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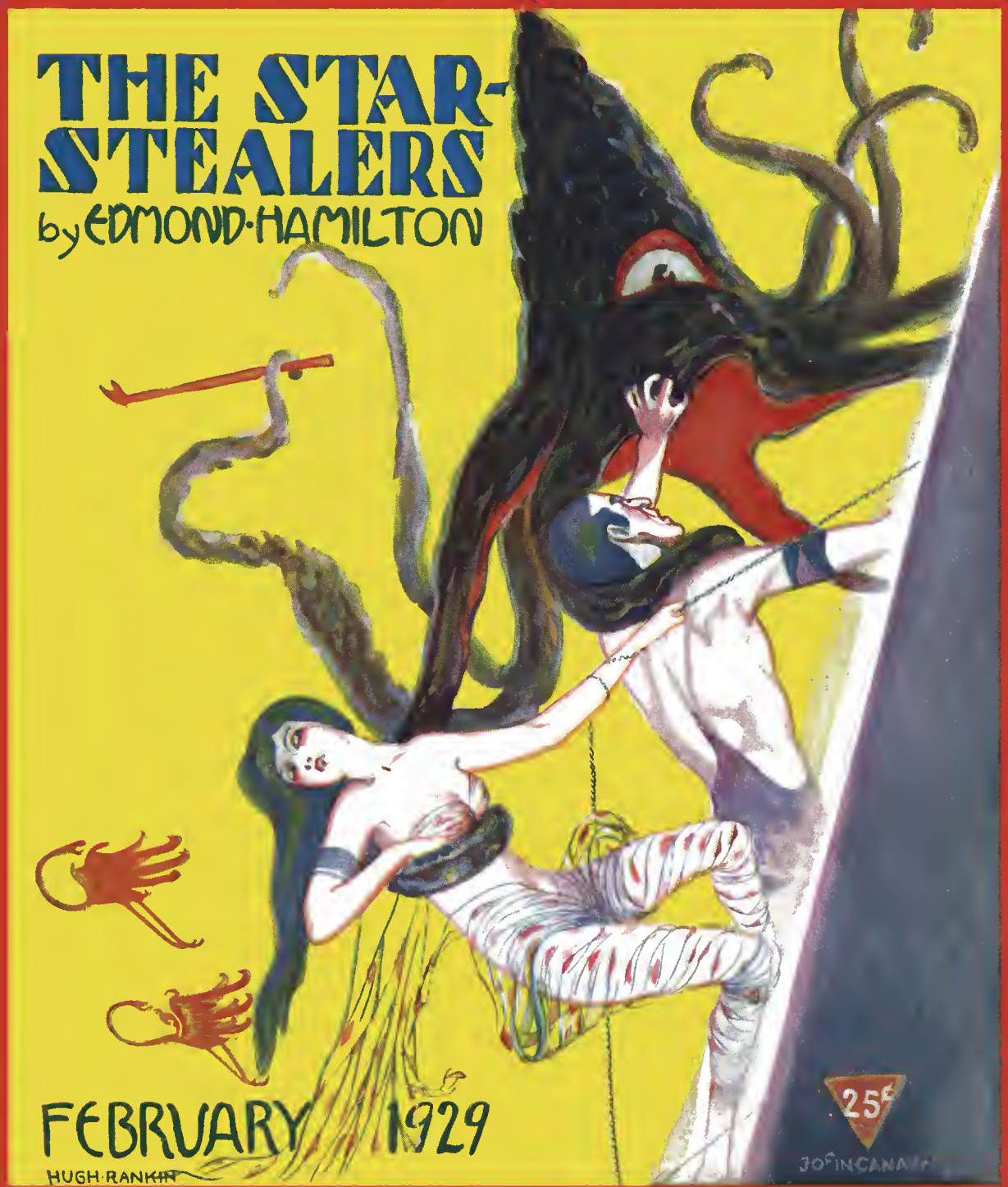

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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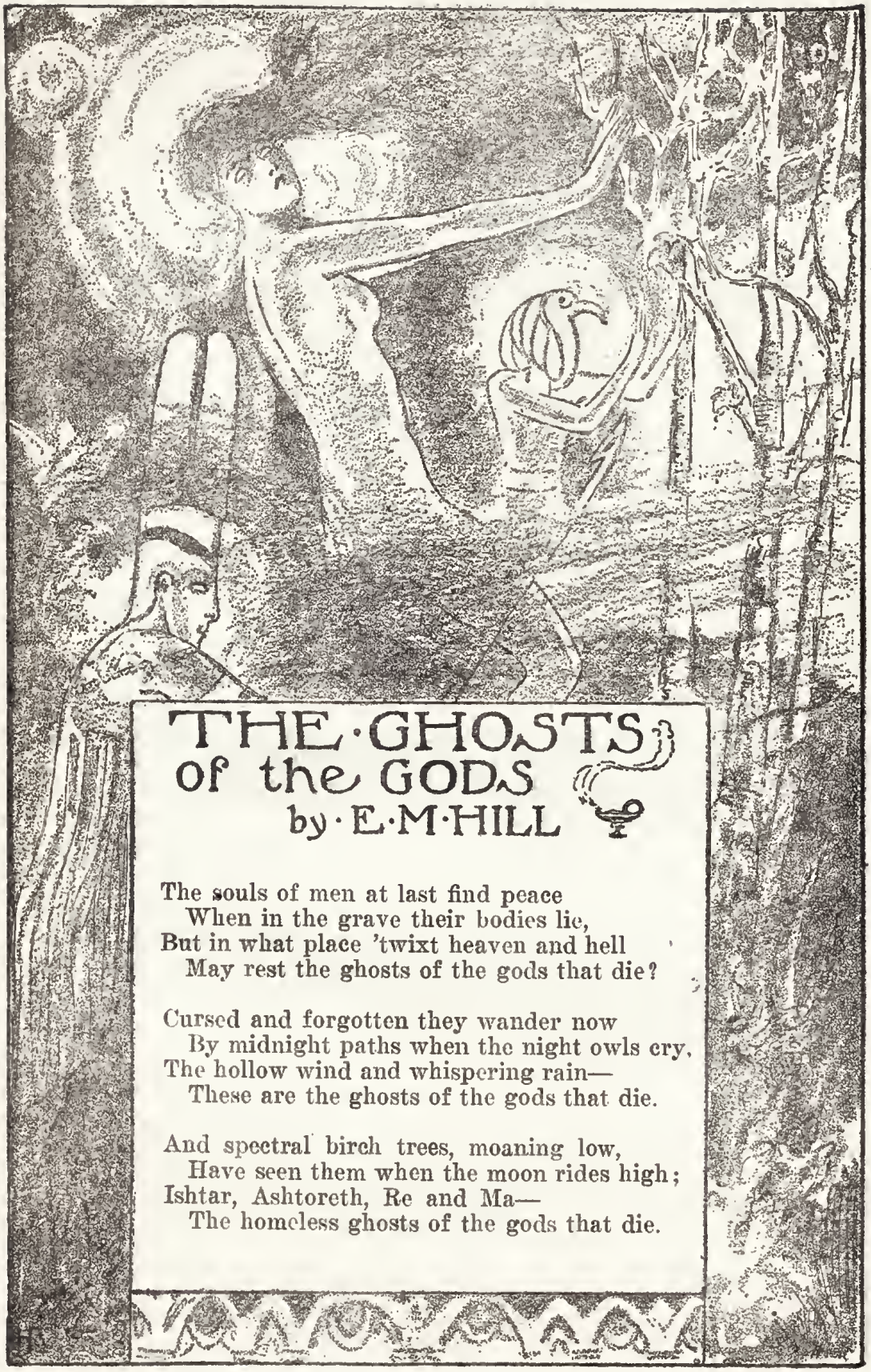


THE GHOSTS of the GODS

by E. M. HILL

The souls of men at last find peace
  When in the grave their bodies lie,
But in what place 'twixt heaven and hell
  May rest the ghosts of the gods that die?

Cursed and forgotten they wander now
  By midnight paths when the night owls cry,
The hollow wind and whispering rain—
  These are the ghosts of the gods that die.

And spectral birch trees, moaning low,
  Have seen them when the moon rides high;
Ishtar, Ashtoreth, Re and Ma—
  The homeless ghosts of the gods that die.

THE STAR-STEALERS

by EDMOND HAMILTON

"The vast globe stretched from horizon to horizon beneath them."

AS I stepped into the narrow bridgeroom the pilot at the controls there turned toward me, saluting.

"Alpha Centauri dead ahead, sir," he reported.

"Turn thirty degrees outward," I told him, "and throttle down to eighty light-speeds until we've passed the star."

Instantly the shining levers flicked back under his hands, and as I stepped over to his side I saw the arrows of the speed-dials creeping backward with the slowing of our flight. Then, gazing through the broad windows which formed the room's front side, I watched the interstellar panorama ahead shifting sidewise with the turning of our course.

The narrow bridgeroom lay across the very top of our ship's long, cigar-like hull, and through its windows all the brilliance of the heavens around us lay revealed. Ahead flamed the great double star of Alpha Centauri, two mighty blazing suns which dimmed all else in the heavens, and which crept slowly sidewise as we veered away from them. Toward our right there stretched along the inky skies the far-flung powdered fires of the Galaxy's thronging suns, gemmed with the crimson splendors of Betelgeuse and the clear brilliance of Canopus and the hot white light of Rigel. And straight ahead, now, gleaming out beyond the twin suns we

were passing, shone the clear yellow star that was the sun of our own system.

It was the yellow star that I was watching, now, as our ship fled on toward it at eighty times the speed of light; for more than two years had passed since our cruiser had left it, to become a part of that great navy of the Federation of Stars which maintained peace over all the Galaxy. We had gone far with the fleet, in those two years, cruising with it the length and breadth of the Milky Way, patrolling the space-lanes of the Galaxy and helping to crush the occasional pirate ships which appeared to levy toll on the interstellar commerce. And now that an order flashed from the authorities of our own solar system had recalled us home, it was with an unalloyed eagerness that we looked forward to the moment of our return. The stars we had touched at, the peoples of their worlds, these had been friendly enough toward us, as fellow-members of the great Federation, yet for all their hospitality we had been glad enough to leave them. For though we had long ago become accustomed to the alien and unhuman forms of the different stellar races, from the strange brain-men of Algol to the birdlike people of Sirius, their worlds were not human worlds, not the familiar eight little planets which swung around our own sun, and toward which we were speeding homeward now.

While I mused thus at the window the two circling suns of Alpha Centauri had dropped behind us, and now, with a swift clicking of switches, the pilot beside me turned on our full speed. Within a few minutes our ship was hurtling on at almost a thousand light-speeds, flung forward by the power of our newly invented de-transforming generators, which could produce propulsion-vibrations of almost a thousand times the frequency of the light-vibrations. At this immense velocity, matched by few other craft in the Galaxy, we were leaping through millions of miles of space each second, yet the gleaming yellow star ahead seemed quite unchanged in size.

Abruptly the door behind me clicked open to admit young Dal Nara, the ship's second-officer, descended from a long line of famous interstellar pilots, who grinned at me openly as she saluted.

"Twelve more hours, sir, and we'll be there," she said.

I smiled at her eagerness. "You'll not be sorry to get back to our little sun, will you?" I asked, and she shook her head.

"Not I! It may be just a pinhead beside Canopus and the rest, but there's no place like it in the Galaxy. I'm wondering, though, what made them call us back to the fleet so suddenly."

My own face clouded, at that. "I don't know," I said, slowly. "It's almost unprecedented for any star to call one of its ships back from the Federation fleet, but there must have been some reason——"

"Well," she said cheerfully, turning toward the door, "it doesn't matter what the reason is, so long as it means a trip home. The crew is worse than I am—they're scrapping the generators down in the engine-room to get another light-speed out of them."

I laughed as the door clicked shut behind her, but as I turned back to the window the question she had voiced rose again in my mind, and I gazed thoughtfully toward the yellow star ahead. For as I had told Dal Nara, it was a well-nigh unheard-of thing for any star to recall one of its cruisers from the great fleet of the Federation. Including as it did every peopled star in the Galaxy, the Federation relied entirely upon the fleet to police the interstellar spaces, and to that fleet each star contributed its quota of cruisers. Only a last extremity, I knew, would ever induce

any star to recall one of its ships, yet the message flashed to our ship had ordered us to return to the solar system at full speed and report at the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge, on Neptune. Whatever was behind the order, I thought, I would learn soon enough, for we were now speeding over the last lap of our homeward journey; so I strove to put the matter from my mind for the time being.

With an odd persistence, though, the question continued to trouble my thoughts in the hours that followed, and when we finally swept in toward the solar system twelve hours later, it was with a certain abstractedness that I watched the slow largening of the yellow star that was our sun. Our velocity had slackened steadily as we approached that star, and we were moving at a bare one light-speed when we finally swept down toward its outermost, far-swinging planet, Neptune, the solar system's point of arrival and departure for all interstellar commerce. Even this speed we reduced still further as we sped past Neptune's single circling moon and down through the crowded shipping-lanes toward the surface of the planet itself.

Fifty miles above its surface all sight of the planet beneath was shut off by the thousands of great ships which hung in dense masses above it —that vast tangle of interstellar traffic which makes the great planet the terror of all inexperienced pilots. From horizon to horizon, it seemed, the ships crowded upon each other, drawn from every quarter of the Galaxy. Huge grain-boats from Betelgeuse, vast, palatial liners from Arcturus and Vega, ship-loads of radium ores from the worlds that circle giant Antares, long, swift mail-boats from distant Deneb—all these and myriad others swirled and circled in one great mass above the planet, dropping down one by one as the official traffic-directors flashed from their own boats the brilliant signals which allowed a lucky one to descend. And through occasional rifts in the crowded mass of ships could be glimpsed the interplanetary traffic of the lower levels, a swarm of swift little boats which darted ceaselessly back and forth on their comparatively short journeys, ferrying crowds of passengers to Jupiter and Venus and Earth, seeming like little toy-boats beside the mighty bulks of the great interstellar ships above them.

As our own cruiser drove down toward the mass of traffic, though, it cleared away from before us instantly; for the symbol of the Federation on our bows was known from Canopus to Fomalhaut, and the cruisers of its fleet were respected by all the traffic of the Galaxy. Arrowing down through this suddenly opened lane we sped smoothly down toward the planet's surface, hovering for a moment above its perplexing maze of white buildings and green gardens, and then slanting down toward the mighty flat-roofed building which housed the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge. As we sped down toward its roof I could not but contrast the warm, sunny green panorama beneath with the icy desert which the planet had been until two hundred thousand years before, when the scientists of the solar system had devised the great heat-transmitters which catch the sun's heat near its blazing surface and fling it out as high-frequency vibrations to the receiving-apparatus on Neptune, to be transformed back into the heat which warms this world. In a moment, though, we were landing gently upon the broad roof, upon which rested scores of other shining cruisers whose crews stood outside them watching our arrival.

Five minutes later I was whirling downward through the building's interior in one of the automatic little cone-elevators, out of which I stepped into a long white corridor. An attendant was awaiting me there, and

I followed him down the corridor's length to a high black door at its end, which he threw open for me, closing it behind me as I stepped inside.

IT WAS an ivory-walled, high-ceilinged room in which I found myself, its whole farther side open to the sunlight and breezes of the green gardens beyond. At a desk across the room was sitting a short-set man with gray-streaked hair and keen, inquiring eyes, and as I entered he sprang up and came toward me.

"Ran Rarak!" he exclaimed. "You've come! For two days, now, we've been expecting you."

"We were delayed off Aldebaran, sir, by generator trouble," I replied, bowing, for I had recognized the speaker as Hurus Hol, chief of the Bureau of Astronomical Knowledge. Now, at a motion from him, I took a chair beside the desk while he resumed his own seat.

A moment he regarded me in silence, and then slowly spoke. "Ran Rarak," he said, "you must have wondered why your ship was ordered back here to the solar system. Well, it was ordered back for a reason which we dared not state in an open message, a reason which, if made public, would plunge the solar system instantly into a chaos of unutterable panic!"

He was silent again for a moment, his eyes on mine, and then went on. "You know, Ran Rarak, that the universe itself is composed of infinite depths of space in which float great clusters of suns, star-clusters which are separated from each other by billions of light-years of space. You know, too, that our own cluster of suns, which we call the Galaxy, is roughly disklike in shape, and that our own particular sun is situated at the very edge of this disk. Beyond lie only those inconceivable leagues of space which separate us from the neighboring star-clusters, or island-universes, depths of space never yet crossed by our own cruisers or by anything else of which we have record.

"But now, at last, something has crossed those abysses, is crossing them; since over three weeks ago our astronomers discovered that a gigantic dark star is approaching our Galaxy from the depths of infinite space—a titanic, dead sun which their instruments showed to be of a size incredible, since, dark and dead as it is, it is larger than the mightiest blazing suns in our own Galaxy, larger than Canopus or Antares or Betelgeuse—a dark, dead star millions of times larger than our own fiery sun—a gigantic wanderer out of some far realm of infinite space, racing toward our Galaxy at a velocity inconceivable!

"The calculations of our scientists showed that this speeding dark star would not race into our Galaxy but would speed past its edge, and out into infinite space again, passing no closer to our own sun, at that edge, than some fifteen billion miles. There was no possibility of collision or danger from it, therefore; and so though the approach of the dark star is known to all in the solar system, there is no idea of any peril connected with it. But there is something else which has been kept quite secret from the peoples of the solar system, something known only to a few astronomers and officials. And that is that during the last few weeks the path of this speeding dark star has changed from a straight path to a curving one, that it is curving inward toward the edge of our Galaxy and will now pass our own sun, in less than twelve weeks, at a distance of less than three billion miles, instead of fifteen! And when this titanic dead sun passes that close to our own sun there can be but one result. Inevitably our own sun will be caught by the powerful gravitational grip of the giant dark star and carried out with all its

planets into the depths of infinite space, never to return!"

Hurus Hol paused, his face white and set, gazing past me with wide, unseeing eyes. My brain whirling beneath the stunning revelation, I sat rigid, silent, and in a moment he went on.

"If this thing were known to all," he said slowly, "there would be an instant, terrible panic over the solar system, and for that reason only a handful have been told. Flight is impossible, for there are not enough ships in the Galaxy to transport the trillions of the solar system's population to another star in the four weeks that are left to us. There is but one chance—one blind, slender chance—and that is to turn aside this onward-thundering dark star from its present inward-curving path, to cause it to pass our sun and the Galaxy's edge far enough away to be harmless. And it is for this reason that we ordered your return.

"For it is my plan to speed out of the Galaxy into the depths of outer space to meet this approaching dark star, taking all of the scientific apparatus and equipment which might be used to swerve it aside from this curving path it is following. During the last week I have assembled the equipment for the expedition and have gathered together a force of fifty star-cruisers which are even now resting on the roof of this building, manned and ready for the trip. These are only swift mail-cruisers, though, specially equipped for the trip, and it was advisable to have at least one battle-cruiser for flag-ship of the force, and so your own was recalled from the Federation fleet. And although I shall go with the expedition, of course, it was my plan to have you yourself as its captain.

"I know, however, that you have spent the last two years in the service of the Federation fleet; so if you desire, another will be appointed to the post. It is one of danger—greater danger, I think, than any of us can dream. Yet the command is yours, if you wish to accept it."

Hurus Hol ceased, intently scanning my face. A moment I sat silent, then rose and stepped to the great open window at the room's far side. Outside stretched the greenery of gardens, and beyond them the white roofs of buildings, gleaming beneath the faint sunlight. Instinctively my eyes went up to the source of that light, the tiny sun, small and faint and far, here, but still—the sun. A long moment I gazed up toward it, and then turned back to Hurus Hol.

"I accept, sir," I said.

He came to his feet, his eyes shining. "I knew that you would," he said, simply, and then: "All has been ready for days, Ran Rarak. We start at once."

Ten minutes later we were on the broad roof, and the crews of our fifty ships were rushing to their posts in answer to the sharp alarm of a signal-bell. Another five minutes and Hurus Hol, Dal Nara and I stood in the bridgeroom of my own cruiser, watching the white roof drop behind and beneath as we slanted up from it. In a moment the half-hundred cruisers on that roof had risen and were racing up behind us, arrowing with us toward the zenith, massed in a close, wedge-shaped formation.

Above, the brilliant signals of the traffic-boats flashed swiftly, clearing a wide lane for us, and then we had passed through the jam of traffic and were driving out past the incoming lines of interstellar ships at swiftly mounting speed, still holding the same formation with the massed cruisers behind us.

Behind and around us, now, flamed the great panorama of the Galaxy's blazing stars, but before us lay only darkness—darkness inconceivable, into which our ships were flashing out at greater and greater speed. Neptune had vanished, and far behind lay the single yellow spark

that was all visible of our solar system as we fled out from it. Out—out—out—rocketing, racing on, out past the boundaries of the great Galaxy itself into the lightless void, out into the unplumbed depths of infinite space to save our threatened sun.

2

TWENTY-FOUR hours after our start I stood again in the bridgeroom, alone except for the silent, imperturbable figure of my ever-watchful wheelman, Nal Jak, staring out with him into the black gulf that lay before us. Many an hour we had stood side by side thus, scanning the interstellar spaces from our cruiser's bridgeroom, but never yet had my eyes been confronted by such a lightless void as lay before me now.

Our ship, indeed, seemed to be racing through a region where light was all but non-existent, a darkness inconceivable to anyone who had never experienced it. Behind lay the Galaxy we had left, a great swarm of shining points of light, contracting slowly as we sped away from it. Toward our right, too, several misty little patches of light glowed faintly in the darkness, hardly to be seen; though these, I knew, were other galaxies or star-clusters like our own —titanic conglomerations of thronging suns dimmed to those tiny flickers of light by the inconceivable depths of space which separated them from ourselves.

Except for these, though, we fled on through a cosmic gloom that was soul-shaking in its deepness and extent, an infinite darkness and stillness in which our ship seemed the only moving thing. Behind us, I knew, the formation of our fifty ships was following close on our track, each ship separated from the next by a five hundred mile interval and each flashing on at exactly the same speed as ourselves. But though we knew they followed, our fifty cruisers were naturally quite invisible to us, and as I gazed now into the tenebrous void ahead the loneliness of our position was overpowering.

Abruptly the door behind me snapped open, and I half turned toward it as Hurus Hol entered. He glanced at our speed-dials, and his brows arched in surprize.

"Good enough," he commented. "If the rest of our ships can hold this pace it will bring us to the dark star in six days."

I nodded, gazing thoughtfully ahead. "Perhaps sooner," I estimated. "The dark star is coming toward us at a tremendous velocity, remember. You will notice on the telechart——"

Together we stepped over to the big telechart, a great rectangular plate of smoothly burnished silvery metal which hung at the bridgeroom's end-wall, the one indispensable aid to interstellar navigation. Upon it were accurately reproduced, by means of projected and reflected rays, the positions and progress of all heavenly bodies near the ship. Intently we contemplated it now. At the rectangle's lower edge there gleamed on the smooth metal a score or more of little circles of glowing light, of varying sizes, representing the suns at the edge of the Galaxy behind us. Outermost of these glowed the light-disk that was our own sun, and around this Hurus Hol had drawn a shining line or circle lying more than four billion miles from our sun, on the chart. He had computed that if the approaching dark star came closer than that to our sun its mighty gravitational attraction would inevitably draw the latter out with it into space; so the shining line represented, for us, the danger-line. And creeping down toward that line and toward our sun, farther up on the blank metal of the great chart, there moved a single giant circle of deepest black, an ebon disk a hundred times the diameter of our glowing little sun-circle, which was sweeping

down toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve.

Hurus Hol gazed thoughtfully at the sinister dark disk, and then shook his head. "There's something very strange about that dark star," he said, slowly. "That curving path it's moving in is contrary to all the laws of celestial mechanics. I wonder if——"

Before he could finish, the words were broken off in his mouth. For at that moment there came a terrific shock, our ship dipped and reeled crazily, and then was whirling blindly about as though caught and shaken by a giant hand. Dal Nara, the pilot, Hurus Hol and I were slammed violently down toward the bridge-room's end with the first crash, and then I clung desperately to the edge of a switch-board as we spun dizzily about. I had a flashing glimpse, through the windows, of our fifty cruisers whirling blindly about like wind-tossed straws, and in another glimpse saw two of them caught and slammed together, both ships smashing like egg-shells beneath the terrific impact, their crews instantly annihilated. Then, as our own ship dipped crazily downward again, I saw Hurus Hol creeping across the floor toward the controls, and in a moment I had slid down beside him. Another instant and we had our hands on the levers, and were slowly pulling them back into position.

Caught and buffeted still by the terrific forces outside, our cruiser slowly steadied to an even keel and then leapt suddenly forward again, the forces that held us seeming to lessen swiftly as we flashed on. There came a harsh, grating sound that brought my heart to my throat as one of the cruisers was hurled past us, grazing us, and then abruptly the mighty grip that held us had suddenly disappeared and we were humming on through the same stillness and silence as before.

I slowed our flight, then, until we hung motionless, and then we gazed wildly at each other, bruised and panting. Before we could give utterance to the exclamations on our lips, though, the door snapped open and Dal Nara burst into the bridgeroom, bleeding from a cut on her forehead.

"What was that?" she cried, raising a trembling hand to her head. "It caught us there like toys—and the other ships——"

Before any of us could answer her a bell beside me rang sharply and from the diaphragm beneath it came the voice of our message-operator.

"Ships 37, 12, 19 and 44 reported destroyed by collisions, sir," he announced, his own voice tremulous. "The others report that they are again taking up formation behind us."

"Very well," I replied. "Order them to start again in three minutes, on Number One speed-scale."

As I turned back from the instrument I drew a deep breath. "Four ships destroyed in less than a minute," I said. "And by *what?*"

"By a whirlpool of ether-currents, undoubtedly," said Hurus Hol. We stared at him blankly, and he threw out a hand in quick explanation. "You know that there are currents in the ether—that was discovered ages ago—and that those currents are responsible for light-drift and similar phenomena. All such currents in the Galaxy have always been found to be comparatively slow and sluggish, but out here in empty space there must be currents of gigantic size and speed, and apparently we stumbled directly into a great whirlpool or maelstrom of them. We were fortunate to lose but four ships," he added soberly.

I shook my head. "I've sailed from Sirius to Rigel," I said, "and I never met anything like that. And if we meet another——"

The strangeness of our experience, in fact, had unnerved me, for even after we had tended to our bruises and were again racing on through the

void, it was with a new fearfulness that I gazed ahead. At any moment, I knew, we might plunge directly into some similar or even larger maelstrom of ether-currents, yet there was no way by which we could avoid the danger. We must drive blindly ahead at full speed and trust to luck to bring us through, and now I began to understand what perils lay between us and our destination.

As hour followed hour, though, my fearfulness gradually lessened, for we encountered no more of the dread maelstroms in our onward flight. Yet as we hummed on and on and on, a new anxiety came to trouble me, for with the passing of each day we were putting behind us billions of miles of space, and were flashing nearer and nearer toward the mighty dark star that was our goal. And even as we fled on we could see, on the great telechart, the dark disk creeping down to meet us, thundering on toward the Galaxy from which, unless we succeeded, it would steal a star.

Unless we succeeded! But could we succeed? Was there any force in the universe that could turn aside this oncoming dark giant in time to prevent the theft of our sun? More and more, as we sped on, there grew in my mind doubt as to our chance of success. We had gone forth on a blind, desperate venture, on a last slender chance, and now at last I began to see how slender indeed was that chance. Dal Nara felt it, too, and even Hurus Hol, I think, but we spoke no word to each other of our thoughts, standing for hours on end in the bridgeroom together, and gazing silently and broodingly out into the darkness where lay our goal.

ON THE sixth day of our flight we computed, by means of our telechart and flight-log, that we were within less than a billion miles of the great dark star ahead, and had slackened our speed until we were barely creeping forward, attempting to locate our goal in the dense, unchanged darkness ahead.

Straining against the windows, we three gazed eagerly forward, while beside me Nal Jak, the wheelman, silently regulated the ship's speed to my orders. Minutes passed while we sped on, and still there lay before us only the deep darkness. Could it be that we had missed our way, that our calculations had been wrong? Could it be—and then the wild speculations that had begun to rise in my mind were cut short by a low exclamation from Dal Nara, beside me. Mutely she pointed ahead.

At first I could see nothing, and then slowly became aware of a feeble glow of light in the heavens ahead, an area of strange, subdued light which stretched across the whole sky, it seemed, yet which was so dim as to be hardly visible to our straining eyes. But swiftly, as we watched it, it intensified, strengthened, taking shape as a mighty circle of pale luminescence which filled almost all the heavens ahead. I gave a low-voiced order to the pilot which reduced our speed still further, but even so the light grew visibly stronger as we sped on.

"Light!" whispered Hurus Hol. "Light on a dark star! It's impossible—and yet——"

And now, in obedience to another order, our ship began to slant sharply up toward the mighty circle's upper limb, followed by the half-hundred ships behind us. And as we lifted higher and higher the circle changed before our eyes into a sphere—a tremendous, faintly glowing sphere of size inconceivable, filling the heavens with its vast bulk, feebly luminous like the ghost of some mighty sun, rushing through space to meet us as we sped up and over it. And now at last we were over it, sweeping above it with our little fleet at a height of a half-million miles, contemplating in

awed silence the titanic dimensions of the faint-glowing sphere beneath us.

For in spite of our great height above it, the vast globe stretched from horizon to horizon beneath us, a single smooth, vastly curving surface, shining with the dim, unfamiliar light whose source we could not guess. It was not the light of fire, or glowing gases, for the sun below was truly a dead one, vast in size as it was. It was a *cold* light, a faint but steady phosphorescence like no other light I had ever seen, a feeble white glow which stretched from horizon to horizon of the mighty world beneath. Dumfoundedly we stared down toward it, and then, at a signal to the pilot, our ship began to drop smoothly downward, trailed by our forty-odd followers behind. Down, down, we sped, slower and slower, until we suddenly started as there came from outside the ship a high-pitched hissing shriek.

"Air!" I cried. "This dark star has an atmosphere! And that light upon it—see!" And I flung a pointing hand toward the surface of the giant world below. For as we dropped swiftly down toward that world we saw at last that the faint light which illuminated it was not artificial light, or reflected light, but light inherent in itself, since all the surface of the mighty sphere glowed with the same phosphorescent light, its plains and hills and valleys alike feebly luminous, with the soft, dim luminosity of radio-active minerals. A shining world, a world glowing eternally with cold white light, a luminous, titanic sphere that rushed through the darkness of infinite space like some pale, gigantic moon. And upon the surface of the glowing plains beneath us rose dense and twisted masses of dark, leafless vegetation, distorted tree-growths and tangles of low shrubs that were all of deepest black in color, springing out of that glowing soil and twisting blackly and grotesquely above its feeble light, stretching away over plain and hill and valley like the monstrous landscape of some undreamed-of hell!

And now, as our ship slanted down across the surface of the glowing sphere, there gleamed ahead a deepening of that glow, a concentration of that feeble light which grew stronger as we raced on toward it. And it was a city! A city whose mighty buildings were each a truncated pyramid in shape, towering into the air for thousands upon thousands of feet, a city whose every building and street and square glowed with the same faint white light as the ground upon which they stood, a metropolis out of nightmare, the darkness of which was dispelled only by the light of its own great glowing structures and streets. Far away stretched the mass of those structures, a luminous mass which covered square mile upon square mile of the surface of this glowing world, and far beyond them there lifted into the dusky air the shining towers and pyramids of still other cities.

We straightened, trembling, turning toward each other with white faces. And then, before any could speak, Dal Nara had whirled to the window and uttered a hoarse shout. "Look!" she cried, and pointed down and outward toward the titanic, glowing buildings of the city ahead; for from their truncated summits were rising suddenly a swarm of long black shapes, a horde of long black cones which were racing straight up toward us.

I shouted an order to the pilot, and instantly our ship was turning and slanting sharply upward, while around us our cruisers sped up with us. Then, from beneath, there sped up toward us a shining little cylinder of metal which struck a cruiser racing beside our own. It exploded instantly into a great flare of blinding light, enveloping the cruiser it had struck, and then the light had vanished, while with it had vanished the ship it

had enveloped. And from the cones beneath and beyond there leapt toward us other of the metal cylinders, striking our ships now by the dozens, flaring and vanishing with them in great, silent explosions of light.

"Etheric bombs!" I cried. "And our ship is the only battle-cruiser—the rest have no weapons!"

I turned, cried another order, and in obedience to it our own cruiser halted suddenly and then dipped downward, racing straight into the ascending swarm of attacking cones. Down we flashed, down, down, and toward us sprang a score of the metal cylinders, grazing along our sides. And then, from the sides of our own downward-swooping ship there sprang out brilliant shafts of green light, the deadly de-cohesion ray of the ships of the Federation Fleet. It struck a score of the cones beneath and they flamed with green light for an instant and then flew into pieces, spilling downward in a great shower of tiny fragments as the cohesion of their particles was destroyed by the deadly ray. And now our cruiser had crashed down through the swarm of them and was driving down toward the luminous plain below, then turning and racing sharply upward again while from all the air around us the black cones swarmed to the attack.

Up, up, we sped, and now I saw that our blow had been struck in vain, for the last of our ships above were vanishing beneath the flares of the etheric bombs. One only of our cruisers remained, racing up toward the zenith in headlong flight with a score of the great cones in hot pursuit. A moment only I glimpsed this, and then we had turned once more and were again diving down upon the attacking cones, while all around us the etheric bombs filled the air with the silent, exploding flares. Again as we swooped downward our green rays cut paths of annihilation across the swarming cones beneath; and then I heard a cry from Hurus Hol, whirled to the window and glimpsed above us a single great cone that was diving headlong down toward us in a resistless, ramming swoop. I shouted to the pilot, sprang to the controls, but was too late to ward off that deadly blow. There was a great crash at the rear of our cruiser; it spun dizzily for a moment in midair, and then was tumbling crazily downward like a falling stone toward the glowing plain a score of miles below.

3

I THINK now that our cruiser's mad downward plunge must have lasted for minutes, at least, yet at the time it seemed over in a single instant. I have a confused memory of the bridgeroom spinning about us as we whirled down, of myself throwing back the controls with a last, instinctive action, and then there came a ripping, rending crash, a violent shock, and I was flung into a corner of the room with terrific force.

Dazed by the swift action of the last few minutes I lay there motionless for a space of seconds, then scrambled to my feet. Hurus Hol and Dal Nara were staggering up likewise, the latter hastening at once down into the cruiser's hull, but Nal Jak, the wheelman, lay motionless against the wall, stunned by the shock. Our first act was to bring him back to consciousness by a few rough first-aid measures, and then we straightened and gazed about us.

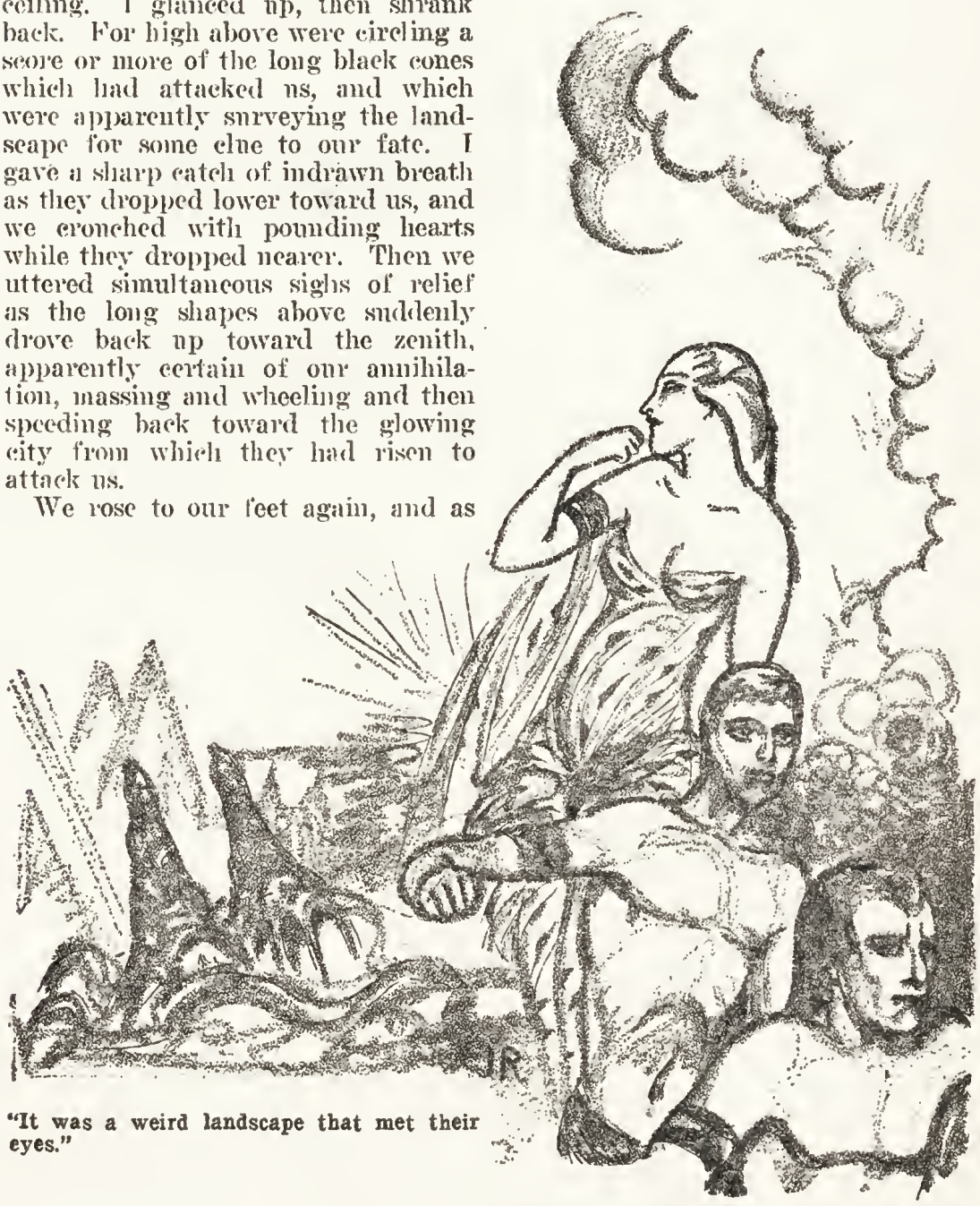
Apparently our cruiser's keel was resting upon the ground, but was tilted over at a sharp angle, as the slant of the room's floor attested. Through the broad windows we could see that around our prostrate ship lay a thick, screening grove of black tree-growths which we had glimpsed from above, and into which we had crashed in our mad plunge downward. As I was later to learn, it was only the shock-absorbing qualities of the vegetation into which we had

fallen, and my own last-minute rush to the controls, which had slowed our fall enough to save us from annihilation.

There was a buzz of excited voices from the crew in the hull beneath us, and then I turned at a sudden exclamation from Hurus Hol, to find him pointing up through the observation windows in the bridgeroom's ceiling. I glanced up, then shrank back. For high above were circling a score or more of the long black cones which had attacked us, and which were apparently surveying the landscape for some clue to our fate. I gave a sharp catch of indrawn breath as they dropped lower toward us, and we crouched with pounding hearts while they dropped nearer. Then we uttered simultaneous sighs of relief as the long shapes above suddenly drove back up toward the zenith, apparently certain of our annihilation, massing and wheeling and then speeding back toward the glowing city from which they had risen to attack us.

We rose to our feet again, and as we did so the door clicked open to admit Dal Nara. She was a bruised, disheveled figure, like the rest of us, but there was something like a grin on her face.

"That cone that rammed us shattered two of our rear vibration-projectors," she announced, "but that was all the damage. And out-



"It was a weird landscape that met their eyes."

side of one man with a broken shoulder the crew is all right."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "It won't take long to replace the broken projectors."

She nodded. "I ordered them to put in two of the spares," she explained. "But what then?"

I considered for a moment. "None of our other cruisers escaped, did they?" I asked.

Dal Nara slowly shook her head. "I don't think so," she said. "Nearly all of them were destroyed in the first few minutes. I saw Ship 16 racing up in an effort to escape, heading back toward the Galaxy, but there were cones hot after it and it couldn't have got away."

The quiet voice of Hurus Hol broke in upon us. "Then we alone can take back word to the Federation of what is happening here," he said. His eyes suddenly flamed. "Two things we know," he exclaimed. "We know that this dark star's curving path through space, which will bring it so fatally near to our own sun in passing, is a path contrary to all the laws of astronomical science. And we know now, too, that upon this dark-star world, in those glowing cities yonder, live beings of some sort who possess, apparently, immense intelligence and power."

My eyes met his. "You mean——" I began, but he interrupted swiftly.

"I mean that in my belief the answer to this riddle lies in that glowing city yonder, and that it is there we must go to find that answer."

"But how?" I asked. "If we take the cruiser near it they'll sight us and annihilate us."

"There is another way," said Hurus Hol. "We can leave the cruiser and its crew hidden here, and approach the city on foot—get as near to it as possible—learn what we can about it."

I think that we all gasped at that suggestion, but as I quickly revolved it in my mind I saw that it was, in reality, our only chance to secure any information of value to take back to the Federation. So we adopted the idea without further discussion and swiftly laid our plans for the venture. At first it was our plan for only us three to go, but at Dal Nara's insistence we included the pilot in our party, the more quickly because I knew her to be resourceful and quick-witted.

Two hours we spent in sleep, at the suggestion of Hurus Hol, then ate a hasty meal and looked to our weapons, small projectors of the de-cohesion ray similar to the great ray-tubes of the cruiser. Already the ship's two shattered vibration-projectors had been replaced by spares, and our last order was for the crew and under-officers to await our return without moving beyond the ship in any event. Then the cruiser's hull-door snapped open and we four stepped outside, ready for our venture.

The sandy ground upon which we stood glowed with the feeble white light which seemed to emanate from all rock and soil on this strange world, a weird light which beat upward upon us instead of down. And in this light the twisted, alien forms of the leafless trees around us writhed upward into the dusky air, their smooth black branches tangling and intertwining far above our heads. As we paused there Hurus Hol reached down for a glowing pebble, which he examined intently for a moment.

"Radio-active," he commented. "All this glowing rock and soil." Then he straightened, glanced around, and led the way unhesitatingly through the thicket of black forest into which our ship had fallen.

Silently we followed him, in single file, across the shining soil and beneath the distorted arches of the twisted trees, until at last we emerged from the thicket and found ourselves

upon the open expanse of the glowing plain. It was a weird landscape which met our eyes, a landscape of glowing plains and shallow valleys patched here and there with the sprawling thickets of black forest, a pale, luminous world whose faint light beat feebly upward into the dusky, twilight skies above. In the distance, perhaps two miles ahead, a glow of deeper light flung up against the hovering dusk from the massed buildings of the luminous city, and toward this we tramped steadily onward, over the shining plains and gullies and once over a swift little brook whose waters glowed as they raced like torrents of rushing light. Within an hour we had drawn to within a distance of five hundred feet from the outermost of the city's pyramidal buildings, and crouched in a little clump of dark tree-growths, gazing fascinatedly toward it.

The scene before us was one of unequaled interest and activity. Over the masses of huge, shining buildings were flitting great swarms of the long black cones, moving from roof to roof, while in the shining streets below them moved other hordes of active figures, the people of the city. And as our eyes took in these latter I think that we all felt something of horror, in spite of all the alien forms which we were familiar with in the thronging worlds of the Galaxy.

For in these creatures was no single point of resemblance to anything human, nothing which the appalled intelligence could seize upon as familiar. Imagine an upright cone of black flesh, several feet in diameter and three or more in height, supported by a dozen or more smooth long tentacles which branched from its lower end — supple, boneless octopus-arms which held the cone-body upright and which served both as arms and legs. And near the top of that cone trunk were the only features, the twin tiny orifices which were the ears and a single round and red-rimmed white eye, set between them. Thus were these beings in appearance, black tentacle-creatures, moving in unending swirling throngs through streets and squares and buildings of their glowing city.

Helplessly we stared upon them, from our place of concealment. To venture into sight, I knew, would be to court swift death. I turned to Hurus Hol, then started as there came from the city ahead a low, waxing sound-note, a deep, powerful tone of immense volume which sounded out over the city like the blast of a deep-pitched horn. Another note joined it, and another, until it seemed that a score of mighty horns were calling across the city, and then they died away. But as we looked now we saw that the shining streets were emptying, suddenly, that the moving swarms of black tentacle-creatures were passing into the pyramidal buildings, that the cones above were slanting down toward the roofs and coming to rest. Within a space of minutes the streets seemed entirely empty and deserted, and the only sign of activity over all the city was the hovering of a few cones that still moved restlessly above it. Astounded, we watched, and then the explanation came suddenly to me.

"It's their sleep-period!" I cried. "Their night! These things must rest, must sleep, like any living thing, and as there's no night on this glowing world those horn-notes must signal the beginning of their sleep-period."

Hurus Hol was on his feet, his eyes suddenly kindling. "It's a chance in a thousand to get inside the city!" he exclaimed.

The next moment we were out of the shelter of our concealing trees and were racing across the stretch of ground which separated us from the city. And five minutes later we were standing in the empty, glowing

streets, hugging closely the mighty sloping walls of the huge buildings along it.

At once Hurus Hol led the way directly down the street toward the heart of the city, and as we hastened on beside him he answered to my question, "We must get to the city's center. There's something there which I glimpsed from our ship, and if it's what I think——"

He had broken into a run, now, and as we raced together down the bare length of the great, shining avenue, I, for one, had an unreassuring presentiment of what would happen should the huge buildings around us disgorge their occupants before we could get out of the city. Then Hurus Hol had suddenly stopped short, and at a motion from him we shrank swiftly behind the corner of a pyramid's slanting walls. Across the street ahead of us were passing a half-dozen of the tentacle-creatures, gliding smoothly toward the open door of one of the great pyramids. A moment we crouched, holding our breath, and then the things had passed inside the building and the door had slid shut behind them. At once we leapt out and hastened on.

We were approaching the heart of the city, I judged, and ahead the broad, shining street we followed seemed to end in a great open space of some sort. As we sped toward it, between the towering luminous lines of buildings, a faint droning sound came to our ears from ahead, waxing louder as we hastened on. The clear space ahead was looming larger, nearer, now, and then as we raced past the last great building on the street's length we burst suddenly into view of the opening ahead and stopped, staring dumfoundedly toward it.

It was no open plaza or square, but a pit — a shallow, circular pit not more than a hundred feet in depth but all of a mile in diameter, and we stood at the rim or edge of it. The floor was smooth and flat, and upon that floor there lay a grouped mass of hundreds of half-globes or hemispheres, each fifty feet in diameter, which were resting upon their flat bases with their curving sides uppermost. Each of these hemispheres was shining with light, but it was very different light from the feeble glow of the buildings and streets around us, an intensely brilliant blue radiance which was all but blinding to our eyes. From these massed, radiant hemispheres came the loud droning we had heard, and now we saw, at the pit's farther edge, a cylindrical little room or structure of metal which was supported several hundred feet above the pit's floor by a single slender shaft of smooth round metal, like a great bird-cage. And toward this cage-structure Hurus Hol was pointing now, his eyes flashing.

"It's the switch-board of the thing!" he cried. "And these brilliant hemispheres—the unheard-of space-path of this dark star—it's all clear now! All——"

He broke off, suddenly, as Nal Jak sprang back, uttering a cry and pointing upward. For the moment we had forgotten the hovering cones above the city, and now one of them was slanting swiftly downward, straight toward us.

We turned, ran back, and the next moment an etheric bomb crashed down upon the spot where we had stood, exploding silently in a great flare of light. Another bomb fell and flared, nearer, and then I turned with sudden fierce anger and aimed the little ray-projector in my hand at the hovering cone above. The brilliant little beam cut across the dark shape; the black cone hovered still for a moment, then crashed down into the street to destruction. But now, from above and beyond, other cones were slanting swiftly down toward us,

while from the pyramidal buildings beside us hordes of the black tentacle-creatures were pouring out in answer to the alarm.

