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Weird Tales

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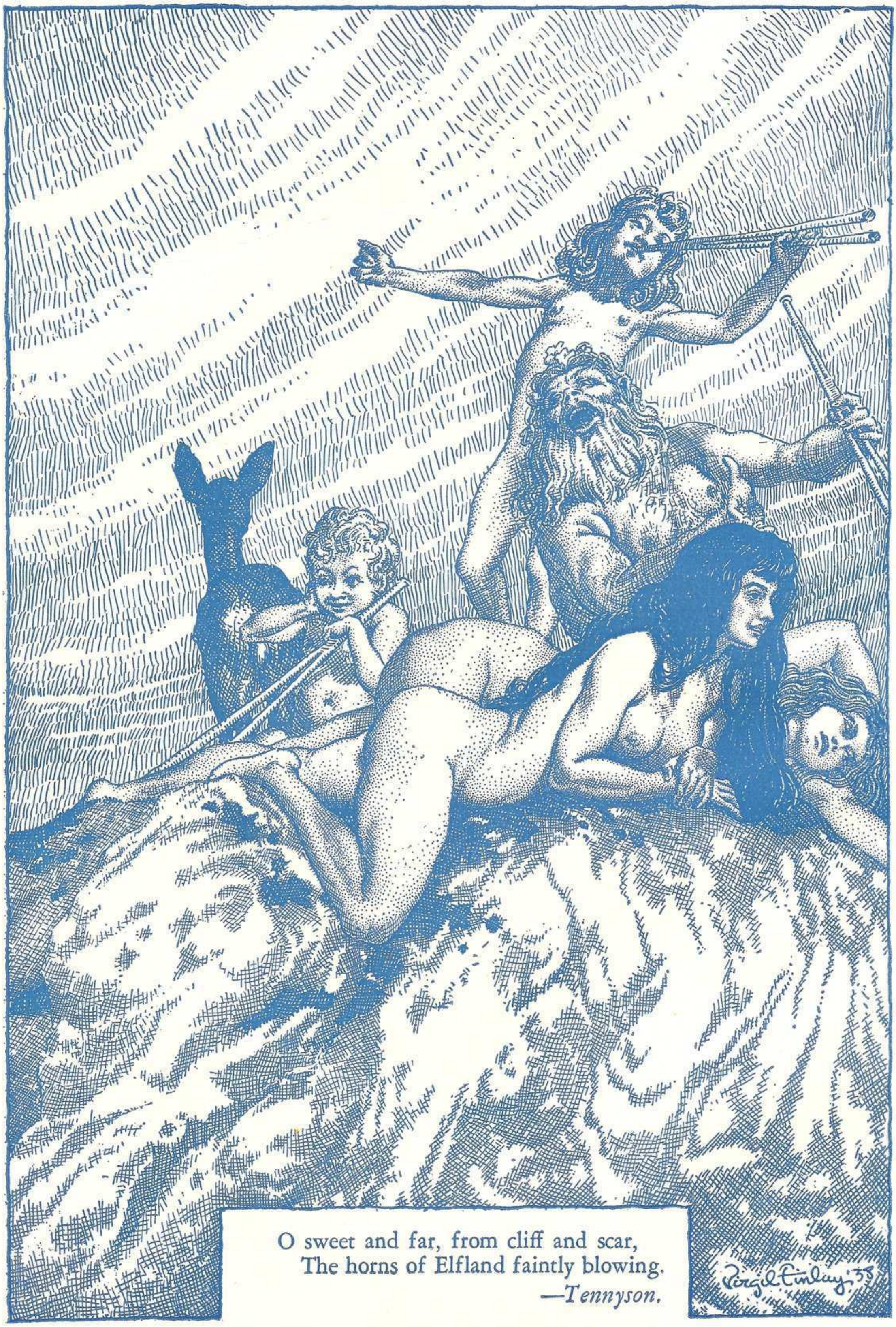
BEYOND THE PHOENIX

a tale of sorcery and thrilling action

By HENRY KUTTNER

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

SEABURY QUINN



O sweet and far, from cliff and scar,
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing.
—*Tennyson.*

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Beyond the Phoenix

By HENRY KUTTNER

A tale of Elak of Atlantis, and an evil priest who was more than human and who worshipped a foul god—a tale of perilous sorcery and thrilling action

1. A King Dies

And the torchlight touched the pale hair
Where silver clouded gold,
And the frame of his face was made of cords,
And a young lord turned among the lords
And said: "The King is old."
—G. K. Chesterton.

"I WON'T kill you quickly," said Lycon, a fierce grin of satisfaction on his round face. "No. I've suffered your insults too long. I must bring an offering each day to the altar of your stinking god, eh? An ear for that!"

He brought down his sword in a vicious sweep.

"Good! Now your nose, Xandar—you've sniffed out too many victims with it already. Thus——" Again steel flashed.

"And an eye, Xandar—see? I remove it with the point. Very carefully. For a copper coin I'd make you eat it."

"Drunken little fool," Elak said, coming over to the table. "Leave that roasted pig alone. It won't be fit to eat after you've finished carving it."

Lycon looked down at the succulent brown carcass on the great wooden platter. "I've not hurt it," he said sullenly.

"You'll be having us swinging by our necks if you keep yelling threats against Xandar. I don't like him any more than you do. But—under the king—he rules Sarhaddon."

This, unhappily, was true. Since the two adventurers had come to Sarhaddon, a little-known city in western Atlantis, they had risen high in the service of King Phrygior, eventually attaining posts in his personal bodyguard. But they had more than once incurred the dislike of the high priest, Xandar, perhaps because they were outlanders who had come from the seaport city of Poseidonia. At any rate, Xandar disliked the two, and took pains to make this clear. It was within his power to levy tribute from any citizen, and therefore Lycon's purse was usually empty. He stole as much as was safe from Elak, but the latter had lately become suspicious.

"I don't like this," Elak said now, his dark wolf-face set in harsh lines. "We're supposed to be with the king now. Always, when he's asleep, his men guard him. Yet the captain sends us down here to the kitchen to wait for—eh? A message, he said."

"This is as good a place as any," Lycon observed, draining a huge drinking-horn. "What foul mead! Twelve cups and I can still walk. It was not like this in Poseidonia."

Elak turned away in disgust. He went to a mullioned window and stared down at the lights of the city, spreading over Sarhaddon Valley. Gaunt granite cliffs rose all about them, and a silver tracery near by marked the course of Syra River. It flowed under the castle, to disappear, so the tales went, into the Gates of the Phœnix, a place in which Elak did not believe, but in which every other inhabitant of the city did. He knew, of course, the traditional death-ceremony of the

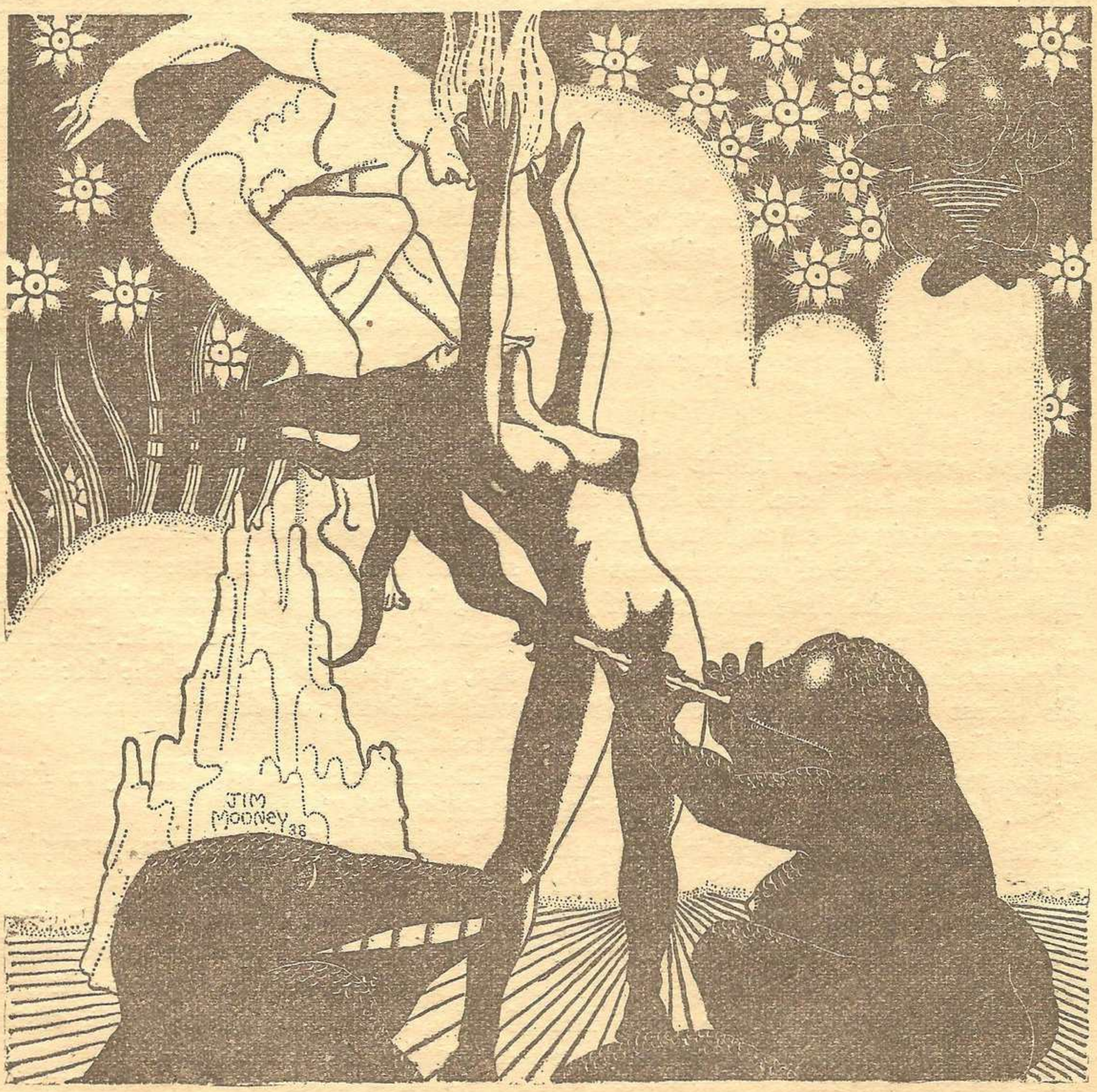
kings. Their bodies were placed aboard a royal barge, and set adrift on Syra—and returned, as the tavern stories went—to the land of their fathers beyond the Phœnix Gates.

Elak grunted softly and touched the hilt of a slim rapier that hung at his side.

"I'm going back," he said. "Wait if you want. I've a feeling——"

Without finishing, he hurried into the hall and up a winding stone stairway, followed by Lycon, who was gulping mead from a horn as he came. The stair-case was a long one, for King Phrygior slept in a high tower that rose above the gray stone battlements of the castle. And the sound of furious battle came to Elak and made him whip out his rapier, snarling a bitter oath.

"Curse Lokar for a traitor!" he whispered, blade ready as he bounded up. Behind him the drinking-horn dropped from Lycon's hand and went clashing and ringing down; but the noise it made could not be heard above the tumult in the king's apartments. Elak gained the ante-



"The two figures moved in a grotesque saraband to the tune of the evil drumming and the pipes."

room and stood for a moment staring.

At his side and below him the deep well of the tower dropped down, bounded by the winding staircase. Yet, somehow, it seemed to Elak that as he stared into the room a dozen feet away he was looking into the abyss of a pit even deeper—a bottomless well that stretched beyond infinity. A blackness lay beyond the threshold, almost tangible in its tenebrous intensity. It was as though a jet curtain had been stretched across the doorway, barring entry.

Yet from beyond came the sound of battle, and abruptly the king's voice in a shout of agony.

Impulse rather than reason sent Elak forward, plunging across the threshold, breaking through the dark veil. For a brief instant the chill of polar lands clawed at his flesh, and he was blind. Then Elak was in the midst of a shambles, his sight restored, and as he saw from the corner of his eye the black curtain behind him had disappeared completely.

THE room was a wreck. Priceless tapestries had been torn down and lay in sword-ripped tatters, smeared with blood. Not a piece of furniture was upright. Above the familiar smell of incense rose the acrid odor of sweat and blood, and at Elak's feet a man lay with his throat torn open, rags of cartilage protruding from the ghastly wound. A dozen corpses were here—few men survived. One of these was Lokar, captain of the guard, who was just swinging his sword down in a stroke that would have decapitated Phrygior, who was clawing at an overturned table in a desperate endeavor to regain his feet.

Elak moved with lightning speed. His rapier, sword-arm and body formed one incredibly swift thrust of movement, and Lokar shouted and let go his sword, which clashed harshly on the stones as it fell. The giant soldier whirled, clutching an impaled wrist from which red spurted. He saw Elak, and bellowed wordless rage.

Ignoring his wounded arm, Lokar sprang for Elak. And Elak made a motion of giving ground, his rapier hanging loose. At the last moment the adventurer leaned forward, bracing one foot on the flagging, and whipped around the rapier-point with flashing, deadly speed. Lokar saw the danger too late. The slender blade ground into his eye, burst through the thin shell of bone, and sheathed itself in the man's brain.

"Look out—'ware, Elak!" Lycon shouted from the doorway. Elak swung about, teeth bared. One living enemy faced him—an unarmed man. Yet, inexplicably, Elak felt an icy shudder crawl down his spine at sight of this man—Xandar the priest.

He was a hunchback—yet no dwarf. His body, though warped and twisted hideously, was gigantic, and great muscles surged beneath the swarthy skin. Above the flattened, hairless head rose the hump, its horror strangely enhanced by the rich gold cloth that draped it. One side of the creature's face was a mangled, featureless slab of scar tissue, remnant of some long-past battle. The red lips, singularly shapely on the left side, widened into a shocking lipless hole on the other.

The monster roared, "Ho, you fool! Back! Swiftly!"

"I serve the king, not you, gargoyle," Elak grunted, and lifted his weapon. At his feet Phrygior stirred, his white beard all slobbered and bespattered with blood. And now Elak saw a dagger's hilt embedded in the king's bare breast, center of a widening crimson stain.

Again the priest bellowed, "Back! Back!"

And Elak, moving forward on cat-like feet, hesitated. An indefinable warning tingled within his brain. He paused, staring at Xandar.

Was it illusion? The monster's warped body seemed to be growing larger, impossibly increasing in bulk till it seemed to tower within the room. Elak shook his head, cursing. What madness was this? He tried to peer at Xandar, and found himself blinking through a dark, hazy mist that slowly grew thicker. Wavering in the dimness stood the shapeless pillar that was Xandar, now shrinking, now swelling to Elak's warped vision. Whence the fog had sprung he did not know, but the subtle evil of it tore at the fortress of his mind with warning fingers. There was danger here—deadly danger. Strong in his nostrils was a sickly-sweet smell, musky, somehow reminiscent of the odor of growing things—but not things that grew in any healthy manner. Rather the disgusting miasma of life that sprang from foul corruption, fungi and lichen bursting from spores and feeding on rotten carcasses. . . .

He heard Lycon's hoarse breathing behind him, and the sound brought back his courage. Xandar was a vague shadow—but at that shadow Elak lunged, rapier leveled. He felt himself smothered suddenly by a blacker darkness, and found his breath stopped by the horrible, miasmic stench. Then there was the familiar feeling of flesh ripping under his steel, the grinding jar of metal clashing on bone, rippling up the rapier to his hand. From the priest burst a bellow of agony.

And the shout changed to words—a frantic cry in syllables Elak did not recognize, though their unearthly sound made him wonder. Grinning harshly, he once more sent steel arrowing through the shadow—vainly, this time.

And the darkness lifted, faded as though a veil had been withdrawn. Elak stood staring in the center of the room, gasping with amazement. He whirled.

"Lycon! Did he get past you?"

The little man shook his head, glancing at his heavy sword. "Ishtar, no! I'd have split him from pate to groin——"

"There must be a hidden passage in the wall," Elak said, and dropped beside the king. Phrygior's bearded lips parted to swallow the wine Elak forced between them. Eyes cold as gray stone looked into the adventurer's—and a blazing spark leaped into them.

"The priest! Kill him!"

"He's gone," Elak said. "The others——"

PHRYGIOR looked down, touched with weak fingers the dagger-hilt in his breast. He said hoarsely, "Leave it. To unsheathe it now would kill me in a moment. First I must——" He fumbled toward the wine-flask. "Esarra—my daughter—summon her."

Elak made a quick gesture.. "Get the princess, Lycon. I'll guard the king."

"No need—now. Xandar has—accomplished his design." Elak held the flask to Phrygior's lips while the dying man drank deeply, and soon, strengthened, he began again.

"The priest has plotted against me for long, Elak. Some of his dogs were in my guard, and tonight they killed the ones who remained faithful. He has long desired the throne—and Esarra. But he dared not defy the Phœnix—the god of Sarhaddon's kings. Thus he sought aid—more wine, Elak. My blood drains fast. . . .

"So. Baal-Yagoth—you know not the name. Few remember, yet ages and ages ago when the gods dwelt on earth, Baal-Yagoth was the power of evil, the embodiment of dark lust. He sought to establish his dominion over the world,

but in a great battle Assurah, the Phœnix, overthrew him, imprisoned him in the land of the gods . . . and now Assurah sleeps, and Xandar has called Baal-Yagoth out of the dark lands to rule Sarhaddon. Only a man crazed with venom and hatred would have dared, for the black god can have no power on earth till a human willingly opens up his soul and brain for Baal-Yagoth's dwelling-place. Within Xandar dwells his god."

Now Elak remembered what had happened when he had attacked the priest.

The king drank more wine. "My strength goes fast. Unless Esarra arrives speedily——" He stiffened in a spasm of agony. "Elak! I cannot wait! Your arm——"

Elak extended his hand, and Phrygior seized it. From his own wrist he took a bracelet of black stone, on which were carved symbols Elak did not recognize. But on the largest lozenge was the outline of a phœnix, eagle-shaped, rubies and gold aping the mythical bird's coloring. Swiftly the king snapped the bracelet on Elak's sinewy arm. It felt curiously cold.

Phrygior touched the phœnix with grotesque, archaic gestures. He murmured a phrase—and his grim face, already shadowed with death, lightened. "Only the Phœnix may unloose the sacred bracelet from your wrist now," he said quietly. "You must go to Assurah—beyond the Gates of the Phœnix. Listen well, Elak, for my strength ebbs.

"At the foot of this tower a tapestry is on the wall, with a dragon battling a basilisk. Touch the basilisk's eyes thrice. Once press the dragon's eyes. A door will open, and you must go through it with your companion, taking Esarra so she will not fall into Xandar's hands. A barge has long waited at the end of the passage you'll find—waited for my corpse. I would have you—take me with you. Esarra will guide you. She is of the Phœnix blood——"

Quite suddenly the indomitable will that had kept Phrygior alive failed. He gave a convulsive shudder, arching his back in agony, while froth bubbled on the white beard. Then he fell back and so died, scarcely an instant before Esarra and Lycon crossed the threshold.

The girl flew to her father's side, while Elak arose, eyeing Lycon's reddened sword. The small adventurer nodded briefly.

"More of Xandar's dogs. I killed 'em. The girl helped, too—her dagger drew blood as often as my sword. What now?"

There was little time to explain. A few words told Esarra how matters stood, and she hastened down the stairway, while Elak followed, bearing the corpse of the king. After him Lycon descended warily.

THE tower's floor seemed deserted, though from not far away came the clash of ringing steel and the shouts of men. The great tapestry stretched across one wall. Elak saw that the eyes of the basilisk and the dragon were gems, and he pressed these as Phrygior had commanded. With scarcely a sound one of the stone flags lifted, revealing a staircase leading down to blackness.

Lycon snatched a flambeau from its socket and led the way, while Elak, after a futile attempt to close the secret trapdoor, followed the girl. He eyed her curiously as her profile was from time to time outlined against the torchlight. A beauty, he thought. The regal cast of her face was softened by its warm humanity, and brown curls clung damply to her pale forehead. The slender, delicate curves of her body were scarcely hidden by the silken night-dress, ripped in more than

one place so that ivory flesh shone through.

Behind him Elak heard the pound of footsteps; he called a warning, and the three hastened their pace. The stairs gave way to a corridor, stone-walled and dank, and this in turn opened into a low-roofed, broad chamber. A narrow ledge ran around its base; below the ledge was water, blackly ominous. A barge floated in the huge pool.

Elak had but a glimpse of dark silks and velvets, a jewel-studded canopy that was a fitting covering for a king's corpse. He leaped aboard the barge, put down his burden, and whirled, rapier out. A hasty glance around showed that the cavern had but one other opening—metal gates, corroded and green with verdigris, that descended from the roof to below the water's surface. Then from the tunnel-mouth burst the pursuers—Xandar's men, swords red, baying like hounds as they ran.

"Lycon! To me!" Elak shouted, but the little man did not answer. The tall adventurer bounded back to the ledge, spitting the foremost attacker through the throat, and deftly wrenching the rapier free as the man fell to splash into the water. He caught sight of Lycon and Esarra working desperately at a great bar of metal—a lever—that hung from the roof. Then Elak forgot all else in a red blaze of battle.

Three men he slew, and was himself wounded in the shoulder, while a flung blade missed his jugular by an inch and sliced his cheek. There was a grinding roar of hidden machinery, and Elak heard a frantic shout from Lycon. He turned to see the barge plunging away on the breast of a descending torrent.

Ignoring the men who were now pressing in to the kill, Elak leaped. A spear screamed past his head as he jumped, and he saw it thud into the barge's side. Ironically, that weapon saved him. He fell short, and his clutching fingers found the haft of the spear. For a second it held, and then Lycon's hands were on his wrists, tugging him to safety.

Above the barge rose the gaunt gray stones of the castle. Already the swift current had carried the craft beyond the door, and the three were safe from pursuit. It was, however, impossible to land, for there were neither poles nor oars. They drifted into a steadily deepening gorge, with the roar of the Syra rising into a thundering madness in their ears.

2. *The Opening of the Gates*

No growth of moor or coppice,
  No heather-flower or vine,
But bloomless buds of poppies,
  Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes,
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes
  For dead men deadly wine.
—Swinburne.

THE river raced into the heart of the mountains that surrounded Sarhaddon, till the blue sky was a brilliant narrow path above, jaggedly outlined by the towering scarps. The three on the barge could do nothing; it was impossible to talk below a shout. Nevertheless Elak explained to his companions what had happened.

"Ishtar!" Lycon screamed above the torrent's roar. "I never trusted that devil Xandar! Did you kill him, do you think?"

Elak shook his head. "Got his arm, I think. That's all." Reminded of his own arm, he began to dress it, while Esarra went to stand in the barge's prow, peering ahead into the mists beneath a pale, shading hand. It was her cry that brought the others.

"The Gates! The Phœnix Gates!"

Slowly they came into view through the clouds of spray, swimming into half-

vividness and then fading again into fog, but growing ever closer—gates that towered up from the torrent, up and up for a hundred feet, constructed of metal that had never been stained or corroded by the unceasing drive of the water. Silvery-white they were, shot with pale bluish gleams. On their center was a Phœnix, huge as three men's height, red as the fiery heart of a ruby, yellow as the golden rivers that wash Cathay. Crest proudly raised, the stupendous effigy seemed to stare down upon Syra River—at the three on the barge. And the current drove the craft remorselessly toward the gates.

"Gods!" Elak said tonelessly, his voice lost in the thunder of the waters. "The river goes under the gates! We'll be dragged down——"

Esarra gripped his arm. "The bracelet! Let the Phœnix see——"

Uncomprehendingly Elak let the girl lift his bare arm till the phœnix bracelet gleamed distinctly through the mists. Was it merely his fancy that a brief, flashing ray of light seemed to leap out between bracelet and the image on the gates? If so, what followed was certainly not imagination. The gates opened. Silently they parted, disclosing glowing depths beyond them, and the barge raced through unharmed. Briefly it surged and rocked with the current, and then steadied as the gates closed once more. It was oddly silent now. They were in a cavern, glowing with weird brilliance. Violet gleams played over the walls.

Without warning came the inexplicable. There was a flashing, swift movement, and abruptly the barge was surrounded by a transparent, circular wall that seemed to be rising from the waters all around. Elak looked about warily, ready to drag out his rapier at the first sign of danger.

The glass wall lifted. It drew together above the barge, forming a dome. What slight trace of sound had drifted through the Phœnix Gates from the bellowing river was lost completely. Deathly silence fell.

Elak said, "I don't like this. It's like a prison. Princess, what——"

Esarra shrugged slim shoulders. "Assurah knows! But the kings of Sarhaddon have traveled this road longer than men remember." Her gaze went to where Phrygior's body lay beneath the great jeweled canopy. There was a little sob in her voice as she went on, "The legends say that the first king of Sarhaddon came from the land of the Phœnix, and his offspring must return there after death. So——"

"'Ware!" Lycon yelped. "'Ware, Elak!"

Imperceptibly the water beneath the barge had drained away till the craft rested on a shell of crystal. Now Elak saw that they were within a huge transparent sphere—and a shudder of movement shook it as Lycon cried warning. One shudder—and the globe dropped. Instantly deep blackness blanketed them. There was no sense of motion; yet Elak felt strangely certain that the sphere was dropping — dropping — into unknown depths. A giddiness assailed him. He felt Esarra's soft body flung against him, and his arms tightened about her protectively. Then the weird feeling of movement, almost extra-sensory in its inexplicable certainty, grew stronger; from the Phœnix bracelet on his wrist alien magic flowed through him. The darkness lightened. He saw Lycon and Esarra peering around blindly, and knew that they were still blind.

The crystal sphere was dropping down a metallic shaft, the sides of which were merely a blurred gleaming as the speed increased. Briefly a flash of violent red burned Elak's eyeballs, and then came a

blaze of pure, deadly white that sent him flat on his face, fists clenched against his agonized eyes. The sickening giddiness grew stronger—stronger yet—

And gratefully Elak let his mind sink into the black pit of unconsciousness that gaped for him. He slept. . . .

Now it seemed to Elak that he dreamed, or so he thought; for, though his eyes were closed, he clearly saw what occurred around him. There was at first only a thick shroud of fog, swirling slowly in drab grayness; and very slowly this mist faded and was gone. In its place was a cold, blue emptiness that seemed to stretch into infinite distances.

But it was not the sky, despite the gleaming points of light that swam into view like stars. That Elak knew. For the glowing specks grew brighter and larger, and he saw that they resembled flowers, many-petaled—yet no flowers of earth. With a cold and dreadful certainty he knew that they were alive.

They watched him, hanging motionless in the blue vastness, until the grip of nightmare clutched Elak. Nothing existed but these malefic flowers, it seemed, and they seemed to press toward him with avid hunger; they strained against the blueness that held them back. It was impossible to judge their size. They might have been small as a man's hand, and very close; or unimaginably huge and far away. They waited. . . .

Now the dream changed. A woman came into Elak's range of vision, slim and dark and vital as a black flame. Red as her lips was the gown she wore, and her eyes and long tresses were midnight black. With slow footsteps she came to stand beside Elak, and in her hand, he saw, she bore a strangely-filigreed chalice. Thin steam ascended from it.

She bent over Elak. The gray mists swirled back, blinding, confusing. Out of the fog loomed the woman's face, arrogantly handsome; her pale hand, and the goblet it bore. She lifted it to Elak's mouth. A cloying fragrance crept into his nostrils, and involuntary repugnance shuddered through him. The liquor's aroma was subtly sweet. A drop of the fluid touched his lips, and a hot pang raced through every atom of his body.

"Tyrala!"

On the word the woman drew back, hell-flames flaring in her eyes. She whirled to face a figure who came slowly through the mists.

It was a man, small but delicately proportioned, clad in tight-fitting silver garments, and, seeing him, Elak was reminded of the Northmen's god Baldur. The fineness of his beardless face was at variance with a certain assured strength in the dark, lazily amused eyes.

He said again, "Tyrala, your haste is ill-advised. I had not known of this man's arrival."

The woman stood rigid, clutching the chalice with white fingers. She hesitated, asked, "Since when have you stooped to interesting yourself in my slaves, Ithron?"

The man's smile was malicious. "But is he one of yours? The men of Nyrvana are pale and yellow-haired, even as myself. This one is dark and lean as a wolf. Moreover, he wears a certain sign. . . ."

Tyrala glanced at the bracelet on Elak's wrist. For a moment fear shone in her eyes, but she said nothing.

The man, Ithron, chuckled. "And I think there were others from above, too. Have you forgotten the pact? We two rule over Nyrvana—we two, not you alone. Shall we not judge these intruders —*together?*"

"Aye," Tyrala said presently, though her face was somber and menacing. "As you will. . . ."

Now the fog closed down again, and darkened into blackness. For a space Elak was unconscious, and he awoke slowly, with an unfamiliar, nauseating taste on his tongue. He sat up, spitting and cursing. From near by came the sound of Lycon's snores.

The two were lying on low tapestried couches set side by side in the center of a great windowless room. Hangings of red samite hid the walls. From the ceiling was suspended a silvern lamp that cast a vague yellowish radiance. Otherwise the chamber was empty.

Elak got heavily to his feet and kicked Lycon off his couch. "Wake up!" he commanded. "We might have had our throats slit as you slept, drunken little dog."

"More mead," murmured the drunken little dog, still apparently engrossed in vinous dreams. "Alas, the cup is empty. . . ."

Elak hauled his companion upright by the scruff of the neck. "I said 'wake up,'" he grunted. "We're in some wizard's den or other, and your sword may be needed. I see you've still got it." He glanced down with satisfaction at the slim rapier at his own belt.

Lycon opened mildly disapproving eyes. "Our throats are safe, for a while anyhow. They had plenty of time to kill you, if they'd wanted to, last night."

"What d'you mean?"

"That I woke up to find myself alone in here. I hammered on the door and swore in seven languages, but vainly. So, as there was nothing better to do, I went to sleep again."

"Where's the princess?" Elak asked suddenly. Lycon shrugged.

"How should I know? Wait till somebody opens the door, Elak. Then we can use our blades. Until then——" He left the sentence unfinished. A low throbbing musical note sounded, and simultaneously a slit widened in the farther wall.

A man stood in the gap, yellow-haired, slightly built, wearing a loose robe of scarlet. He was unarmed. He lifted his arm in a beckoning gesture.

Elak's hand was on his rapier hilt as he moved forward. "Where are we?" he asked shortly. "Where's——"

"You will come with me," the other said. Elak paused at the expression in the man's blue eyes. They seemed, somehow, withdrawn, as though they looked upon invisible things. No hint of curiosity stirred in their depths. Vaguely, absently, the man looked at Elak, and he said again, "Come."

Lycon swaggered to the threshold. "Lead on," he commanded. "But you'd best play no tricks. My sword's sharp!"

The red-robed one turned, led the way along a corridor of white stone, windowless and doorless. Elak and Lycon followed, down the passage, up a winding staircase, lit with the cool pallor of hanging lamps, and down a sloping hall to a door of bronze. A gong clanged, peremptory, harsh. The portals opened.

Beyond the threshold was a great room, high-ceilinged, paved with strangely figured mosaic. Blue smoke drifted up from censers. At the farther end of the room was a dais, and upon it—two thrones.

A throne of gleaming metal, red as sunset-clouds, black-cushioned. And one of pale silver. In the silver seat was a man Elak recognized, small and blond, with lazily amused eyes. In the red throne sat a woman.

Tyrala! Elak did not need to see the goblet on a pedestal at her right hand to recognize her. The black eyes watched enigmatically; slim white figures and ivory shoulders gleamed against the blaze of crimson that was Tyrala's robe.

Above the thrones and between them, high on the wall, was a phœnix, delicately

carved. Coils of incense slid past the jutting beak.

ELAK's guide gestured him on. Slowly the two men walked toward the dais. As they paused before it Elak caught a flash of movement from the corner of his eye; he turned to see Esarra hurrying toward them, while another of the slim, yellow-haired men stood watchfully beside an open door.

"Elak!" The girl's face was white against the clustering chestnut curls; she clung to Elak, trembling a little. A silver gown had replaced the shredded nightdress, and there were silver slippers on the princess's small feet.

"Elak!" she said breathlessly. "I was afraid——"

Now Esarra saw the two upon the thrones. She swung to face them, shrinking against Elak's protective arm about her waist.

The red-clad woman, Tyrala, glanced aside at her companion. She spoke in an undertone. The man nodded. He leaned forward.

"Have no fear," he said. "You have suffered no injury as yet—is that not so?"

Now Elak remembered his vision. He said, "Perhaps we have you to thank for that—Ithron."

The woman caught her breath. Ithron's eyebrows lifted.

"Perhaps," was his only comment. "However, strangers come to Nyrvana seldom. The Kings of Sarhaddon—yes. They are of the Phœnix blood. But they come only after death, and not for many ages—aye, longer than you think!—have living men come from above."

"I don't understand you," Elak said. "Where are we? Last I remember was falling down a hole in some damned cavern—are we underground?"

"Aye," Ithron nodded. "You are in Nyrvana. Far and far is this land from the world above; Nyrvana is within a cave, but a cave so vast you could not span its breadth or height with your eyes."

Esarra whispered, "The land of the gods! Where Assurah dwells——" She looked up at the sculptured phœnix.

"And we rule under Assurah," Ithron said, "Tyrala and I. Before the phœnix slept, he gave us this charge: to rule Nyrvana and to guard—guard——" He hesitated, glanced at Tyrala. The woman's baleful gaze dwelt on Elak.

"They are here for judgment," she said. "Well? Let us judge!"

"Why are you here?" Ithron asked.

Esarra pulled free from Elak. Standing erect before the dais, regal head raised proudly, she told her story. And as she spoke, Tyrala's gaze grew darker and more ominous, while startled amazement crept into Ithron's eyes.

"So Xandar rules Sarhaddon," the girl finished. "And he has slain my father. The law of the Phœnix has been broken. Baal-Yagoth has been freed from his chains——"

"Now by Assurah!" Ithron whispered —and his pale eyes were wide now, and blazing as he glared at the enthroned woman beside him. "By Assurah and Iod! This is your work, Tyrala!"

Tyrala sprang up, her slim fingers flexing into claws. She spat words at the man.

"Aye—my work! And what of that? It has been long since Assurah ruled, and he has no power now. Shall I rule over this land of shadows for ever, with these pallid slaves of yours to serve me—to drink my wine——"

Elak saw a touch of horror in Ithron's face as he glanced at the chalice beside Tyrala's throne. The woman went on bitterly,

"And if I have called on Baal-Yagoth

—what then, my lord Ithron? Who are you to halt me? Serve Assurah then, if you will—rule over Nyrvana! But I have made a pact with a priest of Sarhaddon, and for him I have freed Baal-Yagoth from his chains. Soon now I shall go to the outer world, where there are strong men—men with flame and life blazing within them, like this one here"—she flung out her hand toward Elak—"and they shall taste my wine!"

"Stop!" Ithron was facing the woman now, his face grim and hard. "You dare—under the very symbol of Assurah——"

"Aye—I dare! Nor can you thwart me, Ithron. Now I warn you—stay here. Rule Nyrvana. But if you think to meddle with my plans, you may taste my wine yourself!"

Laughing, Tyrala swept down from the dais, across the room and through open doors of bronze. Ithron turned, flung up his arms at the carven Phœnix on the wall. His voice was a rolling thunder.

"Assurah! Waken! Let your wrath pour down upon this harlot and utterly destroy her!"

The incense drifted up. . . .

"Lord of Nyrvana—waken! Baal-Yagoth is risen from his prison and hangs like a shadow over all the world. Smite him with your lightnings; rend him with your iron beak!

"Assurah—god of Sarhaddon! *Waken!*"

3. *Duel of Gods*

The night is gone and the sword is drawn
And the scabbard is thrown away!
—John G. Neihardt.

VERY slowly the wall behind the thrones began to move. It slid up, the Phœnix rising with it, and revealed a hazy depth beyond, dimly litten with silver radiance. Ithron turned.

"You three—follow."

He moved forward confidently. Elak hesitated, felt Essara tug at his arm. Warily he went toward the gap where the wall had been. Lycon trailed them. His sword brushed the pedestal beside Tyrala's throne, set the goblet rocking. He glanced at it and shuddered.

"Ishtar! I would not taste *that* wine——"

They stood in glowing haze. The wall dropped behind them. Nothing existed now but silvery fog; somehow Elak had a weird feeling that they stood on the very brink of a gulf that fell away to abysmal depths.

At their feet lay an open coffin. In it was King Phrygior, his dead face relaxed and peaceful. He wore a white robe, and an unsheathed sword rested on his breast.

Esarra dropped to her knees beside the sarcophagus. She whispered something Elak did not hear. Her brown curls fell forward, hiding the cameo face.

Ithron touched the coffin; it slid forward and was gone. The silver mists brightened. Far below came the rolling of deep thunder.

And behind them—the clash of arms! A woman's voice, commanding, angry.

Ithron turned swiftly, gripped Elak's arm. "Your bracelet! Hold it—thus——" He lifted Elak's wrist. "Stay here! Tyrala is mad. But her madness gives her strength; I must keep her at bay till Assurah wakes——"

He was gone. A deep-throated roar came faintly to Elak's ears. Dimly he heard Ithron's voice.

But nothing existed but the mist, and two shadows beside him—Esarra and Lycon, waiting . . . and Elak stood with his arm raised, the Phœnix bracelet shining. . . .

Queer tingles darted through his wrist, ran down into his shoulder, racing into

every nerve of his body. Flood of power poured into him, shaking the citadel of his mind with its alien strength. . . .

The fog alternately darkened and lightened; the muttering of thunder grew louder. And dimly he heard Tyrala's voice raised in a cry of triumph from the throneroom beyond the wall.

"I have won, my lord Ithron! None can waken Assurah now. And you—you shall taste my wine!"

The thunder bellowed ominously. The fog brightened with a blaze of silver radiance, and before him Elak saw something rise up, a cyclopean shadow, almost formless, yet with a suggestion of sweeping wings and a beaked, upthrust head. . . .

He heard Esarra cry out, felt Lycon drop to his knees, breath rasping in his throat. From the Phœnix bracelet a tide of primal magic raced through him. The colossal shadow waited in the mist.

Elak felt words rising to his lips without will of his own. He heard himself crying,

"Assurah! Baal-Yagoth is risen! He has burst his chains——"

Elak was never to understand what happened in the next amazing moment. The power that the bracelet had given him was nothing to the inconceivable flood that crashed down on him from the risen god—flood of strange magic, blinding and deafening him, flaming through his brain like lightning. And dimly he heard a voice within his mind.

"I give you strength. Go forth and slay!"

Forthwith the tide lifted Elak and bore him weightless back; he had a vague impression of walls and rooms flickering past like segments of a dream, and yet he knew, somehow, that Esarra and Lycon kept pace with him, shoulder to shoulder. Something was in his mind, and Elak's fingers closed about the hilt of a sword—a blade of flame, white and terrible. All about him the very air shook with unimaginable power. . . .

Elak's vision cleared; he stood in a room and remembered—the room of his dream, where he had first seen Tyrala. The walls were blue as infinity, and in that clear depth hung the glowing flower-things he had already seen. Avidly they waited, with a horrible air of expectation in their attitude, seemingly watching the horror before them.

A muffled drumming throbbed out; shrill insane flutings piped weirdly. There were monstrously misshapen beings that squatted on scaled haunches, demoniac toad-like creatures whose flaming eyes dwelt on the two figures that danced before an altar.

Tyrala — and Ithron! Both nude, Ithron's pale body in strange contrast to the dark vividness of the witch-woman—and Ithron dancing, whirling like a weightless leaf in Tyrala's grasp. An empty goblet lay on the stones. Ithron had tasted the dreadful wine!

The two figures moved in a swift, grotesque saraband, to the tune of the evil drumming and the pipes. The flower-things in the walls waited. And as Tyrala and Ithron danced, the strength seemed to be draining from the man—the life itself—pouring as though sucked by evil vampirism into the body of the witch.

Ithron grew shrunken, paper-white, skeletal. And Tyrala's vivid body seemed to drink in life—whirling and swaying with increased energy. Sparks danced eerily in her streaming black hair. Her eyes were pools of lambent radiance.

"Strike!" a voice whispered in Elak's mind.

He scarcely seemed to move, yet the flaming sword in his hand swung up. From its blade poured a cascade of light-

nings, crackling, flashing, veiling the room with light. Through the blaze he heard Tyrala's scream, knife-edged, keening with an agony beyond life. . . .

And other cries came, thin, utterly horrible. He knew that the glowing flower-things were dying. . . .

THE curtain of light faded. And now nothing existed within the chamber but an altar, blackened and twisted; the walls were burned and blank, and there were mounds of dust on the floor.

The power caught Elak again, lifting him. He caught a momentary glimpse of a broad vista spread far beneath him, a land of sluggish rivers and dark forests stretching into the distance—and it was gone. Brief blackness, and then a flash of metallic walls sliding past, a shaft up which he sped with frightful rapidity, knowing Esarra and Lycon were beside him. . . .

A cavern now, and high gates. A river, under the warm radiance of the sun, tumbling through a craggy gorge. Then a valley—and Sarhaddon, the castles and walls of Sarhaddon, lay beneath him, and he was slanting down through empty air. . . .

Down he swept, through gates and walls and barriers, until he stood in the throneroom of Sarhaddon's kings. On the great carven chair, ornate with gems and precious metals, sat Xandar the priest, his twisted body hung with royal robes. A circlet of gold crowned the bald head. The scarred half of the priest's face was deftly disguised with paints that could not hide the frightful deformity.

A girl lay before the throne, strapped to an engine of torture. Her body was reddened with sword-cuts. She was screaming as cords slowly wrenched her limbs apart.

Around the room stood nobles and priests. On almost every face Elak saw thinly-hidden horror and disgust. One man turned away, and Xandar saw him.

"Ho, you Chemoch!" he roared. "Are you daintier than your king? Would you share this maiden's couch?"

White-faced, the man looked again at the tortured girl. Yet his hand closed convulsively on his sword-hilt.

And then—the voice whispered again in Elak's mind.

"Slay!"

Elak lifted his blade. A great cry went up within the throneroom; the crowd surged back against the tapestried walls. If they had not seen Elak before—he was surely visible now!

The monster on the throne thrust out clawing hands. He bellowed,

"Baal-Yagoth! Yagoth!"

A cloudy veil swept down over the priest, hiding him in shadow like a shroud. A foul, miasmic stench was strong in Elak's nostrils. He swung the sword.

Lightnings blazed out crashing. They thundered down on the priest, enveloping him in flame. They licked at his armor of black fog, and drew back—impotent!

The air was choked with that charnel smell. The darkness crept out from the priest, fingering toward Elak. Again he lifted his sword.

Again the lightnings flared. And this time Elak moved forward, confidently, doggedly, slashing with blade of fire at the dark tendrils that crept in toward him. As he neared Xandar a cold revulsion shuddered through Elak's flesh. He sensed the nearness of an alien thing, a being so evil that it could exist only in the blackness of the pit.

Lightning and shadow clashed, and the

castle rocked with thunderous conflict. The priest roared insane blasphemy.

THE blackness coalesced into a tenebrous cloud. Out of it rose a head, malefic and terrible, with serpent eyes of ancient evil. A flattened head that swayed and arose on shimmering scaled coils—

The head of Baal-Yagoth!

It swung down at Elak. He countered desperately with his sword—felt himself driven back.

The shadow of cyclopean wings filled the throneroom with rushing winds. Something, unseen yet tangible, dropped toward that monstrous head. A blinding flare of consuming light crashed out, and for a brief moment Elak saw a gleam of blood-red feathers, eyes golden as the moon, and a striking silver beak.

And the shadow surrounding Xandar faded and was gone. The rearing serpent-head had vanished. Only the priest stood before the throne, stripped of his magic and his power, contorted lips wide in a despairing shriek. His face was a Gorgon mask, seared and blackened into a charred cindery horror.

Eyes of insane rage glared at Elak. The priest sprang forward, hands clawing for Elak's throat.

Once more, and for the last time, the alien voice whispered within Elak's brain.

"Strike!"

Sword of flame screamed through the air. Bone and brain and flesh split under that blow, and for a second Xandar stood swaying, cloven in half from skull to navel, blood spurting in a red tide. A moment the priest stood, and crashed down at Elak's feet dead in a widening crimson pool.

From the court a great cry went up—of triumph and thanksgiving. Elak felt the sword plucked from his hand; it was a flash of light in the air—and then was gone. He stood alone before the throne of Sarhaddon.

The magic had fled. Power of the Phœnix and evil spell of Baal-Yagoth alike were vanished. The nobles pressed forward, shouting.

Elak turned, saw Esarra cutting the last of the cords that bound Xandar's victim to her rack. A guardsman lifted the sobbing girl, bore her out. Esarra obeyed Elak's gesture.

He led her to the throne, seated her in it, and on her slender wrist clasped the Phœnix bracelet he took from his own arm. Elak swung to face the room. His rapier came out, was lifted.

And a hundred swords were unsheathed, shimmering together, at his shout,

"Esarra of Sarhaddon!"

"Esarra!" roared the nobles.

They dropped to their knees, heads bent, paying homage to the girl. But Elak felt a soft hand on his shoulder as he knelt, and looked up into Esarra's eyes. The girl whispered,

"Elak—you will stay in Sarhaddon?"

Slowly he nodded, and Esarra sank back on her throne, a little smile curving her red lips, as the nobles arose and came forward one by one, sword-hilts extended for her touch. Elak made his way through the group, looking for Lycon He found him at last investigating the contents of a drinking-horn.

"We stay in Sarhaddon—for a while anyhow," he told the little man.

"As you will," Lycon said, smiling wisely. He glanced toward the throne. "No doubt you'll be content enough for a few moons. As for me"—he buried his round face in the horn and gulped noisily—"as for me," he finished, wiping his mouth with a pudgy hand, "I hear good reports of the royal wine-cellars. And may the gods blast me if I don't get the keys to 'em before sunset!"

Black Moon

By SEABURY QUINN

A goose-flesh story of African voodoo transplanted in the United States—an eery tale of weird rites and mysterious murders and a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin, occult detective and ghost-breaker

THE August sun had reigned all day as mercilessly as a tsar whose ukase is a sword and whose sword is sudden death. Now in the evening cool we were dining in the garden, and dinner was unusually good, even for such a virtuoso of cuisine as Nora McGinnis. Tiny clams chilled almost crisp and served with champagne *brut* were followed by green turtle soup and pale dry sherry, then roast young guinea-hen and ginger ice with white Burgundy. Now the spicy sweetness of Chartreuse and the bitterness of Java coffee put a period to a meal which might have brought a flush of envy to Lucullus' face. "*Tiens,* my friend, I am in a pious mood, me," announced Jules de Grandin, his little round blue eyes bright in the candlelight. "But certainly, of course——"

"Are you repenting of past sins, or sins to be committed?" I replied.

He grinned at me. "Observe," he ordered. "In Tarragona, where the good Carthusian brethren work so hard to make this precious stuff, they say that drinking one small glass of it is equal to attending three low masses. *Parbleu,* I make amends for laxness in devotions——" He poised the cruet of green liqueur to decant a second drink, but the wisp-wisp of swift feet on close-cropped grass broke in upon his solemn rite.

