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Weird Tales

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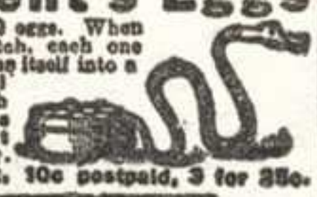
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A MAGAZINE of the BIZARRE and UNUSUAL



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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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A LETTER from Surrey, England, written by A. M. D. Pender, says: "WEIRD TALES is the only magazine I read directly I purchase it. There are two main features which make WEIRD TALES outstanding, or unique, among magazines. These are, first, the manner in which the contents are in accord with the title; and second, the high literary quality of its contents. My dictionary defines the word 'weird' as 'wild, eery, unearthly,' which gives scope for three entirely different types of stories. WEIRD TALES does not stick to one class of story only, regardless of the title, as do most magazines of its class, but its stories cover the whole sphere implied by the word 'weird.' Their quality is unquestionable, especially as your authors include such classic writers as E. F. Benson, Dumas, Gaston Leroux, etc. Now as regards the stories. Edmond Hamilton's stories of the Federation of the Suns are very good; in fact I think they are the best interplanetary stories now written. Please continue this series from time to time. Robert E. Howard is certainly a worthy successor to Sax Rohmer. His yarns are always reliable. By the way, speaking of Sax Rohmer, you may take the opportunity of reprinting one day this author's *Brood of the Witch Queen,* one of the best weird tales ever written."

"Every time I open a copy of WEIRD TALES," writes Charles D. Hornig, of Elizabeth, New Jersey, "I feel as if I am opening the pages of a lost book containing forgotten secrets. It is like delving into the unknown. Without doubt, *The Gods of Bal-Sagoth* by Robert E. Howard led all the stories in the October issue. Its colorful scenes, so vivid in your mind's eye, and its quick daring action of the two enemies working for one purpose certainly make it Howard's best. Although your other readers may not agree with me, in my opinion *The Red Sail,* by Craig, was second. I always did like tales of reincarnation anyway. *The Strange High House in the Mist* is not far behind. Lovecraft can always be depended upon."

Writes Mrs. G. M. Jackson, of Washington, D. C.: "WEIRD TALES is getting better and better, and it always has been good. It gets away from sappy love stories, of which I think all of the people are tired; yet there are enough love stories to hold the interest, only of a different brand. I like all your writers. Luck to them all and to you and your staff."

A letter from Howard J. Duerr, of Buffalo, says: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES almost *ab inito,* and never have I failed to be pleased with it. Where else can I find such writers as Ray Cummings, Edmond Hamilton, H. P. Lovecraft, or my two favorites—E. Hoffmann Price and Robert E. Howard? One of the features of the

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(Continued from page 580)

magazine I have always liked best has been its poems, some mediocre, some good, and others, such as H. P. Lovecraft's sonnets, exquisite."

Writes Miss M. Brink, of Woodhaven, Long Island: "I have read about three of your magazines and enjoyed them so much I am writing to tell you that yours is the spookiest magazine on the market. H. P. Lovecraft and Eleanor Smith certainly knew their stuff when they wrote *Satan's Circus* and *The Strange High House in the Mist.* They both write so convincingly that I look over my shoulder sometimes to see if a vampire or black spirit is after me. Your cover designs are nice, but couldn't they be a little more gruesome?"

"Your September number was unusually interesting," writes Duke Williamson, of Springfield, Massachusetts. "The most unusual tale is probably Smith's *Voyage to Sfanomoë.* The story is exquisitely worded, written in a classic style of which the author is a master. In my opinion, it is fully competent to stand with his *The End of the Story, Sadastor,* and *The Last Incantation.* Of course the most powerful tale is that chilling masterwork by H. P. Lovecraft. Before you read a page of a Lovecraft story you are engulfed in a whirlpool, as it were, of deep mists, eery whispers and deadly foreboding which continues and rises until the very last page, when the climax shatters all and leaves the reader breathless. The above may seem foolish; but Lovecraft's superb tales are so powerful that they affect me for days. By no means secondary are the vivid and brilliant descriptions with which Mr. Lovecraft paints his backgrounds; one could actually *hear* those swirling, trickling brooks, those buzzing voices, and the wind in the trees, through the magic of the author's words."

Laurence Vibbert, of Waterville, Connecticut, writes to the Eyrie: "The September issue of WEIRD TALES was by far the best you have published in a long time. It seemed good to greet Jules de Grandin and Solomon Kane once again. *Satan's Stepson* is one of Quinn's best. *Deadlock,* by Everil Worrell, was one of the best weird-scientific stories I ever read. Originality must be that author's middle name. *Tam, Son of the Tiger,* is the fastest-moving serial you have ever given us, with *The Wolf-Leader* a close second."

Carlyle J. Bessette, of Charlotte, Vermont, writes to the Eyrie: "*Tam, Son of the Tiger,* is the best serial you have published. I enjoy the weird stories very much, but the scientific type are my favorites and I would like to see more of them. Clark Ashton Smith is your best author. His *The Immeasurable Horror* was certainly a masterpiece. Let's have more of Kline, too."

"Although I have been a subscriber of yours for some time," writes John Parsons, "I have never before taken the liberty of expressing my opinion of your stories. I can only say that I am deeply grateful to you for publishing a magazine of the type of W. T. It can lift me out of the daily grind with stories which are the very antithesis of the adventures met with in our ordinary humdrum existence. I like the diversity of your stories, chilling horror, fantasy, scientific and futuristic, blended in each issue, some with a convincing simplicity worthy of Dunsany, others with a touch of sheer beauty worthy of Wells at his best. I like the piquant and thrillingly beautiful short

(Please turn to page 584)



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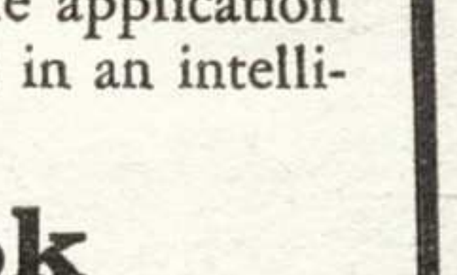
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(Continued from page 582)

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J. D. Arden, of Detroit, who is an admirer of Edmond Hamilton, writes to the Eyrie: "I am making a plea for the quick return to your pages of the Interstellar Patrol. It is a year now since we have read about the interesting adventures of the races of the far future who patrol the limits of the Galaxy in outer space. A year is much too long to wait for a story about the Federation of Suns. Let us have them oftener. That intrepid trio, Dur Nal, Jhul Din and Korus Kan (whom I became acquainted with in that epoch-making serial *Outside the Universe,* and again in *The Cosmic Cloud)* have made me look with great eagerness for another story featuring them."

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THE DARK MAN

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A red-blooded story of the old, heroic days when the Norsemen were raiding the coasts of Ireland, killing the men and carrying off the women

"For this is the night of the drawing of swords,
And the painted tower of the heathen hordes
Leans to our hammers, fires and cords,
Leans a little and falls."

—Chesterton.

A BITING wind drifted the snow as it fell. The surf snarled along the rugged shore and farther out the long leaden combers moaned ceaselessly.



"Two men blocked his way with drawn swords before he could reach Thorfel!"

Through the gray dawn that was stealing over the coast of Connacht a fisherman came trudging, a man rugged as the land that bore him. His feet were wrapped in rough cured leather; a single garment of deerskin scantily sheltered his body. He wore no other clothing. As he strode stolidly along the shore, as heedless of the bitter cold as if he were the shaggy beast he appeared at first glance, he halted. Another man loomed up out of the veil of falling snow and drifting sea-mist. Turlogh Dubh stood before him.

This man was nearly a head taller than the stocky fisherman, and he had the bearing of a fighting man. No single glance would suffice, but any man or woman whose eyes fell on Turlogh Dubh would look long. Six feet and one inch he stood, and the first impression of slimness faded on closer inspection. He

was big but trimly molded; a magnificent sweep of shoulder and depth of chest. Rangy he was, but compact, combining the strength of a bull with the lithe quickness of a panther. The slightest movement he made showed that steel trap coordination that makes the super-fighter. Turlogh Dubh—Black Turlogh, once of the Clan na O'Brien.* And black he was as to hair, and dark of complexion. From under heavy black brows gleamed eyes of a hot volcanic blue. And in his clean-shaven face there was something of the somberness of dark mountains, of the ocean at midnight. Like the fisherman, he was a part of this fierce western land.

On his head he wore a plain vizorless helmet without crest or symbol. From neck to mid-thigh he was protected by a close-fitting shirt of black chain mail. The kilt he wore below his armor and which reached to his knees, was of plain drab material. His legs were wrapped with hard leather that might turn a sword edge, and the shoes on his feet were worn with much traveling.

A broad belt encircled his lean waist, holding a long dirk in a leather sheath. On his left arm he carried a small round shield of hide-covered wood, hard as iron, braced and reinforced with steel, and having a short, heavy spike in the center. An ax hung from his right wrist, and it was to this feature that the fisherman's eyes wandered. The weapon with its three-foot handle and graceful lines looked slim and light when the fisherman mentally compared it to the great axes carried by the Norsemen. Yet scarcely three years had passed, as the fisherman knew, since such axes as these had shattered the northern hosts into red defeat and broken the pagan power forever.

There was individuality about the ax as about its owner. It was not like any other the fisherman had ever seen. Single-edged it was, with a short three-edged spike on the back and another on the top of the head. Like the wielder, it was heavier than it looked. With its slightly curved shaft and the graceful artistry of the blade, it looked the weapon of an expert—swift, lethal, deadly, cobra-like. The head was of finest Irish workmanship, which meant, at that day, the finest in the world. The handle, cut from the heart of a century-old oak, specially fire-hardened and braced with steel, was as unbreakable as an iron bar.

"Who are you?" asked the fisherman with the bluntness of the west.

"Who are you to ask?" answered the other.

The fisherman's eyes roved to the single ornament the warrior wore—a heavy golden armlet on his left arm.

"Clean-shaven and close-cropped in the Norman fashion," he muttered. "And dark—you'd be Black Turlogh, the outlaw of Clan na O'Brien. You range far; I heard of you last in the Wicklow hills preying off the O'Reillys and the Oastmen alike."

"A man must eat, outcast or not," growled the Dalcassian.

The fisherman shrugged his shoulders. A masterless man—it was a hard road. In those days of clans, when a man's own kin cast him out he became a son of Ishmael with a vengeance. All men's hands were against him. The fisherman had heard of Turlogh Dubh—a strange, bitter man, a terrible warrior and a crafty strategist, but one whom sudden bursts of strange madness made a marked man even in that land and age of madmen.

"It's a bitter day," said the fisherman apropos of nothing.

Turlogh stared somberly at his tangled

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*To avoid confusion I have used the modern terms for places and clans.—AUTHOR.

beard and wild matted hair. "Have you a boat?"

The other nodded toward a small sheltered cove where lay snugly anchored a trim craft built with the skill of a hundred generations of men who had torn their livelihood from the stubborn sea.

"It scarce looks seaworthy," said Turlogh.

"Seaworthy? You who were born and bred on the western coast should know better. I've sailed her alone to Drumcliff Bay and back, and all the devils in the wind ripping at her."

"You can't take fish in such a sea."

"Do ye think it's only you chiefs that take sport in risking their hides? By the saints, I've sailed to Ballinskellings in a storm—and back too—just for the fun of the thing."

"Good enough," said Turlogh. "I'll take your boat."

"Ye'll take the devil! What kind of talk is this? If you want to leave Erin, go to Dublin and take ship with your Dane friends."

A black scowl made Turlogh's face a mask of menace. "Men have died for less than that."

"Did you not intrigue with the Danes? —and is that not why your clan drove you out to starve in the heather?"

"The jealousy of a cousin and the spite of a woman," growled Turlogh. "Lies—all lies. But enough. Have you seen a long serpent beating up from the south in the last few days?"

"Aye—three days ago we sighted a dragon-beaked galley before the scud. But she didn't put in—faith, the pirates get naught from the western fishers but hard blows."

"That would be Thorfel the Fair," muttered Turlogh, swaying his ax by its wrist-strap. "I knew it."

"There has been a ship-harrying in the south?"

"A band of reavers fell by night on the castle on Kilbaha. There was a sword-quenching—and the pirates took Moira, daughter of Murtagh, a chief of the Dalcassians."

"I've heard of her," muttered the fisherman. "There'll be a whetting of swords in the south—a red sea-plowing, eh, my black jewel?"

"Her brother Dermod lies helpless from a sword-cut in the foot. The lands of her clan are harried by the MacMurroughs in the east and the O'Connors from the north. Not many men can be spared from the defense of the tribe, even to seek for Moira—the clan is fighting for its life. All Erin is rocking under the Dalcassian throne since great Brian fell. Even so, Cormac O'Brien has taken ship to hunt down her ravishers—but he follows the trail of a wild goose, for it is thought the raiders were Danes from Coningbeg. Well—we outcasts have ways of knowledge—it was Thorfel the Fair who holds the isle of Slyne, that the Norse call Helni, in the Hebrides. There he has taken her—there I follow him. Lend me your boat."

"You are mad!" cried the fisherman sharply. "What are you saying? From Connacht to the Hebrides in an open boat? In this weather? I say you are mad."

"I will essay it," answered Turlogh absently. "Will you lend me your boat?"

"No."

"I might slay you and take it," said Turlogh.

"You might," returned the fisherman stolidly.

"You crawling swine," snarled the out-

law in swift passion, "a princess of Erin languishes in grip of a red-bearded reaver of the north and you haggle like a Saxon."

"Man, I must live!" cried the fisherman as passionately. "Take my boat and I shall starve! Where can I get another like it? It is the cream of its kind!"

Turlogh reached for the armlet on his left arm. "I will pay you. Here is a torc that Brian Boru put on my arm with his own hand before Clontarf. Take it; it would buy a hundred boats. I have starved with it on my arm, but now the need is desperate."

But the fisherman shook his head, the strange illogic of the Gael burning in his eyes. "No! My hut is no place for a torc that King Brian's hands have touched. Keep it—and take the boat, in the name of the saints, if it means that much to you."

"You shall have it back when I return," promised Turlogh, "and mayhap a golden chain that now decks the bull neck of some northern rover."

THE day was sad and leaden. The wind moaned and the everlasting monotone of the sea was like the sorrow that is born in the heart of man. The fisherman stood on the rocks and watched the frail craft glide and twist serpent-like among the rocks until the blast of the open sea smote it and tossed it like a feather. The wind caught the sail and the slim boat leaped and staggered, then righted herself and raced before the gale, dwindling until it was but a dancing speck in the eyes of the watcher. And then a flurry of snow hid it from his sight.

Turlogh realized something of the madness of his pilgrimage. But he was bred to hardships and peril. Cold and ice and driving sleet that would have frozen a weaker man, only spurred him to greater efforts. He was as hard and supple as a wolf. Among a race of men whose hardiness astounded even the toughest Norseman, Turlogh Dubh stood out alone. At birth he had been tossed into a snow-drift to test his right to survive. His childhood and boyhood had been spent on the mountains, coast and moors of the west. Until manhood he had never worn woven cloth upon his body; a wolf-skin had formed the apparel of this son of a Dalcassian chief. Before his outlawry he could out-tire a horse, running all day long beside it. He had never wearied at swimming. Now, since the intrigues of jealous clansmen had driven him into the wastelands and the life of the wolf, his ruggedness was such as can not be conceived by a civilized man.

The snow ceased, the weather cleared, the wind held. Turlogh necessarily hugged the coast line, avoiding the reefs against which it seemed again and again that his craft would be dashed. With tiller, sail and oar he worked tirelessly. Not one man out of a thousand of seafarers could have accomplished it, but Turlogh did. He needed no sleep; as he steered he ate from the rude provisions the fisherman had provided him. By the time he sighted Malin Head the weather had calmed wonderfully. There was still a heavy sea, but the gale had slackened to a sharp breeze that sent the little boat skipping along. Days and nights merged into each other; Turlogh drove eastward. Once he put into shore for fresh water and to snatch a few hours' sleep.

As he steered he thought of the fisherman's last words: "Why should you risk your life for a clan that's put a price on your head?"

Turlogh shrugged his shoulders. Blood was thicker than water. The mere fact that his people had booted him out to die

like a hunted wolf on the moors did not alter the fact that they *were* his people. Little Moira, daughter of Murtagh na Kilbaha, had nothing to do with it. He remembered her—he had played with her when he was a boy and she a babe—he remembered the deep grayness of her eyes and the burnished sheen of her black hair, the fairness of her skin. Even as a child she had been remarkably beautiful—why, she was only a child now, for he, Turlogh, was young and he was many years her senior. Now she was speeding north to become the unwilling bride of a Norse reaver. Thorfel the Fair—the Handsome—Turlogh swore by gods that knew not the Cross. A red mist waved across his eyes so that the rolling sea swam crimson all about him. An Irish girl a captive in the skalli of a Norse pirate—with a vicious wrench Turlogh turned his bows straight for the open sea. There was a tinge of madness in his eyes.

It is a long slant from Malin Head to Helni straight out across the foaming billows, as Turlogh took it. He was aiming for a small island that lay, with many other small islands, between Mull and the Hebrides. A modern seaman with charts and compass might have difficulty in finding it. Turlogh had neither. He sailed by instinct and through knowledge. He knew these seas as a man knows his house. He had sailed them as a raider and an avenger, and once he had sailed them as a captive lashed to the deck of a Danish dragon ship. And he followed a red trail. Smoke drifting from headlands, floating pieces of wreckage, charred timbers showed that Thorfel was ravaging as he went. Turlogh growled in savage satisfaction; he was close behind the viking, in spite of the long lead. For Thorfel was burning and pillaging the shores as he went, and Turlogh's course was like an arrow's.

He was still a long way from Helni when he sighted a small island slightly off his course. He knew it of old as one uninhabited, but there he could get fresh water. So he steered for it. The Isle of Swords it was called, no man knew why. And as he neared the beach he saw a sight which he rightly interpreted. Two boats were drawn up on the shelving shore. One was a crude affair, something like the one Turlogh had, but considerably larger. The other was a long low craft—undeniably viking. Both were deserted. Turlogh listened for the clash of arms, the cry of battle, but silence reigned. Fishers, he thought, from the Scotch isles; they had been sighted by some band of rovers on ship or on some other island, and had been pursued in the long rowboat. But it had been a longer chase than they had anticipated, he was sure; else they would not have started out in an open boat. But inflamed with the murder lust, the reavers would have followed their prey across a hundred miles of rough water, in an open boat, if necessary.

TURLOGH drew inshore, tossed over the stone that served for anchor and leaped upon the beach, ax ready. Then up the shore a short distance he saw a strange red huddle of forms. A few swift strides brough him face to face with mystery. Fifteen red-bearded Danes lay in their own gore in a rough circle. Not one breathed. Within this circle, mingling with the bodies of their slayers, lay other men, such as Turlogh had never seen. Short of stature they were, and very dark; their staring dead eyes were the blackest Turlogh had ever seen. They were scantily armored, and their stiff hands still gripped broken swords and daggers. Here and there lay arrows that had shattered on the corselets of the Danes, and Turlogh observed with surprize that many of them were tipped with flint.

"This was a grim fight," he muttered, "Aye, this was a rare sword-quenching. Who are these people? In all the isles I have never seen their like before. Seven—is that all? Where are their comrades who helped them slay these Danes?"

No tracks led away from the bloody spot. Turlogh's brow darkened.

"These were all—seven against fifteen—yet the slayers died with the slain. What manner of men are these who slay twice their number of vikings? They are small men—their armor is mean. Yet——"

Another thought struck him. Why did not the strangers scatter and flee, hide themselves in the woods? He believed he knew the answer. There, at the very center of the silent circle, lay a strange thing. A statue it was of some dark substance and it was in the form of a man. Some five feet long—or high—it was, carved in a semblance of life that made Turlogh start. Half over it lay the corpse of an ancient man, hacked almost beyond human semblance. One lean arm was locked about the figure; the other was outstretched, the hand gripping a flint dagger which was sheathed to the hilt in the breast of a Dane. Turlogh noted the fearful wounds that disfigured all the dark men. They had been hard to kill—they had fought until literally hacked to pieces, and dying, they had dealt death to their slayers. So much Turlogh's eyes showed him. In the dead faces of the dark strangers was a terrible desperation. He noted how their dead hands were still locked in the beards of their foes. One lay beneath the body of a huge Dane, and on this Dane Turlogh could see no wound; until he looked closer and saw the dark man's teeth were sunk, beast-like, into the bull throat of the other.

He bent and dragged the figure from among the bodies. The ancient's arm was locked about it, and he was forced to tear it away with all his strength. It was as if, even in death, the old one clung to his treasure; for Turlogh felt that it was for this image that the small dark men had died. They might have scattered and eluded their foes, but that would have meant giving up their image. They chose to die beside it. Turlogh shook his head; his hatred of the Norse, a heritage of wrongs and outrages, was a burning, living thing, almost an obsession, that at times drove him to the point of insanity. There was, in his fierce heart, no room for mercy; the sight of these Danes, lying dead at his feet, filled him with savage satisfaction. Yet he sensed here, in these silent dead men, a passion stronger than his. Here was some driving impulse deeper than his hate. Aye—and older. These little men seemed very ancient to him, not old as individuals are old, but old as a race is old. Even their corpses exuded an intangible aura of the primeval. And the image——

The Gael bent and grasped it, to lift it. He expected to encounter great weight and was astonished. It was no heavier than if it had been made of light wood. He tapped it, and the sound was solid. At first he thought it was of iron; then he decided it was of stone, but such stone as he had never seen; and he felt that no such stone was to be found in the British Isles or anywhere in the world he knew. For like the little dead men it looked *old*. It was as smooth and free from corrosion as if carved yesterday, but for all that, it was a symbol of antiquity, Turlogh knew. It was the figure of a man who much resembled the small dark men who lay about it. But it differed subtly. Turlogh felt somehow that this was the image of a man who had lived long ago, for surely the unknown sculptor had had a living model. And he had contrived to breathe a touch of life into his work. There was the sweep of the shoulders, the depth of the chest, the powerfully molded

arms; the strength of the features was evident. The firm jaw, the regular nose, the high forehead, all indicated a powerful intellect, a high courage, an inflexible will. Surely, thought Turlogh, this man was a king—or a god. Yet he wore no crown; his only garment was a sort of loin-cloth, wrought so cunningly that every wrinkle and fold was carved as in reality.

"This was their god," mused Turlogh, looking about him. "They fled before the Danes—but died for their god at last. Who are these people? Whence come they? Whither were they bound?"

He stood, leaning on his ax, and a strange tide rose in his soul. A sense of mighty abysses of time and space opened before; of the strange, endless tides of mankind that drift for ever; of the waves of humanity that wax and wane with the waxing and waning of the sea-tides. Life was a door opening upon two black, unknown worlds—and how many races of men with their hopes and fears, their loves and their hates, had passed through that door—on their pilgrimage from the dark to the dark? Turlogh sighed. Deep in his soul stirred the mystic sadness of the Gael.

"You were a king, once, Dark Man," he said to the silent image. "Mayhap you were a god and reigned over all the world. Your people passed—as mine are passing. Surely you were a king of the Flint People, the race whom my Celtic ancestors destroyed. Well—we have had our day and we, too, are passing. These Danes who lie at your feet—they are the conquerors now. They must have their day—but they too will pass. But you shall go with me, Dark Man, king, god or devil though you be. Aye, for it is in my mind that you will bring me luck, and luck is what I shall need when I sight Helni, Dark Man."

TURLOGH bound the image securely in the bows. Again he set out for his sea-plowing. Now the skies grew gray and the snow fell in driving lances that stung and cut. The waves were gray-grained with ice and the winds bellowed and beat on the open boat. But Turlogh feared not. And his boat rode as it had never ridden before. Through the roaring gale and the driving snow it sped, and to the mind of the Dalcassian it seemed that the Dark Man lent him aid. Surely he had been lost a hundred times without supernatural assistance. With all his skill at boat-handling he wrought, and it seemed to him that there was an unseen hand on the tiller, and at the oar; that more than human skill aided him when he trimmed his sail.

And when all the world was a driving white veil in which even the Gael's sense of direction was lost, it seemed to him that he was steering in compliance with a silent voice that spoke in the dim reaches of his consciousness. Nor was he surprized when at last, when the snow had ceased and the clouds had rolled away beneath a cold silvery moon, he saw land loom up ahead and recognized it as the isle of Helni. More, he knew that just around a point of land was the bay where Thorfel's dragon ship was moored when not ranging the seas, and a hundred yards back from the bay lay Thorfel's skalli. He grinned fiercely. All the skill in the world could not have brought him to this exact spot—it was pure luck—no, it was more than luck. Here was the best place possible for him to make an approach—within half a mile of his foe's hold, yet hidden from sight of any watchers by this jutting promontory. He glanced at the Dark Man in the bows—brooding, inscrutable as the sphinx. A strange feeling stole over the Gael—that all this was his work; that he, Turlogh, was only a pawn in the game. What was this fet-

ish? What grim secret did those carven eyes hold? Why did the dark little men fight so terribly for him?

Turlogh ran his boat inshore, into a small creek. A few yards up this he anchored and stepped out on shore. A last glance at the brooding Dark Man in the bows, and he turned and went hurriedly up the slope of the promontory, keeping to cover as much as possible. At the top of the slope he gazed down on the other side. Less than half a mile away Thorfel's dragon ship lay at anchor. And there lay Thorfel's skalli, also the long low building of rough-hewn log emitting the gleams that betokened the roaring fires within. Shouts of wassail came clearly to the listener through the sharp still air. He ground his teeth. Wassail! Aye, they were celebrating the ruin and destruction they had committed—the homes left in smoking embers—the slain men—the ravished girls. They were lords of the world, these vikings—all the southland lay helpless beneath their swords. The southland folk lived only to furnish them sport—and slaves—Turlogh shuddered violently and shook as if in a chill. The blood-sickness was on him like a physical pain, but he fought back the mists of passion that clouded his brain. He was here, not to fight but to steal away the girl they had stolen.

He took careful note of the ground, like a general going over the plan of his campaign. He noted that the trees grew thick close behind the skalli; that the smaller houses, the storehouses and servants' huts were between the main building and the bay. A huge fire was blazing down by the shore and a few carles were roaring and drinking about it, but the fierce cold had driven most of them into the drinking-hall of the main building.

Turlogh crept down the thickly wooded slope, entering the forest which swept about in a wide curve away from the shore. He kept to the fringe of its shadows, approaching the skalli in a rather indirect route, but afraid to strike out boldly in the open lest he be seen by the watchers that Thorfel surely had out. Gods, if he only had the warriors of Clare at his back as he had of old! Then there would be no skulking like a wolf among the trees! His hand locked like iron on his ax-haft as he visualized the scene—the charge, the shouting, the blood-letting, the play of the Dalcassian axes—he sighed. He was a lone outcast; never again would he lead the swordsmen of his clan to battle.

He dropped suddenly in the snow behind a low shrub and lay still. Men were approaching from the same direction in which he had come—men who grumbled loudly and walked heavily. They came into sight—two of them, huge Norse warriors, their silver-scaled armor flashing in the moonlight. They were carrying something between them with difficulty and to Turlogh's amazement he saw it was the Dark Man. His consternation at the realization that they had found his boat was gulfed in a greater astonishment. These men were giants; their arms bulged with iron muscles. Yet they were staggering under what seemed a stupendous weight. In their hands the Dark Man seemed to weigh hundreds of pounds; yet Turlogh had lifted it lightly as a feather! He almost swore in his amazement. Surely these men were drunk. One of them spoke, and Turlogh's short neck hairs bristled at the sound of the guttural accents, as a dog will bristle at the sight of a foe.

"Let it down; Thor's death, the thing weighs a ton. Let's rest."

The other grunted a reply and they began to ease the image to the earth. Then one of them lost his hold on it; his hand

slipped and the Dark Man crashed heavily into the snow. The first speaker howled.

"You clumsy fool, you dropped it on my foot! Curse you, my ankle's broken!"

"It twisted out of my hand!" cried the other. "The thing's alive, I tell you!"

"Then I'll slay it," snarled the lamed viking, and drawing his sword, he struck savagely at the prostrate figure. Fire flashed as the blade shivered into a hundred pieces, and the other Norseman howled as a flying sliver of steel gashed his cheek.

"The devil's in it!" shouted the other, throwing his hilt away. "I've not even scratched it! Here, take hold—let's get it into the ale-hall and let Thorfel deal with it."

"Let it lie," growled the second man, wiping the blood from his face. "I'm bleeding like a butchered hog. Let's go back and tell Thorfel that there's no ship stealing on the island. That's what he sent us to the point to see."

"What of the boat where we found this?" snapped the other. "Some Scotch fisher driven out of his course by the storm and hiding like a rat in the woods now, I guess. Here, bear a hand; idol or devil, we'll carry this to Thorfel."

Grunting with the effort, they lifted the image once more and went on slowly, one groaning and cursing as he limped along, the other shaking his head from time to time as the blood got into his eyes.

Turlogh rose stealthily and watched them. A touch of chilliness traveled up and down his spine. Either of these men was as strong as he, yet it was taxing their powers to the utmost to carry what he had handled easily. He shook his head and took up his way again.

At last he reached a point in the woods nearest the skalli. Now was the crucial test. Somehow he must reach that building and hide himself, unperceived. Clouds were gathering. He waited until one obscured the moon, and in the gloom that followed, ran swiftly and silently across the snow, crouching. A shadow out of the shadows he seemed. The shouts and songs from within the long building were deafening. Now he was close to its side, flattening himself against the rough-hewn logs. Vigilance was most certainly relaxed now—yet what foe should Thorfel expect, when he was friends with all northern reavers, and none else could be expected to fare forth on a night such as this had been?

A shadow among the shadows, Turlogh stole about the house. He noted a side door and slid cautiously to it. Then he drew back close against the wall. Some one within was fumbling at the latch. Then the door was flung open and a big warrior lurched out, slamming the door to behind him. Then he saw Turlogh. His bearded lips parted, but in that instant the Gael's hands shot to his throat and locked there like a wolf-trap. The threatened yell died in a gasp. One hand flew to Turlogh's wrist, the other drew a dagger and stabbed upward. But already the man was senseless; the dagger rattled feebly against the outlaw's corselet and dropped into the snow. The Norseman sagged in his slayer's grasp, his throat literally crushed by that iron grip. Turlogh flung him contemptuously into the snow and spat in his dead face before he turned again to the door.

THE latch had not fastened within. The door sagged a trifle. Turlogh peered in and saw an empty room, piled with ale barrels. He entered noiselessly, shutting the door but not latching it. He thought of hiding his victim's body, but he did not know how he could do it. He must trust to luck that no one saw it in the deep snow where it lay. He

crossed the room and found it let into another parallel with the outer wall. This was also a storeroom, and was empty. From this a doorway, without a door but furnished with a curtain of skins, let into the main hall, as Turlogh could tell from the sounds on the other side. He peered out cautiously.

He was looking into the drinking-hall —the great hall which served as banquet, council and living-hall of the master of the skalli. This hall, with its smoke-blackened rafters, great roaring fireplaces, and heavily laden boards, was a scene of terrific revelry tonight. Huge warriors with golden beards and savage eyes sat or lounged on the rude benches, strode about the hall or sprawled full length on the floor. They drank mightily from foaming horns and leathern jacks, and gorged themselves on great pieces of rye bread, and huge chunks of meat they cut with their daggers from whole roasted joints. It was a scene of strange incongruity, for in contrast with these barbaric men and their rough songs and shouts, the walls were hung with rare spoils that betokened civilized workmanship. Fine tapestries that Norman women had worked; richly chased weapons that princes of France and Spain had wielded; armor and silken garments from Byzantium and the Orient—for the dragon ships ranged far. With these were placed the spoils of the hunt, to show the viking's mastery of beasts as well as men.

The modern man can scarcely conceive of Turlogh O'Brien's feeling toward these men. To him they were devils—ogres who dwelt in the north only to descend on the peaceful people of the south. All the world was their prey to pick and choose, to take and spare as it pleased their barbaric whims. His brain throbbed and burned as he gazed. As only the Gael can hate, he hated them—their magnificent arrogance, their pride and their power, their contempt for all other races, their stern, forbidding eyes—above all else he hated the eyes that looked scorn and menace on the world. The Gaels were cruel but they had strange moments of sentiment and kindness. There was no sentiment in the Norse make-up.

The sight of this revelry was like a slap in Black Turlogh's face, and only one thing was needed to make his madness complete. This was furnished. At the head of the board sat Thorfel the Fair, young, handsome, arrogant, flushed with wine and pride. He *was* handsome, was young Thorfel. In build he much resembled Turlogh himself, except that he was larger in every way, but there the resemblance ceased. As Turlogh was exceptionally dark among a dark people, Thorfel was exceptionally blond among a people essentially fair. His hair and mustache were like fine-spun gold and his light gray eyes flashed scintillant lights. By his side—Turlogh's nails bit into his palms. Moira of the O'Briens seemed greatly out of place among these huge blond men and strapping yellow-haired women. She was small, almost frail, and her hair was black with glossy bronze tints. But her skin was fair as theirs, with a delicate rose tint their most beautiful women could not boast. Her full lips were white now with fear and she shrank from the clamor and uproar. Turlogh saw her tremble as Thorfel insolently put his arm about her. The hall waved redly before Turlogh's eyes and he fought doggedly for control.

"Thorfel's brother, Osric, to his right," he muttered to himself; "on the other side Tostig, the Dane, who can cleave an ox in half with that great sword of his—they say. And there is Halfgar, and Sweyn, and Oswick, and Athelstane, the

Saxon—the one *man* of a pack of sea-wolves. And name of the devil—what is this? A priest?"

A priest it was, sitting white and still in the rout, silently counting his beads, while his eyes wandered pityingly toward the slender Irish girl at the head of the board. Then Turlogh saw something else. On a smaller table to one side, a table of mahogany whose rich scrollwork showed that it was loot from the south-land, stood the Dark Man. The two crippled Norsemen had brought it to the hall, after all. The sight of it brought a strange shock to Turlogh and cooled his seething brain. Only five feet tall? It seemed much larger now, somehow. It loomed above the revelry, as a god that broods on deep dark matters beyond the ken of the human insects who howl at his feet. As always when looking at the Dark Man, Turlogh felt as if a door had suddenly opened on outer space and the wind that blows among the stars. Waiting—waiting—for whom? Perhaps the carven eyes of the Dark Man looked through the skalli walls, across the snowy waste, and over the promontory. Perhaps those sightless eyes saw the five boats that even now slid silently with muffled oars, through the calm dark waters. But of this Turlogh Dubh knew nothing; nothing of the boats or their silent rowers; small, dark men with inscrutable eyes.

Thorfel's voice cut through the din: "Ho, friends!" They fell silent and turned as the young sea-king rose to his feet. "Tonight," he thundered, "I am taking a bride!"

A thunder of applause shook the smoky rafters. Turlogh cursed with sick fury.

Thorfel caught up the girl with rough gentleness and set her on the board.

"Is she not a fit bride for a viking?" he shouted. "True, she's a bit shy, but that's only natural."

"All Irish are cowards!" shouted Oswick.

"As proved by Clontarf and the scar on your jaw!" rumbled Athelstane, which gentle thrust made Oswick wince and brought a roar of rough mirth from the throng.

"'Ware her temper, Thorfel," called a bold-eyed young Juno who sat with the warriors; "Irish girls have claws like cats."

Thorfel laughed with the confidence of a man used to mastery. "I'll teach her her lessons with a stout birch switch. But enough. It grows late. Priest, marry us."

"Daughter," said the priest, unsteadily, rising, "these pagan men have brought me here by violence to perform Christian nuptials in an ungodly house. Do you marry this man willingly?"

"No! No! Oh God, no!" Moira screamed with a wild despair that brought the sweat to Turlogh's forehead. "Oh most holy master, save me from this fate! They tore me from my home—struck down the brother that would have saved me! This man bore me off as if I were a chattel—a soulless beast!"

"Be silent!" thundered Thorfel, slapping her across the mouth, lightly but with enough force to bring a trickle of blood from her delicate lips. "By Thor, you grow independent. I am determined to have a wife, and all the squeals of a puling little wench will not stop me. Why, you graceless hussy, am I not wedding you in the Christian manner, simply because of your foolish superstitions? Take care that I do not dispense with the nuptials, and take you as slave, not wife!"

"Daughter," quavered the priest, afraid, not for himself, but for her, "bethink you! This man offers you more than many a man would offer. It is at least an honorable married state."

"Aye," rumbled Athelstane, "marry,

him like a good wench and make the best of it. There's more than one southland woman on the cross benches of the north."

What can I do? The question tore through Turlogh's brain. There was but one thing to do—wait until the ceremony was over and Thorfel had retired with his bride. Then steal her away as best he could. After that—but he dared not look ahead. He had done and would do his best. What he did, he of necessity did alone; a masterless man had no friends, even among masterless men. There was no way to reach Moira to tell her of his presence. She must go through with the wedding without even the slim hope of deliverance that knowledge of his presence might have lent. Instinctively his eyes flashed to the Dark Man standing somber and aloof from the rout. At his feet the old quarreled with the new—the pagan with the Christian—and Turlogh even in that moment felt that the old and new were alike young to the Dark Man.

Did the carven ears of the Dark Man hear strange prows grating on the beach, the stroke of a stealthy knife in the night, the gurgle that marks the severed throat? Those in the skalli heard only their own noise and those who revelled by the fires outside sang on, unaware of the silent coils of death closing about them.

"Enough!" shouted Thorfel. "Count your beads and mutter your mummery, priest! Come here, wench, and marry!" He jerked the girl off the board and plumped her down on her feet before him. She tore loose from him with flaming eyes. All the hot Gaelic blood was roused in her.

"You yellow-haired swine!" she cried. "Do you think that a princess of Clare, with Brian Boru's blood in her veins, would sit at the cross bench of a barbarian and bear the tow-headed cubs of a northern thief? No—I'll never marry you!"

"Then I'll take you as a slave!" he roared, snatching at her wrist.

"Nor that way, either, swine!" she exclaimed, her fear forgotten in fierce triumph. With the speed of light she snatched a dagger from his girdle, and before he could seize her she drove the keen blade under her heart. The priest cried out as though he had received the wound, and springing forward, caught her in his arms as she fell.

"The curse of Almighty God on you, Thorfel!" he cried, with a voice that rang like a clarion, as he bore her to a couch near by.

Thorfel stood nonplussed. Silence reigned for an instant, and in that instant Turlogh O'Brien went mad.

"Lamh Laidir Abu!" the war-cry of the O'Briens ripped through the stillness like the scream of a wounded panther, and as men whirled toward the shriek, the frenzied Gael came through the doorway like the blast of a wind from hell. He was in the grip of the Celtic black fury beside which the berserk rage of the viking pales. Eyes glaring and a tinge of froth on his writhing lips, he crashed among the men who sprawled, off guard, in his path. Those terrible eyes were fixed on Thorfel at the other end of the hall, but as Turlogh rushed he smote to the right and left. His charge was the rush of a whirlwind that left a litter of dead and dying men in his wake.

Benches crashed to the floor, men yelled, ale flooded from upset casks. Swift as was the Celt's attack, two men blocked his way with drawn swords before he could reach Thorfel—Halfgar and Oswick. The scarred-faced viking went down with a cleft skull before he could lift his weapon, and Turlogh, catching Halfgar's blade on his shield, struck

again like lightning and the keen ax sheared through hauberk, ribs and spine.

The hall was in a terrific uproar. Men were seizing weapons and pressing forward from all sides, and in the midst the lone Gael raged silently and terribly. Like a wounded tiger was Turlogh Dubh in his madness. His eery movement was a blur of speed, an explosion of dynamic force. Scarce had Halfgar fallen before the Gael leaped across his crumpling form at Thorfel, who had drawn his sword and stood as if bewildered. But a rush of carles swept between them. Swords rose and fell and the Dalcassian ax flashed among them like the play of summer lightning. On either hand and from before and behind a warrior drove at him. From one side Osric rushed, swinging a two-handed sword; from the other a house-carle drove in with a spear. Turlogh stooped beneath the swing of the sword and struck a double blow, forehand and back. Thorfel's brother dropped, hewed through the knee, and the carle died on his feet as the back-lash return drove the ax's back-spike through his skull. Turlogh straightened, dashing his shield into the face of the swordsman who rushed him from the front. The spike in the center of the shield made a ghastly ruin of his features; then even as the Gael wheeled cat-like to guard his rear, he felt the shadow of Death loom over him. From the corner of his eye he saw the Dane Tostig swinging his great two-handed sword, and jammed against the table, off balance, he knew that even his superhuman quickness could not save him. Then the whistling sword struck the Dark Man on the table and with a clash like thunder, shivered to a thousand blue sparks. Tostig staggered, dazedly, still holding the useless hilt, and Turlogh thrust as with a sword; the upper spike of his ax struck the Dane over the eye and crashed through to the brain.

And even at that instant, the air was filled with a strange singing and men howled. A huge carle, ax still lifted, pitched forward clumsily against the Gael, who split his skull before he saw that a flint-pointed arrow transfixed his throat. The hall seemed full of glancing beams of light that hummed like bees and carried quick death in their humming. Turlogh risked his life for a glance toward the great doorway at the other end of the hall. Through it was pouring a strange horde. Small, dark men they were, with beady black eyes and immobile faces. They were scantily armored, but they bore swords, spears and bows. Now at close range they drove their long black arrows point-blank and the carles went down in windrows.

Now a red wave of combat swept the skalli hall, a storm of strife that shattered tables, smashed the benches, tore the hangings and the trophies from the walls, and stained the floors with a red lake. There had been less of the dark strangers than vikings, but in the surprize of the attack, the first flight of arrows had evened the odds, and now at hand-grips the strange warriors showed themselves in no way inferior to their huge foes. Dazed by surprize and the ale they had drunken, with no time to arm themselves fully, the Norsemen yet fought back with all the reckless ferocity of their race. But the primitive fury of their attackers matched their own valor, and at the head of the hall, where a white-faced priest shielded a dying girl, Black Turlogh tore and ripped with a frenzy that made valor and fury alike futile.

And over all towered the Dark Man. To Turlogh's shifting glances, caught between the flash of sword and ax, it seemed that the image had grown—expanded—heightened; that it loomed giant-like over the battle; that its head rose into the

smoke-filled rafters of the great hall; that it brooded like a dark cloud of death over these insects who cut each other's throats at its feet. Turlogh sensed in the lightning sword-play and the slaughter that this was the proper element of the Dark Man. Violence and fury were exuded by him. The raw scent of fresh-spilled blood was good to his nostrils and these yellow-haired corpses that rattled at his feet were as sacrifices to him.

The storm of battle rocked the mighty hall. The skalli became a shambles where men slipped in pools of blood, and slipping, died. Heads spun grinning from slumping shoulders. Barbed spears tore the heart, still beating, from the gory breast. Brains splashed and clotted the madly driving axes. Daggers lunged upward, ripping bellies and spilling entrails upon the floor. The clash and clangor of steel rose deafeningly. No quarter was asked or given. A wounded Norseman had dragged down one of the dark men, and doggedly strangled him regardless of the dagger his victim plunged again and again into his body.

One of the dark men seized a child who ran howling from an inner room, and dashed its brains out against the wall. Another gripped a Norse woman by her golden hair and hurling her to her knees, cut her throat, while she spat in his face. One listening for cries of fear or pleas for mercy would have heard none; men, women or children, they died slashing and clawing, their last gasp a sob of fury, or a snarl of quenchless hatred.

And about the table where stood the Dark Man, immovable as a mountain, washed the red waves of slaughter. Norseman and tribesman died at his feet. How many red infernos of slaughter and madness have your strange carved eyes gazed upon, Dark Man?

Shoulder to shoulder Sweyn and Thorfel fought. The Saxon Athelstane, his golden beard a-bristle with the battle-joy, had placed his back against the wall and a man fell at each sweep of his two-handed ax. Now Turlogh came in like a wave, avoiding, with a lithe twist of his upper body, the first ponderous stroke. Now the superiority of the light Irish ax was proved, for before the Saxon could shift his heavy weapon, the Dalcassian ax licked out like a striking cobra and Athelstane reeled as the edge bit through the corselet into the ribs beneath. Another stroke and he crumpled, blood gushing from his temple.

Now none barred Turlogh's way to Thorfel except Sweyn, and even as the Gael leaped like a panther toward the slashing pair, one was ahead of him. The chief of the dark men glided like a shadow under the slash of Sweyn's sword, and his own short blade thrust upward under the shirt of mail. Thorfel faced Turlogh alone. Thorfel was no coward; he even laughed with pure battle-joy as he thrust, but there was no mirth in Black Turlogh's face, only a frantic rage that writhed his lips and made his eyes coals of blue fire.

In the first whirl of steel Thorfel's sword broke. The young sea-king leaped like a tiger at his foe, thrusting with the shards of the blade. Turlogh laughed fiercely as the jagged remnant gashed his cheek, and at the same instant he cut Thorfel's left foot from under him. The Norseman fell with a heavy crash, then struggled to his knees, clawing for his dagger. His eyes were clouded.

"Make an end, curse you!" he snarled.

Turlogh laughed. "Where is your power and your glory, now?" he taunted. "You who would have for unwilling wife an Irish princess—you——"

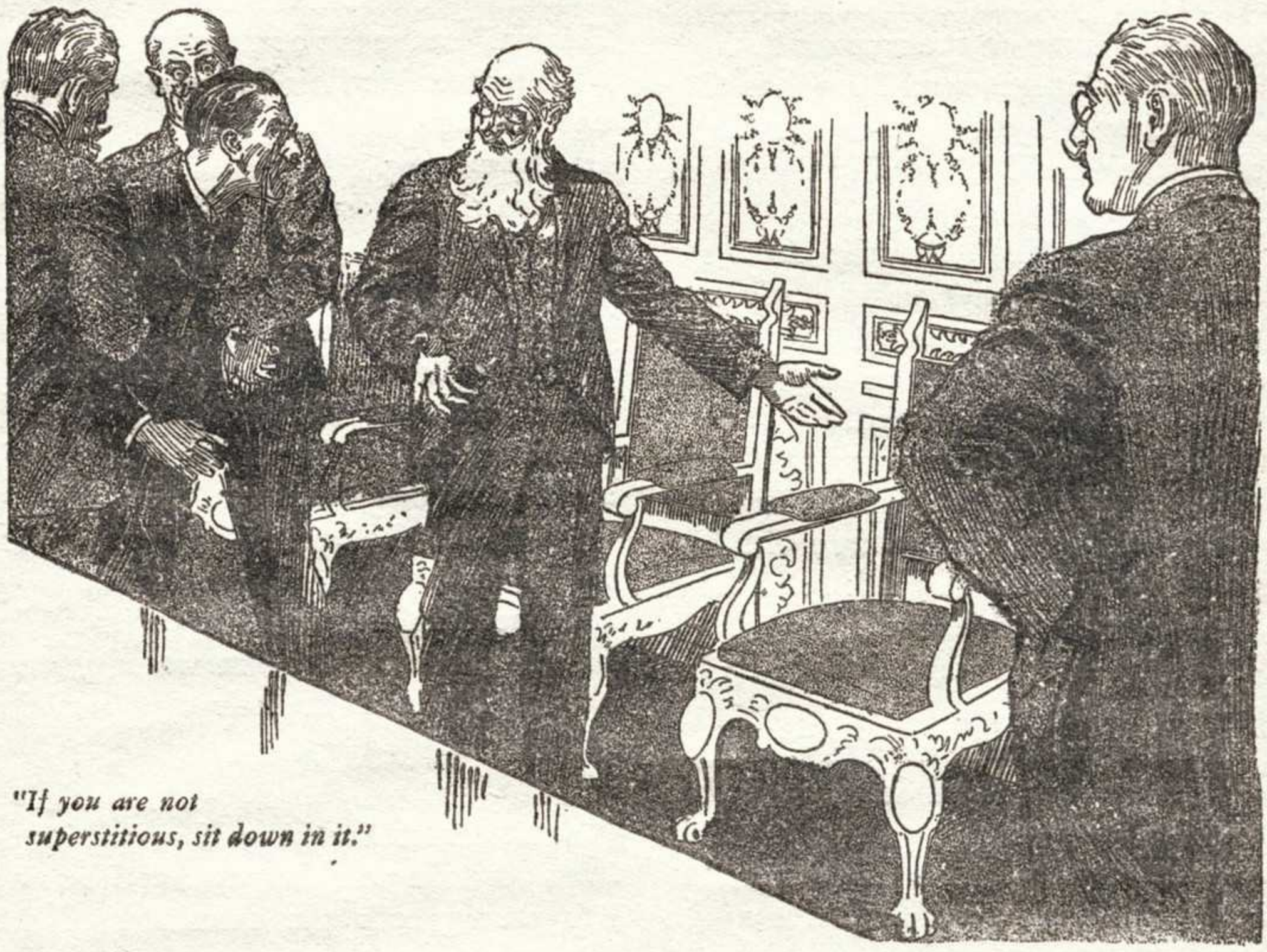
Suddenly his hate strangled him, and with a howl like a maddened panther he

(Please turn to page 714)

The Haunted Chair

By GASTON LEROUX

An amazing novel of eery murders and weird adventures, by the author of "The Phantom of the Opera"



"If you are not superstitious, sit down in it."

