Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

Missing Ad Page

Are You Bashful?

NERVOUS? EMBARRASSED? SHY?

NO WONDER YOU ARE A "STAY-AT-HOME"

)O YOU ever feel embarrassed in the presence of strangers? Are you ays bashful and confused when you et people for the first time or when ı are in company of the opposite sex?

ARE you missing all the good things and good times in life ıst because you are BASHFUL ıd SHY?

Girls and Boys, Men and Women ho are timid, nervous, self-conscious ıd easily embarrassed never have uch fun. How do you expect any-ɔdy to seek your acquaintance and ɔmpanionship if you lack confidence ı yourself? It is not always the ɔod looking attractive men and omen that are showered with all ıe attention.

To be popular—always in demand ; parties, and affairs and social ıtherings one must be a good mixer ıd possess a pleasant personality. Vhy should you sit at home, feeling ue and out of sorts—no place to ɔ—nobody to see? Stop being bash-ıl and embarrassed when you meet eople for the first time or when you re in the company of the opposite ex.

You Are Self-Conscious!

Shame on you! There is no need for you to be nervous and embarrassed. Stop being shy. You can learn how to conquer the terrible fear of your superiors.

DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED!

Every individual now suffering from *Bashfulness* (Self-Consciousness) will welcome this good news. Remarkable discovery used with great success—whereby you can quickly and easily overcome your faults. **Be cheerful and confident of your future!** If you're Bashful — don't wait another day — Send 25c for my fascinating, amazing book. Tells how to master and overcome Self-Consciousness. Write today.

R. BLACKSTONE

B-2810 Flatiron Building New York City

Richard Blackstone,
B-2810 Flatiron Building, New York City.

Please send me a copy of your book on Nervousness and Bashfulness. I am enclosing 25 cents in coin or stamps.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

Weird Tales

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VOLUME XIV NUMBER 4

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Contents for October, 1929

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IT IS the consensus of our readers that the August WEIRD TALES was a little bit better than any previous issue of the magazine. *The Shadow Kingdom,* by Robert E. Howard, evoked enthusiasm that in some cases bordered on delirium; and Gaston Leroux's weird crime story, *The Inn of Terror,* was not far behind it in popularity.

Mrs. Joseph C. Murphy, of Brooklyn, writes: "Please reprint in every following W. T. the story in the last one entitled *The Shadow Kingdom.* I thought it a beautiful tapestry of words, also weird, also with warm human interest, also unique."

E. Hoffmann Price, whose weird orientales have been much admired by readers of this magazine, thus comments on *The Shadow Kingdom* in a letter to the editor: "That is a story for you! Weird, fantastic, but peopled with real men who think and act as we conceive the thoughts and acts of men. And good fighting stuff. Howard very nicely refrained from slowing his combat stuff by technicalities of the sword. As it is, one gets into the spirit of the thing and supplies the cut, thrust, *parade* or *riposte* necessary to the scene: the reader can fight it out according to his own school of swordsmanship. Weird enough and then some; and savage and hairy-chested! Good character portrayal, too. None of the dummies that pirouette through some stories, using stilted, supposedly archaic language, and moving in response to the author's obvious string-pulling. All of which leads you to believe that I like it. Correct. I do. And all the rest of the issue is mighty good reading."

Thomas S. Rice, of the Statutory Crime Commission (Baumes Commission) of New York State, writes an interesting letter about Seabury Quinn's stories: "Whiling away this lazy afternoon of Sunday rest I read the July number of WEIRD TALES. Let me congratulate you upon the first story, that by Seabury Quinn entitled *The Corpse-Master.* Having been a student of legal medicine for a number of years, nothing irritates me more in a fiction story than a display of crass ignorance by the author in respect to elementary details when he deals with poisons or wounds. Mr. Quinn goes to the other extreme. He is meticulously correct without being pedantic and without annoying the

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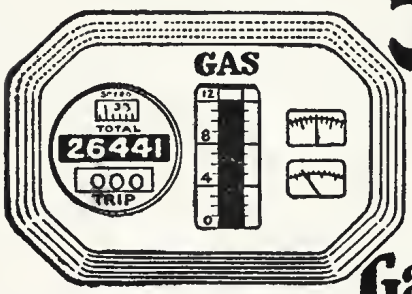
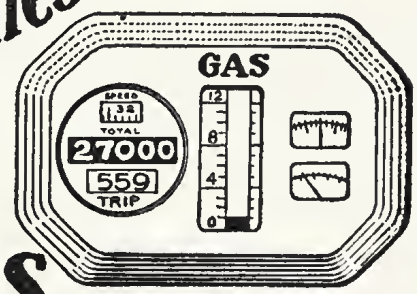
Over the Mountains from Los Angeles



559 Miles on 11



Gallons of GAS

Think of it! FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY-NINE MILES over rough mountainous country burning only ELEVEN GALLONS OF GASOLINE. Imagine more than FIFTY MILES to the GALLON. That is what the WHIRLWIND CARBURETING DEVICE does for D. R. Gilbert, enough of a saving on just one trip to more than pay the cost of the Whirlwind.

THE WHIRLWIND SAVES MOTORISTS MILLIONS OF DOLLARS YEARLY

Whirlwind users, reporting the results of their tests, are amazed at the results they are getting. Letters keep streaming into the office telling of mileages all the way from 22 to 59 miles on a gallon, resulting in a saving of from 25% to 50% in gas bills alone.

Mark H. Estes writes: "I was making 17 miles to the gallon on my Pontiac Coupe. Today, with the Whirlwind, I am making 35 5/10 miles to the gallon. Am I glad I put it on? I'll say so!"

P. P. Goerzen writes: "I made an actual test both with and without a Whirlwind, getting 13½ miles without and 34 6/10 miles with the Whirlwind, or a gain of 21 miles to the gallon. The longer the Whirlwind is in use on the machine the better the engine runs, has more pep and quicker starting. It makes a new engine out of an old one, and starts at the touch of the starter button."

R. J. Tulp: "The Whirlwind increased the mileage on our Ford truck from 12 to 26 miles to gallon and 25% in speed. We placed another on a Willys-Knight and increased from 12 to 17 miles per gallon."

Arthur Grant: "I have an Oakland touring car that has been giving me 15 miles to the gallon average, but I can see a great difference with the Whirlwind, as it climbs the big hills on high and gives me better than 23 miles to the gallon of gas, which is better than 50% saving in gas."

W. A. Scott: "I had my Whirlwind for three years. Winter and summer it gives the same perfect service, instant starting, smoother running, and what I have saved in gasoline these last few years has brought other luxuries which I could not have afforded previously."

Car owners all over the world are saving money every day with the Whirlwind, besides having better operating motors. Think what this means on your own car. Figure up your savings—enough for a radio—a bank account—added pleasures. Why let the Oil Companies profit by your waste? Find out about this amazing little device that will pay for itself every few weeks in gas saving alone.

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In just a few minutes the Whirlwind can be installed on any make of car, truck or tractor. It's actually less work than changing your oil or putting water in the battery. No drilling, tapping or changes of any kind necessary. It is guaranteed to work perfectly on any make of car, truck or tractor, large or small, new model or old model. The more you drive the more you will save.

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Free Sample and $100.00 a Week Offer

Whirlwind men are making big profits supplying this fast-selling device that car owners can not afford to be without. Good territory is still open. Free sample offer and full particulars sent on request. Just check the coupon.

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GUARANTEE

No matter what kind of a car you have—no matter how big a gas eater it is—the Whirlwind will save you money. We absolutely guarantee that the Whirlwind will more than save its cost in gasoline alone within thirty days, or the trial will cost you nothing. We invite you to test it at our risk and expense. You are to be the sole judge.

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Gentlemen: You may send me full particulars of your Whirlwind Carbureting device and free trial offer. This does not obligate me in any way whatever.

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City _____

County _____ State _____

[ ] Check here if you are interested in full or part time salesmen position.

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lay reader by technical language. Such exactness and the ability to explain medical and legal matters in plain language are far greater assets in an author than most publishers realize. So many persons are receiving scientific education nowadays, even to some extent in the high schools, that a magazine which publishes even one story containing scientific absurdities due to the ignorance of the author, and of the copyreader who passed the story, lays itself open to ridicule by a no means inconsiderable number of its readers. I have read a number of Mr. Quinn's stories. All have evidenced the same careful preparation of his material. He is an unusual student in the bypaths of knowledge concerning superstitions, folklore, magic and the religions of backward races. In *The Corpse-Master* he correctly attributes to the black natives of Haiti the belief that some persons have the power to raise the dead for mechanical purposes and that upon coming into contact with certain substances (or hearing certain words or incantations) the soulless bodies will hurry to their original graves and fall there in a state of corruption; but that belief was widespread ages before Haiti was discovered by white men or peopled with African slaves."

A. Merritt, whose story, *The Woman of the Wood*, was one of the most popular ever published in this magazine, writes: "I was struck by the high literary quality in your August number of WEIRD TALES. I have been noticing this for some months, but the August issue seemed to me to be a truly remarkable step ahead in this particular. *The Shadow Kingdom* is told beautifully, and *The Speared Leopard* and *The Idol-Chaser* seemed to me splendidly done. Hamilton's *Outside the Universe* is really an extraordinary story, and handled in first-class manner. I know how hard it is to write this kind of story, and what a slender wire to balance on continually to avoid pitching over into dullness on one side and absurdity on the other."

"Just a line to tell you how much I enjoy reading WEIRD TALES," writes the Rev. Hubert S. Stafford, of Lennox, Massachusetts. "I think that A. Merritt, Lovecraft and Seabury Quinn are among the best of your writers. Can you persuade A. Merritt to write a weird serial? What an imagination this man has!"

"Why not publish a bibliography of 'horror' tales?" asks Richmond E. Myers, of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. "I would like very much to secure such a bibliography myself. There must be many such stories in existence, but in order to locate them, a guide is needed. I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for over two years, and I intend to remain a reader, as long as you keep putting out a publication that holds the standard that WEIRD TALES holds today."

William Bradfield, of Cleveland, writes: "I was very much interested to find in the Eyrie a number of requests for Seabury Quinn's stories printed in one volume. While I have kept all of his stories from the first, as they have appeared, I would much prefer having them in book form, and if you should

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NEXT MONTH

A wealth of fascinating and unusual stories is scheduled for the November issue of WEIRD TALES, on sale October 1.

The House Without a Mirror

By Seabury Quinn

Another strange adventure of Jules de Grandin — a tale of plastic surgery, of weird mutilations, and a grisly revenge.

The Gray Killer

By Everil Worrell

Through the wards of the hospital slithered the Gray Killer—a fascinating tale of utter horror by the author of "The Bird of Space."

Whispering Death

By John Impola

Over the telephone wires came a weird whisper, and the listener froze to the receiver in fascinated horror as the death sound rose in torturing volume—a gripping weird-scientific story.

The Bed by the Window

By E. F. Benson

From the Present he looked into the grisly Future and witnessed a shocking murder—a weird story by a noted British writer.

The Tailed Man of Cornwall

By David H. Keller

Another weird extravaganza by Dr. Keller, narrating how Cecil, Overlord of Cornwall, united Sir Fitz-Hugh and the Irish Queen.

The Roc Raid

By George B. Tuttle

A great earthquake released from the bowels of the earth a host of giant birds. Bullets glanced harmlessly off their wings, and the birds destroyed the air armies of the world and made relentless war on humanity. A fascinating story of aviation and gigantic birds of prey.

The Curse of Yig

By Zealia Brown Reed

A powerful snake story of blood-chilling experiences and Indian superstition—a thrilling weird tale of the American pioneers is this story of wild horror.

Skull-Face

By Robert E. Howard

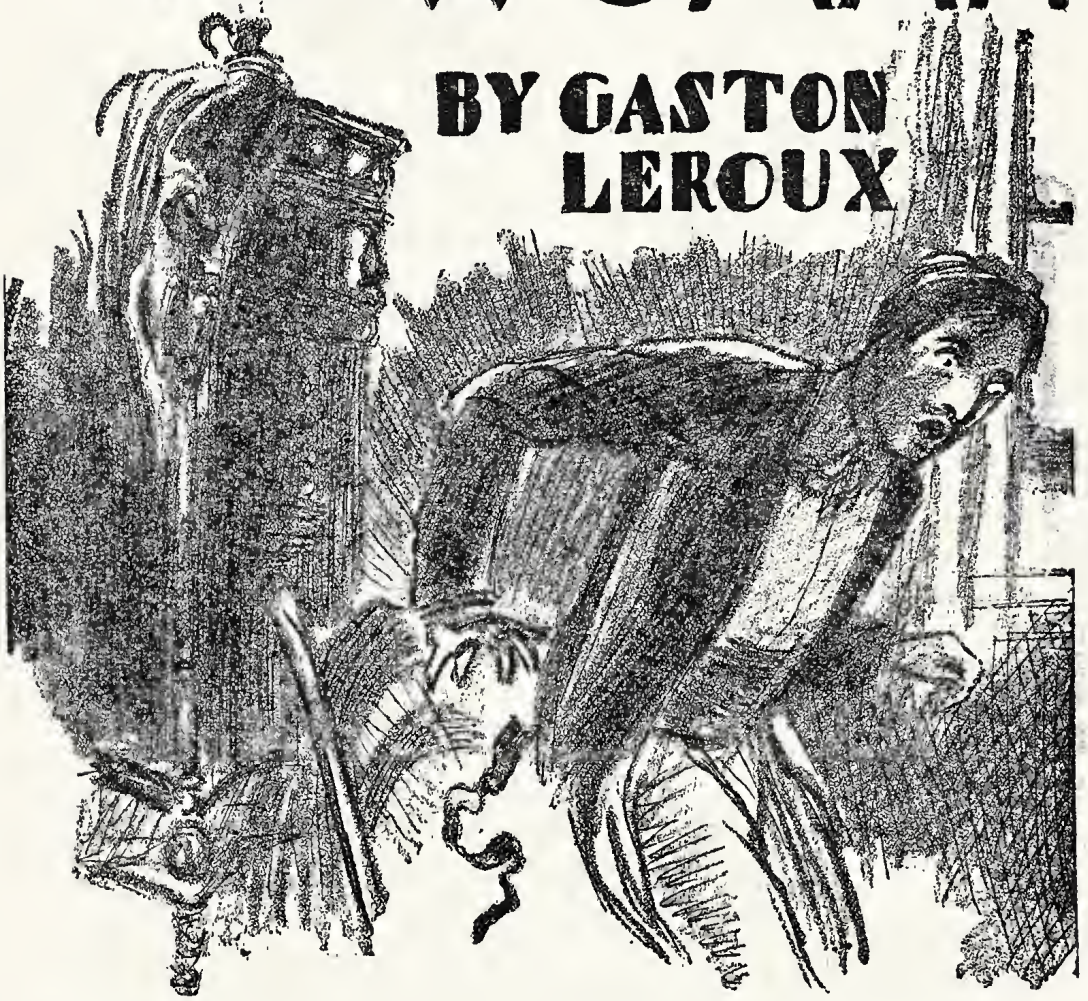
The eery adventures and weird power of Kathulos make the second installment of this fascinating serial a blood-freezing and gripping experience for the readers.

These are some of the super-excellent stories that will appear in the November issue of WEIRD TALES

November Issue on Sale October 1

The WOMAN

BY GASTON LEROUX



"YOU say that all the tales of Corsican vendettas are just the same old story over again," Gobert, a retired sea captain, remarked to his friend Captain Michel. "Well, you're wrong. I know one story that is so terrible that it makes all the others seem mere child's play. It even sent a chill up my hardened spine."

"Yes?" Michel was skeptical. His was the skepticism of a man who, believing to have known the most thrilling adventures, does not take stock in other men's tales. "Yes," he went on, "another case of a couple of bullets in the back, I suppose. But go ahead, let's hear it. We haven't anything better to do."

With this last shot, he ordered another round of drinks, and the party of old sea-dogs, who gathered every evening in the Café of the Sea at Toulon to spin their yarns, settled themselves to listen.

"First of all," Gobert began, "my story hasn't anything to do with guns. And secondly, you've never heard of

with the VELVET COLLAR

"The velvet band came loose in his hands and the head rolled off."

a Corsican vendetta like mine unless, of course, you happened to have been at Bonifacio about thirty years ago, as I was. In that case you would have had your fill of the story because the whole town was agog with it."

He looked around inquiringly, but none of the men present had ever touched at Bonifacio during their many voyages.

"Well, I'm not surprized," Gobert went on. "It's not a port of importance, but it is one of the most picturesque towns in Corsica. You've all seen it, probably, on your way to the Orient. A lovely spot with its old

fortress, the turreted battlements, and time-stained walls. The fortress juts out over the crags like an eagle's nest. . . ."

"Lay off the descriptions and give us the story," the others exclaimed impatiently.

"All right, here it is. I was in command of a small destroyer forming part of the squadron escorting the secretary of the navy on a tour of inspection in Corsica. At that time they were considering the fortification of several ports. In fact, they even thought for a while of turning Porto-Vecchio, which is as large as Brest, into a regular naval base.

"The secretary of the navy went first to Calvi and Bastia, from where we returned to Ajaccio to wait for him while he crossed the island by train, passing by Vizzavona, where he was met with great ceremony by a delegation of bandits who had left the wilds of the interior that very morning to present their respects to him.

"The famous Bella Coscia, himself, commanded the squad that fired the salute. The secretary of the navy was much impressed with his imposing bearing, his rifle whose carved stock had a nick in it for every man he had killed, and his famous knife—the dagger given to him by Edmond About with the request never to leave it in the wound!"

"There you are, the same old stories," Captain Michel interrupted peevishly. "Just a lot of old wives' tales."

"You're right, old chap; these are just stories, but if you'll hold your horses, you'll hear something more important.

"We left Ajaccio and arrived in Bonifacio at night. The larger ships continued to Porto-Vecchio, but I was among those detailed to escort the secretary ashore. It was a gala night, of course. A big dinner was followed by a grand reception at the town-hall.

"Bonifacio, situated as it was opposite Magdalena, wanted fortifications and its citizens had turned out in great style to make a good impression. They produced the best of everything they had—flowers, finery, and beautiful women, and you know how beautiful Corsican women can be! At dinner there were some striking beauties and I remarked about it enthusiastically to my neighbor, Pietro Santo, a charming fellow of a frank, good-natured appearance, who was then town clerk.

" 'Wait until you have seen the woman with the velvet collar,' he said seriously in answer to my remark.

" 'Is she more beautiful than these?' I asked with a smile.

" 'Yes,' he replied without smiling, 'yes, she is more beautiful, but it is not the same kind of beauty. . . .'

"In the meantime our conversation drifted to the customs of the country. My head was still ringing with all the wild brigand stories I had just been hearing from my comrades, on their return from escorting the secretary to Vizzavona, and their account of the spectacular reception by Bella Coscia had seemed to me like a scene from a musical comedy. I thought it was rather polite on my part to doubt the dangerous character of these outlaws. After all, Corsica was as civilized as certain parts of France itself at that time.

" 'The custom of vendetta,' Santo explained to me after I had spoken, 'continues to be a part of the code of honor here in the same way that dueling is with you. Your revenge accomplished, you automatically find yourself an outlaw. But what can be done about it? It's too bad, of course, but we have to put up with existing facts. I myself am an easy-going man. I was brought up in an antique dealer's shop and I'm sorry to see how savage some of my compatriots still can be when their family honor, as they call it, is in danger.'

" 'You surprize me,' I exclaimed, pointing out to him the jolly, good-natured faces around the banquet table.

"He shook his head. 'Don't trust them,' he warned, and his face grew dark; 'a laugh changes very quickly to a diabolical grin on their lips. All these dark eyes are sparkling with frankness and merriment tonight. Tomorrow they may flash black with thoughts of hate and revenge. And all those slender, delicate hands clasping each other in good fellowship never cease toying with hidden arms.'

" 'I thought those customs had died out in the cities and only existed in the little villages of the interior,' I said.

" 'The first husband of the lady with the velvet collar was mayor of Bonifacio, sir.'

"I DID not understand the allusion and was on the verge of asking for an explanation of this somewhat enigmatical remark when I was stopped by a call for silence. The speeches were about to begin. At their conclusion we withdrew to the drawing-room, and it was there that I first saw the woman with the velvet collar. Nor did I need Pietro Santo to point her out to me. There was no mistaking that strange funereal beauty and the velvet ribbon, which circled the base of her neck making a wide, black strip against the whiteness of her skin. This velvet collar was worn very low at the rise of the shoulders and emphasized her long and slender neck. She carried her head very proudly, always holding it in a straight, rigid position. Her face was classic in its beauty but so pale that one would have believed it chiseled in marble had it not been for two flashing eyes of strange brilliancy.

"As she passed through the room they all bowed to her with lowered eyes and I caught a general atmosphere of fear and instinctive recoil which roused my curiosity to full pitch. Her beautiful body was draped in black velvet and as she came forward, slipping in and out of the crowd, with her proud head and tragically pale face, I had the impression of seeing the dignified ghost of some dead and martyred queen. When she had gone, I turned to my new friend and voiced my feelings about this uncanny woman.

" 'There is nothing strange about that,' he answered seriously. *'She was guillotined!'*

"I looked at him in astonishment. 'What do you mean?' I stammered.

"But he could not answer me immediately. The 'woman with the velvet band', having greeted the secretary of the navy, came down the room toward us, stopped and held out her hand to my friend.

" 'Good evening, Pietro Santo,' she said, and I noticed that her head never moved from its rigid position.

"He mumbled something and bowed, and she went on. All the eyes in the room were focused on her and a deep silence had fallen. I noticed then that she was escorted by a handsome, well-built fellow of about thirty. His face had the fine profile often found on old Greek coins. These delicate features are frequently seen among the Corsicans and sometimes give them a family resemblance with the great emperor.

" 'He's her second husband,' Pietro Santo whispered, noticing my gaze.

"The couple disappeared at this moment, and I was conscious of a sigh of relief rising throughout the room, while an old man in a corner crossed himself, muttering a prayer.

" 'They never stay very long,' Pietro Santo explained, 'because they're not on very good terms with the present mayor, Ascoli. Angeluccia —that is her name—has always been proud and ambitious and she wanted her second husband, Giuseppe Gir-

genti, to be mayor like her first one. But they were defeated at the last elections and I think they always will be because of the guillotine affair.'

"I started and caught my friend by the arm. He smiled.

"'Oh,' he exclaimed, 'you'd like to know the story. . . . I hear the mayor telling it to the secretary this minute; but he doesn't know it as well as I do. . . . You see, Captain, I was a member of the household and *I saw everything even to the bottom of the basket!*'

"'Have a cigar, Santo?' I offered. 'You've never smoked any as good as these.'

"Pietro Santo took a cigar and I fumed with impatience while he chatted with the man who had interrupted us. Afterward I suggested he come aboard my ship, for I was determined to know the rest of the story before I left Bonifacio.

"'AND so,' I began with a laugh, as soon as we were installed in my cabin, 'you say that woman was guillotined?'

"'You do wrong to laugh, sir,' he replied, extremely serious. 'She was guillotined and it happened before the eyes of almost all the people you saw this evening. If you noticed, they all crossed themselves when she came into the room.'

"I stared at him in open-eyed amazement and he went on simply: *'That's why she always wears that velvet band: to hide the scar!'*

"'Mr. Santo, you're making fun of me. I'm going to call on Angeluccia and ask her to take off the band before my eyes. I should like to see that scar.'

"The man shook his head. 'She wouldn't take it off, sir. *We all know that if she did her head would fall off!*'

"And so saying, he too made the sign of the cross. I studied him by the light of the little swinging lamp. With his curly hair and slight figure, he looked like a timid angel frightened at the sight of the devil. I could not help smiling.

"'And yet Antonio Macci, Angeluccia's first husband, was the best of men,' he sighed. 'Who would ever suspect such a thing of him? I loved him, sir. He had been very good to me. He was an antique dealer and had brought me up in his shop. He was famous in his line all through Corsica and known to many tourists to whom he sold souvenirs of Napoleon and the imperial family. He manufactured these curios, because the rage for them was such that the authentic pieces had long been sold and there were no more to be had. He made a fortune in this business, and the tourists were quite happy with their purchases, which they were firmly convinced were authentic. Antonio, however, never lost an opportunity to buy any revolutionary articles when the occasion offered. He was able to sell them at a good price to the English and Americans, who never left the island without first paying him a little visit.

"'From time to time he made short trips to France to renew our stock, and I went with him the last time he went to Toulon. He had read in the papers that there were some very interesting pieces to be sold at auction and he was anxious to acquire them for his shop.

"'We made a number of purchases that day. We bought a Bastille relief for 425 francs, General Moreau's bed for 215 francs, Mirabeau's death mask for 1,000 francs, a bezel ring with some locks of Louis XVI's hair for 1,200 francs, and last the famous guillotine which, it seems, Samson, the famous executioner, himself had used. This cost us 921 francs. And we returned home very well pleased with ourselves and our purchases.

"'We found Angeluccia and her cousin Giuseppe waiting for us on the dock. The deputy mayor and a delegation from the town council were also waiting for us because Antonio, through his successful business, had become one of the most important men in the town and had been elected mayor. He was about forty years old at the time and his wife twenty, but this great difference in age did not keep Angeluccia from loving her husband ardently. Giuseppe, however, who was about her age, obviously adored his cousin. Anyone could see it merely by the manner in which he looked at her. But be that as it may, I must add that I for my part had never seen anything in the behavior of the two to justify the slightest suspicion in the husband. Angeluccia, herself, was too honest and too upright in her actions to give poor Giuseppe any chance to forget her marital duties. And I never believed that he would have had the daring to attempt such an enterprise. He loved Angeluccia. That was all. And my master knew it as well as the rest of us. Perfectly sure of his wife, he used to joke with her sometimes about it.

"'Angeluccia, who was kind by nature, asked him to spare her poor cousin and not make too much fun of him because Antonio would never find his equal in imitating and redoing furniture of the Empire and Louis XVI. Giuseppe, in fact, was a real artist. Besides, he knew all of Antonio's business secrets, which was probably why the dealer tolerated a workman who looked at his wife with such eloquent eyes.

"'Giuseppe's forlorn love made him rather melancholy; but Angeluccia was always gay. She had not yet become the funereal beauty you saw today. She laughed often and was affectionate and happy with her husband like any good little wife who has nothing on her conscience.

"'Our return was well celebrated. Angeluccia had prepared an excellent luncheon and had invited a few friends to share it with us. Everyone was anxious to hear of the new and sensational purchases and everyone wanted to see them.

"' "Does the guillotine still work?" one of the guests asked.

"' "Would you like to try it?" the master of the house answered with a laugh.

"'During the meal, Antonio, next to whom I was seated, accidentally dropped his napkin and bent over to pick it up. But I had already seen it slide to the floor and my head was under the table at the same time that his was. I straightened up and returned him his napkin. Then with a hurried excuse I left the room, bewildered.

"'I stumbled into the shop and sank into a chair. My discovery had momentarily stunned me, but as my wits returned to me my first question was: had Antonio seen? No, my sudden movement and the position of my head under the table must have made that impossible. Besides, the very calmness with which he had straightened up and received the napkin from me and the quiet way in which he had resumed conversation should have reassured me.

"'I RETURNED to the dining-room, where the meal was finishing gayly. The deputy mayor, who is the mayor today, was insisting on being shown the guillotine immediately. Antonio, however, answered that he must wait until the instrument of death had been put in working order. "I know my Americans," he added with a laugh; "they won't buy it unless it works perfectly!"

"'Shortly afterward, the guests took leave of their hosts, and during the rest of the day I could not keep my eyes off Angeluccia, who kissed

her husband a hundred times if she kissed him once during the afternoon. It made me shiver to watch her. I did not imagine that such deceit was possible in so young and apparently frank a person.

" 'You see, Captain, when I bent under the table at luncheon I had seen Angeluccia's little foot tightly and amorously pressed between Giuseppe's! Her very movement in releasing her foot had proved the crime to me.

" 'As the days passed, life at the shop went on as usual. A few foreign customers came for the famous guillotine, but the master answered that there were still some necessary repairs and that he would not sell it until it was in perfect working condition. In fact, we were working on it secretly in the basement and had taken it down and put it together several times. It was badly worm-eaten and out of joint and we were trying to balance it properly so that the knife would run smoothly in its grooves. This work revolted me, but it seemed on the contrary to please Antonio.

" 'Angeluccia's birthday and the Pentecost fell on the same date, and as it was customary for the mayor to give a party of some sort on the day of Pentecost, Antonio announced that he had decided to give a costume ball. This would be an excellent opportunity to show his guillotine. No one had seen it yet and it was to be the crowning event of the evening.

" 'Bonifacio is very fond of this sort of amusement, historical reconstructions and pageants, and when Angeluccia heard the plan she flung herself on her husband's neck like a happy child. She, herself, suggested that she go as Marie Antoinette.

" ' "We'll make it very realistic and guillotine you at the end of the party," Antonio said with a laugh.

" ' "Why not?" Angeluccia answered. "It would be fun."

" 'WHEN the town knew what sort of a party the mayor was planning, everyone wanted to go, and the next fifteen days before Pentecost were filled with preparations. The shop was full from morning to night with people running in and out, asking advice and studying old prints. Antonio was to represent Fouquier-Tinville, the terrible public accuser. Giuseppe was to be Samson, the executioner, and I was to fill the humble rôle of his aid.

" 'The great day arrived. Early in the morning we emptied the shop of all the odds and ends with which it was filled and put up the guillotine. Giuseppe had made a knife of cardboard covered with silver paper, so that Angeluccia's desire to play the guillotine scene to the end could be carried out, and we tried the machine several times to make sure it worked.

" 'We danced all afternoon and at night there was a big ball at the town-hall. Everyone drank toast after toast enthusiastically to the mayor and his beautiful wife. Angeluccia was dressed in the costume worn by Marie Antoinette during her imprisonment, and this simple dress, well in keeping with the feelings of a poor woman destined to so tragic an end, suited her marvelously. I shall never forget the sight of Angeluccia's beautiful white neck rising proudly from the delicately crossed kerchief, and Giuseppe devoured her with his eyes. Catching the too apparent flame of desire in his look I could not help glancing from time to time at Antonio, who seemed almost wildly gay.

" 'At the end of the dinner, it was he who gave the signal for the start of the horrible play. In a well-prepared speech, he informed the guests that he and some friends of his had planned a little surprize, which consisted in presenting to them the most tragic hours of the revolution; Bonifacio having the great fortune of possessing a guillotine, they were going to make

use of it to decapitate Marie Antoinette.

"'At these words the people laughed and cheered, making a merry ovation to Angeluccia, who rose from her seat and declared that she would know how to die courageously as befitted a queen of France.

"'A roll of drums suddenly beat in the streets, and we ran to the windows. A miserable cart drawn by a dilapidated horse stood there surrounded by guards and officers of the guillotine all wearing the bonnet of the revolution. A group of horrible knitting-women danced and sang in the streets, calling loudly for the death of the Austrian, dethroned queen of France. One might very easily have imagined himself back in the days of 1793!

"'We had all taken part in this game without seeing any harm in it, and it wasn't until Angeluccia had stepped into the cart with her hands tied behind her back, and the procession had started to the sinister beat of the funeral drums, that more than one felt a shiver steal up his spine and realized that such a masquerade might well touch upon sacrilege.

"'The whole scene was horribly effective. Night had fallen, and the flickering light of the torches gave a death-like beauty to Angeluccia's face. And she played her part well. Holding herself proudly erect, she seemed to be braving the populace with her cold stare, and her face with its changeless severity of expression might well have been carved in stone.

"'WE REACHED Antonio's house, and there the gay laughs broke out anew. Antonio was already in the shop, where he had seated a chosen group of people who were to watch the mock execution. The mob was thickly packed in, and everyone was in a state of extreme excitement at finally seeing the famous guillotine at such close range. My master asked for silence and began by making a little speech on the good points of his instrument of death. He mentioned all the noble necks which, he claimed, had rested on the headboards, and he ended by exhibiting the real knife which he had bought at the same time.

"' "I had the paper knife up there made so that you could see just how the thing worked," he explained; then, turning to Giuseppe, "Are you ready, Samson?"

"'Samson replied that he was ready.

"' "Bring forth the Austrian," Antonio ordered in a deep voice.

"'Giuseppe and I placed Marie Antoinette-Angeluccia on the plank, and Antonio himself lowered the board that held her head in position.

"'The laughter in the room suddenly ceased and an uneasy feeling swept over the crowd. The sight of the lovely body stretched out on the plank brought to the minds of even the hardened men present the memory of all the unfortunates who had really lain there to die. The joke had been carried too far. The merriment was revived for the moment, however, by the sight of Angeluccia's amused face as she looked here and there at the guests while her husband finished his lecture on the machine, showing the basket which received the body and that into which the head fell.

"'But suddenly, as we watched Angeluccia an awful change came over her face. Wild terror was written there. Her eyes had widened horribly and her mouth half opened as though to let out a cry which stuck in her throat.

"'Giuseppe was at the back and had seen nothing of this; but I, who was at the side, was struck with a nameless fear as the others had been. We were looking at the sight of one who really *knew* she was going to be decapitated. The laughter had died out and some of the people even

shrank back as though struck by an invincible terror.

" 'As for me, I came closer, for I had suddenly noticed that Angeluccia's horror-stricken eyes were staring at something in the bottom of the basket which was to receive the head. I looked into this basket, which Antonio had opened only a moment before, and I too read what Angeluccia had read—I too read the little placard fastened to the bottom:

Pray to the Virgin Mary, Angeluccia, wife of Antonio, mistress of Giuseppe, for you are about to die!

" 'I uttered a hollow cry and turned like a madman to stop Giuseppe, who, at a motion from Antonio, had seized the rope. Alas! I was too late. The knife fell, and what followed was horrible, too horrible for words. The unfortunate woman let out a scream, a scream which ended in an abrupt gurgle—a scream which will echo in my ears to my dying day —and then her blood spouted out over the audience, which let out sickening cries and made a desperate fight for the door. I fainted.'

"Here Pietro Santo stopped and grew so pale at the memory of the awful scene that I feared he was going to be ill again. I restored some of his strength with a glass of old grappa.

" 'But in spite of all that,' I said to him, 'Angeluccia was not killed. I saw her myself and she certainly was alive.'

"He sighed and lifted his head.

" 'Are you sure she really is alive?' he asked. 'There isn't a soul in Bonifacio who passes her in the street without crossing himself. Seeing her never look to the right nor to the left, always holding her head rigid, they firmly believe that her head is held to her neck by some supernatural miracle. That is how the legend of the velvet collar grew. Besides, she looks like a ghost, and when she shakes hands with me the touch of her icy skin makes me tremble.

" 'Yes, I know it's childish, but the whole affair was such a strange one that you must excuse the fantastic tales which our peasant folk have created. The truth of the matter is, I suppose, that Antonio planned his blow badly, that the machine was too old and did not work properly, and that Angeluccia's head was pushed too far through the opening, in such a way that the knife struck her at the rise of the shoulders. This is not the first time that such an accident has occurred with the guillotine. We have heard of cases where it took five tries to cut the head off. Giuseppe was the only one present when the doctor, whom he himself had fetched, saw her, and he says the wound was quite large. Everybody ran away at the time, and Antonio himself disappeared. You can see how all this helped form the legend that grew up overnight. Even those who were present at the time claim that they saw Angeluccia's head actually drop into the basket!

" 'Naturally, when Angeluccia reappeared some weeks later with her velvet ribbon, imaginations ran riot. And even when I look at her, there are times when I am hypnotized by her neck and wouldn't dare *under any circumstances untie her velvet band!*'

" 'And what happened to Antonio?'

" 'He is dead, or at least so they say. At any rate, his decease has been legally published since Giuseppe and Angeluccia are married. They found his body half eaten by crabs on the beach near the grottoes. The corpse was completely disfigured, but they found papers on it and the clothes were his. He probably ran away, believing Angeluccia dead, and threw himself over the cliff. He had prepared his revenge well, silently and cunningly as they do here, but I am still amazed at the skill with which he hid his feelings from the day that he

first got an inkling of the truth of the relations between Angeluccia and her cousin.

" 'The police have the duplicate knife that he made so that it would look like Giuseppe's. It is in Ajaccio.' "

"YOUR story isn't bad," Captain Michel conceded generously to Gobert. "It has an element of horror in it."

"It's not finished yet," Gobert explained, asking for another few minutes of silence. "Let me go on and you will see that it really is horrible. I didn't know the end myself until some time later on a second voyage to Bonifacio, and it was good old Pietro Santo who related the concluding details to me.

"Imagine my extreme amazement when on asking him news of the woman with the velvet collar, he answered me in perfect seriousness: 'Captain, the legend was right after all. *Angeluccia died on the day that the velvet collar was touched!*'

" 'What!' I cried. 'But who undid the collar?'

" '*I did. And her head fell off!*'

"While I stared at Pietro Santo, wondering if he had lost his mind, he explained to me that after I had left Bonifacio a doubt had spread through the town as to the truth of Antonio's supposed death. It seemed that Ascoli, the mayor, was responsible for this and claimed to know what he was talking about. He was convinced that he had met Antonio one day when he was out hunting. The man had been almost naked, living like a wild beast, and when Ascoli tried to speak to him he ran away.

"It was during this time that the elections for mayor came up again and Giuseppe was Ascoli's rival for the post. During the entire campaign, Ascoli declared that Giuseppe was the accomplice of a bigamous woman and therefore unworthy of the position. His rage knew no bounds when he was defeated and he resolved to hunt Antonio out. It took him several months to do so, but he finally accomplished his purpose. Antonio, who for ten years had never spoken to a soul, learned that his wife was not dead as he had supposed but was living happily with Giuseppe in the very house in which he had been mayor and had believed himself loved by her.

" 'What happened then,' Pietro Santo went on in a hollow voice, 'is beyond conception, and would make even the demons in hell shrink in horror. Good Lord, if I live to be a thousand. . . . But to cut it short, sir, the story can be told in a few words.

" 'One evening, a soft, clear evening like this, I was returning from an expedition to the grottoes, where I had escorted some friends, and was seated in the little boat taking us back to port when, in passing the cliffs, I heard a chant that made my blood run cold. It was the song which is always sung here by those who have some mortal affront to avenge. I lifted my head. A man stood like a statue on the edge of the rocks which served as a sort of pedestal to him. Although he was dressed in rags, he shouldered his gun proudly, and suddenly, as the last rays of the sun caught his face and brought it into full relief, I uttered one cry: "Antonio!"

" 'It was he! It was he! Oh, I was sure it was he! His fatal song and exalted air convinced me that he had not returned to these parts, after playing dead for ten years, without nursing some abominable purpose.

" 'Fortunately, I could reach town quicker by boat than he could on foot. There would be time to warn Giuseppe and Angeluccia. I threw myself on the oars and reached the dock in a few minutes. The first person I met was Giuseppe himself, who was on his way home from the town-hall. I

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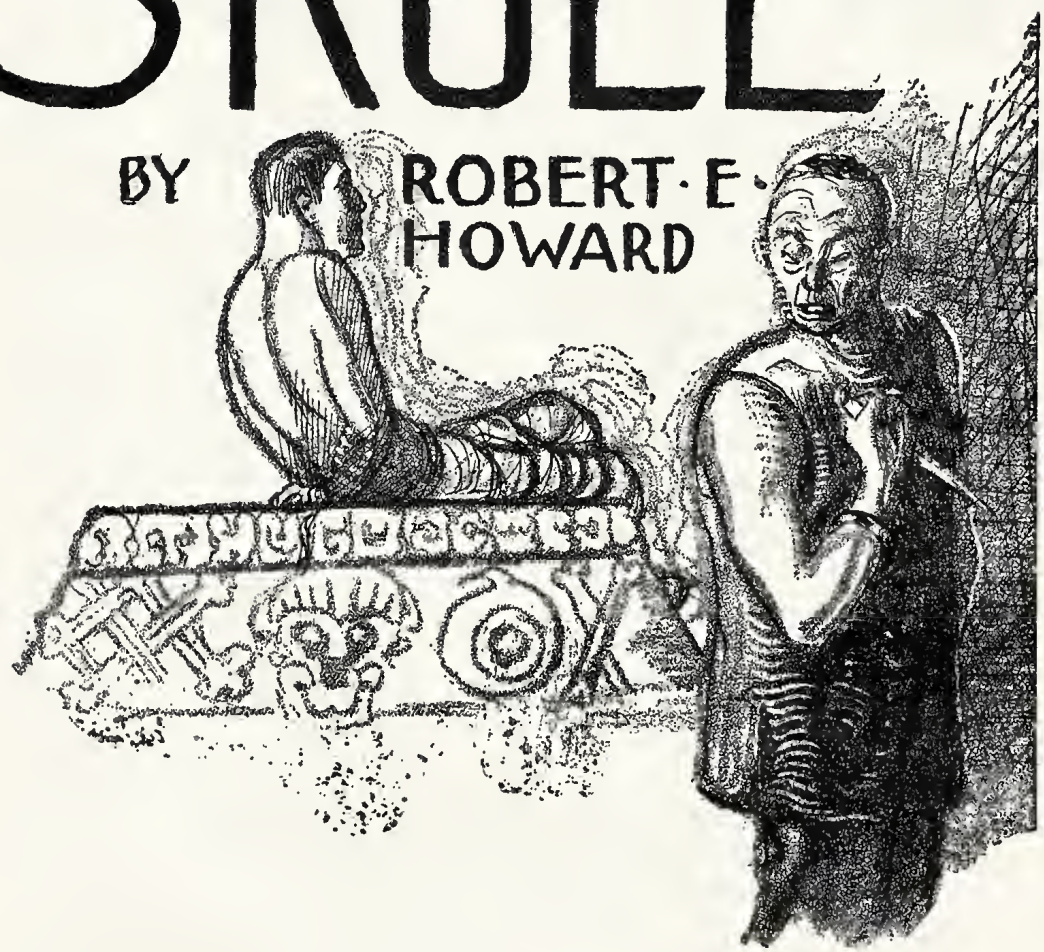
SKULL—

BY ROBERT·E·HOWARD



1. The Face in the Mist

"We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go."

—Omar Khayyam.

THE horror first took concrete form amid that most unconcrete of all things—a hashish dream. I was off on a timeless, spaceless journey through the strange lands that belong to this state of being, a million miles away from earth and all things earthly; yet I became cognizant that something was reaching across the unknown voids—something that tore ruthlessly at the separating curtains of my illusions and intruded itself into my visions.

I did not exactly return to ordinary waking life, yet I was conscious of a seeing and a recognizing that was unpleasant and seemed out of keeping with the dream I was at that time enjoying. To one who has never known the delights of hashish, my explanation must seem chaotic and impossible. Still, I was aware of a rending of mists and then the Face intruded itself into my sight. I thought at first it was merely a skull; then I saw that it was a

FACE

"Kathulos leaped into frenzied activity, hissing orders like a cat."

hideous yellow instead of white, and was endowed with some horrid form of life. Eyes glimmered deep in the sockets and the jaws moved as if in speech. The body, except for the high, thin shoulders, was vague and indistinct, but the hands, which floated in the mists before and below the skull, were horribly vivid and filled me with crawling fears. They were like the hands of a mummy, long, lean and yellow, with knobby joints and cruel curving talons.

Then, to complete the vague horror which was swiftly taking possession of me, a voice spoke—imagine a man so long dead that his vocal organ had grown rusty and unac-

eustomed to speeeh. This was the thought whieh struek me and made my flesh erawl as I listened.

"A strong brute and one who might be useful somehow. See that he is given all the hashish he requires."

Then the face began to reeede, even as I sensed that I was the subjeet of eonversation, and the mists billowed and began to elose again. Yet for a single instant a seene stood out with startling elarity. I gasped —or sought to. For over the high, strange shoulder of the apparition another faee stood out elearly for an instant, as if the owner peered at me. Red lips, half parted, long dark eyelashes, shading vivid eyes, a shimmery eloud of hair. Over the shoulder of Horror, breath-taking beauty for an instant looked at me.

2. The Hashish Slave

"Up from Earth's center through the Seventh Gate
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate."
—Omar Khayyam.

MY DREAM of the skull-faee was borne over that usually unerossable gap that lies between hashish enehantment and humdrum reality. I sat eross-legged on a mat in Yun Shatu's Temple of Dreams and gathered the fading forees of my deeaying brain to the task of remembering events and faces.

This last dream was so entirely different from any I had ever had before, that my waning interest was roused to the point of inquiring as to its origin. When I first began to experiment with hashish, I sought to find a physieal or psyehie basis for the wild flights of illusion pertaining thereto, but of late I had been eontent to enjoy without seeking eause and effeet.

Whenee this unaeeountable sensation of familiarity in regard to that vision? I took my throbbing head between my hands and laboriously sought a clue. A living dead man and a girl of rare beauty who had looked over his shoulder. Then I remembered.

Baek in the fog of days and nights whieh veils a hashish addiet's memory, my money had given out. It seemed years or possibly eenturies, but my stagnant reason told me that it had probably been only a few days. At any rate, I had presented myself at Yun Shatu's sordid dive as usual and had been thrown out by the great negro Hassim when it was learned I had no more money.

My universe erashing to pieces about me, and my nerves humming like taut piano wires for the vital need that was mine, I erouehed in the gutter and gibbered bestially, till Hassim swaggered out and stilled my yammerings with a blow that felled me, half stunned.

Then as I presently rose, staggeringly and with no thought save of the river whieh flowed with eool murmur so near me—as I rose, a light hand was laid like the touch of a rose on my arm. I turned with a frightened start, and stood spellbound before the vision of loveliness whieh met my gaze. Dark eyes limpid with pity surveyed me and the little hand on my ragged sleeve drew me toward the door of the Dream Temple. I shrank baek, but a low voiee, soft and musieal, urged me, and filled with a trust that was strange, I shambled along with my beautiful guide.

At the door Hassim met us, eruel hands lifted and a dark seowl on his ape-like brow, but as I eowered there, expeeting a blow, he halted before the girl's upraised hand and her word of eommand which had taken on an imperious note.

I did not understand what she said, but I saw dimly, as in a fog, that she gave the black man money, and she led me to a eouch where she had me reeline and arranged the eushions as if I were king of Egypt instead of a ragged, dirty renegade

who lived only for hashish. Her slim hand was cool on my brow for a moment, and then she was gone and Yussef Ali came bearing the stuff for which my very soul shrieked—and soon I was wandering again through those strange and exotic countries that only a hashish slave knows.

Now as I sat on the mat and pondered the dream of the skull-face I wondered more. Since the unknown girl had led me back into the dive, I had come and gone as before, when I had plenty of money to pay Yun Shatu. Someone certainly was paying him for me, and while my subconscious mind had told me it was the girl, my rusty brain had failed to grasp the fact entirely, or to wonder why. What need of wondering? So someone paid and the vivid-hued dreams continued, what cared I? But now I wondered. For the girl who had protected me from Hassim and had brought the hashish for me was the same girl I had seen in the skull-face dream.

Through the soddenness of my degradation the lure of her struck like a knife piercing my heart and strangely revived the memories of the days when I was a man like other men—not yet a sullen, cringing slave of dreams. Far and dim they were, shimmery islands in the mist of years—and what a dark sea lay between!

I looked at my ragged sleeve and the dirty, claw-like hand protruding from it; I gazed through the hanging smoke which fogged the sordid room, at the low bunks along the wall whereon lay the blankly staring dreamers—slaves, like me, of hashish or of opium. I gazed at the slippered Chinamen gliding softly to and fro bearing pipes or roasting balls of concentrated purgatory over tiny flickering fires. I gazed at Hassim standing, arms folded, beside the door like a great statue of black basalt.

And I shuddered and hid my face in my hands because with the faint dawning of returning manhood, I knew that this last and most cruel dream was futile—I had crossed an ocean over which I could never return, had cut myself off from the world of normal men and women. Naught remained now but to drown this dream as I had drowned all my others—swiftly and with hope that I should soon attain that Ultimate Ocean which lies beyond all dreams.

