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Edmond Hamilton's

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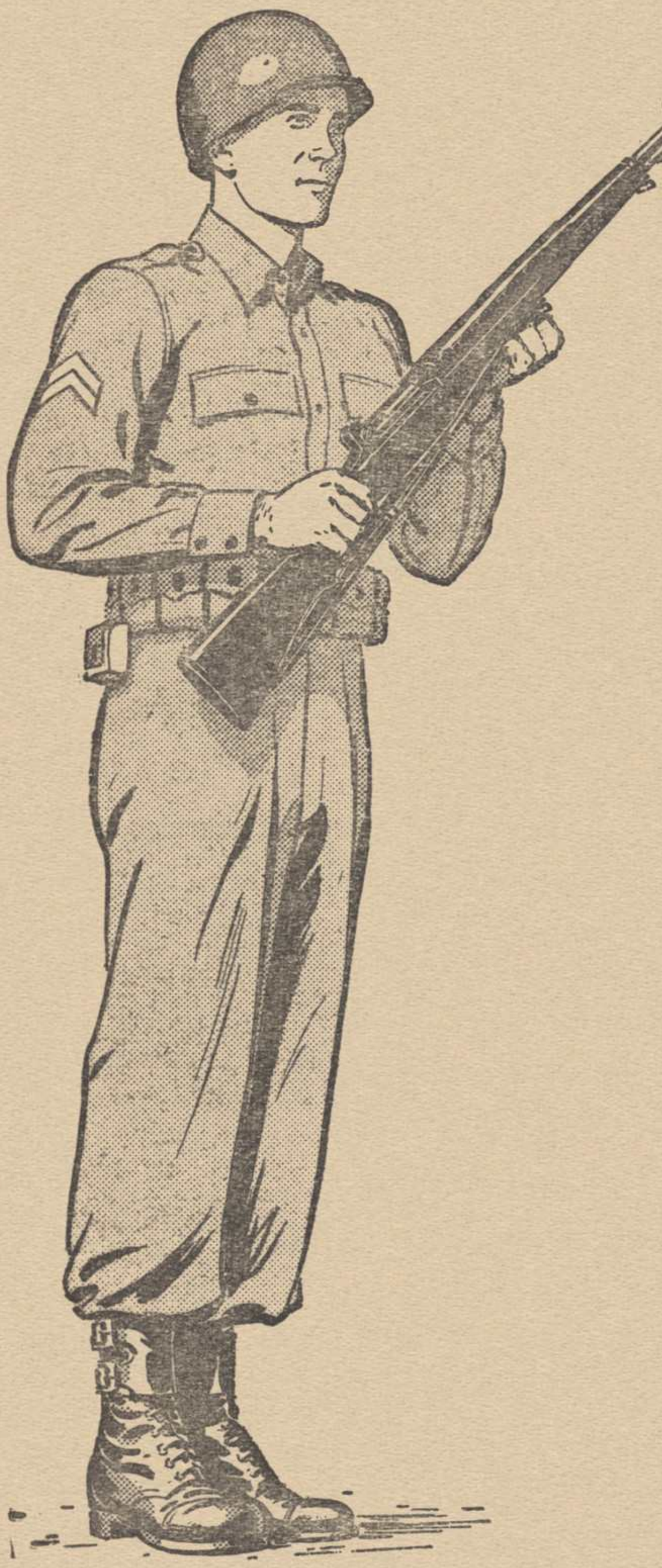

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SHORT STORIES

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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25¢. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, 90¢. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. Vol. 40, No. 5

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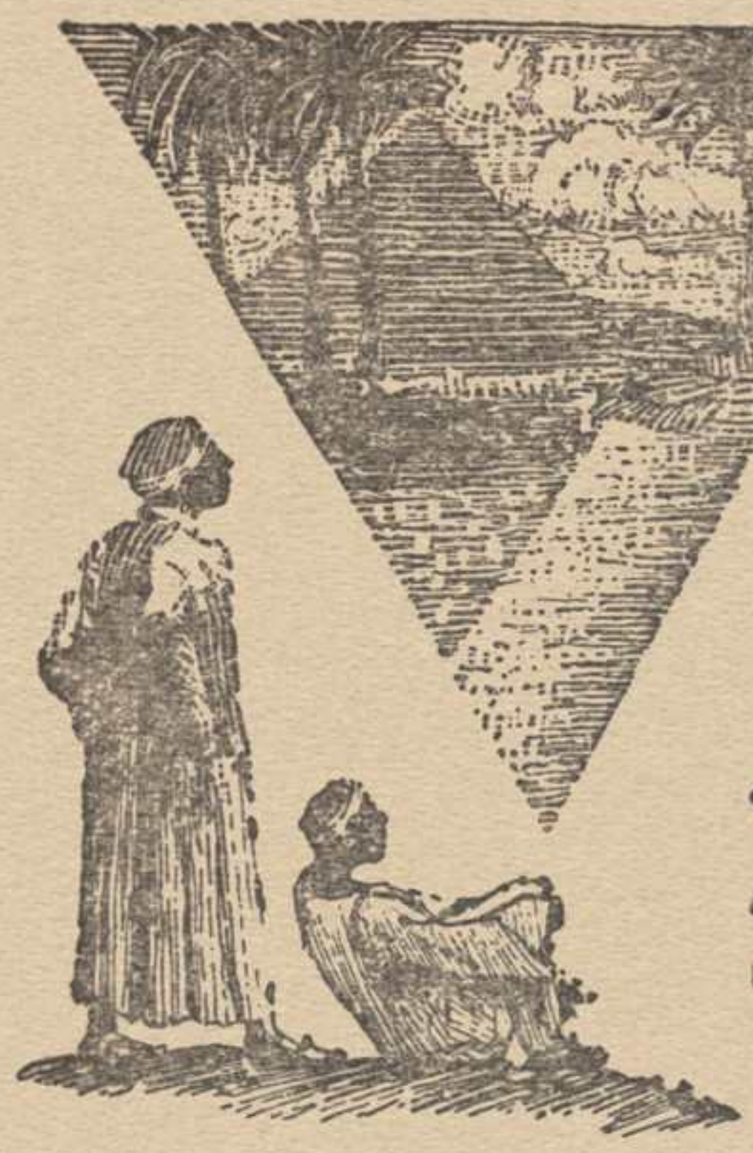

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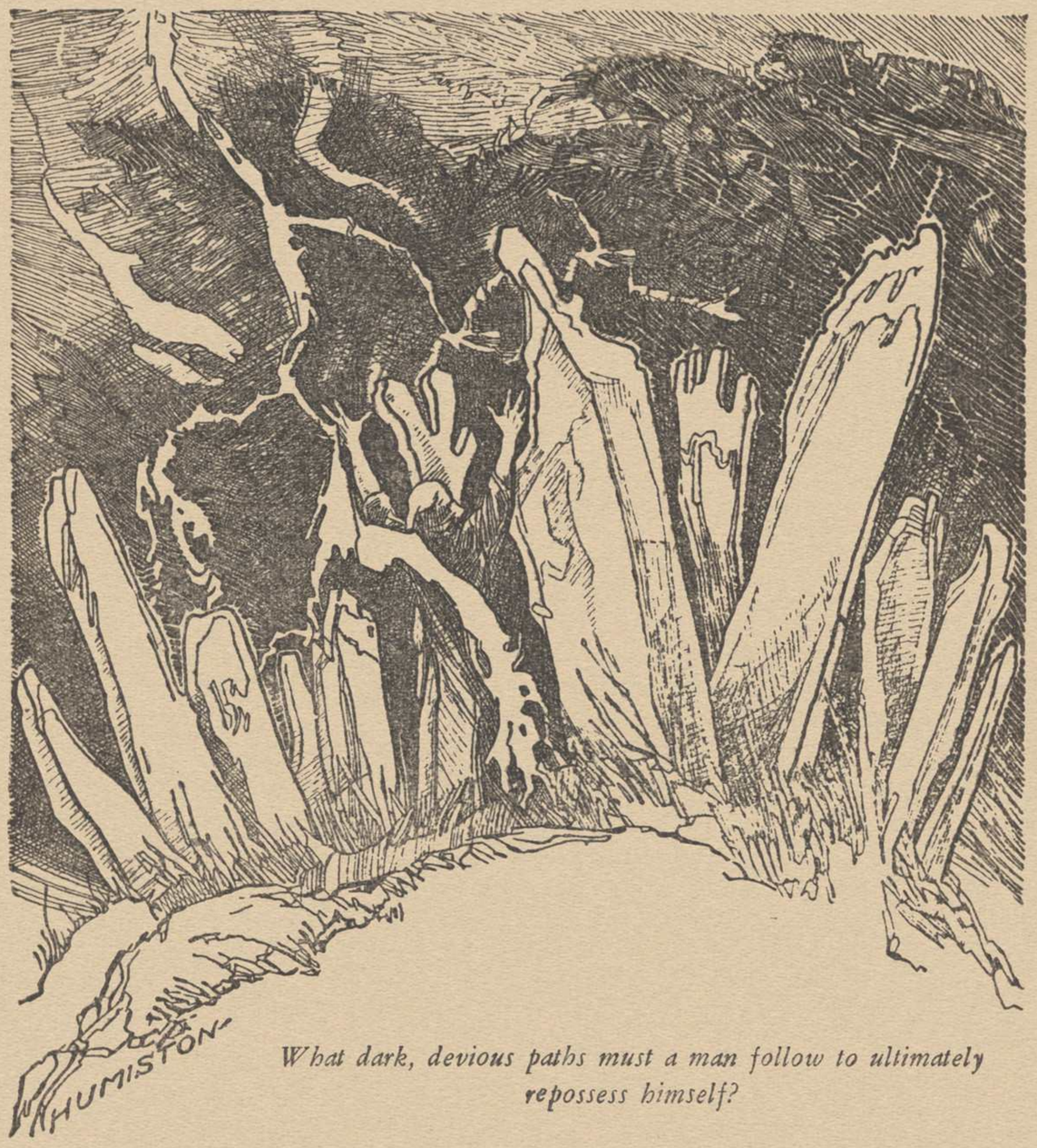
Twilight of the Gods



What dark, devious paths must a man follow to ultimately repossess himself?

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

Heading by Fred Humiston

I

THE haunting mystery that had oppressed me for eight long years had, finally, become unbearable. That June morning in New York, I reached my decision. I must try again to solve the dark riddle of my life.

Because I knew that Laughlin, my employer and my best friend, would try to talk me out of it, I bought my plane ticket first. Then I went to the office and told him.

He looked troubled. "You're going back to Norway? Eric, I wouldn't!"

"I've got to know!" I burst out. "I've got to know who I am!"

"You are Eric Wolverson," he said. "Let it go at that."

I shook my head. "I can't. Because I know that's not my real name—it's only the name they gave me."

I hurried on. "There must be *some* clue to my identity up in those mountains of northern Norway where they found me.

Somewhere, I must have had family, friends, a real past."

"You found nothing, you said, in the year you lived there in the village," he reminded me.

"I gave up too easily," I muttered. "This time, I'll keep searching."

He looked at me keenly. "Eric, what about the people there? Will they have forgotten their superstitious dislike of you?"

I knew well enough that they would not have forgotten. I could hear again the children and the old crones whispering *"Troll!"* as I walked through that little hamlet in the wild, pine-clad northern mountains.

Most Norwegians, even in the remotest districts, are too well educated to harbor old superstitions. But something about me had set them against me from the first. Only the most ignorant had voiced a superstitious fear of me, but all of them—except my foster-parents—had disliked me.

"I don't care," I said grimly. "This time, I'm going to stay there until I discover who I am."

Laughlin desisted his attempt to persuade me. "I can't really blame you, Eric. It must be a maddening thing, not to remember your own past."

He laid his hand on my shoulder. "But if you fail—and I fear you will—promise that you'll come back to New York."

I shook his hand. Twelve hours later, I was in a Constellation winging eastward through the night toward my native land.

My native land? How could I be sure even that Norway was that? All I knew, all that anyone knew, was that it was where I had been found eight years ago.

Hunters had found me, up there in the wildest, forested mountains of the north. A thirty-year-old man, tall and powerful in body—but wandering almost naked in the bitter weather, and mindless as a baby.

I had known nothing, not even my own name. They had taken me back to Stortfors, their village. And there the Wolversons, that kindly old couple whose name I now bore, had taken me in.

Gradually, my strength had returned. But my memory did not. I was a victim of complete amnesia.

The Wolversons cared for me with a kindness I shall never forget. They clothed and sheltered me, and patiently taught me what I must know to live—the language, the customs of civilization, the ways of village life.

IN a few months, I was to all appearances a normal man. I was taller and fairer than even those tall, fair Norwegians, but I was not unlike them in most ways. Yet they did not accept me.

I think that at first they held aloof from me because I was still a mystery. During those months, police officials had investigated without finding a single clue to my identity. No one reported a missing person of my description. My photograph was circulated, but no one knew me.

I had had no clothing or personal effects to trace. My teeth were perfect, so no dentist could provide a clue. I had old scars on my body that looked like battle-scars, but my fingerprints were not to be found in the army files.

The police gave up and registered me as Eric Wolverson, past unknown. But the people of Stortfors would not accept me as one of them.

The few ignorant folk among them muttered about me. They harked back to half-forgotten superstitions. Old women who claimed the second sight declared that I was not entirely human, that I was a troll in human guise.

I endured that silently, but it spurred me to unceasing search of my identity. I tramped to villages and lonely farmsteads, hoping always that someone someday would recognize me and call my name. But no one ever did. And the folk of Stortfors still held aloof from me.

I endured it—till the Wolversons died. With the passing of the old couple who had helped me, I lost my only friends. The suspicion and whispering of the village, the dragging loneliness, became too much for me. I left Norway, and came to America.

In the great metropolis now dropping far behind my plane, I had worked for seven years to make a new life. I had tried to put out of my mind the mystery of my past, to quit brooding about it.

I might have succeeded, had it not been for the dream. The dream that had first come to me years ago in the Wolversons'

little cottage, and that had brought me out of bed sweating and crying aloud. The dream that had returned, and always a little more strongly, ever since.

It was too much for me. I felt that the mystery and the dream would end by cracking my mind, and that my only chance was to solve the riddle of myself once and for all.

Now, eight years afterward, I was on my way back to find that solution. And if I failed—

The flight-steward interrupted my brooding thoughts, by pausing at my seat.

"We will reach Oslo before midnight tonight, Mr. Wolverson," he told me.

I asked about connections, and learned I could now take a local plane to within a hundred miles of Stortfors.

The sun set, and the great plane throbbed on in the twilight above the illimitable dusky plain of the ocean.

After a few more hours, the weariness and monotony of the night flight lulled me to sleep.

And then the dream came—clearer, more real, and more overwhelming than ever before!

It began with the same voice and words as always, the same mocking, silvery voice and taunting words.

"You will not ride back from Muspelheim to Asgard! You will not ride back again!"

In my dream, I knew and hated that face. And I knew and hated—yes, and feared!—the monstrous and unhuman two creatures that crouched beside their master and menaced me.

THEN I saw in the mists beyond them the other face that haunted this dream. The dark, beautiful face of a girl, framed by midnight hair, with slumbrous eyes that now were wide with alarm for me.

Hate of my taunting tormentor and his two monstrous companions flung me raging forward. Then a great hairy beast-weight crushed me and mighty jaws seized my throat.

I heard the dark girl's cry through the dream-mists.

"Loki! Loki, no!"

I struggled madly—and suddenly I was awake, with a hand shaking my shoulder.

It was the flight-steward, looking down at me anxiously. The big plane was still roaring on through the night.

"You seemed to be having a nightmare, sir!"

"Yes—a nightmare," I managed to say, wiping the perspiration from my forehead.

He looked at me strangely. Then, "We are crossing the coast now, sir. We'll reach Oslo in an hour."

I felt badly shaken. The dream had been the same as always, but never before had it been so utterly vivid and real.

What did it mean? What *could* it mean? I had asked myself that question a thousand times.

"You will not ride back again from Muspelheim to Asgard!"

I had, long ago, discovered that those names were from the ancient Norse mythology.

Asgard had been the home of the Aesir, the great Norse gods of long ago. The Vikings of the past had sworn by Odin, king of the Aesir, and by his great warriors, Thor of the Hammer and Tyr of the Sword.

And Muspelheim too was from the old Norse myths, where it was legended to be the realm of strange witch-fire where Surtr held rule.

And that frantic last cry, *"Loki, no!"*

Loki had been the devil of the Norse myths, the handsome, evil one who had turned against the Aesir and had joined their foes.

"But why should I dream of those old myths, again and again?"

I had asked myself that question, endlessly. And without ever finding an explanation.

But somehow, as the plane droned on over the dark, stark mountains of Norway, I had an eerie feeling that the explanation was near at last. That up in the wild north, waiting for me, lay the answer to the twin mysteries of my dream and of my past!

II

NOTHING, I found, had changed in Stortfors. The little northern village of massive timber cottages, huddling in its narrow mountain valley, looked just the

same as when I had left it seven years before.

Nor had its people changed, or forgotten me. They knew me, when I walked down the little street. Most of them spoke to me. But it was with the same reluctance, the same suspicious glances, as before.

Little children playing at a corner looked up at my tall figure with friendliness, until a wide-eyed older child whispered to them.

"Eric Wolverson," I heard. And then the whispered word. "Troll!"

No, I thought bitterly, nothing had changed in Stortfors.

But this time, I told myself, I would not let dislike and ignorant superstition drive me out until I had found the answer to my riddle.

I took up my abode in the cottage of my dead foster-parents. An old widow, whom I had given leave to live there, was still there —but she moved out within an hour of my coming.

For the next few weeks, I was too busy to mind the villagers. I had resolutely set myself to visit every farm and village within a hundred miles, until I found someone who knew me.

I found no one. It was just as before—I might have dropped out of the sky, for all that anyone knew of my past.

My hopes, that had been so high, waned day by day. And then a thing happened that set me on a strange new track.

I was tramping tiredly back into Stortfors in the soft northern twilight, after a long day of fruitless search. Passing the *stavekirk*, I bumped into an old crone coming out of the church.

She recognized me, squeaked in fear, and hastily made an ancient peasant sign against evil.

It touched me on the raw, and I suddenly flared out at her. "Why do you superstitious old fools treat me this way?"

The old crone retorted shrilly. "Because there's a look about you that people don't like, Eric Wolverson! Big and tall and strong as you are, you somehow don't look like other men!"

She wagged her head knowingly. "Trolls and changelings exist, despite what the young folk say. And you were found too close to Runestone Hill for us oldsters ever to like you!"

"Runestone Hill?" I repeated. "I never heard of it."

She cackled. "People wouldn't be likely to talk of that place to *you!*"

She hurried on in the dusk, leaving me standing stock still, and with a strange thrill running through me.

The name, "Runestone Hill," had for a moment, for just a second, seemed vaguely familiar to me. As though something out of my lost memory had almost come back to me.

Frantically, I tried to bring back that elusive memory. But it was already gone, whatever it had been.

That night, I felt charged by excited new hope. For the first time, a name had brought me a vague, fleeting touch of memory. I resolved to search out Runestone Hill. There, perhaps, I would remember more.

Next day found me far back in the wild, pine-clad hills. It was afternoon by the time I reached the little valley where the hunters had found me wandering, eight years before.

I gazed eagerly at the surrounding hills. Armies of dark pines, with here and there straggling birches and lindens, marched up the steep slopes everywhere. I noted one high hill whose summit was bare and decided to explore it first.

It was the hill I sought.

I KNEW it the moment I came out upon the bare, grassy summit, and saw the great circle of massive, ancient stones that crowned the crest.

There were twelve of the stones. They were massive oblong blocks, crumbling with age, and imbedded deeply in the earth. Some leaned drunkenly, others still stood rigidly upright.

Wonderingly, I examined them. On the inner face of each great block was carved an inscription in the rune-writing of the old Norse. I recognized the ancient writings, even though I could not read it.

I walked into the middle of the thirty-foot circle of the runestones. And immediately, dim and terrible memory assailed me.

"I've been here before! I remember—"

But it was gone as swiftly as it had come, that uncanny flash of familiarity. I remembered nothing.

It was maddening, to feel on the very verge of memory, of the solution of my life's

riddle—and yet not to be able to cross that verge.

For hours, I paced feverishly around that hilltop, in my excitement paying no heed to the summer storm that was swiftly darkening over the hills.

A BRIGHT bolt of lightning searing down to strike a nearby hill, and a reverberating crash of thunder, woke me to the imminence of the storm.

Storm or no storm, I would not leave. The key to my mystery lay here, if I could only grasp it.

"What was I doing here before? What?"

The blinding bolts and the crashes came closer. Closer, until the wings of the storm were sweeping down upon Runestone Hill.

The looming stones stood out dark and massive against the lightning-lit sky. And again, I felt the tug of dim memory!

The storm-lightning and the stones—these were right, but there was something yet lacking. Something that I must make ready quickly.

I ran to the nearest clump of birches, whose graceful white trunks were rocking wildly in the wind. With my clasp-knife, I hastily cut a dozen slender birch wands.

Striding back to the runestones, I laid a wand on the ground pointing from each stone toward the center of the circle.

Why did I make these incomprehensible preparations, in the face of an oncoming lightning-storm? I did not know. I knew only that some buried memory told me that these things must be done.

And I, Eric Wolverson, gave way to that smothered impulse in the wild hope that it would waken my numbed memory completely.

I stood in the center of the rune-stone circle, with the birch-wands pointing from each stone toward me like white fingers.

"But there was someone else with me!" I told myself. "Someone—"

Deafening crash of thunder smote and half-stunned me at that moment, as the full fury of the storm reached my hill.

Lightning struck blindingly on the wooded slopes. Then a dazzling bolt hit one of the runestones.

The bolt seemed to hold there, like a writhing serpent of living light. And with hellish flare and reverberation, other shafts of lightning seared down to hit other stones.

Dazed and dazzled, I glimpsed the lightning dripping and flowing from the runestones, and along the birch wands into the enclosed circle in which I crouched. It flowed like liquid flame toward me.

The ground suddenly seemed to waver and dissolve into nothingness under me! I felt myself falling headlong.

III

I AWAKENED from unconsciousness, to find myself lying on the ground. Nearby, the tall, dark runestones loomed against the twilight sky.

For a moment, I thought that the lightning had merely stunned me temporarily, and that my weird sensations had been only the result of shock. Then, as I lay looking at the tall runestones, I perceived something that sent a cold chill through me.

They were not the same stones. They were far less eroded, and they stood all rigidly erect instead of leaning drunkenly as the others had.

I scrambled to my feet, and looked wildly around. A freezing awe fell upon me.

I was not now on the summit of Runestone Hill. *I was not, from all appearances, on Earth!*

"Hysteria—delusion—" I told myself thickly. "The effect of the lightning-shock on my brain."

But I knew as I spoke that my attempt to reassure myself was false, and that I stood in the darkening twilight of another, alien world.

It was a hilltop on which I stood, at the center of the towering, brooding rune-engraved monoliths. But this hill, and the others that rose in the distance, were not the rugged, wooded hills of north Norway.

They were like small mountain-peaks stabbing the sky, stark pinnacles that had an unearthly savagery of outline. They rose out of a mighty conifer forest whose foliage was so dark green that it looked black.

Over this alien panorama arched an alien sky! The dusk was deepening, and in that sky there already blazed brilliant planets unknown to the skies of Earth, dimming the drift of stars. And meteor-moons pitted like

corroded white skulls rode across the heavens in place of Luna.

And far away in the west, silhouetted for a moment against the last afterglow, I saw the distant, soaring towers and keeps of a mighty citadel.

"Another world," I whispered. "Another world, and I have somehow crossed into it from Earth."

And then I, Eric Wolverson, said an insane thing. *"But I have been here before!"*

For this unearthly scene seemed strangely familiar to me. I had the feeling that dead memory was stirring again in my brain, trying frantically to live again.

My gaze clung to that faraway citadel, until it vanished in the deepening night. Somehow, I knew that place!

"But when? How?" I asked myself hoarsely, struggling with the incredible.

I could not, even yet, waken my numbed memory to answer those questions.

As I stood there gazing wildly, I saw something else. It flew black and long and slender across the sky beneath the blazing meteor-moons.

A winged serpent-shape, like a dragon out of fable, flying fast above the forest toward the west. And it, too, seemed fantastically familiar to me.

My brain was rocking from the shock of the impossible. I took the one course of action that might preserve my sanity.

"That citadel—if I go there, I might remember!"

I had *almost* remembered, when I saw those faraway, mighty towers. And now the place was drawing me like a magnet.

I turned to go down the hill, and stumbled on something that lay at my feet within the circle of the runestones. I stooped and picked it up.

It was a sword. A long, glimmering, ancient-looking blade, whose hilt seemed to fit my hand perfectly.

The feel of it comforted me oddly. And I might need a weapon. I gripped it in my hand as I went down the hill.

The great forest closed me in. It was dark and awesome here beneath the mighty conifers, except where shafts of wild brilliance struck down between them from the hurtling meteor-moons.

As I tramped half-dazedly westward, deer crashed across my path and I heard the howl of wolves from somewhere not far away.

But beside these familiar earthly animals, other and more fantastic life was abroad in the night forest.

A HALF-DOZEN wild horses bolted down a forest aisle on my left. And they were *horned* horses, their heads having each a little upcurving tusk like that of the fabled unicorn.

Down from the blazing sky swooped two of the great winged serpents in pursuit! I heard a hissing and a frantic neighing as they all swept away from me.

"A world that is a mixture of the earthly and the unearthly!" I thought. "But how can such a world exist?"

Then the dim shape of a possible explanation entered my stunned mind. "A world distinct from Earth, yet *interpenetrating* Earth—"

The speculations of certain modern physicists, that I had read in my New York years, had recalled themselves to me.

Our Earth, those scientists had theorized, was composed of atoms which were each but a loose, tenuous swarm of infinitesimal electrons and other sub-atomic particles. It was not impossible that other swarms, other worlds, interpenetrated our own atom-swarm, just as two swarms of bees can interpenetrate each other.

This alien planet, I thought, must be such an interpenetrating world. It might occupy exactly the same space as Earth, yet would be forever separated from it by the unbridgeable difference in the rate of its atomic vibration and its time.

