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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

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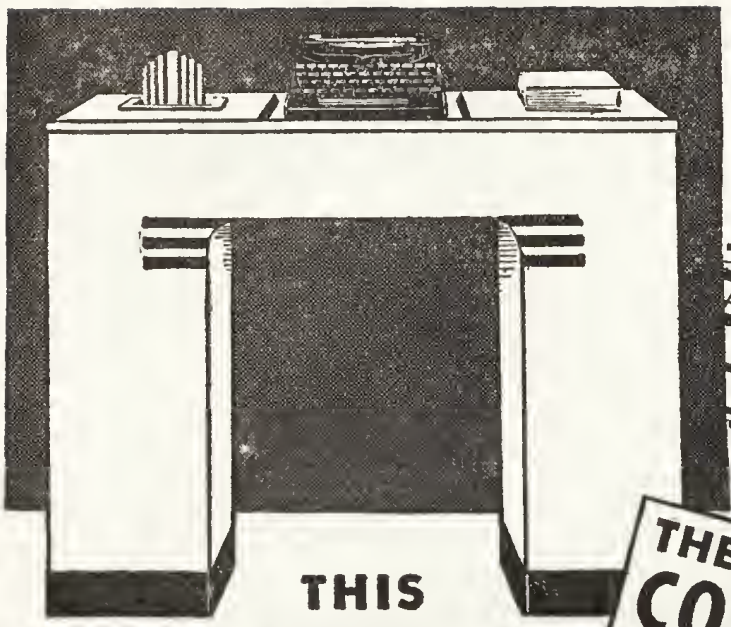

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"He dipped the flashlight so that it illumined Valerie's white face and upturned throat."

# The Hollow Moon

By EVERIL WORRELL

*A fascinatingly different story about the weird adventure that befell a party of Americans shipwrecked in the South Seas—the strangest of all vampire tales*

SOON it will be the end. I believe it might be possible to survive longer here than any of us will in fact live. There is the old question of the will to live: We are a miserable sextette of castaways, and each of us has his (or her) own reason to wish for death. Aside from the fact that this half-life, or life-in-death, in which we count the hours and days and wearily and constantly expect extinction, prompts one toward suicide—and toward murder.

Gibbs' yacht struck on a submerged pinnacle of the rock on which we are slowly dying, at about midnight two weeks ago last night. This chronicle will probably

never be seen by anyone, after the last of us has gone. I have here, however, a bottle which formerly contained gin; and it corks stoutly. I will do the usual honors; keep our record as long as I can, put it into the gin bottle, cork it, and throw it into the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps sometime . . .

The yacht reposes on the floor of the Pacific, and got there not long after she struck, but we took a few things off. Gibbs is responsible for the gin bottle—and for several other bottles of various brands. What we saved of food is gone, and we are living on dew and limpets.

We even have water. I salvaged a couple of large pieces of canvas, and in these we nightly collect dew. I have read of this expedient, and it is amazing how much is really available—enough to make up the loss by broiling endured during the days, I think. I say this guardedly and after much thought. We are dying, and in part dying of thirst; but if our thirst for water alone were killing us, we would be by this time far worse off than we are. We are dying of rebellion against the constant longing for more water; the constant fear of a night when no dew will gather in sufficient quantities—but our tongues do not swell and protrude.

And then, there are in each of us those individual seeds of destruction of which I spoke in the beginning.

We are gaunt, enfeebled living skeletons. We are worse off in physical condition than Terence McSwiney of Ireland and Mahatma Gandhi of India after longer periods of total food and water starvation. But we are devoted to no cause, and our weakness does not grow progressively worse; if our sufferings were as serious as they are intense, as I said, we would be past writing—past quarreling. . . .

We all hate each other.

Gibbs drinks. . . . Lisa, his beautiful wife, who reminds me of Poe's exquisitely lovely Ligeia, she who could not be conquered by death, more or less keeps him company. Ah, but the thing they did yesterday was horrible, considering they really love each other. And yet—sometimes they seem to hate each other too. Yet without each other, life would be for each of them the desert in which no rose blooms. Put all that together, and you have tragedy.

So yesterday, at high noon here on our desert rock island, they went off together to a little cavern we have found on the north side of the rock, low down toward the water. They took a bottle of wine with them; they said they wanted to drink a toast to the voyage that ended on a rock, and to each other.

I went after them, a little later. I thought they had acted strangely when they went away together. I thought, What if they have gone off together to commit double suicide? But it was not that.

THEY were in the little cavern. They lay unconscious there, lit by dancing rays of cold light reflected from the moving waters.

I looked around a little, and saw a white powder scattered on the rock floor of the cavern. I tasted it—bitter. Chloral hydrate, I thought. I remembered Gibbs showing me some after we got our things together on the rock. The wine bottle was barely touched. Lisa's mouth showed an encrustation of white — chloral hydrate. Her wrist was cut, and blood was oozing. I heard about that later, but the bleeding didn't amount to much; to so little, and the action of her heart was so faint, at first I thought she was dead.

I went to work. Not nice work. I carry a ball of twine around with me, and I caught limpets by diving, and hurried back and tied the string to a limpet, and stroked and forced the limpet down Lisa's throat, and after a little pulled the string.

She had some automatic reflexes left, and the chloral was swimming in consid-

erable wine after all, so a good bit of it came up. Then I did the same by Gibbs. I walked them around a bit then, first one and then the other. After a while, both of them came to. I sank down just where I was and lay still for so long I thought maybe it would be for ever; but after another while, the three of us helped each other back to what I may call camp. We told our story, too, just as I am writing it down. Gibbs and Lisa supplied what I didn't know about.

It was not a suicide pact. They had had an unusually bitter quarrel—and had each felt that nothing but murder would make them feel better. We are all so overwrought, here, and they the worst of us. Gibbs then had cut Lisa's wrist, because he wanted to hurt her more. But he went to sleep himself about the time he started, and had only scratched the surface.

They are doing very nicely today.

And I—to think I have saved them—for God knows what fate! At best, another death. Perhaps it was well done. I, Michael Sydney, scientific explorer, delver into hidden secrets and hidden places—I am up against ultimate values which are beyond my judging.

I want, for some reason, to find Valerie Dorn, whom I cannot see from where I am sitting.

I dislike Valerie. I should like to know why I dislike her so much. We are highly antagonistic, and I should like to analyze that. . . .

But—another writing will do for that. I want to know where she is, to talk to her. I want, I suppose, before both of us are gone for ever from this earth, to *change* her. I don't know why it should matter, but it does. There is something about Valerie Dorn that I want to break and shatter—as Gibbs wanted to cut Lisa's wrist before he died. But I dislike Valerie, and everything about her, and the thing between us is a purely mental thing.

Valerie!

I meant to call her, not to write her name. The sun is near the horizon, and the swift red and black of the tropic sunset-fading-into-night is upon us. Before the lurid darkness descends, I want her with the others—safe and where I can see her.

*Record of the Hours Between Sunset and Midnight*

IN PERUSING diaries of the desperate class I have always thought it the height of idiocy to read the calendar headings: "August——, 1940."

For us, for the present, Time is dead. As a matter of fact, I know it is still August. It must be—but that other August in which we sailed the south seas and expected our voyage to follow a certain set and expected course is millennia ago. Einstein's space-time curve has thrown us off. Of course I mean this figuratively; we have had such dizzying events in the last hours that all of us have strange feelings—a sort of mental wandering that had heretofore spared us, has dizzied our minds.

But I want to make this a straight narration.

Last evening, then, as the hour of sunset swooped down out of the sky, I went in search of Valerie. I found her soon enough, seated in a lonely place she frequents behind a sort of pinnacle of rock, where she has what privacy the rock affords.

Valerie is needlessly conceited. I, for instance, have done what few could dream of; Valerie has never done anything noteworthy that I know of. She is unusual, and her thoughts are unusual; but neither she nor her thoughts are worth much. That is why I do not like her.

I invaded her sacred privacy.

"Come back to the others. The rock gets lonely—desolately lonely, when the daylight fades," I told her.

She turned her strange eyes upon me.

Those eyes are wide and darkly shadowed, but I doubt if they have any authentic color of their own. They must reflect things — lights and colors around her, moods and thoughts of her own. I can swear at times that they are a light gray that is almost colorless; again that they are black; and sometimes they hold an undefined depth of color. Also, she is ageless. At times she is fifteen, or even younger; sometimes any age—old, too experienced—not, however, ever tired. Something behind those eyes is always burning, shining—I hate women who think too much. If we were back in the world of men and women and I met her everywhere, I should make it a point never to see her when I could help it. She is an utterly antipathetic type; interesting, but repellant.

"When you and the others are out of sight, this rock is as good as any other place," she said. "I don't have to watch you meeting death halfway, eating it, drinking it, thinking it. I can be normal, if I don't see any of you. Death is only a change in life, anyway. When I am dead, as you would say, I will be alive as Kerry has been for six years. And tonight I intend to break your arbitrary ruling, your Majesty. I am not rejoining the others. I am sleeping here—alone."

I left her, hating her a little more than usual. Kerry was her husband. He had died six years ago, and he is far more of a personality to Valerie than any of us. Yes, to Valerie, death resembles a rather handsome dark man in a gray business suit—Kerry Dorn had walked across the street on his way to work in New York. He had not absent-mindedly strolled in front of a truck, but he had leaped there to push a child out of the way, and of course that made him a hero. But it hardly made him a living hero after six years. But to Valerie, it did.

I left her—with Kerry, after telling her that she is a thanatophile; in love with death. Where Kerry Dorn is, he is not worrying about her any more.

And I went back to the others, who had drawn close together with the falling of darkness. For now it was dark—very dark. We talked a little.

"After all, I remember pretty tough camping trips——"

To think we attempted a little cheer—*that* night! Last night. The night of ultimate horror.

THE others slept, one by one. I must have dozed, for I thought we were all still together, except for Valerie, when I heard her scream.

It was late, and a slightly gibbous moon hung, lop-sided and swollen-looking, low in the sky. The top of the rock was bleak and bare and visible, all but the part hidden by Valerie's sheltering column of rock. To that I raced, forgetting weakness and the pounding of my heart. And around on the other side of that rock column, I saw again the surface of the rock—bleak and bare—with no one visible upon it.

I listened, but heard no sound. There were only two possibilities — she had plunged into the glassy, moonlit waters, screaming as she leaped or fell; or she was in the only really concealed place on the whole rock—the cavern where a few hours ago horror had lurked, because our two lovers had attempted double murder there.

I scrambled and stumbled down to it again, and it was as though the horror reached out for me, met me, drew me by the hand. The mouth of the cave was lit by a truly ghastly, quivering reflected light, for it was on the moonward side of the little island. The back of the cave was in darkness. Darkness and silence. And yet, something was there—something living or something dead. Again, horror and tragedy.

I—I, Michael Sydney—was afraid, partly for myself, partly for Valerie. Back

in that dismal darkness she was, perhaps —and perhaps not alone. I do not know what form my thoughts were taking. I hesitated to go back there; I was feeling my weakness again, and—not for myself alone—I dreaded the blow in the dark that might mean my sudden finish. Yet forward I must go, and into the unseen and unguessable.

Then the surprising thing happened. A light flashed on, back there in the darkness. Before I saw his face my fancy conjured up Gibbs' image; for of us all he alone had saved a flashlight. And it was Gibbs, and Valerie lay apparently senseless at his feet.

He spoke quickly, after the long wait while he must have been looking out of the darkness at me, as I stood there limned against the moonlit water.

"Don't get this wrong, Sydney!" he said. "I've done what I could for her, see? And it was necessary to cut a little. A snake—she came here to sleep alone, I think, and the snake bit her right in the throat. I cut out a little with my penknife, and sucked the wound. I've done what I could, but the throat looks a bit lurid."

He dipped the flashlight, so that its brightest circle of light illumined Valerie's white face and upturned throat.

Yes, it looked lurid, to use his word. Blood was trickling from a swollen wound. She looked like—what? God, the old vampire tales!

Then Gibbs doubled over so that his own face entered the paler circle of light around the central brilliant aura. And he —he looked like Dracula.

I walked over and picked Valerie up in my arms. I had to carry her away from this place at once—at once.

I said only one thing.

*"A snake?"*

Gibbs was in darkness again, but I could almost see and feel the look on his face, the slow flush that went with it.

"Queer, on a bare rock in the mid-Pacific. I saw it, though; it made for the water. A *sea* snake—*sea serpent,* Sydney. You see?"

He was insane and a liar, and I was about to tell him so. But just then he screamed, and swung the flashlight in a wild gesture that seemed to signal me to turn around—and I turned. God! The memory of that moment would live a hundred years, if my life lasted that long.

A snake, after all. As big and thick as a man, limned against the moonlit water beyond the mouth of the cavern behind me, crawling up the sheer side of the rock, and over the ledge that was the mouth of the cavern. As big and thick as a man. . . .

I FELT a scream strangle in my own throat, and then I got hold of myself. For my eyes were playing me tricks, and now I saw that what I had thought was some impossible kind of face in the snake's head, was a face, all right, only it was in the head of a man. Yes, a man was climbing up out of the sea and into our cavern, and I couldn't see how he made it, especially as a sort of cape seemed hanging from his shoulders, which, being wet and slinkily clinging, had given him the serpentine effect.

Then—was he shipwrecked as we were? He must be, and so would be of no help to us, since no man having a boat that would stay afloat would come near a barren rock, let alone swim to it and climb over it.

Gibbs screamed again. I suppose he was, as often, on the border of D.T. anyway, and if he had seen this man and frightened him away by screaming at him before, and if he had really taken him to be a sea serpent, he probably thought now that he saw fangs and heard hisses.

"Shut up, Gibbs," I said crossly. "You're crazy drunk, and I don't know what you've done to Valerie, but after what you did to Lisa today it isn't going to be

good for you if her condition is serious. This is a man and not a snake, and he must have come off of another wrecked boat, even though there has been no storm. He can help us carry Valerie, since he's strong enough to wriggle up the face of a cliff. Pull yourself together while I talk to him. He must speak English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, or some other——"

The next moment I almost went down on my knees thanking God, although the new arrival was definitely of the sneering and supercilious order.

"I see you speak practically every language," he said, too suavely. "Don't spend time naming any more of them. I speak all of them myself, but since you and your friend speak English usually, let us stick to that. I have a boat—not wrecked—I was moved to investigate this rock, which seemed, as you might put it, 'not quite right.'

"My yacht will take care of all of you nicely, just as soon as you can board her——"

I hated him, from the start. But Gibbs was crazy and Valerie perhaps dying, and all of us expecting no future but slow death; so one can easily imagine how glad I was. I'm a man of the world, hardened, stoical, sophisticated; I could die, I wouldn't beg for life, I could take it as it came. . . .

We were saved! We were saved!

I could have kissed his feet, whether I hated him or not. I could have run around in circles, laughing and crying.

I went over and touched Gibbs' arm, and he was shaking and shivering with a nervous fit, and that helped me to cover up my own emotion.

"Get hold of yourself, man!" I said to brace him. "Valerie will get over what you did to her, I hope. We need you to help with her, and to tell the others, and —Gibbs, we'll sleep on board a ship!"

But did I say it was a night of horror? We told the others, yes.

Lisa and Jones, who had been cook on Gibbs' yacht, were hysterical with joy.

But it was too late for Galen, who had been mechanic on the yacht.

We almost fell over him, on the other side of the rock, in Valerie's hide-away—a place where Galen had never bothered to go. He lay in the moonlight with his face turned up and his throat stretched, and so much blood had run out of him that he had a shriveled look. And at that there were only blood-smears—not really much blood. That must have been because of the hunger and thirst. His throat was like Valerie's, but so very much worse, as though with Galen someone had had plenty of time . . .

I looked at Gibbs with more distaste than I have ever looked at any man. And then—in his eyes I read a blank amazement that had the look of utter, if drunken, innocence. Well, a drunk may commit murder and know nothing of it—even two or three murders sometimes. Yet—Gibbs looked a bit like a little boy accused of breaking a window he hasn't been near. Well, it would all have to be thrashed out later. We had to get on the yacht, and take care of Valerie. Tomorrow I will go on with this.

*Tomorrow?*

BY MY watch, which, being waterproof, has never stopped, it *is* tomorrow. By optical evidence, it still is night. Either the watch is bewitched, or these waters through which we sail, and the sky over us as well—or all of us.

Valerie lives. She is weak, but improving. We all had a ghastly kind of meal on board the strange yacht, which should have been breakfast by my watch. The food consisted of one dish, of which our host alone partook with much gusto. I don't care for meat at breakfast, and while

I sometimes like high seasoning, I didn't like this. But I suppose my state of mind affected my appetite.

A special sort of wine was served Valerie, which seemed to do her good. She had almost to be carried to the table, and seemed half fainting when she got there; but after having some of that wine she rallied tremendously.

At our table were Gibbs and Lisa, Valerie and myself, and our host and captain, who calls himself Le Noir. The name suits him only too well; in fact he resembles the Black One of legend, or in other words the Devil himself. He is swarthy, and his heavy brows meet in a V. His skull is long and narrow, and I don't like his looks. Valerie (sweet girl!) has already managed to tell me that I dislike him because I am afraid he knows more than I do. I told her truthfully that I am sure he does, and that I imagine some of his knowledge to be of a kind no decent man would want. Yet perhaps that was rather a foolish remark. I know nothing against Le Noir. He saved us, I suppose; that is, he took us off the rock.

But I wish I knew where he is taking us. He has made no promise as to port; we asked him if he was bound for any port in North or South America; we would have gone down on our knees in gratitude had he mentioned San Francisco. Instead, he said he was on a longish trip which was off the steamer routes.

Except for the fact that water is churning under our keel, I could imagine our course lay off the earth altogether. That sounds like an insane statement, but let me set down the facts. *They* are insane —the facts. Or say, indeed, that the very skies above us and waters beneath are all crazy and impossible.

But the facts:

It is by my watch nine o'clock of an August morning. And I haven't skipped twelve hours or anything like that. Gibbs was awake while I took a short nap, and he assures me that it was a short one—of perhaps two hours' duration only. Well! . . .

*Later*

WELL, to bring this up to the present moment again: Let me try to describe the indescribable.

I walk to the nearest port, which is heavily glassed. (There are no decks on this little ship; we walked into it as into a submarine; once in we are in, and sealed away, it seems, from both outer air and freedom.)

I look out—up, down; a little forward, and a little back toward our wake. And what I see is not so very strange; just natural enough, yet *unnatural* enough, to make me doubt my sanity. I know in the first place that it ought to be—by this time —nearly ten in the morning; but above I see stars, and in the water that streams darkly and vaguely back I see stars once more. That in itself is not as I have ever seen it; as a ship rushes through ocean water, throwing it aside in ripples and furrows in even the calmest sea, it is impossible to see *reflections of stars;* yet they are there beneath us, nor are these reflections as broken as you would suppose. They are dim and faint, and the water seems to flow over them—indeed, it is as though those reflections were other stars which shone upward from beneath the water over which we travel.

The stars above us, on the contrary, are large and clear and burning beyond anything I should have thought possible even in the tropics. They quiver and sparkle a little—a very little indeed; otherwise every star would have the appearance of a planet, so large and near they are. The nebulæ are so brilliantly clear that to follow their convolutions gives me a feeling of dizzy sickness, as though I were too

vividly imagining those unplumbable depths of the abyss; in fact, I dare not look out of the port-hole long at a time, either downward or upward, because of the sickness that overwhelms me; it is all a part of the strangeness of the aspect of what should be a well-accustomed scene at sea; granting that I must be wrong in the first place about it being ten o'clock in the morning; granting that I must have lost a period of time. . . .

There it is! I am losing my grip on myself entirely. I did not sleep. It *is* morning. No, that way madness lies. One cannot look at the night sky, the night sea, and repeat that it is morning. Well, let that pass.

I tear my dizzy eyes away from the awful beauty outside the port. That sky, in the starless tunnels between the nebulæ —the awful, unparalleled blackness of it! The waters beneath our keel, those waters in which faint star-images shine impossibly upward: those misty, milkily violet waters that seem to hold an unknown phosphorescence — that resemble drifting vapor quite as much as water . . .

*He* is approaching, with Valerie. My God! I thought her face was white when we carried her on board this ship. Now it is whiter still, and in her eyes—those indescribable eyes of no color and many colors—there is some sure and dreadful knowledge. She sways as she walks, and his arm goes around her, and I start forward.

But the dizzy sickness I have been fighting overcomes me. The floor of the cabin swings upward, and for a little everything . . .

Was black. I see that I have carried the present tense a bit too far, in rendering legible the lines immediately before this. I fainted for a brief time, and then I was unable to write for a little. But I have found it possible to hold a pen again. *He* says the attacks of utter prostration will be intermittent, and each recovery more complete in the case of those of us who survive, and less complete in the case of those who will die.

Let me write as fast as possible while I can. It seems to me that all of us will die. Our sufferings in the last half-hour have been too intense. . . .

We are sailing—not the seas, but the skies! I have done with conjectures. I am recording things as they happen. This deadly sickness which overcomes us is space-sickness—the name Le Noir gives it. It is the result of shifting from one gravity zone to another. This shift is, I suppose, in the nature of a fairly smooth gradient—although there may be variants beyond my calculation. We are leaving earth and approaching the moon; of course there are small comets, groupings of dark matter, too, everywhere in space, and these set up minor shifts of magnetic attraction.

I think much of the wave-like procession of our attacks of nausea and utter prostration is due, however, to the efforts of our systems at adaptation. On board ship, you know, if one is seasick one can withstand it for a while; one is submerged in misery, and emerges—simply turns his head and is abjectly ill again.

All of us have read fanciful accounts of space-travel. Everything in the ship floats at a certain point; the nose of the ship directs itself forward toward the goal, but at a given place in the journey, up becomes down, and the drag of gravity which has had to be overcome, changes to an accelerating force.

It is all true, so far as it goes. But no writer of things imagined has ever even touched on the deadly shifting of the organs within the body, the very blood within the veins. The bottom of the space-ship is the bottom of the world, so far as you are concerned; yes, but there is that gradual—and sometimes *lurching*—sense of shifting, which is real; the reaction to

everything out here where the drag of earth and moon are approaching equilibrium, and accordingly neither one a governing force. . . .

Out of five passengers, Le Noir has predicted that one or two of us will die. He has made captures such as this before. The mystery of the *Mary S.*, the schooner whose crew disappeared with dinner cooking on the galley, is not a mystery to him. He has hinted at a fate which makes me pray, almost, for death for all of us.

But the suffering. I am going under once more. My nose bleeds, my stomach and heart are bursting; pressure is kept constant in the ship, but the pull from outside of things that are bigger than this little world of ours, things that shift and hurtle by unseen in the dark, too small to be seen as shooting stars from earth, and too lightless, but large enough to tear us in pieces like bullets which need not enter the body to do their deadly work—spears of gravity-pull that invade us and are gone. . . .

I can write no more. Perhaps never another line. . . .

THANK God, whatever happens, we are definitely within the governance of the moon's gravitational field now, and able to think and reason, even if all we can do is to face things bravely.

Le Noir states coolly things I, having heard much, have heard of: but things few people have heard stated or formulated—things about our solar system, so pleasantly and safely lifeless in space around our teeming earth. Le Noir makes it seem to me very silly that the real minds of Earth unite in believing our planet likely to be the only one inhabited in the universe; not that I ever thought that a very sensible idea, if only because of averages. What has happened once, is likely, in the course of a million million million million chances, to happen more than once; and since more than those millions of stars inhabit space, and among them are certainly at least some planets—and we know nothing about these stars, or planets, or the ability of life to adapt itself—well, it does seem quite possible that somewhere besides on Earth, something, *or some things,* live.

Some things live on the moon, according to Le Noir. He himself lives there, when business does not take him to Earth —or to Saturn, home of disintegrating souls. But the moon is our present concern. I perhaps am loath to write of the moon—after listening to Le Noir.

The Things which inhabit the moon do not live *on* it, says Le Noir. Not, at least, to any great extent. His kingdom is not on the moon. Astronomers are not right in saying nothing ever moves *on the light or dark faces* of the moon; but they approach the truth more nearly in saying *that,* than when they put it that the moon is uninhabited.

*There is a ghastly kingdom inside of the moon!*

You (who read, or *never* read) have read vampire stories? Then you have heard mild stories meant for children. Vampires, you know, inhabit dark places; the dirt in which they are buried; they live by the blood of the living; they walk abroad only in the night.

But on Earth, there is always their enemy, the Sun. Men dwell *on* the Earth, and Earth's heavy atmosphere diffuses the sun's rays even into the deepest shadows on the sunward side. But even on the hemisphere of the moon's surface lit glaringly by the sun, there are *utterly black* shadows: inky crater-shadows into whose black depths no heavy air conveys the diffused sun-rays which are death to vampires; and you see that, day or night, there is no place on or in the moon where vampires may not find easy refuge. Now—consider those unlit caverns within the

moon—its hollow center, with fissures extending to the surface; and you have something only too much like that Hell our scientists "know" is impossible—because they have found, in all the universe, no place where they think it can be!

They haven't thought much about the moon in this connection. Le Noir says there are many Hells, as we might describe them. Many Hells—perhaps then, even a few Heavens? It seems our scientists haven't gotten so far with their definite knowledge—but of course I never thought they had. It is so childish, their little fabric of what can and what cannot be; so pitifully childish, when you think how near the earth is to the moon; not very far from Saturn, even; and nothing but cold emptiness between Earth and other places that are worse.

Le Noir hints at these horrors till I think he hopes we may go insane. Jones is dead, died of the space-sickness. Lisa's bleeding wrist wounded by Gibbs, who loves her, was the thing that brought Le Noir's attention to us, that invited him among us; and Galen's death on the rock—Le Noir did that, before he began on Valerie, and then came Gibbs. That horrible first breakfast on his ship—there was blood in that which made us easier victims of his intended doom for us; for he wants to break our wills, to bring us willingly into his moon caverns of Hell. For our blood and our souls, Le Noir had hovered near—and I think *over*—the rock that was a hell on Earth, waiting the darker horrors of crime—murder, madness, cannibalism—to prepare the way for him to reach our very souls. . . .

LISA interrupted me here. She has read what I have written on the ship. She says she likes Le Noir; that he has been telling tales for fools, and that we are in good hands.

"Space-travel — you lunatic!" she said gayly. "Seasickness—and gullibility. You can see the water under the ship, overside out the port——"

"You can see a sort of liquid air which has clung to our ship as she tore out through Earth's atmosphere, which grew heavy and visible in the cold of outer space. Le Noir says that a slight seepage of warmth from out the ship has kept it liquid, or it would be ice. And through it—through that 'water' beneath our keel, if we have a keel—you can see the fixed stars of outer space. Over the ship the air is thin, like a thin veil of vapor—see how the stars burn up there through that little film of air? The bottom of the ship swings toward wherever gravity is pulling us, or downward—whether down for the moment means the earth we left, the moon we approach, or some small lump of matter wandering through space; and so the heaviest and most liquid air swings down too—beneath us; giving the illusion of water—of strange water, through which we see empty space and stars. You see, Lisa?"

"Anyone on Earth would know that you're crazy, Michael," she said. "You take Le Noir seriously, don't you? I *like* him. When we get to Frisco, I'll have you taken to a hospital—you need rest——"

A gong sounds through the ship, which seems to rock in space with the sonorous vibration. I have been writing only a little after each incident, each discovery. Now I feel that I will have to put these notes by; I shall fold them compactly and place them in my vest pocket. Fortunately my handwriting is very small. . . .

### *The End of the Journal*

AT LE NOIR'S summons we all went forward into that part of his spaceship which he has heretofore excluded us from. The whole curved, streamlined front of the vessel is made of heavy glass—and we are able to see ahead of us.

God! The awful glory of the sight!

We were fast approaching the moon, on its bright side. The curved, luminous shield stretched out until it filled the sky from horizon to horizon. What had been only a few moments before a fantastically near, tremendous heavenly orb, was become a landscape; but a landscape such as was never seen on Earth.

Brilliance beyond all power of description—the practically airless, arid desert reflecting the bright fury of the sun's rays clear as they traversed the empty ether. And yet, shadows — shadows huge and monstrous, knife-keen and goblinesque—shadows of those awful mountains of the moon, those dizzy declivities and craters fit for man's nightmares, but not his mortal seeing! This, then, is why I have headed this last short bit of my hopeless journal *The End*. This, and what comes after.

With unexpected ease, Le Noir's space-ship slowed and drifted like a cloud. Lower she swung; and settled, easily as a falling feather, into the mouth of one of the black craters — and so on down — down. . . .

I thought we were going direct to that awful moon-center of which Le Noir had spoken. But for some reason, he delays bringing us to what I think of now as the ultimate Hell. This is because he wants to break us utterly, to weaken us all with suspense; and there are probably factors involved of which I cannot even dream. One thing I know: Valerie resists him with a strength which neither he nor any of her companions had expected. Each look that has passed between them in this last hour has been like the crossing of swords.

Well, as I said, Le Noir delayed our ultimate descent. The space-ship came to rest on a ledge only a little way below the surface of the moon. And he has left us, and gone on down the crater, which leads, he said, into the very center of the moon.

He opened the hatch of the ship, and heavy, damp, but quite breathable air poured in. What keeps it here inside the moon, since none to speak of is on the moon's surface? I asked him that, as he prepared to leave the ship. His answer was like the blow which I half expected to accompany it:

"Gravity, fool! The moon is hollow, I have told you. Having far greater viscosity than the atmosphere of Earth, toward the center the air is very dense—you will all suffer new pangs in descending. Be ready to accompany me when I come back. If you seek to escape—the way back to the surface is clear; but there is no air up there. Of course there is suicide, but it is not supposed to have God's blessing even on more blessed planets. While there is life—hope on! Hope, all of you, for the unspeakable joys of dwelling with ghouls and vampires——"

He laughed. I have never heard such laughter. On Earth it would be insane; but it fits this place well enough.

He went a little further down, and passed into a side tunnel; and as he went from sight, I swear that the serpentine look returned to him which he had when I first saw him, and then the shadows of wings extended from his cloak; so that he was both serpent and winged thing with the wings of a bat. I should call him Satan himself; but he has said that there are many hells in space—so perhaps there are many devils.

None of us will ever see any other place than this; *but I pray to God that there may be in the universe as well, places that are bright and lovely, and as blest as this place is accursed!*

THIS is the end of the journal, I know; but not the end it seemed to be. Here in this ghoul-haunted horror we have found—not hope, but courage; not escape, but in the very face of death, a glimpse of Paradise.


"We looked with unspeakable horror on what must have been a part of Le Noir's hell."

Valerie, whom I have tried to hate—Valerie, who has lived in the past for the sake of a vanished love—came to me with a strange light upon her face.

"Is this your true self, Michael?" she asked, and there was something like awe in her voice. "I have never imagined anything finer or braver; you spoke out loud; you said you prayed that there might be in the universe places lovely and bright, which we would never see.

"Your prayer seemed to put a new heart in me; at the worst, last moment, there must be something better than despair. Suicide, Le Noir spoke of: the death that is accursed—but what if we die fighting, trying to escape? Even if there is not one chance in a million, that is not suicide. Michael! I have told you, and you have laughed at me, that I can hear Kerry—especially in times of crisis. He is dead, you always say and sneer; but I hear him—not his voice, exactly; his thought. Just now it was courage which I drew from you, that cleared my mind so that I felt his presence.

"I have been hearing—really hearing with my auditory sense, I mean—a strange, rushing noise. Haven't you? We have been miserable, preoccupied. But it is clear—a sound like the rushing of water or a great wind. I want to follow the sound, to find out what it is; if only because Le Noir spoke of no such thing—and so it can't be of great interest to him. Besides, in the noise there is a sound like music: sublime—deep-toned, like an organ note—a chord on a mighty organ.

"Possibly, even, he did not want us to know what it is, or to notice it. But when my mind cleared just now, I felt that a beginning to whatever resistance we can make, or effort to hide—*something* there must be which we can attempt. I must follow that sound, find what it leads to. Will you come, Lisa and Gibby? You will, won't you? Anything is better than to wait for Le Noir's return. And *you*—Michael, *you* will go with me?"

Yes, I would go with her, although Lisa and Gibbs were far too broken, too uncertain. They were both hopeless and resigned. Maybe Le Noir was not so hideously bad—were ghouls and vampires and Hell within the white moon possible? Yet—was it possible to have come where we

had come—away from Earth to her bleak satellite? There was nothing to do, then; wait—and see how bad things were. . . .

So I went with Valerie, who cried over Gibbs and Lisa—not over *us*. We were seeking a Grail—escape there is none—so call it that! We dare to seek escape where there is none, a victory that cannot be.

THE crater's sides were steep and almost dark; there was a dim phosphorescence, however; and we found that the sides of the crater were honeycombed with tunnels like the one Le Noir had disappeared in. We did not follow him, but followed the sound Valerie had spoken of; and it was indeed like the rushing of water or a mightier wind than any I had ever heard. . . .

The rocky structure of the moon is different from that of Earth; composed, as we know, of the same elements, they are somehow differently textured, for there is a *transparence* about the moon; incredible as it seems, at one place in the tunnel where the ceiling must have been very thin (I had felt that we were ascending) I saw dimly but clearly the glowing orb of the sun, and even tinier glittering points of light that were the far stars.

And there was a place where the rock floor beneath our feet was thin, too; and we looked with unspeakable horror into what must have been a part of Le Noir's Hell.

Imagine murderers, degenerates, such dregs of humanity as we call "human fiends"—imagine them hurtling on their downward path of disintegration until they are in truth inhuman—until nature conforms their bodies to their black minds, and sneering features and monstrous deformities portray the spirits that inform them!

Imagine the cast-off species of the long, winding trail of evolution—monsters in the animal kingdom dating back to the age of the behemoths, back to the reptilian forms of old Earth, back farther to jelly-like amorphous monstrosities unnamed and undreamed of—imagine these freaks, too horrid to survive on Earth, having established themselves within our near neighbor the moon—and bred and changed strangely there, crossing themselves with the cast-off spawn of humanity that inhabits here with them—a world of men and monsters and demons mixed together—having one thing in common: a constant reiteration of the serpent and bat types; however grotesquely altered—always that.

Limned against a dim phosphorescence from below, through the dark clear glass-like ledge beneath our feet we looked down upon this, and shuddered and clung together; nearly fainting—I as well as Valerie—when a huge winged reptile that was yet man and monster both, swooped upward toward us in wild gyrations, bearing gripped in its slavering jaws a dangling corpse—and one we recognized, newly borne (unknown to us) to this place by Le Noir—Galen, brought here from the rock where last we saw his mutilated body—Galen making a feast for the winged dark thing that tittered. Even the sound came to our ears, echoing in the silence.

It was Valerie who partly recovered first, and drew me on. The rushing sound came to us, close ahead in the darkness. Down a second tunnel we darted; and felt a current of air drawing us on—growing into a wind; into a steady, strong gale. . . .

I said that this was the end of the journal. Now, at last, it is. The very end.

We are going on with the rushing wind. We are going to hurl ourselves into the crater-shaft ahead, up which (we can see and we believe understand) it roars.

The crater shaft ahead is visible to us now, in wonder and horror visible. Its sides are smooth as glass, and as reflectant. They are so worn by the upward rush of air, which at this point escapes under pres-

sure from within the planet, out—*out into space itself*. They are iridescent, shimmering, mother-of-pearl—no, they are like the shifting glimmer that inhabits the moonstone. They seem to reflect the changes in the shifting of sound in the mighty diapason of the organ-chord of the air rushing up the crater shaft from the very center of the moon.

We have spoken together, clinging to each other here just where the onward sweep of air might still be resisted. From the terrific force of that upward current we believe it rushes out into space with sufficient velocity to bear our bodies (it may be and we pray) beyond the reach of the moon's gravity-pull. To wander out on the airless surface of the moon — that was merely suicide, and hardly worth while. Le Noir himself suggested it; I think he would have captured us and dragged us back; perhaps not even dead — perhaps there is, after all, enough air out there to sustain existence for a little while. In any case he would have brought us back—our bodies, if we died there. And there would be the fate of Galen, whose corpse we saw in the horrible jaws of the tittering monster. . . .

No. This way, ahead, lies hope—hope of a death that is clean. We have prayed that our surmise may be right. We hope only for this — escape, clasped in each other's arms, into the utterly lifeless void between the planets—there to be for ever unknown, unguessed, undreamed of—frozen meteors that were a man and woman, locked together. . . .

I am about to wrap the twine which I still carry, and which is very strong, about us, hoping that it will help us cling together as the mighty current sweeps us into space. We want to stay together, as we are going.

Valerie suggests that I fling my finely written and now completed manuscript ahead of us, corked in the flat gin bottle which I have all this time carried, with the ball of twine. No reason; only to watch its going, as a little preliminary before we ourselves go.

The ball of twine! Last time I used it, it was to save Lisa's life, by tying it to a limpet and forcing the limpet down her throat, after she had swallowed poison; I pulled the twine and saved her life—and now she is back there in the space-ship, as she preferred—she and Gibby half believing in Le Noir because it is the easiest thing to do. . . .

Like Valerie, I am sorrier for them than for us. I think we have found a clean death—and there have been other lovers commemorated in the sky as constellations. We will not be exactly that—and no one will know of our fate—but it is not an ignoble one.

And so I will proceed to seal this within the bottle, and hurl it into the outward-bound cyclone—and locked in each other's arms, we will walk forward until it takes us. . . .

*Editorial Comment: by Editor of "The Investigator"*

SPECULATION will be rife concerning the foregoing document. Michael Sydney's is too prominent a name to be discredited in the world of letters, whatever be the material appended to it. Yet the foregoing is of a nature utterly unparalleled, even in the world of imaginative fiction, to which many will wish to consign this against the author's express denial that it is anything but the truth—Sydney's graphic account of the deadly space-sickness from gravity shifting; his description of a world within a hollow moon; his account of an upward geyser of air escaping into space with such force that human bodies are borne by it beyond the reach of the moon's gravity attraction —and, to link Sydney's foregoing story

with the sequel as told to the press by many and diverse reporters, into the field of Earth's magnetic attraction.

To take up the only phase of the affair on which Sydney makes no comment, since he himself has learned of it only through the accounts of others:

On the night of August 30th, three urgent communications were received by groups of spiritualists holding meetings at the three largest Pacific Coast ports of the United States: Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. These communications were beyond all precedent, according to those attending these widely separated seances, urgent and clear. They purported to be given by one who called himself Kerry Dorn; they gave a specific latitude and longitude in the South Pacific Ocean, and urged that rescue parties be sent there with all haste for the rescue of Mrs. Valerie Dorn, the widow of Kerry Dorn; Michael Sydney, explorer; and possibly Arthur K. and Lisa Gibbs.

So unusual and insistent were the communications, given in one case by rappings, in another by trance mediumship and in a third by what was claimed to be a partially materialized control speaking for Kerry Dorn from the "other world," that long-distance telephone calls were exchanged between the three spiritualistic societies. Before morning these were supplemented by hasty investigations which established the truth as to identity of the relationship between Valerie and Kerry Dorn, and also the protracted absence of such a party as was described on the sailing-yacht of Arthur K. Gibbs, owner.

The Coast Guard was appealed to, and declined to take action. However, one of the members of the group in Seattle was very wealthy, and a partner in a shipping concern, and before noon the next day managed to have a fast steam yacht dispatched to the latitude and longitude given in the three diversely received messages.

The result of this expedition has been widely read and lightly credited. This is because we simply do not believe things we are not prepared to believe. Even I, John Graham, editor of *The Investigator*, offer no personal opinion.

But the evidence of all on board the rescue ship is as follows:

On arriving at the given latitude and longitude, at a point in the South Pacific, all on board were amazed to see two small icebergs floating in the warm waters of the sea, not far from each other. On investigation it was found that within each iceberg, frozen in the center, were a couple—a man and woman, clinging to each other, and having on their faces expressions of utter terror.

The ice was gently and carefully chipped and melted by artificial heat, supplementing the action of the sun and warm Pacific water, which had already acted upon it, of course. The man and woman encased in each iceberg were carefully removed to the deck of the *Northbound,* and watched with the closest anxiety. After a little, life returned to the apparently inanimate corpses. All four were perfectly rational, and exhibited in the beginning a delirious joy at finding themselves on the yacht *Northbound,* and immediately afterward an intense desire to relate the events detailed in Sydney's manuscript—in every point of which the four agree. The identity of the four was of course easily established.

This practically completes the case, except for one very interesting detail. While melting away the ice encasing Sydney and Valerie Dorn, the flat gin bottle containing the manuscript, just as he had thrown it before him into the geyser of air, was taken out; hence the foregoing is not furnished by Michael Sydney from memory, but is verbatim his diary as recorded from time to time during the "moon journey," the shipwreck, and the sojourn on the moon and flight from Le Noir's space-ship.

I HAVE discussed the theoretical and scientific features of the whole thing with Sydney, over a dinner for two that lasted until the dawn.

The air which bore them up the moon crater and far into outer space solidified around them, liquefying and freezing with terrific rapidity in the absolute cold into which they entered. The bodies of all four were frozen, of course, and preserved alive in the frozen condition in the same manner in which, experimentally, dogs have been frozen and later thawed and revived in the laboratory. The gin bottle was frozen into the large berg containing Sydney and Valerie Dorn, because its small volume offered so little surface to the uprushing air that it moved upward slowly, and was overtaken by the bodies of the man and woman who shortly afterward hurled themselves, clasped in each other's embrace, into the uprushing air-geyser.

The friendship between the four who were rescued in the South Pacific is of a nature which might in itself testify to shared experiences of unparalleled beauty and terror, horror and victory over almost certain destruction. Valerie Dorn and Michael Sydney repeatedly expressed their delight that Gibbs and his wife had followed them, during the voyage back to Seattle on the *Northbound*.

It is hard not to digress into the personal and human side of a story, an experience, so breath-taking. But to return again to the scientific features, or theories, of Sydney's manuscript and account—

The encasing shroud of frozen air was large enough to protect the bodies of the four men and women in a state of suspended animation, through the encounter with the Earth's atmosphere and the plunge deep into the waters of the ocean, through which the "bergs" rose again upward to float on the surface of the water until the advent of the *Northbound*.

In space-travel fiction, anything plunging with meteor-speed into the earth's atmosphere flames and burns to an ash, unless it be a space-ship of resistant metal; we have here, however, the unprecedented hard coldness of space-frozen air. We have likewise, in defense of Sydney's explanation of events otherwise utterly inexplicable, the oft-reiterated accounts in the late Charles Fort's writings of "apports from the sky" —small animals, often of the lower orders such as periwinkles, snakes and toads— each being encased in a sheath of ice. Here, then, is a definite check of a highly evidential nature. But it is, I predict, one which will not interest scientists.

The hollow moon! The ancient, brittle satellite, drying and cracking, leaving great internal fissures and then a hollow center into which gravity draws down as by a great sucking process the atmosphere which encircled it as it first was torn from Earth. What could be more reasonable? In its very reasonableness I find another check. But I offer no opinion. *The Investigator* publishes authenticated accounts of unusual happenings, and quotes the reasonable explanations offered in their substantiation. Beyond that, it does not go.

Before this issue of *The Investigator* goes to press, the newspapers will have announced the marriage of Michael Sydney and Valerie Dorn.

### *Open Letter to Readers of "The Investigator"*

To you, the readers, I have been permitted by my friend Mr. Graham, editor of *The Investigator,* to write these few words directly:

*The Investigator* is the journal of the open-minded, and Mr. Graham's editorial comments are fair in the extreme. However, I feel that the facts in the above truthfully recorded document demand something more.

These few words are in the nature of an

appeal, of an attempt to awaken Earth from her dream of security, an entreaty to arrive at some real knowledge of the moon.

Only after understanding and knowledge can come even the remotest policy of a planned defense—and defense against such terrible neighbors we must have.

There is much which I had no time to write in my journal; much that haunts my memory waking and sleeping. There is the remembered vision of the brilliantly glaring orb hanging in the sky before our approaching space-ship—of things noted swiftly and in terror, that live again more clearly in the memory.

The vampire-demons, the monster-ghouls who inhabit the moon—our near neighbor in the heavens!—have, I think, given a ghastly life-in-death to the satellite herself, as maggots creeping in the bare skull of a corpse vivify it. The face of the "man in the moon"—ah, when it hung before us it grinned like the face of a skull; and toward an orifice lined with tooth-like crags did the space-ship sink and into it enter, as into a ghastly maw.

The mighty gust of air that swept us out of a connected crater was like the exhalation of a giant's breath, incalculably prolonged; may there be in turn a long inhalation, when air diffused through nearby space is drawn in again through dreadful crater-nostrils?

Those dread forms of nightmare life—Le Noir and his kingdom of monsters—what do they resemble so much as nightmare forms materialized? They inhabit the hollow center of the skull in its vampire death-in-life; the skull that is the moon. Only in the realm of metaphysics might one even conjecture the nature of the relationship between moon and moon-monsters.

This is the wildest conjecture only; I have come to feel that our dead satellite is in itself a wicked, menacing thing. Have we not always felt it? Do not astronomers regard our moon with unease, and point out that some day she will perhaps fall toward the earth, to our destruction? Do not poets paint word pictures attributing malign influences to the orb of night, even while they recognize the sentimental potency of her white light? There was the moon of Oscar Wilde's *Salome,* that moon that rode the sky in quest of dead things. . . .

My space is limited. I feel that never again will I or mine be in extreme peril from Le Noir and those who inhabit the moon; though as to that, only God knows. But I cry out to the world to waken from the dream of false security, into which *they* strike at times — and may strike more widely and terribly.

At least, let us be on guard!

MICHAEL SYDNEY.


**"They clawed vainly at the bars of their prison, or stared down in white-faced horror at the dancing throng below."**

# The Dark Isle

By ROBERT BLOCH

*An eldritch tale of the Romans and the Druids, and the horrendous doom revealed by the flaring torchlight in that frightful underground passage in England*

THE Celts knew it as Mona; the Britons called it Anglesey; but the Welsh spoke truly when they named the shunned spot "Ynys Dywyll"—the Dark Isle.

But all the peoples of Britain feared it for its dwellers. Here were the oaken temples of the Druids, the caves and caverns of the forest people, and the strange altars reared to dread gods. In these times

the Clan of Mabon ruled, and heavy was its hold upon the lands. Erin knew the furtive, bearded priests that stalked through the forests seeking stealthy counsel with voices that moaned in the night. The Britons paid their tribute, turning over the criminally condemned for unspeakable sacrifice before the menhirs of the Druids in groves of oak. The Welsh feared these silent wizards and wonder-workers who appeared at clan gatherings to dispense law and justice throughout the land. They feared what they knew of these men, but greater still was the fear of what they *suspected*.

It was said that the Druids first came from Greece, and before that, from lost Atlantis; that they ruled in Gaul and crossed the seas in boats of stone. It was whispered that they were gifted with curious magics, that they could control the winds and waves and elemental fires. Certainly they were a sect of priests and sorcerers possessing powers before which the savage, blue-painted Britons quailed; black wisdom to quell the wild clans of Erin. They made the laws of the land, and they prophesied before the tribal kings. And ever they took their toll of prisoners for altar rites, their tribute of maidens and young men rich in blooded life.

There were certain dark groves in isolated forests where the boldest huntsmen did not venture, and there were great domed hills bearing curious stones and dolmens where voices cried in the night—voices good folk did not care to hear. In glades of oak the priestcraft dwelt, and what they did there was not a thing to be rashly spoken of.

For this was an age of demons and monsters, when dragons slumbered in the seas, and coiling creatures slithered through burrows beneath the hills; the time of Little Folk, and swamp kelpïes, of sirens and enchanters. All these the Druids controlled, and it was not good to stir their wrath. They kept their peace, and their island stronghold of Anglesey was inviolate to other men.

But Rome knew no master. Cæsar came, and the legions thundered into bloody battle with the stout kings of Britain. Emperor Claudius followed later, and the Eagle Standards were planted ever further in the land. Then crafty Nero held the throne afar, and he sent Suetonius Paulinus to ravage Wales. And so it was that one black night, Vincius the Reaper looked on Anglesey—the Dark Isle of the Druids.

## 2

VINCIUS the Reaper gazed on Anglesey with bold black eyes; wise, unblinking eyes that had seen much that was beautiful, and strange, and dreadful. These eyes had seen Imperial Rome, they had beheld the Sphinx, they had visioned the dark forests of the Rhine, the templed columns of ancient Greece.

They had witnessed blood and battle; fierce fighting, scenes of pain, anguish, barbaric torture.

Yet now they stared in a manner previously unknown; behind the dark pupils crept an unfamiliar tinge of fear. For the great dark island rising out of the sea was reputed a dreadful place. During the long sea-voyage to Britain, the fleet had buzzed with wild tales of the Druids; tales of their dire magic and hideous blood-thirst in the presence of enemies.

Vincius' friends—grizzled veterans of the legions—had known comrades serving against the Druids in Gaul. Some of these comrades had returned with horrific stories of almost unbelievable sorceries they had seen; of voices that cried out in the night, and of sentries found with mangled throats in the morning. They had whispered, these comrades, of how the beasts of the forest fought side by side with the blue barbarians; how packs of wolves and boars

were summoned by wizard priests who piped. And these returning comrades of Vincius had been haggard, their laughter hushed, as though dark memories precluded all thoughts of gayety again. Then too, many of Vincius' comrades had not returned at all. The tales of their dying were singularly unnerving—Druid killing and torture and sacrifice employed ghastly magics.

All through the voyage, rumors and hintings spread from vessel to vessel. For once the invincible might of the Roman standard was questioned; arms were not invulnerable to wizardry. And everyone knew that the fleet sailed to Anglesey—the great sullen island stronghold of the chief Druid clans. It had been a disturbing passage, through the dismal green seas of the North.