So these fleeting moments of lucidity, of longing, that tear aside the veils of all dope slaves—unexplainable, without hope of attainment.

So I went back to my empty dreams, to my fantasmagoria of illusions; but sometimes, like a sword cleaving a mist, through the high lands and the low lands and seas of my visions floated, like half-forgotten music, the sheen of dark eyes and shimmery hair.

You ask how I, Stephen Costigan, American and a man of some attainments and culture, came to lie in a filthy dive of London's Limehouse? The answer is simple—no jaded debauchee, I, seeking new sensations in the mysteries of the Orient. I answer—Argonne! Heavens, what deeps and heights of horror lurk in that one word alone! Shell-shocked—shell-torn. Endless days and nights without end and roaring red hell over No Man's Land where I lay shot and bayoneted to shreds of gory flesh. My body recovered, how I know not; my mind never did.

And the leaping fires and shifting shadows in my tortured brain drove me down and down, along the stairs of degradation, uncaring until at last I found surcease in Yun Shatu's Temple of Dreams, where I slew my red dreams in other dreams—the dreams of hashish whereby a man may descend to the lower pits of the reddest hells or soar into those unnamable heights where the stars are diamond pinpoints beneath his feet.

-Not the visions of the sot, the beast, were mine. I attained the unattainable, stood face to face with the unknown and in cosmic calmness knew the unguessable. And was content after a fashion, until the sight of burnished hair and scarlet lips swept away my dream-built universe and left me shuddering among its ruins.

3. The Master of Doom

"And He that toss'd you down into the Field,
He knows about it all—He knows! He knows!"

—Omar Khayyam.

A HAND shook me roughly as I emerged languidly from my latest debauch.

"The Master wishes you! Up, swine!"

Hassim it was who shook me and who spoke.

"To hell with the Master!" I answered, for I hated Hassim — and feared him.

"Up with you or you get no more hashish," was the brutal response, and I rose in trembling haste.

I followed the huge black man and he led the way to the rear of the building, stepping in and out among the wretched dreamers on the floor.

"Muster all hands on deck!" droned a sailor in a bunk. "All hands!"

Hassim flung open the door at the rear and motioned me to enter. I had never before passed through that door and had supposed it led into Yun Shatu's private quarters. But it was furnished only with a cot, a bronze idol of some sort before which incense burned, and a heavy table.

Hassim gave me a sinister glance and seized the table as if to spin it about. It turned as if it stood on a revolving platform and a section of the floor turned with it, revealing a hidden doorway in the floor. Steps led downward in the darkness.

Hassim lighted a candle and with a brusk gesture invited me to descend. I did so, with the sluggish obedience of the dope addict, and he followed, closing the door above us by means of an iron lever fastened to the under side of the floor. In the semi-darkness we went down the rickety steps, some nine or ten I should say, and then came upon a narrow corridor.

Here Hassim again took the lead, holding the candle high in front of him. I could scarcely see the sides of this cave-like passageway but knew that it was not wide. The flickering light showed it to be bare of any sort of furnishings save for a number of strange-looking chests which lined the walls—receptacles containing opium and other dope, I thought.

A continuous scurrying and the occasional glint of small red eyes haunted the shadows, betraying the presence of vast numbers of the great rats which infest the Thames waterfront of that section.

Then more steps loomed out of the dark in front of us as the corridor came to an abrupt end. Hassim led the way up and at the top knocked four times against what seemed the under side of a floor. A hidden door opened and a flood of soft, illusive light streamed through.

Hassim hustled me up roughly and I stood blinking in such a setting as I had never seen in my wildest flights of vision. I stood in a jungle of palm-trees through which wriggled a million vivid-hued dragons! Then, as my startled eyes became accustomed to the light, I saw that I had not been suddenly transferred to some other planet, as I had at first thought. The palm-trees were there, and the dragons, but the trees were artificial and stood in great pots and the dragons writhed

across heavy tapestries which hid the walls.

The room itself was a monstrous affair—inhumanly large, it seemed to me. A thick smoke, yellowish and tropical in suggestion, seemed to hang over all, veiling the ceiling and baffling upward glances. This smoke, I saw, emanated from an altar in front of the wall to my left. I started. Through the saffron billowing fog two eyes, hideously large and vivid, glittered at me. The vague outlines of some bestial idol took indistinct shape. I flung an uneasy glance about, marking the Oriental divans and couches and the bizarre furnishings, and then my eyes halted and rested on a lacquer screen just in front of me.

I could not pierce it and no sound came from beyond it, yet I felt eyes searing into my consciousness through it, eyes that burned through my very soul. A strange aura of evil flowed from that strange screen with its weird carvings and unholy decorations.

Hassim salaamed profoundly before it and then, without speaking, stepped back and folded his arms, statue-like.

A voice suddenly broke the heavy and oppressive silence.

"You who are a swine, would you like to be a man again?"

I started. The tone was inhuman, cold—more, there was a suggestion of long disuse of the vocal organs—the voice I had heard in my dream!

"Yes," I replied, trance-like, "I would like to be a man again."

Silence ensued for a space; then the voice came again with a sinister whispering undertone at the back of its sound like bats flying through a cavern.

"I shall make you a man again because I am a friend to all broken men. Not for a price shall I do it, nor for gratitude. And I give you a sign to seal my promise and my vow. Thrust your hand through the screen."

At these strange and almost unintelligible words I stood perplexed, and then, as the unseen voice repeated the last command, I stepped forward and thrust my hand through a slit which opened silently in the screen. I felt my wrist seized in an iron grip and something seven times colder than ice touched the inside of my hand. Then my wrist was released, and drawing forth my hand I saw a strange symbol traced in blue close to the base of my thumb—a thing like a scorpion.

The voice spoke again in a sibilant language I did not understand, and Hassim stepped forward deferentially. He reached about the screen and then turned to me, holding a goblet of some amber-colored liquid which he proffered me with an ironical bow. I took it hesitatingly.

"Drink and fear not," said the unseen voice. "It is only an Egyptian wine with life-giving qualities."

So I raised the goblet and emptied it; the taste was not unpleasant, and even as I handed the beaker to Hassim again, I seemed to feel new life and vigor whip along my jaded veins.

"Remain at Yun Shatu's house," said the voice. "You will be given food and a bed until you are strong enough to work for yourself. You will use no hashish nor will you require any. Go!"

As in a daze, I followed Hassim back through the hidden door, down the steps, along the dark corridor and up through the other door that let us into the Temple of Dreams.

As we stepped from the rear chamber into the main room of the dreamers, I turned to the negro wonderingly.

"Master? Master of what? Of Life?"

Hassim laughed, fiercely and sardonically.

"Master of Doom!"

4. *The Spider and the Fly*

"There was the Door to which I found no Key;
There was the Veil through which I might not see."
—Omar Khayyam.

I SAT on Yun Shatu's cushions and pondered with a clearness of mind new and strange to me. As for that, all my sensations were new and strange. I felt as if I had wakened from a monstrously long sleep, and though my thoughts were sluggish, I felt as though the cobwebs which had clogged them for so long had been partly brushed away.

I drew my hand across my brow, noting how it trembled. I was weak and shaky and felt the stirrings of hunger—not for dope but for food. What had been in the draft I had quenched in the chamber of mystery? And why had the "Master" chosen me, out of all the other wretches of Yun Shatu's, for regeneration?

And who was this Master? Somehow the word sounded vaguely familiar—I sought laboriously to remember. Yes—I had heard it, lying half-waking in the bunks or on the floor—whispered sibilantly by Yun Shatu or by Hassim or by Yussef Ali, the Moor, muttered in their low-voiced conversations and mingled always with words I could not understand. Was not Yun Shatu, then, master of the Temple of Dreams? I had thought and the other addicts thought that the withered Chinaman held undisputed sway over this drab kingdom and that Hassim and Yussef Ali were his servants. And the four China boys who roasted opium with Yun Shatu and Yar Khan the Afghan and Santiago the Haitian and Ganra Singh, the renegade Sikh—all in the pay of Yun Shatu, we supposed—bound to the opium lord by bonds of gold or fear.

For Yun Shatu was a power in London's Chinatown and I had heard that his tentacles reached across the seas into high places of mighty and mysterious tongs. Was that Yun Shatu behind the lacquer screen? No; I knew the Chinaman's voice and besides I had seen him puttering about in the front of the Temple just as I went through the back door.

Another thought came to me. Often, lying half torpid, in the late hours of night or in the early grayness of dawn, I had seen men and women steal into the Temple, whose dress and bearing were strangely out of place and incongruous. Tall, erect men, often in evening dress, with their hats drawn low about their brows, and fine ladies, veiled, in silks and furs. Never two of them came together, but always they came separately and, hiding their features, hurried to the rear door, where they entered and presently came forth again, hours later sometimes. Knowing that the lust for dope finds resting-place in high positions sometimes, I had never wondered overmuch, supposing that these were wealthy men and women of society who had fallen victims to the craving, and that somewhere in the back of the building there was a private chamber for such. Yet now I wondered—sometimes these persons had remained only a few moments—was it always opium for which they came, or did they, too, traverse that strange corridor and converse with the One behind the screen?

My mind dallied with the idea of a great specialist to whom came all classes of people to find surcease from the dope habit. Yet it was strange that such a one should select a dope-joint from which to work—strange, too, that the owner of that house should apparently look on him with so much reverence.

I gave it up as my head began to hurt with the unwonted effort of thinking, and shouted for food. Yus-

sef Ali brought it to me on a tray, with a promptness which was surprizing. More, he salaamed as he departed, leaving me to ruminate on the strange shift of my status in the Temple of Dreams.

I ate, wondering what the One of the screen wanted with me. Not for an instant did I suppose that his actions had been prompted by the reasons he pretended; the life of the underworld had taught me that none of its denizens leaned toward philanthropy. And underworld the chamber of mystery had been, in spite of its elaborate and bizarre nature. And where could it be located? How far had I walked along the corridor? I shrugged my shoulders, wondering if it were not all a hashish-induced dream; then my eye fell upon my hand—and the scorpion traced thereon.

"Muster all hands!" droned the sailor in the bunk. "All hands!"

TO TELL in detail of the next few days would be boresome to any who have not tasted the dire slavery of dope. I waited for the craving to strike me again—waited with sure sardonic hopelessness. All day, all night—another day—then the miracle was forced upon my doubting brain. Contrary to all theories and supposed facts of science and common sense the craving had left me as suddenly and completely as a bad dream! At first I could not credit my senses but believed myself to be still in the grip of a dope nightmare. But it was true. From the time I quaffed the goblet in the room of mystery, I felt not the slightest desire for the stuff which had been life itself to me. This, I felt vaguely, was somehow unholy and certainly opposed to all rules of nature. If the dread being behind the screen had discovered the secret of breaking hashish's terrible power, what other monstrous secrets had he discovered and what unthinkable dominance was his? The suggestion of evil crawled serpent-like through my mind.

I remained at Yun Shatu's house, lounging in a bunk or on cushions spread upon the floor, eating and drinking at will, but now that I was becoming a normal man again, the atmosphere became most revolting to me and the sight of the wretches writhing in their dreams reminded me unpleasantly of what I myself had been, and it repelled, nauseated me.

So one day, when no one was watching me, I rose and went out on the street and walked along the waterfront. The air, burdened though it was with smoke and foul scents, filled my lungs with strange freshness and aroused new vigor in what had once been a powerful frame. I took new interest in the sounds of men living and working, and the sight of a vessel being unloaded at one of the wharfs actually thrilled me. The force of longshoremen was short, and presently I found myself heaving and lifting and carrying, and though the sweat coursed down my brow and my limbs trembled at the effort, I exulted in the thought that at last I was able to labor for myself again, no matter how low or drab the work might be.

As I returned to the door of Yun Shatu's that evening — hideously weary but with the renewed feeling of manhood that comes of honest toil —Hassim met me at the door.

"You been where?" he demanded roughly.

"I've been working on the docks," I answered shortly.

"You don't need to work on docks," he snarled. "The Master got work for you."

He led the way, and again I traversed the dark stairs and the corridor under the earth. This time my faculties were alert and I decided that the passageway could not

be over thirty or forty feet in length. Again I stood before the lacquer screen and again I heard the inhuman voice of living death.

"I can give you work," said the voice. "Are you willing to work for me?"

I quickly assented. After all, in spite of the fear which the voice inspired, I was deeply indebted to the owner.

"Good. Take these."

As I started toward the screen a sharp command halted me and Hassim stepped forward and reaching behind took what was offered. This was a bundle of pictures and papers, apparently.

"Study these," said the One behind the screen, "and learn all you can about the man portrayed thereby. Yun Shatu will give you money; buy yourself such clothes as seamen wear and take a room at the front of the Temple. At the end of two days, Hassim will bring you to me again. Go!"

The last impression I had, as the hidden door closed above me, was that the eyes of the idol, blinking through the everlasting smoke, leered mockingly at me.

The front of the Temple of Dreams consisted of rooms for rent, masking the true purpose of the building under the guise of a waterfront boarding-house. The police had made several visits to Yun Shatu but had never gotten any incriminating evidence against him.

So in one of these rooms I took up my abode and set to work studying the material given me.

The pictures were all of one man, a large man, not unlike me in build and general facial outline, except that he wore a heavy beard and was inclined to blondness whereas I am dark. The name, as written on the accompanying papers, was Major Fairlan Morley, special commissioner to Natal and the Transvaal. This office and title were new to me and I wondered at the connection between an African commissioner and an opium house on the Thames waterfront.

The papers consisted of extensive data evidently copied from authentic sources and all dealing with Major Morley, and a number of private documents considerably illuminating on the major's private life.

An exhaustive description was given of the man's personal appearance and habits, some of which seemed very trivial to me. I wondered what the purpose could be, and how the One behind the screen had come in possession of papers of such intimate nature.

I could find no clue in answer to this question but bent all my energies to the task set out for me. I owed a deep debt of gratitude to the unknown man who required this of me and I was determined to repay him to the best of my ability. Nothing, at this time, suggested a snare to me.

5. The Man on the Couch

"What dam of lances sent thee forth to jest at dawn with Death?"

—Kipling.

AT THE expiration of two days, Hassim beckoned me as I stood in the opium room. I advanced with a springy, resilient tread, secure in the confidence that I had culled the Morley papers of all their worth. I was a new man; my mental swiftness and physical readiness surprized me—sometimes it seemed unnatural.

Hassim eyed me through narrowed lids and motioned me to follow, as usual. As we crossed the room, my gaze fell upon a man who lay on a couch close to the wall, smoking opium. There was nothing at all suspicious about his ragged, unkempt clothes, his dirty, bearded face or the blank stare, but my eyes, sharpened to an abnormal point, seemed to sense a certain incongruity in the clean-cut

limbs which not even the slouchy garments could efface.

Hassim spoke impatiently and I turned away. We entered the rear room, and as he shut the door and turned to the table, it moved of itself and a figure bulked up through the hidden doorway. The Sikh, Ganra Singh, a lean sinister-eyed giant, emerged and proceeded to the door opening into the opium room, where he halted until we should have descended and closed the secret doorway.

Again I stood amid the billowing yellow smoke and listened to the hidden voice.

"Do you think you know enough about Major Morley to impersonate him successfully?"

Startled, I answered, "No doubt I could, unless I met someone who was intimate with him."

"I will take care of that. Follow me closely. Tomorrow you sail on the first boat for Calais. There you will meet an agent of mine who will accost you the instant you step upon the wharfs, and give you further instructions. You will sail second class and avoid all conversation with strangers or anyone. Take the papers with you. The agent will aid you in making up and your masquerade will start in Calais. That is all. Go!"

I departed, my wonder growing. All this rigmarole evidently had a meaning, but one which I could not fathom. Back in the opium room Hassim bade me be seated on some cushions to await his return. To my question he snarled that he was going forth as he had been ordered, to buy me a ticket on the Channel boat. He departed and I sat down, leaning my back against the wall. As I ruminated, it seemed suddenly that eyes were fixed on me so intensely as to disturb my sub-mind. I glanced up quickly but no one seemed to be looking at me. The smoke drifted through the hot atmosphere as usual; Yussef Ali and the Chinese glided back and forth tending to the wants of the sleepers.

Suddenly the door to the rear room opened and a strange and hideous figure came haltingly out. Not all of those who found entrance to Yun Shatu's back room were aristocrats and society members. This was one of the exceptions, and one whom I remembered as having often entered and emerged therefrom. A tall, gaunt figure, shapeless in ragged wrappings and nondescript garments, face entirely hidden. Better that the face be hidden, I thought, for without doubt the wrapping concealed a grisly sight. The man was a leper, who had somehow managed to escape the attention of the public guardians and who was occasionally seen haunting the lower and more mysterious regions of East End — a mystery even to the lowest denizens of Limehouse.

Suddenly my supersensitive mind was aware of a swift tension in the air. The leper hobbled out the door, closed it behind him. My eyes instinctively sought the couch whereon lay the man who had aroused my suspicions earlier in the day. I could have sworn that cold steely eyes gleamed menacingly before they flickered shut. I crossed to the couch in one stride and bent over the prostrate man. Something about his face seemed unnatural—a healthy bronze seemed to underlie the pallor of complexion.

"Yun Shatu!" I shouted. "A spy is in the house!"

Things happened then with bewildering speed. The man on the couch with one tigerish movement leaped erect and a revolver gleamed in his hand. One sinewy arm flung me aside as I sought to grapple with him and a sharp decisive voice sounded over the babble which broke forth:

"You there! Halt! Halt!"

The pistol in the stranger's hand was leveled at the leper, who was making for the door in long strides!

All about was confusion; Yun Shatu was shrieking volubly in Chinese and the four China boys and Yussef Ali were rushing in from all sides, knives glittering in their hands.

All this I saw with unnatural clearness even as I marked the stranger's face. As the flying leper gave no evidence of halting, I saw the eyes harden to steely points of determination, sighting along the pistol barrel —the features set with the grim purpose of the slayer. The leper was almost to the outer door, but death would strike him down ere he could reach it.

And then, just as the finger of the stranger tightened on the trigger, I hurled myself forward and my right fist crashed against his chin. He went down as though struck by a trip-hammer, the revolver exploding harmlessly in the air.

In that instant, with the blinding flare of light that sometimes comes to one, I knew that the leper was none other than the Man Behind the Screen!

I bent over the fallen man, who though not entirely senseless had been rendered temporarily helpless by that terrific blow. He was struggling dazedly to rise but I shoved him roughly down again and seizing the false beard he wore, tore it away. A lean bronzed face was revealed, the strong lines of which not even the artificial dirt and grease-paint could alter.

Yussef Ali leaned above him now, dagger in hand, eyes slits of murder. The brown sinewy hand went up—I caught the wrist.

"Not so fast, you black devil! What are you about to do?"

"This is John Gordon," he hissed, "the Master's greatest foe! He must die, curse you!"

John Gordon! The name was familiar somehow, and yet I did not seem to connect it with the London police nor account for the man's presence in Yun Shatu's dope-joint. However, on one point I was determined.

"You don't kill him, at any rate. Up with you!" This last to Gordon, who with my aid staggered up, still very dizzy.

"That punch would have dropped a bull," I said in wonderment; "I didn't know I had it in me."

The false leper had vanished. Yun Shatu stood gazing at me as immobile as an idol, hands in his wide sleeves, and Yussef Ali stood back, muttering murderously and thumbing his dagger edge, as I led Gordon out of the opium room and through the innocent-appearing bar which lay between that room and the street.

Out in the street I said to him: "I have no idea as to who you are or what you are doing here, but you see what an unhealthful place it is for you. Hereafter be advised by me and stay away."

His only answer was a searching glance, and then he turned and walked swiftly though somewhat unsteadily up the street.

6. *The Dream Girl*

"I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule."
—Poe.

OUTSIDE my room sounded a light footstep. The door-knob turned cautiously and slowly; the door opened. I sprang erect with a gasp. Red lips, half parted, dark eyes like limpid seas of wonder, a mass of shimmering hair—framed in my drab doorway stood the girl of my dreams!

She entered, and half turning with a sinuous motion, closed the door. I sprang forward, my hands outstretched, then halted as she put a finger to her lips.

"You must not talk loudly," she almost whispered; "*He* did not say I could not come; yet——"

Her voice was soft and musical, with just a touch of foreign accent which I found delightful. As for the

girl herself, every intonation, every movement proclaimed the Orient. She was a fragrant breath from the East. From her night-black hair, piled high above her alabaster forehead, to her little feet, encased in high-heeled pointed slippers, she portrayed the highest ideal of Asiatic loveliness—an effect which was heightened rather than lessened by the English blouse and skirt which she wore.

"You are beautiful!" I said dazedly. "Who are you?"

"I am Zuleika," she answered with a shy smile. "I—I am glad you like me. I am glad you no longer dream hashish dreams."

Strange that so small a thing should set my heart to leaping wildly!

"I owe it all to you, Zuleika," I said huskily. "Had not I dreamed of you every hour since you first lifted me from the gutter, I had lacked the power of even hoping to be freed from my curse."

She blushed prettily and intertwined her white fingers as if in nervousness.

"You leave England tomorrow?" she said suddenly.

"Yes. Hassim has not returned with my ticket——" I hesitated suddenly, remembering the command of silence.

"Yes, I know, I know!" she whispered swiftly, her eyes widening. "And John Gordon has been here! He saw you!"

"Yes!"

She came close to me with a quick lithe movement.

"You are to impersonate some man! Listen, while you are doing this, you must not ever let Gordon see you! He would know you, no matter what your disguise! He is a terrible man!"

"I don't understand," I said, completely bewildered. "How did the Master break me of my hashish craving? Who is this Gordon and why did he come here? Why does the Master go disguised as a leper—and who is he? Above all, why am I to impersonate a man I never saw or heard of?"

"I can not—I dare not tell you!" she whispered, her face paling. "I——"

Somewhere in the house sounded the faint tones of a Chinese gong. The girl started like a frightened gazelle.

"I must go! *He* summons me!"

She opened the door, darted through, halted a moment to electrify me with her passionate exclamation: "Oh, be careful, be very careful, sahib!"

Then she was gone.

7. *The Man of the Skull*

"What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?"
—Blake.

AWHILE after my beautiful and mysterious visitor had left, I sat in meditation. I believed that I had at last stumbled on to an explanation of a part of the enigma, at any rate. This was the conclusion I had reached: Yun Shatu, the opium lord, was simply the agent or servant of some organization or individual whose work was on a far larger scale than merely supplying dope addicts in the Temple of Dreams. This man or these men needed co-workers among all classes of people; in other words, I was being let in with a group of opium smugglers on a gigantic scale. Gordon no doubt had been investigating the case, and his presence alone showed that it was no ordinary one, for I knew that he held a high position with the English government, though just what, I did not know.

Opium or not, I determined to carry out my obligation to the Master. My moral sense had been blunted by the dark ways I had traveled, and the thought of despicable crime did

not enter my head. I was indeed hardened. More, the mere debt of gratitude was increased a thousandfold by the thought of the girl. To the Master I owed it that I was able to stand up on my feet and look into her clear eyes as a man should. So if he wished my services as a smuggler of dope, he should have them. No doubt I was to impersonate some man so high in governmental esteem that the usual actions of the customs officers would be deemed unnecessary; was I to bring some rare dream-producer into England?

These thoughts were in my mind as I went downstairs, but ever back of them hovered other and more alluring suppositions—what was the reason for the girl, here in this vile dive—a rose in a garbage-heap—and who was she?

As I entered the outer bar, Hassim came in, his brows set in a dark scowl of anger, and, I believed, fear. He carried a newspaper in his hand, folded.

"I told you to wait in opium room," he snarled.

"You were gone so long that I went up to my room. Have you the ticket?"

He merely grunted and pushed on past me into the opium room, and standing at the door I saw him cross the floor and disappear into the rear room. I stood there, my bewilderment increasing. For as Hassim had brushed past me, I had noted an item on the face of the paper, against which his black thumb was tightly pressed as if to mark that special column of news.

And with the unnatural celerity of action and judgment which seemed to be mine those days, I had in that fleeting instant read:

African Special Commissioner Found Murdered!

The body of Major Fairlan Morley was yesterday discovered in a rotting ship's hold at Bordeaux . . .

No more I saw of the details, but that alone was enough to make me think! The affair seemed to be taking on an ugly aspect. Yet——

Another day passed. To my inquiries, Hassim snarled that the plans had been changed and I was not to go to France. Then, late in the evening, he came to bid me once more to the room of mystery.

I stood before the lacquer screen, the yellow smoke acrid in my nostrils, the woven dragons writhing along the tapestries, the palm-trees rearing thick and oppressive.

"A change has come in our plans," said the hidden voice. "You will not sail as was decided before. But I have other work that you may do. Mayhap this will be more to your type of usefulness, for I admit you have somewhat disappointed me in regard to subtlety. You interfered the other day in such manner as will no doubt cause me great inconvenience in the future."

I said nothing, but a feeling of resentment began to stir in me.

"Even after the assurance of one of my most trusted servants," the toneless voice continued, with no mark of any emotion save a slightly rising note, "you insisted on releasing my most deadly enemy. Be more circumspect in the future."

"I saved your life!" I said angrily.

"And for that reason alone I overlook your mistake—this time!"

A slow fury suddenly surged up in me.

"This time! Make the best of it this time, for I assure you there will be no next time. I owe you a greater debt than I can ever hope to pay, but that does not make me your slave. I have saved your life—the debt is as near paid as a man can pay it. Go your way and I go mine!"

A low, hideous laugh answered me, like a reptilian hiss.

"You fool! You will pay with your whole life's toil! You say you are not

my slave? I say you are—just as black Hassim there beside you is my slave—just as the girl Zuleika is my slave, who has bewitched you with her beauty."

These words sent a wave of hot blood to my brain and I was conscious of a flood of fury which completely engulfed my reason for a second. Just as all my moods and senses seemed sharpened and exaggerated those days, so now this burst of rage transcended every moment of anger I had ever had before.

"Hell's fiends!" I shrieked. "You devil—who are you and what is your hold on me? I'll see you or die!"

Hassim sprang at me, but I hurled him backward and with one stride reached the screen and flung it aside with an incredible effort of strength. Then I shrank back, hands outflung, shrieking. A tall, gaunt figure stood before me, a figure arrayed grotesquely in a silk brocaded gown which fell to the floor.

From the sleeves of this gown protruded hands which filled me with crawling horror—long, predatory hands, with thin bony fingers and curved talons—withered skin of a parchment brownish-yellow, like the hands of a man long dead.

The hands—but, oh God, the face! A skull to which no vestige of flesh seemed to remain but on which taut brownish-yellow skin grew fast, etching out every detail of that terrible death's-head. The forehead was high and in a way magnificent, but the head was curiously narrow through the temples, and from under penthouse brows great eyes glimmered like pools of yellow fire. The nose was high-bridged and very thin; the mouth was a mere colorless gash between thin, cruel lips. A long, bony neck supported this frightful vision and completed the effect of a reptilian demon from some mediæval hell.

I was face to face with the skull-faced man of my dreams!

8. *Black Wisdom*

"By thought a crawling ruin,
By life a leaping mire,
By a broken heart in the breast of the world
And the end of the world's desire."
—Chesterton.

THE terrible spectacle drove for the instant all thoughts of rebellion from my mind. My very blood froze in my veins and I stood motionless. I heard Hassim laugh grimly behind me. The eyes in the cadaverous face blazed fiendishly at me and I blanched from the concentrated Satanic fury in them.

Then the horror laughed sibilantly.

"I do you a great honor, Mr. Costigan; among a very few, even of my own servants, you may say that you saw my face and lived. I think you will be more useful to me living than dead."

I was silent, completely unnerved. It was difficult to believe that this man lived, for his appearance certainly belied the thought. He seemed horribly like a mummy. Yet his lips moved when he spoke and his eyes flamed with hideous life.

"You will do as I say," he said abruptly, and his voice had taken on a note of command. "You doubtless know, or know of, Sir Haldred Frenton?"

"Yes."

Every man of culture in Europe and America was familiar with the travel books of Sir Haldred Frenton, author and soldier of fortune.

"You will go to Sir Haldred's estate tonight——"

"Yes?"

"*And kill him!*"

I staggered, literally. This order was incredible—unspeakable! I had sunk low, low enough to smuggle opium, but to deliberately murder a man I had never seen, a man noted for his kindly deeds! That was too monstrous even to contemplate.

"You do not refuse?"

The tone was as loathly and as mocking as the hiss of a serpent.

"Refuse?" I screamed, finding my voice at last. "Refuse? You incarnate devil! Of course I refuse! You——"

Something in the cold assurance of his manner halted me—froze me into apprehensive silence.

"You fool!" he said calmly. "I broke the hashish chains—do you know how? Four minutes from now you will know and curse the day you were born! Have you not thought it strange, the swiftness of brain, the resilience of body—the brain that should be rusty and slow, the body that should be weak and sluggish from years of abuse? That blow that felled John Gordon—have you not wondered at its might? The ease with which you mastered Major Morley's records—have you not wondered at that? You fool, you are bound to me by chains of steel and blood and fire! I have kept you alive and sane—I alone. Each day the life-saving elixir has been given you in your wine. You could not live and keep your reason without it. And I and only I know its secret!"

He glanced at a queer timepiece which stood on a table at his elbow.

"This time I had Yun Shatu leave the elixir out—I anticipated rebellion. The time is near—ha, it strikes!"

Something else he said, but I did not hear. I did not see, nor did I feel in the human sense of the word. I was writhing at his feet, screaming and gibbering in the flames of such hells as men have never dreamed of.

Aye, I knew now! He had simply given me a dope so much stronger that it drowned the hashish. My unnatural ability was explainable now—I had simply been acting under the stimulus of something which combined all the hells in its make-up, which stimulated, something like heroin, but whose effect was unnoticed by the victim. What it was, I had no idea, nor did I believe anyone knew save that hellish being who stood watching me with grim amusement. But it had held my brain together, instilling into my system a need for it, and now my frightful craving tore my soul asunder.

Never, in my moments of worst shell-shock or my moments of hashish-craving, have I ever experienced anything like that. I burned with the heat of a thousand hells and froze with an iciness that was colder than any ice, a hundred times. I swept down to the deepest pits of torture and up to the highest crags of torment—a million yelling devils hemmed me in, shrieking and stabbing. Bone by bone, vein by vein, cell by cell I felt my body disintegrate and fly in bloody atoms all over the universe—and each separate cell was an entire system of quivering, screaming nerves. And they gathered from far voids and reunited with a greater torment.

Through the fiery bloody mists I heard my own voice screaming, a monotonous yammering. Then with distended eyes I saw a golden goblet, held by a claw-like hand, swim into view—a goblet filled with an amber liquid.

With a bestial screech I seized it with both hands, being dimly aware that the metal stem gave beneath my fingers, and brought the brim to my lips. I drank in frenzied haste, the liquid slopping down onto my breast.

9. Kathulos of Egypt

"Night shall be thrice night over you,
And Heaven an iron cope."
—Chesterton.

THE Skull-faced One stood watching me critically as I sat panting on a couch, completely exhausted. He held in his hand the goblet and surveyed the golden stem, which was crushed out of all shape. This my maniac fingers had done in the instant of drinking.

"Superhuman strength, even for a man in your condition," he said with a sort of creaky pedantry. "I doubt if even Hassim here could equal it. Are you ready for your instructions now?"

I nodded, wordless. Already the hellish strength of the elixir was flowing through my veins, renewing my burnt-out force. I wondered how long a man could live as I lived being constantly burned out and artificially rebuilt.

"You will be given a disguise and will go alone to the Frenton estate. No one suspects any design against Sir Haldred and your entrance into the estate and the house itself should be a matter of comparative ease. You will not don the disguise—which will be of unique nature—until you are ready to enter the estate. You will then proceed to Sir Haldred's room and kill him, breaking his neck with your bare hands—this is essential——"

The voice droned on, giving its ghastly orders in a frightfully casual and matter-of-fact way. The cold sweat beaded my brow.

"You will then leave the estate, taking care to leave the imprint of your hand somewhere plainly visible, and the automobile, which will be waiting for you at some safe place near by, will bring you back here, you having first removed the disguise. I have, in case of later complications, any amount of men who will swear that you spent the entire night in the Temple of Dreams and never left it. But there must be no detection! Go warily and perform your task surely, for you know the alternative."

I did not return to the opium house but was taken through winding corridors, hung with heavy tapestries, to a small room containing only an Oriental couch. Hassim gave me to understand that I was to remain there until after nightfall and then left me. The door was closed but I made no effort to discover if it was locked. The Skull-faced Master held me with stronger shackles than locks and bolts.

Seated upon the couch in the bizarre setting of a chamber which might have been a room in an Indian zenana, I faced fact squarely and fought out my battle. There was still in me some trace of manhood left—more than the fiend had reckoned, and added to this were black despair and desperation. I chose and determined on my only course.

Suddenly the door opened softly. Some intuition told me whom to expect, nor was I disappointed. Zuleika stood, a glorious vision before me—a vision which mocked me, made blacker my despair and yet thrilled me with wild yearning and reasonless joy.

She bore a tray of food which she set beside me, and then she seated herself on the couch, her large eyes fixed upon my face. A flower in a serpent den she was, and the beauty of her took hold of my heart.

"Steephen!" she whispered and I thrilled as she spoke my name for the first time.

Her luminous eyes suddenly shone with tears and she laid her little hand on my arm. I seized it in both my rough hands.

"They have set you a task which you fear and hate!" she faltered.

"Aye," I almost laughed, "but I'll fool them yet! Zuleika, tell me—what is the meaning of all this?"

She glanced fearfully around her.

"I do not know all"—she hesitated—"your plight is all my fault but I—I hoped—Steephen, I have watched you every time you came to Yun Shatu's for months. You did not see me but I saw you, and I saw in you, not the broken sot your rags proclaimed, but a wounded soul, a soul bruised terribly on the ramparts of life. And from my heart I pitied you. Then when Hassim abused you that day"—again tears started to her eyes—"I could not bear it and I

knew how you suffered for want of hashish. So I paid Yun Shatu, and going to the Master I—I—oh, you will hate me for this!" she sobbed.

"No—no—never——"

"I told him that you were a man who might be of use to him and begged him to have Yun Shatu supply you with what you needed. He had already noticed you, for his is the eye of the slaver and all the world is his slave market! So he bade Yun Shatu do as I asked; and now—better if you had remained as you were, my friend."

"No! No!" I exclaimed. "I have known a few days of regeneration, even if it was false! I have stood before you as a man, and that is worth all else!"

And all that I felt for her must have looked forth from my eyes, for she dropped hers and flushed. Ask me not how love comes to a man; but I knew that I loved Zuleika—had loved this mysterious Oriental girl since first I saw her—and somehow I felt that she, in a measure, returned my affection. This realization made blacker and more barren the road I had chosen; yet—for pure love must ever strengthen a man—it nerved me to what I must do.

"Zuleika," I said, speaking hurriedly, "time flies and there are things I must learn; tell me—who are you and why do you remain in this den of Hades?"

"I am Zuleika—that is all I know. I am Circassian by blood and birth; when I was very little I was captured in a Turkish raid and raised in a Stamboul harem; while I was yet too young to marry, my master gave me as a present to—to *Him*."

"And who is he—this skull-faced man?"

"He is Kathulos of Egypt—that is all I know. My master."

"An Egyptian? Then what is he doing in London—why all this mystery?"

She intertwined her fingers nervously.

"Steephen, please speak lower; always there is someone listening everywhere. I do not know who the Master is or why he is here or why he does these things. I swear by Allah! If I knew I would tell you. Sometimes distinguished-looking men come here to the room where the Master receives them—not the room where you saw him—and he makes me dance before them and afterward flirt with them a little. And always I must repeat exactly what they say to me. That is what I must always do—in Turkey, in the Barbary States, in Egypt, in France and in England. The Master taught me French and English and educated me in many ways himself. He is the greatest sorcerer in all the world and knows all ancient magic and everything."

"Zuleika," I said, "my race is soon run, but let me get you out of this—come with me and I swear I'll get you away from this fiend!"

She shuddered and hid her face.

"No, no, I can not!"

"Zuleika," I asked gently, "what hold has he over you, child—dope also?"

"No, no!" she whimpered. "I do not know—I do not know—but I can not—I never can escape him!"

I sat, baffled for a few moments; then I asked, "Zuleika, where are we right now?"

"This building is a deserted storehouse back of the Temple of Silence."

"I thought so. What is in the chests in the tunnel?"

"I do not know."

Then suddenly she began weeping softly. "You too, a slave, like me—you who are so strong and kind—oh Steephen, I can not bear it!"

I smiled. "Lean closer, Zuleika, and I will tell you how I am going to fool this Kathulos."

She glanced apprehensively at the door.

"You must speak low. I will lie in your arms and while you pretend to caress me, whisper your words to me."

She glided into my embrace, and there on the dragon-worked couch in that house of horror I first knew the glory of Zuleika's slender form nestling in my arms—of Zuleika's soft cheek pressing my breast. The fragrance of her was in my nostrils, her hair in my eyes, and my senses reeled; then with my lips hidden by her silky hair I whispered, swiftly:

"I am going first to warn Sir Haldred Frenton — then to find John Gordon and tell him of this den. I will lead the police here and you must watch closely and be ready to hide from *Him*—until we can break through and kill or capture him. Then you will be free."

"But you!" she gasped, paling. "You must have the elixir, and only he——"

"I have a way of outdoing him, child," I answered.

She went pitifully white and her woman's intuition sprang at the right conclusion.

"You are going to kill yourself!"

And much as it hurt me to see her emotion, I yet felt a torturing thrill that she should feel so on my account. Her arms tightened about my neck.

"Don't, Steephen!" she begged. "It is better to live, even——"

"No, not at that price. Better to go out clean while I have the manhood left."

She stared at me wildly for an instant; then, pressing her red lips suddenly to mine, she sprang up and fled from the room. Strange, strange are the ways of love. Two stranded ships on the shores of life, we had drifted inevitably together, and though no word of love had passed between us, we knew each other's heart—through grime and rags, and through the accouterments of the slave, we knew each other's heart and from the first loved as naturally and as purely as it was intended from the beginning of Time.

The beginning of life now and the end for me, for as soon as I had completed my task, ere I felt again the torments of my curse, love and life and beauty and torture should be blotted out together in the stark finality of a pistol ball scattering my rotting brain. Better a clean death than——

The door opened again and Yussef Ali entered.

"The hour arrives for departure," he said briefly. "Rise and follow."

I had no idea, of course, as to the time. No window opened from the room I occupied—I had seen no outer window whatever. The rooms were lighted by tapers in censers swinging from the ceiling. As I rose the slim young Moor slanted a sinister glance in my direction.

"This lies between you and me," he said sibilantly. "Servants of the same Master we—but this concerns ourselves alone. Keep your distance from Zuleika—the Master has promised her to me in the days of the empire."

My eyes narrowed to slits as I looked into the frowning, handsome face of the Oriental, and such hate surged up in me as I have seldom known. My fingers involuntarily opened and closed, and the Moor, marking the action, stepped back, hand in his girdle.

"Not now—there is work for us both—later perhaps;" then in a sudden cold gust of hatred, "Swine! ape-man! when the Master is finished with you I shall quench my dagger in your heart!"

I laughed grimly.

"Make it soon, desert-snake, or I'll crush your spine between my hands."

10. The Dark House

"Against all man-made shackles and a man-made Hell—
Alone—at last—unaided—I rebel!"
—Mundy.

I FOLLOWED Yussef Ali along the winding hallways, down the steps —Kathulos was not in the idol-room —and along the tunnel, then through the rooms of the Temple of Dreams and out into the street, where the street lamps gleamed drearily through the fogs and a slight drizzle. Across the street stood an automobile, curtains closely drawn.

"That is yours," said Hassim, who had joined us. "Saunter across natural-like. Don't act suspicious. The place may be watched. The driver knows what to do."

Then he and Yussef Ali drifted back into the bar and I took a single step toward the curb.

"Steephen!"

A voice that made my heart leap spoke my name! A white hand beckoned from the shadows of a doorway. I stepped quickly there.

"Zuleika!"

"Shhh!"

She clutched my arm, slipped something into my hand; I made out vaguely a small flask of gold.

"Hide this, quick!" came her urgent whisper. "Don't come back but go away and hide. This is full of elixir—I will try to get you some more before that is all gone. You must find a way of communicating with me."

"Yes, but how did you get this?" I asked amazedly.

"I stole it from the Master! Now please, I must go before he misses me."

And she sprang back into the doorway and vanished. I stood undecided. I was sure that she had risked nothing less than her life in doing this and I was torn by the fear of what Kathulos might do to her, were the theft discovered. But to return to the house of mystery would certainly invite suspicion, and I might carry out my plan and strike back before the Skull-faced One learned of his slave's duplicity.

So I crossed the street to the waiting automobile. The driver was a negro whom I had never seen before, a lanky man of medium height. I stared hard at him, wondering how much he had seen. He gave no evidence of having seen anything, and I decided that even if he had noticed me step back into the shadows he could not have seen what passed there nor have been able to recognize the girl.

He merely nodded as I climbed in the back seat, and a moment later we were speeding away down the deserted and fog-haunted streets. A bundle beside me I concluded to be the disguise mentioned by the Egyptian.

To recapture the sensations I experienced as I rode through the rainy, misty night would be impossible. I felt as if I were already dead and the bare and dreary streets about me were the roads of death over which my ghost had been doomed to roam forever. A torturing joy was in my heart, and bleak despair—the despair of a doomed man. Not that death itself was so repellent—a dope victim dies too many deaths to shrink from the last—but it was hard to go out just as love had entered my barren life. And I was still young.

A sardonic smile crossed my lips—they were young, too, the men who died beside me in No Man's Land. I drew back my sleeve and clenched my fists, tensing my muscles. There was no surplus weight on my frame, and much of the firm flesh had wasted away, but the cords of the great biceps still stood out like knots of iron, seeming to indicate massive strength. But I knew my might was false, that in reality I was a broken husk of a man, animated only by the artificial fire of the elixir, without which a frail girl might topple me over.

The automobile came to a halt among some trees. We were on the outskirts of an exclusive suburb and the hour was past midnight. Through the trees I saw a large house looming

darkly against the distant flares of night-time London.

"This is where I wait," said the negro. "No one can see the automobile from the road or from the house."

Holding a match so that its light could not be detected outside the car, I examined the "disguise" and was hard put to restrain an insane laugh. The disguise was the complete hide of a gorilla! Gathering the bundle under my arm I trudged toward the wall which surrounded the Frenton estate. A few steps and the trees where the negro hid with the car merged into one dark mass. I did not believe he could see me, but for safety's sake I made, not for the high iron gate at the front but for the wall at the side where there was no gate.

No light showed in the house. Sir Haldred was a bachelor and I was sure that the servants were all in bed long ago. I negotiated the wall with ease and stole across the dark lawn to a side door, still carrying the grisly "disguise" under my arm. The door was locked, as I had anticipated, and I did not wish to arouse anyone until I was safely in the house, where the sound of voices would not carry to one who might have followed me. I took hold of the knob with both hands, and, exerting slowly the inhuman strength that was mine, began to twist. The shaft turned in my hands and the lock within shattered suddenly, with a noise that was like the crash of a cannon in the stillness. An instant more and I was inside and had closed the door behind me.

I took a single stride in the darkness in the direction I believed the stair to be, then halted as a beam of light flashed into my face. At the side of the beam I caught the glimmer of a pistol muzzle. Beyond a lean shadowy face floated.

"Stand where you are and put up your hands!"

I lifted my hands, allowing the bundle to slip to the floor. I had heard that voice only once but I recognized it—knew instantly that the man who held that light was John Gordon.

"How many are with you?"

His voice was sharp, commanding.

"I am alone," I answered. "Take me into a room where a light can not be seen from the outside and I'll tell you some things you want to know."

He was silent; then, bidding me take up the bundle I had dropped, he stepped to one side and motioned me to precede him into the next room. There he directed me to a stairway and at the top landing opened a door and switched on lights.

I found myself in a room whose curtains were closely drawn. During this journey Gordon's alertness had not relaxed, and now he stood, still covering me with his revolver. Clad in conventional garments, he stood revealed a tall, leanly but powerfully built man, taller than I but not so heavy—with steel-gray eyes and clean-cut features. Something about the man attracted me, even as I noted a bruise on his jawbone where my fist had struck in our last meeting.

"I can not believe," he said crisply, "that this apparent clumsiness and lack of subtlety is real. Doubtless you have your own reasons for wishing me to be in a secluded room at this time; but Sir Haldred is efficiently protected even now. Stand still."

Muzzle pressed against my chest, he ran his hand over my garments for concealed weapons, seeming slightly surprized when he found none.

"Still," he murmured as if to himself, "a man who can burst an iron lock with his bare hands has scant need of weapons."

"You are wasting valuable time," I said impatiently. "I was sent here tonight to kill Sir Haldred Frenton——"

"By whom?" the question was shot at me.

"By the man who sometimes goes disguised as a leper."

He nodded, a gleam in his scintillant eyes.

"My suspicions were correct, then."

"Doubtless. Listen to me closely—do you desire the death or arrest of that man?"

Gordon laughed grimly.

"To one who wears the mark of the scorpion on his hand, my answer would be superfluous."

"Then follow my directions and your wish shall be granted."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"So that was the meaning of this open entry and non-resistance," he said slowly. "Does the dope which dilates your eyeballs so warp your mind that you think to lead me into ambush?"

I pressed my hands against my temples. Time was racing and every moment was precious—how could I convince this man of my honesty?

"Listen; my name is Stephen Costigan of America. I was a frequenter of Yun Shatu's dive and a hashish addict—as you have guessed, but just now a slave of stronger dope. By virtue of this slavery, the man you know as a false leper, whom Yun Shatu and his friends call 'Master,' gained dominance over me and sent me here to murder Sir Haldred—why, God only knows. But I have gained a space of respite by coming into possession of some of this dope which I must have in order to live, and I fear and hate this Master. Listen to me and I swear, by all things holy and unholy, that before the sun rises the false leper shall be in your power!"

I could tell that Gordon was impressed in spite of himself.

"Speak fast!" he rapped.

Still I could sense his disbelief and a wave of futility swept over me.

"If you will not act with me," I said, "let me go and somehow I'll find a way to get to the Master and kill him. My time is short—my hours are numbered and my vengeance is yet to be realized."

"Let me hear your plan, and talk fast," Gordon answered.

"It is simple enough. I will return to the Master's lair and tell him I have accomplished that which he sent me to do. You must follow closely with your men and while I engage the Master in conversation, surround the house. Then, at the signal, break in and kill or seize him."

Gordon frowned. "Where is this house?"

"The warehouse back of Yun Shatu's has been converted into a veritable Oriental palace."

"The warehouse!" he exclaimed. "How can that be? I had thought of that first, but I have carefully examined it from without. The windows are closely barred and spiders have built webs across them. The doors are nailed fast on the outside and the seals that mark the warehouse as deserted have never been broken or disturbed in any way."

"They tunneled up from beneath," I answered. "The Temple of Dreams is directly connected with the warehouse."

"I have traversed the alley between the two buildings," said Gordon, "and the doors of the warehouse opening into that alley are, as I have said, nailed shut from without just as the owners left them. There is apparently no rear exit of any kind from the Temple of Dreams."

"A tunnel connects the buildings, with one door in the rear room of Yun Shatu's and the other in the idol-room of the warehouse."

"I have been in Yun Shatu's back room and found no such door."

"The table rests upon it. You noted the heavy table in the center of the room? Had you turned it around the secret door would have opened in the floor. Now this is my plan: I will go in through the Temple of Dreams and meet the Master in the idol room.