In a solid, resistless swarm they rushed upon us. I heard a yell of defiance from Dal Nara, beside me, the hiss of our rays as they clove through the black masses in terrible destruction, and then they were upon us. A single moment we whirled about in a wild mêlée of men and cone-creatures, of striking human arms and coiling tentacles; then there was a shout of warning from one of my friends, something hard descended upon my head with crushing force, and all went black before me.

4

FAINT light was filtering through my eyelids when I came back to consciousness. As I opened them I sat weakly up, then fell back. Dazedly I gazed about me. I was lying in a small, square room lit only by its own glowing walls and floor and ceiling, a room whose one side slanted steeply upward and inward, pierced by a small barred window that was the only opening. Opposite me I discerned a low door of metal bars, or grating, beyond which lay a long, glowing-walled corridor. Then all these things were suddenly blotted out by the anxious face of Hurus Hol, bending down toward me.

"You're awake!" he exclaimed, his face alight. "You know me, Ran Rarak?"

For answer I struggled again to a sitting position, aided by the arm of Dal Nara, who had appeared beside me. I felt strangely weak, exhausted, my head throbbing with racing fires.

"Where are we?" I asked, at last. "The fight in the city—I remember that—but where are we now? And where's Nal Jak?"

The eyes of my two friends met and glanced away, while I looked anxiously toward them. Then Hurus Hol spoke slowly.

"We are imprisoned in this little room in one of the great pyramids of the glowing city," he said. "And in this room you have lain for weeks, Ran Rarak."

"Weeks?" I gasped, and he nodded. "It's been almost ten weeks since we were captured there in the city outside," he said, "and for all that time you've lain here out of your head from that blow you received, sometimes delirious and raving, sometimes completely unconscious. And in all that time this dark star, this world, has been plunging on through space toward our Galaxy, and our sun, and the theft and doom of that sun. Ten more days and it passes our sun, stealing it from the Galaxy. And I, who have learned at last what forces are behind it all, lie prisoned here.

"It was after we four were brought to this cell, after our capture, that I was summoned before our captors, before a council of those strange tentacle-creatures which was made up, I think, of their own scientists. They examined me, my clothing, all about me, then sought to communicate with me. They do not speak—communicating with each other by telepathy—but they strove to enter into communication with me by a projection of pictures on a smooth wall, pictures of their dark star world, pictures of our own Galaxy, our own sun—picture after picture, until at last I began to understand the drift of them, the history and the purpose of these strange beings and their stranger world.

"For ages, I learned, for countless eons, their mighty sun had flashed through the infinities of space, alone except for its numerous planets upon which had risen these races of tentacle-creatures. Their sun was flaming with life, then, and on their circling planets they had attained to

immense science, immense power, as their system rolled on, a single wandering star, through the depths of uncharted space. But as the slow eons passed, the mighty sun began to cool, and their planets to grow colder and colder. At last it had cooled so far that to revive its dying fires they dislodged one of their own planets from its orbit and sent it crashing into their sun, feeding its waning flames. And when more centuries had passed and it was again cooling they followed the same course, sending another planet into it, and so on through the ages, staving off the death of their sun by sacrificing their worlds, until at last but one planet was left to them. And still their sun was cooling, darkening, dying.

"For further ages, though, they managed to preserve a precarious existence on their single planet by means of artificial heat-production, until at last their great sun had cooled and solidified to such a point that life was possible upon its dark, dead surface. That surface, because of the solidified radio-active elements in it, shone always with pale light, and to it the races of the tentacle-creatures now moved. By means of great air-current projectors they transferred the atmosphere of their planet to the dark star itself and then cast loose their planet to wander off into space by itself, for its orbit had become erratic and they feared that it would crash into their own great dark star world, about which it had revolved. But on the warm, shining surface of the great dark star they now spread out and multiplied, raising their cities from its glowing rock and clinging to its surface as it hurtled on and on and on through the dark infinities of trackless space.

"But at last, after further ages of such existence, the tentacle-races saw that again they were menaced with extinction, since in obedience to the inexorable laws of nature their dark star was cooling still further, the molten fires at its center which warmed its surface gradually dying down, while that surface became colder and colder. In a little while, they knew, the fires at its center would be completely dead, and their great world would be a bitter, frozen waste, unless they devised some plan by which to keep warm its surface.

"At this moment their astronomers came forward with the announcement that their dark-star world, plunging on through empty space, would soon pass a great star-cluster or Galaxy of suns at a distance of some fifteen billion miles. They could not invade the worlds of this Galaxy, they knew, for they had discovered that upon those worlds lived countless trillions of intelligent inhabitants who would be able to repel their own invasion, if they attempted it. There was but one expedient left, therefore, and that was to attempt to jerk a sun out of this Galaxy as they passed by it, to steal a star from it to take out with them into space, which would revolve around their own mighty dark world and supply it with the heat they needed.

"The sun which they fixed on to steal was one at the Galaxy's very edge, our own sun. If they passed this at fifteen billion miles, as their course then would cause them to do, they could do nothing. But if they could change their dark star's course, could curve inward to pass this sun at some three billion miles instead of fifteen, then the powerful gravitational grip of their own gigantic world would grasp this sun and carry it out with it into space. The sun's planets, too, would be carried out, but these they planned to crash into the fires of the sun itself, to increase its size and splendor. All that was needed, therefore, was some method of curving their world's course inward, and for this they had recourse to the great gravity-condensers which they

had already used to shift their own planets.

"You know that it is gravitational force alone which keeps the suns and planets to their courses, and you know that the gravitational force of any body, sun or planet, is radiated out from it in all directions, tending to pull all things toward that body. In the same way there is radiated outward perpetually from the Galaxy the combined attractive gravitational force of all its swarming suns, and a tiny fraction of this outward-radiating force, of course, struck the dark star, pulling it weakly toward the Galaxy. If more of that outward-radiating force could strike the dark star, it would be pulled toward the Galaxy with more power, would be pulled nearer toward the Galaxy's edge, as it passed.

"It was just that which their gravity-condenser accomplished. In a low pit at the heart of one of their cities—this city, in fact—they placed the condenser, a mass of brilliant hemispherical ray-attracters which caused more of the Galaxy's outward-shooting attractive force to fall upon the dark star, which condensed and concentrated that radiating force upon the dark star, thereby pulling the dark star inward toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve. When they reached a distance of three billion miles from the Galaxy's edge they planned to turn off the great condenser, and their dark star would then shoot past the Galaxy's edge, jerking out our sun with it, from that edge, by its own terrific gravitational grip. If the condenser were turned off before they came that close, however, they would pass the sun at a distance too far to pull it out with them, and would then speed on out into space alone, toward the freezing of their world and their own extinction. For that reason the condenser, and the great cage-switch of the condenser, were guarded always by hovering cones, to prevent its being turned off before the right moment.

"Since then they have kept the great gravity-condenser in unceasing operation, and their dark star has swept in toward the Galaxy's edge in a great curve. Back in our own solar system I saw and understood what would be the result of that inward curve, and so we came here—and were captured. And in those weeks since we were captured, while you have lain here unconscious and raving, this dark star has been plunging nearer and nearer toward our Galaxy and toward our sun. Ten more days and it passes that sun, carrying it out with it into the darkness of boundless space, unless the great condenser is turned off before then. Ten more days, and we lie here, powerless to warn any of what forces work toward the doom of our sun!"

THERE was a long silence when Hurus Hol's voice had ceased—a whispering, brain-crushing silence which I broke at last with a single question.

"But Nal Jak——?" I asked, and the faces of my two companions became suddenly strange, while Dal Nara turned away. At last Hurus Hol spoke.

"It was after the tentacle-scientists had examined me," he said gently, "that they brought Nal Jak down to examine. I think that they spared me for the time being because of my apparently greater knowledge, but Nal Jak they—vivisected."

There was a longer hush than before, one in which the brave, quiet figure of the wheelman, a companion in all my service with the fleet, seemed to rise before my suddenly blurring eyes. Then abruptly I swung down from the narrow bunk on which I lay, clutched dizzily at my companions for support, and walked

unsteadily to the square, barred little window. Outside and beneath me lay the city of the dark-star people, a mighty mass of pyramidal, glowing buildings, streets thronged with their dark, gliding figures, above them the swarms of the racing cones. From our little window the glowing wall of the great pyramid which held us slanted steeply down for fully five hundred feet, and upward above us for twice that distance. And as I raised my eyes upward I saw, clear and bright above, a great, far-flung field of stars—the stars of our own Galaxy toward which this world was plunging. And burning out clearest among these the star that was nearest of all, the shining yellow star that was our own sun.

I think now that it was the sight of that yellow star, largening steadily as our dark star swept on toward it, which filled us with such utter despair in the hours, the days, that followed. Out beyond the city our cruiser lay hidden in the black forest, we knew, and could we escape we might yet carry word back to the Federation of what was at hand, but escape was impossible. And so, through the long days, days measurable only by our own time-dials, we waxed deeper into an apathy of dull despair.

Rapidly my strength came back to me, though the strange food supplied us once a day by our captors was almost uneatable. But as the days fled by, my spirits sank lower and lower, and less and less we spoke to each other as the doom of our sun approached, the only change in any thing around us being the moment each twenty-four hours when the signal-horns called across the city, summoning the hordes in its streets to their four-hour sleep-period. At last, though, we woke suddenly to realization of the fact that nine days had pased since my awakening, and that upon the next day the dark star would be plunging past the burning yellow star above us and jerking it into its grip. Then, at last, all our apathy dropped from us, and we raged against the walls of our cells with insensate fury. And then, with startling abruptness, came the means of our deliverance.

For hours there had been a busy clanging of tools and machines somewhere in the great building above us, and numbers of the tentacle-creatures had been passing our barred door carrying tools and instruments toward some work being carried out overhead. We had come to pay but little attention to them, in time, but as one passed there came a sudden rattle and clang from outside, and turning to the door we saw that one of the passing creatures had dropped a thick coil of slender metal chain upon the floor and had passed on without noticing his loss.

In an instant we were at the door and reaching through its bars toward the coil, but though we each strained our arms in turn toward it the thing lay a few tantalizing inches beyond our grasp. A moment we surveyed it, baffled, fearing the return at any moment of the creature who had dropped it, and then Dal Nara, with a sudden inspiration, lay flat upon the floor, thrusting her leg out through the grating. In a moment she had caught the coil with her foot, and in another moment we had it inside, examining it.

We found that though it was as slender as my smallest finger the chain was of incredible strength, and when we roughly estimated the extent of its thick-coiled length we discovered that it would be more than long enough to reach from our window to the street below. At once, therefore, we secreted the thing in a corner of the room and impatiently awaited the sleep-period, when we could work without fear of interruption.

At last, after what seemed measureless hours of waiting, the great horns blared forth across the city outside, and swiftly its streets emptied, the sounds in our building quieting until all was silence, except for the humming of a few watchful cones above the great condenser, and the deep droning of the condenser itself in the distance. At once we set to work at the bars of our window.

Frantically we chipped at the rock at the base of one of the metal bars, using the few odd bits of metal at our command, but at the end of two hours had done no more than scratch away a bare inch of the glowing stone. Another hour and we had laid bare from the rock the lower end of the bar, but now we knew that within minutes the sleep-period of the city outside would be ending, and into its streets would be swarming its gliding throngs, making impossible all attempts at escape. Furiously we worked, dripping now with sweat, until at last when our time-dials showed that less than half an hour remained to us I gave over the chipping at the rock and wrapped our chain firmly around the lower end of the bar we had loosened. Then stepping back into the cell and bracing ourselves against the wall below the window, we pulled backward with all our strength.

A tense moment we strained thus, the thick bar holding fast, and then abruptly it gave and fell from its socket in the wall to the floor, with a loud, ringing clang. We lay in a heap on the floor, panting and listening for any sound of alarm, then rose and swiftly fastened the chain's end to one of the remaining bars. The chain itself we dropped out of the window, watching it uncoil its length down the mighty building's glowing side until its end trailed on the empty glowing street far below. At once I motioned Hurus Hol to the window, and in a moment he had squeezed through its bars and was sliding slowly down the chain, hand under hand. Before he was ten feet down Dal Nara was out and creeping downward likewise, and then I too squeezed through the window and followed them, downward, the three of us crawling down the chain along the huge building's steeply sloping side like three flies.

I was ten feet down from the window, now, twenty feet, and glanced down toward the glowing, empty street, five hundred feet below, and seeming five thousand. Then, at a sudden sound from above me, I looked sharply up, and as I did so the most sickening sensation of fear I had ever experienced swept over me. For at the window we had just left, twenty feet above me, one of the tentacle-creatures was leaning out, brought to our cell, I doubted not, by the metal bar's ringing fall, his white, red-rimmed eye turned full upon me.

I heard sighs of horror from my two companions beneath me, and for a single moment we hung motionless along the chain's length, swinging along the huge pyramid's glowing side at a height of hundreds of feet above the shining streets below. Then the creature raised one of its tentacles, a metal tool in its grasp, which he brought down in a sharp blow on the chain at the window's edge. Again he repeated the blow, and again.

He was cutting the chain!

5

For a space of seconds I hung motionless there, and then as the tool in the grasp of the creature above came down on the chain in another sharp blow the sound galvanized me into sudden action.

"Slide on down!" I cried. They didn't, however, but followed me up the chain, though Dal Nara and I alone came to grips with the horrible dead-star creature. I gripped the

links with frantic hands, pulling myself upward toward the window and the creature at the window, twenty feet above me.

Three times the tool in his hand came down upon the chain while I struggled up toward him, and each time I expected the strand to sever and send us down to death, but the hard metal withstood the blows for the moment, and before he could strike at it again I was up to the level of the window and reaching up toward him.

As I did so, swift black tentacles thrust out and gripped Dal Nara and me, while another of the snaky arms swept up with the tool in its grasp for a blow on my head. Before it could fall, though, I had reached out with my right hand, holding to the chain with my left, and had grasped the body of the thing inside the window, pulling him outside before he had time to resist. As I did so my own hold slipped a little, so that we hung a few feet below the window, both clinging to the slender chain and both striking futilely at each other, he with the metal tool and I with my clenched fist.

A moment we hung there, swaying hundreds of feet above the luminous stone street, and then the creature's tentacles coiled swiftly around my neck, tightening, choking me. Hanging precariously to our slender strand with one hand I struck out blindly with the other, but felt consciousness leaving me as that remorseless grip tightened. Then with a last effort I gripped the chain firmly with both hands, doubled my feet under me, and kicked out with all my strength. The kick caught the cone-body of my opponent squarely, tearing him loose from his own hold on the chain, and then there was a sudden wrench at my neck and I was free of him, while beneath Dal Nara and I glimpsed his dark body whirling down toward the street below, twisting and turning in its fall along the building's slanting side and then crashing finally down upon the smooth, shining street below, where it lay a black little huddled mass.

Hanging there I looked down, panting, and saw that Hurus Hol had reached the chain's bottom and was standing in the empty street, awaiting us. Glancing up I saw that the blows of the creature I had fought had half severed one of the links above me, but there was no time to readjust it; so with a prayer that it might hold a few moments longer Dal Nara and I began our slipping, sliding progress downward.

The sharp links tore our hands cruelly as we slid downward, and once it seemed to me that the chain gave a little beneath our weight. Apprehensively I looked upward, then down to where Hurus Hol was waving encouragement. Down, down we slid, not daring to look beneath again, not knowing how near we might be to the bottom. Then there was another slight give in the chain, a sudden grating catch, and abruptly the weakened link above snapped and we dropped headlong downward—ten feet into the arms of Hurus Hol.

A moment we sprawled in a little heap there on the glowing street and then staggered to our feet. "Out of the city!" cried Hurus Hol. "We could never get to the condenser-switch on foot—but in the cruiser there's a chance. And we have but a few minutes now before the sleep-period ends!"

Down the broad street we ran, now, through squares and avenues of glowing, mighty pyramids, crouching down once as the ever-hovering cones swept by above, and then racing on. At any moment, I knew, the great horns might blare across the city, bringing its swarming thousands into its streets, and our only chance was to win free of it before that happened.

(Continued on page 279)

"She was once more a woman of the never-changing East, an elemental female creature stark bare of all the conventions."

A BLEAK northeast wind, sweeping down from the coast of New England and freighted with mingled rain and sleet, howled riotously through the streets as we emerged from Symphony Hall.

"*Cordieu,* Friend Trowbridge," de Grandin exclaimed between chattering teeth as he turned the fur collar of his greatcoat up about his ears and sunk his head between his shoulders, "Monsieur Washington was undoubtlessly a most admirable gentleman in every respect, but of a certainty he chose a most damnable, execrable day on which to be born! Name of a green duck, I am already famished with the cold; come, let us seek shelter, and that with quickness, or I shall expire completely and leave you nothing but the dead corpse of Jules de Grandin for company!"

Grinning at his vehemence, I bent my head to the blast as we buffeted our way against the howling gale, fighting a path over the sleet-swept sidewalks to the glass-and-iron porte-cochère of La Pantoufle Dorée.

As we swept through the revolving plate-glass doors a sleek-looking gigolo with greased hair and beady eyes set too close together snatched at our hats and wraps with an avidity which betrayed his Levantine ancestry, and we marched down a narrow, mirror-lined hall lighted with red-shaded electric bulbs. From the dining-room beyond came the low, dolorous moaning of saxophones blended with the blurred monody of

indiscriminate conversation and the shrill, piping overtones of women's laughter. On the cleared dancing-floor in the center of the room a file of shapely young women in costumes consisting principally of beads and glittering rhinestones danced heetically, their bare, powdered arms, legs and torsos gleaming in the glare of the spotlight. The close, superheated air reeked with the odor of broken food and the effluvia from women's perfumed gowns and bodies, while the savage, heathen snarl of the jazz band's jungle music throbbed and palpitated like a fever patient's pulses. Soft fronds of particolored silk, sweeping gracefully down from the center of the ceiling, formed a tentlike roof which billowed gracefully with each draft from the doors, and the varicolored lights of the great crystal chandelier gleamed dully through the drifting fog-whorls of tobacco smoke.

"U'm?" de Grandin surveyed the scene from the threshold. "These children of present-day America enjoy more luxury than did their country's father on his birthday at Valley Forge a hundred and fifty-two years ago tonight, Friend Trowbridge," he commented dryly.

"How many in the party, please?" demanded the head waiter. "Only two?" Disdain and hauteur seemed fighting for possession of his hard-shaven face as he eyed us frigidly.

"Two, most certainly," de Grandin replied, then tapped the satin lapel of the functionary's dress coat with an impressive forefinger, "but two with the appetites—and thirsts—of four, *mon garçon.*"

Something like a smile flickered across the cruel, arrogant lips of the servitor as he beckoned to a waiter-captain, who led us to a table near the wall.

"*Voleurs*—robbers, bandits!" the little Frenchman exclaimed as he surveyed the price list of the menu. "However, it is *nécessaire* that one eats," he added philosophically as he made his choice known to the hovering waiter.

A matronly-looking, buxom woman of uncertain age in a modestly cut evening gown circulated among the guests. Seemingly acquainted with everyone present, she stopped here and there, slapping a masculine back in frank friendship and camaraderie every once in a while, exchanging a quip or word of greeting with the women patrons.

"Hullo, boys," she greeted cordially as she reached our table, "having a good time? Need anything more to brighten the corner where you are?"

"*Madame,*" de Grandin bent forward from the hips in a formal Continental bow, "if you possess the influence in this establishment, you can confer the priceless favor on us by procuring a *soupçon* of *eau-de-vie.* Consider: we are but just in from the outdoor cold and are frozen to the bone on all sides. If——"

"French!" From the delighted expression on the lady's face it was apparent that the discovery of de Grandin's nationality was the one thing needed to make her happiness complete. "I knew it the moment I laid eyes on you," she assured him. "You boys from across the pond simply *must* have your little nip, mustn't you? Fix it? I'll tell the world I can. Leave it to Mamma; she'll see you get a shot that'll start your blood circulatin'. Back in a minute, Frenchy, and, by the way"—she paused, a genial smile on her broad, rather homely face—"how about a little playmate to liven things up? Someone to share the loneliness of a stranger in a strange land? I got just the little lady to do the trick. She's from over the water, too."

"*Mordieu,* my friend, it seems I have put my foot in it up to the elbow," de Grandin deplored with a grimace of comic tragedy. "My request for a drink brings us not only

the liquor, but a partner to help consume it, it would seem. Two hundred francs at the least, this will cost us, I fear."

I was about to voice a protest, for supping at a night club was one thing, while consorting with the paid entertainers was something very different, but my remonstrances died half uttered, for the hostess bore down upon us, her face wreathed in smiles, a waiter with a long-necked bottle preceding her and a young woman—dark, pretty and with an air of shy timidity—following docilely in her wake. The girl—she was little more—wore a rich, black fur coat over a black evening gown and swung a small black grosgrain slipper bag from her left wrist.

"Shake hands with Ma'mselle Mutina, Frenchy," the hostess bade. "She's just as lonesome and thirsty as you are. You'll get along like mocha and java, you two."

"*Enchanté, Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin assured her as he raised her slender white fingers to his lips and withdrew a chair for her. "You will have a bit of food, some champagne, perhaps, some——" he rattled on with a string of gallantries worthy of a professional boulevardier while I watched him in mingled fascination and disapproval. This was a facet of the many-sided little Frenchman I had never seen before, and I was not especially pleased with it.

Our table-mate seated herself, letting her opulent coat fall back over her chair and revealing a pair of white, rounded shoulders and arms of singular loveliness. Her eyes rested on the table in timid confusion. As de Grandin monopolized the conversation, I studied her attentively. There was no doubting her charm. Slim, youthful, vibrant, she was, yet restrained with a sort of patrician calm. Her skin was not the dead white of the powder-filmed performers of the cabaret, nor yet the pink of the athletic woman's; rather it seemed to glow with a delicate undertone of tan, like the old ivory of ancient Chinese carvings or the richest of cream. Her face was heart-shaped rather than oval, with almost straight eyebrows of jetty blackness, a small, straight nose and a low, broad forehead, blue-black hair that lapped smoothly over her tiny ears like folded raven's wings, and delicate, sensitive lips which, I knew instinctively, would have been lusciously red even without the aid of the rouge with which they were tinted. When she raised timid, troubled eyes to de Grandin's face I saw the irises inside the silken frames of curling black lashes were purple as pansy petals. "Humph," I commented mentally, "she's beautiful—entirely too good-looking to be respectable!"

The waiter brought a chicken sandwich and—to my unbounded astonishment—a bottle of ginger ale for her, and as she was about to lift a morsel of food to her lips I saw her purple eyes suddenly widen with dread and her cheeks go ash-pale with fright.

"*M'sieu',*" she whispered, leaning impulsively across the table, "do not look at once, I implore you, but in a moment glance casually at the table at the far corner of the room and tell me if you see anyone there!"

Restraining an impulse to wheel in my chair, I held myself steady a moment, then with elaborate unconcern surveyed the room slowly. At the table indicated by the girl sat four men in dinner clothes. Leanness—the cadaverous emaciation of dissecting-room material—was their outstanding characteristic. Their cheeks were gaunt and hollow, their lips so thin that the outline of the teeth could be marked through them, and every articulation of their skulls could be traced through the tightly stretched, saddle-brown skin of their faces. But a second's study of their death's-head countenances revealed a more sinister feature. Their eyes

were obliquely set, like cats', yellow-green and cruel, with long slits for pupils. Changeless in expression they were; set, fixed, inscrutable, pitiless as any panther's—waiting, watching, seeing all, revealing nothing. I shuddered in spite of myself as I forced my gaze to travel casually over the remainder of the room.

De Grandin was speaking in a low, suppressed whisper, and in his little round blue eyes there snapped and sparkled the icy flashes which betrayed excitement. "*Mademoiselle,*" he said, "I see four monkey-faced heathen seated at that table. Hindoos they are by their features, perhaps Berbers from Africa, but devil's offspring by their eyes, which are like razors. Do they annoy you? I will order them away, I will pull their crooked noses—*pardieu,* I shall twist their flap-ears before I boot them from the place if you do but say the word!"

"Oh, no, no!" the girl breathed with a frightened shudder, and I could see it was as if a current of cold horror, something nameless and terrible, flowed from the strange men to her. "Do not appear to notice them, sir, but—Aristide!" she beckoned to a waiter hurrying past with a tray of glasses.

"Yes, *Ma'mselle?*" the man answered, pausing with a smile beside her chair.

"Those gentlemen in the corner by the orchestra"—she nodded ever so slightly toward the macabre group—"have you ever seen them here before?"

"Gentlemen, *Ma'mselle?*" the waiter replied with a puzzled frown as he surveyed the table intently. "Surely, you make the joke with Aristide. That table, she are vacant—the only vacant one in the place. It are specially reserved and paid for, but——"

"Never mind," the girl interrupted with a smile, and the man hurried off on his errand.

"You see?" she asked simply.

"*Barbe d'une poule bleu,* but I do not!" de Grandin asserted. "But—"

"Hush!" she interrupted. "Oh, do not let them think we notice them; it would make them frenzied. When the lights go out for the next number of the show, I shall ask a great favor of you, sir. You are a chivalrous gentleman and will not refuse. I shall take a package from my handbag—see, I trust you perfectly—and pass it to you beneath the table, and you will take it at once to 849 Algonquin Avenue and await me there. Please!" Her warm soft fingers curled themselves about his hand with an appealing pressure. "You will do this for me? You will not fail?—you are not afraid?"

"*Mademoiselle,*" he assured her solemnly, returning her handclasp with compound interest, "I shall do it, though forty thousand devils and devilkins bar the way."

As the lights in the big central chandelier dimmed and the spotlight shot its effulgence over the dancing-floor, a petite blond maiden arrayed in silver trunks, bandeau and slippers pranced out between the rows of tables and began singing in a rasping, nasal voice while she strutted and jiggled through the intricate movements of the Baltimore.

"Come, Friend Trowbridge," ordered de Grandin abruptly, stowing something in his pocket at the same time. "We go, we leave; *allez-vous-en!*"

I followed stumblingly through the comparative darkness of the dining-room, but paused on the threshold for a final backward glance. The zone of spotlight on the dancing-floor made the remainder of the place inky black by contrast, and only the highlights of the table napery, the men's shirt-fronts and the women's arms and shoulders showed indistinctly through the gloom, but it seemed to me the oblique, unchanging eyes of the sinister quartet at the corner table

followed us through the dark and shone with sardonic phosphorescence, as the questing eyes of hungry cats spy out the movements of mice among the shadows.

"THIS is the craziest thing you've ever done," I scolded as our taxi gathered speed over the slippery street. "What do we know about that girl? Nothing, except she's an habitué of a none too reputable night club. She may be a dope peddler for all we know, and this may be just a scheme to have us carry her contraband stuff past the police; or it may be a plan for hold-up and robbery and those devilish-looking men her accomplices. I'd not put any sort of villainy past a gang like that, and——"

De Grandin's slender, mocha-gloved fingers beat a devil's tattoo on the silver knob of his ebony cane as he regarded me with a fixed, unwinking stare of disapproval. "All that you say may be true, my friend," he admitted; "nevertheless, I have a mind to see this business through. Are you with me?"

"Of course, but——"

"There are no buts, *cher ami*. Unless I mistake rightly, we shall see remarkable things before we have done, and I would not miss the sight for half a dozen peaceful nights in bed."

As we rounded a corner and turned into the wide, tree-bordered roadway of Algonquin Avenue another car sped past us through the storm, whirling skid-chains snarling savagely against its mudguards.

2

A REAL estate agent's sign announced that the substantial brownstone residence which was 849 Algonquin Avenue was for sale or rent on long-term lease and would be altered to suit the tenant. Otherwise the place was as much like every other house in the block as one grain of rice is like the others in a bag.

Hastening up the short flagstone path leading from the sidewalk, de Grandin mounted the low brownstone stoop, felt uncertainly a moment, located the old-fashioned pull-door-bell and gave the brass knob a vigorous yank.

Through the mosaic of brightly stained glass in the front door panel we could descry a light in the hall, but no footsteps came in answer to our summons. "*Morbleu*, this is villainous!" the little Frenchman muttered as an especially vicious puff of wind hurled a barrage of sleet into his face. "Are we to stand here till death puts an end to our sufferings? I will not have it!" He struck a resounding blow on the door with the knob of his walking-stick.

As though waiting only the slightest pressure, the unlatched door swung back beneath the impact of his cane, and we found ourselves staring down a long, high-ceiled hall. Under the flickering light of an old-fashioned, prism-fringed gas chandelier we glimpsed the riotous colors of the Oriental rugs with which the place was carpeted, caught a flash of king-blue, rose, and rust-red from the sumptuous prayer cloth suspended tapestrywise on the wall, but gave no second glance to the draperies, for at the far end of the passage was that which brought an excited "*A-a-ah?*" from de Grandin and a gasp of horror from me.

The place was a shambles. Hunched forward like a doll with a broken back, an undersized, dark-skinned man in white drill jacket, batik sarong and yellow turban squatted in a low, blackwood chair and stared endlessly before him into infinity with the glazed, half-pleading, half-expressionless eyes of the newly dead. A smear of red, wider than the palm of a man's hand, and still slowly spreading, disfigured the

left breast of his white jacket and told the reason for his death.

Half-way up the stairway which curved from the farther end of the hall another man, similarly attired, had fallen backward, apparently in the act of flight, and lay against the stair-treads like a worn-out tailor's dummy carelessly tossed upon the carpet. His bare brown feet, oddly bent on flaccid ankles, pointed upward; head and hands, lolling downward with an awful awkwardness, were toward us, and I went sick with horror at sight of the open, gasping mouth and set, staring eyes in the reversed face. Under his back-bent chin a terrific wound gaped in his throat like the butcher's mark upon a slaughtered sheep.

"*Grand Dieu!*" de Grandin murmured, surveying the tragic relics a moment; "they were thorough, those assassins."

Darting down the corridor he paused beside the corpses, letting his hand rest on each a moment, then turned away with a shrug. "Dead *comme un mouton,*" he observed almost indifferently, "but not long so, my friend. They are still soft and warm. If we could but—*Dieu de Dieu*—another? Oh, villainous! monstrous! infamous!"

Stepping through an arched doorway we had entered a large room to the left of the hall. A carved black-wood divan stood at the apartment's farther end, and a peacock screen immediately behind it. A red-shaded lamp threw its softly diffused light over the place, mellowing, to some extent, the dreadful tableau spread before us. Full length among the gaudy, heaped-up pillows of the divan a woman reclined indolently, one bare, brown arm extended toward us, wrist bent, hand drooping, a long, thin cheroot of black tobacco held listlessly between her red-stained fingers. Small, she was, almost childishly so, her skin golden as sun-ripened fruit, her lips red as though stained with fresh pomegranate juice, and on the loose robe of sheer yellow muslin which was her only garment glowed a redder stain beneath the gentle swell of her left bosom. Death had been kinder to her than to the men, for her large, black-fringed eyes were closed as though in natural sleep, and her lips were softly parted as if she had gently sighed her life away. The illusion of slumber was heightened by the fact that on the henna-stained toes of one slender foot was balanced a red-velvet slipper heavily embroidered with silver thread while its mate had fallen to the floor, as though listlessly kicked off by its wearer.

Treading softly as though passing the sanctuary of a church, the little Frenchman approached the dead woman, felt her soft, rounded arm a moment, then pinched daintily at the cheroot between her dead fingers. "*Parbleu,* yes!" he nodded vigorously. "It was recent, most recent, Friend Trowbridge. The vile miscreants who did this deed of shame had but just gone when we arrived; for see, her flesh still glows with the warmth of life, and the memory of its fire still lingers in this cigar's tobacco. Not more than ten, nor eight, nor scarcely six minutes can have passed since these poor ones were done to death.

"*Eh bien*"—he bent his left hand palm upward, consulting the tiny watch strapped to the under side of his wrist, and turned toward the door with a faint shrug—"anyone can deplore these deaths; it is for Jules de Grandin to avenge them. Come, we must notify the gendarmes and the coroner, then——"

"What about Mademoiselle Mutina?" I asked maliciously. "You promised to wait here for her, you know."

He paused a moment, regarding me intently with his fixed, level stare. "*Précisément,*" he assented grimly, "what about her? It remains to be

seen. As for my promise—*mordieu,* when I was a little lad I promised myself I should one day be President of the *République,* but when I grew to a man's estate I found too many important things to do." He swung back the front door, thrust his collar up about his ears with a savage jerk and strode across the low porch into the howling storm.

What warned me to look up I shall never know, for the natural course to have followed would have been that taken by de Grandin and bend my head against the wind; but a subtle something, something so tangible that it was almost physical, seemed to jerk my chin up from my greatcoat collar just in time. From the areaway beneath the porch steps, staring at the retreating Frenchman with a malignancy utterly bestial, was a pair of oblique, yellow-green eyes.

"Look out, de Grandin!" I shrieked, and even as I called I realized the warning was too late, for an arm shot upward, poising a dully gleaming weapon—a dagger of some sort, I thought—for a throw.

Scarcely conscious of my act, I acted. Throwing both feet forward, I slipped on the glassy sleet with which the stone steps were veneered, and catapulted down them like a trunk sweeping down a baggage-chute. My feet landed squarely against the Frenchman's legs, knocking him sprawling, and something whizzed past my ear with a deadly, whirring sound and struck against the flagstone path beyond with a brittle, crackling clash.

Fighting to regain my footing like a cat essaying the ascent of a slate gable, I scrambled helplessly on the sleet-glazed walk, saw de Grandin right himself with an oath and dive head-foremost toward the area where his assailant lurked.

For an instant everything was chaos. I saw de Grandin miss his step and lurch drunkenly over the icy footwalk; saw his brown-skinned assailant spring upon him like a panther on its prey; realized dimly that someone had charged across the narrow yard and sprung to my little friend's aid; then was knocked flat once more by a vicious kick which missed my face only a hair's breadth and almost dislocated my shoulder.

"Catch him, Friend Trowbridge—he flies!" de Grandin shouted, disengaging himself from his rescuer's arms and rushing futilely after his fleeing opponent. Sure-footed as a lynx, the fellow ran over the slippery pavement, crossed the roadway and bolted down the connecting street, disappearing from sight as though swallowed up by the enveloping storm.

"*Merci beaucoup, Monsieur,*" de Grandin acknowledged as he turned to his deliverer, "I have not the honor of knowing your name, but my obligation is as great as your help was timely. If you will be so good as to—Trowbridge, my friend, catch him, he swoons!"

"Quick, Friend Trowbridge," the Frenchman ordered, "do you improvise some sort of bandage while I seek conveyance; we must bear him to the house and staunch his wound, else he will bleed to death."

While de Grandin sought frantically for a taxicab I opened the stranger's clothes and wadded my handkerchief against the ugly knife-wound in his upper arm. Crude and makeshift as the device was, it stopped the flow of blood to some extent, and, while still unconscious, the man did not appear measurably worse off when we arrived at my office some twenty minutes later. While I cut away his shirt sleeve and adjusted a proper pad and bandage, de Grandin was busily telephoning our gruesome discoveries to police headquarters.

A stiff drink of brandy and water forced between his lips brought a semblance of color back to the fainting man's cheeks. He turned his head

slowly on the pillow of the examination table and muttered something unintelligible; then, with a start, he rose to a sitting posture and cried: "Mutina, dear love: it is I—Richard! Wait, Mutina, wait a mo——"

As if a curtain had been lifted from before his eyes he saw us and turned from one to the other with an expression of blank bewilderment. "Where—how——" he began dazedly; then: "Oh, I remember, that devil was assaulting you and I rushed in to——"

"To save a total stranger from a most unpleasant predicament, *Monsieur,* for which the stranger greatly thanks you," de Grandin supplied. "And now, if you are feeling somewhat better, will you not be good enough to take another drink—somewhat larger this time, if you please—of this so excellent brandy, then tell us why you call on Mademoiselle Mutina? It so happens that we, too, have much interest in that young lady."

"Who are you?" the youth demanded with sharp suspicion.

"I am Jules de Grandin, doctor of medicine and of the faculty of the Sorbonne, and sometime special agent of the *Sûreté Géneral,* and this is Dr. Samuel Trowbridge, my very good friend and host," the Frenchman returned with a formal bow. "While saving my life from that miserable, execrable rogue who would have assassinated me, you received an ugly wound, and we brought you here to dress it. And now that social amenities are completed, perhaps you will have the goodness to answer my question concerning Mademoiselle Mutina. Who, may I ask, is she, and what is it you know of her? Believe me, young sir, it is not from idle curiosity, but in the interest of justice, that we ask."

"She is my wife," the young man answered after a moment's thoughtful silence in which he seemed to weigh the advisability of speaking. "I am Richard Starkweather—perhaps you know my father, Dr. Trowbridge"—he turned to me—"he was president of the old Harrisonville Street Railway before the Public Service took it over."

I nodded. "Yes, I remember him," I replied. "He was two classes ahead of me at Amherst, but we met at alumni gatherings; and——"

"Never mind the reminiscences, Friend Trowbridge," de Grandin interrupted, his logical French mind refusing to be swerved from the matter in hand. "You were about to tell us, *Monsieur*——" He paused significantly, glancing at our patient with raised, quizzical eyebrows.

"I married Mutina in Sabuah Sulu, then again in Manila, but——"

"*Parbleu*—you did marry her twice?" de Grandin demanded incredulously. "How comes it?"

Starkweather took a deep breath, like a man about to dive into a cold stream, then:

"I met Mutina in Sabuah Sulu," he began. "Possibly you gentlemen have read my book, *Malay Pirates as I Knew Them,* and wondered how I became so intimately acquainted with the engaging scoundrels. The fact is, it was all a matter of luck. The Dutch tramp steamer, *Wilhelmina,* on which I was going from Batavia to Manila, put in at Lubuah, and that's how it began. We all went ashore to see the place, which was only a cluster of Chinese *godowns,* a dozen or so European business places and a couple of hotels of sorts. We saw all we wanted of the dried-mud-and-sand town in a couple of hours, but as the ship wasn't pushing out until sometime in the early morning, several of us looked in on a *honky-tonk* which was in full blast at one of the saloons. I don't know what it was they gave me to drink, but it was surely powerful medicine—probably a mixture of crude white rum and *n'gapi*—whatever it was, it affected me as no Western liquor ever did, and I was dead

to the world in three drinks. The next thing I remember was waking up the following morning, well after sun-up, to find myself with empty pockets and a dreadful headache, floating out of sight of land in a Chinese *sampan*. I haven't the faintest idea how I got there, though I suspect the other members of the party were too drunk to miss me when they put back for the ship, and the proprietor of the dive, seeing me sprawled out there, improved his opportunity to go through my pockets, then lugged me to the water-front, dumped me into the first empty boat he found and let me shift for myself. Maybe he cut me adrift; maybe the boat's painter came untied by accident. At any rate, there I was, washed out to sea by the ebbing tide, with no water, no food, and not the slightest idea where I was or how far away the nearest land lay.

"I had barely sense and strength left to set the *sampan's* matting sail before I fell half conscious into the bottom again, still so sick and weak with liquor that I didn't care particularly whether I ever made land again.

"Just how long I lay there asleep —drugged would be a better term, for that Eastern liquor acts more like opium than alcohol—I haven't the slightest idea. Certainly it was all day; perhaps I slept clear around the clock. When I awoke, the stars were out and the boat was drifting side-on toward a rocky, jagged shore as if she were in a mill-flume.

"I jumped up and snatched the steering paddle, striving with might and main to bring her head around, but I might as well have tried paddling a canoe with a teaspoon. She drove straight for those rocks as if some invisible hand were guiding her to destruction; then, just as I thought I was gone, a big wave caught her squarely under the poop, lifted her over a saw-toothed reef and deposited her on a narrow, sandy shingle almost as gently as if she'd been beached by professional sailors.

"I climbed out as quickly as I could and staggered up the beach, but fell before I'd traversed a quarter-mile. The next thing I knew, it was daylight again and a couple of ugly-looking Malays were standing over me, talking in some outlandish tongue, apparently arguing whether to kill me then or wait a while. I suppose the only thing which saved me was the fact that they'd already been through my pockets and decided that as I had nothing but the tattered clothes I lay in, my live body was more valuable than my wardrobe. Anyhow, they prodded me to my feet with a spear butt and drove me along the beach for almost an hour.

"We finally came to a little horse-shoe-shaped cleft in the shore, and just where the sandy shingle met the jungle of *lalang* grass was a village of half a hundred or so white huts clustering about a much larger house. One of my captors pointed toward the bigger building and said something about 'Kapal Besar', which I assumed to be the name of the village headman.

"He was more than that. He was really a sort of petty sultan, and ruled his little principality with a rod of iron, notwithstanding he was nearly ninety years old and a hopeless paralytic.

"When we got into the village I saw the big house was a sort of combined palace and fortress, for it was surrounded by a high wall of sun-dried brick loopholed for cannon and musketry, and with three or four pieces of ancient ordnance sticking their brass muzzles through the apertures. The wall was topped with an abatis of sharpened bamboo stakes, and a man armed with a Civil War model musket and bayonet stood guard at the gateway through which my finders drove me like a pig on its way to market.

"Inside the encircling wall was a space of smooth sand perhaps ten or twelve feet broad; then a wide, brick-floored piazza roofed over with beams of teak as thick as railway ties laid close together on equally heavy stringers, and from the porch opened any number of doorways into the house.

"My guards led, or drove, me through one of these and down a tiled corridor, while a half-naked boy who popped up out of the darkness like a jack-in-the-box from his ease ran on ahead yelling, 'Kapal Besar—*hai, Kapal Tuan!*' at the top of his shrill, nasal voice.

"I was surprized at the size of the room to which I was taken. It was roughly oval in shape, quite fifty feet long by twenty-five or thirty at its greatest width, and paved with alternate black and red tiles. The roof, which rose like a sugar-loaf in the center, was supported on A-beams resting on columns of skinned palm-tree boles, and to these were nailed brackets from which swung red-glass bowls filled with cocoanut-oil with a floating wick burning in each. The result was the place was fairly well illuminated, and I had a good view of the thin, aged man sitting in a chair of carved blackwood at the farther end of the chamber.

"He was a cadaverous old fellow, seemingly almost bloodless, with skin the color of old parchment stretched tight as a drumhead over his skull; thin, pale lips, and a long, straggling white beard sweeping over his tight green jacket. When he looked at me I saw his eyes were light hazel, almost gray, and piercing and direct as those of a hawk. His thin, high-bridged nose reminded me of a hawk's beak, too, and the bony, almost transparent hands which clutched and fingered the silver-mounted bamboo cane in his lap were like a hawk's talons.

"My two guards made profound *salaams*, but I contented myself with the barest nod civility required.

"The old chap looked appraisingly at me while my discoverers harangued him at great length; then, with an impatient motion of his cane, he waved them to silence and began addressing me in Malayan. I didn't know a dozen words of the language, and made signs to him that I couldn't understand, whereupon he switched to an odd, slurring sort of Spanish which I was able to make out with some difficulty.

"Before he'd spoken five minutes I understood my status, and was none too delighted to learn I was regarded as a legitimate piece of sea-salvage—a slave, in plain language. If I had any special talent, I was informed, I'd better be trotting it out for display right off; for, lacking something to recommend me for service in the palace, I would be forthwith shipped off to the yam fields or the groves where the copra was prepared.

"I was at a loss just how to answer the old duffer when I happened to see a sort of guitar lying on the pavement near the door leading to one of the passages which radiated from the audience chamber like wheel-spokes from a hub. Snatching up the instrument, I tuned it quickly, and picking some sort of accompaniment on it, began to sing. I've a pretty fair baritone, and I put more into it that day than I ever did with the college glee club.

"*Juanita, Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground, Just a Baby's Prayer at Twilight,* and *Over There* went big with the old man, but the song that seemed to touch his heart was *John Brown's Body,* and I had to sing the thing from beginning to end at least a dozen times.

"The upshot of it was that I found myself permanently retained as court minstrel, had my torn white duds replaced by a gorgeous red jacket and yellow turban and a brilliantly striped *sarong,* and was assigned one

of the best rooms in the palace—which isn't saying much from the standpoint of modern conveniences."

The young man paused a moment, and despite his evident distress a boyish grin spread over his lean, brown countenance. "My big chance came when I'd been there about two months," he continued.

"I prepped at St. John's, and put in a full hitch with the infantry during the war, so the I. D. R. and the manuals of guard duty were as familiar to me as the Scriptures are to a circuit-riding preacher. One day when the disorganized mob old Kapal called his army were slouching through their idea of a guard mount, I snatched his musket from the fellow who acted as top sergeant and showed 'em how to do the thing in proper style. The captain of the guard was sore as a pup, but old Kapal was sitting in the piazza watching the drill, and made 'em take orders from me. In half an hour I had them presenting, porting, ordering and shouldering arms in pretty fair shape, and in two weeks they could do the whole manual, go right by squads and come on right into line as snappily as any outfit you ever saw.

"That settled it. I was made captain-general of the army, wore two swords and a brace of old-fashioned brass-mounted powder and ball revolvers in my waist shawl, and was officially known as Rick-kard Tuan. I taught the soldiers to salute, and the civil population took up the custom. In six months' time I couldn't go for a five-minute stroll without gathering more salutes to the yard than a newly commissioned shavetail in the National Army.

"I'd managed to pick up a working knowledge of the language, and was seeing the people at first-hand, living their lives and almost thinking their thoughts—that's where I got the material for my book. That's how I got Mutina, too.

"One morning after drill Kapal Besar called me into the audience chamber and waved me to a seat. I was the only person on the island privileged to sit in his presence, by the way.

"'My son,' he said, 'I have been thinking much of your future, of late. In you I have found a very pearl among men, and it is my wish that you rear strong sons to take your place in the years to come. Mine, too, mayhap, for I have no men-children to rule after me and there is none I would rather have govern in my stead when it shall have pleased Allah (praised be His glorious name!) to call me hence to Paradise. Therefore, you shall have the choice of my women forthwith.' He clapped his thin old hands in signal as he spoke, and a file of tittering, giggling girls sidled through one of the doors and ranged themselves along the wall.

"Like all Oriental despots, Kapal Besar maintained the *droit du seigneur* rigidly—every woman who pleased him was taken into his seraglio, though the old chap, being close to ninety, and paralyzed from the waist down for nearly twenty years, could be nothing more than nominal husband to them, of course.

"Marriage is simple in Malaya, and divorce simpler. 'Thou art divorced,' is all the husband need say to free himself from an unwanted wife, and the whole thing is finished without courts, lawyers or fees.

"I passed down the line of simpering females, wondering how I was going to sidestep this latest honor royalty had thrust upon me, when I came to Mutina. Mutina signifies 'the Pearl' in Malayan, and this girl hadn't been misnamed. Believe me or not, gentlemen, it was a case of love at first sight, as far as I was concerned.

"She was small, even for a Malay girl—not more than four feet ten, or five feet tall at the most—with smooth, glossy black hair and the tiniest feet and hands I've ever seen.

Though she had gone unshod the greater part of her life her feet were slender and high-arched as those of a duchess of the Bourbon court, with long, straight toes and delicate, filbert-shaped nails; and her hands, though used to the heavy work all native women, royal or not, performed, were fine and tapering, and *clean*. She was light-skinned, too, really fairer than I, for her flesh was the color of ivory, while I was deeply sun-burned; and, what attracted me to her more than anything else, I think, her lips and teeth were unstained by betel-nut and there was no smudge or snuff about her nostrils. As she stood there in her prim, modest Malay costume, her eyes modestly cast down and a faint blush staining her face, she was simply ravishing. I felt my heart miss a beat as I paused before her.

"There was a sort of scandalized buzz-buzz of conversation among the women when I turned to Kapal to announce my choice, and the old fellow himself looked surprized for a moment. I thought he was going to renege on his offer, but it developed he thought I'd made an unworthy decision. I'd noticed without thinking of it that the other women kept apart from Mutina, and old Kapal explained the reason in a few terse words. She was, it seemed, *anak gampang;* that is, no one knew who her father was, and such a condition is even more of a social handicap in Malaya than with us. Further, she was suspected of black magical practises, and Kapal went so far as to intimate she had secured the honor of admission to the *zenana* by the use of *guna-guna,* or love potions. Of course, if I wanted her after all he'd said, why, the misfortune was mine—but I was not to complain I hadn't been fairly warned.