Unbridgeable? But I had bridged that gap, even though I knew not how! And it must have been bridged other times in the past, by design or chance, so that the flying serpents and horned horses of this world were known, if only as myths, to Earth.

And—the thought was staggering—the Earth might be interpenetrated by many other alien worlds beside this one. And chance bridging contacts with them in the past might well have supplied other and different myths to the traditions of Earth.

Abruptly, I was aroused from my bewildered speculations by the most blood-chilling sound I had ever heard. It came

from only a few miles behind me—the long, swelling howl of a wolf.

But this was no ordinary wolf-cry. It had a volume and a sheer savagery that bristled the hairs on my head. I swung around, raising my sword.

"He's struck my trail!" I exclaimed. "He—"

He? *Who?* For an instant I had almost known, but then the brief flash of memory died as swiftly as it had come.

That terrible beast-howl, that seemed to throb with mad hatred, faded into echoes and died away.

But I knew, with a knowledge born of that brief flash of almost memory, that an awful danger was coming after me through the forest.

I turned around again and ran, on toward the west. I had to trust to instinct or nothing, and deep instinct told me that safety lay at the distant citadel that was my goal.

That citadel could not be far away, now. But I felt that the pursuers behind me would follow swiftly. I pressed on, stumbling through brush that ripped my thin shirt and breeches and clutched at my hair.

As I ran through the dark forest aisles and across brushy thickets open to the meteor-blazing sky, I had a fierce desire to turn and meet those who tracked me. But again a whisper from my frozen memory seemed to warn me that it would be fatal to do so here.

Great wings threshed and rattled above the tree-tops, and I glimpsed the gliding shape of a winged serpent far huger than any I yet had seen. It planed low above the forest, its snaky head turning from side to side as though it searched below.

I crouched flat against a great trunk until that nightmare dragon-shape banked around and glided back toward the east. Then I ran on.

The forest suddenly ended. I came out upon bare ground, and suddenly stopped short. I stared frozenly at what lay before me.

A few yards in front of me, there yawned the enormous emptiness of a great valley. It was like a gigantic chasm, miles deep and many miles wide, its side dropping sheerly downward from just before me.

The wild, flying light of the meteor-moons illuminated the dark immensities of the abyss. And I saw that not far along it from where I stood, there rose in that abyss a stark pinnacle whose flat summit was level with my eyes.

ON THE summit of that pinnacle was built the citadel I had glimpsed, a mighty stone castle with massive keeps and towers whose windows spilled ruddy light. And from the brink on which I stood, to the citadel out there on the pinnacle, arched a tremendous stone bridge painted like the rainbow.

"The old Norse myth!" I gasped. "The rainbow bridge to Asgard, the home of the gods!"

Myth had come real before my unbelieving eyes! Myth, that for years had strangely haunted my dreams.

"You will not ride home from Muspelheim to Asgard!" that hated dream-voice had always told me.

I had thought it dream only. But the Asgard of myth loomed before me in full reality.

"Have I been here too, before? *Have* I?"

In my wild wonder, I had forgotten the deadly pursuit behind me. And suddenly I had terrible reminder of it.

A low, thunderous coughing from close behind me made me whirl around.

Out of the forest was creeping toward me a gray wolf of incredible size. The hairy monster instantly crouched ready to charge, its blazing green eyes hynotically holding my gaze.

Close to it, that great winged serpent that had hunted me in the forest had just alighted. It coiled, its flat ophidian head rearing menacingly in my direction.

Then from out of the woods rode a mounted man who reined his horse in sharply beside the wolf and serpent. He wore shining mail and helmet of the old Norse pattern, and he had drawn his sword.

"So you have returned?" he cried to me, and though the tongue he spoke was strange to me, I somehow understood it. "Fool, you returned only to your death!"

I knew that haughtily handsome face, that silver, mocking voice. Yes, and I knew the two monstrous shapes that crouched at his side.

They were the face and voice and shapes of my dream. But it was no dream now!

IV

DAZED as I was by the incredible materialization of my dream, I yet recognized the deadly menace in this man and his monstrous beast-companions.

I raised my sword. And at the same time I backed toward the Rainbow Bridge. It was narrow, and on it I could face my enemies and not be taken from behind.

The mailed rider laughed. "There's no help for you from the Aesir. You'll be dead before they come. Stupid one, not to know that my arts would warn me when you opened the Way between Worlds and returned!"

He laughed again. "My pets trailed you for me, and they shall have the pleasure of killing you now. Fenris! Iormungandr!"

At those names, the huge gray wolf sprang up snarling terribly and the great winged serpent unfolded glittering wings and uncoiled for flight.

And at those names, names out of the old Norse mythology, a terrific shock ran through me. This man before me—I guessed his identity now, and yet it was impossible—

"Loki!" I whispered. "The arch-devil of old, the foe of the Aesir!"

His handsome face darkened. "So you can remember me? It's your last memory! There's no Hela here now to save you!"

Hela? That name too sent a swift shock through me, my mind flashing back to the dark, brooding-eyed girl of my dream.

And then suddenly Fenris and Iormungandr, the might wolf and the Midgard-serpent, were upon me!

They came with a rush, the blazing-eyed wolf charging in great bounds, the winged serpent hurtling hissing through the air.

Instinct or memory guided me in the split-second that followed. I crouched down slightly, so that the parapets that railed the bridge would protect me from the swoop of the winged serpent.

At the same moment, wielding the sword as though its use were utterly familiar to me, I stabbed with all my strength at the charging wolf.

An ordinary wolf would have spitted himself on the blade. But the wolf Fenris was too supernaturally alert for that. He—I could not think of that great beast by any other pronoun—checked himself in mid-spring by a marvellous effort.

Flattening his belly to the ground, green eyes and white fangs gleaming at me, Fenris inched closer. A low growl like distant thunder rumbled from his throat. It was answered by the hissing of the Midgard-serpent that was banking around in mid-air for another swoop at me.

"Dog who eats carrion! Worm of the slime!" I taunted them. "So you remember my sword?"

How did *I* remember? How did I remember the tongue in which I cried those taunts, the use of the great sword that flashed in my hand?

I cannot tell. In my overpowering rage, the strange language was as familiar to my lips as the sword to my hand.

Fenris and Iormungandr charged together! I heard the exultant laugh of Loki from the background, as I dropped to one knee.

Great wings fanned me as a dragon head snapped down at me, and missed. The wolf's green eyes blazed hellfire before me, and my swordpoint found a hairy body.

Fenris recoiled, his hairy shoulder slashed. The Midgard-serpent was planing around for another swoop at me.

Then from the great citadel far behind me across the Rainbow Bridge, I heard the distant, warning blast of a horn.

"Now, quickly!" Loki cried to his beast-comrades. "The Aesir come!"

Hoofs thundered on the bridge as he spurred his mount down upon me. His upraised sword glittered, and Fenris charged beside him.

I parried and struck, with a swordsmanship that Eric Wolverson had never possessed. I beat back Loki's descending blade, and again slashed at the great wolf as he tried to leap in from the side.

Loki's eyes were raging as he reined back his plunging horse. Again he cried to wolf and serpent as though they were human.

"No time now—Heimdall and the Aesir are coming!" he shouted.

He turned his steed, galloped toward the shelter of the forest. Wolf Fenris loped be-

side him, and the winged serpent flew over his head.

But at the forest edge, Loki turned his head to send back a silvery cry to me.

"You have not escaped! We three will find you—when we return to Valhalla!"

Then he and his monstrous companions disappeared into the nighted forest.

I stood, sword in hand, breathing in great gasps. My mind was numbed by the shock of the incredible.

Nor was I given time to order my wild thoughts. Before I had regained breath, I heard the tramp of hurrying feet from behind me on the Rainbow Bridge.

I turned. A dozen tall, fair warriors, mailed and helmed and carrying naked swords, were running toward me from the distant citadel.

Their leader, a stalwart, commanding figure, hailed me through the twilight as they came closer.

"That was Loki and his devils' beasts! Who are you, and what do you here with *them?*"

I tried to stammer answer. "I—"

Before I could finish, they had reached me. And as they saw my face, a strange tension seemed to grip these glittering warriors.

One of them pointed to me and cried wildly to their leader. "Lord Heimdall, look at him! His clothing is strange, but it is—"

"I see him," Heimdall answered, in a steely voice. His face had set hard as he looked at me, and his eyes were bleak.

There was a little silence. The very sight of me seemed to have frozen these men for a moment. In their faces, as they stared at me, was icy hatred.

Heimdall broke the silence. "Odin and Thor must know this at once. It may portend—"

He broke off, then resumed, this time speaking grimly to me. "You are going into Valhalla castle with us. Shall it be quietly, or must some of us die to take you?"

I was too overwhelmed for a moment to answer.

An avalanche of fantastic realities had crushed me.

THESE were the Aesir! The Norse hero-gods of long ago, who dwelt in their great eyrie-citadel of Asgard, and who had Odin for king and Thor of the Hammer and Tyr of the Sword for captains.

They existed, real and living. Yet even more stunning than that was the fact that they seemed to *recognize* me.

They were waiting for my answer, with their swords tensely raised. I struggled to speak.

"I do not understand all this," I faltered. "But—I will go with you quietly."

Some of the tension left them, as Heimdall reached and took my sword. I did not resist.

Then I found myself tramping with them in dead silence up the sweeping ascending curve of the Rainbow Bridge.

In the deepening dusk, the abyss beneath that unearthly span seemed almost bottomless. The wild meteor-moons that rode the heavens barely illumined the depths below. Truly it was Niffheim, the gulf of nothingness that moated Asgard!

We passed through a massive gate that pierced the great wall of the mountain-citadel. Again, dim memory seemed to assail me as I looked in awe around me.

THIS citadel of the Aesir was far bigger than I had thought. It held a ring of stone castles that surrounded a wide-open space in the center of which rose the mighty mass of the biggest castle.

And this looming pile was Valhalla! Somehow, I knew that without question as my guard and I passed through its portals and into a huge lighted hall where many warriors were feasting and drinking.

Flashing lights of torches dazzled me. And as I stood uncertain, the rough revelry of deep voices and the clink of cups and flagons stopped dead. The warriors at the long tables, and the Valkyrie-maids who waited upon them, and the busy thralls, all stared frozenly at me.

"Lord Odin!" rang Heimdall's stentorian voice from beside me, across the hall. "One who rode to Muspelheim has—returned."

I looked across the hall. There was a high dais at its end, and a low chair in which sat a great, gray kinglike figure—a man of fifty with iron-gray hair and beard, wrapped in a gray cloak.

He rose to his feet, holding a short, heavy spear in his hand. He had but one eye, but

that single ice-blue orb seemed to transfix me.

"Bring him hither, Heimdall," his deep voice commanded.

Like one in a dream, I went through the staring feasters to the dais. I saw now that another man had risen beside Odin.

A shorter man this, but a burlier and bigger, with tremendous shoulders. His shock head was bare, his red face unbelieving in expression as his small eyes stared at me. His hand clutched the helve of an enormous hammer, and I knew that this was Thor of the Hammer.

Near them on the dais stood another lordly figure, a dark-faced man of forty tall in black mail, who was glaring at me. I wondered numbly if he were the Aesir's other great captain, Tyr of the Sword.

For myth had changed to reality about me, ever since I had plunged from Earth into this neighboring world. Valhalla and the Aesir and their lords were as real around me now as I was myself!

Odin's eye brooded upon me as he spoke to Heimdall. "How came he back to Valhalla, Heimdall?"

"Lord Odin, I am not sure," the other answered. "We glimpsed Loki's beasts at the farther end of Bifrost. We hastened out but by the time we reached there, Loki and his two devils were gone. But *he* was there!"

Odin spoke harshly to me. "So it was with the arch-traitor that you returned?"

I found my voice at last. "Returned?" I cried. "I do not know what you mean! Have I been here in Valhalla before?"

A fierce laugh burst from the giant Thor. "Has he been here before?"

"But eight days have passed since you rode out from here," Odin told me accusingly. "To Muspelheim, you told us. But to join the arch-devil Loki, as we learned later!"

He drew himself to his full height. "Now you have come back, companioned by the traitor you joined, to play the spy among us. But for your crime you shall die now, Tyr!"

Tyr? Tyr of the Sword, great captain of the Aesir—was he addressing that name to *me?*

Realization stunned me. Then I myself was one of the Aesir? Then I was—Tyr?

V

FOR a space of minutes I stood there, too dazed by the impact of the unbelievable to speak.

Could this be the answer to the mystery of my forgotten past? Was it possible that I, Eric Wolverson, was Tyr of the Sword?

It was too incredible. On the other world of Earth, Tyr had been legend for a thousand years. How could I have lived that time?

"I cannot be Tyr!" I cried. "I have been but a few hours in this world, and before that I lived years in another, different world!"

"You are Tyr," Odin said grimly. "And until eight days ago, you were one of the most honored of the Aesir.

"Then you rode to visit Surtr of Muspelheim. You did not return. And we learned that you had joined our arch-foe, Loki."

The tall, dark-faced man in black mail who had been glaring at me now stepped forward.

"It is true," he accused. "Tyr never came to my kingdom of Muspelheim. But I, Surtr, saw him riding with Loki and his hell-crew toward Jotunland. Doubtless he has been plotting with Loki and the Jotuns."

Thor, raising his mighty hammer, strode down toward me. The burly giant's face was crimson, his voice hoarse as he raged at me.

"Tyr of the Sword, my comrade in arms who has faced the Jotuns with me a hundred times in battle, turned traitor! I could kill you myself!"

"But all that never happened, not to me!" I protested. "I remember nothing of it!"

There was an interruption. Through the glaring chieftains stepped a feminine figure in clinging white robe—a woman of fair, gentle beauty with deep blue eyes that earnestly searched my face.

"Wait, lords Odin and Thor!" she said. "It may be that Tyr tells truth when he says that he does not remember."

Thor turned angrily toward her. "What mean you, Cousin Freya?"

Freya's searching eyes had not left my face. "He has the emptiness in his eyes," she said. "The emptiness that comes from the hell-brew which kills the memory."

I looked at her, startled. "It's true that

my memory of all my former life is dead. But—"

Surtr interrupted harshly. "If Tyr drank the hell-brew, it was to wipe memory of his treachery from his brain. He should die now!"

"If he must die, he must," Freya said. "But first, let him—remember. I can cleanse his brain of the hell-brew, if you allow me."

She looked up at Odin. The Aesir lord's one eye brooded upon me, and then he inclined his head slightly.

"Let him remember, then," rumbled Odin. "Let him remember, so that he may know his own black guilt before he dies."

Freya went out of the great hall, leaving us all rigid with tension. No word was spoken until she returned.

She held in her hand a little, twisted glass flagon of red liquid.

"This will wash Hela's dark hell-brew from your brain," she said. "Drink, Tyr."

Again, the name of "Hela" brought fleetingly back to my dazed mind the dream-glimpsed girl of dark beauty whom I had envisioned so often.

I took the little flagon, raised it hesitantly to my lips—and then drank.

Flame seemed to rage instantly through my brain! In the inmost fibers of my being I felt an unbinding, a loosening, a sudden releasing of chained knowledge.

Staggering beneath that wave of fiery pain, I lost all awareness of Valhalla hall and those in it. Light was bursting in upon my agonized mind—light, and *memory!*

In that dreadful moment, I, Tyr, remembered all that I had forgotten.

Yes—*I, Tyr!* For my dead memory had sprung to life at last, and I knew now who I was.

I was not Eric Wolverson of Earth. I was Tyr of the Aesir, Tyr of the sword! And this world of the Aesir, not Earth, was *my* world!

Here I had grown to manhood among the Aesir, and here I had fought the Jotuns and our other savage foes. Here I had won my name by my swordsmanship in battle, fighting beside Thor and Odin.

Yes, all this I remembered. And I remembered too that eight days ago I *had* ridden away from Asgard to visit our ally-kingdom of Muspelheim.

Eight days ago? But I had been eight years in that other world of Earth. Then, even as the Earth scientists had thought, time was different in this interpenetrating world, and a year there was but a day here.

Full memory flashed over me, of what had happened those eight days ago when I had ridden into Muspelheim.

I uttered a fierce shout. "I am Tyr, yes! I remember now! But I am no traitor—I never joined Loki!"

I leveled an accusing finger at Surtr, my rage against that dark-faced king exploding from the memory I had regained.

"Surtr of Muspelheim, who pretends to be ally of the Aesir, is the traitor! For in Muspelheim, I discovered Loki and his hell-brood conspiring with Surtr against us!"

IT HAD all come back to me now, clear and terrible memory of how I had stumbled upon Loki lurking in the palace of Muspelheim.

I remembered how Loki's craft had overpowered me, and how Surtr had cried, "Kill him quickly or he will ruin our plot against the Aesir!"

And of how Loki had laughed in evil triumph and had retorted, "It will please me to have Tyr of the Sword as a mindless slave. The hell-brew of forgetfulness that Hela makes will make him that."

Yes, and I remembered that as the black drink was forced into me and my brain slowly darkened, a girl's voice had cried, *"Loki, no!"*

And that I had known it was the voice of Hela, that darkly beautiful witch whom in bygone years to my sorrow I had loved.

And vaguely, I remembered the coming of Hela to my dungeon a little later, and of how faintly her urgent words had reached my dulling mind.

"I could not stop him from giving you the hell-brew but I cannot see you his slave, Tyr! I have come to help you escape!"

Vague, vague, were my memories of riding druggedly through the night forest with her, and of her voice coming to me as though from far away.

"You cannot return to Asgard, for Surtr is to accuse you of treachery to the Aesir. But I have the art to open the Way between

Worlds and send you to safety in another world!"

And then, as my mind had darkened completely, nothing but a misty dream-memory of a circle of tall stones and of lightnings amid which I seemed to sink into an abyss, and of Hela's voice calling, "Farewell, Tyr!"

Yes, it had all come back to me now, and I, Tyr, poured it forth in a raging flood.

"And *that* is why Surtr came hither to accuse me of treachery! Because I discovered that he himself conspires with Loki and the Jotuns!"

Surtr's dark face was distorted, black with blood. "Tyr lies, to cover his own guilt!"

I sprang forward fiercely. "Give us swords and we'll make trial of the issue by combat!"

Surtr recoiled, and appealed to Odin. "Shall I be slain by Tyr of the Sword to make good his falsehood?"

Odin looked down at me grimly. "If you did not join Loki, how is it that he and his beasts came with you tonight to Asgard?"

"They did not come with me—they pursued me!" I exclaimed. "I fought them, on the bridge!"

"Was it so, Heimdall?" asked Odin.

Heimdall hesitated. "We could not see, in the twilight. We glimpsed Fenris and Iormungandr, but by the time we had crossed Bifrost, they and Loki were gone."

"Why should I betray the Aesir?" I asked passionately. "Have you forgotten how many times I fought for Asgard?"

"No," said Odin sternly, "nor have we forgotten that once in years past you loved that witch Hela whose magic now helps Loki's plots."

In desperation, I pointed down to my clothing, my torn khaki shirt and my breeches and boots. "Does not my strange garb prove that I have been in another world?"

Odin said slowly, "It is true that your garb is alien now. But Loki could have devised you such strange garb to support your story."

Surtr broke in. "I can bring back from Muspelheim witnesses who saw Tyr laughing and plotting in the forest with Loki and the Jotuns!"

Odin delivered his judgment. "Then you shall bring those witnesses, Surtr. I can test their truthfulness! If Tyr's guilt is proved by them, he shall die quickly. Until then, he remains prisoned."

I made a final passionate appeal. "Will you let Surtr ride out of Asgard to bring doom upon you?"

Odin answered grimly, "You are the accused, not our ally Surtr. Heimdall, see to his prisoning."

I knew him too well to make further appeals. My spirit sagged within me. Heavily, I went with Heimdall and his warriors out of Valhalla hall.

THEY took me down to the lowest level of the castle, to corridors and chambers cut deep in the rock of Asgard. I walked into a dark little cell, and heard the bar fall across the door outside.

For a time, I leaned my face against the cold rock of the wall. My brain seemed bursting.

I, Tyr of the Sword, prisoned as a traitor to the Aesir! A traitor who would die shameful death if Surtr brought back convincing witnesses.

But that Surtr would return, I did not believe. He would hasten back to his own fiery kingdom now, only to hurry his plot with Loki to its climax.

What it was that Surtr and Loki together were plotting against Asgard, I did not know. But words spoken when they had captured me back there in Muspelheim gave me a premonition of a terrible doom they were hatching for the Aesir.

"And I must stay helpless here until that doom breaks on Asgard!" I groaned. "It would have been better never to have regained memory!"

Yes, in my agony of spirit, I wished that I could again forget my life as Tyr of the Sword, and be again Eric Wolverson of Earth as I had been for eight years.

Eight years? Eight long years, in that neighbor world of Earth that now seemed so strange to me when I looked back on it. Eight years, that had been only eight days in this world of different time.

And a thousand years of Earth was but a thousand days of our time. I could understand now how the old Norsemen of ten Earth centuries ago had told myths of us Aesir and our world. The Way between

Worlds must have opened more than once in past time, and the tale of us had somehow gone through.

As *I* had gone through to Earth, when to save me Hela had used her magic art to open the Way. So she still must love me a little, even though years ago I had parted from her in bitterness?

I paced the little dark cell feverishly, and rage against my own strange fate mounted higher in me with each passing hour.

"Tyr of the Sword, locked in a prison to die a cow's death, while war and doom gather against the Aesir!"

Finally, the door of my cell suddenly opened.

A giant figure loomed portentously in the opening, and then came in toward me.

It was Thor, and his terrible hammer glinted dully in his hand.

VI

THERE was mixed grief and rage in the face of the giant as he approached me. And now I saw that in his left hand he carried a long, glittering sword — my own sword.

His great voice rumbled. "Tyr, we were comrades in arms long ago. I cannot endure to see them execute you as they will do."

Hope leaped up in me. "Thor, then you believe my story? You mean to help me?"

"No!" he retorted. "But, even though a traitor, Tyr of the Sword deserves better than the shameful death they plan for you."

He handed me my sword. "You asked trial by combat, Tyr. You shall have it—against me."

I recoiled. "Thor, no! I could not fight you! We've stood shoulder to shoulder too many times against the Jotuns!"

"Why did you not remember that when you deserted us for love of Hela, and joined Loki?" roared the giant.

My own temper flashed into wrath. "You are stupid as ever, to believe Surtr's lying story! It's Surtr who plots against the Aesir, I tell you! And it's Surtr I want to meet man-to-man, not you!"

"Surtr rode homeward to Muspelheim, hours ago," the Hammerer replied. "He will be back tomorrow with the witnesses who will prove your guilt. Here, take your sword. I'd rather kill you or be killed, than have an Aesir die as you'll die."

I restrained my anger. "Thor, listen! Did ever I tell lies in all the days we two have comraded?"

"No," he admitted. "But men do strange things for love. And Hela—"

"I parted from Hela years ago, when I discovered the evil that was in her!" I insisted.

"Aye, but I have always thought that you still secretly loved that dark witch," he rumbled.

There was truth enough in that accusation to make me wince. And it must have showed in my face, for Thor's look darkened.

"Enough of this, "he growled. He forced the sword-hilt into my hand. "Take it and defend yourself. I don't want to kill you unfairly."

He backed a few steps away. I raised the blade. We faced each other in the dark cell, sword against hammer.

Tyr of the Sword against Thor of the Hammer! We two famous captains of the Aesir, who together had fought the Jotuns and the Alfings and the Vanir, now seeking each other's lives.

Thor stepped sidewise, his glaring eyes fixed on me, his hammer raised only waist-high. I knew—how well I knew!—that terrible sweeping side-stroke of his that had crushed the skulls of so many of our savage enemies.

He struck! But in his rage, he forgot the cramped smallness of the cell, and the great hammer clanged and caught on the wall.

With a swiftness wonderful in so huge a man, he recovered himself. But the brief instant was time enough for my sword to drive into him.

It was time enough—but I did not stab. I stood unmoving, my sword sagging. I had known from the first that I could not fight in death-duel with my old comrade.

Thor stared at me, and then the rage slowly went out of his face and he lowered his hammer.

"Tyr, I have been a fool. I have been the greatest of fools."

"Your strength was always more in your back than in your head," I retorted.

He did not fire up as he had used to do at my chaffing. He looked shamefaced, and

growled, "You know my temper. The berserk madness came over me when I thought you traitor."

Then he gripped my arm. "I should have known better! Come, we'll see Odin again. I'll convince him somehow that you're telling the truth."

I shook my head. "It's useless. Odin will not relax his decree. He'll wait for Surtr to return with the promised witnesses."

I rushed on desperately, "And Surtr and Loki will return instead with a savage Jotun army and with some mysterious and awful weapon they plan to use against Asgard!"

The Hammerer looked stunned. "But if we can't convince Odin in time, what *can* we do?"

"Thor, whatever thing of doom they are preparing against us must be at Surtr's castle in Muspelheim," I said swiftly. "For it was there that Loki was hiding when I stumbled upon him."

I went on. "I can remember the secret way by which Hela brought me out of that castle. If we two rode there and entered by that way—"

"We could kill Loki and Surtr and destroy this mystery-weapon of theirs!" Thor finished for me. His little eyes began to glitter. "That would be an adventure worthy of Tyr and Thor!"

"Can you get me out of Asgard?" I asked him tensely.

He thought a moment, then said, "Wait!" and went out.

He was back in a few minutes with a helmet and cloak. "Put them on, Tyr. And keep your sword hidden—all Asgard knows that sword."

Helmed and cloaked, I went out of the cell after the Hammerer.

The hour was late. Valhalla castle slept, and no one met us as we went up the stairs and hallways and out a postern door.

The night wind blew chill, in the open air. The towers of Asgard loomed against the flaring, splendid sky of stars and meteor-moons.

All Asgard slumbered, safe behind Bifrost Bridge and its warders.

Thor brought horses, his own great steed and a rangy, clean-limbed mount for me. We vaulted to the saddles and rode clattering through the sleeping ways to the great gate that barred the way to Bifrost Bridge.