You will have men secretly stationed in front of the warehouse and others upon the other street, in front of the Temple of Dreams. Yun Shatu's building, as you know, faces the waterfront, while the warehouse, fronting the opposite direction, faces a narrow street running parallel with the river. At the signal let the men in this street break open the front of the warehouse and rush in, while simultaneously those in front of Yun Shatu's make an invasion through the Temple of Dreams. Let these make for the rear room, shooting without mercy any who may seek to deter them, and there open the secret door as I have said. There being, to the best of my knowledge, no other exit from the Master's lair, he and his servants will necessarily seek to make their escape through the tunnel. Thus we will have them on both sides."

Gordon ruminated while I studied his face with breathless interest.

"This may be only a snare," he muttered, "or an attempt to draw me away from Sir Haldred, but——"

I held my breath.

"I am a gambler by nature," he said slowly. "I am going to follow what you Americans call a hunch—but God help you if you are lying to me!"

I sprang erect.

"Thank God! Now aid me with this suit, for I must be wearing it when I return to the automobile waiting for me."

His eyes narrowed as I shook out the horrible masquerade and prepared to don it.

"This shows, as always, the touch of the master hand. You were doubtless instructed to leave marks of your hands, encased in those hideous gauntlets?"

"Yes—though I have no idea why."

"I think I have—the Master is famed for leaving no real clues to mark his crimes—a great ape escaped from a neighboring zoo earlier in the evening and it seems too obvious for mere chance, in the light of this disguise. The ape would have gotten the blame of Sir Haldred's death."

The thing was easily gotten into and the illusion of reality it created was so perfect as to draw a shudder from me as I viewed myself in a mirror.

"It is now two o'clock," said Gordon. "Allowing for the time it will take you to get back to Limehouse and the time it will take me to get my men stationed, I promise you that at half-past four the house will be closely surrounded. Give me a start—wait here until I have left this house, so I will arrive at least as soon as you."

"Good!" I impulsively grasped his hand. "There will doubtless be a girl there who is in no way implicated with the Master's evil doings, but only a victim of circumstances such as I have been. Deal gently with her."

"It shall be done. What signal shall I look for?"

"I have no way of signaling you and I doubt if any sound in the house could be heard on the street. Let your men make their raid on the stroke of five."

I turned to go.

"A man is waiting for you with a car, I take it? Is he likely to suspect anything?"

"I have a way of finding out, and if he does," I replied grimly, "I will return alone to the Temple of Dreams."

11. Four Thirty-Four

"Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before."

—Poe.

THE door closed softly behind me, the great dark house looming up more starkly than ever. Stooping, I crossed the wet lawn at a run, a grotesque and unholy figure, I doubt

not, since any man had at a glance sworn me to be not a man but a giant ape. So craftily had the Master devised!

I clambered the wall, dropped to the earth beyond and made my way through the darkness and the drizzle to the group of trees which masked the automobile.

The negro driver leaned out of the front seat. I was breathing hard and sought in various ways to simulate the actions of a man who has just murdered in cold blood and fled the scene of his crime.

"You heard nothing, no sound, no scream?" I hissed, gripping his arm.

"No noise except a slight crash when you first went in," he answered. "You did a good job—nobody passing along the road could have suspected anything."

"Have you remained in the car all the time?" I asked. And when he replied that he had, I seized his ankle and ran my hand over the soles of his shoe; it was perfectly dry, as was the cuff of his trouser leg. Satisfied, I climbed into the back seat. Had he taken a step on the earth, shoe and garment would have showed it by the telltale dampness.

I ordered him to refrain from starting the engine until I had removed the apeskin, and then we sped through the night and I fell victim to doubts and uncertainties. Why should Gordon put any trust in the word of a stranger and a former ally of the Master's? Would he not put my tale down as the ravings of a dope-crazed addict, or a lie to ensnare or befool him? Still, if he had not believed me, why had he let me go?

I could but trust. At any rate, what Gordon did or did not do would scarcely affect my fortunes ultimately, even though Zulcika had furnished me with that which would merely extend the number of my days. My thoughts centered on her, and more than my hope of vengeance on Kathulos was the hope that Gordon might be able to save her from the clutches of the fiend. At any rate, I thought grimly, if Gordon failed me, I still had my hands and if I might lay them upon the bony frame of the Skull-faced One——

Abruptly I found myself thinking of Yussef Ali and his strange words, the import of which just occurred to me, *"The Master has promised her to me in the days of the empire!"*

The days of the empire—what could that mean?

The automobile at last drew up in front of the building which hid the Temple of Silence—now dark and still. The ride had seemed interminable, and as I dismounted I glanced at the timepiece on the dashboard of the car. My heart leaped—it was four thirty-four, and unless my eyes tricked me I saw a movement in the shadows across the street, out of the flare of the street lamp. At this time of night it could mean only one of two things—some menial of the Master watching for my return or else Gordon had kept his word. The negro drove away and I opened the door, crossed the deserted bar and entered the opium room. The bunks and the floor were littered with the dreamers, for such places as these know nothing of day or night as normal people know, but all lay deep in sottish slumber.

The lamps glimmered through the smoke and a silence hung mist-like over all.

12. The Stroke of Five

"He saw gigantic tracks of death,
And many a shape of doom."
—Chesterton.

Two of the China boys squatted among the smudge fires, staring at me unwinkingly as I threaded my way among the recumbent bodies and made my way to the rear door. For the first time I traversed the corridor alone and found time to

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In the Toils of the Black Kiva

by D. D. Sharp

"Run!" he screamed to the girl. "It has me! Run!"

HOWARD AUSTIN was upon the mud-baked roof of a Hopi pueblo which was known to few beyond the wild frontier of New Mexico. He was there for trade, and those Indians had been easy in trade. A common French harp had brought him three fine blankets, and a mirror not four inches wide had purchased six blankets and ten plaques. Below, three sleepy burros waited with the burden of his week's trading, and it promised to be a rich trade he should carry across the Painted Desert three hundred miles to the nearest railroad.

Then he heard of the snake dance. All week the young men of the pueblo had been east, west, north and south catching every snake they could find. Howard had surprized strange, calculating glances in his direction, furtive, guarded glances he did not understand and which made him uneasy for the treasure he had upon the donkeys below. At that time no white man had seen the weird dance of the snakes, and old Tyope, his guide, urged him away.

"*Es no bueno, maestro.* These people worship the little snake and the big snake, but more than all they worship the great father of all snakes who lives in the black Kiva and never sees the light of day. He is the great

spirit of the Hopi, fifteen paces long and has the weight of an ox, the head of a snake, and a tail that grips like a man's hand!"

Howard laughed. "Tell that to your muchacho, Tyope," he said. "There are no snakes in all the territory as large as that."

"He no grow here." Tyope shook his head. "The song of the Hopi says many, many years ago the pueblo sent an army of young men far away to the south, where every moon is the moon of heat and where there are no snows even upon the tall mountains. And they were gone many, many moons to search for the great father of all snakes, for there had been conquerors in shining metal clothes who had passed their pueblo and seen their dance of the snakes. And these conquerors had laughed at their little snakes telling of the great father of all snakes who dwelt many, many moons to the south. When the young men returned there was great feasting and joy, for they had brought with them the great father of all snakes that he might protect the pueblo of Obi. And their priest has spoken that only a woman may rule him, a white woman from the settlers to the east. And that is why they steal the white girl, that they may teach her how to rule him. And many girls are taken, but one is given to him at each time. If she masters the great father she may dwell with him; if she fails she dwells in him. Many days they teach her and yet sometimes she fails."

Howard, sitting upon the sun-drenched walls of the pueblo, laughed again. Tales of dark underground gods were far-fetched in such glory of sun.

"Where is this cavern?" he asked, assured with his triumphs over dangers in many places. "I'd like to see the great father. What stuff is he made of? Clay? Wood? Or imagination?"

Old Tyope backed away still shaking his head, drawing serious wrinkles into his already seamy face. "*Es no bueno!*" he emphasized. "The burros are loaded. The day is young. Let us go. It is already too near the time of the great *fiesta.* They have let you go that you may bring again the music and the magic glass. Your fortune is great. Come!"

Howard got up and stood beside the old man who was wrapped in his woolen blanket, bareheaded save for abundant uncut grizzled hair wrapped tightly at the back with lengths of twisted wool.

"Wait, *amigo,* I wish to see the great father."

But Tyope shook his head again like an augur of evil, muttering: "Man is his food at the day of *fiesta;* sometimes the white man, sometimes the *Mexicano,* sometimes the *Indio.*"

Howard pulled from its holster his newest gun, his "pepperbox" with six revolving barrels ready for instant action. "Enough for six great fathers," he laughed.

WELL, it was all myth anyway and no use badgering old Tyope, so Howard pocketed his gun and went over the rude pole ladder which led below, and they crossed to where the burros waited lazily in the rectangle of shadow from the lower walls.

"Es more better," old Tyope muttered as he turned the burros toward the sand drifts of the desert and plugged pebbles at them to hurry their pace. "Es more better," he muttered again as they struck the steady stride which was to carry them back to the east and south.

And if it had not been for the heat of the great, swelling sand dune into which their feet sank half the height of their shoes, it is very probable Howard would have camped that night by the Rio Zuni and the next very close to the Rio Puerco which rises upon the great Continental Divide. But the hot sand burned through their thick soles and the hot air dried their lips and tongues.

They loosened the goatskins of water to slake their thirst, and Howard turned his back to the way they were going, to drink more easily from the water keg, and as he turned about he saw the mud walls of the pueblo shimmering under the sun, dry, bare and brown like a huge dirt-dauber's nest upon the painted sands; upon the topmost room, with a dazzling sky above and behind it, stood a girl in pure white, with long, flowing amber hair and slim white hands stretched toward heaven. And even as he watched in a daze, wondering if the sun was affecting his brain, she dropped to her knees and three half-naked copper-colored men scrambled up the ladder and pounced upon her with the agility of brown apes.

Howard was on his feet with an oath. The precious water from the keg gurgled upon the astonished sand. Old Tyope leaped upon the spurting water and stopped the bung.

Howard ran back toward the pueblo, which sulked with bare walls without doors or windows, silent and blank as though it had never seen the form of anything alive. It seemed more the huge tomb of a long-dead race than the home of a people or the prison of a white girl.

The ladders which led to the roof entrance had been pulled up and about the yard was no stick or stone large enough to aid him. He searched about the walls hoping to find some means of access, some forgotten ladder, but there was only the windswept, bare, beaten ground about the pueblo, drenching sunshine and silence.

He turned about exasperated, fearful for the fate of the girl, wondering if he were heat-mad or had actually seen that bright creature upon the roof. He rounded a corner of the wall and saw faithful old Tyope pounding the burros behind the shelter of a sand dune out of view of the pueblo. He thought the old Indian was deserting him, but soon old Tyope came running back with long strides for so old a man. And then, as he still doubted the real for fancied, he heard a piercing scream, stifled by the thick, windowless walls.

Old Tyope was beside him now, a shriveled, desert-baked hand upon his shoulder: "*Maestro,* this way. Come!"

Howard followed him, crowding close behind, panting under the blazing fire which hung down in the sky, panting and swearing; and then Tyope pointed to the butt of a ladder lying near the edge of the roof. Tyope stooped and Howard leaped upon his bent back and clutched the ladder and dragged it down.

Howard went up first with his "pepperbox" between his teeth, pirate fashion. Tyope followed with agility which seemed marvelous in one of his age.

Upon the first roof an opening confronted them. It had no frame or lid, just a black square opening into the rooms below. Nothing was visible down there but somber shadows, more intense and forbidding in contrast with the sharp sunlight outside. In spite of his bravery Howard shivered as he dropped into the open jaws of the black mouth. It was not a long drop, but the mud floor below was hard and it pained his knees and stung his feet as he landed. Old Tyope dropped beside him almost immediately, but the old man landed awry, and when he tried to rise he could not.

"Are you hurt, friend?" Howard asked as he impatiently bent over the old man. "We must hurry. Can't you get up?"

"Go, son. Leave me. Mebbe I come. I come if I can."

But Howard lifted the old man and straightened him out and felt down his leathery skin to find if a bone was broken, and as he leaned over he felt strong fingers from behind grasp his throat, stifling his breath, choking him with an intolerable clutch. Howard put every ounce of strength, every fiber of his hard muscle into an effort to wrench free, but those lean claw-

like hands held firm, and then there were dozens upon him, his arms, his legs, his thighs, his chest; a thousand-armed octopus seemed slinking there in the dark waiting for him. He heard the patter of running feet, the breathing of struggling men. The blackness before his eyes became shot with red fire and the gasp in his tortured lungs drove him frantic. Suddenly a deeper blackness wiped out everything.

WHEN he came out of it he felt air in his lungs. He must not have been unconscious long, for he was still gasping great breaths of dry, hot air which seemed the greatest gift of heaven. He stared about him. Old Tyope was stretched near him, panting and dry under the direct scorch of the sun.

Over to one side was an opening of what seemed to be a mud-baked Kiva, the door of it covered with a heavy rock; and as Howard looked four stout men were tugging at it with great effort. Howard sat up and found his arms tied behind him with strong, unyielding stuff that cut and lacerated at each effort to wrench his hands free. Old Tyope was lying rigidly composed, but as the great rock in front of the Kiva moved a little and the depths below showed black and impenetrable, the old man gave a hoarse, smothered cry and stiffened as four more copper men leaped into view, raised him swiftly and carried him toward the widening hole.

Howard was on his feet. His hands were throbbing and smarting with the pain of his struggle to get them free, but they were still bound tightly behind his back. The Indians began a wailing chant as they flung the old man bodily through the aperture, and then began a slow, sinuous dance before the opening. From somewhere below came a shrieking cry of one in terrible pain—old Tyope's hoarse scream from that pit of darkness. Howard ran toward the opening. The Indians paid him not the slightest attention, but there was a quick look of amazement upon their mask-like faces as he plunged, hands bound, through the hole and down into the night below.

Into the gloom he tumbled upon the yielding huddle of old Tyope, or rather he thought for a second it was the form of the old man. With ice in his veins he found his error. The thing was cold, oily, and yielded to pressure like an inflated tire tube, and it whipped from under him like a loosened spring. He struggled to his feet and crowded back from the thing there in the darkness just beyond the circle of dim light from the opening above. As his eyes dilated and became used to the meager light he saw the huddle of old Tyope just a step beyond him. He started forward to lift the old man, forgetting he was bound, but suddenly drew back trembling and cold. Extending from the bulk of the writhing snake was a great root-like trunk, and from this trunk was the snake's tail which clutched old Tyope's body like a huge ape-foot. It grasped the body so tightly the flesh bulged on each side of it like a tight rope about a sack of meal. Tyope lay gasping with short panting breaths like a hare in the mouth of a dog.

Chilled terror crept into Howard's spine. Bound, helpless, he crouched against the wall of damp rock and stared as the thing lifted its kill high into the air, slammed it back to earth with a powerful twist of its tail, and then wrapped coil upon coil about it. Howard crowded back from the thing out there near the darkness, crowded back toward the square of light above him, feeling the rocky wall behind him for some way to climb back, thanking God the small square of light remained to him, that there was some contact with the world above ground. He would face a dozen Indians, all of them. He must get out of here.

He screamed. Outside the pit the wild chant was increasing in volume. He screamed again, sawing upon the bonds of his hands against the rocks behind. And then the light in the square above blotted out as he heard the big rock crunch firmly into place.

Blackness! Night! Dark, starless, inky night he could almost feel, all about, and there before him that thing, all the more hideous that he could hear but not see it in the murky pit. Howard heard it gliding now, dragging something heavy. Howard knew what it was dragging: old Tyope! Old Tyope because he had been thrown in first, and this thing was dragging him somewhere into the depths of the earth to devour him! He heard the hiss of it, and its scaly body sliding over the cavern floor, sliding and gliding as though unwinding interminable length.

He turned and fled away from the unseen, unnamed thing—fled into the dark, dank bowels of the earth, losing sense of direction, fleeing any place to put that crawling, scaly mass behind him, and then he came to a wall thick with stalactites and stalagmites, slick with moss and oozy mud. He stumbled, fell, rolled down a short incline and came to a pool of fetid water which stank of the hideous odor of rotten flesh.

HE LAY there for a long time too stunned to get up, wondering where in the depths of the great earth he was, hope gone but with still a spark of his old fighting spirit which the black stomach of earth had not yet absorbed.

He heard something. Taut and intent, he listened. It was not that crawling glide, thank God! It was the patter of moccasined feet, human feet. Thank God for even a red Hopi, anything warm-blooded! He welcomed him. A spear was more tolerable than this rotten, creepy hole.

"*Aqui!*" he shouted; "here by the water hole."

The patter of feet stopped. Silence, absolute and unbearable, fell upon the darkness—silence that ate his nerve like an acid. He could not bear it and called again.

"*Valgame Dios!* Come here, for God's sake."

Then the patter of feet came on. A match flared in the great blackness. The vile shadows fled into the crevices.

It was she whom he had seen upon the roof. She stared at him with anxiety and surprize in her golden eyes. That was what he needed to restore his courage, a girl weaker than himself. He got up and turned his bonds to her that she might burn them away with her flame. He knew what she must have endured down here alone with the dark and that Thing.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"I don't know. There is no time down here, just endless night."

"Don't they let you outside?" he exclaimed.

She shook her head. "I've been trying to escape for a long, long time. Hours and hours, I have been digging a hole through a place where the roof is soft shale. I found a spear back in a grotto that had been lost or forgotten. I got out just a little while ago. What I found crushed me. I thought I was far back from the pueblo, but I had dug right into the council chamber. They were there in a great circle about a fire, but they were too startled to chase me at once. I ran up ladders to the highest roof, hoping they would think I would go down. I thought I might hide up there until night and get away. But an old squaw saw me and raised the alarm. They brought me back here."

Her face held lines of absolute despair, and Howard forgot his own plight in his sorrow for her.

"I saw you up there. That is why I am here."

She reached out gratefully and took hold of his hand. He wondered at the soft whiteness of it after his months of seeing only rough brown hands of the Indian squaws. He felt slightly embarrassed and a good deal confused. He asked, "Have they closed the hole?"

"I do not know. I do not see how they can right away. They have no rock as big as the one upon the door to the Kiva and they have no timbers larger than the ladders. It will be some days before they can close it securely."

Howard thought of the three burros and the kegs of water upon them and the guns and cartridges and how old Tyope had hidden them.

"Show me the way to the hole. I have burros and water and ammunition. We will soon be back with the white man and out of this black pit, thank God."

"They have many men," she stared at him hopelessly. "You are but one."

"I have a gun which shoots six times without reloading," he said proudly, and produced it from his hip pocket.

The match went out. They were again in gloom.

She led him by the hand, and after a while they came to a tunnel or corridor which she seemed to know, for she whispered to him, "We are in a chamber below the pueblo. Don't make a noise. They will hear you up there."

They crept along in the black night. Suddenly she clutched him with her free hand.

"Listen!" she whispered.

He stared about in the blackness. The slimy rocks oozed a stagnant smell of fetid moisture, but there was nothing to be seen. Two black, unfelt thumbs were over his eyes. The damp rocks about were as much black spaces as the long tunnel ahead. The odor of decaying flesh was nauseating. In an unseen crevice above them they heard something gliding stealthily and interminably, the unending rasp of a scaled belly over rock.

"It's up there!" she cried hoarsely, shrinking back against the wall. Howard stooped and felt about the slimy floor for a weapon. He knew if he used his gun it would wake the village above. His hand encountered a large stone, very light for its bulk. His fingers sank into one side of it and felt a disgusting putrid mush of the same stench as pervaded the air. He rose and listened, and heard the Thing dragging itself like a long rope from a crevice. With his free hand Howard struck one of his precious matches.

The light fell about them in a flickering circle of dim splendor. They were in a chamber of the snake-worshipers. From little holes in the white walls of the tunnel, down the whole length of it, green and yellow snakes stuck wedge-shaped heads and spread wide, yellow jaws and licked hair-like tongues. Some had their evil heads in bowls of sacred meal, others were raised high above the bowls as though gulping it down their throats.

Howard raised his missile to crash it into the nearest repulsive head. In taking aim his eyes sought his weapon. Startled, he dropped his match. It fell, hissed, and black dark leaped again into the cavern. He flung his missile, horror creeping into his soul from his smeared fingers. The "stone" was a woman's skull half rotten with decayed flesh.

The girl heard the crash of the skull against the wall. "No!" she screamed, forgetting the tribes overhead. "Not there! It's up higher. That hole up there! Those things are wooden images."

She struck a new match. It sent its tiny pyramid of smoky flame toward the dark dome overhead. Howard looked up to where she was pointing and shrank with her against the wall. The great snake was wound about a pillar of stone, its big, glittering eyes watching them as it dangled, its great tail reaching nearer with the length-

ening stretch of its body, curving out toward them like a hungry tentacle; and then it was upon him like a whip. That clutching tail gripped him about the leg with such force as to wring a cry of pain from his throat. Tight coils whipped about his body, thick and heavy, like great iron pipe, a cold, scaly pipe which rasped and crept. He clutched at it and pounded with puny ineffectiveness. Its tenacious clutch tightened. His bones crunched under its pressure. To fight it was as futile as to fight the ghost he had first imagined it might be. His gun was pressed tight into his hip. His hands grasped the repulsive crawly flesh. He was helpless. His gun was useless. This was to be the end.

"Run!" he screamed to the girl. "It *has* me. Run!"

Instead she stood her ground. The match, still flickering in her hand, threw its sulfurous glow about her. As he fell under the weight of the snake he heard the long rise of a queer sound. It was the high-pitched tune of a pipe, something unlike anything he had ever heard in his whole life before, rising with a weird thin key, quavering and wailing. The big snake heard it, too, and its coils began to relax instead of tighten. Its great head with lidless gleaming eyes moved back and forth, back and forth, like the pendulum of a ghastly clock, swaying to the time of that tune. Still the coils loosened, yet Howard was so held by the spell of the tune he hardly knew he was being released until he fell in a heap upon the damp floor and felt the big scaly tail slide from under him. Then he was on his feet, weak and amazed at what he saw. The girl had a reed pipe in her mouth and was playing as she stared into the eyes of the snake, which was slowly edging toward her under her spell. Forward the snake glided, weaving its ugly head back and forth, doubling and coiling upon itself, slipping its prehensile tail in coils about its body, venturing it toward the girl, hesitating and weaving it in sinuous arcs.

Horror froze in Howard's soul. The thing had lost the girl's spell and was terrorizing her!

Once more he shouted. "Run! Run, girl! Run!" He reached with aching hands into his pocket for his gun.

The reed pipe fell from her mouth. Into the cavern fell a gruesome silence. Her lips parted. Her big, golden eyes stared and her face was drained of color. Her match fell with a hiss into a puddle below. In the dark there was no chance to fire. He had no time even to strike a match. He leaped toward her, pain in his chest from fractured ribs. He caught her cold hand and pulled her toward him. She screamed. The terror of that scream echoed through the black, deep corridor, but she was out of her daze and together they ran ahead breathlessly.

THE snake followed with a sluggish laziness. It was gorged with the flesh of old Tyope. It had not yet fully digested its gruesome meal; still it followed on, more angry than hungry. A faint glimmer of light fell about them as they rounded a turn of the corridor. Both gasped relief, though danger lay behind and in front. Light! Light! The gift of God.

The thing was gaining on them. It seemed roused with a new desire. It was whipping forward now with great sidewise sweeps. Howard pushed the girl into a cleft of the wall behind him, planted himself before her and drew his gun. In the dim, hazy twilight from the opening overhead he drew aim. But something held his fire. It may have been dread of the powerful whipping of that tail should he wound or kill the snake. It may have been paralyzing fear. Thirty feet of sweeping snake-flesh swept past them like a storm. It darkened the light above and then cleared. The

thing had glided through the hole the girl had made. Seeing the light after years of darkness it was eager to escape.

For the space of a dozen breaths they waited, too stunned to move. Then they ventured toward the hole and he crawled through first, half expecting an arrow in his head or the blow of a tomahawk? She followed. The room above was entirely empty. Down in the court was the hubbub of voices and shrill excitement. The Hopi, seeing the Great Father escaping, had given chase.

They crept over to the ladder which led to the ground opposite the clamor below. Howard was sick at heart for the loss of his old friend Tyope, dead because he would not forsake his friend.

In silence they ran across the hot sand to where Tyope had left the burros. Nothing was disturbed. The hobbled burros were nibbling at scant bunches of desert grass.

The clamor of the village was becoming frantic. Howard peered over the sand dune and saw the great snake surrounded by hundreds of half-naked men and women as they beat upon drums and shouted, and one old chieftain danced with fantastic steps before the big reptile, which lay in sluggish coils under the dazzling sun which stupefied it after its long stay in the dark cavern.

Howard took from one burro the long rifle, the one known to all the tribes and all the clans where he had traded, and before the girl could protest he fired at the big snake as it lay glutted of old Tyope, taking revenge in the name of his lost friend.

The Hopi fell upon their faces in stark fear as the great snake whipped the earth in its death fury, raising clouds of dust, thundering like a storm, thrashing tons of weight about in its death agony.

"You have killed their god!" the girl cried. "They will torture you—stretch you upon the roof with green hide to dry in the sun. They'll do everything, everything! You have killed their god!"

But the Hopi sank upon prone faces crying aloud in their wild tongue.

"He who kills god, is greater than god! Have mercy. Oh, white spirit, have mercy! Leave us without thy censure!"

And Howard took one of his small mirrors and flashed the sun into the eyes of the chief priest and cried aloud, "Be blinded by the light of heaven!"

And the priest was stricken with fear, and Howard and the girl departed safely on their long journey.

The SILVER COUNTESS

By SEABURY QUINN

"Countess Eleanor made high holiday with all the multitudinous company not yet made fast in hell."

MY DEAR Trowbridge [the letter ran]—If you will be good enough to bring your friend Dr. de Grandin, of whom I have received some very remarkable reports, out to Lyman's Landing, I think I can present him with a problem worthy of his best talents. More I do not care to write at this time, but I may add that whatever fee he may think proper in the premises will be promptly paid by

Yours cordially,
WALKER SWEARINGEN.

Jules de Grandin lighted a cigarette with slow deliberation, dropped a second sugar tablet into his well-creamed coffee and stirred it thoughtfully, watching the rich, tan liquid in his cup as if it were a hitherto unnoted piece of physical phenomena. At length, "Who is this Monsieur Swearingen who writes so mysteriously of the case he would present me, then concludes his note as though my performances were to be by royal command?" he demanded.

"We were in college together," I answered. "Swearingen was a shy sort of lad, and I rather took him under my wing during our freshman year. He went into some sort of brokerage concern when he graduated, and we've only met casually since—at alumni dinners and that

sort of thing, you know. I understand he piled up a monstrous stack of money speculating in Bethlehem Steel and what not during the early days of the World War, and—well, I'm afraid that's about all I can tell you. I don't really know him well, you see. There's not much question he thinks the case important, though; I don't believe he's trying to be deliberately mysterious by withholding details. More likely he thinks the matter too urgent to be set out in writing and prefers to wait for a personal interview."

"U'm? And he is wealthy, you say?"

"Very. Unless he's lost his money in further speculation Swearingen must be worth a million dollars; possibly two."

"*Eh bien,* in that case I think we shall accept his kindly invitation," the little Frenchman replied with a slightly sarcastic smile. "Believe me, my friend, this Monsieur Swearingen shall be less wealthy when my fee shall have been paid. Me, I do not greatly care for the form in which he makes his request; one would think him royalty's own self, commanding the services of a mountebank trickster from the way he writes, but there is probably no way in which his self-esteem can be reduced save by the collection of a large price; *alors,* I shall deflate his pocketbook. Will you be good enough to write him that we come without delay to match our powers against his mystery and collect a handsome fee for doing so?"

That afternoon I wrote Swearingen, assuring him de Grandin and I should be delighted to accept his offer and that we might be expected two days later. Accordingly, with such paraphernalia as de Grandin considered necessary for the unknown work he was to undertake (which required three trunks and as many more portmanteaux) we set out for Lyman's Landing in my car.

Some three-quarters of a mile from our destination my right steering-knuckle went bad, and we limped to a wayside service station, only to be informed that the machine could not be made roadworthy in less than four hours. I expected the Frenchman to give vent to one of his sudden furious rages, but to my astonishment he merely smiled and elevated his narrow shoulders in a fatalistic shrug. "*C'est la chance,*" he murmured. "Perhaps it is better so. We shall walk to Monsieur Swearingen's, reconnoiter the ground afoot, and thereby possibly see what we should unknowingly pass by, had we traveled by motor. Have them deliver the car at Monsieur Swearingen's when they have completed repairs, Friend Trowbridge."

LYMAN'S LANDING, Walter Swearingen's summer place, stood on a wide, almost level promontory jutting out into the Passaic. Smooth, close-clipped lawns surrounded the house, a tall, carefully tended privet hedge separated the grounds from the highway, and a line of graceful weeping willows formed a lush green background for the weather-mellowed brick walls of the homestead. Originally a small and very select rural hotel, the place had been completely remodeled by Swearingen when he took it over, but the beauty of the ivy-hung red brick walls and the Jacobean architecture with its many gables, mullioned windows and projecting bays had not been sacrificed in the process, and the scene presented as de Grandin and I passed through the high sandstone-and-brick pillars of the gate was more typically English than American. On the smooth grass-covered grounds were set a few painted wicker chairs with cushions of brilliantly striped awning cloth; to one side of the house was a rose garden riotous with color; farther away an oblong bathing-pool, curbed and lined with cool gray-green tiles and partially screened by an en-

circling hedge of arbor-vitæ, was sunk in the lawn. A quartet of youngsters played mixed doubles on a grass tennis court.

As we passed across the grass-plot my eyes fell on a girl in her early twenties lounging in a gayly colored canvas hammock swung between two sycamore trees. She was in the fashionable state of semi-nudity the mode prescribed for sports attire—a wash-silk sleeveless dress which made no effort to veil her stockingless knees, a pair of rubber-soled poplin pumps and, as far as I could discern, nothing else. As we drew abreast of her she kicked one of the white sports shoes off and reached downward, slapping at the palm of her little naked foot as though to brush away a pebble which had sifted into her shoe while she played tennis or walked.

I heard de Grandin breathe a muffled exclamation and felt the nudge of his sharp elbow against my ribs. "Trowbridge, my friend, did you see, did you observe?" he whispered so low I could scarcely hear.

"See? — observe?" I retorted angrily. "How could I help it? Don't you think the little hussy wanted us to? It's disgraceful the way the young people dress today! That girl would hardly have worn less if she were about to step into her bath, and the brazen way she took off part of the little clothes she was wearing just as we passed—it's atrocious! Anyone would have thought she wasn't aware of our existence, judging by her innocent manner, but the sex-conscious little baggage couldn't even let two middle-aged men pass her without trying to cast her net. I think——"

"*Larmes d'un poisson!*" he interrupted, laughing softly. "The man who knows anatomy as he knows the inside of his pocket frets at the sight of an unclothed foot! It was not what I meant, my friend, but no matter. Perhaps it is of no importance; at any rate, you would not understand."

"What d'ye mean?" I countered, nettled as much by his bantering manner as by his words. "I saw five shameless pink toes, if that's what's in your mind, and——"

"*Parbleu,* did you, indeed?" he cut in. "It is perhaps that I did not see it after all. No matter; we are arrived, and I should greatly like to confer with that Monsieur Swearingen concerning the problem which is of too great importance to be committed to paper and for the solution of which he is willing to pay so promptly."

THE score of placid, prosperous years which had passed since our college days had been kind to Walker Swearingen. In addition to wealth he had acquired poise and embonpoint, a heavy, deliberate style of speech, a Vandyke beard and that odd, irritating manner so common to financiers of seeming only to pay half attention to what was told him, and treating the remarks of everyone not dominantly interested in money with the grave mock-courtesy an affable adult bestows on the inconsequential conversation of a child.

"Glad to welcome you to Lyman's Landing, Dr. de Grandin," he acknowledged my introduction. "I think we can offer you as mystifying a case as you've ever encountered. Er"—he paused momentarily and smiled somewhat self-consciously in the depths of his slightly gray beard —"er, there are certain phases of the matter which make me think it's peculiarly the type of case you are fitted to handle, rather than the ordinary detective agency——"

"*Monsieur*——" de Grandin began, and his little blue eyes flashed ominously, but Swearingen, characteristically, took no notice of the attempted interruption.

"The county police and state constabulary are quite out of the question, of course," he went on. "To be quite frank, I'm not prepared to say just what is behind it all; it has some

of the aspects of a silly, childish prank, some similarity to an odd case of kleptomania, and, in other ways, it's like an old-fashioned ghost story. I leave it for you to attach its proper label. U'm''—he consulted a memorandum which he drew from his pocket—''last Thursday night several of my house guests were disturbed by someone in their rooms. None of them actually saw the intruder, but next morning it was found that four rooms had been entered and several valueless, or nearly valueless articles stolen. Then——''

"And the missing articles were what, if you please, *Monsieur?*" de Grandin interrupted, this time so sharply that our host could not ignore him.

"H'm," Swearingen favored the diminutive Frenchman with an annoyed stare, "Miss Brooks—Elizabeth Brooks, my daughter Margery's chum—lost an Episcopal prayer book; Elsie Stephens, another friend, who is a Roman Catholic, missed an inexpensive string of beads; Mr. Massey, one of the young men guests, lost a pocket Testament; and my daughter could not find a small book of devotional poems which had been on her desk. I fancy none of the young people is greatly distressed at his losses, but such things are distinctly disturbing, you must understand.

"Friday night John Rodman, another guest, had a most disconcerting experience. Some time between midnight and daybreak he woke in a state of profuse perspiration, as he thought, feeling extraordinarily weak. It was only by the greatest effort he was able to light his bed-lamp, and discover by its light that his pajamas and the bedclothes were literally drenched with blood, which had flowed from a small, superficial wound in his left breast. We called a physician, and the boy was no worse for his experience, but it caused considerable comment, as you may well imagine. It's impossible he should have wounded himself, for there was no weapon in his room capable of making the incision from which he bled—his razors were in the adjoining bathroom, and there were no bloodstains on the floor; so the hypothesis that he had walked in his sleep, cut himself, then gone back to bed may be ruled out. Besides, the wound was small and almost circular in shape, as though made with an awl or some such small, sharp instrument.

"It was after this mysterious, though fortunately not serious accident that I wrote Dr. Trowbridge. Last night, however, Mr. Rodman's experience was repeated, the wound being in the left side of his throat this time. Rodman's a fine young chap and wouldn't do anything to embarrass me—he told me about the second wounding privately this morning, and now it's for us to find who's up to all this monkey business. I realize this may seem like a tempest in a teapot to you, but I'm sufficiently interested in it to pay——''

"*Tiens, Monsieur,* permit that I discuss the matter of payment when the appropriate time arrives, if you please," de Grandin put in. "Meantime, if you will tell me whether or not the beads which Mademoiselle Stephens lost were merely ornamental trinkets or a rosary, it will be of interest."

"Er, yes, I believe such beads are called by that name," Swearingen returned, evidently annoyed at such a trivial technicality. "Now, if you've any further questions to ask, or any suggestions to make——" He paused expectantly.

De Grandin took his narrow chin between his thumb and forefinger, gazing thoughtfully at the floor; then, "Is there any guest who has not complained of loss?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, we've ten house guests; only those I've mentioned have been annoyed."

"U'm. Perhaps, then, you will be good enough to show us over the

house, *Monsieur;* it is well to know the terrain over which one fights."

FOLLOWING our host we made a brief survey of the establishment. It was a big, rambling building with wide halls, broad staircases and large rooms, unremarkable in any way, save for the lavish manner in which it was furnished, and offering no secret nooks or crannies for nighttime lurkers.

After we had completed our inspection of the upper floors Swearingen led us to the rear section of the house and pushed open a wide oaken door. "This is the art gallery," he announced. "It's the biggest room in the place and—what the devil!" he paused at the entrance, a frown of perplexity and anger gathered between his brows. "By George, this business is ceasing to be a joke!"

We had only to follow the line of his angry glance to see its cause. Against the farther wall hung an ornate gilt frame, some four feet high by three feet wide. About the inner edges of the gilded molding a narrow border of painted canvas adhered, but the picture which the frame had enclosed had obviously been cut away with a less than razor-sharp blade, since raveled bits of the mutilated fabric roughened the lips of the cut.

"This is an outrage; this is infamous!" Swearingen stormed, striding across the gallery and glaring at the tenantless frame. "By George, if I can lay hands on whoever did this I'll prosecute, guest or no guest!"

"And what was the picture which was ravished away, if you please?" de Grandin asked.

"It was a painting of the Virgin Mary—'The Virgin of Eckartsau,' they called it—it cost me five hundred dollars, and——"

"And now it appears to have vanished," the Frenchman supplied dryly. "*Eh bien, Monsieur,* it can not have gone far. Distinctive pictures of the Blessed Virgin identify themselves; the thief can not easily dispose of it and the police will have small trouble tracing it and putting reputable dealers on their guard."

"Yes, yes, of course," Swearingen replied testily, "but this is confoundedly mystifying. My dear man, do you realize everything stolen since this business started is of a religious nature?"

The stare de Grandin returned was as expressionless as the gaze of a china doll. "I have begun to suspect as much, *Monsieur,*" he replied. "Now this, too, would seem—ah? *Cordieu,* Friend Trowbridge, give attention. Do you observe it?"

With what seemed unjustified excitement he had dashed across the wide room to pause beside a piece of sculpture, regarding it with shining eyes, his thin, sensitive nostrils distended, the tips of his tightly waxed diminutive mustache twitching like the whiskers of an eager tom-cat scenting a well-fatted mouse.

It was the top portion of a mediæval altar tomb beside which he halted, the effigy of a recumbent woman executed in what appeared to be Carrara marble lying on an oblong plinth about the chamfered edge of which ran an inscription in Romanesque capitals. The figure was habited from throat to ankle like a Benedictine nun, a leather belt and knotted hempen girdle encircling the slender waist, the hands folded demurely across the breast beneath the scapular. The head, however, instead of being coiffed in a nun's bonnet and wimple was crowned with luxuriant, long hair, smoothly parted in the middle and braided in two long plaits which fell forward over the shoulders and extended nearly to the knees, and on the brow was set a narrow, diadem-like coronet ornamented with a row of ingeniously carved strawberry leaves. It was a beautiful face the old-time sculptor had wrought, the features delicate, regular and classi-

cal, but with an intangible something about them which went beyond mere beauty, something nearly akin to life, something which seemed, subtly, to respond to the gaze of the beholder and attract him unconsciously, whether he would or not.

But it was not on the lovely carven features de Grandin's fascinated gaze rested. His eyes traveled quickly from the slender, curving throat, the gently swelling bosom and delicately rounded knees to the sandaled feet peeping beneath the hem of the monastic gown. Like those of most pietistic figures of its period, the effigy's pedal extremities were represented uncovered save for the parchment soles and narrow crossed straps of *religieuse* sandals. With the fidelity characteristic of the elder craftsmen the carver had shown the feet prolapsed, as was natural when the extensor muscles had lengthened in cadaveric flaccidity, but the seal of death had robbed them of none of their beauty. The heels were narrow, the insteps gracefully arched, the toes long, slender and finger-like, terminating in delicately tapering ends tipped with filbert-shaped nails.

"You see?" the Frenchman asked, reaching out to touch the nearer foot, but halting his finger before it came in contact with the stone.

"Eh?" I queried, puzzled; then, "By Jove, yes!"

Slender as patrician hands, beautifully formed as they were, the statue's feet were anomalies. Each possessed an extra toe inserted between the long, aquiline fourth digit and the little toe.

"Odd that he should have made such a slip; he was so faithful to detail in every other way," I commented.

"U'm, one wonders," de Grandin murmured. "Me, I should not be astonished if his faithfulness persisted, even here, Friend Trowbridge." He shook his head as though to clear his vision, then bent to his knees beside the plinth on which the statue lay, deciphering the inscription cut in the white stone.

Though the effigy was perfect in every way, the letters of the epitaph had been defaced in several places, so we could not read the legend in its entirety. That part still legible presented more of a puzzle than an explanation of the lady's identity.

HIC JACET ELEANORA COMITISSA ARGENT . . .
QVAE OBIIT ANNO CHRISTI MCCX . . .
CVJVS MISEREATVR DEVS

we read.

"Humph," I murmured, "evidently this statue once decorated the tomb of a Countess Eleanor somebody who died sometime in the Thirteenth Century, but——"

"*Regardez-vous*, my friend!" de Grandin's excited comment broke through my reflections. "Observe this, if you please."

Inscribed at the extreme lower edge of the plinth, faint as though scratched with a stylus, was the cryptic notation:

Mal. iii 1

"What make you of that, my friend?" he demanded.

"H'm; the sculptor's signature?" I hazarded.

"*Le bon Dieu* knows," the Frenchman returned with a shrug. "I do not think the sculptor would have signed his work thus—he would have used a chisel, and his letters would have been more regularly formed. However, one guess is as good as another at this time.

"What can you tell us of this, *Monsieur?*" he asked, turning to Swearingen, who stood before his mutilated painting, oblivious of our inspection of the marble.

"Eh?" the other returned. "Oh, that? I don't know much about it. Picked it up at a junk shop in Newark last month. Gloomy sort o' thing, and I wouldn't have bought it if the face hadn't struck me as being rather

pretty. It can't be very valuable; the dealer let me have it for fifty dollars, and I might have gotten it for twenty-five, if I'd held out, I believe. He seemed anxious to get rid of it. Confounded nuisance it is, too. The boys are forever flocking in here and looking at the thing—I caught young Rodman kissing it once, and——"

"*Dieu de Dieu,* do you tell me so?" the Frenchman almost shouted. "Quick, *Monsieur,* you must give me the name of that so generous junkman who sold you this bit of *vertu* so cheaply—right away, immediately, at once!"

"Eh, what's the hurry?" our host demanded. "I don't think——"

"Precisely, exactly, quite so; I am well aware of it, *but I do,*" de Grandin interrupted. "The name and address, at once, if you please, *Monsieur.* And, while we discuss it, when was it the young Rodman embraced this—this statue?"

"H'm; last Friday, I believe, but——"

"Ah? The work was swift. Come, *Monsieur,* I wait the dealer's name."

"Adolph Yellen, Dealer in Antique Furniture, Bric-à-Brac and Objets d'Art," was the legend printed on the rather soiled billhead Swearingen produced in response to de Grandin's insistence.

BORROWING one of the cars with which the garage was well supplied, we set out for Newark post-haste and arrived at the dingy little shop in Polk Street just as the proprietor was about to fasten the gratings before his windows for the night.

"*Holà, mon ami,*" de Grandin cried as he vaulted from the car and approached the stoop-shouldered, bearded shopman, "you are Monsieur Yellen, I make no doubt? If so, I would that you tell us what you know of a certain statue—a piece of carven marble representing a reclining lady—which you sold to Monsieur Swearingen of Lyman's Landing last month."

The little antique dealer regarded his questioner through the surprizingly thick lenses of his horn-rimmed spectacles a moment, then raised his shoulders in a racial shrug. "I nodt know nuttings aboudt her," he returned. "I got her at a auction sale ven der lawyers sell Meestair Pumphrey's t'ings. All I know, I'm glad to be rid from her—she vas onlucky."

"I hope you're not thinking of buying the piece, sir," interrupted a scholarly-looking young man who had been talking with Yellen when we arrived. "Mr. Yellen is quite right, it *is* an unlucky bit of *vertu,* and——"

"Ah, you know something then?" the Frenchman cut in. "*Bon,* say on, *Monsieur,* I listen."

"N-o, I can't say I know anything definite about the statue," the other confessed with a diffident smile, "but I admit having a strong antipathy to it. I'm Jacob Silverstein, Rabbi of the Beth Israel Congregation, and it may be simply the traditional theological dislike for graven images which leads me to dislike this woman's effigy, but I must confess the thing affected me unpleasantly from the moment I saw it. I tried to dissuade Adolph from selling it, and asked him to present it to some museum, or, better still, break it up and throw the pieces into the river, but——"

"One moment, *Monsieur,*" de Grandin cut in. "Have you any definite reason for this so strange dislike for a piece of lifeless stone? If so, I am interested. If not—*parbleu,* in that case, I shall listen to what you say also."

The young Hebrew regarded de Grandin speculatively a moment, as though debating his answer. At length: "You heard Mr. Yellen say the image was unlucky," he replied. "He bought it, as he told you, at the auction of the late Horace Pumphrey's effects. Mr. Pumphrey was a

wealthy eccentric who collected artistic oddities, and this altar-tomb was the last thing he bought. Within a month of its acquisition he began to manifest such unmistakable symptoms of insanity that the authorities would have been obliged to put him in restraint had he not been killed by falling from a second-story window of his house. There was some gossip of suicide, but the final verdict was death by misadventure.

"The first time I saw the statue in Mr. Yellen's shop it produced a most unpleasant sensation; rather like that one experiences when looking into a case of snakes at the zoo—you may know you're in no danger, but the ancient human horror of serpents affects your subconscious fears. After that I avoided the statue as much as possible, but once or twice I was obliged to pass it and—it was doubtless a trick of the light falling on the figure's features—it seemed to me the thing smiled with a sort of malicious contempt as I went by."

The rabbi paused, a faint flush mounting in his dark, hard-shaven cheeks. "Perhaps I'm unduly prejudiced," he admitted, "but I've always attributed Sidney's trouble to some malign influence cast by that image. At the time he bought the thing Mr. Yellen had a young man named Sidney Weitzer in his employ, a youth he'd known practically all his life, and one of the most honest and industrious boys I've ever seen. Two months after that statue was brought into his shop Mr. Yellen was obliged to discharge Sidney for stealing—caught him red-handed in a theft. A few nights later a policeman arrested him as he was attempting to burglarize the store."

"U'm," de Grandin nodded sympathetically. "Were your losses great, Monsieur Yellen?"

"Ha, dot boy, he vas a fool as vell as a t'icfer," the little dealer responded emphatically. "Vot you t'ink he stoled? Books—religious books—old Bibles, prayer books, a missal from Italy vid halluf der pages missink, a vorthless old rosary and vooden statue from a saint—der whole lot vasn't vorth terventy tollars, and——"

"Am I to understand he confined himself solely to the theft of worthless religious objects?" de Grandin interrupted.

Mr. Yellen elevated an expressive shoulder. "Dey vas all I had," he rejoined. "I don't buy much religious stoff—dot goes by der richer dealers, but vonce in a vile I get some vid a chob-lot of t'ings. Efferyting of der kind vat vas in der shop he carted avay—Gott knows vat he did vid dem—nobody vid sense vould haf paid him money for dem. Oh, vell," he waved his hand in a gesture of finality, "vat can you expect from a crazy man, anyhow?"

"Crazy——"

"Unfortunately, yes," the rabbi supplied. "When Sidney was brought to trial for his attempted burglary, the only explanation he made for his crime was: 'She made me do it—I had to go to her.' He could not or would not explain who 'she' was, but begged so piteously to be allowed to return to this unknown 'she' that the magistrate committed him for observation. He was later sent to an asylum."

De Grandin's small blue eyes were snapping with suppressed excitement, and on his face was the absorbed, half-puzzled look of one attempting to recall a forgotten tune or a line of verse which eludes the memory.

"This is most odd, *Monsieur,*" he declared. "And you think——"

The rabbi smiled deprecatingly. "It's prejudice, no doubt," he admitted, "but I do connect the statue with Pumphrey's death and Sidney's otherwise inexplicable aberration. While I was traveling through Drôme some years ago I heard an odd story which might almost have applied here. Near Valence there stands

an ancient ruined *château fort,* and the country people tell a gruesome legend of a woman called the 'Silver Countess,' who——"

"*Mort d'un chat! vie d'un coq!*" de Grandin cried. "That is it! Since first I saw her lying so sweetly innocent in her six-toed sleep I have wondered and wondered what the keynote to this melody of mystery is. Now, thanks to you, *Monsieur,* I have it. *Adieu, Messieurs,* you have been of greatest help to us. Friend Trowbridge, it is to hasten, to rush, to fly! Come, make speed; much must be done, and little time remains for the doing."