"I told him I wanted her if she'd have me, at which he let out a shrill cackle of a laugh, called her to the foot of his throne and spoke so quickly for a minute or so that I couldn't follow him, then waved us all away, saying he wanted to take his siesta.

"I MARCHED from the audience chamber to my quarters feeling pretty well satisfied. It really had been a case of love at first sight as far as I was concerned, and I'd made up my mind to pay real courtship to the lovely girl and try to induce her to marry me, for I was determined that, Kapal Besar or no Kapal Besar, I'd not have her as a gift from anyone but herself.

"As I entered my quarters and turned to lay my swords on the couch, I was startled to see a form dart across the threshold and drop crouching to the floor before me.

"It was Mutina. Her little, soft feet had followed me noiselessly down the corridor, and she must have been at my heels when I entered the room.

"'*Kakasih,*' she said as she knelt before me and drew aside her veil, revealing her blushing face, '*laki kakasih amba anghu memuji*—husband, beloved, I adore thee.'

"Gentlemen, did you ever take a drink of rich old sherry and feel its warming glow creep through every vein and nerve in your body? That was the way I felt when I realized what had happened. The rigmarole old Kapal reeled off in the throne-room was a combined divorce-and-marriage ceremony. Mutina was my wife, and—my heart raced like a coasting motor car's engine—with her own soft lips she had declared her love.

"Three weeks later they found Kapal Besar dead in his great carved chair, and fear that I would seize the government almost precipitated a riot, but when I told 'em I wouldn't have the throne as a gift and wanted nothing but a *prau* and crew to take Mutina and me to the Philippines,

they darn near forced the crown on me in gratitude.

"Two members of the guard, Hussein and Batjan, with Jobita, Hussein's young wife, asked permission to accompany us, so there was a party of five which set out in the *prau* amid the cheers of the army and the booming of the one of Kapal's brass cannon which could be fired."

Young Starkweather paused in his narrative again, and a sort of puzzled, questioning expression spread over his face. "The day before we left," he went on, "I came into the quarters to get some stuff for the ship and found Mutina backed into a corner, fending off with both hands the ugliest-looking customer I'd ever seen. He was a thin, cadaverous fellow, with slanting, yellow eyes and a face like a walking corpse. I saw in a moment Mutina was deathly afraid of him, and yelled, '*Hei badih iang chelaka!*' which may be freely translated as 'Get to hell out of here, you son of an ill-favored dog!'

"Instead of slinking away as any other native would have done if addressed that way by Riek-kard Tuan, the man just stood there and grinned unpleasantly, if you could call his ugly grimace a grin.

"Sabuah Sulu is a rough place, gentlemen, and rough methods are the rule there. I snatched one of the sabers from my cummerbund and cut at him. The fellow must have been extraordinarily agile; for though I don't see how it happened, I missed him completely, though I'd have sworn my blade cut into his neck. That couldn't have been so, though, for there was no resistance to the steel, and there the man stood, unharmed, after a slash which should have lopped the head clean off his shoulders.

"Mutina seemed more concerned about my safety than the circumstances seemed to warrant, for the intruder was unarmed, while I wore two swords and a pair of pistols, and after he'd slunk away with a final menacing look she threw herself into my arms and wept as if her heart would break. I comforted her as best I could, then ran out to ask the guard who the mysterious man was, but the sentry swore by the teeth and beard of Allah that he had seen no stranger enter or leave the compound that day."

"U'm—a-a-ah?" murmured Jules de Grandin, twisting furiously at the ends of his little golden mustache. "Say on, my friend, this is of the most decided interest."

"We got to Manila without much trouble," Starkweather continued as he shot a wondering look at the little Frenchman. "We passed through the Sulu Sea, landed on southern Luzon and completed the trip overland. We were married with Christian ceremonies by an army chaplain at Manila, and I cabled home for money, then arranged passage for our entire party.

"Coming back to the hotel after making some last-minute sailing arrangements, I thought I noticed the shifty-eyed johnny who annoyed Mutina the day before we left Sabuah Sulu sneaking down the street, and it seemed to me he looked at me with a malicious grin as he ducked around the corner. It couldn't have been the same man, of course, but the resemblance was striking, and so was the coincidence.

"I felt a sort of premonition of evil as I rushed up to our suite, and I was in a perfect frenzy of apprehension when I opened the door and found the rooms empty. Mutina was gone. So were Hussein, Batjan and Jobita. There was no clue to their whereabouts, nothing to tell why or where they'd gone; nothing at all but—this."

From an inside pocket he drew a leather case and extracted a folded sheet of note-paper from it. He passed it to de Grandin, who perused

it quickly, nodded once, and handed it to me. A single line of odd, unintelligible characters scrawled across the sheet, but I could make nothing of them till Starkweather translated.

"It's Malayan," he explained. "The same words she first spoke to me: '*Laki kakasih amba anghau memuji* —husband, beloved, I adore thee.'

"I was like a crazy man for the next two months. The police did everything possible to find Mutina, and I hired a small army of private detectives, but we never got one trace of any of the three.

"Finally I came home, tried to reconstruct my life as best I could, and wrote my book on the pirates as I had known them.

"Just tonight I learned that Mutina, accompanied by Hussein and Jobita and Batjan, is living in Harrisonville, and that she's an entertainer at La Pantoufle Dorée. I got her address in Algonquin Avenue from one of the club attendants and rushed out there as fast as I could. Just as I entered the yard I saw you scuffling with someone and—believe it or not—I'm sure the man who assaulted you was the one I saw in Sahuah Sulu and later in Manila. I'd recognize those devilish eyes of his anywhere on earth.

"It was good of you gentlemen to bring me here and patch me up instead of sending me to the hospital," he concluded, "but I'm feeling pretty fit again, now, and I must be off. Men, you don't realize, Mutina's in that house, and that slant-eyed devil's hanging around. I've got to go to her right away. I must see Mutina!"

"Then ye'll be after goin' to th' jail, an' nowheres else, I'm thinkin', me boy," a heavy Irish voice announced truculently from the consulting-room door, and Detective Sergeant Jeremiah Costello strode across the threshold.

3

"MUTINA—in jail?" the young man faltered unbelievingly.

"Sure, good an' tight, an' where else should she be?" returned the detective with a nod to de Grandin and me. "'Tis sorry I am ter come sneakin' in on yez like this, gentlemen," he apologized, "but th' office sent me up to Algonquin Avenue hotfoot when yer message wuz received, an' after I'd made me arrest I thought I'd best be comin' here ter talk matters over wid yez. Th' bell didn't seem to ring when I pushed th' button, an' it's a cruel cold night outside, so I let meself in, seein' as how yer light wuz goin' an' I knew ye'd be up an' ready ter talk."

"Assuredly," de Grandin assented with a nod. "But how comes it that you put Mademoiselle—Madame Mutina under arrest, my friend?"

"Why"—the big Irishman looked wonderingly at the little Frenchman —"what else wuz there ter do, Dr. de Grandin, sor? 'Twas yerself as saw what a howly slaughter-house they'd made o' her place, an' dead men—an' women—don't die widout help. So, when th' young woman comes rushin' up ter th' place in a taxi all out o' breath, as ye might say, hot as fire ter be after gittin inside ter meet someone, why, sez I to meself, 'Ah-ho, me gur-rl, 'tis yerself, an' no one else, as knows sumpin more about these shenanegans than meets th' naked eye, else ye wouldn't be so anxious ter meet someone—wid never a livin' soul save th' pore dead creatures inside th' house ter meet at all, at all.'

"She started some cock-an'-bull story about havin' a date wid a gent whose name she didn't know at th' house—some foreign man, he were, she said. I'll be bettin' me Sunday boots he wuz a foreigner, too—'twas no Christian American who did those bloody murders, an' ye can be sure o' that, too, savin' yer presence, Dr. de Grandin, sor."

The little Frenchman stroked his tiny wheaten mustache caressingly. "I agree with you, *mon cher,*" he assented, "but the young lady's story was not entirely of the gentleman chicken and cow, for it was I whom she was to meet at her house. It was for the purpose of meeting her that Friend Trowbridge and I went there, and found what we discovered. Sergeant Costello, am I a fool?"

"Howly Mither, no!" denied the Irishman. "If they wuz more fools like you in th' wor-rld, Dr. de Grandin, sor, we'd be after havin' fewer funny houses ter keep th' nitwits in, I'm thinkin'."

"Precisely," de Grandin assented. "But I tell you, *mon brave,* Madame Mutina not only did not commit those killings; she suspected nothing of them. Consider: Is it likely she would have made an assignation with Friend Trowbridge and me had she thought we would find evidences of murder there?"

Costello shook his head.

"*Très bon.* Again: It was twenty-one minutes past 11 when Friend Trowbridge and I left her at La Pantoufle Dorée; it was not later than half-past when we arrived at her house, and the poor ones had not been long dead when we got there—their flesh was warm and there was still heat in the murdered woman's cigar; but they had been dead from ten to fifteen minutes, though not much longer. Nevertheless, if we were with Madame Mutina nine minutes before, she could not have been present at the killing."

"But she might 'a' known sumpin about it," the Irishman persisted.

"I doubt it much. At the night club both Friend Trowbridge and I saw several most unbeautiful men who frightened her greatly. It was at sight of them she entrusted some object to me and begged I go to her home with all speed, there to await her coming. As we drove through the storm on our erraud another car passed us with great swiftness. Whether the four unlovely ones rode in it or not I can not say, but I believe they did. In any event, as we left the house after viewing the murdered bodies, a man closely resembling one of them attacked me from behind, and had it not been for good, brave Friend Trowbridge and this so excellent young man here, Jules de Grandin would now be happy in heaven—I hope.

"As it is"—he seized the pointed tips of his mustache in a sudden fierce grip and twisted them till I thought he would tear the hairs loose—"as it is, I still live, and there is earthly work to do. Come, let us go, let us hasten, let us repair immediately to the jail where I may interview the unfortunate, beautiful Madame Mutina.

"No, my friend," he denied as Starkweather would have risen to accompany us, "it is better that you remain away for a time. Me, I shall undertake that no harm comes to your lady, but for the purposes I have in mind I think it best she sees you not for a time. Be assured, I shall give you leave to greet her at the earliest possible moment."

His chin thrust moodily into the upturned collar of his greatcoat, the little Frenchman sat beside me in silence as I drove him and Costello toward police headquarters. As we rounded a corner, driving cautiously to avoid skidding over the sleety pavement, he seemed suddenly to arrive at a decision. "Through Tunlaw Street, if you please, good friend," he ordered. "I would stop at the excellent Bacigalupo's for a little minute."

"At Bacigalupo's?" I echoed in amazement. "Why, Mike has been in bed for hours!"

"Then he must arise," was the uncompromising reply. "I would do the business with him."

No light burned in the windows of the tiny flat where Mike Bacigalupo lived above his prosperous fruit stand, but repeated rings at the bell and poundings on the door finally brought a sleepy and none too amiable Italian head from one of the darkened openings, like an irate tortoise peeping from its shell.

"*Holà*, my friend," de Grandin hailed, "we are come to buy limes. Have the goodness to put ten or a dozen in a bag for us at once."

"Limas?" demanded the Italian in a shocked voice. "You wanta da lima at half-pas' 14 o'clock? You come to hell—I not come down to sell limas to Benito Mussolini deesa time o' night. *Sapr-r-risti!* You mus' t'inka me craze."

For answer de Grandin broke into a flood of rapid, voluble Italian. What he said I do not know, but five minutes later the fruit merchant, shivering with cold inside the folds of a red-flannel bathrobe, appeared at the door and handed him a small paper parcel. More, as we turned away he waved his hand and called, "*Arrivederci, amico mio.*"

I was burning with curiosity as we drove toward headquarters, but long experience with the eccentric little Frenchman had taught me better then to attempt to force his confidence.

It was a frightened and pathetic little figure the police matron ushered into the headquarters room a few minutes later. "*M'sieu'*," she exclaimed piteously at sight of de Grandin, running forward and holding out both slender ivory hands to him, "you have come to save me from this place?"

"More than that, *ma petit chère;* I have come to save you from those who persecute you, if it please heaven," he replied soberly. "You know not why you are arrested, do you?"

"N-no," she faltered. "I came from the club as quickly as I could, but this man and others seized me as I alighted from my taxi. They would not let me enter my own house or see my faithful friends. Oh, *M'sieu'*, make them let me see Hussein and Batjan and Jobita, please."

"*Ma pauvre,*" de Grandin replied, resting his hands gently on her shoulders, "you can not see them ever again. Those of whom we wot—they arrived first."

"D-dead?" the girl stammered half comprehendingly.

He nodded silently as he led her to a seat. Then: "We must see that others do not travel the same path," he added. "You, yourself, may be their next target. You are guilty of no crime, but perhaps it would be safer were you to remain here until——"

As he spoke, never taking his eyes from hers, he rummaged about in his overcoat pocket and suddenly snatched his hand out, crushing one of the limes we had obtained from Bacigalupo between his long, deceptively slender fingers. The pale-gold rind broke beneath his pressure, and a stream of amber juice spurted through the rent, spattering on the girl's bare arm.

"O-o-o-oh—*ai, ai!*" she screamed as the acid liquid touched her flesh, then writhed away from him as though the lime juice had been burning oil.

"*A-hee!*" she gave the shrill, piercing mourning cry of the East as her eyes fastened on the glistening spots of moisture on her forearm, and their round pupils suddenly drew in and shrank to slits like those of a cat coming suddenly into a darkened room from the light.

"*Bien—très bon!*" de Grandin exclaimed, snatching a silk handkerchief from his cuff and drying her arm. "I am sorry, truly sorry, my

poor one; believe me, sooner would Jules de Grandin suffer torture than cause you pain, but it was necessary that I do it. See, it is all well, now."

But it was not all well. Where the gushing lime juice had struck her tender flesh there was a cluster of ugly, red weals on the girl's arm as though her white, soft skin were scalded.

4

For a moment they faced each other in silence, the alert, blond Frenchman and the magnolia-white Eastern girl, and mutual understanding shone in their eyes.

"How—how did you know?" she faltered.

"I did not know, my little one," de Grandin confessed in a low voice, "but what I learned tonight caused me to suspect. *Hélas,* I was only too right in my surmise!"

He gazed thoughtfully at the prison floor, his narrow chin tightly gripped between his thumb and forefinger, then:

"Are you greatly attached to the Prophet, my child?" he asked. "Would you consent to Christian baptism?"

She looked at him in bewilderment as she replied: "Of course; is not the man of my heart of the Nazarenes? If it so be they go endlessly to be companions of hell-fire, as the Prophet (on whom be peace!) declares in the book of Imran's family, then let Mutina's face be blackened too at the last great day, and let her go to everlasting torment with the man she loves. I ask nothing better in the hereafter than to share his torture, if torture be his portion, but in this life it is written that I must keep far away, else I bring on him the vengeance of——"

"Enough!" de Grandin interrupted almost sternly. "Sergeant, we must release Madame Mutina instantly. Come, I am impatient to take her hence. Trowbridge, my friend, do you engage a clergyman at once and have him at the house without delay. It is of importance that we act with speed."

Mutina had been booked for detention only as a material witness, and it was not difficult for Costello to procure her release. In five minutes they had left for my house in a taxicab while I drove toward Saint Luke's rectory, intent on dragging the Reverend Leon Barley from his bed.

With the clergyman in tow I entered the study an hour later, finding de Grandin, Mutina and Costello talking earnestly, but Starkweather nowhere in sight. "Why, where is——" I began, but the Frenchman's uplifted finger cut my question off half uttered.

"It is better that we name no names at present, Friend Trowbridge," he warned, then to Dr. Barley:

"This young lady has the desire for baptism, *mon père*; you will officiate forthwith? Dr. Trowbridge and I will stand sponsors."

"Why, it's a little unusual," the pastor began, but de Grandin interrupted with a vigorous nod of his head. "*Parbleu,* it is more unusual than you can suppose," he agreed. "It is with the unusual we have to deal tonight, my friend, and the ungodly, as well. Come, do us your office and do it quickly, for be assured we have not dragged you from the comfort of your bed for nothing this night."

The Reverend Leon Barley, pious man of God and knowing man of the world, was not the sort of carping stickler for the purity of ecclesiastical rules who casts discredit on the clergy. Though uninformed concerning the ceremony, he realized haste was necessary, and adjusted his stole with the deft quickness learned from service with the A. E. F., and before that in the Philippine insurrection.

Swiftly the beautiful, dignified service proceeded:

"Wilt thou then obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in the same all the days of thy life?" asked Dr. Barley.

"I will, by God's help," murmured Mutina softly.

"Mutina"—Dr. Barley's hand dipped into the Minton salad bowl of water standing on the table and sprinkled a few drops on the girl's bowed head—"I baptize thee in the name of the——"

The solemn pronouncement was drowned in a terrible, blood-chilling scream, for as the sacramental water touched her head Mutina fell forward to the floor and lay there writhing as though in mortal agony.

"Gawd A'mighty!" cried Costello hoarsely. "'Tis th' divil's wor-rk, fer sure!"

"*Sang de Dieu!*" cried Jules de Grandin, bending above the prostrate girl. "Look, Friend Trowbridge, for the love of good God, look!"

Face downward, clawing at the rugs and seemingly convulsed in unsupportable torture, lay Mutina, and the gleaming black hair sleekly parted on her small head *was turning snowy white before our eyes!*

"Great heavens, what is it?" asked the minister unsteadily.

The girl's hysterical movements ceased as de Grandin held a glass of aromatic ammonia and water to her lips, and she whimpered softly as her head rolled weakly in the crook of his elbow.

For a moment he regarded her solicitously; then, as he helped her to a chair, he turned to the clergyman. "It would seem the devil makes much ado about being cheated of a victim," he remarked almost casually. "This poor one was the inheritor of a curse with which she had no more to do than the unborn child with the color of his father's hair. *Eh bien*, I have that upstairs which will do more to revive her body and spirit than all the *eau bénite* in all the world's fonts."

Tiptoeing to the stairs he called: "Richard—Richard, my friend, come down forthwith and see what we have brought!"

There was a pounding of feet on the steps, a glad, wondering cry from the study door, and Richard Starkweather and Mutina, his wife, were locked in each other's arms.

"Come away, quickly, my friends," de Grandin ordered in a sharp whisper as he motioned us from the room. "It is a profanation for our eyes to look on their reunion. Anon we must interrupt them, for there is much to be said and much more to be done, but this moment is theirs, and theirs alone."

5

FIVE of us gathered in my drawing-room after dinner the following evening. Sergeant Costello, mellowed with the effects of an excellent meal, several glasses of fifteen-year-old *liqueur Chartreuse* and the fragrant fumes of an Hoyo de Monterey, lolled in the wing chair to the right of the crackling log fire. Richard and Mutina Starkweather, fingers entwined, occupied the lounge before the fireplace, while I sat opposite Costello. In the center, back to the blaze, small blue eyes flashing and dancing with excitement, tiny waxed mustache quivering like the whiskers of an irritable tom-cat, Jules de Grandin stood with his feet well apart, eyeing us in rapid succession. "Observe, my friends," he commanded, thrusting his hand into the inside pocket of his dinner coat and fishing out a newspaper stone-proof some four inches by eight inches in size; "is it not the grand surprize I have prepared for our evil-eyed friends?"

With a grandiloquent bow he handed me the paper, bidding me

read it aloud. In boldface type the notice announced:

CHEZ LA PANTOUFLE DORÉE
ENGAGEMENT EXTRAORDINARY!

The Sensation of the Year!
La Belle Mutina, former High Priestess of The Rakshasas
Will Positively Appear at this Club During the Supper Hour Tomorrow Night!
La Mutina, Far-famed Malayan Beauty, Will Perform the Notorious
DANCE OF THE INDONG MUTINA
Disclosing for the First Time in the Western Hemisphere The Devilish Rites of the Rakshasas
(Reservations for this extraordinary attraction will positively not be received by mail or telephone.)

I glanced at Mutina, sitting demurely beside her husband, then at the exuberant little Frenchman. "All right, what does it mean?" I asked.

"Ah, my friends, what does it not mean?" he replied with a wave of his hand. "Attend me—carefully, if you please:

"Last night at the club, when the good *Madame* took pity on us and lightened our darkness with the lovely presence of Madame Mutina, I was enchanted. When Madame Mutina invited our attention to the pussy-faced evil ones seated at the corner table I was enraged. When we proceeded to Madame Mutina's house and beheld the new-dead stretched so quietly and pitifully there, their spilled blood crying aloud to heaven—and me—for vengeance, *parbleu,* I was greatly interested.

"My friends, the little feet of Jules de Grandin have covered much territory. Where the eternal snows of the northland fly forever before the ceaseless gales, I have been there. Where the sun burns and burns like the fires of the fundamentalists' hell, there have I been. Nowhere, no land, is a stranger to me. And on my many travels I have kept my mind, my eyes and my ears widely open. Ah, I have heard the muted mumblings of the dwellers round Sierra Leone, when the frightened blacks croueh in their eabins and scaree breathe the name of the human leopards for fear of dreadful vengeanee. In Haiti I have beheld the unclean rites of *voudois* and witnessed the power of *papaloi* and *mamaloi.* The djinns and efreets of Araby, the *dracus,* werewolves and vampires of Hungary, Russia and Rumania, the *bhuts* of India—I know them all. Also I have been in the Malay Archipelago, and know the *rakshasas.* Certainly.

"Consider, my friends: There is no wonder-tale which affrights mankind after the lights are lit which has not its foundation in present or past fact. The legends of the loves of Zeus with mortal women, his liaisons with Danae, Io and Europa, they are but ancestral memories of the bad old days when wicked immortals—*incubi,* if you please—worked their evil will on humanity. In the Middle Ages, when faith burned more brightly than at present, men saw more clearly. Recall the story of *Robert le Diable,* scion of Bertha, a human woman, and Bertramo, a foul fiend disguised as a worthy knight. Remember how this misfortunate Robert was the battleground of his mother's gentle nature and his sire's fiendishness; then consider our poor Madame Mutina.

"In Malaya there exists a race of beings since the beginning of the ages, known variously as the people of Antu or Rakshasa. They are inferior fiends, possessing not much of potent magic, for they are heavily admixed with human half-breeds; but at their weakest they are terrible enough. They can in certain instances make themselves invisible, though only to some people. When visible, the Malays say they can be recognized because of their evil eyes, which are yellow-green and sharp as razors. It was such eyes I saw in the villainous faces

of the ugly ones who frightened Madame Mutina at the club last night. Even so, I did not connect them with the wicked breed of Rakshasas until we had listened to young Starkweather's story. When he told us of the evil-eyed creatures who persecuted his so lovely wife, and how the sentry at the palace gate declared he had seen no stranger leave, though the scoundrel had fled but a moment before, I remembered how Aristide, the waiter, assured us no one sat at the table where we saw the unlovely four with our own eyes even as he spoke.

"Also, had not the young *Monsieur* told us his lovely lady was *anak gampang*—without known father? But of course. What more reasonable than to suppose her mother had been imposed on by a fiend, even as Bertha of the legend married the foul incubus and was then left without husband at the birth of her daughter? Such things have been.

"Nature, as your American slang has it, is truly grand. She is exceedingly grand, my friends. For every plague with which mankind is visited, good, kind nature provides a remedy, can we but find it. The vampire can not cross running water, and is affrighted of wild garlic blooms. The holy leaves of the holly tree and the young shoots of the ash are terrible to the werewolf. So with the Rakshasa. The fruit and blossom of the lime is to him as molten lead is to us. If he makes an unclean feast of human flesh—of which he is most fond—and disguises it as curried chicken or rice, a drop of lime juice sprinkled on it unmasks it for what it is. A smear of the same juice on his flesh causes him intense anguish, and, while ordinary weapons avail not at all against him—remember how Friend Richard struck one with his saber, yet harmed him not?—a sword or bullet dipped in lime juice kills him to death. Yes.

"Last night, as I thought of these things, I determined on an experiment. *Tiens,* though it worked perfectly, I could have struck myself for that I caused pain to Madame Mutina when I spilled the lime juice on her.

"Now, here we are: Madame Mutina, beautiful as the moon as she lies on the breast of the sea, was part human, part demon. In Mohammed's false religion they have no cure for such as she. 'What to do?' I ask me.

"'Baptize her with water and the spirit,' I answer. 'So doing we shall save her soul alive and separate that which is diabolic from that which is good in her so lovely body.'

"You all beheld what happened when the holy water of sacrament fell upon her head last night. But, *grâce à Dieu,* we have won thus far. She are now all woman. The demon in her departed when her lovely hair turned white.

"Ah, but there was more to the mystery than this. 'Why were those three poor ones done to death? Why did she leave her husband almost at the threshold of the *lune de miel*—how do you say it?—honeymoon?' Those questions I also ask me. There is but one sure way to find out. This morning I talk seriously with her.

"It are needless for me to say she is beautiful—we are men, we have all the excellent eyesight in our eyes. But it *is* necessary that I report that the he-creatures of the Rakshasas had also found her exceedingly fair. When it was reported that she would be truly married to Friend Richard, not to be a wife in name only to a paralyzed old dodo of a sultan, they were furious. They sent an ambassador to her to say, 'You shall not wed this man.'

"Greatly did she fear these devil-people, but greater than her fear was her love for the gallant gentleman who would take her to wife in the face of all the palace scandal.

"Now, sacred to these unclean Rakshasas is the coconut pearl, the

pearl which is truly mother-of-pearl because it contains within an outer shell of lovely nacre an inner core of true pearl, as the cocoanut shell encloses the white meat. One of these —and they are very rare—our dear Madame Mutina stole from the Rakshasa temple to hold as hostage for the safety of her beloved. That is what she entrusted to me last night when she beheld the evil-eyed ones at the club.

"But though she held the talisman, she still feared the devil-people exceedingly, and when one of them followed her to Manila and threatened death to her beloved if she consorted with him, though it crushed her heart to do so, she fled from her husband, and hid herself securely.

"A woman's love plumbs any depths, however, my friends. Just to be near her wedded lord brought ease to her mangled bosom, and so she followed him to America, and because she dances like a snowflake sporting with the wind and a moonbeam flitting on flowing water, she had no trouble in securing employment at La Pantoufle Dorée.

"The Rakshasas have also traveled overseas. Seeking their sacred token they traced Madame Mutina, and would, perchance, have slain her, even as they murdered her companions, had she not trusted us with the pearl and bidden us bear it away to her house. Knowing where she lived, suspecting, perhaps, that she hid the precious pearl there, the evil ones reached the house before us, slew her friends, and waited for us, but we—Friend Trowbridge and I—put one of them, at least, to flight, while the arrival of Sergeant Costello and his arrest of Madame Mutina prevented their working their will on her. Meantime, I hold the much-sought pearl."

From his jacket pocket he took an object about the size and shape of a hen's egg, a beautiful, opalescent thing which gave off myriad coruscating beams in the rays of the firelight.

"But where do the evil-eyed sons of Satan and his imps hide themselves? Can we find them?" he asked. "Perhaps yes; perhaps no. In any event, it will take much time, and we wish for speed. Therefore we shall resort to a *ruse de guerre*. This morning, after I talked with Madame Mutina I did rush to the office of *le journal* with a celerity beautiful to behold, and, with the consent of the proprietor of La Pantoufle Dorée, who is an excellent fellow and sells most capital liquor, I inserted the advertisement which Friend Trowbridge has just read.

"*Eh bien*, but the devil-people will surely flock to that cabaret in force tomorrow night. Will they not place reliance in their devilish ability to defy ordinary weapons and attempt to seize the pearl from Madame Mutina as she dances? I shall say they will. But"—he twisted the ends of his mustache savagely—"but they reckon without an unknown host, my friends. You, *cher sergent*, will be there. You, Friend Richard, and you, also, Friend Trowbridge, will be there. As for Jules de Grandin, by the horns, blood and tail of the Devil, he will be there with both feet!

"Ha, *Messieurs les Diables*, tomorrow night we shall show you such a party as you wot not of. Your black blood, which has defied the weapons of men for generations untold, shall flow like springtime freshets when the mounting sun unlocks the icy fetters from the streams!

"And those we do not spoil entirely in the taking, you shall have the pleasure of seating in the electric chair, *mon sergent*," he concluded with a bow to Costello.

6

EVERY table at La Pantoufle Dorée was engaged for the supper show the following night. Here and there the bald head or closely shaven face of some regular patron caught the

soft lights from the central chandelier, but the vast majority of the tables were occupied by small, dark, sinister-looking foreigners, men with oblique eyes and an air of furtive evil which their stylishly cut dinner clothes and sleekly anointed hair could not disguise. Strategically placed, near every exit, were members of Sergeant Costello's strong-arm squad, looking decidedly uncomfortable in their hired dinner clothes and consuming vast quantities of the free menu provided by Starkweather's liberal arrangements with the management with an air of elaborate unconcern. Four patrolmen in plain clothes lounged near the cheekroom counter, eyeing each incoming guest with shrewd, appraising glances.

Near the dancing-floor, facing each other across a small table, sat de Grandin and Starkweather, while Costello and I made ourselves as inconspicuous as possible in our places near the swinging doors which screened the main entrance to the club.

Not many couples whirled and glided on the dancing-floor, for the preponderance of men among the patrons was noticeable, and the usual air of well-bred hilarity which characterized the place was almost entirely lacking.

It was almost half-past 11 when de Grandin gave the signal.

"Now, customers," announced the hostess, advancing to the center of the floor, "we're in for a real treat. You all know Ma'mselle Mutina; she's danced here before, but she never did anything like she's going to show tonight. This is ah-so-lutely the cat's meow, and I don't mean perhaps, either. All set, boys and girls? Come on, then, give the little lady a big hand!"

Two attendants ran forward, spreading a rich Turkish carpet over the smoothly waxed boards of the dancing-floor, and as they retreated every light in the place winked out, leaving the great room in sudden, absolute darkness. Then, like a thrusting sword-blade, a shaft of amethyst light stabbed through the gloom, centering on the purple velvet curtains beside the orchestra stand. No sound came from the musicians, and the place was so still I could hear Costello's heavy breathing where he sat three feet away, and the faint flutter of a menu-card sounded like the scutter of a wind-blown leaf in a quiet forest clearing.

Gazing fascinated at the curtains, I saw them move ever so slightly, flutter a moment, then draw back. Mutina stood revealed.

One little hand on each curtain, she stood like a lovely picture in a frame, a priceless jewel against a background of opulent purple velvet.

Over her head, covering her snowy hair, was drawn a dark-blue veil, silver-fringed and studded with silver stars, and bound about her brows was a chaplet of gold coins which held the magically glowing, opalescent *indong mutina* against her forehead like the sacred asp on an Egyptian monarch's crown. Her lovely shoulders and bosom were encased in a tight-fitting sleeveless zouave jacket of gold-embroidered cerise satin fringed with gilt hawk-bells. From hips to ankles hung a full, many-plaited skirt of sheerest white muslin which revealed the slim lines of her tapering legs with distracting frankness. About her wrists and ankles were garlands of cunningly fashioned metallic flowers, enameled in natural colors, which clashed their petals together like tiny cymbals, setting up a sweet, musical jingle-jangle each time she moved.

For a moment she poised on slim, henna-stained toes, bending her little head with its jewel of glowing pearl as if in response to an ovation; then, raising her arms full length, she laced her long, supple fingers above her head, pirouetted half a dozen

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A Very Short Ghost-Story

Highwaymen

By W. BENSON DOOLING

BOYLE slipped a long pistol from his boot, and drew the trigger back. Its sharp clack-click was mellowed by the soft swish of his cloak, as he drew it more closely about his shoulders and waist; for this was a chill night, one of the somber kind, and this a minute during such a night when sounds soften expectantly, when insects cease their drone, and seem to wait. Boyle pulled lower the sagging front of his featherless velvet hat, and slipped a mask of some dark stuff about his eyes. His horse neighed.

From below on the road by which he stood, straight and expectant on his mount—a road that twined and curled down the mountainside, a hard-packed road much used by the private carriages of the aristocracy, and hardly wide enough for a public coach—came the rattle of hoofs of a jogging pair, and the clank and turmoil of spinning wheels. The volume of sound increased, grew louder and more distinct as the vehicle approached, and Boyle heeled his beast to the road as a small coach wheeled into view.

"Stand and deliver, whelp!"

Boyle's voice was acid, with a sharpness that brooked no argument. A frightened coachman hauled in his pair.

A moon shone, but softly; it was not bright enough to illumine any sentiment on the driver's face, but it disclosed a gaunt, gray-mustached man, who alighted quickly from the coach—an elderly, dignified, green-coated man, who muttered, "Sire, I had heard your kind were more polite!"

"Politeness is the courtly gesture of honest hypocrites, Milord . . . but quick!—your valuables!" Boyle waved his weapon carelessly, and leant low in his saddle, peering quickly into the dark coach.

"My money? There; it's all I have with me, fortunately!" The gaunt man sneered, and passed a small leathern bag to Boyle's waiting hand.

Said Boyle, "No jewels?"

Came the answer, "When traveling? But no, no jewels."

"My thanks! Who's in there?"

"My daughter: she's but a child."

"Then . . . I leave you the most precious of your accouterments. . . ."

A pale, blond head leant from the open coach, with two pretty blue, curious, peering eyes, and a small hand grasped the gentleman's sleeve. "Father," asked a young, frightened voice, "is that man the ghost they talked about at the Inns, who haunts the hills—the bandit ghost, Father?"

"Peace, child! Well, Sire, may we go?"

"But soft!" To the child Boyle said kindly, "Filly, I am but a collector of revenues. I have never met the spook of whom you speak, though, in sooth, I've heard his name. But you'll cloud your pretty face, thinking too much on ghosts. Better forget them, like me, my pretty dear. . . . Sire, you are at liberty to go. . . . Quick, whelp!"

The blond head vanished, and the gentleman regained his seat and

slammed shut the door; the coachman whipped his horses on, too glad to go to resent the sobriquet "whelp" applied by Boyle.

Boyle heeled his sable, then gave him free rein. He wished the child had not spoken of the ghost, for Boyle did not believe in ghosts. Far forward he leant, and low-hanging branches threatened his hat. Once his cloak caught in brambles, and roughly tore loose again. The sharp wind was pleasing, biting at his hollow cheeks. Boyle was horribly emaciated: he was a sportive man, who drank and loved too much.

Night resumed its somber sounds: the chirping of tiny nocturnal insects; from somewhere away the hungry bay of a wolf; above, a screech-owl voiced its curdling sound. Boyle's horse drew back, affrighted; then, at a reassuring word from Boyle, moved on.

Suddenly he drew him in. This was a clearing in the wood, and the moon seemed suddenly more bright. Boyle was perplexed, and lost; he did not know this place. Strange! his horse had led him astray, though the beast knew so well the way from the road, through almost imperceptible paths in the thick wood, to the cabin that Boyle at present occupied.

A formation of trees, beyond the clearing, fascinated him: the moon shone full upon it, making strange shadows in the grass below. Sparse near the trunk, two trees stretched out long arms—chill and bare arms that touched, and seemed one lengthened arm. It looked like a gibbet, and, through some monstrous fantasy —caused, perhaps, by branches and leaves of trees beyond—the shadow on the sward enhanced this effect, and added a shadow like a man's, which seemed gently to move, to swing.

Affrighted, Boyle's horse drew back, and chawed his bit, and pawed with his forefeet, and rolled his flank. Boyle held him in, and perspiration beaded his brow: he saw that the horse was innocent of the trees and their fantasmagoria; that the beast was alarmed at something more subtle, something Boyle had not yet sensed.

"Soft, Ned!"

The beast was still: he trusted Boyle's intelligence.

"Stand and deliver, Sire!" The command came from behind him—a soft modulation, in courteous, almost tender tones, but hollow, somber, chilling; they seemed the voice of another world; the sentence seemed to come unwillingly, as though its author spoke against inclination, did something repugnant that seemed expected of him.

Boyle wheeled his horse. Before him, in the full moonlight, another horseman stood. His mount was snow-white, and fleshy, but looked fleet. Its rider was cloaked and masked, yet under the mask was a mat-white skull—a skull that did not grin, but held its jaws tight-set. A wisp of mustache adhered to where the upper lip had been. Dark, burning, liquid points shone through the mask slits; and the velvet hat was drawn too low for a forehead to be seen. Straight in his saddle the specter stood, holding his pistol muzzle toward Boyle's breast. He pulled his cloak about his waist, as though those fleshless ribs were chill. Boyle knew the saga of this one; knew that he had been hanged a hundred years before.

Boyle moaned: "The Ghost! . . . the devil! . . . the Ghost!"

Instinctively his hand reached down—a nervous, shaking, groping hand—and drew the pistol from his boot. A chill crept along his spine; his jaw gaped; his tongue slid out, strangely parched, and back again. His teeth chattered.

Clack-click! his pistol hammer made an awesome sound that seemed very loud. He swung the muzzle toward the other's head, and touched

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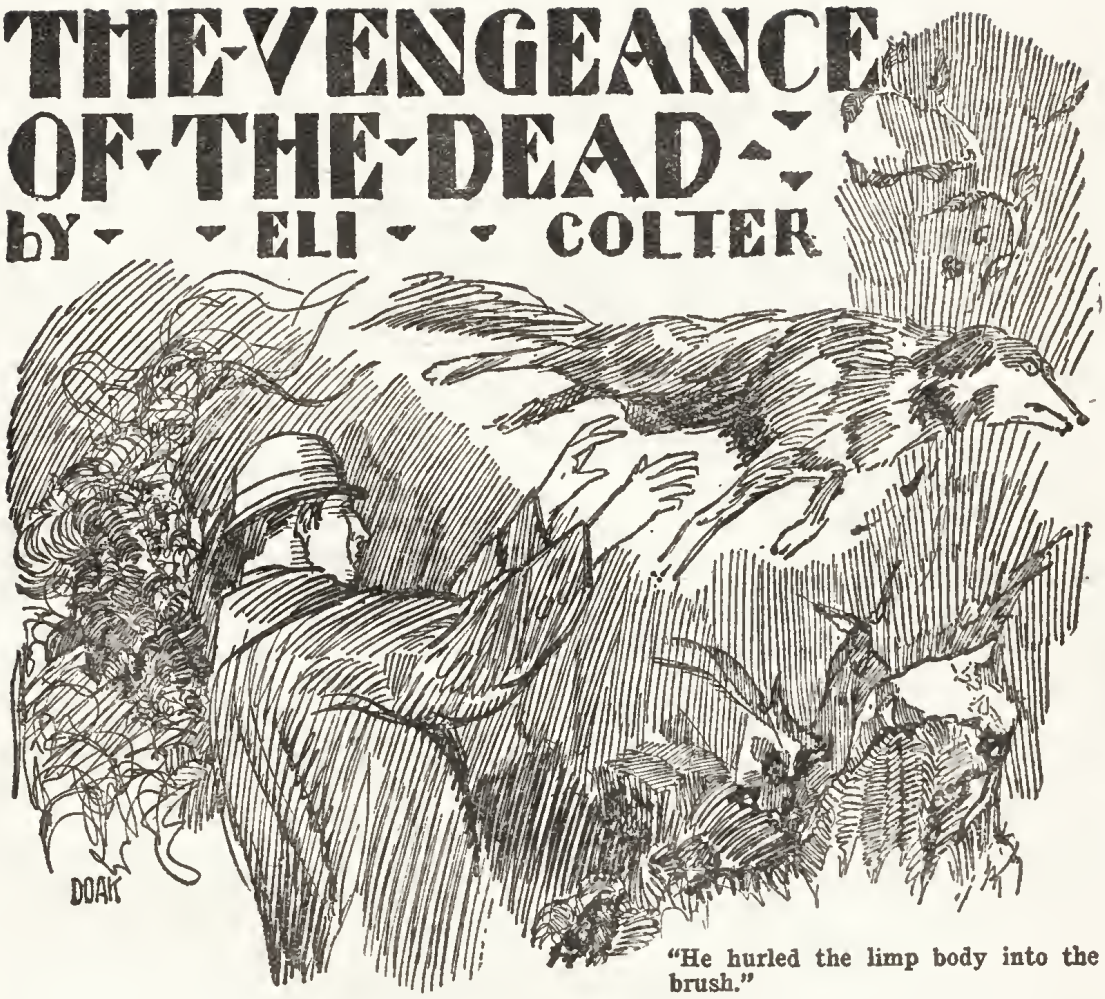
THE VENGEANCE OF THE DEAD

by ELI COLTER



"He hurled the limp body into the brush."

1. *The Marked Man*

"OH, LOOK who's here, folks!" Jane Lee rose to her knees in the sand and pointed her finger toward the sea. We, the whole group of us, were lolling around under a huge beach parasol. And I, with the rest, turned to see what had arrested Jane's attention, even as she informed us by adding, "There's Ben Tarrton."

Following her pointing finger, I glanced across the gayly hued crowds of bathers, to the long springboard jutting from the pier, where a solitary man stood poised leisurely, swaying over the water.

"There's Benny Tarrton, Dan." I turned to my younger brother, who lay sprawled on the sand at my side. "The chap you've been hearing so much about since you came home. Give him the once over. All you've heard is true."

Dan raised himself to his elbows, and I watched him covertly, my pride in him swelling the heart in me. His long body was hard and lean. His skin was bronzed to a deep oak-tan. He had all the earmarks of the typical outdoor man, though there was something in Dan more than that mere manliness you saw on the surface. We had always been very close, but he had been away from me so long now that there was, to my bewilderment, a tenuous and impenetrable veil raised between us. I was conscious of always struggling against it, ever since he had come

north, but of being as powerless as a man trying to batter his path through a veil of fog.

I studied him now, striving to place the thing that had come between us. His deep-set black eyes had lit with a trace of sardonic amusement as he focused them upon the figure poised on the springboard. I knew what he was thinking, rather closely. He was thinking over again the things he had said to me only that morning. Ben Tarrton! How the women did rave over the man! They exhausted every time-honored *cliche* in existence in an effort to express their admiration. Even the men asserted heartily that Tarrton was a regular fellow. Dan tossed his straight black hair out of his eyes and lit a cigarette. Then he looked at me with a grin, and gave me a sarcastic reply.

"Oh, so it's all true, is it? Well, I've heard plenty, Jesse. Sure he can come up to specifications?"

"He certainly can," I answered heartily. I hadn't known Ben so long, if you counted it by decades, but by mere years I had known him long enough to be able to judge, I thought. Dan's grin was almost a sneer. He blew a puff of smoke into the hot lazy air and surveyed Ben with large interest. "I'll call him over," I offered. Cupping my hands together, to form a sounding hollow, I raised my voice in a loud halloo. "Hi—Ben!"

The man on the springboard paused in the act of setting his superb body for a dive. And that's no mere term of admiration. He was superb. Six feet three, built like Cellini's Perseus, and his every line right then displayed to striking advantage by brilliant blue swimming shorts. He turned with his hands half raised in the air, nodding, and his head glinted in the sun. He lifted his resonant baritone voice in answer.

"Oh, there you are! Be right over."

Dan glanced idly at me, then his gaze went back to Ben, and he watched him intently as he made a clean, perfect dive, swam indolently to the shore and started up the beach. I wasn't paying much attention. My mind was irritatedly going over, again and again, that elusive difference in Dan.

Six years in Mexico had served to alienate Dan from our old set, what there was left of it. Between the additions and subtractions continually being accomplished by the Great Mathematician, it was almost a new set to Dan. He felt himself an outsider now, "a rank un-belonger," he had summed it up to me with faint cynicism. Down there below the Border strenuous labor under a broiling sun had made of him a different piece of flesh. In the face of all that grind and drill in the south, the idling of this pleasure-hunting crowd of ours seemed so futile and petty and vain.

I had listened to his saying all that over, repeatedly, as though he knew I sensed the difference in him and wanted to explain it away. But he was not explaining it away, by a long shot. Those differences he delineated were all on the surface—they had to do with the flesh; yes, exactly. And the difference in Dan was not of the flesh. I suppose it was of the spirit, soul, or whatever you choose to call it. But it was something inside of Dan that bothered me, and held me off and made of me a stranger also.

He had been very reluctant to come north, but I wouldn't take no for an answer, and I had advanced every logical argument I could think of. I had reminded him that he had a vacation coming. He hadn't taken one since he went there. I had recalled to him that he hadn't even come up for our father's funeral, though that wasn't his fault. Accident had taken the old chap so suddenly. Dan couldn't have got home before the funeral was over, anyway. But I mentioned it when I

was urging him to come. I was taking a party of old friends out to spend a month or more at father's old hunting-lodge, and I had insisted that Dan become one of the number. He had answered finally that the trip wouldn't mean anything to him, outside of seeing me again. But he would come.

He caught my gaze on him, gestured toward the rest of the group, scowled and spoke in an undertone. "Doesn't look very promising, Jesse, this outing of playboys, to a hard-boiled working *hombre* like yours truly. One thing is certain: I don't consider it entertaining listening to a continual round of silly enthusiasm over a handsome cake-eater."

I felt an uneasy, chilly sense of premonition. Something alien and sinister gripped me and held me still, prevented me from making any response. Why? Such a prescience was utterly without reason. What was there in Dan's disgruntled remark to cause any dark foreboding? I couldn't fail to know what he meant. His deep-set black eyes were still on Ben, who was drawing close to the group. And the group, men and women alike, were extravagantly sounding praises to Ben Tarrton.

Dan spoke again, his voice still lower, and something dragged my gaze to my brother's eyes. "That bird is due for a cropper some of these days, Jesse. I don't think a fellow of his type is too—well, too safe to have around. I wonder if I could persuade you to chalk off this party, some way."

"Rot!" I retorted, impatiently. "What right have you to say a thing like that? What do you know about him? You never saw him before, did you?"

"No, I never saw him before," Dan returned dryly. "But I've heard enough about him to last me the rest of my days."

"Well, forget it," I returned, my tone a little sharp perhaps. "I certainly shall not chalk off the party. We're going to the lodge and have a high old time roughing it, and you'll blend in after a day or two. You'll forget such nonsense when you see more of Ben. You've just heard so much chatter that you're prejudiced."

"Yes? Well, it's on your head, old scout. Only, you can't say I didn't warn you."

DAN'S utterance stopped short, since Ben had come up to us. I shivered involuntarily. There was something so malignant and menacing in Dan's eyes that for a moment I wondered if this were really my brother. That mysterious foreboding again! But I got to my feet, striving to brush it away from me, and held out a hand to Ben.

"Hello, old-timer," I greeted him. "So you did manage to get here, eh? I began to fear you weren't going to make it."

"So did I." Tarrton smiled. "And I had to compromise to get here at all. I had promised Markelle to join his yachting party. I go to them on the twenty-fourth. That gives me a week at The Wilds. Is this the crowd that's going?" He indicated the group behind us under the parasol, and I nodded.

And again, that something alien and sinister chilled me to the marrow. I shook myself, inwardly, angrily. It was downright damnably silly! There on the beach, in the bright hot sun, a crowd of prosaic pleasure-seekers going on a trip to the mountains. That's all we were. And we were in a modern world, in a modern atmosphere, and none of us was at all afflicted by superstitious or weird ideas. Why should I feel the chill of warning, of some obscene and unspeakable horror brooding over us, ready to swoop down? I bit my teeth hard on a curse. It was worse than silly—it was absurd. I looked hard

at Ben, as though to reassure myself that this was our ordinary world, that this was merely our commonplace gay crowd, and that everything was as it should be.

Ben was smiling at Jane Lee. Purposely, I forced myself to note everything about him that made him what he was, though I had done that same thing again and again. I saw nothing but the same old Ben. His eyes were red-brown, his heavy brows and lashes jet-black. Above them, his thick mop of perfectly waved hair was brilliant red-gold. His skin was always as white as a woman's. It never tanned, or burned and peeled. His cheek bones always bore a rose-like flush, and where his two dimples bit into his cheek, when he laughed, the color faded, as though one had pressed it away with a finger, then flooded slowly back. I find it hard to give you an accurate picture of the man. He was vividly unusual, as you can perceive. Once seen, he was not easily forgotten.

I had always considered him merely a fellow at that peculiar sense-provoking stage of muscular development, where the very living vibrant flesh and blood seem to exude magnetism. Dan would be forced to admit that Ben possessed a subtle charm, something on which you couldn't lay your finger, something that did not find its genesis in his undeniable and extravagant beauty, nor in that unfailing graciousness enhanced by fine mannerisms and smooth courtesy. Determined to keep a hold on my common sense, in spite of Dan's queer actions, I turned to introduce him to Ben.

