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Weird Tales

APRIL 25¢



GOLDEN BLOOD

by Jack Williamson

"PSYCHIANA"

(The New Psychological Religion)

A new and revolutionary religious teaching based entirely on the misunderstood sayings of the Galilean Carpenter, and designed to show how to find and use the same identical power that He used.



FRANK R. ROBINSON, D. D.

Founder of "Psychiana." Author of "America Awakening" — "The God Nobody Knows," etc.

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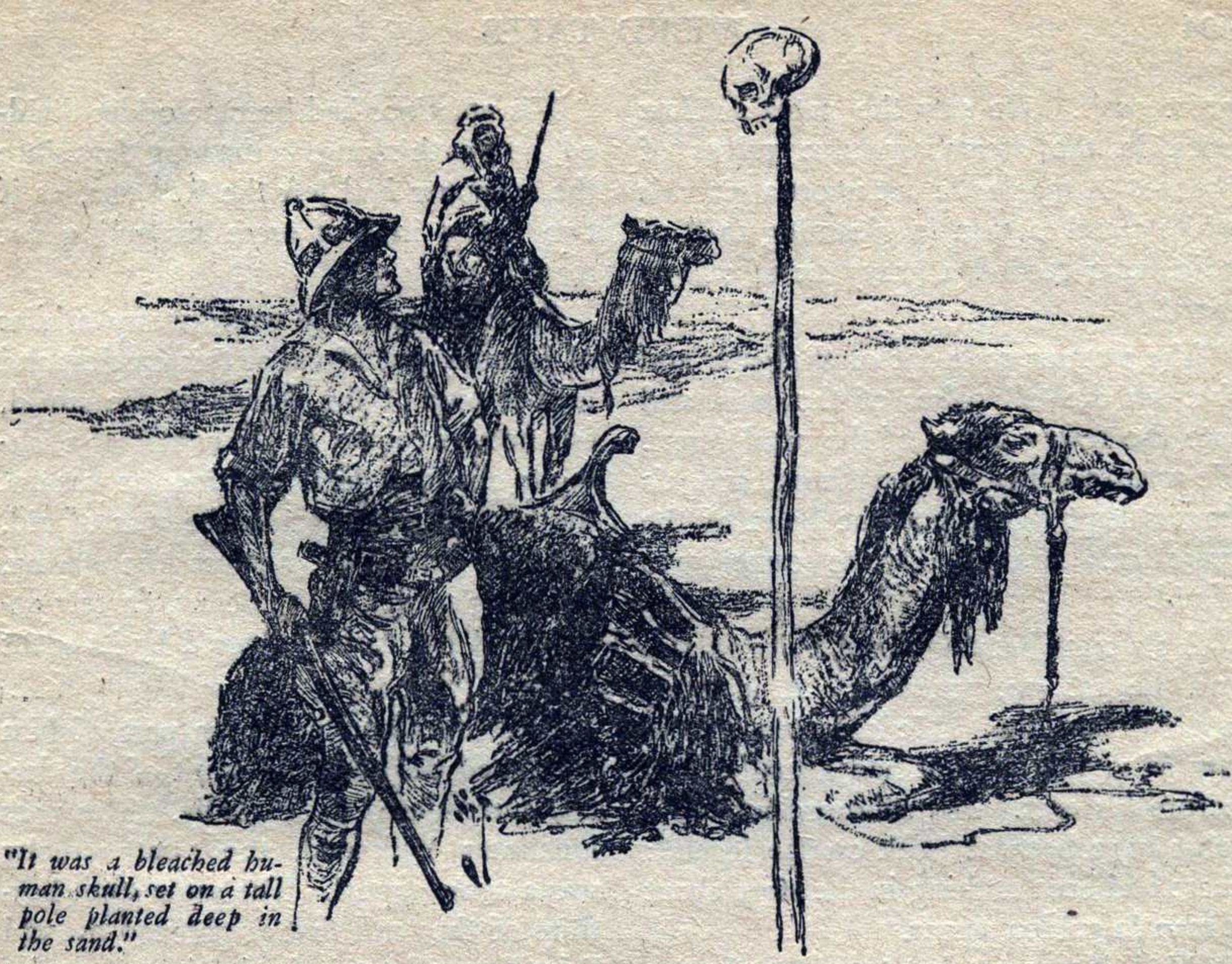
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"It was a bleached human skull, set on a tall pole planted deep in the sand."

Golden Blood

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A tale of weird adventures in the hidden land beyond the cruel desert of the Rub' Al Khali, and a golden folk that ride upon a golden-yellow tiger and worship a golden snake

1. The Secret Legion

THE noonday Arabian sun is curiously like moonlight. The eye-searing brilliance of it, like the moon, blots out all color, in pitiless contrast of black and white. The senses withdraw from its drenching flame; and the Arab *kaylulah* or siesta is a time of supine surrender to supernal day.

Price Durand, sprawled beneath a sun-faded awning on the schooner's heat-blistered deck, lay in that curious half-sleep in which one dreams, yet knows he dreams, and watches his visions like a play. And Price, the waking part of his mind, was astonished at his dream.

For he saw Anz, the lost city of the legend, where it stood hidden in the desert's heart. Mighty walls girdled its proud towers, and away from their foot stretched the green palm groves of the

great oasis. He saw the gates of Anz open in the dream, massive valves of bronze. A man rode out upon a gigantic white camel, a man in gleaming mail of gold, who carried a heavy ax of yellow metal.

The warrior rode out of the gate, and through the tall palms of the oasis, and into the tawny dunes of the sand-desert. He was reaching for something, and his fingers kept tight upon the helve of the great ax. And the white camel was afraid.

A fly came buzzing about Price's head, and he sat up, yawning. A damned queer dream, that! He had seen the old city as vividly as if it had actually been before his eyes. His subconscious mind must have been at work on the legend: there had been nothing in the story about a man in golden armor.

Well, it was too hot to worry about a dream, too hot to think at all. He mopped the perspiration from his face, and stared around him with eyes narrowed against the blinding glare.

The Arabian Sea blazed beneath the merciless sun, a plane of molten glass. The blazing sky was tinged with copper; dry, stinging heat drove down from it. A tawny line of sand marked the northern horizon, where the desolate shifting dunes of the Rub' Al Khali met the incandescent sea. The schooner *Iñez,* as furtively sinister as her swart Macanese master, lay motionless upon the hot, steely ocean, a mile offshore, her drooping, dingy sails casting narrow and comfortless shadows upon greasy decks.

Price Durand, lounging beneath his tattered awning, was saturated with the haunting loneliness of hot sea and burning sand. The brooding, shadowy hostility of the unknown desert so near flowed about him like a tangible current, silent, sinister.

His emotions had become oddly divided, he was thinking, in the long days since the schooner had left the Red Sea, as if two forces in him were struggling for mastery.

Price Durand, the world-weary soldier of fortune, was afraid of this cruelest and least known of the deserts of the world, but not, of course, to the extent of wishing to abandon the expedition; he was not the sort to quit because he was afraid. But he struggled against the tawny, brooding power of the desert, fiercely determined not to be mastered by its silent spell.

And the other, new-born part of him welcomed the haunting spirit of the desert, surrendered to it gladly. The very loneliness beckoned, the swart cruelty was a mute appeal. The same stern hostility of the land that frightened the old Price Durand was a fascinating allure for the new.

"See Fouad's coming," boomed Jacob Garth's calm voice from the foredeck. "Kept the rendezvous to a day. We'll be starting inland by Monday."

Price looked up at Jacob Garth. A huge, gross, red-bearded man, with a deceptive appearance of softness that concealed his iron strength. His skin looked white and smooth; it seemed neither to burn nor tan beneath the sun that had cooked all the others to a chocolate brown.

HOLDING the binoculars with which he had been scanning the red line of the coast, Jacob Garth wheeled with ponderous ease. He evinced no excitement; his pale blue eyes were cold and emotionless. But his words woke the schooner from sun-drenched sleep.

Joao de Castro, the swarthy and slant-eyed Eurasian master, scum of degenerate Macao, burst out of his cabin, shrieked excited questions in Portuguese and bro-

ken English. De Castro was small, physically insignificant, holding authority over his crew by sheer force of cutthroat hellishness. Price had no great liking for any of his strangely assorted fellow adventurers; but Joao was the only one of them he actually hated. That hatred was natural, instinctive; it had risen from some deep well of his nature at first sight of the man; and Price knew the little Macanese returned it cordially.

Jacob Garth silenced the feverish questions of the master with a single booming word: *"There!"*

He handed his binoculars to the little man, pointed at the line of undulating sand across the shimmering, steely sea.

"Price's attention went back to Garth. After three months he knew no more of the man than on the day he had met him. Jacob Garth was a perpetual enigma, a puzzle Price had failed to solve. His broad, tallow-white face was a mask. His mind seemed as deliberate and imperturbable as his massive body. Price had never seen him display any shadow of emotion.

Presumably, Garth was an Englishman. English, at any rate, he spoke, unaccented and with the vocabulary of an educated man. Price imagined that he might be a member of the aristocracy, ruined by the war, and attempting this fantastic expedition to recoup his fortune. But the supposition was unconfirmed.

It was strange, and yet almost amusing, to watch Jacob Garth standing motionless and immutable as a Buddha, while the excitement his words had created ran like a flame over the ship.

The men sprang up from where they had been lounging on the deck, or came running up the companionway, to line the rail in a shouting, jostling throng, oblivious of the beating sun, staring at the horizon of sand.

Price surveyed the line, speculatively. A hard lot, this score of life-toughened adventurers who called themselves the "Secret Legion." But a hard lot was just what this undertaking demanded; no place here for pampered tenderfeet.

Every man of the "Secret Legion" had served in the World War. That was essential, in view of the actual nature of the schooner's cargo, which was manifested as "agricultural machinery." None was younger than thirty, and few were more than forty. One, besides Price, was an American; he was Sam Sorrows, a lanky ex-farmer from Kansas. Nine were British, selected by Jacob Garth. The others represented half a dozen European countries. All were men well trained in the use of the implements in the cargo; and all were the sort to use them with desperate courage, in quest of the fabulous treasure Jacob Garth had promised.

With only their naked eyes, the men at the rail could see nothing. Reluctantly, Price got to his feet, crossed the hot deck to where Garth stood. Without a word, the big man took the binoculars from the captain's trembling hands and handed them to Price.

"Look beyond the second line of dunes, Mr. Durand."

Endless ranks of heaving red-sand crests marched across the lenses. Then Price saw the camels, a line of dark specks, creeping across the yellowish flank of a long dune, winding down toward the sea in interminable procession.

"Sure it's *your* Arabs?" he asked.

"Of course," boomed Garth. "This isn't exactly a main street, you know. And I've had dealings with Fouad before. I promised him two hundred and fifty pounds gold a day, for forty mounted warriors and two hundred extra camels. Knew I could depend on him."

But Price, having heard before of Fouad El Akmet and his renegade band

of Bedouin *harami* or highwaymen, knew that the old sheikh could be depended upon for little save to slit as many throats as possible whenever profitable opportunity offered.

The stinging sun soon drove the men back to the narrow shadows. Stifling silence settled again, and the vast, unfriendly loneliness of the Rub' Al Khali—the Empty Abode—was flung once more over the little schooner drenching in blinding, merciless radiation.

BY SUNSET of the next day the last box and crate had been landed from the schooner and carried up beyond reach of the waves by Fouad's forty-odd men. The neat, tarpaulin-covered piles stood beside the camp, surrounded by tents and kneeling camels.

Price, guarding the piles with an automatic at his hip, smiled at the consternation that would ensue in certain diplomatic circles if it became known that the "agricultural implements" in these crates had gone into private circulation.

Mentally, he ran over the inventory, chuckling.

Fifty new Lebel rifles, .315 caliber, five-shot, sighted to 2,400 meters, with 50,000 rounds of ammunition.

Four French Hotchkiss machine-guns, air-cooled—an important consideration in desert warfare—also .315 caliber, mounting on tripods, with 60,000 rounds of ammunition, in metal strips of thirty rounds.

Two twenty-year-old Krupp mountain guns, which had seen service in several Balkan wars, and five hundred rounds of ammunition, shrapnel and high explosive.

Two Stokes trench mortars, and four hundred ten-pound shells to match.

Four dozen .45 automatics, with ammunition. Ten cases of hand grenades. Five hundred pounds of dynamite, with caps and fuses.

And looming near him, beside a stack of oil and gasoline drums, was the most ambitious weapon of all: a light-armored, three-ton army tank, mounting two machine-guns, equipped with wide treads specially designed for operation over a sandy terrain.

Price had wanted to bring an airplane also. But Jacob Garth had opposed the suggestion, without any good reason save that landing and taking off would be difficult in the sand-desert. Price, for once, had deferred, without suspecting the motive of the other's opposition.

Many weeks of cautious, anxious effort, and many thousands of dollars—Price's money—had been paid for this paraphernalia of modern war, to equip the little band of hard-faced men who called themselves the "Secret Legion."

From his place by the tarpaulin-covered crates, Price watched Jacob Garth coming away from the empty schooner. He noticed curiously that Garth had brought all the men from her, even Joao de Castro, her swarthy, pock-marked little captain. As the boat neared the sand, he saw that Garth and de Castro were quarreling; or rather that the little Eurasian was screaming shrill invective at the big man, who appeared placidly unconscious of him.

Price was wondering why no watch had been left aboard, when he saw the anchored schooner quiver abruptly. A muffled detonation rolled from her across the quiet sea. Price saw debris lift slowly from the deck, and yellow smoke spurt from ports and hatches.

With a curious silent deliberation, the *Iñez* listed to port, lifted her black bow into the air, and slipped down by the stern.

Then Jacob Garth's booming voice drowned the lurid protestation of the en-

raged captain: "We won't need the ship out in the desert. And I didn't want her tempting anybody to turn back. When we find the gold, de Castro, you'll be able to buy the *Majestic*, if you want!"

2. *The Yellow Blade*

JACOB GARTH had come to Price Durand three months before, at a bar in Port Said—a giant of a man, grossly fat, his pouchy, pallid face covered with a tangle of red beard. His once-white linens were soiled, limp with sweat; the sunhelmet pushed back on his head was battered, sweat-sodden.

The man possessed a puzzling strength. In his pale-blue, deeply sunk eyes was something hard and cold, a strange glint of will and power. His great, thick hand was not soft, as Price had expected; its grasp was crushing.

"Durand, aren't you?" he had greeted Price, his deep voice richly resonant. Keenly his pale eyes appraised Price's six-feet-two of solid, red-headed body; penetratingly his cold eyes met Price's unwavering, deep-blue ones.

Price studied him in return, found something to pique his curiosity. He nodded.

"I understand you are the sort who can be called a soldier of fortune?"

"Perhaps," Price admitted. "I have cultivated a certain taste for excitement."

"I have something that should interest you."

"Yes?" Price waited.

"You have heard the desert tales of Anz? I don't mean the village of Anz in North Arabia. The Anz of the lost oasis, beyond the Jebel Harb range."

"Yes, I know the Arab legends, of Magainma and other lost cities of the central desert. New *Arabian Nights*."

"No, Durand." Garth lowered his mellow voice. "The Bedouin tales of Anz, fantastic as they are, are based on truth. Most folk-tales are. Even the *Arabian Nights* you mention have a core of true history. But I've something more than hearsay to go on. If you will be so kind as to accompany me aboard my schooner, I'll give you the details. The *Iñez*—down in the outer basin, by the breakwater."

"Why not here?" Price motioned to a table in the corner.

"There are certain articles I want to show you, by way of evidence. And—well, I don't care to be overheard."

By reputation Price knew the *Iñez* and her swarthy Macanese master—and knew nothing good of either. Any enterprise in which they were involved promised dubious adventure. But in his present mood, restless, weary of the world, that was not to his distaste.

He nodded to the big man.

JOAO DE CASTRO welcomed Price aboard, with a twisted smile upon his swart face, which had been so eaten away by smallpox that it was hairless. The dark, oblique eyes of the little Eurasian went fleetingly to Jacob Garth, and Price caught a furtive question in them. The big man pushed by him, almost roughly, led the way to a dingy cabin, amidships.

Locking the door behind them, he turned to face Price with hard, pale eyes.

"It's understood you say nothing of this, unless you accept my proposition."

"Very well."

He studied Price again, nodded. "I trust you."

He made Price sit down, while he set a bottle of whisky and two glasses upon the cabin table. Price refused the drink, and Jacob Garth said abruptly:

"Suppose you tell me what you know of Anz—the lost Anz."

"Well, simply the usual story. That

the inner desert used to be fertile, or at least inhabitable. That it was ruled by a great city named Anz. That the spreading deserts cut the city off from the world a thousand years or so ago.

"It's just what might be expected, considering the Arab imagination, and the fact that southern Arabia is the biggest blank spot on the map, outside the polar regions."

Jacob Garth spoke slowly, in his deep, passionless tones:

"Durand, that legend, as you have outlined it, is true. Anz exists. It is still inhabited—or at least the old oasis is. And it is the richest city in the world. Loot for an army."

"I've heard men say such things before," Price observed. "Do you *know?*"

"You may judge the evidence. I've been exploring the fringes of the Rub' Al Khali for twelve years—ever since the war. I've lived with the Bedouins, and run down a thousand legends. And most of them turned out to be simply distorted versions of the story of Anz.

"And, Durand, I've been as far as the Jebel Harb range."

That statement raised Price's estimation of the man. He knew that these mountains were considered as mythical as the lost city beyond them. If Jacob Garth had seen them, he must be far more than the unwieldy mass of flesh that he appeared.

"I had five men," he went on. "We had rifles. But we couldn't pass the Jebel Harb. Durand, those mountains were guarded! I fancy the people of Anz know more about the outside world than we know about them. And they aren't anxious to resume communications.

"We had rifles. But they attacked us with weapons that—well, the details are rather unbelievable. But the five with me were brave men, and I came back alone, though not altogether empty-handed. The evidence I spoke of."

Moving with a certain cat-like ease, despite his gross bulk, Jacob Garth opened a locker and brought Price a roll of parchment—a long, narrow strip of cured skin, dry, cracked, the writing upon it fading with the centuries.

"A bit faint, but legible," said Garth. "Do you read Spanish?"

"After a fashion. Modern Spanish."

"This is fair Castilian."

Price took it with eager fingers, unrolled it carefully, and scanned the ancient characters.

"Mayo del Año 1519," it was dated [May, of the year 1519].

The manuscript was a brief autobiography of one Fernando Jesus de Quadra y Vargas. Born in Seville about 1480, he was forced to flee to Portugal at the age of twenty-two, as a result of circumstances that he did not detail.

Entering the maritime service of King Manoel, he was a member of the Portuguese expedition under Alfonso de Albuquerque, which seized the east coast of Arabia in 1508. There, becoming for the second time involved in difficulties that he did not describe, he deserted Albuquerque, only to be immediately captured and enslaved by the Arabs.

After some years, having escaped his captors, and not daring to return to the Portuguese settlements, he had set out, upon a stolen camel, to cross Arabia, in the direction of his native Spain.

"Great hardships attended me," he related, "for want of water, in a heathen land where the true God is not known, nor even the prophet of the infidel. For many weeks I drank naught save the milk of my she-camel, which fed upon the thorns of the cruel desert.

"Then I came into a region of hot sand, where the camel died for want of

water and fodder. I pushed onward on foot, and by the blessing of the Virgin Mary did come into the golden land.

"I found refreshment at a city beside groves of palms. In most hellish idolatry did I find these people, who call themselves the Beni Anz. They worship beings of living gold, which haunt a mountain near the city, and dwell in a house of gold on that mountain.

"These beings, the golden folk, took me captive to the mountain, where I saw the idols, which are a tiger and a great snake that live and move, though they are of yellow gold. A man of gold, who is the priest of the snake, did question me, and then tear out my tongue, and make me a slave.

"For three years did I labor in the mountain, and by the mercy of God I slew my guard with his own sword of gold, which I have with me. Once more with a camel provided by the goodness of the Virgin, I went toward the sea, along a road that is marked with the skulls of men.

"Again thirst has pursued me, and the evil power of the golden gods. The camel is dead, and I am a cripple; so I can never leave these mountains, in which I have found a spring. In this cave I shall die, and I pray that the vengeance of God shall fall soon upon the golden land, to purge it of idolatory and evil."

PRICE sat staring at the dry and brittle parchment, trying to fill out in his imagination the epic of desperate adventure that its faded letters outlined. The old Spaniard must have been made of stern stuff, to do what he had done, and to dress the camel's hide and make ink and write his memoirs—driven by some obscure impulse of egotism—even after he had resigned himself to death.

Garth's deep voice broke the spell: "What do you think of it?"

"Interesting. Very much so. But it might be a forgery, of course. Plenty of old parchment to work on."

"I found that," said Garth, "near a human skeleton, in a cave in the Jebel Harb."

"That doesn't answer my objection."

Garth smiled, grimly. "Perhaps this will. *It* would not be easily forged."

He went back to the locker, and drew out the yellow blade. Wondrously it scintillated in the dim cabin; the ruby blazed hot in the serpent's mouth. A gem-set, golden *yatagban!*

"Look at this!" he boomed, in the deep voice that was so hypnotically compelling. "Gold! Pure gold! And tempered hard as steel! Look at it!"

He swung it in a hissing circle, then handed it to Price.

A weird weapon, heavy, its broad, double-curved blade razor-keen. Price thumbed it, realized that it carried an edge no ordinary gold or alloy of gold could keep. The handle was a coiled serpent of soft gold, grasping in the fanged mouth a great, burning blood ruby.

Leaning across the table, Jacob Garth looked as extraordinary as the weapon; thick-bodied, immensely broad of shoulder, skin soft and white as a child's, cold eyes glittering strange and hard and eager above the tangle of curling red beard.

"Yes, it's gold," Price admitted. No denying that—or that it was harder than any gold he had ever seen. "And the ruby is genuine."

"You are satisfied?" Garth demanded.

"Satisfied that you have something unusual—the manuscript was rather fantastic in spots. But what's your proposition?"

"I'm organizing another expedition. I'm going to take a force strong enough to break through the guarded pass, and to smash whatever resistance the people of Anz may offer, beyond. A small army, if you please."

"Central Arabia has never been conquered—and a good many nations have tried in, in the last fifty centuries or so."

"It won't be easy," Garth agreed, "but the reward will be incalculable! Think of the Spaniard's house of gold! I know the desert; you do, too. We won't be tenderfeet."

"And your proposition?"

"I need about $140,000 to finish equipping the expedition. I understand that you are able to advance such a sum."

"Possibly. And in return?"

"You would be second in command—I am the leader, of course, and de Castro third. Half the loot will have to be divided among the men. The remainder we shall divide in twelve shares, of which five are mine, four are yours, and three de Castro's."

Gold for its own sake meant nothing to Price. His own fortune, which he had not striven to increase, approximated four million dollars. But, at thirty-one, he found himself a wanderer, weary of life, oppressed by killing ennui, driven by vague, formless longings that he did not understand. For a decade he had been an unresting, purposeless wanderer through the tropic East, seeking—what, he did not know.

The swarthy and hostile mystery of the mountain-rimmed, barren sand-desert of the Rub' Al Khali—the "Empty Abode" which the nomad Bedouins themselves fear and shun—held an obscure challenge for him. He had learned Arabic; he knew something of desert life; he had seen the fringes of the unconquered desert.

The lure of treasure was nothing. The promise of action meant more. Of struggle with nature at her cruelest. Of battle—if Garth's story were indeed true—with the strange power reigning in the central desert.

The adventure appealed to him as a sporting proposition, as a daring and difficult thing, that men had not done before. And the gold of which Garth talked meant no more than a trophy.

Price was suddenly eager, more interested and enthusiastic than he had been over anything in many months. Decision came to him instantly. But something about him rebelled at taking second place in anything, at taking orders from another.

"I will have to be in command," he said. "We can share equally—four and a half shares each."

Pale and hard, Jacob Garth's eyes scanned Price's face. His deep voice rang out, almost angrily:

"You heard my proposition." And he added: "You needn't fear dishonesty. You may pay out the money yourself. You know that I wouldn't risk the Rub' Al Khali unless I believed."

"I can't go," said Price, quietly, "except as the leader."

And Garth at last had surrendered. "Very well. You take command, and we share equally."

FOR two months the *Iñez* crept stealthily between ports of eastern Europe and the Levant, while Price and Jacob Garth accumulated by the devious negotiations required in such matters, the cargo listed on the manifests as agricultural machinery, and the score of men who called themselves the "Secret Legion."

The transactions completed and the cargo aboard, she slipped through the canal and down the Red Sea, and east-

ward along the Arabian coast, to the spot that Jacob Garth had designated as the rendezvous with his questionable Arab allies.

3. *The Road of Skulls*

THE Sheikh Fouad el Akmet appeared painfully surprized to learn that he was expected to accompany an expedition into the forbidden heart of the Rub' Al Khali. Jacob Garth, it developed, had engaged his services upon the promise of two hundred and fifty pounds a day, and rich plunder, without specifying where the plundering was to be done.

"*Salaam aleikum!* [peace be unto you!]" he cried, in the age-old formula of desert greeting, when Price Durand and Jacob Garth entered his black tent, on the night after the sinking of the *Iñez*.

"*Aleikum salaam,*" Price returned, thinking at the same time that the old Bedouin's pious greeting would have little meaning if he ever found it feasible to attack his *farengi* allies.

Price and Garth seated themselves upon the worn rugs spread against camel-saddles on the sand. Fouad sat facing them, supported by a dozen of his renegade followers, squatting in a semicircle. One of the Arabs served thick, viscid, unsweetened coffee, poured from a brass pot into a single tiny cup, which passed from hand to hand.

Price sipped the coffee, delaying the opening of negotiations; Garth's bland, pale face was inscrutable. The glitter of curiosity burned stronger in Fouad's dark, shifting eyes, and at last he could contain himself no longer.

"We ride soon?" he asked.

"Truly," Price assented. "Soon."

"Raids," the old sheikh suggested, "against the El Murra? They have many camels, of the fine *Unamiya* breed." His eyes glittered. "Or perhaps we will make war even on the *farengi?*"

Jacob Garth's hand went to the leather scabbard at his belt. Slowly he drew the golden sword, held it up.

"What think you of this?" he asked in Arabic as fluent as Price's own.

Fouad El Akmet started to his feet and came forward eagerly, the gleam of the yellow blade reflected in his eyes.

"Gold?" he demanded. Then, at sight of the snake motif of the sword's handle, of the great ruby held in the serpent's fangs, he leapt back, with a muttered "*Bismillah!*"

"Yes, it is gold," Garth told him.

"The thing is accursed!" he cried. "It is of the forbidden land!"

"Then perhaps you know the road of skulls?" Garth asked, his sonorous voice slow and even. "You perhaps have heard of the treasures that lie at the end of that road, beyond the Jebel Harb?"

"No, by Allah!" the old Bedouin cried, so vehemently that Price knew he lied.

"Then I shall show you the road," Garth told him, "for we ride to plunder the land at its end."

"Allah forbid!" The sheikh was nervously twisting a finger in his sparse, rusty beard; fear was plain in his eyes.

"Every camel will be laden with gold!" Garth predicted.

"It is forbidden the faithful go beyond the Jebel Harb," the sheikh exclaimed with unwonted religious fervor, fondling the *hijab* suspended from his neck. "Beyond is a land of strange evil; Allah and his prophet are unknown there."

"Then shall we not wage a *jehad*, a holy war?" said Price, maliciously.

An agitated whisper ran along the line of squatting men. Price caught mention of *djinn* and *'ifrits*.

"What is there to fear, beyond the mountains?" he asked.

"I know not," he replied, "but men whisper strange things of the Empty Abode."

"And what are those things?" Price insisted.

"Of course I do not believe," Fouad disclaimed his superstition, half-heartedly. "But men say that beyond the Jebel Harb is a great city, that was old when the prophet came. Its people, though Arabs, are not of the faithful, but worship a golden snake, and are ruled, not by men, but by evil yellow *djinn,* in the shape of men.

"The yellow *djinn* ride upon a great tiger, to hunt down those who cross the mountains, and take their skulls to mark their evil caravan-track to the sea. And they dwell in a castle of shining gold, upon a black mountain that is called *hajar jehannum* [the rock of hell].

"Such are the desert tales. But of course I do not believe!" Fouad insisted again, when it was quite evident that he did.

"I see now," Price remarked aside to Garth, "where our old Spanish friend got the material for his fantastic diary."

"I have seen queer things in the Jebel Harb," the other returned. "Fouad's story is more truth than he imagines. Nothing supernatural, you understand. Modern science was born in this part of the world, you know, when Europe was still in the Dark Ages. My theory is that we have to deal with an isolated offshoot of the classic Arabic civilization, on a lost oasis."

Price turned back to Fouad el Akmet, who was sitting again on his rugs, staring fascinated at the golden *yataghan*.

"We talk of the evil of the Empty Abodes," Price explained in Arabic. "There is nothing for our allies to fear, for we bring with us the weapons of the *farengi*. Even should there be such things beyond the accursed mountains as men say there are, we can destroy them."

"On the morrow we shall show you our weapons," Garth agreed suavely. He and Price rose from the rugs, and returned to their own tents, leaving the old sheikh muttering uncertainly, obviously torn between fear of the desert's unknown terrors and greed for its equally unknown treasures.

AT SUNSET on the following day, when the air was comparatively cool again, Price rode upon a borrowed camel with the old Bedouin and a group of his men to the summit of a dune above the camp. Jacob Garth had remained behind, to act as director of ceremonies.

"You have rifles," Price said, indicating the muzzle-loading trade guns the Arabs carried. "But have you such rifles as these?"

He waved an arm, and the four Hotchkiss machine-guns, waiting on their tripods below, burst into staccato song, their hail of bullets lifting little clouds of sand along the beach.

"Your rifles fire swiftly," Fouad admitted. "But what do *djinn* care for rifles?"

"We have greater guns." Again Price waved.

The Stokes mortars and the two ancient mountain guns fired at once. The crashing detonations and the whine of shell fragments, the pits torn in the loose sand, were startling, even to Price. The more cautious of Fouad's men drew their camels back behind the dune.

"And our chariot of death!" Price shouted, signalling again.

The tank, which the Arabs had not seen in motion, burst into roaring life and came lumbering up the slope of the dune, like some gray antediluvian monster, clattering, clanging, guns hammering vicious-

ly. For a moment the awe-struck Arabs held their ground; then, as one, they goaded their camels into sudden flight.

"I am sorry," Jacob Garth greeted them, when they rode sheepishly back into camp, "that you did not remain to see our other weapons."

"The camels were frightened," replied Fouad. "We could not control them."

"Even as the watchers in the desert will be frightened," said Price. "Tomorrow we take the road of skulls?"

The old sheikh hesitated, muttering. "You will pay the gold you promised," he asked Garth, at length, "even if we find no treasure?"

"Yes," Garth assured him.

Price was ready. He called out a command, and four men came staggering from the camp, beneath the weight of a great teak chest. Silently, they set it on the sand in front of Price. Deliberately, he found the key, unlocked it, lifted the lid to display the splendor of glittering yellow sovereigns.

Two men might have carried the chest easily enough; but it contained five thousand pounds sterling, in gold, representing another advance from Price's pocket. He held back the lid, let the Arabs feast avid eyes.

"For each day we will pay you this great wealth." He counted two hundred and fifty coins into golden piles, and let Fouad feel them with trembling hands. "We carry the treasure with us," he added, "in the charict of death, and pay you when we have returned to the sea."

The old sheikh haggled, insisting upon daily payment. But Price held to his terms, and that night, in the coffee-circle, Fouad surrendered.

"*Wallah, effendi.* Tomorrow we ride, and may Allah have mercy!"

IT WAS a curious procession that left the landing-place next morning before sunrise. The Sheikh Fouad El Akmet was the leader, upon his magnificent white *hejin,* or racing-camel. A tall, sparse-bearded, hawk-nosed man was Fouad, with a predatory glitter in his dark eyes that did not belie his unsavory reputation.

The baggage-camels were strung out behind him, laden with cases still marked "spades" or "cultivators" or "farm implements."

The Arabs rode among them; lean men, mostly, as if dried and shriveled by the desert sun, with dark stern faces, thin, tight lips and piercing eyes. Like Fouad, they wore flowing white *kafiyehs,* or head-cloths, and rough black *abbas,* or robes, of camel's hair.

The white men were mostly in the rear, all of them save Price and Jacob Garth unused to camel-riding, and sitting their rolling, jerking mounts awkwardly and with much complaint.

Bringing up the rear came the tank, motor roaring, reeking of burning oil drifting from it. The camels were afraid of it—and the Arabs regarded it as a very dubious addition to the caravan. It would stiffen Fouad's uncertain loyalty, Price thought—especially since it carried the gold.

They had risen before dawn, packed the complaining camels, and breakfasted hastily, the Arabs upon dates and flaps of half-raw dough, the others upon bacon and coffee and hardtack.

Price had put himself near the head of the long line of laden beasts that wound over the first lines of dunes, away from the sea, toward the heart of the great unknown, the Empty Abode, toward desperate adventure.

It was all strong wine of life—the crisp, refreshing dawn-breeze; the glory

of the scarlet sunrise, enchanting the desert with purple mystery; the strong, eager stride of the fine beast he rode; the shouting of the men, even the grumbling groans of the camels.

Caravan of strange adventure! Vague, rosy visions swam before him. He saw the "golden land" of the Spaniard's manuscript, the lost city of Anz beyond the forbidden mountains. Disillusion and ennui slipped from him. He felt young and free and powerful. He knew that he was not living in vain, that splendid deeds awaited to be done.

But the brief *élan* dropped away, as the sun rose higher. The illimitable expanse of crescent hills, dull-red and yellow, wavered and trembled in the heat, unreal. The air became stifling, almost unbreathable, laden with the alkali dust that rose from the trail in choking, saffron clouds.

Perspiration wet his body and the stinging dust clung to it. He soon felt unwashed, miserable. His eyes smarted with dust, ached from the pressure of blinding light that drove down from the sun and the blazing sky, beat back from the sand, shone dazzling from all the hot horizon.

The dry air parched his throat, and he refused himself water from his canteen to wet it—three days, Jacob Garth said it would be, to the first well. The saddle chafed him. His lip bled, where sun and alkali dust had already cracked it.

Even so, the strange urge in him did not completely die. He knew the fierce joy of conquest as he reached the crest of each new dune.

THEY were just losing sight of the sea, over the trackless, undulating plain of sand, when old Fouad rather apprehensively pointed out to Price a tiny white object that gleamed against the dull red waste ahead.

Reluctantly the old Bedouin turned his camel toward it. As they drew near, Price saw that it was a bleached human skull, set on a tall pole planted deep in the sand. From beside it, another was in view, perhaps a mile ahead.

"Who set it here?" Price asked the sheikh, curiously.

"How do I know?" said Fouad, nervously. "Men say the *djinn* of the accursed land leave here the heads of men they have lured to doom. Perhaps they mark the road to Eblis."

Price rode toward the pole. His camel shied from the unfamiliar object; he dismounted and approached it on foot. The pole, some three inches in diameter, was of reddish brown wood, very hard. The skull was some ten feet above his head, but he could see bits of hair and gristle still clinging to it.

The Arab went on, and Price waited for Jacob Garth.

"Just what do you know of these skulls?" he demanded.

"There is an unbroken line of them, extending from here to a pass in the Jebel Harb, where I found the Spaniard's bones. Presumably they go on, to Anz—I wasn't able to get beyond the mountains. They must have been here four hundred years ago, for Quadra y Vargas mentions them in his manuscript."

"This skull is no four centuries old!" objected Price. "Look at it!"

"Evidently not. It must have been recently replaced."

"But who would replace it?"

"I think I told you that I believe the people of the hidden land know more of the outer world than the outer world knows of them. I suppose they wanted to keep marked the road to the sea."

"But why use the skulls of men for markers?"

"Durable and easy to see, I suppose—and cheap."

Several times that day Price rode back along the line of march, to talk with the men. Few of them knew anything of camels. They distrusted the unfamiliar beasts, and were chafed and bruised by the lurching saddles. They complained of thirst and heat and the blinding flame of the brazen sky.

During the intensest heat of the day they stopped and let the camels kneel upon the bare, burning sand, to rest. Toward evening they pushed on again, until it was too dark to find the guiding skulls.

The next day was the same, and the next.

On the morning of the fourth day they came out upon a narrow plain of gravel, a dark slash through red-sand dunes. There they found a well—a square, uncovered pit, from which they drew water with leathern buckets and ropes of camel's hair, for beasts and men. Muddy water, bitter, brackish, almost undrinkable.

It was late afternoon when the last camel had been satisfied and the last water-skin filled. Then they pushed on again, followed by the clattering tank, into another belt of loose red sand.

Two more nights they camped among the dunes. On the morning of the sixth day from the sea they came again upon hard, rolling, flinty gravel, which sloped up to a grim and rugged wall of barren mountains.

"The Jebel Harb," Jacob Garth told Price, "where I was stopped before. We'll see trouble before we pass them—and I don't know what beyond."

In the pellucid desert atmosphere the mountains looked very near. Beetling black granite ramparts, furrowed into rugged gorges and hostile, jutting salients, luridly crowned with strata of red sandstone, with pinnacles of white limestone, glaringly leprously. A basalt-ribbed wall of death. Bare and tortured cliff and peak were silent and ugly as bleaching bones. No green of vegetation lined the steep-walled canyons. Unbroken, the dark cruel scarp marched across the horizon, a sinister barrier to the accursed land.

THE desert is deceptive. The barrier had looked very near, but as sunset approached on the following day, the caravan was still winding up the waterless gravel slopes, which were barren of even the ordinary sprinkling of dwarf acacia and stunted tamarisks.

Fouad was unmistakably apprehensive. Leaving his usual place at the head of the caravan, he rode back to join Price and Jacob Garth. Without his leadership, his men stopped, gazing with unconcealed fear at the grim, looming, granite escarpment.

"*Sidi,*" the sheikh began, unwontedly respectful again in his anxiety, "Allah forbid that we go farther! Before us are the mountains of the accursed land, that Allah gave to powers of evil. Beyond wait the *djinn,* to set our heads upon their poles."

"Nonsense," Price said. "Didn't we show you the *farengi* weapons?"

Fouad muttered in his beard, and craftily demanded that he be paid the seven days' wages due, that he might distribute the gold to encourage his timid men.

"It would only encourage them to desert," Price told him grimly. "Not one piece, until we get back to the sea!"

"There is water in the mountains," boomed Garth. "You know we must have water."

"*Bisshai,*" Fouad agreed. "The skins are dry and the camels are thirsty. But even so——"

"Let us ride on," Price cut him off.

And the old Bedouin, grumbling, at last returned to the head of the column. By sunset they had covered half the remaining distance to the lofty pass ahead, between cleft, towering masses of dark granite, capped with bands of somber red and livid white.

It was at sunset that they saw the first weird phenomenon that heralded the coming conflict with the alien power of the hidden land.

4. *The Tiger in the Sky*

PRICE had urged his weary camel to the head of the line again, to ride beside old Fouad and bolster the Bedouin's courage. Jacob Garth was back among the men. As usual, the camels were strung out in single file; it was over a mile back to the tank, which brought up the rear, clattering and banging across the hard, flinty gravel.

But a few miles ahead the colossal rugged precipices of black granite plunged upward to red-and-white crowns of sandstone and limestone, forming twin towers that grimly guarded the pass.

"Ya Allah!" the Arab renegade shrieked suddenly, terror-stricken. "Be merciful!" Beneath his dark *abba* he raised a lean arm that shook with fear, and pointed above the pass.

Lifting his eyes, Price saw a strange thing in the sky, beyond the yawning gap, above dark, tumbling rocks that were incarnadined with the red glare of sunset.

Penciled rays of light were streaming upward in a vast, spreading fan, against the violet-blue of the east. Thin, pale beams of rose and saffron, flung out as if from a single radiant point hidden below the black range.

Price was startled; something about the luminescent display seemed weirdly artificial. Fighting back his momentary fear, he turned to the trembling Fouad, who had gone white as his pigmentation allowed.

"What is it?"

"The evil *djinn* of the accursed land rise beyond the hills!"

"Nonsense! Just the rays of the sun shining past a cloud, and seeming to converge in the distance. A natural phenomenon——"

Price rapidly scanned the cloud for a cloud to prove his theory, but found its indigo dome, as usual, perfectly clear. He hesitated, then went on rapidly:

"A mirage, perhaps. We always see them in the morning and the evening. They are queer, sometimes. Once, in the Sind desert, hundreds of miles from the sea, I saw a steamer. Funnels and smoke and all. Even made out the boats in their davits. Simply reflection and refraction of light, in the atmosphere——"

"Bismillah wa Allahu akbar!" the old sheikh was groaning, too overcome to listen.

Price then saw that a picture was taking form above the fan of colored rays, somewhat as if projected upon the sky by a colossal magic lantern. Yet it seemed weirdly real, stereoscopic.

What he saw was madness. He knew that it should be mirage, grotesque fancy, illusion. It should have been hallucination, merely the projection of the Arabs' fears against the sky. But he knew that it was not, knew that it was, in some strange way, a reflection of actual existence.

"The tiger of the accursed land!" Fouad was screaming. "The yellow woman of the mirage, whose fatal beauty lures men across the desert to die. And the golden god, the king of evil *djinn!*"

Abruptly the old Bedouin lifted his camel-stick, shouted at his mount, turned in panic flight.

Drawing himself back from the apparition in the sky, Price drew his automatic and called to the Arab in a deadly voice:

"Stop! You aren't going to run off. I can kill you quicker than all the *'ifrits* in Arabia!"

Fouad sputtered and cursed, but he brought his white camel to a halt. His dark eyes, wide with fear, went back to the pass.

A tiger had appeared in the sky, above the spreading rays of rose and topaz. Huge as a cloud, its image was incredibly vivid and real. A sleek, powerful beast, magnified incredibly, floating above the jagged peaks. Its sides were barred with bright, rufous gold. Vast muscles bulged its thick, massive limbs. It looked down from the sky with tawny, terrible eyes, narrowed to black slits.

A curious, box-like saddle of black wood was strapped upon the back of the uncanny beast, like a *howdah* on an elephant. In it were two persons.

One was a man, golden-bearded, yellow-skinned, clad in red robes and wearing a crimson skull-cap. His face was sullenly cruel, marked with the stamp of sinister power. Balanced on his knee was a great spiked mace, of yellow metal.

The other was a woman, green-robed, reclining in an attitude of voluptuous ease. Her skin, also, was yellow; and her long hair, flying free, was red-golden. Slim, green-cased, her body was lithely graceful, and on her face was a perilous beauty.

Her slightly oblique eyes were tawny-green, oddly like the tiger's. Their lids were darkened, as if with kohl. Her lips were crimsoned, her golden cheeks touched with rouge, her slender fingers henna-reddened. Hers was a loveliness exotic and sinister.

Fouad's furtive movement called back Price's eyes. He saw that the whole caravan had stopped. Even the tank's clatter had ceased. He sensed the fear that ran electric along the line, from man to awe-struck man, fear that might readily become disastrous panic.

The old sheikh had been edging his camel away.

"Keep still," Price warned him, "or I'll kill you!"

He was certain that the danger was not immediate, and he knew the Arabs would not desert without their leader.

His eyes went back to the picture in the sky, silent and awful in its magnitude, infinitely appalling for its eldritch strangeness. The yellow man's crafty, leering eyes scanned the caravan. And the woman was smiling down, Price saw, at *him*.

No kind smile was it. Mysterious, enigmatic, mocking. Its evasive challenge raised in Price a vague and nameless anger; yet somehow the exotic golden beauty stirred faint awakenings of desire.

The oval, aureate face was lovely, alluring, yet subtly malicious. The greenish, tawny eyes hinted of hot passion, of burning desire and withering hate, of caprice unchecked by fear or law. They were wise with an ancient knowledge not all of good. They were bold with power unlimited and carelessly held. They watched Price, speculatively, tauntingly. . . .

The yellow-beard moved. In both great hands he raised the spiked golden mace, flourished it over the pass, in a gesture definitely hostile, menacing. On his harsh face was warning . . . and *hate*.

The woman smiled down at Price, with a challenge in her tawny eyes, and ran slim, reddened fingers through the golden masses of her hair.

"See, *Howeja!*" Fouad hissed. "He warns us to go back!"

Price did not answer. His gaze was still upward, meeting the woman's enig-

matic orbs, giving challenge for challenge. His own eyes were hard. Abruptly, to the old Arab's manifest surprize, he laughed, laughed long and harshly, jeeringly, at the woman, and turned away.

"A modern Lilith, eh?" he muttered. "Well, strut your stuff. We can play the game."

Then, slowly as the picture had appeared, it faded, dissolved in the darkening amethystine sky, vanished. The fan of narrow rays died beyond the pass.

The black ramparts of the Jebel Harb loomed hostile against the dusk.

Price sat on his camel, his automatic still covering Fouad El Akmet—and wondered.

The weird beings of the accursed land, then, were not all fiction. People lived beyond the mountains, people whose skins were the color of gold—not the yellow-brown of the Mongolian, but *golden;* people who had domesticated the tiger, and who must command strange powers of science.

The apparition, he was sure, had been some sort of mirage. He recalled the Fata Morgana, that he had seen once at the Strait of Messina, remembered accounts of that uncanny light-phenomenon of the German mountains, known as the Specter of the Brocken, in which colossal shadows are cast upon the clouds. But had this lost race mastered the laws of the mirage? Did they rule illusion?

If this fantastic madness had already greeted them, what would they encounter beyond the range?

5. *The Sign of the Snake*

"CONSIDER this also," Price said: "if any man turns back, we shall pursue him with the chariot of death, and leave his skull to make a nest for scorpions."

Fouad El Akmet muttered, and twisted his finger in his scrawny beard. The Arabs had refused to go farther, on the night before, had protested, even, at camping on the spot. Now, on the following morning, the old sheikh was vainly opposing any further advance.

"*Sidi,* you know that the shadow was a warning. We may yet save our lives from the golden king of *djinn*——"

"If we go on and conquer him!"

"There is water in the pass," Garth said. "A clear, sweet well. And you know the bitter waters of the last well are many days behind. Few of you would live to taste them."

Fouad wavered visibly.

"Remember the chariot of death," Price urged. "And the gold in it that is already yours, if you but stay."

"*Wallah!*" the Bedouin cried at last, though with obviously tepid enthusiasm. "We ride into the pass."

The rugged masses of the Jebel Harb loomed ragged and black against a pallid glow of pearl in the east, as the caravan toiled wearily upward again, over rolling foothills that were darkly purple in the dawn.

The long line of camels wound into the pass, between soaring, cyclopean walls of elemental granite. The patch of sky ahead became a lurid high curtain of scarlet flame; the desert behind was lit with pastel hues of saffron and lavender.

Price rode in the lead, beside Fouad, to keep alive the uncertain spark of the old man's courage. Garth was back among the men; the tank, as usual, at the rear.

The lower pass was a titanic gorge, a gargantuan gash through living rock. Its beetling walls, marching in rough parallel, seemed almost to close above its rugged, boulder-strewn floor. As Price and the old Arab picked a cautious way upward for the tender-footed camels, the sun rose to touch the high cliffs with a

brush of scarlet fire, but the canyon remained shadow-filled.

Scanning the narrowing walls ahead, Price saw a glittering flash at the base of a sandstone column, a mile up the gorge. Instinctively he goaded his camel into cover behind a gigantic fallen mass of granite.

"The pass is guarded," he called out to Fouad. "I saw the gleam of a blade, ahead. Better have your men take cover."

The old Arab groaned.

Price saw that the old sheikh, struck motionless with terror, was staring at the man who had been riding just behind him.

That man was the Arab Mustafa, a young warrior, mounting a black she-camel of whose gait and endurance he was inordinately proud. From the shelter of the fallen megalith, Price saw Mustafa freeze suddenly into strange immobility.

The young Arab and his black camel became utterly motionless. The camel was poised rigid, in the very act of stepping, one forefoot lifted. The man leaned forward, mute wonder on his thin face, one hand lifted as if to shade his eyes. His brown *abba* and flowing white *kafiyeh* had become stiff as cast metal.

"*Ya,* Mustafa!" old Fouad howled, in terror.

A strange, swift change came over the motionless figure. Glittering tracery of white was drawn over man and camel. In seconds, a frosty film covered both. The mounted man had become a statue in white, bright with an icy sparkle.

Staring in dazed and unbelieving wonder, Price heard abrupt, crackling sounds from the figure. A breath of air cold as an arctic blizzard struck Price's face, chilled the sweat on his forehead.

Then he knew! Not, of course, how it had been done. But he knew that *Mustafa had been frozen to death!* By some strange agency, the temperature of his body had been suddenly lowered to a point far below zero. It was so cold that frost condensed upon it from the air.