With a courteous bow to the Jewish gentlemen he pivoted on his heel and fairly dragged me to the waiting car.

"Past a book shop, my friend," he directed as I set the motor going. "We must at once consult a Bible, and all too well I realize we shall find none such at Lyman's Landing!"

I drove slowly through the downtown section, finally located a branch circulating library and paused before it. In a moment de Grandin came out, a small, black-bound volume in his hand. "Attend me, Friend Trowbridge," he commanded, "what is the final book of the Old Testament?"

"U'm," I ransacked my memory for long-forgotten Sunday School teachings, "it's Malachi, isn't it?"

"*Bravo!*" he applauded. "And how would you designate the first verse of the third chapter of that book if you were to write it?" He thrust a pencil and notebook into my hand, then stood waiting expectantly.

Thinking a moment, I scribbled "Mal. iii, 1" on the pad and returned it.

"*Précisément!*" he exulted. "Now think, where have you seen exactly such a citation within the last five hours?"

"U'm," I knit my brows in thought. Then, "Why that's what we found scratched on the plinth of that effigy at Lyman's Landing!" I exclaimed. "Don't you remember, we wondered if it could have been the sculptor's signature, and——"

"I remember most perfectly—now," he cut in. "Regard this, if you please. The first verse of that chapter begins: '*Behold, I will send my messenger.*' What does it mean?"

"Mean? It doesn't make sense," I returned. "Who scratched that Scriptural allusion on that tomb, and what message was it intended to convey?"

"One wonders," he admitted with a shrug. "Of one thing I am sure, however. The lady of the six toes, who lies in Monsieur Swearingen's house at Lyman's Landing, is undoubtlessly the 'Silver Countess' of whom *Monsieur le Rabbin* told us. Consider, does not the epitaph beneath her carven likeness proclaim, '*Hic jacet Eleanora comitissa,*' which is to say, 'Here lies the Countess Eleanor?' And though the terminal of the next word is defaced, yet we have left to us the letters a-r-g-e-n-t, which undoubtlessly might be completed as *argentum,* signifying silver in the Latin tongue. *N'est-ce-pas?*"

"H'm, I dare say," I agreed, "but who the deuce was this Silver Countess, and what was it she did?"

"I do not recall," he admitted ruefully. "One little head, my friend, is too small to hold the great multitude of legends concerning wicked ladies of the past. However, at earliest chance I shall ask my friend Dr. Jacoby, of the *Musée Métropolitain. Cordieu*"—he gave a short chuckle—"that man, he knows every bit of scandalous gossip in the world, provided the events took place not later than the Fifteenth Century!"

THE long summer twilight had darkened into dusk by the time we reached Lyman's Landing and the wide, tree-shaded lawn was beautiful as a picture executed in mosaics of silver and onyx with the alternating high lights of moonlight and patches

of shadow. "My word," I exclaimed enthusiastically, "it's lovely, isn't it? Like a bit of fairyland."

"*Ha*, fairyland, yes," the Frenchman agreed with a vigorous nod. "Like fairyland where pixies seek to lure mortals to their doom and Morgaine la Fée queens it over her court of succubi."

We had barely time to change for dinner before the meal was announced, and course followed heavy course, red and white, dry and sweet wines accompanying the viands, and cognac smooth as oil, mild as springtime and potent as winter complementing coffee, which was served on the terrace.

If the events of the afternoon had given him ground for worry, de Grandin failed to show it at dinner. He ate like a teamster, drank like a sailor, and, judging from the peals of laughter which came from the group of young people surrounding him, jested like Rabelais throughout the meal.

Soon after dessert he excused himself and went to Swearingen's private office, whence he put through a number of urgent telephone calls.

Our host and I sat alone on the terrace while the youngsters danced in the main hall, and I was weary of evading his pointed questions concerning our activities in solving the case when diversion came. With whoops of laughter the young folks came charging from the house arrayed in scanty bathing-attire, and dashed pell-mell across the lawn to the sunken swimming-pool.

"Little fools," Swearingen grumbled, "some of them will get hurt, jumping into that frog-pond after dark like that. I'd have had the thing drained and filled in long ago if Margery hadn't put up such a protest. I tell you, Trowbridge——"

"Mr. Swearingen, oh, Mr. Swearingen!" the excited hail came across the lawn. "Look what we found in the pool, sir!"

A young man ran toward us, his companions trailing after him. Before him, holding it high, that it might not drag on the turf, he bore an oblong of canvas, cracked from rough handling and spoiled with water, but unmistakably an oil painting, the missing *Virgin of Eckartsau*. "I dived right into it," he exclaimed breathlessly, holding his find aloft for our inspection. "Freddy Boerum hopped into the pool ahead of me, and kicked the water up quite a bit, and this thing must have come loose from the bottom where it lay and floated up, for I stuck my face right into it when I went off the springboard."

"Who the devil put it there?" Swearingen demanded angrily. "When I missed that picture this afternoon I thought perhaps we had a thief in the crowd; now I think we've been entertaining a lunatic—nobody in his right mind would cut a picture from its frame and sink it in the pool for a joke; that sort of thing's not done."

"You may have right, my friend" —Jules de Grandin stepped from the house and examined the salvaged painting critically—"but it seems to have been accomplished, nevertheless. Tell me, is it possible for one to drain your swimming-pond?"

"Yes, we can cut off the intake and open the drain, but——"

"Then I would urgently suggest we do so without delay," the Frenchman cut in. "Who knows what more lies beneath the waters?"

At Swearingen's order the gardener shut off the supply line and opened the pool's outlet. In a few minutes the last drop of water went gushing down the waste-pipe with a gurgling mutter, and the rays of half a dozen electric torches focused on the shining wet tiles with which the tank was paved. When ten minutes' inspection failed to produce anything more unusual than a few waterlogged leaves in the pool, de Grandin borrowed a flashlight from one of the

boys and clambered into the shallow end of the bath. Proceeding cautiously over the slippery tiles, he walked the length of the tank, darting his light here and there. At length, when he had almost completed a circuit of the enclosure, he called, "To me, Friend Trowbridge; behold, I have found them."

Leaning over the curb of the pool, I extended my hand, grasped the Frenchman's fingers and assisted him to the lawn. Under his arm he pressed three small, water-soaked books, their bindings warped and peeling, their pages reduced to pulpy ruin, but the gilt letters still adhering to their backs still proclaiming them the Book of Common Prayer, the New Testament and "Elegant Extracts of Devotional Poetry." As he regained the ground the Frenchman thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and brought forth a small, beautifully carved rosary of coral beads.

"They were securely wedged beneath the ledge which circles the bottom of the pond," he explained. "Had we not drained the bath, there is small doubt they would have lain there until time and water had completely destroyed them. *Eh bien,* it is lucky the young people decided on their swimming-party tonight, and thus agitated the water before the hidden objects were rendered unidentifiable."

"But who could have done it?—who would do such a silly, senseless thing?" the guests chorused.

"If there's a practical joker here, he's guilty of mighty bad taste," Swearingen declared, looking angrily at the circle of wondering youngsters.

No sign of guilt was apparent in any of the puzzled young faces, and after another glare our host turned again to de Grandin. "Have you any suggestions concerning it?" he asked.

"Several," the other returned coolly, "but this is neither the time nor place for them. If there is no better plan, I advise we return to the house."

I WAS on the point of disrobing when de Grandin's gesture stayed me. "Not yet, my friend," he denied. "There will be small sleep for us this night, I fear. Let us wait till all is still, then go to our posts."

"Our posts? What——"

"Precisely. I think we shall see a counter-assault by the enemy before long. She will not permit that we triumph thus. You, my friend, I would have take station in the art gallery, and stop anyone, whoever it be, who enters there, or having entered, attempts departure. Me, I shall patrol the corridors, for I have a feeling there will be that abroad in the house which I greatly desire to see. Come, the house is silent; let us go."

Quietly as a pair of wandering ghosts we descended the stairs to the ground floor, and I took up my position just inside the entrance of the gallery where I would be screened from sight of anyone entering the apartment, but could see all corners of the room at once, and instantly detect the slightest touch upon the door-knob from outside.

The big house was still as a mausoleum. Save for the distant, subdued hoot of a motor horn as a car flashed along the highway, and the faint, eery echo of a screech-owl's cry from the wooded land across the river, no sound disturbed the breathless quiet. The wide, low-ceiled room was ghostly-dark, only an occasional beam of moonlight entering the tall, leaded windows as the trees outside shifted their boughs in the light summer breeze. The dim forms of the glass-fronted cases filled with bric-à-brac, the shadowy outlines of framed pictures on the walls and the wraith-like gleams of the marbles through the darkness gave the place a curiously haunted appearance, and I shivered slightly in spite of myself as my vigil

lengthened from quarter-hours to halves, and from halves to hours. Somewhere in the main hall a big floor-clock struck three slow, deliberate notes, seconded by the staccato triple beat of smaller timepieces; an owl hooted closer to the house; and a freshening early-morning breeze stirred the trees outside, unveiling the windows momentarily and letting in long, oblique rays of moonlight which splashed like silver foam across the waxed, unearpeted boards of the gallery floor. I swept the apartment with an appraising stare and settled deeper in my chair, muttering a complaint at the task de Grandin had set me. "Foolishness," I mumbled. "Who ever heard of putting a death-watch over a piece of statuary? Silliest thing I ever——" Insensibly, my head nodded forward, and my tired eyes blinked slowly shut.

How long I napped I do not know. It might have been half an hour, though the chances are it was less. In any event, I straightened up in unbidden wakefulness, my senses alert with that sudden tenseness which is our heritage from cave-dwelling ancestors whose lives depended on instant and full awakening.

The silver light slanted more strongly through the windows, the shadows of the room stood out in stronger contrast. Somewhere, something was moving softly and slowly, creeping with subtle silence, like a panther stalking its prey. My glance swept the room, noting the ordered rows of glass-doored cases, the hanging pictures, the pallid marble of the statues—ah! I half rose from my seat, my fingers gripping the chair arms, my eyes straining through the gloom toward the corner where the funerary effigy of the Countess Eleanor lay. The pale marble image seemed to have grown, to have raised itself from its slab, to move with a slow, deliberate motion. There was a half-seen vision of a pair of carmine lips, of large, lustrous eyes, a curving throat of tawny cream—a mist of white, fine linen.

"Who's there?" I challenged, leaping up and grasping the length of rubber-coated telephone cable de Grandin had handed me as a weapon. "Stand where you are, or——" my fingers felt along the wall, seeking the electric switch.

A gurgling, contemptuous titter, a flouncing of swirling white draperies, the creak of a window-hinge. Next moment the light flooded on, and I stared blinkingly about the empty room.

"Trowbridge, Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, are you within—are you awake?" de Grandin's low, anxious hail sounded from the hall, and the door swung open behind me. "What has happened—is all well—did you see anything?" he demanded, noting the blazing lights and my wondering expression.

"No—yes—I don't know!" I answered in a single breath. "I must have fallen asleep and dreamed someone was here, but when I turned on the lights the place was empty. It *must* have been a dream."

"Indeed?" he replied coldly. "And did you dream yonder window open?" He indicated the swinging casement with a wave of his hand. "And—*pitié de Dieu!*—did you also dream *this?*"

With a cat-like bound he crossed the floor and bent above the supine statue of the Countess, his lips drawn back from his small, white teeth in a grimace which was half sardonic smile, half snarl. I joined him, glanced once at the marble figure, then fell back with a horrified cry. The statue's stony, carven lips were *smeared with fresh, red blood!*

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "What——"

"What, indeed?" he assented. "Attend me. There is much, and very potent, evil loose in this house, my friend. Tonight, before I took up my

watch, I did smear the floor before Monsieur Rodman's door with toilet powder, that anyone who passed in or out might surely leave his foot-tracks on the carpet of the hall. Thereafter I did make regular rounds of the house, watching now at this door, now at that, for I knew not whom to suspect, or even what to suspect him of. Returning through the hall before the young Rodman's door, I found distinct footprints on the carpet, and let myself in without ado. *Parbleu,* it was very well I did so! The poor lad lay weltering in his blood, for another wound had been pierced in his throat, and yet another in his breast above his heart. I bandaged him forthwith, for his case was urgent, then came to acquaint you with my discovery. Behold, I see you blinking like an owl at midday, and the casement window open, and this"—he pointed to the statue's gory mouth—"to mock at my precautions. Furthermore, my good, alert friend, but a few seconds before I came, something—*something white* and of about the height of Madame la Comtesse—entered this room before me. Come, let us go up."

"But——" I expostulated.

"*Non,*" he cut me off. "Let us first see the footprints, if you please."

In the upper hall, beginning directly before young Rodman's door and growing fainter as they receded, was a perfectly defined set of footprints. Someone, walking barefoot, had stepped into the film of talcum powder before the sill, and traced the white dust on the red carpet. I dropped to my knees, examined them carefully, then turned puzzled, incredulous eyes on my friend's face. The tracks were short and narrow—women's footprints—and *each was of a six-toed foot.*

"What—who?" I began, but he silenced me with a bleak smile. "Madame la Comtesse, who lies with blood-stained mouth downstairs, had feet which might have made such tracks," he reminded me.

"But that's absurd—impossible!" I denied. "A stone image can't walk, you know. It's against the course of nature."

"Ha, and is it natural that an image should drink blood?" he rejoined with sarcastic mildness. "No matter. We shall not argue, my friend. There is yet another explanation. Come."

Turning abruptly, he led me down the corridor, paused before a white-enameled door and listened intently at the keyhole, then, grasping the knob firmly, pushed the door open and tiptoed across the threshold, motioning me to follow.

We stood in a darkened bedroom, evidently one occupied by a female guest, for a rumpled silk evening frock was draped carelessly across a chair-back, and below the rocker lay a pair of satin evening pumps and a pair of web-like silk stockings turned half-way inside out, as though their wearer had discarded them hastily.

The Frenchman laid a finger against my lips, enjoining me to silence, then dropped to his knees and crept on all fours across the heavily carpeted floor. I followed, feeling extraordinarily foolish as I did so, but all thought of the ridiculous figure I cut was banished from my mind as de Grandin came to a pause beside the bed and cautiously rose to his knees, sweeping the graceful girlish form on the couch with the swift beam of his flashlight. She was clothed in a filmy nightrobe of Philippine cotton, and neither sheet nor blanket lay over her. It was with difficulty I stifled a gasp of amazement as the flashlight shone on her little, naked feet, for along their plantar region was a thin film of talcum powder; and, as de Grandin's fingers closed round my arm to compel attention, I counted an extra toe on each foot, not a rudimentary, de-

formed digit, but one as perfectly formed as its companions, joining the instep between the bases of the fourth and little toes.

Once more the little Frenchman signaled my attention; then, bending above the sleeping girl, he flashed his light quickly over her face. *Her lips were crimson with fresh blood!*

"*Donc, mon vieux,* are you convinced?" he asked in a low voice.

I made a silencing gesture, but he shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "No need for caution," he returned. "Observe her respiration."

I listened intently a moment, then nodded understanding. Her inhalations gradually became faster and deeper, then slowly ebbed to shallowness and hesitancy—a perfect Cheyne-Stokes cycle. Unquestionably, the girl lay in a light coma.

"What—what does it mean?" I gasped as he piloted me through the door.

"*Parbleu,* I damn think it is the explanation of that notation on that fiendish statue below," he murmured. "Does it not say, '*Behold, I will send my messenger*'? And, *cordieu,* have we not just gazed upon the messenger in person, and no one else?"

"But——"

"*Ah bah,* let us not stand here like two gossiping fishwives. Come with me and I shall show you something, or Jules de Grandin is more mistaken than he thinks."

SILENTLY as a pair of thieves in the night we descended the stairs, and entered the art gallery. For a moment he paused at the threshold, his small blue eyes surveying the room. "Is it not somewhat chill in here, my friend?" he asked irrelevantly as he strode across the apartment.

"Chilly?" I asked, amazed at the question.

"*Mais oui,* have I not said it?"

"It is rather cool," I admitted, "but what that has to do——"

"*Parbleu,* I shall show you," he promised. "Be good enough to place your hand on Madame la Comtesse's brow, if you please."

I bent above the statue and rested my finger tips on the smooth, carven marble features, but drew them away with a sharp exclamation. The lifeless stone was as warm as human flesh, velvet-smooth and slightly humid to the hand, as though it were the cuticle of a living woman I touched, not the marble of an insensate statue.

From the farther wall of the gallery de Grandin reached down an Eleventh Century mace, an uncouth weapon consisting of a shaft of forged iron terminating in a metal sphere almost as large as a coconut studded with angular iron teeth. The thing, designed to crush through tough plate armor and batter mail-protected skulls to splinters, was fully two stone in weight, and seemed grotesquely cumbersome in the little Frenchman's dainty hands, but he swung it to his shoulder as a wood-chopper might bear his ax and marched resolutely toward me between the cases of artistic oddities which Swearingen had collected.

"Whatever are you up to?" I demanded as he approached.

"I shall complete the work the liberated peasants left unfinished in '93," he answered, pausing before the statue and raising his ponderous weapon. "Madame la Comtesse, your reign is at an end; no longer will you send your messengers before you; no more will innocent ones go forth to gather nourishment for your vileness!" He swung the iron weapon in a wide arc above his head.

"Good heavens, man—don't!" I cried, seizing the iron bludgeon's shaft and deflecting the blow he was about to deliver.

He turned on me, his face almost livid. "What, you too, my friend?" he asked, a sort of wondering pity in his tone.

"It—it seems like sacrilege," I protested. "She's too beautiful—see,

anyone would think she realized what you're about, and begged for mercy!"

It was true. Though the marble lids lay placidly above the eyes, the effigy's face was somehow subtly altered, and about the sweet, full-lipped mouth was an expression of pleading, almost as though the image were about to speak and beseech the furious little man to stay his hand.

"*Cordieu,* you have right," he panted, "and thus do I requite her pleadings! Mercy, *ha?* Such mercy as she has shown to others shall be her portion this night!" The iron weapon fairly whistled as he brought it down with a devastating thud, striking the lovely upturned face full upon the blood-stained lips.

Again and yet again the mace descended, a third blow followed the second and a fourth the third. Great drops of perspiration started out upon de Grandin's white brow, and I could see his limbs were shaking with mingled emotion and fatigue, but the inexorable pounding of his hammer did not stop. Chip after chip of the marble fell away. The beautiful face was a horrid, featureless parody of its former self, devoid of life-like semblance as a dead face far gone in putrefaction; the lovely, tapering hands, crossed demurely on the quiet breast, were hewn to fragments and strewn about the floor; the exquisite, six-toed feet were ruthlessly beaten from their rounded ankles and smashed to rubble, and still he swung the desecrating mace, hewing, crushing, splintering, obliterating every likeness to humanity in the statue and leaving only a hideous waste of desolation where the lovely simulacrum had been a few minutes before.

At length he rested from his vandalism and leaned panting on the helve of his weapon. "*Adieu, Madame la Comtesse,*" he muttered. "*Adieu pour ce monde et pour l'éternité! Parbleu,*" he dabbed his forehead with a lavender-bordered white silk handkerchief, "it was no child's-play, that; that damnation statue was tougher than the devil's own conscience. Yes. One requires time to regain one's breath."

"Why did you do it?" I asked reproachfully. "It was one of the most beautiful things I ever saw, and the idea of your venting your rage on it because that little she-devil upstairs——"

"*Zut!*" he shut me off. "Speak not so of the innocent instrument, my friend. Would you sue the pen for libel because some assassin of character writes with it a letter which blasts a reputation? Consider this, if you please." Stooping, he retrieved a scrap of marble from the floor, a bit of one of the shapely hands his mace had smashed so ruthlessly, and thrust it at me. "Examine it, closely, *mon vieux,*" he commanded. "Tell me what it is you see."

I turned the pitiful relic between my fingers, holding it against the strong white light from the ceiling chandelier. "Wh—why, it *can't* be!" I stammered.

"Nevertheless, it is," he responded matter-of-factly. "With your own eyes you see it; can you deny it with your lips?"

Running through the texture of the broken marble as though soaked into the very grain of the stone was a ruddy stain, tinting the broken, rough-edged fragment almost the shade of living flesh, and offering a warm, moist feel to my shaking, incredulous fingers.

"But how——" I began.

"How, indeed?" he interrupted. "On her lips you saw the stain of warm, new blood. On her cheeks you felt the flush of reviving pseudo-life; even in her stone veins you see the vital fluid. Is it not so?"

"Yes, of course; but——"

"No buts, if you please, my friend. Rather come with me and observe a further wonder; one I am sure has come to pass."

Dreading some fresh horror, I followed him to the near-by telephone and waited in a fever of apprehension while he called a number.

"*Allo,*" he challenged when a sleepy central girl had put through his connection, "is this the State Asylum for the Criminal Insane? *Bon.* I am Dr. Jules de Grandin, of Paris and Harrisonville, and I inquire concerning the condition of an inmate, one Sidney Weitzer. Yes, if you will be good enough." To me he ordered: "Take up the adjoining receiver, my friend; I would have you hear the message we receive."

"Hello," a voice came faintly across the wire after we had waited a few moments, "this is Dr. Butterworth. I've had charge of Weitzer for the last four hours. He's been unusually violent, and we had to strap him up about half-past ten."

"Ah?" de Grandin breathed. "And now?"

"Dam' queer," the other replied. "Not five minutes ago he stopped raving and came out of the delirium like a person waking from a dream. Didn't know where he was, or who we were, or what it was all about. Almost had a fit when he found out he was here—couldn't remember being arrested for burglary or anything leading up to his commitment. It's too soon to start bragging, but I'm hanged if I don't think the poor kid's regained his sanity. Damndest thing I ever saw."

"Precisely, you speak truer than you realize, my friend," de Grandin returned as he hung up. To me he observed: "You see, my friend? You realize what it is you heard?"

"No, I'm hanged if I do," I admitted. "I'm glad the poor boy's regained his reason, but I can't see what connection his recovery has with your childishness in smashing that lovely statue, and——"

"No matter," he interrupted with a smile. "Let us sleep, now. To-morrow is another day, and tomorrow I shall tell you all."

JULES DE GRANDIN lighted a fresh cigarette and regarded Walker Swearingen and me through the hovering cloud of acrid, blue-gray smoke. "It is but a fitting together of seemingly unrelated incidents, of seeing that which is pertinent, and understanding what you see," he assured us with a smile. "Me, I am clever, sometimes. I am not often to be fooled; when my luck holds, I always succeed. Consider:

"Yesterday afternoon, as Friend Trowbridge and I crossed your lawn, Monsieur Swearingen, we passed Mademoiselle Hatchcot, who lay resting in a hammock after a strenuous game of tennis. As we went by she did remove her shoe, and as she wore no stockings, I was permitted a glimpse of her so lovely foot. Behold, though that glance was scarcely longer than the winking of an eye, it was sufficient for me to observe that she possessed six toes where there should have been but five. Yes.

"Now, Jules de Grandin has traveled much and always kept his eyes and ears widely open; he has thus picked up much learning where the average man would not. He knows, by example, that among all primitive peoples, and among those not so primitive, who still retain the traditions of the elder days, the possession of an extra finger or toe is regarded as more than a merely physical freak. Certainly. Those having extra digits may be either peculiarly sensitive to good forces or evil, the angels may more readily commune with them; *hélas*, the same holds true of demons and fiends, even to the Arch-Fiend himself, Dulac, the great English painter, in recognition of this widespread belief, has depicted both Circe and Salome, who were representatives of the less good principles, with six-toed feet. Assuredly.

"What your case was, I did not

know, Monsieur Swearingen, for you had wisely failed to set on paper that which, had it reached other hands than mine, might have made you a laughing-stock; but that you had a problem of more than ordinary interest and complication I suspected from your note of invitation, and here, even as I entered the grounds, I find a young lady with six toes, one who therefore has great potentialties either for good or evil. 'Ha,' I say to me, 'I shall remember this young six-toed lady; she are undoubtlessly connected in some manner with that which troubles the house.'

"You then told me of the apparently trifling thefts which had annoyed you, and of the odd manner in which a young man guest have been wounded. 'This are strange,' I think. 'Who would steal sacred things of small money-value, and why? Also, have we, perchance, a vampire—a nocturnal sucker of human blood—in our midst?' I do not know, but I think it unlikely. The vampire, he has a well-defined technique. His unnatural nature have equipped him with sharp, cruel teeth, it are these he uses to obtain the blood of his victims; this young Monsieur Rodman have been wounded with steel, that are not the vampire's way. We must look further. But yes.

"Then you show us that statue of Madame la Comtesse. As I gaze on her loveliness—*le bon Dieu* witness she were very lovely, too!—what do I behold? *Cordieu,* six toes on each of her feet; no less! This are strange, this are extraordinary, this are truly amazing. It pulls the long arm of coincidence till its joints crack beneath the strain; here we have two women, one of flesh, one of stone, and each possesses two more toes than ordinary. Yes, it is so.

"Anon you tell me that the young men of your house party are most greatly smitten with this beauteous statue, that one of them have kissed her on the lips; that he is the same who have been twice already wounded and lost much blood. Now, the olden legends are perhaps only fairy-tales to frighten children; still, where great clouds of smoke arise, there also is some fire, and the legends of old are but the embalmed remains of ancient fact. From the early days come tales of men who wrought their own ruin by embracing images of evil association, by placing nuptial rings on graven fingers, or otherwise acting the lover toward them. This I remember as I try in vain to decipher the meaning of the inscription on the base of the monument. I ask you where you obtained the image, for its history interests me much.

"To Monsieur Yellen I go forthwith, and there I find a most excellent young man, a Hebrew gentleman who ministers to a congregation of that sublime faith and who have traveled much abroad. He tells me how he could not like your statue, for all its beauty, and how he once heard a tale in Drôme concerning a wicked woman popularly known as the Silver Countess. That is sufficient to prime my memory. I recall that I, too, have heard parts of that tale, and I remember the cryptogram of the inscription, 'Mal iii, I,' concerning which Friend Trowbridge and I have argued. It is now plain to me. To test the soundness of my theory I purchase a small Bible and have Friend Trowbridge write down the Scriptural citation which I read. He writes exactly as I have anticipated, and in the Bible I find the first verse of the third chapter of the Book of Malachi begins, *'Behold, I will send my messenger*——' It is enough. I am on the right trail, though my memory of the Silver Countess' story is most hazy.

"To your home I return and reach my good friend, Professor Jacoby, by telephone. He knows everything to be known about the Middle Ages. The liaison of Lancelot and Guinevere is commonest backstairs gossip to him,

and the other peccadilloes with which that period is spiced are as familiar to him as the latest scandal are to the readers of your American tabloid press.

"'I begin my discourse diplomatically. 'Jacoby, my friend,' I say to him, 'I think I have discovered the funerary monument of the famous Silver Countess. Would you that I procure it for your museum?'

"'By the great spoon of horn, I would not!' he tells me. 'If you have found that statue, be advised by me and do one of two things, possibly both. Smash her to a thousand fragments, or run as though the devil in person pursued you.'

"'Ha, do you tell me so?' I ask to know. 'Say on, my friend. I would know more of this so interesting lady.'

"'Thereupon he tells me a tale to make the flesh creep upon your back and the hair to bristle on your head.

"In the old days when such things were, there lived the woman called the Countess Eleanor, sometimes known as the Silver One or the Silver Countess. Her beauty was so great that no man could look into her face without becoming subject to her will. Her skin was like new milk, her lips like old wine, her eyes like the summer sky at midday, her hair like moonlight shining on burnished silver —hence her sobriquet—and her heart —*mordieu*, the seventh subcellar of hell were bright as morning beside its blackness. The Middle Ages are sometimes foolishly called the beautiful Age of Faith by shallow theologians, my friends. Ah, were they to call them the golden age of vileness and sorcery, they would speak with equal truth. The Devil had not yet been laughed out of court then; he were a most real person, and many harsh bargains did he drive with the sons and daughters of men at that time. But certainly, the Faustus legend has more than small foundation in truth, I think. So it was that this so beautiful woman sold herself, both body and soul, to the Evil One, and right faithfully did she carry out her Master's commands. Ere yet she was fourteen years of age she wed a doughty knight and went with him to live in his strong *château fort* near Valence, and there she queened it over the countryside as though she had been the king's own wife.

"Anon her lord journeyed to the wars, but returning to his home sore afflicted with wounds, he entered his wife's bower at night, only to find her in the foul embrace of an incubus—a demon lover with whom she had long time consorted by stealth.

"Had he then deprived her of life, he would have given her but her due, but her beautiful eyes looked on him and her lovely, false lips called his name—*tiens*, there is no fool like a strong man in love, my friends.

"Away he went again, once his wounds were healed, but this time he took particular pains his lady should not be false. About her he set a constant watch of women and pages and hardy men-at-arms, with strictest orders to let her out of their sight for not one little minute.

"Now, among the hangers-on at the castle was a talented youth, a sculptor and carver in wood, stone and ivory, whom the Countess annexed as her personal slave. In the living flesh she posed for him to make her funerary monument, and so faithfully did he execute his work that all who saw it vowed he must have used evil arts thus to reproduce his model so faithfully.

"THE statue was placed in the castle chapel with all due ceremony, beneath a window where the moon's bright rays should fall on it. Upon the testimony of the watchers who never let her from their sight we have the tale that the Countess Eleanor would often creep into the chapel and lay herself prone upon her effigy, her warm bosom to its cold breast, her warm red lips against its carven

mouth, what time her tears coursed down her cheeks and washed the marble visage of the statue. It was not right, it was unholy, but it was her whim, and she was lady and mistress of the castle. What could they do?

"But soon her eccentric behavior was forgotten in the horror which came upon the household. One by one her guardians failed and pined away, though no man knew their malady, and when at last the vigils were relaxed for want of those to keep them, the Countess Eleanor made high holiday with imps and satyrs, incubi and devils, and all the multitudinous company not yet made fast in hell.

"It could not last. In those days the Church frowned on such practises, and what the Church disapproved was soon crushed beneath her iron discipline. At a specially convened tribunal the Lady Eleanor was put upon her trial for witchcraft and diabolism, convicted and sentenced to be hanged and burned like any common witch.

"Upon the night before her execution she had an interview with him who made her effigy. Next morning, when her sinful body had been strangled and burned to ashes, the young sculptor could not be found, but evil continued unabated at the château. One by one the holy relics vanished from the chapel, by degrees the other monuments in the place were defaced; at last only the image of the Countess Eleanor lay perfect and unblemished, keeping lonely vigil in the mortuary chapel.

"Upon a night a hideous thing with blazing eyes and long and matted hair, clothed in filthy rags and howling like a beast, attacked a peasant plowman at fall of dusk hard by the castle. The peasant defended himself so lustily that his assailant, sore smitten, was fain to run away, but the plowman pursued, and roused the castle servants. And when they searched the château they found the vanished sculptor prone upon the statue of the wicked countess, his lips to hers, and on the living man's mouth and on the stone woman's lips was a smear of blood. The wretch had opened his own veins, sucked forth his blood, then with his mouth all reeking, caressed the image of the woman he adored in death.

"*Eh bien*, there were ways of making those who did not wish to speak tell all they knew in those days, and under torture the fellow confessed how he had entered into a compact with his leman to steal forth the sacred objects from the chapel, and thereafter rend and slay those whom he met, and carry their blood in his mouth to her cold, sculptured lips for her refreshment.

"In 1358, when the Jacques revolted, the castle was stormed and taken, but for some reason the Silver Countess' tomb was left inviolate. Again, in 1793, when every vestige of kingcraft was swept from France, a guard of Republican soldiers was sent to the château to wreck it further, but save to deface the epitaph upon the tomb, the citizens did no hurt to the beautiful and evil effigy.

"For years the ruins bore an evil name. No traveler who knew the road would venture near them after nightfall, but strange wayfarers, benighted near the castle, sometimes took shelter there, and death or madnes was their portion.

"The last known instance of the tragic history was during the war of France's betrayal, in 1871. In autumn of that year a foraging party of Uhlans was benighted near the castle and took shelter in the ancient chapel, the only portion of the building still under roof.

"Next morning a company of *francs-tireurs* found them — three dead, the other dying. The dying man related how at midnight he had wakened with the pain of a sword-cut

in his breast, and seen his corporal lapping flowing blood from the severed throat of a comrade, then, with his dripping mouth, kissing and caressing the lips of a statue which lay stark and white in the midnight moonlight. With his pistol he had shot his officer, and the attitude of the man's body bore witness that the wounded man's tale was true; for across the marble statue lay the dead, his bloody lips fast-hung to those of the Countess Eleanor.

"'*Parbleu,*' I say when Professor Jacoby have done, 'you have most greatly enlightened me, my friend. Now much is plain which made no seeming sense before. Now I understand how came it that Monsieur Pumphrey went mad directly he had bought that statue; now I understand why poor Sidney Weitzer went crazy and rifled his master's shop of every holy thing, and why he sought to break and enter like a common burglar. Whom the Silver Countess enthralls she first makes mad, then criminal. He must commit abominations, then seal the contract of his iniquity with a blood-stained kiss.'

"And then I think that this six-toed young lady have also had a part in the business of the monkey which have plagued this house. Yes.

"Last night I set a trap. When I have found Mademoiselle Hatchcot's footprints in the hall, I know young Rodman's room have been visited again, and I enter his apartment without ceremony. It were well I did so, for he is sorely wounded, and bleeding much. I repair him and rush to the gallery below, where I find fresh blood—Monsieur Rodman's blood undoubtlessly—upon the statue's lips. It are the sign and seal of evil service rendered by her servant. '*Behold, I will send my messenger,*' was her parting gibe to humanity, carved on her tomb by that poor young sculptor whose soul she later stole away with her evil loveliness.

"'*Madame la Comtesse,*' I tell her, 'I damn believe you have sent your last messenger to wreak your will on those you hate. Jules de Grandin have found you!'

"*Alors,* to Mademoiselle Hatchcot's chamber I repair, and on her little, six-toed feet I find the marks of powder, but, more important, on her lips I see new blood which she have carried to the wicked one who lies all still and cold below. 'It are sufficient,' I say to me. 'At once, immediately, right away, I shall do the needful.' And so I did.

"Against Friend Trowbridge's protestations I take a tool of iron and break the wicked image in pieces like a potter's vessel. Yes. Beneath the hammering of my mace she are completely smashed, ruined; abolished, *pardieu!*

"Immediately I call the hospital for the insane and ascertain that at the moment I broke the Countess' statue I also broke the madness which held the poor young Sidney in slavery. The final link has been fitted into the chain, and all is done. Your so strange case is solved, *Monsieur.*"

"But what about the Hatchcot girl?" demanded Swearingen.

"What about the telephone through which you send a message?" de Grandin countered. "She is wholly innocent. By accident she wears six toes; entirely without fault she has been made servant to a creature of extreme wickedness. Her mental state while in her mistress' service was like that of one in anesthesia. She knows nothing, remembers nothing, has no personal fault at all. I pray you, say nothing to her of this business. It would break her heart."

"And you expect me to believe this?" Swearingen scoffed.

The Frenchman lifted his shoulders in an indifferent shrug. "It is a matter of no moment what you believe, *Monsieur,*" he returned. "I have dis-

posed of the case, according to your request. Tomorrow, or the next day, perhaps the day following, I shall render you my bill. No matter, that can wait. At present I greatly desire that you will let me have a drink."

THE ROC

IN THE *Arabian Nights*, when Sinbad the Sailor was left behind by his ship on an uninhabited island, he went exploring and presently found towering above him a huge white ball. He could not guess what it was until the sky was suddenly darkened by the wings of a bird of unbelievable size, which settled down and sat on the ball. He then guessed this to be that great bird of prey called the roc, sitting on its egg. He tied himself to the bird's leg (which was as big as the trunk of a large tree), and when the roc arose again, it carried him off to another land. At another time some merchants with whom Sinbad was traveling found a young roc just hatching out of the egg, and insisted on killing it with their axes and cutting off slices, which they cooked and ate. Later, while they were sailing away in their ship, the two parent rocs appeared, each with a great stone in its talons. The first stone, when dropped, missed the ship, but the second crushed and sank it.

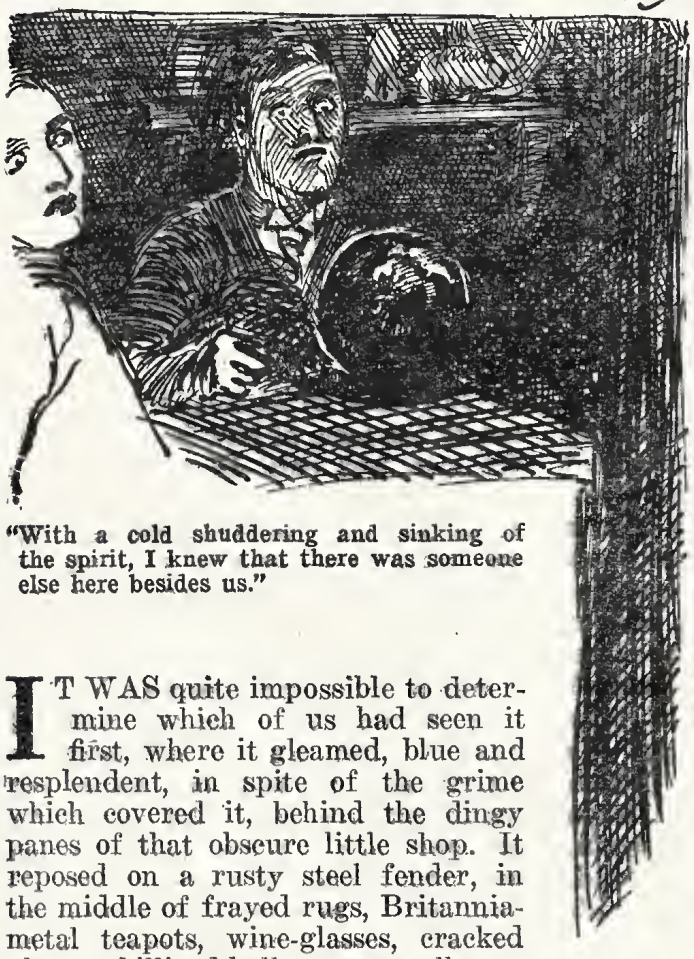
Again and again the roc appears in these tales. It was no mere invention of the moment, for all Oriental peoples, including the Jews of centuries ago, believed firmly in its existence. Naturalists today try to trace the stories to those giant extinct birds, the æpyornis, which lived in Madagascar, or the moa, of New Zealand. But the moa was only 14 feet tall, and the egg of the æpyornis only 12 to 14 inches long; whereas the old Jewish rabbinical writers tell how a roc's eggs once fell out of a nest and broke, covering a whole village and 300 cedar trees with a gluey mass.

Marco Polo, the Thirteenth Century traveler, said that the Khan of Tartary once sent a messenger to Madagascar to find out something about the roc, and the messenger brought back a roc's feather which was nine spans (81 inches) long, its quill two palms (6 or 8 inches) in circumference. Even Captain Cook, the Eighteenth Century explorer, claimed to have found on an island near Australia a nest 26 feet in circumference and 3 feet high, built of sticks on the ground. This, it is said, might have been a roc's nest, though rather small.

An old Jewish legend said that some sailors saw a roc standing immersed up to its knee-joint in a river, and thinking the water could not be very deep, prepared to go in bathing; but a voice came out of Heaven, saying, "Step not in there, for a carpenter dropped his ax there seven years ago, and it hath not yet reached the bottom."

The WITCH-BALL

By E. F. Benson



"With a cold shuddering and sinking of the spirit, I knew that there was someone else here besides us."

IT WAS quite impossible to determine which of us had seen it first, where it gleamed, blue and resplendent, in spite of the grime which covered it, behind the dingy panes of that obscure little shop. It reposed on a rusty steel fender, in the middle of frayed rugs, Britannia-metal teapots, wine-glasses, cracked plates, billiard-balls, stamp-albums, glass beads, pewter mugs, odd volumes of obsolete fiction and history primers at twopence each, false teeth with coral-colored gums, all the depressing miscellany of an unprosperous curiosity shop. . . . Simultaneously and without a word we stepped off the pavement and hurried across the street.

"But is it to be yours or mine?" I said to Margery. "Who saw it first?"

Margery's good sense is always admirable. "Oh, what does that matter at present?" she said. "The only important thing just now is that it should be ours. We'll settle the other point when we've got it!"

She opened the door of the shop, setting a bell jangling, and, after an anxious pause made hideous to us both by the frightful thought that before we had secured it, somebody else might come in on the same quest, a slow step creaked down the stairs within, and the proprietor, eyeing us suspiciously, entered.

"I should like to look at that glass ball in your window," said Margery quite calmly. "How much is it?"

Ten shillings were all that he asked for it, and though Margery dearly loves a little genteel chaffering, she made no attempt to get it cheapened or to examine it closely for cracks, for it must be securely ours without delay: so a minute later we emerged again with the witch-ball wrapped up in a greasy leaf of antique newspaper. Though our intention had been to go for a stroll through the streets of Tillingham till lunch-time on this hot May morning, there was no thought of that now, and we went straight back to my house a few hundred yards distant with our treasure.

"I shall go and wash it at once," she said, "and then we'll settle whose it is."

She hurried upstairs, while I went on into the bookroom where, but a few minutes before, we had left her husband, Hugh Kingwood.

"Back again?" he asked. "I expected you would be. Far too hot to walk on such a morning."

"Oh, that's not why we're back," said I. "We found something in a shop which we had to buy and bring straight home. A witch-ball, the most wonderful ever seen: Margery's washing it. And then we've got to settle whose it is, for we saw it absolutely at the same moment."

Presently she came downstairs with it. Even when it had been covered with dust and dirt it had gleamed like blue fire veiled beneath a scum of ashes, but now that she had washed it, it burned with a far intenser splendor. It was of uncommon size, more than a foot in diameter, and of soft sapphire blue, and it reflected, gorgeously steeped in its own color, the rounded image of the room. Fireplace and bookcases, ceiling and floor, sofa and piano all appeared there with that magical distortion which convex reflection gives, and all was dyed deep in that superb hue. And the window was there with curved sashes, and where at the top of it was a blink of sky, that was of some luminous turquoise tint such as shines in dreams or in fairyland. And yet though these pictures were only a matter of a reflecting surface, it was like looking into fathomless depths of blue: the vision seemed to sink into that shining globe, and dive further and further into gulfs of azure. Witch-balls have always had for me some mysterious charm, born perhaps of the memories of twinkling Christmas trees in childhood, but here there was something more: something of intrinsic lure. . . .

There arose the agonizing question of ownership: Margery, as a matter of fact, had actually paid for it, but, being one of the few women I know who is a thorough gentleman, she spurned so feminine an argument, merely calling attention to her nobility.

"I can't think what's to be done," she said. "I shall go into a decline unless I have it, but then no doubt you will, too. And as far as I can judge we saw it on the same tick of time. Hughie, what's the fair thing?"

Hugh did not answer, and I saw he was looking stedfastly into the witch-ball with some sort of rapt detachment. Then, as if with an effort, he shook himself free of it.

"What a marvelous piece!" he said. "But I don't like it, Margery: there's something uncanny about it. Let Dick have it."

"If that's all you've got to suggest," she remarked severely, "you might as well not have said anything."

She turned from him with scorn.

"I can only see one way of settling it," she said to me, "and that's by the foolish device of tossing up. If I believed that you saw it a fraction of a second before me, I promise you that I should let you have it. But by chance we saw it absolutely together: so let's go to chance again."

I could think of nothing better, so I spun a shilling and Margery called "Heads." I opened my hand, and the witch-ball was hers.

"Rapture!" she said. "Oh, Dick, how I sympathize with you!"

"I don't," said Hugh. "I congratulate you. There's something queer about it."

THE two of them, Margery a first cousin of mine, and Hugh one of my oldest friends, were staying with me in this small Sussex town, for a week or ten days. There was a spell of blazing weather, and though golf had been an intended diversion, it was really impossible to play in this smiting and windless heat. The sky was as brass above and the ground as brass beneath, and instead we often motored down to the shore for a bathe in the afternoon, with some subsequent expedition vaguely in view such as a visit to Bodiam or Dungeness, or merely drove about the lanes and byways of the Romney Marsh and the wooded inland. We did not very much care whether we got anywhere in particular, for the hedgerows were brimming with pink rose-blossom and the woods still milky-green with the foliage of the spring. We lighted on adorable little villages nestling in folds of the downs, on hammer-ponds fringed with cotton-rush, from the edge of which mallards got up with a clangor of wings, or on the wide levels of the marsh we came to antique and solitary farmhouses of timber and rough-cast with glowing gardens set in red-brick walls, and Margery would declare that life was but a tinkling cymbal when lived in such a place within sound of the sea and within sight of Rye.

It was the pearl of them all that we passed that afternoon on our ramble; a plot of garden rather wild and overgrown fronted the road, and on the tall iron gate in the wall was affixed a board to announce that it was to be sold or let unfurnished. Margery, of course, insisted on our stopping, the gate ground on rusty hinges, and we went up the paved garden-walk to the house. But the door was locked, and no knockings or ringings produced any response, and we had to get an idea of the interior by peering through the unblinded windows. The rooms were absolutely empty, but the paint and papering looked fairly fresh, and it was clear that the house had not been untenanted for long. The flower-garden through which we had passed and the kitchen-garden at the back afforded similar evidence, for neither had been neglected for long: vegetables, for instance, peas and beans, had been sown in the spring though not staked. The kitchen garden was unwalled, and had only a wooden paling between it and the marsh-meadows, and along a side of it ran one of the drainage dikes that intersect the marsh. Along the raised edge of it had been planted, evidently not more than a year or two ago, a row of young willows: these had prospered, and now formed a screen for the garden against the prevailing southwesterly winds. At one end of them was a tool-shed, the roof of which was beginning to sag, at the other a couple of derelict beehives. It certainly was an entrancing retreat for any who cared to live the solitary life, and it was sad to see a house and garden full of such charm and tranquillity beginning to suffer from want of care.

"Oh, how I long for it!" said Margery. "Hughie, how happy we should be here! You would start very early every morning to go up to town, driving into Rye, not more than four miles I should think, and then a mere two hours and a half in the train. What's five hours every day in the train with a nice drive at each end?"

"Delicious!" said Hugh, "especially on a winter evening with a southwesterly gale blowing. And I don't like the feel of the place. There's something sinister."

"Darling, you're rather hard to please," said Margery. "You didn't like my witch-ball, and now you don't like my adorable house. How blissful

I should be living here with my witch-ball!"

He shook his head. "No, you wouldn't," he said. "There's something here: you would feel it before long."

"Don't be spooky," said Margery.

She could not tear herself away without another look through the ground-floor windows of the house, and meantime Hugh and I strolled down to the gate where we had left the motor. In spite of his almost savagely practical mind in matters of business, he has always had some queer clairvoyant power of perception, which every now and then pushes its way to the surface of his mind. He sees odd scenes which prove to be actual, if he looks in a crystal, whenever he will consent to try the experiment, but his conscious mind fights shy of this gift, and he will not often attempt to exercise it. Another queer thing is that if I look into the crystal at which he is gazing, I see there what he sees, though I might crystal-gaze day and night by myself without seeing any tremor or shadow appear there. But we have tested this odd joint phenomenon many times and always successfully, so that it seems proved that he can establish some telepathic communication with me though I have no independent power myself, and that this conjunction of my mind with his helps his own power. It occurred to me now, when he said that there was "something here," that some blink of this psychic perception had come to him. I asked him whether it was so.