"Dan," I prompted him to decent politeness, "I want you to meet Ben Tarrton." Dan rose to his feet with a kind of insolent reluctance too subtle for Ben to notice, but I saw it and my irritation rose. What in thunder was the matter with Dan today? With me? With everything? I said, almost angrily, "Ben, this is my kid brother, just up from his beloved job in Mexico. I managed to drag him away from it long enough for this outing. He's heard so much about you that he's green with envy." That last was a trifle malicious, and Dan grinned at it.

"Applesauce isn't for beach consumption," Tarrton countered. "Glad to know you, Dan. All we've heard from Jesse since you said you'd come was Dan this and Dan that. He's been as tickled as a kid with a new toy."

"Yes?" Dan's gaze flashed at me and his black eyes lit. "Jesse is an awful kidder," he answered lightly, and Tarrton moved on to the rest of the crowd.

But under Dan's light words, and in the sudden gleam of his eyes, I saw the evidence, felt the current, of the affection that had run between us of old. I took swift advantage of it as we reseated ourselves on the sand side by side. I made another desperate lunge to get closer to him, to find the old Dan under this strange veil of chill between us.

"Dan," I said quietly, "can't you see that the fellow really has charm?"

"Certainly," my brother agreed. "I've contacted that unnamable force before, Jesse. Seen guys I've had to like outwardly, when inwardly I felt instinctively that I'd like to kill 'em."

"Dan!" I gripped his arm, startled at that malignant look which had again crossed his face. "What in the world is the matter with you?"

"Nothing at all." But his face was savage. "Nothing is the matter with *me*. But I'm warning you, my dear brother, keep your eye on that pretty cake-eater of yours. Maybe cake isn't all he eats."

What could he mean by such a remark? There was something so utterly menacing in his eyes as he

said it, that I shrank from him involuntarily. I glanced at Ben, and back at Dan, bewildered, shaken, only to find Dan's face already smoothed to a mildly sarcastic smile. And I heard Jane Lee remonstrating vigorously about Ben's short stay with the party.

"Oh, Matt! Did you hear that? Ben is only going to be with us for a few days!"

I glanced at her. She had turned to her husband, who was lying beside her flat on his back, a disreputable old Panama hat pulled down over his face. At his wife's words, Lee shoved the hat upward an inch and frowned at the new arrival.

"What does this mean, young man?" Matt demanded, in mock severity. "We've been planning this outing at The Wilds for over a month, and here at the last moment you ditch us. How come?"

"Oh, just my terribly rotten luck, Matt," Ben explained. He had seated himself in the center of the group. "I promised to attend this outing a month ago, granted. You've got me there. But on the same day I promised Markelle to attend his yachting party, too. Jesse set the date at The Wilds for the seventeenth. The mixup arose because Markelle left his date open. And here last week he called me up and said they were leaving harbor on the eighteenth. He's a touchy cuss, and I couldn't turn him down cold. He finally said they'd hold up for me till the twenty-fourth. Sorry, but it was the best I could do."

"Oh, heck! That makes me tired! Ben, you're a mean person to go and bust up the party that way!" Nan Boyce wrinkled her nose in disgust, and Tarrton laughed.

"I'm not busting up the party, monkey. The rest of you will have three or four weeks there after I'm gone. Besides, six days is better than not going at all, for me at least."

"Rather," agreed Marian Gladstone, the one elderly woman in the party, our conventional chaperone.

I swung around to Dan, defensively, as though I wanted to convince him of something, when it was only myself I wanted to convince. "There you are," I said, peevishly, like an irritated child. "You see? They're just a group of ordinary merrymakers out for a good time, and Ben's the pet of the bunch. How can you make such uncalled for remarks about him? Dan, I'd like to jar you into your old self."

"Don't." My brother's smiling face went cold, with a grimness that was almost inhuman. "I would not go back and traverse again the hell I've known for all eternity could offer. I am as I am today, and you can never make me any different. Take me as I am and be patient with me. You may trust me. I won't spoil your party because I detest men like Tarrton. But I shall certainly keep my eye on him, I can tell you that. Marian's talking to you."

"Oh, pardon me. I didn't hear you, Marian." I moved away slightly from Dan and glanced across at our chaperone. "What were you saying?"

"Merely that Waggener Wilds sounds rather primitive," Marian answered. "Is it?"

"You may judge for yourself," I informed her, rather absent-mindedly, my mind still on the puzzling aspect of that antagonism Dan felt for Ben Tarrton. "I'm glad you're going to see it at last. It's quite a lodge. When Father built it, you know, he swore that he was going back to nature. He wouldn't have phone, electric light or radio on the place. The only way you can reach it is by gravel road running through virgin forest."

"Wow!" Lee sat up suddenly,

running his hands through his hair to make it stand on end. "Brrrrr! I'm a wild man! I thirst for the jungles! How many acres am I gonna have to run wild in?"

"Eighty," I answered, smiling at their horseplay. I was grateful for their nonsense. It wrapped the mantle of my sanity closer about me, brought me closer to my sun-lit ordinary world, divided me momentarily from those chill and forbidding shadows that shrouded Dan. Warmed, I answered almost as lightly as Ben had spoken. "It's on a sizeable mountain, plenty far enough from civilization. The R. & S. railroad runs by a mile and a half away. The nearest town is nine miles distant. Natchez, the caretaker, keeps six dogs to save himself from going looney from loneliness—a brace of police dogs, a collie, a red setter, and a couple of big fierce bloodhounds. The hounds are wicked brutes. Natchez always keeps them chained when there's anyone at the lodge, which isn't often. I've only been up once myself since Dad died. You'll feel like Robinson Crusoe once you get on that mountain top. Better not forget any such little things as collar buttons and suspenders," I finished, striving to perfect and hold the casual air I had almost attained.

"What's a suspender?" Jane Lee hooted derisively, and got to her feet, dragging Matt after her. "If this outfit is starting for Waggener Wilds at the ungodly hour of 7 in the morning, I move that we hustle along instead of lounging around here arguing about who's going to play with the dogs and who's going to hunt collar buttons."

"Second the motion!" shouted Lee, jumping up from the sand. "All in favor say aye. The ayes have it. Let's go!" He linked his arm possessively through his wife's and started toward the board walk on a run, pulling her along with him.

I was grateful for their chattering, but it didn't help me much. I hadn't been able to achieve the casual, and what little I had gained was slipping again as I flicked a glance at Dan. He was watching Ben Tarrton, like a lynx, his face impassive, his eyes unreadable. There was growing on me an impression that angered me because I didn't have the power to shake it, an impression that something was going to happen, something horrible and gruesome. I set my teeth. Then Tarrton had passed, and Nan Boyce caught his arm as he ran, and the two of them overtook the Lees together. The four turned down the board walk at a brisk pace, and Rick Boyce spoke to me in a good-natured grumbling.

"Guess I'm deserted, Jesse."

"We'll take you into custody, Rick." Jim Gladstone wiped his perspiring bald head, helped his wife up and pushed his spectacles closer to his near-sighted eyes. "Are we off, Jesse?"

I nodded and fell into step with them, throwing one arm across Dan's shoulder. It was an instinctive gesture with me, as though I could by that physical touch reach him, dispel the insane fear that was rising in me, and beat off the dark cold cloud that was enveloping him. We moved off abreast, the five of us. Then suddenly, apropos of nothing, Marian Gladstone said:

"Do you know, Jim—I'm afraid."

"Eh—what? *Afraid*?" Her husband looked at her in astonishment, and I started. Marian afraid! Marian wasn't afraid of the devil himself. Jim's look turned to a stare, and he asked sharply, "What do you mean? What in the world are you afraid of?"

"It's not what I'm afraid of." Marian shivered. "It's whom I'm afraid *for*."

"Well, for the Lord's sake, who are you afraid for?" Jim demanded, and

in a sidelong glance I caught Dan watching them both.

"I'm afraid for Ben," Marian said sharply. Rick Boyce looked at her pop-eyed, and I felt Dan's shoulders go rigid under my arm.

"Why?" Jim almost snapped.

"I—I don't know." She shook herself, as though she were coming out of a daze, and turned her eyes on me. There was a puzzled, confused look in them. Her eyes expressed what I felt. She repeated, "I don't know. I guess it's just that he's too popular. You know what I mean. He's too happy. He's too well off. He's too unearthly beautiful. Here he is, at the age of thirty-six, wealthy, carefree, friend to everybody and loved by everybody." She stopped speaking abruptly, and we all waited in a tense silence for her to go. The silence lengthened unpleasantly, and Jim broke it in nervous impatience.

"Well, what of it? Is it so unusual to see a man without enemies?"

"N-n-no." Marian frowned, shrinking uneasily as though she saw something that frightened her. "I—I don't know how to say it. I guess it's that he—that life is too smooth for him. It isn't according to the laws of the world that it can go on, don't you see? He—he'll——" she stumbled, and came down to the blatantly ordinary. The finish of her sentence was really ridiculous. "He'll marry the wrong girl and be wretchedly unhappy—or he'll get in an accident and be killed or crippled."

"Oh, is that all that's bothering you!" Jim laughed aloud.

"All right, laugh!" Marian flared darkly. "But I tell you, if there was only one person who disliked him violently, I'd feel easier about him. He'd seem more—more human, someway."

I felt Dan breathing quickly, felt the stiffening of his arm against my side, and Jim laughed again, but not so wholesomely as he had before. "What a thing to say!" he remarked.

"And what a beastly turn the conversation has taken," Rick Boyce put in, uneasily, as though he didn't approve of what was being said and wanted to turn talk to other channels. But Dan followed up Marian's remarks with a short question.

"How long has Tarrton been a member of our particular set, Marian?"

"Nearly all the time you've been in Mexico. Almost five years. Why?"

"Well——" Dan gave her a keen look, and that strange cloud or veil passed over his deep black eyes. His tone was jesting, but his face made me quiver with a revulsion of sick fear. "The rest of the crowd is all new to me, Marian," he went on. "Even Rick's lately acquired wife, Nan. But—if it will make you feel any easier about Tarrton, I don't mind admitting that I—don't like him."

"What, Dan? What's that you say?" Rick raised inquiring brows at him. "Why, you never saw him before, did you?"

"No." Dan shook his head soberly. "I never saw him before. But I've a right to my opinions, I presume. And I simply don't like him, that's all."

His voice chopped off, curtly, and nobody said anything. We turned onto the board walk and hurried to overtake the rest of the party. Before God, I felt that the world was coming to an end, or that something equally as cataclysmic was approaching us. The feeling of impending disaster that had been growing on me all day swooped down with a roar I could almost hear. I want to tell you I was frightened, I was scared stiff, and I don't know any other way to say it. I knew, with a strange sickening certainty, that we were all of us rushing headlong into a vast, harrow-

ing experience, that there loomed right across our path some horrible, ghastly danger.

If I could have turned the whole crowd back right then, I would have done it. But I knew they would only laugh at me, and behind my back decide that I was a very disagreeable and insulting host. I couldn't do anything but go on, with my feet feeling like lead, a nauseating emptiness at the pit of my stomach that made me want to retch, and a tension put on my nerves that made me want to scream. As we reached the bath house down the beach where the others had turned in to dress, and Rick and the Gladstones followed them, I held Dan back, my arm still about his shoulder.

"Listen here," I said harshly, staring at him so doggedly that he had to meet my gaze finally. He did it in a kind of sad defiance. "I want to know what makes you act this way, Dan!" I demanded. "You've put me in the shivers, and you've scared the daylights out of Marian just by your thoughts. What in the name of all that's holy is the matter with you? You'll crab the whole party if you don't come out of it."

"No, it isn't I who'll crab your party." My young brother held my eyes with that strange, sad expression. "And I haven't anything to say, further, because I am not sure. I only have a hunch. I've had it for a long time. All I can say to you is, for God's sake watch Ben Tarrton! And—it isn't because of anything I fear may happen to him as your guest, either! Who's this Natchez you've got up at the lodge?"

"I'll tell you later," I answered. Jim and Marian were coming out of the bath house, talking in low, earnest tones, and I wanted desperately to attain a casual air before the whole crowd got together again.

I don't know whether I managed it or not. Marian seemed to have put by her queer impressions, and the rest of the party came along presently, laughing and chaffing each other. Whatever gloominess may have hung over me was effectually neutralized by their giddy banter. We rushed over to the garage where the cars were waiting, the luggage all in, and piled into the seats. I took the wheel of the big Hammerton eight that belonged to me, and the others trailed along in the rear as I stepped on the gas and turned her loose down the boulevard. But riding with me, even closer than Dan, who sat at my side dark and silent, was a leering evil presence that made me fairly hunch over the wheel, my eyes glued to the road ahead.

2. *Cassimer Natchez*

I DON'T think that either Dan or I spoke again till we had roared into town, put up the car and hurried on to the hotel where the party was stopping over night. Once we attained our room, having evaded the rest of the crowd, I still found it impossible to break the ugly silence that brooded over Dan and me, until he abruptly reminded me that I was going to tell him about the caretaker at the lodge. Relieved at having any topic of conversation that would keep me going for any length of time, I launched into a painstaking description of Natchez.

Cassimer Natchez was a tall, powerfully built man in the middle forties. His eyes were set into their sockets in a queerly square orifice. Even the lines of his face and head were square, and those same lines were carried out in the length and breadth of his big body. The first time I saw him I thought he must be the kind of man from whom the cubists chose their prototype. He was always silent, in a forbidding, callous manner, as though life had dealt him so many heartless punches that he felt no reason for being gracious to anybody, since he couldn't trust

anybody. You felt his distrust even before you saw it in his eyes. A passable civility was the nearest approach to courtesy he ever attained. But he was dependable, and Father had installed him at the lodge and I did not feel exactly licensed to discharge him just because I didn't like him, now that Father was dead and I was left with a free rein.

Father was always picking up queer characters. The way he had come into touch with Natchez was characteristic of him. He had found Cass sitting on a park bench, late one afternoon as he was hurrying across the park to hail a taxi and get in out of the rain. He took a speculative glance at Natchez, sitting there in the downpour, wet to the skin, huddled in a crouch, trying ineffectually to pull the cork of a small bottle. Something about Natchez arrested Father's attention, and he stopped abruptly. Father was always interested in the bench holders.

"Let me help you," he offered, reaching out a hand for the bottle. "I have a corkscrew in my pocket."

He took the bottle from Natchez's chilled fingers, while the derelict sat and stared at him open-mouthed. But Father didn't pull the cork. He threw the bottle violently into the street, where it smashed against the curb, and scattered its contents into the gutter. The man on the bench leaped up with an angry oath.

"Why in hell did you do that?"

"I saw the red skull and crossbones on the label, my friend," Father told him, quietly, pushing him back down upon the bench, and seating himself beside him, forgetting all about the driving sheets of rain. "Now, why were you going to do that?"

"I've no reason for living," Natchez muttered; then he proceeded to tell Father a long rigmarole about himself, a conglomeration of the true and false, I suspect, but gullible old Father believed every word. He felt sorry for Natchez, and the upshot of it was that he installed him as caretaker at the lodge. He had been there ever since.

Dan listened silently until I had finished the account of how Natchez came to be at the lodge; then he asked, "Why don't you like him?"

"I've told you," I answered, with some impatience. "He's surly and uncivil. He's proved himself dependable and honest. But it wouldn't hurt him to try courtesy for a change. He's too damned sour for his own good."

"Maybe he's had something to make him sour," Dan suggested.

"I believe he had a daughter." That may have been a trifle nasty, but I'm a bachelor, and none too trusting in the matter of women. I've always tolerated them, and some of them I've liked. But I never loved any of them, and I failed to see why any man should. Also, I had a theory that any man who kept a woman around continually was letting himself in for a lot of grief. Dan chuckled.

"Still the same old woman-hater, eh? Well, try to find some good in this Natchez. I've a hunch he may be a pretty good sort, under the crust."

"Say, are you crazy?" I demanded, sourly. "You rave. Here you make all manner of nasty insinuations against Ben, whom you've never seen before, and now you're standing up for that beast Natchez, and you haven't seen him yet. What have you been drinking? Or is it dope?"

"Neither," Dan answered, his sober face making me ashamed of my testiness. "It's intuition. Down there on that job of mine I've had a lot of time to think. I've been pretty much alone. And I've been studying various things. I had to have something to take up my mind, if I wanted to preserve my sanity. Among other things I've been delving into the supernatural. I suppose you'll sneer at that."

"No." I shook my head, though I felt suddenly uneasy again. "I don't sneer at it, but I don't put any credence in it, either. You aren't getting to be a spook-chaser, are you?"

He merely looked at me. The remark had been facetious and trivial enough to cause him offense, and I can't say that I blame him. But I was so nerve-fagged that I didn't have good judgment. The very air about me was increasingly oppressive. I could have sworn there were sulfurous fumes insulting my nostrils with their fetid effluvia. It made me dizzy, sick.

"I know what's the matter," I said abruptly. "I'm sick. Just a slight megrim. The sea air never did agree with me any too well. I'll be all right once we reach the lodge, and that atmosphere up there will knock the doldrums out of me. Come on and let's get to bed. We're making an early start tomorrow."

Dan did not speak, but he assented with a nod and began slowly to undress. I pretended to go almost immediately to sleep. I didn't want to talk any more. I wanted to think over the incidents of the whole day, to assault again the baffling problem of Dan's strangeness, to strive to analyze the veil that was grown into a foglike wall between us. He crawled in beside me, presently, and put out the light. I don't know which of us slept the least. I knew from his breathing now and then that he was awake, but I never once let him know I was awake. It was the same thing that weighed us both down, only he knew more of what it was than I. I only knew that I, like Marian Gladstone, was afraid.

It was evening of the next day before we arrived at the lodge, though we roared along at a good pace. I had managed to get in a little sleep before I got up that morning, and I wasn't feeling too much off my feed when Dan and I joined the crowd. There was such a bustle of getting ready and hurrying to be off from the hotel that nobody had much time for imagining things. Then, again, the morning air was warm and clear, and it brightened me a great deal. After I settled down in my car, with Dan at my side and the back of the car piled with luggage, I resolutely kept clear of any subject that could upset me again—Ben Tarrton, or Cassimer Natchez, or supernatural business, or anything else. I turned the old Hammerton loose and let her roll. Dan was content to leave me to my driving and my thoughts. Part of the time he dozed. We stopped only once, for lunch, and then rushed on again, depending on being at the lodge in time for dinner. We made it neatly, and Natchez came down the steps of the lodge to open the car doors and take out the luggage, as we idled down to a stop before the building.

"Hello, Natchez," I greeted him, throwing open the foredoor and ignoring his habitual scowl. "How's the world treating you? My brother Dan, Natchez, just up from Mexico. I wrote you he was coming."

Natchez grunted sourly, glanced past me toward Dan, and his gaze riveted. His scowl evaporated—that's the only way to say it. I never saw such a change in a man's face. In one moment the dour, rude Natchez I knew was there; then a bright, astonished look passed across his features, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud throwing its rays upon a mountain. You know what I mean. You've seen sudden sun on a mountain. While the mountain was in the shadow it looked chill and bleak, colorless as though it were shrouded in snow. But the moment the sun reached it you saw to your amazement that the mountain was fresh, alive and green, and that which you had thought to be snow was revealed as patches of white, fragrant flowers.

You've had that experience? Well, that's what happened to Natchez for just one moment as he gazed at Dan, and I heard him mutter, "Borden Waggener come alive again!" (Borden Waggener was my father.) Then the sun was gone from his face, and the same old grumpy Natchez acknowledged the introduction sullenly, "How-do."

I grinned at Dan as the other cars came to a stop behind us, and Natchez began piling out the bags onto the porch steps. We got out, gratefully stretching ourselves, and turned to see that everybody had arrived safe. Then the dogs came running up in a pack, just as Ben Tarrton stepped down from Lee's car and started to join me. To my astonishment Ben stopped short, and some of the fine coloring ebbed from his cheeks. I stared, and turned to see what had startled him. He was gazing straight at the dogs, and they had come to a halt as abruptly as he. They were all silent, not barking and frisking as they usually did, and the big ugly hounds were in the lead. Like a pack of wolves, they herded together, their hackles rising, their noses snarling and their lips writhing back from their threatening teeth.

"Natchez!" I whirled sharply upon the caretaker, abruptly unstrung and thrown back into the disgusting abyss of apprehension that had engulfed me the night before. And at sight of Natchez I shivered and fought to keep from crying out. He, too, was staring at Ben though Ben didn't see it, with red, gleaming eyes and snarling lips, just like the dogs. "Natchez!" I snapped. "Take those damned dogs of yours back there and chain them up! Move! They're regular savages."

Natchez gave an odd little sigh, a quick intake of breath, and I saw him quiver from head to foot. Then again that lightning change passed over his face. He was again merely sour old Natchez. He leaped upon the hounds, with no more fear than if he had been blood brother to them, grasped them firmly by their collars and dragged them away toward the garage. The other dogs followed. For a second I couldn't take my fascinated eyes from the caretaker. Twice, in a short space of moments, I had seen incredible changes sweep him, just from his mere looking on another man. Sight of Dan had softened him into a fine humanity. Sight of Ben Tarrton had turned him into a fiend. I had the time to wish fervently that we had never come, before common courtesy drove me to thought of Ben.

"Don't mind the hounds, Ben. Natchez should have had them chained. I'll see that he keeps them chained as long as we're here." I turned to him with the best apology I could muster. He was still white, and he dragged his gaze from the dogs, acknowledging my words with a smile. But the smile was forced.

"I'm afraid of dogs, Jesse," he said simply. "I always have been."

"Well, I'll see that they bother you no more," I assured him.

That would explain the dog's snarling at him, I told myself. They knew he was afraid of them, and silly old Natchez was angered at anybody his dogs didn't like. He had some ridiculous theory to the effect that any man dogs distrusted couldn't be of much account. But I knew even as I armed myself with that explanation that it was sophistry. Dan had already poisoned me toward Ben, enough so that I was beginning to wonder what kind of vice was hidden beneath his dazzling exterior. I was impatient with myself for it, but I knew I had a slightly cool manner as I motioned Ben to go on up the steps, and invited the rest of the crowd to come on into the house.

WE ALL went up the steps together, and around me I heard them exclaiming over the

beauty of the big log house. It was more like a sublimated fortress than a private summer home. The crowd pattered up the wide steps, and poured into the hall as I threw open the door, to come to a chattering group in the living-room before the big stone fireplace. Father had planned the house, and my father had loved space. The rooms were big, the ceilings were high, and the fireplace would take a six foot log. I had always loved it before, although I will admit it had seemed gloomy, in a lonely way, built as it was in a forest on the top of an isolated mountain.

But now, in spite of the gay chatter and the ohing and ahing of the women at the unusual features of the huge building, it was suddenly more than gloomy and dark. It was sinister, brooded over by that same nameless apprehension that had got me in its power down on the beach. Shake it I could not. I was nervous as a cat. The shadows in the corners were palpitating with leering, ugly shapes, that flickered as the flames from the fireplace threw their light on the wall. I heard Jane Lee remark something about the closed door across the hall, and I glanced at it, with a feeling of passionate regret.

Besides the living-room in which we had gathered there were, on this side of the entrance hall, two more rooms, kitchen and dining-room. Across the hall was a kind of den and library combined. Adjoining it was a long room that had been my father's private and personal "lair," as he called it. It was the door to that room which was closed, and it should stay closed. It had been locked since his death, all the contents of the room left undisturbed, and I took a kind of melancholy pleasure in knowing that the fact would have pleased him.

As my eyes came back from that locked door, I became aware that Ben Tarrton was speaking to me.

"What's the idea, Jesse?" He was gesturing toward the windows. And I saw that he had noticed the barricade of heavy steel bars beyond the panes.

"Wild animals," I told him. "The first caretaker Father had up here woke one night to the tune of breaking glass, to find a panther in the room. He succeeded in killing the cat but he died of his wounds. Father was badly broken up about it and he immediately installed those bars. Nothing bigger than a squirrel could enter this house when the doors are shut. I should say nothing bigger than an ant, considering the screens."

The others went on talking volubly about the house, and I was glad to be left to my thoughts for a moment. I looked intently about the interior of the room. Why did the lodge seem different to me from what it had been before? Why was there sullen anger in the very atmosphere of the walls? Why was the odor of death in the air? With an abrupt determination to get out into the sunset and shake the fustiness from my brain, I excused myself and walked out upon the front porch. Natchez had chained the hounds, had put the last car in the garage, and was coming back to carry in the luggage.

As I paused on the top step of the stairs leading down from the porch, a rough, heavy-set man emerged from the garage, glanced curiously at me, and stopped to light a cigarette. I nodded toward him with my head, as Natchez came to a halt just below me, and asked, "Who's your friend, Natchez?"

"Hobo," Natchez answered shortly, not even looking at me. "They come up once in a while from the railroad and ask for a handout. This one drifted along a couple of days ago. Ex-service man. I felt sorry for him. So I let him stick around and wash windows, beat rugs and so on, getting the house ready for you, to earn his grub. I'll send him on about his business, now you've come. But"—Natchez hesitated and shot me a dark

glance—"even a dirty hobo is company in this God-forsaken place."

"All right, Natchez." I silenced him, shortly. I didn't like his habit of always ringing in some remark about the loneliness of the lodge. "I just wondered. Give him a good dinner before you send him off."

Natchez nodded, and I turned to go back into the house. I found that I didn't care about the sunset after all. I was too infernally restless to be satisfied anywhere. As I passed into the hall I noticed idly that the dogs were fawning about the tramp, and that he patted them absent-mindedly. I heard Natchez call the man to come and give a hand with the luggage. Conscious of an idle curiosity to get a closer look at the stray, I paused inside the living-room near the door and stood watching from the corner of my eye as Natchez entered the hall followed by the other man, both of them heavily loaded with bags from the cars.

On closer inspection the stranger gave unmistakable evidence of being a typical example of the genus hobo. A battered felt hat was cocked on one side of his head. His coat was frayed and stained, most of its seams ripped and showing the dirty lining. He wore no vest over his ragged shirt, and a piece of rope did duty for suspenders, tied snugly around the waist of his rumpled and faded trousers. A heavy growth of stubble gave his face the uncouth, disreputable look of a professional tramp. But even without the stubble the face was evil enough. Little, ugly, mean eyes, grotesquely far apart, glared out from under a low forehead, like an ape's. His cheeks were broad and sunken, his mouth wide, loose and obscene, drooling slightly open over yellowed, tusklike teeth. Oh, he was a specimen for you! I told myself right then that I shouldn't care to meet him alone on a dark, blowing night.

As he passed me I became conscious of one thing about him that made me turn my face away to hide a smile. One incongruous fling at sartorial dignity was in his attire. Stuck into his dirty soft shirt collar was a tie—one of those cheap, ready-made bow affairs with short celluloid nibs on each side to hold it in place—though it was frankly pinned in place with a rusty safety-pin. This particular neckpiece was fashioned of bright green silk thickly studded with yellow polka dots. Natchez, seeing my eyes on the tie, leered at me as he went by and began to ascend the stairs.

Just at that moment Ben crossed toward me and paused at my elbow.

"I'd like to run up to my room for a moment, Jesse," he said.

I was reminded abruptly that I had forgotten to tell Natchez in what order to place the luggage. I had been so upset by my senseless apprehensions that I was becoming careless in my duties as host. I told Ben to come right along and I would show him his room, that I wanted to speak to Natchez, anyhow. We went down the hall and up the stairs, and I paused with a gesture toward the door of the room I had intended for Ben. Natchez and the other man were just piling the luggage in a heap to one side, and I called Natchez to bring Mr. Tarrton's luggage to this room. I added directions as to the placing of the rest of the luggage in the different rooms. The hobo stood with his back to me, and did not pay any attention to what I was saying.

Ben waited till I had finished giving orders to Natchez, then he asked quietly, "Shall I go right in, Jesse?"

I nodded and was about to speak, but the words died on my tongue. The tramp, hearing the sound of Ben's voice, raised, whirled and stared at him. The mean little eyes narrowed. The hobo started to say something, then clamped his jaws together grimly, a sneer on his loose, obscene mouth, and his huge hairy hands clenched involuntarily. I shot

a glance at Ben. Ben was eyeing the man keenly, slightly puzzled. Then recognition flashed into Ben's red-brown eyes, his handsome face froze contemptuously, and he abruptly stepped into the room I had assigned him and closed the door.

With a feeling of helpless consternation, I turned and started back down the stairs. What in God's name was the matter with this whole trip? Things had started going wrong the moment Dan had laid eyes on Ben, back there on the beach. Was the whole world suddenly conspired to heap on Ben dislike and unpleasant contacts?

Cutting sharply into my harassed thoughts I heard the voice of the hobo speaking to Natchez, about Ben: "Damned, insufferable cocky snob! I'd like to paste him one."

"The man is my employer's guest," Natchez cut him short. "You'd oblige me by holding your tongue."

"Well, he's no guest of mine, damn him!" the tramp retorted. "He was my captain overseas, and I'd like to mess his pretty face for him."

Natchez reproved the man sharply, as I passed beyond range of hearing, descending the stairs toward the living-room. It was with something of relief that I had caught the hobo's last sentence. Ben had been his captain overseas. Ben, as an officer, would have taken no nonsense from such a human beast, and the tramp was the exact species of lout to resent being made to toe the line. I laughed at myself, rather hollowly, for my old-womanish fears. I thought I could see now the whole train of unprecedented incidents that had put me in such a state of foolish apprehension.

In the first place, Ben was so well liked by everybody, as Marian had said, that I had been shocked by Dan's aversion to him. On top of that Marian had voiced her silly ideas, and given her own explanation of them, but I had chosen to put a deeper meaning to a woman's whim. Then the dogs had snarled at him, but he had explained that by making his admission that he was afraid of dogs. The caretaker had snarled at him, also, but as I have already said, Natchez hated anyone his dogs didn't like. The tramp's reason for disliking him was already made clear. And I, in a hypersensitive state, had magnified every trivial incident and made mountains where not even molehills existed.

And I walked into the living-room to join my guests, stubbornly laughing at my idiocy. It was odd that all those little things had linked together so swiftly, in such a way as to impress themselves upon my mind. But it was only coincidence, and it might well be had I not already been upset a trifle by the strangeness about Dan that I would never have noted or given a second thought to such insignificant trifles. Yet, even as I came to a halt in the living-room, and glanced over at my brother Dan, I knew I was lying to myself. Something hideous was in the air, and all my bravado and attempt at cold reasoning could not exorcise the devils that had gotten into my brain. What, I asked myself, with a shudder, what horror was there in the lodge waiting for us?

3. The Rising Terror

NATCHEZ, against the coming of my party, had brought in Chin Hoy from the city, to cook for us. Chin and Natchez had their rooms out over the garage. Chin, who had worked for me many times before and knew my tastes, had gotten us a very fine dinner that evening, but I hadn't much appetite for it. The guests all ate heartily, except Ben. I noticed that he wasn't very hungry, and that he refused to take any meat at all. I didn't think much of it then. After dinner I went out to the garage to tell Natchez to clean up the cars,

since they were rather dusty and some of the party might want to go driving early.

But Natchez, dependable as always, was already at it, while the hobo stood leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette and watching him. Natchez glanced up at me and nodded shortly, then ordered the tramp to get into the tonneau and dust the cushions.

"Sure." The fellow climbed into the car and began folding up the tumbled rugs. The car was the Blue Racer belonging to Matt Lee, in which the Lees had brought Ben Tarrton. As he picked up the last of the rugs, the hobo gave a terse sneering exclamation and held up a small, flat alligator bag. "Here's one we missed, Natchez. According to the tag it belongs to that dirty, lousy———Tarrton."

Natchez gave him a warning scowl, but I, mostly curious to see what he would say, asked him a question in feigned surprize.

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Tarrton?"

"Am I acquainted with Mr. Tarrton!" He mimicked me contemptuously. "I cert'nly am. He was my captain overseas, damn him!"

"Well, that didn't hinder him from being a good officer, I should think," I answered curtly.

Natchez cackled sourly at the thrust, but the tramp leaned over the door of the car, his face darkening with venom.

"Good officer! Say, I got my fill of that guy at Brest. He was nothing but a damned cocky S. O. S. Why, we throwed rocks at his kind at the front. A lot of guys like him got theirs in the trenches, and it wasn't from no Dutchman's bullet, either! Ain't nothin' a doughboy hates like bein' lorded over by some lousy——"

"Maybe you deserved it," I said coldly. I wanted now only to shut him up. He had said enough to show me exactly what I wanted to know. There was no fetid horror under his dislike of Ben. But he was not to be prevented from having his say. He hated Ben with a virulent hatred, and my sarcasm had goaded him. His lips writhed in a vile grimace over his yellow tusks of teeth, his little eyes sparked red with fury, and his voice raised in a loathsome leer.

"Deserved it—hell! I was in the army ten years before the war. I know a real officer when I see one. When we was at the debarkation camp, our nerves in tatters, he had the face to rag us. I couldn't hardly keep my place in ranks, and he yelled at me, 'Dress that piece! You, Sneath! Don't you know enough to hold that piece straight? Hold up your head! How long have you been in the army?' I *couldn't* hold my head up. I was half dead from German gas, and he knew it. He handed me the worst crack you can pull on a doughboy. I nearly pasted him one right there. But that wasn't nothing! It was what I seen at the front. Him, out in No Man's Land when he didn't know I saw him. The damned, dirty——"

Sneath's curses dribbled off into a gibber, and suddenly his face was pasty with the horror of something he had seen.

"Well, forget it!" I interrupted him with sharp finality, shrinking in spite of myself at the abysmal loathing and terror in his eyes. I forced myself to reach toward him. "Give me that bag. I'll take it in." He handed it to me, dumbly, and I whirled and got out of there.

I was shaking as I went up the front steps. What—*what* had Sneath seen at the front, out in No Man's Land, that could even yet fill his eyes with unspeakable horror and whiten the face of a man as thick-skinned as he?

I don't know how I ever got into the hall and deposited that bag. All my horror was on me again. But

some way I did it, and got to Ben's room and placed the bag just inside his door.

As I came downstairs the guests were going out to sit on the veranda and watch the last light ebb from the sky. I trailed along reluctantly, slumped into a chair near the steps, and tried to find some contact with the commonplace through the act of packing and lighting my pipe. They were all chattering and having a gay time, fluttering around Ben like flies around honey, and paying little attention to me.

We had been there but a few minutes when the fellow Sneath came from the garage and started down the road, the dogs at his heels. He paused to order the animals back, but the setter wagged a conciliating tail and refused to go a step, while the police dogs and the collies stopped in the road and eyed him speculatively.

Amused, the irrepressible Matt Lee called to him, "You leavin' us, bo? I see you've made friends with the dogs."

"Yeh, looks like it." Sneath glanced up at Lee, as he made the enigmatic answer, then turned to yell toward the garage: "Hey! Natchez! Call your dogs."

Natchez appeared in the garage door, and at his peremptory order the dogs gave a last sniff at Sneath and trotted back obediently toward their master. The tramp started down the road again, and with a queer feeling of pity for the fellow I hailed him.

He hesitated, turned and walked back toward me. I rose and went down the steps. Pulling a bill from my pocket I pressed it into his grimy palm, wishing him luck. I knew my back was to the guests on the porch, and they could not witness my action. Sneath's sullen, unkempt face lighted in pleased surprize, and an excuse for a smile tightened the loose mouth; then he pocketed the bill and turned to pass on down the road, while I rejoined my guests on the veranda.

"Surly devil, isn't he?" Rick Boyce commented as I took my chair. "Did you see the way he glanced at you, Ben?"

I frowned. I was hoping they hadn't seen the one malignant flash of Sneath's eyes.

"Yes. I noticed," Ben answered, with a shrug. "He was in my company overseas. He belongs to the riff-raff—one of the insolent breed carrying a perpetual peeve for anyone in more fortunate circumstances. It was fellows like him who got it in for the officers and threatened to get even when they were in civvies, and all that rot. Pity of it is, it wasn't *all* rot. This fellow, Sneath, threatened to do for me and my first lieutenant, Jimmy Willotson. Somebody did kill Willotson, after we came back, but the murderer was never caught."

"But that's an exceptional case, isn't it?" Matt Lee asked.

"Oh, yes." Ben nodded. "A lot of the men had it in for Willotson. A lot of them threatened to get him. But most of them were like this bum, Sneath. They'd bluster around and make all kinds of mouthy threats, but they hadn't the courage to do anything."

"And did you see the trick tie?" Lee, the inexpugnable, rose to make a sweeping bow. "Some class to that gink! A rope belt and a polka dot tie! Oh, Kelly with the green necktie!"

Everybody laughed at him, and Ben suggested suddenly that as it was getting cold out there, maybe we'd better go in by the fire. It was getting cold, all right, but hardly cold enough to make Ben shiver. It came to me sharply that he looked thin, that some of the glow about him had faded, that some of his marvelous color had ebbed from his face. I made a mental note that I must have Chin Hoy cook up some especial dainty for him tomorrow, to tempt his appetite. I couldn't afford to let him get to ail-

ing on my hands when I had brought him up here for a lark; not the much-loved Ben! The women would be ready to hang me if I didn't take care of their common Prince Charming.

I followed the party crowd into the house, noting with relief that Dan had joined in their banter to an appreciable extent, and that his manner had lightened decidedly. Nothing of any consequence occurred during the evening, and I sat staring into the fireplace, listening to their talk, and gradually telling myself enough reasonable blah to smooth out the kinks in my brain.

IT WAS nearing 11 o'clock when the guests began to tire, and thought they'd better turn in, since they'd risen unusually early enough to make them sleepy unusually early. They bade me good-night and trooped off to their rooms, but I sat on in front of the open grate, conscious that Dan alone had remained with me, sunk in a big leather chair across the hearth.

I continued stubbornly smoking in silence, keeping my eyes averted from my younger brother's dark brooding face. I had finally gotten everything all explained away to suit me, or thought I had, and I was determined that I wouldn't make any comment or ask any question to get him going again. He seemed to be more like himself, and I certainly wanted him to stay that way. And then he suddenly asked:

"Just who is this Ben Tarrton, Jesse? What's he ever done to distinguish himself?"

"Why, nothing—that I know of," I had to admit. "He has more money than he knows what to do with. Doesn't go in for any of the arts. Never worked a lick in his life. Follows athletics mildly. Just rolls along making a good fellow of himself and being agreeable. He's really a darned fine chap, but I suppose you'd call him light." I was battling for the casual, you see. Dan foiled me.

"I'd also call him a liar," he said grimly.

"A—what?" I stared at him, wondering if I had heard aright.

"That's what I said—a liar. You heard me the first time." The ugly light was in Dan's eyes again, and his mouth was set in a harsh line. "He said he was to join Markelle the twenty-fourth. I dropped into Markelle's office day before yesterday, to say hello to him. He remarked that he hoped we'd have a good time up here, was glad he could change his plans so both your party and his could have Tarrton."

"Yes?" I frowned. "But that's exactly what Ben said."

"Not exactly," Dan corrected. "Markelle told me he was to sail on the eighteenth as he had planned, and was putting in on the Florida coast to pick up Tarrton the twelfth of next month. What I'm wondering is where that bird is going on the twenty-fourth."

"But why the devil should Ben lie about it?" I asked, assailed by swift and fearsome doubts.

"How should I know?" Dan shrugged, and got to his feet. "Say, Jesse, I'd like to go in Father's old room for a few minutes." I started to rise, but he waved me back. "No, just give me the key. I'd rather go alone."

I sank back in my chair, nodded and handed him the key. I felt that I understood. He wanted to be alone with his memories in there, to renew touch with our father in close communion. He took the key and went away from me, and presently I heard the turn of a lock, and the sound of the door closing behind him. Then all was still in the big, gloomy old house. The fire was dying down in the grate, and the candles were burning low in their holders. It *was* growing cold, and I decided I'd turn in. I was on the point of rising and locking up the house when I heard the loud sound of running feet, and Chin

Hoy burst in the front door. I got quickly to my feet and went to meet him.

"Natchez is sick like the devil," he told me, panting, his almond eyes wide and frightened. "You come, no?"

I followed him out without waiting to speak to Dan. Besides, I was reluctant to bother Dan right then. Chin Hoy led me on a run to the garage, and up to the rooms where he and Natchez slept. The caretaker lay on his bed, his face as colorless as that of the dead, his eyes closed. I bent over him, startled, and felt of his pulse. He was cold and clammy, and his pulse was barely discernible. I could only faintly hear the slow thud of his heart. I was shocked. He looked to be on the very borderline. I turned to Chin Hoy swiftly.

"How long has he been like this?"

"No can say." Chin Hoy's popping eyes stared from me to Natchez. "Him go bed allee same hour ago. Him yell. Him groan. Me allee same scared, come see. Ketchum likee that. Call you."

"Well, I'll have to get a doctor," I cut in. "The man's nearly dead. Must be his heart. You stay here with him and I'll go for the town doctor. No use in rousing the whole house. It wouldn't do any good. You stay right here, Chin."

Chin nodded and sat down stiffly in a chair by the bed. I made another rapid examination of Natchez, then rushed back to the house to tell Dan what was up.

My brother had returned to the living-room and was standing before the fire, his dark face in shadow, his brooding eyes on the wall. I told him that Natchez was sick and that I was off for the village doctor. He nodded, asked if there was anything he could do, and dropped easily into the big leather chair.

"Nothing but lock up the house," I told him. "And lock it from garret to cellar. Dan, hell's loose here tonight or I'm mad. Lock every door and shoot every bolt."

Dan sat up suddenly in his chair and leaned toward me, his face tense and his black eyes blazing. "I'll lock up, all right, Jesse. But there are some hells over which steel bars, screened windows, bolts and locks have no power."

I chose to make no answer to that. Even as he spoke the room was alive with shouting, leering shadows, yet I heard no sound—I only knew they were there: great, loathsome, obscene shapes that whirled about him in a ghostly carmagnole. But I could only whirl on my heel and rush away. I didn't dare stay. The whole world was swiftly becoming an insane place, wherein a man with cool senses could find no haven. From the hall I snatched topcoat and gloves, and dashed out into the night. I raced down the front steps, slammed open the garage doors, backed the Hammerton out, turned it and slid down the road as quietly as I could, so that I might not alarm our guests, yet striving to get away from there as fast as I could move.

The powerful lights of the car picked out the gravel road like a metal river running ahead of me, and as I got farther from the house I stepped on the gas with a fierce craving for speed. I came to a turn in the road, not a half-mile from the lodge, and slowed for it. As I rounded again to the straightaway I saw some dark object lying in the edge of the brush lining the roadway. I shoved down the brake and threw my spotlight on the object. It was the body of an animal, and as I came abreast of it I was aware that it was Cassimer Natchez's collie. I brought the car to a halt, intending to throw the body in the car and take it back and bury it decently, for I could see that the dog was dead.

I slipped out from under the wheel, hurried over to it, and started to pick

it up. Then I stopped stock-still in horror. The poor brute's throat had been torn wide open. Around the dog's neck there was a wide band of white, as is common in collies. And on that white fur there was a welter-ing splotch of blood. I bent closer, staring at the limp body in the glare of my spotlight, unable for a moment to understand. Then I started back with a sick gasp as I comprehended it. The throat had been torn open by huge teeth. A panther must have killed the poor beast, and my lights must have driven him away from the dog's body. The blood was still oozing out of the wound.

No, I would never take that hideous carcass back to Natchez. I picked it up and hurled it far out of sight back in the brush, rushed back to my car, shaking like a leaf, crowded myself under the wheel and let in the clutch. I knew my face must have been ghastly, but it was not strange that it should be so. Had I said the world was becoming insane? It was becoming a vast welter of nauseous, filthy madness, in which anything might happen and in which I could find nothing to which I might cling and save myself alive. What in the name of heaven could have killed that poor dog unless it was a panther? Yet memory reminded me that panthers had long been extinct in that territory. What wild and nameless terror was loose on this mountain? This mountain that had always been so peaceful and restful to my father in the past?

I LET the old Hammerton out to fifty miles on that mountain road, not caring what ruts or bumps were in the way. The Hammerton was heavy; it would hold the road regardless of its roughness. Far ahead of me I heard a high scream, and I stepped on the brake involuntarily as I let up the gas pedal. The car slowed so abruptly that the tires scraped, and rocked to a mere crawl. Again I heard the scream. I am not ashamed to admit that I was afraid to stop the car entirely. I was about to step on the gas again, when I saw a figure stagger out of the brush and halt in front of me, waving arms that formed a signal for me to stop. Then I did stop, with something of relief. It was Sneath.

As the car came to a halt, he waddled out of the road and came up to the door, and I saw that he was drunk. He leaned close, seeing my face by the dashlight, and my relief faded in another swoop of horror. His eyes were staring, his loose mouth jabbering insane, meaningless phrases. The man had been frightened almost into madness, and perhaps the only thing that had kept him from insanity was the fact that he was so infernally drunk that not even his terror had sobered him. Recognizing me, he calmed a little.

"For Gawd's sake let me into the car with yuh!" he begged, fairly slobbering in entreaty. "Gimme a lift to the tool house on the track. Gawd—I seen him do it again!"

I motioned for him to get into the tonneau, and he fairly leaped over the door and fell sprawling on the cushions, jabbering and mouthing to himself that he had seen somebody again.

I turned in the seat and barked at him, "You saw what—whom! Talk sense, man. What's the matter with you? What did you see?"

He cowered on the rear seat, gibbering. "I seen him, I tell yuh! Back there by the road, maybe half an hour ago—maybe a hundred years. And he was doin' it again!" His voice rose almost to a scream, the scream I had heard before I stopped my car. "He was doin' it again!"

"Doing what!" I shouted furiously, feeling the hair rising on my scalp. "Whom did you see? And what was he doing?"

"That damn' captain," Sneath moaned. "That pretty-faced hell-

hound! He—he''—his voice rose into that unearthly scream again—''he was doin' like I seen him doin' in No Man's Land. Only—only—there it was men he killed—and this time it was—Natchez's collie-dog.''

I stared, utterly frozen stiff with horror. Then cold sober sense came again to my aid. The man had the D.T.'s! I shouted at him again, shaking myself violently into action, and reaching for the wheel.

''You're drunk, crazy drunk, you damned fool! Where'd you get the whisky?''

''Out of your cellar,'' he whimpered. ''Natchez gimme it.''

''Well, you're drunk!'' I sneered at him, half insane myself. ''And you're crazy in the bargain. Tarrton was in bed asleep two hours ago.''

''Yeh, and he was in his dugout asleep when we seen him changin' into a wolf among the dead men, too, my buddy and me!'' Sneath came back crazily. ''But we seen him—and if my buddy was alive he'd back me up in——''

''Shut up!'' I roared.

And maybe I didn't step on the gas then! I wanted nothing so much as to get to the railroad track and ditch that drunken madman at the tool house where he had asked to be taken. I wasn't ten minutes in reaching it, stopping the car and ordering him out.

''Yeh, I'll go,'' he slobbered at me, threateningly, as he climbed over the door and dropped heavily to the ground. ''But I'm comin' back to that damn' lodge of yours and stick a knife in that guy, like I done to Willotson. Him and Willotson was hell-hounds together. I seen 'em, I tell yuh, turnin' to wolves, and killin' and killin' just for the fun of it. I followed 'em for hours before I got sick and fainted. And I followed Willotson two years before I finally got him——''

''Get away from there!'' I bellowed. I couldn't stand any more.

I jammed down the gas pedal and let in the clutch. The old Hammerton shot ahead like a locomotive, with a madman at the throttle. I tell you I was mighty close to being a madman! The ghastly horror of Sneath's mouthings had shaken me to the soul. Not that I believed any such outlandish impossibilities for even a fraction of a second, but I was sick to death at the mere thought of such horrors being conjured up even in the drink-sick brain of a beast like Sneath.

I'll never know how I managed to reach the town, only to find that the only doctor there was sick in bed himself with a bad attack of smallpox, and I had to turn around and race back to the lodge alone. I wondered how I'd find Natchez, if he'd be still alive or if I'd find that the sluggish heart in his breast was stopped. Within a mile of the lodge I heard a sound that chilled my spine and made my hair stiffen on my scalp. The dogs were howling, with an awful, frightened howl. What terror was among them now? Was the ghastly bloodthirsty monster that had killed the collie after another victim? Up the road I tore, the gas pedal down to the last notch.