For a moment Price was dazed by the discovery, with all that it implied of the perils ahead. Then a mind and body trained to meet unexpected emergencies responded smoothly, almost automatically.

"Quick," he called to the men behind. "Get over by the cliff, out of sight." He gestured.

A score of the Bedouins and a few of the whites had been close enough to see the weird tragedy. As Price's words broke their spell of terror, they wheeled with one accord in panic flight, goading weary camels to a run. In vain he shouted at them to halt, as they vanished down the canyon.

DISMOUNTING swiftly, he slipped to the edge of the sheltering boulder and cautiously surveyed the gorge ahead. He saw nothing moving; ominous silence hung expectant between the frowning walls. He studied the base of the sandstone monolith, where he had seen that fleeting, betraying gleam that had saved him from Mustafa's fate, and quickly estimated the range.

Then, hastening back, he found the whole caravan gathered in confusion about the tank, where Jacob Garth had succeeded in stopping the fleeing Arabs. The frightened clamor ceased as he rode up.

"Refrigeration to the *n*th degree," he explained tersely. "The man was frozen —instantly. The white is frost. I saw the glitter of the thing that did it, up the canyon."

The pale, fat face, the cold, deep-set eyes of Jacob Garth revealed neither wonder nor fear.

"They saw us, last night," he boomed.

"In that—mirage. They are ready—as they were before."

"We'll give them a run for the money," announced Price. He turned to the men and began shouting brisk orders:

"Müller, take your crews and mount the Krupps for action. Bear on the base of that sandstone cliff." He pointed. "Range is about four thousand yards."

"Yes, sir!" The little Teuton, who had been a captain of artillery in the Austrian army, saluted briskly and ran toward the baggage-camels that carried the mountain guns.

Rapidly Price gave commands to have the machine-guns unpacked and set up, to cover the ancient cannon. He had rifles and automatics served out, stationed snipers to pick off any of the unseen enemy that might appear.

When the weapons were unpacked, he sent the camels back to the rear, with Arab herdsmen. The camels were to be guarded at all costs, for their loss would mean inevitable ruin.

Jacob Garth watched silently as Price rapped out his orders, the bland white face showing neither satisfaction nor disapproval.

"Watch Fouad," Price told him, in a low voice. "If he runs out on us, with the camels, we're ditched. I'm going up in the tank, where I can watch the results of our fire and signal corrections."

As the little mountain guns delivered their first bracketing shots, Price delivered final instructions, sprang upon the iron deck of the tank and climbed down through the manhole to the gunner's seat. He spoke swiftly to Sam Sorrows, the lanky Kansan, who had been driving the machine, and it lurched into roaring motion.

Up the defile it lumbered, past the clustered, frightened Arabs, still mounted, under Jacob Garth's guard, past the thudding little mountain guns, past the Hotchkiss guns and snipers that protected them.

Below the fallen megalith, beside which Mutafa stood white in statuesque rigidity, Price left the tank, crept forward again to scan the upper gorge. No enemy was in view. He watched the yellow bursts of dust and smoke about the base of the sandstone column as the shells exploded, called corrections out to Sam Sorrows, at the tank, who wigwagged them back to the gun crews.

A score of shells whined over: still the enemy did not appear.

Price slipped back to the tank.

"Signal them to stop firing," he said. "Probably just wasting ammunition. And let's go ahead, to where we can see, anyhow. Do you mind?"

"You're the captain," grinned the man.

"It will be risky. I don't know what we'll find. Our guns may have scared them off; they may be waiting. The thing that hit Mustafa——"

Sam Sorrows was clambering back into the tank.

"Risks are up my street, or I'd be back in Kansas," he said. "Let's go!"

Price climbed in after him, smiling. Here was a man! Price, himself, never tried too hard to avoid danger; he had a fatalistic faith in the Durand luck. His philosophy was simple: play the game, leave the dealing of the cards to fate, to *kismet,* as the Arabs said. And he rejoiced to find another of the same reckless stamp.

LURCHING, clanging, treads ringing upon bare rock, the tank roared upward between narrowing granite walls, on to the sandstone pillar. And chill fingers of fear snatched at Price's heart: the shells had fallen short!

Bright metal glittered a full hundred yards beyond the group of ragged, smok-

ing, shell-torn craters, a fantastic device of glistening brass, of shimmering crystal, surmounted with a huge, ellipsoid mirror, scintillant with a silvery fulgor.

A single man in blue bent behind the machine.

This uncanny mechanism, Price knew, was what had killed Mustafa. Would the tank's light armor be sufficient protection against the terrific cold that had frozen the Arab rigid in a split second? He thought not.

Fear numbed him, the deadliest he had ever known. Icy feet raced up his spine. Chill sweat beaded his face. Grim, tense, he bent to the machine-gun.

The harsh stutter of it rose above the song of the racing engine. But, tossing from side to side in the lurching, rocking tank, he could not aim. Splinters of rock danced about the strange glittering machine, but the old, blue-robed man behind it seemed invulnerable.

Violet light gleamed suddenly on the ellipsoid mirror. And the air in the tank was deathly cold. Price's breath crackled, as he expelled it in an involuntary gasp of terror.

With numbed hands, he kept the gun hammering. At last a stream of bullets swept the bright machine. A vivid flare of purple light enveloped it, an explosive burst of flame that left but a twisted wreck of bent metal and broken crystal. Flung back by the blast, the blue-robe fell, lay motionless.

The man was still alive when they left the tank and went to him, though burned by the explosion and riddled with bullets. He lay in his gory robe, and stared up at Price with a red grin of hate.

He had been tall. His features were of the familiar Arab type, hawk-nosed, thin-lipped, cruel. He might have been some ensanguined, dying Bedouin.

Price bent beside him. His black eyes filmed with hate, and he whispered, in the strangely inflected Arabic of an unfamiliar dialect:

"I die. But on you, intruder, is the curse of the golden folk. By Vekyra, and by the tiger and the snake, and by Malikar the master—you shall follow me!"

He coughed blood, and died with a leer of bloody horror on his face.

Only when his final struggles had ceased did Price find the sign of the snake—a brand on his forehead, that had been hidden by the hood of his burnoose-like blue robe. Printed in gold on the dark skin was the figure of a coiled snake. It seemed burned into the skin, indelible.

Price studied it with wonder strangely akin to horror. What did it mean? Was the dead man a branded member of some grim snake-cult?

"Let's go on through the pass," Sam Sorrows proposed suddenly.

"A good idea. Might be more of them."

They clambered back in the tank, which was now silvery with its bright armor of frost where the ray of deadly cold had touched it. The defile narrowed before them, then broadened, and they lumbered across a high sandstone plateau.

They looked beyond the range.

PRICE had half expected to see a fertile, inhabited oasis, but the endless plain that stretched away beyond the Jebel Harb, shimmering in a smoky haze of heat, was grim and lifeless desolation.

Long drear dunes of red sand, like stilled seas of death. Dark gravel-barrens. Lurid streaks of yellow clay. Salt-pans, glaring leprous white. Low and age-worn hills of livid limestone and black basalt; grim, denuded skeletons of ancient ranges.

The accursed land, indeed! All its swart vastness showed no hint of life.

Nothing moved upon it save the ceaseless, silent flicker of heat, like waves of ghost-seas. Or perhaps, when the winds blew, red and ancient sands, whispering secrets of the immemorial past.

Across those wastes of desolation led the road of skulls. With his binoculars, Price could trace the white gleams of the grisly landmarks for many miles, far out into the dead solitude of the forbidden land.

What would they find at the end of that road? That is, he thought, if they lived to reach it! The perils of alien science—the encounter in the pass had assured him of that. The peril that had been promised in the yellow man's flourish of the great mace, in the mirage about the mountains. And the peril Price had read in the taunting, tawny-greenish eyes of the golden woman.

Jacob Garth met them, alone and on foot, as the tank lumbered back down the gorge. Icy apprehension had dawned in Price's heart before they heard him speak. The pale eyes in his fat, bland face were coldly unreadable as ever; his deep, suave voice carried neither concern nor self-reproach, when he said:

"Durand, Fouad got away."

Throat suddenly dry, Price managed to whisper, "The camels?"

"Gone. We're stranded As the Spaniard was."

Price's despair gave way to a flame of useless anger.

"I told you to watch! How——"

"We were watching the tank. When it turned white, and stopped, the Arabs wheeled and dashed off, before we could stop them. Drove off the baggage-camels too. We're on foot."

Scathing criticism was on Price's tongue, but he checked it. It would do no good. Nothing, now, would do any good. Only a hopeless battle remained; battle, not with man but with the world's cruelest desert.

The astounding adventure that befell Price Durand unrolls its breath-taking incidents in next month's WEIRD TALES. You can not afford to miss it.

Autumn

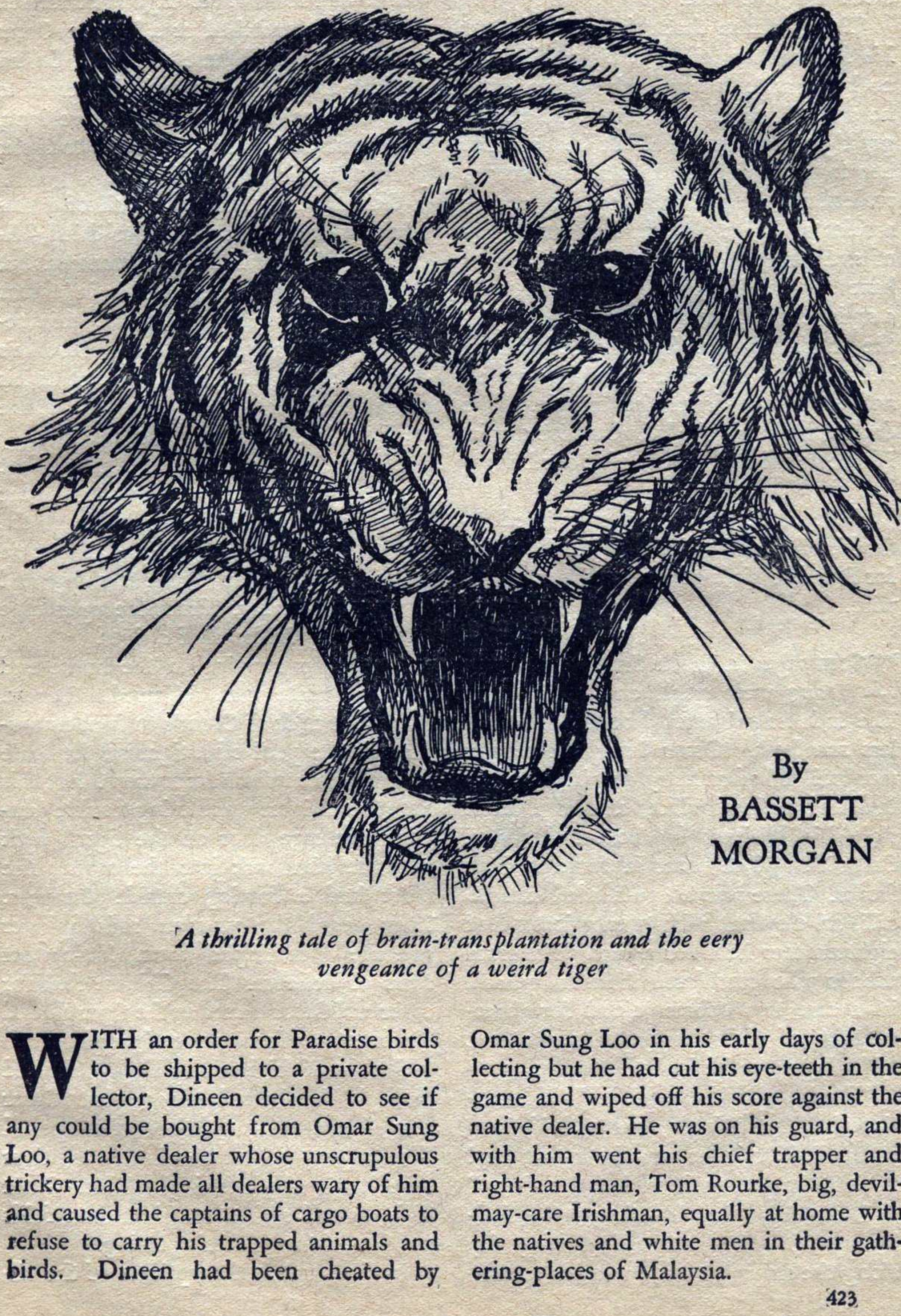
By ROBERT E. HOWARD

Now is the lyre of Homer flecked with rust,
And yellow leaves are blown across the world,
And naked trees that shake at every gust
Stand gaunt against the clouds autumnal-curled.

Now from the hollow moaning of the sea
The dreary birds against the sunset fly,
And drifting down the sad wind's ghostly dree
A breath of music echoes with a sigh.

The barren branch shakes down the withered fruit,
The seas faint footprints on the strand erase;
The sere leaves fall on a forgotten lute,
And autumn's arms enfold a dying race.

Tiger Dust—



By
BASSETT
MORGAN

A thrilling tale of brain-transplantation and the eery vengeance of a weird tiger

WITH an order for Paradise birds to be shipped to a private collector, Dineen decided to see if any could be bought from Omar Sung Loo, a native dealer whose unscrupulous trickery had made all dealers wary of him and caused the captains of cargo boats to refuse to carry his trapped animals and birds. Dineen had been cheated by Omar Sung Loo in his early days of collecting but he had cut his eye-teeth in the game and wiped off his score against the native dealer. He was on his guard, and with him went his chief trapper and right-hand man, Tom Rourke, big, devil-may-care Irishman, equally at home with the natives and white men in their gathering-places of Malaysia.

Over a drink before they started, Rourke unbosomed the fact that he had taken a native wife.

"Faith, a man that might any day set his foot on the tail of a king cobra has no business to marry a nice white girl," he said. "Should I meet up wid a hungry tiger, my fate wouldn't be good for her to contemplate. But native women understand their country an' its peculiar accidents. What's more, they have ways of avengin' a man just as white widows have accident insurance claims. There's a sayin' that where nature grows a poison the antidote is near by. Maybe 'tis true. But anyway I paid dear for a little golden native woman from the temple. She dances finely, an' she knows native magic. I hope you'll feel free to visit our bungalow any time, sir."

Time came when Dineen wished to God he had not bothered with the order for Paradise birds or met Rourke's native wife.

THE cages in Omar Sung Loo's *kampong* were small and badly kept. The luckless prisoners drooped in merciless sun heat. Omar Sung Loo was a mongrel of bad ancestry despised by Malays and Chinese alike, and as Dineen stole his business by honest dealings, Omar Sung Loo went in for side-show freaks. There was a two-headed carabao calf, an elephant with twenty instead of eighteen toes held for a high price from nabobs who considered them lucky, and in a case two cobras joined for three-quarters of their length. Rourke spat with disgust as he looked at them.

"Freaks should be killed," he mentioned. "But Dineen, damned if them cobras look as if they was born that way! Look at the puckered scar between them."

Omar Sung Loo led them to a shallow pond where a small monkey lay along the sloping bank, its lower extremity in the water. Dineen cursed as he gazed. Instead of legs the tail of a fish was joined to its hips! Agony burned in its eyes. It snatched at a banana Omar offered and a Chinese attendant forced a tablet down its throat, which seemed to relieve its pain. It would not live long, but Omar Sung Loo tried hard to make Dineen buy it while it lived.

Oriental curio shops are full of mummied monkey bodies joined to dried fish-tails, the "mermaid" of commerce, but Dineen realized some hellishly ingenious master surgeon had attempted this revolting living experiment. Rourke's curses were livid. His hand went to his pocket and the searing sunlight shone on a small black revolver in his hand.

"I'm of two minds whether to shoot you or the monkey," he said to Omar Sung Loo, who backed away from the belligerent Irishman and snarled out an order. The Chinese darted to a cage and howled a warning. From the open cage door swung the head of a tiger.

Omar was running to the house and the two white men followed. Dineen knew that trick of Omar's to frighten visitors by the peril of a tiger on the loose and gouge cumshaw from them. But this time the Chinese was having trouble jamming the cage door on the tiger's neck to force him back into the cage. The beast had a foreleg outside the bars. They heard the wooden rods splinter and the tiger leaped down, letting out roars of defiance. The Chinese fled for cover and Omar cursed as the tiger cleared the *kampong* fence at one bound.

Shrieks of frightened villagers shrilled through the heated silence, but Omar snarled commands and the coolies opened the *kampong* gates and wheeled the tiger cage across the opening. Then Omar took a small sack from his turban folds and loosed the puckering string.

In the sun-baked emptiness of the vil-

lage road stalked the royal beast, roaring at intervals. A native coming down the road unaware of peril saw it and ran up the *kampong* fence in an incredible burst of agility and dived over. Rourke chuckled. But Omar went into the road and tossed a little powder from the pouch in his hand. The tiger crouched with lashing tail, ready to spring, took a crawling step forward and sniffed the white powder. Instead of leaping, it began to lick the dust. Omar dribbled a line of white powder to the cage and the beast lapped and purred, rolling as it went along licking the powder to a few grains on the floor of the cage. The cage door was jammed shut, with a contented, purring tiger inside.

With a malignant smirk Omar turned to the two white men.

"My lord knows his master," he said.

"Will you sell me some of that powder?" asked Dineen.

"No, *Tuan,* it is my great secret," said Omar, drawing up the pouch string. An instant later Rourke's hand darted, snatched the pouch, and with his gun covering Omar's breast he nudged Dineen to go and backed out of the place with the curses and threats of Omar Sung Loo shrieked after them.

"Curses don't worry me none," said Rourke. "But he's said 'em of a nature to blast my body now an' my soul hereafter."

NO NATIVE showed a face to them in that otherwise friendly village as they plodded the hot road back to Soerabaya after a fruitless search for birds and with trouble hot on their heels for the theft of the tiger dust.

"I'll go get ye some birds," said Rourke. "It'd be as well fer me to get inland anyway. Omar is lower than a cobra, but he's clever an' he's in with the worst fiends of undiluted Asiatic hellishness this side o' Sheol. Dineen, some o' his Chink surgeons joined them two cobras, sure as I live! I've heard o' graftin' fins on fish, but that monkey business makes a man sick inside. He's got smart surgeons on his staff, an' no laws o' God or man, heaven or hell to keep him in bounds. I'll give that tiger dust to my wife, who believes tigers have souls. She even says humans can change into tigers, an'——" Rourke launched into stories of were-tigers that lasted until they were back at the hotel, bathed and sipping cool drinks.

Next day Rourke departed for the interior after Paradise birds, and Dineen waited. No word came for months and he grew worried and decided to call on Rourke's native wife in a village of the interior. He came after the heat of the day to a pretty bungalow covered with wine-colored bougainvillea, and coming up the path heard the soft notes of a native bell-gong and the croon of a love song which ceased as he drew near. Rourke's wife came to the porch clad in a silk sarong, her dark hair in a coil over one ear, a red flower over the other.

She was dainty and pretty, but her dark eyes held the enigmatic look of coquetry arrested in full flush by tragedy. He had brought her a string of small seed pearls as a wedding gift, but dropping them into her hand made him feel as awkward as if he gave red-heeled slippers to a nun. She spoke port English and he asked if she had heard from Rourke.

Dineen came from that interview with a chill in spite of the tropic heat. Undoubtedly Rourke's wife was fey. Her passion for Rourke was apparent, her loyalty intense. She talked queerly, cautiously, but she said evil had befallen her man. She had heard him calling in agony yet warning her not to try to reach him. He was not dead, yet devils tor-

mented him. He loved her, yet their life together was ended. He commanded her not to avenge him as love might prompt. Dineen realized that she accepted her loss with native philosophy but she was waiting to learn the mystery regarding Rourke and brooding vengeance in spite of his warning.

Dineen decided to search for his chief trapper, and Rourke's wife sent him a relative of her family named Inbam who knew Rourke and was loyal to his wife. Inbam gathered native carriers and supplies for the trip, one item of which surprized Dineen, a supply of thick long candles. Dineen reminded Inbam that they had flashlights, but the native said Rourke always carried "corpse-candles", which in case of his death were to be lighted around his body. Rourke's wife added her gift for good luck, a treasured crucifix of Rourke's, finely carved of ebony and ivory wrapped in a length of silk, which Dineen placed in the box containing the "corpse-candles" and some canned and bottled delicacies for his own personal use.

NATIVE canoes took them up shoreless rivers where mangrove pods ripen on branches and drop roots in tenuous webs bedded in the ooze. Crocodiles rested their opened jaws on the roots and small sicsac birds flew in and out taking food particles from their fangs. The country swarmed with small monkeys that scattered when a big orang-outang would come along and peer curiously at the canoes. Dineen noticed his natives were uneasy from the start, and their fears affected him. But there were compensations for the discomforts of insects and leeches and guarding against the swinging tails of crocodiles. The mountain peaks were mist-wreathed, the wooded jungles held orchids like tinted flames. Birds of Paradise danced on upper tree branches at sunrise. There were flashes of gaudy parrots and butterflies like wind-blown bits of gay silks.

They found a blazed trail where Rourke had cut his way inland. But the irritating thing to Dineen was the constant torturing roll and stuttering of native drums talking back and forth.

Inbam, who understood the drum gossip, was worried. The other natives wanted to turn back, but there is a penalty for deserting a white man in the jungle; also, Inbam held over them the fear of vengeance from Rourke's wife, who had a definite reputation as a sorceress.

Leaving the canoes, they went through saw-edged jungle grass, plagued by leeches and stinging insects. Around the evening campfire the men picked off leeches and polished their *jimats,* which are charms against evil. The villagers met with were friendly and they remembered Rourke going through, but refused to furnish guides. "There are debbil-debbils," they said.

Inbam translated, but Dineen did not scoff. There was a tangible apprehension in his own mind, a feeling of weird things going forward in the jungle. He decided that a rest from the laborious travelling and a little hunting might cheer the men. Birds were plentiful. So at the foot of a hill range standing like the vertebræ of a monster that had fossilized as it crawled seaward, they made camp.

Dineen's personal supplies were kept in a hut they built on high stilt legs. He was sitting in the doorway one sundown when he saw a huge orang-outang standing in the crotch of a near-by tree holding the branches apart and peering down. Inbam also saw it and silently handed up a gun to Dineen's hand. Instantly the branches crashed together, the ape fled, and the swish of other branches spring-

ing back as it leaped from one to another told of its size and weight.

That night the native drums were livelier. Inbam went to the nearest village and returned late with a tale that kept Dineen awake longer than usual. He said a native girl had been carried into the jungle by one of the orang-outangs. The villagers were mourning her loss and talking about terrible magic in the hills. Inbam's own tale was interrupted as he ceased speaking and pointed toward the tree, and in the moonlight Dineen saw again an orang-outang with its fangs bared as if it grinned. There came a bellow from that hairy throat which sent the men lying around the small campfire scuttling toward the hut, their curved knives ready for defense.

'The big ape stood on a branch balanced by its hand-grip on a higher limb and from its black lips came sounds so uncouth that Dineen felt the hair prickling on the nape of his neck. He could have sworn he heard the creature mouth words:

"*By, Tuan, by . . .*" which means "It is true, *Tuan.*"

A silence bred of fear held Dineen mute. Slowly and laboriously the great ape mouthed sounds like Malay words. The natives huddled together, whispering in terror. At Dineen's ear Inbam breathed:

"He says '*orang puteh ubat,*' *Tuan.* He wants white man medicine. What devil is it that gives speech to a man of the woods, *Tuan?*"

"That is foolish talk," said Dineen stubbornly. "Your wits wander. Get the express rifle." But at sight of Dineen with the elephant gun in his hand, the ape disappeared.

Below the hut the natives were chattering in frenzied outbursts and Dineen knew they were ready to bolt.

"It is an ape that somebody has trained and taught to speak," he said, knowing it was folly to contradict their belief that the creature had used their own speech. He did not yet believe it, and his men needed to be handled carefully lest they desert him now.

THAT night the drums spoke in purring spurts and tattoo rolls, bursting sometimes into violent throbbing, and his men lay awake whispering. At dawn they pleaded to leave this evil place. Dineen was one white man among a crowd of savages almost uncontrollable from superstitious fear. He started them placing bird-lime on sticks to lodge in the trees and building cages on tall poles beyond the reach of snakes; then he led them into the jungle to hunt.

That night in camp, while supper was cooking, he sat cleaning off leeches that had penetrated his puttees and laced boots, and decided to open canned peaches for a treat. He pulled the box with his clothing from under the camp bed and groped for the other case. Then Dineen cursed. The case of precious canned food was gone, and with it the candles and crucifix packed among the bottles. He did not suspect a thief among his own men; yet around the hut lay his shaving tackle, weapons and ammunition, far more appealing to a native from the village, left undisturbed. He searched further, then called Inbam, who had discovered that a sack of rice was missing also. The sack had been punctured and rice had trickled from the hole as it was carried away.

At dawn they saw birds alighting to feed on the rice. Dineen marked their swooping flight toward a shadowy crevasse in the hills.

"We'll follow the thief," he announced.

With a few picked men and Inbam he started across the valley and camped near

the hills that night. He was wakened from sleep beside the campfire by a sound that lifted his hair. The light of dying embers showed his men crouching or creeping toward him. From the caves of gloom beyond the dim fire-glow came a booming voice like a minor tune played on the bass notes of an ancient organ. No human throat could have emitted its rumbling sonorousness. Inbam touched Dineen's arm and his teeth chattered as he whispered:

"*Tuan,* the man of the woods sings a mating-song that I have sung to women. It is a devil!"

"I've heard that damned ditty," agreed Dineen. Yet fear clawed at his brain. Cold sweat broke from his pores. "It's that talking ape," he added.

"Yes, *Tuan.* He is singing to the native girl he stole from the village," said Inbam.

There was a restless rustling of tree branches that told of more than one great ape in the vicinity. To Dineen's increasing horror there came a gusty burst of profanity in a voice as mighty as that of the singer:

"Shut up, ye damned brute. Quit yer singin' love songs to what the Chinks'll make o' that poor little native girl that ye stole an' dropped in their *kampong.* God! I could kill ye for doing that if it wouldn't be so hellish lonesome without yer bad company in my own misery." The speech ended with a volley of oaths that should have blasted their victim; then came the reply in port Pidgin from the voice that had sung the pantun:

"Be not angry with thy servant, *Tuan.* Long have I followed you into the perils of trapping beasts and birds. Now I am trapped with you. Yet perhaps it was so written. Strange magic I have seen, yet never did I think to be caught by it. The spirit of my first woman entered into the body of a tigress. Now my spirit has entered into the body of a man of the woods."

A snarl ended the stentorian musings. Dineen pinched his own forearm until it hurt convincing himself that he was not dreaming. The crashing of tree branches ended the jungle parley.

THERE was no more sleep for Dineen. At daybreak he led his men toward the purple gap in the hills and again camped at the edge of flat country bordering another crocodile-infested river. Leaving the men and supplies, Dineen and Inbam went forward, picking their way through masses of creepers and rotting deadwood to the gloom of mangroves bordering the water. From one twisted root to another they stepped cautiously. The muggers slipped into the water and sank slowly, their unblinking eyes staring upward, bubbles breaking where they sank. The stench of rotting vegetation and nauseating crocodile odor was thick and heavy. Then as Dineen peered up and down the dark stream he caught sight of a neat modern powerboat on the opposite side, moored to a tree. From where it lay, a trail had been hacked into the farther jungle.

Small monkeys chattered and fled with sudden cries, a sign that orang-outangs were coming. At the sound of distant branches swishing, Dineen turned to retrace his way to solid ground. Inbam was younger and more agile and he left Dineen behind. Creepers cut off Dineen's sight of the native, when suddenly a great ape dropped and confronted the white man.

It stood erect, horribly huge and menacing. Dineen tried to shoot, but as he swung the gun to his shoulder it was wrenched from his grasp by a second orang-outang which hung by its paws

from an overhead tree branch. His blood seemed to congeal in his flesh as the big ape came nearer, mouthing uncouth sounds that even in his terror Dineen could not refuse to understand.

"Dineen, ye don't know me," it said mournfully. "Ye don't know Rourke, an' I don't blame ye. Ye couldn't believe it's me in this awful shape. But it's true, Dineen. It's Rourke's brain in the head of an ape. That's what the Chinks did to me. Omar Sung Loo's Chink surgeons played their hellish tricks on me an' my trapper, jist because I stole that tiger dust o' his. God! what a price fer a man to pay."

Dineen felt his senses whirling, his legs wobbling. The stench of the crocodile swamp filled his throat and nostrils and vertigo clamped its claws in his vitals. He tried to leap to the next tree-root and his legs were paralyzed like a man in a nightmare trying to escape from demons. He stumbled and fell across a mangrove root with his legs in the stinking ooze.

The giant ape came nearer, a paw reached for him. He was lifted close to that terrible face. Then he knew nothing more until his eyes opened on a leafy canopy of cool shade and cleaner wind. It was some minutes before he saw the great apes crouching near him and realized that he lay on a platform of bamboo crudely lashed to branches high in the trees, which swayed gently as the apes moved and shifted their weight.

"Dineen," came the rasping and thick sounds from a tongue that was slowly accustoming itself to human speech, "It's Rourke talkin'. God! I don't blame ye fer doubtin' what I say. But listen to what I'm sayin' an' try to understand. Here, take a swig o' this coconut milk." He whanged a nut on the tree branch and broke the shell.

Dineen's throat was parched and he drank eagerly; then as his head lifted he dropped it again on his arm, hoping to God he dreamed the sight before him. Yet the voice went on relentlessly:

"Dineen, I'm a sight to scare a man, I know, but listen. Omar Sung Loo's Chink surgeons have a *kampong* near here an' a nice little surgery. Tabak—that's my trapper as was, though he's an ape now same as I am—well, we walked into it innocent as babes. The Chinks was polite and give us food an' drinks. They was both doped, Dineen. An' them devils butchered us an' put our brains into the heads of orang-outangs. They meant to ship us to Omar an' sell us as freaks, but we broke away. Omar owed me a grudge, an' you remember how he cursed me. He said he'd pay back, an' he did."

It took time for the slow and labored utterance to be voiced. Dineen listened helplessly, and something in that sorrowful wail penetrated past fear, which was his only sensation.

"Ye can't believe," mourned the ape, "but I'll show ye presently how true it is. My wife knows. I went there an' told her I was in a devil land an' could never come home to her again. I told her not to search for me. But I said if Omar Sung Loo came tiger-trapping in the jungles she might slip the word to the natives to let a tiger maul him to death. 'Tis a poor revenge but 'twill keep him from further hellishness. An' Dineen, I want your help now. My man, Tabak—the unbaptized son of a slut!—stole a native girl an' handed her down to the *kampong* fer this Chink surgeon to make him a sweetheart orang-outang. We stole her before the head wound healed, an' she's here on our tree-nest dyin' by inches. You've some skill with wounds, Dineen. Look at her an' see can ye do anything. I'd end it for her, only it's so damned

lonesome, an' Tabak an' me would fight. Somehow I want to live to know Omar is dead first . . . if I can stand it that long."

DINEEN lay shuddering, hearing but not heeding. The great ape lifted him with his back against the tree bole and pointed toward a female ape that sat slumped in a heap as native women sit, its body leaning forward between its upthrust knees. Around its head was a pink puckered scar like the edge of a cap. One look at the scar revealed to Dineen the badly infected state. His dread-filled eyes gazed at the other apes and saw the healed scars around their heads. A burst of insane laughter came from his lips.

"It's tough on ye, Dineen, but you're safe with us, if that's any comfort. Tell me about the ape-girl."

"That wound needs surgical attention and disinfectants," he muttered hoarsely.

"We got none, but there's plenty in the Chink's *kampong*. You know drugs better'n I do. I'll take ye along."

"I won't go!" Dineen protested, but his resistance was feeble. The big ape was ruthless. Dineen saw that the ape body and instincts were not wholly controlled by the human brain, and Rourke had been a bold hunter, cruel enough when his work demanded. Dineen was slung over his shoulder like a sack, carried in swinging flight that swooped from branch to tree. To save the lashing of branches on his face he ducked his head against the hairy breast and shut his eyes. Presently he must waken from this devil dream. . . .

There was a glimpse of dark water as the apes leaped and caught branches on the opposite shore; then he saw sun gleams on a bamboo palisade and thatched buildings like large huts. From high in the tree Dineen looked down and saw humans. His first thought was of escape.

Gathering all his strength in a desperate effort he heaved suddenly against the ape's grasp. Then he was falling, slithering through thick-foliaged branches, dropping to the ground inside the stockade. He heard the bellow of the apes and gun-shots crashing. Opening his eyes later he saw a Chinese walking beside him as coolies carried him to the hut. He also saw three orang-outangs chained to trees in the *kampong*, leaping the length of their fetters, yelling horridly. The Chinese lashed at them with a whip in his hand, and they cowered, whimpering. A fourth ape slumped between its knees like the she-ape in the tree eyrie. Their heads were swathed in bandages, their four paws manacled.

Dineen was glad to lie on a cot on the hut porch behind mosquito netting and drink what was handed him. The Chinese spoke excellent English, but as Dineen cursed the nightmare through which he was enduring so dreadfully, there came further horror.

"It is neither fever nor a dream," said the Chinese. "Those apes have human brains. We experimented long ago in that branch of surgery. My countrymen were adepts at grafting when your Western colleges were being built. Recently we have studied your work and gone ahead tremendously. Animals furnish our greatest field of experimentation. You have seen some poor specimens in the cages of Omar Sung Loo's *kampong*. He has a market for side-show freaks. We hope he will be able to sell the talking apes which we have successfully produced. It has been possible for us to transplant human brains into the skulls of orang-outangs and have them survive. But unfortunately our greatest prize, a man of your race, escaped with a Malay

ape-man. They brought me a native girl who was operated upon, but stole her before her wound healed. She may not survive, for such operations need care in treatment. Those men-apes you see in the *kampong* speak no English and will not be so valuable for side-show purposes in European countries. So you see how grateful I am that Rourke, the man-ape who captured you, dropped you here. I hope you will enjoy our hospitality until we can trap another orang-outang."

The sinister menace of the Chinese's words was some time penetrating Dineen's mind. He was given highly spiced curry and cool drinks, which he ate and drank gratefully. Then he slept and wakened behind the mosquito-netting of the cot in a contented lethargy only disturbed by the clanking chains and hoarse cries of the ape prisoners.

A coolie led him to a bath house and handed him fresh pajamas, comforting and cool to his flesh. He was enjoying the rest, the well-seasoned food and drinks. His body and brain were still too exhausted to anticipate danger or defend himself against it. Except for the chained apes, the place was quiet and deserted, yet the jungle seemed noisier than usual by day, beyond the bamboo fence.

HE ROSE and strolled toward the fence, but two natives appeared armed with ugly-looking krisses and herded him ignominiously back to the porch, where one stood guard while the other summoned the Chinese surgeon.

Courteous of speech yet blandly cruel, the surgeon informed Dineen more fully of the horror awaiting him.

"You must not leave the house."

Anger of the white man toward the Oriental stoicism roused Dineen's rage.

"I'll go where I damn please," he cried. "And you'll stop me at your peril. My men are not far away, remember."

"They can not enter here," said the Chinese. "Nor are you free to leave, Dineen. I could not part with so fortunate a guest for the experiment I have in view, your own intelligent, trained and educated brain. I lost Rourke, but I shall not risk losing you. Better have another drink, Mr. Dineen, to quiet your nerves."

"Not another drop," shouted Dineen. "I believe you doped my drinks."

"Of course, both your food and drink were doped, as you call it. But is it not better to meet fate which even the bravest man puts off as long as he can, the translation from one existence to another form of life? Think it over. I must attend to that suffering ape in the *kampong*."

Slowly, frightfully, the ghastly truth dawned in his mind. He sat in a hell of chaotic and frenzied fear, and when the drink was brought, he struck it from the man's hand. He was unarmed, helpless; even his clothes were gone, except the cotton pajamas in which he sat. His body shuddered as he realized the fiendish surgeon fully intended to make an ape of him! Chattering fear took him down the steps to where the Chinese bent over the chained ape, but two Malays dogged his steps and stood beside him as he began to plead against the fate in store for him.

The end came suddenly. From the trees dropped a cyclonic fury of fighting apes, bellowing their rage, knocking the Malays aside, seizing them by the feet and swinging their heads against the palms, breaking their skulls like egg-shells. Dineen turned from the sight of the surgeon being torn to shreds. Then he was caught over the shoulder of an ape and swung to the trees, the guttural Malay of Tabak in his ears. The ape-man Rourke

was gathering up the surgical instruments, bottles of medicine and rolls of gauze.

A hell of noise, shrieking, roaring, screeching, rang in Dineen's ears until he was carried to the tree platform. The height above ground made him crouch low beside the she-ape which lay limp on its side. When the case of instruments and drugs was thumped down beside him Dineen touched the she-ape's body. He sat back on his heels and shook his head.

"She is dead," he said.

IN THE swaying aerial perch he felt numbed after the fright in his mind and din of the fight. He watched dully as the ape-men picked up the dead orang-outang and lowered her body to the thicket of lianas below, where they vanished. He was alone in the tree as night fell and the prowlers of darkness began their mysterious rustlings, the insect clack and clamor arose. He slept and wakened as the Scorpion crawled down the sky and the Southern Cross was dimmed by dawnlight.

He shrank from an attempt to descend, but thirst tortured so badly that summoning his courage he swung from the platform to the nearest branch, and working his way by the tree crotches he reached the protruding root-knees and got to solid ground. He drank from moisture of night dew cupped in leaves, and followed a well-defined trail to higher ground. His men had fled, leaving the cold ashes of a campfire to mark the place where they had been. All day he traveled, following their trail, and at dark he saw small lights flickering against a hill. With a fresh burst of speed he hurried on, then halted. Against the little flames he saw the grotesque figures of the two ape-men.

He would not risk being their prisoner again, and he circled cautiously along a hill slope to a rock from which he could look down. And the fear and repulsion of the unnatural beasts left him as he gazed upon their work. There was a hole scooped from the earth, and in it lay the body of the she-ape with the ivory and ebony crucifix stolen from his camp hut, on her breast. Around the grave stood his stolen candles, their flames wavering in the soft night breeze. Beside the grave the ape-man Tabak sat crooning that Malay pantun, the love song roared in the night. Dineen remembered that it was the same song he had heard Rourke's native wife singing to the accompaniment of bell-gongs as he went up the path to her bungalow. The voice of Rourke, mournfully unaware of its volume, came to him sorrowfully:

"Corpse-candles don't mean much to her, Tabak, but maybe it'll help her soul find its way home. God help me! I wonder if this purgatory I'm goin' through will be enough fer me to find heaven."

The cool night breeze was clearing Dineen's head of the drugs he had imbibed in the *kampong* food. He remembered all that had happened, and even believed it now! Yet exhaustion forced him to lie and sleep on the rocky hill. The leeches which had bled him freely by day dropped from his flesh at night. A feeling of fatalism dulled further fear. He was roused from sleep by a touch on his arm, and the sight of the ape squatting near him was no longer frightening.

"Dineen, I'll be takin' ye to yer camp. Go out with your men. There's nothing you can do for me except kill me, unless maybe you'd see my wife an' tell her to go back to her people an' forget me. There's nothing for her to forgive. We was happy while it lasted."

Dineen was carried swiftly, not caring where, and dropped on the opening of the hill crevasse into the valley, high enough to look down on his own camp.

"Put him there, Tabak," said the other ape, who carried the gun that had been snatched from Dineen when he met them at the river. "Dineen, when ye get out say a prayer fer the soul o' Tom Rourke. He's had hell enough alive. There can't be worse hell where he's goin'." The rumbling voice held tragic sorrow and despair.

Dineen plunged down the trail. The sound of a shot startled him and he looked back. On the rock ledge one ape writhed in death agony a moment, then limply its body fell from the ledge. Dineen heard it crash in the bushes.

Then the other ape squatted and braced the gun between its feet and placed the muzzle between its open jaws. Its hand reached down the gun-barrel to find the trigger. There was a second report. An inert mass of hair-covered body slumped from sight. Dineen ran on.

EXHAUSTED, speechless, Dineen came to his camp bleeding from leeches, his feet cut and gashed, his face gray and grim. He gave the command to go out and fell into Inbam's arms. They carried him in a hammock to the dark river and canoe. Repentant over deserting him, Inbam made that trip comfortable and brought him to the house of Rourke's native wife.

For days he lay, nursed by native women, drinking the bitter herb tea that combats fever, his body massaged with scented unguents, his appetite tempted with delicacies. Rourke's wife asked no questions, but Inbam called daily and talked with her for hours. Dineen knew that she heard from Inbam what had happened in the jungle.

Her house was cool and pleasant, and in time she tried to amuse Dineen with her dances, her body sheathed in glittering metal cloth sewn with little mirrors. She crooned songs and tapped the soft-voiced bells, and one night she began the love pantun he had heard roared from the voice of an ape-man in the jungle. Dineen started up from his couch protesting.

"Not that song!" he cried aghast.

"No?" she asked, her hands still stroking chimes from the bell-gong. "It is the song I sang to my man in the night, *Tuan*. A song he loved. And it is time I was doing what must be done."

"What must you do?" he asked.

"*Tuan*, the enemy that tortured him must die. Inbam has told me much, and you shouted much in the fever which tortured you. Omar Sung Loo shall not continue his evil magic and fill the jungle with fear!" Her small body seemed to grow in height and dignity. Her soft eyes were black fire.

Dineen protested very little. No white man can argue a native from a blood feud, and Dineen had no pity for Omar Sung Loo or the surgeons who provided his cages with animal freaks.

With a crash of her hands on the bell-gong, Rourke's wife ran to her room and returned wrapped in a black sarong. She went from the house and did not return until just before dawn. She slept that day like a woman drugged, but the servants looked after Dineen. That night as they sat cross-legged at the tiny low table, she ate little, and again as the moon rose she went from the house. It was two days before she returned. Dineen was wakened by a sound and saw her swaying as she made her way through the house to her room.

Then for several days she stayed in the house and seemed to regain spirits that had been exhausted on those nights she was away. A week passed, and one day she said to Dineen:

"*Tuan*, word has been carried to Omar

Sung Loo that there is good tiger-hunting near here. He is coming to trap them. But you must not leave the house while he is near."

A weird chill touched Dineen's flesh. It was evening, with a red moon like an old doubloon rising behind the hills and turning silver. The hot thick scent of flowers weighted the wind.

"I would like to see a tiger trap him," said Dineen.

"Yes, *Tuan*"—her voice held a quivering vibrance of satisfaction like the purring of a cat—"but tigers take vengeance on innocent and guilty men alike. It will not be safe for you to be abroad."

"How brave you are," he said, "to say the name of the tiger boldly. Your people always speak of him as 'My Lord'."

He saw her slow smile in the moonlight.

"Perhaps the *Tuan* remembers the little bag of tiger dust my beloved took from the unmentionable Omar Sung Loo. It is mine now. Besides, there are tigers and tigers. Most of them are stupid beasts intent only on fending for existence. Has the *Tuan* heard of the tiger *berhantu*?"

"Ghost tigers!" he said. "I have heard. Rourke believed in them. I do not. Anyway, it happens I have never killed a tiger, so no spirit need take vengeance on me."

"*Tuan*, it is not dead tigers you need fear. But you will give me the word of a white *Tuan* that you will not leave my house until vengeance is accomplished!"

She swayed before him, sitting on her heels with her pretty head bent in supplication. He saw his pearls in a string around the creamy column of her throat. A queer fascination caught him as her head lifted and he looked into the black fire of her eyes, which slowly brightened until they were shining amber in the moonlighted porch. He was ready to grant her slightest wish; yet his mood was unaffected by her prettiness as a woman. She was no longer quite normal. He felt the burning desire of her vengeance toward Rourke's murderer as she rose and stood before him motionless, then spread her arms and bent her body as if dedicating herself to a mission.

She went from the house, but that night Dineen sat in a porch chair, dozing and waking until the dark hour before dawn, when in the night noises he heard another sound. Something crept stealthily nearer. The slanting moonlight showed a long shape stirring the flower hedge it came through. He saw a tawny body. Then to his horror it reared up on its hind legs, and the two forepaws and velvet-striped head of a tiger rose above the floor boards of the porch. He saw its shining green eyes, its bristling whiskers, its black muzzle and white fangs, the long claws clenched on the floor matting.

As he stared, the tiger head changed. Like breath blown on hot metal it was misted and blurred. Before his terrified gaze the velvet stripes of the head fused into the black hair of Rourke's wife, framing her amber-tinted face. The tiger body flowed up the steps, transfusing itself into the slender body of the girl, which stood there shuddering, her black hair veiling arms that were torn and scratched. One hand was drawn across her lips and came away stained darkly. Then she saw Dineen in the porch chair.

Rage leaped furiously to life in her tired flesh.

"*Tuan*, how dare you sleep here? Long have we nursed you through fever. The night chill will bring it on again."

"I'm not afraid of night chill or ghost tigers!" he said gently.

He heard a gasping sob as she vanished

in the house, heard her cot creak as she dropped on it to sleep.

THAT day Dineen sent for Inbam, who was plainly reluctant to speak of the fate of Rourke or the ruse to fetch Omar Sung Loo tiger-trapping, until Dineen forced him to talk by mentioning that Inbam had deserted him in the jungle, a crime for which the punishment was severe if complaint was made.

"I shall not interfere with your affairs, Inbam, but I want some questions answered. Otherwise——" his tone held a threat. "Now tell me what became of the helpers of that Chinese surgeon in the jungle *kampong*."

"*Tuan*, they were killed by a tigress and the ants have picked their bones."

"And your kinswoman in this house, had she a hand in that vengeance, Inbam?" he asked.

"Of a truth, *Tuan*, is she not the widow of a white *Tuan* the Chinese devils killed? More I can not answer, except that what is written, is written."

"Where does Rourke's widow go by night, Inbam?"

"*Tuan*, I dare not follow her to know."

"But you know where she goes, Inbam."

"*Tuan*, I know only that what is written, is written!"

"Where is Omar Sung Loo, Inbam?"

"Word comes that he is on his way to trap tigers and should be here soon."

The widow slept all that day. Intrigued and curious about her, Dineen came to her couch and stood looking down through the mosquito-netting. An impulse prompted him to hum the love pantun softly. Hearing it in her sleep, she stirred and sighed and began to murmur words. Dineen listened shamelessly.

"Beloved . . . five have I killed. . . . I leaped from the gloom. My fangs gripped and shook them. A golden death all too merciful for such dogs. They were his men, Beloved. . . . And I have his scent. Your murderer shall not escape long."

DINEEN went quietly away and sat brooding on the mysterious and uncanny problem until tiffin, but the widow did not appear. He finally went to bed but lay awake, and as the moon sailed high he was aware of her soundless gliding to the door and into the flower hedge. He followed and found the black sarong she had left there. He had slept that afternoon and had no difficulty staying awake until the hour she returned. From inside the house he watched again until he heard the soft thud of bounding paws and distinctly saw by a moon late enough to leave its frail ghost by dawnlight, the striped body of the tigress transformed as it glided over the porch, into the body of Rourke's widow. He saw the startling green glow of her eyes as she went to her room. That morning he stood beside her again and saw the change in her appearance. She had been a dainty, perfumed creature. Now her face was haggard, her amber-colored flesh was scratched, her nails were broken and grimed, and about her was the fetid odor of the great carnivore's breath, faint yet distinct.

As he watched, her body moved, stretched and curled again like a cat, and her fingers flexed and spread like claws. Dineen touched her wrist. Without a movement her eyes opened their glowing green fire; yet in the light the iris narrowed to a thin slit of emerald flame. Her head rubbed against his arm, and like a kitten her tongue licked at his hand.

He jerked back and spoke sharply. Blood oozed to the surface of the skin her tongue had rasped. Then he regretted

speaking, for she wakened fully, and he saw she was bewildered, and shuddered convulsively, moaning a little.

"I dreamed, *Tuan!* I dreamed I was caught in a trap!"

"Then take warning," he said gently. "Leave vengeance to the gods." Then, ashamed of a speech that betrayed his own weak slipping into a belief in this dreadful metempsychosis, he left her abruptly, thinking it was high time he cleared out and went back to the haunts of his own logical-minded race.

"Tomorrow I leave," he announced to her late that afternoon.

She did not demur, and as usual disappeared as the moon rose. As before, he waited until dawn, but this time his vigil was fruitless. She did not return. Remembering that she sometimes stayed away for a few days, he was not alarmed until Inbam came running in the noonday heat when no native willingly stirs abroad. He was greatly upset and excited and almost incoherent as he blurted out the news that Omar Sung Loo had trapped a splendid tigress and was shipping her back to his *kampong*.

"*Tuan*, you must buy this tigress and set it free," wailed Inbam. "I tried to buy it. I offered all I possessed and all my kinsfolk possessed, but he will not sell. *Tuan*, he trapped the tigress with bags of white dust he scattered, a magic powder that made her forget her cunning and roll in it like a cub at play. But she must be freed, *Tuan*. Buy her. By your hope of Paradise, you must free this tigress."