"Yes, there is something here," he said, "which I don't like a bit. There's a wicked unquiet atmosphere in the kitchen garden particularly; it's steeped in horror of some sort. And the queer thing is that Margery's witch-ball gives me the same feeling: no, I don't mean a similar feeling, but the same. I think you and I will have to gaze, and see if we can get at anything."

It so happened that Margery went early to bed that night, and as soon as she had gone, Hugh and I moved in from the garden where we had been sitting after dinner for the sake of coolness into the bookroom, where stood the witch-ball. His notion was to make it his crystal, and see if by gazing into it any manifestation appeared. We turned out all the lights but one so that the reflection should not be distracting, and now in the dimmer illumination the witch-ball lost its sapphire hue, precisely as the stone itself does by artificial light, and seemed black. Just one point of radiance gleamed in it in the middle of this pool of clear, deep darkness.

We must have sat there long before anything came through to Hugh's vision, for the house had grown quiet, and the church clock had twice chimed a quarter-hour before he spoke.

"Look: something is coming," he said in that dreamy monotonous voice, which always betokens that he is in that state of half-trance which precedes vision. "Tell me what you see."

There was something seething far down in the dark pool of the ball: it was as if clear black water was beginning to boil from below and break into bubbles. These bubbles bursting on the surface were slightly luminous, and as they multiplied the darkness cleared as if with the approach of dawn on night. It grew rapidly brighter.

"There's a line of house-roofs against the sky," I said, "and in front of the house there's a garden. There's a row of trees on the left, young trees, and they're blowing about in a wind. And there's the figure of a woman . . . . I can't make it out: she seems to be lying under the trees—among their roots, I mean, not on the ground beside them. And there's a tool-shed close by——"

Suddenly, with a gasp of my breath, I recognized the scene. It was the kitchen garden of the house in the marsh which we had visited that afternoon. In the shock which came with this recognition my attention was jerked away from its quiet scrutiny, and in the instant the vision had vanished. I was staring into a black witch-ball with one point of light in it.

Hugh was still gazing into it with wide eyes.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I see all that. But she's moving now: she's standing upright: and now she's gone. Ah, the whole thing has vanished. Yes, of course it was the place we saw. But who was the woman? We didn't see her this afternoon. And where has she gone?"

He raised his head, and peered out, as if trying to focus something, through the open door into the garden, and though following his eyes I saw nothing but the deep dusk there, I knew that there was some presence, which had come out of the witch-ball, and was hovering there watching us.

"Hugh, what are you looking at?" I said sharply.

It was with an evident effort that he detached his gaze, and turned it back into the room.

"I don't know," he said. "But there was someone there, though I saw nothing. We won't try it again tonight, because I've got the jumps, but tomorrow we must sit again. Don't tell Margery anything about it."

I CAME down next morning after an uneasy night, during which again and again I thought I heard some stir of movement in the house, to find that Margery had already breakfasted and gone out. Presently she came back in a state of high heat and excitement.

"I have been clever," she said. "I've found all about the adorable house. A certain Mr. Woolaby is the owner of it, and two years ago his wife disappeared and was never traced. He lived on there alone till this spring, when he made up his mind to sell the house, and had an auction of all its contents."

"Where did you learn all this?" I asked.

"From the house agent whose name and address was on the board there. He lives just down the street. And the name of the house is Beetles. Just Beetles! Did you ever hear of anything so attractive!"

"Beetles would smell as sweet——" I began.

"No, it wouldn't. And then I was cleverer still, and you'll never guess where I went next. It was an inspiration."

"Do you want me to have an inspiration, too?" I asked. "Or say that I've no idea?"

"No: have an inspiration if you can," said Margery.

"You went to the shop where we bought the witch-ball yesterday, and found that it came from the sale at Beetles."

"Heavens! We're both inspired," said Margery. "Quite right. But how did you think of that?"

"Well, you mentioned an auction."

"Very brilliant," she said. "And now, as I know you hate talking at breakfast, I shall go away and look at my witch-ball. Isn't it odd that I said I should be so happy living at Beetles with it, and that now I find that it came from there?"

THOUGH I was late this morning, Hugh was later, and it was not for some minutes after Margery had gone that he appeared. He helped himself to food, and propped up a daily paper in front of his place, but after staring at it in silence, whisked it away again.

"There are odd things happening," he said. "Something, or somebody, came out of the witch-ball last night—at least that's how I felt it—and stood at the open door of the book-

room. I saw nothing any more than you did, but it was there. And it's been here ever since; it was moving about the house all last night, and it wants something of us."

"I felt it was here, too," I said.

"Well, we've got to give it a chance," he said. "We must sit again, and now that it has established some sort of communication it will probably manifest itself more clearly. I believe that the figure we first saw lying underneath the trees is what is wanting us. So we must sit again, and there's no use in waiting till the evening. Let's have a gaze at the ball this morning when Margery's occupied elsewhere. I fancy there's something horrible behind it all, and I don't want her to know about it."

THAT was easily arranged, for Margery soon announced her intention of sketching in one of the old streets of the town, and as soon as she had gone, we went into the bookroom again. There on a table near the door into the garden stood the witch-ball, a huge blazing sapphire, and once more we prepared to gaze. There were disturbing cross-lights, and we drew the curtains over all the windows, so that the illumination came only from the open garden-door. . . . But though it was daylight now we had hardly begun to concentrate when the color faded from the ball, and presently I was gazing into thick clear darkness, depth upon depth, in which, as last night, there seethed the luminous bubbles, and there emerged again the house we had seen, and the kitchen garden, and the row of willows. But now there was no figure of a woman lying there beneath them, and I wondered where she had gone. I told Hugh what I was seeing, and he nodded without speaking. . . .

And then with some cold shuddering and sinking of the spirit, I knew that there was someone else here besides us, and a dimming of the light which came in from the garden-door made me look up. Just outside, in the hot bright sunshine there stood the figure of a woman. She was dressed in some sort of cloak, mold-stained and rent and decaying, and snails and fibers of root clung to it. One hand was wrapped in it, holding it to her, but the other with the arm up to the elbow was visible: here and there the bone showed; here and there lumps of rotting flesh dangled from it. Above, thick rusty-colored hair drooped on each side of what had been a face. But now the flesh had fallen away from the mouth, exposing the rows of discolored teeth; the nose was an earth-stained stump of cartilage; and the eye-sockets were empty. The decay and horror of it all were vividly illuminated by the sunlight.

Something froze within me: I could only look. And then the specter advanced to the open door as if it was about to step into the room. At that my panic-stricken nerves broke through their paralysis of terror, and I screamed out. . . . And, behold, there was nothing there but the wash of hot summer sun over the garden, and the breeze that stirred in the myrtle-bush by the door.

NOW the inspector of police at Tillingham is a friend of mine, and ten minutes later Hugh and I were closeted with him.

"Not burglary or anything of that sort, I hope," he said genially, as we sat down.

"No, nothing of the kind," I said. "But there were just a couple of questions my friend and I wanted to ask you. I fancy that about two years ago Mrs. Woolaby disappeared from her husband's house down in the marsh."

"That's correct," he said. "And her husband continued living there till the spring of this year, when he had an auction of his furniture, and put the house up for sale."

"And has anything ever been heard of Mrs. Woolaby?" I asked.

"Never a word: not a trace has been seen of her since she disappeared. Most mysterious thing. Has either of you gentlemen got anything to tell me about her?"

"Was search made for her in the neighborhood of the house?" asked Hugh.

"Certainly, sir. The dikes were dragged in case she had fallen into one, for there was foggy weather, and if she had lost her memory and gone wandering, she might have slipped in and been drowned. But there wasn't much else to search, for it's a bare bit of land, with no woods anywhere near."

"We were there yesterday," I said. "There's a kitchen garden adjoining the house and on one side of it a row of young willows, planted evidently not very long ago. My friend and I both believe that if you dig under them at the end which adjoins the tool-house, you may learn something about Mrs. Woolaby's disappearance."

The inspector stared at us a moment in silence.

"Can you give me any reason for your believing that?" he asked.

"Nothing that would carry any weight with you," said Hugh. "But we're both fearfully serious about it. You hardly imagine, I suppose, that we're trying a hoax on you."

He sat there a moment longer, looking from one to the other of us, and then got up.

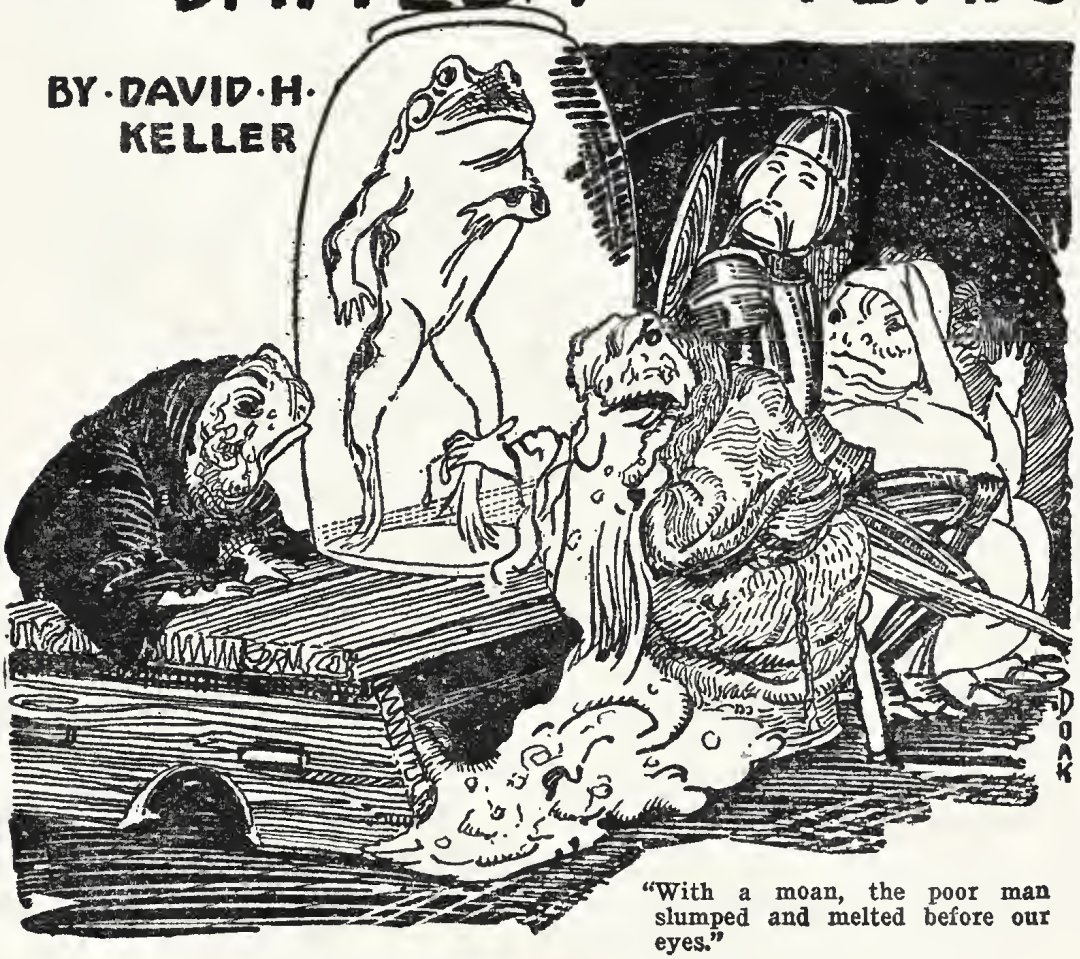
"I should like to know more," he said, "but if you don't mean to tell me, there it is. I'm bound to look into any information given me. I expect what you gentlemen mean is that her body will be found there, though I can't tell why you think so. Below the willows along the kitchen garden, and at the end by the tool-shed, I think you said. I'll let you know at once if anything is discovered."

A few hours later I was called to the telephone. The inspector wished to tell me that the body of a woman had been found at the place indicated. A couple of days later an inquest was held, and her identity established.

For several days, and more than once a day, Hugh and I gazed into the witch-ball. But never again did we see that black boiling-up of something within it, which presently disclosed the row of willows and what had lain beneath, nor did any apparition again manifest itself. It had been used, I think we must suppose, by some occult and mysterious agency to perform a certain office, and had now given forth the perilous stuff with which it was charged. It hangs still, a blue and radiant splendor, in Margery's sitting-room, and sometimes she almost makes up her mind to give it me, but has never yet quite scaled those heights of altruism. The sequel of the discovery of the body of Mrs. Woolaby I need not recount, for I am sure it is familiar to all those who take an interest in murder trials.

The BATTLE of the TOADS

BY·DAVID·H·KELLER



"With a moan, the poor man slumped and melted before our eyes."

MY FIRST thought of the monk was, "He looks like a toad!" My second thought was, "But, mayhap, he will be of use to me in becoming the Overlord of Cornwall."

For some years I had been obsessed with this desire, to become the ruler of this strange land. Odd longings had led me to foreign lands, and there I had seen things and performed acts, the telling of which made ordinary stay-at-homes gape with astonishment. Now, with the education that results only from such adventuresome activity, I felt that it was time for me to settle down and become a somebody among the landed gentry of the British Isles. Learning that there was no great man of outstanding merit in that part of the world known as Cornwall, I felt that opportunity knocked at my door; so I journeyed to Cornwall.

That journeying, perforce, was slow. My charger, spavined, aged, thin and blind of one eye, made difficult work of carrying me and my armor. In fact, on the third day after entering the new land that in the future I was to rule over, this nag showed his profound indifference to my ambitions by allowing me to find him dead when I awoke by his side in the dark forest. It being impossible for even a man of my great

strength to make much headway on foot, carrying a complete set of harness, including lance, mace, great-sword and shield, I sorrowfully placed much of my treasures in a pile under some leaves and stone, and journeyed on with a dagger in my belt and my so-heavy sword and shield pounding my back at every step.

So I came to the castle of the Abbé Rousseau. Of course, he should have been living in a monastery with other priests; in fact, a man of his name had no business in Cornwall at all, at all, as his name in every way was French. I made up my mind that when I became Overlord of the country, such irregularities should be given particular attention. Yet, at that time, I was in need of shelter and food and a warm place by the fire; so I was not inclined to state openly my views concerning foreigners. In very truth, some of the natives might rightly have called me an outlander myself; which, in a way, was true, as I could hardly speak their language, and in another way was not true, as I intended to become their Overlord (though they did not know this latter fact during the first few weeks of my stay in Cornwall).

The Abbé lived in a pile of ruins that might be called, by courtesy, a castle. Though the place was a rather hopeless mess of fallen stone, still it was a tough nut to crack, and I suppose that I should still be outside the walls had I not been able to convince the Abbé, by the use of my most excellent Latin and French, that I was a man of culture, meant him no harm, and was in sore need of the hospitality and refreshments that he could offer me.

Finally he opened a little door and let me in.

It was twilight; he had his face partly covered with a hood; the pine split that he carried was small and smoking; so, for more reasons than one, I did not see his face till I arrived with him in front of a large fire that blazed in the great hall. Leaving me there, he wended him into the shadows, where he found and brought to me a well-gnawed joint of meat, some hard bread and a bottle of sour wine. On this banquet I regaled myself with the eagerness born of hunger, rather than with the enjoyment of an epicurean.

And after I had eaten all that there was to eat I thanked my host. Now, for the first time, I saw his face. In worn velvets he stood before the fire, warming his withered shins and ivory hands. Those hands, dead white, with large blue veins coursing over them; those hands, with long, hungry fingers and uncut nails, caused me to shiver, for the fingers moved in aimless fashion, and as though alive and independent of the man that they were grown to; which was a thought that so far I had never had of the fingers of any man whom I had ever seen.

But strangest of all, and far more soul-racking to me, was the sight of the man's face. Of course, it was the face of a man. It was easy to tell that it was a man who had admitted me and fed me and now stood before the fire, ready to talk to me; I bitterly told myself that I was a fool to think otherwise of one who had so hospitably entertained me; yet there was something about that face, so intermittently illumined by the dancing shadows from the fluttering flames—there was something about that face that chilled me and made me hurriedly clutch at the gold crucifix hung around my neck—for there was something about the face of the man that made me think of a toad.

The lips were thin, bloodless, tightly compressed, and stretched wide across a face that was remarkable for the receding forehead and shrunken cheeks. The skin was like parchment, thin parchment of a slightly green tinting — and now and then, as the Abbé stood there in silent meditation, he breathed into his closed mouth and

puffed out those thin cheeks like a fish-bladder, and then he looked more like a frog than ever.

Of course, I could not say a word in regard to it. A Christian knight, who pretends to be a gentleman, does not eat the meat of a stranger and accept his hospitality and then repay him by telling him how very much like a frog he looks. At least, that was not the way that I acted in such emergencies; yet there was no harm in my thinking, and I certainly thought hard.

Then the Abbé asked me who I was and how I was hight and what I was doing, wayfaring in Cornwall; to all which questions I made answers that had a great deal of the truth in them, though I was naturally unwilling to confide in him as far as my desire to become Overlord of the land was concerned. He seemed to be well pleased with all that I had to say, and more and more he teetered on his feet, which were longer than the feet of most men, and faster and faster he puffed out his cheeks, breaking into my remarks with a strange puffing of wind, which, to my excited fancy, sounded rather like the croak-croak-croak of bullfrogs at the breeding season. Then, when I came to an end, he told me of himself.

"Fair sir, who say you are Cecil, son of James, son of David, son of John, and even back as far as the son of Saint Christopher, you have come to Cornwall in good time, and the moment of your arrival in this wild land is indeed opportune. Of course, I am not a man of Cornwall, nor are these friends of mine you will see here tonight. Some of us are from France, and again there are some from Bohemia, and a few from the far lands beyond the deserts of Tartary, but we are all brothers, bound together by ties of blood and desire, and held fast by a blood-oath and a great ambition, which will be soon disclosed to you. Yet, while we all excel in brains and chicanery and knowledge, weird and deadly, yet none of us is skilled in arms and the use of weapons of offense and defense, and this is not due to any lack of bravery on our part—oh! believe me, fair sir, when I say that it is not due to any lack of bravery on our part, but, rather, to the possession of certain defects which prevent us from the brave art of war that most men delight in. So we gain our ends by other means, but tonight we must have a man who will fight for us, if there be need of fighting, and though I hope that such will not be the case, still, there may be need of fighting—yes, there is no doubt that there will be use for a sharp sword, though it would be so nice if you could use your dagger."

"'Oh! as for that," I replied, "I can use either one that is the most needed. Personally, I prefer the two-handed sword that I carry on my back, but, perhaps, if there is not much room, and the light is not the best, the dagger would be the weapon of choice. Now, in my previous work with giants, I always felt that the sword was the best, because there always came a time when it was necessary to carve off their heads, and, of course, that is slow work with a dagger. Yet, in a little mêlée that I had with a one-eyed dragon in a cave on the Canary Isle I obtained much satisfaction in blinding him with one stroke of the dagger and the next moment the point found his heart. You would have enjoyed that little fight, Abbé, and I am sure that had you seen it, you would have full confidence in my ability to handle any emergency that might arise tonight."

The Abbé smiled. "I like you. On my word, I like you. I am so impressed with you that I am almost tempted to ask you to become one of the Brethren. That may come later on. But to the point of my tale. We are gathered here tonight to witness the overcoming of one of our greatest and most troublesome enemies. For

centuries he has outwitted us and caused us grief. More than one brother has come to his death through the evil machinations of this fiend. But at last we have outwitted him, and tonight we are going to kill him. Naturally, when he dies his power will come to us, and, with that additional power, there is no telling to what heights of fame the Brethren will rise. We will kill him. For centuries he has boasted of his immortality, of his greatness, of his inability to be harmed; yet tonight we will kill him.

"I misspoke myself. We will not kill him. *I will do it.* That is what pleases me so. All of us are powerful, but I am just a little stronger than the others of the Brethren. So I am going to kill this enemy, and when I do so I will rule the men who are associated with me. I will rule them and also all men on this earth, and, perhaps, the men and women on other earths. I long to go into space, to conquer other stars than this we live on.

"So, tonight we will do this. I have this man in a glass bottle. By craft, I induced him to enter the bottle. Once there, he took a new shape — and was it not a pleasant thing that he took the shape he did? It gave me the power and the glory—world without end—no! *no!* NO! Oh, God! I did not intend to say that—not now! Not yet! I am not powerful enough to defy God." His voice sank to a whine. "Not yet, but, perhaps, in a few hours—after I have added to my power the strength of the dead fiend.

"This thing in the bottle can not be killed by poison, by steel, by fire, by water or by the preventing of his breath from reaching his lungs. There is no weapon of sufficient power to destroy him—but tonight he dies—tonight he is inside the glass bottle and I am on the outside, and he has voluntarily assumed the shape that makes it possible for me to kill him—through the glass—do you see? The glass is transparent. He has to look at me! I shall look at him, and in that glance lies his death. Soon he will shrivel, smaller; little by little he will lose his form till he lies, a few drops of slime, a twisted mass of softened bone, at the bottom of the bottle. Then I shall take the stopper out, and oh! the cunning I showed when I selected the stopper! True, it is of glass, but at the center there are ashes from the bones of saints and tears that fell from the eyes of Mary, and a drop of sweat from the brow of one of the saints, and it is thus I hold the fiend a prisoner. Well, since he is dead, the stopper is of no value; so I will remove it and place my mouth on the mouth of the bottle and suck into me the spirit of this dead fiend. No longer having a body to stay in, that spirit will be glad to inhabit me, and thus I will have the strength and power and glory of this fiend from Hell. Rather clever, what?"

"Indeed it is," I replied with a lilt to my voice and a nausea in the pit of me. "But why do you have me in the drama, if my sword and my dagger are useless against this Evil One?"

He came over to me. He walked across the floor, and his feet made no noise on the pavement stones; he slid over to me and ingratiatingly put a hand on my hand and almost a cheek against my cheek, and, as I shivered at the cold touch of him and the clammy skin so cold and dew-wetted, he whined in my ear:

"You are to guard me, fair youth. You who are so brave and full of desire and the longing to be someone before you die, you have been sent here by Fate, in a most opportune moment, for you can guard me when I need that protection. Can not you see the situation? There I am, with my mouth over the mouth of the bottle, all ready to breathe in the spirit that will make me the greatest of all men, living or dead. Suppose

just before I breathe, one of the Brethren (and I particularly suspect the man from Gobi) slips a dagger through my heart and takes my place as the breather-in of this power of greatness. Think how horrible this would be—what a sad ending to all my thoughts of greatness! And I have planned it all and plotted it all and brought it all to pass, and why should I, at the lastward, be denied the right to become Emperor of the Powerful Ones, simply because a Chinese dagger is plunged through my heart? I know you will protect me. Oh! promise that you will be at my back and see that none of the Brethren acts in a manner that is wrong. Will you promise me? And in return I will see that you are paid. What do you wish most? Gold? Power? The love of beautiful women? Let me look into your eyes. Oh, lovely! You are a true brother of mine, for I see that you desire a warm room and safety and a library, with many books therein, and old manuscripts and curious vellums. I will give you all of these. I know you know me for a brother now. We are akin. Ha! What say you if I rewarded by giving you a copy of *Elephantis?* Some think Nero destroyed them all, but I know where one copy is. Will you guard me if I give you all this?"

"I certainly will," I replied, and I was almost enthusiastic.

Of course, there were a few additional things that I wanted, but I thought it unwise to mention these ambitions at this time. I really was not very well acquainted with the Abbé, and, after all, it is not best to be two precipitous in your confidences.

The Abbé seemed pleased. He insisted on shaking hands. He even kissed me, on both cheeks, after the French fashion.

I want to say at this place, that though I have performed many brave acts of derring-do in my short life, such as subduing, single-handed, the Yellow Ant of Fargone, eight feet tall and very deadly in its poison, and facing, undaunted, the Mystic Mere Woman of the Western Sea, still, the bravest moment of my life was when I withstood the frog kiss of the Abbé and did not scream; for I wanted to —oh! how I longed to howl out my fear to the listening owls and scorpions—but, of course, such conduct would be unseemly in the future Overlord of Cornwall. So I smiled, and vowed him my vows and told him to be sure not to forget the copy of *Elephantis,* and would he please refresh me with some more wine before the evening's performance began.

IT WAS later on, an eternity of waiting as far as I was concerned, but perhaps only an hour or so in actual minutes, and then we foregathered in a lower room of the castle. A light shone in that room, though where it came from was only one more thing for me to worry over. Near one wall was a low stool, and in front of it a low table, and on that table something tall and round, covered by a square of velvet tapestry.

The Abbé sat on the stool.

I stood behind him, and my right hand thoughtfully fingered the handle of my favorite dagger, the one carved out of ivory into the semblance of a woman—and the naked blade of her had kissed more than one brave man and foul monster to death.

Then from cracks in the walls—yes! perhaps cracks in the floor, or so it seemed to my fancy—the brethren came into being and gathered in a semicircle around the table, and their faces all seemed frog-like and of a peculiar resemblance to the Abbé—and there they stood, and I said to my knees, "Thou art of the offspring of the loins of Christopher;" and I whispered to my jaws, "In silence, remember the bravery of thy grandsire David." But in spite of these admonitions my knees and my jaws castanetted, to my sore dismay.

From the Abbé came a croak. And in a low chorus came answering croaks from the men who stood before us. I looked into their faces, and in the shifting, shimmering streak of light I saw the same frog-like features that I had been so amazed at seeing in the face of the Abbé.

Before I could properly conceal my astonishment, the Abbé took a chalice from a hole in the wall, and, after doing that which seemed rather indecorous, took it in both hands and gave each of the Brethren a drink from it. What that drink really was I, at that time, could only imagine, but later on, after deep study of Satanism, I frequently shuddered at my narrow escape that night. Fortunately, I was not asked to join with them in the draining of the cup.

Seating himself on the stool back of the table, he bade me take the covering from off the thing that was both tall and round. I did so, and, even as he had told me, there was a large glass bottle with a toad squatting at the bottom. The glass of the vessel was of a wonderful clearness. There was no difficulty in seeing the toad, every part of him, but especially his face and eyes. He faced the Abbé—and the eyes of these two loathsome things, one a demon-frog, and the other a man-frog, glowed ghoulishly at each other.

Meanwhile, the other Brethren, those from Bohemia, and even as far as Gobi, stood silently, and whether they even breathed or not was hard to say, for all I knew was that none of them should come to the back of the Abbé, and also I knew that what I was seeing was a most interesting sight.

The two animals looked at each other. Between them, separated by a glass wall, divided by thousands of years of different thinking, conflicting ambitions, crossed personalities, waged a conflict of the souls, such as rarely has been fought on this earth or any other, as far as I know; though, of course, I do not know all that there is to know about the other planets, or this one either, for that matter.

They glared at each other, each striving for supremacy, each trying to destroy the other. I could not see the eyes of the Abbé, but clearly I saw that the eyes of the imprisoned toad were the eyes of confidence, and supreme confidence.

Did the Abbé see in that what I saw?

He must have! For he tried to escape. Three times he endeavored to arise and flee, and each time he was pulled down to the stool and his face and eyes drawn closer to the face peering at him so derisively through the clear glass wall. Then, with a low moan, the poor man slumped silently forward, and even before our eyes he melted, first into a jelly, and then into a pool of evil, odoriferous slime, running here and there over the floor, but mainly absorbed and held together by the clothing of what had once been called the Abbé Rousseau.

And as he died, the frog grew larger and in some ways changed to a more human shape. He swung slowly around in the bottle, and, in the course of the circle that his eyes made he looked long at each of the Brethren, and after that look, they stood still and moved not, though in the face of each came a gleam of despair.

Now the thing in the bottle looked at me. Well, let him look all he wanted to! I was holding fast to the cross in my bosom and I knew the power of the cork to hold him inside his crystal prison. If I found that there was something to his glare, I could shut my eyes. Of course, I knew that I could shut my eyes whenever I wanted to, if the influence was too baleful.

But those eyes did not try to do me harm. Rather——

The thing stood on his hind legs, and with his hand he made a sign

Shocked beyond measure, I recalled that appeal for help, taught me by other Brethren in the desert of Araby. What could such a creature mean by doing thus? Or was it an accident? A coincidence?

Or had this toad also once been in the Holy Presence in Araby?

Of course, I knew what he wanted.

And, answering his sign, I pulled out the cork.

He came out.

I had expected that, but I was surprized to find that after he had passed through the neck of the bottle he was no longer a toad but rather like a man. Even his face did not look like the face of the Abbé, but had a pleasant countenance that in some way warmed my heart and removed at least a part of my apprehension.

He paid no attention to me, but passed slowly in front of the frog-faced men, and as he passed they moaned in anguish and fell on their knees and faces before him and tried to kiss his feet——

But it was this act of adoration that made me look at his feet, and then I saw that they were hoofed and hairy, like those of a goat.

Finally, he passed all the men, and, turning, made a sign, and at that sign they also turned to slime, and their ending was in all respects like the ending of the Abbé, naught being left on the floor save the clothing that they wore and the toad-juice, oozing out of it.

Then the strange man came to where I was standing, braced gainst the wall to keep me from falling, and he said merrily:

"Well, Cecil, my good fellow and rare sib, how goes the evening?"

"Pleasant enough," I replied; "first with one divertissement and then another. In fact, it has been a most profitable time for me."

"Lad," he said kindly, gripping me by the shoulder, and in that grip was the warmth of human comradeship, "you showed rare discernment in releasing me from that bottle. Of course, I could have broken it, but there was something about your face that pleasured me and I wanted to test you. You also had been in Araby, in the East, and when I asked for help, you gave it. These toad-men have worried me for years. I have tried to destroy them, for they hurt my cause, but never till tonight, and then only by guessing better than they did, could I gather them together in one room. I warrant the Abbé was surprized. He had experimented and killed many a real toad and, of course, he thought that if I was in the guise of a toad, he could kill me; but, of course, I was not a toad, but just in the appearance of one for the time being. Well, that is over with and I can go back to better and happier occupations. But—you really did let me out, and, perhaps, the magic of that cork was stronger than I thought, so I will give you three requests, my dear sib—ask for anything you desire."

My heart was in my mouth, but, none-the-less, I spoke up bravely:

"Give me power to conquer all giants, robbers, knaves, salamanders, ogres, serpents, dragons and all evil things, male and female, on, beneath, and above the earth, wherever and whenever I come into conflict with them."

"That is a lot of power, but I will grant it."

"Then I want a nice castle, with all the furnishings, and, above all, a good library. Long ago there was a book by a woman, called *Elephantis*. I should like to have that book in the library."

The man laughed.

"I heard the Abbé tell you about that book. Do you know that I was well acquainted with that girl? In fact, I put some of the idea about that book into her head. Well, I will fix up this castle in the way you

want it. And, now, what next? Do you desire no temporal power?"

"Certainly," I said, in almost a grandiose manner: "I want to rule in Cornwall."

"That is easy, a mere bagatelle. I think they call such a person the Overlord. Well, I must be going. I wish you a long life and a merry one."

He vanished amid the hooting of owls. All around me stirred new life in stone and plaster, and the reassembling of things that were dust a thousand years. Slowly I walked through the long halls, and here and there a menial bowed low in humble obeisance. On and on I walked, and, finally, into the great hall, and there men-at-arms waited my command, and little pages ran to ask my desires.

Still slowly, and as though in a dream, I mounted the winding stairway and climbed up to the top of the tower. It was a beautiful night, starlighted and with a full moon. There I stood beside a sturdy warrior, standing watch over the safety of the castle.

Far down the winding road came the sound of trumpets and the pleasant music of horses' feet on the hard clay and the sounding clash of sword, falling against armor at each step of the charger. There came the noise of many men and here and there a peal of woman's laughter.

"What means this cavalcade advancing toward my domain?" I gruffly asked the aged warrior, who smiled in the moonlight as he replied:

"These be the great men of Cornwall, with their ladies and knights and all of their men-at-arms, who wend their way through the night to bid you welcome to Cornwall, and humbly acknowledge you as their Overlord."

"That is as it should be," I made reply. "Go and command that all be prepared against their arrival. And when they come, bid the nobles come to me; they will find me—in the library."

Another whimsical adventure of the Overlord of Cornwall will appear in next month's WEIRD TALES

NYCTALOPS

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Ye that see in darkness,
When the moon is drowned
In the coiling fen-mist
Far along the ground—
Ye that see in darkness,
Say, what have ye found?

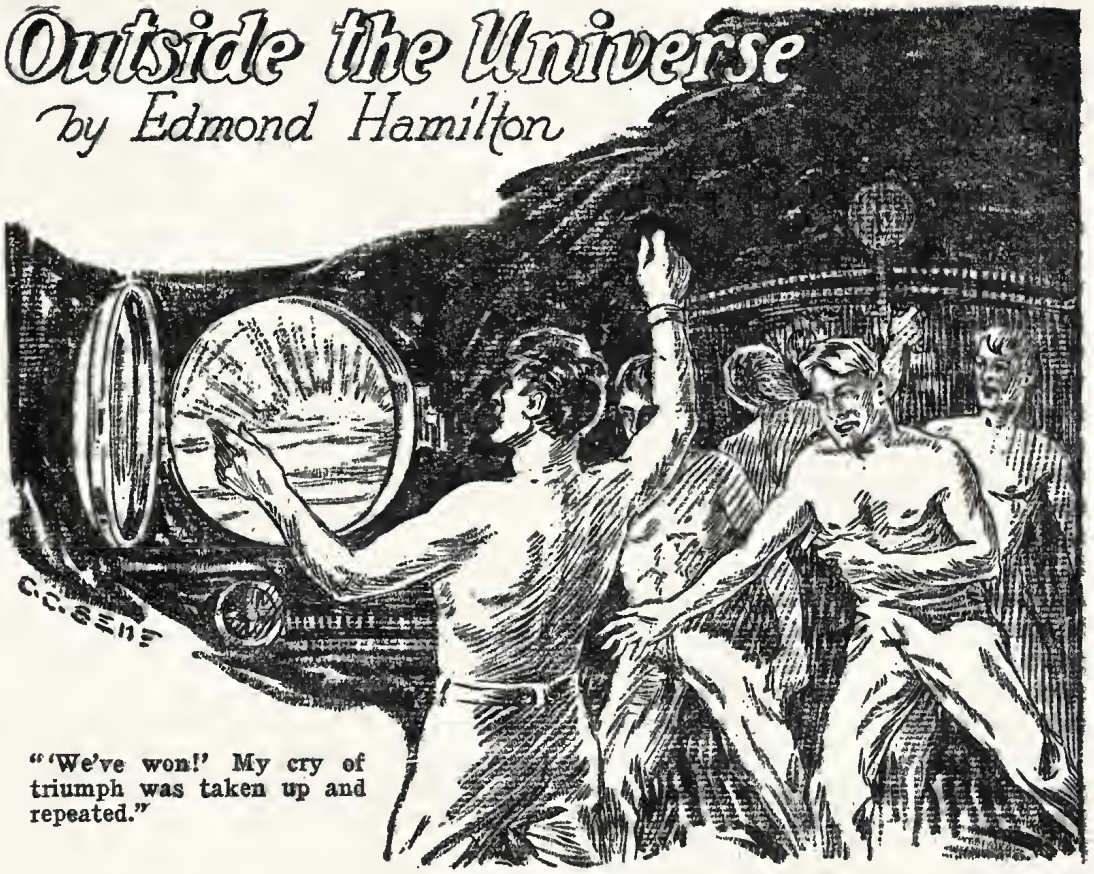
—We have seen strange atoms
Trysting on the air,
The dust of vanished lovers
Long parted in despair,
And dust of flowers that withered
In worlds of otherwhere.

We have seen the nightmares
Winging down the sky,
Bat-like and silent,
To where the sleepers lie;
We have seen the bosoms
Of the succubi.

We have seen fair colors
That dwell not in the light—
Intenser gold and iris
Occult and recondite;
We have seen the black suns
Pouring forth the night.

Outside the Universe

by Edmond Hamilton



"'We've won!' My cry of triumph was taken up and repeated."

The Story Thus Far

A FLEET of serpent-people from a dying universe establish themselves in the worlds of the Cancer cluster and prepare to wipe out all life from our universe. Meantime Dur Nal has been sent to ask aid from the gaseous people of the Andromeda universe. The Andromedan fleet, under Dur Nal's command, starts out for our universe.

14. Back to the Galaxy

STANDING once more in the pilot room, with Jhul Din at the controls beside me, I stared out through the room's fore-windows, straining my vision out through the cosmic darkness that lay about our onward-rushing ships. Far ahead, in that darkness, lay a great, glowing mass of light, lay a radiant, disk-like mass that was resolving itself into a great swarm of brilliant stars as we rushed ever on toward it. In silence we two gazed toward it, for it was our own great galaxy that lay before us, toward which for day upon dragging day, hour upon slow hour, our mighty fleet had rushed on and on.

Now, as we gazed toward it, waxing there in splendor before us in the lightless heavens, I could not but reflect upon how infinitely strange and far a journey had been ours since we had left it, across what infinities of trackless space and upon what alien suns and worlds we had gone. Out into the infinite we had gone for the help that might save our universe, and now out of the infinite we were coming with that help, but two returning where three had gone out. Yet would the help we brought be in time to save our galaxy? Already the great serpent-hordes, we knew, would have reached that galaxy, would have settled upon the suns and worlds of the great Cancer cluster where their vanguard had made for them a base, and there they would be laboring to

complete the colossal death-beam cone with which they could wipe out all the life on all the galaxy's worlds, and all our own great fleet. Could we reach them and conquer them before they completed that great cone of death?

We were within a few score hours of the galaxy ahead, I knew, and as we raced on toward it at the same unvarying velocity, its individual greater stars were burning out more clearly, and the great Cancer cluster was a tiny ball of light at the glowing swarm's edge. Countless billions of miles of space lay between us and that cluster still, I knew, yet it was with something of hope that I watched it as we flashed on. For though inside it the gigantic death-cone might be approaching completion, it would not be long before our vast fleet would be pouring down upon that cluster and upon the serpent-hordes within it, before the great cone could be finished.

As I mused thus, though, there came a low exclamation from Jhul Din, and I turned to find him peering forward into the void with a gaze suddenly tense. Then he had turned toward me and was pointing ahead and to the left into the darkness before us.

"One of the great heat-regions!" he exclaimed.

I gazed out toward it and in a moment I, too, had seen it — a dim, faint little glow of red light, flickering there in the darkness of space before us and to the left. Steadily that little glow was broadening, deepening, though, while our temperature-dials were recording swiftly rising heat outside as we neared it. There was no need to change the course of our fleet, though, since the heat-region lay toward the left and our present course would take us safely past its right edge. It was, perhaps, the same region into which we had blundered on our outward flight, and with interest we watched it as our great fleet shot forward and along its outer edge. It was a vast area of glowing crimson light to our left, now, a terrific furnace of heat-vibrations loosed by the collision of the great ether-currents through which we were plunging. Then, just as our fleet was speeding directly past the mighty, glowing region, along its outer edge, our prow turned slowly toward the left, toward the heat-region, and then we were racing straight inward toward the region's fiery heart!

For an instant I stared in stunned amazement as our ship shifted thus, then whirled around to the Spican. "Jhul Din!" I exclaimed. "The controls! The ship's heading into the heat-region!"

But already he was twisting frantically at the controls, and now he looked up wildly toward me. "The ship doesn't answer the controls!" he cried. "It's heading straight inward—and the ships behind us—!" And he pointed up toward the space-chart, where I saw now that as they rushed on, the thousands of ships behind us were shifting their course like our own and racing into the heat-region after us—racing in like us toward a fiery death! Then, as I gazed stupefied up toward the space-chart, I saw something else, saw that inches to the left of our fleet on the chart, away on the other side of the glowing heat-region from us, there hung a half-thousand ships, that showed on the chart as a close-massed swarm of dots, hanging there motionless. And as I saw them I understood, and with understanding a great shout broke from me.

"Attraction-ships!" I cried. "It's an ambush the serpent-fleet left for us if we followed them! Attraction-ships hanging there on the other side of the heat-region and pulling our ships toward themselves, and toward and into that region!"

With that cry I leapt forward, pressing swiftly a half-dozen of the keys before me, flashing an order for all ships behind to turn at right-angles immediately. Watching the chart, though, I saw that nearly all

our mighty fleet was now moving into the heat-region, caught in the grip of the attraction-ships beyond it. As my order flashed, though, the last ships of our fleet, not more than a thousand in number, had turned immediately, just before they too had raced into the deadly grip, and were rushing clear. Then, as their occupants, too, saw upon the space-charts the attraction-ships hovering beyond the heat-region, I saw them race away and around the great glowing region's edge toward those attraction-ships, while the rest of all our mighty fleet was drawn farther and farther in toward its fiery heart.

All about us now was the faint red glow of the heat-region's outer portions, while swiftly the heat inside our ship was increasing, the air in the pilot room being already almost too warm to breathe. Onward we were being pulled, irresistibly, our walls beginning already to warp and crack beneath the terrific temperatures outside. Gazing forward through the glare of the great region's fiery heart, even as we were swept in toward it, I could make out through our distance-windows a swarm of great, disk-shaped craft hanging beyond the heat-region, the attraction-ships that were pulling us on to doom. Around the great region's edge toward those disk-craft our own thousand escaped ships were flashing, but before ever they could reach them, it seemed, we must perish, so awful had the heat about us become.

Then I saw our thousand ships, racing about the great region's edge, pouring down on the five hundred attraction-ships, rushing down upon them in a mad swooping charge. About ourselves the crimson glare had become all but blinding, and our walls were glowing dull red, the air about us stifling. Already Jhul Din was swaying at the controls beneath that overpowering heat, and as our walls wrenched and cracked again I knew that a moment more of the terrific heat into which we were being pulled would mean the end. But even with that realization I shouted with sudden hope, since through our telemagnifier I had glimpsed one after another of the attraction-ships, far on the other side of the heat-region, reeling and crumpling beneath the force-shafts of our thousand attacking ships!

With every one of those attraction-ships destroyed, the pull that was drawing us into the fiery maelstrom of light and heat was lessening in strength, drawing us ever more slowly forward. But forward still we were moving, pulled by the remaining attraction-ships that fought still desperately against the thousand attacking craft, fighting to the end in their great effort to destroy all our fleet. Into the very inmost flaming heart of the great region we were plunging, now, the whole universe about us seeming but a single thunderous inferno of blood-like light and burning heat. Then, as choking and reeling I felt the ship quiver violently with the approaching end, I saw our thousand or less attacking ships beyond crashing down upon the resisting attraction-ships in one irresistible, headlong charge, and as those great disk-ships, flickering with attractive force, crumpled and vanished beneath that last wild swoop, the pull upon us suddenly relaxed, vanished also. The next moment we had shot the controls sharply over, and our ship and all the ships behind it were shooting out of that hell of heat and light into empty space once more.

Now, as we sped out into the clean cold void of space again, our ships again taking up their formation and heading toward the galaxy, I turned to Jhul Din.

"It's their last attempt to stop us!" I cried. "But we've won clear—nothing can keep us from reaching them now!"

And as our great fleet again shot forward at full speed through the void I stood now no longer tense or anxious

but with the old lust for battle burning up in me stood grimly silent with eyes upon the universe ahead as its glowing mass of stars broadened across the heavens before us. For now, I knew, we had plunged through the last trap, the last delay, by which the serpent-creatures had planned to hold back and destroy us, and now nothing could prevent the final attack toward which we were racing. Our great flight outward from our galaxy for help, our terrible captivity in the dying universe, our mad flight to the Andromeda universe, and our struggle there in which one of us had gone to his end, our sailing for the dying universe with the great Andromedan fleet—all these things were drawing now toward their climax, when we were to pour down on the Cancer cluster and the serpent-creatures there in our great attack.

Humming, throbbing, droning, on through the void our great fleet shot, force-shaft cylinders and other mechanisms clanging now beneath us as our Andromedan crew cleared the decks below for action. With every hour, every moment, the galaxy's stars were shining in greater splendor ahead, a giant belt of suns across the firmament before us. My eyes roved across them, from the yellow splendor of Capella to the white brilliance of Rigel, and then something of emotion rose in me as they shifted to Antares, the great crimson star that had been Korus Kan's home sun. But my eyes hardened again as they turned toward the Cancer cluster, a great ball of suns glowing in resplendent glory at the galaxy's edge before us; for well I knew that upon the thronging worlds of its clustered suns the countless races of the serpent-creatures were gathered now, completing the gigantic death-beam cone with which they would sweep out to annihilate all life in our galaxy save themselves. Straight toward that ball of suns our fleet was leaping, and now Jhul Din turned toward me.

"You're going to drive with our fleet straight into the cluster itself?" he asked, and I nodded grimly.

"It's our only chance," I said. "All the serpent-hordes are on the worlds inside it, and we've got to reach it to destroy that great cone before they finish it."

Now the galaxy's flaring suns filled the heavens before us as our mighty armada raced in through the outer void toward them, the Cancer cluster flaming ahead in all the blinding glory of its gathered suns, those suns appearing on the upper part of our space-chart as a mass of glowing little circles, toward which our vast swarm of ship-dots was speeding. Minutes more of our terrific speed would see us reaching that cluster, I knew, and I turned toward the bank of keys before me to shift our great fleet's mass into a formation that would allow us to pour down into that ball of suns in our great attack. But as I did so, as I reached toward those keys, there came from Jhul Din a cry that held me rigid. He was gazing up toward the space-chart, and pointing.

"Look—in the cluster!" he cried. "Those dots—those ships——!"

I looked swiftly up, saw that among the massed sun-circles of the Cancer cluster, on the chart, were moving a countless number of tiny dots of black, dots that were sweeping outward from and between those sun-circles, ships that were rising from the worlds around them! Out between the cluster's glowing circles they moved, toward us, in thousands, in tens of thousands, until all hung just outside it, a huge swarm of dots as large or larger than our own, a full hundred thousand mighty ships! There in space outside the cluster that vast fleet hung, and then was moving out toward us, a tremendous swarm of dots that was creeping down across the space-chart toward our own upmoving swarm, a mighty armada that was rushing out through the void toward our own inrushing armada! And

as I gazed up at the great chart, stunned, there came from beside me the Spican's cry again.

"It's the serpent-creatures' fleet! They've seen us coming — know we mean to attack the cluster and destroy the cone—and they've massed all their ships and are coming out to meet us!"

15. An Armageddon of Universes

As JHUL DIN'S cry rang out I stood for an instant quite still, my eyes fixed on the chart upon which that great, outrushing swarm was drawing nearer to our own each moment. It was the vast fleet we had seen building in the dying universe, I knew, that had carried all their hordes across the void to our galaxy, to the Cancer cluster, and that they were flinging out now to meet and halt us here in outer space while in that cluster they labored to complete their giant cone of death. Before ever we could attack the cluster, now, we must come to death-grips with the titanic fleet rushing out toward us, a fleet that in size and power was at least as great as our own, and for that instant hope sank within me. Then, as the two fleets rushed ever closer, my doubts dissolved into a fierce determination.

"They've come out for battle," I cried, "and battle we'll give them! A battle this time to the end!"

At the same moment I turned swiftly toward the bank of keys before me. On the space-chart I saw that the serpent-fleet was driving toward us in a long, rectangular formation, our own fleet racing in its pyramid-formation to meet it. Both tremendous armadas were moving at their utmost speeds, toward each other, but as I pressed a key that slackened the speed of our own fleet I saw the other slowing also. Then, in swift succession, I touched other keys, and out from the great mass of our fleet behind me sprang two thousand of our swiftest ships, driving out from our fleet in a great fringe, ahead of us and to each side and above and below; and in a few moments more there leaped from the approaching serpent-armada a similar line of scouts.