The giant banged with his hammer on the metal bars, setting up a thunderous clangor. Heimdall, captain of the gate-guard, looked down from a window of the watch-tower.

"Open, Heimdall!" Thor rumbled. "I go forth with a companion to see if accursed Loki still lurks in the forest yonder."

"Had I not better call a company of warriors to accompany you?" Heimdall asked. I kept my helmed head bowed, as he looked down at us.

"Am I a babe that I need protection from Loki and his devil-pets?" roared the Hammerer. "One comrade is enough! Open!"

The great gates creaked open. We spurred our mounts and galloped up the great curve of the bridge, hoofs drumming loudly on the stone. Then we were across and in the shadow of the great trees.

"I know the shortest way to Muspelheim!" I called over the rush of wind. "We should reach the Fire Kingdom before dawn."

Thor laughed and swung his great hammer in the air. "It is like old days again to ride forth together, Tyr!"

Yes, it was not the first time that Thor of the Hammer and Tyr of the Sword had gone forth from Asgard into danger. But never, I knew, into such terrible danger as was gathering now.

WHAT *was* the dreadful thing that Loki and Surtr were preparing against Asgard? I had heard only sinister hints, but enough to convince me that it was a real and awful menace.

They could bring against us the hosts of the savage Jotuns, our old foes, and the smaller army of Surtr. But these alone could never conquer Asgard. I knew Loki's evil cunning, and I felt cold apprehension.

The forest seemed dark and strange and tense, this night. By the wild rays of the meteor-moons that struck down through the trees, we saw deer and wolves and bands of the horned horses and flying serpents, all moving southward away from Muspelheim.

We had ridden but a few hours when I saw far ahead of us the strange, greenish glow in the sky that warned we were approaching the realm of Surtr.

"We are near Muspelheim!" I called.

"See, yonder in the north glows the mountain of the witch-fires."

"I like not those witch-fires whose very warmth is death," Thor growled. "Only Surtr would wish to rule such a land as this."

Well-named was the Fire Kingdom of Surtr! For as we rode over a forested ridge, we had clear view of that most frightful mountain which gave the land its name.

It looked miles away from us, a great, squat crater flinging into the sky a cold, shaking green radiance from the strange witch-fires that forever churned in its mighty caldron.

Always we had known that even to approach too close those witch-fires was to die, and that only the rocks rich in lead which formed the crater walls kept these fires from inside our world from flowing outward.

But now I, Tyr, had Eric Wolverson's memories of Earth-science to give me hint of what those witch-fires really were. They were radio-active fires, *atomic* fires welling up from the depths of our world.

I told Thor, "On the world Earth where I spent eight years—or days—they have the witch-fire. It does not occur naturally there, but they have learned how to make it to use as a weapon of war."

Thor uttered an outraged roar. "Use the witch-fire as a war-weapon? That is black and shameful! Are they too craven to fight with sword and spear?"

We rode past that dreadful crater at several miles distance, and soon reached the edge of the great lake on whose farther edge was Muspelheim.

The hurtling meteor-moons poured radiance on the lake, and illumined the dark, stark citadel of Surt that rose brutally massive amid smaller castles on the bluffs of the opposite shore.

"The secret way by which Hela brought me out of the citadel opens down at the foot of the bluff," I told Thor. "We must ride around, along the water edge."

The Hammerer glanced at me oddly. "That Jotun witch must still have some love for you, to have risked Loki's wrath to save you."

"Speak no more of that," I said harshly. "That was over for me on the day years ago when I discovered how she used her magic art."

But as we two rode down to the lake and began to circle its edge, I wondered if I spoke truth. Was it over, really? Would it ever be?

Certainly I had loved no other woman as I had that dark Jotun girl whose mastery of wizardy was surpassed only by that of Loki himself. And certainly, she had risked much to get me to safety in the other world.

Had Loki discovered her duplicity? If he had, I could guess what that arch-devil would have done to her.

And then I reproached myself bitterly for thinking of Hela when the safety of Asgard itself was at stake.

"This is the place," I told Thor in a whisper, a little later. "Tie the horses to those shrubs, and follow me silently."

WE HAD reached the foot of the bluff directly below the citadel of Muspelheim. Here there was only a narrow strand between lake and cliff. A hundred feet above us, on the brink of the cliff, loomed Surtr's dark castle.

I led the way to an almost invisible foxhole in the rock wall. I slipped inside but Thor had to struggle to squeeze his great form through.

We crouched in a narrow tunnel that climbed upward into utter darkness.

The steep little passage was one that had been eroded naturally by water, and then enlarged by human hands. I wondered if Surtr knew this way into his citadel, or if it was one of cunning Loki's secrets.

The climbing tunnel ended in a blank stone door. I motioned Thor to silence, and then gently slid the stone slab aside.

We stepped out into one of the dank corridors beneath Muspelheim. Faint reflected torchlight filtered down into it from a stair at one end.

"Loki's lair here was on the level above this," I whispered to Thor. "It was there that I stumbled on him—and it's there that he and Surtr are most likely to be preparing their devils' work."

Thor nodded his shaggy head, and raised his hammer a little. "Just lead me close enough to reach them with Miolnir and I'll end their plots."

We went down the corridor to the stair, and listened at its foot. There was no sound from the upper levels, though dawn must be near.

"This whole place is too *quiet,*" muttered the Hammerer. "I don't like it."

I too was oppressed by the unnatural silence of the great castle. But I gripped my sword-hilt more tightly and led the way stealthily up the stair.

The corridors of the next level seemed deserted too. I went rapidly down it with Thor, and paused outside a massive door.

"This was Loki's lair," I murmured. "Be ready to strike!"

Then I suddenly pushed the door open and we two burst in with sword and hammer upraised.

The dusky stone chamber was as I had seen it before—a small room, with tables littered with the grotesque and gruesome instruments of Loki's magic art.

But Loki himself was not in the room, nor was Surtr. Its only occupant was a girl who had swung quickly around to face us.

A girl whose flowing black hair matched the jet hue of her clinging, belted robe—a girl whose wide dark eyes stared at me out of a dead-white, beautiful face.

I sprang across the room and seized her. "If you try to give the alarm I'll have to kill you, Hela! Don't make me do it!"

She looked unbelievingly up into my face. "Tyr!" she whispered. "Tyr, returned to this world and to memory! Loki told me, but I could not believe—"

I still held her tightly, my sword was still raised. But Thor spoke unexpectedly.

"Cease threatening her, Tyr," said the Hammerer. "She will never bring danger upon you, that I swear."

"No," whispered Hela, "I'll never bring bring danger upon you, Tyr."

She took from the silken belt-pouch that hung beside her dagger-sheath, a little vial of black liquid.

"See, it is the hell-brew that destroys all memory. I have many times meant to drink it myself, because I could no longer bear to remember you."

I felt a strange emotion. I knew now that whatever had been between Hela and myself, whatever the strange pattern that the Norns had twisted of our life-threads, it was not yet ended.

And yet my dread for the Aesir drove me so strongly that I ignored the emotions that had burst in me at sight of her.

"Where is Loki?" I demanded of her. "I know that he plans disaster for the Aesir, and I am going to kill him this day."

Hela shook her dark head. "You are *too late,* Tyr! He and Surtr and their host have already gone to bear doom to Asgard!"

VII

THE dim shape of the mysterious disaster that I feared seemed suddenly to become a tangible menace, with Hela's words.

"But we did not meet Loki and Surtr and their host, as we came hither!" I cried.

"They, and the army of Jotuns they lead, did not march directly toward Asgard," Hela said. "They went by way of the mountain of the witch-fires."

A possibility so awful that I could not credit it, dawned upon my mind.

"Hela, why did they go by the Fire Mountain?"

Her face was deathly pale. "Because the doom Loki bears to Asgard is the doom of the witch-fires! Yes, Tyr—he and Surtr plan to use those terrible fires against the Aesir!"

Thor uttered an unbelieving exclamation. "It is impossible! Those fires are so deadly that man cannot even approach them closely without being blasted by their rays."

"Loki found a way!" Hela replied. "He reasoned that since the lead-rich rocks of the crater had always safely confined the witch-fires, then shields of lead would protect a man from them.

"He and Surtr made such shields, and a leaden vessel to contain the captured fires. And with them and their host goes an engine that will hurl those deadly fires upon Asgard."

Fear was in her dark, wide eyes. She clutched my arm. "Tyr, I begged them not to do it! Not from love of the Aesir, who have always condemned me for my Jotun blood. But because I am afraid to see those terrible witch-fires loosed. Afraid, for our whole world!"

I felt a dread equalling hers. For I, in my Earth-years as Eric Wolverson, had learned enough of science to realize the peril of what Loki planned to do.

I whirled around to Thor. "There's but once chance. To overtake and kill Loki and Surtr before they can use that weapon!"

Thor brandished his hammer high. "Then this day comes the end of that arch-devil's life!"

We turned hastily toward the door, but again Hela caught my arm. Her dark, brilliant eyes looked up at me.

"Tyr, I have had strange visions and I think that many things end this day. Let me go with you!"

I stared haggardly down at her, and it seemed that all these past years faded away and that we were again the lovers we had been long ago.

All her bitterness against the Aesir because they would not accept a Jotun girl, all my own bitterness when I had discovered her using her wizardries to help Loki against my people—all this was gone now.

I took her in my arms. "Hela, when this peril passes—"

"Is this a time for lovemaking?" roared Thor. "Hurry!"

I released Hela and told her quickly, "Get a fast horse and ride out around the lake—we'll meet you there."

Then the Hammerer and I hurried back down the way we had come. And still we met no one. All Surtr's warriors had gone with his and Loki's host.

Day had come when we squeezed out of the tunnel onto the lake strand where our horses were tied. It was a dark, lowering day, with masses of sullen clouds brooding across the sky.

We galloped around the lake, and Hela came riding fast to meet us. Then we three rode hard through the forest toward Asgard.

The forest seemed alive with fear! As on the previous night, all its living things were moving southward in a strange, panicky stampede.

"Storm is coming, Tyr!" shouted Thor as he rode, gesturing with his great hammer toward the still-darkening sky.

"Aye, and such a storm as this world has never seen before!" called Hela, with that note of dread again in her voice.

Now, after hours of riding, our path joined the trampled track left in the forest by the passage of a great body of men.

"Loki and Surtr and their host are ahead of us!" I cried. "They must be already approaching Asgard!"

We spurred our sturdy mounts faster, their hoofs waking drumming echoes beneath the giant, solemn trees.

Lightning flared across the black sky, and flared again, and there came the crash of thunder. And the hubbub of the storm increased as we covered the last few miles.

Then, even through the tempest, we heard a different and familiar sound—the hoarse, pulsating roar of many voices, of battle.

"They're already attacking Asgard!" yelled Thor.

We had reached the last ridge of the for-

est, and for a moment we sat our horses on the ridge to take in that terrible scene.

UNDER the lowering, storm-swept sky, the abyss of Niffleheim yawned black and gloomy. Out there on the lofty pinnacle that rose from the abyss, the towers of Asgard seemed to challenge the lightning.

Directly below us, on the hither side of the abyss, a great battle raged. Out across Bifrost had come the bright-mailed warriors of the Aesir, and they were pressing back a great host of dark Jotuns who had sought to win the bridge.

"Look, where lord Odin leads the Aesir!" shouted Thor. "See, there fight Heimdall and Aegir and Bragi! Come, Tyr!"

I restrained the battle-lusting giant. "Wait! Where are Loki and Surtr and their weapon?"

Hela pointed swiftly. "There, Tyr! They prepare to cast the witch-fires!"

Now I saw them, and for a moment the blood seemed to drain from my heart at what I saw.

On a hillock a little distance from the battle, ringed round by a guard of warriors, Loki and Surtr were working at a ponderous thing that I recognized as a powerful catapult.

They were fastening upon the catapult throwing-arm a huge globular flask which I divined to be the leaden container of the atomic witch-fire.

"We must kill them before they release that thing!" I cried to Thor. "Wait here, Hela!"

And then the Hammerer and I spurred our horses and galloped past the main battle in a charge for that hillock.

They saw us coming, those Jotun warriors who guarded Loki and Surtr. They shouted warning to each other, and formed hastily on the side of the hillock to meet us.

Our charge crashed into them, and then Thor's hammer was swinging in terrible arcs of death while my own sword stabbed and stabbed.

Thor's horse was speared, but the giant leaped clear to the ground and continued to crush skulls with his awful weapon. I leaped from the saddle to his side, and we fought together up the hillock side.

There had been but a handful of Jotun guards, and half of them were dead or wounded. We had taken our own wounds, but the few men left before us could not hold us as we pressed up the hillock's side.

"It's Tyr and the Hammerer!" I heard Surtr shouting hoarsely to Loki, up there. "Cast the witch-fire, quickly!"

"A moment more!" cried Loki, busy at the big catapult. "Hold them back, slay them! Fenris! Iormungandr!"

And now through the fray I glimpsed what before I had not, that up there beside Loki were his two monstrous beasts, the great wolf and the coiled winged serpent.

And at their lord's command, Fenris and Iormungandr came down with Surtr against us! I saw the blazing green eyes of the giant wolf springing toward me, and heard the thresh of Iormungandr's wings as the mighty serpent launched through the air at Thor.

Thor struck up ragingly at the Midgard serpent that was swooping toward him. And as he did so, Surtr rushed in under his blow and stabbed his sword deep into the Hammerer's breast.

With a hoarse cry, Thor struck downward. The mighty hammer whistled and swung, and crushed Surtr's helmet and head like an eggshell.

"So much for traitors!" Thor bellowed. Then he staggered as the Midgard serpent launched upon him from the sky.

Fenris' hot breath was in my own face, his jaws closing on my throat! I recoiled, and heard the clash of his fangs meeting. My sword stabbed into that huge, hairy body that was bearing me backward.

The wolf would not die. His jaws had gripped my left shoulder, and worked nearer to my throat as I stabbed again and again.

Then the beast slumped down, his hold upon me relaxing but his green eyes still blazing hatred up at me.

"Thor!" I shouted hoarsely, as I scrambled to my feet.

The Hammerer stood, a swaying giant around whose body the Midgard serpent was wrapped in mighty coils. His face was crimson, his eyes flaming, as his hands twisted Iormungandr's dragon head in a supreme effort.

The serpent's vertebra snapped, its coils loosened and fell away from Thor.

But the last Jotun warriors, who had held back appalled from our death-duel with Loki's monstrous beasts, rushed back in upon us now.

We struck at them like madmen, fighting forward. And then suddenly came a twanging sound that struck my ears like the clang of doom.

Up on the hillock summit, Loki had fired his catapult. And the huge leaden flask of prisoned doom was hurtling across the storm-swept sky toward the towers of Asgard.

"Behold!" pealed Loki's silver voice, soaring triumphant. "Behold the doom of the Aesir!"

Frozenly, I and the staggering Hammerer and our remaining Jotun foes watched the curving flight of that deadly thing.

I SAW the flask crash down upon the towers of Valhalla castle. And from it, as it smashed open, there burst in all directions an explosion of fire.

Cold green witch-fire, not red flame! Cold witch-fire that spattered and dripped in hellish, burning viridescence over the towers and walls of Asgard, spreading with nightmare rapidity.

From the Aesir battling on this side of Bifrost Bridge came a terrible cry. "Asgard burns!"

And then Odin's stern shout. "Our folk are there—back to save them or die with them, my warriors!"

The Aesir fell back across the Rainbow Bridge, back into Asgard. And after them poured the Jotun hosts, with wolfish yells of triumph.

But already, all Asgard was flaming with the witch-fires! The dread atomic blaze enwrapped towering Valhalla in a sheet of green radiance that paled the lightning of the stormy sky.

"Asgard and the Aesir are doomed!" choked Thor. He staggered, a giant, blood-covered figure, then sagged to his knees.

The hammer dropped from his hand, as I sprang to support him. He whispered, "And Surtr's stab has cut my thread. I perish with our people—"

There came a scream of terror from the Jotuns nearby. "The witch-fires spread across Niffleheim! See!"

The green witch-fires now roared in infernal holocaust through all of Asgard and were sweeping across Bifrost Bridge.

I knew now what dread doom Hela had foreseen! Those awful atomic fires, feeding upon all but the most obdurate kinds of matter, could not now be stayed. For ages they had been safely prisoned in their leaden crater, but now Loki's madness had loosed them on our world.

Bifrost Bridge was burning, and the radiant green death was sweeping on from it across this battlefield. The Jotuns were fleeing with screams of terror.

I stared frozenly, and then I lowered my sword. Motionless, in an agony of despair, I waited for the blazing green death to reach me. My comrades of the Aesir were gone forever, and I would not outlive them.

But hoofs drummed, and Hela's clear cry struck my ears. She had caught my own horse and ridden to me.

"Tyr, Loki escapes!" she cried. "He has seen that this world is doomed, and seeks to flee to the Way between Worlds!"

I swung around, and fierce rage replaced my dull agony as I glimpsed Loki galloping madly into the forest on his steed.

And after him staggered a great gray shape—the Fenris wolf whom I had wounded mortally but who still followed his master with dying strength.

"Loki shall not escape!" I shouted, and leaped into the saddle. "He dies with our world and us!"

We two spurred after him, into the forest. The woods swarmed with panicky Jotuns, who yelled hoarsely in terror as they sought to flee the advancing atomic blaze.

Through the forest we rode, and behind us the sky flamed with a lurid radiance that outdazzled the lightning still darting above us.

Now, far ahead of us, we saw Loki riding fast up the side of the hill on whose summit were the rune-stones of the Way between Worlds.

By the time we rode up onto the summit, Loki had planted the birch-rods beside the great stones and stood in their circle as lightning struck down blindingly at them.

And Fenris, dying but still faithful, stood staggering beside his master and snarled madly at us.

I leaped from my horse and darted into that circle of awesome lightning. Loki met me, his handsome face now a hell-mask of fear and hate, his sword clashing ringing against my blade.

Hela screamed, and from the corner of my eye I glimpsed Fenris staggering with great jaws open to pull me down from the side.

"Traitress witch!" howled Loki, as Hela sprang between me and the wolf with her dagger raised.

The jaws of the dying beast closed upon Hela, dragged her down. With superhuman strength, I struck Loki's sword down and stabbed.

Lightning danced suddenly in terrific splendor about the circle of rune-stones that enclosed us. I felt myself sinking, falling—

Slowly, I came to myself again. I was lying on warm ground, with the sun hot upon my face and a gentle breeze rustling my hair.

I staggered up. Wildly, I looked around. Gone were the lightnings and the lurid green blaze of the witch-fires, gone the savage hills and forests of that other world.

I stood in the sunlight in the circle of crumbling rune-stones upon that other hill in peaceful Norway.

The Way between Worlds had opened and I had come through to Earth.

And not I alone. Loki lay dead at my feet, and Fenris and Hela nearby.

Dead, all dead! The jaws of the dying wolf had slain Hela, as she sought to shield me.

Dead, as all the world of the Aesir now must be on the other side of the veil! A blackened, cinder planet, all its life burned out by the atomic blaze, it would remain until the end of time.

Yes, I had found my past and my people and my lost love. But I had found them only to see them perish in that twilight of the gods.

VIII

BEFORE I left that place, I buried Loki and Fenris together on the shadowy slopes of Runestone Hill.

But Hela, I buried deep within the circle of the ancient, graven stones.

The people of Stortfors shrank from me in superstitious fear when I entered the village. A full Earth-year had passed since I left it, and now I reappeared dazed, exhausted and bleeding from my wounds.

I could not stay there long. Before a day had passed, I had left Norway by plane and was on my way back to New York.

But here in the great city where I write these words, I am now a stranger. Yes, I know that I am a stranger forever on this Earth that is not my world.

I am Tyr of the Sword, captain and warrior of the Aesir. But the Aesir and their world are gone forever now. Never again shall I ride forth with Thor to battle, never again shall we hail lord Odin in Valhalla hall.

And never again shall I see that dark witch-girl whom alone of women I have loved.

I know that memory of them all will haunt me until I go mad or kill myself. And madness and self-slaughter are no death for a warrior.

So I must forget. And there is but one way of forgetting, and that is for Tyr of the Sword to become again Eric Wolverson of Earth.

When I buried Hela, I took but two things from her body—the ring I gave her long ago and the vial of that dark hell-brew that washes away the memory.

The vial lies on my desk before me now. When I have finished writing this, I shall drink its contents. And then I shall forget.

I shall forget the world of the Aesir, and Odin and Thor and Loki—and Hela. I shall remember nothing.

My friends here will tell me that I am Eric Wolverson, and I shall believe them and take up Eric Wolverson's life again and not ever be driven to madness by the memories of Tyr.

I will read then this story that I have just written, and will think as you think that it is but a fantastic imagining.

I may doubt, in times to come. I may wonder if this story is not true, if I am not really Tyr of the lost Aesir.

But I will never, thank the fates, be sure.

WEIRDISMS

Drawings — Lee Brown Coye

Legend — E. Crosby Michel

FOR NEARLY FIVE HUNDRED YEARS ALMOST ANY VAGARY OF MAN OR NATURE WAS ATTRIBUTED TO WITCHCRAFT. FIRE, FLOOD, STORM OR PESTILENCE WOULD BRING FORTH AN IMMEDIATE FLURRY OF WITCH TORTURES AND BURNINGS IN WHICH THEY WERE ACCUSED AND CONVICTED OF EATING BABIES, DRYING UP COWS, DESTROYING CROPS, CAUSING DYSPEPSIA OR A FRESH OUTBREAK OF THE PLAGUE.

What Beckoning Ghost?

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

What beckoning ghost along the moonlight shade
Invites my steps, and points to yonder glade?
Pope: To the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady.

NOT so long ago I came across the above lines, and it seemed to me they might have been written with Sharon Powell in mind—yes, even to the very title. I never told what I knew at the time, and indeed I've sometimes wondered what I did know. I'm only telling it now as a form of mental catharsis, that my mind, weary of fruitless speculation, might be set at rest and freed to concentrate on other things.

I remember it was an unseasonably hot night for early May, the night the terror first struck Ballard Powell. I've often thought since that it should have been a night of vivid lightning, crashing thunder and teeming rain. But it was a singularly unghostly night, despite what happened later.

I'd driven him back to Lake Forest from a concert in town, and after leaving him at the door of the big house, I ran the Cadillac into the garage and climbed the stairs to the three-room apartment above, my quarters as chauffeur-gardener. I mopped my brow and

Nobody—really nobody—believes in ghosts.
Until one appears!

Heading by Vincent Napoli

wiped the sweat-band of my visored cap as I climbed, and once upstairs I lost no time in peeling off my tan gabardine tunic and shirt.

It was much too hot to work on the novel (which was why I had taken the job in the first place, upon leaving college the year before. The pay, food and quarters were good enough, and as the Powells lived very quietly, the job left me time enough to write).

But not tonight. I turned the radio on low, and threw myself down on the sofa with a sigh, just as I was, in puttees, breeches and undershirt. As I lay there, meaning to rest only a moment, the soft hot winds blew over me through the open windows, and I must have dropped off into a doze.

It was shortly after midnight when the pounding began, though I had heard nothing to herald it. But now someone was hammering on the gumwood door belowstairs, and hammering with both fists to judge by the racket being raised.

The agonized immediacy that I sensed behind it brought me to my feet with a jerk, wide-awake. I clattered down the uncarpeted stairs, my heart pounding, and threw the door open. Ballard Powell tumbled in past me, his eyes dilated with fright, his head turned back over his shoulder as if watching something in the grounds between the garage and the big house, something that had peen pursuing him.

"Bolt the door!" he gibbered hoarsely. He didn't even wait to see if I obeyed him, but scrambled up the stairs to my quarters as if, even now, the thing he fled thundered at his heels.

I had seen nothing in the moonlit grounds that brief instant I held the opened door ajar, but now I lost no time in bolting it and following my employer upstairs.

He'd collapsed on the studio couch. His breath was still wheezing in and out of his lungs noisily. The sweat was pouring down his face, and he made no move to wipe it away.

IT WAS hard for me to believe that this figure of dishevelment was Ballard Powell. He was a tall man, slender, dark-eyed, gray at the temples, about forty-eight years old. Cool, self-contained, unemotional, he had always been in the past. It was strange to see him looking anything but admirably poised.

"What happened?" I asked.

He shook his head. He still hadn't breath to answer. I hesitated a moment, then went over and mixed him a highball, though I feared he wouldn't approve of his chauffeur having liquor in his possession. But he said nothing—only took the drink gladly enough and gulped it down, his Adam's apple bobbing convulsively as he swallowed.

"What happened?" I asked again. "What frightened you?"

His eyes narrowed secretively, evaded mine. "Nothing."

Nothing! I stared my disbelief.

"That is, I thought I—I heard something." He wiped his face again with a fine linen handkerchief, straightened his tie with a shaking hand, smiled weakly. "But of course I didn't," he muttered. "I couldn't have. It's—it's preposterous."

But still he couldn't meet my eyes, and it seemed significant. He sounded to me like a man who was trying to convince himself. He didn't *want* to believe he'd heard whatever it was that he had heard.

"But what was it that you thought you heard?" I persisted.

"I told you I couldn't have heard anything!" he said irritably, stubbornly. He had a grip on himself again now, and the cold glance he gave me was meant, I knew, to remind me that I was only his chauffeur and hence in no position to persist in pestering him with embarrassing questions.

I repressed a shrug. After all, if Powell chose to let "nothing" frighten him into a state of witlessness, it was no business of mine. So I only said, "Would you like me to walk back to the big house with you, sir?"

He hesitated. I think he meant to refuse at first, once having convinced himself that his mysterious fear was unfounded. But some memory of it must have lingered still, deciding him against foolhardiness, for he said at last, "Perhaps it would be better if you will, Haines."

I pulled on a light jacket, and we started up the cement drive to the main house. The grounds were extensive, elaborately landscaped with overhanging shrubbery, and we had quite a little walk before us. As a pre-

caution I took a flashlight from one of the cars to light our way, though the night was bright enough.

Halfway up to the house, Powell laughed shortly. "Sorry I was in such a blue funk. I know I must have startled you. To tell you the truth, I thought I had heard a burglar in the grounds."

I could feel his eyes on me, judging the effect of this. I said, "When we reach the house, I'll make a circuit of it and search the shrubbery."