Dineen leaned forward in his chair, staring at the agonized Inbam.

"Why should I set this tigress free?" he demanded.

"By the spirit of *Tuan* Rourke who was your friend, you must. *Tuan*, it is past the belief of a white *Tuan*. But the tigress is my kinswoman, the wife of *Tuan* Rourke!"

"Nonsense," shouted Dineen. "You lie to me!"

"*Tuan*, I speak truth. She is a tigress *berhantu*. A ghost tigress."

"Then why should cage bars hold her, Inbam?"

"*Tuan*, it is that magic tiger dust of Omar Sung Loo drugging her senses. She lies contented licking it, rolling in the dirty straw, she who loved perfumes and silks and jewels. *Tuan*, see her and know if I lie to you. She wears the pearls you gave her on her neck!"

Dineen laughed harshly. These nightmares were sending him mad. Reason was tottering. He would get out at once. Inbam agreed to go with him, but when they started from the village they learned that Omar Sung Loo had gone, the tigress was on her way to his *kampong*. Driven now by a desire to see the finish of the affair, Dineen followed. The lumbering cage on cart-wheels, drawn by carabaos, was somewhere on the river road, but Dineen took a boat and some time in the night he passed it.

HE WAITED in the village until word came that Omar Sung Loo had returned. Then with a loaded gun in his pocket he went to the *kampong*.

Omar Sung Loo stood at the gate and barred his way belligerently. Smirking and defiant, he said he had nothing for sale.

"You captured a tigress. I will buy her," said Dineen.

"She is not for sale, *Tuan*. Down her black throat has gone more of my magic powder than she is worth. Yet I have an affection for the beast and will not sell her."

"Let me see her!" Dineen's gun poked the belly of Omar Sung Loo and his finger

curved on the trigger. The dealer snarled and backed toward the *kampong* where the tigress lay in her cage on dirty jungle grass, her tongue lolling thirstily, her eyes glowing green with hate and fear. She crouched and snarled as Omar Sung Loo came near, and her lithe paw reached through the bars.

Dineen held Omar Sung Loo in a corner by the cage, with his gun still indenting the brown skin. The cries of Omar fell on heedless ears. Dineen began to whistle, then to sing the tune of the love pantun he had heard Rourke's wife sing, and again heard roared from the throat of a bull ape in the jungle.

The effect on the tigress was startling. She lifted her head and roared. She worked herself into a fury and her long claws tore splinters from the cage bars. Then she went into a flurry that made the wooden crate creak and strain. Omar screeched in fear, his defiance was gone.

"*Tuan,* she was kept without food or water, but the cage bars can not hold her now. They are breaking!"

It was true. Two of the bars were gone. The head of the tigress and one foreleg came through. Omar Sung Loo's shaking fingers grabbed a sack of tiger dust from his loin-rag and he tried to loosen the string.

The tigress leaped to earth, and came toward them, her great pads stepping deliberately, daintily, but she was snarling her rage. Fear-stricken, Omar shook the sack of tiger dust, but a hot wind carried it high in air, over the pond. His scream was pitiful, but it was cut short as the tigress leaped.

Dineen whirled as he saw the animal's jaws fasten on the neck of Omar, and she shook him like a rat. His body fell and lay still, blood pulsing from his neck into the dust. Over him the tigress stood, her ears laid back, snarling at Dineen. He saw her body flatten, her muscles gathered to leap.

There came the quick staccato of gunshots and the beautiful beast dropped slowly over the body of the man she had killed.

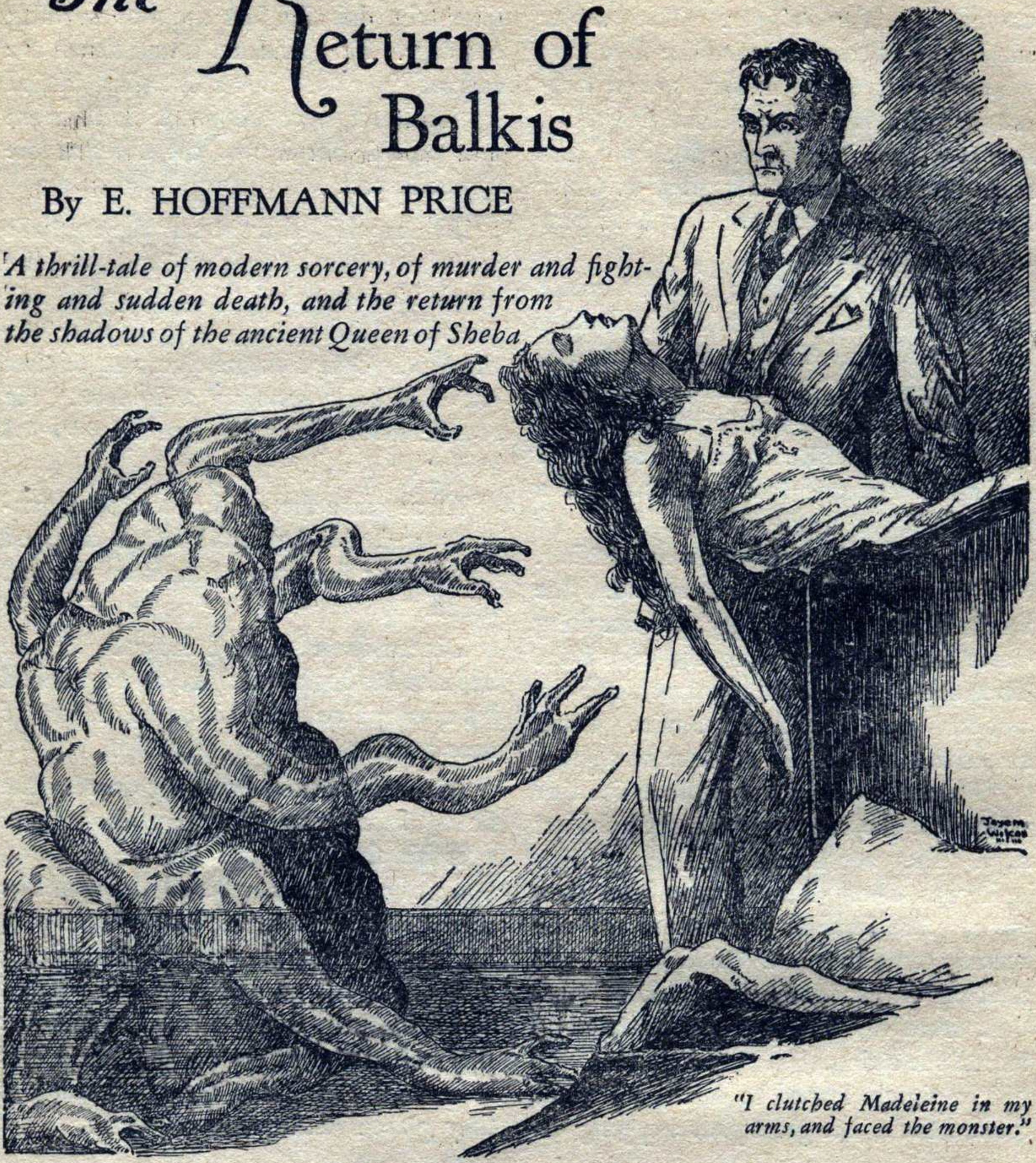
Dineen darted toward the gate. There he halted to look back. He stared, rubbed his eyes and retraced his steps. A cry of near madness came from his lips.

In the sun-baked *kampong* dust lay the dead Omar Sung Loo, face down, and over his shoulders was the amber-tinted body of a woman. Blood drained like scarlet ribbons from the bullet wounds in her breast. About her neck was the string of small pearls he had given the wife of Tom Rourke! But it seemed to him her lips smiled and in her partly opened eyes was a look of triumph slowly dimming as they glazed in the chill of death.

The Return of Balkis

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

A thrill-tale of modern sorcery, of murder and fighting and sudden death, and the return from the shadows of the ancient Queen of Sheba



"I clutched Madeleine in my arms, and faced the monster."

"MY FRIEND," began Pierre d'Artois abruptly, one evening a few days after my arrival in Bayonne, "you have heard that two women can not occupy one house without discord, have you not?"

As he spoke, he thrust aside the untasted glass of *vieux armagnac* at which he had been staring.

"Eh, what's that?" I demanded. He had caught me off guard, and at loss for the proper response to what seemed the opening remarks of a discussion of wife versus mother-in-law: an odd topic, since, happily, it could at the best be only academic as far as either Pierre or I was concerned. "Well, now that you mention it, doubtless the situation has its trying features. But——"

"*Alors,*" continued d'Artois, "what if two women are seeking to occupy the same body?"

"Good Lord, Pierre!" I began. "This is too thick. Two women *in the same body?*"

But I could not hurdle it, even with a running start.

"Yes. Exactly that," affirmed Pierre. "Madeleine's personality is splitting. An intruder from across the Border is taking possession of her."

D'Artois was referring to the daughter of his old friend, André Delorme. Her presence in Pierre's house had been a surprize to me, particularly since d'Artois in his letter of a week ago, inviting me from Bordeaux, had said nothing about his expecting a decidedly charming guest from the States to enliven my visit.

"An intruder from across the Border?" I said, groping for my wits.

The idea was hard to assimilate. But I had noticed something strange about Madeleine Delorme. She was colorfully charming, despite the swiftly changing moods that had baffled and disconcerted me; yet there was a suggestion of the uncanny.

"Now that you mention it," I continued, "it did seem as though some second personality was regarding me from her eyes. At times their expression was very old, and absolutely alien. Could that be what you mean?"

"For a fact, that is exactly what I mean," assured d'Artois.

" 'Some one is trying to crowd me out of myself,' she said to me a few days before your arrival. 'I dare not relax. Not for a moment. It is waiting and ready, lurking beside me. It is gaining in strength. At times I feel that I am some one else. I'm afraid to leave the house. It might take possession of me, and lead me—oh, good God, but where might it not lead me?'

"*Alors,* I had her leave the *pension* where she was staying, and move into my house, where I could observe her. I thought at first that it was a hysterical fancy. But one night I *saw*. Then I knew."

D'Artois paused. I wondered what it could have been that he had seen. There are vaults and passages far beneath the ancient city that for centuries have been lost to the memory of those who daily throng the arcades of rue Pont Neuf, and the narrow tortuous length of rue d'Espagne. Something archaic and malignant was whispering from the blacknesses of those unhallowed mazes. It had spoken to Madeleine, and she had heard.

Bayonne is ancient, somnolent, fantastic as a hasheesh dream, and as strangely beautiful when of a morning the gray walls and battlements of the citadel are afloat on the low-hanging river mists, and the cathedral spires reach into the early light like long slim lance-heads. But at night the blacknesses of the crypts far below the level of the moat that girdles the city begin their murmuring: and Madeleine had listened too long.

"But see for yourself," continued d'Artois. "We will watch in her room. It will return. It is growing strong in its success——"

"Who will return?" I demanded, as I followed him up the winding staircase. "What manner of thing, or presence, is haunting her?"

"See, and you will know," evaded Pierre, as he led the way down the hall.

D'Artois tapped gently at Madeleine's door.

"She is asleep," he said in a low voice. "But let us go in."

MADELEINE lay under the canopy of a great four-poster bed. The moonlight filtering in through the bars of the window and between the heavy drapes caressed her faultless shoulders and graciously curved throat, and lost itself in

the twining midnight of her hair. She was lovely, this Madeleine Delorme.

And something was crowding her out of her own body! The thought was outrageous. But I remembered other and equally incredible things that had taken place in Bayonne, and could not doubt Pierre's ominous words. And certainly I could not question his sincerity.

D'Artois nudged me, and gestured toward a chair.

"Seat yourself," he whispered. "Wait and you will see."

We sat there in the shadows. I wondered what specter from the dark background of that old city would appear to make good Pierre's ominous words. I heard the silvery chime of the cathedral clock striking eleven. I relaxed. It . . . whatever it would be . . . would not appear until midnight.

But I was wrong. I became aware of a subtle, poison sweetness that permeated the room. And in the darkness to the left of the moonbeams that marched slowly across the floor, I saw a shimmering phosphorescence that elongated, and spread, and took form. It was at first so tenuous that I could distinguish the mantelpiece looming out of the shadows behind it. The odor in the room was becoming more intense. It was like the aroma of embalming spices from some desecrated sarcophagus, but infinitely more pungent. The luminous haze was something from a tomb, or worse. Even as I watched, drugged by that spectral sweetness, the silvery mist became substantial. It assumed a definite form.

It was a woman of surpassingly gracious figure. She wore on her head a tall, curiously wrought diadem. As she turned to face us, I saw that her features were lovely with an evil beauty. Her smile was a curved sinister mockery. Her lips moved, but I could distinguish no sound.

Neither d'Artois nor I stirred. I doubt even that we breathed. We sat there, watching that shadowy, diabolical beauty return our stare. Then she noiselessly approached Madeleine's bed, moving with an undulant, serpentine grace. She bent over the sleeping girl, and made weaving passes with her slender hands.

Madeleine stirred, and murmured in her sleep, and made a gesture as if to repel the presence. She half rose and supported herself on her elbow. Then as she sank back among her pillows, her gesture became one of despair and weariness, and resignation. Her deep sigh was the only sound in the terrible, haunted silence of that room.

I saw a misty vapor rising from her half-parted lips. It floated, and spread like cigarette smoke in a room whose air is utterly still.

"Pardieu!" muttered d'Artois. "She defies us to our teeth!"

He rose from his chair, and advanced a pace.

"Balkis, Queen of the Morning, get you back to the shadows whence you came!" he commanded in a low, tense voice. "Back to the shadows, Balkis, and confuse him who disturbed your rest."

The presence ceased her gestures. She stood erect, and regarded Pierre with eyes burning with fury. She advanced a pace toward him. But instead of retreating, d'Artois took another stride toward that spectral presence. The air became tense from the silent conflict of Pierre's will and the resentment of that ghostly beauty. For an instant it seemed that she was becoming more substantial, and was poised, ready to claw him in her imperious, unspoken wrath.

D'Artois advanced another pace, almost within arm's reach, and confronted her, eye to eye. He feared neither man nor devil, that fierce old soldier.

Then he spoke solemnly in a sonorous language that reminded me of Arabic. His voice was low, but the syllables rolled like the surge of a distant surf. As he intoned, he extended his hand in a gesture of command. The presence became more and more tenuous, and retreated. It became a vague fleck of luminescence that paled in the slowly shifting moonlight; and in another moment it vanished.

I heard Pierre's sharply exhaled breath, and saw his shoulders droop wearily. The tension in the room eased abruptly. And then I noted that Madeleine no longer exhaled the misty vapor that had been passing between her lips.

HE TURNED. Trembling violently, I followed him from the room. Under the light in the hall, I could see that his features were drawn and haggard, and that his eyes burned with a fierce light. He too was trembling; not from fright, but from the effort of will which he had exerted in defying the lovely, spectral presence.

"For God's sake, what was it?" I finally ventured to ask, speaking in a whisper. "Will it stay away?"

"That is what is seeking to take possession of her," replied d'Artois. "And it will not stay away, if he who sent it chooses to make it return."

"What is it?" I repeated. "A ghost?"

"In a way, yes," he said, "but no honest ghost walking of its own accord. It is a presence conjured up by some necromancer, and sent to possess her. And though I have driven her away tonight, she will return tomorrow night, and the one thereafter, until she has accomplished her end. I ordered her to leave. I used no formula other than that of solemn command. It was my will against that damnable shade from across the Border."

"But who is she?" I asked, still dazed by the apparition, and by the glare of deadly hatred she had turned on us.

"Balkis, Queen of the Morning," said d'Artois, "and having been aroused from her sleep, she is struggling eagerly to take the body that her damnable ally has sought for her to inhabit. And we can not stop her. True, I drove the presence away. But I must have a better weapon than my unaided will, or in the end, when I am exhausted, she will return, and finally take full possession."

"Good God, Pierre, that's terrible!" I exclaimed, horrified at the thought of a woman's soul being crowded out of her own body.

"But how do you know that this apparition is Balkis? And why did you call her Queen of the Morning?"

"I judged by her costume. And at times Madeleine in her speech gropes for words, as though she had forgotten the languages she speaks, or forgot what she intended to say. And then she drops a few foreign words, starts, corrects herself. And those foreign words were in that long-forgotten dialect spoken by the Sabeans. Judge for yourself. Balkis lurks in the body of Madeleine, and even during the day asserts herself.

"But that in itself proves nothing, you understand," d'Artois continued. "This, however, does: when I called her Balkis, Queen of the Morning, and addressed her in her own language, she obeyed me. That title is a play on the Arabic word that designated her ancient kingdom."

I pondered on this for a moment, then resumed my questions.

"But can't some one drive her away, and keep her away?" I demanded. "Haven't the clergy some ritual of exorcism, or has that been discarded in this day and age? I notice you didn't follow the old traditional sign-of-the-cross formula."

"There is nothing essentially evil about Balkis," explained Pierre. "She is only a

woman whom some evil person has called from her grave. And a Christian exorcism would be as meaningless to her as it would be to a Hottentot. She never heard of such a thing. It would be utter vanity.

"An occult knowledge more profound than that possessed by any one in France is required," he continued. "I know of only one person who has it, and I have sent for him. He is a darwish, one of those eccentric mendicants who preserve the occult traditions of the Orient. He is an adept.

"With his assistance, we may succeed, if in the meanwhile Madeleine does not become entirely possessed. Sitting and watching her will be futile. To expel Balkis by the unaided will is a terrific task, and no sooner is it accomplished than she presently returns, and in no wise discouraged."

The mere announcement of the presence of our spectral guest would have been sufficiently disconcerting; but actually to have seen her was too much for my comfort. Yet I finally slept, thanks to a half-pint of Pierre's *vieux armagnac*. It burned like the everlasting fires, but it drugged my wrenched nerves. Dead royalty in the house, visible or invisible, is not an effective sedative.

MADELEINE spent most of the following day in her room. And charming as she was, I was glad that she remained out of sight. Her presence would have been disconcerting. I would have wondered whether Madeleine or her ghostly companion looked at me from those lustrous, almond-shaped eyes. The apparition of the previous night accounted for the indefinable foreign expression of her features. It was the spiritual intrusion of Balkis, leaving its imprint, bit by bit. And those successive visitations would be branded on her brain so that in the end, Madeleine Delorme would be thinking the thoughts and pondering on the age-old memories of dead Balkis.

We sat again in Pierre's study. The evening ritual of cigars and coffee and *liqueur* was somber and unrelieved by the scintillant d'Artois conversation and *esprit* that in the past had made him the perfect host. He was staring at the pattern of the Boukhara rug, and absently lifting a *demi-tasse* to his lips.

I heard the sharp crack of a pistol, the shattering of the cup, a tinkle of glass, and the solid *chunk* of something striking the woodwork behind him.

"The devil!" exclaimed d'Artois, diving to the floor. "We are under fire!"

I snatched the cord that drew the heavy damask drapes away from the windows, letting them close and mask the opening.

"Some one," said Pierre, "resents my expelling Balkis last night. Ah . . . there's where it landed."

With his penknife, d'Artois dug into the door-jamb and extracted a bullet.

"Probably a Luger," he muttered as he studied the jacketed missile. "And, thank God, a bungler fired the shot. My friend, they are hunting us. They see that we are keeping her, and that though they accomplish their devilish aims, it will avail them nothing. Resurrected queens may disturb one's mind, but they do not fire pistols and shoot a *demi-tasse* from one's lips."

Pierre seated himself, and pondered. His brow was cleft by a triple-furrowed frown, and he twisted his fierce gray mustache. Then, finally, he spoke.

"Some one has prepared Madeleine for this outrage, and has overcome her will, so that when she is asleep she can not any longer deny the ghostly intruder that would inhabit her body. And that one, *pardieu,* is the person we must find. Somewhere in this town is a necromancer whose terrible studies have led him to

this outrage. Some one has called Balkis from the shadows of twenty-eight dusty centuries. She has not appeared of her own volition. This wasted bullet bears witness to her living sponsor."

He paused for a moment, regarded me intently, and continued in a low, tense voice, "Some necrophile is enamored of the Queen of the Morning, and wishes to give her a new body."

"Necrophile?" I shuddered at the hideous implication. "But that would signify——"

"That is hair-splitting," d'Artois interrupted. "Whether this one be in love with the very body of dead Balkis, or whether, as in the present case, it is her spirit for which he seeks a living body, he is still a necrophile. And this, while less horrible to contemplate than that which you had in mind, is really a greater outrage, since it is directed against a person who would much rather be herself than any number of departed queens. *Mordieu!* And rightly so!

"We know now that we have men as well as a phantom to combat. This wild shot has betrayed the nature of the enemy, and we shall track down this lover of dead Balkis. And then, when that old darwish appears—I cabled the consuls and Residents of every port in whose hinterland he might be—he will expel Balkis and she will swallow her rage and go back to her disturbed sleep, to dream once more of Suleiman.

"Do you, therefore, watch by her room. Do not fear the presence if it appears. For it is constantly here, whether visible or not. If anything substantial enough to handle a pistol or knife appears, draw and fire. With the full moon, you may enjoy excellent shooting!"

Pierre's gray eyes had a steely glitter, and he spoke now with his old vivacity. That bullet which had picked the *demi-tasse* from his very lips had immeasurably encouraged him.

"We will hunt him down, *pardieu!*" he exclaimed. "And in the meanwhile, we will divide the watches of the night. Take your post, and your choice of pistols. I will relieve you at midnight. And until then, I will be busy with some deductions of my own. While we are awaiting the arrival of our excellent darwish, we may find that accursed lover of dead queens, and he will regret his poor marksmanship. *Salaud!* I will not miss!"

I SELECTED a pistol from Pierre's arsenal, and took my post in the hallway, just outside Madeleine's door. I knew that her windows were barred, and that nothing larger than a cat could slip through. And being on the second floor, it would require exceptionally clever work for an intruder to steal in and make away with her. The sawing or forcing of the bars, moreover, would betray him, then and there.

This, however, did not lull me into a sense of false security. The knowledge that in the room beyond the door, Balkis might be bending over Madeleine, and with ceremonious gestures and passes be commanding her spirit to leave its body, was sufficient to keep me from becoming sleepy, or negligent in my watch. I paced up and down the carpeted hallway. Yet it was an eery vigil, and I forced myself to cease visioning that sinister, shadowy presence that Pierre had confronted the night before. At times, I fancied that I could again smell the subtle sweetness that had heralded the materialization of dead Balkis.

There was a window at the end of the hallway. I glanced out, occasionally, and saw nothing but the light of a full moon. But the black shadows seemed alive with emanations filtering from the ancient, un-

disturbed soil of the citadel. A conclave of evil was abetting Balkis. This house had become a focal point of entities that the power of some necromancer had released in summoning Balkis from the dust. I entered the vacant room that adjoined Madeleine's. It was the one that her maid had occupied before leaving in terror one night after having seen the apparition. Like Madeleine's, it faced the tree-clustered parkway that extended from the gray walls and moat toward the highway that leads to ruined Château Maracq.

I looked down into the deserted street that ran along the city wall. Once I thought I could see a figure lurking in an angle of the parapet. And then it seemed after all to be only a wisp of river mist, or perhaps a whirling of wind-blown dust. But I started, stared for an instant, and shivered, for even the dust of this ancient town is alive and vibrant with that which it has received and assimilated since mediæval sorcerers and alchemists crouched shuddering over their terribly charged alembics that bubbled and dripped strange distillates, and fumed in the red glare of charcoal furnaces.

But that dust cloud or fog wisp could not reach to the second story. So I returned again to the hall, to walk my post.

I heard Pierre stirring about in the study on the first floor. He commanded the entrance of the house. Then later, I heard him exclaim and mutter. Some late visitor, I thought, as the door opened. And then . . .

I heard a gasp, and a groan, and the thud of a falling body and the splintering of wood.

"*Sacré nom d'un nom!*" I heard Pierre exclaim.

That was enough. They were taking us by assault. As I bounded down the winding stairway, three steps at a time, I drew my pistol.

Another crash, and a splintering of glass, and the smack of a pistol.

"Hold 'em, Pierre!" I shouted. And an instant later, I landed with a leap in the vestibule. A man lay stretched out on the floor. Pierre was struggling with another, seeking to wrench from his hand a long, curved knife. A third, groaning and cursing, was reaching for a pistol that lay beyond his grasp. Just as d'Artois back-heeled his adversary and sent him crashing into a corner, I opened up with my pistol. The gentleman on the floor lost all interest in the weapon he sought.

"Back to your post, *imbécile!*" d'Artois yelled, as he turned to face me. "See if they are attacking the second floor."

"But the windows——"

"Back to your post! Immediately!"

As I turned to obey, I heard another crash, and saw d'Artois following me. The yard-long blade of a Moro kampilan flashed as he leaped after me, carrying the weapon at the port.

WE BURST into Madeleine's room. Pierre's intuition had been right. In the moonlight we saw three intruders. Two of them were about to take Madeleine from her bed. The third with a gesture was indicating the window. I saw that the bars had been wrenched aside, and caught a glimpse of a rope ladder, apparently let down from the roof.

As we leaped into the room, the leader shouted a warning, and Madeleine's captors dropped her to the bed from which they were lifting her. A pistol cracked. I saw Pierre flinch from the impact, but the shot did not stop him. His blade flashed forward and up, ripping his enemy from waist to chin.

As I turned to let drive at the one who

was leaping across Madeleine's bed, knife in hand, a fourth, emerging from a corner, struck my arm. My shot went wild; and then my pistol jammed as I whirled about to fire at the assailant from the side. A blade raked my ribs, and in another instant I was grappling hand to hand with the newcomer, striving to brain him with my clubbed pistol, and to avoid his curved knife.

We crashed to the floor. Luckily, it was his head and not mine that was dashed against the massive leg of Madeleine's bed. I rapped the useless pistol against his skull for good measure, and staggered to my feet.

D'Artois, blade in hand, was facing the two survivors. One was poised to leap and thrust with his knife. The other, pistol rising from his hip, was ready to drop d'Artois.

One of them would be sliced in half by that yard-long kampilan. One of them was a dead man. But the other would account for d'Artois as I hurdled the bed to close in, hand to hand. Neither thrust nor shot could miss at that range.

There was but one thing to do. I hurled my jammed pistol at the one about to fire. I missed. It crashed into a mirror. I had failed d'Artois.

Then, during that despairing instant in which I leaped, empty-handed and too late, it happened.

I saw an incredibly swift, fluent flash of steel, and a spurt of fire; heard a grunt, a shot, a yell of mortal terror, and once more the sound of steel biting home.

Pierre, poised and tense in his moment of extreme peril, had lunged as the shivering of the glass distracted the enemy's attention, and slashed asunder the one who fired, an instant too late. Then, cat-like, he whirled about to cut down the survivor.

All in a glance, I saw him, knife still clutched, sink to the floor. The kampilan, wedged in the bones of the hip, was pulled from Pierre's grasp.

D'Artois sighed, tottered, and leaned against the bed-post.

Of the two, I was the most shaken, as spectators usually are.

"Christ, Pierre!" I exclaimed. I had to say something. "You'd make a wonderful *jurmentado!* But did that first shot get you?"

"Only a scratch," he assured. "The second missed entirely."

He shook his head, and regarded the two at his feet.

"They should have died in good spirits," he muttered, "knowing how close they came to taking the hide of Pierre d'Artois. And that shot, earlier this evening—*mordieu!* Some one is cursing his poor marksmanship.

"That attack at the front door," he continued, "was undoubtedly a ruse to draw you from your post. As for the window—look!"

He indicated the bars that had been wrenched aside.

"Those were sawed in advance of the attempt. All of which confirms my suspicions. We are contending with more than ghosts. This necromancer has a well organized crew of cutthroats, who——"

"Good Lord," I interrupted, "she's not even awakened by all this rioting."

"No," replied d'Artois. "Nor is that strange. My guess—*tu comprends,* it is but a guess—is that Madeleine has been carefully prepared for this outrage. Some one has hypnotized her and impressed upon her mind certain commands which she executes without knowing why."

"But how could she be hypnotized, and not know it?" I wondered. "Did she mention——"

"That is simple," explained d'Artois. "He could order her to forget it, and all

else but the commands he wants her to remember. But give me a hand, and we will heave this carrion into the courtyard."

One by one we dragged the intruders to the window and heard them drop to the paving below.

"In the morning," said Pierre, "I will have new bars set into the window. Better yet, we will move her into another room, although that will in all probability not fool them. And then I must report this skirmish to the police. It will be embarrassing, but I think that I can convince *Monsieur le Préfet,* without his having to listen to any talk about a queen loitering about the house."

Then, as I followed him down the stairway, "Those I left scattered about down below must also be disposed of."

But as we entered the vestibule, we saw not a sign of those that d'Artois had struck down.

He stared at me for an instant, and frowned.

"One would think from this, *mon vieux,* that we were indeed under close observation. Even as we fought up there, some one hauled the casualties away. Do you, therefore, sleep, and I will stand watch the rest of the night. While another attempt is not at all likely, it would be best to take no chances."

And though the events of the evening did not tend to promote sound sleep, I did better than the previous night. Nevertheless, I was up shortly after sunrise.

I FOUND d'Artois sitting on the balcony overlooking the moat, and the rolling parkway below. Raoul was serving coffee.

"My friend," said d'Artois as I greeted him, "I will allow you no more than three of those guesses. What happened while you snored so melodiously to keep me awake on my post?"

"Good Lord, Pierre!" I exclaimed, fearing the worst. "Surely, they didn't return and——"

"They did indeed return, and——"

He laughed outright at my dismay, then continued, "And take away those we heaved into the court. Under my nose, *pardieu,* or while you and I surveyed the wreckage in my study. But they asked for no more steel!" he concluded with a grim smile, and a twist of his fierce gray mustache.

Then, as an afterthought, "But this enemy is no incompetent bungler, despite his poor marksmanship."

As I sipped my coffee, and digested Pierre's last remark, I glanced down rue Lachepaillet. The street extends from the citadel commandant's headquarters, along the city wall, to the guardhouse at the Porte d'Espagne drawbridge. An old man was striding jauntily up the grade. His white beard streamed in the morning breeze. He wore an Arab's burnoose, and headkerchief. The hilt of a simitar peeped over his shoulder, and his belt bristled with daggers.

A frown wrinkled his scar-seamed forehead as he halted and regarded the number over the front door.

"Pierre," I said, "it seems we have a visitor."

D'Artois thrust aside his coffee, and glanced down from the balcony.

"*Holá!* Nureddin!" he hailed.

"*Ya* Pierre!" shouted the old fellow, as he looked up and recognized d'Artois.

The ensuing sputter of Arabic was too fast for my ear. And then d'Artois, after hesitating for a moment at the balcony railing, decided the leap was too great for his years, and dashed down the stairs to admit his visitor.

"*Ya sidi,*" said the old man, as Pierre

seized his hand, "the British Resident at Aden sought me out in the desert and gave me your message. And behold, I am here, *el hamdu lilahi!*"

"And I also praise God, my good friend," exclaimed d'Artois devoutly. And then, "Raoul! Coffee!"

Turning to me, Pierre continued, "This is Nureddin, a holy darwish with whom I have had dealings in the past."

The old fellow grinned, nodded, and said, "By the bounty of Allah, I am indeed a pious recluse, but my friend Pierre summoned me from my meditations."

He made the last part of his declaration solemnly; but the twinkle in his keen old eyes convinced me that his holiness had been considerably diluted of late.

"There were no vessels, and I was in a hurry," he continued. "So in my despair, I approached the crew of a *zaroug* lying at anchor. I gave them various presents. We threw the *nakhoda* overboard, with the help of Allah, and set sail."

And then Raoul served coffee. Nureddin's piety did not keep him from relishing the brandy that Raoul had added.

This wrinkled old reprobate from the hinterland of Aden must be the ally that Pierre had summoned, relying on past friendship to bring him in such haste. Piracy, it seemed, was a new accomplishment, for as he sipped his coffee, he repeated with gusto how with the help of God they had thrown the captain overboard, and sailed up the Red Sea.

"We were not far from the shore, *sidi*," he added, "and the dog refused a fair offer I made him. My crew? *Wallah*, they will remain in the *zaroug*. Eight stout Dankalis. Wild men from behind Djibouti. The voyage kept them busy, but lying here in idleness, they will doubtless cut each other to pieces——"

"Say you so, my friend?" interrupted d'Artois. "I will give them cutting in good measure."

Nureddin's eyes brightened.

"Praise God!" he ejaculated devoutly. "But I saw no camels in the public square this morning, and I feared that there were no caravans to rob——"

"There are none," admitted Pierre. "But we have better game for you. And as for your Dankalis, let them make camp in the courtyard. I have work for the good fellows."

"In that case, my lord," replied the old darwish, "I will get them at once."

And Nureddin, striking light to a cigarette, strode briskly to the door, and thence down rue Lachepaillet.

"WHERE," I demanded, "did you find him?"

"That is Nureddin, the darwish," said Pierre. "A pious and holy man——"

"Holy, hell!" I exclaimed. "Then I'm a cardinal."

"Despite his occasional trifling with caravans, he is, according to his own standards, a pious and holy man," d'Artois insisted. "He robs only heretic Persians——"

"And dumps the *nakhoda* over the side, as his debut in piracy," I interrupted.

"*Tiens!*" scoffed Pierre. "He was in a hurry on my account. As I said, the good fellow is versed in occult sciences. He has even been in that lost city Madinat ash-Shams, far beyond the ruins of Mareb. He, if any one, can get to the bottom of this matter. Be of good cheer, my friend. This accursed pack of devil-mongers will have the crimp put in their style!"

D'Artois was enormously cheered by the arrival of his strange ally. I could see that he had shaken off the burden of despair that had weighed him down ever since my arrival in Bayonne.

In order to thwart a repetition of the previous night's raid, we decided to continue our watch. The power that was reaching forth to clutch Madeleine had become stronger. Her eyes had become strange in expression, and regarded us with curiosity mingled with resentment. Her slow, enigmatic smile made us shudder from its resemblance to the shadowy Balkis whom Pierre had commanded to leave, that night that we had seen the apparition. And then, once in a while, we caught flashes of Madeleine herself, bewildered, and dazed, and strange in her own body. Her gestures had become undulant and serpentine. It was terrifying to watch Madeleine being rapidly thrust into the background by the invader. She was lovelier, perhaps, than she had been, but it was a dismaying beauty that came from the grave of Balkis.

Happily, she was awake but little of the day. And shortly after sunset, she fell into a deep sleep.

"Watch her closely, my friend," said Pierre. "Do not relax from your vigilance even for a moment. Nureddin and I will divide the watches with you. Beware of any trickery to distract you. Call me if you should become drowsy—no matter how early it may be, call me at once."

In view of the strategy employed by the enemy in the attack of the preceding night, I took my post in Madeleine's room. I examined the window-bars, and noted that they had not been tampered with. And regardless of whatever disturbance I might hear from below, I resolved not to quit my post. With Pierre, and the old Arab, Nureddin, and the crew of Dankalis from the *zaroug,* any handful of cutthroats that the unknown devil-monger might send would meet an adequate reception committee.

It was utterly inconceivable, a woman's being crowded out of her own body; yet Madeleine had actually become another person. When, during her waking moments, Nureddin had succeeded in cajoling her from her haughty silence, she had addressed him in what the darwish declared was the language of the ancient Sabeans.

The classic example of the illiterate servant-girl's reciting long passages of Hebraic which she had overheard her master, a philologist, declaiming did not apply to Madeleine. The servant in the delirium of fever *recited,* whereas Madeleine *conversed.* The distinction and the logical inference were painfully obvious.

Balkis the Queen remembered that her people, the Sabeans, were cousins of the Arabs, and she recognized the kinship between her and the darwish. She considered Pierre and me as aliens. She spoke in the present tense of the lost splendors of Madinat ash-Shams, that city whose ruins are in Arabia, far behind Mareb.

"By Allah!" the darwish had exclaimed at the end of one of those conversations, "I have seen those ruins. And I know that she speaks of that city as it was in the days of Suleiman, upon whom be the peace!

"She is verily Balkis, *Malikat as-Sabahh!*" he continued, lowering his voice in awe. "The Queen of the Morning. And look you, *sidi,* those are the eyes of a Sabean woman of the line of Iaraab, of pure race."

It was terrifying to think that a necromancer loved a dead queen, and could summon her from her grave, and plan so that his accursed lips might thrill to the caress of one who had smiled at Solomon.

Then what of the true Madeleine? Into what darkness was she banished?

In what limbo, neither living nor dead, did she roam, desolate and become like a bird without feathers?

Hideous! Only in this hasheesh dream of a city could this infamy have occurred.

The moon was almost full. In another night, lean, wrinkled Nureddin would try his occult arts, whether or not the identity of the devil-monger was known. And in the meanwhile, he and d'Artois were taking counsel.

The night was warm and pleasant, yet suddenly I shivered. My thoughts were poor company. I knew that this room was alive with presences, and that the very silence masked the soundless murmuring of powers who were striving to make a final assault against that body whose soul they had banished.

I could not see them, but they were assembling.

The room had become a congress of evil, unseen shapes. Dead Balkis had been only an apparition, which should have been asleep rather than awake and wandering. But this which I now sensed approaching was malignant, and obscene in its own right.

The moonlight that had streamed in through the window was becoming dimmed.

"Only a cloud," I reassured myself. But I knew better.

Madeleine—Balkis—stirred uneasily, and murmured. Then her great dark eyes opened. They had the sightlessness of drugged sleep. I knew that something was commanding her silence.

The cloud that blotted the moon must now be very dense. The moon sought to hide her face from the evils of creation. The air was now vibrant with menace. Balkis, ghost that she was in a living body, was at least human. I wondered for a moment if I could awaken her, and let her dark eyes and strange tongue reprove me for my insolence, so that I would not be utterly alone in this whirlpool of evil. I wondered then if even Balkis was present. That darkened room had become appallingly empty, save for that malevolence that had become a concentrated fury.

I glanced at the window, and saw that which I had not heard. Then I wondered if, indeed, I saw. That which stared between the stout half-inch bars of steel was a thing which could not have any existence. It was a foulness and an abomination and an outrage, that slate-gray, amorphous presence, four of whose misshapen hands clutched the sill. It was that whose soundless approach, and not any cloud, had obscured the moon.

The reptilian stench of the creature choked me, and its baleful eyes paralyzed me. I gasped, and licked my dry lips, and sought to yell, but my throat was a dusty void through which my breath hissed and muttered futilely. I had a pistol, but as in a dreadful nightmare, my numb hands would not draw and fire. I knew that firing would be useless. I knew that it would be vain to alarm Pierre and the darwish, and the Dankali sailors.

Two of the hands gripped the bars, and strained against them, until they stretched and snapped. And then another pair gave way before the resistless force of that monster. It was translucent in the moonlight; and despite its prodigious strength, it was unsubstantial seeming, and formless. It was a foulness from those unhallowed vaults, coming to do the bidding of him who had resurrected and enslaved dead Balkis.

THE window was now clear. That shapeless, monstrous thing flowed into the room with its ghastly confusion of limbs. The reptilian mustiness of

serpent-infested subterranean caverns made the air dense and stifling and foul.

In that extreme of terror, I could no longer tremble. A lethargic resignation possessed me. And then I remembered that it had come at its diabolical master's command to seize Madeleine. My throat was still inarticulate, but with a mighty effort I regained command of my arms. I seized the chair on which I had been sitting and with the strength of frenzy, smote the creature on the head. I thought, at least, that it was its head, but I could not be sure, for the monstrosity transcended the anatomy of honest beasts.

The chair splintered, and yet bounded back as though I had smitten an inflated tire. I lashed out again with what remained in my hand. It ignored me, and lumbered toward Madeleine's bed. It was as indifferent to position as it was to blows; for instead of rising from its dive to the floor, it waddled sidewise, crablike. That formless foulness moved but with a single idea. It was devoid of perceptions. If it were cut to fragments, they would unite, and march on. Neither beast, nor reptile, nor plant, but a hideous blending of them.

It waddled, dragging its members with a scraping, hissing rustling. Nothing could stop that abysmal foulness.

It would take Madeleine to the den of the necromancer. Madeleine was doomed, and before my staring eyes. My paralyzed throat still sought to yell, but could not. A fragment of the heavy chair still hung in my grasp. Hopeless. Hopeless. What if the Dankalis drove their broad-bladed knives through it? What if Pierre sliced it with that two-handed Moro kampilan? Futile. Vain. The master demanded Madeleine. And it served. It advanced, deliberately.

"No, by God!" my mind said, though my lips were dumb. "There is a way."

I leaped past the terror, clutched Madeleine in my arms, and faced the monster. Madeleine—Balkis—was the beloved of that damnable necromancer. It would not hurt her.

I shuddered, and sickened as it embraced me and my still sleeping burden. I held her in a frenzied grip, so that it would seize us as one. My senses whirled and spun as the deadly vileness exhaled by the creature stifled me.

"Must . . . hold . . . tight."

Good God, what would not a breath . . . one breath . . . of pure air be worth! And that amorphous, textureless travesty on all creation was touching *her*. I wondered how her bare skin could endure that which made me shudder from the contamination that filtered through my heavier clothing.

That quintessence of all subterranean loathsomeness. . . .

"Must . . . hold . . . tight . . . go with . . . her . . ."

My last conscious impression was that we were descending the masonry side of the building. Very vaguely, and as from a great distance, I heard yells of frantic men crying out in a strange language.

The Dankali sailors had seen it. . . .

Then no more, until—I know not how much later—I opened my eyes, and saw that I was in a vast, high-ceiled room pervaded with a phosphorescent greenness that quivered and glowed and flickered maddeningly. The expanse of floor was so broad that the furniture, visible at the far side, seemed diminutive. I was lying near the wall. My hands and feet were tied with cords. My desperate strategy had worked, though to what end, I knew not. I had followed Madeleine into the house of the sorcerer, or into his subterranean den. I had no ideas on my location, whether above or below ground.

My clothing still reeked from the foulness of that which had brought us here, although the stench was rapidly becoming less intense. I shivered from the memory of that repugnant contact.

In the dim light of the room, I could distinguish hooded and robed figures. Some sat cross-legged, each on a bench scarcely larger than a coffee-table. Others, shadowy, ominous presences, conferred in low tones. A heavy haze of incense from several wrought-iron tripods clouded the room with its dizzying, breath-taking fumes. From another apartment, beyond the brocaded draperies, that concealed a doorway, I could hear the muttering of kettle-drums, and the whine of single-stringed *kemenjahs*, and the sobbing notes of pipes. The weird, minor harmony sent chills up my spine.

Then a man garbed in formal evening attire emerged from the shadows not far from me. He was tall and aquiline-featured; his eyes were glittering and phosphorescent, like those of a great cat.

This was the Master of the show, that necromancer who had defiled the very order of life in his attempt to gratify his ghastly whim; and those robed, hooded figures that moved through the spectral haze of the room were his acolytes, and his adepts in the devilish hierarchy which he had assembled.

ONE of the adepts strode across the tile floor and halted within a few paces of the Master. He was lean, and cadaverous, and his bald head was bulbous and dome-like. He carried in his hand a long, carven staff on which he leaned as he rendered his report in halting French.

"All is in readiness, Master," he said. "We are waiting for your command."

"Then wait no longer," replied the necromancer. "Bring her into the hall at once."

I had wondered for a moment as to my own fate. But as I heard the Master's instruction, and saw that corpse-like fellow with the staff hurrying from one group to the next, issuing orders in a low, hoarse voice, my thoughts reverted to Madeleine. Some final ritual, some uttermost outrage seemed to be necessary before Madeleine would be utterly expelled from her body, and everlastingly cast into the darkness from which dead Balkis had been summoned.

I heard the resonant clang of a brazen gong. A woodwind instrument breathed mellow, evil notes that bore a mocking semblance to the human voice. Then four litter-bearers, nude save for loincloths, strode across my field of vision. Despite my bonds, I contrived to wriggle to a sitting position, against the wall. I saw that it was Madeleine they were carrying to the dim shadows of the extremity of the hall. As they approached their destination, I saw a muffled figure flitting about, taper in hand, touching light to other tapers. Their glow was wan in that poisonous greenish phosphorescence; but the added illumination revealed an altar, and an arched shrine whose monstrous carvings leered horribly in the flickering, sickly flames.

The acolytes laid Madeleine on the altar. Then with ceremonious gestures and obeisance, they retreated and took their posts at the left of the shrine.

The Master, incongruous in his faultless *costume de rigueur,* then approached the shrine, and halting three paces distant, extended his arms.

At his gesture, the gongs clanged again, and as their brazen thunder subsided in a hissing, rustling shiver, he raised his voice in a terrific invocation.

"Balkis! Balkis! Balkis, Queen of Saba! I have descended into the shadows, and into the grave, and led you

back to the morning! I have sifted the dust of forgotten centuries, and found for you a body lovelier than that before! Balkis, Queen of the Morning! Balkis, Queen of the Yaman! I will drive her into the shadows, Balkis, and you will rejoice in this body, and in this new life! I have faced the blacknesses of death, and the terror of the grave and the wrath beyond, for your sake, Balkis. . . ."

It was somber and magnificent and terrible, that deep-throated chant. I shuddered with an ecstasy of horror as I heard that resonant rich voice declaim full-throated above the wailing reeds and mocking mellow pipes. His words were a colossal blasphemy and a superhuman magnificence that echoed the voice of that arch-rebel, Lucifer, Son of the Morning, crying his defiance across the vastnesses of the gulf into which he had been hurled. And I knew that when he reached the climax of that awful invocation, Madeleine would be for ever damned to wander in unfathomable blacknesses; and resurrected Balkis would smile with new eyes and new lips at that mortal who had plunged into the shadows beyond the Border, and led her by the hand to greet once more the morning she had not seen for twenty-eight weary centuries of wasting her beauty among the cheerless dead.

Acolytes stood by, prepared to do that which the ritual prescribed, and waiting for the signal of the Master. The strange utensils and the uncouth objects that they held in readiness hinted at further blasphemies to come.

And then one from the farther shadows came running into the semicircular field of the tapers' glow. His oiled skin shone dully in the flickering light. He bowed his shaven skull to the tiles, and lifted his arms in supplication.

"Master, he is on the way! He knows!"

"What?" thundered the Master. "Who?"

"The enemy, Master!" replied the retainer. "And armed men are with him."

Pierre on the way! The necromancer's spies had come to warn him that the avenger had found the trail, and was on the road to end this toying with the dead, and affronting the living. Pierre had heard. It had not been my fancy, that terrified yell of the Dankalis in the courtyard. Pierre had in some way found a clue which would lead him to this den of uttermost damnation.

THE Master stared at the white form on the altar before him, and at the acolytes ranged about him. He frowned, then clapped his hands. The bulbous-headed, cadaverous one advanced.

"What say you?" demanded the Master.

"Stop him at once," came the reply. "Send It out again. There is yet time. They can form the circle, and It will crush the enemy——"

"Set them to work!" commanded the Master; and then, perturbed, he strode up and down the expanse of tiles.

At a signal from the chief of the acolytes, an attendant smote a brazen gong. He shouted a command. Robed figures emerged from the shadows, each bringing with him his own bench. They arranged themselves in a crescent in the center of the hall. I heard the purr of drums; and then the adepts of the crescent began murmuring in cadence to the rhythm. Lips drawn to thin lines, jaws clenched, they hummed in a droning monotone, as they swayed from the hips, and made serpentine passes and gestures. Their eyes stared glassily in that awful greenish light and their bronzed features were expressionless. They had become automatons, moving to the cadence of those

whining pipes and muttering drums. They were like the evil fantasies of Indian sculpture set to a devilish music. And then the music ceased, so that nothing was audible but that damnable droning, like the buzz of monstrous flies. Finally they broke the unison that had marked their start, and each carried on his own peculiar humming, so that it seemed as though articulate voices were chanting as from a great distance, pronouncing words that I could almost understand.

Then at the point on which their staring eyes were focused, I perceived a hazy, bluish vortex that spun, and expanded and contracted as it spiralled. It elongated, and began an axial spinning. That nebulous vapor expanded, and branched, growing in stature and becoming every instant more solid, until it evolved into a monstrous presence. It was neither human, nor reptile, nor beast, but a hideous travesty that was a blasphemy against created things. It was the counterpart of that which had seized Madeleine. It was even more horrible in that green luminescence than it had been in the moonlight of Madeleine's room. It was a horror and an outrage conceived by those six adepts; and projected by the concentrated force of their wills exerted in unison, it had assumed physical substance. It fed on their will-emanations, and waxed momentarily more and more substantial.

The Master contemplated the horror. He smiled thinly, as well he could, having marched into the grave and led Balkis by the hand to see the morning. He knew that it would waylay Pierre and his men, and crush them in its irresistible grasp, and sear their brains with the terror of its presence.