The ghastly and terrible happenings at the lodge will be told next month in the concluding chapters of this story

The BRASS KEY

by HAL·K·WELLS

"Then came darkness and the spider horde."

IN THE home of Foo Chong, merchant prince of Los Angeles' Chinatown, there were two strange rooms. The keys to their two locked doors were carried only by Foo Chong himself.

Foo Chong had first planned the rooms six months ago when they brought to him the broken body of his son, with an expression stamped upon the sensitive, old-ivory features of the motherless youth which threatened a fate rather worse than death. When days and then weeks slipped by, sealing the verdict of the Pacific Coast's foremost brain specialists, Foo Chong smiled sadly and ordered that the two rooms be prepared.

The first of the rooms of mystery was equipped as a playroom. Its gaily figured walls, its pictures and furnishings, the toys scattered carelessly on the floor—all were of the kind that would appeal to a very young child. Yet the youth for whom the room was prepared was nearly twenty, in years on the very threshold of manhood.

But Foo Chong's only son would be as a very young child for the rest of his life, the eminent brain surgeons had said. The jagged scar beneath the crisp black hair had healed months before, but the deeper injury that the crashing impact of that cruel blow had wrought could never be healed. The youth would always be content with his toys on the floor of the nursery room.

The second of the two rooms, though it required days of work to construct, and weeks to equip completely, was intended for less than a single night's occupancy. The guest upon whom such a signal honor was to be bestowed was "Bull" Partlow.

It was late in the evening and Foo Chong was spending his usual hour in the nursery with his son when a servant came with word that Bull Partlow had at last been brought to the place. Rising from his place on the floor beside the slight silken-clad figure who was absorbed in constructing queer little houses from a set of American building-blocks, Foo Chong carefully closed the door of the room behind him and joined his servant in the hall.

"We found him who is called 'the Bull' at the drinking-place of Black Manuel in San Pedro," the man told his master. "'The Bull' had but just returned this morning with his ship from a long cruise to Tahiti and other islands of the Southern Seas."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"He bears no injury save from the drug which we slipped into his drink. He knew nothing of the long automobile ride which brought him here, and he only now begins to recover his senses from the drug."

"You have done well," Foo Chong commended, and handed the servant a key. "Take him to the little room with the steel door. Bind him tightly to the chair within, but with his back to the glass case in the floor. Remove every particle of his clothing, even his shoes. Then rub his body well with the ointment which is in a stone jar by the chair. Place his watch beside the dagger on the little table.

"Then stay with him until I come. And, if you value your reason," he warned, "or your life itself, touch nothing in the room save as I have directed!"

With a nod of understanding, the servant was gone.

Foo Chong returned to the nursery. "Come, my son," he said gently. "It is time to go to bed."

The youth obediently left his blocks where they had fallen and allowed Foo Chong with tender, practised hands to undress him as though he were a babe in arms. Then, after he was tucked into bed, the boy smiled contentedly and dropped off into sleep with the swift ease of a tired child.

Foo Chong stepped softly over to a corner of the room. For a moment he touched with caressing fingers the carefully arranged instruments laid out there on a drawing-board, placed there in a vain hope that their once-loved shapes might bring a ray of light to the boy's darkened brain. As he idly fingered the T-square and the compasses, Foo Chong thought sadly of those days when his son's keen young mind and sensitive fingers were being trained for the modern magic of a structural engineer.

Foo Chong sighed as he closed and locked behind him the door of the nursery room. Then he went to his reckoning with "Bull" Partlow.

IT WAS a strange little room which had been built behind the second locked door. From the center of its ceiling there was suspended a single electric light bulb. The walls were without windows or visible openings of any kind, except for a thin line of latticework grating near the top. Otherwise, their flat gray surfaces were as bare as those of a prison cell. Scattered about the little room at apparent random were half a dozen small pieces of intricately carved Chinese furniture.

In the exact center of the floor, directly under the solitary light, a vivid white circle a yard and a half in diameter had been painted. Within this circle a peculiar glass case, with a heavy glass lid, was set into the floor. In size and shape it was

not unlike a cheese-box. Its interior fairly swarmed with horrid life.

Foo Chong's entrance was greeted with a flood of foul-mouthed protest and profane abuse from the hulking, apelike figure who was bound to a chair between the glass case and the door. Foo Chong nodded a brief dismissal to the servant. Then, with folded arms, he studied his captive in silence for a moment.

The mark of the beast was stamped indelibly upon the heavy features of the man before him. The full lips, squat nose, and heavy lower jaw hinted at the mixture of races which had produced an ideal specimen of harbor bruiser and deep-water bully. The bulging muscles on mighty shoulders and powerful torso bespoke the origin of the name, "Bull." His naked body smelled pungently of the strangely scented ointment with which it had been rubbed.

"And so you are Bull Partlow." Foo Chong's voice was very quiet. "The Bull Partlow upon whose ship my son stowed away six months ago, for the adventure of a trip up the coast from San Pedro to Portland?"

"I didn't know the whelp was yours," growled the bound giant in surly defiance.

"That matters not. You do know that my son never got to Portland. He was found on the waterfront at San Francisco, with his skull fractured, and at the point of death. For you had found him in his hiding-place, Partlow, and dragged him out to work his passage. That was not amiss. But when my son's strength failed him at the unaccustomed labor, you beat him. Then, when he fell to the deck unconscious from your blows, you kicked him in the head. He did not regain consciousness, and, becoming frightened, you left him at San Francisco to die."

"I didn't kick him in th' head!" Partlow protested thickly. "He hit his head again' somethin' when he fell."

Foo Chong leaned forward and gazed deep into the other's eyes. For a long moment their wills met and battled. Then Partlow suddenly looked away with a muttered oath.

"Aw, what's the difference?" he snarled. "Yeh, I did it—I kicked him." Then, squaring his shoulders with a return of bravado, "What're yuh gonna do about it? Th' kid didn't die, did he?"

"No, my son did not die," agreed Foo Chong softly. "It would have been better if he had."

There was another long moment of silence, until Partlow began to fidget uneasily. Then Foo Chong's even tones continued.

"I am going to exact the price of your evil act from you, Partlow. I have prepared a little game of wits which you and I shall play."

Keeping carefully away from his bound captive's hands, Foo Chong spun the other's chair about until Partlow faced the glass case. Then he watched the man's face blanch in sudden terror as he saw the fearful contents of the case for the first time.

There was ample reason for Partlow's fear. A frail glass case filled with living specimens of the great tree spider of Papua is not a pleasant sight to see suddenly at one's very feet. With sprawling, hairy legs spanning seven inches, and bloated pursy body two inches in length, the creature is a monstrous abnormality which only the nightmare depths of a tropical jungle could spawn.

The glass case literally swarmed with the great spiders. Its floor and its glass walls were carpeted everywhere with the surging silken-brown creatures. In the stillness of the cell-like room the slithering sound of the myriad groping legs was faintly audible as the horde surged in ceaseless activity over the smooth walls of the cage.

"Somewhere within the four walls of this little room," Foo Chong explained quietly, "is hidden a small key of brass. It is possibly two inches in length, and has a handle in the design of a scroll. It is the key to the door. If you succeed in finding it you are free to go when you will, unmolested.

"You have two hours in which to search for the key. At the end of that period the timing mechanism of the case will cause the lid to rise, and the spiders will be liberated into the room. As the lid of the case rises, the light will be extinguished. Your body has been anointed with an oil which is a natural lure for the spiders. It should be only a moment or so in the darkness before the horde is swarming over your bare skin. The least tampering with the case, if you even touch a finger inside the white circle on the floor, will bring the end at once.

"But there is one alternative." Foo Chong gestured to where a heavy dagger of Oriental workmanship rested on the polished top of a small table. "If your search for the key is in vain, and your courage fails you as the light darkens and the spiders come forth, the blade of the dagger may bring you a quicker and more merciful release—if you care to take it.

"You have two hours. Then, if your search fails, you face either the spiders or the knife. It should be an interesting game, Partlow."

As Foo Chong finished, Partlow with an effort forced his gaze from the spider cage at his feet and twisted in his chair to look his captor in the face. The deep-set eyes of "the Bull" were clouded as his slow brain seemed to struggle to realize the situation. Then realization apparently came, and stark murder flamed suddenly in the smoldering eyes.

With a sudden convulsive straining of every muscle in his powerful body, Partlow wrenched himself to his feet as though the heavy chair to which he was bound were a toy, and hurled himself at Foo Chong in one desperate, mighty effort to crush and destroy the slight figure before him. The attempt failed by inches. Warned by the flash in the other's eyes, Foo Chong stepped swiftly aside. Even as the bound figure crashed to the floor, Foo Chong clanged shut the steel door of the cell behind him.

As Foo Chong entered his own room next door he glanced at the clock on the table before throwing the switch that set in motion the timing mechanism of the spider cage. Eleven o'clock. At 1, the mechanism would function, if it were not disturbed before.

FOO CHONG turned out the light, then crossed the room and ascended a short flight of steps leading to a small platform high up along the wall which separated the room from the cell next door. A cunningly concealed opening in the grating near the ceiling of the cellroom enabled Foo Chong, though impossible of discovery himself, to see and hear every detail in Partlow's prison as though he were actually with him. Leaning forward in his chair on the platform, Foo Chong settled himself patiently to his long watch.

Brief though the interval had been, Partlow had nearly freed himself from the bonds that lashed him to the wrecked chair. The last of the weakened strands snapped in one mighty effort, and "the Bull" shambled to his feet.

For a brief time he stood there, half crouched, with long arms tensed at his sides, his great chest rising and falling from his recent exertions, and his little bloodshot eyes darting swift glances to either side like those of an animal at bay. Then, as the minutes passed without event, his tension gradually relaxed.

Then, as though finally deciding

that he was really left to his own devices, he went into action. Stepping over to the door he gave a tentative wrench at the handle, then beat testingly upon it with his hands. Not satisfied, he swept up the heavy chair to which he had been bound and, swinging it lightly aloft, rained crashing blows upon the door.

The heavy piece of furniture splintered into kindling wood on the steel panel. Apparently realizing then the futility of escape in that direction, Partlow began ranging the four walls with the quick, restless tread of a caged jungle beast. He began a careful series of blows upon the walls as high as he could reach, striking with the heel of his hand and listening for the hollow sound which might denote a weak spot. He found none.

Then, for the first time since Foo Chong had left the room, Partlow's gaze returned to the cage of the spiders. The sight of the writhing brown horde within its glass walls had the electrical effect of a dash of ice-cold water. Snatching up his watch from its resting-place beside the dagger on the little table, he scanned the face of the instrument with feverish interest.

Fifteen minutes had gone.

Partlow licked lips that seemed to have gone suddenly dry, and began to search for the key in earnest.

He studiously kept his gaze averted from the cage of the spiders as he set to work upon the bizarre furniture of the cell. There were six pieces in all. They included the little table where the dagger and the watch rested, the chair to which he had been bound, and four pieces whose myriad drawers and compartments might have adapted them for almost any purpose. Except for the chair, all the pieces were of Oriental design and workmanship, with their intricately carved surfaces and recesses offering hiding-places for a hundred keys.

Selecting a piece at random, Partlow searched swiftly through its visible drawers and compartments. At the end of his fruitless search, with a dozen or more empty receptacles strewn about him on the floor, he paused for a moment, baffled.

Then his groping fingers blundered upon a hidden spring. He grunted in satisfaction as a tiny secret drawer slid open. The grunt changed to a muttered curse when he found the drawer empty, but the incident spurred him on to renewed efforts.

The piece proved to be literally honeycombed with secret drawers and nooks which came to light as the concealed springs were pressed by Partlow's clumsy fingers. But, one by one, the hidden spaces proved empty, and without trace of the brass key.

The possibilities of the first piece apparently exhausted, Partlow passed on to the next. The second piece of furniture was nearly as well equipped with hidden niches as the first, but the search for the key continued fruitless. Save for an occasional disappointed oath, the searcher worked in grim and tense silence. At constantly shortening intervals he glanced at the watch, setting to work again each time with a new and more feverish energy as he noted the passing of the precious minutes.

Twelve o'clock. Only one hour more.

Every piece of the six had been ransacked without result. In grim desperation Partlow now began work on the skeleton framework of the furniture, tearing the joints apart with his bare hands.

A quarter past 12.

Partlow's face showed that the strain was beginning to tell. Streams of sweat bathed his swarthy features. His heavy lips began to creep back from his teeth in a set snarl of terror. Heedless of sharp

edges and jagged splinters, he continued to tear at the wooden fragments with raw, bleeding fingers in feverish and ever growing desperation.

Twelve-thirty. Only half an hour more.

Partlow's nerve seemed breaking with ghastly swiftness, until he threatened momentarily to give way blindly to sheer panic. The watcher in the room next door sighed softly. Foo Chong might almost have felt compassion for that pitiable figure in the cell had it not been for another image which loomed before him—that of the other room with a locked door, where a slender youth with listless eyes spent his days putting together endless little houses of building-blocks.

Only thirty minutes left in which to find the precious key of brass, and it seemed that every possible hiding-place in the cell had been searched. But, after all—was there not at least one place left untouched? Apparently struck by a sudden thought, Partlow glanced tentatively at the cage of the spiders.

Visibly shaken at the sight, he shuddered. But he steeled himself to look again, his eyes staring and intent as they searched for a telltale glint of brass beneath that surging horde of pursy brown bodies and writhing legs. Slowly and unwillingly he forced himself to approach the case more closely.

Finally he was kneeling on the floor beside it, his hands resting just outside the warning white circle. His face was not a yard from the glass of the case itself. The proximity nearly proved fatal.

As he gazed at the horrid inhabitants of the cage sprawling in hideous array so near his eyes, Partlow's swarthy features slowly went ashen. His lips opened in horror while, with fascinated eyes staring with hypnotic intentness, he began slowly swaying back and forth, threatening momentarily to topple over on the case in utter collapse.

Foo Chong watched breathlessly as the seconds passed and a premature climax loomed imminent. Then, at the last moment, Partlow wrenched his gaze away as though breaking a physical bond, and threw himself backward from the case.

FOR the next quarter of an hour it was little more than a madman who raged up and down within the confines of the cell—a madman who beat wildly upon door and walls with clenched fists, and who chattered mingled curses and prayers as he pawed frenziedly with bleeding fingers among the scattered scraps of wood in a last sobbing effort to find the key. Then the reaction came swiftly, and he sank to the floor, crouched on his haunches in a listless stupor.

It was five minutes of 1 when he roused himself from his lethargy of despair.

He lifted the watch with a shaking hand. As he read the dial's fateful message, the timepiece slipped from his limp fingers and clattered unheeded to the floor. No need now for a measure of the few precious moments remaining.

Foo Chong leaned forward with new intentness at his vigil.

With movements as deliberate and mechanical as those of a sleepwalker, Partlow picked up the heavy dagger, and turned to face the glass case.

Four minutes of 1.

Was it imagination, or was the light in the cell now tinged with a faint reddish hue—and was the heavy lid of the spider cage trembling ever so slightly upon its supports?

Three minutes—and doubt became awful certainty!

The light from the solitary bulb was now dimming swiftly, its filaments fading to loops of vivid red.

And the lid of the case was slowly rising! Partlow's grasp upon the dagger tightened.

Two minutes.

With eyes that sought to pierce the crimson gloom, Partlow saw the lid of the case yawn until the crevice was fringed with twitching legs as the great spiders swarmed at the opening. The man's face writhed in a ghastly grimace, as though he already felt the touch of those hateful bodies swarming over his bare skin, with poison fangs bared to strike. He raised the dagger until its point rested just over his heart.

One minute.

The light was now but a dim red glow. The lid of the case seemed rising more swiftly. Suddenly from beneath its edge the first of the spiders dropped, pushed through the crevice by the surging bodies behind.

The creature's pursy body struck the floor with a slight but audible thud. For a second it sprawled there with forelegs twitching, then scuttled straight for Partlow.

It was the end.

Partlow whimpered aloud as he convulsively drove the dagger's blade home.

As he lurched to his knees, a small object tinkled to the floor in front of him. Groping for a moment on all fours, he sought with fast-glazing eyes to identify the object. Then, almost with his last breath, he cursed aloud as he realized the truth.

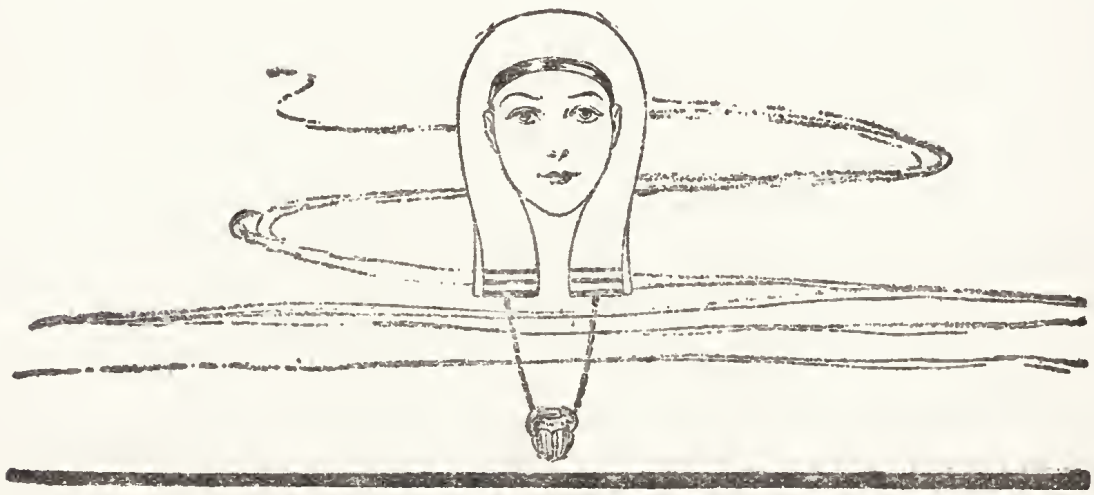
It was the key to the door that lay before him there on the floor—a small key of brass with a handle of scrollwork. The twisting blow as he had driven the blade of the dagger home had released the key from its hiding-place in the hollow handle of the weapon.

Partlow made a last convulsive effort to grasp the key, but his ebbing strength was not equal to the task. His clutching fingers fell short by inches as he sprawled limply forward on his face.

Then came darkness and the spider horde.

As FOO CHONG rose from his post of vigil and stretched cramped limbs, he smiled gently to himself, but there was no hint of gladness in that faint smile.

For Foo Chong was again thinking of that other strange room, the nursery where toys and child's building-blocks were scattered carelessly on the floor like shattered fragments of some tenderly cherished dream.



The GHOST SHIP

by ARLTON EADIE

"From her lips came the song she had sung the night the Valhalla went down."

THE port of La Guayra does not boast of a harbor, so that when I came to board the *Emperatriz* I was forced to charter one of the local ruffians to ferry me across the half-mile or so of sea which separated her from the mole. Viewed from the shore, the ship—a tramp steamer of some 8,000 tons—had seemed smart enough. But I quickly discovered that, in her case, distance decidedly did lend enchantment to the view, for a nearer approach rendered only too obvious her dingy, sun-blistered paintwork and her rust-streaked, dented plates.

But I was not in a position to be over particular—anything that was capable of floating and bearing me out of Venezuela would have looked good to me just then. My last voyage had terminated with some abruptness owing to a difference of opinion with the *guardacostas* farther down the coast. They had pried open some of the cases in our hold, which were down in the manifest as "machinery," and found them to contain machine-guns; in consequence, for the past three weeks it had needed all my ingenuity to steer clear of the local *carcel*. So that when a greasy, garlic-scented individual had sidled up to me with the offer of a berth, I had not asked too many questions before accepting.

The moment I clambered aboard I was confronted by a red-faced giant clad in a uniform cap and a suit of pajamas. I handed him the agent's

letter by way of introduction, but he merely glanced at the superscription and handed it back.

"My name's Hawes, and I'm first mate of this old water-pusher," he told me. "The new captain hasn't come aboard yet."

"The *new* captain?" My voice must have betrayed my surprize.

He nodded, his eyes fixed on mine the while. "We lost the old man and the second mate coming down. They died of fever."

"Both of them?" I cried.

"Ay—it's been a sickly trip."

Then he turned and walked aft as a hint that the interview was finished.

This certainly did not sound very reassuring, but I made no comment as I descended to my cabin and proceeded to stow away my traps. Then, after having a cursory look round, I went on deck for a quiet smoke.

The fiery, copper-red disk of the sun was just preparing to dip behind the western horizon, tinging everything with its fierce and vivid hue. It turned the waters of the roadstead to a pool of molten gold; it smote upon the mountains which, like mighty bulwarks, tower above the little port, turning their jagged peaks to flaming beacons against the cold purple shadows of the coming night. Slowly the sun disappeared; for a brief instant the red afterglow hovered high up in the zenith; then, with the abruptness of an extinguished candle, it was night.

I was just on the point of turning in when I noticed a shore boat heading toward us, and I at once concluded that it must be bringing the new captain. Being somewhat curious to know what sort of a shipmaster they had managed to pick up in that out-of-the-way port, I shifted my position so that I could get an uninterrupted view of the accommodation ladder. Scarcely had I taken my stand than the boat came alongside and a tall man sprang nimbly on to the grating. Our navigation lights had already been shipped preparatory to putting to sea, and as he paused to pay his boatman, the green rays of the starboard light fell full upon his face, the unreal, ghostly glare revealing a countenance so striking and unusual that it has remained indelibly photographed on my mind.

In former days he must have been more than passably handsome, for the features were regular and finely formed; but now they were seamed with deep-graven lines which spoke of every base and lawless passion. I do not suppose that he was more than fifty at the most, for the full beard showed no trace of gray, and his step, as he mounted to the bridge, was quick and firm. But he appeared like a man who had drained the cup of life until nothing but the very dregs remained, and in the depths of his sunken eyes there lay a look, at once apprehensive and defiant, of a man who is dogged by some long-feared, unavoidable fate. "If it be possible for a man to be haunted in this world," I found myself muttering as I turned away, "then that man is!"

But, haunted or not, Captain Frewin seemed a capable seaman. Orders followed each other in quick succession. The ancient winch on the forecastle wheezed and leaked steam as the anchor was hove short and hoisted. Then, taking the wheel himself, he ordered "Full speed," and the old lumbering freighter came round like a yacht and set her bows to the broad Atlantic.

Our voyage had begun. Little did I—or any aboard—dream how it was to end.

ONCE clear of soundings, it is remarkable how quickly you settle down to the routine of shipboard life. All ships are, broadly speaking, very much alike and the round of duties practically the same. But one's shipmates are likely to vary

considerably, and I must admit that mine on board the *Emperatriz* did not endear themselves to me on closer acquaintance. To put the matter bluntly, I do not think a more out-and-out mob of incompetents and undesirables were to be found in the length and breadth of the seven seas. And my estimate of their character was upheld by the mature experience of the chief engineer, who had probably sailed the seas for as many years as I had months. Like so many of his calling, he was a Scotsman, hailing from that home of engineers —Clydeside. He was a kindly old soul, with an intense appreciation of everything which had its origin in his native land, from ships' engines to whisky. No sooner did he learn that my mother's name had been Campbell, and that I had served in one of the kilted regiments in the war, than he took me—metaphorically—to his oily bosom with all the patriotic fervor of the true Scot.

"I've nae wish tae appear inquisitive, laddie," he said to me one night as we sat smoking, "but hoo comes ye tae be aboard a packet like this?"

I told him what had happened at La Guayra and he nodded sympathetically.

"Ay, ay, 'tis the same auld tale the world over. Obey the orders if ye brak' the owners, and obey the owners if ye brak' yerself. I'll no' be denying that I was a wee bit under a cloud when I signed on here—otherwise I'd no' be doctoring the heap o' scrap that masquerades as engines aboard this ship. Losh, laddie, but we're a fine, gay shipload! I dinna think there's a mon of us but what's got a mark agin his ticket. An' I'm no' excepting the skipper, for he's got the blackest mark o' the lot!"

"Captain Frewin?" I cried. "How could he get command if his certificate were not in order?"

McPherson laughed and spat contemptuously over the side.

"The Dago firm that owns the *Emperatriz* are nae so particular as tae yon! Mon, I tell ye, they'd employ a deil red-hot frae hell so long's he could handle a ship, and came cheap enow. As for the skipper, there's no' a reputable shipowner that'll employ him since he piled up the *Valhalla* in 1906."

"How did it happen?" I asked, scenting a yarn.

"He was a guid five miles oot o' his course. I was on the ship as fourth engineer at the time, and I canna help thinking the mon was just demented."

"Drunk?"

"Ay—but no' with liquor. He was just mad with love for one o' the lassies on board. Mind ye, the captain was a smart young fellow in those days, and the *Valhalla* was his first command. She was a big, twin-screw passenger and cargo steamer, running between London and the Australian ports by way of the Cape of Good Hope. It was on the return trip of her maiden voyage that it happened.

"We'd had fine weather 'most all the way across, and it looked like as if we were going to make what in those days was considered a record run. We were three parts of the way across the Bay of Biscay, and we expected to be off the Wight by the following morning, so the passengers had made up a merry party in the saloon to mark the last night of the voyage. Puir souls, 'twas the last night o' life for mony a one of them!

"During the last part of my spell in the engine room I'd heard the foghorn going, but as we'd had nae orders to slacken her down I thought we'd run into a bit of a haze in the Channel. But, ma conscience! when I cam' on deck I got the shock o' ma life. It was thick as pea-soup, and there we were snorting along as though we had the open sea in front of us. As I looked at the bow-wave

over the side I remember asking mysel' what sort of a captain it was who risked precious lives to pull down a bit of a speed record. But that wasn't the worst, either. Instead of being at his post on the bridge, where d'ye think Cap'n Frewin was? In the saloon, whispering sweet nothings into the ear of his lady-love! I looked through the saloon skylight and I see him wi' ma' ain eyes, else I never had believed it possible.

"Mind ye, I'm no' saying but that they made a well-matched couple. He was good-looking more 'n common, and so was she, though in a different sort o' way. She was as fair as he was dark, with long curling hair, yellow as the sands of the sea when the sunlight falls on it. She used to wear a dress of some green silky stuff which somehow always seemed to remind me of wet seaweed—everything aboot her, from her coral-red lips to her little shell-like ears, reminded you of the sea. As I peered at her I couldna help thinking she'd make a bonny sailor's bride. But this was nae time for love-making, as they were very soon to find out.

"Presently someone struck a few bars on the piano and the young lassie began to sing. Eh, but she had a sweet, tender voice. There was nae fancy trills and screeches aboot it, like ye sometimes hears on the stage, but it seemed to gang straight to your heart. As I stood listening to it I forgot the ship, I forgot the fog, I forgot the rocks of Ushant. And dootless the cap'n did as weel. He sat there drinkin' in the melody like a man fascinated—bewitched. Before she'd finished, one of the officers from the bridge came to the saloon door in his wet oilskins and whispered in the cap'n's ear, but he waved him away impatiently and turned again to the girl. It must ha' been some important message, for I saw the mon raise his eyebrows when it was ignored. And so it went on—the ship racing ahead, the song floating up sweet and low as the lapping of the waves when the tide is on the turn, the blaring of the foghorn overhead. . . .

"Weel, the crash had tae come, and come it did. Ye can imagine what happens when a 16,000-ton boat takes a sunken reef at full speed. It just ripped the keel clean out of her, and doon she went to the bottom like a stane, taking with her maist o' the passengers and crew. I was one of the lucky ones. I managed to get to the shore, and so did Captain Frewin."

"And the girl in green—what became of her?"

"Nae doot she went doon with the ship, for she was never seen afterward," replied McPherson. "The cap'n was like a madman for days, searching the seashore for her body, cursing the sea that had stolen her from him. That night's work ruined him body and soul, and sometimes I think it would ha' been better for him if he'd gone to the bottom with his ship."

And I, remembering the look I had seen in his eyes when first we met, felt inclined to agree.

We skirted along the coast, passed the island of Trinidad, then set our course almost due east, for our next port of call was Freetown, Sierra Leone. There we lay for over a week while a gang of negro stevedores leisurely discharged part of our cargo, afterward loading us with bales of copra and barrels of palm-oil until we were down to our Plimsoll's mark once more. Clearing from there, we began to round the great shoulder of Africa, making for our final port, London.

On the third day out, when I came on the bridge to relieve the first mate at eight bells noon, I found him staring aft through the binoculars. So engrossed was he that he failed to note my approach until I touched him on the arm. Then he handed me the glasses.

"What do you make of that trail of smoke on the horizon?" he asked in a slightly puzzled tone, at the same time indicating a spot about three points off the starboard quarter.

I focused the glasses and took a long look. "It belongs to a fairly big ship, with two funnels," I said presently.

"*Two?*" he asked quickly.

"Sure. I can distinctly make out the two plumes."

He looked at me and rubbed his hand thoughtfully across his chin. "Well, that's damned queer," he muttered.

"How?"

"It's mighty seldom that you come across a slow cargo steamer with a couple of smokestacks. Twin-funneled craft are usually liners of sorts, and have some turn of speed. Our old tub is barely making eight knots, yet that ship has kept the same position right from the moment we left Freetown. Why, she should have overhauled us days ago!"

"Perhaps she's developed trouble in her engine room," I suggested.

Hawes' face lit up at my words. Hopes of salvage are never far distant from a sailor's thoughts, and a broken-down liner in need of a tow might mean a small fortune. But the next moment he was shaking his head despondently.

"Whatever her game is, she's still capable of keeping under way. No chance of earning the price of a freehold farm ashore this trip, worse luck!" And, with a disgusted glance astern, he turned and quitted the bridge.

At intervals during my watch I glanced toward that distant smudge on the horizon, but its position with regard to our own ship appeared to be unchanged. At eight bells the captain came on the bridge, and it was at once clear that he was not in the best of tempers.

"Anything to report?" he growled as he came across to take a squint at the compass.

"There's a liner astern that seems to be making poor speed, sir."

"Indeed?" He favored me with a sardonic grin. "What then? Do you want me to unship my donkey-engine and make 'em a present of it to help 'em up to time?"

"If we slowed down a few revolutions, so that she could come up with us——" I began, but he cut me short as though the suggestion were a personal insult.

"Slow down nothing! My economical speed's seven-point-eight, and that's what I'm going to steam at—if there's fifty flaming liners astern! Haven't I got troubles of my own without seeking others? If she's in distress, why the blazes don't she send up rockets? Didn't they teach you any sense in the girls' school where you learnt navigation? Keep her as she goes, quartermaster."

For a moment I boiled inwardly at the open affront. Then, with an effort, I choked down the words I was about to say and, touching my cap with what I intended to be a dignified salute, I went below.

My next spell of duty was the morning watch, and as soon as the sun was up I found my eyes turning toward the strange ship. There she was, in the same position as before, no nearer, no closer. The respective positions could not have remained more constant if an invisible tow-rope had connected the two ships.

It does not take much to set men's tongues wagging at sea. By this time the news of the strange behavior of the unknown vessel had penetrated even to the stokehold. I heard two of the firemen discussing it half jestingly as they performed their ablutions after coming off duty.

"We're bein' shadowed, that's what it is, matey," declared one. "Got anyfink on yer conscience, Ginger?"

"Not 'arf so much as wot the old man has, if all yer 'ears abart 'im is right. 'Struth! I've got through a few mucky jobs in my time, but I reckon I'm a plaster himage compared with 'im. Who the 'ell is it that's following us?"

"Never heard of the Phantom Ship, Ginger?" grinned the first speaker. "She's been fitted out with triple expansions specially to bring us the sailors' last warning. Mark my words, this old hooker is going to make her last big 'ole in the water before long!"

DESPITE the contempt with which he had greeted my reference to the subject, I could see that as the time went on Captain Frewin began to grow uneasy in his mind. Many a time I caught him glancing furtively at the faint and distant blur that followed so persistently in our wake; but it was not until a week had passed that he made the first move to solve the mystery.

A big P. & O. mailboat had been sighted ahead, traveling in the opposite direction to ourselves. When she was but a mile distant, Captain Frewin suddenly rang off the engines, and the *Emperatriz,* gradually losing way, remained motionless save for the slow movement imparted to her by the long Atlantic rollers. Attracted by the unusual maneuver, the approaching boat shifted her helm and bore down, a string of colored bunting breaking from her forward signal yard.

"What ship?" it said.

"*Emperatriz,* Freetown to London," was our answer.

"*Ballarat,* for Adelaide. Are you in need of assistance?"

"No. Stopped because of heated bearing. Good-bye. Pleasant voyage."

"Thanks, same to you. Good-bye."

As the ocean greyhound again settled into her stride, I turned my eyes toward the distant smoke of the mystery ship. As I looked I felt my breath catch in my throat. For the thin double plume soared straight upward in the breathless air, showing that, like ourselves, the stranger had hove to. There could be no doubt about it now—she was dogging us. But why?

I faced about and looked at Captain Frewin. He was standing motionless on the swaying bridge, his eyes fixed on the *Ballarat,* which, having swung past us, was now rapidly approaching the unknown ship. Minutes passed, and still he made no attempt to resume our voyage. What was he looking at? What was he expecting to see? Why had he stopped the ship in mid-ocean? Then like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, the answer came.

I felt a hand grip my arm and an awestruck voice whispered into my ear in broadest Doric:

"Canna ye understand, mon? The *Ballarat's* passing her—passing a stationary liner without sae much as a dip of her ensign! An' I'll tell ye for why. *They canna see her!* She's a ghost ship, haunting us alone. She's the old *Valhalla,* following the mon who sent her to the bottom twenty-two years ago, and—*she's freighted with the dead!*"

THE last days of that voyage will ever remain in my memory like a ghastly nightmare. There are some superior people who declare that the advent of steam has caused the sailor to abandon his old superstitions; but the dread of the unknown and unknowable has its roots too deeply planted in the human soul for that to be. If those armchair psychologists who lay down the law so glibly could have seen the demeanor of our crew during the next few days they would have had reason to revise their opinions. The men went about their duties sullen and fearful; the gloom of impending tragedy hung over the whole ship; mutterings and sidelong glances told of smoldering mutiny.

I firmly believe it was only the open display of the revolvers, which each of the officers carried, that prevented them rising in a body and heaving the skipper overboard.

Tension was at its highest when there came a sudden change in the weather. The light southwesterly wind which had accompanied us for the past two days gave place to a baffling mist, while the slow, oily swell changed to a heavy head sea. With our engines slowed down until they only gave us steerage-way, and with extra lookouts posted round the ship, we slowly crawled ahead. The only sounds were the steady pounding of our screw, deliberate now as the drum in a funeral march, and the wail of the siren as it sent its eldritch warning over the mist-hung waters.

It was during a pause between the blasts that we seemed to hear a faint echo coming out of the white obscurity. Immediately the lookout hailed the bridge:

"Big steamer in the offing, sir."

"Where away?"

After a pause the answer came. "Seems dead astarn, sir!"

Frewin gave a low-voiced order and the quartermaster shifted the spokes of the wheel.

Again came the faint, deep-booming sound, and again the lookout hailed.

"Steamer coming up astarn, sir!"

Captain Frewin turned to the steersman. "Keep her off another point." Then, to Hawes: "Give a toot to let 'em know there's someone in their track."

The first mate raised his hand to the lanyard and a long-drawn blast of our foghorn followed. Barely had the last vibrations died away when, as if in mockery, the *woom—w-o-o-o-m* of the other ship's foghorn floated out of the mist behind us. This time it was perceptibly nearer—so near indeed that it seemed as if the ship that sounded it must be traveling at a speed that was, in weather like this, nothing short of reckless.

"I suppose the blighter thinks he's got the ocean to himself," I heard Hawes mutter. "These swell liners——" The remainder of the sentence was drowned in a frenzied shout from aft.

"Big liner coming up astarn, sir—traveling fast!"

Not a cable's length distant, looming wan and spectral through the misty veil, there appeared the shadow of a huge gray hull. She was steaming in the same direction as ourselves, and following the exact same course. Her forestay, masts and funnels lay in one straight line, showing that she was bearing directly down on us; her sheer, sharp bows pointed straight at our stern.

In one mad leap Hawes clutched the handle of the engine-room telegraph and threw it full over.

"Below there! Steam for full speed!" he roared down the speaking-tube. "Open her out all you know—it's life or death!" At the same time Frewin rammed the helm hard over to starboard.

Like a tired horse that feels the rider's spurs, the old freighter picked up speed. The slow drumming of our propeller rose to a rapid tattoo; dense volumes of smoke began to roll from our funnel as the stokehold crew fired up the furnaces, and the growing white cloud at the escape-pipe told of the increased head of steam which resulted from their efforts, while deep down in the fabric of the ship the panting and groaning of the worn-out engines proved that McPherson was making the old *Emperatriz* do her best.

But her best was poor enough compared with that of the rushing monster behind us. Her speed was more than three times as great as ours, and she never wavered or slackened in her headlong progress. Yard by yard, she began to overtake us. Nearer and nearer drew her

bows, until I found myself watching, as though hypnotized, the waves of creaming foam which curved on each side of her sharp forefoot as it clove through the sea. For a few breathless moments it seemed as if a collision were inevitable. Grasping the rail before me with all my strength, I waited for the crash, every nerve tingling with suspense. Nearer and ever nearer she came, until I could count the very rivets of her plates. Then the *Emperatriz* slowly came round to her helm and the strange ship swept past with a bare ten feet of water between her bows and our propeller.

Drawing a long breath of relief, I glanced at Captain Frewin. Heavens, what was the matter with the man? Surely the peril through which we had just passed was not sufficient to account for such a change! His face had turned a sickly grayish yellow beneath its tan, and wild panic shone in his staring eyes. His hand was shaking like an aspen as he pointed to the bows of the other ship, which, now on a course parallel to our own, had drawn level with the bridge.

"The *Valhalla!*" His voice had sunk to a hoarse croak. "My old ship!"

My heart turned to ice as I realized the meaning of his words. I turned my gaze upward—stared and stared again. For, high up on the towering side, in huge golden letters that could not be misread, was blazoned the name of the ship which, twenty-two years ago almost to the very day, had split on the rocks of Ushant—the ship whose bones at that moment lay rusting on the sea-bed far below the waters on which we sailed!

Like a man in a dream I read and reread the gilded letters, my mind struggling to convince itself that the whole thing was impossible—absurd. Then my eyes fell upon the single figure upon the liner's bridge, and my mind struggled no more. For, though his hair was a trifle darker and his figure more upright, his face was, feature for feature, the same as Captain Frewin's might have been when he had paced the bridge of his first command in the full flush of his early manhood. And as I looked, the figure on the liner slowly raised its hands to the peak of its uniform cap, and like an automaton controlled by another will, our captain did the same. For a full minute they stood motionless, the living facing his dead self in grave salute; then the liner forged ahead and the curtain of fog descended on it.

But not before I had caught sight of another figure upon its decks—the figure of a young girl in a sea-green dress. In a flash I remembered the old engineer's description of the siren who had lured the captain to his ruin. Yes, it was she! There was the same pale face, wonderfully, supernaturally beautiful; the same full, coral-red lips, now parted in a smile so alluring that it seemed to draw my very soul to her like a compass-needle quivering to the north. Her long hair, bright as the sunlit sand of some tropic isle, flowed free upon her shoulders, and upon it the drops of flying spray shimmered like pearls.

"Lucy!" The cry came from Frewin like the wail of a soul in torment. "My Lucy!"

She leaned over the rail and stretched out her arms toward him, and from her lips there burst a song such as I have never heard before or since. I don't remember the tune and I don't remember the words—if there were words to it. But it seemed to tell of all that the sea can tell—of smiling calms, light breezes like lovers' sighs, hurricanes, tempests, the wild music of the breakers on lee shores, and of the cool green depths in which the bones of drowned men lay. It was such a song as few mortal men have listened to—and lived.

And so the ship passed on. But the moment her stern was clear,

Frewin ground the helm a-port and set our bows straight into her churning wake. He gave no heed to the compass-eard before him; his eyes were fixed in a stony stare ahead; his ears strained to eateh the siren's song that was leading him to destruction.

Obedienee to one's superior officer comes as second nature on shipboard, but even diseipline has its breaking-point. At all costs I must stop the ship. I stepped to the eaptain's side.

"Beg pardon, sir, but had we not better——"

He turned on me with a snarl like a wild beast.

"Take your hand away from that telegraph!" I felt a eold eirele of steel pressed to the back of my neek as he gritted out the words. "If you attempt to move or ery out I'll blow your backbone through your teeth! Don't you hear Lucy ealling me? There—there—I must go to her! I've waited for her too long!"

From out of the mist eame the erooning song, low and sweet as a mother lulling her babe to sleep. But I had other things to think of. Ducking swiftly, I faeed about. There was a erashing report, almost in my ear, and a bullet sang past and buried itself in the woodwork. Before he eould pull trigger again I had closed with the madman, striving to get possession of the wheel. But he seemed to be endowed with the strength of three. I managed to wrest the revolver from him, but that only gave him another free hand. It closed upon my throat with a grip of iron as he foreed me backward till my shoulders rested against the fore dodger of the bridge. I was like a child in his grasp. I felt my senses swim.

Then, when everything was growing black around me, I felt the touch of eold metal against my faee. Turning my eyes, I eaught the gleam of brass, and a wave of hope surged through me. It was the mouth of the speaking-tube that communicated with the engine room. Loosening my grip on Frewin, I tore out the plug and bent as near as I eould to the tube.

"Reverse the engines! Reverse for your life, Mac — we're heading straight for——"

A sudden erash eame from our bows. The *Emperatriz* stopped dead, staggered for a moment like a great, stricken beast; then, as she lurched forward again, there came a series of long-drawn, grinding wreneches as she tore her keel into scrap-iron and passed over, settling fast into the deep water that surrounds the outlying rocks of Ushant.

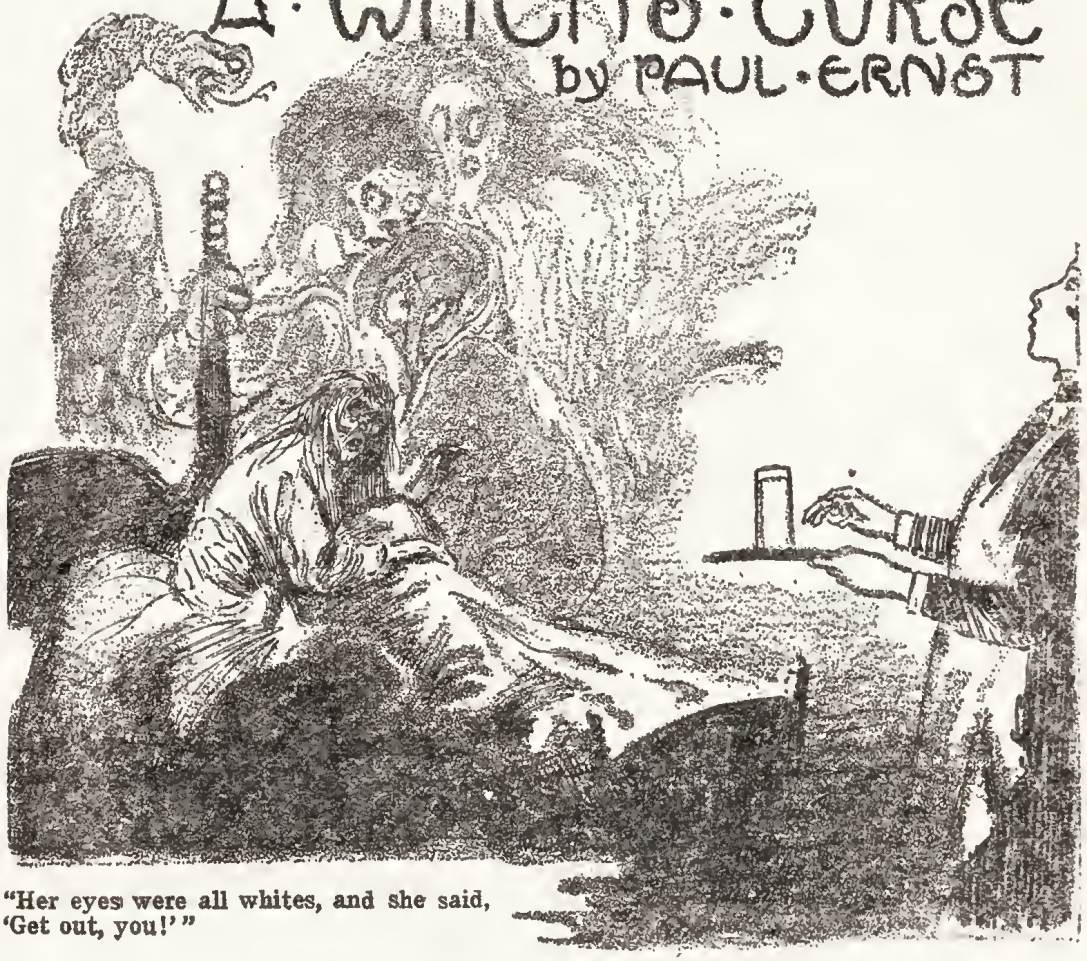
When, two days later, I recovered full consciousness, I was lying in the hut of one of the kindly Breton fisherfolk, and it was there that MePherson told me of the last plunge of the old *Emperatriz* and the death of Captain Frewin.

While supporting my senseless body on an overturned boat, the engineer had seen him swimming with slow and steady strokes for the shore.

"Then, straight in front of him, there appeared the woman frae the sea. Her shoulders and breasts were bare; her hair was floating out behind her like a golden eloud. From her lips there eam' the same song as she had sung the night the *Valhalla* went doon," the old man told me. "I saw her reach the struggling mon, saw her slender white arms twine themselves aroond him, saw her wet lips, red as coral, pressed to his. Then, locked in each other's arms, they slowly sank, and the green waters closed above their heads. And there they'll bide until the sea gies up its dead."

A·WITCH'S·CURSE

by PAUL·ERNST



"Her eyes were all whites, and she said, 'Get out, you!'"

THIS is a strange tale, of ancient beliefs—or misbeliefs if you will—projected into a Twentieth Century setting; of bizarre happenings with never a tangible foundation of fact on which to rest the bewildered mind of the observer; of events that, it seems, could never occur outside the covers of those old hand-illumined volumes dealing with "Black Magycke."

You may believe it or not. Frankly, the newspapers did not. There was in their uninspired columns no hint of anything beyond the realm of everyday happenings. Mrs. Boyd Barringer, wife of the last of that family of Barringers who had packed their Puritanical belongings and landed in New England long before the tea party—had suddenly and completely disappeared! Simple enough, the newspapers implied. A husband who was not too attentive, a secret admirer—and flight to parts unknown.

But in this implication the newspapers were wrong—or at least only half right. Mrs. Barringer, granted, had departed for parts unknown. But it was not because of a too indifferent husband; nor was it due to one of those unfortunate love affairs that occasionally upset the most solidly established homes. There was a different reason from either of these behind her sudden disappearance—a reason that goes back two hundred and thirty years to the mysterious labors of an elderly woman who lived,

and died with suddenness and violence, in Salem, Massachusetts.

To begin with, Boyd Barringer was not an indifferent husband. There never lived a man who loved more profoundly, nor who was more kindly attentive than he was to Clara Barringer, his wife. And she in her turn adored him too completely to gaze at another man with more than the casual glance of a stranger.

Their very marriage is proof of this love of theirs. For Clara, apprehensive of the curse that she felt was laid upon her, did not want to inflict sorrow on Boyd; and for months she held out against his urgent pleading that she be his wife. That he continued to so plead until he had won her in spite of her loving fears, and that she consented at last to his pleading in spite of every obstacle her harassed mind could set forth, indicates more than any other circumstance the depth of their affection for each other.

The scene in which Boyd had finally won over her unwillingness to risk bringing him harm was a stormy one in some respects.

"Clara," said Boyd, his hands closing over her round, firm arms rather cruelly and his eyes searching into hers, "Clara, is there someone else? Do you refuse me because there is another man before me in your heart?"

Clara hesitated before answering that question. Her eyes took in every detail of the man before her with a painful accuracy; for she firmly intended that they should never meet again, and she wanted a last mental picture of him to carry with her.

