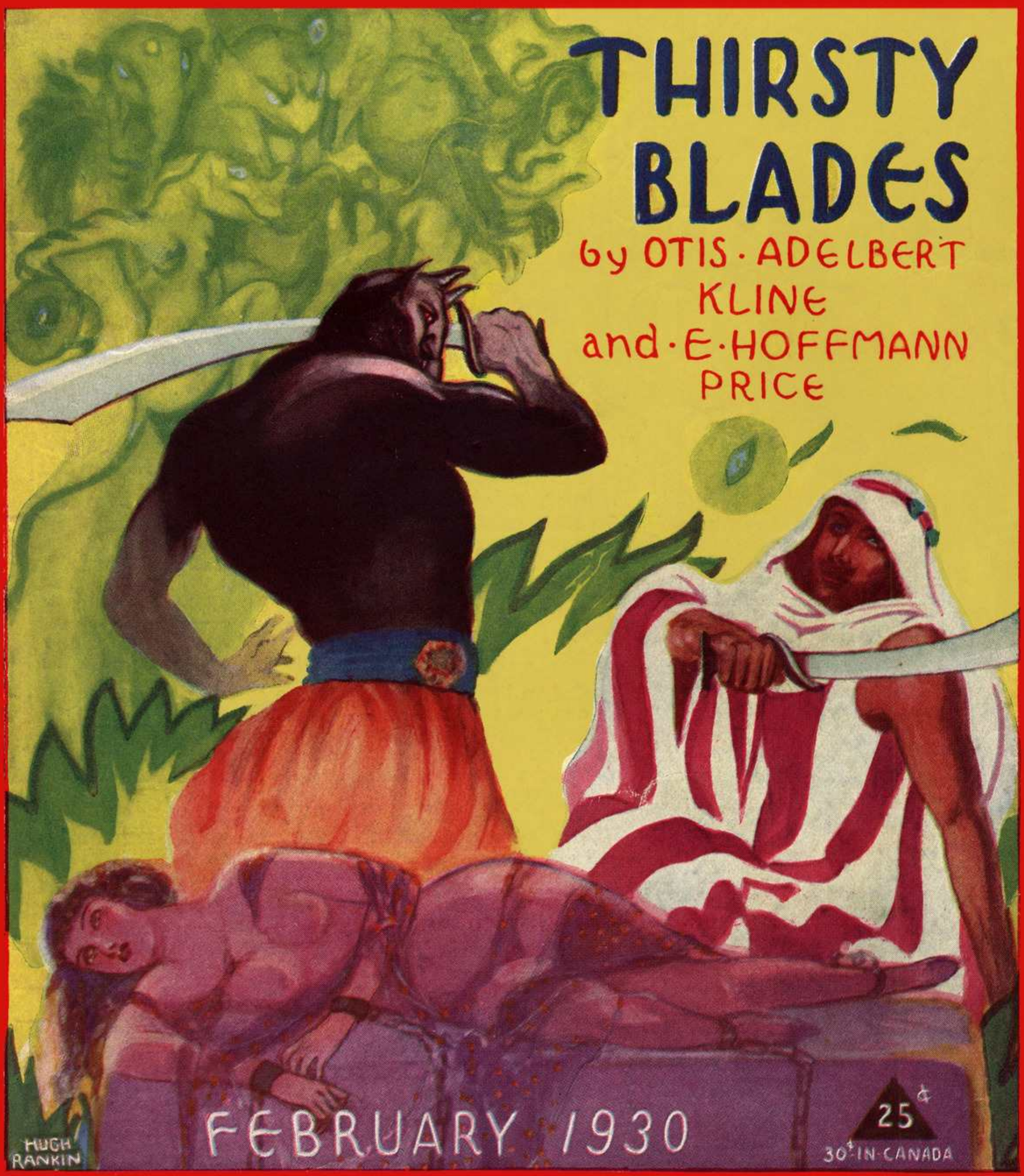
Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine



FEBRUARY 1930

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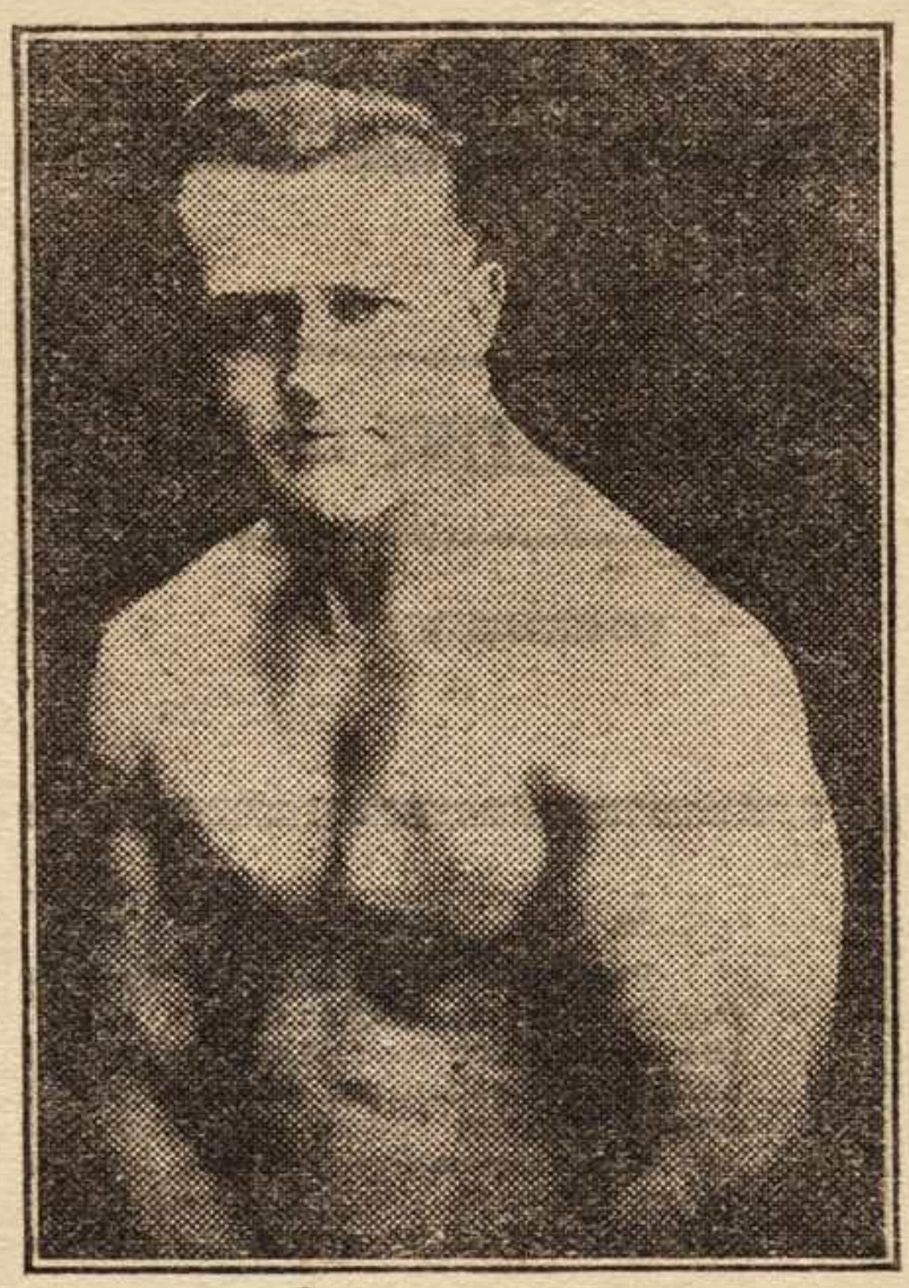
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If You Were
DYING TO-NIGHT

and I offered you something that would give you ten years more to live, would you take it? You'd grab it. **Well, fellows, I've got it,** but don't wait till you're dying or it won't do you a bit of good. It will then be too late. Right now is the time. Tomorrow or any day, some disease will get you and if you have not equipped yourself to fight it off, you're gone. **I don't claim to cure disease.** I am not a medical doctor, but **I'll put you in such condition that the doctor will starve to death waiting for you to take sick. Can you imagine a mosquito trying to bite a brick wall? A fine chance.**



EARLE LIEDERMAN, The Muscle Builder
Author of "Muscle Building," "Science of Wrestling," "Secrets of Strength," "Here's Health," "Endurance," Etc.

A Re-Built Man

I like to get the weak ones. I delight in getting hold of a man who has been turned down as hopeless by others. It's easy enough to finish a task that's more than half done. But give me the weak, sickly chap and watch him grow stronger. That's what I like. It's fun to me because I know I can do it and I like to give the other fellow the laugh. I don't just give you a veneer of muscle that looks good to others. I work on you both inside and out. I not only put big, massive arms and legs on you, but I build up those inner muscles that surround your vital organs. **The kind that give you real pep and energy, the kind that fire you with ambition and the courage to tackle anything set before you.**

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Who says it takes years to get in shape? Show me the man who maks any such claims and I'll make him eat his words. I'll put one full inch on your arm in just 30 days. Yes, and two full inches on your chest in the same length of time. Meanwhile, I'm putting life and pep into your old backbone. And from then on just watch 'em grow. At the end of thirty days you won't know yourself. Your whole body will take on an entirely different appearance. But you've only started. Now comes the real work. I've only built my foundation. I want just 60 days more (90 in all) and you'll make those friends of yours who think they're strong look like something the cat dragged in.

A Real Man

When I'm through with you, you're a real man. The kind that can prove it. You will be able to do things that you had thought impossible and the beauty of it is you keep on going. Your deep full chest breathes in rich pure air, stimulating your blood and making you just bubble over with vim and vitality. Your huge, square shoulders, and your massive muscular arms have that craving for the exercise of a regular he man. You have the flash to your eye and the pep to your step that will make you admired and sought after in both the business and social world.

This is no idle prattle, fellows. If you doubt me, make me prove it. Go ahead, I like it. I have already done this for thousands of others, and my records are unchallenged. What I have done for them I will do for you. Come then, for time flies and every day counts. Let this very day be the beginning of new life to you.

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Weird Tales

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A MAGAZINE of the BIZARRE and UNUSUAL



VOLUME XV NUMBER 3

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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THE last installment of *Skull-Face,* Robert E. Howard's romantic and fascinating serial about a mummy that came up out of the sea and attempted to rule the world, was easily the first choice of you, the readers, among the stories in the December issue. Your second choice was *Children of Ubasti,* Seabury Quinn's story of a cat-like couple from Africa, who chose New Jersey as the seat of their unnatural crimes. Howard is rapidly becoming a prime favorite with WEIRD TALES readers, and Quinn's lovable little Frenchman, Jules de Grandin, is eagerly looked for each month.

"The last ten lines of Seabury Quinn's story, *The House Without a Mirror,* are worth the cost of the magazine ten times over," writes Ed Fuller, of Sheridan, Oregon. "All the stories in the November issue are very interesting."

"I have often wondered why you don't run a series of articles on weird things that actually exist," suggests George D. Dean, of San Francisco. "Take the Winchester Mystery House for example. Many of your readers would be extremely interested in a description and explanation of this most amazing dwelling."

Writes J. Ernest Wagner, of Centre Hall, Pennsylvania: "The stories by Benson and Leroux in the last three issues of WEIRD TALES are wonderful, but why not give us some more by Frank Owen and H. P. Lovecraft? I enjoy thoroughly every story I read in WEIRD TALES."

"I am almost in love with Jules de Grandin, the fiery little Frenchman of Seabury Quinn's stories," writes R. Marian Durland, of Salem, Oregon, and adds: "You see, I am French, too. About five years ago Mother received a bunch of magazines from a friend. Among them was a copy of WEIRD TALES. I read it and have not missed a copy since. It is a wonderful magazine."

J. Wasso, Jr., of Pen Argyl, Pennsylvania, suggests that the admirers of H. P. Lovecraft's stories get together and form an H. P. Lovecraft club. "I have a dandy name for it," he writes. "Come on, let's show them how much we think of Lovecraft, master of weird tales."

"I am in favor of making all your reprints old stories from WEIRD

(Continued on page 150)

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(Continued from page 148)

TALES," writes Henry Kuttner, Jr., of Los Angeles. "Why wait ten years, when seven years are already successfully behind you? Many great stories are buried in the past files of WEIRD TALES, particularly Lovecraft's."

Edna Eastman, of New York City, writes to the Eyrie: "I have been reading your magazine with great interest. Your story-tellers, in reading between the lines, disclose the fact that they are deep scientific students. I had hoped for great things from the movies as an educator, but my hopes are dashed to earth when they tell me their aim is increased box receipts. I find the high school boy and girl interested in your magazine, and they also work out these stories according to their lessons in their serious high school studies. Let the good work go on. Perhaps you will do much that the movies should have done."

"I must thank you for the fine stories you are publishing in WEIRD TALES, especially those by Robert E. Howard," writes W. B. Boehnke, of Dayton, Kentncky. "His *Skull-Face* is wonderful. I hope you publish more of his works soon. Gaston Leroux's works also are excellent. Won't you please publish more stories by A. Merritt? His *Woman of the Wood* was one of the most superb jewels ever published in WEIRD TALES."

Writes Charles Donnelly, of Johnson City, Tennessee: "Since I started reading WEIRD TALES, a little over four years ago, I have not missed a single copy. Lately I have been looking forward to the stories about the Overlord of Cornwall, by David H. Keller. I am hoping you will print lots more of them; but then all the stories in WEIRD TALES are excellent. I have yet to find an issue in which I haven't been more than satisfied."

Norman O'Brien, of Forth Worth, Texas, writes to the Eyrie: "Having finished *Skull-Face,* don't you think it natural that I should voice a wish for you to engage Mr. Howard to write us a serial about Kathulos at the time that person was a sorcerer in Atlantis? I am sure many W. T. readers feel the same way."

"There is too long a time between issues of WEIRD TALES," writes John Lawrence Taylor, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, "but don't let that scare you into making the magazine a weekly or bi-weekly, for that would only do more harm than good in the end. The field of the bizarre is limited, and by flooding the field with good stories every week, after a time you would not have enough good stories to go around and would have to resort to second-rate ones. As soon as that happened the readers would raise cain and demand better stories, which you could not furnish because the field had been exhausted. Think it over and you will see that I am right. There is a law in nature that excess is harmful; sounds funny but it's true—been proved time after time. There is no one who would welcome WEIRD TALES as a weekly more than I, but—for how long? The answer to that is: as long as the good stories last."

(Continued on page 152)

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R E A D

—how a certain noble lady slipped into her husband's chamber by stealth, and changed places with his mistress in order to win back his love.

—how a tiny mole on a woman's breast, condemned her to death and wrecked three lives!

—how a princess of highest rank was humiliated beyond all toleration in her own bed-chamber by a cavalier whose "viens ran fire instead of blood!"

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(Continued from page 150)

"Give us more stories of vampires and werewolves, and less of those that deal with the planets, stars and moon," writes Mrs. Beckemeyer, of St. Louis. "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for the last three years and I must say I can hardly wait till the first of each month for the next issue."

"I find the whimsical tales of David H. Keller very delightful, and hope to read many more of them," writes Mrs. E. Van Ness, of Washington, D. C. "They are a welcome change from the grimness of the other stories. *Skull-Face* was equal to the best mystery stories written."

Henry S. Whitehead, well known to you as a writer of weird tales, writes to the editor: "Just a few lines (as a reader of W. T.) heartily to commend *The Dancer in the Crystal* by Francis Flagg. This is an unusually well-planned, well-composed, and well-written story, and its author, unknown to me previously, should go far. He knows his stuff! On the other hand, it seems to me that M. Leroux has produced a rather wild tale, appealing to the sadistic element in a certain proportion of readers—the kind who would ignore the practised skill of the matador, the courage of the *cuadrilla* as a whole, and the agility of the *banderilleros* and ENJOY the gut-ripping of the sorry nags who bore the *picadores.* I think the first-named story ornaments the magazine, while *The Mystery of the Four Husbands* detracts sadly from the December issue. This, of course, is only one person's reaction, and I have little doubt but that the Leroux yarn will have a large commendation in the mail. Congratulations, too, on the comic relief of *No Other Man.* That's a bully story."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? It will help us to keep the magazine in line with your wishes if you will let us know.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE FEBRUARY WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1) _____	_____
(2) _____	_____
(3) _____	_____

I do not like the following stories:

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SHADOWS

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Thy shadow falls on the fount,
On the fount with the marble wall . . .
And in alien time and space
On the towns of a doomèd race
The shadows of glaciers mount;
And patchouli-shadows crawl
On the mottling of boas that bask
In the fire of a moon fantasque;
And the light shades of bamboo
Flutter and ruffle and lift
In the silver dawn they sift
On the meadows of Zanadu.

* * * * * *

They shall fall, till the light be done,
By moon and cresset and sun,
From gnomon and fir-tree and throne
And the vine-caught monoliths leaning
In the woods of a world far-flown;
They shall pass on the parapegms
Of the planets of Algebar,
They shall follow the somber gems
Of an empress of Mizar;
They shall move on the primal plains
In the broken thunder and rains;
They shall haply reel and soar
Where the red volcanoes roar
From the peaks of a blackening sun;
They shall haply float and run
From the tails of the lyre-birds preening
On the palms of a magic mead;
And their mystery none shall read,
And none shall have known their meaning
Ere night and the shadows are one.

NEXT MONTH

Another great collection of fine stories is scheduled for the March issue of WEIRD TALES, on sale February 1.

In Letters of Fire

By Gaston Leroux

A devil-tale by the author of **"The Phantom of the Opera"**—an eery story of the dogs that barked in silence, and the man who could not lose.

The Drums of Damballah

By Seabury Quinn

A wild adventure of Jules de Grandin—a powerful story of Haitian voodoo, uncanny murders, and blood-curdling dangers—a tale of the worship of the Snake Goddess.

The Haunted Chessmen

By E. R. Punshon

A strange, gripping tale of a set of chessmen made from human bones, and a weird game played against an invisible antagonist, with terror and dread for referees, in the still hours of the night.

The Thought-Monster

By Amelia Reynolds Long

Sudden and frightful were the deaths caused by the strange creature that was loose in the village, and gruesome was the hunt for it—a goose-flesh story.

The Third Man

By George Norsworthy

Gruesome was the ordeal endured by a young man in search of employment, and dreadful were the dangers he faced, alone in the gloomy house with the terrible old man.

The Pacer

By August W. Derleth and Marc R. Schorer

Overhead, day after day, that maddening pacing went on, and the man who investigated it blundered into grisly, blood-freezing horror at death.

The Flowing Death

By Arlton Eadie

A gripping tale of microbes that got beyond control and swept over England in a tide of disaster and death.

The Black Monarch

By Paul Ernst

This serial rises in interest as the intrepid crusaders penetrate the underground fastness of the Black Monarch in the second installment of this enthralling tale.

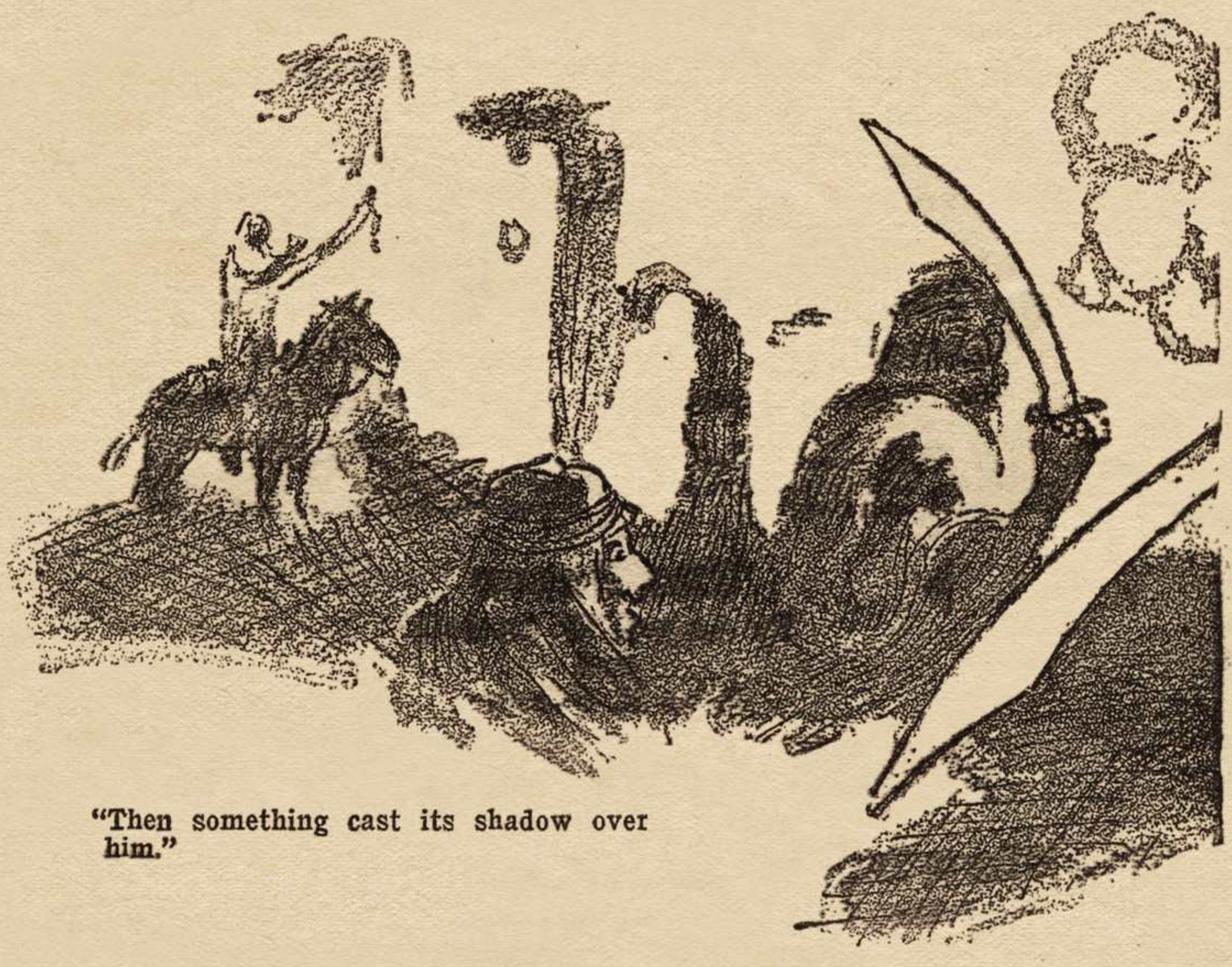
These are some of the super-excellent stories that will appear in the March issue of WEIRD TALES

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Thirsty

by OTIS·ADELBERT·KLINE
and E·HOFFMANN·PRICE



"Then something cast its shadow over him."

THE side entrance to the *caravanserai* was closed. Well then, back down the alley, and around the corner to the main gate. But when Rankin turned to retrace his steps, he saw that it might be a long way from there to any other place. For to his right and left were blank walls; at his back, a closed gate; and in front, a crescent of drawn blades was closing in on him.

Behind the six advancing swordsmen rode their commander. He reined in his Barbary stallion, stroked his beard — henna red, as Rankin could see plainly in the white moonlight—and settled back to enjoy the spectacle.

"Click-click-click!" mocked the hammer of Rankin's .45 as it fell on a succession of empty chambers.

The red-bearded chief smiled. And Rankin knew that more than his own carelessness was responsible for the



unloading of that revolver. Someone had worked fast and skilfully as Rankin reclined in the *souk* that afternoon, smoking a *narghileh*, sipping bitter Abyssinian coffee, and pondering on how to extricate the lady Azizah from the peril that was descending from the mountains of Kurdistan.

Shoulder to shoulder the assailants advanced. Their steps were deliberate, now that they were certain rather than hopeful that the .45 had not been reloaded. Six lean swordsmen from the desert, grim phantoms whose curved blades gleamed frostily in the moonlight; curved simitars whose drawing cut shears from

shoulder to hip with one swift stroke.

Rankin drew his simitar, cursed the disguise that had forbidden his favorite saber, and came on guard. The six paused a moment in their advance. *One* of them, they knew, must close with their prey, while the other five hacked him to pieces. And the sentence of that *one* was written; for their victim's frenzy would not be tempered with any hope of escape. *One* of them was even now a dead man. . . .

One . . . two . . . three paces. . . .

Rankin dropped his point and laughed.

The line wavered. It takes courage to assault a madman.

A long, fierce lunge, and a deadly swift flicker of steel; and Rankin withdrew from the mêlée, on guard again. That sudden assault from beyond probable striking-distance had caught them off balance; *one* of them was even now a dead man, shorn half asunder.

Then they closed in. Rankin's footwork saved him, and during that instant of grace, his blade again hit deep as he evaded the charge.

"*Mashallah*"! gasped the red-bearded chief as he spurred his horse a pace forward.

There were only four to continue the attack, but their assault would be a reckless whirlwind of steel. No more sidestepping or retreating for Rankin.

"——hacked to pieces in some side street of Tekrit——" flashed through his mind. Ismeddin the Darvish was right.

And then he saw the chief draw his blade.

"Horse and foot! Christ, if I could only get *him*!" prayed Rankin.

Time had ceased. He remembered how very slowly a swift blade approaches when one is in the last extremity. He could parry, cut, retreat, parry again, cut—and then the chief on horse would cut him down. But there was plenty of time. . . .

Then something on the wall behind Rankin cast its shadow over him: attack from the rear.

"They are thorough in Tekrit!" flashed through his mind as the very end of that interminable instant came in an irresistibly flailing mill of blades.

Clack-clack-click! And a silent stroke that bit flesh. Clack-clack——

"Halt!" roared the chief from his Barbary horse.

His upraised blade swept down. In response to his signal, something soft and clinging dropped from the wall and enveloped Rankin. Snared in a net!

The three surviving footmen sheathed their blades, seized Rankin, now firmly enmeshed in the silken net, shouldered him, and followed their chief.

"Well," reflected Rankin, as he resigned himself to captivity, "if I'm hacked to pieces at all, it probably won't be in a side street. . . . I wonder if Ismeddin foresaw *this*?

"And this only the 11th of Nisan . . . two more like this, and I'll be in good training for that black swordsman in the vault. . . .

"They expected me—just staring at that girl had nothing to do with it," Rankin assured himself by way of minimizing the folly of having stared too intently into the eyes of the veiled woman who had that afternoon appraised him from the height of her glittering litter.

But Rankin knew that there was a direct connection between the sanguinary combat of a few moments ago, and the exchange of glances between him and the veiled girl whose gorgeously adorned litter had followed the red-bearded dignitary through the *souk*. There was but one conclusion: the girl had called the redbeard's attention to Rankin.

Well, and so be it then! For those were the eyes of Azizah who so often had accompanied Suleiman Baalshem in that haunting, recurring dream

that for twenty years had driven Rankin the length and breadth of Asia, and across all the lands of Islam. He was attaining his goal, even if only to meet the thirsty blades whereof Ismeddin had spoken.

The chief of his assailants, then, must be the Shareef, Sayyid Yussuf, the girl's uncle and guardian. In which case, all the better: at least Rankin was not in the hands of the devil-worshipers who had been filtering out of Kurdistan to celebrate their dreadful *sabbat* in that ravine two days' ride from Tekrit . . . and thus and thus Rankin speculated . . . with never a passer-by to intrude on the unreality of it all.

THE chief at last drew up before a massive, iron-studded gate that was firmly hinged to the heavy masonry jamb and wall. He thumped the brazen lock-plate with the pommel of his simitar. The door opened without a challenge from the porter within. The redbeard dismounted and signaled his men-at-arms to release Rankin from his silken web.

At the end of a long, narrow passage, they turned into a courtyard where fountains sprayed mistily in the moonlight. Rankin's captors released their grip on his arms; and one of them presented Rankin's simitar, hilt foremost.

Rankin accepted the blade and glanced sharply about him. More combat?

The chief smiled. "You are among friends, Saidi Rankin."

"Your playmates didn't look so friendly," retorted Rankin.

"I am Absál, the son of our lord the Shareef," continued the redbeard, "and my six playmates were only to assure me of your identity. There are others on the same mission that leads you to Tekrit. Anyway, before I could signal Silat up there on the wall with his net, three of my men were out of action."

"One should," agreed Rankin, "always be sure of a stranger's identity. But what if they had cut me into many small pieces?"

Absál shrugged. "*Wallah*! That would have been deplorable, of course. But it would have proved to my entire satisfaction that you are not the man for the venture I have in mind. As it is——"

"As it is, saidi," interrupted Rankin, "you think that perhaps I may be fit to meet the Black Presence in the vault on the night of the 14th of Nisan?"

"*Inshallah!*" evaded Absál. "If it please God. And our lord the Shareef has a good deal to say about that."

A gong clanged. The heavy drapes that masked the horseshoe arch in the left wall of the courtyard parted, revealing a long, narrow room at whose farther end was a dais on which sat a white-bearded, hook-nosed man: Absál's father, the Shareef.

They paused in the archway to bow, and offer the peace.

"*Wa'salaam aleikum*!" responded the Shareef. And then, after scrutinizing Rankin with his hard, piercing eyes: "So this is the stout swordsman of the tradition?"

"Even so, father," replied Absál.

The old man twice clapped his hands. There was a rustling behind the curtains at the Shareef's right, and the tinkle of anklets. The curtains parted slightly, and Rankin again looked into the smoldering, Saracenic eyes of the veiled lady of the market-place.

"Is this the man?" queried the Shareef, half turning to catch the eye of the girl in the doorway.

"This is indeed the man, uncle."

"Very well," he acknowledged. And then, to Rankin: "If you are the man, what is your hidden name?"

"Abdemon."

"Again, very well," agreed the Shareef. "Now tell me, Abdemon, how it was that Suleiman Baalshem could not keep his promise to you; and why, through all these dusty centuries, the

word of Suleiman has been in the power of Shaitan the Damned."

"A neighboring king," began Rankin, "proposed a riddle that Suleiman could not solve. Therefore he swore by his beard that if I, Abdemon, a captain of his guard, would solve the riddle, he would give me his daughter, who was the granddaughter of the sultan of Egypt. Suleiman, the Lord of the Name, swore by his beard and by his right hand, but he failed to add, '*Inshallah*! If it so please God.' And Allah punished Suleiman for his impiety by giving Iblis, prince of djinn, full power over the promise of Suleiman for a whole day. And during that day of power, Iblis abducted my bride-to-be, so that Suleiman could not keep the oath he had sworn. Yet in the end Allah relented, and granted that after the march of centuries Suleiman would finally be able to keep his promise: provided that Abdemon in one of his incarnations would meet Iblis, sword to sword, and defeat him. And thus, bound by my oath to Suleiman, and bound by my love for this girl who was almost mine, I have marched across the centuries, from one failure to another, to meet Iblis, the Dark Presence, in the vault, on the night of the 14th of Nisan: the first full moon of spring.

"In those days they called her Neferte, but now she is called Azizah," continued Rankin. "And on nights of the full moon she lies as one dead; her heartbeat is stopped, and her breath is imperceptible."

"Well said," agreed the Shareef. "Now for the final proof: give me the seal."

"What seal?" countered Rankin.

"The leaden seal from the shattered urn."

Rankin started at this glib mention of the seal his father had given him nearly twenty years ago, and wondered how the Shareef could know of the incident.

"That I can not do," declared Rankin. "It is the leaden impression of the seal of Suleiman Baalshem, who commanded that no hands other than my own should touch it."

The old man nodded and smiled.

"I was aware also of that. So hold it in your own hands that I may examine it."

Rankin produced a small leather bag suspended from a chain passed around his neck. Opening the bag, he took therefrom a small disk of lead, and held it up for the Shareef to examine.

The Shareef and his son bowed low.

"*Bismillahi rahmani raheem*!" they exclaimed. "Praise to God, Lord of the Worlds! It is truly the seal of Suleiman Baalshem."

"But tell me," continued the Shareef, "who told you that you would find your destiny in Tekrit?"

"Ismeddin the Darvish interpreted the dreams which have haunted me since I was a boy, and told me how I could release your brother's daughter from the blackness that clouds her senses on nights of the full moon, when the power of Iblis the Damned is at its height," replied Rankin.

The Shareef frowned at the mention of Ismeddin.

"So that old ruffian and heretic sent you to Tekrit? Did he by any chance speak of the dooms that overtake meddlers who roam about here in search of adventure?"

"At great length, *saidi*," responded Rankin, "even as he explained that due to various misunderstandings you two have had regarding some horses, he could scarcely appear in person to present me to you. But I came, nevertheless. Is it not written," quoted Rankin, "*There is no shield to turn aside the spear cast of Destiny: gold, glory, silver, each avail not?*"

"Spoken like a true believer," agreed the Shareef. And then, sharply, "Testify!"

"*La illaha illa allah*——" began Rankin, and paused.

The sequence was familiar as his own name, but Rankin was not truly

a Moslem, and one can not testify falsely when the word of Suleiman and its fulfilment lie in one's hands.

"*Wa Muhammad er-rasul allahi!*" recited the red-bearded chief. "I have testified in his place. And let us consider that this infidel has testified that Muhammad is the prophet of God as well as that there is no God but Allah. For if he can wear the seal of Suleiman Baalshem without harm, it makes little difference what he testifies. For Allah is wise, all-knowing," concluded Sayyid Absál sonorously.

"There is something in what you say," conceded the Shareef. "Still, am I to entrust the welfare of my brother's daughter to the hands of an infidel? And an infidel sent by that bandit of an Ismeddin!"

"But," protested the redbeard, "didn't he prove himself? He is the stout swordsman of the tradition, Abdemon whose skill was the delight of Suleiman, ages ago, and whose sword must give the word of Suleiman its only chance of fulfilment. And he has the seal——"

"Mummeries to fool true believers!" growled the Shareef. "Tonight is but the 11th of Nisan. I will look into this fellow's story, and on the 12th I will either let him carry out his plan, or else——"

The old man nodded significantly at the stalwart African at his left, who was toying with the hilt of a ponderous two-handed sword.

The Shareef clapped his hands. "Show this unbeliever every consideration," he directed, as two slaves approached at his signal. "But on your lives, keep him locked up."

"The swords," thought Rankin, as his escort led him to a cell, "may quench their thirst unless Ismeddin is closer than he seems."

Just before he passed out of earshot, he caught the faint tinkle of anklets, but he dared not turn back for even a glance at Azizah, who once had almost been his.

ZANTUT, servant of Iblis and high priest of the devil-worshipers who had come down from the mountains of Kurdistan, sat in an upper room of the *caravanserai* just across the street from that selected by Rankin the day before. Two lamps flared ruddily at each side of the Master, casting a flickering light on the parchment scroll he studied. Zantut muttered to himself as he spelled out, line by line, the fine, intricate characters of the manuscript.

At times he would raise his eyes from his work, glance sharply to either side, and at the door of the room, which he was facing. At last he addressed the adept who squatted, cross-legged, in a shadowy corner where he fed grains of sandalwood to a censer that fumed before the silver image of a peacock.

"Humayd, what time is it?"

"Well past midnight, *saidi*. The sentries have been changed three times since sunset."

"And still no report!" muttered Zantut as he stroked his black beard. Then, to Humayd: "Sound recall."

The adept drew from behind the pedestal of the silver peacock a small drum, carefully tuned it, and with knuckles and the heel of his hand beat a curious, broken rhythm. The drum emitted a surprizing volume of sound for its size; yet so low-pitched was its hollow chug-chug-thump that it barely disturbed the silence of that late hour.

Scarcely had Humayd set aside the drum when there came at the door a tapping that mimicked the cadence of the recall.

"Enter!" commanded Zantut. And then, recognizing the newcomer, "What luck, Saoud?"

"Less than none, *saidi*. I waited at the entrance of the *caravanserai* across the street until my legs were knotted with cramps. And this"—he flashed from beneath his *djellab* a keen, curved blade—"is all too clean."

Zantut scrutinized him gravely.

"You slept!" snapped the Master.

"Not in that corner of perdition, *saidi*. And I reported while that drum was still warm."

"Granted!" admitted Zantut.

And then came another sequence of taps at the door.

"Enter and report!" commanded Zantut.

"Weariness and waste of time, *saidi*," announced the latest arrival. "As you ordered, I had a word with the guards posted at the city gates. My purse is somewhat lighter, but to no purpose."

And the purport of each of the succeeding scouts was similar. Rankin had evaded them all. Then, after an interval, came the last scout.

"I saw a man on horse, followed by three on foot, *saidi*," he began. "They carried a burden that might very well have been a man. The horseman halted at the house of the Shareef Yussuf, where he and his followers entered."

"Ah! . . . could it have been the Shareef's son, Absál?"

"It could. He had a red beard, and was very tall and lean."

"Sayyid Absál himself! Then what, Ismail?"

"Someone of the party had been wounded. I followed blood splashes on the paving until I came to a side street close to the *caravanserai* of this madman we are seeking. In a blind street I saw three men lying where they had fallen. They had no further use for the swords they still clutched. But before I could investigate, a party of armed men approached to pick up the dead."

"Then what?" demanded Zantut.

"I gathered from their remarks that an additional corpse would be easily enough handled. And I didn't wish to arouse suspicion by loitering."

"Very good, Ismail," replied Zantut. "It seems that our enemy is in good hands: either dead or imprisoned. That saves us considerable annoyance. Being strangers, we could not handle an assassination as safely or effectively as the son of our Lord the Shareef."

"But why," queried one of the adepts, "should Sayyid Absál have killed or captured this madman, Rankin?"

"Iblis alone can say. Power and praise to Thousand-Eyed Malik Taûs!"

"Praise and power to him!" intoned the assembled adepts in unison as they made with their left hands a curious fleeting gesture.

"It may be," continued Zantut, "that the Shareef or Sayyid Absál doubted that Rankin is indeed the Elect, the reincarnated Abdemon who alone can thwart Iblis on the 14th of Nisan. Which is all the better; for then one of us can very easily approach the Shareef claiming to be the Elect, get possession of the lady Azizah on the pretext of breaking the spell that clouds her senses on nights of the full moon, and then seek the hidden vault. But it is late. Humayd, stand guard while we sleep."

Humayd took his post, simitar in hand.

Zantut set aside his scrolls and stretched out on his divan. The adepts extinguished the flaring lamps and lay down on the thick rug at the foot of the Master's couch.

"WELL," thought Rankin, as he surveyed his cell by the light of the jailer's torch as the barred door clanged shut, "I've been in worse holes than this."

Odors were present, and vermin also; but by no means as plentiful or as unbearable as, for instance, they had been in the dungeons of the Emir's palace in Boukhara. And the air was almost fresh. In the course of a few years of adventure, one at times sleeps on a worse bed than the stone bench that ran along the wall of the cell.

"And Ismeddin," reflected Rankin, "is doubtless on the job. All the worse for Iblis and his friends!"

The very absence of any sign of Ismeddin seemed to Rankin to be certain proof that the wily old darvish was busily at work against the followers of Iblis, who was worshiped in Kurdistan as Malik Taûs, the Lord Peacock. Rankin had heard tales the length and breadth of Kurdistan, telling of the outrageous feats and resourcefulness of that unusual hermit who divided his time between the walls of his cavern and the palaces of princes: that is, when not engaged in the single-handed looting of caravans.

Then, like any seasoned campaigner, Rankin sought and found the soft spots of the stone bench, and stretched out for as much sleep as the night afforded. But that sleep was to have its interruption.

A pebble clicked against the wall at Rankin's side; and then another.

"Ismeddin, by God!" was Rankin's first thought as he raised himself on his elbow and looked up at the tiny, barred window through which filtered the moon's dazzling whiteness.

Then, lest a repetition of the signal attract the attention of the sentry posted somewhere in the hall leading to the door of the cell, Rankin intoned the sonorous first lines of the Sura of the Brightness, as any piously inclined prisoner might do in resigning himself to captivity:

"By the noonday brightness, and by the night when it darkeneth!
Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee, neither hath he been displeased."

The pebbles ceased.

But the hand thrust in between the bars of the window was certainly not the grimy talon of Ismeddin. The slender white fingers released a scrap of paper that fluttered a moment in the moonlight, then, passing out of the beam, settled to the floor where in the darkness Rankin could just distinguish it.

"Truly the future shall be better for thee than the Past," concluded Rankin. *"And thy Lord shall be gracious, and thou satisfied."*

The jeweled fingers gestured ever so slightly, paused a moment, and disappeared.

Rankin curbed his impatience and contented himself with staring at the scarcely perceptible blotch that was the note from his unknown friend.

Very faintly from the hall came the snore of the sentry.

"My devoutness was wasted," thought Rankin, as he arose to get the note. "Still, a bit of piety is never out of order."

Rankin struck a match. One sufficed, for the note was brief:

Bismillahi! Neferte to Abdemon, greeting! The darvish, Ismeddin, will spring the bars of your cell and release you on the night of the 12th of Nisan. Ride and overtake us at the oasis of al Akra.

The night of the twelfth . . . two days of hard riding . . . well, that would not be so bad . . . so let Ismeddin do the worrying for the next few hours. . . .

ON THE evening of the 12th, the porter admitted seven darvishes seeking audience of the Shareef shortly before the sunset prayer.

"Prayer and the Peace upon you, Cousin of the Prophet," saluted Zantut as he bowed low before the white-bearded Shareef. "My companions and I have ridden day and night from the north of Kurdistan in our haste to fulfil an ancient prophecy. It is written——"

Zantut paused and turned to the adept at his left: "Humayd, tell the Cousin of the Prophet, our Lord the Shareef, of your vision."

"Three nights ago," began Humayd, after receiving the Shareef's permission to speak, "I was sitting in

contemplation of holy things, when suddenly a great light appeared in my cave. A tall stranger whose face and garments shone like the noonday sun stood there before me.

"'Rise at once, Abdemon,' he said, 'and with your pious companions seek the house of the Shareef, Sayyid Yussuf——'

"'A thousand pardons,' I replied, 'but I am Humayd, a darvish, and not Abdemon.'

"'You are wrong,' said the glittering stranger; 'not Humayd, but Abdemon, who in a former life were favored by our lord, Suleiman Baalshem, who promised you his daughter, Neferte. But that promise, as you know, Suleiman could not keep, on account of Allah's wrath at his impiety. But Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, has relented; and on the 14th of Nisan, the first full moon of spring, you must take Neferte, who in this life is the lady Azizah, the niece of our lord the Shareef, to the Valley of Djinn, and there perform the ritual which will lift the curse from her life. And then Suleiman's promise to you in an earlier life can be fulfilled. Finally, there is a great treasure which Suleiman left awaiting this day; one third of it is yours, and the rest is for the pious Shareef.'

"Then there came an intolerable brightness which blinded me; and when I could again see, the Presence had vanished. I sought my instructor the holy Zantut; and behold, we are here," concluded Humayd.

"So there is also a treasure?" queried the Shareef.

"Even so, *saidi*. Just as Humayd has said."

"What of the seal?" asked the Shareef.

Humayd drew from a small pouch suspended at his throat a leaden seal.

"The seal of Suleiman Baalshem," admitted the Shareef. "And then, Ishtitad!" he commanded. "Testify!"

"*La illaha illa allah,*" intoned Humayd. "*Wa Muhammad er-rasul allahi.*"

"At least we have a true believer this time," reflected the Shareef. Then, to his son: "Was I not right in imprisoning the infidel you brought before me?"

"Not entirely," protested Sayyid Absál. "The *kaffir* is a great swordsman, even as the prophecy said. And one of these men is a liar, for one of the leaden seals must be false."

"My lord," interposed Zantut, "is it not more likely that a true believer should have the seal of Suleiman Baalshem than an unbeliever?"

"That goes without saying," agreed the Shareef.

"But," protested Sayyid Absál, "who are we to know what is acceptable to Allah, and to whom he would entrust the seal of Suleiman? Is this fellow Humayd a fighting man? Let him meet my six best retainers in a side street," challenged Sayyid Absál, "and if he can prove himself in that way, I will agree."

"Son," reproved the Shareef, "it seems to me that you have no more to agree than to disagree."

"Well," retorted Sayyid Absál, "and has this pious Zantut by any chance dazzled you with his tale of great treasure? The tradition speaks of the promise of Suleiman, and the health of our cousin, Azizah, and not of chests of treasure."

"My lord," interrupted Zantut, "is it not also possible that this infidel impostor said nothing about the treasure so that he could keep it all for himself?"

"Even so," assented the Shareef.

"Now by Allah and by my beard!" thundered Sayyid Absál. "The issue is evaded! What of the stout swordsman of the tradition?"

"Humayd," replied Zantut, "is a great swordsman, even if he has not distinguished himself in street brawling in Tekrit."

"Then if he is such a swordsman, let him meet this *kaffir* in single combat, and may Allah judge between them!" demanded Sayyid Absál.

"That," conceded the Shareef, "would be fair."

Humayd's confusion did not escape Sayyid Absál. But the triumph was fleeting.

"My lord," protested Zantut, "need we put a revelation from Allah to the trial of combat? Would that be an auspicious beginning, making the favored of Allah prove himself against an infidel?"

"Assuredly not," agreed the Shareef.

"Allah, and again, by Allah!" stormed Sayyid Absál. "My uncle's daughter identified this unbeliever as the stout swordsman of her visions. Let her at least identify this holy darvish."

"That also would be well," admitted Zantut. "But my lord knows as well as I do what value to set on the fancy of a woman. She saw him sitting in the *souk,* smoking, and he pleased her. Is that to be taken against the revelations of an angel to a devout and holy man?"

Zantut paused, stroked his beard, and continued: "Cousin of the Prophet, I am a peacemaker. I would not for the very treasure of Suleiman cause contention between you and your son. My disciple may have been deceived; or what he saw might have been a snare of Iblis. And lest injustice be done, let this *kaffir* accompany us; and if Humayd fails in the ritual, then let the *kaffir* prove himself. Thus we will have twice the chance of dissolving the curse that clouds the life of your brother's daughter."

"Done, by Allah and by my beard!" exclaimed the Shareef. "Wise and holy man, none but Suleiman himself has equal wisdom."

The Shareef twice clapped his hands.

"Fresh camels for Zantut and his followers," he commanded. "A litter for the lady Azizah. Then get the infidel swordsman, well bound, and put him in a litter."

With a lordly gesture, the Shareef dismissed Zantut and his companions.

AN HOUR after sunset, ten swift *meharis* filed past the sentries at the Isfayan Gate. Two of them bore between them a richly adorned *takht rawan;* and a third carried a litter of ordinary design. The other seven camels were ridden by the darvishes who but a short while before had been dismissed by the Shareef.

A one-eyed hunch-backed beggar squatted at the gate, whining to Allah and all passers-by for alms.

"The Lord will provide," growled Zantut from the height of his *mehari.*

"Son of a flat-nosed mother," muttered the beggar as he adjusted the patch over his right eye, "you would be amazed if you knew what the Lord will provide for you!"

He stroked his long beard, and grinned evilly.

"Alms, in the name of Allah, alms!" he whined, the stout savagery of his expression changing swiftly to one more in keeping with his position as he noted the approach of a tall slave in a striped *kaftán.*

The slave tossed him a coin, glanced quickly about him, then stooped and muttered in the mendicant's ear.

"What's this?" demanded the beggar. "Released? How, and by whom?"

"My lord the Shareef ordered it. Both the infidel and the lady Azizah left just a short while ago."

"Left?"

"Yes. With the darvish Zantut and his pious companions."

"Father of seven hundred pigs!" stormed the beggar. "Son of calamity! Where is the Shareef?"

"In his reception hall, *saidi,*" replied the slave respectfully.

"Alms, for the love of Allah!" whined the beggar for the benefit of

a passer-by. And then to the slave, in an undertone: "Very well, Musa. I shall remember this."

And with a surprizingly jaunty gait, the hunchback strode down the main street of Tekrit, and then, turning down a side alley, bore directly toward the great house of the Shareef. But instead of waiting to be announced, the beggar thrust the porter aside, stalked down the hall, across the courtyard, and into the Shareef's presence.

"Old man," demanded the Shareef, "who admitted you?"

"I admitted myself, *saidi*," replied the beggar. "And as soon as your men withdraw," he continued, indicating the porter and two slaves who were advancing to seize him, "I will say more."

The Shareef gasped, turned the color of an old saddle; then, meeting for a moment the grimy wanderer's fierce eye, relented. The man was obviously mad, reflected the Shareef; some saint or holy man whose wits were in Allah's keeping.

"I will see him, Kasim," he said, dismissing with a gesture the astonished porter and his companions.

"Now, old man, what is it?"

"Prayer, and the Peace, Cousin of the Prophet!" began the hunchback, "I have come to make a wager."

"And what would you wager, holy man?"

The Shareef was now quite convinced, from the intruder's wild manner, unkempt beard, and one glittering eye, that this was indeed a wandering saint.