The droning of the adepts ceased and with it the mutter of drums and whine of strings. They swayed in cadence to the rhythm that had been established. They stared fixedly at the spot from whence the monstrosity had materialized, and gestured with the slow precision of an intricate machine.

The silence was absolute for a moment.

And then I heard the faint, sibilant hiss of the monster's limbs as it dragged them across the tiles. A choking, nauseous vapor exuded from its presence. As it advanced, it began to murmur, and flex its misshapen members as though to test their strength. It paused a moment, as if to receive its final instructions, and then it moved across the floor with a rapidity that belied its grotesquely deformed shape. I heard a door close behind it, and bolts slip into place as that foulness went out into the night to seek Pierre and waylay him. Nor could it miss, for it was guided by the fiendish intelligence of those entranced adepts, who were clairvoyant in that self-imposed hypnosis which enabled them to materialize their malignant thought-form. It would hunt him down. He could not by any chance avoid it; and he could not overcome it.

Madeleine was doomed. In my despair, I became resigned to my bonds. Balkis would smile from her new body, and be untroubled by any lingering vestige of that lovely girl's personality. The Master had but to resume his sonorous invocation, and weave again the spell, complete the ritual recitation of that which he had faced to woo her among the dead, then chant her back to the forgotten light of the morning.

Pierre was doomed, and with him, stout Nureddin who had come across the desert and sailed a frail *zaroug* coastwise from the Red Sea to France. It would annihilate them all, Pierre, the darwish, and the Dankalis with their broad-bladed knives.

A great rage then possessed me, and put to flight my resignation. I would burst my bonds, and bare-handed avenge as much of this infamy as I could until those adepts overwhelmed me. But as I strained at the cords that bound my ankles and wrists, I knew that even that was vanity.

And then a cigar-lighter fell from my vest pocket to the tiles. The Master had not even glanced in my direction. He still paced up and down before the altar, disturbed by the interruption of his ritual. He was waiting to learn of the destruction of Pierre and his party.

Arching my back like a measuring-worm, I placed myself over the cigar-lighter, and with the fingers of one hand, uncapped it, and whirled the milled wheel. The wick ignited. I could feel its tiny, fierce flame eating into my wrists; and above the fumes that rose from the tall wrought-iron tripod censers, I could smell the burning of the cord, and the singeing of hair and flesh. The pain was excruciating. I dared not move. The strain of keeping my body clear of the lighter, so that its flame would not be smothered, was intolerable. And then the cords yielded. Hands free! With my scorched fingers, I dug a penknife from my pocket, and slashed the cords that bound me.

The Master stood before the altar, contemplating Madeleine's still body in the light of those flickering tapers. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his head bowed.

The shaven heads of the six adepts seated crescent-wise behind the Master were weaving and nodding in cadence.

And then I heard a shout, and cries of terror. Pierre's voice. He had avoided It until almost within striking distance of the enemy.

I LEAPED to my feet, and seized the wrought-iron tripod by its legs. I charged across the hall, scattering behind me a trail of incandescent coals. The Master heard me, and turned. He shouted a command. I saw emerging from the green shadows a file of short, muscular men, naked save for loin-cloths, and armed with short curved blades.

With my feet planted firmly on the tiles, I swung my fire-charged weapon—not at them, but crashing down on the shaven skull of the first of the six adepts and showering the others with fire.

That would break up their concentration!

Crash! Another found his brains oozing across the tiles.

They were almost upon me, those swordsmen. Their blades glittered as they advanced.

A pistol cracked, and the impact of the Master's shot whirled me back a pace. I recovered, and swung again as he fired a second time. And then I hurled the tripod full into the face of the leading swordsman. Their blades hacked and raked me as I stretched out in a lunge that carried me under their sweeping slashes. I clutched the second by the ankles and dragged him to the floor. They howled with pain as their bare feet trod on the live coals I had scattered.

The Master no longer dared fire, lest he strike his own men.

They were hacking and thrusting in that milling confusion of arms and legs and bodies, doing each other more harm than they did me. I salvaged a dagger, and stabbed blindly. But it was a hopeless mêlée. I was at the bottom of the heap.

Those few seconds of close-packed confusion seemed ages. No one could last long against such odds. Any instant would bring the finishing thrust. . . .

I heard a splintering of glass, and shouts. The voice of Pierre! And Nureddin with his Dankalis!

In an instant, the milling tangle leaped clear, leaving me lying among the dead. I saw the darwish, white beard streaming, sword in hand, leading his copper-colored Dankalis toward the altar, slaying-mad and howling as they slashed with their broad-bladed knives.

One of them was about to cut down the Master.

"Stop!" cried Pierre.

The mad savage halted, and lowered his blade. I struggled to my feet, cut, blood-drenched, but not entirely dismembered.

The hall was a madhouse of slaughter. Nureddin's curved blade dripped bloodily. A Dankali lay on a heap of fallen swordsmen, still clutching his knife. Pierre's pistol, empty and fuming, was in his hand, at his side.

"Graf Istavan," he said to that tall, somber Master, "it seems that you are the only survivor. But I propose to remedy that in a moment."

"So the redoubtable d'Artois will attack an unarmed man?" he murmured disdainfully.

"By no means, *monsieur,*" said Pierre, "but wait and see."

"My lord," said Nureddin, as he approached, "I will send Balkis back to the shadows."

And then he spoke to the Dankalis in their own language. They surrounded Graf Istavan with a circle of steel. The darwish picked from the floor a fragment of charcoal that had been spilled during the skirmish, and set about making good his promise to d'Artois. While he was marking upon the tiles the figure that was required, I turned to Pierre to inquire about the monstrosity that had been sent to waylay him.

"It met us as we drew up in the grove outside the château," he said. *"Mon Dieu!* A loathsome nightmare! The darwish slashed it with his simitar. I fired at it, but the thing was invulnerable. The Dankalis were too frightened to run. So were we all, for that matter. It enveloped us in its limbs and was crushing us slowly but very surely, like some monstrous octopus, and stifling us with its poisonous exhalation."

D'Artois shuddered at the memory of the horror.

"And then," he resumed, "it suddenly became vague and shadowy. Now that I hear your side of it, it is all clear. You were right in bending that iron tripod over the heads of those adepts. The monster was their thought-form, projected into the physical plane, and when you so deftly addled the brains of two or three of them, the concentration was interrupted. As you describe the ritual, those adepts must have hypnotized themselves, each envisioning the same creature, bent on the same mission. The Yogis in Hindustan have a similar feat. The vortex of thought force became a physical entity with no motive but to annihilate us, just as the thing which took you and Madeleine had but one impulse, capturing her. Your device, my friend, in seizing her and being taken with her was shrewd strategy——"

"I was too scared to do anything else," I replied. "But where are we? How did you follow us? How——"

"Tenez!" exclaimed d'Artois. "I will enlighten you. One of the Dankalis howled as though Satan had prodded him with his red-hot trident. He had seen It leaving with you and Madeleine.

"Nureddin and I had been studying the case that evening. We carefully considered a list, as I told you, of all persons Madeleine had had any contact with while in Bayonne. I took the liberty of opening

a letter addressed to her, from a friend in Marseilles, and there I found it. *'You didn't tell me about the seance at Graf Istavan's château,'* the young lady wrote to Madeleine.

"Voilà! There I had it. Why did she forget the handsome Graf Istavan, when she remembered all those shopkeepers and servants, and casual acquaintances? How could a girl reared in America, where a Hungarian count would be a sensation, forget an invitation to a *soirée* at his château? I inquired. It was simple. I knew then that she had forgotten *because she had been commanded to remember that she was Balkis, and to forget that she had ever heard of Graf Istavan.* It was obvious, simple, *n'est-ce pas?* And so when I found you two had vanished and heard of the *afreet,* as those excellent black fellows called the hideous thing, I set out on the trail. And the rest you know."

WE GLANCED at the darwish. He had drawn a pentacle upon the tiled floor. In each of its five angles he was inscribing symbols, and characters in a script I did not recognize.

"Look!" muttered Pierre. "Madeleine's fate depends upon that darwish. When he arrived, he thought that it would be simple to expel Balkis. But she has taken such complete possession that it will be more than a simple exorcism. And the great danger is that Madeleine has been thrust so far into the shadows that there is no longer any bond between her and the body that once was hers.

"My friend, you think that the evening behind you has been one of perils and encounters. *À bas!* That has been nothing. The conflict is yet to come. That white-bearded nomad holds the destiny of two women in his hands. And, if I mistake not, perhaps another destiny."

At the corners of the pentacle, the darwish had placed glowing charcoal from the censers that had not been overturned. And on each heap he poured a handful of the same incense that they had been burning in the room. As the fumes rose in dense, stifling sweet clouds that almost obscured the darwish as he knelt in the center of the figure, we heard him chant.

"Ya Balkis! *Ya* Balkis, *malikat us-Sabahh!* Beloved of Suleiman! The thief and the spoiler has robbed the grave and called you from being queen among the quiet dead. The mocker and the defiler has disturbed your rest.

"Ya Balkis, come forth from the body which you have invaded!

"Ya Balkis, come forth of your own will, or I will pronounce your Hidden Name. I will pronounce your True Name. Hear me, Balkis, Queen of the Morning, for this I can and this I will do!"

Then he began solemnly intoning in that almost forgotten language. His voice rolled and thundered like drums beaten before a palace; and from time to time, during that sonorous invocation, we heard her name, and knew that he had not yet pronounced the True Name.

D'Artois shivered, and down my own spine there were chills leaping and dancing to the cadence of that great voice. A terrific tension was in the air, and a rustling and chirping, and a murmuring: and within the pentacle, beside the smoke-veiled kneeling form of the darwish, we saw another standing, who was slender and wore a tall, curiously wrought diadem.

The chanting ceased, and the muttering, rustling sounds that we had heard. And then the darwish pronounced a single phrase, and made a gesture.

There was a deep sigh, and a stifled wail of unutterable despair. The darwish was alone in the pentacle. His eyes stared and his face was drawn as he bowed to the

five points of the pentacle, and stepped from its limits.

He addressed d'Artois.

"My lord, Balkis has returned to the shadows. Now let us see what tenant the stolen body has."

Madeleine lay motionless on the altar, in the wan light of the flickering tapers, and the green phosphorescence that pervaded the room.

"Look," whispered Pierre, "her expression is changed. *She* is indeed gone."

I saw then that while the features had not altered in any essential, there was an indefinable though certain difference. I wondered if Madeleine would look at us from those long-lashed eyes when she opened them.

"Awaken her at once!" commanded d'Artois, beckoning to Graf Istavan. He too had seen that presence in the pentacle with the darwish, and with her disappearance, his last hope had vanished. His haughty features were calm in despair: for Balkis, the beloved from the shadows, had died before his eyes.

Nureddin muttered a word to the Dankalis. As they advanced, their circle of steel urged Graf Istavan toward the altar. Then they halted, letting him approach the body of his victim. Their thirsty blades were poised, ready to cut him down at Nureddin's signal.

The necromancer turned toward d'Artois.

"Monsieur," he said, "this has gone too far. I can not awaken her."

"Try it!" demanded d'Artois. "It is worth trying. If you fail, these black fellows will tear you to pieces and eat your raw flesh. Awaken her!"

GRAF ISTAVAN knew that d'Artois had used no figure of speech when he made his threat. He saw the darwish thoughtfully fingering the edge of his sword. Then he faced the altar, and made stroking passes and gestures. He addressed the sleeping girl in sharp syllables of command. Perspiration cropped out on his forehead. His hands began to tremble as he exerted his will to its utmost, trying one device after another to awaken Madeleine. He was fighting for his life, and he knew it. But in vain.

His arms dropped to his side. He turned to Pierre with a despairing gesture.

"It is useless, *monsieur,"* he said. "She has escaped. She is beyond my reach. She——"

"Is she dead?" I demanded. "Pierre——"

"No," said d'Artois. "Her body is alive. It has suffered no violence. But her spiritual essence, her intelligence, her soul, call it what you will, had been forced so far into the shadows that it wanders, lost and confused, and can not find its way back. Try again, Graf Istavan, or by the living God, these fellows will tear you limb from limb, and I am not jesting!"

The necromancer shrugged his shoulders resignedly, and shook his head.

"What I can not do, I can not. Do your worst. I am beaten, and I do not complain. That white-bearded juggler of yours, that wild darwish from the desert, has driven Balkis beyond my reach. I heard him command her by her True Name, and she obeyed. She is gone——"

Again that gesture, and that haunted look of despair.

"So it makes little difference what happens to me. Let them strike. Perhaps I can find her somewhere across the Border, where she is with the untroubled dead. Strike, *monsieur.* I am unarmed."

And the eager steel that touched him, waiting to drive home, did not make him flinch. I saw that he welcomed it. I sensed

that we were but saving him from seeking his own life. It was I, rather than Graf Istavan, who felt the supreme despair of that tense moment when the steel would blossom red again and complete the evening's vain butchery. For vain it was, with Madeleine lying there, a thing of exquisite beauty: living, yet dead. Madeleine's *self* was wandering blindly in a limbo whose dim mazes confused her groping search for her body. I saw the fierce light in Pierre's eyes and the passionless, serene gaze of the darwish, and the grimness of the Dankalis poised to strike: and saw but futile vengeance whose bitter fruit would be a lovely, soulless body.

Nureddin's gesture beckoned the savages away from Graf Istavan, whose life they wanted as blood indemnity for their fallen comrades.

"Nureddin," said d'Artois, "is there no way? Are we too late?"

His voice was unsteady, and his features were tense. For a moment I wondered if he would with his own hands kill an unarmed man.

"*Sidi,* there is a way," replied the darwish. He spoke very slowly and solemnly. "Do you remember that night? We were in Kuh-i-Atesh?"

D'Artois' tanned cheeks paled at the mention of the Mountain of Fire, in Kurdistan. "Good God! you don't mean that you'll try *that* ritual?"

"If it please Allah, I will," affirmed the darwish.

D'Artois bowed his head for a moment. He glanced at the sleeping loveliness on the altar. His eyes were somber and despairing.

"I can't let him do that," he muttered. "And she's the daughter of my old friend. I can't refuse. . . ."

Pierre's features quivered with emotion. He paced back and forth, head bowed, and eyes staring at the tiles. Pierre was playing the heart-breaking rôle of destiny. His choice would decide the day. Madeleine would remain a lovely, lifeless thing—or old Nureddin would face some awful peril. I had sensed that from the moment I had heard the name of that mountain in Kurdistan. Now I knew it.

"My friend," said the darwish, "I will make the venture, *inshallah!* Do not seek to dissuade me. You have no choice. I will not fail!"

The darwish turned to the Dankalis and spoke a few words in a low voice. They stared, and made gestures of protest. Nureddin hushed their murmurings with a sharp command. Then they escorted Graf Istavan away from the altar. I had not understood a word of that Somali Coast jargon, but I saw from their faces that the words of Nureddin had instilled fear, and consternation, and grief.

"Mordieu!" exclaimed Pierre as he faced me. "He has taken the initiative so as to absolve me of all blame. He knew that I could neither consent nor deny."

In a low, hoarse voice he continued, "To stand here and watch, helplessly—it is terrible!"

The darwish in the meanwhile had been scratching a circle on the tiles with the point of his blade. Then he wiped it clean and forced it between the tiles so that it stood upright before him. The steel glistened frostily in that weird green light.

NUREDDIN knelt and crossed his arms on his breast. He bowed thrice, touching his forehead to the tiles just in front of the sword. We heard him muttering words that he pronounced so rapidly that we made no attempt to understand or even recognize the language. Then his voice became a faint murmur as he stared

fixedly at the glittering steel. Finally it subsided to an indistinct whisper, then to silence. His body swayed ever so slightly, like a reed in a gentle breeze.

Nureddin's features were transfigured with an awful solemnity. His eyes had become fixed in an intent stare. I held my breath, and quivered from a growing tension. Neither fuming censers nor chanting acolytes: only an old man kneeling before an upright blade, and staring fixedly; yet it was more awesome and compelling than any of the thaumaturgy and sonorous rituals I had witnessed that night, and more terribly thrilling than Graf Istavan's mighty recital.

I knew that this darwish who knelt in the circle was indeed a pious and holy man; that such pecadillos as the robbing of caravans were trifles not to be charged to his account.

The room was a brooding silence such as precedes the relentless stroke of doom. I glanced at Pierre, and was glad that *I* did not know what to expect.

We stood poised on the very border of——

A great cry wrenched our tense nerves. Then we heard a gasp, and the scream of a startled woman.

Madeleine sat upright on the altar. She was bewildered, and her eyes were wide with terror. Then she recognized d'Artois.

"Oh, Uncle Pierre!" she exclaimed, as she slid from the altar that had come so perilously close to being her bier. "What in the world—where—an old white-bearded man was leading me through an awful fog where I'd been lost so hopelessly——"

She laughed hysterically, and clung to her Uncle Pierre.

"He took me . . . by the hand . . . and led me. . . . Oh, it was terrible, but his face was so kind. . . ."

"My dear," said d'Artois, making an effort to control his conflicting emotions, "let us go home. We have—here, take her!" he commanded in a voice whose gruffness nearly cracked for an instant. "The car is not far from the château, in front."

As Madeleine clung to my arm, I caught a glimpse of Nureddin lying face down on the tiles. His arms stretched out before him. Only a glance: but I knew now why d'Artois had paled at the mention of Kuh-i-Atesh.

The exit from the room was through the window. As I helped Madeleine through the shattered sash, I heard Pierre's voice, very stern, and too well controlled. He spoke to the Dankalis in Arabic.

"One of you help me with your master's body. He is dead."

"Monsieur d'Artois," said Graf Istavan, "death is nothing to me. But would you leave me to be mutilated by these savages?"

"Their master," replied d'Artois sternly, "went across the Border to lead your victim back to her body before it died. But he himself could not return. Before he left, I fancy that he instructed his men. Who am I to ask them to disobey?"

I leaped to the ground. As Madeleine dropped to my arms, one of the Dankalis followed her. After him came d'Artois, who let down the body of the darwish.

Pierre, however, carried Nureddin single-handed to the car, for the Dankali was in great haste to rejoin his comrades. . . .

WE DROVE back to Pierre's house as fast as the powerful car would carry us. Madeleine, still unstrung from her sudden awakening, was startled at the sight of Nureddin.

"Oh, that's the same old man that I saw in my dream!" she exclaimed. "He

led me back through the fog and the darkness. It's been the most miserable nightmare! Most of the time I thought I was some one else."

Later, as we three sat in his study, I said, "Pierre, what really did happen, now that it's all over?"

"That old darwish," said d'Artois, "knew that there was but one way of bringing Madeleine back to her body. He knew that that would be a feat that even an adept can perform but once. Yet, knowing that it would be fatal, he persisted.

"My dear," he continued, turning to Madeleine, "although your body was still alive, *you* were dead. And had Nureddin not acted so quickly, you would have joined Balkis in the shadows, for there would have been no living body to await your return."

For a few moments we were without words. Death had taken the darwish, but the living girl was testimony that Death himself had been robbed by that strange old man.

"But why didn't he use the True Name —whatever that may be?" I finally asked d'Artois.

"Nureddin's occult studies could scarcely have included Madeleine's True Name," replied d'Artois. "He did not know it, and thus could not call her back to her body. But an adept from the Orient would know the True Name of Balkis.

"That principle," d'Artois continued, "is one of the oldest in the study of magic and the occult. The ancient Hebraic cabala made much of the holy and awful mystery of the True Name of Javeh. Egyptian sorcerers claimed that they would work miracles by threatening Osiris with the public revelation of his True Name if he did not lend them his power.

"Everything, in fact, is supposed to have a secret name by which it can be commanded," concluded Pierre. "But few have that knowledge."

"And to think," said Madeleine, "that that old man deliberately gave his life for a strange woman." Her eyes sparkled with tears as she continued, "That took greater courage than facing—oh, but I shouldn't say that, after what you and Uncle Pierre did. What I mean—if I could only express——"

"Don't try to, my dear," said Pierre. "We know how you feel about that heroic old fellow." And then, solemnly, "You can best express your appreciation by never regretting that you are not a queen."

D'Artois, deeply moved as he was by the sacrifice of the darwish, smiled, and twisted his mustache. "You might," he suggested, "remember him, and some day name your first son Nureddin!

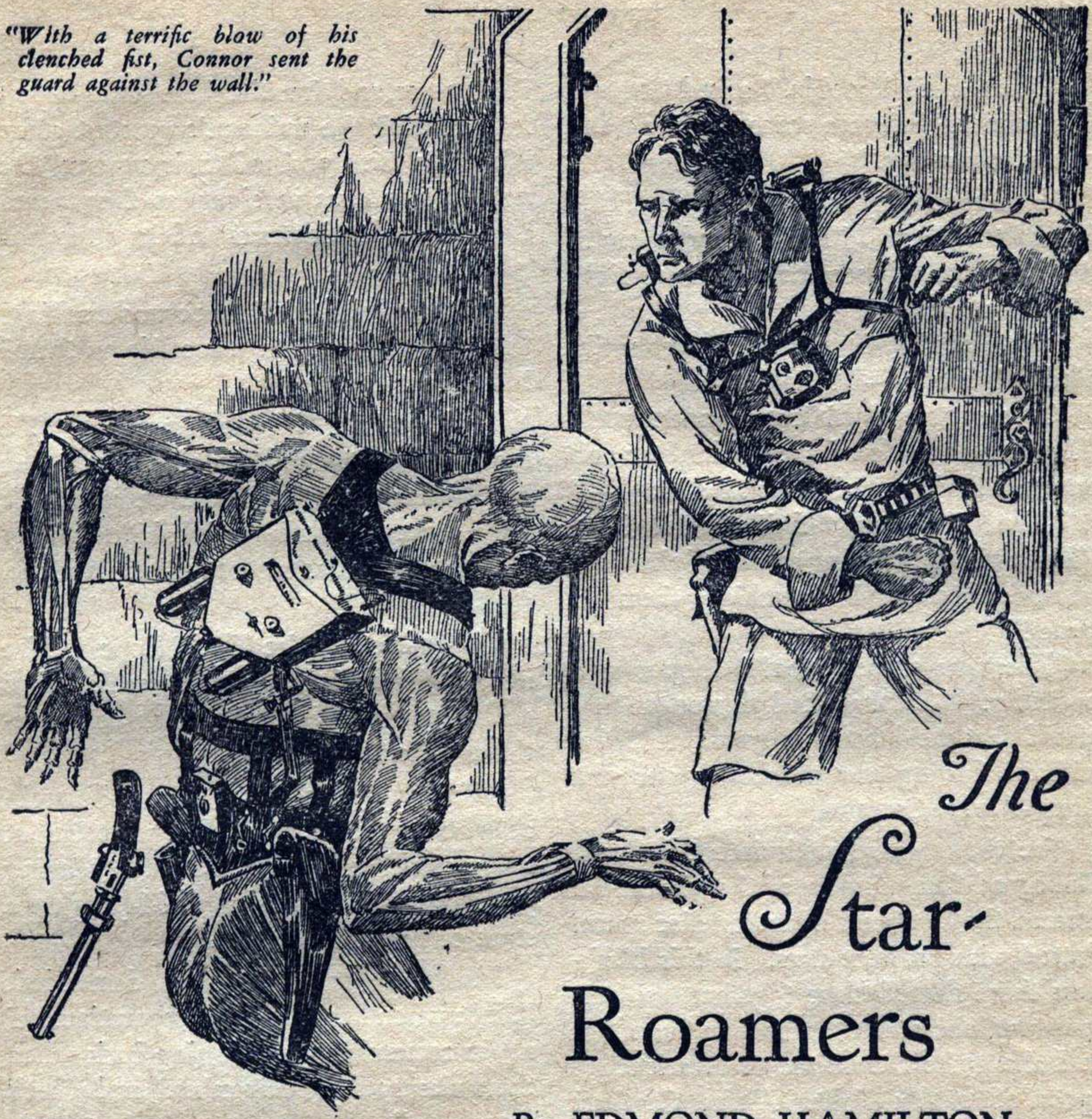
"And now I must busy myself with certain arrangements with *Monsieur* the Prefect of Police, on account of the messy condition of the château of the late Graf Istavan. His title, by the way, is as fictitious as your claim to the throne of Balkis. Those good Dankalis would do well to leave Bayonne quietly and quickly. And while I arrange——"

D'Artois winked at me, and grinned, making an unconvincing attempt to conceal his emotions.

"See if you can console this young lady for her sudden loss of a crown," he said.

"That," murmured Madeleine, as the door closed behind Pierre, "should be easy enough, unless you take after Graf Istavan and insist upon royalty."

But she was wrong: for my thoughts as well as hers, that evening, were of an old man who had gone empty-handed on a raid to rob Death, instead of a caravan of Persian heretics.



"With a terrific blow of his clenched fist, Connor sent the guard against the wall."

The Star-Roamers

By EDMOND HAMILTON

An interplanetary story of many thrills—a battle of leaping flame on the worlds of Alpha Centauri, our nearest neighbor in space

"CONNOR! Newell!" called Rodney March from the cruiser's wheel. "Come up here to the pilot room—something to show you!"

A voice reached him from below. "I'll be up in a minute, Rod, but don't ask Connor. He looks a little space-sick."

"Space-sick your eye!" a wrathful voice answered. "If you were just half the space-sailor I am, you'd——"

"Cut it and come up here!" March ordered impatiently. "Can't you two let up on this scrapping for a few minutes?"

There was silence for a few moments, and then the two climbed up into the broad-windowed little pilot room in which March sat at the controls of the cruiser as it raced through the void.

Tim Connor was red-haired and blue-eyed, with hard-bitten face, while Milt Newell was long and dark and lazy-moving. They came over to March's side.

"What is it? Trouble?" asked Connor. "I'd almost welcome some to break this cursed monotony."

"The monotony is almost over, Tim," March told him. "Look ahead there at Alpha Centauri—see those spots of light on either side?"

"Spots of light?" Connor's eyes wrinkled. "Spots——"

"I see them!" Newell announced. "Two on one side of the double-star and one on the other side! They must be——"

"Planets!" March finished for him. "Three planets moving round Alpha Centauri, and we'll be reaching them in hours!"

"They *are* planets, too!" Connor said excitedly. "By the Lord, I was getting afraid that we'd have to go on to Sirius without finding any planets at our first stop—Alpha Centauri!"

The three gazed with intent interest. The broad fore-window of the pilot room framed the blackness of interstellar space, dotted with brilliant stars. In this blackness there flamed close together two yellow suns, one rather larger than the other, and about them were the three attendant spots of steady light. Alpha Centauri and its three worlds!

Toward Alpha Centauri their cruiser had raced steadily through the trackless void for weeks, since they had left their own solar system. It was in a wild longing for new adventure that the three had left in their new cruiser of revolutionary design. Wearied by the boredom of the solar system's tame interplanetary traffic, they had started toward the hitherto unreached stars on a voyage of discovery and adventure.

Their cruiser, driven by etheric propulsion-vibrations which it projected behind it, could attain speeds many times the speed of light itself. It had super-concentrated supplies and almost inexhaustible power, and thus the three could expect in it to visit the universe's greatest stars. Now the first goal of their voyage, the nearest star, was in sight, as they gazed toward Alpha Centauri and its attendant planets.

"Three worlds!" Connor was exulting. "Do you suppose they have life on them? Intelligent life?"

"Hard to tell," March answered. "We can't expect to find peopled planets or even planets at every star we visit. If these three worlds have inhabitants, they may be like ourselves or entirely alien in form."

"Whatever they're like, I hope they're not too peaceful," Connor said. "I'm aching to get this boat's guns on something—then *bam!*"

"You and your cursed guns will probably be the end of us before we touch at many stars," Newell told him. "Having you along is a perfect way of laying up a store of first-class trouble."

"Is that so?" Connor demanded. "Since when have you been so cautious? I never remember you hanging back when there was trouble being mixed, and what's more——"

"Will you two lay off?" March asked. "We'll reach those planets in a few hours; so try to control yourselves until then."

"Going to head for the outermost planet first?" Connor asked, and March nodded.

"Yes, it's the nearest, and we may as well look it over first."

WITHIN hours Alpha Centauri's outermost planet had grown from a speck of steady light to a great yellowish globe over which their cruiser hung in space. March began to bring the cruiser down in steep spirals toward the planet. He was gazing intently down with Con-

nor and Newell when there came a startling interruption to their descent.

Space about them was suddenly alive with strange, dark oval ships! March, even as he whirled over the cruiser's wheel in answer to Newell's startled cry of warning, was aware that from the rushing ships small globular clouds of white gas were speeding toward them! The scores of oval ships were attacking them!

The cruiser heeled dizzily in space as it answered the wheel. Crisscrossing gas-globes hurtled through space where it had just been, and as one of these globes of gas touched a darting oval ship that was too slow in escaping its path, March saw the ship crumbled to fragments by the globe of gas! As he swerved the cruiser with instinctive swiftness, he heard a cry from Newell, another from Connor.

Connor was at the controls of the cruiser's guns, his blue eyes blazing. From these ether-guns mounted at prow and stern of the cruiser came a swift drumming as they poured a stream of ether-shells at the attacking oval ships around them. Three ships were struck by the ether-shells and vanished instantly, the exploding shells dematerializing them by destroying the ether about and through them. But the scores of other oval ships were closing in.

Their deadly gas-globes hurtled from every direction as March kept the cruiser leaping, turning, jerking and dodging in an effort to evade them. Newell was shouting something to him—Connor was yelling as he worked the ether-guns—he glimpsed symbols of two metal circles on the sides of the oval ships—he knew that in seconds one of those hurtling gas-globes would touch the cruiser——

Suddenly the attacking ships whirled back, recoiled. Other oval ships, twice their number and like them save that they bore a three-circle symbol, were racing up from beneath and falling on the attackers! Instantly there was a mad mélange of battle around the cruiser, gas-globes storming thick among the spinning ships, crumbling to fragments those ships they touched. Then abruptly those who had attacked the cruiser fled, darting up and out of sight. The battle was over!

"Good God!" cried March, shaken. "What kind of a hornet's nest have we blundered into here?"

"Whatever else this star has, it has fighting!" Connor cried, his blue eyes brilliant with excitement. "We put our mark on those birds, too, though they'd have had us if the others hadn't shown up."

It reminded March. "The ships that saved us! Look, they're coming toward us—they must be friendly."

"I see men inside that one!" said Newell suddenly. "Look, Rod, the transparent part there at the nose!"

March had seen. One of the scores of oval ships of their rescuers had driven level with the cruiser in space and at its nose was a transparent-windowed section much like the cruiser's pilot room. They could see men inside it, bronze-skinned and dark-haired men clad in black harness. One of them was making friendly signs to the three in the cruiser's pilot room, pointing down to the planet below.

"They want us to accompany them down to their world," March interpreted. "They seem friendly enough, too."

"Well, it's where we were going anyway," Connor said, "though I'd like to come out here and meet those other birds again some time."

"We're going down with them," March decided. "Remember to keep your mitts off those gun-grips, Tim. These people are friends."

Their cruiser swung down in steep spirals with the oval ships around it. "Rod, do you think those ships that at-

tacked us came from one of the other two planets?" Newell asked.

"Must have," March said thoughtfully. "I didn't glimpse those inside them, but I've no doubt they were from the other worlds."

They descended quickly with the oval ships flying smoothly down around them. Soon the rush and roar of air outside told them that they were entering the planet's atmosphere. Newell consulted meters and reported the atmosphere a heavy one of air. Connor looked down with March intently.

They dropped through the mists of the planet's upper atmosphere and had glimpses from time to time of a yellow and black checkered plain below. They shot down through the last mists to find themselves less than a mile over this plain. March and Connor and Newell exclaimed in their surprize. The plain was a city!

It was an immense yellow and black checker-city, the yellow squares being blocks of thick yellow vegetation carefully tended, and the black squares being blocks of cubical black buildings. This strange checker-city of vegetation and buildings stretched from horizon to horizon of the world under them.

Its inhabitants, they saw as they dropped lower, were innumerable bronze-skinned men and women. Many thronged the ways of the building-squares, while as many others worked in the vegetation-squares at the cultivation of the growths there. A few oval ships were in sight over the city, most of them near a block that held the largest black buildings. Toward this the cruiser's escorting ships were leading it.

THE cruiser came to rest with the oval ships about it on the black plaza surrounding these large central buildings.

"Here we are," said March, "and there's a crowd waiting for us out there already. What do the meters read, Milt?"

"Atmosphere and temperature about the same as earth's—gravitation a little stronger," Newell reported. "Our belt automatic-equalizers will take care of the increased gravitation, of course."

"Then it's safe to go out. Come on, you two."

"Shall we take ether-pistols?" Connor asked.

"You're a trusting fellow, aren't you?" Newell exclaimed. "These people out there just saved all our necks and the first thing you suggest is taking ether-pistols on a friendly call on them!"

"I don't think we'll need the pistols," March said.

"Have it your own way," Connor returned. "I'm only afraid that when they see this pan of Newell's they'll regret saving us and want to——"

"Can it, will you!" March exclaimed. "No more out of you two, now—let's get out."

He led down to the space-doors, spinning open inner and outer ones, and they stepped out onto the plaza's seamless black paving.

They looked instinctively upward first and then blinked dazzled eyes for a moment, almost blinded by the brilliance of the two suns flaming close together in the heavens. An intense flood of light and heat poured down from the two luminaries.

When their eyes were a little accustomed to the light, they saw in front of them a group of a dozen waiting men. They were the bronze-skinned, dark-haired men of the oval ships, their features regular and intelligent. They wore black belts that formed more a harness than clothing, and each wore on his shoulder-belt a symbol of three metal circles like those on their ships. They surveyed

the earthmen in patent amazement, which was shared by the throngs of bronze-skinned men and women gathered at a respectful distance.

"These people seem far enough advanced to converse telepathically as we can in the solar system," March told his companions. "I'll try them."

He projected a clear thought at the men before him. "We three are men from another sun's worlds—from another star. Can you receive and understand my thought?"

The foremost bronze man, a tall, commanding figure, answered, his own clear thought coming into the minds of the three. "I understand you; yet I do not understand how you can claim to be from another star."

March gestured upward. "The stars that dot the heavens at night are all suns. You know that?"

"We know," the other answered, "but never have we thought it possible to cross the vast gulfs that lie between the suns. Yet on the other hand you three are not of any of our suns' three worlds."

"Your three worlds are all inhabited then by humans like yourselves?" March asked quickly, but the other shook his head.

"No, we Kerts inhabit only this outermost world, planet three. I, Jurn, am one of the two co-rulers of our race of Kerts or humans, and beside me is Hollak, the other. We were conferring here together on the situation of our world when there came an alarm that a ship was being attacked over it."

"Then the ships that attacked us weren't ships of humans?" asked Newell.

Again Jurn shook his head. "No, they were ships of the Threns who inhabit the second planet and make war on us Kerts. While somewhat like humans in appearance, the Threns are really but half-developed between liquid and human form, though as intelligent as we are."

"And the other planet, the innermost one?" March pursued.

"The innermost planet is inhabited neither by us Kerts nor by the Threns, but by the Rhels," Jurn answered. "The Rhels are a strange liquid-people supposed to be ancestors of both Threns and Kerts, and greater in intelligence than either. But little is known of them, for they have no intercourse with either of the other two worlds."

"But the space-ships and weapons of the Threns seemed just the same as yours," Connor commented.

Hollak, the huge co-ruler of Jurn, answered. "They are the same, for they were handed down to us from the far past when the Threns were the ancestors of our own Kert race."

"It is so," Jurn added, "and because our weapons and space-ships are the same as theirs the Threns have warred for long without conquering us. But of late they have been growing too strong for us—too strong——" His face shadowed.

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THEN Jurn's manner changed suddenly. "But enough of Threns and Kerts for the present. I am forgetting my duties toward you as guests of our world." He motioned to the great buildings.

March hesitated. "Our cruiser will be safe here?"

"I will make sure for you that it is," Jurn answered.

He turned and uttered a brief order. Guards armed with short rods—gas-globe weapons, they guessed—surrounded the cruiser.

Jurn and Hollak led the way toward the great central building in the block of huge black cubes ahead. A little retinue

of guards and officials followed them, and the watching crowds of Kerts gave way before the party, staring with a very human curiosity at March and his companions.

When they had passed out of the two suns' blaze of light and heat into the cool dimness of the great cube-building, Jurn led them to the black-walled, high-windowed chambers that were to be theirs. He informed them that they would meet Hollak and him shortly at the evening meal.

When he had gone, March and Connor and Newell stared about them and from the windows, as though doubting the reality of their transition from the monotony of space to this civilized city. The utter simplicity of design of all about them bespoke a combination of scientific and artistic knowledge and instinct.

Soft and sourceless light waxed in the rooms as darkness fell outside, and silent-moving Kert servants tended them unobtrusively. They went then to join Jurn and Hollak and found the two co-rulers on a balcony that jutted from the great cube-building's side. A small food-laden table awaited them. The great city stretched before them in the darkness, many lights blinking from its checkered building-squares.

The Kert city's patterned lights were rivalled by the star-spawn that glittered across the sky. March and Newell and Connor gazed up across them, noting that some of the familiar constellations had altered slightly in outline but that most were unchanged. The sun of their own origin shone as a bright yellow point, and March gestured to it.

"Our sun—our star! It seems a long while now since we started out from it toward this star."

"It is wonderful that such a thing could be," Jurn marvelled. "And do you go back from here to your own sun again?"

"No," Connor grinned. "Sirius is our next stop, and after that we go on from star to star."

"Sirius, and then on from star to star," mused Hollak. "You have surely ahead of you the greatest adventures in the universe, though they almost ended today beneath the gas-globes of the Threns."

"We've you to thank that they didn't," March returned. "I admit that I'm curious about what you told us of the Threns and Rhels. You say both were the ancestors of your own race of Kerts?"

"That is so," Jurn answered. "The first life in this system developed on the innermost planet and there under its conditions of intense heat and light evolved into intelligent creatures in liquid form, the Rhels. They are semi-liquid protoplasmic masses with half-human heads. Having great intelligence and scientific knowledge, some of these Rhels built space-ships and migrated to the second planet.

"Its conditions of heat and gravitation being different, the Rhels who settled there evolved with time into a differently formed race, roughly human in form but with glistening protoplasmic flesh. Thus was formed the race of Threns, and since the Threns had some of the scientific knowledge of their ancestors the Rhels, some of them migrated in turn to this outermost one of the three planets.

"On this planet, with its still different conditions, the Threns settling here changed in turn, developing tissues and skin and blood instead of their protoplasmic flesh, and becoming in fact Kerts or humans such as we are now. Such was the origin of this system's three races, though no doubt the humans of your own system developed by a different evolutionary chain.

"The Rhels have remained secluded on their inner planet without holding any intercourse with the other two races. The Threns of the second planet, however, have sought repeatedly to conquer and enslave us Kerts. We have had to struggle hard to repel them; for they are slightly superior to us in scientific knowledge and weapons, though inferior to the Rhels in these."

"Then this war of Threns and Kerts is now going on?" March asked, and Jurn nodded.

"Yes, and our situation is growing menacing; for Grund is gathering the Threns for a final attack on us. Grund is the present Thren ruler and is one of the hardest and most ruthless of his race. He has overruled the many Threns who would like to live at peace with us, and with his two lieutenants, Quarnal and Dron, has been preparing for a final conquest of our world and race.

"Undoubtedly Grund will loose his attack on us before long, but seems waiting now to find where we are weakest. If Grund learns how our space-ships are disposed in defense around our world he can attack the weakest side first and be certain of victory. Of late a force of Thren ships has been hovering over our world for some purpose we can not guess, but which is undoubtedly part of Grund's plan."

"Those were the ships that attacked us when we ran into them?" Newell asked.

"They were, and they would have destroyed you had we not got the alarm from our patrols in time," Jurn replied. "As it was, the greater part of them escaped us; for we dared not chase them too far out in space lest we be ambushed by a superior force. They're probably hovering up there above our patrols yet."

"They are only the vanguard of those that will come," interjected Hollak somberly. "When Grund strikes, the Threns will pour down on our world like an avalanche."

"I am afraid it will be so," Jurn admitted. "I had hoped that the many Threns who want peace with us would have stopped this attack, but Grund has overruled them. There's nothing left for us but to fight."

THE conversation went on, March and his companions rapidly learning by this telepathic talk the language which they were informed was spoken alike by Kerts, Threns and Rhels. March a little later stepped over to the balcony's rail and looked out over the city's checkered lights.

The huge black bulk of the cubical building behind him, shouldered against the stars, seemed brooding on the Kert city. From distant building-squares came a dim hum of voices, and as March looked up he could see a group of oval ships dropping leisurely out of the night.

"Fighting here seems the real thing," he heard Connor saying. "Those gas-globes you use, now——"

"What are those ships, patrols coming in?" March turned to ask Hollak.

The ruler and Connor came to his side. "What ships?" Hollak asked.

March pointed up to the descending ships, that seemed dropping now almost straight toward the balcony. Hollak peered up at them. The oval ships suddenly deserted their leisurely slowness of descent and dropped like plummets to hang level beside the balcony.

With exclamations the three recoiled, just as the space-doors of the ships burst open. Out from them a stream of weird figures poured onto the balcony, figures human in shape but with glistening, skinless bodies! They bore gas-globe rods in their grasp, but without using them they

threw themselves toward the two rulers and the earthmen.

"Thren raiders!" cried Hollak, his rod-weapon leaping.

"They're the Thren ships that have been hovering over this world!" cried Jurn. "I know now — they're after us——"

The glistening-bodied Threns had seized March and Connor and Hollak in their first rush, knocking the weapon from the latter's grasp. Kert guards in the great building were coming on the run, shouting, while the big Thren who seemed leader of the raiders was pointing to Jurn and Hollak and bellowing to his followers.

March, struggling with glistening figures, glimpsed Hollak being dragged into a ship by four Threns and saw Connor, when he leapt to free him, pulled after him. Others were reaching for Jurn, but March and Newell were fighting so frenziedly beside him that they could not overpower him.

There came the fierce cries of the Kert guards bursting out on the balcony. The Thren leader leapt back into a ship and it and the other oval ships shot up into the night. The Threns left on the balcony turned desperately to face their opponents, but the Kerts had raised their rods, and the white gas-globes that hurtled from them crumbled and annihilated the glistening raiders.

The fight on the balcony was over. The Thren ships had disappeared into the upper night, alarmed patrol-ships of the Kerts racing after them, and March and Newell and Jurn faced each other wild-eyed.

"They got Connor!" cried March. "They dragged him in after Hollak when he tried to pull Hollak free!"

"I see it all now!" Jurn exclaimed. "Those Threns have been hovering over our world for days for that purpose, to raid us and capture Hollak and myself. This is Grund's plan—to capture us two before he starts the attack on our world."

"And they tried to seize all of us—did seize Tim—just to get you two!"

"But we're not going to let them keep Tim!" Newell burst. "Damn it, Rod, where's our ship? We're going after them!"

"Wait—wait!" Jurn interrupted. "You will not help your friend by following him to a similar fate. He and Hollak will undoubtedly be taken before Grund, and whether or not Grund is able to get information from them, he will not let them live long."

"The more reason for us to start after them now!" Newell said. "Do you think we're going to let the Threns keep Tim or Hollak either? We'll go to the Thren planet and yank them out of there!"

"Milt is right, Jurn," said March, his voice steely. "We're not the kind to sheer off and leave Tim to his fate."

"I understand," Jurn said, "but you do not know how hopeless such a project is. You would have to go alone to the Thren world; for with this attack hanging over us I could not give you an escort of supporting ships. And alone how can you hope even to find your friend and Hollak, let alone take them from the clutches of Grund?"

"We can try, and we're going to try," March answered. "Where on the Thren world would they be taken, do you think?"

Jurn shook his head. "None of us Kerts know much of the Thren world, but it is known that Grund has immense central palaces from which he rules, his aides Quarnal and Dron have separate palaces. I think two prisoners of such importance would be held in the palaces of Grund."

"That gives us something to go on, at least," March said. "If we can reach the palaces you speak of we can trust the rest to luck."

"You are foolish to walk thus into death," Jurn said, "but if you must go, go in one of our oval ships and not in your cruiser. Our ships are the same in appearance as the Thren ships, and you will have a far better chance of landing on the Thren world in one."

"That's reasonable," March agreed, "but we don't know the operation of your ships and their weapons."

"They are simple—you can learn in a few hours," Jurn said.

"But that means waiting till tomorrow to start!" Newell protested.

Jurn regarded him. "What difference will a few hours make? Grund will not kill Hollak and your friend until he has learned all possible from them, and if I know Hollak, that will not be soon. And this short delay will give you a far better chance of reaching them."

"He's right, Milt," March said. "We can learn how to run these Kert ships before morning and start then."

THEY spent the following hours of the night in unceasing activity. By morning, under the tutelage of Kert pilots, they had learned the operation of the oval ships, which they found were propelled by force-vibrations like their cruiser, though far inferior to it in speed. The controls of the gas-globe weapons they found quite simple.

They equipped themselves with ether-pistols from their cruiser, and when the two suns rose they were ready to start. Jurn was at hand to see them go, having spent the night in gathering his world's forces against possible subsequent raids.

"You are brave men, men from the stars," he told them. "Your cruiser shall be safely guarded and will be here for you if you return."

"There are no ifs about it," March smiled. "We'll be back, and Connor and Hollak with us. And if possible we'll give your friend Grund a sock in the eye while we're calling on him."

"That's if Tim and Hollak haven't done it already," Newell added.

They shook Jurn's hand and then the space-door shut after them and the oval craft shot up into the blazing light of the two rising suns. It climbed up and out in spirals from the planet's atmosphere, hovered for a moment, and then shot through space in the direction of the suns, toward the planet of the Threns.

3

WHEN the Thren raiders had dragged Hollak from the balcony into one of their hanging ships, Connor had leapt to his aid only to be grasped by a half-dozen Threns and dragged after him. Connor struck out fiercely and was struggling still as the Kert guards called by Jurn burst onto the balcony. Then, as the ships shot upward, some one struck him a stunning blow on the head and for the moment he knew no more.

When Connor came back to consciousness he found himself half lying against a wall with Hollak reviving him. He remembered at sight of the big Kert and grasped his arm.

"What happened? Were Rod or Milt hurt?" he demanded.

Hollak shook his head. "None was hurt that I could see, and none but ourselves captured."

"Captured?" Connor's jaw dropped. "We two captured?"

He looked amazedly about him. He and Hollak sat in the corner of a metal-walled compartment. The humming of

mechanisms and quiver of motion told them that it was part of a ship racing through space. Opposite Hollak and Connor stood three Threns, watching with gas-globe rods ready.

Connor stared at them, seeing them fully for the first time. The Threns were weird figures, having bodies, limbs and hairless heads of human shape and size, with human eyes and features and harness-clothing, but with glistening protoplasmic flesh instead of ordinary human tissues. Connor could half discern their arm and leg-bones through their translucent, rubbery flesh! They were watching the two captives steadily.

"Holy smoke—and these birds are the Threns!" he exclaimed. "What are they going to do with us?"

"Whatever it is, it isn't likely to be pleasant," Hollak answered. "This ship is on its way with the others to their world."

The compartment's door opened and two other Threns entered. Connor recognized the largest, one as big as Hollak, as the leader of the attack on the balcony. This Thren stared contemptuously at them.

"So, Hollak, you go with us to be the guest of Grund," he said, using the language which served all three races and which Connor and his friends had learned much of in telepathic conversation with Jurn and Hollak. "Grund will be glad to see you," the Thren continued, "though he will be sorry we couldn't bring Jurn also. He'll be glad to hear all you can tell him about the forces of your race of slaves."

"Grund will learn nothing from me, and you know it, Quarnal," answered Hollak.

"You are obstinate now, but when my torturers work on you you'll talk," Quarnal warned. "You won't be the first Kert I've had them twist to shapelessness."

"Is it so?" said Hollak quietly. "Then for these others when the times comes, Quarnal, I am going to kill you—slowly."

Quarnal started toward him, glistening features contorted with rage, but the other Thren jerked him back.

"Enough of this, Quarnal!" he snapped. "I know your ways, but there'll be no prisoner-torturing in my presence!"

Quarnal turned angrily on him. "You are strangely solicitous about our enemies, Dron!" he snarled. "So solicitous indeed that even Grund has begun to wonder whether you are Thren or Kert!"

Dron faced him calmly. "I am Thren, and all know it," he said, "but though I fight as a Thren I think as a reasoning being, and I see that these wars of ours on the Kerts are folly. And you need not carry that tale to Grund, for I said as much to him myself!"

"So Grund told me," said Quarnal, his tone subtly menacing. He turned back to the prisoners. "Enough for you at present, Hollak," he said. "Who is this strange-garbed son of a slave we took with you?"