1. Death Strikes Twice

"THEY say the man doesn't know what fear is."

"Maybe so, but he's courting death. Let's hope, though, that he'll escape. Come on, we must hurry!"

Gaston Lalouette looked up, startled. He was a kindly man, around forty-five, who for the last six years had kept a shop in the Rue Laffitte where he sold pictures and antiques. Today he had been wandering about the left bank of the Seine examining the old prints and oddities which the stall-keepers of that section of Paris display to lure the leisurely passer-by.

As he turned he was jostled by a group of college boys, wearing the students' béret. Coming down the Rue Bonaparte, they were too absorbed in excited conversation to beg Lalouette's pardon as they hurried past. Lalouette hid his impatience, and laid their incivility to the fact that they were probably on their way to witness a duel, the outcome of which, he gathered, would be fatal.

He turned back to the stalls to examine a rare jewel-box, which had caught his eye. Claiming to date from the days of St. Louis, it was carved in an exquisite fleur-de-lys design, and Lalouette liked to fancy that perhaps it once had held the

love-letters of some beautiful court favorite.

Over his shoulder he heard:

"No matter what any one says, he's without fear."

"Yes," said a second voice, "but I don't mind telling you I'd rather be in my shoes than his. Come on, we mustn't be late."

Again Lalouette turned around. This time he saw two elderly men hurrying as fast as they could in the direction of the French Academy.

"Is it possible," thought Lalouette, "that these old men have suddenly gone as crazy as the young ones? Those two sound as though they were on their way to the same duelling-ground."

Occupied with these thoughts, Gaston Lalouette was sauntering up the Rue Mazarin, when he came face to face with four men in frock coats and silk hats. They also were very much excited.

"All the same, I can't believe he has made his will."

"Well, if he hasn't, it's a pity."

"They say he's faced death more than once."

"True. And when his friends called to plead with him, he put them out of the house."

"Still, don't you think he may change his mind at the last moment?"

"You don't think he is such a coward, do you?"

"Look! Here he comes!"

The four men started to run, and darted across the street.

Gaston Lalouette gave no more thought to antiques. His one idea was to see the man who was about to risk his life, for what reasons Lalouette did not yet know. Mere chance, he thought, had brought him close to a hero.

He hurried to overtake the four frock-coated men and soon found himself in a little square packed with people. Automobiles were trying to move forward; drivers cursed each other. Under an arch leading to the outer court of the Academy, a noisy crowd was pressing around a man who seemed to be having great difficulty in making his way through the admiring throng. And whom should he see but the four dignified men shouting "Hurrah! Hurrah!" at the top of their lungs.

Lalouette lifted his hat, and turning to one of them asked, quite timidly, what was happening.

"Can't you see? It's Commander d'Aulnay."

"Is he going to fight a duel?" asked Lalouette, very respectfully.

"No, of course not. He's been made one of the forty members of the French Academy and is about to deliver his speech accepting the honor."

Meantime, Lalouette had been caught up in the milling throng. Friends of Maxime d'Aulnay, who had escorted him in and congratulated him warmly, were now trying to fight their way into the auditorium.

LALOUETTE found himself pinned in between the peaceful paws of the stone lion that guards the threshold of the Academy.

Now Monsieur Gaston Lalouette, in his profession of antiquarian, held literature in very high esteem. He was himself an author. He had published two books—the pride of his life. In one he treated of the signatures of celebrated painters and the means of recognizing the authenticity of their works. The other concerned the art of picture-framing. As a result of this authorship, he had been awarded an honorary title, "Officer of the Academy." But he had never been inside the Academy. Moreover, the idea he had been able to form of it did not agree at all with what he had just heard and seen in the last fifteen minutes. Never, for example, in order to make an

address, would he have thought it useful to have made one's last will and testament, and to have fear of nothing under the sun. So the good man fought his way from between the lion's paws and after accepting humbly the hundred blows rained on all parts of his anatomy, squeezed into as good a place as possible in the gallery. Every one around him was on tiptoe, eagerly straining to see what was going on.

Maxime d'Aulnay, looking somewhat pale, entered just then. On either side walked his sponsors, paler even than he.

A shiver went through the audience. Women, numerous and of the best society, could not suppress their admiration or their anxiety. One pious dowager crossed herself as he passed, and when he ascended the steps to the platform every one stood up, moved by the same deep respect shown a funeral cortège as it passes in the street.

The newly elected member reached his seat and sat down between his sponsors. He raised his eyes and looked steadily around at his colleagues, the audience, the speaker's desk, and then upon the somber faces of the members of this illustrious Academy whose duty it was to receive him into membership.

While Lalouette was taking in this panorama he lost not a word of what was being said around him.

"Poor Jean Mortimar was young and handsome, too, just like him."

"And so happy about his election."

"You remember how he looked when he stood up to make his address?"

"Yes indeed. He seemed radiant with the joy of life."

"You can't tell me it was a natural death. People don't die that way."

Lalouette turned around to ask whose death they were talking about. He saw he was addressing the very same man who had answered his questions so crabbedly a few minutes before. This time he didn't mince words.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you ever read your newspapers?"

Well, no, Monsieur Lalouette didn't read the papers and for a reason we shall have occasion to explain a little later, and which Monsieur Lalouette did not shout from the house-tops. So, as he was not in the habit of reading the newspapers, the mystery into which he had walked was deepening more and more every minute. That was why he didn't understand the meaning of the protest that was apparent when an important-looking woman, whom he had heard some one call Madame de Bithynia, came into the box reserved for her. That was why also he did not understand what she meant when she looked at the audience with an expression of proud arrogance, spoke a few words to friends with her, and then leveled her lorgnette on Maxime d'Aulnay.

"She'll bring him bad luck," a voice called out.

"Indeed she will. She'll bring him bad luck, too."

"Why is she going to bring him bad luck?" Lalouette asked, but he got no answer. The man on the platform, ready to make his speech, was Maxime d'Aulnay, he gathered; he was commander of a ship; he had written a book called *A Voyage Around My Cabin;* he had been elected to fill the chair in the Academy formerly occupied by Monsignor d'Abbeville.

Then with shouts and crazy gesticulations the mystery began to unfold. Those seated in the galleries jumped to their feet and yelled:

"Just like the other letter!"

"Don't open it!"

"Look, the letter!"

"Like the other one!"

"Just like the other one!"

"Don't read it!"

"Don't let him read it!"

Lalouette leaned over and saw a messenger carrying a letter to d'Aulnay. The sight of the letter was enough to throw the audience into a state of great excitement. Only the members of the reception committee were self-possessed, but it was evident that Monsieur Hippolyte Patard, secretary of the Academy, was all a-tremble.

MAXIME D'AULNAY arose, stepped forward, took the letter from the messenger and read it. A smile passed over his face. The gallery murmured:

"He's smiling, he's smiling. Mortimar smiled, too."

Maxime d'Aulnay passed the letter to his sponsors, but they did not smile. At once the import of the message was in every one's mouth. Lalouette learned that it was: "There are some voyages more dangerous than those one makes around one's cabin."

That line threw the audience into the highest pitch of excitement. When order was restored, the unimpassioned voice of the president announced that the meeting had opened. A dramatic silence fell.

Maxime d'Aulnay was on his feet—more than brave—reckless!

Now he had begun to read his address in a deep, sonorous voice.

He began with great dignity by thanking the members of the Academy for honoring him. After a brief allusion to a loss that so recently struck into the very body of the Academy itself, he spoke of Monsignor d'Abbeville.

He spoke at length.

The man seated beside Lalouette murmured under his breath words which Lalouette thought—wrongly, of course—were inspired by the length of the speech.

"He's holding out longer than the other one."

As d'Aulnay came to the end of his eulogy of Monsignor d'Abbeville, he showed excitement. He talked with great animation of the great prelate's talents. Then in a splendid outburst, he cried:

"Six thousand years ago, gentlemen, divine vengeance chained Prometheus to his rock. I too am not one of those who fear the thunder of men, I fear only the lightning of God."

Scarcely had he uttered these words when he tottered forward, passed his hands over his face desperately, and crashed to the floor.

A cry of terror rang through the auditorium. The members of the Academy rushed forward; they leaned over the lifeless body.

Maxime d'Aulnay was dead!

Dead, just as two months before, during his reception into the Academy, had died Jean Mortimar, the poet, author of *Tragic Perfumes,* and the first man chosen to succeed Monsignor d'Abbeville. He too had received a threatening letter brought to the Academy by a messenger who then had mysteriously disappeared—a letter in which Mortimar had read, "Perfumes are sometimes more tragic than one might think." A few minutes later he had dropped dead. This was what Lalouette had learned at last, very vaguely, as he listened with eager ears to the excited words of that crowd which had packed the auditorium a few moments ago and had just poured out into the streets in indescribable disorder. Now, at least, he knew why. Jean Mortimar's tragic death had made them fear for Maxime d'Aulnay. True, he heard them hint of vengeance, but he attached little importance to it. However, to satisfy his curiosity, he asked who was seeking revenge. For answer, they poured upon him such a flood of fantastic vowels that he thought they were only making fun of

his ignorance. So, with night coming on, he decided to go home.

As he crossed the street he passed some Academy members and their friends. He noted that they too were deeply stirred by the terrible coincidence of these two sinister events; one was still trembling with the excitement he had just passed through. Lalouette stepped up to him and asked:

"Does any one know what killed him?"

"The doctors say he died of the bursting of a blood vessel."

"And the other one, of what did he die—the first one?"

"The doctors say he died of a hemorrhage of the brain."

Just then a sinister shadow passed between them and whispered:

"All that is sheer nonsense. Both of them died because they wanted to sit in the Haunted Chair."

Lalouette was so startled that the shadowy form had vanished before he could distinguish his features. He was lost in deep thought as he slowly walked home.

THE day after this terrible event, Hippolyte Patard, the secretary, walked into the Academy just as the hour was striking. The superintendent was standing in the doorway. He handed the mail to the secretary and said:

"You're ahead of time today, sir. No one has come yet."

Patard took his mail and was going on his way without a word.

The superintendent was astonished at such an oversight.

"You seem very preoccupied, sir. As a matter of fact, everybody else was struck speechless by the shock."

Monsieur Hippolyte Patard paid not the slightest attention.

Then the superintendent asked Monsieur Patard whether he had read the story in the morning *Epoch* about the Haunted Chair. The secretary went on without replying.

Had he read the article about the Haunted Chair? Indeed, he had! What else could he have read all these many weeks? And since the sudden death of Jean Mortimar, if the newspapers had their way, no one would be allowed to be indifferent to a subject so rich in dramatic possibilities.

And yet what intellect that had any sense (and here Monsieur Patard stood stock-still in order to ask himself once more), what sensible mind would have dared to see in these two deaths anything more than a regrettable incident? Jean Mortimar had died of the bursting of a blood vessel; nothing unnatural about that. And Maxime d'Aulnay, deeply moved by the tragic end of his predecessor, and by the impressiveness of the ceremony, and also by the annoying forecasts with which those meddling "ornaments of literature" had accompanied his election, had died of cerebral hemorrhage. Nor was there anything the least unnatural about that, either.

"If only there hadn't been those two letters; those two letters signed with the initials E D S E D T D L N," he said to himself. "Those are the initials of that plotting mystifier, Eliphas."

Then he began to repeat aloud the name of the man who by some sort of criminal wizardry had unloosed the chains of Fate upon the illustrious and peaceful Academy: "Eliphas de Saint-Elmo de Taillebourg de la Nox."

Any one with such a name to have dared to aspire to a seat! This self-styled prophet, who insisted on being addressed as Sire; who had published a book, absolutely ridiculous, called *The Surgery of the Soul*—this charlatan to have hoped for the immortal honor of occupying the chair left vacant by Monsignor d'Abbeville!

Yes, a magician—you might even say a sorcerer — who pretends to know the past and the future, and all the secrets than can make a mere man the master of the universe; an alchemist; an astrologer; a wizard; a necromancer! That such as he should dream of being elected to the Academy!

The secretary choked at the very thought. Yet, since this magician had been blackballed as he deserved to be, two unfortunate men who had been elected to fill that very seat had died suddenly.

Ah indeed! had the secretary read the article about the Haunted Chair? Yes. He had re-read it this very morning in the newspapers and he was just going to read it again in the *Epoch*. As a matter of fact he was unfolding the paper with an energy ferocious for his age. It took up two columns on the first page, and it repeated all the absurdities which had long since wearied his secretarial eyes. He could no longer go into a drawing-room or a library wthout hearing, "Well, how about the Haunted Chair?"

With regard to the overwhelming coincidence of the death of two men, the *Epoch* deemed it its duty to report at length the legend which was being formed around d'Abbeville's chair. In certain Parisian circles closely in touch with the affairs of the Academy, people were persuaded that this chair was from now on haunted by the vengeful spirit of Sire Eliphas de Saint-Elmo de Taillebourg de la Nox! And since, after his rejection, this Eliphas had disappeared, the *Epoch* could not cease regretting that he had, just before he disappeared, uttered threatening words, followed very evilly by equally regrettable and sudden deaths. When, for the last time, he left the Pneumatic Club (taking its name from the word *pneuma:* meaning the soul) which he had founded in the drawing-room of the beautiful Madame de Bithynia, Eliphas had been heard to say emphatically, in speaking of d'Abbeville's chair: "Evil be to those who sit in that chair before I do!" In short, the *Epoch* was very suspicious. It said, referring to the letters received by Mortimar and d'Aulnay just before their deaths, that the Academy might perhaps have to deal with a charlatan but that it was possible it had to deal with an insane man. The paper demanded that Eliphas be found; it was hinted that it might urge an autopsy on the bodies of Mortimar and d'Aulnay.

The article was not signed, but Monsieur Patard, after having declared him an idiot, consigned the anonymous writer to hell.

2. *The Haunted Chair*

THE secretary closed the door of the Dictionary Room after him. He took off his hat and replaced it with a little, tight-fitting black velvet cap. Then he walked softly around the table looking at the chairs drawn up so snugly, and so carefully distanced from each other as to seem to form separate little boxes for their occupants. They had certainly seated some famous men, he mused, as he murmured a few illustrious names.

He looked long at a chair facing him.

It was like all the other chairs, with its four claw-feet and its square back—in no way different—but it was in this chair that d'Abbeville had sat and listened to the Academy's deliberations.

Ever since his death it had been vacant.

Not only had poor Jean Mortimar and Maxime d'Aulnay not sat in it; they had not even had an opportunity to cross the threshold of the room where the Academy's private conferences were held—always known as the Dictionary Room. Here are placed forty chairs—the seats of the Immortals.

"The Haunted Chair!" said the secre-

tary, half aloud, as he stood gazing at d'Abbeville's unoccupied seat. Then he shrugged his shoulders and, in a derisive tone, uttered those fatal words, "May evil come to him who shall hope to sit in this chair before I do!"

Suddenly he strode near enough to touch it.

"Well, I," he cried, striking his chest as though bolstering his courage, "I, Hippolyte Patard, who am afraid neither of bad luck nor Eliphas de Saint-Elmo de Taillebourg de la Nox, I—I am going to sit down in you, O Haunted Chair!"

And turning about, he was just on the verge of sitting down when he stopped, drew himself up straight again and said:

"No, I won't do that. That's too stupid . . . one ought not to pay any attention to such nonsense."

As the secretary went back to his own chair, the door swung open and the chancellor came in, leading the director. Now the director of the Academy at this time was the great Lonstalot, one of the foremost scholars of the world. He used to permit himself to be led about by the arm, just as a blind man is led. Not that the director didn't see perfectly well; but he lived so completely in his ethereal abstractions that the members of the Academy had decided not to allow him to take one step unattended. He lived in the suburbs. When he left his home to come into Paris, a little boy of ten would come with him and leave him in the superintendent's lodgings. There the chancellor would take charge of him.

Ordinarily, the great Lonstalot was completely oblivious to everything that went on around him. But today the circumstances were so serious that the secretary did not hesitate to speak to him regarding them. Lonstalot had not been present at the meeting of the night before. It was more than probable that he was the one person at that hour in the entire civilized world still unaware that Maxime d'Aulnay had suffered the same cruel fate as Jean Mortimar, the author of *Tragic Perfumes*. Hence the Academy had sent for him at his home.

"Ah, Monsieur Lonstalot, such a catastrophe!" cried Patard, stretching his hands toward heaven.

"Well, what's the trouble?" Lonstalot deigned to ask, almost affably.

"What? You don't know? The chancellor didn't tell you? It then becomes my distressing duty to inform you that Maxime d'Aulnay is dead—dead, even as Jean Mortimar died, while delivering his address at the Academy."

"So much the better," declared the scholar, most seriously. "That's a beautiful way to die," and he rubbed his hands innocently. "Is that why you've disturbed me?" he added.

Bewildered, the secretary looked at the chancellor and the chancellor looked at the secretary. They let the matter drop. They led him back to his chair; helped him to seat himself comfortably; gave him some paper, a pen and ink.

WITHDRAWING into the recess of a window, the secretary and the chancellor threw a satisfied glance down into the empty courtyard of the Academy and congratulated themselves on the strategy they had used in getting rid of the newspaper men. They had had it announced officially the night before that, after having decided to be present as a body at the funeral services of Maxime d'Aulnay, the Academy would not meet for two weeks for the purpose of electing a successor to d'Abbeville—they continued to speak of it as his chair, just as though two successive elections had not given it two new names. Thus they had deceived the newspapers. In reality, the election was to take place on the day following the death of Maxime d'Aulnay,

the day we have just been accompanying Monsieur Patard through the Dictionary Room. All the Academy members had been advised by the careful secretary; and that meeting, as extraordinary as it was confidential, was to begin within the next half-hour.

The chancellor whispered into Patard's ear:

"Martin Latouche, do you know anything about him?"

While he was asking this question he kept scanning the secretary's expression with an intensity he made no effort to hide.

"No, nothing at all," answered Patard.

"What's that—you haven't heard anything from him?"

The secretary pointed to his mail, still unopened, and said, "I haven't looked over my mail yet."

"Open it now, I beseech you."

"You seem to be in a great hurry, Chancellor," said Patard, hesitating a little.

"Monsieur Patard, I don't understand you at all."

"You're in a hurry, I see, to learn that perhaps Martin Latouche, the only man who dared persist in his candidacy against Maxime d'Aulnay—knowing even then that he would not be elected—you're anxious to find out whether Martin Latouche, the only one left, now renounces his succession to d'Abbeville's chair."

"In that case," said the chancellor, "you'll not open your letters . . . until after."

"Quite right, Chancellor; there will still be time for us to learn, after he has been elected, that Monsieur Latouche is not presenting himself as a candidate. . . . There are not very many candidates for the Haunted Chair."

Hardly had Patard uttered these last two words when a shiver shot through him; they had come to his lips just as though it was a quite natural thing to say "the Haunted Chair!"

A silence fell between the two men. Outside in the Academy court little groups were beginning to form; but each man, lost in his own thoughts, neither secretary nor chancellor was aware of them.

THE door opened with a bang. Barbentane entered, Barbentane, the rabid old royalist, author of *The History of the House of Condé.*

"Do you know what his name is?" he cried.

"Whose name?" asked the secretary.

"Why, his, of course, *your* Eliphas?"

"What do you mean, *our* Eliphas?"

"Well, anyway, *their* Eliphas; that is, the name of Monsieur Eliphas de Saint-Elmo de Taillebourg de la Nox is Borigo, just like any one else, Monsieur Borigo."

Some other members had just come in, all talking at the same time, and very excitedly.

"Yes, yes," they were saying, "Monsieur Borigo; the reporters are sure of it."

"Do you mean to tell me the reporters are down there?" exclaimed the secretary.

"Of course they are. The court below is full of them. They have found out we're holding a meeting and they declare that Martin Latouche is no longer a candidate."

Patard turned pale as he said:

"I've not received a line from him about that. . . ."

Anxiously they all kept on questioning him; his attempt to reassure them wasn't very convincing.

"That's one more story invented by the reporters . . . I know Martin Latouche . . . and he's not a man to be intimidated. As a matter of fact we're going right on with the election."

He was interrupted by the brusk arrival of Count de Bray, one of Maxime d'Aulnay's sponsors.

"Do you know what he sells, this man Borigo of yours?" he asked. "He sells olive oil; and since he was born near Provence in the Carei valley, he just called himself Jean Borigo du Carei."

At that moment the door opened once more and let in Raymond de la Beyssière, the old Egyptologist, who had written pyramids of books on the subject of the earliest pyramids.

"Jean Borigo du Carei," he said simply, "that's the name I knew him by."

Now since Raymond de la Beyssière was the one who had cast the single vote for Eliphas, an icy silence greeted his appearance. The members felt that they had that man to thank for the shame of giving even one vote to Eliphas. The secretary went up to the new arrival.

"Our dear colleague, would you be so kind as to tell us if, at the time you mention, Monsieur Borigo was selling olive oil, or the skins of young children, or foxes' teeth, or——"

He was stopped by roars of laughter. Raymond de la Beyssière paid no attention to them. He answered:

"No. It was when he was in Egypt as secretary to Marietta Bey, the illustrious successor of Champollion. And he was trying to decipher the mysterious texts which ages ago at Sakkarah were carved on the walls of the pyramids of the fifth and sixth dynasties. Also he was trying to find out the secret of Toth."

When he had finished, the Egyptologist went to sit down in his chair.

But he found his customary chair occupied by another member who wasn't aware of what he had done. Patard, watching Monsieur Raymond de la Beyssière over the top of his glasses, said to him:

"Well, aren't you going to sit down at all? D'Abbeville's chair is stretching out its arms to you?"

The tone of his voice as he answered made some of the members turn around.

"No, I shall certainly not sit down in his chair!"

"And why not?" the secretary asked, with an unpleasant little laugh. "Why will you not sit in that chair? Can it be possible that you are crediting anything serious to all this humbug going around concerning the Haunted Chair?"

"I never take any humbug seriously, Monsieur Secretary. But I shall not sit down at all, because I do not wish to. It's very simple."

The colleague who had taken Raymond de la Beyssière's chair gave it back to him at once and asked him very politely and with no ill-feeling, if he believed he, Raymond, who had lived so long in the Orient and whose researches had led him further back into the past than any one else—even up to the remotest occultism —if he believed in Fate?

"I should hesitate to deny it."

That statement startled every one and they asked him to explain what he meant.

The Academician noticed that the smiling had died away and that Secretary Patard had dropped his facetious manner.

In a serious voice he began:

"When we speak of these things we touch upon the mysterious. Everything that surrounds us and that we do not see is mysterious. Modern science has penetrated well what we see, but it lags far behind ancient science in that which concerns what we do not see. We can not see 'Bad Luck,' but it exists. Who would deny Good Luck or Bad Luck? Either the one or the other attaches itself with remarkable tenacity to people, to things, to undertakings. Today we speak of a 'run of good luck' or a 'run of bad luck,' as though it were a fatality against which nothing can be done. Ancient science, after centuries of study, had gaged that secret force and it may be—I say it is

possible—that he who would go 'way back to the origin of that science would learn from it how to direct that force, that is to say, to distribute good or bad luck. . . . It is possible. . . ."

SILENCE followed these thoughts. Every one looked at the Chair.

"And Eliphas de la Nox, did he really penetrate what we can not see?" the chancellor asked.

"I think so," answered Monsieur Raymond, "without any doubt. If I had not believed it, I should not have voted for him. It is his real knowledge of occultism that made him worthy to have a chair in our company. This study of the occult, which seems to be crying to be reborn in these days under the name of Pneumatology, is the oldest of the sciences and by that token the more to be respected. Only fools laugh at it."

And here Raymond de la Beyssière once more looked around at the company. No one was laughing now.

The room had gradually been filling.

"What do you mean by that thing you spoke of—the secret of Toth?" some one asked.

"Toth," the scientist answered, "is the inventor of Egyptian magic and his secret is the secret of Life and Death."

At this point Secretary Patard piped up.

"With a secret like that it must be very annoying not to be elected to the French Academy."

"Monsieur Secretary," began Monsieur Raymond de la Beyssière, very gravely, "if Monsieur Borigo or Monsieur Eliphas —call him what you will, it's of no importance—if that man has found out, as he says he has, the secret of Toth, he is stronger than you or I. And if I have been so unfortunate as to make an enemy of him, I would rather meet a troop of armed brigands on a dark night than to meet that man empty-handed in broad daylight."

The Orientalist had uttered these words with so much force and conviction that he made a profound impression.

But the secretary answered with his dry little laugh.

"Maybe it's Toth who taught him to walk into Paris drawing-rooms dressed in a strange, phosphorescent robe! It seems he presides over the meetings of the Pneumatic Society at the house of the beautiful Madame de Bithynia wearing a robe that glistens fantastically in the light."

"We all have our harmless little follies."

"What do you mean by that remark?" the secretary was imprudent enough to ask.

"Nothing," Monsieur de la Beyssière replied enigmatically, "only, my dear Secretary, allow me to be astonished that a man as wise and serious as Borigo du Carei should find that the most superstitious one among us is the very one who jeers at him."

"I, superstitious?" cried Patard, walking toward his colleague, his mouth open, his jaw set, as though bent on swallowing up in one gulp the entire science of Egyptology. "What can possibly make you think that I am superstitious?"

"By seeing you knock on wood, when you thought no one was around."

"I—knock on wood? You saw me touch wood—me, me, touch wood?"

"More than twenty times a day."

"That's a lie, sir!"

Quickly those standing near interposed: "Come now, gentlemen! Gentlemen!" and "Mr. Secretary, calm yourself," and "Monsieur de la Beyssière, this quarrel is unworthy of both you and the Academy."

The whole illustrious assembly was in a state of unbelievable excitement. Mon-

sieur de la Beyssière remained perfectly composed.

"Monsieur Secretary," he said, "I have never lied in my life and I've no idea of starting in now at my age. Even as recently as yesterday, just before the meeting, I saw you kiss the handle of your umbrella."

Hippolyte Patard started forward and they had all the trouble in the world restraining him from assaulting the old Egyptologist.

"My umbrella! my umbrella! To begin with, I forbid you to speak of my umbrella."

Monsieur de la Beyssière silenced him by pointing out to him with a tragic gesture the Haunted Chair.

"If you're not superstitious, sit down in it."

The company, a moment ago in such a tumult, was suddenly struck speechless. They looked from the chair to Patard and back from Patard to the chair.

"I would sit down in it if I wanted to," he cried, "but I take orders from no one. . . . And now, gentlemen, allow me to remind you that the hour for taking the vote struck some five minutes ago."

Having recovered himself, he went back to his chair with great dignity.

As the members took their seats, he noticed that some were still smiling. Seeing the Haunted Chair unoccupied, he said in his dry manner:

"There is no rule forbidding any of my colleagues from sitting in d'Abbeville's chair."

No one stirred. A quick-witted member saved the awkward situation.

"We'd better not sit in his chair out of respect for the great man!"

The only candidate, Martin Latouche, was unanimously elected on the first ballot.

Then Monsieur Hippolyte Patard opened his mail. He found no word from Martin Latouche.

Humbly he received the Academy's extraordinary commission to go, in person, and announce the happy news to Martin Latouche.

It had never been done that way before.

"What are you going to say to him?" the chancellor wanted to know.

After all the ridiculous happenings of the last few minutes the secretary's head wasn't very clear; he answered vaguely.

"What would you have me say? . . . I shall say to him, 'Courage, my friend.'"

And that is how it came about that that very night on the stroke of ten, a shadow, taking great care not to be followed, stole along the deserted sidewalk of the old Place Dauphine and stopped in front of a little house. Each stroke of the knocker resounded lugubriously in that still spot.

HIPPOLYTE PATARD never went out after dinner. He didn't know what it was to walk the streets of Paris at night, many of his friends said, and he had read in the papers that it was dangerous. When he thought of a nocturnal Paris he imagined dark, winding streets lighted here and there by a lantern, and suspicious characters lurking about lying in wait to attack the rich, just as they had done back in the days of Louis XIV.

Being in this state of mind, the secretary of the Academy continued to occupy the shabby flat which no possible literary triumph, no Academical honor could possibly make him leave. So on this night when he stood in the silent Place Dauphine with its ancient narrow streets, its abandoned quays and its disquieting Pont Neuf, he could not see the slightest difference between the Paris of his imagination and the somber reality.

Added to everything else, he was afraid.

Afraid of robbers. . . .

And reporters . . . especially reporters.

The thought came that some newspaper man might catch him—him, the secretary of the French Academy, making a nocturnal overture to the newly elected member! He trembled.

For such an unprecedented duty he would have preferred the bright light of day.

And then he confessed the reason to himself. He had not troubled to make this inconvenient visit to Place Dauphine merely to announce officially to Martin Latouche his election to the Academy (an event Latouche himself could no longer be unaware of). That was less his reason than to find out from Latouche himself if it was true that he had said he was not represented and that he was refusing d'Abbeville's chair.

For that was the report that all the evening papers were carrying that very night.

If it was true, the plight in which the French Academy found itself was terrible —and ridiculous.

And now there he stood at Martin Latouche's door, shaking. He lifted the knocker, tapped twice; but the door was not opened.

He jumped. He thought he noticed over his left shoulder in the flickering street light, a shadow—fantastic, surprizing, unexplainable.

Yes, he was sure of it! He had seen something like a box walking.

It was a square box mounted on thin legs; and it had fled, soundless, into the dark shadows of the square.

Patard had not been able to make out anything of the upper portion of this strange object, merely two thin legs attached to a box . . . a box that could walk! . . . the dark night . . . Place Dauphine!

In a frenzy of fear, he knocked on the door.

3. *The Walking Box*

STANDING there, shaking from head to foot, Patard hardly dared turn to look over his shoulder in the direction of the strange apparition.

A little peephole slid open and lighted up the shabby door of Latouche's flat. A streak of light struck full across the secretary's scared features.

"Who is it? What do you want?" a stern voice asked.

"It's I, Hippolyte Patard."

"Patard?"

"The secretary . . . Academy. . . ."

At the word "Academy" the peephole shut with a bang and once more the secretary found himself standing trembling and alone in the dismal square.

All of a sudden he saw pass, this time on his right, the shadow of the Walking Box.

Perspiration now poured down the cheeks of the honored representative of the famous Group, and in justice to Hippolyte Patard it must be said that the emotion to which he was on the point of yielding came less from the unheard-of vision of that Walking Box or from the fear of robbers than from the affront which the entire body of the French Academy had just suffered.

The Box had vanished as swiftly as it had appeared.

Dazed, the poor man looked around, vaguely.

His eyes stared at the sharp roofs of the old, old houses of the square; and from them up to the canopy of heaven gilded with heavy clouds. He was feeling the gloom of his surroundings, when, of a sudden in the space in front of the Palace of Justice, lighted up by a brief ray of

moonlight, he saw flit by again the Walking Box.

In truth it was running, as fast as its thin legs could carry it. There was something devilish about it.

Desperate, the poor, unhappy man touched his umbrella handle.

Suddenly he jumped; he felt as though something had burst behind him.

An angry voice said:

"There he is again; there he is again; if only I could land one of these blows on his head!"

Incapable of uttering a scream, Hippolyte Patard clung to the wall, his legs sinking under him. A kind of broomstick was whirling above his head. In agony he closed his eyes, ready to give up his soul in death, a martyr to the Academy.

And then he opened them again, astonished to find himself still living. The broomstick, still waving above a whirl of skirts, withdrew, the noise of wooden shoes clanking along the sidewalk ceased. Those cries, those threats, those broomstick blows were not intended for him! He breathed easier.

But where did that latest apparition come from?

He turned around. The door behind him stood half open. He pushed it and went into a hallway leading to a court where met all the winds of winter.

He was in Martin Latouche's apartment.

THE secretary had armed himself with a few facts before he started out on this mission. He knew that Martin Latouche was a bachelor whose only love was music; and that he lived with an old housekeeper who could not endure it. She was a tyrant and had the reputation of making him do whatever she wished. But she was utterly devoted to him and often coddled him as though he were a child; and he submitted with the resignation of a martyr. In spite of Babette's hatred of singing and wind instruments, he had not been kept from writing a history of music which had been highly rewarded by the French Academy.

Monsieur Hippolyte Patard stopped in the hallway, sure that he had just seen and heard the terrible Babette. Indeed he thought he heard her coming back. It was in this hope that he kept perfectly quiet, not daring to call out for fear of waking the angry tenants, nor daring to make a sound for fear of being beaten up.

His patience was about to be rewarded. He heard again the sound of the wooden shoes, and the hallway door closed noisily.

A black body struck against the timid visitor.

"Who's there?"

"It's I, Hippolyte Patard . . . Academy . . . Secretary," answered a trembling voice.

"What do you want?"

"Monsieur Martin Latouche."

"He's not home. . . . But come in, anyway . . . I've something to say to you."

And Hippolyte Patard went in. By the light of a lamp burning on a rough wooden table and lighting up an array of kitchen utensils along the wall, he realized that he had been obliged to enter by the kitchen pantry.

The door swung shut behind him.

In front of him he saw an enormous stomach covered with a checked apron and two fists resting on two formidable hips. One of these fists kept grasping the broomstick.

Above in the darkness a husky voice, a voice toward which Patard did not dare raise his eyes, spoke:

"So you want to kill him?"

She spoke in the accent peculiar to

Aveyron; for, like Martin Latouche, she was a native of Rodez.

Monsieur Patard did not answer: he only trembled and the voice repeated:

"Tell me, Mr. Secretary, do you want to kill him?"

"Mr. Secretary" shook his head in sign of denial.

"No," he finally said, "I don't want to kill him, but I would like to see him."

"Well, you're going to see him, Mr. Secretary, because you seem to have the face of an honest man. You're going to see him: he's here. But first I must speak to you; that's why you'll have to excuse me for bringing you in by the back door through the kitchen."

AT LAST the terrible Babette put down her broom and motioned to Hippolyte Patard to follow her to a corner near the window where they each found a chair. But before sitting down, Babette placed her lamp so that the corner in which they were sitting was in darkness. Then she came back and slowly opened one of the inside window-blinds. Thus one side of the window now showed its iron bars. A bit of trembling light of a street lamp fell through the bars and lit up Babette's face. The secretary looked at her and felt reassured, even though all the precautions she had taken could only puzzle and even disquiet him. That face must, in certain moments, have been fearsome: in this serious moment its sweetness gave him confidence.

"Mr. Secretary," said Babette, sitting down opposite him, "don't be surprized at what I am doing. I am seating you in the darkness so that I can watch the organ-grinder. But let's not speak of that for the moment; for the moment I want to say just one thing." The husky voice was very tender. "Do you want to kill him?"

As she spoke, Babette took in her hands the hands of Hippolyte Patard, who did not withdraw them; for he had begun to be deeply stirred by that accent of unhappiness which came from the heart of this old woman.

"Listen," she went on, "I must ask you this, Mr. Secretary. Tell me, do you sincerely believe in your soul and conscience, as the lawyers say, that all these deaths are natural? Answer me, Mr. Secretary."

In this unexpected question, Patard discerned trouble. But after a minute that seemed very solemn to Babette, he answered in a steady voice.

"In my soul and conscience, yes . . . I think these deaths are natural."

Silence.

"Mr. Secretary," said Babette seriously, "perhaps you have never thought about them enough."

"The doctors, *Madame,* swear to it."

"The doctors are often mistaken, *Monsieur.* . . . I am going to say one thing, one doesn't die like that . . . all of a sudden, in the same spot, two people saying the same words a few weeks apart, unless it has been prepared beforehand."

Babette, in language more expressive than correct, had summed up the situation admirably. The secretary was impressed.

"Then what do you think?" he asked.

"I think that Eliphas de la Nox is a wicked magician. He said he would have his revenge and so he poisoned them. . . . Perhaps the poison was in the letters. You don't believe me? Perhaps it was not. But, Mr. Secretary, listen to me; perhaps it's something else. . . . I want to ask you one question: In your soul and conscience if, in making his speech full of compliments Monsieur Latouche fell dead, like the other two, would you still think that it was perfectly natural?"

"No, I would not think so," Patard replied, without hesitation.

"In your soul and conscience?"

"In my soul and conscience."

"Well, then, Mr. Secretary, I don't want him to die."

"But he won't die, *Madame.*"

"That's what they said about d'Aulnay and he died."

"That's no reason that Monsieur Latouche——"

"Perhaps. Anyway, I forbade him to present himself at your Academy."

"But he's elected."

"No, he's not, since he didn't present himself. Ah, I was the one who answered all the reporters who came here. . . . There's nothing to deny."

"What do you mean, he didn't present himself? We have letters from him."

"They don't mean anything now . . . since the last one he wrote you last night, in front of me, the moment we heard of d'Aulnay's death. . . . He wrote it there, right in front of my face, nobody can say he didn't . . . and you must have received it this morning. He read it to me. He said in it that he was not presenting himself to the Academy."

"I swear, *Madame,* that I did not receive it."

Babette hesitated a moment, then said:

"I believe you, Mr. Secretary."

"Sometimes letters are lost," Patard said.

"No, Mr. Secretary. . . . No, it's not that," she said with a sigh; "no, you didn't receive that letter because he did not put it in the box."

And she sighed again.

"He wanted so much to be a member of your Academy, Mr. Secretary."

And Babette wept.

"Oh, it will certainly bring him bad luck," she kept repeating in her tears; "it will surely bring him bad luck.

"I have some warnings . . . they don't deceive me. It wouldn't be natural, would it, Mr. Secretary, if he were to die like the others? . . . So don't do everything to make him die as the others did. Don't have him make that speech all full of compliments and praise."

"Ah, but that," answered Patard with moist eyes, "that is impossible. He has to end his speech with a eulogy of d'Abbeville."

"It's all the same to me," replied Babette, "but alas, he thinks of nothing else but that . . . to pay those compliments to Monsieur d'Abbeville. . . . Ah, those compliments, he will make them. . . . That's not holding him back from being of your Academy . . . but I have warnings."

All of a sudden she stopped crying.

"Hush," she said.

Fiercely, she glared at the sidewalk in front of the house. The secretary followed her eyes and there, under the street light, he saw the Walking Box; only now not only with legs, but it had a head on it and a face, both covered with long, thick hair.

"A hand-organ player," whispered Patard.

"An organ-grinder!" Babette corrected him, for to her all musicians, in the courtyards, were "grinders." "There he is again. He thinks we've gone to bed. . . . Don't budge!"

She was so excited that you could hear her heart beat.

"We'll see what he's going to do," she said between her teeth.

The Walking Box was not walking now. And the hairy, bearded head, on top of the box, kept staring, motionless, first at Monsieur Patard, then back to Babette, but evidently without seeing them.

Its hair was so thick and bushy that it was impossible to see any features of the face, except the eyes. They were bright and piercing.

"I've seen those eyes somewhere before," Patard thought.

And he was more disturbed than ever by that thought. Not that there was need for anything new to happen. He was getting more and more troubled every minute. The hour was so fantastic, so dubious, so mysterious in that old kitchen, behind the bars of that dim window, face to face with that kind old servant whose questions had made him heartsick. (In truth, he had said that these two deaths were natural . . . and supposing they were not natural! . . . and supposing the other also, the third one were to die! . . . what a responsibility for Monsieur Hippolyte Patard! . . . and what remorse!)

His heart beat now as loud as old Babette's.

That hairy head and that bushy face topping the hand-organ—what could it be doing at this hour on the lonely sidewalk? Why had the Box walked so strangely a little while ago, appearing, disappearing, coming back after it had been chased off? Surely this was the thing that old Babette had chased as hotly as her heavy wooden shoes would let her, off the sidewalk in the middle of the night. Why had it come back again under the street lamp? . . . that thick bushy hair and beard . . . those little shiny eyes? "Now we'll see what it's going to do," Babette had said.

But the only thing it did was to stare . . . stare. . . .

"Wait," whispered Babette, "wait."

Very cautiously she went toward the kitchen door. Evidently she was going to chase him again! Ah, she was brave, in spite of her fear!

For one moment the secretary had taken his eyes off the motionless Box to watch Babette's movements. When he looked out into the street again, the Box had vanished!

"It's gone," he said.

Babette came back to the window. She too looked into the street.

"Nothing there now," she moaned. "It frightened me to death. . . . If only I could get my fingers into that bushy beard!"

"What does he want?" the secretary ventured to ask.

"You'll have to ask him, Mr. Secretary, you'll have to ask him. . . . But he won't let you get near him. He flits quicker than a shadow. . . . And then, you know, I think . . . organ-grinders bring bad luck."

"Ah," said Mr. Secretary, touching his umbrella handle. "And why?"

Babette crossed herself and pronounced in a very low voice.

"La Baucal——"

"What? La Baucal?"

"La Baucal had asked the grinders to play music on the street corners so that no one would hear her murder that poor Monsieur Fualdes. . . . But everybody knew about that, Mr. Secretary."

"Yes, yes, I know . . . that's that Fualdes story. But I don't see——"

"You don't see? . . . But don't you hear? Don't you hear?"

And Babette bent down in a sinister position. Her ear, close to the brick tile, seemed to hear things which did not reach the secretary's ears. But all the same he was terribly excited.

"You're going to take me at once to Monsieur Latouche," he said, forcing himself to show some authority.

But Babette sank down again in her chair.

"I'm crazy," she said. "I had thought . . . but such things are not possible! . . . Didn't you hear anything, Mr. Secretary?"

"No, nothing at all."

"Yes, I'm going crazy with this grinder who never leaves us alone."

"What's that you say? He never leaves you now?"

"Yes, in broad daylight, at the very moment you would the least expect him, there he is in the courtyard. I chase him . . . I find him in the stairs . . . behind the door . . . anywhere . . . and at night he prowls under the windows."

"That's certainly not natural," declared the secretary.

"You see it yourself. I don't have to make you say that."

"Has he been prowling about like this for a long time?"

"For about three months now."

"As long as that?"

"Oh, sometimes weeks pass and he doesn't come. . . . Listen, the first time he came it was the day——"

She stopped.

"Well?" Patard asked, wondering at that sudden silence.

The old servant whispered.

"There are some things I don't dare say . . . but all the same, the old grinder came at the time Monsieur Latouche presented himself at your Academy . . . even then I said: 'That's not a good sign.' And it was just at the time that the others died. And whenever he spoke of your Academy it would be just at that time that it would come again. No, no, all that's not natural. . . . But I mustn't tell you anything."

And she shook her head decisively. Now Patard was very much puzzled. He sat down again. Babette began once more as if she were talking to herself.

"There are times when I try to reason with myself. I say to myself that it's nothing but a notion. At Rodez, back in my day, whenever you saw a grinder, you crossed yourself, and the children used to pelt him with stones . . . and the grinders would run off.

"But this one here," she added, thoughtfully, "he always comes back."

"You just said that you could not tell me something?" asked Patard. "Is it something about the grinder?"

"Oh, it isn't only the grinders."

But still she shook her head, as though to hold herself back from speaking. The more she shook her head, the more Patard wanted her to go on.

He resolved to make a bold attempt to encourage her, so he said:

"Perhaps, after all, these deaths . . . are not as natural as we might think . . . and if you know anything, *Madame,* you will be more to blame than all of us . . . if anything happens."

Babette joined her hands, as if in prayer.

"I have sworn in the name of God——" she said.

Patard stood up very straight.

"Take me, *Madame,* to your master."

Babette jumped.

"So, is everything decided?" she asked.

"What, decided?" the secretary asked in a slightly severe tone.

"I ask you, is every thing decided? You have elected him to your Academy? He's one of it? And he's going to say compliments to d'Abbeville?"

"Of course, *Madame.*"

"And he will say those compliments . . . before everybody?"

"Certainly."

"Just like the other two?"

"Just like the two others . . . he is obliged to."

But here the secretary's voice was no longer the least bit severe. It was even trembling a little.

"Well, then, you are murderers," said Babette quietly, as she crossed herself. "But I will not let my master be murdered; I shall save him in spite of himself . . . in spite of what I have sworn. . . . Mr. Secretary, sit down, I am going to tell you everything."

And she fell on her knees on the tile floor.

"I have sworn by my soul and I am breaking my vow. But the good God who reads my heart will grant me his pardon. Here, exactly, is what happened."

WHILE he was listening hungrily to Babette, Patard was looking vaguely through the half-open blind into the street. He saw that the grinder had come back, and that he was raising his glistening eyes up into space, glaring at something up above Patard's head, toward the first floor of the house. The secretary began to tremble. All the same he controlled himself, so as not to reveal to Babette by any sudden movement what was going on in the street. . . . And she was not interrupted in her story.

On her knees as she was, she could see nothing. And she did not try to. She spoke sadly, right straight ahead, sighing from time to time as though at confessional . . . as though she wanted, as quickly as possible, to shake off the burden weighing on her conscience.

"It happened that two days after you didn't want my master in your Academy (for at that time you didn't want him, and you took instead a Monsieur Mortimar, just as after you took Monsieur d'Aulnay) and on an afternoon when I should have gone out and when instead I stayed at home in my kitchen without Monsieur Latouche knowing it, I saw come in a man who, all by himself, found out where the stairs were that led to my master's room. He went in and closed the door. I had never seen him before. Five minutes later another man, that I didn't know either, came too . . . and he went upstairs too, quickly, just like the other one, as though he was afraid of being discovered . . . and I heard him knock at the library door, which was opened at once. Now there they were, the three of them in the library: Monsieur Latouche and the two strangers.