Boyd was rather tall, but his inclination toward heaviness took away from his height. Wide, thick shoulders sloped into a powerful neck. His features were purposeful, almost grim. A typical man of the business world, one would say, successful and commanding, with not too much sentiment or dreamy nonsense to hinder his path among the material things of life. But his eyes contradicted the rest of his appearance. Deep blue, they were, almost like a woman's in their tenderness and understanding. His eyes lent a softness to his firm mouth, and took away some of the harshness of his chin. A man of action with the eyes of a lover. It is small wonder that Clara should find it hard to utter the lie that was intended to drive him away.

Nevertheless, driving her rebellious tongue with her head instead of with her pleading heart, lie she did.

"You have guessed it," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "I love another man. That is why I can never marry you."

But Boyd had not been fooled. He had looked back into her own eyes—those odd eyes of hers with the spindle-shaped, feline pupils—and he had smiled.

"You aren't telling me the truth, Clara. That's not the reason why you won't marry me. Are you still letting yourself think about that fantastic curse that's supposed to crop out in your family tree sometime? Would you actually let such an insane legend keep us apart when we want each other so badly?"

"It's not an insane legend!" Clara cried, a break in her words. "Look at me! Just look at me! Can't you see the seeds of fulfilment of that old prophecy in my eyes, in my head, in the very way I walk?" She began to weep, wildly, her shoulders shaking with incipient hysteria.

Boyd attempted to calm her, to humor her.

"Come now," he suggested, "let's assume that this two-hundred-year-old fable has some truth in it. Let us do it the honor of investigating it thoroughly so that our reason may kill it forever. You are too intelligent to believe in such a fantastic old wive's tale without proof of some kind. Show me the proof, then, and tell me the whole history. And if,

after I have heard it all, I still want you to marry me, you will, won't you? Say you will, dear."

"How can I answer?" whispered Clara. "Surely no one was ever in such a position before. But I will tell you the whole story now instead of the hints and snatches of it that I have allowed you to hear. Wait just a moment while I go up to the attic —there is an old trunk there with the documents and pictures relating to my family history."

"I'll go with you. There is a light up there? Good." And Boyd followed her up the flights of steps that ended under the gables of the old stone house—and in a discovery astounding enough, though of course utterly unbelievable.

THE place in which a story is related has much to do with the impression made by that story. In the full light of day, in some prosaic spot, Boyd would have laughed at the crazy tale, proof or no proof—as, indeed, he did next morning. But up there under the roof, in the dim light of a single small electric globe, he must have spent a most uncomfortable hour listening to Clara's incredible history of a feud that had endured for seven generations.

The big attic had been floored but never finished off further. Like square-hewn ribs the beams depended overhead, festooned with cobwebs, vague and uncertain in the illumination of the unshaded, dust-crusted light bulb. The place was cluttered with old chairs and tables with legs like tentacles in the shadowy darkness. An eery spot, certainly, and almost too well fitted for Clara's words.

Several very old chests were in a far corner; and one of these Boyd dragged out under the light at Clara's request. After a struggle with the rusty catches this was opened, revealing a miscellany of ancient garments, pictures, and yellowed papers.

"In 1692," Clara began dully, "a solitary old woman lived in a shack on the edge of Salem, Massachusetts. She was supposed to have a son somewhere, but no one knew for sure, and he never came to visit her. She kept herself alive by raising vegetables and selling them or trading them to the neighboring townspeople.

"She must have been rather a repulsive-looking creature — very old and wrinkled, with a long chin and a long nose that almost met like pincers, due to her lack of teeth. She was not very clean, and her mind was a bit unhinged. But she did no one harm and was not herself molested; at least at the time my story begins.

"My mother's ancestors also lived in Salem—the Manfred Jones clan. There was, among other children of this family, a brooding, dark-haired little girl by the name of Emily—my own ancestress. Here is a picture of her as a small child."

Clara handed Boyd a miniature, rather dimmed by age, but cleverly done and quite legible. It was the picture of a girl of about eleven years; though the eyes, dark and intense, looked older. Boyd gazed at the picture with interest, then handed it back silently.

"The old woman I spoke of had often brought her vegetables to the Jones home, and she met Emily. She seemed immensely attracted to the little girl. But Emily, possibly because she was afraid, would never make up to her. So it was that one day when the old crone passed her hand longingly over Emily's fine dark hair, the girl squirmed out of her grasp, kicked and clawed at her like a little animal, and ran away. Then from a safe distance she proceeded to make faces at her and taunt her with her bent ugliness of age. It was a very regrettable thing, but, after all, it was natural in a child so young.

"From that one scene grew the shadow that has clung to my mother's family ever since. For the old woman

hated the child from then on. And that hatred was mutual. Emily Jones went out of her way to invent pranks to play on the woman, and incited all her little friends to do the same. This, too, was regrettable, but it was something any child might do.

"It was in the early spring of that year that queer tales began to get around concerning the old lady. Farmers complained that cattle sickened when she looked in their direction. A neighbor of hers said that she had the Evil Eye. In short, all the stock tales of a witch's persecution were told on her. She began to be known as the Witch of Salem town. Everyone avoided her. No one bought or traded for her vegetables, and she was near to starving to death.

"The vague rumors concerning her might never have amounted to much. The most rabid period of the witch craze lasted only a year or so, you know. And she might have weathered the storm of the neighborhood's disapproval and fear very easily—but for little Emily Jones!

"With an intelligence older than her eleven years, Emily took in all the talk concerning the old woman she hated with the petulance of childhood. And as she listened she remembered a sentence that the crone had flung after her when she was particularly annoyed at some prank the little girl had played on her:

"'I'll turn you into a cat, Emily Jones! I'll turn you into a cat if you don't stop your nuisance! Folks say I'm a witch. Well—a witch can turn little girls into cats. And that's just what I'll do to you, Emily Jones!'

"That threat rankled in the girl's mind, and it ripened and grew until a thought flashed on her one day: Suppose she pretended that the witch really was turning her into a cat! What a joke that would be! How it would plague her!

"Old enough and intelligent enough to reason thus far, Emily was yet unable to go farther and realize the extreme gravity of her plan. She was too young, of course, to understand the strength of the feeling that was gathering against the old hag.

"So the child put her scheme in motion. . . .

"She began, one evening, to crawl catlike under the tables and chairs, mewing and scratching with imaginary claws at her brothers and sisters. She licked her arms with her tongue and glared blankly about, imitating a cat with all the monkey cleverness a child has for imitations.

"Naturally the father, Manfred Jones, was astounded. More, he was as badly frightened as a grown man can be.

"'Emily! Emily!' he cried, 'What in heaven's name possesses you? You act as though you were bewitched!'

"'I am!' was the solemn answer. 'The old witch said she would turn me into a cat. And I can feel her doing it now!'

"Manfred Jones was an influential man. Also, in common with a great many other normally intelligent men, he believed in witchcraft. He took his little daughter's statement at face value and proceeded against the so-called witch with all the power at his command.

"In April of the year 1692 he urged action against the old lady in a public hearing presided over by six magistrates and four ministers of the gospel. So violent were his charges and so high was feeling running against the old woman that she was promptly 'cried out,' or accused formally of being a witch. Without further ceremony she was thrown into the crude town jail.

"And now the girl Emily was terrified at the consequences of her thoughtless prank. She told of the trick she had played. She pleaded that the old woman be released, swearing that she had made up the whole thing. But no one believed her. Solemnly it was judged that Emily's denials were a further proof

of the witch's guilt: She had sent a demon to the child which impelled her to withdraw her charges!

"The jailer, an ignorant and superstitious man, furthered the misfortune of the unhappy woman. He accused her of bewitching his stomach so that it was seized by violent cramps! And this absurd, utterly insane charge was the last straw. The people of Salem were now so frightened and angry that they visited the magistrates in a body and demanded that the witch be put to death.

"The magistrates obeyed the people's wish. They decreed that the witch be hanged.

"By some odd telepathy the crone had a premonition of her fate. At the moment when the death decree was signed, according to the jailer, she cried out and sank in a senseless heap to the floor of the cell. And then comes the strangest part of all. . . .

"When she regained consciousness she began to pace her cell like a maniac, shrieking and shaking her fists. 'They're going to hang me!' she shouted in her high, shrill voice. 'They're going to kill me! And it's the Jones brat that's the cause! She told them I said I'd change her into a cat. So they're going to hang me!'

"And it was at this point, the jailer said in his later account, that she stopped dead-still and raised her joined hands as though she were praying.

"'They're killing me on the word of a child!' she said harshly. 'Very well—I'll be quit with the child! By all the devils in hell, by the stars in heaven's floor, by all the ghostly guards of that witchcraft of which I am accused, I'll do as the child charged. I *will* change her into a cat!'

"And there in that dimly lit cell the desperate old hag squatted on the dirt floor and closed her eyes and mumbled and whined to herself. And back in the Jones home, Emily, half sick with terror at the thing she'd done, began to change under the very eyes of her amazed family! With every syllable the condemned witch uttered half a mile away, the girl jerked convulsively as though she had been struck.

"The pupils of her eyes quivered and shook, and finally became slitted and catlike. She began to crawl around the floor in dead earnest now, mewing and spitting. Actually a fine, almost imperceptible growth of hair, like fur, showed on her arms and the backs of her hands!

"We'll never know what dread thing would have happened—for action was swift in Massachusetts in 1692. The mob poured down to the jail with the death decree, burst open the doors and proceeded to hang the witch from a beam in her own cell!

"Just before the final moment she laughed, a high, empty, awful laugh. 'You've got me now,' she screamed. 'But I'll have my revenge! If I must wait till the seventh generation, I'll have revenge!'

"And then the end. She died with a curse on her lips against the family that had been the cause of her execution."

CLARA shuddered and covered her face with her hands. And Boyd, his own face ashen and his lips white and dry, drew her close to him.

"A mad, dangerous legend to let live," he whispered. "But, Clara—my heavens! Surely you aren't believing such a monstrous thing!"

"Our ancestors in Salem were strong, firm-minded, material men, Boyd. If so many of such men believed in witchcraft—were so desperately afraid of it that they took human life to protect themselves—it would indicate that there is actually something in the Black Art, wouldn't it?"

"Impossible!" said Boyd. But there was a shadow on his face that contradicted the spoken word.

"Anyway, there are proofs," said Clara drearily. "Awful proofs! Here are the records of the public hearing where the witch was cried out. And here is the death warrant. And here is the document of Manfred Jones." She handed him a packet of yellow papers, documents. "But here, Boyd, is the most conclusive proof of all—a picture of Emily Jones when she was a woman, years after the witch's curse."

Boyd was conscious of a shudder as he looked into the miniature that showed the girl Emily grown up.

With uncanny intuition the artist had caught at secret, hidden things in the sad face. The eyes, with their spindle-shaped, ominously slitted pupils; the odd set of the head; the hint of unnatural hair in the shading of the delicate upper lip; all breathed of unbelievable metamorphosis. Boyd suddenly covered the picture with his hand to shut out the queer eyes that seemed to live and stare at him.

"And my eyes, too, Boyd," Clara murmured, reading his thought. "They are the same. And I—am the seventh generation! The witch, with her last breath, said distinctly the seventh generation. And I am the seventh!"

"Clara, compose yourself, dear." Boyd's face was white but steady. "What you deduce, the thing you fear, is not possible. Let us laugh at this silly tale as it deserves, and forget it forever. Clara—will you marry me?"

"In spite of—of——"

"In spite of the legend? Of course. All the fairy-stories in the world couldn't change my love for you. Please!"

He held out his arms, and Clara, doubting and wondering still but tired to the death of bearing her heavy burden alone, crept close to him and gave her promise.

"Just one thing more," Boyd called out as he was leaving, "what was the name of that old witch of yours? I'd like to look her up and see from the records whether her son was mythical or a real being who left a family. It might help make your mind easy if I gather all the facts in the case."

"I'm not sure of her name," said Clara slowly. "The records I have are contradictory there. The death decree named her Joan Byfield. But in the minutes of the public hearing she was written down as Joan Basfield. I don't know which is correct."

"Basfield!" cried Boyd, startled. "Basfield! Clara, tell me—is that spelled with one 's' or two?"

"Spelled with one 's,'" said Clara, wondering at his excitement. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh—nothing. If it is spelled with one 's,' or if it was Byfield, it couldn't be the same. But—the devil! It couldn't be the same in any event. The very idea is preposterous!"

"What are you talking of, Boyd?"

"Nothing, dear," said Boyd, refusing to meet her puzzled eyes. "Nothing. A foolish passing thought of mine, not worth mentioning."

Slowly he descended the steps, his head bent, his thoughts far away.

LIFE flowed smoothly for Boyd and Clara Barringer.

Realizing that setting is half the trouble of any chronic mind disorder, Boyd insisted on selling Clara's old stone house, putting the proceeds in trust for her, and shortly afterward they moved down to New York.

The apprehension gradually faded from Clara's eyes—those eyes with the odd, slitted pupils—and she was a normal, loving wife. Boyd was content to believe that the fantasy that had festered in her brain since she was a girl, had faded from her consciousness forever. The aged documents treating with one Joan Basfield, or Byfield, witch, who went about transforming little girls into cats, had been burned in the furnace

with all the ceremony the rite demanded; and the uncanny miniature of Emily Jones had accompanied the records into the fire.

Clara moved contentedly and prosaically about the handsome house Boyd had bought in New York. And, after two years, during which no shadow of her delusion had obtruded, Boyd felt that it was safe to make a request—a request he would certainly have made sooner had he not felt that trouble might result from a certain similarity of names.

"Clara," he said casually one evening, "we have plenty of room here. I wonder if you would mind very much if I had my Aunt Jane up for a long visit? She's quite old and helpless, alone in the world. Do you care if I invite her?"

Clara smiled. That Boyd was fond of his mother's sister she knew well. Quite often he had mentioned her. An old woman now, but still almost dismayingly clever, she lived alone with few friends and few interests in life. She was devoted to her favorite nephew, Boyd. Clara wondered idly why he had never asked to have her visit them before; and she found herself eager to meet the woman who commanded her man's admiring respect and affection.

"I'll be glad to have her come for as long as she wants, dear," she assured him. "It's a pity for an old person to be alone as she is. Too bad she hasn't a nice old husband to share her life."

Boyd grinned. "I'm afraid the young men of her day and acquaintance were too much in awe of her to propose. She had rather a sharp tongue, I've been told, in addition to too many brains for a proper wife. And her temper was notorious. Even now she's a terror when anything angers or upsets her. Anyway, she never married."

"Well, I'll write and ask her at once, Boyd. What is her full name and address? If you've ever called her anything but just Aunt Jane I can't remember it."

This, under the circumstances, was a disturbing question, and Boyd had dreaded it in spite of two years of peace which had done so much to erase the childish bogy of the witch's curse from Clara's mind. As he answered he was very careful to seem carelessly offhand.

"Her name," he said lightly, "is Jane Evers Bassfield. The address is —why, Clara!"

He caught her as she swayed and seemed about to faint.

But Clara's surrender to old fears was over in a few moments.

"The names are so much alike," she explained later in the evening. "Joan Basfield the witch—and Jane Bassfield, your aunt. For an instant I was rather startled. I'm sorry to be such a fool, Boyd."

"I was afraid the name would bother you," Boyd confessed, "or I would have asked her here long ago. But now that you have cleared this last hurdle I think we can safely say that you are cured of your superstition—if you don't mind my calling a spade a spade."

When Jane Bassfield arrived in answer to her invitation, Clara was further reassured. Obviously she was a strong-minded, prideful old lady with her firm, projecting chin and arrogant nose. And her eyes were that cool gray that can be glacial in moments of anger. But her manner was warm and charming in the extreme.

"I've been perishing to meet Boyd's wife for two years. But I couldn't very well come without being invited, and I was afraid you didn't want to be bothered with doddering old age. Show me the room you've picked for me, my dear, and come along and tell me how Boyd is treating you. If he's a cruel husband I'll set the spirits on him!"

Boyd hastened to answer the perturbed question that instantly rose in Clara's eyes.

"She means that she'll disturb my morning coffee by ghostly rappings on the breakfast table," he laughed. "Aunt Jane is supposed to be psychic and everything."

"Are you—really?" asked Clara, gazing wide-eyed at the vigorous old woman, and with that in her voice that made Boyd wince in alarm.

Jane Bassfield shrugged, the gesture seeming almost masculine.

"Who can say?" she evaded. "Everyone assures me so often that psychic phenomena are all faked that I'm beginning to believe it myself. But long ago I found that I could defend myself from ignorant and undesirable people by claiming that I was psychic. It became, and still is, a favorite threat of mine to 'set the spirits on' anyone who tries to cross me. Heavens, child, don't look at me like that! I won't bite you!"

She put her hand in a kindly way over Clara's cold fingers, seeming not to notice when the younger woman quickly drew away from her. "Come and show me your new house. You must be fearfully successful, Boyd, to buy such a tidy little mansion."

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Two days after Jane Bassfield arrived, Clara's maid, Agnes, left the Barringer employ. She left in a panic at 11 o'clock at night, announcing her change of heart, packing her belongings, and fleeing out the front gate all within one short half-hour.

To Clara she gave no explanation at all. To her good friend Beulah, the cook, she gave a reason of sorts, but it was so vague and unconvincing that it was worse than no reason.

"I don't see anything wrong with old Miss Bassfield," Beulah had said in answer to Agnes' statement that she was leaving because of Mr. Barringer's aunt. "She's awful strong-minded and kind of particular. But aside from that she's all right."

"Oh, Beulah, you should have seen what I saw just a few minutes ago. You'd march right down and say you were going to quit too!"

"What'd you see?"

"Well, you know I've been waiting on the old woman, kind of, since she got here. And Mrs. Barringer said it would be nice if I took her up a glass of hot milk. That was at half-past 10, just a few minutes ago. Well, I heated some milk—you saw me—and took it up to her.

"I knocked on her door and didn't get an answer, so I just went in, thinking the old lady was asleep and that I'd put the milk on the stand near the bed for when she woke up. But she wasn't asleep.

"I slipped in quiet and she didn't hear me, I guess. She was sitting straight up in bed with a night-cap on and just that little night-light going. And then—what I saw!"

"Well, what'd you see?" asked Beulah impatiently.

"Shadows!" said Agnes with a tensity that would have been absurd had it not been for the pallor of her face.

"What about the shadows?" Beulah urged her.

"She was sitting so the night-light threw a big shadow of her against the wall. And such a shadow! The end of her nose and the end of her chin almost came together. The night-cap looked like a—a—I can't tell you just what, Beulah. All I can say is—she looked like an old witch!"

"Go on!" scoffed Beulah. "You, a grown woman, saying such things!"

"But that wasn't the worst," said Agnes, unheeding the jeer. "There were other shadows sort of swimming around hers on the wall. They looked like shadows of nightmare animals all bowing and dancing around the shadow of her head with the nose and chin almost coming together. But when I looked at her and not at her shadow I couldn't see any shapes of animals around her. It was only the

shadows I could see." Agnes stopped for breath.

"Then what?" prompted Beulah.

"Isn't that enough? The old lady saw me standing there all of a sudden, and she glared like she was going to jump at me. Her eyes were all whites, and she said, 'Get out, you!' And I got out. And I'm going to keep right on getting out, Beulah. I won't live in a place with anyone like that. Honest, I think she *is* a witch!"

Which met with the scorn it deserved. Beulah was a realistic soul, and she treated Agnes' raving with amused indifference. But she was, nevertheless, unable to persuade Agnes to change her mind and stay under the Barringer roof.

IT WAS soon after this that Clara Barringer began to be troubled with insomnia. It was not the ordinary affair of being unable to go to sleep—it was a matter of being afraid to let herself sink into slumber: her dreams were so hideous! Just what these nightmares were she couldn't have said herself. She never remembered any of them. All she knew was that they were utterly horrible and left her weak and shaken in the morning.

Boyd was more familiar with her nightmares than she herself was—he heard her mumbled, feverish whispering during the night only too often. And piecing the broken snatches of her sleep talk together, and viewing with alarm the delirious pattern the words produced, he went one day to a famous mind specialist. To him he told the story of the fantastic curse that haunted his wife, and he recounted the bits of sentences and phrases that voiced her terror in the nightmare-ridden night.

At the conclusion of the account the specialist pronounced the same opinion that Boyd himself had formed: his aunt, Jane Bassfield, must leave their home at once!

"For there is no doubt, my dear man, that the presence of your aunt and the odd coincidence of names have wrought up the feelings of your wife to a dangerous pitch. Really, I couldn't answer for her sanity if the disturbing element, Miss Bassfield, is not removed at once!"

"And you think she'll be herself again as soon as my aunt leaves?" Boyd's voice was shaken. To the doctor this was a most interesting and intriguing case, but to Boyd it was the anguish of his beloved wife.

"I'm sure she'll be all right when your aunt leaves, Mr. Barringer."

Boyd hesitated an instant before putting his next question. He felt like a fool, but for the life of him he couldn't restrain it.

"Then there is no danger of—of this thing coming true? There is no chance that——?" He colored with embarrassment.

"No danger that the lady will turn your wife into a cat?" The specialist's voice was as heavy with scorn as he dared make it, what with the size of the fee he had in mind as suitable for the Barringer purse. "Hardly, my dear fellow! That is a metamorphosis rather incompatible with the best customs of biology!"

"I know it sounds ridiculous," Boyd confessed. "But if you had seen my wife's eyes last night! Her eyes were always queerly catlike, and last night they were enormous, with glints of green and yellow——"

"Mr. Barringer, you will be my patient too if you don't watch your step. Use your reason, man! Just go out into the street here, and watch the motors and trolley cars go by, and to the accompaniment of that friendly din say to yourself a dozen times—I am afraid my aunt is going to change my wife into a cat! If that doesn't make you roar with cleansing laughter in about three seconds—you'd better come back here and take a few treatments yourself!"

JANE BASSFIELD took Boyd's awkward attempts at mollifying explanation better than he had hoped she would. Indeed, she seemed almost to have suspected some such condition.

"I was afraid that Clara didn't like me," she sighed. "I have tried hard to be friends, but she seems almost to fear me. I'll go immediately, of course."

With Clara she seemed deeply sympathetic.

"I'm so sorry you haven't been feeling as well as usual. And I'm so sorry I have to leave you—some business matters at home that I must tend to at once."

But for one instant, just before train time, she and Clara were alone. And if Boyd could have heard and seen he would not have been so sure that the mere withdrawal of his aunt's presence would leave his wife as she had been before the visit.

With her eyes gleaming like cold fires, the grim old woman whispered one sentence to Clara. The words wiped the color from the younger woman's face and sent the thick blood rushing to her brain. It confirmed her every dazed suspicion; and, indicating only one possible explanation to her mind, this sentence can be pointed to as the final seal of her fate.

"Distance won't stop me, Clara *Jones*, and you know it—you who also know the history of Joan Basfield!"

Boyd was vastly disappointed that day. He had hoped to the last that he could reconcile his wife to the old lady; so it was most unfortunate that Clara had suddenly become too ill to accompany them to the train. . . .

CLARA BARRINGER'S illness, mentioned by the later newspaper accounts of her curious disappearance, persisted from this time on. In the course of the next month Boyd called often at the office of the specialist in mind disorders.

"Can it be that there is something physically wrong with her brain—tumor or bone pressure or something?" he asked the doctor once.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because she is suffering from the most frightful headaches. Her eyes have been tested and found excellent, so that this could not be the cause."

"What does Mrs. Barringer say about her headaches?" the doctor probed.

"She says they are due to—but what she says is so fanciful that it wouldn't help you any to know."

"Nevertheless, tell me what she says is the cause, please."

"Well then," answered Boyd, his eyes averted, "she says that it is due to the changing of the shape of her head. She says that her skull is gradually growing rounder and flatter—like a cat's!"

The doctor shook his head.

"I've never heard nor seen before so persistent a delusion," he mused. "But I'm afraid there is nothing we can do. Power of mind over matter, you know. She will probably continue to suffer from these headaches until we can cure her. If I could only see her!"

But this Boyd would not consent to.

"She becomes terribly angry if I even mention you," he confessed. "She simply would not see you or admit for one instant the chance that her mind is not quite right."

However, he was soon forced to accede and obey the doctor's request that he see his patient personally.

"Clara," he asked anxiously one day, "why do you walk so queerly, with your arms hung so? You are getting very round-shouldered."

Her voice was more disturbing in the hopeless calm of its answer than any wild hysteria would have been, and her words sent him rushing once again to the specialist's office.

"You know why, Boyd," she said. Just that and nothing more; no

attempt to explain or to answer his words of protest.

"You must come and see for yourself, doctor," he pleaded later. "The time has arrived when we must do something drastic. This must stop!"

"Describe to me the way she walks, please."

"It is very hard to describe. About all I can say is that she walks almost like—like an animal! Her arms hang straight down before her, and are drawn close together as though they were—were forelegs. She bends far over from the waist so that her hands are nearly on a level with her knees. And her stride itself has changed so that, while she seems to rise and fall as though on pads, she is yet more awkward."

"Quite in order with the cat delusion," pronounced the doctor. "I'll come this evening as a personal friend. Don't hint to her that I'm calling in a professional capacity."

The call was not productive. After talking with Clara Barringer and sounding her as deeply as he dared, the specialist admitted that he was rather undecided as to what to do next. And, as it is the custom to do in such cases, he advised consulting another specialist.

Writing a name and address on his card, he handed it to Boyd.

"Go and see this man," he suggested. "Your wife's case has passed beyond the confines of the mind and into the purely physical. A physician should see her at once, and this man is of the best. He is particularly well informed concerning bone ailments—and I think he will need all his knowledge to diagnose the trouble that has bent your wife's shoulders and rounded them so decidedly."

So another great specialist called at the Barringer home and examined Clara with microscopic care. This time the identity was admitted. Boyd did not attempt to pass the doctor off as a friend. Specimen blood was taken, and the specialist left in a noncommittal fog of silence to take his problem to the laboratory and pronounce sentence accordingly.

"Poor Boyd!" said Clara softly. "It's no use, dear. You might as well save us both grief and wasted time. No doctor can help me—unless he can go back two hundred years and save old Joan Basfield from a witch's death!"

"Clara, for God's sake——" At the look in her eyes, Boyd stopped helplessly.

The findings of the second specialist threw no scientific light on the subject of the malformation of Clara's back and shoulders.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with Mrs. Barringer that I can lay my finger on with definite knowledge," he said. "Yet there is something decidedly wrong with the set of her shoulders and the curve of her spine."

Boyd eyed the doctor intently, sensing evasion.

"You are quite sure your laboratory tests revealed no unusual circumstance?" he insisted.

The doctor stroked his bearded chin.

"There was one perplexing discovery," he said uneasily. "However, I can only think it was the fault of the microscope. I have sent the instrument out to be inspected for lens flaws, and have submitted the slide I was studying to a professional laboratory for their opinion. But of course the error must lie in my microscope. There could actually be no such blood corpuscles as the glass revealed."

"What was the matter?" Boyd's voice was strained.

"There were present, in the blood specimen I obtained, some corpuscles that were—I hardly know how to say it——"

"Not human?" Boyd suggested, biting his lips for self-control.

"Yes," said the doctor, staring, "exactly."

"Like a cat's?" Boyd's voice was unrecognizable.

"How in the world did you guess that, man?" cried the doctor.

Boyd told haltingly of the delusions from which Clara suffered.

"But she is mad!" said the doctor. "Utterly mad! She needs more than a physician, my friend. Forgive me for saying it, but she should be given the expert care of an institution for the mentally deranged."

"Your microscopic findings?" Boyd said dully. "They prove——"

"They prove no such crack-brained thing as you suggest," interrupted the doctor. "In these days of highly artificial civilization humanity is rapidly succumbing to new diseases. Assuming my microscope is correct, I have merely been fortunate enough, from my standpoint at least, to be in a position to tabulate and announce a new medical discovery: that is all."

But it was not quite all. The worthy doctor was offered another profound scientific puzzle before a week had passed.

A fine, downy growth of hair was appearing on Clara Barringer's arms and body!

With detached excitement the doctor took several specimens and hastened to his microscope, which had been returned to him marked mechanically perfect. He examined the specimen intently. Then he phoned Boyd and asked him to come to his office at once.

"It is like no hair that I have ever seen before," he concluded. "It is not like hair at all. It is like—*fur!*"

Boyd was utterly beyond words. He merely nodded, with his eyes closed and his lips compressed. Still without a word he left the doctor's office and went directly to the railroad station. . . .

BOYD'S interview with his aunt, a hundred miles away, was not very satisfactory.

"Boyd, you are entirely insane! Clara's family history is correct. There was a Joan Basfield who was hanged for witchcraft in Salem in the year 1692. I will go further and admit that I am a direct descendant of that unfortunate woman—her son changed the name to Bassfield, with a double 's', for reasons that are now unknown. But as for the preposterous bewitchment you are talking of——!"

"So you are of the blood of Joan Basfield, the witch!" Boyd flung at her. "And this is the seventh generation! The seventh generation!" Then he leaned back, ashamed of his violence.

"You poor boy!" murmured Jane Bassfield without reproach. "Go back to Clara. She needs you. And give her my sincerest love and sympathy."

On the train that bore him back, Boyd tried not to think of the shadow of a cold, unearthly smile that had seemed to tighten the corners of the old woman's lips. He had, of course, imagined this. He was imagining many things of late. . . .

At the door of his home he hesitated before admitting himself. He was imagining things again. It seemed to him as though a palpable aura of loathsome shadows hung over that house of his. But he was not left to stand long. Mary—the maid who had replaced Agnes—flung open the door and beckoned him in before he could insert his key in the lock. She had, it appeared, waited there for him, and her relief at his return was almost hysterical.

"Oh, Mr. Barringer, Mr. Barringer, something's the matter with your missus! Something's the matter—something——"

Boyd shook the girl roughly as her voice rose from key to key in overstrung distress. His hands, clutching

at her arms more savagely than he knew, jerked her back to some control of herself.

"What is wrong?" he urged. "Tell me!"

"I don't know what it is. Something. She's in her room and won't let anyone come in. She's locked the door!"

"Why did she lock herself in?" Boyd was white-faced with a foreboding he would not admit even to himself. "Was she ill?"

"No, not exactly. I can't say she was sick, hardly. Worse than that!" Mary wept noisily, fearfully.

"What was the matter, then? Tell me how she looked!"

"She looked awful, Mr. Barringer. I can hardly tell you. But less than an hour after you left she began to *change*. The hair on her arms and body that you went to see the doctor about got longer and thicker like it was growing under your very eyes. And she got—smaller!"

"Smaller? What are you talking about, Mary!"

"That's just what!" repeated Mary, her voice rising shrilly again. "She sort of shriveled up. She sat down in the big chair in the library, and she fell asleep. I looked in at her when she was just dozing off, and again when she just woke up. And I saw all the change in her. And I say she was littler! She was a foot shorter when she got up than when she had sat down!"

"Mary—think what you're saying!" Boyd shook her again. "You don't mean to say such a thing. You were mistaken!"

"No I wasn't, either. She was really smaller. Her clothes hung loose all over her. And she was stooped more than I ever saw her before!"

"Then what?" prompted Boyd, licking his dry lips.

"Then's when she went to her room. All of a sudden she woke up. I was watching her. And she gave one look at herself in the big mirror in the hall. She screamed out like someone had stabbed her. And before I could say a word she turned and scuttled up the stairs. She didn't run, Mr. Barringer—she *scuttled!* As she went her hands hung so low that they touched the stairs, and she seemed to help herself along with them, too, like an animal! And her eyes——!"

Boyd waited to hear no more. Releasing the girl from his clutch so suddenly that she nearly fell, he turned and raced up the stairway to Clara's room. He did not stop to turn on the lights but ran down the dark hall with the certainty of long familiarity.

"Clara," he called, tapping on the panels of her door. No light showed from the slit under the door. Her room was in pitch darkness; and there was no answer to his call.

"Clara—it's Boyd. Open the door." Still there was no answer, no sound from the darkened room. He twisted at the knob but the door was locked.

"Clara, can you hear me?" He pounded on the panels till the skin was knocked from his knuckles, though he did not feel the pain.

"I will have to break the door down," he said, speaking aloud and entirely unaware that he had so spoken.

There was a stir in the darkened room, a voice that he could hardly recognize as Clara's.

"Go away! Oh, please go away!"

"I must get in, Clara."

"No! No! Go away!" The voice was high and keen, almost metallic. It sounded more like a violin string that had been plucked too harshly than like a human voice.

"But, darling," soothed Boyd, "don't you see—if you're not well I'll have to call the doctor. You can't stay on in there by yourself. You must have some kind of attention."

"Boyd, no!"

"Won't you let me send Mary in to you if you don't want me?"

"No!"

"Clara, dear—please."

"No, Boyd, no! Oh, go away!"

Boyd called upon his will for a last effort.

"I'll break in if you don't unlock the door!"

"Boyd, you mustn't——"

With his shoulder aching and tingling from the shock, Boyd stepped through the splintered doorway and into the darkness of the room. The shades were tightly drawn, and this in addition to the natural gloom of a moonless night made the room like a pocket. He tried to penetrate the blackness with his eyes but could see nothing.

His hand groped along the wall for the light switch. The movement was arrested by the voice—the voice that was like and yet not like Clara's. At the sound of that voice his searching fingers seemed to coil in on themselves as though they had touched ice.

"Don't light the light! Oh, don't light the light! Whatever you do you mustn't touch the light!"

Boyd held his breath till his chest ached. The voice had come from low down—from almost the level of the floor!

What sight would meet his eyes if he flooded that room with light? What machination of Joan Basfield, dead two hundred and thirty years, would reveal itself? Better never to enter this room again, better never to look on his wife's face again, than stun his brain with the spectacle that intuition told him would confront his eyes!

But this was nonsense! Such things could not be! He would light the light so that he could go to Clara and soothe her out of her fears. Then—after she was well again—they would smile together at their fantastic terrors. His fingers sought along the wall for the switch.

"Don't! Don't!" the voice pleaded.

Out of the whirlpool of his mind Boyd clutched at one perplexing straw. It was a small thing, it seemed, to take up his thoughts at such a moment, but the wonder of it grew and grew.

"How—how do you know what I am doing?" he whispered at last. "It is too dark for you to see me. I can't see you."

"I see every move you make," said the voice. "I can see as well in this room as you can in daylight."

"But how? It is pitch-dark in here! How can you see?"

"Oh, Boyd," moaned the voice, "you know why I can see in the dark as well as in the light! You know!"

"I won't believe it," said Boyd hoarsely. "I tell you I won't believe it! I won't! I won't!"

Again his questing fingers fumbled for the light switch. "I'm going to turn on this light!"

"You mustn't, I say! You *must not*——"

There was a click and the room was flooded with light.

For a dozen eternities Boyd stood there in the doorway, staring with frightful eyes at a small, furry body that shuddered and huddled in the corner.

There was a soft patter of frantic paws. The supple, feline body flashed by him and out of the door with a scream that was almost human.

THE THREE

By LOUISE VAN DE VERG

"I NEVER saw such a thick fog," said the man. "Where do you suppose we are by this time?"

"I don't know," returned the woman. "Frank, I'm afraid."

"What nonsense, Margaret! The driver set us in the right path!"

"Did he?"

"Of course he did!" said the man, testily. "Don't let yourself get nervous. Don't you suppose that driver knows his business? He's been meeting the ships from—from—the ships down there at the docks for twenty years. He told me so."

"I heard that." Margaret's little gloved hand moved a trifle frantically. "Frank, you don't remember, either! That's—that's what's unnerved me—not the fog! I can't remember where it is we've come from—nor where we're going!" Tears were near the surface of her voice. "Frank—do *you* remember?"

"Of course I do! We've come from——" There was a long, blank pause, through which the white fog dripped from invisible trees and fell with little pattering sounds to the unseen ground. They could see nothing but a short stretch of beaten path, with a little green at the edges, always the same, receding into the fog at their backs, appearing from the fog in front of them. They continued to walk, but there was panic between them as they paced through the looming and invisible wood.

At last the man spoke. "I don't remember," he said, under his breath. "I—don't—remember." The silence fell again, heavily, oppressive as the fog.

They came to the gate before they knew it was there, and paused before it, doubtfully.

"Shall we go through?" asked the woman.

"The path does; and the driver said——"

"Ah, don't speak to me of the driver!" But she opened the gate, and they went through together. The sound of the dripping trees grew faint behind them, and there were flowers beside the path, now. "I hope Edith has not been worrying about us," said Margaret.

"Edith!" cried the man. "Edith! Then you do——"

"It came to me all at once," she said, wondering. "Until you spoke I didn't realize I hadn't known before."

"Edith what?"

"I—don't remember her married name. She's a widow, and we're—we're——"

As she spoke they came to a house—a small, comfortable cottage, by what they could see of it. "We're what?" asked the man.

"I don't remember that," she answered, the anxious frown on her brow again. "It must be that we have been invited to call—if we were to stay longer we'd have had our own bags. I—almost feel I know this house, Frank! I suppose it's because Edith has sent me pictures, but I don't remember it, if she did—nor Edith, either! It's charming, isn't it?"

"We'll have one like it, Mrs. Dawes," said the man, smiling at her, "after the honeymoon's over."

"I—don't know that I want it," she said, somberly, making no response to his overture. "It's charming, but it—frightens me."

"You're nervous."

"I wish I could remember! If I could remember I'd be all right."

"It'll come back to you," he reassured her. "It's begun already. Isn't there anyone home, d'you think?"

"I don't know." Margaret sighed. "You might ring," she suggested.

A moment later, Edith was at the door. "How do you do?" she said, interrogatively. It was plain she did not know them. Margaret felt a shock of surprize, but was able to answer.

"I am Margaret Chiltern," she said. There! She had made the mistake she had feared to make. Margaret Chiltern, indeed! Margaret Dawes since this morning. She glanced at her husband. There was no expression in his face.

"Come in, Mrs. Chiltern." Edith was opening the door. "And Mr. Chiltern! I'm glad to see you. I was almost afraid you'd be lost in this fog."

Well, well, it was a natural mistake on her part. Why didn't Frank correct her? She was a hospitable soul, thought Margaret, but typical of the women whom matrimony deadens, whose husbands leave them for other women by the time they reach the forties. Perhaps she had been spared a heavier heartache, by her husband's early death. These thoughts were in the top of Margaret's mind as she followed her hostess down the passage. Beneath them surged horror. Horror of what? She would not look at it long enough to find out; she was only able to cast oblique glances, and see the matronly figure of Edith moving kindly in its midst.

"This is your room," said Edith, opening a door.

"Why, our trunks are here!" cried Margaret.

"Yes," said the woman with a surprized look. "What's the matter, Mrs. Chiltern?"

"Nothing—nothing," said Margaret. "You have—unusually quick service here."

"Yes, it's good," assented Edith. "You'll want to freshen up, after your journey, I suppose. I'll see to tea, unless there's something else I can do for you."

"Thank you, we shan't need a thing," said Margaret.

"I don't usually have tea, when I'm alone," Edith said, "and it's such a pleasure to me that you like it. I always had it when Ronny was home." She smiled, and left them.

"Now is Ronny her husband?" wondered Margaret.

"Don't, Meg!" Frank almost moaned the words. "Let's get away from here! I don't like it, Margaret! There's—there's something about that woman!"

"Why, Frank!"

"I didn't dare correct her about the names," he went on. "There's something about that woman," he reiterated. "I'm—yes, I am! I'm afraid of her!"

"You're getting as bad as I am," smiled Margaret, but without mirth. "She's a dear thing."

"Yes, but Margaret, I know her, I tell you! I know her! Only I—can't remember. Did—did you see that scar on her throat?"

"I saw it," she answered steadily. But she was unable to hide a small shudder that possessed her at the moment of speech. "This room's—familiar, somehow, too," she said, after a minute. "I know I've been in this room before."

"How could you have been?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because it's—it's like the rooms the women's magazines tell you how to furnish. I don't suppose I really have been in it," she added, gazing idly into the fog. "She'd remember me, if I had been. I think the fog's not so thick."

"Let's go back, now, Margaret, before she comes again, while the fog will hide us."

"Back where? Oh, Frank, I *couldn't* go back to those woods again not knowing where we were going, or what would happen!"

"You don't know what's going to

happen here. It may be something horrible. I feel it, Margaret, I feel something horrible in the air. Please come away, darling!"

"It's the fog," she assured him.

Edith's knock prevented a repetition of his plea. They went out to sit at a pleasant tea-table and smile politely comfortable smiles at their mysterious hostess, who placidly poured, and served, and chatted in a halo of terror.

"Ronny—my boy, you know—is in South America—with a steamship company. He's a dear boy, and a very capable officer. He's doing awfully well."

"I'm glad of that," said Margaret. "Do you hear from him often?"

A distressed look crossed Edith's face. "I haven't heard from him since the earthquake," she said. "But really, I don't suppose there's any reason to worry. That country, you know! That earthquake was when I lost my husband," she told them.

It was hard for Margaret to sit with a polite face, even a sympathetic face, while icy fear swirled about her. She ventured a glance at Frank. He, too, was tortured.

Edith's voice continued, to an accompaniment of Margaret's murmur of sympathy. "We had been driving, you know, and we were coming home. Frank—my husband's name was Frank, too, like yours, Mrs. Chiltern—Frank had been nervous all day and the traffic had bothered him. You know, I believe there is something in the air, before a quake! At any rate, we both felt it—a kind of tension, you know. We were glad to get home. I went in first, and Frank was right behind me. We had one of those big hat-racks, with mirrors, in the hall, and the first thing I noticed was that it was moving. The next minute I knew nothing."

A hat-rack with a mirror—a dark hall—a woman coming in out of the night. As though in a moving picture, Margaret saw herself in that hall, moving from that shadow with a gleaming—what? Not a knife! Yet in the picture it was a knife, and Margaret seemed quite calm. In a whirl of horror she forced herself to listen.

"The mirror was broken, and a piece of the glass cut me here." Edith touched the scar on her throat. "I had a bad concussion, and was unconscious for several weeks. I never even knew when Mr. Dawes' funeral took place—I have never known the date." She rose. "We need some more jelly," she said placidly, moving to the kitchen.

This horror left her untouched, yet she was part of it. The pictures were whirling now, before Margaret's eyes. She could no longer hide from them the knife, nor its use, nor their flight, nor their capture—nor the plain, bare room from which they had started that morning, with the terrible throne in its center—the throne of death.

"Frank!" she whispered. "Frank! Her husband's name was Frank Dawes!"

"We *had* seen this house before. It was mine—where I lived—with—her." He was breathing heavily. "She doesn't know us," he whispered. "She doesn't know us—and I guess she never will."

"We'll have to get away!"

"We can't. We were brought; we'll have to stay."

"But we're dead, Frank! We're dead! And I thought after we were dead we'd—we'd be together."

"She was dead first; and we *are* together—with her."

"We've *got* to get away, Frank!"

"We can't. I know we can't." There was a dreary and desolate finality in the insistent repetition.

"Even—here—it follows us," she mused, and she did not again think of flight.

Edith was in the room again. "I've been very much alone, since then," she said. "That was why I advertised for a couple, or two ladies to

live with me. I do hope," she smiled, "that you won't call me Mrs. Dawes, Mrs. Chiltern. Let's not stand on ceremony. My name is Edith, you know."

Margaret's lips were stiff, but she smiled. "I will call you Edith," she said. "I've felt from the first I knew you well."

"I'm glad. And may I call you Margaret?" She moved to the window. "The fog has lifted," she said. "We can see the woods plainly. I love those trees!"

POPE JOAN

FOR centuries the myth that a woman once occupied the papal chair at Rome persisted and was believed by many scholars. The fable seems to have been first launched in the Thirteenth Century, although she was said to have lived four hundred years before; most writers placed her reign at about 855 to 858 A. D. The story most common was that she was of English descent (though one account has made her the daughter of a Thessalian) but was born at Ingelheim or Mainz, in Germany. Her name at this time is sometimes given as Agnes. At school she was clever and studious. In her youth she fell in love with a young Benedictine monk, and clad in male attire fled with him to Athens. After his death she removed to Rome, still disguised as a man, and rose rapidly in the church, being distinguished for high integrity and great learning. Presently she was elected cardinal and soon afterward pope. Most of the accounts then represented her as having died under very discreditable circumstances, during a religious celebration.

So firmly established was the belief in this story that as late as 1843 and 1845 two ponderous works on the subject were published by Dutch scholars; the first, by Professor Kist, to prove the existence of Pope Joan, and the second, by Professor Wensing, to demolish Kist's argument. An Italian investigator turned out a volume in 1845 upon the subject, and Dollinger, of Germany, about 1870 devoted a considerable part of a volume to disproving the yarn. Kist thought that Pope Joan was possibly the widow of Pope Leo IV, who died in 855. But history seems to show pretty conclusively that Benedict III succeeded Leo IV, and reigned from 855 to 858. Another writer claimed that Joan reigned for a short time between Leo and Benedict.

There are some people still who repeat the old gossip for truth, but the whole thing is so preposterous and so utterly without foundation that modern historians dismiss it as a myth.

The Isle of Lost Souls

by JOEL MARTIN NICHOLS Jr.

"I was afraid," said Karlak, "that you would not call upon me until too late."

The Story Thus Far

RALPH HEARNE, riding in a New York subway in the year 2014, is recognized by Dr. Trask as the reincarnation of Boris Saranoff, who nearly a century before had helped bury the jewels of the Russian imperial family in the sea at Bakelief Island, Alaska. Dr. Trask is himself the reincarnation of Gregory Birsk, an unscrupulous Russian soldier of fortune who had tried to obtain the jewels for himself and been slain in a duel; and Dr. Trask's lovely wife is the reincarnation of the Grand Duchess Tatiana, the murdered Tsar's daughter, who escaped the massacre of her family by the Bolsheviks at Ekaterinburg. Dr. Trask projects himself, his wife, Hearne, and Merwin (the doctor's assistant, who is the reincarnation of Metkanoff) back into the past in the Fourth Dimension, hoping that by their combined psychic power they can change the course of past events and discover the hiding-place of the Tsar's jewels. He plans to betray his wife and Hearne, leaving them stranded in the Fourth Dimension nearly a century in the past, while he returns to his body in 2014 A. D. and organizes an expedition to Bakelief Island to recover the jewels for himself. The four arrive on the island and enter the bodies of the Russians. Saranoff fights a duel with Birsk, who fails to change the course of fate and is killed. He has with him the ring containing the little pellets that would enable Hearne and Mrs. Trask to return to their own bodies. They are stranded back in the past in the bodies of Saranoff and Tatiana.

10. Stranded in the Past

KARLAK recovered himself first. With a single bound he cleared a way through those between himself and Hillis. A sudden blow and he had felled the man holding the American.

He turned to the girl. "Quick!" he shouted. "Over the cliffs!"

She, too, seemed rooted to the spot, but Marta pushed her toward the edge. A quick rush, and the dazed Saranoff was beside her, his hand still gripping his useless arm. An instant later and they jumped almost together, landing on the shelving ledge ten feet below. Karlak and Hillis waited only until they were once more on their feet; then he and Hillis jumped also.

This story began in WEIRD TALES for December

Metkanoff was the first of Birsk's henchmen to realize what had happened. Running, pistol in hand, to the edge of the cliff, he knelt and leaned over, aiming carefully at the scrambling group below. They were helpless to shield themselves, but even as his finger tightened on the trigger he felt himself seized about the waist, and then, locked in old Marta's withered arms, he staggered and tottered over the void until balance left him and he fell, dragging her with him, to the waiting Pacific below. Merwin, still projected from Metkanoff's true body, read his doom in the falling man, screamed once—and vanished.

Pandemonium reigned on the cliff. Few had brought firearms, and those who had were in no mind to venture too near the edge, over which two of their number had so quickly gone to their deaths. Before they could collect their scattered wits there came a shout from one of them, and then, looking down into the valley, they saw three figures running toward the edge of the basin.