Now, anchored offshore, the fleet awaited morning to land and attack.

And Vincius, sleepless, took the deck and stared out across the brooding waters toward the black bulk of the island.

His lean, lantern-jawed face, browned by Syrian sun in the last campaign, was set in a scowl of puzzled bewilderment. Vincius was a veteran, and there were many things about this night which past experiences warned him of.

For one thing, the great island was too dark, too silent. Usually on the eve of battle the barbarian peoples gathered for war-dances about great fires. They would shriek and prance to the thunder of drums, give frenzied sacrifice to the gods for victory. But here all was dark and still; and the darkness and the stillness hinted of secret thoughts and plottings.

Again, Vincius' trained senses told him that the fleet was being watched. Although they had anchored under the cover of a foggy dusk, he felt that their movements had been observed; nay, expected. And now eyes peered across the silent waters.

The old soldier scowled, and stroked an ancient scar which whitely slashed the bronze of his forehead. A restless uneasiness kept him from sleep; some inner intuition told him to wait out the night and the silence.

The silence—it was too silent! The sullen lapping of waters against the sides of the vessel had seemingly ceased. Instinctively, the Reaper's eyes turned toward the helm, where a sentry stood peering and still. In the murky torchlight Vincius saw that his eyes were open, but glazed. He had turned, so that his back was to the rail.

And now, in the soundless hush, Vincius stared at the rail—stared at the two blue talons that slowly crept above it and clutched for support.

Two *blue* talons!

And two blue arms—long, emaciated arms, leprous and phosphorescent in the night—writhed above the rail. A great shaggy head appeared over the side of the ship, a terrible head, haloed by a tumbling mass of matted white hair. It framed a face shaped in Hell; a gaunt, thin face with cadaverous cheeks, hollowed eye-sockets, and a snarling mouth opened to reveal animal fangs. Two burning yellow eyes blazed under corpse-lids.

The face was blue.

Vincius the Reaper stared transfixed, and gaped as the bony body slithered over the rail, dropped noiselessly to the deck and stood erect; a figure clad in animal skins; a figure whose moist and dripping skin was deep, unearthly blue—a burning blue no dye could produce.

The withered old man crept slowly toward the glassy-eyed sentry. His hands stretched out, and taloned claws sought a windpipe. Then Vincius moved.

A flash of reason bade him still the cry which instinctively rose to his lips. The enormity of this; a naked barbarian boarding a ship of the fleet and killing a sentry at will—it would be shocking and shameful were this fact revealed to the legions on

the eve of battle. Better to keep silent; better to draw one's sword, leap silently across the deck, press the blade into the neck of the ancient horror.

Vincius did so. The old man dropped the sentry's body without a sound. As the lean claws released their hold, a muffled burbling came from the dying throat of the strangled soldier. Then the strange blue creature turned and stared.

Vincius held him, pinioning his arms with one hand and holding his sword with the other. His flesh crawled at the feel of the slimy wet flesh that seemed unnaturally cold, and dreadfully soft.

Still, his grip never relaxed as with his free arm he drew the naked sword-blade in an arc under the throat of the ancient horror that gazed at him unblinking and impassive. Looking deep into the empty yellow eyes, the Reaper shuddered. On the wrinkled forehead he now discerned the almost imperceptible outline of a coiled serpent set in raised weals against the terrible bluish flesh.

"A Druid priest!" The exclamation escaped him in a whisper. At the sound of the words his captive smiled.

"Aye." A croaking voice wheezed out, as though the effort of speech were painful and the Latin tongue difficult.

"Aye," said the blue man. "Druid am I. Mark ye, Roman—I came to slay, but ye thwarted me in that; else there would be a dozen sentries dead, and as many ships at the mercy of my peoples.

"I came to slay, but I remain to warn. Tell this to your commander, oh blasphemer! On the morrow ye come to attack the shrines of our people; this we know. And we are ready. Aye! It will be a warm welcome—by Primal Nodens, know that we of the Druids can conjure magics for your confoundment. Tell your commander to turn back lest he and all his cursed hordes perish dreadfully before the Children of Mabon. Tell him, fool."

THE old man croaked out his words slowly, in deep gutturals which unnerved Vincius more than he durst admit even to himself. Impulse prompted him to drive his sword home and destroy this creature whose weird blue skin was somehow utterly unnatural.

Still, reason told him to wait. This old priest evidently knew the plans of the enemy. Threats might force him to talk, or else torture might be employed as a last resort.

Accordingly, the Reaper whispered.

"Speak of these plans, dog, or my sword will prompt your tongue." The blade bit into the neck.

And the old man lifted his blue and ghastly face in a horrid smile. Retching mirth burst in cackles from his corded throat.

"Eeeeeeeh! The fool—the heathen fool threatens me with death. The jest is rich. Eeeeeeeh!"

Mad laughter, though Vincius shook the withered body in rage. Then the terrible eyes slitted, and the fretted mouth gaped again.

"Look at me," hissed the ancient Druid. "Did ye not mark the blue pallor of my flesh? Think ye the Druids are fools to send a common priest on a desperate errand such as this? No!"

Vincius guessed, with a thrill of horror, the next words.

"Look at me," droned the croaking voice. "No paint, no dye empurples the flesh to my hue. Yet ye think to threaten me with death! Know then, fool, that I *am* dead—dead and drowned these three years past!"

With a sort of madness, Vincius lunged his blade out at the laughing corpse-head, slashed at the bony yellow eyes set in flabby, bluing skin. The sword sheared the grinning face, and laughter ceased. The body fell, and like a pricked bladder, collapsed. No blood flowed forth, yet the

form dwindled and shrank upon the deck. There was an instant of terrible coagulation as the flesh fused, and then the planks were drenched with a wave of gelatinous ichor. Where the twice-dead body had crumpled there was now only a greenish-black pool of slime that flowed bubbling over the deck toward the rail.

Vincius the Reaper turned and ran cursing from the spot.

3

TRUMPETS sounded the dawn. The boats set out, laden with cargoes of living steel. Armored, corseletted men glared shoreward through the mists. Sword, lance, spear, bow, shield, helmet, breast-plate—these were thousandfold duplicated jewels to glitter against the rising sun. These were thousandfold instruments to clash in martial symphony. These were thousandfold symbols of the might that was Mother Rome. The boats rode shoreward.

Vincius stared again at Anglesey as it loomed near. He had not spoken of the night to anyone. The ichor had vanished almost instantly from the deck when he returned after arousing another sentry to stand watch.

Wisdom had kept him from going to Paulinus, the commander, with any fantastic tale of a dead Druid who came to slay and warn. Not only was such a story difficult to credit, but even belief meant only disaster—for such a fearful warning might dishearten the leaders. As it was, Vincius noticed that there had been no report on the auguries taken this morning; no word that favorable omens had been observed before battle. It was a bad sign when the gods did not prophesy victory for the arms of Rome. The soldier's smile was grimly echoed by his comrades.

Now the boats were beached. The phalanx formed along the sandy shore as the leaders gathered under the Eagles. Britons and scouts delegated by the Army of Occupation were scurrying off into the deep woods offshore. They sought the Druid hordes in the woods.

Formations stood in silence; then signals flashed in sword-points against the sun. Bugles blared, and kettle-drums set up a martial clangor. The long lines swept on. If the Druids chose to keep silent and lurk in the woods, they would be hunted out—beaten from cover.

Armored ranks swept across the rocky beach toward the still green depths. Clank of weapons set against utter silence from beyond.

And then, soundlessly, a thousand serpents flew straight against the sun. A thousand barbed, feathered serpents, rigid and unswerving, dipped toward the legion rows.

Arrows!

From the seemingly deserted woods they poured, and found their marks. Men dropped.

Another cloud followed very swiftly. Screaming and cursing, the phalanx formations burst into a charge. More arrows met their advance, and hundreds fell. Each dart, wherever it struck, produced a hideous result. Within a moment after the wound was inflicted, the unfortunate victim was writhing on the ground, froth bubbling from shrieking lips. A moment later and the man was dead—dead and decaying!

Indeed, the Druids employed strange magic. Invisible, they poured poisoned arrows into the finest men of Rome.

The broken front ranks entered the outskirts of the woods. Arrows hummed about them as they sought foemen behind tree-trunk and buried boulder. They found only death—swift, writhing death.

Officers swore, bugles bleated vain commands, men shouted in confusion, fear, sudden agony. The dark woods closed about the legions—the bold legions that

planned to swoop in unbroken lines straight across the barbarian island.

And still, no foes appeared.

Men cursed and died there in the green dark, as swarming arrows struck again and again—yet never a face of the enemy.

Vincius was in the van. Perhaps a hundred had managed to penetrate the wood to any extent; behind them came the confused murmur which bore the shameful tale of an army in flight. The legion was retreating back down the beach!

Vincius' companions turned to follow, arrows pursuing. And then there were shrill whistlings and pipings all about them, and from beyond further trees robed figures appeared—blue-faced, bearded men screaming in wild triumph as they closed in on the fleeing band. Now stone clubs whizzed about helmeted heads. To the commands conveyed by the pipings, little groups were creeping around to head off the escaping men. Stones catapulted into the running bodies. Arrows found screaming targets.

Vincius and two companions made for a thicket. The Reaper took the lead, beckoning for the others to follow. He knew that an instant's delay would be fatal, for the forest men had virtually cut off all avenues of escape.

He entered the brush—and five skin-clad savages rose to confront him. Roman swords and stone war-clubs met in blow, thrust, parry. A legion man went down, his face crushed to red pulp. A short dagger tore a bearded throat. The Reaper's sword whirled about in a pendulum-course of death. The blue-skinned men crept under the guard as the second Roman fell, pinned to the ground by a shivered spear. The Reaper fought alone, lopping at arms that brandished bludgeons and crude maces. He fought until a crouching figure sidled to his rear, half turned to meet the blow of his enemy; then sank to the ground as red fire drowned his senses.

4

VINCIUS opened his eyes. He lay where he had fallen, in the shadow of a large rock.

He stirred tentatively, then sat up and rubbed his aching head where the glancing blow of the stone club had left its painful bruise. Satisfied that he had suffered no permanent or seriously incapacitating injury, the Roman glanced about.

The glade was very still, and there were no noises audible from the beach. Far out on the water, the galleys still rolled at anchor. But from them rose no martial clangor, no trumpeting of victory. The pennons of triumph did not flutter forth amidst the billowed sails. The Reaper was puzzled—could it be that the attack had failed?

In the glade about him he found the answer with his eyes; the mute answer of arrow-riddled bodies, heaped in gory profusion. The men of the legions lay where they had fallen, and in death they were hideous to see. Some few had fallen by the sword or by the blow of club and ax, and these had made a peaceful passing compared to the greater number that lay slain by Druid arrows. For the latter were lying in twisted and contorted attitudes of agony. Their hands clutched at the sod in torture, their faces bore the mark of delirium. And their bodies—their writhing, convulsed bodies—were blue! Swollen, puffed, bloated with evil poison from the wounds, they had died in an instant; an instant that brought them madness. It was an awesome spectacle, and one which caused the soldier to shudder. Never before had he seen Romans in a death like this. It hinted of sorcery, of the dark magic prophesied by the Druid priest.

Vincius the Reaper rose to his feet slowly, his thoughts a confused jumble of pity for his companions, awe at their defeat, and furtive fear at the manner of their

passing. But in a moment a much more personal note of concern obtruded.

For even as he rose, a hand fell upon his shoulder. Cat-like the Roman wheeled and faced—a Druid warrior!

Short, squat, his moon-face painted blue in ghastly simulation of the dead, the Druid confronted him. Vincius raised his sword.

The Druid held up his hand hastily and spoke; spoke in Latin—not as the old priest had spoken, hesitantly — but as though it were his native tongue.

"Wait, soldier," the short man gasped. "I'm Roman, not a savage."

Half expectant of some treachery, though he now saw that the fellow was unarmed, Vincius lowered his blade.

"Who are you?" he growled. "And if you're a Roman, what means this heathen garb?"

"I can explain," babbled the little man, hastily. "Lupus, my nickname is. I served on the triremes—at the oars, you know. Galley slave for bad debts. The ship foundered off this cursed coast three months ago, and I swam ashore. They captured me, the priests did, and gave me my choice: service or death. Well, I'd no mind to die; so since then I've lived with these blasted barbarians."

"What do you seek now?" asked the Reaper, suspiciously.

The little man's face was pale beneath the woad-stains. He peered up at the tall soldier earnestly.

"Believe me in this," he murmured. "When I heard of the attack today I sought the shore hoping to escape; even the galleys are better than life among such godless swine. But more than that, I had hoped to find someone whom I could warn. The attack failed; I could not pass through the fray and make myself known in time. I've been skulking about in the bushes ever since, hoping to find some survivor to give my message to."

"Well, speak up, man," grunted the Reaper.

Lupus nodded gravely before continuing.

"My message is this," he said. "I've heard in their black council last night that these heathens mean to sink the fleet tomorrow."

"Sink the fleet?" echoed the Roman, incredulously. "Why, that's impossible! They've no boats, and besides they fight on land behind the trees like the cowards they are."

"So?" said Lupus. His voice was mocking, but his manner gravely earnest. "Did not the attack fail? Look around you and tell me what you see." With a wave of his hand he indicated the blue and swollen bodies of the dead.

"I tell you that they spoke truly. If they vowed to sink the fleet they'll do it. Not with boats, or men, but with their cursed magics. It was magic that defeated us today, and it will be magic that brings doom on the morrow. I know. I've seen their devilish ways before. They control land, air, fire, water—and *things that dwell in them*. What demons they mean to conjure up for the deed I cannot say, but be warned. We must get news to the ships."

The Reaper scowled.

"How are we to do this?" he questioned. "We're marooned, practically prisoners here. There are no boats available, and the shore is probably guarded well."

"I have a plan," said Lupus, slowly. "We can't get through to the beach without being observed. If we move inland we are equally liable to capture. But tonight there will be a big ceremony and sacrifice in the biggest temple grove."

"I understand," nodded the Reaper. "We shall wait until then, and make for the beach."

"Not so fast, friend," returned the other, with a sad smile. "It isn't as simple as that, by any means. The Druids are cun-

ning. They keep guard everywhere along the shore, by night as well as by day. Only on the sea-wall is there no sentinel. And it is a thousand-foot drop of sheer rock."

"Then what do you propose?" countered the Reaper.

"This." Lupus lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. "In my days here I have had occasion to observe many things. I watched, and I learned. There is one altar in the big glade that has a hollow base. Beneath it is a tunnel of some sort that runs under the island to an opening on the base of the sea-wall. This the priests have spoken of, and with my own eyes I have seen certain of them go and come by means of this tunnel below the altar. Methinks I can find that altar and learn the secret of its pivot."

"But what is the purpose of this passage?" asked the soldier, a trifle incredulously. Lupus looked grave.

"That I do not know," he answered. "What the priests do down there I cannot say. Perhaps they commune with their black heathen gods. They are strange men. We may encounter peril below, but it is better than certain death above, say I."

"Your plan?" persisted the Roman.

"Simply this. In the evening they will gather by the oak glade and perform some damnable rite or other. That I know. Then the woods between there and the beach-sentries will be free, and we can approach the spot. After their ceremonies will come some revel or feast. At any rate, the grove will be deserted for the rest of the night. We can enter then, find the altar-stone and the passage beneath it, and take our chances on making the shore by morning. From there we shall swim out to the ship, the gods willing."

"Umm." The Roman grunted. Then he placed his hand on the little man's shoulder. "A pact it is, friend," he said.

Until twilight they remained crouching in the concealment of the boulders. Lupus kept up a steady stream of conversation in a soft voice, narrating his story of captivity among the oak-men. He told the soldier of Druid ways, and the strange faith of the nature-gods these people worshipped. He spoke of their black powers, and how their magic had driven back even the Roman might this afternoon.

Night fell, and as the moon crept across the sky, the two ventured forth from their place of concealment. The Roman was hungry. Down the path lay a body—that of a huge German mercenary, in full regalia. The Reaper, spying the provision pouch at the dead man's belt, stooped down and tugged it free. His eyes grew wide with loathing at the sight of that blue, contorted face, those blackened, swollen limbs that bore mute testimony to the strange power of Druidic poison. With an oath, he tossed the pouch aside and followed his companion down the path that led into the woods.

They walked slowly, in wary silence. The trees about them rustled in the stillness, and Lupus started nervously upon several occasions.

How far they proceeded it was difficult to judge, but the moon rode high in the heavens when first the sound of voices was audible from somewhere ahead.

Soon faint flickers of light filtered through the twisting trees. Lupus leading, they warily circled the path and crept close through the untracked woodland. In a short time they were nearing the open space in the forest from which the light and sound proceeded.

The Reaper scowled at the spectacle before him. A throng of triumphant Druids moved about the grove, clustering before stone altars on which reposed the limp bodies of sheep and cattle. Blood bubbled redly on the slabs in the light of the torches flaring at the sides of the clearing; blood stained the robes and limbs of the celebrants.

Gongs clashed, horns blared, men and women moved and gestured, but the whole gathering maintained an attitude of expectancy.

Lupus gestured the Reaper to come forward, and together they took their station behind a thick cluster of underbrush.

Vincius saw the priests foregather about the central altar and heard the throbbing drums boom out in a subtle, augmented rhythm that steadily mounted to a delirious crescendo. Something was about to happen!

Drums beating, and the shadows on the trees. . . . For the first time the two men noticed that tree-bordered background and discerned what stood against it.

It seemed as though there were great, shadowy shapes weaving and hovering over the heads of the multitude; great shapes moving in rhythm with the surging drums; nightmare shamblers, tall as the tree-tops. The drums boomed madly. More torches flared.

"Look!" cried Lupus. His fingers dug into the Reaper's wrist as with his free hand he gestured excitedly toward the clearing ahead.

The Reaper gazed, and for all his stoicism he could not repress an involuntary shudder. For in the torchlight he discerned the outlines of the great, shadowy figures; saw that they were green and moving; saw that these giants were like trees in the shape of men. And they were forty feet tall!

5

CROUCHING in the bushes, Vincius the Reaper stared in fascinated horror at the cyclopean shapes looming before him. Gigantic human trees? That was not possible. What then?

Lupus placed his mouth against the Reaper's ear as he whispered an explanation.

"It's the sacrifice," he murmured. "The Druids are disposing of the prisoners. I've heard tales of this: Cæsar's men spoke of it in Rome. The devils build great wicker frames and place branches around them; these they shape into a series of cages until they construct the figure of a man. Then they fill these cages with prisoners and condemned and burn the tree-idol in honor of their heathen gods."

The Reaper looked again and saw that his companion spoke truly. For ringed in a semi-circle stood six great green figures made in a horrid mockery of human form. Their lower limbs were trees, their arms vast pruned branches formed from whole trunks, stripped white in ghastly semblance of flesh.

Evil, painted faces were surmounted by leafy hair, so that each giant stood like a green ogre in the forest—a green ogre whose monstrous wicker belly was filled with living men!

Sweat beaded the Reaper's brow as he gazed at the gargantuan paunches that bulged forth in a wicker framework from those huge and dreadful simulacra. Through lattice and leafy interstice, through knotted rope and wicker vine he saw that each idol's body was in reality a vast cage, a cage packed with the huddled bodies of Roman soldiers and mercenaries. Stifled, half suffocated by the density of their crowding together, they clawed vainly at the bars of their prison, or stared down in white-faced horror at the dancing throng below.

Vincius caught the flash of armor through the green trellises, heard the moaning wails of frightened men as they huddled together awaiting an undreamt-of fate.

Nor was that fate long in coming. For even now the bearded priests had stepped forth from the throng, and, torches in hand, they approached the white columns of the giant feet. The torches flared,

then quickly kindled the dry wood. The limbs of the moving monster-shapes burst into livid flame.

Others had climbed to adjoining trees, the Reaper noticed. Now, leaning out on the branches, they flung their brands into the bushy green hair of the gigantic images so that each painted brow now wore a flaming crown.

A scream of animal ecstasy rose exultant from the crowd below. It was echoed by a shriek of horror from the imprisoned men, as they strained at the iron bellies of the monsters that held them.

Vincius stifled an oath, and his hand leaped instinctively to his scabbard. But Lupus pulled him back into the concealment of the shrubbery.

"Don't be a fool, man!" he growled. "One man can't help them. An army couldn't, now."

It was true. The flames were eating into oaken arms and rising to girdle the wooden waists. Suddenly, with a grotesqueness utterly terrifying in its sheer, unexpected horror, the six painted faces of the burning monsters were contorted as if with hideous pain. Great eyes rolled in anguish-torn sockets, and red lips writhed back to reveal clenched white teeth. Deep, droning bellows rose from the burning wooden throats.

The Reaper trembled. The voices of the tortured gods! Then common sense told him that the faces were hinged so that they could be manipulated with ropes by the priests below. Horns and bladders of air in the hollow necks produced the terrifying sounds. But the reality was dreadful, for the fiery images moved flaming arms as if in torment, and crumbling legs twisted in agony. The howling worshippers danced and bowed in adoration, their faces ever turned upward, for now the flames were reaching the bound bellies from both ends of the tree-monsters' burning bodies. The flames were licking at the wicker prisons, and the captives were wheezing and choking in the swirling smoke.

Tongues of fire licked between the oil-soaked bars. A man cried out terribly in a scream that rose even above the roar of the fire as he was consumed by the blast. Others within the prison beat at their flaming hair. The fire spread, until all six of the colossal shapes were merely great pillars of glowing flame; flame that glowed more redly as it sucked fresh nourishment from the burning bellies.

Then, one after another, the giants pitched forward, still burning. Showers of sparks singed the bodies of the fleeing crowd; the images fell with thunderous crashings and disintegrated into ashy embers or smoking dust. The fire still ate away at the skeleton bellies, and a few awful shapes still writhed and twisted in the red furnaces.

But the priests and devotees had gone, back into the forest groves. From far away came the thudding thunder of their drums.

"It's over," Lupus whispered. "No one will disturb this spot till morning now. You see, the whole rite is connected with the religion; it is symbolical. The tree-images are those of Mabon and their other devil-gods. The prisoners are placed in the bellies to signify that the gods have devoured their enemies. The fire is a purification of the gods after their contamination by enemies. Now that the rite is accomplished the gods sleep appeased, and the Druids—curse their black entrails!—may celebrate their triumph undisturbed by wrathful eyes. They will not return here to wake the divine spirits."

Vincius grunted. The sonorous speech of his companion annoyed him. A man of action, he wanted only to escape. Consequently it was he who led the way into the clearing. Lupus followed, stepping

gingerly to avoid the rosy ashes and still smoking embers that littered their path.

SOON they reached a spot untouched by the flames, for the bare, hard-packed earth did not allow the fire to spread. Then Lupus resumed his place as leader, and guided the soldier to a shadowy corner of the grotto. Here loomed an altar, gray against the darkness.

"This is the one," the little man whispered. "Give me your sword."

Vincius complied; then, frowning, he watched his guide thrust the tempered blade amidst the small rocks at the altar's base.

"I'll find the pivot," grunted Lupus, as he poked away. "Damnably clever, these barbarians."

The metal rang. Lupus tugged at the hilt of the weapon as he twisted it into some invisible niche. With a little click the stone tilted forward.

"Wrath of Jupiter!" the Reaper swore. Leaning forward, he stared down into a black chasm slanting deep into the earth beneath the altar-base. A series of stone steps was dimly discernible in the darkness.

"I was right, as I told you," said Lupus, calmly, as he relinquished the sword to his companion. The soldier shoved it back into its scabbard with a sigh of satisfaction. But he knitted black brows as he gazed again at the cryptically yawning mouth of that mysterious pit.

"I don't like the looks of this," he declared. "Such crawling about in the dark is not to my liking. And if there be such things below as you hint of——"

The other held up his hand in a gesture of despair that served to silence the Roman.

"It's our only chance," he whispered. "We can't skulk about in those heathen-infested woods, and when the morning comes we'll be taken surely. I do not like the passages myself, but I like still less the usage accorded those in the wicker cages." With a wry grimace, Lupus indicated the smudging remains of the fire-giants.

"What we may encounter there below I dare not say, but I would rather risk my skin with a chance of reaching the beach and escaping than stay behind. They'll kill you, but I shall assuredly be tortured." Lupus subsided, awaiting a reply.

The Reaper smiled dourly. "Come on, then," he said, pushing his companion before him. "We'll chance the caverns. But I'm not blundering through darkness."

So saying he stooped and picked up a burning branch from one of the tree-images. It made an admirable torch.

Steps led down. Torchlight flickered on stone stairs, low rock walls of a narrow passage. The Reaper turned, and drew the altar-base down over their heads. His muscles tautened with effort, and his face contorted.

Lupus's countenance was likewise contorted, but it expressed fear rather than exertion.

"There's no turning back now," he whispered, eyeing the now immovable stone barrier above their heads. "We'll have to risk whatever lies ahead, and I've little stomach for any Druid magic this night."

The Reaper smiled grimly.

"It's your decision," he declared, "and we must abide by it. Let's be off."

Torch in hand, he padded down the stairs, Lupus following with obvious reluctance as he stared at the carved-out walls of the tunnel. The stairs turned, then abruptly gave way to a slanting stretch of stone that wound off into deep darkness. It was a hot, unhealthy darkness; as they walked, the rocky floor became damp. Moisture dripped from the walls and the low ceiling. Moss and lichens were green-coiled on wet walls beaded with a diamond sweat in the firelight. They walked on in silence, into still blacker abysses ahead.

Now the footing became precarious, as they toiled through the rocky under-earth. Occasionally side-passages pitted the walls, sometimes singly and sometimes in pairs like the eyeless sockets of some strange stone monsters. The silence and damp heat were more and more oppressive as time went on. Stolidly, the Reaper plodded ahead; Lupus glanced about with increasing nervousness.

The little man grasped Vincius by the sword-arm, halting his stolid stride. He whispered shrilly in the soldier's ear.

"I've a feeling we're being observed. Quick—your torch."

Grasping the beacon, he flashed it suddenly toward the nearest opening in the wall just ahead. Was it fancy, or did the light indeed glint upon two staring eyes in the darkness? Neither man could say, for in a moment the half-fancied flash of reflection had disappeared. The flame disclosed only the silent blackness welling from the orifice mouth.

"Hurry," mumbled Lupus.

Their feet quickened as they half ran along the rocky floor of the burrow. The Reaper was almost flung against the wall when with a sudden sharp turning the tunnel twisted still deeper into the earth.

Now the damp silence exuded tangible menace. As they gazed down the long corridor ahead, their pace slackened to a halt. They stared into the gloomy shaft, its sides so ominously slitted with grinning cavern mouths.

And then from afar rose the sound of a strange piping—a faint, eery cascade of sweetness. Its import was unmistakable; only a combination of reed and lips could produce that high stabbing wail that held within its weird beauty a hint of summoning and dark command.

It came from one of the side-burrows ahead, and welled forth to echo through the stillness of the caves. The unseen piper played, and Lupus half turned as if to flee.

"We can't go back, you fool," the Reaper muttered. "The altar-stone is replaced."

"Druid magic," whimpered the other. We——"

"Come on." Vincius half dragged his cowering companion along the path. "There's a man playing that pipe, and I've something here to change the scoundrel's tune."

His sword flashed silver as he thrust the torch into Lupus's trembling hands.

THEY advanced down the corridor, and still that high-pitched music swelled, luring and calling.

Abruptly another sound was superimposed upon the shrillness; a deep whispering, a rustling noise that gathered rhythmic volume. It came from the pit mouths, and slithered forth as though answering the music's summons.

The Reaper's eyes scanned each pitted opening in turn, seeking the source of the shrilling pipes. Then the strange rustling crawled, and the Reaper, glancing downward, saw coiled horror.

The path before him was filled with serpents. Weaving, writhing, hissing in dreadful rhythm to the sound of the far-off flute, they swayed and undulated forth from each pit until the floor of the shaft ahead was a wriggling mass of moving emerald menace. Snakes of every size and shape glided across the gelid stones.

For a moment Vincius recoiled. Lupus crouched behind him in sudden terror. His mumbled prayers were faint against the eery wailing, the rustle and hissing. The great living wave advanced.

Steeling himself, the Reaper met the attack. His sword rose, descended to shear the heads of a dozen wriggling foes. And still the serpentine sea moved forward, choking the narrow passage and rising

knee-deep in living, writhing dread. The Roman slashed again, and again. Hissing in pain, a score twisted severed coils, but those behind swept on, commanded by the wild whistling of the unseen pipes.

The great mass bore down upon the two, a twisting torrent studded with opal eyes that flamed malignantly in the dusk. The Reaper scanned the choked path before him, then turned hastily to his cringing companion.

"Get ready to follow me," he whispered. Lupus nodded, lips working in his white face.

Vincius stepped forward, both hands gripping the hilt of his weapon as he brought it down in a sweeping arc. Again and again it rose and fell, slashing, slicing, shearing at the shapes that now pressed his very legs. He felt the slimy wetness of cold bodies, smelt the sickening reek of their foulness. He hacked a pathway through, only to see it obliterated by fresh hordes from further pits. And the piping mocked from afar.

The writhing blob swept him back. The green strands of Medusa's locks were coiling about his waist and thighs, dragging him down to fanged kisses and choking caresses.

"Follow," he yelled, glancing at Lupus over his shoulder.

Wheeling he dashed back a few paces along the corridor, with Lupus at his heels. Then he turned and again confronted the reptile army. He ran forward, swinging his blade. To Lupus's startled eyes it looked as though he were running directly into the mass that crawled before him.

But as he reached the spot he leaped. His jump carried him over the heads of the foremost serpents. Lupus closed his eyes and followed suit. His feet left the ground, he sailed into space. His feet landed on a treacherous wriggling heap. He leaped again, seeing the Reaper ahead of him. The Roman was alternately leaping and landing. So sudden were his movements that the reptiles had no time to prepare themselves for striking, and each time he came down the sword swooped.

Within a few breathless minutes the two stood clear on the other side of the blocked corridor.

Vincius forced a wry smile.

"Much more of that," he observed, "and we'll never live to deliver our little message of warning before daybreak."

It was quite evident from his frightened face that the little man agreed only too well with this statement. When the soldier started forward once more, Lupus restrained him.

"Don't go on," he begged. "They know we're here. The priests—the high priests—must be down here tonight. And I've a feeling that they are summoning up their Powers for the morrow."

"What's this?" the Roman queried.

"This must be the Place of Mysteries they speak of," Lupus went on. "The place where the Arch-Druids and the inner circle come to seek aid of their gods for magic. Tonight they have to do with the wrecking of the fleet. We'd best turn back. Those devils would never let us through alive, and if we were to encounter what they may have summoned to aid them——"

"We must go on," pronounced the Reaper, shortly. "You know there's no turning back. And hurry."

"It's death."

"Death for the fleet if we don't get through," Vincius reminded. "We'll have to try."

Turning, he hurried down the gloomy incline. Lupus dogged his heels, turning his head quickly from side to side and eyeing each burrow he passed as though expecting the worst.

Winding, twisting, writhing into darkness, deeper and deeper into the tunneled maze they plunged. A hundred turnings,

each with a thousand branch burrows, were passed at almost running speed. There were no further evidences of hostility, but both men still felt that peculiar sensation of being under scrutiny of alien eyes—wise, evil eyes that waited.

Then they took that final turning that led into the cyclopean chamber where the red torches flared interminably from rocky niches in the vaulted walls. They saw the piper waiting before them—a tall, white-robed Druid, with the shaven head of a Vate, and a bearded face alight with gloating expectancy. In one slim hand he bore the slender reed of his piping, and in the other he held a coiling viper that fawned up at him even as it hissed. And from out of the chamber's stone sides stepped other Druids, armed and ready for combat.

They were silent, and the Reaper did not speak as he reached again for his sword. But he was speechless not at the sight of them, but at the vision of what lay behind them. For he saw that which they guarded.

There was a pool in the center of the cavern—a great murky pool of gelid water that rose subterraneously from some hidden spring below. It was black, unmoving. Beside its ringed orbit stood a flat stone and on it lay something huge and red and swollen—something that bled horribly, yet wobbled as though still pulsing with life. It was monstrous, gigantic, yet unmistakable—a swollen, severed *tongue*.

VINCIUS could not tear his eyes away from the tremendous ruby organ that lolled palpitant upon the stones. Imagination quailed before the thought of a beast so enormous as to possess a tongue of this incredible size. Lupus cowered behind him.

Then the slender, shaven-headed piper raised his head so that his gaze challenged and commanded attention. The other Druids grouped behind him in the red torchlight, standing upon the brink of the black chasm of water at their back.

The mocking Vate smiled, stepped forward.

"Who interrupts the Council of the Crescent?" he purred. "You stupid Roman intruders have troubled our deliberations."

Vincius scowled, but stood silent. His grimness cloaked a fear only too fully manifested by the quaking Lupus at his side. Why did this priest speak? Why not strike? His sneer of mockery seemed to veil a horror greater than anything yet revealed to the Reaper—and the Roman almost wanted to cast himself forward on the swords of the foe, to die in a red blaze that might drown the uneasy presence of dread which now oppressed him.

Yet the priest continued, sibilantly. "Ye have dared the secret temple of our people, and for that ye shall die. But a few hours and all your kind shall perish. We Druids will never bow before the spawn of Rome. Even as today the Dragon's tongue venom laid your comrades low, so tomorrow the Dragon shall destroy the cursed ships which brought ye."

Dragon's tongue? Vincius glanced again at the monstrous red thing lying on the stone—glanced at the oozing greenish fluid which dripped onto the floor—and knew the secret of the day's battle. This organ held poison; reptile venom, which, placed on the Druid arrows, had brought swift and dreadful death.

Dragon's tongue? Dragons—those were the terrible creatures of old British legend; great sea-serpents, reptilian monsters supposed to inhabit the subterrene sea-depths. But they were only legends, like the Tritons, and Dagon, and Greek monsters.

Or were they? This great red tongue was real, and the Druids could summon and control all beasts and creatures of the deep. Tomorrow they planned to wreck the fleet, and a Dragon could pull ships down into the sea. Was it possible?

Vincius mused for only a second. Then he realized that the cunning priest had revealed these words to him for that reason alone—so that in a moment's contemplation he would be lost.

Now the other priests had crept up behind, and Lupus screamed. The Reaper wheeled, to see three priests stab at the short man's unprotected throat. Roaring, Vincius slashed out. A head rolled to the floor, to stare up Medusa-like from a pool of serpentinely rilling blood.

Again the sword leaped and fell, parrying a stabbing thrust and coming down on the arm of the second priest. He dropped, howling as he clutched a jerking stump of shoulder.

And then a half-dozen priests were at his back. Vincius leaped, dodged, smote. They pressed forward, while the slim bearded leader urged them on.

"Into the pool!" shouted the Vate. "Food for the Primal One! Take him—by the Three and Thirty Tests, I command ye!"

THEY fought grimly, though two fell. The Reaper's arm was tiring under the weight of the heavy blade. He all but slipped in a sticky red pool, and was forced to give ground again. Now he was being forced back to the brink of the terrible black chasm where inky water lapped. The Druid swords were everywhere. Vincius tried to round the stone on which the gigantic tongue rested. They pressed him back against it—one blade shot out under the Reaper's waist. His quick duck brought the Druid against him, and they grappled. Locked in deadly embrace, they reeled against the stone.

Then Vincius knew. His sword-arm jerked free. He plunged his weapon to the hilt in the great spongy red mass upon the altar-stone. It gave, and something green and wet spurted onto the blade. Vincius tore the sword free and sought the enemy's back. At the first thrust the Druid stiffened and fell.

And Vincius swung. One swordsman after another felt the terrible point, felt the poisoned tip of the steel bite into his veins; fell in writhing death. The Vate piped wildly.

The last man he beheaded completely, then re-thrust his weapon into the envenomed organ. He raced after the fleeing Vate, who ran frantically back toward the tunnel entrance. The Reaper was swift. His blade was swifter. With a scream of anguish the last Druid priest went down in final agony.

Vincius turned. The black pool loomed. Beyond it was a dark slit in the rock—and poor dead Lupus had said that it led to the sea.

He must still warn the fleet, Dragon or no Dragon. Into the gelid waters, then.

Murky, clinging, slimy depths enfolded him as he leaped, sword tucked into his belt. The dark waves were sticky and warm, as though befouled. Vincius swam quickly, making for the orifice beyond, where he fancied he could detect a faint glimmering of starlight. A few strokes now. . . .

Then horror came. From directly ahead the water spouted and inky jets spurted upward. A boiling froth arose, and great waves bubbled from the depths.

Suddenly a head appeared—a gigantic head, born only in nightmare delirium and the realms of insane myth. Great, green, scaly head, red eyes glaring from behind huge, dripping jaws—and then a thrashing body; reticulated jade, gilled, slitted, winged, with a tremendous lashing tail.

The mad head rose and undulated above the waves on a long barrel-neck; then the great scarlet jaws drew back to disclose simitar fangs—and a great empty cavern that was red, bleeding, and *tongueless!*

It was the Dragon of Druid lore.

Vincius saw it tower above him in the

slimy black water; heard the brazen bellow, and felt the carrion wind that was its breath.

Its tail was curving toward him, its clawing appendages reached out, its neck swooped down so that the cruel, tremendous maw yawned to engulf him.

It was true then. This was the Beast of Myth which the ancient, evil priests had summoned to destroy the fleet upon the morrow. By some magic power they had lured it here, prisoned it in the pool, and ripped out its tongue for venom to use in their archery warfare. Vincius thought this, but felt fear. The enormous horror had seen him. It thrashed toward his puny, swimming form, loomed larger than any ship. From depths of dread it had come, and on the next day it would drag down the armies of Rome to those drowned realms of dread.

Now the mouth rushed on, churning and bubbling as it cut the waves and reached to swallow the struggling man. No use to fight. Or——

Vincius remembered. His sword—the venom upon it! He groped, drew, raised the blade.

The gigantic teeth ground in his face, then raised. Another swoop and he would be drawn between those fangs. He raised up out of the water, threw himself forward.

As the throat opened, he jammed the blade into the bleeding, tongueless maw of the monster. A shrill scream blasted his ear-drums as the beast reared back, sword jerking like a silver sliver in the open jaws. Titanic thrashing sent waves surging across the pool. The Dragon roared with pain; a great green body reared out of the black waters, then fell back to squirm in mad, thunderous pulsations of pain.

With a single moan of gigantic, convulsive agony, the hideous head sank beneath the waves, red eyes glazed in death. The nightmare's own poison had destroyed it.

Vincius trod water until the bubbling from below subsided, then stroked for the slit in the stone without glancing back into the chamber of fear. He entered the narrow opening, swimming on.

Ahead he saw starlight, paling into dawn. A few moments brought him out into open water. He swam slowly out toward the nearest vessel; nor did he even turn to gaze at the dark cliff-wall which shielded this side of Anglesey.

His mission was done. Now, with morning, the Romans might land freely; leaderless, the Druids would give way before the legions. They and their cursed barbarian sorceries would be blotted out forever.

Vincius smiled as he neared the ship's side. Then he frowned at the final memory of the dying dragon, going down with the Reaper's blade wedged in its throat.

"I'll need a new sword for the morning," he growled.

"He knew his father instantly."

# Washington Nocturne

By SEABURY QUINN

*Who was the stranger that walked before the Tomb and vanished, yet by his mere coming radically changed the lives of three persons? —a tale of the Unknown Soldier*

**" . . . that these dead shall not have died in vain."**

**—Lincoln: *Gettysburg Address.***

THIS is absolutely *extra ordinem*—outside things' usual and accepted order—as the lawyers say, yet I have the factual and disinterested statement of three people for it, every statement in agreement with the others in essentials, but with just sufficient minor differences to support its credibility.

THE misty, bluish haze that gathers when the sun slants down was falling like a fragile chiffon veil on the Virginia hills and the Potomac. Lamps blossomed into twinkling luminance across the river, defining streets and avenues, bringing the

cold marble buildings into soft relief against the deepening twilight. But here a sort of solemn, breathless stillness seemed to hold the very air in abeyance. As midnight belongs neither to the day that passes nor to the one that presses on, but holds a momentary neutral balance, so it seemed that here was neither day nor night nor dawn nor dusk, but a combination of all four, unreal as a softly lighted stage, otherworldly as the farthest bounds of interstellar space.

Save for the scuttering of dry November leaves across the granite steps and the soft beat of the sentry's feet against the rubber footway stretched on the marble terrace there was no sound, for no planes were rising from the drome in East Potomac Park and the city's subdued noises did not reach across the river.

The Tomb seemed poised against the darkening sky instead of bedded in its solid rock foundations. Silver-white in the pale gathering dusk its marble was; the wreaths of laurel seemed picked out in silvered purple — shade of immortality. Faintly shadowed but distinct the legend showed against the pallid marble:

Here Rests in Honored Glory
An American Soldier
Known But to God

Four visitors stood on the terrace by the Tomb. With the instinct of the well bred to respect another's privacy even when a common interest draws them to the same place they stood apart, looking now at the pale simple block of stone that marks the nation's tribute to its fallen chivalry, now at the haze-bound valley of the Potomac and the lights that scintillated like bright jewels as Washington arrayed herself for evening. Different, and yet oddly like they were in looks, these four, this woman from the Middle West, this typical New Yorker, this boyish man who obviously came from New England and this girl who might have come from anywhere in eastern Europe, or perhaps from hither Asia.

Oddly similar in thought, too. In lightly furrowed brow, in compressed lips, in hard uncompromising eyes that barred the door to sentiment, there was a likeness almost startling; an evidence of dedication of a kind, yet of dedication without exaltation, based in hate more than enthusiasm; habitual hate so long nurtured it had become a way of life and rule of conduct.

MRS. AUDREY MATSON-JAMISON —she always used the full name, and the hyphen was her own idea—was smart beyond the usual clubwoman, which is tantamount to saying she expressed the final word in *chic* for middle age. From the pompom of cock feathers on her black-felt tricorn to the platform soles of her suede oxfords she was perfectly turned out; double silver-fox scarf, London smoke-gray redingote, black pigskin gloves, black pinseal purse, gray hose—precisely what the well-dressed matron ought to wear for business or shopping. She was a mildly stout woman in her late forties who by dint of massage and expensive corsets contrived to seem in her late thirties. Smart, not simply stylish; cultured, not merely educated; international, not narrowly American.

Looking at her modish clothes and coiffure, her intelligent, cold face, you could not help but wonder at the "Mrs." in her name. Emotion seemed as alien to her as it would be to a queen depicted in a "command portrait." You could vision her upon the lecture platform or in committee meeting, poised coolly and efficiently behind a microphone, seated at a glass-topped desk with flowers in a vase, twin fountain pens and telephones and push-buttons upon it. But had those firm, immobile lips been kissed and kissed until the breath came haltingly between them, had those well-

cared-for hands once held a man's cheeks in their palms, drawing down his eager mouth to hers; had a pulse beat in her throat until the white skin fluttered like a captive, frightened bird; had she thrilled to swooning as she rested in the circle of a man's arms and with lowered lids and parted, yearning lips repeated love's sweet antiphon? Had she ever held a child against her, felt small hands grope blindly at her breast, brushed her lips across the downy tuft of fuzz on a pink skull? It was easier to conceive Minerva in a housewife's apron cooking pancakes in a cottage kitchen on a frosty morning. Yet . . .

AUDREY MATSON began life in a small Ohio town—on the wrong side of the tracks. She was two years old when Coxey's Army marched on Washington with her father leading a platoon. He never came back, nor was any word had from him, and Mrs. Matson hung a sign on her front porch announcing rooms and table board were to be had within. But this was 1894. Men were out of work, the mills were closed, hoboes outnumbered paying travelers on the railroads. Neither rooms nor board found takers; or, if they did, they were not paid for, and the Matson family lived precariously as beneficiaries of the tub and washboard.

Soon even this failed. Neighbors washed their own clothes in such times as these, laundresses were an uneconomic luxury, and Mrs. Matson went to work as cook in Mrs. Thaddeus Jamison's kitchen.

Audrey finished eight grades in the public school, then donned a smart black uniform, a pert lawn cap and neat white apron as Mrs. Jamison's parlor maid.

Service in the big house was an education. By attentive observation she learned to iron out irregularities of grammar which environment had left in her speech despite her teachers' efforts; which fork to use, and when, how to greet a hostess or receive a guest; what was smart and what bad taste in dress—these and a hundred other things which marked the boundary separating her world from the world of wealth and fashion Audrey learned.

1916 went, and, the elections safely over, with it went the attitude which made America too proud to fight. Everywhere was excitement, enthusiasm, stimulation. Cakes were baked and socks and sweaters knitted; everyone was talking about doing his bit, conserving fuel and food, giving till it hurt.

Mrs. Jamison was very patriotic. With well-filled bins and pantries fully stocked she exhorted neighbors to observe all heatless and meatless days, to substitute corn meal for white flour, and above all to buy bonds. Her own investments were in railroads, steel and mortgages. Of course, she could not break into these, but a fifty-dollar bond brought a sticker for her window, and she held back enough from her servants' wages to enable each of them to buy a similar bond. Eventually a proud sign notified all who passed her house, "This place has subscribed 100 Per Cent to Liberty Bonds."

War had its social phases, too. There was a cantonment not far away, and when the boys came into town they had to be amused. Mrs. Jamison gave dances for the officers at her house, and approved her servants going out to dance with the enlisted men.

Thaddeus Jamison and Audrey had been classmates till he went East to a fashionable prep school and she graduated to his mother's service. Often as she went about her work she saw his picture, silver-framed, upon her mistress' bureau and, forgetful of her station, wondered what he was like now. He had been a nice lad when they went to school together, gentle, slow-spoken and generous, but no sissy. More than once he'd bought her tidbits—raisin pie or dill pickles—at the penny store;

several times he'd helped her with her books—she had no strap, and geographies and histories are slippery and heavy. Once he thrashed Bill Taylor, who was several years his senior, for splashing mud on her and twitting her with being a domestic servant's daughter. Every time she saw him smiling at her from his mother's dresser she wondered what it would be like to know him now. Not that he'd notice her, of course, but . . . whether dressed in livery or the latest mode, youth has its dreams.

Thaddeus was not a good correspondent. For two months his mother's letters went unanswered. Mrs. Jamison was first indignant, then worried, finally panic-stricken. If Eastern college made him forgetful of home, he'd best be coming back. . . .

DECEMBER 23, 1917: The doorbell rang and Audrey answered it. Upon the porch a soldier stood, not one of the young officers who were always happening in for tea or luncheon, but a ranker, an enlisted man, a private. His chin was sunk deep in the collar of his issue overcoat, his hands thrust elbow-deep into his pockets; beside him on the porch there stood a barrack-bag. Audrey knew just what to do. Tradesmen, servants and enlisted men should be directed to the kitchen door if they forgot themselves so far as to come to the front entrance. But this enlisted man was different. Instead of lifting his hat as so many of the brand-new soldiers did in memory of civilian days, or saluting as the seasoned rookies did, he stepped across the threshold dedicated to his betters, threw both arms round Audrey and kissed her without ceremony.

"Hullo, Audrey, mighty glad to see you!" he exclaimed.

Amazement fought with incredulity as she recognized him. Whether she was more surprised at seeing Thaddeus Jamison in a private's uniform, or at being kissed by him, was hard to say. But there was no doubting which delighted her the most.

"So this is why you haven't written!" sobbed Mrs. Jamison. "Oh, my poor boy! Running off and enlisting—the idea! Take that hideous uniform right off and put on some decent clothes. I'll write Congressman Phillips this afternoon and have him get you a commission."

"Pardon me for seeming crude, old dear," her son denied, "but I'll be double-damned if you do. Somebody's got to fight this man's war; everyone can't be a shavetail. And as for this hideous uniform, it's the country's livery, Mater. I'll take it off, all right—when we've won the war, and not a second sooner."

He had only three days' leave, and from his mother's standpoint they were entirely wasted. She couldn't have the officers in to meet him—a pair of gold bars set a barrier impassable between her son and her young friends. The girls had little time for him. Enlisted men were commoner than autumnal leaves in Vallombrosa. Besides, who wanted a beau who had to salute any passing officer and stand stiffly at attention till bidden "as you were" if you stopped to chat with some young captain or lieutenant? Thaddeus spent most of his leave indoors. And Audrey . . .

The clock struck midnight, half-past; one o'clock. Christmas was an hour old, and from the streets downtown there still came echoing faint sounds of horns and bells and shouting. But everything was quiet in the big house. Only a faint creak on the back stairs, the patter of soft bedroom slippers on the waxed floors, a shape which slipped as noiselessly as if it were a shadow written on the wall by the last flickering of the dying fire, disturbed the tomb-like stillness.

Mrs. Jamison deplored the trend toward luxury the lower orders manifested, and at her command all of Audrey's night-

gowns were of serviceable flannelette with high-cut necks and long, substantial sleeves. All but one. The lone exception was a pink georgette creation, low cut and sleeveless as an evening gown, appliquéd above the bosom with a sheaf of lace-and-satin roses. It had cost a whole week's pay, and was well worth it.

The logs that blazed in the big fireplace blazed no longer; the fire was dying, and in its final agony it lashed bright-orange tentacles across the umber tiles of the hearth. Shadows alternated with highlights against the walls. As Audrey stood a-tiptoe to thrust her little gift into the army stocking hanging from the mantel-shelf her slim and almost boyish form was silhouetted in its clinging sheath of georgette against the soft effulgence of the sinking fire.

"Hullo, and *what's* all this?" In quilted dressing-gown and soft morocco slippers, Thaddeus rose from the big Turkish chair where he'd been sitting in a fireside revery. "Something for the conquering hero, eh? All right. It's already Christmas, Audrey. Let me have it."

"Thad—Mr. Thaddeus—*oh!*" With a little, half-coherent wail Audrey turned to run, felt herself encircled by a pair of arms, had her head bent back until it hurt her neck, and tasted heaven on the lips of Thaddeus Jamison.