"My head against your two best horses, *saidi*. Have them saddled, *saidi*, and when we are well beyond the city walls, I will propose the wager."

"By Allah," muttered the Shareef, "but he is mad!"

"My lord," resumed the beggar, "I am unarmed, and an old man. I repeat my wager: my head against two good horses."

"So be it," agreed the Shareef, as he clapped his hands. "Horses and arms at once, Kasim!"

"Allah upon you, my lord, but you wish to win this very good head of mine?"

"Holy stranger," replied the Shareef, "leave your prayer with this house; and if you lose your wager, you may keep your head."

"Of what use are my prayers, *saidi*, seeing that the servant of Satan the Damned this very day beguiled you? Where is the daughter of your brother, on whom be peace?"

"On the way to the Valley of Djinn, with Zantut the darvish and his pious companions."

"And what of the infidel, Rankin?" next demanded the beggar.

"The *kaffir* rides with them. But who are you, reverend saint?" wondered the Shareef; for there was something strangely familiar about this madman.

"I am as much a saint as Zantut is a darvish. It is you who are stark mad, and not I," declared the beggar.

"Even so," agreed the Shareef. "But what do you mean?"

"Wait until we are well without the city walls, and in the desert which has seen all things. Wait until we have seen what we are to see——"

Kasim entered and bowed to the Shareef.

"In readiness, *saidi*," he announced.

The beggar followed the Shareef to the main entrance, where a groom with two mares, saddled and richly caparisoned, awaited them.

"*Wallah!*" ejaculated the beggar, "but my lord wagers heavily against one cracked head. Each a Saklawiyah-Jidraniyah——"

He bowed low as he pronounced the race and strain of the matchless beasts; and then, "To horse, *saidi*!"

"You are strangely familiar with noble horses," observed the Shareef.

The grimy hunchback smiled crookedly.

"To the Isfayan Gate, *saidi*," he suggested, as the Shareef took the lead.

At the gate the sentries challenged them, but recognizing Sayyid Yussuf, permitted them to pass.

The beggar muttered a few words to the sentry.

"I have kept it safely, *saidi*," replied the sentry, as he unbuckled from his waist a belt and simitar which he handed the beggar.

"I ride unarmed. Sayyid Yussuf, be kind enough to carry my sword."

"Allah, and again, by Allah!" marveled the Shareef as he accepted the blade, and noted the sentry's respectful address. "Saint or beggar, or both . . . but who are you, old man?"

"You would be amazed, my lord," was the evasive reply. "Ride on yet a way. Let me lead."

This time the Shareef followed in the wanderer's trace. And as he rode, he fingered the hilt of the beggar's simitar, and wondered at the cool, unblinking sapphires that adorned the pommel, and the cunning workmanship of the embroidered belt.

"LET us halt here, *saidi*," requested the beggar after half an hour's brisk ride.

They dismounted beside a low, half-crumbled, white-washed cupola that loomed spectrally in the moonlight: the ruined tomb of a forgotten saint. They made their salaam to the unknown occupant of the holy place.

"For a beggar," began the Shareef, "you are armed like a prince. And I wonder whether you are mad as you pretend to be."

"And for a cousin of the Prophet," replied the beggar, "I wonder if you are as wise as you ought to be."

The moon was masked by a thin wisp of cloud. A cool, chilling breeze crept across the desert.

"Kneel here, three paces before me, *saidi*," murmured the beggar. "Kneel facing me, with this ghost of a wind at your left . . . and let this ghost of a moon bear witness to the truth that lies hidden in these sands . . . Let it bear witness to my wager: my head against those two *asil* mares. . . . With my own sword strike off my head, *saidi*," crooned the beggar, "if what you see be not the truth as Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, sees it . . . and the truth, my lord, is that Iblis the Damned has beguiled you. . . .

"Look, *saidi*," chanted the beggar, as he gathered handfuls of sand and let it trickle between his fingers. "Look at this sand which is the dust of unremembered kings and the dust of forgotten slaves . . . look at this sand over which kings and slaves have marched, endless procession, ages without end. . . ."

The beggar's gesture of scooping sand lengthened until his hands swept in an arc from the ground to the full extent of his arm. The cool breeze caught the fine dust, blowing it into little clouds that whisked and whirled uncannily.

"And that moon, *saidi*, that pale moon who hides her face behind a veil, *saidi* . . . let her bear witness, for she has seen all things and knows all things. . . ."

As the beggar chanted, the breeze centered in a vortex between him and the Shareef.

"Look closely, *saidi* . . . these sands bear witness, and this dust bears witness . . . and this moon also, who knows all things. . . ."

Faster and yet faster the old man flung sand before him; yet slower and still more slowly he chanted in murmuring monotone, like the maddening pulse of a necromancer's drum.

Sayyid Yussuf stared fixedly into the veil of ever moving, ever present,

living dust . . . for the dust lived, and danced in tiny figures before him. . . . He shuddered. . . .

"And now you see that which there is to see," chanted the beggar. "Now you see the peril into which you sent Azizah . . . they file into the black pit of the Lord of the Black Hands . . . and Abdemon whom you denied is bound, and can not save her . . . it is written in this dust, saidi . . . it is written on these sands . . . and this moon bears witness, this moon who knows all that is to be . . . for that which is to be is one with that which has been, O cousin of the Prophet. . . ."

The beggar abruptly ceased chanting, and clapped his hands sharply.

"*Wallah!*" gasped the Shareef, blinking. "By my beard!"

He trembled violently at that which had left the beggar's swiftly weaving hands to dance in the tiny whirlwinds before him.

"That sign with the left hand, old man——"

"Just as I said. But it has not yet happened——"

"Not yet?"

The Shareef vaulted to the saddle.

"No. But wait a moment. We have time. Your horses are fast."

The beggar drew from somewhere in the ragged folds of his dirty *djellab* a slender tube the length of his forearm.

"Strike light, *saidi*!" he commanded.

The Shareef fumbled with flint and steel.

"The fire of your pistol will do!" snapped the beggar. The Shareef fired. Then the sputtering of a fuse, and a shower of sparks, and three red stars hung high above them, flamed ruddily for half a minute, and vanished.

"The *Feringhi* troops used them to signal," explained the beggar. "I stole a box of them at Beirut."

"Ah!" And the Shareef frowned. "Old man, whom are you signaling? On your head——"

He leveled his pistol.

"Peace upon you, my lord," grinned the beggar. "I am signaling a detachment of the guard to follow us as fast as their horses can travel."

"*You*, signal the guard? Now, by Allah, but this is too much! Who are you?" demanded the Shareef.

The beggar readjusted his turban; reached with his right hand into his *djellab* and over his left shoulder, dragging forth a large leather pouch; jerked the patch from his right eye; stretched himself, clutching skyward with his grimy talons; and then stood before the astonished Shareef, straight as a lance, fierce-eyed as a bird of prey.

"I am Ismeddin! Whose head you swore you would have. As it is, I keep my head, and, *inshallah*, those two *asil* mares," exulted the darvish.

"By Allah and by Abaddon!" gasped Sayyid Yussuf. "Old thief, you dared venture into Tekrit at the risk of your head?"

"Even so, my lord. For the promise of Suleiman has waited all these centuries for fulfilment. And the infidel Rankin, who was once Abdemon, could not have accomplished his mission single-handed. But now, to horse! Those sons of Iblis the Damned are mounted on your swiftest *meharis*."

The Shareef snorted.

"Follow me!"

Their mounts stretched out in an extended gallop.

"*Wallah!*" exulted Ismeddin, as he drew up beside the Shareef's mare. "She flies! And to think that I overlooked her when I raided your camp at Deir el Zor . . . had your men but snored a moment longer . . . but give me my sword, *saidi* . . . we have hot work ahead of us. . . ."

Ismeddin leaned forward in the saddle, caught the simitar the Shareef tossed him, and buckled the belt about his waist.

BIBAN UL DJINNI they called that desolate, narrow valley: the Valley of the Djinn. But these bearded strangers out of northern Kurdistan eagerly sought that avoided citadel where their dark monarch sat dreaming of ancient days before Suleiman learned the Word of Power; for this was the eve of the 14th of Nisan, when they could make secure for their lord forever after the triumph of that one day wherein he held absolute power over the word of Suleiman.

Ten *meharis* filed down an avenue dimly outlined by the stumps of shattered columns. They picked their way slowly, for the full moon had not yet risen to illuminate the desolation. Finally, at the end of the avenue, they halted. The seven *soi-disant* darvishes dismounted and gathered about the kneeling *meharis* that bore the rich *tahkt rawan*. Zantut parted the curtains and by the light of a torch looked in.

"As I expected," he announced, "she is in a trance. Ibrahaim, stand guard," he commanded. "And keep an eye on the infidel, Rankin. The rest of you, follow me."

Zantut, followed by his adepts, turned toward the black-tiled circular court at the extremity of the avenue up which they had ridden.

"Look, master! There it is, just as it was written!" exclaimed one of the adepts as he pointed out to Zantut a copper image that gleamed dully on its basalt pedestal.

"There is where Iblis sits dreaming of those broad, rich days before Suleiman—may wild hogs defile his grave!—learned the Word of Power. Stand by, brethren!" commanded Zantut.

They formed in a crescent before the image.

Zantut advanced, bearing in each hand a torch which he planted at either side of the image. Then, taking from his belt a small copper mallet, he tapped the image in various spots, each tap sounding a different note; and as he tapped, he listened carefully. Over and over he tapped, here and there; then finally announced, "The third arm; the second hand; the fourth head."

Three stepped forward, each grasping one of the members named by Zantut.

"Ready?" demanded Zantut.

"Ready, master," they replied.

"Now!" exclaimed the master.

And as each adept twisted the member he grasped, the copper image, pedestal and all, swung noiselessly aside.

"Follow me!" directed Zantut.

The dark-robed devotees of Iblis, torch in hand, filed after the master, stepping in unison down the smooth, black stairs.

"The Sura of the Darkness!" commanded Zantut. "One . . . Two . . . Three!"

In deep, resonant tones they chanted as they advanced into the abysmal blacknesses of the vault, swaying their torches in cadence:

"Lord of many brazen hells,
Lord of the Painted Fan,
Prince of the Outer Marches,
Prince of the Borderland,
Iblis, 'tis Thee that we adore,
Just and logical God!"

Flight after flight they marched, chanting as they descended into the depths, until finally, arriving at the foot of the winding stairs, they halted at the entrance of a great hall whose floor was paved with tiles of lapis lazuli.

The master halted and lifted his left arm. His followers ceased chanting and, following Zantut's example, removed their shoes before entering the sanctuary of Iblis.

"Lord and Master," intoned Zantut as he made a swift gesture with his left hand, "we Thy faithful servants bring Thee reverence and worship."

Then, with heads bowed and arms crossed, Zantut and his followers ad-

vanced across the blue tiles toward the Presence that sat cross-legged on a lofty dais at the farther end of the hall. When within five paces of the dais, all except Zantut halted, and kneeling, formed a semicircle.

Zantut advanced to the first step, knelt, and carefully scrutinized the approach to the high place. With his finger tips he caressed the polished stones.

"The holy place has not been defiled," he announced. "The dust of the weary centuries has not been disturbed. The Master sits dreaming of the Night of Power; and his sleep has not been broken."

Then, raising his head and lifting up his arms, Zantut gazed full at the Presence.

"Hail, Iblis, Lord of the Outer Darkness, Malik Taûs, Prince of the Painted Fan!" he saluted, and bowed his head once more to the paving.

"Servants of Iblis," he announced, "you may lift up your eyes and gaze at your Prince."

They contemplated their Prince, stared in wonder at the onyx blackness of his lean, aquiline features: the predatory nose and hard mouth of one whose iron soul has experienced everything save submission. But the eyes were sightless and blank.

"He breathes," murmured an adept.

"That is but the final trace of life the conqueror could not quite extinguish," explained Zantut. "And it is that trace which we must fan into full flame tonight. At each former meeting, Abdemon has failed; and this is his last chance. And we know best what this last chance is worth!

"Talaat! Saoud! Ismail! Go up and get the girl, and Abdemon also. And tell Ibrahaim that when the comrades from Azerbaijan arrive, they are to descend at once. The hour is close at hand."

"Harkening and obedience, *saidi*," replied Talaat, bowing first to the Dark Presence on the throne, and then to Zantut.

From the dim shadows of the hall, Zantut and the two remaining adepts dragged forth a great block of chiseled porphyry, which they slid readily enough across the polished tiles to a position exactly in front of the throne. Zantut then plucked from five of the tiles the pentagonal silver plates with which they were inlaid, uncovering orifices that led to unplumbed depths beneath that subterranean hall. An adept, standing by, presented with ceremonious gestures a small glazed flask which Zantut with gestures equally formal accepted. As he unstoppered the flask, acrid, resinous, violet-colored fumes rose from its mouth. The adepts knelt as Zantut paced about the ominous block of porphyry, pausing at each of the five holes in the floor to pour into the depths a portion of the fuming contents of the flask.

Then a faint humming was heard, which in a few moments became a steady throbbing as of a slowly beaten drum: and tall, slender threads of violet flame rose from the openings in the floor.

At Zantut's signal, the torches were extinguished.

"They are here, Master," whispered the adept at the right of the altar.

Zantut turned to face the entrance of the hall.

The acolytes were bringing in the veiled Azizah, and Rankin, securely bound.

"Lay them on the altar," commanded Zantut.

The deep resonance of a brazen gong rang down the succession of winding stairways, and rolled and thundered in the vaulted holy of holies.

"The hour is at hand," proclaimed Zantut solemnly. And then, to those who had carried Azizah and Rankin into the sanctuary: "The brethren

from Azerbaijan are late. Did you see any signs of them?"

"Yes, *saidi*. And Ibrahaim up there is watching the star of our Lord very closely so as to withhold the final signal until the very last moment. He will strike two warning taps. And then the third, to let you know that the moment has arrived. But they heard the first stroke, and are riding hard to get here in time."

"Very good," acknowledged Zantut, as he stripped from Azizah the silken gauze that enfolded her. "This time our Lord will not be bothered with bungling swordsmen. . . . Unbeliever, would it not have been better to have stayed in *Feringhistan* where you belong?"

To which Rankin, bound and gagged, could reply with neither word nor gesture.

"Ismeddin," thought Rankin, as he saw an acolyte kneel at Zantut's feet and present a long knife and a whetstone, "for once was wrong. . . . That butcher's tool is no thirsty sword. . . ."

Again the solemn, brazen resonance of the gong rolled and surged through the vaulted sanctuary.

"Number two," reflected Rankin. "Thank God she's unconscious . . ."

As the note of the gong died, there came from above the clank of arms and the tinkle of accouterments, and the measured tread of feet descending the winding stairways.

"Ismeddin and the guard!" exulted Rankin.

And then he heard the measured cadence of voices chanting in an unknown tongue.

"The brethren from Azerbaijan!" shouted the assembled adepts.

And Zantut, with statuesquely formal gestures, stroked the blade of his long knife against the whetstone, with each steely caress pausing to intone a sentence in a language that was forgotten when the last stone of that sanctuary of devil-worship was laid and awfully cemented into place.

The brethren from Azerbaijan, still chanting, were filing into the hall, and grouping themselves in a crescent about the sacrificial stone.

THROUGH the coolness of the desert's windswept night and through the sultry flame of its day rode Ismeddin and the Shareef, with but an occasional rest to share with their horses a handful of parched corn. But as the sun set on the eve of the 14th of Nisan, Ismeddin reined in the *asil* mare.

"Slowly, uncle. We must let those sons of confusion get into their underground rendezvous with Satan. They are eight . . . eight at least——"

"And doubtless, Hajj Ismeddin," laughed the Shareef, "you are an old man——"

"Praise be to Allah," agreed the darvish, "my days have been many——"

"And pious also," scoffed the Shareef. "But what is your plan, *Haaji?*"

"The sentry at the entrance must be silenced without disturbance. As for the rest . . . six or seven to one is not so bad. . . . *Inshallah!* but I have a surprize for them. Hot fires for Satan's wings, *saidi!*

"To our left front, an hour's easy ride from here, is Biban ul Djinni, in which the home of Malik Taûs is buried," continued Ismeddin as he scanned the horizon.

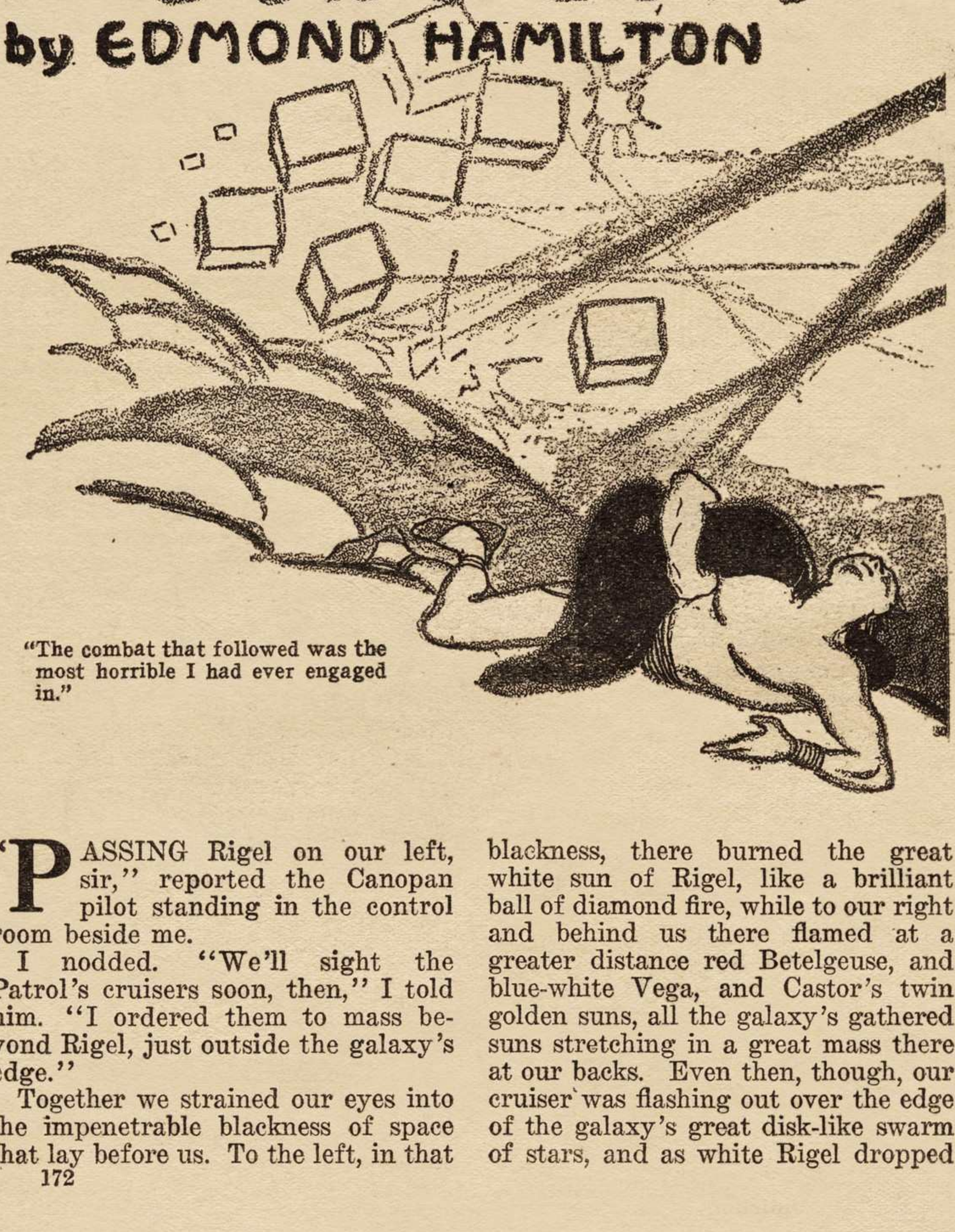
Dusk came swiftly on the heels of sunset. The Shareef followed the dirty white blotch that was Ismeddin's *djellab,* and wondered what strange device the darvish had in mind. For while Ismeddin had signaled the captain of the guard, he had not given him a chance, even with the hardest riding, to overtake them. The encounter would surely be against odds.

From afar they heard the sonorous

(Continued on page 277)

The COMET-DRIVERS

by EDMOND HAMILTON



"The combat that followed was the most horrible I had ever engaged in."

"PASSING Rigel on our left, sir," reported the Canopan pilot standing in the control room beside me.

I nodded. "We'll sight the Patrol's cruisers soon, then," I told him. "I ordered them to mass beyond Rigel, just outside the galaxy's edge."

Together we strained our eyes into the impenetrable blackness of space that lay before us. To the left, in that blackness, there burned the great white sun of Rigel, like a brilliant ball of diamond fire, while to our right and behind us there flamed at a greater distance red Betelgeuse, and blue-white Vega, and Castor's twin golden suns, all the galaxy's gathered suns stretching in a great mass there at our backs. Even then, though, our cruiser was flashing out over the edge of the galaxy's great disk-like swarm of stars, and as white Rigel dropped



behind us to the left there lay before us only the vast, uncharted deeps of outer space.

Gazing forward into those black depths our eyes could make out, faint and inconceivably far, the few little patches of misty light that we knew were remote galaxies of suns like the one behind us, unthinkably distant universes like our own. In the blackness before us, too, there shone a single great point of crimson light, burning through the blackness of the

outer void like a great red eye. It was toward this crimson point that I and the great-headed, bodiless Canopan pilot beside me were gazing, somberly and silently, as our cruiser hummed on. Then as he shifted his gaze there came from him a low exclamation, and I turned to see that a great swarm of gleaming points had appeared in the blackness close before us, resolving as we flashed on toward them into a far-flung, motionless swarm of long, gleaming cruisers like our own.

Swiftly our cruiser rushed into that hanging swarm of ships, which made way quickly before us as there flashed from our bows the signal that marked my cruiser as that of the Chief of the Interstellar Patrol. Then as we too slowed and hung motionless at the head of the swarm I saw three cruisers among them flashing toward us, slanting up and hovering just beneath our craft. There came the sharp rattle of metal as their space-gangways rose up and connected with our cruiser, and then the clang of our space-doors opening. A moment more and the door of the control room was snapped suddenly aside and three strange and dissimilar figures stepped inside, coming swiftly to attention and saluting me.

"Gor Han! Jurt Tul! Najus Nar!" I greeted them. "You've massed a thousand of the Patrol's cruisers here as I ordered?"

Gor Han bowed in the affirmative. A great Betelgeusan, his big fur-covered shape was typical of the races of that big sun's cold world: a huge barrel-like torso supported by four thick stocky limbs, with four similar upper arms; his dark eyes and other features being set directly into the upper part of that furry torso, which was headless. Jurt Tul, beside him, was as strange a figure, patently of the amphibious peoples of Aldebaran's watery worlds, his great green bulk of shapeless body and powerful flipper-limbs almost hiding the small bulbous head with its round and lidless eyes. And Najus Nar, who completed the strange trio, was as dissimilar from them as from myself. One of the powerful insect-men of Procyon, his flat, upright body, as tall almost as my own, was dark and hard and shiny in back and of soft white flesh in front, with a half-dozen pairs of short limbs branching from it from bottom to top, and with a blank, faceless head from the sides of which projected the short, flexible stalks that held in their ends his four keen eyes. Strange enough were these three Sub-Chiefs of the great Patrol, yet to me these three lieutenants of mine were so familiar, in appearance, that as they faced me now their strange and dissimilar forms made no impression on my mind.

"Your order was urgent, sir," Gor Han was saying, "that we mass a thousand of the Patrol's cruisers here outside the galaxy's edge, and await your coming."

"Urgent, yes," I repeated somberly, my eyes turning from them to the great point of crimson light that shone in the black depths beyond; "urgent because it is out from the galaxy's edge that we are going with these cruisers, toward that point of red light there in the void that has puzzled all the galaxy since its appearance days ago—out toward that point of crimson light which our astronomers now have discovered to be a gigantic comet that is racing at speed incredible straight toward our galaxy from the depths of outer space!"

The three gazed at me, stunned, silent, and in that moment the only sound in the control room was the low humming of the generators beneath, which sustained our ship in space. Then, gazing out again into the black depths ahead toward that blood-like point, I was speaking on.

"Comets there are in our galaxy, as you know, comets that revolve in

irregular orbits about various of our stars, and which have been familiar to us always. A comet, as you know, consists of the coma or head, the nucleus, and the tail. The coma is simply a great globe of electrical energy, with a hollow space at its center. The nucleus is all the comet's solid matter, a mass of meteoric and other material hanging in the hollow at the coma's center. The great coma blows from its own electrical energy, and is driven through space by the release of some of that energy backward, through the vast tail, which is simply released energy from the coma. It is the great coma that makes a comet deadly to approach, since any matter that enters its terrific sea of electrical energy is converted instantly into electrical energy likewise, changed from matter-vibrations to electrical vibrations, annihilated. Our interstellar navigators have for that reason always avoided the comets of our galaxy, while never has it been dreamed that a comet might exist in empty space outside our galaxy.

"Now, however, our astronomers have found that this crimson spot of light that has appeared in the outer void and has puzzled us for days is in reality a giant crimson comet of size and speed unthinkable, which is racing straight toward our galaxy and will reach it within a few more weeks. *And when it does reach it, it means the galaxy's doom!* For this gigantic comet, greater by far than any of the galaxy's greatest suns, will crash through the galaxy's swarm of stars like a meteor through a swarm of fireflies, annihilating those in its path by absorbing them and their worlds into the terrific electrical energy of its mighty coma; disrupting all the finely balanced celestial mechanism of our universe and sucking its whirling stars into its deadly self as it smashes on; engulfing our suns and worlds in electrical annihilation, and then racing on into the void, leaving behind it but the drifting fragments of our wrecked and riven universe!

"Onward toward our universe this mighty comet is thundering, and but one chance remains for us to turn it aside. The center of this comet, of any comet, is the nucleus at the heart of its coma, which is the only solid matter in it. If we could penetrate through the coma to the great hollow inside it, could turn upon that nucleus the powerful force-beams used by our Patrol cruisers to sweep up meteor-swarms, we could possibly push it aside enough to change its course, to send it past our galaxy's edge instead of through it. But that must be done soon! Our astronomers have calculated that within twelve more days the comet will have reached a point so near the galaxy that it will be too late for anything ever to turn it aside. When the Council of Suns informed me of this I flashed word immediately for you three Sub-Chiefs to mass swiftly a thousand of the Patrol's cruisers here outside the galaxy's edge. And with these thousand ships we are starting at once toward the comet!

"Behind us the Patrol will be massing another five thousand cruisers to send out after us, but these can hardly reach the comet before it is too late. It is on us, and on our thousand cruisers, that the galaxy's fate now hangs. If we can reach the great oncoming comet, can penetrate through its deadly coma to the solid nucleus at its center, can deflect that nucleus with our force-beams before the twelfth day ends, we will have turned the great comet aside, will have saved the galaxy itself from death. If we can not, the galaxy perishes and we perish with it. For we of the Interstellar Patrol, who have defended and guarded the ways of that galaxy for thousands upon tens of thousands of years, go out to the oncoming comet now not to return unless we can turn

that comet aside and save our universe from doom!''

Again in the control room was silence when I had finished, a silence that seemed intensified, as the three strange Sub-Chiefs before me held my eyes. Then, without speaking, they calmly saluted once more, eyes alight. Impulsively I reached hands out toward them, grasped their own. Then they had turned, were striding swiftly out of the control room and through the passages beyond down to the space-doors, and through the closed space-gangways to their own three cruisers. As our space-doors clanged shut once more, the gangways of those cruisers folded down upon them, and then the three craft had smoothly moved back to take up a position just behind my own.

I turned to the round opening of the speech-instrument beside me, spoke a brief order into it, and in answer to that order the thousand cruisers behind us smoothly and quickly massed into space-squadron formation, a long slender wedge with my own cruiser at the apex and those of the three Sub-Chiefs just behind me. Another brief order and the Canopan pilot beside me was opening the controls, our cruiser and the great triangle of massed cruisers behind us moving smoothly forward toward the crimson-gleaming point in the blackness ahead, our generators throbbing louder and louder as we slipped forward at swiftly mounting speed. We were on our way toward the great comet, and our struggle for the life of our universe had begun!

THE voice of Gor Han came clearly from the speech-instrument as I stepped into the control room, days later. ''Comet dead ahead, sir,'' he announced.

But my own eyes were already on the scene ahead. ''Yes,'' I told him, ''another hour will bring us to the coma's edge.''

For before us now, bulking crimson and mighty and monstrous in the heavens ahead, glowed the giant comet toward which for the last nine days our thousand ships had been flashing. On and on we had rushed toward it at unnumbered light-speeds, through the vast ether-currents that raged here in space outside the galaxy, past regions of strange and deadly force which we but glimpsed and which we gave a wide berth, on into the endless outer void until our galaxy had shrunk to a small swarm of blinking light-points in the darkness behind us. Almost, in those days, we had forgotten the existence of that galaxy, so centered was our attention upon the sinister crimson glory of the comet ahead. Through those days it had largened swiftly to our eyes, from a light-point to a small red disk, and then to a larger disk, and finally to the gigantic circle of crimson-glowing light that loomed before us now, and toward which I and the three Sub-Chiefs in the cruisers just behind my own now gazed.

Tremendous as it was, the great comet's light was not dazzling to our eyes, being a deep crimson, a dusky, lurid red, and gazing forward I could make out its general features. The spherical coma was what lay full before us, a gigantic ball of crimson-glowing electrical energy that I knew, as in all comets, was hollow, holding in the space inside it the solid matter of the nucleus. Behind it, too, I could glimpse the vast faint-glowing tail streaming outward behind the onrushing coma. The light of that tail, I knew, was but faint electrical energy shot back from the terrific coma and propelling that coma forward through space like a great rocket streaming fire behind it. The small comets of our own galaxy, I knew, moved in fixed though irregular orbits about our stars, and thus would often move about a star or sun in the

opposite direction to that in which their tail was pushing them, simply because even the impetus of the tail could not make them leave their fixed orbits. This giant comet of outer space, though, I knew, moved in no orbit whatever through the empty immensities of the outer void, and so would always race through space in a direction opposite to that of its tail, the energy of the mighty coma shot forth in the tail like the powder of a great rocket, propelling it irresistibly forward with terrific momentum and force.

The glowing coma seemed countless millions of miles across, the still vaster tail behind appearing to extend limitlessly backward into the void. Gazing toward it, with something of awe, I was silent for a time, then turned to the speech-instrument. "We'll slant our ships up over the coma," I ordered, "and reconnoiter it for an opening."

Our massed cruisers shot steeply upward at the order, but as they did so the voice of Jurt Tul came doubtfully from the opening before me. "You think we can find an opening through which we can penetrate inside the coma?" he asked.

"We'll have to," I told him. "We've only a few score hours left to get inside and bring our force-beams to bear on the nucleus."

The Aldebaranian's voice came slowly in answer. "That coma," he said; "it seems impossible that we can ever get inside it——"

There was silence as I gazed ahead toward the great comet, whose coma was now indeed a terrific spectacle. An immense lurid sea of crimson light, it seemed to fill all the universe, shifting slowly downward and beneath us as our thousand cruisers hummed up at a steep slant over it. We were racing toward it at a full million miles above its level, the rim of the huge sphere of crimson light creeping across the black void beneath us as comet and cruisers rushed closer to each other. Gazing down toward the great coma, its lurid crimson light drenching all in the control room, I heard startled exclamations beneath as even the imperturbable members of my cruiser's cosmopolitan crew were awed by the comet's magnitude and terror. Then, when the titanic crimson sphere of the coma seemed squarely beneath our rushing ships, I uttered a word into the instrument before me, and immediately our cruiser and the thousand behind it had halted, had turned squarely about, and then at reduced speed were racing along at the same speed as the comet, hanging above it and accompanying it on its mad rush through the void toward our galaxy.

Below us now lay the giant red-glowing globe of the coma, racing on toward the far swarm of light-points that was our galaxy. And now, gazing intently down into its far-flung glowing mass, I strained my eyes for sight of some opening, some crevice in that mighty body of glowing electrical energy that would permit us to penetrate to the space inside it. Yet no such opening could be seen, no tiniest break in the coma's lurid sphere. A single, unbroken and gigantic globe of crimson luminescence, it hung beneath us, as we rushed through the void, the vast fan-tail of faintest crimson light streaming out behind. Through all our days of tense flight outward toward the comet I had hoped against hope that in its coma would be some break or opening, however small, that would permit us to penetrate inside, but now my last hope, and the galaxy's last hope, was shattered by the glowing, unbroken mass of this gigantic comet's coma. With sinking heart I gazed down toward it as our triangle of ships sped on above it.

Gor Han's deep voice sounded from the instrument before me. "There seems no opening in the coma at all,

Khel Ken," he said. "And it is instant annihilation for anything to venture into that coma's electrical energy!"

"We'll have to drop lower and cruise about the coma's surface," I told the Betelgeusan. "We *must* get inside, somehow!"

With the words our cruiser began to sink smoothly downward, still holding its forward flight above the comet, the massed ships behind following steadily in our course. Down—down—by thousands of miles a moment we sank, down until the giant coma beneath seemed the only thing in all the universe, glowing from horizon to horizon like an awful aurora of crimson death. An inconceivably colossal sea of lurid electrical energy, a giant deadly sphere of glowing force which it were annihilation for anything to touch, it stretched beneath us, broadening still as we came closer toward it. Down—down——

A cry from Najus Nar sounded beside me. "Those cubes!" the insectman was shouting. "Racing ahead of the comet there!"

Swiftly I gazed down toward the foremost rim of the great, onrushing coma, and saw what he had seen. Racing along a few thousand miles in front of the comet, separated from each other by great spaces, there sped score upon score of mighty metal cubes, glinting in the coma's lurid light! Distant as they were, I could glimpse them clearly through our telescopic windows, extending in a great chain or line around the comet's head, and rushing before it through the deeps of space. And there were openings in the sides of these speeding cubes, transparent openings from which gushed pure white light! For they were ships! Colossal cube-ships flashing on with the great comet on its thundering rush toward our universe!

"Cube-ships!" It was Gor Han's shout that echoed my thought.

"Cube-ships!" Najus Nar too was crying. "Scouting before the comet!"

"And that means that these cube-ships are from the comet's heart!" I cried excitedly; "from its——"

My exclamation had been cut short by simultaneous sharp cries from Gor Han and Jurt Tul.

"The cubes have seen us!" they shouted. "They're coming up toward us!"

For there, far below us, the great chain of mighty cube-ships had suddenly condensed, shortened, and they had all, a hundred or more in number, massed swiftly together as though in answer to some sudden alarm and were driving up toward us! At velocity incredible they shot up toward us, while we gazed stunned; then as they flashed nearer there flashed up from the foremost of them a long, slender shaft of crimson light like that of the comet below, a terrific bolt of electrical energy like that of the coma beneath, which struck one of our cruisers squarely and instantly annihilated it. And as we gazed stupefied toward it in that dazing moment, from the upleaping cubes beneath score upon score of other crimson deadly bolts were stabbing up toward us!

2

"BATTLE formation!"

Even as the deadly crimson bolts had shot up from the cubes toward us I had yelled the order into the instrument before me, and it was all that saved us from disaster in that moment, since in the split-second before the glowing bolts could reach us our cruisers had shifted their formation suddenly, only a score of them being struck by those glowing shafts. In that moment our cruisers had shifted into three long parallel lines, and then, as the massed cubes beneath flashed ever upward toward us, their glowing bolts blasting our cruisers, I

had shouted another order into the speech-instrument above the great din beneath.

"The force-beams!" I cried. "Turn them on these cube-ships—push them down into the coma!"

There came a deep shout from Gor Han at the order, and from Jurt Tul's ship there issued through my instrument the amphibian's cool laugh. The next instant there were shooting downward from all our cruisers the great force-beams, broad beams, not of light but of darkness, of utter blackness and absence of light, of great force that was invisible itself but whose terrific power drove even the light-vibrations from its path and so made the force-beams seem beams of utter blackness. Down toward the uprushing cube-ships the black force-beams stabbed, and as they smote among those cubes those that were struck by them were driven suddenly downward with inconceivable power. Down, down, struggling vainly against the irresistible force-beams that pushed them, down, down until in a moment more those struck had been driven into the crimson sphere of the mighty coma beneath, vanishing in its immense lurid sea and there meeting annihilation instantly in spurts of leaping light!

Thus a full score of the hundred cube-ships below had been forced down to death in the comet in a single moment, but the rest were still leaping toward us and before we could loose more of the deadly force-beams they were just beneath us, among us, their crimson bolts blasting lightning-like about them, leaping from cube to cruiser. High above the titanic thundering comet, like flies above a sun, cubes and cruisers whirled and struck and ran, with crimson bolts and black force-beams stabbing thick through the void about us. I heard the shouts of Gor Han and Jurt Tul and Najus Nar from the instrument before me, screamed my orders into its opening as my own cruiser soared through the wild mêlée with black beams whirling. I glimpsed one of the cubes rocketing toward us, looming in an instant to immense size, a colossal metal cube thousands of feet square, through the transparent sections of which I could glimpse for a split-second the white-lit interior, a mass of intricate mechanisms among which clung the beings who manned it, black, shapeless masses that I but half glimpsed in that mad moment. Then from the cube's great side a glowing red bolt shot toward us, but a moment too late, since by then our cruiser had shot upward and our black force-beam had smote down upon the cube-ship to drive it into the glowing sea of death below!

About us, too, all our cruisers were speeding upward, in answer to my orders, and before the cubes could check our maneuver we were over them, all our dark force-beams smiting from above. Struck by those beams, all but a scant half-dozen of the remaining cubes drove down to doom in the coma's fiery sea, before they could rise to our level to resume the battle. The half-dozen left seemed to hover motionless a moment, then turned and sped away from us, back over the coma's crimson-glowing sphere toward the great tail of the comet, streaming out behind!

"We've beaten them!" Gor Han was bellowing. "They're trying to get away——"

"After them!" I yelled into the speech-instrument. "They're trying to get back inside the coma — they must have some way of getting inside!"

But my order had been unnecessary, for even as the half-dozen great cubes flashed away, our cruisers, still some eight hundred in number, had turned and were racing after them like unleashed hounds after their prey. Downward and backward we

raced after them, low across the glowing surface of the great comet, over the deadly coma to where the faint, vast tail issued from it. Ahead we could see the six cubes fleeing onward, at a speed equal to our own, and the sight of them caused us to open to the last notch the power of our throbbing generators for that wild pursuit. Within moments, at that tremendous speed, there came into view ahead the rear rim of the coma's colossal glowing sphere, with the fainter glow that marked the currents of the great tail streaming back from the rim into the void of space.

Swift as were the great cubes ahead, though, our great cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol, speediest of all the galaxy's ships, were proving now to be swifter, since slowly, steadily, we had begun to overhaul those fleeing shapes. I heard Gor Han's deep voice, excited as always in battle, from the speech-instruments, heard Jurt Tul's calm comments as we drove nearer the flying cubes, heard Najus Nar's eager cries. The cubes were passing out now from over the great coma, on over the vast tail, to my puzzlement. I had thought they were striving to gain the interior of the comet, but instead they were racing away from it, while with every moment we were drawing nearer to them. Then, just when it seemed that another moment's flight would bring us upon them, they halted abruptly in space, hovering above the faint, vast-streaming tail, and then plunged straight down into the mighty currents of the tail, and were moving back, *inside* that tail, toward the great coma behind us!

"The tail!" cried Najus Nar. "They're going up the tail itself and into the coma's heart!"

But I too had seen and had understood all in that moment, had understood what I had not dreamed before, that the only opening through the great coma to the hollow at its heart lay at the coma's rear, and could be reached only by struggling up to it through the awful currents of the tail! These mighty cubes, I saw, had been constructed in that shape especially to resist and endure those terrible, back-sweeping ether-currents set up by the comet's rush through the void, terrific currents glowing with the electrical energy shot backward and dissipated in driving the comet on. The cubes thus specially constructed could brave those colossal currents where weaker craft would be battered to fragments. All this I understood and weighed, in that tense moment, and then had made decision and was shouting back into the instrument before me.

"Down with our ships, too, then!" I cried. "*We're going up the tail after them!*"

I heard an exclamation from Gor Han, an answering shout from Najus Nar, and then my cruiser and all the cruisers behind us were dipping steeply downward, plunging into the vast and faint-glowing tail! The next moment was one of blind, utter confusion, for as we plunged into the terrific currents our cruisers were whirled up and backward as though by gigantic hands, thrown helplessly like leaves in a terrific wind, cruiser smashing against cruiser and destroying each other there by dozens in that wild moment. Then as the pilot beside me clung to the controls, bringing its bows around to face those mighty currents, heading toward the coma, our ship steadied, while those about it steadied likewise. We had lost half a hundred ships in that first terrific plunge, but neither my own nor those of the three Sub-Chiefs had been injured, and now we were moving slowly up the great currents of the tail toward the coma. The tail about us was to the eyes but a great region of faint light, but far ahead of us there glowed like a crimson

wall of light across the heavens the mighty coma, and against it we could make out the dark square shapes of the cube-ships we pursued, likewise fighting their way toward the coma through those terrific currents.

I THINK now that the moments which followed, as we struggled in pursuit of those cubes, were almost the most terrible I ever experienced, moments in which it seemed impossible that our ships could breast such awful currents and live. About us the currents roared deafeningly, thrilling through every portion of our ships, sweeping against us with titanic power. On and on we struggled, veering to take advantage of weaker currents, blundering into great maelstroms, swaying, plunging, fighting on, with the coma's glowing wall looming ever closer ahead. I heard Gor Han's anxious comments from the instrument before me, glimpsed cruisers here and there behind my own collapsing and sweeping backward, knew that not for long could we fight against those currents and live.

The coma was very near, now, a giant wall of crimson light across the heavens, and now I made out a dark circle within that glowing wall, a circular opening rapidly largening to our eyes and toward which the flying cubes ahead were struggling.

"The opening!" Gor Han was shouting, his voice coming to me even above the awful din of the currents about us.

"Straight toward it after those cubes!" I cried. "Our ships can't stand this much longer!"

Now ahead I could see the cube-ships we pursued struggling toward that opening slower and slower, fighting the currents which were most powerful here where they issued from the mighty coma ahead. A moment more, though, and they had reached it, and vanished inside, while we in turn were fighting through the titanic sweep of those currents toward it. On—on—the currents that raged against us had become awful in strength, seeming to clutch at us with supreme power at this last moment. The opening loomed larger ahead, now, a dark circular passageway remaining miraculously open and unchanged through that electrical sea whose deadly crimson mass formed its walls. On—on—it seemed that never could we reach it, so terribly did the currents sweep about us. Yard by yard, foot by foot, we crept forward toward it, were on its brink, seemed to hesitate there for an instant before being swept backward and away, and then with a supreme last effort of our throbbing generators we crept forward out of the grip of those gigantic currents and into the open passageway!

Now all about us there raged the glowing electrical sea of the colossal coma, into the deadly mass of which the passage led, a straight passage which I knew could only be artificially made and maintained. Far ahead in that light-walled passage we could glimpse the dark shapes of the cubes, fleeing still before us, and now with humming generators our cruisers leapt forward, through that tunnel of the deadly coma! Above, below, on each side, there raged the coma's electrical sea, which it were annihilation to touch, and the circular passage down which we fled was hardly wide enough to admit three of our ships abreast, yet down it at reckless speed we sped, all thought leaving us now save the wild excitement of the pursuit.

Crimson light from the hell of glowing death that raged all about us beat blood-like upon us as we drove on, yet the cries of Gor Han and Najus Nar and even the cool Jurt Tul mingled with my own from the speech-instrument, as we shot forward in pursuit of the fleeing cubes. Never, surely, was pursuit stranger than that one, the galaxy's hundreds of cruisers,

manned by every dissimilar shape to be found upon its myriad worlds, leaping forward in the narrow opening that led through a comet's deadly mass into its unglimpsed heart, after the strange cube-craft that fled on before us. A single slip of the controls for a fraction of an inch was enough to send any cruiser into the incandescent walls to death, and indeed I glimpsed cruisers among those that followed me blundering into those walls in our wild flight onward and vanishing in wild spurts of light!

Yet on and on we leapt, and shouted now as we saw the cubes ahead shooting out from the passageway into open space beyond. A moment more and we were on their tracks, were flashing out too from the encircling crimson walls of glowing death, that vanished suddenly from about us as we entered into a vast region of open space, the immense open space that lay at the giant comet's heart! Far, far away from us there stretched the walls of the gigantic coma that encompassed this open space, above and below, enclosing all that space within their deadly electrical sea. This, though, we had expected and it was not this that held our attention in that stunning moment. It was the comet's nucleus, hanging at the center of that space. For that nucleus was a mass of smoothly revolving worlds!

Worlds! Worlds there at the comet's heart, worlds that were disk-shaped instead of spherical, a dozen or more of which revolved in a great ring about a single world that was larger than any of the others, and that hung motionless! Over those revolving worlds, down toward that central disk-world the cube-ships ahead of us were fleeing, and as we shot down after them I saw that it and the rim of other disks, though not illuminated by the dusky crimson glow of the encompassing comet, were bathed in light, pure white light that seemed to emanate from themselves! And as we rushed down toward the surface of that central world I glimpsed upon it smooth dark ways and streets, on each side of which were what seemed great, smooth-sided shallow pits; glimpsed multitudes of dark, shapeless figures that moved to and fro along those streets and ways, tending great mechanisms set up in masses here and there along them; glimpsed a single great circular plaza or smooth-floored clearing set amid those streets and pits and massed mechanisms, at the center of which loomed a great, truncated dark pyramid upon whose flat summit rested some big disk-shaped mechanism. Then in that same flashing glimpse I saw that which drove all else from my mind, saw from the surface of all this mighty world a tremendous swarm of great cube-ships that was driving up toward the ships we pursued, and toward ourselves!

"Cube-ships!" Gor Han was crying. "Cube-ships in thousands, and they're attacking us!"

"Back!" I cried. "Back up and outward! We have no chance against these thousands!"

But before our cruisers could turn, before we could halt and slant back upward, the thousands of leaping cubes from beneath were upon us! Then about us for a wild moment was conflict indescribable, colossal cubes rushing by thousands upon our hundreds of gleaming cruisers, crimson electrical bolts and black force-beams whirling and stabbing in wild destruction. Cubes thronged thick about us as our cruiser leapt upward, and then the thrumming of the force-beams of our ship sounded as they drove paths of instant devastation through the ruck of battle about us. From the speech-instrument there came above the din of battle a wild cry from Gor Han, and I saw that a crimson bolt had grazed past his

cruiser's stern, warping its whole side with its terrific power and sending his craft swirling helplessly down to the world below! I cried out at that sight, then saw Najus Nar's craft slant downward even as my own struggled wildly with the cubes about it, saw the insect-man's cruiser drive right and left with force-beams, as other cubes from beneath rushed up toward it. Then as it shot downward among them to reach Gor Han's falling ship it had crashed glancingly along the side of one of the uprushing cubes, and with its prow a twisted wreck of metal was whirling down also!

"Gor Han! Najus Nar!" I shouted, as I saw them fall; then a deadly bolt of blinding crimson fire flashed past our cruiser's walls, missing us only by inches; I yelled crazily as the cube above that had loosed it was driven smashingly into the battle whirl about us by our swift-leaping force-beam. But about us now our cruisers were swiftly vanishing, as the hordes of cube-ships rushed upon them! They were stabbing out with black beams to the bitter end, driving cubes down to death with those beams, yet they were fast disappearing beneath the withering hail of deadly crimson electrical bolts. But a score of cruisers remained beside me, now but a dozen, as the crimson bolts still flashed thick, Jurt Tul's ship fighting side by side with my own. Then, as but a scant five or six cruisers remained, the target of all the blasting bolts from the massed cubes about us, there penetrated through the deafening roar of battle from the speech-instrument Jurt Tul's great voice.

"Back out of the comet!" he yelled. "It's our only chance, Khel Ken—to get outside until the rest of the Patrol's cruisers arrive!"

I saw, even through my mad bloodlust at that moment, that he was right and that our only chance of further action lay in winning clear of the comet. "Back, then!" I cried.