Connor's wrath had been rising to bursting-point during the preceding exchanges, and now he found utterance.

"Listen, you half-finished excuse for a human being," he told Quarnal. "I come from another solar system and it's one where you and your crowd would be hung up to dry in three seconds flat. Your face gives me a pain, your talk is foolish, your manners don't exist, and in short I'm beginning to think I don't like you."

"From another star?" Quarnal said, and laughed. "Then you have come a long way to be killed. You prevented us from taking Jurn, and I think Grund will be glad to see you."

He left the compartment with that, and

Dron, distaste evident on his face, followed.

"So that's why Grund ordered the capture of Jurn and myself," Hollak commented, "to take our race's leaders and torture information about our forces from us. Well, they didn't get Jurn and they'll get no information from me."

"That Quarnal is sure poison," Connor said, "though the other one, Dron, seems regular."

"Dron is one of the Threns who hate this warring with the Kerts but whom Grund has overruled," Hollak told him. "But neither Dron nor those who believe with him will be able to save us from Grund when we reach the second planet. And we'll be reaching it in hours."

IN THE next hours the ship in which they were prisoned sped steadily on through space. From the compartment's window they could look out, though the guards did not relax their vigilance.

Through this window Connor saw that the ship, with other similar oval ships around it, was racing in toward the second planet that glowed like a steady star in the blackness of space. Beyond this planet of the Threns, on the other side of the two suns, he could make out the light-point of the innermost planet, the planet of the Rhels.

The Thren planet grew ahead of them to a buff-colored ball, and soon the ships were rushing down through its atmosphere. The ships came to rest, and Connor and Hollak were marched out into the open air by Quarnal and Dron and a group of guards. The Thren world lay about them in the brilliant sunlight.

It was covered like the world of the Kerts by a single city, denoting a great population. But though this city's buildings were also black and cubical, there were no vegetation-squares checkering them. In the streets, crowds of Threns, glistening and weird figures, thronged busily, and Connor could see some Kerts who carried burdens and were quite evidently captive slaves. Hollak growled deep in his chest at sight of these.

The ships had landed on a broad park that surrounded immense cubical buildings, by far the largest they had seen on either world. Into one of these they were conducted.

In a few minutes they were halted near the center of a long, high-windowed hall crowded with Threns, while Quarnal and Dron made their report to Grund.

Grund, ruler of the Threns, was a dominant figure as he sat on his throne-like erection at the hall's end, officials and guards about him. Connor forgot the glistening body as he saw Grund's cold, keen eyes. It was evident that the report of Quarnal and Dron displeased Grund.

"You should have taken them both!" he snapped to Quarnal. "You took Hollak—why not Jurn?"

"It was because of the strangely garbed men with them, who fought us off long enough for the guards to get there," Quarnal explained. "We took one of them and might have taken Jurn despite them if Dron had taken part in the attack," he added maliciously.

"I do not like such sneaking exploits," said Dron directly. "Such raids are mistakes—many of our people say that that other raid you ordered will bring disaster on us."

Grund eyed him narrowly. "And you do not discourage them from saying that, do you?" he asked softly but with deadly emphasis. "You grow somewhat too bold, Dron. Remember that I am ruler of the Threns and not you, and that while I rule we'll go on until these Kerts are conquered and made what they should be, our slaves."

He made a gesture, and the guards jerked Hollak and Connor forward. Hollak eyed the Thren ruler levelly.

"Your head will not be so high before long, Hollak," said Grund. "Will you tell me what forces of ships the Kerts have and how they are placed around your world?"

"You know that I will not," Hollak answered contemptuously.

Grund's cold eyes did not change. "We will see—we will see. A few hours of torture sometimes works wonders. I will give you a night in which to consider that fact, and if then you are not more willing, we'll see what Quarnal and his followers can do with you."

"We will, will we?" Connor exclaimed. "Say, if you want to keep Quarnal healthy, keep him out of my reach, or I'll smack him down so flat you can write a letter home on him!"

Grund's gaze switched to Connor, and Quarnal spoke a few words of explanation. "You say he is from another star?" Grund said. "What matters it?—he is one of those who blocked your capture of Jurn. You need not have brought him here. Dispose of him."

Quarnal's rod came up to loose a gas-globe at Connor, but before the Thren could use the weapon Hollak stepped between it and the earthman.

"If you kill this man you will kill me with him," Hollak informed Quarnal. Quarnal's savage change of expression showed that he meant to do so, but a quick sign from Grund made him desist.

"Let him live for the present, then," Grund ordered, "since Hollak must live until we have learned what we want from him. Put the two of them down there with the other, and if Hollak hasn't talked by morning you can start your torturers to work on him."

QUARNAL gave an order to the guards and they followed him back out of the hall, marching Connor and Hollak with them. They passed through curving corridors and ramps leading downward, until Connor estimated that they were some distance below ground-level. Entering a corridor with barred doors along it, they moved down it and halted before one of the doors. A guard unbarred and opened it and Quarnal motioned them inside.

"Remember, Kert," he said to Hollak, "that unless your tongue loosens by morning my torturers will show me their skill on you!"

Hollak turned in the door. "You, Quarnal, remember this," he said levelly, "that I have promised to kill you and that I have never yet broken a promise."

"That'll hold you," observed Connor to Quarnal. "And you can tell Grund that I wish him the same and many of them."

Connor and Hollak were thrust on through the door and it clanged shut after them, the bar falling. They heard Quarnal order one of the Thren guards to remain outside it, and then he moved off with the others.

They looked about their prison. It was a small room, dimly lit by a ray of waning light from a tiny loophole in the wall, the only opening.

Connor put his hand on Hollak's shoulder. "That's one I owe you, Hollak," he observed. "Quarnal was set to give me the works when you stepped between us."

"We are but quits; for you were taken trying to save me," Hollak told him. "Besides, I knew Grund would not let me be killed until he had learned what he wants to know from me, how our Kert forces are divided on our world. He is holding his attack on our world until he

learns in this way its weakest point, but he'll never learn it from me."

"That's the spirit," Connor approved, "though this fix we're in isn't much to my—what was that?"

Something had moved in the darkness of the little room, something that was coming toward them with a soft, slithering sound.

"It's some one they've prisoned us with!" Hollak exclaimed. "You remember, Grund ordered them to put us down here with the other."

"But good Lord, look at him!" Connor cried, stupefied.

"It's a Rhel!" Hollak exclaimed. "A Rhel prisoner of the Threns!"

The figure advancing toward them was staggeringly weird in appearance as it emerged into the single ray's dim light. It seemed a great viscous mass of translucent flesh like that of the Threns' bodies. But it was simply a mass, without permanent form, flowing forward and reaching out great pseudopod-tentacles as an ameba does.

Set at the center of this flowing mass was its one permanent feature, the head. It was a glistening head like those of the Threns, with dark human-like eyes and a mouth below them, the black nerve-connections branching from this head being visible in the translucent mass of the body. The creature was speaking to Connor and Hollak in a low, hissing voice.

"Yes, a Rhel prisoner of the Threns," it was saying. "And I, Xydd, am first of the Rhels that the Threns have ever dared to imprison."

"A Rhel!" Connor was exclaiming, and Hollak nodded quickly. "Yes, one of the race of the inner planet who were ancestors of both Threns and Kerts. They have never had intercourse with the other planets, this being the first Rhel I have ever really seen myself."

"How comes it that the Threns dared capture you?" he asked Xydd.

"It was simple enough," Xydd answered. "I am one of the greatest of the Rhel scientists, and this Grund, the Thren ruler, sent a raiding party to capture Rhel scientists so that he might gain from them knowledge of new weapons with which to conquer you Kerts. His raiders came to our world, and since we have no guards, none ever before daring to molest us, they found it easy to penetrate our city unobserved by night and to capture me in my laboratory.

"They saw no chance to capture others of our scientists; so they left and brought me here. Their ruler, this Grund, demanded that I design new weapons for him to use against the Kerts. I told him that I, Xydd, was a Rhel and that when Mnann, ruler of the Rhels, learned what he had dared do, the Rhels would take a terrible retribution. He answered that Mnann would never learn and that in any case he feared none in the three worlds. I was imprisoned here with Grund's warning that unless I acceded to his demand I would meet death, and I think that will be soon now."

"So Grund dared do that, capture a Rhel!" exclaimed Hollak. "Then that was what Dron referred to when he said that the Thren people feared the other raid would bring disaster on them."

"Who is this with you?" asked Xydd. "He seems a Kert, yet different."

Briefly Hollak explained Connor's origin. The Rhel seemed highly interested, his dark eyes running over Connor.

"So you came with others from another star? We Rhels have long thought that possible, though engrossed in different researches we have never investigated the matter. I should be interested in seeing your star's worlds—for though your people can not rival the Rhels in knowledge,

they must have made considerable progress."

Hollak intervened impatiently. "It is no time for scientific speculations," he told Xydd, "but for us to think of what we are to do."

"What we are to do?" echoed Xydd. "That is easy—we will wait here, and before long the Threns will put us to death for not telling them the things they wish to know."

"Some program," Connor commented. "Don't you even want to make a try to get out of here?"

"Of what use to try? I am sorry to die now, for I was engaged in a very interesting scientific study in my world; but since we can not escape there is no help in feeding ourselves with useless hopes."

"There must be some way of escape," Hollak insisted.

"There is none," Xydd repeated. "The first day I was prisoned here I concentrated all my mental power on possibilities of escape. I found there was none, and so dismissed the question from my mind."

In the next hours, rack their brains as they might, Connor and Hollak had no better success than Xydd. It seemed impossible to escape from their cell, and in time they gave up discussing impossible schemes.

Darkness had fallen outside and the dim ray of sunlight from the loophole was replaced by an equally dim sourceless light that came into being in the room with the coming of night.

Connor and Hollak and Xydd had sat silent for some time, when there was an exchange of voices outside their door and they heard it unbarred and opened. A figure stepped inside, the door being closed and locked after him by the guard. The three prisoners stared at the newcomer.

It was Dron.

4

DRON at once revealed his purpose in coming. "My business is with Xydd," he told Hollak and Connor.

"Xydd," he said to the Rhel, "since your capture by Grund's raiders became known, many of us Threns have been very anxious. We fear that by his rash action Grund has made the whole Rhel race our enemies."

"You fear rightly," Xydd told him calmly. "If Mnann, ruler of the Rhels, learns of it, your people will know the Rhel vengeance."

"But we have no desire to become enemies of the Rhels, whatever Grund has done!" Dron exclaimed. "The great majority of us disapprove even of this war of conquest against the Kerts."

"Why do you tell me this?" Xydd asked him.

"For this reason," Dron returned. "There are many of us who would like to release you from this prison to go back to your own world. If we did this would it placate your people when they learned of what had happened?"

Before Xydd could answer the door flew open. Quarnal stood in it, the single Thren door-guard behind him. Quarnal's face was aflame with evil triumph.

"So I've caught you at last, Dron!" he exulted. "You would release this Rhel prisoner, would you? I think Grund will thank me for this news."

Connor whispered tensely to Hollak. "Hollak, here's our chance! Take Quarnal and I'll take the guard—quick——"

Connor had seen their opportunity. Quarnal's triumph at overhearing his fellow-Thren had made him forget for the moment that the cell's door was open and

that but one guard stood behind him. So his denunciation of Dron was hardly out of Quarnal's mouth before Hollak had leapt upon him. Connor sprang for the guard.

With a terrific blow of his clenched fist Connor drove the guard against the wall, where he fell to the floor stunned. Quarnal had given a brief bellow of rage as Hollak seized him, and as Connor turned he saw that Hollak held the Thren in his great arms, while Xydd had reached quick pseudopod arms to pull down Dron.

For a moment there was silence in the cell, Quarnal straining every muscle to break free of Hollak's grip. Hollak's arm went higher, around his glistening neck, and Quarnal's eyes protruded, became dreadful. Then Hollak's arm closed with tremendous power, there was a dull snap, and Quarnal's head rolled limp. Hollak let the dead Thren fall to the floor.

"I promised him that I would kill him," he panted.

"What of this one?" Xydd asked. He was holding Dron bound and gagged by four powerful pseudopod-arms. "Shall I kill him also?"

"No," Connor said. "He's too good a guy for that, even if he is a Thren."

"We'll tie and gag him to keep him from giving the alarm," Hollak said. "Quick—his harness-straps——"

They secured and gagged Dron with the belts of his own harness. His gas-globe rod, and those of Quarnal and the guard, they quickly retrieved, Hollak showing Connor the catch by which the rods were operated. They hurried then out into the corridor.

No one was in sight along its dim-lit length.

"Come on!" Hollak said. "If we can get out of this building we may be able to steal a ship in the darkness outside."

"Here's hoping!" Connor returned as they hastened along the corridor. "Whatever happens, I'm glad Quarnal got what was coming to him."

"Careful!" Xydd warned suddenly. "My hearing is better than yours—I can hear voices from around the corridor's turn."

They crept on with sudden stealth. They made three weirdly dissimilar figures in the dim corridor—Connor in his tight-fitting space-jacket, the huge Hollak in his black harness, the monstrous human-headed Xydd with viscous body flowing smoothly beside them. Their rods were raised as they came to the hall's turn and peered around it.

Two guards were stationed at separate doors not a dozen feet around the turn, and these two Threns glimpsed the three a second too late as they appeared at the corner; for from the rods of Xydd and Hollak and Connor leapt white gas-globes that crumbled and annihilated the two Threns as they raised their own weapons.

THE three moved swiftly on, following a branch corridor that seemed to lead upward. The immense building over them was largely silent; its dim corridors were almost deserted. The one they followed debouched suddenly into the outside air, and they found themselves in the darkness just outside the wall of Grund's huge palaces.

The world-covering city of the Threns extended before them in the darkness, a plain of twinkling lights. There were some lights in the huge buildings behind them, too, and among the scores of ships resting in the surrounding park. Toward the nearest of these ships the trio moved swiftly, Xydd gliding easily beside the running Connor and Hollak.

They were beside the nearest oval ship when they flattened themselves suddenly

under its curve. A ship was descending from above! It was an oval ship that circled down very slowly over the park and then came to rest directly beside the craft under which they crouched. The space-door of the newly landed ship swung open and before the three could change position two figures had emerged from this door, stepping from it almost directly into the crouching three.

There was a low cry from one of them, a rush of dark shadows, and then before either party could use their gas-rods they were struggling hand to hand. Connor knew that a cry from the two would summon Thren guards, but to his amazement there came no cry from them. And in a moment he knew the reason, for as he struggled fiercely with one of the two his hands encountered in the darkness not the glistening body of a Thren but a body clothed in a space-jacket like his own!

He uttered an exclamation, pawing at his opponent. "Good God—it's Connor!" exclaimed his antagonist at that moment. "Rod, it's Tim!"

"Milt Newell!" gasped Connor. "What the devil—is the other one Rod?"

"It is," announced March, freeing himself from Hollak as the big Kert now recognized his antagonist. "And damn glad to see you again, Tim!"

"Speak for yourself," Newell said. "This red-headed baboon almost choked the life out of me."

"I surely would have if I'd known whom I was choking!" Connor declared.

March was smiling to himself in the darkness at this exchange, for he could guess not only how anxious Connor and Newell had been about each other but how fearful each was of showing it.

"It's sheer luck we found you this way," he told Hollak and Connor. "Milt and I reached this world hours ago, and after locating those palaces from high above, we waited until night to come down in this ship and try getting inside them."

Xydd's hissing voice came from the darkness. "If we are to escape it had best be soon," he warned. "They will find Dron and give the alarm at any moment."

"Who's that?" exclaimed March, making out Xydd's weird form for the first time.

Briefly Connor explained how he and Hollak had been prisoned with the Rhel and had escaped with him. March's eyes lit.

"Then this is your chance to smash Grund's plans for good, Hollak!" he exclaimed. "If Xydd will raise the Rhels and you go back and gather the Kert forces, the two combined can crush Grund and the Threns."

"By the two suns, it is so!" Hollak exclaimed. "Xydd, do you agree to that?"

"I am not the ruler of the Rhels," Xydd answered, "but I am sure that Mnann, who is ruler, will agree when he hears my tale. I can guarantee to have the Rhel forces here for the attack."

"Then that settles it!" Hollak cried. "I will go back to the third planet and Jurn and I will bring all the Kert forces here to meet the Rhels over this world at noon of the third day from this, and make a combined attack on Grund and his Threns."

"That means we'll have to steal one of these ships," March planned swiftly, "and some of us will have to go with Xydd in it to his world, in case he meets Thren ships in space and has to fight; and some will have to go back with Hollak for the same reason."

"I'll go back with Hollak," Newell said. "I know how to work the ship's gas-globe weapons in case he runs into

trouble. You and Tim can go on with Xydd."

"Then it's agreed. Remember," March added to Hollak, "noon of the third day from this for the attack."

"Jurn and I will be ready with every Kert ship," Hollak answered tersely.

"Into this ship with you, then!" March told him and Newell. "We three will take one of these others—quick!"

In a moment the ship's space-door had shut after Newell and Hollak, and their craft was humming up into the night. March and Xydd and Connor raced to the door of one of the parked oval ships beside them. They were entering the ship when from the immense black palaces of Grund came a rising clamor.

"They've found Drom!" Connor cried. "The sooner we're out of here the healthier!"

March was already in the pilot's seat of the ship. "Can you work the gas-globe weapons of this ship, Xydd?" he cried to the Rhel as their ship rose from the park.

For answer Xydd grasped the gas-globe controls with two pseudopod-arms. Connor, gazing down as their craft shot upward, uttered a cry. "They're after us already, Rod!"

THREN ships that had been over the city, attracted by the alarm at the palaces, were darting up after them. March held the controls grimly open, the oval ship flashing out through the planet's atmosphere with the pursuing ones grouped behind.

Almost before they knew it the roar of air about the ship died as its great speed took it clear of the planet's atmosphere and into free space. Before them flamed Alpha Centauri's two suns, one partly hiding the other, with the light-spot of the world of the Rhels on the other side of them. They were heading through space toward that light-spot.

"They're creeping closer," Xydd announced. "They'll be abreast of us shortly!"

"If we only were in our own cruiser!" Connor exclaimed. "We'd leave those ships out of sight in a second."

"How many are there after us, Xydd?" March asked.

"Four that I can make out," the Rhel answered. "They're coming still closer—will be using their gas-globes in a moment——"

Almost as he spoke March glimpsed the dark Thren ships drawing into sight in space beside them. He slanted their ship sharply upward as his eyes caught the flash of white gas-globes from the Thren craft.

The globes missed, and as they hurtled past, Xydd shot two gas-globes from their own ship. One missed, but the other struck and the four Thren ships became abruptly three.

"One of them!" March exclaimed. "Keep at it, Xydd!"

"If this ship only had ether-guns!" groaned Connor.

The Thren ships were darting close again to the fleeing craft, March swerving this way and that to confuse them. Deadly white gas-globes were hurtling again in a crisscross between pursuers and pursued as they held to this running fight—racing on through space. . . .

5

MARCH for a moment thought it the end as white gas-globes hurtled all around their ship. But miraculously they were unhit, and then the struggle came to an abrupt end. The Thren ships had darted close to release those gas-globes, and now Xydd drove globes at them in swift succession. Two struck, two Thren

ships crumbled, and the remaining one sheered off, halted and turned backward, vanishing from sight.

"Good work, Xydd!" cried Connor approvingly. "Though I still wish I'd had an ether-gun's grips in my hands."

"No more ships in sight behind us," Xydd reported. "I think we've shaken off all pursuit."

"And Hollak and Newell must have got clear, for they had a start on us," March said.

"On to the first planet, then!" Connor exclaimed. "And if all the Rhels there can fight like Xydd, it's good-bye Grund!"

For a score of hours their ship hummed at its highest speed, a comparatively great one, toward the light-spot of the innermost planet. To reach it they must pass the two flaming suns of Alpha Centauri, and this they did as closely as they dared. The two suns were sights of awesome splendor with their great coronas, and with their huge prominences that seemed licking out toward the passing ship.

At last the innermost planet was a dull globe ahead. They tore in through its atmosphere and slanted toward its surface.

Like the world of the Threns, it was covered by a city, but this city of the Rhels was different in many respects. Its square buildings were quite roofless, bespeaking a perfect weather-control. Its wide streets held throngs of the weird Rhels, human-headed viscous masses gliding to and fro in the sunlight and warmth of the two suns, which were intense on this innermost world. No ships at all were in sight over it.

Xydd directed March to land before a low, square, roofless building inside which a dozen smaller square structures could be seen, each enclosed within the next. March and Connor had no sooner stepped out of the ship with Xydd than a mass of the Rhels had gathered about them, many bearing unfamiliar-looking weapons.

Xydd made rapid explanations to them and then the three passed into the strange great structure. In minutes they stood in its inmost square before Mnann, ruler of the Rhels.

Mnann, a viscous-bodied creature with a head unusually large even for a Rhel, listened in calm silence to Xydd's story. When Xydd had finished Mnann seemed to meditate.

He spoke finally. "Your unaccountable absence was reported to me, Xydd, but I had not dreamed that Grund and his Threns would have dared seize you, a Rhel. For ages none has dared molest us here."

"Yet Grund dared," Xydd told him, "and will dare even more in the future. I think he means to master all the three worlds if he can."

"And I think it is time the Rhels taught him and the Threns a lesson," Mnann returned. "You say the Kerts will be ready to attack his world at the time mentioned? Then we Rhels will be there also with our ships, and will have a reckoning with Grund."

"With your ships?" Connor repeated. "Do you have any? I haven't seen one on this world."

"We do not use space-ships ordinarily," Mnann told him, "for we have no intercourse with the other two planets. But we have ships stored, and weapons too, so that in an emergency we can protect ourselves. I will order them brought forth at once—our force will have to start soon if we're to reach the Thren world at the time set."

There followed a scene that astonished March and Connor. Mnann gave an order, and as scores of Rhels glided swift-

ly off to execute it the Rhel world became alive with activity.

Great sections of the wide streets were slid aside, exposing cavern-like hangars beneath that held oval ships much larger than those of either the Threns or Kerts. These were rapidly brought forth and their mechanisms and weapons inspected by crews of Rhels. All these preparations were carried out with a swift efficiency that was an index to the co-operative quality of the Rhel civilization.

WHILE the preparations went on, March and Connor snatched much-needed sleep in one of the roofless rooms of the Rhel ruler's structure. When they awoke, the two suns had travelled down the sky to the planet's horizon, and when they went to join Mnann they found him with Xydd and his other weird-bodied lieutenants.

"Our forces are ready to start," Mnann informed the earthmen. "I have been hearing from Xydd that you two are from another sun's system—is it aught like this one of ours?"

"It is in some ways," March said, "but in others different. For one thing, the wars of our system's worlds ended long ago, whereas the three races of this system seem still hostile to each other."

"That is so," said Mnann thoughtfully, "and it should not be so, many of us have long thought. But enough of this for the present—the ships are ready."

Minutes later a force of three hundred great ships rose from the Rhel world in regular columns. March and Connor stood with Mnann and Xydd and a half-dozen other Rhels in the pilot section of the foremost ship as the fleet sailed out from the inner planet.

"You use the same gas-globe weapons as the Threns and Kerts?" Connor asked, but Mnann's answer was negative.

"No, we have other weapons, devised to protect ourselves but which we have scarcely ever used."

The Rhel fleet throbbed steadily at top-most speed through the void for the following hours. They passed the two suns of Alpha Centauri, giving them a somewhat wider berth than March had done, and drew visibly closer to the shining planet of the Threns.

March estimated that at their present progress they would reach the second planet at almost exactly the time set, when Jurn and Hollak and the Kert forces should arrive also.

"I hope Milt and Hollak got through all right," Connor said. "If they didn't the Kerts won't be there to join us."

"I think they must have made it," March reassured him. "We'll know soon, in any case."

Mnann gave an order and the fleet slackened speed as it approached the ball-like Thren planet. The Rhel ships proceeded in a regular formation with all in them watching intently, as they moved in space over the Thren world.

There came an exclamation as some one in the pilot room sighted ships ahead, and pointed. There were four hundred oval ships approaching, in compact battle-formation, coming forward with cautious slowness.

They peered narrowly. "Oval ships—they may be either Thren or Kert ships," March said. "If they're Threns it means the Kerts haven't shown up."

"They're not, they're Kert ships!" cried Connor. "See the three-circle symbols on their sides!"

The Kert fleet came warily on until it had recognized the Rhel ships, and then one of the Kert craft drove up to hang beside the ship of Mnann. In its pilot room could be glimpsed Jurn and Hollak and Newell. Swiftly a tubular space-

gangway was run out from the space-door of the Rhel craft to the other, and in a moment the three from the other had joined March and Connor and the Rhel leaders.

The faces of Jurn and Hollak gleamed with intense excitement, and it was with a very apparent respect tinged with awe that they met the great Rhel ruler.

"We have brought all our ships," Jurn told Mnann, "and every Kert in them is eager for the battle."

"And the Thren fleet will be waiting for us!" Hollak added. "Grund will have known what our escape meant."

"It is well that you are here," Mnann told Jurn and Hollak, "but it will be best for your ships to take up formation behind and within the formation of our own Rhel fleet. Then we can move down to the attack."

Jurn and Hollak stared. "But by the two suns," Hollak exclaimed, "you can't expect us Kerts to let you do our fighting for us!"

"You tell him, Hollak!" approved Connor. "The Rhels can't hog the whole scrap!"

"It will be best as I have said," Mnann calmly repeated.

Jurn intervened. "Mnann is right, Hollak," he said. "There'll be fighting enough for all when we meet the Thren fleet."

"Very well, then," Hollak reluctantly agreed.

JURN and Hollak returned to their own ship, the space-gangway was withdrawn, and the Rhel ships proceeded to form a great wedge, inside and behind which the Kert fleet placed itself. Then this triangle moved down toward the Thren world.

Air roared outside as the combined fleet entered the atmosphere of the big buff planet. As they moved down through this, two oval ships that had been patrolling beneath suddenly darted downward at top speed.

"Thren scouts," commented Mnann. "Grund expects our attack and will be ready for it. Well, it will be over for them so much the sooner."

"Confident, isn't he?" Connor whispered to March and Newell. "He seems to think this is going to be a push-over, but those Threns are tough eggs."

"He knows what he's about, I suppose," said March doubtfully.

In a few minutes there came into sight ahead of them, over the Thren planet, a mass of dark dots. This grew, as it neared them, into a fleet of several hundred oval ships, heading toward them in a circular formation adapted either to offense or defense. At sight of it the Rhel and Kert fleet slowed until it hung motionless in the air.

The circle of Thren ships slowed also, as though expecting a sudden dash from their enemies. But as the Rhel and Kert ships remained motionless the Threns seemed to lose their doubts, their circle leaping forward with renewed speed. It was opening as it did so and in moments would have flashed round the Rhel and Kert fleet to enclose it.

"What's the matter with these birds?" demanded Connor tensely. "Don't they see we'll have those hundreds of Threns on all sides of us in a moment, all their gas-globes going?"

"Quiet, Tim," warned March. "This is their battle."

"Wait," Xydd told the earthmen. "You will soon see the Rhel power."

Mnann was gazing calmly at the onrushing Thren ships. Even March had begun to doubt, but at the moment that the Thren circle seemed almost on and

around them, Mnann spoke briefly and a signal flashed.

From the three hundred Rhel ships there sprang instantly flashes of blinding white flame toward the Thren ships. The flame-flashes blasted and annihilated the Thren craft they struck, and did not go out when they had done so but leapt through the air to neighboring ships to blast them also. The flame-flashes were burning up the Thren fleet, leaping from ship to ship.

The Thren ships yet untouched by the flames were scattering madly, seeking flight, but the flame-flashes leapt after them, devoured almost all of them. In a few moments, before the stupefied eyes of Connor and March and Newell, nine-tenths of the hundreds of Thren ships had been annihilated without loosing a gas-globe, and as the flame-flashes went out in the air the survivors were in mad flight.

"You have seen," came Mnann's calm voice. "The retribution of the Rhels."

Connor turned to him, shaken. "I take it all back, Mnann," he said. "When it comes to fighting, you Rhels know your business!"

"We descend now to find Grund," Mnann said. "It is he who ordered the seizing of a Rhel, and for him we have come."

THE combined fleet of Rhel and Kert ships dropped rapidly toward the planet below, but halted a few thousand feet above its surface.

The Thren city that covered the planet was the scene of a wild battle between different swarms of the Threns.

This struggle seemed centered on the great black palaces of Grund, whose guards were striving to hold back Thren hordes pouring from all directions toward it. The Rhels and Kerts above, gazing down in astonishment, could see the play of white gas-globes. In the intensity of this wild civil combat the Threns did not notice the ships hanging above.

"Holy smoke—the Threns are massacring each other!" Connor exclaimed. "What the devil does it mean?"

"Whatever they're fighting about, its almost over," Kydd said.

The struggle across the city had died out and the fighting at Grund's palaces was ceasing as the guards there were overcome.

"Let's go on down, then," urged Newell. "There'll be no resistance from that wild mob."

Mnann gave the order and the fleet descended rapidly. As they dropped through the sunlight the wild crowds of Threns below saw them for the first time and scattered.

The greater part of the Rhel and Kert ships remained hovering while a score descended to land in the park around Grund's palaces. From these ships emerged Rhels and Kerts, including Mnann and Xydd and Connor and Newell and March, and Jurn and Hollak.

They were moving toward the great palaces when a party of Threns emerged and approached them. Mnann and his companions waited their approach, and as they came near, Connor and Hollak and Xydd recognized the Thren at their head as Dron.

"We Rhels have come for Grund," Mnann said to him, "and will spare your race if you do not resist us."

"Grund is dead," Dron told them. "He was killed but minutes ago."

"Grund killed!" exclaimed Hollak. "By whom?"

"By myself and my followers," Dron answered calmly. "Many of us Threns have long hated Grund's plans of war and conquest. When the survivors of our

fleet returned but now with news that the Rhels had destroyed our ships and were approaching with the Kerts, our Thren people realized that this was the result of Grund's doing, and revolt broke out. When we stormed the palace but now, Grund was in it and died fighting. The Threns have now named me as their new ruler.

"I have never seen why we Threns should war with the Kerts," Dron added, "nor can I see why we should war with the Rhels. Our three races are descended one from another, so why should we not live at peace with one another? Grund is gone and we Threns wish peace as you do; so why can we not agree to bury all enmity and live as friends on our three worlds?"

"We can!" Jurn exclaimed. "Dron, I have respected you even when you warred against us—we Kerts have no enmity for you."

"None at all," Hollak agreed, "nor have we ever ourselves sought warfare with the Threns. Our agreement for lasting peace you have, then, but what of the Rhels?"

Mnann spoke. "We Rhels have never fought but to protect ourselves; so you have our agreement also. And more, whatever of scientific knowledge we have greater than your own shall be shared with Threns and Kerts. We are, after all, their parent-race."

"Then our three worlds will live in friendly peace, as I have dreamed!" Jurn cried. "And I think that we owe that to these three, these men from another star!"

"Not to us!" exclaimed March and Newell, but Jurn nodded.

"Yes, to you, for our races had warred in this system for ages before you came. But you came, and we now see Grund dead and his plans of conquest shattered, we see Rhels and Threns and Kerts friends at last. We see a system that was torn with war and battle when you reached it become now a system whose peace shall be unbroken."

"And you're grateful to us for that?" Connor exclaimed.

"Of course we are!" Jurn answered. "So grateful that your names will live in this system while any one lives in it."

"Can you tie that?" exclaimed Connor to March and Newell. "We started out from our own solar system because it was too dull and peaceful, and here we've been making this system of Alpha Centauri's, that was full of battle, murder and sudden death—we've been making it into a dull and peaceful one like our own! And the crowning blow is that they're grateful to us for it!"

6

MARCH and Connor and Newell had two leave-takings in the next days. The first was on the Thren world, a few days after the new peace agreement of the Rhels, Threns and Kerts. That agreement had been sealed at a formal council at which Dron, the new ruler of the Threns, had pledged his people's adherence to it, Jurn and Hollak ratified it for the Kerts and Mnann for the Rhels.

With the council over, the representatives of the three races were ready to part, Mnann and Xydd with the other Rhels to the innermost planet, Jurn and Hollak with their Kerts to the outermost world. Each of the three races had desired March and his companions to remain as their guests, but the three had explained their desire to continue their star-cruising voyage, and so had parted from Dron and Mnann and Xydd, to accompany Jurn and Hollak.

It was from Jurn and Hollak that their second leave-taking was, a few days later. Standing beneath the blaze of Alpha Cen-

tauri's suns on the outermost planet, beside their cruiser's open door, they shook the hands of the Kert rulers.

"We'd sure stick around here at Alpha Centauri if we weren't so anxious to find out what it's like at Sirius," Connor explained.

"And at the stars beyond Sirius," March smiled.

"I understand," Jurn said, "nor will we try to detain you. But if you ever come back this way——"

"Remember that at this star at least you have only friends," Hollak finished for him.

"We'll remember," Connor assured him. "So long, Jurn—Hollak——"

In moments their cruiser was climbing up out of the planet's atmosphere into free space. High it climbed until Alpha Centauri's suns lay down to their right, its three worlds but shining specks. In black space around them blazed the hosts of countless stars.

One blazed brightest among them, green and briiliant, and toward it March pointed the cruiser's prow. Newell and Connor gazed with him toward the great green star as the cruiser leapt forward with mounting speed toward it.

"That's our next stop—Sirius!" March told them.

"Sirius—and what'll it be like there, I wonder?" speculated Newell.

"Whatever it's like, it can't be much more exciting than back at Alpha Centauri," Connor said. "Our first stop—and it came near being my last."

"Yes, I was hopeful for a time that Rod and I were going to shake you there and make the trip a success after all," Newell said. "But I might have known we couldn't lose you."

"Is that so?" Connor demanded. "You lazy, long-legged liability, if any one's a drawback on this trip it's you! If we don't get rid of you at some star soon, we might as well give up and go home, you cross-jointed, cock-eyed——" He broke off to ask, "What were you saying, Rod?"

"I was just saying," said March, "that after all I'm glad to be out here again in space, where everything's calm and peaceful!"



"He was about to assail the huge icicles with his pick, when he heard an agonizing scream from the jeweler."

The Ice-Demon

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A fantastic tale of an animate, sentient sheet of ice, and the wild adventure of Quanga the hunter, who sought to dig royal rubies from that glacial tomb

QUANGA the huntsman, with Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tsanth, two of the most enterprising jewelers of Iqqua, had crossed the borders of a region into which men went but seldom—and wherefrom they returned even more rarely. Travelling north from Iqqua, they had passed into desolate Mhu Thulan, where the great glacier of Polarion had rolled like a frozen sea upon wealthy and far-famed cities, covering the broad isthmus from shore to shore beneath fathoms of perpetual ice.

The shell-shaped domes of Cerngoth, it was fabled, could still be seen deep down in the glaciation; and the high, keen spires of Oggon-Zhai were embedded therein, together with fern-palm and mammoth and the square black temples of the god Tsathoggua. All this had occurred many centuries ago; and still the

ice, a mighty, glittering rampart, was moving south upon deserted lands.

Now, in the path of the embattled glacier, Quanga led his companions on a bold quest. Their object was nothing less than the retrieval of the rubies of King Haalor, who, with the wizard Ommum-Vog and many full-caparisoned soldiers, had gone out five decades before to make war upon the polar ice. From this fantastic expedition, neither Haalor nor Ommum-Vog had come back; and the sorry, ragged remnant of their men-at-arms, returning to Iqqua, after two moons, had told a dire tale.

The army, they said, had made its encampment on a sort of knoll, carefully chosen by Ommum-Vog, in full sight of the vanward ice. Then the mighty sorcerer, standing with Haalor amid a ring of braziers that fumed incessantly with golden smoke, and reciting runes that were older than the world, had conjured up a fiery orb, vaster and redder than the southward-circling sun of heaven. And the orb, with blazing beams that smote from the zenith, torrid and effulgent, had caused the sun to seem no more than a daylight moon, and the soldiers had almost swooned from its heat in their heavy panoply. But beneath its beams the verges of the glacier melted and ran in swift rills and rivers, so that Haalor for a time was hopeful of reconquering the realm of Mhu Thulan over which his forefathers had ruled in bygone ages.

The rushing waters had deepened, flowing past the knoll on which the army waited. Then, as if by a hostile magic, the rivers began to give forth a pale and stifling mist, that blinded the conjured sun of Ommum-Vog, so that its sultry beams grew faint and chill and had power no longer on the ice.

Vainly the wizard had put forth other spells, trying to dissipate the deep and gelid fog. But the vapor drew down, evil and clammy, coiling and wreathing like knots of phantom serpents, and filling men's marrows as if with the cold of death. It covered all the camp, a tangible thing, ever colder and thicker, numbing the limbs of those who groped blindly and could not see the faces of their fellows at arm's-length. A few of the common soldiers, somehow, reached its outer confines and crept fearfully away beneath the wan sun, seeing no longer in the skies the wizard globe that had been called up by Ommum-Vog. And looking back presently, as they fled in strange terror, they beheld, instead of the low-lying mist they had thought to see, a newly frozen sheet of ice that covered the mound on which the king and the sorcerer had made their encampment. The ice rose higher above the ground than a tall man's head; and dimly, in its glittering depth, the fleeing soldiers saw the imprisoned forms of their leaders and companions.

Deeming that this thing was no natural occurrence, but a sorcery that had been exerted by the great glacier, and that the glacier itself was a live, malignant entity with powers of unknown bale, they did not slacken their flight. And the ice had suffered them to depart in peace, as if to give warning of the fate of those who dared to assail it.

Some there were who believed the tale, and some who doubted. But the kings that ruled in Iqqua after Haalor went not forth to do battle with the ice; and no wizard rose to make war upon it with conjured suns. Men fled before the ever-advancing glaciations; and strange legends were told of how people had been overtaken or cut off in lonely valleys by sudden, diabolic shiftings of the ice, as if it had stretched out a living hand. And legends there were, of awful crevasses that yawned abruptly and closed like monstrous mouths upon them that dared

the frozen waste; of winds like the breath of boreal demons, that blasted men's flesh with instant, utter cold and turned them into statues hard as granite. In time the whole region, for many miles before the glacier, was generally shunned; and only the hardiest hunters would follow their quarry into that winter-blighted land.

Now it happened that the fearless huntsman Iluac, the elder brother of Quanga, had gone into Mhu Thulan, and had pursued an enormous black fox that led him afar on the mighty fields of the ice-sheet. For many leagues he trailed it, coming never within bowshot of the beast; and at length he came to a great mound on the plain, that seemed to mark the position of a buried hill. And Iluac thought that the fox entered a cavern in the mound; so, with lifted bow and a poised arrow at the string, he went after it into the cavern.

The place was like a chamber of boreal kings or gods. All about him, in a dim green light, were huge, glimmering pillars; and giant icicles hung from the roof in the form of stalactites. The floor sloped downward; and Iluac came to the cave's end without finding any trace of the fox. But in the transparent depth of the further wall, at the bottom, he saw the standing shapes of many men, deep-frozen and sealed up as in a tomb, with undecaying bodies and fair, unshrunken features. The men were armed with tall spears, and most of them wore the panoply of soldiers. But among them, in the van, there stood a haughty figure attired in the sea-blue robes of a king; and beside him was a bowed ancient who wore the night-black garb of a sorcerer. The robes of the regal figure were heavily sewn with gems that burned like colored stars through the ice; and great rubies red as gouts of newly congealing blood were arranged in the lines of a triangle on the bosom, forming the royal sign of the kings of Iqqua. So Iluac knew, by these tokens, that he had found the tomb of Haalor and Ommum-Vog and the soldiers with whom they had gone up against the ice in former days.

Overawed by the strangeness of it all, and remembering now the old legends, Iluac lost his courage for the first time, and quitted the chamber without delay. Nowhere could he find the black fox; and abandoning the chase, he returned southward, reaching the lands below the glacier without mishap. But he swore later that the ice had changed in a weird manner while he was following the fox, so that he was unsure of his direction for a while after leaving the cavern. There were steep ridges and hummocks where none had been before, making his return a toilsome journey; and the glaciation seemed to extend itself for many miles beyond its former limits. And because of these things, which he could not explain or understand, a curious eery fear was born in the heart of Iluac.

Never again did he go back upon the glacier; but he told his brother Quanga of that which he had found, and described the location of the cavern-chamber in which King Haalor and Ommum-Vog and their men-at-arms were entombed. And soon after this, Iluac was killed by a white bear on which he had used all his arrows in vain.

QUANGA was no less brave than Iluac; and he did not fear the glacier, since he had been upon it many times and had noticed nothing untoward. His was a heart that lusted after gain, and often he thought of the rubies of Haalor, locked with the king in eternal ice; and it seemed to him that a bold man might recover the rubies.

So, one summer, while trading in

Iqqua with his furs, he went to the jewelers Eibur Tsanth and Hoom Feethos, taking with him a few garnets that he had found in a northern valley. While the jewelers were appraising the garnets, he spoke idly of the rubies of Haalor, and inquired craftily as to their value. Then, hearing the great worth of the gems, and noting the greedy interest that was shown by Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tsanth, he told them the tale he had heard from his brother Iluac, and offered, if they would promise him half the value of the rubies, to guide them to the hidden cave.

The jewelers agreed to this proposition, in spite of the hardships of the proposed journey, and the difficulty they might afterward encounter in disposing surreptitiously of gems that belonged to the royal family of Iqqua and would be claimed by the present king, Ralour, if their discovery were learned. The fabulous worth of the rubies had fired their avarice. Quanga, on his part, desired the complicity and connivance of the dealers, knowing that it would be hard for him to sell the jewels otherwise. He did not trust Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tsanth, and it was for this reason that he required them to go with him to the cavern and pay over to him the agreed sum of money as soon as they were in possession of the treasure.

The strange trio had set forth in midsummer. Now, after two weeks of journeying through a wild, sub-arctic region, they were approaching the confines of the eternal ice. They travelled on foot, and their supplies were carried by three horses little larger than musk-oxen. Quanga, an unerring marksman, hunted for their daily food the hares and waterfowl of the country.

Behind them, in a cloudless turquoise heaven, there burned the low sun that was said to have described a loftier ecliptic in former ages. Drifts of unmelting snow were heaped in the shadows of the higher hills; and in steep valleys they came upon the vanward glaciers of the ice-sheet. The trees and shrubs were already sparse and stunted, in a land where rich forests had flourished in olden time beneath a milder climate. But poppies flamed in the meadows and along the slopes, spreading their frail beauty like a scarlet rug before the feet of perennial winter; and the quiet pools and stagnant-flowing streams were lined with white water-lilies.

A little to the east, they saw the fuming of volcanic peaks that still resisted the inroads of the glaciers. On the west were high, gaunt mountains whose sheer cliffs and pinnacles were topped with snow, and around whose nether slopes the ice had climbed like an inundating sea. Before them was the looming, crenelated wall of the realm-wide glaciation, moving equally on plain and hill, uprooting the trees, and pressing the soil forward in vast folds and ridges. Its progress had been stayed a little by the northern summer. Quanga and the jewelers, as they went on, came to turbid rills, made by a temporary melting, that issued from beneath the glittering blue-green ramparts.

THEY left their pack-horses in a grassy valley, tethered by long cords of elk-thong to the dwarfish willows. Then, carrying such provisions and other equipment as they might require for a two days' journey, they climbed the ice-slope at a point selected by Quanga as being most readily accessible, and started in the direction of the cave that had been found by Iluac. Quanga took his bearings from the position of the volcanic mountains, and also from two isolated peaks that rose on the sheeted plain to the north like the breasts of a giantess beneath her shining armor.

The three were well equipped for all

the exigencies of their search. Quanga carried a curious pick-ax of finely tempered bronze, to be used in disentombing the body of King Haalor; and he was armed with a short, leaf-shaped sword, in addition to his bow and quiver of arrows. His garments were made from the fur of a giant bear, brown-black in color.

Hoom Feethos and Eibur Tsanth, in raiment heavily quilted with eider-down against the cold, followed him complainingly but with avaricious eagerness. They had not enjoyed the long marches through a desolate, bleakening land, nor the rough fare and exposure to the northern elements. Moreover, they had taken a dislike to Quanga, whom they considered rude and overbearing. Their grievances were aggravated by the fact that he was now compelling them to carry most of the supplies in addition to the two heavy bags of gold which they were to exchange later for the gems. Nothing less valuable than the rubies of Haalor would have induced them to come so far, or to set foot on the formidable wastes of the ice-sheet.

The scene before them was like some frozen world of the outer void. Vast, unbroken, save for a few scattered mounds and ridges, the plain extended to the white horizon and its armored peaks. Nothing seemed to live or move on the awful, glistening vistas, whose nearer levels were swept clean of snow. The sun appeared to grow pale and chill, and to recede behind the adventurers; and a wind blew upon them from the ice, like a breath from abysses beyond the pole.

Apart from the boreal desolation and dreariness, however, there was nothing to dismay Quanga or his companions. None of them was superstitious, and they deemed that the old tales were idle myths, were no more than fear-born delusions. Quanga smiled commiseratively at the thought of his brother Iluac, who had been so oddly frightened and had fancied such extraordinary things after the finding of Haalor. It was a singular weakness in Iluac, the rash and almost foolhardy hunter who had feared neither man nor beast. As to the trapping of Haalor and Ommum-Vog and their army in the glacier, it was plain that they had allowed themselves to be overtaken by the winter storms; and the few survivors, mentally unhinged by their hardships, had told a wild story. Ice—even though it had conquered half of a continent—was merely ice, and its workings conformed invariably to certain natural laws. Iluac had said that the ice-sheet was a great demon, cruel, greedy, and loth to give up that which it had taken. But such beliefs were crude and primitive superstitions, not to be entertained by enlightened minds of the Pleistocene age.

They had climbed the rampart at an early hour of morning. Quanga assured the jewelers that they would reach the cavern by noon at the latest, even if there should be a certain amount of difficulty and delay in locating it.

The plain before them was remarkably free of crevasses, and there was little to obstruct their advance. Steering their way with the two breast-shaped mountains for landmarks before them, they came after three hours to a hill-like elevation that corresponded to the mound of Iluac's story. With little trouble, they found the opening of the deep chamber.

IT SEEMED that the place had changed little if at all since the visit of Iluac, for the interior, with its columns and pendant icicles, conformed closely to his description. The entrance was like a fanged maw. Within, the floor sloped downward at a slippery angle for more than a hundred feet. The chamber swam with a cold and glaucous translucency that filtered through the dome-like roof,

At the lower end, in the striated wall, Quanga and the jewelers saw the embedded shapes of a number of men, among which they distinguished easily the tall, blue-clad corpse of King Haalor and the dark, bowed mummy of Ommum-Vog. Behind these, the shapes of others, lifting their serried spears eternally, and receding downward in stiff ranks through unfathomable depths, were faintly discernible.

Haalor stood regal and erect, with wide-open eyes that stared haughtily as in life. Upon his bosom the triangle of hot and blood-bright rubies smoldered unquenchably in the glacial gloom; and the colder eyes of topazes, of beryls, of diamonds, of chrysolites, gleamed and twinkled from his azure raiment. It seemed that the fabulous gems were separated by no more than a foot or two of ice from the greedy fingers of the hunter and his companions.

Without speaking, they stared raptly at the far-sought treasure. Apart from the great rubies, the jewelers were also estimating the value of the other gems worn by Haalor. These alone, they thought complacently, would have made it worth while to endure the fatigue of the journey and the insolence of Quanga.

The hunter, on his part, was wishing that he had driven an even steeper bargain. The two bags of gold, however, would make him a wealthy man. He could drink to his full content the costly wines, redder than the rubies, that came from far Uzuldaroum in the south. The tawny, slant-eyed girls of Iqqua would dance at his bidding; and he could gamble for high stakes.

All three were unmindful of the eeriness of their situation, alone in that boreal solitude with the frozen dead; and they were oblivious likewise to the ghoulish nature of the robbery they were about to commit. Without waiting to be urged by his companions, Quanga raised the keen and highly tempered pick of bronze, and began to assail the translucent wall with mighty blows.

The ice rang shrilly beneath the pick, and dropped away in crystal splinters and diamond lumps. In a few minutes, he had made a large cavity; and only a thin shell, cracked and shattering, remained before the body of Haalor. This shell Quanga proceeded to pry off with great care; and soon the triangle of monstrous rubies, more or less encrusted still with clinging ice, lay bare to his fingers. While the proud, bleak eyes of Haalor stared immovably upon him from behind their glassy mask, the hunter dropped the pick, and drawing his sharp, leaf-shaped sword from its scabbard, he began to sever the fine silver wires by which the rubies were attached cunningly to the king's raiment. In his haste he ripped away portions of the sea-blue fabric, baring the frozen and dead-white flesh beneath. One by one, as he removed the rubies, he gave them to Hoom Feethos, standing close behind him; and the dealer, bright-eyed with avarice, drooling a little with ecstasy, stored them carefully in a huge pouch of mottled lizardskin that he had brought along for the purpose.