But I didn't believe a word of Powell's belated explanation. He'd had time to think, time to make up a story with which he hoped to satisfy me. I was sure Powell was no physical coward, and I seem to remember thinking, even then, that it must have been more than a burglar in the grounds that had sent him down to me at the garage in such a state of gibbering terror.

But perhaps I am merely being wise after the event.

THE drive curves around the service quarters, and on the far side, to the south, is the flagstone terrace upon which the French doors opening from the living room give. It was just as we neared the steps leading to the terrace that I heard it.

Powell heard it too. He must have. But I think he hoped against hope that he had not. For he kept on walking. Doggedly. Determined to go on if I made no sign. Thinking perhaps that the sound was only a figment of his own imagination.

I know now how desperately he must have hoped so!

But I caught his arm. "Listen!" I warned.

It was enough. He couldn't pretend any longer, not even to himself. He wilted visibly. "Oh, God," he said, with dull despair. "You—hear it, too?"

I nodded, more interested at the moment in the sound than in Ballard Powell. It came faintly from the living room. A song. A song I'd heard dozens of times at funerals. A woman with a soft, husky, strangely familiar contralto was singing *Beautiful Isle of Somewhere.* There was a grisly, mortuary touch about it coming so softly from that darkened room. I felt a faint chill, a mounting sense of depression.

Powell stood hunched over, like a man who'd received a blow in the solar plexus. "I—I cannot go on."

"Wait here," I said.

I went as silently as I could up the flagstone steps, crossed the terrace, entered the open French doors to come to a halt just over the threshold. The room was pitch-dark, but I'd been in the house often enough before, and I knew where the piano was. On the long wall opposite the fireplace.

I pointed the flashlight toward where I knew the piano to be, clicked it on. The beam fell right upon the keyboard. It was playing. *Someone* was playing it, for I could see the keys as they were depressed. And the voice was still singing eerily.

But—there was no one seated on the bench before the piano!

I swept the room with the torch. "Who's there?" I called, foolishly enough.

For I could see plainly at once that there was no one at the piano, no one in the room. And naturally I received no answer.

The voice sang on as if uninterrupted. And then I knew. And, knowing, superstitious terror pricked my scalp. I stood there listening, shivering. It was as if someone trailed icy fingers up the channel of my spine.

No wonder that voice had sounded strangely familiar! I recognized it now. And the knowledge was enough to send me backing from the room, across the terrace and down the steps until I was at Powell's side again.

Mercifully, before I reached him, the song stopped.

"That voice!" I whispered. "It was Mrs. Powell singing. I tell you, it was *Mrs. Powell!"*

I expected him to deny it. Prayed that he would.

But he only said again, without emphasis, "Oh, God." His face was terror-washed in the moonlight. "And she is dead. You know that, as well as I. Sharon has been dead these six months past."

I nodded dumbly, greatly shaken. What could I say? It was true. Sharon Powell had been dead six months, yet that was her voice we heard. It had a distinctive husk to it, unlike any other, once-heard, never-forgotten. I was completely bewildered.

You must understand that there is in my

make-up nothing of the mystic. I believe that when you're dead, you're dead. And that's an end of it. I do not hold with the spiritualists that the soul, the spirit, the essence —whatever you wish to call it—can return to indulge in table-rapping, bell-ringing or any other form of asinine hell-raising. If I seem to write that last sentence with acerbity, it is because the Powell affair outraged, from beginning to end, every tenet of my beliefs.

And yet I *had* to believe what I saw with my own eyes, heard with my own ears!

Powell brought me back to the present by clutching my arm convulsively. "I—I cannot go in." He looked at me defiantly. "Call me a coward if you like, but I can't enter that house. I'll spend the night in your quarters."

God knows I couldn't blame him. We went down the drive together, back to my apartment.

Now here's a strange thing.

You would have thought that we'd spend the rest of the night in conjecture, wondering at what we'd seen and heard. But we did not. I gave Powell the bedroom, and slept myself on the studio couch in the living room. And we didn't say a word about what we'd heard! Something in Powell's manner, a cautious withdrawal, absolutely forbade my questioning him. It gave me the uneasy feeling that while the whole thing was completely baffling to me, Powell at least had some inner knowledge, some secret understanding that would have helped him explain the mystery, had he but cared to do so.

But he was silent.

MORNING brought with it a feeling of unreality. It seemed as if I must have dreamed the events of the night before.

To begin with, Ballard Powell was not in my quarters when I woke up. Sometime after dawn, his courage must have returned sufficiently for him to leave and make his way to the big house. I might have doubted he'd been with me at all if it weren't for the tumbled bed he'd left behind him, evidence of the fact that he must have tossed and turned sleeplessly for most of the remainder of that night.

I had no time for conjecture. Mystery is for the hours of darkness. With morning, the day's duties begin, and life crowds in upon one.

At eight-thirty, I had the car at the front door, as usual, ready to drive Powell into town. He was an investment counsellor with offices on La Salle Street, and even though Mrs. Powell's death had left him as sole heir independently wealthy, he still continued faithfully to go to his office every day.

When he emerged from the house, he seemed much as ever, except that I thought I detected a faint aura of sheepishness hanging about him. He made no mention of the night before, and I hardly felt it was my place to bring up the subject. If he had succeeded in forgetting that eerie singing, God knows I was willing to try! I suppose if it had ended there, the bizarre events of the night before would have passed into the limbo of forgotten things, for the human mind is adept at forgetting what is unpleasant to remember.

But that afternoon something else happened.

Powell left his office somewhat earlier than usual, so that it was only shortly after four o'clock when we returned to Lake Forest. Powell had brought home several files of business papers, and he asked me if I'd carry them into his study for him. They made a sizable bundle as I gathered them up. He held the outer door open for me and followed through close on my heels, so that we entered the main hall almost simultaneously.

I noticed something at once. A powerful odor of tube-roses, those flowers of the dead. And then I saw what had caused it. On an easel facing the front door was a large wreath of flowers, with a gold-lettered band of mauve gauze stretched across it at an angle.

It looked, unmistakably, like a funeral wreath.

We'd stopped short when we first saw it, but now curiosity drove us forward together. I don't think Powell was alarmed at first. He gave no evidence of it. He just seemed puzzled by the sight of such a macabre offering standing in the front hall of his home.

But I heard the air suck sharply into his lungs as we bent forward to read the inscription:

MY DEAR HUSBAND
BALLARD POWELL
Requiescat in Pace

Bewilderment, first. Then, as understanding sunk in, I felt a creeping sensation as of a cold hand tightening on my heart. Oh, the thing was inoffensive enough in itself. Just a harmless wreath of flowers. It was in its connotation that it was so terrible, hinting as it did that Ballard Powell was—dead? Or about to die? God knows there was little to choose between either!

Powell swallowed twice noisily in the silence that gripped us before he was able to say harshly, "Take that thing out to the incinerator, Haines, and destroy it at once!"

His pallor rivaled milk. He took out his linen handkerchief to dab at his lips, and I saw that they were blue and trembling.

It was only in common humanity that I suggested, "This must be someone's warped idea of a practical joke," as I picked up the wreath, easel and all.

Powell looked at me strangely. Again I received the impression that he had his own suspicions. But he only said, "Yes. Yes, of course. That must be it."

I couldn't imagine what other possible theory he might have for this sudden appearance of a wreath so suggestive of his own death. The funeral odor of tube-roses was overpowering, miasmic, horrible. I was glad myself when I had it afire in the incinerator, and I stood there watching until it crumbled into gray ash.

WHEN I returned to the house to see if he required anything further of me, I found Powell interviewing Mrs. Giddings, the housekeeper, in the library.

"It was delivered just about half an hour before you returned, Mr. Powell," she was saying as I entered. "I signed for it, but I'm afraid I didn't notice what florist it came from."

"But surely you must have been curious when you saw what it was, and what inscription it bore?" Powell asked testily.

"But I didn't see it, Mr. Powell," the housekeeper defended herself. "I still don't know what it was, except that it was a floral offering of some kind. It was covered with brown manila wrapping paper, and I just stood it in the hall, meaning to remove the paper before you returned. But you came home before I had a chance to do it."

"But someone must have removed the paper!"

"No one could have done it!" Mrs. Giddings objected. "It's the maids' day off, and I was the only one in the house until you and Haines returned."

Powell looked shaken at this, but he finally let her go. When she had left the room, he sat there tugging at his lower lip, apparently in bewilderment.

I WAITED patiently for minutes before asking, "Is there anything else, sir?"

He waved an abstracted hand. "Nothing, Haines."

When I left the library, it was to find Mrs. Giddings lying in wait for me in the back hall. At her beckoning gesture, I joined her, and she drew me into the little housekeeper's office behind the main staircase. I left the door standing slightly ajar.

"There's something very strange going on in this house," Mrs. Giddings said in a low voice.

I raised my eyebrows.

"I was afraid to show this to Mr. Powell," Mrs. Giddings went on. "I found it this afternoon on the night table beside his bed."

"This" was an antique bracelet of Etruscan gold set with oblongs of topaz. I held it on the palm of my hand. It was meaningless to me.

"It was Mrs. Powell's," Mrs. Giddings explained. "Mr. Powell bought it for her in Italy when they were on their honeymoon. She told me so herself, one time when I admired it."

"I can't see anything so strange about its being on his night table," I said. "No doubt he'd been looking at it, and put it there to be placed away later on."

"No. No, that couldn't be." Mrs. Giddings shook her head. "For you see—the bracelet was buried with her!"

"What!"

"Let me see that bracelet!" a voice broke in.

Mrs. Giddings and I jumped guiltily, absurdly. Powell was standing in the doorway. He took the bracelet from my hand, and examined it closely.

"It *is* hers!" he confirmed at last. "It *was* on her arm when she was buried!"

He stood there, staring down at the thing. The expression on his face almost defied description. No terror in it now, only wonder, doubt, anger and a sort of sullen defiance. But of what I don't know. He silenced any further comment from Mrs. Giddings and myself.

He said to me sharply, "I know it's your night off, Haines, but I want you to stay in your quarters instead. I intend to remain in myself, but—but I'd like to feel you were there in case I should—need you."

I said I would, of course. I'd intended to work on the book anyway, so Powell's halting request didn't interfere with any other plans I might have made.

And I wondered what Powell expected to happen next to make him feel that he might —need me.

I FOUND, once I was alone in my own apartment, that the book was far from my mind. I spent the evening, instead, going over what I remembered of the Powells—especially Mrs. Powell, dead now these past six months—seeking some clue to the bewildering occurrences of the past twenty-four hours.

In her lifetime, Sharon Powell certainly had never inspired fear in anyone. She had been a fluttery, wistful-eyed little lady when I'd first come to work for them a year before. And she had been very, very much in love with her husband, or I was no judge. All the money was really hers (according to the servants' gossip I'd heard) and Powell was some five years her junior. Nevertheless, her love for him had made her docile. She'd delight in deferring to him.

Perhaps three months after my arrival, the trouble began. Mrs. Powell began to complain of hearing voices in her bedroom when she was alone at night. Several times she called Powell in to listen, but he could hear nothing. Then, too, she began to mislay things, to grow forgetful. Her mind seemed to be failing her, and it worried her desperately. She grew thinner and thinner, more and more silent, brooding. Until even I—a newcomer—could see the change in her.

For all his natural coldness of character, Powell really behaved admirably. It would have been so easy for him to grow impatient of her vagaries, but he did his best to reassure her, instead. I used to hear them talking about it in the car. Mrs. Powell would weep helplessly, and he would do his best to comfort her. But I thought I could detect a faintly dubious overtone, as if he were afraid, too, that she was growing insane.

The climax came when Mrs. Powell stole a brooch from her best friend. Oh, it was hushed up, but servants hear everything, sooner or later. The theft had occurred at a dinner given by the friend, which the Powells had attended. Shortly after arriving home, the friend phoned to say her brooch was missing. Later Mrs. Powell's bag had fallen to the floor, and among the spilled contents was the missing brooch!

Powell himself picked it up from the floor, faced her with sick accusation in his face.

She had, she'd said, no memory of taking it. Hysteria, then.

Poor little woman! It must have been the final straw. For it was that night that she had committed suicide. Her farewell note made it clear she was convinced that she was going insane, and she couldn't face the slow horror of it.

Powell was grief-stricken at her death. Everyone was amazed that a man so reserved should break down so utterly. I distinctly remember one incident at the funeral, especially as the memory of it was to return to me unpleasantly enough later. Mrs. Powell had always loved pink camellias. Just before they closed her casket, Powell unostentatiously had placed a pink camellia in her hand.

The gesture was infinitely touching, seeming, as it did, mute testimony to a love and grief too deep for utterance.

And now someone—for some inexplicable and heartless reason—was recalling to Powell the memory of the wife he had loved. And for what object? I marshalled what facts I had, and tried to reach some sort of intelligent conclusion.

If it were some practical joker, as I strongly suspected, who had sent the wreath and placed that bracelet (a clever copy, surely?) on the night table—why? And who could it be? For the Powells had no living relatives, no really intimate friends. As for

Sharon Powell's voice singing *Beautiful Isle of Somewhere*—there didn't seem to be any rational explanation for that!

The whole sorry business passed my understanding completely.

I paced my quarters restlessly that evening, half-expecting to hear a pounding on the door below, receive again another urgent summons from Ballard Powell.

But there were no further demonstrations that night.

YOU realize, of course, that I can't vouch for what passed through Ballard Powell's mind those hours of darkness. But at some time during that night he must have reached a decision.

The house phone rang while I was shaving, early the next morning. It was Mrs. Giddings on the wire.

"Mr. Powell told me to tell you," she said, "that he won't be going to the office today, but he'll want the car at one o'clock."

I hung up thoughtfully. In the year that I'd worked for him, I'd never known Powell to fail to go to the office on a weekday, except for the three days at the time of Mrs. Powell's death.

There was a fresh surprise in store for me at one o'clock, when Powell came out of the house.

"To the cemetery, Haines," he directed.

It wasn't his custom to make regular visits to the cemetery. I'd driven him there only once since the funeral, just before Christmas when Powell had brought a wreath out there to place it before the marble slab behind which Mrs. Powell was sleeping that long last sleep in the black marble and bronze mausoleum.

But now we stopped for no wreaths, and Decoration Day was still two weeks in the future. Powell must have some other reason for the visit.

Except for a few caretakers engaged in raking up the debris of the past winter, the cemetery was deserted when we reached it. I pulled up before the Powell mausoleum, which stood on a triangular island of ground formed by three driveways that bordered it.

Powell got out of the car, reaching for his key-ring. But when he had the key in the bronze-and-crystal door, he hesitated and turned to where I was still sitting behind the wheel of the car.

"Will you come in with me, Haines?" he asked.

I could see that he was very nervous, and reluctant to enter alone. What did he expect to find? More than a little puzzled, I left the car and walked up the three steps. He opened the door then, and we walked in.

The air was a little stale, naturally, despite the ventilator grills, and the wreath he had placed there at Christmas was withered now. But with the open door, and the light that was coming through the window in the back wall, the place was not too depressing.

I watched Powell curiously.

He went to the marble slab on the left, and began to run his fingers over it. The slab bore the inscription:

SHARON POWELL
Born Sept. 11, 1894
Died Nov. 23, 1946

Powell continued to examine closely the joints where the marble was joined. The cemented joints were dry, and obviously hadn't been tampered with since the tomb was sealed, if that was what he was seeking to learn.

I looked away.

At the same time the inscription had been cut on Mrs. Powell's tomb, Powell had had his own slab on the right marked, too. Like the other, it read:

BALLARD POWELL
Born June 12, 1899
Died

with the date of his death, of course, left blank.

It seemed to me it must be a gruesome thing to see it every time you visited the cemetery—that blank line waiting ominously to be filled in. Impossible not to speculate when that date might come! But I knew it was a common enough custom, especially when, as in Powell's case, the sole survivor had no descendants or other relatives to perform that melancholy office for him later.

My eye fell on Powell's slab now, and I stiffened with sudden shock. Unconsciously

I must have made a strangling noise of surprise, for Powell wheeled nervously.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

Before I could explain, or even point my finger at it, he saw it himself.

The blank line on his slab had been filled in!

Died May 16, 1947

Why, that—that was *tomorrow!*

A slow creeping paralysis of horror twitched the muscles of my back.

If it affected me so somberly, you may well imagine Powell's reaction. He slumped against the wall, shuddering, making dry, retching sounds in his throat, his eyes dilated.

He'd grabbed my arm, and I could feel the fingernails biting into my muscles.

"Get—get me out of here," he whispered hoarsely.

I GOT my shoulder under his armpit, and though he leaned on me, a dead-weight, I managed to assist him down the steps and into the car. I took the key-ring from his listless fingers, locked the door of the mausoleum, returned the keys to him, and lost no speed in getting out of the cemetery.

By the time we reached home, he was able to get into the house by himself. But I could see that he was in a state of shock, as well he might be. Surely he had never expected to find that date inscribed on his waiting tomb? No, it was obvious by then, even to me, why he had gone to the cemetery in the first place.

To make sure that Sharon Powell—*was still there!*

He must believe that it was she motivating these unholy attacks on his nerves.

Quite apart from my natural skepticism, my puzzlement only increased.

Even if the dead *could walk,* why should Sharon Powell return to torture so maddeningly a husband she had loved, and who had loved her so dearly, if inarticulately?

For I remember again his last touching gesture of placing the pink camellia in her dead hand.

I saw Powell no more that afternoon, but Mrs. Giddings called me on the telephone from the main house late that night. She sounded worried, and my heart leaped jerkily.

"What is it now?" I asked.

But it wasn't what I had feared.

"Mr. Powell locked himself into the library when he returned this afternoon," Mrs. Giddings said, "and I think he's been drinking steadily ever since. He looked so odd when he came in that I'm—I'm afraid. You'd better come up here, Haines, and see if you can persuade him to go to bed."

"All right."

When I reached the house I rapped three times on the library door, as Mrs. Giddings hovered anxiously. But there was no response.

"I'll go around outside," I said, "and see if the window is open." I was afraid of what I might find in the library, and I wanted no fainting woman on my hands. "You'd better go to your room, Mrs. Giddings. Mr. Powell won't want you to see him in his present state."

She did as I asked immediately, glad enough to escape any possible unpleasantness.

The library window was open and, pushing up the sash, I threw my leg over the sill. I switched on a light, then breathed a sigh of relief. Powell had not harmed himself, as I had feared, for I'd known his demoralization to be complete. But he was safe enough.

He was sunk deep in a drunken stupor, sprawling in one of the leather chairs. He roused as he sensed someone in the room with him. He looked up glassy-eyed, starting a little from his chair, but evidently he recognized me at once, for he sank back, as if relieved.

"Mrs. Giddings thought I'd better come up and help you to bed," I'd said soothingly.

"I'm not going to bed." His speech was remarkably unslurred, considering the amount of liquor he must have downed. The empty bottles lying around gave testimony to that. "I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

He put his finger alongside his nose, drunkenly elfin, and regarded me owlishly. "Haines do the dead—walk?"

I was taken by surprise. "I—I don't think so." I realized then what I was saying, and added more forcefully, "I mean—of course, they don't. Certainly not!"

He was shaking his head in reproof. "You were right, Haines, the first time. They do. *I* know it. And I tell you, *I'm afraid!*"

I WAS carried back many years, to the time when my grandmother had died while I was a child, and I'd been afraid to sleep in the same house with her corpse, those three days before the funeral. I'd been reluctant to go to bed, and something of my fear must have penetrated to my mother. She'd said something then that I've always remembered, "It's only the living whom you must fear, Donnie. The dead will never hurt you."

Haltingly I repeated something of this sort now.

But Powell shook his head stubbornly. "But what if *you* had harmed the dead *first?*" He eyed me in drunken triumph, and then seemed to wilt and collapse at his own words. He gave a despairing cry and began to sob drunkenly. "I never thought—Haines, Haines, I did it!" The words poured out in the relief of confession. "I never thought she'd kill herself, as God is my judge! I only meant to drive her insane, that I might gain sole control of the estate. *I* planted the microphone in her room, misplaced her things, stole the brooch! But I swear I never intended to have her do what she did!"

He had driven her to her death? But I'd thought he had loved her! I shrank from him in disgust. It had only been a role he'd played, every move cunningly calculated for effect—yes, even to the pink camellia he'd placed in her waxen hand to disarm any possible suspicion, while in his heart he must have been exulting that she was gone and he was sole master at last!

But he was a sorry enough looking object now. And I found myself wondering who had suspected him from the first. Who was so shrewdly playing on *his* nerves now to drive him the way his wife had gone? It seemed unbelievable that these last forty-eight hours could so have disintegrated the suave Ballard Powell.

I felt myself softening unwillingly as I eyed him. The evil was done, and who was I to judge? Almost I could feel pity for the man, as one would for a crippled lizard, however loathsome.

So it was that I took it upon myself to say, "Perhaps it is only this house that is playing on your nerves. Why not leave here? Now. Tonight. Come, I'll drive you in to the apartment in town."

One last duty, and then I wanted to get away. Never wanted to see him again.

His eyes lost their fixed stare, as he tried to concentrate on my words. Then slowly his head began to nod in agreement. "Yes. That would be better. Perhaps—*she* won't be there."

Strange how he persisted in thinking it was the dead Sharon Powell behind all this!

For the first time I thought I really understood the meaning of that line—the guilty flee where none pursue.

AS IT was my suggestion that he go to the apartment, I suppose I could be held to blame for what followed. But I'm inclined to believe that it was inevitable.

The drive to town sobered Powell up considerably. It was after midnight by the time we'd drawn up before the cooperative apartment house on Lake Shore Drive, and he seemed almost his usual self. He didn't meet my eyes as he got out of the car, and I knew he was regretting already the impulsive confession he'd made to me. I had confirmation of this at once.

"If you'll come up with me, Haines, I'll write out a check for what is due you. Your services are no longer required."

I smiled contemptuously. I knew he was doing it for self-protection, already formulating cross-accusations if I should ever tell what I knew. Who would believe the story of a disgruntled chauffeur he'd been forced to discharge?

In silence we took the automatic elevator up to the penthouse floor.

The Powell studio apartment was small in point of number of rooms, but the rooms themselves were huge. The living room was enormous, giving an effect of even greater spaciousness by virtue of the wall-to-wall eggshell-colored carpeting that floored it. And the entire east wall was one huge studio window of glass, overlooking the park and lake far below.

Powell opened the door and switched on the lights. The room sprang from darkness, dramatically, like a stage setting. We froze

where we were. I—I couldn't stand much more of this! Every light in the room was focused to bring out in sharp relief the thing that sprawled before the fireplace.

A coffin!

Bronze. Empty. Horribly suggestive in its very emptiness! As if it waited—patiently to be filled!

I swallowed dryness.

Something halfway between a groan and a sob tore through Ballard Powell's lips. Then silence, pregnant, brooding, while a cold, damp draft, as from a vault, swept the apartment.

But this terror was as nothing to the way Powell behaved.

He lifted his head, and began to speak, in a whisper indescribably eerie. "It's you, Sharon? You're here? You know now—that it was I?"

I edged away from him. Surely he had gone quite mad?

He cocked his head, as if listening. I listened, too, chilled to the marrow, dreading what might come.

And then I heard something. And God! I never want to hear anything like it again! A woman's voice began singing softly, huskily—

Nearer, My God, To Thee!

Powell stared wildly at something over my shoulder. I wheeled. I don't know what—or who—he was watching. *I* saw nothing.

"No!" Powell screamed. He backed haltingly, his eyes insane, glaring at some nameless Dread. Then he turned from that oncoming thing, that ultimate horror. Turned and ran blindly straight down the room, leaped through the great window, shattering it with a brittle, spilling, crashing crescendo of sound!

I saw the dark sky, the darker figure outlined momentarily against it. I ran toward the window, my hand outstretched, as if even yet it weren't too late for me to stop what had already happened.

I reached the window, leaned out gingerly. I was just in time to see Powell's body strike the ground thirty-six stories below. I still remember with awful clarity that it bounced a very little with the impact. But lifelessly. Like a dead tennis ball.

Then I was swallowing back the sickness in my throat. My dazed mind tried to encompass everything at once. The doctor. The police. The building superintendent. Someone must be called.

I started to run for the phone. And then I stopped. Uncertainly. Unwilling to believe.

To this day no one has ever known what it was that I saw in the center of that vast expanse of carpeting. I could never bring myself to tell, could never bring myself really to believe the only way it might have got there.

I stooped and picked it up. Infinite in its pathos, gray as the ashes of a dead love. No thing of horror. No thing to make the hand recoil in fear.

Only a pink camellia, dropped there by—

What beckoning ghost?

Isle of Women

ALLISON V. HARDING

A strange island, inhabited by an impossible tribe. . . .

WE HAD come down through the sunny Caribbean, our little chartered ship picking its way watchfully through the reefs and cays off Honduras and eastern Nicaragua. We went through the canal, an old experience for Professor Brewster, but a new one for me and several others of the party.

The *S. S. Blue Bay* shoved her nose southwestward then, taking the choppiness of the Gulf of Panama in stride but rolling and bucking more with the long swells of the Pacific as her screw churned her down the coast of Colombia and Ecuador.

Professor Albert Brewster was probably the leading expert of geodesy in the Western Hemisphere.

He had been commissioned jointly by an American business firm and elements of the Ecuadorian government to restudy certain chartings of areas oceanic and insular of the Galapagos Islands.

I, Alan Vincent, by name could do the sort of things that an ex-paratrooper can accomplish or learn to do in a big hurry. I'd met Brewster at the University where I'd been taking a class under him in Surveying, but university life, even with its football and other sports which I dearly loved, seemed a bit out of place for me now after six years of service life and all of twenty-nine years of age.

I don't know whether Brewster liked my good marks in his course or the way I pushed my six feet and a hundred and ninety pounds off-tackle for Dear Old U. (yes, he occasionally came to the games) . . . or whether he wanted me to protect him from that Amazonian secretary of his, Brenda Thompson.

For Brenda *was* an Amazon, the 1948 variety. But as I thought to myself at first meeting, the more to be beautiful! She looked as though she could have tucked the Professor, who was small and spare, under one arm.

