs of their prisoners securely bound beneath the bellies of the horses, they mounted behind them with the carbines and precious ammunition and hurried away toward the lair of their chief, leaving the dead trooper to the tender mercies of the bristly wild boars that roam the banks of the Artibonite in the dry season of the year.

The sun had disappeared behind the gaunt and jagged peaks of Mamon, and long, ominous shadows cast their gloomy forms through the deep and pathless vales. It was the fall of a Haitian twilight, filled with the strange and creepy sounds of the wild and boundless mountains, the sharp chirp of the night birds, the bray of the burros, the dismal and reverberating call of the conch-horn as it summoned back to camp those great black sentinels who guarded all approaches to the lair of the Caco chieftain. By day, every peak for miles beyond the precincts of the camp had shown the restless pacings of silent watchers, but with the fall of night all were called in except a single mounted post of four men stationed in the center of the one narrow gorge that made access to the camp possible during the hours of darkness.

There was a sound of approaching hoofbeats in the thickening dusk, and the sharp command of the sentinel rang out as he blocked the passage.

"Halte! Qui vous?"

"Caco, Caco," came the answer.

The sentinel stood at the ready, with his finger on the trigger, as he ordered: *"Avanz!"*

The sergeant of the watch had stepped outside from the lean-to of bark at the sounds of the voices, and his dark face took on a look of pain and fear, but he uttered no word, as he recognized the bound form of Levenz, a comrade of other days when the two had soldiered together under La Falais at Chardonierres. They had been as brothers for years until the sergeant had been forced to flee and join the Cacos because he had incurred the displeasure of his captain. As he motioned the sentinel to pass the party, there was sorrow in his heart, for he knew the hatred entertained by Norde for captives from the Federal army. He was in high favor with his chief, and he resolved to intercede on behalf of his friend.

The party passed on and arrived at length at the main camp. The prisoners were hurried to a small adobe hut and thrust roughly into a dark and foul-smelling room while the scout in charge made his way to the shack in which the great chief had his headquarters.

NORDE, a great gaunt ape of a man, sat behind a rude table signing some papers for distribution among the peasantry for the purpose of attracting recruits to his standard. He stroked his bearded jowl with one hand, and his face was wreathed in a cruel and sinister smile as he muttered to himself: "I shall sleep in Thomassique within the week, or Norde is a lamb."

At this instant he lifted his shaggy head and saw the scout standing in the doorway, holding the carbines and bandoleers.

"Great work, Baquet!" he exclaimed. "Where did you make the haul?"

The scout explained the happenings of the day and on finishing handed him the crumpled message taken from Levenz.

Norde read the note and as a horrible purpose took root in his blood-reeking soul he said: "Men sick. Reinforcements. Norde at Cerca-la-Source. Old Felix shall have an answer, but it shall be penned by the Vulture of Pignon."

He smiled evilly.

"Baquet, fetch the prisoners," he commanded, and the scout passed out.

Presently he re-entered, and the two troopers stood before the man they feared more than the wild beasts of the mountains.

"Ahem! A corporal," chuckled Norde. "How go things at Thomassique, my fine lad of the gold tooth? How many men has Felix all told, sick and well?"

"I joined only the day before I was sent to carry the message," lied Levenz, "and could not say, sir. I heard rumors that a large patrol of our troops was operating in the vicinity of Cerca-la-Source, but how many were in the patrol I could not say, as they had been sent out before I arrived."

"How soon did your captain expect an answer to this message?" Norde questioned as he unfolded the paper.

"I told him I would bring back an answer before sunset of tomorrow," replied Levenz, and a cold chill stole up his back as he noted the sinister smile of his questioner.

Norde sat for a full minute in deep thought. Could the prisoners have seen behind the veil of that blood-ridden brain, they would have smothered with horror.

At length Norde spoke, and there was a tone of sarcasm in his voice.

"I respect that soldier who can tell his chief that he will carry out orders with the utmost speed and does carry them out. You shall spend the night

in the camp of the Vulture of Pignon and, unless your horse fails you, you shall carry back an answer before sunset of tomorrow, as you promised. I am indeed sorry to detain you over night but I believe you may be of some interest to my followers, many of whom you know, I am sure."

As Norde finished speaking there was noise and bustle outside in the camp, and he led the two prisoners to the door.

FIRES were burning in a dozen places, and around them in hunched circles sat every type of human being that inhabits the plains and mountains of northern Haiti: shriveled old men, smoking long pipes; dirty old hags with stringy and matted hair falling tangled over their bare shoulders; dirty children, both male and female, whining and tugging at their mother's ragged skirts. Some of the women were bolting huge slabs of beef down their skinny throats, others were holding a sort of bowl to their lips and shoveling or raking a greasy mixture of beans and tallow into their mouths. All Haitian generals carry a great troop of camp followers, and Norde was no exception to the rule.

The fires flung bright lights far up against the dark crags of the mountains and played over the black and yellow faces of the Cacos. Everyone sprang up as the guttural and commanding voice of Norde rang out.

"Assemble, Army of Mamon, for we have visitors tonight, and they wear the uniform of that rascal La Falais."

They surged about their chief, uttering oaths and curses as they saw that in fact the prisoners were dressed in the garb of the Federal army.

"Bid Campan David come here," Norde ordered.

A loud and prolonged cheer went up from the whole crowd, for they knew what it meant when their leader sent for Campan David—a night of merrymaking, a night of bloody torture, and a morning sun blazing upon the drunken and stupefied bodies of every man and woman in camp.

Presently there came writhing through the multitude an awful and disgusting form. It was Campan David, the notorious voodoo priest, the demon who sat by day in his unspeakable filth and vermin, and planned every cursed form of torture the brain of a beast could devise.

He was tall and skinny, bare to the waist, his body greased with the foul-smelling sheep tallow. His black face was drawn and emaciated. Each cheek, and his forehead, showed a splotch of white paint. His bloodshot eyes, wildly rolling, seemed seeking a victim to be rent and destroyed, and he grinned like a demon as he spied the prisoners. Two decayed and yellow fangs protruded from beneath his bestial lip. Around his long and flabby neck he wore a string from which dangled and rattled a score of human teeth; and some of the teeth had gold fillings in them. As no men of the North had fillings of gold in their teeth except Federal soldiers sent from Port-au-Prince, the story of a squad that had died at the hands of Norde came back to the helpless prisoners with certain and awful truth. From his waist down Campan David wore a sort of skirt, made from the untanned hide of a bull, killed but two days before, and the stench from that green and disgusting thing was horrible. The tail of the bull dragged along behind and was still full of mountain burs.

On arriving before Norde, he lifted high above his head his black and grease-smeared arms, shrieking with a shrill voice: *"AI-ai-ai-ai."*

As his accents slowly fell and swung into a singsong chant, everyone stood with bowed head.

Finally he addressed Norde.

"Most noble chief, Campan David has come. What does his Excellency desire?"

"We have here, holy Campan," answered Norde, "two of the soldiers of La Falais, the man who has stolen away Haitian liberty. It is my wish that the sacred rites be performed and that their blood be spilled in retaliation for the lives of those of our number who have fallen before the bullets and bayonets of the Federal soldiery."

"It shall be as you say, worthy chief," replied the festering beast.

A LARGE circle was formed, in the center of which was placed a smooth white stone. At a word from Campan, a half dozen Cacos seized the prisoners, ripped off their clothing and bound them hand and foot to two posts near the stone. Dozens and dozens of gourds were brought, many of them holding as much as four gallons of taffia, or white rum. The fires leaped higher and higher as great loads of brushwood were piled on by the expectant Cacos. When all were seated a bull was led sniffing into the center of the circle where Campan and Norde stood beside the prisoners. At the direction of the priest one of the blacks plunged a bayonet into the bull's chest, just behind its left foreleg. There was a slushing sound and it sank quivering to its haunches. Its throat was opened and Campan caught the blood in a gourd, uttering as he marked the glazing eyes and throbbing stream, that weird and awe inspiring chant: *"AI-ai-ai-ai."*

As the bull rolled over on its side and its head flopped against the ground in death, the priest dipped his long finger in the blood, stooped over the smooth white stone and made a cross, while the chant went on in measured beat. He then poured some of the thick blood into each of the other gourds of taffia and stirred it up with his grimy hands as all the Cacos looked on and longed for the signal to throw that terrible mess down their throats.