"My dear," he pushed the hair back from her ear to whisper in it, "you're the only one who's real; the only one who really cares a damn about me. I'm *déclassé* with all of 'em, even Mater. Just another damned enlisted man——"

"Oh, Mr. Thaddeus—Thad dear, I love you so terribly!" she sobbed.

He held her in his arms for a long time. Then suddenly he laughed. Not a pleasant laugh; low, but not merry. "Go get some clothes on, honey," he commanded.

"Clothes——"

"Surest thing you know. You can't expect to face a devil-dodger in that get-up. Where's your shame, if any?"

The light was shining through the painted windows of St. Michael and All Angels when they drove up to the church porch. Early service, celebration of the eucharist, was in progress, but when it ended and an usher tiptoed to the chancel with a whispered, "Soldier due in camp tomorrow wants to get married," the smiling rector delayed benediction while he read the service for them.

A wisp of frost lay on the city's window-panes, with mild-eyed stars above and light silvery powder on the ground as they drove from the church. It was to Mendelssohn's music that they marched down the aisle, but not the customary wedding march from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Instead, an older and, it seemed to her, a sweeter, more appropriate tune:

> Mild He lays His glory by,
> Born that man no more may die,
> Born to raise the sons of earth,
> Born to give them second birth. . . .

It was not until the following October Mrs. Jamison learned of it. Belleau Wood had been fought through, Château-Thierry, then the Argonne. "Mrs. Thaddeus Jamison, Junior?" the postman asked.

"I am Mrs. Thaddeus Jamison; there is no junior," Mrs. Jamison answered.

"If you please, Madame, I think it's for me," said Audrey as she held a trembling hand out for the message.

"You—*you?*" Amazement made her mistress' voice sound shrill and quite unladylike, but Audrey paid no heed. She was tearing at the envelope, reading the short, formal missive with eyes that somehow couldn't seem to focus properly.

"It—it's——" she thrust the letter at her mother-in-law.

The notice was terse almost to the point of self-consciousness. Almost as if the Government were embarrassed at what it

had to say: "The War Department regrets to inform you . . ."

"Good heavens, this is terrible!" quavered Mrs. Jamison.

"Better look to her, Ma'am," said the postman. " 'Pears to me she's fainted."

Audrey said nothing. She had dropped senseless to the floor, a little heap of black alpaca and white linen, with an even whiter face.

WHEN Audrey regained consciousness her mistress had things to say to her. She was unflatteringly compared to the snake in the fable which stung its benefactor, to a wolf that masquerades in sheep's clothing, even to the ladies of light morals who did a thriving trade with soldiers and war workers at the outskirts of the town. Then she was ordered from the house she had defiled.

But Mrs. Jamison could not stop the Government from paying Audrey her war risk insurance, though she besought her congressman to do so. Neither could she stop the payment of insurance policies which Thaddeus had ordered changed to Audrey's name, nor prevent her taking dower rights in the small fortune which his grandfather had left him.

Audrey was young, exceedingly good-looking, and with independent means. Also she was a woman with a mission. Thaddeus had been her first and only love. The war-makers, Mrs. Jamison and her kind, hard, intolerant, hide-bound by tradition, had snatched him from her. What did they care how many women were made widows, how many children orphaned, if only their investments were protected? Gold, property, the sacred rights of caste and class, these all outweighed the blood of men and tears of women. War was murder, war was looting, war was indefensible in any circumstances. There must be no more war!

She studied, achieved education, worked until her eyes ached and her nerves were frayed to ravelings, always with one goal before her. War must end!

Stenography, French, Latin, elocution, political economy, one by one she mastered them, drove herself, drove others, always onward, never resting, never pausing. There must be no more war!

Let others follow woman suffrage, prohibition, abolition of child labor. These were puny matters, fit for puny minds and puny effort. Only one thing was important, one thing could and should and must be brought to pass. There must be no more war!

Organizing women's clubs, church guilds, parent-teacher groups, first-voters' leagues, young-voters' associations; clasping hands with Nazi-ism, Communism, Fascism, every sort and kind of ism, making allies where she could; urging, wheedling, brow-beating, speaking, writing, broadcasting, she fought on relentlessly, sounding with Catonian persistence her slogan: There must be no more war!

Tonight she was to speak at a mass meeting of the anti-war groups. National defense was to the fore, statesmen talked again of armaments, of rearming till America was invulnerable to attack from sea or air. Cheap deceptions, just one more opiate to lull the unsuspecting people! They were meditating war! No man carried matches if he did not mean to light a fire; no one went walking in the country with a gun unless he meant to kill something. No nation ever armed except to war upon its neighbors. There must be no rearmament, no increase in land or sea or air forces. Let others spend their substance on these vanities. We must set them an example, show them how a truly mighty nation dares walk unarmed amid the madness of an arming world.

She looked again at the pale marble Tomb. Thaddeus . . . Thaddeus . . . maybe . . .

They'd never brought his body home. Dug near the spot he fell, his grave had been plowed and replowed with shell fire. When the G.R.S. men came to take the bodies up, half of them could not be identified. No dog-tags could be found in that field plowed and harrowed by the implements of Mars' husbandry.

Her lips moved, but it was her heart that spoke. "Thaddeus, my dear, my only dear, they took you from me; but they'll never do it to another woman. They'll never make our young men into cannon fodder, or mold our women's tears and men's blood into bullets. . . ."

* * * * *

COLONEL JORALEMON VOORHIES was as typical of New York as the Chrysler or Empire State buildings, Rockefeller Center or the Murray Hill Hotel. Somewhere the wrong side of sixty, his thinning hair was gray as burnished pewter, and as smooth, his close-cropped military mustache was white, his manner stiff and brittle as if he were in uniform and on duty. His well-cut dark suit draped a body neither fat nor thin, but which combined the stoutness of good living with the leanness of good care. A line of white piqué edged his waistcoat, a good pearl shone in his black poplin cravat. His black Homburg hat was tilted at a you-be-damned angle, in one gray-gloved hand he held a blackthorn stick. You could read his background and his status easily as you could read a soldier's service from his ribbons: Well born, well educated, a soldier when the country was at war, a lawyer who had foregone practise for banking; one who wielded influence in politics but consistently refused to accept office, though judgeships, nominations to the legislature and Congress, even governorships were offered him.

When war broke out with Spain he was a captain in the regiment to which his family had belonged since the days when Lord Sterling held the British at Long Island's rim while Washington retreated to the heights of Harlem—one of the few guard units entitled to have tabards on its trumpets.

Flora Voorhies (born Van Buskirk) buckled on her husband's sword, precisely as her great-grandmother buckled on her husband's in 1812, and her grandmother in 1861, and off the young captain, a bridegroom of a year, went to war—at Key West. There enteric fever stopped him, and when he tottered from his bed in convalescent hospital to take the letter with the New York postmark from the mail orderly he found he was a widower and father at once. Service with his company was impossible, but a desk was found for him in Washington, and the brevet rank of colonel.

The old home in East Fifty-seventh Street seemed vast and empty as a mausoleum when Colonel Voorhies came back from departmental duty in the war. His love for Flora had not been a great one, but they'd known each other since childhood, and he was completely used to her. Somehow, he resented her desertion, leaving him without a chatelaine to entertain his guests. Times were changing with breath-taking swiftness in these post-war days, industry was expanding to a size undreamt of, and social contacts were important to an up-and-coming financier. For a while he considered remarrying, but for two reasons gave the idea up. First, he could find no one to meet his requirements. The combination of good looks, good nature, wealth, brains and background he demanded was not procurable in any unattached young woman in his set, and the Voorhies did not look outside the Social Register for mates. Second, he could not bring himself to give Van Buskirk a stepmother.

For Colonel Voorhies loved his son. Not

that anyone would have known it. Van Buskirk had been nearly two years old when he first saw his father; for though the war was long since done, the paper-work in Washington had kept the colonel at his desk until the first half of McKinley's first term passed. "This is your Papa, dear," the governess had introduced when the strange, already graying man came into the nursery, and he had run to throw his chubby arms about the long checked trouser legs.

"How are you, young man?" the tall, strange Papa greeted, bending down to shake hands formally, as though Van were another grown-up. Then, to the governess, "Has he been eating regularly, Miss Smythe? In bed on time? D'ye see he has his airing in the park each morning?"

As Van Buskirk Voorhies grew, relations with his father failed to soften. Never did the "governor" come into his room to talk when lights were out and all the house was still; there were no confidences, no intimacies. Good-conduct rewards were forthcoming when he made good marks at school, or he was soundly rated for a failure, but never did he have a word of praise. The pater seemed to think the checks spoke for themselves. There was no doubt about the dressings-down which he received when things went wrong in class.

After prep school college, then Columbia Law School and a billet in the Old Regiment. If his father pulled some strings he never knew, but his commission came through almost before he learned to shoulder arms. Once when they held a drill-review for the old members of the outfit he glanced out of the corner of his eye as his platoon passed the stand, and saw the gleam of prideful tears upon his father's cheek. When the review was over and dancing was about to start he dashed across the armory impulsively to greet his sire.

"You'd better give that second squad a working over, Lieutenant," said the Colonel coolly. "Number four man was at least six inches out of line when they came to eyes right at the stand."

Nineteen-seventeen: Bands playing, flags awave, wild, feverish activity. First went the regulars, then the Guard. The Colonel knew the right people. He secured a pier pass and was on the dock at Hoboken when the Regiment embarked. "Good luck, youngster, keep your head down," he advised just before Van's platoon marched across the gangway. He put his hand out formally, gripped his son's gloved fingers, shook them as he might have shaken a stranger's.

In the stateroom which he shared with his captain young Lieutenant Voorhies sat upon his berth and drew his hand across his eyes. "Buck up, Van," the skipper comforted, "it's the first hundred years that're hardest. At that," he added, looking wistfully through the porthole, "it's hard to say good-bye to Little Old New York, isn't it?"

Van Buskirk took his lower lip between his teeth, like a little boy determined not to cry. "It isn't that, sir," he replied, "Only——" He didn't finish with his lips, but in his heart there was a wail: "Oh, Dad, Dad, couldn't you have kissed me, or put your arm around my shoulders —just this once?" Twenty-one years old he was, and never had his father kissed him or clapped him on the shoulder in comradery.

He couldn't know the times the Colonel bent above his crib, brushed the tangled, moist hair back and kissed him on the brow, the many times he'd tiptoed to his room to look at him a moment as he slept in graceful young-man's beauty; no one ever told him how his father waited up for him when he was out with classmates or fellow officers, sitting in his study, smoking, pretending to himself that he

was reading, till his latch-key clicked in the front door. Such knowledge doesn't come by intuition.

THE air was clear as water from a spring. Tall and gaunt against the argent moonlight the trees through which the front-line trenches pierced were motionless as spires; when you looked up at the July sky the man in the moon was plain as if he had been drawn upon the silver disk with charcoal. So was the woman in the moon. She looked like one of Gibson's drawings in *Life,* Van Buskirk thought, like the girls you saw at Reisenweber's, or the Golden Glades, or Murray's. . . .

"Van," the skipper's whisper broke his revery, "take your platoon out on scout patrol. Fritz is up to something. We want to find out what he's got tucked up his sleeve."

The line of shadows moved with less noise than the breeze among the wheat as they slipped along the gully, faces darkened, rifles held well out to keep them from betraying *clinks* on buttons, gas masks at alert. They'd left the woods and wire behind. Here had been a wheat field —only mangey stubble now—traversed by this gully washed by last year's rains. Yonder, half a mile, three-quarters, maybe, were the Heinies, keeping mighty still. That was not so good. You had to look sharp when the squareheads sulked. That was when they planned to pull some rough stuff.

"See anything yet, sir?" Sergeant Moeller whispered. "I thought I saw a movement in that line o' timber yonder, but——"

The detonation of a field gun broke the quiet, followed by another, and another, and another. Shells whined with shrill crescendo. The first one dropped a hundred feet or so behind, lay a sullen moment as if meditating whether it would burst or not, then tore asunder with a deafening roar, sending up a flare of flame and a pompon of dry earth. The second shell fell nearer, and its roar came just before it struck. The fuses were erratically timed—or where they?

Now the air was filled with whistling, shrieking shells, the earth was going crazy, bubbling and bursting like a pot of boiling porridge. "Yea bo; Jerry's comin' over in a hurry!" Moeller yelled.

"Beat it, you guys; back to the works; keep your heads down an' step on it!" shouted Van Buskirk.

"Moeller's got it, sir!" screamed Corporal Minsky as he dropped upon his hands and knees and scuttled like a crab along the dry ditch-bottom.

"The hell he has!" Van Buskirk wheeled and crawled back toward the pile of earth that riffled like a sand dune in the wind. "Hey, Sergeant, where are you? Did they get you bad——"

Sergeant Ernst Moeller lay upon his side, blood gushing from his neck. A shell fragment had struck him just below the ear, crashing through his jawbone as if it had been egg-shell, shattering veins and arteries. Not much chance for first aid here; you couldn't put a tourniquet around a man's neck . . . still, a pad and bandage might . . . Van Buskirk tore his first aid packet open, ripped a length of gauze from it, knotted some of it into a ball, bent over the sergeant. . . .

The earth bounced up like splashing water as a blast of blinding flame struck like a Jovian thunderbolt.

Back in the trench that rimmed the patch of woodland a staff lieutenant took a quick look from the parapet. "It's extraordinary how beautiful that high explosive is when it bursts," he murmured to the captain of B Company.

"Yeah, you'll be seeing prettier things than that in a few minutes. Fritz is getting our range. He'll be comin' over for

a call directly," the skipper answered dryly. "Have to ask you to go back, now. Attack's comin', and orders are all non-combatants must fall back to the second line."

IN THE John Street office of Van Buskirk, Voorhies & Joralemon, Colonel Voorhies tore the wrapping from a letter from the War Department. "Wonder what the deuce this is? More Four Minute work, or——"

The letter dropped upon the broadloom carpet of his office. He looked across the sunlit river to the Brooklyn shore, but the piers and passing steamers were as indistinct as shadows in the fog: "The War Department regrets to inform you . . ."

VAN BUSKIRK, Voorhies & Joralemon took a dreadful beating in the post-war years. Friends, allies and former enemies alike were borrowing money wholesale in America, and like every other private banking house the old-established firm in which the Colonel was a partner underwrote great blocks of foreign bonds. With what seemed like canny foresight they reserved impressive portions of the issues for themselves. "No need to let the public in on everything; with fees and commissions charged off these things should pay us better than fifteen percent," declared old Commodore Van Buskirk.

So they would have, but for one small unforeseen circumstance. When bond-maturity arrived the debtor nations found it inconvenient to meet obligations. The money had been spent, there was no way to collect it short of war. Let Uncle Shylock stew in his own juices—serve the money-grubbing Yankees right!

So they felt that way, ha? Blasted foreigners welching on their debts, eh? A hatred which became obsession took possession of Colonel Voorhies. Everything that came from overseas, whether grown or made or born, became the object of his scorn and detestation. When laws restricting immigration were proposed in Congress he led a delegation to the capital to bring pressure on the legislators to write more stringent limitations in the statutes. Build a battlemented wall around the country; keep the blasted scoundrels out; the whole dam' kit-kaboodle of 'em! Don't let 'em overrun America, taking bread from our own citizens, underselling labor with cheap wages, lowering our living standards!

He had come to Washington that afternoon. Tonight he'd talk with Pendergast and lay the law down to him. This proposal to relax the immigration quotas to permit political refugees from Europe to come in was all a lot of blasted nonsense. Even if the bars were let down for no longer than six months it would be half a year too long. Refugees or not, foreigners were foreigners. Persecuted, were they? Let 'em save themsleves. We did it when George III tried to oppress us, didn't we? Let 'em do the same, or dam' well be annihilated.

He had the votes to make his protest stick, too. Pendergast was up for re-election next year; so were Walsh and Richardson and Smiley. If he turned thumbs down on it the bill would never pass.

The Tomb's white marble seemed to shimmer in the deepening dusk, almost as if it had an inward light of its own. Colonel Voorhies faced it and threw back his shoulders instinctively, like one who comes to attention. Van Buskirk . . . perhaps. . . . The shell had torn him and Moeller into shreds; they could not identify him. . . .

* * * * *

BY HIS pork-pie hat and llama polo coat you knew he was collegiate, by his sometimes sharp-cut, sometimes slurred speech—he pronounced "park" as "pack," "mercury" as "maircury" and "medicine"

as "medsin"—you knew him for a native of New England. When you heard his name was Adams Putnam Breed you placed him definitely as an offshoot of the folks who lived on Beacon Hill behind tall windows glazed with amethyst glass, white doors with silver knobs and a wall of reserve less penetrable than that the Chinese built to hold back wandering Tartar tribes.

He had begun life in a big white-chimneyed house midway between Boston and Lexington, as had his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather before him. Longfellow and Agassiz, Garrison and Emerson, Phillips Brooks and William Cullen Bryant had been guests in that house; tradition said that General Washington had passed a night there and sat up half of it drinking rum punch and apple toddy with Colonel Hezekiah Breed, but that was never fully verified.

He remembered Grandpa Breed, old and spare, but straight and soldierly; less vividly he recalled Grandma, smelling most divinely of eau de cologne and with a pocket in her black dress filled with sharp but very pleasant lozenges of wintergreen.

Pleasantest of all his childhood memories was his father, a slim pale man in his late twenties with a lock of blond hair that fell down his forehead and had to be constantly pushed back, kindly student's eyes behind neat rimless spectacles, and a pleasant, friendly smile. Everyone liked Ezra Breed. The most striking impression he made was one of instant, effortless friendliness and candor. His son adored him. He loved to walk with him, to ride with him in the shiny black electric runabout; most of all he loved it when Dad came into his room after he was tucked in bed and told him wonderful stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, or about the heroes of old Greece and Rome; how Beowulf killed the man-devouring monster Grendel with his bare hands. The ordinary child would have been frightened to convulsions by these wild tales of the olden days. Not Adams. Dad was with him, and Dad was a full match, and more, for all the monsters in the story books.

He didn't know what it was all about that day in April when the bells began to ring and all the whistles screamed and hooted till it seemed they must go hoarse, but it was not long afterward that Dad came home in a new suit, one of a kind he'd never seen before. The jacket was quite short and had a collar something like the collars on policemen's coats; the trousers were like those the young men wore when they went riding in the park. The buttons looked like oversized pennies, and the hat was like those worn by cowboys in the movies. Adams wasn't sure he liked it, but if it suited Dad it must be perfect. Dad was never wrong about anything.

Then Dad went somewhere and came home only occasionally. He was learning to be a soldier, Mother said, but why anyone as wise and brave and altogether perfect as his Dad should have to go to school to learn anything was more than he could understand.

At last: "Be a good lad and take good care of Mother, son," his father bade, and took him in his arms and kissed him in a way he'd never done before. "Dad has to go away a while——"

"Where to, Daddy?"

"To help to make the world a decent place to live in, son. To make it a safe place for you and other little boys to grow up in and work out your destinies as free men. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' . . ." Dad's voice was queer and reverent and sort of choked, like the clergyman's when he pronounced the

Creed at Sunday service. Adams recognized the tone; he was a regular attendant at Sunday School. Something needed to be said by him, he felt, Dad was waiting for his response, so he added:

"For ever and ever. Amen."

The pressure of his father's arms was tightened so suddenly that it almost drove the breath from him.

"That's it, son; that's it! Hold tight to that always—'For ever and ever. Amen'!"

MOTHER was reading to him the afternoon the letter came. Mother read extremely well in a rich well-modulated voice, with just the proper emphasis in the proper places, but she couldn't "tell stories freehand" as Dad did. It was one of his favorite stories, the one about Horatius at the Bridge, and she had just come to the part that always gave him goose-flesh of delight:

> To every man upon this earth
> Death cometh soon or late;
> And how can man die better
> Than facing fearful odds
> For the ashes of his fathers
> And the temples of his Gods . . .

Mother looked up from her reading as Maggie tiptoed in. "Yes, Maggie?"

" 'Tis a letter from th' Gover'mint in Washin'ton, Ma'am. Maybe Misther Ezra's comin' home . . ."

Mother's gray eyes widened with a look that Adams never saw in them before—like Tom Tidler's when he saw a strange dog in the yard and arched his back and made a bottle-brush tail at it. The pupils seemed to spread and spread until they all but hid the irides.

"Ezra," she whispered in a small, thin voice. "Oh, Ezra, my beloved!"

Adams got up from his hassock and picked up the letter Mother had let fall. Laboriously he spelled its message out: "T-h-e W-a-r D-e-p-a-r-t-m-e-n-t r-e-g-r-e-t-s t-o i-n-f-o-r-m y-o-u . . ."

AGAIN the bells huzzaed and whistles cheered. Flags fluttered, bands blared. "Mademoiselle from Armentieres . . ."; " . . . and we won't be back till it's over Over There!"; " . . . there's a long, long trail a-winding . . ."

But Dad did not come back, not even when the silent, unheralded ships nosed into Hoboken with their freights of chestnut caskets. The creeping barrage preceding the attack in which he took part crept a thought too slowly. Shell fire from their own guns dropped upon the first wave of the infantry advance. . . . Officers wore no dog tags. Even if they had, who could identify a body blown to bloody pulp—handless, legless, headless?

LIFE paused a while in the old house, then started with a jerk, like a freight train bumping into motion after standing on a side track while the express clattered past.

Times were changing, tempo was increasing. Militant virtue sat in the saddle spurred and booted, riding like a buckaroo in a rodeo. America enjoyed the peace, prosperity and health that come from conscious rectitude and sinless living. Drunkenness had been outlawed, poverty had been abolished. Everyone was happy in this golden age that followed the conclusion of the War to end all War. Laborers wore silk shirts and silk underwear; waitresses, shopgirls and motormen were dealing in the market, accumulating paper fortunes greater than their parents could have saved by life-long penny-pinching. Nearly everybody owned a car of some sort, and when the saturation point was finally reached—let's begin all over! This is a two-car country!

There was no sin, no crime, unless you wished to be a spoil-sport and comment on the prevalency of bootlegging, dope-peddling, the accidents from drunken driving that strewed the roads with corpses, the

murders, stick-ups, highway robberies and hijackings which were so common that they seldom made the front page of the papers. And then . . .

The whole grand structure crumbled like a child's sand castle overwhelmed by rising tides. Brokers wailed and wrung their hands. Bankers bleated in dismay. Some shot themselves. Some jumped from windows. A few were sent to prison. Industry was prostrate, labor stunned. Prosperity was just around the corner. And breadlines formed. Men went peddling apples . . . "Brother, can you spare a dime?" . . . Here and there an angry murmur: "Why doesn't Washington do something? What this country needs is a dictator!"

Near the western edge of Asia and in the boot that juts out in the Mediterranean men were working out a new interpretation of the Social Contract. Hitherto a king had ruled despotically or the people took the government in hand and administered it for themselves. The prophets of the new conception brushed these ancient forms aside: Crowned tyrants were uneconomic, democracy was inefficient. The State was paramount, supreme, all-inclusive. Individuals existed in and by and for the State as cells existed in the body. Their only function was the support of the State. They had no right to wish or thought or will as human beings, nor had they any rights the State was bound to respect. Indeed, the State was bound by nothing. God? A concept of the ignorant and superstitious. God was the State; the State was God!

In the cloisters of American universities professors looked on the new theories of the Old World and found them good.

Adams Breed completed grammar school and high school; then his mother's illness kept him home a year. He went to college while the sod was still new on her grave, and in unremitting study found an anodyne for loneliness. The ideas fed him from the platforms of the lecture halls shocked him with their first impact, but gradually he saw the truth behind them. Where men resigned thought, hope and ambition, giving all up for the State as mediæval friars resigned all to God, there were no business failures, no unemployment; there were no strikes or lockouts in the factories, no armed and organized criminal class. Those people over there were right. Democracy was worn out, antiquated, finished.

He took his baccalaureate degree and then his master's. Now he was working for his doctorate and his thesis was to proclaim the confession of his faith. To get close to things as they were he moved to New York, took a room in Catherine Street, lived and talked and ate and thought with the apostles of the new order. Webster Hall, the old Opera House, the Labor Lyceum, these were his haunts, their habitués his only intimates.

It was in Webster Hall he met Tanechka. The place was packed to suffocation and a hundred smells, none pleasant, mingled in the heavy, vitiated atmosphere. He was leaning forward in his seat, listening with almost hypnotic concentration to the speaker when he felt the hair rise on his neck and turned to find her eyes upon him. Odd eyes they were, black as obsidian, lifted at the corners, topped by brows so thin and black and delicately arched they might have been drawn on with a cosmetic pencil. Her face was calm, composed, dead-white, slashed by the thin line of a scarlet mouth which might have been pretty if it had not been so serious, and hard. She wore no hat, and the hair that skull-capped her small head and gathered in a loose knot at her neck was black and dull as soot. It might have been a wig, or the hair of a dead woman, for it caught and pocketed the faint rays of the lamps without the slightest sheen or reflection. Her black-fur coat was open, and beneath it he

descried a blouse of vivid scarlet worked with gold and blue embroidery. From the lobes of her small ears there dangled disks of antique silver set with uncut turquoise.

She was alluring in a strange way. She had little animal attraction—too cold, too fine-drawn, too aloof and contemptuous—but her slender, flat-hipped, generous-bosomed body, her immobile face and the contrast of the black and white and scarlet of her hair and face and mouth had an appeal almost terrifying. Adams' life had been without a woman since his mother's death, and from the moment of their meeting he was Tanechka's slave. She took possession of him like a drug. From her he learned to smoke long paper-tube-tipped cigarettes, to drink tea so black and strong it almost etched lines in his tongue and throat, to eat strange foods with stranger names, to meet the dark and furtive men who came to visit her and call them comrade, to speak their language measurably well and, most important, think their thoughts.

He'd known her six months when he came to his decision. Why stay here in this soft, effete democracy writing futile protests at the cruelty with which class oppressed class? Why lead a life of pampered ease on money others left him, money minted from the workers' blood and sweat? Why—why, indeed?

He would go with her to her homeland, birthplace of the new concept of society. First-hand he'd learn the technique of the Social Reformation, work with hands as well as brain, imbibe true doctrine at its fountainhead. He'd give his fortune to the Cause, live on the proceeds of his labor and, later, perhaps, come back as a missionary.

On impulse they had come to Washington, and Tanechka had not demurred when he bought chairs in the parlor car and ordered luncheon in the diner. Neither did one of the most expensive suites in the Mayflower do violence to her proletarian professions. They wanted to see its wide streets and avenues, its great buildings, its tree-set parks. They would take descriptions of it with them, tell what a wealth of spoil lay ready for the taking when the new concept of government had been nurtured to fruition in America.

"March, little strutting puppet, little guardian of the oppressors!" whispered Tanechka as the sentry walked his post. "We'll strip that livery of slavery from you by and by; yes, and fling that monument you guard down in the river, too. Soon your democracy will be as dead as the dead tool of oppression in that grave. Cossack!" She spewed the epithet out furiously, as if it burnt her tongue.

* * * * *

THE time had come to change sentries. Old guard and new marched forward on the rubber carpet till they faced each other with the Tomb's width separating them. A young lieutenant stepped between the soldiers, clicked his heels and brought his hand up in salute. Rifles came to the present. On behalf of the Republic, every husband, son and father who had bled and died for America, every widow, child and mother who had wept for them, the soldier-citizens paid soldiers' tribute to the Unknown Soldier and the things for which he died.

Three people caught their breaths.

"Oh, Thad, Thad dear!" the whisper was soundless, but Mrs. Matson-Jamison's discreetly rouged lips formed the words.

"My boy, my boy! If only I'd unbent a little—not let you go to death and glory as if you had been a stranger——" Tears shone with diamond-luster on Colonel Voorhies' cheeks.

"Dad—Dad!" A sob choked Adams' half-articulate ejaculation.

"Cossack swine!" Tanechka murmured.

Thus the witnesses. Three people in

no wise remarkable, typically American, gifted with imagination, but decidedly not imaginative. Anglo-Saxon blood and heritage, not "fey" or second-sighted like the Highland Scots or Irish, yet . . .

All agree on this: At the moment of the changing of the guard a fifth person was with them. Where he came from none knew. He had not been there before, that much was certain. The open terrace round the Tomb afforded no shelter, he could not have come without their seeing him. He did not come. He was simply there.

All agree on his appearance. It was vague, entirely unremarkable. His suit was some dark-colored cloth, conservative and inconspicuous. It might have been the daily costume of a salesman in a large department store or the Sabbath best of a small tradesman or mechanic, typically American and middle-class as attending church or having chicken for Sunday dinner. He was young. His step was firm and graceful and assured, but in spare frame and hollow cheeks there was the mark of vital illness.

As he passed he looked at them in turn. He did not pause, but each one saw his face distinctly. And they stood near enough each other to hear the words his long, calm, searching scrutiny evoked.

Colonel Voorhies and young Breed distinctly heard Mrs. Matson-Jamison's half-breathless, half-incredulous, "Yes, dear—*yes!* I see it, now. I'll try to undo all——"

The other two are agreed Colonel Voorhies said, "You're right, son. Right! I understand!"

Both Mrs. Matson-Jamison and Colonel Voorhies heard Adams' almost anguished, "I remember, Dad—'For ever and ever. Amen'!"

So far their testimony agrees line for line and point for point. Then comes a cleavage, sharp and utterly irreconcilable. Each saw the stranger's face distinctly in the clear light of the rising moon. There was no possibility of error or mistake.

Mrs. Matson-Jamison recognized it. Superimposed upon the memory-picture printed indelibly on her heart it fitted so precisely that the mental and the visual images blent without a flaw or blur. Filled with gentle understanding, but a little pleading, too, she saw Thaddeus Jamison's face between the nondescript dark suit and the commonplace dark hat the stranger wore.

Colonel Voorhies saw him plainly, too, for he passed less than six feet away. The face was young, almost boyish, and bore a strong resemblance to the Colonel's. He could not be mistaken. What father fails to recognize his son?

Adams Breed declares both Mrs. Matson-Jamison and the Colonel were mistaken, for the man wore spectacles, neat rimless lenses joined by a gold bow, and across his forehead drooped a lock of blond hair. He knew his father instantly. The light must have played tricks upon the other two's vision.

So much for the differences in testimony. Then once again they are agreed. The stranger walked the length of the terrace and—vanished. The shadows were pellucid, not impenetrable; they could not have hidden a dry leaf from sight, much less a man, and there was no solid object, no possible obstacle behind which he could have disappeared. Yet where a man had walked a second before there was no one now.

* * * * *

"YOU have become mad, Ad-dams?" asked Tanechka as he finished speaking. "Not to go with me, not to help the Cause, nor overthrow the old injustice? You cannot mean you will not join the battle of the classes, tear the tyrants from their thrones upon the people's necks. You must be mad, completely!"

"Saner than I've been in years," he an-

swered evenly. "Lord, what a fool I've been! State supremacy's not progress, it's turning back the clock a thousand years to the Dark Ages. Giving up your soul and body and your manhood to the State's not freedom, it's slavery of the worst kind. What's the difference between kings' tyranny and the tyranny of a bureaucracy? The lash stings just as cruelly if you call the one who wields it comrade or Cossack; slavery's as degrading if you call your master State or Sultan.

"There's no such entity as the State. It's just the people aggregated, and if the people are in bondage the State's despotic, just as it's their servant if they're free. Who gives the State authority? The people. No one else. Any government not based on the consent of the governed is a despotism.

"You talk about destroying the oppressive ruling class. There isn't any such thing here. No man or class of men can rule free people with the ballot in their hands——"

"Freedom!" she spat bitterly. "Freedom to starve——"

"All right. So what? That man back there"—he pointed toward the Tomb—"thought freedom was worth dying for in battle. Washington's soldiers starved for it at Valley Forge—suppose we do starve. We shan't, but just suppose we do. Starvation's better than the bread of slavery!

"I got your message, Dad!" Again he faced the Tomb. " 'All men created equal . . . life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness . . . for ever and ever . . .' "

SENATOR PENDERGAST was worried. If Voorhies put the pressure on he'd not dare vote to let the immigration quotas down to admit refugees. He had to have the Colonel's support and financial backing in next year's campaign . . . but men were dying out there; women and small children, too. Being starved and plundered, oppressed with a cruelty and savagery unknown since Sparta ground the Helots' faces in the earth . . .

"Ah, good evening, Voorhies," as his butler ushered in the Colonel. "I hope you've given due consideration to my bill to relax quotas—only for six months, you know——"

"I have, Senator," Colonel Voorhies cut in almost testily. "I've considered it most carefully. Have you read the Declaration of Independence lately?"

"The Declar—I'm afraid I don't quite understand, Colonel."

"Humph. Probably not. You fellows in Washington are so close to things you can't see the forest for the trees. You've probably forgotten Jefferson's assertion that all men are created equal, and entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?"

"No-o, I've not forgotten——"

"Good. Those fellows over there—blasted foreigners!—are trampling everything we hold sacred. If they're killing and despoiling men and women just because they dare affirm the principles on which America is founded, isn't it up to us to provide asylum for their victims? We've always been a refuge for the downtrodden. It's America's tradition——"

"My *dear* Voorhies!" The Senator could hardly believe that he heard aright. "You can't imagine how delighted I am that you take this view. But—er—didn't you feel differently this spring? What's changed your attitude? These latest inhumanities——"

"My son I saw him this evening, and——"

"God bless my soul!" Senator Pendergast hurried to the tabouret and seized a glass and bottle. "Don't you want a whisky-soda, Colonel?"

THE theatre was packed to overflowing. Even standing-room was at a premium. Mrs. Matson-Jamison looked out across the

chiaroscuro of upturned, eager faces, mostly women's, and drew a short deep breath. "My friends," her charmingly developed voice carried to the farthest corner of the upper balconies, and a storm of applause echoed through the house, "my fellow citizens and fellow countrywomen—" Now the applause slackened. These were strange words, falling from her lips. Always she had maintained the women of all countries were a class apart, sisters dedicated to a holy cause unbound by narrow nationalistic fetters.

"My sisters," she began again, and now the volume of applause swelled, "we must face conditions as they are, not as we'd like to have them. Almost two hundred years ago our ancestors set up a new nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are equals and enjoy the right to live and pursue happiness in freedom. We know this proposition to be right; we know unless it is maintained and nurtured mankind will sink once more to savagery, and war, plague, pestilence and famine will take dominion of the earth.

"But there are men across the sea who care nothing for these principles, who call the love of peace a sign of weakness, and deny responsibility to any power, even God's.

"We cannot reason with them nor persuade them any more than we could reason with a mad dog not to bite. When a mad dog rages through the streets men with guns must put an end to it, or dreadful harm will follow. The mad dogs of the world are loosed, my sisters; they have infected half the old world with the virus of their madness, and at any moment they may turn on us. And we have no guns. We are defenseless against them. We have no force to meet their force, no adequate defense to turn them back or beat them down.

"As one who hates war with the bitterest hatred any human heart can harbor, I call on you to arm for peace, to uphold the President and Congress in their effort to rearm America against the assaults of the mad dogs of the world!"

There was no applause as she walked from the stage. Here and there a boo or hiss began, but even these died out in a few seconds.

A silence deep and shocked as that which would lay hold upon a congregation if the priest should start to bawl a ribald ditty at the elevation of the Host held the assemblage spellbound.

Mrs. Matson-Jamison held her head high as she walked through the wings. Her lips were set in a firm line, her eyes gazed straight ahead, but as she passed, a stagehand heard her whisper: "I've kept the faith, my darling. Please God you and those others may not have died in vain!"

* * * * *

THE whole thing's *contra ordinem,* as I said at the beginning. Who the stranger that appeared and walked across the terrace into nothingness was—or even if there were a stranger—I would not pretend to say. Of course, the probabilities . . .

But there is the testimony of three people, substantially agreed, differing just enough to strengthen credibility.

Also, there is the record of three abruptly changed life-patterns.

Is it—might it not be—possible that young soldier of America, known but to God, stands guard eternally above the Potomac, protecting in his immortality those things for which he gave his mortal life?

These three believe so implicitly, and probability to the contrary notwithstanding, bear testimony of the vision they beheld at the Unknown Soldier's Tomb that night.


"The light grew dimmer and dimmer till we got into a ghastly greenish obscurity."

# The Thinking Machine

By J. J. CONNINGTON

*A strange and curious story about a fantastic weird machine that possessed a brute desire to slay—a startling thrill-tale of an eery invention*

I WAS lucky enough to find an empty compartment in the train at Euston; and when I had put my suit-case on the rack above a window-seat, I went out on to the platform to get something to read on the journey. Coming back again, just as the whistle blew, I was slightly put out to find that someone had planted himself, vis-à-vis, in the opposite corner, though all the rest of the seats were empty. I hate conversations with casual strangers in the train; so without a glance at my unwanted companion I opened one of the books I had just bought, and began to read.

Over the edge of the page, I noticed that the fellow was eyeing me as though looking for an opening; so I shifted the book an inch or two higher, hoping that this would choke him off. Then he got to his feet, leaned forward over me, and deliberately examined the label of my suit-case. After that, he sat down again, bent forward, and tapped me on my knee to attract my attention. I had to lower my book.

"I thought it looked like you," he explained; "so I glanced at your name on the label. Don't you remember me? I'm Milton."

Then I recognized him. The watery blue eye was as cold as ever, and I recalled the twist of the bad mouth with its rat-like teeth. He and I had never been more than acquaintances during our university days. Physics was his line, and I was on the biology side; so we had few contacts. Since then, we had completely lost sight of each other, having nothing in common; and I resented the resurgence of this ghost from the past who would evidently irritate me with his conversation on a long railway journey. I wasn't cordial, I'm afraid. Not that he seemed to mind. He wanted someone to talk to, and I was a gift from the gods.

He discussed the weather, the emptiness of the train, a sore throat he'd had that week, and the chance of a hard winter. When I managed to insert myself into the talk, I mentioned that for the last two years I'd been out of touch with things, botanizing in Central Africa on behalf of a go-ahead drug firm. That didn't interest him, and he fell back on boring reminiscences of our student days. "Do you remember So-and-so?" Extremely tiresome. It seemed to last for hours. And slowly, as I listened to this stream of trivialities,I began to see that the man was all on edge, talking to keep himself from thinking, just a bundle of nerves in bad order. Then I happened to mention Stevenson.

In my student days, Stevenson was marked out as the coming man in physics—heaps of brains, large private means, and a knack of working things out in an incredibly short time, once he started on them. Two characteristics told against him in the scientific world. He was quite unorthodox in his views and he was amazingly secretive until he had finished the piece of research

he had in hand. He could afford private assistants, but he used them purely as mechanical hands. Unless they could guess for themselves, they learned nothing of the ultimate object in view in the researches they helped him with. He did his own thinking and kept the results to himself. The last line he'd been on before I left for Africa had been a parallelism between response in living and in non-living materials. And when his name came up, I remember vaguely that Milton had been one of these mechanical hacks employed in the private laboratory.

"Are you still with Stevenson?" I inquired. "What's he on, nowadays?"

MILTON seemed a bit confused by the direct question. He hunted in his pocket for a moment or two without answering, and I began to fear I had been too inquisitive. After all, one can't expect a paid assistant to be overfree about his chief's private work. However, at last he fished out a pocket-book and extracted a newspaper cutting which he flipped across to me. As far as I can remember, it ran something like this:

DISAPPEARANCE OF WELL-KNOWN SCIENTIST

It appears probable that the well-known physicist, Professor Loraine Stevenson, has been drowned. He was spending his vacation on his estate in the Hebrides, and on Tuesday morning he and his assistant went out in a motor-launch. A storm came on during the afternoon, and it is feared that the launch capsized. No trace of the launch or its occupants has been found. The name of the assistant has not transpired. A peculiar feature of the case is the disappearance of a number of bearer bonds which the late professor is known to have had in his possession at the time of his disappearance.

I handed him back the cutting.

"Who was the assistant they mention? It must be fairly well known, who he was."

Milton looked at me and I seemed to see a flicker of something in his glance, something I couldn't put a name to, a disturbing thing like the gleam of insanity in a lunatic's eye.

"Well," he answered haltingly, "the fact is . . . I mean . . . well, you see, *I* was the assistant."

"So the boat wasn't lost at all? What became of Stevenson, then? And how did it come that your name was left out of that yarn?"

And at that, out came his tale. I don't say I believe it, nor do I say I disbelieve it. Queerer things than that have turned out to be true, in the scientific field. I put it down as he told it to me—in his own words as far as I can remember them.

MIND, I don't expect you to believe this [he began]. It's a bit out of the common—so much so, that I'd prefer to leave the newspaper story as it stands, rather than contradict it. You'll see why, later on.

This is how it happened. Last summer, Stevenson offered to take me up north with him. You know he had a place up there? He'd a big bit of work on hand that he wanted to finish, and he needed help with it. I was to get some fishing, but it was really work he was taking me there for. There was to be a good bonus in addition to my ordinary screw, so long as I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't even to say I was going up with him.

Of course I jumped at the bonus suggestion. We got up there at the end of the week. A God-forsaken establishment: a rambling old house on a drafty headland. An old housekeeper, stone-deaf—cooked divinely, though, I must say. She never knew my name. No letters were sent on to me, you know, and I didn't trouble to bawl into her ear.

For a month or so, Stevenson kept me hard at it, measuring potential-differences

in the air. It seemed to me the merest waste of time. However, when I showed him my results, he seemed satisfied. I supposed he was after wireless atmospherics; but I've thought differently since then, though even now I'm in the dark. You know how tight he was about any of his work.

He had a small petrol-launch—the thing they mention in that cutting—and every morning he used to go off alone in it. The natives about there thought he went fishing, I believe. Then one day he seemed dissatisfied with my results. The location was bad, by his way of it, and he wanted a place where there would be less disturbance than in the house. It was all Greek to me, but he never encouraged one to stick one's oar in.

Next morning he got me to put the apparatus into the petrol-launch, and off we went, down the coast a bit, zigzagging among some small islands. I never had any head for topography, and soon I hadn't the foggiest notion where we were. Finally, he swung her round a point and brought her close inshore. Just in front of us was a fairly big arch in the cliffs. The launch went through it, into a sea-cave, and Stevenson turned on a small light he had in the bow.

You know the eery feeling these sea-caves give you? The waves come in smoothly, with an edge of foam at the rocks; then you lift up as the crests go by, and it feels as if you were going to hit the roof. The wave drops you again; you hear it swirl on into the dark, and finally it breaks, away in, with a sickening kind of roar. I never liked sea-caves. They always give me the impression that there's some huge brute at the far end, waiting to pounce on me. As a matter of fact, there *was* a brute waiting for me at the far end of that one, a new kind of brute, worse than anything one sees in nightmares.

But I'm getting ahead of my yarn. The launch came alongside a ledge of rock and we dragged out the apparatus-cases. Stevenson took some of the stuff; I carried the rest; and we went along toward the land-end of the cave. It grew darker and darker as we came nearer the surf on the rocks at the end of the tunnel, and I began to think it was a queer place for a simple physicist to make his living in. I slipped on a bit of wet sea-weed, once; and that showed me that at high tide most of this part of the cave must be under water. The light grew dimmer and dimmer till we got into a ghastly greenish obscurity; and even that waxed and waned every time a wave came into the cave-mouth. Everything was beastly. Once I trod on a crab and nearly stumbled into the water. After that, Stevenson produced an electric torch. I suppose he'd been into the place so often that he'd forgotten that a stranger might trip on the door-mat. And the swirl of water up the channel and the crash of it at the end of the tunnel got on my nerves. I was completely fed up with the whole business.

Finally, we came to a kind of funnel leading up into the dark. There was a rope-ladder and a windlass affair for shifting stuff up to a higher level. The ladder brought us up into a decent-sized cave out of which a series of tunnels ran. I couldn't see much by the light of the torch, and Stevenson didn't seem eager to show me round the premises. He led me down one tunnel, and I found myself in quite a snug little place. Surprising, eh? It was quite dry; and he'd even put in electric heating of some sort.

WE GOT the cases in, and I spent the rest of the day putting the apparatus together and testing it. Stevenson himself disappeared up one of the other tunnels. Later on, he came in with some lunch, for it seemed we couldn't get out through the sea-cave till the tide went down again. He left me again. Once I heard him hammer-

ing at something, and another time I caught the noise of some fair-sized machinery going. Sounds get magnified a bit in these caves.

I couldn't tell what sort of machine it was. It whirred, like a dynamo. Altogether, it struck me as a queer place to work in, but it was ideal for steadiness. The waves didn't shake the instruments; so we must have been in pretty solid rock. I never found out how he got the place equipped—he must have done it single-handed.

Late in the afternoon, he came along and told me the tide had gone down enough to make the cave-entrance practicable. So we went home in the launch.

This sort of thing went on for a week or two, though of course the program-hours varied with the tides. We went off in the launch. I did my measurements while he vanished into one of the tunnels. The weather was first-class, and I quite enjoyed the boat-trips.

Then, one evening, sitting smoking over the fire after dinner—it was chilly weather and a rainy night for once—he grew quite communicative. Surprising, eh? It took me aback, you know. So unlike him. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't a kind of presentiment—fey, the Scots call it. Anyhow, I got the last testament of a scientific genius. He talked to himself almost as much as to me, I think; so I didn't feel called to contribute anything of note. You remember his queer, pedantic way of talking: every word in full and no elisions. I can't pretend to reproduce what he said exactly, but it ran something like this:

"I presume it has puzzled you as well as my other assistants. Most of my work may seem disjointed, but if you had the clue, you would have been able to follow out the main lines for yourself. It has taken me fifteen years, but I think I am in sight of the end. Probably I am very near the end."

He was—a mighty sight nearer than he thought, then.

"I was not anxious to define my objective until I came within reach of the solution," he went on. "I had no desire to be called a quack, and that is what they would have termed me. The kernel of the problem I had set myself to solve was this: to construct an intelligent machine."

So that was what he was after! A thinking machine! What would you have thought if he'd said that to you? Rot, eh? Worse than old Frankenstein. I just bit on my pipe and said nix. He gave me a moment or two to digest it. Then he went on again.

"A living organism differs from a normal machine in that, if you stimulate it, it either fights or runs away from the stimulus; whereas a machine is simply passive. Therefore I had to choose one of two ways in constructing my machine; either give it the power of locomotion or endow it with a capacity for self-defense in its own environment. The second is the easier solution, for the machine can be placed in an environment wherein it is superior to anything which can be brought against it. My view is that if once you give an organism—be it machine or anything else—the power of appreciating stimuli and coping with them, you produce in it something akin to intelligence. It is certain, I believe, to develop the most fundamental of all instincts, a sense of self-preservation. It will become a thinking mechanism."

His cigar had gone out and he relighted it before going on.

"That is what I have been working toward for the last fifteen years, and the machine is finished at last. It may be a total failure. One can never be sure. But I have taken pains over the details. You are the first person to whom I have said anything on the matter. I had not meant to tell you, but I suppose I feel the need of an audience, after all."

He stopped abruptly and looked as if he regretted having said so much. I didn't care

to ask questions. The communicative mood seemed to have dropped off him suddenly, and he wasn't the kind of man one could cross-examine. We played chess for the rest of the evening.

NEXT morning, the weather had changed. The sea was pretty rough, squalls came down at times, and the launch rolled a lot as he took her round. We got into the cave all right, though, and climbed up to the laboratory level. Stevenson seemed to be regretting his overnight confidences, and I half thought he was going to draw back after all. But the cat was out of the bag; so apparently he made up his mind to show me his machine.

From the well-head, we went along a tunnel, turned into another one, and then switched into a side-passage. The place was a perfect warren, a regular labyrinth, I thought, as I followed the light of the torch he was carrying as he led me on. At last we came into a biggish cave, lighted by electric lamps. (He got his electricity from tidal power, he told me, once.) It was a sort of irregular hall, about eighty feet by fifty, with a fairly high roof. The floor was leveled and the walls were smooth.

The machine itself was in the middle of the place. When he spoke to me the night before, I'd no idea he meant such a huge contrivance. It covered about a hundred square feet of the floor. I don't know if you've any feeling about "personality" in machines—the difference between a racing-car and a runabout, for instance. I mean a matter of lines, you know, not mere sizes. This machine of Stevenson's was like no machine I'd ever seen before; but its physical appearance wasn't the thing that struck me most about it. It had, somehow, a personality. I can't explain what I mean. It looked wicked, just as a bull looks wicked in comparison with a cow.

And of course it was unlike any machine you ever set eyes on. First of all one saw a pair of things like huge wooden cameras with dark lenses. Behind them was a mass of intricate machinery with coils of insulated wire sprouting up, here and there. Underneath the cameras, on the floor, were coils and coils of some kind of jointed metallic cable, and one end of each coil ran back under the cameras and ended up among the machinery. Above the cameras lay what seemed to be a couple of loose hanks of very fine wires, almost filaments. The whole contraption looked like a gigantic squid built out of all sorts of electrical fittings, and the camera-lenses made a pair of big gloomy eyes to the thing. A gruesome-looking brute!

Stevenson interrupted my inspection before I had time to see many details.

"I have no time to explain the construction just now," he said, "but you can see the outlines for yourself. The machine needs motive power, and I got that by using the rise and fall of the tide in the cavern below. That drives a dynamo, so the machine is independent of fuel supply.

"Now as regards the means of detecting foreign objects, it was clear from the first that the machine would need something akin to sight. You notice that the walls and floor of this place have been painted uniform in tint. The two camera-shaped devices above the main body of the machine act as eyes. They are actually cameras, but instead of the ordinary focussing-screens, they have surfaces built up from hundreds of tiny photo-electric cells. Normally, these cells are uniformly illuminated since the wall coloring is uniform. But if a foreign object approaches the machine, then wherever its image falls on the 'focussing-screens', the cells there will be lighter or darker than before. This difference in the incident-rays sets up a current in the wire attached to that particular cell, and thus a means of setting the protective machinery in motion is provided. It is per-

fectly simple. And, of course, one needs two cameras, just as one needs two eyes in an animal to get the perspective.