"One hour, two hours passed like that. . . . The library is directly over the kitchen. . . . The thing that surprized me most was that I didn't even hear them take a step . . . they didn't make the slightest sound; that puzzled me most, and I admit I was curious. Monsieur Latouche had never spoken to me of such visits. . . . So now, I too went upstairs and I put my ear to the library door . . . I couldn't hear a sound. . . . So I knocked . . . nobody answered . . . I opened the door. . . . There wasn't a soul inside. . . . As there is only one door, except the one I came in by, the door of the little writing-room, which leads into the library, I went to this door, but I was more surprized than ever . . . for never, never had I dared to go into Monsieur Latouche's little private den. And my master never received any one there; it was almost a mania with him. He wanted that room just to write in and to be sure he would not be disturbed when he was in it. Often he would give way to me about something if I would ask him reasonably, but never about that place. He had a special key made and so I had never set foot in it before. He took care of it himself. He used to say to me: 'All the rest of the apartment is yours, Babette, to polish and scrub as you will; that little corner belongs to me.' . . . And there he was locked up in there with two men I didn't know from Adam and Eve.

"So, I listened . . . through the door I tried to find out what was going on, what was being said, but they were speaking very low and I was furious not to catch anything. . . . At last I thought they were having a discussion. . . . All of a sudden, my master raised his voice and said, and I heard it perfectly clear . . .

"That's not possible. There would be no worse crime in the world!' . . . That I heard . . . with my own ears . . . that's all I heard. . . . I was still dumfounded when the door opened and the two strangers fell against me. . . .

" 'Don't harm her!' cried Monsieur Latouche as he carefully closed the door behind him. 'I am as responsible for her as for myself.' . . . And he came to me and said: 'Babette, no one will question you; you have heard or you have not heard. But you are going to kneel down and swear in the name of God that you will never speak to a living soul of what you have seen and heard. I thought you had gone out, so you did not see these men come up to my office. You do not know them. Swear that, Babette.'

"I looked at my master. I never saw his face like that before. Him, usually so gentle . . . I could do anything I wanted with him . . . anger had transformed him. He was trembling with it. . . . The two strangers were bent over me with threatening faces. I fell on my knees and I swore what they asked me to. . . . Then they went off, one behind the other, looking cautiously down the street.

"I got up more dead than alive, went down to the kitchen, and I was watching them out of sight when . . . just then . . . for the first time . . . I noticed the grinder! . . . He was standing just like a few minutes ago, under the street lamp. . . . I crossed myself . . . misfortune had come to the house."

Listening intently to Babette's story, the secretary had never once taken his eyes off the grinder. He had watched every one of his movements, and he was not a little impressed to see him make mysterious signs over his box. . . . Finally, once again the Walking Box vanished into the night.

Babette got up.

"Yes," she said, "bad luck is in the house."

"And these men," asked Patard, stirred beyond words by the housekeeper's story, "these men, have you ever seen them again?"

"There's one of them I never saw again, because he's dead. I saw his picture in the paper. That's that Monsieur Mortimar."

The secretary started.

"Monsieur Mortimar . . . and the other, the other?"

"The other . . . I saw his photograph in the paper. . . . It was Monsieur d'Aulnay."

"Monsieur d'Aulnay . . . and you saw him again?"

"Yes, him too . . . I saw him again. He came here the night before his death."

"The night before his death! Night before last?"

"Night before last . . . and no sooner had he arrived than I saw the grinder in the court. The moment he saw me, he fled, as usual. But at once I thought, 'Bad sign, bad sign! . . . Mr. Secretary, my great-aunt used to say to me always: 'Babette, beware the grinders!' . . . And my great-aunt, who was very old, Mr. Secretary, knew a great deal about such things. She lived just opposite La Baucal, the night they murdered Fualdes, down in Rodez where I was born . . . and she heard the tune of the crime . . . the tune the hand-organ players and the grinders played in the street, while on the table, La Baucal and Bastide and the others were cutting the poor man's throat. . . . It's a tune . . . which always stayed in her ears . . . the poor old woman, and she sang it to me very secretly, very low, so no one would hear her . . . a tune . . . a tune."

With the stiff movements of an automaton, Babette suddenly stood up straight. On her face, lighted by the pale reddish

streak from the street lamp opposite, was stamped inexpressible terror. Her stiff arm pointed toward the street, from whence floated an old air, slow, faint, desperately melancholy.

"That very tune!" she rattled. "Listen . . . it was that very tune!"

4. *Martin Latouche*

AT THAT very moment a terrible crash in the room just over the kitchen shook the ceiling. It sounded as though some sort of struggle was going on up there, as though furniture was being overturned. The house trembled.

"They're killing him!" Babette yelled. "Help! Help!"

She leaped to the fireplace, seized a poker, rushed out of the kitchen, tore up the stairs.

"My God!" Hippolyte Patard murmured.

He stayed where he was, prostrate with fear, broken by the horror of the situation, while in the street the accursed tune kept up its dull rhythm, accomplice of some new crime—a tune of death eternally drowning out the shrieks of its victims. There it was now, all alone, smothering every other sound. It had reached the throbbing ears of Hippolyte Patard . . . fallen upon his chilled heart.

He felt he was on the verge of fainting. But the shame he suddenly felt for his weakness held him back on the brink of that dark abyss into which the human soul, suddenly dizzy, lets itself fall. He remembered just in time that he was the secretary of the Academy. Thus aroused to a great moral and physical effort, he grasped in his left hand his umbrella, in his right a pair of fire-tongs, and found himself before a door on the first floor which Babette was pounding with her poker. . . . It was opened at once.

"Are you always so crazy, Babette?" Patard heard a thin but quiet voice say.

A man of some sixty years, robust, with wavy gray hair, a fine white beard framing a handsome face and gentle eyes, stood in the doorway.

It was Martin Latouche.

When his eyes fell upon Hippolyte Patard standing there with his tongs in one hand and his umbrella in the other, he couldn't suppress a smile.

"You, my dear Patard! What's the trouble?" he asked, bowing respectfully.

"Ah, *Monsieur,*" Babette cried as she threw down the poker, "that's just what we want you to tell *us*. What in Heaven's name was making such a terrible noise? We thought some one was murdering you. . . . And then the grinder is under our very windows, grinding out that terrible tune."

"He'd better go off to bed," Latouche answered quietly, "and you too, my good Babette."

Then turning toward Patard, he said, "Dear Mr. Secretary, I am curious to know to what I am indebted for the honor of your visit at such an hour?"

He led Patard into the library and took the tongs from him. But Babette had followed them in.

She looked all around.

The furniture was in its proper place . . . tables, chairs, book-shelves . . . everything in order.

"But surely," she said, "this gentleman and I were not dreaming! It sounded as if a fight was going on up here."

"Calm yourself, Babette. . . . I was in my writing-room and stumbled over an armchair, that's all. . . . I won't need you any more . . . good-night."

Babette looked suspiciously at the door of the little writing-room, that door which was never open to her, and sighed.

"You never want me in that room."

"Leave us, Babette."

"Promise you'll do nothing more about the Academy."

"Babette, will you leave us?".

"You know that you write letters you don't mail . . . that you're always liable to receive strangers in secret——"

"What's that?"

"———strangers from the Academy. . . ."

"Babette, there weren't any strangers from the Academy!"

"Oh, those men never get to be known until they're dead!"

No sooner had she uttered these words than Latouche seized her by the throat, shouting, "Be quiet."

It was the first time he had ever laid violent hands on his old servant, and he was sorry at once, and especially because the secretary of the Academy had witnessed his outburst.

"I beg your pardon," he said, trying to control the emotion which was clearly gripping him, "but that foolish old Babette has the power of exasperating me tonight . . . ah, woman's obstinacy! . . . Please be seated, sir."

Latouche offered Patard an armchair with its back to Babette and he too turned his back on her. They both tried to forget that she was there, since she wouldn't leave.

"Monsieur Latouche," said Babette suddenly, "after what you have just done to me I may expect anything; you may even kill me. But I have told Mr. Secretary here everything."

LATOUCHE wheeled around. His head was entirely in the shadow, and Patard was unable to read on his face his excited feelings, but the hand of the man, leaning against the table, was shaking. It was several minutes before he could say a word.

"What did you tell Monsieur Patard, Babette?" he asked at last.

"I told him that Monsieur d'Aulnay and Monsieur Mortimar came here and were closeted with you in the little writing-room before they went to die at the Academy."

"You promised to say nothing about it."

"Yes, but I spoke of it only to save you. If I didn't do something, you would go right there and die, just like the others."

"What else did you tell the secretary?" said Latouche in a broken voice.

"I told him what I heard when I listened at the door of the little writing-room. I told him I heard you say, *'No, no, that's not possible, that would be the worst crime in the world.'* "

For what seemed a long time, Latouche said nothing. He was thinking deeply. Patard was made more uncomfortable by the oppressive silence in the old house at that moment than he had been by the tune of the organ-grinder a little while ago.

"You didn't hear anything else?" Latouche finally said. "Babette, you didn't tell anything else?"

"Nothing at all."

Suddenly, to the utter surprize of the servant and Patard, Latouche let out a big, hearty laugh. He went up to Babette and patted her cheek.

"I only wanted to frighten you, you old goose; you've got a good heart, and I think a lot of you. Now I want to talk to Monsieur Patard. I'll see you in the morning, Babette."

"May God keep you until then, sir. I have done my duty."

She bowed ceremoniously and withdrew, carefully closing the library door after her.

Latouche listened to her footsteps as she went down the stairs.

"Oh, these old servants; they are devotion itself, and yet often annoying. She's a little bit touched, you know.

Those two deaths at the Academy have affected her. . . .

"As she told you, Monsieur d'Aulnay talked to me here the night before his death. He was very much impressed by Mortimar's sudden death following Eliphas' public warnings. Maxime d'Aulnay had a weak heart. When he, like Mortimar, received a threatening letter, sent I am sure by some practical joker, he must have been terribly frightened, in spite of his bold front. Having a weak heart, that was all he needed to——"

Patard rose. He took a long breath and heaved one of those deep sighs that seem to restore life to divers who have been long under the water.

"Ah, my dear Latouche," he said, "what a relief it is to hear you say that! I will not hide from you that with all those stories of your Babette, I also was beginning to doubt the truth, which must, however, be obvious to every person of common sense."

"Yes, yes," Latouche answered gently, "I see how that could be . . . memories of the Fualdes affair . . . my meetings with Mortimar and d'Aulnay . . . their deaths right afterward . . . the terrible words spoken in my little writing-room——"

"That's true," Patard broke in, "I didn't know what to think."

Latouche took the Secretary's hands in his and shook them warmly, as a sign of complete confidence and friendship.

"My dear Patard," he said, "may I ask you to come into my little writing-room?"

IT WAS a small, square room. The window was open; a table and an armchair were overturned and papers and books lay in great disorder about the room. A lamp on the piano lighted up some strange-looking musical instruments hanging on the wall. Hippolyte Patard was perplexed. Martin Latouche locked the door, went to the window, looked out for a moment, then closed it.

"I'm sure he's gone now," he said. "He must have realized that again tonight there was nothing he could do about it."

"Who?" asked Patard, troubled.

"Oh, the grinder, of course, as foolish old Babette calls him," he said, as he began to put tables and chairs back in place. A kindly, child-like smile lighted up his face as he turned to the secretary and said in a low voice:

"You see, my dear Patard, this little room belongs to me. It's not as well cared for as the rest of the house because Babette is not allowed to step foot into it! . . . Here's where I hide my musical instruments, the whole collection . . . if Babette ever knew, she would throw every one of them into the fire. . . . My old Northern lyre and Fifteenth Century harp . . . and my psalter . . . and my guitar . . . oh, by the way, have you seen my guitar? . . . just look at it! . . . and my lute . . . and my mandolin . . . oh, you're admiring my guitar . . . it's the oldest one in existence, it may interest you to know. . . . Well, she would throw them all right into the fire. Yes, yes, that's the truth . . . she doesn't like music."

He sighed deeply and went on:

"And just because she's been brought up on all that tragic Fualdes incident . . . in our youth, at Rodez, that's all any one talked about . . . of the grinders who were playing their organs while Fualdes was being murdered . . . since then Babette has never wanted to look at another musical instrument . . . you'll never know, Mr. Secretary, how many schemes I've had to think up just to have these instruments brought in here!

"Just now, for instance, I want to buy a hand-organ, as they're called, one of the

oldest in existence. The poor devil who was grinding music out of it hadn't the least idea he had such a treasure! . . . When I ran across him one afternoon the poor man was begging . . . I'm an honest man . . . I told him I'd give him five hundred francs for his box. . . . We closed the deal at once. Five hundred francs was a fortune to him and I didn't want to rob him. . . . I promised him all I had. But the hardest thing to arrange was to get possession of the instrument. Babette is sure to be in the house every time the man comes. . . . She runs into him in the courtyard, on the stairs, just when we think she's gone out for the afternoon. And then there's the very devil of a chase! Lucky for him he can run! This evening we had it all arranged that when Babette was safe in bed, I was to hoist the instrument up into the little den with ropes. . . . So there I was up on the table and just as I was going to throw the ropes, the table turned upside down! . . . that was at the very moment you both came in, thinking that I was being murdered! . . . You certainly did look funny, Mr. Secretary, with your umbrella and your fire-tongs! . . . Very funny, but you meant well!"

Martin Latouche laughed heartily. The secretary, too, could laugh now, not only at the funny picture Latouche had drawn of him, but at his own fear of the Walking Box.

"How naturally everything is explained!" thought Hippolyte Patard. "There are times when a man has no more sense than a baby!" How ridiculous he had been to be impressed with Babette's story about the grinder! How sorry he was for the old man, who, like so many others, was under the thumb of his old servant!

"Don't be too sorry," said Latouche, serious again. "If I didn't have Babette, I would have been in the poor-house long ago. We're not rich—far from it—and in the beginning I did many a foolish thing in order to add to my collection! Good old Babette, she often has to squeeze the pennies, and she deprives herself of many things just to give them to me. She watches out for me as though she were my mother . . . but she can't endure the sound of music.

"Ah," he said, as he touched his instruments lovingly, "see, I caress them gently, so gently that we always weep together . . . and then sometimes . . . when I have succeeded in sending Babette off on some errand . . . then I take my little guitar I've restrung with some old strings I picked up, and I play old airs just as though I were a real troubadour . . . oh, no, no indeed, Mr. Secretary, I'm not unhappy at all . . . and then, too, I have my piano . . . I do as I like with my piano . . . I play all the tunes I want to . . . loud, tempestuous preludes, the most devastating marches. Ah, it's a superb piano . . . and it doesn't bother Babette a bit!"

Saying which, Latouche sat down at a piano and his fingers began to race up and down the keyboard in a veritable fury. Monsieur Patard stood, expecting to hear mad sounds issue from the piano. But not a note was heard. It was a soundless piano, manufactured for considerate musicians who want to practise the scales without disturbing their neighbors.

"Sometimes I play it all day long," said Latouche as his fingers bounded up and down the keyboard, his eyes lifted to heaven, his hair in great disorder, "and nobody hears it but me. It's full and loud, like a complete orchestra."

Suddenly he closed it, and the secretary saw that he was weeping. So he went up to the old man and said very gently:

"My friend——"

Latouche was touched. "You are kind,

very kind," he said, his voice trembling. "One is fortunate to be a member of a society which has a man like you in it. Now you know all my little troubles, you have seen my little den where such mysterious meetings occur, and you know why I am so worried when I find out that my old Babette listened behind the door. I love her very much, but I also love my little guitar . . . and I don't want to be without either one . . . even if sometimes" (and here he whispered into Patard's ear) "there's nothing in the house to eat. . . . Ah, Mr. Secretary, you're an old bachelor, but you're not a collector. To have the soul of a collector in the body of an old bachelor is terrible. But despite Babette I shall get the hand-organ . . . perhaps the very organ they used at the Fualdes murder . . . who knows?"

With the back of his hand he wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"It's getting very late," he said, and taking every precaution, led the secretary from the little secret den to the large library adjoining. As he closed the precious door behind him, he said again:

"Yes, very late! But why did you come at such a late hour, Mr. Secretary?"

"There's a rumor that you refused to take the d'Abbeville seat. The evening papers came out with that story."

"Nonsense!" he insisted in a solemn voice. "Stupid! I'm going to write a triple eulogy in praise of all three men—d'Abbeville, Mortimar and d'Aulnay."

"Then tomorrow I shall send a statement to the newspapers," said Patard. "But tell me, my dear colleague . . . perhaps it's a little indiscreet on my part——" As a matter of fact the secretary did seem rather embarrassed. He kept turning the handle of his umbrella round and round. Finally he ventured:

"Well, since you've been so confidential with me, I shall risk it. First—and this is not indiscreet—did you know Jean Mortimar and Maxime d'Aulnay very well?"

Latouche did not answer at once. He went to the table, picked up the lamp and held it above Patard's head.

"I'm going to escort you," he said, "down as far as the street door, or if you are afraid of unpleasant experiences I'll go all the way home with you. In spite of its dismal appearance, the neighborhood is very quiet."

"No, certainly not, my dear colleague. Don't trouble to do that."

"As you like," answered Latouche without insisting. "I'll light you down the stairs."

BY THE time they were on the landing the new member of the Academy stopped to answer Patard's question.

"Yes, indeed, I knew them very well. We were old friends, companions, and when we learned that all three of us were candidates for Monsieur d'Abbeville's chair, we decided not to confuse the situation. We used to get together sometimes to discuss the affair, sometimes at one house, sometimes at another. We were rather amused than otherwise by the threats Eliphas made after Mortimar's election."

"That was the conversation that frightened Babette . . . of what crime were you talking when you said, *'No, no, it's not possible! That would be the worst crime in the world'?"*

Latouche lighted Patard down a few steps, begging him to feel his way carefully along the stairway.

"Well, now," he continued, "(you'll want to laugh) I've already told you that although Maxime d'Aulnay made light of them, he was really worried by the threats of Eliphas, who had disappeared after he made them. That very day, Maxime d'Aulnay, while congratulating Mortimar

on his election two days previously, had warned him—more or less jokingly of course—to be on his guard because the vengeful Lord Eliphas was lying in waiting. Hadn't he said that Monsieur d'Abbeville's chair would be fatal for the one who dared to sit in it? . . . For my part I thought nothing better—be careful of that step, Mr. Secretary—I thought nothing was better than to go that kind of joke one better—watch out there—and I cried out—turn to the left there—Mr. Secretary—and I cried out, *"No, no, it's not possible! That would be the worst crime in the world!"*—well, here we are!"

The two men were standing at the outside door. Latouche drew the heavy iron bolt, noisily turned an enormous key, opened the door, and looked out on the square.

"All quiet," he said, "every one's asleep. Would you like me to go with you, Mr. Secretary?"

"No, no indeed. I'm stupid. I'm a poor, stupid man. Ah, my dear colleague, allow me to shake your hand for the last time."

"What do you mean by the last time? Do you think I'm going to die, too? I don't. I haven't a weak heart!"

"No. I'm just silly. We must hope that less serious times are ahead of us and that some day we'll be able to laugh at all this. Good-bye, my dear new colleague. . . . Good-bye . . . and once more, all my best wishes!"

With a brave and reassured spirit, Patard, umbrella in hand, was striding off into the night when Latouche called him.

"Listen," he whispered, touching his lips with his finger. "One more word. Don't forget that all those are my little secrets."

"You don't know me, my dear Latouche. It's understood that I haven't seen you tonight."

5. *Death Strikes Again*

THE great day arrived. It had been set by the Academy for two weeks after the burial of Maxime d'Aulnay, for the Immortals wanted to put an end to the regrettable incidents as quickly as possible; to hush up all the absurd rumors that the disciples of Eliphas de la Nox, the friends of the beautiful Madame de Bithynia and all the members of the Pneumatic Club (from *pneuma,* meaning the *soul*) had never ceased circulating. As to Lord Eliphas himself, he seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. All efforts to find him had come to naught. The cleverest reporters turned loose on his trail had come back baffled. His prolonged absence had become the principal reason for anxiety; evidently His Highness was hiding. And why was he hiding?

On the other hand, it must be admitted that the sane-minded, after the excitement of the first, or rather the second, moment had subsided, had regained their equilibrium.

Thus the most self-possessed of men, following his exciting and secret interview with Martin Latouche, was Hippolyte Patard. He had even regained his pink complexion.

But, when the great day of Latouche's reception arrived, every one's curiosity was aroused. Excitement ran high in all classes—the great and the humble, the wise and the foolish.

The crowd rushed to get into the little open space under the cupola of the Academy. After this was filled up, the onlookers packed into the adjacent streets, blocking all traffic.

Inside the building, in the great public hall, nobody was seated; men and women were crushing each other. As the minutes wore on—the minutes preceding the opening of the session—the silence became more and more oppressive.

It was noted that the beautiful Madame de Bithynia had not appeared. Her absence was construed as a dire omen; certainly if *anything should happen,* she had acted wisely not to show herself, for she would have been torn limb from limb by a crowd already pitched to the verge of a mad fury.

In the seat that lady had occupied at the preceding session sat a correct gentleman, whose bourgeois stomach was adorned with a handsome, heavy gold chain. He was standing up. His face was not that of a genius, but it was very far from being unintelligent. He was wearing gold-rimmed eyeglasses. Monsieur Gaspard Lalouette (it was he) was not near-sighted, but he was pleased to make the world believe that his eyesight had been impaired by much reading, like most great literary men.

He was just as excited as the crowd clamoring around him, and a little nervous twitch made him keep raising his eyebrows—a very amusing effect. He looked at the spot where Martin Latouche was going to deliver his speech of acceptance.

One minute! One minute more! The president was about to open the meeting . . . if . . . if Martin Latouche arrived. His sponsors, disconsolate, were awaiting him . . . standing at the door, anxious, hopeless, looking this way and that.

Could he have backed out at the last moment? Could he have been afraid?

This is what Hippolyte Patard kept asking himself, and the thought brought the lemon color to his face.

Suddenly he stood up straight, an ear turned in the direction of a far-away noise . . . a noise coming nearer . . . faster and faster—a burst of enthusiasm, no doubt, announcing the arrival of Martin Latouche.

The tumult of cries, shouts and rumblings of the crowds increased in menacing proportions. It was far from being reassuring, but it was impossible to make out what they were shrieking outside.

Then the entire hall, which up to that moment had been breathing the very same emotion as Patard, suddenly in the winking of an eyelash stopped breathing at all.

The tempest seemed to shake the building. The throng battered the walls, pounded on the doors . . . soldiers, guards, withdrew into the hall. A kind of peculiar groaning began to make itself heard even amid such a tumult. It was like a melancholy bellowing.

Patard felt his hair stand up on his head, as a kind of human animal, a hideous bundle rolled in, its skirt in shreds, its bodice torn away, the whole topped by gorgon's hair which angry fists were tearing, while an indistinguishable mouth shrieked:

"Mr. Secretary! Mr. Secretary! . . . He's dead! My master's dead! . . . You've gone and killed him!"

Yes, Martin Latouche was dead! Dead just like the others!

No words can describe the confusion that ensued.

So Martin Latouche was dead! Dead like the others! Not, though, while he was making his speech of acceptance under the dome, but just at the very moment when he was to leave for the Academy to read it—when, like the other two, he was about to sit in Monsieur d'Abbeville's chair.

THE tragic news shrieked through every corner of Paris.

The next day's papers carried little else. After recalling to their readers the circumstances of the first two deaths, they hinted that this latest one was nothing short of criminal; they called upon the prosecutor to apprehend the murderer.

Quite naturally the first person to be questioned was the old servant Babette.

On that fatal day they had carried her home in an unconscious state. In a very perturbed state, Hippolyte Patard had been escorted to his dwelling by several of his devoted friends. Here follows, in Babette's own words, the story of the extraordinary death of her master:

"For some time, my master went around thinking only of that speech he had to make and I kept hearing him talk of their d'Abbevilles, and their Mortimars, and their d'Aulnays as though they were little tin gods. I even saw him posing, making gestures before the long mirror, just the way actors do. To see a man of his age behaving like this made me feel sorry for him, and I would have laughed him out of it, only I was scared off by the threats of that wizard they wouldn't have in their accursed Academy. He'd already made way with two men and I was afraid he'd kill my master. When I whispered this into the ear of Mr. Secretary he wouldn't listen, for it seems that by hook or by crook, he had to have one more man for his Academy. So whenever I'd hear my master start that speech of his, I'd implore him on bended knees to send his resignation to the secretary. I had warnings. Every day I'd meet an old organ-grinder; that's a sure sign of bad luck in my part of the world, in Rodez, ever since the Fualdes scandal; and I told this to Monsieur Latouche, but I might as well have spared my breath.

"Even so, I was going to stand by him to the bitter end. So, the day of the speech, I got all dressed up, I left the kitchen door open, and I decided that I'd follow after him wherever he went—to that miserable Academy, to the end of the world—anywhere. There I stood waiting, but he didn't come. Still I waited—where was he? Just when I was most alarmed, what did I hear but that terrible tune again, the tune that had killed Monsieur Fualdes! Cold shivers ran up and down my spine! That old organ-grinder was certainly somewhere near. The hour of death was striking! I opened the windows, looked up and down the street. . . . Nobody. . . . I ran out of the kitchen, searched the court; not a sign anywhere. And still always the tune ringing in my ears. . . . Nobody on the stairs; on the first floor; and the more I searched the more I heard it. . . . I opened the library door; you could have sworn the tune was being played right there behind the books. . . . My master wasn't there . . . Perhaps he was in his little private den? . . . I listened. . . . The murder tune came from the master's little den! . . . My heart was thumping, as I put my ear to the door to listen. . . . I called, 'Master, Master.'

"No answer. The tune kept on playing . . . playing behind the door. . . . What sad notes, those—enough to make your heart stop beating and bring tears to the eyes of all the murderers since the world began. . . .

"To steady myself, I leaned against the door. . . . Suddenly it opened. . . . At that very second, the terrible tune seemed to scrape out of the hand-organ . . . to scratch across your very ears and heart. . . . I almost fell in a faint flat on the floor, but I straightened up as stiff as a poker when I saw my master there bent over the hand-organ. . . . I recognized it . . . that was the music-box that had been playing the murder tune! . . . but no grinder to be seen . . . it was my master's hand that was clutching the handle. . . . I ran to him . . . the hand dropped . . . he fell full-length on the floor . . . my poor master was dead, killed by the murder tune!"

BABETTE'S testimony made a strange impression, and public opinion was by no means satisfied by the more natural explanation developed at the inquest. It

was officially declared that old Martin Latouche had gone crazy over his hobby of collecting musical instruments; that he would even go without food to save a few pennies to spend adding to his collection. This evidence, it was maintained, explained how the hand-organ had come into his possession, in spite of the watchful Babette; and, just as he was trying to turn the handle, he fell to the floor, weak from lack of food.

But everybody declared that this explanation was much too simple to be believed. The newspapers demanded that the police get busy and find the organ-grinder.

However, he was as elusive as Eliphas himself. The result was just what was to be expected—the reporters swore that Eliphas and the organ-grinder were one and the same person—the real murderer under two different names.

As a last resort the public demanded autopsies and in spite of official influence brought to bear against such action, the bodies of Jean Mortimar and Maxime d'Aulnay were exhumed.

The physicians found not the slightest evidence of poisoning. Mortimar's body was perfectly normal but they did find on d'Aulnay's face a few spots, which at any other time would not have been noticed, or which would have been attributed to normal decomposition.

They looked like very faint star-shaped burns. On examining d'Aulnay's face closely, two of the doctors stated (the third doctor couldn't see anything at all!) that they noted a burnished tint on it.

These doctors also examined Latouche's body, and all they found was evidence of a slight nose-bleed. As a matter of fact that hemorrhage must have been caused when the body fell to the floor; but the public was so aroused that it attached a mysterious importance to meaningless little blood spots, and a detailed and perfectly plausible murder theory resulted.

Hand-writing experts examined the two threatening letters sent to the first two candidates just as they were being received into the Academy. These experts swore that the letters were not in the hand-writing of Eliphas de la Nox, with examples of which they had been provided. But there are always those who declare that hand-writing experts are far from infallible.

Finally there was the question of the hand-organ. An antiquarian, dealing from time to time in rare instruments and claiming to be an authority, asked to be allowed to examine the instrument.

The court granted him permission, hoping to quiet those who imagined that that old box, wheezing out its tune while Martin Latouche was drawing his last breath, couldn't be any ordinary hand-organ; and that a man like Eliphas had perhaps concealed himself in the instrument, or better still, had hidden the means of committing his crime. The antiquarian thoroughly examined the organ and even played what Babette always spoke of as the murder tune.

"Is that an organ like any ordinary one?" the official asked the antiquarian.

"No," he answered, "it's not like any other. It's one of the rarest and oldest that has been brought to us from Italy."

"Have you found anything mysterious about it?"

"Nothing whatsoever."

"Do you think that hand-organ is in any way connected with the crime?"

"I couldn't say about that," answered the antiquarian, ambiguously. "I wasn't there when it began to grind out the murder music."

"So, then, you think a crime was committed, do you?"

"Oiy, oiy."

In vain they tried to draw from him

what he meant by his 'Oiy, oiy.' All he would say was "Oiy, oiy."

Thus that expert antiquarian ended by unsettling their minds all the more.

This man was also an art merchant; he lived in the Rue Laffitte; his name, Gaspard Lalouette.

A FEW days later, at a quarter past three in the afternoon, a man of about 45, wearing a heavy gold chain across his pleasantly curved stomach, got out of a second-class compartment at the Varenne-St. Hilaire station.

He turned up his overcoat collar as protection against the chill wind. He walked along the main street until he came to the river Marne, crossed the bridge leading to Chennevières and went along the right-hand bank.

He followed it for a quarter of an hour; then he looked about him. He was leaving behind him the last cottages, vacant since summertime, and he was in a section quite flat and deserted. A wide blanket of fresh snow spread out at his feet. With his broad overcoat flapping in the wind as he walked, he looked like a huge black bird.

Far off he saw some trees and through them the sharp roof of a house. He muttered something ill-natured about any one being so pig-headed as to want to stay in such a place in the middle of winter. He plodded on. A deep, white silence enveloped him.

It was about four o'clock when he reached the grove of trees protecting an estate surrounded by high walls . A heavy wrought-iron gateway barred strangers.

Not another habitation was to be seen, as far as the eye could reach.

At the iron gateway the man pulled the bell. Immediately two huge Great Dane dogs rushed upon him, foaming at the mouth and growling.

A horrible, guttural voice thundered:

"Ajax, Achilles, you brutes, back to your kennel."

And a giant appeared.

Such a giant as he was, too! A thing of monstrous proportions, between six and seven feet tall when he stood erect. Just now he stooped somewhat, his heavy shoulders bent forward. His head was round, with short bushy hair. A long beard covered his face and gave him the fierce look of Attila, the Hun. His jowl was as terrifying as that of the two watch-dogs growling at the iron bars. With powerful hands he clutched the beasts by their necks, and with an effortless movement tossed them behind him.

The visitor trembled ever so slightly—a mere shiver across his shoulders—and murmured between his teeth, "I had been warned to beware of the dogs, but no one told me anything about the giant."

The monster pressed his brute face against the wrought iron.

"Whoizzit?"

The visitor took up his position at a respectful distance, and then answered, "I would like to speak to Monsieur Lonstalot."

"Whattabout?"

"Tell him that it has to do with the affairs of the French Academy and that I'm in somewhat of a hurry."

He took a card from his pocket and offered it to the giant. Grumbling and muttering the man went off in the direction of a flight of steps leading to the main part of the house. At once Ajax and Achilles came back and growled menacingly through the iron grating; they did not bark this time; they glared at him ravenously, wild to break through the barrier that separated them from a good meal.

The visitor looked at his watch.

"It isn't late," he said. "So much the better, if I must wait two or three hours

before he will receive me. . . . He'll not allow any one to disturb him if he's in the middle of his experiments . . . and he's apt to forget there's a visitor. . . . All is pardoned the great Lonstalot."

Having made up his mind to yield to the inevitable, imagine his surprize when he looked up and saw coming toward him, not the giant, but the great Lonstalot himself!

We know already that outside his work he was indifferent and preoccupied; mingling with men, he was as intangible and aloof as a shadow, utterly unaware of passing events. Every one knew him for this kind of man. Imagine then the visitor's surprize when he saw the famous little scientist hurrying as fast as his little legs would allow toward the iron gateway and asking, "Is it you, Gaspard Lalouette?"

"It is, my master, at your service," answered Lalouette, making a low sweeping bow with his soft felt hat (the expert in antiques and works of art used to mark such great occasions by wearing a full, velvet-collared cape and a broad-brimmed felt hat. He aimed to look as much as he possibly could like the well-known romantic poets—Byron, for example, or Alfred de Vigny or the young Chatterton. For above everything else he worshipped letters—and we must not forget that he was also an officer of the French Academy).

In next month's chapters of this fascinating story you will experience the dread thrills of Patard and Lalouette as they uncover the eery secrets that lie buried in Lonstalot's dungeon of living death. On sale in all magazine stores December 1st.

Creatures of the Comet

By EDMOND HAMILTON

An utterly strange and blood-curdling tale about a weird world in the heart of a comet, and fearful adventures thereon

JACKSON, the rocket-dispatcher, shook his head for the twentieth time at Kirk and Madden. The two trim-garbed young men stood beside their fifty-foot rocket, upright in the sunlight at the rocket-station's edge, and heard Jackson for the twentieth time deliver his opinion.

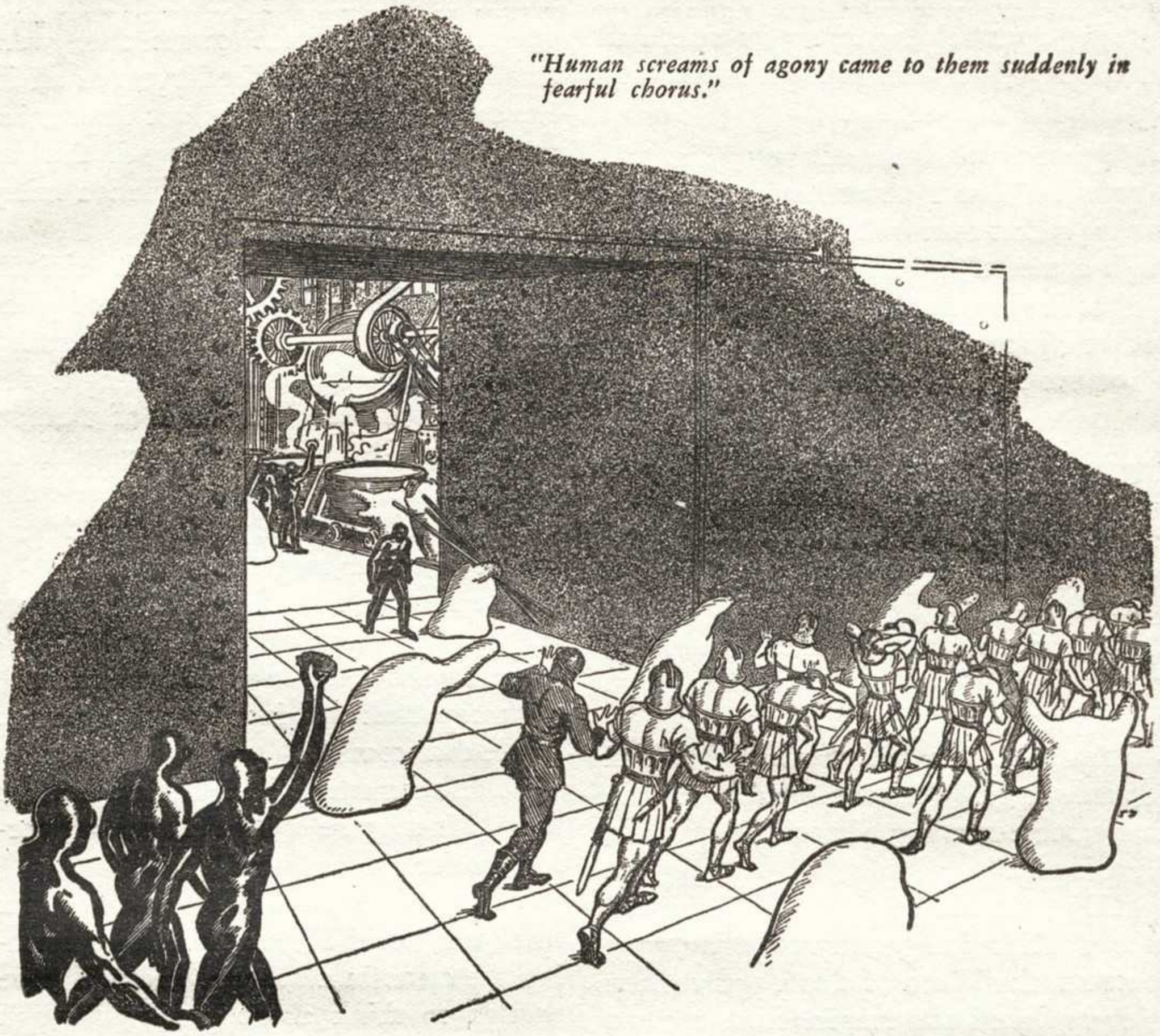
"It's just sheer dumb suicide," the dispatcher pronounced. "You two have been in the rocket-service long enough to know better—but don't!"

"You talk as though we hadn't a chance of succeeding," Kirk countered.

"And you talk as though you had one!" burst Jackson. "You know as well as I what a comet's like—a great globe of glowing gas charged with enough electrical force to blast out of existence any matter that touches it. That's what a comet's coma is, and you two are going to drive straight into one!"

"It's not as bad as you make out, Jackson," protested Kirk. "This rocket is made of the new alloy, insulite, and can take us through the coma unharmed."

"And that means we can explore the comet's interior first of all men," added



"Human screams of agony came to them suddenly in fearful chorus."

Madden. "Everything else in the solar system is known now, but think of the glory of being first to penetrate inside its biggest comet!"

"You'll get glory," Jackson predicted grimly. "You'll go to glory when you hit that coma, as many a rocket's done before that blundered into it!"

"We don't think so," said Madden, "but even if that happens we'll have got at least that far."

Jackson spread his hands as though on the point of making a final appeal, then suddenly dropped them helplessly.

"I see it's no use," he told them. "You're going—and I'm wishing you the best."

"We'll need it," Kirk grinned. "But you wait—you'll see us come roaring back some day with every tube firing and a piece of comet hitched on behind!"

They clasped hands with Jackson, then climbed the little ladder that led up into the rocket's upright cylindrical bulk. Jackson saw the circular door they entered spinning shut from inside, and a moment later glimpsed the two of them seating themselves in the control-chairs, up in the rocket's transparent-walled pilot-house. He waved his hand to them.

The lights high up on the station's dispatching-tower, that controlled the arrival and departure of rockets, began to flash. They changed from yellow to green, then to red, and at last to pure white. At once there was a deafening downward blast

from the rocket and it shot upward, its landing-arms folding along its side, and in a second had vanished. Jackson stared up into the blue after it.

"Space-struck, both of them," he told himself. "But I never heard of even a nutty rocket-man who would monkey with a comet!"

Out in the pilot-house of the speeding rocket Kirk was making much the same comment to his companion, as with deft fingers on the firing-levers he kept the rocket roaring out from earth through the black void of space, exchanging sharp words on the space-phone with the pilots of rockets that crowded them in the space-lane.

"You can't blame Jackson much," he was saying. "It's going to be a tough order, getting inside a comet."

"I'm glad you realize that," Madden replied dryly. "Maybe you'll restrain that trouble-hunting disposition of yours on this trip."

"*My* trouble-hunting disposition?" echoed Kirk indignantly. "Why, you space-struck old son of a son, you've been in every fight I was ever in, from one end of the solar system to the other!"

"Yes, I was in them," said Madden. "If I hadn't jumped in them to pull you out you'd have been buried by now on nine different planets!"

He dodged with a laugh as Kirk, too indignant to reply, aimed a blow at him from his control-chair.

DAYS passed as the rocket fled like a shining missile out through the solar system's vast spaces. After the first forty hours the firing-tubes had brought the rocket to its highest possible speed and had been cut off, so that it was as silently as a dream-craft that they sped through the void. The sun and the inner planets dwindled fast behind them.

And ahead Kirk and Madden could see a spot of white light growing with proportionate speed, the comet they were heading for. It was the largest of all in the solar system, but was not impressive at this distance. Having no tail this far out from the sun, it resembled a misty glowing little sun.

But it grew—it grew into sinister splendor as they crossed the orbit of planet after planet toward it. When fourteen days had been checked off their log it was a stupendous spectacle ahead of them, a colossal globe of gas glowing with its electrical charge. This globe, the coma or head of the comet, hid entirely with its sphere whatever might lie within.

The two men watched closely as their rocket neared the titanic thing. "Gravitometers show a strong pull from ahead," Kirk reported. "Must be some matter inside that coma."

"There's matter, all right, but in what form? It may be a big interior meteor-swarm, for all we know."

"Well, time enough to worry about that later," said Kirk. "We'll be reaching the coma in a minute, and will have enough to think about getting through it."

"If we get through it at all," Madden added. "If this rocket's insulite shell can't stand the charge, it'll be all over with us so quick we won't know it."

"What a comfort you are!" Kirk grinned. "Hold tight, fellow—we're going to hit that coma's edge!"

The huge coma walled the firmament before them, glowing like a colossal rampart of blinding light. Both had slipped dark glasses over their eyes but the light even through them was dazzling. They forgot their aching eyes in a brief moment, however, as the rocket sped into the region that marked the coma's limits, and rushed on into its blinding glare.

Kirk and Madden voiced exclamations despite themselves. It was as though all

in the universe had melted into brilliant light and force. The coma's glowing gas, charged with incredible force, roared and bellowed against the transparent insulite windows of the pilot-house. Kirk, his hands tense on the firing-levers, knew that any other rocket would already have perished in a blast of electrical fire. Only their insulite shell protected them from instant annihilation.

They were rushing deeper into the coma. How thick was it? It might extend almost to the center, though they knew that since there was matter inside there must somewhere be clear space where that matter could exist. Yet the coma's eye-dazing glory was still about them, and it seemed incredible that their rocket should actually be racing through this sea of death. A flaw or break in the insulite would mean the end.

Suddenly the coma was gone from about them! The rocket had shot out into the great central space they had hoped existed inside it!

Madden shouted, pointed. Kirk saw that ahead of them swung a world, poised at the center of the shell-like coma, at the comet's heart. A comet world! And their rocket was rushing toward it at a speed that meant a smash in landing! Kirk's hands flew over the firing-levers, and a deafening blast came from the rocket's nose-tubes, firing ahead to check their immense speed.

The rocket lurched and bucked, slowed. Its speed rapidly diminished, a sickening deceleration that crushed them deep in the control-chairs. The world ahead, a dark-green sphere, was shifting downward as the rocket turned in the grasp of its gravitation. They were still nearing it at terrific speed, though, with nose-tubes still firing to check them.

Madden was crying something but Kirk did not listen. The surface of the comet world was rushing up toward them, a checkered light and dark pattern. Air sang shrilly outside and Kirk's mind automatically recorded the fact that this world had an atmosphere. The shrilling of air increased, green-clad hills and valleys rose stunningly toward them, and then at the very moment of touching Kirk's hands flashed and the nose-tubes all blasted together with full power.

There was a shock that drove them down and then upward, an instant click and clang as the rocket's landing-arms automatically unfolded to hold it in an erect position on the ground. Then silence.

Kirk and Madden struggled out of their control-chairs. "A world—a comet world!" Kirk exulted. "We've found it —just wait until we take this news back!"

Madden, hardly less excited, was eyeing dials. "The meters show breathable air, temperature and gravitation about the same as earth's," he reported.

"Outside for me, then!" exclaimed Kirk, heading down into the rocket's body toward its door. "I'm going to give our discovery the once-over."

"Wait a minute, you nut!" Madden checked him. "Here, we're going to take our rocket-pistols with us—no telling what's outside."

"Come on," said Kirk impatiently. "This is the last time I go cometeering with any one as slow as you."

WITH rocket-pistols in their belts they spun open the big screw-door, a light metal ladder unfolding down from it as it opened. They climbed down this, soft warm air upon their faces, and looked excitedly about them.

The rocket stood on a small clear patch of soft turf, that sloped upward from a broad river. The river's waters were not transparent but bright green, with an unearthly aspect. The slope on which they stood, like the one across the river, was

covered save for a few clear spots with a green and mighty jungle.

Its towering growths rose on all sides of them, growths almost too strange to be termed trees. They were rather like a cubistic painting of trees, with square, bright green trunks, limbs that were either square or hexagonal, and foliage that had not the irregular shape of earthly leaves but consisted of sprays of flat green squares or hexagons. Some of the trees bore green and purple fruits that were almost perfectly cubical in shape.

This weird forest sloped up from the river as far as their eyes reached. Overhead the glowing shell of the coma that enclosed this world stretched from horizon to horizon like a sky of flame. Warmth and light beat down upon them from it. There was no living thing in sight, and but few sounds from the surrounding jungle.

"Some world," Kirk commented. "It looks as though there ought to be life on it somewhere."

"It may be of a kind wholly unfamiliar to us, if there is," Madden answered. "I imagine that life developing under this world's conditions might take strange forms."

"It's disappointing. I rather hoped that a committee of comet-citizens would be ready to welcome us and thank us for discovering them."

"You would," Madden smiled. "But listen—do you hear that?"

Distant sounds were coming to their ears from the jungle farther up the slope. Distorted by the soft breeze that brought them, the sounds seemed of vague voices intermixed with occasional sharp notes.

"Somebody up there, at least!" Kirk declared. "Come on, Madden—let's see what they're like."

"Careful now, Kirk," warned the other. "There's no telling what kind of things are up there."

They moved up the slope through the jungle toward the sounds, their rocket-pistols ready. Progress was easy, there being no underbrush between the square trunks of the towering trees. In a few moments the sounds became definitely louder, and soon they emerged onto a wide faint trail. At once they shrank back behind a giant tree, for those they heard were coming toward them along this trail.

2

A PARTY of considerable size seemed approaching along the path. Voices came to them that they recognized now as human voices, but there were occasional sharp sound-notes, varying in tone. In a few moments the head of the party came into sight along the trail, and Kirk and Madden almost betrayed their presence by their smothered exclamations.

The main portion of the approaching party was human, men and women for the most part young. They were a white-skinned, dark-haired people, the men tall and stalwart and the women in many cases with perfect figures and features. Men and women were dressed almost alike in abbreviated garments of green cloth, and wore flat sandals.

To Kirk and Madden it was not these humans who were for the moment most interesting, but those who accompanied them. These were creatures such as they had never dreamed could exist.

They were simply masses of white flesh, each one several feet across. They moved by gliding over the ground as amebas glide, and like amebas could project pseudopod-like arms of flesh out of their body-mass. Their glide or flow took them over the ground with incredible speed and their muscular power was apparently enormous. One of the humans

stumbled out of the column in which they marched, and in a flash one of the flesh-monsters had darted to him and thrust him back into the line.

There were perhaps a dozen of the flesh-monsters, and they glided along on either side of the column of humans, who numbered twice as many. The two men staring in fascinated horror from their shelter forget the peril of their own position in their stupefied watch of this strange party that was now passing them.