All was ready for the night of debauchery and death. The liquor must go the rounds before the torture began.

"Summon the third relief from its post," ordered Norde. "No enemy will come tonight. Federal soldiers do not march when they have malaria and are commanded by such a spineless pig as old Felix. Not one of my men shall miss this rare treat.

"Drink to the sack of Thomassique and the torture of our enemies," he yelled as he lifted a gourd with both hands to his black lips.

Like thirsty dogs the whole multitude gulped down the loathsome liquid and cheered: "To the sack of Thomassique and the torture of our enemies."

At this moment the third relief arrived, and the sergeant, after making his way through the crowd with great difficulty, stopped with downcast face before the Caco chief.

"Excellency," he began, "I have served you long and faithfully. I carried you wounded and bleeding from the field of Anses-à-Pitre when you were about to fall into the hands of La Falais. I have stood by you always and in everything. I come now to ask of you a small favor. Spare this corporal the terrible torture at the hands of Campan David. If he must die, strike him down mercifully with sudden death, for he is a brave man and deserves a better fate."

"That the Vulture of Pignon should see that day," stormed Norde, as his black face twisted in anger, "when his most trusted sergeant should come forth to plead the cause of a Federal soldier, in opposition to that torture demanded by the sacred rites of voodoo!"

"It is but a little thing I ask, Excellency, and I ask it in the fair name of justice, than which there is nothing more sacred."

"No more of his sacrilegious prattle!" broke in Campan David, as he strode nearer with the rotting and putrid bull-hide flapping against his bony knees. "He is a traitor, to thus seek to defeat the holy mandates of voodoo. The great chief has asked that the sacred rites be performed. Let the sergeant's blood also stain the holy stone lest the great and powerful gods of our religion forbid the consummation of that scheme dearest to the heart of our leader. A sad day it is when a puny and prating sergeant presumes to dictate to his chief."

Norde, his beastly brain beclouded by the stupefying taffia and maddened by Campan's intimation that unless the sergeant's blood were shed the heathen gods would defeat his long-cherished desire of capturing and sacking Thomassique, jerked his heavy machete from his girdle and slashed down upon the sergeant's shoulder a terrible and crunching blow. All the leaders and bones were severed. The left arm and part of the side were sheared off. The heart and left lung were plainly visible as the victim sank to the ground with a choking sob. As he lay quivering and bleeding on the sand, Campan stooped, dipped his talonlike finger in the reddening pool and made another cross on the smooth, white stone.

Again went up that weird and hair-raising chant from the priest: *"AI-ai-ai-ai."*

The fiery liquor went the rounds a hundred times. The tomtoms began their doleful and measured beat. The yelling and drunken Cacos, blood-mad, swayed around the prisoners to the awful sounds of the death march. The prisoners stared blankly at the miserable scene and awaited the inevitable end. The red flames leaping up from the fires disclosed a fearful sight, worse than hell itself. The corpse still lay twitching and gaping in the bloody sand alongside the stiffening bull.

THE time had arrived for the human torture. Norde and his imps of Satan sat down and hunched themselves in a circle where they could see every move of the torturer. They grinned and cursed, uttering drunken words of approval as Campan selected a flaming firebrand.

He approached Levenz brandishing the fatal brand and his wild eyes gleamed with hatred as he broke into the chant: *"AI-ai-ai-ai."*

He thrust forward the blazing point and placed it against the bare stomach of the victim. It sank slowly into the sensitive tissues, through and into the intestines with crackling and frying sound. Levenz bit his thin lips till the blood ran out and trickled down his bare and heaving chest. A man with less fortitude and endurance would have died instantly before this ghastly ordeal. The brand was withdrawn, leaving a cavernous and charred hole. The same process was followed with the other prisoner. He screamed with mortal agony. His body convulsed. A shiver ran through him. He moaned and was dead. When the priest saw that death had come, he leaped forward like a madman and clawed the dead face with his talons till the blood oozed out and wet his fingers; then he stooped and made a cross on the smooth, white stone.

The gourds were refilled, emptied, and the dance began once more to the beat of the tomtom, while Levenz stared on the ghastly scene with fast-glazing eyeballs, bulging out and then receding into their sockets.

They danced and yelled in their drunken fury till, exhausted, they began to fall, one at a time, upon the ground. Old hags of women with

their bushy hair flying in the wind leaped up and down till they were hoarse from screaming, dropped down in huddled heaps and snored. At length no one remained on his feet except Campan and Norde, who staggered around holding each other's hands.

Finally they reeled up to Levenz, and they saw he still breathed. Campan picked up a rough stone, smashed out the gold tooth that had showed so plainly when the corporal last spoke to his captain, and fastened it to the string about his neck. He swiped his hand across the bleeding mouth of the victim, reeled over to the smooth stone and made such a splotch with his bloody hand that all the crosses were blotted out in one solid stain of red. Then he sank down to snore in his rotting bull-hide, while Norde, with yet a little of his cursed reason left, staggered away to execute the other dastardly deed he had planned in his more sober moments.

MIDNIGHT came, and the fires burned themselves down into heaps of white ashes; and after hours of silence, broken only by the snores and moans of the drunken beasts, the sun blazed up over the eastern mountains, and a horse, the horse of Corporal Levenz, loosed by the hands of the Vulture of Pignon, sped down the silent gorge and flew like the wind across the seared plains toward the Artibonite.

The day was far spent when Captain Felix, shading his eyes with his hands, gazed long and anxiously to the northward for the first signs of dust that would betoken the return of his patrol and an answer to his message. It was now late, but he felt the answer would come, for Levenz had said he would bring it before sunset, and Levenz had never disappointed him.

A cloud of dust suddenly became visible far out the trail and then the figure of a horse. Onward it came. But what was that the captain saw? The horse was riderless, and as it stopped before him, panting, foam-flaked and dusty, he noticed that it carried only a *macout* or double bag.

With trembling hand he lifted the flap and drew forth a loathsome, gory and ghastly thing—a human head!

It was the head of Corporal Levenz. The gold tooth was gone, but between the others there was tightly clenched a message, an answer; and there was a signature: *"The Vulture of Pignon."*

And the sun went down.

Note.—"Jean Beauce," another of W. J. Stamper's tales of the Black Republic, will appear in WEIRD TALES *next month.*



A Solemn Pact Between Two Artists Caused One of Them to Become a Murderer

Wolfgang Fex, Criminal

By HOWARD ELSMERE FULLER

DE FLEAR is dead (thank God! his death at least has been accomplished), and cruel iron bars separate me from the trees, the flowers, the singing birds and the soft Italian twilight; for having been charged with the murder of René de Flear, I have been found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. That I encompassed his death, I have never sought to conceal. My statements, even before the grim tribunal, were said to be strangely free from subterfuge and dissimulation. The trial was brief—indecently brief; my counsel could adduce no precedent to sustain his earnest plea for extenuation. And I was led from the ghastly whitewashed halls through hosts of curious spectators to the condemned cell where I lay for many days in a drowzy stupor.

Everything had been so sudden, so diabolically well-ordered, that my reason must have been temporarily deposed when the cataclysm swept into the quiet lives of de Flear and me.

Why should the world so concern itself with our motives and methods? We had asked nothing of it save forbearance—permission to live, to toil, to pass our lives in our own way, unhampered by the arbitrary decrees of a giddy society. I was bitter against the world—bitter against the contemptible minions of the law—bitter against the fell circumstances that had laid bare one tragic act in the drama of our lives.

I have said that we asked only forbearance from our natural enemy, mankind, but deeper introspection reveals to me that which I must have long known. We craved the appreciation that we felt was due to our prodigious labors in the province of art.

For de Flear and I were ardent painters—obscure, if you will; but we painted with a soul-excoriating fervor and an interpretative bodying forth of life as we had lived it that were calculated to secure our canvases to immortality. I have but scant patience with the man that stoops to belittle his work. It is as great an offense for a man to underestimate his ability as it is for him to overestimate it. Had we not thought our work meritorious, consistency would have required us to abandon it years ago. But we had not abandoned it; and our pictures have been exhibited in salon and gallery, far and wide, over two continents.