"In addition, I added these tentacles which you see lying in a heap above the cameras. You will see their function in a moment or two.

"The means of defense are these wire coils on the floor. As soon as the 'eyes' or the tentacles locate a foreign body in the room, the machine can uncoil one or more of these cables and project it to the proper spot. That was merely a question of coordinating the joints."

He went out of the place and left me to inspect his toy. The more I looked at it, the less I liked it. The ugliest machine I ever saw! I'd seen a dead squid on the shore a day or two earlier, and it reminded me of that, more than anything. Ugh! But I hadn't much time to examine its beauties. Stevenson came back almost at once, carrying a small monkey, of all things.

"This brute will serve for a first experiment," he said, pitching it on the floor. "It has a fair degree of intelligence and reasonable agility—a sound test of the machine's capacity, I imagine. We can stand in this recess near the entrance and be out of reach of the cameras. The control switch is here, just outside the recess."

He pulled over the switch, and I noticed that he broke the circuit to bring the machine into action, which isn't the usual way with switches. I suppose, normally, his current was running into his batteries, or something. I only noticed this subconsciously, for I was watching the machine.

WITH the click of the switch, the sprawling mass of machinery on the floor seemed to come to life. There's no other word for it. Ever see a spider making a dart out of its den, and then stopping suddenly as it catches sight of you? The machine had that action to a hair. There was a sudden rustle of the cables, a sort of general heave in the thing; the cameras swung round with a jerk, and stopped. Then—stillness.

The monkey was crawling about on the floor between us and the machine, and at the sudden movement of the contrivance behind it, it stopped dead, crouched, and looked over its shoulder. The two things looked at each other. Then, in a flash, the tentacles above the cameras sprang up, diverged, and hung wriggling like Medusa's hair above the head of the machine. At that, the monkey began a kind of scrambling run. Before it had gone a yard, a long cable shot out from below the cameras, twined itself round the little beast's body, clinched, and fell back as quickly as it had come, leaving the poor little brute dead on the floor. It was as quick a killing as one could look for.

"Very good for a first trial," said Stevenson. "Now I'll switch off and——"

As he put out his hand to the switch, the cameras swung round with a snap; half a dozen cables swept out, seized his arm, and dragged him out of the niche. He nearly gripped me as he went. D'you remember the serpent and the donkey in the *Swiss Family Robinson?* It killed him like that—squeezed the life out of him in no time. Oh, very quick, very quick indeed!

I thought of jumping for the switch while it was busy, but just as I'd made up my mind about it, two more cables uncoiled from the thing and tore the switchboard off the wall. He'd forgotten to paint it neutral tint like the walls, and of course his machine spotted it at once and abolished it. I suppose he'd painted the walls long before, and put up the switch at the last moment, forgetting that it showed up on the uniform background. Curious how one can't think of everything!

Well, there I was, in a pretty case. The switch was gone. I had no means of stopping the infernal machine. And the only man who knew the ins and outs of the

brute was lying more or less in bits in front of me. First of all I was sick, deadly sick. When I felt better I sat down in the niche and did a quick piece of thinking, I can tell you. The trouble was, you see, that although I was out of sight of the machine unless I leaned out of the niche, I'd no idea of the brute's full capabilities. For all I knew, Stevenson might have equipped it with a whole battery of ways of finding the stranger within its gates. I'd no notion if the filaments were long enough to reach round into my recess. If they did get there, a cable or two would come my way, pretty quick, I was sure.

It didn't take me long to see that the main weapon on the machine's side was its eyesight. Fancy thinking of a machine's eyesight! But by that time I'd ceased to bother much about its being only a bit of mechanism. It was quite alive enough for all practical purposes. Blind it! That was the game. Blind it, and take my chance with the rest of the equipment. But it was out of the question to get at the camera-lenses and smash them; they looked pretty solid. So for a while I was stuck, simply couldn't think of anything.

Then, by Jove! I had it! If I could chuck something at the electric lamps and break them, the trick would be done. Once the place was in darkness, the cameras would be out of action. I nearly laughed in the machine's face. Oh, yes, it had a sort of suggestion of a face—quite as much as the average spider, you know. The bother was, of course, that if I leaned too far out of the niche, the thing would have me. For a while I couldn't get over this; then at last I thought of diverting the brute's attention by throwing my coat out, just before I had to lean out myself. This seemed the only plan.

Then I began to reckon up ways and means. There were four lamps: two close to me, and two that would be longish shots. I went through my pockets and found I had six pennies, a florin, a half-crown, and two shillings. Then I had a petrol cigarette-lighter, a penknife, two keys of a reasonable size, and a wrist-watch. Queer collection of things to stand between a man and death, what?

I decided to start work on the nearer lamps, so as to get my hand in. Luckily I used to play cricket. One of them I could get at comfortably without going out of the recess, and I smashed it second shot with one of the shillings. I wasn't anxious to begin shedding clothes till I had to. I wanted to keep them in reserve in case I had to make a rush for the exit at the last. So I had a go at the other nearer lamp, and I wasted four of my pennies and a florin over it, before I got it square with the second shilling. I never knew the real joy of breaking things until that lamp went out.

MY END of the place was very gloomy by that time, and the machine seemed to grow perturbed by the change. It began sending out its cables and worrying the bodies on the floor. Finally it gathered them nearer to itself, had a good look at them, and then gave them a few warm embraces. Bones do make a nasty crack, especially when you expect your own ones to go the same way, before long. By this time I must have been well off my head. I know I had wild ideas about reasoning with the brute, if only I could find a means of communicating with it.

I turned my attention to the other two lamps. One was dead in front of the niche, but it was a long shot. The penny and the half-crown went near it, but both missed. Then I opened fire with the rest of my collection. I got pretty excited over it, and when at last I did score a hit, I found I'd used up all my ammunition. So there I was, with nothing in hand and one lamp to the bad; besides which, the machine was now getting seriously disturbed and had begun to throw its filaments out round about

the place. It was only a question of time till it had me, if the antennæ were long enough to reach into my niche.

Then, all at once, I thought of the best thing of all: my shoes. Queer how one overlooks the obvious, isn't it? I had them off in a jiffy. By this time, it was a case of all or nothing; so I took off my coat, balanced a shoe in my hand, and ran out toward the last lamp. If I'd waited to think over it, I'd never have been able to screw myself up to that. The cameras came round —snap!—and for a moment I looked into their dark lenses and began to feel almost hypnotized. The thing was so much like a monstrous misshapen animal. I can't convey the impression to you, but the personality of the brute almost did for me. All the machines you've ever met were doing their job quietly, with no interest in your existence; but here was a thing whose sole purpose was my destruction. One couldn't help thinking of it as a gigantic beast.

I had just sense enough to jump aside; and as I did so, a leash of cables coiled out at me. I flung the shoe straight at the lamp —I was only ten feet or so from it—and out went the light. I jumped again, more by instinct than judgment, and a cable swung past me with a hiss. Darkness seemed to have thrown the thing into a panic, for it made no systematic attempt to search the place. If it had done so, my number would have been up. As it was, I'd only the vaguest ideas about the position of the entrance, and to get there I had to risk blundering into some tentacle or other.

However, I moved in what I took to be the right direction, and at last I found a cool draft blowing. Something gripped the coat from my hand—I found I'd forgotten to throw it away—and three hair-like things fell across my neck and cheek. But by that time I was at the entrance—and free. Behind me, I could hear the thing lashing round in fury; then suddenly there was silence. Perhaps it had some means of knowing that I was out of range. I ran down the pitch-dark corridor, blundered into another, and then into a third. Then I collapsed on the floor.

When I came to my senses again, I realized the hole I was in. I'd lost my way in the corridors, I hadn't any matches, and if I stumbled into the den of the machine in the dark, I might expect short shrift. It took me hours to find my way through that labyrinth to the well-head. The tide was in, and I had to wait for the ebb before I could get the launch out. I started the engine and nearly wrecked the damned boat on the way down the sea-cave. All the while I had a nightmare feeling that the machine might come after me. Silly, of course, but my nerves were all to bits, you know.

It was dark—nighttime—when I got out of the cave. As it said in the cutting I showed you, there was a storm. I didn't much care. All I wanted was to get clean away from that infernal cave. I ran the launch for all she was worth through the best part of the night, and once I nearly rammed a fishing-boat. Then I just missed getting piled up on some rocks. Finally, about dawn, a big sea broke over us, and down she went.

I just managed to swim ashore. Then I collapsed. Some people picked me up in a state of what the novelists call brain-fever, and I lay in their house till I got better. When I did come back to a reasonable condition, I saw that if I told the truth, I should be put down as a lunatic—I'd been delirious, you know—so I decided to suppress that for a bit. You're the first person I've told the yarn to. Perhaps you'll believe it. At least it's done me some good to get it out of my mind.

THAT was the tale Milton told me. When he had finished, I glanced at the cutting again, mechanically, and something in it caught my eye.

"What about these bearer bonds they talk about here?" I asked.

Milton stared at me with that fishy eye of his.

"Oh, Stevenson gave me them as my bonus, of course."

People were passing along the corridor of the train, and I remembered I'd put myself down for a seat in the restaurant car. I got up, expecting Milton to follow, but he sat tight. "I'm not taking dinner on the train," he said.

I left him sitting there, but when I came back after dinner, he was gone. The train stopped at Rugby and he must have got out there.

I feel I'm in an awkward position. On the face of it, the man in the street would say that Milton probably murdered Stevenson for the sake of those bearer bonds, and that I ought to lodge information with the police. On the other hand, the whole thing may be imagination on Milton's part: one of his delirium's nightmare dreams which has become real to him. And, finally, there's nothing impossible in his tale. A machine of that sort could be made, improbable as it sounds. Science is full of queer things. It's as well to keep an open mind. But if anyone discovers that sea-cave, I should keep out of it, if I were in his shoes. If there's anything in the story, that machine will still be waiting, for tidal power doesn't run down.

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# *The* Plumed Serpent

By HOWELL CALHOUN

What surging hordes have swept before your face
Of cold blue stone! What caravans of slaves
And golden idols have rolled past this place
Of death! And loose-frocked priests, within huge caves
That loom below your horrid skull have read
From bibles older than sage Egypt's lore;
And drums beat far below your chiseled head
While maidens swayed upon the painted floor.

Your once translucent eyes of rough-hewn jade
Which gazed upon the holy Aztec kings,
The centuries of dust have overlaid,
And caked upon those orbs two crumbling rings.
Where once great Montezuma bowed in fear,
The visages of jungle beasts now leer.

"It is an awesome sensation to be suddenly hurled from one's native world into a new strange alien sphere."

# Almuric

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

*An amazing story from the pen of a master of weird fiction, which begins on our own planet and ends in the demon-haunted world Almuric*

*Foreword*

IT WAS not my original intention ever to divulge the whereabouts of Esau Cairn, or the mystery surrounding him. My change of mind was brought about by Cairn himself, who retained a perhaps natural and human desire to give his strange story to the world which had disowned him and whose members can now never reach him. What he wishes to tell is his affair. One phase of my part of the transaction I refuse to divulge; I will not make public the means by which I transported Esau Cairn from his native Earth to a planet in a solar system undreamed of by even the wildest astronomical theorists. Nor will I divulge by what means I later achieved communication with him, and heard his story from his own lips, whispering ghostily across the cosmos.

Let me say that it was not premeditated. I stumbled upon the Great Secret quite by accident in the midst of a scientific experiment, and never thought of putting it to any practical use, until that night when Esau Cairn groped his way into my darkened observatory, a hunted man, with the blood of a human being on his hands. It was chance led him there, the blind instinct of the hunted thing to find a den wherein to turn at bay.

Let me state definitely and flatly, that, whatever the appearances against him, Esau Cairn is not, and was never, a criminal. In that specific case he was merely the pawn of a corrupt political machine which turned on him when he realized his position and refused to comply further with its demands. In general, the acts of his life which might suggest a violent and unruly nature simply sprang from his peculiar mental make-up.

Science is at last beginning to perceive that there is sound truth in the popular phrase, "born out of his time." Certain natures are attuned to certain phases or epochs of history, and these natures, when cast by chance into an age alien to their reactions and emotions, find difficulty in adapting themselves to their surroundings. It is but another example of nature's inscrutable laws, which sometimes are thrown out of stride by some cosmic friction or rift, and result in havoc to the individual and the mass.

Many men are born outside their century; Esau Cairn was born outside his epoch. Neither a moron nor a low-class primitive, possessing a mind well above the average, he was, nevertheless, distinctly out of place in the modern age. I never knew a man of intelligence so little fitted for adjustment in a machine-made civilization. (Let it be noted that I speak of him in the past tense; Esau Cairn lives, as far as the cosmos is concerned; as far as the earth is concerned, he is dead, for he will never again set foot upon it.)

He was of a restless mold, impatient of restraint and resentful of authority. Not by any means a bully, he at the same time refused to countenance what he considered to be the slightest infringement on his

rights. He was primitive in his passions, with a gusty temper and a courage inferior to none on this planet. His life was a series of repressions. Even in athletic contests he was forced to hold himself in, lest he injure his opponents. Esau Cairn was, in short, a freak—a man whose physical body and mental bent leaned back to the primordial.

Born in the Southwest, of old frontier stock, he came of a race whose characteristics were inclined toward violence, and whose traditions were of war and feud and battle against man and nature. The mountain country in which he spent his boyhood carried out the tradition. Contest—physical contest—was the breath of life to him. Without it he was unstable and uncertain. Because of his peculiar physical make-up, full enjoyment in a legitimate way, in the ring or on the football field was denied him. His career as a football player was marked by crippling injuries received by men playing against him, and he was branded as an unnecessarily brutal man, who fought to maim his opponents rather than win games. This was unfair. The injuries were simply resultant from the use of his great strength, always so far superior to that of the men opposed to him. Cairn was not a great sluggish lethargic giant as so many powerful men are; he was vibrant with fierce life, ablaze with dynamic energy. Carried away by the lust of combat, he forgot to control his powers, and the result was broken limbs or fractured skulls for his opponent.

It was for this reason that he withdrew from college life, unsatisfied and embittered, and entered the professional ring. Again his fate dogged him. In his training-quarters, before he had had a single match, he almost fatally injured a sparring partner. Instantly the papers pounced upon the incident, and played it up beyond its natural proportions. As a result Cairn's license was revoked.

BEWILDERED, unsatisfied, he wandered over the world, a restless Hercules, seeking outlet for the immense vitality that surged tumultuously within him, searching vainly for some form of life wild and strenuous enough to satisfy his cravings, born in the dim red days of the world's youth.

Of the final burst of blind passion that banished him for ever from the life wherein he roamed, a stranger, I need say little. It was a nine-days wonder, and the papers exploited it with screaming headlines. It was an old story—a rotten city government, a crooked political boss, a man chosen, unwittingly on his part, to be used as a tool and serve as a puppet.

Cairn, restless, weary of the monotony of a life for which he was unsuited, was an ideal tool—for a while. But Cairn was neither a criminal nor a fool. He understood their game quicker than they expected, and took a stand surprisingly firm to them, who did not know the real man.

Yet, even so, the result would not have been so violent if the man who had used and ruined Cairn had any real intelligence. Used to grinding men under his feet and seeing them cringe and beg for mercy, Boss Blaine could not understand that he was dealing with a man to whom his power and wealth meant nothing.

Yet so schooled was Cairn to iron self-control that it required first a gross insult, then an actual blow on the part of Blaine, to rouse him. Then for the first time in his life, his wild nature blazed into full being. All his thwarted and repressed life surged up behind the clenched fist that broke Blaine's skull like an eggshell and stretched him lifeless on the floor, behind the desk from which he had for years ruled a whole district.

Cairn was no fool. With the red haze of fury fading from his glare, he realized that he could not hope to escape the vengeance of the machine that controlled the

city. It was not because of fear that he fled Blaine's house. It was simply because of his primitive instinct to find a more convenient place to turn at bay and fight out his death fight.

So it was that chance led him to my observatory.

He would have left, instantly, not wishing to embroil me in his trouble, but I persuaded him to remain and tell me his story. I had long expected some catastrophe of the sort. That he had repressed himself as long as he did, shows something of his iron character. His nature was as wild and untamed as that of a maned lion.

He had no plan—he simply intended to fortify himself somewhere and fight it out with the police until he was riddled with lead.

I at first agreed with him, seeing no better alternative. I was not so naïve as to believe he had any chance in the courts, with the evidence that would be presented against him. Then a sudden thought occurred to me, so fantastic and alien, and yet so logical, that I instantly propounded it to my companion. I told him of the Great Secret, and gave him proof of its possibilities.

In short, I urged him to take the chance of a flight through space, rather than meet the certain death that awaited him.

And he agreed. There was no place in the universe which would support human life. But I had looked beyond the knowledge of men, in universes beyond universes. And I chose the only planet I knew on which a human being could exist—the wild, primitive, and strange planet I named Almuric.

Cairn understood the risks and uncertainties as well as I. But he was utterly fearless—and the thing was done. Esau Cairn left the planet of his birth, for a world swimming afar in space, alien, aloof, strange.

*Esau Cairn's Narrative*

THE transition was so swift and brief, that it seemed less than a tick of time lay between the moment I placed myself in Professor Hildebrand's strange machine, and the instant when I found myself standing upright in the clear sunlight that flooded a broad plain. I could not doubt that I had indeed been transported to another world. The landscape was not so grotesque and fantastic as I might have supposed, but it was indisputably alien to anything existing on the Earth.

But before I gave much heed to my surroundings, I examined my own person to learn if I had survived that awful flight without injury. Apparently I had. My various parts functioned with their accustomed vigor. But I was naked. Hildebrand had told me that inorganic substance could not survive the transmutation. Only vibrant, living matter could pass unchanged through the unthinkable gulfs which lie between the planets. I was grateful that I had not fallen into a land of ice and snow. The plain seemed filled with a lazy summer-like heat. The warmth of the sun was pleasant on my bare limbs.

On every side stretched away a vast level plain, thickly grown with short green grass. In the distance this grass attained a greater height, and through it I caught the glint of water. Here and there throughout the plain this phenomenon was repeated, and I traced the meandering course of several rivers, apparently of no great width. Black dots moved through the grass near the rivers, but their nature I could not determine. However, it was quite evident that my lot had not been cast on an uninhabited planet, though I could not guess the nature of the inhabitants. My imagination peopled the distances with nightmare shapes.

It is an awesome sensation to be suddenly hurled from one's native world into a new strange alien sphere. To say that

I was not appalled at the prospect, that I did not shrink and shudder in spite of the peaceful quiet of my environs, would be hypocrisy. I, who had never known fear, was transformed into a mass of quivering, cowering nerves, starting at my own shadow. It was that man's utter helplessness was borne in upon me, and my mighty frame and massive thews seemed frail and brittle as the body of a child. How could I pit them against an unknown world? In that instant I would gladly have returned to Earth and the gallows that awaited me, rather than face the nameless terrors with which imagination peopled my new-found world. But I was soon to learn that those thews I now despised were capable of carrying me through greater perils than I dreamed.

A SLIGHT sound behind me brought me around to stare amazedly at the first inhabitant of Almuric I was to encounter. And the sight, awesome and menacing as it was, yet drove the ice from my veins and brought back some of my dwindling courage. The tangible and material can never be as grisly as the unknown, however perilous.

At my first startled glance I thought it was a gorilla which stood before me. Even with the thought I realized that it was a man, but such a man as neither I nor any other Earthman had ever looked upon.

He was not much taller than I, but broader and heavier, with a great spread of shoulders, and thick limbs knotted with muscles. He wore a loin-cloth of some silk-like material, girdled with a broad belt which supported a long knife in a leather sheath. High-strapped sandals were on his feet. These details I took in at a glance, my attention being instantly fixed in fascination on his face.

Such a countenance it is difficult to imagine or describe. The head was set squarely between the massive shoulders, the neck so squat as to be scarcely apparent. The jaw was square and powerful, and as the wide thin lips lifted in a snarl, I glimpsed brutal tusk-like teeth. A short bristly beard masked the jaw, set off by fierce, up-curving mustaches. The nose was almost rudimentary, with wide flaring nostrils. The eyes were small, bloodshot, and an icy gray in color. From the thick black brows the forehead, low and receding, sloped back into a tangle of coarse, bushy hair. The ears were small and very close-set.

The mane and beard were very blue-black, and the creature's limbs and body were almost covered with hair of the same hue. He was not, indeed, as hairy as an ape, but he was hairier than any human being I had ever seen.

I instantly realized that the being, hostile or not, was a formidable figure. He fairly emanated strength — hard, raw, brutal power. There was not an ounce of surplus flesh on him. His frame was massive, with heavy bones. His hairy skin rippled with muscles that looked iron-hard. Yet it was not altogether his body that spoke of dangerous power. His look, his carriage, his whole manner reflected a terrible physical might backed by a cruel and implacable mind. As I met the blaze of his bloodshot eyes, I felt a wave of corresponding anger. The stranger's attitude was arrogant and provocative beyond description. I felt my muscles tense and harden instinctively.

But for an instant my resentment was submerged by the amazement with which I heard him speak in perfect English!

"Thak! What manner of man are you?"

His voice was harsh, grating and insulting. There was nothing subdued or restrained about him. Here were the naked primitive instincts and manners, unmodified. Again I felt the old red fury rising in me, but I fought it down.

"I am Esau Cairn," I answered shortly, and halted, at a loss how to explain my presence on his planet.

His arrogant eyes roved contemptuously over my hairless limbs and smooth face, and when he spoke, it was with unbearable scorn.

"By Thak, are you a man or a woman?"

My answer was a smash of my clenched fist that sent him rolling on the sward.

The act was instinctive. Again my primitive wrath had betrayed me. But I had no time for self-reproach. With a scream of bestial rage my enemy sprang up and rushed at me, roaring and frothing. I met him breast to breast, as reckless in my wrath as he, and in an instant was fighting for my life.

I, who had always had to restrain and hold down my strength lest I injure my fellow men, for the first time in my life found myself in the clutches of a man stronger than myself. This I realized in the first instant of impact, and it was only by the most desperate efforts that I fought clear of his crushing embrace.

The fight was short and deadly. The only thing that saved me was the fact that my antagonist knew nothing of boxing. He could—and did—strike powerful blows with his clenched fists, but they were clumsy, ill-timed and erratic. Thrice I mauled my way out of grapples that would have ended with the snapping of my spine. He had no knack of avoiding blows; no man on Earth could have survived the terrible battering I gave him. Yet he incessantly surged in on me, his mighty hands spread to drag me down. His nails were almost like talons, and I was quickly bleeding from a score of places where they had torn the skin.

Why he did not draw his dagger I could not understand, unless it was because he considered himself capable of crushing me with his bare hands—which proved to be the case. At last, half blinded by my smashes, blood gushing from his split ears and splintered teeth, he did reach for his weapon, and the move won the fight for me.

Breaking out of a half-clinch, he straightened out of his defensive crouch and drew his dagger. And as he did so, I hooked my left into his belly with all the might of my heavy shoulders and powerfully driving legs behind it. The breath went out of him in an explosive gasp, and my fist sank to the wrist in his belly. He swayed, his mouth flying open, and I smashed my right to his sagging jaw. The punch started at my hip, and carried every ounce of my weight and strength. He went down like a slaughtered ox and lay without twitching, blood spreading out over his beard. That last smash had torn his lip open from the corner of his mouth to the rim of his chin, and must surely have fractured his jawbone as well.

PANTING from the fury of the bout, my muscles aching from his crushing grasp, I worked my raw, skinned knuckles, and stared down at my victim, wondering if I had sealed my doom. Surely, I could expect nothing now but hostility from the people of Almuric. Well, I thought, as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat. Stooping, I despoiled my adversary of his single garment, belt and weapon, and transferred them to my own frame. This done, I felt some slight renewal of confidence. At least I was partly clothed and armed.

I examined the dagger with much interest. A more murderous weapon I have never seen. The blade was perhaps nineteen inches in length, double-edged, and sharp as a razor. It was broad at the haft, tapering to a diamond point. The guard and pommel were of silver, the hilt covered with a substance somewhat like shagreen. The blade was indisputably steel, but of a quality I had never before encountered. The whole was a triumph of the

weapon-maker's art, and seemed to indicate a high order of culture.

From my admiration of my newly-acquired weapon, I turned again to my victim, who was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness. Instinct caused me to sweep the grasslands, and in the distance, to the south, I saw a group of figures moving toward me. They were surely men, and armed men. I caught the flash of the sunlight on steel. Perhaps they were of the tribe of my adversary. If they found me standing over their senseless comrade, wearing the spoils of conquest, their attitude toward me was not hard to visualize.

I cast my eyes about for some avenue of escape or refuge, and saw that the plain, some distance away, ran up into low green-clad foot-hills. Beyond these in turn, I saw larger hills, marching up and up in serried ranges. Another glance showed the distant figures to have vanished among the tall grass along one of the river courses, which they must cross before they reached the spot where I stood.

Waiting for no more, I turned and ran swiftly toward the hills. I did not lessen my pace until I reached the foot of the first foot-hills, where I ventured to look back, my breath coming in gasps, and my heart pounding suffocatingly from my exertions. I could see my antagonist, a small shape in the vastness of the plain. Further on, the group I was seeking to avoid had come into the open and were hastening toward him.

I hurried up the low slope, drenched with sweat and trembling with fatigue. At the crest I looked back once more, to see the figures clustered about my vanquished opponent. Then I went down the opposite slope quickly, and saw them no more.

An hour's journeying brought me into as rugged a country as I have ever seen. On all sides rose steep slopes, littered with loose boulders which threatened to roll down upon the wayfarer. Bare stone cliffs, reddish in color, were much in evidence. There was little vegetation, except for low stunted trees, of which the spread of their branches was equal to the height of the trunk, and several varieties of thorny bushes, upon some of which grew nuts of peculiar shape and color. I broke open several of these, finding the kernel to be rich and meaty in appearance, but I dared not eat it, although I was feeling the bite of hunger.

My thirst bothered me more than my hunger, and this at least I was able to satisfy, although the satisfying nearly cost me my life. I clambered down a precipitous steep and entered a narrow valley, enclosed by lofty cliffs, at the foot of which the nut-bearing bushes grew in great abundance. In the middle of the valley lay a broad pool, apparently fed by a spring. In the center of the pool the water bubbled continuously, and a small stream led off down the valley.

I approached the pool eagerly, and lying on my belly at its lush-grown marge, plunged my muzzle into the crystal-clear water. It, too, might be lethal for an Earthman, for all I knew, but I was so maddened with thirst that I risked it. It had an unusual tang, a quality I have always found present in Almuric water, but it was deliciously cold and satisfying. So pleasant it was to my parched lips that after I had satisfied my thirst, I lay there enjoying the sensation of tranquillity. That was a mistake. Eat quickly, drink quickly, sleep lightly, and linger not over anything —those are the first rules of the wild, and his life is not long who fails to observe them.

The warmth of the sun, the bubbling of the water, the sensuous feeling of relaxation and satiation after fatigue and thirst— these wrought on me like an opiate to lull me into semi-slumber. It must have been some sub-conscious instinct that warned me, when a faint swishing reached my ears

that was not part of the rippling of the spring. Even before my mind translated the sound as the passing of a heavy body through the tall grass, I whirled on my side, snatching at my poniard.

Simultaneously my ears were stunned with a deafening roar, there was a rushing through the air, and a giant form crashed down where I had lain an instant before, so close to me that its outspread talons raked my thigh. I had no time to tell the nature of my attacker—I had only a dazed impression that it was huge, supple, and cat-like. I rolled frantically aside as it spat and struck at me sidewise; then it was on me, and even as I felt its claws tear agonizingly into my flesh, the ice-cold water engulfed us both. A cat-like yowl rose half strangled, as if the yowler had swallowed a large amount of water, there was a great splashing and thrashing about me; then as I rose to the surface, I saw a long, bedraggled shape disappearing around the bushes near the cliffs. What it was I could not say, but it looked more like a leopard than anything else, though it was bigger than any leopard I had ever seen.

Scanning the shore carefully, I saw no other enemy, and crawled out of the pool, shivering from my icy plunge. My poniard was still in its scabbard. I had had no time to draw it, which was just as well. If I had not rolled into the pool, just when I did, dragging my attacker with me, it would have been my finish. Evidently the beast had a true cat-like distaste for water.

I found that I had a deep gash in my thigh and four lesser abrasions on my shoulder, where a great talon-armed paw had closed. The gash in my leg was pouring blood, and I thrust the limb deep into the icy pool, swearing at the excruciating sting of the cold water on the raw flesh. My leg was nearly numb when the bleeding ceased.

I now found myself in a quandary. I was hungry, night was coming on, there was no telling when the leopard-beast might return, or another predatory animal attack me; more than that, I was wounded Civilized man is soft and easily disabled. I had a wound such as would be considered, among civilized people, ample reason for weeks of an invalid's existence. Strong and rugged as I was, according to Earth standards, I despaired when I surveyed the wound, and wondered how I was to treat it. The matter was quickly taken out of my hands.

I HAD started across the valley toward the cliffs, hoping I might find a cave there, for the nip of the air warned me that the night would not be as warm as the day, when a hellish clamor up near the mouth of the valley caused me to wheel and glare in that direction. Over the ridge came what I thought to be a pack of hyenas, except for their noise, which was more infernal than an earthly hyena, even, could produce. I had no illusions as to their purpose. It was I they were after.

Necessity recognizes few limitations. An instant before I had been limping painfully and slowly. Now I set out on a mad race for the cliff as if I were fresh and unwounded. With every step a spasm of agony shot along my thigh, and the wound, bleeding afresh, spurted red, but I gritted my teeth and increased my efforts.

My pursuers gave tongue and raced after me with such appalling speed that I had almost given up hope of reaching the trees beneath the cliffs before they pulled me down. They were snapping at my heels when I lurched into the low stunted growths, and swarmed up the spreading branches with a gasp of relief. But to my horror the hyenas climbed after me! A desperate downward glance showed me that they were not true hyenas; they differed from the breed I had known just as everything on Almuric differed subtly from its nearest counterpart on Earth. These

beasts had curving cat-like claws, and their bodily structure was cat-like enough to allow them to climb as well as a lynx.

Despairingly, I was about to turn at bay, when I saw a ledge on the cliff above my head. There the cliff was deeply weathered, and the branches pressed against it. A desperate scramble up the perilous slant, and I had dragged my scratched and bruised body up on the ledge and lay glaring down at my pursuers, who loaded the topmost branches and howled up at me like lost souls. Evidently their climbing ability did not include cliffs, because after one attempt, in which one sprang up toward the ledge, clawed frantically for an instant on the sloping stone wall, and then fell off with an awful shriek, they made no effort to reach me.

Neither did they abandon their post. Stars came out, strange unfamiliar constellations, that blazed whitely in the dark velvet skies, and a broad golden moon rose above the cliffs and flooded the hills with weird light; but still my sentinels sat on the branches below me and howled up at me their hatred and belly-hunger.

The air was icy, and frost formed on the bare stone where I lay. My limbs became stiff and numb. I had knotted my girdle about my leg for a tourniquet; the run had apparently ruptured some small veins laid bare by the wound, because the blood flowed from it in an alarming manner.

I never spent a more miserable night. I lay on the frosty stone ledge, shaking with cold. Below me the eyes of my hunters burned up at me. Throughout the shadowy hills sounded the roaring and bellowing of unknown monsters. Howls, screams and yapping cut the night. And there I lay, naked, wounded, freezing, hungry, terrified, just as one of my remote ancestors might have lain in the Paleolithic Age of my own planet.

I can understand why our heathen ancestors worshipped the sun. When at last the cold moon sank and the sun of Almuric pushed its golden rim above the distant cliffs, I could have wept for sheer joy. Below me the hyenas snarled and stretched themselves, bayed up at me briefly, and loped away in search of easier prey. Slowly the warmth of the sun stole through my cramped, numbed limbs, and I rose stiffly up to greet the day, just as that forgotten forebear of mine might have stood up in the youth-dawn of the Earth.

After a while I descended, and fell upon the nuts clustered in the bushes near by. I was faint from hunger, and decided that I had as soon die from poisoning as from starvation. I broke open the thick shells and munched the meaty kernels eagerly, and I can not recall any Earthly meal, howsoever elaborate, that tasted half as good. No ill effects followed; the nuts were good and nutritious. I was beginning to overcome my surroundings, at least so far as food was concerned. I had surmounted one obstacle of life on Almuric.

IT IS needless for me to narrate the details of the following months. I dwelt among the hills in such suffering and peril as no man on Earth has experienced for thousands of years. I make bold to say that only a man of extraordinary strength and ruggedness could have survived as I did. I did more than survive. I came at last to thrive on the existence.

At first I dared not leave the valley, where I was sure of water and food. I built a sort of nest of branches and leaves on the ledge, and slept there at night. Slept? The word is misleading. I crouched there, trying to keep from freezing, grimly lasting out the night. In the daytime I snatched naps, learning to sleep anywhere, or at any time, and so lightly that the slightest unusual noise would awaken me. The rest of the time I explored my valley and the hills about, and picked and ate nuts.

Nor were my humble explorations uneventful. Time and again I raced for the cliffs or the trees, winning sometimes by shuddery hair-breadths. The hills swarmed with beasts, and all seemed predatory.

It was that fact which held me to my valley, where I at least had a bit of safety. What drove me forth at last was the same reason that has always driven forth the human race, from the first apeman down to the last European colonist—the search for food. My supply of nuts became exhausted. The trees were stripped. This was not altogether on my account, although I developed a most ravenous hunger, what of my constant exertions; but others came to eat the nuts—huge shaggy bear-like creatures, and things that looked like fur-clad baboons. These animals ate nuts, but they were omnivorous, to judge by the attention they accorded me. The bears were comparatively easy to avoid; they were mountains of flesh and muscle, but they could not climb, and their eyes were none too good. It was the baboons I learned to fear and hate. They pursued me on sight, they could both run and climb, and they were not balked by the cliff.

One pursued me to my eyrie, and swarmed up onto the ledge with me. At least such was his intention, but man is always most dangerous when cornered. I was weary of being hunted. As the frothing apish monstrosity hauled himself up over my ledge, man-like, I drove my poniard down between his shoulders with such fury that I literally pinned him to the ledge; the keen point sinking a full inch into the solid stone beneath him.

The incident showed me both the temper of my steel, and the growing quality of my own muscles. I who had been among the strongest on my own planet, found myself a weakling on primordial Almuric. Yet the potentiality of mastery was in my brain and my thews, and I was beginning to find myself.

Since survival was dependent on toughening, I toughened. My skin, burnt brown by the sun and hardened by the elements, became more impervious to both heat and cold than I had deemed possible. Muscles I had not known I possessed became evident. Such strength and suppleness became mine as Earthmen have not known for ages.

A short time before I had been transported from my native planet, a noted physical culture expert had pronounced me the most perfectly developed man on Earth. As I hardened with my fierce life on Almuric, I realized that the expert honestly had not known what physical development was. Nor had I. Had it been possible to divide my being and set opposite each other the man that expert praised, and the man I had become, the former would have seemed ridiculously soft, sluggish and clumsy in comparison to the brown, sinewy giant opposed to him.

I no longer turned blue with the cold at night, nor did the rockiest way bruise my naked feet. I could swarm up an almost sheer cliff with the ease of a monkey, I could run for hours without exhaustion; in short dashes it would have taken a racehorse to outfoot me. My wounds, untended except for washing in cold water, healed of themselves, as Nature is prone to heal the hurts of such as live close to her.

All this I narrate in order that it may be seen what sort of a man was formed in the savage mold. Had it not been for the fierce forging that made me steel and rawhide, I could not have survived the grim and bloody episodes through which I was to pass on that wild planet.

With new realization of power came confidence. I stood on my feet and stared at my bestial neighbors with defiance. I no longer fled from a frothing, champing baboon. With them, at least, I declared feud, growing to hate the abominable beasts as I might have hated human ene-

mies. Besides, they ate the nuts I wished for myself.

They soon learned not to follow me to my eyrie, and the day came when I dared to meet one on even terms. I will never forget the sight of him frothing and roaring as he charged out of a clump of bushes, and the awful glare in his manlike eyes. My resolution wavered, but it was too late to retreat, and I met him squarely, skewering him through the heart as he closed in with his long clutching arms.

But there were other beasts which frequented the valley, and which I did not attempt to meet on any terms:—the hyenas, the sabertooth leopards, longer and heavier than an Earthly tiger and more ferocious; giant moose-like creatures, carnivorous, with alligator-like tusks; the monstrous bears; gigantic boars, with bristly hair which looked impervious to a sword-cut. There were other monsters, which appeared only at night, and the details of which I was not able to make out. These mysterious beasts moved mostly in silence, though some emitted high-pitched weird wails, or low earth-shaking rumbles. As the unknown is most menacing, I had a feeling that these nighted monsters were even more terrible than the familiar horrors which harried my day-life.

I remember one occasion on which I awoke suddenly and found myself lying tensely on my ledge, my ears strained to a night suddenly and breathlessly silent. The moon had set and the valley was veiled in darkness. Not a chattering baboon, not a yelping hyena disturbed the sinister stillness. *Something* was moving through the valley; I heard the faint rhythmic swishing of the grass that marked the passing of some huge body, but in the darkness I made out only a dim gigantic shape, which somehow seemed infinitely longer than it was broad — out of natural proportion, somehow. It passed away up the valley, and with its going, it was as if the night audibly expelled a gusty sigh of relief. The nocturnal noises started up again, and I lay back to sleep once more with a vague feeling that some grisly horror had passed me in the night.

I HAVE said that I strove with the baboons over the possession of the life-giving nuts. What of my own appetite and those of the beasts, there came a time when I was forced to leave my valley and seek far afield in search of nutriment. My explorations had become broader and broader, until I had exhausted the resources of the country close about. So I set forth at random through the hills in a southerly and easterly direction. Of my wanderings I will deal briefly. For many weeks I roamed through the hills, starving, feasting, threatened by savage beasts, sleeping in trees or perilously on tall rocks when night fell. I fled, I fought, I slew, I suffered wounds. Oh, I can tell you my life was neither dull nor eventful.

I was living the life of the most primitive savage; I had neither companionship, books, clothing, nor any of the things which go to make up civilization. According to the cultured viewpoint, I should have been most miserable. I was not. I revelled in my existence. My being grew and expanded. I tell you, the natural life of mankind is a grim battle for existence against the forces of nature, and any other form of life is artificial and without realistic meaning.

My life was not empty; it was crowded with adventures calling on every ounce of intelligence and physical power. When I swung down from my chosen eyrie at dawn, I knew that I would see the sun set only through my personal craft and strength and speed. I came to read the meaning of every waving grass tuft, each masking bush, each towering boulder. On every hand lurked Death in a thousand

forms. My vigilance could not be relaxed, even in sleep. When I closed my eyes at night it was with no assurance that I would open them at dawn. I was fully alive. That phrase has more meaning than appears on the surface. The average civilized man is never fully alive; he is burdened with masses of atrophied tissue and useless matter. Life flickers feebly in him; his senses are dull and torpid. In developing his intellect he has sacrificed far more than he realizes.

I realized that I, too, had been partly dead on my native planet. But now I was alive in every sense of the word; I tingled and burned and stung with life to the finger tips and the ends of my toes. Every sinew, vein, and springy bone was vibrant with the dynamic flood of singing, pulsing, humming life. My time was too much occupied with food-getting and preserving my skin to allow the developing of the morbid and intricate complexes and inhibitions which torment the civilized individual. To those highly complex persons who would complain that the psychology of such a life is over-simple, I can but reply that in my life at that time, violent and

"Something was moving through the valley."

continual action and the necessity of action crowded out most of the gropings and soul-searchings common to those whose safety and daily meals are assured them by the toil of others. My life *was* primitively simple; I dwelt altogether in the present. My life on Earth already seemed like a dream, dim and far away.

All my life I had held down my instincts, had chained and enthralled my over-abundant vitalities. Now I was free to hurl all my mental and physical powers into the untamed struggle for existence, and I knew such zest and freedom as I had never dreamed of.

In all my wanderings—and since leaving the valley I had covered an enormous distance—I had seen no sign of humanity, or anything remotely resembling humanity.

IT WAS the day I glimpsed a vista of rolling grassland beyond the peaks, that I suddenly encountered a human being. The meeting was unexpected. As I strode along an upland plateau, thickly grown with bushes and littered with boulders, I came abruptly on a scene striking in its primordial significance.

Ahead of me the earth sloped down to form a shallow bowl, the floor of which was thickly grown with tall grass, indicating the presence of a spring. In the midst of this bowl a figure similar to the one I had encountered on my arrival on Almuric was waging an unequal battle with a saber-tooth leopard. I stared in amazement, for I had not supposed that any human could stand before the great cat and live.

Always the glittering wheel of a sword shimmered between the monster and its prey, and blood on the spotted hide showed that the blade had been fleshed more than once. But it could not last; at any instant I expected to see the swordsman go down beneath the giant body.

Even with the thought, I was running fleetly down the shallow slope. I owed nothing to the unknown man, but his valiant battle stirred newly plumbed depths in my soul. I did not shout but rushed in silently and murderously, my poniard gleaming in my hand. Even as I reached them, the great cat sprang, the sword went spinning from the wielder's hand, and he went down beneath the hurtling bulk. And almost simultaneously I disemboweled the sabertooth with one tremendous ripping stroke.

With a scream it lurched off its victim, slashing murderously as I leaped back, and then it began rolling and tumbling over the grass, roaring hideously and ripping up the earth with its frantic talons, in a ghastly welter of blood and streaming entrails.

It was a sight to sicken the hardiest, and I was glad when the mangled beast stiffened convulsively and lay still.

I turned to the man, but with little hope of finding life in him. I had seen the terrible saber-like fangs of the giant carnivore tear into his throat as he went down.

He was lying in a wide pool of blood, his throat horribly mangled. I could see the pulsing of the great jugular vein which had been laid bare, though not severed. One of the huge taloned paws had raked down his side from arm-pit to hip, and his thigh had been laid open in a frightful manner; I could see the naked bone, and from the ruptured veins blood was gushing. Yet to my amazement the man was not only living, but conscious. Yet even as I looked, his eyes glazed and the light faded in them.

I tore a strip from his loin-cloth and made a tourniquet about his thigh which somewhat slackened the flow of blood; then I looked down at him helplessly. He was apparently dying, though I knew something of the stamina and vitality of the wild and its people. And such evidently this man was; he was as savage and hairy in appearance, though not quite so

bulky, as the man I had fought during my first day on Almuric.

As I stood there helplessly, something whistled venomously past my ear and thudded into the slope behind me. I saw a long arrow quivering there, and a fierce shout reached my ears. Glaring about, I saw half a dozen hairy men running fleetly toward me, fitting shafts to their bows as they came.

With an instinctive snarl I bounded up the short slope, the whistle of the missiles about my head lending wings to my heels. I did not stop, once I had gained the cover of the bushes surrounding the bowl, but went straight on, wrathful and disgusted. Evidently men as well as beasts were hostile on Almuric, and I would do well to avoid them in the future.

Then I found my anger submerged in a fantastic problem. I had understood some of the shouts of the men as they rushed toward me. The words had been in English, just as the antagonist of my first encounter had spoken and understood that language. In vain I cudgeled my mind for a solution. I had found that while animate and inanimate objects on Almuric often closely copied things on Earth, yet there was always a striking difference somewhere, in substance, quality, shape or mode of action. It was preposterous that certain conditions on the separate planets could run such a perfect parallel as to produce an identical language. Yet I could not doubt the evidence of my ears. With a curse I abandoned the problem as too fantastic to waste time on.

Perhaps it was this incident, perhaps the glimpse of the distant savannas which filled me with a restlessness and distaste for the barren hill country where I had fared so hardily. The sight of men, strange and alien as they were, stirred in my breast a desire for human companionship, and this frustrated longing became in turn a sudden feeling of repulsion for my surroundings. I did not hope to meet friendly humans on the plains; but I determined to try my chances upon them, nevertheless, though what perils I might meet there I could not know. Before I left the hills some whim caused me to scrape from my face my heavy growth and trim my shaggy hair with my poniard, which had lost none of its razor edge. Why I did this I cannot say, unless it was the natural instinct of a man setting forth into new country to look his "best."

THE next morning I descended into the grassy plains, which swept eastward and southward as far as sight could reach. I continued eastward and covered many miles that day, without any unusual incident. I encountered several small winding rivers, along whose marges the grass stood taller than my head. Among this grass I heard the snorting and thrashing of heavy animals of some sort, and gave them a wide berth—for which caution I was later thankful.

The rivers were thronged in many cases with gayly colored birds of many shapes and hues, some silent, others continually giving forth strident cries as they wheeled above the waters or dipped down to snatch their prey from its depths.

Further out on the plain I came upon herds of grazing animals—small deer-like creatures, and a curious animal that looked like a pot-bellied pig with abnormally long hind legs, and that progressed in enormous bounds, after the fashion of a kangaroo. It was a most ludicrous sight, and I laughed until my belly ached. Later I reflected that it was the first time I had laughed—outside of a few short barks of savage satisfaction at the discomfiture of an enemy—since I had set foot on Almuric.

That night I slept in the tall grass not far from a water course, and might have been made the prey of any wandering meat-eater. But fortune was with me that

night. All across the plains sounded the thunderous roaring of stalking monsters, but none came near my frail retreat. The night was warm and pleasant, strikingly in contrast with the nights in the chill grim hills.

The next day a momentous thing occurred. I had had no meat on Almuric, except when ravenous hunger had driven me to eat raw flesh. I had searched in vain for some stone that would strike a spark. The rocks were of a peculiar nature, unknown to Earth. But that morning on the plains, I found a bit of greenish-looking stone lying in the grass, and experiments showed that it had some of the qualities of flint. Patient effort, in which I clinked my poniard against the stone, rewarded me with a spark of fire in the dry grass, which I soon fanned to a blaze—and had some difficulty in extinguishing.

That night I surrounded myself with a ring of fire which I fed with dry grass and stalked plants which burned slowly, and I felt comparatively safe, though huge forms moved about me in the darkness, and I caught the stealthy pad of great paws, and the glimmer of wicked eyes.

On my journey across the plains I subsisted on fruit I found growing on green stalks, which I saw the birds eating. It was pleasant to the taste, though lacking in the nutritive qualities of the nuts in the hills. I looked longingly at the scampering deer-like animals, now that I had the means of cooking their flesh, but saw no way of securing them.

And so for days I wandered aimlessly across those vast plains, until I came in sight of a massive walled city.

I sighted it just at nightfall, and eager though I was to investigate it further, I made my camp and waited for morning. I wondered if my fire would be seen by the inhabitants, and if they would send out a party to discover my nature and purpose.

With the fall of night I could no longer make it out, but the last waning light had shown it plainly, rising stark and somber against the eastern sky. At that distance no evidence of life was visible, but I had a dim impression of huge walls and massive towers, all of a greenish tint.

I lay within the circle of my fire, while great sinuous bodies rustled through the grass and fierce eyes glared at me, and my imagination was at work as I strove to visualize the possible inhabitants of that mysterious city. Would they be of the same race as the hairy ferocious troglodytes I had encountered? I doubted it, for it hardly seemed possible that these primitive creatures would be capable of rearing such a structure. Perhaps there I would find a highly developed type of cultured man. Perhaps—here imaginings too dark and shadowy for description whispered at the back of my consciousness.

Then the moon rose behind the city, etching its massive outlines in the weird golden glow. It looked black and somber in the moonlight; there was something distinctly brutish and forbidding about its contours. As I sank into slumber I reflected that if apemen could build a city, it would surely resemble that colossus in the moon.

## 2

DAWN found me on my way across the plain. It may seem like the height of folly to have gone striding openly toward the city, which might be full of hostile beings, but I had learned to take desperate chances, and I was consumed with curiosity; weary at last of my lonely life.

The nearer I approached, the more rugged the details stood out. There was more of the fortress than the city about the walls, which, with the towers that loomed behind and above them, seemed to have been built of huge blocks of greenish stone, very roughly cut. There was no apparent attempt at smoothing, polishing or other-

wise adorning this stone. The whole appearance was rude and savage, suggesting a wild fierce people heaping up rocks as a defense against enemies.

As yet I had seen nothing of the inhabitants. The city might have been empty of human life. But a broad road leading to the massive gate was beaten bare of grass, as if by the constant impact of many feet. There were no fields or gardens about the city; the grass waved to the foot of the walls. All during that long march across the plain to the gates, I saw nothing resembling a human being. But as I came under the shadow of the great gate, which was flanked on either hand by a massive tower, I caught a glimpse of tousled black heads moving along the squat battlements. I halted and threw back my head to hail them. The sun had just topped the towers and its glare was full in my eyes. Even as I opened my lips, there was a cracking report like a rifle shot, a jet of white smoke spurted from a tower, and a terrific impact against my head dashed me into unconsciousness.

When I came to my senses it was not slowly, but quickly and clear-headedly, what of my immense recuperative powers. I was lying on a bare stone floor in a large chamber, the walls, ceiling and floor of which were composed of huge blocks of green stone. From a barred window high up in one wall sunlight poured to illumine the room, which was without furnishing, except for a bench, crudely and massively built.

A heavy chain was looped about my waist and made fast with a strange, heavy lock. The other end of the chain was fastened to a thick ring set in the wall. Everything about that fantastic city seemed massive.

Lifting a hand to my head, I found it was bandaged with something that felt like silk. My head throbbed. Evidently whatever missile it was that had been fired at me from the wall, had only grazed my head, inflicting a scalp wound and knocking me senseless. I felt for my poniard, but naturally it was gone.