Brewster had a way with him. I think they used to refer to it in my old officers' manual as the "commanding manner," and the old boy really knew his business.

The fourth in our party was Joe Stillman, a tall, lean and sour individual a few years my senior, with an air of perpetual disapproval. Brenda called him "The Man with the Ledgers." I could have done without him very well, but Professor Brewster had told me he was a great one with mathematics and the intricacies of higher bookkeeping. He did everything from keeping the journal of our voyage to checking stores and supplies.

THE *Blue Bay* out of Miami and chartered there by the Professor was manned by a motley group of semi-efficient Cubans and South Americans. Their skipper was Frank Hallard, an old Coast Guardsman from the last war (World War I, that is) who knew his ship better than he knew the seas this side of the Canal.

I personally wouldn't have bet much on our chances of getting to the one unsubstantial-looking lifeboat in case of accident ahead of the crew, and Brenda joked that they "looked like a bunch of cutthroats." But Professor Brewster seemed perfectly

Heading by John Giunta

satisfied, and Hallard knew how to keep them together to the degree of performing at least the minimum, most necessary tasks around ship.

We steamed on, and always the days were filled with sunshine and little to do, although Brewster kept himself busy with his charts and tomes, while Stillman usually could be found puttering over his ledgers.

Brenda took the sun in bathing suit or shorts, which seemed to have a devastating effect on what little crew morale there still was. So much so that after a day or so Skipper Hallard came and asked that Miss Thompson desist from sunning herself on the forward deck!

Brenda pouted and shook her dark hair but Brewster nodded absently in agreement and that was that. Only Stillman glowered, and I knew then that he disliked the girl. I later found out that he'd been with the Professor many times before on excursions of one sort or another, while for Brenda, like myself, this was our first trip with Brewster.

We coasted down on the Galapagos, sliding through the now almost glassy sky-blue water till we sighted first Abingdon and then Bindloe. These tiny islands lie just north of the Equator. We headed south past Albermarle, made the usual to-do about crossing the Equator . . . an event which seemed to me merely an excuse for the crew to break out bottles and get drunk almost to the last man!

Professor Brewster's work lay some miles south of the Galapagos in the direction, he told us, of some smaller uncharted isles.

As we cruised towards our destination, Captain Hallard took me aside and told me the barometer was falling.

"I know this ship and she's all right a few miles off Key West, Mister Vincent. But I'd hate to try her in a bad blow and with this bunch as crew!" He spat in disdain over the rail.

I relayed the bad news to Professor Brewster, when I found that worthy sitting in Joe Stillman's cabin.

"I suppose an ex-Army man is afraid of a little weather!" Stillman sneered.

I ignored the remark.

"We're only a short ways away from the area now, Alan, I want to take a look. Then if the captain deems best, we'll put back to Albermarle."

I nodded and went out. It was all the same to me.

I SPOTTED Brenda in the stern with a camera, trying to focus on a gull that was weaving and dipping along behind us. Then I trotted up the steps to the bridge. I told Captain Hallard the Professor's reply and he grinned wryly.

"Thought the old boy'd say that!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Can't be helped. I tried to get a weather report but our radio temporarily conked out."

He turned and we both ducked into the cubbyhole off the bridge that housed the wireless.

Sparks was a toothy, grinning Cuban who'd have looked more in place waving a maracas in a Havana orchestra than sitting here by a radio set tapping the still-dead instrument helplessly.

"Anything?"

The Cuban shook his head. We went back out on the bridge.

"Well, Mister Vincent," the skipper said, "if it's a blow you folks want, it's a blow you'll be gettin'! Maybe not tomorrow or the next day but there's one comin'!"

I noticed the darkness seemed to fall earlier that evening, and the next day, after many filled with nothing but sunshine, was murky and leaden with a fog that seemed to creep along with the ship.

We sighted the first of the uncharted isles about noon. I studied the terrain through powerful glasses. I saw a sharp rise from sea level and then a leveling-off so that the top was flattish. I could spot some vegetation but not much.

I was on the bridge with Hallard, Brewster, Stillman, and the first officer, a swarthy Ecuadorian named Mortez.

"Anyone ever live on those isles?" I asked.

Hallard didn't answer but Brewster shrugged his shoulders non-committally. The South American, Mortez, broke into a stream of language indistinguishable to me. Hallard grinned.

"He says," indicating his first officer, "that there were stories about people and things who live on those isles."

"Now don't scare us!" Stillman put in sarcastically.

Despite Brewster's high esteem for him, I found myself disliking the man more and more. Ignoring Stillman, I went on addressing my remarks to Brewster.

"But if these isles are uncharted and nobody seems to know much about them, where does Mortez get these stories?"

THE first officer who seemed to understand English even if he could speak it only with difficulty when serene and not at all when excited, broke into another chain of explosive sounds. Hallard translated, still smiling.

"He has heard and his father has told him and his father's father that this is a wicked, bad place. And there is one isle eviler than all the rest!"

Stillman snorted again.

But Brewster observed, "It's interesting, these folk tales. One of them perhaps made his way here in a small boat decades, even generations ago, and something may have befallen him outside his ken, and thus a whole legend may grow."

Mortez went on talking, and the grin on Hallard's face faded.

"What is it?" I asked when the first officer had ceased speaking.

The skipper shook his head. "Nothing really. Just nonsense. Some more about this one very evil isle which he seems afraid of. But he says he didn't know and some of the other men in the crew who understand about the badness of this place didn't know we were sailing for here. They're not going to like it!"

Brewster's face took on a mildly worried expression.

"Now, Captain, this isn't going to cause any. . . ."

"Don't worry, Mister Brewster," Hallard put in quickly. "After all, I was responsible for the charter and I got this crew together. I'll take care of them!"

The meeting on the bridge broke up, and after another look at the oil sea wastes surrounding *Blue Bay* on all sides, I went below decks.

This inactivity was getting me down. I'd gone through all of the ship's magazines and books that interested me, so it wasn't surprising that I took refuge in a nap. I woke up with the side of the bunk trying to pound my shoulder off. The blanket I'd hastily pulled over myself when I lay down was damp with the salt spray that came flying through the partly open port. I dressed with difficulty on the pitching floor of my cabin and went astern to the dining room.

Hallard left almost as soon as I arrived, mumbling that he had to get back on the bridge with this dirty weather blowing up. Professor Brewster, Mortez, and Brenda seemed to be taking the storm in their stride, but I noticed Joe Stillman looked a mite green as he pawed distastefully at his canned pears.

I sat down and made a few abortive attempts at conversation. Mortez tried his best to follow me and reply, but every now and then he would go off into his own tongue. Then with a final burst of unintelligible language and a wave of his hands, he too left the table.

Brenda raised her eyebrows. "He seems awfully worried about something."

Stillman, who understood enough of the dialects to make some sense of them said, "He's still going on about this evil island. He calls it . . . it sounded like . . . isle of women! Very bad place! I think the guy's scared of the storm too."

Brewster wagged his head. "Unfortunate, these native superstitions. Kick up a lot of trouble."

I HAD my fork poised to spear the last bit of my pear just as Brewster finished speaking. I never made it. The pear, the china dish that held it, and the table underneath came right up as though to make it easier for me to reach the food. The table hit me in the face, and suddenly I was on my back on the floor of the dining room and that floor was a slide.

The sound of chinaware smashing and the startled yells around me were as nothing compared to the grinding, crunching crescendo that arose from the deepermost bowels of the ship. We'd struck, I knew even as I slid, and from the sound of it, it was rock.

I lassoed a table leg with my arms as I slid past. Some of the crew members were already on their feet and running by on

the sloping deck side within my vision. There was Hallard's voice, megaphone-magnified, sounding like the knell of doom.

The seconds became minutes as I found my way out on deck. There was nothing to be seen for a moment coming out of the lighted cabin but the angry sea all around us, and beyond that the wall put up by the elements of fog and rain and windblown spray.

Blue Bay was fixed as though Neptune had speared her from below. She took her pounding and moved very little. Below decks I could picture the hell that was going on. I wondered what I could do. Hallard's voice through the megaphone was intelligible now.

"Abandon ship!" he bellowed over and over again, although the order hardly seemed necessary, for I'd noticed that several members of the crew were hysterically ripping the tarpaulin off the longboat mounted forward.

They levered her davits to port, swung the boat out over the tilting rail. I looked down. The prospects weren't good. Hallard was cursing now, still from his bridge. *Blue Bay* gave a heave and shook herself partially free of the rocks, settling by the stern as she did.

Mortez, afraid of a superstition, was now acting the part of a brave man. He was flourishing a revolver at the lifeboat's side. The crew, without any respect for orders though, was piling in. I looked around me. Joe Stillman had joined Mortez, but Brewster . . . ah yes, there he was.

The Professor and Brenda appeared from a companionway. I yelled at them, but my voice was flung away uselessly with only the howl of the wind to take its place.

MORTEZ was having more trouble with the crew. Hallard kept bellowing from the bridge, and I watched his long red megaphone dripping rain even as that voice kept up incessantly. He and Mortez of course wanted places made for us, and particularly Brenda, in the lifeboat. The crew was unwieldy as a group of such nondescripts would be. They were struggling and fighting with each other, and already I saw with a sinking heart the longboat was overcrowded.

Mortez fired once, twice, into the air, but they paid no attention. He turned then, the revolver hanging uselessly in his hand, and looked up at the bridge as much as to say, "Well, you see, my Captain, I've done the best I could."

The deserters began to lower away then, and the longboat, as she went down, banged against the *Blue Bay's* sides. The lifeboat was perhaps halfway to the water when she cracked fairly through the middle, her backbone bursting with the dry, brittle rottenness of years of neglect.

The crewmen screamed, those that were not spilled out immediately into the boiling sea. A few clung to the staves of the disintegrating boat. But one by one they lost their holds in the now-roaring storm that came in on the weather side before Mortez, Stillman, and myself could make any appreciable progress towards hauling them up.

Hallard was down off the bridge now. He took one look over the side and shook his head. The whole force of the sea was pounding in on the port rail of the *Blue Bay*.

Those few of the crew who were able to swim well enough to stay up in that kind of water still were not able to get away from the boat, and one by one they were smashed against the sides, their heads then disappearing for good.

Hallard gesticulated, and we followed him to the starboard rail. The *Blue Bay* gave a grind and slid further into the water. Her stern rail was awash now. It was only the rocky thumb through her underside guts that kept her from submerging completely.

The captain and Mortez worked quickly at getting lines over the rails, and then they began throwing overboard everything in sight. The rest of us, catching on, followed suit.

Tables, chairs, ornaments, debris went hurtling into the water as we cleaned the decks.

"When this storm struck . . ." Hallard screamed in our ears, ". . . we weren't too far off the island. We got no liferafts aboard and the preservers aren't worth a damn! They'd let you down like an iron doughnut! But with enough of this floating junk, we've got some chance. Mebbe!"

MORTEZ led the way over the side, sliding down monkey-fashion on the ropes. Because of *Blue Bay's* list, the descent was gradual and easier than it would have been off the port rail. I followed. Hallard had ordered Mortez and me to get hold of as much of the floating debris as we could—if we could—bind it together with the thongs of rope we each carried under our arms.

I didn't feel desperate until I hit the water, and then its violent pull and tug almost exhausted me in the first minute. Just to get my breath was a feat and I saw Mortez was having the same trouble.

I struck out through the churning water and got hold of a table top and fastened it to some crates that Mortez had shoved towards me. It wasn't much. Then I looked over at the *Blue Bay*. The gale was blowing us away from her but I could see she was much lower in the water now. Two more figures were coming over the side. I couldn't see who they were.

A sheet of rain came down then, almost like the asbestos curtain in a theater. I yelled for Mortez and found his hand on my wrist. We barely crawled up onto the wood we'd tied together and tried paddling our way in the direction we'd last seen the *Blue Bay*. We heard her then. The scream of a ship dying on the rocks as the rest of her belly was ripped out. And then the hiss and gurgling as she slid beneath the surface.

Mortez appreciated those death throes quicker than I did. We both redoubled our efforts and took turns yelling. Finally, we heard an answering shout, and a few moments later we saw Hallard and Stillman bobbing up and down, their arms wrapped around some planking. We got to them, but our doubts rose about Brenda and the Professor.

Hallard had sent the girl and Brewster over after us. Then Stillman had followed, and the captain was last overside. Not a moment too soon either, for he'd barely paddled away from the ship and found Stillman when the *Blue Bay* had gone under, drawing tons of water into a swirling vortex.

We did our best to maintain our position by paddling our clumsy water caravan. There was some luck with us, for the storm was beginning to lessen. Stillman was spent, and no good for anything, but the captain, Mortez and I kept slapping our swollen hands and chilled legs into the salt water, propelling the rude raft forward.

SUDDENLY Mortez, who had the sharpest eyes of all, let out a yell. Directly ahead but still a considerable distance away was something. A hand seemed to wave from the bobbing dot, but it might have been our imagination and just another bit of wreckage, for time and again, we'd been fooled into thinking that a floating crate or some odd or end was Brenda Thompson or the Professor.

But this time as we paddled furiously toward the speck, we saw the one dot become two—two heads. A moment more and I had slipped off our raft and was swimming towards them. I could see now that it was Brenda, and she was supporting Professor Brewster.

I reached them and relieved the nearly spent girl of her burden. The Professor was only semi-conscious and unable to even dog-paddle. I instructed Brenda to put her hands on my shoulders. By now, Mortez and Hallard had guided the raft closer. Eager hands lifted my two companions and I pulled myself aboard. I think even Stillman, who was taking notice enough now to sit up, looked at Brenda with some admiration. With an incredible prodigy of strength and endurance, she had supported Brewster for nearly two hours. For it had been that long since *Blue Bay* sank until the time we discovered them.

The raft was barely big enough for the six of us and in the now-quieting seas, we began to look around for an addition to our float, but the problem was solved for us. Out of the gloom directly ahead loomed the advance abutments of some sort of land.

A few more frantic paddles and we were scraping a coral beach. I will not repeat the axiomatic sentiments of those saved from a watery grave at the last minute, but I can admit that it's true what they say about that precious land.

We scrambled ashore as fast as our exhausted condition would permit. All except Professor Brewster, for I had to carry him ashore. It was a rough and jagged beach

our feet found rather than sandy, but at its upper edge, there was some foliage, and here I laid Brewster down while Brenda bent over him trying to make him comfortable. Mortez stirred about collecting firewood, upon which he spent a precious match from his waterproof case.

WHEN we were seated around the welcome blaze, our plight seemed less somber. Brewster was reviving now, and I was glad to see that his thin frame was no longer racked with chills. Then Stillman put what I think all of us were wondering into words.

"Well, Captain," he asked. "Where do you think we are?"

Captain Hallard shook his head. "I don't know exactly. I had a bearing though, just a few minutes before we struck. I gave it to Sparks after we hit."

"Then you got an SOS out?" Brewster brightened.

"I don't know." Hallard's honest face showed a frown. "I don't know. The radio still wasn't working too well. I got right back to the bridge. The last thing I knew the crew was making that rush for the lifeboat."

He shook his head again distastefully. "Sparks was with 'em. Doubt if he got off any coherent SOS."

"We might as well take it easy now," I said in an attempt at lightness. "Time enough to do our exploring in the morning. By that time, maybe we'll be picked up!"

Nobody answered. Nobody sided with my voiced optimism. Nor did I!

I made myself an impromptu bed out of some grass and my rolled-up jacket, now fire-dried. Well, here we were, I thought as I lay on my back and looked up at the black night. I heard the small stirrings of the others settling down around me. Brenda was over by the fire, and Professor Brewster here on his side. Mortez, Hallard and Stillman I could just make out sitting in the outskirts of the ring of light thrown out by the little blaze.

And then I fell asleep the way men do under any circumstances. I'd slept in worst places than this, thinking of the France and Germany I'd seen as a paratrooper. Hell, at least here, nobody was shooting at me! That was my last thought as I went to sleep.

When I awoke, it was to the unpleasant sound of Mortez screaming. I was wide awake in a moment. The first officer was kneeling in the pebbles facing inland. I noticed that the sun was already high in the sky. I'd slept late.

Hallard was standing by his crew member, and Stillman also was nearby. The South American mumbled and raised his hands heavenward and then bowed his head.

"What's wrong!" I joined the two staring at Mortez.

Stillman shrugged his shoulders. "He woke up a little while ago, took one look around him and started to yell! He's probably gone off his nut! The only thing I could first make out of the gibberish was something about the island. He doesn't like it." Stillman shrugged cynically. "Who does? I wish I was back in Tampa!"

Hallard raised his hand for us to be silent and bent closer to Mortez. The man's mouthings were utterly unintelligible to me, although once in a while I deciphered the word "diable" which even I recognized.

When his first officer had subsided, Captain Hallard came over to us and spoke in a low voice.

"He says this is the evil isle! It is inhabited by she-devils who will devour us! Mortez wishes we had all perished in the storm. I think we'd better keep this from the Professor and Miss Thompson."

"*You* surely don't believe that fol-de-rol!" scoffed Stillman.

HALLARD moved his shoulders noncommittally. "I don't know anything about it, but I've never seen a man any more frightened than he is!" He indicated Mortez with his finger. "And yet aboard the *Blue Bay* he was the only man I had who acted like a sailor instead of a gin-soaked coward!"

The skipper went on. "There's more he tells me. About a time long, long ago, it must've been, when his father and a native chanced upon this isle when a storm drove their small boat far off-course.

"As I get the story from Mortez, the two came ashore to make repairs to their little vessel—and from then on the tale is a

strange mixture of terror, legend and superstition. The two were attacked by a mysterious tribe of wild people, hideously painted."

We waited as Hallard paused, looked around again to make sure that his disquieting remarks could not be overheard by either Brenda or the Professor.

Stillman and I leaned even closer as the captain continued.

"Guess Mortez was very young when this happened, but he still remembers—he says, like it was only yesterday—when his father came back to the mainland, a changed and haunted man. He told dreadful tales for young ears about what had happened to the two of them. How they had been tortured and how finally his native companion had been forced into a black, seething smoking pit—the pit of the devil, Mortez claims—which was infested with all manner of water monsters. Somehow he had managed to escape.

"Mortez' father was never the same," Hallard pointed at his head significantly. "He died soon after but his horrible adventure lived on in the minds of all who heard of it. And it added to the peculiar, impossible but persistent legends whispered about the evil islands."

The skipper paused, and looked at his crew member. I myself am not at all of a superstitious nature and yet something of the horror on Mortez' face, the concern of Hallard's manner made itself felt. I tried to smile disparagingly to cover up my feelings. But a dismal silence had fallen among us.

"I suppose the best thing to do," I put in finally, "is to look over this place. What are the chances, Captain, of finding any sort of edibles that will keep us alive?"

"We had bad luck on what drifted ashore here from the *Blue Bay,*" Hallard replied. "A lot of useless crates of charts, some clothing we won't need too much here, and a good-sized waterproof crate of dynamite. Heaven knows what we'll do with that! We had plenty of foodstuff aboard the ship and some small arms, but they're no use to us now at the bottom of the ocean!"

Stillman added, "The captain and I've been down on the beach already seeing what came ashore with us on the raft last night. That's all there is to it, though. We had a discouraging haul. Except if we get too bored with this place, we can blow it up!"

The hollow attempt at humor pleased none of us.

As the morning passed into afternoon, it became increasingly apparent to me that someone would have to head up the commissary department. As a rule, in all such expeditions, particularly the fictional ones, there is someone in the company who understands the value of various berries and herbs to be found on tropical islands.

I naturally expected Captain Hallard or Professor Brewster to take the lead in this all-important matter. But it was evident that both were shunning the task.

I fished around in my waterproof jacket pocket and came up with a three-quarters bar of chocolate. It was almost appetizing, and silently I cut it into six equal shares. Our little meal put into words what I'd been worrying about.

Professor Brewster spoke up.

"What's your opinion, Captain Hallard, of the chances of obtaining any sort of food on this isle?"

Hallard's face was worried. "Honestly, I don't know, Professor. That's not my line! They say there're berries and things you can eat, but there's others that look just as good that are poisonous. I wouldn't know!"

"Nor I!" breathed Brewster soulfully.

I looked at Stillman. He had nothing to offer. Mortez, now completely abject, was sitting staring out to sea as though that were a better way to look than towards the interior.

THE warm sun and the humidity of that latitude was conducive to relaxation, and I saw all the signs of a growing siesta descending on the party. I shook off the soporific effects of the climate and walked down the beach, determined to see as much of the terrain as I could. I turned at the sound of footsteps behind me and saw Brenda approaching.

"Where are you going, Alan?" she asked.

"Thought I'd look around."

She said after a second's hesitation. "I guess things don't look too good for us, do they?"

"Well, it's tough that we don't have some young naturalist with us who can make a T-bone out of a handful of grass and get us our liquids out of a coconut! We're just a bunch of dudes who're used to our vitamins and K-rations!"

She smiled appreciatively at my light manner.

"Don't kid me, Vincent. Honestly, are we going to starve?"

"Child," I said with mock seriousness. "If necessary, we'll each draw sticks. Short one gets roasted! You heard Hallard tell us he had an SOS sent. They're looking for us by now probably." I didn't add aloud, I hope, I hope.

We walked for a while along the beach.

"You don't think Brewster'll miss you?"

"No. He's just worrying about not having some of his instruments salvaged with him!"

We studied the interior of the island as best we could see it from its seaside rim. Brenda shuddered a bit at my side.

"It doesn't look very inviting."

And it didn't. Tropical foliage went back for some distance, and then in the center rose a core of forbidding looking cliffs, gray soot in color. Then went up to considerable height and ended in what looked almost like a plateau. The mountainous region was irregular as far as we could discern it from here, appearing honeycombed with caves and gorges.

"There must be some sort of wild life around here we could kill and eat."

"Captain Hallard is taking an inventory," Brenda supplied. "When I left, he said he was going to go over everything we had. There's nothing much, I guess, but at least between us, we have a good many matches."

WE WERE out of sight of our original landing place now as the shape of the island curved the beach away. We stepped through some underbrush that had pushed some tenacious greenery out onto the beach.

"I hate snakes!" Brenda put in. "I hope there aren't any here!"

That was another thing, I thought to myself. We had no first-aid kit. If one of us got a broken leg or any other injury—or a snake bite—we were out of luck!

We were coming to the head of the island, for here the interior cliffs looked closer to the beach. Long slabs of rock dissected the rocky sand just ahead of us and terraced out into the water for several dozen feet. We clambered over them, filled with the human desire to see what was on the other side.

It was just more of the same sort of terrain we'd been traversing. The sun was low in the west now.

"I guess we'd better go back." I put out a hand to help Brenda up the rock again, although she wasn't the type of girl who needed help, when the twanging sound took my attention.

Then there was the noise of a stone striking the rock we were standing on. I looked down, and at my feet making its own crack in the coral was a spent arrow, its shaft still quivering!

BRENDA saw it at the same time I did, and her eyes widened. I grabbed the thing, jerked it free, noting the sharp edge, and thanked my stars that I'd just stepped quickly upward from the spot at which the arrow had been aimed.

We were over the crown of that rock in a hurry, and our feet slapped into the sand as we tore back along the beach.

Not until we were in sight of our friends did we slow down, and Brenda said to me, "So we're not alone here! Is that good, Alan, or bad?"

I wagged my head. "At least it means somebody else is able to live off this island. If they can, we can!"

"But suppose they're wild?"

I didn't know the answer. I took the arrow to Brewster and told him of our experience. Stillman came and looked over the Professor's shoulder. They both looked troubled. Brewster called Hallard, and there we were looking down at the arrow as I'd laid it in the sand.

There were mute questions in all our eyes, but it was fear that lit up Mortez' face when he wandered over to look down at the object, and the arrow sent him off into a new set of gibberings.

"Well," said Hallard squaring his thick shoulders. "I think tomorrow we'd better have a look-see around this place and find out who our neighbors are!"

AS EVENING fell we camped down on the same spot where we'd spent our first night. I had demurred, suggesting we move into cover. It seemed to me we were the veritable sitting ducks out there in the open on the beach's rim, but I was outvoted by the rest who didn't like the idea of the shadowy foliage.

Mortez and Hallard had dragged the crate of dynamite up and placed it in a safe spot just where the jungle started. It was Hallard's theory, privately expressed to Stillman, Mortez, and myself, that sticks of dynamite could prove a very effective weapon if we were forced to fight.

I settled back, but this time sleep did not come as readily as on the previous evening. I listened to the lap of water rolling into the beach. It was a restful sound. Then came the gentle noise of one of our party snoring. I smiled in spite of myself. I think it was Professor Brewster. For what sound in all the world is so reassuring?

The ocean cast forth a faint luminance which made even deep night not quite night. I was far enough from the dying fire's embers to be, myself, in total darkness and my eyes were accustomed to it. So accustomed to it that I noticed immediately the movement in the undergrowth directly ahead of me!

Slowly, and with the stealthy coordination of muscles only a couple of years away from active paratrooping, I rolled into a crouching position. I think I was prepared for anything, from a tiger to a boa constrictor or some other weird monster.

But what I saw tightened a knot of wonderment and awe in my contracted stomach!

It was a head. A head with long, long hair, and the face, painted multi-colored, was faintly discernible even in that light!

The head was turned away from me towards the fire and my slumbering companions. And then as I watched, it swiveled slowly as though on a great ball-bearing wheel, and I saw the full malevolence of that face!

The eyes seemed to find my dark form, and I tensed myself lest it should spring to the attack. But the head turned away, and then as abruptly as it had appeared, it passed out of view.

I WAITED for a breathless thirty seconds, and then crawling as I knew how to crawl, soundlessly I too made my way into the underbrush. Soon I came to the place where the Thing, whatever it was, had been. I could feel the matted-down grass with my hands. It was pitch dark in here, and I had to grope to find the trail, or what I thought to be the trail.

I rose to my feet and crept on inch by inch, foot by foot. All thought of stepping on some sort of tropical snake or spider was out of me. Nothing but the spirit of the chase.

I don't know how far I'd gone before I realized I was lost, lost in the midst of an island jungle with no light and no sure sense of direction, with all the creatures of the night and that Thing I'd seen somewhere around me! How near, I knew not.