And we consorted with each other, de Flear and I. We painted; and we dwelt in squalor—in a dwarfing poverty. We painted, but we scorned to let the covetous vulture of poverty prey upon our genius. It may lacerate and tear the flesh, but it shall not feed upon the soul. But then, what does sear the tender soul and cause the life to go from it as from the severed flower? It is the poisonous breath of smug critics and the venomous indifference of an ignorant and unappreciative public.

Fame is but a handful of star dust thrown by the gods upon the decaying bones of mortals to stay the ravages of time a little longer. I would not draw one breath for fame. Wide distinctions exist between fame and greatness—greatness, rooted in the knowledge of self, fructifies in the accurate interpretation thereof. Fame, unlike greatness, does not necessarily follow noble works. Unless a work of art pierces the very soul of the beholder and stirs to life sweet and gentle emotions, long latent and dead, its creator is a dumb and bitter failure. Childhood must feel its little pulse quickened, and its gayety, for the moment, tempered; youth —virile, effervescent youth—must feel the calm of sobriety and the weight of life; age must soften with reminiscence, and wander anew in the labyrinth of memory.

It is strange.

Four years ago tomorrow, de Flear called me to the studio from the chamber where I had retired for the night. As I entered, he was pressing home a tiny hypodermic needle in his thin blue-dotted wrist, from which he had pushed the sleeve of his ragged and color-bedaubed smock.

"Fex," he said, laying down the needle, "observe the canvas on yonder easel. It is ready for the first painting. It shall be my masterpiece. It will be the last picture I shall ever paint."

De Flear was a remarkably handsome man. His brow was high, white, and blue-veined; his hair, suffered to grow without restraint, fell in curling masses upon his shoulders. But poverty had not failed to leave its acid marks on his countenance. It was drawn, emaciated and thin. His nose, high cut and delicate, and his lips, perfectly chiseled, sea-shell pink and full, were pre-eminently those of the artist. There was a wanness and a fragility in the feminine grace of his hands that spoke of his ultra-sensitiveness.

Somewhat bewildered by his speech, I regarded him with more than my usual curiosity.

He was speaking again.

"Fex," he said, opening a drawer in the table at his side, "I cannot live unless I paint."

Laying a small silver-mounted stiletto on the table, he continued:

"I have spent years of my life at the easel. I have drained my veins on the palette. My canvases, as well as yours, hang in the galleries with Rembrandt, Velasquez and Murillo. Their color is not inferior to that of Titian; their sweetness, to that of Reynolds; their sublimity, to that of Raphael—yet none has seen that sublimity—that sweetness—that color. None has paused to search for their beauty or to bathe in their serenity. None has striven to draw sustenance from their solidity of conception. The duty of our contemporaries is to the masters; they close their eyes, lest they see meaning in modern art. If it has not been my pleasure to see my art appreciated, it shall be yours."

Here he picked up the stiletto and tapped the keen edge with his forefinger. A sarcastic smile contorted his lips.

"Fex, when I have finished my canvas, I will pose for you with this stiletto buried in my heart."

When I had become cognizant of the full purport of his words, I, who had known the fruitful sources of bitterness such as his, made reply, "As it has ever been, recognition will come with the surcease of the breath: man must lay down his mortality so that his work may take up immortality. And just as we have sacrificed much to put our conceptions on canvas, we must sacrifice all to secure their messages to posterity. After all it is pitifully little to be required of men whom the cosmic spirit has breathed upon. We have known our

joys, our loves, our sweet moments, our ecstasies. We have walked with the gods, even if shadowed by the satyrs; we have bathed our souls in the witchery of color; we have been keenly alive to the magic softness of these moonlit Italian nights. We are the fond apostles of feeling; beauty is our heritage. The gorgeous clouds festooned with flaming tongues of lavender and rose madder, melting into the tranquil purple of the evening sky; the cerulean bosom of the satin sea, like a turquoise stone in an emerald setting mirroring the trembling stars of night or the pearly clouds of burning noon; the sober browns of autumn, the naked blacks and whites of winter, the glistening verdure of spring, the dusty greens and yellows of summer—these are the things that have spoken to our hearts of the glories of the creation. But there is no sunshine that hath not its shade'; the richly endowed and highly susceptible often become the vortex of mighty sorrows. He that is supersensitive to pleasure is perforce supersensitive to pain—the eternal law of compensation, you will perceive, my dear de Flear. With you, I shall become a martyr to art. I shall willingly cast myself, a propitiation, upon her flaming altar, and let my work, unfettered, make its mute appeal to man. Let my immolation be witness to my sincerity."

And so it was.

The solemn pact into which we entered that night provided that immediately following the completion of our next—and final—canvases, one of us should become both suicide and murderer; and the sortilege, which we instituted for the purpose of determining which of us should so function, placed the obligation with me.

THE years passed; we worked fervently and pertinaciously, constantly. Our canvases became living, pulsating symphonies of tone and color. We painted as men enamored of life—as full, buoyant souls whose range of experience comprehended the whole vast universe; whose intuition rivaled that of nature herself. Every detail was studied with an ardor seldom seen in sane men. Conscientious defenders of technique, we strove after balance, detail and accuracy.

At length there came a day, a sweet, sad day in early fall, whose high noon, I perceived, must witness the completion of my last contribution to the field of art. The air was dazzling and crisp in its purity; the sky, steel-gray and lofty; the sea, beauteous as a dream.

De Flear painted for some hours after I had laid in the last bits of color; the shadows were lengthening and a molten sun was fast sinking into the fragile turquoise of the Tyrrhenian before he threw aside his brushes, saying that he was convinced that he could not farther improve his work. He stepped to the window and gazed with loving eyes into the radiant west. Calling me to his side, he said, "Drink in the beauty of the earth, the sea and the sky."

I gazed with a rapturous and unconquerable fascination at the magnificent panorama etched on the western sky. Like a fairy city of opal and alabaster rose majestic clouds from the bosom of the iridescent sea. Many-spired as the Cathedral of Milan, they shot their flaming pinnacles far into the deepening azure of the heavens. Delicate frieze and subtile tracery, scintillating like diamond filigree, surmounted façades of the purest crystal. Swanlike in their stately dignity floated islands of gold on seas of emerald and silver. Voluminous masses of fleecy cumuli, dimpled with many a sheeny grotto, tossed in a haze of dingy ultramarine like ponderous icebergs in an Arctic sea. Grotesque shapes, readily transmutable by the imaginative eye into

demons and behemoths of delirious medieval fancy, stood, silent and pompous guards, before palaces of sapphire and onyx.

Like a lovelorn swain sucking the sweet poison from the lips of a Cleopatra, I longed to revel once—only once—in the unearthly glory of that sunset and to die with its beauty seeping into my soul.

I turned to look at de Flear; he had fallen back a few paces; his face was radiant and godlike.

"Enough," he was saying, "enough, this is the moment. Why tarry?"

The airy sky tapestries of clear lilac and violet were now faded into drab and gray, and the chariots of fire had merged into formless, colorless monstrosities, and the towered castles of amethyst and opal were become distorted masses of dusky pearl; I raised the glittering stiletto, an exquisite product of old Damascus, and pushed its hungry blade deep into the bared and quivering bosom of René de Flear.

The co-ordination of trivial circumstances—how potent, how devastating, how deadly!

There was the half-open door through which my unconventional behavior had arrested the attention of a casual passer-by; then there was the hurling at me of a heavy iron candlestick which he had been carrying, and the bursting of a hoarse cry of alarm from his lips as he flung himself into the room. The missile struck me on the wrist; the stiletto went clattering far away; and in a moment more, my arms pinioned at my sides by brawny hands, I was borne powerless to the floor with the hot breath of my colossal assailant fanning my cheek. The room filled with uniformed champions of law and order, and the corridors buzzed with a curious throng. The fantastic prison cart already stood at the steps, and I was bundled into it amid the coarse shouts of the rabble and the ribald jests of the officers. I but vaguely remember the gruesome details connected with the indictment, the trial and the sentence; I lived through them as in a fatal dream.

I OFTEN pore over these clippings sent me by a friend. The first is a press account of the so-called crime, and runs thus:

All S——— was shocked at the recent perpetration of one of the most brutal crimes in its history. Signor René de Flear, the great painter, was stabbed and instantly killed by one Wolfgang Fex, thought to be also a painter. The tragedy occurred late Friday afternoon in Signor de Flear's apartments, and apparently while he was at work on a canvas. It is evident that Fex shared, or at least worked in, de Flear's rooms, inasmuch as a daub of recent painting with his name attached was discovered by the inspector in charge.