I cursed heartily. When I had found myself on Almuric I had been appalled by my prospects; but then at least I had been free. Now I was in the hands of God only knew what manner of beings. All I knew was that they were hostile. But my inordinate self-confidence would not down, and I felt no great fear. I did feel a rush of panic, common to all wild things, at being confined and shackled, but I fought down this feeling, and it was succeeded by one of red unreasoning rage. Springing to my feet, which movement the chain was long enough to allow, I began jerking and tearing at my shackle.

IT WAS while engaged in this fruitless exhibition of primitive resentment that a slight noise caused me to wheel, snarling, my muscles tensed for attack or defense. What I saw froze me in my tracks.

Just within the doorway stood a girl. Except in her garments she differed little from the type of girls I had known on Earth, except that her slim figure exhibited a suppleness superior to theirs. Her hair was intensely black, her skin white as alabaster. Her lissome limbs were barely concealed by a light, tunic-like garment, sleeveless, low-necked, revealing the greater part of her ivory breasts. This garment was girdled at her lithe waist, and came to within a few inches above her knees. Soft sandals encased her slender feet. She was standing in an attitude of awed fascination, her dark eyes wide, her crimson lips parted. As I wheeled and glared at her she gave back with a quick gasp of surprise or fear, and fled lightly from the chamber.

I stared after her. If she were typical of the people of the city, then surely the effect produced by the brutish masonry

was an illusion, for she seemed the product of some gentle and refined civilization, allowing for a certain barbaric suggestion about her costume.

While so musing, I heard the tramp of feet, harsh voices were lifted in argument, and the next instant a group of men strode into the chamber, halting as they saw me conscious and on my feet. Still thinking of the girl, I glared at them in surprise. They were of the same type as the others I had seen, huge, hairy, ferocious, with the same ape-like forward-thrust heads and formidable faces. Some, I noticed, were darker than others, but all were dark and fierce, and the whole effect was one of somber and ferocious savagery. They were instinct with ferocity; it blazed in their icy-gray eyes, reflected in the snarling lift of their bristling lips, rumbled in their rough voices.

All were armed, and their hands seemed instinctively to seek their hilts as they stood glaring at me, their shaggy heads thrust forward in their ape-like manner.

"Thak!" one exclaimed, or rather roared —all their voices were as gusty as a sea wind—"he's conscious!"

"Do you suppose he can speak or understand human language?" rumbled another.

All this while I had stood glaring back at them, wondering anew at their speech. Now I realized that they were not speaking English.

The thing was so unnatural that it it gave me a shock. They were not speaking any Earthly language, and I realized it; yet I understood them, except for various words which apparently had no counterpart on Earth. I made no attempt to understand this seemingly impossible phenomenon, but answered the last speaker.

"I can speak and understand," I grunted. "Who are you? What city is this? Why did you attack me? Why am I in chains?"

They rumbled in amazement, with much tugging of mustaches, shaking of heads, and uncouth profanity.

"He talks, by Thak!" said one. "I tell you, he is from beyond the Girdle!"

"From beyond my hip!" broke in another rudely. "He is a freak, a damned, smooth-skinned degenerate misfit which should not have been born, or allowed to exist."

"Ask him how he came by the Bonecrusher's poniard," requested yet another.

At that one of them advanced, and, fixing me with a stern and accusing eye, held out a sheathed weapon which I recognized as my poniard.

"Did you steal this from Logar?" he demanded.

"I stole nothing!" I snapped, feeling like a wild beast being prodded through the bars of a cage by unfeeling and critical spectators. My rages, like all the emotions on that wild planet, were without restraint.

"I took that poniard from the man who carried it, and I took it in a fair fight," I added.

"Did you slay him?" they demanded unbelievingly.

"No," I growled. "We fought with our bare hands, until he tried to knife me. Then I knocked him senseless."

A ROAR greeted my words. I thought at first they were clamoring with rage; then I made out that they were arguing among themselves.

"I tell you, he lies!" one bull's bellow rose above the tumult. "We all know that Logar the Bonecrusher is not the man to be thrashed and stripped by a smooth-skinned hairless brown man like this. Ghor the Bear might be a match for Logar. No one else."

"Well, there's the poniard," someone pointed out.

The clamor rose again, and in an instant the disputants were yelling and cursing, and brandishing their hairy fists in one

another's faces, hands fumbled at sword-hilts, and challenges and defiances were exchanged freely.

I looked to see a general throat-cutting, but presently one who seemed in some authority drew his sword and began banging the hilt on the rude bench, at the same time drowning out the voices of the others with his bull-like bellowing.

"Shut up! Shut up! Let another man open his mouth and I'll split his head!" As the clamor subsided and the disputants glared venomously at him, he continued in a voice as calm as if nothing had occurred. "It's neither here nor there about the poniard. He might have caught Logar sleeping and brained him, or he might have stolen it, or found it. Are we Logar's brothers, that we should seek after his welfare?"

A general snarl answered this. Evidently the man called Logar was not popular among them.

"The question is, what shall we do with this creature? We've got to hold a council and decide. He's evidently uneatable." He grinned as he said this, which was apparently meant as a bit of grim humor.

"His hide would make good leather," suggested another in a tone that did not sound as though he was joking.

"Too soft," protested another.

"He didn't feel soft while we were carrying him in," returned the first speaker. "He was hard as steel springs."

"Tush," deprecated the other. "I'll show you how tender his flesh is. Watch me slice off a few strips." He drew his dagger and approached me while the others watched with interest.

All this time my rage had been growing, until the chamber seemed to swim in a red mist. Now, as I realized that the fellow really intended trying the edge of his steel on my skin I went berserk. Wheeling, I gripped the chain with both hands, wrapping it around my wrists for more leverage. Then, bracing my feet against the floor and walls I began to strain with all my strength. All over my body the great muscles coiled and knotted; sweat broke out on my skin, and then with a shattering crash the stone gave way, the iron ring was torn out bodily, and I was catapulted on my back onto the floor, at the feet of my captors who roared with amazement and fell on me *en masse*.

I ANSWERED their bellows with one strident yell of bloodthirsty gratification, and heaving up through the mêlée, began swinging my heavy fists like caulking mallets. Oh, that was a rough-house while it lasted! They made no attempt to knife me, striving to swamp me with numbers. We rolled from one side of the chamber to the other, a gasping, thrashing, cursing, hammering mass, while with the yells, howls, earnest profanity, and impact of heavy bodies, it was a perfect bedlam. Once I seemed to catch a fleeting glimpse of the door thronged with the heads of women similar to the one I had seen, but I could not be sure: my teeth were set in a hairy ear, my eyes were full of sweat and stars from a vicious punch on the nose, and what with a gang of heavy forms romping all over me my sight was none too good.

Yet I gave a good account of myself. Ears split, noses crumpled and teeth splintered under the crushing impact of my iron-hard fists, and the yells of the wounded were music to my battered ears. But that damnable chain about my waist kept tripping me and coiling about my legs, and pretty soon the bandage was ripped from my head, my scalp wound opened anew and deluged me with blood Blinded by this I floundered and stumbled, and gasping and panting they bore me down and bound my arms and legs.

The survivors then fell away from me and lay or sat in positions of pain and

exhaustion while I, finding my voice, cursed them luridly. I derived ferocious satisfaction at the sight of all the bloody noses, black eyes, torn ears and smashed teeth which were in evidence, and barked in vicious laughter when one announced with many curses that his arm was broken. One of them was out cold, and had to be revived, which they did by dumping over him a vessel of cold water that was fetched by someone I could not see from where I lay. I had an idea that it was a woman who came in answer to a harsh roar of command.

"His wound is open again," said one, pointing at me. "He'll bleed to death."

"I hope he does," snarled another, lying doubled up on the floor. "He's burst my belly. I'm dying. Get me some wine."

"If you're dying you don't need wine," brutally answered the one who seemed a chief, as he spat out bits of splintered teeth. "Tie up his wound, Akra."

Akra limped over to me with no great enthusiasm and bent down.

"Hold your damnable head still," he growled.

"Keep off!" I snarled. "I'll have nothing from you. Touch me at your peril."

He exasperatedly grabbed my face in his broad hand and shoved me violently down. That was a mistake. My jaws locked on his thumb, evoking an ear-splitting howl, and it was only with the aid of his comrades that he extricated the mangled member. Maddened by the pain, he howled wordlessly, then suddenly gave me a terrific kick in the temple, driving my wounded head with great violence back against the massive bench leg. Once again I lost consciousness.

When I came to myself again I was once more bandaged, shackled by the wrists and ankles, and made fast to a fresh ring, newly set in the stone, and apparently more firmly fixed than the other had been. It was night. Through the window I glimpsed the star-dotted sky. A torch which burned with a peculiar white flame was thrust into a niche in the wall, and a man sat on the bench, elbows on knees and chin on fists, regarding me intently. On the bench near him stood a huge gold vessel.

"I doubted if you'd come to after that last crack," he said at last.

"It would take more than that to finish me," I snarled. "You are a pack of cursed weaklings. But for my wound and that infernal chain, I'd have bested the whole mob of you."

My insults seemed to interest rather than anger him. He absently fingered a large bump on his head on which blood was thickly clotted, and asked: "Who are you? Whence do you come?"

"None of your business," I snapped.

He shrugged his shoulders, and lifting the vessel in one hand drew his dagger with the other.

"In Koth none goes hungry," he said. "I'm going to place this food near your hand and you can eat. But I warn you, if you try to strike or bite me, I'll stab you."

I merely snarled truculently, and he bent and set down the bowl, hastily withdrawing. I found the food to be a kind of stew, satisfying both thirst and hunger. Having eaten I felt in somewhat better mood, and upon my guard renewing his questions, I answered: "My name is Esau Cairn. I am an American, from the planet Earth."

He mulled over my statements for a space, then asked: "Are these places beyond the Girdle?"

"I don't understand you," I answered.

He shook his head. "Nor I you. But if you do not know of the Girdle, you cannot be from beyond it. Doubtless it is all fable, anyway. But whence did you come when we saw you approaching across the plain? Was that your fire we glimpsed from the towers last night?"

"I suppose so," I replied. "For many months I have lived in the hills to the west. It was only a few weeks ago that I descended into the plains."

He started and stared at me.

"In the hills? Alone, and with only a poniard?"

"Well, what about it?" I demanded.

HE SHOOK his head as if in doubt or wonder. "A few hours ago I would have called you a liar. Now I am not sure."

"What is the name of this city?" I asked.

"Koth, of the Kothan tribe. Our chief is Khossuth Skullsplitter. I am Thab the Swift. I am detailed to guard you while the warriors hold council."

"What's the nature of their council?" I inquired.

"They discuss what shall be done with you; and they have been arguing since sunset, and are no nearer a solution than before."

"What is their disagreement?"

"Well," he answered. "Some want to hang you, and some want to shoot you."

"I don't suppose it's occurred to them that they might let me go," I suggested with some bitterness.

He gave me a cold look. "Don't be a fool," he said reprovingly.

At that moment a light step sounded outside, and the girl I had seen before tiptoed into the chamber. Thab eyed her disapprovingly.

"What are you doing here, Altha?" he demanded.

"I came to look again at the stranger," she answered in a soft musical voice. "I never saw a man like him. His skin is nearly as smooth as mine, and he has no hair on his countenance. How strange are his eyes! Whence does he come?"

"From the Hills, he says," grunted Thab.

Her eyes widened. "Why, none dwells in the Hills, except wild beasts! Can it be that he is some sort of animal? They say he speaks and understands speech."

"So he does," growled Thab, fingering his bruises. "He also knocks out men's brains with his naked fists, which are harder and heavier than maces. Get away from there.

He's a rampaging devil. If he gets his hands on you he won't leave enough of you for the vultures to pick."

"I won't get near him," she assured him. "But, Thab, he does not look so terrible. See, there is no anger in the gaze he fixes on me. What will be done with him?"

"The tribe will decide," he answered. "Probably let him fight a sabertooth leopard bare-handed."

She clasped her own hands with more human feeling than I had yet seen shown on Almuric.

"Oh, Thab, why? He has done no harm; he came alone and with empty hands. The warriors shot him down without warning—and now——"

He glanced at her in irritation. "If I told your father you were pleading for a captive——"

Evidently the threat carried weight. She visibly wilted.

"Don't tell him," she pleaded. Then she flared up again. "Whatever you say, it's beastly! If my father whips me until the blood runs over my heels, I'll still say so!"

And so saying, she ran quickly out of the chamber.

"Who is that girl?" I asked.

"Altha, the daughter of Zal the Thrower."

"Who's he?"

"One of those you battled so viciously a short time ago."

"You mean to tell me a girl like that is the daughter of a man like——" Words failed me.

"What's wrong with her?" he de-

manded. "She differs none from the rest of our women."

"You mean all the women look like her, and all the men like you?"

"Certainly—allowing for their indiv'dual characteristics. Is it otherwise among your people? That is, if you are not a solitary freak."

"Well, I'll be——" I began in bewilderment, when another warrior appeared at the door, saying, "I'm to relieve you, Thab. The warriors have decided to leave the matter to Khossuth when he returns on the morrow."

Thab departed and the other seated himself on the bench. I made no attempt to talk to him. My head was swimming with the contradictory phenomena I had heard and observed, and I felt the need of sleep. I soon sank into dreamless slumber.

Doubtless my wits were still addled from the battering I had received. Otherwise I would have snapped awake when I felt something touch my hair. As it was, I woke only partly. From under drooping lids I glimpsed, as in a dream, a girlish face bent close to mine, dark eyes wide with frightened fascination, red lips parted. The fragrance of her foamy black hair was in my nostrils. She timidly touched my face, then drew back with a quick soft intake of breath, as if frightened by her action. The guard snored on the bench. The torch had burned to a stub that cast a weird dull glow over the chamber. Outside, the moon had set. This much I vaguely realized before I sank back into slumber again, to be haunted by a dim beautiful face that shimmered through my dreams.

## 3

I AWOKE again in the cold gray light of dawn, at a time when the condemned meet their executioners. A group of men stood over me, and one I knew was Khossuth the Skullsplitter.

He was taller than most, and leaner—almost gaunt in comparison to the others. This circumstance made his broad shoulders seem abnormally huge. His face and body were seamed with old scars. He was very dark, and apparently old; an impressive and terrible image of somber savagery.

He stood looking down at me, fingering the hilt of his great sword. His gaze was gloomy and detached.

"They say you claim to have beaten Logar of Thugra in open fight," he said at last, and his voice was cavernous and ghostly in a manner I cannot describe.

I did not reply, but lay staring up at him, partly in fascination at his strange and menacing appearance, partly in the anger that seemed generally to be with me during those times.

"Why do you not answer?" he rumbled.

"Because I'm weary of being called a liar," I snarled.

"Why did you come to Koth?"

"Because I was tired of living alone among wild beasts. I was a fool. I thought I would find human beings whose company was preferable to the leopards and baboons. I find I was wrong."

He tugged his bristling mustaches.

"Men say you fight like a mad leopard. Thab says that you did not come to the gates as an enemy comes. I love brave men. But what can we do? If we free you, you will hate us because of what has passed, and your hate is not lightly to be loosed."

"Why not take me into the tribe?" I remarked, at random.

He shook his head. "We are not Yagas, to keep slaves."

"Nor am I a slave," I grunted. "Let me live among you as an equal. I will hunt and fight with you. I am as good a man as any of your warriors."

At this another pushed past Khossuth. This fellow was bigger than any I had yet

seen in Koth—not taller, but broader, more massive. His hair was thicker on his limbs, and of a peculiar rusty cast instead of black.

"That you must prove!" he roared, with an oath. "Loose him, Khossuth! The warriors have been praising his power until my belly revolts! Loose him and let us have a grapple!"

"The man is wounded, Ghor," answered Khossuth.

"Then let him be cared for until his wound is healed," urged the warrior eagerly, spreading his arms in a curious grappling gesture.

"His fists are like hammers," warned another.

"Thak's devils!" roared Ghor, his eyes glaring, his hairy arms brandished. "Admit him into the tribe, Khossuth! Let him endure the test! If he survives—well, by Thak, he'll be worthy even to be called a man of Koth!"

"I will go and think upon the matter," answered Khossuth after a long deliberation.

That settled the matter for the time being. All trooped out after him. Thab was last, and at the door he turned and made a gesture which I took to be one of encouragement. These strange people seemed not entirely without feelings of pity and friendship.

THE day passed uneventfully. Thab did not return. Other warriors brought me food and drink, and I allowed them to bandage my scalp. With more human treatment the wild beast fury in me had been subordinated to my human reason. But that fury lurked close to the surface of my soul, ready to blaze into ferocious life at the slightest encroachment.

I did not see the girl Altha, though I heard light footsteps outside the chamber several times, whether hers or another's I could not know.

About nightfall a group of warriors came into the room and announced that I was to be taken to the council, where Khossuth would listen to all arguments and decide my fate. I was surprised to learn that arguments would be presented on my behalf. They got my promise not to attack them, and loosed me from the chain that bound me to the wall, but they did not remove the shackles on my wrists and ankles.

I was escorted out of the chamber into a vast hall, lighted by the white fire torches. There were no hangings or furnishings, nor any sort of ornamentation—just an almost oppressive sense of massive architecture.

We traversed several halls, all equally huge and windy, with rugged walls and lofty ceilings, and came at last into a vast circular space, roofed with a dome. Against the back wall a stone throne stood on a block-like dais, and on the throne sat old Khossuth in gloomy majesty, clad in a spotted leopardskin. Before him in a vast three-quarters circle sat the tribe, the men cross-legged on skins spread on the stone floor, and behind them the women and children seated on fur-covered benches.

It was a strange concourse. The contrast was startling between the hairy males and the slender, white-skinned, dainty women. The men were clad in loin-cloths and high-strapped sandals; some had thrown pantherskins over their massive shoulders. The women were dressed similar to the girl Altha, whom I saw sitting with the others. They wore soft sandals or none, and scanty tunics girdled about their waists. That was all. The difference of the sexes was carried out down to the smallest babies. The girl children were quiet, dainty and pretty. The young males looked even more like monkeys than did their elders.

I was told to take my seat on a block of stone in front and somewhat to the side of the dais. Sitting among the warriors I saw

Ghor, squirming impatiently as he unconsciously flexed his thick biceps.

As soon as I had taken my seat, the proceedings went forward. Khossuth simply announced that he would hear the arguments, and pointed out a man to represent me, at which I was again surprised, but this apparently was a regular custom among these people. The man chosen was the lesser chief who had commanded the warriors I had battled in the cell, and they called him Gutchluk Tigerwrath. He eyed me venomously as he limped forward with no great enthusiasm, bearing the marks of our encounter.

He laid his sword and dagger on the dais, and the foremost warriors did likewise. Then he glared at the rest truculently, and Khossuth called for arguments to show why Esau Cairn—he made a marvelous jumble of the pronunciation—should not be taken into the tribe.

Apparently the reasons were legion. Half a dozen warriors sprang up and began shouting at the top of their voice, while Gutchluk dutifully strove to answer them. I felt already doomed. But the game was not played out, or even well begun. At first Gutchluk went at it only half-heartedly, but opposition heated him to his task. His eyes blazed, his jaw jutted, and he began to roar and bellow with the best of them. From the arguments he presented, or rather thundered, one would have thought he and I were lifelong friends.

No particular person was designated to protest against me. Everybody who wished took a hand. And if Gutchluk won over anyone, that person joined his voice to Gutchluk's. Already there were men on my side. Thab's shout and Ghor's bellow vied with my attorney's roar, and soon others took up my defense.

THAT debate is impossible for an Earth man to conceive of, without having witnessed it. It was sheer bedlam, with from three voices to five hundred voices clamoring at once. How Khossuth sifted any sense out of it, I cannot even guess. But he brooded somberly above the tumult, like a grim god over the paltry aspirations of mankind.

There was wisdom in the discarding of weapons. Dispute frequently became biting, and criticisms of ancestors and personal habits entered into it. Hands clutched at empty belts and mustaches bristled belligerently. Occasionally Khossuth lifted his weird voice across the clamor and restored a semblance of order.

My attempts to follow the arguments were vain. My opponents went into matters seemingly utterly irrelevant, and were met by rebuttals just as illogical. Authorities of antiquity were dragged out, to be refuted by records equally musty.

To further complicate matters, disputants frequently snared themselves in their own arguments, or forgot which side they were on, and found themselves raging frenziedly on the other. There seemed no end to the debate, and no limit to the endurance of the debaters. At midnight they were still yelling as loudly, and shaking their fists in one another's beards as violently as ever.

The women took no part in the arguments.

They began to glide away about midnight, with the children. Finally only one small figure was left among the benches. It was Altha, who was following—or trying to follow—the proceedings with a surprising interest.

I had long since given up the attempt. Gutchluk was holding the floor valiantly, his veins swelling and his hair and beard bristling with his exertions. Ghor was actually weeping with rage and begging Khossuth to let him break a few necks. Oh, that he had lived to see the men of Koth become adders and snakes, with the hearts of buzzards and the guts of toads!

he bawled, brandishing his huge arms to high heaven.

It was all a senseless madhouse to me. Finally, in spite of the clamor, and the fact that my life was being weighed in the balance, I fell asleep on my block and snored peacefully while the men of Koth raged and pounded their hairy breasts and bellowed, and the strange planet of Almuric whirled on its way under the stars that neither knew nor cared for men, Earthly or otherwise.

It was dawn when Thab shook me awake and shouted in my ear: "We have won! You enter the tribe, if you'll wrestle Ghor!"

"I'll break his back!" I grunted, and went back to sleep again.

## 4

SO BEGAN my life as a man among men on Almuric. I who had begun my new life as a naked savage, now took the next step on the ladder of evolution and became a barbarian. For the men of Koth were barbarians, for all their silks and steel and stone towers. Their counterpart is not on Earth today, nor has it ever been. But of that later. Let me tell first of my battle with Ghor the Bear.

My chains were removed and I was taken to a stone tower on the wall, there to dwell until my wounds had healed. I was still a prisoner. Food and drink were brought me regularly by the tribesmen, who also tended carefully to my wounds, which were unimportant, considering the hurts I had had from wild beasts, and had recovered from unaided. But they wished me to be in prime condition for the wrestling, which was to decide whether I should be admitted into the tribe of Koth, or—well, from what they said of Ghor, if I lost there would be no problem as to my disposition. The wolves and vultures would take care of that.

Their manner toward me was noncommittal, with the exception of Thab the Swift, who was frankly cordial to me. I saw neither Khossuth, Ghor, nor Gutchluk during the time I was imprisoned in the tower, nor did I see the girl Altha.

I do not remember a more tedious and wearisome time. I was not nervous because of any fear of Ghor; I frankly doubted my ability to beat him, but I had risked my life so often and against such fearful odds, that personal fear had been stamped out of my soul. But for months I had lived like a mountain panther, and now to be caged up in a stone tower, where my movements were limited, bounded and restricted—it was intolerable, and if I had been forced to put up with it a day longer, I would have lost control of myself, and either fought my way to freedom or perished in the attempt. As it was, all the constrained energy in me was pent up almost to the snapping-point, giving me a terrific store of nervous power which stood me in good stead in my battle.

There is no man on Earth equal in sheer strength to any man of Koth. They lived barbaric lives, filled with continuous peril and warfare against foes human and bestial. But after all, they lived the lives of men, and I had been living the life of a wild beast.

As I paced my tower chamber, I thought of a certain great wrestling champion of Europe with whom I had once contested in a friendly private bout, and who pronounced me the strongest man he had ever encountered. Could he have seen me now, in the tower of Koth! I am certain that I could have torn out his biceps like rotten cloth, broken his spine across my knee, or caved in his breast-bone with my clenched fist; and as for speed, the most finely trained Earth athlete would have seemed awkward and sluggish in comparison to the tigerish quickness lurking in my rippling sinews.

Yet for all that, I knew that I would be strained to the uttermost even to hold my own with the giant they called Ghor the Bear. He did, indeed, resemble a shaggy rusty-hued cave-bear.

Thab the Swift narrated some of his triumphs to me, and such a record of personal mayhem I never heard; the man's progress through life was marked by broken limbs, backs and necks. No man had yet stood before him in barehanded battle, though some swore Logar the Bonecrusher was his equal.

Logar, I learned, was chief of Thugra, a city hostile to Koth. All cities on Almuric seemed to be hostile to each other, the people of the planet being divided into many small tribes, incessantly at war. The chief of Thugra was called the Bonecrusher because of his terrible strength. The poniard I had taken from him had been his favorite weapon, a famous blade, forged, Thab said, by a supernatural smith. Thab called this being a *gorka,* and I found in tales concerning the creature an analogy to the dwarfish metal-works of the ancient Germanic myths of my own world.

Thab told me much concerning his people and his planet, but of these things I will deal later. At last Khossuth came, found my wounds completely cured, eyed my bronzed sinews with a shadow of respect in his cold brooding eyes, and pronounced me fit for battle.

NIGHT had fallen when I was led into the streets of Koth. I looked with wonder at the giant walls towering above me, dwarfing their human inhabitants. Everything in Koth was built on a heroic scale. Neither the walls nor the edifices were unusually high, in comparison to their bulk, but they were so massive. My guides led me to a sort of amphitheater near the outer wall. It was an oval space surrounded by huge stone blocks, rising tier upon tier, and forming seats for the spectators. The open space in the center was hard ground, covered with short grass. A sort of bulwark was formed about it out of woven leather thongs, apparently to keep the contestants from dashing their heads against the surrounding stones. Torches lighted the scene.

The spectators were already there, the men occupying the lower blocks, the women and children the upper. My gaze roved over the sea of faces, hairy or smooth, until it rested on one I recognized, and I felt a strange throb of pleasure at the sight of Altha sitting there watching me with her intent dark eyes.

Thab indicated for me to enter the arena, and I did so, thinking of the old-time bare-knuckle bouts of my own planet, which were fought in crude rings pitched, like this, on the naked turf. Thab and the other warriors who had escorted me remained outside. Above us brooded old Khossuth on a carven stone elevated above the first tier, and covered with leopard-skins.

I glanced beyond him to that dusky star-filled sky whose strange beauty never failed to fascinate me, and I laughed at the fantasy of it all—where I, Esau Cairn, was to earn by sweat and blood my right to exist on this alien world, the existence of which was undreamed by the people of my own planet.

I saw a group of warriors approaching from the other side, a giant form looming among them. Ghor the Bear glared at me across the ring, his hairy paws grasping the thongs, then with a roar he vaulted over them and stood before me, an image of truculence incarnate—angry because I had chanced to reach the ring before him.

On his rude throne above us, old Khossuth lifted a spear and cast it earthward. Our eyes followed its flight, and as it sheathed its shining blade in the turf outside the ring, we hurled ourselves at each other, iron masses of bone and thew, vi-

brant with fierce life and the lust to destroy.

We were each naked except for a sort of leather loin-clout, which was more brace than garment. The rules of the match were simple; we were not to strike with our fists or open hands, knees or elbows, kick, bite or gouge. Outside of that, anything went.

At the first impact of his hairy body against mine, I realized that Ghor was stronger than Logar. Without my best natural weapons—my fists—Ghor had the advantage.

He was a hairy mountain of iron muscle, and he moved with the quickness of a huge cat. Accustomed to such fighting, he knew tricks of which I was ignorant. Lastly, his bullet head was set so squarely on his shoulders that it was practically impossible to strangle that thick squat neck of his.

What saved me was the wild life I had lived which had toughened me as no man, living as a man, can be toughened. Mine was the superior quickness, and ultimately, the superior endurance.

There is little to be said of that fight. Time ceased to be composed of intervals of change, and merged into a blind mist of tearing, snarling eternity. There was no sound except our panting gasps, the guttering of the torches in the light wind, and the impact of our feet on the turf, of our hard bodies against each other. We were too evenly matched for either to gain a quick advantage. There was no pinning of shoulders, as in an Earthly wrestling match. The fight would continue until one or both of the contestants were dead or senseless.

When I think of our endurance and stamina, I stand appalled. At midnight we were still rending and tearing at each other. The whole world was swimming red when I broke free out of a murderous grapple. My whole frame was a throb of wrenched, twisted agony. Some of my muscles were numbed and useless. Blood poured from my nose and mouth. I was half blind and dizzy from the impact of my head against the hard earth. My legs trembled and my breath came in great gulps. But I saw that Ghor was in no better case. He too bled at the nose and mouth, and more, blood trickled from his ears. He reeled as he faced me, and his hairy chest heaved spasmodically. He spat out a mouthful of blood, and with a roar that was more a gasp, he hurled himself at me again. And steeling my ebbing strength for one last effort, I caught his outstretched wrist, wheeled, ducking low and bringing his arm over my shoulder, and heaved with all my last ounce of power.

THE impetus of his rush helped my throw. He whirled headlong over my back and crashed to the turf on his neck and shoulder, slumped over and lay still. An instant I stood swaying above him, while a sudden deep-throated roar rose from the people of Koth, and then a rush of darkness blotted out the stars and the flickering torches, and I fell senseless across the still body of my antagonist.

Later they told me that they thought both Ghor and I were dead. They worked over us for hours. How our hearts resisted the terrible strain of our exertions is a matter of wonder to me. Men said it was by far the longest fight ever waged in the arena.

Ghor was badly hurt, even for a Kothan. That last fall had broken his shoulder-bone and fractured his skull, to say nothing of the minor injuries he had received before the climax. Three of my ribs were broken, and my joints, limbs and muscles so twisted and wrenched that for days I was unable even to rise from my couch. The men of Koth treated our wounds and bruises with all their skill, which far transcends that of the Earth; but in the main it was our remarkable primitive vitality that put us back on our feet. When a creature

of the wild is wounded, he generally either dies quickly or recovers quickly.

I asked Thab if Ghor would hate me for his defeat, and Thab was at a loss; Ghor had never been defeated before.

But my mind was soon put at rest on this score. Seven brawny warriors entered the chamber in which I had been placed, bearing a litter on which lay my late foe, wrapped in so many bandages he was scarcely recognizable. But his bellowing voice was familiar. He had forced his friends to bring him to see me as soon as he was able to stir on his couch. He held no malice. In his great, simple, primitive heart there was only admiration for the man who had given him his first defeat. He recounted our Homeric struggle with a gusto that made the roof reverberate, and roared his impatient eagerness for us to fare forth and do battle together against the foes of Koth.

He was borne back to his own chamber, still bellowing his admiration and gory plans for the future, and I experienced a warm glow in my heart for this great-hearted child of nature, who was far more of a man than many sophisticated scions of civilization that I had met.

And so I, Esau Cairn, took the step from savagery to barbarism. In the vast domed council hall before the assembled tribesmen, as soon as I was able, I stood before the throne of Khossuth Skullsplitter, and he cut the mysterious symbol of Koth above my head with his sword. Then with his own hands he buckled on me the harness of a warrior—the broad leather belt with the iron buckle, supporting my poniard and a long straight sword with a broad silver guard. Then the warriors filed past me, and each chief placed his palm against mine, and spoke his name, and I repeated it, and he repeated the name they had given me: Ironhand. That part was most wearisome, for there were some four thousand warriors, and four hundred of these were chiefs of various rank. But it was part of the ritual of initiation, and when it was over I was as much a Kothan as if I had been born into the tribe.

In the tower chamber, pacing like a caged tiger while Thab talked, and later as a member of the tribe, I learned all that the people of Koth knew of their strange planet.

They and their kind, they said, were the only true humans on Almuric, though there was a mysterious race of beings dwelling far to the south called Yagas. The Kothans called themselves Guras, which applied to all cast in their mold, and meant no more than "man" does on Earth. There were many tribes of Guras, each dwelling in its separate city, each of which was a counterpart of Koth. No tribe numbered more than four or five thousand fighting-men, with the appropriate number of women and children.

NO MAN of Koth had ever circled the globe, but they ranged far in their hunts and raids, and legends had been handed down concerning their world—which, naturally, they called by a name simply corresponding to the word "Earth"; though after a while some of them took up my habit of speaking of the planet as Almuric. Far to the north there was a land of ice and snow, uninhabited by human beings, though men spoke of weird cries shuddering by night from the ice crags, and of shadows falling across the snow. A lesser distance to the south rose a barrier no man had ever passed—a gigantic wall of rock which legend said girdled the planet; it was called, therefore, the Girdle. What lay beyond that Girdle, none knew. Some believed it was the rim of the world, and beyond it lay only empty space. Others maintained that another hemisphere lay beyond it. They believed, as seemed to me most logical, that the Girdle separated the northern and southern halves of the world,

and that the southern hemisphere was inhabited by men and animals, though the exponents of this theory could give no proof, and were generally scoffed at as over-imaginative romanticists.

At any rate, the cities of the Guras dotted the vast expanse that lay between the Girdle and the land of ice. The northern hemisphere possessed no great body of water. There were rivers, great plains, a few scattered lakes, occasional stretches of dark, thick forests, long ranges of barren hills, and a few mountains. The larger rivers ran southward, to plunge into chasms in the Girdle.

The cities of the Guras were invariably built on the open plains, and always far apart. Their architecture was the result of the peculiar evolution of their builders—they were, basically, fortresses of rocks heaped up for defense. They reflected the nature of their builders, being rude, stalwart, massive, despising gaudy show and ornamentation, and knowing nothing of the arts.

In many ways the Guras are like the men of Earth, in other ways bafflingly different. Some of the lines on which they have evolved are so alien to Earthly evolution that I find it difficult to explain their ways and their development.

Specifically, Koth—and what is said of Koth can be said of every other Gura city: —the men of Koth are skilled in war, the hunt, and weapon-making. The latter science is taught each male child, but now seldom used. It is seldom found necessary to manufacture new arms, because of the durability of the material used. Weapons are handed down from generation to generation, or captured from enemies.

Metal is used only for weapons, in building, and for clasps and buckles on garments. No ornaments are worn, either by men or women, and there are no such things as coins. There is no medium of exchange. No trade between cities exists, and such "business" as goes on within the city is a matter of barter. The only cloth worn is a kind of silk, made from the fiber of a curious plant grown within the city walls. Other plants furnish wine, fruit, and seasonings. Fresh meat, the principal food of the Guras, is furnished by hunting, a pastime at once a sport and an occupation.

The folk of Koth, then, are highly skilled in metal-working, in silk-weaving, and in their peculiar form of agriculture. They have a written language, a simple hieroglyphic form, scrawled on leaves like papyrus, with a dagger-like pen dipped in the crimson juice of a curious blossom, but few except the chiefs can read or write. Literature they have none; they know nothing of painting, sculpturing, or the "higher" learning. They have evolved to the point of culture needful for the necessities of life, and they progress no further. Seemingly defying laws we on Earth have come to regard as immutable, they remain stationary, neither advancing nor retrogressing.

Like most barbaric people, they have a form of rude poetry, dealing almost exclusively with battle, mayhem and rapine. They have no bards or minstrels, but every man of the tribe knows the popular ballads of his clan, and after a few jacks of ale is prone to bellow them forth in a voice fit to burst one's ear-drums.

These songs are never written down, and there is no written history. As a result, events of antiquity are hazy, and mixed with improbable legends.

No one knows how old is the city of Koth. Its gigantic stones are impervious to the elements, and might have stood there ten years or ten thousand years. I am of the opinion that the city is at least fifteen thousand years old. The Guras are an ancient race, in spite of their exuberant barbarism which gives them the atmosphere of a new young people. Of the evolution

of the race from whatever beast was their common ancestor, of their racial splittings off and tribal drifts, of their development to their present condition, nothing whatever is known. The Guras themselves have no idea of evolution. They suppose that, like eternity, their race is without beginning and without end, that they have always been exactly as they are now. They have no legends to explain their creation.

I HAVE devoted most of my remarks to the men of Koth. The women of Koth are no less worthy of detailed comment. I found the difference in the appearance of the sexes not so inexplicable after all. It is simply the result of natural evolution, and its roots lie in a fierce tenderness on the part of the Gura males for their women. It was to protect their women that they first, I am certain, built those brutish heaps of stone and dwelt among them; for the innate nature of the Gura male is definitely nomadic.

The women, carefully guarded and shielded both from danger and from the hard work that is the natural portion of the women of Earthly barbarians, evolved by natural processes into the type I have described. The men, on the other hand, lead incredibly active and strenuous lives. Their existence has been a savage battle for survival, ever since the first ape stood upright on Almuric. And they have evolved into a special type to fit their needs. Their peculiar appearance is not a result of degeneration or under-development. They are, indeed, a highly specialized type, finely adapted to the wild life they follow.

As the men assume all risks and responsibility, they naturally assume all authority. The Gura woman has no say whatever in the government of the city and tribe, and her mate's authority over her is absolute, with the exception that she has the right to appeal to the council and chief in case of oppression. Her scope is narrow; few women ever set foot outside the city in which they are born, unless they are carried off in a raid.

Yet her lot is not so unhappy as it might seem. I have said that one of the characteristics of the Gura male is a savage tenderness for his women. Mistreatment of a woman is very rare, not tolerated by the tribe.

Monogamy is the rule. The Guras are not given to hand-kissing and pretty compliments, and the other superficial adjuncts of chivalry, but there is justice and a rough kindness in their dealing with women, somewhat similar to the attitude of the American frontiersman.

The duties of the Gura women are few, concerned mainly with child-bearing and child-rearing. They do no work heavier than the manufacturing of silk from the silk plants. They are musically inclined, and play on a small, stringed affair, resembling a lute, and they sing. They are quicker-witted, and of much more sensitive mind than the men. They are witty, merry, affectionate, playful and docile. They have their own amusements, and time does not seem to drag for them. The average woman could not be persuaded to set foot outside the city walls. They well know the perils that hem the cities in, and they are content in the protection of their ferocious mates and masters.

The men are, as I have said, in many ways like barbaric peoples on Earth. In some respects they resemble, I imagine, the ancient Vikings. They are honest, scorning theft and deceit. They delight in war and the hunt, but are not wantonly cruel, except when maddened by rage or bloodlust. Then they can be screaming fiends. They are blunt in speech, rough in their manners, easily angered, but as easily pacified, except when confronted by an hereditary enemy. They have a definite, though crude, sense of humor, a ferocious love for

tribe and city, and a passion for personal freedom.

Their weapons consist of swords, daggers, spears, and a firearm something like a carbine — a single-shot, breech-loading weapon of no great range, but deadly and accurate within its range. The combustible material is not powder, as we know it. Its counterpart is not found on Earth. It possesses both percussion and explosive qualities. The bullet is of a substance much like lead. These weapons were used mainly in war with men; for hunting, bows and arrows were most often used.

Hunting-parties are always going forth, so that the full force of warriors is seldom in the city at once. Hunters are often gone for weeks or months. But there are always a thousand fighting-men in the city to repel possible attack, though it is not often that the Guras lay siege to a hostile city. Those cities are difficult to storm, and it is impossible to starve out the inhabitants, since they produce so much of their food supply within the walls, and in each city is an unfailing spring of pure water. The hunters frequently sought their prey in the Hills which I had haunted, and which were reputed to contain more and varied forms of ferocious bestial life than any other section of the globe. The boldest hunters went in strong parties to the Hills, and seldom roamed there more than a few days. The fact that I had lived among the Hills alone for months won me even more respect and admiration among those wild fighting-men than had my fight with Ghor.

OH, I learned much of Almuric. As this is a chronicle and not an essay, I can scarcely skim the surface of customs, ways and traditions. I learned all they could tell me, and I learned much more. The Guras were not first on Almuric, though they considered themselves to be. They told me of ancient ruins, never built by Guras, relics of vanished races, who, they supposed, were contemporary with their distant ancestors, but which, as I came to learn, had risen and vanished awfully before the first Gura began to heap up stones to build his primordial city. And how I learned what no Gura knew, is part of this strange narrative.

But they spoke of strange unhuman beings or survivals. They told me of the Yagas, a terrible race of winged black men, dwelling far to the south, within sight of the Girdle, in the grim city of Yugga, on the rock Yuthla, by the river Yogh, in the land of Yagg, where living man had never set foot. The Yagas, the Guras said, were not true men, but devils in a human form. From Yugga they swooped periodically, bearing the sword of slaughter and the torch of destruction, to carry young Gura girls into a slavery the manner of which none knew, because none had ever escaped from the land of Yagg. Some men thought that they were fed to a monster worshiped by the Yagas as a god, though some swore that the fiends worshiped nothing except themselves. This was known: their ruler was a black queen, named Yasmeena, and for more than a thousand years she had reigned on the grim rock of Yuthla, her shadow falling across the world to make men shudder.

The Guras told me other things, things weird and terrible: of dog-headed monstrosities skulking beneath the ruins of nameless cities; of earth-shaking colossals stalking through the night; of fires flitting like flaming bats through the shadowy skies; of things that haunted midnight forests, crawling, squamous things that were never seen, but which tracked men down in the dank depths. They told me of great bats whose laughter drove men mad, and of gaunt shapes shambling hideously through the dusk of the hills. They told me of such things as do not even haunt the dreams of men on my native planet. For Life has taken strange shapes on Almuric,

and natural Life is not the only Life there.

But the nightmares told to me and the nightmares seen by me unfold in their place, and I have already lingered too long in my narrative. Be patient a little, because events move swiftly on Almuric, and my chronicle moves no less swiftly when well under way.

For months I dwelt in Koth, fitting into the life of hunting, feasting, ale-guzzling, and brawling, as if I had been born into it. There life was not restrained and bound down, as it is on Earth. As yet no tribal war had tested my powers, but there was fighting enough in the city with naked hands, in friendly bouts, and drunken brawls, when the fighting-men dashed down their foaming jacks and bellowed their challenges across the ale-stained boards. I revelled in my new existence. Here, as in the Hills, I threw my full powers unleashed into life; and here, unlike as in the Hills, I had human companionship, of a sort that suited my particular make-up. I felt no need of art, literature or intellectuality; I hunted, I gorged, I guzzled, I fought; I spread my massive arms and clutched at life like a glutton. And in my brawling and revelling I all but forgot the slender figure which had sat so patiently in the council chamber beneath the great dome.

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# *The* Dead Host's Welcome

By JOHN FLETCHER

'Tis late and cold; stir up the fire;
Sit close and draw the table nigher;
Be merry, and drink wine that's old,
A hearty medicine 'gainst a cold:
Your beds of wanton down the best,
Where you shall tumble to your rest;
I could wish you wenches too,
But I am dead, and cannot do.
Call for the best the house may ring;
Sack, white, and claret, let them bring,
And drink apace, while breath you have;
You'll find but cold drink in the grave:
Plover, partridge for your dinner,
And a capon for the sinner,
You shall find ready when you're up,
And your horse shall have his sup:
Welcome, welcome, shall fly round,
And I shall smile, though under ground.


"You are going to die at this corner before the year is out."

# The Face at Death Corner

By PAUL ERNST

*Inexplicably, death after death occurred in traffic accidents at Death Corner, and a young reporter set out to find out why*

THE other of the two men who had been in the death car still lay on the reddened pavement at the corner of King and Altsheller Streets. On what was left of him rested a ten-ton coal truck with a front wheel off. It would be hours before that immense bulk was jacked up and the draggled wisp of exhumanity removed.

This one, who had driven the car, lay in the emergency ward, raving in delirium, with a cover mercifully concealing his body. He was dying, and the hospital was doing nothing but administer drugs to dull his agony. After a glance at him, the head surgeon had shrugged and declared it was futile even to try to operate.

One dead man back at King and Altsheller under the tons of metal and coal! One dying man here! That was the fatal toll of the spot recently nicknamed Death Corner.

The dying man stared at and through me in his feeble delirium.

"The face!" he gasped out. "Oh, my God—*the face!*"

I leaned forward urgently. The nurse made as if to stop me, then shrugged as the surgeon had done. The man would die in a few minutes anyway.

"What face?" I said. "What face? Can't you tell me?"

The dying man did not hear. He was almost in another world.

"The face," he whispered, with a look in his starting eyes that made the nurse bite her lips till the blood almost came, in a wave of horror.

He sank back then, and his eyes closed.

"Dead?" I asked the nurse in a low tone.

She nodded, and sighed, a long, shuddering sigh like a sob.

"You were at that corner when this happened, weren't you?" she said.

I nodded, staring at the mask of terror which was the dead man's face.

"How in the world could it have happened?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I can tell you *what* happened: this man was crossing King Street in a hurry to beat the red light, and he ran his sedan head on into a coal truck hurrying from the opposite direction. But I can't tell you *how* it happened—because I can't figure that out myself."

"They ought to block that corner off, do something about it," said the nurse.

I made some absent-minded reply, and went to the hospital's registry desk. There, still absent-mindedly, I went through a newspaper reporter's routine in such cases. I got the man's name and address, as given by identifying papers in his pocket, and his occupation and business address as given by a business card. He was a Mr. Lincoln Abner, wholesaler in furniture.

I phoned the dope in to Morgan, city editor.

"Stick around that corner, Brennan," he said. "That's your assignment from now on, remember, till we make something out of this."

He didn't hint at the nature of the "something" I might possibly "make out of this," because he had no idea of what it might be, any more than I did. But I knew that he was as sure as I was that something peculiar *did* lie at the bottom of it.

Eleven dead within the past three weeks in traffic accidents at the corner of King and Altsheller Streets! No wonder it had suddenly come to be named Death Corner!

But what, I speculated as I went slowly back to the fatal spot, had suddenly inaugurated this reign of death? The intersection was a secondary one, with no more traffic on it than on dozens of others in the big city. Till recently it had had a modest sum of fatalities; perhaps two killed there a year, perhaps less than that.

Now, in three weeks—eleven had died!

Morgan had called me in two days ago. Before him were clippings, and a sheet of paper on which he had listed items.

"Bill," he said, "you brought in that last story of an accident at King and Altsheller, the one where the man and woman in the blue coupé were killed when they slammed into the nose of a speeding ambulance. Didn't it occur to you that there was something mighty funny about that corner lately?"

I admitted that it hadn't.

"It wouldn't occur to most of you guys to come in out of the rain, unless you had an important assignment that should take you out," Morgan growled. "Well, it occurred to *me* that it was queer. So I started checking facts. And the total is queerer yet."

HE ARRANGED the news clippings on his crowded desk.

"Until three weeks ago King and Alt-

sheller was just another corner. Then cars began plowing into each other, or running down pedestrians. Now—bingo! Nine dead!

"The first was an old woman, nameless and homeless as far as the police could find out, an old crone of no consequence. A drunk ran over her and she died half an hour later. The next was a motorcycle delivery boy named Freis, who smashed into the front of a dry-goods truck and broke his neck. Next were two men in a roadster who met a moving-van head on."

He went down the list of victims.

"Nine, Brennan. And in each accident several of the same sets of circumstances have cropped out."

He stared at me with a somber light in his eyes.

"Each accident has occurred between the hours of five and six in the afternoon. Each has happened for absolutely no reason at all: cars running into other cars or running over pedestrians as though the drivers had suddenly gone blind. And in each case . . . here's the oddest part . . . in each case, as reported by witnesses to the accident, the car driver seemed to be frightened of something just before he crashed. That might seem goofy, but on several of the dead faces, after the accidents, a look of terror was still stamped, which lends veracity to the witnesses' reports."

"Well?" I said, after a little silence.

"Well," snarled Morgan, "what do you want me to do—write your story for you? Get onto this. Stick around Altsheller and King and see what you can see. If there's another accident, trail along and try to find out something. Why would people at that corner suddenly look scared to death and then step blindly under the wheels of a truck, or otherwise die all over the pavement?"

So I had gone to King and Altsheller, and stuck around. For two days I'd been there, particularly from five to six in the afternoon.

The first day nothing whatever had happened, not so much as a crumpled fender. On this, the second, afternoon . . .

Altsheller and King, as has been said, is a secondary intersection. It hasn't the traffic crushes of some of the downtown streets. But traffic moves fast there. King is broad, with stop signs on all side streets running into it. Cars speed on it. When they come to Altsheller, which is a car-line street of normal size, they often crowd the traffic light there. They do this particularly because there aren't many pedestrians: the district is devoted more to business than to stores, with old three and four story buildings on all four corners; nothing to call forth large crowds.

On the second afternoon, when the thing happened that brought the total of fatalities at Death Corner from nine to eleven, there had been practically nothing moving along King Street but the two vehicles which crashed. I know because I saw the whole thing.

It was at ten minutes to six. The dying sun slanted down Altsheller Street's narrow canyon, gilding the corner of the old loft building on the southeast corner of the intersection. I lounged against that building, looking around for—I knew not what.

I saw the coal truck coming down King Street, from the south. It was coming fast; these huge trucks can go like the wind. The driver was evidently late on a delivery and thinking of dinner.

From the north came a small sedan with two men in the front seat. The fall day was warm. The sedan's driver had his window open, so that I could see his face with cameo clarity.

I saw these two rapidly moving things approach each other. I saw the traffic light change from green to yellow. And I saw both truck and sedan spurt forward to cross before the red showed.

The rest was as bewildering as it was horrible.

The driver of the sedan had been smiling, probably at something the other man said. And then, as his front wheels whirred past the curb line and onto the intersection, he turned his face from the road ahead. He looked in my direction. Indeed, I thought for a fraction of a second that he was looking at me, before I realized that his gaze went over my head.

The smile froze on his lips. Abruptly there came to his face such a look of horror that I felt the breath freeze in my throat. I'll swear I saw his eyes glaze, like the eyes of a man newly dead.

All this was a matter of a half-second. And then I shouted aloud, as did several other people near by—screamed to the man, and pointed ahead of him in warning.

The driver of the truck was half standing in his cab as he smashed down on his brake with all his power. He was hauling at the ponderous steering-wheel. But it was useless.

The sedan's driver had jerked his wheel a little to the left, in the direction of his horrified gaze. His light car was shooting straight toward the nose of the truck.

Time seemed to stand still in that hideous second; rather, it seemed to hang suspended on a hook of horror. Then the two rapidly moving masses of metal met head on.