I stood for long moments just where I was, remembering my training and knowing that the worst thing I could do would be to rush around, to make noise, or to get myself panicked.

And then the direction of the beach identified itself with a hoarse yell followed by other yells! I heard a scream, which must have been Brenda. But then there were other shrill noises that sounded womanlike. I knew they could not all be the girl's. I wondered if there was any species of animal that made those strange noises.

I felt my way towards the sounds and then realized they were coming in my direction.

I crouched in the foliage and a procession went by but yards away. I didn't need to see. I could hear!

Hallard and Stillman were cursing viciously. Mortez was mumbling, and there were strange high angry sounds. The arrow fired at Brenda and me earlier, the hideous painted face—and now this! They all added up. There were natives on this isle, and they were aggressive and hostile enough to have fallen upon our defenseless camp and taken my friends prisoners.

I wished mightily for my old Thompson submachine gun. And when the procession passed, and I could hear them threshing away into the distance of the jungle, I followed the sounds as best I could. They were headed, I knew, towards the cliffs of the

interior, for any direction into the heart of the island would take us there.

The foliage thinned out and disappeared almost entirely. I stood on the outskirts of a level area, perhaps a hundred yards in depth. On the opposite side, the dark ominous heights rose to blend with the dark sky.

But at the cliffs' side directly before me was a flaming fiery torch set in a brazier. To its side was an aperture into which, from the sounds that still echoed back, I knew my friends had been taken.

FOR a long time I debated my next move. I was a sitting, or I should say, a walking target the instant I stepped out in the open space. I could be seen from the jungle behind me, from the sides, or from any vantage point of the cliffs that looked down on me. Yet what else was there to do but follow?

I was not overly conversant with the inhabitants of the Galapagos, but head-hunters seemed to me to be part of another age and different creatures. This brand of Indians or natives or whatever they were, had probably been startled at finding us on their island. Once realizing we meant no harm, they would be glad to help us.

Oh, it was wishful thinking, of course. Perhaps quite fatuous. But it made up my mind for me and I stepped resolutely across the intervening space to the cliff. I saw no one, heard nothing. The sounds of the procession had long since died away along the dark path that I saw stretch before me.

I stood for a moment outside and then ducked into the opening of the cliffs. My steps rang hollowly from the black sides. Soon I realized I was going downward. Once in a while I would come out into a place where the path led between two sheer sides of mountain, but then the way again would be a tunnel, and always leading downward, it seemed.

I still had my waterproof matches but dared not strike one. The surface beneath my feet was smooth. There seemed to be nothing to trip over, and I let my fingertips trail along the sides of the tunnel. I stopped every now and then to listen, and once I thought I heard faint voices far ahead of me but then there was a rushing noise, perhaps of water as some subterranean stream ran through the bowels of these black catacombs.

I stopped more often and went ahead more slowly, listening and waiting for long moments. I was less sure now that I had done the right thing. And then I was positive that I had made a foolish blunder when I heard the steps behind me in those dark tunnels!

At first they were as faint and far off as the noises of my friends I'd been pursuing. But then they seemed to grow louder, and down the inclining tube I'd been traversing a faint luminance cast itself ahead of the intruders, whoever they were.

I yelled then. It was silly to keep this up any longer, but no sooner had my full-throated roar filled the tunnel than the luminance which had made that impenetrable darkness more bearable was gone like a candle snuffed suddenly out.

I STOOD in blackness for long minutes of torture, the dampness on my forehead and hands increasing. Then I started back, slowly retracing my steps. I walked for some time upward back through the tunnel, until a sixth sense set my ear and neck muscles to quivering.

I knew for a certainty what those steps in the distance had indicated . . . that I was no longer alone in that subterranean passageway! Someone else was near . . . very near!

And then as I strained my ears to their utmost, I caught a sound of breathing ahead of me. I said hello, and my voice filled the tunnel with reverberations. I groped forward. Anything would be preferable now to this nightmare stalking in the dark!

I walked to where the sound of breathing had come and stopped. There was nothing but the darkness.

And then out of the darkness down around my throat, I felt two sinuous hands closing on my windpipe! I jerked forward and backward, twisted and sent a heavy kick at my unseen assailant. There was a shrill cry of pain, the treble timbre of the voice startling me.

And then from all sides attackers came, bearing me down with weight of numbers. I fought furiously but they were too many. The hot breath of my foes was on my face

as I drove my fist forward for a last time. That brought forth another cry of pain, and this time I was sure with appalled wonderment. The cry was that of a woman!

At that something heavy smashed against my head and the ensuing darkness was deeper than that of the stygian tunnel.

I CAME to—and I don't know how much later it was—lying on my back. I looked up into the kindly face of Professor Brewster. Captain Hallard was standing at the other side.

"Ah, he's regained consciousness."

I looked from one to the other and felt ruefully of the side of my head.

"You got quite a bump," Hallard admitted.

I could feel the swelling easily enough with my fingers. Relief went through me, and it was a good feeling to counteract the memory of those last conscious moments in the dark tunnel. What had happened to me and how I got out and with my friends again were questions that didn't matter. Apparently we were all okay.

With some difficulty I pushed myself to a sitting position. Brewster must have interpreted my thoughts from the look on my face.

"Alan, we seem to be. . . ."

He didn't have to say anymore. The stone on which I lay was the floor of a cell! There were rude but stout timbered bars and a lattice door, also of heavy wood. The chamber came by its light in two ways. There was a small aperture high up on the wall, which evidently led to the outside. Too small, I noticed abstractly, for a human to crawl through, but some radiance did penetrate, and by its nature, I knew it was day again.

The other and stronger light came from a torch burning in a brazier outside our cell. But my greatest surprise was not so much at finding myself imprisoned nor the nature of my physical surroundings. It was the looming figure that stood outside our cell on guard. It was a woman, and from the hideously painted face, I think the same one I'd seen in the jungle before we'd been attacked!

She was bronze-skinned and wore the scantiest of clothing, which accentuated the massiveness of her build. The eyes which she turned upon us were malevolent, and wild as any creature's. She held in one hand a heavy wooden club, and I marveled at the muscles of her arm and had no doubt she could use the weapon with disastrous results.

AFTER a while she grew tired of her scrutiny and turned away to pace a few steps down the stone terrace outside our cell. As I finally wrenched my eyes from her forbidding figure, I noticed Mortez huddled in the corner, his head in his hands. Brewster brought me up to date as far as he could.

"We have been captured, Alan, by what appears to be a thoroughly wild and primitive tribe of natives. What has interested Hallard and me the most is that nowhere have we seen any males! The skipper here has told me that he's learned through Mortez, that is one of the legends of the evil isle. The superstition goes that this island is inhabited entirely by a band of monstrous wild women who have perpetuated themselves through the decades!"

Brewster shrugged: "The circumstances are strange. Only Mortez seems to understand their gibberish. It's quite beyond me, but evidently we have intruded on unwelcome shores!"

I listened to his story, amazed, and looking at the others, noticed for the first time the absence of two of our group.

"What about Joe and Brenda?" I asked.

Hallard spat contemptuously and Brewster looked pained.

"In our fight with these creatures down at the beach, Stillman took rather a bad beating. Perhaps it affected his thinking, but still, except for Mortez, he seemed to have some grasp of their language. You know, he was something of a linguist." I sensed Brewster was temporizing.

The captain stood, but thinly disguising his disgust.

"Threw in with them! That's what he did!"

"Well now, I wouldn't say that. He did seem able to make himself understood," Brewster explained, "and finally they led him away. Brenda, strangely enough, seemed to enjoy a complete immunity. She

was never put in this cell with us but was led, or I should say, dragged away. But only because she was so unwilling to go!"

"What do we do next?" I said, getting slowly to my feet and feeling my strength come back. "Can't open this door, eh?"

A heavy bar held it staunchly in place, and obviously, it could only be removed from the outside.

"Well, what's there to be so glum about?" I went on, still remembering my experience in the tunnel where I'd been prepared for anything—things far worse than a band of females. "They feed us, don't they?"

"We've gotten some bowls of mush," Hallard nodded.

I DECIDED to size our situation up and got as far as I could into a corner and peered through the bar. Beyond, and to the side of the terrace patrolled by our huge female guard, there was what looked to be a square space sunk into the ground. I could guess no reason for it as I studied it. Perhaps it was a well or a pit of some sort.

Hallard came over and stood beside me, seeing where my interest lay.

"It's for something that's no good, that's sure!" he put in. "That she-devil out there has pointed to us a couple of times and then to that pit there and grins! I don't like it!"

I jerked my head at Mortez, "How's he?"

"Bad. The poor fellow is weighted down with all these stories. You know how they are. It's funny though, Vincent, the way he talks about this island and this tribe of women natives. It's all come true, hasn't it! And if the whole business is true—I mean about how they're possessed with evil and so forth—we're going to wish we'd stuck with the *Blue Bay* and gone down to Davy Jones!"

I said something like, "Well, where there's life, there's hope," but my attention was riveted on new sounds coming down the stone tunnel that emptied into the terrace before our cell.

We couldn't see, but there were indications of a whole group approaching. Finally the procession hove into view. There were probably two dozen of them, and they were, as Professor Brewster had observed, all women—some old and some young, although there were no very young. But all of them were massive—and ominous.

I was staring at two other figures in their midst. Two figures that seemed so very out of place. One was Stillman, hobbled with thongs bound around his arms and a rope attached to one leg, its other end gripped firmly by one of the women. If the expression on those bestial faces had not sent a coldness into my very soul, I would have been amused at the spectacle, for our lanky bookkeeper looked like some sort of human pet being led around.

The other person I had eyes for was Brenda. It was fairly apparent that she was no prisoner and no one laid a hand on her although she was under close surveillance. She was dressed much as the other women were—a brief loincloth around her hips and little else to hide her splendid figure. There were the same grotesque painted markings on her face and shoulders.

The women warriors filed in front of our cell and spat at us, showing their teeth and grinning fiendishly. Stillman followed suit. They prodded him close to the bars and he yelled at us, his eyes popping with fear.

Hallard mumbled something back angrily, but I plucked at the skipper's sleeve. Then Brenda passed before us, her eyes slipping over as though she'd never seen us. She was particularly demonstrative in her hate, beating at the bars with her hands. And this seemed to please our captors.

FINALLY, apparently tired of taunting us, the group turned and started off down the corridor, our two white-skinned friends, Stillman and Brenda, looking incongruous in the ranks.

"They're crazy! They've gone daft!" Hallard hissed. "Stillman . . . well, I never *did* like him! But Miss Thompson! Maybe they've drugged her up, eh?"

I shook my head. The whole exhibition had sickened me. I sat down to try and think and barely noticed when our guard pushed four rude containers of unappetizing looking food into the chamber. I ate slowly and suspiciously at first, but the Professor and Hallard had both partaken before and with no ill effects. The stuff was unidentifiable to me but I'd had nothing to

eat for a long time, and in spite of a natural repugnance, the substance was at least palatable.

I watched the light of the outside day fade from the small opening at the top of the stone wall that made one side of our prison.

I tried to think. I tried to work something out. I'd been in many tight spots before. The war, and earlier.

There was one basic disadvantage here though. There was no common ground seemingly on which we could appeal to these she-devils. Only Mortez, and possibly Stillman, and he was now no use to us, could even hope to communicate with them on even a modest basis. We knew not what these people took us for nor what they planned to do with us. But their whole attitude was hostile, deadly!

Brewster, I saw, had been scratching with some object from his pocket on the stone floor of our prison. I went over to him and sat down.

"You know," he remarked, "the more I think about this isle, from what I saw of it from the beach and as we were brought here, I think it's one of those small dots that have sprung up on the ocean's surface from various volcanic activity."

He went over and scraped at the side of the cell, picked at the crevices with the small pin he'd brought to light from his pocket. He carried back to me in the palm of his hand a small, gray-black sooty substance.

"This could very well be the sediment from some eruptive action."

It was almost as though he mused out loud.

"Of course, probably the thing is extinct now," Brewster continued his observations, "but these subterranean, circuitous tunnels and tubes along which we came suggest something of the sort."

"What's that got to do with getting us out of here?" I asked somewhat sharply.

THE Professor's eyes, as he'd spoken to me, had taken on the far-away look of the professorate and they refocussed on me almost reluctantly.

He replied to my question, "Yes. Quite right, Alan. Our job is to get out of here. I hope they don't harm Stillman and Brenda!"

"Looks to me as though they'd done a pretty good job! At least to their minds!" I added.

It was then I heard again the sound I knew heralded the approach of our captors. The steps rang down the corridor. Long before shadows showed and before they emerged into plain view. There were five figures. Four warrior women and Stillman in the middle. He was struggling and babbling incoherently. The two leading women carried flaming torches.

As we crowded instinctively towards the bars of our cage to see better, they shoved the flaming torches fairly into our faces causing us to reel backward to keep from being burned.

At the same time, our guard raised the bar of the prison. The door was pulled open for a second, and Stillman was hurled through the air to fall at our feet. I thought for a fleeting second of charging that open portal, but it would have been suicide with the flaming torches inserted through the bars at either side. I would have been blinded or maimed at the very least. And if I could get through the door, I wondered a little at the thought of facing the heavy clubs wielded by those wild monster creatures.

The delegation of wild women withdrew and we revived Stillman as best we could. His eyes were dilated with fear, his mumblings unintelligible.

"Come now, man, pull yourself together!" Brewster said to his assistant, but Stillman was possessed of an unholy fear.

It was night now, although we didn't have a watch among us, I knew from the tiny frustrating opening into the outside world. I lay down determined to get some rest, though Stillman's moans were hardly conducive to sleep. Finally, the exhaustion resulting from the last thirty-six hours overcame me. Gradually I dozed off, aware that Hallard nearby and Brewster on the other side of the cell were also sleeping.

I AWOKE with a start. The start engendered by a bloodcurdling shriek. I got my feet under me and charged, but I hit the door a fraction too late. It thudded shut,

the bar replaced by the huge grinning guard. Hallard was right behind me. The thing that had shrieked was Stillman, and he was still crying out.

I don't know how long we'd been sleeping, but stealthily while we lay there, they'd opened our cell. They'd crept in and taken him. Eight of them, not counting our massive guard, and there was a ninth dressed in what I took to be ceremonial robes.

Stillman fought furiously but his struggles were puny in the many grips of those monster woman-warriors. They propelled him slowly but surely towards the black mouth of the pit that gaped just beyond the terrace. He teetered for a moment on its edge, and those at his side stepped backward quickly, releasing their hold on his arms.

Our guard, the one with the particularly malevolent face and the largest of the women warriors, gave him a brutal shove and he sailed into the aperture.

I expected anything, I think. The distant splash of water or a long fading scream of terror as he fell into the bowels of the earth, for some of these volcanic shafts go deep. Instead, I heard the thud of his body. He could have only fallen a relatively few feet. And then I could see, as he had drawn himself erect, Joe Stillman's contorted face and shoulders.

The pit could be no more than ten feet in depth, but there was no purchase at its sides and there was no way he could get out.

He stood and looked up at them, and they looked down at him, and I wondered, what then? One of the group gave a whistle, and with the whistle there was a far-away answering one.

In a few moments I heard a sudden hissing. Stillman yelled again and looked down. The hissing was a more pronounced rushing now and I could distinguish that it was water. Apparently the pit was some sort of trap with a lead from one of the many subterranean streams that coursed through these catacombs.

I'd heard the sound of them before in my adventures in the underground tunnel

earlier. What they planned to do to Stillman flashed across my mind. He would struggle in the water as long as he could, swim around in that small space until his strength gave out, and then he would drown.

BUT I figured without the diabolical minds of these creatures who held us prisoner. It was Mortez screaming beside me that made me realize that drowning was a luxury that was not to be Stillman's!

Hallard quickly shushed the man down, but not before he had made something intelligible of his first officer's ravings. He repeated it to me and Brewster.

"It's in the legend, these pits of the evil women," he told us. "They are able to turn small rivers into them. Some of these rivers are infested with deadly vipers. Perhaps they are able to turn such a stream into that pit!"

Sweat poured off Hallard's face. "God help poor Stillman!"

Stillman was swimming now and yelling and cursing all at the same time. I don't know exactly how long we watched, fascinated by the hellish spectacle, standing there, our sweaty hands clutched uselessly around the bars of our prison.

The end came abruptly Stillman was swimming, and then I could swear that even from where we were, I could see his already pale face become ashen. He ducked an arm and shoulder beneath the water as though he were reaching for something and then he had it and raised it high into view.

It was, at first sight, a long piece of rope, and Joe Stillman, completely out of his head now, tried to throw it at his laughing torturers standing around the rim of the pit. But the rope had life in it and a will of its own. Its coils screwed down his arm, striking as it went at his neck, at his face! And then it disappeared sinuously beneath the water.

In a moment more, Stillman disappeared too. I shall never forget that scene and I know that after it was over, I was not the only one of our group that went into a corner and was sick.

After I got control of my nerves, I went over and started a minute examination of the door again. But the bar that held it locked was beyond my reach, and my investigations only caused the giantess outside to leap towards the bars, waving her club hoping to catch my hand and crush it with a blow.

Hope was a small, dying thing in us then, I think, and each of us responded to the situation in his own way. Mortez either was silent, staring woodenly at a fixed point or he mumbled and ranted. Hallard paced the cell space shaking his head angrily and muttering at times to himself. Professor Brewster sat in the corner almost relaxedly, his kindly face dull with resignation.

If I examined that prison chamber of ours once, I did it a thousand times. There was no way to reach the tiny window exit. Had there been, a small boy would have been hard put to squeeze through. The door was foolproof. The only thing I could think of was if they came to get one of us. This time we had nothing to lose by rushing them.

IT WAS the next day that I saw Brenda again. This time she was accompanied by only two others. She stood in front of our cell, her tall magnificent figure fairly twitching with rage. She spat at us and shook her fist, and that seemed to please the bronze natives with her. But before she turned away, she managed a tiny wink and a fleeting smile! But then Brenda didn't know what had happened to Joe Stillman, and even if she were sane and not "gone nuts" as Captain Hallard had it, what could she possibly do for us?

We four were getting already more on edge. The diet of mush was weakening us. I could feel the lessening of strength in my limbs. Somehow, we would have to force the issue.

Our fifth night of imprisonment was particularly hellish. Three of our captors appeared in the middle of the night with a rude hamper. It was possibly only the unintentional noise they made forcing its opening between the bars that woke us in time to see the long sinuous shape drop into our cell.

It was a snake, and in a moment each of us was on his feet! There was no question of escape. There was no place to run to! The snake moved this way and that rest-

lessly, eyeing first one of us and then another. And we moved with it in silence.

At last it became fascinated with Brewster and moved on him in the corner. As it slid forward, I leaped on its back, bringing my heavy boot heel down squarely on its head.

We took the dead thing and threw it through the bars and stood there, four deathly white men bathed in sweat, each shaking more than a little and unashamed of it.

Mortez, I saw, was in the worst shape. His eyes rolled and his lips were flecked. The man was plainly near the end of his rope.

But our captors' desire for sadistic pleasure was not to be satiated so easily. Within an hour of our throwing the dead carcass of the reptile out of the cell, they were back with the hamper. Another deadly viper was dropped into the chamber!

I KNEW in that moment, that without some unforeseen intervention, we were finished. They would not bother again to open the door of the prison but would wear us out this way. The stalk started again. This second reptile was larger. It seemed quicker in its motions. I felt its eyes on me and I maneuvered quickly out of the corner into the center of the floor.

As I stepped sideways, I brushed against someone else. It was Mortez.

"For God's sake, keep moving, man!" I spoke to him.

The first officer did move. He flung himself forward at the snake and took its strike with his thigh, and a satisfied "Ah" went up from the watchers outside the cell, but he stayed with the reptile, caught its threshing body with his hands, disregarding the fangs that buried themselves again and again in his flesh!

He tore the viper to pieces even as we yelled at him. Even before he'd completed his mad, crazy task, Mortez had started to swell. His wrist where one strike had caught him. His body where he'd been bitten again.

I kicked the remains of the reptile aside and ripped at the man's clothing. Hallard and Brewster were with me. I knew as soon as I saw his leg, in addition to the wrist and neck bites, that it was hopeless. Mortez had received the poison in too many areas. Already his bloodstream was full of it.

Have you ever seen a man die of snake bite? It's not a pleasant death and it's not pleasant to watch. We did what we could for him but it was nothing and useless. I was glad that it lasted no longer than it did, for it was not very long before the last flutter of the first officer's pulse came and went.

And so it was with the atavistic faces that had peered through the bars into our cell, and we were left alone for the rest of the night with our one guard outside. And in here the dead man with the three of us who expected now to join him soon.

Brewster, Hallard and myself huddled together, whispering guardedly among ourselves. Hallard's broad, strong features were aged with strain. He allowed as how there must be something to Mortez' stories. These she-devils who'd captured us were certainly fiends incarnate!

He mentioned again the chance that the SOS had been got away from the *Blue Bay* before she sank, and I admired the man's courage at this low ebb of our fortunes to still keep plugging away on that optimistic note.

Brewster, I could tell from the way his spare figure sagged, was nearly spent. I wondered how long we had. I had a particular repugnance for snakes and yet I feared now that our captors would not even take the chance of opening the massive portal to the cell under any pretense.

I HAD faced death many times in the last few years but it had been clean in form. A bullet or a shell, coldness or hunger, not a demented tribe of fanatics using evil and monstrous contrivances to torture as they killed!

I knew one thing. They would never force me into that snake pit. Or if I went, I'd take a couple of those leering she-devils with me!

It was then that I saw the first outline of the moving shadow on the terrace! Our guard was stretched out in an attitude of slumber, but I knew from our earlier nights here that the merest noise would waken her. The shadow moved again, and I don't

know why, but as I watched, I hoped. Because why would one of our captors approach us so furtively?

Wild possibilities occurred to me. Another ship might have found traces of the *Blue Bay's* wreck, sent a landing party here, or perhaps. . . .

But then I knew! The shadow became Brenda standing just inside the tunnel that led to the rest of that tribal world. She saw I was awake and put a quick finger up to her lips. And then with her eyes on the giantess who guarded us, she stole towards the cell door! The inches seemed miles to me, as they must have to Brenda! The time may have been only a few minutes, but it seemed interminable.

Then she was within a couple of yards, a couple of feet of the heavy bar that held our door secure. To lift it, she had to turn her back on the hideous painted guard.

She took two more steps forward on long, strong legs and raised her hands out in the very act of placing them under the timbered bolt. I watched, hypnotized.

And in the next second, I heard the roar that filled the chamber! Saw the bronze native surge to her feet and charge across the short, intervening space!

Brenda, to protect herself, turned quickly. I thought with sinking heart that there was no time for her to run, but evidently she had no intention of escaping. She met the other's charge fairly and the two girls came together and rolled to the floor, threshing furiously.

BY NOW Hallard and Brewster had woken and were at my side. Three useless figures standing within the bars, hands white around the timbers that held us in, watching the titanic struggle. Brenda's main efforts seemed cannily bent on clinging to the bronzed arm that held the heavy club. The native woman, in the meantime, was beating Brenda heavily with her free hand, but the white girl retaliated by sinking her teeth into the mahogony wrist.

There was a screech of pain and the club skittered away free, Brenda scrambling after it. I prayed that she would get the weapon to more equalize the struggle, but the island woman was just as quick. Each jarred the other as they leaped for the coveted prize. A foot struck the club, sending it rolling. It fell with a dismal thud into the snake pit.

The two girls stood and faced each other then, panting and weaponless. Brenda was not quite as tall nor as heavy, but they were almost of a size. The island woman came forward, and Brenda circled warily away, backing towards the door of our cell. In a second more, she whirled, throwing herself on the bar and starting to lift it.

We eagerly pushed at the door, but simultaneously the native leaped upon Brenda's unguarded back and bore her to the ground. I do not know how long the girls fought. It was a terrible spectacle, for they battled as only desperate, infuriated women will, like animals giving and expecting no quarter. I know that a lifetime passed for us as we watched, our hopes alternately rising and falling with the tide of battle.

Brenda was beaten terribly but she managed always to pull away the fingers that clutched at her throat to snuff out life, or parry the blows that might have delivered the coup d'etat.

Finally Brenda seemed nearly spent, and I saw there was blood on my hands where I'd dug my nails into the wood till they'd ripped from the awful tension of the scene. The hideous face of our guard was lit with a triumphant light as she drove heavy blow after heavy blow at the other girl.

Then the native rose, and I turned my head away, unable to stand any more and afraid of seeing the final brutality that would end Brenda's life.

But instead, the native woman, battered and weaving herself, started slowly towards the tocsin that hung on the far side of the vault to summon aid. I knew then that Brenda's fate, like ours, would be the snake pit.

A sigh of resignation went up from the three of us, but almost before its sound was a reality, we were startled into disbelief.

BRENDA, with her incredible endurance and resoluteness, had rolled over and was tortuously getting to her feet. The native guard, still groggy and staggering towards the tocsin to ring it and bring the others, knew nothing until the white girl was on her back, one strong forearm around her throat. The other struggled furiously

for a moment, and then Brenda tripped her opponent.

Our guard went down backward with a sickening thud and Brenda landed full on top of her with all the weight of her magnificent body. I knew then that the fight was over.

We called to her then. Brewster was sobbing and Hallard was shaking like a scared child. We raised our voices a little and finally she got up and came towards us.

The guard did not move and probably would not again. There was a widening pool of blood spreading across the stone under her smashed head.

Brenda made the door, lifted the bar and fell into my arms moaning but too exhausted to speak. Hallard and Brewster were out in an instant. I hoisted the girl's battered form gently over my shoulder. Brewster hopped along at my side murmuring over and over, "Poor girl! Poor darling girl!" while the skipper led the way through the tunnel that branched off to the right.

Luckily for us, the divisions of those subterranean halls were few, and some sixth sense of the captain's kept us headed right. Too, it must have been the wee hours of the morning and none of our captors were around.

Finally the tunnel mouth showed ahead and we were standing outside the last soot-colored cliff. The clearing was ahead and the jungle, and beyond, the beach. It was a long way, and I don't know how I made it at the fast pace we kept because Brenda was big and her heaviness weighed me down. But I think I could have carried her around the world after what she'd done for us and the others, I knew, felt the same way.