The last ruby had been secured, and Quanga was about to turn his attention to the lesser jewels that adorned the king's garments in curious patterns and signs of astrological or hieratic significance. Then, amid their preoccupation, he and Hoom Feethos were startled by a loud and splintering crash that ended with myriad tinklings as of broken glass. Turning, they saw that a huge icicle had fallen from the cavern-dome; and its point, as if aimed unerringly, had cloven the skull of Eibur Tsanth, who lay amid the débris of shattered ice with the sharp end of the fragment deeply embedded in his

oozing brain. He had died, instantly, without knowledge of his doom.

The accident, it seemed, was a perfectly natural one, such as might occur in summer from a slight melting of the immense pendant; but, amid their consternation, Quanga and Hoom Feethos were compelled to take note of certain circumstances that were far from normal or explicable.

During the removal of the rubies, on which their attention had been centered so exclusively, *the chamber had narrowed to half of its former width, and had also closed down from above,* till the hanging icicles were almost upon them, like the champing teeth of some tremendous mouth. The place had darkened, and the light was such as might filter into arctic seas beneath heavy floes. The incline of the cave had grown steeper, as if it were pitching into bottomless depths. Far up —incredibly far—the two men beheld the tiny entrance, which seemed no bigger than the mouth of a fox's hole.

For an instant, they were stupefied. The changes of the cavern could admit of no natural explanation; and the Hyperboreans felt the clammy surge of all the superstitious terrors that they had formerly disclaimed. No longer could they deny the conscious, animate malevolence, the diabolic powers of bale imputed to the ice in old legends.

Realizing their peril, and spurred by a wild panic, they started to climb the incline. Hoom Feethos retained the bulging pouch of rubies, as well as the heavy bag of gold coins that hung from his girdle; and Quanga had enough presence of mind to keep his sword and pick-ax. In their terror-driven haste, however, both forgot the second bag of gold, which lay beside Eibur Tsanth, under the débris of the shattered pendant.

The supernatural narrowing of the cave, the dreadful and sinister closing-down of its roof, had apparently ceased. At any rate, the Hyperboreans could detect no visible continuation of the process as they climbed frantically and precariously toward the opening. They were forced to stoop in many places to avoid the mighty fangs that threatened to descend upon them; and even with the rough tigerskin buskins that they wore, it was hard to keep their footing on the terrible slope. Sometimes they pulled themselves up by means of the slippery, pillar-like formations; and often Quanga, who led the way, was compelled to hew hasty steps in the incline with his pick.

Hoom Feethos was too terrified for even the most rudimentary reflection. But Quanga, as he climbed, was considering the monstrous alterations of the cave, which he could not aline with his wide and various experience of the phenomena of nature. He tried to convince himself that he had made a singular error in estimating the chamber's dimensions and the inclination of its floor. The effort was useless: he still found himself confronted by a thing that outraged his reason; a thing that distorted the known face of the world with unearthly, hideous madness, and mingled a malign chaos with its ordered workings.

After an ascent that was frightfully prolonged, like the effort to escape from some delirious, tedious nightmare predicament, they neared the cavern-mouth. There was barely room now for a man to creep on his belly beneath the sharp and ponderous teeth. Quanga, feeling that the fangs might close upon him like those of some great monster, hurled himself forward and started to wriggle through the opening with a most unheroic celerity. Something held him back, and he thought, for one moment of stark horror, that his worst apprehensions were being realized. Then he found that his bow and quiver

of arrows, which he had forgotten to remove from his shoulders, were caught against the pendant ice. While Hoom Feethos gibbered in a frenzy of fear and impatience, he crawled back and relieved himself of the impeding weapons, which he thrust before him together with his pick in a second and more successful attempt to pass through the strait opening.

Rising to his feet on the open glacier, he heard a wild cry from Hoom Feethos, who, trying to follow Quanga, had become tightly wedged in the entrance through his greater girth. His right hand, clutching the pouch of rubies, was thrust forward beyond the threshold of the cave. He howled incessantly, with half-coherent protestations that the cruel ice-teeth were crunching him to death.

In spite of the eery terrors that had unmanned him, the hunter still retained enough courage to go back and try to assist Hoom Feethos. He was about to assail the huge icicles with his pick, when he heard an agonizing scream from the jeweler, followed by a harsh and indescribable grating. There had been no visible movement of the fangs—and yet Quanga now saw that they had reached the cavern-floor! The body of Hoom Feethos, pierced through and through by one of the icicles, and ground down by the blunter teeth, was spurting blood on the glacier, like the red mist from a wine-press.

Quanga doubted the very testimony of his senses. The thing before him was patently impossible—there was no mark of cleavage in the mound above the cavern-mouth, to explain the descent of those awful fangs. Before his very eyes, but too swiftly for direct cognition, this unthinkable enormity had occurred.

Hoom Feethos was beyond all earthly help, and Quanga, now wholly the slave of a hideous panic, would hardly have stayed longer to assist him in any case. But seeing the pouch that had fallen forward from the dead jeweler's fingers, the hunter snatched it up through an impulse of terror-mingled greed; and then, with no backward glance, he fled on the glacier, toward the low-circling sun.

For a few moments, as he ran, Quanga failed to perceive the sinister and ill-boding alterations, comparable to those of the cave, which had somehow occurred in the sheeted plain itself. With a terrific shock, which became an actual vertigo, he saw that he was climbing a long, insanely tilted slope above whose remote extreme the sun had receded strangely, and was now small and chill as if seen from an outer planet. The very sky was different: though still perfectly cloudless, it had taken on a curious deathly pallor. A brooding sense of inimical volition, a vast and freezing malignity, seemed to pervade the air and to settle upon Quanga like an incubus. But more terrifying than all else, in its proof of a conscious and malign derangement of natural law, was the giddy poleward inclination that had been assumed by the level plateau.

Quanga felt that creation itself had gone mad, and had left him at the mercy of demoniacal forces from the godless outer gulfs. Keeping a perilous foothold, weaving and staggering laboriously upward, he feared momently that he would slip and fall and slide back for ever into arctic depths unfathomable. And yet, when he dared to pause at last, and turned shudderingly to peer down at the supposed descent, he saw *behind* him an acclivity similar in all respects to the one he was climbing: a mad, oblique wall of ice, that rose interminably to a second remote sun.

In the confusion of that strange *bouleversement,* he seemed to lose the last remnant of equilibrium; and the glacier

reeled and pitched about him like an overturning world as he strove to recover the sense of direction that had never before deserted him. Everywhere, it appeared, there were small and wan parhelia that mocked him above unending glacial scarps. He resumed his hopeless climb through a topsy-turvy world of illusion: whether north, south, east or west, he could not tell.

A sudden wind swept downward on the glacier; it shrieked in Quanga's ears like the myriad voices of taunting devils; it moaned and laughed and ululated with shrill notes as of crackling ice. It seemed to pluck at Quanga with live malicious fingers, to suck the breath for which he fought agonizingly. In spite of his heavy raiment, and the speed of his toilsome ascent, he felt its bitter, mordant teeth, searching and biting even to the marrow.

Dimly, as he continued to climb upward, he saw that the ice was no longer smooth, but had risen into pillars and pyramids around him, or was fretted obscenely into wilder shapes. Immense, malignant profiles leered in blue-green crystal; the malformed heads of bestial devils frowned; and rearing dragons writhed immovably along the scarp, or sank frozen into deep crevasses.

Apart from these imaginary forms that were assumed by the ice itself, Quanga saw, or believed that he saw, human bodies and faces embedded in the glacier. Pale hands appeared to reach dimly and imploringly toward him from the depths; and he felt upon him the frost-bound eyes of men who had been lost in former years; and beheld their sunken limbs, grown rigid in strange attitudes of torture.

Quanga was no longer capable of thought. Dear, blind, primordial terrors, older than reason, had filled his mind with their atavistic darkness. They drove him on implacably, as a beast is driven, and would not let him pause or flag on the mocking, nightmare slope. Reflection would have told him only that his ultimate escape was impossible; that the ice, a live and conscious and maleficent thing, was merely playing a cruel and fantastic game which it had somehow devised in its incredible animism. So, perhaps, it was well that he had lost the power of reflection.

Beyond hope and without warning, he came to the end of the glaciation. It was like the sudden shift of a dream, which takes the dreamer unaware; and he stared uncomprehendingly for some moments at the familiar Hyperborean valleys below the rampart, to the south, and the volcanoes that fumed darkly beyond the scutheastern hills.

His flight from the cavern had consumed almost the whole of the long, sub-polar afternoon, and the sun was now swinging close above the horizon. The parhelia had vanished, and the ice-sheet, as if by some prodigious legerdemain, had resumed its normal horizontality. If he had been able to compare his impressions, Quanga would have realized that at no time had he surprized the glacier in the accomplishment of its bewildering supernatural changes.

DOUBTFULLY, as if it were a mirage that might fade at any moment, he surveyed the landscape below the battlements. To all appearances, he had returned to the very place from which he and the jewelers had begun their disastrous journey on the ice. Before him an easy declivity, fretted and runneled, ran down toward the grassy meadows. Fearing that it was all deceitful and unreal—a fair, beguiling trap, a new treachery of the element that he had grown to regard as a cruel and almighty demon—Quanga descended the slope with hasty leaps and bounds. Even when he stood

ankle-deep in the great club-mosses, with leafy willows and sedgy grasses about him, he could not quite believe in the verity of his escape.

The mindless prompting of a panic fear still drove him on; and a primal instinct, equally mindless, drew him toward the volcanic peaks. The instinct told him that he would find refuge from the bitter boreal cold amid their purlieus; and there, if anywhere, he would be safe from the diabolical machinations of the glacier. Boiling springs were said to flow perpetually from the nether slopes of these mountains; great geysers, roaring and hissing like infernal cauldrons, filled the higher gullies with scalding cataracts. The long snows that swept upon Hyperborea were turned to mild rains in the vicinity of the volcanoes; and there a rich and sultry-colored flora, formerly native to the whole region, but now exotic, flourished throughout the seasons.

Quanga could not find the little shaggy horses that he and his companions had left tethered to the dwarf willows in the valley-meadow. Perhaps, after all, it was not the same valley. At any rate, he did not stay his flight to search for them. Without delay or lingering, after one fearful backward look at the menacing mass of the glaciation, he started off in a direct line for the smoke-plumed mountains.

The sun sank lower, skirting endlessly the southwestern horizon, and flooding the battlemented ice and the rolling landscape with a light of pale amethyst. Quanga, with iron thews inured to protracted marches, pressed on in his unremitting terror, and was overtaken gradually by the long, ethereal-tinted twilight of northern summer.

Somehow, through all the stages of his flight, he had retained the pick-ax, as well as his bow and arrows. Automatically, hours before, he had placed the heavy pouch of rubies in the bosom of his raiment for safekeeping. He had forgotten them, and he did not even notice the trickle of water from the melting of crusted ice about the jewels, that seeped upon his flesh from the lizard-skin pouch.

Crossing one of the innumerable valleys, he stumbled against a protruding willow-root, and the pick was hurled from his fingers as he fell. Rising to his feet, he ran on without stopping to retrieve it.

A ruddy glow from the volcanoes was now visible on the darkening sky. It brightened as Quanga went on; and he felt that he was nearing the far-sought, inviolable sanctuary. Though still thoroughly shaken and demoralized by his preterhuman ordeals, he began to think that he might escape from the ice-demon after all.

Suddenly he became aware of a consuming thirst, to which he had been oblivious heretofore. Daring to pause in one of the shallow valleys, he drank from a blossom-bordered stream. Then, beneath the crushing load of an unconsciously accumulated fatigue, he flung himself down to rest for a little while among the blood-red poppies that were purple with twilight.

SLEEP fell like a soft and overwhelming snow upon his eyelids, but was soon broken by evil dreams in which he still fled vainly from the mocking and inexorable glacier. He awoke in a cold horror, sweating and shivering, and found himself staring at the northern sky, where a delicate flush was dying slowly. It seemed to him that a great shadow, malign and massive and somehow *solid,* was moving upon the horizon and striding over the low hills toward the valley in which he lay. It came with inexpressible speed, and the last light ap-

peared to fall from the heavens, chill as a reflection caught in ice.

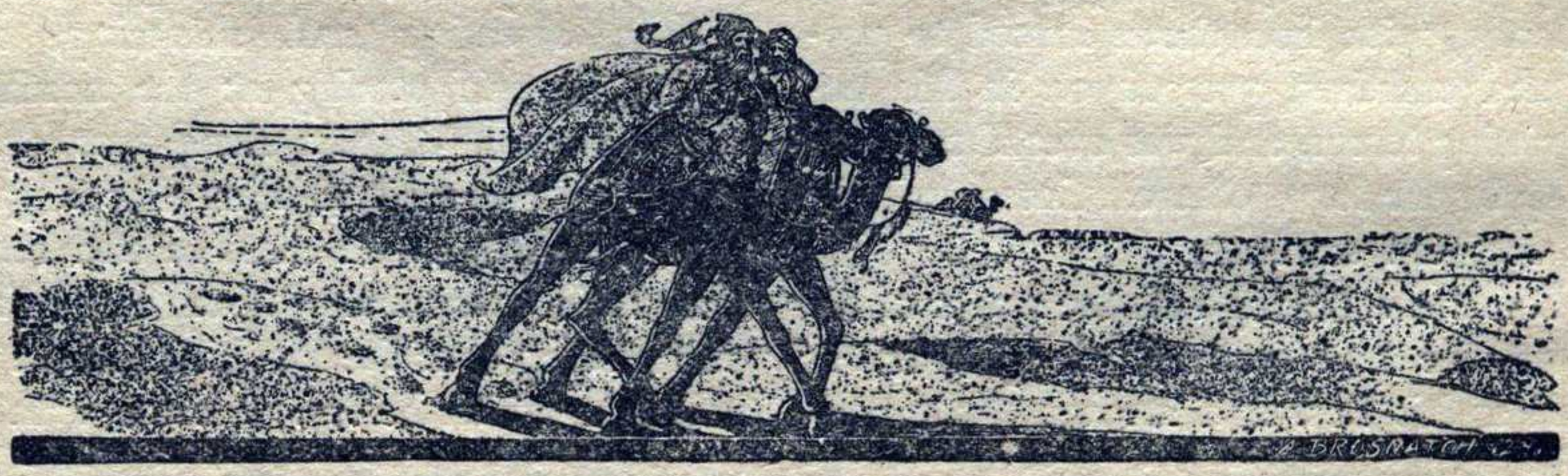
He started to his feet with the stiffness of prolonged exhaustion in all his body, and the nightmare stupefaction of slumber still mingling with his half-awakened fears. In this state, with a mad, momentary defiance, he unslung his bow and discharged arrow after arrow, emptying his quiver at the huge and bleak and formless shadow that seemed to impend before him on the sky. Having done this, he resumed his headlong flight.

Even as he ran, he shivered uncontrollably with the sudden and intense cold that had filled the valley. Vaguely, with an access of fear, he felt that there was something unwholesome and unnatural about the cold—something that did not belong to the place or the season. The glowing volcanoes were quite near, and soon he would reach their outlying hills. The air about him should be temperate, even if not actually warm.

All at once, the air darkened before him, with a sourceless, blue-green glimmering in its depths. For a moment, he saw the featureless Shadow that rose gigantically upon his path and obscured the very stars and the glare of the volcanoes. Then, with the swirling of a tempest-driven vapor, it closed about him, gelid and relentless. It was like phantom ice—a thing that blinded his eyes and stifled his breath, as if he were buried in some glacial tomb. It was cold with a transarctic rigor, such as he had never known, that ached unbearably in all his flesh, and was followed by a swiftly spreading numbness.

Dimly he heard a sound as of clashing icicles, a grinding as of heavy floes, in the blue-green gloom that tightened and thickened around him. It was as if the soul of the glacier, malign and implacable, had overtaken him in his flight. At times he struggled numbly, in half-drowsy terror. With some obscure impulse, as if to propitiate a vengeful deity, he took the pouch of rubies from his bosom with prolonged and painful effort, and tried to hurl it away. The thongs that tied the pouch were loosened by its fall, and Quanga heard faintly, as if from a great distance, the tinkle of the rubies as they rolled and scattered on some hard surface. Then oblivion deepened about him, and he fell forward stiffly, without knowing that he had fallen.

Morning found him beside the little stream, stark-frozen, and lying on his face in a circle of poppies that had been blackened as if by the footprint of some gigantic demon of frost. A near-by pool, formed by the leisurely rill, was covered with thin ice; and on the ice, like gouts of frozen blood, there lay the scattered rubies of Haalor. In its own time, the great glacier, moving slowly and irresistibly southward, would reclaim them.



Revelations in Black

By CARL JACOBI

An utterly strange story of three mad volumes and a weird woman who sat by a fountain in the house of the twenty-six bluejays



"Oh, the foulness of it! She had been feasting on my blood!"

IT WAS a dreary, forlorn establishment way down on Harbor Street. An old sign announced the legend: "Giovanni Larla—Antiques," and a dingy window revealed a display half masked in dust.

Even as I crossed the threshold that cheerless September afternoon, driven from the sidewalk by a gust of rain and perhaps a fascination for all antiques, the gloominess fell upon me like a material pall. Inside was half darkness, piled boxes and a monstrous tapestry, frayed with the warp showing in worn places. An Italian Renaissance wine cabinet shrank despondently in its corner and seemed to frown at me as I passed.

"Good afternoon, *Signor*. There is something you wish to buy? A picture, a ring, a vase perhaps?"

I peered at the squat, pudgy bulk of the Italian proprietor there in the shadows and hesitated.

"Just looking around," I said, turning my eyes to the jumble about me. "Nothing in particular. . . ."

The man's oily face moved in smile as though he had heard the remark a thousand times before. He sighed, stood there in thought a moment, the rain drumming and swishing against the outer pane. Then very deliberately he stepped to the shelves and glanced up and down them considering. I moved to his side, letting my eyes sweep across the stacked array of ancient oddities. At length he drew forth an object which I perceived to be a painted chalice.

"An authentic Sixteenth Century Tandart," he murmured. "A work of art, *Signor.*"

I shook my head. "No pottery," I said. "Books perhaps, but no pottery."

He frowned slowly. "I have books too," he replied, "rare books which nobody sells but me, Giovanni Larla. But you must look at my other treasures too."

There was, I found, no hurrying the man. A quarter of an hour passed, during which I had to see a Glycon cameo brooch, a carved chair of some indeterminate style and period, and a muddle of yellowed statuettes, small oils and one or two dreary Portland vases. Several times I glanced at my watch impatiently, wondering how I might break away from this Italian and his gloomy shop. Already the fascination of its dust and shadows had begun to wear off, and I was anxious to reach the street.

But when he had conducted me well toward the rear of the shop, something caught my fancy. I drew then from the shelf the first book of horror. If I had but known the terrible events that were to follow, if I could only have had a foresight into the future that September day, I swear I would have avoided the book like a leprous thing, would have shunned that wretched antique store and the very street it stood on like places accursed. A thousand times I have wished my eyes had never rested on that cover in black. What writhings of the soul, what terrors, what unrest, what madness would have been spared me!

But never dreaming the hideous secret of its pages I fondled it casually and remarked:

"An unusual book. What is it?"

Larla glanced up and scowled.

"That is not for sale," he said quietly. "I don't know how it got on these shelves. It was my poor brother's."

THE volume in my hand was indeed unusual in appearance. Measuring but four inches across and five inches in length and bound in black velvet with each outside corner protected with a triangle of ivory, it was the most beautiful piece of book-binding I had ever seen. In the center of the cover was mounted a tiny piece of ivory intricately cut in the shape of a skull. But it was the title of the book that excited my interest. Embroidered in gold braid, the title read:

"Five Unicorns and a Pearl."

I looked at Larla. "How much?" I asked and reached for my wallet.

He shook his head. "No, it is not for sale. It is . . . it is the last work of my brother. He wrote it just before he died in the institution."

"The institution?" I queried.

Larla made no reply but stood staring at the book, his mind obviously drifting away in deep thought. A moment of silence dragged by. There was a strange gleam in his eyes when finally he spoke. And I thought I saw his fingers tremble slightly.

"My brother, Alessandro, was a fine man before he wrote that book," he said slowly. "He wrote beautifully, *Signor*, and he was strong and healthy. For hours I could sit while he read to me his poems. He was a dreamer, Alessandro;

he loved everything beautiful, and the two of us were very happy.

"All . . . until that terrible night. Then he . . . but no . . . a year has passed now. It is best to forget." He passed his hand before his eyes and drew in his breath sharply.

"What happened?" I asked sympathetically, his words arousing my curiosity.

"Happened, *Signor?* I do not really know. It was all so confusing. He became suddenly ill, ill without reason. The flush of sunny Italy, which was always on his cheek, faded, and he grew white and drawn. His strength left him day by day. Doctors prescribed, gave medicines, but nothing helped. He grew steadily weaker until . . . until that night."

I looked at him curiously, impressed by his perturbation.

"And then——?" I urged.

Hands opening and closing, Larla seemed to sway unsteadily; his liquid eyes opened wide to the brows, and his voice was strained and tense as he continued:

"And then . . . oh, if I could but forget! It was horrible. Poor Alessandro came home screaming, sobbing, tearing his hair. He was . . . he was stark, raving mad!

"They took him to the institution for the insane and said he needed a complete rest, that he had suffered from some terrific mental shock. He . . . died three weeks later with the crucifix on his lips."

For a moment I stood there in silence, staring out at the falling rain. Then I said:

"He wrote this book while confined to the institution?"

Larla nodded absently.

"Three books," he replied. "Two others exactly like the one you have in your hand. The bindings he made, of course, when he was quite well. It was his original intention, I believe, to pen in them by hand the verses of Marini. He was very clever at such work. But the wanderings of his mind which filled the pages now, I have never read. Nor do I intend to. I want to keep with me the memory of him when he was happy. This book has come on these shelves by mistake. I shall put it with his other possessions."

My desire to read the few pages bound in velvet increased a thousandfold when I found they were unobtainable. I have always had an interest in abnormal psychology and have gone through a number of books on the subject. Here was the work of a man confined in the asylum for the insane. Here was the unexpurgated writing of an educated brain gone mad. And unless my intuition failed me, here was a suggestion of some deep mystery. My mind was made up. I must have it.

I turned to Larla and chose my words carefully.

"I can well appreciate your wish to keep the book," I said, "and since you refuse to sell, may I ask if you would consider lending it to me for just one night? If I promised to return it in the morning? . . ."

The Italian hesitated. He toyed undecidedly with a heavy gold watch chain.

"No. I am sorry. . . ."

"Ten dollars and back tomorrow unharmed."

Larla studied his shoe.

"Very well, *Signor,* I will trust you. But please, I ask you, please be sure and return it."

THAT night in the quiet of my apartment I opened the book. Immediately my attention was drawn to three lines scrawled in a feminine hand across the inside of the front cover, lines written in a faded red solution that looked more like blood than ink. They read:

"Revelations meant to destroy but only binding without the stake. Read, fool, and enter my field, for we are chained to the spot. Oh wo unto Larla."

I mused over these undecipherable sentences for some time without solving their meaning. At last, shrugging my shoulders, I turned to the first page and began the last work of Alessandro Larla, the strangest story I had ever in my years of browsing through old books, come upon.

"On the evening of the fifteenth of October I turned my steps into the cold and walked until I was tired. The roar of the present was in the distance when I came to twenty-six bluejays silently contemplating the ruins. Passing in the midst of them I wandered by the skeleton trees and seated myself where I could watch the leering fish. A child worshipped. Glass threw the moon at me. Grass sang a litany at my feet. And the pointed shadow moved slowly to the left.

"I walked along the silver gravel until I came to five unicorns galloping beside water of the past. Here I found a pearl, a magnificent pearl, a pearl beautiful but black. Like a flower it carried a rich perfume, and once I thought the odor was but a mask, but why should such a perfect creation need a mask?

"I sat between the leering fish and the five galloping unicorns, and I fell madly in love with the pearl. The past lost itself in drabness and——"

I laid the book down and sat watching the smoke-curls from my pipe eddy ceilingward. There was much more, but I could make no sense to any of it. All was in that strange style and completely incomprehensible. And yet it seemed the story was more than the mere wanderings of a madman. Behind it all seemed to lie a narrative cloaked in symbolism.

Something about the few sentences—just what I can not say—had cast an immediate spell of depression over me. The vague lines weighed upon my mind, hung before my eyes like a design, and I felt myself slowly seized by a deep feeling of uneasiness.

The air of the room grew heavy and close. The open casement and the out-of-doors seemed to beckon to me. I walked to the window, thrust the curtain aside, stood there, smoking furiously. Let me say that regular habits have long been a part of my make-up. I am not addicted to nocturnal strolls or late meanderings before seeking my bed; yet now, curiously enough, with the pages of the book still in my mind I suddenly experienced an indefinable urge to leave my apartment and walk the darkened streets.

I paced the room nervously, irritated that the sensation did not pass. The clock on the mantel pushed its ticks slowly through the quiet. And at length with a shrug I threw my pipe to the table, reached for my hat and coat and made for the door.

Ridiculous as it may sound, upon reaching the street I found that urge had increased to a distinct attraction. I felt that under no circumstances must I turn any direction but northward, and although this way led into a district quite unknown to me, I was in a moment pacing forward, choosing streets deliberately and heading without knowing why toward the outskirts of the city. It was a brilliant moonlight night in September. Summer had passed and already there was the smell of frosted vegetation in the air. The great chimes in Capitol tower were sounding midnight, and the buildings and shops and later the private houses were dark and silent as I passed.

Try as I would to erase from my memory the queer book which I had just read, the mystery of its pages hammered at me, arousing my curiosity, dampening my

spirits. "Five Unicorns and a Pearl!" What did it all mean?

More and more I realized as I went on that a power other than my own will was leading my steps. It was absurd, and I tried to resist, to turn back. Yet once when I did momentarily come to a halt that attraction swept upon me as inexorably as the desire for a narcotic.

It was far out on Easterly Street that I came upon a high stone wall flanking the sidewalk. Over its ornamented top I could see the shadows of a dark building set well back in the grounds. A wrought-iron gate in the wall opened upon a view of wild desertion and neglect. Swathed in the light of the moon, an old courtyard strewn with fountains, stone benches and statues lay tangled in rank weeds and undergrowth. The windows of the building, which evidently had once been a private dwelling, were boarded up, all except those on a little tower or cupola rising to a point in the front. And here the glass caught the blue-gray light and refracted it into the shadows.

Before that gate my feet stopped like dead things. The psychic power which had been leading me had now become a reality. Directly from the courtyard it emanated, drawing me toward it with an intensity that smothered all reluctance.

STRANGELY enough, the gate was unlocked; and feeling like a man in a trance I swung the creaking hinges and entered, making my way along a grass-grown path to one of the benches. It seemed that once inside the court the distant sounds of the city died away, leaving a hollow silence broken only by the wind rustling through the tall dead weeds. Rearing up before me, the building with its dark wings, cupola and façade oddly resembled a colossal hound, crouched and ready to spring.

There were several fountains, weather-beaten and ornamented with curious figures, to which at the time I paid only casual attention. Farther on, half hidden by the underbrush, was the life-size statue of a little child kneeling in position of prayer. Erosion on the soft stone had disfigured the face, and in the half-light the carved features presented an expression strangely grotesque and repelling.

How long I sat there in the quiet, I don't know. The surroundings under the moonlight blended harmoniously with my mood. But more than that I seemed physically unable to rouse myself and pass on.

It was with a suddenness that brought me electrified to my feet that I became aware of the real significance of the objects about me. Held motionless, I stood there running my eyes wildly from place to place, refusing to believe. Surely I must be dreaming. In the name of all that was unusual this . . . this absolutely couldn't be. And yet——

It was the fountain at my side that had caught my attention first. Across the top of the water basin were *five stone unicorns,* all identically carved, each seeming to follow the other in galloping procession. Looking farther, prompted now by a madly rising recollection, I saw that the cupola, towering high above the house, eclipsed the rays of the moon and threw *a long pointed shadow* across the ground *at my left.* The other fountain some distance away was ornamented with the figure of a stone fish, *a fish* whose empty eye-sockets *were leering* straight in my direction. And the climax of it all—the wall! At intervals of every three feet on the top of the street expanse were mounted crude carven stone shapes of birds. And counting them I saw that *those birds were twenty-six bluejays.*

Unquestionably—startling and impos-

sible as it seemed—I was in the same setting as described in Larla's book! It was a staggering revelation, and my mind reeled at the thought of it. How strange, how odd that I should be drawn to a portion of the city I had never before frequented and thrown into the midst of a narrative written almost a year before!

I saw now that Alessandro Larla, writing as a patient in the institution for the insane, had seized isolated details but neglected to explain them. Here was a problem for the psychologist, the mad, the symbolic, the incredible story of the dead Italian. I was bewildered, confused, and I pondered for an answer.

As if to soothe my perturbation there stole into the court then a faint odor of perfume. Pleasantly it touched my nostrils, seemed to blend with the moonlight. I breathed it in deeply as I stood there by the curious fountain. But slowly that odor became more noticeable, grew stronger, a sickish sweet smell that began to creep down my lungs like smoke. And absently I recognized it. Heliotrope! The honeyed aroma blanketed the garden, thickened the air, seemed to fall upon me like a drug.

And then came my second surprize of the evening. Looking about to discover the source of the irritating fragrance I saw opposite me, seated on another stone bench, a woman. She was dressed entirely in black, and her face was hidden by a veil. She seemed unaware of my presence. Her head was slightly bowed, and her whole position suggested a person deep in contemplation.

I noticed also the thing that crouched by her side. It was a dog, a tremendous brute with a head strangely out of proportion and eyes as large as the ends of big spoons. For several moments I stood staring at the two of them. Although the air was quite chilly, the women were no over-jacket, only the black dress relieved solely by the whiteness of her throat.

WITH a sigh of regret at having my pleasant solitude thus disturbed I moved across the court until I stood at her side. Still she showed no recognition of my presence, and clearing my throat I said hesitatingly:

"I suppose you are the owner here. I . . . I really didn't know the place was occupied, and the gate . . . well, the gate was unlocked. I'm sorry I trespassed."

She made no reply to that, and the dog merely gazed at me in dumb silence. No graceful words of polite departure came to my lips, and I moved hesitatingly toward the gate.

"Please don't go," she said suddenly, looking up. "I'm lonely. Oh, if you but knew how lonely I am!" She moved to one side on the bench and motioned that I sit beside her. The dog continued to examine me with its big eyes.

Whether it was the nearness of that odor of heliotrope, the suddenness of it all, or perhaps the moonlight, I did not know, but at her words a thrill of pleasure ran through me, and I accepted the proffered seat.

There followed an interval of silence, during which I puzzled my brain for a means to start conversation. But abruptly she turned to the beast and said in German:

"Fort mit dir, Johann!"

The dog rose obediently to its feet and stole slowly off into the shadows. I watched it for a moment until it disappeared in the direction of the house. Then the woman said to me in English which was slightly stilted and marked with an accent:

"It has been ages since I have spoken to any one. . . . We are strangers. I do

not know you, and you do not know me. Yet . . . strangers sometimes find in each other a bond of interest. Supposing . . . supposing we forget customs and formality of introduction? Shall we?"

For some reason I felt my pulse quicken as she said that. "Please do," I replied. "A spot like this is enough introduction in itself. Tell me, do you live here?"

She made no answer for a moment, and I began to fear I had taken her suggestion too quickly. Then she began slowly:

"My name is Perle von Mauren, and I am really a stranger to your country, though I have been here now more than a year. My home is in Austria near what is now the Czechoslovakian frontier. You see, it was to find my only brother that I came to the United States. During the war he was a lieutenant under General Mackensen, but in 1916, in April I believe it was, he . . . he was reported missing.

"War is a cruel thing. It took our money; it took our castle on the Danube, and then—my brother. Those following years were horrible. We lived always in doubt, hoping against hope that he was still living.

"Then after the Armistice a fellow officer claimed to have served next to him on grave-digging detail at a French prison camp near Monpré. And later came a thin rumor that he was in the United States. I gathered together as much money as I could and came here in search of him."

Her voice dwindled off, and she sat in silence staring at the brown weeds. When she resumed, her voice was low and wavering.

"I . . . found him . . . but would to God I hadn't! He . . . he was no longer living."

I stared at her. "Dead?" I asked.

The veil trembled as though moved by a shudder, as though her thoughts had exhumed some terrible event of the past. Unconscious of my interruption she went on:

"Tonight I came here—I don't know why—merely because the gate was unlocked, and there was a place of quiet within. Now have I bored you with my confidences and personal history?"

"Not at all," I replied. "I came here by chance myself. Probably the beauty of the place attracted me. I dabble in amateur photography occasionally and react strongly to unusual scenes. Tonight I went for a midnight stroll to relieve my mind from the bad effect of a book I was reading."

She made a strange reply to that, a reply away from our line of thought and which seemed an interjection that escaped her involuntarily.

"Books," she said, "are powerful things. They can fetter one more than the walls of a prison."

She caught my puzzled stare at the remark and added hastily: "It is odd that we should meet here."

For a moment I didn't answer. I was thinking of her heliotrope perfume, which for a woman of her apparent culture was applied in far too great a quantity to manifest good taste. The impression stole upon me that the perfume cloaked some secret, that if it were removed I should find . . . but what? It was ridiculous, and I tried to cast the feeling aside.

The hours passed, and still we sat there talking, enjoying each other's companionship. She did not remove her veil, and though I was burning with a desire to see her features, I had not dared ask her to. A strange nervousness had slowly seized me. The woman was a charming conversationalist, but there was about her an in-

definable something which produced in me a distinct feeling of unease.

It was, I should judge, but a few moments before the first streaks of dawn when it happened. As I look back now, even with mundane objects and thoughts on every side, it is not difficult to realize the dire significance, the absolute baseness of that vision. But at the time my brain was too much in a whirl to understand.

A thin shadow moving across the garden attracted my gaze once again into the night about me. I looked up over the spire of the deserted house and started as if struck by a blow. For a moment I thought I had seen a curious cloud formation racing low directly above me, a cloud black and impenetrable with two wing-like ends strangely in the shape of a monstrous flying bat.

I blinked my eyes hard and looked again.

"That cloud!" I exclaimed, "that strange cloud! . . . Did you see——"

I stopped and stared dumbly.

The bench at my side was empty. The woman had disappeared.

DURING the next day I went about my professional duties in the law office with only half interest, and my business partner looked at me queerly several times when he came upon me mumbling to myself. The incidents of the evening before were rushing through my mind in grand turmoil. Questions unanswerable hammered at me. That I should have come upon the very details described by mad Larla in his strange book: the leering fish, the praying child, the twenty-six bluejays, the pointed shadow of the cupola—it was unexplainable; it was weird.

"Five Unicorns and a Pearl." The unicorns were the stone statues ornamenting the old fountain, yes—but the pearl? With a start I suddenly recalled the name of the woman in black: *Perle* von Mauren. The revelation climaxed my train of thought. What did it all mean?

Dinner had little attraction for me that evening. Earlier I had gone to the antique-dealer and begged him to loan me the sequel, the second volume of his brother Alessandro. When he had refused, objected because I had not yet returned the first book, my nerves had suddenly jumped on edge. I felt like a narcotic fiend faced with the realization that he could not procure the desired drug. In desperation, yet hardly knowing why, I offered the man money, more money, until at length I had come away, my powers of persuasion and my pocket-book successful.

The second volume was identical in outward respects to its predecessor except that it bore no title. But if I was expecting more disclosures in symbolism I was doomed to disappointment. Vague as "Five Unicorns and a Pearl" had been, the text of the sequel was even more wandering and was obviously only the ramblings of a mad brain. By watching the sentences closely I did gather that Alessandro Larla had made a second trip to his court of the twenty-six bluejays and met there again his "pearl."

There was a paragraph toward the end that puzzled me. It read:

"Can it possibly be? I pray that it is not. And yet I have seen it and heard it snarl. Oh, the loathsome creature! I will not, I will not believe it."

I closed the book with a snap and tried to divert my attention elsewhere by polishing the lens of my newest portable camera. But again, as before, that same urge stole upon me, that same desire to visit the garden. I confess that I had watched the intervening hours until I would meet the woman in black again; for strangely enough, in spite of her abrupt

exit before, I never doubted but that she would be there waiting for me. I wanted her to lift the veil. I wanted to talk with her. I wanted to throw myself once again into the narrative of Larla's book.

Yet the whole thing seemed preposterous, and I fought the sensation with every ounce of will-power I could call to mind. Then it suddenly occurred to me what a remarkable picture she would make, sitting there on the stone bench, clothed in black, with the classic background of the old courtyard. If I could but catch the scene on a photographic plate. . . .

I halted my polishing and mused a moment. With a new electric flash-lamp, that handy invention which has supplanted the old mussy flash-powder, I could illuminate the garden and snap the picture with ease. And if the result were satisfactory it would make a worthy contribution to the International Camera Contest at Geneva next month.

The idea appealed to me, and gathering together the necessary equipment I drew on an ulster (for it was a wet, chilly night) and slipped out of my rooms and headed northward. Mad, unseeing fool that I was! If only I had stopped then and there, returned the book to the antique-dealer and closed the incident! But the strange magnetic attraction had gripped me in earnest, and I rushed headlong into the horror.

A FALL rain was drumming the pavement, and the streets were deserted. Off to the east, however, the heavy blanket of clouds glowed with a soft radiance where the moon was trying to break through, and a strong wind from the south gave promise of clearing the skies before long. With my coat collar turned well up at the throat I passed once again into the older section of the town and down forgotten Easterly Street. I found the gate to the grounds unlocked as before, and the garden a dripping place masked in shadow.

The woman was not there. Still the hour was early, and I did not for a moment doubt that she would appear later. Gripped now with the enthusiasm of my plan, I set the camera carefully on the stone fountain, training the lens as well as I could on the bench where we had sat the previous evening. The flash-lamp with its battery handle I laid within easy reach.

Scarcely had I finished my arrangements when the crunch of gravel on the path caused me to turn. She was approaching the stone bench, heavily veiled as before and with the same sweeping black dress.

"You have come again," she said as I took my place beside her.

"Yes," I replied. "I could not stay away."

Our conversation that night gradually centered about her dead brother, although I thought several times that the woman tried to avoid the subject. He had been, it seemed, the black sheep of the family, had led more or less of a dissolute life and had been expelled from the University of Vienna not only because of his lack of respect for the pedagogues of the various sciences but also because of his queer unorthodox papers on philosophy. His sufferings in the war prison camp must have been intense. With a kind of grim delight she dwelt on his horrible experiences in the grave-digging detail which had been related to her by the fellow officer. But of the manner in which he had met his death she would say absolutely nothing.

Stronger than on the night before was the sweet smell of heliotrope. And again as the fumes crept nauseatingly down my lungs there came that same sense of nervousness, that same feeling that the

perfume was hiding something I should know. The desire to see beneath the veil had become maddening by this time, but still I lacked the boldness to ask her to lift it.

Toward midnight the heavens cleared and the moon in splendid contrast shone high in the sky. The time had come for my picture.

"Sit where you are," I said. "I'll be back in a moment."

Stepping quickly to the fountain I grasped the flash-lamp, held it aloft for an instant and placed my finger on the shutter lever of the camera. The woman remained motionless on the bench, evidently puzzled as to the meaning of my movements. The range was perfect. A click, and a dazzling white light enveloped the courtyard about us. For a brief second she was outlined there against the old wall. Then the blue moonlight returned, and I was smiling in satisfaction.

"It ought to make a beautiful picture," I said.

She leaped to her feet.

"Fool!" she cried hoarsely. "Blundering fool! What have you done?"

EVEN though the veil was there to hide her face I got the instant impression that her eyes were glaring at me, smoldering with hatred. I gazed at her curiously as she stood erect, head thrown back, body apparently taut as wire, and a slow shudder crept down my spine. Then without warning she gathered up her dress and ran down the path toward the deserted house. A moment later she had disappeared somewhere in the shadows of the giant bushes.

I stood there by the fountain, staring after her in a daze. Suddenly, off in the umbra of the house's façade there rose a low animal snarl.

And then before I could move, a huge gray shape came hurtling through the long weeds, bounding in great leaps straight toward me. It was the woman's dog, which I had seen with her the night before. But no longer was it a beast passive and silent. Its face was contorted in diabolic fury, and its jaws were dripping slaver. Even in that moment of terror as I stood frozen before it, the sight of those white nostrils and those black hyalescent eyes emblazoned itself on my mind, never to be forgotten.

Then with a lunge it was upon me. I had only time to thrust the flash-lamp upward in half protection and throw my weight to the side. My arm jumped in recoil. The bulb exploded, and I could feel those teeth clamp down hard on the handle. Backward I fell, a scream gurgling to my lips, a terrific heaviness surging upon my body.

I struck out frantically, beat my fists into that growling face. My fingers groped blindly for its throat, sank deep into the hairy flesh. I could feel its very breath mingling with my own now, but desperately I hung on.

The pressure of my hands told. The dog coughed and fell back. And seizing that instant I struggled to my feet, jumped forward and planted a terrific kick straight into the brute's middle.

"*Fort mit dir,* Johann!" I cried, remembering the woman's German command.

It leaped back and, fangs bared, glared at me motionless for a moment. Then abruptly it turned and slunk off through the weeds.

Weak and trembling, I drew myself together, picked up my camera and passed through the gate toward home.

THREE days passed. Those endless hours I spent confined to my apartment suffering the tortures of the damned.

On the day following the night of my

terrible experience with the dog I realized I was in no condition to go to work. I drank two cups of strong black coffee and then forced myself to sit quietly in a chair, hoping to soothe my nerves. But the sight of the camera there on the table excited me to action. Five minutes later I was in the dark room arranged as my studio, developing the picture I had taken the night before. I worked feverishly, urged on by the thought of what an unusual contribution it would make for the amateur contest next month at Geneva, should the result be successful.

An exclamation burst from my lips as I stared at the still-wet print. There was the old garden clear and sharp with the bushes, the statue of the child, the fountain and the wall in the background, but the bench—the stone bench was empty. There was nc sign, not even a blur of the woman in black.

My brain in a whirl, I rushed the negative through a saturated solution of mercuric chloride in water, then treated it with ferrous oxalate. But even after this intensifying process the second print was like the first, focused in every detail, the bench standing in the foreground in sharp relief, but no trace of the woman.

I stared incredulously. She had been in plain view when I snapped the shutter. Of that I was positive. And my camera was in perfect condition. What then was wrong? Not until I had looked at the print hard in the daylight would I believe my eyes. No explanation offered itself, none at all; and at length, confused unto weakness, I returned to my bed and fell into a heavy sleep.

Straight through the day I slept. Hours later I seemed to wake from a vague nightmare, and had not strength to rise from my pillow. A great physical faintness had overwhelmed me. My arms, my legs, lay like dead things. My heart was fluttering weakly. All was quiet, so still that the clock on my bureau ticked distinctly each passing second. The curtain billowed in the night breeze, though I was positive I had closed the casement when I entered the room.

And then suddenly I threw back my head and screamed from the bottomest depths of my soul! For slowly, slowly creeping down my lungs was that detestable odor of heliotrope!

Morning, and I found all was not a dream. My head was ringing, my hands trembling, and I was so weak I could hardly stand. The doctor I called in looked grave as he felt my pulse.

"You are on the verge of a complete collapse," he said. "If you do not allow yourself a rest it may permanently affect your mind. Take things easy for a while. And if you don't mind, I'll cauterize those two little cuts on your neck. They're rather raw wounds. What caused them?"

I moved my fingers to my throat and drew them away again tipped with blood.

"I . . . I don't know," I faltered.

He busied himself with his medicines, and a few minutes later reached for his hat.

"I advise that you don't leave your bed for a week at least," he said. "I'll give you a thorough examination then and see if there are any signs of anemia." But as he went out the door I thought I saw a puzzled look on his face.

Those subsequent hours allowed my thoughts to run wild once more. I vowed I would forget it all, go back to my work and never look upon the books again. But I knew I could not. The woman in black persisted in my mind, and each minute away from her became a torture. But more than that, if there had been a decided urge to continue my reading in the second book, the desire to see the third book, the last of the trilogy, was slowly

increasing to an obsession. It gripped me, etched itself deep into my thoughts.

At length I could stand it no longer, and on the morning of the third day I took a cab to the antique store and tried to persuade Larla to give me the third volume of his brother. But the Italian was firm. I had already taken two books, neither of which I had returned. Until I brought them back he would not listen. Vainly I tried to explain that one was of no value without the sequel and that I wanted to read the entire narrative as a unit. He merely shrugged his shoulders and toyed with his watch chain.

Cold perspiration broke out on my forehead as I heard my desire disregarded. Like the blows of a bludgeon the thought beat upon me that I must have that book. I argued. I pleaded. But to no avail.

At length when Larla had turned the other way I gave in to desperation, seized the third book as I saw it lying on the shelf, slid it into my pocket and walked guiltily out. I make no apologies for my action. In the light of what developed later it may be considered a temptation inspired, for my will at the time was a conquered thing blanketed by that strange lure.

BACK in my apartment I dropped into a chair and hastened to open the velvet cover. Here was the last chronicling of that strange series of events which had so completely become a part of my life during the past five days. Larla's volume three. Would all be explained in its pages? If so, what secret would be revealed?

With the light from a reading-lamp glaring full over my shoulder I opened the book, thumbed through it slowly, marveling again at the exquisite hand-printing. It seemed then as I sat there that an almost palpable cloud of intense quiet settled over me, a mental miasma muffling the distant sounds of the street. I was vaguely aware of an atmosphere, heavy and dense, in which objects other than the book lost their focus and became blurred in proportion.

For a moment I hesitated. Something psychic, something indefinable seemed to forbid me to read farther. Conscience, curiosity, that queer urge told me to go on. Slowly, like a man in a hypnotic trance wavering between two wills, I began to turn the pages, one at a time, from back to front.

Symbolism again. Vague wanderings with no sane meaning.

But suddenly my fingers stopped! My eyes had caught sight of the last paragraph on the last page, the final pennings of Alessandro Larla. I started downward as a terrific shock ripped through me from head to foot. I read, re-read, and read again those words, those blasphemous words. I brought the book closer. I traced each word in the lamplight, slowly, carefully, letter for letter. I opened and closed my eyes. Then the horror of it burst like a bomb within me.

In blood-red ink the lines read:

"What shall I do? She has drained my blood and rotted my soul. My pearl is black, black as all evil. The curse be upon her brother, for it is he who made her thus. I pray the truth in these pages will destroy them for ever.

"But my brain is hammering itself apart. Heaven help me, Perle von Mauren and her brother, Johann, are vampires!"

With a scream I leaped to my feet.

"Vampires!" I shrieked. "Vampires! Oh, my God!"

I clutched at the edge of the table and stood there swaying, the realization of it surging upon me like the blast of a furnace. Vampires! Those horrible crea-

tures with a lust for human blood, fiends of hell, taking the shape of men, of bats, of dogs. I saw it all now, and my brain reeled at the horror of it.

Oh, why had I been such a fool? Why had I not looked beneath the surface, taken away the veil, gone farther than the perfume? That damnable heliotrope was a mask, a mask hiding all the unspeakable foulness of the grave.

My emotions burst out of control then. With a cry I swept the water-glass, the books, the vase from the table, smote my fist down upon the flat surface again and again until a thousand little pains were stabbing the flesh.

"Vampires!" I screamed. "No, no—oh God, it isn't true!"

But I knew that it was. The events of the past days rose before me in all their horror now, and I could see the black significance of every detail.

The brother, Johann—some time since the war he had become a vampire. When the woman sought him out years later he had forced this terrible existence upon her too. Yes, that was it.

With the garden as their lair the two of them had entangled poor Alessandro Larla in their serpentine coils a year before. He had loved the woman, had worshipped her madly. And then he had found the truth, the awful truth that had sent him stumbling home, stark, raving mad.

Mad, yes, but not mad enough to keep him from writing the facts in his three velvet-bound books for the world to see. He had hoped the disclosures would dispatch the woman and her brother for ever. But it was not enough.

FOLLOWING my thoughts, I whipped the first book from the table stand and opened the front cover. There again I saw those scrawled lines which had meant nothing to me before.

"Revelations meant to destroy but only binding without the stake. Read, fool, and enter my field, for we are chained to the spot. Oh, wo unto Larla!"

Perle von Mauren had written that. Fool that I was, unseeing fool! The books had not put an end to the evil life of her or her brother. No, only one thing could do that. Yet the exposures had not been written in vain. They were recorded for mortal posterity to see.

Those books bound the two vampires, Perle von Mauren and her brother, Johann, to the old garden, kept them from roaming the night streets in search of victims. Only him who had once passed through the gate could they pursue and attack.