"Good God, Madden!" Kirk breathed. "Those monsters are herding the humans —herding men and women!"

"It can't be!" Madden whispered, shaken. "They have no heads, even, no intelligence!"

"But they are! Listen—those sound-notes seem to direct them!"

One of the clear sound-notes had come from the marching column's rear. As though in instant obedience to an order, the flesh-monsters at once halted their human captives a little along the trail past the spot where Kirk and Madden crouched. The halt was evidently for a rest, the men and women sinking wearily to the ground.

The two earth-men were waiting tensely to see the source of the sound-notes that directed the monsters. They strode into sight, two figures following and commanding the party, two figures at sight of which a horror shook Kirk and Madden that made their horror of the flesh-monsters seem as nothing.

The two were metal men! So Kirk and Madden told themselves, staring. They were grotesquely man-like in shape, as tall as a man and with twin legs and arms that gave them the human similitude. But their bodies were not of flesh but of dark gleaming metal that seemed as flexible as flesh, without clothing. And in the metal head of each of the creatures the only features were two round black lidless eyes that looked out from the blank metal face!

Kirk and Madden saw one of the creatures raise a small instrument like a handled disk, pressing one of the dozen studs along its handle. From the disk a sharp note sounded, high in pitch, and in obedience to it the flesh-monsters ranged themselves in a watchful circle about the humans, apparently to prevent the escape of any of them during the rest-period. The two metal men themselves were just passing the tree behind which Kirk and Madden crouched, stopping a few steps beyond it.

"Kirk, they're the masters!" whispered Madden. "Those metal creatures—they control the flesh-monsters by the sound-notes, and the humans are their captives!"

"Humans—captives of those metal things and their monsters!" Kirk seemed striving to realize it. "Madden, we're not going to watch this! You've got your pistol ready?"

"What are you going to do, man?"

"I'm going to blow the heads off those damn metal monsters! Are you with me?"

"Kirk, you can't hope to——"

"You're not with me? Then I'm trying it myself!"

"Kirk—wait!" Madden's tense whisper halted the other. "If you miss those things it will take only one note from their command-disks to hurl all the flesh-monsters on us. But if we steal on them and knock their disks out of their grasp we'll have only them to deal with—the flesh-monsters undoubtedly won't act without a sound-note order!"

"You're right!" his companion approved. "Then you take the left one and I'll take the right one. Hit hard, boy!"

They crept from behind the great tree's trunk. The metal men stood but a few steps from them, their strange faces turned in the direction of the captives. There was nothing for it but a rush, and

a rush the two made, Kirk toward the farther metal man and Madden toward the nearer.

Half-way in their leap Kirk saw the two metal shapes spin around, their command-disks coming up to hurl a sound-note order at the resting flesh-monsters. But he and Madden struck with the long barrels of their rocket-pistols and knocked the instruments from their grasp before they could be used. Before they could fire their pistols, though, the metal men had leaped forward on them.

An arm, flexible as flesh yet cold and metallic, wound about Kirk's body and crushed him in a rib-cracking grasp. The other arm struck at him, a blow of a two-fingered metal hand that would have smashed his skull had it landed. But he jerked sidewise to dodge it, brought the rocket-pistol up with its muzzle against the blank metal face of his opponent. Kirk pulled trigger and as the rocket-bullet drove into the metal head and exploded, the metal man sank to the ground.

Kirk, staggering, saw that Madden's opponent had hurled him to the ground and was leaping toward the command-disk that had been knocked at first from his grasp. The instrument lay beside the group of humans and flesh-monsters, the former of whom were watching the battle in terror, the latter remaining quite motionless. Madden fired at the metal man, but the rocket-bullet missed and the creature was stooping to grasp the instrument. A girl among the humans kicked it from him.

Before the metal creature could again reach it Madden and Kirk had fired together, and this time both bullets struck and exploded against the thing's metal head. It flew to fragments and the second metal man collapsed instantly as had the first.

Kirk and Madden swayed, breathless. The humans were chattering wildly among themselves but the flesh-monsters still waited motionless about them, obedient to the last sound-note order and waiting for another. They seemed wholly mindless, mere mechanisms of living flesh as incapable of original thought and action as any mechanism.

"We'll have to kill all these things too!" Madden panted. "Their last order was to guard these humans and they'll stay here until they rot doing it!"

Kirk nodded grimly. "Take the ones on this side—I'll settle them on the other."

THEY began. Kirk fired point-blank at the nearest flesh-monster and as the rocket-bullet exploded in it there was a convulsion of reflexive movements and it lay in a torn and ragged mass of twitching flesh. Sickened, Kirk and Madden went on with the slaughter. It was horrible in that the flesh-monsters made no move to escape the death of whose coming no mind could warn them. Less horrible, though, in that the monsters seemed only masses of flesh and not living things.

The last of the things slain, they thrust the rocket-pistols into their belts and approached the humans. These, stupefied by the flash and explosion of the death-dealing pistols, shrank from them in panic. Kirk tried to pacify them, and as they recovered from their first fear one of them came a little forward. It was the girl who had kicked aside the command-disk at their struggle's critical moment.

She was dark of hair and eyes, like the rest, and would have been regarded as beautiful, Kirk told himself, on any planet. By pointing to herself and repeating the word she told them that her name was Nuna. The rest of her rapid talk was wasted on the two earth-men, but when she pointed to the slain metal men and then ahead along the trail, shaking her

head emphatically in warning, they understood.

"I gather that our metal friends infest the region ahead," Kirk announced. "But where do these people come from?"

Nuna, seeming to sense his meaning, pointed back along the trail.

"As I thought," Madden commented. "These metal men, with their flesh-monsters, were raiding the humans and taking back some prisoners when we stumbled on them."

"Metal men capturing humans—it's unreal," Kirk declared. "I can't yet believe those metal things were living."

"The one was living that nearly broke my neck," Madden assured him. "Kirk, the bodies of those things are of organic metal, something unknown on earth. The organic metal of their bodies is as living as the organic flesh of ours, and this living metal on this comet world has apparently evolved upward into these intelligent metal men. Their intelligence and life-centers are undoubtedly in their metal heads."

The girl Nuna interrupted. The humans were moving uneasily, and Nuna pointed back along the trail urgently, speaking quickly.

"They want to start for home," Kirk guessed, "and they want us to go with them."

"If we do it means leaving the rocket," Madden reminded him. "I'd hate to be shipwrecked inside a comet."

"I think it will be safe," his friend urged. "The rocket is perfectly hidden down there and there were no signs of any one ever visiting the spot. We came to find what was inside the comet—this is our chance. We can look over these people, learn all we can from them, and then hop back out of the comet without getting into any more trouble."

"As though you didn't leap for trouble like a fish for water!" Madden scoffed. "But I guess you're right. You can lead on, Nuna—we're with you."

The girl gathered their assent and spoke rapidly to the others, and instantly all set out along the trail in the direction opposite to that which they had been following as prisoners. As they passed the scene of their struggle, where the bodies of the metal men lay, Kirk reached to pick up the command-disks that lay near them. Curiously he examined the studs on their handles that produced the different sound-note orders, then thrust them into his pocket.

Rapidly the party swung along the trail, Kirk, Madden and Nuna at its head. The way wound always through towering jungles, up and down slopes as they crossed ranges of low, jungle-clad hills. Once from a ridge they glimpsed a green river far below, perhaps the one by which they had left their rocket. The anxiety of the party was apparent in the pace it maintained, men and women alike, yet there were of necessity frequent halts for rest.

Time was almost immeasurable to Kirk and Madden, for the sky of glowing flame overhead that was in reality the inside of the comet's coma never changed. It was clear to them that upon this comet world there could be no night at all but an endless day, the light and warmth of the glowing sky beating unceasingly down. When the party was on the march, or stooping to gather the cubical fruits that formed their food, the two earth-men could make a guess at the passage of time. But they had no way of estimating the time spent in their halts for rest and sleep.

Both Kirk and Madden came quickly to learn from Nuna the elements of her people's language. Her vivid gestures gave them at first a medium of conversation by which as they swung along the trail they picked up more and more

words. By the time Nuna announced that they were nearing the city of her people, they could speak the language well enough to learn from her and the others something of the world on which they were.

Nuna informed them that her people were great in number, living in a walled and defended city, but that they and all the other cities of humans on the comet world lived in extreme fear of the metal men. The metal men were not great in number—there was but one city of them—but they were very much farther advanced in science than the humans, whose only weapons were swords and spears.

The metal men, she added, never engaged in battle themselves but directed their mindless flesh-monsters in combat by their command-disks. With these monsters they often raided the cities of the humans, carrying away as many prisoners as possible, and in such a raid had captured herself and her companions, outside their city. When Kirk tried to learn what the metal men did with their human captives, Nuna whitened with such horror that they did not press the point.

The girl and her companions became increasingly joyful as they neared their city along the faint trail the metal raiders had worn to it. Nuna explained that she was the betrothed of Krall, the chief of her city, and that Kirk and Madden were sure of a welcome in it. A rescue of any human captive of the metal men and their monsters had hardly ever been accomplished, and the actual slaying of two of the metal masters was unprecedented.

When after marches and halts they came finally to still another low jungle-clad range of hills, their companions joyfully asserted that on the other side lay their city. Kirk and Madden were forced to extend themselves to keep up with the others, then, as they pressed up the slope between the towering trees. When they reached the ridge, coming out on a small clear space on its jungled crest, they stood with the others gazing downward.

Down in the distance the jungle gave way to a grassy valley, and beside a river that wound like a bright green ribbon down the valley stood the city. It was compact, its black walls enclosing a circle no more than a mile across, but every foot of the space inside seemed taken up by close-clustering buildings, black like the walls. They could make out narrow streets but were too far away to distinguish people who might be in them.

"The city of my people!" Nuna pointed joyfully. "There Krall will know soon I have escaped—and there we'll be safe, or at least safer."

"Safer is a better word to use," Kirk commented. "I'm beginning to think that as far as safety is concerned this world——"

He did not finish the words. There was a scream from a woman behind him, a rush of movement on either side of them, and from the jungle's depths to right and left a swarm of swift figures emerged upon them.

3

THE rocket-pistols of Kirk and Madden flashed out instantly, but two things restrained them from firing. One was that the half-hundred figures who had appeared so abruptly were men like those of their own party, but fighting-men armed with metal swords and spears. The other thing was that Nuna had run instantly to the leader of the newcomers, a tall and finely-muscled fighting-man.

"Krall!" she was crying. "Krall, we escaped!"

"Nuna!" The tall leader seemed unable to believe his eyes. "Nuna, we were setting forth on a forlorn hope of overtaking your captors! We hid here be-

cause we thought it was more raiders approaching, and it was you whom we hardly hoped ever to see again!"

"You would not have seen us, Krall, but for these two! Kirk and Madden"—the names came strangely accented from her lips—"slew the metal men who had captured us and all their flesh-monsters. They are strangers to this world, they say, and came with us to learn more of it."

Krall advanced to Kirk and Madden. "I can well believe that you are not of this world! No men on it have ever slain any of the metal men!"

"Well, since we've been learning something about them we wouldn't mind mixing it with them again," Kirk told him.

"Talk for yourself, Kirk!" admonished Madden. "I'm not yearning for any more play with those metal lads."

Krall seemed to understand, and smiled. "None of us is eager to meet the metal men," he said, "and for that reason we had best be getting back down to our city. There is no safety outside it—or even in it sometimes—from the metal men and their numberless monsters."

As their party moved down the slope into the valley, Nuna clinging close to Krall and the armed fighting-men going ahead and behind, Madden sought for further information from the chief.

"I don't yet understand the motive of the metal men in making these raids," he said. "Since their science is far advanced and they have the flesh-monsters as slaves, what do they want with human captives?"

Nuna shuddered, and Krall's face grew somber. "You do not yet know the situation," he told Madden. "Where do you suppose the metal men get those mindless flesh-monsters?"

"Why, I hadn't thought. I suppose they are crude living organisms of a low order that the metal men have trained to obey commands."

Krall shook his head. "No, my friend. The metal men *make* those flesh-monsters."

"Make them! From what?"

"From the living flesh of their human captives!"

Madden and Kirk stared at Krall incredulously. "It is so," the chief told them, "and has been so since man can remember.

"The metal men developed on this world long before the humans. There have never been more than some thousands of them, but they are practically immortal. It is only when some accident smashes their metal heads that one of them dies. Such accidents are very rare, and so their single city has held almost always the same number of them, their strange race having long ago ceased to develop new members by evolution as had formerly been the case.

"They had need of slaves in their city and first tried using captured humans as such, but found them too rebellious and inefficient. So they hit on the plan of taking the living flesh of humans and fusing it into flesh-masses with only the minimum necessary interior organization. These flesh-monsters were quite mindless and therefore utterly at their orders.

"The main sense of the flesh-monsters is that of hearing, and with it they act as swiftly and efficiently as though with all five. Their sense of hearing is connected directly to their motor-nerve centers in such a way that certain standardized sound-notes, when heard by the monsters, cause them to perform automatically certain actions. Thus one note makes them crush and kill all within reach save those who sound the note. Another makes them capture instead of kill, and there are a dozen such notes which give the flesh-monsters as many different orders."

"And you mean that those demons were taking Nuna and the rest to their city to

make into more flesh-monsters?" Madden asked in horror, and Krall nodded.

"That would have been their fate. In the city of the metal men is a great flesh-factory into which all their captives go, to have their living flesh torn from them to make into more of the monstrous slaves. And since the flesh-monsters, unlike the metal men, do not live forever but die in time as anything of flesh must, the metal men must bring new captives to feed the flesh-factory that replaces their slaves.

"For that reason they raid us humans unceasingly. Formerly they captured only those of us who strayed outside our cities, as did Nuna and these others you rescued. But of late they have been attacking our cities in force. The metal men themselves do not take part in these attacks, of course. They stay at a distance and send their flesh-monsters in upon us. And these hordes of mindless things, made of the flesh of our own previously captured friends, break into our cities sometimes and carry off hundreds of us to be taken to the city of the metal men and made into new hordes of flesh-monsters."

"God, what a horror!" Kirk exclaimed. "This world seems like a hell, with the metal men its devils!"

"Why don't you humans all band together and attack their city?" Madden asked. "You ought to be able to wipe out the metal men if there are only some thousands of them as you say."

Krall shook his head. "There are only some thousands of them, it is true, but the flesh-monsters in their city number tens of thousands. That is why they keep them in such numbers, to dominate this world, the flesh-monsters being not only their slaves but their only weapons."

Meanwhile the party had wound down from the jungled slope into the green, grassy valley, and was approaching the city's gate.

Kirk and Madden, surveying the place as they neared it, could see at once that defense had been the prime consideration in its design. The curving wall of black, seamless stone that enclosed it rose vertically for forty feet and was crowned by rows of sharp metal spikes set thickly together. There were also inner embrasures from which spearmen could thrust at invaders who might struggle over the spikes.

Their approach had been perceived by armed sentries on the wall, and its gate was opening before them. The gate-opening was a circular one hardly higher than a man, and was closed by a huge disk of black stone that rolled across it in a groove inside the wall. When they had passed through, it was closed immediately after them.

THE city was one of crowding low black buildings in the divisions of which lived thousands of families. The narrow streets thronged with green-garbed men and women hastening to greet Krall, and especially Nuna, with shouts of joy. And when the latter made known to them the slaying of the metal men by Madden and Kirk, an explosion of excited shouts made known the feelings of the crowds toward the two earthmen.

The two found themselves, in the time that followed, almost worshipped by the city's people for their deed. It was strong evidence to them of how much the metal men were feared. And as sleep-period followed sleep-period in the city, always under the changeless light and heat of the coma-sky, the two perceived with increasing clarity how dark the shadow of the metal men lay upon this world.

The men and women who went forth each day to work the fields around the city whose cultivation supplied its food could never know when swift flesh-mon-

sters would glide on them from the jungled hills, sent down by the metal masters to carry off captives to a horrible fate. Communication with the other cities of humans was made almost nonexistent by the same menace.

The dread of the metal men and their mindless slaves strangled the chance of human progress. The metal oppressors were hated, too, with a hatred in which Kirk and Madden came soon to share. They were one in feeling with Krall and his people when, four sleep-periods after their coming to the city, there burst events which swiftly altered the state of affairs.

The city was wakened in the fourth sleep-period by cries of alarm from the sentries on the wall.

At first Kirk and Madden, stumbling out into the swift-filling street, thought it a mere raid for captives that was going on outside the city. But the uproar that had been touched off in the city, and the hordes of sword- and spear-armed men rushing for the wall would have told them otherwise, even had not Krall appeared beside them, eyes blazing, to disillusion them.

"It's an attack on the whole city!" Krall cried.

"By the flesh-monsters?" Kirk exclaimed.

"Yes, by hordes of them that the metal men have sent down to break in and carry off captives! To the wall—if they get over it they'll carry off hundreds of our people!"

Almost without volition Kirk and Madden found themselves rushing beside Krall. About them the streets were mill-races of fighting men heading toward the wall on the city's threatened side. The two earth-men could see fierce fighting already going on up in the wall's embrasures, and when they burst up onto the crenelated top with Krall and his men they found themselves at once in the thick of it.

Flesh-monsters in hundreds were appearing on the wall's top, struggling over the spikes and reaching with pseudopod arms toward the men who resisted them. Kirk saw a dozen men grasped and carried back out over the wall in the first minute of fighting. Madden and he had their rocket-pistols out and fired at the flesh-monsters as fast as they could pull trigger. When their cartridges were spent both men seized swords that had been dropped and fought on with these.

Krall was fighting like a demon beside them, his great blade slicing through the pseudopod arms that reached toward him, slashing into masses of severed flesh the monsters who leapt for him. With his yells he rallied the struggling men all along the wall, who gave him back fierce shout for shout. But their mindless attackers were still pouring up on them.

Madden could see that the flesh-monsters scaled the vertical wall by simply crawling up its side as so many caterpillars might have done. Those who grasped captives crawled down with them in the same way, and glided swiftly back toward the jungled hills where there awaited them the metal men who had sent them forth on this attack. Madden saw that already more than a score of men had been carried off thus.

He saw the swords of Kirk and Krall flashing beside him as they struck and struck. What a mad and unreal battle it was, Madden thought momentarily, men and monsters at combat there beneath the comet world's sky of flame! More flesh-monsters were appearing now, and Krall's fighting-men were struggling fiercely to hold them back, to keep them from the city within.

The flesh-monsters broke through! Their hordes broke the line of men opposing them at one point, and before the

gap could be closed a mass of the creatures glided down into the city.

Krall leapt with sword gleaming to close the gap and Kirk was as swift beside him as a flying shadow. Madden, fighting at a little distance from them, saw their whirling blades holding back the monstrous horde until others along the wall could reach their side. Again an unbroken line faced the attackers and the flesh-monsters were dwindling visibly in number. But Krall's mind was on those who had broken into the city and he shouted to Madden, jerking his head backward.

Madden understood. Krall and his men were beating down the attackers, but before they were all disposed of those who had gained the city's interior could carry away scores of captives. Madden and a little following of men who understood his purpose threw themselves down the winding ways from the wall's top into the city.

It was an inferno of panic. The flesh-monsters in it were seizing captives on every side from the throngs that fled before them. Most of these were women, and Madden saw flesh-monsters already gliding toward the wall to carry out their captives. He and the men with him sprang upon these.

There was wild work then in the city's streets. The flesh-monsters clung to their captives even as they fought off their attackers. They made for the wall always like the insensate things they were, the one order to capture and return ruling them as rigidly as a machine is ruled by its controls. Madden and his men were slashing them down swiftly, so swiftly that none could gain the wall.

Madden was aware of Nuna, appearing out of the turmoil and stabbing at the monsters with a short sword. He saw that others of the women had followed her example and that the number of flesh-monsters visible was dwindling fast. A glance back up at the wall told him that the fighting there was nearly over, a few flesh-monsters still grasping captives and escaping with them, but most of the attackers already dead. Nuna was crying something to him, her eyes flashing.

Soon the end came, the last flesh-monster inside the city slain. Madden and Nuna, breathless, looked about them. The fighting was over in the streets, and when they reached the wall's top they saw it was over there too. Only some scores of the wall's defenders were missing, those who had been captured, since the flesh-monsters had sought always to capture and not to kill. Madden could see that the last of them were already out of sight with their captives in the jungled hills.

He was looking for Kirk when Nuna, who had been listening to the excited talk of some of the fighting-men, ran to him.

"Krall!" she cried. "He and Kirk were captured by the flesh-monsters!"

"Captured!" Madden exclaimed. "Why, they were fighting side by side here when I left the wall!"

"Kirk was stunned and carried away in the last moments of fighting and Krall was taken in trying to save him! Already they must be in the hands of the metal men, on their way to their city and to death!"

4

KIRK opened his eyes. Pain flooded his brain but he was aware that he was in movement, and could see far overhead the flaming coma-sky. He tried to turn himself and so became aware that he was tightly held. He twisted his head around a little, painfully, and shuddered as he discovered his position. He was being carried by a flesh-monster!

The creature held him on its mass with two pseudopod arms, gliding smoothly

forward. Twisting his head Kirk saw that they were moving in this strange fashion along a jungle trail much like the one he and Madden had followed toward the city of humans. He saw now, too, that ahead of him a column of men were marching with a guard of flesh-monsters on either side. Kirk's heart jumped as he recognized Krall among them.

He remembered, then. He remembered those last minutes of fighting on the wall of Krall's city, when they had been beating down the last of the attacking flesh-monsters. He had stabbed at one reaching for him, and his sword had struck a corner of the embrasure in which he stood and had been knocked from his hand. Before he could regain it the creature had grasped him, Krall leaping toward them. Kirk's head had been knocked against the embrasure's side as he was jerked through it by the monster, and all then had been darkness.

So he had been captured, and Krall too in trying to save him. Captured by the metal men! He wondered where they were in this party, and twisting his head discovered a half-score of them striding behind the monster who carried him. Kirk, knowing what he now did of them, felt hate and horror rise together in him at sight of the dark eyes and gleaming bodies of living metal of these strange masters of the comet world.

The nearest metal men saw his movement, came closer to examine him with round lidless eyes. Seeming satisfied of Kirk's return to consciousness the metal man raised his command-disk, sounded a note. The monster who carried Kirk at once set him on the ground and thrust him forward into the marching column of prisoners. In a moment, as they marched on, Kirk was at Krall's side.

"Krall—they got you too! And trying to save me!"

"One grasped me when I sought to tear your captor from you," Krall explained simply. "I was taken before the others could reach us."

"But the attack was beaten off?"

"It was," said Krall proudly. "They captured some scores of us but lost hundreds of their flesh-monsters."

"I'm glad," Kirk said. "I was stunned when I was taken and had no knowledge of anything further."

"I know that you were," the chief told him. "For a long time you have remained unconscious — we have marched and marched until I think that we now near the metal men's city."

"The metal men's city!" Realization smote Kirk. "And there?"

"There, my friend, we go sooner or later into the flesh-factory with all these captives. And our bodies will form new flesh-monsters to go forth on the errands of the metal men."

Kirk suppressed another shudder. He looked about, the pain clearing rapidly from his head. They were travelling along a jungled slope that he could not remember having passed before.

"This isn't the trail Madden and I followed with Nuna and the others," he told Krall.

"No doubt it is not, for the metal men have many such trails that lead from their city to the cities of the humans. They take the shortest possible trail always."

"I suppose there's no chance of any one following and rescuing us—Madden will want to, I know."

"No chance at all, I fear," Krall answered. "We are almost to the city of the metal men now, and no humans on this world dare venture near it, since it would mean suicide to any force to do so."

In silence they marched on, Kirk's thoughts busy. Soon he saw that they had reached an unwooded plain, and after travelling across it for a time they drew

within sight of a great mass of buildings ahead that threw up a glare of light reflected from them. The city of the metal men, he knew without asking.

It was a metal city, in fact, one whose buildings shone metallic in the light of the flaming sky. They were like huge polyhedrons in shape, those buildings, angled and faceted like huge cut jewels. Some of the buildings were enormous in size, and the city was much larger than that of Krall's people. A metal wall surrounded the place, its open gateways showing it was not needed or used for defense, and through one of these openings Kirk and Krall and the rest were marched into the astounding city.

It seemed a dream city. The huge faceted buildings loomed over narrow streets that ran in straight short lengths between them. Metal men in hundreds were in the streets, coming and going, weird figures conversing silently by whatever sixth sense they used for speech. And there were flesh-monsters not in hundreds but in thousands, outnumbering the metal men ten to one.

Mindless slaves of flesh inhabiting this city of metal masters, their hordes seemed numberless. They thronged in the streets like insect-swarms, each intent upon the particular task to which it had been ordered. Files of them glided past carrying great loads of metal or machinery. Others still were going forth in masses, led by one or two metal men, no doubt for a raid on some city of humans.

Kirk began to understand how much the metal men depended upon these flesh-monsters, who were at one and the same time their slaves and their weapons.

NONE in the city seemed to pay attention to the prisoners being marched through it—a common sight, no doubt. They were being taken toward a colossal faceted building that bulked over a great part of the city's area. Great numbers of metal men and monsters poured constantly to and from it, making it seem one of the vital organs of the city's life. They passed with their captors into its interior, into broad corridors and ways lit by high windows.

A strange and sickening odor came to Kirk's nostrils as they entered, a heavy exhalation that made his skin crawl when he recognized it.

"The flesh-factory!" Krall exclaimed. "This is where they make their monsters from the flesh of their captives!"

"Then this is the end for us now?" Kirk asked.

"Not immediately," a prisoner beside him said. "I have heard that the metal men keep great pens of thousands of prisoners and only send them into the flesh-factory as they need new monsters. So we may go there in an hour or in a hundred hours."

"I'll never go there!" Kirk was grim-voiced. "Or if I do I'll go dead and take some of these metal monsters with me!"

"Hopeless," the other said. "A quick death is the best we can expect."

As Kirk and his fellows were marched deeper into the building they passed broad intersecting corridors leading right and left.

Everywhere along these, flesh-monsters were coming and going busily, a metal man here and there supervising with the sound-note orders of his command-disk. They passed one set of corridors leading to the left that gave them passing glimpses of that part of the building from which came the heavy and sickening halitus.

Great rooms they glimpsed there, steamy and filled with activity, in which giant retorts of gleaming metal were ranged in rows. They could see metal men and flesh-monsters busy among

them, could hear the chump-chump-chump of big mixing-machines at work. Human screams of agony came suddenly to them in a fearful chorus as the machines halted, a tumult of shrieks that ceased abruptly. Then the mixing machinery began again. Kirk found his brow cold with sweat as they marched on past these corridors.

They came to a wide door in which a score of flesh-monsters were stationed, a mindless living bar that none could pass. The monsters moved aside, though, as a metal man sounded an order-note, and the captives were thrust inside. Another note and the mindless guards resumed their place.

Kirk and Krall found themselves in the prison-pens! These were connecting rooms of great size, lit by tiny barred windows. They held a close-crowded throng of humans, the great majority being men. Kirk estimated that there were nearly five thousand of them, held there until they were needed in the flesh-factory. The single door of the prison-pens was that through which they had entered, guarded by the flesh-monsters.

"Couldn't we make a rush for the door?" he asked Krall. "With all these it seems impossible that we couldn't break through those guards."

Krall shook his head. "We have no weapons at all—the flesh-monsters would simply slay us as fast as we reached the door. Not one of these people would follow you, anyway, for they know that a prisoner never leaves these pens until he goes to the flesh-factory."

Kirk subsided, sitting beside Krall at the room's edge and cudgelling his brain for a plan of escape. He found none. The flesh-monsters across the door were an unanswerable problem. They were a stronger bar than any door or lock could have been. Krall sat in somber silence, and Kirk wondered if he was thinking of his city, or of Nuna.

Time, unguessable in length where nothing changed, passed and Kirk felt despair deepening in his subconscious mind, though he fought it. Then came a dreadful break in the monotony. Two metal men entered with a half-hundred flesh-monsters, who seized as many captives from those in the pens. They withdrew immediately with them, the monster-guards closing across the door, but all in the prison-pens could hear the distant and diminishing screams of the luckless ones as they were carried toward those great rooms of retorts and machines.

Kirk saw new prisoners thrust in soon after, taken on fresh raids. A little later a single additional prisoner, a girl, was thrust inside. At sight of her both Krall and he leapt to their feet with exclamations of amazement. The girl was Nuna!

"Good God, Nuna!" cried Kirk. "How did you get here?"

"You too captured, Nuna?" Krall cried. "Did they raid our city again?"

"No, Krall—when I learned that you were captured I slipped away and followed, came straight into this city. The first metal man who saw me thrust me into these prison-pens, as I knew they would."

"But why—why walk into death like this?"

"You were here, Krall—I could not stay there in safety——"

Kirk turned his head from the two figures so close together. The depth of the girl's devotion in walking fearlessly to a dread fate that she might share it with Krall touched him almost as much as it did the chief himself. He turned back when he heard her call his name.

"Kirk, your friend was wild when he found you had been taken!"

"Madden!" Kirk's heart leapt. "He's safe, then?"

"He was safe, yes," Nuna said, "but he too is on his way here now! He is raising the fighting-men of our city and of the near-by cities to attack this city of the metal men, to rescue their chief, Krall, and you! I slipped away from them but they must be on the way here by now!"

"On the way to attack this city!" Krall cried. "It means death for all of them—the tens of thousands of flesh-monsters here will kill or capture every one of them! They'll have no chance!"

"And Madden at their head!" Kirk exclaimed. "They're marching toward certain death—toward a fate like ours!"

5

A TENSE silence held them for a few moments. In it Kirk's spinning thoughts sought in vain to grapple with this new contingency. He could imagine to himself the rage of Madden at finding him captured, the rage of Krall's men at the taking of their chief, the quick rush toward this mad attack. Yet it meant death for them all—Kirk knew without shadow of doubt that the metal men's numberless flesh-monster hordes would sweep the attackers from existence.

"We've got to stop them!" he cried. "We've got to keep Madden and his forces from reaching here!"

"If we only could!" Krall agonized. "The fighting-men of my city and the others marching to doom!"

"Nothing will stop them while we are here," Nuna said. "Madden and my people are determined on this rescue. Only if we escaped from here and met them could we keep them from coming on, and escape is impossible."

"There must be some way!" Kirk exclaimed.

"There is no way," Krall said slowly. "We have not even a chance of passing out of these prison-pens, as you know well, for the flesh-monsters across the door never move from it until the command-disks of the metal men order them."

"The command-disks!" Kirk's face was changing. "The command——"

His memory was retracing events lightning-like. Back it went to that struggle of Madden and his on the trail when they had rescued Nuna and her companions and killed the two metal men. He remembered that after the struggle he had picked up the two command-disks of the fallen metal men, examining them curiously and then thrusting them into his pocket.

His pocket! Kirk's hands pawed frantically in it, the others looking at him in astonishment. His heart sank, then bounded as his hand encountered two small metal objects in the deep pocket's miscellaneous contents. He drew them forth—the two command-disks he had forgotten until that moment!

Krall almost shouted, but in time changed it to a hissing intake of breath. Kirk slipped one of the instruments into the other's hand, spoke low to him with his voice crackling electrically with hope.

"Krall, with these we can order the flesh-monsters away from their guard of the door — can get out and perhaps through the city!"

"But we don't know the working of them! Each stud produces a different sound-note when touched and each note means a different order."

"We'll have to chance it!" Kirk said with fierce insistence. "Man, every hour we stay here Madden and your men are coming nearer!"

"We'll try it," Krall said, decided. "Shall we press the top studs on the handles, together?"

Kirk nodded. They moved toward the

single door of the prison-pens, going unostentatiously through the throngs of prisoners who watched them apathetically. They reached the door, almost within touch of the great flesh-monsters massed across it. Kirk's heart sank at sight of them, they seemed so mindlessly immovable. They waited until they saw the corridors beyond the door free for the moment of passing metal men.

Then together he and Krall touched the top studs of the command-disks' handles. From the disks two sharp notes of the same pitch sounded. The effect was appalling. The flesh-monsters in the doorway leapt in to seize prisoners. Kirk and Krall had unwittingly given them the command to kill, to kill all within reach save those who sounded the order!

Before the monsters could more than reach the prisoners, though, Kirk and Krall had pressed the next stud, taking a blind chance again. As two notes of different pitch sounded the flesh-monsters instantly halted their attack and stood aside. The doorway was open! Instantly the thousands of prisoners were surging in wild uproar toward it!

Krall's great voice was shouting to them. "It's a chance to escape!" he cried. "Keep close together and we may win out of the city!"

"Come on, Krall!" Kirk cried. "Out of here while we have the chance!"

Mad with the chance of freedom, the prisoners poured out into the corridor, Kirk and Krall at their head with Nuna between the two.

They were but a few yards down the broad hall when there turned into it ahead a single metal man with a following of a half-dozen flesh-monsters.

For a moment the metal man halted and stared in sheer astonishment at the prisoner-horde approaching, and in that moment Kirk and Krall pressed the top studs of their disks. The order-note, the command to kill, sang from the disks and the flesh-monsters ahead leapt instantly upon their metal master! In a trice they had crushed his metal body by sheer strength, wrenching the head almost completely from it. They would have leapt then on the prisoners had not Kirk and Krall sounded the second note, that made them stand aside!

But now the alarm was spreading in the great building. Metal men were emerging into its corridors, racing down from its upper levels, monstrous slaves about them. The command-disks of Kirk and his companion shrilled unceasingly with the order to kill. The scene became chaos, the metal men confused and astounded as their own slaves leapt on them. A strange, nightmare-like battle it was that raged for a moment in the corridors before the building's metal men were crushed and slain. The escaping hordes of humans then rushed on toward the street.

But the delay inside had been fatal. The alarm had gone forth into the city and thousands upon thousands of flesh-monsters were rushing into the great building, urged on by the twanging notes of their metal masters outside! The city's numberless hordes of monsters were being sent in to seize the prisoners and return them to the pens! And the two command-disks of Kirk and Krall could affect but one out of a hundred of the thousands now rushing them, were practically useless in the face of this greater attack.

"Too late!" Krall cried. "No chance to get out now—they have us!"

"Back inside, then!" shouted Kirk. "Get everything you can use for weapons—we're not going back to those prison-pens alive!"

The crazed mob behind him roared approval.

"Weapons—weapons!"

They surged back through the corridors and rooms of the building, seizing everything that could be used to strike a blow, wrenching metal handles from machines, grasping sharp tools, swinging great metal maces. Like a living and overwhelming tide the flesh-monsters were now rushing in upon them.

The humans fought back. Massed closely together still, pressed back in through the building by the hordes attacking them, they sent a storm of crashing blows into the monsters whose pseudopod arms sought to seize them. The battle was hideous, appalling. No metal man now was inside the building, but from outside their order-notes sent new hordes rushing into it.

Krall and Kirk were whirled back in the heart of the insane combat as struggling men and monsters swayed through the corridors and rooms. Krall was keeping Nuna close beside him, holding his command-disk still but whirling a great mace too. Still back the countless flesh-monsters were forcing them, but none of the humans was being captured, all fighting to the death.

Kirk was aware that they were fighting through the great rooms of retorts and machines where the actual making of the flesh-monsters was carried out. They were rooms of horror, holding masses of half-finished and quivering flesh-monsters, but the red tide of battle crashed through them. Kirk glimpsed a way leading upward, a ramp-like stepless stair, and at his shout the human masses poured into it and up it.

They could defend this stair more easily, but even on it the mindless and tireless monsters pressed them upward, urged still by the order-notes from outside. The humans retreated slowly up through level after level of the enormous building. They passed through rooms containing mechanisms connected with the making of the flesh-monsters, passed other great empty rooms that were evidently extra prison-pens, others that held machinery and materials they hardly saw.

EVER they were forced upward, and this awful battle without end had become a nightmare to Kirk. But soon he saw the end was near. They had been forced up into the topmost level of the building, a single great room holding a number of upright machines and with great metal drawers inset in its walls. Packed in that room, stifling, the humans made their last stand. Those who held back the tide of monsters at the stair stood now of necessity motionless, fighting until they went down.

Kirk heard Nuna's piercing cry, saw her at one of the room's windows pointing. He reached her side, Krall with him. From the window they could see far out over the plain that surrounded the weird city of the metal men, and could discern, away out on the plain, thousands of men coming at a fast march toward the city.

"Madden!" cried Kirk. "They're coming, and we can't save them!"

"On their way to death!" Krall cried.

Kirk knew, with an agonizing certainty, that it was so. The mindless hordes of flesh-monsters now attacking them would in minutes have overwhelmed them, and would then be loosed by the metal men upon Madden and his men. It would be the end for all of them, for him and Krall and Nuna up here in the building's top, for Madden and his followers when they reached the city a little later. It would be——

Suddenly Kirk's heart leapt uncontrollably. His eyes had fallen on one of the upright machines the room held. Close beside him, it seemed used for the manufacture of small instruments. Kirk grasped one of the half-finished instru-

ments. A command-disk! He pushed his way to the metal drawers in the wall, flung them open frantically. They were full of command-disks!

Kirk understood suddenly. This room at the top of the great flesh-factory building was the one in which the metal men manufactured and stored the command-disks by which they controlled the monsters turned forth below! His crazy cry reached Krall, whose own eyes started as he saw.

"Command-disks!" he cried.

"Distribute them to our men!" Kirk yelled. "Tell them to press the top stud —the command to kill!"

The disks poured forth into the hands of the battling men. In a moment those who were holding back the monsters on the stair had them, Kirk and Krall among them.

The studs pressed, a chorus of countless sharp notes sounded, the notes that were orders to kill all save those who sounded them! The flesh-monsters on the stair, the thousands down in the building and outside, heard that storm of notes. Their attack halted, they were turning, were gliding out and falling upon all outside, upon the metal men! The metal masters, thunderstruck by the swift reversal of the battle, strove in vain to hold back the rushing thousands of monsters with a few scattered notes from their own disks.

Kirk and Krall were yelling hoarsely, both gone as fighting mad as the men around them as they poured down the stair, out of the building and into the street. It was a raging storm of notes that was sounding now, a hurricane of avenging orders. The streets of the weird city had become streets of hell. The city's tens of thousands of flesh-monsters, touched into action by the unceasing notes from the battle-mad humans, were killing their metal masters!

Metal men were seeking to flee, were grasped by gliding monsters, their heads crushed and smashed and their bodies broken. The mindless slaves were wreaking vengeance on those who had made them! It was a wild storm of awful death that swept over the city and wiped the metal men rapidly from existence. And with almost the last of the metal men slain, the flesh-monsters, in blind obedience still to the command to kill, were falling upon one another!

Krall caught Kirk's arm, jerked him back to sanity. "We've got to get out of here—now!" he cried.

The red mists cleared from Kirk's brain. "Right—lead on!" With Nuna again between them, they and the thousands of their followers moved rapidly out of the city by the nearest gate.

The city's uproar diminished behind them as they moved across the plain, its metal masters slain and its numberless monsters killing each other.

They soon met the force of several thousand fighting-men they had seen marching toward them, Madden at its head. Deafening shouts came from these as they saw their approach, and learned of the awful storm of death that had swept away the metal men. The humans were hailing Krall and Nuna and Kirk, almost crushing them as they pushed toward them.

The roar diminished for a moment as Madden and Kirk met. Krall and Nuna and the thousands around them watched the meeting of the two friends. They shook hands as casually as though meeting by chance, only they two knowing the tightness of the grip. They grinned at each other.

"Well, I see you blundered out some way," Madden said. "I was on my way to pull you out of the jam, as usual."

"As usual? You mean that as usual

you were leaping into a scrap to blame it on me afterward!"

"You're all right, Kirk?"

"All right, Madden."

6

KIRK and Madden found their rocket unharmed and as they had left it when they came to it again with their friends. They had not lingered long near the city of the metal men, only long enough to ascertain that all its metal masters and most of their monstrous slaves had indeed been swept away. They had left the weird city to its silence and death, then, the shadow of its strange inhabitants lifted forever from the world of the comet.

The humans from whom that shadow had been raised had sought to have the two stay with them, for a time at least, but both had refused. So Krall and Nuna had given in, stipulating only that they would escort them to their rocket. And so Kirk and Madden came to it, with eight thousand fighting-men, and found the rocket as they had left it in the little clearing beneath the coma-sky.

It was but the work of a moment to reverse it in its landing-arms so that its nose pointed upward. Then the moment of parting.

At the last neither Krall nor Nuna could find words, but they had need of none as they grasped the hands of Kirk and Madden for a last time. The spears and swords of the fighting-men around them went up with a deafening shout of salute and farewell. Kirk and Madden climbed into the rocket, spun shut its door, and in a minute more were seated in its pilot-house as it roared upward.

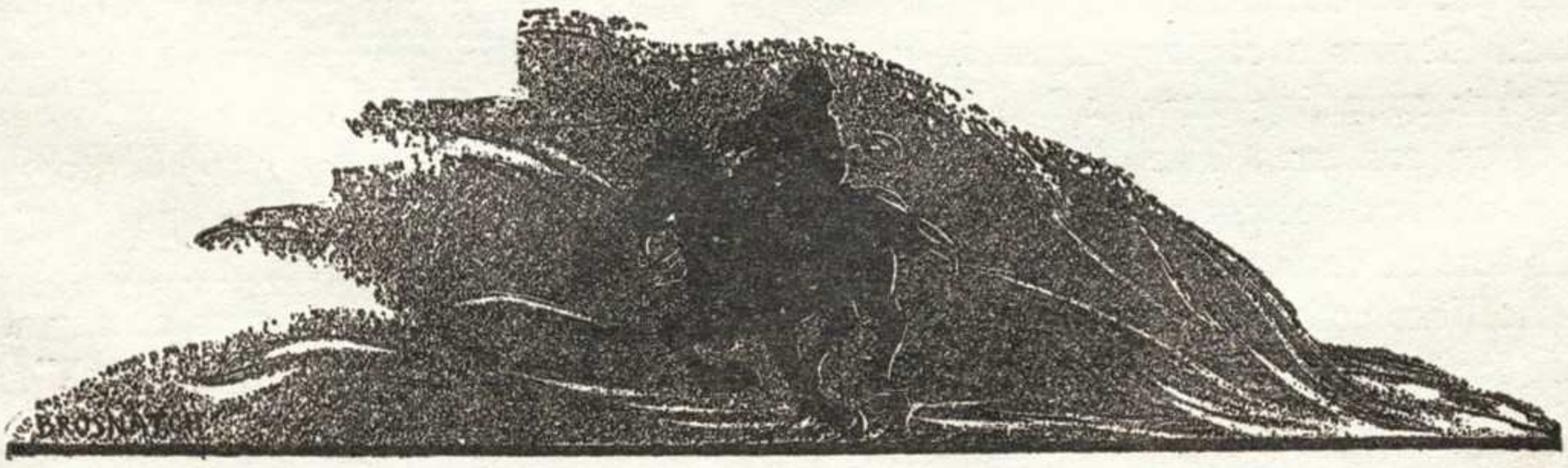
The world of the comet receded beneath them as the rocket's firing-tubes drove it up and outward with quick-mounting speed. Soon the coma's blinding wall loomed again before them and then again they were racing out through its deadly sea. Once more they fought through it until at last their rocket drove out into the black void of free space, brilliant with stars, and with the comet diminishing fast behind them.

Both looked back. "By heaven, it seems incredible that we were inside it, now!" Kirk exclaimed. "That we were ever on the world of the comet, or that there was such a world!"

Madden shook his head. "It seems more incredible to me that we're back again where we belong, where there are sun and stars and space instead of everlasting day."

From the space-phone came suddenly a wrathful voice. "Where in the name of the nine planets do you birds think you're going? Your rocket has cut across three space-lanes in the last ten minutes, you space-struck sons of perdition!"

"Do you hear that, Madden?" Kirk cried happily. "We're back again, all right!"





"If I live I'll tell on yuh and if I die I'll haunt yuh!"

Dead Man's Vengeance

By BENJAMIN F. FERRILL

A weird story of a train robbery—a red-blooded Western tale of a murder and an eery voice in the air

"THERE! That light ahead—that's them. Slow down so's to stop near it. *Slow down,* you hear, or I'll kill you where you sit!" The speaker's voice rose snarlingly above the clank and grind of metal on metal as old Rob Travis, engineer of the night-traveling passenger train, seemed to hesitate.

In the tone as well as the words Travis sensed ruthless and animal-cruel determination. But for one swift thought-crowded second the engineer considered, even though the other's big blunt-nosed automatic covered him like a pointing finger of death. Briefly he glanced outward from the window over a vast starlit sweep of sand and sage, Joshua trees and huge cactus, then backward to the crouching figure who stood with feet braced apart and eyed him uglily over the short barrel of the weapon.

Clearly as his glance had taken in the scene, the engineer's mind told him what had happened—that the lone highwayman had gotten on the blind baggage or engine tender as the train paused at the recent desert-edge tank town of Joshua Barrens for water before entering on its

hundred miles of desert run, staying hidden until he had spied the signal light of his pals ahead.

Quick calculation told Travis the train was now almost in the center of the wide uninhabited stretch of desert. With the realization of the shrewdness of the brain that had planned such an arrangement he reluctantly obeyed the order. There was likely to be money, and a lot of it, back there in the express cars—but there was also a train full of sleeping passengers behind these. And Travis sensed that a live engineer, even though guided by the directions of another, would be of more use to them than a dead one. With a scream of tortured brake shoes the train slowed to a halt.

Before it had come to a full stop the engine passed the spot from which the light had gleamed. As it did, two men sprang from a growth of mesquite trees near the track. A third, dimly outlined in the night, remained by the thicket holding the bridles of their saddle horses. One of the two, a strapping hard-faced six-footer, clambered briskly into the engine cab, nodding to the gunman as he did. "Good stuff, Lem," he said in a rumbling bass voice.

Lem Yarrow, who had stopped the train and whose gun now watchfully covered the engineer and fireman that he had lined up side by side, grinned with a touch of pride. "Hello, Alkali. Say, this is just my regular speed. I'd have had them deliver the stuff clear out to the foothills for us if they could have run the train without the tracks," he said in his dry, rasping voice.

Catching the pair of shiny new handcuffs that Yarrow tossed him, "Alkali" Payton snapped one side of them on the wrist of the engineer, then yanked the hand down and snapped the other side of the handcuffs on the fireman's ankle. "That'll hold yuh two for a while. But if yuh know what's good for yuh, yuh'd better sit quiet till we clear out. We'll be right back in the express cars. Any monkeyshines out of yuh will bring one of us on the run. And if we do come back we'll come shootin'," he rumbled. Hardly thirty seconds had passed as the two highwaymen swung down out of the engine cab and followed the third man, who had disappeared back along the train.

Not long afterward the three reappeared, moving with their same brisk business-like air and carrying two large-sized canvas bags. Seeing them, Shab Dones, the fourth man of the party, who had remained to hold the horses and watch outside, holstered his gun and began to sort out the bridle reins for departure. The whole thing had been carried forward quickly and without a hitch up to this time. A minute more and they would all have been on their way. Then something went suddenly and violently wrong.