"If yez plaze, sors, there's a gintleman to see yez," announced Nora.

Nora resents callers after office hours. More than once she has turned my patients off with sharp-tongued rebuke when they rang the door-bell around dinnertime, but now her eyes were shining with suppressed elation, and she seemed to labor with some weighty secret as she bore the message of the interruption to our after-dinner confab.

"A visitor—*grand Dieu des porcs!*—are we to be eternally annoyed by them?" de Grandin answered tartly. "Bid him depart, *ma chère,* tell him we are indisposed, that we died this afternoon and now await the coming of the undertaker——"

"And if she did he'd not believe a word of it; he's too familiar with your shameless lies, you little blighter!" a deep voice challenged as a big form vaulted from the side porch and came striding toward us through the deepening twilight.

"*Comment? Mais non!* It cannot be, and yet it is, by blue!" de Grandin cried. "Hiji, *mon brave, mon cher camarade, mon beau copain*—is it truly thou, or has some spirit put your form upon him?" In a moment he had grasped the big intruder by the shoulders, drawn him to him in a bear-hug and stood on tiptoe to impress a kiss on both his cheeks.

"Give over, you small devil, d'ye want the neighbors talkin'?" exclaimed the new arrival, thrusting back the little Frenchman, but retaining a tight hold upon his shoulders. "Trowbridge, old top, how are you?" With his free hand he grasped mine and almost paralyzed it in a vise-tight grip.

"Ingraham!" I gasped, amazed. "My boy, I'm glad to see you!"

"Glad enough to offer me a whisky-soda?" he asked as he drew a chair up to the table.

Nora had the bottle and siphon at his side almost before he could finish speaking, and as he poured about four ounces of the liquor in his glass and diluted it with rather less than that much soda I observed him carefully. Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jamison Ingraham, known to all his intimates as Hiji, late of the Sierra Leone Frontier Police, member of the British Army Intelligence, detective extraordinary and adventurer-at-large, was taller by almost two feet than Jules de Grandin, and lean with the leanness of the practised athlete. Although his small mustache was black, his hair was iron-gray, and his long, thin, high-cheeked face was burned almost the hue of old mahogany. With de Grandin and Costello and Inspector Renouard of the French Cambodian *gendarmerie* he had smashed a bold conspiracy to spread devil worship throughout Asia, and more than once we'd talked of him and mourned his absence when we'd found ourselves in places where a man with a strong arm and ability to shoot straight would have come in handy. Now, dropped from the sum-

"The visitant reached suddenly into the fire and seized a blazing pine brand from the flames."

mer evening sky, apparently, he sat beside us, drinking whisky-soda as composedly as though we'd seen each other at the breakfast table.

"What is it brings you here, my friend?" de Grandin asked. "Is it that you offer us a chance to go with you on some adventure? One hopes so most devoutly. Life grows stale and tiresome in New Jersey——"

The big Englishman grinned at him. "Still on the go, eh, Frenchy? Too bad I have to let you down, but I'm a married man these days, with a wife and kids and everything that goes with it. Also, I'm no longer in the Army. I'm a member of his Majesty's Consular Service, quiet and respectable as a retired parson."

The Frenchman's eager little face went long, and Hiji grinned at him almost maliciously as he reached into his dinner coat and drew a sheaf of papers from his pocket. "Glance these over," he commanded as he spread the documents upon the tablecloth. "Just a little routine stuff about commercial matters." He raised his glass and took a long sip, gazing at de Grandin over the tall tumbler's rim.

With a grimace of distaste the Frenchman spread the papers out before him. They seemed to be newspaper clippings pasted on stiff sheets of foolscap and numbered in rotation. What possible interest Jules de Grandin could have in production and consumption, imports and exports, I could not conceive, but I saw his narrow brows draw down in concentration as he read, and when he looked up there was a lightning-glint in his small, deep-set blue eyes. "Me, I am greatly interested in this species of commercialism," he declared. "Is it that you invite us to assist in your investigations?"

"Just what I dropped in for," answered Hiji. "Can you come?"

The little Frenchman spread his hands in a wide gesture. "Can the pussycat devour liver, or the duck perform aquatic feats?" he asked. "When do we depart?"

"What's it all about?" I cut in. "I never knew you cared two pins for commerce, de Grandin, yet——"

"Observe them, if you please," he broke in as he thrust the papers toward me. "They do not make sense, I agree, but they promise something interesting, I damn think."

AS FAR as I could see, the cuttings were without relation to each other. The first, dated a year back, bore the head:

Students' Prank Seen in Police Find
Parts of Bodies Found in Bay Believed
Dissecting-Room Relics—Murder Mystery Blows Up

The item related the finding of a gunny-sack in the Chesapeake not far from Reedville, Virginia, which when opened proved to contain several human arm and leg bones from which the flesh had been almost completely cut away. Local police had at first believed them evidence of murder, but when physicians declared the grisly relics were from several bodies the theory that medical students had tossed the sack into the bay near Norfolk was accepted as the most likely explanation.

Less than an inch in length, and without relation to the first, the second cutting bore the head: "Farm and Domestic Help Scarce," and related that domestic and field helpers were at a premium in Westmoreland, Richmond and Northumberland Counties, though there had been no great migration to the North.

"Camp Meetings Lose Appeal" the third clipping was headlined, and told of the almost total failure of attendance at recent camp and bush meetings among the colored population of the Norfolk section, something without precedent in the memory of the oldest inhabitants.

Entirely unrelated to the first three items, as far as I could see, was the clipping from a New York Negro daily telling of the gory murder of the proprietor of a Harlem café. The body had been found almost denuded of clothing, scored and slashed as if a savage beast had clawed it. Robbery had not been the motive, for the dead man's well-filled wallet was intact, and a diamond scarf-pin was still in his tie. He had no enemies, as far as the authorities could learn. Indeed, he had been very popular, especially with the Southern Negroes of the district.

The final story dealt with the unexplained murder of a Captain Ronald Sterling, apparently a gentleman of some importance in Westmoreland County. He had, according to the clipping, been found dead on his front lawn, his face, neck and breast so horribly mutilated that identification was possible only by his clothes. While every circumstance pointed to death being due to some ferocious beast, a careful check-up of the death scene disclosed no animal tracks, though numerous human footprints were discovered on the sandy driveway. No one had been approached, for the police had been unable to formulate a tenable theory in the case.

"H'm, perhaps there's some connection in these stories, but I can't find it if there is," I said as I passed back the papers.

Ingraham produced a small black pipe and a tin of Three Nuns and began tamping the tobacco in the briar as he looked quizzically at us. "There doesn't seem to be any common denominator, I'll admit," he answered, "but I think there is. So do my bosses. You see, there have been quite a number of Jamaican and Barbadian Negroes coming to this country lately, and some of your G-gentlemen seem to think they're mixed up in this business. His Majesty's Government thinks otherwise; I've been deputed to prove we're right."

"But what is 'this business,' as you call it?" I demanded. "I don't see any possible connection between medical students' pranks and failing attendance at camp meetings with murders in Virginia and Harlem——"

"No"—Hiji took a few quick puffs to get his pipe alight—"I don't suppose you do, but there are data not shown in the clippings. For instance, those bones washed up by the Chesapeake were charred by fire. Exposure to the water rendered positive opinion difficult, but the little flesh remaining on them appeared to have been acted on by heat. Bluntly, they'd been cooked.

"Second, there have been a number of strange Negroes seen in that section of Virginia and southeastern Maryland. They're West Indians, not from Jamaica or Barbados, but from Martinique and Haiti, men and women speaking English with a strong French patois accent. That's where we come in. Your people don't seem able to distinguish between our Negroes and those from the non-British islands.

"Now, as to connection between these murders: Jim Collins, the proprietor of that Harlan hot spot, wasn't a West Indian. He went North from Virginia something like a year ago, and he went from Captain Sterling's place. It's known that he corresponded with Sterling after coming North, and a letter was received from him two days before Sterling's death."

"D'ye know what it said?"

He nodded. "Just five words: 'Some of them are here.' I think it was 'some of them,' whoever they were or are, who killed both him and Captain Sterling. The same technique was followed in each case. Furthermore, there have been three more deaths like those of Collins and the captain, though I haven't clippings on them. One was in Maryland, almost across the bay from Sterling's place; one

was in South Carolina, one in Louisiana. Add the fact that Negro churches in those localities have been steadily losing in attendance to these murders occurring hundreds of miles apart, and I think you have something. Sterling's death might have been laid to some freak of criminology, or to some wild beast escaped from a circus, but you can't advance that theory to account for the other killings. Collins writes a letter saying, 'Some of them are here,' and dies next day. Sterling receives it and dies exactly the same way two days later. A circus beast might have killed Collins *or* Sterling, but it couldn't have traveled from New York to Virginia in that short time. Or, say it was a criminal pervert. Those Johnnies aren't usually so choicy. Like our Jack the Ripper or your own sadistic murderers, they take their victims where they find 'em. Why should one of 'em kill the Negro Collins in New York, then hop a train to travel to Virginia just to kill the white man Sterling? And even if he did do that, would he be likely then to cross the bay to Maryland, kill a Johnny there, then travel down to Carolina and cross the country into Louisiana just to kill two more?"

"You think it was a gang?"

"I'm sure of it, and——"

"One moment, if you please!" de Grandin broke in. "Await me here; I must know something." Jumping up, he ran into the house, where a moment later we saw a glow of light shine through the study windows. In a minute he returned, announcing: "I have looked in last year's almanac. One week before that sack of bones was found in Chesapeake Bay there was a total lunar eclipse, visible from that portion of Maryland and Virginia."

"Well, what of it?" I demanded. "What's a lunar eclipse to do with——"

The little Frenchman looked at the big Englishman, and each saw confirmation of a thought in the other's glance.

"The Black Moon!" Hiji said as he let his breath out softly through his teeth.

"Precisely," nodded Jules de Grandin. "Also, according to the almanac, another eclipse will occur there in three days."

"I think we'd better do a move," replied the Englishman. "Can you put me up tonight, Trowbridge?"

AT OUR backs the sun rose from the Chesapeake; underfoot the shaky little pier swayed with each rising wave; ahead of us the bay showed as clear of any sign of craft as the ocean around Juan Fernandez when Crusoe was cast on its beach. An hour earlier the steamboat which had brought us up from Norfolk had deposited us and a tall, handsome, dark young woman on the dock from which the motor ferry was supposed to operate, and since that time we had seen nothing more than sea-gulls on the water.

"Lost," Ingraham muttered as he knocked the dottle from his pipe against his heel. "We've been marooned, men, and if we can't reach Sterling's Landing by tomorrow——"

"Pardon me, sir, did I understand you all are goin' to Sterling's Landing?" the tall young woman who was our fellow castaway broke in. "May I inquire your business there? I'm Captain Sterling's daughter," she added, softening the apparent sharpness of her question. "You see, I'm his sole survivor, and——"

"Of course, one understands, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin answered with a bow. "I am Doctor Jules de Grandin and these are Doctor Samuel Trowbridge and Sir Haddingway Ingraham of the British Consular Service. We have come to make investigation of the disaffection of your local Negro population——"

The young woman—she was no girl,

but five or six and twenty—shuddered slightly, despite the rising August heat.

"I'd like to know about that, too," she answered. "Papa wrote me of it just before he died. It seems the colored people all refused to work, and some of them were insolent. A pa'cel of strange darkies came and squatted on our land, and when he warned them off they defied him——"

"Do"—the little Frenchman spoke deliberately as he eyed her narrowly—"do you connect your father's death with this, *Mademoiselle?*"

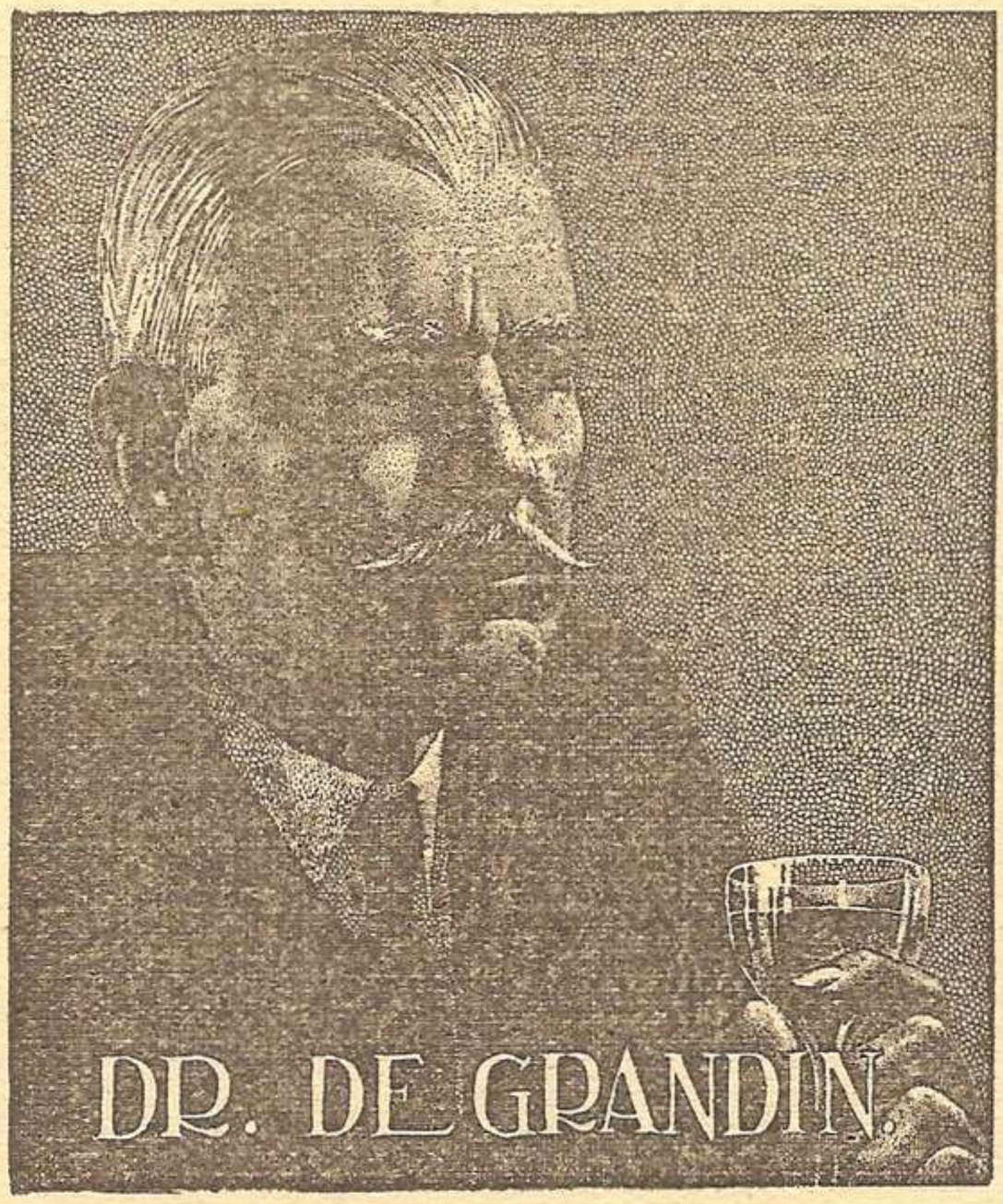
"I really couldn't say, sir. You see, I'm on the stage, and was playin' in St. Louis when word came of my father's death. I came as quickly as I could, but" —she paused and bit her lip, then: "I had to wait until I had the money to come home."

Again the little Frenchman nodded. Following his quick glance I read the sign upon her wardrobe trunk: "Coralea Sterling, Moonlight Maidens, Theatre." Some months before, the Moonlight Maidens burlesque troupe had played in Harrisonville, and from theatrical reports I'd gathered they were not very successful.

"May we count upon your help, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked.

"Of course. I'll be very glad to put you all up at the house, and if there's any way that I can help you find out——"

The hooting of the little ferry's air-whistle broke in, and in a moment we were headed down the bay for Sterling's Landing.



THE Sterling mansion proved a disappointment. Far from being the Southern manor house of tradition, it was a fairly comfortable old farmhouse, badly in need of repair, set back from the sand by-road in a plot of rather unkempt lawn with an avenue of honey-locust leading from its gate. A kitchen garden mostly weeds was at its back door, and behind that was a farm of thirty-five or forty acres in a state of almost utter fallowness. Mortgages, I guessed, had been the chief crop of that land for many years. Inside, the house was fairly clean, with some pieces of good furniture of the Victorian era, some family portraits dating to the days before the Civil War, and several chambers with large, comfortable beds. No one met us at the landing, and we took turns carrying the luggage to the house, then at Miss Sterling's request went down to the village store, where we laid in a supply of canned goods, supplemented by a ham and some fresh eggs and vegetables. By noon we had fire going in the kitchen range and made a comfortable meal.

The interval that followed was a pleasant one. We all turned in to wash and put away the dishes, and as I looked at Coralea enveloped in her big apron I had a hard time visualizing her shuffling and strutting back and forth across a darkened stage while she felt for concealed fasteners in her gown and discarded piece on piece of costume till she stood revealed in pristine nudity beneath the spotlight's

purple glare. With uncanny understanding de Grandin read my thought. "One often wonders at the lure the theatre has," he whispered. "I have known mothers to desert their children and wives desert their comfortable homes to dance and sing in third-rate music halls, enduring poverty and social ostracism cheerfully. One cannot explain it, one only knows that it is so."

I nodded, but before I could reply our hostess spoke: "Can I trouble you gentlemen to make one more trip to the Landin'? There are some more things we'll be needin' from the sto'e, and while you're gone I'd like to visit 'round the neighborhood a little. I can borrow a horse next door at Hopkins'."

Half an hour later we set out for the small general store, while Coralea waved to us as she walked in the opposite direction, her slim, tall form almost boyish in khaki jodhpurs and checked riding-coat.

While I made the purchases, Hiji and de Grandin engaged some store-porch loafers in confab, and though our actual business occupied a scant half-hour it was midafternoon before we started on our homeward walk.

"It all fits in," said Hiji. "We see a disaffection among the local blacks who refuse work, no matter what the wages are. Negroes are naturally religious, yet there's a steady fallin' off in church attendance. Next we have four terrifyin' murders, identical in technique, but widely separated. Each victim has no known enemies, each was popular among the colored folks. Collins, the Harlem Negro, was something of a leader of his race and highly thought of by both whites and blacks. Sterling enjoyed the confidence of local colored residents, the Carolina victim was a social worker deeply loved by all the colored folks, and the fourth was a young Baptist missionary from the North who by his eloquence and kindness had won a host of friends, both white and black, and was more than holding his own against the ebb-tide in church membership. Then crack-o! someone murders him, and his congregation falls to pieces. Why should these people, so widely separated by distance, race, vocation and background, have been killed in the same manner?

"Then, here's another puzzle: The bones they found down here appear to have been relics of a cannibal feast. There's never been a case of cannibalism heard of in this country; yet—there it is.

"If these murders had been done in Africa I'd say they were the work of Leopard Men. Furthermore, the Human Leopards make a practise of eating their victims, and their big cannibal parties are held during an eclipse—at the time of the 'Black Moon.' It looks almost as if this deviltry had been imported from West Africa."

"But only indirectly," said de Grandin. "Me, I have another theory. The islands of the Caribbean reek with voodoo, the black sorcery imported with the slaves from Africa. It began in Haiti before Dessalines threw off French government; it grew upon the ruins of the church the black imperialists tore down. It is said Célestine, daughter of President Antoine-Simone, was high priestess of the cult. Its blasphemies and obscenities run through the island's culture as tropic breezes rustle through the jungle trees. There at the time of the Black Moon the 'Goat Without Horns' has been sacrificed on voodoo altars; there the drums have bidden worshippers to the shrine of the White Queen; there a priesthood more terrible than that of Baal has ruled supreme since 1791. *Ha,* but with the coming of American marines the scene was changed. Precisely as you ran down the Leopard Men, my Hiji, the Americans hunted down the sorcerers of voodoo until their power was

broken utterly. Now, I damn think, they have decided on a bold stroke. Here"—he swung his arm in a wide arc—"right here, it seems, they have decided to set up their bloody altars and force the native blacks to join with them in a worship which blends jungle bestiality with the depravity of decadent European superstition. Unless I miss my guess, my friends, we are at grips with *obea,* voodoo—call it what you will, it makes no difference——"

The furious drumming of a horse's hoofs broke through his words, and round the turning of the sandy road a maddened beast came rushing, bearing down upon us like a miniature cavalry charge. Clinging to the pommel of the saddle, with no effort to control the frenzied steed, was Coralea Sterling, hat gone, her long black hair whipped out behind her like a fluttering signal of distress. Her eyes were round with horror, her cheeks gray with the waxen hue that comes from but one cause. One glance at her blenched, terrified, drawn face told all. Sheer, ghastly fear had seized her by the throat, strangling back the scream her grayed lips were parted to utter.

"Runaway!" cried Hiji, and poised to launch himself at the maddened horse's bridle, but the girl waved him frantically aside. Then we noticed that the unspurred heels of her tan riding-boots were beating an hysterical tattoo against the horse's sides. She was urging it to greater speed.

Like an express train flashing past a way-station, horse and rider thundered past us, while we gaped in wonder. Then:

"*Grand Dieu des chats!*" de Grandin cried, and sprang into the dusty road, dragging at the handle of his sword-stick. Something eery whipped along the highway, weaving in and out between the tracks left by the fleeing horse, something I could not see, but which left a little zigzag trail of kicked-up dust like a puff of wind gone crazy. De Grandin brought the slim blade of his sword-cane down upon the dancing dust with a cutting, lash-like motion, and something brown and gray, with a flash of yellowish-white underside, squirmed up from the baked roadway and writhed about his blade like the serpent on Mercury's caducæus. A strumming like a chorus of a hundred summer locusts in unison sounded as he struck and whipped his sword-blade back, then struck again.

"Nice work, old son—good Lord!" Hiji thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and snatched his blue steel Browning out, firing point-blank into the road six feet or so behind de Grandin. A little spurt of dust kicked up where the steel-capped bullet struck, and with it rose a writhing thing as thick as a man's arm and half again as long.

"*Merci beaucoup, mon ami,*" de Grandin grinned. "I had not noticed him, and had you not been quick I fear I should not long have noticed anything. It seems our bag is full, now; let us count the game."

DIZZY with bewilderment, I stepped out into the road. At de Grandin's feet, still quivering, but stone-dead beneath the lashing of his sword-cane, lay a diamond-headed rattlesnake, its tail adorned with ten bone buttons. Beyond the little Frenchman, where Hiji's bullet had almost shot its head away, another snake lay squirming in death agony, thrashing up the road dust into tiny, inch-high sand dunes.

I looked at both the loathsome things with a shudder of repulsion, but Hiji and de Grandin had eyes only for the second snake. "By George!" the Englishman turned the thing over with his foot.

"*Mais oui, précisément,*" the Frenchman nodded. "You recognize him?"

"Quite. I've been to Martinique and Haiti."

I stared from one to the other, puzzled as a child whose elders spell out words. De Grandin pointed first to one dead reptile, then the other. "This," he told me, "is a rattlesnake, native of this section, and this," he touched the other with his sword-tip, "is a fer-de-lance, found in both Martinique and Haiti, but never in this country, except in zoos. You comprehend?"

"Can't say I do."

"*Non.* I am not sure that I do, either; but I should guess those naughty people we suspect have brought in snakes as well as most deplorably bad manners with them. What say you, *mon* Hiji?"

But the big Englishman was intent on a fresh find. "What d'ye make o' this, Frenchy?" he asked, poking a knot of gum-like substance lying in the road.

De Grandin bent and looked at it intently, lowered his head until his nostrils almost touched it, and sniffed daintily. "I recognize him," he replied, "but I cannot call his name."

"Me, too," the Englishman agreed. "A cove who used to live in Haiti showed me some of it once. Those black blighters down there make a mixture by some secret formula and put it where it will be stepped in by someone they don't love so awfully much. Maybe they smear it on his motor tires or on his horse's hooves. It's all one, as far as results go. No sooner does the poor bloke go out than all the bally snakes in seven counties pick his spoor up and go after him. In a little while he gets rid of the stuff or dies by snakebite, for the stuff's attractive to the little scaly devils as valerian is to a cat."

"I think that you have right, my friend."

"You think? You know dam' well I'm right! Didn't you see how the gal was kickin' her cob to more speed when the poor brute was already giving all it had? That was no runaway; that was panic flight. And the snakes—did you ever see a snake, 'specially a lazy rotter like a rattler, pursue a human bein' for all he was worth? Watch this!" He tossed the knot of gum into the roadside grass and motioned us to stand back.

We waited silently ten, fifteen, twenty minutes; then: "Look sharp!" commanded Hiji. A rustling sounded in the short, dry grass, a little spurt of sun-baked dust showed in the center of the road. Converging on the spot where he had thrown the gum were several snakes: two full-grown rattlers, a small, slim copperhead; finally, sliding like the flickering shadow of a whiplash drawn across a horse's flank, a six-foot black snake.

"Convinced?" asked Hiji as he turned away.

"NO," SAID Coralea, "I can't remember when I first saw them. I'd been the rounds, callin' on the neighbors and tryin' to find out something about Papa's death. The last place I stopped at was Judge Scatterhorn's, but I don't remember anything suspicious. A colored lad was out in front when I came out, and led my horse up to the carriage block, but —oh!" She stopped abruptly, one hand raised to her mouth.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin prompted.

"I tossed a dime to him as I rode off, for he'd held my stirrup very nicely, but instead of takin' it he let it fall into the road and muttered something——"

"He held your stirrup, did you say?" de Grandin interrupted.

"Yes, he did, and——"

"*Mademoiselle,* where are your riding-boots?"

"My—my ridin'-boots?"

"*Précisément.*"

"Why, in the cupboard of my room——"

Without a word the Frenchman rose and hurried up the stairs. In a moment we heard the sharp double crack of his small pocket pistol, and a minute later he came down the stairs with two dead snakes looped across the stick he'd taken from her bedroom window. "They were in your closet, *Mademoiselle*. When you went to get a change of clothing you would have found them waiting for you. I dislike to say so, but it would be safer if you burned those boots. One can replace burned boots, but it is not often one recovers from a fatal snakebite."

DINNER was a gayer meal than I had looked for. Somewhere Coralea had found a store of wine, and with this, tinned soup, fried ham and eggs and a liberal portion of fresh melon, we did very well. But though we chatted cheerfully as we did the dinner dishes there was an air of gathering restraint which seemed to seep into the lamplit kitchen as though it were a chilling fog no door could quite shut out. Shadows flickering in the corners took on strange shapes of menace, and more than once I drew my hand back quickly, thinking I had seen the looping convolutions of a coiled snake as I reached to place a piece of china in the cupboard. By the time the last dish had been wiped and stored away our nerves were at the snapping-point. I jumped as if I had been stung when a hail came from the front door.

"Miss Sterling; oh, Miss Coralea, is your 'phone in workin' order? Judge Scatterhorn's been killed."

"You and Doctor Trowbridge go and take a look—medical chaps are better qualified for that sort o' work—I'll stay here and keep the jolly home fires burnin'," Hiji said as we gave over efforts to get service from the telephone. "Sing out when you come to the door, though; I'm liable to have a nervy finger on the trigger."

A little knot of white men grouped round something on the ground before the Scatterhorn veranda, a railroad lantern shedding its uncertain light upon their dusty boots. Two or three Negroes, eyes rolling in abysmal terror till they seemed all whites, hung on the outskirts of the crowd, studiously avoiding a glance at the blanket-covered object round which the white men gathered.

"Pardon, gentlemen, we are physicians," apologized de Grandin as we pushed our way among the crowd, knelt and turned the blanket back.

Judge Scatterhorn lay as he had died, his arms outstretched, fingers clutching at the yielding sand of the driveway. His throat and chest were horribly lacerated, as though he had been clawed and bitten by some savage beast; across his cheeks and brow ran several hideous gashes; as de Grandin turned him gently over we saw six deep cuts upon his back, running parallel from shoulder-blade to waist, and so deeply incised that the bone had been laid bare in several places.

"When did this atrocity occur?" de Grandin asked as we completed our examination.

"'Bout half an hour back," a member of the crowd replied. "We just got word of it. Mis' Semmes 'phoned us."

"Ah? And who is Madame Semmes?"

"She's th' Judge's sister. Wanna see her?"

"I regret to intrude, but it would be well if I might question her." The little Frenchman put the blanket back upon the dead man's face and rose, brushing the sand from his knees.

"*Madame,* we do not waste your time in idle curiosity," he told the trembling woman when she met us in her parlor,

"but much depends upon our having first-hand information now. Will you tell us all you can?"

"We've had no servants for the last two weeks," the bereaved lady answered, "and George and I made out the best we could. He'd been out this evenin', and I heard him drive into the yard about three-quarters of an hour ago. Presently I caught his step as he walked round to the front door—we've kept the back door barred since all the servants left—then I heard a frightful scream, and the sound of someone strugglin' on the porch. George called, 'Don't come out, Sally!' then there was the sound of more thrashin' around, and—and when I finally lit a lamp and ventured out, I found him there—like that."

"Was it your brother who screamed, *Madame?*"

"No. Oh, no. It sounded more like the scream of a wildcat."

"And did you hear anything else?"

"I—I think—but I'm not quite sure—I heard somebody laughin', a terrible, high-pitched laugh; then I heard someone or something runnin' off among the laurels."

The little Frenchman looked at her intently for a moment. "You say that you have been without domestic servants for some time, *Madame*. Why is that?"

The woman shuddered. "My brother was a justice of the peace. For some time, now, there have been strange Negroes in the district. None of them has been disorderly, but they're a sullen lot, and we considered them a bad influence on the local colored people. So when one of them was picked up by the constable last month my brother sentenced him to road work as a vagrant. The fellow grinned at him before they took him off and told George, 'You'll regret this, you infernal *blanc*'—I don't know what he meant by that, but he spoke English with so strong an accent that perhaps it was an insult in some foreign language. At any rate, our servants left us the next mornin', without explanation and without even waitin' for their wages, and we've had no help of any sort since then."

De Grandin took his chin between a thoughtful thumb and forefinger. "Mademoiselle Sterling called on you this afternoon?"

"Yes, she did."

"And was it one of your servants who held her stirrup?"

A slight flush mounted to our hostess' face. "Perhaps you didn't understand," she answered. "I told you that we'd been without help for two weeks."

"Forgive my seeming rudeness, *Madame,* but Mademoiselle Coralea told us that a strange young colored lad was waiting at the front door when she left, and helped her set her foot into the stirrup."

We left the bereaved lady with her grief, and at the doorway de Grandin gave a snort of impatience. "Me, I am the stupid-head!" he confided. "I have left my pocket lens. Will you be good enough to go and fetch it from our room, Friend Trowbridge? I fear the crowd has destroyed most of the evidence, but I may be able to find something helpful to us. I shall wait you here."

I WAS none too pleased with the assignment, but there was no way of getting out of it; so I started up the road toward Sterling's home, grasping my heavy stick and walking faster with each step. The moon rode high and round in a clear sky, and the wind that blew up from the bay moaned and sighed among the roadside cedars like the ghosts of lovers parted in the days when North and South contended bloodily for this Virginia land. Nearer and nearer I approached the Sterling homestead, faster and faster I walked. By

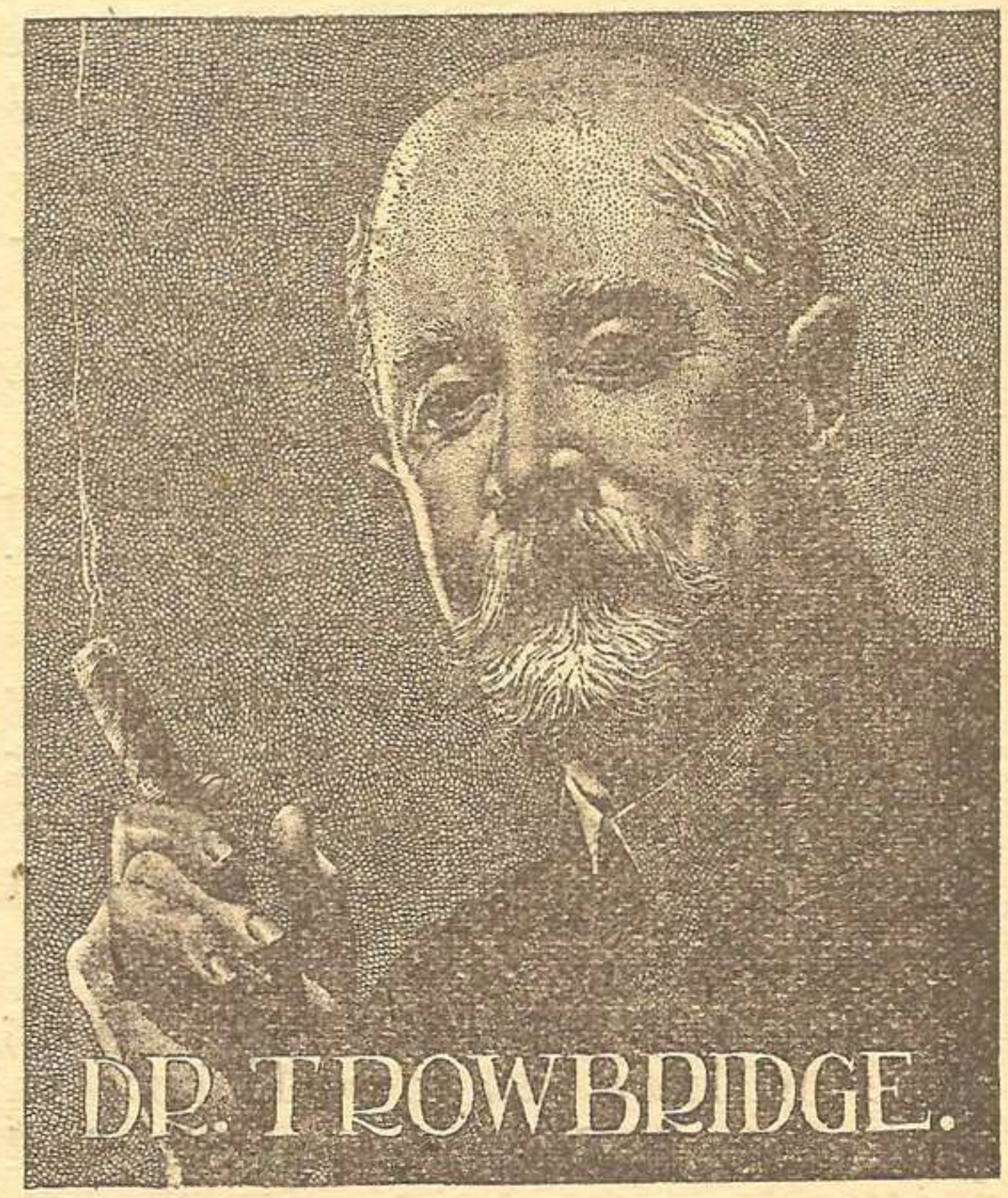
the time I reached the driveway I was almost running.

The house lights shone between the trees with beckoning cheerfulness; I had not more than fifty yards to go until I reached the door, but the memory of Judge Scatterhorn's disfigured face was with me like the image of a walking nightmare. I pursed my lips to whistle a signal to Hiji, but it was no use. Walking required all my breath, and the muscles of my face were stiff as if a winter chill had gripped them.

A heavy growth of vines screened the porch from the front lawn, and the rustling of their leaves in the light breeze was like the clapping of dry, long-dead hands applauding some obscene comedy. I launched myself at the short flight of steps that led to the veranda like a winded runner entering the home stretch, then rolled floundering to the sandy driveway beneath a sudden devastating impact from above.

Something long and black, twisting, clutching, grappling, dropped upon me from the string-piece of the porch roof, hurtling through the air like a panther pouncing on its prey, clawing, grasping, tearing at my throat, gnashing teeth in berserk rage, screaming like all the fiends of hell in chorus. I felt myself borne to the earth beneath its loathsome weight, felt the cruel, cutting claws shear through the padding of my jacket shoulders, felt the gush of warm blood as they sank into my flesh.

I tried to draw the pistol which de Grandin had insisted that I carry. My right arm was pinioned to my side between my body and the ground. I tried to strike at the thing with my fist. A talon hand, strong as a steel vise, gripped my wrist until I thought the bones would surely break. "This is how Judge Scatterhorn was killed!" I thought as I



bridged my body, rising on a shoulder as I sought desperately to free myself.

A blaze of sudden light seared my eyes, a report like a field gun's sounded in my ear. There was a light impact, like a stone flung into moist sand, and the thing above me stiffened, then went limp. Something warm and sticky-feeling, something which I felt instinctively was red, began to soak the clothes above my breast.

"Bull's-eye, by Jove!" Hiji called delightedly, rushing forward from the shadow, his Browning gleaming in the lamplight filtering through the porch vinery. "Potted the beggar neat as neat. Couldn't 'a' done it better if I'd practised on him for an hour!

"Up you come, Trowbridge." He rolled the body off me and thrust forth a helping hand. "Cheerio. You're all right, old thing!"

I wasn't quite as certain of my all-rightness as he seemed to be as I sat up slowly and stared around. Close behind him, her face pale and set, but without a trace of fear, stood Coralea, a dark cloak masking her light dress.

"We were sittin' in the parlor after

you all'd gone," she explained, "when suddenly Sir Haddingway said, *'S-s-sh!* There's something prowling round outside.' I thought maybe it was you all coming back, but he insisted on investigatin', so I came along, too. We slipped out a side window and circled round the house, keepin' down behind the bushes till we came to the front lawn. Just as we got there we saw someone or something climb one of the porch posts and crawl along the string-piece up above the steps. Sir Haddingway couldn't shoot it from there, for the beam was between it and us, so we waited.

"Directly we heard you comin' up the drive and knew that it would jump on you, so Sir Haddingway had his pistol ready to shoot it before it could do much harm."

"H'm, I'm glad he didn't wait much longer," I replied. "His idea of harm and mine don't seem to coincide."

"Trowbridge, old fellow, you're not much hurt, are you?" cried Hiji penitently. "I'd 'a' shot him sooner, but I was afraid of hittin' you——"

"Oh, I don't think there's any damage sticking-plaster and some antiseptic can't take care of," I responded as I got unsteadily upon my feet.

"Right-o," Hiji answered with enthusiasm. "Here comes the blighted little Frenchman. Wait till we show him our bag. First blood for us, eh, what?"

"TROWBRIDGE, *mon vieux,* is it thou?" de Grandin called as he strode up the drive. "I decided that it was too dark to make out anything tonight, so—*mon Dieu,* what have we here?"

Hiji struck an attitude. "This w'y, gents an' lydies, yer ludships an' yer 'ighnesses!" he called in whining singsong. "Come see the gryte he-normous wild man, shot in 'is nytive 'abitat by Hiji, the gryte 'unter. Come one, come hall, and see the gryte, he-normous marvel——"

"Que diable?" de Grandin cut in testily, glancing from my torn and blood-stained clothing to the dark bulk of the thing Hiji had shot. "Be silent, you great zany, and tell me what goes on here!"

Coralea supplied the information, repeating substantially what she had told me, but making it appear Hiji's shot was almost supererogation, since, according to her version, I had already worsted my antagonist and Hiji shot him merely to relieve him of his suffering.

The little Frenchman viewed my tattered clothing skeptically. "Hiji, my friend, I am indebted to you," he declared. "Me, I have often thought Friend Trowbridge might be better for a slight amount of murdering, but always I have wished to do it with my own two hands. You have preserved him for my vengeance." But there was no affectation in the tears that glinted on his lashes as he threw both arms around me and kissed me on each cheek, murmuring, *"Mon vieux, mon cher, mon brave camarade!"*

He drew a hand across his eyes and turned away, playing his flashlight upon the sprawling body. It was a man, very tall, very thin, with cord-like muscles standing out on arms and legs. Save for a breech-clout of gunny-sacking he was naked, but his black skin was smeared with patches of dun-colored pigment in each of which was a rosette of five small dark-brown dots, the design bearing a striking resemblance to a leopard's spots.

Fastened to his hands by thongs were metal appliances like brass knuckles, only instead of bearing knobs, their rings were supplied with long, sharp blades which curved above the fingers, making each hand a clawed talon. About his head was bound a band of skin which proved to be the scaly hide of a full-grown fer-de-lance

—such a snake as we had seen pursuing Coralea that afternoon.

"By George," said Hiji as de Grandin shut his light off, "he's got the full regalia on. I've seen his kind in the Reserved Forest Area more than once—hanged a few dozen of 'em, too."

The Frenchman smiled, a thought unpleasantly. "Unless I'm more mistaken than I think, some necks will test the strength of ropes before we finish with this present business of the monkey," he declared.

THE big clock in the hall ticked slowly. All of us were tired, but sleep was farthest from our thoughts. My shoulder hurt abominably, and every whisper of a breeze-blown leaf against the window-panes seemed charged with menace. Once or twice I started up, sure that I saw a grinning, painted face beyond the window, but each time search showed that imagination had been playing tricks on me. "If we could only find the blighters' lair we'd clean 'em out in jig-time," muttered Hiji. "In most ways they've run true to form, murderin' people with their 'leopard claws' and terrifyin' all the local blacks so they don't dare squeak on 'em, but there's one thing puzzles me. In Africa these human leopards gather for their pow-wows several days before the Black Moon, and send their signals to the party out by means of drums. They should be usin' something of the kind round here——"

"That's hardly likely," I objected. "So far they've managed to conduct their raids in secrecy. If they beat drums at their meetings they'd give away their gathering-place, and——"

Across the sultry summer night there came a low, slow-swelling sound. Something like the rumble of a giant kettle-drum, but also like the low, sustained note of a bass viol it was, beginning on a low, deep note and slowly rising in intensity, if not in pitch: *"Ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum; ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum,"* its rhythm swelled and sank with a monotonous, menacing insistence.

Hiji leaped across the room, dashed the window up and thrust his head out, listening intently. "That's it!" he told us as he wheeled around. "The jungle telegraph, the night-drum of the Leopard People! What're we waitin' for? Let's go! Yoicks away, lads; the chase is on!"

We started for the door, but: "Wait a moment, wait for me!" cried Coralea. "You all aren't goin' out to hunt those savages and leave me here alone; I'm goin' with you. Give me a half a minute to put on some other clothes!"

She was somewhat longer than the stipulated thirty seconds, but it was little later when she reappeared in boyish riding-togs, twisting her long hair in a knot and stuffing it into a cap as she ran down the stairs. Bound to her slender waist by a wide leather belt was a powder-and-ball revolver of Civil War model, its eight-inch barrel knocking trim, straight knees each step she took.

"Let's go!" she cried as she rejoined us, and before we realized her intent she was through the door, across the veranda and speeding down the driveway beneath the honey-locust trees, heading for the open road.

We followed, catching up with her just as she reached the gate, and paused a moment, seeking bearings.

"Ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum; ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum!" the drums' deep monotone rolled across the darkened landscape, surging forward and receding like the sound of distant surf.

"It's over there," said Hiji, nodding toward a low, tree-crested line of hills that raised their bulk beyond the intervening fallow fields.

"It can't be there," objected Coralea. "There's an abandoned Negro cemetery in the hollow of those hills; a pair of murderers are buried there, and you couldn't get a darky within half a mile of it in daylight, much less at midnight."

Hiji's teeth flashed white beneath the black of his mustache. "You may know the superstition of your local blacks, but you don't know voodoo. Graveyards and haunted places are their favorite gathering-spots. Earth from graves of executed felons is a favorite ingredient of their charms. I vote we try the jolly old burying-ground."

"I, too," de Grandin concurred. "But let us step with caution. We may be seen by members of the cult who come in answer to those devils' church bells."

Cautiously we made our way across the fields, dropping to all-fours occasionally where the visibility was high, crawling, running half bent over, gradually approaching the thick-wooded knoll behind which growled the drums' low monody. By the time we reached the hill crest we were crawling on our stomachs like a scout patrol of soldiers reconnoitering an enemy's position.

Light gleamed in the little valley shut in by the hills. A bonfire of fat pine sent its orange-yellow flames mounting ten feet, painting the whitewashed headboards and occasional stone markers of the graves with startling highlights, casting purple shadows on surrounding trees and bramble bushes.

Where light and shadow met, a circle of dark forms was huddled in a wide, loose ring, the gleam of a once-white shirt or a soiled Mother Hubbard giving clue to the spectator's sex. A low, slow-moaning chant, like that heard when the mourners are about to 'get religion' at a Negro gospel meeting, sounded from the group. Now and then there was a movement, a flash of firelit clothing or the gleam of bared teeth or of rolling eyeballs, which told that a fresh member of the congregation had arrived in response to the summons of the drums.

More and more they came, creeping stealthily up to the firelight's margin. From fifty to a hundred the group grew; now there were two hundred votaries about the fire, at last at least five hundred. And still the drums tolled their insistent *"ro-o-om, ro-o-om; rum-rum-rum"* through the night.

I heard Coralea's small smothered "Oh!" and Hiji's sigh of excitement coupled with de Grandin's almost frenzied flow of bubbling French profanity as a figure glided from behind a tombstone. It was a woman, so old and thin and wrinkled there was something almost obscene in the picture she presented, as if a mummy had come from the tomb or the corpse of one dead of senility had risen from its grave to mock and gibber at the living. Her skinny arms and legs, bare in the mounting firelight, seemed smeared with mingled filth and ashes. Her lich-like form was nude save for a length of dirty calico which hung across her back, loose ends split and tied about her waist and hips to form a sort of apron. The upper end of the cloth had been bound about her gray-wooled head to make a turban, and round and round this weird head-dress had been wound strings of gleaming beads. "Teeth!" muttered Hiji. "Human teeth! They knock 'em out and string 'em to make amulets."

"Ouranga!" came a greeting from the crone as she danced round the firelit circle. *"Ouranga!"* In one emaciated hand she held a blacksnake whip; in the other was a dried gourd-shell which she waved to and fro, making its seeds rattle furiously against the sun-dried rind. Back and forth before the fire she tripped and stumbled, leaping, sometimes, sometimes

shuffling in a sort of buck-and-wing; then pirouetting on her toes like a ghastly caricature of Columbine. *"Ouranga!"*

From the trembling congregation sounded echoes of her hail, not deep-voiced, but high and thread-thin, frightened, more than half hysterical: *"Ouranga, ouranga; ouranga!"* Then, in a high-swelling chorus, *"Voodoo!"*

With a mincing, shuffling step the old hag circled round the fire, clattering her rattle, flourishing her whip, pausing now and then, and each time she halted the men and women groveling before her shrank back in the shadows as though she menaced them with a live snake.

"Ouranga!" shrieked the crone again, and half a dozen men came struggling from the shadows, pushing three cowering wretches, two men and a woman. The luckless trio were flung face-downward on the ground, where they lay quaking, too terrified to utter pleas for mercy.

"Ouranga!" the witch cried furiously, leaping forward to bring down her whip on the prostrate victims' backs. Repeatedly she cried the mystic word, accompanying each repetition with a cut of her cruel lash until dull scarlet stains showed through the groveling wretches' scanty clothing.

"Back-sliders from the cult," said Hiji in a whisper. "Not much inducement for 'em to leave the fold, eh what?"