I heard a scream that was perhaps from one of the doomed men in the sedan and perhaps from a bystander. I saw the white, appalled face of the truck driver. Then—the end.

The sedan was a mass of junk, half under the truck. One of the truck's big front wheels had cracked off with the crash, slamming the truck to the pavement.

The driver of the sedan lay thirty feet away, as still as though already dead. The man who had ridden beside him had been thrown forward through the windshield at the moment of impact and had somehow gotten under the truck when the ten-ton bulk carried the light sedan back along its tracks for a few yards. People were trying to avert their eyes from the body under the truck. . . .

I had followed the ambulance that bore the sedan driver to the emergency ward. And I had there heard the dying man's whisper, in accents of horror, of a "face."

What face? What in God's name had he been raving about? And why had he taken his eyes off the street and rammed straight into the coal truck?

Eleven killed on Death Corner through reasonless accidents! Had all felt terror freeze their blood while they took their glazed eyes from the road just long enough for motored death to overrun them? Had all seen—a "face"?

BACK at Death Corner, I found that the truck had been jacked up and the other body removed from under it. Men were working to clear the giant thing off the street. And I got to work myself.

I had one slight lead to go on: the direction in which the driver of the sedan had looked, with horror in his eyes, just before he hit the truck.

He had seemed to look right at me—but then I had got the impression that his gaze went over my head. And it was just after he looked that the glaze of terror had come to his eyes.

What in the world had he seen? And where had he seen it?

The latter question I set about trying to answer first.

I had been leaning against the corner of the building at the northeast corner of the intersection. And somewhere at that building the driver must have looked. I examined the front of it from across the street.

It was a three-story building, long past the point where it should have been torn

down to make room for a more modern structure. The first floor was occupied by business concerns. The second and third floors had windows so grimy that I could not tell if they were occupied or not.

I crossed over, found a door leading to a stairway, and went up to the second floor.

There was a corridor up there, and off it were doors with frosted glass panels. On some of the panels were traces of lettering, indicating that doctors' offices and small sales representatives' headquarters had once been here. But as far as I could see, none of the places was tenanted now.

I went down the corridor, opening first one door and then another. All the doors were unlocked; for the purpose, I suppose, of letting the building agent show prospective renters without bothering to get keys. Each office was dust-covered, long vacant. I went to the street window of each cubicle, and looked carefully at the floor under it, and at the dusty sills. Possibly the driver of the sedan had seen someone or something in one of these windows that had horrified him.

But office after office presented the same thing: unbroken dust layers all around the King Street windows, proving that no one had stood near them for many weeks.

All—but the last office.

I was about ready to conclude that none of the little offices was occupied when I came to that last one, in the King and Altsheller corner of the building. Then I saw that the door of this corner office was open. And I heard a stir of movement in there.

My heart began to thud in my throat. Someone up here after all! Perhaps the key to the mystery was about to be discovered.

But my thought died when a person backed out of the office and started to shut and fasten the door after her. An old woman, shabbily dressed, with gray hair stringing in wisps from under a hat so shapeless and drab that I can't remember now what it looked like; I can only remember that she did wear a hat.

She turned and saw me. She was older even than I had thought from seeing her bent back. At least eighty, I'd say. But there was a sort of strength in her wrinkled, ugly hag's face that relieved her age. Old she might be, and feeble, but she was not senile—not with that light of intelligence in her dim eyes, and the alertness of her manner as she saw me.

She straightened. "You wanted to see me, young man?" she cackled. "You need my services?"

I smiled a little at that.

"Your services?" I said.

"Yes. You would like to know your future?"

I tumbled then, of course. The crone, a fortune-teller, had picked up one of these empty offices cheap for her sucker business. I started to grin, then switched it off. The old woman's window looked down on the scene of the accident. She might be able to tell me a little about it, but she'd have to be pumped subtly. The angle of her long jaw, curving up a bit at the end toward her long, craggy nose, indicated obstinacy.

"Why, yes," I said, "I would like to have my fortune told. If you have the time——"

"I have all the time in the world," she said, smiling.

I almost shuddered at her smile. It creased her old face till it looked like a withered apple. And into the lines and creases crept a look of dark decay where the pigment under the ancient skin was bunched together. She had a wen the size of the end of my thumb on her left cheek, near her ear, that didn't help improve her appearance at all.

She turned to the door and opened it again. She waved me in. I entered, looking around.

There was a bare table in the center of the place, with a plain wooden chair on each side of it. The office had two windows, one on King Street and one on Altsheller. It was quite dim; the sun had set some time ago and only dusk lit the place; but she made no move to turn on the lights.

She sat on one of the chairs, and nodded for me to take the other one.

"Cards, or palm?" she said.

"Palm," I said, extending my hand.

She took it in her dry claw. I felt chilled by the contact. She stared at my palm. And I tried to get information.

"That was a bad accident that happened on this corner a little while ago," I said.

"The heart line runs straight across the palm," the crone mumbled. "Accident?"

"Yes. A sedan hit a truck, head on. Didn't you hear it, or look out and see the crowds afterward?"

"Oh, yes, I heard it. The heart line parallels the head line, save at the end."

"Both men were killed in the sedan," I said. "And no one can figure out why the man drove into the truck."

THE crone raised her head a little and looked at me in the dusk of the office. It was now so late that I could see her eyes only as dim, dark glints.

"No one can figure it out?" she droned.

"No. And no one can figure out why the other accidents happened at this corner. Except for the first one."

"The first one?" I repeated.

"Yes. The one in which a helpless old woman was run down by a drunken driver." The hag's voice quivered with anger. Old herself, she evidently felt enraged for the similar type of person who had met her death just outside because a driver had been criminally drunken and careless.

"Were you here when that happened?" I said.

She nodded. The repulsive wen on her left cheek seemed about to be engulfed by the loose folds of her ancient skin. "Yes, I was at this corner when it happened. Your emotions are ruled by your reason. You are calculating, a little selfish, and slow to anger——"

"I saw the accident this afternoon," I said. "Just before it occurred, a curious thing happened. The driver of the sedan looked toward this building, toward this very corner of it, and saw something. I don't know what it was, but it distracted his attention so that he didn't look where he was going."

The old woman stared at me.

"Did you come to have your future revealed, or to talk nonsense?" she said.

I shrugged.

"Frankly," I said, "I came to see if you could give me any information concerning this afternoon's accident, or any of the other accidents. Your windows look down on the scene of all of them."

She got up, dropping my hand. And that was one relief at least: the cessation of contact with her dry, chill skin.

"The first accident is all that concerns me. The murder—for that's what it was—of a harmless old person. The other deaths"—she shrugged—"are no more than deserved, to pay for that first one."

I started toward the door, but the old hag wasn't quite through yet.

"You lied when you said you wanted your future foretold," she spat at me. "But you shall hear anyway. You are going to die before the year is out—*at this corner!*"

I got out then, in a hurry. I'm a fairly young man, fairly muscular. She was a bent wisp of an old woman. But there was something in the febrile light of her dim eyes that frightened me. I was glad to get away.

However, I had discovered precisely nothing from following my lead. I hadn't found out what the sedan's driver looked

at, and I hadn't uncovered any least clue to his rambling talk of "the face."

I STARTED toward the office. There was one more thing I could do, I thought. That was—to undergo myself the conditions under which these mysterious accidents had occurred at Death Corner.

Morgan looked at me strangely when I suggested it.

"You want a car, and you want to drive across the intersection at King and Altsheller yourself?" he repeated.

I nodded. "Yes. Maybe I can find out that way what causes the accidents."

He fiddled with a pencil.

"Maybe you could," he said. "But maybe you wouldn't be able to tell anyone about it afterward."

He threw the pencil down.

"You damn fool! Everyone who has been in an accident at the corner has died as a result of it! You're a bum reporter, but at that you're more use to me alive than dead."

"Some of 'em haven't died," I pointed out. "The driver of the coal truck, for example——"

"From what you tell me," he pointed out, "the driver of the coal truck didn't see anything to horrify him, either. It's the people who see that, whatever it is, that die. So if you did accomplish what you set out to do, you wouldn't be writing any accounts of it later."

"Nuts!" I said, more confidently than I felt. I put from my mind the words of the old hag who had professed to foretell my future: *"You are going to die before the year is out—at this corner!"*

"Supply me a car," I urged. "Probably nothing at all will happen. But it's worth a try, anyway."

NEXT afternoon at a quarter of five, I drove slowly down King Street toward Altsheller. All the accidents had occurred between five and six. So I was getting there at a quarter of five to be sure and cover the time—if there was anything but coincidence in the hour of the accidents.

I planned to cruise back and forth across that intersection from a little before five to a little past six—and see if anything happened to me. In theory it was like holding a loaded gun to your head and pulling the trigger to see if the bullet would miss fire. In fact, I was able to laugh it off to some extent. Of course nothing would happen, particularly when I was on the alert for anything peculiar that might occur. None of the other drivers who had been killed here had been forewarned.

Duplicate all circumstances of the other accident, and see what happened. Well, I began.

I rolled to a stop at the red light, then started up and crossed Altsheller. . . .

I got across that intersection with my breath aching in my throat and with cold perspiration studding my forehead. I wouldn't have admitted it to a soul, because it sounded too crazy; but I was filled with foreboding. Something, I felt, was going to happen on this corner again today. And the words of the hag with the wen on her cheek rang in my ears: that I would die at this intersection before the year was out. Well, it was fall now. That didn't give me much time, I tried to tell myself jokingly. . . .

I turned at the next block, and came back. Again I drove across the intersection. . . .

I had made perhaps twenty trips back and forth over the crossing, sometimes swiftly with the green light, sometimes starting up after the red, when I thought for a moment I might have discovered the reason for the accidents.

The dying sun was slanting down Altsheller Street. Something about the con-

formation of the street seemed to funnel the light, making it stronger than normal sunset. And as I crossed the intersection at about twenty minutes past five, I found myself blinded for an instant. It was as if a powerful spotlight had been focussed directly into my eyes.

I cursed and slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing a man who had been running in front of me against the lights; and not missing a heavy bump in the rear from the car behind me, which had had no warning of my swift stop, and could not stop in time.

No damage was done, I saw as I pulled over to the curb after getting beyond the intersection. I examined the source of the brilliant light that had dazzled me.

It was a very simple thing. The sun, for an instant of angle that had been just right, had glanced from the polished chromium knob that controlled the opening and closing of the windshield in the center of the dash. Due to the slant of Altsheller Street, that instant of blinding reflection had occurred at the worst possible time—just as I was in the middle of the intersection. That must have happened to the others, I theorized.

Two things were not taken into account by this theory. One was the look of horror on the faces of those about to die. The other was the fact that only my make of car, probably, had a windshield control-knob at just that spot. However, I thought I could explain those two things.

"On all cars," I told myself, "there are probably *some* polished dash-gadgets that could reflect the sunlight at day's end between five and six. As for the look of horror—a driver, blinded and fearing to hit something in his blindness, would tend to look horrified. The driver of the sedan, for instance, must have been dazzled, have looked away to try to blink his sight back again, and have expressed horror because for the moment he was helpless."

Just that simple, I thought. And, thinking it, I started the car again to go back to the office and report my findings to Morgan for whatever they might be worth.

The newspaper office was north of me, which meant that it was across Altsheller from where I had parked. I made a wide turn on King Street, and headed back north.

I had laced back and forth over that intersection till I knew every cobblestone in it. The familiarity with it bred the slight carelessness that familiarity always breeds, I suppose. And I was sure Death Corner's riddle lay in reflected sunlight that occurred at the sunset hour—a danger I could eliminate by simply turning the bright windshield knob so that it slanted at a different angle.

I was in a hurry to get to the office, and I had the green light, so I spun the car along up to twenty-five miles an hour before reaching to shift from second gear. But the reach was not completed.

When I got to about twenty yards of the intersection, the green light shifted to yellow. The lights are long there, and, as I said, I was in a hurry, now. I stepped hard on the accelerator, still in second gear.

The car spurted forward. I was doing a little better than thirty, I think, when I came to the crossing. Coming down the other side of the street I saw a big sedan. It was racing for the light, too. But I paid it little attention. We would pass on that wide street with twenty feet between us.

Like a yellow golden shaft, the sun hit me down Altsheller Street. And I suddenly felt cold with a chill from the tomb. I only remember three things, fragments from the chaos that ensued in the next few seconds. One was this ghastly feeling of chill, another was an overwhelming compulsion to look to the left, though God knows I should have kept my eyes on the road.

The third was—the thing I saw when my eyes turned left.

I looked straight at it, as though an eery hand had turned my head in precisely the right direction. And as I looked, I heard my own voice raised high in a scream of horror.

THE dying sun glittered full on the corner windows of the old building on the northeast corner of the intersection. Particularly they glistened on the second floor window. The yellow rays were like a brilliant amber spotlight played full on that window. Their strength dissipated the grime on the panes, and showed in every ghastly detail the thing pressed there.

That thing was a face.

I saw a long, craggy jaw upturned at the end toward a long, craggy nose. I saw a countenance seamed with a million wrinkles, with the creased skin showing ashen and decayed-looking where the pigmentation was gathered. I saw, even in that flash and at that distance, a hairy protuberance on the left cheek, a wen, like an evil eruption on dead flesh.

But that was not the full horror. The thing that wrung the scream from my lips was the head.

The face was turned down, lowering at me, so that I could see most of the top of the head. Only—there was no top.

Where the round of the skull should have shown through lank, stringy gray hair, there was a gory and uneven hole. The whole top of the skull was gone, as the top of a can is removed by a can-opener. And I could see the contents of the skull, as the contents of an open can may be seen.

With that ghastly sight filling my horror-dilated eyes, and with the sound of my own scream keening in my ears, I hit something. I felt my body rising in the seat, felt myself strike the windshield of the car. Then—nothing.

GRADUALLY I became aware of pain. It racked me from head to foot, drew a moan from my aching lips. I opened my eyes.

I saw white walls, the white enamel bars of a hospital bed, a girl in a white uniform beside me. I heard a man say: "Look, he's coming out of it at last."

Full consciousness came back to me then and I struggled to sit up.

"The face!" I whispered. "Oh, God—the face!"

Another figure came into my range of vision, then. It was Morgan, city editor. He stared down at me with a look in his eyes unlike any I'd ever seen there before. The sight of his familiar and prosaic features calmed me a little. I controlled my twitching lips—even made them attempt a grin, though the attempt must have been pretty bad.

"Well," I said weakly, "I've got the story of Death Corner for you, though you'll have to get someone else to write it."

I noticed then that it was daylight. "I've been unconscious all night!" I exclaimed.

"You've been out of your head for three days," Morgan said gruffly.

"Three days!" It didn't seem possible. I tried to shrug, and winced with the movement. "It doesn't matter. The story's as good now as it was three days ago. You go to the building on the northeast corner of King and Altsheller, and in the second-floor corner office——"

The expression on his face stopped me. He laid his hand lightly on my shoulder.

"I've already gone, Bill," he said. "You told everything in your delirium, over and over again."

I stared at him.

"You told of meeting an old hag of a fortune-teller in that office. You told of her prophecy that you'd die at the intersection. You told of seeing her face at the

window later, and of the sight of her head."

He stopped for a moment, then went on.

"You were watching that face you thought you saw, so closely that you ran head on into a big sedan coming from the opposite direction."

"Face I *thought* I saw?" I echoed. "It was considerably more than a thought! I *did* see it! And I think I know the answer. That old woman was insanely angered when the other old crone—you know, the first on the new list of accidents at Death Corner—was run down and killed. She took that office, and in a sort of crazed revenge she daubed red on her skull to make it look as if it had been battered open, and then pressed her face, like the face of a dead woman, against the window. The sun at that hour strikes full on the window, and someone, pedestrian or driver, was bound to see it. . . ."

Again my words trailed to a stop at the look on Morgan's face. The queer expression in his eyes had deepened.

"Sure, Bill," he said hesitantly. It was the first time I had ever seen Morgan—hard-boiled Morgan—hesitant about anything. "I doped that out too. And as I said, we went to look at that office."

His hand touched my shoulder again.

"Dust gathers fast in a city, Bill. There was half an inch of dust, literally, over everything in the office. It covered the floor, and the window-sills, and an old table and two chairs someone had left in there. . . . Well, now wait. It didn't cover one of the chairs. That seemed to have been sat on recently, and on the table were two spots as though two arms had rested on it for a minute."

"Just *one*—of the chairs—had been used?" I whispered.

He nodded. "Just one of them. And there was no trace whatever of feet in the dust around the windows. The building manager says no one of the offices has been tenanted for at least eighteen months, including the corner one. And there has never been a fortune-teller on their board."

I could feel the slow blood pump thickly through my pulses. Morgan cleared his throat.

"I dug up the police description of the first woman killed, Bill. She was a wrinkled old hag, unidentified. She had a large wen on her left cheek. . . ."

He stepped away from my bed, at a warning glance from the nurse.

"I'd better run along, Bill. You'll be out in a month, the doc says, but you're pretty weak now. As for the story of Death Corner . . . I think maybe we'd better just say between us that you imagined something, and let it go at that."

We looked at each other for a long time.

"Yes," I said hoarsely, "I guess we'd better—let it go at that."

I WAS out of the hospital in the promised month. I didn't die at Death Corner as was prophesied. Of course, I still have a month to go at this writing and the prophecy was that I'd die before the year was out. . . .

However, I tell myself that even the thought of such a thing is absurd. To beat it, I make myself walk across the intersection of King and Altsheller every day on my way to and from the office.

But I wait very carefully for the traffic lights to turn before I step from the curb. And even then, sometimes, I wonder. . . .


**"Ay, he is cursed!" she shrilled.
"From Heaven and Hell he is cursed!"**

# Witch's Hair

By MEARLE PROUT

*An outré story of a gipsy curse, and the strangling hair of a young gipsy mother—a tale of stark tragedy*

AS THE drama fades into the background, the memories attendant upon it grow less poignant. Yet it is only at this late date that I can set down, in orderly sequence, the things as it occurred. Although my reasons, or excuses, for so writing are numerous, my friends will readily understand that my chief purpose is to clear the name of my unfortunate wife, and if possible to

obtain her release from the state hospital where she is now held.

The story which I told so falteringly in the courtroom will be set down here, not in the order of events as I became acquainted with them, but in their actual chronological order. For many of the things mentioned here were unknown to me until after the trial, and the event which really begins the story was learned last of all.

I ask my readers' patience with certain gaps which will occur in the telling. For, even now, there are parts of the story which are not clear. And, at best, only the barest outline of the drama can be presented.

AS OUR curtain rises, the first scene is that of the fourteenth of February, nearly two years ago. Dusk is deepening over a blizzard which has raged for three days, howling through the deserted streets of the town, and piling deeper the huge drifts of snow around the great house on the hill. It is bitterly cold.

At once our attention is directed to a deserted shack a quarter-mile below the house. Here old man Benedict had lived with his family before his steel mill brought him wealth, and before the harshness of his rule had driven the last of his children from him.

But tonight the old house is not deserted. A great fire roars within, and through the lighted windows are heard merry voices and laughter. The stables are crowded with sleek, well-fed horses, and in the yard, half buried in snow, four gaudy carriages proclaim the identity of those within. It is a gipsy band.

There are perhaps twenty of them, men and women, around the stove in the center of the room. One of the number appears ill.

She is on a makeshift cot behind the stove, swathed against the cold beneath a thick pile of blankets. With alert, merry eyes she watches the festivities, but her face is lined with pain.

Her hair is of that peculiar lustrous black which is characteristic of the gipsy tribe. Loosened now for greater comfort, it flows in black cascades over the edge of the bed and hangs toward the floor. And beside her, idly combing the black locks, is an old crone whose shrunken and wrinkled face well proclaims her seventy years.

"Your hair is beautiful, child," she says. "It is just like mine, when I was your age."

The girl looks up at her, smiling slightly.

"Before morning, you think, mother!"

"Yes, child, before morning, I am sure."

There is a sudden knock, harsh, insistent. A silence falls over the group, but no one moves. Again the knock; this time louder still, and more compelling. With a warning glance around the room the leader rises and opens the door.

The sudden lamplight reveals a squat but powerful figure, limned in belligerent attitude in the very doorway. His clean-shaven but deeply lined face is distorted now with rage. For a moment he is apparently unable to speak. Then:

"What are you? What right have you to be here?"

The gipsy chief laughs easily, as one would humor a child.

"The right of any man, my friend, to save himself and his people from freezing. Come in, and warm yourself."

But the invitation appears only to incense the old man beyond all reason.

"Come in, he says, to my own house! Get out! I'll have the law——"

For the first time a doubt shadows the swarthy face of the gipsy chief.

"But there is my Anna. She is ill. Before morning there will be a child——"

"Not in my house! Not while——"

He pauses a moment as if to collect himself, then goes on more clearly.

"I'll give you just fifteen minutes to get out. At the end of that time, if you're still here, I'll call the law. And I guess you know what that means."

Before anyone answers he turns back into the storm. The door swings closed behind him.

AN HOUR later we see the little caravan again. It is halted in the bed of a dry creek by the roadside, where the high banks and overhanging trees offer some measure of protection against the storm. Only the east, the side toward the town, is open; and through the snow-filled air the dim radiance of the city lights is seen.

Around a dimly flickering fire the gipsies are standing. But they are not warming themselves now. They stand at a distance, fearfully, waiting.

On a pile of blankets by the fire Anna stirs weakly.

"Mother, I am—so cold."

"Ay, 'tis cold," answers the old woman. "They'll be bringing more wood soon, if they can find it. Then, maybe, we can have hot water, too."

She peers intently at the girl's closed eyes, and at the silken hair, darker and more glistening than ever in the unsteady glow of the fire. Again the girl stirs weakly.

"Mother, I'm—I think I'm dying."

"Ay, child, I know."

The snow thins. The old woman lifts her eyes to the house on the hill, silhouetted faintly now against the aura of lights cast by the town. Anna sees it too, and suddenly her pale face is suffused with color. She struggles upright.

"Curse him!" she cries. "Let me hear you curse him before I die!"

At the command the old crone rises from her seat, and her white hair streams long in the lurid firelight.

"Ay, he is cursed!" she shrills. "From Heaven and Hell he is cursed! May he live in fear and die a death of horror upon a night of fire!"

Stooping, she runs her fingers through her daughter's hair, and holds it up as if for him to see.

"By every hair of her head is he cursed! For every hair of the one he has brought to death may he suffer a night of torture. May its black coils be in his thoughts in the day, and may it haunt him in the darkness. And may it choke the life from him at last! Ay, he is cursed!"

And the girl, still sitting upright, with the same mad gleam in her eyes, shrieks after her:

"Ay, he is cursed!"

The hatred flaming in her face dies suddenly. She falls back weakly upon the pillow. Her eyes close, and a cold which is not the cold of the storm settles upon her brow.

IT WAS in April of that year that I happened into my favorite pawn-shop on Center Street. I have a pawn-shop complex, and though I usually enter to browse around with no intention of buying, seldom do I escape without some object or other. This time it was a magnificent artificial hair-dress which attracted my interest. It was made of smooth black coils, of a luster which is rarely surpassed even in live hair. At once I wished to possess it. Simultaneously, I recalled that my wife had asked me to be on the watch for artificial hair for her amateur theatricals. And the net result of these two urges was that when I left the shop I was carrying it, carefully wrapped beneath my arm.

Once home, I presented it to my wife, who admired it immensely. Strangely, even as she was complimenting me for buying it, I began to regret my action. The very luster which had at first attracted my attention now began to affect me unfavor-

ably. It was *too* glistening. I am sensitive to such things, and, try as I might, I could not relieve myself of the vaguely disquieting impression that it was alive. I handled it again, but the feeling was not dispelled. I could almost feel it stir in my fingers. And though I did not mention it to Elise, who is a thoroughly practical woman, I hoped fervently that she would never wear it.

I was doomed to early disappointment. At that time it was the temporary fashion in our town for women to wear gorgeous hair-dresses. To those who had worn their hair short this was a temporary hardship, and many wore artificial hair at social gatherings. This my wife resolved to do. Against the idea I brought to bear every possible argument, except the real reason for my disapproval. She pronounced them all foolish, which they were. But——

On the evening of the following Sunday we were preparing to go to church. Having finished dressing first, I was waiting for her in the living-room when she came in.

I had known that she was going to wear the hair, and was in a measure prepared for what I was to see. But when she came in I only rose and stared, so striking was her appearance. She was regal, queen-like. The luxuriant black hair accentuated her height and stood out in marked contrast to the whiteness of her complexion. It touched with a becoming shadow of gloom her already serious features.

She mistook the cause of my stare and smiled, pleased.

"Are you going to stand there all night, John? We'd better go."

On the way to the church I watched her closely. She seemed to be changed in some indefinable way. It was not only that her beauty was heightened. She was more reserved, almost somber in repose. In some manner she recalled to my mind the evangelist Mary Morton—the "woman with a mission."

At the church she acknowledged the compliments paid to her hair with an indifferent nod. She grew increasingly restless throughout the services. Toward the last I noticed that her face was flushed—dangerously so, I thought. I leaned toward her.

"Ill, darling?" I whispered.

She shook her head.

"Except that I have a headache. It must be stuffy in here. This hair feels strange, too, John."

I suppose I looked my apprehension.

"Oh, nothing so serious," she said. "It just feels heavy, is all."

I was glad when the services drew to a close.

"Tonight," the pastor was saying, "I will ask Mr. Benedict to dismiss us."

"That hypocrite!" my wife murmured.

I was more than mildly surprised. A number of people near by had heard her. As we stood for the benediction I noticed her hands resting on the back of the pew. The knuckles were white and drawn.

Once home, she put away the hair with a sigh of relief.

"I doubt if I'll ever wear it again," she commented.

"Whatever made you say that about old man Benedict tonight?" I asked.

"I don't know. But it's true, John—we know it. Him with his steel mills, gouging his tenants and pinching the pennies. He is, all right."

"I know. But I wish you hadn't said it. I noticed him on the street a week ago. He doesn't look well."

THE weeks moved through April and into May. My wife was in poor health, and my growing concern over her for a time supplanted my worries about the black hair, which she had not worn since the first night.

And indeed her condition was serious. All visible symptoms pointed to pernicious anemia, yet the blood-tests were negative. I was deeply troubled as I watched her growing pallor, and saw the increasing lassitude creep over her until now she did little more than sit at her window; especially so, as medical science seemed able to offer no relief.

"John," she confided one day, "I can't help feeling that this whole trouble is mental."

I had feared as much myself, but was not pleased to hear her say it.

"How so?" I queried.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I get the strangest impression of something left undone; but when I try to locate it, it's not there. Did you ever find yourself craving some one food, but unable to tell just what it was you wanted? It's like that."

Later in the evening, restless, I chanced to look in the bureau drawer where I knew she had placed the hair. It was gone! Just why I should be upset, or even surprised, I did not know. Yet I was.

"Darling," I said in considerable agitation, "you remember that hair I bought a few weeks back? Where is it?"

"Oh, that? It's in my room, with the rest of my cast-off things." She spoke with a rising inflection.

"You never wear it, then?"

"No. You know that. Except—once in a while in the afternoon I try it on, just to get the effect."

"You do? Well—I wish you wouldn't."

"Why? I never wear it outside the house. But in the afternoon—well, I do most everything to help pass the time."

It was true. Her afternoons were long now. And, pitying her, I did not press the point.

It has been said that much of the world's misery is caused, not alone by carelessness, but by kindness as well. Anxious to spare the feelings of our friend, we refuse to tell him things which might be of real value. In at least one sense, the truest friends we have are our enemies.

So in this situation. If I had refused to be set aside, if I had been a little harsher, much suffering might have been avoided. But, realizing my almost ridiculous position, and the weakness of my arguments, I yielded. I contented myself with examining the hair, even to sniffing it for some drug which I imagined might be present, and then returned it to her.

That night I was wakened by the moon shining through my window. I lay there for some time, drowsing, before I realized that my wife was gone. She had been sleeping in my room since her illness, but I had not yet become so used to her as to miss her from force of habit. Once realizing, though, I started up, fully awake.

A hasty glance around the moonlit room showed no trace of her. Without waiting even to put on my shoes I ran to her room. She was not there. The bed was undisturbed. I snapped on the hall light and ran down the stairs, three steps at a time. I burst into the darkened living-room. My unprotected foot met a chair, and I shouted aloud.

"What's the matter, John?" Her voice sounded flat, and listless. "You almost frightened me."

I saw her then, sitting, a shapeless splotch of dark, in her chair at the window. I switched on the light. Something akin to dismay came over me as I saw the hair, black and glistening, coiled in lustrous bands around her head.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Just looking. The moonlight is pretty. See how it lights the hill?"

I looked. The great house on the hill dominated the scene as the moon dominated the sky. In the silver light it was white and somber, set in sharp relief against the darker background of the horizon.

"But what's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

"No, I can't sleep. There's something I must do, John—something I should have done long ago. Can you think what it is?"

"No."

"I wish I could. I think if I only knew, I could sleep——"

The May night was chill. In my thin pajamas I was shivering.

"But why are you wearing that hair?"

"It—it seems to soothe me, John. Sometimes I get to wanting to wear it—I don't know why—and unless I do I get nervous, and ill."

I lifted the black coils off her head.

"Tomorrow," I said, "I'm going to burn this—every last strand. I don't know how, but I feel this is mixed up with your being ill. We'll get rid of it."

"No——"

"Yes!"

THE next morning, leaving her still asleep, I went to where I had left the hair, firmly resolved to carry out my threat. It was gone!

Agitated, I woke her.

"That hair," I said; "where is it?"

Her eyes looked up at me out of the depths of sleep. She passed her hand over her forehead as if only half comprehending.

"I—don't know. Funny—I remember getting up in the night and hiding it—so you wouldn't burn it, you know? But—now I can't remember where I put it."

I went away much worried, but more resolved than ever to search the house over when I returned. I left the office early that evening with that purpose in mind.

She was sitting at the window again when I came in.

"How are you tonight, Elise?" I asked her.

"I don't know. But—you know what's been worrying me? I know what it is I have to do now. It came to me quite suddenly this afternoon."

"What is it?"

"I—I can't think now. But I did know; and I felt much better for a while. Then I forgot again. But it was something up there——"

She pointed out of the window.

"On the hill?"

"Yes."

"Was it something about the house?"

"I—I don't know, now. Let me be, John."

Something about her eyes gave me my cue. I went directly to my room and to the telephone.

"Doctor Brewer?" I said when I had got my party. "This is John Wainright. Can you come up right away? . . . Yes, I think so. . . . No, it seems to be her mind that is affected. . . . Not until morning? . . . I see. Thank you, Doctor."

Then, with my room as a starting-point, I searched the entire house, intent upon finding that damnable hair. But it was hidden too well. Nor could Elise help me. Although she remembered wearing it a short while before I came home, she could not recall where she had left it.

I WENT to bed that night only when I saw her safely in before me. And I intended, if possible, to stay awake until the specialist came the following morning.

Yet I must have dozed off, for when I awoke later her place beside me was vacant.

In haste I switched on the light. She was gone. A rising tumult in the street finally forced itself upon my consciousness. I ran to the window and looked out, to see a wavering red glow suffusing the atmosphere and reflecting from the houses. Even as I watched, a train of fire-engines raced past, their shrill sirens blasting through the night above the shouts of excited people.

Thoroughly frightened now, I rushed out of the house to locate the fire. Nor was I long in finding it. The house on the hill was a single blazing pile, topped by long, slow flames which were seemingly magnified by the height of their source. I recalled the words:

"Something I must do—something up on the hill, John"—and cursed myself for my negligence.

No need to re-enter the house to look for her now. I knew where she was. Madly, I wheeled the car into the street and whirled it around. At top speed I raced up the still crowded street. In two minutes I was at the scene of the fire.

An immense crowd was there before me. Police had drawn a cordon at a safe distance, and behind it the crowd milled in wild excitement.

With scant courtesy I forced my way to the front.

"What do you want?" asked a policeman roughly as I attempted to push by.

"I'm looking for—I want——" I dared not speak my suspicion. "Nothing," I muttered, and quickly lost myself in the crowd.

Someone cried, "There she is—with the sheriff."

There was a quick rustle as people turned from the fire to the new interest. Fingers pointed.

"She did it, huh?"

"One of his tenants, probably—poor woman! Just what he deserved, too."

I looked, though there was no need. Then I forced my way through the throng to—my wife.

She looked at me with a slow smile.

"Darling," I said, "was it you?"

"Yes, John."

"But why? Why——"

"I don't know. Maybe it *was* the hair, after all. It—it gave me queer ideas, sometimes."

"Then why did you wear it?"

"I—couldn't stop wearing it. It frightened me — but sometimes, when I was alone, I couldn't help putting it on——"

"But you're ill——"

She shook her head.

"No—not now. It was this that made me ill, John. This job. Even before I knew it was my job. I had to do it, John."

"But you poor dear—don't you know what they'll do to you?"

She nodded soberly.

"I know. But I had to, you see. It wasn't my fault. Don't you understand?"

I wasn't sure then that I did. But when the sheriff led her away I remained behind. There was something here, where she had been, that I wanted to see.

The fire was conquered only after the house was two-thirds burned. An hour later, when the hottest embers had been cooled, the police entered the ruins, and I with them.

In a blackened cell that had been a room on the second floor we found the old man's body.

His knees were on the floor, but his head and arms rested across the charred frame of a chair, as if he had died while kneeling. The body was burned almost beyond recognition, but—and here was a peculiar circumstance—around his neck was wound, tightly, a thick black rope of lustrous hair, which was entirely unburned.

"Damn!" said the sergeant. "Who'd have supposed the old boy had a heart? It must be his dead wife's hair."

I said nothing. What was the use of pointing out that he had quite plainly been strangled by it before he even felt the fire? Why ask how, even yet, it could remain so tightly coiled around his neck? Yet there was more. Even as we watched, the black stuff seemed to loosen, to uncoil gently. Softly it slid from his shoulders, and dropped at last in a loose heap on the floor. I stooped and held it up to the lantern.

"Funny," said the sergeant, "that the stuff didn't burn."

"Yes," I agreed, "but it will burn now; I'm sure of it."

Holding it from me, I lighted a match and touched it with the flame. Then, as it flared to instant life, I stepped to the window and dropped the burning mass to the wet ground below.

OF THE trial there is little to be said. Elise never had to defend herself against a charge of murder; fortunately that much was spared her. But at the sanity hearing she was bitterly attacked. I told my story, and she corroborated it in every detail. Yet who is to be particularly blamed that it was not believed?

And yet there is injustice. For more than a year my wife has been held in the state hospital for the criminal insane. Barring the slight hope of release, she will remain there throughout her life. She, who is as normal as you or I. . . .

There remains but one infinitesimal bit of evidence which I can add. Shortly after the conclusion of these unfortunate events I made it a point to visit the pawn-broker from whom I had obtained the hair; and I asked him how he had happened to buy such an apparently unmarketable thing. This is what he said:

"I remember the incident, because I bought it at a low price from an old lady who so obviously needed the money. I believe—yes, I am sure—she was a gipsy."

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# *I*n a Dark Wood

By MARION DOYLE

She came to a wood of twisted trees
Where claw-like roots clutched at her knees;
  A bracken thrust its threatening frond
  Into her heart; a stagnant pond
Spread treacherous iris to ensnare
Bewildered feet in a sinking lair;
  Flung from its farthest edge, a briar
  Seared her eyes like living fire,
Blinding her utterly; but before,
She had seen the pearly cup on the floor
  Of the forest, under a monstrous tree,
  And knew what the end was meant to be:

No going back the way she came
(No more of quicksand, sword and flame)
  To crystal springs.
She knelt by the dank
Destroying Angel's cup—and drank.

"Quick as a bouncing leopard she launched her lithe body at the would-be murderer."

# The Phantom Island

By ARLTON EADIE

*He bought the cabin of the old sailing-vessel to put in his garden as a summer-house—and thereby let himself in for a weird and profitable experience*

"YES, sir, that's the old *Euphrates,* that was launched seventy-odd years ago in this same river, not far from the spot where we're standing now. She's seen a tidy few changes in her time, she has; but she's finished her voyaging now, for they've towed her here to be broken up. She was designed for a fast

Atlantic passenger-boat—fast for her day, that is—but the Government took her over as soon as she was off the stocks, and used her for carrying troops to the Crimea. They only used her as a transport for about ten years; then she was sold out of the Service and converted into a cargo steamer, to go tramping round for another twenty. They were a bit distrustful of steam in those days and always built their vessels as full-rigged ships, so's they could sail if anything went wrong with the machinery, as it frequently did. When other, newer ships came along, and the owners found that she couldn't compete against 'em except at a loss, they had the machinery ripped out of her and used her as a sailing-ship pure and simple. She's changed hands a many times since then, and now she's come to the breaking-yard. But she were a fine ship in her day. Would you care to have a look over her, sir?"

Accompanied by my brother-in-law, George Gough, I had visited the Thames-side yard in the hope of picking up some old, well-seasoned oak with which to try our 'prentice hands in constructing a summer-house for my garden. While looking round, we had witnessed a large three-masted ship being towed to her moorings by two straining tugs, and a chance inquiry had elicited her life-history from the yard foreman.

There was something pathetic in the progress of the doomed ship as she silently glided to her last resting-place and was made fast by many hawsers. Aged, storm-battered, neglected, she seemed like some old war-charger who, its term of usefulness past, ambles wearily into the knacker's yard.

Accepting the foreman's invitation, we passed up the gang-plank, peering in turn into the fo'castle, lined with tiers of coffin-like bunks, the deserted galley with its rusty stove, the stripped chartroom and officers' cabins; finally regaining the deck and entering the deckhouse which was situated between the main and mizzen masts. This was a fairly large structure, measuring twelve feet by eighteen, its greatest length of course running fore and aft. Round it ran a series of cushioned lockers which could be used either as seats or berths. This was obviously a relic of the *Euphrates'* luxurious, passenger-carrying days; for it was paneled in carved rosewood, with numerous ports and a large, sliding double-door on either side. Although the interior fittings showed signs of rough usage, they were much less dilapidated than the other portions of the ship, and I surmised—rightly as it turned out later—that this had been set aside for the captain.

"What becomes of all this?" I asked the foreman. "Surely it could be used again?"

The man shook his head dubiously.

"Well, I dunno, sir. Maybe, maybe not. If we has a ship in good condition to break up, they can gen'rally use the standard fittings—boats, brasswork, companion-rails and hatchways—on other vessels. But with a deckhouse like this, sir, it's a thousand chances to one against it being used on shipboard."

George suddenly pinched my arm.

"Why, here's your summer house already made for you," he whispered. "We could cart it up to your place in sections and put it together in no time. It'll be a bit of a novelty to have a real ship's cabin in the middle of your lawn. You don't see carving like this every day. Look at that figure of Neptune over the clock, and those mermaids over the doorways! And you may get the whole thing for a mere song."

Being unaware of the precise monetary value which George sets upon his vocal efforts, I am unable to say if his estimate proved to be correct, but I was quite satisfied with my bargain when we quitted the office after completing the deal.

In due course the various sections were

delivered, and the small damage they had suffered in removal proved that the note, which I had slipped into the foreman's hand at parting, had not been wasted. In a few days we had fitted them together in my garden; thereby setting the scene, as it were, for a drama as tense, grim, and intriguing as any seen upon the stage.

I SOON discovered that my novel "den" made an ideal place to write in during the summer months. I was seated there one sunny August afternoon about two months after its erection, busily correcting some proof sheets. Coming to the end of the last one, I placed it on the pile under the paperweight (for a fairly strong breeze came through the open doors), then lit my pipe and lay back on the settee, musing and day-dreaming. Gradually my thoughts turned to the cabin in which I lay. What varied scenes its portholes must have looked out upon during its checkered career; the number of miles it had traveled; the storms that must have tossed it ere it came to its present quiet haven in that shady Kentish garden, where the only sounds that broke the stillness were the drowsy hum of the bees hovering over the flower beds and the soft rustle of the wind-stirred trees.

If those wooden walls could only tell their tale! . . . The listless, half-formed thought was my last conscious sensation before I surrendered myself to the lulling magic of my surroundings and fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.

It is a well-known fact that the unconscious mind takes no heed of the passage of time; when I again opened my eyes I was uncertain whether minutes or hours had elapsed while I slept. Not that I thought long about the matter, for other and more startling problems soon forced thmselves upon my mind.

When I had fallen asleep, the view from the right-hand door of the deckhouse had been confined to a small lawn, bordered by flower beds and bounded by a tall hedge of box; but now my bewildered eyes saw an expanse of sunlit sea, upon which lay a long, low island, girt by surf-drenched coral and crowned with tropical palms. From the other door, instead of the familiar view of the back elevation of the house, an ocean of deep sapphire blue stretched out until it joined the lighter blue of the sky in one long, unbroken line.

For a minute or two I naturally assumed that I was experiencing a particularly vivid dream, but soon I began to doubt if this were so. For the delusion—if it were such—was not confined to the sense of sight. The floor beneath me rose and dipped with the steady roll of a ship at anchor; near at hand came the faint creaking of yards, with every now and then the measured thunder of the surf on the distant reef; while over all there hung that mingled odor of tar, hemp and stale cookery which seems inseparable from a sailing-ship.

I decided that this was one of the occasions when a quiet smoke would do a man a world of good. I glanced toward the table where I had laid my pipe, only to find that it, together with the pen and ink, typewriter, manuscript, and everything else belonging to me, had disappeared. In their place there lay a large chart, an old-fashioned double-barreled pistol and a decanter half filled with an amber liquid which I judged to be rum.

"Well, I've never had a dream as real as this before!" was my mental comment as I rose to my feet and bent over the chart, which was partly rolled up from each end. I put out my hand to straighten it, then drew in my breath with a sudden gasp.

Although my hand was touching the surface of the paper, and I could feel its texture with my fingers, there appeared to be nothing there! I put forth my other hand, with a like result. I glanced down

at my feet—and then only did the startling truth grip my mind.

*I was disembodied—invisible—an unsubstantial phantom with the emotions and senses of a man!*

I CANNOT describe the agony and confusion of my mind as I sank down on the settee I had just quitted. Was I dead?—dreaming?—mad? In vain I racked my brain for an explanation of my surroundings. I think I must have finally decided in favor of it being a dream, for I lay back once more to await events. It may or may not have been a fortunate circumstance that it did not cross my mind to make my way through the open door onto the deck outside.

"*Euphrates* ahoy. Heave a line there!"

The hail sounded as though it came from but a few yards off. There was a rattle of unshipped oars as a small boat came alongside, and immediately afterward two men stepped across the bulwarks and entered the deckhouse. One was a middle-aged man of harsh and forbidding aspect, the other a mere lad of nineteen or twenty. Both were dressed in seafaring clothes which went out of vogue half a century ago. The older man wore wide canvas trousers and a short blue coat with tarnished brass buttons, over which was spread the square collar of his check shirt. His upper lip and chin were shaven, but beneath it ran a strip of whisker which extended up to meet the longish hair of his head. On his left hip there dangled a cutlass, while a pistol was thrust through the belt he wore round his waist.

"Well, that business is hitched up taut and shipshape, thank the lord!" he said, tossing his broad-brimmed straw hat on a locker and mopping his streaming forehead with a gaudy handkerchief. "Whew! the sun's enough to boil a man's brains inside his skull, sink me if it ain't! Five flamin' miles through the bush they took me before we came to the place where the old king slings his hammock, and all the while I didn't know but what the next step was going to land me in an ambush. But everything turned out all right in the end."

"The natives were quite friendly, then?" The tone in which the younger man asked the question was that of an educated man.

"I guess they ain't got the savvy to be anything else," returned the other in a contemptuous voice. "They're as friendly and innocent as little babbies; I don't suppose a white man's ship has touched here since the day it was created. That hurricane what blew us out of our course must ha' been sent by the good angels. It's virgin soil here, Davy my lad, every foot of it!"

"And you think there may be pearls here?" burst eagerly from the boy's lips.

"I know there is! Listen here." He seated himself and bent closer to the other. "One of the chief's darters, a mighty good-looking young gal of about eighteen, or thereabouts, had 'many moons ago'—heaven alone knows how long she meant by that—been caught in a gale while out fishin', and carried to another island where there happened to be a white missionary—'God-man' she called him. There she had picked up a bit of English before she was sent back in a native craft. She acted as go-between, seein' as how I couldn't speak their lingo; and as soon as she made her papa understand what I were arter, the old boy sings out to two of his bucks, and they takes me in their canoe and paddles out into the lagoon on the fur side o' the island. Halfway across they stops and points overboard. The water was that clear and calm that you could see the shadow of their boat on the bottom, a couple o' fathoms down. Shiver me if the whole sea floor ain't smothered with real, black-edged pearl-bearing shell, laying as thick as the pebbles on Deal Beach! The natives here are as much at home in the water as on dry land. For a few glass beads they'll

clear that lagoon for us. Then, arter allowing a month for the shell to rot, we can load up and make for home waters—made men for the rest of our lives."

For a while the two sat silently reviewing the prospect before them. Then Dave rose to his feet with something like a sigh.

"It seems too good to be true, Mark, after all the ill-luck we've had on this cruise."

Into the other's heavy-lidded black eyes there came a suspicious gleam. But the next moment he burst into a hearty laugh.

"True? O' course it's true. Haven't I just been a tellin' you?" he said. "Everything's fallen into our hands. The shell is ours for the takin'—the natives are friendly——"

"But *are* they friendly, Mark?" interrupted the boy. "They may be concealing their real feelings to put us off our guard. A sudden rush when we were unprepared, and they'd swamp us by their very numbers."

Mark rose to his feet and clapped the younger man heartily on the shoulder.

"No fear o' that, my lad. Why, the king is sendin' his own darter to us as a hostage for his good behavior."

"His daughter?"

"Ay, the one I told you about—her that can speak English. She's goin' to sling her hammock aboard here until we've got the shell under hatches. They're bringin' her on board tomorrow, and a prettier or daintier hostage you couldn't wish for. Come, we'll have a peg in honor of our guest."

He took two glasses from the locker and filled them from the decanter on the table. His lips were twisted into a sardonic smile as he handed one to Dave and raised the other aloft.

"Here's to Lèla, the belle of Tuvongo—our hostage!"

Even as he raised the glass to his lips his figure became shadowy and indistinct, and the dull boom of the surf gave place to the twittering of sparrows on the lawn. The tropical isle had vanished. I was back in England, within a few yards of my own home. The only things unchanged were the walls of the deckhouse of the *Euphrates*.

FOR some time afterward I continued to sit still, my mind frantically endeavoring to recall and analyze the impressions it had received. Plain, practical sense seemed to tell me that the whole thing was nothing but a particularly intense dream; yet that commonplace explanation was far from satisfying me. The episode had been too detailed, too real, too much like an actual, personal experience for it to have been a mere fantasm conjured up by the sleeping brain. There must be some deeper, more logical explanation.

Even then I was far from suspecting that I possessed psychic powers—indeed I had always regarded such powers in others with a good deal of skepticism. Still, I felt that there must be some influence, some latent power—a legacy, maybe, of the stirred emotions of those who had lived there before—that gave the old walls the power of reproducing, to the unconscious or semiconscious mind, some of the scenes that had been enacted within them. But, whatever the explanation might be, I was determined to make another effort to see the outcome of the strange drama whose opening had been so unexpectedly revealed.

George, of course, had his own theory.

"H'm, liver out of order," was his verdict when I had told my story. "You keep too late hours and do too much scribbling. Come have a round at golf."

I gravely thanked him for his good advice, but the next afternoon saw me lying on the deckhouse settee in the hope of witnessing a continuation of my vision. My mind, however, was far too excited to allow me to sleep. In vain I tried every

known device to ensure the desired oblivion; the mere fact that I was desperately anxious to sleep was sufficient to keep me wide awake. Not to be defeated, I made my bed there that night, having previously (for I had no desire to alarm the ladies of the household by any hint of supernatural happenings) made the unusually hot weather my excuse. But I must have slept too soundly on these occasions, for nothing unusual took place. I had almost resigned myself to George's view of the matter when, without warning, I experienced the sequel to the previous manifestation.

Once more it happened on an afternoon. The weather was oppressively hot, without a breath of wind stirring; the sky was overcast by low clouds and there was a hint of thunder in the air. I had been working at high pressure for the past few days in order to make up for time lost in my former experiments, and sleep came to me unbidden.

It seemed as if I had scarcely closed my eyes before I was aware of the slow, regular motion of a sea-borne ship. Eagerly I looked through the open door. Yes, there was the same low island with its ring of snow-white coral and its fretwork of bronze-green palms outlined against the sky.

Once again I experienced that strange, detached sensation of being an invisible observer of a scene of long ago.

Seated at the table, her brows puckered into a puzzled frown as she bent over an open book, was a young native girl. Her complexion of warm copper-brown, her scarlet, small-lipped mouth and straight nose, the hair which fell in wavy masses over her gently curving breasts, all seemed to indicate that at least some white blood coursed beneath the smooth, satin-like skin.

A shadow fell across the doorway and the young boy whom I knew as Davy entered.

"Hullo, Lèla," he cried gayly. "Trying your hand at white-man magic? Ah, you'll need a bit of schooling before you'll get that book to talk to you!"

There was a flash of white teeth as her lips parted in a smile of welcome and a deeper tinge crept into her cheeks. But an instant later her lips drooped in a rebellious pout.

"Why um book no speak to Lèla same's you?" she demanded. "Lèla all same white Mary-girl. Um?"

There was something like pity in the boy's eyes as he looked down at the face upturned so eagerly to his.

"Not quite the same, Lèla. But you wouldn't understand the difference if I tried to explain. But don't puzzle your pretty head over that old book. Here's something you can understand better."

He drew a necklace of glittering glass beads from his pocket and threw it over her head.