The police were summoned by D———, a fellow lodger, who chanced upon the scene. Fex has been ordered to appear before the tribunal during the latter part of the month.

Other lodgers at the inn claim to have known but little of the habits of the two men, and professional jealousy on the part of Fex is thought to have been responsible for the killing. We are assured, however, that the police, operating with their customary sagacity, will soon discover Fex's diabolical motives.

The other, appearing in *The Journal of the Seven Arts*, is from the pen of H———, the noted art critic.

There is no more sublime a figure in contemporary art—one might almost say, in all art—than René de Flear, the creator of "The Spirit of Poesy."

Working in arrant poverty amid sordid surroundings, which is the usual portion of genius, he has evolved some of the very greatest canvases of all time; and it was while he was engaged on "The Spirit of Poesy" (unquestionably his masterpiece), that the traitorous blade of a fanatical assassin put an end to his brilliant career.

For homogeneity of tone and color, few have approached and none has ever surpassed this masterpiece. There is no conscious—hence artificial—striving after effect. The effect is there—by the grace of God, it is there—but it inheres in the conceptual breadth of the theme. It would have been impossible for de Flear to paint

otherwise than with a sweeping technique. He would have had to labor to obtain pettiness in his style as you or I should have to labor to obtain perfection. That which distinguishes the mere painter from the artist is an innate spirituelle quality, embodying in this instance the allegorical character of the basic idea.

Like a bird, with its eye fixed on the distant cliff, beating impotently against the bars of its cage until it falls, a lifeless thing, on the floor, so did de Flear, aflame with the burden of his lofty fancy, beat against the bars of mortality, intent on bursting from its narrow confines and on doing homage at the shrine of beauty. Apotheosized by his zeal, he wove his own soul into the canvas, there to illuminate the glory of his conception. Whether he succeeded, no one will question.

As I have before suggested, there is much of the tragic surrounding the last days of René de Flear. He was murdered by an insane bigot, Wolfgang Fex, on the very eve of the completion of his greatest picture. To many this must seem a meet conclusion to his unhappy career—for in losing his life, he found it.

NOTE.—This grim last episode in the history of René de Flear will be perennially suggested to art lovers by a mediocre bit in oil, now to be seen hanging in the National Gallery beside "The Spirit of Poesy," and said to have been painted by Wolfgang Fex, the man that struck down in cold blood, the foremost exponent of modern art. Fex has been tried in the Italian courts of justice, and condemned to death. The exeeution is set for November 1.

TODAY I write. Tomorrow my soul will be launched forth into eternity to join those of ages flown. Then I, too, shall become great—greater than my beloved de Flear, because I murdered him.

The REVENGE *of* PHILIPPE AUGUSTE*

By HASAN VOKINE *and* HENRI DE CROUET

WHY do I write this? I suppose it is because we lonely souls must have someone in whom to confide, and so we have discovered a way of confiding in ourselves.

When I was but seven years old, my brother Henri, in a fit of childish temper, caused me to fall from a tree in which we both had climbed. The fall crippled me, not only in a physical sense but in a mental one also. All my fond dreams, all the bright horizon of childhood's ambition, all my hopes, everything became, that day, shattered and ruined.

If I have absorbed a deep hatred of the human race, not on me but on my brother be the blame. At that moment a passion for revenge was kindled, and it has long been smoldering in me. However, imbued with a cunning which only a passion bordering on insanity gives to one, I smiled through it all, told everyone I bore my brother no grudge, and in return was called by all, "brave, cheerful little invalid."

My brother Henri was also bright, and soon it was time for him to go to college at the University of Paris. After graduation he became a lawyer

**Fragments culled from the journal of one Philippe Auguste de Margerac, son of Baron Henri Mauret de Margerac of Ville Niche.*

and acquired a moderate fame in the capital.

As for me, the long years of pain, consciousness of my infirmities and sorrow at my miserable position only served to increase my longing for revenge. I was now able to get up from my bed and hobble about the great expanses of the château. I made use of this privilege to delve into a great deal of old reading matter and books of a morbid sort.

About this time our venerable father died, leaving us only the château and the honor of his name. My brother's success left me undisturbed in the château, and now my favorite haunt is my father's laboratory. Here his magnificent apparatus and chemical library have imbued in me the same love for research work that he once had, but I have specialized intensively on high explosives.

[So far, the incidents in the journal have been undated. At this point, however, they take diary form, and the writer begins with July 17. On this date he tells that he has decided to dismiss the old domestics in order to work in greater privacy. The following week he describes his work on a special cabinet in which he is to conduct his researches. "In it," he says (July 25), "I am free from any outside influences which might foil all my plans. . . It is dangerous work, but I love it because it keeps my hatred of Henri continually in my mind."]

JULY 29. I work, I study, I dream, I laugh. Soon my brother will know how truly I forgave and forgot.

AUGUST 5. The stage is set. After many days of preparation I have created enough suppressed energy to make the halls of De Margerac disappear from the face of the earth. It lies waiting at my command on the floor below. I have sent a telegram to Henri with the news that I am lying in bed with a fever and am on the verge of death. Ah, Henri! You do not know how near we both are to that abyss.

AUGUST 7. This is the fatal day. My brother has wired back that his train will arrive at Ville Niche a few minutes before 8 o'clock tonight.

12:00 NOON. I have spent the morning in reinspecting the stage. My engine of destruction, the largest I have ever created, is connected with the door of my bedchamber. My brother, upon entering and seeing no one in the lower apartments, will ascend to my room, as was his wont in former days to tease his crippled brother. The moment that he enters the room I will leap upon him and sink my yellow fangs into the flesh of his neck. The wretch shall feel those teeth about whose length he has so often taunted me. Are they like the teeth of maniacs? Well, there is something else that is peculiar to maniacs—a never-failing memory.

I will have three of the happiest minutes of my life, and, at the end of the one hundred and eightieth precious second my bomb will have its way.

6:10 P. M. I have wasted the afternoon, laughing by turns, crying by turns, singing and yelling by turns. Food has been the least of my thoughts, but I have bolstered up my courage with some of the best De Margerac vintage.

7:35 P. M. The doom approaching with the night has caused me to break out in a cold sweat. My fury increases.

8:00 P. M. How ominous is the sound of that striking clock which I shall never hear again! It is now but a matter of a few minutes.

8:05 P. M. From my bow window I can see a light slowly approaching De Margerac by the Ville Niche road. It is Gustave, the old sot who runs the cab stand at the station, unconsciously

luring Henri into my web of destruction.

8:08 P. M. I hear the sound of his phaeton rolling over the cobbles of the courtyard. I shall extinguish my candle.

[*The following entry, very illegibly scrawled, has been translated as accurately as is possible.*]

8:09 P. M. Ah, I must stop. . . . Gustave is turning his phaeton. Henri mounts the stair. . . The only three minutes of bliss I have ever experienced are about to be . . . Farewell. The knob turns. . .

AUGUST 8, 4:30 A. M. Here I am five miles from the château. I find myself hiding in the fields and trembling like a hunted beast. Ah! But I have had my revenge. I have not lived in vain.

Contrary to my plans, however, I still live. As Henri opened the door I pounced upon him like a bloodthirsty lynx. I closed my jaws on his scrawny neck and tore at his throat until I was bathed in the warm ooze which gushed from him. He had been too startled to struggle, and my vise-like grip soon overcame him, but he continued to cry out loudly in words that I could not understand. In the darkness it was only possible to feel his body and hear his screams, yet I also imagined that I could see those anguished eyes appealing to me for mercy. To me! Ha! I clawed at them and laughed in glee at his agony.

At that moment, catapulted by a terrific explosion, the room hurled itself into the air, then with a sickening lunge all crashed to pieces with the rest of Margerac. The shock had torn me from my victim and I had been thrown far from the crumbling walls. When I came to I lay sprawled among the wild gorse which I had so often gazed upon from high above.

Something rustled over the cobble stones. It was moved by the wind like a scurrying bird and fluttered at my feet. I stooped to pick it up. There were the pages of my diary to remind me that I had partially failed.