From the dark back along the train a door clanged open and a form moved with shadowy outline. Then from the spot a gun began to roar at the desperadoes with the sudden red thunder of hell cracking wide. At the second shot one of the men swayed and sank down cursing, with both hands clapped to his hip. Swinging about with weapons gleaming, the two unmounted bandits fired several quick rattling shots at the flashes. Then with one on each side of the wounded man they raised him off the ground and hurried toward the horses.

With difficulty they got him into the saddle; but just as they were on the point of swinging their horses out into the night, Lem Yarrow, the man who had stopped the train, spoke suddenly. "Say, there's a doctor back there beating his

way. I saw him when I got on the blinds back at the water tank. Not wanting no railroad bull to be gumming up our plans I asked him his name and business, over my gun barrel, and he said he was Doctor Carl Walters. I don't know why he's beating his way, but since he is he won't be missed from the train, and we'd as well take him along for Gorton here," he said rapidly.

"Get 'im then. And cut out the talk. I'm dyin' by inches!" Gorton snarled, his face gray-white in the gloom. He was the one who had hurried toward the cars as the train stopped, and there was something more than pain in his eyes now as he stared at the others through the night —there was a sudden sharp suspicion and distrust.

TURNING on his heel, Yarrow ran back, drawing his gun as he did. A moment later there came a sound of voices raised in sharp protest and command. Then Yarrow emerged from between the engine-tender and first car with his free hand gripped on the coat collar of a medium-sized figure that he encouraged into speed with the muzzle of the automatic. "Get onto that pack-horse there. He ain't so loaded but what he can carry you. We got a hurt man here we want you to look at soon as we get a little way out," Yarrow ordered.

Carl Walters stared toward the wounded man, who sagged in the saddle and held on to the saddle horn with both hands. Then he faced the three desperadoes, and a strangely mirthless smile seemed to lift the corners of his thin mouth. He was mild-appearing and soberly dressed; apparently not a fighter. But his jaw squared determinedly now as he faced the men. "Wait—you can't take me. I'm not a"—Walters paused, his eyes on the listeners uncertainly, and finished shortly—"I'm not a surgeon. Not the sort of doctor you want."

"Damn that! Quit stallin'. Yuh want to get some more of us shot? A doctor's a doctor," the huge Alkali rumbled with an uneasy glance at the train. And as Walters still seemed to hesitate he lurched forward and struck him a jarring face blow that crumpled the smaller man in a heap. "Get up and get on that horse or I'll put my foot on yore neck and stomp a kink in yore goozle string," Alkali Payton bellowed. "Yuh told Yarrow yuh were a doctor, and a doctor yuh'd better be! If yuh ain't yuh're a road cop, and bein' that won't better yore standin' none with us," he added.

Without further words Walters climbed on the horse and the five headed quickly out and away from the train and railroad, from a train which was no longer sleeping, but from which lights were beginning to glow and voices to call inquiringly.

Glancing backward, Lem Yarrow noted these points and grunted briefly. "Good thing we got started when we did; and it's better still since Gorton fumbled it like this that we picked this desert country where there ain't no auto roads and where it's fifty miles either way to a town where horses can be had," he observed, quickening his mount.

The words and act brought an instant stir from the wounded man. "*I* fumbled it, heh? Say, how the blazes do you figure that? Could I help gettin' shot? Who learned about this thing and let yuh fellers in on it anyway—me, that's who! And slow down. Do yuh want to kill me off right away so yuh can get my share?" Gorton spat furiously. Yarrow made no reply and Gorton lapsed into silence. But scarcely five minutes had passed when he again spoke huskily. "Say,

I can't go no further. I'm done," he croaked.

Pulling up his horse, Yarrow stared back to where the train was getting under way, and nodded reluctantly. "All right, Gorton, we'll risk stopping a few minutes and see what this guy can do for you. Look him over, Doc, and see if you can patch him up temporary till we get over to the San Loreto range. We'll be safe there in a hide-out I know, and he can take his time getting well then. But make it quick now," Yarrow said, dismounting. Plainly the others looked on Yarrow as leader, for they obeyed without comment.

Gathering up an armload of dry brush, Dones, the man that had held the horses, lit it and by the light Walters examined the wounded man, while the others smoked cigarettes and stared backward uneasily.

The examination was brief. "There's nothing I can do. He's been shot clear through the hip. The bullet must have shattered a bone and likely nicked a good-sized blood vessel by the looks. He ought to be put in a hospital at once. Anyway he can't ride horseback any further—you can see that for yourself," Walters said, rising. "What you men had better do is to leave me with him here till some of the posse come along and pick us up," Walters added.

Lem Yarrow nodded. Then of a sudden his face hardened and he eyed Walters suspiciously. "Yeah, and leave you with the memory of how we three look and with the knowledge that we're heading for the San Loreto country, heh? Now wouldn't that be sweet—and I was about to fall for it too! No, Doc, you're going right along with us," Yarrow rasped in his harsh, grating voice.

"He's right! The Doc's right. I can't go on," Gorton groaned. "That damned horse was tearin' me to pieces with every step. We'll have to camp here a few hours till I'm better," he said.

Lem Yarrow ran a lean sinew-corded hand thoughtfully over his chin. For a long minute he stared from the wounded man back toward the railroad. Then with a grunt of decision he turned to his horse. "We'll have to leave you, Gorton, and let them pick you up, but we'll have to take this doctor guy with us for the reasons I've named. They'll run that train into the nearest town and be back out here with a box-car of saddle horses and take the trail inside a couple of hours; so they ought to find you well before morning. But waiting here and getting caught with you wouldn't help none of us. It's just a tough break you've got," he said.

Disregarding his wound Gorton rose to a sitting position, his eyes gleaming like a madman's in the flicker of the brushwood fire. "Leave me to get jailed, eh. *That's* the kind of pals I picked for this job, is it? Me that learned about this train carryin' all that dough—well, yuh won't *all* go," he shrieked. As he spoke Gorton's arm moved jerkily. His right hand darted toward his shoulder holster, and out, and a gun glowed dully in the firelight.

But before Gorton could fire, Yarrow sprang forward and twisted the gun from his weakened fingers. "Stop it! Have you gone nuts?" he questioned.

The realization of his weakness seemed only to enrage Gorton the more. A cunning light sprang suddenly into his wildly staring eyes. "Yuh can't leave the doctor because he's seen the three of yuh, eh? Well, *ain't I?* And if yuh skunks go off now and leave me I'll give as clear a description of yuh to the cops as a photograph could print, that's straight!" he threatened venemously.

"Say, that cooks me with you! I felt sorry for you up to that crack; but now you can go to blazes," Lem Yarrow rasped harshly. Stepping forward he stared savagely down at the wounded man, and his

final words had the sting of a whip-lash. "You'll be dead in a couple of hours if I'm any judge! But just as a matter of extra caution we'll take along your share of this haul we've made, and which I'd intended to hand over up to now. If we get away we'll hold your share till we can get it to you some way. If we get caught you lose it. Now, damn you, will that muzzle you?" Yarrow said. "Get on your horses, men, and come on, all of you," he added to the others and turned away.

Gorton made no further effort to argue. Sitting upright with face dead-white in the red glow of the fire, and with a feverish brightness gleaming from his eyes, he cursed the vanishing men. "Leave me to die alone like a rat after it was me that let yuh in on this thing, heh? Well, if I live I'll tell on yuh, and if I die I'll *haunt yuh!* I'll follow yuh till every penny of that money is spent. I'll haunt yuh, I'll——"

"Come on, let's hurry. That guy gives me the willies," the huge hard-faced Alkali rumbled, urging his horse on as the hoarse rise and fall of the wounded man's voice followed them eerily through the still desert night. Dones complied eagerly; and although Yarrow laughed jeeringly at the comment he too increased the speed of his mount as if secretly eager to put added distance between himself and the muttering voice.

GAZING at the three from his position in the rear, Walters studied them, and again the mirthless half-smile passed briefly over his battered features. Turning his head, he stared backward at the dimming glow of the campfire and on beyond it to the railroad. Well enough he knew that in the frame of mind the wounded man had put the bandits, and with the large sum of money they spoke of having secured, his captors were equal to anything. Resolutely forcing the thought from his mind, he scanned the surrounding wasteland. Beneath the vast, palely star-lit sky the desert stretched flatly away on all sides, except where it was cut by the beds of dry washes or landmarked by the tombstone-like shapes of rocky outcrops of gray stone. From all about in almost a complete circle the weird *yip-yap-yip-hiee* of desert coyotes signalled of the passing men to one another. Great night-hunting horned owls from the distant foothills, soaring mile after mile over the desert surface on wings as noiseless as death, rose with a metallic snap of beaks at sight of the travelers. It was a ghostly, unreal place at best, and the silent moonless night made it doubly so, Walters felt.

Shortly after, Alkali Payton halted where he rode in the lead and faced rearward. Through the gloom his eyes looked uneasy. "Who's that mumblin'?" he blustered, staring accusingly from his two partners to Walters.

All shook their heads; and Yarrow grunted wrathfully. "Nobody said nothing. What's eating you?" he growled.

Payton made no reply, and urged his horse quickly on. But he had gone hardly a hundred yards when he jerked his mount to a stop with a suddenness that sat it back on its haunches. *"There!* I heard it again. It's keepin' on—followin' us—gettin' nearer all the time," he stuttered. This time he made no effort to hide the fear that shone out of his eyes.

Yarrow glanced from Dones to the hunched form of Walters, and then faced Alkali Payton. "Who'd it *sound* like?" he asked searchingly.

"Yuh know damn well! *It's Gorton I'm hearin'!* He's followin' us, like he claimed he'd do! And it's yore fault, Lem Yarrow! I wasn't for leavin' him. Yuh know it, and Gorton knows it," Alkali Payton's rumbling voice rose loudly in his excitement.

The iron-nerved Yarrow laughed gratingly. Taking a cigarette from his pocket, he lit it and inhaled deeply. "You're going nuts," he growled to Alkali—then stopped, and Walters saw the red tip of his cigarette quiver in the dark. Yarrow too had heard something, and was listening——

In the tense, nerve-tingling silence that followed, the muttering rise and fall of a voice reached them all. At first only a hoarse mumble of oaths, it slowly took form and the words were plainly heard. "Leave me, huh? Leave me to die like a rat, and after I told yuh about this——" There was a pause as unnerving to the waiting listeners as the ghostly rumble of talk. Then the voice came again. "I'll follow yuh till every penny of that money is spent. I'll haunt yuh."

With a sharp half-moan of terror Alkali Payton spurred his mount ahead in a leap, to be closely followed by the others. Through a seemingly endless stretch of sandy wasteland; then up a long bare slope of ridge that rose from the desert floor; and down the other side with the hoofs of their horses rattling and sliding on solid rock, they raced with a reckless disregard of rocky outcrops or dry washes.

FULLY five miles had been covered when Yarrow finally pulled his horse to a stop and called to the others to halt. For some seconds they listened, staring silently backward without comment. Then Alkali Payton's voice broke the stillness. "I can still hear it mumblin'! It's comin' closer again! Don't yuh hear it!" he quavered, making as if to start on.

Lem Yarrow stopped him. "Shut up, you gabbling fool, and stay where you are! I hear it too. But if we can't outrun it in five miles we can't in fifty. It's Gorton, all right. But what of it? I never heard of a ghost doing nobody any harm. They can't handle knives or guns, can they?" Plainly Yarrow was shaken to the core, but the tough fiber that had made him their leader refused stubbornly to admit defeat.

Alkali Payton was not convinced. "What can we do with him followin' us about? I'll go crazy in a day. He's sore because we left him; that's the trouble. What we'd better do is to go back there and let him know we've given in. Then, dead or not, he'll settle down quiet. I've heard of such things," Payton said in a tone of superstitious awe.

Dones, a lean-faced, furtive-eyed man, spoke for the first time that Walters had heard. "Yeah, Lem, I think Alkali's right. We better go back before we're any further, and try and square it some way with Gorton. Then he'll likely lay quiet," he agreed.

With an oath Lem Yarrow faced his partners hotly. "Well, Gorton is not the only lunatic running loose, if you guys think I'm going back all the near ten miles we've traveled! Why, where we left Gorton is not half a mile from the railroad, and it'll be broad daylight in a couple of hours. We'd be in a fine fix back there with that locality swarming with sheriffs and road cops by now," Yarrow snarled. "I'll tell you what; we're plenty far from the railroad for the time being, so we'll make camp. Build up a big fire and wait here till daylight. It's this dark desert and all that's getting our goats. How do we know it ain't just some sort of echo we're hearing, anyway?" he ended. "Well, come on and let's scatter out and get some brush," Yarrow added, glancing about at the bare rocks. Then, as none of the others made any move, he started resolutely off afoot into the darkness.

Walters started away also, and after a moment's hesitation Alkali and Dones did likewise. But a short time later as

they met again all were empty-handed. "There's no brush nor nothing to burn, just rocks and sand. We're too far out. Looks like we'll have to make a fireless camp or keep on going," Yarrow said dubiously; then stopped tensely in an involuntary listening attitude.

Through the night, rising and falling in its ghostly mutter came the blood-chilling voice. "Yuh won't find any firewood nor water either. And yuh won't find peace anywheres unless yuh come back. I told yuh I'd haunt yuh. I won't ever stop——"

"*Hear that!* It's him. It's Gorton! He knows what we're doin' and where we are," Alkali Payton stuttered, his teeth chattering. His last vestige of bravado had vanished. Turning, he strode quietly across to his horse and gathered up the reins that he had trailed on the ground when he dismounted. Seeing the move, Dones followed quickly.

"Wait a minute! Where are you fellers going?" It was Lem Yarrow that spoke, and as he did his hand darted beneath his coat edge. When the hand came into sight again it held the heavy blunt-nosed automatic Yarrow had wielded so purposefully in the hold-up. "If you guys think you're going back you've got another think coming! The money is in them sacks on the pack-horse Walter was riding—and it stays with me! But if Gorton can scare the pair of you into going back and letting yourselves get caught, he can scare you into telling the route *I've* gone. So I'm playing safe, and taking you two along with me for the same reason we didn't leave this doctor fellow with Gorton—you understand!" Yarrow barked.

Alkali Payton, who was nearest Yarrow, moved with amazing speed for a man of his size. Caught between the known and the unknown he chose quickly. One huge paw-like hand leaped for his gun.

But Lem Yarrow's automatic was already out, his fingers coiled about the mechanism, his eyes watchful and deadly. As Alkali Payton's weapon appeared Yarrow's tense fingers pressed the hair-geared trigger of his gun. Two stabbing red jets of gun flame licked vividly from the blunt muzzle, and with a sudden startled look on his face and two bullets through his chest, Payton staggered back. For a moment he clutched vainly at his plunging horse as if to mount, then sank dead upon the rocky earth.

The instant Yarrow saw that Payton was finished he turned toward Dones. But taking advantage of the fight with Payton, Dones had mounted. Bending low in the saddle now he ignored Yarrow's call to halt and spurred his horse recklessly away.

With features set in mask-like hardness, Lem Yarrow emptied his automatic at the swiftly vanishing rider. Not until the blunt-nosed pistol refused to function further did Yarrow pause. Then he swung furiously on Walters as an object for his wrath and disappointment.

"Well, Mister Doctor man, there's just you and me left of the party, and soon as I get this automatic reloaded there's just going to be *half that many!* Somebody's been a jinx on this trip, and maybe it's you. Anyhow there's no use in me lugging you along further," Yarraw grated.

"You mean you're going to kill me?" Walters asked amazedly.

"How'd you guess it?" Yarrow sneered, drawing a fresh clip of cartridges from his pocket for the automatic. "If we hadn't had such bum luck the whole trip I might have took you along for company. But I'm not taking any chances the way things have turned out—and Dones is enough to go back. Even if he tells all

he knows and they catch me, it will still be only his word against mine. But you alive to talk would make it *two* against my one—hell!" Lem Yarrow's voice broke, and rose in a sharp exclamation as Walters tensed and leaped at him like a cornered cougar. Realizing that Yarrow was in grim earnest and being himself unarmed, Walters had not waited for Yarrow to get the gun reloaded.

AS WALTERS sprang, Yarrow's grip tightened on the pistol and he swung hurriedly with the empty weapon. But the quickness of Walters' leap had put him so near that Yarrow's blow had no room to gain force. The next second Walters' clutching hand closed on Yarrow's wrist, while the other circled his body. Releasing the useless gun, Yarrow gripped Walters, endeavoring to trip or throw him. Locked tightly, the two struggled furiously back and forth, each striving for the advantage, until Walters' foot struck a rounded stone and they crashed heavily to the ground.

Then began a swift brute-force fight that knew no rules but the need of survival. Bracing with knee and elbow, striking in furious short-arm jabs when a blow could be risked, striving silently for the upper hand when it could not, they staged a grim no-quarter battle.

With the money and his freedom at stake Lem Yarrow fought savagely. But Walters was fighting for an even greater stake—for life itself. The realization gave him the added strength of desperation. Throwing caution to the winds he gave blow for blow, making no effort to protect himself but only to inflict the greater punishment on his foe as the two tumbled and rolled about the rocky earth. Of a sudden Yarrow managed to pin Walters flat on his back. Exerting all his force he held Walters down with the weight of his body. At the same instant his groping fingers closed about Walters' throat.

Grimly, relentlessly Yarrow's fingers tightened in a grip that Walters found himself powerless to loosen. Desperately he strove to tear the bandit's hands away, to twist his body from beneath Yarrow's —but in vain. Winded already from the past struggle and with Yarrow's throttling grip shutting the life-giving air from his lungs, Walters' efforts became rapidly feebler. Once more he roused from the blackness into which he found himself sinking to strike blindly at the face that leered triumphantly down at him. In a final effort his fingers again strove vainly to break the grip on his throat. Then his arms relaxed, dropped limply outspread on either side of his body. But as they did Walters' right hand struck something that momentarily sent a surge of new life and vitality through his body. It was the object he had tripped on; a loose, wind- and sand-rounded stone larger than a baseball and weighing several pounds! With heart thumping wildly against his ribs and the strength of a new hope in his body, Walters' fingers closed tightly on the stone; his arm tensed. The next instant it hissed upward in a swift quarter-circle swing.

There was a dully solid thud as the stone struck the side of Lem Yarrow's head. This was followed by a groan and the rustle of a settling figure as Yarrow sank senseless beside Walters. Rising stiffly, Walters felt gingerly over himself for broken bones. Finding none, he crossed to the pack-horse and searched out a length of rope he remembered having felt there when riding the horse.

SOME moments later when Lem Yarrow dazedly opened his eyes he found himself bound securely. Walters sat a few feet away calmly smoking a cigarette and watching a red streak in the east that

told of the coming of daylight, for which he was waiting before starting back toward the railroad with his prisoner.

For a space Lem Yarrow studied the quiet, sober-faced figure in sour silence. He was too much a judge of men to waste time in offering a bribe or a threat. But after a time he spoke, as a thought occurred to him. "Say, Doc, what's wrong with Gorton's ghost? I don't hear it muttering and groaning no more," he rasped in an effort at easy bravado.

Walters faced the bound man and for the first time since Yarrow had met him a grin of genuine humor crossed his face. "You're wrong on both counts," Walters said. "First, I'm not a doctor—which I tried to explain at the start, but stopped for fear of my life. I'm a small-time vaudeville actor, and had been playing these little tank towns out here; but my act didn't go over and I was beating my way back east when you nabbed me," he said.

Lem Yarrow looked interested but unconvinced. "Well, what'd you *say* you were a doctor for, and what's all that got to do with me being wrong about Gorton's ghost?" he growled.

"It's got a lot!" Walters replied, and made a motion for silence. Then as before came the awful mutter and threat of the voice: "Leave me here to die like a rat, heh? I'll haunt you. I'll——"

The voice died away and Walters grinned at Yarrow's amazement as he continued. "You see I'm a ventriloquist, can throw my voice; and Gorton's threat gave me the chance I needed to put a proper scare into the three of you. My act was to come out on the stage as a doctor and talk with a dummy that is lying on a couch as a sick man, and the wise cracks I make and have the dummy say in reply make up my act. That's how I got in the habit of calling myself doctor—'a doctor of the blues' they billed me. Now laugh that off," Walters ended jocularly.

Lem Yarrow's reply was to tug vainly at his tightly knotted bonds and swear bitterly. His sense of humor wasn't working well just then.

GHOST

By LOUISE GARWOOD

Your shoes are muddy . . . you'll not track the floor?
Nor fail to double-latch and try the door?
The kitchen window—have you made it fast?
Now put the screen around the fireplace, last.

Before you go upstairs—that pantry light—
You know it used to burn, sometimes, all night.
To bed, dear heart! How thoughtful you have grown
Of little tasks, now that you are alone!

Lord of the Talking Heads

By ARTHUR WOODWARD

A thrill-tale about the head-hunting Jibaros of Peru, and the Big Smoke who controlled the spirits of the dead

THE phone rang and the secretary announced that a man was coming up to see me. Such reports are a part of the day's business. Often they are worth while. Sometimes they are the means of acquiring valuable collections or specimens for the museum. At other times they are merely indicative of some one who wishes something identified or requires information on some Indian tribe. All are welcome.

The man who rapped timidly on the door and sidled furtively into the room with a small paper-wrapped parcel in his hand looked to be at least sixty. His hair was white and his face thin, haggard but singularly free from wrinkles for a man of his age.

"Are you the man in charge of this department?" he asked. Again I was puzzled, for the voice was that of a man in his prime.

"Yes, sir; won't you be seated?" I responded, motioning to a guest chair near the desk.

"Are you the one who accepts things for the museum, Indian things and such-like?"

Again I nodded. "Always glad to look at anything. You have something interesting?"

He placed the small parcel on the desk.

"I—I think I have," he faltered. "Mebbe you won't think so, but if you'd care to listen a minute, that is if you have the time, it won't take very long, I'd like to tell you about this, this specimen I want to loan you, if you want it."

Something about the man, his old-youthful look and actions, the air of timidity with which he entered the room, aroused in me a curiosity that I do not usually have for the chance visitor.

"Make yourself at home," I said. "Comfortable? All right, shoot!"

He drew a long breath and eyed me steadily. "I don't look crazy, do I?" he asked quietly.

I laughed at that. He looked the part of a timid, hard-working rancher but scarcely that of an insane man.

"Well," he continued, settling back in his chair, "I just wanted to know, because what I have to tell you may sound crazy, but I want to say right now that I am as sane as you are, only it's all so damned weird and foolish that sometimes I wonder if I am crazy or not. Do you know who I am?"

"You have the best of me, friend," I answered. "I don't recall having seen you before."

"Well, I work here in the museum," he said. "My name is John Benson."

I thought rapidly, trying to fit this man with some of the attendants who might possibly work in the annex or the preparator's laboratory, places I rarely visited, but could not remember having seen him nor hearing his name.

"I'm the night watchman," he added. "I know you by your name on the door. I make the rounds every night but you've never seen me. I've been planning on coming to see you for a month, ever since I got the job, but couldn't bring myself to do it, but things have come to such a pass I just had to get rid of it."

"Get rid of what?" I asked.

He pointed to the bundle on the desk.



"Then that dried head began to speak."

"That. No, wait, don't open it yet. Wait'll I tell you my little yarn; then you can look at it, and if you want it for the museum I'll loan it to you. I can't give it to you, but you can have it for a long-time loan."

"We have papers for what we call indefinite loans," I said.

"That's it, I'll loan it to you indefinitely; you can keep it as long as I live. Keep it in a glass case where I can see it at night when I make my rounds, and I won't have to think of it being in my room daytimes, while I'm asleep. That's why I want you to have it. I must retain ownership while I'm alive. After I'm dead, well, you can do what you wish with it—keep it, burn it, bury it, anything you like. Now you want the dope?"

He was a most unusual man, and his statements were as unusual as his looks and manners, and his words aroused my curiosity as nothing had done for many a moon.

"Well," he began, "two years ago I shipped out of San Francisco for a job with a mining company in Ecuador. I was just twenty-eight then. I am sixty now! Look at my hair! Look at my face! You thought I was an old man, didn't you? No matter, every one does. That's why I can't get a job as a young man. My looks are against me. That's why I'm a night watchman, working at an old man's job for an old man's pay, by night, and trying to sleep by day. My God! If I don't get some sleep soon I'll be as mad as I sound.

"Well, no matter. Once this is off my chest I'll sleep soundly.

"The job didn't pan out as well as I expected, and being young and ready for anything I fell like a ripe peach for an old yarn of a lost Inca city lousy with gold somewhere in the Oriente country. I heard it from a young Indian in Quito. He seemed to know what he was talking about. Got me all pepped up with the idea, and offered to guide me in. Said he needed a white man to help him.

"WE OUTFITTED and started out. I didn't know a thing about the country, or what we needed, left it all to the Indian. I furnished him with all the money I had, and it seemed to me he got an ungodly amount of stuff for just two of us, and when I mentioned it he just grinned, and said he knew what we were up against, and would need everything we had before we got back—if we got back. That last crack didn't sound good to me, and I asked him what he meant.

"Then he told me about the Jibaros. To me they might have been a new brand of cigarettes or something to eat had I heard them mentioned in Frisco, but when that brown-skinned devil calmly informed me that they were some of his uncivilized brothers who made it a national pastime to remove people's heads and convert them into household ornaments, cold shivers rippled up my backbone and I began to wish I was any place but there. However, there was no backing out then. The Indian had hired some carriers from another tribe to cart our stuff over the mountains, and down into the forest land. The whole push decamped the second night after we reached the timber.

" 'Now what?' I asks. 'How we gonna get all this junk into this mess with us and where is that city of gold?' By this time I was beginning to be fed up with cold nights and hot days, strong winds and poor grub.

" 'We wait, bimeby they come, take us in. Pretty soon everything all *bueno*.'

"That night they did come, twenty or thirty of them, lean, half-naked cusses, all carrying long, chonta palm spears tipped with bone points and decorated with plaited basketry and tufts of bright feathers. Nearly every one had a German-made machete thrust through a woven girdle and five or six of them toted .44 Winchesters.

"They jabbered among themselves, looked at me, grinned, fingered my hair —it was red then—and every minute I expected to see one of their big knives flicker toward my neck or have a spear probing my liver. I didn't like it and told Pepe, my Indian guide, so in danged few words. I was all for going back. He wouldn't hear of it.

" 'We go with them now, see the chief, he expects us,' he said.

"And go we did. At sunset we halted in a clearing where a big house stood, made of posts set on end in the ground and thatched with grass of some sort.

"They motioned us to go in, and once inside I took a good look around and nearly fell over, for there sitting on a common kitchen chair sat a huge negro. He was a good six feet tall and husky as a mule. On his head he had a short, stiff standup headdress of purple and red parrot feathers. On his chest was a breast-plate of jaguar skin ornamented all over with red and black seeds, bright feathers, stuffed hummingbird skins and shining green beetle wings.

"On his arms were bands of bark painted red and hung with crimson feather tufts. In his ears were huge golden wheels inlaid with turquoise, the first evidence I had seen of any gold in that neck of the woods. A Winchester lay

across his lap. When he saw me he grinned like a devil.

" 'Git down on yoh knees, white trash,' he rumbled, 'git down on yoh knees and crawl heah and kiss mah feet. Down, yoh heah me?'

"He raised the Winchester and at the same time I felt the point of a spear prod me in the small of the back. Instinctively I glanced over my shoulder and saw Pepe leering at me mockingly.

"What was there to do? A blood-thirsty, traitorous Indian behind me, a mad coon in front of me, ready to blow my guts out. I did what you'd have done, brother: I crawled.

"Well, that was the beginning of six months hell. It seemed the big smoke had deserted from a steamer on the coast and had made his way inland and was just a bit mad, by his actions. He had set himself up as sort of a god among those Jibaros. He had welded them into a fighting body and ruled them by magic. He claimed he had conjuring powers, and those babies are as superstitious as they make 'em. He had learned of a hidden Inca treasure and helped himself to it. He hated white men, and had lured several parties into the forest, where he delivered them into the hands of the Jibaro warriors. The heads of those unfortunates hung in a dark, repulsive cluster around the center pole of the Big Smoke's house.

"Then he got the Big Idea. He wanted a white slave. He sent Pepe, one of his trusted men, out with the same bait, buried gold. I was the fall guy.

"For six months I was dog-robber to that big burly black man. I had to fan him, I had to wash his feet, I had to fetch and carry for him, and all the time I schemed to escape.

"He was a cunning devil. He seemed to be able to read my thoughts. When I looked longingly at the trail that led into the forest lands toward the west he'd laugh and prod me in the ribs.

" 'Thinkin' uh leavin' me, wuz yoh? Jus' try it, white trash! Yuh haid will look purty fine up dar among dose fine gemmemun. Yassuh, soon's yoh daid I'm gonna sew yoh soul inside yoh haid and keep yoh to help me lak I does dem other white folks. Yassuh, dyin' won't let yoh go. I keeps yoh atter you-all am daid. Oooee, I got power, I'se got conjure medicine. I holds onto daid men's souls. Look, white trash, see, dey all got dey lips sewed up. Dey can't escape. Dey helps me.'

"He was mad. No doubt about it. But didn't those Jibaros eat it up! They believed implicitly in what he said, and every head they took they shrunk to the size of an orange, using hot sand and rocks in the curing process. Then they held a nine-day ceremony, during which time the head-takers danced with those damned grisly things flopping on their chests. At first they just stuck little chonta palm splinters in the lips and later ran long cotton cords through the holes, sewing the lips tightly together.

"I attended many of those ceremonies during the time I was with them. I had to. In that way I learned just how to do it—how long the fresh skin should be boiled in the preliminary shrinking and how to mold the features as the skin gradually dried, how to sew the cut at the back of the neck where they slit the skin in order to peel the hide from the head, and how to do the delicate skinning work required to remove the skin from around the nose and eyes.

"One day they brought in the head of a kid about fourteen or fifteen, a *mestizo,* a half-breed.

" 'Now, white trash, I show yoh how I keeps de soul,' leered the Big Smoke

when the head was properly cured. 'I done got dis young-un's spirit cooped up, an' to show yoh how easy it is I'se gonna take de splinters outen de lips an' leave 'em out so's yoh can heah it talk to me. Hit's too yong to bodder me. Hit's too scairt o' me to do anythin' but obey. Watch and lissen!'

"I'll never forget that night as long as I live. Big Smoke took that gruesome, wizened head and swung it by the head-cord, which was fastened to the top of the scalp, on the center pole. Then he sat down on his chair facing it, and closed his eyes. The hut was full of Jibaros, stinking of sweat, and grease; the fire had some cussed stuff on it that gave off a sickish smell, and a gray silvery smoke that made the air foggy.

" 'Lissen, yoh spirit-boy, lissen an' answer me. I'se tellin' yoh what I wants yoh to do. Tell me, whut does it look lak, dat house way up yander on de mountain, de last one jest before de trail dips down de hills into de trees? Tell me so's I can heah.'

"I leaned forward, watching the head. This was just mummery, I knew, but I had to watch that head.

"I knew the house to which the Big Smoke referred. It was the last sign of civilization we had passed, one hundred and fifty miles to the west, a small, stone hut with tiled roof, unlike the wooden, thatched dwellings of the Jibaro country.

"Then my hair began to crawl on the nape of my neck. I felt cold sweat begin to ooze from my pores. I froze in my tracks.

"*That dried head began to speak!* From the tiny open mouth issued a thin trembling voice speaking in Spanish.

" '*La casita es de piedra blanca. Hay dos ventanas. Yo veo un hombre en la puerta, es un soldado . . .*'

"The head was swaying back and forth, back and forth, and about that time I lost my grip on things and passed out.

"When I came to, the hut was empty of Indians. The head on the post was trembling almost imperceptibly and the Big Smoke was looking down at me, a mocking sneer on his ebony face.

" 'Theah, yoh see, white trash? I'se voodoo. Now yoh is mah slave foh life—an' in death.'

"That night I sneaked into the hut and ripped the mouth cords out of *every white man's head* that hung on the central post!

"Mad? Perhaps I was, but I had been shown my way out. The Big Smoke feared those spirits. He controlled them only so long as he could keep their souls in their heads. The soul must escape through the mouth.

"Then I ran from the hut and hid in the darkness outside. Suddenly I heard a fearful, blood-curdling cry and the sound of a huge body lurching around inside the house. Then a black hulk stumbled through the doorway and loomed for a moment against the stars. I heard hoarse bubbling gasps and an instant later the Big Smoke crashed full length in the path, his feet drumming a tattoo on the beaten earth.

"A moment later I heard the sound of laughter, excited happy laughter and a babble of men's voices dwindling in the distance.

"All the rest of that long night I lay there in the bush scarcely daring to breathe, and not a lance-length from me sprawled the silent corpse of the Big Smoke.

"When morning broke I stole over to the body and looked at it. The face was screwed into a terror-stricken mask, the yellow white of the eyeballs stood out hideously, the mouth gaped open and the tongue was thick and swollen, and on the black throat were the thin welts of many

fingers, fingers that were bone-like in their thinness.

"IT WAS a pleasure to prepare that head. I removed it and stole away into the forest. By that time I was an adept at getting around in the undergrowth. I cured the head as I had seen it done dozens of times, and I was very careful to sew the lips tightly together.

"Then I escaped. I had the golden ear-plugs which the Big Smoke had worn in his ears. I had other gold in a leather pouch, along with extra ammunition for the Big Smoke's .44.

"Finally I won out to the coast and managed to ship home. My hair has been like this since that awful night when the Big Smoke passed out.

"Everything was all right. I was home, and if it wasn't for the kinky-haired doll head I kept on the shelf in my room, which all my friends took for a new kind of Woolworth souvenir, I'd have said it was just a bad dream.

"Then one night I awakened to hear a gasping gurgle close to my ear. It was the mumble of the Big Smoke.

" *'Jest a little moah! Jest a little moah! One moah string and I'se free. Then I gits yoh, white trash!'*

"I switched on the light and looked at the head. All save one of the cotton cords that held the lips together had parted from dampness and action of a mouse which had gnawed away while I slept.

"It didn't take me long to put new cords in place, I can tell you, but every night now for the last few weeks I have worked here, and I don't have to face the danger of the night, but I can't sleep in the daytime for fear the Big Smoke will get loose. So, I want you to take him, put him in a tight glass case where moths or mice can't get at him, and where I can flash my light on him as I make my rounds, and the attendants can watch him during the day. Then I'll sleep. Will you do this for me?"

As he ceased, he fumbled with the cord of the parcel and opened the paper.

There lay the shrunken head of a negro, tiny, repellent.

The tiny eye-slits were closed tightly, the hair curled in a tight kinky mass on the bullet-shaped head, and on the face was a look of horror, perceptible even in the diminutive features which apparently had been carefully molded to represent the living man. Looking closer I saw that the lobe of each ear was slit and distended. The lips were sewed together with new, white cotton cord.

I looked at Benson. He was watching me intently, appealingly.

"Well?"

"Why, of course, we'll be glad to take care of it for you," I said cheerfully, as though I had not listened to as wild a tale as a man ever heard. Privately I thought him the biggest liar I had ever listened to, but he did have a shrunken head and those grisly things do attract the public. "Only," I continued, "I'll have to wait a day or two before I can find a case for it. In the meantime I'll turn it over to the custodian to place in a fumigating-vat."

"You're sure it'll be safe there? Mice can't get at it? My God, man, can't you realize what it would mean to me if those lips should become unsealed? Suppose I felt those damned black paws at my throat as I traveled down one of the dark corridors. Suppose *he* got loose and hid out in this building. Can't you imagine the horror of it?"

"Well, mice can't live in fumigating-vats, and besides I imagine he'd feel lost in this building, if he did get loose."

Benson looked at me fearfully.

"You don't know what you're saying. Oh, I know you think I'm crazy as a loon, but for God's sake take care of that head! Now I'm going home and enjoy the first good sleep I've had in weeks."

After he had gone I sat for some time looking at the gruesome, wizened trophy. It was genuine, all right. We have had reports that some cunning Chinamen in Panama have been making bootleg heads taken from paupers' bodies, but they sew the neck slit with ordinary cord instead of a bit of fiber from a vine. This head was sewed in the orthodox manner. As for the soul part of it . . . bosh, the man was just a bit daffy. I've had visitors of his caliber before. There was the little old lady who was so gentle and calm but she went off raving in two minutes, telling me about the disembodied spirit named Harvey who kept invisible watch on her and whispered vile things in her ear as she took the air on top of a Fifth Avenue bus. Benson had been too much alone. He walked at night down the dim corridors alive with the memories of bygone days, and perhaps he had been a prisoner in the Jibaro country, and the sights he had seen were now crystallizing in an all too vivid form.

I turned the head over to the custodian and forgot it for the moment. I really intended to put it on exhibition the same afternoon after it had been in the fumigating-case, but other matters came up and I forgot the cursed thing.

Two days after this interiew Benson came to see me again, and I resigned myself to another long tale of hair-raising horrors, but he surprized me by his brevity.

"You haven't put the head on exhibition yet, I notice," he said, after the first greetings were over. "Would you mind telling me where it is? I—I—don't feel easy unless I can keep it where I can see it."

"By Jove, so I haven't," I said. "The custodian took it to the fumigation case and I completely forgot it. Glad you reminded me of it. I'll get it immediately."

I went to the phone and rang the front office and asked for the custodian.

"It is his day off, and he won't be in until tomorrow morning," the secretary told me.

"Well, it looks as though we'll have to wait until tomorrow, Benson. Dickson, the custodian, is off for the day, and he has the key to the fumigating-case. I'll make a memorandum and have that head out first thing in the morning."

He appeared somewhat relieved, but a trace of anxiety still lingered in his face.

"It'll be in a case by tomorrow, sure?" he pressed.

"Word of honor," I assured him.

He thanked me and went out.

THE next morning the head was on my mind, and I fully intended asking Dickson to open the case and get the head for me, but an excited group in front of the unfinished gorilla group in the African hall drove the good intention into thin air.

"What's up?" I asked of the electrician who stood on the fringe of the knot of employees.

"Plenty," he answered solemnly. "We got a dead man here and we're waiting for the coroner."

"Dead man!" I echoed. "Who is it?"

"Night watchman, a new man; some one says his name is Benson. Must have had a fit or something. He looks terrible."

I pushed through the group and bent over the body of a man sprawled in a grotesque heap at the feet of one of the huge mounted simians that loomed over the dead body like an ungainly, sinister

thing, a setting in that dim, gloomy hall fit to be the climax of a movie thriller.

It was Benson. He had fallen on his back. His flashlight was clutched tightly in his right hand, and the time-clock, glass shattered for all of its protective covering, lay at the feet of the gorilla. I looked at the clock. It had stopped at ten minutes past twelve.

Some one had thrown a piece of canvas over the face of the corpse. I lifted the fabric and stared at the features of the man who had been in my office the day before. In truth the man must have died of some sudden seizure. The eyeballs protruded, the tongue showed thick and swollen through blackened lips. I bent closer . . . merciful God, *the throat* . . .

I whirled and dashed for the door.

"Dickson! Get Dickson!" I shouted.

He came on the run.

"For heaven's sake, man," he gasped, "what on earth is the matter with you?"

"The key, man, the key! Open the fumigating-vat immediately!" I said, and I trembled in spite of myself.

"It's empty," he answered. "Oh, by gosh, I intended telling you something. You know that head——"

"Yes, that's it, the head, what did you do with it? Where is it? Quick, tell me, *where is that head?*" I seized him by the shoulders and shook him. I felt that I must be going mad.

Dickson gaped at me.

"You crazy?" he asked, wrenching away from me. "Keep your shirt on and I'll tell you. I intended doing it before I left, but it slipped my mind—didn't amount to anything, but I thought I ought to mention it——"

"Out with it! Quick, for the love of heaven, Dickson—where have you put that head? I've got to know," I snapped.

"Well, when you brought it in to me I started to take it downstairs, and by accident the strings dangling from the lips caught on the door and yanked loose. I thought I'd better mend it and took it back to my desk, but some one called me away just then and I forgot all about it. That's all there is to it. The head is on my desk now. Satisfied?"

For a moment I thought I was going to keel over. Strings pulled out . . . head on desk. Lips unsealed . . . and there in the gloom of the African hall lay all that was mortal of Benson with a set of cruel, deep welts on his throat. . . .

It was broad daylight but I swear to this day that I heard far off, a throaty, terrible chuckle, receding into the distance, and a voice that chilled me to the bone, jeeringly say:

"Crawl, white trash. Ah holds yoh now foh good! Git down an' crawl!" A mad, terrible voice.

But Dickson couldn't hear it, and now they say I'm a bit cracked because I wired the lips of a shrunken head shut with heavy copper wire, and keep it in a sealed case.

They don't know what Benson and I know.

Tam, Son of the Tiger

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

An exciting weird novel of wild adventure in a subterranean world under Tibet, and the ancient gods of Asia

The Story Thus Far

TAM, the infant son of Major Charles Evans, American sportsman in Burma, was carried off and reared by a white tigress. The tigress had been raised by a lama named Lozong, who had gone on a long pilgrimage, and returned to find Tam, now about twelve years of age, living with the tigress and her full-grown cub, Chiam.

Tam believed himself a tiger and acted as such until the lama taught him languages, and much other knowledge.

One of Tam's jungle friends was a huge elephant named Ganesha. He strayed one day, and Tam, while in search of him, rescued a beautiful girl in golden armor from a man-eating tiger. In a language that resembled Sanskrit and Tibetan, both of which Tam understood, she told him that she was Nina, Princess of Arya, a country in a subterranean world called Iramatri, and that she had come to save the world from Siva the Destroyer, who planned to conquer all the earth.

Tam and the girl were attacked by four-armed giants riding beasts larger than elephants, who carried Nina off and left Tam for dead. But he had only been stunned by a blow from a mace. Ganesha arrived as Tam recovered his senses, and together they set off in search of Nina.

Meanwhile, Tam's father, who had devoted his life to killing tigers, had seen Nina's bodyguard massacred by the four-armed white giants, or Saivas. Major Evans and his party trailed the victors, and joined forces with Lozong, the white tigress, and her cub, who were seeking Tam.

His trail led them through a secret passage under the hills into a subterranean jungle. After many adventures, they caught up with him in the City of Aryatun, Nina's capital.

But all, including Tam, were captured and imprisoned in a dungeon by Nina's treacherous uncle, Nirgo, who sought the throne of Arya for his daughter, Bina.

Nirgo, who had also captured Nina, put her in a cage and threatened to loose a *manacvan,* a man-eating dog-faced man, upon her unless she would agree to marry his idiot son, Virgo. Pretending to accede to his desires, she was able to snatch Nirgo's *tulwar,* and felled him with it.

Seeing her strike his father down, the idiot Virgo became enraged, and opened the door which let the man-eater into her cage.

Meanwhile Tam, who had succeeded in breaking his chain, sprang at his jailer, who was armed with a dagger.

CHAPTER 19

Lords of the Serpent

WITH the swiftness of a darting serpent, the dagger of the old jailer flashed straight for Tam's breast. Surprized though he was at the speed and skill with which one apparently so aged and decrepit could use the weapon, Tam's training in the lair of the tigress stood him in good stead. Quickly turning so that the keen blade barely grazed him, he

This story began in WEIRD TALES for July



"Whipping out his yatagan, Tam leaped between the monster and the girl."

seized the bony wrist and gripped it so tightly that the weapon clattered to the floor.

"Help!" squawked the jailer. "A prisoner has broken his chain! Hel——!"

He could not finish, for Tam's fingers had suddenly cut off his wind.

"Another sound from you, old one," he said, "and I'll tear out your throat. Nod your head if you agree to silence. And no tricks."

Weakly, the warder nodded.

Tam released his throat, and said: "Now unlock the collars of these four prisoners."

"But I——" protested the jailer.

"Unlock them," warned Tam, "or I'll slay you, then take your keys and do so myself."

With shaking fingers the warder took the bunch of keys from his belt. After conning them over for what seemed to Tam to be an unnecessarily long time, he selected one, and unlocked the major's collar.

"Boy! It's a relief to get that off!" exclaimed Tam's father, rubbing the chafed creases made in his neck by the metal.

One by one the old man unlocked the collars of the others. When he had opened

the last collar—that of Dhava the Aryan —Tam seized the key. Then he thrust the scrawny neck of the jailer into the collar and locked it.

"Have mercy!" groaned the old fellow. "Would you leave me here with these rotting corpses—these whitening bones? I can't stand it. I'll go mad!"

"It seems that you have so left many others during your career as jailer here," said Tam.

"And laughed at them," added the doctor.

"And taunted them," said the major. "I really think we should bind and gag the old dungeon rat," he continued. "He may start squawking as soon as we are gone, and bring the guard."

"I had intended doing that," said Tam, "but first I want to question him." He turned to the cowering warder, and in his hand gleamed the sharp dagger of the old fellow, which he had recovered from the floor. "Where is the Princess Nina?" he asked, presenting the keen point of the weapon to the scrawny chest.

"I do not know," replied the warder. "I swear to you by the seven gods on the mountain that I do not know."

"Liar!" said Tam. "Will you tell, or shall I cut out your heart?" He advanced the dagger threateningly.

"I swear to you by the seven great names——!" whined the frightened jailer, but stopped when the dagger point pricked his skin. "Wait! Don't kill me! I will tell you!"

"Ah! That's better. Speak."

"She is confined in one side of a cage, in a room on the fourth level above this one."

"A cage!"

"Aye. Such a cage as wild beasts are kept in. And in the other side of the cage, separated from her by a door and a few bars, is a male *manacvan*. Nirgo himself is to come soon, to pull the lever which separates them if she refuses to wed his idiot son, which she probably will do. It will be a most amusing sight. Ho! Ho! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Obscene and cackling fool!" grated Tam between clenched teeth. "Tell me quickly how to reach that cage if you would not have your voice stilled forever."

"Climb the winding stairway to the fourth level. Enter the door at the left of the landing as you go up, follow the passageway to the third door on the right, and enter if it be not locked. If locked, Nirgo will be there and you will be too late."

"I'll just take your keys along in case it is locked," said Tam, hooking the bundle in his belt.

"And I'll go with you," said his father.

"I also. Yusuf and Dhava can bind the warder and follow," the doctor said. "We can arm ourselves with the weapons of these dead guards."

The Pathan and the Aryan bent to their task of making the old fellow silent and helpless, while the three men hurried away. Tam, the swiftest of the three, took the lead. Each man carried a *tulwar* and dagger.

Swiftly and silently, Tam went up the steps. Close behind him were the major and the doctor. The door at the left of the landing was open, but the third door on the right of the passageway was locked. Feverishly Tam tried key after key, as the sound of voices drifted faintly to him from beyond. He recognized the deep, wheezy tones of Nirgo and the soft voice of Nina. Also he heard the eager whining of a *manacvan* and caught its pungent, disagreeable scent. Suddenly he heard the clank of steel against steel and the fall of a heavy body. It was followed by a clang, as of a metal gate opening, the scream of

Nina in deadly terror, and the horrible, mirthless laugh of an idiot.

Hurling his keys impatiently to the ground, Tam attacked the door with his heavy *tulwar*. The blade bit through the wooden paneling four times in quick succession, cutting a rectangular opening. Through the aperture, he saw that which made his blood boil—Nina fighting off the advances of a fierce but wary *manacvan* with a jewel-hilted *tulwar,* while a hare-lipped, hunchbacked idiot leaped up and down before the cage, laughing uproariously.