The hag had ceased her flogging, more from weariness than mercy, and the chastened apostates crawled like beaten dogs to the ranks that hovered in the shadows. We saw the others draw away from them as from contagion as they found seats on the ground.

A long black shadow cut between the fire and us, and a tall, thin man came dancing out between the tombstones, pausing for a moment with uplifted hands, then falling prostrate on the sand before the voodoo priestess. In every detail he was like the man who had attacked me; painted like a leopard, hands armed with sharp, cruel iron claws, he might have been the same man raised from the dead by some unholy miracle.

The *obi* witch addressed him in a flood of cackling gibberish, and he responded in the same jargon. Finally, rising to his knees, he circled round the fire, half crawling, half dancing, waving clawed hands in the air as if he tore the life from an unseen victim. Graphically, in pantomime, we saw him re-enact the murder of Judge Scatterhorn. We saw him creep up to the quiet house, secrete himself among the shrubbery, lie in waiting for his victim. His eyes glared horribly, his teeth gleamed like the fangs of some wild thing as he arched his back and sprang. A leap, a scream like that of a demented fiend, and he swept in an arc through the air, striking with his iron-taloned hands straight at his quarry's throat, then rolling thrashing on the ground, as if locked in a death-grip with some phantom adversary. At last he lay stretched out upon the dried grass, breathing hard from his exertions, then rolled upon his face before the hag, reaching out his gaffed hands till they almost touched her feet.

"Bon—bon!" The *obi* witch commended, and the leopard man leaped up and joined the circle. His work had won approval from the voodoo cult's high priestess.

The bonfire had begun to burn itself to embers, and a moaning, low, almost a whimpering singsong, passed from lip to lip about the ring of squatting men and women. *"Dhan ghi — dhan ghi!"* we heard them cry. Two men staggered forward with a large pine packing-case between them. The box was reminiscent of the outside cases used to enclose caskets at cheap funerals, but was fitted with a hinged lid secured by heavy hasps and padlocks. With a sudden shock I realized

that what I'd thought were painted spots were really holes bored through the planks. "De Grandin," I whispered, "there's something *live* inside there!"

"*Mais oui, mais certainement,*" he answered imperturbably. "These naughty followers of *vaudois* are worshippers of a great snake they call the 'White Queen.' Observe them, if you please."

One of the bearers set his end of the case down and ran back to the shadows, returning in an instant with a squawking cockerel. The voodoo priestess snatched the fowl from him, drew a knife from her turban and slit its throat with a quick slash.

Now her dance was like the antics of a maniac. Laughing insanely, fiendishly, muttering unintelligible charms, shrieking and crying, she whirled and turned in the fast-waning firelight, waving the stiffening body of the slaughtered cock about her head till the spurting blood from its cut neck sprayed on the worshippers, who crouched together in an ecstasy of shuddering fear. Twice she leaped upon the box with the hinged top, and each time the congregation shrieked in wild, ecstatic glee. Once she clawed at its locked lid until I thought that she would open it, but apparently she reconsidered, and the lid remained closed on the dread god of the *obi* people.

"I think the convocation will be ending soon," de Grandin whispered. "Let us depart before they break their meeting up. We cannot hope to fight them single-handed, and if they should discover us——" It was not necessary for him to proceed; imagination more than supplied details missing from his statement.

CREEPING flat to earth, we wriggled down the hill, reached an unplowed field and rose to run across it. "Hiji!" exclaimed de Grandin. "Where is he?"

Apparently he had dematerialized. A moment earlier he had lain beside us in our ambuscade; none of us had seen him leave, but—he was gone.

"We must go back," the Frenchman announced firmly. "We cannot leave him in their hands, they would—*mon Dieu!* Down, down for your lives, my friends!"

Coming toward us through the gloom there bulked a monstrous form. It was like some giant spider walking on its two hind legs, but larger than a cow. We dropped down to the turf, not daring to draw breath lest our respirations betray us; then: "I say, de Grandin, is that you?" Low, but distinctly cheerful, Hiji's voice came to us.

"*Bien oui,* it is I, and not another, but who in heaven's name are you?" the Frenchman answered.

"Why, Frenchy, don't you recognize your little playmate?" Hiji answered plaintively. "And I've brought our other little friend along, too. The cove who mauled Trowbridge this evenin', don't you know? While we were lyin' there and watchin' all the voodoo doin's, I thought I could find work for him, so I hustled back and got him."

I breathed more easily. What we had mistaken for a monster was the Englishman, walking upright with the dead leopard man across his shoulders.

"Just wait for me a mo'," Hiji bade. "I'll be comin' back this way, and when I come you'd best be on your toes and ready to make distance."

He trudged off in the darkness with his grisly burden. Ten minutes passed, fifteen, half an hour; then as if in response to a signal there rose such a pandemonium of shouts and screams and yells from the abandoned cemetery as might have waked the dead who slept there.

A moment later Hiji came abreast of us, running like an antelope. "Run, you blighters; cut and run for it, or you'll not

see tomorrow's sunrise!" he cried pantingly. "Don't let 'em sight you!"

We ran. My heart was pounding like a battering-ram against my ribs long before we reached the Sterling house, but, amazingly, there was no pursuit.

We faced each other in the lamplit parlor. "Tell me, *mon beau sauvage,* what was it that you did to them?" de Grandin ordered.

"Oh, just gave a demonstration of my kind of magic. The beggars were waitin' a report from the feller who jumped Trowbridge, so I took care they jolly well got it. When I got back to their council fire I was put to it for a means of deliverin' him, and a young tree gave me the idea. They were raisin' such a bally row I could a sung *God Save the King* at top voice and never have been heard; so I had no trouble loppin' off the sapling's limbs, then climbin' it and draggin' my deceased friend after me. I lodged him in the tree-fork, then swung down, bringin' the tree down with me, and let go. It straightened up, of course, when I released my weight, and shot him like a stone out of a catapult, right plump into the middle of their pow-wow, neat as wax. You should have heard 'em bellow when he landed at their hospitable fireside."

"*Parbleu,* my friend, we did," de Grandin answered. "We did, indeed, and—*mordieu,* why can we not?"

"Eh?" answered Hiji.

"You have given me the idea, the hunch, the inspiration. But certainly. These devil-doings we beheld tonight were but the dress rehearsal to the ceremonies they will hold tomorrow when the moon is in eclipse. Why should we not prepare more magic for tomorrow night? Why should we not frighten them until they call upon the hills to fall upon them and hide them from the vengeance of our medicine?"

"All right, why should we not?" demanded Hiji. "If you've any ideas for a charade, spill 'em. Depend on me to rally round, old son."

"By blue, my friend, I think that you can be of service. Tell me, can you recall the chants these Leopard People sang in Africa?"

"Er—yes, I think I can. They went something like this." From half-closed lips he hummed a syncopated, wordless tune, an eery, eldritch thing resembling our swing music as the bitter scent of hydrocyanic acid gas resembles the perfume of crushed peach leaves, a wicked tune that made the listener think of pitch-black midnights and rifled graves and evil deeds done in the darkness of the moon. As he hummed he beat time with his finger on the table top, a sharp, staccato beat of broken rhythm.

De Grandin bent his gaze on Coralea as Hiji hummed. "What does the music make you think of, *Mademoiselle?*" he asked.

"Oh"—she shook her shoulders in disgust—"it stirs me all up. It makes me want to rend and tear and scratch, as if I were a savage cat. It rouses all the elemental brute in me."

"Fine, excellent, superb!" he applauded. "I had hoped you would say something of the sort. Tomorrow night we do it. Yes, by blue, and you shall help us, for you are a psychic, *Mademoiselle!*"

"TROWBRIDGE, *mon vieux,* I have a task for you," he told me as we rose next morning. "Be good enough to take a launch and go to Monsieur Townsend at Elizabeth City. Among other things he keeps a stock of fireworks, and I should greatly like to have one hundred rockets of the largest size available. You will kindly bring them back to me as soon as possible——"

"Rockets?" I echoed stupidly. "You mean skyrockets?"

"Nothing less, my wise one. Large, fine rockets, filled with balls of colored fire and powder which goes *swis-s-s-sh!* You comprehend?"

"No, can't say that I do, but I'll get 'em for you," I replied as I finished shaving. "Anything else you'd like?"

"No, unless you wish to get some Roman candles, also."

The afternoon was far spent when I returned with the fireworks, and my companions seemed on edge with excitement. We made a hurried, almost silent meal, and just before dusk Hiji and Coralea set out for some mysterious rendezvous. Looking grim as the governor of a prison on a hanging-day, the Englishman was back within an hour, and I decided that he must have taken her to some safe place while we faced the voodoo worshippers. A little later he came into the parlor with a pair of odd contraptions. One was an ordinary rubber comb with an envelope of tissue paper pasted over it, the other a small copper kettle the flat lid of which had been clamped down and fastened with a rim of sealing-wax.

"You have tested them?" de Grandin asked.

"Absolutely. Everything's as right as rain."

"*Très bon.* Be ready when the signal comes."

We waited nervously. Neither Hiji nor de Grandin seemed inclined to talk, and both seemed listening for some signal. The daylight faded slowly, and night came on with faltering, indecisive steps. Jays and sparrows put themselves to bed with noisy good-night chirpings. Every now and then de Grandin or the Englishman went out upon the porch and looked up at the sky as though they sought some portent there. At last: "It comes, my friends, it comes!" de Grandin cried excitedly. "Behold him, if you please!"

Following his pointing finger we looked up to the zenith. The moon, as full and round and yellow as a disk of gold alloyed with silver, swam in a cloudless sky, but nicking the smooth margin of its circle there appeared a tiny sliver of black shadow. Slowly, slower than the minute hand of a run-down old clock, the shadow moved, spreading gradually across the glowing lunar disk.

"The time has come, *mes amis,*" de Grandin announced. "You know the part you are to play, my Hiji. May good fortune wait upon your work. *À bientôt.*"

"Carry on, old feller," the Englishman tucked his paper-covered comb and kettle underneath his arm and gave us each a handclasp. "Keep your heads down, and if things go wrong and I get there first, I'll tell the Devil that you're on the way and have him burn a sulfur-candle in the window for you. Cheerio." He turned and stalked off in the darkness.

"We also have our work, my friend," de Grandin told me as he bent and took a bundle of skyrockets in his arms, motioning me to take the sheaf which he had made of the remainder.

Quietly we walked across the fields while the shadow of the eclipse grew larger with each step we took. We bent double as we reached the hill range and step by cautious step began the ascent toward the wooded knoll that overlooked the voodoo meeting-place. Half-way up I paused for breath, and as I looked around I caught a flash of fluttering drapery in the gathering shadows of the road.

"Wha—what's that?" I asked. Upon a night like this the age-old fears came crowding back, and the thing I saw was like a brooding, sheeted ghost that watched us as we mounted to our doom.

"Look farther, if you please, my

friend," he answered with a laugh, "and tell me what it is you see."

I looked. Far down the road, as motionless as something carved of stone, there stood another sheeted figure, gigantic, menacing, immobile. And a little farther down the road another, and another —and another. Silent, sheeted sentinels of the night, grim specters from the olden times when dead men walked on moonless nights . . . my scalp began to prickle and my breath came faster. "What in heaven's name *are* they?" I gasped.

"Night riders," he replied. "A hundred of them, all in ghost-clothes, all with rifles, all ready for the signal we shall give, my friend."

"Whatever do you mean——"

He eased his burden to the turf and bent toward me. "Today we have been busy while you were away, my friend. The local colored folk are good and honest men and women, but they are firmly bound by racial fears. When these *sacré* villains from the Caribbean came here they seduced them from their simple, peaceful ways, telling them that they would bring a government like that of Haiti in the days of Henri Christophe here. Every man should be a marquis or a duke or count, every woman have a title, too, and the white oppressor should be driven from the land. Moreover, those who doubted or refused to help them were intimidated, some were even killed. Such was the fate of James Collins, whom they tracked to Harlem and murdered. You saw the sway these voodooists have on the local blacks last night. It is a kind of superstitious awe they hold them in, and only by a greater magic can that hold be broken. The authorities could harry them and hunt them, perhaps they could convict them of the murders which they have committed, but I doubt it. For where could they find a colored man or woman who would dare to testify against them? *Ha,* but if we can put on a show which seems to overmatch the voodoo magic, if we can swoop down on them with all the dreaded panoply of the sheeted riders of the night, and take their voodoo priests and priestesses before their very eyes and hang them to convenient limbs—what then?"

"But that's sheer terrorism——"

"And what is it these villains practise here? Philanthropy? I tell you, good Friend Trowbridge, only by a show of extra-legal might can we put this horror down. When we have done our part the sheeted riders will close in. They know the local blacks, and those they know will be allowed to escape. As for the voodoo men — such men as those who killed Judge Scatterhorn and Captain Sterling, and almost did the same to you—I damn think that the ropes are now all ready for their necks. Yes, certainly. Of course."

I was about to protest, but the midnight calm was shattered by the sudden rumble of a drum: *"Ro-o-om, ro-o-om; rum-rum-rum!"* As on the night before, the devilish sound seemed welling from the very center of the earth, swelling and expanding till it filled the highest heavens with its maddening discord.

"Up, up, my friend, our work is waiting for us!"

With our rockets bundled in our arms we scrambled up the grassy slope and halted in the woods which fringed the hilltop. Quickly de Grandin set his rocket-sticks into the earth, sighting each one carefully, as though he were a battery commander about to launch a charge of grapeshot at advancing cavalry.

THE voodoo fire was burning in the hollow of the hills, the dusky worshippers were crouched in fascinated terror at the shadows' edge, the voodoo priestess danced and postured in the space between the tombstones. *"Ouranga, ou-*

ranga; voodoo!" came the litany of the black rite as the priestess and her congregation worked themselves into a frenzy.

"Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!" the cry rose from the swaying audience. "The White Queen, show the White Queen to us. Let her testify!"

"Ouranga, ouranga!" shrieked the withered hag in red as she danced and leaped among the graves, twisting and writhing in an ecstasy of self-induced hypnosis. *"Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!"* She shook her claw-like hands up at the moon, which now was almost hidden in eclipse.

Now four men came shuffling forward, and between them they were bundling two more creatures, half-grown Negresses, poor, terrified, impotent things so utterly unnerved by fear that they could scarcely struggle in their captor's hands. *"Grand Dieu, les boucs; les boucs sans bois*—the human sacrifices, goats without horns!" de Grandin whispered. "Have we made a mistake, will they reverse the ceremony, and have the feast before the White Queen testifies?"

The sacrifices were flung down before the fire and the voodoo witch bent over them, touching each with her gourd rattle, then dancing off again.

"Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!" the chant rose louder, more insistently, and another group of men came staggering out into the firelight; between them bumped the long, hole-decorated box we'd seen the night before.

"Ah?" murmured Jules de Grandin. "It seems that I was not mistaken, after all."

The bearers dropped the box unceremoniously and scuttled off, racing back to join their fellows in the circle, for plainly their fear of the goddess in the box was greater than their faith in the high priestess' magic to protect them when the great snake issued forth.

"Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!" The hag was stepping in a constantly accelerated pace about the box, her knees raised level with her waist, her scrawny, splay-boned feet extended straight in a continuation of her spindling shanks. *"Dhan ghi, dhan ghi, dhan ghi!"*

Now from between her tightly compressed lips there came a whining singsong chant, a rising, quavering cry like that snake-charmers make before the serpents issue from their baskets. For a moment she paused by the box, then snatched the lid up in her claws, springing back two yards or so to avoid the great snake's head in case it started out of the case suddenly.

De Grandin's teeth were fairly chattering, and a flow of weirdly garbled French profanity came sprawling from his lips like sparks that sputter from a dampened fuse.

We waited breathless. A pall of silence fell upon the worshippers. We could hear a sudden hissing sizzle in the fire as a fresh stick fell into the flames.

"A-a-ah!" de Grandin let his breath out slowly. "She comes. Behold her, good Friend Trowbridge!"

No wicked, wedge-shaped, scale-mailed head arose from the voodoo tabernacle. No forked tongue darted menace at the posturing priestess and cowering congregation. Nothing at all came from the box.

Instead, high overhead, seemingly dropping from the zenith where the moon's pale countenance was masked, there came the whirring notes of a slow, syncopated, wordless chant, an eery thing that made the listener think of pitch-black midnights and graves from which the dead were torn, and evil deeds done in the darkness of the moon. And with the rasping, scobbing music came the sound of a tom-tom which beat in sharp staccato, its broken measures reaching to the very marrow of our spines.

The *obi* woman looked up to the sky from which the eldritch music seemed to drip like venom from a manchineel tree. Nothing met her gaze. Only the insistent, buzzing, susurrating notes swooped downward as from some discarnate unclean spirit perched among the swaying pine-trees' boughs.

The witch's hideous old face took on a look of wonder, then of worry, finally of blind, unreasoning panic. But her terror was no more than the prelude to that which followed, for something slowly rose from the long box beyond the dying fire.

A tall, lean thing it was, brown-skinned, ash-smeared, a mop of matted white hair stringing round its skull-like face. Wisps of age-rotted cloth were loosely bound around it, like grave-clothes falling from a putrefying corpse, and where the rags left chocolate-colored body bare great patches of a leprous gray showed in a ghastly contrast.

Faster and faster dripped the ghost-tune from the treetops; louder and more menacing the phantom drum-beats came. The hideous thing leaped from its box, vaulted the fire and stood face to face with the old voodoo witch. The hag drew back her arm as if to strike the specter with her lash; the visitant reached suddenly into the fire, seized a blazing pine branch from the flames and felled the priestess with a single blow.

Before the *obi* woman could retain her feet the thing turned to the fire, striking it repeatedly with a green branch, flailing out the sinking blaze until it flickered lower, lower—finally died to a dull-glowing heap of coals.

And now a thing too terrible to credit happened. The spirit of the beaten fire seemed transferred to the body of the hideous creature from the box, for its limbs and face began to glow with horrifying, smoky luminance, a glow such as dead things give off in marshes in the darkness of the night.

Higher, shriller, rising to a keening wail that sent horripilations rippling through my skin, the ghostly music lifted, while the tom-tom's tempo quickened till each plangent beat seemed driving deep into our vertebræ, and like a sulfurous silhouette against the background of the night the fiery thing danced and shuffled back and forth between the sunken-mounded graves, its glowing feet in measure with the skirl of spectral music, its smoldering body seeming hung midway between the earth and sky as it whirled and turned and leaped and bounded where the voodoo witch-fire had been burning. Now, rag by filthy, rotting rag it tore its moldering grave-clothes off, and as each fetid fragment fell upon the earth fresh horrors met our fascinated gaze. Ribs, pelvic bones and sternum seemed made of living fire which shone through the integument of chocolate-colored skin as marsh-fire might shine through the drifting brume of foul miasmal vapors.

A MOANING, low but pregnant with unutterable dread, broke from the congregation as they saw their witch-priestess felled by this awful apparition which glowed with smoldering inward fire and summoned ghost-tunes from the moonless midnight sky.

"Men and women of the race," a voice sang from the specter's burning throat, "I bring you testimony. Daughter am I to *Iblis,* Chief of Devils; even of the *bori* of the jungle am I daughter.

"Voodoo is unclean; voodoo is forbidden those who would not feel the vengeance of the *bori.* Get ye to your homes, ye foolish ones; to your work go ye, for to labor is to praise the jungle people of your fathers.

"Where is your witch-woman now?

Where is her magic? Could she stand before the power of the spirits of the jungle? Could her fire burn one who carries fumes of hell within her body, or can her magic save ye from my wrath?

"Back to your homes, before I call on you the curse of *Mai-Aska,* who brings scars and rashes. To your cabins, followers of false gods, or on you will I bring the wrath of *Kuri-Yandu,* who swells the joints with misery. See, ye fools who trust in voodoo, even now I call the stars down from the sky to crush you with their weight. On you I call the curse of *Mai-Ja-Chikki,* who will blind you for your sins. Behold!"

She reached her fire-gloved hands up toward the moonless sky and a swishing like the roar of flooding water when the rivers overflow their banks came from the pine trees, while curve on lambent curve of fire swept through the darkness as though a storm of meteors had been blown from hell by Satan's all-destroying breath.

"*Morbleu,* but it is perfect, it is excellent, it is *magnifique!*" de Grandin whispered in delight as he raced along the line of rockets, setting fire to them and, as they soared roaring through the air, setting fresh ones in their places.

The rockets reached their apogees and hissed down to the earth, bursting into fiery constellations. It seemed as if the heavens were alive with falling, bursting stars; the wrath of fire and brimstone that burned Sodom and Gomorrah, the promised day of awful fate when earth should be consumed by fire seemed on us as the blazing, shattering missiles crashed down from the zenith.

Screams of terror, frenzied, hopeless pleas for mercy, sounded on all sides. "Oh, Lawd, Ah's got it! Ah's gone blind, mah eyes is out!" cried one man, clawing at his dazzled eyes. Another and another took the wail up, and in a moment rustlings in the bushes told where congregation members crawled away for sanctuary, deserting the outlanders who had held them captive in a thrall of superstition.

But now the clatter of shod hoofs came from the highway, and fresh shouts of dismay rose from the frightened fugitives as the sheeted riders of the night closed in upon the voodoo rendezvous. They were a fearsome sight—steeds and riders masked in fluttering white with fiery eyes aglare through peepholes in their draperies, torches blazing in their hands, guns or whips upraised in menace.

The ghostly riders opened ranks to let the fleeing voodoo worshippers scuttle off to safety, but with the voodoo leaders it was different. Within a moment six outlandishly dressed men and the old *obi* priestess had been corralled and bound with ropes. "I think our bag is full," de Grandin murmured; "they have them all."

"Wha—what will you do with them?" I faltered, wild stories of the condign justice meted out by night riders recurring to me.

"Do? *Parbleu,* what should they do with such ones? Have we not seen them taken as they gloated over the commission of a foul crime? Can we not testify against them from our own knowledge? *Mais certainement,* my friend. Within the hour they will lie all safe in *la bastille.* Tomorrow, at the latest, the *juge d' instruction* hears our evidence. After that—*morbleu,* one wishes one could be as sure of reaching heaven as one is that they will be convicted by the county court and suffer condemnation for their crimes! Come, let us go. This evening's work is finished, I damn think."

AN HOUR later we gathered in the Sterling parlor. Lamplight shone upon the tall, mint-garlanded tumblers,

ice clinked pleasantly. The juleps were delicious.

"No," Hiji laughed, "I didn't have a bit of trouble. They were all so bally intent on the doin's in the cemetery that I shinned up the tree without a single blighter spottin' me. After that"—he took another long drink—"how do you Yankees say? It was in the bag."

"Whatever——" I began, but de Grandin hastened to explain before I had a chance to frame my question.

"*Mais, c'est tout simplement, mon vieux.* One only needs to think things through, and *voilà.*" He turned as footsteps echoed in the hall and Coralea came in, her face and hands and arms aglow from recent vigorous scrubbing. "*Messieurs,* permit me to present *la grande prêtresse de voudois,* the superwitch." Coralea blushed rosily beneath her soap-and-water glow.

"The superwitch?" I echoed. "You mean——"

"*Précisément.* I had been wondering how we might turn the tables on those naughty people from the Caribbean, and when Hiji flung the body of their executed comrade into camp the idea came to me like that—*pouf!* 'These so evil fellows have laid hold upon the superstition of the local colored folk by force of fear; they have worked on their imagination, they have convinced them that they are all-powerful,' I say to me.

" 'Exactly so; you have it right, my perspicacious self,' I answer me. 'Jules de Grandin, you and I must convince them that we have the greater power. We must induce them to go back to their homes and resume their simple, peaceful mode of life.'

" 'You have summed the situation up exactly, Jules de Grandin,' I tell me. 'But how are we to do these things?'

"Then I engage myself in deep conference. We have *matériel* at hand, it only waits our use. Hiji knows the demon music of the Africans, those bad, fierce Leopard Men of the West Coast beside whom these voodooists are but inept amateurs; he can reproduce it, but we must find a way to carry it to them and make them think it comes from superhuman agencies. Also, it is for us to make the magic of these voodoo people seem a weak and ineffective thing. We must put shame on them, as Moses shamed the magic-makers of the Pharaoh. How to do it? Then I recall Mademoiselle Coralea is a *danseuse.* She is clever, she is talented, she knows these people, and she has said the music of the Leopard Men arouses all her evil instincts. 'Mademoiselle Coralea,' I apostrophize her, 'you shall be our superwitch. You shall dance before the voodoo council of fire. You shall put shame on their *mamaloi.*'

"So I approach her with my proposition. At first she is afraid, but she is the *artiste,* the rôle appeals to her dramatic nature, and so at last she gives consent. Thereupon we get our properties together. Hiji makes a tom-tom of an old kettle, and a pipe out of a piece of paper wrapped around a comb. Together in the barn we make the music, very softly, and Mademoiselle Coralea perfects her dance. We make a costume for her out of cheesecloth which we drag around the barnyard till it looks as old as sin's own self. We smear her with a chocolate paste. We buy up all the matches at the village store and boil them; then with the sulfurous paste we paint a skeleton upon her so that her bones will seem to shine clear through her skin when it is dark.

"Then Hiji and I set forth to find the 'White Queen.' We find her lying in her box out in the cemetery, and—it took but two shots to dispatch her. Afterward we clean her box with disinfectant, and into it goes Mademoiselle Coralea. *Parbleu,* I think it took more courage to lie curled

up in that snake's ex-den than it took to face the voodoo people in the open!

"In a tree above the graveyard we hung a telephone transmitter with an amplifier attached to it. These we connected to a wire and a telephone receiver which were hidden in a near-by tree, and into this our Hiji sang his tune and beat upon his kettle-drum. *Tiens,* the effect was most realistic, *n' est-ce-pas?* When the music seemed to come from nowhere, when the voodoo priestess was struck down by the fiery visitant which leaped out of the snake box, when the stars began to fall from heaven as our rockets took their flight—*parbleu,* it was so good a piece of stagecraft that even I who knew the plot was half afraid, myself!"

Coralea's pink cheeks were dimpled with a smile. "Doctor de Grandin, I think I owe you something for tonight," she told him.

"How is that, *Mademoiselle?*"

"That dance I did tonight; if it was good enough to make those people think I was a demon from the jungle it ought to be successful in the theatre. I'll get Sir Haddingway to play the Leopard People's music on a record for me; then as soon as Papa's estate has been settled I'll go to New York. That dance should be good for a month's engagement at the Irving Place Opera House. After that—well, other burlesque actresses have gone to Hollywood. Why shouldn't I?"

"Why not, indeed, *ma plus belle héroïne?*" replied de Grandin. "*À votre triomphe!*"

We clinked our glasses on the toast.

Death

By WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

(From "*Measure for Measure*")

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod, and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbèd ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be—worse than worst—
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling,—'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathèd worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

The Isle of Abominations

By KADRA MAYSI

A gripping story about the strange, carnivorous forest planted by old Mr. Chalcedyne on an island in the swamps, and the shocking aftermath of an attempt to cut the forest down

FOR two hours the put-put boat had been running south with the tidal river. The barrier islands lay to east, opalescent in the evening light. Behind their dunes was tangled growth of palmetto palm, oak, muscadine, scrub pine, cassena, and myrtle thickets. Westward, long miles of marshes stretched toward the Carolina mainland. The setting sun was kindling them, slowly, into a sea of flame: fiery eyots and red marsh-grass and creeks where molten lava ran.

Dicon Croyce sat in the bow upon a coil of dirty rope and watched the sunset from beneath the down-turned brim of his soft hat. They were a land unto themselves, these dark and ancient sea islands. In his childhood he had lived upon them. He knew them: their people and their ways. . . . He felt himself both butcher and traitor because of what he had come to do. He drew deep on his old black pipe and spoke to his fellow forester.

"This is one job, Harvey, that I don't relish. It seems cruelty—almost sacrilege."

Harvey spoke curtly.

"In these lean years, there's no job that I don't relish. Besides, it's in our line. Aren't we foresters?"

"That's exactly it, Harvey. We're foresters, not butchers. We've been trained to cure and save trees as an M. D. is trained to save human beings."

"We've had to cut trees by the thousand. I've watched you saw and lop and chop."

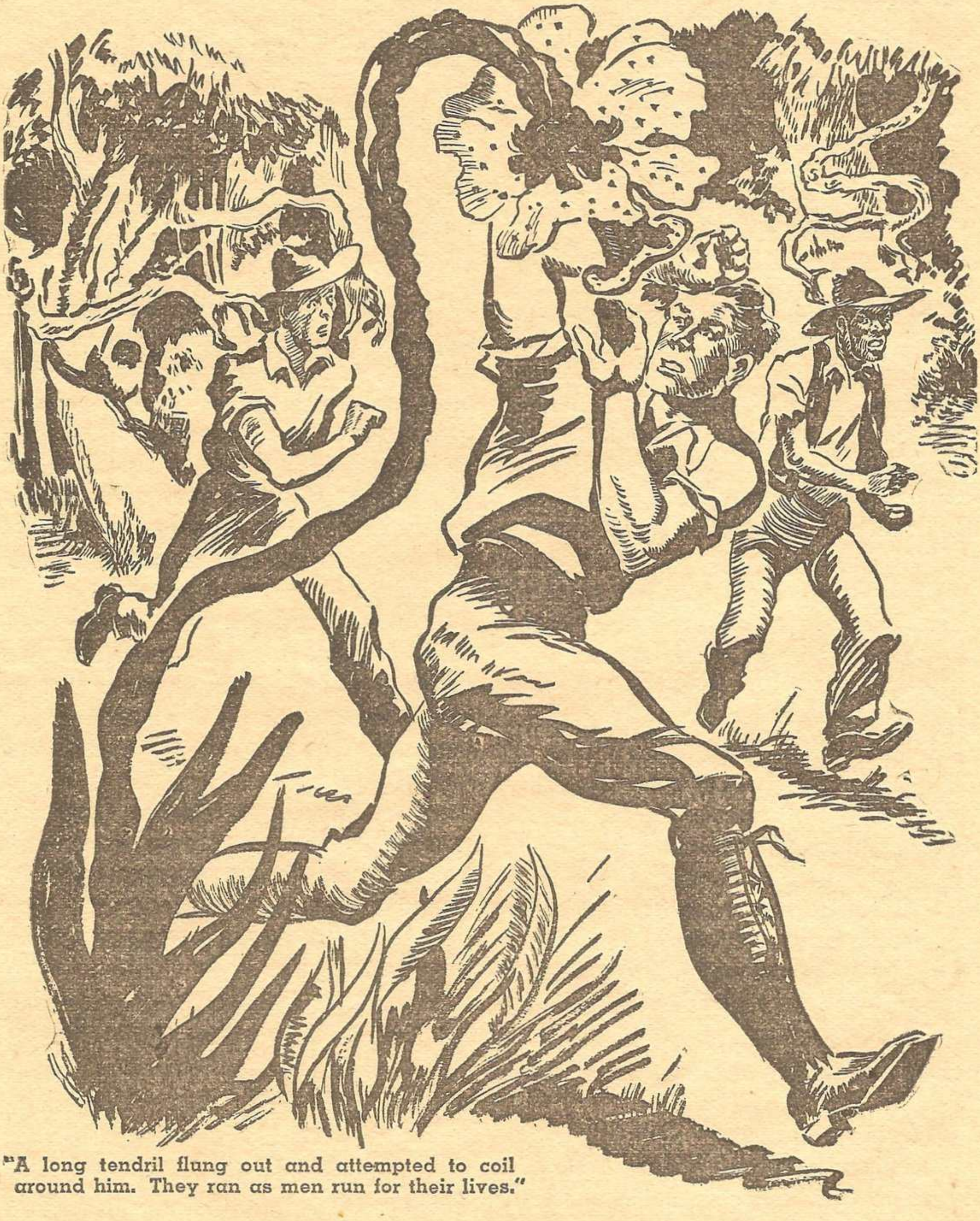
"Granted—but, just so does a surgeon amputate. It is necessary for tree surgeons to amputate limbs and, frequently, to remove an entire tree for the good of other trees. But to raze a miniature forest—and a forest such as this! I've visited Mr. Chalcedyne and walked with him in his woods. He knew every tree and loved each one. He fed and tended and cared for them."

"I know—and he was a blamed old crank. He had some crazy theories. He fed them bone-meal by the ton, and he went farther than that. He bought all dead animals for fifty miles around and buried them on that island for fertilizer. They say the negroes used to bring carcasses of horses and mules and cows on little flatboats. It was even hinted that he bought two-legged stiffs——"

Dicon Croyce threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"Hard-Boiled Harvey, don't you, of all men, tell me ghost stories. If he bought any two-legged stiffs, they were merely chickens and ducks. He experimented, and I must confess that the things he grew used a lot of—that stuff."

There came an unearthly, goblin cry, high-pitched, then quavering into silence. The creek ran narrow now, between banks of quivering, rustling blackness. Something cold and wet and fleshy materialized from the night and swept clammy fingers across Harvey's face. He started up with an exclamation. Croyce said:



"A long tendril flung out and attempted to coil around him. They ran as men run for their lives."

"It was only a trailing vine. Chalcedyne has some rather queer vines. He brought them, and his trees and shrubs, from almost every country of the world. That God-awful screech was a loon's cry. The sea islands get on some men's nerves."

"I believe you," Harvey said, glancing nervously into the darkness. The mast lantern cast a pallid and green-white glow over all three faces. That tiny, green-white glow like a Jack-o'-Lantern's flame, was the only spark of light in total, immeasurable night. He asked, anxiously:

"Are we near the island?"

"This is the island," Croyce said—and

a torch flared, suddenly, on the shore.

The negro boatman swung the launch gently alongside of the little wooden pier, and from it a nasal and yet drawling voice spoke:

"You the two wood-cuttin' men I been expectin'? Well, w'y don't one of you throw me a rope?"

The disembodied drawl caught the thrown hawser and made them fast, fore and aft. Then Croyce and Harvey clambered up a swaying palmetto pile and shook hands with Gideon White, superintendent of the late Mr. Chalcedyne. He was the tallest, thinnest, most leathery-looking man whom Harvey had ever seen. He welcomed them in his sorrowful drawl and led the way ashore; but, from his first words, the newcomers sensed hostility.

"Camp's just a quarter-mile inshore, and some of your sawyers got in today. I got room for you in the lodge with me, if you want to stay there. Seems like Mr. Chalcedyne would turn in his grave if he knew you were goin' to cut the whole island. But come on! Jason will bring your things. Might as well get goin', since you've come to do it."

CROYCE slept at the lodge, but his sleep was uneasy and troubled. Even in slumber, he was aware of the presence of the living forest—the lush, moist, vital, sentient forest, pulsing with warmth and fecundity—the forest which Chalcedyne had loved and tended, but which he and Harvey had been hired to destroy. The sea wind wandered across the pines as fingers across the strings of a harp. All night its haunting, minor chords accompanied his broken dreams. Just at dawn he was awakened by voices whispering outside; but, straining his ears, he could only hear the whisper of palmetto fronds.

He and White had almost finished breakfast when Harvey appeared. He looked haggard, and in reply to Croyce's question as to how he had slept, replied briefly:

"Like hell."

White seemed decidedly pleased to hear it. He smiled gloomily and suggested that they take a look around together.

"The trees are grouped," he told them. "Mr. Chalcedyne planted the ones that were alike in what he called the same 'communities.' He treated them same as human beings. He said they were pretty near human."

Harvey said, irritably:

"Everybody groups trees. I group them in landscape gardening; but I'm not fool enough to think them human."

White removed his slouch hat and scratched his grizzled head.

"Maybe, if you lived with 'em long enough—I mean that some queer things have happened over here. Well, as I was sayin', Mr. Chalcedyne was always tryin' experiments. You see that grove of magnolias right there?"

They grew in a ring in a swampy spot between the pine ridge and the palms—nine of the largest, sturdiest specimens of the tree Croyce had ever seen. Their leaves were glossily, darkly green; and, although it was late June, a number of huge, creamy blossoms drooped from their stems and scented the air.

"Well, what?" asked Harvey impatiently. "I've seen the laurel magnolia before."

White said deliberately, "Maybe. But you never saw one bear blood-red flowers."

"That species bears only white," answered Harvey. "But I've seen other kinds with colored blooms."

"I'm talkin' about those same trees," insisted the superintendent. "This time last year, Mr. Chalcedyne had 'em bearin' red flowers instead of white ones."

"As a schoolboy," said Croyce, "I used to pick one and put it in red ink instead of water. Through its stem, it drew up a faint, pinkish coloring."

"It drew up this colorin'," said White, "from a long way farther down than its stem. And—I tell you it wasn't faint. It was just as red as blood."

"Do you mean that Mr. Chalcedyne put coloring-matter at the roots?"

But the superintendent retreated, suspiciously, into a shell of ignorance. He was afraid he had gone too far and that these "city men" would laugh at him. What did they know of hot, thick nights when strange scents and sounds blew out of the jungle? If they ever heard a rabbit scream—if they knew why he did not keep a dog . . .

Ignorance was his only retreat, and he took it. Even his grammar forsook him, as did all other knowledge.

"I don't mean nothin' and I don't know nothin'. Mr. Chalcedyne never said what he used."

"Everybody knows that he used dead animals as fertilizer. I never understood why he needed so much of that matter, but I know that he had here a lot of queer, tropical stuff."

"Some of it's worse than queer," said White. "I hate to see the island cut, but I've got another job, and I'll be glad to quit this one."

Harvey said, "I don't see exactly what you two are driving at. Let's get on with our look-see and know the layout. We start tomorrow."

All forenoon they tramped through the wood, shuttling from ocean beach to marsh. The island was only four miles long and approximately a half-mile wide. They were starting upon its northern end. White reported that it lay northeast to southwest, with the coast, and that its lower end was somewhat protected and, consequently, planted far more thickly.

"That's why Mr. Chalcedyne had all his buildings up on this end. Nobody could live down there with some of those plants. They stink!"

"Probably insectivorous," said Harvey. "The *Dionæa* are peculiar to the Carolinas."

"*Dionæa* ain't nothin' but fly-traps," said the caretaker, rather surprizingly. "Things I'm talkin' about are big—wicked, stunted-looking trees, and vines as thick as your arm and as soft as flesh but as strong as cable."

"He must have brought in some carnivorous plants since I was here last," said Croyce. "Hello! What are those drums? Do you bring gasoline over here?"

The big steel hogsheads were stacked in a hollow square, as if for removal. But it was easy to see that they had remained in the same spot for some time. The quick growth of a semi-tropical region was in and about them. Plumy fennel and coarse swamp-cane pushed between and close against them. Running oak, blackberry, and wild bignonia vines were weaving a shroud for them. Myrtle and gum and small pine sprouted where seed and mast had been wind-sown.

The three men walked closer to them, White appearing to hang back. Most of the drums appeared to have had holes chiseled in just one place; but, from a few, the entire heads had been removed and they stood wide open. Sides and bottoms were discolored with a stain that might have been reddish rust. Croyce and Harvey peered into them, but White still hung back. He stood fully twenty feet away. Harvey asked:

"Did they bring gasoline?"

"No," said the man. "We never needed gasoline over here."

"Then what came in them? The ones

with the holes must have brought liquid."

"Mr. Chalcedyne used to buy stuff from the abattoir. I don't know nothin' about it—and we better be gettin' back for dinner."

THAT next day they started cutting. Sawyers and axmen were all in camp. The two foresters in charge of the work had not yet seen all of the island; but directions were clear, and all they needed was men and machinery for the work.

The heirs of the eccentric horticulturist had been unable to agree upon disposal of the place, so had accepted the first offer made them for the wood upon it. Croyce and Harvey had been engaged, as experts, by the purchasing timber company, to oversee a general cutting and then select, for that company, all logs of value to them. After removal of this large timber, a pulp factory would send men to figure upon and bid in the small wood.

Such plan entailed total destruction of the beautiful and valuable international forest started, as an experiment, by its owner. However, few people were interested in experimental horticulture, and from a monetary standpoint the grove was worth no more than its timber. So reasoned the five people who had inherited it; and, so reasoning, they decided to sell its timber rights and, later, to sell the cut-over land for sea-island farms.

Croyce was thinking about it all and about a queer event of the night. He had not mentioned it to Harvey or White, but he thought about it all day. When they had returned to the lodge and were eating fried ham, eggs, and hominy for supper, he decided to speak.

"The underbrush and vines grow pretty fast here, don't they, Mr. White?"

The superintendent looked at him, off guard and plainly startled.

"I'll say they grow fast. And I ought to know."

"What kind of vine is that which comes through my window?"

The man pushed back his chair with a sudden, scraping sound.

"You say—that vine—that vine came through your window?"

"No. I asked you *what* vine. I don't know what vine it was."

"Ain't no vine on this house except the one on the kitchen chimney. I begged Mr. Chalcedyne not to put it there, but he said it came from an African jungle and the chimney warmth might make it grow."

"He must have known his vine," said Croyce. "It's grown a long way from home. My window is at least thirty feet from that brick chimney."

"And you say it came—came through the window—into the room?"

There was a strange pallor underneath the leathery tan of the man's face. Harvey had laid down knife and fork and was listening. Croyce said:

"I suppose there's nothing so strange about it. Tropical flora grows fast, and it rained a little during the night. I thought it was raining again, for I heard a little rustling sound. I kept hearing it between naps, and, although faint, it was oddly disturbing. Finally I fell asleep, assuring myself it was rain on the leaves, and suddenly I was awakened by a distinct touch on my foot. I lay still, and it was repeated, this time upon my ankle. Something seemed rubbing against my leg, trying to crawl around it. I thought of a mouse, then a snake, for the thing felt clammy and cold through the trouser of my pajamas. So I reached out, without moving my body, and turned my flashlight on the foot of the bed. There was a long, reddish-brown tendril waving about my feet. It must have been sensitive to light, for it stopped all movement at once and hung, limply, against the footboard."

Harvey asked intently, "Aren't your windows screened? Mine are."

"Yes; both of my windows are screened. But wire rusts fast in this salt air. Mine was either already broken or else rotted weak by rust; for the tendril had pushed its way between wire screening and frame, spanned the two feet between the sill and the footboard of my bed, and managed to coil itself around the iron rods of the footboard."

White rose, without a word, strode to the door and left the room. Harvey glanced after him, then looked back at Croyce.

"You call it a 'tendril.' How big around was the creeper?"

"About as big as my thumb, I should guess. But you can see for yourself. I purposely left it to see how much more it would grow during the day."

THEY left the combination living-room and dining-room and walked through the hall to Croyce's bedroom, which was at the back. It was half past six o'clock and still broad daylight. Everything in the small, sparsely furnished sleeping-room was plainly visible to a casual glance.

Both men looked first at the narrow iron bedstead which stood alongside the wall with its foot two feet from a big window. Croyce had drawn it up himself, in the fashion of men accustomed to camps. His lightweight khaki blanket covered it like a quilt and was neatly and tightly tucked under the mattress upon all sides. Its drab color was broken only by a flat white pillow at the head.

But along the slender iron rods of the low footboard, both saw a distinct, shuddering thread of movement run. It was as though the rods, themselves, trembled and writhed under some stress.

Together they stepped forward, curious, yet oddly reluctant. Croyce exclaimed:

"It's grown, but something must have happened to it. It looks injured, shriveled, lifeless. By George, Harve, something must have killed it!"

Under their eyes the coiled tendrils tightened their grip on the small rods. It was as though they contracted in a sudden spasm of pain. Then they loosened and hung utterly limp and still.

Harvey was gazing intently from the window to the bed. He put out a hand and lifted the creeper's loose-hanging end.

"It's tropical, of course—jungular—and succulent. Feel it, Croyce. It's just like touching cold, bloodless, shriveled flesh."

"It's clammy. I noticed that. But it wasn't shriveled last night. It looked succulent, and full of life. It must be mainly a night-grower. It was about that business last night, and it looked almost alive. It gave me a funny feeling to see it swaying, like a snake, when I took it by surprize and turned the light on it. I couldn't help wondering whether, if I hadn't awakened, it would have taken a coil around my leg—or even my body."

Harvey did not smile. He said gravely:

"What time last night was it when you turned the light on?"

"It must have been about four o'clock. I did not go to sleep again. I lay there awhile, with my flashlight burning, hoping to see the thing grow. But it hung, dead still, and did not move again. By that time I was wide awake and looked at my watch. It was four-thirty. I turned off my flash and lay there watching the day break and listening for the five o'clock whistle at the camp."

"Then you never slept again—after you once saw the thing?"

"No; it was too near daybreak and the blamed thing had waked me up. But,

why call it 'the thing?' It's nothing more than a tropical vine which was probably growing on the window-sill last night. Tropical vines grow by feet instead of inches."

Harvey still looked intent and curiously grave.

"No; I happened to notice it and examine it yesterday. I spotted it, at once, as one of the carnivora. I've hardly studied them, but I've read a lot about insectivora. I followed this vine from the chimney bricks along one side of the kitchen. I can swear that its nearest tendril was fully twenty feet from your window at noon yesterday."

Croyce whistled softly.

"Some growing! I didn't think it was possible."

"Neither did I," said Harvey.

"Suppose we go and ask White about it," Croyce suggested. "The old Poker-Face must have had something else to do. He left the table so quickly that I had no time for questions."

They found White at the foot of the chimney where the vine had grown. He had cut it down from the root and was hacking, with his ax, for that. Croyce exclaimed:

"So, that's the reason why the tendril died on my bed! God—but it was almost human! It shuddered, and then lay still."

Harvey looked at him queerly, then stooped and gathered a section of root. As they bent their heads over it, he and Croyce detected a faint, sickening stench, an odor like that of decaying meat.

IT RAINED next day, delaying work. The wood seemed to grow before Croyce's eyes. The whole island breathed deeply, as though it had drunk its fill. There was, underfoot, indefinite and yet primal movement: a swelling, gentle but immense, primordial, protoplasmic. Earth and air were faintly disturbed by the throb and stretch of some vague increase.

Impatient to get on, Croyce decided to leave Harvey to overseeing all cutting—which was, necessarily, slow under the driving, stormy gusts—and to make a complete trip around the water edge, riding the beaches and inspecting, from them, the growth as a whole. For mount he procured a mule which belonged to the cook, Bones, and which was the only living domestic animal upon the place. So old and gaunt was the quadruped that its master's name would have suited it; yet it appeared to attract one of the Irish foremen. As Croyce was mounting, that one left his saw gang and approached. His words to Bones were a mixture of that familiarity and rudeness with which the low white treats the negro.

"Ould nagur, I'd like to ride the crayture meself, I would."

And Bones answered him as the negro answers the white whom he does not respect.

"Ah ain't lendin' my mule to nubuddy cep'n my boss-man. Ah ain't gwine let no po' w'ite trash git neah 'nuff my mule tuh tech um!"

Mulcahy cursed and advanced threateningly toward the old man, but Croyce spoke sharply:

"You're fired if you touch Bones, Mulcahy. It's your own fault that he was rude to you. Get back to your gang and stay there. You have nothing to do with him or his mule."

The Irishman turned slowly away, muttering to himself as he did. Croyce said to Harvey, who had come up:

"Better keep an eye on that man. He's a chiseler and a bully, and I think he's drinking, too."

Then he rode slowly away on his stiff and ancient charger, and, coming through the dunes to the beach, began his tour of inspection.