I had had no wish to go on living, once the supreme desire of my life was fulfilled. Without knowing why, I hobbled madly from the hated spot.

AUGUST 9. Wretched God! When is my torment to end? Under what unlucky star was this helpless creature born? Have I ever fulfilled any plan?

I am captured. I am chained in the dirty cell of this Ville Niche court house. Merciful heaven, how much do they know?

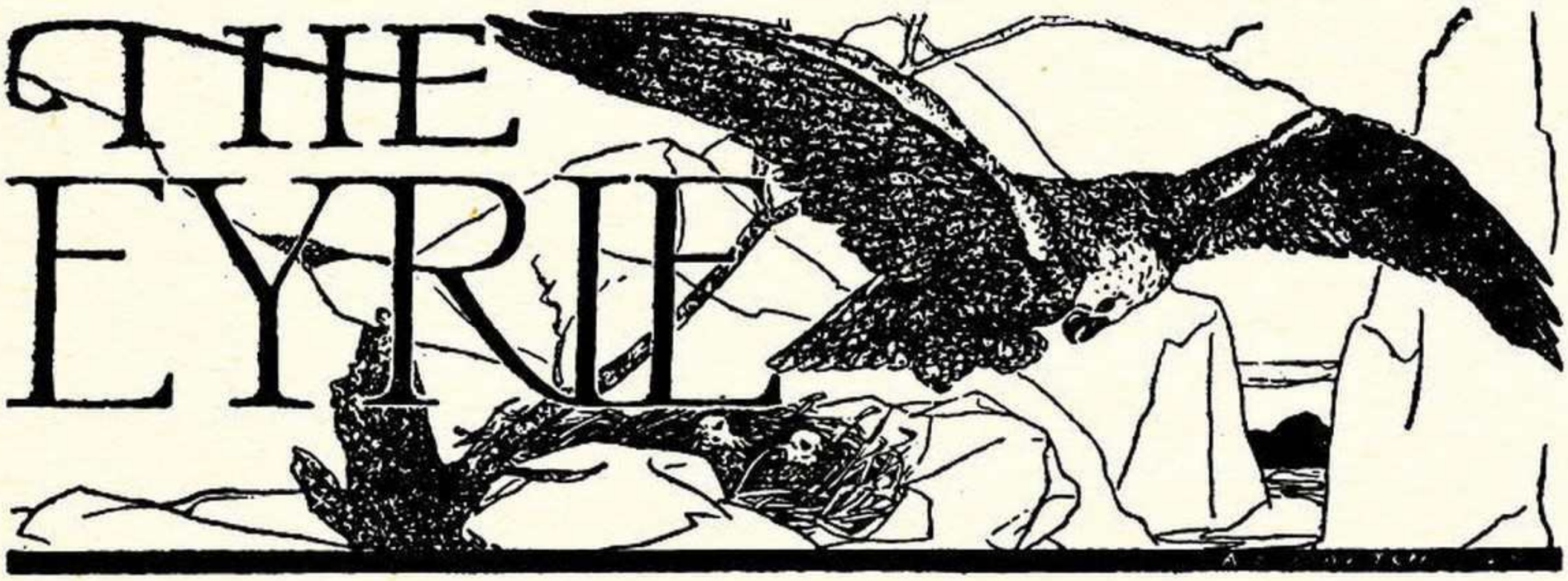
AUGUST 10. Each hour puts another curse upon my life. My jailer has just brought me my bread and half-cooked carrots folded in a page of yesterday's *Figaro*. And here—what is this that I see when I scrape the mess on to my pan? Why do I tremble with terror and then with rage? Simply because this stares up at me:

VILLE NICHE, August 8.—A mysterious explosion here last night ruined the old château of Margerac. Among the ruins peasants found a dead body with the throat and face torn as if it had been attacked by a beast.

The following note was in the man's wallet: "Dear Brother Philippe Auguste: As I am suddenly called to England I shall be unable to reach you as I wired, but I have persuaded my friend, Herr Doctor Schnitzer, an eminent Austrian physician, to give you some of his time. He will arrive on the train I expected to take, and will give you this note. I have spoken to the Herr Doctor about your case and he seems positive that, if you can recover from this probably temporary fever, he will be able to cure your lameness. Accept, dear brother, my most sincere wishes. Henri De Margerac."

This morning the lame owner of the mansion was discovered hobbling around in the fields like a madman. He is being detained while the authorities investigate.

THE EYRIE



NOW that WEIRD TALES has firmly established itself, it is possible (with the help of the readers) to lay out a definite program of even more wonderful stories for the future. The first issue of WEIRD TALES appeared in March, 1923, and the magazine has in its more than two years of existence made many very valuable contributions to literature. Its tales have dealt with the monstrosities of superstitious legend (werewolves. vampires, ghosts, banshees, etc.); with stark horror; strange monsters; cosmic cataclysms and the destruction of the universe; wars between the worlds; weird surgical devices; colossal inventions of the future; and the eternal conflict between evil beings and the forces of good.

Certain stories have been so outstanding that they have called forth scores of enthusiastic letters from the readers; and it is from these outstanding stories and the readers' comment on them that we are enabled to find out just what manner of stories you want. (For this magazine belongs to you, the readers, and it is only by your constant advice and comment that we can know whether you are pleased with the magazine or not.)

In WEIRD TALES under the old management, one of the stories that called forth the greatest enthusiasm was *The Moon-Terror*, by A. G. Birch—a two-part novelette relating how a group of Chinese scientists endeavored to shake the world to pieces by timing the stroke of an electric hammer to coincide with the vibratory period of the earth. This story was so popular that the entire reserve stock of magazines for May, 1923 (which contained the first installment) was sold out on special orders. Such pseudo-scientific stories have ever been popular with you, the readers, if we may judge by the letters received, and we shall print many more of them.

Two other stories that set a standard and are often referred to in the letters to The Eyrie are *The Phantom Farmhouse*, by Seabury Quinn, and *The Rats in the Walls*, by H. P. Lovecraft. Mr. Quinn's story was a fascinating werewolf tale, wherein the werewolf had likable human qualities. Mr. Lovecraft's story was a particularly gruesome tale, superbly told, of devil-worship and underground rites, and a horrifying throwback to ancestral practises of eating human flesh—a tale with a dénouement that was utterly terrifie. Such tales do not grow on every bush, but it is our earnest desire to give you many more such.

The three tales that top the list of popularity in the eight issues of WEIRD TALES that have so far been published by the present régime are *When the Green Star Waned*, by Nictzin Dyalhis; *Whispering Tunnels*, by Stephen Bagby; and *Out of the Long Ago*, by Seabury Quinn. The first is a highly

imaginative tale of warfare between the worlds and the conquest of our planet by evil beings from the dark side of the moon; the second is a tale of medieval devil-worship and encounters with familiars in the tunnels of Verdun after the World War; the third is a werewolf story, a tale of creeping horror, in which a Mohawk Indian fights to the death with a werewolf on a dolmen in Wales.

It was the popularity of Mr. Quinn's werewolf story that led us to feature *The Werewolf of Ponkert,* by H. Warner Munn, in last month's issue. The popularity of *When the Green Star Waned* has caused us to schedule another of Mr. Dyalhis' tales of interstellar spaces for an early issue. Another tale of devil-worship, *The Gargoyle,* begins next month. It is by Greye La Spina. We want to give you, the readers, such stories as you can get nowhere else, stories that break away from the humdrum workaday world; and we cannot know whether we are succeeding unless you tell us.

Write to The Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 408 Holliday Building, Indianapolis, Indiana, and let us know what is your favorite story in this issue. Do you want more horror stories? Or do you want more stress on pseudo-scientific tales, on voyages to other planets, on giant inventions of future ages? Do you like tales of voodoo and witchcraft? Of devil-worship? Of werewolves and vampires? How about a few old-fashioned ghost stories? Let us know what you want, and we will lay out our table of contents accordingly. WEIRD TALES has firmly established itself, and we feel, therefore, that we are filling a very important place in the magazine world; but we want to give you better and better stories with each issue. We cannot be satisfied unless we grow steadily in quality and literary merit of our stories; and this we can do only with your helpful comment.