With the words our half-dozen cruisers zoomed upward and outward at such tremendous velocity that the deadly bolts from the thousands of cubes beneath fell short of us in our wild upward rush. Up—up—upward from that great central world we shot, and outward. The cube-ships beneath, taken by surprize for the moment, then massed also and leapt up after us. And now, a scant six cruisers remaining of all the thousands that had been our force a few minutes before, we raced out from that central world, toward the darker circle in the distant coma's wall that was the one passage to outside space. Out over the ring of revolving disk-worlds we shot, out toward that opening, out——

But what was that? That swarm of tiny, square shapes, of gleaming little cube-shapes, which even at that distance we could see had darted suddenly from one side across the dark circle of the single opening? Close-massed in a compact swarm, they had shot out from the side to halt *across* that opening, hanging motionless there. Cube-ships, hundreds in number, that had flashed toward that opening from one side, to hang motionless there across it, while behind us there raced after us in deadly pursuit the other cube-ship thousands! Cube-ships that hung motionless, ready, across that round opening through the great coma, and at sight of which I cried aloud once more.

"They've cut us off—they're ahead of us!" I cried. *"They've barred the one way to outside space and we're trapped here at the comet's heart!"*

3

THE moment that followed, as our ships slowed and hung motionless, with doom ahead and doom behind, was one in which the death that we had dared a score of times since reach-

ing the comet loomed full before us. The cube-ships that barred the way ahead, the thousands racing toward us from behind — these were like death's great jaws closing upon us, and for an instant I felt myself surrendering to utter despair. But then, as my eyes dropped downward, toward the ring of outer smaller disk-worlds over which we had been flashing and above which we now hung, a flicker of hope shot through me and I turned swiftly to the speech-instrument.

"Down to those worlds below!" I cried. "There's a chance that we can hide on one of them until we can get out of the comet!"

Instantly, spurred to greater swiftness by our desperate situation, our half-dozen cruisers were slanting sharply down toward one of those revolving disk-worlds. The surface of that world leapt up with terrific speed toward us as we shot recklessly downward, and I sighted cities of pits and streets and mechanisms like that of the central world upon it, cities though that did not cover all its surface as in the central world, but were scattered about it, the rest of the disk-world's surface being a tumbled mass of mighty mountains and chasmed valleys, all of barren dark rock. It was down toward one of these tremendous chasms, near the disk-world's outer edge, that we were heading, every feature of that world's surface lying plain beneath us in the strange white light that bathed all these revolving worlds. Downward into that awful chasm our cruisers shot, and as they did so I glimpsed, high above, a swarm of tiny dark cube-shapes that had halted their pursuit of us, were circling about and dropping lower as though to discover our whereabouts!

Our lives depended on finding some place of hiding in this tremendous-walled chasm, I knew, and as we arrowed down into its depths, white-lit by the same strange illumination, I gazed swiftly about for some place of concealment. A moment the search seemed hopeless, there being nothing but the chasm's narrow floor of barren rock, its towering jagged rock sides, and then as we shot along its length I sighted a great crack or crevice in one of them, a long, crack-like opening that was large enough to admit our cruisers, and behind which could be glimpsed the dark depths of some great cavernous hollow in the rock.

"Through that crack!" I ordered swiftly, saw Jurt Tul's cruiser move quickly toward it, scraping against the crack's jagged edges as it pushed through into the dark cavern behind. Another of our cruisers followed, and then the rest, one by one, until my own was scraping inside, just as I saw the cube-ships high above dropping toward us, splitting into divisions of a dozen ships each which were slanting down over all the surface of this world in search of us, one of them heading straight toward the great chasm!

As it slanted down toward us I gazed about me, saw that our six cruisers were hanging in a dark, cavernous abyss that seemed to extend far down into the depths of this disk-world. A rocky shelf just inside the crack-opening, though, seemed large enough for us to rest our ships upon; so instantly we brought them to rest there, cutting off the generators whose humming might betray us. Then, as our space-doors opened with a slight inward hiss from the higher-pressure air of the disk's atmosphere, I stept quickly out, found Jurt Tul and the other cruiser captains beside me, and then we had all suddenly crouched down inside the great crack's edge as a score of the great cube-ships shot down into the white-lit chasm outside.

Peering out from the cavern's dark depths we saw those cubes hanging there, then moving slowly along the

chasm's length as though in search of us. Down its length they disappeared and we breathed easier for a moment; then they reappeared, coming to rest on the chasm's floor directly beneath the opening in which we crouched, scarce a half-hundred feet below us. Tensely we watched, saw that doors were opening in those cubes' sides, creatures emerging, the comet-creatures of these strange worlds. And at sight of those creatures even our tense situation could not suppress our gasps. For they were — liquid-creatures! Creatures whose bodies were liquid instead of solid, creatures that were each but a pool of thick black liquid, flowing viscously about, in each of which pools floated two round, white blank disks, great white pupilless eyes.

We saw them flowing forth from out their cubes, saw some whose viscous bodies held what seemed tools or weapons, saw the floating eyes turned this way and that about the chasm, as though in search of us. Then a score of the strange creatures did an incomprehensible thing: they flowed together into a single liquid mass, a great black pool in which floated all their eyes, their liquid bodies mingling together! A moment they remained thus, then had separated, each from the others, and were returning to their cubes.

"Conversing!" whispered Jurt Tul beside me. "It's their method of conversing, of exchanging thoughts—to mingle their liquid bodies one with another!"

I knew the amphibian was right, and shuddered involuntarily at the thing we had seen. The cubes' doors had closed now, and the cubes were lifting upward from the chasm's floor. One, more suspicious apparently than the rest, hovered a moment outside the crack within which we crouched, and we shrank back, suddenly tense, but after a moment's inspection it too had driven up after the others, which passed from sight high above, searching slowly across the disk-world's surface in a strange formation as though following some discussed plan. We breathed easier, then, standing erect, and I turned quickly to Jurt Tul.

"Our only chance is to get out of the comet and wait for the five thousand Patrol cruisers that were to come after us," I told him. "But we can't leave the comet with Gor Han and Najus Nar prisoned in it!"

The great amphibian shook his head. "We could venture back to the comet-city on the central world to attempt to find them," he said, "but in this brilliant white light we'd be seen and destroyed at once."

I was silent, for I knew that it was so, and broodingly I considered that light, whose white illumination filled all the great chasm outside, beating faintly even into the cavern, yet seeming to have no visible source whatever. And then, even as I gazed upon it, that light died! It seemed to gray, to darken, and then had vanished altogether, within a moment, while at the same moment there beat faintly through the air from far away a great clanging note like that of a giant gong. The chasm outside, the world and worlds about us, lay now in dusk, their only illumination the lurid, dark crimson light of the comet's glowing coma, a red disk that gave to the barren rocky world about us an inconceivably weird appearance.

"That gong!" Jurt Tul was saying. "You heard it? It sounded when the light died—it means that these comet-creatures maintain and regulate their own day and night!"

"That white light," I said; "you mean that it's made by them, turned off for their night?"

He nodded quickly. "It must be. They can use the coma's great electrical energy to produce that light at will, just as they use that energy for their crimson bolts. They must turn it off and on at regular intervals, to

produce their day and night, their activity-periods and rest-periods."

"But then we can venture back to the comet-city — back to the central world for Gor Han and Najus Nar!" I exclaimed, and he nodded.

"Yes, but we'd best wait longer, since now the cube-ships' search will be going on, even in this dusk, and we'd have small chance of escaping them."

For all my impatience I saw the wisdom of Jurt Tul's suggestion and so composed myself to a longer period of waiting. So hour followed hour while we crouched there in the great crack in the chasm's wall. Far above we could see the crimson coma, against which there came and went now and then divisions of cube-ships, still searching, searching for the fugitives who had escaped them. My thoughts turned to Gor Han and to Najus Nar, prisoned in the comet-city, and then to our own predicament. But hours remained now in which the comet might be turned aside, and unless we could escape from it, could meet the five thousand cruisers that were racing toward it from the galaxy and lead them inside, no power in all space and time could turn the comet aside from the galaxy. And I could not, would not, attempt to escape from the comet without having first learned the fate, at least, of Gor Han and Najus Nar.

At last I stood upright, turned to Jurt Tul. "The cube-ships above seem to have slackened their search," I told him, "and now's the time for our venture. We've had hours now of this dusk, and the light of their day may be turned on at any time."

He nodded, then pointed out that his cruiser had been damaged somewhat in the battle over the central world. So that it might not delay us we transferred his crew from it to the others, Jurt Tul entering my own cruiser with me, while the damaged one we left there on the cavern's shelf. Then, after we had closed our space-doors, our cruisers moved gently out of the narrow opening, rising swiftly up over the disk-world from the chasm's depths. That disk-world's surface lay beneath us, now, illumined by the coma's far crimson glow alone, a lurid luminescence that picked out streaks and veins of metal here and there in the jagged rock. It was plain, indeed, that these worlds were meteoric in nature, and had been formed and set spinning in this orderly fashion by the comet-creatures themselves.

For the time, though, we heeded not these things, intent on the scene ahead as our five cruisers shot silently through the lurid dusk toward the central world. Far away, now and then, against the coma's baleful glow, we caught sight of cube-ships moving still restlessly about in search of us, and once a party of these seemed to take up our course, to follow us. These, though, veered away in the dusk behind us, and then in a moment more we had passed above that ring of outer disk-worlds, and Jurt Tul and I, gazing forward from the control room, could make out the great, motionless mass of the central world beneath us, the world that was our goal. No light gleamed upon its darkened surface, lying in a weird picture there in the coma's crimson dusk. As we shot down toward it I saw vaguely in that dusk the great, massed machines here and there, the smooth streets, the enigmatic pits about them, and then the great clearing at the flat world's center.

"That clearing!" I whispered to Jurt Tul. "It was near it that Gor Han's and Najus Nar's ships fell— we'll land near it."

Our cruisers now were arrowing smoothly down toward one of the broader streets some distance from the clearing, since we could see now

that on all the world below there moved only an occasional dark liquid-creature, the throngs we had seen before having unaccountably disappeared. Here and there above it moved a cube-ship, but none of these glimpsed us through the dusk, and in a moment more our cruisers had landed gently upon one of the smooth streets. There Jurt Tul and I swiftly stepped forth, for we had decided that we two alone could explore the comet-city more silently than a larger party. At once the cruisers swept back to wait for us in the dusk above, ready to make an attempt at escape from the comet should we be discovered. Then the amphibian and I moved swiftly along that silent street toward the great central plaza.

On each side of us loomed great massed machines at which we merely glanced as we hurried on. As we passed one of the pits that had puzzled me, though, I stepped to its edge, gazed down, then shrank back in horror! For in that shallow, smooth-walled pit there lay what seemed a great pool of thick black liquid unguessably deep, a pool formed by the liquid bodies of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the liquid comet-creatures that had poured into it! I could glimpse the white eyes floating in it, here and there, but there was no other sign of life or movement in the mass, and as I saw that and thought of the rows upon rows of other similar pits that extended across the comet-city, I understood, and turned swiftly to Jurt Tul.

"Sleeping!" I exclaimed. "In their night, their rest-period, they must all pour into these pits together—mingling their liquid bodies!"

Swiftly we shrank back from the great pit, moved on toward the clearing. Massed machines, grim and gleaming and towering, loomed all about us, half seen in the crimson dusk, and we passed scores of the great, liquid-filled pits in which slept the comet-creatures, but there was no sign of our two friends. Had they been destroyed? Dread filled me, dread intensified because I realized that soon the comet-creatures would be ending their night, and turning on their white light of day, discovering us there on their world. Then, abruptly, Jurt Tul jerked me back from my forward stride, crouching silently with me upon the street, behind a mass of great mechanisms. For out of the darkness to our right had come the sound of something moving, something approaching us! Silently, tensely, we crouched there, and saw a dark shape moving stealthily down one of the branching streets toward us. It had turned from us, toward the great clearing ahead, when unexpectedly, as we crouched, my arm had brushed against the great machine beside us and touched something that moved beneath the touch, with a loud metallic clicking. Instantly that dark shape ahead had turned, and then was leaping straight toward us!

Before we could rise to meet it the rush of it had borne us downward, and as it did so I realized with a wild thrill that it was *not* a liquid-creature but a great and warm and fur-covered being, many-limbed, that had attacked us! Even as that fact penetrated into my brain our struggle had abruptly ceased, and we were staggering erect, Jurt Tul and I grasping the other.

"Gor Han!" I exclaimed. "It's you!"

The great Betelgeusan's fur-covered body and strange features were clearly visible to us now as he grasped our own hands, his eyes wide.

"Khel Ken! Jurt Tul!" he whispered. "I thought you destroyed in the battle!"

"We hid—escaped," I explained to him swiftly. "But you, Gor Han—how have you escaped?—and where's Najus Nar?"

He was silent a moment, then suddenly dragged us down into the deeper shadow of the great machines beside us. There, with the lurid light of the coma on his strange features, he spoke swiftly.

"Najus Nar is—living," he said, "but I will tell you what came upon us. You saw our ships fall in the battle over the city here, crashing down into it. At once these liquid comet-creatures were upon us, most of our crews having been killed in the crash, and but a few were left; but these being injured, too, they annihilated them with crimson bolts before we realized it, leaving but Najus Nar and myself, whom they wished, apparently, to question. Us they secured by metal bonds to one of the great machines, then came to us with little metal models, made of what seemed plastic gleaming metal, which could change instantaneously through a myriad different forms at their operation, and which they used for a rough communication with us. And through these and the things they explained to us, we learned, Najus Nar and I, something of the purpose and the past of these comet-creatures.

"Eons they had dwelt upon the central worlds of this giant comet that roamed the outer void, shaping those worlds to their will as it flashed on. They had used the coma's electrical energy for their own weapons, and had used it to produce light-vibrations, a white light which they turned on and off for their day and night. The coma's energy, indeed, was the source of all their world's activities, but as their giant comet plunged on through space, that energy, ever shot backward in the tail that drove the comet on, was dissipated faster and faster, the coma waning and dying as all comets wane and die in time. But one thing could save them: to absorb into the coma vast quantities of matter, which would be converted instantly into electrical energy to replenish the coma. Not far from the great comet at that time loomed a vast universe of suns, and if the comet were to crash through the universe its suns and worlds would replenish their waning coma and save their comet from death. They needed but to change the comet's course, to send it toward the universe instead of passing it, and to do this they set up a great comet-control.

"This comet-control was set on the top of a truncated pyramid in a clearing at the central world's center. It was a great horizontal disk, set parallel to their disk world, with a pointer that could be moved at will around the disk-dial. The position of the pointer, by means of great projectors to which it was connected, controlled the position of the comet's tail. If the pointer was at the dial's rear the tail would be shot forth from the great coma's rear also, driving it forward through space. If they turned the pointer to the left the tail would shoot from the coma's left, driving the comet to the right. They could thus, by means of the comet-control and the great projectors which controlled the tail's position, drive the comet in any direction at will. The only thing they could not do with it was to reverse the comet-control, to shoot out a new tail opposite to the old one, since the momentum of the old one and the opposite momentum or pressure of the new one would crush and annihilate the coma and its worlds between their great pressures. They could drive the comet to right or left at will, though, which was all that they needed, since now they drove it toward the universe of suns near them.

"Onward the giant comet drove to that universe, and soon crashed through it, its suns and worlds being sucked into the gigantic coma and annihilated there, converted instantly into electrical energy which restored the waning coma's glory. So onward through space with renewed power it

flashed, through the great void between the galaxies, until ages later when its coma was again waning they drove it toward another universe, crashed through it likewise. And so through the eons, as ever the comet's glory, the coma's power, has waned, they have driven it through another universe, destroying that universe to restore it. On through the limitless void of outer space they have driven it, a cosmic vampire looting the life of universes to restore its own! And now, when the comet's glory has again waned, they have turned it toward our own galaxy, to destroy it as they have done countless others. And within less than a scant half-dozen hours now the comet will have thundered so close to our galaxy that no power in existence can turn it aside!

"All this we heard from the comet-creatures' communication with us, and then they proposed that we cast in our lot with them, forgetting our doomed universe, and help them build great cruisers and force-beam apparatus like those with which we had fought them. I refused, of course, not wishing to live under any conditions after our galaxy's death, but to my horror Najus Nar accepted the proposal! He joined them, not listening to my frantic words, and went away with them, leaving me in despair. Then when the gong sounded across their worlds that marked the end of the white light and the beginning of this night, I began to work frantically with the metal bonds that held me to the great machine, twisting and untwisting them until at last, but minutes ago, I managed to break them. They had counted on the bonds holding me, and had left no guard over me, so at once I started off toward the central clearing, toward the great comet-control, for a desperate last attempt at turning the comet aside with it. I heard you crouching there, thought you comet-creatures and sprang at you, and the rest you know."

When Gor Han's deep whisper had ceased we were silent a moment, and surely never did stranger trio crouch in stranger place than we three, earth-man and amphibian Aldebaranian and great fur-clad Betelgeusan, there in the crimson dusk of the comet-city, all about us the pits that held its countless liquid-creatures and above us the glowing red coma which encompassed this world and was driving on toward our galaxy's doom. At last I broke the silence.

"Najus Nar with the comet-creatures!" I whispered. "It's impossible! In all its record there have been no traitors in the Interstellar Patrol!"

Gor Han looked steadily, compassionately, at me. "It is so, Khel Ken," he said. "I would not believe it had I not seen it myself."

"Najus Nar!" I repeated, again, then gathered myself. "There's but one thing to do," I said swiftly, "and that's for us three to make the attempt you planned, Gor Han, to get to the comet-control in the clearing and turn it, then destroy it before they can turn it back!"

We rose, paused. "There are comet-guards at the pyramid's base and summit, I know," said Gor Han, "but if we can overcome them before this night-period ends we'll succeed!"

Swiftly we moved forward, now, down the street through the dusk toward the great clearing. Mighty machines looming in the red dusk on each side of us, dark pits yawning between them in which the comet-hordes lay silent, glowing crimson coma that swung above — these made an inconceivably weird scene about us through which we three, a weird and dissimilar enough trio in that lurid dusk, moved rapidly on.

Once we saw a few of the liquid-creatures flowing across one of the streets ahead, shrank back until they had disappeared, then moved swiftly on. One or two cube-ships slid by above, too, but these did not spy us, and in a few minutes more we had emerged from the mass of machines and pits into the great flat-floored circular plaza at the city's center, the truncated pyramid rising vaguely from it in the crimson dusk.

"The guards!" whispered Gor Han. "There at the pyramid's base!"

I gazed, saw that a great notched stair or flight of narrow steps ran up the pyramid's side, and that at its foot were some four dark liquid-shapes, lying motionless, but with weapons of some sort, bolt-containers I did not doubt, held in the grasp of their viscous fluid bodies. A moment we hesitated, then crept out across the clearing toward them. They seemed not aware of our approach, and still nearer we crept stealthily, approaching them from a side, until just when we were within yards, within feet of them, one seemed to flow swiftly toward us for an instant, then back, at the same time training his deadly weapon upon us! Before he could loose the crashing bolts from it, though, we had sprung upon them!

The combat that followed at the pyramid's base was the most horrible, I think, that ever I engaged in. I had grasped at the body of one of the things but instantly felt the viscous liquid body withdraw from my grasp, flow away from me, while I struggled in vain for some hold upon it. Then I glimpsed Gor Han with his four great arms gripping one of the viscous things and hurling it against the pyramid's side before it could evade his grasp, shattering it into liquid black splashes there. The thing I struggled with had gripped me in turn, now, and was like fluid steel in the strength with which it held me. I felt a powerful viscous arm tightening about my neck, while others pinioned my arms, felt that grasp tightening, strangling me, and then it was abruptly torn from me as Gor Han lifted and flung it likewise! I rose, staggering, to see that of the four comet-creatures only black splashes here and there about us remained, Gor Han and Jurt Tul having annihilated them with their mighty limbs.

"Up to the pyramid's summit!" I choked, stumbling toward the stair's base. "We've a chance to win yet!"

The others were rushing toward the stair with me, and then suddenly, as we set foot upon it, we stopped short. For in the air about us, sounding out across all the central world and the worlds about it, had clanged the note of a mighty gong! I heard Gor Han and Jurt Tul cry out at that sound, but in the next instant brilliant white light had sprung into being about us, the light of the comet-creatures' day, suddenly turned on, bathing all things in their world in its revealing glare! And as we staggered there almost blinded by that brilliance, from the streets about us comet-creatures were flowing into the great clearing, liquid black comet-creatures in countless hordes from the pits of the mighty city. Even as they poured into the clearing they saw us, those on the pyramid's summit had also glimpsed us, and then from above and from all about the comet-creatures in countless thousands were rushing upon us!

4

THERE was a wild cry from Gor Han. "They've come out—it's the end of their night! And the end for us!"

The end for us! It seemed so in that instant, the great hordes of comet-creatures flowing in toward us from all the clearing's sides, from the pyramid's summit down toward us,

the suddenly aroused cube-ships darting across the city toward us from far away. Then, even in that split-second of terror, I saw rushing toward us among those liquid-hordes a figure at sight of which I forgot even the doom that was upon us, an erect, many-limbed, familiar insect-figure as tall almost as myself, at sight of which I uttered a great cry.

"Najus Nar!" My great shout reached him even across the wild confusion and din of that moment, and I saw him gaze full toward us, his strange face expressionless, then rush on toward us without sign of recognition, one with the hordes of comet-creatures about him! I heard a gasp of unbelief as Jurt Tul beside me saw also, heard the crazy yell of great Gor Han as with eyes crimson he stepped forward to throw himself against those onrushing comet-creatures, then was conscious that great dark shapes had swooped down from behind us, hovering momentarily beside us. They were our five cruisers!

Their space-doors were already wide, and in the next instant, just before the comet-creatures were upon us, we had tumbled inside, were rocketing upward above the city pursued by scores of brilliant crimson bolts, two of which found their marks and sent two of our ships into flaring death. The cruiser into which we three had rushed, though, and the other two remaining ones, were racing up now above the white-lit central world, with the countless cubes rising swiftly after us, forming in a great crescent-formation behind us as they flashed after us across the ringed worlds toward the coma's wall!

"They're going to drive us straight into the coma itself!" cried Gor Han above the din of our generators as we flung madly on.

I saw in the same moment that it was so, that the great crescent of thousands of cube-ships that had risen to destroy us were not overhauling us, behind, but were driving us onward without chance of escape sidewise or downward, this time. The glowing wall loomed before us, and the single circular opening in that wall was guarded still by hundreds of other cube-ships, hanging in a solid mass across it. We could not escape through that opening, even had we desired escape, nor could we evade the relentless pursuit behind us, and inevitably within seconds more we would be driven into instant annihilation! Driven to our own deaths by the cubes behind us! This I saw, and in that instant of cold despair could have plunged on into that annihilating death, but then wild anger surged up in me and I whirled to Gor Han and Jurt Tul and the pilot beside them.

"Drive straight toward the opening!" I shouted. "Straight into the cube-ships there! If this is the end we'll take some of them, at least, with us!"

A fierce cry from the Betelgeusan, a reckless laugh from the amphibian, answered me as our three ships shot forward in that moment like things of light toward the cube-ships massed across the opening. Nearer we flashed toward them, nearer toward the hundreds of crimson bolts which in another moment would blast us, nearer—but look! look! Those hundreds of waiting ships had turned suddenly from us, had turned about and disregarding us were loosing their crimson bolts into the great passage-opening through the coma behind them, were falling back toward us from that opening, with red bolts blasting toward it! And then out of that opening after them came the things at which they fired, mass upon mass of long, shining shapes, of great, long *cruisers,* that burst forth from the opening in hundreds, in thousands, loosing upon the battling cubes a myriad of black shafts of the force-beams which in a moment more had

driven them down and back in shattered masses of wreckage!

"Cruisers! Cruisers of the Interstellar Patrol!"

We were all shouting madly, then. Cruisers, the five thousand cruisers that had been sent out after our own thousand and that now, at the last, had found their way inside the comet in time to save us! They were shooting toward our own, massing about us, and then as from our bows flashed the signal that was mine as Chief of the Patrol, they were massing swiftly behind us, battle-formation again in long parallel lines, with our own ship at their head!

"Back to the central world!" I cried, my eyes upon the time dial set before me. "We've minutes left yet to get to that comet-control!"

Cruisers massed together, we were leaping back, now, back toward the spinning worlds, and toward the great crescent-formation of cube-ships that faced us now. Before those thousands of cube-ships had grasped what had happened, before they could turn, could change their formation, our compact mass had driven into them. Then cruiser thousands and cube-ship thousands were spinning and striking and mingling together, smiting with black force-beams and crimson bolts in titanic battle inside the tremendous electrical coma, whirling and stabbing in awful combat, the comet-creatures for their comet and we for our universe! Comet and galaxy had come to grips at last as those two huge fleets caught and struck at each other!

Cubes and cruisers swirled and ran about us as our own cruiser struggled through the wild ruck of the battle, our own black beams stabbing to smash back cubes before and beside us, while through the speech-instruments before me I cried orders to my mighty fleet, directing the masses of cruisers that leapt and struck and soared at the great square cubes about us. All space outside seemed a single giant mass of struggling cubes and cruisers, cut across by blasting crimson bolt and ebon beam, yet ever we were forcing the cube-ships back, back over their ring of revolving disk-worlds, back over their mighty central world, and then down toward it as they fought fiercely against our black beams which drove great paths of destruction through them!

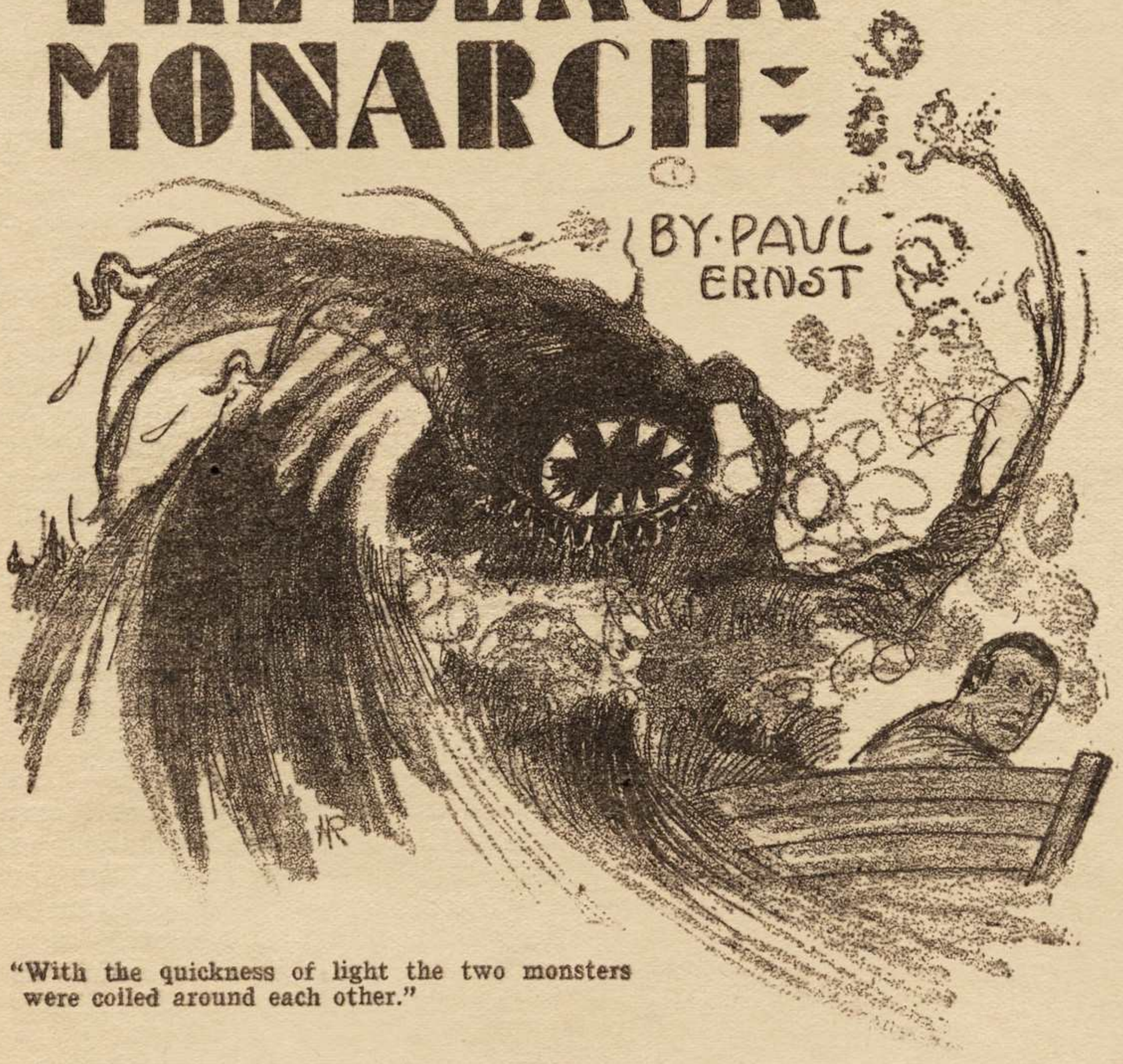
The surface of that world was looming clearer beneath us, bathed in white revealing light, as the giant battle swung lower down toward it. I glimpsed the great circular clearing, the pyramid with the mechanism and comet-guards on its summit, knew by the dial before me that but minutes still remained to turn aside with it the colossal on-thundering comet. Lower we swung toward the clearing, and as we did so the cubes beneath stiffened against us, their uprushing hail of deadly red bolts stabbing like an upward-falling rain of crimson death! But still more deadly were the black beams that drove down through them from our ships, and they were giving a little before us, sinking lower still, when suddenly from the surface of the world below there rose up among them another cube, one vastly greater than any of the others, one that moved ponderously up to the center of the cube-ship fleet and then glowed suddenly with a brilliant light. And as it did so the thousands of cube-ships beneath us suddenly vanished! Disappeared from sight as though they had never been, leaving below us only the spot of brilliant light that marked the greater cube!

"That great cube!" Jurt Tul was crying. "It's a vibration-projector of some kind, one whose vibrations make invisible all the cube-ships around it and leave our ships and all else visible! And they're attacking now!"

(Continued on page 274)

THE BLACK MONARCH

BY PAUL ERNST



"With the quickness of light the two monsters were coiled around each other."

1. *The Blue Diamonds*

STEPPING to the deck rail, Neal Emory stared down at the black water that foamed along the wall of the ship's hull. As he gazed, he gripped the protecting rail with both hands, and held himself a few inches away from it as though fearful of losing his balance and going over. His nervousness, under the circumstances, was natural. He had just had a narrow escape from falling into that fathomless black water!

Restlessly he moved away and began to pace up and down the deserted promenade, pressing his hands to his temples now and then in an effort to relieve the ache that persisted there. He felt as if he had recently waked from a coma induced by drugs, instead of from a supposedly normal slumber. His nerves were raw and jerky, his eyes smarted as though there were sand in them, and his head throbbed painfully with every beat of his heart. It was a curious physical discomfort to have been brought on by so tenuous a thing as a dream.

But then, he mused, it had been a curious dream; though he hardly knew whether to define it as that—he could remember no scenes or events

such as usually can be recalled after a nightmare. It was all vague, formless. It had been less like a dream than like a distant command coming to him over the desolate noises of creaking timbers and swishing drapes always to be heard on a steamer at the dead of night in mid-ocean.

All he could call to mind of it now was a dim recollection of struggling against some power, some intangible force, that strove to make him go somewhere he did not want to go. He could remember hanging back against the power that hauled at him, but could not remember what the power itself might be. He recalled that a hand had seemed to clutch his own and pull him forward, but there was no rememberable substance or shape to the clutching hand. There was nothing to fasten to, save the fact that suddenly in his sleep he had felt himself moving, moving, in spite of all his efforts to stand still.

An uncomfortable sensation of cramp in his right shoulder had waked him—to discover himself in an alarming position.

He was standing on a chair by the open port-hole of his stateroom. His head and left shoulder were crowded through the aperture so that he was looking directly down into the water that fell away from the ship in her rapid flight; and he was trying mechanically to force his right shoulder also through the narrow opening. His left arm was groping down as though inspired by a will of its own to dominate the rest of his body and lead it to the oblivion below. Altogether it was fortunate that he had been aroused by the pressure of the sharp brass casement against his shoulder. Small as the port-hole was, he might easily have succeeded in forcing his way through!

It had been a strange nightmare with possibilities of a tragic end. Probably, he had told himself, it was the outcome of too much brooding over his father's recent death. He must mingle more with the other passengers, try to divert his mind as he had intended when he booked passage on the Mediterranean cruise. And attempting thus to explain the incident and dismiss it from his thoughts he had partly dressed, thrown a heavy coat around his shoulders, and walked out here on the deserted deck to see if he could get rid of the headache that had come with his odd dream.

It wasn't until a little later that he had remembered a peculiar thing, a trivial but puzzling detail: Although he was almost helplessly right-handed in every move he made, the arm that had groped through the port-hole first had been his left arm. The hand that had assumed the initiative and led the rest of his body, contrary to a lifetime of habit, had been his left hand. It was a small riddle to obsess his mind in the face of the graver fact that he had very nearly committed suicide in his sleep, but nevertheless it persisted.

Stopping under a deck light he raised the offending left hand and stared at it as though he thought to remark a change in it, a difference from its fellow that might explain the puzzle. As he made the move, a ring on his little finger glittered faintly as it caught and reflected the dull illumination.

It was an odd piece of jewelry consisting of a flat-cut, oblong stone of deepest indigo blue like a tiny bit of polished night sky, held in a heavy gold mounting formed of two coiled snakes. The stone, peculiarly attractive in its dark, almost sullen shading, was a blue diamond.

AFTER a few moments of brisk pacing, the cool night breeze cleared his head somewhat; and, feeling more himself, he leaned against the rail and lit a cigarette.

As he stood there a man approached him at a rapid walk, gazed at and through him, and thudded by, having paid him no more attention than if he

had been part of the deck rail. For an instant Neal had the curious illusion that he was no thicker than a shadow, a transparent substance through which one could look at will. While he was shrugging aside this uncomfortable sensation the other went by again and he noticed him more clearly.

He was unacquainted with him personally, but he recognized him at sight as a certain Professor Eden Sanderson who was supposed to be something of a mystery. On every hand he had overheard gossip about the eccentric professor. He had heard fabulous descriptions of his great bulk; vague reports of his brilliance as a scientist, though no one seemed able to place his name precisely; and puzzled speculation as to why so virile a man should keep himself shut up in his cabin so secretively. Everybody, it seemed, was wondering who he was and why he was so seclusive. Neal, sunk in reminiscences of his father's tragedy, had appeared to be the only one aboard who had no curiosity concerning him. The giant professor was placed at his table in the salon; but beyond noticing idly that he had never taken a meal there in spite of the perfect weather, he had not thought twice about the man. Now here he was, taking advantage of the lateness of the hour to tramp in seclusion along the promenade deck.

Certainly, Neal confessed to himself, he was a figure to provoke curiosity!

Gossip had said that he was unusually large, and gossip had not exaggerated. He was one of the biggest human beings Neal had ever seen. Himself just short of six feet in height, he looked up at the massive bare head and felt like a pigmy in comparison. The spread of the man's shoulders was correspondingly enormous, and they rolled alternately forward with the swing of his heavy arms as though he were continually breaking a path through waist-high snow drifts. In spite of the cold his throat was bare, and a fringe of heavy black hair showed at the base of his neck where it matted up from his thick chest. His hands were bare, too, and on the backs of them was more spiky black hair. His face was covered with stiff, blue-black beard, in striking contrast with his light gray, brooding eyes. Yet the intangible air of uncleanliness that sometimes comes with a superabundance of body hair was not at all in evidence. He looked as clean as a north gale—and as irresistible.

There was agitation in his tread as he walked; now and again his stiff black eyebrows met in a line over his light eyes; and his lips moved as if he were mumbling to himself.

Then abruptly, a few paces from Neal, he stopped as though he had run against a wall—and there started a struggle as odd as it was inexplicable.

An enormous force seemed suddenly to gather from thin air and shove his great body toward the deck rail! It was as though a thousand shadowy hands were crowding to press him forward—as though a soundless hurricane beat steadily at him until his huge frame was weak in its grip.

There wasn't a human being in sight in either direction. The deck around them was absolutely empty. Yet in that seemingly empty space *something* gripped the big body with ever increasing violence! Neal could hear his heavy breathing, and see sweat glisten on his straining neck as he resisted it. Under the unseen pressure his arms were rigid as bars. His back arched in a quivering half-circle as he braced himself against the thing that bore him nearer and nearer to the deck's edge and the black water beneath.

And then, just as Neal had recovered a little from the first paralysis of his amazement and was about to run to help him, the struggle ceased as abruptly as it had started. Whatever it was that had threatened re-

leased its grip. The professor clung weakly to the rail and panted.

A moment later he straightened with a jerk, brought his left hand up before his eyes, and looked at it intently. With the move, Neal saw something glitter on his third finger. And for one astounding instant he had a clear glimpse of what the glittering thing was!

It was a ring, consisting of a flat-cut, oblong stone of deepest indigo blue, held in a heavy gold mounting molded in the semblance of two coiled serpents. As nearly as he could tell in the uncertain light, it was an exact duplicate of his own blue diamond ring!

Still breathing heavily, the professor looked at the dark stone as though he were regarding a deadly thing—as a man might stare at a poisonous snake that held him powerless in a hypnotic trance.

With an exclamation he suddenly tore it from his finger and threw it over the deck rail. It fell in a dully gleaming arc, dropping with a slight splash inaudible in the hissing foam of the ship's progress. An instant he stood there, turning his head slowly to watch the spot where the ring had disappeared. Then he squared his heavy shoulders, sighed with a relief that seemed tinged a little with doubt, and walked from the promenade.

NEAL relaxed his tense body and went slowly to his stateroom, reviewing the enigmatic scene he had just witnessed. Now, with the arched body no longer straining before his eyes, he began to wonder exactly what it was that he had seen; and he found it hard to believe that he had watched a struggle at all. It had seemed at the moment like a conflict between two powerful wrestlers, one of whom was invisible. But this was nothing but imagination. What had there been to fight against? Only empty air! Yet the professor had braced his arms and swelled his muscles as though a dozen men were combined against him—pushing him toward the rail and death in the ocean below.

Finally, as he dwelt on the weird event, he decided that the fellow must be afflicted with epilepsy; though this theory didn't explain why he should throw away a valuable ring. Sitting down on the bed, he looked at the ring on his own hand, twisting it in his fingers so the light gleamed sullenly from the flat blue surface. Had the professor's ring been an actual duplicate, or had he been deceived in the poor light? It seemed impossible that there should be a mate to his blue diamond. . . .

It had belonged originally to a friend of his father's, Jim Arfield, chief engineer of the North African Construction Company, who had picked it up somewhere in the Orient. Five years ago Arfield had died in engineering disgrace—brought low by the failure of one of his smallest and most insignificant jobs. A bridge over a low gully had collapsed under a trainload of passengers. It seemed as though any student engineer might have designed the simple thing; but Arfield, with forty years of complicated engineering monuments to his credit, had fallen down on this commonplace job and had come home to live out the last few years of his useless life. He had acquired the blue diamond ring shortly before designing the bridge that so unaccountably went wrong.

He had given the ring to Emory Senior just before he died. Neal remembered the date, the third of August, 1947, clearly enough—for it was just at this time that his father began the series of political mistakes that had so astounded all who knew him. For no reason that anyone could discover, he became a changed man. He turned from a brilliant politician into that most dangerous of persons—an egomaniac in a position of power. And he had crowned his life with five years of inexcusable blunders that had

ruined his career, swept away most of his fortune, caused a wave of financial unrest along the whole Atlantic seaboard, and finally brought about his murder by an ally who had been wrecked in the general crash.

Both his father and Arfield had happened to acquire the blue diamond at about the time when disaster marked them down. It was mere coincidence, of course. The stone itself could hold no significance. It was too fantastic to suppose that a lump of carbon could influence a man's actions in any way. . . .

He shifted his thoughts, and turned off the light. He must stop thinking of the past. Already such brooding had caused him to walk in his sleep. Toward the open port-hole. Left hand first. Curious that his left hand should have taken precedence over his right. . . .

At length he dropped off to sleep.

WHEN he woke next morning he found that the weather had changed. The sky was gray, and a wind whistled from the east that heeled the ship with its force and piled up waves that hourly grew higher. By nightfall the motion of the ship was extreme. Less than a dozen passengers came to the salon for dinner. It was perhaps because of the prevailing air of desertion that Professor Sanderson chose that evening to take his first meal outside the solitude of his cabin.

Neal regarded him dubiously as he lowered his weight into the chair opposite. A man of his colossal size with a suspected strain of mental queerness was not too comfortable a dinner partner! But the bearded face seemed composed enough now, and the light gray eyes were clear with calm reason and perfect health.

In view of his reputation of being a rather sulky hermit, Neal hesitated to address him for a moment; but the scientist nodded slightly as he met his gaze, and seemed not at all apt to resent attempts at acquaintance. He appeared to be an entirely different person from the harassed being of the evening before. Neal made a tentative overture.

"You're one of a very few," he commented, waving around at the empty dining-salon. "Yesterday I overheard several of our fellow passengers mention this as their twenty-fourth voyage, and I see none of them here tonight. You are used to the sea, I suppose?"

"I have never been on a ship before," answered the professor, and the air seemed to quiver visibly in time to the slow vibrations of his heavy voice. "I have always been too busy in my laboratory to do much traveling."

He beckoned to one of the stewards.

"My usual dinner," he rumbled. "The head steward will tell you what it is."

For a time there was silence as he approached his special meal with a hearty but guarded appetite. Neal found himself looking at an array of food that guided his mind back to the training-table of his college days. In comparison with the older man's scientifically balanced meal, his own standard dinner seemed luxurious.

"You must be an athlete," he remarked at last.

The professor shook his shaggy head. "No," he said pleasantly. "At least not in the sense you probably mean. I eat carefully, as you see, because I must keep myself in the best of physical shape in order to accomplish my mission."

The silence that followed was only awkward because Neal made it so. The professor went on eating as placidly as though he had said nothing in the least unusual.

"Your — mission?" Neal repeated at last.

At the tone of his voice the professor glanced up with a slight smile.

"Oh, I'm not a missionary," he said. "My activities are entirely scientific — though it is possible that

some people might class them as religious."

Astronomy was the only branch of science Neal could think of as remotely to be classed with religion. He called to mind accounts he had read of distant observatories placed in the purer air of tropic islands and desert places.

"You're on your way to some astronomical post, perhaps?" he inquired.

"No. My work doesn't concern the heavens either literally or figuratively," answered Professor Sanderson. "I said it might be termed religious, in a sense, because it has to do with good and evil. Particularly evil!"

"That does sound as if it left the realms of science," Neal murmured.

"Not at all. Evil—and its destruction—are purely matters for science to deal with, if only people knew it. . . ." The professor halted as though regretting his loquacity, and turned his attention to eating.

"The destruction of evil?" Neal repeated at last. "That is an odd word to use in such a connection. I have always thought of evil as a thing to be *eradicated,* perhaps by education, perhaps by punishment of evil-doers. It never occurred to me that it was a thing tangible enough to be—destroyed."

"Neither has it occurred to anyone else, outside of myself and another," was the answer. "But just a little thought serves to explain the puzzle readily. But perhaps you are not interested. . . ."

"I am quite interested," said Neal, truthfully enough.

"TO BEGIN with," said the professor, still looking as though he rather regretted the initial loquacity that had started him on the subject, "the world is governed by an abstract good intelligence that is constantly being attacked by an abstract evil intelligence. This is an old truth. Men have known it, or felt it, since they walked on two legs. They have called the good influence by many names. Also they have branded the evil intelligence in many ways. Devil is our name for the latter, for instance."

He glanced covertly at Neal as though to see how his words were being received, then continued.

"Another thing that is common knowledge is that this abstract good intelligence has occasionally been embodied in human form. Now and then a great personage arises who is somehow linked directly with the benevolent influence that shapes the universe. There have been several examples of this.

"So far does the knowledge of man extend. But the corollary to these truths has been somewhat overlooked, I think. For, if the good influence can be personified and made tangible, there is nothing to prevent the evil intelligence from undergoing the same process and becoming an incarnate thing. And once made tangible, it follows that there is nothing to prevent science from locating and destroying it."

He calmly replenished his glass with mineral water.

"Then according to your theory——" Neal began. But the professor bristled a little at the word, as though it had been thrown at him on some painful occasion, perhaps in connection with this very subject on which he was discoursing.

"Theory!" he rumbled. "Theory! I am not giving idle suppositions merely to make pleasant conversation. This is no theory—it has grown beyond that into actual fact! By my efforts, and those of a brilliant man who is now dead, it has been definitely proved that the evil intelligence is the one now incarnated in human form—at least I think it's human!—and it is the task of my life to remove this evil being from an unsuspecting world. That is my mission."

Neal gazed incredulously at the sci-

entist, and wondered if he talked that way to everyone he met.

And then the professor's fork clattered to the floor as he stared for the first time at Neal's left hand.

"That ring!" he boomed. "Where did you get that ring!"

His light eyes widened as though seeing ghostly things. Neal moved uneasily in his chair as he wondered again if the bearded giant were mentally unbalanced. Seeing his confusion, the professor reddened slightly and made an effort to compose himself.

"Sorry I shouted at you like that," he apologized. "You see, I used to have a ring exactly like it, and I never dreamed there might be a duplicate. I thought for a moment yours might be the same one—but that is impossible! At least it ought to be impossible, because last night I——"

"Yes, I know," said Neal as the professor paused uncertainly. "I was there and saw you."

"So it was you!" He squinted thoughtfully. "I was so preoccupied, I wasn't sure. . . . Did you see what happened before I threw it over the rail?"

Neal nodded. Professor Sanderson leaned forward as though he were about to explain, then closed his lips as he quite as obviously decided against it.

"Where did you get your ring?" he asked at length. "It's odd there should be two of them. Do you know anything of its history?"

Neal told him of Arfield's acquisition of it. The name, Arfield, rang familiarly in the professor's memory; and in answer to his resulting question, Neal described the disaster that had driven him from his profession of engineering. Then he mentioned that his father had worn the ring also. Of his violent death he said nothing; but the professor seemed to guess.

"And your father?" he inquired. "Did his possession of the diamond make no difference in his life?"

Neal stared. "What possible difference could the mere ownership of a ring make in a man's life?" he countered.

"It depends on the ring," Sanderson answered. "You say nothing happened to him that might be compared with Arfield's disaster?"

"He seemed changed, somehow, during his last years," Neal admitted at last. "And he died—was murdered, a month ago."

The scientist nodded as though he had expected some such reply. Again he subjected Neal to a thoughtful scrutiny.

"And you've never linked the wearing of the ring with the downfall of your father and your father's friend?" he probed.

"Once or twice some such thought had crossed my mind. But I have never allowed myself to take such a superstition seriously. . . ."

"It isn't entirely superstition!" declared Professor Sanderson, a grim line forming around his mouth. He drummed uncertainly with his heavy fingers. Then, "I'd like to tell you something of my own story," he said abruptly, "of the task for which I've been trained all my life, and something of the reason that prompted me to throw my ring into the sea last night. Will you come to my stateroom?"

"With pleasure," said Neal, rising uncertainly to the swaying floor. "I'll order coffee to be brought in——"

"For yourself, if you like," said the professor. "I never drink coffee. Its effect on the heart is slight—but in just that small a degree it might lessen my chances of saving an ignorant world from the horrible power that controls it."

2. *The Mind Machine*

THIRTY-SIX years before, Professor Sanderson said, during the great World War in 1916, a boy was born in the charity ward of a west coast city. The father, a heavyweight prize-

fighter, had died six months previously; and the mother, a variety dancer, left life with the birth of the child. The boy was sent to an orphan asylum where the first six years of his babyhood were spent.

To the institution one day there came a middle-aged scientist who wanted to adopt a son. The qualification he desired most was health; for the son he picked was to be trained long hours daily to be worthy of a certain mission he had in mind for him.

The matron led out the sturdy little son of the prize-fighter and the professor carried him off to his lonely laboratory in the mountains. And with the boy's eighth birthday there began the training of which Eden had given the matron a hint.

First, a carefully selected diet came into being. The best of food in sparse quantities, scientifically balanced, was set before him, together with vitamin concoctions of the professor's own formulæ, until he was eating at a training-table that would have roused the envy of an Olympic runner.

Next he entered a course of strenuous physical exercise. There were fast walks over the mountains — orderly twistings and turnings in the gymnasium over the laboratory that Eden had fitted up with apparatus from the city—swimming in the icy mountain creek where it widened into a pool behind the house. And during rest periods he lay in a glass-enclosed alcove built on the roof, his skin soaking in sun rays carefully filtered through panes tinted to the professor's specifications and which separated the light beams in some way, and for some reason, that no one else quite understood.