*"Ohè!"* She uttered a squeal of childish pleasure, then dashed to the looking-glass at the end of the deckhouse and stood twisting her sinuous body so as to make the sunlight catch the stones. Suddenly, as though seized by a passing fear, she ceased her contortions and returned to the boy, searching his face with troubled eyes.

"Why you give Lèla these?" she asked, lifting the beads and running them through her slender brown fingers.

"Because it's time to up-anchor and sail for home."

"You go away—right away?" Her lips were trembling as she said the words, her young bosom rising and falling swiftly.

"Sure," answered the boy, idly turning the pages of the book on the table. Had he chanced to glance up he could not have mistaken the emotion which his words had caused. "We've got together nearly two thousand virgin pearls—some of 'em whoppers, too! And we've more nacre-shell than we can stow on board. It only remains to fill our water-tanks, escort you back to your father, and we'll be ready for

sea. But we shan't send you back empty-handed, Lèla—why, the other girls will go and drown themselves with envy when they see what you've got. See here—and here!"

He had thrown open one of the lockers, and now he poured into the girl's lap handful after handful of gaudy trifles and knick-nacks dear to the savage heart. But she made no effort to touch them as she stared down at the glittering heap with lack-luster eyes, and presently her indifference caused him to look up.

"Why, Lèla," he cried in surprise. "Don't you want them?"

"No!" She stood up, letting the rings and bracelets fall to the deck and roll in all directions. "Lèla want to stay here—with you!" And she fixed her glowing eyes upon him with a look that no man could misunderstand.

THAT the boy was genuinely taken aback by this demonstration there could not be the slightest doubt. There was an expression of embarrassed distress on his good-looking, sunburnt face as he gently laid his hand on her shoulder.

"But, my dear girl, you must go back," he said in the tone of one who humors a wayward child. "You are our hostage—the pledge given for our safety. What would your father think if——"

"Give him these!" she burst out fiercely, spurning with her bare feet the baubles on the deck. "Give him these—and let me go with you!"

He came a step nearer and looked into the flushed, quivering face. She returned his gaze with eyes that had in their dusky depths that look of dumb, adoring devotion that one sometimes sees in the eyes of a faithful dog. Thus they stood, while a dozen long-drawn breaths came from between her parted lips. Then a loud, raucous laugh from the open doorway made them both turn with a start.

"Oh-ho! little Lèla likes her quarters so much that she doesn't like the idea of goin' back to her mat in the women's hut?" Mark came forward into the cabin as he spoke, glancing from one to the other with eyes which glowed with an animal light. "I'm sorry to have to cut short your little love scene, but sharp's the order now. The glass is droppin', and there's a bank of cloud comin' up from windward that means a blow—and a mighty stiff one, too! I don't want to be caught with a coral-reef under my lee. We'll hoist and run for it while there's time. Put the girl ashore and get back quick!"

No sooner had the boy drawn the reluctant Lèla from the deckhouse, than Mark, with a quick glance from the door, crossed to an iron-bound box in the corner, unlocked it, and drew out a bulky leather bag and emptied its contents on the table. As he did so, there burst upon my astonished gaze a cascade of shimmering opalescence which reflected back the sunshine in softly glowing, many-colored fires. Some of the pearls were quite small, but the majority were as large as peas, while one or two seemed of the size of robins' eggs, though flatter in shape. Altogether their value must have been enormous, and as I saw the light of greedy cunning which flared in the man's eyes as he ran his coarse fingers through that heap of wealth, I felt myself trembling for the safety of his young partner.

With a sudden movement he swept the pearls back into the bag, but instead of replacing it in the iron casket, he mounted on the locker at the farther end of the cabin and inserted the point of his sheathknife in the carved frieze that ran round the top of the walls.

Under his careful leverage a small portion of the woodwork hinged outward, disclosing a square cavity. Placing the treasure inside, he closed the door of his secret hiding-place and sprang lightly down, regaining the deck in time to find

himself face to face with Dave and Lèla as they re-entered the deckhouse.

"Why—not gone yet?" he cried with an oath that seemed to indicate as much fear as anger. "Are you mad? Look at the sea——"

"Aye, look at it—no boat could pass the reef!"

As Dave spoke, the ship gave a sudden lurch and rolled, staggering like a stricken thing, sharply to leeward. Looking outside, I saw that the stretch of gently heaving blue was now a seething cauldron of yeasty waves, lashed into fury by the hurricane that had burst upon us.

Almost immediately a sharp crash sounded in the cabin as the iron casket slid across the polished surface of the table and fell to the floor, the impact making the lid fly open, revealing its emptiness.

"The pearls! They're gone!"

Fiercely the boy flung the words as he stared wide-eyed at the rifled casket. When he shifted his eyes it was to fix them on his partner in a long, steady look that was in itself an unspoken accusation.

The atmosphere of the cabin grew suddenly tense as the two men eyed each other in silence across the dizzily swaying floor. Then a laugh sounded above the droning wind and crashing seas, a laugh that was more like the snarl of a wild beast than the utterance of a human being. It came from the lips of the older man as he pointed toward the native girl.

"Lèla! That she-devil has stolen them!"

A quiver ran over the girl's brown body as she realized the meaning of the accusation hurled at her, and for an instant she seemed to shrink under the venomous glare of Mark's eyes. Recovering, she threw back her head with a proud, unstudied grace, and shook it fiercely.

"Lèla no thief!" she cried with flashing eyes.

"Aye, she's right there," agreed the boy. "Natives don't value pearls, and she'd just refused a heap of trinkets that were far more precious in her eyes. Why should she steal from us things she could pick out of the lagoon?"

A derisive smile curved the other's cruel mouth.

"You fool!" he spat out the words with eager haste. "O' course she took 'em, so's we'd have to stop here to gather more. Can't ye see her darned artfulness? She didn't want us to sail away, and to lose her blue-eyed boy. She wanted to enjoy another month of——"

The words were clipped off short as Dave stepped forward and caught him a smashing blow on the jaw, sending him sprawling over the floor. He was up again in a flash, and the next instant the two were locked together in a fierce, struggling embrace which it seemed that death alone could break. To and fro, backward and forward they reeled over the tilting, pitching floor; the one mouthing threats and curses, the other fighting in tight-lipped silence.

Outside, the hurricane was shrieking like a thousand unleashed fiends, and the thunder of the waves on the reef had merged into one long, unbroken roar. But the two fought on unheedful of the warring elements, until a sharp, jarring crash from the bows signaled a mutual truce.

"The cable's parted!" Dave cried as he rose to his feet. "Help make sail if you want to live another hour. We can finish our argument when there's clear sea ahead." And he made for the open door.

The instant his back was turned, Mark drew a pistol from his belt, cocked it, and raised it deliberately until the long, shining barrel pointed straight between the other's shoulder-blades.

"Take that, ye scum!" he snarled as he pressed the trigger.

The crash of the discharge and the smack of the leaden bullet came simultaneously. But the shot had been fired by

a man already in the throes of death. Quick as a pouncing leopard, Lèla had launched her lithe body at the would-be murderer the moment his intention had rushed to her mind. One brown hand closed over the man's wrist, jerking the pistol so that the bullet flew wide; the other rose and fell twice, sideways, with a flash of steel. Making a convulsive movement, Mark crumpled forward on his outstretched hands, then slowly slid to the deck, coughing out his life with the hilt of a native dagger protruding just below his armpit.

With a glance of silent gratitude to the girl, Dave hastened out on deck. There came a quick succession of shouted orders, the thudding of many bare feet on the deck; then the wild pitching gave place to the steady slant of a ship under sail, and the roar of the breakers grew fainter.

Turning my eyes shoreward, I saw that the foam-ringed island was slipping past as the ship gathered way. Patches of waving green appeared amid the tossing waters—the tropic brilliancy of the sky gave place to a duller hue, as the scene faded like breath upon a window-pane. I realized that I was looking out on the trees of my own garden, and that someone was gripping my shoulder and shaking me to and fro.

"WAKE up, old man! Are you having nightmares in the daytime?"

I slowly raised myself to a sitting posture. George, his hand still upon my shoulder, was looking down at me with an expression of concern on his usually cheerful countenance.

"You've been pulling such pretty faces during the last ten minutes that I thought it a kindness to wake you up," he told me. "You looked as though you were seeing more spooks."

"That's just what I have been seeing," I answered, and then went on to tell him what had occurred. At the conclusion he gave a little cough.

"It's queer, of course—very queer," he murmured, shaking a smiling head at me. "Still, if you will persist in eating heavy lunches this hot weather——"

"Wait a moment before you laugh," I warned him as I rose to my feet. "Lend me your pocket-knife."

He did so, being careful, I noticed, to keep the width of the table between us. Opening the largest blade, I stepped onto the top of the locker and began to pry among the carved foliage which ornamented the junction of the wall and roof.

"I say," began George, "what's the big idea?"

"This!"

I thrust my hand into the space which had at that moment been revealed by the opening of the cunningly contrived door, and drew out a leather bag.

"You mean that it is true—really true?" stammered George, his eyes beginning to bulge.

"Judge for yourself," I returned in a tone of very pardonable triumph as I severed the thong which bound the mouth of the bag, and shot the contents out on the table.

There, with their satiny luster somewhat dulled by their dark hiding-place, but scarcely less precious for that, lay a heap of shimmering pearls.

# Cross of Fire

By LESTER DEL REY

*A strange tale of the Undead*

THAT rain! Will it never stop? My clothes are soaked, my body frozen. But at least the lightning is gone. Strange; I haven't seen it since I awoke. There was lightning, I think. I can't seem to remember anything clearly, yet I am sure there was a fork of light in the sky; no, not a fork; it was like a cross.

That's silly, of course. Lightning can't form a cross. It must have been a dream while I was lying there in the mud. I don't recall how I came there, either. Perhaps I was ambushed and robbed, then left lying there until the rain brought me to. But my head doesn't hurt; the pain is in my shoulder, a sharp, jabbing ache. No, I couldn't have been robbed; I still have my ring, and there is money in my pocket.

I wish I could remember what happened. When I try to think, my brain refuses. There is some part of it that doesn't want to remember. Now why should that be? There. . . . No, it's gone again. It must have been another dream; it had to be. Horrible!

Now I must find shelter from the rain. I'll make a fire when I get home and stop trying to think until my mind is rested. Ah, I know where home is. This can't be so terrible if I know that. . . .

There, I have made a fire and my clothes are drying before it. I was right; this is my home. And I'm Karl Hahrhöffer. Tomorrow I'll ask in the village how I came here. The people in Altdorf are my friends. Altdorf! When I am not trying to think, things come back a little. Yes, I'll go to the village tomorrow. I'll need food, anyway, and there are no provisions in the house.

But that is not strange. When I arrived here, it was boarded and nailed shut, and I spent nearly an hour trying to get in. Then my feet guided me to the cellar, and it was not locked. My muscles sometimes know better than my brain. And sometimes they trick me. They would have led me deeper into the cellar instead of up the steps to this room.

Dust and dirt are everywhere, and the furniture seems about to fall apart. One might think no one had lived here for a century. Perhaps I have been away from Altdorf a long time, but surely I can't have lived away while all this happened. I find a mirror. There should be one over there, but it's gone; no matter, a tin pan of water will serve.

Not a mirror in the house. I used to like my reflection, and found my face fine and aristocratic. I've changed. My face is but little older, but the eyes are hard, the lips thin and red, and there is something unpleasant about my expression. When I smile, the muscles twist crookedly before they attempt my old cockiness. Sister Flämchen used to love my smile.

There is a bright red wound on my shoulder, like a burn. It must have been the lightning, after all. Perhaps it was that cross of fire in the sky I seem to remember. It shocked my brain badly, then left me on the soggy earth until the cold revived me.

But that does not explain the condition of the house, nor where old Fritz has gone.

Flämchen may have married and gone away, but Fritz would have stayed with me. I may have taken him to America with me, but what became of him then? Yes, I was going to America before . . . before something happened. I must have gone and been away longer than I look to have been. In ten years much might happen to a deserted house. And Fritz was old. Did I bury him in America?

They may know in Altdorf. The rain has stopped and there is a flush of dawn in the sky. I'll go down soon. But now I am growing sleepy. Small wonder, with all I have been through. I'll go upstairs and sleep for a little while before going to the village. The sun will be up in a few minutes.

No, fool legs, to the left! The right leads back to the cellar, not the bedroom. Up! The bed may not be the best now, but the linens should keep well, and I should be able to sleep there. I can hardly keep my eyes open long enough to reach it.

I MUST have been more tired than I thought, since it's dark again. Extreme fatigue always brings nightmares, too. They've faded out, as dreams do, but they must have been rather gruesome, from the impression left behind. And I woke up ravenously hungry.

It is good that my pockets are well filled with money. It would take a long time to go to Edeldorf where the bank is. Now it won't be necessary for some time. This money seems odd, but I suppose the coinage has changed while I was gone. How long have I been away?

The air is cool and sweet after yesterday's rain, but the moon is hidden. I've picked up an aversion to cloudy nights. And something seems wrong with the road to the village. Of course it would change, but it seems to have been an unusually great change for ten years or so.

Ah, Altdorf! Where the Burgermeister's house was, there is now some shop with a queer pump in front of it—gasoline. Much that I cannot recall ever seeing before, my mind seems to recognize, even to expect. Changes all around me, yet Altdorf has not changed as greatly as I feared. There is the tavern, beyond is the food store, and down the street is the wine shop. Excellent!

No, I was wrong; Altdorf has not changed, but the people have. I don't recognize any of them, and they stare at me most unpleasantly. They should be my friends; the children should run after me for sweets. Why should they fear me? Why should that old woman cry out and draw her children into the house as I pass? Why are the lights turned out as I approach and the streets deserted? Could I have become a criminal in America? I had no leaning toward crime. They must mistake me for someone else; I do look greatly different.

The storekeeper seems familiar, but younger and altered in subtle ways from the one I remember. A brother, perhaps. "Don't run away, you fool! I won't hurt you. I only wish to purchase some vegetables and provisions. Let me see—no, no beef. I am no robber, I will pay you. See, I have money."

His face is white, his hands tremble. Why does he stare at me when I order such common things? "For myself, of course. For whom else should I buy these? My larder is empty. Yes, that will do nicely."

If he would stop shaking; must he look back to that door so furtively? Now his back is turned, and his hands grope up as if he were crossing himself. Does he think one sells one's soul to the devil by going to America?

"No, not that, storekeeper. Its color is the most nauseous red I've seen. And some coffee and cream, some sugar, some—yes, some liverwurst and some of that

brown sausage. I'd like some bacon, but cut out the lean—I want only the fat. Blutwurst? No, never. What a thought! Yes, I'll take it myself, if your boy is sick. It *is* a long walk to my place. If you'll lend me that wagon, I'll return it tomorrow. . . . All right, I'll buy it.

"How much? No, of course I'll pay. This should cover it, if you won't name a price. Do I have to throw it at you? Here, I'll leave it on the counter. Yes, you can go."

Now why should the fool scuttle off as if I had the plague?

That might be it. They would avoid me, of course, if I had had some contagious disease. Yet surely I couldn't have returned here alone, if I had been sick. No, that doesn't explain it.

Now the wine-dealer. He is a young man, very self-satisfied. Perhaps he will act sensibly. At least he doesn't run, though his skin blanches. "Yes, some wine."

He isn't surprised as much as the storekeeper; wine seems a more normal request than groceries. "No, white port, not the red. Don't look so surprised, man. White port and light tokay. Yes, that brand will do if you haven't the other. And a little cognac. These evenings are so cool. Your money. . . . Very well."

He doesn't refuse the money, nor hesitate to charge double for his goods. But he picks it up with a hesitant gesture and then dumps the change into my hand without counting it out. There must be something in my looks that the water did not reveal last night. He stands staring at me so fixedly as I draw my wagon away. Next time I shall buy a good mirror, but I have had enough of this village for the time.

NIGHT again. This morning I lay down before sunrise, expecting to catch a little sleep before exploring the house, but again it was dark before I awoke. Well, I have candles enough; it makes little difference whether I explore the place by day or night.

Hungry as I am, it seems an effort to swallow the food, and the taste is odd and unfamiliar, as if I had eaten none of it for a long time. But then, naturally the foods in America would not be the same. I am beginning to believe that I was away longer than I thought. The wine is good, though. It courses through my veins like new life.

And the wine dispels the lurking queerness of the nightmares. I had hoped that my sleep would be dreamless, but they came again, this time stronger. Some I half remember. Flämchen was in one, Fritz in several.

That is due to my being back in the old house. And because the house has changed so unpleasantly, Fritz and Flämchen have altered into the horrible travesties I see in my dreams.

Now to look over the house. First the attic, then the cellar. The rest of it I have seen, and it is little different except for its anachronistic appearance of age. Probably the attic will be the same, though curiosity and idleness urge me to see.

These stairs must be fixed; the ladder looks too shaky to risk. It seems solid enough, though. Now the trap-door—ah, it opens easily. But what is that odor? Garlic—or the age-worn ghost of garlic. The place reeks of it; there are little withered bunches of it tied everywhere.

Someone must have lived up here once. There is a bed and a table, with a few soiled dishes. That refuse might have been food once. And that old hat was one that Fritz always wore. The cross on the wall and the Bible on the table were Flämchen's. My sister and Fritz must have shut themselves up here after I was gone. More mysteries. If that is true, they may have died here. The villagers must know of them. Perhaps there is one

who will tell me. That wine-dealer might, for a price.

There is little to hold me here, unless the table drawer has secrets it will surrender. Stuck! The rust and rotten wood cannot be wrong. I must have been away more years than I thought. Ah, there it comes. Yes, there is something here, a book of some sort. *Diary of Fritz August Schmidt.* This should give me a clue, if I can break the clasp. There should be tools in the work-room.

But first I must explore the cellar. It seems strange that the door should have been open there when all the rest were so carefully nailed shut. If I could only remember how long I've been gone!

How easily my feet lead me down into the cellar! Well, let them have their way this once. Perhaps they know more than my memory tells. They guided me here well enough before. Tracks in the dust! A man's shoe-print. Wait. . . . Yes, they match perfectly; they are mine. Then I came down here before the shock. Ah, that explains the door. I came here, opened that, and walked about. Probably I was on my way to the village when the storm came up. Yes, that must be it. And that explains why my legs moved so surely to the cellar entrance. Muscular habits are hard to break.

But why should I have stayed here so long? The tracks go in all directions, and they cover the floor. Surely there is nothing to hold my interest here. The walls are bare, the shelves crumbling to pieces, and not a sign of anything unusual anywhere. No, there is something; that board shouldn't be loose, where the tracks all meet again. How easily it comes away in my hand!

Now why should there be a pit dug out behind the wall, when the cellar is still empty? Perhaps something is hidden here. The air is moldy and sickening inside. Somewhere I've smelled it before, and the association is not pleasant. Ah, now I can see. There's a box there, a large one, and heavy. Inside. . . . A coffin, open and empty!

Someone buried here? But that is senseless; it is empty. Too, the earth would have been filled in. No, there is something wrong here. Strange things have gone on in this house while I have been away. The house is too old, the villagers fear me, Fritz shut himself up in the attic, this coffin is hidden here; somehow they must be connected. And I must find that connection.

This was an unusually fine coffin once; the satin lining is still scarcely soiled, except for those odd brown blotches. Mold, perhaps, though I've never seen it harden the cloth before; it looks more like blood. Evidently I'll not find my connection here. But there still remains the diary. Somewhere there has to be an answer. I'll break that clasp at once, and see if my questions are settled there.

THIS time, reading and work have given me no chance to sleep through the day as before. It is almost night again, and I am still awake.

Yes, the diary held the answer. I have burned it now, but I could recite it from memory. Memory! How I hate that word! Mercifully, some things are still only half clear; my hope now is that I may never remember fully. How I have remained sane this long is a miracle beyond comprehension. If I had not found the diary, things might . . . but better this way.

The story is complete now. At first as I read Fritz's scrawl it was all strange and unbelievable; but the names and events jogged my memory until I was living again the nightmare I read. I should have guessed before. The sleeping by day, the age of the house, the lack of mirrors, the action of the villagers, my appearance—a hundred things—all should have told me what I had been. The story is told all too clearly by

the words Fritz wrote before he left the attic.

My plans had been made, and I was to leave for America in three days when I met a stranger the villagers called the "Night Lady." Evil things had been whispered of her, and they feared and despised her, but I would have none of their superstition. For me she had an uncanny fascination. My journey was forgotten, and I was seen with her at night until even my priest turned against me. Only Fritz and Flämchen stayed with me.

When I "died," the doctors called it anemia, but the villagers knew better. They banded together and hunted until they found the body of the woman. On her they used a hartshorn stake and fire. But my coffin had been moved; though they knew I had become a monster, they could not find my body.

Fritz knew what would happen. The old servant sealed himself and Flämchen in the attic away from me. He could not give up hopes for me, though. He had a theory of his own about the Undead. "It is not death," he wrote, "but a possession. The true soul sleeps, while the demon who has entered the body rules instead. There must be some way to drive out the fiend without killing the real person, as our Lord did to the man possessed. Somehow, I must find that method."

That was before I returned and lured Flämchen to me. Why is it that we—such as I was—must prey always on those whom we loved? Is it not enough to lie writhing in the hell the usurper has made of our body without the added agonies of seeing one's friends its victims?

When Flämchen joined me in Undeath, Fritz came down from his retreat. He came willingly if not happily to join us. Such loyalty deserved a better reward. Wretched Flämchen, miserable Fritz!

They came here last night, but it was almost dawn, and they had to go back. Poor, lustful faces, pressed against the broken windows, calling me to them! Since they have found me, they will surely be back. It is night again, and they should be here any moment now. Let them come. My preparations are made, and I am ready. We have stayed together before, and will vanish together tonight.

A torch is lit and within reach, and the dry old floor is covered with rags and oil to fire the place. On the table I have a gun loaded with three bullets. Two of them are of silver, and on each a cross is cut deeply. If Fritz were right, only such bullets may kill a vampire, and in all other things he has proved correct.

Once I, too, should have needed the argent metal, but now this simple bit of lead will serve as well. Fritz's theory was correct.

That cross of lightning, which drove away the demon possessing my body, brought my real soul back to life; once a vampire, again I became a man. But almost I should prefer the curse to the memories it has left.

Ah, they have returned. They are tapping at the door I have unfastened, moaning their blood-lust as of old.

"Come in, come in. It is not locked. See, I am ready for you. No, don't draw back from the gun. Fritz, Flämchen, you should welcome this. . . ."

How peaceful they look now! Real death is so clean. But I'll drop the torch on the tinder, to make doubly sure. Fire is cleanest of all things. Then I shall join them. . . . This gun against my heart seems like an old friend; the pull of the trigger is like a soft caress.

Strange. The pistol flame looks like a cross. . . . Flämchen . . . the cross . . . so clean!


Where crafty gnomes with scarlet eyes conspire
To quench Aldebaran's affronting fire,
Low sparkling just beyond their cavern's mouth.
—Sterling: *A Wine of Wizardry.*

# The Watcher at the Door

By HENRY KUTTNER

*A brief, shuddery story about the horror that haunted Keene's dreams*

THE house was loathsomely old. I felt that from the first. I am not usually sensitive to such impressions, but the tall gambreled house in which Edward Keene was staying seemed to exhale a perceptible miasma of dusty antiquity. The house was set in a little valley in the New England hills, all alone, and Keene had leased it for the summer in order to have a headquarters in which to complete a series of paintings of the countryside and landmarks.

I was spending my vacation in New York, and drove down one Sunday to see Keene, whom I knew well. He came to the door of the house and greeted me, and I was shocked at the pallor of his face and the feverish brightness of his eyes. After greeting me with pleasure that nevertheless showed a trace of reticence, he led me along a narrow, dingy hall to his studio. We smoked and chatted for almost an hour before the lurking terror in Keene's eyes was explained.

He broke in suddenly on some unimportant retrospection of mine. Leaning forward, he put one thin hand on my knee for emphasis, and said hurriedly, "Johnny, do I look insane? I've been to a doctor, and he could find nothing wrong—but something is wrong. Do I——"

"A touch of flu?" I suggested. "You may have been working too hard, Ed. But why insanity?"

He looked at me hard. "I'll tell you, I've been wanting to tell somebody, anyway—all about it, from the first moment I noticed there weren't any rats."

I stared, and he smiled crookedly.

"This house is very old. A witch was supposed to have died here in the old days. And in houses as dilapidated as this you naturally expect rats. See?"

I nodded, and Keene's eyes went past me to the doorway. The door, I saw suddenly, was open, although I thought I had closed it on entering.

The most horrible expression appeared for a moment on Keene's face—and was gone, so swiftly I could not analyze it. I felt an unfamiliar chill creep along my spine as he continued.

"No rats. No spiders. No insects. There's no life in the house, except for me. The woodwork creaks sometimes, though—at night."

"You're a victim of a bad case of nerves," I said. "Woodwork creaking! You'll be telling me next there's a ghost in the house."

"Yes," he said. "There is."

For a moment I didn't say anything. And Keene went on swiftly, as though to forestall my comments.

"It happened the first week I stayed here. You know the long hallway that runs the length of the house? Come here." He got up, motioned me to the door, and stood waiting. I hesitated and then preceded him from the room, noticing that his eyes were fixed with curious steadiness upon the threshold.

The hallway was dark, and looking along it I got the impression of an incredibly long tunnel, stretching to infinite depths.

"What am I supposed to see, Ed?" I asked.

He shrugged and drew me back into the room.

"Nothing I suppose. I could scarcely expect——" His white face was intensely serious. "Did you see nothing at all, not even a suspicion of any movement?"

"No. You're coming back to town with me—to a doctor."

"Always practical," he said, shrugging. "I've tried that. It doesn't help. Well — I was telling you what happened. A few nights after I came here I—dreamed.

"I WAS very tired and sleepy, but in the dream I moved with a curious lightness, as though not bound by gravitation. My bed's here"—he pointed to a cot under the window—"and in the dream I seemed to get up and go to the door, which opened, very slowly, as I approached. Moonlight came in through the window, but in the hall it was black as pitch. I felt my way, running my hand over the wall on the right side of the passage. Remember that.

"On my right, bare woodwork—and old, horribly old. I felt something under my fingers as I moved along—a carved panel of wood, and, involuntarily groping for the doorknob, my fingers closed over a heavy metal latch of some kind. I hesitated—and then, even in my dream, I remembered. There's no door in that wall.

"Of course," he said, checking my comment with an uplifted hand, "just a dream. But I can't hope to convey the sense of shock, the horrible disorientation of the moment. Then, too, I heard something that was quite distinctly not the disturbing creaking of the woodwork around me —a soft, rubbing sound, as though of some heavy body scraping itself against the door; and I felt the latch quiver in my hand.

"Almost involuntarily I compressed the latch, and abruptly the door was flung open—pulled violently away from me. Remember, I could see nothing. Just blackness—and two little points of light that sprang into existence just ahead of my face. Amber lights, like the eyes of a cat. Then I woke up."

Keene watched me closely, and I forced from my face the concern that I felt. "You need a rest," I said. "This house *is* old—but I always thought you were pretty hard-headed, Ed." I laughed, and a flash of anger crossed his face. It was gone swiftly.

"Trying to laugh me out of it? I wish it would work. No—when I asked you if you saw anything in the hall, I wanted to find out if you saw what I did."

"And that is?"

"Eyes. Amber cat's-eyes, watching me. I can see them now, in the doorway. Two disembodied eyes." He began to tremble violently, and I realized the intense nervous strain under which he labored. "Good God, can't you understand how I've fought against it, told myself the damned things can't exist? That it's hallucination, and if I don't want to lose my mind I'll have to ignore them—and they watch, they watch me, always! No expression in them. Always keeping the same distance ahead of me—but they can't cross the threshold of this room. I don't know why."

I saw that Keene was mad, or going mad.

He got up and strode about the room, his gaze continually returning to the doorway. I went to the door, intending to close it, but his voice stopped me.

"No—don't! It's worse when it's shut. I can't tell what it's doing, but I know it's behind there. And when I open the door it'll be waiting. If it would only give me some hint of its purpose—what it wants, what it intends to do! Am I mad, Johnny?"

"No," I said. "But you're on the right road, unless you come to town with me and see a doctor—a specialist maybe."

"It's no good." His haggard face was covered with perspiration. "It follows me. Even in the doctor's office I could see those two cat's-eyes, watching—*he* couldn't see

them. Gave me pills, the fool—and wanted to send me to a sanitarium." Keene laughed wildly. "Oh, no—I know what would happen there. I'd break and start raving, and then they'd put me in a strait-jacket, and I'd have to lie there and watch the eyes without being able to move. I'd go crazy then, all right."

"Listen, Ed," I commanded. "You've got to snap out of it. You've got sense enough to know that this is a hallucination, caused by overwork, perhaps. The thing to do is to get *you* in good condition, not your imaginary eyes."

KEENE was watching the doorway.

"Imaginary eyes," he repeated. "*Imaginary eyes*—God, what a huge joke! The worst of it is I don't know whether I'm right or you are—whether I'm going crazy, or——" He stopped suddenly, a violent shudder shaking his slender frame. His dark eyes were haunted.

"Overwork might have caused it," I said, realizing that I had to get Keene to a doctor as soon as possible. "Or nervous strain—eh?"

"I've not been under a nervous strain," he murmured. "Not till that dream. If you want to know what caused it, come here!"

There was another door in the room and he led me to this, opening it. Twilight was falling over the valley—a somber, brooding hush had dropped upon the hills, stilling even the bird-songs. Keene stepped into a weed-covered garden and drew me along the side of the house.

"See that?" he asked, pointing. I could see nothing but the bare, rotting wood, flaked and withered by the weather. I told him as much.

"Oh, there's nothing to see. That's the worst of it. As nearly as I remember, that's the point in the hallway where, in my dream, I opened the door. And look here."

He nodded toward a crumbled wooden slab, half embedded in the weeds, a few feet away. I bent low, straining my eyes in the twilight.

"*Ori—ori* something," I said. "I can't make it out."

"*Origo mali,*" Keene completed. "That's all. The origin of the evil."

He turned back to the house, and, back within the studio room, lit an old-fashioned oil lamp. His eyes were startlingly black in the sickly yellow of his face that shone, mask-like in the lamplight.

"I'm not sure, of course," he told me, pulling a chair up to a rickety table. "But remember I mentioned that a witch was once supposed to have lived in this house?"

I nodded.

"She died here, too. I wandered around the hills, and visited a few farms. One old man told me a lot. Just tales, and fragmentary; he'd had them from *his* father. About an old woman who lived here long ago, and died and was buried outside the house. I rather imagine"—he watched me closely—"that that slab you just saw is what's left of her headstone."

His eyes went to the threshold, and a muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched. Involuntarily I turned my head.

Only the dark rectangle of the doorway was there, of course.

"I haven't told you the worst," Keene said. He pillowed his head on his arms, and the table creaked under his weight. His voice came muffled. "I get sleepy, at the first hint of nightfall. Every night since that first one I've dreamed."

I looked at the top of his head, and saw, with a sudden shock, that there were gray hairs among the glossy black ones.

"Ed," I said to him sharply. "You're coming——"

"I dream," he interrupted me dully. "Each night I have the same dream. I go down the passage in the darkness till I feel that cold metal latch under my hand.

The door opens, and I don't wake up, as I did the first time. Nor do I see the amber eyes. They're in the hall, at my side. . . ."

HIS VOICE died away in a mumble, and his head rolled aside. But before I could move he went on almost inaudibly. "I've got to go in the—whatever it is. Not a room. I've got to step across the threshold, pass that doorway that doesn't exist—there's a horrible compulsion pushing me—and . . . each night I step a little further toward it. Last night I put one foot over the threshold. . . ."

For a long time there was utter silence. Woodwork creaked eerily around me. The lamp burned unevenly, casting heavy, misshapen shadows on the walls. I thought of that hideous little wooden slab outside the house, and shivered. The drive back to town would not be a pleasant one.

Minutes passed. Suddenly Keene spoke again, halting me as I was about to rise from my chair.

"The witch died. She couldn't live forever. But she had discovered a way to live again—not her body, buried and long ago rotted into dust, but her soul. She waited in her grave for someone to enter this house.

"They came at last, but only after a long time, for the witch had been feared. From the grave a spell was cast upon that man, so that he dreamed of a door. The moment the door was opened . . . he was doomed. No matter where he fled, he would dream again . . . and again . . . until finally, in his dream, he would step over the threshold.

"When he did that, his body would be vacant, and the soul of the witch would enter it."

I heard a faint noise from behind me. I turned to stare at the doorway. Black emptiness.

The low voice droned on.

"'Such changes are not easily wrought. A strong vessel, a strong body, was needed to survive the metamorphosis and hold the soul of the witch. The first man died . . . and many others died . . . and still the witch had found no body strong enough to hold her soul."

"Listen!" I said peremptorily, and stared at the doorway. I had heard something that sounded like the rattling of metal.

Then, unmistakably, I heard a door slam. I got up quickly, realizing that my breath no longer came evenly. Without moving I waited, watching the doorway. But there was no further sound.

KEENE had lifted his head, and was staring at me. For a moment the horrible thing escaped me. Then I saw, and, I think, I screamed.

Keene's face had changed. Like a dark veil, impalpable and intangible, an expression was upon it that I can only describe as sheer evil. It was still Keene's face, but it was at the same time the face of a demon. But it wasn't that which sent abysmal horror lancing through me, making me shudder with frightful nausea. The eyes that stared from Keene's ghastly face were no longer dark—*they were amber cat's-eyes!*

It is difficult for me to remember what happened after that. I think the monster that was Keene rose up from the table, and smiled very terribly, piercing me with those demoniac eyes. I think I screamed again, as I remembered the sound from the hall—the sound of a door slamming—and realized that Edward Keene had dreamed again, and had stepped over the fearsome threshold he had dreaded so much. And I know that the light suddenly faded from the amber eyes, and a lean body collapsed on the floor and lay quite still . . . and when I finally forced myself to feel for a pulse there was none.

That was two nights ago. I left the

witchhouse and drove like mad to the city, seeking only to escape the tentacles of fear that had closed around me. As I drove I kept remembering words I had heard: ". . . . a strong body was needed to hold the soul of the witch. The first man died . . . and many others died. . . ."

What thing had spoken to me with Edward Keene's lips? There can be but one answer, and it is an answer so fantastic that no sane man could entertain the possibility of its accuracy. But I am no longer sane.

At least, I hope I am not sane. For if what I saw in the witch-house was more than the crazy phantoms of a disordered mind, the fate that overtook Edward Keene is one on which I dare not speculate. Also, sitting here alone in this modern hotel room in Boston, I keep remembering certain phrases: "From the grave a spell was cast on that man, so that he dreamed of a door.

"The moment that the door was opened . . . he was doomed . . . he would dream again and again until finally he would step over the threshold. . . ."

I DREAMED last night. In a modern hotel, in modern Boston. I dreamed of a dark passage along which I fumbled my way, and of a latch that turned beneath my hand . . . and of a door that opened.

As I write, my eyes stray to the doorway of my bedroom, and the amber points of light I see there.

It is twilight. An irresistible drowsiness has crept up and overwhelmed me. My head nods continually, and my eyelids are very heavy. Presently I shall fall asleep and dream of a threshold beyond which waits horror unimaginable.

And that is something I cannot and dare not face.

So—I suppose—I must kill myself.

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# Harbor Whistles

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Over old roofs and past decaying spires
The harbor whistles chant all through the night;
Throats from strange ports, and beaches far and white,
And fabulous oceans, ranged in motley choirs,
Each to the other alien and unknown,
Yet all, by some obscurely-focussed force
From brooding gulfs beyond the Zodiac's course,
Fused into one mysterious cosmic drone.

Through shadowy dreams they send a marching line
Of still more shadowy shapes and hints and views;
Echoes from outer voids, and subtle clues
To things which they themselves cannot define.
And always in that chorus, faintly blent,
We catch some notes no earth-ship ever sent.

"Her other hand suddenly caught the puppet in a crushing grip."

# "Not Both!"

By FRANCES GARFIELD

*A brief weird story about a wax image, and a flaming jealousy that over-reached itself*

MARGARET TERRILL bent over her typewriter and stared at the envelope she was addressing, but her eyes did not focus. It would never do, she told herself desperately, to let fear choke her like this—not at the office, anyway. Better wait until she got back to her little room-and-a-half flat in the East End, and then collapse. But now——

She opened the top drawer of the desk. There it lay, a folded gray sheet, as she had drawn it from the envelope that morning:

*Miss Terrill,*

*I have given you a week. Three days of it are gone. I hate you.*

She lifted her right hand and shakily rumpled her wheat-blond curls, that gave her a false appearance of shallow gayety. The first note, day before yesterday, she'd thought a practical joke. It said that some unsigned enemy had made a waxen image of her, would burn it a trifle each day, inflict slow pin-stabs of torture. She, too, would know burning, stabbing pains. And on the last day of the week, as flames consumed the wax to the final atom, Margaret Terrill, also, would perish.

The second letter was three words: *I hate you.*

Margaret shuddered. The new throbbing ache, that made her left arm almost

helpless, seemed to find and explore her shoulder and chest. It was all foolish, of course, but she must tell someone. Would Gene Hilton, her employer and lover, understand if she told him? Or would he laugh? She felt she could not endure it if he laughed.

"Are you ill, Miss Terrill?"

The voice came from the desk opposite where sat Truda Fitzner, Gene Hilton's other secretary. She was slender, dark, mousy, of indeterminate age. Behind their thick lenses, her eyes were knowing and concerned.

"I'll?" repeated Margaret. "I—well, I don't know, Miss Fitzner——"

'Tell me." The almost spider-thin figure of the other woman rose from behind the desk and came forward. Truda Fitzner looked very efficient, cool, wise. Would she understand? Margaret began to talk, tremblingly but trustfully. She told everything about the three strange letters. "I know you'll laugh," she finished in almost a wail, "and you'll think I'm making it all up——"

"I won't laugh," said Truda Fitzner gravely. She was perching on the edge of Margaret's desk. With one thin brown hand she felt in a pocket of her neat tailored jacket. She exhibited for a moment an envelope—square, gray, with upon it a scrawled address in a hand that Margaret knew.

"What's that?" Margaret gasped. "Where did you get it? It looks like——"

Truda Fitzner thrust the letter back out of sight. "Yes, it looks like the notes you've received. You see, I've been getting them, too."

But she did not sound upset, only grave and gentle. Her spectacled eyes concentrated assurance as they stared into Margaret's wide blue ones. "Now," Truda Fitzner was continuing, "I would rationalize it like this: Someone hates you, and knows only that you work in this office. So, to make sure of frightening you, that person learns both our names and addresses——"

"Wait," interrupted Margaret, her voice steadier than it had been. "Someone hates me, you think, without knowing how I look? Doesn't what you just said prove that it may be you who are being hated?"

Truda Fitzner shook her mousy head. "Do I look like someone who would be hated?" she asked. "Am I dangerous? Would I make anyone jealous?"

Margaret felt the throb in her half-paralyzed left arm growing stronger and faster again. "You think, then, that somebody is jealous of me?"

"Undoubtedly," nodded Truda Fitzner. "And I can guess, perhaps, who that somebody is." She paused, as if to gather effect. "Mrs. Hilton!"

"Why," choked Margaret, "why——"

"I can't help but know," the other woman told her. "I've been a secretary, and a good one, to Gene Hilton for the past five years. It follows that I must know that his wife bores him, and that he turned to you when you brought all this beauty into the office."

"It's true," decided Margaret at once. "Aline Hilton is doing this—black magic—against me. She must be crazy."

"She must be," agreed Truda Fitzner. "Nobody believes that pain can be transferred from a wax puppet to a living enemy, except someone whose mind is all awry." Margaret started to speak, but Truda Fitzner stopped her with a lifted hand, as small and slender as a doll's. "I know what you're going to say. Your arm hurts—yes, I've seen you rubbing and favoring it."

"You must be a detective!" cried Margaret, but Truda Fitzner laughed and shook her head again.

"No, Miss Terrill—only a good secretary who keeps her near-sighted eyes open. But let me go on. Don't connect that sore

arm with threats of supernatural revenge. It's probably only a sprain, something you wouldn't notice if you weren't upset."

"You make me feel better, Miss Fitzner," Margaret confessed. "Shall we keep this a secret?"

"If you like, unless you want to tell Mr. Hilton."

"I thought of that. And, if his wife is really doing such an insane thing——"

"Yes," agreed Truda Fitzner, and rose from her perch on the edge of the desk. "He ought to be warned about his wife."

"I'll tell him," said Margaret, "this very day."

MARGARET and Gene Hilton were at tea, but they did not eat or drink. Hilton, his usually cheerful face gone stern, was glaring at the gray letter.

"It doesn't look like Aline's hand," he remarked, "but she'd disguise that, of course." He tore the sheet across, then tore it again. He crumpled the pieces savagely on the table beside his teacup.

"You're right," he told Margaret. "Only Aline would have the cause to make such wild threats—and such idiocy. Well, I'm going to take steps right now."

"What will you do?" asked Margaret.

"I'll talk to Aline." They rose from the table. "Is Truda gone from the office? Then go back and wait for me. I won't be long."

"Gene!" She put her right hand on his arm. Her left arm was hurting almost unbearably. "Do be careful."

"What about?" he demanded. "We're not in hiding any more, sweetheart. Aline knows about us, and her idea of reprisal—of spoiling our love story—is this fantastic voodooism." The waiter came with the check, and Hilton put a bill on the table. "Good-bye for the moment, Margaret."

They separated outside. She walked down the street to the office. He got into his car, touched the starter and shifted gears purposefully, then sped away to the uptown apartment building where he lived.

He grated his key in the lock of his home apartment. Inside, the parlor was dim and spacious. His wife looked up from the divan where she sat painting her nails the color of stale blood. She was babyishly pretty, over-coiffured and over-dressed, with too much make-up on.

"Home so soon?" she smiled.

"Yes—for the last time." He strode in and towered above her. "I've found out what you're doing."

"What I'm doing?" Her plucked eyebrows lifted in mystified arches. "You sound mad, Gene."

"It's you who's mad—mad as a hatter." He pointed a forefinger, with the fierce triumph of an attorney who has confused a witness. "This witchcraft, Aline—this torturing of a wax doll to hurt Margaret——"

"Margaret?" she echoed, childishly. "Who's Margaret?"

"Don't be crafty, Aline," he stormed suddenly. "It's mighty unconvincing. You know who she is, you know what you're trying to do." His eyes blazed. "I don't fear such hocus-pocus in the least, and I never did. But I consider you a cruel, murderous enemy to a sweet and honest girl, exactly as though there were real power in the thing you're trying."

Aline rose to her feet. She was suddenly as dignified as such a woman could be.

"I've suspected that you had a sweetheart, Gene," she said, "and I knew that we wouldn't make a go of it much longer. But I haven't tried to do anything——"

"That's a lie," he cut her off savagely. "You know it, and I know it, and there's nothing more to be said or done."

He swung around and almost ran into the bedroom. Dragging a suitcase from the closet he began throwing clothes and toilet articles into it. His wife came to the threshold.

"You're leaving?" she asked stupidly.

"I am," he assured her, and snapped the case shut. Brushing past her, he walked to the front door, then paused with his hand on the knob. "Communicate with Davis at his law office," he told her. "He'll arrange about the money and property. And if you don't start divorce action, I will."

Aline was as pale as a corpse beneath her make-up. "You're mistaken about something, Gene," she said in a low, deadly tone. "Somebody else is doing whatever you accuse me of doing. Go ahead and leave. I knew you would, one of these days. And I hope that—that whatever you think will happen, does happen, and to both of you!"

He did not answer, but hurried out and slammed the door behind him. He, too, was pale, and trembling in every ounce of his substance. His hands were unsteady as he drove back to the office.

MARGARET was sitting at her desk when he entered. She sprang up and ran to him, and they kissed, winning fresh calm and strength from the touch of each other.

"I wish we could go somewhere among friends," he murmured. "We need some understanding companionship. But who?"

"Maybe Miss Fitzner," she said slowly. "Gene, I hope you don't mind, but she knows about us, and about this wax-doll mystery, and she's so kind and understanding——"

He laughed suddenly. "Of course I don't mind," he cried. "Why, Truda's a peach, solid as a sod house and level-headed as a washstand!" His hand slipped under her elbow. "Let's go to her place and let her reason us out of this lousy mood."

They walked out together, and got into Hilton's car. "If Truda can calm us down," said Hilton, as he drew away from the curb, "I'll give her a raise in salary."

"I think she can," smiled Margaret. The ache was subdued in her left arm.

A little later she said, "Aren't you going a bit fast, Gene?"

"Not too fast," he replied easily. "Over here on the West End it's pretty open and trafficless. And the car only seems to be light and happy."

"You must be exceeding the speed limit," she persisted.

"Am I? No, you're only nervous. Look, I think that's Truda's place in the next block . . . hey! It's the steering-gear, gone wrong!"

He wrenched at the wheel. The car plunged forward suddenly. People on the sidewalks turned to stare and shout.

"Stop it!" screamed Margaret. "We'll be wrecked!"

"The brake!" Hilton was crying. "It won't work, either!"

IT WAS bitterly hot in the shade-drawn room of Truda Fitzner. Fire danced in the open grate, but no light seemed to come from those dark, thick flames. Truda Fitzner, sitting in a straight wooden chair, was muttering aloud.

"You won't get him, Margaret Terrill," she said softly, but with exultant assurance. "You won't win him out of my hands."

She had taken off her thick glasses, and her eyes shone like beads of amber, almost feline in their brilliance. One thin hand dangled something before her—a crude little wax image of a woman, carved from a candle, a loop of thread around the neck. It was partially collapsed and melted, as though it had hung in heat, and through one waxen arm was thrust a straight pin.

"You'll never know I did it," chanted Truda Fitzner. "You even confided in me—and I was able to make you my trusting friend, to put the blame on someone else. You're comforted now, Margaret Terrill, but you're going to die. You're as one al-

ready dead. And Gene—Gene, whom I love and have loved since the day I saw him—will turn to me!" Her voice trembled, but grew louder and suddenly shrill. "I know the spell that will bring him on his knees to me, as soon as you're in the ground and forgotten."

The image quivered, as though alive and terrified; but it must have been Truda Fitzner's hand that trembled.

"In three days more—but why wait three days? Why not kill you now?"

Her other hand suddenly caught the puppet in a crushing grip. The wax collapsed and crumpled in her fingers. "All right, Margaret Terrill, Margaret Manstealer!" she cawed. "You die—now!"

The fragments she hurled into the fire. The flames glowed fatly around them, and Truda Fitzner shouted a peal of laughter—a peal suddenly dominated by a great, crashing explosion of sound from without.

The lean little woman drew herself tense in the chair. She gazed quickly around, as though expecting invasion and attack. Then she sprang up and scurried, almost like a mouse, to the front window. She pulled aside a corner of the blind.

A car had struck a lamp-post in front of the house, had turned over. People were crowding around it, prying into it. Two men tugged and heaved, then brought into view a female form. It sagged motionlessly in their arms.

Truda Fitzner emitted a little whinnying cry, something like a laugh.

"It's you!" she mumbled through lips that seemed to swell and sweat with emotion. "You came here and died at my feet, Margaret Terrill! You're dead, dead, and I killed you—oh!"

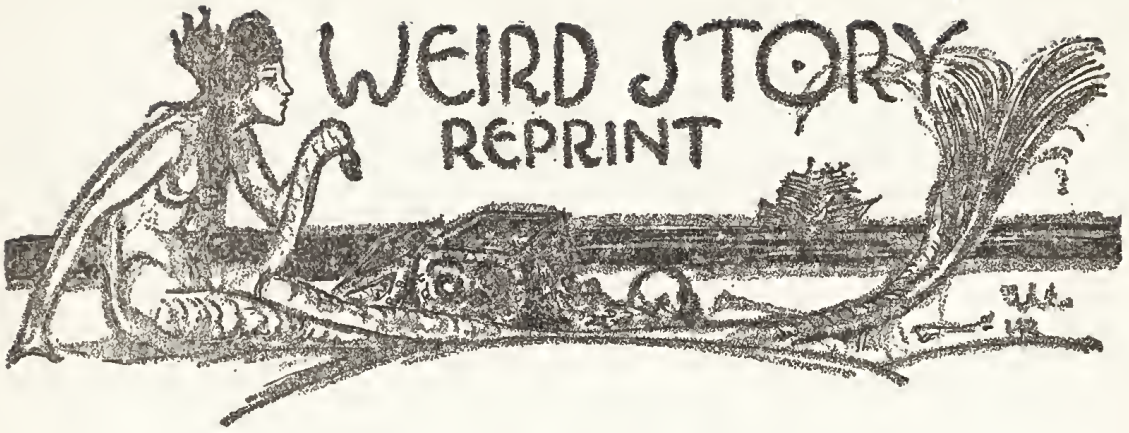
She fell silent, and swayed. Her eyes blurred, but still she could see that other figure that the rescuers were dragging from the wrecked car—could see and recognize. A man this time, slack and broken, his face and clothes almost gloriously bright with blood—Gene Hilton!

"But—but——"

She staggered back from the window. The curtain slipped down and blotted out the scene.

She spoke, as though to a companion who had erred.

"I didn't mean for both to die!" she quavered. *"Not both!"*




# The Dead Soul

By RAOUL LENOIR

SEATED in a steamer chair beneath the gloom of an awning which blotted its sharp shadow across a section of the deck of the river steamer *Amenothes II,* Sternberg, the Austrian, lit a fresh cigarette and repeated his question to the man who sat beside him: "What do you know of Von Schrimm?"