The readers' favorite story in the June issue was the concluding installment of Greye La Spina's werewolf serial: *Invaders From the Dark;* and this tale was closely pressed for first honors by Paul S. Powers' tale of gigantic spiders: *Monsters of the Pit.*

L. W. Heald, of Osceola, Nebraska, writes: "My friends who have read WEIRD TALES all agree with me that *Invaders From the Dark* is the best story that has yet been published between the covers of the finest fictional magazine on the market. For a while here our magazine dealer got but two copies of WEIRD TALES, and it was always touch and go with us to see who got it first. Now he gets many more, and he has no trouble in selling them, believe me. I enjoy many of your stories, but never before have I so anxiously looked forward to the magazine's coming as I have since this story has been running. I certainly liked the way in which the author concluded it, and the story as a whole held many thrills. It was absorbing and interesting to the last word."

Lieutenant W. J. Stamper, of the Marine Corps, read the May issue on his way to capture the Hawaiian Islands, theoretically held by some foreign enemy, in the recent maneuvers. "I have been very busy," he writes, "but found time to purchase the May issue of WEIRD TALES, which I tucked away in my grip before leaving Frisco. I believe I picked the ideal conditions for reading weird stories. Lying in my bunk, late at night, with the moon peeking through the portholes and no sound save the throbbing of the engines, I devoured every story. That darned creepy thing concocted by Lovecraft, *The Music of Erich Zann,* knocked me flat. My vote goes unqualifiedly for *The Music.*"

Writes George R. Santos, of New York: "I have just finished the concluding chapters of Greye La Spina's unique *Invaders From the Dark,* and

may I tell you that story will hold a space in my memory until the day of my death. The story is tremendously vivid and lifelike, and the death of Sophie Delorme has almost made me cry. Greye La Spina is a wonderful author."

George T. Spillman, of Kent, Ohio, put WEIRD TALES to practical use recently. He is fifteen years old and a senior in high school. "Last week I gave a talk on reincarnation before my classes which astounded the entire high school," he writes. "Ha! most of my information for that talk was gleaned from your story, *Under the N-Ray*, by Will Smith and R. J. Robbins. That's the kind of story I like; let's have more of them. Your page of contents is a veritable Hall of Fame. I have read nearly every magazine on the market, but none is half as high in my esteem as WEIRD TALES, not only because I am a lover of the bizarre, but also for the masterly style the authors employ in the stories you choose. It is not only the most interesting pastime I can imagine, but it is also an education to read your magazine. Many of the authors whose names you are displaying will go down the pages of literary history on a par with Poe. Your ghost stories and your werewolves are so convincing that I almost think I believe in both."

Sidney W. Wright, of Fairmont, West Virginia, writes to The Eyrie: "I like your magazine, and one great revelation, to me, is that there are so many splendid writers appearing in your pages, and yet they are, in a sense, 'unknowns'. It is surprizing how much talent goes unheralded."

Walter Goldstein, of New Orleans, writes: "I am an inveterate reader of WEIRD TALES and up to now have never missed a copy, and have saved all my old copies. I think *Whispering Tunnels* was the best story I have read in years. Still, *The Brain in the Jar* ran it a pretty close second. WEIRD TALES comes up to all my requirements, and if I do say so myself, I am a pretty particular reader."

Junius B. Smith, author of *An Arc of Direction* in the June issue, writes: "I wish to congratulate you on the perfect typesetting of this story. It so frequently happens in all-fiction magazines that errors creep in which mutilate the story, that it is a pleasure to find a story set so well that not even a minor defect greets the eye as it is read. I think the magazine is improving in appearance all the time. The cover on the June number easily catches the eye of one interested in things that are weird."

Frank Belknap Long, Jr., writes from New York: "The June cover grows on me! Ye gods!—I cannot imagine a more gigantic, reddish, loathsome or delicious—but I sputter and go out! Andrew Brosnatch is to be congratulated."

An enthusiastic letter to The Eyrie from Edwin R. Matthews, of Seattle, reads: "I want to tell you how utterly thrilled I was by your Anniversary Number. That man Kline has a wonderful imagination to be able to conceive of such a creature as *The Malignant Entity*, which flowed out of a tub and devoured policemen and then flowed back again. And *The Sunken Land*, by George Bayly, surely is the cat's pajamas for creeping horror—that great forest of octopuslike trees alive with malignant hate is one of the weirdest conceptions I have ever encountered in a fairly wide reading of weird literature. But for out-and-out masterly handling of a rattling good story theme, that very short story by Edith Lichty Stewart, *The Sixth Tree*, has anything I ever read faded to a fare-thee-well. That story is literature, and literature of a mighty high type. For sheer merit the stories in your Anniversary Issue are worth many times over the half-dollar I sent for the issue."

Black Medicine

(Continued from page 166)

out of an army of 35,000, a mere handful returned to tell of the hell through which all had gone? No wonder the hair of the man in the little house was prematurely streaked with gray! A general may be confident when facing flying lead; but what can he do when his men sicken and die in the silent places, untouched by machete or bullet, transferred into gibbering skeletons by the mere presence of black brutes with not a weapon in their hands? With only the vast knowledge of evil tactics possessed by the brain of a single negro who was as elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp!

The officer in the little house came to the door and looked away toward the jungle wall. Chandler saw him beckon to a private soldier who stood just outside. The soldier placed a metal instrument to his lips and, though he could not hear it, Chandler knew that the man was blowing the call which would assemble the soldiers for, startled, they leaped to their feet. The officer raised his hand in a signal and the soldiers began to fall in, in long, ragged ranks. The officer placed his queer-shaped hat upon his head, looked around the jungle once more, turned about and deliberately touched fire to the building he had just left!

The camp was being abandoned! Chandler saw the blacks in the jungle lick their drooling lips with red tongues. Then, with the officer leading, the little army fell into step and marched into the forest, its members scanning the close-ranked trees for signs of the black hordes which they could not see, but which they knew were watching their every step.

The army of Le Clair had begun the first leg of its long journey back to France, to report dismal failure to Napoleon!

Slowly the flagpole, bare now of the flapping tricolor, began to shimmer and grow dim, until it vanished altogether. The flame from the house which the officer had occupied blended slowly with that vaster flame against which the weird picture had been painted by the horrid necromancy of a voodoo priestess. This huge flame divided slowly as the picture vanished, and through it came the figure of the voodoo priestess herself!

CHANDLER blinked his eyes as he saw the blacks seated around him and took in the circle of fires, ordinary fires now, upon a hilltop, with the motionless figure of Chal David in the background, arms akimbo.

The woman spoke again.

"See!" she cried; "see the potency of the black medicine which we of the Green Serpent have created! You have drunk of it and have seen a vision which cannot but inspire you to go and do likewise! The point of the sword of Dessalines is lowering! The medicine is almost perfect—lacking but a single ingredient—"

The woman paused for effect.

"You all know that ingredient," she screamed, "and know that only the blood of a hated *blanc* can complete the brewing of the black medicine—that medicine which is to help us make a new Haiti which shall be a country for followers of the Great Green Serpent, in which there is no room for white masters! Across the border, yet far from the rifles of soldiers, there are white people. One of you will now be chosen to cross that border and return with either a white person or a small portion of that life-giving element which flows in his veins! It shall be a charm against the rifles of the soldiers after

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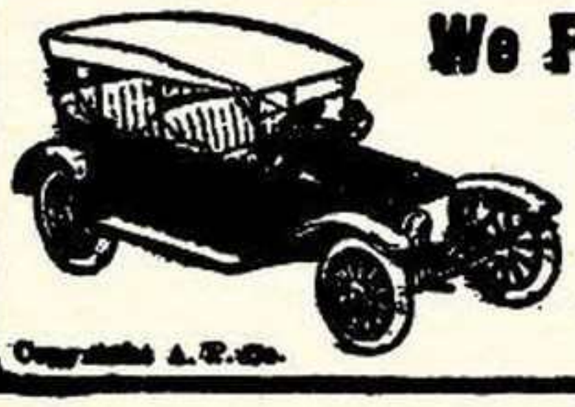
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we have mingled it with our black medicine!"

The woman paused again and Chandler knew that she was preparing to choose her emissary for this ghastly mission. Slowly she looked around the circle of black faces. Her eyes rested at last on the face of Chal David.

"And who," she said softly, "could be more fitted for such a mission than our greatest *Papa Lou?* Chal David is chosen!"