Between rain squalls he managed to

get a good view and a good idea of what lay within the elongated circle he was making. From the ocean beach he saw, first, the palms, and behind them, a higher and darker wall of pines and the larger oaks. Upon the northern half of the island, the woods were comparatively free of underbrush, but as he went farther south they thickened visibly. Palmetto palms still followed the beach, but, one mile from the southern end, pines and oaks appeared to have ceased and been replaced by a jungle. He was riding slowly, both because of the old mule and of his observations; but, even so, his forester's eyes could not classify these trees and shrubs. Except for an occasional, towering, dark-green crown, they were lower than the growth upon the island's other end; and they appeared knit together, in an almost impenetrable mass, by gigantic vines which climbed and coiled and swayed in the wind.

The rain had ceased, and as he rounded the southernmost point, he could see in detail. Here, where the islet met the marsh, its undergrowth was most tropical, and, even from the last outpost of its poisonous-looking maze, it seemed to have thrown, toward the water, interwoven mats of green. The old mule shied away when Croyce tried to ride into these; so he was obliged to dismount, leave the patient creature standing, and walk up to them. As he approached, they seemed to be heaving slightly, but sinuously. He told himself that it must be this movement, occasioned possibly by the wind, which had alarmed his charger and made it refuse to approach.

Standing over them, he found the living mats of unusual interest. They were formed of a thousand vines, of every size and stage of development. The stems of some were as large as his arm and were studded with greenish suction cups. Some of these were open, and their thread-like petals waved with rhythmic, reaching movement. Some were folded. They reminded him of repulsive marine animals on rocks. He reached down, and with his heavy working-gloves unfolded the tight and strangely muscular petals of one of the largest flowers. Within it was a bloody mass of half-digested feathers and bones.

Croyce released it, dusting his hands, and it snapped shut, greedily. He whistled softly. So Chalcedyne had his carnivora after all. He, Croyce, was a horticulturist and knew little about vines and plants. But he could see with half an eye that these meat-eaters were large enough to feed upon rats, rabbits, and other small animals, as well as upon butterflies, moths and birds. Doubtless, intensive cultivation and almost forced feeding had developed unusually large and powerful specimens. It was rather a horrid thought. How far could such a plan be carried? Blood and bone-meal at the roots of a plant which could digest a rabbit might develop—sooner or later—a plant which would devour a man!

He mounted the old mule and rode on, pulling his poncho over his knees. Although it was hot, he was shivering. He told himself that he was wet, in spite of the equestrian raincoat. But even the rain was warm. The wind was warm. It came in hot gusts. He was now on the landward beach and it blew across the jungle to him. It was moist and hot, and it brought a distinctly unpleasant smell to his nostrils. The mule seemed nervous and hobbled along in a sort of running walk.

Suddenly Croyce spied a heap of the steel drums which he had noted before. They lay, carelessly thrown, around the roots of a tree. His eyes went from drums and roots up to heavy, sturdy trunk. Bark and leaves were unlike anything he had

seen before. The tree began branching at about ten feet from the ground, and its branches had a curious, unfinished appearance. Some of them looked as though they were a half instead of a whole branch; as though, grafted together, two might be complete and symmetrical.

Kicking the old mule in the ribs, he persuaded it underneath the tree. It blew violently, through its nose, as though terrified, and Croyce said to it:

"You darned old bag-of-bones, you! I was almost ashamed to ride you. I felt as though I should carry you instead of letting you carry me. Then you forget you're a hundred years old and pretend you're a skittish, nervous colt."

The animal stood, quieted by his voice, but its ears were alert and he felt its sides heave. He stood in his stirrups and, reaching far up, touched the sleek side of a forking limb.

A shuddering rustle ran through the whole tree. It seemed, in a second, to come alive. To his horror, the forking limb which his fingers had barely touched, closed, scissors-like, with and upon the limb from which it forked.

The mule, with a scream of terror, reared and leapt forward, almost unseating him. In spite of its age, it carried him, at full gallop, along the path. Not until they had come again to the grassy road of the back beach did it slow its pace, for all its rider's pulling.

Croyce took a khaki handkerchief and wiped cold sweat from his face. Cold tremors ran from the back of his neck along his spine and down his legs. He finally pulled the frightened mule to a halt, but he could not turn it around. He had to look back, over his shoulder, to see the spot he had just left.

Against the jungle wall the tree had a curiously contracted look. It seemed to have shrunk and folded in upon itself. He told himself that it must be some unusual kind of sensitive plant—something like the mimosa, which closed its leaves at any touch.

But, as he rode on, Croyce wiped cold sweat from his face.

IMMEDIATELY after supper Croyce told Harvey about the tree. He tried to be casual as he suggested that they go into his room and talk matters over, but he could not hide the uneasiness in his voice and in his eyes. Long afterward, he was to remember that scene in the monkishly bare, small room—Harvey seated in the one straight chair and he seated on the narrow bed—and to thank his God that he had, at least, told his companion all he knew.

When he had finished, Harvey still smoked, without comment, staring at the floor, and Croyce heard himself repeating aimlessly, foolishly:

"It must have been some gigantic sensitive plant—something like the mimosa; which closes at human touch. It must have been only that. It could not have been anything else."

Harvey stared at the floor and smoked.

"Unquestionably," he said, at last. "I have heard tales of trees which closed, somewhat in the way which you describe. But I don't see how it links up with—with the rest of this business."

"Then you acknowledge," asked Croyce directly, "that there is — something?"

Harvey retreated into the cynical, hard-boiled pose which he usually took.

"*Something?* Of course there's something. Any fool can see that. But it is nothing more than result of hasty organization, bad management, adverse weather conditions, and other unfortunate circumstances. We were forced to start this job in such a hurry that we were unable to organize properly. We have the poorest kind of labor. That showed with the

first swing of an ax. The negroes are of the laziest, most ignorant, superstitious type. The sawyers are Black Irish—the kind that will cut your throat for a shilling. I told them today that I didn't believe they had ever thrown trees before. Every one fell a different way, and several times there were near-accidents. Mulcahy tried to talk back to me and said there was something wrong with the place. One more crack out of him and I'm going to throw him into the creek!"

Harvey's voice was so discouraged that Croyce tried to cheer him.

"Perhaps it's the rain, and this close, damp heat. It makes me feel queer. I think, as soon as the rain stops, we can lick them into shape and go faster."

"Let's hope so, at any rate. And grouching about it won't help us. We've had a hard day and we'd better turn in and get a night's sleep. Cheerio!"

CROYCE was weary and he slept well. Through his dreams, he heard the rain on the roof. But, when the camp whistle waked him at five, rain had ceased and day was breaking clear.

He found Harvey at the breakfast table, engaged with coffee and corn cakes. White, usually first of the three, was absent. Bones said he had been called out. Before they finished eating, he came in, hungry and angry.

"That dirty Mick you have in charge of the saw gang stole Bones' mule. I don't want to slow up your work, but I'm going to have him arrested. I'll ask the sheriff to wait and grab him when you're through and he's leaving the island."

"What did he want with it?" asked Croyce. "What can he do with it over here?"

"Nothing, of course. He's crazy drunk. He was drinking all yesterday. Instead of going to bed last night, six of them got together and drank. The other five are so stewed that they don't know anything; but the sober ones say that, just about midnight, Mulcahy went around the camp shaking them awake and inviting them to go fox-hunting with him. They cursed him and tried to quiet him down, but he finally went away, yelling out a hunting-song and swearing that he would ride the mule."

"He'll kill the poor devil," interpolated Croyce. "It could hardly carry me, although I rode slowly, yesterday."

"Pity it wouldn't kill him," said Harvey.

White said: "If he runs it, it will. It falls down, even in the road. If he pretends he's fox-hunting and goes busting through these woods, he'll wind up with a broken neck—and you'll wind up with a better fo'man."

Croyce had a swift vision of the old mule, emaciated, terrified, bracing its stiff forelegs in fear and snorting as Mulcahy urged it on. A shiver of fear ran down his spine at the picture of man and beast going alone, in the night, into that wet, hot, evil wood. What would it do to one who rode, in the darkness, deep and far into it? He shook his head, as though to clear eyes and brain of fantasy, and he spoke, scoffingly, to the two others.

"You'll find Mulcahy somewhere on the beach sleeping off his binge. Whether or not you'll find the poor devil of a mule alive, I don't know. But I do know that I'm going to fire that scoundrel just as soon as I find him. So you needn't delay sending word to your sheriff to come for him."

White said: "I've already sent out several darkies who know the island to try to locate him and Bones's mule. I told Bones to go after them, as soon as he gave us breakfast, but he got down on his knees and howled and said his mule was dead already. They have all sorts of

queer ideas about this place. I hardly blame them."

Harvey picked up his hat.

"What we need is a whipping overseer. Jungles—ghosts—voodoo—Black Irish! It's enough to make a man see things. Mulcahy deserves whatever he's got. Let's get on to work. The negroes can find him."

THEY promoted a sober Irishman to the deserter's place; and, in the mother-of-pearl daybreak, the giant saws began to whine. The sawyers had progressed, now, for about a half-mile on the ridge of pine. The axmen followed and flanked them, cutting the smaller trees and the underbrush. At nine o'clock one of the negroes came in to say that they had covered beaches, sand dunes, and marshes, without trace of Mulcahy. White said:

"Then divide up and go over all the roads and paths you can find. If there's no trace of him by noon, come back, and we'll go in with you."

Croyce saw a startled expression flash over the brown face. The man pulled his forelock and muttered, respectfully:

"Tank yuh, Boss. Ah sure glad ef you-all go 'long wid me."

As he went away, White spoke to Croyce:

"If you and Mr. Harvey can leave, I'll take you directly south on that trail I was telling you about. From it you can judge more of the growth than from anywhere else on the island. But better bring a couple of axmen, because it's likely to have grown up in spots."

Croyce called to Harvey, who gave directions to his new foreman, and then joined them.

"That fellow is anxious to make good," he said. "He seems glad of the promotion. None of the gang liked Mulcahy—except his five fellow drunks—so I hope that our troubles are over and the work will go better."

Croyce had told off a couple of powerful darkies from his axmen.

"You boys just follow us, now. We'll need you, later, to cut a path."

Glad as children of any change from the routine of steady work, they swung axes over muscular shoulders and followed after the three white men. The superintendent was leading them on a narrow footpath, directly south. He said:

"Mr. Chalcedyne had this cut and, during his life, he kept it cleared. It used to run from one end of the island to the other. He called it Longitude Alley. Bones used to ride his mule on it."

"For heaven's sake," Harvey asked, "how did the mule get on the island?"

White laughed.

"It was brought as a carcass, on a flat-boat, for fertilizer. They rolled it from the barge to the wharf and were just going to haul it inland when it switched its tail gently and gave a little coughing moan. Bones said it had been 'in a trance.' I think the poor thing was just starved to death. Mr. Chalcedyne, who was very humane, had everybody running around getting soft, hot gruel in place of bran mash. When they revived it and got it on its feet, Bones was so crazy about it that Mr. Chalcedyne gave it to him. He plants corn and oats for it, and it grazes for its hay. He really loves the old bag-of-bones, and he's upset about it today. But he's not enough upset to go out and hunt for it. He howled like a dog and told me the mule was already dead and he was scared."

Croyce, who loved all animals, remarked: "I'd enjoy beating up Mulcahy."

White went on: "Taking this way, we are really searching for them. The negroes I sent out would never dare to come this path by themselves. If Mulcahy

and the mule really got into the jungle, we'll have to turn in and lead the hunt ourselves. It gets thicker as we go on. The vines begin in about two miles. Mr. Chalcedyne kept them to the southern end of the island. They grow exceedingly fast; so they may be a quarter-mile nearer than that."

For several minutes, Croyce had had his eye fixed on a towering pine. Its trunk and branches seemed to be twined in some kind of foreign growth, but as they drew nearer he saw that its branches were all dead. So high was it that he could see it above the rest of the trees. As they approached, the growth upon it took on a strangely familiar look. He said to White:

"The vines on that dead pine look like the vines you are talking about."

The superintendent shaded his keen gray eyes with a hand. He whistled sharply:

"By Godfrey! If they are, they've grown a mile in six months."

WHEN they reached the pine, it was easy to see that the vines were those of which Croyce spoke. The huge trunk was repulsively twined with enormous, fleshy tendrils and, set at intervals upon these, wide-open flower cups beckoned and gaped. The whole effect was unspeakably horrid, in spite of a strange, savage beauty. It was as though the evil blossoms were alive and soliciting. Shamelessly, they flaunted themselves, beckoning, writhing voluptuously, trying, in every way, to attract the attention of their prey. A number of butterflies hovered, in small colored clouds, around the tree; and, every now and then, Croyce saw one flutter up against it. Watching closely, he never saw the small flutterer emerge. He was aware that the atmosphere was tainted faintly, unpleasantly.

Harvey interrupted his thoughts, which were running away from him.

"You'd better not stand so close to the damn thing. It's dead and dried. It's liable to fall any minute—and you seem to be hypnotized."

Coming back to reality, he heard faint crackings from the tree. It was swaying in the wind and its long festoons swayed with it. White said:

"Those infernal vines kill everything that they touch. Mr. Chalcedyne planned to keep them confined to the lower end, entirely. I haven't been on this path for six months; and, of course, since his death, we haven't kept trimming. Still, I don't see—I can't see—how the things could come a mile—a whole mile in six months."

Harvey said sharply, resentfully:

"It's been a rainy season. In this country, we have no idea of how fast tropical flora grows. I suppose any carnivora would kill a tree upon which they climbed. Roosting turkey buzzards eventually kill the tree in which they roost. Such plants must bring myriads of small bugs and flies and worms, which get under the bark and bore into the bole. What I'm thinking about, however, is how we'll take this tree down. Nothing on earth, except those vines, is balancing it and holding it up. Conversely, they can throw it, in a second, by tightening on one side or the other."

They stood, staring at the tall tree, and it swayed, gently, under their gaze. There was something rhythmic and seductive in its movements and in the play of the closing and unclosing of the beautiful, foul flowers. Croyce was thinking that a contraction of those muscular, enwrapping arms could pull the whole structure one way or another—one way or another—as the vines chose. . . .

He was interrupted by a startled shout

from one of the axmen behind them. Turning, the three white men saw a negro running, full speed, toward them. It was Cuffee, leader of the group which had been sent to seek Mulcahy. When he reached them, he staggered against and clutched a sapling to steady himself. His black face was gray with fear, his mouth worked and slobbered as he tried to speak. White said sharply, knowing the race, and hoping to snap him out of his terrors:

"Talk, you fool! Talk! Have you found Mulcahy?"

Cuffee nodded — or, rather, his chin dropped loosely from his lower jaw.

"Yes, Boss—we fine um—fine um—an' de mule."

"Go on, you fool! What scared you? Tell me, or I'll shake it out of you!"

"Boss—we fine um. But—*Jedus!*—dem wine done et um up!"

THE horror of it almost unseated Croyce's reason as he gazed down. In the midst of that luxuriant, glossily-healthy foliage, lay what was left of a man and a mule—which is to say, what the plants did not want. What they could ingest, they had taken. They were gorged —replete—heavy with food. They were more still than Croyce had ever seen them before. All their cup-like blossoms were closed and they barely stirred in the breeze. They slept—like a python which has fed—heaving gently, as though they breathed. Their green was more vivid, their stems more juicy, because of what lay in their midst.

It was easy to reconstruct what had happened. The mule had fallen over a log. Mulcahy had been riding it fast, drunkenly, crazily. The narrow print of its donkey-like hooves were deeply set in the wet ground. It had approached at full gallop, stumbled, fallen headlong on its rider. He had been unable to escape and had been pinned underneath it. His skeleton showed no broken bones. They would never know whether or not he was conscious.

The mule had broken one of its fore-legs and so been unable to rise again. Fantastically, awfully, it had taken its revenge. Croyce thought of its patient, frightened eyes; and he seemed to hear the dumb brute speak: *"Judge between us, oh, man, my master! I did not mean him any harm. All I asked was a little food and to work for those who were kind to me. I knew that Horror lived in the swamp and I refused to carry you there. He jerked my mouth—he lashed and kicked me—he tortured me until I obeyed him. So, when he brought me to death by the Horror, could I be sorry that he died with me? Although he was more brute than I, his presence was all the comfort I had!"*

Through a reddish haze, Croyce looked down at the torn rags of dark brown pelt. He lifted the broken foreleg and felt that both greater and smaller bone had snapped. The legs were intact—too hard for digestion — but curiously light, as though sucked dry. Upon them, at intervals, he saw raw spots about the size of a quarter-dollar. The barrel-like formation of ribs, with ragged fur clinging here and there, rose above the green carpet which came well above a man's ankle. As Croyce looked, a thick green tendril, swayed and came to rest upon it, moving, almost caressingly, across the bare bones.

With a yell of rage, Croyce went berserk. He snatched an ax from the nearest negro and began slashing about him, making a swath of destruction. To his surprize he saw White at his side, chopping away. They worked in grim silence, except for the rip and thud of the blades, until a circle had been made around that gruesome charnel-house. The cut vines seemed to writhe, and Croyce noted it

with joy. He noted that, where they ceased chopping, the tendrils beyond drew back from them, half as if in fear and half with the movement of snakes about to strike. He was avenging, as well as he could, the Irishman and the negro's mule. He was battling against a foe more hateful because unnatural. Was it vegetable or animal?

Harvey's voice recalled him to himself. Harvey was shouting, his voice hoarse, his face pinched and as pallid as clay:

"You damned fools, cut it out! You've frightened all the darkies away. Now we'll have to carry—them—back to the lodge, ourselves."

Croyce suggested getting Jason's cart and four strong laborers to pull it, but White advised keeping the men away.

"The darkies will tell, of course, but the Irish will think they exaggerate. Being superstitious themselves, they have no belief in other people's superstitions. If you want to keep any labor over here, you'll have to tell them, when they ask, that possums and buzzards might have done this."

They decided, at last, to tell only the foreman who had taken Mulcahy's place. In the noon hour, White brought him back, the two of them pulling Bones's cart. Flannigan was a bold man, but he went white to the lips when he saw.

CROYCE and Harvey returned to the lodge, to find trouble awaiting them. The negro hands had left in a body as soon as their comrades had told them the news. They had signaled a passing potato boat and gone without waiting for any wages. Old Bones's wrinkled face was the only black one on the island.

They had been axmen, the Irish the sawyers. The two gangs had disliked each other and their foremen, to prevent fights, had kept them away from each other. So Croyce and Harvey had reason to hope that the negroes might have told them nothing. Harvey, who was handling the sawyers, went to their camp to investigate.

They knew of Mulcahy's death and knew, besides, that something was wrong. They were surly and suspicious, and he did not know what to tell them. He consulted Flannigan — who was making a better foreman, by far, than Mulcahy had made — and Flannigan advised him to tell, only, that the negroes were frightened away.

It was good psychology. In laughing at the negroes and boasting about themselves, the sawyers lost the edge of alarm and showed no wish to stop work. Harvey offered them extra wages to cut as long as daylight lasted and to double on the jobs and release some of their number for axmen. They accepted, apparently satisfied; but, walking back to the lodge, Harvey said to Flannigan:

"I feel that I ought to have told those men all."

Flannigan shook his red head.

"Would you wish to lose them—to a man? Besides which, what—in the name of God—can you tell them, Misther Harvey?"

"Everything. I'd tell them that Chalcedyne had carnivora—I mean meat-eating plants—and that he fed and developed them until they became large and strong. I'd tell them—for I am sure of this—that his death cut off their meat supply and left them, by their own efforts, to satisfy their appetite. Being unnaturally strong and large, they did not die. They learned to forage for themselves and grew stronger and more savage——"

Flannigan's expression stopped him short.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir; but—for the love of God—don't tell them! What do they know—such as they—about meat-eating plants? They'll think you're drunk,

and laugh in your face, and we'll get no more work out of them."

Harvey told Croyce of it before the afternoon was over. The latter stood, gazing moodily toward the sea-oats on the dunes. Several acres of it swept inland, up to the very edge of the wood where cut trees and chopped brush were drying rapidly.

"I suppose he's right, at that," said Croyce. "Unless a man saw, he couldn't believe. I'll start the ax gang south tomorrow on the trail that White was showing us today."

He intended to have an ax in his own hand as he led them. From now on, it would be a pleasure to slash at those succulent stems. Both he and Harvey were secretly glad that it was now expedient, because of the scarcity of men, for them to work with the gangs. Working helped one not to remember that macabre procession on the beach, that two-wheel cart pushed and pulled by four men sick until they staggered.

He walked over to the deserted camp which had housed the negro axmen, and he chose a keen blade with a long hickory handle. As he whirled it over his head, he looked toward the dunes, toward that field of dry oats and grass shimmering in the evening light.

CROYCE took a savage pleasure in his long, razor-sharp ax. It had troubled him to destroy the jungle. It did not trouble him any more. At the head of his small crew—for Harvey had given him eight of the sawyers—he pushed, by way of Longitude Alley, deeper and deeper into the wood. Vines and underbrush grew there as they did not grow on the northern side. They made headway overnight, as though fighting back at the invaders. In the dewy wetness of early day, the axmen would arrive at a clearing, which they had left bare the night before, and find its chopped brush laced and bound with withes of muscular, living vine. It began to be a game with them, a game which was also a war. They were making headway and pushing a wide road fast through the enemy's country; but, in other places, where they were not on guard, the vines were advancing every hour.

Croyce was certain now that he heard them whispering as they grew in the night. He slept poorly in spite of hard labor, and he lost his appetite. When the wind changed to southwest, it was almost unbearable for the rank, unclean fetid odor that it brought. The men in the saw camp noticed it and were restless and quarrelsome. When one of Croyce's gang found a rabbit caught and half digested, it was all that Croyce could do to keep them from quitting on the spot.

Harvey's sawyers made slower headway but moved forward on a wider front. They were now approaching the tall, dead pine anchored, on every side, by vines. To saw it was, of course, out of the question: it was a job for the axmen to do. The wind was blowing on the morning that Croyce had planned to take it down. He watched it sway and dip and wished that he had done the job on a stiller day. But the saws were almost upon their heels and it had to be removed before them. He called to two of his best men and walked forward, ax on his shoulder.

He was so close that he did not see the danger as soon as those farther saw it. He heard a creak, and a rending split, just as he heard the men's shout of warning. With a yell to his two men to follow him, he looked swiftly up and then sprinted.

Burke ran with him, but Corley did not. Corley lost his head and stood still.

Then, like a stampeded steer, he dashed in the wrong direction.

It was hard to find him, at first, for the giant tree had smashed and crumbled as it fell. The other six axmen had seen it more clearly than either Croyce or Burke, and all eight of them were at the spot in fifteen seconds after it struck. So swiftly had they come that there was still movement along the torn trunk. Croyce told himself that the tree had not settled from its impact with the earth. Then he saw.

He saw that the tree was lying, a mass of dead, broken timber, but that the vines were reaching, struggling, fighting for something underneath.

Shouting curses, he stamped them down, for he had dropped his ax as he ran. He cursed and trampled and pushed them aside and broke them with his bare hands. And, as he did, he called to his men to do likewise—to find Corley—to get his body out and prevent abomination from being accomplished.

In a few minutes they drew it out—whole, but marked for the obscene feast. Its shirt was shredded and the exposed flesh was pocked by foul mouths and dribbling blood. A gigantic axman turned away, retching, and began to vomit.

They carried it back, a man holding each limb; for they dared not leave it, even for seconds. They tried to avoid passing the sawyers, and Croyce ordered his axmen to hold their tongues. His only desire was to find Harvey and to get everyone off the island. As he walked last of the short cortège, his eyes sought out the dry grass fields to east.

He had them lay Corley upon his own bed, and again he told them to hold their tongues. But he knew, as he watched them hurry away, that they were going to tell their comrades.

Bones, shivering as if with ague, followed him onto the veranda. He had trouble in understanding what the old man was trying to say:

"Ah jes' wish fuh tell yuh, Boss, dat Ah got muh trus'-me-Gawd hid. Ah got muh trus'-me-Gawd hid behin' dat big pa'm tree on de front beach."

Croyce said "Yes, yes;" but it did not register. He wanted to find Harvey, and Harvey was not with the saw gang. They had told him that Harvey and White had gone to see about a tree. As he stood on the step, looking dazedly out, he saw the gang emerge from the wood and go, at a run, across the island, toward the back beach. He exclaimed, half to Bones and half to himself:

"Where in the world are they trying to go? They can't get off the island."

Bones began to mumble again.

"Yessuh. Dat wat Ah try fuh tell yuh. Jason came in wid de la'nch less'n t'ree hours ago. Dem mens know dat an' dey gwine gittum an' mek Jason carry um 'way. But, Ah got muh trus'-me-Gawd hid on de beach way nobody fin' um."

The trust-me-Gawd—the frail, home-made boat in which the sea-island negroes dare the ocean—would be the only thing to save the three whites and Bones now. Croyce visioned the scene on the little pier when the Irish rushed the small put-put boat. Unless they stood back and made four or five trips, they would sink her before she left the dock. Even had there been room for Croyce, he would not have left without Harvey and White. The faithful negro was saving them by the offer of his bateau. He shook his head as though to clear it from awful phantasmagoria. First of all, he must find Harvey. He and Bones must stick together. He could not be alone now, and he must protect the old man. Over the whisper of the wind, he heard the whisper of tendrils growing.

They started together, along the back beach, for Bones had seen Harvey and White start that way. The vines had encroached upon the beach and almost covered the grassy road. Some stimulus—possibly rain—was causing this terrific growth. For years they had been quiescent, normal. Now they awakened, like long-dormant beasts. He told himself that it was the rain. The rainy spell must have caused it. It could not possibly be the scent of flesh and blood that had maddened them. . . .

Brain reeling, he hurried along the road, with the old black cook stumbling after him. He had gone thus for nearly a mile when he saw White at the jungle's edge. White was standing, harmlessly, underneath a large tree. Croyce slowed his pace and breathed deep with relief as the superintendent waved in greeting. His eyes went from the tall, thin figure standing beneath the tree up the smooth trunk which ran, without branches, for about fifteen feet. The forked, unfinished limbs had a vaguely familiar look. Somewhere, on a smaller scale, he had seen a tree like that.

Suddenly he saw that a rope was dangling from a limb, and that a second figure was going, hand over hand, up into the tree.

Harvey?

Croyce's heart stood still. Harvey was swinging himself up. He was going up, gripping with hands and feet as the trained foresters go. For some reason—to examine—or to limb the tree—*he was going up!*

Croyce heard himself screaming wildly, insanely, to his friend to stop. He was running again, not trotting now, but sprinting with every ounce in him. White was staring at him agape, but Harvey was still going up. As Croyce came within a few hundred feet of the tree, Harvey grasped the limb, near its fork, and swung himself astride of it.

To Croyce it seemed to snap shut as the slavering mouth of a wild beast snaps. Harvey cried once and then was silent. The only sound, above the wind, was the shuddering, rustling, closing sound of the leaves and boughs above their heads.

White had brought an ax, and Croyce whirled and seized it. He was insane. With a madman's strength, he swung and hacked at the sleek, thick trunk until White and Bones dragged him away. White said:

"If you throw it, it will kill us all. You've cut it half through. Let it suffer—die slowly. Bones says that the others have gone. We must go. We must hurry and leave in his bateau."

As they ran down the path through the jungle, they heard, on all sides, the rustle and hiss of life. Several times, a long tendril flung out and attempted to coil about one of the three. They ran as men run for their lives, and they took turns at helping the old cook along. They ran past the deserted camps, past the dead pine writhing with growth. They ran past a circle of stumps where the nine magnolia trees had stood. They had been recently sawn. As he passed them, Croyce saw, in the dark, gleaming leaves, one perfect, wide-open flower, with its petals as red as blood.

When they came out on the dunes and saw the clean ocean in front of them, they were panting like animals and barely staggering along. The clean sea wind blew in their faces—blew directly from the east. It rippled the long, dry fields of pale yellow oats and swamp-cane which ran, from the beach, to the cut wood and brush where the forest had been.

Croyce staggered up a dune and stood, swaying, upon its crest. He breathed deep

of the stiff east wind and his eyes ran over the long grass fields. Then he began to laugh aloud—wildly, exultantly.

Bones fell on his knees and began to pray:

"Oh, Chris', my boss-man gone crazy! Oh, Gawd, please fuh tek off de spell 'dem t'ing in de woods put on my boss!"

But Croyce shouted aloud, exultantly:

"Thank God for an east wind—and dry grass—and a match!"

He lighted it and it flared like tinder, and he lighted it in another place. Long stripes of red, like gashes of blood, ran through it, always toward the jungle. White and Bones, without his help, had dragged the boat to the water's edge. They had to come back and drag him away—down the beach—and into the boat.

The hand-made oars carried it out, beyond the surf, and they steered northward. They would round the island's upper end and take the creek to the nearest mainland. White said:

"Croyce, this old man musn't row. Snap out of it and take his oar!"

And Dicon Croyce took one last look at the fire, now shooting above the jungle; choked back his dreadful laughter and took the oar from the tired old black hand.

Jekal's Lesson

By DAVID BERNARD

A weird, creepy story about the living corpse that lay in its coffin, there on the floor of a deserted basement, and the ghastly experience of a physician

SEATED alone in his study, Harlow Barton, M. A., Ph. D., M. D., youthful president of Dean College, gave vent to his annoyance by noisily shaking the sheaf of papers he held before him on his desk.

"This is the last straw," he muttered to himself. "Complaint after complaint from parents. What could have happened to the supervision during my absence? 'Hypnotism' . . . 'spiritualism' . . . 'psychic vibrations and influences' . . . why, from these letters that fanatical fool, Jekal, must have been having a free hand. I might have known it would happen if I gave him control of a class. Spreading superstitious and dangerous nonsense in the guise of a class in psychology!"

"I beg your pardon, Doctor Barton."

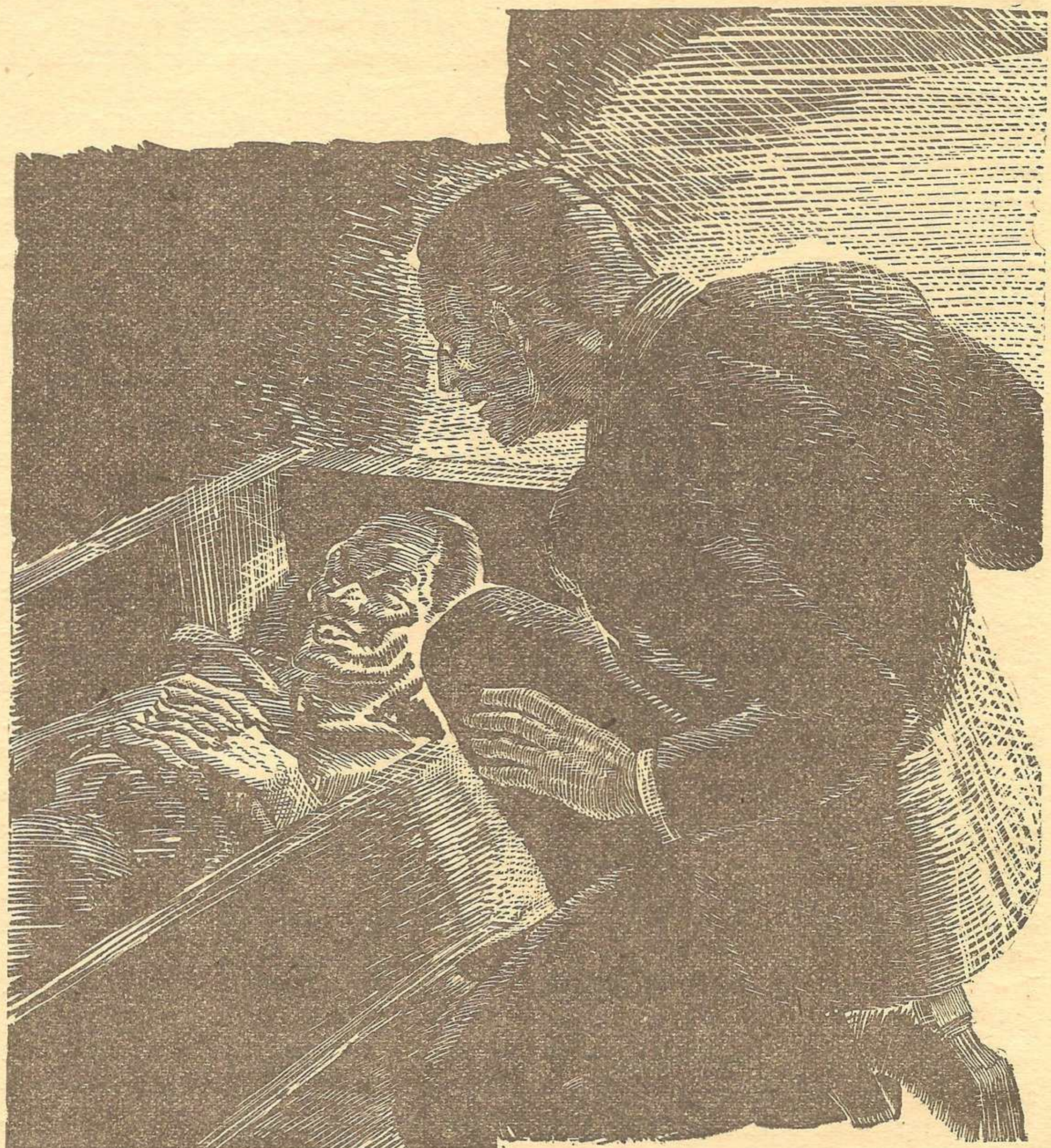
Startled, the doctor looked up. A slender, dark-complexioned oriental stood before the firmly closed door, staring at him. Thin lips curled into a supercilious smile, he seemed immensely pleased at the effect occasioned by his stealthy entry.

His was a face to remember: high cheekbones, imparting to the already thin face a sunken, fleshless appearance; a sharp, aquiline nose; two emerald eyes that shone with cat-like brightness. A smooth face, haughty, shrewd, lit with intelligence—the intelligence of a lynx.

His carefully modulated voice, bearing the trace of an alien tongue, harmonized well with the feline air that surrounded him.

"Again, I beg your pardon, Doctor Barton. I understood you wish to see me."

"You understood correctly," Doctor Barton burst out warmly. "I've just read over these letters received from parents and relatives of our students. It seems they resent, quite reasonably I'd say, the unscientific claptrap you've been teaching



"As he watched, the doctor saw the mouth move, the uneven teeth separate, until the bloodless lips were shaped into a mirthless grin."

their children, to say nothing of the absurd and harmful experiments in hypnotism and God knows what else that you had them undertake."

Jekal stroked his smooth, hairless chin with long, taper fingers. "I'm sure," he purred, "I can satisfactorily answer the unjustifiably anxious parents, if you so kindly would permit me."

Doctor Barton banged his fist on the desk. "That is unnecessary. I've already given them their answer. I've written them that you are no longer connected with Dean College."

The sneering smile yielded slowly to a scowl. "You do not mean that——?"

"I do, quite emphatically. It was through no desire of mine that you were appointed here in the first place. You have no academic background of any worth. And from the so-called course in psychology you have been giving, it is obvious that your ignorance of that subject is abysmal."

"Ignorant?" The humorless smile crept back to Jekal's lips. "It is you, proud exponent of western materialism that blinds you to the facts of eastern psychology—the true science of the soul—you who are ignorant."

Doctor Barton cut in impatiently. "I have no intention of trying to alter your beliefs. But I do object—as do the men and women who have written to me—to your imposing those beliefs on our pupils."

"The blind lead the blind," Jekal retorted angrily. "Your eyes are closed to the realities of the invisible universe all about you; you are determined the eyes of the young seekers for knowledge shall not be opened."

"And their minds twisted by attempting to develop their 'inner' powers. I think we thrashed all that out more than a few times already."

Jekal's rejoinder was lost in a fit of racking coughing that shook his slight body spasmodically for nearly a minute.

"And I repeat what I told you before," the doctor went on, "that when you will submit the teachings of your oriental high priests of magic—whose knowledge you claim to possess—to the laboratory methods of experimental science, then and then only will I pay serious attention to them."

Delicately sliding the end of a handkerchief across his wet lips, Jekal stood eyeing the speaker with mingled hatred and contempt. He coughed sharply once or twice. "Some day you will be shown the bottomless depths of your ignorance. And I trust I shall personally be able to do you that service."

Doctor Barton shrugged. "Well, in any event, we will give you a month's salary."

"You are serious?"

"Quite. You are no longer associated with this college."

"But the bequest of the Gadsby estate clearly stipulates that I am to carry on psychical investigation here at Dean."

"And you've done nothing of the kind. Not a job of investigation, in the scientific sense; no experimental testing of phenomena. You've used your position to hand out mystical dogmas, and the fruits of your own vivid imagination. And you've permitted and encouraged gullible young men to submit themselves to your hypnotic practises.

"The trustees of the college are backing me. And if the survivors of John Gadsby, who was so misguidedly impressed by your wisdom, object to what I am doing—which I'm sure they won't—Dean College will sacrifice their endowment rather than jeopardize the minds and health of our students. That is all—*Mister* Jekal."

Jekal stood immobile. "Very well, Doctor Barton. Very well. As you wish."

He turned, trod noiselessly to the door. He hesitated, then said over his shoulder, "One thing, Doctor Barton; you will give me a letter of recommendation?"

The doctor reflected for a moment. "Well—bluntly, Jekal, I will if you insist. But I hardly think you'd care to show the letter to a prospective employer."

The door slammed. The dark-skinned Jekal was gone.

2

IT WAS more than a decade later, in a different setting. Harlow Barton, seated at his desk, looked up, face creased with smiles, as Bill Masefield eased his tall, strapping frame through the doorway and strode toward him. He rose to grip the extended hand.

"I'm certainly glad to see you, Bill. Sit down, won't you?"

The two men sat studying each other closely. The doctor, temples now tinged with gray, broke the silence.

"Bill, you've scarcely changed. Still the same picture of rugged good health."

The former athletic coach at Dean College flexed his biceps. "Still doing a bit of wrestling," he grinned. "You, Harlow, private practise seems to have fattened you somewhat, and you're getting gray—but you're no old man by any means."

Reflecting, the doctor shook his head. "Twelve years—seems like yesterday. Is it that long since I left Dean?"

"Yes. You left soon after you returned from Pitfield."

The light of remembrance flared in the doctor's eyes.

"I had returned from the trial of Jekal —the poor, deluded fool. Ended up as I knew he would, only a year after I discharged him—mind twisted, bent on spreading superstition in the world."

It was obvious that Jekal had left a deep, if bitter, impression.

"And I'm not sorry I testified as I did. Despite his defense, he unquestionably was aiming to execute some blood-thirsty voodooistic rite he had picked up in the orient when arrested with that young boy."

"Your testimony concerning his beliefs and behavior at Dean," Bill put in, "turned the balance against him. So the papers said."

"Yes, it probably did. Jekal certainly thought so. He pleaded, then threatened. But I considered it my duty. In trying to translate his bizarre beliefs into practise that man had become a menace to society. I'm not sorry I put him where he is."

"Why," Bill interposed, "haven't you heard? Jekal was released from jail—about a week ago."

The doctor's face fell. "Why, how is that?"

"I heard he was dying. T. B. An act of mercy."

Bill declined the cigarette offered him. Doctor Barton inhaled deeply, for the moment lost in thought.

"Well," he said at last, "he had all the symptoms when I last saw him. There's no doubt his peculiar exercises—that he was brazen enough to urge on the students at Dean—deep breathing, self-hypnosis and what not—by which he hoped to develop the so-called occult powers, made him prone to the disease."

"Well," Bill changed the subject, "I remember him, too, but for a different reason."

Doctor Barton laughed. "Oh yes. From what you used to tell me I gathered the only contribution our would-be psychologist made to Dean was in wrestling."

"You laugh. Seriously, wrestling is a science; and that amazing trick of his was no mean contribution. The Arm Twist we called it, for want of a better term. I'll never forget the day he walked into the gym. He seemed so out of place. And when he invited me to throw him, I thought he was joking. But skinny and small as he was he sent me to the mat no less than a half-dozen times in succession. And, mind you, in front of my admiring students!

"He did it again, too, many times after —but I never could learn how he did it. Whatever you think of the deep secrets he claimed to possess, that Arm Twist was a secret that neither I nor anyone else I knew could ever fathom. A curious chap, that Jekal. If he had applied himself he could have done better things in life."

"In wrestling?" Doctor Barton inquired sarcastically.

Bill shrugged. "Quarter to three," he observed, glancing down at his watch. "I have an appointment at the club here in town at three. Will you join me?" He stood up, stretching.

"Like to, but I also have an appointment. Thought I'd be free this afternoon, but Frances, my nurse, left a note for me." The doctor tapped his hand on a memorandum pad on his desk. "Three o'clock appointment, too. Marked 'important'—and when Frances says 'important' she means just that."

He arose, picked up his small black bag. "But I should be back in an hour. I'll join you then."

The two walked through the door, the doctor locking it after him, then down the stairs and out into the street. Entering his roadster, Doctor Barton, with a noisy shifting of gears, was soon driving slowly up the street. Bill drove his car off in the opposite direction.

3

FAR at the other end of town Doctor Barton leaned out of his roadster to peer at the sign on the corner. "Front Street." Down the cobblestone road that wound its narrow way along the dirty, oily river he steered, alert for the address designated in his nurse's note.

Ramshackle buildings, uninhabited by municipal government order, vacant warehouses, coated with soot and filth, presented a drab picture on either side of the trafficless street. From the dark recesses of an empty dwelling an unkempt human derelict staggered forth here and there. No other human was in view. Cats seemed everywhere. Plump, large, mangy, baring needle teeth viciously as the doctor jolted by; they seemed to resent his intrusion on their domain. Years ago the commerce and shipping which had kept the section vibrant with activity had departed for the other end of town. And with its soul gone, Front Street was left but a corpse, doomed to decay.

The doctor's eye caught the address of a squat building that once had served the active neighborhood as a garage. So close to it that at first view they appeared joined was a narrow brick building. Neatly marked over the doorway was the address Doctor Barton sought.

Parking his car across the street, he walked to the door. It was boarded up securely. He glanced again at the address. He was sure he had not misread Frances' note. The three-story building was obviously uninhabited.

Puzzled, he walked to the side, peered down the alley that separated the building from the garage. The odor of the river, with its smoky tugs and garbage scows, wafted to his nostrils. He stepped hesitantly forward between the narrow walls. The scrape of a footstep other than his own made him pull up abrupt-

ly, whirl about. There, blocking egress from the alley, stood a huge black man.

Doctor Barton's heart picked up several beats as the man walked deliberately toward him. Within a pace he halted, a ponderous, somber brute, well over six feet tall. His shiny body was bare above the waist, exposing a massive pair of shoulders, long, simian, muscle-knotted arms, a barrel chest. The one ear he possessed was shriveled into the semblance of a dried cauliflower segment; a livid scar writhed from temple to fleshy, protuberant lips.

Gulping with apprehension, Doctor Barton asked timidly, "Do you know a family named Isaacs? Children sick?"

The Negro grunted, coconut head bobbing. Shuffling sullenly forward, he motioned the doctor to lead.

"Where to?" the doctor asked, standing firm.

No reply, only a vigorous head-shaking and further motioning.

The doctor repeated his query. This time the negro bent his ugly face close to the doctor's. Parting his thick lips, he pointed a finger into his mouth. As Doctor Barton gazed, horrified, into that cavernous opening, it was clear why the man had not replied. Where once had been a tongue there remained nothing but a cruelly torn, stumpy crimson mass. Breathing deep, the doctor obeyed the silent command to walk on.

Down the alley they paced, until the doctor could see the tugs churning up and down the river, almost within hailing distance, and hear the water as it lapped against the piles which supported the concrete embankment at the alley's dead end. Suddenly the negro laid a heavy arm on the doctor, turning him aside, forcibly directing his attention to a small window that apparently led into the cellar of the building. Maintaining his grip, the black used his other arm to open the window. Forced forward and downward, Doctor Barton tried to resist. But the superior weight and strength of his unwelcome guide left him no alternative but to leap blindly through the window.

The descent, no more than a couple of feet, did not deprive him of his balance. Holding his bag, he stood there, waiting in the darkness. Like a clumsy anthropoid descending from a tree-top, the brawny black bounded to his side. Flashlight in hand cutting a narrow swath through the gloom, he pushed the doctor on through the damp, musty basement. Past shadowy cases, ill-smelling walls . . . cobwebs brushed against Doctor Barton's face, clung disgustingly; the noise of scurrying vermin came to his ears. Now and again he would stumble over boxes or lumber strewn carelessly about; at times he would splash and trip through foul-smelling water that formed slimy, stagnant pools in the depressed areas of the cellar. But he never fell, for all the while the negro held him with a painful grip of steel.

At last the negro halted. His light slanted down, focussing upon what appeared to be a massive hatchway. The light went out.

In that inky blackness Doctor Barton could only guess what was taking place. He felt himself shoved roughly against a wall. Something whirred by his head. What must have been a large rodent rubbed its fat, wet body boldly against his leg until he finally gained sufficient control of his shaken nerves to kick out blindly. And then the noisy creaking and clanking of rusty hinges broke the silence. A grunt, the flash of a light in his eyes; the black was at his side.

This time he was led but a few steps forward. The light revealed the hatch to be standing on end, alongside a small, square opening that led down into God alone knew what black hole beneath the

basement floor. Shuddering, Doctor Barton tensed his muscles to resist the negro's pressure. The light died out. Two arms encircled him like metal bands. The struggle was hopelessly uneven. Like a child the doctor was lifted bodily, then carefully lowered down the hatchway.

Squirming feverishly as he hung with feet unsupported, he felt the negro's grip relax. Down he fell, striking the stone floor about ten feet below with a stunning crash. Reeling, he heard the noisy clanking of the hatch as it was pushed firmly into its snug-fitting frame.

4

"BILL! Bill Masefield!"

Stepping from the running-board of his car, which he had just parked around the corner from the club, Bill turned at mention of his name to face a smiling young woman.

"I remember you," he stammered, scrutinizing her, "but your name——"

"Why, Bill Masefield, how forgetful!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Frances! Oh, I'm so sorry. Why, how are you?"

"Fine, Bill. Married, you know. And you?"

She continued eagerly after his brief reply, but he cut her short, as politely as possible.

"I'm sorry, Fran; give me your address. I'll look you up. I'll be in town till tomorrow. You see, I have an appointment at three—in the club."

"Oh! Then you'll meet your old friend, Doctor Barton," she chattered, pressing her card into his hand. "You know, I'm working for him now."

"Why," Bill chuckled, "I recall now he did mention the name Frances, but I never associated it with——" He swallowed his words, a puzzled expression overspreading his face. "You say I'll meet the doctor in the club?"

"That's right. He's always there on Friday afternoons."

"But he has an appointment this afternoon; an important appointment, he said. You see, I just spoke to him less than fifteen minutes ago." He looked sharply at her. "Why—*you* left him instructions to that effect."

Frances' smile disappeared. "*I* did? You're talking riddles, Bill. I haven't even been in the office since eleven, when Doctor Barton left on his calls. I never go to the office on Friday afternoons. . . . Why, what *are* you doing, Bill?"

Bill was pulling her by the sleeve, his other hand reaching for the door of his car.

"Come," he said, "you're taking me to the doctor's office."