Overhead, the chill disk of the full moon rode high in the void of an unclouded sky, flooding the Egyptian landscape in the weird soft glow of its radiance, so that from the deck the eye roved restfully across a scene of milky whiteness and sharp shadows, the gleaming waters of the Nile, the dark loom of the shore, the delicate tracery of the palm tops and the deep blotches of darkness where their massed shadows fell heavily across the thirsty earth. Even the mud walls and miserable hovels of the fellaheen stood transformed in the enchantment of the white light, freed for a space from the squalor and heat-blistered desolation which the blaze of day so pitilessly revealed.

George Lawson turned toward his questioner. The first interrogation coming sudden and unexpected upon the heels of a long period of silence, had but served to shatter his moonlight revery; its insistent repetition demanded an answer.

"Not much," he admitted. "We met him first on the excursion to the pyramids. We were staying at the Continental and so was he. Chance threw us together a good deal in the various jaunts around Cairo, and our acquaintance developed as a matter of course. He is a lonely man, I fancy. His mind seems so deeply saturated with archeology that he has missed everything else in life. I believe he found our society a pleasant relaxation. He was always a capital companion, even though his conversation is apt to run for ever on his favorite subject."

"Did you arrange to take this river trip together?"

"No, that was quite a coincidence. He left the Continental several days before we did. It was a mutual surprise when we met on board. For the rest, you know as much about him as I do. You have met him and talked to him frequently on this trip. You must admit at the least that he is a gentleman and remarkably well versed in the lore

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of ancient Egypt. But why this questioning?"

Sternberg flicked the stub of his cigarette across the rail into the Nile.

"Mr. Lawson," he said, speaking slowly, as one who measures his words, "you are an American and I presume you are quite capable of managing your own business without outside interference. At the same time I am old enough in body to be your father and old enough in knowledge to be your long-forgotten ancestor, and I am thick-skinned enough to risk insulting you if thereby I may do you a service. There are several reasons for my curiosity, but one is sufficient for the moment. Frankly, it seems to me that this Von Schrimm is far more interested in your wife's society than should be good for your peace of mind."

Lawson flushed angrily.

"Indeed?" he said with frigid politeness.

"Oh, you are insulted, of course," continued Sternberg, calmly lighting a fresh cigarette, "yet if you will be fair, you will see that there is no cause for offense. What I say, I say in the greatest friendship. Were I less of a friend I should keep silent. I do not suggest that your wife is in the slightest degree a party to this situation. I do not believe she suspects it. I will say, however, that Von Schrimm does not beget my confidence. He is a man of powerful personality—of evil personality. If I were you I should view him with suspicion and distrust."

"Mrs. Lawson is quite capable of looking after herself," remarked Lawson, still with some annoyance.

"No woman is capable of looking after herself when dealing with a man of Von Schrimm's type," returned the Austrian calmly. "Have you ever looked into his eyes?"

"Well, his eyes, at least, don't fascinate Hetty. She has even said unkind things about them."

"What did she say?"

"She said that they looked like the eyes of a 'dead soul' and she hated them."

STERNBERG sat up in his chair so suddenly that his glowing cigarette fell from his lips and rolled across the deck.

"Did she say *that?*" he demanded

"Those were the very words she used. Rather original, don't you think—the eyes of a 'dead soul'?"

"Very," answered the Austrian with an emphasis that was lost upon Lawson.

He extracted and lit another cigarette. There was a silence.

"Did you ever meet a 'dead soul'?"

There was an intenseness in the question which caused Lawson to stare at his companion in surprise.

"Good God, no! Did *you?*"

"Once," said the Austrian, quietly. "It was a ghastly business."

"What on earth are you talking about?" cried Lawson in horrified amazement.

"Life is an awful mystery, whichever way you look at it," continued Sternberg imperturbably, speaking in a low voice, almost as though to himself. "We moderns are apt to forget that the ancients came closer to solving some of its mysteries than we with our boasted science have ever done. Even the ancients did not solve the mystery of the soul, but they did discover that man has still several bodily vehicles remaining to him after he has discarded his earth body in the change which we call death. Each of these finer bodies he discards in turn, but they, being possessed of a certain inherent life of their own, do not immediately disintegrate when the 'soul' abandons them. Instead, they drift around more or less aimlessly for indefinite periods. They form the foundation of most of the ghost stories. Sometimes through some tragic disaster a 'soul' is arrested in its evolution and is doomed to wander for vast spaces of time

imprisoned in one of these discarded vehicles. You might call it a 'dead soul'."

"What an awful idea!" said Lawson with a shiver. "Wherever did you unearth that ghastly belief? What conceivable thing could cause the death of a soul?"

Sternberg coolly hunted for another cigarette.

"Did you ever have a nightmare?" he asked grimly.

"Why, yes." Lawson's tone was puzzled.

"Then," pursued the Austrian deliberately, "you will remember that on occasions it has seemed to you that you were hunted through dark corridors and fathomless spaces by nameless horrors from which you strove frantically to escape. On these occasions you have been paralyzed with terror, but always you have awakened in time to save your soul from the clutch of the demons which were upon it, and you have never realized when you awoke how real had been your peril. Now, do you understand how a soul dies?"

"You mean——?"

"Yes, I mean just that. Some people never awaken from their nightmares. They are found dead in their beds. Their 'souls' while absent from their bodies in sleep have been overpowered by some malevolent power and their progress in the scheme of existence indefinitely arrested. These mysterious deaths are popularly ascribed to 'heart failure.' Oh well——"

He rose abruptly, and, crumpling his cigarette into a shapeless mass with nervous fingers, pitched it over the rail. "Let us go around to the other side and join the rest," he said.

They passed round the corner of the deck house and crossed over to the starboard side of the deck, where the majority of the passengers of the *Amenothes II* were clustered in little groups along the rail, chatting and gazing idly into the swirls and sparkles of the silver-splashed water overside.

A little apart from the rest Von Schrimm and Mrs. Lawson were engaged in an animated conversation. He was pointing out across the desert and describing something, evidently humorous, with his characteristic intensity, and as Lawson came into ear-shot the sound of his wife's laugh floated toward him through the stillness of the moonlight.

2

"OH THE devil!"

Lawson leaned across the rail and gazed disgustedly at the low march of sun-smitten thirsty earth that marked the confines of the shallow, turgid river.

The Nile was low, very low for the season, and the gaunt ribs of brown sand and mud which the receding waters were laying bare stretched here and there in full view in the channel, their low ridges crowned with the marshaled rows of river fowl, sleepily digesting their morning catch of fish.

Around these miniature sandy islets the shallow current of the river swept muddily, and in other places the ripple and quiver of the torrent revealed the presence of submerged shoals that formed a constant menace to navigation.

It was on one of these submerged bars that the *Amenothes II* lay stranded. Stranding had become the boat's habit. On her leisurely course up the Nile, since the night when Sternberg and Lawson had sat in the lee of the deck house and wandered in their conversation from Von Schrimm to mystery, stranding had followed stranding with monotonous regularity, and even the most vigilant use of the *medreh* in the hands of the Egyptian pilot seemed powerless to read the soundings in time to prevent disaster.

"Oh, the devil!" Lawson muttered again.

He glared savagely at the toiling efforts

of the native crew. The prospect of another long delay in the hot sun rankled upon him.

Truth to tell, Lawson was tiring of the Nile and of Egypt. The first novelty and interest had long since worn off, and the repeated gazing upon piles of half-obliterated ruins and alleged "wonderful" carvings which to his disenchanted eyes seemed to resemble the crude scrawlings of untaught children more than anything else, had begun to pall upon him.

There were other causes, too, which conspired to render him heartily sick of the trip.

One of these was Von Schrimm—polite, learned and irreproachable as ever, but clothed now, almost against Lawson's will, with the haunting suggestion which Sternberg's words had thrown upon him.

Once—only once—did he attempt to broach the matter to his wife, and the burst of amused laughter with which she met his blundering remarks banished his half-formed doubts and forbade a repetition of the matter.

"Why, George, you dear stupid old goose!" she laughed, playfully pulling his head toward her and planting a kiss upon the tip of his nose; "I believe you are jealous of poor old Von Schrimm. You are simply ridiculous. Why, the poor fellow's heart is as petrified and musty as his knowledge. You know perfectly well that he can talk of nothing but Egypt all the time. Honestly I don't like him—his eyes are creepy—but I feel sorry for him. He seems so lonesome, and no one else appears to take much interest in his stories. Besides, you must remember how good he was in Cairo. It would be awfully insulting to cut him now. Jealous of Von Schrimm? Why, you silly boy, you might as well be jealous of a mummy."

And thus the only attempt that Lawson ever made to put his disquieting doubts into words ended in laughs and kisses. He and his wife had been married less than a year. They were both young and both very much in love with each other.

Nevertheless, it was hard to preserve the old friendly attitude toward Von Schrimm, and as Lawson leaned upon the rail watching the scurryings of the crew, who were putting out anchors in the attempt to haul the boat off, he found himself wishing fervently that they were to put about that very day and begin the return journey toward Cairo.

A hand laid upon his arm brought him suddenly to himself. He turned to find the figure of his wife beside him, her face shining with interest and excitement.

"Such luck!" she cried gleefully. "The best thing that this horrid old steamer has ever done! Selim says it is quite possible we may be aground here for two or three days. The captain is just going off to the next village to ask the *Omdeh* for help and reinforcements, and in the meantime a party is being made up to go ashore and visit some awfully interesting old tombs and things that Von Schrimm knows of near here. Selim is going ashore with the captain and will arrange to get donkeys and everything from the village. The tombs lie quite a way out on the desert. Of course, we will go too—won't we?"

She squeezed his arm persuasively.

"Oh, I suppose so," he said, looking down on her with a smile. "I don't mind seeing a lot more badly done scrawls and a fresh batch of snub-nosed images if it pleases you. It will be better than rotting here in the mud anyway."

"But these are different," she protested. "Von Schrimm says that the place is very seldom visited. It lies out of the regular track of tourists, you see. And there aren't so very many things to see, either, only some partly explored tombs, but the great charm of it is that the place is more or less unknown yet. We might find all sorts of interesting things."

"We might even find some genuine old relics—made in Birmingham," he suggested sarcastically, "or a piece of 'genuine' mummy-cloth that your donkey boy has thoughtfully hidden in a hole—just where you are certain to find it. Never mind, we'll go anyhow."

And they went.

3

VON SCHRIMM and Selim, the dragoman, headed the little procession of riders and baggage animals that struck off into the desert.

Von Schrimm had become the man of the hour. The expedition had been of his suggestion, and besides, excepting for Selim, who had heard of the place, and Sternberg, the Austrian, who kept his counsel to himself and said nothing, none of the others in the party had the faintest idea as to where they were going.

They spent the night on the desert, in the shelter of two or three scraggly palms beside a half-forgotten native well, from which they hauled precious bucketfuls of the scanty, weird-smelling water for the thirsty donkeys.

Next day the march was resumed at an easy pace, and toward evening, passing over the edge of a dip in the desert, they came in sight of an outcropping ridge of tawny rock, the edge of a small, bare, low-lying plateau, rising above the sandy desolation that stretched around, the rocky face of it glowing cinnamon and dun in the slanting rays of the declining sun.

Von Schrimm raised his whip and pointed.

"Behold!" he cried; "the Hill of the Dead—one of the most ancient burial places in all Egypt and the only one that has managed to guard most of its secrets."

A murmur of curiosity and expectation from the dusty lips of his hearers followed his announcement. With renewed speed they pushed onward, and by nightfall had pitched their camp among the broken ground at the foot of the cliff, in the very loom of the cavernous indentations which the wasting passage of unnumbered centuries had worn in the face of the age-scarred rock.

"Well, what do you think of it?" said Lawson speculatively. "I wonder will it prove worth the trouble of coming?"

Sternberg extracted and lit one of his eternal cigarettes before replying. He and Lawson had wandered out a little distance into the desert and stood for a moment surveying the camp and the cliff behind it, lit with the dancing glow of the several tiny fires.

"You will perhaps be disappointed," he answered presently. "There is comparatively little to be seen. A few commonplace tombs, a few mediocre hieroglyphics—that is all."

"You know that place?" questioned Lawson in surprise. "You never mentioned that before."

"Why should I? Is it necessary to parade one's knowledge before the rabble? Yes, I know this place only too well. It was here that Carl Metzer, of Berlin, a personal friend of mine, unaccountably disappeared twenty-five years ago. It was a mysterious affair and has always puzzled me. We were both members of a scientific expedition to this very spot. One night Metzer disappeared from the camp—vanished as it were into thin air. No trace of him has ever been found. It was in the forlorn hope that I might by chance stumble upon some clue to the mystery—even after all these years—that I took this opportunity to revisit the place."

"And you never found a trace of him?" asked Lawson with interest. "Was there no theory?"

"There were several, but none of them was ever proved. One idea was that some of our Arabs had murdered him and concealed the body. Another theory suggested

that he had become suddenly insane in the night and had wandered off into the desert and died somewhere in some hole or hollow. Still another had it that he had strolled into the desert and been carried off and murdered by a roving band of Arabs. Of course these were only theories. We never found the slightest trace of Metzer. All we know is that one night he went to his tent as usual, and in the morning he was gone. We searched everywhere, but the mystery has remained a mystery ever since."

"A strange affair," commented Lawson. "I don't wonder that you take an interest in the place. It is certainly a fit theater for a mystery. The place is dreary and ominous enough for anything."

"Is it not?" Sternberg agreed. "As ominous as its name. Strange, how inanimate objects and localities have a very real atmosphere and personality of their own—but they have. Well, let us return to camp. There is no wisdom in wandering too far."

"You surely don't suggest that there is any danger, do you?"

"Danger? Oh, I don't know," said the Austrian thoughtfully. "I was thinking of Metzer—and other things."

They retraced their steps in silence. Just before they came within earshot of the others Sternberg spoke.

"You will oblige me by saying nothing of what I have told you. I have reasons for not wanting the story to become public property. Good night."

He turned away and departed to the little tent that had been pitched for him on the far edge of the camp.

## 4

IT WAS late, and the night was already far advanced when Lawson awoke with that strange premonition of impending evil which will occasionally awaken even the heaviest sleepers.

The camp was silent as the grave: wrapped deep in slumber. Over all brooded the vast stillness of the desert night. But presently a faint air, stirring across the dry sands, began to rustle and scrape the tent flap with the warning of a coming night breeze.

It was this faint, desolate voicing of the tent flap that suddenly jarred Lawson into complete wakefulness with a chill sensation of alarm, sudden as a dash of icy water.

The tent flap was unlaced and stood swaying open.

Lawson sat up suddenly, and as he did so he was aware of another circumstance, which brought him to his feet with a spring.

The other cot, which his wife had occupied, was disordered and vacant. He was alone.

A creeping shiver, like a drafty blast of cold air, ran down his spine at the realization. For an instant his heart stood still; and in that instant, while he stood paralyzed and irresolute, a dark form blotted across the tent opening, and a voice that he recognized as Sternberg's came in a hoarse, tense whisper from without:

"Lawson! Quick, man, quick! Don't waste a second or it may be too late. Come!"

In the Austrian's voice there was a compelling intensity that called for instant, unquestioning compliance. Lawson tore on his boots, and, clad as he was in his sleeping-garments, stepped out into the starlight.

Sternberg caught his arm with iron grip. The Austrian was fully dressed and was laboring under some violent excitement.

"Come," he repeated, almost breathlessly. "Don't attempt to ask questions; follow me. And remember—whatever you see or hear, say nothing; do nothing, or *it* may kill her. Do you understand? Leave everything to me. Remember your

silence is the only hope of her safety. A false movement—a cry—may mean her instant death."

He turned and led the way into the darkness, moving with long, noiseless, nervous strides.

They passed swiftly beyond the area of the camp and began to pick their way among the broken ground at the foot of the rocks, Sternberg leading among the rocks and shadows with the instinct and agility of a panther. Far out on the desert the quavering wail of a lone jackal broke the silence with a note that froze the blood in Lawson's veins. He followed, stumbling and breathless, in the footsteps of his guide.

Suddenly Sternberg paused.

"Ssst!" he breathed. "Look!"

Directly ahead, on a shoulder of rising ground that stretched from the base of the cliff, Lawson was aware of two figures emerging slowly from a band of shadow and making their way directly toward the base of the towering rocks.

It was his wife and Von Schrimm.

Lawson felt the hand of Sternberg close hard upon his wrist as a reminder of his warning. Silently, cautiously, they followed, hugging the deeper shadows and drawing closer with each step to the slowly moving pair ahead.

Von Schrimm was in the lead. He was moving with deliberate certainty, as of one who follows a well-known path. His head was half turned and his eyes were fixed, not upon the way of his feet, but upon the face of the woman who followed.

And she was following him stiffly, mechanically, with the dull lethargy of a sleep-walker. Her head was thrown back, and the masses of her unbound hair fell in a cloud about her shoulders, stirring and waving in the light desert wind that fluttered the folds of the long dark cloak which she had thrown over her night attire. Her hands were clasped upon her breast, gathering and holding her cloak about her, and over the rough, rocky surface of the ground her bare feet moved steadily and apparently without sensation, gleaming palely beneath the fluttering hem of her long white gown.

Von Schrimm was bareheaded, but save for this he was fully dressed. He kept moving steadily forward, and from his lips came at intervals a low sound, an indescribable purring note that had something of a hiss in it.

And the girl followed him, involuntarily, apparently powerless. Only once did she appear to halt and hesitate, and in that moment, despite the hand that Sternberg clapped suddenly over his mouth, Lawson came near to emitting a shriek of terror.

For the instant she paused. Von Schrimm halted and drew himself to his full height. The purring note rose to an angry hiss. His right arm swept aloft, and, gripped in the upraised hand, gleamed a long, broad-bladed dagger, poised menacingly, the starlight glittering coldly upon the cruel savage length of steel. The girl shivered mechanically and once more moved forward.

The beads of cold sweat broke out in a rain over Lawson's body. Trembling in every limb he was conscious of the fierce whisper of Sternberg in his ear: "Fool! If *it* suspects your presence it will slay her on the instant. Silence, if you value her life."

UPON a narrow platform-like space, where the shoulder of the ridge butted against the face of the cliff, Von Schrimm paused beside a gigantic boulder, a great fragment of stone that had apparently fallen from above and now lay wedged securely against the face of the parent rock behind it. He began to work with straining muscles upon the stone, and as he worked the girl stood beside him

motionless—a rigid, pale-faced statue, lifeless as marble.

Slowly, steadily, under Von Schrimm's pressure, the great fragment moved upon an invisible pivot. Inch by inch it swung and yawned away from the cliff, until finally, when the toiler desisted from his efforts, it stood open like some titanic door, the tremendous shutter of the narrow opening which loomed dark black against the living rock behind.

Von Schrimm turned and faced the motionless girl. Once more he raised the cold length of naked steel. Once more the angry hiss broke from his lips, and as she moved toward him he stepped backward. Together they vanished into the yawning mouth of the tomb.

Sternberg dragged Lawson swiftly forward. Trembling with the excitement and terror that was upon them both, they passed from the darkness of the night into the blacker darkness of the sepulcher.

The characteristic musty breath of a closed burial chamber smote upon their nostrils as they crossed the portal, but the air was not nearly so thick and choking as is usual in a first-opened tomb. There seemed to be a ventilation shaft somewhere, for as they noiselessly followed the sound of shuffling footsteps into the blackness, the faint air of the desert followed them, driving back and clearing the heavy atmosphere.

That there was such a shaft shortly became established. The floor of the passage was smooth and trended downward, and as they advanced the gloom began to lighten until at a point it thinned to the dim radiance of the outer light. In the roof of the rock-hewn gallery a great shaft led upward to the outer air. The light of stars fell into the passage, illuminating it with a pale twilight like that which reigns at the bottom of a deep well.

In the center of this dim patch of hazy darkness they were presently aware that Von Schrimm and his companion had halted. The black blotch of their figures was just visible in the half-light.

Then came the sound of a voice. Von Schrimm was speaking, and the voice in which he spoke was his and yet not his—there was a terrible vibration in it which quivered upon the listeners' ears, awakening a sensation of insane fear.

"I have come back," rang that grim, compelling voice. "Through the length of the deathless ages of the past I have come back to thee, O thou from whom the dwellers of the shadows tore my soul. O radiant princess, royal mate of my throne, sharer of my destiny! O thou who wast the assigned partner of my spirit from that first hour when we were flung together from the flaming center of the birth of Time, I have come back!

"Dost thou not remember me, O my partner of eternity? Turn back, turn back thy memory upon itself. Rememberest thou those evenings when we rode together into the glow of bloody sunsets, the dust clouds of the desert rising beneath the feet of our victorious hosts, the shadows of the night ringing with the clanking fetters of our captives? Rememberest thou those evenings upon the Nile, those evenings of our burning, blinding love? Those evenings when the moon rose above the desert to silver the dark river and the frowning loom of our ramparts; when the silence was unbroken save for the murmur of the rowers and the splashing water of the blades? Rememberest thou not the whole glorious march of our twain destiny; of our eternal love? That destiny from which in a night I was flung headlong by the awful dwellers of the void? O mate of my living soul, dost thou not remember?"

And hollow and tense and fearful came the low-breathed answer: "I remember."

"Long have I sought thee," continued that terrible voice. "Long ages has my slain soul pursued thee through the track-

less mazes of the lightless dark of that dread region of the lost. But always thou fled from me in horror. Thy living soul shrank from the embraces of my dead spirit, and always thou fled safe from me protected by that great barrier which holds dead from living. Long have I yearned for thee in vain, but now I fail no longer. Into my hands has come the key of victory. Once more art thou within the pale of my power, O long-lost partner of my soul! Dead is my soul and dead shall thine accompany me, to the borders of that dark river which rolls its waters through the dying ages toward oblivion. Come!"

The awful voice rose to a shriek, and as the sound of its last word rang upon the rocky roof, a blaze of light sprang from the electric torch in Sternberg's hand, followed an instant later by two spurts of duller flame; the savage double report of the Austrian's Luger echoed through the tomb; the ejected shells from the automatic bounded from the wall and fell tinkling upon the passage floor.

In the flooding glare of the blinding light the form of Von Schrimm stood for an instant fully revealed, leaning forward with hungry, clutching arms toward the trembling figure before him, his face transfigured with an expression of devilish triumph such as never sat upon human features.

One instant only he stood thus, and then, as the powerful expanding bullets tore their way through that hideous leering countenance, he reeled and fell backward, headlong and alone, into the depths of a yawning chasm behind, which his devilish machinations had destined for both.

5

LAWSON rushed forward and caught the collapsing body of his wife in his arms. The strained tension that had held her so long in thrall had snapped. They carried her, fainting, unnerved and sobbing, out beyond the entrance and laid her in the cool air beside the doorway.

The Austrian turned back.

"I have work to do in here which it will be too late to do tomorrow," he said. "Stay here and look after her. Wait until I come."

He re-entered the tomb, swinging the light of his pocket torch before him.

He was a long while gone, and when he returned he was dusty and grimy and hot with exertion. He was in no mood for talk, and Lawson, supporting his wife's head in his arms, watched him silently as he slowly swung back that titanic door of rock which for centuries unnumbered had closed and guarded the secret of the tomb behind it.

The girl had fallen into a strange deep slumber, and presently, when he had completed his task, the Austrian came and stood looking down at her.

"It is well," he said at length. "The strain has been terrific and she may remain asleep thus for hours, but she will be normal when she wakes, and I do not think she will have the slightest recollection of the whole affair."

"Are you sure?" queried Lawson anxiously.

"Almost. I have seen somewhat similar cases of great mental strain, and it has always left complete forgetfulness of the circumstance. Meanwhile, since I may not be able to talk to you afterward for some time, you had better know what is in there."

He indicated the closed tomb.

"What did you do with the body?'

"There was *no* body," said the Austrian steadily, "at least not the kind of body you are thinking of. There was a mummy there in an unopened sarcophagus. I smashed the mummy to bits," he added. "It was a choking, loathsome job."

"But the corpse of Von Schrimm?" cried

Lawson. "What did you do with *that?*"

"There was *no* corpse of Von Schrimm," repeated the Austrian. "There *never was* a Von Schrimm. There is nothing in there but the twenty-five-years-dead skeleton of Carl Metzer, dressed in a new suit of clothes, and with two Luger bullets through its skull."

"My God!" cried Lawson. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Sternberg solemnly, "that the mystery of Metzer's disappearance is a mystery no longer. He must have wandered in his sleep that night, twenty-five years ago, to the edge of the shaft where it opens upon the plateau above, and fallen in. The terrible being which haunted the tomb seized the opportunity of taking possession of Metzer's body, and for all these years it has occupied it, changing its very features with its own personality and holding the form together by the sheer strength of its own purpose. The moment it lost its grip the body vanished, nothing but the skeleton remaining, as would have been the case in the natural course of events."

"Oh, my God!" cried Lawson in horror. "I can't believe it! It's too ghastly!"

"There is not the slightest possibility of doubt," returned Sternberg mercilessly. "Metzer once broke his leg and it was unskilfully set. The fracture shows quite plainly on the skeleton. Besides, I found this upon the *thing*. It's a wonder that I never noticed it before, because I have had a suspicion of this ghastly business from the beginning and I have watched what you called 'Von Schrimm' very closely."

He held out a gold watch and snapped open the case in the glare of the torch.

"Carl Metzer," ran the engraved inscription, surrounded by a wreath of laurel.

"You see there is no doubt," said the Austrian, snapping shut the case. "Come. It is time we were starting back. She will have to be carried quietly and gently, remember, and we must get back without observation some way or other. In the morning there will be a fine outcry over Von Schrimm's disappearance; and there will be official investigations and no end of red tape. But remember, keep your counsel and breathe no word. The wind is rising, our footprints in the sand will be obliterated in a few minutes. No trace of this night's business will remain. The fate of Von Schrimm and the secret of that dead *thing* in the tomb is hid for ever. Come, let us go."

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# Dust

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

Carthage is dust, and Nineveh; Babylon, proud and fair,
Has gone in the way of things that were, vanished into the air;
The jackal prowls through the dreary sands, lifting his howl to the moon,
And the winds swing over the cheerless wastes, singing a nameless tune.

Helen is dust, and Paris, too; Egypt, the dreamy-eyed,
Is only the breath of a whispered word, the ghost of a dream that has died;
Yet ever the earth and the stars roll on, according to God's own plan;
Carthage is dust, and Nineveh! What in God's scheme is Man?


FOR sixteen years WEIRD TALES has consistently endeavored to give its readers stories that are different from any to be found elsewhere. In addition to the best weird and fantastic stories obtainable, we have sought out and printed other highly imaginative tales, so plausibly told that they seem entirely possible and convincing. That we have succeeded in our purpose of presenting utterly *different* literary fare is attested by the multitudinous flood of enthusiastic letters from you, the readers, throughout the years this magazine has been published. Such a *different* story is *The Hollow Moon* in this issue, the story of a lunar vampire, written by an author whose previous vampire story, *The Canal,* was acclaimed by no less an authority than the late H. P. Lovecraft himself as one of the greatest vampire tales ever written. The next few months will be particularly rich in such highly original and utterly different tales, notable among them being *Giants of the Sky* by Frank Belknap Long, Jr., an unusual tale of vast beings in a super-cosmos who make our earth the object of an experiment; *King of the World's Edge* by H. Warner Munn, an intriguing weird novel of America in King Arthur's time, with Merlin as one of its principal characters; and *Spawn* by P. Schuyler Miller, as powerful and strange a tale as it has ever been our good fortune to present to you, our readers.

### The Very Top

Herbert Vincent Ross writes from London: "WEIRD TALES has traveled steadily upward to the very top of literary weird art. Take the tale by Manly Wade Wellman in the October issue, *Up Under the Roof,* which was a perfect example of the modern WEIRD TALES. What a little gem that was, and fit to be included in any modern anthology! And then H. P. Lovecraft's *The Other Gods,* which was so typical of that great master of bizarre fiction. Was not HPL truly the master of them all, even including Poe, Beirce, Machen, Dunsany? I think the answer is 'yes' and that in time his work will take its proper place amongst the world's classics. Congratulations also to Clark Ashton Smith for his *Maze of Maal Dweb,* which was also the sort of thing we expect from this unique poet and artist; for Smith is an artist, an artist of words, and none draws more vividly or more romantically than he. *The Black Monk* by Pendarves was passable, but I expect better from this writer, and in any case I tumbled to the plot before I was halfway through the story. Brother Ignatius was a dead give-away for the Black Monk, and so it proved; but still it was passable. *Witches on the Heath,* the poem by Leah Bodine Drake, was good and also really weird; the line, *'Somebody* played in the twisted tree,' left quite a lot to the imagination, which is as it should be in a work such as this. And now a grumble. I realize I am only one reader amongst many thousands, but do readers really like those 'formula' tales by Edmond Hamilton like *The Fire Princess?* Ah well, I suppose they do or you would not print them; but for me, although it was a hot fire, it left me cold. Hamilton can do good things, we know, for he has given us *Isle of the Sleeper, Child of*

*the Winds* (very fine), *He that Hath Wings*, etc. These are always welcome, but I for one would not miss the type of *The Fire Princess*, which is a sort of mixture of adventure, weird science-fiction, all mixed up, making gosh only knows what!"

### Difficult to Find Words

Ralph Rayburn Phillips writes from Portland, Oregon: "Some of the stories in WEIRD TALES are of such high quality that it is difficult to find words expressive enough when one wishes to comment. *A Thunder of Trumpets* by Robert E. Howard and Frank Thurston Torbett is superb. It is far more than a mere story, as every student of the Wisdom of the East knows; one must be a student to appreciate it fully. I desire to congratulate these brilliant writers who have given us such a story. Seabury Quinn in *More Lives than One* has also given us a wonderful story. His *Roads* is another. Both these stories contain truths which make them far more than stories. Mr. Quinn is truly a great writer. Only WEIRD TALES, the incomparable magazine, could present us such an amazing story as *Beyond the Wall of Sleep*, by the master, H. P. Lovecraft, who has gone on to higher worlds. We feel his loss keenly."

### That Circe Cover

Caroline Ferber writes from Chicago: "Circe's gown on the cover of the March issue is really a jewel-toned blue—an excellent color illustration. To get to Ball's story of *The Swine of Æaea*—it was very enjoyable, altho I didn't care much for the listener breaking in on the yarn. Would prefer just the narrative without one feller telling t'other feller. Oh—oo—horrors! Quinn did up an ugly one this time with the mad scientist. I shuddered at the plight of the bewful opera coloratura. You did right well by yourself in this tale, sir. F'ebben's sakes!—Derleth s'prised me no end with *The Return of Hastur*. Somehow I didn't mind the suggestion of inconceivable beings—& how well the ending—that pillar of light removing the struggling things and casting them afar. Altho some exciting events were included in this instalment of *Fearful Rock*, it seemed summat slow. Bein' as how the next issue closes the story, it should be truly exciting. That metal box bothers me much. Howard's poem, *Desert Dawn*, is superbly worded. Finlay's selection for his full-page illustration is well chosen—it is horrifying to see Satan as he 'fondles a screaming thing'! And this *Comrades of Time* story—thanks to Mr. Hamilton for most enjoyable reading. The whole was so packed with excitement—even the thought of those people from centuries apart, to meet. It was very well done. Lovecraft's delightful fantasy, *The Quest of Iranon*, seemed almost a fable. It was a bit touching at the end, yet on the whole it was quite a treat. Of all the startling stories, the reprint of Bassett Morgan's *The Devils of Po Sung* cops the cream. This devil Po Sung dabbled in all the meanest arts of evil. A brilliant fellow, but yes! Shux!—can't find a thing for comment in the Eyrie this month. Am I slipping?"

### Doubts Silenced

C. S. Youd writes from Eastleigh, England: "I must honestly say that when the change of owners first occurred I had grave misgivings, but with the first enlarged issue my doubts were effectively silenced. The best in the issue was Smith's *The Double Shadow*, which easily surpassed the rest of the stories. Nathan Hindin took second place, but there were no stories with which I could really quarrel. Of the verse, Howard's was quite Chestertonian in character and as attractive as that great writer's."

### A Veritable Proteus

E. Hoffmann Price, of Kurdistan and points west, writes: "Derleth's interesting yarn in the March issue is a colorful tribute to his late master, HLP. The sage of Providence did what very few accomplish: start a school of mythology! And Derleth, I think, has more of the real touch than any other of the disciples. Amazingly versatile, Derleth. A veritable Proteus. Somehow, it struck me that HPL's yarn, *The Quest of Iranon*, symbolized his own career. This is hard to explain, but that was the reaction.

It left me with the conviction that that beautiful bit of writing was rightly kept until after his death, and then published as an epitaph. Perhaps I have this idea because of his oft-repeated statement to the effect that the longer he worked and studied, the further he was from his aim as a writer; an estimate that no one shared with him."

### An Oustanding Issue

Charles H. Chandler writes from Wooster, Ohio: "The issue for March was an outstanding one. The cover was beautiful—better than any for a long time—better even than last October's cover, which is saying quite a bit. Finlay deserves high praise for his work this month. . . . His full-page illustration this month was also outstanding, although I prefer his line and stipple work to his charcoal. He certainly does like Sterling's *A Wine of Wizardry*—nor do I blame him, for it's a fearful and wonderful poem. . . . In my opinion, *The Return of Hastur* was the best story in the March issue, and one of the best you have ever printed. It is a true weird tale—fulfils every requirement, and a good job at that—imaginative, really creepy, convincing, and the rest of it. Those *soggy* footsteps, for instance, and the strange noises that permeated the sub-basement in the night. It is a story that will not be quickly forgotten. Derleth has also tied together a great many loose ends of local color, with his associating and organizing the books we have heard so much about: viz., *De Vermis Mysteriis,* the *Necronomicon, Book of Eibon,* and the rest, even bringing in good old WT—which is as it should be. . . . Second place in the issue goes, I think, to *The Quest of Iranon,* although *The Swine of Æaea* is a close third in my opinion. The former's beauty gives it the edge. . . . *The Stratosphere Menace* wasn't even good science-fiction—much less a weird tale. It was childish and out of place. *Smoke Fantasy* was at least weird—I'll say that much for it. However, these brickbats are negligible; an issue containing seven good stories may certainly be forgiven a couple of bad ones. Maybe they were just bad by comparison."

### Magnificently Composed

Robert A. Madle writes from Philadelphia: "Far and away the best story in the March issue is H. P. Lovecraft's masterpiece of fantasy, *The Quest of Iranon.* I am almost tempted to say that this tale is the greatest you have ever published by HPL. *The Quest of Iranon* is one of the most magnificently composed pieces of writing I have ever read. If there are any other pieces of pure fantasy by HPL still unpublished, I advise you to grab them up in a hurry. *The Return of Hastur,* an unusual story for Derleth, and Clifford Ball's *The Swine of Æaea* take second and third honors respectively. The reprint in the February issue, *The Last Horror,* was a classic; one of the most enthralling stories I have ever read."

### Going Places

Paul N. Nicholaioff writes from New York: "After finishing reading the March issue of WEIRD TALES I couldn't help writing and letting you know how much I enjoyed it. First, the cover was excellent and striking. Inside illustrations were great, and I notice Virgil can apply his pens, brushes and inks in various ways which few artists can use. And what do you know—four illustrations for the yarn by Ball! WEIRD TALES seems to be going places since the change in publishers."

### Reprint Suggestions

B. M. Reynolds writes from North Adams, Massachusetts: "WEIRD TALES cerainly 'went to town' this month in its new 160-page augmented edition. You are 'tops' now in the fantasy-fiction field in both size and quality and I sincerely hope this new achievement will gain for you many new friends and supporters. I was more than delighted to read of the return of some of the old-time contributors to your pages, C. L. Moore, Donald Wandrei, H. Warner Munn and Clark Ashton Smith. As to the contents of the issue: Thomas P. Kelley again takes first honors with *I Found Cleopatra.* I eagerly await his next novel. Second place goes to Donald Wandrei for *Giant-Plasm.* Third place I award to Clark Ashton Smith and

Henry Kuttner, equally, for *The Double Shadow,* an exceptionally well-written piece of fantasy, and *The Transgressor,* which gives a unique and ironical twist to the theory of time-travel. The balance of the issue was well up to standard. It seems to me that, in its new format, WT could now easily reprint some of the longer best stories from past issues, without stealing too much space from the new ones. Even an occasional reprint serial should now meet with the approval of your readers, and there are some bang-up good ones such as *Golden Blood* and *Drome.* As to the shorter reprints: *Bimini, Lochinvar Lodge, The Space-Eaters, Something from Above, Isle of the Fairy Morgana, The Wand of Doom,* and *The Arctic Death* would, I am sure, be greatly welcomed by a great majority of us."

### Hard-Earned Pennies

Eleanor Elizabeth B. writes from Kennebunk, Maine: "Several cheers for the March issue. Bend your little pink ear and let me whisper that I was scared practically out of my few wits after that session with Derleth's *The Return of Hastur.* Living not so very far from the scene of the—er—crime as I do, it was sort of hair-raising to wonder why Innsmouth is so shunned (if it is). Seabury Quinn's story is a humdinger as usual, but I think the cream of this month's crop was good old Eddie Hamilton's *Comrades of Time.* I take back everything I ever said about science-fiction. This one has everything, and I hope he brings back all those characters in other stories. My apologies, Eddie; I 'done you wrong' in my thoughts. . . . I still think WT is the tops in spookiness. I know whereof I speak, 'cause I've thrown away lots of hard-earned pennies trying to find a magazine even half as good, while waiting for the next issue of WT; then I could kick something *hard* when the trashy ones don't come up to WT. Not that I really expected that they could. One more nosegay: the poems you print are grand."

### Robert W. Chambers

Lester Anderson writes from San Francisco: "I should like to say a word about the current WT. Derleth in *The Return of Hastur*

continues the Lovecraft tradition of 'Elder God' tales. Good boy, August. Keep it up. Ball's *The Swine of Æaea* was good—better than his other tales. I never was a super-fan of the Conan-type fantasy. Kuttner's *The Transgressor* was delightful.... May I request the reprinting of Robert W. Chambers' appropriate short fantasies which appeared in *The King in Yellow* and *The Maker of Moons?* Also the excerpt from another of his tales—*The Dark Star,* I think, is the title—dealing with the gods Derleth mentioned in *Hastur.* In the reprint section I suggest little-known hard-to-locate tales (not reprinted in anthologies.)"

### Only One Grouse

Basil H. Appleyard writes from London: "I have only recently been introduced to your magazine and would like to express my appreciation of the really splendid matter which it contains. Over here in England it is rather difficult to obtain regular supplies and I am eagerly awaiting my news agent's next consignment. There is no doubt about it, I shall have to become a regular subscriber. . . . Finlay's illustrations are unspeakably real and weird, and the work he puts into them must be colossal. I have only one grouse against the magazine—it should be three times as large, and also it is a hellish thing to be reading by candlelight whilst watching over someone who is doing his best to croak, which was my job a short while ago."

### A Poet's Comments

Clark Ashton Smith writes from his home in California: "The March issue of WT is certainly an excellent one. *The Metal Chamber, The Swine of Æaea, The Return of Hastur,* and *The Quest of Iranon* are all notably good. And I mustn't forget the reprint of Bassett Morgan's brain-surgery horror, *The Devils of Po Sung,* which still remains one of the best stories ever written on that theme."

### Circe's Pigs

E. B. Hardy writes from Lewiston, Maine: "Quite an interesting cover this month. I hardly got a chance to read the stories, with

my mother constantly asking for another look at the swine nosing around in the background. She insisted they look like some my father had years ago, but of course they can't be the same ones—relatives, probably. . . . Circe has always been a most charming lady, and in *The Swine of Æaea,* Clifford Ball has given us a dandy story about her. WEIRD TALES writers have given us stories about Medusa and Circe; now how about the sirens who sat on a rock in the sea and lured sailors to their doom with their beautiful singing? How shall I go about the throwing of an 'irish posy' at a favorite author of mine? I'm new at the game. I'm referring to Seabury Quinn and his story *The House Where Time Stood Still.* Written in his usual fascinating, lively style it held my horrified attention to the last gruesome detail—and gave me nightmares. Please, please, Mr. Quinn, curb your weird imaginings in the direction of beautiful women with mutilated bodies, lest you scare yourself to death (as you so nearly did me) and leave us desolate. Part 2 of *Fearful Rock,* by Manly Wade Wellman, is as interesting as Part 1. With her splendid courage, Enid Mandifer would scorn pity, but I anxiously await her release from the evil forces that surround her. *The Stratosphere Menace* by Ralph Milne Farley is delightfully humorous. I would enjoy reading more stories written by this author."

### Boredom-Ridden Humans

Paul L. McCleave writes from Nantucket, Massachusetts: "Not all the hosts of sinking Tzar can keep me from proffering to you my sincerest thanks—for an issue (March) of pure enjoyment. Even as I write, Iranon's music fills my soul with pain; and I watch again the dazzling swordplay of the *Comrades of Time.* Perhaps, my friend, you don't realize what a great service WEIRD TALES is doing for us prosaic, boredom-ridden humans of all classes, races and nationalities. For your authors pluck the strings of racial memories—and send one back to the days when blood flowed free as wine, and the Elder Gods held sway. Kindly eliminate, in future, such stories as *The Stratosphere Menace.* It was a

fine story, but in the wrong publication. Of course, I fully realize that there is a very thin partition between the 'weird' and 'science-fiction' types of stories; but, by a simple weeding-out process, such tales should be easily discarded. So, in parting—a thought: many search for gold at the rainbow's end. Yes, I found it—in H. P. Lovecraft's little story. It had—among other things—a dreamy loveliness, and the infinite tragedy of a broken heart. One more thing: please hurry with those Conan reprints. There *was* a man!"

### Cold Chills

Margaret H. Gray writes from Steubenville, Ohio: "Clark Ashton Smith has come through again with a truly weird masterpiece, namely, *The Double Shadow*. It certainly gave me cold chills when I read how that strange entity from the long-dead serpent people slowly absorbed the sorcerer Avyctes, the mummy Oigos, and the pupil Pharpetron. The reprint for this month certainly takes the blue ribbon as far as I am concerned. *The Last Horror* is the peak of all that is weird in this issue. Eli Colter is a truly masterful writer."

### No Disappointment

Seymour Kapetansky writes from Detroit: "The February issue was not a disappointment to me; I was expecting that a 160-page WT would be loaded with poor stuff, but I cheerfully admit I'm wrong. Particularly I liked Clark Ashton Smith's shadowy and shuddery tale, and Kuttner's *Transgressor*. The elephant was n. g. As for Quinn's contribution, it was up to par; but I do wish the worthy Doctor Trowbridge would stop proclaiming that ghosts ain't; hasn't he gone around with Jules long enough to realize that there *are* ghosts? . . . I *love* WEIRD TALES."

### Lost Track of Time

John V. Baltadonis writes from Philadelphia: "*The Swine of Æaea,* by Clifford Ball, is a story hard to beat. When I came to the end of the tale, I could hardly believe it—it was so interesting that I lost track of time and

the number of pages I passed. I like your policy of having several illustrations for the cover story. I sincerely hope that you maintain this policy, especially if the stories are illustrated by the incomparable Finlay."

### After Midnight

George C. Bowring writes from Los Angeles: "It is now after midnight. The February WEIRD TALES came to hand today, so I dug up the previous three issues and spent a most satisfactory evening reading *I Found Cleopatra.* Not since the last Merritt story have I enjoyed a tale quite so much. Kelley handles the weird parts of his story with admirable restraint."

### Hours of Enjoyment

Joseph Gaviani writes from Roxbury, Massachusetts: "First place in the March WT belongs to Mr. Derleth's *The Return of Hastur,* the only really weird story in the issue. Mr. Quinn's horror-tale takes second place, followed by Mr. Rimel's interplanetary story *The Metal Chamber.* Returning to the question of reprints, I notice it is some months since you used an HPL story. I am one of the many who were unfortunate enough to miss Mr. Lovecraft's *The Rats in the Walls,* and *The Outsider.* You can earn our undying gratitude by reprinting one of these in the near future. Accept my thanks for the many hours of enjoyment your choice of stories has provided me with, and my hope that we may have many more weird tales that live up to the name."

### Greatest on Earth

Archie H. Lucas writes from Leesburg, Virginia: "I have been a constant reader of WEIRD TALES for five years and I think it just about the greatest on earth. I especially enjoy the stories by Seabury Quinn and Clark Ashton Smith. So enthusiastic has been my interest in WEIRD TALES that four of my friends have become regular purchasers of your magazine, influenced by my praise of your stories."

### Bloch Will Forgive You

Dale H. Exum writes from Nimrod, Texas: "I bought and read the January and Febru-

ary WT together. My favorite five of the two issues are in this order: First, Tom P. Kelley's truly grand and weird tale of Egypt, *I Found Cleopatra.* Kelley is king of the Egyptian story world, says I. Second in my favor is Ed Hamilton's *Bride of the Lightning,* really a wonderful tale, that, a story that I can understand, for you see of all the splendid adornments of nature none appeals to me as much as the glittering lightning and the sound of thunder do. The brain of a man who can conceive of such splendor as Hamilton has is surely burning with the fire of his own thoughts. Hamilton's *He That Hath Wings* I always shall remember. Who has not dreamed and in that dream experienced the wild weird freedom of wings? Quite a number of us shared Ed's dream. I award third place to the first installment of Manly Wade Wellman's *Fearful Rock.* Mr. Wellman really catches the mood of that particular corner of the Southland—I know, for I was born in the Ozark locality on the Arkansas side and lived there for a number of years. A swell setting for a swell tale. In my estimation, fourth place should go to Z. B. Bishop's *Medusa's Coil.* Fifth place to my old favorite, Clark Ashton Smith and his *Double Shadow.* I couldn't blame those scared souls for being scared. I'd be 'scared of my shadder' too if it doubled up on me. Good old Robert Bloch gave us a splendid example in *Waxworks.* That story came right down my alley and up my tree—and like to've got me—to've got me to give it second place in this line-up, I mean. If I had time to write this letter over I think it would get third place at least. I'll bet Bob sure regrets my carelessness!"

## Concise Comments

W. M. Jones writes from New York City: "WEIRD TALES is and has been, and probably will continue to be, one of the real adventures in reading. Keep up the good work!"

W. G. Spicker writes from Logan, Utah: "I congratulate you upon the enlarged WT. I am sure that the additional stories will be welcomed everywhere by lovers of the unusual."

Robert Barbour Johnson writes from San Francisco: "Best regards to the new and much improved WEIRD TALES. Its popularity has jumped enormously in these parts since the change."

Harry Warner, Jr., writes from Hagerstown, Maryland: "Every yarn of Lovecraft's that you print is better than the last; keep it up until they run out completely."

Howard B. MacDonald writes from Yonkers, New York: "*The Last Horror* is one of the finest stories I have yet come upon in WEIRD TALES. It not only has a strong theme, plenty of physical horror and drama, but also a magnificent psychological climax. This combination makes a gripping tale."

Ian C. Knox writes from London, England: "I am glad to see Seabury Quinn back again on the Jules de Grandin stories. I am sorry to say it, but, barring *Roads,* I thought his stories without the Frenchman lacked just that something extra."

### Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite in this issue? And if there are any stories you do not like, let us know about them, too. Address your letter to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City. The most popular story in our March issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was August W. Derleth's fine story of the Ancient Ones, *The Return of Hastur.*

### An Ardent New Reader

Miss Joanna E. Mosden writes from Port Said, Egypt: "Just a note to say how much I enjoy reading your magazine. I started in August and have since been an ardent reader. Believe me, I am thoroughly glad I 'discovered' it. I am a great lover of horror and ghost stories, but I had never experienced that cold and creepy feeling these tales are associated with; now I must admit March's WT really gave me the jitters. I think the best story was *The House Where Time Stood Still,* although it cannot be classified as supernatural. *The Return of Hastur* runs a close second."

# COMING NEXT MONTH

THE POWER TUBES had warmed up and all was in readiness. Don Jones puffed slowly at his cigarette. He cherished the smoke in his lungs, knowing it might be the last inhaling he would ever do. He wondered if they would know of cigarettes in that distant future to which he was going.

"Don't hurry yourself," said Professor White at the control board. "I want to run the system at full load for five minutes yet to make sure everything is all right. Are you nervous?"

"No," denied Don Jones, but the hand that held the cigarette shook. It was not quite as easy as he had thought—leaving the life and time he knew. But because recurrent epilepsy had made life miserable for him, he had consented to be the subject of Professor White's experiment. Young, and healthy in all other ways, Don Jones wished at this last minute that he were free of his promise.

"I'm nervous myself," admitted the professor, dabbing at knife-switches with fluttery fingers to make certain they were firmly closed. "I almost feel as though I were about to become your murderer."

"Forget it," grunted Don. "I had no peace in this life. I've thought of suicide, but this is better."

"Not suicide," said the scientist, turning around. "You can't compare this to death, Don. You are going to a new life, but without dissolution. You are really going to be a time-traveler. Your body and mind—and soul, if there is such a thing—will be projected into a future age—anywhere from ten to a hundred thousand years ahead; I can't be sure just how far." . . .

You will not want to miss the fantastic adventures of Don Jones in that distant time, when the world has become a weird land of anarchy and strange machines, with no laws, but everyone for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. This engrossing novelette will be published complete in the next issue of WEIRD TALES.

# GIANTS OF ANARCHY

## By Eando Binder

**——also——**

### FAR BELOW

*By* ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

A weird tale of the New York subways, and horrible things with dead-white eyes that burrow up beneath the unsuspecting city.

### THE SITTER IN THE MOUND

*By* BRUCE BRYAN

Faverly was an archeologist—or grave-robber, as he called himself—and fearful was his discovery in that ghastly Indian burial mound.

### MANSIONS IN THE SKY

*By* SEABURY QUINN

A tale of Jules de Grandin, the dynamic little French occult detective, ghost-breaker and expert in things supernatural.

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June Issue of Weird Tales . . . . . Out May 1

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