Last came mental training. Mathematics was the order of the day, budding into advanced algebra when the boy was still at an age normally devoted to soldiers and Indians. Physics came next; with Latin, as the tongue of science, and the practical ologies close behind. The more graceful chores of the modern curriculum were almost wholly ignored. Eden didn't think they would help in equipping him for his great life-work.

At the beginning there was a schedule of five hours of study and five hours of exercise every day. Gradually this was lengthened to six hours, to six and a half, and finally to eight hours. The two-mile runs were increased to four; and the swims in the chill creek behind the house lasted later and later into autumn, until at length they were extended through winter with the thermometer at zero or lower.

At fifteen he was nearly six feet tall, weighed a hundred and seventy-four pounds, and had a grasp of general science that was astounding. And at fifteen he rebelled at the monastic simplicity and labor of his life.

Often he had asked his mentor why he must keep such arduous training-hours, and always Eden had put him off with evasive answers, or had merely told him he wasn't old enough to understand. Now, with the body and brain of an average man of twenty-eight, though he was actually only fifteen years old, he insisted on an answer. He faced the scientist and demanded an explanation of why, out of each day of his life, a third should be devoted to exercise that would kill a lumberjack, a third to exhausted sleep, a third to dry scientific study with no end seeming to be in view for its application.

Outwardly composed, but inwardly trembling with the suspense of how it might be received, Eden finally gave him the explanation he demanded. He told him of the incarnate evil intelligence—the monstrous Thing—he was being trained to meet. He couched his words in curt scientific terms which, while making the import of his talk seem more astounding than ever in contrast with its cold phraseology, held young Sanderson's well-trained mind from instantly branding the

story as a concoction of a madman. And at the same moment, for the first time, he showed him the indigo diamond.

EDEN began with the theory upon which he had founded his scientific life years before: That the presence in human beings of large-scale good or evil is unnatural, abnormal, and due entirely to obedience to some powerful outside influence.

It is natural, he said, for humanity to commit good or evil actions in a small way; the small vices and virtues are inherent in human nature. But to remain natural they must remain small! Man is only an animal after all, unable by his own effort to escape the natural law of mediocrity and perform acts of great good or evil.

Yet occasionally men do grow beyond themselves and accomplish evil on a vast and hence unnatural scale. What was the answer? What factor entered here, tuned the brain to abnormal pitch, and drove these men from the path followed by their natural, mediocre brothers? Some external influence, some transmitted power of evil, must inflame every man who deviates from normality and leads his section of earth to ruin and death.

How it operated, and of what it might consist, were the problems to which Eden applied himself.

Since man's actions originate in his brain, the course of his experiment necessarily led through the mind. First, then, he must have a machine to measure grade and degree of mental activity.

He set to work, and out of his necessity he invented the instrument he needed. It was simple enough in principle—a detector on the order of a seismograph, to record disturbances of distant minds just as that machine recorded disturbances of distant earth surfaces. It was a fragile, sensitive thing of platinum wire like cobwebs, coiled springs that must be grasped delicately with tweezers and held to the light in order to be visible, and fine mesh screening like bits of gossamer. Faintly electrified it caught and measured the quantity and quality of thought. He called it the edograph.

The edograph did its work too well at first! It reacted to every strong, clearly defined thought-stream in range; and as its range was the face of the earth, the indicator needle did little but dart from calibration to calibration too rapidly for the eye to follow. Eden was aghast at the unforeseen development, which yet should have been so apparent to an experimenter. But a solution soon offered itself.

An infamous murderer—one of those inhuman beings who seem wholly evil—had been caught, and lay in the death cell of the state prison. So to the prison went Eden with his thought recorder; and he obtained permission to spend a night in the adjoining cell.

Knowing the sinister quality of the murderer's thought, and with that thought dominating all else because it was so near, it was finally possible for him to get the wave length and set the machine to record only evil mental disturbances. Then he retarded the sensitivity of the instrument so that only the purest and strongest of destructive vibrations were recorded on the finely calibrated dial.

NOW he began the advanced stage of his work.

His first observation was that the needle pointed steadily to a figure a third of the way around the dial, indicating a constant flow of evil power from some unguessable point in the compass. It was like a gigantic black river, that steady flow. It proved that there really was some malignant power—some living, devilish Thing—that squatted afar in a hidden place and ruled humanity through its baser part.

The problem was now to ascertain what it might be—if, indeed, it were not entirely abstract—and try to locate it.

He accepted the constant recording of evil as his working normal, set the dial so the zero point coincided with the unmoving detector needle, and began to spend all his waking hours before his edograph with a chart ruled off to record every variation of the sensitive machine.

Now and again the needle crawled up a few points, remained for a little while, and dropped back again, its movements forming a power peak on the spaced chart.

With every power peak, Eden searched the leading journals of the world for news of some tremendous hurt to humanity, and tried to trace the author of it—a discovery easily made in most cases, since few of these cataclysms came under the heading of crime and the authors were under no necessity of concealing their identities. The information thus gained was faithfully tabulated, with particular care taken to mention distance and compass direction.

For example, the needle would rise to 12:02; and next day's paper would disclose that a well-known stock manipulator had made over a hundred million dollars by playing with the price of some essential and life-giving cereal. At the time he planned the coup he was in Florida, giving his orders from there by telephone. Promptly Eden would ascertain the latitude and longitude of the Floridian town, its distance from the laboratory, and its compass direction; and set the figures down against the 12.02 registration.

Again, the needle would point to 11.39; and a small item would appear in the newspapers revealing the fact that the mayor of a certain city had reported its tenements—notorious fire-traps—to be reasonably fire-proof and sanitary. There followed distance and location, which was filed with the dial reading.

Occasionally it was some time before the meaning of a power deviation was explained. Thus there was the instance when the edograph registered 8.21, and it was fourteen months before the tabulation could be completed: A too economically constructed theater roof caved with the weight of an unusually heavy snowfall during a crowded attendance, and the contractor was to be tried for criminal negligence. He had O. K.'d the building plans just fourteen months before!

From these tabulations Eden worked at the task of locating the malevolent central power of evil, figuring that by reducing to a formula the geographic locations, distances, and corresponding degrees of disturbance registered, he could get a wave-length-distance ratio that would give him the information he sought.

The result was a failure because one of his factors was inconstant: The degree of individual force varied so that a man five hundred miles away might register no more strongly than a man two thousand miles away, provided the latter's villainy was the more gigantic.

This was proved without further doubt by the instance where the needle reached the astounding height of 39.40, to be followed shortly by news of the invasion of Belgium. Here was a mental explosion thousands of miles away that showed stronger than any other case on file, near or far! A new method must be tried.

IT WAS shortly after this that an incident occurred in his life which was to have an important bearing on his work — and which revealed the fact that his persistent labors were not entirely unknown to the dim enemy he was beginning to threaten with exposure.

A man knocked at his door one

night, said he had lost his way, and asked if he could be sheltered until morning. There was no other house for miles around and it was so late in autumn that a night out of doors was unthinkable. Without question, Eden invited him to be his guest.

He proved to be an educated man, an interesting talker, and a pleasant fellow. Eden thoroughly enjoyed his unexpected company. He conversed more freely with him than he had talked to anyone else in years. In him he found an audience gifted with the power of flattering attention; and he discovered himself describing his life alone in the mountains, such incidents of his laboratory existence as he thought might be interesting to a layman — and even something of the nature of his greatest experiment.

Here, however, he quickly drew back into his accustomed shell of reticence. For all he knew the fellow might be a journalist; and he would be more than a fool if he continued frankly to expose the details of his life's supreme work to the possible jeers of the public.

He was astounded at the effort of will it cost to refrain from babbling to this utter stranger!

In the morning his guest left directly after breakfast, thanking him for his courtesy. And it wasn't till afternoon that Eden stumbled onto the personal possession he had left behind. Whether it was an oversight or a clumsy attempt at tactful payment, he couldn't decide. . . .

It was a ring—a darkly transparent, flat-cut blue stone held in a heavy gold mounting formed of two coiled serpents. At a glance he saw that it was very old, and probably valuable. Either his guest was a quixotic multimillionaire to scatter such favors in his wake, or he was a singularly forgetful man. On the chance that the latter was the correct supposition, he wrote to the city's leading daily and had an announcement inserted in the personal column; but he never heard from his guest again, nor ran across the name he had given—Charles Derrez.

It was immediately afterward that his invaluable edograph refused to function.

The indicator needle ceased to register accurately the evil thoughts of distant minds, and seemed to have acquired a devilish genius of its own. The slender hand darted and quivered, raced around the dial only to fall back to zero and remain inert, swung like an insane pendulum. In alarm he retarded the sensitivity of the machine lest it destroy itself by its own violence, and tried to find the trouble and adjust it.

The task proved impossible. Though diminished in activity it continued its senseless quivering and chaotic swinging, its starts and stops and meaningless spasms. The cause was evidently external, and he must solve its mystery or give up his experiment and call the years wasted.

Was it some actual recording of new plans of dictators in the war then being waged? No. That would not account for the wild convulsions of the instrument: A steady flow would have been registered. Was it some concentrated, deliberate design against his experiment? Probably. By elimination he worked it out.

The only stranger to enter his laboratory for years was the man, Derrez. In some manner he must have radiated an influence powerful enough nearly to wreck the edograph. The influence persisted in his absence. Was it a ghost of his will lingering behind him, a psychic echo of an uncommonly evil soul remaining within the four walls of the laboratory? It was possible, but not scientifically probable. Some force more direct and tangible than a psychic echo was producing the crazy gyrations of the edograph needle!

Well—the man actually had left behind something more tangible than

reflected personality. He had left his ring. And it began to seem probable now that it had been left neither through oversight nor quixotism.

Keenly watching the convulsive movement of the needle, Eden slipped the ring on his finger and approached the instrument to test the possible effect of proximity. . . .

Instantly with the feel of the ring a temporary insanity clutched him! It was a physical insanity, leaving his mind untouched, as though another person had been poured into his skin and were waving his arms and moving his legs regardless of the commands of his brain. And the brain withdrew, appalled, and watched the astounding rebellion of the body.

He grasped a heavy stick and smashed a row of test-tubes to bits. He lifted a storage battery as though it were a biscuit tin, and crashed it through a window. For thirty seconds he raged around the laboratory, breaking everything within reach.

And then, with club upraised, he approached the edograph—that fragile, intricate mass of cobweb wires and mesh!

But here the amazed brain, by a titanic effort, resumed control. With the fingers of his left hand he pried frantically at the fingers of his right until the club fell from his grasp. He managed finally to remove the ring and place it a safe distance away on a splintered rack, after which he sank exhausted into a chair.

The experiment, though unexpectedly violent, had been a success. He knew now why—though he did not know how—his invention had been rendered useless.

The edograph never again performed its designed function. He tried in every conceivable and extravagant way to insulate the ring, to cut off the powerful emanations from the blue diamond that hopelessly unbalanced the instrument; but every attempt ended only in further dismaying proof of the remarkable penetrating quality of the rays with which he had been experimenting since his work began. When he finally sealed the ring in a lead-lined quartz case to absolutely no avail, he gave it up.

There remained but one other insulation to try—that of sheer distance. He was about to send the diamond by registered mail to a European bank vault when he made a curious discovery regarding the seemingly useless edograph.

Like many another intricate invention, it so happened that the edograph had assembled in its platinum and spring steel heart a quality of which the inventor himself had been ignorant. This was the property not only of recording strength of thought rays, but also of transmitting pictures relevant to the source of these rays if a blank surface of the right kind were at hand to receive them. A kind of television. This unconsidered property of the instrument was imperfect, crude; but it was well enough defined to lead to great consequences. Eden discovered it only by a fortunate accident.

In a last effort to neutralize the machine to the dominating influence of the ring, he sat one night at the big stone block on which the edograph rested, working absorbedly at attempted adjustment. The dial was off; and a light bulb, lowered almost to the level of his eyes, poured its glow over the twining array of mesh and springs. The ring was placed in front of the instrument and a little to one side, so that the flat surface of the diamond faced it squarely.

Wrapped in his task, he was increasing and decreasing the infinitesimal amount of electric current that pulsed through the delicate machine. And as he turned the current a little higher than he had ever dared risk before, he happened to gaze at the jewel. . . .

In its oblong surface, as in a tiny

mirror, there was a faint reflection of something.

At first all he could see was a slightly moving blur, shot through with reflected gleams from the light bulb near his head. Then it assumed vague outlines, so vague indeed that he thought his imagination was responsible for them or that he was again under the hypnotic spell of the indigo-blue stone. But the reflected object, if indistinct, was also unvarying; and he was at length convinced that he saw it with the eyes of the flesh and not of the mind.

He glanced up quickly to see if someone had entered the laboratory unnoticed by him in his absorption, and was standing behind him. But the image was not the reflection of anyone in that room! It came from afar—and could have only one significance!

In his lonely mountain laboratory, transmitted from God knew where, was being mirrored the image of the monster who was the mainspring of earthly wickedness—the devilish Being who was the soul of evil!

Catching his breath, Eden leaned forward to examine it more closely. Inadverently he touched the graduated switch with his hand. . . .

With the change in current through the edograph, the picture blurred and faded.

Again and again he fumbled with the switch, trying, trying for the precise amount of current that had endowed the instrument with its marvelous, unsuspected power. His effort lasted until eight in the morning, when, red-eyed and wringing with perspiration, he was forcibly barred from further experiment: reckless in his disappointment and dismay, he turned the current on a shade too strongly and burned out one of the myriad wires.

He was frantic at the delay entailed. Calling up a manufacturing jeweler in the city, he ordered a replacement to be made and rushed by special messenger. But with every resource strained to save time, it was six days before the part was drawn to proper micrometer fit and tempered as to specification.

Meanwhile he paced his laboratory, slept when he fell exhausted into a chair, and ate when the floor swayed dizzily up to meet him. Now he was certain he had seen something in the blue diamond—the transmitted image of the Thing of Evil he sought! Now he fancied despondently that it was all imaginary. At one moment he was a great man on the brink of a colossal discovery; at the next he was a futile dreamer.

By the time the replacement came he was calm with the lethargy of exhaustion. With numb fingers he put the hair-like wire in place. The light bulb was lowered to its former level—he did not know if this was necessary, but he was careful to duplicate every condition of the former partial success. He set the ring so that it faced the dialless edograph, and began to manipulate the power switch.

A thousandth at a time he turned it, staring unblinking at the flat-cut diamond that had once, somehow, acted as a screen for the reception of a distant picture. Six and a half hours later he scored again! On the polished surface appeared a faint blur that cleared a trifle with the next thousandth, and refused to grow more distinct with further manipulation.

This time Eden was prepared. He took a picture of the vague image on a sensitized plate. Then he noted down the dial number of the switch, turned it off, and stumbled into bed to sleep like a dead man for twenty-two hours.

3. *The Black Monarch*

THE photograph developed from that plate—the actual photograph of the world's dread master, the Monarch of all Evil—gave him the supreme thrill of his life.

As a picture it was lamentable—a jagged pattern of white patches

and gray shadows grouped around a central blur that vaguely resembled a human figure. But under a lens the jagged pattern became more significant as it was enlarged.

The white patches were light-shot areas from the glare of the bulb in the polished surface of the diamond. The shadows remained meaningless shadows. But the central blur, that looked like a human figure, resolved itself unmistakably into a dim portrayal of the devilish being he hunted, whose existence he alone suspected.

It *was* a human figure, that tantalizing blur! At least it was human in form. Gigantic, dim, like a distorted glimpse of a swimmer under water, it lurked among the imperfections of the film.

At first Eden, examining it breathlessly through the lens, thought it was a grotesque female, as there seemed to be a kind of skirt ending midway between waist and knee. But the span of the creature's shoulders persuaded him at last that it was a man—at least in semblance—but dressed as no men garb themselves in any known part of the world.

The head remained indecipherable. Centered between the great shoulders there was something indeed. But it must be merely one of the shadows sharpened to a clearer shape. It was impossible that it should be the Thing's head—it was three times too large for that, and was shaped rather like a big-bore, long-range projectile. Eden eventually decided it was but another photographic imperfection.

Picture after picture was taken. Each was murky and faint, but some one detail in each stood out clearer than in any of the others. By gradually piecing these definable details together, Eden saw his antagonist—his scientifically evoked devil—as through a haze of smoke. And he trembled a little at what he saw!

The most arresting feature was the head. The first dim impression had been correct and not a photographic flaw.

Springing straight up from the Thing's shoulders was a smooth cylindrical mass tapering to a rounded point. In the front were two round patches that resembled huge, unwinking eyes. Aside from these there was no trace of other human features — no nose, nor mouth, nor ears. A perfectly plain, tapered cylinder with round spots that might or might not function as organs of sight!

About the body there was less to excite bewilderment. It was clad in a one-piece tunic that extended halfway to the knee in a kilt effect and fastened around the waist with a wide belt. The bare arms and legs were enormously muscled; and the many positions in which the camera caught the figure indicated vigorous activity. The creature loomed gigantic! Although there was no standard of comparison by which to judge whether it might be two feet high or ten, one judged it to be about a foot above average stature.

Strangest of all, however, even stranger than the fantastic head, was an impression that had nothing to do with the mechanical recording of the camera. This was a feeling of horror and repulsion that closed over one like a thick sea at the mere sight of that dimly pictured, awful form!

It was at this point that Professor Eden decided he must have help. Until the present moment he had never imagined what might be the appearance of the foe against which he had pitted himself. A disembodied brain, perhaps, or—in which case he would have had to admit complete defeat—an abstract force against which no mortal could struggle.

By proving to be a human creature, though of an entirely new kind, it justified his hopes but neces-

sitated aid. Here was a thing of mind and body, too; and while he dared to cross minds with it, he knew himself defeated physically before he started.

The thought of using man-made engines of force—firearms, explosives—against this superlative monster was too ridiculous to entertain for a moment. He must get an apostle who combined great brain and huge muscle even as that perverted, unnatural Thing combined great brain and huge muscle. The only method of acquiring such a disciple was to choose him in embryo and train him to the point where he could go forth on his bizarre crusade with some chance of success.

That apostle, still as the oak chair in which he sat, was now listening to his demanded explanation of the reason for his daily herculean training.

YOUNG Sanderson breathed deeply and flexed the muscles of his legs to relieve them of the nervous cramp that attends long and intense mental concentration.

"What makes you think this—this Thing will permit the approach of an opponent?" he asked.

It was Eden's turn to draw a deep breath. The question was a perfectly serious one, with no underlying hint of incredulity. At least he was believed.

"Shut up in his underground palace like a blind animal," he replied, "he can not be omnipotent. Undoubtedly he has some method of informing himself of the thoughts and activities of any given man at any given time—probably through some sort of transmitted picture process having to do with the blue diamond his messenger delivered to me. But it is impossible that he should be all-seeing! A man might slip into his hiding-place while his attention was engaged elsewhere." He sighed. "It is rather tenuous reasoning, my son," he confessed humbly.

"Hmm," said Sanderson. "How do you know he lives underground? And you mention a palace. Do any of these details show in the pictures you speak of?"

"No. I am merely theorizing. So unique a creature must live apart from all other men or he would be too conspicuous a figure to remain unknown. As there is no habitable place on the face of the earth where he could get this necessary solitude, his only refuge would be under the ground. Also, with his tremendous capabilities, he would contrive himself the most luxurious dwelling he could to make up for his enforced exile."

"Tenuous reasoning indeed!" commented Sanderson, speaking as the scientist and not as the son.

"No more so than the first theory that started all this experimenting—and that completely proved itself!" defended Eden. No master of his craft is too consistently humble before his apprentice.

"Then you think much of the evil of the world would wither at the extinction of this underground monarch?"

"I don't know. There must be a larger, abstract power of evil in existence, of which this creature is but a small incarnate part. The larger force is, of course, unreachable. But the world would probably be enormously benefited by the removal of this personified influence."

"Mightn't he—if he's mortal as you say—eventually die a natural death of old age and automatically rid the world of his rule?"

"It's doubtful," said Eden. "Either this rule is a constantly descending one of identical father to identical son, or, what is more likely, he has solved the problem of indefinitely prolonging life."

"Have you located his hiding-place yet?"

"No, that is the final task left to perform before—venturing against him?" It was a question rather than a statement, an appeal, an advance exoneration if the apostle should not see eye to eye with the master.

"Let me look at the pictures of the Thing I'm training to meet," was Sanderson's calm answer, "and then we'll see if we can mark the spot where he hides his misshapen head."

Years passed while they worked at this final computation. The labor was endlessly intricate: Attempts to measure the thought waves tabulated by the edograph before the unsettling proximity of the ring had destroyed its function; attempts to measure the rays responsible for the transmission of the pictures; comparisons of the two results; further experiments, only a few of which were remotely rewarded with success.

And in the course of examining and re-examining the photographs they took of the image in the jewel, they unearthed another puzzle.

Faintly in some of the pictures could be discerned a circular, luminous patch whose outline was unvarying. It looked like a ghost of a moon—such a moon as might be seen through thin cloud on a bright morning. Sometimes a photograph would show just an edge of it; sometimes it would be half hidden in back of the shadowy, human-looking figure. In the picture which revealed the phenomenon most clearly and which had first drawn their attention to it, the luminous patch chanced to be centered squarely behind the conical head like an ominous halo. What it might be, they could not guess. . . .

Meanwhile their work dragged on. Eden was a burned-out shell of a man before their task was completed and they could lay positive finger to map and say, "He is here!"

He died; and Sanderson went out to the encounter for which he had been trained during the whole of his life.

MECHANICALLY Neal Emory reached out his hand for the long-cooled, neglected cup of coffee. The laboratory, wherein two men wrestled with an intangible evil force and strove mightily to trap a shadow, faded with the end of Sanderson's words; and he was back again in a matter-of-fact stateroom surrounded by matter-of-fact things. Also he was again in his normal frame of mind, and, in the ensuing silence, able to review what he had heard and think about it.

The professor's story was the most reasonable presentation of unreason he had ever heard; a perfectly logical sequence of events leading to an illogical result; a crazily ordered mathematical progression that ended in a child's fable. It reminded him of the trick where it is proved, with paper and pencil, that four and seven add up to ten.

And yet, under his mental scoffing at the impossibility of the tale, one small remembrance of something raised its voice and refused to be stilled—though he denied it recognition.

"Have you got those pictures with you?" he inquired, after a time.

"No. Before I left, I put them in the hands of my bank with a complete account of the experiment to date. If I should disappear the bank is to give them to the newspapers. Alive, I should be called insane if I published the facts and made a bid for help. But dead, I might have a chance of being believed, and a successor might be found to carry on my work."

"Why did you decide to tell me about it?"

At the sound of his voice the professor turned quickly to face him.

"Don't you believe what I've told you?" he asked.

"Of course I do!" said Neal; and he meant it sincerely. No one could have listened to the earnest words, or watched Sanderson's face in their telling, without believing him.

"But you think I—well, that I've worked too long at this and have allowed it to unsettle my mind?"

"Certainly not," murmured Neal.

"Your tone contradicts your words," said the professor with a shrug. "And yet you have proof enough, I think. You saw me come within a fraction of suicide last night. It was the Black Monarch, working through the infernal diamond I got from Eden, who caused that. My body became possessed of his mind, and for the moment my body was determined to destroy itself! He knows I'm moving against him and means to stop me if he can."

Neal lit a cigarette. "Was that why you threw the ring away?"

"Yes. A blind desire to rid myself of the object that threatened my life. Animal instinct of self-preservation. I'd give a lot to undo the act—I was depending on the ring to help in my search. Being a direct tool of the devilish creature I'm hunting, it might have proved a connecting link, a thread to lead me into his presence."

Neal gazed at the indigo-blue diamond on his own finger, the ring that was an exact duplicate of the one involved in the amazing laboratory experiments.

"You think this stone may be under the same influence?" he asked, the small remembrance under his maze of doubt demanding to be heard.

"Certainly. It led your father to his death, didn't it?"

"What!"

"Didn't it?" insisted the professor.

Neal stared at him, his jaw set at a hard angle. For an instant he allowed himself to suppose the professor's calculations were right, in which event there existed somewhere a tangible Thing from which he might wring revenge for his father's death! The thought was welcome. Then reason returned.

"It was only coincidence that my father's mind should happen to slide shortly after he began to wear the ring," he declared.

"And it was only coincidence, I suppose, that I should nearly commit suicide last night because of the ring on my own hand! It was only coincidence that Professor Eden, when he slipped the ring on his finger, should immediately go mad and wreck a lot of his valuable laboratory equipment — and come within an ace of smashing his edograph, the heart of his experiment! Your jewel is of a piece with the one I threw into the sea, my friend, and that was designed in some unguessable way to bring the wearer under the influence of my evil antagonist. So I tell you it was responsible for Arfield's disaster, for the ruin your unsuspecting father made of his great responsibilities—and for his death."

"But, look here! I've worn this ring for over a month, and I haven't felt any insane impulses."

"You're quite sure of that?"

The insistent memory that kept him from unhesitatingly branding the professor's story as impossible demanded utterance. He told of his dream of the evening before, when he had waked to find himself trying to force his way through the porthole and into the sea. "But it was only a nightmare," he concluded. "The ring could have had nothing to do with it."

"Didn't you say your left hand was extended first — your ring hand?"

"A small thing," objected Neal, choosing to ignore the fact that he

had puzzled over the same observation.

"Not a small thing at all! A few minutes ago you reached automatically for your coffee cup, using your right hand. The cigarette you are now smoking was lit from a lighter held in your right hand. And you put the cigarette case back in your pocket with your right hand in spite of the fact that you could have saved several unnecessary motions by using your left. Every unconscious move you make proves you extremely right-handed. Yet in your sleep, when the unconscious is the supreme governing power, your left hand suddenly takes the initiative—and you say it has no significance!"

Not being able to find a ready answer, Neal was silent for a few moments. Then, "It all takes me back to Sunday School days," he mused. "There was a wicked old devil living under the ground and inspiring everyone to evil for his own ends. . . ."

"The idea is not so far from the mark!" said the professor in all seriousness. "This being, this evil genius, might very easily be—indeed, has been—named Devil, in just the sense you mean. But he is mortal enough to be destroyed, differing in this from the biblical devil—and I'm the one who is going to destroy him!"

As Neal looked at him the smile faded from his lips. Nobody could have continued to grin after regarding the transfigured face of this man who had sworn his life away to the pursuit of a dream.

The professor relaxed from his pose—though such was his sincerity that he didn't conceive for a moment that it might be considered a pose—and stepped across the room to his trunk. From it he took a large-scale map of Algeria, North Africa, which he spread open on his knees.

He pointed to a tiny penciled cross near Bone, not far from the Mediterranean coast. Looking closely, Neal saw that the cross almost directly superimposed a speck tagged Hammam Meskoutine.

"Our devil has his headquarters here," rumbled the professor.

Neal thought he detected a faint pleading note in the heavy voice; and a premonition of why he was being confided in so openly made him glance up hastily.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he demanded again.

The professor looked as though he wanted badly to say something and didn't quite know how to phrase it.

"It's because I want you to help me," he blurted after a moment. "I want to ask you to go along with me. . . ."

"To go along with you! Why?"

"I could give a lot of answers to that. I could say that, having lost my own diamond, yours might substitute as possible pathfinder. I could say that I need someone to act as messenger and get back to the world with a record of events in case something happens to me—and I have felt more than once that I might not come out of this alive. I could give a dozen reasons but I'll only bother with the main one: I want help in this lonely business, and I like you immensely. Will you be my partner in an attempt to free the world from this menace? Our efforts are bound to pass unknown and unrewarded, but——"

"Well, I'm damned!" was all Neal could find to say.

"Think it over," urged Sanderson. "It's dangerous business, and I suppose I haven't the moral right to ask anyone to share it. But, if you could see your way clear——"

BACK in his stateroom, Neal thought of a dozen replies he should have made to the professor—replies he had been too much surprized to formulate on the spur of the mo-

ment. Very little deliberating was necessary to tell what answer he would give to the proposition! He got into bed, determined to fall asleep and forget the whole affair. But sleep was long in coming. The pathos of the huge professor's life haunted him. Here was a man with an able mind and a marvelous physique, devoting his existence to a kink in his brain that sent him hunting phantoms! A modern knight going on a Twentieth Century quest —against a suggestively formed blur on a sensitized plate!

However, he caught himself up at this point. Who was he to say the professor was insane in his crusade? There were many intangible forces able to produce distant phenomena. Electric energy could be projected through space to far places and act powerfully there on appropriate objects. Waves of unseen impulse carried light, pictures, sound, at the command of science. Why, then, was it impossible for a superpowerful being to find a way of transmitting his own thought to the brains of others and forcing them to perform his will?

Here his teeth clicked shut and he drew an uneven breath. Again he realized that, if Sanderson were right, it was not coincidence that his father had gone to ruin and death shortly after receiving the ring. The evil genius, through the antenna of the blue diamond, had sent him there! Here was reason enough to join the professor!

He relaxed with a smile at his credulity. Resolved to tell Sanderson he could not go, he composed himself for sleep. First thing in the morning he would give his excuses. . . .

He never gave them. In the morning he went to breakfast paler than usual and grim-eyed. The professor wasn't there, so he went to his stateroom, opening the door to find him swinging his mighty arms in a vigorous set of exercises.

"I'm going with you!" he said abruptly.

Sanderson stopped his labors, and enveloped Neal's hand in a grip that he felt for days afterward.

"But what decided you?" he inquired. "Last night you were determined not to go. I could see it in your face."

"I had another dream last night," said Neal, "and I woke up half out the port-hole. Again I went through left hand first!" He gazed with narrowed eyes at his sullen-looking blue diamond.

4. *The Crusade*

THE country surrounding the speck on the map tagged Hammam Meskoutine is extraordinary and grotesque.

Low mountains of splintered gray rock enclose a valley that seems to lie under their misshapen shadows as under a weight. In the valley are mineral springs, frothing up in a score of spots, which have built themselves fifty-foot-high pulpits of the snow-white minerals which load the waters.

The springs, besides being laden with minerals, are intensely hot—a bare three or four degrees below the boiling-point. Thus from dozens of places spirals of steam curl up into the air and lend a further air of unreality to the land.

The healing waters of the locality have been known as far back as history records; and to this day there can be seen a group of Roman baths in excellent preservation. Modernity has not been left behind. Near the largest spring, a complacent incongruity in the bizarre landscape, there is a large and sophisticated-appearing hotel, which is all there is to Hammam Meskoutine. And here Neal and Sanderson stayed while

they sought an opening into the secret retreat of the Black Monarch.

With a large-scale local map presented them by the concierge, they planned an efficient combing of the surrounding land.

According to the figuring of Eden and Sanderson, the evil genius had his underground palace within a three-mile radius of Hammam Meskoutine. But to allow for possible errors in calculation they drew a circle with a five instead of a three mile radius, using the hotel site as center. They ruled the circle into thirty-six squares, each square to take a full day's work of searching for any kind of cave or crevice that looked as though it might lead down for a considerable distance.

At seven in the morning of the first day they started on their hunt for the hiding-place of old Eden's Devil, having chosen the center square on the map.

Back and forth they laced over the allotted segment, following a pocket compass to avoid covering any patch twice at the expense of an unexplored patch. The areas about the spring sources were scrutinized with particular care. Sanderson poked around the roots of thick bushes with his steel-tipped cane; each fissure in the soft rock was sounded with a weighted cord regardless of narrowness; even flat stones were overturned if there was any indication that they might be hiding intriguing holes. By five-thirty the square had been thoroughly covered, and the result was a blank.

"But of course it will be hard to find," said Neal. "If the opening to the home of our Devil weren't small and well concealed it would have been uncovered long ago. Why—perhaps there's no opening at all! He might be sealed up like a snake in a strong box!"

"In that event the snake would die," the professor pointed out. "There must be ventilation shafts, either natural or artificial, leading down. We can only hope to find one of them. . . ."

"Then what—mine for him? Such a hole would certainly be too small to admit a human body."

"We'll have to let that problem take care of itself when it comes up," said the professor with a worried frown.

For five weeks they searched the five mile area ruled out on the map; and at the end of that time they had to admit failure.

Not a cave in the entire district but what had been examined with scrupulous thoroughness. Not a fissure or crevice but what had been sounded from end to end. And only once was there a momentary flare of hope: a crack in the rock at the foot of a square hill named Block Mountain had seemed to be bottomless. But when another twenty feet was added to the weighted cord they touched bottom quickly enough.

"Are you sure your original figuring was right?" Neal asked as they returned from that fiasco. "I've never been able to understand how you and Eden could sit in your laboratory, thousands of miles from here, and calculate that this particular spot concealed your Devil! Are you absolutely sure you were right?"

"I still think we were right, but—I'm not so sure as I once was," murmured Sanderson; and at the look on his face, Neal forbore to question him further.

Next day Sanderson advanced a new theory, one that seemed to have fired him again with certainty and eagerness — enthusiasms that had dropped slowly from him during their weeks of fruitless labor.

"I think," he said, "that we ought to try an experiment with your blue diamond. We have been overlooking that. It has proved to be a connecting link between ourselves and

the Power we seek—maybe in some way it can guide us. Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Close your eyes. Then hold out your left hand and turn around several times until you've lost your sense of direction. When you haven't an idea which way you're facing, stop, and we'll see where your ring hand is pointing."

"It's like a child's game!" expostulated Neal as, feeling more than a little foolish, he obeyed the order.

"Is it? I never played games when I was a child. Do you know which way you're facing?"

"No."

"Stop any time, then. Ah. . . ."

With a tingle of excitement, Neal opened his eyes to see where he was pointing. . . .

Straight ahead of them was Block Mountain! Gray and leaden-colored, looking as though squared by human hands to receive some incredibly vast statue, it seemed a likely monument to squat at the entrance to a scientific land of hobgoblins.

Eagerly they started toward it. And as they neared it they suddenly felt the earth tremble slightly under their feet, and heard a low rumbling noise as though an avalanche had started into being. Rounding the steep side of the cliff they found the cause of the noise—a rock slide that had bared a great hole into which they could look and discern a sullen glint of water.

The disturbance that had revealed the hitherto undreamed-of subterranean lake was not so much a slide as a collapse. A shell of rock a few yards across and only twenty or twenty-five feet thick at this point, had fallen of its own weight into the water below, where a tip of it remained as a diminutive islet above the surface. They climbed down to this and gazed about them.

In the direction of the mountain the lake apparently ended in a wall of stone a few yards from the cave-in. Toward the hotel, two miles away, it extended for an unguessable distance. A barely perceptible current proved that there were outlets and inlets; but there was no way of telling where these might be. The roof of rock was very low, coming down almost to the surface in places, and in others dipping entirely below the lake level like great, twisted columns. Thus one got an impression of a labyrinthine maze with arches and tunnels opening in every direction save the rear.

There was no way of ascertaining how large the body of water was, but one received a conception, a *feel*, of immensity. Outside the short range of their flashlights the columned lake seemed to stretch on and on for awesome distances. So much the professor and Neal were able to discover.

Then, as there was nothing more they could do without a boat with which to explore the lake further, they returned to the hotel—to order a small shell from Bone, and get a good rest against the perilous search they proposed to undertake next day.

As soon as the boat was delivered next morning, they set off toward Block Mountain, following the Arab porters who were carrying the fragile shell.

Solemnly they superintended the lowering of the craft to the surface of the subterranean lake. Then they climbed down, took one look through the jagged opening above them as though to carry away a picture of sky and trees and clouds, and assumed their places. Neal shoved away from the rock and Sanderson grasped the oars. Before he started to row, however, he faced Neal somberly.

"This is the pathway to the stronghold of the Power of Evil," he

said. "I'm certain of it. You know the danger we run if I am right?"

"I do," said Neal.

"From this point on, I haven't an idea what may happen to us. But—you know the chances are all against our returning to the surface of the earth again?"

"Yes."

"You're sure you want to go on and face this monster?"

"I am," said Neal.

"Then," said the professor, drawing a deep breath, "we will start!"

With slow strokes he sent the boat along the right bank. They would skirt the edge of the water, he explained, as closely as the low-hanging roof permitted; and they would stop to examine any openings that looked worthy of exploration. But they saw no openings. Ever on their right the lake was bounded unbrokenly by the down-drooping rock; and on their left, toward the center, was the maze of columns rearing up from the surface.

They had drifted for half an hour before the professor noticed that it was perceptibly easier to maintain their speed.

"The current is getting stronger," he remarked. "If the pace gets too swift we'll turn back the way we came and edge down the other side."

Neal nodded. "Along the edge is best. We'd lose ourselves hopelessly in that muddle of pillars in the center."

For a time after that they were silent, depressed by their surroundings. Some mammoth grottoes are inspiring in their beauty, glittering as though sown with jewels, studded with lacy, half-columns and fairy fretwork. But this was different. Drab, gray-brown, the low-arched roof extended above them in sharp ridges and waves like an inverted, crystallized sea. There was no glitter, no grace—only gloomy shadows melting into further shadows as the beams of their flashlight lost themselves in the distance.

The current grew rapidly stronger. Soon the professor was only moving his oars to keep steerage way, and a faint murmuring could be heard far ahead, a murmuring that grew slowly into a sound like that of a distant train passing over a high trestle.

"A waterfall!" exclaimed Neal.

"Yes," acknowledged the professor. "But I can still manage the oars quite easily. We'll keep on for awhile, as long as we dare. I wonder how deep it is. Can you see bottom?"

Neal trained the light over the side of the boat—and started so violently that he nearly dropped it.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, staring down at something just under the surface, something that drifted with the current and kept an even pace with the boat.

"What is it?" asked the professor, startled at the expression on his face. "What do you see?"

"The most impossible creation this side of a nightmare! Look!"

Sanderson dropped the oars and leaned over the side. Together they stared, fascinated, at the thing that drifted below them.

It was a long, serpentine creature that looked like an eel, but was larger than any eel could possibly be. The body was sulfur-yellow. The front was entirely mouth, like the cone of a funnel, studded with sharp, backward-pointing teeth. The tail tapered into a ten-foot length of living whip-lash that coiled hungrily and blindly about as though searching for prey. Down the whole length of the back and sides were rows of blood-red, twining tentacles that resembled attenuated, skinless fingers. There were no eyes discernible.

"If that snaky-looking monster ever takes a notion to climb into the boat——" breathed Neal. "What on earth can it be?"

"I don't know. There's another one!"

Into the circle of light writhed a second sulfur-colored body, not quite so large as the first. Side by side the two repellent things drifted with the current, seemingly unaware of each other.

"Friends or enemies?" whispered Neal.

The next instant the question was answered as the long, groping tails touched for a fraction of a second. Sightless as they were, up until that moment each must have been oblivious of the other's proximity; but with the momentary contact it was as though a switch had been thrown charging them with electric current. With the quickness of light the two monsters were coiled around each other, tails snapping from side to side almost too rapidly for the eye to follow.

Length to length they twined and tightened with convulsive jerks, like two insane water pythons trying to squeeze the life from each other. Back along the twisted mass of their yellow bodies reached the slender, powerful tails, flicking about the funnel-shaped heads like the hands of wrestlers feeling for the hold that shall decide the struggle.

Once a glimpse was got of what this hold might be. The smaller of the two suddenly wound its tail around the wide-open jaws of the larger and pressed until the flesh stood out in ridges on each side of the constricted coil.

Their movements increased in intensity until the boat swayed with the commotion of the surrounding water. Out of the circle of light shot the writhing things, then back in—and the larger fish had shaken free of the deadly tail clamped around its jaws. The smaller appeared to be weakening.

Up and down the shimmering bodies the blood-red tentacles interlaced and tore at each other, leaving disks of flesh that oozed liquid. And now the larger reptile caught the other's jaw with flashing tail — was shaken off—caught the hold again. . . .

Tighter and tighter the steely length circled the gaping mouth. The smaller creature coiled and writhed and shook its length like a snapping rope, but the pressure could not be dislodged. Slowly its jaws crumpled like the mouth of a bag around which a cord is tied too tightly.

In an instant the fight was ended. The larger mouth engulfed the smaller, crushed one. The two lengths momentarily became one long form as they were telescoped together. Back through the slanting jaws the beaten monster was forced inch by inch, snapping from side to side but ever held by the inward-pointing teeth.

Steadily it disappeared until only the whip-lash tail could be seen, still feebly coiling and twisting. Then the victor darted out of the circle of light, back against the current. It moved with frantic haste, as though suddenly startled by something.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Neal, drawing an uneven breath. "What an awful——"

He stopped short, realizing that he could not hear his own voice! As though a sound-proof curtain had been rolled up, he was abruptly aware of a roaring that filled the cavern like the crash of a Niagara pent up within the narrow space.

The surface of the water near the boat glittered smooth as glass. But in front of each irregular rock pillar it was piled up like the wave at the bow of a fast-moving ship, while at the rear was a glistening hollow where the water was whirled past before it could fill the vacuum caused by its own speed.

The rowboat seemed to float motionless on the glassy surface while the low-hanging roof and rocky pillars swept steadily past at a pace almost as swift as a man could run. While they had watched the struggle of the

serpents, too engrossed even to be conscious of the ever-growing clamor of the falls ahead, the current had caught them in a grip that would be hard to loosen.

"The falls!" Neal shouted.

But even as he spoke, as they whirled under a low spot in the roof, the professor crumpled and slid to the bottom of the boat. A fraction of a second later, before Neal could duck his head, he too was hit on the temple by the low-hanging section of rocky arch. He slumped half over the side of the boat, one hand trailing in the water, a stain of red slowly forming over his eye and running down his cheek.

The flashlight dropped from his limp fingers and sank into the black water, where it flickered for an instant like a phosphorescent fish before it disappeared.

The darkness was absolute. And somewhere in its oppressive folds, swinging aimlessly from side to side, the boat rode the current and bore two unconscious human figures toward the unseen point where the water fell thundering from blackness into deeper blackness.

FAR off in an underground chamber, a last flicker of yellowish light faded out.

That it was an underground chamber was evidenced by the peculiar, blankety texture of the darkness that blotted the dying light. That it was somewhere far from the turmoil of the waterfall could be guessed by the utter soundlessness of the place—a soundlessness of the kind that succeeds the stoppage of some constant noise like the long-accustomed hum of a dynamo or tap of a riveting machine.

Quiescent in the entire lack of sound and light, the air of the room seemed charged with expectance of some happening.

At length, so gradually that one could not have told the precise moment when part of the darkness was mingled with luminosity, a circle of light began to outline itself. More distinctly it shone, until it had the seeming of a four-foot disk of dark blue night sky with a dim moon behind it.

Brighter and brighter became the great disk; and with the growing brightness the blue color faded and left it like an unflecked, burnished sheet of silver. The source of the illumination, whatever it may have been, was peculiar in that it was contained entirely within itself. The room continued dark and indistinguishable although the circle glowed with cold light.

Then the light became inconstant on the face of the disk. It wavered in intensity; streamers played across the smooth surface leaving shadows that moved and intertwined like smoke-wraiths; till a picture was formed that was perfect in every detail.

The picture showed two men in a small rowboat that was floating on the ebony surface of an underground body of water. Over their heads a drab, gray-brown canopy of rock dipped and rose in a bewildering maze of arches. The man who pulled the oars was a giant in size and wore a spiky black beard. The other, a younger man, was clean-shaven and of average build. In his hand was a flashlight which he constantly trained from point to point of sides and overhanging roof.

After a moment or two the pictured lips of the large man moved in speech —and instantly a miracle took place! Syllable for syllable his words were reproduced as they came from his lips —reproduced in a voice that was as staggering as a physical blow!

For it was not a man's deep bass that issued from the disk. It was a woman's voice, marvelous in quality though unvarying and lifeless in monotone; firm and clear, but almost deathly in its lack of spontaneity; an automatic series of vocal sounds that

might have been produced by a beautifully perfect mechanical transmitter, and that was yet imbued with a suggestion of having come from a soft white throat. Could a dead woman speak like a phonograph, or a phonograph acquire the soul of a dead woman—this voice would have been the result!

"——wonder how deep it is. Can you see bottom?"

Perfectly timed with the moving of the bearded lips in the picture came the marvelous but incongruous voice. Startling transmutation—as the male bass rumble was filtered through the disk to sound out in a feminine contralto. Iron into gold, strength into beauty!

The younger man held his flashlight over the side and looked down. His face showed startled and absorbed at something he saw in the water beneath.

"Good God!" His words were mirrored by the same sweet voice, without a ripple of expression or a shading of inflection.

The man at the oars also leaned over the side to stare, and the younger man wondered audibly what would happen if the snaky monster should decide to climb into the boat. The large man pointed and said that another was coming to join it. Then for a time there was silence as they gazed over the side.

Meanwhile the water, pictured soundlessly on the face of the disk, piled higher and higher against the irregular columns that swept past ever more rapidly. Suddenly the younger man looked up, noticed the increased current, and faced his companion in alarm. An instant later a low-hanging rock caught the large man on the back of the head and his friend on the temple as the boat whirled forward. The flashlight dropped from the younger man's hand, splashed into the water and went out.

With its fading brightness the white light left the disk, and it was again a four-foot circle of indigo night sky with a dim moon behind it. This, too, grew fainter and fainter until there was no further speck of illumination in the room.

But before it had faded entirely, silhouetted against it for a moment like the fragment of a nightmare, a weird figure loomed up. Great, columnar legs concealed from just above the knee by some kind of tunic. Huge, bare arms. Gigantic torso swelling into proportionate breadth of shoulder. And, springing up from between the shoulders, with no neck perceivable—a cylindrical head that tapered to a rounded point like a projectile!

There was a rustling of draperies near the disk, and the nightmare figure vanished from sight.

AS THOUGH an unseen finger had touched an electric button, the room was suddenly flooded with clear amber light.

It was a large chamber, about twice as long as it was wide. Folds of some coarse white material like linen were draped over the walls, entirely concealing them; and at frequent intervals were hung ancient shields of the Roman type, and bladed weapons, of which a preponderance were javelins. The ceiling was also draped with the heavy, linen-like material; and studded into it were plates of some kind of metal which shone like tiny suns and were the source of the yellow light and mild warmth that bathed the room.

There were few furnishings. A hard woven rug of the prevailing white material covered the floor from wall to wall; several plain benches of dull gray metal, and two long tables of the same substance were ranged against the sides; and an ancient Roman sarcophagus, a mammoth thing of sculptured marble, squatted in a corner. There were no doors or windows visible.

At one end of the room was a disk of deeply translucent crystal with a highly polished surface. This glistened sullenly in the light like a circle of indigo night sky. In dimensions it might have been a large round piece of extra heavy plate glass — being barely an inch thick although it was at least four feet in diameter. The rim was jagged and uneven as though small pieces had been chipped off from time to time, always with care exercised to preserve the circular shape.

The coarse white drapery extended behind the disk as it did along the other three walls; but here it hung unevenly, and gave the impression that it was not a wall-covering but a flimsy partition. Evidently there was another, smaller chamber behind the disk.

Suddenly there was a rustling noise, and at the opposite end of the room one of the white drapes was pushed aside with the opening of a hitherto unseen door; and a man stepped in with machine-like strides as though in answer to a summons. He was bare-armed and bare-legged, clad in a one-piece tunic of white material hardly finer in texture than the wall drapes. Across the tunic at the breast were large letters of purple—R E Z. On his feet were metal sandals and on his head was a conical helmet with an indigo blue diamond set in the front of it.

Reverently he strode down the room toward the disk, stopped a few feet in front of it, and bowed low. With his head inclined as though he were silently worshiping a god, but with his face as impassive and expressionless as a mask of wood, he stood there, motionless.

Seeming to come from the heart of the disk, but possibly issuing from the curtains behind it, sounded the marvelous contralto voice. Sonorous words floated out — words of some language unlike any used on earth today, and yet vaguely familiar. Evidently a command was given; for the helmeted figure bowed submissively, answered briefly in the same tongue, and left by the curtained door.

Silence again claimed the big room. The coarse white drapes near the disk swayed as though some huge body on the other side had brushed against them, then were motionless.

5. *The Devil's Gateway*

THE icy chill of the water in which one of his hands was dangling gradually brought Neal to his senses. He groaned, moved slightly in an effort to relieve his back of the ache caused by the thrust of his weight against the side of the boat, and pressed his hand to his temple.

The side of his face was sticky with blood. His forehead throbbed and pulsed unmercifully. In his ears was a roaring like that of a hurricane gone mad. It was pitch-dark, and he seemed to be swaying up and down, and whirling around in circles. He hadn't a notion, for the moment, of where he might be or of what had hit his head. The darkness, and roaring in his ears, and the sensation of swaying dizzily, were no doubt reactions to the blow on his temple. It was all very uncomfortable. . . .

With an exclamation he sat upright as memory returned to him of their position. That hurricane roar in his ears was not an illusion. It was real and appalling—coming from a short distance ahead of them in the darkness where tremendous volumes of water smashed down against more water somewhere far below.