Snatching his long dagger from his belt, Tam balanced it for a moment, then hurled it with the strength and precision which his years of training had given him. It struck the *manacvan's* shaggy temple just back of the eye, with a force that mere bone could not resist, and passing on through the brain of the man-dog protruded from the other temple. Slain instantly, and almost painlessly, the beast slumped to the floor of the cage without a sound.

Almost before the *manacvan* had collapsed into the filthy litter at the feet of the astonished girl, Tam had squeezed through the opening he had cut in the door, and was bounding forward. At sight of him and the other men crawling through the cut panel, the idiot voiced a howl of fear and dived beneath the cage. But Tam grasped him by an ankle, and dragging him out, gave him into the care of the major.

Nina, still holding Nirgo's *tulwar,* seemed dumfounded at first by the swift sequence of events. Because of the cries of the idiot and the snarling and growling of the *manacvan,* she had not heard Tam cut the hole in the door. Her first intimation that rescue was at hand had been the sight of a long dagger sticking clear through the skull of the dog-faced man as he slumped to the floor. Bewildered, she had turned in time to see Tam's back as he bent to pull the idiot son of Nirgo from beneath the cage. Behind Tam stood a tall, slender man whose hair was slightly gray at the temples, dressed in clothing the like of which she had never seen before. And squeezing through the door panel was a shorter, stockier man with glasses and a flaming red beard. These, she thought, must be Tam's father and his friend the doctor of whom Lozong had spoken. With a glad cry, she hurried to the front of the cage.

There were doors at the back of the cage, but Tam did not even see them. Gripping two of the heavy bars, he bent them apart as if they had been putty, while his father and the doctor looked on amazed at his great strength. Nina stepped through the opening, and Tam, standing on the floor below her, caught her in his arms as she jumped.

No longer clad in metal, but now wearing a soft, white diaphanous garment, she seemed a new Nina to Tam. It thrilled him unaccountably to hold her there in his arms, to feel her soft young body close to his. And looking down into her eyes, he saw a light which sent the hot blood coursing through his veins. The cage, the dead beast, the idiot, the presence of his father and his father's friend—all were forgotten in that instant. A soft arm stole about his neck. A hand caressed his hair. Their lips met in a moment of ecstasy that set them both trembling.

"Tam," she said. "My Tam, I thought I should never see you again."

"And I feared that I should be too late," he replied.

He turned to face the others, but as he did so his foot encountered something soft, warm and sticky. Looking down in surprize, he beheld the bloodstained countenance of Nirgo, his jeweled crown

jammed down over his forehead and badly dented in the center.

"Dead?" he asked Nina.

"No, only stunned," she replied. "I struck him down with his own *tulwar* but the blade did not touch him. His crown cut him as it was driven down over his forehead."

"Then," said Tam, "while he remains in oblivion permit me to present my father, Major Evans."

The major advanced, and with a courtly bow, kissed the hand of the Princess, while the doctor took charge of the frightened idiot. In his turn, he held the quaking Virgo while the doctor was presented.

At this juncture, Dhava and Yusuf arrived, both dressed in armor taken from the guards who had been slain in the dungeon, and bearing their weapons. The former dropped on his knees before the Princess, who gave him her hand to kiss, and commended his brave defense of her during the attack by Ranya, lieutenant of Siva. The major presented Yusuf, who had knelt beside Dhava.

"What are Your Majesty's commands?" asked Dhava, who was now attired in the armor of an officer of the palace guard.

"You will know where to find my loyal retainers," she told him. "Take this man with you in case you are attacked, and as soon as you have gathered sufficient forces, put every Nirgo vassal in the dungeons. Send a guard of ten men to me, here."

"I hear and I obey, Majesty," replied Dhava, and departed, followed by Yusuf.

"What will we do with the usurper and his idiot son?" asked the doctor.

"I suggest the cage as a good place for them," said Tam, "until such time as Her Majesty shall have decided their fate."

"A splendid idea," said Nina. "Let it be the cage."

The idiot, Virgo, was placed in the compartment where the *manacvan* had been confined. Then, after the door between the two sides had been closed, Nirgo, who had begun to recover consciousness, was deprived of his dagger and thrust into the other. Tam then pushed the bars back into place, and after he had straightened them, neither Nirgo nor any other man in that company could have moved them from their places again.

Soon there was the clank of metal in the corridor, and the guard of ten men which Nina had ordered, arrived. Leaving a man to guard the caged usurper, who was now groveling in the filthy litter in abject terror, and his idiotic son, they ascended to the ground floor of the palace. Here Nina was met by her lord chamberlain, who had just been notified of her presence, and who, with a hastily assembled group of dignitaries and servitors had hurried down to meet her.

After all had made obeisance, she gave a few swift orders, as a result of which Tam, his father and the doctor were conducted to a magnificent suite of rooms, where each had private sleeping-quarters and bathing-pool, and a host of slaves to minister to his every want.

Tam bathed in a pool of lapis lazuli, the major in one of agate, and the doctor in one of jasper. Emerging from their baths, refreshed, they were clothed in silken court garments held by belts and fastenings so richly decked with jewels that each man had on his person the ransom of a rajah. Then, at a table the legs of which were carved mammoth ivory and the top polished jet, there were served on engraved golden plates with purple silken napery, wines, meats, cakes, fruits and sweetmeats of so many varieties that they could not begin to taste even a tenth of the dishes.

When they had eaten and drunk their fill, the major and doctor lighted their pipes, and all three settled back contented-

ly among their cushions while the slaves cleared away the dishes.

Presently a page appeared.

They rose and followed the page. He led them down a tiled corridor before which stood two mailed guards with *tulwars* at their sides and spears in their hands.

The guards stood aside, crossing their spears above the doorway. Two others inside parted heavy curtains of imperial purple.

They entered an immense audience chamber large enough to have held at least a hundred thousand people, but in which there were, at the moment, less than a hundred. Its floors were of carnelian, its pillars of jade, and its wainscoting of onyx. Above the wainscoting, set in paneling of gold, were mural paintings in life size and natural colors, depicting battle scenes and triumphal processions in which mammoths played a prominent part, hunting scenes, religious ceremonies, and men and women engaged in agricultural and pastoral pursuits.

The hugeness of the place and the richness of its decorations elicited gasps of astonishment and admiration from the major and doctor, but Tam had eyes only for a slender girl seated on a high throne at the far end of the room, surrounded by her soldiers and courtiers.

"Never, in the history of the outer world, has there been a throne room to equal this," exclaimed the doctor. "Pool the grandeur of Rome, Athens, Memphis, Thebes, Babylon, Ur—all the great capitals of the world at the height of their glory, and united, they pale to insignificance beside such splendor as this. Why, there is assembled in this room alone, wealth greater than that of all the outer world today. Here, in addition to more gold than is held by all the great powers combined, are precious minerals employed in building with a prodigal and lavish hand."

"It's magnificent," agreed the major. "Almost beyond belief."

Their footfalls echoed hollowly in the vast emptiness of the place as they marched across the floor to the foot of the throne, which was at the top of seven semicircular steps of gold. The throne itself was a masterpiece of the goldsmiths' and jewelers' art. It was supported by two crouching golden tigers, whose eyes were emeralds, whose stripes were jet inlay, and whose heads formed the arm rests. Forming the back of the throne as well as a glittering canopy above it, was a gigantic uræus, a cobra head and neck of platinum encrusted with jewels. The color and form of each scale of the serpent's head and hooded neck were reproduced faithfully in sparkling gems. The uræus was crowned by a large crescent of burnished silver surmounted by a shining golden disk—emblems of the moon and sun respectively.

Tam had only a glance for these things, for the warriors in their shining armor, and the richly dressed courtiers who stood at either side of the throne. Then his eyes centered on the slender form of Nina, who looked very tiny indeed, seated between the two massive golden lions with the gem-studded platinum uræus rising behind her and arching above her head. Over the white, diaphanous garment which clung to her shapely body, she wore a robe of imperial purple, lined with soft white fur and caught at her shoulders with jeweled clasps. In her left hand she held the golden scepter of ancient Arya, which was about a foot in length and had a small trident at each end. It was richly powdered with gems, and glittered with each movement of her hand. On her head was the three-pointed golden crown of Arya, blazing with precious stones and

circling a helmet of the same metal, at the point of which reared the uræus surmounted by crescent and disk, thus combining in one headpiece the symbols of both goddess and princess.

AS THE three men halted at the foot of the golden steps which led to the throne, Nina smiled and stood up, thus honoring them as she would have honored visiting monarchs of her own rank.

"I have asked you here," she said, "that I might formally thank all of you in the presence of my chief nobles and officials for the parts you have played, severally and individually, in saving my life and restoring me to my throne and people. You are my honored guests, and the guests of the Aryan Empire for as long as you choose to remain. Although it is not within my power to reward you fittingly for your services to me, and therefore to my cause, I shall bestow on each of you a slight token of my gratitude and that of my country. Each of you will mount the steps as his name is called."

Nina's pompous lord chamberlain now stood forth from the others at the right of the throne. Removing the gold cord wrapping from a small book he carried, he opened it and read:

"Tam Evans, known as 'Son of the White Tigress.' "

Tam stepped forward, and mounting the seven golden steps, knelt before the throne. From a tray tendered her by a slave girl, Nina took a small jeweled platinum cobra. She wound its malleable coils twice around his right wrist.

"By this emblem and my proclamation," she said, "you will henceforth be known as a Lord of the Serpent. Hereafter your slightest wish will be a command to each and all of my subjects, from my highest nobles and officials to the lowliest slaves. And who would say you nay must deal with me. I have spoken."

"Her Holy and Imperial Majesty, Nina of Arya, has spoken," intoned the courtiers. "As she has commanded, so must it be."

Tam thanked her, rose, and descended the seven golden steps.

"Major Charles Evans, known as 'The Tiger Slayer,' " cried the lord chamberlain.

"He must have been reading my mail," grinned Tam's father to his friend the doctor, when the latter had translated his title for him. He mounted the steps and received a decoration similar to that of Tam and bestowed with the same ritual.

"Doctor Hubert Green, known as 'The Wise One,' " called the lord chamberlain.

After the doctor had received his decoration and resumed his place once more, Nina said:

"This ends the formal audience, but in a few moments I will confer privately with you three. Arval, my lord chamberlain, will conduct you to the conference room."

Arval, with the pomposity which seemed an attribute of his office, conducted them through a side door into a small but elegantly appointed room, furnished with low divans, ottomans, cushions and taborets. He left them there.

IN A few moments the curtains parted, and Nina entered the room. She had discarded the heavy crown and purple cloak of state, and wore only a clinging white garment which accentuated the shapely curves of her slim young body. Her hair was caught with a band of pearls woven on golden threads.

The three men were on their feet in an instant.

"Please be at ease," she said, smiling. "No formality here. We are all just friends."

Lightly she took the hands of Tam and his father and led them to a divan, seating them at each side of her. The doctor, at her invitation, drew up an ottoman facing her.

"Three days hence," she said, "I make pilgrimage to the Place of the Gods. There I will petition the Seven Who Rule, imploring them to keep the ancient weapons from Siva the Destroyer, for if they should be given him, he would be invincible. There would be a holocaust of blood and horror such as your world has never known, for he is bent on conquering it, and would stop at nothing. 'Submit or die,' would be the only terms accorded to the people of the earth, and submission would mean abject slavery. The world would be in chains, supine beneath the mail-shod foot of Siva the Bloodthirsty, Siva the Lustful. And a terrible tribute would be exacted—her handsomest sons and fairest daughters. With the former he would sate his blood-hunger in the games. The latter would go to his *zenana* to satisfy his libidinous desires.

"I know that Tam will want to go with me, and I take it that his father and his father's friend, who are interested in protecting their world from this menace, will want to go also. But, first, I must warn you of the dangers. This is no picnic journey, ending at some wayside shrine. The Place of the Gods is not easily reached, has not been reached by any from Iramatri for many generations. The Seven Who Rule saw to it, long ago, that their abode was well guarded. Three only who attempted the journey have succeeded during the last six thousand years. The others turned back at the first obstacle, or were heard from no more. Now will you go with me?"

"Of course," responded Tam. "Anywhere with you."

"After what you have told me, you would have to put me in double irons to keep me from going," said the major.

"And I," stated the doctor, "am positively afire with eagerness to start."

"For three days," Nina told them, "we will hold services in the temple, that Nina, *Jagan Mata,* may look with favor upon our enterprise. On the morning of the fourth day, we start. Your strange weapons from outer earth, which the men of Nirgo took from you, have been recovered and will be restored to you. And so——"

She was interrupted by the abrupt entrance of her lord chamberlain, who stood hesitatingly in the doorway.

"I crave pardon, Majesty," he said, "for interrupting, but a rider has just arrived from Indratun with an urgent message."

"Admit him."

A mailed warrior, whose face was streaked with blood and dust and who was so weary that he could scarcely lift one foot before the other, entered and knelt before the Princess.

"Your message, soldier," she said.

"This night," the warrior answered, "Siva will be guest of Indra in Indratun. Tomorrow he will cross into the Land of the Gods and make pilgrimage to the Most High Place where sit the Seven Who Rule. I was in Indratun when his advance guard arrived this morning, and securing a pass, rode out of the city immediately. One of Siva's spies followed, and gave me this," pointing to a cut on his forehead, "but I silenced him forever and came on."

"You have done well, soldier," she said, "and I will see that you are rewarded. You may go."

Rising, the warrior backed from the room.

"That changes our plans," she told the three, when he had gone. "Tonight only will we hold services in the temple. We

will leave tomorrow at dawn." She stood up. "I must go, now, to prepare for the evening ceremony, which you are invited to attend."

She gave her hand to the major, who bent over it with courtly grace, pressing his lips to her fingers. The doctor did likewise, when she laid her hand in his. Tam held her hand for a moment, looking into her eyes, for he would fain have kissed her lips. But there was no tenderness in her look. It was friendly, but impersonal. He bent and brushed her fingers with his lips. A page showed them to their apartments.

FOOD and drink were brought, but Tam would not come to the table. Despite the repeated invitations of his father and the doctor to join them, he sulked in a corner.

Presently the major rose, and walking over to where he stood, threw his arm about his shoulders.

"I know just how you feel, son," he said, "but you are wrong. This girl you love is no common wanton who wears her heart upon her sleeve, and whose kisses may always be had for the taking. She did not deliberately repulse you today, nor, I am convinced, have her feelings changed toward you since, in an unguarded moment, she revealed them to you. That was not a surrender but a revelation. Be patient, son, and some day in her own good time it may be that she will come to you. For your sake I hope so, for I see that you love her very dearly. But it is possible that, being a princess, she may not marry one not of the blood royal. And being esteemed a goddess, it may be that she is not permitted to marry at all."

"Princess or goddess, I love her, and must have her," said Tam.

"There are many beautiful women——" began his father.

"For me there can be but one," Tam cut in.

"In that case," said the major, "I'll do what little I may to help your cause along. And now, come. Eat and drink with us. Tomorrow we start on a long and dangerous journey, and you will need your strength.

Without another word, Tam rose and followed him to the table.

CHAPTER 20

The Jewel in the Lotus

TAM, his father and the doctor had dined, and were contemplating the yellow glow from the windows of their magnificent living-room, which heralded the approach of evening.

"Puzzling thing, isn't it?" said the major. "This simulation of sunlight and moonlight in an underground world. I can't understand it."

"Nor I," replied the doctor, "but I have a theory. I've kept my watch going since we left the outer world, and find that dawn and darkness here correspond with sunrise and sunset outside. Moreover, the coming of the violet night-light has agreed exactly with the rising of the moon as it would have been on the outer earth at this point and time. See any connection?"

"I must confess that I don't," admitted the major.

"You've heard of the so-called cosmic rays, haven't you?"

"Yes. But what have they to do with it? I understand that they are believed to strike the earth from outer space—possibly coming from distant stars or nebulæ."

"I don't believe their origin has been definitely established. But they have one characteristic which gives me an analogy for my theory. They have been found to penetrate the earth's crust as far as man

has been able to dig underground to check up on them. It is even possible that they pass clear through the earth. Now suppose there are some emanations from our sun, not identical with cosmic rays, but having the power to penetrate the earth's crust for a considerable distance. Suppose the moon, because of the composition of its surface, has the power to reflect at least a part of these rays."

"I don't see how we could get so much light from them, even at that," argued the major. "We know that sunlight is easily cut off, even by the simplest and flimsiest sort of screen."

"That is true of the visible rays, and most of the known invisible rays. But I doubt very much if our scientists have discovered and isolated all the emanations which are beyond the violet on the one hand and beyond the red on the other. Let us presume, for the moment, that far beyond the ultra-violet or the infra-red, are rays unknown to science. Suppose these rays at one or the other extreme have the property, when penetrating a certain radioactive substance, of greatly stimulating its activity—making it luminous if not incandescent. Then, if such rays do come from our sun, and are partially reflected by our moon, and if the vault above this inner world is composed of, or contains a considerable quantity of this hypothetical radioactive substance, we will have daylight and moonlight occurring here in precise chronological agreement with the daylight and moonlight above us, the color of the light being governed, of course, by the substance from which it is generated. I submit that things happen as if all these hypothetical facts were true."

"And I agree with you," said the major. "Your theory seems perfectly sound."

"Of course," the doctor finished, "I have offered no proof. Merely evidence. Such a theory could only be proved or disproved by a series of complicated investigations and experiments, and with the aid of extremely complicated and sensitive instruments. However——"

He was interrupted by the entrance of Dhava, followed by Yusuf, who between them carried the arms and ammunition which Nirgo's henchmen had taken from them. Both were richly dressed in court attire with jeweled fastenings, and Tam noticed that Dhava wore a glittering cobra bracelet like his own.

"You two seem to have prospered mightily since last I saw you," greeted the major.

"I have been made a Lord of the Serpent," replied Dhava, proudly flashing his bracelet, "and have been advanced in rank. Her Gracious Majesty has made me supreme commander of the armies of Arya."

"That's great, Dhava. I'm glad of it," said the major, as he inspected his weapons which Yusuf had handed him. "And what about you, Yusuf?"

"Her Majesty gave me jewels to the value of at least ten million rupees," said Yusuf. "Moreover, she presented me with two mammoths, one for riding and the other laden with as much gold as it could carry. I am content, for when I return to Afghanistan I will be wealthy as a sultan. But despite my wealth I would still serve you if you will have me."

"I'm suspicious," said the major with assumed sternness, "that you've been talking about me behind my back. Today in court I was named 'The Tiger Slayer,' yet I am convinced that there was none here but you and the doctor who knew that I had killed a few tigers. What about it?"

"I did speak modestly of your prowess, and of the great wisdom of the doctor," admitted Yusuf, shamefacedly.

"So? What has he been telling about us, Dhava?"

"Why, merely that you had slain some ten thousand tigers, and were the greatest hunter of the outer world. And he mentioned that the doctor was, without a doubt, the wisest man on earth, and was readily acknowledged as such by the leading scientists of all nations."

"So I thought. Well, we'll let it pass this time, in view of his past faithful services."

"Then it wasn't true?" asked Dhava.

"Only partly," said the major. "I should say, very slightly. Yusuf meant well, but he has given both the doctor and me quite some reputations to live up to."

"Her Majesty bade me inform you," said Dhava, "that if you will accompany me to the front balcony you can see the procession leave for the temple. She thought perhaps you might be interested."

"We are," said the major. "Lead on."

Dhava led them through a number of corridors and hallways to a wide balcony at the front of the palace, where there were assembled a group of Aryan nobles with their wives and children. The palace gates had been opened, and beyond them, as far as they could see in the orange glow of evening, both sides of the broad street were thickly packed with spectators.

THEY had scarcely reached the railing ere a ringing blast of trumpets sounded from below, and there rode forth from the courtyard a score of heralds mounted on mammoths. Behind the heralds marched a hundred members of the palace guard in their shining armor. Then came Nina, riding in a jewel-studded golden *howdah* on the back of an immense white mammoth. She was wearing her golden helmet and chain-mail, which, Dhava told them, signified that she would shortly go forth to battle. Behind her marched another hundred of her guards. Then there followed processions of priests, nobles and officials, all pointed out and described by Dhava.

As Nina rode down the street, the multitude cheered itself hoarse. It was plain to be seen that these people loved their Princess, and were glad of her safe return.

At the end of the procession a large cage on wheels, drawn by a single mammoth and guarded by six warriors, rattled and bumped into view. Tam saw that it was occupied by two men, kept apart by a partition which divided it in the middle. With one of the men, he saw the carcass of a *manacvan*. The man was Nirgo, and the other his idiot son, Virgo.

"What will they do with them?" Tam asked Dhava, for the multitude roared angrily at sight of Nina's treacherous uncle and cousin.

"Her majesty has graciously spared their lives," replied Dhava. "She ordered as their punishment that they be paraded through the streets in the cage in which they had confined her, and afterward banished to Namanacvarta."

"Namanacvarta?" asked Tam. "Where is that?"

"It is an island in the middle of an almost trackless marsh, where the worst felons of all nations, if they are not executed or otherwise punished, are sent. There is but one road through the swamp, and this is guarded night and day by warriors supplied by the seven nations of Iramatri; so those who are banished to Namanacvarta may not leave it except by permission of the officer in charge. And he can only grant a prisoner such permission by royal edict of the prisoner's sovereign. It is, as you may imagine, a horrible place, made more horrible by the criminals who inhabit it. I am told that a licentious Saiva princeling has gathered a band of despe-

rados around him and made himself ruler of the place, but it is not difficult to picture what such an administration would be like. Such prisoners as have anything of value when they reach the island are quickly despoiled of it by the Saiva tyrant and his ruffians."

As the cage passed out of sight down the street, followed by the denunciations and sneers of the multitude, darkness replaced the red glow of evening and the city lights flashed on.

Dhava said:

"Mammoths are waiting to conduct us to the temple, where the ceremony will shortly begin. Follow me."

He led them back through the palace, and down a stairway to the inner courtyard, where a number of the nobles were mounting the necks of riding-mammoths. Women and children were carried in *howdahs* on the backs of the great beasts, but men invariably rode the necks of the animals.

Attendants brought a mammoth for each member of the party, and caused the beasts to kneel. Then, with Dhava leading the way, they set out for the temple. Once they were outside the palace gates, Tam saw that nearly every one else was headed in the same direction. Most of the populace was afoot. But not an inconsiderable number rode mammoths, and a still larger number bestrode bullocks, some of which closely resembled zebus, while others of a different breed looked like large buffalos. Many of these hauled two-wheeled carts in which rode mothers and children.

FROM a distance, Tam had seen the great central dome of the temple, and had been impressed by its size and architectural beauty, but now, on closer inspection, it stood forth among the lesser buildings of the city, the most colossal and magnificent example of the builders' art he had ever seen. Brilliant flares of red, blue, green, yellow and white lighted and brought out in sharp relief every detail of its graceful lines. The dome was of burnished gold, and the roof of shining silver was supported by columns of turquoise set on bases of clearest crystal. The stairways and floors were of polished jet blocks, set in a mortar in which tiny jewels had been mixed.

The five mammoths knelt at a point near the entrance, and waiting grooms rushed up to take charge of them when Tam and his companions dismounted.

They were about to climb the glittering black stairway when a soldier who had hurriedly ridden up, dismounted and bowed low before Tam.

"O Son of the White Tigress and Lord of the Serpent," he said. "I crave your indulgence for but a moment. A short time ago there appeared at the western gate of the city an old man riding a hairless mammoth of a slate-gray color. He wore a hat and robe of red, and carried, in addition to his spear and bow and arrows, a strange double-curved sword and a knife of much the same pattern. He claimed that he was friend to you and Nina, and asked that we bring word that Lozong had arrived. I admitted him, but was naturally suspicious of so strange a character, believing he might be a spy of Siva. He and his great hairless beast are being brought hither now guarded by a dozen warriors on mammoths, but I thought it best to come on ahead of them, to ascertain whether or not his story is true. Shall I bring him here or detain him until after the ceremony?"

"Bring him here, by all means," said Tam. He turned to Dhava. "I don't want the others to be late for the ceremony, but I must wait here for my teacher. Take them on without me."

"There will be plenty of time," said Dhava, "if the soldier hurries." He turned to the warrior. "Dismiss the guard," he commanded, "and conduct the red-robed one to us as quickly as possible."

The soldier bowed, leaped to the neck of his waiting mammoth, and rode away at top speed. In a few moments he returned, followed by Lozong astride the neck of Ganesha. When the elephant saw Tam he dashed ahead of the mammoth, trumpeting eagerly to the alarm of a number of the people arriving for the services. Hurrying straight to where his master stood, he nuzzled him affectionately with his trunk, while Tam patted him and called him all manner of pet names. Then he set Lozong on the ground, and Tam embraced his old teacher and foster father.

"You found our trail at last," he exclaimed. "I'm glad. But where are the tigers?"

"I left Leang and Chiam in a wood near the highway," replied Lozong. "When I saw that a city lay ahead, I did not deem it advisable to bring them with me. They can forage for themselves, and I doubt if any of the beasts I have seen hereabouts will have the hardihood to attack them."

"We leave at dawn, on the most dangerous expedition we have yet begun," said Tam. "We can pick them up then, and take them with us."

Lozong greeted the other men in turn, all of whom he had camped and traveled with on the journey to Iramatri. Then, leaving Ganesha in charge of a capable groom, they mounted the black steps and entered the temple.

After crossing a broad foyer, they entered the main auditorium, in which more than two hundred thousand worshippers had assembled, and were now kneeling, facing a truncated, four-sided pyramid placed beneath the center of the immense dome. It was faced with blocks of glittering chalcedony jointed with gold. Four jet stairways, one on each side, led to its broad flat top. At each corner of the top an altar was placed, and on each of the four altars smoldered a mound of incense. In constant attendance on each altar were seven vestal virgins who wore tunics of translucent white, girdled with robes of gold.

AS TAM and the members of his party knelt in their places there sounded from high in the dome the booming of an immense gong. Instantly all the lights in the palace were extinguished except the blood-orange glow from the four altars, which lighted up the top of the pyramid but left everything else in darkness.

The booming of the gong ceased, and there was a moment of impressive silence. Then there drifted down from the dome, the slow strains of a plaintive, haunting melody, soft at first, and carried by only one violin-like instrument. But other instruments joined in, one by one, adding to the volume of sound in a gradual crescendo, until it became evident that no less than a thousand musicians were taking part, and it seemed to Tam that no greater volume of sound could possibly be reached. Then it ended with a crash, and a single booming stroke of the gong.

Once more there was a moment of silence, followed this time by barbaric minor strains in dance tempo, accompanied by drums. On top of the platform there suddenly appeared, as if by magic, a troupe of a hundred dancing girls. There followed a dance, lasting some twenty minutes, in which the girls, with lissom steps and graceful postures, kept perfect time with the music of the unseen orchestra.

Presently Tam noticed that something

red and pointed was slowly rising into view from the center of the platform. The red was presently followed by a band of green, and he saw that the object was a beautiful replica of a closed lotus bud about four feet across, with petals cut from ruby and leaves and stem of emerald. It rose to a height of about fifteen feet above the platform on its emerald stem, and stopped. Instantly the music ceased, the gong boomed, and every dancing girl and vestal virgin turned and knelt, facing it.

Tam gave an involuntary gasp of astonishment as he noticed that the petals were slowly opening. Beside him he heard the awed whispering of Lozong muttering to himself:

"The sacred lotus! *Om mani padme hum!* O jewel in the lotus, amen!" accompanied by the clicking of the wooden beads of his rosary.

Presently, as the ruby petals flattened out, Tam saw that there was something white in their midst. Suddenly their movement ceased, and the white object moved—sat up. There, sitting cross-legged in the heart of the lotus, was Nina, clad in a gossamer wrap that seemed woven of nothing more substantial than cobwebs and moonbeams. On her head was a plain circlet of gold, from the front of which arched a uræus surmounted by a silver crescent and golden disk. Jeweled breast shields and girdle, glittering beneath her diaphanous garment, completed her attire.

Tam once more became aware of the audible whispering of Lozong, beside him:

"I thank thee, O Prince of Righteousness, for that thou hast led my faltering footsteps to this place, and a thousand thousand times I thank and praise thee, for that thou hast vouchsafed me this sight of the precious jewel in the lotus. *Om mani padme hum! Om mani padme hum!*"

Nina raised her right hand, and the unseen orchestra responded with a sweet melody, the soft strains of which were in waltz time. Slowly she stood up—stretched out her arms. Her gossamer wrap slid from her shoulders and fell to form a little mound of shimmering white at her feet. The temple dancing girls had been selected for their beauty and grace from among millions of applicants throughout the Empire of Arya. But as Nina stepped out upon the point of the nearest ruby petal, and in perfect rhythm with the music danced from petal to petal with easy grace, she so far outshone them that their performance, beautiful as it had been, paled to insignificance in comparison.

With bated breath Tam watched her, the pious muttering of Lozong no longer heeded. Her dancing ended, she leaped lightly to the center of the lotus, and held one hand aloft, the index finger pointed upward. The music ended with a single stroke of the great gong. Then, clear and silvery sweet, the sound of her voice drifted out over the kneeling multitude.

"O, Nina, *Mahadevi**, *Jagan Mata,†*" she said. "We have performed thy ritual in accordance with thine ancient command. We pray that thou wilt never turn thy radiant countenance from thy humble and faithful followers, and beseech that thou wilt look with favor on the pilgrimage which we will make tomorrow to the Place of the Gods, where thou art seated in the highest place among the immortals. This we ask in the name of humanity, that millions of thy children may be saved from the ravages and lust of that cruel and bloodthirsty monster, Siva the Destroyer."

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*Great Goddess.
†Mother of the World.

Her prayer ended, Nina resumed her cross-legged posture in the center of the lotus, and drawing her gossamer wrap about her shoulders, bowed her head. Swiftly the ruby petals folded, hiding her from view. And more swiftly the closed flower descended until lost from sight in the pyramid.

Lights flashed on in the immense auditorium until it was ablaze with brilliance. The vast multitude rose from its knees and slowly surged toward the door.

CHAPTER 21

The Pilgrimage

AT THE first red glow of dawn, a cavalcade of immense pachyderms, carrying their relatively tiny riders on their necks, filed through the western gate of Aryatun. There were a hundred human beings in the party, ninety-eight woolly mammoths, and one huge bull elephant. At the head of the procession rode Tam and Nina, side by side, the former mounted on Ganesha, the latter on an immense mammoth. And walking beside Ganesha, with the skirts of his red robe tucked up to insure more freedom to his limbs, was Lozong the lama, carrying his long spear, the shaft of which he used as a staff, his bow and arrows at his back, and his *yatagan* and *dah* at his waist. For though he might have had a mammoth to ride, or shared the broad back of Ganesha with Tam, Lozong expressed a preference for walking.

Just behind Tam and Nina rode Major Evans and Doctor Green, each astride the neck of a mammoth. Special holsters had been built for their rifles and fastened to the harness of their mounts, and they wore pistols and knives at their belts. They were followed by Dhava, Yusuf, and the warriors and attendants of Nina.

They had not traveled far when Nina raised her hand, and the procession stopped. Tam dismounted, and accompanied by Lozong, plunged into the jungle at the side of the trail. The two returned about twenty minutes later, accompanied by a white tigress and a striped tiger, that leaped and cavorted about Tam, showing their affection like two big dogs.

The mammoths became restive at sight of the carnivores, so it was decided that Lozong should take them to the rear of the cavalcade, where they could range as much as they pleased without disturbing the mounts of the party.

"Why have you taken so small an army when a million men would have marched at your command?" asked Tam after he had remounted. "You spoke of great dangers, and the imminence of a battle with Siva."

"An ancient law," replied Nina, "drafted by the Seven Who Rule, explicitly states that no one may make the pilgrimage to the Land of the Gods with a party of more than a hundred. After the Land of the Gods has been penetrated a little way, half this party must be left behind at a certain point. A little farther the party must be again divided. This splitting-up process continues until, when I have reached the antechamber of the gods with but one companion, I am compelled to leave the companion there and mount alone to the high place where sit the seven immortals."

AT THIS juncture they came to a crossroad where Nina turned to the right, following a curving highway which seemed to form a sort of belt line about the city.

"We left by the west gate to get your tigers," she told Tam, "but the road we will travel lies northward. By following this circling highway we will come to it."

"I'm sorry to have had your expedition

delayed on account of the beasts," said Tam, "but they will come in handy if there is to be fighting."

"We've only gone a few *varsads* out of our way," replied Nina. "I should probably have come this way anyhow, as Siva has undoubtedly posted spies along our route, and perhaps archers with instructions to assassinate us."

It was not long before they came to the north road, which was the direct route to the Land of the Gods.

There was a stop at midday at one of the caravanserais maintained by the Aryan government. Here men and beasts ate and drank, and rested for a brief time. Then they pressed on without a pause until nightfall, where a stop was made at another government caravanserai.

AFTER two more days and nights of swift but uneventful travel, they came, early one morning, to a place where three highways blended into one.

"The one from the southwest," Nina explained to Tam, "comes from Indratun. That from the southeast is from Nagatun. Soon we will reach the end of the paving, and will then learn whether or not Siva has beaten us here."

True to her prediction, the paving soon ended at the edge of what appeared to be an impassable marsh, in which rushes and jointed grasses contested for standing room in the muck and stagnant water, and the united hum of countless millions of insects formed a steady, monotonous undertone, punctuated by the calls of birds, the clatter of frogs, and the bellows, shrieks and roars of its mightier inhabitants.

At the right, Tam saw a place where the rushes had been bent and trampled into the water as if by a host of large animals. Then his jungle-trained eye caught the print of a large foot on a small hummock some twenty feet from the paving, and he recognized the track of a baluchitherium.

Nina saw it at the same time.

"Siva has been here before us," she said.

"The trail is fresh," Tam told her, "not more than an hour old. Perhaps we can overtake him."

"Perhaps, but we must proceed with caution," she replied, "ever alert for trap or ambush. The Destroyer is wily and ruthless."

"I'll lead the way," said Tam.

"But you are without armor. I forbid you."

Ignoring Nina's protest, Tam swung Ganesha to the right and urged him along the trail at such speed that there was nothing left for her to do but follow. The rest of the procession strung out after her, single file.

Despite his seeming recklessness, Tam was constantly on the alert as his big mount splashed aud floundered across the marsh. He had armed himself with a long, straight Aryan lance, bow and arrows, a *tulwar* and dagger, and with arrow fitted to bow he watched every bit of suspicious cover that might conceal a foe. Insects rose in swarms, and not a few of them alighted on man and beast, biting viciously. Waterfowl, both swimmers and waders, disturbed at their feeding, flapped swiftly away. Small marsh animals scampered from the pathway, and serpents crawled sluggishly from underfoot.

Presently he came to higher and dryer ground, a small tree-covered hummock. An ideal place for an ambush, he thought, and scarcely had the idea occurred to him ere the reality appeared. Yelling like demons, and riding with three-pointed lances couched, in semicircular formation, a force of fifty Saivas came charging out from among the trees.

Tam's arrow transfixed the throat of the nearest four-armed giant, pitching him from the saddle. Two riders charged at him from each side—trident points gleaming, menacing. He threw himself flat on the neck of Ganesha, and the pronged heads clashed together, splintering the shafts.

Unsheathing his own long lance, he lunged at the breast of the rider on the left. The point went true, and a second assailant was disposed of. But meanwhile, the third Saiva had ridden in so close that the lance was out of the question. Dropping it, Tam whipped out his *tulwar* just in time to parry a vicious cut for the head. As the blade of his antagonist slid from his own, he struck back with a neck cut that sent the grinning head flying from the giant's shoulders.

The line had swept beyond him now, and mingled with the shouts, screams, clashing blades and thundering hoofs, he heard the sharp reports of rifles.

Swinging Ganesha about, he charged back to where a group of a dozen Saivas had surrounded Nina, cutting her off from the others. The plan of the Saivas was instantly manifest. Believing that she would be at the head of the party, where she would have been had Tam not insisted on taking the lead, they had hoped to kill or capture her by this unexpected coup. And despite Tam's presence, it began to look as if they would succeed. The major, the doctor and Yusuf were completely cut off from her and unable to fire at her assailants, while Dhava, whose men were strung out in single file far back into the marsh, was beset by the remainder of the attackers.

With dagger in one hand and *tulwar* in the other, Tam smashed into the ring of giants that encircled the Princess. Two fell beneath his blade before they were even aware of his presence. But in the meantime a four-armed giant had succeeded in snatching Nina from her seat, while another knocked her *tulwar* from her grasp. She struggled desperately but unavailingly in the grip of the giant, who immediately turned his steed and rode off at full speed, followed by all but two of his comrades who remained to engage Tam. One of these fell with his head split open, and the other with a thrust through the abdomen, but as he fell, the arm holding the reins jerked the head of his mount to one side, and straight at Tam. Struck unexpectedly by the massive head of the baluchitherium, Tam was swept from his seat, and hit the ground with a jolt that dazed him for a moment.

Getting to his feet, he shook his head to clear it and looked unsteadily about him. The Saiva who had captured Nina, and his seven remaining companions, were riding for cover as fast as their huge mounts would carry them. And following in swift pursuit on their woolly mammoths, were Tam's father, the professor, and Yusuf. A glance at the place where these three had been surrounded a moment before was sufficient to tell the story of their deadly rifle fire. Not one of their former assailants was in his saddle. And the remaining giants, who had attacked Dhava, were now surrounded and all but annihilated by his warriors.

"CRACK!" The major's rifle spit angrily and a Saiva pitched from his saddle.

"Bang!" The doctor's double-barreled elephant gun brought down a baluchitherium which fell on its side, pinning its rider. Yusuf, following closely behind the two Americans, gave the fellow his *coup de grâce* as he passed, while they continued their bombardment of the fleeing Saivas.

Two more riders fell to the rifle of the

sportsman, and one baluchitherium to the heavier gun of the scientist, as the remaining three plunged into the woods. Tam, whose senses had cleared meanwhile, had sprinted after them as fast as his legs would carry him, which was far swifter than either mammoths or baluchitheriums could travel. As the three Saivas entered the wood, he passed the major's party like a shot, and plunged in after Nina's abductors.

Suddenly he heard a muffled roar, only a short distance ahead of him. It was followed by a second roar louder than the first. He instantly recognized the voices of Leang, the white tigress, and Chiam, her striped offspring. Puzzled at their presence in the wood when he had thought them at the end of the line, he strained his eyes for sight of them as he bounded forward.

In a few moments he saw them in a small grassy glade. Leang was crouching over one of the Saivas, who lay mangled and still on the ground. Chiam, who had pulled another from his mount, had sunk his teeth into the giant's shoulder and was shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. The third and sole remaining rider, he who carried Nina, had evidently been in the lead and had decided to return to the aid of his companions, for he was charging at Chiam with his trident couched.

Tulwar in hand, Tam leaped forward to intercept him, but at that moment a bow twanged, a long arrow sank feather-deep into the shoulder of the baluchitherium, and the great beast toppled and fell. Then Lozong, bow in hand, stepped into the glade.

Still gripping Nina with one arm, the giant rider shook his stirrups from his toes, swung clear of the saddle, and alighted on his feet as his mount went down. Confronted by both Tam and Lozong, he backed against the bole of an immense tree. Then, holding Nina before him with both left hands, he whipped out his long *tulwar* and said:

"Back! Stand back, both of you, or by the Sacred Seven I'll cut the Princess in two!"

He raised his *tulwar* as if to carry out his threat. Tam and Lozong stopped in their tracks.

"O coward who hides behind a woman," taunted Tam. "Put her down and I will fight you alone. If you kill me you shall go free."

"I will go free," rumbled the giant, "and the Princess shall go with me. Otherwise——"

His speech was cut short as a rifle cracked and a bullet drilled him between the eyes. Without another sound he slumped to the forest floor.

Bounding forward, Tam freed Nina from the death-grip of the Saiva. The major stepped from a patch of undergrowth, a wisp of smoke curling upward from his rifle barrel. He had dismounted at the edge of the wood and followed Tam's trail on foot.

"A splendid shot, my father," said Tam, as the major came up.

"It was easy, son," replied the major. "I coudn't have missed the big oaf."

"It saved my life," said Nina, "for which I am again beholden to you."

They walked back through the trees to where their victorious cavalcade waited. Lozong, with difficulty, pulled the two tigers from the giants they had slain, and led them to one side until the party should pass. It was found that Nina had lost twenty warriors in the engagement. A number of others were wounded, but not incapacitated, Yusuf and Dhava among them.

Nina, Tam and the major remounted, and the cavalcade was once more on its way.

THE tree-clothed hummock passed, they came to a gently sloping flat on which the mud had dried and split into large cakes. Beyond this the black waters of a wide river glistened in the day-blaze like molten tar. It was dotted with verdant islets, and its farther shore appeared to be fringed with willows. A haze hung over it, obscuring the country beyond.

"The Kalaudan, or Black Water," said Nina, "River of the Gods. Beyond it lies the Land of the Gods."

As they drew near the river bank, Tam saw an immense, square-nosed craft which had been previously hidden by one of the islets, coming toward them across the black stream. It was low in the water, without sails or upper structure, and at least a hundred rowers manned the long sweeps that were swiftly propelling it toward the shore. From the glint of the day-blaze on their bodies as they moved, he judged that they wore close-fitting, polished armor.

Nina's party halted on the river bank, awaiting the coming of the huge barge. As its square nose slid upon the gently sloping bank, Tam saw that the rowers were not wearing armor, but were covered from head to foot with scales like those of a cobra.

"What are these creatures?" Tam asked Nina.

"The Nagamanacs," she replied. "The Snake-men. They are evolutionary descendents of the Nagas, the great serpents who ruled the earth long before the advent of man. It is said that they have jewels in their heads, which give them their sparkling appearance. They are immune from attack by the Nagas and Mahanagas, and for this reason are able to exist on the shores of the River of the Gods, where they ferry pilgrims to and fro for a fee."

One of the Nagamanacs, who appeared to be a leader, now leaped from the prow of the boat and advanced toward them. Tam saw that he was hairless, and that the markings on his scaly body corresponded to those of a cobra, even to the dread spectacle mark. He came straight to where Nina sat her mount and bowed low before her.

"Speak, Nagamanac," she commanded.

"We await your pleasure, Majesty," he said, and Tam saw when he opened his mouth to speak that his teeth were needle-sharp like the fangs of a serpent. "Will it please Your Majesty to cross to the Land of the Gods in our humble craft?"

"Your price, boatman?" she inquired.

"A hundred fish spears with heads of steel and a hundred keen-bladed *kukries*."

"The price is high, Nagamanac," she said, "but I will pay it." She raised her hand, and led the procession up onto the barge. All the mammoths were marched to the end of the craft farthest from shore, whereupon the end which lay on the shore was raised above it and the rowers easily pushed off.

As they rowed away, Nina sent for the mammoth that carried the fish spears and *kukries*, and the leader of the scaly boatmen was paid his fare.

THEY had passed one of the wooded islets almost in the center of the stream, when Tam noticed a tremendous boiling of the water ahead of them. Then seven gigantic cobra heads, each of which appeared capable of swallowing an elephant, were suddenly reared above the water on scaly necks that flared for fully thirty feet at the widest point. But what amazed him the most was that all seven necks sprouted from the same immense body.

"It is Sesha the Mahanaga, who guards the Kalaudan," explained Nina, "so that

none may enter the Land of the Gods save their chosen ones."

"But how can this big snake know?" asked Tam, as he watched the gigantic reptile swimming toward them.

"If he hears the 'Song of the Serpents' all will go well with the pilgrims, but if there is no one in the party who can play this song for him, all are doomed."

So saying, she extracted a tiny golden flute from her belt pouch and began playing a shrill, plaintive air. By this time the seven great heads were rearing precariously above the barge, and Tam saw that his first estimate of their immense size had not been exaggerated. For a moment the heads poised threateningly above the boat. Then they slowly began swaying in unison, keeping perfect time with the music as the monster swam beside the craft. Tam recognized in the strange melody some passages that he himself had learned from a snake-charming *fakir* when he was quite young. Remembering that Iramatri had been cut off from the outer world for five thousand years, Tam reflected that in all probability these wandering mendicants had passed fragments of the original "Song of the Serpents" down through the ages for that length of time.

Presently the immense reptile swung in behind the boat, and Tam, watching it fascinated, saw that seven mammoths had been stripped of their packs and led aft under the direction of Dhava. For a moment the seven heads ceased their swaying, poised in midair with red tongues darting. Then, with one accord, they struck downward, each seizing a mammoth with its enormous fangs and raising it aloft as easily as a cobra would lift a mouse. Lightly the great beasts were flipped about in the horrible jaws until all were turned endways. Then they were swallowed, and the monster veered off, to swim sluggishly away toward the nearest island.

Nina ceased her playing.

"Our toll to Sesha," she explained. "On the way back we must offer him seven more mammoths, and he will probably take them—if we come back."

A FEW moments later they reached shore and landed. Lozong went ashore last with the two tigers, both of which had given him some trouble on the way over, snarling at the scaly boatmen and only restrained from charging them with great difficulty.

The bank was much steeper here than on the other side, and they followed a narrow, winding path, which led up through the trees that fringed the shore. At the top of the bank they emerged upon a flat open space facing a wall about fifty feet in height in which there was an arched gateway closed by two immense gates faced with gold and studded with jewels. Pacing the wall, and armed with tridents, bows and arrows, and *tulwars*, were a number of gigantic, four-armed females, jet-black in color.

"Amazon warriors of Kali, the Black One," Nina told Tam. "She is friendly to Siva, his inamorata in fact, but these warriors she has sent as tribute to the Seven Who Rule are slaves of the gods and subject only to their dictates. Her nation is not in Iramatri, but lies beyond the Land of the Gods in a place of eternal darkness which borders the domain of Yama, King of Hell."

There was a hail from the wall, and an Amazon warrior looked down at them.

"Who comes?" she asked.

"Nina of Arya on pilgrimage," replied Dhava.

"Enter the Land of the Gods, Nina of Arya."

The two huge gates swung open, Nina

raised her hand, and the cavalcade moved forward.

Before them stretched a broad road paved with white stone, which led over a country of low, rolling hills. This country was divided into fields, where crops of various kinds were raised. And laboring in the fields, Tam recognized men of every race of Iramatri, monkeys of Hanuman, and strange specimens of humankind, the like of which he had never seen before.

"The fields of the gods," Nina told him. "Every ruler in the Nether World sends slaves to work for the gods—even Hanuman, the monkey god, and Yama, King of Hell. They till the fields, labor in the workshops, guard the borders and various other places, and serve the priests in the temples. Arya alone sends ten thousand male and ten thousand female slaves every year, to serve the gods. From Iramatri, one hundred and forty thousand slaves go forth to the Land of the Gods each year, and an equal number, having served their allotted time, return."

As they rode farther away from the river, the fog lifted, and Tam gave a gasp of astonishment at the sight which it had previously veiled. For he suddenly perceived, about ten miles ahead of them, an immense dazzling-white mountain, the peak of which extended up to and disappeared in the luminous mists through which streamed the day-blaze, and which formed the sky of the Nether World.

"The Mountain of the Gods," said Nina. "At its peak is the Most High Place, the destination which I hope to reach ere Siva has persuaded the Seven Who Rule to let him have the ancient weapons."

AFTER they had traveled about two miles they came to a second wall, higher than the first, and again two massive gates barred their way.