5

SPRAWLED on the cold stone floor, senses awhirl, Doctor Barton attempted to take note of his surroundings. If anything, the darkness was greater than in the cellar. The atmosphere, too, was far worse. More chill, damp, the very floor seemed to exude sweat. It was certain that the pit lay somewhere below the river's level. But here the fetid air of the basement was aggravated by a rank stench that struck the nostrils, bringing to the doctor unpleasant memories of the deadhouse.

Fearfully feeling his bruised legs, he pulled himself to his feet, carefully testing his weight on them.

"At least no bones broken," he muttered grimly. "I can be thankful for that."

"Yes, quite true," a low, peculiarly resonant voice boomed out somewhere in the darkness—"thankful you may be, indeed, my good friend, Doctor Barton."

The doctor started violently. That oily, slow-spoken voice, despite its un-

familiar hollowness, struck a responsive chord in his memory.

"Jekal!" he cried.

"Ah!" returned the voice. "You remember!" It broke off into an insane, mocking laugh.

Gropingly Doctor Barton extended his hands. "Jekal! Where are you?"

"There is a lamp near the wall, behind you," came the reply. "Strike a match."

Fumbling inside his pocket, the doctor drew out a package of paper matches. The match flared up evenly, throwing its feeble rays about. The walls of the place appeared at most four yards apart. Finding a small oil lamp on the floor behind him, he touched the match to the wick. It burst into sputtering, smoky flame.

It was with difficulty that the doctor adjusted his vision to examine his surroundings. The room, a square concrete box, he perceived to be deserted save for him. Unfurnished, walls bare, the only visible entrance was the hatch above. He coughed. The wretched hole stunk suffocatingly. Lifting the lamp overhead, he cast its lurid light toward each wall in turn.

"Jekal," he called out, "where are you?"

The response was a deep-throated chuckle. "Here, over here on the floor. Look down. Ooh ha ha ha!"

Shuddering, the doctor did as directed. Guided by the lamplight he stepped cautiously toward the apparent source of the voice. A long, narrow box was close to the wall. He stooped down, bringing the lamp close. What met his eyes made his hair crackle: A lidless coffin, and in it, lying stiffly, serenely—the emaciated body of Jekal!

Timorously he put his unsteady fingers to the body. They touched ice. He recoiled. The source of the noisome odor became apparent. He was in the room with a corpse!

What madman's hoax was being perpetrated? Every nerve aquiver, he sprang to his feet. And as once more that voice from a void boomed out, echoing weirdly from the close walls, a cold sweat drenched his body.

"You err in your diagnosis, Doctor Barton. To your limited vision I lie here dead. But you only prove what so long ago I told you. Your boasted science possesses knowledge merely of the superficial, least vital facts of life.

"Your schools never could learn what I, Jekal, *know*" — the voice inflected dramatically—"that the soul, the soul that you, proud scoffer, deny, lingers in the body for many hours after what you call death has taken place. When your ignorant authorities pronounce men dead—*they still live.* Just as I, notwithstanding your conclusion, I, Jekal, still live!"

Cursing, the doctor once more bent low, scrutinizing the immobile figure in the coffin. The eyes of the cadaverous face were shut. The skinny body, naked to the waist, was blue and deathly cold. Biting his lip, the doctor, filled with loathing, placed his ear to the frigid chest, for his stethoscope lay with his other instruments in his bag somewhere on the floor above. Neither respiration nor cardiac action was perceptible.

He ran his fingers along the body, palpating the bony appendages, then the thorax. The sensation was that of something soft, spongy dry, rotten dough. Bewildered, he sat back on his heels, breathing heavily. Unless his senses lied, as the vile odor made manifest, the disintegration succeeding *rigor mortis* had already set in. And as if to mock him there sounded out once more the unearthly voice, snickering harshly.

"Who are you?" he cried out.

"Jekal."

"Nonsense! Tell me who you are and what this outrage means!"

For fully a minute he had to endure that taunting laugh. Then the voice grew stern.

"Fool! You doubt—to the last you doubt! It is I, Jekal, who speaks. It is my body, the body of Jekal, that lies before you. Because the evidence of your senses, upon which you claim to depend, does not conform to your favorite theories, you deny it. Fool! Had you the power, as I have, to see beyond the gross outer sheath of matter, you could see that I still live; that though partly out of my almost completely dead body, I am still linked to it by the ethereal thread of the soul."

FAINT and dizzy, Doctor Barton lapsed into a kneeling position, grunting disapproval. Yet, fight as he might to deny it and its harrowing implications, that voice, despite its unearthly timbre, was, as he vividly recalled it, Jekal's; while the identity of the corpse in the casket he knew beyond question.

As the voice faded out he centered attention on his increasing difficulty of breathing. Gasping, he ripped collar and tie from his throat, then stood up unsteadily. From wall to wall he lurched, hammering, knocking, testing. They were firm, unyielding, so solid they must have been built against the natural clay deposits of the waterfront. He was helplessly imprisoned.

Fuming, he cupped hands to mouth and called out: "Jekal—or whoever you are!"

"What is it, my good friend?"

"It's suffocating down here. I can't breathe."

"Quite true," came the silky response. "So I perceive."

The heartless assurance of those words sent the doctor into a frenzy. He stamped wildly, pounded on the walls until at last, hands lacerated and bloody, he fell in exhaustion. His outburst only emphasized his impotence.

"What is the meaning of this? Why—am I here—Jekal—if Jekal you are?"

After a long interval of silence the voice droned a reply.

"I could cite many reasons, my dear Doctor Barton. But I shall pass over those pertaining to such simple, human reasons as lead a wronged man to inflict retribution upon his persecutor. I prefer to say that you are here in answer to your own request. You were ever hungry for proof. 'Laboratory demonstration' I think you called it. Proof of the occult wisdom which I, Jekal, have studied and possess. Thus you are here, *in my laboratory,* for a practical demonstration, a lesson in the wisdom of Jekal!"

As the voice paused to emit that croaking laugh, Doctor Barton moved the lamp quickly to the face of the corpse. Not a trace of movement was detectable.

"Fool!" grated the voice. "The voice-producing organs you have studied so minutely are needed for speech only on the physical plane of existence. Those possessing control of the inner, astral organs—as I, Jekal, have, after long training—can speak as I now do, and be heard, so long as contact is retained with the plane of matter."

Growing progressively weaker, the doctor prostrated himself on the floor. Mind battling to hold its grip on sanity, he cast about desperately for hypotheses to account for the nightmare experience he was passing through. Anything—hypnotism, ventriloquism, hallucination, telepathy—anything within the realm of plausibility.

"Hm!" boomed the voice, weirdly divining his thoughts. "Still doubting! Skeptical fool! Bend low—by my face."

In the fitful glare of the lamp the face appeared withered, ghastly, yellow. And as in silence he watched, the doctor saw

the mouth move, the uneven teeth separate, until the bloodless lips of the expressionless skull were shaped into a hideous, mirthless grin. And then the teeth clicked sharply together, and there remained nothing but memory of the uncanny occurrence.

OVERWHELMED with horror, with fear of the inexplicable electrifying his nerves, Doctor Barton shrank back, as once more that blood-chilling laugh swirled up out of hell.

"Let me out of this hole," he gasped weakly.

"Impoliteness—such impoliteness!"

"I—I'm—ch-choking." He pounded on the floor.

"A physician should know better than to increase his respiration by unneeded exertion."

"I can't live—much longer—in this," the doctor wheezed, noting with just alarm his already seriously advanced symptoms of asphyxia.

"This time, for once, Doctor Barton, your observation is quite correct. But by calming yourself you can easily survive for several more minutes—ample time for your lesson."

Swearing bitterly, coughing and wheezing, the doctor wormed his way to the flickering lamp. The thought of losing even such dim comfort in the gloomy chamber appalled him; yet its flame, feeble though it was, was too great a tax upon what little oxygen yet remained. He hesitated, then abruptly extinguished the flame. Pressing close to the floor, where the air was least vitiated, he prayed for the unconsciousness that would spare him the agony of slow asphyxiation. But the voice allowed him no peace.

"Lie still. That is wise. You can better hear what I say. Your lesson, my good pupil, must be grasped.

"I am about to give you the supreme demonstration of the power and control over nature that I have achieved. You shall see how far the learning of Jekal—at which you stupidly scoffed—soars beyond your elementary and false concepts of man and nature.

"You were not far wrong when you thought me dead. My body, plagued with a disease that my cursed parents handed on to me, has long given me trouble. And now, now as it is about to be cast off completely—it is already beyond resurrection—I am well pleased. Long has it hindered me. Hm! Except at night, when it slept, and I would glide forth into the unseen astral world. But what can that mean to you—ignorant fool! —locked in your gross body from birth to death, glorying in your childish learning!

"By nerve-racking exercise and training, day after day, year after year, I developed the power—the power to leave this cursed body behind me—when I chose. At will! At will! Do you hear me?" the voice thundered.

Snuggling to the floor, sucking in the air with feeble gasps, the doctor made no reply. Again the dismal voice. And then a terrifying chill—a chill that made the cold stone of the floor seem warm by contrast—swept noiselessly over him. Whatever its source, it froze him to the marrow, bringing enervating fear as its attendant. Like one in the grip of a spastic disease the weakened doctor shook. At the verge of screaming, he knew well that fear alone could not account for his quivering.

As abruptly as it had descended upon him, the icy presence departed, leaving Doctor Barton in silence broken only by his pounding heart and irregular, rasping breath. Hoarsely he answered in the affirmative as the voice boomed, "Do you hear?" And monotonously, as if never interrupted, it droned on.

"Since attaining that power, I have

looked forward eagerly to the day when I might lay aside my body and enter into another, more desirable earthly tenement. Hm! Another superstition, according to the empty-headed authorities to whom you give reverence. But you shall soon learn otherwise!

"There are men in the wise orient who have lived centuries, even millennia, on earth. . . . Going from body to body, leaving their own when outworn. . . . Entering others, weakened bodies, whose owners cannot resist. . . . Hm! Yet you believe—and teach—that soul and body are one and inseparable!

"But I must not digress. Time grows short. Experimental proof—so all-important to you—shall now be yours. For very soon, when my body is completely cast off, I, my good Doctor Barton, shall enter into yours. You, Doctor Barton, you shall be the first stepping-stone to unbroken, conscious immortality — here on earth—for Jekal!"

Had he wanted to reply to those diabolical words, the doctor possessed neither strength nor breath to do so. Over and over the moaning, maddening laugh sounded out.

"Your thanks for the lesson are not forthcoming, but no matter. The pleasure I have derived from teaching you—to say nothing of the use of your handsome, healthy body—is to me quite ample payment. Ooh ha ha ha ha!"

As if from a great distance the doctor heard the voice add:

"Already I see your ethereal body oozing forth. A body trapped in an oxygenless pit affords it poor nourishment. But do not despair. Soon your distressed lungs shall feast upon good fresh air. My faithful slave, Moro, shall bring forth the weakened body. And once revived, following his strange experience, Doctor Barton shall return home, a quite changed man; changed in temperament and, I dare say, knowledge. Behind him he will leave the dead Jekal—the poor Jekal, dead of consumption, the fools will say."

But at that point the light of consciousness grew dim, and as the doctor heard the maniacal cackle sound out once more, a merciful unconsciousness descended upon him.

6

With a screeching of brakes, Bill Masefield pulled his car up behind Doctor Barton's roadster. Incredulity when Frances had denied authorship of the note, despite its similarity to her writing, had given way to suspicion that had sent him speeding to the address mentioned. As he had progressed into the deserted, desolate waterfront, suspicion yielded to ominous foreboding.

Finding the door boarded up, he stepped cautiously down the alley. He peered in through the open window. A beam of light was cutting through the blackness. Toward him it came, then swerved abruptly and was gone. Soon there appeared the scattered rays of a steady source of light shining at the far side of the basement.

Bill eased his body through the window. He tiptoed toward the light. Outside the half-closed door of a room he halted. Seated by a table, atop which burned a watchman's lamp, sat the huge black.

Hurling caution to the winds, Bill pushed through the door.

"Where is Doctor Barton?" he rapped at the startled giant.

The response was a sudden rush at him by the latter, chair poised overhead. Reacting instantly, Bill stooped low, meeting the attack with a charging shoulder-butt that caught the negro heavily in the thighs. The chair fell to the floor as he fell back, pained and aston-

ished. Grimacing with rage, he shuffled clumsily forward, reaching for the shrewdly retreating Bill. Within reach, he clutched for Bill's swaying head.

With skill born of a lifetime of training the latter weaved in close, turned unexpectedly about, reached up to lock his hands about the negro's bull-like neck. Down he bent, jerking his arms. The black sailed over his head in a somersault, crashing into the wall. He shook his head, then, with incredible vitality, pulled himself up. Again unprotected, he waddled to the attack, once more playing into his skilled antagonist's hands.

This time the flying mare was repeated, with even more force. Headlong into the stone floor the big man smashed. He writhed convulsively for a few seconds, then lay motionless, mouth agape, eyes staring glassily into space. Grasping the lamp, Bill ran out into the basement, using it to guide him through the gloom.

No entrance to the building above—not a trace of the one he sought—no one could he find. Despairing, as for the second time he completely traversed the cellar, his foot tripped over something. His heart leaped. It was the doctor's bag! Close by was the trap-door.

Every ounce of his strength was required to lift that massive hatch from its frame. The graveolent stench that swirled up forced him back. Hand clapped to nose, he lowered the lamp through the opening, and strode quickly to the nearby wall, heart racing with fear and excitement. He had deduced correctly: there was a ladder close to the wall. Lamp in hand he was soon descending, not daring to breathe, into the hole.

The sight that met his eyes convulsed him with horror. The putrescent corpse of Jekal, in the coffin; the prostrate Doctor Barton. Lungs threatening to burst, he lifted the doctor's inert form upon his back, carrying him in a fireman's hold up the ladder.

INTO the open air of the alley he staggered at last. There was not a second to spare. He carefully laid the doctor face down on the ground and knelt to his rear. He was soon administering artificial respiration to his unbreathing, blue-faced friend.

Tenaciously, unmindful of the fleeting minutes, he continued, rhythmically forcing the precious air in and out of the doctor's lungs. At long last he was rewarded by hearing a feeble resumption of breathing. Slowly this gained strength.

Doctor Barton opened his eyes. A sickly grin crossed his lips as he met the anxious eyes of his friend. He had been dreaming, a soul-racking nightmare, in which he had been struggling—for what, against what, he could not recall, except that, somehow, his very life depended on the outcome of the struggle. And then, like some appalling weight, there descended upon him the terribly real events of the afternoon.

As if compelled to unburden himself, he jerked forth the incredible details of it all to the astounded Bill.

"But, Bill," he concluded hoarsely, "Bill, he—he's dead. You know that, Bill. You saw him."

Silently, grimly, Bill assented. A look of relief spread over the doctor's haggard face.

He knew—he *must know,* he told himself—the rational explanation of it all. He shook his head slowly. "No—it couldn't be—*it couldn't,*" he muttered over and over.

Bill, looking quizzically at him, attributed it to his shaken condition.

Then, abruptly, the doctor gasped:

"Look!" seizing Bill by the sleeve, turning him about.

There, emerging stealthily from the open window, some dozen paces down the alley, was the ponderous form of the black.

Ugly features barely discernible in the half-light, he glanced at them, wheeled and lumbered off toward the alley's blind end.

"Hold up, you!" cried Bill, sprinting after him.

Pulling himself up weakly, Doctor Barton followed on unsteady feet.

Just as the black scrambled onto the five-foot embankment, Bill, with a reckless leap, grabbed him from behind. The big man twisted about, pressing his opponent against the concrete. Bill, seasoned wrestler that he was, immediately shifted his hold to the front. Fighting desperately to free himself, the black brought his knee chestward, breaking Bill's grasp and jolting him backward. As the latter sprawled on the ground, the negro, off balance, was forced to jump down from the embankment.

In a flash Bill was up, interposed between the black and his obvious avenue of escape. Without hesitating, the man shuffled forward, grunting viciously. Hands extended, feet well spread, Bill confidently awaited his untutored opponent. As one heavily muscled black arm reached out, he feinted cleverly and lunged to the attack.

As if from nowhere the negro's hand darted out, gripping Bill's wrist. Half pulling, half twisting, he drew Bill's arm peculiarly across his chest. With incredible speed he ducked low, and as Bill tilted forward, grasped him at the crotch. As though all in one movement, Bill was lifted high overhead, whirled dizzily about, sent hurtling through the air to land with a sickening jar near where Doctor Barton stood, dumb-struck.

The negro clambered quickly to the top of the embankment. Pausing to draw breath, he turned his head deliberately. Over his shoulder his eyes, glinting strangely, fixed upon the open-mouthed Doctor Barton. Fleshy lips parted, and as several deep-throated raspy sounds came forth, the scarred face twisted into a hideous grimace of hate. He snarled brutishly, turned and leaped, striking the water with a loud splash.

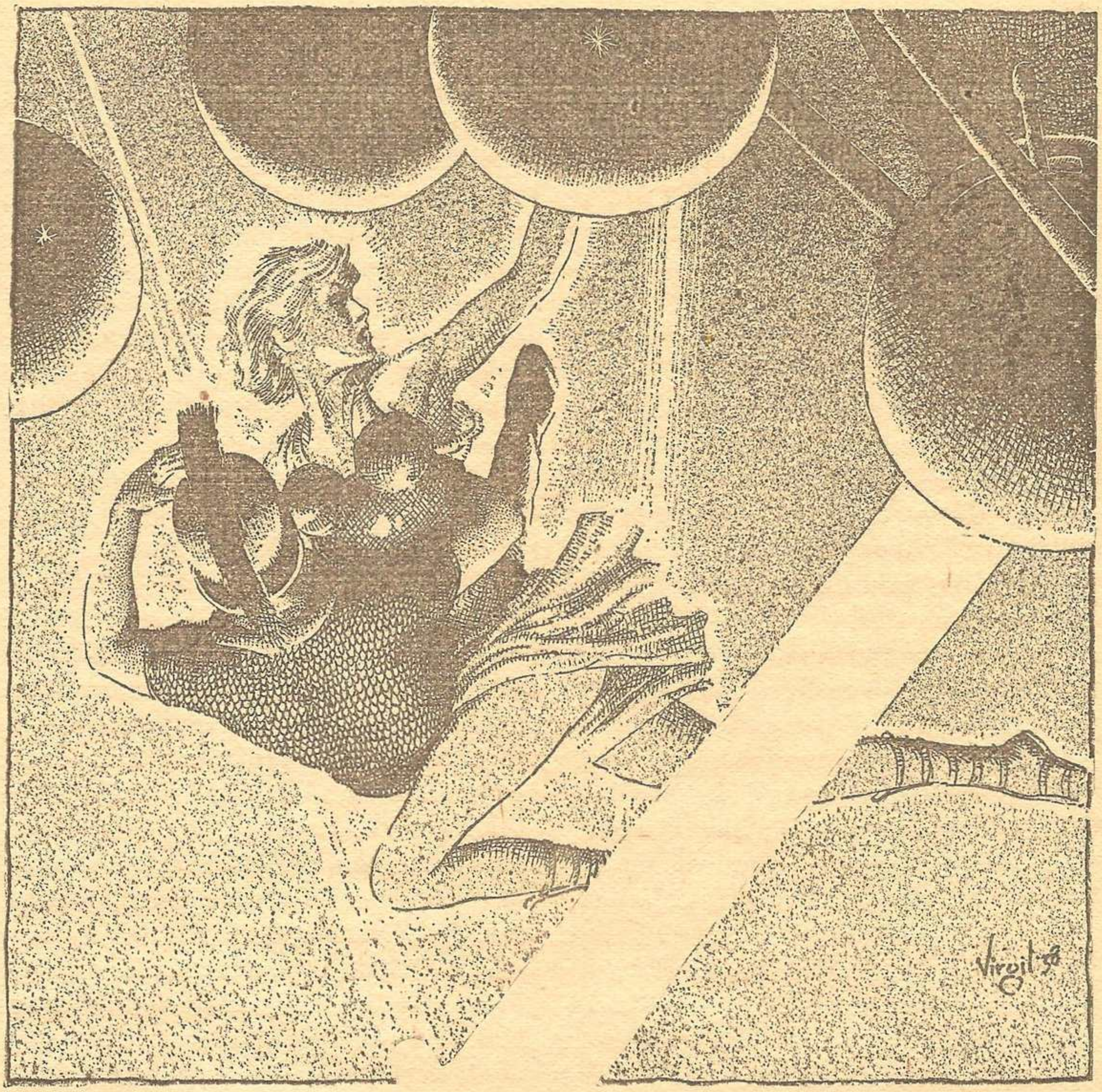
Running anxiously to the embankment, Doctor Barton saw the kinky head bob to the surface a stone's throw away. Heavy arms thrashing clumsily, the glistening body moved steadily, obliquely upshore. Not until the churning figure was swallowed up in the haze, somewhere near the deserted wharf a hundred yards up the shore, did Doctor Barton turn to his badly stunned friend.

Eyes popping, face white, Bill's lips twitched spasmodically — for all the world, the doctor couldn't help thinking as he knelt beside him, like a neurotic woman on the verge of hysteria.

"Har-Harlow," he stammered, "Harlow—there was only one—one man—who could do that. That was the Arm Twist—the Arm Twist. . . ." His voice cracked into a wheeze, more a sob.

"The Arm Twist," whispered Doctor Barton dully. He forced a laugh. "Why, of course not, Bill. You're mistaken, Bill."

But the very words called up with unnerving vividness the picture of a black face, a savage face with incongruously luminous eyes that glared with a mad hate. And as the moist, odorous breeze blew softly down the alley, bringing, or seeming to bring, a guttural, inhuman voice to his ears above the lapping of the tide and the rhythmic pounding of the tugs, Doctor Barton knew that he had lied.



"Jhulun leaped, with Shirani in his arms, into the fiery depths."

The Fire Princess

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrill-tale of intrigue and weird horror in the terrible valley of Koom, the hidden city—a story of the Place of Power that was the tomb of the Ancient Ones

The Story Thus Far

GARY MARTIN, secret agent of the United States, has been sent on a perilous mission on which depends the peace of the world. He has gone into the mountains of mysterious Tibet, seeking the legended, forbidden kingdom of Koom in which dwells a sacred white race. The superstitious peoples of Asia believe that a princess of that hidden race is coming forth soon to lead them to world conquest. Gary's mission is to pre-

This story began in WEIRD TALES for August

vent her from coming forth and plunging the world into war. Three spies of other countries, Major Okara of Japan, Boris Borchoff of Russia, and Joan Laird of Britain, also seek to enter the hidden land.

Gary Martin and his three spy-rivals succeed in entering Koom, which lies in a valley completely surrounded by towering volcanoes. The city of the weird hidden kingdom is situated beside a fiery sea of molten lava, from which a lava river runs through a natural tunnel out of the valley. They are all four seized by the soldiers of Koom, under command of Shirani, the princess and ruler of this hidden white race.

Gary learns that Shirani does mean to go forth into the outside world and lead the nomad races to conquest. But before she goes forth, she means to bring about a world cataclysm that will shatter all the civilized nations of earth. In this valley ages ago lived a strange race of unhuman beings, the Ancient Ones, who had the power to alter the whole surface of earth by tampering with the keystone of earth's structure, a fiery abyss deep under the volcanoes, which is called the Place of Power. Shirani means to utilize this ancient power to wreck earth, then conquer it.

Despite himself, Gary has fallen in love with the fiery, beautiful princess, and she with him. This has aroused the jealousy and hate of Jhulun, a noble of Koom. But when he hears of the catastrophe that Shirani means to cause, Gary joins forces with the other three spies to prevent her. The others decide that the only way to stop Shirani is to kill her, and reluctantly Gary, torn between love and duty, agrees to the plan. He and Okara and Borchoff make their way to her apartment in the palace, by night. Borchoff is killed by her guards. But Gary has a chance to kill Shirani—and finds that he is unable to do it.

Shirani tells Gary that when she has wrecked and conquered the earth, he shall rule it by her side. She leads him down into the fiery caverns under the volcanoes. They pass through the great cavern-tomb of the Ancient Ones, where those unhuman, mineral-fleshed creatures of the far past lie in their sepulchers. Then they enter the Place of Power, where exist the forces that Shirani means to use soon to bring destruction to the nations of earth.

The story continues:

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10. The Place of Power

GARY felt as though he and Shirani were walking into a raging inferno of light and sound. The stunning blaze that nearly blinded their dazzled eyes, the thunderous, unceasing roar as of a cosmic forge beating out new planets, these things smote his brain into reeling impotence. He stumbled forward like a man in a dream, his tall form rigid, his tanned, lean face aghast in the terrific light.

But Shirani, her strong little fingers locking his, was advancing eagerly beside him. The gold head of the princess was erect, her silken, slender form straining forward, her beautiful face and wide blue eyes throbbing with tense expectation. She seemed drawn irresistibly forward like a flame sucked by wind.

They took six steps forward, through the huge, open doors, and their feet rooted. Gary took one long look ahead, with wild, dilated eyes. Then he swayed, tottered. He felt his brain darkening dizzily, from the shock of the incredible and awful vista into which he looked.

"The Place of Power!" Shirani's voice shrilled silver over the thunderous roar, awe on even her wild face now. "The keystone to the whole earth's structure!"

"God!" Gary's hoarse exclamation was almost a prayer. "This—it's hell itself."

They stood on the rock brink of an im-

measurable flaming abyss. Before them and under them stretched a vast, fiery space—a colossal hollow in the rock crust of the earth.

This space was miles and miles across, Gary's reeling gaze apprehended. The rocky roof of it was but a few hundred feet higher than the narrow shelf on which they stood. From that roof so close above them, the titanic abyss dropped downward. Peering down, Gary felt a sick vertigo.

He looked down into an enormous fiery space shaped like a seven-pointed star. The center of that vast hollow, *miles* beneath him, was an awful fire-world of red-hot rock and boiling lava streams and seas, swept by winds of flame, shaken by bellowing thunder-sounds.

From that terrible central space, seven giant chasms radiated into the hot crust of earth. Their star-like structure was almost mathematical in its exactness. Seven terrific fissures, extending into the fiery rock farther than his dazed eyes could follow——

"Gary, you are falling!"

Shirani's cry in his ear, her little hands clutching his arm, recalled Gary from the reeling giddiness overcoming him.

"This place—it's incredible!" he shouted over the thunderous, unceasing roar that came up from the fiery depths.

Shirani pointed, her eyes blazing with excitement. "It *is* the keystone of Earth—see where the great cracks of Earth's crust converge here upon each other. And see, there are the instruments which the Ancient Ones long ago used to shake and rive the whole surface of the earth!"

Gary's eyes followed her pointing hand. A little along the shelf on which they stood, a slender spur of rock stabbed outward like a huge finger, projecting out above the fiery abyss.

The rock spur was a hundred yards long, and its end had been hollowed into a small, railed platform. His half-dazzled eyes described, projecting from that platform, a dark, looming mechanism.

"Come, Gary!" Shirani was crying. She led eagerly along the precariously narrow rock shelf, toward the spur.

He followed, his steps clumsy and unsteady. The terrible, crashing roar from the abyss beneath, the hot winds and sulfurous breath that came up from it, added to the benumbment of his mind.

They reached the spur. Shirani still held his hand tightly as she started out on that slender tongue of rock. Its top side had been smoothed but was only a few yards wide, and without protective rail of any kind. A misstep to either side meant a tumble into the abyss. Yet Shirani moved as lightly and fearlessly as though she walked in the palace of Koom. In this thunderous, fiery underworld, she herself looked like a thing of flame and force, gold hair blown back by the hot winds, blue eyes burning with eager excitement.

The rock spur trembled and vibrated unceasingly under them, and to Gary, it was like walking a narrow plank out over the mouth of hell. His knees buckled as they stepped down into the slightly sunken platform at the end of the spur.

This place was ten feet square, sunken a yard into the solid rock. It quivered like an aspen leaf under their feet, vibrating to the wild rush of roaring winds from the flaming spaces below. But Shirani ran with eager cry toward the looming mechanism or instrument that projected out beyond the end of the spur itself.

"At last!" she cried. "The power over all Earth which I have desired so long—in my hands!"

"But what is the thing?" Gary asked dazedly.

Eight metal hemispheres like great searchlights were mounted so that their

translucent lenses pointed down into the abyss. The largest hemisphere pointed its lens straight down into the central fiery space far below, and the other seven lenses were directed each at one of the seven tremendous chasms that radiated star-like into the crust of the earth.

Behind this weird mechanism stood a massive metal cube that appeared the container of whatever power the searchlight-things were meant to project. Atop the case were eight levers, movable in graduated slots. And there also rested a thin flat book of metal leaves bearing clear diagrams of the machine and of Earth's crustal structure.

"See, these are the instructions left by the Ancient Ones for operating this instrument of theirs to change Earth's surface!" Shirani exclaimed. "They left them here so that if ever man needed this mighty power to preserve himself, it would be available."

"But that's impossible!" Gary cried, his razed mind wildly clinging to the shreds of his disbelief. "This machine couldn't have the power to shake or change Earth's surface——"

SHIRANI grasped up the metal book, her whole body quivering in wild triumph. She cried to him, "We must return now, Gary!"

Stunned, incapable of clear thought, Gary went back with her along the quivering spur to the narrow rock shelf. He stumbled with her through the open doors, back into the gloomy cavern-tomb of the Ancient Ones.

The high priest Dridim's body still lay just in front of the open doors to the Place of Power, blood still seeping from the wound in his breast that Shirani's dagger had made. And in the blazing light, his dead eyes still seemed to stare at them in hollow hate.

"Let us rid this place of Dridim's body," Shirani said. "His eyes, even in death, trouble me—I still seem to hear him prophesying to me of the doom that would come upon me from this tomb." She added, "We will cast him into the Place of Power, Gary."

Numbly Gary lifted the body of the black-robed priest and carried it back through the doors to the edge of the rock shelf. With a staggering thrust, he shoved it over into the abyss. Looking down after it, a violent sickness shook him as he saw that black body tumbling, dropping with awful speed, down, down, into the fiery world far beneath, down until it was but a falling speck.

It seemed to Gary for a moment that *he* was falling, screaming down into that roaring hell of flame and thunder. Then, far below, the falling speck of Dridim's body vanished.

"So end Dridim and his dark prophecies of doom!" Shirani exclaimed fiercely. "He should be well content, since he has had burial in the very heart of the Place of Power which he sought to guard."

"Shirani, let's get out of here," Gary muttered thickly. "I—I can't stand much more of this."

They went back again through the doors into the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, and started forward. When they had taken a dozen steps forward, the great double doors of the Place of Power closed softly behind them, actuated by some delicate, hidden mechanism.

Instantly the roaring blaze and thunder of that awful place vanished, and the great cavern-tomb was dark and silent once more. Only the feeble glow of Shirani's silver lamp, still burning on the floor where she had left it, dispelled the solemn gloom.

Shirani picked up the lamp, and they went on back through the cavern. As they passed between the rows of high stone blocks upon which lay the huge,

dead, man-like forms of the Ancient Ones, Gary hardly spared a glance at those alien, unearthly bodies of mineral flesh. His brain was too dazed by his glimpse of the Place of Power.

But as they reached the tunnel that led to the upper world, and followed that dark passage upward through the solid rock and on through the awful chasm of the spurting fire-fountain, Gary's numbed mind began slowly to function again. A cold, shuddering fear began to invade him as he realized the terrible meaning of what he had seen.

They reached the mouth of the tunnel, where their horses were nervously stamping, and mounted. Gary rode after Shirani out of the tunnel into the night. Before them stretched the burning lava sea and from high above them leaped down the thundering lava cataract. But these things, which had so appalled Gary on the inward journey, he did not even see now in the appalling fear that possessed his mind.

His dazed brain was just beginning to realize that it was all *real.* Yes, the secret Place of Power which he had thought was mere superstition was real, and real too was the power to shake and shatter the whole surface of Earth which lay in the great instrument he had seen there. And that terrible power was now in Shirani's relentless hands!

They were galloping around the burning lava sea toward the black city of Koom, Shirani leading eagerly.

As they rode into the dark, sleeping city, Gary spurred his horse to her side and cried to her.

"Shirani, I never believed until now that you *could* do this thing you've planned—that you could shake Earth and shatter the nations. But—my God—I believe now! And you must not do it!"

"Gary, not anyone in the world can keep me from attainment of my great ambition now!" her silver voice pealed. "This book of the Ancient Ones will teach me how to operate their instrument in the Place of Power, and with it I shall cause the earth to shudder and quake and wreck those nations which you thought so mighty. And when Earth lies prostrate and ready to be conquered easily, then I and my people go forth from Koom and gather the nomad millions who wait outside the mountains, and sweep forth to conquest of the broken world. And you ride by my side in that conquest, Gary."

"Shirani, I want no part of such a hellish plan!" Gary cried wildly. "This unholy, ruthless ambition of yours will kill whole peoples—will shatter civilization itself. Even if I myself can't prevent you, someone or something surely will."

"Now you begin to talk like Dridim, and his dire predictions of the doom that would overtake me!" flared Shirani. "No, Gary, nothing can stop me now."

THEIR horses were clattering now into the dark stone streets of Koom. The city still lay wrapped in slumber, brooding blackly beneath the wild, horizontal rays of the glowing fire sea.

Shirani rode her horse up to the vast black palace on the side that fronted the great plaza. She dismounted, and with Gary behind her, swung swiftly up the steps. The silver-armored guards in front of the palace flashed their swords in quick salute to their princess.

"Wake all Koom, at once!" Shirani commanded. "Summon my people here!"

There was a hasty running of guards, a calling of voices, and then a score of warriors with long silver trumpets hurried out of the palace and ranged themselves in a row. They raised the trumpets to their lips and blew a silver-stabbing blast. The snarling blast reverberated across the city, and was repeated, again and again.

Shirani waited, eyes glowing with ex-

citement, her back to the trumpeters. She stood facing the plaza, Gary beside her. Koom was awaking, as the trumpet-blasts shook the night. Lamps and torches flared in the black stone buildings, and people were pouring into the plaza. Soldiers in silver armor, plebeians in blue silk, nobles in white—a great, torchlit crowd soon faced Shirani.

"People of Koom," cried her silver voice clearly, "I have long promised you that soon would come a day when I should lead you out of this prisoning valley to a conquest of the wide world. Now I tell you—*that day has come!*"

A dead silence of amazement held the great throng. Gary saw their faces, white and stupefied in the torchlight. Then a vast, thunderous cheer went up from them, splitting the night, a shout of fanatical enthusiasm.

"Yes, that day has come," Shirani repeated, her slim, imperious white figure riveting their attention. "The high priest Dridim, who so long thwarted our will and refused us the key to the Place of Power, is dead. And I hold that key, and I have been tonight in the Place of Power. And tomorrow night I go there again, to loose the forces that will shatter the nations of the outer world, that shall crash their cities and their pride to ruins. And when that is done, we ride forth from Koom, and with the peoples who await our coming, we shall gallop to world conquest. The hooves of our horses shall drum upon the wrecked empires of the world!"

"Shirani! Shirani!" rose the frantic shout of approval as swords flashed wildly in the torchlight. "We will follow you, princess!"

"Then make you ready tomorrow for our going forth," Shirani ordered them. "And one thing more I have to tell you."

She turned to Gary and took his arm.

"This stranger lord rides by my side when we go forth," Shirani declared. "Honor him, my people, for he is the husband chosen by the princess of Koom."

There was a moment's hesitation, and then from the crowd rose another cry.

"We honor your husband, princess!"

But as that shout died, a hoarse, loud voice cried out, and a big, powerful figure in silver armor forced out of the crowd and came running up the steps.

It was Jhulun. The Koomian noble's handsome, arrogant face was mad with jealousy and hate. He pointed with a quivering finger at Gary, and cried out loudly to the crowd below.

"Are you of Koom to be ruled by an outland stranger?" he cried fiercely. "Yes, and a stranger who came to this land to kill your princess! I heard him say it."

"Jhulun, be silent!" blazed Shirani, lightning flashing from her stormy blue eyes.

The Koomian turned upon her a distorted, jealousy-maddened face, and laughed fiercely. "No, Shirani—since you prefer this outland dog to me, who was promised your hand, I shall see that you never wed him."

A great muttering, an angry, swelling murmur, was rising from the crowd. The words of Jhulun had sown sudden doubts.

Shirani heard, and raised her hand in imperious command for silence. Her voice flared forth wrathfully.

"My people, listen not to Jhulun, who is crazed with jealousy. This stranger lord I have chosen for mate does not desire to kill me—Jhulun but seeks to stir you up against him."

"But why should you wed any stranger, princess?" cried an angry voice from the crowd. "Why not mate with one of the ancient blood of Koom?"

There were cries of agreement. Jhulun's sullen face took on a smile of fierce satisfaction.

Shirani stiffened. And then she seemed

to flame out tangible force. She had never been so terribly, so utterly beautiful, Gary thought numbly, as now when her will had been challenged by the crowd.

"Am I or am I not your ruler?" she cried passionately. "Mutter longer against my will, and I will withhold from you the world-empire I have promised you!"

Her flaming threat silenced them. And then a warrior's strong, deep voice spoke from the crowd.

"Your will is our will, princess! If you choose this stranger for husband, we do not protest."

And a loud shout of agreement went up quickly from the great crowd that a moment before had been murmuring in dissatisfaction.

"It is well!" Shirani exclaimed. "Go back to your homes now, and tomorrow prepare your horses and swords and spears. And fear nothing, my people—though the whole world shall shake and creak tomorrow night when I loose the forces in the Place of Power, naught shall be felt here in Koom."

With a final wild roar of enthusiasm, the excited crowd began to disperse. Shirani turned to Jhulun, triumph in her face.

"You see now, Jhulun," she declared, "how fruitless was your attempt to turn my people against me. Now I have found out how venomous is your secret soul, and I warn you that if you try once more to thwart my will, you shall not long remain living."

Jhulun did not recoil from that fierce threat of the princess. The Koomian's handsome face was ghastly in its passion.

"So this," he said thickly, "is my reward for long service to you—to be cast aside for a nameless stranger."

His steely eyes seemed to dart devouring hate-flames at Gary. "So be it, then, Shirani," he grated, and strode away.

Shirani looked after him darkly. "Almost I think it would be wiser to order Jhulun's death now," she declared to Gary. "Yes, and I would order it this moment were it not that I cannot give cause for dissension to rise among my people on the eve of our great destiny."

She looked up into Gary's face with a gaze that was almost wistful.

"I know what you are thinking, Gary," she said. "You are still filled with horror at what I plan to do."

"Yes, I am," Gary said hoarsely. "Shirani, you cannot bring this great catastrophe on Earth. The very thought of it is evil, evil—and I tell you now, that though I love you, that love will turn to bitter hate and loathing if you succeed in your unholy intentions."

"No, Gary," she said confidently. "You will *always* love me—that I am sure of. And once this thing is done and the cataclysm has passed and is beyond mending, you will no longer feel such horror. Until the thing is done, you must remain under guard, Gary. You would give your life, I know, to thwart me and save your peoples. And while I am sure that you could never again try to kill me, yet you might do something that would hamper my plans."

She called the guards waiting watchfully a little distance away, and ordered them to return Gary to his apartment in the palace.

"Tomorrow night," she told him, "I shall come for you, for I wish you to be at my side in the Place of Power when I loose the forces there. Until then, I shall not see you, for I have much to learn from this book of the Ancient Ones, of the control of those forces."

GARY could find nothing more to say, in his present mental and physical exhaustion. He stumbled with the guards into the palace, and up to the guarded door of the apartment which he had left

with Okara and Borchoff hours before—eternities before, it seemed now!

He staggered into the lamplit rooms and sank upon a chair. The guards outside had closed the door. Okara and Joan had been at the window, but they turned at Gary's entrance. They stared tensely at his huddled figure.

There was an aching pity, a strange, blind yearning in Joan Laird's brown eyes, as the English girl stared at Gary. But there was none of this in the yellow face of the little Japanese spy—nothing but bitter contempt and hate.

"So, Martin, you are to be Shirani's husband, her partner in the war and conquest she will carry outside this valley?" Okara hissed.

Gary raised his dark head, and stared haggardly at the Japanese.

"You heard her speak just now to the people?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes, we watched and heard from the window," said Okara burningly. "We heard you receive your reward for betraying Borchoff and myself."

"I didn't mean to fail you," Gary said thickly. "But—I love Shirani, and when the moment came for me to kill her, I couldn't do it. I couldn't! And now I wish to God I had! For by letting her live, I've condemned our world to ruin and death."

"What do you mean?" Okara hissed, slant eyes narrowing.

Gary stared at him and at Joan's pale face, somberly, almost drunkenly, before he answered.

"The Place of Power—I've been there with Shirani. And it's *real*—the forces *do* exist there by which she can cause the whole surface of Earth to quake, and shatter every country on Earth."

"Gods of Nippon!" cried Okara, in sudden, terrible agony of comprehension. "My country—every country—smitten down! And we have no way now to stop Shirani from doing it——"

Joan's stubborn face was white as death. "The whole world," she whispered, her eyes dilated. "People everywhere dying by millions, as the earth quakes and cracks under them——"

The Japanese's black eyes flamed up with mad passion and he pointed a shaking finger at Gary.

"*You* will bear the guilt of that cataclysm, Martin. If you had not betrayed us, if you had killed Shirani as we planned, there would be no danger now."

He started toward Gary, his slant eyes burning with terrible anger, his hands opening and closing convulsively.

"I am going to kill you, Martin," choked his passion-strangled voice in deadly accents. "You are going to die here and now for your betrayal of the world."

Gary looked dully at him as he advanced, but made no move to rise or defend himself. He sat like a sagging statue.

But Joan sprang in front of the Japanese and held him back.

"No, Okara!" she cried. "It's not Gary's fault. He didn't know, when he spared Shirani's life, that she would really have the power to bring on this catastrophe. We must think now of stopping this thing," Joan continued desperately. "There must be some way."

"There is no way, now," Okara hissed. "We had a chance, and Martin threw it away when he failed to kill that fire-witch. Now he is going to pay for her life—with his own!"

And Okara thrust the English girl aside and came on, murder flaming in his slant eyes.

He stopped three paces from Gary. There had been a sudden muffled clash of arms out in the corridor, a smothered cry,

the thud of falling bodies. Then the door burst sharply open.

Jhulun and a half-dozen other men in silver armor burst into the room. The Koomian noble's handsome face was terrible.

Okara spun around with a snarl, and Gary leaped to his feet. Too late! Before they could do more than that, Jhulun's followers overwhelmed them, leaping and crushing them to the floor.

"Bind and gag them!" Jhulun exclaimed with fierce urgency. "Be quick!"

Gary struggled wildly, all his lethargy gone, but weight of superior numbers held him crushed, and a great hand over his mouth prevented any outcry. Rapidly the three spies were bound and gagged. There had been no alarm.

"Why not kill them here?" one of the Koomians exclaimed.

"No!" Jhulun cried. "If we slay them here, Shirani will know it is my work. We will take them out of the palace by the secret stair and throw them into the flaming river. Then Shirani, and everyone else, will think they killed their guards and escaped. Be quick, before we are discovered!"

11. The Hour of Decision

TRUSSED up like animals about to be slaughtered, Gary and Joan and the little Japanese were hastily carried out of the room into the lamplit corridor, past the dead bodies of the guards whom Jhulun and his followers had slaughtered in a surprize attack. Gary wildly cursed himself for not foreseeing that this might happen. He might have known that Jhulun, in his raging jealousy and hate, would try to make away with the stranger who had supplanted him in Shirani's regard. And now whatever chance they might have to halt Shirani's terrible plan was gone, for now they were going to their deaths.

"Quick!" Jhulun exclaimed. "To the secret stair!"

The three were half dragged and half carried along the dim, lamplit corridor to a spot where Jhulun touched a point in the wall. A whole section of the wall slid open, a secret door that disclosed a narrow stone stair winding downward. They were hastily hauled into it, and the door closed behind them.

Absolute darkness reigned as they were carried rapidly down the stair, and silence except for the clank of armor and swords. Then Gary heard the throbbing voice of Jhulun, beside him.

"It is dangerous to aspire to the love of princesses, stranger! You are about to learn that."

Wildly Gary sought to break the bonds around his wrists, but the cords would not give. And the gag over his mouth effectually prevented any outcry. Jhulun had prepared well.

They stopped in the darkness at the foot of the narrow stair. There was a grating sound, and a door slid open. They looked out into one of the dark courtyards behind the palace. Two men were waiting nervously with horses.

"All goes well," Jhulun whispered triumphantly. "Bring them on."

The Koomian noble led the way out into the courtyard, and the others followed carrying Gary's helpless form, and then Joan, and finally Okara. But as Okara was carried out through the narrow door, the little Japanese twisted his head so that his face scraped cruelly along the stone edge of the doorway. It scraped aside the gag over his mouth—and instantly Okara uttered a fierce, wild yell.

"Guards! Guards!"

"The slant-eyed one—kill him!" yelled Jhulun frantically.

Okara's bound form was dropped, and

the swords of Jhulun and two of his followers tore into the little spy's body. Yet he still yelled chokingly.

"Guards!"

The Koomians carrying Gary and Joan had dropped the two to help silence Okara. Lying helpless on the stone paving of the dark court, Gary heard shouts of alarm, the running feet of Shirani's guards.

"All is discovered—we must flee!" cried one of the Koomians wildly.

"At least I'll make sure this upstart dies!" cried Jhulun fiercely, and he came running back toward Gary with his bloody sword upraised.

Gary rolled desperately aside as the sword flashed down at him. The blade shattered on the stone. Jhulun, foaming with rage, sprang upon him and gripped his throat with strangling hands, throttling him. But one of his companions pulled him away, screaming a warning.

"Jhulun, the guards come! Save yourself!"

With a hoarse cry of baffled fury, Jhulun stumbled away, fleeing after his companions toward the horses.

Torches were bobbing and alarmed voices were shouting as a score of silver guards came running with drawn swords. Gary heard the clash of blades as they intercepted some of Jhulun's fleeing followers. Then through the running guards and confusion of darkness came flying a slim white figure from the palace. It was Shirani, her white face alarmed as she saw Gary's prone figure.

"Gary!" she cried with wild anxiety, bending over him and drawing her dagger to slash his bonds. "Are you hurt?"

"No," he gasped. "It was Jhulun and his men——"

"Jhulun!" Shirani's electric eyes flashed wild passion and she sprang to her feet. Her silver voice soared ragingly as she cried to the gathering guards. "Hunt down Jhulun! Kill him and all who were with him!"

Lightning of terrible anger flared in her face. "To think that Jhulun dared do this in his jealousy! To think he dared!"

GARY had stumbled to untie Joan, and then ran to Okara's side. The little Japanese lay, his breast a bloody mess from the sword wounds he had received. Okara's yellow face was grayish, death stamped upon it. He looked up with strange fixedness as Gary loosened his bonds.

"Is the slant-eyed one killed?" Shirani exclaimed.

Terrible, burning hate came into Okara's slant black eyes as he saw Shirani bending over him. He spat feebly up at her, with dying hate.

"Witch from hell!" he croaked.

Then his burning eyes held on Gary Martin's face, and his gasping voice came in almost indistinguishable words.

"Martin, this leaves—only you—to prevent that witch from wrecking the earth. You must—must——"

He could not finish. His eyes dimmed, and a strange expression of peace settled upon his fierce face.