How long he and the professor had lain there helpless while they were being drawn nearer to the unseen brink of the waterfall, he could not guess. Sufficient that the brink was very near now—right at hand if the noise were a true indication. In another moment or two their fragile

boat would be in that welter of smashing water!

He felt his way toward the oars, stumbling and nearly going over the side as the boat rocketed against something and caromed away again. The professor was lying across the rower's seat still senseless; but as he touched the bearded face in the darkness he could feel a tremor of returning consciousness. He dashed some water over his friend's neck and forehead, and a moment later Sanderson sat up, clutching heavily at the hand he held out in the dark to help him.

It was impossible to make his voice heard in the roar of the waterfall so close to them, so he shook the heavy shoulders to hasten the return of consciousness, and tried to take a place at the oars. He felt himself pushed impatiently away, felt the boat heave slightly to the urge of the professor's strokes. . . .

It was too late for rowing to save them. The oar blades were whirled forward by the current almost faster than they could be pulled. Neal knew they were certain to go over and down to the black depths below unless a miracle happened. He knew the professor must realize it also, though the boat still quivered to his mighty strokes. The main hope was that the falls were not so high as the stunning noise indicated.

A mist of spray suddenly damped his face, and the air trembled still more wildly with the smash of tons of falling water. The prow of the boat wavered sickeningly as the support of the water beneath it was abruptly withdrawn. For an instant it sagged in empty space; then the rear of the boat shot up as though thrown by a sling. He jumped to clear himself, felt himself hurtling down through wet black air. Then he plunged head first into a seething insanity of water, going far under the surface, rolled over by currents and cross currents that seemed about to tear him to pieces.

ETERNITIES later he struggled slowly to the surface, gasping and strangling in air so filled with spray that it was hardly more life-giving than the water itself. Fighting to breathe, he managed weakly to keep his head above the surface for a time while the whirling currents bore him away from the cauldron at the foot of the falls. It was impossible to swim; even the effort to keep from going under was too much to prolong for more than a few moments when he was starving for air. Each time he was dragged below the surface by the current, he felt he could never fight his way up again.

Something clamped over his shoulder, and he had an instant's vision of the horrible yellow water-serpents with the whip-lash tails.

But it was a human hand, big and steady, comforting at the moment as an answer to prayer. He felt himself guided toward a floating object—a large fragment of the rowboat. He rested in this comparative safety, without thought of what disasters the next moment might bring, while the current carried them steadily away from the waterfall. Gradually the roaring subsided until he could hear Sanderson's shout as to whether he was all right. He answered with a touch of his hand. The whirling eddies ceased to toss them so wildly, and at length they drifted into stillness.

Suddenly the professor's voice sounded in the darkness. "Look! Is that a light—or am I imagining it?"

"It's a light," replied Neal after a moment. "But there's something else —steam or something. . . ."

Gradually, as they were borne toward it, the patch of illumination grew clearer. At first it appeared to be an irregular white curtain of flimsy cloth waving in a wind. Then it could be seen that it was steam, rising up from some point near the water level and faintly lighted from behind.

At this point, like the walls of a theater curving to a focus on the stage, the cave curved to an end. But in spite of this there was no lessening of the steady current that dragged them on!

"A subterranean outlet!" exclaimed the professor, and for the first time Neal could see his face, white and strained. "The water sweeps under that end wall. Somehow we've got to keep from being swept with it."

"There's a ledge in front of the steam," replied Neal. "Perhaps we can reach that and climb up."

They urged their boat timber toward the right, making for the recess in the sheer wall.

"The outlet must be just to the left of the ledge," called Sanderson. "Try to steady me while I crawl on top of these timbers. If I can just get enough purchase to raise myself as we pass the ledge——"

The floating wood sank under him a bit, but with Neal's help he managed to get one foot into place and remain fairly upright. The ledge was within a few feet now.

As they floated by he raised himself toward it and sprang. The timbers sank under his full weight—but not before he had grasped the rock shelf. He writhed to security and turned to help Neal, and in a moment had pulled him from the water.

Their position, however, was hardly improved; in a few minutes they would certainly strangle in the steam-laden atmosphere.

"We've got to get out of this—somewhere," Neal panted. "And we can't go back the way we came. There's only one direction left."

"Through the steam," agreed the professor. "And beyond—to wherever that light is coming from."

Rising uncertainly, they groped their way into the clouds of vapor. . . .

As Neal felt his way along, his foot suddenly slipped over the edge of the opening from which the steam was seething up—a sheer wall going down to unguessable depths below him. It was impossible to see how wide the crevice was—impossible to see anything in the blind air. It might be four feet across or it might be forty. Behind it lay the positive barrier of the waterfall. Before it was at least the chance bred by hope.

Taking a long breath he jumped for the opposite, unseen edge.

He just made it, landing on hands and knees, with one foot dangling over the brink of the narrow chasm. A few more steps and the cloud thinned. With his lungs bursting and his skin feeling as though rinsed in scalding water, he staggered out into pure cool air and lay down at full length, fearful that the professor had not felt the crevice in time to escape falling, but Neal was too exhausted even to call out to him.

Vaguely he realized that he was in yet another cavern, that it was very large and somehow brightly illuminated with clear yellow light like that of the sun. Then the reaction to the blow on his temple, to the shock of the plunge over the falls, and to the terrific heat exposure, drew a black curtain over his senses even as he was trying to rise and go back into the steam to find the professor.

SOME little time later, Neal stirred, recovered consciousness with a realization of burning thirst and cramped limbs, and opened his eyes to the wonder of the place in which he found himself.

The cave of the lake, the subterranean waterfall, the steam chamber—all had been strange enough; but they were normal, fashioned by the forces of nature. This tremendous cavern that stretched up and away like an enormous ballroom had either been retouched, or completely built by the hand of man!

Laboriously hewn and smoothed into symmetry, the lofty roof extended on and on in a continuous peaked

arch like the ceiling of a Gothic cathedral. Across this at regular intervals were transverse arches; and at each central junction a tremendous column of natural stone tapered up from the smooth floor to flare at the top in arboreal support. Along the walls and peaked roof were mistily painted grotesque monsters of which a distorted representation of the sulfur-colored water-serpents recurred oftenest. Between each two of the columns, set into the rock ceiling, was a round metal plate that gave out warm yellow rays precisely like the rays of the sun.

It was like a vast church gone mad! Weird wall and ceiling decorations portrayed devilish things instead of saints and angels. Hot yellow light poured from the curious plates, instead of dim cool colors filtering through stained windows. An intangible atmosphere of demoniac evil replaced the air of placid sanctitude that hovers over earthly cathedrals. One could picture hordes of slack-mouthed fanatics assembled here to worship a creature whose lust was for blood and supreme sacrifice and whose power lay rooted in sovereign fear.

If any doubt had still remained in his mind as to the actual existence of the Monster of Evil the professor hunted, it was dispelled by the sight of this enormous chamber that was his handiwork. For this was plainly no chance-found ruin of ancient times, at least as we know of them. Here was no trace of Egyptian or Phenician craft. More, being in perfect repair as it was, it told of present-day labor and supervision. It was as freshly kept up as any modern edifice. And those mysterious illuminating plates—no forgotten and long-dead race had contrived those, or left them to shine through centuries to the present day. They were new, and affixed by the command of a brain that must be alive, and somewhere near, at that very moment!

What could be the nature and appearance of the owner of that brain? What genius had caused this wonder to be built far below the earth's surface? The professor had a few blurred pictures of a human-seeming Thing with a weird head. But what was it really like? Did it love and hate and eat and sleep as other mortals—or was it some kind of bloodless, superhuman creature such as the world has never produced before? Was it made of totally different flesh, perhaps, a new species of superman that needed no food nor rest and felt no emotion?

And what could be the character of the subjects of this monstrous and uncanny king? For subjects he must have by the thousands. The incredible labor represented in the hollowing of this great mock-cathedral from the solid rock proved that; and there must be much more of the underground construction: the great cave was entirely deserted and no sound of life penetrated to it from any point around. How much more, and how marvelous the life and contrivances it all might contain, could only be guessed at. But what could the workmen responsible for the marvels be like? Men or machines? Animals, or——

His thoughts trailed off into wild imaginings of monstrous and inhuman beings with ten legs, possibly, and a score of arms—improbable and nightmare figures. It was easy to imagine the improbable here, to build up mental pictures of creatures such as no natural laws would allow to come into being. And yet—no natural laws could account for such a creation as the Devil whose existence was now definitely proved by this huge cave that was his anteroom, and against whom Sanderson and he had elected to cast their absurdly frail strength!

However, no matter what the nature and form of the Black Monarch of evil and his thousands of subjects might be, it would do no good to re-

main here and rot in useless conjecture. All he could do was—go on and see what befell him.

He shuddered and got to his feet, overwhelmed by a rush of awful loneliness as he stood, a tiny thing, a mite in the vast, brooding silence of the hall. He was terribly alone. Sanderson was lying at the bottom of the steam crevice—there was probably a lake of boiling water in those depths. The little expedition of two had reached the threshold of the Dark Ruler at last; but now the leader of the expedition was gone; and he was left alone to find death or escape. And death seemed very near, escape appallingly remote.

He sighed, squared his shoulders, and began to walk down the great cavern—naked as the first man in a malign Eden.

At the end of the hall were four tunnels leading off in four different directions. They were all lit by the sun-like metal plates, and all identical in size and appearance. Which of the four exits he should take was a matter he could not determine. One might lead to the outside world and safety, and its next-door neighbor might take him to direct capture by whatever freakish beings lived here. In either event he had no way of knowing beforehand; and he must go somewhere, quickly, in the hope of finding water to quench his thirst.

It was maddening, that thirst! Every drop of moisture seemed to have been drained from him in the heat of the steam chamber. Every fiber in him called for water. Without paying much attention to where he was going, he pushed into the nearest tunnel. Branching off from this were other runways; and soon he could not have found his way back to the huge cavern of the murals if he had so desired.

At last he heard the sound he was listening for—the drip of water. He started to run in its direction, came into another vast cave—and instantly drew back to hide himself in the tunnel mouth!

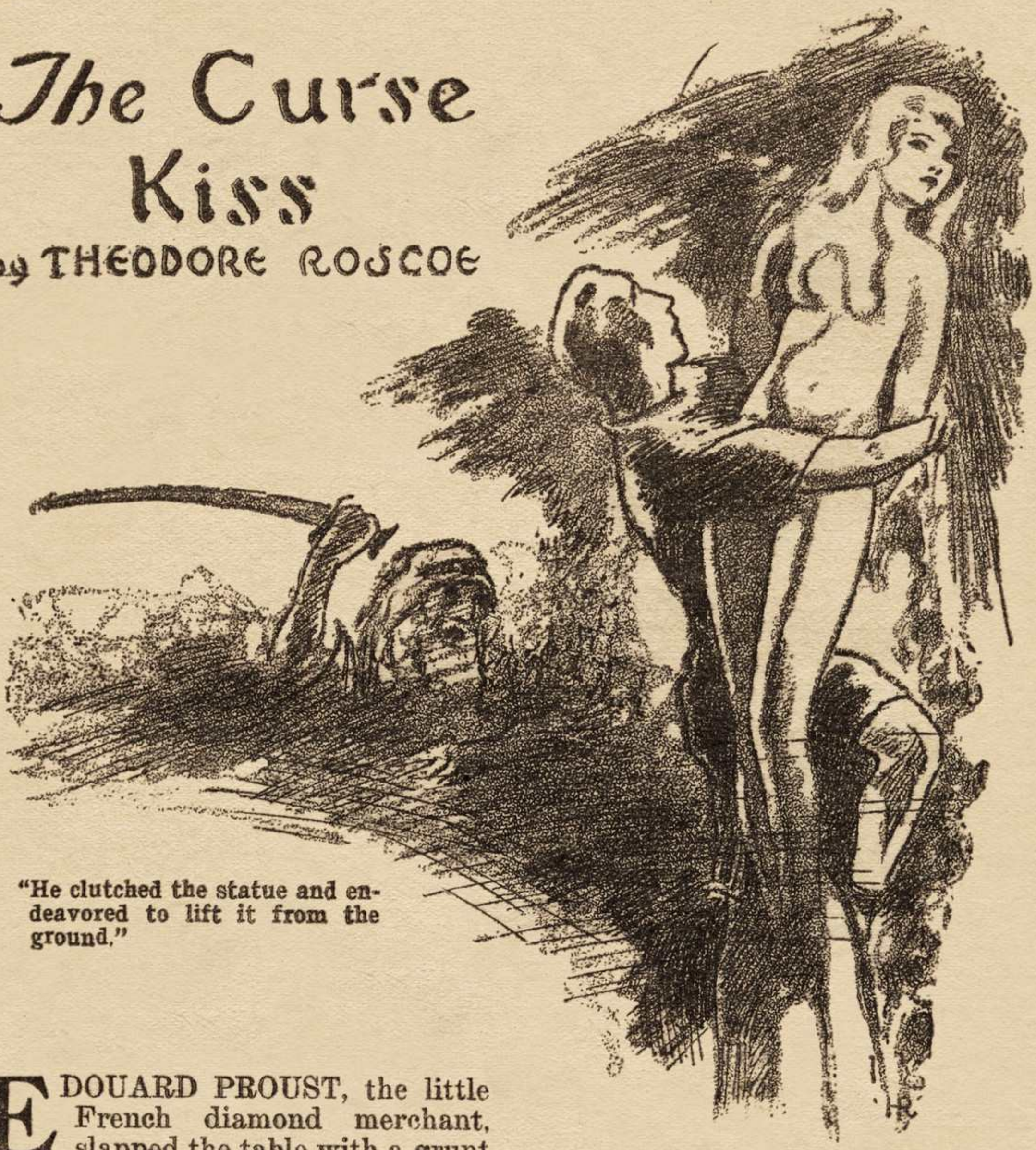
He had caught his first glimpse of the creatures that inhabited this subterranean kingdom.

The appalling weird being whom Neal and the professor are fighting enters the story in vivid and startling manner in next month's installment.



The Curse Kiss

by THEODORE ROSCOE



"He clutched the statue and endeavored to lift it from the ground."

EDOUARD PROUST, the little French diamond merchant, slapped the table with a grunt of anger, and spat through the jut of snowy whisker on his lips.

"Bah!" he snarled, and he stared at Lars Issracket, and through him, and straight through the wall of the beer parlor. And he stared right out across the Red Sea, over the munching waters of Bab el Mandeb to Aden. Edouard Proust was like that.

After Proust had stared for about five minutes even Lars Issracket began to feel uncomfortable. It was much too hot for a man to slap a table and strain and stare like a spirit medium just because the remark was passed that voodooisms were the bunk.

"Come out of it!" snapped Lars. "What in the world you throwin' a fit over? Drink your peg, Proust, and let's get out of here before the flies eat us up. What's the idea of all the play?"

"Issracket," announced the Frenchman, glaring clean down to Cape Town, "you are sixteen kinds of a Dutch fool. You stroll into the Orient with the arm of an ox, morals of a Sphinx, nerves of a brass mon-

key. You sit and swizzle gin. You knock over the natives. You scramble in and out of street brawls, chuckling with joy. *Mort de Dieu!* You curse God! You laugh at my story! Ho! You are one who believes only in that which he can see and drink. Your God is your forearm. As for powers of darkness and the supernatural—pah! you say, and blow your nose. Listen! Things dwell here of which you have no slightest notion. Powers that could reach out and throttle that tan throat of yours with ghostly fingers. Spirits! Ah, you laugh. Laugh, then. But, my so phlegmatic friend, perhaps you will see. Do not evils spawn in the East? *Pœrbleu!* The night stinks with mystery! The day is bright with a spell — that's it, Issracket — what your American fiction writer calls the spell of the East! It oppresses me like a humid day on the Dekkan. *Dieu,* it does that. But you—you walk the lanes with a grin and a knotted fist. Pah! I will give you a year in this devil's land. Your eyes will drop their twinkle; your cheeks glow with different hue! You comprehend a knife, a gun, five knuckles, nautch girls, rum, but you must comprehend more than that to survive the Orient. *Oui!* You must! Did you ever see a vermin-tortured *yogi* throw a rope five leagues in the air and climb it before your eyes? I have! In the Punjab! Or a snake-charmer call his wriggling fiends with a wailing lute? Or a sun-fried beggar grow a mango in five minutes before your very nose, from a tiny seed? I have! Or the eyes of a Turkoman woman; or the glance of a *hadji* who has drunk the waters of the Zen? Or twilight in a temple where incense floats and priests skip? I have! And I perspired, I tell you. Bah! Issracket, you have seen nothing!"

Issracket yawned in the immense heat, and idly scratched a red jowl.

"Hell," was his terse comment. "Lay off the dream medicines, *mon enfant.* The East is getting you. You'll be believin' in fairies——"

"I believe in them!"

"Sure; and in phantoms, Irish banshees, witches an' gnomes, I'll wager——"

"*Oui!* All of them," muttered the little Frenchman, draining his glass.

Issracket shrugged indifferently.

"Bring 'em on, if you care to. Bring on your three-card-monte men from India, your devil-workers from Persia, an' throw in a handful of Arabian werewolves an' Javanese charm doctors. I'll stack a good six-shooter against the whole kaboodle an' their evil eye—damn me if I won't!"

Edouard Proust growled, and looked as if he saw the entire Orient twinkling in a spot of beer on the wall behind the Dutchman's head.

"Lars, you do not know. You do not see below the surface. Eyes to you are eyes—things to be blackened. You would shake a curse as a dog shakes water from its spine. But I will show you! By the bones of Saint Stephen, I will! You laughed at my tale about the whispering rubies of Jehan Ji—a tale I can not prove, because the rubies are long gone. Here, then, is one I can show. Have you ever in all your travelings heard the legend of Lot's Wife? Perhaps you know your Scripture? Ho! You are a babe to the East. I will show you Lot's Wife! You will grow old in an hour. Wisdom will sigh in your ear. After meeting with Lot's Wife you, Lars, may become a man!"

Now Lars Issracket resented any inference that he was not a man, for Lars was a man to know. Six feet he stood, from his heels to the stack of hay-colored hair on his crown, and built like a catamount. Tan was his skin, and his eyes were blue, and as his French friend had stated, nerves and morals troubled him not. Dutch parents had taken him to America, and early he had left the land of

the free, cracking the walls of a county jail to do so. A *peon* had cheated him in Mexico City; and Lars quit the city, and so did the *peon*, only the *peon* rode in a hearse. Mexico to Norway, Hawaii, France (where he first met Proust), Congo, Peru and back to France again, where for three years he joyed to the spank of machine-guns and the skush of the driven bayonet. The man was one of those characters simply untroubled by a soul. People had crossed Lars Issracket, and they were gone. But Lars was genial. Yes. Genial, stubborn, afraid of no man, and, of course, no God.

He resented the little diamond merchant's words.

"Say!" He gestured a brown fist under Proust's chin. "If you wasn't once in the trenches with me, I'd lam you for hinting I wasn't a man. But I'm game! Bring on this here Lot's Wife. Let her open her bag o' tricks. Maybe I can tie th' strings for her!"

Proust had sailed seven seas from marge to marge, and many strange things he knew. But Lars Issracket thought him mad, when he said:

"Be, then, at that little wharf gin palace that reeks so of rum at nine tonight. At nine. *Oui? Bien.* And be ready for the strangest, maddest experience of your whole stupid existence—for an adventure blown by the breath of the yellow-eyed East — for your first lesson in Orientation, shall I call it? Ha! Lot's Wife! She is a woman to meet! Seventeen years have I wandered these lands of the rising sun, and in all that time, she is, I say, the most amazing sight I have ever seen! Oh ho! Don't laugh! *Sapristi!* Your eyes, when they see her, will pop from your head like little corks from green bottles in the Café de la Paix!"

"At nine, then," Issracket agreed; and superb in nonchalance, began to pick his teeth with the dirk that always waited in his belt.

2

ISSRACKET located Proust at a corner table in Islam Ike's Sanctorum of the Lifted Veil—that little twelve-cylinder hell from the region of which the Assab police steered clear. It was nine o'clock, and in a greasy vapor of smoke and fumes the Sanctorum odorously simmered with a milling cram of decayed humanity. Issracket shoved his way through a stewing sea of faces—brown, black, gray, red and speckled. Medley of a dozen nations. Dregs.

But the strangest figure in the room was the man sitting with Edouard Proust. Issracket damned himself with surprize. The French diamond merchant's companion was an Abyssinian nobleman. Serenely he sat in his chair, a colorful touch to the drab in his beaded velvet mantle, ruby-red sash, breastplate of beaten silver, headpiece and collar of lion's mane. At his feet leaned a wrought shield of rhinoceros hide. Under his ebony hand lay a fusil that might have seen service with the musketeers of Cardinal Richelieu. Lars Issracket's mouth sagged open.

Edouard Proust looked up with a smile. "Permit me to present Yesus," he announced, delighted at the Dutch adventurer's surprize. "He is to be our guide. He's a Moslim, so he won't drink with us; but pour yourself a peg. Ready for the trip, *mon brave?*"

Issracket spilled his whisky carefully, and staring at the Abyssinian, smiled faintly. "Where we bound?" he finally demanded.

"Land of the Queen of Sheba," Proust told him. "We can leave Somaliland tonight, and if fortunate, grab the iron steam-demon tomorrow at Jibuti. Were you ever in Addis Ababa? It is as far as the railroad goes, and truly, no one would wish

to go farther. It is a ride to try the patience of the patient Saint Francis, but it will be worth it to see Lot's Wife. Yesus will lead us to her, for I could not locate her to save my soul. Not I. Last season I caravanned by mistake almost to the Blue Nile. That was a desolate, devastating journey. This season I am setting out prepared. You shall come along. Yesus can find her easily, knowing the region as if he made it, instead of our friend the devil. We quit the thrice curst steam-vomiter at Modjo, and push south for Lake Twai."

All of which meant little to the Dutchman, who was beginning to think the whole affair a fantasy from a deranged mind. Lot's Wife? Abyssinia? Eastern mystery? What was it all about? He had a strong inclination to snap fingers at the idea, and duck from the room; to proceed to Aden as had been his original intent. But it would never do for his French friend to think him a quitter. Moreover, his curiosity had been fanned. From some stagnant corner of his brain he dug out faint memory of a Bible story about a woman who looked back on a burning city or something, and thereby turned to a pillar of salt. Could it be that Proust had located this salt pillar? Lot's Wife—that was it all right. Suddenly Lars Issracket decided he wanted like anything to see Lot's Wife. He spat thoughtfully and accurately at a *chipkilli*. He tugged the hair in his right ear. He laughed, and said he was game. Anyway this voodooism business was the bunk. . . .

3

The journey from Assab, across French Somaliland to Jibuti (a rubbish pile if there ever was one) was uneventful. Proust unearthed a Bible—a true miracle for him—and read Issracket the story of Lot and his recalcitrant spouse:

> Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire. . . .
> And he overthrew these cities and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.
> But Lot's wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.

"*Mais oui,*" concluded Proust. "Here, my friend, is the amazing thing. I am no student of the Testaments, but I am sure all this happened in Syria somewhere. How, then, comes this salt pillar to be in the hills south of Modjo? It was a shock, Issracket, to see her there. Those who know of her, Mohammedan and Coptic faith, swear by their gods it is she. An old monk with a voice that came from yesterday, and a white beard like a waterfall, showed her to me. Swearing most devoutly by his patron Saint George, he vowed that Lalibela, a mythical Abyssinian king, brought Lot's Wife to the country when the desert was a child and he first cut churches in the solid rock."

Lars Issracket had been swigging *tej*, and staring foolishly at their Abyssinian guide, while the French diamond merchant talked. Now he turned with a sour grimace.

"That's the junk I don't swallow!" he snapped testily. "All this balderdash fried up in the brains of a hooting gang of half-wits who spend their lives howling lies, and whistling to their gods for a wind!"

"As the Yankee drink-mixer in Penang used to say," returned Proust, "you ain't heard nothing, yet. Lend ear now, and listen well. That old monk told me that he who kissed the salt pillar on the lips would bring it to life! Now try to comprehend. That statue exudes life! You long to kiss that salt-pillar, I swear by Saint Julian! *Oui!* You do! It is so real! It is a pillar of salt in the desert, but *Dieu!* doesn't it pulsate with life! Magnetism! It was all I could do to resist the witchery! But the old monk screamed *non!* Do you know what he said?

Do not kiss her! He said an evil spirit dwelt in her; that she was an evil and accursed woman. *Comprenez?* So the Lord destroyed her. And he who kissed her would bring her to life, but be, himself, turned into a pillar of salt!"

Taut, weltering silence tumbled over the room after the click of the Frenchman's words. A waiting silence. Proust wiped his wet face. Yesus, the guide, a somber, silent figure, stared unblinking at the candle. It was Issracket who splintered the quiet to tingling atoms; burst into thunderous laughter; pounded the table till the jugs jumped.

"Turn into salt!" he roared. "Funniest damn yarn I ever heard! Kiss her! She comes to life! I turn into a pillar of salt! Cook me, Proust, if it ain't balmy! An' you believe it!"

Laughter is a maddening thing. Issracket's drummed in the grass-roofed hut, and flung into the lane that snaked before the door. The Dutchman's sides shook. His face crimsoned. His body rocked with mirth.

And Edouard Proust got angry. Sparks glinted in his eye, his beard quivered, as he cackled suddenly:

"*Pardieu!* You laugh, eh? Here, then! You are a great infant, Lars Issracket; for only infants, knowing nothing, believe nothing!" He fumbled in his shirt. "*Voilà!* I lay you that, saying you will not dare kiss her!"

Issracket eyed the gold pieces the Frenchman had slapped on the table. He snorted angrily, then grinned.

"It's a go!" he chuckled. "Take you double, I do! Say! I'll smack that statue good! Yeah! What's more, I'll grab her up, an' carry her off! You bet I will! Let her evil eye do what it can! I'll sell her to a museum, or a salt comp'ny! See?" he roared cheerfully. "I'll kiss her an' cop her!"

4

THE train to Modjo was one of those cindery, rattly toy affairs that inched its way along, wheezing over endless miles of arid wasteland. Hot cars were jammed with steamy, therefore smelly, natives, and Issracket vowed he could run along behind with greater comfort. Nomads attacked the train the second evening of its journey, and in the ensuing battle the huge Dutchman exercised joyously, scattering the dusky fiends with a fusillade of bullets and lusty yells that terrified even the passengers. It was the one rift in a monotonously dismal journey of heat and cinders and stench.

Proust and Yesus did not seem to mind, but Issracket was rubbed raw by the trip, and profanely glad when the train gasped into Modjo. On horseback they abandoned the town, heading south. Pushing over boundless reaches of desert under cold, night sky, they gained a country of low hills just as dawn was firing the horizon.

Strange land, here. In the chill of daybreak, Issracket felt depressed. Desolation closed in on the riders. Ancient hills, gray-tinted in the dawn, whispered their eternal loneliness. Lars Issracket was not nervous, but something of dejection crept into his blood. He was glad of the knife in his belt, the rifle hanging from his saddle. Yesus had provided carbines as protection from the brigandry that lurked in the deserts. Issracket almost wished the brigandry would appear. No soul, however, seemed to inhabit the land. No tree picketed the horizon. Just sterile, bitterly barren hills. Ragged, lifeless landscape.

The Dutch adventurer sniffed. "Looks like hell!" he said.

Proust tilted his helmet and nodded sagely. "Perhaps you believe in spells, then," he noted. "Ho!

This country casts one. It is a land that sings a poison song in my ear, bitters my tongue, and suffocates my soul. It is a land drenched with—how can I say it?—you know. One begins to peer, look over one's shoulder, and startle at one's own voice."

For the first time on their journey, the guide spoke more than a sentence. Pointing to a jagged ridge of cliffs that clutched into maroon sky ahead, he chattered in Amharic. Proust nodded; turned to Issracket.

"Yesus tells me just before us lies the forbidden spot. He further adds the country is charmed and he will ride on not a pace. He says we shall find the monk at the shrine, and he warns you a thousand times, Lars, not to go near Lot's Wife. I, myself, am uneasy. So do not keep this silly wager! Stay away! Just stare, and stay away. For your life, I beg you!"

Issracket clucked softly.

"*Allons!* She stands, then, beyond the first ridge, in an amphitheater. I recall now. Like a spirit. Surrounded by a grove of trees. The monk lives in a cave on the hillside. He will come out winking like a mole. It is uncanny. Lars, forget the wager!"

But Lars Issracket never forgot a wager.

5

CANTERING forward together, Issracket and Proust left Yesus alone behind them. Issracket did not enjoy the ride to the ridge. The French diamond merchant was enough to make anyone ill at ease; he seemed like a cat waiting for its nerves to fly into smithereens. The blond Dutchman tried to whistle, succeeding only in shrilling a mournful note unhappy as the moaning call of a conch shell.

"My God," he admitted to himself, "this dump is a bit creepy. What is it, anyway? I feel almost like I did when them Boche shells ripped by overhead."

A blazing sun swam over the red horizon and killed the last cool breath. White light flamed over the sands. Heat waves shimmered. The adventurers found themselves panting, and mopping their necks.

"Scorchin' day," ventured Issracket at last.

Proust made no reply. The horses plodded on. The sky burned to a hot brass bowl. Issracket drew his helmet over his eyes. Silence. Throbbing silence. Then——

"There you are!" exclaimed Proust, as the horses mounted a sandstone hillock. "There lies the gully, Lars. *Sapristi!* And there is Lot's Wife!"

Issracket stared into a shallow wash sloping before him. At the foot of the wash an amphitheater had been scooped in the sand. About the amphitheater grew a circle of trees, standing constant vigil over the charge in their midst. And there, surrounded by the sentinel trees, stood Lot's Wife!

What witchery, what illusion was this! Lot's Wife! A master sculptor had wrought her form, a divine sculptor had molded her features. She posed, a figure of peerless contours, tall, lissom, graceful as a deer; a slender hand at her shoulder, lending her serene poise; head turned, eyes glancing back. A masterpiece in rock salt, fine as marble, that sparkled like snow in the intense sunlight. A glistening, twinkling sylph.

"Look at her eyes," croaked Proust wildly. "They live!"

Issracket found voice. "I see 'em! More appeal than a Port Said dancin' girl! Color her a bit, an' she'd live! God! Just look at her!"

Never in all his days had Issracket seen a sight so strange. Fascinated, he slid from his saddle.

"Lars!" Proust flung warning. "Don't go near! Stay!"

Without replying, the Dutchman scrambled into the gully; strode toward the salt pillar, determination in

his tread. He did not hear Proust's protest. He was thinking, "Them eyes is too real to be carved of salt. Funny business here. Nor I ain't forgot my bet. I'll kiss her, an' cop her. I wo——"

Came a cry from Proust. "The monk!"

Issracket whirled around. Along the ridge bordering the amphitheater loped a ghost—a curious ghost of a creature, who had appeared as mysteriously as if the desert had sprouted him from red sand. Like an evil thought he streaked with long strides down the hill, spectral in a flutter of white robes and beard that blew about his knees. Behind the beard hid a wizened old face, dried as a stale orange, black as soot, cleft with a labyrinth of wrinkles, skin drawn drum-tight over bone. Issracket stifled a yell of surprize, and greeted this ancient with a grin.

"Hello, Noah. How's the Ark?"

He was not prepared for the reply which came in sonorous funereal tones that seemed to echo up from a very deep well.

"Blaspheme not, ye who trespass here. Aye, and stay thy step, lest the evil of Lot's Wife feed on thy soul and destroy thee. Approach her not, for he who enters the forbidden grove shall be charmed, and he who toucheth the Wife of Lot shall turn a salt pillar himself even as she is freed from the bondage of three thousand years. Three thousand years——"

Feeling as if he had been slapped across the chest, Issracket glared in amazement at the hoary old creature, and was so stricken with surprize he wondered if he was already turning to salt. Looking back, he saw Proust waiting in his saddle, and the Frenchman's cry, "Come away!" spurred him forward.

"Out of the way, Sandy Claus!" he growled. "I ain't got time to fool!"

And brushing past the monk, he hurried for the grove. Watching, mute with fearful suspense, Proust saw Issracket rush up to the statue, clutch it in his embrace, then endeavor to lift it from the ground. But the Dutchman's design was interrupted. Racing like a greyhound, the old monk darted into the amphitheater and launched himself through the trees at the startled adventurer. Startled indeed! From beneath his beard and robes that monk had found a three-foot knife that glinted like a hot wire in the sun—a yard-long needle, sharp as a razor, the very sight of which froze Issracket where he stood. Giving the Dutchman no time to draw gun or dirk, the old fiend vaulted toward him spitting hate.

Issracket screeched. Came a pop from the hillside, but Proust's bullet missed the monk by yards. That old monk was fast, too. Terrified, the Dutchman fled from the grove, the monk after him with blade raised; and like arrows they sped up the red sand slope. Proust spurred his horse toward the grove in an effort to overtake the raging fanatic.

Along the ridge they dashed: Issracket legging it for all he was worth, sending sand and gravel showering from his heels; the monk sprinting like a genius. The old demon very nearly caught him, and Issracket was sickened by that slim blade that zipped so maddeningly close beside his ear. But that monk did not catch him. Not quite. With a sudden spurt of speed he cut the razor-knife a stroke that swept by the Dutchman's cheek like a bolt of white lightning. Issracket threw a yell that echoed against the hot horizon; hurled himself aside. Losing balance, the old monk buckled to his knees with a wild squawk! Flying from his fingers, his blade crooned past Issracket's chin and dug quivering into the sand.

The Dutchman gave a savage

shout, yanked out the weapon, and pounced upon the monk. The old monk hopped to his feet in a hurry. A mighty big hurry. Squealing, he fled like a phantom back for the grove of trees behind the ridge. But he never got there. Both hands on the knife hilt, Issracket bounded after that monk. He gained—caught up with him. And with a furious thrust, he stabbed the blade like a driven bolt, poking the knife clean through the old monk's skinny back, sweeping him from his feet, and nailing him fast to the sand, where he lay squirming on his face and squeaking like a legion of mice!

Issracket plopped to his knees and brushed sweat from his eyes. Suddenly he wondered where Proust was. Proust had disappeared. His horse stood riderless on the ridge. The grove lay just out of sight beyond the rise. Perhaps Proust had stopped at the desert shrine; but Issracket could not imagine his French friend abandoning him to the old monk and his blade. He staggered to his feet, drew his dirk and drove it into the writhing creature at his boots. With that he hurried up the slope to find Proust. To his dismay, he discovered the Frenchman lying in the wash below his horse, revolver in limp hand. The Dutchman ran to catch up his companion, and as he did so, the diamond merchant opened his eyes.

"Good!" panted Issracket. "You ain't dead. I thought maybe this rotten heat had got you."

"*Sapristi!*" Proust blew the exclamation from his lungs. "What happened? *Dieu!* I was riding down the ridge to get a shot at the monk—is he dead? I spurred by the grove. *Dieu!* I must have fainted! From the shock! See! Lot's Wife! Gone!"

Profanity banged from Issracket's lips. He glared through the shimmering haze. The shrine was there. The trees were there. The pillar of salt that had been Lot's Wife had vanished.

And as he stared, Lars Issracket's eyes almost popped from his head like little corks from green bottles in the Café de la Paix! His lips puckered! His tongue writhed in his mouth!

"God!" he screamed. "All I can taste is salt! Help! She's come to life—gone! An' I'm turning to salt!"

And his voice echoed over the red desert: ". . . turning to salt . . . to salt . . . salt . . ."

6

A TERRIFIED Proust and a scared Yesus dragged the unconscious Dutch adventurer all the weary, calcined miles to the railroad. And the story might end here, but it does not. It certainly does not!

Sunken in a fog of mental depression, Issracket soddenly allowed himself to be taken to Addis Ababa. As the train he was on crawled to a halt at the station, its load of choking passengers were attracted by a great clamor dinning in the street. Converts of some mystic order, holding a religious revival before the station.

Supporting his sick friend, Proust pushed through the crowd. In the middle of the street stood the evangelist, surrounded by a raving gang of fanatics who tore the burning air with fervent petitions for their gods to save their rusty souls. That gang could pray! The town rattled with prayer. Spiritual power from the evangelist electrified that mob. Skinny black arms shot skyward. Woolly heads bobbed. Glistening bodies rocked in mad excitement. Wails, sighs, moans, groans and prayer ritual rang to the heavens with intensity of feeling thick as thunder; and under the wizardry of that all-compelling evangelist who

toiled with them, they writhed and wrenched and flung their tortured spirits high in the blistering afternoon.

Suddenly a shout clarioned out from the center of the crowd.

"*Lot's Wife!*"

That evangelist had been carved by a master, her face molded by divinity. Her eyes flashed magnetism deep as time; her skin gleamed white as salt! It was as if the pillar of salt from the shrine in the desert south of Modjo had been transplanted, with life breathed into it, to that scribbly street in Addis Ababa.

"*Lot's Wife!*"

A giant Dutchman with a stack of yellow hair that tossed over mad eyes stormed through the mob like a tornado. The converts scattered like leaves in wind. Shouts. Howls. Screams. Tangle of twisting arms and ducking heads. The mad Dutchman hurled aside a shrieking negro, kicked at a scrambling Arab, and swung a sledge-hammer fist. The fist, crimson now, whipped out and crashed the beautiful evangelist a ripping blow to the forehead that felled her like the sweep of an ax. Then those converts did yell! In half a second a hundred fanatics were screaming like maniacs and clawing like tigers at the frenzied Dutchman. Knives glinted in the sun. Fist-beats smacked loud. Dust clouds hung over roaring battle.

Shots! A little Frenchman with snowy beard bobbing fought his way into the riot and spread the uproar with a hot revolver. Shots! A foolish corps of police chased around the corner and scrambled the tumult with generous application of sword and musket.

The red dust settled on a downed giant Dutchman who bled from a hundred wounds, and who was carried away by direction of a sobbing Frenchman. The felled evangelist had been spirited from the scene by mysterious hands.

And Abyssinia is a strange country. Did not Fejewel el-Hatim, the Moslim ivory-trader who spoke a dozen tongues, swear by the Beard of the Prophet that he heard the cause of the riot mumbling he was turning to salt?

7

Four long, malodorous months Proust, aided by the thin, fumbling doctor from Addis Ababa (and a beery devil he was!), fought at the bedside of Lars Issracket, dragged him from a tropical fever resembling typhus, plucked him from the horrors of leprosy, and clutched him to sanity again.

Then Edouard Proust, an aged little French diamond merchant, made his way up to Suez for a real whisky peg and a hair-cut. He bid good-bye to a trembly Dutchman with gaunt cheeks and great purple clouds painted under sunken eyes—eyes that had lost their twinkle—cheeks that had lost their glow—a Dutchman who had taken his lesson in Orientation.

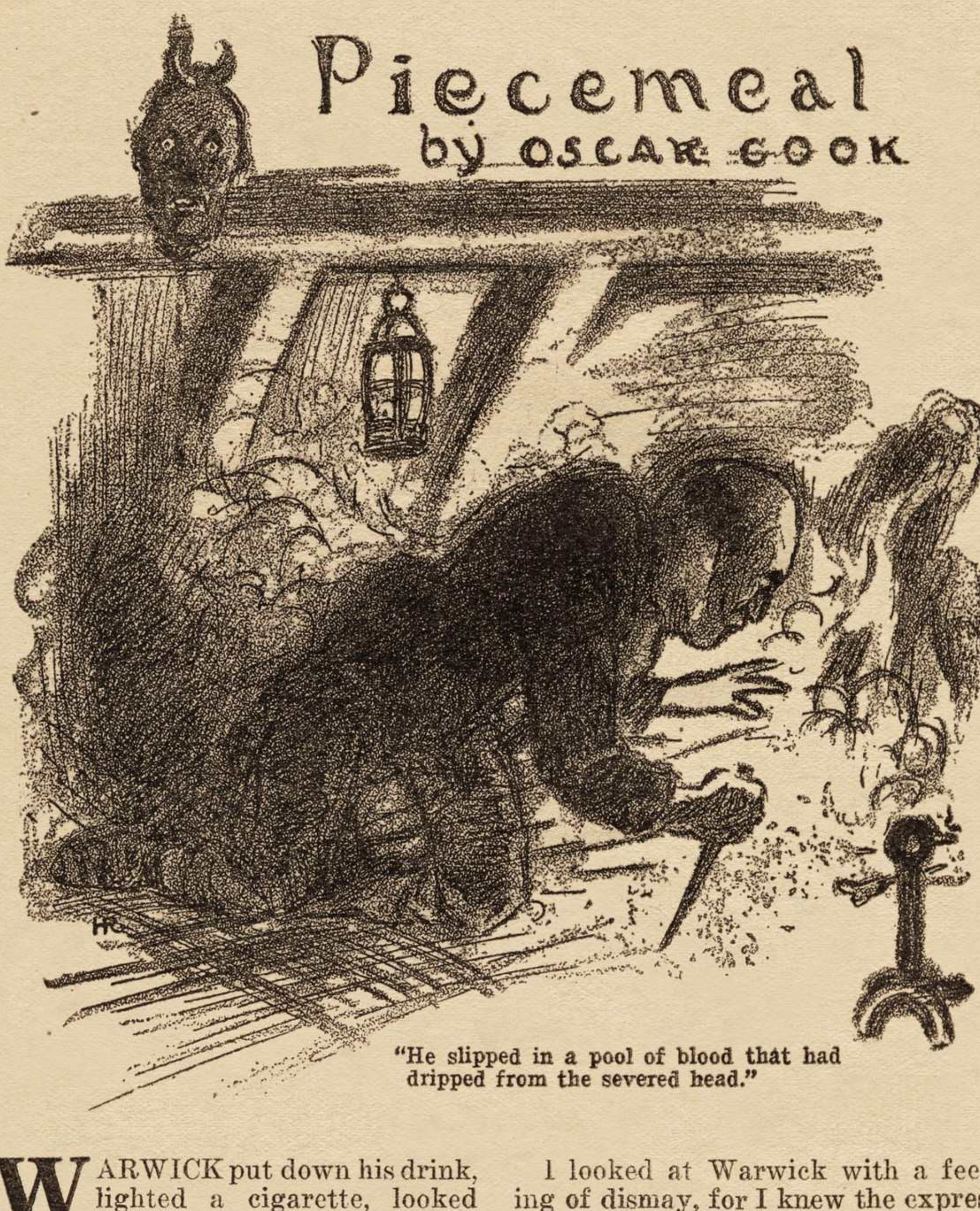
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They noticed nothing peculiar about the man named Issracket when, seated at mess on the windjammer he had grabbed out of Aden, he grimaced at the menu of salted fish. But the little one-eyed sailor who sat next to him swore that night to his mates in the forecastle that:

"This 'ere pop-eyed Dutch bloke wot come aboard is looney, dippy, lost 'is bearin's! W'y blarst me now, I like to o' split! Sittin' at mess we were, an' so 'elp me if 'e didn't burst out a-cryin'! Bawlin' 'e was. An' just because I passed 'im th' shaker full o' salt!"

Piecemeal

by OSCAR COOK



"He slipped in a pool of blood that had dripped from the severed head."

WARWICK put down his drink, lighted a cigarette, looked round the club smoking-room to discover that, in our corner at least, we were alone. Then, leaning toward me, he asked in that abrupt disturbing manner of his, "What happened to Mendingham?"

I was startled, the more so as at that moment the threatening storm broke with a streak of forked lightning and a clap of thunder that seemed right overhead. Then the deluge came.

I looked at Warwick with a feeling of dismay, for I knew the expression on his face, the set of his lips and jaw and the curious rigidity that somehow seemed to stiffen even his ears. There was no gainsaying him: if he meant to learn Mendingham's fate, nothing I could say would put him off; also, as it happened, we both had time hanging on our hands.

And yet——

It was on just such a night as this, stormy, wild, "filthy" in sailor parlance, that I found him. The memory

of that discovery would never die, but a storm always accentuated it.

"What happened?" Warwick repeated. "Out with the story, for I mean to know. I'm hard up for copy, and the stream of ideas is low. They're bread and butter to me in the writing trade, so——" The gesture of his hands was more eloquent than words.

I signed to him to draw his chair closer, and called a waiter to replenish our glasses. Then, and not till then, I began the story.

"I'm going to tell you, Warwick," I began, "one of the most gruesome stories the world has ever known."

He rubbed his hands together and looked pleased.

"So gruesome," I went on, "that I won't even extract from you a promise not to make use of it, for I feel certain you'll never want to write it up. You remember Gregory?"

"Yes," Warwick nodded. "Met him quite a lot at one time. Then he too seemed to fade away. He'd a most wonderfully and gorgeously beautiful wife."

"Exactly. She was the cause of the mystery."

Warwick chuckled. "Then there was a mystery! I thought so."

"Yes, but not in the way you imagine. You went abroad a good while before their divorce case."

"*Cherchez la femme!* I always thought Gregory too careless and too cold-blooded to have such an attractive piece of goods about. He was asking for trouble."

"Perhaps. But Mendingham was after all his greatest friend."

"And thundering good-looking, with a taking air and an eye for the ladies, eh?"

"As you say, but that's no excuse. Mendingham was a friend of mine, but I can't hold him guiltless in this matter. Some things just aren't done."

"Such as?"

"Making love to and running off with your best friend's wife, even if she weren't happy with her husband."

Warwick gave vent to a low whistle.

"That was at the bottom of the trouble, was it?" he stated, rather than asked.

I nodded, and he went on: "Well, I'm not surprized. What did and still does surprize me is how on earth Moyra married Gregory. He was a queer fish always: a great brain full of medicine and surgical ideas, but the coldest, most calculating human being I've ever met—and I've traveled a lot and met some. Ever seen him in the operating-theater?"

I started. He put the question with that sudden disconcerting manner of his. It almost made me think he knew more than he admitted, while it brought back with redoubled intensity that awful final scene when—but I'm rattling on too fast.

I took a long pull at my whisky and soda. Warwick saw my agitation and smiled.

"Don't worry," he said. "Tell me the story in your own way. From now on I'll try and not interrupt, but for heaven's sake, man, keep the tension strong and hot: at present you're about as exciting as Tennyson's *Brook*."

I made no comment; the desire for super-horrors among the present-day host of sensation-mongers masquerading as journalists—once members of an honorable profession—is beyond my power of speech.

Instead I settled down as comfortably as my own prickly memories and the raging storm would let me to tell the story in my own way. And I must admit that it was a relief to get the gruesome tragedy off my chest; for up to now I'd shared a solitary secret, as the affair was somehow kept out of the press.

"GREGORY had planned a great tour," I began, "into the heart of Dutch Borneo, one of the few places of the earth today still really unknown. He was intrigued with the idea of finding the race of natives, the most backward in the world, which is reputed to be possessed of tails not less than three inches long, who live in trees, and who still practise cannibalism. He was going alone; that is, Moyra was not to accompany him. It was no journey for her."

Warwick smiled his cynical grin. "Mendingham's opportunity."

I paid no heed. "Gregory was away a little over a year. On his return he wirelessed Moyra two days out of Liverpool to meet him. She was not at the quayside when the steamer berthed. Arrived in London, he went straight to his house in Harley Street. It was shut up and showed no sign of life. He got in with his own key. Most of the furniture was gone; only his bedroom, consulting-room and smoking-room were furnished. The house was otherwise completely empty; more, it was thick with dust. That night he slept at his club and early the next morning went round to the house agents. They knew nothing, save that the rent had been regularly paid by a check from the bank. The bank and solicitors could be no more explanatory or communicative."

I paused to light a cigarette and in doing so took a long look at Warwick. He was thrilled. There was no mistaking the expression of beatific glee on his face as he listened to the sensational tragedy of his one-time friend.

"When did you learn all this?" he asked.

"From Gregory himself," I answered, having blown out the match. "I saw a lot of him in the time that followed, when he was hunting for his wife."

"And Mendingham?" Warwick pointedly asked.

"That's what gave him the clue. Mendingham was absent quite a lot from his favorite haunts, and when they met he seemed distrait. What gave Gregory an inkling was the fact that Mendingham never once mentioned Moyra's name, whereas previously he had always asked after her and joked about her being Beauty and Gregory the Beast. Gregory put a detective on to him. The rest was easy. They were living together in a minute lonely cottage in the New Forest."

Warwick took a long gulp at his drink.

"Cut the cackle and get to the 'osses," he snapped, as he put the glass down. "You can skip the intervening bit—I can find it any day in the back files of any newspaper catering for the public that likes spice. Like the little girl with her new story book, I want to hear the end."

At that moment the little liking I ever had for Warwick nearly died. He was positively reveling in anticipatory horrors. It revolted me. It was, however, my turn to smile.