It was the old metaphysical law: evil shrinking in the face of truth.

Yet if the books had bound their power in chains they had also opened a new avenue for their attacks. Once immersed in the pages of the trilogy, the reader fell helplessly into their clutches. Those printed lines had become the outer reaches of their web. They were an entrapping net within which the power of the vampires always crouched.

That was why my life had blended so strangely with the story of Larla. The moment I had cast my eyes on the opening paragraph I had fallen into their coils to do with as they had done with Larla a year before. I had been lured, drawn relentlessly into the tentacles of the woman in black. Once I was past the garden gate the binding spell of the books was gone, and they were free to pursue me and to——

A giddy sensation rose within me. Now I saw why the scientific doctor had been puzzled. Now I saw the reason for my physical weakness. Oh, the foul-

ness of it! She had been—feasting on my blood!

With a sobbing cry I flung the book to a far corner, turned and began madly pacing up and down the room. Cold perspiration oozed from every pore. My heart pounded like a runner's. My brain ran wild.

Was I to end as Larla had ended, another victim of this loathsome being's power? Was she to gorge herself further on my life and live on? Were others to be preyed upon and go down into the pits of despair? No, and again no! If Larla had been ignorant of the one and only way in which to dispose of such a creature, I was not. I had not vacationed in south Europe without learning something of these ancient evils.

Frantically I looked about the room, took in the objects about me. A chair, a table, a taboret, one of my cameras with its long tripod. I stared at the latter as in my terror-stricken mind a plan leaped into action. With a lunge I was across the floor, had seized one of the wooden legs of the tripod in my hands. I snapped it across my knee. Then, grasping the two broken pieces, both now with sharp splintered ends, I rushed hatless out of the door to the street.

A moment later I was racing northward in a cab bound for Easterly Street.

"Hurry!" I cried to the driver as I glanced at the westering sun. "Faster, do you hear?"

We shot along the cross-streets, into the old suburbs and toward the outskirts of town. Every traffic halt found me fuming at the delay. But at length we drew up before the wall of the garden.

Tossing the driver a bill, I swung the wrought-iron gate open and with the wooden pieces of the tripod still under my arm, rushed in. The courtyard was a place of reality in the daylight, but the moldering masonry and tangled weeds were steeped in silence as before.

STRAIGHT for the house I made, climbing the rotten steps to the front entrance. The door was boarded up and locked. Smothering an impulse to scream, I retraced my steps at a run and began to circle the south wall of the building. It was this direction I had seen the woman take when she had fled after I had tried to snap her picture. The twenty-six blue-jays on the wall leered at me like a flock of harpies.

Well toward the rear of the building I reached a small half-open door leading to the cellar. For a moment I hesitated there, sick with the dread of what I knew lay before me. Then, clenching hard the two wooden tripod stakes, I entered.

Inside, cloaked in gloom, a narrow corridor stretched before me. The floor was littered with rubble and fallen masonry, the ceiling interlaced with a thousand cobwebs.

I stumbled forward, my eyes quickly accustoming themselves to the half-light from the almost opaque windows. A maddening urge to leave it all and flee back to the sunlight was welling up within me now. I fought it back. Failure would mean a continuation of the horrors—a lingering death—would leave the gate open for others.

At the end of the corridor a second door barred my passage. I thrust it open—and stood swaying there on the sill staring inward. A great loathing crept over me, a stifling sense of utter repulsion. Hot blood rushed to my head. The air seemed to move upward in palpable swirls.

Beyond was a small room, barely ten feet square, with a low-raftered ceiling. And by the light of the open door I saw side by side in the center of the floor—two white wood coffins.

How long I stood there leaning weakly against the stone wall I don't know. There was a silence so profound the beating of my heart pulsed through the passage like the blows of a mallet. And there was a slow penetrating odor drifting from out of that chamber that entered my nostrils and claimed instant recognition. Heliotrope! But heliotrope defiled by the rotting smell of an ancient grave.

Then suddenly with a determination born of despair I leaped forward, rushed to the nearest coffin, seized its cover and ripped it open.

Would to heaven I could forget the sight that met my eyes. There lay Perle von Mauren, the woman in black—unveiled.

That face—how can I describe it? It was divinely beautiful, the hair black as sable, the cheeks a classic white. But the lips—oh God! those lips! I grew suddenly sick as I looked upon them. They were scarlet, crimson . . . and sticky with human blood.

I moved like an automaton then. With a low sob I reached for one of the tripod stakes, seized a flagstone from the floor and with the pointed end of the wood resting directly over the woman's heart, struck a crashing blow. The stake jumped downward. A sickening crunch—and a violent contortion shook the coffin. Up to my face rushed a warm, nauseating breath of rot and decay.

I wheeled and hurled open the lid of her brother's coffin. With only a flashing glance at the young masculine Teutonic face I raised the other stake high in the air and brought it stabbing down with all the strength in my right arm. Red blood suddenly began to form a thick pool on the floor.

For an instant I stood rooted to the spot, the utter obscenity of it all searing its way into my brain like a hot sword. Even in that moment of stark horror I realized that not even the most subtle erasures of Time would be able to remove that blasphemous sight from my inner eye.

It was a scene so abysmally corrupt—I pray heaven my dreams will never find it and re-vision its unholy tableau. There before me, focused in the shaft of light that filtered through the open door like the miasma from a fever swamp, lay the two white caskets.

And within them now, staring up at me from eyeless sockets—two gray and moldering skeletons, each with its hideous leering head of death.

THE rest is but a vague dream. I seem to remember rushing madly outside, along the path to the gate and down the street, down Easterly, away from that accursed garden of the jays.

At length, utterly exhausted, I reached my apartment, burst open the door and staggered in. Those mundane surroundings that confronted me were like balm to my burning eyes. But as if in mocking irony there centered into my gaze three objects lying where I had left them, the three volumes of Larla.

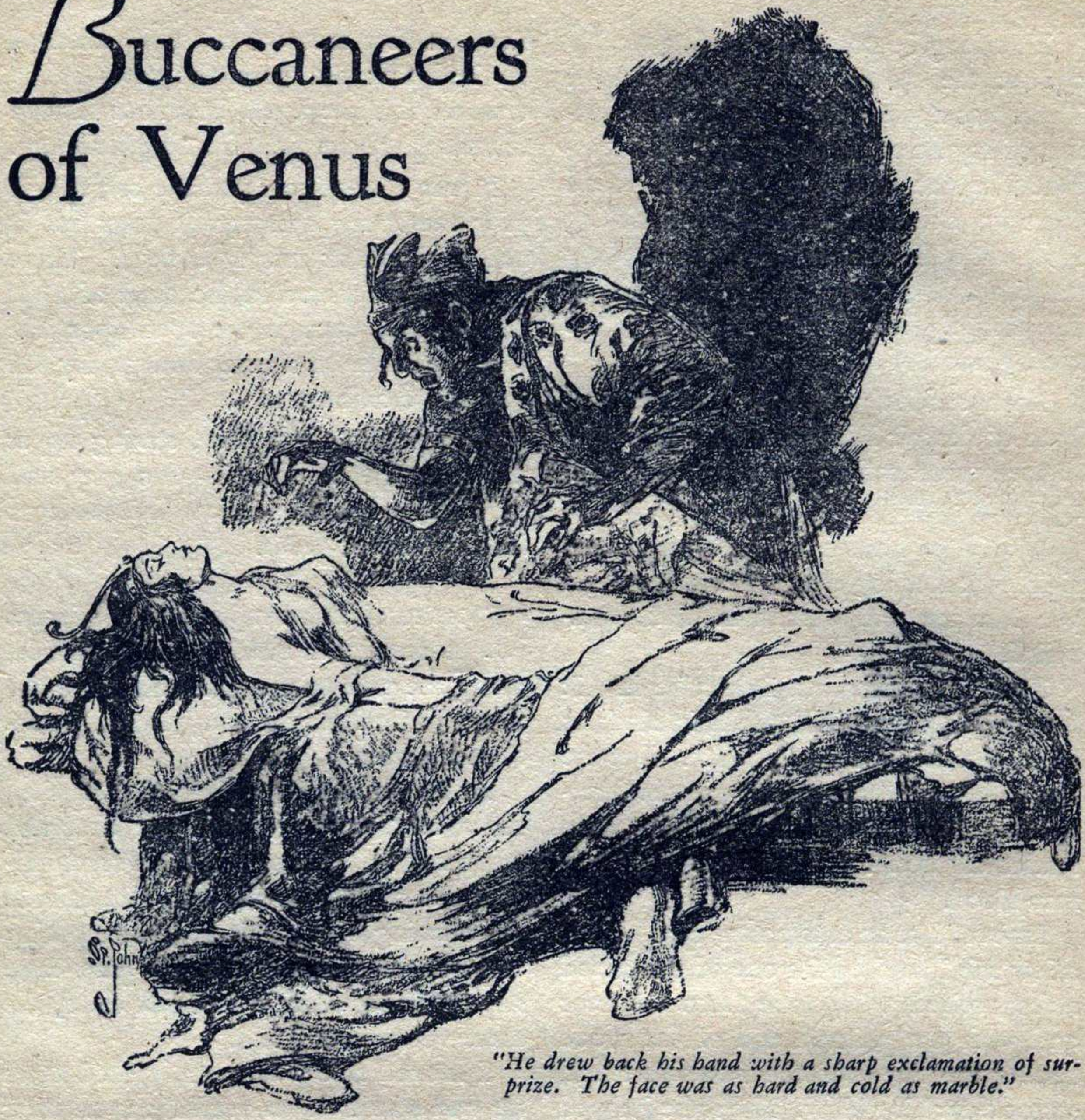
I moved across to them, picked them up and stared down vacantly upon their black sides. These were the hellish works that had caused it all. These were the pages that were responsible. . . .

With a low cry I turned to the grate on the other side of the room and flung the three of them onto the still glowing coals.

There was an instant hiss, and a line of yellow flame streaked upward and began eating into the velvet. I watched the fire grow higher . . . higher . . . and diminish slowly.

And as the last glowing spark died into a blackened ash there swept over me a mighty feeling of quiet and relief.

Buccaneers of Venus



"He drew back his hand with a sharp exclamation of surprize. The face was as hard and cold as marble."

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

A powerful weird-scientific story by a master of science-fiction—a swift-moving tale of piracy, and weird monsters on another planet

The Story Thus Far

ROBERT GRANDON, young Chicago clubman who had fought his way to the throne of Reabon, mightiest empire of the planet Venus, was honeymooning on the sea-coast with his beautiful young bride, Vernia, Princess of Reabon, when she was carried off by the Huitsenni, a hairless, toothless yellow race of buccaneers against which Grandon had previously formed a secret alliance with three other Venusian rulers.

Grandon instantly set out in pursuit of the pirate fleet in a small fishing-boat, accompanied by Kantar the Gunner, who was an expert with the Venusian machine-guns known as mattorks. They were captured by the buccaneers, but managed to

This story began in WEIRD TALES for November

escape, after they reached Huitsen, the hidden port of the pirates, and form an alliance with the Chispoks, a secret society opposed to piratical practises.

With the help of the Chispoks, Grandon got into the palace and killed Yin Yin, the pirate ruler, while Kantar, mistaking another captive princess, Narine of Tyrhana, for Vernia, escaped with her in a small boat.

Vernia, meanwhile, was carried off by Heg, Rogo of the Ibbits, a furry race of savages inhabiting the antarctic wastes south of Huitsen. Grandon killed Heg and rescued Vernia, but they were later captured by the Huitsenni, and Grandon was condemned to death.

Kantar, who had in the meantime discovered his mistake, fell in love with Narine. They were recaptured by the pirates, and rescued by the aerial battleships of Zinlo of Olba. Zinlo took them to the flagship of Ad of Tyrhana, father of Narine, and they formulated a plan for capturing Huitsen and rescuing Grandon and Vernia.

CHAPTER 19

THE DUEL

BACK in the throne room of Thid Yet, Rogo of Huitsen, Grandon, who had been forced to his knees by his two burly guards, awaited the stroke of Ez Bin, the headsman. He saw the huge blade flash upward, and nerved himself for a mighty effort. As the two-handed scarbo descended, he flung himself backward, carrying both guards with him. The heavy blade crashed to the polished glass floor, and many tiny cracks radiated from the point where it had struck.

Grandon instantly flung his right arm forward once more. The guard who clung to it tripped over the blade of Ez Bin, and losing his hold, fell on his face before the throne. His right arm now free, Grandon snatched the scarbo which depended from the belt of the other guard, and ran him through.

At this, one of Vernia's guards sprang forward and struck at Grandon with his scarbo. The Earth-man side-stepped the blow and countered with a slash to the head that stretched his opponent on the floor. In the meantime, Ez Bin had recovered his weapon, and made a terrific swing at Grandon's neck. Dodging beneath the blade, the Earth-man stabbed upward and thrust him through the throat. Then, before any one could stop him, he sprang straight for the monarch who squatted on the throne.

With screams of terror, the slave-girls scattered. But Thid Yet whipped out his scarbo and leaped to his feet. He had not been Rogo long enough to become fat and flabby like Yin Yin from easy living, nor was he a coward, but despite his great girth, a trained fighting-man in the pink of condition, and the veteran of many hand-to-hand encounters which had made him the most feared duelist in Huitsen.

"Stand back," he shouted to the nobles and soldiers who had begun to crowd around. "Stand back and watch your Rogo carve the heart from this white-skinned slave who dares to attack the throne of Huitsen."

To the courtiers of Huitsen their ruler's word was absolutely law; so they fell back and made room for the two combatants. Nor were any of them worried as to the outcome. Thid Yet had not had time to select any favorites from among those who stood about his throne, which he had seized with the assistance of the navy faction, nor had he, as yet, conferred any honors or promotions. If he were slain, another would take his place, prob-

ably no better or no worse, and Grandon could easily be dealt with.

It was evident, as Thid Yet sprang forward to meet the Earth-man, that despite Grandon's reputation as a swordsman, he was positive he could easily best him—that it would be an opportunity to add to his laurels and convince the Huitsenni beyond all doubt that they were ruled by a brave man.

As their blades clashed, and Grandon felt the strength of his wrist and met the lightning speed of his attack, he knew he had an opponent worthy of his steel, and that the outcome was indeed doubtful. Blood was drawn on both sides at the very start. First Thid Yet's point raked Grandon's cheek, cutting a deep gash. Then the Earth-man countered with a swift head cut. The Rogo parried in time to save his head, but not his ear, which was shorn off by the blow.

The spectators cried out in delighted amazement at the swift and brilliant sword-play that followed. Trained from infancy in the use of the scarbo, these men of Huitsen knew that they were witnessing a duel the like of which they might never see again were they to live a dozen lifetimes. One after another, Grandon tried all the tricks he had learned from his old fencing-master, Le Blanc, and from the numerous scarbo experts he had encountered. But thrust or cut as he would, the darting blade of Thid Yet was there to meet his, and to counter with a lightning slash or a swift riposte. Time and again Grandon received wounds which might have been fatal had he not succeeded in parrying them or springing back just in time. And for every wound he received, the yellow Rogo was dealt two, though he was equally successful in avoiding a fatal injury.

Bathed in blood and perspiration, the two contestants fought back and forth over an area that had become slippery with their own gore. Grandon's sword arm began to ache. His head swam dizzily. Loss of blood was beginning to sap his strength. He wondered how Thid Yet, who appeared to be losing more blood than he, could stand the terrific exertion. And wondering, he began to conserve his strength, to fight a defensive rather than an offensive battle, and to wait.

Presently the Earth-man felt the arm of his adversary begin to weaken. Still he fought cautiously, reserving his strength for a final effort—waiting. Suddenly Thid Yet extended his weapon in a vicious but clumsy thrust at Grandon's left breast. With a quick parry, and a narrow moulinet ending in a swift drawing cut, the Earth-man brought his keen blade down on his opponent's extended wrist, shearing through bone and muscle. The scarbo of the Rogo clattered to the floor, his severed hand still clinging to the grip.

Thid Yet uttered a grunt of surprize and pain, and stared at his spurting wrist for a moment as if he could not believe what he saw. Then he clamped the fingers of his left hand just behind the stump to stay the bleeding, and staggered backward, collapsed against the base of his throne.

In the uproar that followed, Grandon leaped back to where Vernia, who had recovered consciousness shortly after the duel commenced and watched it with bated breath, stood in the custody of her remaining guard. The fellow reached for his scarbo, but not quickly enough. He died with the blade half out of the scabbard and Grandon's point through his heart. With his left arm around his wife's slender waist, Grandon waved his bloody scarbo, menacing the nobles and warriors who were crowding around him.

One elevated his tork, but ere he could fire it, there was a report from an upper balcony and he pitched forward on his face. A voice rang out from above them. "Back, all of you, and lay down your arms. The first to menace Their Majesties dies."

Looking up, Grandon saw Kantar standing on a balcony, his tork muzzle pointed over the railing. Behind him, two Olban warriors guarded the door.

A number of the nobles had rushed to Thid Yet's assistance. Two of them helped him to the throne, while a third tightly bound his wrist with a strip of silk torn from his own cloak. The cat-like eyes of the Rogo glittered with hatred.

"Shoot them," he groaned. "Slay them all."

A noble reached for his tork, followed by two more. But as swiftly as they went for their weapons, the tork of the gunner spoke. One after another they sank to the floor. The lesson was not lost on the others. Most of them quickly complied with Kantar's request by opening their belts and letting their weapons drop to the floor. Then they clasped their hands behind their heads in token of surrender. A few guards who had rushed in from the outer corridors to learn the cause of the disturbance, quickly followed their example.

"What's this?" cried Thid Yet. "Is my entire court to be captured by a single marksman?" He reached for his own tork. Then a bullet drilled him neatly between the eyes and he slumped forward, dead.

This settled the matter for those who had hesitated to obey the commands of the sharp-shooting gunner. They all dropped their weapons and clasped their hands behind their heads.

Leaving one of his companions to cover the group while the other still watched the door, Kantar dropped from balcony to balcony until he reached the floor. Scarcely had his feet touched its mirrored surface ere a terrific bombardment commenced outside. He ran over to where Grandon and Vernia stood, and made obeisance.

"What's all the shooting about outside?" asked Grandon.

"Your Majesty's warriors are attacking the city," replied Kantar, "under cover of a barrage from the artillery. The air fleet of Olba is also bombarding the city, as are the ships of Reabon, Tyrhana and Adonijar, which are now fighting their way into the harbor and coming up the canal."

"But you! Where did you come from with these Olban warriors? Did you drop from the sky?"

"In truth, I did, Majesty. Zinlo of Olba, at my request, dropped me on one of the outer balconies of the palace with these two warriors. His airship was not fired upon, as it came and went so suddenly that the Huitsenni had no time to train their heavy mattorks on it. I hoped to find you here, as a squadron sent to follow the party of Ibbits with whom Your Majesties were supposed to be traveling, returned to report that you were not with them. I feared that your lives would be put in jeopardy by the attack, and so came before the assault. By arguing with our scarbos, we convinced several yellow guards who barred our way that we had important business with the Rogo of Huitsen. Then we came to the inner balcony."

"You came in the nick of time, Gunner," said Grandon, "and I'm eternally grateful. Now, let's get out of here."

The gunner signaled to the Olban warrior on the balcony. He called to his companion, and the two dropped from balcony to balcony under the protection of the watchful gunner's tork, until they reached the floor.

"What shall we do with these prison-

ers, Majesty?" asked Kantar, indicating the group of disarmed nobles, officers and slaves who still stood with their hands clasped behind their heads.

Grandon thought for a moment. "We'll take them with us," he decided. "It is the only way. Let the two Olban warriors bind their hands behind their backs."

WHILE the members of the group were being bound with strips torn from their own clothing, Grandon selected a tork and ammunition belt from the pile of weapons. He also exchanged his nicked and bloody scarbo for a jewel-hilted weapon which had belonged to one of the nobles. Vernia also armed herself, and the two assisted Kantar to keep watch on the balconies and doorways. But it soon appeared that there was no need for this. Evidently the thunder of the conflict outside had prevented the palace inmates from taking any interest in what went on in the throne room.

As soon as the prisoners had been bound, Grandon divided them into two groups, one to march before them, and one behind. Then, with Grandon and Kantar covering the group that marched before and the two Olbans walking backward with their torks trained on those who came behind, they passed out into the corridor which led to the main gate.

They had scarcely moved twenty feet along this corridor, when a considerable body of Huitsenni, wearing white scarves around their necks, poured in from a side corridor. Grandon instantly elevated his tork, but Kantar, recognizing the white scarves as the symbol previously agreed upon, stayed his hand.

"Don't shoot, Majesty," he said. "These are friends." He called to the advancing warriors. "Ho, Chispoks. We are brothers and allies. Relieve us of these prisoners."

"Gladly, brothers. We were sent by Han Lay to rescue you, and assist in taking the palace, but you have evidently been able to take care of yourselves."

"Is the palace taken?" Grandon asked the mojak of the band.

The officer bowed low. "No, Majesty. But it soon will be. Already a thousand of the brotherhood have come in through the boat entrances, and they are fighting their way to the top. Five thousand more are storming the gates on the street level, and the rest stand ready to cut off the retreating army of Thid Yet."

"Then my soldiers have broken through?"

"They have, Majesty, and drive the army of the false Rogo before them like frightened frellas, while the warriors from the ships close in from the other side."

"The false Rogo is now a dead Rogo," Grandon told him. "But where is Han Lay?"

"He was to lead the charge on the palace gate, so it is there he will be if he has not fallen."

"Then let us charge through from the inside. It will make victory swifter and easier."

"But most of my men are fighting on the upper floors."

"Never mind. Can you spare twenty?"

"Assuredly. Fifty."

"Splendid! I will lead them." He turned to the two Olbans, who, relieved of their prisoners, awaited orders. "Guard Her Majesty well," he commanded. Then, to Kantar. "Come, Gunner."

Followed by the fifty men whom the mojak had detailed to accompany them, Grandon and Kantar led the charge through the entrance, and straight into the mêlée where the palace guards strove with

the Chispoks at the gate. For some minutes the guards, beset from both sides, offered half-hearted resistance. Then, one by one, they threw down their weapons and clasped their hands behind their heads. The attacking Chispoks surged in, with Han Lay at their head.

"I rejoice to find you alive, Majesty," said Han Lay, rendering the royal salute to Grandon.

"And I, you, Your Majesty soon to be," replied Grandon, returning his salute.

Suddenly a string of aerial battleships swooped down from the sky and circled the palace. Swiftly their mattorks silenced the weapons of those who fired at them. Then they sailed up to the balconies at the various levels, and Olban warriors poured down their aluminum stairways into the palace. The leading airship settled beside the palace gate. The steps dropped, and down them came Zinlo and Narine.

Grandon and Zinlo saluted each other in the Zorovian fashion, then puzzled those who stood around them by enthusiastically shaking hands, a purely earthly demonstration which was unknown on Venus.

"I see you are in at the kill, in spite of the fact that we couldn't notify you," said Zinlo.

"Decidedly," replied Grandon. "Where are Ad and Aardvan?"

"Coming. They have just accepted the surrender of the Romojak of Huitsen, and will be here in a moment."

Grandon presented Han Lay to Zinlo and Narine. Then Vernia came out, accompanied by her two Olban guards, and to her he was also presented.

A MOMENT later, three men strode up to the palace gate, a half-dozen warriors making a way for them through the vast multitude that had gathered there. They were Ad of Tyrhana, Aardvan of Adonijar, and San Thoy. Grandon held a short conference with his allies. Then, accompanied by Han Lay, he mounted to the top step of the aluminum stairs which led to Zinlo's flagship. It was a position from which he could command a view of the entire crowd, and be seen by them.

"People of Huitsen," he shouted. "First of all, I want to tell you, and I speak on behalf of my allies as well as myself, that we are not here to exact tributes or reparations, nor to gloat over a prostrate foe. On the contrary, we wish to establish friendly relations with the people of Huitsen—relations that will last through the years. The officer and renowned warrior who stands here beside me is willing to meet the conditions which will best foster these relations, namely, an abolition of piracy, the freeing of all slaves who have been acquired by buccaneering and coastal raids, and the entry of Huitsen into peaceful commerce with the other nations of this planet.

"Being in full accord with these policies, we will withdraw our warriors as soon as a treaty is concluded with him, if you will acclaim him your Rogo. What is your pleasure?"

"Han Lay for Rogo," shouted a warrior. The shout was taken up by thousands of throats.

Presently Grandon held up his hands for silence. When the clamor had ceased, he said: "Have you any other candidates to propose?"

No one spoke. He waited for a moment. "Then acclaim him," he cried.

"Hail Han Lay, Rogo of Huitsen!" roared the crowd, as with one voice.

When the shouting had subsided to a murmur, Grandon turned to Han Lay, and said: "I have a suggestion, Your Majesty. There is one who, though he

has his little weaknesses, has been largely instrumental in the consummation of this glorious victory. I refer to San Thoy, and recommend that he be suitably rewarded."

The new Rogo beckoned to San Thoy, who came and made obeisance before him.

"Rise, San Thoy, Romojak of the Navies of Huitsen," said Han Lay.

Then he and Grandon descended the ladder, and amid the cheering of the populace, the royal group, attended by their officers and guards, went into the palace.

As they entered, Han Lay, who was walking beside Grandon, said: "What of this lascivious Rogo who was the cause of Her Majesty's abduction? Can we be of assistance in bringing him to justice?"

"You can, decidedly," replied Grandon. "I had already thought of a plan. I should like to borrow one of your largest vessels complete with officers and crew, with San Thoy in command. Also, if you can furnish me with a sculptor who can make a life-like image of one who will pose for him, say in wax, or some such material, I shall be able to complete my plans without great difficulty."

"These are but trifles," protested Han Lay. "A ship will be put at your disposal immediately, and within the hour a dozen such sculptors as you require will await your pleasure."

"Excellent! As soon as I have had these scratches dressed, I'll explain my plan to you."

CHAPTER 20

RETRIBUTION AND REWARD

TEN days had elapsed since the fall of Huitsen. On the day following their victory, the ships and warriors of the allies had sailed away. Only a part of the Olban air fleet remained, while Grandon, Vernia, Zinlo, Loralie, Kantar and Narine stayed at the palace as guests of the new Rogo. Now Han Lay stood on the palace steps, surrounded by his nobles and officers, to bid his friends farewell.

Zinlo's flagship had descended to the ground, and two of its aluminum staircases had been lowered. Up one of these, a number of Huitsenni struggled with two heavy, coffin-like chests, and passed them to the waiting Olbans.

Farewells were said, and, one by one, Han Lay's guests mounted the other stairway. The stairs were raised, the doors were closed, and the mighty airship shot skyward, while the people cheered and the palace mattorks thundered a farewell salute.

At an elevation of about two thousand feet, the flagship darted seaward, followed by the fleet, which had been hovering above the palace.

Installed in his luxurious cabin, Zinlo's guests sipped kova and chatted gayly. Having seen to their comforts, the Torrogo of Olba climbed to the forward turret to note their progress.

Presently Grandon joined him. "Are you sure we can catch San Thoy before he reaches the rendezvous?" he asked.

"Positive," Zinlo replied. "We have already covered half the distance."

"Marvellous! How fast will these things go, anyway?"

"Earth distance and time, about a thousand miles an hour. In Olba, the speed is reckoned in rotations of the planet at its equator, or fractions thereof. Our smallest and slowest ships make at least a quarter of a rotation. This one can easily do a rotation."

"I thought the shoreline of Huitsen receded pretty fast, but I didn't know it was quite that speedy. Look! We're passing over a fleet, now."

"That's Ad of Tyrhana, ready to attack Zanaloth from the south. See that fleet over to the west? That's Aard-

van, spoiling for a fight. Your own ships are over at your right, and the fleet that set sail from Reabon under your orders should be within twenty-five miles of the north coast of the Island of the Valkars by now."

"Why, there's San Thoy's ship, already."

"Right. We'll ascend and do a little scouting before we drop you off."

He gave several swift orders to his Romojak. Then the entire fleet of aircraft shot skyward, and entered the lowest cloud stratum.

Looking down through the thin veil of vapor, Grandon presently descried an island, the Island of the Valkars. Anchored off its tiny harbor was a single battleship, flying the flag of Mernerum. But behind a jutting promontory, only a little way off, fully fifty big battleships lurked.

"It's just as you thought," said Zinlo, at sight of the concealed ships. "Either Zanaloth was afraid of treachery on the part of the Huitsenni, or he intended treachery toward them. He came prepared for trouble, in any event."

They cruised toward the north a few minutes longer, and Grandon saw another fleet, consisting of fully a hundred splendid battleships, the pride of Reabon's navy, sailing toward the island. Zinlo saw them, too, and immediately gave orders to turn back.

"All is ready," he said. "Now, if you still insist, I'll put you on San Thoy's ship, but I can't for the life of me see the sense of it. We've got them bottled up, anyway, and it won't be much of a job to lick them."

"I'll tell you why I insist on carrying out my plan," replied Grandon. "It's the only way I can make sure of meeting my worst enemy face to face."

"I see. You want the pleasure of killing him, yourself. Well, I don't blame you."

They paused, at this moment, above the bat-winged vessel which Han Lay had lent to Grandon, and Zinlo gave orders for them to descend.

Lightly the airship dropped beside the vessel. Grappling-irons were tossed aboard, and the two stairways let down. Grandon bade his friends good-bye, and took Vernia in his arms. She clung to him at the door—begged him not to go. "You are putting your head in the mouth of the marmelot," she said. "Why not capture him first, then deal with him afterward? I'm afraid for you."

"And I," replied Grandon, "am afraid he might otherwise escape me. This way, he will not."

As he descended the ladder, San Thoy stood on the deck to greet him, mumbling kerra spores and grinning toothlessly. In the meantime, the two casket-like chests which had been brought in the airship were lowered to the deck of the vessel. The stairs were drawn up and the grappling-irons cast off.

Grandon waved farewell to his friends, and entered the cabin of the bowing San Thoy.

ZANALOTH, dissolute Torrogo of Mernerum, sat at the gold-topped table in the luxurious cabin of his flagship, sipping kova. Oglo, Romojak of the Imperial Navy, stood at attention, awaiting his pleasure.

Presently the dissipated Torrogo turned his bloated countenance toward his chief naval officer, and said: "The time is nearly at hand, Oglo. Are you positive that everything is ready?"

"Positive, Your Majesty. A thousand warriors are concealed in the hold, awaiting instructions. Our fleet lurks in readi-

ness to come to us under full sail at the boom of the first mattork."

Zanaloth emptied his kova bowl and smacked his thick, sensuous lips. "Very good. Very good, indeed. If the pirates come in a single ship, as we agreed, we can capture it. If they mean treachery, and have other vessels standing by to attack us, they will easily be taken care of by our battle fleet.

"Now let us review your instructions, so there will be no mistakes. As soon as the pirates display the royal prisoner, we will request that she be brought aboard our vessel. They, on their side, will no doubt insist that the gold be transferred to their ship. We will agree to this, and begin transferring the gold. But as soon as the Princess of Reabon is safely inside this cabin, I will enter in and close the door. That will be your signal to attack. Let the warriors take the place of the gold-passers, and charge into the other ship. See that you have plenty of grappling-irons aboard her, so she can't slip away from us. And don't forget to go into action immediately with the mattorks, so the battle fleet will know they are to start at once."

"To hear Your Majesty is to obey," replied Oglo.

"And remember. Every man aboard the pirate vessel must die. If need be, we will sink their ship, but first we must try to get back what gold has been taken aboard her. As for the slaves we are supposed to have put ashore for them, the pirates will not live to look for them. We will have both the girl and the gold, and the Rogo of Huitsen will perhaps guess that he has been beaten at his own game, but he will have no proof."

"I will not forget, Majesty."

"If your head fails you in this, I promise it will no longer remain on your shoulders to trouble you. Go, now, and watch for that ship."

Oglo made profound obeisance, and withdrew.

Zanaloth fidgeted impatiently. Presently he quaffed another bowl of kova and getting ponderously to his feet, paced the floor.

Suddenly the door was flung open, and Oglo, bowing on the threshold, announced breathlessly: "A sail, Majesty! A pirate sail!"

Zanaloth grunted. "So! They come to the rendezvous at last."

He squeezed his ample girth through the doorway, and walked forward, Oglo following at a respectful distance. Then he took the glass which his romojak obsequiously proffered, and focused it on the approaching vessel. Traveling under full sail before a stiff breeze, it was making considerable speed.

"Bones of Thorth!" he exclaimed. "We must save that splendid ship, if possible. It flies over the water like an ormf. A few alterations, and it will never be recognized."

As if its commander had no suspicion of treachery, the pirate ship sailed swiftly up to them, hove to, and dropped its anchors. An officer came out of a cabin, wearing the uniform of a romojak, and Zanaloth hailed him.

"Are you Thid Yet, Romojak of Huitsen?" he asked.

"No, I am San Thoy, Romojak of Huitsen," was the reply. "Thid Yet is dead, and I have come to keep the rendezvous in his place."

"You have brought the royal slave-girl?"

"We have, Your Majesty. And what of the gold?"

"We stand ready to deliver it to you. But first let me see the royal prisoner."

"What of the slaves you were to place on the island for us?"

"They are there, under guard, awaiting your pleasure. But let us see your prisoner."

"Very well, Majesty."

San Thoy went into a cabin, and remained for several minutes. Then he came out, alone. "She has fainted, Your Majesty. Will you not come aboard and see her?"

"Ha! What's this? Perhaps you have not brought her, after all."

"Well then, if you doubt my word, I'll have her carried out, so you may view her."

He raised his hand, and a mojak entered the cabin. He came out in a moment, followed by four Huitsenni, who bore a litter on which reposed the golden-haired, richly clad figure of a young woman.

Zanaloth stared until he was watery-eyed. Then he focused his glass on the recumbent figure and stared again.

"By the blood and body of Thorth!" he exclaimed to Oglo. "It is she. It must be. For nowhere on Zorovia is there beauty such as hers." To San Thoy he called: "I am satisfied. Let us draw the ships together with grappling-irons. My men are ready to unload the gold."

IRONS were quickly hurled from ship to ship, and the chains, drawn taut by hand-turned winches, gradually drew the two vessels together. This achieved, gangplanks were dropped across, fore and aft, and Zanaloth's men began carrying bars of gold to the pirate ship from the after hold, to be checked, weighed and received by members of the yellow crew.

For some time Zanaloth and San Thoy chatted across the rails. Then the latter said: "Nearly half the gold is unloaded. Shall we convey Her Majesty to the quarters you have provided for her?"

This was precisely what Zanaloth wanted, but he did not wish to appear too eager. "At your convenience," he replied. "The cabin behind me has been prepared for her."

San Thoy signaled to the officer who stood near the recumbent figure. The latter gave a command, and four Huitsenni took up the litter, while four more came out from the cabin and fell in behind them with a heavy, ornate chest about seven feet in length.

"What is in that chest?" asked Zanaloth, suspiciously.

"A few of Her Majesty's belongings," replied San Thoy. "Mostly wearing-apparel and ornaments."

San Thoy himself crossed the gangplank ahead of the others.

"This cabin?" he asked, indicating the door of Zanaloth's cabin.

"That is right. Just leave her in there, and I'll call the ship's doctor to attend her in a moment."

Zanaloth drank in the beauty of the recumbent girlish form as it was borne past him. "How still she is!" he thought. "Perhaps she is dead, and they have tricked me." But a searching look at the red lips and pink cheeks reassured him. "No corpse could have such bloom of life and health as this," he reasoned.

Under the supervision of their officer, the eight men placed the litter and the large chest in the cabin. Then they retired.

"You will excuse me," said Zanaloth, formally, "if I go to examine the merchandise I have purchased at so high a price."

"Assuredly," replied San Thoy. "I will, in the meantime, take a closer look at the gold with which it was purchased." He bowed low, with right hand extended

palm downward, and turning, crossed the plank to his own ship.

Zanaloth watched his broad back with a supercilious sneer, until he had reached his own vessel. Then, with a significant glance at Oglo, he swung on his heel, and entering his cabin, slammed the door shut behind him. The boom of a mattork outside instantly followed his action. It was succeeded by shouts, commands, shrieks and groans, mingled with the popping of torks, the clash of blades, the scurrying of feet on deck, and the rumble of mattorks. He smiled cunningly as he thought of the splendid prize which his concealed warriors would take so easily, and of the very slight expense at which he had been to secure the golden-haired beauty who lay at his mercy on the litter before him.

He crossed the room, and kneeling, touched a rosy cheek. Then he drew back his hand with a sharp exclamation of surprize. The face was as hard and cold as if it had been hewn from marble.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder and closed with a grip that made him wince. He was jerked to his feet, and spun around to face a tall, handsome stranger, who wore the scarlet of royalty and the insignia of the imperial house of Reabon.

"Who—who are you?" he stammered, his trembling voice barely audible above the din of battle outside.

"I am Grandon of Terra, Torrogo of Reabon, and husband of her whom you would have wronged — whose graven image you just now profaned by the touch of your filthy hand."

Behind Grandon, the ornate chest under which the four Huitsenni had staggered stood with the lid thrown back, empty. Zanaloth's gaze roved from this to the door, as he realized the manner in which Grandon had gained access to his cabin. He leaped for the door, but found it locked. Grandon reached in his belt-pouch and held up the key.

"Wha—what do you want?" asked Zanaloth.

"I have come for your head," replied the Earth-man, whipping out his scarbo. "On guard, if you have the manhood left to defend it."

With trembling fingers, Zanaloth drew his own scarbo. In his youth he had been accounted an excellent scarboman. But that day was long past. Years of dissipation and luxurious living had made him short of breath and flabby of muscle. And he knew that there were few, if any, of the most expert duelists on Zorovia who could meet Grandon of Terra, scarbo in hand, and live to boast of it. Only a trick, a sudden, unexpected move, might save him. He came on guard, but before the blades had touched, lowered his point.

"I can not fight you," he whined. "It would be suicide."

Unsuspecting, Grandon lowered his own point.

"You may choose between——" he began. But just then Zanaloth raised his weapon and lunged at his opponent's unprotected body. Grandon had no time to parry this vicious and cowardly thrust. Barely in time to avert disaster, he hurled himself to one side, so that the point only grazed him. Zanaloth automatically recovered his stance as Grandon now attacked. For a moment, it seemed to the Mernerumite that the blade of his opponent had wrapped itself around his own. Then his weapon was twisted from his grasp, and flew through the air to alight in a corner of the cabin. Zanaloth started back, his eyes wide with terror, as the point of the Earth-man plunged straight for his breast. But Grandon stopped the thrust, and contented himself with merely touching his antagonist.

THE din of battle had increased outside, but neither man heeded it.

"I suggest that you pick up your scarbo," said Grandon, "and that hereafter you keep a tighter grip on it."

Furtively watching his generous opponent, Zanaloth slunk to the corner and recovered his weapon. He knew that he could not hope to win this fight, that death had marked him for its own. Great beads of sweat standing out on his forehead betrayed the fear that gripped his craven heart.

At his left side, as at Grandon's, there hung a jeweled, gold-plated tork. Suddenly he lowered his left hand, gripped the weapon, and was about to press the firing-button when a projectile struck his wrist, numbing it, and paralyzing his fingers. With incredible swiftness, Grandon had again forestalled him.

Seeing that he had rendered the Mernerumite's tork hand useless, Grandon lowered his own weapon. "Since you can no longer fight with the tork," he said, politely, "perhaps we had best resume with the scarbo." He advanced, and once more their blades met. "I advise you," continued Grandon, mechanically cutting, thrusting and parrying, "to guard well your head, as I have promised it to the Rogo of Huitsen. A little gift to recompense him for the loss of much gold and many slaves. But then the head of a Torrogo is a rare and truly royal gift, even if its intrinsic worth is trifling."

Zanaloth said nothing. He was fighting with all his skill and strength, yet the Earth-man was only playing with him. Suddenly Grandon's blade flashed in a swift moulinet, touched the Mernerumite's neck, and was withdrawn, without so much as drawing blood. But to Grandon's surprize, his antagonist dropped his weapon and sank to the floor, limp, and apparently lifeless.

For some time the Earth-man stood there, waiting, suspecting a trick. But as his opponent continued motionless, he bent and felt a flabby wrist, then held his hand over the heart. There was no pulse. Zanaloth of Mernerum was dead, not slain by the scarbo, but by a weapon that is often more deadly, that always tortures before it kills—fear.

Grandon rose to his feet and sheathed his bloodless blade. Then, taking the key from his belt pouch, he opened the cabin door and stepped out on deck. San Thoy was waiting there to greet him. The fighting had ceased, and the Huitsenni worked side by side with his own Fighting Traveks who had been concealed in the hold of their ship. They were tossing the corpses of the slain Mernerumites overboard, tending the wounded, and guarding the prisoners.

A large aerial battleship dropped beside them. Grappling-irons were cast aboard, and an aluminum stairway was lowered. Zinlo stood in the doorway.

"The battle fleet of Mernerum has surrendered," he said. "Coming aboard?"

"Immediately," replied Grandon. With one foot on the stairway, he turned to San Thoy. "Good-bye, my friend," he said. "Come and visit me in Reabon. Oh, by the way! You will find the gift I promised Han Lay on the floor of Zanaloth's cabin. Present it to him with my compliments."

San Thoy bowed low, and grinned toothlessly, as Grandon mounted the stairs.

THE next day, Grandon sat at the crystal-topped table in the drawing-room of his private apartments in the imperial palace of Reabon.

Bonal, his torrango, or prime minister, appeared in the doorway and made obeisance. "The messenger has arrived from

Mernerum, Your Majesty," he announced.

"I'll receive him here," replied Grandon. "And by the way, Zonal, ask Zinlo of Olba to come in now. I want him to be present at the interview."

A few moments later, Bonal announced: "His Imperial Majesty, Zinlo of Olba, and Mojak Sed of the staff of Orthad, Supreme Romojak of Reabon."

Zinlo entered, followed by a young Reabonian officer. The Torrogo of Olba took a seat at the table, and the democratic Grandon invited the young officer also to be seated, knowing it would not offend his equally democratic guest.

"You bring a message from Orthad?" Grandon asked.

"I do, Majesty. He bids me inform you that we took Mernerum with ease. The people were sick of the tyrannous Zanaloth, and most of them actually welcomed us. We were delayed only by the difficulties which arise in moving so large an army. The fighting was but desultory, and there were few casualties."

"What was the attitude of the nobles and officials?"

"They begged that Mernerum be annexed to Reabon, or if this should not comport with Your Majesty's wishes, that you name a competent Torrogo to rule them. So as soon as Kantar the Gunner arrived in the Olban airship, His Excellency named him Torrogo, in accordance with Your Majesty's commands. He was later acclaimed by the nobles, warriors and people without a dissenting voice."

"What of the other ceremony?"

"It has been performed, Majesty. And Her Majesty invites all to attend the feast which will be held this evening."

"Did you bring with you a messenger from the new Torroga?"

"I did, your Majesty. He awaits your permission to present his missive to Ad of Tyrhana."

"Good. You may go now. And send this messenger to me."

The mojak arose, and making the customary obeisance, withdrew.

"Thus far," Grandon told Zinlo, "our plot has worked out. It remains to be seen how Ad of Tyrhana will take the news." He called a guard. "Have Bonal usher in Their Majesties of Tyrhana and Adonijar," he commanded.

"I can tell you how Ad will take it," said Zinlo. "He'll take it as a marmelot takes a slap on the nose. But it was the only thing to do."

A moment later, Ad and Aardvan were ushered in by Bonal. A slave brought kova, and the four Torrogos were chatting merrily over their bowls when Bonal announced: "A messenger from Her Imperial Majesty, the Torroga of Mernerum, to see His Imperial Majesty, the Torrogo of Tyrhana."

"What's this?" exclaimed Ad. "I didn't know Zanaloth left a widow. And why should she send a messenger to me?"

"Perhaps an interview with the messenger will explain," rumbled the deep-voiced Aardvan.

"True. Show him in, Bonal."

The messenger, who wore the uniform of a mojak of the Imperial Guards of Mernerum, made obeisance to all four of the rulers. His puzzled look showed that he did not know which one to address.

"I am the Torrogo of Tyrhana," said Ad. "I believe your message is for me."

"It is, Your Majesty." The mojak took a small scroll from his belt pouch and handed it to Ad. "From Her Imperial Majesty, the Torroga of Mernerum," he said.

Ad broke the seal and unrolled the missive. First he looked puzzled, then astounded, then fiercely angry. His face

purpled and his brow contracted. "Blood of Thorth!" he exploded. "Narine has eloped with that young upstart of a gunner, and married him!"

"She could have done worse," soothed Grandon. "The gunner is now Torrogo of Mernerum."

"The little she-marmelot! The traitor! The ungrateful child! I'll disown her! I'll—I'll——"

"Tut, tut," said Aardvan. "I think she has made a splendid match."

"But what of Gadrimel? What of our pact that my daughter and your son should wed?"

"I don't like to mention this," replied Aardvan, "but Gadrimel picked up a slave-girl in Huitsen and brought her here with him. Zena, I believe he called her, an ex-concubine of Yin Yin's. I told him to get rid of her, and last night they both disappeared. Later, I learned that they had gone for a cruise in one of my ships."

"Um," grunted Ad, non-committally.

"So you see," continued Aardvan, "their marriage would have been impossible, anyway. Besides, we need no marriage to cement the firm friendship between us. And think, you will now have as an additional ally the wealthy and powerful Torrogo of Mernerum, your son-in-law."

"That's right, Your Majesty," said Zinlo. "Forgive the child, and let's pile into one of my ships and attend the wedding feast tonight, all of us."

"What! You, too? This has all the earmarks of a conspiracy," said Ad.

Grandon filled the kova bowls all around, then took up his own, and said: "My friends, let us drink to the health and happiness of the charming young bride and the lucky bridegroom."

Zinlo and Aardvan drained their bowls.

Ad hesitated for a moment, then caught up his own bowl and emptied it with apparent gusto. "Our work is done," he said. "The power of the pirates is broken, and the port of peril is no more. Let us on to the wedding feast."

[THE END]

The House of Shadows

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

A strange little story is this, about a family whose images would not reflect in the mirror

THE train pulled up with a noisy jerk and wheeze, and I peered out into the semi-gloom of dusk at the little depot. What was the place?—"Oak Grove." I could read dimly the sign on the station's roof. I sighed wearily. Three days on the train! Lord, I was tired of the lurching roll, the cinders, the scenery flying past my window! I came to a sudden decision and hurried down the aisle to where the conductor was helping an old lady off.

"How long do we stop here?" I asked him quickly.

"About ten minutes, ma'am," he said, and I stepped from the train to the smooth sand in front of the station. So pleasant to walk on firm ground again! I breathed deeply of the spicy winter air, and strolled to the far side of the station. A brisk little wind was whipping my skirts about my legs and blowing wisps of hair into my eyes. I looked idly about at what I could see of Oak Grove. It was a typical small town—a little sleepier than some, a little prettier than most. I wandered a block or two toward the business district, glancing nervously at my watch from time to time. My ten minutes threatened to be up, when I came upon two dogs trying to tear a small kitten to pieces.

I dived into the fray and rescued the kitten, not without a few bites and scratches in the way of service wounds, and put the little animal inside a store doorway. At that moment a long-drawn, it seemed to me derisive, whistle from my train rent the quiet, and as I tore back toward the station I heard it chugging away. I reached the tracks just in time to see the caboose rattling away into the night.

What should I do? Oh, why had I jumped off at this accursed little station? My luggage, everything I possessed except my purse, was on that vanished train, and here I was, marooned in a village I had never heard of before!

Or had I? "Oak Grove" . . . the name had a familiar ring. Oak Grove . . . ah! I had it! My roommate at college two years before had lived in a town called Oak Grove. I darted into the depot.

"Does a Miss Mary Allison live here?" I inquired of the station-master. "Mary Deane Allison?"

I wondered at the peculiar unfathomable look the old man gave me, and at his long silence before he answered my question. "Yes'm," he said slowly, with an odd hesitancy that was very noticeable. "You her kin?"

"No," I smiled. "I went to college with her. I . . . I thought perhaps she might put me up for the night. I've . . . well, I was idiot enough to let my train go off and leave me. Do you . . . is she fixed to put up an unexpected guest, do you know?"

"Well"—again that odd hesitancy—"we've a fair to middlin' hotel here," he evaded. "Maybe you'd rather stay there."

I frowned. Perhaps my old friend had incurred the disapproval of Oak Grove by indiscreet behavior—it seems a very easy thing to do in rural towns. I looked at him coldly.

"Perhaps you can direct me to her house," I said stiffly.

He did so, still with that strange reluctance.

I made my way to the big white house at the far end of town, where I was told Mary Allison lived. Vague memories flitted through my mind of my chum as I had seen her last, a vivacious cheerful girl whose home and family life meant more to her than college. I recalled hazy pictures she had given me of her house, of her parents and a brother whose picture had been on our dresser at school. I found myself hurrying forward with eagerness to see her again and meet that doting family of hers.