Ralph Hearne, in Saranoff's body, had viewed this swift course of events with horrified dismay. Whatever chance Gloria Trask might have had of returning to her own world, her own body, was now irretrievably lost, so far as he could see. Birsk had been killed, leaving Trask's soul to the horrible fate of wandering through eternity. There now remained only the ring, which would be on Birsk's finger, since Metkanoff, after taking it from Saranoff, had given it to Birsk the day they were captured. But Birsk's body was in the Pacific quite out of reach. And even if Birsk's body lay within Saranoff's reach Hearne could not touch the ring because one of the innumerable dimensions of space lay between him and it. And with Trask gone and Merwin gone and their psychic power destroyed there would not be enough psychic power left between Hearne and Gloria Trask to enable Hearne to suspend the laws of space and reach through the dimension which lay between him and the ring and take it. No, her soul was to be lost as well as his. Saranoff and the grand duchess were rushing on now to their doom; a few hours would see them die. It had been so ordained.

Hearne took some cold comfort in the fact that no act of his had contributed to the loss of Gloria Trask's soul. And thinking thus, he allowed himself once more the maximum of relaxation in Saranoff's body, realizing that the latter had now emerged in the valley and was running with Karlak, the grand duchess and Hillis toward the basin.

The launch of the *Narcissus* was moored to the rough stone quay near the shore. It required but a few moments for the fugitives to scramble into it and push off to the yacht. As they swarmed up the companionway ladder there were tiny geysers rising in the water below them, and distant reports from the cliffs told them a few of those they had left behind had resorted to their rifles.

Hillis tore the tarpaulin from the machine-gun where Birsk had mounted it on the forecastle, and in another moment the harsh rattle of it sent the Russians on the cliffs scurrying to shelter. Then a deep silence descended on the island.

"It was a queer thing, that pain coming in my shoulder just when it did," Saranoff was saying to the grand duchess. "It felt just like a searing red-hot iron. I thought someone had shot me."

"Isn't there a wound there?" she asked.

He turned back his coat and opened his shirt. "Not a thing," he murmured.

"And I thought I heard a pistol shot," she added.

"I WONDER what those devils are up to?" fumed Karlak when an hour's close watch on the hills above the basin had failed to show them sign of any living thing. "They're planning some deviltry, but I can't imagine what it may be."

The silence was, indeed, ominous.

"I don't know what they could possibly do," began Karlak, once more. "There's nothing—St. Michael!"

Came a whistling shriek overhead and then a great geyser of water shot skyward near the farther side of the basin, many yards away from the yacht. On the heels of it there was a re-echoing crash from the cliffs which sent the nesting sea-gulls into the air with wild flapping of pinions and raucous cries. Karlak's face went white.

"By heaven!" he cried. "I forgot the gun! We unshipped it from the vessel that brings us supplies, and now it's up over the passage. They could sink us in a few minutes!"

Another whistle and shriek, and a second shot plunged into the basin, this time no nearer the vessel than before.

"They can't hit us from where the gun is now," said Karlak. "There's an intervening ledge of rock between us and them, and they have to shoot too high to clear it. But it won't take more than a few minutes to move the gun."

His surmise was correct. A third shot from the cliff had apparently convinced them that they were but wasting their ammunition.

Half an hour later those on the *Narcissus* saw a group of figures tugging with ropes on one of the upper cliffs, and not long afterward they saw the black muzzle of the piece swing into place behind a barrier of stones. Hillis tried to reach them with the machine-gun, but they were safely out of range.

Presently a shell shrieked over the basin and dropped close to the bows of the *Narcissus*. Scarcely had the ripples on the water died away than another whined through the air, crashing into the forecastle and exploding just under Hillis and the machine-gun.

Saranoff started forward, but Karlak held him back, pointing with trembling finger at the limp figure of Hillis lying in the torn and twisted debris about the gun. Almost at the same moment the forward part of the *Narcissus* burst into flame, and soon a dense pall of smoke rolled upward, shutting the cliffs from their view.

"I think we'd better abandon ship under cover of that smoke," said Karlak. "We can swim to the shore and hide in one of those caves. But I'd better get some food to carry with us. Wait here."

He ran down the companionway stairs to the saloon. Hearne started to follow, but at that instant another shell shrieked out of the smoke, tearing and crashing its way through to the saloon deck. There came a second rending crash from below as it exploded, followed by a burst of white-hot flame from the ignited woodwork.

Saranoff dropped down the companionway and gazed into the blazing cabin. Karlak lay there full on the floor amidst a clutter of broken crockery and torn hangings.

"Karlak! Karlak!" cried Saranoff, running to the prostrate man. "Karlak, are you badly hit?"

"Don't bother—with me—get out—away from here—while you can. They'll be sure to board you when they see it burning. Go!"

His head slumped downward, his voice trailed off into silence. Saranoff, tearing his coat away, put his ear to Karlak's heart. It was still!

As he emerged from the companionway another shell shrieked over

their heads, this time plunging into the basin. He hurried to the girl. "We've got to get over the side and swim for it," he exclaimed. "Can you swim?"

"Yes."

Suiting action to the word they dropped over the side and into the water. By this time the *Narcissus* was beginning to list heavily toward them, while smoke poured over her forward and aft. The firing from the cliffs had ceased for that moment, at least. The time to go was now, under the shelter of the black pall, which rolled heavenward from the doomed vessel.

Swimming slowly with only their heads near the surface for a necessary draft of air, they struck out toward the promontory under which the cavern led through to the Pacific. Scarcely had they reached the ledge beneath it than there came a shout from the cliffs behind them, followed by a report. A rifle bullet smacked against the stones above their heads, sending down a clutter of stones and gravel. Churning the water with powerful strokes Saranoff pushed the girl ahead of him into the cavern. The tide was coming in and the opening was already nearly covered with water, but, knowing the path as they did, they were able to push in until the air and darkness of the inner tunnel greeted them once more.

Saranoff knew they must hurry if they were to reach the other side before the tide filled the farther end of the cavern; but to be caught between the two would not be fatal, since they could linger in the upper reaches until it ebbed again. He doubted whether they would be pursued far at this time. Later they might easily be trapped on the other side if the islanders guessed their purpose.

At that moment there was a splashing in the tunnel behind them, followed by the murmur of voices. They were being pursued, after all!

He pushed ahead in the blackness, knowing that the slim chance of safety now depended on their getting to the other side and swimming or wading to a place of concealment somewhere at the base of the cliffs. On they toiled, now crawling, now on all fours, now standing upright and running as fast as they dared, fearing at any moment to plunge headlong into some projecting ledge. Behind them the voices died away into silence. Presently the girl, who was ahead, halted suddenly and Saranoff plunged headlong into her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Boris," she murmured, "there's a wall here. It's caved in."

He groped with his hands. "No, that's solid. We must have run off in some side tunnel. We've missed the way. If we hurry we may get back to the dividing-point before they reach it."

They plunged back in the gloom. Presently they rounded a sharp corner and emerged into the vaulted passage once more.

"This is where we got off the track," muttered Saranoff. "Quick! Follow ahead on the other branch."

At that moment there was a shout from behind them, and a beam of light shot through the gloom from the distant end of the tunnel. It was an electric torch in the hands of the islanders. The fugitives, turning to run toward the Pacific side, found themselves plunged to the knees in icy water. It was the tide from the Pacific!

"We're caught," Saranoff groaned. "They've—my God!"

From somewhere in the murk behind them there came a low rumble, followed by a shout of terror and then a terrific roar that filled the cavern. The light behind them vanished; there were smothered screams; another grating roar and then silence, save for the subdued rippling of the water at their feet.

Staggering back, Saranoff found himself confronted by an earthy

wall, pierced here and there by the corners of giant rocks. The vaulted roof of the cave had fallen in even as Hillis had predicted. The pursuers were caught, crushed and smothered under tons and tons of basalt. Not a cry, not a groan from the immovable pile.

They were saved! Saranoff, the word hoarse on his lips, staggered backward—to find himself standing once more deep in the water. Saved—but for what? To be drowned here with the incoming tide from the Pacific! Escape was impossible: they could never swim that distance under water to the mouth of the cavern. The tide would run much farther in than its present mark. They were surely trapped!

11. The Face in the Water

He told her in as few words as possible what had happened. She said nothing—only came and stood closer to him in the darkness while the ripples played about their ankles. Finally he put his arm about her and they groped their way over to the wall.

"There's a flat-topped stone here. Let's sit down and wait," he said quietly.

The tide crept on up to their shoetops.

"So this is to be the end!" he murmured. "After all it won't be so bad—we shall die together."

"Yes," she answered, her voice in a whisper. "It has been a long time that we have waited. But now that we are together——" He felt her stiffen suddenly and pull partly away from him.

"Do you realize," she asked, her voice struck with awe, "that this is not a rock we're sitting on? It's—it's an iron chest. See, I can feel a handle at this end."

"By heaven, you're right," he murmured. "It's the second chest. Karlak said that was only a ruse—to sink one in the harbor—probably the officers did it to fool the crew when they brought them in. Then they hid this other in here. It must contain the jewels. But small good they'll do anybody now."

She pushed herself again into his arms, saying nothing.

The water lapped gently about their knees. He put out his hand to measure its depth on the walls, and pulled suddenly back with an exclamation of horror. She asked him what it was.

"It's a face—there's a body floating there brought in by the tide," he murmured. He reached again into the water. "Yes, it's a body—Birsk's body. Remember, he fell off the cliff about near the opening of this cavern."

"Must he be with us, even here?" she asked, shuddering.

Ralph Hearne, in Saranoff's body, had until now viewed the further course of events with apathy. He had so completely given up his own soul for lost that its destiny interested him no further. With Birsk's death he had realized that the ring was now out of Gloria Trask's reach as well as his own and that she was now doomed to the same fate as he.

Birsk's body had drifted by chance into the cavern where they were trapped, but even in this close proximity to the ring he and Gloria Trask were separated from it by the bridgeless cavern of some unknown dimension. He might reach down and try to wrench it from the corpse, but he knew that so far as Birsk's corpse was concerned, his fingers could have no more effect upon it than the tiny ripples which now played over it.

Thinking thus, he projected himself out of Saranoff's body and called for Gloria Trask, and in that instant she was there at his side.

"We are lost," he said, quietly and without emotion. "We lack sufficient psychic power to reach through the dimension and take the ring.

For myself, I am reconciled, since for a long time I could see no other end; but for you—I had hoped for more. If Birsk had lived, Trask would have survived. He told me it was his intention to take you back with him to our own world."

She shuddered. "That would be far worse than death—far worse than what is in store for us," she murmured, looking up at him. "I would rather be here with you."

"You do not understand," he protested. "This is horrible! It is not a pleasant fate to contemplate the loss of one's immortal soul."

"Well, shall we not lose it together? Shall we not always be together?"

He looked at her, scarcely daring to believe his ears.

"Gloria," he said, "I love you. I love you."

"Yes, and I love you. I know, now. Has it not been said that love alone is immortal? How can our souls die if still we love? Or is that just some pretty thing a poet has said?"

"I fear it is poetry," said he. "And poetry and science seldom mix. But it is a thought. I will ask the Spirit Karlak."

The Spirit Karlak stood beside them in that instant. "I was afraid," said he, "that you would not call me before it is too late. Saranoff and the grand duchess will die by drowning within the hour, quite as was arranged by fate. Trask failed in his attempt, thank God. He little realized what a problem he had on his hands. He used the pooled psychic power to swing events out of alinement; he succeeded, but they snapped back into place again. He should have been better prepared."

"How was that?" asked Hearne.

"Well, fate has it that Saranoff should kill Birsk on the rock. Trask prevented Birsk being killed by Saranoff through using Merwin. As it was ordained, Saranoff was to cut Birsk down, and then his dead body was to fall over the cliff. As it happened, Saranoff did not cut Birsk down, but he fell over the cliff, nevertheless. The ultimate effect was the same. The only difference was that Birsk's life was prolonged some fifty seconds. He died on the reefs rather than by a saber-thrust on the cliff. Everything else has been exactly as it was ordained. Nothing else has varied one jot. Hillis and Karlak were to be killed on the yacht; their bodies are now on the bottom with her. Karlak's individual soul had been reabsorbed in me. The rest were to be killed by the landslide in the cavern. You have just witnessed that. Saranoff and the grand duchess perish in the cavern with the tide. See, the water is already to their waists."

"And we lose our souls when they perish," put in Hearne, dully.

"On the contrary," said the Spirit Karlak, "you do nothing of the sort. The ring is here now, is it not? Birsk's body is there, floating in the cavern."

"Yes, but I can not touch the ring. I am in another dimension from Birsk's body, am I not?"

"True, but there is enough psychic power here in this cavern to suspend the laws of the universe for the moment. You may reach through and take it—I can assure you of that."

"Then it is our love, is it not?" asked Gloria Trask. "I was just telling Ralph that love was immortal; therefore we who loved could never die. But he thought that was merely a saying of the poets."

The Spirit Karlak smiled. "It is your earthly way of explaining psychic phenomena," said he. "It is merely calling the same thing by a different name. The fact of the matter is that love is one of the greatest dynamos of psychic force in the world. It is the bridge between the

psychic and the purely physical; hence it partakes of the properties of both. Love has come to you at this moment in this cavern. Go, my friends, reach down and take the ring. It is yours. And since you are through with me, I shall bid you farewell."

"Farewell," said Hearne, raising his hand.

But the Spirit Karlak had vanished.

Hearne waded forward into the cavern. It was a gruesome job to push his hands over that ghastly floating object, but in a moment the ring was in his hand. He came back, unscrewed the cap and gave her one of the pellets. The remaining one he took himself.

"Look!" she said, pointing to the couple sitting on the chest. "Look, Saranoff has taken the princess in his arms. Let us relax and go back into their bodies. They will die in each other's arms, but you and I will live."

They relaxed and he found her in his arms.

"I feel drowsy," she murmured. "There seems to be a warm glow stealing over me and a roaring as of winds in a cavern."

"It is the sea," he said. "It is almost to their shoulders. I am drowsy too, very drowsy."

And so, locked in each other's arms, they fell off into deep slumber.

The tide rolled in, reached their shoulders, rose to their mouths and played with her hair. Presently they drifted from the chest and floated there on the surface, still locked in each other's arms.

Epilogue

On a certain day in May in the year 2014 the New York City newspapers carried an account of the tragic outcome of a series of experiments by Dr. Gregory Trask, the noted psychiatrist, in his laboratory on East Twenty-eighth Street. Late in the evening of that day the police were called to the Trask apartment by Mrs. Trask and Ralph Hearne, a young man who had recently been hired by Dr. Trask as a laboratory assistant. There they found that Dr. Trask and his first assistant, Olan Merwin, had succumbed to an overdose of a morphine compound with which Dr. Trask had been experimenting on his own body and on that of Merwin. A curious angle of the case was, however, that although the phial found at Dr. Trask's side contained a compound showing traces of morphine, the usual effects of morphine poisoning or any other poisoning could not be found in the viscera of the victim when an autopsy was performed on the bodies. Indeed, so far as the medical examiner could determine, there was no condition apparent in the bodies which could have brought about such an unexpected and untimely end.

Shortly afterward, when the case had been quite forgotten, Hearne married Mrs. Trask, and the two, with the small funds left by Dr. Trask, journeyed to Alaska on their honeymoon. There they chartered a small motor-cruiser for a summer trip in the Aleutian archipelago. According to John Torrence, who navigated the small vessel for them, the trip was uneventful, save for one incident. Near Bakelief Island Mr. and Mrs. Hearne evinced a sudden desire to explore one of the several caverns which honeycomb the granite cliffs of the island. Good luck seemed to be with them, for deep inside the cavern they found a solid iron chest, which they brought back to the cruiser but never opened during all the time they were on board. Near the chest, according to Mr. Torrence, they discovered, half buried in the sands, three skeletons. One of these, obviously that of a man of great size, lay at a considerable distance from

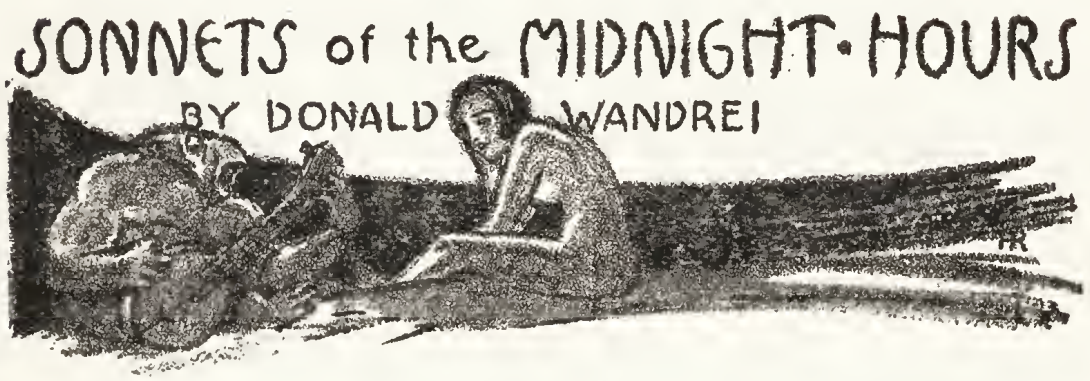
the other two. Of these two, Torrence, who examined them closely, thinks one was a woman and the other a man.

Some of the old residents remembered the incident of the *Narcissus* then, and ventured the theory that the yacht, in trying to escape the destroyers, had struck a hidden reef of Bakelief, going down immediately with all hands. These were survivors who had crawled to the cavern and hidden there only to be trapped by the tide. But those who examined the old records said this could hardly be so, since there had been no woman on board the *Narcissus* after she was stolen.

Nobody ever knew what was in the iron chest. But it must have been treasure, because shortly after their return Mr. and Mrs. Hearne seemed to have come into great wealth. Of this they spent little on themselves, preferring rather to make bounteous grants to charity with a peculiar leaning toward the efforts of the American Relief Association in its work with the orphans of Russia.

As for Bakelief—it is a place avoided now. Since that day the phantom ship was seen, followed so soon by the finding of the skeletons, no mariner in his right mind would be found within rifle-shot of its beetling, fog-swept crags. And those that pass there at whatever distance report they hear on the rising tide the beat of waves in the cavern and a moaning of receding waters like the wailing of lost souls.

[THE END]



11. Doom

Oblivion had laid its deathless curse
  Upon all things of life and time and space;
  Of death itself, there now was left no trace,
And DOOM had fallen on the universe.
The heavens like a dead, colossal hearse
  Contained no thought or dust of thing or race;
  In all infinity was left no place
Where Death in death all things did not immerse.

For Death the Conqueror at last was king;
  His realms were vacua, he proved his vow
    That all would pass, that nothing would abide.
Not anywhere was life nor anything,
  Nor vestige of the worlds of old; and now,
    Upon his fallen kingdoms, God had died.

A Five-Minute Ghost Story

"MELODIE IN E MINOR"

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THERE is a certain section of St. Louis that gives one nausea to go through. There is a perpetual cloud of smoke above the section, a cloud which no one seems to mind, not even the people who walk about below it with soot-streaked faces. Once in a while, on a clear night, the smoke disappears, only to appear in a much denser form the following morning. A heavy rain drives the smoke away for a while, but it is sure to come back when the rain stops. A stench that seems alive creeps from one dim alley to another, gathering strength as it goes. This, too, the people do not mind. Dirty children play in the midst of it; they go home reeking with it. But what difference does it make? Their homes reek with it.

There are more than two hundred houses in this section, and each house is just like all the others. Thus, each house might have belonged to Jack Hammond, except for one little difference: In Hammond's house the noise started exactly at 6 o'clock in the evening, and ended exactly at 6 o'clock in the morning, when both Jack and Amy went to work.

When Amy married Jack Hammond he had "prospects", but, somehow, he lost them, and Amy never forgave him for it. When they moved to this squalid section, it was to be temporary. But it had become permanent; Amy would not forgive Jack, either for this or for making her go to work shortly after their marriage.

Amy made life miserable for Jack in all ways, but especially at the supper table. She had taken a fancy to a piece by Rachmaninoff that she had once heard in a recital, *Melodie in E Minor*. She bought the piece and learned it note for note, until she was able to play it after a fashion. Every night while Jack ate his supper she played it. At first Jack didn't want to say anything about it, though he hated that kind of music, and Amy knew it. Invariably he began to hum *St. Louis Blues* when Amy started to play, but Amy soon drowned him out. Cursing did Amy no harm, nor did his threats. The situation showed no sign of progressing either for better or for worse.

At 6 o'clock in the evening the program opened, somewhat like this:

"Supper ready?" from Jack, to Amy's young brother, who stayed at home and did the cooking for the two workers.

Amy would throw down her bag and hat, and move toward the door of the parlor. It was called a parlor only because of the piano in it. "I'm not hungry; guess I'll play the piano for a while."

At this juncture Amy's brother vacated.

"Listen, Amy (this from Jack): if you think you're going to play that thing again, you got another guess coming. And if you play that E Minor thing, I'll——"

"Shut up, Jack. Why'd I ever

marry a fool like you? Got no appreciation of good music, and never will have. Haven't even got a little horse sense."

"Shut up, damn you. I got just as good an education as you, Amy Hammond. Amy! If you play that piano, you'll go to work with a black eye tomorrow."

"Oh! I will, huh? And you'll never see your little Amy any more."

"No such luck, Amy; you know when you got it good, and you'd soon be back. Damn you! what d'you have to play that piece again for? You know I don't like it. I'm going to sell that damned piano!"

"Who's going to buy it?"

"Amy! By God, some day I'm going to break that damn' neck of yours."

"Yeh? What about funeral expenses; where you going to get 'em? And what about your own neck?"

"My neck's all right; you just watch out for yours."

"Aw, sign off, Jack. Be yourself. Go out and get an education."

"Damn you, Amy! Some day——"

"Yeh! Some day you'll break my neck; that's ancient history, Jack."

"Well, damn you, some day I will."

"Oh! yeh! yeh! Of course!"

One night Amy's brother Jim set the supper table as usual, and went out for a package of cigarettes. When he came back he found Jack home, surly as always, with an expression on his face that scared Amy's brother.

"Where's Amy, Jack?"

"She ain't home yet, Jim. Ain't seen her on the way, have you?"

"No."

"Where in thunder is she, then? She ought to be home by now."

"Yeh! She ought to."

Jack sat down and began to eat his supper. From time to time he glanced nervously at the door.

"What in hell's keeping that woman? Sure she isn't home?"

"She didn't come in."

Jack kept on eating. Suddenly the staccato notes of Rachmaninoff's *Melodie in E Minor* came to the ears of the two men in the kitchen. Jack dropped his fork with a curse, and looked at Amy's brother. Cowed, the youth shrank into a corner. But curiously, Jack's glance was not of anger, and Amy's brother picked up courage.

"It's Amy, Jack. She's come in by the winder."

"My God! Do you hear the piano, Jim?"

"Sure. It's Amy."

Jack got up from the table slowly. His hands hung limply by his side; his face twitched spasmodically.

"Don't hurt her, Jack. Don't hurt her, please."

Jack Hammond did not notice the youth in the corner. For a second he stood before the parlor door. Then he turned to Amy's brother.

"Call Amy, Jim."

"Amy! Amy!" The youth stuck his head into the parlor. "She don't answer, Jack. I can't see very well; it's kinda dark in there." He turned and looked at Jack curiously. "Maybe it ain't Amy; huh, Jack?"

With a stifled sound Jack Hammond sank back into a chair. "No! No! My God! It ain't Amy! It can't be Amy! No! It ain't!"

He rose a second time and moved jerkily toward the parlor door. The piece ended abruptly, then began over again.

Something like a sob escaped Jack. "My God! I killed Amy just before —she started playing again—that damned piece! It ain't Amy. I killed her!"

Without a sound he pitched forward and lay in a crumpled heap on the floor.

AN ADVENTURE IN ANESTHESIA

by EVERIL WORRELL

"There were swooping shadows and darting reflections of great, lurid flames."

THERE is a stage known as "Fool's Paradise" in the course of acute appendicitis, and this stage Brown had reached. It is caused by the relaxation of tortured nerves incident to the relief occasioned by the bursting of a distended appendix, and is not in itself an encouraging symptom; but the corresponding mental relief, after the preoccupation of pain and nausea, made it easy for Brown's anticipations of the new experience to be wildly exciting. Taking an anesthetic —well, the patient with the soundest heart *sometimes* fails to come back. Being sliced with a surgeon's knife, and returning to consciousness with a deep wound—that, too, is a thing to make the pulses throb with the effort of meeting the issue without panic.

However, when the doctors asked him if he had any objection to the use of a new gas called ethysene, his curiosity was slight.

"I don't want to be experimented on," he told them, "but if it will keep me from feeling you slice me, and if it's all right on the heart, go ahead. I suppose you fellows know all those things well enough, or you wouldn't be planning to use it on me."

"We know those things," he was assured. "We've used this gas in this hospital. It is highly desirable to use

it, because of the very things you mention. Shock is slight, heart action good, the physical condition fine. But——"

"Here's the dope, Brown," interrupted the house doctor. "We gave ethysene to a man named Hallam, who had a tonsillectomy here. All right. He took it well, and rallied well. Only, when he had regained consciousness, he insisted that the new gas had an effect on the *soul,* and that it had sent his to heaven. He liked it so well in heaven, that after he got out and about, he took gas again—illuminating-gas, in his room, with the keyhole plugged and that sort of thing, you know—in order to go back to heaven again. I guess he succeeded—at least he died."

Brown laughed.

"Well, I'm pretty well satisfied that my family tree goes back to a fine, hairy ape. I guess that answers your question. Unless, of course, the gas had the effect of making him loco. Do you mean he's the only patient here who ever took ethysene, and that I would be the second?"

"Oh, no, no!" The surgeon and house doctor answered together, and the house doctor continued:

"Three cases—names were Newton, Meredith and Canby—we've been offering it pretty freely, though most of our patients want the old-fashioned stuff. Newton, Meredith and Canby, they all three had ethysene inside the last month. Well, none of them went to heaven. So, now, what do you say?"

"Oh, make it ethysene, by all means," said Brown. "I say, let's get it over. Let's go."

Brown had had a reason for asking to be taken to Franklin Hospital. His sweetheart, Dorothy Wood, a pretty girl with gray eyes and dark auburn hair, was a student nurse there. While Brown was being prepared for the operating-room, a coarse hospital gown buttoned at his neck, coarse white wrappings fastened over his feet and legs, and a hypodermic needle jabbed into his arm, the girl hovered in the corridor outside his door. When they wheeled him into the hall, his brain hazy from the injected opiate, she met his gaze with a tender, tremulous smile. It raised Brown's spirits, and the effect of the morphine was to make him light-headed.

"Tell you all about heaven when I get back, Dorothy," he called, as they wheeled him toward the elevator.

For a moment the girl named Dorothy stood motionless, unconscious of sympathetic glances from two other nurses and a young intern who stood near by. All at once she started forward.

"Did he mean—are they going to give him that ethysene gas?" she asked the young intern.

"Yes, but that's all right. Don't worry, Miss Wood," he consoled her. "There was only that fellow, Hallam. They've used it since, and it's perfectly fine. Hallam was crazy."

"But it might—it might affect the soul."

The intern raised his eyebrows.

"Well, if Brown goes to heaven, he'll come back, as poor Hallam said that *he* did. And then I guess you can keep him here, can't you, Miss Wood?"

He chuckled and went off down the corridor.

BROWN lay flat on his back, his face encased in an air-tight mask. There were isinglass eye-holes, through which he looked. Through a tube in front of his mouth and nose, the anesthetic was being pumped in. His heart beat hard, with the excitement and fear that were overmastering him at last. He wanted to kick and struggle, but he would not let himself do that. He would breathe deeply, and get it over.

"Let's go—let's go," he muttered inside the mask.

His lungs burned as he inhaled deeply. Little pains like knives shot through them. But his effort to cooperate was having an effect. His heart did not pound now. He felt weak—yes, faint. He was going. At every pump stroke, the white faces he now saw dimly through the isinglass dissolved into white mist. Between strokes they became faces again, but each time more featureless, more indistinct. Somebody spoke to him.

"Lift your hand. Can you lift your hand?"

They must not think he was unconscious. He lifted his hand with an effort.

Now everything was a white mist. He was floating——

"Again. *Lift your hand.*"

Brown made a supreme effort. He willed to lift his whole arm—to lift it high. For he was not unconscious, but they would think so. The world was unreal about him—he could not see; he could hardly hear—but he was intensely conscious, and they must not begin to cut. He directed the whole force of his will, of his consciousness, into the lifting of his arm—and somehow knew that he had raised one finger, just a little.

He was floating—going away. Up in the upper right-hand corner of the room, he felt that he stopped. Somehow, he felt that he stopped there, although he was adrift in a mist through which he could not see. Anxiety held him there for a moment. A little way down there was the table, and what was going on there was of vital importance. Yet he could not hold himself near. He was adrift, and going far and fast.

He was dizzy with rushing through space—dizzy with not seeing, with not feeling anything to lay hold on, with having nothing to orient himself by. He was desperate. He clutched with his hands.

And suddenly, both hands were caught in a firm grip. The relief he felt measured the horror that had been engulfing him. He felt his feet on something solid, and saw the mist thinning around him. Only a little, for he could not see far in any direction. But he could see, now, that he stood, not by one person, but between two men, and each had one of his hands.

He blinked his eyes, looking from one to the other. Both of them resembled him! Not exactly. There were differences of expression. And they did not dress as he did, nor wear their hair just as he did—Brown's hair was very sleek and flat on his head, unless his progress through space had changed that. But they looked sufficiently like him to make the coincidence a strange one, and to give him a strange sensation as he regarded them.

One spoke to Brown. He, Brown at once decided, was the more attractive of the two, the more desirable version of himself, if they did resemble him as much as he thought. As he looked longer at their faces, differences between themselves and him, between each of them and the other, became apparent. This one who spoke now was shrewder, keener-looking, more clever and snappy, a good businessman type, according to Brown's standard.

"I came to offer you convoy," he said in a voice that matched well with his appearance. "The trails here aren't well marked, unless you know how to see them. I will be very glad to take you with me, and keep you with me while you stay. You're the kind of man we want where I come from. We've watched you on earth. You are the surviving type, the type of man who gets ahead, as you say there. The same qualities are just as desirable where I reside as they are on earth. We saw you when you earned your last raise from your firm, and you're the kind of man we want."

Brown felt a warm glow pervade what he supposed was his astral body.

Then he had a surviving part, yes—a soul! And what you did on earth counted after you went out—went on and on with you. That was good. He *was* a surviving type. That was putting it neatly. And Nietsche's philosophy, which had always appealed to him, because he had always felt that way about himself, wasn't so badly received in the next world as the old-fashioned moralists liked to think it would be.

But at this point his thoughts were interrupted by the other man, who still held his right hand.

"I came to offer my convoy, too," he said. "But I'll tell you frankly that you'll have to change a good bit if you want to get along, if you go with me. I know a good deal about you, too, Brown. I know about the 'raise' you earned recently—you misrepresented the work of a good man and kept him from getting the salary of the work he was doing. So, because you cut down the salary roll, you managed to get yourself a good whack-off. That's the truth about the way you earned that raise, isn't it?"

Brown looked at the speaker and disliked him. It wasn't only what he said. He was a type Brown hated, a type he had once feared he had it in him to be. He had standardized himself now, and his personality was nothing but an asset; but when he was a boy he had come very near to turning into an impractical, dreamer sort of fellow, the sort people accused of having too many ideals. A person who looked like this one who was speaking to him, and as Brown had once been afraid he would look, would be capable of just this sort of judgment and this lack of tact.

Brown laughed a little light-headedly, as if the morphine which had been shot into his corporeal body had slightly affected his astral one.

"It seems to me that *we* have more in common," he replied to the last speaker, indicating the other with an inclination of his head. "So I guess I will choose accordingly. I'm quite as much obliged."

A second more, and the undesired guide had disappeared.

HE WAS rushing along again, but in a definite, directed manner. The floating, whirling sensation, and the feeling of being loosed from the chains of gravity and horribly lost without them, were gone. And again, his feet found foothold, and they were walking hand in hand. A door seemed to open before them. A close passageway engulfed them, and the way seemed too narrow. Then it widened out, and they stood together, he and his guide, in a strange place, in——

"Hell!" Brown screamed horribly, and struggled with his guide. "Let me go. Let me go back! You didn't tell me *that* was what I was deciding. My *God!* Give me a chance! I didn't know. I didn't want to go to hell!"

A chorus of laughter greeted his ravings.

"The only myth is that there are myths."

Somewhere, Brown had read that. It flashed across his mind, now, even in his first panic. It meant that back of every myth, every legend, every superstition, was somewhere—a fact. And sometimes, at least, that was true. The references to hell that Brown had read in the Bible as a child—the ravings of itinerant preachers—the majestic, dreadful imaginings of Milton—Shakespeare—— He thought of Lady Macbeth's words: "My lord, hell is murky." It was.

It was as though the light was of low vibration in quality, just over the line from heat. And it was hot. Just endurable enough, as to excess heat, so that it could be endured, so that one, kept there long enough, would wish it were not endurable, so that there might be an end. Also, there were swooping shadows and darting reflections of great, lurid flames, so

that Brown felt that the worst was as yet beyond his imagining. It was no modified Hades, but the old-fashioned hell that, on earth, has become more a joke than a legend. But here, it was no joke.

And yet, none of this was what made the place so horrible that Brown screamed and raved and struggled, and would rather have died than come through the door and the narrow passage, if he had known. It was the Things in the place—Things to which not the Bible, the itinerant preachers, Milton, Shakespeare nor any of the others had done justice. Deformed monstrosities—there were too many of them. If one of them ever lived in any form approaching the present one, it would have been hard for it not to merit hell. And probably many of them had grown, here, progressively worse for a long, long time, so that their like could never have been seen on earth.

But there were human things, and things that had changed from humanity, so that Brown was not sure. There was a man with a hideous, mad face carrying the dead body of a woman, and beating it constantly over the head.

"That man killed his wife," Brown heard in his ear. "So his punishment, partly, is to carry her so, through all eternity, beating her like that, as he did when he killed her. A century from now, as you count, you won't recognize either one of them; they will have become so much worse."

"But she—she was his victim. Why does *she* stay here?"

Brown's teeth chattered. But his curiosity was awakening.

"She—oh, she deserved to be killed, you see. She got what was coming to her. So, here they both are."

The speaker, standing somewhere behind Brown, broke off in a peal of the wild, echoing laughter that seemed to greet everything of a horrible or distressful nature. Brown was reminded of an insane asylum he had once visited.

Another figure caught his eye—a man who must have come lately, for there was a natural, human look about him that warmed Brown's trembling heart. But—he had strapped to him, somehow, a coil of tubing that ended in an ordinary gas jet just in front of his nostrils, so that he seemed constantly in the throes of suffocation and disgust at the smell of fumes which issued from the jet, like ordinary illuminating-gas from a gas light. The unfortunate creature kept trying to turn his head away, but the jet with the nauseating fumes turned with him.

"I knew of someone—I heard of someone lately——" began Brown.

"Yes. Hallam. That's Hallam." The unseen voice resumed explanations. "You see he killed himself, to get to heaven. But there's an old, old law against that. So he was sent here, because he was a suicide. *His* punishment, partly, is to go on enduring the pain, sickness, disgust and regret that he felt just before he passed out. They expect to go through that stage. But they don't know that they go right on going through it, until it's too late."

Brown turned quickly. He could not bear to hear again that laugh, which he was sure was about to follow these words. And, having turned, he encountered a look which made the laugh unnecessary—a look that in itself made a mock of all decent feeling, pity and sympathy. And the look was on the unspeakably evil face and out of the unspeakably evil eyes of a gentleman in red, with a horn in the center of his forehead and one cloven hoof where his right foot should be.

"The only myth is that there are myths," thought Brown again; and suddenly became aware that the place was full of smaller, subservient-

appearing beings, decorated each with one horn and a single cloven hoof.

"But——"

The Devil interrupted his half-formed thought.

"They do exaggerate things," he sneered. "One horn is enough, and one hoof is enough, and one of each is easier to disguise than two when we go to earth, as some of us do. I do, quite often. Some of our information on *your* case, I gathered myself. You don't amount to much, but you have some very nasty tendencies. You haven't had much chance. Your environment nearly turned you into a good man, but you're our own sort. You might go a long way with us, if you try to fit in with our ways. So, what do you say?"

The question had a familiar ring, like an echo.

"I say, let's go." Brown was quoting himself, but he was not quite sure just when he had said that recently before. "I say, it's a hard life, and I'll try to make the best of it," he enlarged.

"That's good," said the Devil, giving him a violent blow on the forehead with something hard and sharp. "We all wear those."

Those were the horns. Brown, dizzy with pain, had put up his hand and felt a distinct bump springing up on his forehead. It would not be a very well-defined horn, but he was marked. Still dizzy with pain and shock, suddenly he was seized again with panic. He wanted to die. But souls did not die. An awful despair settled down on him, so that he hardly listened to what was being said to him.

"There's a real reason for that," he finally caught. "Your astral and physical bodies are still connected, and that blow has an effect on your brain cells as well. When you go back, you will be surprized at yourself. You will be quite a different sort of person. And you will be able to confer distinguishing marks on people who are near and dear to you, and who love you, now and then. Oh, yes, many—*very* many—of the old legends have foundations. But you won't exactly *love* those who are near and dear to you, after you go back. You will—well, you will see. However, you'll keep our patents of nobility."

Brown felt of his head again. It was less painful. Pondering over the Devil's last words, he looked at the Devil's cloven hoof.

"A token like that would be embarrassing on earth," he suggested.

"You can't be too particular," retorted the Devil.

He signed to Brown's guide, whom Brown had forgotten.

"Take him back—for the present," he said shortly.

Brown was hurried toward the narrow passageway. At its entrance he held back, curiosity once more dominant.

"Newton, Meredith, and Canby, who took ethysene—did they come here and go back to earth? Or did they go to heaven?"

The Devil burst into a paroxysm of laughter. He was hideous when he laughed, and more evil than at any other time.

"That brings us to one of the best jokes of the ages," he finally gasped. "While people on earth are quarreling over the question of evolution, it seems impossible that not one of them has even guessed at the truth of the matter. What's the matter with their brains? They were supposed to have been endowed with good brains, through evolution and one thing and another. But speaking of evolution—you know, their bodies evolved from the ape. Oh, yes! But a dual race developed. One branch was endowed with a soul, with individual souls, you know—it was done with the best of intentions. Ha! Ha! The other branch dies as dead as a dog or cat. Naturally, ethysene would not affect members of that

branch. Newton, Meredith and Canby all belonged to that family, see? You and Hallam belong to the other branch, having souls—and here you both are. Pretty good batting average for hell, is it not?

"If they guessed it on earth, all the savants would be laying claims to personal souls, instead of disclaiming their existence. But the cream of the joke is, that while many who are sure they have souls have them, and many who are sure they have none, have none—just as many are sure they have souls and then die like their ape forefathers, and as many who are sure they have none find out, too late, that they have!

"Complicated, but good. Think it over."

Brown, pushed into the smothering, close passageway, was thinking. It *was* a good joke, although it was on him too.

THEY said that Brown came out of the anesthetic in fine shape, but he could not agree with them. He was utterly miserable, if that was being in fine shape. He was burning and cold, as though he had been chilled by some wind between the worlds of consciousness, and scorched by a hot, unhealthful vapor.

People seemed to have changed in their attitude toward him, and he toward them. He had been a hospital favorite; now, one would hardly call him that. He was strangely sensitive about one of his feet—the right one. He moved it as though it were stiff, or injured, or in pain, although it was none of these things. He felt as though, when he walked again, he would walk with a halt. Perhaps it had something to do with the appendicitis, which had sent stabs of pain shooting down his right leg before the operation; or perhaps it had something to do with—something he had dreamed.

Another thing which he tried not to think of was the discolored contusion which he wore down from the operating-room. There were comments about that, and dismay. Some carelessness must be responsible for it, carelessness in moving him, or in handling him. But when the house doctor tried to tell him how sorry he was that it should have happened, Brown taught him not to discuss the personal appearance of his patients, by unleashing upon him a devil of a temper that he did not remember ever having displayed before in his life.

It developed, during Brown's convalescence, that the nurse Dorothy Wood was more deeply smitten with him than he had known—a phenomenon which, before his operation, he would have hailed with almost incredulous delight. As it was, the childish little nurse was the only thing about the hospital which amused him. It amused him to lead her on to talk tenderly to him, to show her anxiety for him, to show the depth of the fears she had felt while he lay unconscious. It amused him to see that she had thought he loved her, in that time which lay behind his recent illness; that she had thought, even, that he wanted to marry her some day. If he had ever hinted at such a thing, it struck him now as the essence of supreme humor. He, Brown, wasn't going to marry for love and a pretty face; he was going to climb higher in the future than he had ever climbed. He knew a girl he could marry. He hadn't liked her over well, in the past, but if he hadn't meant to marry her and her bank account he must have been "light" in the head. It was the thing to do; such chances didn't come every day. As for Dorothy, and pretty little nobodies like her who dreamed of catching a successful man with nothing to offer but love, they would do to play with.

It was fun to make her break hospital regulations, and slip into his room from her ward duty, and stay

for long talks that would have gotten her discharged any time the head nurse happened in. When they put her on night duty, it was funnier still, because her discharge would have been even more certain, then, and because she was so forgetful of herself in her childish feeling for him.

At last, one night when he had progressed a long way back toward health and strength, he drew her head down to his pillow, and kissed her squarely on the lips. It was a long kiss; and when it was over, Dorothy slipped swiftly to the floor. Not to her feet—that would have put her too far from him; to her knees, so that their faces were still on a level. Her regard for professional etiquette, which had been deeply rooted in her once, had been able to do so much toward separating them, but it could do no more.

She knelt there, looking at him. And Brown, looking at her transfigured face, felt the laugh freeze on his lips.

It had been fun to play with her, to see how far he could make her go in the breaking of the rigid laws she was bound to obey. It had been fun to see how easily he could get that kiss—the first he had ever had from her. But there was something, now, about her eyes——

They were the eyes of a little girl, to whom fairyland has opened. They were the eyes of a very young girl, whose first dream of love has come true. They were the eyes of an angel —of a woman——

They made another face rise before Brown's "mind's eye"—a face like his, which seemed made to answer that new look on Dorothy's face. A face like his, and yet not quite like his; a face that might belong to a man with a touch of the visionary in him, with a bit of other-worldliness about him that didn't fit in with the picture of a successful executive, perhaps—a face that might be framed by hair a bit unruly and unheeded, because its owner's eyes were on far things.

And then both faces—Dorothy's face, and that other face of Brown's fancy—were put out of the foreground by the consciousness that a third face, very real and near, was peering through a crack in the door.

It was the head nurse. It was a face which must have been created especially to be the face of a head nurse.

"I've been watching you for some time, Miss Wood," it said triumphantly. "I think you'll find there isn't room on our hospital staff for girls of your sort, who are capable of such indiscretions as this. I think you'll find it hard to get on the staff of another hospital. I have never been so outraged—right under my nose, Miss——"

The head nurse was working herself up.

Dorothy Wood put out her hands, only a little way, in a broken gesture of pleading.

"Oh, please——" she said to Brown.

It wasn't clear just what she wanted of him. But she wanted some intervention that only he could give. It flashed through Brown's mind that if he said they were engaged, the hospital board might have clemency. It might mean a hard thing in a girl's life, to be discharged from a nursing staff with a bad character. It wouldn't hurt him to say that saving thing; even if he never married her, it wouldn't hurt——

But why should he? What had he to gain by shielding this girl who seemed so sure that he had once been very fond of her, that she hadn't discerned the change in his nature which he, himself, knew to have taken place. It was all rather funny.

He wanted to laugh. The head nurse's expression, and Dorothy's expression, were so very funny, in their solemn assumption that this affair was a thing of great importance to

everybody. It wasn't important to Brown, and it needn't be. Say Dorothy Wood was fired tomorrow, and he never saw her again, and the head nurse glared at him until he went home quite well—would he remember the incident a year from now? His was to be a busy life, a life of climbing over other people to the top, which only the fit attained.

He did laugh, flinging out his arms in a sudden passionate enjoyment of the joke, while the two women stared at him, Dorothy still on her knees. In her eyes, something was dying, and something was springing to life. His carelessly outflung hand struck against her forehead—not very hard—just with the knuckle. He was watching that new look in her eyes—a something hard and reckless, and not in the least childish; and then he saw the mark that he had made upon the smooth whiteness of her forehead.

Where had he seen one just like that before? A swelling bruise, a discolored contusion—why, it was very like the one he had worn down from the operating-room—the sight of which stirred those awful memories he had put away from him with such an effort.

He heard his own voice, laughing on. What devil had he heard laugh, somewhere, like that? He thought the word "devil," as one thinks those epithets, carelessly, expecting to recall the laugh of some malicious practical joker of his acquaintance, but it recalled something more than that:

A scene of lurid darkness, a blow, a Thing that laughed, and a promise that he would be able to present certain little tokens to those who loved him——

The laugh died in Brown's throat, and he screamed sharply in anguish:

"Oh, it's a mistake—a horrible mistake! I never meant——"

The bitter look in Dorothy's eyes wavered. Her gaze was fixed upon him trustingly, again. She thought he meant to speak up in her behalf, at last.

Once more, for a fleeting instant, he saw that other vision of himself: a man who had kindness written in his face, and not much thought of self. Like one reaching in the dark for a friendly hand, he felt himself reaching out toward it. It was a face which mightn't get on—but it was a face which would be strangely out of place in——

He touched the bruise on the young nurse's head with pitiful, tender fingers.

"I didn't mean to do that," he said gently. "I didn't mean to get you into trouble, either. Please don't report her—don't be hard on her. I came to this hospital because we are sweethearts. We haven't told anyone of our engagement yet, but that's why she was so indiscreet, and because I've coaxed her to spend a few minutes here, now and then, against the rules. She's been worried about me, since I've been here. You don't *have* to report her because I've been selfish, and she a little foolish, do you, nurse?"

A heaviness seemed to be lifting from the air of the little room. There was a cool, sweet breeze blowing in at the window, from some place where there were many flowers.

The head nurse smiled.

"If you'll both have respect for the rules in future, I'll let this go," she said. "After all, the hospital owes you something, sir. We don't often get our patients injured in handling——

"I'll declare, I'm right glad to see that mark fading from your forehead. It's odd you've bruised Miss Wood's forehead, in the same place. But hers won't show by tomorrow."

*The Tall Woman**

By PEDRO ANTONIO DE ALARCÓN

"HOW little we really know, my friends; how little we really know!"

The speaker was Gabriel, a distinguished civil engineer of the mountain corps. He was seated under a pine-tree, near a spring, on the crest of the Guadarrama. It was only about a league and a half distant from the palace of the Escurial, on the boundary line of the provinces of Madrid and Segovia. I know the place, spring, pine-tree and all, but I have forgotten its name.

"Let us sit down," went on Gabriel, "as that is the correct thing to do, and as our program calls for a rest here—here in this pleasant and classic spot, famous for the digestive properties of that spring, and for the many lambs here devoured by our noted teachers, Don Miguel Boseh, Don Máximo Laguna, Don Augustin Pascual, and other illustrious naturalists. Sit down, and I will tell you a strange and wonderful story in proof of my thesis, which is, though you call me an obscurantist for it, that supernatural events still occur on this terraqueous globe. I mean events which you can not get into terms of reason, or science, or philosophy — as those 'words, words, words,' in Hamlet's phrase, are understood (or are not understood) today."

Gabriel was addressing his animated remarks to five persons of different ages. None of them was young, though only one was well along in years. Three of them were, like Gabriel, engineers; the fourth was a painter, and the fifth was a *littérateur* in a small way. In company with the speaker, who was the youngest, we had all ridden up on hired mules from the Real Sitio de San Lorenzo to spend the day botanizing among the beautiful pine groves of Pequerinos, chasing butterflies with gauze nets, catching rare beetles under the bark of the decayed pines, and eating a cold lunch out of a hamper which we had paid for on shares.

This took place in 1875. It was the height of the summer. I do not remember whether it was Saint James' day or Saint Louis'; I am inclined to think it was Saint Louis'. Whichever it was, we enjoyed a delicious coolness at that height, and the heart and brain, as well as the stomach, were there in much better working order than usual.