The woman extended her arm, pointing toward the east.

"In that direction lies your pathway, Chal David," she cried. "Go!"

Chal David bowed slightly and turned. Almost instantly his huge form vanished in the shadows as he moved away on his mission. The woman spoke once more before she, too, turned away and walked into the woods:

"Chal David will lead us when we hurl the whites into the Gulf of Gonaives! What more fitting than that he should also furnish the last and necessary ingredient for our black medicine?"

Chandler waited to hear no more. He knew that, did Chal David return, his mission successful, these crazed blacks could be induced to hurl themselves into the mouth of hell at his wish. Chal David must not return! Many lives might depend upon the coolness of Chandler.

He plunged into the woods, circled the bonfires, and set out in the direction taken by Chal David. As he hurried through the night he was glad that he could not know what terrible things had already gone into the brewing of the black medicine—of which he himself had partaken!

4

Some little time was required for Chandler to skirt the camp of the black folk, and by the time he had accomplished the feat, Chal David had been gone about ten minutes. And Chandler knew that the huge negro walked swiftly. He prayed that he might be able to keep near him. When his feet stumbled at last into a hard-packed trail he was more than thankful. Yet he had been in Santo Domingo and, once upon a time, had been a member of the Dominican border patrol; therefore he knew that he might not, after all, be in the trail which Chal David followed. For at the border there are many trails which connect the two little republics. Chandler, however, believed that he had found the right trail. He stopped to listen, hoping to hear the scuffling of feet. But he could hear nothing beyond the monotonous *"Al! ai!"* of the negroes he had left back there upon that bare hilltop. He must trust to blind chance and keep his head level.

Gone now were any thought of hunger and thirst. Chandler, a true American, had a duty to perform, perhaps some lives to save; and the knowledge that this was so drove all lesser thoughts from his mind. He wondered, as he walked, just how far he might be from the border. He had knowledge of another matter, of which Chal David was perhaps ignorant—which was that, right near the border on the Dominican side, most of the population was as black as is to be found in all Haiti. This argued that there must needs be some little delay while Chal David skulked about in search of the white-skinned one who would fulfil the specifications of the high priestess. And any delay would militate in Chandler's favor, he fervently hoped.

An hour passed. Chandler saw a light ahead which told him of the location of a native hut. He approached it carefully, making no noise. Inside he could hear the sleepy tones of a man and woman and they were speaking the Spanish *patois* of

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Santo Domingo. This told him that he had crossed the border into the sister republic to the east. He wondered if Chal David had discovered this house, and if anyone inside it were light enough of skin to satisfy the priest. Chandler crept closer and looked through a chink in the framework of the wall. The people inside spoke Spanish, true enough; but they were as black as Chal David himself.

Chandler moved back and hurried on. A half hour later and he paused once more. Surely he had gone far enough. He stood still and pondered.

His head jerked up suddenly. Faintly to his nostrils came the unmistakable odor of native tobacco! But they used the same sort of tobacco in Santo Domingo, so that might mean nothing at all. Down in his heart, however, Chandler believed that Chal David lurked somewhere near in the darkness. And when that odd chuckle came to him out of the shadow he was sure! Chal David knew that he was watched; but did he know the identity of the one who spied upon him?

The chuckle did not come again. Thinking to mislead Chal David, Chandler, making plenty of noise now, turned and fled hurriedly back the way he had come, intentionally brushing the tree limbs as he passed. Chal David gave no sign.

Thinking that he had gone far enough so that the sound of his footfalls would have died away anyhow, Chandler stopped and once more climbed a tree to wait for morning. He guessed that it was about 2 o'clock, some several hours before the coming of daylight.

ONCE during the night he awoke, thinking that a terrible scream, somehow akin to the screams of those who had signaled when he had penetrated the jungle, had gone winging its eery way through the night. But the scream was not repeated and, thinking that it had been but part of a horrible nightmare, Chandler sank back and dropped once more into slumber.

He awoke to find that the sun was all of two hours high. He swore roundly at himself, believing that Chal David had had, perhaps, sufficient time to complete his mission and to return. There was no noise in the woods except the twittering of forest birds.

But stay! Was there no other noise?

Faintly, while he strained his ears to listen, there came to him out of the east a wailing chant which, in its way, was as soul-searching as the chanting *"AI! ai!"* of the Haitians:

"Ai, mi hijo! Ai, mi hijo! Habla otra vez con su mama! Ai, dios! Dolor de curazon!"

It was the heartbreaking wail of a Dominican mother who wept aloud over her dead!

Chandler had heard those pitiful cries before now, and had been a bit cynical anent such lavish display of sorrow—sorrow perhaps for dead who, in life, had been granted more blows from stout cudgels than maternal compassion. But now there was a difference. Chal David, the high priest who sought for the blood of a white child, was somewhere near.

SLIDING down from his tree, Chandler hurried in the direction of the sound, finding himself shortly in the little yard, freshly cleared, before a Dominican hut from which issued those heartrending wails. Chandler knew that he had been on this spot before and that, on his previous visit, there had been no yard and no hut. A Dominican family had moved here to build a home and, in so doing, had apparently played into the hands of Chal David—if Chandler's guess were correct. He strode forward and knocked loudly. Silence fell upon

the little hut. Then came the quavering tones of a woman:

"Quien toca?" (Who knocks?)

Chandler answered:

"Un Americano!"

A sigh from beyond the door, which was immediately thrown open to expose a ragged Dominican woman, almost white, whose eyes were red from copious weeping. Chandler judged her to be beyond the thirty year mark, although, in Santo Domingo, a woman grows old swiftly.

"What is it, mother?" asked Chandler gently.

For answer she stepped aside, signaling Chandler to enter. He stepped inside, instinctively doffing his hat. The woman beckoned toward another door which led into the sleeping room, and Chandler moved ahead. Very little light came into this room, but there was sufficient for Chandler to make out the still form which lay in a huddled, blood-stained heap upon the narrow cot. A mere boy it was, barely in his teens. Dead!

Chandler drew closer and peered into the pinched pale face.

There were blue marks upon the white throat, and the jugular vein had almost been torn away. The ghastly wound had bled profusely and the woman had tried to stem the life-tide with whatever bits of cloth she could find. But she had ceased to try long ago, and the gory bandages had fallen away from the gaping wound. The boy had been dead so long that the body was beginning to stiffen.

Chandler drew back in horror. The woman began to weep afresh. She wrung her hands as she sank down beside the cot and leaned forward to stare into the still face. And her broken phrases told Chandler something of what had happened.

"Ai, el negro! Un hombre sin curazon! Un hombre quien parece el diablo!" (Oh, the black man! Man



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without a heart! A man who is like the devil!)

Chandler touched the woman's shoulder.

"Where is your man, mother?" he asked softly, "How did this happen?"

"We sent Felipe out before the sunrise as always," moaned the woman, to bring in water for the morning meal. It must, as you perhaps know, be carried several miles from a stream at the base of the Bahorucos. He had scarce gone when we heard a scream from the same direction he had taken. Juan, my *hombre,* was afraid to go forth; but, *ai, dios!* I knew that something had befallen Felipe. So I pounded Juan into wakefulness and ordered him to follow Felipe's trail. A few minutes and he came back, his back bowed under the dead weight of our little Felipe, blood flowing from that terrible wound in his neck! Juan told a wild story of seeing Felipe in the trail—with a black beast kneeling beside him, his head bent over as though his lips were against Felipe's neck! Juan was very much frightened at first, not seeing what manner of beast it was. Then the beast raised its head and Juan saw that it was, after all, nothing but a crazy Haitian—who was more frightened than was Juan himself; for he looked all around him as though fearing discovery. He did not see Juan, and Juan gained enough courage to find a stout club. With the club in his hand Juan fell upon the black man and pounded him until he sank down, unconscious. Then he brought Felipe back here."

"Where is Juan now?"

"Gone! He went back to take vengeance on the Haitian."

"What direction, woman?"

The woman went to the outer door and pointed. Chandler, speaking a few hurried words of condolence, hurried forth upon the trail the woman

had pointed out. And came upon Juan!

The Dominican was standing before Chal David, and Chal David, conscious, covered with blood from his own wounds, was trussed upright to the bole of a tree—*above an ant-hill!*

Merely saying that blows from the stout club which Juan carried had broken many bones in Chal David's body, we will draw down the curtain here.