This second wall was policed by red warriors of Brahm. An officer called down to them from a tower beside the gate.

"Who comes?"

"Nina of Arya on pilgrimage," Dhava answered.

"You must leave half of your party here," said the man on the wall. "The rest may enter."

Encamped in a small grove a short distance from the road, Tam saw a party of twenty-five Saivas. Dhava was selecting the forty men who should stay behind at this point, as well as the camping equipment they should keep for their use.

"Do you see those Saivas?" Tam asked Nina.

"Yes. What about them?"

"Why not attack them while we are here in full force. If we leave but forty men here to battle those giants we may find them wiped out on our return."

Nina smiled. "No danger of that," she replied. "Fighting between pilgrim bands is not permitted in the Land of the Gods. If the Saivas were to attack our men, an army would be quickly sent against them and they would be wiped out, or, if taken alive, punished with horrible lingering deaths."

When the party was properly divided, the gates swung open and Nina once more gave the order to advance.

This time they passed through a belt of thick forest before coming to the third wall—a hunting-preserve of the gods, so Nina informed Tam. This third wall was guarded by warriors of Indra, who challenged the party as before, and informed them that half their number must be left behind. It was decided that Lozong and the tigers should be left here with the nineteen warriors Dhava selected to remain, as this would be the best place for the beasts to find sustenance. After turning the two beasts into the forest, the old

lama came up to where Tam sat his mount. Unbuckling his belt, he passed it, with his *yatagan,* up to Tam.

"Take this with my blessing, my *chela,*" he said. "It's a good strong blade, and the kind you use best. Leave that clumsy, brittle-bladed *tulwar* with me. I'll have no need of it here, but you are going into unknown danger and must go well armed."

Tam took the *yatagan* to humor the old fellow, and passed his *tulwar* down to him. Nor was he sorry to have it strapped to his side, for it was his favorite weapon, the weapon with which he could split the skull of a buffalo or tiger.

As they rode on, he noticed that a party of thirteen Saivas was encamped near the wall at some distance from the highway.

THEY then passed successively through a region of lakes which Nina said was the fishing-ground of the gods, and a region of graves and mausoleums—the burial ground of the gods. They left ten men to make a camp in the former, before a wall guarded by Vaishnava warriors, and five more, among whom was Yusuf, in the latter before a wall guarded by Saiva soldiers. Then Nina, Tam, the major, the doctor and Dhava entered the gate of a ring-shaped city which extended around the base of the mountain—the City of the Gods.

Nina gave the signal to halt when all were inside and the gates had closed behind them.

"Now listen carefully to what I have to say, all of you," she told them, "for each man's life will depend upon his actions during the next few minutes. We are about to enter the Street of the Archers. The gods have ruled that pilgrims traversing this street must not speak, and must not look either to the right or left. The houses of this street are topped with battlements, behind which archers are posted. A word, a look to the right or left, is a signal for them to loose their arrows at the offending pilgrim. And in the street below, people are posted, whose business it is to sorely tempt you to break the rule. Heed them not, or you will surely die."

CHAPTER 22

The Place of the Gods

WHEN the four men had assured Nina that they would neither speak nor turn their heads, she gave the order to advance in single file.

Riding just behind her, Tam could see, from the corners of his eyes, that the city through which they were passing was much like Aryatun in construction, and was inhabited by people of all the races of Iramatri, as well as those of strange races which he concluded must live in that part of the Nether World mentioned by Nina, beyond the Land of the Gods. He saw the battlements on the houses that lined the street, and behind them caught the glint of the day-blaze on many a polished helmet, and on the gleaming points of hundreds of arrows, held to bowstrings and pointing over the battlements.

Suddenly something soft, and of a most disagreeable odor, struck the side of his face. In the street beside him there was a peal of mocking laughter. Furious, he was about to turn on his tormenter when he remembered, just in time, the reason for the archers on the wall. He saw that Nina had not been spared similar treatment, and judged from the sounds behind him that the others were also being bombarded with rotten fruit.

After that, various ingenious means were employed to cause the five riders to forfeit their lives. Insults, curses and threats were hurled at them by men who danced and shouted before and around

them, while the archers watched grimly—silently. Mud and other filth was thrown at them. Caged or chained wild beasts were made to roar close beside them, to distract their attention. Fires blazed up, men shouting around them in alarm. Brawls were started in the street, with clashing weapons and furious shouts. A screaming girl was dragged out of a doorway by her hair. But the five riders never spoke—never turned to look.

After a few moments these demonstrations ceased. Then Tam heard a voice beside him say: "The danger is over now. You may look and speak. You have done very well indeed."

He glanced at Nina and saw that she was looking straight ahead. From the corners of his eyes he could still see the gleam of arrow points and helmets above the battlements. He had been about to turn and reply to the courteous speech. What a narrow escape!

But this was the final trick of those who sought to trap them into forfeiting their lives. They emerged from the street of the archers into a small park, evidently built especially for pilgrims. Here one lone Saiva was encamped—and so Tam judged that, from this point, Siva had gone on alone.

Traversing the park, they came to a wall guarded by Aryan warriors.

"Who comes?" called an officer from beside the gate.

"Nina of Arya on pilgrimage," Dhava answered.

"Three must remain. Two may go on," said the officer. "Also the beasts must stay. Beyond this gate, pilgrims must travel on foot."

All the members of the party dismounted, and farewells were said, Nina having announced that Tam should be the one to accompany her up the mountain. Just before she left, Dhava handed her a small parcel, which she examined, then passed to Tam to carry for her.

THE gates opened, then clashed shut behind them, as Tam and Nina began the steep ascent of the rocky incline. There was a broad and well-worn pathway cut into the stone by the countless millions of human feet that had trodden this path through the ages. Most of them, Nina told Tam, had been the feet of priests and slaves conveying offerings to the Place of the Gods. The only pilgrims permitted to come this far were the rulers of Iramatri, each of whom might bring one companion as far as the antechamber of the Most High Place. And this royal pilgrimage, she told him, was seldom made more than once in a thousand years, though lesser pilgrims came in hordes to visit the City of the Gods and its shrines at the season when Sesha, the monster serpent who guarded the river, had gone to drowse in his lair and shed his skin, which he did annually.

The path narrowed presently, and turned onto a ledge which slanted up a sheer wall of rock. It was slippery and narrow, and they were compelled to walk in single file, often walking sideways and hugging the precipice in order to keep their balance where parts of the path had crumbled away leaving little more than toe-room.

It was tiring and dangerous work, and Tam, who was not accustomed to such tremendous heights, made the mistake of looking down when they were nearing the top of the precipice. A dizziness overcame him, so that he swayed and would have fallen to a swift death on the rocks five thousand feet below, had not Nina steadied him until he recovered his poise.

Tam breathed a sigh of relief when he scrambled up over the top of the cliff. Turning, he extended a hand to Nina and helped her up.

The path they followed was now horizontal for a time, leading across a wide boulder-strewn ledge. As they advanced Tam noticed a strange increase in the temperature of the air. Then suddenly a tremendous chasm yawned at his feet, from the bottom of which yellow flames leaped and swirled upward. It extended as far as he could see to the right and left, and the sole visible means of crossing it appeared to be a grassy, smoke-blackened pole.

"The fiery chasm," said Nina. "The most dread ordeal of them all. It is the law that each pilgrim, priest or slave to pass this place must walk across the pole alone."

"I'll go first," said Tam, "and see if it will bear your weight."

He started for the pole, but she laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"No, Tam. In this case, I *must* go first. It is the law of the gods."

Resolutely, she stepped out on the slippery pole, which bent slightly under her weight, and swayed from side to side as she walked. Tam watched her with bated breath. She had passed the middle, and he thought she was going to make it, when suddenly her foot slipped and she fell. He groaned, expecting to see her disappear into the fiery hell beneath, but quick as a flash she threw out her arm and caught the pole, swinging dizzily above the licking flames, her elbow crooked about it.

Tam was about to go out after her when she began creeping toward the opposite wall, hand over hand, her body still dangling beneath the pole. He restrained himself from following when the sudden realization came to him that the slender shaft would not, in all probability, support their combined weights.

As she neared the wall her movements became more slow and labored, showing that her strength was nearly gone. She was endeavoring to perform a feat which any trained athlete would find difficulty in imitating, and it appeared that the strain would be too much for her. A few feet from the wall she stopped to rest, breathing heavily. Then she made a last desperate dash for the wall—and reached it. But when she tried to draw herself up, her strength failed her. Twice she tried, and each time slipped back helplessly, one hand clutching the pole and the other hooked over the ledge.

It was obvious to Tam that she could not hold on much longer, and that unaided she would never be able to pull herself up on the ledge. There was a chance that he might loosen her grip on the pole by its swaying if he should cross, and another that the pole might break. But against these there was the certainty that she would fall to her death if not aided within the next few moments.

"Hang on. Don't try to lift yourself. I'll help you," he shouted. Then, thrusting the bundle he carried into the bosom of his garment, he sprinted lightly across the pole, so forgetful of self in his anxiety for Nina's safety that not the slightest dizziness assailed him. Once across, he seized her wrists, and quickly hauled her to safety. For a moment she stood bravely erect. Then she went limp in his arms, her head on his shoulder.

"Oh, Tam, it was horrible!" she said. "You came just in time." He felt her trembling in his arms, and saw that she was weeping. The strain had been too much for her overwrought nerves.

She ceased her sobbing presently, and looked up with tears still trembling on her long, curled lashes.

"We must go on," she said, "or darkness will catch us here on the mountainside. And it may be that, by that time, Siva will have accomplished his purpose."

A CLIMB of about a half-hour brought them to a doorway cut in the mountainside. Only a short distance above them now was the luminous mist through which came the day-blaze. It did not seem any hotter here than on the ground, but there were odd electrical emanations that caused a prickly sensation as of many tiny needles, and the air was filled with the peculiar sweetish scent of ozone.

They entered the doorway and went up a winding stairway cut from the solid rock. It was lighted by small, heavily glazed portholes excavated through the mountainside. As they mounted higher and higher, the light from these portholes became so bright that they were nearly blinded, and the electrical emanations grew so powerful that their limbs were numbed and they walked as if they were carrying heavy burdens.

But relief came as they passed from the zone of bright light into one of comparative twilight. Here there were no portholes, and the way was lighted by guttering lamps burning aromatic oil and set in niches in the rock.

Tam felt no ill effects from the ordeal of having passed through the blazing light, but was, on the contrary, refreshed and stimulated. He noticed that Nina, too, was walking more buoyantly than at the beginning of the climb, despite the fact that only a short time before, it had appeared that her strength was nearly exhausted.

Abruptly the ascent came to an end as they entered a large room carved from the solid rock. It was brightly lighted by a score of aromatic oil lamps set before mirrors. Having looked upon the magnificence of the Aryan palace and temple, Tam had, up to this moment, fully believed that he had seen the utmost limit of man's ingenuity in the lavish use of precious stones and metals for interior decoration. But the vision of splendor which dazzled his gaze as he entered this room convinced him that he had been wrong. The floor and wainscoting were of golden tiles set in a mortar of platinum. The domed ceiling was of lapis lazuli, in the rich azure sky of which were set immense diamonds that sparkled like stars of the first magnitude.. At one end of the room seven colossal and richly bejeweled figures sat on immense thrones. Before each was a golden altar on which a brazier of incense smoldered. At first Tam thought the gigantic figures were living creatures, perhaps the gods themselves, but as he approached more closely he saw that they were only images, so convincingly wrought that they appeared alive. They represented Brahm, Vishnu, Siva, Nina, Indra, Hanuman and Vasuki, the two latter depicted as an immense monkey and a huge seven-headed cobra, respectively.

"This is the antechamber of the gods," said Nina, "and is as far as you may go. Give me the parcel you carry for me, that I may make ready to go on alone to the Most High Place."

He handed her the bundle, which she unwrapped. It contained a garment of white, semi-transparent silk, a golden circlet for the hair adorned with uræus, disk and crescent, and six half-opened lotus buds.

"Help me remove this armor," she said. "I can not go before the gods in the panoply of war."

Awkward but efficient, he helped her remove her suit of chain mail, nor did the thought occur to either of them that there might be any impropriety in her disrobing before him. The Semitic tradition of Adam and Eve, who ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and thereafter grew ashamed of their own bodies, had never reached this ancient Aryan stronghold. Nor had it affected the naïve personality of the jungle-reared

Tam, who had spent ten years of his life without clothing of any kind.

DIVESTED of her mail, she wound the silken garment about her trim little figure and adjusted the circlet on her fluffy head. Then she took up the seven lotus buds, and walking up to where the seven colossal images looked down from their lofty thrones, laid a blossom on the altar of each with a short prayer.

She turned to Tam. "I am ready to go up now, to the Most High Place. Somehow, I feel afraid. It seems that the Mahadevi is warning me not to go, that danger lies ahead."

"Then don't go," said Tam. "Or if you feel that you must, why, let me go with you."

"I must go," she told him, a note of terror in her voice, "and alone. Siva of Saivarta has gone up and has not returned, so he must be there petitioning the gods for the ancient weapons. Perhaps they have already granted his prayer. It may be that I am too late."

"And you will go up there alone to face Siva the Destroyer—Siva the libidinous? It is unthinkable."

"It is inevitable. And after all, reason tells me that my fears are groundless, for he would not dare to harm me in the very presence of the seven immortals." She stiffened resolutely. "I am going."

She walked toward an arched doorway at the opposite end of the room. It was closed by seven golden bars, beyond which could be seen golden steps leading upward. And above it was the inscription in Aryan:

TO THE MOST HIGH PLACE

As Nina came to a halt in front of the doorway, a deep voice which seemed to come from the bars themselves, said:

"Who comes?"

"Nina of Arya, to petition the gods."

"Enter, Nina of Arya."

The seven golden bars slid upward, and Nina stepped through the doorway. As she began her ascent of the stairs they dropped smoothly back into place.

Listening intently, Tam heard the sound of her footfalls gradually grow softer as she climbed the golden steps, until they died away altogether. Thereafter, for some time, he stood there in a silence so intense that the sound of his own breathing seemed to fill the whole room. Tense with anxiety, he listened on, but the silence continued.

This would not do. He must pull himself together. With measured strides, he began pacing back and forth across the floor, oblivious to his surroundings. Then a sudden movement in the direction of the seven colossi attracted his attention. It had seemed to him that something about the central image, that of Nina Jagan Mata, had moved. But what? He looked carefully. Then he saw, to his astonishment, that the right hand which had previously pointed heavenward had straightened out, and was now pointing toward the door to the Most High Place.

Puzzled, he stared for an instant at this seeming miracle—the movement of an arm of apparently solid and jointless metal. Then the thought came that this gesture might be meant for *him*. Was the Jagan Mata directing him to go to that door?

Swiftly turning, he ran up to the golden bars and stood there, listening. Faintly there came to his ears, from far above him, the sound of a woman's scream of terror. Was it Nina crying out in agony or in mortal fear? He must investigate. He pounded on the nearest bar.

There was a booming challenge from the concealed voice:

"Who comes?"

"Tam, Son of the Tiger."

"Go back, Tam, Son of the Tiger. You may not pass."

Desperately, Tam wrenched at the thick golden bars. To his surprize they bent in his hands as easily as would iron bars of a much smaller diameter. Spreading them apart, he squeezed through the opening he had made and bounded up the stairs.

IT SEEMED to Tam as he rushed up the spiral stairway that he would never reach the top. From time to time he plainly heard the frightened screams of Nina, which grew louder as he mounted higher, until at length he came to a second doorway, barred like the first. Wrenching two more golden bars apart, he pushed through, and into a great domed room ten times as large as the one he had just left, but constructed and decorated in much the same manner, though with an even more lavish hand.

In the center of the room stood an immense, seven-sided golden altar, from the middle of which yellow flames like those he had seen in the Abyss of Fire and evidently fed by a natural gas well, blazed upward, shedding a flickering radiance that caused the jewels in the dome to twinkle like stars and made shadowy objects appear to move.

From behind the altar came Nina, screaming, and running like a frightened deer. She was closely followed by the largest and most hideous quasi-human monster Tam had yet beheld in this land of strange beings. Gigantic, four-armed, and a sickly white in color like the Saivas, this creature was fully a head taller than any Saiva Tam had yet encountered. Five ugly faces, each with a third eye peeping from beneath the golden helmet, made it evident that this was Siva of Saivarta—Siva *Panchanana,* the Five-faced, Siva *Trinetra,* the Three-eyed. He wore a necklace of human skulls, and the skin of an immense tiger was wrapped about his loins. From his belt depended an immense *tulwar,* a mace, and a battle-ax.

Whipping out the *yatagan* which Lozong had pressed upon him, Tam leaped between the monster and the girl.

Astounded and enraged at this sudden interruption of his pleasant little girl-hunt, Siva paused, glaring down at Tam from his towering height.

"Fool!" he roared. "Who are you, and what do you here in the place of the immortals?"

Tam did not speak, but rushed at the monster, who promptly drew his long *tulwar* and came on guard.

It was Nina who answered for him as their blades clashed together.

"He is the Son of the White Tigress," she cried, "come to fulfil the prophecy—to destroy the Destroyer."

"Ha! A two-legged tiger, is he? I have slain many of the four-legged kind, but this one will be much easier to kill."

He brought his heavy *tulwar* down in such a powerful head-cut that had Tam parried with an ordinary blade it would have shattered under the blow. But this was no ordinary weapon which Lozong had pressed upon his *chela.* And Tam was thankful that he had accepted it, for the *tulwar* slid harmlessly to one side. He countered with a quick neck cut which drew blood, and would have bitten deep had the giant not caught it on his mace as it was descending, breaking its force. Then he was compelled to leap back to avoid a terrific slash which the crafty Siva aimed at his legs.

After that there was a bewildering exchange of cuts and thrusts, swiftly given and deftly parried, and Tam realized that he was up against the greatest swordsman he had ever encountered. He tried every trick of swordsmanship that Lozong had

taught him, and several more which he had invented himself, but although his blade drew blood again and again he could not succeed in inflicting a mortal or even a crippling wound on his wily adversary, and was himself severely cut about the head and shoulders.

Soon both opponents were bleeding from a score of wounds, and Tam began to feel his sword arm weakening from the terrific loss of blood. Not only was he sorely put to it to avoid the slashes and thrusts of the long *tulwar,* but in addition, he was compelled to dodge the blows of the heavy mace which Siva swung with one of his right hands. Several times the giant had saved himself from mortal wounds by parrying with the mace, and Tam believed that if the bludgeon could be eliminated from the contest he might improve his chance of winning.

Accordingly, he whipped out his long dagger, and holding it sword-fashion in his left hand, used it to parry a thrust of the *tulwar* while he struck at the arm that held the mace. The keen, double-curved blade of the *yatagan* bit through the giant's wrist, and the heavy weapon, still gripped in the severed hand, fell to the floor. But scarcely had it fallen ere the other right hand whipped the battle-ax from the monster's belt, and Tam was faced with an even more formidable weapon than before. It swung up, then down, in a flashing arc, aimed for his head. He raised his *yatagan* to ward off the blow, but his arm had weakened, and the heavy ax head forced down his guard, striking him in the forehead. There was a brief instant in which it seemed that all the flashing jewels in the blue dome above had crashed down around him. Then he found himself lying flat on his back with Siva bringing his ax down for the death blow. Unable to rise, he rolled over to avoid the descending weapon, which bit deep into the golden tiles beside him. With a snarl of rage, Siva wrenched it free, and again swung for Tam's head with terrific force. This time Tam rolled back to his original position, and the ax haft shivered with the force of the blow as the blade once more bit into the golden floor.

Roaring like an angry bull, Siva flung the useless handle from him and raised his *tulwar*. But in that instant Tam had transferred his long dagger to his right hand. He balanced it carefully, then hurled it with all the strength and skill he could muster. Straight as an arrow it flew, sinking up to the hilt in the third eye of Siva which a moment before had blinked fiercely down at him from beneath the golden helmet. Again Tam rolled to one side, but this time to avoid the body of the giant, which toppled and fell with a terrific crash.

WITH head swimming dizzily, Tam got to his feet. A single slash of his keen *yatagan,* and the head of the giant rolled free of the corpse. He picked it up by the tuft of hair which projected through the peak of the golden helmet, and to his surprize saw for the first time that four of this monster's faces were cleverly and artistically made masks, so constructed by means of a concealed mechanism that they would follow every muscular movement of the real face. The third eye in the forehead, however, was real enough.

He was suddenly conscious of Nina beside him, her hand on his arm.

"Tam, you were wonderful! But you are wounded—bleeding. Let me bind up your cuts."

He dropped the gory thing he held in his hand and flung down his bloody *yatagan.*

"I'm all right," he said, but his tongue

had grown unaccountably thick. "Just a few scratches." The floor seemed to be rocking beneath his feet. Nina drew his arm over her shoulders and put her own around his waist to steady him. With head reeling, he noticed for the first time that they were standing in front of a colossal throne, a gigantic counterpart of the throne of Nina in Aryatun. On either side of it, but placed just a little lower, were three lesser thrones. In a flash, he realized that these were the thrones of the seven immortals. But where were their mighty owners?

"The thrones of the gods," he said thickly. "But where have they gone? Where are the gods?"

"Tam, you must not talk of that now. Let me see to your wounds."

A gray mist swirled before his eyes. He tried to brush it away with his hand, but it only grew thicker—darker.

"There are no gods," he muttered. The mist grew heavier, turned inky black.

Faintly, as from a vast distance, he heard the voice of Nina.

"Oh, Tam! You are falling! You *must* let me help you! Tam! Ta——!" Swiftly he sank into a sea of black oblivion. The sound of her voice died in the distance.

For an instant or an eternity, he knew not which, he was in a cold, dark void. Then he felt the sensation of floating bodiless in the air. And he could hear and see.

Beneath him was his own body, Nina bending over it, her head on his bosom—weeping.

In front of him were the seven colossal thrones. And they were occupied! There sat the seven immortals, looking down at the relatively tiny beings on the gold-tiled floor—Brahm, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Siva, the Destroyer were at the right. On the central throne, which was slightly raised above the others, sat Nina Jagan Mata. At her left were Indra, Ruler of the Bright Firmament, Hanuman, the Monkey God, and Vasuki, the Seven-headed Mahanaga, Ruler of the Serpents.

Slowly Siva turned to Nina and spoke —his voice like the rolling of thunder: "Thy champion has won and saved the world, O Nina, but it has cost him dear."

The voice of the goddess was full of compassion as she replied: "Yes. It has cost him dear, O Siva, but he is a hero who does not count the cost. Had he but clung to life a little longer——. But no matter. The love of my priestess will follow him, even to his next incarnation, where they will meet again."

Faintly, Tam then heard the cry of Nina, who with one hand clinging to the fingers of his own lifeless one, prostrated herself in the direction of the lofty central throne.

"O Nina, Mahadevi, compassionate Mother of the World, save him. Save this man for thy handmaiden. He has laid low the Destroyer, who would have made a bloody shambles of the earth and doomed thy children to slavery and violent death. For their sakes and mine, restore him to life."

The goddess looked down at her little priestess—smiled.

"Dost want him so much?" she asked.

"More than anything in earth or Heaven, O Mother."

The compassionate eyes of the great figure on the throne seemed to twinkle just a little.

"Why then, we'll see what can be done."

The radiant face, the compassionate orbs were turned full on Tam.

"Back. Go back to thy mortal shell," the voice commanded. "It may be that I

can save it and detain thee for her who loveth thee better than earthly empire or hope of Nirvana."

It seemed to Tam that he floated swiftly downward. Then he was plunged, once more, into that cold black void through which he had previously passed.

ROARS of applause. A swaying motion. Intolerable heat. Tam returned to consciousness and felt a cool hand on his brow. He opened his eyes and tried to sit up, but the hand restrained him.

"Lie still, beloved. You are very weak." It was the voice of Nina—the hand of Nina. Eagerly he grasped the hand.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Back in Aryatun, dear heart. For four days you have been delirious. I despaired of your life, but the great compassionate Mother saved you for me, and three of her priests helped me to bring you down the mountain. Praise Nina, the fever has broken at last, and you will get well."

"Those people. Why are they shouting?"

"Let me prop you up a little, and you will see for yourself." She helped him to lift his head, and adjusted the silken cushions. They were riding in a magnificent litter, swung between two richly caparisoned mammoths walking tandem. The streets were lined with men, women and children, crowding each other to get a look at the returning hero, and shouting:

"Hail, Tam, Son of the Tiger! He has slain the Destroyer and saved the world!"

Beside the litter on one side walked Dhava, proudly carrying a long pike, from the top of which the head of Siva leered blankly down at the populace, the hilt of Tam's dagger still projecting from its third eye. Behind Dhava walked Lozong, accompanied by Chiam, the tiger, and Leang, the white tigress. On the other side of the litter strode Major Evans and Doctor Green. Behind them, head stiffly erect, obviously conscious of the tremendous adulation of the crowd, walked Yusuf the Pathan with three rifles slung over his shoulder.

"Why, we're nearing your palace," Tam said, as the beautiful building loomed before them.

"We are nearing *our* palace, beloved," Nina replied, and there in full view of the madly cheering populace she bent and kissed him on the lips.

[THE END]



BITTER GOLD

By B. C. BRIDGES

The old man and his wife needed money—a brief, grim tale of Siberia

THE night was cold, and Ivan huddled close to the grate. He looked across the hearth to where the woman sat who was his wife; she was not as old as Ivan, and still held her body erect, but was seldom seen to smile.

"Ivan," she said, "put more wood upon the fire."

He obeyed without speaking, but shook his head and sighed; wood was scarce when the snow had fallen. The seasons had been unfavorable, and much of the harvest in that part of Siberia had failed; for many, in the little village, there was no food.

Some one was knocking at the door. The woman took up the candle and crossed the room.

"Who is there?" she asked.

"A friend," answered a voice. "Open the door."

"What do you want?" demanded the woman.

"I seek food and shelter for the night."

"We have no food; go away."

"But I was told at the village you could give me food. A place on the floor by the fire will do for me; I have come a long way and I am very tired. I can pay; I have gold."

The woman's expression changed.

"Ah, yes, yes, to be sure," she said, flinging the door wide and holding the candle low to light the step. "Come in, come in! We are only poor folk, but you are welcome. It is very cold, but we will soon have something hot for you to drink. Do not think it strange that we were at first suspicious; there are many thieves and rogues about these days; one must be careful. Ivan," calling over her shoulder, "build up the fire and put water on to boil. We have a guest; a gentleman has come to stay with us tonight."

She bustled around the room placing food upon a rough table before the stranger, whose eyes followed her every movement. Ivan aided his wife, casting sidelong glances from time to time at their guest, who was a large man with a heavy beard. The part of his face that showed was darkly tanned as if from long exposure to the sun, as were his hands, which seemed thick and toughened by much labor.

Presently the meal was finished, and the stranger drew a leathern purse from his pocket.

"Here," he said, laying coins on the table, "this will pay for what I have eaten; I will give you more in the morning."

The woman took the money with many bows and words of gratitude. Turning to the man, she said in a low voice, "Give him your bed and the thick bearskin for a cover; we must be sure he sleeps soundly."

Ivan led the stranger through a narrow doorway and returned presently. Soon the sound of heavy breathing told the listeners that their guest was asleep.

The man and woman spoke in low tones.

"He looks very strong," said the man. "Perhaps the first stroke would not be enough."

"It will be easy," said the woman. "He sleeps on his back, and I will stand beside you with the hatchet."

"He is big and there would be much blood."

"Oh, that is quickly cleaned up. We can put the body out in the snow, and by morning the wolves will have eaten it. We can say he arose and left very early, or that he did not come here at all. He has gold, much gold; I saw it shining in the candle-light."

"I am old and weak," protested the man. "I have not strength to strike the blow; see how my hands tremble."

"I tell you, you are a fool, Ivan!" hissed the woman angrily. "Here," thrusting money in his hand, "take this; go to the inn and drink! Perhaps that will give you courage. Bah," she added under her breath, "all men are cowards!"

He took the money without answering and left the hut.

At the inn, Ivan drank several glasses of strong liquor, one after another, without stopping.

"You drink for joy," said old Dmitri, the innkeeper, "because your son has returned?"

Ivan stared.

"My son?"

"Yes," said Dmitri. "He came here and asked if you still lived, then left, speaking of some boyish plan to deceive you for a jest. I did not know him at first, for he has a great beard now, and it is many years since he went away. How well I remember him! He was a good boy; a little headstrong, perhaps, but good at heart. Many times have I carried him on my back through the forest to search for nuts. He had rosy cheeks and laughed all the time. And now he has returned with much gold; he showed it to me; all for his old father and mother! Surely your fortune is good. Ah, if I had such a son! Now I am old and there is none to care for me. Come, Ivan, drink again and I will drink with you!"

Ivan still gaped in dumb amazement.

"My son?" he repeated.

Suddenly with a choking cry he lunged for the door.

The thickly fallen snow was above Ivan's knees as he plunged up the hill. He reeled unsteadily as he ran; once he fell, cutting his hand on a sharp rock, half buried. He did not feel the hurt, but the snow showed deeply crimson. Struggling weakly to his feet, he hurried on, making noises in his throat like a wounded animal. The wind was like a strong man pushing against his chest. His lungs seemed ready to burst and strange lights flashed before his eyes. At last he reached the hut. Pushing open the door, he stumbled in. The woman stood by the table, wiping her hands on a dirty rag. She saw him and smiled guiltily.

"Never mind," she said; "it's all done now."



DESERTER

By LIEUTENANT E. W. CHAMBERLAIN

A story of the Philippines—the revenant of an American soldier who disappeared in the fighting against the Moros

JOLO, Dec. 24, 1902.—Dragon, James M., Sergeant, Co. "B," —th Infantry, Missing. Thought to have deserted.—Casualty report.

* * * * * * *

It was six in the afternoon and Christmas Eve of 1927, but the tropic darkness had already fallen as Scott plodded across the tent-dotted clearing to the stone church which housed company headquarters for the night. It was three days now since the word had come down to Zamboango of white-clad Moros in the hills and burned barrios along the riverbeds of Mindanao. Scott was tired; tired with the weariness which comes only to one who has struggled for two sleepless days and nights through the dripping jungle, and it was with a sigh of relief that he turned into the ruined stone doorway.

Captain Jessup sat before an upturned condensed milk box on which a candle sputtered in the heavy air. He looked up and nodded as Scott stumbled in.

"Been looking for you for the last hour." He touched the tip of a cigaret to the candle flame. "Find anything?"

Scott shook his head. "Nothing but rumors. The barrios are all scared to death. We had a hell of a time getting through. Cruz played out this morning and we had to carry him in." He dropped his musette bag on the floor and slowly unbuckled his pistol belt.

Jessup nodded again. "Whole thing's probably nothing but another scare. Better turn in. We're going to be on the road early. There's some blankets in the corner." He jerked his thumb at the wall and bent over his reports again. "Spooky damn place. Hope you don't believe in ghosts — probably plenty of them in here."

Scott laughed shortly as he lowered himself to the floor. "Ghosts be damned," he mumbled and was asleep instantly.

It was some hours later that he was awakened by an indefinable feeling of threatening danger and he shivered a little as he reached his hand toward the spot where his ready pistol lay. The room was bare and cold in the candle-light which still flickered on the walls, and then Scott suppressed a start; for the milk box and its single candle were gone and in its place six tall candles burned on the stone altar against the wall. He raised himself on one elbow and then felt the hair prickle along his spine as he lowered himself again and crowded back into the shadow against the wall. There were men beside the altar and they wore the scarlet tights and white turbans of Moros.

Scott's mind raced madly. He had walked into an ambush last night. The company was gone—Captain Jessup was gone. The razor edges of the krisses which those men against the wall carried had seen to that. The shadow in which he lay had saved him for the moment but it would not be long before he would be discovered, and he shivered a little as he remembered how Corporal Gomez had looked when they had found him two months ago.

Then Scott's heart stopped entirely for a second. There was a stir at the door as more white turbans pushed in, and before

them they drove a prisoner, a white man, his hands tied behind him and a great smear of blood on one temple. Scott gasped as the man faced him. He wore, not the khaki and olive drab which clothed Scott's own company, but the blue shirt and yellow leggings which the men who had fought over the rice paddies of Luzon and through the jungles of Mindanao had worn twenty-five years before.

The candles smoked in the damp air and Scott could see the chevrons of a sergeant on the blue sleeve as the other turned to face the chief of his captors with his head up and a sardonic smile on his lips. A Moro whose turban carried a silver crescent stepped forward and spoke in English.

"Dog, tell me at which ford the Americans cross and where they camp tomorrow night before I leave you for the little red ants to pick."

The sergeant laughed mirthlessly. "Three guesses, funny-face," he said. The thin lips of the Moro tightened evilly as he struck the white man across the face with his open hand. The sergeant's face reddened but his lips still twisted in a mocking smile.

"Dog and son of a dog," the Moro's voice was hoarse with passion, "look behind you. Do you see those hooks in the wall? It takes a man many hours to die on those hooks. Think well before you answer. Which ford do the Americans take?"

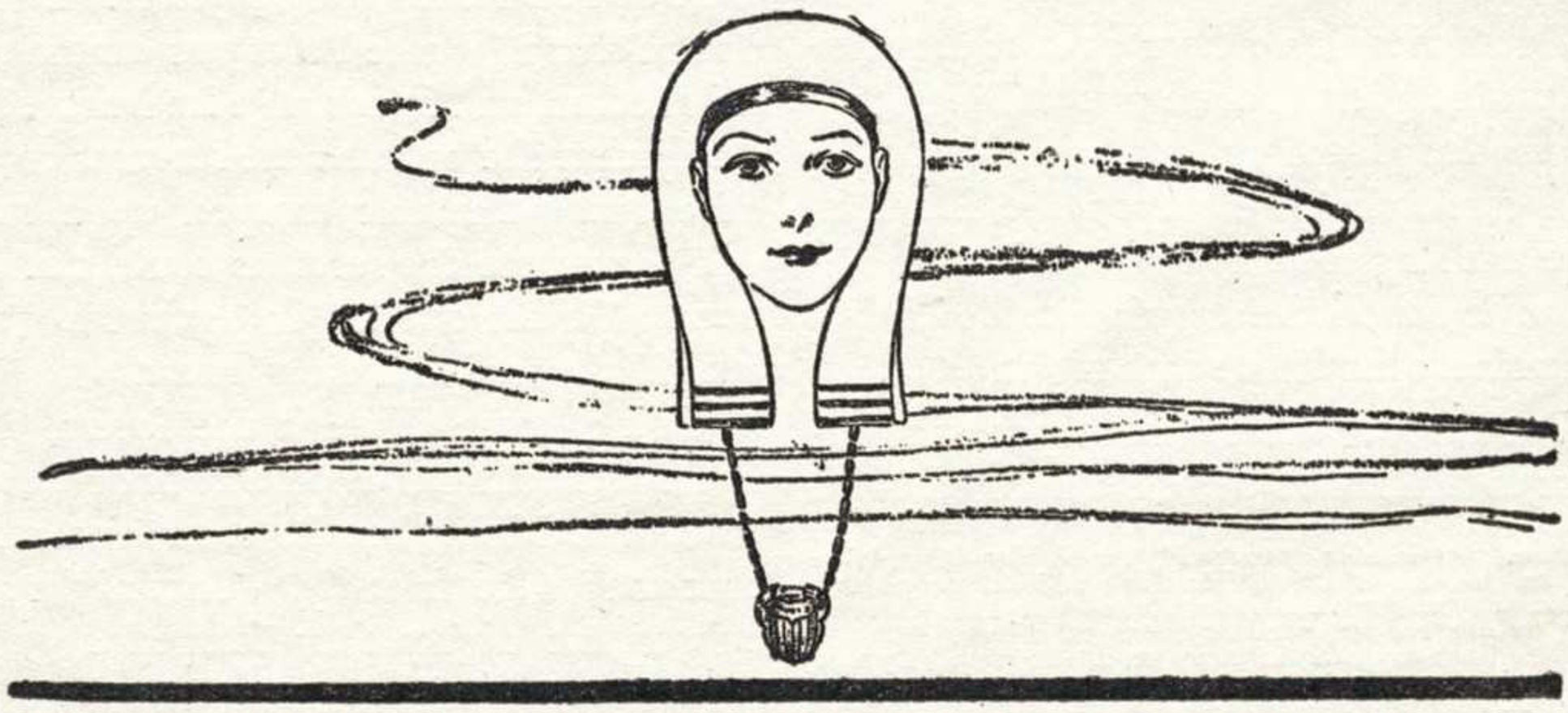
The sergeant spat contemptuously. "Do you wear pants under that dress?" he asked.

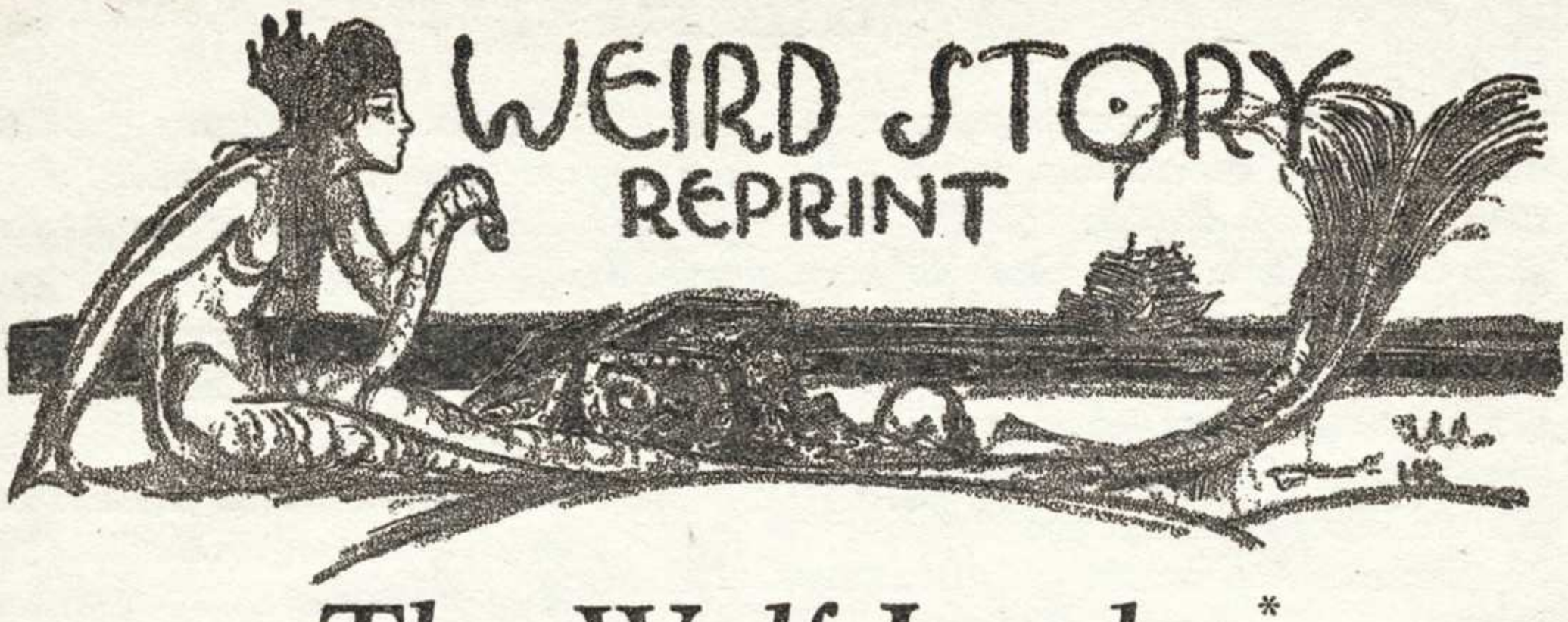
The Moro slapped again and motioned to the turbaned men behind him. Without a word they carried the prisoner to the wall and Scott saw his arms go above his head, white arms with two brown hands grasping each wrist, as they slowly raised him toward the glistening hooks. With a yell Scott leaped from his corner and screamed as he felt a body under him.

"What the hell's the matter?" Captain Jessup rubbed his throat tenderly. "You damn near choked me to death."

Threads of sleep slowly untangled themselves from Scott's brain. Christmas Day was dawning and along the edge of the jungle the men were already rolling their packs for the day's march. Scott passed a hand across his eyes.

"He was *here,*" he muttered. "God, he *was* here," and Captain Jessup stared wonderingly as Scott rose to his feet and walked to the opposite wall. There, at the height of a tall man's arms above his head, two great hooks rusted in the rotting stone.





The Wolf-Leader*

By ALEXANDRE DUMAS

The Story Thus Far

THIBAULT, a French shoemaker, lived alone in a forest near Villers-Cotteret on the estate of the Baron of Vez. A good-looking man in his late twenties, Thibault had seen just enough of the world to make him discontented with his own station in life.

The Baron of Vez was an ardent huntsman. Following a stag one day, his dog pack lost the scent near Thibault's hut. Thibault sought to obtain the stag for himself, by poaching, but was found out, and escaped a severe whipping only by the intervention of a girl, Agnelette. The girl told Thibault quite frankly, after the Baron's party departed, that she wished to marry, and Thibault engaged himself to her.

But Thibault's rancor against the Baron was so great that he was willing to go to any length to get even with him. He had carelessly called upon the Devil to give the stag to him, and to his astonishment he found the stag tied inside his hut when he went home that night.

But the stag was a mild surprize in contrast to Thibault's second visitor, a huge black wolf that appeared in the hut in a very mysterious way. When the shoemaker raised a hatchet with an idea of killing the wolf, he was dumfounded to hear the beast speak. The strange creature gave Thibault to understand that the Devil was of a mind to bargain and would grant the man's desires in return for hairs from his head, one for the first wish, two for the second, four for the third and so on, doubling the number for every wish granted. The wolf then gave Thibault a ring in exchange for one the shoemaker was wearing, and the unholy pact was complete.

Thibault's ambition fired by the black wolf's promises, the shoemaker determined to forget Agnelette and marry Madame Polet, the wealthy young widow who owned the mill at Croyolles. But he found that Madame Polet was enamoured of another, and in his rage he behaved so badly that she ordered the servants to put him out. Thibault escaped up a steep hillside where the servants could not follow. "What can we do against a werewolf?" they asked their mistress.

Going home through the forest, Thibault was alarmed when a pack of wolves surrounded him, but he soon discovered that they were friendly. That night and subsequent nights they formed a guard

*This remarkable werewolf novel, by Alexandre Dumas, *fils*, is not included in the published collections of Dumas' works in English, and will therefore be new to our readers, except those who have had the good fortune to read the story in the original French.

This story began in WEIRD TALES for August

around his hut, even hunting for deer and bringing him venison to eat.

One lock of Thibault's hair was now entirely red, but his envy of the nobility made him resolve to use his satanic power to the utmost, even if all his hair should be claimed by the Devil's color.

By chance Thibault made the acquaintance of Maître Magloire, the bailiff, and was invited to his house for supper. Having drunk the bailiff under the table, he entered Madame Magloire's bedchamber to make love to her, but found her in the arms of the Baron of Vez. He uttered the wish that her husband would walk in and surprize her, and immediately the door opened and Maître Magloire walked into the room.

CHAPTER 13

Where it is demonstrated that a woman never speaks more eloquently than when she holds her tongue

AS THIBAULT was talking to himself he did not catch the few hurried words which Suzanne whispered to the Baron; and all he saw was that she appeared to totter, and then fall back into her lover's arms, as if in a dead faint.

The bailiff stopped short as he caught sight of this curious group, lit up by his candle. He was facing Thibault, and the latter endeavored to read in Monsieur Magloire's face what was passing in his mind.

But the bailiff's jovial physiognomy was not made by nature to express any strong emotion, and Thibault could detect nothing in it but a benevolent astonishment on the part of the amiable husband.

The Baron, also, evidently detected nothing more, for with a coolness and ease of manner which produced on Thibault a surprize beyond expression, he turned to the bailiff, and asked:

"Well, friend Magloire, and how do you carry your wine this evening?"

"Why, is it you, my lord?" replied the bailiff, opening his fat little eyes. "Ah! pray excuse me, and believe me, had I known I was to have the honor of seeing you here, I should not have allowed myself to appear in such an unsuitable costume."

"Pooh-pooh! nonsense!"

"Yes, indeed, my lord; you must permit me to go and make a little toilette."

"No ceremony, I pray!" rejoined the Baron. "After curfew, one is at least free to receive one's friends in what costume one likes. Besides, my dear friend, there is something which requires more immediate attention."

"What is that, my lord?"

"To restore Madame Magloire to her senses, who, you see, has fainted in my arms."

"Fainted? Suzanne fainted? Ah, my God!" cried the little man, putting down his candle on the chimney-piece, "how ever did such a misfortune happen?"

"Wait, wait, Monsieur Magloire!" said my lord; "we must first get your wife into a more comfortable position in an armchair; nothing annoys women so much as not to be at their ease when they are unfortunate enough to faint."

"You are right, my lord; let us first put her in the armchair. . . . Oh Suzanne! poor Suzanne! How can such a thing as this have happened?"

"I pray you at least, my dear fellow, not to think ill of me at finding me in your house at such a time of night!"

"Far from it, my lord," replied the bailiff; "the friendship with which you honor us, and the virtue of Madame Magloire, are sufficient guarantees for me to be glad at any hour to have my house honored by your presence."

"Triple-dyed idiot!" murmured the

shoemaker, "unless I ought rather to call him a doubly clever dissembler. . . . No matter which, however! we have yet to see how my lord is going to get out of it."

"Nevertheless," continued Maître Magloire, dipping a handkerchief into some aromatic water, and bathing his wife's temples with it, "nevertheless, I am curious to know how my poor wife can have received such a shock."

"It's a simple affair enough, as I will explain, my dear fellow. I was returning from dining with my friend, de Vivières, and passing through Erneville on my way to Vez, I caught sight of an open window, and a woman inside making signals of distress."

"Ah! my God!"

"That is what I exclaimed, when I realized that the window belonged to your house; can it be my friend the bailiff's wife, I thought, who is in danger and in need of help?"

"You are good indeed, my lord," said the bailiff, quite overcome. "I trust it was nothing of the sort."

"On the contrary, my dear man."

"How? on the contrary?"

"Yes, as you will see."

"You make me shudder, my lord! And do you mean that my wife was in need of help and did not call me?"

"It had been her first thought to call you, but she abstained from doing so, for —and here you see her delicacy of feeling—she was afraid that if you came, your precious life might be endangered."

The bailiff turned pale and gave an exclamation.

"My precious life, as you are good enough to call it, is in danger?"

"Not now, since I am here."

"But tell me, I pray, my lord, what had happened?"

The Baron went on: "So I ran to her, and seeing her all trembling and alarmed, I asked, 'What is the matter, Madame Magloire, and what is causing you so much alarm?' 'Ah! my lord,' she replied, 'just think what I feel, when I tell you that yesterday and today, my husband has been entertaining a man about whom I have the worst suspicions. Ugh! A man who has introduced himself under the pretense of friendship to my dear Magloire, and actually makes love to me, to me——'"

"She told you that?"

"Word for word, my dear fellow!"

"Ah! these men! these men!" murmured the bailiff.

"Yes, race of vipers!" continued my lord of Vez. "Do you wish me to go on?"