"You'd search the papers in vain," I said, rather acidly. "The suit was undefended, so there was nothing to report. It was from that time onward, though, that things began to happen. In due time the decree was made absolute and Mendingham and Moyra married and even talked of coming back to town."

"And Gregory?" Warwick interpolated with that almost fiendish quickness of his for seizing upon the heart of a story.

"Gregory," I continued slowly, "was gradually becoming a recluse. He gave up coming to the club, sold the lease of his house and acquired a dilapidated houseboat on a little-known and unfrequented backwater on the Thames. Here he 'did' for himself, once a week brought his stores from the village and in this seclusion wrote the *magnum opus*—an account of his Dutch Borneo trip. From the point of view of ethnology, it is unsurpassed."

"You've read it?" Warwick shot the question at me.

"Of course. Then for some time I practically lost all touch with him, though I occasionally saw the other two, who were tremendously happy. Moyra absolutely adored Mendingham. Then one day I heard from Gregory that he was going abroad. I asked him to dine with me on his last night in England, but he refused and I never saw him again, until——"

Just then a terrific clap of thunder made me start, and I spilt a lot of my drink. Warwick was frankly impatient.

"It is certain," I continued, "that he bought tickets for the Congo, but whether he went is another matter. All I know is that as far as I am concerned, and others interested in him also, he completely disappeared into the blue."

"A monomaniac, nursing his grievance," Warwick sneered. "What an end to a great brain! But where does Mendingham fit in with all this?"

His devilish persistence annoyed me.

"I'm coming to that now," I answered, "only for God's sake, don't interrupt. It was nearly three months after Gregory supposedly went abroad that Mendingham became missing."

"You mean dead?" Warwick asked.

I turned on him in fury. "No!" I snapped. "I don't. I mean missing. He went out one morning as usual and was never seen again."

"Never?" Warwick's eyes were bulging out of his head and he was breathing hard in his excitement.

"Not till I found him," I answered slowly, "or, to be accurate, his remains—the little that was left of him."

"A rotten mass of decomposing flesh, or just dried bones?" Warwick asked, almost licking his lips in ecstasy.

"Neither," I replied, and then lapsed into silence as the poignant memory coupled with a nausea for the human ghoul alongside me nearly proved more than I could bear. At length, however, I was able to continue, strengthened by the desire to share, at last, my terrible secret.

"Moyra, as you may imagine, was frantic, and the strain and suspense nearly killed her. But she survived, chiefly, I think, on account of an indomitable desire to get to the bottom of the mystery. There was no question, you must understand, of desertion for another woman. Mendingham was this time really and truly in love. I saw a lot of Moyra during this time and helped all I could, but all in vain. The police, the wireless, the motor associations, all were roped in: all did their utmost, but Mendingham was not to be found."

"Not a trace?" Warwick's tone was a mixture of skepticism and glee.

"Not a trace, but rumors by the score. He had been seen in every part of England; every report and identification tallied, yet it was never he. There must be hundreds of doubles in the country, were it known.

"THE next item of interest, at the time seeming quite irrelevant, was Gregory's return. This was about a month—a little less perhaps—after Mendingham's disappearance. Though not really sociable as of old, he was not so hermit-like as before he went abroad. He took a room at his club and was seen now and again about town — a theater, an exhibition and such like—but he still owned the houseboat, where he admitted to spending a lot of time.

"About three days after his return, Moyra telephoned me. She was hysterical; that was clear over the wire. She wanted me to go round to her at once, she had a—I never heard what, for her voice died away in a choking groan. I hurried round. She was beside herself. She couldn't speak, but with white frozen face, with wide open eyes and bloodless lips, she

pointed to a parcel that lay open on the divan in her drawing-room. I crossed over and picked it up; then, although braced up for something uncanny or dangerous like a bomb or a snake, I dropped it with a startled cry, for it contained—a hand."

"Just one?" There was actually disappointed interest in Warwick's tone.

"God, man!" I burst out. "Wasn't that enough to send by post? A dried, fleshless, skinless hand. Imagine Moyra opening it! The shock, and then—and this is the awful part of it—finding it to be Mendingham's hand, with his signet ring, one she had given him, on the little finger."

For the fraction of a second I noticed Warwick wilt; then he was himself again.

"Nothing else inside?" he asked. "Not even the usual printed note or mystic sign?"

"Not a line—just the hand and the ring. I got someone to come and stay with Moyra, collected the parcel and its gruesome contents and took them to Scotland Yard. That's all there was to be done: all they could do. There wasn't a fingerprint or clue, though the postmark was Balham."

"What next?" Warwick inquired, and I was glad to notice even he was a little subdued.

"A week later," I continued, after following his example and emptying my glass, "Moyra received another parcel. This one contained the other hand, and Mendingham's fountain pen—his initials were on the gold band and Moyra had no doubts in identifying it. It had been posted in a W. C. district and bore the label of a shop at which she had the day before bought some wool. So when she opened it she was not suspicious."

"She sent for you?"

I nodded.

"And you? What did you do?" Warwick asked, with hardly suppressed excitement.

"Same as before," I replied. "And the result was the same: no clues."

"But she was being watched?" Warwick's tone was vibrant. "The rest was easy."

"That's what the police thought, but they made a mistake. How could they watch everybody who came into contact with Moyra or passed her in a shop, in a train, on a bus? There were a hundred people a day to watch. They had to give it up. Moyra went away to the country, and for a month nothing happened. I had to stay in town and, as it chanced, twice met Gregory, but we never mentioned the subject. When Mendingham first disappeared, he had made some quite appropriate remarks, but naturally it wasn't for me to refer to the subject."

"Hardly!" Warwick offered me a cigarette, and threw away an unlighted one that he had chewn to bits.

"Then," I continued, "Moyra received a foot by post—the other foot by special messenger. She was nearly mad, and I don't wonder. Then the right forearm and later the left leg to above the knee, and in each case a little personal belonging of Mendingham's was included, though there was no need for such refinement of cruelty."

"Pointing the moral with a vengeance, what?" Warwick said a little unsteadily.

"Exactly. But the last parcel proved too much. Moyra collapsed and was taken to a nursing-home and from there to a lunatic asylum, where her one idea is that she is the farmer's wife, her one cry and plea is for a carving-knife, and her only exercise running after 'three blind mice'."

I PAUSED and put my hand up to my eyes—I was fond of Moyra, and had once been more than that. For a little while only the thunder rumbled and the lightning cracked, while the rain sizzled down. Then Warwick broke the silence.

"Is that all?" he asked.

I took my hand from my eyes. "I wish to God it were!" I cried. "Do you want the rest?"

"You may as well get it off your chest," he answered quietly. "But it's the toughest, saddest story I ever heard."

I pulled myself together. There wasn't much more to tell and I'd get it over and then we could have another drink.

"Well, from the time Moyra went into the nursing-home, the parcels stopped coming. She had letters, even in the asylum, but no more gruesome parcels. Suddenly that fact struck me, and the one word, Revenge, blazed into my mind."

"Gregory!" The word was a breathless whisper from Warwick.

"Yes. That's how I saw it. He was cold-blooded, but in a possessive manner he had loved Moyra. She and Mendingham had, vulgarly speaking, 'done him down.' He would be revenged on both—a cruel, subtle, lingering revenge. Then came another thought. Was Mendingham by any chance alive? Gregory was a surgeon, one of the cleverest of his day. Mendingham had never been found, and no vital part of his body had been contained in those parcels. Another point in favor of this idea, mad as it seemed, was the lapse of time between the receipt of the parcels. It would have given Mendingham time to get strong enough to bear another operation.

"That very day I was dining with Gregory, the first meal we'd had together since he had gone abroad. Casually, I noticed that he missed the meat course, but in every other way made a good meal. I referred to Mendingham, but he was merely polite. I mentioned Moyra, but he would not be drawn. Then we fell to discussing his book. Over this he became thoroughly enthusiastic, and communicative. He waxed emphatic on the morality of those natives, who, he maintained, neither lied nor stole and who considered adultery the deadliest sin. Murder with them was a just punishment, if any crime deserved it. They were, according to him, not immoral but unmoral, and to emphasize the point he referred to a particularly nasty divorce case which was at the time something of a *cause celebre*. 'In such a case——' he began, then suddenly stopped, passed a hand wearily over his head and went deadly white. After a minute or two, he got up, made an excuse about having forgotten an appointment, and hurriedly left the club. I was frankly curious and full of my idea, so I decided to try and follow him. It was a ghastly night, raining hell-for-leather, thundering and lightning."

"Like this?" Warwick was sitting bolt upright and his hands gripped his knees so tightly that the knuckles shone white.

"Worse," I answered, and went on. "I got to the backwater by the house-boat an hour and a half later and there met a check. Gregory crossed to the far side in a dinghy. I had no means of getting over. It took me half an hour to find a boat and another quarter to row upstream, but eventually I got alongside. In one window through the gaps of closely drawn curtains I could see a light. I had no need to go quietly, for the storm drowned all noise. I crept on deck and tried to peer in, but all I could see was an empty corner of a room. Yet I waited, fascinated, glued to the spot. Then I became conscious of a smell—a cooking, roasting smell, and in a lull of the storm I could have sworn that I heard a horrible laugh.

"I never quite knew how long I waited, but suddenly I became aware of the most severe cramp. I tried to move, my leg refused to support me and I fell with a crash against the long French window. The latch failed to withstand the shock and I was pitchforked into the room. In an instant I was on my feet, cramp or no cramp, and was standing face to face

with Gregory, who looked like an incarnate fiend.

"Behind him was an old-fashioned open grate, built in the far side of the houseboat. The fire was burning, a big glowing mass now, and on a huge grid was what I took to be a side or half-side of beef."

For a second I paused to moisten my lips. Warwick's face was ghastly to look at and from his parched mouth he just managed to gasp, "Go on!"

"Without a word Gregory sprang at me with a huge butcher-knife in his hand. Somehow I dodged him and it, and as I sidestepped I struck him with all my force. He fell down, completely stunned. That he was mad, I realized almost at once—almost as quickly as I realized he *had* something in the houseboat he wished to hide. What?"

"Mendingham?" Warwick whispered through trembling lips.

For a moment I could not answer. All I was capable of, so acute was memory, was to nod. Then at last I found my voice.

"That joint roasting over the fire was Mendingham—all that was left of him—his trunk. Hanging from the roof like a round ball of fly-paper was his severed head. God! but it was awful—utter hell. I was sick. Just as I recovered, Gregory came to. He staggered up, first to his knees, then to his feet, laughing and chuckling all the time. He came slowly toward me, while I waited. Nearer he came, nearer, the long knife in his hand. I was frozen with fear and sheer horror. Nearer, two more paces and—he slipped in a pool of blood on the floor that had dripped from the newly severed head, and fell face downward into the fire."

"Yes?" In his excitement Warwick had clutched both of my wrists and his eyes were burning into mine. "What next?"

"I had no time to think," I whispered hoarsely. "It was my chance. My life or his, and he was mad, and a cannibal. There was no doubt of this. I put my foot on the back of his head and pressed and pressed."

Warwick let go my wrists and a great sigh escaped him.

"Good man!" he said at last. "You've got pluck! What about the rest? You couldn't leave it at that?"

"No," I answered, "for my own sake as well as for his. I looked around and found two kerosene tins, full. I used them and put a match to the lot. But before doing so I saw Gregory's book lying open on a table in another room. A passage was underlined, the passage in which he said the only time he found those natives addicted to cannibalism was as a solemn ritual. It was the tribal punishment for adultery and——"

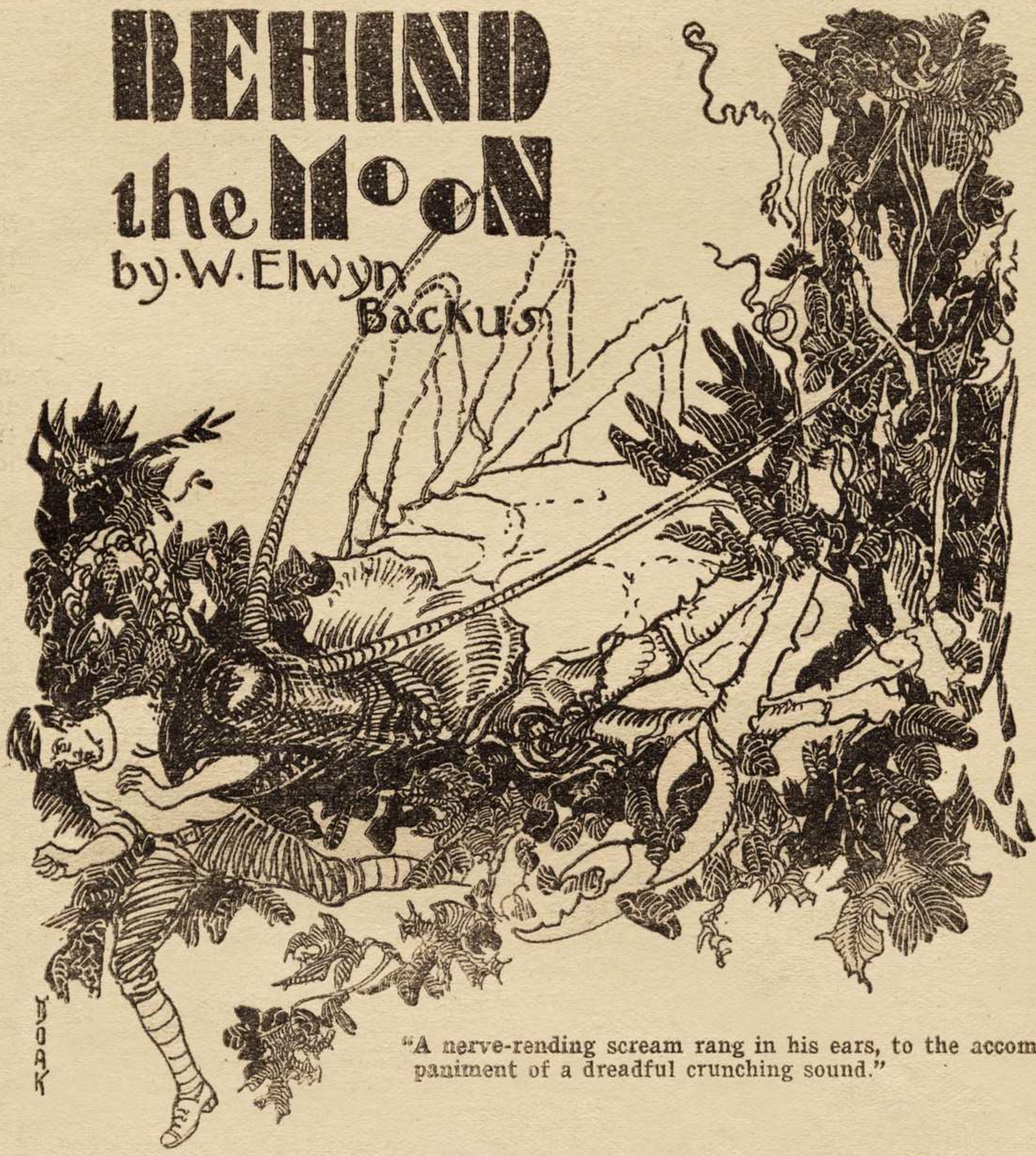
Warwick put out a hand.

"Enough," he said. "For heaven's sake, man, order another drink!"



BEHIND the MOON

by W. Elwyn Backus



"A nerve-rending scream rang in his ears, to the accompaniment of a dreadful crunching sound."

The Story Thus Far

THE Rocket, a space-ship invented by Philip Carewe, lands on the Moon, with its inventor, Donald Armstrong, John Sanderson, and a girl, Beryl Claverly. They are captured by the lunarites—a strange, hybrid race which grow like mushrooms, dying in about seven years. They conceive the horrible and fantastic scheme of using Beryl, by transfusion of blood, to produce a new hybrid race, so that their offspring will no longer need to be planted in the mushroom beds to grow like fungus until they attain the power of independent movement. Escaping from the caves of the lunarites, the adventurers land the Rocket on the side of the Moon which is hidden from the Earth. Finding a large diamond in the sands near their landing-place, they prepare to explore the dwarf forest at the desert's edge.

CHAPTER 14

THE utter stillness of that twisted mass with its eery shadows was strangely unnerving to the adventurers who hesitated before the rose-gray tips that reached hungrily out from the somber gray behind. They peered uneasily into the dim recesses before them. At first it seemed to Philfp that any passage through that growth was impossible, while Sanderson already was for turning back. But

presently Philip observed an opening of a sort. Cautiously he led the way into this, a thinned section of that matted wall which might or might not disclose an avenue to its deeper recesses.

As they proceeded, a tortuous trail took shape before them—"trail" for want of a better name, for it was scarcely more than a bulging looseness between the millions of vines such as might have been made by some living thing wedging its way through them with irresistible force, the rubbery mass partially closing up again after it.

They had not gone far before other and similar passages appeared about them, crisscrossing, and joining, this one. At the second of the branching passages, Philip halted.

"It doesn't look as if there's anything to this but what we've already seen—except the things that have made these passages. Think we'd best turn back?"

He was frankly nervous and all but convinced now of the folly of wandering about this forbidding maze of mysterious paths in the ooze which had made its appearance underfoot shortly beyond the edge of the vine jungle, and which was steadily becoming deeper, more treacherous.

But he received a surprize. Sanderson wanted to press on, regardless. His next words explained this unexpected attitude.

"Maybe if we can find where some of these beings live, we will also find more diamonds—possibly the source of them."

His eyes shone avariciously.

"All right," agreed Philip after a pause. He hated to persist in a rôle that might be looked upon as that of a coward. "If you're willing, I am—so far as there is a reasonable chance of our finding a way back out of here. We still can tell the general direction from the sun."

The tangled mass grew deeper and deeper, however, with their resumed passage, soon rising to perhaps fifteen feet above their heads. Not a great height, being probably no more than twenty feet tall in all; yet so thickly entwined were the vines overhead, running from the thickness of a pencil to that of a man's wrist, that the sunlight already was growing dim about them.

The footing now was a veritable quagmire, its slime threatening to engulf them each time their feet slipped from the hidden but packed path or slide, which was covered here by a shallow skim of foul-smelling water. It was evident that, whatever the character of the things that used these trails, they were of tremendous weight, thus to pack the otherwise spongy soil.

"Wait," said Philip, suddenly halting. Sanderson, who had plainly been growing less sure of his desire to continue, but following close upon Philip's heels, brought up sharply against him.

"What's the idea?" he grumbled.

"Did you hear a cry—like someone in distress?"

They listened briefly. But the dank, heavy silence about them was unbroken. Still, as they moved on again, Philip thought he heard the sound again, but set it down to his overwrought imagination. Or possibly it was the cry of some denizen of this place—a bird, if such existed anywhere on this satellite.

They had traversed perhaps a quarter-mile more of the treacherous going when Sanderson suddenly gripped Philip's arm. Startled, Philip turned, to find him white-lipped and staring hypnotically through the vines on his left.

"What is it?" muttered Philip. He felt none too good himself.

"There was — something — moving over there!"

Together they listened. A crackling as of breaking twigs broke on their hearing then. It was coming closer, accompanied by a sliding

sound, such as might be made by the dragging of a log through that ooze and rank growth.

But now it seemed that the sound had shifted. It came to them from a new quarter, apparently. Then it died out. All was silent once more.

"I can't make out which direction it's coming from," whispered Sanderson.

"Because it's coming from more than one direction," said Philip, listening intently.

The rustling, snapping noise had been resumed, more distinct now. It was suddenly borne in upon them that they were surrounded by this stealthy approach—by heaven only knew what sort of creatures!

Added to these sounds now was a sucking sound, as of things being thrust down into the ooze and pulled out again with slow but irresistible force.

Sanderson's face was the color of putty. He stared round wildly. All at once he turned and dashed back over the way they had come.

He had covered less than twenty yards of the treacherous trail, however, before he halted as if shot. A hoarse cry escaped him as he faced about.

"My God, Phil, they've got us!" he yelled. "They're right behind me!"

Then Philip saw them. Beyond Sanderson's struggling form, striving to race through the clinging slime to where he waited, Philip could see a huge flat mass advancing out of the gloom. It was followed by other things like it—giant, crab-like bodies propelled by writhing, many-jointed legs that reached yards ahead of them with a stretching, prodding motion!

Fascinated, spellbound, he watched them come on, great spider-legs reaching outward, then thrust suddenly downward into the ooze with a gurgling sound. Then that convulsive, jerking pull that lifted their ten-foot-wide bodies over yards of soggy ground, accompanied by a horrible sucking sound as the hind legs were withdrawn from the clinging mire. In spite of their awkward, deliberate movements, the things were moving at the pace of a man's brisk walk—steadily, irresistibly, without cry or sound other than the snapping and sucking noise of their pursuit.

Bright, beady eyes bulged just above their shells in front from a roach-like head that kept twisting grotesquely about, unceasingly exploring in awful, terrifying silence. In color they were a great deal like a June beetle—a deep bottle green, with purplish shadows.

PHILIP shook himself abruptly free of the dread spell that had held him helpless for several priceless seconds. A swift glance around discovered more of the great twitching forms closing in from other sides. It looked very much like the end of it all for Sanderson and himself.

He was aware then of the other clutching at him and mouthing strangely, awfully. In a detached way, he was conscious of a feeling of shame that a fellow-being should so far let himself go, even in the last minutes of existence. He pushed the pawing hands aside in disgust—turned a last, sweeping look upon their surroundings.

They were not yet completely surrounded by the spider horde. There was still hope. Diagonally off toward the right, the direction from which they had come, the gray tangle was free of the advancing horde. It was their only chance.

"Come out of it, man!" he barked at the abject Sanderson. "We've got to get across that strip before they cut us off."

The revolting creatures were closing in upon them with dismaying swiftness as Philip plunged across the morass. He could hear Sanderson stumbling along close behind him—and that terrifying, slithering sound ever more distinct behind them both.

Would they win through to the little desert plain before that dwindling margin behind them had been wiped out?

The boggy soil clung to their feet in great, sodden masses, for they could not wait to pick their way over the higher patches here and there. The roots of the vines tripped them repeatedly. It seemed as if each staggering step must be their last, while those things behind slid their flat, bristling bodies over the mud steadily, effortlessly. Were it not for the fact that the growth here was somewhat more open than the ground they had hitherto covered, they should have been caught before this. Philip's anxious glance over his shoulder showed the nearest of the horde not fifteen yards behind!

There is a saying that one should never look back in a race. Admitting the wisdom of that advice, Philip's looking back was the means of saving his life. For in that instant he saw Sanderson's arm upraised in the act of bringing down upon his head a stone which he clutched. There was a murderous gleam in his eye.

Caught off balance, Philip twisted his body awkwardly in an effort to ward off the blow. The descending rock struck his arm with a stunning force that must surely have crushed his skull had it reached its original goal. Fortunately, the blow was a glancing one, but it sent him to his knees in the ooze.

Before he could recover, a vicious kick in his side all but put him out. He sprawled in the ooze on all fours for a moment, even as his brain told him he must not; that if he was to warn Beryl and Donald and reach the Rocket and safety from the horde that was almost upon them, he must somehow get to his feet instantly, must struggle onward through that seemingly endless tangle of vines and slime.

"Lie there and feed them while I go back to her, you ———!" spat Sanderson. His features were convulsed with hate as he aimed another kick at his prostrate rival, this time at his head.

Perhaps that mysterious reservoir of energy that physicians claim we can call forth only in times of intense stress was responsible for what followed. At any rate, Philip managed not only to squirm out of reach of that murderous foot, but to lash out suddenly with one leg and with such violence as to upset Sanderson sharply. The next instant he was somehow on his feet again, his hands instinctively clutching each a stone that he had plucked from the slime's depths for self-protection. Oddly enough, there seemed here to be a sort of under-bedding of these stones.

Sanderson still sprawled in the ooze. Their situations were exactly reversed. But there was not another moment to spare. The things were almost upon them.

Even now Philip could not bring himself to turn his back upon Sanderson, as treacherous a member of his own race as he had proved himself to be. He dropped one of the stones to reach forth a forlornly helping hand.

In that instant his blood froze in his veins.

Out of the matted wall beside him a gray frond stabbed, propelled by a long, many-jointed gray rod—the foot and limb of one of the monsters come to cut off their retreat!

Before his paralyzed muscles could function again, he saw that twitching limb followed by another. A sudden nausea swept over him at the sight of Sanderson struggling futilely in the clutch of the monster that now was fully revealed by the parted vine. A rounded, tapering thing—a "feeler" —curved toward him from the beetle-like head, where protruding eyes the size of a man's fist wriggled and glistened horribly, a triangular, purply-fleshed mouth gaping at him cruelly. In stark horror he turned instinctively and ran for his life.

The inhuman, nerve-rending scream that rang in his ears to the accompaniment of a dreadful crunching sound was to be remembered vividly by him the rest of his life.

CHAPTER 15

How he escaped that nearly complete and shrinking circle of monsters, Philip never clearly knew. The nearest of those he and Sanderson had first sighted were but a few feet away. Their front ranks formed an enveloping V, while still others were already crowding from the sides to that indecent feast. He was practically trapped between them.

But probably the horde's attention was centered upon its first victim. At any rate, Philip did manage somehow to elude those reaching fronds and antennæ, to stumble and slide clear of them.

Perhaps, too, his recollections of that scene were further confused by the shock that followed upon the very heels of his unnerving contact with the things. For he had struggled less than thirty yards through the morass when he suddenly was confronted by a vision—a soiled and tattered vision, but a vision nevertheless for his haunted, hungry eyes. There, directly ahead of him, stood Beryl! Plainly she was on the verge of a nervous collapse. It was evident that she had witnessed the dreadful fate of Sanderson. Fright and horror showed in her eyes.

"Phil—oh, Phil!" she stammered.

"Beryl! You here!"

Amazement and fresh terror at this turn of events possessed him. He ran to her, swept her along with him. The strength of desperation still was his. Only one thought was in his mind now: He must carry her beyond the reach of those twitching, rending legs and beaks.

Then he saw the open sand beyond, through the thinning vines. A great wave of thankfulness passed over him.

But his relief was short-lived. Dark, moving blotches marked the plain, as he now saw. And where the Rocket reared its peak, a solid mass some hundred yards wide undulated about it. Revoltingly familiar projections reached up from that mass here and there, waving grotesquely about in empty searching.

"Donald—where is he?" he gasped, turning to Beryl. Icy fingers clutched at his heart. Dear, grumbling but whole-hearted old Don, as dependable and true as God made men ever. Was he, too, gone? And why was he no longer with Beryl?

"It's my fault," she sobbed. "He tried to dissuade me from trying to find you when you didn't come back. I was so worried—had a premonition or something — that you were in dreadful danger. He said he wouldn't go with me—that you wouldn't want me to leave the plain—and he started back toward the Rocket, trying me out and hoping, no doubt, that I'd follow him. But I was obstinate and wouldn't turn back.

"Then, when I started into the jungle, he turned back after me. I hurried to elude him. Before I had penetrated the vines more than a dozen yards, however, I heard him shouting excitedly — something I couldn't make out, but it sounded like a warning. I decided I'd better go back after all and find out what he was saying.

"As I reached the edge of the sand again, I got a terrible shock. Five great monsters, the most horrible creatures I had ever seen — the same creatures I saw you and John——!" She choked back a hysterical sob. The recent sight of a former sweetheart, even a traitorous one, in the fatal clutches of those grisly things was too much.

With a determined effort, she regained a measure of composure once more.

"They must have come out of the thick growth close by where I had entered." She shuddered and hurried

on. "Donald shouted to me to run around them and toward the Rocket while he tried to attract their attention away from me by running in the other direction.

"But the things could move with surprizing swiftness over that loose sand. My legs seemed paralyzed for the moment with fear. I dared not attempt it—coward that I was. Poor Don! He, too, must have been surprized by their speed, for when several others appeared ahead of him, he had no choice but to run for the Rocket. To have attempted to get past them surely would have resulted fatally for him, and would have but caused them to turn after us both even if he had got through somehow.

"The last I saw of him was when he paused a moment on the ladder, waving me back. One of the monsters was almost upon him. I turned and ran into the vines, praying that those things out there on the plain had not yet seen me, and that all anywhere near were out there in the open and not lurking near me in the vines.

"For what seemed an endless nightmare of time, I slipped and stumbled blindly on, unreasoning, calling out to you both every now and then in the hope that you would hear me and answer. Then, finally, when it seemed I could go no farther, and that I was hopelessly lost, I sank down and cried like a child.

"Imagine my feelings when, upon looking about again, I glimpsed the plain through the vines, and, beyond, the Rocket still surrounded by those awful monsters. Only there seemed to be more of them than before. I must have traveled in a circle.

"Then all at once I heard a sound of ripping vines. It grew steadily louder. I was terrified. With those monsters waiting for me out there on the plain, and others now probably approaching from within this jungle, I would be caught between them. I thought of you and John, and feared the worst—that you both had been caught and devoured by the same monsters that soon would be upon me!

"I moved a little closer to the edge of the vines, so that I could watch both ways without being visible to those out there. I waited, terrified, while the sounds came nearer and nearer. Then—oh God in heaven!—I saw you and John—and——" She covered her eyes with her hands.

"Come, dear," Philip urged, putting a steadying arm about her. "We can't remain here. At any moment they may scent us and pounce upon us."

"But, Phil, darling, we can't go out there. They're sure to see us—and they've the Rocket surrounded."

"I know. God in heaven, there *must* be a way out of this!"

Abruptly he became aware that he still was unconsciously holding in one hand the stone from the ooze. It had a familiar look. An ironic smile twisted his lips, for he had suddenly recognized it as another diamond in the rough. The jungle was probably full of them, from whence those they had found on the plain had been dragged by the movements of the monsters from time to time. A trainload of these would be of no benefit to them now. Yet some impulse caused him to drop the stone into his coat pocket—that human instinct to cling to treasure no matter where it be found and when.

"If I could only signal some way to Don," he muttered. "There might be a way—hello!"

A deep roar had shattered the stillness. A brilliant flash penetrated the jungle and drew their gaze to the Rocket. What they saw there made them throw caution to the winds. They ran to the edge of the plain with suddenly racing hearts.

CHAPTER 16

AN APPALLING sight met their gaze. Heaped round the Rocket, one upon the other, the monsters had two-thirds of the great metal cylinder

buried between their crawling bodies, while for many yards on all sides the plain was packed with them.

But now there was panic among that revolting mass. Already the flame belching from the tubes was finding outlets from below between their packed bodies—was bursting out here and there, sickly clouds of yellowish smoke topping the ruddy spurts.

And now a new and soul-wrenching sound was heard—a shrill, whistling chorus of screams, like nothing they had ever heard. It swelled rapidly to a volume and pitch that threatened to pierce their very eardrums—the awful cry of creatures in mortal agony!

Philip found himself trembling as with ague at the spectacle. The sea of hideous bodies—the now-added and awful sound of frying animal tissues in that pit—the rising stench of that searing flesh—it was horrible almost beyond human endurance, and especially with nerves still taut from a never-to-be-forgotten contact with those selfsame creatures.

The mass was turning now—was extricating itself, in part, from that belching inferno. The monsters in the outer fringe were making room for their wailing members behind. With a gasp of despair, Philip saw the nearer ones tilting their grisly bodies toward the spot where he and Beryl stood. There own fate appeared sealed. He held her quivering form close to him, pressing her face against his breast to hide the scene from her.

Yet they must not wait here indefinitely, rooted to the spot. In another minute or so the screaming horde would reach and sweep over them! What mattered it that the monsters probably would not notice them in their agonized retreat from that engine of destruction which had attracted them first, then repelled them with roaring columns of white fire? They would be torn into shreds by the twitching, grinding mass just as surely as if they were deliberately attacked!

Then suddenly, with a start of forlorn hope, Philip noticed that while the main body of monsters was making for the nearest section of the jungle's edge in a fan-shaped retreat that would envelop the spot on which they stood, the nearer edge of that broad mass was driving ahead without any indication of straying farther to the side. Patently, the creatures were intent, as he had already suspected, only upon reaching the familiar protection of their soggy habitat. If he and Beryl could win their way round that oncoming inverted wedge, if they could race parallel with the jungle's edge to the freedom of the open plain before the things cut them off, they might yet reach the Rocket safely. For even as he shook Beryl alive to their combined danger and opportunity, he saw that the Rocket now was clear of all but several dead or disabled monsters that had been unable to follow their fellows.

"Quick!" he cried, urging the dazed girl ahead. "We can make it. Run!"

Half dragging her along, he lunged forward, one arm supporting her.

After the first few steps, she regained control of herself, began to run with him.

Less than forty yards away, and still spread beyond a point which they must round before they could run away from, instead of parallel with, the mass, the nearest monsters moved upon them. For every yard the pair ran, the monsters came a yard closer.

But now the corner of that fan-shaped stampede was near. Sixty yards—thirty—ten—a long gray cable reached out over their heads, curved downward toward them. Glistening, twisting eyes bent toward them above a gnashing beak. The cable fell upon Philip's shoulder stingingly, its tip curling quickly to encircle his throat. With a sob of revulsion, he clutched at it, tore its moist armored end

away before it could twist itself into a strangle-hold.

The next instant they had passed out of that nearly closed strip of sand between the onrushing horde and the jungle—had reached the open plain at last.

Not daring to hesitate long enough to look back, Philip ran on beside Beryl for another quarter of a minute; each second he half expected to feel again the revolting touch of a reaching antenna, or a clacking beak. But their escape continued unchecked. The shuffling and sliding noises behind grew more vague. Stealing a glance over his shoulder then, Philip saw with a surge of relief that the monsters had suffered them to escape without following, were even now crashing into the rank vine growth in a crowding mass of flailing legs and grinding bodies as those behind strove to crawl over the struggling leaders.

Turning toward the Rocket, the pair raced for its still-spurting flare. By this time those of the disabled monsters that could still crawl had moved as far as possible from that terrible blast. On the side opposite the jungle, open spaces between the buckled and quiet forms of dead monsters suggested an opportunity for their return to the security of the Rocket's interior, if they could but attract Donald's attention.

"Do you think he will see us soon?" panted Beryl, as they paused cautiously some distance beyond the broken and reeking ring of shapes.

Her question was answered before Philip could form a reply. The roar of the tubes suddenly ceased. The abrupt silence clapped down over them like the quiet that follows the shattered eardrums of a gunner. For some seconds they could hear nothing at all. Then a new sound began to penetrate their shocked consciousness—the faint sound of a human voice calling out to them as if from a vast distance.

"Don!" cried Philip. "There he is, looking out and waving at us from the manhole."

The twisted remains of the aluminum ladder lay beneath the Rocket. They would have to find other means of reaching the manhole.

With difficulty, Philip managed to catch snatches of what Donald was shouting to them.

"Better . . . it to the rope . . . tied it for you . . . hurry!"

"Coming," Philip shouted back. He saw, then, a rope dangling from the rung under the floor by the manhole.

Between the burned hulks in and near the pit they darted toward the Rocket. A few moments later they stood beneath the stout line.

"Up you go," he grunted, boosting Beryl high up as she clutched the rope. She went up the rest of the way hand over hand, but slowly, for, athlete though she was, she was weak from nervousness. Philip followed as soon as she was safely inside. The manhole covers were clapped into place and fastened securely. Then, and not until then, did they pause for explanations.

"Phil, old fellow, I thought the jig was up at last when I saw that mess between Beryl and the Rocket after my bungling attempt to——"

"Oh, cut it out, Don!" Beryl cried. "The more you say about it, the worse I feel for my silly part in it all."

"All right, if you say so. Now that we're all——" He halted awkwardly over that last word, his eyes seeking Philip's questioningly. "Anyway, we're here and safe," he finished lamely. "Thank God for that!"

CHAPTER 17

ONCE more the adventurers—but three of them now—were in the air. Literally so, for in a last effort to ascertain whether there were any outstanding peculiarities of the moon that they might have missed—features hitherto unobserved or unexplained by the earth's astronomers—they were

weaving back and forth close above that region which is ever turned away from the earth.

The dread jungle of those awful monsters was left far behind—that is, the part where they had all but seen written the finis to this momentous venture. The gray expanse, however, continued unbroken, though Philip had swung the Rocket well around the bulge of the unexplored quarter of the satellite. They still were well beyond the limits of the known hemisphere—were still "behind the moon."

"Looks as if we've about 'done' the old gourd," observed Donald. "The rest of this side doesn't promise much variety or excitement. And between what we've already seen of the other side, and what our astronomers already know of it, there isn't a lot left to invite our curiosity. What do you say, Phil, to indulging our homesick fancies at last?" There was a touching plaintiveness in his voice.

Philip caught Beryl's gaze fixed questioningly upon himself. She appeared wan and sadly shaken by the perils they had so shortly left behind. Yet she was uncomplaining, regarding him mutely now. Poor, plucky kid! They should have turned back with her ere this.

"You spoke a chapter, Don," he answered. "We're on our way back home right now!"

But Fate had one more snicker up her sleeve. She must have one last fling at these puppets before releasing them from the grip of this strange world. Even as Philip spoke, a long line appeared across the low-flung horizon ahead, drew rapidly nearer.

"Great guns!" Donald ejaculated, watching intently out of a window-well. "It looks like the whole blamed ball is cracked to the core!"

His statement was not greatly exaggerated, so far as appearances went. Now almost directly below them, a vast fissure rent the surface so deeply that even at their height of several miles, it seemed almost bottomless. In breadth, it was perhaps ten miles; while the ends were lost over the horizon in either direction. The gray jungle ran almost to the lip of this great crevasse on each side.

Philip had caused the Rocket to slow and hover over the chasm while they observed it curiously and in awe-struck silence. In its proportions it dwarfed the Grand Canyon into insignificance. Possibly, in cooling, this elongated side of the satellite had cracked to its very heart. The fissure's sides seemed to go down, down into nothingness, until they finally met in a thin, indistinct wedge.

Suddenly he felt a sensation similar to that sometimes felt in a swiftly descending elevator. Simultaneously he saw the chasm rushing up toward them, its jaws widening rapidly as if hungering for this infinitesimal speck falling into its maw, a speck that had ventured too near, had been caught in some weird, magnetic force that threatened to dash it to doom somewhere in the mysterious depths in the bowels of the moon!

A stifled scream came from Beryl. Philip saw Donald rushing to his aid with startled eyes, evidently thinking that he had lost control. He clutched the control for the five roaring tubes and pulled it wide open before the other reached him.

The Rocket continued to fall!

"What is it, Phil?" cried Donald wildly. "Can't you stop it?"

"It's—it's slowing up some now," gulped Philip. "Got the tubes on full blast!"

He had to shout the last words. Added to the doubled roar of the tubes was the reverberation of the explosions from the uprushing rock sides. Now they were below the rim—were dropping between those sheer, split-lava sides. The shadows of the immeasurable depths threatened and enveloped them.

Then, gradually, the walls ceased to flow dizzily upward past them—began to pass in slower and slower proces-

sion. Actually, this change must have been far more rapid than it seemed to their agonized senses. For as the full, terrific force of all five tubes fought against the pull of that strange and powerful magnetic force, or suction—or whatever it was that had suddenly seized upon the Rocket's metal hulk—and finally overcame this force, they were abruptly precipitated up out of those stony jaws, soaring high into the lunar sky with a startling rush.

Philip was taking no more chances. He continued utilizing the maximum force of propulsion. He, as well as the others, had had their fill of the treacherous satellite. By some miracle of luck, they had made that erratic drop and had shot back out of the chasm without striking either side, or its bottom. Almost, that mysterious and powerful attraction had drawn the Rocket and them to oblivion before Philip could overcome the momentum of that sudden plunge. Almost, the world had lost them forever, leaving their fate to be pondered upon for decades to come.

"No more false starts, I hope," chattered Donald, as the horizon shrank with comforting swiftness below them. He was shaking like an aspen from the scare of that narrow escape.

Beryl had crept to a seat beside Philip before the controls. He drew her suddenly close.

"We have not only started," he said, "but are cutting down the distance to the earth right now at a rate of about five hundred miles an hour, and should soon double and redouble that. With luck, we should be home again in less than a week."

Home! The magic of that word, after the adventures of the last weeks! The thought set at least two hearts to pulsing faster.

"Parson," said Philip, obeying an impulse. "I wish——"

"Aye, aye, captain," returned Donald smartly, a broad smile on his face.

Beryl sat up straight. She observed Philip closely, interestedly.

"Can you splice us? It will be the first space wedding in history, and a great feather in your cap, Parson."

"Have you a license—a ring—the consent of the young woman's parents——"

"Or of the young woman?" put in Beryl. "This is——"

"——so sudden," finished Donald. "And we have no witnesses, either."

"But we have a ring, and plenty of determination," ventured Philip, taking off his mother's wedding ring, which he had worn ever since she had given it into his care at her death. "Also, as captain of this space-ship, I delegate — nay, command — you to marry us. That is, if we have the 'young woman's consent'?"

Her only answer was to snuggle closer.

So they were married—the first couple to be married beyond the earth's envelope of atmosphere, though many had been the weddings among and above the clouds in that envelope. Donald uncovered a Bible, and the deed was done in the sight of God and with the aid of the clergy, to be confirmed more officially later.

Thus began a honeymoon with five days of bliss among the stars!

IT WAS on the sixth day, as reckoned by the space voyagers according to earthly hours, that Philip checked the Rocket's speed to enter the envelope of atmosphere about the earth to avert the peril of overheating through air-friction like a meteor. A few hours later saw the Rocket hovering a few miles above the sunlit clouds that hid the Atlantic from their eager eyes, for they had passed round the earth to the side opposite the moon.

Finally Philip dropped the big projectile through the clouds, the mechanism still working beautifully—not a single mechanical mishap had they experienced since leaving the moon. The familiar Jersey coast met their

grateful eyes. Luck was indeed with them thus far.

Now commenced the most difficult feat of all — the landing within the crowded confines of the earth's thickly populated surface. Vast open spaces had been their target on the moon. Here the erratically bobbing and darting Rocket, throttled down as it was, must be set down within a comparatively small area, if safety for its inmates and the populace below was to be insured.

But the feat was at length achieved. Philip placed the Rocket well within the fenced boundaries of a large sweet-potato field of a thoroughly startled truck grower—to say nothing of half the countryside. They were 'home' at last!

CHAPTER 18

THIS strange story started out with a newspaper account. A newspaper account will inform you on its conclusion, enlightening you on some points about which you may be wondering — principally, perhaps, about that half million; and about—but let the article speak for itself.

ROCKET'S INVENTOR REFUSES CHANCE AT BILLIONS

SPACE NAVIGATOR AND BRIDE SATISFIED WITH SHARE OF $500,000

PREFER PEACEFUL EARTHLY EXISTENCE

Philip Carewe, young inventor of the amazing space-defying Rocket, in which he and his bride have just returned from the moon, has definitely turned down Arthur Hanley's proposition for fetching a cargo of lunar diamonds.

The large specimen diamond in the rough that the surviving trio of space navigators brought back from the moon, proved to be of the finest and worth a fair-sized fortune to its holders. Their account of adventures on the satellite indicate that there are literally thousands of these monstrous gems to be picked up on its surface.

Hanley, whose money built the Rocket, paid the agreed $125,000 each to Carewe, to his bride, the former Beryl Claverly, and to Donald Armstrong, who accompanied them. The remaining $125,000 of the half-million-dollar prize award has gone to Mrs. J. J. Sanderson, whose son, John Sanderson, lost his life on the moon in a fatal struggle with a swarm of jungle monsters.

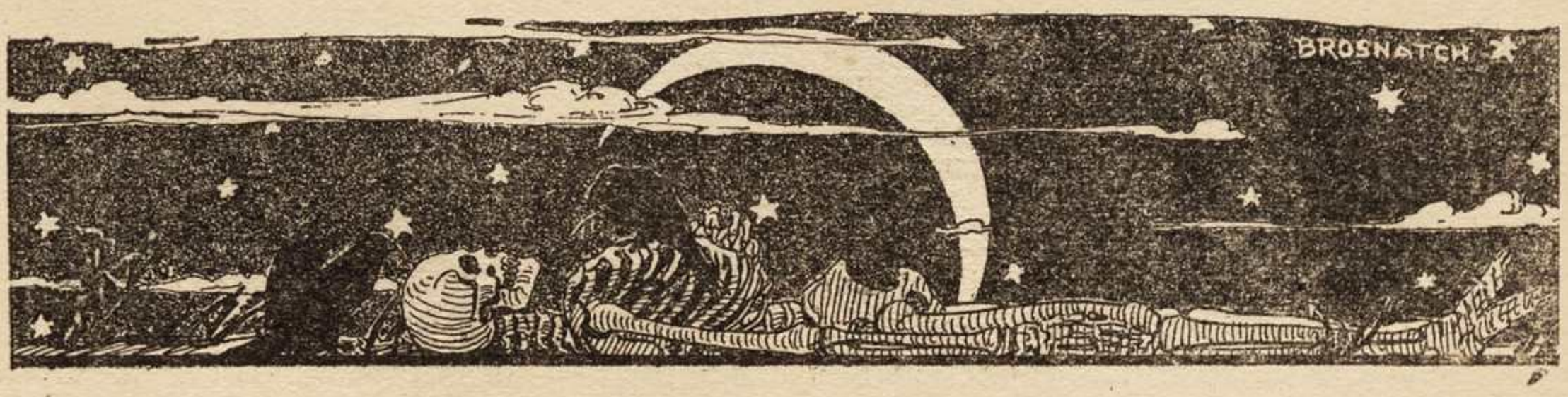
Hanley proposed to accompany Carewe on a return trip to the lunar diamond field and to load the Rocket to capacity with the immense lunar diamonds, sharing equally with Carewe the fabulous sum such a cargo should bring.

But young Carewe has agreed with Mrs. Carewe, that they have enough for comfort and to spare; that the security of Mother Earth is much to be preferred to the moon and added wealth for which they have no need.

The pair have bought a delightful little home on Long Island, and have settled down to enjoy life at its best in their youth.

It might be added that ever since the arrival of the mail rocket from the parent machine, announcing the well-being of the adventurers, Ruth Hasken's faith in Donald's ability to win a share of the half million had been comfortably revived. She was eagerly waiting for him when he finally returned. But he has so far remained single and happy in his means of providing for his mother the luxuries he had so often longed to give her before.

[THE END]



The DAUGHTER of ISIS

BY HAL K. WELLS



"He entered the soft embrace of slim ivory arms, in a riotous madness such as only the gods should know."

I WAS utterly at ease and very well satisfied with both myself and the world as I sprawled there in the big easy chair before the open fire in my bachelor apartment.

I had just returned from an excellent dinner. It was some little time yet before I was due at the home of Alice Worthing, my fiancée. I settled down in the big chair for a comfortable smoke.

My cigarette glowed warmly in its holder. As the smoke curled upward in the dimly lighted room, through half-closed eyelids I lazily conjured up visions of Alice in the fond way that a young man very much in love is apt to do. I visualized the soft sheen of her amber hair, the crystal clearness of the blue in her eyes, the utterly adorable dimple that lurked in the satin smoothness of her cheek.

Then abruptly, without a second's warning, She came — a vision as amazingly different from the serene beauty of Alice as night is from day.

It was only for the barest fraction of a minute that the stranger's face appeared in the gray cloud of cigarette smoke just before my eyes, yet so vivid was the exotic beauty of her face that its every detail lingered in my memory for hours—the lambent depths of the large dark eyes; the warm, alluring lips; the strangely fascinating dusky pallor of the skin, as of very delicately tinted old ivory.

There was something strange and alien in the face—in the odd, almost Oriental slant of the almond eyes; in the rather high cheek-bones; in the unfamiliar, barbaric beauty of the

jeweled crescent-and-globe emblem on the rich head-dress which fitted snugly down over the straight lustrous black hair.

So startlingly vivid was the vision that when it abruptly vanished a moment later I blinked my eyes in dazed bewilderment and peered half fearfully about the room as though expecting to find some barbaric princess there in the flesh. There was no one there, of course. I set the odd happening down as being merely a weird trick of an over-active imagination.

But later in the evening, after I had arrived at Alice Worthing's home, I found the memory of that fascinating face with the strange oblique eyes and the warm alluring lips kept looming up in my mind with an impish persistence. So obvious did my preoccupation become that Alice at last commented upon it.

"What is the matter with you tonight, Frank?" she asked curiously. "You are not looking at me at all. You just sit there staring into space as though at any moment you expected to see—oh, I don't know what!"

I managed a fairly convincing apology about too much work of late. For the rest of the evening I succeeded in keeping my mind where it belonged.

The next day proved a busy one for the law office in which I was one of the junior partners, and I had no time to brood over visions, pleasant or otherwise. I took some of the work home to my apartment to finish that night.