I FOUND my way at last to the place, a beautiful old Colonial mansion with tall pillars. The grounds were overgrown with shrubbery and weeds, and the enormous white oaks completely screened the great house from the street, giving it an appearance of hiding from the world. The place was sadly in need of repairs and a gardener's care, but it must have been magnificent at one time.

I mounted the steps and rapped with

the heavy brass knocker. At my third knock the massive door swung open a little way, and my college friend stood in the aperture, staring at me without a word. I held out my hand, smiling delightedly, and she took it in a slow incredulous grasp. She was unchanged, I noticed—except, perhaps, that her dancing bright-blue eyes had taken on a vague dreamy look. There was an unnatural quiet about her manner, too, which was not noticeable until she spoke. She stood in the doorway, staring at me with those misty blue eyes for a long moment without speech; then she said slowly, with more amazement than I thought natural, "Liz! Liz!" Her fingers tightened about my hand as though she were afraid I might suddenly vanish. "It's . . . it's good to see you! Gosh! How . . . why did you come here?" with a queer embarrassment.

"Well, to tell the truth, my train ran off and left me when I got off for a breath of air," I confessed sheepishly. "But I'm glad now that it did . . . remembered you lived here, so here I am!" She merely stared at me strangely, still clutching my hand. "There's no train to Atlanta till ten in the morning." I hesitated, then laughed, "Well, aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Why . . . why, of course," Mary said oddly, as if the idea was strange and had not occurred to her. "Come in!"

I stepped into the great hall, wondering at her queer manner. She had been one of my best friends at college, so why this odd constraint? Not quite as if she did not want me around—more as if it were queer that I should wish to enter her house, as if I were a total stranger, a creature from another planet! I tried to attribute it to the unexpectedness of my visit; yet inwardly I felt this explanation was not sufficient.

"What a beautiful old place!" I exclaimed, with an effort to put her at ease again. Then, as the complete silence of the place struck me, unthinkingly I added, "You don't live here alone, do you?"

She gave me the oddest look, one I could not fathom, and replied so softly that I could hardly catch the words, "Oh, no."

I laughed. "Of course! I'm crazy . . . but where is everybody?"

I took off my hat, looking about me at the Colonial furniture and the large candelabra on the walls with the clusters of lighted candles which gave the only light in the place—for there were no modern lighting fixtures of any kind, I noted. The dim candle-light threw deep shadows about the hall—shadows that flickered and moved, that seemed alive. It should have given me a sense of nervous fear; yet somehow there was peace, contentment, warmth about the old mansion. Yet, too, there was an incongruous air of mystery, of unseen things in the shadowy corners, of being watched by unseen eyes.

"Where is everybody? Gone to bed?" I repeated, as she seemed not to have heard my question.

"Here they are," Mary answered in that strange hushed voice I had noticed, as if some one were asleep whom she might waken.

I looked in the direction she indicated, and started slightly. I had not seen that little group when I entered! They were standing scarcely ten feet from me just beyond the aura of light from the candles, and they stared at me silently, huddled together and motionless.

I smiled and glanced at Mary, who said in a soft voice like the murmur of a light wind, "My mother . . ."

I stepped forward and held out my hand to the tall kind-faced woman who

advanced a few steps from the half-seen group in the shadows. She seemed, without offense, not to see my hand, but merely gave me a beautiful smile and said, in that same hushed voice Mary used, "If you are my daughter's friend, you are welcome!"

I happened to glance at Mary from the corner of my eye as she spoke, and I saw my friend's unnatural constraint vanish, give place to a look, I thought wonderingly, that was unmistakably one of relief.

"My father," Mary's voice had a peculiar tone of happiness. A tall distinguished-looking man of about forty stepped toward me, smiling gently. He too seemed not to see my outthrust hand, but said in a quiet friendly voice, "I am glad to know you, my dear. Mary has spoken of you often."

I made some friendly answer to the old couple; then Mary said, "This is Lonny . . . remember his picture?"

The handsome young man whose photograph I remembered stepped forward, grinning engagingly.

"So this is Liz!" he said. "Always wanted to meet one girl who isn't afraid of a mouse . . . remember? Mary told us about the time you put one in the prof's desk." He too spoke in that near-whisper that went oddly with his cheery words, and I found myself unconsciously lowering my voice to match theirs. They were unusually quiet for such a merry friendly group, and I was especially puzzled at Mary's hushed voice and manner—she had always been a boisterous tomboy sort of person.

"This is Betty," Mary spoke again, a strange glow lighting her face.

A small girl about twelve stepped solemnly from the shadows and gave me a grave old-fashioned curtsey.

"And Bill," said Mary, as a chubby child peeped out at me from behind his sister's dress and broke into a soft gurgling laugh.

"What darling kids!" I burst out.

The baby toddled out from behind Betty and stood looking at me with big blue eyes, head on one side. I stepped forward to pat the curly head, but as I put out a hand to touch him, he seemed to draw away easily just out of reach. I could not feel rebuffed, however, with his bright eyes telling me plainly that I was liked. It was just a baby's natural shyness with strangers, I told myself, and made no other attempt to catch him.

AFTER a moment's conversation, during which my liking for this charming family grew, Mary asked if I should like to go to my room and freshen up a bit before dinner. As I followed her up the stairs, it struck me forcibly—as it had before only vaguely — that this family, with the exception of Mary, were in very bad health. From father to baby, they were most pasty-white of complexion—not sallow, I mused, but a sort of translucent white like the glazed-glass doors of private offices. I attributed it to the uncertain light of the candles that they looked rather smoky, like figures in a movie when the film has become old and faded.

"Dinner at six," Mary told me, smiling, and left me to remove the travel-stains.

I came downstairs a little before the dinner hour, to find the hall deserted—and, woman-like, I stopped to parade before a large cheval-glass in the wall. It was a huge mirror, reflecting the whole hall behind me, mellowly illumined in the glow of the candles. Turning about for a back-view of myself, I saw the little baby, Bill, standing just beside me, big eyes twinkling merrily.

"Hello there, old fellow," I smiled at him. "Do I look all right?" I glanced back at the mirror . . . and what it reflected gave me a shock.

I could see myself clearly in the big glass, and most of the hall far behind me, stretching back into the shadows. But the baby was not reflected in the glass at all! I moved, with a little chill, just behind him . . . and I could see my own reflection clearly, but it was as if he was simply not there.

At that moment Mary called us to dinner, and I promptly forgot the disturbing optical illusion with the parting resolve to have my eyes examined. I held out my hand to lead little Bill into the dining-room, but he dodged by me with a mischievous gurgle of laughter, and toddled into the room ahead of me.

THAT was the pleasantest meal I can remember. The food was excellent and the conversation cheery and light, though I had to strain to catch words spoken at the far end of the table, as they still spoke in that queer hushed tone. My voice, breaking into the murmur of theirs, sounded loud and discordant, though I have a real Southern voice.

Mary served the dinner, hopping up and running back into the kitchen from time to time to fetch things. By this I gathered that they were in rather straitened circumstances and could not afford a servant. I chattered gayly to Lonny and Mary, while the baby and Betty listened with obvious delight and Mary's parents put in a word occasionally when they could break into our chatter.

It was a merry informal dinner, not unusual except that the conversation was carried on in that near-whisper. I noticed vaguely that Mary and I were the only ones who ate anything at all. The others merely toyed with their food, cutting it up ready for eating but not tasting a bite, though several times they would raise a fork to their lips and put it down again, as though pretending to eat. Even the baby only splashed with his little fork in his rice and kept his eyes fixed on me, now and then breaking into that merry gurgling laugh.

We wandered into the library after the meal, where Mary and I chatted of old times. Mr. Allison and his wife read or gave ear to our prattling from time to time, smiling and winking at each other. Lonny, with the baby in his lap and Betty perched on the arm of his chair, laughed with us at some foolish tale of our freshman days.

At about eleven Mary caught me yawning covertly, and hustled me off to bed. I obediently retired, thankful for a bed that did not roll me from side to side all night, and crawled in bed in borrowed pajamas with a book, to read myself to sleep by the flickering candle on my bedside table.

I MUST have dropped off to sleep suddenly, for I awoke to find my candle still burning. I was about to blow it out and go back to sleep when a slight sound startled the last trace of drowsiness from me.

It was the gentle rattle of my door-knob being turned very quietly.

An impulse made me feign sleep, though my eyes were not quite closed and I watched the door through my eyelashes. It swung open slowly, and Mrs. Allison came into the room. She walked with absolute noiselessness up to my bed, and stood looking down at me intently. I shut my eyes tightly so my eyelids would not flutter, and when I opened them slightly in a moment, she was moving toward the door, apparently satisfied that I was fast asleep. I thought she was go-

ing out again, but she paused at the door and beckoned to some one outside in the hall.

Slowly and with incredible lack of sound, there tiptoed into my room Mr. Allison, Lonny, Betty, and the baby. They stood beside the bed looking down at me with such tender expressions that I was touched.

I conquered an impulse to open my eyes and ask them what they meant by this late visit, deciding to wait and watch. It did not occur to me to be frightened at this midnight intrusion. There swept over me instead a sense of unutterable peace and safety, a feeling of being watched over and guarded by some benevolent angel.

They stood for a long moment without speaking, and then the little girl, bending close to me, gently caressed my hand, which was lying on the coverlet. I controlled a start with great effort.

Her little hand was icy cold—not with the coldness of hands, but with a peculiar *windy* coldness. It was as if some one had merely blown a breath of icy air on me, for though her hand rested a moment on mine, it had no weight!

Then, still without speaking but with gentle affectionate smiles on all their faces, they tiptoed out in single file. Wondering at their actions, I dropped off at last into a serene sleep.

MARY brought my breakfast to my bed next morning, and sat chattering with me while I ate. I dressed leisurely and made ready to catch my ten o'clock train. When the time drew near, I asked Mary where her family was—they were nowhere in the house and I had seen none of them since the night before. I reiterated how charming they were, and how happy my visit had been. That little glow of happiness lighted my friend's face again, but at my next words it vanished into one that was certainly frightened pleading. I had merely asked to tell them good-bye.

That odd unfathomable expression flitted across her face once more. "They . . . they're gone," she said in a strained whisper. And as I stared at her perplexedly, she added in confusion, "I . . . I mean, they're away. They won't be back until . . . nightfall," the last word was so low it was almost unintelligible.

So I told her to give them my thanks and farewells. She did not seem to want to accompany me to the train, so I went alone. My train was late, and I wandered to the ticket window and chatted with the station-master.

"Miss Allison has a charming family, hasn't she?" I began conversationally. "They seem so devoted to each other."

Then I saw the station-master was staring at me as if I had suddenly gone mad. His wrinkled face had gone very pale.

"You stayed there last night?" His voice was almost a croak.

"Why, yes!" I replied, wondering at his behavior. "I did. Why not?"

"And . . . you saw . . . *them?*" his voice sank to a whisper.

"You mean Mary's family?" I asked, becoming a little annoyed at his foolish perturbation. "Certainly I saw them! What's so strange about that? What's wrong with them?"

My approaching train wailed in the distance, but I lingered to hear his reply. It came with that same reluctance, that same hesitancy, after a long moment.

"They died last year," he whispered, leaning forward toward me and fixing me with wide intent eyes. "Wiped out—every one of 'em exceptin' Mary—by smallpox."



Over an Absinthe Bottle

By W. C. MORROW

ARTHUR KIMBERLIN, a young man of very high spirit, found himself a total stranger in San Francisco one rainy evening, at a time when his heart was breaking; for his hunger was of that most poignant kind in which physical suffering is forced to the highest point without impairment of the mental functions. There remained in his possession not a thing that he might have pawned for a morsel to eat; and even as it was, he had stripped his body of all articles of clothing except those which a remaining sense of decency compelled him to retain. Hence it was that cold assailed him and conspired with hunger to complete his misery. Having been brought into the world and reared a gentleman, he lacked the courage to beg and the skill to steal. Had not an extraordinary thing occurred to him, he either would have drowned himself in the bay within twenty-four hours or died of pneumonia in the street. He had been seventy hours without food, and his mental desperation had driven him far in its race with his physical needs to consume the strength within him; so that now, pale, weak, and tottering, he took what comfort he could find in the savory odors which came steaming up from the basement kitchen of the restaurants in Market Street, caring more to gain them than to avoid the rain. His teeth chattered; he shambled, stooped, and gasped. He was too desperate to curse his fate—he could only long for food. He could not reason; he could not understand that ten thousand hands might gladly have fed him; he could think only of the hunger which consumed him, and of food that could give him warmth and happiness.

When he had arrived at Mason Street, he saw a restaurant a little way up that thoroughfare, and for that he headed, crossing the street diagonally. He stopped before the window and ogled the steaks, thick and lined with fat; big oysters lying on ice; slices of ham as large as his hat; whole roasted chickens, brown and juicy. He ground his teeth, groaned, and staggered on.

A few steps beyond was a drinking-saloon, which had a private door at one side, with the words "Family Entrance" painted thereon. In the recess of the door (which was closed) stood a man.

In spite of his agony, Kimberlin saw something in this man's face that appalled and fascinated him. Night was on, and the light in the vicinity was dim; but it was apparent that the stranger had an appearance of whose character he himself must have been ignorant. Perhaps it was the unspeakable anguish of it that struck through Kimberlin's sympathies. The young man came to an uncertain halt and stared at the stranger. At first he was unseen, for the stranger looked straight out into the street with singular fixity, and the death-like pallor of his face added a weirdness to the immobility of his gaze. Then he took notice of the young man.

"Ah," he said, slowly and with peculiar distinctness, "the rain has caught you, too, without overcoat or umbrella! Stand in this doorway—there is room for two."

The voice was not unkind, though it had an alarming hardness. It was the first word that had been addressed to the sufferer since hunger had seized him, and to be spoken to at all, and have his comfort regarded in the slightest way, gave him cheer. He entered the embrasure and stood beside the stranger, who at once relapsed into his fixed gaze at nothing across the street. But presently the stranger stirred himself again.

"It may rain a long time," said he; "I am cold, and I observe that you tremble. Let us step inside and get a drink."

He opened the door and Kimberlin followed, hope beginning to lay a warm hand upon his heart. The pale stranger led the way into one of the little private booths with which the place was furnished. Before sitting down he put his hand into his pocket and drew forth a roll of bank-bills.

"You are younger than I," he said; "won't you go to the bar and buy a bottle of absinthe, and bring a pitcher of water and some glasses? I don't like for the waiters to come around. Here is a twenty-dollar bill."

KIMBERLIN took the bill and started down through the corridor toward the bar. He clutched the money tightly in his palm; it felt warm and comfortable, and sent a delicious tingling through his arm. How many glorious hot meals did that bill represent? He clutched it tighter and hesitated. He thought he smelled a broiled steak, with fat little mushrooms and melted butter in the steaming dish. He stopped and looked back toward the door of the booth. He saw that the stranger had closed it. He could pass it, slip out the door, and buy something to eat. He turned and started, but the coward in him (there are other names for this) tripped his resolution; so he went straight to the bar and made the purchase. This was so unusual that the man who served him looked sharply at him.

"Ain't goin' to drink all o' that, are you?" he asked.

"I have friends in the box," replied Kimberlin, "and we want to drink quietly and without interruption. We are in Number 7."

"Oh, beg pardon. That's all right," said the man.

Kimberlin's step was very much stronger and steadier as he returned with the liquor. He opened the door of the booth. The stranger sat at the side of the little table, staring at the opposite wall just as he had stared across the street. He wore a wide-brimmed, slouch hat, drawn well down. It was only after Kimberlin had set the bottle, pitcher, and glasses on the table, and seated himself opposite the stranger and within his range of vision, that the pale man noticed him.

"Oh! you have brought it? How kind of you! Now please lock the door."

Kimberlin had slipped the change into his pocket, and was in the act of bringing it out when the stranger said,—

"Keep the change. You will need it, for I am going to get it back in a way that may interest you. Let us first drink, and then I will explain."

The pale man mixed two drinks of absinthe and water, and the two drank. Kimberlin, unsophisticated, had never tasted the liquor before, and he found it harsh and offensive; but no sooner had it reached his stomach than it began to warm him, and sent the most delicious thrill through his frame.

"It will do us good," said the stranger; "presently we shall have more. Meanwhile, do you know how to throw dice?"

Kimberlin weakly confessed that he did not.

"I thought not. Well, please go to the bar and bring a dice-box. I would ring for it, but I don't want the waiters to be coming in."

Kimberlin fetched the box, again locked the door, and the game began. It was not one of the simple old games, but had complications, in which judgment, as well as chance, played a part. After a game or two without stakes, the stranger said,—

"You now seem to understand it. Very well—I will show you that you do not. We will now throw for a dollar a game, and in that way I shall win the money that you received in change. Otherwise I should be robbing you, and I imagine you can not afford to lose. I mean no offense. I am a plain-spoken man, but I believe in honesty before politeness. I merely want a little diversion, and you are so kind-natured that I am sure you will not object."

"On the contrary," replied Kimberlin, "I shall enjoy it."

"Very well; but let us have another drink before we start. I believe I am growing colder."

They drank again, and this time the starving man took his liquor with relish —at least, it was something in his stomach, and it warmed and delighted him.

THE stake was a dollar a side. Kimberlin won. The pale stranger smiled grimly, and opened another game. Again Kimberlin won. Then the stranger pushed back his hat and fixed that still gaze upon his opponent, smiling yet. With this full view of the pale stranger's face, Kimberlin was more appalled than ever. He had begun to acquire a certain self-possession and ease, and his marvelling at the singular character of the adventure had begun to weaken, when this new incident threw him back into confusion. It was the extraordinary expression of the stranger's face that alarmed him. Never upon the face of a living being had he seen a pallor so death-like and chilling. The face was more than pale; it was white. Kimberlin's observing faculty had been sharpened by the absinthe, and, after having detected the stranger in an absent-minded effort two or three times to stroke a beard which had no existence, he reflected that some of the whiteness of the face might be due to the recent removal of a full beard. Besides the pallor, there were deep and sharp lines upon the face, which the electric light brought out very distinctly. With the exception of the steady glance of the eyes and an occasional hard smile, which seemed out of place upon such a face, the expression was that of stone inartistically cut. The eyes were black, but of heavy expression; the lower lip was purple; the hands were

fine, white, and thin, and dark veins bulged out upon them. The stranger pulled down his hat.

"You are lucky," he said. "Suppose we try another drink. There is nothing like absinthe to sharpen one's wits, and I see that you and I are going to have a delightful game."

After the drink the game proceeded. Kimberlin won from the very first, rarely losing a game. He became greatly excited. His eyes shone; color came to his cheeks. The stranger, having exhausted the roll of bills which he first produced, drew forth another, much larger and of higher denominations. There were several thousand dollars in the roil. At Kimberlin's right hand were his winnings—something like two hundred dollars. The stakes were raised, and the game went rapidly on. Another drink was taken. Then fortune turned the stranger's way, and he won easily. It went back to Kimberlin, for he was now playing with all the judgment and skill he could command. Once only did it occur to him to wonder what he should do with the money if he should quit winner; but a sense of honor decided him that it would belong to the stranger.

By this time the absinthe had so sharpened Kimberlin's faculties that, the temporary satisfaction which it had brought to his hunger having passed, his physical suffering returned with increased aggressiveness. Could he not order a supper with his earnings? No; that was out of the question, and the stranger said nothing about eating. Kimberlin continued to play, while the manifestations of hunger took the form of sharp pains, which darted through him viciously, causing him to writhe and grind his teeth. The stranger paid no attention, for he was now wholly absorbed in the game. He seemed puzzled and disconcerted. He played with great care, studying each throw minutely. No conversation passed between them now. They drank occasionally, the dice continued to rattle, the money kept piling up at Kimberlin's hand.

The pale man began to behave strangely. At times he would start and throw back his head, as though he were listening. For a moment his eyes would sharpen and flash, and then sink into heaviness again. More than once Kimberlin, who had now begun to suspect his antagonist was some kind of monster, saw a frightfully ghastly expression sweep over his face, and his features would become fixed for a very short time in a peculiar grimace. It was noticeable, however, that he was steadily sinking deeper and deeper into a condition of apathy. Occasionally he would raise his eyes to Kimberlin's face after the young man had made an astonishingly lucky throw, and keep them fixed there with a steadiness that made the young man quail.

The stranger produced another roll of bills when the second was gone, and this had a value many times as great as the others together. The stakes were raised to a thousand dollars a game, and still Kimberlin won. At last the time came when the stranger braced himself for a final effort. With speech somewhat thick, but very deliberate and quiet, he said,—

"You have won seventy-four thousand dollars, which is exactly the amount I have remaining. We have been playing for several hours. I am tired, and I suppose you are. Let us finish the game. Each will now stake his all and throw a final game for it."

WITHOUT hesitation, Kimberlin agreed. The bills made a considerable pile on the table. Kimberlin threw, and the box held but one combination that could possibly beat him; this com-

bination might be thrown once in ten thousand times. The starving man's heart beat violently as the stranger picked up the box with exasperating deliberation. It was a long time before he threw. He made his combination and ended by defeating his opponent. He sat looking at the dice a long time, and then he slowly leaned back in his chair, settled himself comfortably, raised his eyes to Kimberlin's, and fixed that unearthly stare upon him. He said not a word; his face contained not a trace of emotion or intelligence. He simply looked. One can not keep one's eyes open very long without winking, but the stranger did. He sat so motionless that Kimberlin began to be tortured.

"I will go now," he said to the stranger—said that when he had not a cent and was starving.

The stranger made no reply, but did not relax his gaze; and under that gaze the young man shrank back in his own chair, terrified. He became aware that two men were cautiously talking in an adjoining booth. As there was now a deathly silence in his own, he listened, and this is what he heard:

"Yes; he was seen to turn into this street about three hours ago."

"And he had shaved?"

"He must have done so; and to remove a full beard would naturally make a great change in a man."

"But it may not have been he."

"True enough; but his extreme pallor attracted attention. You know that he has been troubled with heart-disease lately, and it has affected him seriously."

"Yes, but his old skill remains. Why, this is the most daring bank-robbery we ever had here. A hundred and forty-eight thousand dollars—think of it! How long has it been since he was let out of Joliet?"

"Eight years. In that time he has grown a beard, and lived by dice-throwing with men who thought they could detect him if he should swindle them; but that is impossible. No human being can come winner out of a game with him. He is evidently not here; let us look farther."

Then the two men clinked glasses and passed out.

The dice-players—the pale one and the starving one—sat gazing at each other, with a hundred and forty-eight thousand dollars piled up between them. The winner made no move to take in the money; he merely sat and stared at Kimberlin, wholly unmoved by the conversation in the adjoining room. His imperturbability was amazing, his absolute stillness terrifying.

Kimberlin began to shake with an ague. The cold, steady gaze of the stranger sent ice into his marrow. Unable to bear longer this unwavering look, Kimberlin moved to one side, and then he was amazed to discover that the eyes of the pale man, instead of following him, remained fixed upon the spot where he had sat, or, rather, upon the wall behind it. A great dread beset the young man. He feared to make the slightest sound. Voices of men in the bar-room were audible, and the sufferer imagined that he heard others whispering and tiptoeing in the passage outside his booth. He poured out some absinthe, watching his strange companion all the while, and drank alone and unnoticed. He took a heavy drink, and it had a peculiar effect upon him: he felt his heart bounding with alarming force and rapidity, and breathing was difficult. Still his hunger remained, and that and the absinthe gave him an idea that the gastric acids were destroying him by digesting his stomach. He leaned forward and whispered to the stranger, but was given no attention. One of the man's hands lay upon the table;

Kimberlin placed his upon it, and then drew back in terror—the hand was as cold as a stone.

The money must not lie there exposed. Kimberlin arranged it into neat parcels, looking furtively every moment at his immovable companion, and *in mortal fear that he would stir!* Then he sat back and waited. A deadly fascination impelled him to move back into his former position, so as to bring his face directly before the gaze of the stranger. And so the two sat and stared at each other.

Kimberlin felt his breath coming heavier and his heart-beats growing weaker, but these conditions gave him comfort by reducing his anxiety and softening the pangs of hunger. He was growing more and more comfortable and yawned. If he had dared he might have gone to sleep.

Suddenly a fierce light flooded his vision and sent him with a bound to his feet. Had he been struck upon the head or stabbed to the heart? No; he was sound and alive. The pale stranger still sat there staring at nothing and immovable; but Kimberlin was no longer afraid of him. On the contrary, an extraordinary buoyancy of spirit and elasticity of body made him feel reckless and daring. His former timidity and scruples vanished, and he felt equal to any adventure. Without hesitation he gathered up the money and bestowed it in his several pockets.

"I am a fool to starve," he said to himself, "with all this money ready to my hand."

AS CAUTIOUSLY as a thief he unlocked the door, stepped out, reclosed it, and boldly and with head erect stalked out upon the street. Much to his astonishment, he found the city in the bustle of the early evening, yet the sky was clear. It was evident to him that he had not been in the saloon as long as he had supposed. He walked along the street with the utmost unconcern of the dangers that beset him, and laughed softly but gleefully. Would he not eat now—ah, would he not? Why, he could buy a dozen restaurants! Not only that, but he would hunt the city up and down for hungry men and feed them with the fattest steaks, the juiciest roasts, and the biggest oysters that the town could supply. As for himself, he must eat first; after that he would set up a great establishment for feeding other hungry mortals without charge. Yes, he would eat first; if he pleased, he would eat till he should burst. In what single place could he find sufficient to satisfy his hunger? Could he live sufficiently long to have an ox killed and roasted whole for his supper? Besides an ox he would order two dozen broiled chickens, fifty dozen oysters, a dozen crabs, ten dozen eggs, ten hams, eight young pigs, twenty wild ducks, fifteen fish of four different kinds, eight salads, four dozen bottles each of claret, burgundy, and champagne; for pastry, eight plum-puddings, and for dessert, bushels of nuts, ices, and confections. It would require time to prepare such a meal, and if he could only live until it could be made ready it would be infinitely better than to spoil his appetite with a dozen or two meals of ordinary size. He thought he could live that long, for he felt amazingly strong and bright. Never in his life before had he walked with so great ease and lightness; his feet hardly touched the ground—he ran and leaped. It did him good to tantalize his hunger, for that would make his relish of the feast all the keener. Oh, but how they would stare when he would give his order, and how

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THE EYRIE



IN THE January issue of WEIRD TALES, we asked you, the readers, whether you wished us to discontinue stories of other planets and other stars. We asked this question because of the vehement letters of protest against interplanetary stories that we received from a number of our readers. The replies demonstrated the strong hold that such imaginative tales as the interplanetary stories of Kline and the Interstellar Patrol stories of Hamilton have upon your affections. There have been many letters in favor of discontinuing such stories; but these have been swamped by the flood of letters protesting against any decrease in the number of interplanetary tales in this magazine. We bow to your wishes, and in this issue we are printing *The Star-Roamers,* by Edmond Hamilton, and have a goodly number of excellent interplanetary stories to follow, including Hamilton's *Thundering Worlds* and *The Horror on the Asteroid.* One qualification, however, appears frequently in the letters you have written urging us to continue using interplanetary stories: that is, that the stories must be weird enough to class as weird-scientific stories, and not merely pseudo-scientific. This seems a reasonable demand, and we shall heed it.

Alford Cuatt, of Mamaroneck, New York, writes to the Eyrie: "Receiving my January issue of WEIRD TALES later than usual, on account of my being up in the mountains, I write immediately to defend stories of Otis Adelbert Kline's caliber. It might interest you to know that through the *Buccaneers of Venus* I have become an ardent reader of WEIRD TALES. Picking up the magazine on a local news stand, I decided to buy it because Kline's story appealed to me. Incidentally, I read the other stories, and feel now that I couldn't get along without your magazine."

"You certainly can pick out good stories," writes Claude H. Cameron, of Toronto, Canada. "The current issue is excellent, and it is really difficult to assign the first place of preference, so evenly balanced is the entire issue. However, I think I would assign first place to *The Chadbourne Episode* by Whitehead, because of its vital reality. Somehow, due to Whitehead's craftsmanship, the story rings true and seems entirely plausible. I vote second place to *The Mirror* by Burrowes, because he sounds a new note in a new way—logical, well written, excellently plotted."

Writes Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C.: "I am bitterly opposed to any idea of eliminating interplanetary stories. They are a feature of our magazine. I am extremely distressed that you have neglected to have more of Edmond Hamilton's Interstellar Patrol stories and trust that in the near future I will have the opportunity to read more of them in WT. I am enjoying tremendously the short stories reprinted from back issues of WT and I congratulate you on your splendid selections."

Reginald A. Pryke writes from England: "Let me state without any preamble whatsoever that this letter constitutes an emphatic and almost shocked 'no' to the query: 'Shall we discontinue scientific stories?' I read the question with dismay. I vote emphatically for the continuance of your present policy of including stories to suit all tastes. Are you contemplating the destruction of the magazine's reputation merely to please a blustering few whose tastes are so hidebound as to refuse recognition to tales that do not conform to their own ice-locked mentalities? Do I desire tales of years gone by, of battle and majestic kingliness, I turn to Howard. Do I crave stories to curdle my blood and bring shivers to my spine, I steer for Lovecraft and Quinn, and if I yearn for a yarn of doom, awful and magnificent, of self-sacrifice and high endeavor, I pick our old reliable Edmond Hamilton. Hamilton is the acknowledged master of this type of fiction, yet you threaten to expunge from your periodical his imaginative tales. Have done with this half-hearted hesitation."

"*De Brignac's Lady,* by Kirk Mashburn, is one of those stories that linger in the memory long after they are read," writes J. D. Arden, of Detroit. "Needless to say, it is my favorite story in the February issue. Following that, I select *The Fire Vampires,* by Donald Wandrei. One can always rely on Wandrei. His themes are unique and original. What surprized me, however, was the high literary quality of the 'shorts.' The Lovecraft story you used for the reprint was uncommonly good, but in my opinion too short to be used as a reprint. I am still patiently waiting for you to reprint *The Woman of the Wood,* by A. Merritt, which appeared in WT several years ago."

"Although I was on the losing side in the recent controversy over reprint serials," writes Donald Allgeier, of Mountain Grove, Maryland, "I again take up the gage to defend the pseudo-science serials. Without your weird-scientific stories your magazine would lose much of its appeal to me. In my opinion Edmond Hamilton and Otis Adelbert Kline are virtually unexcelled as authors, and both lean toward the science type of fiction. The outstanding feature of your magazine is its variety, its wide scope, its liberal translation of the word 'weird.' It is my opinion that a periodical filled entirely with vampires and horror stories would become monotonous. Your science novelettes are the cream of the crop. Keep them so and I will venture to say that the approvals will shower over the protests."

Mrs. M. McHenry, of Toledo, Ohio, writes to the Eyrie: "I wish to cast my vote against stories dealing with other planets. Give us more stories about haunted houses, werewolves, vampires, and about scientists who change parts of humans with animals, etc. In fact, I like all your stories except the ones I mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph; I always omit reading them. I especially liked Jules de Grandin and would like to see one about him in every issue. In the February issue, which I have just completed, my favorite story was *De Brignac's Lady,* by Kirk Mashburn. Keep WEIRD TALES weird."

From Superior, Arizona, comes a letter from Mrs. P. E. Wilkins, who writes to the Eyrie: "I have just finished reading my February issue of WT, and 'day by day in every way it is getting better and better,' especially the covers. The best story was undoubtedly *De Brignac's Lady.* Kirk Mashburn almost makes me believe there really are such things as vampires; and baby vampires—that is something new."

Clark Ashton Smith, known to all of you by his artistic weird stories, writes: "Howard's *The Scarlet Citadel,* in the current WT, gave me a grand thrill. It seems

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Coming Next Month

GOING below was like walking into salt water, the odor was that strong, pushing and holding us back, a nauseating odor, filthy, abominable, and beast-like. I think I was faint when we reached the hold, for I can not otherwise quite account for what happened. Bill was carrying a lighted candle while I unbattened the hatch and looked in.

"Shut it! Shut it!" Bill screamed, and we hurled ourselves against the door, fastening it securely. Down in the hold we had seen a vast, shapeless mass of undulating greenish-white stuff, thick as skin, with a beating motion like a pulse. The revolting odor came from that mass, but what terrified us most was the way that pulpy substance leaped up at us when we opened the hatch! Leaped, like an unknown animal after prey, with a furious beating of the pulse, its surface writhing into tentacles that flung at us, and a hiss like an inarticulate cry.

The candle went out when Bill jumped. Darkness dropped upon us like a shroud. We heard the thing undulating in the hold and pounding against the hatch.

Panic caught us. We dashed for the other hatchways and fought to get out. Once on deck, we felt a bit ashamed, with the morning sun shining brightly. We looked at each other, white and shaken, for all that. Then a wave of corruption eddied around us, and we knew it came from the thing in the hold. . . .

New thrills await you in this story of a fearsome sea voyage, with a terrible death striking from the hold, and shuddering dread as the constant companion of the voyagers. This startling narrative by the author of *The Red Brain* will be published complete in next month's WEIRD TALES:

SPAWN OF THE SEA

By DONALD WANDREI

—ALSO—

THE WHEEL

By H. Warner Munn

Another grim and powerful tale of torture, by the author of *The Chain*.

DEAD MAN'S BELT

By Hugh B. Cave

A grim story of murder and the dwellers on a city dump—an unusual and striking tale.

THE CARVEN IMAGE

By August W. Derleth and Mark Schorer

The story of a wooden image endued with a hideous life —a grim, tragic tale of three bloody murders.

THE GIRL WITH THE GREEN EYES

By Mary Elizabeth Counselman

An utterly strange story about witchcraft and occult powers of evil—a story of eery thrills.

GOLDEN BLOOD

By Jack Williamson

Another thrilling installment of this fascinating serial story.

May WEIRD TALES Out April 1

(Continued from page 536)

to me that Howard is improving, that his tales are becoming weirder and more imaginative. The only drawback, from my viewpoint, is the excessive manslaughter: some time, I wish he would write a tale in which the hero isn't always mowing people down in windrows with a double-fisted sword. Apart from that element, *The Scarlet Citadel* is absolutely first-rate; and probably most readers will like it all the better for the super-heroism. Apropos of the interplanetary question: I vote for the retention of such stories, but think they should be much weirder and better-written than the general run. Tales such as Nictzin Dyalhis used to write would be suitable. Kline's serial is enjoyable, and has touches of sly humor that lift it above some of Burroughs' work on similar themes. And I don't mean to disparage Burroughs either: his *The Master Mind of Mars* was a great story, no matter what the pedants may say."

A. V. Pershing, of Indianapolis, writes. "I vote that all reprints be taken from back issues of WEIRD TALES. Please reprint all of Lovecraft's stories, also *The Woman of the Wood* by A. Merritt, and other rare gems of your magazine. I vote for vampire, ghost, and Chinese stories, also the Howard type of story. There was only one thing wrong with the January issue: it did not contain a story by Clark Ashton Smith."

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue of WEIRD TALES? *De Brignac's Lady,* Kirk Mashburn's eery story of baby vampires, won first place in your letters among all the stories in our February issue, as shown by your letters and votes. *The Chadbourne Episode,* by the late Henry S. Whitehead, won second place.

Now for the big surprize: Your favorite stories from WEIRD TALES, past and present, will be broadcast nationally, with prominent motion picture stars portraying the characters. One of these radio dramatizations will be broadcast each week, beginning with *De Brignac's Lady,* by Kirk Mashburn. Watch your local newspaper for details.

My favorite stories in the April WEIRD TALES are:

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

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comically they would hang back, and how amazed they would be when he would throw a few thousands of dollars on the counter and tell them to take their money out of it and keep the change! Really, it was worth while to be so hungry as that, for then eating became an unspeakable luxury. And one must not be in too great a hurry to eat when one is so hungry—that is beastly. How much of the joy of living do rich people miss from eating before they are hungry—before they have gone three days and nights without food! And how manly it is, and how great self-control it shows, to dally with starvation when one has a dazzling fortune in one's pocket and every restaurant has an open door! To be hungry without money—that is despair; to be starving with a bursting pocket—that is sublime! Surely the only true heaven is that in which one famishes in the presence of abundant food, which he might have for the taking, and then a gorged stomach and a long sleep.

The starving wretch, speculating thus, still kept from food. He felt himself growing in stature, and the people whom he met became pigmies. The streets widened, the stars became suns and dimmed the electric lights, and the most intoxicating odors and the sweetest music filled the air. Shouting, laughing, and singing, Kimberlin joined in a great chorus that swept over the city, and then——

* * * * *

THE two detectives who had traced the famous bank-robber to the saloon in Mason Street, where Kimberlin had encountered the stranger of the pallid face, left the saloon; but, unable to pursue the trail farther, had finally returned. They found the door of booth No. 7 locked. After rapping and calling and

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receiving no answer, they burst open the door, and there they saw two men—one of middle age and the other very young—sitting perfectly still, and in the strangest manner imaginable staring at each other across the table. Between them was a great pile of money, arranged neatly in parcels. Near at hand were an empty absinthe bottle, a water-pitcher, glasses, and a dice-box, with the dice lying before the elder man as he had thrown them last. One of the detectives covered the elder man with a revolver and commanded,—

"Throw up your hands!"

But the dice-thrower paid no attention. The detectives exchanged startled glances. They looked closer into the faces of the two men, and then they discovered that both were dead.

The White Moth

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A brief weird tale—a little white insect, fluttering just beyond the man's reach, became an instrument of retribution

PAUL BLAKE took the crape band from his arm and laid it very carefully away. Then he glanced at himself in the large mirror and reflected that he looked properly grieved. He sighed with relief, and was about to turn away from the mirror when he saw Alice. She was standing just behind him, laughing silently, and the glass gave back her reflection as clearly as his own. He spun around, but there was nothing there. Nerves, he thought, and shrugged his shoulders. At any rate, Alice could not have known—when he himself was not sure. That arsenic had taken infernally long to get down to business; three years of feeding it to her, before the end came. Paul Blake felt that his relief was justified.

As he stepped out of his chamber into the hall, he saw Alice a second time. She was walking along the hall not very far from where he stood, and as he looked at her, she turned and gave him a swift, mocking glance. He leaned weakly against the wall, and continued to lean there even after she had disappeared where her room was. When he had recovered himself sufficiently to stride away from the wall, he felt that indeed his nerves had been strained unduly, and that perhaps he had better go away for a while. And then immediately Alice was there at his side; he almost fell on the stairs, but caught himself in time.

"You can't get away like that, Paul," she was saying. Oh! that was her voice, all right; there was no mistaking it.

"Alice!" he muttered.

"Oh, it's Alice, right enough," she said. "This is the first time I've seen you worked up for three years—that's correct, isn't it, three years? Dear me, how the years go on!"

Paul took a firm hold of the banister and began to descend the stairs. It was as if he could feel Alice over his left shoulder; there was no use in trying to

shake off the feeling because he could hear Alice's voice all the time, and at the same time he was trying very hard to forget how she looked as she lay in her coffin those last few days.

"Of course, I knew it all along," Alice was saying. "Such infinite patience, Paul; who would ever have thought it of you? Your idea of gradually weakening me was quite good—it worked, at any rate."

"Alice—please—my God, Alice," and Paul Blake found that, standing there, half-way down the stairs, there was nothing in the world he could say to Alice. There was absolutely nothing; he could only listen, and he found in one brief attempt to stop his ears that he must do that.

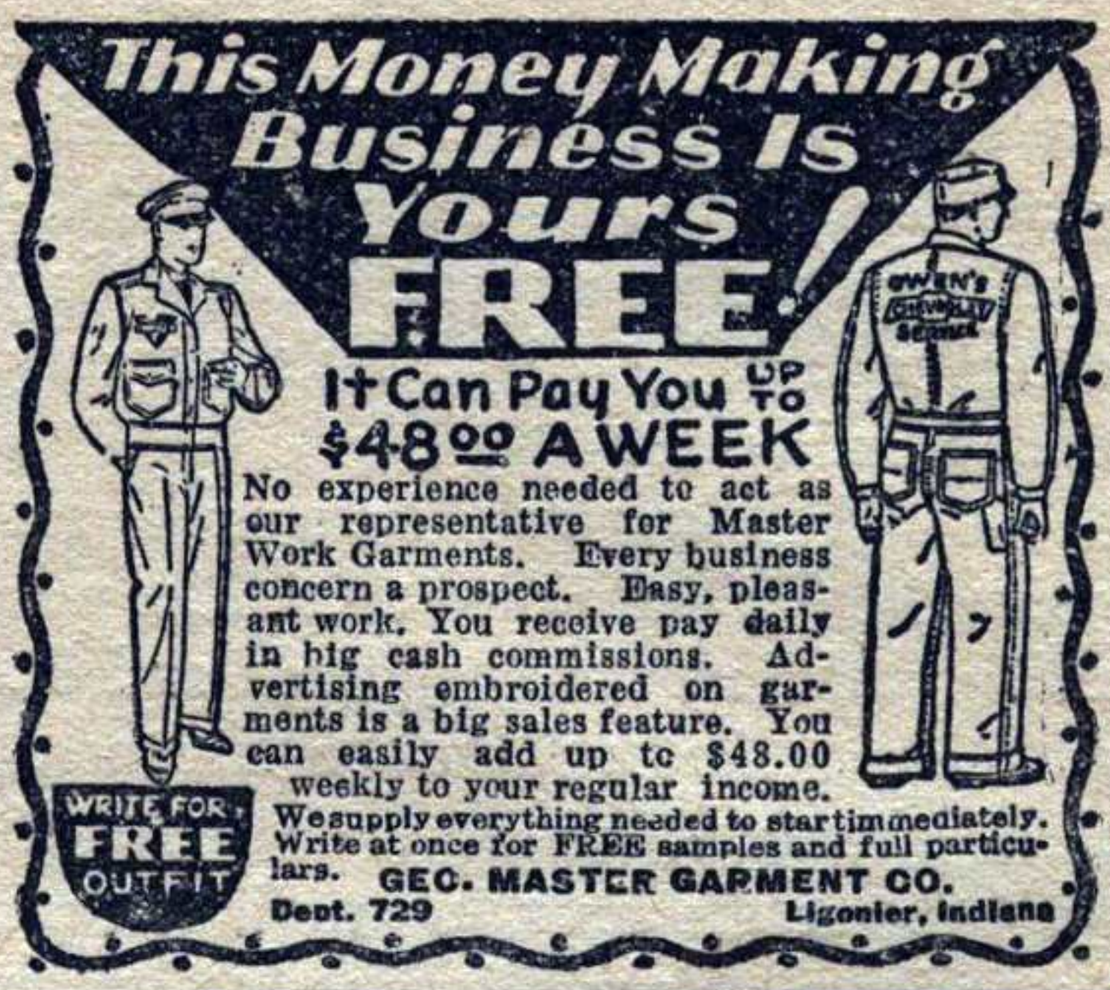
"Goodness," said Alice in a mocking voice, "you seem to be at a distinct loss for once; unusual, not, Paul?" And then, receiving no answer, she went on, "Now that I'm dead, I suppose you'll want to see Beatrice, won't you? You *have* waited quite a decent interval, at that."

"Is there anything . . . ?" he managed to ask, and then thought of how ridiculous his position was — poisoning her, and then asking if there was anything he could do.

She laughed, having read his mind with perfect ease, as he sensed immediately. "I shouldn't advise you to see Beatrice," she went on, and her voice seemed somehow changed, hardened almost, "because I shall consider it my duty to be there if you do. And that would be rather inconvenient, I'm afraid. You'd best be rather careful all around, because I shall manage to get through to you occasionally. At least, until you come to me. Whenever you see a white moth, think of me, Paul."

Then, abruptly, Paul Blake felt that Alice had gone. He went forward hesitatingly, expecting every moment to hear

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(Continued from preceding page)
her voice at his ear. But there was nothing, and he slipped into his topcoat feeling somewhat more at ease. An evening at the club served to dispel his temporary depression still more.

When, three days later, he went to see Beatrice, he felt convinced that Alice was securely and permanently dead, and he looked upon the incident of her post-mortem appearance as a severe attack of nerves, or, at the least, a warning from his conscience. He was inclined to accept the latter, distasteful as it seemed, because his physician had told him there was absolutely nothing the matter with his nerves. Paul Blake looked forward with genuine enthusiasm to an evening at the opera with Beatrice.

CHALIAPIN was in the midst of Mefistofeles' *O Night Draw Thy Curtain,* when Paul Blake became suddenly conscious of a small white moth fluttering about in his box. He looked at Beatrice; she had not noticed it, at any rate, for she was still absorbed in the opera. He wondered whether he could kill it without her seeing, and began to watch it covertly, hoping it would come to rest where he could strike at it. And this it presently did. He fixed his eyes on it, measuring its position, and then suddenly swept his hand outward to catch and crush it in his fingers. But the moth eluded him, though he was sure he had touched it at least, and worse, Beatrice noticed his maneuver and turned.

"What is it?" she asked.

He looked at her foolishly. "I was trying to catch that white moth, before it could annoy you," and he pointed to where it was circling the fan in Beatrice's hand.

Beatrice looked at her fan, and back at Paul Blake with the faintest trace of annoyance on her features. "You'll have to do better than that, Paul; how could a moth get in here?"

"Can't you see it?" asked Paul, and he smiled at her in order to hide the dismay at the answer he foresaw he would get.

"Silly. Of course not. There's nothing there."

But Paul Blake could see the moth as clearly as anything else in his box, and as he looked at it, he thought he heard Alice laughing; since he did not want to recognize the thought, he contented himself with believing that it was some one on the stage, though the action at that point was anything but a matter for laughter.

After that, he did not go to see Beatrice for almost a week, and when he did, he saw the white moth again. As he looked at it, he fancied that it had grown much larger. They were sitting in the garden, and for a moment Paul Blake wondered whether it would do any good to go into the house. But he knew it would not, and for the second time he pointed out the moth to Beatrice.

"I think you've got a moth complex," she said. "Really, I can't see it at all. Do you really see it, or is it just a joke?"

And at that, Paul Blake felt for the first time the irony of Alice's appearance. If he told Beatrice he really saw the moth, she would begin to doubt his sanity, and if he passed it off as a joke—well, it was a mighty poor joke at best. In the end he grinned rather stupidly, and the matter was dropped. Paul Blake went home early, and he noticed the white moth fluttering along before him until he reached his door.

Next day, when he went to the telephone to make his apologies to Beatrice —for he felt that she deserved them— there was the white moth, fluttering about the instrument. As he came toward it, the moth settled itself on the mouthpiece. Paul Blake made a savage swipe at it,

but either he had missed it completely, or the moth had fluttered up and back down again, for it was still on the mouthpiece despite his attack. For a moment he stood looking at it, and then he turned abruptly on his heel and left the room; he could telephone as well some other time. As he closed the door behind him, the sound of Alice's mocking laughter came to him too distinctly for him to pass it off.

Two nights later, when he left the house to call on Beatrice, the white moth, now grown much larger, appeared within a block of his door, and after a short hesitation he turned back to the house, called Beatrice and gave a sudden illness as his excuse for not coming.

After that, he began to haunt the club. He came to suffer from long spells of melancholia, and fellow club members one by one fell away from him. He noticed their attitude, but there was nothing he could do about it. Hemingway stuck with him, and Dillon—and they'd stick for a good long while yet. There was one thing he had set his mind on: no one should know about the white moth; he would suffer in silence, no matter what happened.

HEMINGWAY was with him when the end came, and even he did not recognize that anything had happened to Paul Blake until the morning papers had come in. He told it later at the club.

"If it hadn't ended so tragically, the thing would have been funny. We were walking along the drive that night, talking about nothing in particular; it was raining just a little, but not enough for us to open our umbrellas. Just as we came out of the light of a street lamp, a rather bedraggled-looking white moth came fluttering toward us from the darkness.

"Blake saw the moth, and since I was talking to him at the time, I had my eyes

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(Continued from preceding page)

fixed on him. As he looked at the moth, his jaw dropped, and he stood stock-still as if waiting for the thing to pass. Then he began to glare at it in the most unusual fashion, so that for a moment I thought he'd gone suddenly mad. You know, that happens sometimes. I put my hand on his arm, but he shook it off. Then he gave a sort of cry—it sounded, you know, as if he were saying 'Alice'—too bad about his wife; I've always felt that her death was a pretty hard blow for him—and then he aimed at the moth with his umbrella. Of course, he missed it, and it flew off into the darkness, and then, to my amazement, he began to race along after it, striking at it with his umbrella. At first I thought of going after him, but I remembered his condition and thought it would be best if I left him alone.

"I feel rather bad now—ever since I saw the papers that carried the story of his drowning last night. When he raced off like that, I'd forgotten all about the river being right in his path. And I can't think why I didn't remember that he couldn't swim a stroke."

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