"*Sayonara,*" he whispered faintly.

And with that whisper of farewell, Okara's body relaxed gently in death.

Gary stared down at the dead, proud face, shaken and trembling. He heard Joan sobbing.

"He was brave, this slant-eyed one," Shirani said in wonder. "Yes, even as he died, he still voiced his hate for me."

"It was he who thwarted Jhulun's plan, by giving the alarm at the cost of his own life," Gary said dully.

Dawn was breaking, a pale gray light growing around the palace. A captain of guards came running excitedly through the courts.

"Jhulun escaped, princess!" the captain reported. "We caught and killed all his companions, but Jhulun himself got away in the darkness and rode out through the city like mad."

"Search the whole valley for him!" Shirani cried, her nostrils expanding, her slim form quivering with anger. "He must be hiding somewhere in the forests of the lower valley—beat those forests until you find him. His life is forfeit—and I will richly reward the man who kills him."

Guards mounted and rode clanging out of the palace courts into the dawn-lit city, in obedience to her order.

Shirani clasped Gary's arm with her hands, her stormy blue eyes looking at him with fiercely possessive tenderness.

"You might have been killed, Gary," she exclaimed. "Oh, the great destiny that becomes mine tonight when I loose the forces in the Place of Power, would have been bitter dust and ashes to me if you had been slain."

"Dust and ashes is all you will reap from your dreadful plan, Shirani," Gary said in hoarse, desperate appeal. "These dead men around us are but the first of countless ones who will die if you continue in your mad ambition."

"Must you be always against me, my love?" Shirani cried with troubled passion, her blue eyes yearningly searching his face. Then she smiled confidently.

"You will feel differently after the thing is done tonight. You still have in you the milky sentiment of the outer world, but I will drive it from your soul with the fire of power. Yes, when we ride out knee to knee to conquest of the ruined earth, you will forget your nagging conscience and be truly my mate."

Joan was watching her. Fierce hatred shone in the brown eyes of the English girl. But Shirani, unheeding, called Grauh, the hard-faced captain of guards who with a group of armored men awaited her orders.

"Grauh, the few soldiers you posted to guard the strangers' rooms were easily slain," she said sternly. "See that this time you put many there."

"I will watch there myself, princess," Grauh replied curtly.

"Tonight I shall come for you before I go to the Place of Power, Gary," Shirani promised again, and added fiercely, "And I shall make sure that Jhulun is caught and slain, before then."

Gary went dully with Joan and the guards back up into the black palace. When they had re-entered their quarters, he went over to the window and looked out haggardly.

The sun was rising above the volcanoes that walled the eastern edge of the valley. In the bright light, all Koom was astir, a hurrying bustle of preparations beginning everywhere. The whole black city throbbed with a pulse of unwonted excitement.

Joan spoke slowly, breaking the hush in the room.

"Borchoff dead—and now Okara too. Just the two of us left, Gary, to stop this thing Shirani means to do."

"How *can* we stop her?" Gary cried out of the depths of his chaotic, despairing mind. "There's nothing we can do now."

"Gary, Shirani must die," Joan said solemnly. "If she does not, then tonight the countries and civilization of our world will die."

She came to his side and grasped his shoulders fiercely with her strong little hands, turning him about so that his desperate eyes looked down into hers.

"You started once to kill Shirani, Gary," she said vibrantly. "You couldn't do it, then. But you didn't realize then what an awful menace to our world she represents. Now you do realize it. And

now you must do that which you couldn't do before. Shirani must die before she unchains that terrible catastrophe tonight."

Gary groaned. "I know—I know. But Joan, I love her. And I'm not sure that I could bring myself to kill her, even now."

"Even when you know that only her death will save our civilization from ruin?" Joan cried incredulously.

"Joan, I'm not sure," he repeated, wildly agitated. "I can resolve now to kill her, for I know that that is what I should do. But when I stand face to face with her, knowing that she loves me and that I love her — I'm afraid that I wouldn't be able to do it."

"If you don't, you are the traitor that Okara called you!" Joan flamed. "A traitor to your country and to the world!"

Gary felt the fierce indictment strike home into his throbbing brain.

Desperately he exclaimed, "But even if I could bring myself to do it, Joan, there will be no opportunity. For Shirani knows that I may try something desperate to stop her. She means to keep guards close to me until she has accomplished what she plans to do tonight."

"You must *make* an opportunity!" Joan exclaimed fiercely. "She is taking you down with her into the Place of Power tonight, to be with her when she looses the forces there. Then will be your chance—when the attention of her and the guards is distracted, you can snatch her dagger out and strike her down before she can begin her work of ruin."

"There would be a chance then, yes," Gary muttered. "But I wouldn't be able to do it—I know I wouldn't."

"You must!" Joan insisted desperately. "Think of your country, Gary—think of the whole world, its people lying down tonight to sleep in peace, men and women, mothers and children. Think of the dreadful wakening when the earth shudders and reels under them!

"All those millions—their lives in the hollow of your hand! Civilization itself hanging in the balance, poised to crash into ruin tonight unless you take Shirani's life!"

And Joan's brown eyes suddenly filled with hot tears, her pale face working. She put strong, warm arms around him, her tear-stained cheek against his haggard face.

"Gary, I know that you love Shirani. But I love you, too—I have, from the first. You mustn't take upon your soul the black guilt of having ruined our world, when you could have prevented that ruin. You must kill Shirani tonight."

SHE was sobbing, her tear-smeared face pressed against him, her shoulders shaking. His arms tightened around her and a strange, cold calm invaded his fevered mind. All the mad chaos of his thoughts fell away, and an icy, inflexible determination was born in his soul.

He knew, now! He knew that all his irresolution was gone at last, that in this terrible hour when Earth was rushing toward awful destiny, his hand must not and would not fail. He loved Shirani—yes. He alone knew the throbbing strength of that love. But she was going to die at his hands, this night. He knew it.

"Don't cry, Joan," he said softly. "Everything is going to be all right."

She looked up, her brimming brown eyes and stained face unbelieving. "You mean——"

"I mean that Shirani will die in the Place of Power tonight," Gary said steadily. "I promise it."

He saw the aching doubt that persisted in Joan's torn face, the doubt that she did not need to voice.

"I couldn't kill her, before," he went

on, his voice calm and passionless. "But I will, tonight. You need not fear that I shall break my promise."

Joan believed, now. But a strange horror dawned slowly in her eyes.

"Gary, I know what you mean to do! You are going to kill her—and then take your own life!"

He said somberly, "I could not continue to live, knowing that I had her blood upon my hands."

"No," Joan wailed. "No, Gary——"

He patted her shoulder with protective, big-brother tenderness. "Do not think of it any longer, Joan. It's all going to be all right. You must rest now."

He led her to the couch by the window, made her lie down upon it. Her sobbing gradually quieted as she lay, clinging tightly to his hand. He saw in a little while that her exhausted, tear-smeared face had relaxed in sleep.

Gary sat, brooding as he looked past her sleeping form, out over the black city toward the fiery sea. He saw the Koomians hurrying excitedly back and forth in the streets, saw horses and armor and swords and spears being gathered, all the preparations that Shirani had commanded. Hour after hour those excited preparations continued.

A strange smile touched Gary's face as he watched. It was a queer place, he was thinking, to come to his end. And a queer way. Well, he had had a great run for his money—he had had adventure, and excitement, and he had Shirani's love, until he and she both died tonight.

The sun wheeled slowly down behind the towering volcano wall, as he brooded. Night stalked somberly upon tense, waiting Koom. Torches flared out in the plaza, where a great throng was expectantly gathering. The very air seemed stung with suspense. Only then did Joan awake.

She looked at him breathlessly through the dusk of the room, and whispered, "Gary, is it time?"

He heard the approach of feet along the corridor outside, and he nodded calmly.

"Yes, Joan. I hear Shirani coming now."

He touched her shoulder awkwardly. "So long, Joan. You've been a swell kid."

"Good-bye, Gary," she whispered, eyes winking brightly.

The door opened. And against a background of silver-armored guards, Shirani stood on the threshold.

"Gary, the great hour has come!" she cried vibrantly. "We go now to the Place of Power."

Shirani blazed. Her beautiful face was afire with excitement and determination, her wonderful eyes dazzling as blue lightning. The very air about her slim white figure seemed to crackle with force.

Yet her gaze upon Gary was wonderfully eager and soft, a clean, burning blue flame of love. She did not even look to where Joan stood rigid.

"I'm ready, Shirani," Gary said calmly.

Grauh and his guards had stepped watchfully to the American's side, were keeping close, observing his every motion.

"You have changed somehow, Gary," Shirani said troubledly, her eager eyes clouding. "There is something cold and strange about you——"

Then she smiled dazzingly. "I grow nervous, I think, to be imagining such things. Come, Gary——"

Shirani led the way back out of the room and down the corridor. Grauh and his men kept close to Gary as he followed the princess out of the room.

Gary turned and looked back at Joan

as he went out. He nodded slightly to her. And that calm little nod had a terrible meaning that she read clearly:

"I will keep my promise!"

12. *The Loosing of the Forces*

THEY went down through the dusky corridors of the great palace, the armored guards keeping always close to Gary. He realized that they must have had their orders from Shirani. He had no chance of reaching her at present, but it did not trouble his cold, fixed mind. His chance would come, in the Place of Power.

They passed across the great audience hall in which a few brief days ago—so long ago, it seemed now!—the high priest Dridim had confronted Shirani. A captain of soldiers met them in this shadowy hall, saluting to Shirani a little apprehensively.

"Princess, we have not been able to find Jhulun," he reported. "And we have searched the forests of the valley all day."

Shirani's eyes flashed. "He must be hiding there somewhere. Keep searching, and be sure that when you find Jhulun, you kill him at once."

The captain stood respectfully aside. And as they went on, Shirani called passionately back to Gary, "Oh, if I had only given order to kill Jhulun last night when I thought of it! But he cannot escape death long."

They passed out of the palace into the night, and Shirani halted for a moment on the palace steps above the plaza.

Tens of thousands of people, the whole population of Koom, was jammed into the triangular plaza before them, torches waving wild above a sea of white, taut faces. As their princess emerged, a tremendous roar of voices went up, beating on Gary's ears in waves of stunning sound.

It was a scene to make the blood race. The vast, shouting throng before them, the shaking red rays that glared from the distant fire sea across the black roofs of Koom, the mighty volcanoes that towered all around the valley with snowy slopes tinged with bloody light. Yet Gary's pulse did not even heighten, in the strange, cold calm of terrible purpose that possessed him.

"Shirani! Shirani!" crashed the frantic shout of the crowd.

Shirani flung her hand high in greeting. "Now has the great hour come, my people!" she cried clearly. "I go to the Place of Power, to win for us the lordship of the world."

Horses were waiting at the foot of the palace steps. Lightly Shirani sprang to the back of her stamping black stallion.

Gary and the guards mounted. The crowd that packed the plaza gave back to make an avenue through their midst. And through that solid mass of humanity, Shirani and her companions galloped. Thousands on thousands of voices yelled wildly in Gary's ears from either side, a hoarse, tremendous acclaim:

"Shirani!"

Then they were galloping on through the dark stone streets of Koom, Shirani's white figure leading, Grauh and his men still keeping their horses close beside the American.

"Oh, Gary, is not one such hour as this worth a hundred lifetimes of security?" cried Shirani's silver voice, her face glorious as she looked back at him.

Gary did not—could not—answer. For as they rode, his hungry eyes were drinking in her supernal loveliness for the last time. He knew that within the hour he would kill her.

They rode along the edge of the fire sea. Never had that lake of burning lava

seemed to bubble and ripple so evilly to Gary as tonight. And the fire cataract that tumbled and roared from high in the side of the frowning volcano seemed to gush with enhanced splendor.

Shirani rode with her golden head fearlessly high, under the niagara of fiery lava. As Gary followed with the guards, he saw that Grauh and his half-dozen men were pale with apprehension. Yet loyally they followed where their princess led. And now Shirani had ridden into the tunnel in the volcano side, and they followed thankfully out of the stunning roar into the comparative quiet of the passage.

Already Shirani had dismounted. In her belt beside her dagger was thrust the golden tube that was the key to the Place of Power. And she carried the flat metal book of the Ancient Ones, and also had brought a silver lamp, which she now lighted. Then she spoke reassuringly to Grauh and his men as they stood doubtfully beside Gary.

"Fear nothing, my men! The way we go is strange but nothing can harm you."

"We fear," Grauh said steadily, "but we will follow you, princess."

Shirani looked at Gary's strange, set face, as though trying to read his strained gray eyes.

"I know that you do not fear, Gary," she said, "for you walked this way with me but last night."

"No, Shirani," he said, almost gently, "I am not afraid of anything, any more."

Doubtfully her brilliant eyes clung to Gary's strange face. Then she turned and with the lighted lamp started ahead down the high, winding tunnel that the Ancient Ones had hollowed ages before.

GRAUH and his men followed closely, with Gary. And as they went on down the dark passage, into the bowels of the mighty volcano, they could hear all about them the whispering and creaking and rustling of mighty, prisoned forces.

Gary saw the Koomians recoil a little as Shirani led out along the edge of that tremendous chasm in which the huge fountain of living lava sho- ceaselessly upward. The men seemed to breathe easier when they were again in the dark, solid rock tunnel.

At last they were at the entrance to the tomb of the Ancient Ones. That great cavern stretched before them, dark and solemn and hushed, the little glow of Shirani's lamp only partially illuminating the countless rows of high stone blocks upon which the stony, semi-human bodies of the Ancient Ones lay in death and night.

"Gods!" whispered one of Grauh's men shakenly. "We look upon the mighty Ancient Ones, themselves."

"They are dead bodies only," Shirani's silver voice pealed. "For ages they have lain here in darkness and silence and death—they cannot harm you."

Yet it seemed to Gary Martin's strangely strained nerves that as they went forward through the great tomb, the atmosphere here was pregnant with dark menace, with a throbbing, pulsing hate.

Shirani seemed to feel it, too. For she stopped when they were but a dozen feet from the great silvery doors in the end-wall of the cavern-tomb. And her face was strangely pale in the light of her upheld lamp.

"Gary, I feel something *living* in this tomb tonight," she whispered. "A living, terrible hatred——"

"Then abandon your terrible plan, Shirani," pleaded Gary, a last hope flickering up in him. "Death waits for you if you go into the Place of Power—I tell you, I know it! If you love me, give up this intention of yours."

Shirani's golden head jerked up proudly. "No, Gary! I have won to the very

threshold of my great ambition, and I shall not draw back now. It is but eager imagination that makes me feel such things."

She stepped forward with fierce pride toward the huge, silvery double doors of the Place of Power. Grauh and his men followed with Gary. The faces of the Koomians were pale and fearful.

Shirani drew the golden tube from her belt. But as she did so, the thing that had so terribly startled her and Gary on their first visit to this place, happened now again. The mysterious, hidden mechanism installed here by the Ancient Ones operated again as they approached the doors.

Out of the aperture in the rock wall above the doors, there issued once more that deep, unhuman voice, speaking mechanically in rusty, alien accents.

"Oh ye who seek to open these doors —beware!"

As the deep voice rolled forth, Grauh and his soldiers started wildly.

"The Ancient Ones speak to us!" cried one of the Koomians in panic.

"It is but a machine hidden in the rock that speaks!" Shirani reassured them swiftly. "It spoke to us, before."

"But it is *still* warning us, princess," whispered the terrified man.

And in fact, Gary could hear the echo of those deep words reverberating through the great, gloomy cavern in a hollow whisper, just as it had done before.

"*Beware*——" warned that throbbing murmur, over and over.

"Do not fear!" Shirani told the Koomians. "And now prepare yourselves, for we are about to enter the Place of Power. You will find it a terrible place, but there is nothing there to harm you if you follow my orders in all things."

She leveled the golden tube at the silvery doors. The thread of white force leaped from the tube into the tiny keyhole. And silently, ponderously, the great double doors swung inward.

Again on Gary's face beat the raging blaze of light from the Place of Power, and once more the ceaseless crashing thunder of the infernal fires smote upon his ears. Grauh and his soldiers trembled, their faces aghast in the wild light.

"Fear not, I say!" Shirani's voice rose commandingly. "And follow me."

She moved fearlessly through the doors, and Gary followed with the quivering Koomian guards. They reached again the narrow rock shelf, beyond and below which stretched the fiery abyss.

There were hoarse exclamations from the soldiers as they first looked into the awful depths. Far, far below, the vast hollow and the seven gigantic chasms that radiated star-like from it, still seethed with boiling fires.

Shirani was moving along the shelf, out onto the narrow rock spur that pointed like a finger into the abyss.

"Follow!" she cried over the roaring din.

Grauh and his men moved forward with Gary, keeping faithfully beside him even as they walked tremblingly out on the narrow spur. They gasped with relief when they reached the sunken platform at its end.

Shirani was already leaning tensely over the great mechanism of the Ancient Ones, inspecting the eight huge hemispherical lenses that pointed downward, and the eight levers that controlled them. She turned, her beautiful face triumphant.

"All is in readiness!" she exclaimed. "The book of the Ancient Ones has made all clear to me.

"First must I loose the great force that will stir the fires below into raging, greater life. And then the seven beams of force that will cause those seven

cracks in Earth's crust to widen, buckling the whole crust of Earth."

GARY drew himself tensely together. He knew that the moment was almost at hand, the time when he must kill Shirani.

He avoided her eyes, keeping his gaze fixed on the dagger that hung at her belt, and on the tender, silken curve of her left breast where he must sink the blade.

"Follow my orders, now," Shirani shouted to the guardsmen.

Instantly Grauh and the warriors seized Gary. Before the stunned American could resist, they had bound his hands and feet. They propped him up against the rail of the platform, helpless to move.

"Shirani, why do you do this?" Gary cried wildly.

Shirani came toward him, her glowing face inflexible. "Gary, I can take no chances with you," she shouted above the roar. "I felt that at the last moment you would try to wreck the mechanism, or do something else to stop me, so I warned Grauh and his men to bind you thus."

Terrible realization crashed into Gary's brain. His desperate plan had been thwarted. He could not kill Shirani, now. All the cold, somber resolution that had held him in icy calm dissolved now into wild emotion as he realized that.

"Shirani, for God's sake turn back from what you plan!" he cried wildly. "Don't do this thing—don't——"

She came closer to him, where he struggled vainly to break his bonds. Her silken arms went around him, and she pressed passionately close to him. She kissed him, with strangely fierce tenderness, her lips flaming against his own, her glorious eyes pools of glowing love. And she cupped his wild face between her hands as she spoke to him.

"Gary, in a few minutes all will be done. Then we begin our love and life together—not in ignoble security, but in high adventure and conquest."

Shirani turned commandingly then to Grauh and his men, who were shrinking, terrified, their eyes full of panic.

"You need not stay here now, Grauh. You and your men may wait in the Tomb of the Ancient Ones."

"Yes, princess!" Grauh's voice was a sob of relief. Tremblingly he and his soldiers moved back along the rocky spur, and back through the open doors into the dark cavern-tomb.

Shirani and Gary were left alone on the platform. Shirani turned tensely toward the great mechanism. Her flashing eyes glanced at a page of the metal book of diagrams, as though to make certain, and then she stretched forth her hand to one of the eight levers.

Gary watched, petrified. In that terrible moment, there rushed over his brain a vision of the whole outer world, of great cities gay with night pleasures, of peaceful hamlets slumbering under the stars, of ships moving upon the dark, heaving oceans. And he seemed to see the striking of the tremendous cataclysm, the towering cities shaken suddenly by the quaking earth into showers of wreckage that fell upon screaming throngs, the slumbering villages engulfed by awful cracks and chasms, the seas mountaining above the tortured earth and crashing in vast waves of deluge and destruction.

Shirani drew the first lever two-thirds of the way back in its graduated slot, and a tremendous beam of pale white force lanced down from one of the eight hemispherical lenses, a ray of incalculable power driving right down into the center of the abyss of fire.

Instantly the roaring below swelled titanically, terribly. Looking down, Gary's dazzled eyes saw a tumultuous change

taking place in the fiery depths, a piling up of lava masses, molten rock boiling slowly upward in the abyss like a rising tide of flaming destruction.

"See—the power of the Ancient Ones at work!" cried Shirani thinly over the awfully augmented thunder. "Now I loose their full forces upon Earth!"

She was reaching for the other seven levers, which controlled the lenses pointed at the seven great radiating chasms.

"Shirani, don't!" Gary cried, struggling wildly.

Then as he threshed madly, Gary's eyes perceived something that petrified him. A crouching form, creeping stealthily and swiftly from the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, into the Place of Power.

"Shirani!" he yelled wildly, and she turned her blazing face. And she too saw the advancing figure.

It was a man in silver armor, who now was running recklessly along the rock shelf toward the spur at whose end they were. And then the man was leaping out along the narrow spur toward them.

"*Jhulun!*" cried Shirani.

It was the Koomian noble. In the cosmic blaze and thunder of this terrible place, his distorted face was diabolical in hate.

"Yes, Jhulun!" he shouted hoarsely as he leaped down into the sunken platform. "The man you cast aside—the man you ordered killed! I hid in the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, when I fled," he cried. "I knew that when you came here, I would have my chance to take vengeance on you."

For a heart-beat, a terrible look came into Shirani's eyes.

"Dridim said that out of that tomb death would come——" her voice faltered. Then her silver tones raged up flaringly. "Guards! Come quickly, Grauh!" Out of the cavern-tomb, summoned by that piercing cry Grauh and his men came running. They saw, and leaped forward with wild cries. The whole rock spur was trembling and shaking crazily in the shrieking, screaming winds that howled up from the abyss of rising fires.

Jhulun saw the guards coming, and he sprang forward upon Shirani. He grasped her dagger hand as she struck at him.

"You'll not escape me!" he screamed madly. "I am going to die, but you shall go with me, Shirani!"

"Shirani!" yelled Gary wildly, straining with superhuman strength to break his bonds.

Jhulun had grasped Shirani around the body, and was leaping up with her onto the rail above the abyss.

Gary's bonds snapped. He rushed forward, and as he did so, with an insane, terrible laugh, Jhulun leaped with Shirani in his arms, off the rail into the fiery depths.

"Gary——" a wild, silver cry stabbed up thinly from the thundering depths.

Gary rushed crazily forward, looked downward, saw two black specks falling, dropping, racing each other down into the dreadful deeps.

"Shirani! Shirani!" he screamed wildly.

The spur shook and threw him from his feet. He heard wild cries from Grauh and the soldiers, and saw them turning and fleeing. The whole cavern, the whole abyss, was trembling and quivering and boiling with rising fire as the white ray still stabbed down into it. Gary flung back the lever, and the ray ceased. But the boiling fires of the shaking abyss still surged upward with solemn world-chords of dead diastrophism.

Gary turned drunkenly, fled back along the spur to the rock shelf, and on through the open doors into the cavern-tomb. Weeping, almost mindlessly, he staggered on up through lightless, shuddering tun-

nels and caverns toward the surface. He came to himself only when he stumbled into the horses waiting in the mouth of the tunnel, whinnying in panic.

Then Gary found himself on the back of one, riding out under the fiery cataract, galloping wildly around the edge of the fire sea toward the city Koom. The lava sea was terribly agitated, its molten waves surging up and down in nightmare tides, and swirling in great maelstroms.

GARY looked up into the night sky and cried out hoarsely. From all the great ring of snowy volcanoes around the valley, fire was shooting into the air. Great showers of fiery ashes were bursting up, and glowing red streams of lava were already pouring from the craters and rolling down the snowy slopes into the valley.

The hot ashes were falling in choking clouds as he galloped into Koom. The ground was shaking under his feet, stone walls and roofs were crashing, and the people of Koom were running about in wild, insensate panic.

The horse he rode bore Gary Martin straight through the panic-maddened throng, toward the palace. And as he rode up to it, he saw a small figure in blue silk running out from it.

"Joan!" he cried wildly, riding up to her.

"Gary, what has happened?" she screamed. "Shirani——"

"Dead!" he cried. "Dead by an awful end! Jhulun did it, but before he did, she loosed one of the forces down there. It won't cause the great catastrophe to Earth —she didn't get that far. But it has stirred up the volcanic fires of the depths, and this village is going to be destroyed. Joan, we must ride for the tunnel!"

He rode after and caught another horse bolting past, and Joan mounted it. Then they galloped at reckless speed out of the maddened city, and down the dark valley along the glowing red lava river.

The valley of Koom had by now become a terrible picture of doom. From all the giant volcanoes around it, continuous showers of blazing ashes were bursting and raining down like an incredible fall of meteors. And from the craters, greater and greater floods of red lava were pouring down the snowy slopes into the doomed valley.

Gary looked back as they rode wildly. The giant volcano at the head of the valley that stood over the Place of Power was a terrific sight. It was belching a vast cloud of flame and smoke and burning embers that were falling in a smothering death-rain on the black city. And the fire sea was bursting its banks, ravening through the dying city.

"This lava river will be rising swiftly!" Gary cried hoarsely. "Unless we get through the tunnel before the rise catches us, we've no chance."

It seemed eternities before they rode up at last to the mouth of the tunnel through the mountains, at the end of the valley— the passage through which the fiery river flowed into the outside world.

Gary saw that the lava stream was already rising in the tunnel, nearly to the level of the narrow ledge that was the only pathway through the passage.

"We'll have to *ride* through the tunnel —we can never get through in time on foot!" he cried. "Ride hard, Joan!"

Gary looked back for a last glance as their horses entered the perilous passage. Almost all the valley of Koom was now being flooded by the molten lava pouring down from the surrounding flaming craters. All trace of the black city had vanished in the burning flood, and the whole valley was shuddering under the continuous rain of burning ashes.

Then he and Joan were riding on into the fearful tunnel, galloping recklessly

along the narrow ledge just above the rising river of molten rock. He jumped his bolting horse over the breaks in the ledge, and Joan followed his example. The lava was rising fast now, threatening to wash over the ledge they followed. The horses snorted wildly in the superheated, sulfurous air, raced forward crazily, maddened by it.

Then into Gary's reeling brain penetrated consciousness that they had burst out of the infernal tunnel, that the horses were bolting up a slope of deep snow, in the open air. And that air was suddenly icy, striking through their thin silk garments. Gary's mind was darkening now, but he clung to his steed until the lava river, roaring like a spring freshet of fire, was far down the snowy slope behind them.

He turned, and saw in the night sky the blood-red, shaking glare of the annihilation of the hidden valley. Then everything was dark to him, he was falling from his horse, and he heard Joan's frantic voice as from a great distance.

"Gary! Gary——"

13. Epilog

THE little mud-brick mission, squatting bravely on the drab, rolling plain somewhere upon the hazy borders of Tibet and China, had an English flag fluttering bravely in the chill sunlight. The colorful flag could be seen for a far greater distance across the plain than the mission itself, or the miserable village that lay near by.

Gary Martin and Joan Laird came riding slowly, wearily, toward it, from the direction of the high, blue-white mountains that loomed on the distant western skyline. They looked like nomad wanderers of the wastes, for they wore shapeless Tibetan sheep garments, and ragged fur caps.

Gary and Joan had found the garments and food in the abandoned camp of the nomads outside the mountains, once they had toilsomely made their way out through the snowy peaks and passes. It was evident that the vast volcanic eruption inside the mountains had caused the hordes of superstitiously waiting nomads to flee in panic haste.

They stopped their horses, by common consent, a half-mile from the mission. Gary pointed to the flag.

"They'll take care of you here, Joan—they're your own people."

"Gary, aren't you stopping here with me?" she asked, her brown eyes watching him achingly.

Gary's lean, tanned face was years older in appearance. Strange, deep lines were cut in it that would never be erased. And the hair at his temples was fringed with white.

He looked away from her, his unfathomable gray eyes sweeping the drab horizon.

"No, Joan, I'm going on to Chengtu. Cray, my superior, is still waiting for a report on my mission."

"Gary, don't go like this!" she begged, her eyes glimmering with fine tears. "I can't stand it.

"Do you remember," she continued swiftly, "that night in the palace, when I told you that I loved you? I meant it, Gary—I still mean it. Say the word, and I'll go anywhere in the world with you."

He smiled faintly. "No, Joan, you couldn't. The British secret service couldn't very well marry the American secret service."

"I'll resign!" she cried, but he shook his head.

"They wouldn't let you."

Joan winked back her tears and said steadily, "I understand, Gary. It's still Shirani, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's still Shirani," he said slowly,

his eyes on the far horizon. "Ruthless and terrible as her plans may have been, it will *always* be Shirani, with me."

"I hated her—I still hate her!" Joan cried fiercely.

Gary smiled, and reached out his hand. "Good-bye, Joan."

"No, not good-bye," Joan said, struggling to smile through her tears. "Maybe some day——"

"Yes—maybe some day," Gary said. He leaned and kissed her, her warm quivering lips clinging to his. Then he urged his horse on.

Joan sat watching him, as he rode slowly eastward. His tired pony and shapeless figure diminished in the distance, growing smaller in her blurred vision until at last she could no longer even make out the dwindling speck that was disappearing in the immensity of the plain.

[THE END]

The Maze of Maal Dweb

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

What strange and bizarre fate awaited the girl Athlé and the hunter Tiglari in the fearsome labyrinth of the enchanter?

BY THE light of the four small waning moons of Xiccarph, Tiglari had crossed that bottomless swamp wherein no reptile dwelt and no dragon descended; but where the pitch-black ooze was alive with incessant heavings. He had not cared to use the high causey of corundum that spanned the fen, and had threaded his way with much peril from isle to sedgy isle that shuddered gelatinously beneath him. When he reached the solid shore and the shelter of the palm-tall rushes, he did not approach the porphyry stairs that wound skyward through giddy chasms and along glassy scarps to the house of Maal Dweb. The causey and the stairs were guarded by the silent, colossal automatons of Maal Dweb, whose arms ended in long crescent blades of tempered steel which were raised in implacable scything against any who came thither without their master's permission.

Tiglari's naked body was smeared with the juice of a plant repugnant to all the fauna of Xiccarph. By virtue of this he hoped to pass unharmed the ferocious ape-like creatures that roamed at will through the tyrant's cliff-hung gardens. He carried a coil of woven root-fiber, strong and light, and weighted with a brazen ball, for use in climbing the mesa. At his side, in a sheath of chimera-skin, he wore a needle-sharp knife that had been dipped in the poison of winged vipers.

Many, before Tiglari, with the same

noble dream of tyrannicide, had attempted to cross the fen and scale the scarps. But none had returned; and the fate of such as had won to the palace of Maal Dweb was a much-disputed problem. But Tiglari, the skilled jungle hunter, was undeterred by the hideous dubieties before him.

That escalade would have been an improbable feat by the full light of the three suns of Xiccarph. With eyes keen as those of some night-flying pterodactyl, Tiglari hurled his weighted coil about narrow coigns and salients. He climbed with simian ease from foothold to foothold; and at length he gained a little buttress beneath the last cliff. From this vantage it was easy to fling his rope around a crooked tree that leaned gulfward with simitar-like foliage from the gardens.

Evading the sharp, semi-metallic leaves that slashed downward as the tree bent limberly with his weight, he stood, stooping warily, on the fearsome and fabled mesa. Here, it was said, with no human aid, the half-demoniac sorcerer had carved a mountain's pinnacles into walls, domes and turrets, and had leveled the rest of the mountain to a flat space about them. This space he had covered with loamy soil, produced by magic; and therein he had planted curious baneful trees from outlying worlds, together with flowers that might have been those of some exuberant hell.

Little enough was known of these gardens; but the flora that grew upon the northern, southern and western sides of the palace was believed to be less deadly than that which faced the dawning of the three suns. Much of this latter vegetation, according to myth, had been trained and topiarized in the form of a labyrinth, balefully ingenious, that concealed atrocious traps and unknown dooms. Mindful of this labyrinth, Tiglari had approached the place on the side toward the sunset.

Breathless from his climb, he crouched in the garden shadows. About him heavy-hooded blossoms leaned in venomous languor, or fawned with open mouths that exhaled a narcotic perfume or diffused a pollen of madness. Anomalous, multiform, with silhouettes that curdled the blood or touched the mind with nightmare, the trees of Maal Dweb appeared to gather and conspire against him. Some arose with the sinuous towering of plumed pythons, of aigretted dragons. Others crouched with radiating limbs like the hairy members of giant spiders. They seemed to close in upon Tiglari. They waved their frightful darts of thorn, their scythe-like leaves. They blotted the four moons with webs of arabesque menace.

With endless caution the hunter made his way forward, seeking a rift in the monstrous hedge. His faculties, ever alert, were quickened still more by fear and hatred. The fear was not for himself but for the girl Athlé, his beloved and the fairest of his tribe, who had gone up alone that evening by the causey of corundum and the porphyry stairs, at the summons of Maal Dweb. His hatred was that of an outraged lover for the all-powerful, all-dreaded tyrant whom no man had ever seen, and from whose abode no woman ever came back; who spoke with an iron voice audible in far cities or outmost jungles; who punished the disobedient with a doom of falling fire swifter than the thunderstone.

Maal Dweb had taken ever the fairest from among the maidens of the planet Xiccarph; and no mansion of the walled towns, or outland cave, was exempt from his scrutiny. He had chosen no less than fifty girls during the period of his tyranny; and these, forsaking their lovers and kinsfolk voluntarily, lest the wrath of Maal Dweb should descend upon

them, had gone one by one to the mountain citadel and were lost behind its cryptic walls. There, as the odalisques of the aging sorcerer, they were supposed to dwell in halls that multiplied their beauty with a thousand mirrors; and were said to have for servants women of brass and men of iron.

Tiglari had poured before Athlé his uncouth adoration and the spoils of the chase, but having many rivals, was unsure of her favor. Cool as a river-lily, she had accepted impartially his worship and that of the others, among whom the warrior Mocair was perhaps the most formidable. Returning from the hunt, Tiglari had found the tribe in lamentation; and learning that Athlé had departed to the harem of Maal Dweb, was swift to follow. He had not told his intention to anyone, since the ears of Maal Dweb were everywhere; and he did not know whether Mocair or any of the others had preceded him in his desperate errantry. But it was not unlikely that Mocair had already dared the obscure and hideous perils of the mountain.

THE thought of this was enough to drive Tiglari forward with a rash disregard of the clutching foliations and reptile flowers. He came to a gap in the horrible grove, and saw the saffron lights from the sorcerer's windows. The lights were vigilant as dragons' eyes, and appeared to regard him with an evil awareness. But Tiglari leapt toward them, across the gap, and heard the clash of sabered leaves meeting behind him.

Before him was an open lawn, covered with a queer grass that squirmed like innumerable worms under his feet. He did not care to linger upon that lawn. There were no footmarks in the grass; but, nearing the palace portico, he saw a coil of thin rope that someone had flung aside, and surmised that Mocair had preceded him.

There were paths of mottled marble about the palace, and fountains that played from the throats of carven monsters. The open portals were unguarded, and the whole building was still as a mausoleum lit by windless lamps. Tiglari, however, mistrusted this appearance of quietude and slumber, and followed the bordering paths for some distance before daring to approach nearer to the palace.

Certain large and shadowy animals, which he took for the apish monsters of Maal Dweb, went by him in the gloom. Some of them ran in four-footed fashion, while others maintained the half-erect posture of anthropoids; but all were hairy and uncouth. They did not offer to molest Tiglari; but, whining dismally, they slunk away as if to avoid him. By this token he knew that they were actual beasts, and could not abide the odor with which he had smeared his limbs and torso.

At length he came to a lampless, column-crowded portico; and, gliding silently as a jungle snake, he entered the mysterious house of Maal Dweb. A door stood open behind the dark pillars; and beyond the door he discerned the dim reaches of an empty hall.

Tiglari went in with redoubled caution, and began to follow the arrased wall. The place was full of unknown perfumes, languorous and somnolent: a subtle reek as of censers in hidden alcoves of love. He did not like the perfumes; and the silence troubled him more and more. It seemed to him that the darkness was thick with unheard breathings, was alive with invisible movements.

Slowly, like the opening of great yellow eyes, yellow flames arose in lamps of copper along the hall. Tiglari hid himself behind an arras; and peering forth

presently, he saw that the hall was still deserted. Finally he dared to resume his progress. All around him the rich hangings, broidered with purple men and blue women on a field of blood, appeared to stir with uneasy life in a wind he could not feel. But there was no sign of the presence of Maal Dweb or his metal servitors and human odalisques.

The doors on either side of the hall, with cunningly mated valves of ebony and ivory, were all closed. At the far end Tiglari saw a thin rift of light in a somber double arras. Parting the arras very softly, he peered through into a huge, brilliantly lit chamber that seemed to be the harem of Maal Dweb, peopled with all the girls that the enchanter had summoned to his dwelling. It seemed, in fact, that there were hundreds, leaning or lying on ornate couches, or standing in attitudes of languor or terror. Tiglari discerned in the throng the women of Ommu-Zain, whose flesh is whiter than desert salt; the slim girls of Uthmai, who are molded from breathing, palpitating jet; the queenly topaz girls of equatorial Xala; and the small women of Ilap, who have the tones of newly greening bronze. But among them all he could not find the lotus-like beauty of Athlé.

Much he marveled at the number of the women and the perfect stillness with which they maintained their various postures. They were like goddesses that slept in some enchanted hall of eternity. Tiglari, the intrepid hunter, was awed and frightened. These women—if indeed they were women and not mere statues—were surely the thralls of a death-like spell. Here, indeed, was proof of the sorcery of Maal Dweb.

However, if Tiglari were to continue his search, he must traverse that enchanted chamber. Feeling that a marble sleep might descend upon him at the crossing of the sill, he went in with held breath and furtive leopard-like paces. About him the women preserved their eternal stillness. Each, it seemed, had been overcome by the spell at the instant of some particular emotion, whether of fear, wonder, curiosity, vanity, weariness, anger or voluptuousness. Their number was fewer than he had supposed; and the room itself was smaller: but metal mirrors, paneling the walls, had created an illusion of multitude and immensity.

At the farther end he parted a second double arras, and peered through into a twilight chamber illumined dimly by two censers that gave forth a parti-colored glow. The censers stood on tripods, facing each other. Between them, beneath a canopy of some dark and smoldering stuff with fringes braided like women's hair, was a couch of night-deep purples bordered with silver birds that fought against golden snakes.

On the couch, in sober garments, a man reclined as if weary or asleep. The man's face was dim with ever-wavering shadows; but it did not occur to Tiglari that this was any other than the redoubtable tyrant whom he had come to slay. He knew that this was Maal Dweb, whom no man had seen in the flesh but whose power was manifest to all: the occult, omniscient ruler of Xiccarph; the suzerain of the three suns and of all their planets and moons.

Like ghostly sentinels, the symbols of the grandeur of Maal Dweb, the images of his frightful empire, rose up to confront Tiglari. But the thought of Athlé was a red mist that blotted all. He forgot his eery terrors, his awe of that wizard palace. The rage of the bereaved lover, the blood-thirst of the cunning hunter awoke within him. He neared the unconscious sorcerer; and his hand tightened on the hilt of the needle-sharp knife that had been dipped in viper-venom.

THE man before him lay with closed eyes and a cryptic weariness on his mouth and eyelids. He seemed to meditate rather than sleep, like one who wanders in a maze of distant memories or profound reveries. About him the walls were draped with funereal hangings, darkly figured. Above him the twin censers wrought a cloudy glow, and diffused throughout the room their drowsy myrrh, which made Tiglari's senses swim with a strange dimness.

Crouching tiger-wise, he made ready for the stroke. Then, mastering the subtle vertigo of the perfume, he rose up; and his arm, with the darting movement of some heavy but supple adder, struck fiercely at the tyrant's heart.

It was as if he had tried to pierce a wall of stone. In midair, before and above the recumbent enchanter, the knife clashed on some unseen, impenetrable substance; and the point broke off and tinkled on the floor at Tiglari's feet. Uncomprehending, baffled, he peered at the being whom he had sought to slay. Maal Dweb had not stirred nor opened his eyes; but his look of enigmatic weariness was somehow touched with a faint and cruel amusement.

Tiglari put out his hand to verify a curious notion that had occurred to him. Even as he had suspected, there was no couch or canopy between the censers—only a vertical, unbroken, highly polished surface in which the couch and its occupant were apparently reflected. But, to his further mystification, he himself was not visible in the mirror.

He whirled about, thinking that Maal Dweb must be somewhere in the room. Even as he turned, the funereal draperies rushed back with a silken, evil whispering from the walls, as if drawn by unseen hands. The chamber leapt into sudden glaring light; the walls appeared to recede illimitably; and naked giants, whose umber-brown limbs and torsos glistened as if smeared with ointment, stood in menacing postures on every side. Their eyes glowered like those of jungle creatures; and each of them held an enormous knife, from which the point had been broken.

This, thought Tiglari, was a fearsome thaumaturgy; and he crouched down, wary as a trapped animal, to await the assault of the giants. But these beings, crouching simultaneously, mimicked his every movement. It came to him that what he saw was his own reflection, multiplied and monstrously amplified in the mirrors.

He turned again. The tasseled canopy, the couch of night-dark purples, the reclining dreamer, had vanished. Only the censers remained, rearing before a glassy wall that gave back like the others the reflection of Tiglari himself.

Baffled and terrified, he felt that Maal Dweb, the all-seeing, all-potent magician, was playing a game and was deluding him with elaborate mockeries. Rashly indeed had Tiglari pitted his simple brawn and forest craft against a being capable of such demoniac artifice. He dared not stir, he scarcely ventured to breathe. The monstrous reflections appeared to watch him like giants guarding a captive pigmy. The light, which streamed as if from hidden lamps in the mirrors, took on a more pitiless and alarming luster. The reaches of the room seemed to deepen; and far away in their shadows he saw the gathering of vapors with human faces that melted and reformed incessantly and were never twice the same.

Ever the weird radiance brightened; ever the mist of faces, like a hell-born smoke, dissolved and re-limned itself behind the immobile giants, in the lengthening vistas. How long Tiglari waited, he could not tell: the bright, frozen horror

of that room was a thing apart from time.

Now, in the lit air, a voice began to speak; a voice that was toneless, deliberate, and disembodied. It was faintly contemptuous; a little weary; slightly cruel. It was near as the beating of Tiglari's heart—and yet infinitely far.

"What do you seek, Tiglari?" said the voice. "Do you think to enter with impunity the palace of Maal Dweb? Others —many others, with the same intentions —have come before you. But all have paid a price for their temerity."

"I seek the maiden Athlé," said Tiglari. "What have you done with her?"

"Athlé is very beautiful," returned the voice. "It is the will of Maal Dweb to make a certain use of her loveliness. The use is not one that should concern a hunter of wild beasts. . . . You are unwise, Tiglari."

"Where is Athlé?" persisted the hunter.

"She has gone to find her fate in the labyrinth of Maal Dweb. Not long ago, the warrior Mocair, who had followed her to my palace, went out at my suggestion to pursue his search amid the threadless windings of that never-to-be-exhausted maze. Go now, Tiglari, and seek her also. There are many mysteries in my labyrinth; and among them, perhaps, is one which you are destined to solve."

A door had opened in the mirror-paneled wall. Emerging as if from the mirrors, two of the metal slaves of Maal Dweb had appeared. Taller than living men, and gleaming from head to foot with implacable lusters as of burnished swords, they came forward upon Tiglari. The right arm of each was handed with a great sickle. Hastily, the hunter went out through the opened door, and heard behind him the surly clash of its meeting valves.

THE short night of the planet Xiccarph was not yet over; and the moons had all gone down. But Tiglari saw before him the beginning of the fabled maze, illumined by glowing globular fruits that hung lantern-wise from arches of foliage. Guided only by their light, he entered the labyrinth.

At first, it was a place of elfin fantasies. There were quaint paths, pillared with antic trees, latticed with drolly peering faces of extravagant orchids, that led the seeker to hidden, surprizing bowers of goblinry. It was as if those outer mazes had been planned wholly to entice and beguile.

Then, by vague degrees, it seemed that the designer's mood had darkened, had become more ominous and baleful. The trees that lined the way with their twisted, intertwining boles were Laocöons of struggle and torture, lit by enormous fungi that seemed to lift unholy tapers. The path ran downward to eery pools alight with wreathing witchfires, or climbed with evilly tilted steps through caverns of close-set leafage that shone like brazen dragon-scales. It divided at every turn; the branchings multiplied; and skilled though he was in jungle-craft, it would have been impossible for Tiglari to trace his wanderings. He kept on, hoping that chance would somehow lead him to Athlé; and many times he called her name aloud but was answered only by remote, derisive echoes or by the dolorous howling of some unseen beast.

Now he was mounting through arbors of malignant hydra growths that coiled and uncoiled tumultuously about him. The way lightened more and more; the night-shining fruits and blossoms were pale and sickly as the dying tapers of a witches' revel. The earliest of the three suns had risen; and its gamboge-yellow beams were filtering in through the frilled and venomous vines.

Far off, and seeming to fall from some hidden height in the maze before him, he heard a chorus of brazen voices that were like articulate bells. He could not distinguish the words; but the accents were those of a solemn announcement, fraught with portentous finality. They ceased; and there was no sound other than the hiss and rustle of swaying plants.

It seemed now, as Tiglari went on, that his every step was predestined. He was no longer free to choose his way; for many of the paths were overgrown by things that he did not care to face; and others were blocked by horrid portcullises of cacti, or ended in pools that teemed with leeches larger than tunnies. The second and third suns arose, heightening with their emerald and carmine rays the horror of the strange web closing ineluctably about him.

He climbed on by stairs that reptilian vines had taken, and gradients lined with tossing, clashing aloes. Rarely could he see the reaches below, or the levels toward which he was tending. Somewhere on the blind path he met one of the ape-like animals of Maal Dweb: a dark, savage creature, sleek and glistening like a wet otter, as if it bathed in one of the pools. It passed him with a hoarse growl, recoiling as the others had done from his repulsively smeared body. . . . But nowhere could he find the maiden Athlé, or the warrior Mocair, who had preceded him into the maze.

Now he came to a curious little pavement of onyx, oblong, and surrounded by enormous flowers with bronze-like stems and great leaning bells that might have been the mouths of chimeras, yawning to disclose their crimson throats. He stepped forward upon the pavement through a narrow gap in this singular hedge, and stood staring irresolutely at the serried blooms: for here the way seemed to end.

The onyx beneath his feet was wet with some unknown, sticky fluid. A quick sense of peril stirred within him, and he turned to retrace his steps. At his first movement toward the opening through which he had entered, a long tendril like a wire of bronze uncoiled with lightning rapidity from the base of each of the flower stems, and closed about his ankles. He stood trapped and helpless at the center of a taut net. Then, while he struggled impotently, the stems began to lean and tilt toward him, till the red mouths of their blossoms were close about his knees like a circle of fawning monsters.

Nearer they came, almost touching him. From their lips a clear, hueless liquid, dripping slowly at first, and then running in little rills, descended on his feet and ankles and shanks. Indescribably, his flesh crawled beneath it; then there was a passing numbness; then a furious stinging like the bites of innumerable insects. Between the crowding heads of the flowers, he saw that his legs had undergone a mysterious and horrifying change. Their natural hairiness had thickened, had assumed a shaggy pile like the fur of apes; the shanks themselves had somehow shortened and the feet had grown longer, with uncouth finger-like toes such as were possessed by the animals of Maal Dweb!