With papers spread all over my study table I was soon thoroughly engrossed in my work. It was nearly an hour later when, like a fragrant breath from some suddenly opened perfume-container, I abruptly became aware of a new and singularly pleasant aroma mingling with the tobacco fumes in the room—a strange, exotic scent in which sandalwood, myrrh, orris and a dozen other Oriental perfumes seemed blended in a bizarre fragrance.

I looked quickly up from my work. Looming vividly in the gray cigarette smoke just before my eyes was the face again, with vibrant life glowing in every exquisite line of its softly oval contour.

There was an odd expression in the lustrous depths of those great dark eyes, a strange sweet pleading that I could not understand, yet which I felt in every fiber of my being. For a full minute the face lingered there so close to my own in the smoke-filled air.

When it finally vanished it left me oddly shaken. I found it hard to convince myself that there was not something more behind the affair than any mere prank of overworked nerves.

I did no more work that evening. My dreams when I finally fell asleep were queerly jumbled mosaics of jeweled crescent-and-globe emblems, the perfume of sandalwood, and glorious eyes set oddly oblique beneath finely arched brows.

In the calm, matter-of-fact routine of our office the next morning I found myself still remembering the vivid vision of the night before. I finally resolved to put the matter to a definite test that evening. I would deliberately court the vision. If it did not appear, then I would know that the whole thing had been merely a trick of frayed nerves. If it did appear again — well, the experiment would then be all the more interesting.

I RETURNED to my apartment immediately after dinner. Alice Worthing had gone out of town for a two days' trip, and the entire evening was my own. As nearly as I could remember them, I exactly duplicated the conditions that had preceded the vision's first appearance. With the living-room of my apartment dimly,

lighted by a shaded bridge-lamp over in the corner, I settled myself comfortably in the big easy chair before the fire. Then, with fingers that trembled a little in spite of myself, I placed a cigarette in the holder.

I had a queer intangible feeling almost of dread, as though I were being warned against carrying my experiment any farther lest I tamper with things and with forces that had far better be left unknown. I dismissed this feeling with an impatient shrug of my shoulders, and touched a match to my cigarette.

Again the gray smoke curled upward in lazy spirals. I hesitated for one breathless moment. Then, closing my eyes, I concentrated every ounce of my will in calling the exotic stranger back to me. I knew even as my will sent my wordless invitation out into space that it was being answered—answered with a swift exultant eagerness that startled me in spite of myself.

There was a sudden surge of the strange Oriental perfume until it seemed fairly to fill the room. I opened my eyes.

And there She was, standing before me, no mere face floating in air this time but a complete and gloriously perfect woman. From the crescent-and-globe in her jeweled headdress to the silver sandals on her tiny aristocratic feet She was as utterly and maddeningly beautiful as any woman could ever be. Her barbaric, richly ornamented costume revealed more than it hid of the lissome grace of that superb body.

She was a living flame of desire, a flame which called to every yearning fiber of my being.

"Beloved, you called and I am here," she said simply in a voice that carried all the sweet husky resonance of muted temple bells. She raised her arms to me as though to welcome me to their ivory embrace.

I struggled dazedly to my feet. Dreading lest I touch only the empty air, I stretched trembling hands toward the glorious figure who stood so near me. An instant later my fingers closed over her hands, and as I felt the warmth of those slender fingers I realized with a sudden mighty thrill of incredulous joy that this was no mere vision molded from empty air. This was a living woman!

Then I entered the soft embrace of those slim ivory arms and, with an ecstasy coursing through my veins in a riotous madness such as only the gods should know, I clasped her yielding form to mine until the very beating of her heart seemed to mingle with my own.

I looked down deep into those superb dark eyes, and now I understood the plea that flamed in their depths. Our lips met in a long kiss of such strange and overwhelming sweetness that my senses reeled, and time ceased to exist.

Then suddenly my arms clasped only empty air. I was alone again. I had a queer feeling that I had only to call and She would return to me again, but I did not call. For the first time since I began my experiment I found myself actually frightened.

Because I now knew that She was no mere figment of the imagination. She was an eery visitant from an alien world, a strange eldritch world into which no sane man should ever venture if he valued his soul.

Sleep was a torture that night. My every sense yearned to feel again the sweet embrace of those slender ivory arms and to rain kisses upon those warm lips again. I had to fight with the last scrap of my will-power to keep from again calling the exotic wearer of the crescent-and-globe to me.

I struggled somehow through my work at the office the next day, dreading what the evening might bring yet at the same time eagerly looking forward to it. When I rose from dinner in the restaurant I was

firmly resolved to spend the next three or four hours in the security of a theater. But even as I left the restaurant doors I found that I was in the grip of a power stronger than my will. My footsteps inevitably led back to the solitude of my apartment.

And there, in the semi-darkness of my dimly lighted living-room, I fought a battle such as few mortal men have ever fought. I at last realized the full extent of the weird peril that I had so rashly brought upon myself.

I no longer needed to call to bring my exotic visitant to me. I could feel her presence there constantly at my side, yearning, pleading to be allowed to appear before me in the flesh again. Knowing that it was only the barrier that I was erecting by sheer will-power that kept her from appearing in a tangible form, I fought to keep that barrier firm.

But it was a losing fight. Even though I knew the terrible folly of yielding again to the phantom's damnable lure, my will slowly crumbled under that insidious onslaught. At last there came the time when my resistance collapsed completely.

For one delirious soul-stirring moment I again surrendered to the yearning embrace of those exquisite arms and again crushed those warm alluring lips to mine.

It was only for an instant. Then with a mighty effort that drained my last reserve of will-power I succeeded in dismissing her back to that eldritch unseen world from which She had come. But my victory was a hollow one. I knew, and She knew, that the time was perilously near when I would yield myself utterly to her mad love even though it meant my irrevocable doom, both body and soul.

THE effort of that last struggle exhausted me so utterly that I slept. I again dragged myself down to the office, though I knew that any effort at work would be little more than a joke.

I refused to cudgel my weary brain over the problem any longer. I was too dazed and bewildered from the unbelievable things that had happened to me since the sinisterly beautiful visitant from the unknown had first broken the even tenor of my life. I could not fight against that strange, terrible lure forever. I knew within my heart that when evening came again it would in all probability bring with it my final and utter surrender.

For the first time, I really understood how a moth must feel when it heedlessly hurls itself headlong into the beckoning flame, gladly enduring the searing agony for the sake of the brief instant of glorious ecstasy that the fiery embrace must bring.

The hours dragged endlessly. I found myself looking forward to evening with an ever-growing eagerness. Then late in the afternoon Alice Worthing phoned me, asking me to come over that evening.

Her familiar voice brought me back to my senses with the swift welcome release of a sudden gust of cold pure air that awakens a struggling dreamer from some eery nightmare. I dismissed all thought of the exotic wearer of the crescent-and-globe, and again became a normal man in a normal wholesome world.

As I rose from my dinner table in the restaurant that night I felt again the urge to return to my apartment. A pair of great lustrous eyes, slightly oblique beneath their finely arched brows, seemed to glow for an instant there in the air before me, the lambent flame in their depths pleading and beckoning. I dismissed their message almost contemptuously.

So easy was my victory that it seemed incredible that I had fallen such easy prey to that phantom lure the evening before. I went directly to Alice Worthing's home.

There for the next hour I fairly

reveled in the companionship of the girl who had been my sweetheart since we were children together. We were more than sweethearts. We were pals and comrades with a deep and perfect love which only years of genuine understanding can bring.

I came to Alice's comforting arms with the thankful relief of a small boy who has been badly scared by the dark. Alice, as always, understood my mood. Her cool slender fingers caressed my forehead with a soothing gentleness that slowly brought peace to my troubled soul.

Then with ghastly abruptness my dream of security was shattered. A sudden overpowering surge of that too-familiar Oriental perfume swept into the room until it seemed to fill the air with cloying, sinister fragrance. And She stood there beside me, looking down upon us with a faintly contemptuous smile. Without a word She stretched forth beckoning arms to me.

Alice looked up, startled, as I leaped to my feet and confronted the intruder from the unknown. To my amazement I could see from the expression upon Alice's face that for her eyes the weirdly beautiful apparition did not even exist!

The wearer of the crescent-and-globe flung those perfectly molded arms about my neck.

"Beloved, no one can ever take you from me," she told me softly in that sweetly husky voice as of muted temple bells. "You are mine, mine alone!"

Alice's amazed voice broke in upon my ears.

"Why, Frank, what in the world has happened to you? You stand there almost as though you were embracing someone—listening to someone—talking to someone. Yet there is not a soul there but you! You almost frighten me."

Her voice shattered the spell for the moment. Sinking back on the divan I buried my face in my trembling hands. God! what was this ghastly spell with which I seemed to be cursed? A perfume that was detected by no senses but my own, a voice that only I could hear, a sinister beauty that only I could see, and a vibrant body that only I could touch!

The next hour there in that pleasant living-room was a weird nightmare. No longer was She dependent upon my will to appear. She came without my wishing it, and remained against my will.

I fought to return to the wholesome sanity of our companionship before She came, but it was impossible. Always She stood there beside me, beckoning, alluring. Always her face came between me and Alice, her oblique eyes shining with the knowledge that I was powerless to dismiss her. Her warm lips returned to mine again and again, and I shuddered as I felt the dangerously sweet thrill of their mad kisses.

Alice was bewildered and frightened at what must have seemed little short of insanity in my actions as I struggled vainly against that eldritch presence. At last I could stand it no longer. With a hastily muttered apology I left the Worthing home and fled into the night.

I walked the streets like a madman. Always I felt the presence there beside me and I cursed her as I fled, for now I realized fully what her unholy love was doing to me. It was costing me the one thing I held dearest in life—the perfect love that had existed between Alice Worthing and me. And I was utterly powerless—as helpless as a child in the power of those unknown forces with which I had so foolishly tampered!

I MUST have walked for hours when a lighted shop window revealed something that stopped me abruptly. It was a picture there in the dusty window, but a picture that no sane artist should ever have painted.

For it was She who had been his model. The unknown artist had caught her terrible beauty with breath-taking reality. The great oblique eyes fairly blazed their beckoning lure from the painted canvas.

The store was the curio shop of Old Levine, a strange character with whom I had had some slight dealings before. It was odd that the little shop should be open at this late hour of the night, but it offered a last ray of hope at which I clutched eagerly.

Old Levine calmly looked up from the ancient manuscript over which he had been poring when I entered. His somber eyes set far back in their bony sockets brought to me the same icy shock of numbing dread that they had on several occasions before. That wrinkled yellow face, with its dry leathery skin stretched drum-tight over gaunt cheek-bones, was so utterly and incredibly old! It was old with the terrible age of one who has so long defied Death that he has at last forgotten how to die.

Old Levine followed my fascinated gaze to the picture in the window. He cackled in sudden recognition and understanding as his eyes turned back to me.

"Ah, so it is you, is it, my fine young man?" he greeted me. "It is a pleasure to see you again. I have been expecting you."

"You have been expecting me?" I repeated dazedly.

"Yes, ever since I sold you the Zhanthores papyrus several days ago."

"But you sold me no papyrus!" I protested.

"You probably did not recognize it as such. It was a part of the queer little cigarette-holder you liked so well."

I remembered the cigarette-holder then. Taking it from my pocket, I looked at it more closely. It was an odd little piece whose quaint form had irresistibly appealed to me the moment that I first saw it. At the time I had thought that the two-inch-wide light band around the middle of the cylinder was old ivory inset upon the wood. But now I saw that it was indeed a small and very fine papyrus that had been glued completely around the holder, then varnished over with some transparent lacquer. Its surface was nearly covered with tiny hieroglyphic symbols which meant nothing whatever to my unschooled eye.

"That papyrus has seen many strange resting-places throughout the centuries," Old Levine cackled. "It has decorated the enameled top of a cavalier's jewel box; it has been worn in the helmet of one of Richard's knights; it has been an amulet suspended around the neck of a young Roman centurion; it has been set in the heavy bracelet of an Indian prince; it has even been locked in the hollow hilt of a viking chieftain's sword. For it must always be among the intimate personal possessions of its owner if he is to become one of Zhanthores' countless lovers."

"Do you mean to tell me," I interrupted the old man incredulously, "that this tiny piece of papyrus has been the means of bringing upon me the terrible attentions of that woman —or Thing—that you call Zhanthores?"

"Oh, she is a woman all right," Old Levine assured me, "and such a woman as this dull planet has seldom seen. You need not be ashamed of being numbered among Zhanthores' lovers. In the three thousand years and more since she was buried with mystic rites in her strange tomb beside the Nile she has numbered kings, princes, and even emperors among the ever-growing lists of her lovers.

"No, it is no disgrace to be loved by Zhanthores," Old Levine went on. "It is a mad ecstasy that is given to few mortals to know. Zhanthores, Daughter of Isis, she was called back in the days when she lived as other mortals live, and trod with dainty

sandals among the lush grasses that grew then in the valley of the Nile." Old Levine's tones were oddly reminiscent. I shuddered as a sudden impression swept over me that those somber eyes of his had actually looked upon those lush grasses that grew in the Egyptian valley thirty centuries and more ago.

"She was the sister of Xilor, High Priest of Isis," the old man's voice droned on, "and so adept did she herself become in the magic of Isis and Osiris, mightiest of all Egyptian deities, that she became known as the Daughter of Isis. Zhanthores loved for the sweet mad sake of love itself. She could not bear to face the thought of the time when age must rob her of her glorious beauty and bar forever to her the gates of love.

"And so it is said that she made a strange and terrible bargain with Isis, Goddess of the Moon. In return for the magic papyrus, Zhanthores sold to Isis her body and her soul. It is in token of that bargain that even today Zhanthores wears upon her brow the crescent-and-globe symbol of Isis.

"Isis claimed Zhanthores in death. Her beautiful body was buried with strange rites in a secret tomb by Xilor and a chosen few of the highest adepts of the cult. And it is from that tomb, never since found by man, that Zhanthores' spirit has roamed abroad through the passing centuries, with the papyrus the key that opens for her the doors to the never-ending love for which she eternally hungers.

"The papyrus passes from hand to hand in the world of mortals, though it has never been relinquished by one of its owners until Death has stricken his name from the lists of Zhanthores' conquests. No matter in what trinket the papyrus may for the moment be embodied, it always exercises an irresistible lure for young men who are already in love. They possess it, and its possession seals their doom. Zhanthores can appear only to the owner of the papyrus. At first, she can not even return to him again unless he wills it. But once he has called her and has known the terrible mad joy of Zhanthores' kiss, he is forever hers."

Zhanthores, Daughter of Isis, dead three thousand years yet still roaming the world of living men and bringing to her hapless victims a love such as no mortal man should ever taste, a love in which the rapture of paradise and the agonies of hell flamed side by side! Old Levine's tale was incredible, mad. Yet, looking into the brooding depths of his somber eyes, I believed him.

"I have already known Zhanthores' kiss," I admitted. "But surely there must be some way in which I can still break this hellish spell? The papyrus was in your possession once and yet you are unscathed. I am sure you can help me—if you will!"

"The papyrus has been in my possession many times," Old Levine agreed. "I am immune. It is useless to tell you why. It is an immunity to which you could never attain in a dozen lifetimes. Your only hope of release is to destroy the papyrus. It can be destroyed only by fire, and even then only if its owner really wishes in his soul to destroy it. If he still yearns for Zhanthores and longs to feel again the ecstasy of her kiss, however, the papyrus will not even be charred though the coals under it may burn to ashes.

"Thus far the papyrus has proved indestructible through the ages. If you are able to destroy it you will not only win freedom from her power over you, but you will forever destroy Zhanthores as well. But I warn you that you are attempting a task at which a thousand men have failed. The papyrus has been thrown on the flames countless times, but no man who has once known Zhanthores' kiss has ever been able, when the

final test has come, to relinquish her."

Old Levine would tell me no more, in spite of my pleading. I left the shop and for hours I again tramped the deserted streets, trying to numb my seething brain by sheer physical exertion. And always I felt the presence of Zhanthores at my side, beckoning, waiting.

DAWN came, and with it I felt the presence of the Daughter of Isis no longer. Returning to my apartment, I spent the entire day in a dead sleep of utter physical exhaustion. It was dark when I awoke. Though the wearer of the crescent-and-globe was not visible as yet, the room was already beginning to fill with the exotic Egyptian perfume.

I grimly resolved to fight my last battle against that eery spirit then and there. I hurriedly piled stick after stick on the fire in the grate until I had a leaping mass of flames. I had to nerve myself as for some mighty physical effort before I finally succeeded in flinging the cigarette-holder into the very heart of the fire.

The flames licked hungrily at the dry wood and parchment. In an instant the wooden part of the cylinder was ablaze. Then I felt my attention suddenly and irresistibly drawn away from the fireplace. There beside me stood Zhanthores, ivory arms outstretched toward me, her glorious eyes beckoning to me, every line of that superbly beautiful body calling me to her. I strove dazedly to visualize Alice Worthing, to remember the wholesome joys of a normal world that I was forever renouncing; but the effort was hopeless.

I sprang to my feet, with the mad exotic lure of the Daughter of Isis sweeping through my veins like liquid fire. I yielded, utterly and completely, and again in the savage joy of Zhanthores' kisses I was fellow to the gods themselves.

I realized that I was sealing my own doom, but I cared not. My career as Zhanthores' lover might be a brief one before the fires of that terrible love inevitably consumed me, but its short span would at least be one of sheer mad ecstasy!

The fire in the grate burned to smoldering ashes. The wooden part of the cigarette-holder had long been consumed, but the papyrus still remained there in its fiery bed unscathed.

IT MAY have been minutes later, or it may have been hours, that the insistent ringing of my telephone tore me reluctantly from the perfumed embrace of the Daughter of Isis. It was Alice Worthing on the line.

No longer did her voice have any power to awaken me from the eldritch passion to which I had fallen victim. Nothing mattered to my crazed brain now but Zhanthores and the vibrant kisses of her warm lips. But Alice's worried voice did awaken in me enough of a last lingering spark of decency so that I resolved to pay her a final visit and, as gently as I could, explain to her that our engagement could no longer mean anything to me.

I gingerly fished the uncharred papyrus out of the ashes of the grate and replaced it in my pocket. Then I left for the Worthing home.

And there, seated beside Alice on a divan in front of the open grate fire in the big comfortable living-room, I tried to bring myself to telling my childhood sweetheart the thing that I knew would break her heart.

Alice could not smell the exotic perfume that filled the room, nor could she see the eerily beautiful figure of Zhanthores sitting there languidly in a big chair beside us, watching the proceedings with a confident, mocking smile.

But Alice did know that something was very much wrong, and her eyes

had almost an expression of fear in them as she raised them to mine.

It was then that the miracle happened.

It was a miracle that was born in the depths of those clear blue eyes, a miracle that swept the vapors of my mad delirium away like swamp mists before the warm morning sun. For in Alice's eyes I read a love and devotion so great, a love so normal and clean and wholesome, that its overwhelming tenderness would have recalled a man from the brink of the Pit itself.

I knew with a mighty rush of exultant joy that deliverance for me was at hand. I snatched the papyrus of Zhanthores from my pocket and hurled it into the fire in the grate. Then I clasped Alice tenderly to me and pressed her sweet cool lips to mine.

There was a lurid flash of ruddy flame from the grate. My heart sang within me. The papyrus was burning, burning, for this time I was willing its destruction with every last shred of my soul.

I caught a final glimpse of Zhanthores, a glimpse that sickened me. For, as she writhed there in her chair in what seemed to be an unearthly torment, that glorious beauty of hers was fading with an incredible and horrible speed. She was now an old crone, almost corpse-like in her ghastly, age-ravaged features. There was one awful final glimpse of a gibbering skeleton form; then even that vanished.

The bizarre perfume was swiftly fading from the air. The papyrus had crumbled to feathery ashes in the grate.

I clasped Alice to me more tightly. I was free.

Zhanthores was gone—forever!

AT EVENTIDE

***By* HANNA BAIRD CAMPBELL**

At eventide, dear heart, when I
Shall sleep beneath the quiet sky,
  I shall not see the light-winged lark,
  Against the darkening west, nor mark
The hours, like gray ghosts, stealing by.

I shall not know when night draws nigh,
But I shall hear your lonely cry—
  Your faltering footsteps in the dark
    At eventide.

I shall not care if violets shy,
Or snowdrifts, deep above me lie.
  But I shall know when life's dim spark
  Shall set you free, when you lie stark
Beside me there beneath the sky
    At eventide.

The FALLING KNIFE

by HAROLD MARKHAM



"Number thirty-seven!"

THERE was more than one guillotine in France in the days of Robespierre, and that of Dauvignon was controlled and fed by citizen Meurière, ex-barrister at law and personal friend and disciple of the Sea-green Incorruptible himself.

Meurière copied his master in even the most trivial details. Just as his administration at Dauvignon was an exact replica of Paris, tumbrils and guillotine, all complete; so was his dress a reflection of that of the Arch-Terrorist, from his neatly powdered hair down to the glittering buckles which still graced his shoes, in spite of the recent change in the fashions.

Most of all, it was the good citizen Meurière's delight to reflect the inner, yet more than the outer, Robespierre—to be incapable alike of favoritism or pity, to be the long-winded mouthpiece of ultra-patriotic sentiments and the imperturbable agent of ruthless justice, in the name of France.

So his lieutenant Piron found him in the matter of Roxalane de Tourneye.

For no less than an hour Piron besought his superior for her life, on

his knees and with tears in his eyes. He urged the loyalty of his service, the bonds of friendship, the innocence and utter harmlessness of the girl, aristocrat though she might be, and her obvious repudiation of her caste, in that she had returned the love of so pronounced a Jacobin as himself. With an eloquence worthy of the cause he pleaded, implored, entreated—and to all Meurière listened stonily, his chin buried in the folds of his tall cravat and his transparent blue eyes gazing fixedly across at the opposite wall.

At last the deputy withdrew his hand from the breast of his coat.

"Enough!" he said coldly. "The matter shall have my consideration!"

Piron gave a wild, inarticulate cry.

"Citizen!" he stammered. "You mean—Roxalane shall live? Oh, I live again, myself, in your words!" And, clasping Meurière's hand in both of his, he covered it with kisses.

"Enough!" The mirror of Robespierre drew away his hand abruptly. "Rise to your feet, Piron, and cease this blubbering! I have said the matter shall have my consideration. . . . And now to supper!"

VIANDS were already on the table, and as the two men ate and drank Meurière lectured his subordinate at length. . . .

"Liberty . . . Equality . . . Fraternity . . . Fraternity . . . Equality . . . Liberty. . . ."

On and on he droned, and a gradual drowsiness came over Piron which could not have been wholly attributable to even so prolonged a sermon. The wine passed freely. Piron woke up on, but not in, his bed at midday on the morrow and realized that he had not undressed.

He had a splitting headache and a vile taste in his mouth. A Sèvres clock on the mantelpiece told him the hour . . . midday . . . Roxalane . . . she was to have died at ten o'clock with the rest. . . .

Piron shuddered and a dry sob escaped him.

Then he remembered his superior's promise of the night before. . . . His face brightened and he leapt up from his bed with a glad cry. . . .

Yes, Meurière had promised and Roxalane was saved!

Having washed away the stains of his overnight debauch he strode off gayly to the prison. He had the entrée there, and by now Meurière's reprieve would have come . . . a word would open the great iron doors and set free his bride.

It was his custom to run an eye down the notice-board outside the main gate whenever he visited the prison, and he did so now, mechanically.

Then the street went dark and he leant for support against the wall.

The exact words of Meurière seemed to appear before him in letters of fire—"The matter shall *have my consideration*"—for it was a list of those executed that morning he read. . . .

While he had lain drunk and senseless in his room, she—Roxalane—had been driven with all the others to her fate.

"Traitor!" gritted Piron under his breath.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, shook himself, stood upright . . . in a moment he was calm again; but there was a look in his eyes that had not been there before.

MEURIERE and Piron again sat over their wine and the deputy smiled coldly as his subordinate leant across the table, his voice and features animated alike.

"It is the chance of a lifetime, Citizen," Piron assured him, "your greatest opportunity of serving Robespierre and France; and—and—I want you to have it rather than myself in token of gratitude!"

The delicately penciled eyebrows rose slightly.

"Gratitude, Citizen Piron?"

"Aye! . . . My master, you have taught me all—you have done all for me"—his voice sank—"you have saved me for France!"

Meurière smiled a little.

"You mean the she-aristocrat of a month ago?"

Piron nodded vigorously.

"Even that woman! But for you I should be on my way to the Sainte Guillotine by now, with her! You saw this, Citizen, when I could not. I, fond imbecile, believed that she might be turned Jacobin and become one with us. You, O fountain of wisdom, you saw that naught but death could come of it—you saw what the Incorruptible would think of a citizen of France who allied himself to an aristocrat bitch! Oh, you saw—and I was blind!"

Meurière nodded gravely.

"It is well. And now, this Vicomte de Fournal—you tell me he will speak? He knows of this plot against Citizen Robespierre?"

"He will speak on promise of his life!"

Meurière smiled.

"He shall have his *promise*, my Piron!"

Piron saw the point and chuckled.

"Then, my master, I suggest that we go to the prison at once. It is dusk—eh? It is better that our visit be——?"

"Precisely! The less known about it the better. We will go at once. Forward, Piron!"

MEURIERE led the way down a maze of dark stone corridors, past iron doors from behind some of which came moans and mutterings; though for the most part the prisoners were silent.

"Here?" he asked, pausing.

"Here!" assented Piron. "You may go!" he added to the jailer, a filthy, half-naked wretch with a week's growth of beard and a clay pipe. "I shall return your keys as we go out."

A nod from Meurière reassured the man, who departed, growling.

Piron stealthily unlocked and threw wide the door, standing back respectfully for his chief.

Taking a couple of paces into the cell, Meurière halted, astonished . . . for a moment he half believed he was looking into a mirror; for in the blue twilight from the grated window he saw a man who differed from himself in scarcely one particular, save his clothes. These, the tattered remnants of a once magnificent silk and velvet suit, alone contrasted with the trim figure of the deputy. The face, though haggard and pale, was otherwise the counterpart of his own.

At that moment something happened to Meurière—what it was he could not afterward remember—and he sank down, down, down into an unfathomable abyss of reddish-black darkness, flecked with swirling stars.

WHEN Meurière came to there was a cold, white beam of sunlight playing from the high, barred window onto the grimy stone floor where he lay. He felt decidedly ill; a sickly smell in his nostrils and throat made him feel uncommonly like being physically so. His head ached and he was dizzy and weak.

For some time he lay half stupefied, watching idly the shadow of the three iron bars creep across the flagstone it had been touching when he first regained consciousness; then he turned over, found himself stiff in every joint, but otherwise a free man.

After a while he sat up and it began to dawn on him that he was not in his bedroom. In front of him was the shadowy outline of an iron door. The place smelt vilely of decay and damp.

He shivered and rose painfully to his feet, and the next moment

started backward with a cry of alarm as his gaze fell on his own legs. . . . Whose clothes were these he was wearing? Whose the torn, dirty white breeches and unpolished top-boots? Top-boots! He had never possessed a pair in his life!

Quickly Meurière extended his arms, to discover the sleeves of a "zebra" fashion silk tail-coat—another garment he had never worn!

What did it mean? Where was he? What had happened?

Then he laughed. Of course, he was dreaming! The affair was too fantastic, impossible, unreal. Soon he would wake up in his own bed with his own clothes on the chair beside him!

But — *morbleu* — he must have mixed his drinks the night before!

He chuckled icily.

He—the great, the incorruptible Meurière—the pupil of the Sea-green one of Paris—drunk!

But didn't that prove all the more that it was a dream? Drunk? He? Never in his life!

Well, well—it would soon be over, this quaint nightmare, and the best thing to do was to humor it while it lasted. In an hour or two he would be telling it jocularly to Piron over chocolate and rolls prior to his departure for Paris. . . .

Paris? Yes, to be sure! He had been bound for Paris to make a report in person to Robespierre—a carriage had been ordered for 9:30, and—yes, surely there was something else? Something Piron had been telling him?

Settling himself at full length on a wooden bench which seemed uncommonly hard and real for a mere incident in a dream, he cudgeled his brains.

What had Piron been telling him? Something—something about somebody in the prison, wasn't it?

Ah! There lay the explanation of the whole affair! An unwise supper, some business or other to do with the prison—and here he was dreaming himself a prisoner in one of his own cells! Absurd! Positively comical! But, that business—what had it been?

The effort of thinking caused his head to throb afresh, and Meurière gave himself up to sleep.

"NUMBER thirty-seven!" The voice was thick, coarse, lustful. "Tumble out there, number thirty-seven—your blasted carriage is waiting!"

Meurière sat up and blinked. "You addressed me, fellow?"

"Oh no, your Royal Excellence!" the jailor guffawed; then, sharply, "tumble out there and be sharp about it! D'you expect to dine here?"

Meurière saw before him a tall, muscular brute of a man, naked from the waist up save for a greasy red cap on which the tricolor rosette's colors were merged and smeared into one another with grime. He had a week's growth of beard, a flat, negroid nose, and little red eyes like those of a boar from the forests.

"Name of the devil!" snapped Meurière. "Who are you?"

The man's teeth flashed in a leer of enjoyment at his annoyance. Otherwise not a muscle of him moved.

"I asked who the devil you were? What do you want? *Sacré imbecile,* don't you know me?"

The man still leered and kept motionless.

A slow smile turned up the corners of Meurière's thin lips.

"Bah! Another phantom! I am still dreaming, it appears. Well, well; be off with you, my friend, and leave me to sleep it out. I have a long journey today!"

The leer broadened.

"A long journey?" sneered the jailer. "That's right, by the guillotine—we know all about that, Citizen! . . . A long journey, in truth, and the time has come to set about it!"

Meurière frowned. It struck him

that here was another ramification of this unpleasant dream. The journey to Paris had got mixed up with it, now! *Parbleu,* but he must inquire carefully into his last night's menu . . . a repetition of this sort of thing was not to be desired!

Meanwhile, as he had observed before, the wisest thing to do was to humor the nightmare till it had run its course.

"Very well, my friend," answered Meurière. "Lead the way; I am ready!"

The man grunted and, having seen him out of the door, followed him down the passage.

A moment later he arrived at a gate where a sentry stood with fixed bayonet. Broad daylight smote him in the face.

Meurière blinked. . . .

He was in the Rue de Maubrun—he recognized the houses opposite—there were soldiers standing round the gate who could have mustered one complete set of uniform between them, and behind these were huddled the very riff-raff of Dauvignon, hunger and hatred in their eyes.

"Up with you!" snarled the jailer at his elbow, and, glancing round, he became for the first time aware of a rough cart, driven by a filthy apparition in rags and a red cap, and already loaded with four passengers—a woman and three men.

"Stay, my friend!" said the deputy firmly. "This is going *too* far—I shall have to pinch myself and wake up! *Peste,* another half-hour of this dream and——"

"Get up into that cart, will you? You won't? Then curse you and to hell with you for a filthy aristocrat!"

A great vise of a hand seized his coat collar and he was flung in the direction of the cart. The next moment a soldier gripped him below the knees and he was tossed up like a sack of flour amid screams of high-pitched laughter from the crowd. Some projection on the floor of the tumbril grazed his forehead, blood ran down his face, and as he stumbled onto his feet Citizen Meurière finally awoke. . . .

The crowd still jeered. The soldiers chanted an obscene song. Back at the gateway his huge jailer stood, arms akimbo, his naked body a-quiver with laughter. Only the one woman and three men, his fellow passengers, were silent and unmoved.

Meurière awoke to the realization that it was all true: he, a deputy of France, the friend and pupil of Robespierre, was in a tumbril, en route for the guillotine!

For some moments he was speechless—it took a little while for the facts to soak in. Then he screamed aloud. It seemed that the dancing, gibbering mob echoed his screams back to him. A hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, *Monsieur*—have you not observed we have a lady with us?"

He glared wildly into the face of an old man whose tarnished finery bespoke him a condemned aristocrat.

"*Monsieur* must be calm!" reiterated this other; "it is better to cheat these *sansculottes* of their sport, is that not so? Besides, a lady's presence should restrain——"

"Curse you, fool!" spluttered Meurière. "You don't understand! There has been a mistake!"

The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

"A mistake, I tell you!" fumed the Jacobin. "Stop them! Call the officer in charge! I am Meurière and——"

His sentence was drowned by a burst of laughter from the mob in which the soldiers joined readily. They turned a corner and the *Grande Place* came in view, the black posts and triangular blade of the guillotine towering above the seething humanity which filled it.

"Fools! Imbeciles! *Canaille!*" stormed the deputy. "I tell you I am Meurière! Send for Citizen Piron

immediately—he will know your own deputy, if you don't, you insane children of hell!"

"*Monsieur, Monsieur!*" whispered the old aristocrat reprovingly; "can you not contain yourself for these few —these very few moments that are left to us? Think, *Monsieur*, in a little while from now we shall be as if we had never been—and what use will be all your fuming and fretting, then? Come, *Monsieur!* Nothing can save us—would you *give* these carrion crows the one thing they can not take away from you—your gentleman's dignity?"

Meurière stared into his face, speechless.

THE tumbril halted with a jerk and a sergeant roughly ordered the victims to dismount.

Meurière clutched at him.

"Piron—Citizen Piron—I entreat you! Call Citizen Piron! There has been a mistake—you know not what you do—would you not avert a terrible miscarriage of justice? Oh, my God!"—atheist though he was, the oath slipped from him in his extremity—"will no one call Citizen Piron?" . . .

"Number thirty-three!"

Meurière's heart and tongue stood still. . . .

A dull crash—a pause.

"Number thirty-four! . . . Number thirty-five!"

Suddenly he gave a scream in which terror, joy and relief were mingled and struggled with his guards. "Piron!" he cried. "Piron! To me, my old Piron, to me—it is Meurière!"

"Number thirty-six!"

As the knife fell Piron rode through the crowd.

"Number——"

Piron raised his hand.

"Well?" he asked bluntly, leaning forward in his stirrups.

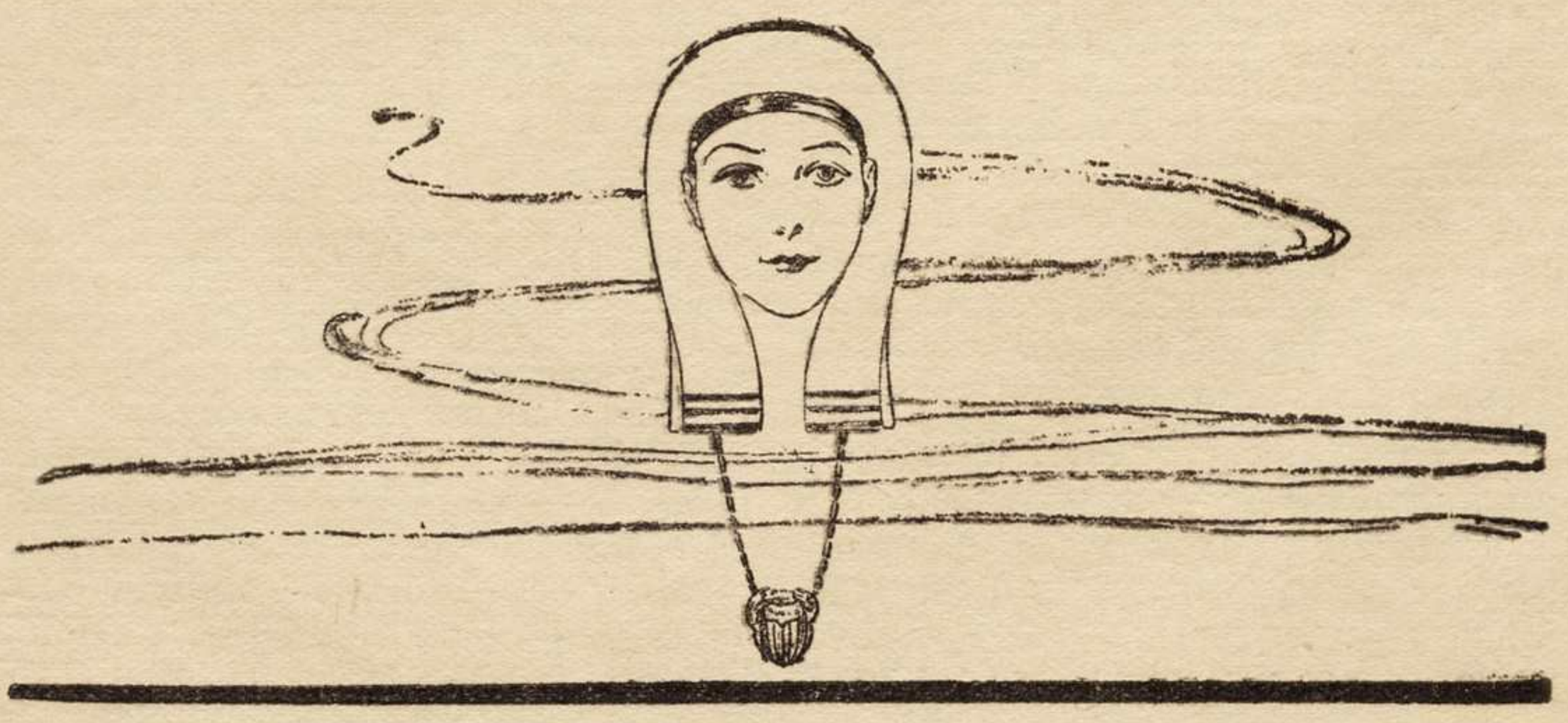
"Piron"—the tears ran down Meurière's cheeks—"oh, my Piron—in the nick of time—you see? You see? Tell them who I am—bid these fools release me! Oh, to think that a moment later! . . . tell them I am Meurière and that there has been a terrible mistake!"

Piron smiled.

"The mistake is yours, Monsieur le Vicomte de Fournal. As for Citizen Meurière, he left the town at 9:30 this morning. It is now 10 o'clock and I rule in his place. . . . Continue!"

"Number thirty-seven!"

As they forced Meurière down on the board he saw a wooden collar, reeking with new blood and loathsome to the touch. A hand wrenched off his neck-cloth . . . the top half of the collar was shut down. . . .



A Gentle Weird Story Is

The Lilac Bush

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE lilac bush stood about seventy feet from the road on the top of Springfield Hill. It was a very large bush, and it almost covered one side of the old log building that was decaying just behind it. It stood in soggy marsh land, and here and there in the thick tufts of grass, little pools of water could be seen. Adjoining it was a thin strip of woodland, and beyond that, green fields stretched away into the distance. Wisconsin Highway Twelve ran past the spot, but nobody ever noticed the curious incongruity of the lilac bush.

The day was hot for May, and Mrs. Jones came to the door of the house to look at her children playing about the lilac bush across the road. Mrs. Jones was a thin, gaunt woman, with stern gray eyes. Just now an ordinary house apron hung loosely about her, and her hair was somewhat unkempt, as farmers' wives' hair is likely to be. She sighed as she brushed her hand across her forehead, and, raising her eyes, she gazed long and earnestly at her children. They were standing quietly together. Ada was holding her younger brother's hand. Both were gazing in rapt attention at the lilac bush. Mrs. Jones moved uneasily.

"Ada!" she called sharply. And again, "Ada!"

But Ada apparently did not hear; nor did her brother. Both remained standing as before, with their backs to their mother. Mrs. Jones thought that something had got into the log ruins—a rabbit, perhaps, or a squirrel. Or maybe the children were playing a new game; that was more like it. She shrugged her shoulders and returned to her work.

At intervals she came to the door and looked out. The children were playing. But when she looked over at them an hour after, they stood again looking attentively at the lilac bush.

"Ada!" Mrs. Jones called.

This time the child turned slightly, as if under stress, and turned back as quickly. Mrs. Jones walked swiftly to the gate and crossed the road. A car with a California license on it shot by, and she stopped a moment to look after it. It was not often she saw them from so far away; still, yesterday one from Maine had come through, and a week ago, one from somewhere in Canada. Then she began picking her way carefully over the soggy land to where the children were standing. The children turned before she reached them. Hand in hand they watched her come on.

"Mamma," called Ada. "That's our bush, isn't it?" She pointed to the lilac bush.

"Of course," said Mrs. Jones, almost slipping from a clump of grass into a pool of water. "Of course. Your grandpa planted that bush when he was a boy and lived in that old cabin his dad built."

"Well, somebody was picking our lilacs. It looked like a man, mamma; I couldn't see."

"Man," said the boy, looking at her out of great blue eyes, opened wide. "Man," he repeated, nodding his

head vigorously. His chubby face was flushed.

Mrs. Jones eyed her children, frowning. "What are you talking about? The sun's got you, I guess. You better come into the house and rest. You're tearing around here all day, and you need it. Come on."

The children obediently followed Mrs. Jones across the road and into the house. The boy was still very young, and he could just walk. Mrs. Jones noticed that Ada was getting too stout for her age.

They sat in the kitchen and watched their mother work. After a time Ada sat at the window and looked over at the bush. Her brother came over and sat beside her. Mrs. Jones stood with her arms akimbo and watched them for a moment. Then she stepped lightly over to them and bent her head to look out with them. Ada looked up at her mother.

"He's there again, mamma. He's picking our lilacs."

"Man," said the boy, pounding the window with a small pudgy fist.

"What's the matter with you, Ada?" asked Mrs. Jones. "There's no one there."

"Yes, there is, mamma. An old man with a cane. He's picking the lilacs, our lilacs. Stop him, mamma. Why don't you stop him?"

Mrs. Jones glanced curiously at Ada, and from her to the boy. She felt a sudden tightening at her heart. Then she went out of the door and started across the road. She picked her way over the soggy land as before, and drew up at the lilac bush. There was no one there. The wind went through the bush with a curious rustling sound. Mrs. Jones looked at the bush and down at the ground. There were no footprints but those of the children, and she looked back at the bush somewhat puzzled. Behind her a car went past, and immediately after, another. Mrs. Jones reached up and pulled down one of the tall, thin branches. Among the leaves at the very top of the branch a broken twig stuck out. She looked at it in amazement. She had picked no lilacs for the last three days—and this twig was freshly broken, so freshly that she could discern the faintly glistening beads of sap that had oozed from the broken wood. She glanced suddenly back at the house. The children sat as before, watching her. She pulled down another branch with an effort—she had to stand on tiptoe, and then she could barely reach it. From the top of this branch, too, a blossom had been freshly broken. She looked around her suspiciously. There was nothing that the children might have stood on—nor were the broken blossoms in evidence. She went back to the house, walking slowly.

AT EVENING Mrs. Jones took the children and started down the road for the cows. On the way they had to pass one of the three cemeteries on Springfield Hill. There was a lurid flare of red in the western sky, as if someone had lighted great bonfires along the horizon. Mrs. Jones looked over the trees at the dying day, and back again. From down the road came the faintly acrid scent of last year's dry leaves burning.

Suddenly she stopped dead. Out of the corner of her eye she caught an incongruous color in the cemetery. She shook Ada, taking hold of her shoulder.

"How many times have I told you not to go into the cemetery, Ada?"

"I didn't." Ada looked at her mother in childish astonishment.

"Don't lie to me, Ada. Who put the lilacs on grandpa's grave if you didn't?" She shook her again.

"I didn't, mamma." Ada was close to tears.

But Mrs. Jones was no longer looking at Ada. Her eyes were fastened on a lilac blossom, half buried in the

earth on the grave and at the same moment she saw herself standing on tiptoe, striving to reach upward toward the broken twig. Almost roughly she pulled Ada with her as she moved on, a sudden paleness in her cheeks. She turned and called after the boy.

"Come on, boy. Come on."

"Man!" said the boy suddenly, throwing a stone with unexpected vigor in the direction of the lilac bush.

The Horror on Dagoth Wold

By **FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.**

"I have it here," he said and stroked the rust
Upon his box,—his eyes were twin dark stars—
"Medusa's head that turns desire to dust!
They buried it a fathom deep on Mars.

"I waited till the stars were right, and then
I robed myself in ermine flaked with gold,
And with a silver spade, unwatched by men,
I crept to where it lay in Dagoth Wold.

"I crept to where it lay, and working fast,
I drew it from its red and sentient tomb;
From jellied earth that whispered in the gloom,
And mired my feet until I woke at last."
"You woke?" I stared at him in pained surprize,
Forgetful of the star-glint in his eyes.

"To futile toil," he said, "our race is bound,
And to the waking world it must return:
Some vileness in us makes us scorn and wound
The shapes of flame for which our spirits yearn.

"But men go back again to dreams for things
They left behind; perchance to fetch a cloak,
Or gather up a batch of stolen rings,
Or catch a word some sweet, soft woman spoke.

"I have it here," he said, and tapped the lid
Upon his box,—his eyes were twin dark stars—
"When Perseus died they sought to keep it hid,
And buried it a fathom deep on Mars."

A Tale of Stark, Unreasoning Terror

The Fearsome Touch of Death

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

As long as midnight cloaks the earth
With shadows grim and stark,
God save us from the Judas kiss
Of a dead man in the dark.

OLD Adam Farrel lay dead in the house wherein he had lived alone for the last twenty years. A silent, churlish recluse, in his life he had known no friends, and only two men had watched his passing.

Dr. Stein rose and glanced out the window into the gathering dusk.

"You think you can spend the night here, then?" he asked his companion.

This man, Falred by name, assented.

"Yes, certainly. I guess it's up to me."

"Rather a useless and primitive custom, sitting up with the dead," commented the doctor, preparing to depart, "but I suppose in common decency we will have to bow to precedence. Maybe I can find some one who'll come over here and help you with your vigil."

Falred shrugged his shoulders. "I doubt it. Farrel wasn't liked—wasn't known by many people. I scarcely knew him myself, but I don't mind sitting up with the corpse."

Dr. Stein was removing his rubber gloves, and Falred watched the process with an interest that almost amounted to fascination. A slight, involuntary shudder shook him at the memory of touching these gloves—slick, cold, clammy things, like the touch of death.

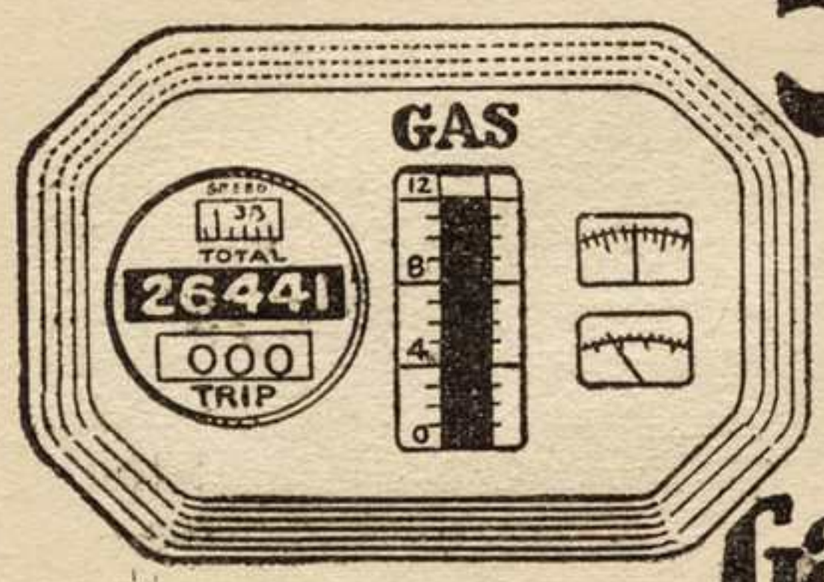
"You may get lonely tonight, if I don't find anyone," the doctor remarked as he opened the door. "Not superstitious, are you?"

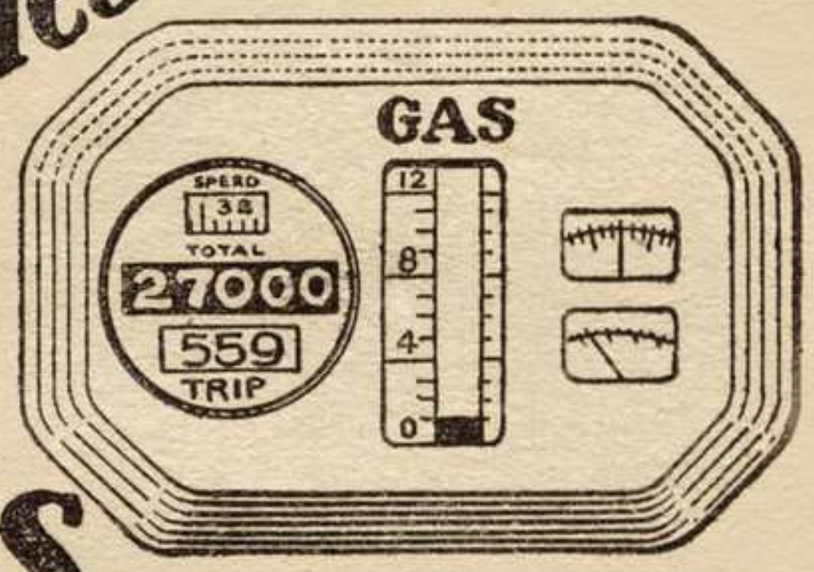
Falred laughed. "Scarcely. To tell the truth, from what I hear of Farrel's disposition, I'd rather be watching his corpse than have been his guest in life."