Tensely I gazed out into the void as our two fleets neared each other, the scouts of each driving far ahead and to the sides, while steadily our own speed was slowing as I touched one after another of the keys before me. On the space-chart I could see the foremost scout-ships of each fleet almost meeting, now, but even in that moment of suspense the strangeness of my position and of all about me struck home to me—the tremendous gloom of space about us, the blazing suns of our galaxy stretched across the firmament ahead, the Cancer cluster a brilliant ball of close-massed suns among them, the two tremendous fleets that were rushing through the void toward each other. With every moment the speed of the oncoming serpent-fleet was slackening, though, and smoothly that of our own was lessening as my fingers moved upon the bank of keys before me that held the control of all our hundred thousand ships. Surely never in any struggle in all time had any commander directed thus, with swift-changing finger-touches, such a colossal force as moved now behind my flag-ship, responding swiftly to every touch upon the keys before me. As I stood alone there in the little pilot room, save for Jhul Din at the controls, the tremendous responsibility that was mine seemed weighing down upon me tangibly, crushing me, but I gripped myself, peered tensely ahead.

Smoothly still our great fleet shot through the void of darkness, and then upon the space-chart I saw our most advanced scout-ships creeping toward the advancing serpent-scouts and meeting them, touching them. At the same moment, in the darkness far ahead, there glowed out here and there long, pale shafts of misty white light, appearing and disappearing, hardly to be seen against the flaring

suns of the galaxy beyond. All along a broad, thin line ahead those little beams of pale light were showing, like ghostly, questing fingers of death, and as they glowed and vanished there far ahead, soundlessly, the big Spican beside me twitched with eagerness.

"The scouts!" he exclaimed. "They've met—they're fighting!"

I nodded, without speaking, straining my gaze into the void ahead, where our scouting-ships and those of the serpent-fleet were, I knew, already whirling and stabbing at each other, while in toward them were moving the main masses of the two vast armadas. Hardly more than an inch's gap lay between those two fleets on the space-chart, now, and as I gazed ahead I saw the fighting scout-ships coming into view before us, a long, thin line of battle extending across the void before us and made up of gleaming oval serpent-craft and flat Andromedan ships, dipping and striking and soaring there before us. Fiercely those advance-ships of the two mighty fleets were grappling there, scores of them reeling aimlessly away as the pale beams swept them or crumpling suddenly up as the invisible but deadly force-shafts struck them. But I was looking beyond them, now, looking beyond them to where, between them and the galaxy's suns, a gigantic, far-flung swarm of shining light-points was rushing toward us.

"The serpent-fleet!" I whispered.

On it was coming toward us, even as we moved toward it, the long line of struggling, raging scout-ships between our advancing fleets. Swiftly it was changing from a swarm of innumerable light-points to a swarm of vaguely glimpsed shapes that grew larger, clearer, with every moment that they neared us, thousands upon tens of thousands of great oval ships, flashing toward us in a mighty rectangle! Toward it our own vast pyramid of ships was rushing in turn, and then the struggling scouts ahead had flashed back to rejoin their respective fleets, and with only empty space between them now the two titanic armadas were thundering toward each other! The Armageddon of our universes had begun!

SWIFTLY, as our vast fleet leapt forward through the void, my fingers were pressing the keys before me, and instantly our massed thousands of ships had shifted from their pyramidal formation into one of two long and mighty columns, racing forward side by side. Nearer the colossal rectangle of the serpent-fleet was rushing toward us—nearer with each instant, until it seemed that the two vast armadas must crash into each other and destroy each other. Bending tensely over my keys I saw their huge fleet looming before us, an enormous, close-massed swarm of great oval hulls rushing lightning-like toward us. Then, just before they reached us, I pressed a single key.

Instantly our two great racing columns of ships divided, one to the right, our own ship at its head, and one to the left, splitting from each other and flashing past the great mass of the serpent-fleet on each side! And as we thus flashed past there leapt from the cylinders of our ships toward the serpent-fleet between our columns countless deadly shafts of invisible force, shafts that in the instant that we flashed past had crumpled and smashed to twisted wrecks of metal a full three thousand or more of the great mass of the serpent-ships! From their fleet's edge the pale beams sprang out in answer to us, wiping the life from scores of our racing ships; but caught as they thus were between our flashing columns they could not loose those beams effectively, and in a moment we were past them. Then with the galaxy's suns before us our great fleet was halting, turning, its columns closing again together, while toward those distant suns were

drifting all about us the crumpled wrecks of the serpent-ships that had fallen before us.

"First blood!" cried Jhul Din, and I nodded without speaking, bending again over my keys as our fleet raced forward again toward the enemy.

The serpent-fleet, too, had turned, and was moving cautiously back toward us, and I knew that not again could we execute upon them the maneuver which we had just used. As we rushed again upon them, though, their fleet racing again to meet us, my fingers pressed swiftly again on the keys and our long columns of ships shifted swiftly into another formation, a long wedge with our own flagship at its point. Just before we again raced into the serpent-ships our fleet assumed this formation, for it was my plan this time to tear by main force through the serpent-fleet, shattering it before us. But in the instant before we could do so, before our mighty wedge's point could crash into them, their own fleet had divided suddenly, some fifteen hundred ships from its center driving upward and far above us while the remaining gigantic mass drove down under and beneath us. And in the next moment I saw that five hundred of the fifteen hundred ships above were great disk-ships, and that they were glowing with sudden, flickering radiance!

"Attraction-ships!" Jhul Din was shouting, but already our own ships and all those behind us were turning upward, pulled resistlessly up, while from beneath with death-beams whirling thick the mass of the great serpent-fleet was leaping up toward us.

With the first sight of the attraction-ships, though—a sight which I had been expecting—I had pressed quickly on two of the keys before me, and at once the great line of scout-ships that had hung high above us and on each side during all the battle so far, awaiting this emergency, were gathering swiftly high above and then leaping toward the attraction-ships! Out toward them sprang the thousand serpent-craft that had risen with the attraction-ships to guard them, and then as they met our charging scouts there was a fierce, wild struggle high above us, a struggle that was a tiny replica of the gigantic combat that was going on below. For now, as we were pulled helplessly upward, the thousands upon tens of thousands of serpent-ships beneath were rushing up to attack us, undeterred by the crumpling shafts of force that shot down to meet them, charging up with death-beams sweeping through us in great shafts of ghostly light!

Swiftly, I saw, the crews of scores of ships about us were being annihilated by the whirling beams, that wiped all life from those ships, though still they drove unguided upward, pulled by the relentless grip of the attraction-ships high above. Down toward those glowing disk-ships were racing our gathered scouts but ever as they charged down the serpent-ships that guarded the attraction-craft leapt to meet them, fighting with blind courage to hold them back long enough to encompass the destruction of our main fleet below. Not for much longer could we continue in that deadly grip if we were to escape, I knew, since through ever more of our ships were sweeping the deadly beams from beneath!

Then I saw one of the scout-ships high above charge down through the opposing serpent-craft in a terrific, headlong plunge, saw it smash squarely down onto one of the hovering disk-ships, and then both had buckled and collapsed, were drifting away toward the galaxy in twisted wrecks of metal. And down in the same way were plunging others of the scout-ships, a deliberate and awful self-sacrifice of their Andromedan crews, diving down with all their terrific speed and tearing through the guarding serpent-ships to crash into and destroy the glowing attraction-ships that had gripped our main fleet. A

moment more and the last of the attraction-ships and the last of the serpent-ships also had vanished above us, our scout-ships perishing almost to the last one, too. But they had saved us for the moment, since now, released from that deadly grip above, our fleet was massing and swooping down in turn upon the main body of the serpent-fleet beneath us, whose beams had been slicing through us!

Down—down—black gloom of space and blazing suns and whirling ships, all spun about me as our fleet rushed giddily down through the void toward the massed serpent-fleet beneath; then we were upon them, were shifting into a long, slender line of ships as my fingers on the keys flashed another signal, were driving in that line past them, raking them with all the force-shafts of our cylinders. But as we did so their own great mass of ships shifted swiftly into a similar long, slender column, and then they were racing through space beside us, two tremendously long lines of thousands upon thousands of ships, rushing through the void toward the galaxy, with pale death-beams and invisible force-shafts clashing and crossing from line to line as they flashed on!

For the moment, as the two fleets rushed thus side by side toward the galaxy's suns, so narrow was the gap between their flashing two lines that it seemed they must needs annihilate each other with their mighty weapons. Plainly visible in space beside us raced the line of the serpent-fleet, its beams stabbing thick toward our own ships, and in that wild moment ships behind and about our own were reeling unguided away by scores as the pale beams swept through them. Into one another and into untouched ships about them they crashed, whirling crazily in all directions; but in the same moments the deadly shafts from our own cylinders were leaping across the gap between the racing lines also, and serpent-ships all along their tremendous line were crumpling and collapsing, the racing ships behind them often crashing into those twisted wrecks before they could swerve aside from them. On—on—in a tremendous running fight the vast fleets leapt, a fight that was annihilating the ships of both fleets by scores and hundreds with each moment, but which neither of us would turn away from, hanging to each other and stabbing furiously with our beams and shafts toward each other as we raced madly on!

On—on—far ahead the galaxy's suns were flaming out in greater splendor each moment as at all our terrific utmost velocity our ships and the enemy ships beside us reeled on. Blazing, glorious, those suns filled the heavens before us, now. We had reeled sidewise in our first mad struggle and now the Cancer cluster lay to our left ahead, a stupendous ball of swarming stars at the galaxy's edge, while directly before us at that edge burned a great star of brilliant green, a mighty sun toward which at awful speed our two struggling, tremendous lines of ships were leaping. All about us still the ghostly beams were sweeping from the great lines of ships to our left, but swiftly the controls clicked beneath Jhul Din's grasp as he sent our ship racing forward on a corkscrew, twisting course, evading with miraculous swiftness and skill the deadly beams; while at the same time from beneath there came to our ears over the roaring drone of the generators the slap and clang of the great cylinders as our Andromedan crew shifted their aim, sending crumpling, devastating shafts of unseen force across the gap toward the serpent-ships!

But now ahead the great green sun toward which our long, strung-out fleets were flashing was growing to dazzling size and splendor as we neared it, neared the galaxy's edge. Like a giant globe of dazzling green fire it flamed before us, with all about

and behind it the awful blaze of the galaxy's thundering suns, in toward which at terrific and unabated speed we were racing. Countless thousands upon thousands of ships, stretched far out in long lines there in space, we were reeling on at our utmost velocity of millions of light-speeds, stabbing and striking and falling in wild battle as we plunged madly on. Toward the right our two flashing lines of ships shifted, as we neared the giant green sun ahead, for now it was flaming across the firmament before us like a titanic wall of blinding emerald flame. Still farther to the right we veered, and then we had reached that sun and it was flaming in stupendous glory just to our left as we raced along its side!

"We're racing straight into the galaxy!" cried Jhul Din hoarsely as we thundered on. "It means death to carry this battle in there—our ships will crash into the suns and worlds at this terrific speed!"

"The serpent-ships will crash then too!" I screamed back to him, above the roar of the generators and the hissing of beams and force-shafts about us. "We'll carry this battle to a finish!"

Now as we sped past the giant green sun to the left, the line of serpent-ships between our own vast line and that sun, their ships were all but invisible to us against the blinding glare of that sun. Swiftly they took advantage of this, their pale beams leaping toward us with renewed fury, while in that dazzling glare our shafts of force could only be loosed upon them as we chanced to glimpse or guess their position. I saw ships in our line all about and behind us reeling away as the beams raked them, and then set my teeth, pressed a single one of the keys before me. At once all our great line of ships bore toward the left, against the line of the serpent-ships!

Toward them we slanted, even as we raced with them past the tremendous green sun, and then our line was pressing against their own, our ships colliding with theirs, oval ships and flat craft vanishing in great wrecks of metal as they crashed into each other, beams and force-shafts leaping thick from line to line as we bore inward against them. Involuntarily, though, their line gave beneath the terrific pressure of our own, veered to the left farther to escape that pressure, toward the great green sun. Then, as it veered too far, that which I had hoped for came to pass, for at the terrific speed at which they were moving that inward swerve took a full two thousand of their ships into the outward-leaping prominences of that sun. Into those gigantic, outrushing tongues of green flame they blundered, a tiny swarm of midges in comparison to them, and in the next instant had vanished, only a few tiny jets of fire from the prominences' sides marking their end. Then we were past the great sun, were flashing on and into the galaxy's thronging suns that lay thick in the heavens all about us.

The moments that followed live in my memory now as a mad time of insane, racing combat, of our two gigantic fleets, strung out still in their long lines, flashing inward into the galaxy and between its thundering suns at an unabated, awful speed, striking and soaring and falling with wild, unceasing fury as they plunged on. For now a score or more of great suns were looming close before us as we raced forward, crimson and white and yellow stars between which we reeled crazily and blindly as we grappled still in our vast running fight. Full before us a single one of them, a sun of brilliant white, was looming larger each instant as we sped toward it, and as we almost reached it the serpent-ships drove us inward toward it, striving to repeat our own maneuver, pressed us inward until its heat was

terrific even through our insulated walls, until almost we were within the limits of the glowing, stupendous corona!

One or two of our inmost ships were already shriveling and perishing as they drove inward too far and plunged into that corona, but as they did so I had sent our long line heading outward again with a swift flash signal, crashing against the serpent-fleet's line with a mighty shock and forcing them outward as in hundreds their ships and ours perished by collisions and from the death-beams and force-shafts, as our line struck theirs. The next instant, though, as we forced them outward, passing the great white sun, there loomed swiftly before us the mighty, turning planets of that sun — great, far-swinging worlds through which our two vast fleets were flashing! Then all about us ships of our own fleet and of the serpent-fleet were crashing into those planets as we drove wildly on. One of them loomed swiftly before ourselves, a great turning world of whose mountains and gleaming seas I had a flashing glimpse, about which a swarm of little space-ships were thronging, like pigmies rushing to and fro as about and above them raged the colossal battle of giants. Then in the instant that I glimpsed it, as that world loomed lightning-like stupendous in size before us, we had flashed sidewise as Jhul Din shifted the controls and were past it!

Behind us our ships and the serpent-ships were crashing by hundreds, by thousands, into those turning planets as our two great fleets raged between and among them, at many millions of miles a second. Then we were through and past them, racing crazily on, soaring and stabbing at each other still, serpent-ships and Andromedan ships reeling away or crumpling and perishing as death-beams or force-shafts reached them. On—on—farther in among the galaxy's suns, a stupendous mass of great stars all about us that watched us like gigantic, flaming eyes as we reeled and ran and struck at each other's great fleet there between them. Away to the left one of the galaxy's mighty nebulæ stretched, a stupendous cloud of glowing gas, while far ahead and to the right the strange, mysterious flaming beauty of one of the giant comets was visible, driving itself between the stars but at a speed snail-like in comparison to ours. And there among them all, fiery suns and whirling worlds, vast nebulæ, and glowing comets, our two tremendous fleets were battling on!

On—on—it seemed unthinkable that any beings could live in that stupendous struggle, as we fought and flashed there past thundering suns and worlds, twisting, turning, swaying to avoid them. It seemed that we could but keep up our colossal battle until both fleets were destroyed there inside the galaxy. With a swiftness not of reason but of instinct I touched the keys before me, holding our fleet still to its long column-formation as we fought on, while beside me Jhul Din uttered low, fierce exclamations as he twisted our ship lightning-like to that side or this, his battle-hungry soul being glutted now for once; while, beneath, our gaseous Andromedan crew wielded the force-cylinders like mad beings, they and those in the thousands of ships behind me striking with all their force at their serpent-enemies, reeling here in mighty battle with them in a universe strange to both!

ABOVE a great red sun our fleets were driving now, stabbing and striking still with all their force at each other's long, strung-out line of ships; then, as we rocketed out into more open space again, with other mighty flaming suns all about us, I had a flashing glimpse of a black point far ahead that stood out against one of those suns, a point that leapt lightning-like to greater size. to a tremen-

dous dark, round bulk that was driving toward us even as our struggling line of ships flashed toward it. Then in the next fleeting instant I saw that it was a giant dark-star, one of the many that roved the galaxy, a colossal black and burned-out globe toward which our battling line of ships was racing and which was itself booming on through space toward us!

But a single instant did I glimpse that great dead sun before it was upon us, because of our terrific speed, and was looming gigantically before us! In that instant, though, I had seen our peril, seen the annihilation of our fleet that would come in another moment as we crashed into it, and my fingers had shot down upon the keys with lightning speed, our whole great line of ships swerving instantly to the right. As we did so the great line of serpent-ships swerved after us, shooting in pursuit as we seemed to give way before them, never glimpsing in their hot pursuit the thundering dark-star ahead. And as they swerved sidewise after us, just as we reached that dark-star, it was upon them, was crashing straight through their tremendous line of ships!

A full fifth of their vast, long line of ships that dead sun crashed through, as though through so many flies, annihilating in that instant thousands of their ships! Shattered by that awful blow, their fleet already depleted like ours by the fury of our great battle so far, the serpent-ships reeled back from us, while we leapt in turn toward them. But instead of racing on with us they were slowing, were halting, were massing together, were turning, gathered now in a compact mass, and were racing back—back toward the Caneer cluster, back toward the galaxy's edge!

"They're fleeing!" My cry was a great shout of triumph. "We've beaten them—they're fleeing before us!"

Jhul Din was shouting hoarsely too, now, as I swiftly pressed on the keys before me, our long line of ships massing instantly together in close pursuit-formation and then flashing after the fleeing serpent-fleet. Not many more ships than that fleet did our own number, even now, yet before us the thousands of serpent-ships, close-massed together like ourselves, were racing back toward the galaxy's edge at their utmost speed, between the suns and past the swinging worlds, on and on. Nearer and nearer with each moment, though, we were drawing toward them, swiftly overhauling them, until within moments more they were visible just ahead of us, fleeing still from before us as steadily we overtook them. Then, as we flashed there between the flaming, thundering suns, as we seemed about to overtake them entirely, to blast them with our crumpling shafts of force, I saw a full hundred of their ships drop behind the rest of their mass; a hundred great oval ships different from the rest in that the rear portion of their oval had been truncated, cut squarely off, presenting toward us on each a round, flat surface that suddenly shone with brilliant red light!

An abrupt instinct of danger flashed through me in that moment, and my hands flashed down to the keys, to signal to our great mass of ships to slow our pursuit. But in the moment that they did so the thing had happened. For as our close-massed fleet raced on, after those hundred red-glowing ships ahead that lay between us and the serpent-fleet, it was as though a gigantic hand had in the next moment grasped the compact mass of our ships and scattered them in all directions like a handful of sand, throwing Jhul Din and me to the floor as our ship was hurled blindly away with terrific force, scattering our compact-massed fleet in a single instant across all the heavens, for millions upon millions of miles! And as we were flung thus blindly outward I cried aloud.

"Those red-glowing serpent-ships!" I cried. "They've generated colossal

ether-currents behind them as they fled on—ether-currents that have shattered our fleet!"

For I knew, even in that desperate instant, that that was the explanation. Those red-shining ships had been specially designed to project a great force into the ether behind them that would cause gigantic currents to whirl through that ether instantly, and the flight of the serpent-fleet had been feigned to give them a chance to use those ships! They had loosed the vast ether-currents behind them as they fled on before us, currents that had flung the ships of our fleet to all sides like a handful of toys as we raced into them! And now, with our ships scattered far across the heavens in all directions, our fleet shattered and disorganized and incapable of resistance, the massed thousands of serpent-ships ahead had turned and were racing back toward us!

Back they came, flashing in a close-massed formation still, gathered thousands of great ships speeding back upon our own ship and upon the few hundreds of our ships scattered directly about us. In an instant more they would reach us, and the death-beams of their mighty fleet would sweep us out of existence, would wipe out our few ships and proceed onward, annihilating the far-scattered ships of our great fleet before they could gather to resist! Motionless we hung there in space, in that instant, as they raced back toward us, the remnant of their mighty fleet looming vast before us, and I heard as through a great stillness the clang of the cylinders beneath as our Andromedans swung them forward, to die fighting to the last!

"It's the end, Dur Nal!" Jhul Din was shouting, and I turned to him, my eyes meeting his strangely, steadily, in that instant.

"The end for us—and for our universe," I said, softly. Then in the next instant the mighty serpent-fleet was looming gigantic above and ahead of us, was flashing down in one titanic swoop upon us!

But what was that? Midway in that swooping plunge the serpent-fleet had halted, had recoiled! In a daze we looked up toward it, about us, behind us—and then we were crying out in our excitement. For there from above and behind us was racing toward us a new, tremendous fleet of ships, ships that were not oval like the serpent-ships, or long and flat like our Andromedan craft, but were long and tapering and cigar-like, as the ships of the Interstellar Patrol had been! In a vast armada of tens of thousands they were sweeping out from the center of our galaxy, toward and over us at a speed equal to our greatest speed, and then from them narrow rays of dazzling red light were springing out, striking thick among the massed serpent-ships ahead, annihilating those they struck in bursts of blinding crimson light! And as I saw that I cried aloud again.

"They're our own galaxy's ships!" My great cry was like a trumpet-call of faith and hope in that mad moment. "They're the great fleet of ships the Council Chief said they'd build—and they're striking out now with us to save our universe!"

16. From Outside the Universe!

THE moment that followed was one of action and combat on such a scale as to stun the senses. Even as the great fleet of our galaxy rushed forward upon the serpent-fleet that had recoiled before it, the far-scattered ships of our own great armada had had time to rush in toward me again, to mass behind me. Then, as my fingers flashed down on the signal-keys, our own Andromedan fleet and the mighty galaxy-fleet above us were leaping as one toward the serpent-ships! Before those ships had time to dodge us we were upon them, the galaxy fleet flashing above them and our own beneath them, and as we

flashed thus above and beneath them thousands of deadly force-shafts struck up toward the serpent-ships from beneath, while from above countless brilliant crimson rays burned down toward them.

It was a scene unimaginable, that, as the three great fleets crossed and clashed. Three titanic armadas, each of thousands of close-massed mighty ships, that whirled and struck and ran there in the space between the crowding stars, three far-distant universes coming at last to death-grips within one of those universes. Flashing beneath the serpent-fleet it seemed that in all the firmament above us was but a single vast mass of oval ships, and as our invisible force-shafts stabbed up in swift revenge toward those ships they were crumpling here and there, collapsing and falling, whirling away toward the nearest of the thundering suns about us, while other ships among and above them were flaring wildly in great explosions of crimson light and vanishing as the annihilating rays of the fleet of the Federated Suns struck down upon them from above.

Thousands of ships, I think, must have gone into annihilation in that first wild rush of the three fleets, for ships all about our own were reeling blindly away as the pale beams that whirled down from above swept through them. Upward and downward those ghostly beams were leaping thick, finding their mark in many of the ships of our two fleets, but it was the serpent-fleet that suffered most in that mad rush. Caught as they were between the deadly fires of both our fleets, though only in the moment that we flashed past, their ships had yet vanished by hundreds, by thousands, as force-shaft and red ray flashed and stabbed among them. I heard Jhul Din shouting with mad joy as we shot past them beneath, heard, too, the cries of our few followers among the Andromedan crew beneath, and then we were past them, were pausing in space, as I pressed the keys of the fleet-control, and were turning to rush back for another blow.

Above us now the great galaxy-fleet was turning likewise, slanting down beside us, and then our two fleets were leaping together back toward the serpent-ships. They had courage, the beings in those ships, for though now the tables were turned and it was we who outnumbered them, they had turned, massed still closely together, and were racing forward to meet us. By this time our mighty battle had reeled sidewise toward one of the near-by suns, a great double yellow star that flamed to our left in growing, awful glory as we raced across the firmament toward it; but no thought did we give it in that wild moment, since ahead the serpent-fleet, forming suddenly into a long wedge, was racing toward us. On it came, heading straight toward our two fleets that flashed to meet it, and then just before it reached those fleets it veered swiftly sidewise, to pass by the side of our own fleet, raking us with its beams while our own ships should mask them from the rays of the galaxy-fleet.

In the instant that they had veered, though, I had seen their maneuver, had pressed lightning-like on the keys before me. Instantly our own great fleet shot sharply sidewise also, so far sidewise in that moment that instead of racing past us the serpent-fleet flashed between us and the galaxy-fleet. And again, as they ran the gantlet of the terrible rays and force-shafts of our two fleets, their ships were crumpling and vanishing in flares of light, through all their mighty mass. Another such deadly blow and we would have shattered their fleet, I knew, and as the serpent-ships shot past us and beyond us, their own death-beams stabbing out sullenly still, our two great armadas were turning again, were wheeling and flashing back again for another great blow, while to our side the twin great

golden suns toward which we were swaying were looming now in dazzling grandeur.

Backward, side by side, our two vast fleets shot once more, and before us the serpent-ships were whirling again upon us! Surely no such struggle to the death had any universe ever seen as this one, in which all of our three great fleets seemed intent only on grappling there until all were destroyed. On toward us the serpent-ships were flashing, all things before and about us bathed now in the dazzling glare of the stupendous yellow suns to our left; then, just as their great fleet had almost reached our own two fleets, racing forward to meet it, they had dipped, had dived sharply downward to pass beneath us. But in that same moment, with the same idea, I had pressed the keys before me and our own fleet, and the galaxy-fleet with us, had dipped down also, rushing forward; and then in the next wild instant our two great fleets and that of the serpent-creatures had collided, had crashed head on there in space!

I had only a blinding vision of those thousands of mighty ships rushing toward us, and we toward them, and then it seemed that in all the universe about us was nothing but colliding mighty shapes of metal, oval and cigar-like and long and flat, as our two massed fleets crashed into their own. How our own ship escaped, in the van of our fleet, I can not guess, for space about us in that moment was but a single awful mass of shattered and shattering vessels. Crashing into each other head on, transformed in an instant from gleaming, leaping craft to mere twisted wrecks of metal, went the thousands of ships about us, perishing in thousands in that colossal shock. Before us there seemed only a single mass of great oval ships leaping toward us, serpent-pilots plainly visible for a flashing moment in their white-lit pilot rooms, and then our craft was twisting and swaying and ducking like a mad thing as Jhul Din shot it this way and that to avoid the ships before us.

Then, as the impetus of that mighty rush of the three fleets vanished with their awful crash together, they were hanging there, each fleet mixed and mingled now with the others in that wild, crashing moment, no longer three vast organized fleets but a single colossal mass of countless ships, struggling together, ship to ship, in one tremendous field of battle there between the suns. It was as though, in that moment, space about us had become suddenly peopled thick with struggling ships, before and ahead, to each side and above and below, striking at each other with red ray or pale beam of invisible force-shaft, whirling and crashing into each other with inconceivable fury.

Out of the mass before us a single serpent-ship was rushing head on toward us. As Jhul Din swerved our ship sharply up to avoid collision with it, its death-beam leapt toward us, but again we leapt sidewise and upward to avoid that beam and it shot past us and instantly wiped the life from one of the cigar-like galaxy-ships behind us. As it did so, though, our force-shafts were stabbing from their cylinders as our Andromedans beneath swiftly turned them, and then the ship ahead had crumpled and vanished; while across and above us shot other pale beams from beyond as another serpent-ship leapt to take its place.

Crash!—a mighty shock flung us sidewise as our craft reeled over, and we glimpsed a serpent-ship that had flashed down on us from above, grazing past us. Our force-shafts leapt from the cylinders toward it, missed it, and then as its death-beams whirled toward us in passing there burned past us from behind a brilliant red ray that touched it and destroyed it in a great burst of crimson light! Then in the next instant our cylinders

were swinging toward a trio of close-ranked serpent-ships that were rushing toward us, one behind the other. The death-beams of the foremost leapt out, seared along the edge of our ship, but at the same moment that foremost ship had crumpled suddenly beneath our force-shafts, and before the two behind it could swerve they had crashed into that twisted wreck of metal and into each other. Then all three buckled, shattered hulks were drifting sidewise from the battle.

But now all about us an awful glare was growing, and as we whirled and struck there I looked up to see that our titanic mass of tens of thousands of struggling ships, whirling on with all their speed and striking with all their power at each other, were drifting blindly toward the two flaming yellow suns that loomed now in dazzling size and splendor just before us! Yet on, on we were whirling, stabbing, soaring and vanishing, locked still in the colossal death-grip of universes, on until all about and before us was nothing but thundering, blinding walls of flame as we reeled sidewise into those two great suns!

Even as we soared and struck there, our force-shafts stabbing in crumpling death toward the serpent-ships that leapt toward us, I saw that far away on each side the vast mass of struggling ships, extending as far as the eye could reach, was reeling sidewise with us, vanishing already by scores and by hundreds as they reeled into the out-leaping fiery prominences of the giant golden suns before us. Yet on and on we were whirling still, all organization and plan gone now, with the two thundering suns beside us like vast ramparts of blazing fire across all the heavens, into which we were moving. Then suddenly those ramparts were all about us, titanic walls of awful flame that seemed to enclose the great mass of our thousands of struggling ships, and as we dipped and struck and ran I saw that our great masses were reeling in *between* the two suns!

On we went, our gigantic mass of grappling craft staggering into that narrow gap between the great suns, with their awful roaring fires all about us, now. Hundreds after hundreds of ships on the edge of our struggling mass were vanishing in those fires as they reeled too far to the side, or were licked up by the mighty, out-rushing prominences, only tiny spurts of flame marking their end. Yet still we whirled and smote at each other, there, until the walls of stupendous fire about us had dropped back, until we were reeling out from between the suns, staggering through them, and were swaying on into the space ahead of us, raging on between the galaxy's thundering suns in our colossal battle of giants.

Reeling thus onward in mad combat I saw for an instant that now among the suns before us there stretched the gigantic, glowing mass of the great nebula we had glimpsed to the left at the battle's beginning, a tremendous ocean of flaming gas there in the heavens toward which our vast field of struggling ships was swaying. I saw, too, that but a score of thousands of ships were left now of each of the three great mingled struggling fleets, and then all else left my mind as fiercely toward us swooped again a pair of the serpent-ships about us, one beneath and one above with their death-beams stabbing up and down toward us as they drove upon us!

At the instant they did so our cylinders had shot down crumpling death upon the uprushing ship beneath, and then, as the one above leapt down toward us before the shafts could be turned on it, Jhul Din whirled our craft up in a great leap, the sharp prow of our ship ripping through the rear end of that ship as though through paper, annihilating all in that ship as the awful cold of airless space rushed into it. An instant it hung there, all dead in it that instant, and then, be-

fore it could drive aimlessly away, a shaft of red rays stabbing out of the great mêlée behind us had touched it and destroyed it.

Now before us, as we reeled on in that terrific battle that seemed to us to have endured for ages, there was glowing a great mass of light in the heavens, the stupendous cloud of flaming gas that was the nebula ahead, glowing there among the galaxy's stars that seemed but tiny sparks beside it. Straight toward its flaming mass our ships were whirling, locked still in our awful grapple! For the moment I turned from it, though, as in the struggling mass beside us three serpent-ships flashed down upon a single galaxy-ship. Our force-shafts shot out and crumpled one of them even as it flashed down, while at the same instant the crimson rays of the attacked ship annihilated another. In the same moment, though, the death-beams of the third ship had leapt downward, had swept through the galaxy-ship from stem to stern, annihilating all life inside it and sending it crashing away into the mass of struggling craft about it, while the third serpent-ship leapt toward us. But at that moment, over the throb of our generators and the hiss of our force-shafts, there came to my ears a dull, tremendous roaring sound that drowned out all else, while about us at the same time, about all the ships of our onward-reeling mass, was flooding a vast sea of flaming gas, a fiery ocean into which we were whirling!

"The battle's going inside the nebula!" yelled Jhul Din, over the thunderous roar of flame about us.

"Hold our ship with the rest!" I shouted thickly back to him. "It's going to be fought to the end this time!"

Now all about us was a single titanic ocean of glowing gas, as our thousands of struggling ships reeled into the great nebula's raging fires. Through those fires we could make out dimly the shapes of the ships about us, whirling and battling on still in that hell of flame, the heat-resistant hulls of them all enabling them to withstand the comparatively low temperature of the nebula's sea of flame. On and on, striking, whirling, grappling, we raged, force-shafts and death-beams and crimson rays stabbing through the glowing gases that flooded between us, carrying death and destruction still from ship to struggling ship. For still ships were flaring crimson and vanishing, were staggering aimlessly away as the pale beams swept them, or were crumpling and collapsing as our force-shafts struck them, all life inside them annihilated as they collapsed by the inrushing sea of flame, now.

Our titanic battle had reached its height, its climax, I knew, and with the fierce, desperate fury born of that realization, our ships were leaping upon the serpent-craft. It was a battle out of nightmare, that awful struggle, a battle of the thousands of ships of three great universes that grappled with each other to the death there in that hell of thundering flame. Gaseous Andromedans in their long, flat ships, writhing serpent-creatures with their oval craft, strange, dissimilar shapes from the races of all the galaxy's suns in their great, cigarlike hulls — all swayed and smote and stabbed there together in that stupendous struggle, pale beam and red ray and unseen shaft of force whirling this way and that through the seas of raging fire through which we reeled. On and on we whirled, all thought of everything but the enemy ships before us gone as each of the thousands of ships struck out with all its powers for its races, its universe!

Swiftly now, rocking and grappling there in the nebula's glowing ocean, with flame above and below and on each side and all about us, ships around us were vanishing, crashing into each other blindly amid the roaring fires, taking deadly toll of each other with their mighty weapons. But

ever more swiftly, assailed on all sides by our terrific attack, the serpent-ships were decreasing in number, and though our own craft whirled to death about us also I saw that rapidly the serpent-ships were being annihilated in scores and hundreds as with the fury of utter reckless single-mindedness we leapt upon them. Thousands by thousands their ships were vanishing, and though hardly a score of thousands of ships remained now of our two mighty fleets the serpent-ships had been reduced to a fourth of that number by our terrible attack!

Still upon them we sprang, there in the nebula's fires, our force-shafts and red rays whirling ceaselessly through the thundering flames about us toward them, though sullenly still their beams sprang to meet us. Through that inferno of flame, between and through the whirling ships about us, our own craft leapt, its cylinders still stabbing forth crumpling death to the oval ships about us, and then suddenly, in answer to some signal flashed among them, all those oval craft, those serpent-ships, had driven swiftly upward from the mighty battle, into the roaring fires above us. In those fires, while we too drove up through the flaming ocean in pursuit of them, they gathered for an instant, massing together, and then were flashing away, through the nebula's flaming sea and out of it into open space once more, flashing together back toward the galaxy's edge!

"The Cancer cluster!" Jhul Din was screaming, now. "They're in flight—they're heading back toward the cluster!"

But already I had pressed swiftly on the keys before me, and about us our ships were massing again, the galaxy-ships with us now; and then close-massed together we were racing outward, too, out of the mighty sea of flame about us, bursting out of the titanic nebula into the open spaces of the galaxy once more, its thronging suns all about us. Through those suns, back toward the galaxy's edge in swift flight, the five thousand remaining serpent-ships were flashing, the only surviving remnant of their vast fleet, that our two armadas had conquered and all but destroyed. Back toward the Cancer cluster they were fleeing, upon whose thronging worlds all the hordes of the serpent-races were massed, and within which those hordes, we knew, would be laboring still to complete the great cone that now we could destroy. So on after them our own fleet leapt, a score of thousands of mighty ships in close formation thundering after our flying enemy.

Past mighty, flaming suns we were racing, in pursuit, past slow-turning great worlds that moved about those suns and that we raced between and past, through the galaxy's giant stars toward its edge, toward the Cancer cluster. On—on—after the fleeing serpent-craft we raced, until far before us through the crowding suns there came into view the great cluster toward which they were heading, a gigantic, globular swarm of suns there at the galaxy's edge. The serpent-ships had reached it, now, were dropping swiftly down toward it, and as we too flashed above it we dropped after them in hot pursuit. Down—down—the great ball of flaming suns was growing swiftly in size as we neared it, the countless thronging worlds between those suns, packed now with the serpent-races, visible beneath—down—down—and then suddenly, in obedience to some unseen order, the serpent-ships fleeing downward beneath us had halted, had turned, and then were driving straight back up toward us!

SO UTTERLY unlooked for was that swift, fierce attack that before we could swerve aside our downward-rushing thousands of craft had crashed straight into the uprushing serpent-ships. Then the moment after that wild shock in which hundreds,

thousands of ships had smashed head-on together, there was battle again there above that mighty ball of suns, with the giant splendor of our galaxy to one side and the infinite vault of outer space to the other, a battle such as in sheer, concentrated intensity none of us had ever yet experienced. Like senseless mechanisms, with the mad energy of despair, the serpent-ships drove toward us, flinging away their lives to hold us longer from the great cluster beneath and its crowded, serpent-peopled worlds, throwing themselves upon us with such awful fierceness that, outnumbering them as we did, our fleet reeled and staggered there beneath their blows.

Our ships were falling by the hundreds each moment, but now we gripped ourselves, sprang upon the attacking serpent-ships with a fury that matched their own, summoning all the strength of despair ourselves as the vast battle hung thus in the balance, ourselves leaping down upon the serpent-ships with a suicidal recklessness that sent them into annihilation swiftly beneath us. For a single wild moment, it seemed, their ships and ours alike had gathered their utmost powers for one last supreme effort, were throwing themselves upon each other with a last mad burst of strength, and in that moment death-beam and red ray and unseen force-shafts flashed thick through space from ship to ship. Then the serpent-ships were thinning in number before us, fewer and fewer, as regardless of our losses we pressed our fierce attack, until at last but a scant score of them remained, a score that in the next moment were gone also, flaring crimson or crumpling and collapsing. A battered remnant of what had once been two tremendous fleets, but ten thousand ships left of all our countless thousands, we hung there in space above the cluster—alone! The serpent-ships were gone at last! The serpent-fleet was no more!

"We've won!" My cry of triumph was taken up and repeated, by Jhul Din beside me, by our followers beneath, by all, I knew, in our ships about us as we hung there. We had won! Had annihilated to the last one the countless serpent-ships, there in awful battle, reeling with them out of the outer void and through the galaxy, through thundering suns and whirling worlds, past dark-star and comet, through the mighty flames of the great nebula! Had swept the last of their fleet from space and now were moving down toward the great cluster beneath, toward the thronging suns and countless worlds among them, where all the hordes of the serpent-races were massed, dropping down to destroy the last mighty mechanism with which they had sought to conquer and annihilate us! We had——

But what was that below? Our downward-rushing ships had paused, millions of miles still above the great cluster, and we were gazing down toward it, toward a vast, dark shape that was rising from among its swarming suns! A colossal dark *cone*, that was coming slowly, deliberately, up among those suns and at sight of which our cries had died on our lips, our faces masks of blank horror! *It was the mighty death-beam cone of the serpent-creatures!* It was the colossal generator of death that they had brought with them unfinished from the dying universe, that their serpent-hordes in the cluster beneath had labored upon while we had fought our mighty battle, and that now, while the last of the serpent-ships had held us back a moment longer, they had completed! Up toward us it was coming, slowly rising among the mighty cluster's suns, ponderously, deliberately, and we knew that in a moment more it would be rising out of that cluster, would be annihilating all life in our ships with a single sweep of its colossal beams of death, would be sailing deliberately on to wipe all the life from the gal-

axy's worlds, and give those worlds forever to the serpent-hordes massed in the cluster beneath! We had not won, but lost!

There was a silence—a silence of death—in that moment, as the stupendous cone rose up through the ball of suns beneath. Still, silent, we hung there—our doom rising up beneath us—a moment in which there whirled through my brain confused, swift visions—our awful battle in vain—our universe and the Andromeda universe the serpent-peoples', our races gone forever—and then suddenly into my whirling brain there penetrated a choking cry. It was from Jhul Din, and he was at the window, strangling, staggering, pointing out into the black void of outer space beside us, out to where a little swarm of great shapes were rushing headlong toward us out of that void! A hundred great shapes that were like mighty hemispheres of metal, domed and flatbottomed and gleaming——

"It's the sun-swinging ships!" Jhul Din's great cry stabbed into my dazed brain like a sword of sound. *"It's Korus Kan and the sun-swinging ships. They escaped from the attraction-ships that captured them—have come across the void after us——!"*

The sun-swinging ships! The ships that with Korus Kan in them had been captured and that we had thought destroyed, but that somehow, in the void outside the Andromeda universe, had escaped from the attraction-ships that held them, had sped across the void after us and were now racing in among us, hanging above the giant cluster of suns beneath, up through which the great cone of doom was rising! Then from those hundred domed ships hanging there, there sprang downward vast, broad rays of dark, purple-glowing force, the force with which the Andromedans had moved all their suns, vast rays that spread out fanwise as they shot down and that formed a continuous, unbroken wall of purple-glowing force about all the great cluster beneath, screening all in that cluster from the gravitational pull of everything outside, from the pull of the galaxy that alone counterbalanced the attraction of the cluster's suns toward each other! And as that counterbalancing pull was shut off, that alone had held the suns of the giant cluster in their balanced positions, *those suns began slowly to move—to move toward each other!*

Slowly at first they moved, and then faster and faster, sweeping majestically in toward each other, the whole giant cluster of swarming suns contracting, condensing! Inward they moved, and now sun was crashing into sun, at the cluster's center, sending up towering bursts of awful flame as they met in titanic shock! Inward the thronging, blazing suns swept still, crashing now through all the cluster into each other, worlds that circled about them vanishing in great bursts of fire as they plunged into or were caught between the suns that crashed about them! Almost to the great cluster's top had the giant death-cone reached, as the suns about and below it hurtled inward to doom, and then we saw two mighty suns on each side of it that were rushing inward and toward it, converging upon it, annihilating themselves and it together in the gigantic shock of their collision! On and on, sun moving into sun, they went, all the worlds about them vanishing into their fires, annihilating forever all the serpent-hordes that had massed upon them, all matter and all life inside that cluster perishing as its thundering suns crashed gigantically into each other! On and on, until but a single colossal core of fire remained below us, formed by all the cluster's crashing suns, and that already, as the domed ships among us turned off their screening force, was beginning to expand outward, to swell out into a vast nebula of flaming gas! A mighty nebula there where the great cluster had been! A

giant nebula that held within its fires all that had been the countless invading serpent-hordes who had swept upon us from—and who had been annihilated at the last by others from—outside the universe!

17. Outward Once Again

STANDING outside the mighty tower of the Council of Suns, with the light of great Canopus brilliant on all about us, Jhul Din, Korus Kan and I watched, days later, as our Andromedan allies bade us farewell. Behind us were grouped the massed thousands of the Council, with its Chief, Serk Haj, beside us, while in close-ranked rows on the ground before us rested the five thousand Andromedan ships that were all that remained of the mighty fleet of a hundred thousand that had come across the void to our universe. From those ships the dozen of the Andromedan leaders were coming toward us, while in them their crews awaited the start.

In the intervening days those crews, those thousands of gaseous Andromedans, had been the recipients of the galaxy's frantic gratitude at having lifted from it the shadow of doom that had hung upon it, in all that time when the serpent-creatures, in the Cancer cluster, had prepared to spread out in their great conquest. Sun had vied with sun, and world with world, to do the Andromedans honor, for they it was, as all in the galaxy knew, who had gathered the mighty fleet that had rushed across the void to our universe's aid. They it was who, with the galaxy's fleet, had smashed the serpent-armada in such a battle as had never been known before. And they it was, too, whose great sun-swinging ships had saved us at the last, had annihilated all the serpent-hordes and their cone of doom.

And if the galaxy had given to the Andromedans for their aid its highest honors, it had given no less to us and our followers who had dared cross the void to seek that aid; to me, who had led that wild expedition across the gulf and had led the great Andromedan fleet back to our galaxy and into the colossal battle of universes; to Jhul Din, who had saved us all, and with us the galaxy's chance of life, in the serpent universe; and to Korus Kan, who when captured with the sun-swinging craft by the attraction-ships had managed to escape them in the void far out from the Andromeda universe by replacing in an upward position some of the purple-force projectors of the sun-swinging ships, blasting the disk-ships that held them with the force of those projectors and racing back to find our great fleet gone, speeding across the void after us and flashing in to save us at the last moment. So great was the gratitude of our galaxy for what we had done that no reward had been offered, either to us or to the Andromedans. For what save our universe itself could reward those who had saved that universe?

Now, as the dozen Andromedan leaders came toward us there, the great Council behind us and the vast throngs about us silent, they paused. Strange, erect columns of misty green vapor, they poised there, contemplating us, I knew. Then Serk Haj had reached an arm toward them, bat-winged being of Deneb with his grasp returned by the misty arms of the gaseous beings before us, and then they had passed from him to Jhul Din, and from the big crustacean to Korus Kan, and from his gleaming metal figure to me. There was a strange tightness across my throat as I reached a hand out toward them, and they paused as they grasped it, paused as for the third and for the last time I gripped hands with these gaseous beings of an alien universe, whose great fleet I had led through the void from battle to mighty battle. Then they had turned, were gliding toward their ships.

And now we three turned toward

our own long, cigar-like ship that waited beside us, for we were to pilot them out through our galaxy into outer space once more. Into our craft we stepped, up into its pilot room with Korus Kan at the controls once more, and then we were driving up from the great world beneath, with the five thousand Andromedan ships behind us, were slanting up and outward—out from that world, out from great Canopus, until it was dwindling and diminishing behind us, out through the galaxy's swarming suns and past the great nebula that had been the Cancer cluster, until we were driving out from the galaxy's edge into the great void once again.

Our ship and the ships about us slowed, halted. Before us lay the vast darkness of outer space, infinite in extent. Before us and to the right in that darkness, far ahead and hardly to be seen, was visible a dim little flicker of light, the flicker that was the serpent-universe, a dying universe almost as lifeless as the worlds within it were now. And to the left and ahead glowed the misty little patch of light that was the Andromeda universe. Even as our eyes caught it, the ships around us were moving toward that misty patch, outward into the gulf of space, passing from about us, their great shapes dwindling swiftly as they sped out from us, toward their universe. Standing there, shoulder to shoulder, we three watched them go, until at last they were but tiny points ahead, were wavering, were vanishing, were gone.

Yet still, though, we stood there unmoving, gazing out after them, with before us the silence and darkness of the eternal void, and behind us the galaxy's stars.

[THE END]

FATE

By THELMA E. JOHNSON

I know a land of beauty and of peace:
  Serene it lies, beyond the gates of death,
  Remote and holy, free from any breath
Of earthly winds and rain that never cease;
And there with you, beloved, I would walk
  Deep in the windless solitude sublime,
  A child of music and of careless rime,
And oh, how new and strange would be our talk!

But there is one who still withholds the key:
  He stands unmoved beside the marble gate,
  A veiled, colossal figure—is it Fate
Or only Death that chills the heart of me?
  Beloved, will I walk with you alone
  In that far land, between the gates of stone?

A Weird Mystery Is Brought to Light

The Gray Lady

By FLAVIA RICHARDSON

THEY had been married three or four months and were still perfectly happy. Bernard was working all day in a publisher's office, and because he did not get a very large salary Maureen went on with her daily job as a typist. As a general rule she got back to the flat about half an hour before Bernard. They had been very much pleased when they first found the flat. It was at the top of one of the large, old-fashioned houses that abound in Bloomsbury and consisted of four rooms—bedroom, living-room, bathroom and a minute dressing-room. Their meals were eaten in restaurants, cooked on the gas ring, or provided by the housekeeper.

The first floor of the house was occupied by an elderly gentleman who lived a presumably blameless existence with his radio and his pet canary, which hung in the sitting-room window and occasionally came out of the cage to hop around.

The second and third floors were empty and unfurnished. Lodgers seemed somehow to fight shy of the rooms on those floors: either there were not enough of them or the rents were too high. And still higher, up a corkscrew flight of stairs, but with no front door of their own, lived Maureen and Bernard.

It was not until they had lived in the house for three or four months that Maureen began to wonder. She said nothing: she was Irish enough to believe in the other world; she was English enough to have a real distaste for being ridiculed in any way. And she did not know Bernard very well—or thought she did not. Besides, there was so little to say—nothing to go upon, nothing tangible, or even visible; only a strange impression that she was not alone when she came into the house, that someone every now and then followed her up the stairs to the first floor.