In a frenzy of nameless alarm, he drew his broken-tipped knife and began to slash at the flowers. It was as if he had assailed the armored heads of dragons, or had struck at ringing bells of iron. The blade snapped at the hilt. Then the blossoms, lifting hideously, were leaning about his waist, were laving his hips and thighs in their thin, evil slaver.

With the senses of one who drowns in nightmare, he heard the startled cry of a woman. Above the tilted flowers he be-

held a strange scene which the hitherto impenetrable maze, parting as if by magic, had revealed. Fifty feet away, on the same level as the onyx pavement, there stood an elliptic dais of moon-white stone at whose center the maiden Athlé, emerging from the labyrinth on a raised porphyry walk, had paused in an attitude of wonder. Before her, in the claws of an immense marble lizard that reared above the dais, a round mirror of steely metal was held upright. Athlé, as if fascinated by some strange vision, was peering into the disk. Midway between the pavement and the dais, a row of slender brazen columns rose at broad intervals, topped with graven heads like demoniac Termini.

Tiglari would have called out to Athlé. But at that moment she took a single step toward the mirror, as if drawn by something that she saw in its depths; and the dull disk seemed to brighten with some internal, incandescent flame. The hunter's eyes were blinded by the spiky rays that leapt forth from it for an instant, enveloping and transfixing the maiden. When the dimness cleared away in whirling blots of color, he saw that Athlé, in a pose of statuesque rigidity, was still regarding the mirror with startled eyes. She had not moved; the wonder was frozen on her face; and it came to Tiglari that she was like the women who slept in an enchanted slumber in the harem of Maal Dweb. Even as this thought occurred to him, he heard a ringing chorus of metallic voices that seemed to emanate from the graven demon heads of the columns.

"The maiden Athlé," announced the voices in solemn and portentous tones, "has beheld herself in the mirror of Eternity, and has passed beyond the changes and corruptions of Time."

Tiglari felt as if he were sinking into some obscure and terrible fen. He could comprehend nothing of what had befallen Athlé; and his own fate was an equally dark and dreadful enigma, beyond the solution of a simple hunter.

Now the blossoms had lifted about his shoulders, were laving his arms, his body. Beneath their abhorrent alchemy the transformation continued. A long fur sprang up on the thickening torso; the arms lengthened; they became simian; the hands took on a likeness to the feet. From the neck downward, Tiglari differed in no wise from the apish creatures of the garden.

In helpless abject horror, he waited for the completion of the metamorphosis. Then he became aware that a man in sober garments, with eyes and mouth filled with the weariness of strange things, was standing before him. Behind the man were two of the sickle-handed iron automatons.

In a somewhat languid voice, the man uttered an unknown word that vibrated in the air with prolonged, mysterious aftertones. The circle of craning flowers drew back from Tiglari, resuming their former upright positions in a close hedge; and the wiry tendrils were withdrawn from his ankles. Hardly able to comprehend his release, he heard a sound of brazen voices, and knew dimly that the demon heads of the columns had spoken, saying:

"The hunter Tiglari has been laved in the nectar of the blossoms of primordial life, and has become in all ways, *from the neck downward,* even as the beasts that he hunted."

When the chorus ceased, the weary man in sober raiment came nearer and addressed him:

"I, Maal Dweb, had planned to deal with you precisely as I dealt with Mocair and many others. Mocair was the beast that you met in the labyrinth, with new-

made fur still sleek and wet from the liquor of the flowers; and you saw some of his predecessors about the palace. However, I find that my whims are not always the same. You, Tiglari, unlike the others, shall at least remain a man from the neck upward; and you are free to resume your wanderings in the labyrinth, and escape from it if you can. I do not wish to see you again, and my clemency springs from another reason than esteem for your kind. Go now: the maze has many windings which you are yet to traverse."

A great awe was upon Tiglari; his native fierceness, his savage volition, were tamed by the enchanter's languid will. With one backward look of concern and wonder at Athlé, he withdrew obediently, slouching like a huge ape. His fur glistening wetly to the three suns, he vanished amid the labyrinth.

Maal Dweb, attended by his metal slaves, went over to the figure of Athlé, which still regarded the mirror with astonished eyes.

"Mong Lut," he said, addressing by name the nearer of the two automatons at his heels, "it has been, as you know, my caprice to eternalize the frail beauty of women. Athlé, like the others before her, has explored my ingenious maze, and has looked into that mirror whose sudden radiance turns the flesh to a stone fairer than marble and no less enduring. . . . Also, as you know, it has been my whim to turn men into beasts with the copious fluid of certain artificial flowers,. so that their outer semblance should conform more strictly to their inner nature. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I have done these things? Am I not Maal Dweb, in whom all knowledge and all power reside?"

"Yea, master," echoed the automaton. "You are Maal Dweb, the all-wise, the all-powerful, and it is well that you have done these things."

"However," continued Maal Dweb, "the repetition of even the most remarkable thaumaturgies can grow tiresome after a certain number of times. I do not think that I shall deal again in this fashion with any woman, or deal thus with any man. Is it not well, Mong Lut, that I should vary my sorceries in future? Am I not Maal Dweb, the all-resourceful?"

"Indeed, you are Maal Dweb," agreed the automaton, "and it would no doubt be well for you to diversify your enchantments."

Maal Dweb was not ill pleased with the answers that the automaton had given. He cared little for converse, other than the iron echoing of his metal servitors, who assented always to all that he said, and spared him the tedium of arguments. And it may have been that there were times when he wearied a little even of this, and preferred the silence of the petrified women, or the muteness of the beasts that could no longer call themselves men.

The Black Monk

By G. G. PENDARVES

Woe be to the luckless man who encounters the Black Monk of Chaard Island!

YES. It's true that I'm dictating this, but don't picture to yourself a famous author, a luxurious study, and a highly paid secretary. No! I'm dictating this for publication because I promised the Abbot of Chaard that I would. I can't go against his wishes. Not again.

"ALL LIES and rubbish! Don't you believe a word of it, sir. It suits them," the gamekeeper jerked a thumb in the direction of the monastery behind him, "to keep such fairy-tales alive. Gives them a hold on the people. Everyone on this island believes in the Black Monk, swears they've caught sight of him on the prowl. I never have—and why? Because I'm not afraid. It's all rubbish, so I tell you straight, damned rubbish."

I looked at Morton. His brown deep-set eyes, his wrinkled face, his long lean body in its ancient brown tweeds, even his old leggings and the way he carried his gun and wore his cap expressed contempt. He'd no use for the monks or for anyone else on the island. Stayed because he'd no chance of work elsewhere. Owed everything to the Abbot and hated him in proportion to his debt.

"They give chapter and verse for it at the monastery," I ventured. "Got old documents. Supposed to be treasure buried here in the Fifth Century when Britain was conquered by the English. Brought by a faithful monk who came up the Thames from Kent. Got across here, buried his treasure, and died on the island, keeping guard to the end. And he's still on duty, it appears."

"Treasure and guardian! Tale for children and the bloody fools that spend their days gabbling prayers when they'd be a sight better digging and planting and weeding on this blamed island of theirs. I'm the only man does a decent day's work here. And what do I get for it? A damp cottage, wages that don't even run to a twist of baccy, and a lecture from his reverence when the monastery kitchen isn't stocked with game to suit him."

"And so you've never caught a glimpse of the Black Monk?" I persisted. "Never seen him by the old fish pond, or pacing the cliffs, or going down the Long Lane after sundown?"

"No, nor never will! The only Black Monk on the island is up at the monastery—that colored fellow from the West Indies. They don't want anyone blacker than Brother Ignatius. Looks a proper crow with his black habit and black face and all. Not but what I think he's a deal better in black than in white like these here Benedictines on Chaard."

"Of course," I suggested, "you've got to remember that some people aren't able to see things like—well, like the Black Monk. Just as some people don't take certain diseases."

"No one's ever seen the Black Monk and no one's ever going to see him. Why? Because he don't happen to be on Chaard Island! The monks keep the old tale going to frighten the people into go-

ing regular to mass and confession. And visitors like it. They go round with eyes popping out of their silly heads. They talk and write things to the papers—see! That's all advertisement and helps to bring money in. It's a put-up game and a pack of damned nonsense, I says."

I left him glooming at his gate and turned down the Long Lane. Morton versus the monks amused me. An idea struck me, result of the recent talk and a most perfect night. A big golden harvest moon was rising. No wind. Mild, almost warm for late October. I'd stay out, all night if necessary, and follow the legendary track of the Black Monk from Pirates' Bay, where he was said to have landed, to a certain wood where he was popularly supposed to have buried his treasure. No one seemed to have tried to stalk him with any method. No one wanted to follow him. His cowled figure had been glimpsed at various points of his route—dark on the pale sands of the landing-beach — melting into shadows cast by Long Lane's steep hedges—a hurrying figure on the skyline of high plowed fields—a tall sentinel by the old neglected green-scummed fish pond—or vanishing into the fir wood.

My brief holiday was almost over. I'd got what I came for—an account of the annual Passion Play the monks gave. It would pay my expenses here. A night's ramble over the romantic island might inspire another article. I lighted a cigarette and made for the beach.

Chaard was settling down for sleep already. The revolving brilliance of its lighthouse grew brighter as lamps went out in cottage windows. Down the Long Lane where nut-trees rustled withered leaves, down past the postoffice *cum* store that served the island's needs, down under the walls of the big white monastery with its towers and turrets, its balconies and chime of bells, its red roofs and steep gables, down to the sand-dunes where tall rushes dipped and whispered in the moonlight, down to the crescent of Pirates' Bay—its fine pale sand ground by thundering surf that now was a mere murmurous line of white edging distant sea.

There I go . . . there I go! I apologize. I'll restrain myself. You'll understand later why the enchanted background of the island on a supremely lovely night is so difficult for me to keep out of this account. You may forgive a poor devil then for looking back on a lost paradise.

I SAT on an upturned boat, smoked and dreamed, let the long strange history of Chaard Island float across my mind like weed on a shallow pool. An hour—two hours—I don't know how long I sat there. My lighter ran dry at last, I had no matches, and the search for them shook me out of dreams. I felt stiff and rather cold.

"Well, you're late if you mean to land tonight, old man!"

I spoke aloud, and glanced back across broken rocks that formed one curving horn of my crescent shore. For a moment, actual funk paralyzed me. For a moment I really believed the absurd legend was true. A dark cowled figure was skirting the rocks—moving toward me.

I confess that I didn't move because literally I couldn't. When I saw at last who it was, relief was so overwhelming that I fairly went off like a rocket.

"Brother Ignatius! Upon my word, d'you know I took you for the Black Monk himself! You loomed up there in the moonlight as big and black as a nursery bogy."

The West Indian's gentle liquid speech was the friendliest sound I'd ever heard.

"You ought not to be here," he reproved. "The Father-Abbot would not

like it. You are, in a sense, a guest of the monastery since it governs the whole island and its affairs."

"I'm only a heretic." I laughed overloudly. The sound jarred on that quiet lonely shore. "My soul's more or less lost anyhow in the Abbot's eyes, I expect."

"Yes," agreed Brother Ignatius.

I was irrationally annoyed. "Oh, well, live and let live!" I babbled. My nerves still quivered. My tongue clacked like a toy bell.

"It is difficult, sometimes, to know what that means. It is difficult, sometimes, to say what is life and what is—death."

I'd never realized what a bore the fellow was. I'd rather liked the gentle simple creature before. Now I was irritated. His prosings had broken the magic spell of the night for me.

"On your way to the monastery, I suppose? I'm going to dawdle about another hour, or so. Good-night."

"Not alone! No, really, it is not safe for you alone here. The Black Monk——"

"That's why I'm here," I interrupted the serious quiet voice. "I'm waiting for him. When and if he shows up I'm going to follow him, discover the long-lost secret of his treasure."

"You don't understand." Brother Ignatius was now genuinely perturbed. "It is very dangerous for you."

I made an impatient movement, and half turned to leave him.

"If you wish it so much," his words came slow and hesitant, "if you have made up your mind—perhaps—it would be better that I should——"

"Well?"

I looked up and caught the faint glimmer of white teeth as his lips parted in a smile under his cowl's dark shadow.

"I think the Father-Abbot would forgive me, since you are, in a sense, his guest. Yes, I will show you. I will lead you to the place where the treasure lies buried."

"What?"

"Yes. I will take you," murmured the monk.

"But—there isn't any treasure! It's only a wild old tale. What d'you mean?"

"There *is* treasure — golden glorious treasure," softly affirmed the other. "And rather than leave you here, alone, I will show you."

I began to doubt my companion's sanity. I'd no idea what he was talking about. My journalist's imagination began to weave a new story. Well, why not go with him? My mood for solitude and a night's wandering under the moon was gone. I'd humor Brother Ignatius. He was stooping toward me, apparently very keen on his idea.

"Have it your own way," I agreed. "It may save me from a chill, if not from your friend the Black Monk. By the way, suppose you find him on his job—guarding the treasure!"

"No. You won't see him there. Not if you are with me."

The grave reply and the air with which he turned to cross the sandhills rather took my fancy. Long cloak swaying and billowing in the rising wind, Brother Ignatius strode a few paces ahead. Given the right clothes, I thought, the colored man does redeem movement from the commonplace.

I could see myself, in plus-fours and cap, a discord, an alien figure on that lonely, lovely silvered shore. I could see the monk as a tree whose dark boughs swept the ground or as a wave rising—falling. Part of the earth, possessed by it and possessing it.

"Must be getting a temperature," I told myself. "If I work any little stunt of that sort into my article they'll give me the comic-strip to do."

A new idea struck me.

"I've never met any of you before at this hour. Aren't there rules? I thought the monastery bolted and barred you in your cells long before this."

We'd reached the high heathery cliffs above Pirates' Bay. Brother Ignatius kept the lead. His answer came back on the wind, his cowled head turned to me, and again I caught a flashing glimpse of his gentle smile.

"You forget the weeks for retreat."

He gestured toward a solitary wooden building not a hundred yards distant.

"Of course. I had forgotten. But—if you're in retreat—surely you're breaking your rule now in being here with me."

"The Father-Abbot would put your safety before a rule of this sort. It means, of course, that the month's solitude must begin again. It was necessary. Nothing else would have taken you from that dangerous shore—nothing except my promise to take you to the treasure."

I felt uncomfortable. The Abbot had been extremely courteous to me, given me a good many little privileges, allowed me to go where most visitors are forbidden. To interfere with the religious observance of his order was a poor way of acknowledging his consideration.

Then I shrugged off my qualms. I didn't believe the legend. I didn't think the Abbot believed it. Brother Ignatius had broken his retreat to save me from a non-existent danger, had insisted on this fantastic expedition, and was, in fact, a little mad. I absolved myself from blame and followed on.

At last we came to a small dense wood in a fissure between Hawk's Point and Shark's Fin—two cruel masses of rock jutting out to sea where many ships had piled up in old days. The monk waited.

"Take hold of my cloak," he advised. "The path is narrow, but I know every inch of the way. You won't fall if you follow my lead exactly."

His cloak, between my fingers, was rough and dry as bark. We plunged into the wood. Dark as a shaft here. Fairly smooth underfoot but an endless, endless way. I protested at last.

"We must be going in circles. The wood's small enough to cross in five minutes."

Brother Ignatius stopped as I spoke.

"We are here now. Sit down. Sit down on the soft mossy earth and rest."

I sank down, feeling as if I'd walked to the other end of the earth. Something, immensely heavy, cold, and round was put into my hands.

"What's this? Feels like a crown. What a weight! But I can't see a thing. How do I know if this is gold or lead?"

"Gold, pure gold." Brother Ignatius spoke with awe. "And here are plates and goblets and scepters. Here are candlesticks. This is a great jeweled cross that took a lifetime to fashion. This, too, is set with jewels, a little altar lamp, a most precious relic though so small."

One after another, these things were put into my hands while the monk's quiet voice expatiated on their beauty. I fingered the small heavy lamp. Exasperation seized me.

"But what's the use!" I burst out. "It's absurd to be fumbling away in the dark like this. I want to see them!"

I stood up suddenly, felt the ground slippery underfoot, reached out for support. I called sharply. The monk's cloak brushed my outstretched hands. I tried to grasp it, slipped again, plunged forward, hit my forehead a smashing blow against a tree-trunk and fell heavily.

My senses returned slowly. Darkness, like walls of black velvet, shut me in—darkness and warmth. The wood had seemed damp and cold before. I felt hor-

ribly confused. On all sides my hands encountered brush and thorn. Impossible to take any direction in such complete darkness.

"Where are you?" I shouted. "Where are you? Hello! Hello! *Helloooo!* Brother Ignatius, where are you?"

I went on shouting. Anger and increasing warmth in the dark wood served at least to heat my stiff chilled body. I grew more and more furious. The monk must be mad as a hatter. Why hadn't anyone warned me about him? Perhaps they hadn't wanted to discredit their precious monastery.

Exhausted, hungry and thirsty, pricked and scratched with thorns, I sat still and yelled until I was hoarse. When a voice hailed me at last I was in pretty bad shape. I felt like bursting into tears instead of answering. It was the gamekeeper, Morton.

"Have you hurt yourself, sir?"

His strong wiry arm was about my shoulders, raising me to my feet.

"Get me out of this confounded wood, Morton!" I demanded. "I've been hours here. That crazy monk, Brother Ignatius, brought me. I was a fool to follow him, of course, but I'd no idea he was mad."

Morton made no response save by a sudden stiffening of his arm about me.

"Get me out of this wood, d'you hear!" The darkness was becoming a torture now. "Get me out and I'll explain afterward. I don't want to spend the rest of the night here."

"You're not in any wood." Morton's voice seemed choked and indistinct. "You're in a gorse-patch on a headland right over at the back of the island. I came after rabbits and heard you yelling."

"But it's dark! You're drunk, man, you're drunk! It's dark. It's the middle of the night."

"It's eight o'clock in the morning, sir. And the sun's shining full and early."

"You're drunk. You're lying. It's perfectly dark. Pitch-black night."

Then I heard the larks, chimes from the monastery tower for eight o'clock service, chirrup of insects in the grass, lowing of cattle. I knew the truth at last.

I was blind.

"Sir!" Morton's voice came to me from some remote distance. "It couldn't ha' been Brother Ignatius you saw last night. He left the island day before yesterday along with Brother Stephen and the Prior. I rowed 'em all three to the mainland. No one comes or goes from here without I takes 'em. They won't none of them be back for a month."

"You *are* drunk, after all, disgracefully drunk!" I talked now to fight back my thoughts. "No other monk here wears a black habit except Brother Ignatius. How could I possibly mistake a Benedictine's white habit for a black one? I tell you I was with Brother Ignatius for hours. I recognized him—his voice, his smile! It was Brother Ignatius."

Morton didn't argue. He took me to the monastery. The Abbot heard me out.

"Treasure is buried on this island, I believe." His slow solemn tone chilled me. "But it was not Brother Ignatius whom you met on Pirates' Beach."

"But—but——" I stuttered, "I tell you I saw him, talked, walked with him for an hour at least."

"The monk you met was one who has guarded the treasure through centuries. An ancient and cunning guardian."

"No! No! No! I heard myself; whispering. "There is no such one! I met a man—an ordinary man."

"You met the Black Monk of Chaard Island, for whose tormented weary soul I pray. And for you in darkness and despair, for you, too, I ask deliverance, my son."

The Other Gods

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A short weird fantasy by a late great master of bizarre fiction

ATOP the tallest of earth's peaks dwell the gods of earth, and suffer no man to tell that he hath looked upon them. Lesser peaks they once inhabited; but ever the men from the plains would scale the slopes of rock and snow, driving the gods to higher and higher mountains till now only the last remains. When they left their older peaks they took with them all signs of themselves, save once, it is said, when they left a carven image on the face of the mountain which they called Ngranek.

But now they have betaken themselves to unknown Kadath in the cold waste where no man treads, and are grown stern, having no higher peak whereto to flee at the coming of men. They are grown stern, and where once they suffered men to displace them, they now forbid men to come; or coming, to depart. It is well for men that they know not of Kadath in the cold waste; else they would seek injudiciously to scale it.

Sometimes when earth's gods are homesick they visit in the still night the peaks where once they dwelt, and weep softly as they try to play in the olden way on remembered slopes. Men have felt the tears of the gods on white-capped Thurai, though they have thought it rain; and have heard the sighs of the gods in the plaintive dawn-winds of Lerion. In cloud-ships the gods are wont to travel, and wise cotters have legends that keep them from certain high peaks at night when it is cloudy, for the gods are not lenient as of old.

In Ulthar, which lies beyond the river Skai, once dwelt an old man avid to behold the gods of earth; a man deeply learned in the seven cryptical books of earth, and familiar with the Pnakotic Manuscripts of distant and frozen Lomar. His name was Barzai the Wise, and the villagers tell of how he went up a mountain on the night of the strange eclipse.

Barzai knew so much of the gods that he could tell of their comings and goings, and guessed so many of their secrets that he was deemed half a god himself. It was he who wisely advised the burgesses of Ulthar when they passed their remarkable law against the slaying of cats, and who first told the young priest Atal where it is that black cats go at midnight on St. John's Eve. Barzai was learned in the lore of earth's gods, and had gained a desire to look upon their faces. He believed that his great secret knowledge of gods could shield him from their wrath, so resolved to go up to the summit of high and rocky Hatheg-Kla on a night when he knew the gods would be there.

Hatheg-Kla is far in the stony desert beyond Hatheg, for which it is named, and rises like a rock statue in a silent temple. Around its peak the mists play always mournfully, for mists are the memories of the gods, and the gods loved Hatheg-Kla when they dwelt upon it in the old days. Often the gods of earth visit Hatheg-Kla in their ships of cloud, casting pale vapors over the slopes as they dance reminiscently on the summit under a clear moon. The villagers of Hatheg say it is ill to climb Hatheg-Kla at any

time, and deadly to climb it by night when pale vapors hide the summit and the moon; but Barzai heeded them not when he came from neighboring Ulthar with the young priest Atal, who was his disciple. Atal was only the son of an innkeeper, and was sometimes afraid; but Barzai's father had been a landgrave who dwelt in an ancient castle, so he had no common superstition in his blood, and only laughed at the fearful cotters.

BARZAI and Atal went out of Hatheg into the stony desert despite the prayers of peasants, and talked of earth's gods by their campfires at night. Many days they traveled, and from afar saw lofty Hatheg-Kla with his aureole of mournful mist. On the thirteenth day they reached the mountain's lonely base, and Atal spoke of his fears. But Barzai was old and learned and had no fears, so led the way boldly up the slope that no man had scaled since the time of Sansu, who is written of with fright in the moldy Pnakotic Manuscripts.

The way was rocky, and made perilous by chasms, cliffs, and falling stones. Later it grew cold and snowy; and Barzai and Atal often slipped and fell as they hewed and plodded upward with staves and axes. Finally the air grew thin, and the sky changed color, and the climbers found it hard to breathe; but still they toiled up and up, marveling at the strangeness of the scene and thrilling at the thought of what would happen on the summit when the moon was out and the pale vapors spread around. For three days they climbed higher and higher toward the roof of the world; then they camped to wait for the clouding of the moon.

For four nights no clouds came, and the moon shone down cold through the thin mournful mists around the silent pinnacle. Then on the fifth night, which was the night of the full moon, Barzai saw some dense clouds far to the north, and stayed up with Atal to watch them draw near. Thick and majestic they sailed, slowly and deliberately onward; ranging themselves round the peak high above the watchers, and hiding the moon and the summit from view. For a long hour the watchers gazed, whilst the vapors swirled and the screen of clouds grew thicker and more restless. Barzai was wise in the lore of earth's gods, and listened hard for certain sounds, but Atal felt the chill of the vapors and the awe of the night, and feared much. And when Barzai began to climb higher and beckon eagerly, it was long before Atal would follow.

So thick were the vapors that the way was hard, and though Atal followed on at last, he could scarce see the gray shape of Barzai on the dim slope above in the clouded moonlight. Barzai forged very far ahead, and seemed despite his age to climb more easily than Atal; fearing not the steepness that began to grow too great for any save a strong and dauntless man, nor pausing at wide black chasms that Atal could scarce leap. And so they went up wildly over rocks and gulfs, slipping and stumbling, and sometimes awed at the vastness and horrible silence of bleak ice pinnacles and mute granite steeps.

Very suddenly Barzai went out of Atal's sight, scaling a hideous cliff that seemed to bulge outward and block the path for any climber not inspired of earth's gods. Atal was far below, and planning what he should do when he reached the place, when curiously he noticed that the light had grown strong, as if the cloudless peak and moonlit meeting-place of the gods were very near. And as he scrambled on toward the bulging cliff and litten sky he felt fears more shocking than any he had known before.

Then through the high mists he heard the voice of unseen Barzai shouting wildly in delight:

"I have heard the gods! I have heard earth's gods singing in revelry on Hatheg-Kla! The voices of earth's gods are known to Barzai the Prophet! The mists are thin and the moon is bright, and I shall see the gods dancing wildly on Hatheg-Kla that they loved in youth. The wisdom of Barzai hath made him greater than earth's gods, and against his will their spells and barriers are as naught; Barzai will behold the gods, the proud gods, the secret gods, the gods of earth who spurn the sight of man!"

Atal could not hear the voices Barzai heard, but he was now close to the bulging cliff and scanning it for footholds. Then he heard Barzai's voice grow shriller and louder:

"The mist is very thin, and the moon casts shadows on the slope; the voice of earth's gods are high and wild, and they fear the coming of Barzai the Wise, who is greater than they. . . . The moon's light flickers, as earth's gods dance against it; I shall see the dancing forms of the gods that leap and howl in the moonlight. . . . The light is dimmer and the gods are afraid. . . ."

WHILST Barzai was shouting these things Atal felt a spectral change in all the air, as if the laws of earth were bowing to greater laws; for though the way was steeper than ever, the upward path was now grown fearsomely easy, and the bulging cliff proved scarce an obstacle when he reached it and slid perilously up its convex face. The light of the moon had strangely failed, and as Atal plunged upward through the mists he heard Barzai the Wise shrieking in the shadows:

"The moon is dark, and the gods dance in the night; there is terror in the sky, for upon the moon hath sunk an eclipse foretold in no books of men or of earth's gods. . . . There is unknown magic on Hatheg-Kla, for the screams of the frightened gods have turned to laughter, and the slopes of ice shoot up endlessly into the black heavens whither I am plunging. . . . Hei! Hei! At last! In the dim light I behold the gods of earth!"

And now Atal, slipping dizzily up over inconceivable steeps, heard in the dark a loathsome laughing, mixed with such a cry as no man else ever heard save in the Phlegethon of unrelatable nightmares; a cry wherein reverberated the horror and anguish of a haunted lifetime packed into one atrocious moment:

"The other gods! The other gods! The gods of the outer hells that guard the feeble gods of earth! . . . Look away. . . . Go back. . . . Do not see! Do not see! The vengeance of the infinite abysses. . . . That cursed, that damnable pit. . . . Merciful gods of earth, I am falling into the sky!"

And as Atal shut his eyes and stopped his ears and tried to jump downward against the frightful pull from unknown heights, there resounded on Hatheg-Kla that terrible peal of thunder which awaked the good cotters of the plains and the honest burgesses of Hatheg, Nir and Ulthar, and caused them to behold through the clouds that strange eclipse of the moon that no book ever predicted. And when the moon came out at last Atal was safe on the lower snows of the mountain without sight of earth's gods, or of the other gods.

Now it is told in the moldy Pnakotic Manuscripts that Sansu found naught but wordless ice and rock when he did climb Hatheg-Kla in the youth of the world. Yet when the men of Ulthar and Nir

and Hatheg crushed their fears and scaled that haunted steep by day in search of Barzai the Wise, they found graven in the naked stone of the summit a curious and cyclopean symbol fifty cubits wide, as if the rock had been riven by some titanic chisel. And the symbol was like to one that learned men have discerned in those frightful parts of the Pnakotic Manuscripts which were too ancient to be read. This they found.

Barzai the Wise they never found, nor could the holy priest Atal ever be persuaded to pray for his soul's repose. Moreover, to this day the people of Ulthar and Nir and Hatheg fear eclipses, and pray by night when pale vapors hide the mountain-top and the moon. And above the mists on Hatheg-Kla, earth's gods sometimes dance reminiscently; for they know they are safe, and love to come from unknown Kadath in ships of cloud and play in the olden way, as they did when earth was new and men not given to the climbing of inaccessible places.

Witches on the Heath

By LEAH BODINE DRAKE

Three witches danced on the heath last night,
  Dancing widdershins round a tree.
  Wildly widdershins whirled the three
Under a wild and cloud-swept sky,
While a goblin moon rolled high
Over the hill where the Old Stones lie;
  And their hats were peaked,
  And they twittered and squeaked
As they danced in the green moonlight.

And out of the boughs of the twisted thorn
  Came the wail of a violin,
  Queer and evil and sad and thin . . .
And though there was nobody one could see,
Somebody played in the twisted tree
Queer, sad tunes for the witches three,
  Till a lost wind crept
  From the hills and wept,
And the farm-cocks crowed up the morn!

Up Under the Roof

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A tale of fear

WHEN I was twelve years old I lived in a shabby old two-story house, built square below and double-gabled above. The four gables contained an upstairs room apiece, each facing a different direction and the entire four making a cross, with a hall and stairwell at the center. The front and side rooms were ceiled and plastered and kalsomined, for bedrooms, but the unfinished rear one held only trunks, boxes and broken furniture. This part of the house was hot and dusty, and open right up to the peak of its gable. Directly above its doorway to the central hall gaped an empty dark triangle, leading into the slant-sided cave above the bedroom ceilings. This lumber-room was called the garret, though it was not a real garret. The real garret was that dark space, up under the roof.

I was the youngest person in the house by more than a decade, and my youth offended everyone bitterly. I was constantly reminded of my childish stupidity and inexperience. Nobody felt that years would mend me, and in time I grew to share that opinion. I tried never to make a statement or venture an opinion that had not been voiced previously by one of my elders. Even at that, I came in for plenty of snubs and corrections, and learned to withdraw into myself. The downstairs parlor was full of books, and I read in them a great deal, including nearly all of an old *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This taste for reading attracted some curious attention on the part of my guardians; occasionally one of them would suggest to the others that I might be trained for the law or the ministry. Never was I consulted as to my own ambition, which would have shocked the household. I wanted to be a deep-sea diver.

The summer was a hot one, and my room—in the gable on the right or northern side—had only one window. The sun's rays fell directly on the sloping walls, which were only the gable's pitches plastered in, affording little insulation. I slept poorly, bothered by strange and vivid dreams. Sometimes I started awake, itching nervously at armpits and groins, hearing every rustle of the cottonwoods outside and the creakings of the house timbers.

After a while, I am not sure exactly when, I began to hear something else.

Awareness of that sound grew upon me, first slowly and faintly, then with terrifying clarity, over a number of hot, wakeful nights. It was something up above, between the roof-peak and the ceiling, something big and clumsy and stealthy. I remember telling myself once that it was a rat, but the moment the thought came into my head I knew it for a silly lie. Rats skip and scamper, they are light and sure. This was huge and weighty, of a bulk that I judged was far more than my own; and it moved, I say, with a slow, unsure stealth that had sustained rhythm of a sort. It did not drag or walk, but it moved. Years afterward I saw through a microscope the plodding of an ameba. The thing up under the roof sounded as an ameba looks—a mass

stretching out a thin, loose portion of itself, then rolling and flowing all of its substance into that portion, and so creeping along. Only it must have been many, many thousands of times larger than an ameba.

Before long I was hearing the noise every night. I would wait for it, lying awake until it humped itself across the ceiling above me. Always with it came fear, fear that did not diminish with time. I would stare in the dark, my tongue would dry up between my teeth, and my fingertips would tingle as though they had been rubbed sore. On my back would sprout and fan and winnow little involuntary wings of chill, making my spine shrink and quiver as though ice mingled with the marrow. The ceiling, I knew, would descend some night upon me like a great millstone, then crumble about my bed. Something huge and soft would wriggle free of the broken bits and sprawl upon me.

There could be no talking about the business, I well knew. Long before, I had learned that nobody would listen or care. As I have said, I was resented by the other dwellers in that house. Once, when a neighbor boy of fifteen gave me a terrible beating in the front yard, everyone watched from our front windows, but none stirred to help me, not even when I thought I would fall dead at my enemy's scornful feet. When, tired of pulping my face with his knuckles, he turned away at last, I dragged myself in and was tongue-lashed on all sides for an hour. Today I cannot remember exactly what was urged against me, but the tears I had not shed for pain welled forth under the scolding. Things like that made me hesitate about asking for help. One morning I did inquire at breakfast if the others had heard anything strange; but I was only reprimanded for interrupting a discussion of local politics.

THAT night the noise was louder and more terrifying than ever. It began above some other room, and then it trundled along my ceiling, slower and still slower until it paused just over my bed. It seemed to me at that moment that the lath and plaster were no tighter or stronger than a spider-web, and that the entity was incalculably more awful than the prince and father of all spiders. It crouched there, almost within reach of me, gloating and hungering, turning over in its dark mind the problem of when and how to take hold of me.

I could not have stirred from my bed, could not have cried out even.

The thing and its fear were with me always, night after night and week after week, until a day past the middle of the summer, a dark and rainy day when it did not wait for nightfall.

I was alone in the house, tired of hearing the rain and the swish of wet leaves outside. I had exhausted the books in the parlor, and remembered a stack of illustrated magazines, very old, in the lumber-room. I climbed the stairs. The lumber-room was unthinkably ugly and close, with a sort of brown light reflected by the unpainted joists and the insides of the shingles. I found the magazines and began to paw through them.

All had been silent, except for the rain outside. But, in the midst of my searchings, there came a *hump-hump* from overhead, from the opening that led above the ceilings. Something sly and heavy was there, looking down upon me.

But in one scrambling moment I had fled downstairs and to the front door.

It was no swelling of courage that made me pause before rushing out—only a sensible, if hopeless, consideration of what must follow. I could leave the house and mope in the rainy street until someone came back. Then I would have to

come back, too, and in time I would have to go to bed. Then the creature that made the noise would come down; it would wait no longer, for it had seen me and my tortured terror. It would flow to the floor, through my door and creep into bed with me. I would know how it looked, what color it was, and what it wanted with me.

A cold determination came, I know not whence, stiffening my limbs and neck like new sawdust poured into an empty doll. I walked slowly back through the house to the foot of the stairs. There I paused, trying to lift myself to the bottom step. I could not, and turned and walked to the back porch. There, upon the wood-box, lay a hand-ax. It was dull and rusty, and wobbled upon its helve, but I took it and this time I mounted the steps—slowly—one after another, with long, tight breaths between. The old boards creaked under my feet, as if aghast at my foolish daring. I reached the upper hall, and went back into the lumber-room.

It had turned darker than when I had first come to find the magazines. I made myself look up at the triangular opening, and that took a mustering of all my will-power, but there was nothing to see. I stuck the handle of the ax into the waist-band of my knickerbockers, and dragged a heavy, dust-laden old bureau over against the wall by the door. On that I placed a broken chair; then a candle-box, precariously on end. At last I climbed up on the bureau, up on the chair, up on the box. My chin came level with the threshold of the black cavern. It was like gazing into a pool of ink. I got hold of a cross-timber and drew myself slowly up. The candle-box tipped over and fell from beneath my feet, striking the floor of the lumber-room with a crash like an explosion. But next moment I had dragged myself up inside the loft. The roof-peak was so low above my head that I could barely rise to my knees.

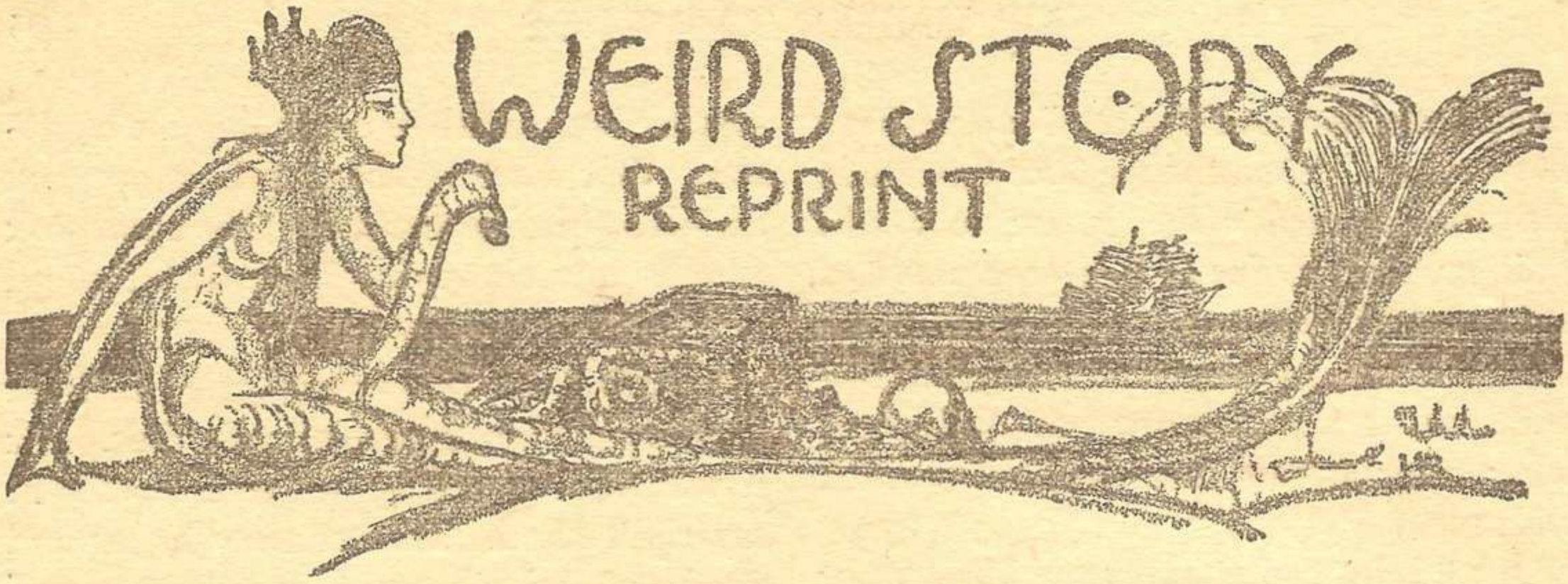
I pulled out the ax and tried to hold it in my mouth, like a pirate's dirk. But it was too big and heavy, so I kept it in my right hand. Then, on my knees and my left hand, I went forward on top of the rafters. Every inch took me deeper into darkness, and when I reached and crept past a big rough chimney I might as well have been in a coal mine.

First I went straight to the front of the house. I felt all along the wall, and into the corners. Then I dragged myself around. I could see the light at the far end, partly obstructed by the chimney. Crawling back, I explored gropingly the space above the south bedroom. Last of all I drove myself into the chamber above my own room, where I had always heard the sounds.

I found nothing.

I always finished with those three words when, grown up enough to be listened to, I told this story in after years. But I knew then, and I know now, that there was something, or that there had been something. Until I drove myself to face it, that something had been a mortal peril. Had I done anything else, it would have come looking for me. What would have followed, I am sure nobody can think.

But from that time forward there was not the slightest murmur of noise up under the roof. I grew to sleep so soundly that I had to be shaken in the mornings. Nor did I ever know fear again, not even in the war.



The Oldest Story in the World*

By MURRAY LEINSTER

THE man who told me this story said that it was the oldest story in the world, and that it happened a hundred thousand years ago. But somehow, I disbelieve him. He was very drunk and his eyes were a trifle too bright and his hair was quite remarkably disheveled, so it is possible that he was somewhat mixed in his statistics.

He came over to my table in the Jardin de Paris, which is a place in the city of Rangoon some thousands of miles from the real Paris, and as many leagues removed from anything Parisian. For one thing, the stench of the Guleh-Wat is all too near, and it is a mingled odor of incense and stale lotus and nipa blossoms and very, very unwashed human beings who come there to worship. And then, too, one may look out over the river and see the sandbars, with an occasional vulture perched there, critically inspecting some especially unattractive thing that floated down with the current. And of course there are snub-nosed British tramps, and very natty and not quite clean Japanese cargo-boats, and pot-bellied Chinese junks, and the river craft of Siam, who deserve an adjective all to themselves. The Jardin de Paris is, moreover, some two continents removed from and a hundred years behind anything French, and it is two shillings rickshaw fare from the British legation.

He came over to my table and begged me not to finish the drink I had before me, because the grenadine made it red. He told me that one could have green drinks, made with absinthe, or white ones made with gin and limes, or purple ones and yellow champagne, but that I should not drink red drinks because they were like rubies and in consequence abominable beyond the imagination of men. They had been cursed for a hundred thousand years, he said, ever since the raja of Barowak laughed. And therefore, if I would have a waiter take my red drink away, not spilling any of it, being especially careful not to spill any of it, he would buy me thousands of green or

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white or purple drinks, and he would sit down beside me and tell me the oldest story in the world.

And naturally, I listened.

TO GET to Kosar in the old days (so the man with the disheveled hair told me) one went by Bitab and Pulat through the Molanasian Pass, which led to the country of the Sakai where it was necessary to travel very carefully because they used poisoned arrows and lay in wait for strangers. And one would begin to hear tales of Kosar by the campfires somewhere around Ghal, and the tales would become quite definite in the bazars of Talt. There you would hear of the raja of Kosar, of his falling-down palaces and his half-starved guard, of his two mangy elephants and the exaggerated penury of the whole tiny kingdom—save for the jewels he wore on occasions of state. And they were worth more than the whole of his realm. They were rubies, and the largest was as big as a man's closed fist, and the next were as large as a man's thumb, and there were rubies of all sizes from thence on down to small, glittering red stones no bigger than a grain of sand. Very precious were the rubies, and very carefully guarded. It was death to come within ten paces of the raja when he wore them, and no one save only the raja and the ranee, his queen, knew where they were hid.

It was in Talt that a certain man came to believe that they actually existed. He was a white man and had fled from the seacoast because he had killed a man over a gambling-game and feared the law of his nation. He was in Talt, living with a dancing-girl who was very proud to belong to a white man, and in consequence gave him all her earnings. He lived in her house because she loved him, and he felt safe from the laws of his nation, and had no worry over the means of living so long as her love continued. At ease, then, he spent much time in the bazars learning to pass as a native of the country he lived in, in case he needed disguise for farther flight. And in the bazars he heard tales of Kosar, and of the rubies, and from the dancing-girl he learned many other strange things. In particular, he learned the language which is spoken in Kosar and Barowak and the states between them. It is a cursed language (so the man with the bright eyes told me) which wise men take care to have no knowledge of. But the white man was not wise.

He had much knowledge of sorts it is not well for a white man to have, however, and he had a plan which made him desire to have more. He knew, for example, of the secret cult of Khayandra, the god of the elephant's trunk, which is knowledge that only princes and ranees may possess. The god Khayandra is one of the two gods of birth and causes male children to be born, while Visayana causes females. The knowledge of this secret is confined to princes, of course, because otherwise their people might worship successfully and there would be only men-children born in their domains and no women to bear yet other men.

The secrets of this cult seemed to promise much to the white man, a hundred centuries ago, and so he began to make his preparations. To rid himself of the dancing-girl he resorted to a drug, and sold her to a merchant on his way to China. She had loved him, and for months she had kept him in her house because of her love, but he needed to be rid of her before he could go on to Jolun, and Halak, and through the mountains to Kosar.

He journeyed in that direction for a matter of weeks with the mark of Khayandra on his forehead, and that mark is something like a worm, and something

like an elephant's trunk, and two of them joined together make a perfect circle.

He came to the city, then, and saw its walls falling, and men nearly naked in the streets from poverty, and children fighting with dogs for bits of food. Kosar was decayed from her ancient splendor, and vultures perched upon her ruined ramparts, and grass grew in many abandoned streets, and the palace of the raja was growing up with weeds save for the small part that was still inhabited.

The white man reached Kosar on a day when the raja showed himself to his people, and saw twenty horsemen upon stunted spindling steeds driving away the people from a street that was lined with once magnificent palaces that had belonged to the nobles when Kosar was a mighty kingdom. And then there came possibly a hundred soldiers, ragged and unkempt, struggling to make a show with faded finery. And then two elephants, mangy and uncared for, with the raja on the second. All else in the city and the kingdom was poor and mean and faded, even the howdah of the raja's mount, but the jewels gleamed the more brightly for the tawdriness of their surroundings.

They glittered like blood, they sparkled like flames, they were a blaze of sheer magnificence upon a small, weary, dark-skinned man who extracted some weak, vain satisfaction from the looks his people cast upon those rubies. There were no guards near the raja, because it was death to come within ten paces when he wore the jewels of state. And it was possibly due to the lack of guards that a child, barely toddling, escaped from its mother and advanced with curious steps toward the ponderous bulk of the slow-moving elephant. The raja saw it coming near. It was ten paces, seven, five, from his sacred personage.

He nodded negligently, and a spearman darted into the circle that was about the jewels. The scream of the mother was very terrible. . . .

THE man with the disheveled hair, who was telling me this story in the Jardin de Paris, in Rangoon, stopped suddenly. He looked across to another table where a man I knew was taking a seat. A waiter was coming with a glass in which was the counterpart of the drink I had discarded. It is one part limes and one part gin and one part grenadine, with ice and carbonated water, and it is very satisfying.

"He—he is going to drink the red drink!" cried the man with the disheveled hair, in distress. "And the red drink is the color of rubies!"

The man I knew caught my eye, and I beckoned him to come over. His name was Gresham, and he was officially a superintendent of constabulary under the Siamese government, but he was as British as it was possible for a man to be, and I know that he made his reports in duplicate, one copy of which went to his legation.

"Gresham," I said coaxingly, "won't you join us and have a drink? My friend here is telling me about Kosar."

Gresham slipped into a seat and nodded brightly.

"I know Kosar," he said unexpectedly. "Had to go up there and argue with the raja. Beastly tumble-down place. The raja was spearing people that came within a certain sacred limit of his person. Silly stunt. Had some amazin' rubies, though. You've been there?"

He was talking to the man with the disheveled hair, but that person was looking fearfully at the waiter who had followed Gresham with his drink. I explained gently to Gresham, and he sent

the drink away. He began to look very thoughtful, suddenly.

"You say you've been to Kosar?" he repeated slowly.

I interrupted, and told him that I was hearing the oldest story in the world, which was a matter of some consequence to a man of my profession. Other things could wait.

The man with the disheveled hair had lost the thread of his story by this time, however, and I had to prompt him to get him back on the track.

THE white man prospered in Kosar. There were those who knew of the meaning of the mark on his forehead, and they paid court to him because he could dispense the favors of Khayandra. He had horses and slaves and food waiting for him when he received a secret summons from the palace. It was from the ranee, the wife of the raja, and she met the white man with tears in her eyes and something of fear upon her countenance.

"You must pray to the god Khayandra," she told him, wringing her hands. "You must implore the god to be merciful."

The white man knew what she had to say, because it had been a part of his planning that she should say just this. But he feigned ignorance. In his pretended character of a priest he asked, "What do you wish of the god Khayandra, whose name not many know?"

And she told him. The raja was growing weary of her, and she loved him. He had no son to carry on his name and was debating within himself the purchase of other and younger wives. He would even sell one or more of his rubies to secure young and fruitful girls of great beauty. The ranee wept as she told the white man of this, thinking him a priest of the god of births.