When the six friends were seated, Gabriel continued as follows:

"I do not think you will accuse me of being a visionary. Luckily or un-

* Translated from the Spanish.

luckily, I am, if you will allow me to say so, a man of the modern world. I have no superstition about me, and am as much of a Positivist as the best of them, although I include among the positive data of nature all the mysterious faculties and feelings of the soul. Well, then, apropos of supernatural, or extra-natural, phenomena, listen to what I have seen and heard, although I was not the real hero of the very strange story I am going to relate, and then tell me what explanation of an earthly, physical, or natural sort, however you may name it, can be given of so wonderful an occurrence.

"The case was as follows. But wait! Pour me out a drop, for the skin-bottle must have got cooled off by this time in that bubbling, crystalline spring, located by Providence on this piny crest for the express purpose of cooling a botanist's wine.

2

"WELL, gentlemen, I do not know whether you ever heard of an engineer of the roads corps named Telesforo X———; he died in 1860."

"No; I haven't."

"But I have."

"So have I. He was a young fellow from Andalusia, with a black mustache; he was to have married the Marquis of Moreda's daughter, but he died of jaundice."

"The very one," said Gabriel. "Well, then, my friend Telesforo, six months before his death, was still a most promising young man, as they say nowadays. He was good-looking, well built, energetic, and had the glory of being the first one in his class to be promoted. He had already gained distinction in the practise of his profession through some fine pieces of work. Several different companies were competing for his services, and many marriageable women were also competing for him. But Telesforo, as you said, was faithful to poor Joaquina Moreda.

"As you know, it turned out that she died suddenly at the baths of Santa Agueda, at the end of the summer of 1859. I was in Pau when I received the sad news of her death, which affected me very much on account of my close friendship with Telesforo. With her I had spoken only once, in the house of her aunt, the wife of General Lopez, and I certainly thought her bluish pallor a symptom of bad health. But, however that may be, she had a distinguished manner and a great deal of grace, and was, besides, the only daughter of a title, and a title that carried some comfortable thousands with it; so I felt sure my good mathematician would be inconsolable. Consequently, as soon as I was back in Madrid, fifteen or twenty days after his loss, I went to see him very early one morning. He lived in elegant bachelor quarters in Lobo Street —I do not remember the number, but it was near the Carrera de San Jerónimo.

"The young engineer was very melancholy, although calm and apparently master of his grief. He was already at work, even at that hour, laboring with his assistants over some railroad plans or other. He was dressed in deep mourning.

"He greeted me with a long and close embrace, without so much as sighing. Then he gave some directions to his assistants about the work in hand, and afterward led me to his private office at the farther end of the house. As we were on our way there he said, in a sorrowful tone and without glancing at me:

" 'I am very glad you have come. Several times I have found myself wishing you were here. A very strange thing has happened to me. Only a friend such as you are can hear of it without thinking me either a fool or crazy. I want to get an opinion about it as calm and cool as science itself.

" 'Sit down,' he went on when we had reached his office, 'and do not imagine that I am going to afflict you with a description of the sorrow I am suffering—a sorrow which will last as long as I live. Why should I? You can easily picture it to yourself, little as you know of trouble. And as for being comforted, I do not wish to be, either now, or later, or ever! What I am going to speak to you about, with the requisite deliberation going back to the very beginning of the thing, is a horrible and mysterious occurrence, which was an infernal omen of my calamity, and which has distressed me in a frightful manner.'

" 'Go on,' I replied, sitting down. The fact was, I almost repented having entered the house, as I saw the expression of abject fear on my friend's face.

" 'Listen, then,' said he, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

3

" 'I DO not know whether it is due to some inborn fatality of imagination, or to having heard some story or other of the kind with which children are so rashly allowed to be frightened, but the fact is, that since my earliest years nothing has caused me so much horror and alarm as a woman alone, in the street, at a late hour of the night. The effect is the same whether I actually encounter her, or simply have an image of her in my mind.

" 'You can testify that I was never a coward. I fought a duel once, when I had to, like any other man. Just after I had left the School of Engineers, my workmen in Despeñaperros revolted, and I fought them with stick and pistol until I made them submit. All my life long, in Jaen, in Madrid, and elsewhere, I have walked the streets at all hours, alone and unarmed, and if I have chanced to run upon suspicious-looking persons, thieves, or mere sneaking beggars, they have had to get out of my way or take to their heels. But if the person turned out to be a solitary woman, standing still or walking, and I was also alone, with no one in sight in any direction—then (laugh if you want to, but believe me) I would be all covered over with goose-flesh; vague fears would assail me; I would think about beings of the other world, about imaginary existences, and about all the superstitious stories which would make me laugh under other circumstances. I would quicken my pace, or else turn back, and would not get over my fright in the least until safe in my own house.

" 'Once there I would fall a-laughing, and would be ashamed of my crazy fears. The only comfort I had was that nobody knew anything about it. Then I would dispassionately remind myself that I did not believe in goblins, witches, or ghosts, and that I had no reason whatever to be afraid of that wretched woman driven from her home at such an hour by poverty, or some crime, or accident, to whom I might better have offered help, if she needed it, or given alms. Nevertheless, the pitiable scene would be gone over again as often as a similar thing occurred—and remember that I was twenty-four years old, that I had experienced a great many adventures by night, and yet that I had never had the slightest difficulty of any sort with such solitary women in the streets after midnight. But nothing of what I have so far told you ever came to have any importance, since that irrational fear always left me as soon as I reached home, or saw anyone else in the street, and I would scarcely recall it a few minutes afterward, any more than one would recall a stupid mistake which had no result of any consequence.

" 'Things were going on so, when, nearly three years ago (unhappily, I have good reason for knowing the date, it was the night of November 15-16, 1857), I was coming home at

3 in the morning. As you remember, I was living then in that little house in Jardines Street, near Montera Street. I had just come, at that late hour, a bitter, cold wind blowing at the time, out of a sort of a gambling-house—I tell you this, although I know it will surprize you. You know that I am not a gambler. I went into the place, deceived by an alleged friend. But the fact was, that as people began to drop in about midnight, coming from receptions or the theater, the play began to be very heavy, and one saw the gleam of gold in plenty. Then came bank-bills, and notes of hand. Little by little I was carried away by the feverish and seductive passion, and lost all the money I had. I even went away owing a round sum, for which I had left my note behind me. In short, I ruined myself completely; and but for the legacy that came to me afterward, together with the good jobs I have had, my situation would have been extremely critical and painful.

"'So I was going home, I say, at so late an hour that night, numb with the cold, hungry, ashamed, and disgusted as you can imagine, thinking about my sick old father more than about myself. I should have to write to him for money, and this would astonish as much as it would grieve him, since he thought me in very easy circumstances. Just before reaching my street, where it crosses Peligros Street, as I was walking in front of a newly built house, I perceived something in its doorway. It was a tall, large woman, standing stiff and motionless, as if made of wood. She seemed to be about sixty years old. Her bold and malignant eyes, unshaded by eyelashes, were fixed on mine like two daggers. Her toothless mouth made a horrible grimace at me, meant to be a smile.

"'The very terror or delirium of fear which instantly overcame me gave me somehow a most acute perception, so that I could distinguish at a glance, in the two seconds it took me to pass by that repugnant vision, the slightest details of her face and dress. Let me see if I can put together my impressions in the way and form in which I received them, as they were engraved ineffaceably on my brain in the light of the street-lamp which shone luridly over that ghastly scene. But I am exciting myself too much, though there is reason enough for it, as you will see further on. Don't be concerned, however, for the state of my mind. I am not yet crazy!

"'The first thing which struck me in that *woman*, as I will call her, was her extreme height and the breadth of her bony shoulders; then, the roundness and fixity of her dry, owlish eyes, the enormous size of her protruding nose, and the great dark cavern of her mouth; finally, her dress, like that of a young woman of Avapiés—the new little cotton handkerchief which she wore on her head, tied under her chin, and a diminutive fan which she carried opened in her hand, and with which, in affected modesty, she was covering the middle of her waist.

"'Nothing could be at the same time more ridiculous and more awful, more laughable and more taunting, than that little fan in those huge hands. It seemed like a make-believe scepter in the hands of such an old, hideous and bony giantess. A like effect was produced by the showy percale handkerchief adorning her face by the side of that cutwater nose, hooked and masculine; for a moment I was led to believe (or I was very glad to) that it was a man in disguise.

"'But her cynical glance and harsh smile were those of a hag, of a witch, an enchantress, a Fate, a—I know not what! There was something about her to justify fully the aversion and fright which I had been caused all my life long by women walking alone in the streets at night. One would have said that I had had

a presentiment of that encounter from my cradle. One would have said that I was frightened by it instinctively, as every living being fears and divines, and scents and recognizes, its natural enemy before ever being injured by it, before ever having seen it, and solely on hearing its tread.

" 'I did not dash away in a run when I saw my life's sphinx. I restrained my impulse to do so, less out of shame and manly pride than out of fear lest my very fright should reveal to her who I was, or should give her wings to follow me, to overtake me—I do not know what. Panic like that dreams of dangers which have neither form nor name.

" 'My house was at the opposite end of the long and narrow street, in which I was alone, entirely alone with that mysterious phantom whom I thought able to annihilate me with a word. How should I ever get home? Oh, how anxiously I looked toward that distant Montera Street, broad and well lighted, where there are policemen to be found at all hours! I decided, finally, to get the better of my weakness; to dissemble and hide that wretched fear; not to hasten my pace, but to keep on advancing slowly, even at the cost of years of health or life, and in this way, little by little, to go on getting nearer to my house, exerting myself to the utmost not to fall fainting on the ground before I reached it.

" 'I was walking along in this way —I must have taken about twenty steps after leaving behind me the doorway where the woman with the fan was hidden, when suddenly a horrible idea came to me—horrible, yet very natural nevertheless—the idea that I would look back to see if my enemy was following me. One thing or the other I thought, with the rapidity of a flash of lightning: either my alarm has some foundation or it is madness; if it has any foundation, this woman will have started after me, will be overtaking me, and there is no hope for me on earth. But if it is madness, a mere supposition, a panic fright like any other, I will convince myself of it in the present instance, and for every case that may occur hereafter, by seeing that that poor old woman has stayed in that doorway to protect herself from the cold, or to wait till the door is opened; and thereupon I can go on to my house in perfect tranquillity, and I shall have cured myself of a fancy that causes me great mortification.

" 'This reasoning gone through with, I made an extraordinary effort and turned my head. Ah, Gabriel! Gabriel! how fearful it was! The tall woman had followed me with silent tread, was right over me, almost touching me with her fan, almost leaning her head on my shoulder.

" 'Why was she doing it?—why, my Gabriel? Was she a thief? Was she really a man in disguise? Was she some malicious old hag who had seen that I was afraid of her? Was she a specter conjured up by my very cowardice? Was she a mocking fantasm of human self-deception?

" 'I could never tell you all I thought in a single moment. If the truth must be told, I gave a scream and flew away like a child of four years who thinks he sees the Black Man. I did not stop running until I got out into Montera Street. Once there, my fear left me like magic, in spite of the fact that that street also was deserted. Then I turned my head to look back to Jardines Street. I could see down its whole length. It was lighted well enough for me to see the tall woman, if she had drawn back in any direction, and, by heaven! I could not see her, standing still, walking, or in any way! However, I was very careful not to go back into that street again. The

wretch, I said to myself, has slunk into some other doorway. But she can't move without my seeing her.

" 'Just then I saw a policeman coming up Caballero de Gracia Street, and I shouted to him without stirring from my place. I told him that there was a man dressed as a woman in Jardines Street. I directed him to go round by the way of Peligros and Aduana Streets, while I would remain where I was, and in that way the fellow, who was probably a thief or murderer, could not escape us. The policeman did as I said. He went through Aduana Street, and as soon as I saw his lantern coming along Jardines Street I also went up it resolutely.

" 'We soon met at about the middle of the block, without either of us having encountered a soul, although we had examined door after door.

" ' "He has got into some house," said the policeman.

" ' "That must be so," I replied, opening my door with the fixed purpose of moving to some other street the next day.

" 'A few moments later I was in my room; I always carried my latchkey, so as not to have to disturb my good José. Nevertheless, he was waiting for me that night. My misfortunes of the 15th and 16th of November were not yet ended.

" ' "What has happened?" I asked him, in surprize.

" ' "Major Falcón was here," he replied, with evident agitation, "waiting for you from 11 till half-past 2, and told me that, if you came home to sleep, you had better not undress, as he would be back at daybreak."

" 'Those words left me trembling with grief and alarm, as if they had predicted my own death to me. I knew that my beloved father, at his home in Jaen, had been suffering frequent and dangerous attacks of his chronic disease. I had written to my brothers that, if there should be a sudden and fatal termination of the sickness, they were to telegraph Major Falcón, who would inform me in some suitable way. I had not the slightest doubt, therefore, that my father had died.

" 'I sat down in an armchair to wait for the morning and my friend, and, with them, the news of my great misfortune. God only knows what I suffered in those two cruel hours of waiting. All the while, three distinct ideas were inseparably joined in my mind; though they seemed unlike, they took pains, as it were, to keep in a dreadful group. They were: my losses at play, my meeting with the tall woman, and the death of my revered father.

" 'Precisely at 6 Major Falcón came into my room, and looked at me in silence. I threw myself into his arms, weeping bitterly, and he exclaimed, caressing me:

" ' "Yes, my dear fellow, weep, weep." '

4

"My friend Telesforo," Gabriel went on, after having drained another glass of wine, "also rested a moment when he reached this point, and then he proceeded as follows:

" 'If my story ended here, perhaps you would not find anything extraordinary or supernatural in it. You would say to me the same thing that men of good judgment said to me at that time: that everyone who has a lively imagination is subject to some impulse of fear or other; that mine came from belated, solitary women, and that the old creature of Jardines Street was only some homeless waif who was going to beg of me when I screamed and ran.

" 'For my part, I tried to believe that it was so. I even came to believe it at the end of several months. Still, I would have given years of my

life to be sure that I was not again to encounter the tall woman. But, today, I would give every drop of my blood to be able to meet her again.'

"'What for?'

"'To kill her on the spot.'

"'I do not understand you.'

"'You will understand me when I tell you that I did meet her again, three weeks ago, a few hours before I had the fatal news of my poor Joaquina's death.'

"'Tell me about it! tell me about it!'

"'There is little more to tell. It was 5 o'clock in the morning. It was not yet fully light, though the dawn was visible from the streets looking toward the east. The street lamps had just been put out, and the policemen had withdrawn. As I was going through Prado Street, so as to get to the other end of Lobo Street, the dreadful woman crossed in front of me. She did not look at me, and I thought she had not seen me.

"'She wore the same dress and carried the same fan as three years before. My trepidation and alarm were greater than ever. I ran rapidly across Prado Street as soon as she had passed, although I did not take my eyes off her, so as to make sure that she did not look back, and, when I had reached the other end of Lobo Street, I panted as if I had just swum an impetuous stream. Then I pressed on with fresh speed toward home, filled now with gladness rather than fear, for I thought that the hateful witch had been conquered and shorn of her power, from the very fact that I had been so near her and yet that she had not seen me.

"'But soon, and when I had almost reached this house, a rush of fear swept over me, in the thought that the crafty old hag had seen and recognized me, that she had made a pretense of not knowing me so as to let me get into Lobo Street, where it was still rather dark, and where she might set upon me in safety, that she would follow me, that she was already over me.

"'Upon this, I looked around—and there she was! There at my shoulder, almost touching me with her clothes, gazing at me with her horrible little eyes, displaying the gloomy cavern of her mouth, fanning herself in a mocking manner, as if to make fun of my childish alarm.

"'I passed from dread to the most furious anger, to savage and desperate rage. I dashed at the heavy old creature. I flung her against the wall. I put my hand to her throat. I felt of her face, her breast, the straggling locks of her gray hair, until I was thoroughly convinced that she was a human being—a woman.

"'Meanwhile she had uttered a howl which was hoarse and piercing at the same time. It seemed false and feigned to me, like the hypocritical expression of a fear which she did not really feel. Immediately afterward she exclaimed, making believe cry, though she was not crying, but looking at me with her hyena eyes:

"'"Why have you picked a quarrel with me?"

"'This remark increased my fright and weakened my wrath.

"'"Then you remember," I cried, "that you have seen me somewhere else."

"'"I should say so, my dear," she replied, mockingly. "Saint Eugene's night, in Jardines Street, three years ago."

"'My very marrow was chilled.

"'"But who are you?" I asked, without letting go of her. "Why do you follow me? What business have you with me?"

"'"I am a poor weak woman," she answered, with a devilish leer. "You hate me, and you are afraid of me without any reason. If not, tell me, good sir, why you were so frightened the first time you saw me."

"'"Because I have loathed you ever since I was born. Because you are the evil spirit of my life."

"'"It seems, then, that you have known me for a long time. Well, look, my son, so have I known you."

"'"You have known me? How long?"

"'"Since before you were born! And when I saw you pass by me, three years ago, I said to myself, *that's the one.*"

"'"But what am I to you? What are you to me?"

"'"The devil!" replied the hag, spitting full in my face, freeing herself from my grasp, and running away with amazing swiftness. She held her skirts higher than her knees, and her feet did not make the slightest noise as they touched the ground.

"'It was madness to try to catch her. Besides, people were already passing through the Carrera de San Jerónimo, and in Prado Street, too. It was broad daylight. The tall woman kept on running, or flying, as far as Huertas Street, which was now lighted up by the sun. There she stopped to look back at me. She waved her closed fan at me once or twice, threateningly, and then disappeared around a corner.

"'Wait a litle longer, Gabriel. Do not yet pronounce judgment in this case, where my life and soul are concerned. Listen to me two minutes longer.

"'When I entered my house I met Colonel Falcón, who had just come to tell me that my Joaquina, my betrothed, all my hope and happiness and joy on earth, had died the day before in Santa Agueda. The unfortunate father had telegraphed Falcón to tell me—me, who should have divined it an hour before, when I met the evil spirt of my life! Don't you understand, now, that I must kill that born enemy of my happiness, that vile old hag, who is the living mockery of my destiny?

"'But why do I say kill? Is she a woman? Is she a human being? Why have I had a presentiment of her ever since I was born? Why did she recognize me when she first saw me? Why do I never see her except when some great calamity has befallen me? Is she Satan? Is she Death? Is she Life? Is she Antichrist? Who is she? What is she?'

5

"I WILL spare you, my dear friends," continued Gabriel, "the arguments and remarks which I used to see if I could not calm Telesforo, for they are the same, precisely the same, which you are preparing now to advance to prove that there is nothing supernatural or superhuman in my story. You will even go further; you will say that my friend was half crazy; that he always was so; that, at least, he suffered from that moral disease which some call 'panic terror,' and others 'emotional insanity;' that, even granting the truth of what I have related about the tall woman, it must all be referred to chance coincidences of dates and events; and, finally, that the poor old creature could also have been crazy, or a thief, or a beggar, or a procuress—as the hero of my story said to himself in a lucid interval."

"A very proper supposition!" exclaimed Gabriel's comrades; "that is just what we were going to say."

"Well, listen a few minutes longer, and you will see that I was mistaken at the time, as you are mistaken now. The one who unfortunately made no mistake was Telesforo. It is much easier to speak the word 'insanity' than to find an explanation for some things that happen on the earth."

"Speak, speak!"

"I am going to; and this time, as it is the last, I will pick up the thread of my story without first drinking a glass of wine.

6

"A FEW days after that conversation with Telesforo I was sent to the province of Albacete in my capacity as engineer of the mountain corps. Not many weeks had passed before I learned, from a contractor for public works, that my unhappy friend had been attacked by a dreadful form of jaundice; it had turned him entirely green, and he reclined in an armchair without working or wishing to see anybody, weeping night and day in inconsolable grief.

"This made me understand why he had not answered my letters. I had to resort to Colonel Faleón as a source of news of him, and all the while the reports kept getting more unfavorable and gloomy.

"After an absence of five months I returned to Madrid the same day that the telegraph brought the news of the battle of Tetuan. I remember it as if it were yesterday. That night I bought the indispensable *Correspondencia de España,* and the first thing I read in it was the notice of Telesforo's death. His friends were invited to the funeral the following morning.

"You will be sure that I was present. As we arrived at the San Luis cemetery, whither I rode in one of the carriages nearest the hearse, my attention was called to a peasant woman. She was old and very tall. She was laughing sacrilegiously as she saw them taking out the coffin. Then she placed herself in front of the pall-bearers in a triumphant attitude and pointed out to them with a very small fan the passageway they were to take to reach the open and waiting grave.

"At the first glance I perceived, with amazement and alarm, that she was Telesforo's implacable enemy. She was just as he had described her to me—with her enormous nose, her devilish eyes, her awful mouth, her percale handkerchief, and that diminutive fan which seemed in her hands the scepter of indecency and mockery.

"She immediately observed that I was looking at her, and fixed her gaze upon me in a peculiar manner, as if recognizing me, as if letting me know that she recognized me, as if acquainted with the fact that the dead man had told me about the scenes in Jardines Street and Lobo Street, as if defying me, as if declaring me the inheritor of the hate which she had cherished for my unfortunate friend.

"I confess that at the time my fright was greater than my wonder at those new coincidences and accidents. It seemed evident to me that some supernatural relation, antecedent to earthly life, had existed between the mysterious old woman and Telesforo. But for the time being my sole concern was about my own life, my own soul, my own happiness —all of which would be exposed to the greatest peril if I should really inherit such a curse.

"The tall woman began to laugh. She pointed at me contemptuously with the fan, as if she had read my thoughts and were publicly exposing my cowardice. I had to lean on a friend's arm to keep myself from falling. Then she made a pitying or disdainful gesture, turned on her heels, and went into the cemetery. Her head was turned toward me. She fanned herself and nodded to me at the same time. She sidled along among the graves with an indescribable, infernal coquetry until at last she disappeared forever in that labyrinth of tombs.

"I say forever, since fifteen years have passed and I have never seen her again. If she was a human being she must have died before this; if she was not, I rest in the conviction that she despised me too much to meddle with me.

"Now, then, bring on your theories! Give me your opinion about these strange events. Do you still regard them as entirely natural?"

THE EYRIE

THE weird, the grotesque, the abnormal, the utterly unusual in literature have held a strange fascination for the reading public for centuries; though not until Poe's macabre genius devised an adequate mechanism for such stories was the weird tale raised to the artistic heights it has attained under such masters as Blackwood, Machen, Lovecraft, and others. The brilliant success of this magazine shows the extent to which the *conte macabre* has caught the imagination of discerning readers. A letter from Montevallo, Alabama, from one of our readers who signs himself I. L. S., goes far to explain the success which WEIRD TALES has experienced: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES since 1923. At that time I had exhausted all of Poe's works that I could lay my hands on, and had come to the conclusion that as far as further exploitation of the weird and gruesome in literature was concerned 'there just wasn't any more.' Then I discovered WEIRD TALES; and I confess that I have enjoyed my wild and excited searching through each copy since then for something grotesque, and lovely in its grotesqueness. I have in mind one tale by Mr. Lovecraft in your magazine. I think it was called *The White Ship* (I hope my memory has not failed me on that point, for I hoped never to forget it). It was serenely told; furthermore, it was beautiful, and conclusive proof that Mr. Lovecraft's gift of word-painting is at times beyond description."

Writes Tom Cain, of Baltimore, in a letter to The Eyrie: "WEIRD TALES certainly fills a crying need in these days of steadily increasing materialism. To get away from hard facts for awhile, to soar into realms of bizarrerie where one may meet witches and warlocks, shake hands with the celebrities of distant planets, be called a species of asparagus by Dr. de Grandin, or walk right through an old-fashioned spook—such release gives one time to catch one's breath, mentally speaking, or possibly even to get a new slant on the world we have to live in. You have asked a few questions as to the readers' attitude toward your reprint policy. Well, why not continue as at present? There is no better way than to reprint monthly in the magazine some famous weird tale, especially those not easily accessible to the average reader, and to

publish, let us say annually, a volume of reprints from your magazine similar to *The Moon Terror*. I have noticed the list of requested stories in your November issue: it is quite proper that *The Wind That Tramps the World* should hold first place; but any volume of reprints should certainly include *The Red Brain*, by Donald Wandrei. Those two are real, enduring literature, and WEIRD TALES should be congratulated on being first to publish them."

It was with a good deal of trepidation that we included Captain George Fielding Eliot's story, *The Copper Bowl*, in our December issue; for it was a particularly gruesome story of torture, and we did not know just how our readers would receive it. But our own judgment of the story's high merit (for the tale was extremely well told) was confirmed by the letters from you, the readers. Only one story in the issue got more votes—and that was the cover-design story featuring the inimitable Jules de Grandin.

"I think I can safely give my vote of preference for the stories in the December WEIRD TALES to *The Copper Bowl*," writes H. F. Scotten, of Indianapolis. "Captain Eliot has succeeded, in this story, in exciting the reader's imagination to the extent that one is drawn, willy-nilly, into the person of his hero; suffering with him his loathing for his fellow enemy, his consuming anger, his desperation incited by the suffering of his sweetheart, his raging attack on the torturers, and finally, the complete dissolution of his sanity. In my opinion, Captain Eliot gave us a notable tale. And there is the inimitable de Grandin again. How does Seabury Quinn do it? By all means, let us have a reprint of *The Wind That Tramps the World*. I am sure that your readers who have read it would enjoy it again, and it would be a rare treat for those who have not."

Mrs. Edward McCann, of Dundalk, Maryland, writes to The Eyrie: "*The Copper Bowl* was—well, it can't be described. It makes the hair rise yet on the back of my neck to think of it. *Beyond Power of Man*, by Paul Ernst, was very fine; every time I looked around I expected to see or hear his giant."

Writes Grace Norton, of San Diego, California: "I have just read my first copy of your magazine, admittedly to see if a plot which I have had in mind for some time would fit it, and I was delightfully surprized in the quality of your stories. From being a purely business proposition at first, it turned out to be an entertaining one—and I finished the magazine the evening it was purchased, and almost scared myself into sleeplessness by doing so! The stories are great. *The Copper Bowl* is an unusual story, even for gruesomeness. It is splendidly written. Also *The Tinkle of the Camel's Bell*, and *The Chapel of Mystic Horror*."

"I have just read the conclusion of *The Werewolf's Daughter*, by H. Warner Munn," writes R. E. Ingraham, of Greenville, Michigan. "That serial is about the best story I have ever read in your magazine."

"Why not have more stories like *The Copper Bowl* in the December issue?" queries Miss LaVerne Johnson, of Rawlins, Wyoming. "I'm especially

(Continued on page 278)

FUTURE ISSUES

A WEALTH of fascinating stories is scheduled for early publication in WEIRD TALES, the unique magazine. The brilliant success of WEIRD TALES has been founded on its unrivaled, superb stories of the strange, the grotesque and the terrible—gripping stories that stimulate the imagination and send shivers of apprehension up the spine—tales that take the reader from the humdrum world about us into a deathless realm of fancy—marvelous tales so thrillingly told that they seem very real. WEIRD TALES prints the best weird fiction in the world today. If Poe were alive he would undoubtedly be a contributor. In addition to creepy mystery stories, ghost-tales, stories of devil-worship, witchcraft, vampires and strange monsters, this magazine also prints the cream of the weird-scientific fiction that is written today—tales of the spaces between the worlds, surgical stories, and stories that scan the future with the eye of prophecy. Among the amazing tales in the next few issues will be:

ATAVAR, *by Wallace West*

The author of "The Incubator Man" picturee a world inhabited only by women, many centurlee in the futuro; and in that lovcless and heartless world is born a man-child, a throwback to the days when there were both men and women in the world.

IN A DEAD MAN'S SHOES, *by Harold Markham*

A etory of Tyburn Gallowe and vengeance from beyond the grave—a taic of Davy Garrick, the actor, and grim justice vieited upon tho man who betrayed his friend the highwayman.

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(Continued from page 276)

fond of Chinese torture tales. And Jules de Grandin—if you were to lose him I know we'd all mourn. I don't care much about 'Scienti-fiction,' but I like everything else in the magazine—the weirder, the better. I have read WEIRD TALES, right through to the end, for three years; it's the only magazine on the market that I read from end to end, even to the ads. I buy the first copy sold here every month. Here's to the 'Different Magazine' and the 'Best'."

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The Star-Stealers

(Continued from page 168)

At last we were speeding down the street by which we had entered the city, and before us lay that street's end, with beyond it the vista of black forest and glowing plain over which we had come. And now we were racing over that glowing plain, a quarter-mile, a half, a mile. . . .

Abruptly from far behind came the calling, crescendo notes of the mighty horns, marking the sleep-period's end, bringing back into the streets the city's tentacle-people. It could be but moments now, we knew, before our escape was discovered, and as we panted on at our highest speed we listened for the sounding of the alarm behind us.

It came! When we had drawn to within a half-mile of the black forest where our cruiser lay hidden, another great tumult of horn-notes burst out over the glowing city behind, high and shrill and raging. And glancing back we saw swarms of the black cones rising from the pyramidal buildings' summits, circling, searching, speeding out over the glowing plains around the city, a compact mass of them racing straight toward us.

"On!" cried Hurus Hol. "It's our last chance—to get to the cruiser!"

STAGGERING, stumbling, with the last of our strength we sped on, over the glowing soil and rocks, toward the rim of the black forest which lay now a scant quarter-mile ahead. Then suddenly Hurus Hol stumbled, tripped and fell. I halted, turned toward him, then turned again as Dal Nara shouted thickly and pointed upward. We had been sighted by the speeding cones above and two of them were driving straight down toward us.

A moment we stood there, rigid, while the great cones dipped toward us, waiting for the death that would

crash down upon us from them. Then suddenly a great dark shape loomed in the air above and behind us, from which sprang out swift shafts of brilliant green light, the dazzling decohesion ray, striking the two swooping cones and sending them down in twin torrents of shattered wreckage. And now the mighty hulk behind us swept swiftly down upon us, and we saw that it was our cruiser.

Smoothly it shot down to the ground, and we stumbled to its side, through the waiting open door. As I staggered up to the bridgeroom the third officer was shouting in my ear. "We sighted you from the forest," he was crying. "Came out in the cruiser to get you——"

But now I was in the bridgeroom, brushing the wheelman from the controls, sending our ship slanting sharply up toward the zenith. Hurus Hol was at my side, now, pointing toward the great telechart and shouting something in my ear. I glanced over, and my heart stood still. For the great dark disk on the chart had swept down to within an inch of the shining line around our sun-circle, the danger-line.

"The condenser!" I shouted. "We must get to that switch—turn it off! It's our only chance!"

We were racing through the air toward the luminous city, now, and ahead a mighty swarm of the cones was gathering and forming to meet us, while from behind and from each side came other swarms, driving on toward us. Then the door clicked open and Dal Nara burst into the bridgeroom.

"The ship's ray-tubes are useless!" she cried. "They've used the last charge in the ray-tanks!"

At that cry the controls quivered under my hands, the ship slowed, stopped. Silence filled the bridgeroom, filled all the cruiser, the last silence of despair. We had failed. Weaponless our ship hung there, motionless, while toward it from all directions leaped the swift and swarming cones, in dozens, in scores, in hundreds, leaping toward us, long black messengers of death, while on the great telechart the mighty dark star leapt closer toward the shining circle that was our sun, toward the fateful line around it. We had failed, and death was upon us.

And now the black swarms of the cones were very near us, and were slowing a little, as though fearing some ruse on our part, were slowing but moving closer, closer, while we awaited them in a last utter stupor of despair. Closer they came, closer, closer. . . .

A ringing, exultant cry suddenly sounded from somewhere in the cruiser beneath me, taken up by a sudden babel of voices, and then Dal Nara cried out hoarsely, beside me, and pointed up through our upper observation-windows toward a long, shining, slender shape that was driving down toward us out of the upper air, while behind it drove a vast swarm of other and larger shapes, long and black and mighty.

"It's our own ship!" Dal Nara was shouting, insanely. "It's Ship 16! They escaped, got back to the Galaxy —and look there—behind them—it's the fleet, the Federation fleet!"

There was a wild singing of blood in my ears as I looked up, saw the mighy swarm of black shapes that were speeding down upon us behind the shining cruiser, the five thousand mighty battle-cruisers of the Federation fleet.

The fleet! The massed fighting-ships of the Galaxy, cruisers from Antares and Sirius and Regulus and Spica, the keepers of the Milky Way patrol, the picked fighters of a universe! Ships with which I had cruised from Aretnrus to Deneb, beside which I had battled in many an interstellar fight. The fleet! They were straightening, wheeling, hovering, high above us, and then they were driving down upon the massed

swarms of cones around us in one titanic, simultaneous swoop.

Then around us the air flashed brilliant with green ray and bursting flares, as de-cohesion rays and etheric bombs crashed and burst from ship to ship. Weaponless our cruiser hung there, at the center of that gigantic battle, while around us the mighty cruisers of the Galaxy and the long black cones of the tentacle-people crashed and whirled and flared, swooping and dipping and racing upon each other, whirling down to the glowing world below in scores of shattered wrecks, vanishing in silent flares of blinding light. From far away across the surface of the luminous world beneath, the great swarms of cones drove on toward the battle, from the shining towers of cities far away, racing fearlessly to the attack, sinking and falling and crumbling beneath the terrible rays of the leaping ships above, ramming and crashing with them to the ground in sacrificial plunges. But swiftly, now, the cones were vanishing beneath the brilliant rays.

Then Hurus Hol was at my side, shouting and pointing down toward the glowing city below. "The condenser!" he cried, pointing to where its blue radiance still flared on. "The dark star—look!" He flung a hand toward the telechart, where the dark star disk was but a scant half-inch from the shining line around our sun-circle, a tiny gap that was swiftly closing. I glanced toward the battle that raged around us, where the Federation cruisers were sending the cones down to destruction by swarms, now, but unheeding of the condenser below. A bare half-mile beneath us lay that condenser, and its cage-pillar switch, which a single shaft of the green ray would have destroyed instantly. And our ray-tubes were useless!

Then wild resolve flared up in my brain and I slammed down the levers in my hands, sent our ship racing

down toward the condenser and its upheld cage like a released thunderbolt of hurtling metal. "*Hold tight!*" I screamed as we thundered down. "*I'm going to ram the switch!*"

And now up toward us were rushing the brilliant blue hemispheres of the pit, the great pillar and upheld cage beside them, toward which we flashed with the speed of lightning. *Crash!*—and a tremendous shock shook the cruiser from stem to stern as its prow tore through the upheld metal cage, ripping it from its supporting pillar and sending it crashing to the ground. Our cruiser spun, hovered for a moment as though to whirl down to destruction, then steadied, while we at the window gazed downward, shouting.

For beneath us the blinding radiance of the massed hemispheres had suddenly snapped out! Around and above us the great battle had died, the last of the cones tumbling to the ground beneath the rays of the mighty fleet, and now we turned swiftly to the telechart. Tensely we scanned it. Upon it the great dark-star disk was creeping still toward the line around our sun-circle, creeping slower and slower toward it but still moving on, on, on. . . . Had we lost, at the last moment? Now the black disk, hardly moving, was all but touching the shining line, separated from it by only a hair's-breadth gap. A single moment we watched while it hovered thus, a moment in which was settled the destiny of a sun. And then a babel of incoherent cries came from our lips. For the tiny gap was *widening!*

The black disk was moving back, was curving outward again from our sun and from the Galaxy's edge, curving out once more into the blank depths of space whence it had come, without the star it had planned to steal. Out, out, out—and we knew, at last, that we had won.

And the mighty fleet of ships around us knew, from their own telecharts. They were massing around us and hanging motionless while beneath us the palely glowing gigantic dark star swept on, out into the darkness of trackless space until it hung like a titanic feeble moon in the heavens before us, retreating farther and farther from the shining stars of our Galaxy, carrying with it the glowing cities and the hordes of the tentacle-peoples, never to return. There in the bridgeroom, with our massed ships around us, we three watched it go, then turned back toward our own yellow star, serene and far and benignant, that yellow star around which swung our own eight little worlds. And then Dal Nara flung out a hand toward it, half weeping now.

"The sun!" she cried. "The sun! The good old sun, that we fought for and saved! *Our* sun, till the end of time!"

6

IT WAS on a night a week later that Dal Nara and I said farewell to Hurus Hol, standing on the roof of that same great building on Neptune from which we had started with our fifty cruisers weeks before. We had learned, in that week, how the only survivor of those cruisers, Ship 16, had managed to shake off the pursuing cones in that first fierce attack and had sped back to the Galaxy to give the alarm, of how the mighty Federation fleet had raced through the Galaxy from beyond Antares in answer to that alarm, speeding out toward the approaching dark star and reaching it just in time to save our own ship, and our sun.

The other events of that week, the honors which had been loaded upon us, I shall not attempt to describe. There was little in the solar system which we three could not have had for the asking, but Hurus Hol was content to follow the science that was his life-work, while Dal Nara, after the manner of her sex through all the ages, sought a beauty parlor, and I

asked only to continue with our cruiser in the service of the Federation fleet. The solar system was home to us, would always be home to us, but never, I knew, would either of us be able to break away from the fascination of the great fleet's interstellar patrol, the flashing from sun to sun, the long silent hours in cosmic night and stellar glare. We would be star-rovers, she and I, until the end.

So now, ready to rejoin the fleet, I stood on the great building's roof, the mighty black bulk of our cruiser behind us and the stupendous canopy of the Galaxy's glittering suns over our heads. In the streets below, too, were other lights, brilliant flares, where thronging crowds still celebrated the escape of their worlds. And now Hurus Hol was speaking, more moved than ever I had seen him.

"If Nal Jak were here——" he said, and we were all silent for a moment. Then his hand came out toward us and silently we wrung it, turning toward the cruiser's door.

As it slammed shut behind us we were ascending to the bridgeroom, and from there we glimpsed now the great roof dropping away beneath us as we slanted up from it once more, the dark figure of Hurus Hol outlined for a moment at its edge against the lights below, then vanishing. And the world beneath us was shrinking, vanishing once more, until at last of all the solar system behind us there was visible only the single yellow spark that was our sun.

Then about our outward-racing cruiser was darkness, the infinite void's eternal night—night and the unchanging, glittering hosts of wheeling, flaming stars.

COMING SOON—

Within the Nebula

A Gripping Interplanetary Tale

By EDMOND HAMILTON

The Devil-People

(Continued from page 190)

times till the flower-bells on her ankles seemed to clap their petals for very joy and her sheer, diaphanous skirt stood stiffly out, whirling round her like a wheel of white. Next, with a quick, dodging motion, she advanced a step or two, retreated, and bent almost double in a profound salaam to the audience.

A second of tableau; then with a long, graceful bound she reached the center of the rug spread on the dance floor, turning to the orchestra and snapping her fingers imperatively. A flageolet burst into a strain of rippling, purling minors, a zither hummed and sang accompaniment, a tom-tom seconded with a hollow, thumping rhythm.

"*Hai!*" she cried in gipsy abandon. "*Hai, hai, hai!*"

With a slow, gliding movement she began her dance, hands and feet moving subtly, in perfect harmony. Now she leaned forward till her cerise bodice seemed barely to clear the floor, now she bent back till it seemed she could not retain her balance. Again her little naked feet were motionless on the dark carpet as twin stars reflected in a still pool while her body swayed and rippled from ankle to chin like a cobra rearing upright, and her arms, seemingly boneless, described sinuous, serpentine patterns in the air, her hands bent backward till the fingers almost touched the wrists.

Now pipe and zither were stilled and only the *rhum, rhum, rhum—rhum-rhum,* of the tom-tom spoke, and her torso throbbed and rippled in the *danse du ventre.*

The music rose suddenly to a shrill crescendo and she began to whirl on her painted toes with a wild fandango movement, her arms straight out from her shoulders as though nailed to an invisible cross, her skirt flickering horizontally about her like some great, white-petaled flower, her little, soft feet making little, soft hissing sounds against the purple carpet as she spun round and round.

Slowly, slowly, her speed decreased. She was like a beautiful top spun at greatest speed, gradually losing its momentum. The music died to a thin, plaintive wail, the pipe whimpering softly, the zither crooning sleepily and the tom-tom's rumble growing fainter and fainter like receding summer thunder.

For a moment she paused, dead-still, only her slim breasts moving as they fought flutteringly for breath. Then, in a high, sweet soprano, she began an old Eastern love song, a languorous, beguiling tune of a people who have made a fine art of love-making for uncounted generations.

For thou, beloved, art to me
As a garden;
Even as a garden of rare and beauteous flowers.
Roses bloom upon thy lips,
And the mountain myrtle
In thy eyes.
Thy breasts are even as the lily,
Even as the moonflower
Who unveils her pale face nightly
To the passionate caresses of the moon.
Thy hair is as the tendril of the grape. . . .

With slow, gliding steps she retreated toward the archway through which she had come, paused a moment, and held her hands out to the audience, her henna-tipped fingers curled into little, flowerlike cups.

As she halted in her recessional a great shout went up from one of the slant-eyed men nearest the dancing-floor.

In a moment the place was like an unroofed ant-hill. "Lights!" shouted de Grandin, springing from his seat. "Trowbridge—Costello, guard the door!"

In the sudden welter of bright illumination as every light in the place was snapped on, we saw a circle of the strange people forming and slowly closing on Mutina, more than one of the men stealthily drawing a wicked-looking Malay *kris* from beneath his coat.

Thrusting both hands beneath her star-sown veil the girl brought forth a pair of limes, broke their rinds with frantic haste and sprinkled a circle of the acid, amber juice about her on the floor.

An evil-eyed man who seemed to be the leader of the strangers started backward with a snarl of baffled rage as she completed the circle, and looked wonderingly about him.

"Ha, my ugly-faced friend, you did not expect that, *hein?*" asked Jules de Grandin in high good humor. "Me, I am responsible for it. As a half-breed of your cursed devil-tribe, Madame Mutina could no more have touched a lime than she could have handled a live coal, but with the aid of a Christian priest I have freed her from her curse, and now she does defy you. Meanwhile——"

He got no further. With a yell of fury like the scream of a blood-mad leopard, the razor-eyed creature leaped forward, and at his back pressed a half-score of others of his kind.

"Back to back, *mon brave,*" de Grandin commanded Starkweather as he thrust his hand inside his jacket and brought forth an eighteen-inch length of flexible, rubber-bound electric cable tipped with a ball of lead in which a dozen steel spikes had been embedded.

Similarly armed, young Starkweather whirled round, bracing his shoulders to the little Frenchman's back.

Feet well apart, de Grandin and his ally swung their improvised maces with the regularity of pendulums.

Screams and curses and cries of surprized dismay followed every

A Tale of Eery Happenings

"The Moon Terror"

down-stroke of the spiked clubs. The assailants, half their former number, drew back, mouthing obscenities at the pair, then rushed again to the attack.

Mutina was like a thing possessed. Gone was every vestige of Western culture she had picked up during her residence here. She was once more a woman of the never-changing East, an elemental female creature, stark bare of all conventions, glorying in the battle and the savage part her man played in it. Safe inside her barrier of lime juice, she danced up and down in wild elation as de Grandin and Starkweather, slowly advancing across the dance floor, beat a path toward her, smashing arms and ribs and skulls with the merciless flailing of their spiked clubs.

"Bravely struck, O defender of the fatherless!" she screamed. "*Billahi*—by the breath of God, well struck, O peerless warrior!"

"Up an' at 'em, boys!" bellowed Costello, seeming to emerge suddenly from the trance of admiration with which he had watched de Grandin and Starkweather battle. "Give 'em th' wor-rks!"

Like terriers leaping on a pitful of rats, Costello's detectives boiled over the dancing-floor. Blackjacks, previously well soaked in lime juice, brass knuckles similarly treated, and here and there a big, raw fist, still wet with its baptism of acid liquid, struck and hammered against brown faces and dashed devastating blows into wicked, slanting yellow eyes.

"BE DAD, Dr. de Grandin, sor," declared Costello twenty minutes later as he wrung the little Frenchman's slender white hand, "'tis th' broth of a boy ye are, an' no mistake. Never in all me bor-rn days have I seen a better lad wid th' old shillalah. Glory be to Gawd, but ye'd be th' pride o' all th' colleens an' th' despair o' all the boys if ye ever went ter Donnybrook Fair, so ye would, sor!"

"A VINTAGE, *Madame*," de Grandin cried to the stout hostess who hovered near, uncertain whether to bewail the fight which had emptied her establishment or add her congratulations to Costello's, "a vintage of your rarest, and let it be not less than two quarts. Me, I have serious drinking to do, now that business is finished. Have no fear of the good sergeant. Have I not heard him say more than once that legging of the boot is more a work of Christian charity than a crime? Certainly.

"To us, my friends," he pronounced when the champagne was brought and our glasses filled with bubbling, pale-yellow liquid. "To stout young Monsieur Starkweather, who fights like a very du Guesclin; to Trowbridge and Costello, than whom no man ever had better friends or better comrades; but most of all, beautiful Mutina, to you. To you, who braved the sorrows of a broken heart and the wrath of the devil-people on earth and the tortures of the False Prophet's everlasting hell hereafter for love of him who is your husband. *Cordieu*, never was toast drunk to a nobler, gentler lady—he who says otherwise is a foul liar!"

He sent the fragile goblet crashing to the floor as the pledge was finished, and turned again to the reunited couple. "Your troubles are like the shadows of him who walks westward in the evening, my friends," he assured them. "For ever and for always they lie behind you. As for the foul Rakshasas—pouf! as young Starkweather and I shattered their evil skulls, their power over you is shattered for all time, even as this——" Snatching the glowing *indong mutina* from the girl's diadem he struck it sharply against the table edge. The iridescent shell cracked, almost as though it had been an egg, and from it dropped the most

magnificent pearl I had ever seen. Large as a small marble it was, with a pigeon's-neck luster and deep, opal-like fire-gleams in its depths which held the eyes in fascination as a magic crystal might hold a devotee enthralled. Ignorant as I was of such matters, I knew the thing must be worth at least thirty thousand dollars, perhaps twice that sum.

"To a pearl among women, a pearl among pearls," de Grandin announced, taking Mutina's little hand in his and kissing her painted finger tips, one after the other, then closing them about the lustrous gem. "Take you each other to yourselves, my friends," he bade, "and may the good God bless you and yours for ever and always."

Simply as a child, wholly unmindful of the rest of us, Mutina turned her lips for her husband's caress, and as she did so, I heard her murmur softly: "*Laki kakasih amba kau puji sampei kakol*—best beloved, husband and lover, forever and forever I adore thee!"

CRETE

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

The green waves wash above us
  Who slumber in the bay
As washed the tide of ages
  That swept our race away.

Our cities—dusty ruins;
  Our galleys—deep-sea slime;
Our very ghosts, forgotten,
  Bow to the sweep of Time.

Our land lies stark before it
  As we to alien spears,
But, ah, the love we bore it
  Outlasts the crawling years.

Ah, jeweled spires at even—
  The lute's soft golden sigh—
The Lion-Gates of Knossos
  When dawn was in the sky.

Highwaymen

(Continued from page 192)

the trigger. Ned plunged at the sharp report, but the white steed stood nonchalantly, unperturbed. A little whiff of smoke cleared in the wind. The specter wiped the back of a hand across his brow, then leveled his pistol at Boyle's head, but refrained from firing it. Boyle was an excellent shot; he knew, despite his nervousness, that his bullet had struck his adversary between the eyes. He shoved his pistol into his boot.

Spectral and cool came the lamenting command: "Stand and deliver, Sire!"

A hand of white, glaring bones stretched out, and grasped the little leathern bag proffered by Boyle's outstretched, quavering palm.

"Sire, you are at liberty to go: but quickly, Sire!"

There was no sound from the white steed's quick hoofs as he wheeled and hurried his ghastly rider away—a rider who seemed not to stoop before low-hanging limbs, but who stayed in his saddle as he rode. Boyle was alone.

How long he waited there, trembling, is problematical. Drawing his pistol, he reloaded it and played nervously with the hammer. Ned was still, but a cold sweat covered him. Boyle looked again toward the trees that had startled him: they seemed but trees.

Then he spoke softly to Ned, heeled him on, riding gently, his weapon across his chest.

Then he laughed harshly, as Ned swung into a trot, at last free of that spectral clearing and the things it had held: "Soft, Ned, good horse! . . . I hope Mag's in tender mood tonight . . . I hope she has some hot punch on . . . in sooth, we can hand her nothing that jingles tonight, old horse!"

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