It so happened that she was often the only inhabitant when she returned from the office. The housekeeper was either out shopping or else so deeply entombed in the basement that she might to all intents and purposes have been elsewhere; the old gentleman usually went out for an airing after tea, whatever the weather; in addition to being old, he was crippled and very sensitive over the deformity; he liked to walk in the quieter streets at the quieter part of the day.

Maureen began to turn her head to see who was on the stairs; the stone steps were unearpeted and she was sure that she could hear the distinct sound of individual footsteps. But there was never anything to be seen. After the first floor, the steps usually stopped; once she heard a lingering sigh that seemed to float on the air as though someone were reluctant to leave her company.

She was nervous as a rule, disliking to be alone, always liable to imagine burglars if the chairs creaked. Yet curiously enough this ghost or suggestion of a ghost did not make her afraid. It seemed friendly, lonely, as if anxious for company.

At last she summoned up courage to tell Bernard.

"It's silly of me, I know," she said, when she had ended her story, "but I'm always sure that there's someone there."

Bernard said nothing for a minute or two. He pulled at his right eyebrow, a habit he had when he was a little puzzled. Then he asked her to give him the dates more particularly and to try and remember if she had been specially conscious of the influence on any particular day.

Maureen frowned. "No," she admitted at last. "But it seems to be getting more definite, little by little."

"Curious," submitted Bernard, slowly. "I've felt it, too."

"You?" Maureen's voice was partly surprize, partly relief.

"Yes. I wouldn't say anything to you because I didn't want to make you nervous and I know you come in by yourself at night and that to all intents and purposes you're alone in the house. But I've been conscious of it for quite a time."

"What—what ought we to do about it?" asked Maureen.

"Nothing," replied Bernard promptly. "At least, not at present. After all, what have we got to go on? Nothing that we could tell anyone else. And it's no good asking Mrs. Johnson downstairs if she's noticed it, because she'll only go off the deep end and give notice to the landlord and then there'll be a real row. Besides, we don't want her to go. She can cook."

Maureen was a little doubtful. "If it gets worse——?"

"I daresay it won't. And you must admit that so far it hasn't shown any desire to hurt you. It seems very friendly."

"I don't mind it," she hastened to explain. "It almost seems like company some days. But I don't feel quite happy. It seems to be gaining strength so much."

Bernard shrugged his shoulders. "Why not? You're quite friendly disposed to it and so am I. Why shouldn't it be friendly? It's probably some old bird who used to live here and had a good time and comes back to enjoy the scene of his debauches. It has never shown any desire to show me where to find hidden hoards, or anything of that kind. I'm afraid it's a washout in that way."

Maureen shivered a little. "I used not to mind; I still don't mind," she began, "but I am beginning to dislike it."

"That's due to talking it over," suggested Bernard. "You've begun subconsciously to think of ghost stories and evil spirits and things like that, and that's getting mixed up in your mind with our perfectly harmless goosestepper. Don't be silly."

Thus admonished, Maureen mentally shook herself and made up her mind not to give way to foolish fancies. But she was not too happy. Her complete enjoyment in their first home since marriage had begun to quiver. The flat was lovely; she was quite happy there, but though she did not exactly dread the stairs, she began to be glad when she had mounted them, to run a little more swiftly through the hall and up the first flight.

And as she ran, so the steps seemed to hurry too, until she found she could never outpace them. But still nothing more happened, and she neither heard nor saw anything fresh, so that gradually she began to become accustomed to them once again.

BY TACIT consent, neither she nor Bernard had ever spoken of the ghost outside their two selves: it did not seem a matter to treat too lightly; neither did they want to be laughed at by more sophisticated friends.

It was therefore somewhat of a surprize when one evening Betty Danvers, Maureen's intimate friend, came to see them and said casually as she dropped into the big armchair, "What a funny echo you have in this house!

I could have sworn that someone followed me up the first flight of stairs. It was so strong an echo that I turned round to see who was there."

Maureen and Bernard exchanged uneasy glances. Betty saw the constraint in their manner and begged for the truth.

They told her, rather reluctantly, but to their surprize she did not laugh. Instead she looked more serious.

"Rather you than me," she said, with a little grimace. "I don't like those sorts of stray things running round my house. But why doesn't it ever come any higher?"

"Don't know," said Bernard, filling his pipe as he spoke. "I suppose the chief seat of the power, or whatever you call it, is on the first flight. Perhaps the old boy lived in the first floor room once. Old man Robinson downstairs may be on quite pally terms with him. But one can hardly ask that kind of a question of a man to whom one has never spoken before."

The subject was dropped, and for a time nothing happened.

MAUREEN made the next discovery. She was coming up the stairs on a rather dark evening in early spring. She had noticed that for once no footsteps had followed her and was a little surprized, so familiar had they become.

Lifting her head as she came round the bend on the half-landing she was suddenly aware of a woman in a gray dress, slipping into Mr. Robinson's sitting-room, the door of which faced the stairs. The woman, if woman there was, disappeared so quickly that Maureen was loth to believe the evidence of her eyes, taking the fast-fading daylight into account. She was convinced, however, that she had seen the woman, but suddenly as she continued upstairs and thought over the incident, she remembered that the sitting-room door had been shut, in accordance with Mr. Robinson's invariable custom.

Maureen told Bernard, who considered this new development with becoming gravity. He suggested the possibility of a visitor to the old man, but was puzzled by the closed door. Though perfectly convinced himself that Maureen had actually seen the ghost, he preferred to ascribe it to a trick of the light, being extremely anxious not to allow his imagination to run away.

Asking her not to think of it any more, he determined to keep his own eyes and ears open and to discover the mystery if he could. Somehow he began to believe that there was some sinister meaning behind it all. The atmosphere of the house seemed subtly to have changed. There was a curious air about it, an air of hushed expectancy, instead of the placid calm that had hitherto been especially noticeable.

Both Maureen and Bernard were conscious of the change. Maureen grew tense and nervous; she took to going for walks in the evening to fill in the time between her return and Bernard's. Then she took to waiting about for him in the street, and asking him to wait for her if she were not there, so as to avoid any possibility of her having to go into the house alone.

She did not see the gray lady again for a long time, but once as she almost ran past the first floor landing she thought she heard a laugh, a strange, unearthly laugh, and though it was not exactly horrible, it made her blood run cold.

"We must look for other rooms," Bernard declared.

But Maureen shook her head. "I must see this through," she said. "I don't know why, but I couldn't leave here now."

"But it's making you ill," protested Bernard.

"I won't get ill. I promise that. I

know I'm nervous and tired, but I won't let it get the better of me. And I feel—I can't explain, but I know something is going to happen soon."

"As you like," he returned. "But if the climax doesn't come within the next three months when we get our holiday, I shan't let you come back here. Seriously, darling, it's beyond a joke, and I don't like the place myself. I believe we're both having hallucinations, that the drains are wrong. There's a filthy smell on that first flight sometimes—only not the kind of smell you can get hold of and complain about. It made me nearly sick today."

"Oh, so you've smelt it, too," was all that Maureen said.

The banging of a door below made them both jump. Bernard slipped on to the landing, ran down the corkscrew flight and hung over the banisters below. He came back in a moment or two.

"Old man Robinson's just gone out," he reported. "I say, Maureen, do you know he almost ran down the stairs?"

"Ran?" she echoed in surprize. "But he's a cripple."

"Yes." Bernard spoke slowly. "He almost ran and he's a cripple. The inference is that he was running either away from something pretty beastly or to something pretty safe. Get me?"

Maureen nodded. "He's seen—her?" she suggested.

"Probably. I wonder if we dare call on him and inquire."

"Better not. You can't very easily ask him, can you? And it isn't in the best of taste to watch his comings and goings over the banisters. You know what I mean?"

Bernard looked doubtful. "I don't like it," he said.

By tacit consent they seldom went upstairs alone. If either had to go down on an errand the other one accompanied. At first they made feeble little excuses but after a short time these dried up and it was simply accepted as a matter of course.

There was no doubt about the smell now, but it was so transitory that there seemed nothing to lay hold upon. Bernard mentioned it to Mrs. Johnson, but she could smell nothing, though he dragged her up to the first flight at a moment when he knew that there had been a particularly malignant odor there a few moments before. But he was obliged to agree that there was no trace of any trouble just then and could only compromise by saying that he would write to the landlord and ask to have the drains tested. But he did not trouble to write that letter.

As he went upstairs after Mrs. Johnson had gone down, he distinctly saw the gray lady whisk into Mr. Robinson's room.

After that they began to see her more frequently, but only her back; the face was never turned toward them and she was always disappearing into the room, from which she never seemed to come out. Gradually, too, her outlines began to be more defined: they could distinctly tell the contours of her hair-dressing, the shape of her hand, the curve of her neck. But the face was always hidden and this tantalized Maureen.

"She might at least let us see if we can recognize her," she contended one evening. She had lost a good deal of her nervous tension but she spoke more rapidly than before and there was a patch of color in her face that Bernard did not like.

"I don't want to," he said. "It might be unutterably foul."

"I have a feeling," said Maureen, slowly, "that when we do see her face we shall come to the end of the story."

"Perhaps," Bernard grunted, and then added, "And the end of the story lies, I believe, in Robinson's

room. The only question is, does it affect him or is it something he's walked into?"

"He hasn't run downstairs again—at least we haven't heard him," Maureen amended. "Bernard, I am sure he's mixed up in it somehow. Aren't you?"

Bernard was non-committal. He had his own theories, but they were only theories and he did not choose to speak of them at that moment for fear they should loom too realistically in their minds and prevent them from weighing their evidence calmly.

THE spring days were lengthening and the evenings were drawing out, assisted particularly by the daylight saving, but still there was no ending to the drama that went on below.

And then, in the first week of May, came a thunderstorm. It began late in the afternoon, and when Bernard and Maureen came to the house it was raging fiercely. Thunder pealed overhead as they shut the front door behind them and shook themselves in the tiled hall, rubbing shoes on the worn coconut hair mat.

Suddenly at the foot of the stairs Maureen clutched her husband by the elbow. "Bernard!" she cried. "Look—look!"

On the half-landing stood the gray lady. As they stared at her she turned slowly in their direction. A vivid flash of lightning lit up the whole of the staircase, pouring in from the window half-way up. The yellow rays played on the woman. At the sight of her Maureen screamed and Bernard shouted to her to hide her eyes. The gray lady had no face. Where one should have been yawned a mask of white and red, horridly mingled, and as Bernard continued to gaze, petrified by what he saw, he realized that the features had been beaten into a pulp.

With a motion of her hand, the lady beckoned them to come up the stairs. Moved by an impulse she could not fathom, Maureen started to go forward. Bernard, still holding her closely, came too, afraid to leave her alone, certain that she should not come.

Outside the door of the sitting-room the gray lady paused for a second, with her back to them as usual. Then she went inside. Another vivid flash of lightning lit up the house. As it died away, a terrible cry was heard from inside the room.

Bernard sprang forward. Maureen clutched him wildly.

"Don't!" she cried. "Oh, Bernard, don't go in!"

"Stay here," he commanded. "I must see what has happened."

He turned the handle of the sitting-room door, which yielded to his touch. Then, bracing himself for a further shock, he went boldly in.

On the floor lay the body of Mr. Robinson, dead. The last vivid flash of lightning had struck him where he stood by the open window. He had fallen on to the floor, his head against a tall cupboard built into the wall.

Bernard came on to the landing again, shut the door and turned the key in the lock.

"Mr. Robinson has been struck by lightning," he said. "He's dead. I must go and telephone for the police and a doctor."

"I'll go," said Maureen, and ran before he could speak.

She was back in a minute or two with a policeman who had providentially been near by. Together the three went into the room of mystery.

All seemed ordinary and there was nothing to alarm anyone. Yet the policeman looked round with some suspicion before he went over to the still figure on the floor.

"Dog or cat about, sir?" he asked.

(Continued on page 571)

An Eery Story Is

THE PALACE OF THE DEAD

By ROBERT PEERY

THE night was cold and quiet. The traffic outside the windows of Gale Parmenter's great brown mansion on Taliaferro Street had moderated until there was heard only now and then the slithering whir of black tires on the frozen pavement. The fire had burned low in the grate and neither of us had thought to replenish it from the black enameled box that stood beside it. The shadows flickered in an eery dance over the walls, the floor and the ceiling of the big room. For four hours we had sat there, slowly exhausting the possibilities of conversation between two old friends who had not seen each other for ten years. The clock in the hall behind us had faithfully ticked the minutes away, and now, after groaning internally, it clanged out the hour from its brass throat.

"The dead," said Gale Parmenter, his cold black pipe still clenched between his teeth, "have devious ways of communicating with the living."

The notes from the clock wavered about us, then died away until only a ghostly echo, small, reverberating, remained.

"And the easiest way is through dreams," he said.

I had been surprized at the change that had come to the face and to the philosophy of my old friend. Where before—when I left him at the ferry at Hoboken on our return from a jaunt with Jack Pershing in France—his face had been ruddy, and alive with the joy of healthy living, it now was the color and seemed of the very texture of old and yellowed parchment. I remembered his eyes as small wells of happiness; I saw them now as burned holes in his cadaverous face. He was thinner by thirty pounds; I had heard that he rarely left his house, but remained cloistered there like a monk, poring over ancient tomes and puzzling his head with various abstruse studies. All night his conversation had been forced. I could tell that much; his manner impressed me strangely. He had appeared all evening to be looking or listening for some horror just beyond the next tick of the hall clock.

I had watched his gaze wander and fasten for minutes at a time upon the painting that hung above the black marble mantel-board. I will admit that the picture held for me also a peculiar sense of fascination. It was Delgari's *The Palace of the Dead,* an excellent copy of original size, in genuine oils. The foreground was a placid lake; tall, exquisite poplars, of a height and beauty not seen even in Lombardy, stood like solitary sentinels on each side of a cavern which lifted its black masses ponderously, majestically, toward a dark and scowling heaven. Upon the lake in a small boat was the figure of a man with outstretched arms, who was pleading with some savage god to renounce the verdict of death to his soul. The colors were somber, dispirited. The very taint of death seemed to exude from that terrible canvas. I shud-

dered involuntarily when I caught the burning eyes of Gale Parmenter fixed intently upon the painting. And it seemed to me, in that moment as he spoke the words, that it was his own figure in that boat upon the lip of the cavern in which the dead were prisoned for an eternity of darkness and damnation. It was more than merely that there seemed a sort of kinship between that man in the boat of the picture and my friend in the chair before the dying firelight. It was more serious than that; it created strange thoughts in me; I do not know how I might explain this, but it was there, and it was of reality, I think. I have never been called an unduly imaginative man.

"The picture, Frank," said Gale in a flat, almost toneless voice, "is part of a strangely recurring dream that comes to me with the regularity of a booming evening gun—like the guns at Mangapore, you'll remember." At such times, when he recalled a scene, a friend, a time we both had known, there was the slightest wraith of his old self that seemed to flicker past his eyes. But not for long.

"I have dreamed so many times that I have stood in that boat and rowed into that yawning cavern which lips the lake like a grinning god of destruction that I am almost convinced that I am that person who rails so ineffectually against the powers whose shapes one can so dimly discern in the gray and black skies above."

I stood up, the better to examine the picture, and to find what I had at first overlooked. So skilful had been the artist's brush that one had to look closely to see that the very clouds above that darkly mirroring lake were the heads and writhing torsos of enigmatic gods at sportive play and amorous jousts! Their puffed eyes were greedily watching the drama below them. What matter to them that another human being made the dangerous journey to the shades of Death? What cared they? It was a part of their sport, a spectacle for the jaded eyes of their goddess mistresses! Their limbs were like writhing serpents, their middles bloated and spongy. Their mouths grinned luridly. The figures seemed to shift about in disorderly fashion.

I stepped back. They had gone. The leaden sky was immovable but grim with the power of its implacable, unending surface. A step forward and again I saw the bawdy sport of deism! I could almost hear their voices as they shouted cruel words that would thunder at length upon the ears of the tortured being upon that ebony lake.

"I have heard those voices, too," said Gale. He had not risen from his chair; his eyes searched the last flickering flames within the grate. The room had begun to grow colder. I turned to him with surprize in my face.

"The voices of those terrible gods?" I cried. Was he hypnotizing me? Why should he have twice voiced my thoughts?

"The Voices of the Terrible Gods," he replied. His voice rose as each syllable fell from his lips; unconsciously he had capitalized the letters of his sentence by the inflection, the horror, of his tone. "Shall I tell you about the dream?" he asked.

I sat down once more and he began.

"IT HAS been eight years since first I dreamed of the Palace of the Dead. I bought that picture when the furniture and furnishings of the old Campanis place were sold at auction in New Orleans. It was the only purchase I made. It struck me as soon as I laid eyes upon it. It cost a great deal of money, too, but I wanted it and I bought it.

"I will not try to tell you that the picture has some malign influence over my mind, because we both are sensible men. I have caused myself to dream of these things because of late years my mind has fastened

itself tenaciously upon the utter horror of death, upon the imperturbable countenance of death, and upon the necessity for each man 'wrapping the mantle of his couch about him and lying down to'—to what, Frank? What lies just beyond the brightness, the sunlight, the color and the noise of this life? Is it peace? Contentment? Or a vague wandering, an unrest, an eternal search for something which forever eludes? I have imagined ofttimes, have dreamed, that I was lost in an eternity of distance, bodiless, brainless, heartless—searching, groping in a darkness deeper than any Stygian hell, and never finding what I sought! Is it possible that whatever gods there be can be so cruel as to send a soul upon such a fruitless quest? Is it not enough that they should make sport with our destinies while we live and play and dream upon this earth? Can it be true, as Delgari has portrayed in this picture, that their sport has only begun when we leave behind the vestments of reality and take upon our souls the ineffectual garments of death? Will they hound us through all eternity, as they hound us through the black door of death—as they thunderously charge that pitiful figure of a man to enter the Palace of the Dead and its ghastliness? Look at him, Frank! See the horror-stricken countenance, the livid eyes, the grip of death in his clenched hands, the upraised, hopeless arms begging for mercy at the couches of those grinning gods who turn from his plea with mirth to place their hot mouths upon the lecherous lips of their mistresses! See how death hangs in heavy folds about his damp garments! Look how the odor of death beats up from his mouth!"

I arose nervously and placed a stick of wood upon the red coals. I had begun to feel that I could not for a moment longer bear the thought of that room growing darker and colder.

"Always I seem to be waking upon a flat, level ground upon which no living thing grows. The flatlands stretch away to the gray horizon. Always I feel as if the sky above me is pressing down about my body, is strangling me, is imprisoning my heart and lungs with its suffocating embrace. The essence of the sky in that picture, in my dreams, seems to be loosed in my breast and to pluck at the beat of my heart as a skeleton might pluck the strings of a ghostly guitar. And always the rhythm of that serenade is played to the beat of my heart—always I feel it pulsing, quivering, as if trying to escape some indescribable horror.

"My throat becomes slowly more and more constricted—breathing becomes a torture—often I wake at that point, and always I am glad when I do. But more often than not I must go forward on weak limbs until I stumble upon the edge of a lake in which nothing grows, neither green nor brown nor black. And there upon the edge of that dead lake I find my guide with the boat.

"The boat is frail, of a thin, carved black wood, like ebony, and the oarsman is unspeakably dirty and slimy. His hair hangs about his face like matted seaweed; his nose is hooked and thin; his lips curl back with disdain for my plight. He speaks no word to me. He is like a madman, now sobbing violently, now laughing as if in merriment; again drawing himself into a shell of reserve as if he knew the answer to the riddles of the world but was afraid to look at any man lest he give something of his knowledge away with a single glance. Silently he paddles the boat along over that lake whose waters are like none in this land of the living. There is great depth to the lake, although one can not see for an inch beneath the surface. There is no slightest ripple upon the surface, because, you see, the wind is dead, too. The paddle makes no ripple as it rises and falls with the slow movement of the guide's

arms. That water is thick, like black blood, and a terrible odor arises from it. . . .

"At length we come to the mouth —the yawning, hungry mouth of the cavern that is the Palace of the Dead. Where there was darkness before, there now is complete night. There is no sound; the boat glides on as if upon the air, without motion to the right or to the left, but on, implacably on, toward the horrors of the grave and the musty corridors of that cavern wherein the dead speak without words in a strange idiom of unreality. Beside us, as we go farther into the cave, I see the wraiths walking with solemn, funereal tread, their heads bowed with their great despair. Their clothing hangs from their shoulders in somber folds.

"Here and there along the narrow ledge that borders the channel, pale, yellowish lights throw back the terrible darkness for a few yards, but the water of the canal gives back no answering reflection. Have you ever seen a light that refused the exhilaration of reflection? It is terrible in its finality—it shines for a little way into the blackness, then abruptly throws itself against an eternity of darkness.

"At length we reach land; the stone corridors and the vistas of cathedral spaces filled with strange, bat-like creatures give way at last, and we step out upon the soil, where stretches away a flat, monotonous land without herbage or trees as far as our eyes can reach in the yellowish eternal dusk of that awful place. And as our feet step upon the ground it gives beneath my tread as if it were spongy, unwholesome soil, not built for the tread of living bodies. Always it is only my own feet that sink deep into that strange ground; the feet of my guide, who goes ahead, tread more lightly. Always there is the feeling that I alone of all the creatures in that place am alive, that all my companions are dead things, spinning out the futility of non-existence for the satisfaction of their terrible gods.

"And here comes the strangest part of this dream that recurs. . . ."

DURING this recitation my eyes had remained upon the face of my friend. The nerves along his temple jerked and fluttered as he unfolded the tale for my ears. Although the fire had mounted to licking amber and red, the room seemed permeated with a strange, unearthly chill.

"I must go back now, Frank, to a day in France when we stormed the canal at St. Quentin," he continued. "During the evening, you will remember, we found a platoon of skulking Germans in the tunnel and routed them out. I can remember still how they came out with their hands in the air, their faces caked with the blue, sticky mud of that upturn land, their eyes hollows of madness. Do you remember what I did that evening in the dusk near Bellinglis?"

I nodded. How well I remembered! Gale Parmenter, tired, nervous, the rack and tension of the day's battle against the death-rattling pillboxes on the slope, against the clattering cataract of German rifle fire, still tearing with destructive fingers at his brain, had gone mad in an instant. A German boy, wearing the uniform of the Bavarian regiment then in action in that sector, came up out of the tunnel. His face was pasty gray, his eyes pitted sepulchers, his hair matted, and his mouth twisted with horror. And Gale Parmenter, his mind snapping for a moment with frenzy and madness, had lunged once with naked, already reddened bayonet. The German boy fell in a heap before him, a little moan of surprize escaping between his lips. We removed the dripping bayonet. For weeks Gale Parmenter lay on a bed of torment; his mind seemed to us at one time completely upset and beyond all chance of recovery. When he finally regained a degree of sanity he re-

membered his act, but it required expert nursing and attention to bring him out of the pit of despair into which that mad act had cast his soul.

"The dead, Frank, have devious ways of communicating with the living. In this dream I meet the German boy of Bellinglis. He wears the small skull-cap as he wore it that evening when I spitted him upon my bayonet. His face is just as it appeared to me that day—the matted locks, the horribly staring eyes, the trembling lips. He points his finger at me in that dream, and from his lips, in a voice that is like a woman's, so small and weak and tired it seems, he says to me, *'Der Tag!'*—the two German words that one heard so much in those days. 'The Day!' And I know what he means. He is telling me that the day is coming when the gods themselves will take toll upon my life for the wrong I committed upon him at Bellinglis. He was a captured prisoner, Frank. . . ."

Parmenter's voice had weakened considerably at this point. I interrupted.

"You must forget that dream, Gale," I said. "Surely you can not feel that you are responsible for your moment of madness. Surely the gods will not further despise you."

"They must have their sport," he said, casting his glance toward the sportive, greedy gods in the sky above the Palace of the Dead in the picture above the black marble board. "They will visit something more upon me."

The jangling of the door-bell shattered the silence. I sprang half up from the depths of my chair. Gale Parmenter also sprang to his feet, and his face went deathly white.

"Who could be ringing the door-bell at this hour? And Fanning is abed long ago. I shall have to answer it."

I stood up and watched him walk toward the doors of the study. And I knew in that moment that he was going to his doom, but I was powerless to speak. My tongue refused the bidding of my mind. I heard the front door open and I heard a guttural voice repeating the two words that were spoken in the dream: *"Der Tag!"*

I HEARD the body fall. I ran to the hallway and found Gale Parmenter lying face downward in the door. I looked through the door. A very shabby man with a close-fitting skull-cap was standing there, his eyes distended in horror. His hair was matted beneath the cap; his face wore a yellowish, grayish cast. I tried to order him inside. I could not speak. I lowered my gaze from that apparition, then glanced up again. The figure was still there. The lips were trembling.

He moved through the door and knelt beside me. "I think I am mad," he said weakly.

My hands searched for a spark of life about the stilled heart of Gale Parmenter. He was dead.

"Who are you?" I cried, in horror of the man who knelt beside me.

"My name is Fritz Artmann. I could not sleep tonight. I dressed and walked, not knowing where I was going. I have been out of work. I am a ditch-digger. A German. It is hard to find work because I am not very strong. I do not know why I came to this door and pushed the bell. Something was pushing me along the street."

I knew he was telling the truth.

"Were you in the German army?" I asked.

"I was wounded at Bellinglis during the last days. My comrade, a youth, was killed at Bellinglis with his hands in the air. Sometimes he comes to me in dreams——"

"At Bellinglis? Your comrade killed?" I cried.

I felt the fingers of Gale's unseen ghostly musician plucking at the beat of my own heart. The strange horror

closed over me, suffocating, destroying my heart with its deadly embrace. The last thing I remember was a mocking tongue shouting words that must have been my own: "The dead have devious ways of communicating with the living!"

I saw the grins of the gods above the Palace of the Dead; I saw their lecherous sport; I heard the mocking thunder of their gargantuan laughter rolling and resounding along the leaden sky above that implacable lake. Then I fell into unconsciousness.

A Very Short Ghost-Story Is

THE PHANTOM BARBER

By E. W. MAYO

WE WERE all gathered around the fire, and had been telling ghost stories, when Ed Winters, who had been unusually silent all evening, cleared his throat and leaned forward.

"I had the strangest experience of my life about a month ago," began Ed. "I had just returned from a four weeks hunting-trip and I needed a haircut, so I started for Sam Dally's barber shop as soon as I reached town.

"As I entered the shop a strange feeling crept over me, and it seemed as if an uncanny spell hovered over the whole place. Just as I shut the door I heard the courthouse clock strike three, and as the last sound died away I thought I heard a mocking laugh. I looked up. Bill Elders, the assistant barber, was alone in the shop, and I tried to tell myself I imagined the laugh.

"You know that Bill Elders and I had hated each other like poison since I beat him up for kicking that lame dog. And you know that Bill had threatened to get even with me—had even threatened to kill me. But I was too tired to come back later, so I climbed into the chair and told Bill I wanted a shave and haircut. Bill didn't say a word, but started to cut my hair.

"As I sat in the chair a strange uneasiness stole over me, and the room seemed filled with weirdness.

"Finally Bill finished my hair and started to shave me. Suddenly something seemed to warn me of danger; I glanced toward the mirror, and as I looked my blood froze in my veins.

"Bill Elders stood above me with a terrible look of hate on his face. In his upraised hand he held a razor, and it was just about to descend on my throat when I screamed and slipped over the side of the chair and raced for the door. I pulled it open and fled down the street and into the arms of Sam Dally.

" 'Sam,' I screamed, 'Bill Elders just tried to murder me!'

"A look of amazement overspread Sam Dally's face as he stood and stared at me.

" 'Ed,' he said, 'you're crazy! Bill Elders was killed in an accident two days ago and was buried at 3 o'clock this afternoon.'

"And that," concluded Ed Winters, "was the strangest experience I ever had in my life."

The Scourge of Egypt

by

Arlton Eadie

"The screams continued, broken now by a wild demoniacal laugh."

"WELL, and what do you think of it?" asked Noel Drayle.

The object upon which I was thus invited to pass an opinion was a large and very battered wooden mummy-case resting in the middle of the floor of his study. The lid was carved in low relief with a representation of a life-sized human figure, and the sides daubed with crude hieroglyphs in red and green paint. These were so plainly the work of a modern hand that I had no difficulty in making up my mind.

"A palpable fake," I said with a shrug. "I'm surprized at a man of your experience being taken in with a thing like that. Why, the signs seem to have been painted in haphazard — they do not even make sense."

Noel Drayle merely laughed.

"Oh, I quite agree that the hieroglyphic writing is a forgery—it was added by an ignorant showman to whose 'Exhibition of Freaks and Curiosities' the mummy formerly belonged. It is quite evident that they have been painted by someone who did not know their meaning, just to make the thing look interesting. The fraud is so bare-faced that not a single bid — other than my own, of course — was forthcoming when it was put up for sale last week. It was knocked down to me for five pounds, and I think I've got a bargain."

"Mummy and all?" I cried; for he had removed the lid as he spoke, re-

vealing the still, linen-wrapped figure within.

"Yes, and I think it's rather an unusual type of mummy at that," was my friend's reply.

I drew near and looked into the great wooden case.

Even to one whose daily task is to lecture on the antiquities of ancient Egypt there comes a feeling of mystery and awe at the sight of the embalmed remains of the men and women who once formed part of that remote and long-vanished civilization. Looking upon their silent, stiff-lying forms, one is tempted to ask oneself what strange sights have greeted those now lusterless eyes; what deeds have been accomplished by those rigid hands; what thoughts and emotions have surged within those handfuls of brownish dust which were their brains. Could they but speak, what a tale those lips could tell of the dim, far-off ages when the history of our own land had yet to emerge from the mists of savagery which then enshrouded it.

"A little bit out of the usual, eh?"

Noel's question roused me from the train of thought into which I had unconsciously fallen. Dismissing my romantic speculations, I applied myself to the practical task of examining the mummy.

Yes, it certainly *did* seem to differ from the common run. The general style of the interlaced swathings led me to assign it to the early part of the Nineteenth Dynasty, probably between the reigns of Rameses I and Menephtah II, though the absence of any inscription made this a mere guess on my part. This absence, in itself, was unusual. The method of embalming was a costly one, only used for wealthy and influential persons, and such were in the habit of having their names and titles fully displayed.

"There seems to be some metal object beneath the wrappings," said Noel, gently prodding the breast of the mummy, "and the shape of the head seems to suggest there is a sort of diadem on it. I've a jolly good mind to unroll the wrappings and see what's underneath."

"Just as you please," I answered, adding, with an attempt at a rather grim jest, "I reckon it's *your* funeral—not mine."

"Let's carry him into the surgery—we're not likely to be disturbed there. It would be deuced awkward if Esther happened to walk in here while we were in the middle of our post-mortem!"

We gently lifted the ancient relic of humanity and carried it into the tiny, white-painted room where Noel was accustomed to perform his minor operations.

"Up with him," said Noel, and an instant later his long-defunct "subject" was lying on the silver-plated top of the long iron table.

For a while the young surgeon looked at it reflectively.

"It has just struck me," he said suddenly, "what a splendid idea it would be for an up-to-date murderer to get rid of his victim by embalming the corpse and passing it off as an ancient Egyptian mummy."

I started and drew back slightly. His casually uttered surmise had sent an ice-cold shiver down my spine.

"You — you surely don't think that this——"

He interrupted me with a laugh.

"Of course not, old chap. The thought merely crossed my mind, that's all, and I wondered why these writers of sensational fiction have never hit upon so novel, yet obvious, a method of getting rid of the *corpus delicti*. But let's get to work."

REMOVING our coats and rolling up our shirt-sleeves, we began our ghoulish task. Taking a pair of scissors from his instrument-case, he cut the knot at the back of the neck; then, I lifting the shoulders while he unrolled, we began to remove the

endless bandages with which the mummy was swathed. We worked in silence, the only sounds to be heard within that tiny, brilliantly lighted room being the pattering of the dried spices on to the metal table and the whir of the electric fan which Noel had set in motion to dissipate the heavy aromatic odor arising from the mummy.

"I was right. Look!" said Noel suddenly, pointing to a gleam of bronze which showed dully between the swathings on the breast. Then he resumed his task with feverish energy.

But it almost seemed as if the mummy were reluctant to give up its secret. With tantalizing deviation the wrappings led down to the feet, then upward to the shoulders — everywhere, in fact, except where their unrolling would reveal the hidden object. What could it be? I asked myself the question time and again as I breathlessly waited. Was it an amulet? — the usual *ushabti* image?—a sword?—a regal scepter?

But it was none of those things that Noel at last drew forth.

"Why, it's a flail!" he cried, holding it up.

"It looks to me more like a scourge," I answered, as I took the strange object from him and closely examined it.

Whatever name one chose to call it by, it was a terrible instrument. The stock was of bronze, elaborately ornamented and engraved with an inscription in hieroglyphic writing. The butt was fashioned into a beautifully carved head of a Sphinx; from the other end there sprang three thin, pliant bronze wires, loaded at their tips with many small, sharp pieces of the same metal, placed there, presumably, for the purpose of lacerating the flesh of the unfortunate slaves or criminals whose fate it had been to come under its deadly stroke; for it seemed as though the thing had formed an instrument of execution rather than a mere means of punishment. The same thought seemed to occur to my friend.

"Pretty little toy, isn't it?" he said, making the loaded triple tails whistle through the air. "I should imagine that a couple of dozen with this was about equivalent to a sentence of death."

"It looks as though you've got good value for your fiver," I told him. "Although I've had a fairly wide experience of Egyptian antiquities, I've never seen such an article before. There's an inscription on it, too. Would you mind if I have a shot at deciphering it?"

"By no means. Go ahead."

It did not take me many minutes to realize the importance of the engraved signs.

"Hullo! here's a royal *cartouche!*" I cried, pointing to an oval near the end of the inscription; "'Seti Menephtah, beloved of the Gods'— that's the king usually known as Seti the First——"

"Let's have it in its proper order," said Noel, burning with impatience.

I again applied myself to the study of the writing.

"'This is the Scourge of Kephra-Ophis, Lord of the Lash, Keeper of the bond-slaves of Yuteh-Melk, those who labor for their divine master, King Seti Menephtah, beloved of the Gods, ruler of the Upper and Lower Nile-lands' — why, Noel, my boy, you've struck a gold mine this time. You can sell this relic for a thousand times the sum you gave for it."

He looked at me as though he thought I had taken leave of my senses.

"What's the excitement?" he said. "I can't see anything extraordinary in the thing. Is it made of gold?"

I shook my head.

"Better than that," I answered impressively. "That scourge has made history—and big, world-famed history! Seti was the Pharaoh of the Oppression, the bond-slaves of

Yuteh-Melk were the Israelites, and this scourge was wielded by the chief of their Egyptian taskmasters, and that ornament"—I pointed to the circlet of bronze which he had at that moment freed from the head-wrappings—"was probably Kephra-Ophis' badge of office!"

Noel Drayle gave a little gasp.

"You're joking—you must be!" he cried incredulously.

"I'm quite prepared to offer you a hundred pounds for your purchase, right now. But I warn you that it is not a tenth of its real value."

"I don't intend to sell, anyway," Noel returned decisively. "If what you say is true, I think I'll make a little experiment with our defunct slave-driver——"

"What kind of an experiment?" I asked quickly.

"I'll tell you that when my arrangements are complete," he countered, with a cryptic smile. "And now, if you don't mind, we'll return Kephra-Ophis to his little wooden dugout. I've had about enough research for one night. I want to do a bit of thinking."

I INTEND no disrespect to the man who was my friend when I say that Noel Drayle was possessed of a strange and unusual mentality. He had not been content with making the physical properties of the human brain his special study; he went farther, delving into the much-debated questions of the psychological functions of that organ, with the result that his undoubted success in the first-named sphere was more than counterbalanced by the coldness with which the medical world received his startling, semi-occult theories in the latter. During the last few years, I knew, his investigations had been centered on the phenomena of hypnotism. It occasioned no surprize, therefore, when I called on him a few days later, to find him in the company of Dr. Harland, the man whose open practise of mesmerism had been the subject of a recent inquiry of the British Medical Society.

Harland was a tall, commanding, hawk-faced man with an almost Oriental swarthiness of hair and complexion. It needed but one glance into his dark, magnetic eyes to understand the secret of his successful treatment of obscure nervous disorders. He was one of those strange freaks of nature that one occasionally meets with, a man possessed of a natural power to sway the thoughts and emotions of his fellow-creatures.

The surprize with which Noel Drayle greeted me seemed rather greater than the occasion called for.

"So it *is* you, after all?" he cried. Then he turned to the other man. "Pray accept my apology, Dr. Harland; you were quite right."

I gazed from one to the other in surprize. Noticing my look, Harland stepped forward with a smile.

"I think we are needlessly mystifying you, sir," he said, fixing his bright, black eyes on me. "As a matter of fact, we expected your coming—at least I did, though Mr. Drayle was somewhat skeptical!"

I shook my head.

"I fear you have made a mistake," I answered. "My visit here was quite on the impulse of the moment."

"Quite so," Harland's tone was quite unruffled by my denial. "And I do not think I am far out when I say that this sudden impulse—as you quite honestly thought it to be—came to you exactly ten minutes since."

I thought for a moment, then was compelled to admit that he was right. I had started out with the intention of going somewhere else; it was only when I was passing the top of the street that I turned aside to seek out Drayle.

"You'll probably be surprized to know that you're here because Dr. Harland willed you to come," interposed Noel Drayle at this point. "I

particularly wished to see you, and suggested 'phoning you to call round. Dr. Harland, however, asserted that he could bring you here by exerting his will and implanting the unconscious impulse in your mind. I agreed to allow him to make a test of his power—and within ten minutes you were ringing at the bell!"

It was certainly a strange explanation of my unpremeditated visit, but I possessed too open a mind on such matters either to affirm or deny its truth. I ventured to hint, however, that I should be glad to witness another and more convincing demonstration of the hypnotic doctor's skill.

"And you have come at just the right time to do so," declared Noel. "Come into my study, and we shall see——"

"What we shall see," broke in Harland with a smiling shrug. "It is best not to dogmatize on the success of any incursion into the occult. It is only tricksters and charlatans who claim the power of entering the unseen world at any and every seance."

As soon as I entered the study I saw that some preparations had already been made. Two couches had been drawn up side by side in the center of the room, immediately beneath the electrolier; the heavy curtains were drawn across the windows so as to exclude every ray of daylight. Upon one couch lay the mummy of Kephra-Ophis, still partly unrolled as we had left it after the finding of the scourge and head-fillet. These latter objects had been placed in their original positions, one resting on the head of the mummy, the other lying between its clasped hands.

"Mr. Drayle informs me that you are able to write shorthand," said Harland, turning to me. "Are you able to do so in the dark?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've never had occasion to attempt that feat," I answered, smiling.

Harland looked disappointed.

"In that case we will have to have a little light during the seance, though I should have preferred the room to be in complete darkness. I am about to place your friend in an hypnotic trance, and I wish you to take down anything he may say while under its influence. But first we must reduce the light."

He mounted on a chair and, after one or two attempts, succeeded in fixing a piece of brown paper over the single illuminated globe in such a manner as to throw a narrow funnel of light on to the two couches, the rest of the room being in semi-darkness.

"Is there enough light for you to write by?" he inquired of me when he had finished.

"Oh, yes," I assured him, glancing at his notebook which I had placed before me in readiness. There was just sufficient light for me to see the point of my pencil against the paper.

"Then let us begin," said Harland.

As he spoke, the door was thrown open and Esther Drayle entered.

ON THE few occasions on which I had met Noel's wife I had been impressed by her unusual, if somewhat statuesque, beauty. With her dark, thickly curling hair, her large somber eyes, her slightly aquiline, pallid features and full red lips, she had always struck me as being more of an Oriental than a European type. I knew that Noel had met her while traveling in the East, but exactly where, and under what circumstances, he had not thought it necessary to explain. Now, as she entered the room, I could see that she was laboring under some strong emotion.

"Noel!" She ignored our presence and advanced straight to her husband. "What is this thing that you intend to do?"

The young surgeon laughed reassuringly as he laid a hand on her arm.

"A little experiment, Esther; that is all."

"With that?" An expression of loathing mounted on the beautiful face as she pointed to the mummy of Kephra-Ophis.

Noel flushed and fidgeted like a guilty schoolboy.

"Tell me exactly what you are about to do," she went on in a tone of quiet insistence.

"Well, I know it may sound very foolish to a professed skeptic in occult matters, such as you, my dear, but we—or rather I—was about to attempt a little tentative journey into the Past."

"I'm afraid I do not understand, Noel." She looked around as she spoke and for the first time seemed to become aware of the presence of Harland and me.

"There is really no occasion for alarm, my dear Mrs. Drayle," said Dr. Harland as he stepped forward. "These little—ah—investigations are quite trifling little affairs, interesting only to those eccentric people who, like myself, look upon the unseen world as being no less real than the one around us. They are so foolish and trifling as to be quite unworthy of the notice of such an enlightened skeptic as yourself!" And he made a slow, ironical inclination of his head.

Esther Drayle shrugged slightly and a hard look came into her eyes.

"I must ask you for a more detailed explanation of your 'little investigation,' Doctor," she said firmly.

The great hypnotist gave a tolerant smile.

"I will do my best to make things clear, my dear madam." He spoke in the patient tone of one who humors the caprice of a wayward child. "I fear I may seem to be talking in a foreign language if I attempt to explain the theories of the great Freud, so I will confine myself to elementary matters. Of course you, in common with the rest of the human race, occasionally have dreams. When the conscious mind has lost its own individuality in that periodical oblivion which we call sleep, a series of impressions will sometimes be recorded by the sensorium—that part of the nervous system which is the first recipient of the impressions of the senses—which causes images to appear before the mental eye. Sometimes the visions thus called up are reasonable and coherent; sometimes they are fragmentary and fantastic. But invariably the sleeper has no conception of Time or Space. For his soaring senses the barriers which beset our petty, earthly lives do not exist. Without astonishment he re-enacts the events that have happened long ago; without fear he holds converse with those who have passed away. But these are the mere chance impressions impinging on the sleeping brain. When such visions are controlled——"

"How can they be controlled?" demanded the girl.

"By the exercise of hypnotic influence, aided by the propinquity of some object that will help to fix the subconscious impression. This mummy"—Harland pointed to the motionless form on the couch—"is that of a man who lived in the reign of Seti the First, about 3,300 years ago. By virtue of the time-annihilating power of sleep, I am confident that I will be able to so merge the individuality of your husband—the *ka*, or twin-soul, as the ancient Egyptians called it—with that of this Kephra-Ophis, as to cause him to recall the memories of that long-dead officer of Pharaoh, to be swayed by his thoughts, to experience his loves and hatreds. All this, of course, only so long as he remains in the hypnotic sleep."

Esther Drayle turned to her hus-

band and held out her hands in appeal.

"Do not consent, Noel," she cried. "Do not allow him to carry out this experiment. Remember that if it is successful you will assume the individuality of this Egyptian slave-driver, reverencing what he reverenced and hating what he hated."

"Of course," returned Noel, surprized at the vehemence of her opposition to his project. "That is the whole point of the experiment."

"Then do not allow it to be made!" she burst out, her voice vibrant with entreaty. "If you do, your love for me will turn to bitter hatred. The bond-slaves of Yuteh-Melk, whom this Kephra-Ophis scourged and flayed, were the Children of Israel."

Noel Drayle looked puzzled.

"I know that, Esther, but I fail to see how that fact can affect my love for you."

"Have you not read of the barbarities which he practised on the Jewish slaves? If you allow your soul to enter into his body, you will loathe me as he loathed them—treat me as he treated them. For, although I have never confessed it before, I am of Jewish race."

He stared at her for a moment in bewildered surprize, then laid his hand on her arm with a reassuring laugh.

"That can not possibly make the slightest difference in my love for you," he answered gently. "Come, come, Esther. You are exciting yourself needlessly."

Dr. Harland stepped forward with a smile.

"Since Mrs. Drayle objects to the experiment, there is nothing more to be said——"

"No, no, Doctor," Noel interrupted quickly. "I should never forgive myself if I allowed a foolish scruple to stand in the way of my great adventure. Come with me, Esther. You will laugh at your hysterical fears when it is all over."

He took her arm gently and led her from the room, returning in a few moments.

"I have administered a sedative," he said briefly. "And now, gentlemen, I am ready for the experiment."

HE LAID himself on the couch by the side of the mummy and Harland took up his stand before him and began to make slow passes in the air. In a few seconds Noel's eyes grew fixed and vacant; the muscles of his body relaxed; his breathing became slow and regular.

Harland ceased his passes and folded his arms across his breast.

"Sleep!" he commanded in a deep, sonorous voice. "Let your soul wing its way back through the mists of Time, seeing, and revealing what it sees. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," came from Noel's slightly parted lips.

"What do you behold?"

There was a slight pause; then:

"I see two narrow belts of verdure set in a waste of golden sand, with a broad river running through the green. It is the Land of Khem."

"Approach nearer," ordered the hypnotist. "What do you see now?"

"I see a mighty, many-pillared temple, with sun-kissed pylons rising into the blue sky. It is the Temple of Chensu at Karnak. An avenue of Sphinxes guards the approach, all fresh-hewn and gleaming white. There are six on one side and five on the other."

"Seek out the missing Sphinx. . . . Have you found it?"

"Yes. A fourfold line of toiling captives is strung along the desert road which leads from the quarries of On. They are harnessed together like cattle — old men, young men, boys—all straining at the chains by which they drag the massive, sculptured monster to its appointed place. Tall, fierce-looking men walk up and

down the line of toilers, cracking their long whips and shouting threats and curses. On the statue's base there stands a man clad in rich vesture, with a coronet of bright bronze upon his head and a three-thonged scourge of metal in his hand. It is Kephra-Ophis, Lord of the Lash, Keeper of the bond-slaves of Yuteh-Melk."

"That man is yourself!" said Harland, and made a peculiar motion with his hands.

Instantly the voice of the hypnotized man changed from his usual cultured accents to a raucous bellow so pregnant with cruelty and bloodlust that I felt my heart go cold.

"Yes, I am Kephra-Ophis!" he roared. "Lord of the Lash—Keeper of the Slaves! Ho-ho! Faster there—faster, you dogs! Ho-ho! Faster!"

The voice went on, but I was no longer listening. My attention had been attracted by a slight movement of the wrappings of the mummy. At first it was so slight that for a moment I thought my eyes were deceiving me. I looked again. No, I was not mistaken. The mummy was bathed in the narrow stream of white light that fell from the electric globe overhead; every detail was clear and distinct. And the bands of discolored linen which swathed the body of Kephra-Ophis were, slowly but surely, *moving!*

A sudden rigidity seemed to descend upon my limbs as I thought I realized the meaning of what I saw—that the hideous, dried-up caricature of humanity was about to wake to life. I could not move, or even cry out. I could only stare with distended, horrified eyes at the gentle movement which agitated the mummy's breast.

Presently I was aware that a thin gap had appeared where the edge of one of the bands was lifted. Then, with slow and horrible deliberation there crawled from beneath a small *scarabæus* beetle. Its color was silvery white, and it seemed to be semi-transparent. Whether it was its color or the apparent feebleness of its movements I know not, but the impression it gave to my mind was one of almost incredible age.

Slowly, warily, as though it were testing its power of movement after awakening from centuries of inaction, it crawled toward the mummy's shoulder, then to the padded rail of the couch on which Noel Drayle lay.

It was not the aimless running to and fro of an ordinary insect, but a steady, purposeful progress, and I could see that it was making its way toward the face of the sleeping man. As though I, too, were hypnotized, I watched it mount his shoulder. I could even distinguish its tiny shadow on the stiff linen as it passed across his collar, then upward over his throat toward the parted lips. . . .