Chandler hurried forward to speak to Juan. Juan turned with a beastly snarl and struck out at Chandler. Chandler fell like a lump of clay.

When he regained consciousness he was on the floor of a native hut, and a dozen curious Dominicans were gazing in upon him from the doorway. He looked about him and saw Chal David, miraculously still alive; but stark, staring crazy! He groveled on the dirt floor like a rag man, his black and grimy hands weaving here and there as though searching—searching; his eyes, devoid of any human expression, moving about as he looked around his cage. Chandler knew that Chal David's hours were numbered, even as he knew how tenaciously a Haitian clings to life.

A bowl of rice and beans had been placed at Chal David's side, and the high priest's hands, ever and anon, wandered to this bowl and scooped up handfuls of the unsavory-looking mess which, instead of eating—he carefully smeared over his naked body!

One of the Dominicans entered and spoke confidentially to Chandler, gesturing toward the black as he did so.

"Just a crazy Haitian," he said, "hungry for human flesh!"

Chandler nodded wearily, stedfastly refusing to look again at Chal David who, now, would never lead his followers in a massacre of the whites—yea, even though the whole statue

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of Dessalines were to bow and beckon!

The Dominican continued: "Luckily you were not killed. If you are able to walk you will be taken to the Haitian border, given a bit of food, and turned loose to find your way back to the capital as best you may. We know whence you came, because you talked wildly when your eyes were closed."

THREE days later two American officers entered the foyer of the American Hotel, supporting between them a wildly babbling man whom no one there would have recognized as Chandler—clothes torn, hair dishevelled, grimy with the dirt of the trail.

"We found him at the edge of the city," they said, "and he was screaming, *'AI! ai! AI! ai! AI! ai!'* at the top of his lungs! Does anyone here know him? He seems to be a white man."

A man in white duck stepped forward and looked closely at the white man.

"Must be Chandler," he said; "he's been missing for a week and no one knew where he had gone. Drank too many cocktails, I guess, and went off his nut!"

"Sure!" babbled the ragged man, "it was the cocktails! But even so, it is all the fault of Dessalines!"

And the white people of the American colony there present looked soberly at one another, and touched their foreheads with significant gestures!

Later, after the fever induced by his hardship in the jungle had subsided, people pressed around Chandler and asked what he had been doing during his week of absence, and when he tried to tell them they smiled so significantly their unbelief that Chandler finally closed his lips about the matter, vowing that he would never mention it again. What was the use?

The Oldest Story in the World

(Continued from page 176)

NIGHT had fallen in the Jardin de Paris, in Rangoon, and the boats on the river were no more than dark bulks from which many-colored lights shone out serenely. The scents of the Guleh-Wat, over the wall, grew thin. The incense became stale. The hibiscus and the nipa blossoms and the lotus flowers took on a queer, sickly smell that was the odor of premature decay. The night insects were fluttering about our heads with an exaggerated energy.

Gresham coughed suddenly.

"Poor beggar," he said, not ungently. "I sh'd think that would drive a man crazy. Fancy a drop of water on one tiny spot that you couldn't vary! It 'ud make a man hysterical, I imagine."

The man with the disheveled hair turned too-bright eyes upon us.

"It lasted for a hundred thousand years," he said lucidly, "so, naturally, he cursed rubies, because everything about him all that time was the color of rubies and the water that fell was always tinted like rubies. It looked like them as it fell, glittering . . ."

"I wonder," I said, ruminating, "if it would have to fall on a special part of a man's skull to drive him crazy. I've heard of it, of course."

The man with the disheveled hair told me that it would not. That it had fallen all over the white man's head, but in each imprisonment only upon the one spot. He told me accurately just where it fell each time, but curiously, he did not raise his hand to his head to illustrate.

Gresham lighted a cigarette very

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thoughtfully. He had hardly paid attention to the last of this talk.

He made a sudden impatient gesture.

"Look here, Leinster," he said abruptly to me, with an undercurrent of meaning and perplexity in his voice. "I'm supposed to arrest a certain chap. I'm in the constabulary, y'know, and you can guess why I ought to arrest him. But—dash it all! What'd you do?"

The man with the disheveled hair was lying slumped back in his seat, and he was staring with an infinite pleasure at the greenness of his drink as it showed in the dim lights the Jardin de Paris provides.

"A hundred thousand years," he murmured, and shuddered. "Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . ."

A waiter passed behind him and stumbled just a little. In stumbling, he raised his arm to catch himself and a single drop of red liquid slopped over the edge of the glass. It fell on the head of the man with the disheveled hair.

And in an instant he had caught the arms of his chair in a frenzied grasp and was sitting upright in a queerly rigid position, as if he were tied there. His face was terrible to look upon and his eyes were fixed. And he began to scream in a certain horrible monotony, as if he had been screaming for a hundred thousand years.

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The Bearded Men

(Continued from page 184)

were committed by my people—crimes that have remained unsolved. And I have grown rich. My fortune is in trust for my daughter, Freda.

"A hypnotized person is far less ely to be captured in the commission of a crime than one in his normal senses. Why? Because the latter thinks of what he is doing, and in thinking he endeavors to cover his tracks. My people think only my thoughts, do only my bidding; when they have completed their work, they are finished thinking even my thoughts, more than to return to me. I plan shrewdly and direct all their actions mentally. Sometimes my plans fail. It is known that a person cannot be made to do a thing hypnotically which he would not do in his normal senses—a criminal act, I mean. But most of my people, having been carefully selected, lack scruples in that direction and are good material. Occasionally I, myself, care for important matters. You who read this may have heard of 'the Little Black Man', supposed to be a figment of the criminal brain. But not so. I am 'the Little Black Man'—the 'Mysterious Egyptian' of newspaper headlines. He is one of my disguises: at that I am an adept. My people can mingle with those who have known them without fear of detection, after they leave my hands.

"That is all. Should I die suddenly, a competent hypnotist could release any of my mesmerized subjects from their trance. Then will the papers have another sensation. Involuntarily, by my own disappearance years ago, a mystery which has become proverbial in such cases, I afforded the world a sensation. This you will no doubt appreciate when I sign myself—

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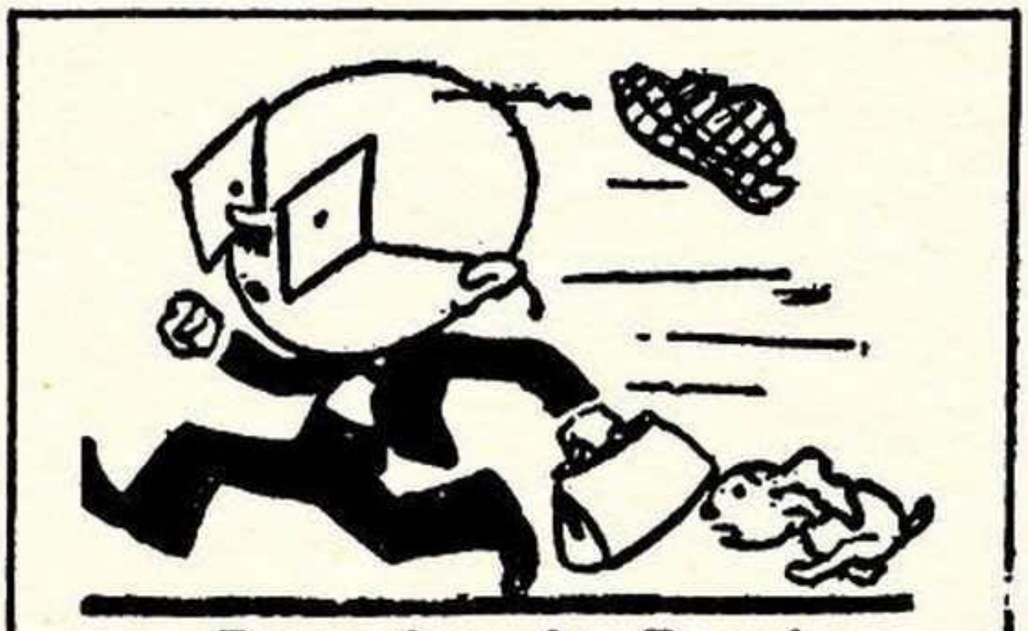
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