AT LAST we made the beach. I laid the girl down tenderly, and Brewster and I bathed her scratches as best we could. She smiled thankfully and seemed to be regaining some of her strength when Hallard, who'd disappeared for a moment, came staggering up the beach carrying something.

After a moment's puzzlement, I saw what it was.

"You're out of your mind, Skipper! What're you going to do with that dynamite?"

"You stay here, Vincent!" The captain's broad face was lit with the unholy anger of revenge. "I've got a few accounts to settle!" and he made his way back from where we'd just come.

I FEARED for the man's safety, but I knew there was no deterring him. In addition, I wouldn't have left Brenda's side for anything. I calculated that it was still a couple of hours before dawn, before our escape would be noticed. Whatever Hallard did would probably neither add to nor detract from our chances of getting away from here whole.

Brenda was sitting up now smiling at me. Brewster had gone off to find some clothes we'd stashed, to tear into strips and bind her wounds.

"You think we're going to get out of this place all right, Alan?"

"You've certainly done your part!" I answered.

I kissed her then and wondered why I hadn't thought of that long before. Then we heard the Professor come bumbling back. He fussed over her until finally she said, "Now, Professor Brewster! You're going to wear yourself all out! I'm feeling much better. I'll be perfectly okay in a little while."

I glanced towards the jungle wondering about Hallard. The man had been gone what must have been nearly an hour. I didn't wonder long! A few moments later, the interior of the island was lit by an orange flash. The ground beneath us rolled and trembled and the explosions, first sharp, took on a deep-throated rumble! The Professor was knocked to his knees and expostulated, "My word!"

I cursed to myself. Hallard was going to blow all of us up with his tricks! The dynamite charges had gone up, but the deep-throated rumbling seemed to continue. There were crashes of rock and subterranean shiftings and growls that shook the very terrain under us.

I thought of the tribe of women back there in those catacombs. So this was Hallard's revenge! I couldn't feel very sorry for them. I could never forget the way

Mortez had looked and the way Stillman had screamed in the pit.

Sometime later, Captain Hallard came lurching out of the underbrush. He sat down beside us and his face had a look of grim satisfaction.

"I've blown up their whole damn mountain! Those she-devils and their snakes are all one now!"

WE SAT for a while, still feeling the trembling of the earth beneath us. And then there was another even deeper-throated rumble. A reddish glow lit the mountain side from which we'd so recently fled. There was a sulphuric odor suddenly in the air. Even Hallard was astonished at this and muttered to himself. Professor Brewster shook his head.

"As I feared!" he spoke out loud.

I think I knew what he meant, but I asked him.

"You mean you were right, Professor, about the volcano?"

Brewster nodded his head. "Your dynamite, Mister Hallard, has changed the subterranean pressures. Some of the old eruptive shafts which have probably lain quiescent for decades have been stirred into activity!"

I pictured being driven into the sea by hot bubbling lava, and I started to curse the day we'd ever come on this cruise with the *Blue Bay*. But I stopped myself, for had it not been for that expedition, I wouldn't have met Brenda, and she was by all odds the most important thing that had ever happened to me.

Get going, Vincent, I said to myself. You've been sitting around letting a girl get you out of trouble! Now, let's see you do something!

Enough wreckage from the *Blue Bay* was still left on the beach by the height of the tide for me to form a raft of sorts. I worked furiously, Hallard giving me help, until my hands were bleeding. I think the raft was a pretty good one. Hallard said so anyway, and he should have known about such things.

But we never actually put it to use. We never had to test it. For just as I was explaining to Professor Brewster and Brenda that we'd have to hold ourselves in readiness to shove off on the planked square if the volcanic eruption endangered our beachhold, a searchlight from seaside blazed forth and bathed the island in its pointing finger of luminance.

The ship, whoever she was, was standing towards us, because as we jumped up and down, waving our arms wildly, the light grew brighter and finally the sound of lowering davits came clearly across the water as she hove to out a ways to lower a boat.

I breathed a thankful prayer to the Sparks on the *Blue Bay* who'd sent out his SOS before he'd bolted for the lifeboat.

THE craft from the steamer lying off the isle came none too soon. Brewster called my name sharply, and I went over to where he stood looking into the interior. In the slightly growing light of dawn, the dark molten mass could be seen moving down irresistibly from what was left of the blasted cliff sides. Soon the island would be all of a same, covered with steaming lava, killing every living thing within reach until the boiling island was cooled off by the sea itself!

Brenda and I stood in the stern of the lifeboat as she pulled away from the island, my arm around her waist. As we came aboard our rescuer—a Panamanian freighter—we were welcomed enthusiastically and gave our fervent thanks in kind to the officer who'd admitted he'd picked up a fleeting SOS and then, steaming nearer to our bearings, had seen the flashes of light from the island caused by Hallard's explosions.

We stood, the four of us, on the bridge, looking back at the evil isle as we steamed away, feeling like four reprieved persons, as of course we were. I breathed a prayer for Stillman and Mortez, thinking particularly of the latter.

How right he had been in his fears which we had called "idle superstition!" Even on this freighter, we'd already found among the native crew those who crossed themselves as we came aboard and mumbled fervently that "No one ever returned alive from the Evil Isle!"

The Tsanta in the Parlor

BY STEPHEN GRENDON

AFTER seven years of profound silence —surely a length of time sufficiently long to have encouraged hope for the worst—Ernest Ambler made it plain to his uncle, Theophilus, that he was not, after all, dead—"lost in the wilds of South America," as he put it, but not permanently. His letter was followed by his peace-offering, and no doubt, the old man reflected pessimistically, his peace-offering would in all probability shortly be followed by Ernest himself, and there would then begin once more the problem of waiting upon Ernest's better nature just long enough to allow his real self to assert control, after which Ernest would need to be packed off to some remote place all over again.

Full circle. Circles, rather.

"I may very well be a crusty old curmudgeon," said Theophilus to the single servant who waited upon him in his gloomy old house on Main Street in the Southern town of Euphoria, "but naturally, *I* couldn't believe it, could I? No, of course not," he

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

A shriveled something that should've been buried and left long ago

went on, replying to his question precisely as he had replied to his own questions for half a century gone by, "nor do I need Ernest to remind me. What a curse on my old bones! To have to deal with Ernest once, twice, thrice—and God knows how many times! Get his room ready, Fulton. And what was in that box? I noticed you took the stamps off for your cousin's girl—I hope her collection is growing."

"It is, Mr. Ambler. Very much. Thanks to you partly."

"The box, Fulton."

"Yes, sir. A small object."

"Yes, it was, wasn't it! Oh, forgive me—you meant its contents. I referred to the box. My error. A small object, eh? What kind of object?"

"It was a shriveled something. Rubbery."

"Where is it?"

"Over on the mantel. I thought perhaps it was meant to belong with your collection of ivory and ebony pieces."

Theophilus Ambler meandered over to look at his nephew's peace-offering. He was a tall, thin man, but not cadaverous so much as anemic-looking, still able despite his seventy-odd years, and only a little absent-minded. He put on his pince-nez and peered.

The peace-offering stood between an ivory elephant and an ebony rook, looming larger than either. Brown, shriveled, rubbery indeed, with a resemblance to a monkey's head; it was not nice to touch. He swept it off the mantel in the palm of his hand and held it forth into the sunlight streaming through the French windows.

"Ernest will never change," he said. "I suppose he would call it a sense of humor."

"What is it, Mr. Ambler?"

"Damn it, man—you might have seen it for yourself. It's a human head, shrunken, of course. Probably Jivaro in origin. They call these things tsantsas. There are still head-hunters down there, I suspect. It doesn't seem to be Ernest's head, though. Much too dark. An Indian, probably."

"It's an odd gift, isn't it?"

"Only Ernest would think of it. And what the devil I'm to do with it, I don't know."

"No one would notice it among those pieces, sir. That's why I put it there."

Ambler smiled and replaced it. "Good enough. Now let me have his letter again."

"I think it's in the pocket of your robe, sir."

"Oh, yes. So it is." He took it out and read it slowly, aloud, while Fulton stood in almost obsequious attention. " 'Dear Uncle Theophilus, Like a bad penny, I am turning up again. It now seems quite possible that I may be in the States again within a few weeks or months—events will determine that—and I should like to see you, naturally. I hope all is forgiven. Under separate cover, I am sending you a little curio which you might like. I picked it up not long ago and thought of you immediately. My best wishes.' Humph! Best wishes, indeed. That is an ambiguous letter, in my opinion. But, of course, Ernest never wrote anything straightforward in his life—or spoke it, either. How long ago was it written? Three weeks. I suppose we can expect him any day."

"I'm afraid so," agreed Fulton.

Fulton drifted out of the room and Theophilus was left alone. He made a determined effort to put the unpleasant thought of his nephew from his mind, and settled down to read. But Ernest persisted. Ernest, who had never been a very pleasant child, and who had made life miserable for practically everyone, relative or friend, with whom he had been associated. And how long will it be before I have to get him out of another scrape? he wondered. He was really getting too well along in years for that sort of thing, he felt. Not really doddering yet, of course, but still—no longer young. And Ernest, who must now be well into his forties, was old enough by this time to know what responsibilities meant. But he knew in his heart that Ernest would never be old enough for that.

IN THE night the house creaked and groaned in the wind; rafters cracked and the bushes around the old building whispered in the hushing night air. Theophilus Ambler went to his bed not long after sundown, and Fulton went shortly thereafter. The old house was thus quickly lulled in darkness, and the sounds it made were long familiar. Mice scuttered in the attic, making their intimate small patterings; Theophilus

had come to welcome them; he slept to their footsteps, and no creak or crack or groan invaded his sleep.

But this night a new sound flowed through the house.

Theophilus woke to it at last. He lay for a while listening, and decided finally that it must be Fulton talking in his sleep. Or grumbling. He sighed and waited for the sound to subside.

But it did not subside. So Theophilus dragged himself out of bed, got into his slippers and dressing-gown in the dark, puttered over to a candle, lit it, and held it before him to light his way into the hall. He went down to Fulton's room, opened the door, and looked in. Fulton's face caught the flickering candlelight.

Theophilus listened.

No sound. Nothing whatever from Fulton.

Fulton lay in peaceful sleep, as quiet as a tired child. And a child he is sometimes, reflected Theophilus wearily, withdrawing again and closing the door.

He stood there in the shadowed hall, listening.

Certainly there was a voice somewhere. Since it was not Fulton's, it must belong to someone else. A faint prickle of perturbation made itself evident. No one else should be in the house, and the sound came from **inside**; the wind would have whipped **breath** away from anyone beyond the walls.

Thoughtfully, Theophilus blew out the candle. He felt somewhat more secure in darkness without the light to offer himself as a target for any possible invader. Ah, but who would invade the house? And for what? For there was nothing of value in any part of it. And what potential burglar would announce himself so carelessly?

The darkness enfolded him, the darkness enclosed him in an uncertain security.

He went noiselessly back along the hall to the head of the stairs. The sound came from below, steadily. Ah, but what was it? A muttering—or a tittering—a shrill gibberish—or an incoherent series of mouthings, scarcely human. And yet, now and then, it seemed, there were guttural words.

Ambler listened, straining himself to detach and isolate recognizable sounds.

And presently, slowly, word by word, fragments of a sentence fell into his consciousness, and he put them together painstakingly, while the darkness pressed about him with false security.

"Een . . . thees . . . house . . . ees . . . Meestaire Amblair . . ."

The darkness concealed menace, the terrible muttering from below gave birth to alarm. Ambler was not afraid, but he was not inclined to dare the unknown without weapons and without some knowledge of what he might face. He felt instinctively that something dreadful lurked in the darkness below.

"Bite," said the gibbering voice. "Bite," came the muttering. "Bite," rose out of the incoherent sounds from below.

"Een . . . thees . . . house," it said again.

And what a horrible tittering sound! How primitive! thought Ambler in some confusion. His confusion was, however, controlled. He made no betraying sound; whatever it was, menaced him, he was sure.

The silence which fell was as sudden as it was unexpected. It made Theophilus Ambler even more uncomfortable than the sounds. But what came after was even worse in that sentient darkness.

A new sound now, an incredible sound.

Someone weeping, someone sobbing!

Ambler stood there listening unbelievingly. What in God's name had got into the house? He felt his skin crawl; he felt something gnawing at the pit of his stomach; he felt in turmoil, in a wretchedness of undefined fear and a kind of sick loathing, for the sound was so piteous that it was revolting.

The sound of grief diminished, fell away, was gone, and the silence came.

In a little while the familiar signatures of the old house began once more, serenely —the creaking and cracking and groaning, the wind's hush-hush at the eaves, the comfort of mice scampering about overhead.

Theophilus Ambler retreated noiselessly to his room, where he sat for a long time listening, listening and wondering, before he brought himself to put off his slippers and dressing-gown and return to bed.

HE CONSIDERED inquiring next morning of Fulton whether he had heard anything in the night, but thought better of

it. If Fulton had heard, he would find some opportunity to mention it; if he had not, there was no need to alarm him. That would come soon enough, if the experience persisted.

Nevertheless, Theophilus Ambler made a thorough search of the old house. He turned up several articles which had been lost for years, but nothing at all to show that anyone had got into the house during the night. Every door and every window remained locked, just as they had been at bedtime the previous night. Moreover, nothing whatever was in any way disturbed. Could it have been that one of the Negroes from the other side of town had got drunk and wandered into the neighborhood, finding himself a corner somewhere outside the house from which the sounds, despite the tearing wind, had reached into and through the walls? But no, hardly; that was stretching the bounds of probability too far. Yet it was undeniable that the sounds he had heard in the night might very well have been made by a black.

Theophilus sat for some time in the horsehair-furnished parlor, ostensibly reading, but secretly pondering the problem. With each hour that passed, his perplexity grew. More than once, he gazed meditatively over at that curious peace offering of Ernest's, and at last he went to bring it out into a strong light so that he could examine it closely. Was it his imagination, or was the thing damp?

He looked at it closely.

It had once been a fine head, he decided. Almost Nordic, save for its dark skin and the cut of the mouth. He fingered it judiciously. It seemed that some kind of teeth had been put into it. Very sharp, too. The jaws seemed firm enough. He replaced it on the mantel; his improbable theory was clearly untenable, and he was left more puzzled than ever.

Several times during that day, he found himself regarding the Jivaro head with mixed emotions, uppermost among which was the impulse to rid himself of the object with summary dispatch.

He waited for night with some apprehension.

That night he lay in his dark bedroom at the head of the stairs waiting for untoward sounds, for no wind filled the old house with the familiar noises to which Theophilus had been so long accustomed. The clock struck nine, the clock struck ten, the clock struck eleven. Outside, the town grew quiet toward midnight as the streets emptied and the last late crowd from the last picture-show dispersed.

Inside the old house on Main Street the voice began again.

Theophilus rose at once; he had not undressed, but had only put on his gown, in one pocket of which he had taken care to place a small pistol. He had put out a strong-beamed flashlight, feeling more secure with it in his hand than candles; and, so armed, he set out from his room, walking with every caution to the head of the stairs and slowly, slowly down, step by step, careful to make no sound.

THE voice gibbered in the darkness; the voice complained, argued, cried—a horrible cacophony in the black well below.

Near the bottom of the stairs, Theophilus paused. The atmosphere of menace around him was thick, unpleasant, cloying. Once again, there were audible words, disjointed, almost meaningless.

"Head . . . of . . . stairs . . . room . . . een . . . thees . . . house . . . een . . . third . . . night . . ." And again gibberish, horribly intermingled with sounds of grief.

And what was to be made of that?

The sounds came from the parlor, beyond any question.

Mustering his courage, Theophilus tiptoed down the hall toward the old-fashioned portieres which marked the entrance to the parlor. In the silence which held the house, the sounds seemed twice and three times as loud as they were, so that at any moment Theophilus expected a distraught Fulton to appear at the head of the stairs. But there was no betrayal from above.

He stood before the closed portieres listening. He heard a constant muttering, and, paying careful attention, he detected a pattern of gutturals. Words, certainly. But not English. Words in some alien language. Phonetic, he decided; probably primitive, with now and then an English word. It struck him as very odd that the heavy accent of the English words was so similar to the

less obvious accent Ernest had affected when last he had visited in Euphoria.

His impulse was to retreat, but he would not yield to it.

He did the second-best thing; he effected a compromise. Rather than enter the parlor, he made a small parting of the portieres at the level of his eyes, thrust his flashlight into the opening and, focusing the beam on the mantel, switched it on.

The ivory and ebony figures sprang into being—and the dark brown head, agleam as with perspiration there. It seemed to Theophilus Ambler that there was a burning of tiny eyes, a movement of the shrunken lips. But the instant the light flashed forth, the sounds from within the room ceased.

There was nothing.

But wait—! The head was not where he had put it. When last he had put it down, it was left standing next to an ivory knight; now it stood before a teakwood box—fully a foot and a half away. Could Fulton have moved it? Hardly. Even if he had taken it up, he would have replaced it precisely where it had been.

What then? The possibilities which occurred to him were not comforting. Theophilus was not unimaginative, but he was not inclined to accept the products of his imagination too readily. He looked across the room to the figures illuminated by his flashlight's beam. He could not rid himself of the conviction that one among them gazed back, with malevolence.

He snapped off the light and withdrew, allowing the portieres to close before him. He waited.

Nothing happened.

He was vaguely disconcerted; he had expected the gibbering and muttering to begin again, but no, no untoward sound came out of the parlor. Indeed, the room and the house were as one might expect them to be in the dead of the night.

Theophilus walked back to the stairs. There he waited a while longer. Nothing took place, no unaccountable sound invaded the darkness.

He went slowly up the stairs in the dark, with every step expecting to hear that weird voice again. But he heard nothing; all was as before, except that Fulton was snoring. He's lying on his back again, thought Theophilus. He turned at the head of the stairs and looked back down into the well of black. He had a momentary feeling that someone watched him; he thought he saw a vague, shadowy figure, neck to toes—without a head; but he blinked and it was gone.

More shaken than he cared to admit to himself, he re-entered his room. He considered blocking the door with the heavy easy chair in his room, but stoutly refused to give way to a fear so nebulous as that he now entertained. Just to be on the safe side, however, he slipped his pistol under his pillow, and presently he slept after a fashion.

THE morning brought more than another day. It brought Ernest Ambler, looking, if possible, more dissipated than ever, with bags under his eyes, and smouldering fire, like a fever inside. He was of medium height, stoop-shouldered, and, one might have said, hawk-like in his appearance, except that it did injustice to a noble family of birds. His face was not so much prepossessing as it was fascinating in a revolting way. He looked, and often acted, like a character out of a painting by Felicien Rops, quite as if he had practised every known major vice and quite a few minor ones.

Theophilus found his nephew at breakfast when the old man descended.

Ernest shot him an unsteady glance. "Hullo, Uncle Theo," he said with false heartiness. "You're looking uncommonly well."

Theophilus growled an acknowledgment. "And you're looking seedy, if I must say so. Puffy."

"It was a long trip."

"I'll bet it was. How'd you make it? In steerage?"

Ernest set forth his trip in patience. He made it commendably short. He had been working among the Jivaro Indians. He had sent up a sample of their work, but apparently it had not yet arrived.

"I got it," said Theophilus shortly.

Ernest seemed manifestly surprised. "Oh," he said. "Oh, you did." He licked his lips. "But surely, not very long ago, eh?"

"Two days ago."

"Then this is actually the . . . the third day you've had it, isn't it?"

A stupid question, thought Theophilus.

Small wonder he tittered after it. Still had that disgusting accent, too.

"How the devil did you get along with the Indians, Ernest? Or can you speak their language?"

"I learned it. And I taught some of them English. Oh, I taught them a lot of things, and they taught me. That head I sent you—I can do that sort of thing myself now. And a lot of others."

"Equally reprehensible, no doubt."

Ernest frowned angrily. "You would think so."

"I know the precedents," answered Theophilus curtly. "How long are you planning on staying?"

"Oh, not too long. A week or two, maybe. Then I must go back. I've got quite a reputation among those Indians."

"I can imagine."

"You'll find it hard to believe, but they think I'm a big medicine-man—the equivalent of an African witch-doctor, no less."

Ernest swallowed. "You always think the worst of me," he muttered.

"Ah, and whose fault is that?" Theophilus got up, leaning above his nephew. He had scarcely touched his coffee, but he no longer had any appetite for it. "If you're staying, Ernest, you take the room next to mine. I have to tell you, though—there appears to be somebody else in the house, besides Fulton and me. You'll find out about that in good time."

Ernest stared after him with narrowed eyes.

Theophilus was profoundly disturbed. He read his nephew's eyes. He read hope, hate, avarice; he read more. And how curiously Ernest had spoken! He was not cringing, as he had formerly done; he was not apologizing or begging; his was an attitude of watchful waiting, an almost irrepressible gloating straying from behind his feverish eyes.

Theophilus continued to be upset at intervals throughout the day. So did Fulton, what with the way in which Ernest presumed to order him about. Ernest managed to surcharge the already troubled atmosphere of the house on Main Street with an explosive chaos. Moreover, as evening approached, Ernest began to get extremely fidgety, and at last, immediately after supper, rose and left the house, mumbling that he would be back later, and no one needed to be waiting up for him—as if anyone intended to do so.

"The front door will be left open," said Theophilus. And it would be just like Ernest to come in in the midst of a soliloquy from that thing in the parlor, he thought. He half hoped he would do so.

BUT that night advanced without the disturbance of the past two nights. Theophilus listened for hours. When at last the clock struck eleven, he was tense with listening. He heard the murmur of wind in the trees, the creaking of the house, the scuttering of mice—and, a quarter past the hour, a terrific clatter on the front porch, followed by an assault on the door, which opened and closed, and permitted Theophilus to hear a succession of unsteady footsteps advancing down the hall.

Ernest—and drunk. Theophilus sighed. He might have expected that. He got up, pulling on his dressing-gown. He opened the door of his room and stood there, waiting, listening to Ernest stumbling through the hall, up the stairs. He hoped that Ernest would find his own room.

That hope, however, was not destined to be fulfilled. Seeing the open door, Ernest came into his uncle's room, lurched across to the bed, and flung himself on it. Disgusted, Theophilus walked over and touched him on the shoulder. Ernest looked warily around, bleary-eyed. Seeing Theophilus, his eyes opened wide and closed again, tightly.

"Go 'way," he muttered thickly. "Never wash 'fraid 'v you 'live, n' 'fraid 'v you dead. Go 'way."

Was it worth it? Theophilus wondered. If left alone, Ernest might go to sleep in a matter of seconds; if not, he might become obstreperous and insistently difficult. He stood there for a moment, feeling the chill of the night through his dressing-gown; then he gave up, and went out, leaving the door ajar, so that he might hear if Ernest got up again. He could as easily sleep next door, in the room assigned to Ernest, as in his own, much as he disliked being routed from his own warm bed.

He got into Ernest's bed, profoundly hoping that he might be able now to sleep

without interruption for what remained of the night.

He was.

He woke up just as Fulton found him. Fulton, much agitated, his hands almost palsied. He woke quickly.

"Mr. Ambler, sir—Mr. Ernest's on your bed."

"Yes, of course. I let him."

"I'm afraid he's ill, sir."

"Drunk, damn him! Just plain beastly drunk."

Fulton looked apologetically dubious. "But the blood," he said faintly.

"Blood?" echoed Theophilus.

He got up, forgetting his dressing-gown, and walked in his nightshirt as fast as he was able down the hall to his own room.

Fulton had not exaggerated. There was quite a bit of blood, emanating apparently from some puffy wounds on Ernest's neck. Ernest himself was dead; of that there was not the shadow of a doubt. His neck was torn and lacerated, but not fatally, to Theophilus Ambler's untrained eye.

"Call somebody," he said to Fulton.

"The undertaker?" ventured Fulton.

"And the sheriff, too. They'll want to ask questions. They always do."

THE sheriff came and asked a good many questions, particularly after a report from the county coroner was in. Ernest Ambler had died of poison, evidently administered through the wounds in his neck. Curare. A poison well-known to certain Indian tribes of South America. As for the wounds in his neck—clearly bites of some kind. Perhaps rats. What did Mr. Theophilus Ambler know about it?

Theophilus was not of much help. But for the fact that he had not a shred of motive for wanting his nephew out of the way, it might have gone very badly for him and for Fulton. As it was, the absence of evidence failed to constitute anything positive. Two or three times it was on the tip of his tongue to say something about that strange tsantsa on the mantel, but he wisely forebore; he might escape a barred cell for a padded one.

At the first opportunity, however, he examined the bloodstains on the stairs which the men from the sheriff's office had found; there were not many, and they ended halfway down the stairs. He went into the parlor. The tsantsa stood on the very edge of the shelf. There was a red-brown smear at one corner of its mouth. Theophilus had not a doubt but that, if he sent away the pointed "teeth" from that monkey-like head, he would find the source of the curare which had killed Ernest.

He had an understandable reluctance to do so.

But something would have to be done about the thing on the mantel. For the time being it could stay where it was—but not for long.

WITHIN a fortnight the mail brought in a letter sent to Theophilus Ambler by the American consul at Cuenca, Ecuador. Did Mr. Ambler have in his possession a shrunken Jivaro head, recently acquired? And if so, would he send it posthaste to the consulate? The consul was sorry, but he had been plagued by a Jivaro woman who had told him a long rigmarole and given him no rest until he sent to inquire. Her husband, whose headless body had been discovered in the garden behind a small house once occupied by Ernest Ambler, who had gone from there, had been murdered by someone—according to her, by Ambler, who had—so she told the consul she had learned from her husband's spectre—performed certain ancient rites in sorcery over the head and dispatched it to a place in America to do a deed, after which the head would be returned. Now the ghost of the dead Indian appeared nightly to his wife, weeping and clamoring for his head. It was absurd, it was ridiculous, but the consul hoped that Mr. Theophilus Ambler knew how difficult a consul's life could be and might understand.

Theophilus understood very well indeed. The tsantsa had been sent to do a deed—on the third night in the room at the head of the stairs. The incorrigible Ernest had counted on the tsantsa's earlier arrival. Fortunately, Theophilus was in a position to appreciate the irony of the situation, however incredible.