"The god will hear you," said the white man, pointing to the mark on his forehead. "By this mark he will hear you, if you make proper sacrifice."

And she wept again, and told of her poverty, of the poverty of all the whole realm where the raja's palaces fell to ruins for lack of revenues to keep them in repair, while the raja clung close to his rubies, in worth more than the whole kingdom.

"Those rubies," said the false priest of Khayandra, his eyes glittering strangely; "show me those rubies. Let me touch the mark upon my forehead with the greatest of all the rubies, and the god will grant your prayer."

"But it is death to approach them," cried the ranee, again wringing her hands, "save only for the raja himself."

Here the false priest turned away, and the ranee flung herself upon the floor before him, pleading. And he was obdurate.

With a cloak flung about her and a single taper in her hand, she led him down deep and dark damp passages, where molds grew upon the walls, and where the air was heavy with the scents of decay. Once she crept softly past a sleeping guard. Twice she pressed secret springs, and seeming solid blocks of stone opened before them. Twice she shuddered as she led the way within.

And then they came to a place where there was a moldy European carpet upon the floor of a tiny, rock-walled room. And there were rickety chairs there, and a table that was falling to pieces from the damp. And in a chest, quite unlocked, she showed him the rubies.

They glowed and gleamed and glittered by the ray of the single taper. The white man, disguised as a priest of Khayandra,

caught his breath as he looked at them. They were men's lives, and women's honors, and war, and famine, and pillage. They were all luxuries, and all things desirable, and they were things that caught at a man's heart and held it fast, so that he coveted them fiercely and could not rest until he possessed them.

"Here," said the ranee, catching her breath in a sob, "here is my sacrifice to the god Khayandra. I have betrayed my lord through love of him, that the god Khayandra may grant my prayer for his honor."

And the white man, in his strange robes of a hidden priesthood, threw back his head and laughed.

"Come here, then," said he, "and I will show you proof of the god's reward."

And she stood before him, hopeful that her prayer would be answered, yet unhappy because she had betrayed a secret of her lord. And the white man made a sudden movement, and a knife glinted momentarily in the dim light of the taper. She did not cry out save once, but the taper fell from her fingers and was extinguished. And then in the darkness there was no sound save the suddenly stealthy movements of the white man as he groped in the chest and hid things away in corners of his robe, and in his head-dress. He was suddenly very much afraid, because the rubies were his, now, and he was in a strange panic lest other men hear of it and kill him for them.

He made his way back through the damp and moldy passages, feeling the walls with his fingers. When he came to the place where there was a guard, the man was stirring drowzily beside his light, and the white man leaped upon him suddenly from behind.

He felt queerly secure, then, and wiped his knife carefully before he made his way unseen out into the ruined streets of the fallen city of Kosar.

MY GLASS was empty, and I rapped on it as a signal for the waiter to bring another drink. The man with the too-bright eyes and the disheveled hair was leaning forward upon the table. His expression was curious—that of one who sees incredible things. I began to suspect that he had the horrors, but Gresham was listening intently. He yawned, however, when the man stopped.

"Beastly unpleasant yarn, this," he remarked casually.

"Which happened," I commented skeptically, "a hundred thousand years ago. And I still don't see why rubies are accurst."

"That was because the raja of Barowak laughed." The man with the disheveled hair shivered uncontrollably, and his eyes, which were too bright, began to look rather alarming. I was growing rather bored, and it began to be apparent to me that the man only had the horrors.

Certainly there was no other reason why one dressed so carefully and so well should have his hair in a tangled, matted mass on his head, as if no comb had been through it in weeks or months. And I guessed at the horrors because they are not infrequent in hot climates with strong liquors, and they often make a man have queer aversions to some small thing. I knew a man once, who would not cut his nails for a year and a half and could do no work in consequence until he sold his nails to a Chinaman who wanted to send evidence home that he had prospered. But that, after all, has nothing to do with this. It was Gresham who prodded on the stranger to the rest of his yarn.

"I know the raja of Barowak," he commented sympathetically. "He has an odd sense of humor. Had some pigs, once, put in china jars——"

He laughed. The stranger shivered again. "It was a hundred thousand years ago. . . ."

The scents from the Guleh-Wat came over the wall as he went on, mingled odors of incense and stale flowers and cooked food and particularly unwashed humanity. A colossal temple bell clanged slowly, far over the city. Sunset was upon us, and the big moths that flutter in the tropics began to fly about, clumsily, because it was still light. The man with the disheveled hair clutched firmly at his glass. It was full of a green liquid.

THE white man went swiftly away from Kosar (so he told us) only anxious to get beyond the reach of the raja's half-starved guard. He was very much afraid. He was terrified by his own shadow, and it seemed to him that everyone who passed him must know of the jewels he had hidden about his garments. He fled hurriedly through Raman and Khota to Barowak. And constantly he became more and more afraid. In Raman there were few who knew what the mark on his forehead meant. In Khota there was none. He ceased to be regarded with profound respect, and he considered that as a sign of suspicion.

When he saw the walls of the city of Barowak below him, he was in terror. He ordered camp to be made, and the slaves who had been given him in exchange for his prayers pitched his tent and watched over him while he slept, or seemed to sleep. Actually, he was making a hiding-place beneath his bed for the jewels. He buried them deeply, and in the morning he went on to the city of Barowak alone, leaving his slaves to guard his tent. He was a clever man, the white one, and he knew that they would never suspect that he had left about them a treasure more precious than the kingdom of Kosar.

He went down into the city, and by means of his knowledge of the languages they speak in Barowak he mingled in the crowds and listened to the talk in the bazars. And he heard no word of Kosar save of the rubies of the raja and his falling-down palaces, and the people hungry while the raja wore jewels, in value greater than his whole domain besides. And then a great contentment settled upon the white man. He knew that no word of his most marvelous theft had preceded him through the kingdoms. He became intoxicated with security, and knew that he had only to travel onward to China where in a certain city there was a man who would buy of him whatever he chose to sell, when he could go far from the sea and build himself a secret palace with many dancing-girls and much wine and live in endless delight from thence onward.

He was a great man, and a wise man, so he felt, and it was already time for him to begin the enjoyment of his treasure. He began to look hungrily at the wines and sweetmeats, and to think obscure and evil thoughts concerning the women he saw about him. He debated on the purchase of dancing-girls. He had been so long among dark races that he had almost forgotten that he was a white man.

Surely it was not the thought of a white man that made him throw back his head and laugh aloud in the bazar at Barowak. He had heard that the ranee of Barowak was most beautiful of all women. And it was no more than fitting that he who had taken the jewels of Kosar should likewise take for himself the pearl of Barowak. His garb had been perfect for the first of his purposes, and was no less adapted to the second.

He went and held a secret consultation with an old female slave of the palace. . . .

THE mark on his forehead was a sign to make the doors of women open to him, and to make women anxious to please him. He could grant or withhold the favor of the god Khayandra, the mark told those who were wise enough to understand it. And women desire that god's favor, and in particular, the wives of rajas desire it.

She gave him cooling drinks with her own hands, and watched him anxiously as he sat at ease beside a small marble pool, all ringed about with marble, while a scented fountain played in the stillness. She was desirous of making him well-disposed toward her, but she seemed a little frightened, too.

"Why have you fear?" he asked, as she listened apprehensively to some retreating footsteps.

"My lord knows not the worship of Khayandra," she told him. "But if I may please the god in any way. . . ."

The white man was drunk with his power, which lay hidden in the ground among the hills that looked down on the city. His power was in small red stones, the largest of which was the size of a man's fist, but they glittered very wonderfully, and most men would have sold their souls for one of the smallest of them. The white man, disguised as a priest of Khayandra, thought of those stones glittering in the dark damp earth, waiting for his coming, and the thought intoxicated him. He looked upon the woman before him and found her pleasing. She was proud of carriage, and small of foot, and graceful. And her lips were very, very red, almost as red as the rubies the white man had stolen, and her eyes were like other jewels he did not possess.

"The god Khayandra," he murmured, looking at her obliquely, "desires to show you his favor. And I am his priest."

Had he been a wiser man, he would have seen that the light that came upon her face was from a thought of another than him, but his own heart was puffed up with pride, and full to bursting with vanity. And there was much evil in his eyes, which blinded him. He did not see stealthy figures creeping up behind him, nor read aright the sudden terror that overcame her as he reached out his hand to touch her.

An arm crept about his throat and tightened. And a cold, wavy blade pressed against his side, and then two men flung themselves upon his feet before he could more than gasp from a sudden very terrible fear. Then he saw small, monkey-like eunuchs fling themselves upon the ranee Sahnya, and bind her fast. Then they grinned at him while one more monkey-like than the rest squatted on his haunches and made signs to the white man. The monkey-like man could not speak, because his tongue was cut out,—which told with horrible clarity of tortures that were in store for the false priest of Khayandra.

THE white man had forgotten that though he might be very powerful, because of certain red stones hidden in the damp earth, he had ventured from pride and lust into the palace of the raja of Barowak, and that the raja was jealous of his honor, besides being possessed of a peculiar sense of humor. The white man went pale to his very liver, from certain foreknowledge of what was to come to him. He had forgotten the mark on his forehead.

One of the eunuchs vanished, bearing a message, and presently returned. He made signs to the others, and the white man was lifted up and carried for a long distance through gloomy corridors of stone, while those who carried him giggled to themselves at what was to befall him. He could only writhe. But the ranee Sahnya made no struggle.

They brought him at last to a little courtyard where there was a fountain, and the raja of Barowak sitting on a divan, half asleep, while a pallid, plump man with spectacles read to him from a book. It was a curious book to be in such a place. It was printed in English, and the *babu* was reading from it with great unction, and then translating what he had read into the accurst language which is spoken in Barowak.

The raja of Barowak looked up sleepily when the white man was flung down upon the stone floor.

"How did he find entrance?" he asked drowzily. "Slay those who let him in."

And then he nodded again to the plump man with the spectacles, and he went on with his reading. The raja listened only half-attentively. Behind his sleepy eyes thoughts were moving slowly. After a long time he smiled to himself.

"Stay. What is the name of that book?"

The *babu* puffed out a little.

"It is the *History of the Spanish Inquisition.*" He read the title in English, and then translated.

The raja grinned like one who is very drowzy.

"And what was that other one, from which you read this morning?"

The *babu* picked up a volume which was lettered: *Arthurian Legends.* Truly those were strange books to be in such a place, but the white man who lay bound there, waiting to learn in what fashion he was to die, did not think of that. He was remembering tales he had heard concerning the various unpleasant things a man may endure before death comes to him. He had heard that with care an expert torturer could keep one alive for four, even five days, in torment that would make hell a haven of infinite repose by contrast.

The ranee still was silent. The raja looked at her without particular malice, but rather as one who is meditating upon some jest.

"What is your excuse, O Sahnya?" he asked mildly. "Doubtless you love the man."

"Nay, my lord. But he is a priest of the god Khayandra, and I had supplication to make of his deity."

The raja said nothing whatever, but he looked very carefully at the mark on the white man's forehead. The white man took courage and spoke loudly, threatening the raja with the wrath of Khayandra. And the raja smiled again, seemingly half asleep.

"But the priests of Khayandra," he murmured softly, "have that mark indelibly upon their foreheads, and yours is running down your face from the cold sweat of terror." He began to laugh suddenly. "O white man, you have had your skin stained brown for many months, but the nails have grown out from your fingers, and the base of your nails is like the nails of the white men. This is a jest. I shall judge you by the laws of the white men."

The white man would have groveled in the earth, then, but that he was tied. The raja laughed, rocking his body back and forth.

"The raja Arthur, with his *tuans,* had many strange customs. There was that notion of the ordeal. I shall put you two to the ordeal. One of you shall live. And the other . . ."

The ranee spoke very softly, and very quietly. She was pleading for her life, but she spoke very softly. The raja waved her aside.

"This white man's custom of chi—chi——" He looked at the *babu,* and the *babu* puffed out and said, "Chivalree, sar." The raja chuckled and murmured, "Chivalree. It means that a man always

dies for a woman. It is very foolish. You two may decide which is to die, and which is to go free."

The white man began to plead in an agony of pleading, struggling with his fear-stiffened tongue until the froth welled from his lips, begging, imploring the raja to slay the woman with many tortures, but to let him go free.

But the woman merely said, "If he is a false priest, kill him."

The raja looked disappointed. He had perhaps looked for a comedy wherein each would beg for the other's life. This matter convinced him against his will that the woman was innocent, but he had no mind to lose his jest.

"Then you may buy your freedom, or she may buy hers," he said, still hopeful of diversion. "And the one who fails to pay the greater price shall test out some of the things that are in this book."

He indicated the fatter of the two books, from which the *babu* had been reading.

"It is vairy instructive, sar," said the *babu,* lapsing into English in his excitement. "This feeding a man powdered diamond, sar. He lingers for months, with many peculiar pains, sar. I—I was jeweler's clerk in Bombay, sar, an' I could fix——"

He began to rustle in the pages of the book and read excitedly, while the raja listened drowzily. The rack was there described in detail, and the torment of thumbscrews, and of the boot, and the other devices with which the Inquisition had operated upon men's religious convictions.

He read on and on, his translations growing more and more enthusiastic as he described the tortures that had been devised by holy men. He was especially pleased by the device of clipping off the eyelids and staking a man out in the sun.

But the raja merely drowzed, until presently he said suddenly:

"Let them name the prices they will pay for mercy."

And then there was silence for a long time, while the white man's soul writhed. On the one hand, the prospect of staring with lidless scorched eyes up at a pitiless tropic sun for days or weeks or months, with other tortures yet to follow, the rack, and the boot, and flame, and water dripping until death came. And on the other hand, the giving up of his rubies, his priceless, precious rubies that glittered with a red fire that was neither of land nor sea.

He gave an agonized cry at the thought, but terror drove him, and he offered rubies for his life. The largest was the size of a man's fist and those next in size as large as a man's thumb, and so on down to tiny glittering stones no bigger than a grain of sand. He offered them all, despairingly, for his life.

And the raja looked sleepily at the woman.

"And what is your price that you will pay for life?"

And she said just two words, which the white man did not hear.

Then the raja smiled very curiously, and bade his servants go and dig up the rubies that the white man had described, and as he saw them go, all the anguish and bitterness in the white man's heart turned to venom against the woman whom he had coveted to this loss, and he made a bargain with the raja that if the rubies were as he said, that he should be able to ask one demand.

And he lay bound in the sunlight, full of an unspeakable anguish at the loss of his rubies, until the men came back with his treasure.

The raja looked at them sleepily, and allowed the *babu* to touch and finger them. He made no move to examine them himself. But the white man, seeing all his wealth passing forever from his hands, cried out horribly.

"My demand! I make my demand!"

And the raja gazed at him, drowzily.

"The life of that woman! Kill her with torments!"

The white man sank back upon the stone flooring and moaned with anguish at the red stones going from him forever.

And then the *babu* looked up and smiled very placidly and said, "These are the rubies of the raja of Kosar, sar. I took them to him from Bombay, sar, when I was jeweler's clerk. He was very poor an' could make no display, so he had these jewels made for state occasions, sar, an' they are made out of glass."

Through the stunned horror of the white man there came a curious sound. It was the raja, laughing. He was laughing at the jest of a man trying to buy his own life and the death of a woman with bits of colored glass which were paste and not precious stones at all. He was particularly amused at the white man's trying to buy the death of a woman who had offered a very great price for her life. She had offered him a son, concerning whom she had wished to make prayers to the god Khayandra. It diverted the raja of Barowak to think of a man trying to exchange trumpery bits of trash for so priceless a gift, and he was minded to carry out the jest to its only fitting conclusion, with the aid of the *Arthurian Legends* and the *History of the Spanish Inquisition.* He gave orders, laughing uncontrollably. . . .

THE man with the disheveled hair was staring, now, as if he saw terrifying things. He drank of his green drink and shuddered. Gresham was listening very intently, and perhaps for the first time in his life did not notice that we were becoming a bit conspicuous. The voice of the man with the disheveled hair had grown louder, toward the last.

THE raja of Barowak gave orders, laughing, and men departed swiftly north and south and east and west to scour the whole world for red things. They brought red cloths and red woods and red stones and red dyes. And they took whole rivers and made them red with the dyes that they had brought. And then they took the white man and sat him in a red chair, binding him very securely,- and so that he could not move, nor even open his jaws to scream. And then for a hundred years they left him.

They did not touch him. They did not beat him. They did not harm him in any smallest way, but from some spot far overhead a tiny drop of red-tinted water fell down upon his head. Once every second it fell, deliberately, inexorably, never late, never early, never varying by the thousandth fraction of an inch from the one spot where it fell.

From taps the blows rose to hammer-blows and then to mighty, horrible collisions that jarred his brain to its very foundations. The inevitable monotony of it grew terrible, horrifying, of a sort to drive away sanity. The white man began to make noises in his throat by the end of the first year. By the hundredth year he was screaming through forcibly closed lips.

Then they took him away, and he slept for a day. And then they took him back for another hundred years, but he was forgotten, and they left him for a thousand generations, while he screamed and screamed and the water fell remorselessly, drop by drop, drop by drop, upon the one same spot upon his skull.

And then he was released for a single

day, while he knew that the raja and all his descendants must have died and been forgotten, and hoped that they had forgotten the cause of his doom, or the length of it. But they put him back again and again, and yet again, until he knew that he must wait patiently, until all the armies of the world could find no more red dye with which to tint the rivers, and the rivers had run dry, and there was no more water in the earth. He sat on his reddened throne and screamed endlessly because a tiny drop of water fell drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . upon a single tiny spot upon his skull.

And he stayed there a hundred thousand years.

NIGHT had fallen in the Jardin de Paris, in Rangoon, and the boats on the river were no more than dark bulks from which many-colored lights shone out serenely. The scents of the Guleh-Wat, over the wall, grew thin. The incense became stale. The hibiscus and the nipa blossoms and the lotus flowers took on a queer, sickly smell that was the odor of premature decay. The night insects were fluttering about our heads with an exaggerated energy.

Gresham coughed suddenly.

"Poor beggar," he said, not ungently. "I sh'd think that would drive a man crazy. Fancy a drop of water on one tiny spot that you couldn't vary! It 'ud make a man hysterical, I imagine."

The man with the disheveled hair turned too-bright eyes upon us.

"It lasted for a hundred thousand years," he said lucidly, "so, naturally, he cursed rubies, because everything about him all that time was the color of rubies and the water that fell was always tinted like rubies. It looked like them as it fell, glittering. . . ."

"I wonder," I said, ruminating, "if it would have to fall on a special part of a man's skull to drive him crazy. I've heard of it, of course."

The man with the disheveled hair told me that it would not, that it had fallen all over the white man's head, but in each imprisonment only upon the one spot. He told me accurately just where it fell each time, but curiously, he did not raise his hand to his head to illustrate.

Gresham lighted a cigarette very thoughtfully. He had hardly paid attention to the last of this talk.

He made a sudden impatient gesture.

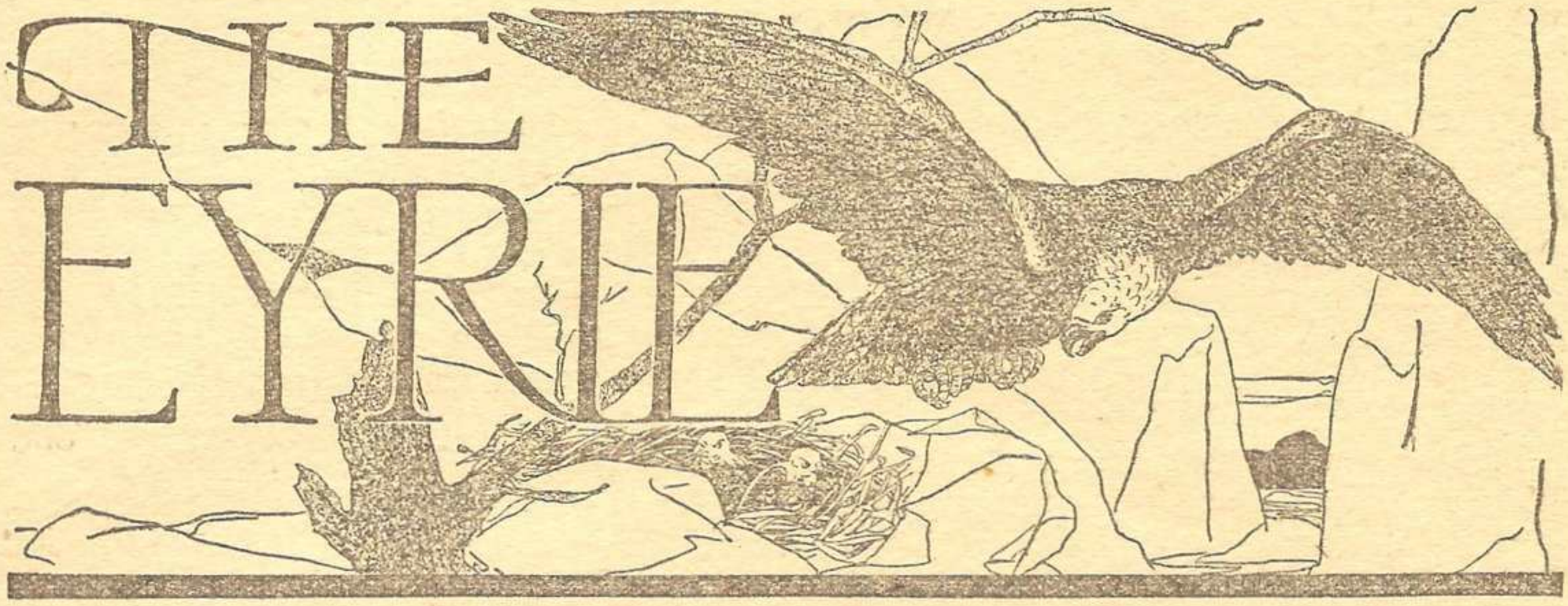
"Look here, Leinster," he said abruptly to me, with an undercurrent of meaning and perplexity in his voice. "I'm supposed to arrest a certain chap. I'm in the constabulary, y'know, and you can guess why I ought to arrest him. But—dash it all! What'd you do?"

The man with the disheveled hair was lying slumped back in his seat, and he was staring with an infinite pleasure at the greenness of his drink as it showed in the dim lights the Jardin de Paris provides.

"A hundred thousand years," he murmured, and shuddered. "Drip . . . drip . . . drip . . ."

A waiter passed behind him and stumbled just a little. In stumbling, he raised his arm to catch himself and a single drop of red liquid slopped over the edge of the glass. It fell on the head of the man with the disheveled hair.

And in an instant he had caught the arms of his chair in a frenzied grasp and was sitting upright in a queerly rigid position, as if he were tied there. His face was terrible to look upon and his eyes were fixed. And he began to scream in a certain horrible monotony, as if he had been screaming for a hundred thousand years.



CAROLINE FERBER writes from Chicago: "Groggy with heat, we remain faithful to our trust—yessuh—the monthly letter to WT must be written. Among other things, have been wondering if Virgil Finlay has recovered sufficiently to draw some more purty pix for us. The late Eadie left us with a nice chiller—*The Wolf-Girl of Josselin*—too bad he is no longer among us. His stories were always welcome. Whew! Seabury Quinn threw a new lite on poisoned breath. Certainly some of these garlic feasters enjoy little popularity, and though one is staggered at times, at least it is not fatal. Why, that little old dried-up meanie! Do all these Hindoos bear grudges for so long? Shuddery? Yes indeedy! Mm—yummy—another lovely young Amazon, and leading a band of fair, flaxen-haired people! *The Fire Princess* is one of those yarns relished with gusto and to be dreamed of many a time after. Tell me, do I detect a slight resemblance to that grand movie, *Lost Horizon?* Also I enjoyed Howard's verse, *Lines Written in the Realization that I Must Die. Green Horror,* although not so much the type of story I really like, was short enough to keep it interesting. Had it been stretched out, it would have been a boresome squirmer. As it stands, the author kept me in a state of suspense. There now, I had a feeling that Varduk in *The Black Drama* was the supposedly long-dead Lord Byron! Author Field knows how to turn out a fine yarn. I trust we will get to read more of the kindly Judge Pursuivant for many a long time. Right behind is a story rather unusual, although supplying the ghost element. *Dead Dog* wasn't bad. Derleth's tale of the *Three Gentlemen in Black* wasn't bad, more to my liking than some of his previous tales. Ah! —Lovecraft's *The Tree* was styled in the grand manner of the ancient mysteries. So much was said, yet so much left untold. It is readings like these that make one sigh and wonder at cruel nature to deprive us of such grand genius. Whoever J. Schlossel might be is a puzzle, but the reprint *Invaders from Outside* was good—very much so. This is one interplanetary yarn from which I withdraw my ban. Hyar and thyar through the Eyrie, let me agree with Claire Beck of Lakeport, California, in that Finlay's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is the best. It seems I can't acquiesce with some readers on Poe and Hawthorne for reprints. If they had not been exceptionally superb, they would not have lasted through the history of literature. That's all now, the heat is too enervating for much comment."

Trudy's Spellings

Kenneth Moor writes from Lancashire, England: "I was very much amused to receive a pictureless copy of WT in yesterday's mail, but I hope there are no more, because Finlay's illustrations are, to me, 50 per cent of the magazine. I must say, however, that I don't think his new type of drawings are anything like as good as his former ones. (If you would like to print this I would be very interested to see the storm of abuse the last statement will bring down on my defenseless head from other Finlay fans!) And talking of printing letters: thanks for putting in my last one—I was never so surprized in my life! Congratulations on *Pigeons from Hell,* the weirdest tale you've ever produced to my knowledge. But then I'm bloodthirsty! . . . Now a few pats on the back. I read the August issue and enjoyed it except for—but we've had enough brickbats. I think *The Fire Princess* is a winner even if there was nothing to show it was a serial until the very last page. Hamilton's descriptions are marvelous and one can really visualize the set-

tings. That is the highest tribute that can be paid to any writer. (I notice that the British agent seems to be a rather incompetent young lady! No offense, Mr. Hamilton.) . . . Yours till Trudy takes her spellings from the Oxford Dictionary!"

Armful of Orchids

Eleanor Braley writes from Kennebunk, Maine: "Here's a whole armful of orchids for the July and August numbers of WEIRD TALES. That utterly different story, *He that Hath Wings* by Edmond Hamilton, was about the most extraordinary tale I think I ever read. *Mother of Toads* by Clark Ashton Smith almost gave me nightmares. Now every time I look at a poor innocent toad, I wonder suspiciously if it is such a creature as Mère Antoinette turned out to be. If *The Fire Princess* by Edmond Hamilton goes on at the rate it starts out it will be a rip-snortin' story. Most serials are so disappointing. *The Wolf-Girl of Josselin* by Arlton Eadie came in next by a whisker. Her picture on the cover should start a new fashion fad and wouldn't that be something? The poems are precious in both numbers, but I was so disappointed at the lack of pictures in the August issue that I nearly wept. Since so many orchids are passed about for the authors who have passed on, why doesn't someone write us what happened to the illustrator who used to decorate WT? I mean the one who made that cute little sketch one always finds at the top of the reprints. Those really were scary."

A Curse from Peru

Misti Selkirk writes from Lima, Peru: "After these many years of devotion to WEIRD TALES, at last I find that I must register my first complaint. Has anyone noticed how trite and tiresome has become that line introducing the letters to the Eyrie, 'Fulano de Tal writes from Somewhere:'? Even our perennially refreshing Miss Hemken is presented as 'G. H. writes from Chicago:'. No doubt I make too much notice of so small a matter, but the net result of reading that same by-line some hundreds of times is the shadow of a dissatisfaction with the Eyrie itself, which the Lord forbid! Once started, the brickbats seem to come readily to hand. My second has to do with certain tales which have appeared in recent issues. The writer has shown that his talent is such that he need not depend upon imitation to be effective, that tales purely his own should be excellent. I solemnly warn him that I have spent the past week in sifting over the most horrid necromancies of the pre-Inca mythologies searching for a curse of sufficient virulence to suit his crime. I have at last extracted one from the cob-webbed corridors of the nighted necropoli of Nazca which I am sure will be satisfactory. After dusting it off and adjusting its delicate mechanism, I have made a trial of its potency, which trial resulted in a blister on my tongue, an extensive charring of the grass roundabout, and a large crack in the granite boulder on which I was sitting when I repeated the incantation. So I wrapped the curse in paper of purest asbestos ready to mail upon a moment's notice to anyone who again so dares to stir the bones of the illustrious dead and to trouble once more the mighty shade of great Conan, to drag back a feeble shadow of his greatness from the Valhalla he so nobly earned. Since, without the sugar coating, there is bitterness and resentment in the best-intentioned quinine, let me continue with a few words of appreciation for the many stories in recent numbers that I did like. Your reprint of *Saladin's Throne-Rug* was a superb choice and recalls to my mind the wealth of wonderful tales printed in your pages in years gone by. Let us have more of these old masterpieces. Please allow me to congratulate Mr. Bloch on his streamlined re-creation of the horror tales of Poe. Let no one think that I intend thereby disrespect or disparagement of either Mr. Bloch or Mr. Poe. *Escape,* by Ernst, is a well-tailored little tale, almost inducing belief. *Mother of Toads* fully meets the standard of excellence which we have come to expect from Mr. Smith. *The Black Drama* promises to be the best serial in many a moss-draped moon. Let us hope that it continues in the same high plane. *The Defense Rests* is a very novel and welcome treatment of a theme not new, but always of absorbing interest to those of us who have not yet gone 'over there.' Just one little corner of a brickbat to David Keller for his entirely unconvincing *Dust in the House.* Mr. Keller has often shown us in times past that he can do much better. Also, may I ask why Edmond Hamilton has so long hidden his light under the bushel of so many carbon-copy tales when he had the

talent for ones like *The Isle of the Sleeper* and *He that Hath Wings?* These last two are probably the best that we have ever had from his pen. Give us more like these, Mr. Hamilton. No appreciation of the tales in the July issue would be complete without a word for *Fortune's Fools,* another of those word-faceted jewel carvings of phrases which we owe to the genius of Seabury Quinn, whose *Globe of Memories* and *Roads* have shown us so clearly that beauty and tenderness also have their place in the weird tale."

WT Best

Mrs. C. L. Janney writes from Deepwater, New Jersey: "Just want to write and say that I prefer WEIRD TALES to any magazine on the market. They are not printed often enough for me, and I agree with Richard Conrad Nicholas from New York in saving—write more stories of the supernatural, ghosts, werewolves and that sort. Keep out robots, planetary and time-travel. The August WEIRD TALES is the best I've read for a long time. I hope they are all as good."

Against Serials

Richard K. Weldon writes from Kaduna, Nigeria: "I take this opportunity of telling you how much I appreciate WEIRD TALES. Last year I discovered a copy in a second-hand bookshop in Ireland, and on reading it I immediately instructed my agent to put in a permanent order. I like this kind of fiction and your magazine is the first of its kind I have ever come across. I do not intend to select particular stories for special mention, as the all-round form is exceedingly high, but I do wish you could cut out the serials. In themselves they are usually excellent, but their drawback is that one must wait a month for the next installment. Perhaps some day you will publish twice monthly—one number with the short stories and the other with the rather longer ones. When you do—if ever—you may be sure that I will be one of your first readers to 'double' his order."

Two Super-Stories

Donald V. Allgeier writes from Springfield, Missouri: "In the July issue it seemed to me that there were two 'super-stories'—*Fortune's Fools* and *He that Hath Wings.* Quinn's story is just about his best to date. It is far superior to the puerile *Roads* (do I hear boos?). It has everything a good weird tale should have—plus that extra, indefinable something. Hamilton's story recaptures the atmosphere of his *Child of the Winds.* His latest is a charming story. *Saladin's Throne-Rug* would seem better to me if I had not read *The Girl from Samarcand.* I'm saving both of them, however. Other good stories in July were *Return to the Sabbath, The Defense Rests* and *Spawn of Dagon*—the latter inferior to the first Elak yarn. . . . I still maintain that you should have a line blank for story preferences, about reprints. Let the readers vote on the stories they want reprinted. Tabulate the votes and reprint the most popular one first, then several of the others in order. The best story in the August number is *The Black Drama.* Field is one of your best authors. *The Wolf-Girl of Josselin* is fine, though only original in a few touches. I liked the denouement very much. *The Fire Princess* is an excellent example of the weird action story. It should grow more entertaining as the yarn unfolds."

Lack of Illustrations

T. O. Hoffmaister writes from Saint Louis, Missouri: "I was very much disappointed in the August issue when I noticed the lack of illustrations. Please do not make this a policy in the future, for the illustrations add quite a bit to the magazine, especially those of Virgil Finlay. I would like to see him do some more covers soon. Among recent stories I particularly enjoyed *Goetterdaemmerung, He that Hath Wings* and *From the Beginning.*"

The Perfect Pearls

Robert Black writes from San Antonio, Texas: "I have been reading your magazine for years—always in deepest appreciation. But this is my first letter. First, let me draw a great tide of maledictions onto my head by criticizing the dead master, Lovecraft, and his story, *The Doom that Came to Sarnath.* All I can say is he must have been reading some of Lord Dunsany's books before writing that—it has all the Dunsany touches and quirks—not like Lovecraft, at all. Judge Pursuivant gets better in each story. He's great in *The Black Drama.* Elak is one of my favorites—he and the good Doctor Jules de Grandin. Elak may even approach the level of that king of buccaneers—Conan the Barbarian. . . . A word of commenda-

tion. For his two perfect pearls, *Roads* and *Goetterdaemmerung, I* could forgive Quinn anything. If he can do it some more, here is the man to take the cloak of Howard or Lovecraft. More power to him!"

A Mournful Dirge

Ralph Clarry writes from Toronto, Ontario, Canada: "This is indeed a mournful dirge I write; for WEIRD TALES has been banned from Canada, is now no more as far as we are concerned. Possibly due a great deal to its striking covers more than anything else, this great and unique magazine has succumbed to the ax of indiscriminate chopping. I would write at great length on this subject, but I feel that it would be of no use to point out various facts to those responsible. The truly imposing array of authors that have graced the pages of WEIRD TALES since its inception, contemporary and deceased, has been ignored. Names like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, Algernon Blackwood, Nathaniel Hawthorne, A. Merritt and H. P. Lovecraft, to mention only a few who have had some of their best works printed in WT, have not been considered, and represent, I think, just how far into the magazine's contents the banners went. No, I think we can safely assume that a few kicks probably from some rheumy old chronics have been the main element in the dictum. I was told by a news-dealer here that if just three complaints are registered against a particular periodical throughout the whole of Ontario, then that magazine is banned. Six, no less, have been thus eliminated in the last month. Upon my word, it seems not impossible that in short order we shall have nothing but the funny papers to read here in Canada—if what constitutes good reading and what doesn't is left to the judgment of a few persons, that is. . . . There isn't very much I can add to this letter. If you print it in the Eyrie, I will never get to see it, but mayhap someone might who could do something about the deplorable high-handed action that has deprived the many Canadian readers of their irreplaceable weird monthly. I am treating this in a very sober light, admittedly, but it is more than annoying to have something taken away that you have enjoyed for years. Suffice to say I know now what a baby feels like when you take candy from it! I have never had any kick to make about the magazine as it was, probably never would have, but I find it impossible to withhold a kick for the magazine's being banned. It is rank injustice."

The Book of Thel

Earl E. Le Clair writes from Buffalo, New York: "I consider WEIRD TALES the most literary of all the pulp magazines. This statement is well backed by a number of your contributors and the type of work they do. Another good point in the magazine is the frontispiece in which some artist illustrates an excerpt from some classical work. Might I suggest illustrations of perhaps William Collins' *The Passions* or some of William Blake's *Prophetic Books,* as for instance *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* or *The Book of Thel,* from which I quote *Thel's Motto:*

'Does the eagle know what is in the Pot,
Or wilt thou go ask the mole?
Can wisdom be put in a silver rod,
Or love in a golden bowl?'

Might I also mention the works of Lord Byron, Robert Browning and James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night,* and endless others that, I think, could supply inspiration to this artist. . . . I like those stories that deal with pure mystics or with metaphysics, or with the strange and forgotten of some land, time, or peoples; although I do not care for that type of story that has to do with mechanical or scientific wonder-stories of the future."

What! No Pictures?

Francis Hacker writes from Hollywood, California: "I enjoyed the August issue more than any other one for years back, and I was amused to find the reason made plain to me by your note at the end—apologizing for the lack of pictures. If only the accident which prevented pictures which attempt to depict the undepictable could become a permanent part of your schedule of publication! You will always find voluble readers to praise anything at all—while a much bigger block of potential buyers are put off by these puerile attempts at illustrations which to a devastating degree offset the terrific stimuli to the imagination that I am sure you intend the stories to be. Words, skilfully handled, may suggest a picture as inherently a portrayal, and who may portray a nightmare? It is a negation of terms. Since I am an old,

old reader I have allowed myself the privilege of friendly criticism—but I cannot thank you enough for piloting WEIRD TALES so successfully—and by and large—avoiding the mediocrity of the run-of-the-mill science-fiction and horror tales."

No Sequel

Allan Scott writes from New York City: "In the December, 1937, issue of WEIRD TALES you had an exceptionally interesting story by the name of *The Sea-Witch* by some author with an unpronounceable name (Nictzin Dyalhis). The story ended: 'I wonder if . . .' Will you inform me at your earliest possible convenience whether there is to be a sequel?"

What Is So Rare?

Robert Burrell writes from Corona, California: "What's so rare as a day in June, and along with it a copy of WT as good as the current issue (July), and a cracking good story like Henry Kuttner's *Spawn of Dagon?* Others, mayhap, may sigh for the conventional accouterments of a hurricane-like wind blowing with a ferocity sufficient to lift a dog house from its measly foundations, raindrops the size of Homburg grapes, and chain lightning without; a big silent house, a cold, playful draft, and a brace of guttering candles within, to fully enjoy the 'unique magazine'. But give me WEIRD TALES any time and in any place and I'm gone with the gale until I've read it from cover to cover. The Imperial Valley, with the mercury playfully hovering around the 122° mark; a snowbound lookout tower in the Santa Anna Mountains; or my station before the console of the organ in the church in which I serve in the capacity of organist (with WT safely hidden from view in the depths of a ponderous volume of Bach toccatas and fugues and Cesar Franck voluntaries), none of these locales serve to dampen my ardor when a new copy of WT comes into my hands. Might I toss a large, luscious orchid in Seabury Quinn's direction for his *Fortune's Fools?* This sprightly tale, dealing as it did with the adventures of the illustrious great-grandsire of the present-day ubiquitous Jules de Grandin, proved a welcome change over the usually-chronicled doings of the latter intrepid gentleman and his moronic pal, Doctor Trowbridge. Quinn also receives my vote of gratitude for his *Roads*

NEXT ISSUE

Lynne Foster Is Dead

By SEABURY QUINN

THE strangest adventure that ever befell a mortal man happened to a handsome young American after an ill-starred traffic accident in the streets of Cairo. Almost unbelievably fantastic though the story is, the genius of its author makes it credible and fascinating.

WE WILL not reveal to you in advance the intriguing nature of Lynne Foster's adventure, but it is so astounding as to leave the reader quite breathless. Seabury Quinn has written many startling and fascinating stories, but rarely has he equaled this novelette, which will be published complete

in the

next

issue of

WEIRD TALES

of several months ago. Robert Bloch, I was happy to see, did his usual good work with *Return to the Sabbath.* Bloch has been pretty much my favorite author from the time of his WT debut with *The Feast in the Abbey.* Mr. Bloch is approximately my own age (21), is he not? I was somewhat disappointed with Clark Ashton Smith with his *Mother of Toads,* when he usually writes so charmingly of the people and forest of Averoigne. However, for sheer charm, I doubt whether even this gifted writer can ever surpass his own *The Holiness of Azedarac* of several years ago. The varied comments from interested readers in the Eyrie included the best single collection of letters in several issues. Gertrude Hemken is priceless. I have often wished that she would turn her hand to writing a tale for publication. It would probably be quite worth while. Incidentally, what has happened to 'good old Jack Darrow'? His somewhat lengthy absence from the column has been a bit disturbing."

Woe! Woe! Woe!

John V. Baltadonis writes from Philadelphia: "Woe is me! No Finlay illustrations! That, by the way, lowers my opinion of the August issue a whole lot. The cover, of course, was very good—though definitely not in the story. It misleads one very much as to the theme of the yarn. I can readily imagine the scene Finlay would pick for the illustrating of *The Fire Princess.* That it would be beautiful is undoubted. The story, itself, is very good, and I can hardly wait till its final parts come around. *The Black Drama* was a gripping story all the way through—e'en though I did know how it was going to end. *The Tree* was both unique and beautiful. Best in the issue was Hamilton's serial yarn."

Concise Comments

Richard Kraft writes from Allenhurst, New Jersey: "Arlton Eadie's last tale was truly a fine one. *The Wolf Girl of Josselin* was excellently written, had a new twist to rather a stale plot, and left one a feeling of having read a real weird tale."

Earl Leaston Bell writes from Augusta, Georgia: "Give us plenty more of Gans T. Field, but in memory of H. P. L. and R. H. please lay off such poorly written stuff as *Green Horror* in the August issue."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Easily the most popular story in our August issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the closing installment of *The Black Drama,* Gans T. Field's strange serial tale about Lord Byron.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE SEPTEMBER WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1) ----------	----------
(2) ----------	----------
(3) ----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1) ---------- Why? ----------

(2) ---------- ----------

Address coupon to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

$50 - B13 Weird 1380 Oct

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE great chapel, circular in shape, had walls that rose curving, darkly luminous, satin-smooth as the petals of a vast black tulip, to meet a vaulted roof—their polished surface broken by squat archways behind which darkness lay like a crouching beast of prey.

Above the huge slab of the altar-stone was a reredos of red alabaster, a screen some thirty feet by ten. It was powerfully illumined from behind, so that its carving stood out in bold relief and a trick in the lighting gave a sinister effect of constant movement.

This screen was a vivid presentment of a human sacrifice. Bound on the stone altar, a woman appeared to writhe and quiver. Her long bright hair rippled down to a deep trough about the altar-base. About the altar stood tall candles whose flames danced in frenzy. And behind the candles' flare and flicker, at each of the four corners of the altar, a veiled figure towered. Menacing, gigantic, these figures were the only immovable objects on the screen, and they achieved by their fateful stillness—in contrast with the surge and movement of all else in the picture—an effect of final inescapable doom. Dark crescent moons poised above each veiled head of these four attendant genii, bearing Hebrew characters which read—EARTH. WINTER. NIGHT. DEATH.

And now Sant saw the black-clad figure—the body of Stephen Lynn, torn and wrenched, trembling from head to foot in diabolic ecstasy, arms flung wide, head bent backward so that light from the suspended globe beat full and fiercely down upon the upturned face. Louder—louder rang the great triumphant organ voice, pealing out into the unclean silence of the chapel's gloom, beating against the curved and shining walls which sent back clashing pæans of tremendous harmony. . . .

You cannot afford to miss this strange and powerful tale of possession and dual personality, by the author of *Thing of Darkness*. This fascinating novelette will be published complete in the next issue of WEIRD TALES:

THE SIN-EATER

By G. G. Pendarves

——Also——

THE THING IN THE TRUNK

By PAUL ERNST

A fascinating story about a heinous crime and its strange aftermath—by the author of "The Witch's Curse" and other weird thrill-tales.

THE NAMELESS CITY

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

It lay silent and dead under the cold desert moonlight, but what strange race inhabited the abyss under those cyclopean ruins?

THE HOUND OF PEDRO

By ROBERT BLOCH

A tale of old Mexico under the Spaniards, of an evil black Moor from Granada, of a dire oppression of the Indians, and a ghastly game of ten-pins played on the desert sands.

LYNNE FOSTER IS DEAD

By SEABURY QUINN

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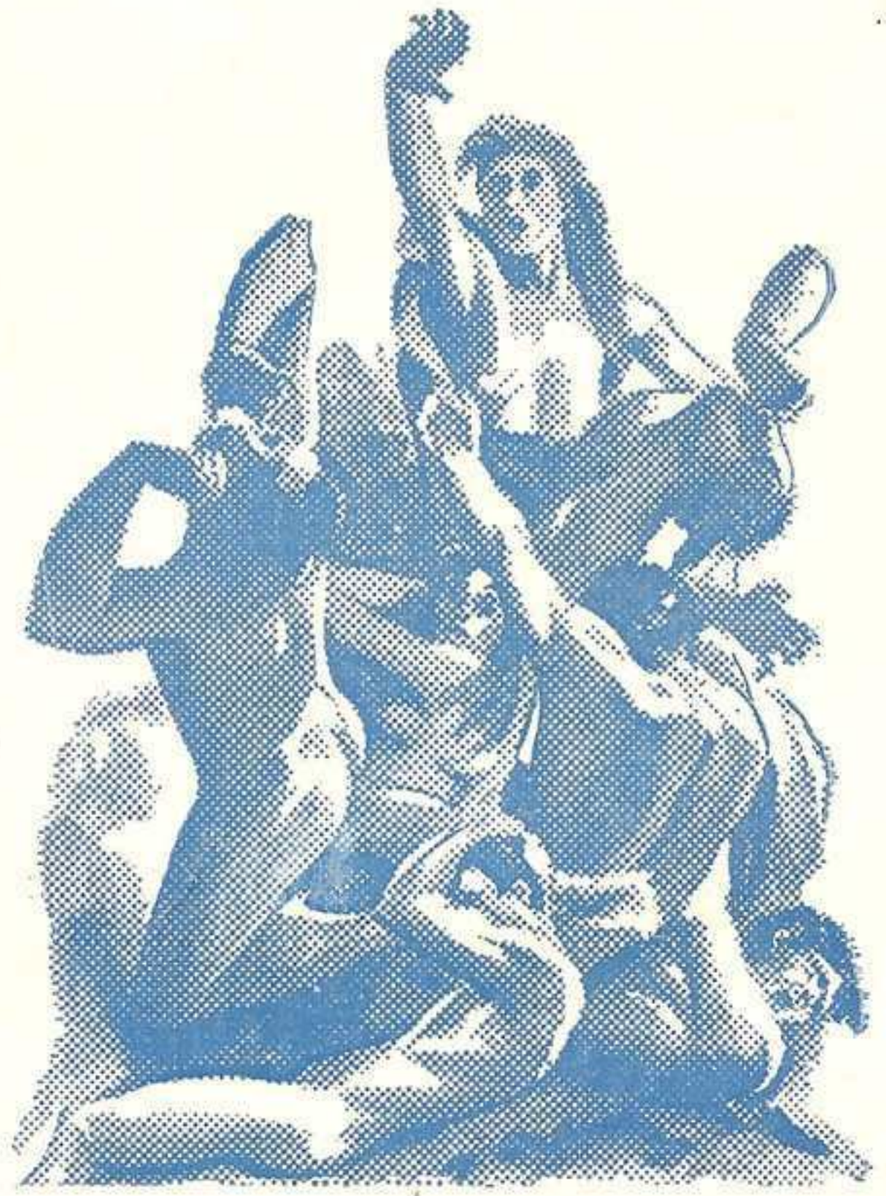

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