A strangled scream from the doorway made me swing round. Esther Drayle had entered and was pointing a shaking finger at her unconscious husband.

"Look! the *scarabæus*—the Sacred Beetle of Egypt! Can't you see it? Shake it off—kill it!"

I looked in the direction of her pointing finger. The beetle had vanished.

How it had disappeared, or where it was now, I did not have time even to consider, for at that moment Noel Drayle rose to his feet.

But it was a transformed Noel. His features were convulsed with hatred; a ferocious glare was in his eyes. From his lips came harsh, guttural sounds—the voice of Kephra-Ophis.

"Noel! Noel, dearest — don't you know me?"

The man paid not the slightest heed to her trembling question. Stooping swiftly, he lifted the bronze diadem from the mummy's brow and placed it on his own. Snatching up the Scourge of Egypt, he aimed a savage blow at Esther.

"He's mad!" she shrieked, and fled from the room, closely pursued by the frenzied man.

For a few seconds the unexpected outcome of our experiment seemed to deprive both Harland and me of the power of coherent thought. Then he leapt toward the door.

"After him—quick! He'll murder——"

A sudden outburst of agonized screams guided our steps as we dashed up the stairs. They came from a room on our right. The door was locked.

"Force it," gasped Harland, white to the lips.

Not once but many times did we throw ourselves against the panels before the lock gave way; and all the time the screams continued, broken now and again by a wild demoniacal laugh.

As we entered the room a terrible sight met our eyes. Esther, her dainty dressing-wrapper torn to ribbons and soaked with blood, was crouching in the farther corner. Over her towered Noel Drayle, swinging the bronze scourge in his hand.

"Noel!" I cried as I ran forward. "What are you about——"

He shook off my grasp and turned with a snarl. I heard the swish of the loaded thongs as the whip descended within an inch of my face. Desperately I closed with him, endeavoring to hold his hands. But he broke my grip with a madman's strength and again raised his flail-like weapon.

Lucky it was for me that the commotion by this time attracted the attention of the servants. Harland and a burly chauffeur threw themselves on him; a very distressed-looking butler hung grimly to his feet. In a few seconds he was being held down on the bed, while Harland rendered first aid to the girl and I telephoned for more effective means of restraint.

For three days and nights Noel Drayle's life hung in the balance. For the most part his hours of consciousness were spent in a stony silence, which he broke only to utter strange words, seeming to urge on gangs of slaves to the building of pyramids and temples which existed only in his own imagination. The doctors could only shake their heads and offer their opinion that his mental lapse had been caused by too deep a study of the history of ancient Egypt. But Esther Drayle had another theory.

"Why do you not remove the mesmeric influence?" she demanded of Dr. Harland when we called together to inquire after her husband.

But he gave a helpless shrug.

"I would willingly give all I possess to undo the mischief I have unwittingly done," he answered sadly. "But I fear that the soul of Kephra-Ophis will never quit the body of your husband."

"What makes you so positive on that point?" she asked, with, it seemed, a sudden suspicion.

Instead of answering, he turned to me with another question.

"Did you notice a strange, transparent beetle emerge from the wrappings of the mummy?"

I told him that I had seen it.

"Did you see where it went to?" was his next query.

I shook my head, and he went on impressively.

"It entered the parted lips of the sleeping man, and I verily believe that by doing so it has prevented me from recalling Noel to his own self. Strange as it may seem, I am forced to the theory that the white *scarabæus* was the soul of Kephra-Ophis."

A loud and mocking laugh from Esther greeted his words.

"A very pretty little fairy-tale, but it does not deceive me!" she cried, stepping close to him and

speaking rapidly. "I know your reason for not allowing Noel to return to his normal state of mind. A check, drawn in your favor and purporting to be signed by him, was presented at his bank on the morning following your so-called experiment. The signature is very much like Noel's writing, but I know for a fact that he would never give away such a huge sum without telling me. That check is a forgery, Dr. Harland, and you are keeping him under your influence to prevent his denouncing you!"

The mesmerist gave a tolerant shrug.

"A wild and fantastic tale, and one the police will laugh at," he sneered. "The check was in settlement of a long-standing loan. As for your unfortunate husband, it grieves me to have to tell you that he will never utter another sane word."

Esther's dark eyes hardened until they resembled two points of steel.

"I have asked—humbly asked—you to remove the influence which is clouding Noel's mind," she said slowly. "But what I have asked in vain I must now compel."

Harland's deep-set eyes flickered with amusement.

"How?" he asked mockingly.

"With this!"

Her hand flashed forward, and I saw it held a small revolver aimed directly at his heart. One delicate finger was crooked over the trigger, and I could tell by the depression of the sinews of her wrist that the slightest additional pressure would launch the bullet on its deadly errand.

Apparently Harland saw it, too, for he bowed his head with a slow, submissive gesture which was in itself a confession that his deep-laid plot had failed.

"You win."

As he made the curt admission, Harland waved his hand several times above the face of the unconscious man. Then he turned and passed from the room, a defeated and a ruined man.

And Esther Drayle, with a sob of thanksgiving, threw herself into the eagerly outstretched arms of the man who had, all unknowingly, once wielded the dreaded Scourge of Egypt.

TRANSFORMATION

By HARVEY W. FLINK

We saw the island through the golden mists
  Of early dawn: our hearts beat high with hope;
  And as we scrambled up the sandy slope
We praised our gods until a serpent hissed.
We praised our gods until the leopards came
  And licked our hands, and led us from the beach;
  And we discerned, across a grassy reach,
A palace that was wreathed in living flame.

The leopards, leaping in the pallid shine,
  Brought us to Circe, daughter of the Sun:
We drank from goblets of rich Smyrna wine,
  And groveled at her feet till day was done:
  But when we rose and left her, one by one,
We crossed the floor red-bristled, squealing swine.

The Lost Room

By FITZ-JAMES O'BRIEN

It was oppressively warm. The sun had long disappeared, but seemed to have left its vital spirit of heat behind it. The air rested; the leaves of the acacia-trees that shrouded my windows hung plumb-like on their delicate stalks. The smoke of my cigar scarce rose above my head, but hung about me in a pale blue cloud, which I had to dissipate with languid waves of my hand. My shirt was open at the throat, and my chest heaved laboriously in the effort to catch some breaths of fresher air. The noises of the city seemed to be wrapped in slumber, and the shrilling of the mosquitoes was the only sound that broke the stillness.

As I lay with my feet elevated on the back of a chair, wrapped in that peculiar frame of mind in which thought assumes a species of lifeless motion, the strange fancy seized me of making a languid inventory of the principal articles of furniture in my room. It was a task well suited to the mood in which I found myself. Their forms were duskily defined in the dim twilight that floated shadowily through the chamber; it was no labor to note and particularize each, and from the place where I sat I could command a view of all my possessions without even turning my head.

There was, *imprimis*, that ghostly lithograph by Calame. It was a mere black spot on the white wall, but my inner vision scrutinized every detail of the picture. A wild, desolate, midnight heath, with a spectral oak-tree in the center of the foreground. The wind blows fiercely, and the jagged branches, clothed scantily with ill-grown leaves, are swept to the left continually by its giant force. A formless wrack of clouds streams across the awful sky, and the rain sweeps almost parallel with the horizon. Beyond, the heath stretches off into endless blackness, in the extreme of which either fancy or art has conjured up some undefinable shapes that seem riding into space. At the base of the huge oak stands a shrouded figure. His mantle is wound by the blast in tight folds around his form, and the long cock's feather in his hat is blown upright, till it seems as if it stood on end with fear. His features are not visible, for he has grasped his cloak with both hands, and drawn it from either side across his face. The picture is seemingly objectless. It tells no tale, but there is a weird power about it that haunts one, and it was for that I bought it.

Next to the picture comes the round blot that hangs below it, which I

know to be a smoking-cap. It has my coat of arms embroidered on the front, and for that reason I never wear it; though, when properly arranged on my head, with its long blue silken tassel hanging down by my cheek, I believe it becomes me well. I remember the time when it was in the course of manufacture. I remember the tiny little hands that pushed the colored silks so nimbly through the cloth that was stretched on the embroidery-frame—the vast trouble I was put to to get a colored copy of my armorial bearings for the heraldic work which was to decorate the front of the band—the pursings up of the little mouth, and the contractions of the young forehead, as their possessor plunged into a profound sea of cogitation touching the way in which the cloud should be represented from which the armed hand, that is my crest, issues—the heavenly moment when the tiny hands placed it on my head, in a position that I could not bear for more than a few seconds, and I, king-like, immediately assumed my royal prerogative after the coronation, and instantly levied a tax on my only subject, which was, however, not paid unwillingly. Ah, the cap is there, but the embroiderer has fled; for Atropos was severing the web of life above her head while she was weaving that silken shelter for mine!

How uncouthly the huge piano that occupies the corner at the left of the door looms out in the uncertain twilight! I neither play nor sing, yet I own a piano. It is a comfort to me to look at it, and to feel that the music is there, although I am not able to break the spell that binds it. It is pleasant to know that Bellini and Mozart, Cimarosa, Porpora, Glück, and all such—or at least their souls—sleep in that unwieldy case. There lie embalmed, as it were, all operas, sonatas, oratorios, notturnos, marches, songs, and dances, that ever climbed into existence through the four bars that wall in melody. Once I was entirely repaid for the investment of my funds in that instrument which I never use. Blokeeta, the composer, came to see me. Of course his instincts urged him as irresistibly to my piano as if some magnetic power lay within it compelling him to approach. He tuned it, he played on it. All night long, until the gray and spectral dawn rose out of the depths of the midnight, he sat and played, and I lay smoking by the window listening. Wild, unearthly, and sometimes insufferably painful, were the improvisations of Blokeeta. The chords of the instrument seemed breaking with anguish. Lost souls shrieked in his dismal preludes; the half-heard utterances of spirits in pain, that groped at inconceivable distances from anything lovely or harmonious, seemed to rise dimly up out of the waves of sound that gathered under his hands. Melancholy human love wandered out on distant heaths, or beneath dank and gloomy cypresses, murmuring its unanswered sorrow, or hateful gnomes sported and sang in the stagnant swamps, triumphing in unearthly tones over the knight whom they had lured to his death. Such was Blokeeta's night's entertainment; and when he at length closed the piano, and hurried away through the cold morning, he left a memory about the instrument from which I could never escape.

Those snow-shoes that hang in the space between the mirror and the door recall Canadian wanderings—a long race through the dense forests, over the frozen snow, through whose brittle crust the slender hoofs of the caribou that we were pursuing sank at every step, until the poor creature despairingly turned at bay in a small juniper coppice, and we heartlessly shot him down. And I remember how Gabriel, the *habitant*, and François, the half-breed, cut his throat, and how the hot blood rushed out in a torrent over the snowy soil; and I recall the snow *cabane* that Gabriel built, where we

all three slept so warmly; and the great fire that glowed at our feet, painting all kinds of demoniac shapes on the black screen of forest that lay without; and the deer-steaks that we roasted for our breakfast; and the savage drunkenness of Gabriel in the morning, he having been privately drinking out of my brandy-flask all the night long.

That long, haftless dagger that dangles over the mantelpiece makes my heart swell. I found it, when a boy, in a hoary old castle in which one of my maternal ancestors once lived. That same ancestor—who, by the way, yet lives in history—was a strange old sea-king, who dwelt on the extremest point of the southwestern coast of Ireland. He owned the whole of that fertile island called Inniskeiran, which directly faces Cape Clear, where between them the Atlantic rolls furiously, forming what the fishermen of the place call "the Sound." An awful place in winter is that same Sound. On certain days no boat can live there for a moment, and Cape Clear is frequently cut off for days from any communication with the main land.

This old sea-king—Sir Florence O'Driscoll by name—passed a stormy life. From the summit of his castle he watched the ocean, and when any richly laden vessels, bound from the south to the industrious Galway merchants, hove in sight, Sir Florence hoisted the sails of his galley, and it went hard with him if he did not tow into harbor ship and crew. In this way he lived; not a very honest mode of livelihood, certainly, according to our modern ideas, but quite reconcilable with the morals of the time.

As may be supposed, Sir Florence got into trouble. Complaints were laid against him at the English court by the plundered merchants, and the Irish viking set out for London, to plead his own cause before good Queen Bess, as she was called. He had one powerful recommendation: he was a marvelously handsome man. Not Celtic by descent, but half Spanish, half Danish in blood, he had the great northern stature with the regular features, flashing eyes, and dark hair of the Iberian race. This may account for the fact that his stay at the English court was much longer than was necessary, as also for the tradition, which a local historian mentions, that the English queen evinced a preference for the Irish chieftain, of other nature than that usually shown by monarch to subject.

Previous to his departure, Sir Florence had intrusted the care of his property to an Englishman named Hull. During the long absence of the knight, this person managed to ingratiate himself with the local authorities, and gain their favor so far that they were willing to support him in almost any scheme. After a protracted stay, Sir Florence, pardoned of all his misdeeds, returned to his home. Home no longer. Hull was in possession, and refused to yield an acre of the lands he had so nefariously acquired. It was no use appealing to the law, for its officers were in the opposite interest. It was no use appealing to the queen, for she had another lover, and had forgotten the poor Irish knight by this time; and so the viking passed the best portion of his life in unsuccessful attempts to reclaim his vast estates, and was eventually, in his old age, obliged to content himself with his castle by the sea and the island of Inniskeiran, the only spot of which the usurper was unable to deprive him. So this old story of my kinsman's fate looms up out of the darkness that enshrouds that haftless dagger hanging on the wall.

It was somewhat after the foregoing fashion that I dreamily made the inventory of my personal property. As I turned my eyes on each object, one after the other—or the places where they lay, for the room was now so dark that it was almost impossible

to see with any distinctness—a crowd of memories connected with each rose up before me, and, perforce, I had to indulge them. So I proceeded but slowly, and at last my cigar shortened to a hot and bitter morsel that I could barely hold between my lips, while it seemed to me that the night grew each moment more insufferably oppressive. While I was revolving some impossible means of cooling my wretched body, the cigar stump began to burn my lips. I flung it angrily through the open window, and stooped out to watch it falling. It first lighted on the leaves of the acacia, sending out a spray of red sparkles; then, rolling off, it fell plump on the dark walk in the garden, faintly illuminating for a moment the dusky trees and breathless flowers. Whether it was the contrast between the red flash of the cigar-stump and the silent darkness of the garden, or whether it was that I detected by the sudden light a faint waving of the leaves, I know not; but something suggested to me that the garden was cool. I will take a turn there, thought I, just as I am; it can not be warmer than this room, and however still the atmosphere, there is always a feeling of liberty and spaciousness in the open air, that partially supplies one's wants. With this idea running through my head, I arose, lit another cigar, and passed out into the long, intricate corridors that led to the main staircase. As I crossed the threshold of my room, with what a different feeling I should have passed it had I known that I was never to set foot in it again!

I LIVED in a very large house, in which I occupied two rooms on the second floor. The house was old-fashioned, and all the floors communicated by a huge circular staircase that wound up through the center of the building, while at every landing long, rambling corridors stretched off into mysterious nooks and corners. This palace of mine was very high, and its resources, in the way of crannies and windings, seemed to be interminable. Nothing seemed to stop anywhere. Cul-de-sacs were unknown on the premises. The corridors and passages, like mathematical lines, seemed capable of indefinite extensions, and the object of the architect must have been to erect an edifice in which people might go ahead forever. The whole place was gloomy, not so much because it was large, but because an unearthly nakedness seemed to pervade the structure. The staircases, corridors, halls, and vestibules all partook of a desert-like desolation. There was nothing on the walls to break the somber monotony of those long vistas of shade. No carvings on the wainscoting, no molded masks peering down from the simply severe cornices, no marble vases on the landings. There was an eminent dreariness and want of life—so rare in an American establishment—all over the abode. It was Hood's haunted house put in order and newly painted. The servants, too, were shadowy, and chary of their visits. Bells rang three times before the gloomy chambermaid could be induced to present herself; and the negro waiter, a ghoul-like looking creature from Congo, obeyed the summons only when one's patience was exhausted or one's want satisfied in some other way. When he did come, one felt sorry that he had not stayed away altogether, so sullen and savage did he appear. He moved along the echoless floors with a slow, noiseless shamble, until his dusky figure, advancing from the gloom, seemed like some reluctant afreet, compelled by the superior power of his master to disclose himself. When the doors of all the chambers were closed, and no light illuminated the long corridor save the red, unwholesome glare of a small oil lamp on a table at the end, where late lodgers lit their candles, one could not by any possibility conjure up a sadder or more desolate prospect.

Yet the house suited me. Of meditative and sedentary habits, I enjoyed the extreme quiet. There were but few lodgers, from which I infer that the landlord did not drive a very thriving trade; and these, probably oppressed by the somber spirit of the place, were quiet and ghost-like in their movements. The proprietor I scarcely ever saw. My bills were deposited by unseen hands every month on my table, while I was out walking or riding, and my pecuniary response was intrusted to the attendant afreet. On the whole, when the bustling wide-awake spirit of New York is taken into consideration, the somber, half-vivified character of the house in which I lived was an anomaly that no one appreciated better than I who lived there.

I felt my way down the wide, dark staircase in my pursuit of zephyrs. The garden, as I entered it, did feel somewhat cooler than my own room, and I puffed my cigar along the dim, cypress-shrouded walks with a sensation of comparative relief. It was very dark. The tall-growing flowers that bordered the path were so wrapped in gloom as to present the aspect of solid pyramidal masses, all the details of leaves and blossoms being buried in an embracing darkness, while the trees had lost all form, and seemed like masses of overhanging cloud. It was a place and time to excite the imagination; for in the impenetrable cavities of endless gloom there was room for the most riotous fancies to play at will. I walked and walked, and the echoes of my footsteps on the ungraveled and mossy path suggested a double feeling. I felt alone and yet in company at the same time. The solitariness of the place made itself distinct enough in the stillness, broken alone by the hollow reverberations of my step, while those very reverberations seemed to imbue me with an undefined feeling that I was not alone. I was not, therefore, much startled when I was suddenly accosted from beneath the solid darkness of an immense cypress by a voice saying, "Will you give me a light, sir?"

"Certainly," I replied, trying in vain to distinguish the speaker amidst the impenetrable dark.

Somebody advanced, and I held out my cigar. All I could gather definitely about the individual who thus accosted me was that he must have been of extremely small stature; for I, who am by no means an overgrown man, had to stoop considerably in handing him my cigar. The vigorous puff that he gave his own lighted up my Havana for a moment, and I fancied that I caught a glimpse of a pale, weird countenance, immersed in a background of long, wild hair. The flash was, however, so momentary that I could not even say certainly whether this was an actual impression or the mere effort of imagination to embody that which the senses had failed to distinguish.

"Sir, you are out late," said this unknown to me, as he, with half-uttered thanks, handed me back my cigar, for which I had to grope in the gloom.

"Not later than usual," I replied, dryly.

"Hum! you are fond of late wanderings, then?"

"That is just as the fancy seizes me."

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Queer house, isn't it?"

"I have only found it quiet."

"Hum! But you *will* find it queer, take my word for it." This was earnestly uttered; and I felt at the same time a bony finger laid on my arm, that cut it sharply like a blunted knife.

"I can not take your word for any such assertion," I replied, rudely, shaking off the bony finger with an irrepressible motion of disgust.

"No offense, no offense," muttered my unseen companion rapidly, in a

strange, subdued voice, that would have been shrill had it been louder; "your being angry does not alter the matter. You will find it a queer house. Everybody finds it a queer house. Do you know who live there?"

"I never busy myself, sir, about other people's affairs," I answered sharply, for the individual's manner, combined with my utter uncertainty as to his appearance, oppressed me with an irksome longing to be rid of him.

"O, you don't? Well, I do. I know what they are—well, well, well!" and as he pronounced the three last words his voice rose with each, until, with the last, it reached a shrill shriek that echoed horribly among the lonely walks. "Do you know what they eat?" he continued.

"No, sir—nor care."

"O, but you will care. You must care. You shall care. I'll tell you what they are. They are enchanters. They are ghouls. They are cannibals. Did you never remark their eyes, and how they gloated on you when you passed? Did you never remark the food that they served up at your table? Did you never in the dead of night hear muffled and unearthly footsteps gliding along the corridors, and stealthy hands turning the handle of your door? Does not some magnetic influence fold itself continually around you when they pass, and send a thrill through spirit and body, and a cold shiver that no sunshine will chase away? O, you have! You have felt all these things! I know it!"

The earnest rapidity, the subdued tones, the eagerness of accent, with which all this was uttered, impressed me most uncomfortably. It really seemed as if I could recall all those weird occurrences and influences of which he spoke; and I shuddered in spite of myself in the midst of the impenetrable darkness that surrounded me.

"Hum!" said I, assuming, without knowing it, a confidential tone, "may I ask how you know these things?"

"How I know them? Because I am their enemy; because they tremble at my whisper; because I hang upon their track with the perseverance of a bloodhound and the stealthiness of a tiger; because—because—I was *of* them once!"

"Wretch!" I cried excitedly, for involuntarily his eager tones had wrought me up to a high pitch of spasmodic nervousness, "then you mean to say that you——"

As I uttered this word, obeying an uncontrollable impulse, I stretched forth my hand in the direction of the speaker and made a blind clutch. The tips of my fingers seemed to touch a surface as smooth as glass, that glided suddenly from under them. A sharp, angry hiss sounded through the gloom, followed by a whirring noise, as if some projectile passed rapidly by, and the next moment I felt instinctively that I was alone.

ALMOST disagreeable feeling instantly assailed me;—a prophetic instinct that some terrible misfortune menaced me; an eager and overpowering anxiety to get back to my own room without loss of time. I turned and ran blindly along the dark cypress alley, every dusky clump of flowers that rose blackly in the borders making my heart each moment cease to beat. The echoes of my own footsteps seemed to redouble and assume the sounds of unknown pursuers following fast upon my track. The boughs of lilac-bushes and syringas, that here and there stretched partly across the walk, seemed to have been furnished suddenly with hooked hands that sought to grasp me as I flew by, and each moment I expected to behold some awful and impassable barrier fall across my track and wall me up forever.

At length I reached the wide entrance. With a single leap I sprang up the four or five steps that formed the stoop, and dashed along the hall,

up the wide, echoing stairs, and again along the dim, funereal corridors until I paused, breathless and panting, at the door of my room. Once so far, I stopped for an instant and leaned heavily against one of the panels, panting lustily after my late run. I had, however, scarcely rested my whole weight against the door, when it suddenly gave way, and I staggered in, head foremost. To my utter astonishment the room I had left in profound darkness was now a blaze of light. So intense was the illumination that for a few seconds while the pupils of my eyes were contracting under the sudden change, I saw absolutely nothing save the dazzling glare. This fact in itself, coming on me with such utter suddenness, was sufficient to prolong my confusion, and it was not until after several minutes had elapsed that I perceived the room was not only illuminated, but occupied. And such occupants! Amazement at the scene took such possession of me that I was incapable of either moving or uttering a word. All that I could do was to lean against the wall, and stare blankly at the strange picture.

It might have been a scene out of Faublas, or Grammont's *Memoirs*, or happened in some palace of Minister Fouqué.

Round a large table in the center of the room, where I had left a student-like litter of books and papers, were seated a half a dozen persons. Three were men and three were women. The table was heaped with a prodigality of luxuries. Luscious eastern fruits were piled up in silver filigree vases, through whose meshes their glowing rinds shone in the contrasts of a thousand hues. Small silver dishes that Benvenuto might have designed, filled with succulent and aromatic meats, were distributed upon a cloth of snowy damask. Bottles of every shape, slender ones from the Rhine, stout fellows from Holland, sturdy ones from Spain, and quaint basket-woven flasks from Italy, absolutely littered the board. Drinking-glasses of every size and hue filled up the interstices, and the thirsty German flagon stood side by side with the aerial bubbles of Venetian glass that rest so lightly on their thread-like stems. An odor of luxury and sensuality floated through the apartment. The lamps that burned in every direction seemed to diffuse a subtle incense on the air, and in a large vase that stood on the floor I saw a mass of magnolias, tuberoses, and jasmines grouped together, stifling each other with their honeyed and heavy fragrance.

The inhabitants of my room seemed beings well suited to so sensual an atmosphere. The women were strangely beautiful, and all were attired in dresses of the most fantastic devices and brilliant hues. Their figures were round, supple, and elastic; their eyes dark and languishing; their lips full, ripe, and of the richest bloom. The three men wore half-masks, so that all I could distinguish were heavy jaws, pointed beards, and brawny throats that rose like massive pillars out of their doublets. All six lay reclining on Roman couches about the table, drinking down the purple wines in large drafts, and tossing back their heads and laughing wildly.

I stood, I suppose, for some three minutes, with my back against the wall staring vacantly at the bacchanal vision, before any of the revellers appeared to notice my presence. At length, without any expression to indicate whether I had been observed from the beginning or not, two of the women arose from their couches, and, approaching, took each a hand and led me to the table. I obeyed their motions mechanically. I sat on a couch between them as they indicated. I unresistingly permitted them to wind their arms about my neck.

"You must drink," said one, pouring out a large glass of red wine; "here is Clos Vougeot of a rare vin-

tage; and here," pushing a flask of amber-hued wine before me, "is Lachryma Christi."

"You must eat," said the other, drawing the silver dishes toward her. "Here are cutlets stewed with olives, and here are slices of a *filet* stuffed with bruised sweet chestnuts;" and as she spoke, she, without waiting for a reply, proceeded to help me.

The sight of the food recalled to me the warnings I had received in the garden. This sudden effort of memory restored to me my other faculties at the same instant. I sprang to my feet, thrusting the women from me with each hand.

"Demons!" I almost shouted, "I will have none of your accursed food. I know you. You are cannibals, you are ghouls, you are enchanters. Begone, I tell you! Leave my room in peace!"

A shout of laughter from all six was the only effect that my passionate speech produced. The men rolled on their couches, and their half-masks quivered with the convulsions of their mirth. The women shrieked, and tossed the slender wine-glasses wildly aloft, and turned to me and flung themselves on my bosom fairly sobbing with laughter.

"Yes," I continued, as soon as the noisy mirth had subsided, "yes, I say, leave my room instantly! I will have none of your unnatural orgies here!"

"His room!" shrieked the woman on my right.

"His room!" echoed she on my left.

"His room! He calls it his room!" shouted the whole party, as they rolled once more into jocular convulsions.

"How know you that it is your room?" said one of the men who sat opposite to me, at length, after the laughter had once more somewhat subsided.

"How do I know?" I replied, indignantly. "How do I know my own room? How could I mistake it, pray? There's my furniture—my piano——"

"He calls that a piano!" shouted my neighbors, again in convulsions as I pointed to the corner where my huge piano, sacred to the memory of Blokeeta, used to stand. "Oh, yes! It is his room. There—there is his piano!"

The peculiar emphasis they laid on the word "piano" caused me to scrutinize the article I was indicating more thoroughly. Up to this time, though utterly amazed at the entrance of these people into my chamber, and connecting them somewhat with the wild stories I had heard in the garden, I still had a sort of indefinite idea that the whole thing was a masquerading freak got up in my absence, and that the bacchanalian orgy I was witnessing was nothing more than a portion of some elaborate hoax of which I was to be the victim. But when my eyes turned to the corner where I had left a huge and cumbrous piano, and beheld a vast and somber organ lifting its fluted front to the very ceiling, and convinced myself, by a hurried process of memory, that it occupied the very spot in which I had left my own instrument, the little self-possession that I had left forsook me. I gazed around me bewildered.

In like manner everything was changed. In the place of that old haftless dagger, connected with so many historic associations personal to myself, I beheld a Turkish yataghan dangling by its belt of crimson silk, while the jewels in the hilt blazed as the lamplight played upon them. In the spot where hung my cherished smoking-cap, memorial of a buried love, a knightly casque was suspended, on the crest of which a golden dragon stood in the act of springing. That strange lithograph by Calame was no longer a lithograph, but it seemed to me that the portion of the wall which it had covered, of the exact shape and size, had been cut out, and, in place of the picture, a *real* scene on the same scale, and with real actors, was distinctly visible. The old oak

was there, and the stormy sky was there; but I saw the branches of the oak sway with the tempest, and the clouds drive before the wind. The wanderer in his cloak was gone; but in his place I beheld a circle of wild figures, men and women, dancing with linked hands around the bole of the great tree, chanting some wild fragment of a song, to which the winds roared an unearthly chorus. The snow-shoes, too, on whose sinewy woof I had sped for many days amidst Canadian wastes, had vanished, and in their place lay a pair of strange upcurled Turkish slippers, that had, perhaps, been many a time shuffled off at the doors of mosques, beneath the steady blaze of an Orient sun.

All was changed. Wherever my eyes turned they missed familiar objects, yet encountered strange representatives. Still, in all the substitutes there seemed to me a reminiscence of what they replaced. They seemed only for a time transmuted into other shapes, and there lingered around them the atmosphere of what they once had been. Thus I could have sworn the room to have been mine, yet there was nothing in it that I could rightly claim. Everything reminded me of some former possession that it was not. I looked for the acacia at the window, and, lo! long, silken palm-leaves swayed in through the open lattice; yet they had the same motion and the same air of my favorite tree, and seemed to murmur to me, "Though we seem to be palm-leaves, yet are we acacia-leaves; yea, those very ones on which you used to watch the butterflies alight and the rain patter while you smoked and dreamed!" So in all things; the room was, yet was not, mine; and a sickening consciousness of my utter inability to reconcile its identity with its appearance overwhelmed me, and choked my reason.

"Well, have you determined whether or not this is your room?" asked the girl on my left, proffering me a huge tumbler creaming over with champagne, and laughing wickedly as she spoke.

"It is mine," I answered, doggedly, striking the glass rudely with my hand, and dashing the aromatic wine over the white cloth. "I know that it is mine; and ye are jugglers and enchanters who want to drive me mad."

"Hush! hush!" she said, gently, not in the least angered at my rough treatment. "You are excited. Alf shall play something to soothe you."

At her signal, one of the men sat down at the organ. After a short, wild, spasmodic prelude, he began what seemed to me to be a symphony of recollections. Dark and somber, and all through full of quivering and intense agony, it appeared to recall a dark and dismal night, on a cold reef, around which an unseen but terribly audible ocean broke with eternal fury. It seemed as if a lonely pair were on the reef, one living, the other dead; one clasping his arms around the tender neck and naked bosom of the other, striving to warm her into life, when his own vitality was being each moment sucked from him by the icy breath of the storm. Here and there a terrible wailing minor key would tremble through the chords like the shriek of sea-birds, or the warning of advancing death. While the man played I could scarce restrain myself. It seemed to be Blokeeta whom I listened to, and on whom I gazed. That wondrous night of pleasure and pain that I had once passed listening to him seemed to have been taken up again at the spot where it had broken off, and the same hand was continuing it. I stared at the man called Alf. There he sat with his cloak and doublet, and long rapier and mask of black velvet. But there was something in the air of the peaked beard, a familiar mystery in the wild mass of raven hair that fell as if wind-blown over his shoulders, which riveted my memory.

"Blokeeta! Blokeeta!" I shouted, starting up furiously from the couch

on which I was lying, and bursting the fair arms that were linked around my neck as if they had been hateful chains; "Blokeeta! my friend! speak to me, I entreat you! Tell these horrid enchanters to leave me. Say that I hate them. Say that I command them to leave my room."

THE man at the organ stirred not in answer to my appeal. He ceased playing, and the dying sound of the last note he had touched faded off into a melancholy moan. The other men and the women burst once more into peals of mocking laughter.

"Why will you persist in calling this your room?" said the woman next to me, with a smile meant to be kind, but to me inexpressibly loathsome. "Have we not shown you by the furniture, by the general appearance of the place, that you are mistaken, and that this can not be your apartment? Rest content, then, with us. You are welcome here, and need no longer trouble yourself about your room."

"Rest content?" I answered, madly; "live with ghosts! eat of awful meats, and see awful sights! Never, never! You have cast some enchantment over the place that has disguised it; but for all that I know it to be my room. You shall leave it!"

"Softly, softly!" said another of the sirens. "Let us settle this amicably. This poor gentleman seems obstinate and inclined to make an uproar. Now we do not want an uproar. We love the night and its quiet; and there is no night that we love so well as that on which the moon is coffined in clouds. Is it not so, my brothers?"

An awful and sinister smile gleamed on the countenances of her unearthly audience, and seemed to glide visibly from underneath their masks.

"Now," she continued, "I have a proposition to make. It would be ridiculous for us to surrender this room simply because this gentleman states that it is his; and yet I feel anxious to gratify, as far as may be fair, his wild assertion of ownership. A room, after all, is not much to us; we can get one easily enough, but still we should be loth to give this apartment up to so imperious a demand. We are willing, however, to *risk* its loss. That is to say"—turning to me—"I propose that we play for the room. If you win, we will immediately surrender it to you just as it stands; if, on the contrary, you lose, you shall bind yourself to depart and never molest us again."

Agonized at the ever-darkening mysteries that seemed to thicken around me, and despairing of being able to dissipate them by the mere exercise of my own will, I caught almost gladly at the chance thus presented to me. The idea of my loss or my gain scarce entered into my calculations. All I felt was an indefinite knowledge that I might, in the way proposed, regain, in an instant, that quiet chamber and that peace of mind of which I had so strangely been deprived.

"I agree," I cried, eagerly; "I agree. Anything to rid myself of such unearthly company!"

The woman touched a small golden bell that stood near her on the table, and it had scarce ceased to tinkle when a negro dwarf entered with a silver tray on which were dice-boxes and dice. A shudder passed over me as I thought in this stunted African I could trace a resemblance to the ghoul-like black servant to whose attendance I had been accustomed.

"Now," said my neighbor, seizing one of the dice-boxes and giving me the other, "the highest wins. Shall I throw first?"

I nodded assent. She rattled the dice, and I felt an inexpressible load lifted from my heart as she threw fifteen.

"It is your turn," she said, with a mocking smile; "but before you throw, I repeat the offer I made you

before. Live with us. Be one of us. We will initiate you into our mysteries and enjoyments—enjoyments of which you can form no idea unless you experience them. Come; it is not too late yet to change your mind. Be with us!"

My reply was a fierce oath, as I rattled the dice with spasmodic nervousness and flung them on the board. They rolled over and over again, and during that brief instant I felt a suspense, the intensity of which I have never known before or since. At last they lay before me. A shout of the same horrible, maddening laughter rang in my ears. I peered in vain at the dice, but my sight was so confused that I could not distinguish the amount of the cast. This lasted for a few moments. Then my sight grew clear, and I sank back almost lifeless with despair as I saw that I had thrown but *twelve!*

"Lost! Lost!" screamed my neighbor, with a wild laugh. "Lost! Lost!" shouted the deep voices of the masked men. "Leave us, coward!" they all cried; "you are not fit to be one of us. Remember your promise; leave us!"

Then it seemed as if some unseen power caught me by the shoulders and thrust me toward the door. In vain I resisted. In vain I screamed and shouted for help. In vain I implored them for pity. All the reply I had was those mocking peals of merriment, while, under the invisible influence, I staggered like a drunken man toward the door. As I reached the threshold the organ pealed out a wild, triumphal strain. The power that impelled me concentrated itself into one vigorous impulse that sent me blindly staggering out into the echoing corridor, and, as the door closed swiftly behind me, I caught one glimpse of the apartment I had left forever. A change passed like a shadow over it. The lamps died out, the siren women and masked men had vanished, the flowers, the fruits, the bright silver and bizarre furniture faded swiftly, and I saw again, for the tenth of a second, my own old chamber restored. There was the acacia waving darkly; there was the table littered with books; there was the ghostly lithograph, the dearly beloved smoking-cap, the Canadian snow-shoes, the ancestral dagger. And there, at the piano, organ no longer, sat Blokeeta playing.

The next instant the door closed violently, and I was left standing in the corridor stunned and despairing.

As soon as I had partially recovered my comprehension I rushed madly to the door, with the dim idea of beating it in. My fingers touched a cold and solid wall. There was no door! I felt all along the corridor for many yards on both sides. There was not even a crevice to give me hope. I rushed down stairs shouting madly. No one answered. In the vestibule I met the negro; I seized him by the collar, and demanded my room. The demon showed his white and awful teeth, which were filed into a saw-like shape, and, extricating himself from my grasp with a sudden jerk, fled down the passage with a gibbering laugh. Nothing but echo answered to my despairing shrieks. The lonely garden resounded with my cries as I strode madly through the dark walks, and the tall funereal cypresses seemed to bury me beneath their heavy shadows. I met no one—could find no one. I had to bear my sorrow and despair alone.

Since that awful hour I have never found my room. Everywhere I look for it, but never see it. Shall I ever find it?

The Eyrie

(Continued from page 438)

publish this collection of weird stories it would be very appropriate to do so under the title of *Weird Tales*, by Seabury Quinn, because that is just what they are. In fact, he has helped materially to make the weird tale famous."

Martin M. Laibow, of Atlantic City, New Jersey, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been a reader of your extremely interesting and absorbing magazine for well over three years, and I can truthfully say it is the *only* magazine that affords me any sort of thrill at all. I am by no means blasé but I am rather hard to get excited. My favorite authors are Seabury Quinn, who, with his excitable, mercurial Frenchman, Jules de Grandin, and the stolid, rather dense Dr. Trowbridge, has endeared himself forever in the hearts of all true weird-fiction lovers, and the inimitable Edmond Hamilton, the dean of weird-scientific fiction-writers. More life to both of them!"

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Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? It will help us to give you the kind of stories you want if you will let us know your likes and dislikes in each issue. *The Shadow Kingdom,* by Robert E. Howard, was the most popular story in the August issue.

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Reader's name and address:

The Gray Lady

(Continued from page 542)

"There seems a queer smell around. Mice, perhaps, after the bird seed."

Bernard said nothing. It was not his business.

"No question of foul play here, sir," said the policeman. "We might move the gentleman on to the sofa before we send for the doctor. Make him more decent-like."

He stooped to take Mr. Robinson's shoulders, and Bernard bent down to lift the ankles. As they half raised themselves with their heavy burden the policeman's boot slipped on the parquet floor. He recovered himself with an effort but kicked heavily against the cupboard door. It flew open.

Maureen screamed.

Almost dropping the body, the two men turned. The cupboard was full, full of a box of unmistakable shape and size.

"My God!" muttered Bernard.

"The gray lady," said Maureen.

"A coffin," the policeman whispered. "What's this?"

He went over to it, and passed his hands gently along the wood. Suddenly there was a wrenching, expanding sound. The air coming suddenly from the open cupboard door, which had been hitherto hermetically sealed, forced the wooden planks apart.

The whole of the front of the coffin fell away. For a moment the three standing there saw the full-sized figure of a woman in a gray dress, her face mercifully covered by a cloth.

Even as they looked the fresh air wreaked its vengeance.

Before any of them could take a step forward there was the sound of a lingering sigh, a little rustle, and all that remained in the coffin was a little heap of dust and rag.

Skull-Face

(Continued from page 472)

wonder again as to the contents of the strange chests which lined the walls.

Four raps on the under side of the floor, and a moment later I stood in the idol-room. I gasped in amazement—the fact that across a table from me sat Kathulos in all his horror was not the cause of my exclamation. Except for the table, the chair on which the Skull-face sat and the altar—now bare of incense—the room was perfectly bare! Drab, unlovely walls of the unused warehouse met my gaze instead of the costly tapestries I had become accustomed to. The palms, the idol, the lacquered screen—all were gone.

"Ah, Mr. Costigan, you wonder, no doubt."

The dead voice of the Master broke in on my thoughts. His serpent eyes glittered balefully. The long yellow fingers twined sinuously upon the table.

"You thought me to be a trusting fool, no doubt!" he rapped suddenly. "Did you think I would not have you followed? You fool, Yussef Ali was at your heels every moment!"

An instant I stood speechless, frozen by the crash of these words against my brain; then as their import sank home, I launched myself forward with a roar. At the same instant, before my clutching fingers could close on the mocking horror on the other side of the table, men rushed from every side. I whirled, and with the clarity of hate, from the swirl of savage faces I singled out Yussef Ali, and crashed my right fist against his temple with every ounce of my strength. Even as he dropped, Hassim struck me to my knees and a Chinaman flung a man-net over my shoulders. I heaved erect, bursting the stout cords as if they were strings, and then a blackjack in the hands of Ganra Singh stretched me stunned and bleeding on the floor.

Lean sinewy hands seized and bound me with cords that cut cruelly into my flesh. Emerging from the mists of semi-unconsciousness, I found myself lying on the altar with the masked Kathulos towering over me like a gaunt ivory tower. About in a semicircle stood Ganra Singh, Yar Khan, Yun Shatu and several others whom I knew as frequenters of the Temple of Dreams. Beyond them—and the sight cut me to the heart—I saw Zuleika crouching in a doorway, her face white and her hands pressed against her cheeks, in an attitude of abject terror.

"I did not fully trust you," said Kathulos sibilantly, "so I sent Yussef Ali to follow you. He reached the group of trees before you and following you into the estate heard your very interesting conversation with John Gordon—for he scaled the house-wall like a cat and clung to the window-ledge! Your driver delayed purposely so as to give Yussef Ali plenty of time to get back—I have decided to change my abode anyway. My furnishings are already on their way to another house, and as soon as we have disposed of the traitor—you!—we shall depart also, leaving a little surprize for your friend Gordon when he arrives at five-thirty."

My heart gave a sudden leap of hope. Yussef Ali had misunderstood, and Kathulos lingered here in false security while the London detective force had already silently surrounded the house. Over my shoulder I saw Zuleika vanish from the door.

I eyed Kathulos, absolutely unaware of what he was saying. It was not long until five—if he dallied longer—then I froze as the Egyptian spoke a word and Li Kung, a gaunt,

cadaverous Chinaman, stepped from the silent semicircle and drew from his sleeve a long thin dagger. My eyes sought the timepiece that still rested on the table and my heart sank. It was still ten minutes until five. My death did not matter so much, since it simply hastened the inevitable, but in my mind's eye I could see Kathulos and his murderers escaping while the police awaited the stroke of five.

The Skull-face halted in some harangue, and stood in a listening attitude. I believe his uncanny intuition warned him of danger. He spoke a quick staccato command to Li Kung and the Chinaman sprang forward, dagger lifted above my breast.

The air was suddenly supercharged with dynamic tension. The keen dagger-point hovered high above me—loud and clear sounded the skirl of a police whistle and on the heels of the sound there came a terrific crash from the front of the warehouse!

Kathulos leaped into frenzied activity. Hissing orders like a cat spitting, he sprang for the hidden door and the rest followed him. Things happened with the speed of a nightmare. Li Kung had followed the rest, but Kathulos flung a command over his shoulder and the Chinaman turned back and came rushing toward the altar where I lay, dagger high, desperation in his countenance.

A scream broke through the clamor and as I twisted desperately about to avoid the descending dagger, I caught a glimpse of Kathulos dragging Zuleika away. Then with a frenzied wrench I toppled from the altar just as Li Kung's dagger, grazing my breast, sank inches deep into the dark-stained surface and quivered there.

I had fallen on the side next to the wall and what was taking place in the room I could not see, but it seemed as if far away I could hear

men screaming faintly and hideously. Then Li Kung wrenched his blade free and sprang, tigerishly, around the end of the altar. Simultaneously a revolver cracked from the doorway —the Chinaman spun clear around, the dagger flying from his hand—he slumped to the floor.

Gordon came running from the doorway where a few moments earlier Zuleika had stood, his pistol still smoking in his hand. At his heels were three rangy, clean-cut men in plain clothes. He cut my bonds and dragged me upright.

"Quick! Where have they gone?"

The room was empty of life save for myself, Gordon and his men, though two dead men lay on the floor.

I found the secret door and after a few seconds' search located the lever which opened it. Revolvers drawn, the men grouped about me and peered nervously into the dark stairway. Not a sound came up from the total darkness.

"This is uncanny!" muttered Gordon. "I suppose the Master and his servants went this way when they left the building—as they are certainly not here now!—and Leary and his men should have stopped them either in the tunnel itself or in the rear room of Yun Shatu's. At any rate, in either event they should have communicated with us by this time."

"Look out, sir!" one of the men exclaimed suddenly, and Gordon, with an ejaculation, struck out with his pistol barrel and crushed the life from a huge snake which had crawled silently up the steps from the blackness beneath.

"Let us see into this matter," said he, straightening.

But before he could step onto the first stair, I halted him; for, flesh crawling, I began dimly to understand something of what had happened — I began to understand the silence in the tunnel, the absence of the detectives, the screams I had heard some minutes previously while I lay on the altar. Examining the lever which opened the door, I found another smaller lever—I began to believe I knew what those mysterious chests in the tunnel contained.

"Gordon," I said hoarsely, "have you an electric torch?"

One of the men produced a large one.

"Direct the light into the tunnel, but as you value your life, do not put a foot upon the steps."

The beam of light struck through the shadows, lighting the tunnel, etching out boldly a scene that will haunt my brain all the rest of my life. On the floor of the tunnel, between the chests which now gaped open, lay two men who were members of London's finest secret service. Limbs twisted and faces horribly distorted they lay, and above and about them writhed, in long glittering scaly shimmerings, scores of hideous reptiles.

The clock struck five.

The astounding, horrifying revelation of who Kathulos was and what was his purpose will be made in next issue of WEIRD TALES

The Woman With the Velvet Collar

(Continued from page 449)

thanked heaven I had arrived in time and called out to him to hurry, that a terrible misfortune was about to fall, that I had seen Antonio—Antonio himself—alive, and that he was on his way to town.

"'While questioning me he fell into step beside me and we both ran for his house at full speed and arrived there panting.

"'"Angeluccia! Angeluccia!" we called, flinging open the door.

"'No answer.

"'"God help us if she's gone for a walk," Giuseppe groaned desperately.

"'We went upstairs, still calling her, and he went into one room while I entered another. And it was there that I found her. She was seated by the window in a large armchair, her head resting against the cushion, and she seemed to be sleeping. As she was always extremely pale, the pallor of her beautiful face did not surprize me although it might have struck another.

"'"Come," I cried to Giuseppe; "she is here."

"'In the meantime I had come closer, surprized that she did not awake. I touched her . . . I touched the velvet band, which came loose in my hands, *and her head rolled off!*

"'I fled with my heart pounding wildly from shock and fright, but on my way I slipped and fell in a horrible pool of blood, which I had not noticed on entering because of the shadows which darkened the room. I picked myself up with a yell and left the house madly. People ran from me in the streets as one runs from a wild beast.

"'During the next few days I came near to going insane. Fortunately I completely recovered my senses, well enough, in fact, to be the present

mayor of Bonifacio. As you probably understand by now, sir, I had seen Antonio *as he was returning from the deed!* It was easy enough to figure the whole thing out then. He had entered the house, found Angeluccia alone, and killed her with a stab in the heart. Then, his mind haunted by what Ascoli had told him, he completed the work which he had commenced so clumsily ten years before. More certain of his Corsican dagger than of the mock-historical instrument which had failed him before, he had decapitated her and without shrinking from the atrocity of the deed had *replaced her head on her shoulders and had tied it in position with the velvet ribbon!*

"'And now,' concluded Pietro Santo, 'if you want news of Giuseppe you will have to go into the wilds for it. Two days after the murder, he disappeared into the mountains with a gun over his shoulder and Angeluccia's head, which he had embalmed himself, in a sack around his waist. Giuseppe, Ascoli and Antonio have never been seen since, but they have probably met in the approved fashion and killed each other in some hidden corner of the woods.

"'That, sir, is the only way in which the custom of vendetta will be done away with in this country: when everybody is dead!'"

"She is Yours, Master!"

SICK at heart the trembling girl shuddered at the words that delivered her to this terrible fate of the East. How could she escape from this Oriental monster into whose hands she had been given—this mysterious man of mighty power whose face none had yet seen?

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