"Yes, indeed!" said the little man, forgetting the scantiness of his attire in the interest excited in him by the Baron's tale.

" 'But Madame, I said to my friend Madame Magloire, 'how could you tell that he had the audacity to love you?' "

"Yes," put in the bailiff, "how did she find it out? I never noticed anything myself."

"You would have been aware of it, my dear friend, if only you had looked under the table; but, fond of your dinner as you are, you were not likely to be looking at the dishes on the table and underneath it at the same time."

"The truth is, my lord, we had the most perfect little supper! just you think now—cutlets of young wild-boar——"

"Very well," said the Baron, "now you are going to tell me about your supper, instead of listening to the end of my tale, a tale which concerns the honor of your wife!"

"True, true! My poor Suzanne! My lord, help me to rub her hands, that I may slap them on the palms."

The Lord of Vez gave all the assistance in his power to Monsieur Magloire, and by dint of their united efforts they forced open Madame Magloire's hands.

The good man, now easier in his mind, began slapping his wife's palms with his chubby little hands, all the while giving his attention to the remainder of the Baron's interesting story.

"Madame Magloire and your guest left the table. She told him which was his room, and Perrine showed him to it; after which, kind and faithful wife as she is, Madame Magloire tucked you into bed, and went into her own room."

"Dear little Suzanne!" said the bailiff in a voice of emotion.

"And it was then, when she found herself in her room, and all alone, that she got frightened; she went to the window and opened it; the wind, blowing into the room, put out her candle. You know what it is to have a sudden panic come over you, do you not?"

"Oh! yes," replied the baliff naïvely, "I am very timid myself."

"After that she was seized with panic, and not daring to wake you, for fear any harm should come to you, she called to the first horseman she saw go by—and luckily, that horseman was myself."

"It was indeed fortunate, my lord."

"Was it not? I ran, I made myself known.

" 'Come up, my lord, come up,' she cried. 'Come up quickly—I am sure there is a man in my room.'

"I thought it was only losing time to stop and ring; I gave my horse to l'Eveillé, I stood up on the saddle, climbed from that to the balcony, and, so that the man who was in the room might not escape, I shut the window. It was just at that moment that Madame Magloire, hearing the sound of your door opening, and overcome by such a succession of painful feelings, fell fainting into my arms."

"Ah! my lord!" said the bailiff, "how frightful all this is that you tell me!"

"And be sure, my dear friend, that I have rather softened than added to its terror; anyhow, you will hear what Madame Magloire has to tell you when she comes to. . . ."

"See, my lord, she is beginning to move."

"That's right! burn a feather under her nose."

"But where shall I find a feather?" asked the bailiff.

"Here! take this, the feather round my hat." And the lord of Vez broke off a bit of the ostrich feather which ornamented his hat, gave it to Monsieur Magloire, who lighted it at the candle and held it smoking under his wife's nose.

The effect of it was instantaneous; Madame Magloire sneezed.

"Ah!" cried the bailiff delightedly, "now she is coming to! my wife! my dear wife! my dear little wife!"

MADAME MAGLOIRE opened her eyes, looked first at the bailiff and then at the Baron, with a bewildered gaze, and then finally fixing them on the bailiff:

"Magloire! dear Magloire!" she said, "is it really you? Oh! how glad I am to see you again after the bad dream I have had!"

"Alas! my beautiful Suzanne," said the bailiff, "it is no bad dream you have had, but, as it seems, a hideous reality."

"Ah! I remember now," responded Madame Magloire. Then, as if noticing for the first time that the lord of Vez was there:

"Ah! my lord," she continued, "I hope you have repeated nothing to my husband of all those foolish things I told you?"

"And why not, dear lady?" asked the Baron.

"Because an honest woman knows how to protect herself, and has no need to keep on telling her husband a lot of nonsense like that."

"On the contrary, Madame," replied the Baron, "I have told my friend everything."

"Do you mean that you have told him that during the whole of supper-time that man was fondling my knee under the table?"

"I told him that, certainly."

"Oh! the wretch!" exclaimed the bailiff.

"And that Monsieur Magloire having a passing giddiness which made him shut his eyes while at table, his guest took the opportunity to kiss me against my will?"

"I thought it was right for a husband to know everything."

"Oh! the knave!" cried the bailiff.

"And did you even go so far as to tell him that having come into my room, and the wind having blown out the candle, I fancied I saw the window curtains move, which made me call to you for help, believing that he was hidden behind them?"

"No, I did not tell him that! I was going to when you sneezed."

"Oh! the vile rascal!" roared the bailiff, taking hold of the Baron's sword which the latter had laid on a chair, and drawing it out of the scabbard, then running toward the window which his wife had indicated. "He had better not be behind these curtains, or I will spit him like a woodcock," and with this he gave one or two lunges with the sword against the window hangings.

But all at once the bailiff stayed his hand, and stood as if arrested like a schoolboy caught trespassing out of bounds; his hair rose on end beneath his cotton night-cap, and this conjugal headdress became agitated as by some convulsive movement. The sword dropped from his trembling hand and fell with a clatter on the floor. He had caught sight of Thibault behind the curtains, and as Hamlet kills Polonius, thinking to slay his father's murderer, so he, believing that he was thrusting at nothing, had nearly killed his crony of the night before, who had already had time enough to prove himself a false friend. Moreover, as he had lifted the curtain with the point of the sword, the bailiff was not the only one who had seen Thibault. His wife and the lord of Vez had both been participators in the unexpected vision, and both uttered a cry of surprize. In telling their tale so well, they had had no idea that they were so near the truth. The Baron, too, had not only seen that there was a man, but had also recognized that the man was Thibault.

"Damn me!" he exclaimed, as he went nearer to him, "if I mistake not, this is my old acquaintance, the man with the boar-spear!"

"How! how! man with the boar-spear?" asked the bailiff, his teeth chattering as he spoke. "Anyway I trust he has not his boar-spear with him now!" And he ran behind his wife for protection.

"No, no, do not be alarmed," said the Lord of Vez; "even if he has got it with him, I promise you it shall not stay long in his hands. So, master poacher," he went on, addressing himself to Thibault, "you are not content to hunt the game belonging to his Highness the Duke of Orleans, in the forest of Villers-Cotterets, but you must come and make excursions in the open and poach on the territory of my friend Maître Magloire?"

"A poacher! do you say?" exclaimed the bailiff. "Is not Monsieur Thibault a landowner, the proprietor of farms, living in his country house on the income from his estate of a hundred acres?"

"What, he?" said the Baron, bursting into a loud guffaw. "So he made you believe all that stuff, did he? the rascal

has got a clever tongue. He! a landowner! that poor starveling! why, the only property he possesses is what my stable-boys wear on their feet—the wooden shoes he gets his living by making."

Madame Suzanne, on hearing Thibault thus classified, made a gesture of scorn and contempt. Maître Magloire drew back a step, while the color mounted to his face. Not that the good little man was proud, but he hated all kinds of deceit; it was not because he had clinked glasses with a shoemaker that he turned red, but because he had drunk in company with a liar and a traitor.

During this avalanche of abuse Thibault had stood immovable with his arms folded and a smile on his lips. He had no fear but that when his turn came to speak, he would be able to take an easy revenge. And the moment to speak seemed now to have come. In a light, bantering tone of voice—which showed that he was gradually accustoming himself to conversing with people of a superior rank to his own—he then exclaimed: "By the Devil and his horns! as you yourself remarked a little while ago, you can tell tales of other people, my lord, without much compunction, and I fancy if every one followed your example, I should not be at such a loss what to say, as I choose to appear!"

The lord of Vez, perfectly aware, as was the bailiff's wife, of the menace conveyed in these words, answered by looking Thibault up and down with eyes that were starting with anger.

"Oh!" said Madame Magloire, somewhat imprudently, "you will see, he is going to invent some scandalous tale about me."

"Have no fear, Madame," replied Thibault, who had quite recovered his self-possession; "you have left me nothing to invent on that score."

During this speech the lord of Vez had picked up his sword and advanced threateningly toward Thibault. But the bailiff threw himself between them, and held back the Baron's arm. It was fortunate for Thibault that he did so, for the latter did not move an inch to avoid the blow, evidently prepared at the last moment to utter some terrible wish which would avert the danger from him; but the bailiff interposing, Thibault had no need to resort to this means of help.

"Gently, my lord!" said the Maître Magloire, "this man is not worthy our anger. I am but a plain citizen myself, but you see, I have only contempt for what he says, and I readily forgive him the way in which he has endeavored to abuse my hospitality."

Madame Magloire now thought that her moment had come for moistening the situation of affairs with her tears, and burst into loud sobs.

THIBAULT'S heart was swelling with rage and hatred; himself unaware of the rapid growth of evil within him, he was fast growing from a selfish and covetous man into a wicked one. Suddenly, his eyes flashing, he cried aloud: "I do not know what holds me back from putting a terrible end to all this!"

On hearing this exclamation, which had all the character of a menace in it, the Baron and Suzanne understood it to mean that some great and unknown and unexpected danger was hanging over everybody's heads. But the Baron was not easily intimidated, and he drew his sword for the second time and made a movement toward Thibault. Again the bailiff interposed.

"My lord Baron! my lord Baron!" said Thibault in a low voice, "this is the second time that you have, in wish at least, passed your sword through my body; twice therefore you have been a murderer

in thought! Take care! one can sin in other ways besides sinning in deed."

"Thousand devils!" cried the Baron, beside himself with anger, "the rascal is actually reading me a moral lesson! My friend, you were wanting a little while ago to spit him like a woodcock; allow me to give him one light touch, such as the matador gives the bull, and I will answer for it that he won't get up again in a hurry."

"I beseech you on my knees, as a favor to your humble servant, my lord," replied the bailiff, "to let him go in peace; and deign to remember that, as he is my guest, there should no hurt nor harm be done to him in this poor house of mine."

"So be it!" answered the Baron. "I shall meet him again. All kinds of bad reports are about concerning him, and poaching is not the only harm reported of him; he has been seen and recognized running the forest along with a pack of wolves—and astonishingly tame wolves at that. It's my opinion that the scoundrel does not always spend his midnights at home, but sits astride a broomstick oftener than becomes a good Catholic; the owner of the mill at Croyolles has made complaint of his wizardries. However, we will not talk of it any more now; I shall have his hut searched, and if everything there is not as it should be, the wizard's hole shall be destroyed, for I will not allow it to remain on his Highness's territory. And now, take yourself off, and that quickly!"

The shoemaker's exasperation had come to a pitch during this menacing tirade from the Baron; but, nevertheless, he profited by the passage that was cleared for him, and went out of the room. Thanks to his faculty of being able to see in the dark, he walked straight to the door, opened it, and passed over the threshold of the house, where he had left behind so many fond hopes, now lost for ever, slamming the door after him with such violence that the whole house shook. He was obliged to call to mind the useless expenditure of wishes and hair of the preceding evening, to keep himself from asking that the whole house, and all within it, might be devoured by the flames. He walked on for ten minutes before he became conscious that it was pouring with rain—but the rain, frozen as it was, and even because it was so bitterly cold, seemed to do Thibault good. As the good Magloire had artlessly remarked, his head was on fire.

On leaving the bailiff's house, Thibault had taken the first road he came to; he had no wish to go in one direction more than another; all he wanted was space, fresh air and movement. His desultory walking brought him first of all on to the Value lands; but even then he did not notice where he was until he saw the mill of Croyolles in the distance. He muttered a curse against its fair owner as he passed, rushed on like a madman between Vauciennes and Croyolles, and seeing a dark mass in front of him, plunged into its depths. This dark mass was the forest.

The forest-path to the rear of Ham, which leads from Croyolles to Préciamont, was now ahead of him, and into this he turned, guided solely by chance.

CHAPTER 14

A Village Wedding

HE HAD made but a few steps within the forest, when he found himself surrounded by his wolves. He was pleased to see them again; he slackened his pace; he called to them, and the wolves came crowding round him. Thibault caressed them as a shepherd might his sheep, as a keeper of the hounds his dogs. They were his flock, his hunting pack; a flock with flaming eyes, a pack with looks of fire. Overhead, among the bare branches,

the screech-owls were hopping and fluttering, making their plaintive calls, while the other owls uttered their melancholy cries in concert. The eyes of these night-birds shone like winged coals flying about among the trees, and there was Thibault in the middle of it all, the center of the devilish circle.

Even as the wolves came up to fawn upon him and crouch at his feet, so the owls appeared to be attracted toward him. The tips of their silent wings brushed against his hair; some of them alighted to perch upon his shoulder.

"Ah!" murmured Thibault, "I am not then the enemy of all created things; if men hate me, the animals love me."

He forgot what place the animals who loved him held in the chain of created beings. He did not remember that these animals which loved him were those which hated mankind, and which mankind cursed.

He did not pause to reflect that these animals loved him because he had become among men what they were among animals, a creature of the night, a man of prey! With all these animals together he could not do an atom of good; but, on the other hand, he could do a great deal of harm. Thibault smiled at the thought of the harm he could do.

He was still some distance from home, and he began to feel tired. He knew there was a large hollow oak somewhere near, and he took his bearings and made for it; but he would have missed his way if the wolves, who seemed to guess his thoughts, had not guided him to it. While flocks of owls hopped along from branch to branch, as if to illuminate the way, the wolves trotted along in front to show it to him. The tree stood about twenty paces back from the road; it was, as I have said, an old oak, numbering not years, but centuries. Forty men could not have encircled the trunk of the old oak with their arms.

The hollow made by time was as large as an ordinary-sized room; but the entrance to it barely allowed a man to pass through. Thibault crept inside; there he found a sort of seat cut out of the thickness of the trunk, as soft and comfortable to sit in as an armchair. Taking his place in it, and bidding good-night to his wolves and his screech-owls, he closed his eyes and fell asleep, or at least appeared to do so. The wolves lay down in a circle round the tree; the owls perched in the branches.

It was broad daylight when Thibault awoke; the wolves had long ago sought their hiding-places, the owls flown back to their ruins. The rain of the night before had ceased, and a ray of sunlight came gliding through the naked branches of the trees, and having as yet none of the short-lived verdure of the year to shine upon, lit up the dark green of the mistletoe.

From afar came a faint sound of music; gradually it grew nearer, and the notes of two violins and a hautboy could be distinguished.

Thibault thought at first that he must be dreaming. But as it was broad daylight he was obliged to acknowledge that he was wide awake, the more so, that having well rubbed his eyes, to make quite sure of the fact, the rustic sounds came as distinctly as ever to his ear. They were drawing rapidly nearer; a bird sang, answering the music of man with the music of God; and at the foot of the bush where it sat and made its song, a flower was shining like a star. The sky above was as blue as on an April day. What was the meaning of this spring-like festival, now, in the heart of winter?

The notes of the bird as it sang in salutation of this bright, unexpected day, the

sounds of merry-making which told the lost and unhappy man that his fellow-creatures were joining with the rest of nature in their rejoicings under the azure canopy of heaven, all the aroma of joy, all this up-springing of happiness, brought no calmer thoughts back to Thibault, but rather increased the anger and bitterness of his feelings. He would have liked the whole world to be as dark and gloomy as was his own soul.

On first detecting the sounds of the approaching rural band, he thought of running away from it; but a power stronger than his will, as it seemed to him, held him rooted to the spot; so he hid himself in the hollow of the oak and waited. Merry voices and lively songs could be heard mingling with the notes of the violins and hautboy; now and again a gun went off, or a cracker exploded; and Thibault felt sure that all these festive sounds must be occasioned by some village wedding. He was right, for he soon caught sight of a procession of villagers, all dressed in their best, with long ribands of many colors floating in the breeze, some from the women's waists, some from the men's hats or buttonholes. They emerged into view at the end of the long lane of Ham.

They were headed by the fiddlers; then followed a few peasants, and among them some figures, which by their livery, Thibault recognized as keepers in the service of the lord of Vez. Then came Engoulevent, the second huntsman, giving his arm to an old blind woman, who was decked out with ribands like the others; then the major-domo of the Castle of Vez, as representative probably of the father of the little huntsman, giving his arm to the bride.

And the bride herself—Thibault stared at her with wild fixed eyes; he endeavored, but vainly, to persuade himself that he did not recognize her—it was impossible not to do so when she came within a few paces from where he was hiding. The bride was Agnelette.

Agnelette!

And to crown his humiliation, as if to give a final blow to his pride, no pale and trembling Agnelette dragged reluctantly to the altar, casting looks behind her of regret or remembrance, but an Agnelette as bright and happy as the bird that was singing, the sunlight that was shining; an Agnelette full of delighted pride in her wreath of orange flowers, her tulle veil and muslin dress; an Agnelette, in short, as fair and smiling as the virgin in the church at Villers-Cotterets, when dressed in her beautiful white dress at Whitsuntide.

She was, no doubt, indebted for all this finery to the lady of the Castle, the wife of the lord of Vez, who was a true Lady Bountiful in such matters.

But the chief cause of Agnelette's happiness and smiles was not the great love she felt toward the man who was to become her husband, but her contentment at having found what she so ardently desired, that which Thibault had wickedly promised to her without really wishing to give her—some one who would help her to support her blind old grandmother.

The musicians, the bride and bridegroom, the young men and maidens, passed along the road within twenty paces of Thibault, without observing the head with its flaming hair and the eyes with their fiery gleam, looking out from the hollow of the tree. Then, as Thibault had watched them appear through the undergrowth, so he watched them disappear. As the sounds of the violins and hautboy had gradually become louder and louder, so now they became fainter and fainter, until in another quarter of an hour the forest was as silent and deserted as ever, and Thibault was left alone with his singing bird and his glittering ray of

sunlight. But a new fire of hell had been lighted in his heart, the worst of the fires of hell; that which gnaws at the vitals like the sharpest serpent's tooth, and corrodes the blood like the most destructive poison—the fire of jealousy.

On seeing Agnelette again, so fresh and pretty, so innocently happy, and, worse still, seeing her at the moment when she was about to be married to another, Thibault, who had not given a thought to her for the last three months, Thibault, who had never had any intention of keeping the promise which he made her, Thibault now brought himself to believe that he had never ceased to love her.

He persuaded himself that Agnelette was engaged to him by oath, that Engoulevent was carrying off what belonged to him, and he almost leaped from his hiding-place to rush after her and reproach her with her infidelity. Agnelette, now no longer his, at once appeared to his eyes as endowed with all the virtues and good qualities that would make it advantageous to marry her, which, when he had only to speak the word and everything would have been his, he had not even suspected.

After being the victim of so much deception, to lose what he looked upon as his own particular treasure, to which he had imagined that it would not be too late to return at any time, simply because he never dreamed that any one would wish to take it from him, seemed to him the last stroke of ill fortune. His despair was no less profound and gloomy that it was a mute despair. He bit his fists, he knocked his head against the sides of the tree, and finally began to cry and sob. But they were not those tears and sobs which gradually soften the heart and are often kindly agents in dispersing a bad humor and reviving a better one; no, they were tears and sobs arising rather from anger than from regret, and these tears and sobs had no power to drive the hatred out of Thibault's heart. As some of his tears fell visibly adown his face, so it seemed that others fell on his heart within like drops of gall.

He declared that he loved Agnelette; he lamented at having lost her; nevertheless, this furious man, with all his tender love, would gladly have been able to see her fall dead, together with her bridegroom, at the foot of the altar when the priest was about to join them.

BEFORE long the shoemaker began to feel ashamed of his tears and sobs; he forced back the former, and made an effort to swallow the latter.

He came out of his lair, not quite knowing where he was, and rushed off in the direction of his hut, covering a league in a quarter of an hour; this mad race, however, by causing him to perspire, somewhat calmed him down. He went into his hut as a tiger might enter its den, closed the door behind him, and went and crouched down in the darkest corner he could find in his miserable lodging. There, his elbows on his knees, his chin on his hands, he sat and thought. And what thoughts were those which occupied this unhappy, desperate man? Ask of Milton what were Satan's thoughts after his fall.

He went over again all the old questions which had upset his mind from the beginning, which had brought despair upon so many before him, and would bring despair to so many that came after him.

Why should some be born in bondage and others be born to power? Why should there be so much inequality with regard to a thing which takes place in exactly the same way in all classes—namely, birth? By what means can this

game of nature's, in which chance for ever holds the cards against mankind, be made a fairer one? And is not the only way to accomplish this, to do what the clever gamester does—get the devil to back him up? He had certainly thought so once.

To cheat? He had tried that game himself. And what had he gained by it? Each time he had held a good hand, each time he had felt sure of the game, it was the devil after all who had won. What benefit had he reaped from this deadly power that had been given him of working evil to others? None.

Agnelette had been taken from him; the owner of the mill had driven him away; the bailiff's wife had made game of him.

His first wish had caused the death of poor Marcotte, and had not even procured him a haunch of the buck that he had been so ambitious to obtain, and this had been the starting-point of all his disappointed longings, for he had been obliged to give the buck to the dogs so as to put them off the scent of the black wolf.

And then this rapid multiplication of devil's hairs was appalling! He recalled the tale of the philosopher who asked for a grain of wheat, multiplied by each of the sixty-four squares of the chessboard —the abundant harvests of a thousand years were required to fill the last square. And he—how many wishes yet remained to him?—seven or eight at the outside. The unhappy man dared not look at himself either in the spring which lurked at the foot of one of the trees in the forest, or in the mirror that hung against the wall. He feared to render an exact account to himself of the time still left to him in which to exercise his power; he preferred to remain in the night of uncertainty rather than face the terrible dawn which must rise when the night was over.

But still, there must be a way of continuing matters, so that the misfortunes of others should bring him good of some kind. He thought surely that if he had received a scientific education, instead of being a poor shoemaker, scarcely knowing how to read or cipher, he would have found out, by the aid of science, some combinations which would infallibly have procured for him both riches and happiness.

Poor fool! If he had been a man of learning, he would have known the legend of Doctor Faust. To what did the omnipotence conferred on him by Mephistopheles lead Faust, the dreamer, the thinker, the pre-eminent scholar? To the murder of Valentine! to Margaret's suicide! to the pursuit of Helen of Troy, the pursuit of an empty shadow!

And, moreover, how could Thibault think coherently at all of ways and means while jealousy was raging in his heart, while he continued to picture Agnelette at the altar, giving herself for life to another than himself?

And who was that other? That wretched little Engoulevent, the man who had spied him out when he was perched in the tree, who had found his boar-spear in the bush, which had been the cause of the stripes he had received from Marcotte.

Ah! if he had but known! to him and not to Marcotte would he have willed that evil should befall! What was the physical torture he had undergone from the blows of the strap compared to the moral torture he was enduring now!

And if only ambition had not taken such hold upon him, had not borne him on the wings of pride above his sphere, what happiness might have been his, as

(Please turn to page 714)

Coming Next Month

HUGH bent down, puzzled, to examine more closely the spot on the floor from which that strange yellow smoke was rising. There was nothing. He could not find even a charred match among the wet flowers and leaves. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes on the moving spiral.

Then he knew! Every nerve in his paralyzed body, every heavy beat of his heart told him his hour was come!

Fascinated he watched the swirling, eddying smoke. Desperately he strove to stave off the cold fear that robbed him of all thought and reason. He recalled Kipling's tale of the monkey-tribe caught by their enemy, Kaa, the monstrous snake. A flashing mental picture of those helpless animals rose in his mind. The foolish chattering creatures—hypnotized by Kaa's spell—walking obedient down the very throat of the great serpent, as it weaved its sinuous body in its dance of death! Even so was he going to his fearful end!

With a hideous effort he pushed open the window . . . he was choking . . . gasping for air.

The smoke steadied and solidified. Two shadowy hands seemed to fold the vapor like a cloak about an unseen body. Color gleamed on cheek and hair and the rich folds of a robe.

The thing was close beside Hugh now; it leaned against him familiarly, took his hand, stroked it with soft hypnotic touch. Hugh shuddered, an ice-cold chill in his veins. A fearful nausea made his brain reel. He was slipping . . . slipping away to some dark world . . . slipping backward faster and faster . . . with those cold malevolent eyes boring into his very soul! . . .

The nature of this weird being against which Hugh struggled so desperately will be told in next month's WEIRD TALES, in a story of sinister powers and evil magic:

FROM THE DARK HALLS OF HELL

By G. G. PENDARVES

—ALSO—

THE MALIGNANT INVADER
by Frank Belknap Long, Jr.

A powerful story of a horror from beneath the earth, by the author of **The Space-Eaters.**

THOSE WHO SEEK
by August W. Derleth

The tale of a ghastly encounter with the elementals that haunted a ruined British abbey dating from the Druidic times before the Roman invasion of England.

THE HEAD
by S. B. H. Hurst

A strange and unusual story of psychic memory—a tale of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex.

THE DRAGON GIRL
by Edith de Garis

A thrilling Japanese tale about the fiery love of a Geisha girl for an Englishman and the weird apparition that broke into the Dragon Dance.

These are some of the super-excellent stories that will appear in the next issue. Also, another thrilling installment of Gaston Leroux's weird-mystery story, **The Haunted Chair,** and Alexandre Dumas' exciting tale, **The Wolf-Leader.**

January WEIRD TALES Out December 1

(Continued from page 712)

the clever workman, able to earn as much as six francs a day, with Agnelette for his charming little housekeeper! For he had certainly been the one whom Agnelette had first loved; perhaps, although marrying another man, she still loved him. And as Thibault sat pondering over these things, he became conscious that time was passing, that night was approaching.

However modest might be the fortune of the wedded pair, however limited the desires of the peasants who had followed them, it was quite certain that bride, bridegroom and peasants were all at this hour feasting merrily together.

And he, he was sad and alone. There was no one to prepare a meal for him; and what was there in his house to eat or drink? A little bread! a little water! and solitude! in place of that blessing from heaven which we call a sister, a mistress, a wife.

But, after all, why should not he also dine merrily and abundantly? Could he not go and dine wheresoever he liked? Had he not money in his pocket from the last game he had sold to the host of the *Boule-d'Or?* And could he not spend on himself as much as the wedded couple and all their guests together? He had only himself to please.

"And, by my faith!" he exclaimed, "I am an idiot indeed to stay here, with my brain racked by jealousy, and my stomach with hunger, when, with the aid of a good dinner and two or three bottles of wine, I can rid myself of both torments before another hour is over. I will be off to get food, and better still, to get drink!"

In order to carry this determination into effect, Thibault took the road to Ferté-Milon, where there was an excellent restaurant, known as the *Dauphin d'Or,* able it was said to serve up dinners equal to those provided by his head cook for his Highness, the Duke of Orleans.

(To be continued next month)

The Dark Man

(Continued from page 600)

swung his ax in a whistling arc that cleft the Norseman from shoulder to breast-bone. Another stroke severed the head, and with the grisly trophy in his hand he approached the couch where lay Moira O'Brien. The priest had lifted her head and held a goblet of wine to her pale lips. Her cloudy gray eyes rested with slight recognition on Turlogh—but it seemed at last she knew him and she tried to smile.

"Moira, blood of my heart," said the outlaw heavily, "you die in a strange land. But the birds in the Cullane hills will weep for you, and the heather will sigh in vain for the tread of your little feet. But you shall not be forgotten; axes shall drip for you and for you shall galleys crash and walled cities go up in flames. And that your ghost go not unassuaged into the realms of Tir-na-n-Oge, behold this token of vengeance!"

And he held forth the dripping head of Thorfel.

"In God's name, my son," said the priest, his voice husky with horror, "have done—have done. Will you do your ghastly deeds in the very presence of—

see, she is dead. May God in His infinite justice have mercy on her soul, for though she took her own life, yet she died as she lived, in innocence and purity."

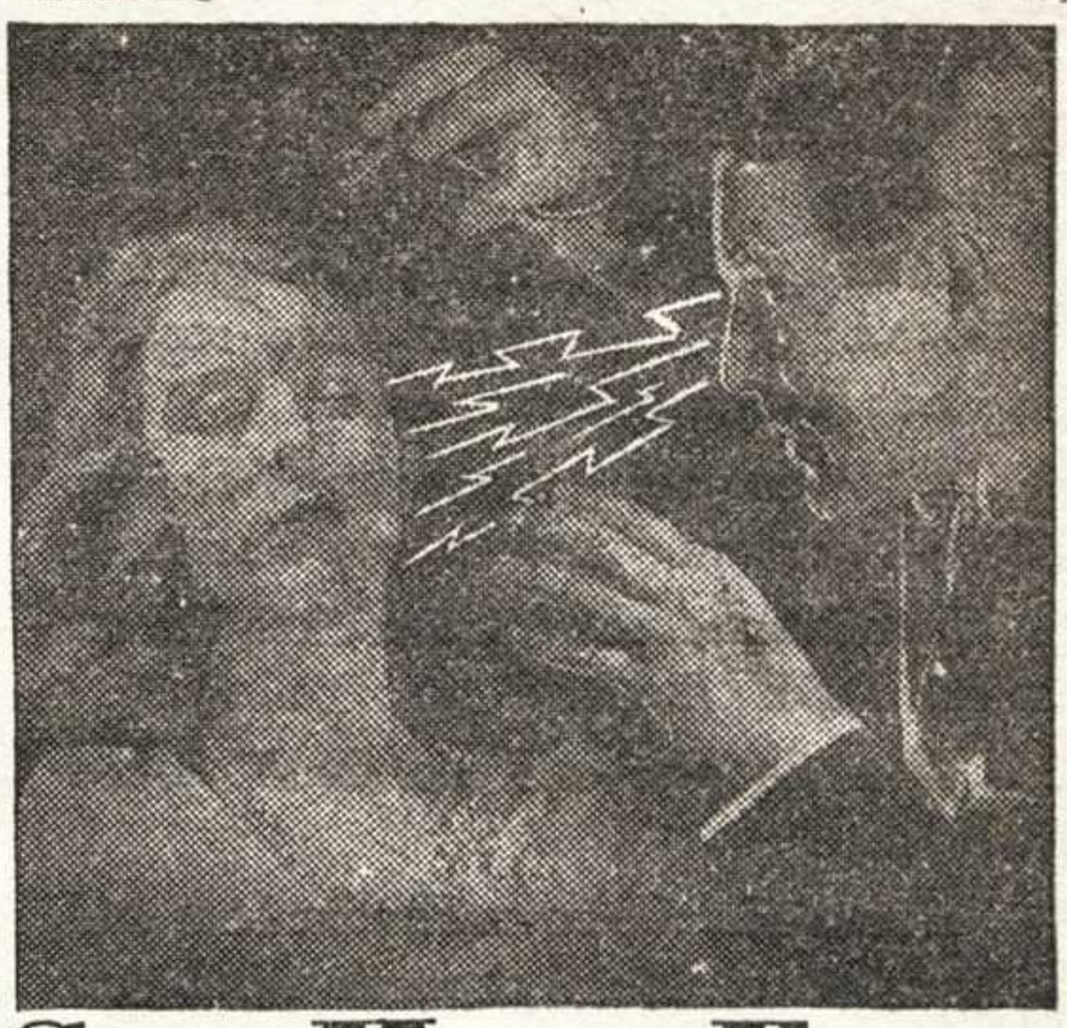
Turlogh dropped his ax-head to the floor and his head was bowed. All the fire of his madness had left him and there remained only a dark sadness, a deep sense of futility and weariness. Over all the hall there was no sound. No groans of the wounded were raised, for the knives of the little dark men had been at work, and save their own, there were no wounded. Turlogh sensed that the survivors had gathered about the statue on the table and now stood looking at him with inscrutable eyes. The priest mumbled over the corpse of the girl, telling his beads. Flame ate at the farther wall of the building, but none heeded it. Then from among the dead on the floor a huge form heaved up unsteadily. Athelstane the Saxon, overlooked by the killers, leaned against the wall and stared about dazedly. Blood flowed from a wound in his ribs and another in his scalp where Turlogh's ax had struck glancingly.

The Gael walked over to him. "I have no hatred for you, Saxon," said he, heavily, "but blood calls for blood and you must die."

Athelstane looked at him without an answer. His large gray eyes were serious but without fear. He too was a barbarian —more pagan than Christian; he too realized the rights of the blood-feud. But as Turlogh raised his ax, the priest sprang between, his thin hands outstretched, his eyes haggard.

"Have done! In God's name I command you! Almighty Powers, has not enough blood been shed this fearful night? In the name of the Most High, I claim this man."

Turlogh dropped his ax. "He is yours; not for your oath or your curse, not for



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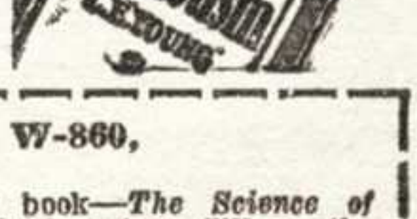
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your creed but for that you too are a man and did your best for Moira."

A touch on his arm made Turlogh turn. The chief of the strangers stood regarding him with inscrutable eyes.

"Who are you?" asked the Gael idly. He did not care; he felt only weariness.

"I am Brogar, chief of the Picts, Friend of the Dark Man."

"Why do you call me that?" asked Turlogh.

"He rode in the bows of your boat and guided you to Helni through wind and snow. He saved your life when he broke the great sword of the Dane."

Turlogh glanced at the brooding Dark One. It seemed there must be a human or superhuman intelligence behind those strange stone eyes. Was it chance alone that caused Tostig's sword to strike the image as he swung it in a death blow?

"What is this thing?" asked the Gael.

"It is the only god we have left," answered the other somberly. "It is the image of our greatest king, Bran Mak Morn, he who gathered the broken lines of the Pictish tribes into a single mighty nation, he who drove forth the Norseman and Briton and shattered the legions of Rome, centuries ago. A wizard made this statue while the great Morni yet lived and reigned, and when he died in the last great battle, his spirit entered into it. It is our god.

"Ages ago we ruled. Before the Dane, before the Gael, before the Briton, before the Roman, we reigned in the western isles. Our stone circles rose to the sun. We worked in flint and hides and were happy. Then came the Celts and drove us into the wildernesses. They held the southland. But we throve in the north and were strong. Rome broke the Britons and came against us. But there rose among us Bran Mak Morn, of the blood of Brule the Spear-slayer, the friend of King Kull of Valusia who reigned thousands of years ago before Atlantis sank. Bran became king of all Caledon. He broke the iron ranks of Rome and sent the legions cowering south behind their Wall.

"Bran Mak Morn fell in battle; the nation fell apart. Civil wars rocked it. The Gaels came and reared the kingdom of Dalriadia above the ruins of the Cruithni. When the Scot Kenneth MacAlpine broke the kingdom of Galloway, the last remnant of the Pictish empire faded like snow on the mountains. Like wolves we live now among the scattered islands, among the crags of the highlands and the dim hills of Galloway. We are a fading people. We pass. But the Dark Man remains—the Dark One, the great king, Bran Mak Morn, whose ghost dwells forever in the stone likeness of his living self."

As in a dream Turlogh saw an ancient Pict who looked much like the one in whose dead arms he had found the Dark Man, lift the image from the table. The old man's arms were thin as withered branches and his skin clung to his skull like a mummy's, but he handled with ease the image that two strong vikings had had trouble in carrying.

As if reading his thoughts Brogar spoke softly: "Only a friend may with safety touch the Dark One. We knew you to be a friend, for he rode in your boat and did you no harm."

"How know you this?"

"The Old One," pointing to the white-bearded ancient, "Gonar, high priest of the Dark One—the ghost of Bran comes to him in dreams. It was Grok, the lesser priest and his people who stole the image and took to sea in a long boat. In dreams Gonar followed; aye, as he slept he sent his spirit with the ghost of the Morni, and he saw the pursuit by the Danes, the battle and slaughter on the Isle of Swords.

He saw you come and find the Dark One, and he saw that the ghost of the great king was pleased with you. Wo to the foes of the Mak Morn! But good luck shall fare the friends of him."

TURLOGH came to himself as from a trance. The heat of the burning hall was in his face and the flickering flames lit and shadowed the carven face of the Dark Man as his worshippers bore him from the building, lending it a strange life. Was it, in truth, that the spirit of a long-dead king lived in that cold stone? Bran Mak Morn loved his people with a savage love; he hated their foes with a terrible hate. Was it possible to breathe into inanimate blind stone a pulsating love and hate that should outlast the centuries?

Turlogh lifted the still, slight form of the dead girl and bore her out of the flaming hall. Five long open boats lay at anchor, and scattered about the embers of the fires the carles had lit, lay the reddened corpses of the revelers who had died silently.

"How stole ye upon these undiscovered?" asked Turlogh. "And whence came you in those open boats?"

"The stealth of the panther is theirs who live by stealth," answered the Pict. "And these were drunken. We followed the path of the Dark One and we came hither from the Isle of the Altar, near the Scottish mainland, from whence Grok stole the Dark Man."

Turlogh knew no island of that name but he did realize the courage of these men in daring the seas in boats such as these. He thought of his own boat and requested Brogar to send some of his men for it. The Pict did so. While he waited for them to bring it around the point, he watched the priest bandaging the wounds of the survivors. Silent, im-

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mobile, they spoke no word either of complaint or thanks.

The fisherman's boat came scudding around the point just as the first hint of sunrise reddened the waters. The Picts were getting into their boats, lifting in the dead and wounded. Turlogh stepped into his boat and gently eased his pitiful burden down.

"She shall sleep in her own land," he said somberly. "She shall not lie in this cold foreign isle. Brogar, whither go you?"

"We take the Dark One back to his isle and his altar," said the Pict. "Through the mouth of his people he thanks you. The tie of blood is between us, Gael, and mayhap we shall come to you again in your need, as Bran Mak Morn, great king of Pictdom, shall come again to his people some day in the days to come."

"And you, good Jerome? You will come with me?"

The priest shook his head and pointed to Athelstane. The wounded Saxon reposed on a rude couch made of skins piled in the snow.

"I stay here to attend to this man. He is sorely wounded."

Turlogh looked about. The walls of the skalli had crashed into a mass of glowing embers. Brogar's men had set fire to the storehouses and the long galley, and the smoke and flame vied luridly with the growing morning light.

"You will freeze or starve. Come with me."

"I will find sustenance for us both. Persuade me not, my son."

"He is a pagan and a reaver."

"No matter. He is a human—a living creature. I will not leave him to die."

"So be it."

Turlogh prepared to cast off. The boats of the Picts were already rounding

(Please turn to page 720)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912,

Of Weird Tales, published monthly at Indianapolis, Indiana, for October 1, 1931.

State of Illinois }
County of Cook } ss.

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Wm. R. Sprenger, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Weird Tales and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher—Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Editor—Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Managing Editor—None.

Business Manager—William R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.)

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the six months preceding the date shown above is_____. (This information is required from daily publications only.)

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(Continued from page 718)

the point. The rhythmic clack of their oar-locks came clearly to him. They looked not back, bending stolidly to their work.

He glanced at the stiff corpses about the beach, at the charred embers of the skalli and the glowing timbers of the galley. In the glare the priest seemed unearthly in his thinness and whiteness, like a saint from some old illuminated manuscript. In his worn pallid face was a more than human sadness, a greater than human weariness.

"Look!" he cried suddenly, pointing seaward. "The ocean is of blood! See how it swims red in the rising sun! Oh, my people, my people, the blood you have spilt in anger turns the very seas to scarlet! How can you win through?"

"I came in the snow and sleet," said Turlogh, not understanding at first. "I go as I came."

The priest shook his head. "It is more than a mortal sea. Your hands are red with blood and you follow a red sea-path, yet the fault is not wholly with you. Almighty God, when will the reign of blood cease?"

Turlogh shook his head. "Not so long as the race lasts."

The morning wind caught and filled his sail. Into the west he raced like a shadow fleeing the dawn. And so passed Turlogh Dubh O'Brien from the sight of the priest Jerome, who stood watching, shading his weary brow with his thin hand, until the boat was but a tiny speck far out on the tossing wastes of the blue ocean.

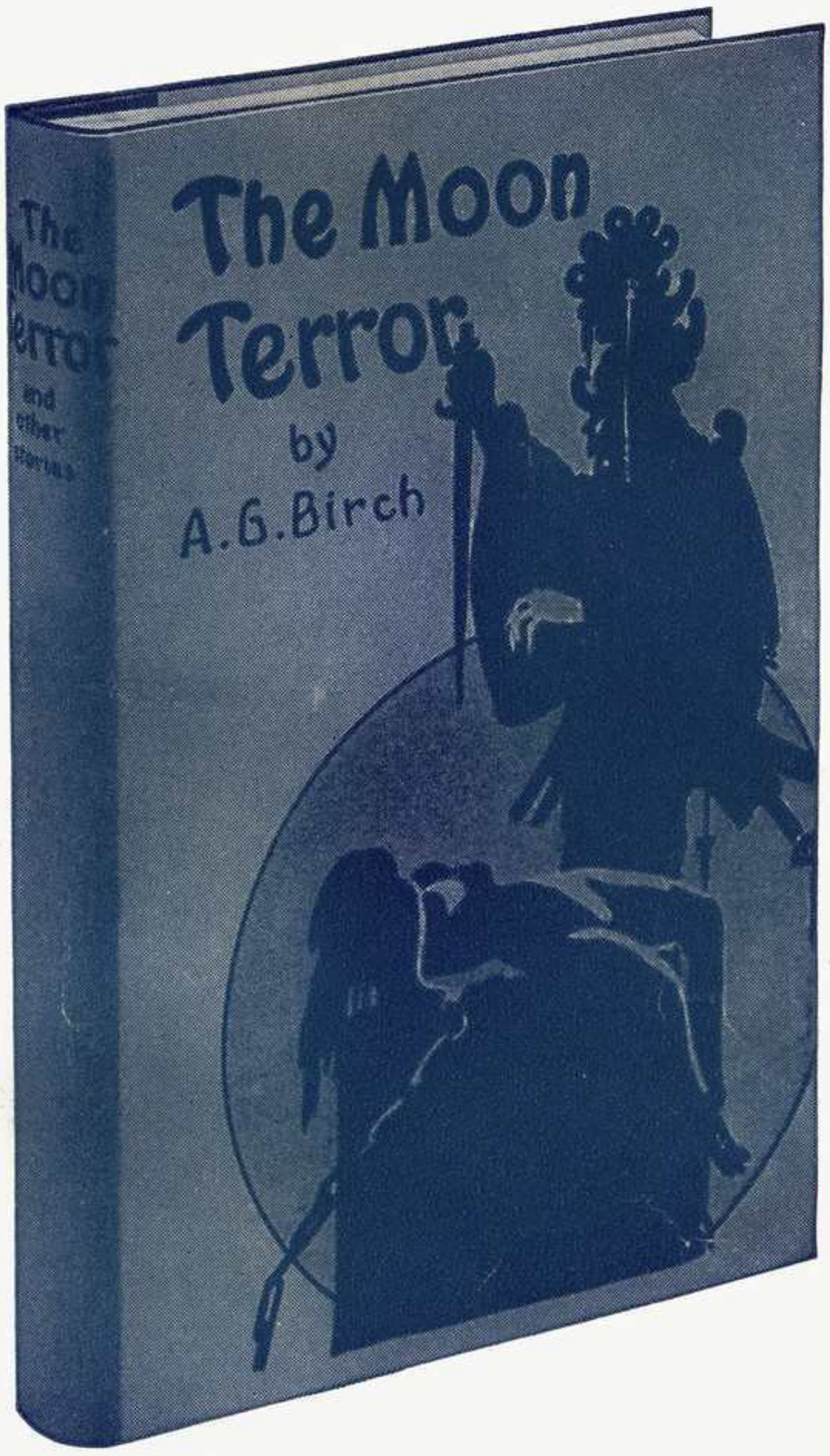
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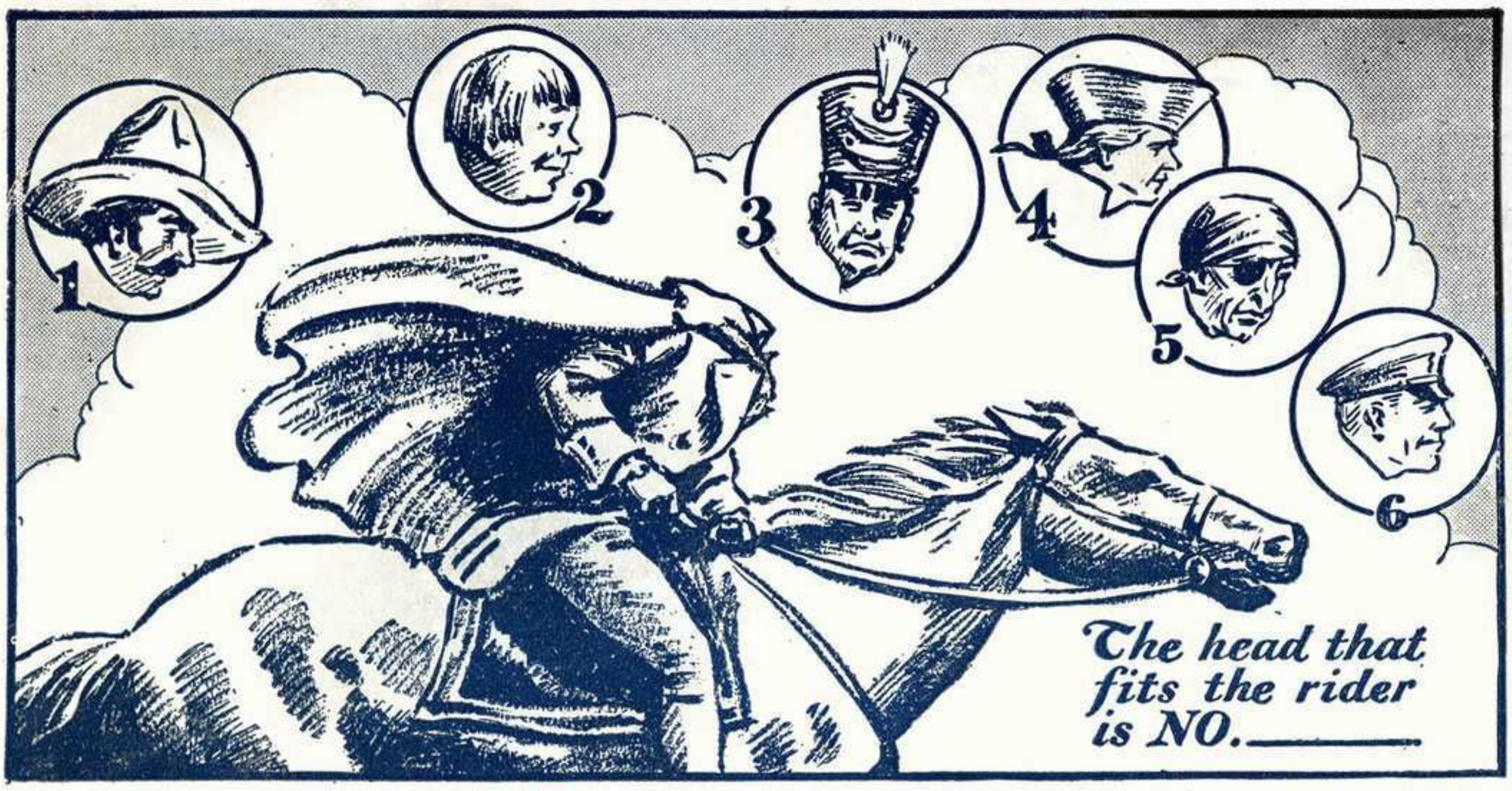
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