The door closed and Falred took up his vigil. He seated himself in the only chair the room boasted, glanced casually at the formless, sheeted bulk on the bed opposite him, and began to read by the light of the dim lamp which stood on the rough table.

Outside the darkness gathered swiftly, and finally Falred laid down his magazine to rest his eyes. He looked again at the shape which had, in life, been the form of Adam Farrel, wondering what quirk in the human nature made the sight of a corpse not only so unpleasant, but such an object of fear to many. Unthinking ignorance, seeing in dead things a reminder of death to come, he decided lazily, and began idly contemplating as to what life had held for this grim and crabbed old man, who had neither relatives nor friends, and who had seldom left the house wherein he had died. The usual tales of miser-hoarded wealth had accumu-

Over the Mountains from Los Angeles 559 Miles on 11 Gallons of GAS





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lated, but Falred felt so little interest in the whole matter that it was not even necessary for him to overcome any temptation to pry about the house for possible hidden treasure.

He returned to his reading with a shrug. The task was more boresome than he had thought for. After a while he was aware that every time he looked up from his magazine and his eyes fell upon the bed with its grim occupant, he started involuntarily as if he had, for an instant, forgotten the presence of the dead man and was unpleasantly reminded of the fact. The start was slight and instinctive, but he felt almost angered at himself. He realized, for the first time, the utter and deadening silence which enwrapped the house—a silence apparently shared by the night, for no sound came through the window. Adam Farrel had lived as far apart from his neighbors as possible, and there was no other house within hearing distance.

Falred shook himself as if to rid his mind of unsavory speculations, and went back to his reading. A sudden vagrant gust of wind whipped through the window, in which the light in the lamp flickered and went out suddenly. Falred, cursing softly, groped in the darkness for matches, burning his fingers on the hot lamp chimney. He struck a match, relighted the lamp, and glancing over at the bed, got a horrible mental jolt. Adam Farrel's face stared blindly at him, the dead eyes wide and blank, framed in the gnarled gray features. Even as Falred instinctively shuddered, his reason explained the apparent phenomenon: the sheet that covered the corpse had been carelessly thrown across the face and the sudden puff of wind had disarranged and flung it aside.

Yet there was something grisly about the thing, something fearsomely suggestive—as if, in the cloaking dark, a dead hand had flung aside the sheet, just as if the corpse were about to rise. . . .

Falred, an imaginative man, shrugged his shoulders at these ghastly thoughts and crossed the room to replace the sheet. The dead eyes seemed to stare at him malevolently, with an evilness that transcended the dead man's churlishness in life. The workings of a vivid imagination, Falred knew, and he re-covered the gray face, shrinking as his hand chanced to touch the cold flesh—slick and clammy, the touch of death. He shuddered with the natural revulsion of the living for the dead, and went back to his chair and magazine.

At last, growing sleepy, he lay down upon a couch which, by some strange whim of the original owner, formed part of the room's scant furnishings, and composed himself for slumber. He decided to leave the light burning, telling himself that it was in accordance with the usual custom of leaving lights burning for the dead; for he was not willing to admit to himself that already he was conscious of a dislike for lying in the darkness with the corpse. He dozed, awoke with a start and looked at the sheeted form on the bed. Silence reigned over the house, and outside it was very dark.

The hour was approaching midnight, with its accompanying eery domination over the human mind. Falred glanced again at the bed where the body lay and found the sight of the sheeted object most repellent. A fantastic idea had birth in his mind and grew, that beneath the sheet, the mere lifeless body had become a strange, monstrous thing, a hideous, conscious being, that watched him with eyes which burned through the fabric of the cloth. This thought—a mere fantasy, of course—he explained to himself by the legends of vampires, undead, ghosts and such like—the fearsome attributes with which the living have cloaked the dead for

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countless ages, since primitive man first recognized in death something horrid and apart from life. Man feared death, thought Falred, and some of his fear of death took hold on the dead so that they, too, were feared. And the sight of the dead engendered grisly thoughts, gave rise to dim fears of hereditary memory, lurking back in the dark corners of the brain.

At any rate, that silent, hidden thing was getting on his nerves. He thought of uncovering the face, on the principle that familiarity breeds contempt. The sight of the features, calm and still in death, would banish, he thought, all such wild conjectures as were haunting him in spite of himself. But the thought of those dead eyes staring in the lamplight was intolerable; so at last he blew out the light and lay down. This fear had been stealing upon him so insidiously and gradually that he had not been aware of its growth.

With the extinguishing of the light, however, and the blotting out of the sight of the corpse, things assumed their true character and proportions, and Falred fell asleep almost instantly, on his lips a faint smile for his previous folly.

HE AWAKENED suddenly. How long he had been asleep he did not know. He sat up, his pulse pounding frantically, the cold sweat beading his forehead. He knew instantly where he was, remembered the other occupant of the room. But what had awakened him? A dream—yes, now he remembered—a hideous dream in which the dead man had risen from the bed and stalked stiffly across the room with eyes of fire and a horrid leer frozen on his gray lips. Falred had seemed to lie motionless, helpless; then as the corpse reached a gnarled and horrible hand, he had awakened.

He strove to pierce the gloom, but the room was all blackness and all without was so dark that no gleam of light came through the window. He reached a shaking hand toward the lamp, then recoiled as if from a hidden serpent. Sitting here in the dark with a fiendish corpse was bad enough, but he dared not light the lamp, for fear that his reason would be snuffed out like a candle at what he might see. Horror, stark and unreasoning, had full possession of his soul; he no longer questioned the instinctive fears that rose in him. All those legends he had heard came back to him and brought a belief in them. Death was a hideous thing, a brain-shattering horror, imbuing lifeless men with a horrid malevolence. Adam Farrel in his life had been simply a churlish but harmless man; now he was a terror, a monster, a fiend lurking in the shadows of fear, ready to leap on mankind with talons dipped deep in death and insanity.

Falred sat there, his blood freezing, and fought out his silent battle. Faint glimmerings of reason had begun to touch his fright when a soft, stealthy sound again froze him. He did not recognize it as the whisper of the night wind across the window-sill. His frenzied fancy knew it only as the tread of death and horror. He sprang from the couch, then stood undecided. Escape was in his mind but he was too dazed to even try to formulate a plan of escape. Even his sense of direction was gone. Fear had so stultified his mind that he was not able to think consciously. The blackness spread in long waves about him and its darkness and void entered into his brain. His motions, such as they were, were instinctive. He seemed shackled with mighty chains and his limbs responded sluggishly, like an imbecile's.

A terrible horror grew up in him and reared its grisly shape, that the dead man was behind him, was stealing upon him from the rear. He no longer thought of lighting the lamp;

he no longer thought of anything. Fear filled his whole being; there was room for nothing else.

He backed slowly away in the darkness, hands behind him, instinctively feeling the way. With a terrific effort he partly shook the clinging mists of horror from him, and, the cold sweat clammy upon his body, strove to orient himself. He could see nothing, but the bed was across the room, in front of him. He was backing away from it. There was where the dead man was lying, according to all rules of nature; if the thing were, as he felt, behind him, then the old tales were true: death did implant in lifeless bodies an unearthly animation, and dead men did roam the shadows to work their ghastly and evil will upon the sons of men. Then—great God!—what was man but a wailing infant, lost in the night and beset by frightful things from the black abysses and the terrible unknown voids of space and time? These conclusions he did not reach by any reasoning process; they leaped full-grown into his terror-dazed brain. He worked his way slowly backward, groping, clinging to the thought that the dead man *must* be in front of him.

Then his back-flung hands encountered something—something slick, cold and clammy—like the touch of death. A scream shook the echoes, followed by the crash of a falling body.

THE next morning they who came to the house of death found two corpses in the room. Adam Farrel's sheeted body lay motionless upon the bed, and across the room lay the body of Falred, beneath the shelf where Dr. Stein had absent-mindedly left his gloves—rubber gloves, slick and clammy to the touch of a hand groping in the dark—a hand of one fleeing his own fear—rubber gloves, slick and clammy and cold, like the touch of death.

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The Comet-Drivers

(Continued from page 192)

For even at that moment, as we stared dumfounded toward the place where the cube-ship fleet had vanished, there had come from beneath and beside us hundreds upon hundreds of crimson bolts, bolts that flashed seemingly out of empty space annihilating scores, hundreds, of our bewildered ships, bolts from the cube-ships which we could not see, but which were circling about us now loosing their terrific shafts of death upon us! A battle to the death between two mighty fleets, one invisible, the other a plain target! Out in all directions our black beams were wildly whirling, but we could loose them only by chance, while our own ships, a perfect target to the invisible cubes about us, were flaring in annihilation in ever-increasing numbers!

"That great projector-cube!" I shouted to Gor Han. "Our only chance is to get to it—destroy it!"

I pointed down toward the spot of brilliant light beneath, which marked the position of the great cube that was projecting the vibrations that made our enemies invisible. But even as I did so a half hundred cruisers of our fleet had massed together, shooting downward in a great wedge, through a withering hail of crimson bolts, down through invisible cubes through which they crashed, down until an instant later the score remaining of them had crashed squarely into the spot of brilliant light below, meeting annihilation with it in that collision. But the light vanished as they crashed, leaving but wreckage of cube and cruisers, and at the same moment the mass of cube-ships beneath us had suddenly flashed into full view once more!

Our great fleet was gathering itself now for a last final rush downward through those opposing cube-ships toward the comet-control. I could hear the wild victorious shouts of Gor Han and Jurt Tul and the crew beneath loud in my ears, could see the pyramid's summit, the great control, close beneath, as I turned to the speech-instrument to shout the word that would send our fleet thundering down. But before ever my lips opened I had stiffened, stood motionless. For from the time-dial before me had come the low, metallic note of the passing hour, marking the end of the last moment in which the comet could have been turned aside! Marking the end for our universe, sounding in my stunned ears like a titanic knell of doom across the infinite for our galaxy! Nothing now in all the universe could turn the giant comet aside from that galaxy enough to save it! Motionless there, Gor Han and Jurt Tul and I heard echoing away that muted note that had struck for the galaxy's doom!

"Lost!" Gor Han was saying it, strangely, slowly, uncomprehendingly. "We've lost!"

Lost! The galaxy—our suns—our myriad peopled worlds—all lost, all doomed to annihilation by the gigantic comet about us that was thundering on now irrevocably! It seemed, in that instant, that all things in existence, the cruisers about us, the cube-ships beneath us, the comet-creature hordes on the surface of the white-lit world below, had paused for one moment breathless, a moment that marked a galaxy's doom. Then suddenly Gor Han was pointing downward, eyes starting, point-

ing to the comet-creature hordes on that world below, which were suddenly rushing crazily toward the pyramid beneath us, the cube-ships also racing wildly down toward the pyramid's summit! For on that summit from the stair on the pyramid's side a dark, erect figure had suddenly rushed, and before the comet-guards had glimpsed him had rushed to the great disk-dial and pointer of the comet-control! An erect, many-limbed dark figure who had seized the pointer in his grasp!

"Najus Nar!" Gor Han's great scream held within it all our renewed faith, our sudden comprehension.

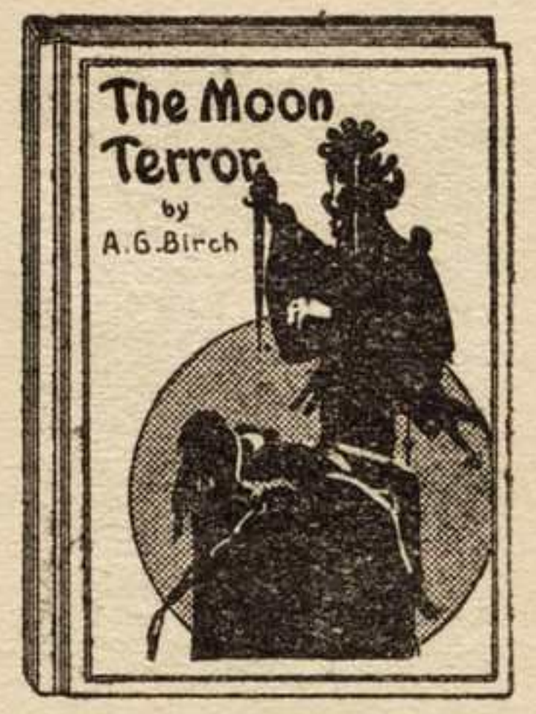
For the insect-man had grasped the pointer, the pointer that controlled the position of the giant comet's tail, and had swung it half around the disk from the dial's rear to its front! As he did so he straightened, arms upflung toward us in a last great gesture toward the distant opening through the coma, and then the comet-guards were upon him, the blasting crimson bolts from the darting cubes above had reached him, annihilating the pyramid's summit, while in all the city beneath us liquid comet-creatures and great cubes were rushing crazily toward that pyramid, rushing too late toward the control which they had themselves built for their comet and which now had destroyed them!

For Najus Nar had reversed the comet-control!

Even as the bolts had blasted the pyramid's top our cruisers had shot with the velocity of thousands of light-speeds out from the central world and those about it, out across the comet's heart toward the circular opening through the coma, through that passage of crimson death at awful speed and out into space behind the comet as the passage closed behind us, as the tail behind the comet waned swiftly! And as our cruisers shot up above the mighty comet, we saw that it had halted in space, the awful momentum with which the old tail

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at the rear had driven it on balanced, opposed, by the new tail shot from its front, toward the galaxy, when Najus Nar had reversed the control! Caught between the two cosmic pressures, between the momentum and terrific speed with which the old tail drove it forward and the power with which the new tail drove it backward, the mighty coma beneath us was bulging, was spreading! Bulging outward above and below, to right and to left, its giant crimson-glowing coma dilating and breaking up between the terrific pressures from front and rear! Changing from a great sphere to a gigantic shapeless crimson mass of electrical energy, bulging out in all directions, great flashes of leaping light inside it marking the end of the great comet-worlds caught and annihilated inside its tortured mass! Out—out—it swelled, our cruisers hanging far above it, watching it grow swiftly greater, *thinner*, until in moments more where the colossal crimson comet had been was nothing but a vast, far-flung cloud of faint electrical radiance, the concentrated electrical energy that had been the giant comet and its worlds dispersed out into that huge, faint-shining cloud!

The cosmic vampire that had threatened the life of our universe was gone forever! The comet-drivers had driven their comet and its worlds, at last, to death!

5

SWEEPING in toward the galaxy's gathered suns, days later, our great cruiser fleet slowed, halted, hung motionless outside the galaxy's edge once more. Before us flamed great white Rigel, as it had flamed—how long it seemed before!—when Gor Han and Jurt Tul and Najus Nar had gathered in the control room of my cruiser, at the start of our mad journey toward the comet. Now that comet was but a vast, faint cloud of radiance far in the void behind us. And now, too, it was Gor Han and Jurt Tul that stood before me, in the cruiser's silent control room.

The cruisers about us had massed into two great divisions, since here at the galaxy's edge Gor Han and Jurt Tul were to leave me, taking up once more their duties in the ceaseless watch of the Interstellar Patrol, with for me my work as Chief in the headquarters at Canopus. The frantic joy that would be shaking the galaxy's peoples to see the shadow of doom thus lifted from them, the frantic gratitude that we might claim — in these we had no interest now, wanting only to take up once more the great Patrol's endless work. So now the cruisers of my two friends hung waiting beneath my own, as we paused in silence at the moment of parting.

Gor Han's deep voice broke the silence at last. "The end of the journey, for us," he said. "And for Najus Nar——?"

"For Najus Nar, too," I said. "He dared and died, for the galaxy—pretending to join the comet-creatures that he might thwart their plans at the last—and he would have wished no other end."

Jurt Tul nodded slowly. "Najus Nar would have wished it," he said. "Yet strange it seems, that we four of the Patrol are three, at last."

Silent we stood again, at that, and then Gor Han and Jurt Tul reached forth, Betelgeusan and Aldebaranian and earth-man clasping hands in a moment's grip. Then they had turned, had saluted sharply, and were striding down through the cruiser toward their own ships, which with a clang of metal moved away from beneath my own. Gor Han's to the right, Jurt Tul's to the left, they moved, heading each the massed cruisers there, and then those cruisers were moving away, to right and left along the galaxy's edge, passing and vanishing. My single cruiser hung alone

in the void, the pilot beside me with hands on its controls, but for a moment I paused still, gazing back through the blackness of the great void toward a far, faint-shining cloud that glimmered in the blackness. A long moment I gazed toward it, then turned. And then our cruiser too was moving, in over the galaxy's edge, in toward great Canopus through its gathered, flaming suns.

Thirsty Blades

(Continued from page 171)

clang of a gong. The lower edge of the first full moon of spring had just cleared the horizon. Filing down Biban ul Djinni was a caravan of camels and horses, bearing at a steady gait toward a cluster of shattered columns whose stumps towered skyward. As the light of the rising moon grew stronger, they could pick out the figure of a warder on guard in the center of a circular courtyard.

"Worse and worse yet!" exclaimed Ismeddin, as the Shareef drew up beside him. "Though I more than half expected as much. About forty of those sons of Satan. . . . You and I might have taken those seven by surprize——"

"Well, why not wait for the guard, *Haaji?*" demanded the Shareef.

"To late!" snapped Ismeddin. "You heard that gong? A warning signal. That caravan arrived just in time for the sacrifice. You and I must stop it."

"*Wallah!* But the odds are great. . . . Still——"

The Shareef drew his simitar.

"After my own heart, *saidi!*" exclaimed the darvish. "But rash. Let them first get under ground——"

"But how about the sentry?" demanded the Shareef. "He'll give the alarm."

"On the contrary, uncle. Look!"

Ismeddin produced from his capa-

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cious wallet a small, glittering object: the effigy of a peacock carved of silver.

"Malik Taûs! The damnation of Allah upon him!" exclaimed the Shareef as he recognized the symbol of the devil-worshipers.

"Follow me!" commanded Ismeddin, as he spurred his weary horse down the steep side of the valley.

They rode boldly now, making no attempt at concealment. The warder standing watch in the center of the ruined courtyard was taking an observation with his astrolabe, following the course of a star that flamed bloodily overhead. Then he set aside his instrument and smote a brazen gong whose golden sheen they could plainly see in the white moonlight. The solemn, vibrant note rolled dreadfully across the valley. The tall figure of doom once more turned his astrolabe on the star whose altitude he was reading.

Ismeddin leaned forward in the saddle, chirping and muttering to his exhausted beast.

"Allah, what a horseman!" gasped the Shareef as he saw the *asil* mare, true to her breeding, stretch out again at a full gallop.

They clattered up the broad avenue, clearing fragments of monstrous columns at a bound, Ismeddin shouting in a language unknown to the Shareef.

The warder started, and turned to face them.

"Hurry, *saidi*! The moment is almost here." And then: "The sign and the symbol!"

Ismeddin extended the silver image of the peacock, and in response to the warder's muttered formula, replied in that same obscure tongue.

The warder bowed, gestured toward the cavernous entrance to the vault, and turned to resume his observations. . . .

The Shareef's blade flickered in the moonlight.

Ismeddin seized one of the torches that flared smokily at each side of the copper image, and plunged into the depths, three steps at a time.

"SNICK-SNICK-SNICK!" whispered the slender knife as Zantut continued the ceremonial whetting.

"Christ on the mountain tops!" despaired Rankin. "Sharpen that knife and be done with it!"

Rankin sighed, and relaxed as the diabolical whisper of steel against stone ceased, and Zantut, pacing about the altar, passed his hands and knife through each of the five streamers of violet flame. The Dark Prince would this time be victorious without even stepping from his throne. And this was the last chance. . . .

From the depths came the ever-increasing volume of a beaten drum.

"Abaddon in the darkness beats his black drum triumphantly!" intoned Zantut. And then he uttered a word of command, at which the assembled devil-worshipers knelt about the altar.

Zantut, knife in hand, stepped forward.

"Malik Taûs, Lord and Master, accept the sacrifice that Thy servants offer!" he intoned, timing his words so that the last syllable would be coincident with the final stroke of the gong. "Malik Taûs, the Night of Power is at hand. Malik Taûs, the broad moon rises——"

"Halt!" commanded a voice that rang like sword against sword.

Zantut whirled about, knife in hand.

The adepts leaped to their feet.

Ismeddin, sword in one hand, torch in the other, stood in the entrance. Following him came the Shareef.

"Holy darvish! Oh, son of many pigs!" roared the Shareef, and opened fire with his pistol. But the old man's rage was too much for his aim.

"Steady, uncle!" snapped Ismeddin. "You'll hit the girl!"

Zantut and his followers charged, swords drawn.

Ismeddin dashed his blade to the floor, drew from his *djellab* a slim tube the length of his forearm, and touched it with his torch.

The fuse sputtered . . . and then a cascade of sparks and flame.

"There is neither might nor majesty save in Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!" thundered Ismeddin. "Out, sons of calamity!"

And as he sprayed the devil-worshipers with his torrent of flame, he side-stepped to his right, flanking the howling, smoking, milling company of adepts, driving them toward the entrance of the vault.

The devil-worshipers bolted, Zantut leading.

The Shareef opened fire with his pistol.

Ismeddin tossed aside the dead signal rocket and retrieved his blade.

"*Allah Akbar!*" roared the Shareef as he dropped his emptied pistol, drew his sword, and carved his way into the fugitives, cutting them down as they fought their way up the stairs.

Above the confusion and uproar of the slaughter, Ismeddin heard the clank of arms and the clatter of hoofs in the courtyard, far above them.

"If that's the guard," observed Ismeddin, as he paused to wipe on his *djellab* the blood-drenched grip of his simitar, "all is well. But if it's reinforcements for these sons of flat-nosed mothers, they'll regain their wits . . . Drive hard, uncle!"

And the two graybeards resumed the pursuit, slashing and hacking as they took the steps three at a leap.

"*Bismillahi!*" exclaimed the Shareef, as he paused for breath. And then, listening to the increasing uproar from the courtyard: "Mamoun and the guard are at it!"

"*Wallah!* But he made good time," agreed Ismeddin. "Do you blame me for stealing a few horses like those, Cousin of the Prophet?"

"Not after a night like this," panted the Shareef.

"And now," resumed Ismeddin,



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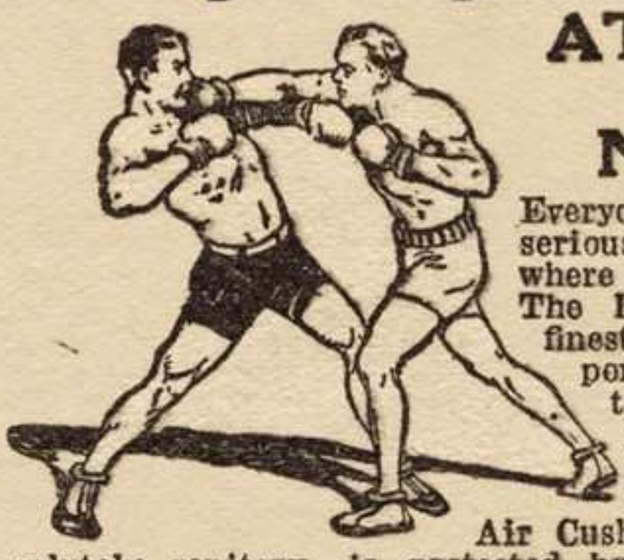
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"let us attend to our work downstairs. Much is to be done, and there is little time."

They retraced their steps, picking their way among the devil-worshipers that lay on the slippery stairs.

"Seven . . . eight," counted Ismeddin as he led the way, "nine . . . son of a disease, how did I miss you?"

The old man's blade drove home.

"Nine . . . ten . . . eleven," continued the darvish. "And now, when we release Saidi Rankin, we will see some fighting. The Father of Lies must step from his black throne and meet Abdemon, sword to sword. And if Abdemon defeats him, the promise of Suleiman will at last be kept."

"But he is a *kaffir!*" protested the Shareef. "And my brother's daughter——"

"Be that as it may. If Saidi Rankin wins, it will only be because it so pleases Allah. Would you rather leave her spirit in the hands of Shaitan the Damned? Give me a hand, here," directed Ismeddin, as they halted at the black altar on which the prisoners lay bound.

TOGETHER they pushed the massive block a dozen paces from the throne, then cut the cords that bound Rankin, and removed from between his teeth the piece of wood with which he had been gagged.

"Ismeddin!" gasped Rankin as he stretched his numbed limbs. "How much of this did you foresee?"

"All of it, *saidi,*" smiled the darvish. "Except the final outcome. And that, *inshallah,* depends on your sword."

Rankin leaped to the tiled floor and flexed his cramped legs. He stared in wonder at the unveiled features of Azizah.

"Allah, and again, by Allah! Neferte . . . after all these centuries. . . . Then give me a sword!"

"Presently, my lord, presently." And then, to the Shareef: "*Kaffir* or true believer, she is his . . . for even Satan's fortune can not last forever."

Whereupon Ismeddin with a piece of chalk traced on the floor a circle some ten paces in diameter; and at three of the four cardinal points of the compass he inscribed a curious symbol, and several characters in the ancient Kufic script. Then from his knapsack he took a small box whose contents, a fine, reddish powder, he poured evenly in a circle that inclosed the first circle drawn in chalk, except for a yard-long gap precisely in front of the dark stranger's throne.

"Saidi Rankin—Abdemon, as tonight you are—take your post," commanded the darvish. "Just a pace from the inner circumference, and facing that dark mocker on his lofty throne. Will you use my sword, or that of our lord, the Shareef?"

"Yours will bring me luck, Haaj Ismeddin," replied Rankin. "Though all swords are alike tonight," he concluded, as with a final glance at the sleeping loveliness on the porphyry block, he turned to belt Ismeddin's simitar to his waist.

"No scabbards tonight," directed the darvish. "Take only the blade."

As Rankin took his post, Ismeddin advanced to the foot of the dais. Extending his arms, Ismeddin began his invocation:

"Father of Mockeries, Master of Deceptions," he intoned, "the dusty centuries are weary of your dominion. The word of Suleiman seeks its fulfilment, and the servant of Suleiman awaits your awakening. Dark Prince, Black Lord, the circle of your destiny has been drawn, and a doom awaits you with a sword."

The darvish advanced a step of the ascent to the dais.

"I know your hidden name, and I can speak it to your ruin," continued the darvish; and thus, step by step, he ascended. But on the last step, instead of speaking aloud, he leaned forward and whispered in the ear of the Dark Prince.

"Harkening and obedience," growled the Presence. And like a doom that marches down the corridors of the world, he strode down the steps of his dais and entered the circle, facing Rankin.

As he crossed the inner circumference, Ismeddin drew at the fourth cardinal point characters and symbols resembling those at the other three; and with a remnant of the red powder, he completed the outer circle. And all the while the Dark Presence stared at Rankin and beyond him cool and unconcerned, scorning even to smile his scorn.

Ismeddin then struck light to the circle of powder. A tall, unwavering green flame crept along the circumference, until Rankin and his opponent were inclosed in a waist-high wall of fire: and this incredible flame emitted an overpowering sweetness that made Rankin's senses reel.

He saw nebulous forms gathering behind the Dark Prince, and crowding against the wall of flame. They muttered to each other, and with their left hands made curious signs. Then, from a great distance, Rankin heard the thump-thump of a drum, and the solemn voice of Ismeddin:

"Abdemon, friend of Suleiman; and you, Iblis, bound to human form, stand in this circle which is neither earth nor high heaven, nor the house of everlasting fire: and this circle but one of you may leave."

A pause; and then Ismeddin's command: "Strike!"

The drum resumed its savage muttering; and the opponents, swords advanced, circled warily, each seeking an opening in the other's guard. Then swift as thought came a relentless whirlwind of steel that bore Rankin back, step by step. The green flames singed his kaftan. Rankin halted, flat-footed, parrying and returning, cut for cut. And from without the circle of quivering, leaping flame the little drum muttered fiercely the song of doom which old Ismeddin's knuck-

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les and finger tips coaxed from its head of serpent hide.

"In four lives you have failed!" taunted the Dark Prince as he paused in his attack, and relaxed, point lowered.

Rankin's blade wavered—groped—then sheared swiftly down and back in a drawing cut to the adversary's forearm.

"You improve with practise!" mocked the Dark Prince as Rankin's blade cut only the poison sweetness of the heavy air. "If you only had another life——"

Then he fell back before Rankin's renewed attack.

Clack-clack-click! Blade against blade, whirling, circling, yielding a step, gaining a step, traversing, dodging: parry, return, and cut again—an endless, deadly mill. The Dark Prince ceased smiling, and his breath came too fast for mockery. But Rankin's tough arm ached to the very shoulder from the merciless, biting assault of steel upon steel. And his head whirled from the everlasting mutter of the snakeskin drum. . . .

The figures crowding against the wall of green flame became more distinct. Their mumbled words became more plain. At times Rankin caught a word, and was glad that he could not understand all. . . .

Steel against steel . . . strength against strength . . . but ages of cunning against the wits of one short life: for only the body of that terrific adversary was human.

The tall flames were diminishing. With them would perish the last chance. Those who had crossed the Border to aid their Prince crowded against the barrier that would soon give way. Rankin wondered if Suleiman's shadowy presence was behind him; but he dared not glance back for even an instant.

The Dark Prince stood fast in the center of the circle, secure in his faultless defense. Rankin knew that when he had exhausted himself against that flashing barrier of steel, the enemy would resume his deadly assault. Six to one in a side street . . . that was easy . . . but this thirsty blade would soon drink deep. . . . Rankin's arm was numb, and his parry against those biting swift returns was ragged. Just one slip—and that would be any moment now. . . .

The enemy's eye shifted ever so slightly. He measured the height of the diminishing green flame, and smiled again.

Then Rankin cut to the head. The adversary parried, and the hungry blade flamed swiftly in return——

Rankin could not parry. But stretched out in a full lunge, he passed beneath the shearing steel, and drove home with his point——

The green flame flickered and died.

Rankin, still clutching his blade, lurched forward on his face as the Dark Prince crumpled in a heap on the tiles. But before the blackness descended, Rankin caught a glimpse of the shadowy figure of a bearded king who bowed and extended his arm in salutation. And this time the smiling loveliness of the girl at his side was not obscured by any veil. . . .

A strong hand gripped Rankin's shoulder, pulled him back to his knees, and lifted him to his feet.

"*Wallah!*" marveled the Shareef. "*Kaffir* or not, he is the father of all swordsmen! I knew that his head would be clipped off. And then he stretched out and impaled that son of confusion. . . . Look! That stroke sheared off a bit of his turban. Allah, and again, by Allah!"

"Then give him his prize, *saidi*," replied Ismeddin. And to Azizah, who sat upright and wondering on the polished black sacrificial stone: "You need no veil, *ya bint!* After all these dusty centuries, you are his."

Ismeddin turned to the Shareef: "As for me, *saidi*, I will be content

with but one of those *asil* mares you wagered against my cracked head."

"So be it," laughed the Shareef, as he led the way up the blood-drenched stairs. "Though doubtless you will steal the other in due course!"

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A Ghost*

By GUY DE MAUPASSANT

WE WERE speaking of sequestration, alluding to a recent lawsuit. It was at the close of a friendly evening in a very old mansion in the Rue de Grenelle, and each of the guests had a story to tell, which he assured us was true.

Then the old Marquis de la Tour-Samuel, eighty-two years of age, rose and came forward to lean on the mantelpiece. He told the following story in his slightly quavering voice.

"I, also, have witnessed a strange thing—so strange that it has been the nightmare of my life. It happened fifty-six years ago, and yet there is not a month when I do not see it again in my dreams. From that day I have borne a mark, a stamp of fear—do you understand?

"Yes, for ten minutes I was a prey to terror, in such a way that ever since a constant dread has remained in my soul. Unexpected sounds chill me to the heart; objects which I can ill distinguish in the evening shadows make me long to flee. I am afraid at night.

"No! I would not have owned such a thing before reaching my present age. But now I may tell everything. One may fear imaginary dangers at eighty-two years old. But before actual danger I have never turned back, *mesdames.*

"That affair so upset my mind,

*Translated from the French.

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filled me with such a deep, mysterious unrest that I never could tell it. I kept it in that inmost part, that corner where we conceal our sad, our shameful secrets, all the weaknesses of our life which can not be confessed.

"I will tell you that strange happening just as it took place, with no attempt to explain it. Unless I went mad for one short hour it must be explainable, though. Yet I was not mad, and I will prove it to you. Imagine what you will. Here are the simple facts:

"It was in 1827, in July. I was quartered with my regiment in Rouen.

"One day, as I was strolling on the quay, I came across a man I believed I recognized, though I could not place him with certainty. I instinctively went more slowly, ready to pause. The stranger saw my impulse, looked at me, and fell into my arms.

"It was a friend of my younger days, of whom I had been very fond. He seemed to have become half a century older in the five years since I had seen him. His hair was white, and he stooped in his walk, as if he were exhausted. He understood my amazement and told me the story of his life.

"A terrible event had broken him down. He had fallen madly in love with a young girl and married her in a kind of dream-like ecstasy. After a year of unalloyed bliss and unexhausted passion, she had died suddenly of heart disease, no doubt killed by love itself.

"He had left the country on the very day of her funeral, and had come to live in his hotel at Rouen. He remained there, solitary and desperate, grief slowly mining him, so wretched that he constantly thought of suicide.

" 'As I thus came across you again,' he said, 'I shall ask a great favor of you. I want you to go to my château and get some papers I urgently need. They are in the writing-desk of my room, of *our* room. I can not send a servant or a lawyer, as the errand must be kept private. I want absolute silence.

" 'I shall give you the key of the room, which I locked carefully myself before leaving, and the key to the writing-desk. I shall also give you a note for the gardener, who will let you in.

" 'Come to breakfast with me tomorrow, and we'll talk the matter over.'

"I promised to render him that slight service. It would mean but a pleasant excursion for me, his home being not more than twenty-five miles from Rouen. I could go there in an hour on horseback.

"At ten o'clock the next day I was with him. We breakfasted alone together, yet he did not utter more than twenty words. He asked me to excuse him. The thought that I was going to visit the room where his happiness lay shattered upset him, he said. Indeed, he seemed perturbed, worried, as if some mysterious struggle were taking place in his soul.

"At last he explained exactly what I was to do. It was very simple. I was to take two packages of letters and some papers, locked in the first drawer at the right of the desk of which I had the key. He added:

" 'I need not ask you not to glance at them.'

"I was almost hurt by his words, and told him so, rather sharply. He stammered: 'Forgive me. I suffer so much!'

"And tears came to his eyes.

"I LEFT about one o'clock to accomplish my errand.

"The day was radiant, and I rushed through the meadows, listening to the song of the larks, and the rhythmical beat of my sword on my riding-boots.

"Then I entered the forest, and I set my horse to walking. Branches of the trees softly caressed my face, and now and then I would catch a leaf between my teeth and bite it with

avidity, full of the joy of life, such as fills one without reason, with a tumultuous happiness almost indefinable, a kind of magical strength.

"As I neared the house I took out the letter for the gardener, and noted with surprize that it was sealed. I was so amazed and so annoyed that I almost turned back without fulfilling my mission. Then I thought that I should thus display over-sensitiveness and bad taste. My friend might have sealed it unconsciously, worried as he was.

"The manor looked as though it had been deserted the last twenty years. The gate, wide open and rotten, held, one wondered how. Grass filled the paths; I could not tell the flower-beds from the lawn.

"At the noise I made kicking a shutter, an old man came out from a side door and was apparently amazed to see me there. I dismounted from my horse and gave him the letter. He read it once or twice, turned it over, looked at me with suspicion, and asked: 'Well, what do you want?'

"I answered sharply: 'You must know, as you have read your master's orders. I want to get in the house.'

"He appeared overwhelmed. He said: 'So—you are going in—in his room?'

"I was getting impatient. '*Parbleu!* Do you intend to question me?'

"He stammered: 'No—*monsieur*—only—it has not been opened since—since the death. If you will wait five minutes, I will go in to see whether——'

"I interrupted angrily: 'See here, are you joking? You can't go in that room as I have the key!'

"He no longer knew what to say.

"'Then, *monsieur*, I will show you the way.'

"'Show me the stairs and leave me alone. I can find it without your help.'

"'But—still—*monsieur*——'

"Then I lost my temper. 'Now be quiet! Else you'll be sorry!'

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"I roughly pushed him aside and went into the house.

"I first went through the kitchen, then crossed two small rooms occupied by the man and his wife. From there I stepped into a large hall. I went up the stairs, and recognized the door my friend had described to me.

"I opened it with ease and went in.

"The room was so dark that at first I could not distinguish anything. I paused, arrested by that moldy and stale odor peculiar to deserted and condemned rooms, of dead rooms. Then gradually my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and I saw rather clearly a great room in disorder, a bed without sheets, having still its mattresses and pillows, one of which bore the deep print of an elbow or a head, as if someone had just been resting on it.

"The chairs seemed all in confusion. I noticed that a door, probably that of a closet, had remained ajar.

"I first went to the window and opened it to get some light, but the hinges of the outside shutters were so rusted that I could not loosen them.

"I even tried to break them with my sword, but did not succeed. As those fruitless attempts irritated me, and as my eyes were by now adjusted to the dim light, I gave up hope of getting more light and went toward the writing-desk.

"I sat down in an armchair, folded back the top, and opened the drawer. It was full to the edge. I needed but three packages, which I knew how to distinguish, and I started looking for them.

"I WAS straining my eyes to decipher the inscriptions, when I thought I heard, or rather felt, a rustle behind me. I took no notice, thinking a draft had lifted some curtain. But a minute later, another movement, almost indistinct, sent a disagreeable shiver over my skin. It was so ridiculous to be moved thus even so slightly, that I would not turn around, being ashamed. I had just discovered the second package I needed, and was on the point of reaching for the third, when a great and sorrowful sigh, close to my shoulder, made me give a mad leap two yards away. In my spring I had turned round, my hand on the hilt of my sword, and surely had I not felt that, I should have fled like a coward.

"A tall woman, dressed in white, was facing me, standing behind the chair in which I had sat a second before.

"Such a shudder ran through me that I almost fell back! Oh, no one who has not felt them can understand those gruesome and ridiculous terrors! Your soul melts; your heart seems to stop; your whole body becomes limp as a sponge, and your innermost parts seem collapsing.

"I do not believe in ghosts; and yet I broke down before the hideous fear of the dead; and I suffered, oh, I suffered more in a few minutes, in the irresistible anguish of supernatural dread, than I have suffered in all the rest of my life!

"If she had not spoken, I might have died. But she did speak; she spoke in a soft and plaintive voice which set my nerves vibrating. I could not say that I regained my self-control. No, I was past knowing what I did; but the kind of pride I have in me, as well as a military pride, helped me to maintain, almost in spite of myself, an honorable countenance. I was making a pose, a pose for myself, and for her, whatever she was, woman, or phantom. I realized this later, for at the time of the apparition I could think of nothing. I was afraid.

"She said: 'Oh, you can be of great help to me, *monsieur!*'

"I tried to answer, but I was unable to utter one word. A vague sound came from my throat.

"She continued: 'Will you? You can save me, cure me. I suffer terribly. I always suffer. I suffer, oh, I suffer!'

"And she sat down gently in my chair. She looked at me.

"'Will you?'

"I nodded my head, being still paralyzed.

"Then she handed me a woman's comb of tortoise-shell, and murmured: 'Comb my hair! Oh, comb my hair! That will cure me. Look at my head—how I suffer! And my hair—how it hurts!'

"Her loose hair, very long, very black, it seemed to me, hung over the back of the chair, touching the floor.

"Why did I do it? Why did I, shivering, accept that comb, and why did I take between my hands her long hair, which left on my skin a ghastly impression of cold, as if I had handled serpents? I do not know.

"That feeling still clings about my fingers, and I shiver when I recall it.

"I combed her, I handled, I know not how, that hair of ice. I bound and unbound it; I plaited it as one plaits a horse's mane. She sighed, bent her head, seemed happy.

"Suddenly she said, 'Thank you!' tore the comb from my hands, and fled through the door, which I had noticed was half opened.

"Left alone, I had for a few seconds the hazy feeling one feels in waking up from a nightmare. Then I recovered myself. I ran to the window and broke the shutters by my furious assault.

"A stream of light poured in. I rushed to the door through which that being had gone. I found it locked and immovable.

"Then a fever of flight seized on me, a panic, the true panic of battle. I quickly grasped the three packages of letters from the open desk; I crossed the room running; I took the steps of the stairway four at a time. I found myself outside, I don't know how, and seeing my horse close by, I mounted in one leap and left at a full gallop.

"I didn't stop till I reached Rouen



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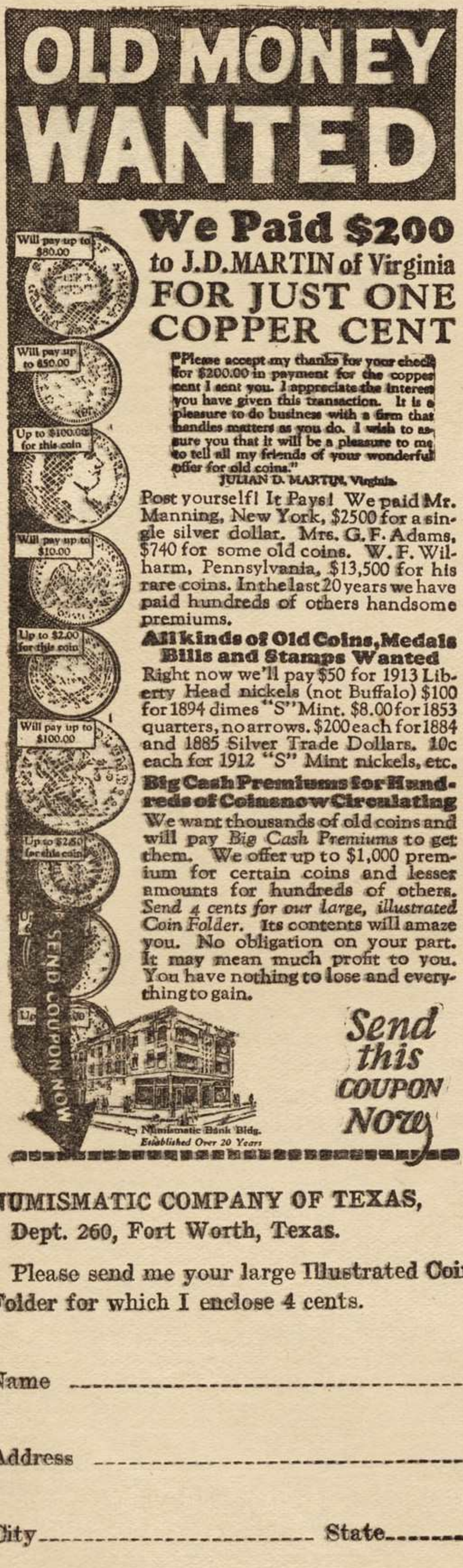
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and drew up in front of my house. Having thrown the reins to my orderly, I flew to my room and locked myself in to think.

"Then for an hour I asked myself whether I had not been the victim of an hallucination. Certainly I must have had one of those nervous shocks, one of those brain disorders such as give rise to miracles, to which the supernatural owes its strength.

"And I had almost concluded that it was a vision, an illusion of my senses, when I came near to the window. My eyes by chance looked down. My tunic was covered with hairs, long woman's hairs which had entangled themselves around the buttons!

"I took them off one by one and threw them out of the window with trembling fingers.

"I then called my orderly. I felt too perturbed, too moved, to go and see my friend on that day. Besides, I needed to think over what I should tell him.

"I had his letters delivered to him. He gave a receipt to the soldier. He inquired after me and was told that I was not well. I had had a sunstroke, or something. He seemed distressed.

"I went to see him the next day, early in the morning, bent on telling him the truth. He had gone out the evening before and had not come back.

"I returned the same day, but he had not been seen. I waited a week. He did not come back. I notified the police. They searched for him everywhere, but no one could find any trace of his passing or his retreat.

"A careful search was made in the deserted manor. No suspicious clue was discovered.

"There was no sign that a woman had been concealed there.

"The inquest gave no result, and so the search went no further.

"And in fifty-six years I have learned nothing more. I never found out the truth."



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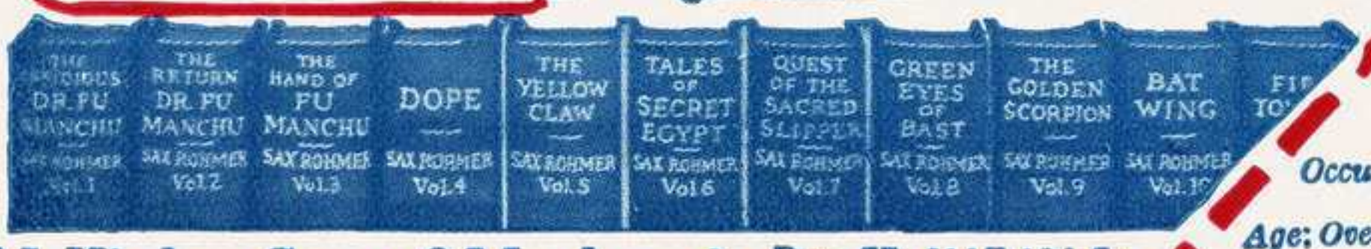
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"What? Learn Music by Mail?" *they laughed*



"Yes," I cried, "and I'll bet money I can do it!"

ONE day after lunch the office crowd was in the recreation-room, smoking and talking, while I thumbed through a magazine.

"Why so quiet, Joe," some one called to me. "Just reading an ad," I replied, "about a new way to learn music by mail. Says here anyone can learn to play in a few months at home, without a teacher. Sounds easy."

"Ha, ha," laughed Fred Lawrence, "do you suppose they would say it was *hard?*"

"Perhaps not," I came back, a bit peeved, "but it sounds so reasonable I thought I'd write them for their booklet."

Well, maybe I didn't get a razzing then! Fred Lawrence sneered: "The poor fellow *really* believes he can learn music by mail!"

"Yes, and I'll bet money I can do it!" I cried. But the crowd only laughed harder than ever.

During the few months that followed Fred Lawrence never missed a chance to give me a sly dig about my bet. And the boys always got a good laugh, too. But I never said a word. I was waiting patiently for a chance to get the *last* laugh *myself*.

My Chance Arrives

Then came the office outing at Pine Grove.

After lunch it rained, and we had to sit around inside. Suddenly some one spied a piano in the corner. Fred Lawrence saw a fine chance to have some fun at my expense.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried, "our friend Joe, the music-master, has consented to give us a recital."

That gave the boys a good laugh. Some of them got on either side of me and with mock dignity started to escort me to the piano.

"Play 'The Varsity Drag'," shouted Fred, thinking to embarrass me further. I heard a girl say, "Oh, let the poor fellow alone; can't you see he's mortified to death?"

The Last Laugh

I smiled to myself. This was certainly a wonderful setting for my little surprise party. Assuming a scared look, I began fingering the keys, and then . . . with a wonderful feeling of cool confidence . . . I broke right into the very selection Fred asked for. There was a sudden hush in the room as I made that old piano talk. But in a few minutes a fellow jumped to his feet and shouted. "Believe me, the boy is *there!* Let's dance."

Tables and chairs were pushed aside, and soon the whole crowd was having a whale of a time. I played one peppy selection after another until I finished with "Crazy Rhythm," and the crowd stopped dancing and singing to applaud me. As I turned around to thank them, there was Fred holding a tenspot under my nose.

"Folks," he said, "I want to apologize to Joe. I bet him he couldn't learn to play by mail, and believe me, he sure deserves to win the money!"

"Learn to play *by mail!*" exclaimed a dozen people. "That sounds impossible! Tell us how you did it!"

I was only too glad to tell them how I'd always wanted to play but couldn't afford a teacher, and couldn't think of spending years in practice. I described how I had read the U. S. School of Music ad and how Fred bet me I couldn't learn to play by mail.

"Folks," I continued, "it was the biggest surprise of my life when I got the first lesson. It was fun right from the start. everything as simple as A-B-C. There were no scales or tiresome exercises. And all it required was part of my spare time. In a short time I was playing jazz, classical pieces, and in fact, anything I wanted. Believe me, that certainly was a profitable bet I made with Fred."

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