He took no chances with the tsantsa. He packed it carefully and sent it by air to the American consulate at Cuenca.

Abdication

BY THEODORE STURGEON

I SAT at the controls of the big D-8 bulldozer, and I tried to remember. The airfield shoulder, built on a saltflat, stretched around me. Off to the west was a clump of buildings—the gas station and grease rack. Near it was the skeletal silhouette of a temporary weather observation post with its spinning velocimeter and vane and windsock. Everything seemed normal, but there was something *else*. . . .

I could remember people, beautiful people in shining, floating garments. I remembered them as if I had seen them just a minute ago, and yet at a distance; but the memories were of faces close—close. One face—a golden girl; eyes and skin and hair three different shades of gold.

I shook my head so violently that it hurt. I was a bulldozer operator. I was—what was I supposed to be doing? I looked around me, saw the gravel spread behind me, the bare earth ahead; knew, then, that I was spreading gravel with the machine. But I seemed to—to— Look, without the physical fact of the half-done job around me, I

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

He wanted to go back to a place he'd surely never visited!

wouldn't have known why I was there at all!

I knew where I had seen that girl, those people. I thought I knew . . . but the thought was just where I couldn't reach it. My mind put out searching tendrils for that knowledge of place, that was so certainly there, and the knowledge receded so that the tendrils stretched out thin and cracked with the effort, and my head ached from it.

A big trailer-type bottom-dump truck came hurtling and howling over the shoulder toward me, the huge fenderless driving wheels throwing clots of mud high in the air. The driver was a Puerto-Rican, a hefty middle-aged fellow. I knew him well. Well —didn't I? He threw out one arm, palm up, signaling "Where do you want it?" I pointed vaguely to the right, to the advancing edge of the spread gravel. He spun his steering wheel with one hand, put the other on the trip-lever on his steering column, keeping his eyes on my face. As he struck the edge of the gravel fill with his wheels I dropped my hand; he punched the lever and the bottom of the trailer opened up, streaming gravel out in a windrow thirty feet long and a foot deep—twelve cubic yards of it, delivered at full speed. The driver waved and headed off, the straight-gut exhaust of his high-speed Diesel snorting and snarling as the rough ground bounced the man's foot on the accelerator.

I waved back at the Puerto-Rican—what was his name? I knew him, didn't I? He knew me, the way he waved as he left. His name—was it Paco? Cruz? Eulalio? Damn it, no, and I knew it as well as I knew my own—

But I didn't know my own name!

Oh hell, oh hell, I'm crazy. I'm scared. I'm scared crazy. What had happened to my head? . . . Everything whirled around me and without effort I remembered about the people in the shining clothes and as my mind closed on it, it evaporated again and there was nothing there.

ONCE when I was a kid in school I fell off the parallel bars and knocked myself out, and when I came to it was like this. I could see everything and feel and smell and taste anything, but I couldn't remember anything. Not for a minute. I would ask what had happened, and they would tell me, and five minutes later I'd ask again. They asked me my address so they could take me home, and I couldn't remember it. They got the address from the school files and took me home, and my feet found the way in and up four flights of stairs to our apartment—I didn't remember which way to go but my feet did. I went in and tried to tell my mother what was the matter with me and I couldn't remember, and she put me to bed and I woke four hours later perfectly all right again.

In a minute, there on the bulldozer, I didn't get over being scared but I began to get used to it, so I could think a little. I tried to remember everything at first, but that was too hard, so I tried to find something I could remember. I sat there and let my mind go quite blank. Right away there was something about a bottom-dump truck and some gravel. It was there, clear enough, but I didn't know where it fit nor how far back. I looked around me and there was the windrow of gravel waiting to be spread. Then that was what the truck was for; and—had it just been there, or had I been sitting there for long, for ever so long, waiting to remember that I must spread it?

Then I saw that I could remember ideas, but not events. Events were there, yes, but not in order. No continuity. A year ago—a second ago—same thing. Nothing clear, nothing very real, all mixed up. Ideas were there whatever, and continuity didn't matter. That I could remember an idea, that I could know that a windrow of gravel meant that gravel must be spread; *that* was an idea, a condition of things which I could recognize. The truck's coming and going and dumping, that was an event. I knew it had happened because the gravel was there, but I didn't know when, or if anything had happened in between.

I looked at the controls and frowned. Could I remember what to do with them? This lever and that pedal—what did they mean to me? Nothing, and nothing again. . . .

I mustn't think about that. I don't have to think about that. I must think about *what* I must do and not how I must do it. I've got to spread the stone. Here there is spread stone and there there is none, and at the

edge of the spread stone is the windrow of gravel. So, watching it, seeing how it lay, I let my hands and feet remember about the levers and pedals. They throttled up, raised the blade off the ground, shifted into third gear, swung the three-ton moldboard and its twelve-foot cutting edge into the windrow. The blade loaded and gravel ran off the ends in two even rolls, and my right hand flicked to and away from me on the blade control, knowing how to raise it enough to let the gravel run out evenly underneath the cutting edge, not too high so that it would make a bobble in the fill for the tracks to teeter on when they reached it —for a bulldozer builds the road it walks on, and if the road is rough the machine see-saws forward and the blade cuts and fills to make waves which, when the tracks reach them, makes the machine see-saw and cut waves, which, when the tracks reach them . . . anyway, my hands knew what to do, and my feet; and they did it all the time when I could only see what was to be done, and could not understand the events of doing it.

This won't do, I thought desperately. I'm all right, I guess, because I can do my work. It's all laid out in front of me and I know what has to be done and my hands and feet know how to do it; but suppose somebody comes and speaks to me or tells me to go somewhere else, I who can't even remember my own name. My hands and my feet have more sense than my head.

SO I thought that I had to inventory everything I could trust, everything I knew positively. What were the things I knew?

The machine was there and true, and the gravel, and the bottom-dump that brought it. My being there was a real thing. You have to start everything with the belief that you yourself exist.

The job, the work, they were true things.

Where was I?

I must be where I should be, where I belonged, for the bottom-dump driver knew me, knew I was there, knew I was waiting for stone to spread. The airfield was there, and the fact that it was unfinished. "Airfield" was like a corollary to me, with the runway and the windsock its supporting axioms, and I had no need to think further. The people in the shining garments, and the girl—

But there was nothing about them here. Nothing at all.

To spread stone was a thing I had to do. But was that all? It wasn't just spreading stone. I had to spread it to—to—

Not to help finish the airfield. It wasn't that. It was something else, something—

Oh. Oh! I had to spread stone to *get* somewhere.

I didn't want to get anywhere, except maybe to a place where I could think again, where I could know what was happening to me, where I could reach out with my mind and grasp those important things, like my name, and the name of the bottom-dump driver, Paco, or Cruz, or Eulalio or maybe even Emanualo von Hachmann de la Vega, or whatever. But being able to think straight again and know all these important things was arriving at a *state* of consciousness, not at a *place*. I knew, I knew, somehow I knew truly, that to arrive at that state I had to arrive at a point.

Suddenly, overwhelmingly, I had a flash of knowledge about the point—not what it was, but how it was, and I screamed and hurt my throat and fell blindly back in the seat of the tractor trying to push away *how* it was.

My abdomen kneaded itself with the horror of it. I put my hands on my face and my hands and face were wet with sweat and tears. Afraid? Have you ever been afraid to die, seeing Death looking right at you; closer than that; have you seen Death turn away from you because He knows you must follow Him? Have you seen that, and been afraid?

Well, this was worse. For this I'd hug Death to me, for He alone could spare me what would happen to me when I reached the place I was going to.

So I wouldn't spread stone.

I wouldn't do anything that would bring me closer to reaching the place where that thing would happen to me. *Had happened* to me. . . . I wouldn't do it. That was an important thing.

There was one other important thing. I must not go on like this, not knowing my name, and what the name of the bottom-

dump driver was, and where this airfield and this base were, and all those things.

These two things were the most important things in the world. In *this* world. . . . THIS world. . . .

This world, this world—*other* world. . . .

THERE was a desert all around me.

Ha! So the airfield wasn't real, and the bottom-dump wasn't real, and the animometer and the grease-racks weren't real. Ha! (why worry about the driver's name if he wasn't real?)

The bulldozer was real, though. I was sitting on it. The six big cylinders were ticking over, and the master-clutch lever was twitching rhythmically as if its lower end were buried in something that breathed. Otherwise—just desert, and some hills over there, and a sun which was too orange.

Think, now, think. This desert means something important. I wasn't surprised at being in the desert. That was important. This place in the desert was near something, near an awful something that would hurt me.

I looked all around me. I couldn't see it, but it was there, the something that would hurt so. I wouldn't go through that again—

Again.

Again—that was an important thing. I wouldn't spread stone and reach that place. I wouldn't go through that which had happened to me even if I stayed crazy like I was for the rest of eternity. Let them put me away and tie me up and shake their heads over me and walk away and leave me, and put bars on the window to slice the light of the crooked moon into black and silver bars on the floor of my cell. I didn't care about all that. I could face the ache of wanting to know about my name and the name of the driver of the bottom-dump (he was a Puerto-Rican so his name must be Villamil or Roberto, not Bucyrus-Erie or Caterpillar Thirteen Thousand) and the people in the shining clothes; I *was* facing all that, and I know how it hurt, but I would not go through that place again and be hurt so much more. Not again. Not again.

Again. Again again again. What is the again-ness of everything? Everything I am doing I am doing again. I could remember that feeling from before—years ago it used to happen to me every once in a while. You've never been to a certain village before, we'll say, and you come up over the crown of the hill on your bicycle and see the way the church is and the houses, and the turn of that crooked cobblestoned street, the shape and tone of the very flower-stems. You know that if you were asked, you could say how many pickets were in the white gate in the blue-and-white fence in the little house third from the corner. All the scientists nod and smile and say you did see it for the second time—a twentieth of a second after the first glimpse; and that the impact of familiarity was built up in the next twentieth of a second. And you nod and smile too and say well, whaddaye know. But you know, you *know* you've seen that place before, no matter what they say.

That's the way I knew it, sitting there on my machine in the desert and not surprised, and having that feeling of again-ness; because I was remembering the last time the bottom-dump came to me there on the airfield shoulder, trailing a plume of blue smoke from the exhaust stack, bouncing and barking as it hurtled toward me. It meant nothing at first, remembering, that it came, nor that it was the same driver, the Puerto-Rican; and of course he was carrying the same sized load of the same material. All trips of the bottom-dump were pretty much the same. But there was one thing I remembered—*now* I remembered—

THERE was a grade-stake driven into the fill, to guide the depth of the gravel, and *it was no nearer to me than it had ever been.* So that hadn't been the same bottom-dump, back another time. It was the *same time,* all over again! The last time was wiped out. I was on a kind of escalator and it carried me up until I reached the place where I realized about what I had to go through, and screamed. And then I was snatched back and put on the bottom again, at the place where the Puerto Rican driver Senor What's-his-name dumped the gravel and went away again.

And this desert, now. This desert was a sort of landing at the side of the escalator, where I might fall sometimes instead of going all the way to the bottom where the truck came. I had been here before, and I

was here again. I had been at the unfinished air base again and again. And there was the other place, with the shining people, and the girl with all those kinds of gold. That was the same place with the crooked moon.

I covered my eyes with my hands and tried to think. The clacking Diesel annoyed me, suddenly, and I got up and reached under the hood and pulled the compression release. Gases chattered out of the ports, and a bubble of silence formed around me, swelling, the last little sounds scampering away from me in all directions, leaving me quiet.

There was a soft thump in the sand beside the machine. It was one of the shining people, the old one, whose forehead was so broad and whose hair was fine, fine like a cobweb. I knew him. I knew his name, too, though I couldn't think of it at the moment.

He dismounted from his flying-chair and came to me.

"Hello," I said. I took my shirt from the seat beside me and hung it on my shoulder. "Come on up."

He smiled and put up his hand. I took it and helped him climb up over the cat. His hands were very strong. He stepped over me and sat down.

"How do you feel?" Sometimes he spoke aloud, and sometimes he didn't, but I always understood him.

"I feel—mixed up."

"Yes, of course," he said kindly. "Go on. Ask me about it."

I looked at him. "Do I—*always* ask you about it?"

"Every time."

"Oh." I looked all around, at the desert, at the hills, at the dozer, at the sun which was too orange. "Where am I?"

"On Earth," he said; only the word he used for Earth meant Earth only to him. It meant *his* earth.

"I know that," I said. "I mean, where am I really? Am I on that air base, or am I here?"

"Oh, you are here," he said.

SOMEHOW I was vastly relieved to hear it. "Maybe you'd better tell me all about it again."

"You said 'again'," he said, and put his hand on my arm. "You're beginning to realize. . . . Good, lad. Good. All right. I'll tell you once more.

"You came here a long time ago. You followed a road with your big noisy machine, and came roaring down out of the desert to the city. The people had never seen a noisy machine before, and they clustered around the gate to see you come. They stood aside to let you pass, and wondered, and you swung the machine and crushed six of them against the gate-posts."

"I *did?*" I cried. Then I said, "I did. Oh, I did."

He smiled at me again. "Shh. Don't. It was a long time ago. Shall I go on?

"We couldn't stop you. We have no weapons. We could do nothing in the face of that monster you were driving. You ranged up and down the streets, smashing the fronts of buildings, running people down, and laughing. We had to wait until you got off the machine, and then we overpowered you. You were totally mad. It was," he added thoughtfully, "a very interesting study."

"Why did I do it?" I whispered. "How could I do such things to—*you?*"

"You had been hurt. Dreadfully hurt. You had come here, arriving somewhere near this spot. You were crazed by what you had endured. Later, we followed the tracks of your machine back. We found where you had driven it aimlessly over the desert, and where, once, you had left the machine and lived in a cave, probably for weeks. You ate desert grasses and the eight-legged crabs. You killed everything you could, through some strange, warped revenge motivation.

"You were crazed with thirst and revenge, and you were very thin, and your face was covered with hair, of all extraordinary things, though analysis showed that you had a constant desire for a hairless face. After treatment you became almost rational. But your time-sense was almost totally destroyed. And you had two almost unbreakable psychological blocks—your memory of how you came here, and your sense of identity.

"We did what we could for you, but you were unhappy. The moons had an odd effect on you. We have two, one well inside the other in its orbit, but both with the same

period. Without instruments they appear to be an eclipse when they are full. The sight of what you called that crooked moon undid a lot of our work. And then you would get the attacks of an overwhelming emotion you term 'remorse,' which appeared to be something like cruelty and something like love and included a partial negation of the will to survive . . . and you could not understand why we would not punish you. Punish you—when you were sick!"

"Yes," I said. "I—remember most of it now. You gave me everything I could want. You even gave me—gave me—"

"Oh—that. Yes. You had some deep-seated convictions about love, and marriage. We felt you would be happier—"

"I was, and then I wasn't. I—I wanted—"

"I know. I know," he said soothingly. "You wanted your name again, and somehow you wanted your own earth."

I CLENCHED my fists until my forearms hurt. "I should be satisfied," I cried. "I should be. You are all so kind, and she—and she—she's been—" I shook my head angrily. "I must be crazy."

"You generally ask me," he said smiling, "at this point, how you came here."

"I do?"

"You do. I'll repeat it. You see, there are irregularities in the fabric of space. No—not space, exactly. We have a word for it—" (he spoke it) "—which means, literally, 'space which is time which is psyche'. It is a condition of space which by its nature creates time and thought and matter. Your world, relative to ours, is in the infinitely great, or in the infinitely small, or perhaps in the infinitely distant, either in space or in time—it does not matter, for they are all the same thing in their ulitmate extensions . . . but to go on:

"While you were at your work, you ran your machine into a point of tension in this fabric—a freak, completely improbable position in—" (he spoke the word again) "—in which your universe and ours were tangential. You—went through."

I tensed as he said it.

"Yes, that was the thing. It caused you inconceivable agony. It drove you mad. It filled you full of vengeance and fear. Well, we—cured you of everything but the single fear of going through that agony again, and the peculiar melancholy involving the loss of your ego—your desire to know your own name. Since we failed there—" he shrugged "—we have been doing the only thing left to us. We are trying to send you back."

"Why? Why bother?"

"You are not content here. Our whole social system, our entire philosophy, is based on the contentment of the individual. So we must do what we can . . . in addition, you have given us a tremendous amount of research material in psychology and in theoretical cosmogony. We are grateful. We want you to have what you want. Your fear is great. Your desire is greater. And to help you achieve your desire, we have put you on this course of abreaction.

"Abreaction?"

He nodded. "The psychological re-enactment, or retracing, of everything you have done since you came here, in an effort to return you to the entrance-point in exactly the same frame of mind as that in which you came through it. We cannot find that point. It has something to do with your particular psychic matrix. But if the point is still here, and if, by hypnosis, we can cause you to do exactly what you did when you first came through—why, then, you'll go back."

"Will it be—dangerous?"

"Yes," he said, unhesitatingly. "Even if the point of tangency is still here, where you emerged, it may not be at the same point on your earth. Don't forget—you have been here for eleven of your years. . . . And then there's the agony—bad enough if you do go through, infinitely worse if you do not, for you may drift in— in *somewhere* forever, quite conscious, and with no possibility of release.

You know all this, and yet you still want us to try. . . . " He sighed. "We admire you deeply, and wonder too; for you are the bravest man we have ever known. We wonder most particularly at your culture, which can produce such an incredible regard for the ego. . . . Shall we try again?"

I LOOKED at the sun which was too orange, and at the hills, and at his broad, quiet, beautiful face. If I could have spoken my name then, I think I should have stayed. If I could have seen *her* just at that

moment, I think I should have waited a little longer, at least.

"Yes," I said. "Let's try it again."

I was so afraid that I couldn't remember my name or the name of Gracias de Nada, or something, the fellow who drove the bottom-dump. I couldn't remember how to run the machine; but my hands remembered, and my feet.

Now I sat and looked at the windrow; and then I pulled back the throttle and raised the blade. I swung into the windrow, and the gravel loaded clean onto the blade and cleanly ran off in two even rolls at the sides. When I sensed that the gravel was all off the blade, I stopped, shifted into high reverse, pulled the left steering clutch to me, let in the master clutch, stamped the left brake. . . .

That was the thing, then. Back-blading that roll out—the long small windrow of gravel that had run off the ends of my blade. As I backed over it, the machine straddling it, I dropped the blade on it and floated it, so that it smoothed out the roll. Then it was that I looked back—force of habit, for a bulldozer that size can do real damage backing into powerpoles or buildings—and I saw the muzzy bit of fill.

It was a patch of spread gravel that seemed whirling, blurred at the edges. Look into the sun and then suddenly at the floor. There will be a muzzy patch there, whirling and swirling like that. I thought something funny had happened to my eyes. But I didn't stop the machine, and then suddenly I was in it.

Again.

It built up slowly, the agony. It built up in a way that promised more and then carefully fulfilled the promise, and made of the peak of pain a further promise. There was no sense of strain, for everything was poised and counterbalanced and nothing would break. All of the inner force was as strong as all the outer forces, and all of me was the point of equilibrium.

Don't try to think about it. Don't try to imagine for a second. A second of that, unbalanced, would crush you to cosmic dust. There were years of it for me; years and years. . . . I was in an unused stockpile of years, somewhere in a hyperspace, and the weight of them all was on me and in me, consecutively, concurrently.

I WOKE up very slowly. I hurt all over, and that was an excruciating pleasure, because the pain was only physical.

I began to forget right away.

A company doctor came in and peeped at me. I said, "Hi."

"Well, well," he said, beaming. "So the flying catskinner is with us again."

"What flying catskinner? What happened? Where am I?"

"You're in the dispensary. You, my boy, were working your bulldozer out on the fill and all of a sudden took it into your head to be a flying kay-det at the same time. That's what they say, anyhow. I do know that there wasn't a mark around the machine where it lay—not for sixty feet. You sure didn't drive it over there."

"What are you talking about?"

"That, son, I wouldn't know. But I went and looked myself. There lay the Cat, all broken up, and you beside it with your lungs all full of your own ribs. Deadest looking man I ever saw get better."

"I don't get it. Did anybody see this happen? Are you trying to—"

"Only one claims to have seen it was a Puerto-Rican bottom-dump driver. Doesn't speak any English, but he swears on every saint in the calendar that he looked back after dumping a load and saw you and twenty tons of bulldozer *forty feet in the air,* and then it was coming down!"

I stared. "Who was the man?"

"Heavy-set fellow. About forty-five. Strong as a rhino and seemed sane."

"I know him," I said. "A good man." Suddenly, then, happily: "Doc—you know what his name is?"

"No. Didn't ask. Some flowery Spanish moniker, I guess."

"No, it isn't," I said. "His name is Kirkpatrick. Alonzo Padin de Kirkpatrick."

He laughed. "The Irish are a wonderful people. Go to sleep. You've been unconscious for nearly three weeks."

"I've been unconscious for eleven years," I said, and felt foolish as hell because I hadn't meant to say anything like that and couldn't imagine what put it into my head.

Croatan

BY MALCOLM M. FERGUSON

I AM being held in the case of the mysterious disappearance of my friend, John Saunders, whom I visited at the hospital of St. Anthony, outside Roanoke, Virginia. I will not be held long, because I am responsible neither for his disappearance from an escape-proof upper-storey room, nor, for that matter, for the equally strange cause of his admission to that hospital room. For there are two mysteries, one inside the other.

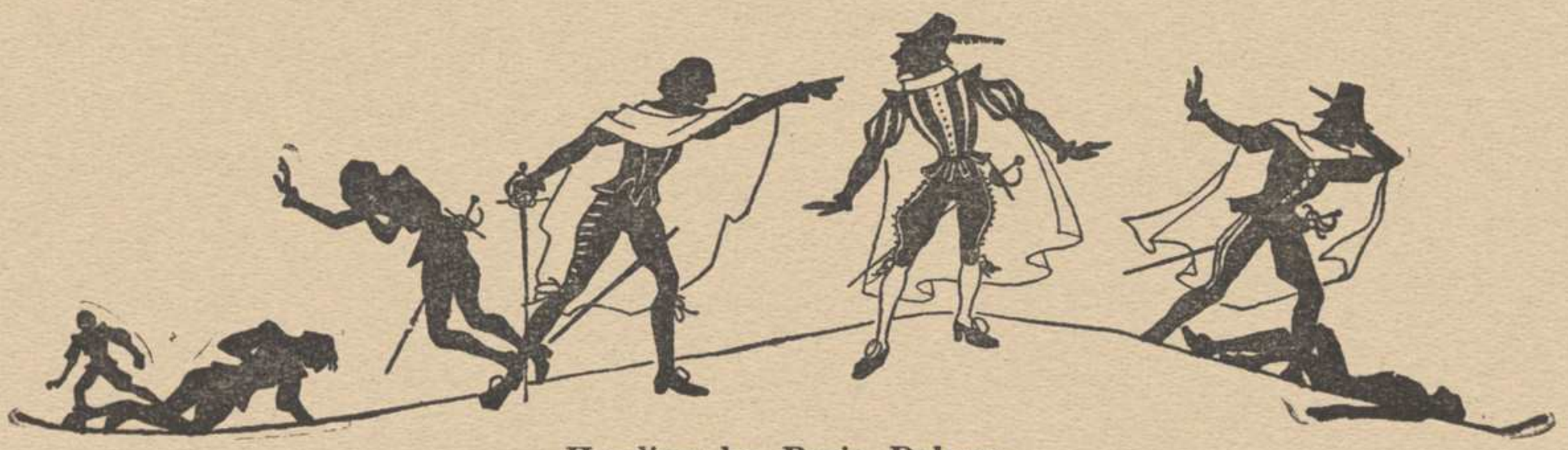
To begin with, it was a mystery why John Saunders lay sick. And that sick, he, for the moment clairvoyant, should speak of matters he knew not, and hint gravely in a voice not his own, of mysteries beyond his ken.

I knew him well, having often visited his house and the nearby workshop from which emerged the painted tiles, the pottery-ware, and more recently, the glass-ware which made his reputation. I had watched these creations grow under the young man's deft hands; I had argued with him about the folk-aspects of this work, or rather, examined his knowledge upon the subject, being frequently surprised by the depth of interest and knowledge of the tall, blond, boyish-looking young man.

It was, in fact, only two days after I had left his house that I read the strange item in a Washington newspaper. There had been a fall of brown snow near Roanoke, a fall localized to a radus of about four miles. Brown snow. That was certainly odd, I thought, determining to call John up on the phone. No doubt he would go to the scene to study it—surely he could identify the alien substance if anyone could.

He answered the phone on his workshop extension. "Yes; I have some of the stuff under the microscope now," he replied to my query. "And it is like nothing else on earth that I know of. The particles are apparently crystalline, though they change shape rapidly, their movements making them seem alive, or imbued with a lifelike

Creatures summoned from outer eons, our masters by an eternity of time and progress



Heading by Boris Dolgov

energy. I want to try some sort of spectroscopic examination on them next, though I don't know offhand how I'll go about it."

Whether he made a spectroscopic examination of the particles or not—or the exact nature of his difficulties in doing so—I never asked him, nor would I have understood in detail if he told me. I had learned that this substance was mystifying John, and I felt that my curiosity didn't justify me in distracting him further at that moment. Then, too, I was quite busy in Washington and heard nothing further until the newspapers announced, two days later, the sickness of John Saunders and two other men—a newspaper science-editor and an amateur scientist, all associated, apparently, with the study of this brown snow.

The next morning a telegram arrived urging me to come to the hospital. I drove down early in the afternoon. Saunders, who had asked that it be sent, was apparently permitted to see me, though I marveled that he wasn't put in isolation, his ailment being of undetermined nature and origin, and quite possibly contagious.

I am no scientist, so I wondered why Saunders had called me instead of one of his friends among recent Tech graduates.

He was lying down in bed, quite pale, but in no apparent discomfiture at the moment.

"Well," he said, our greetings over, "it caught me with my guard down. I expected radio-active elements, and found no danger there. But germs—I had no way of guessing—or of detecting them without risk, if I had guessed. So I found myself suddenly coming down with a violent chill. I was barely able to summon help.

"But that isn't why I called you. I've been experiencing something quite alien to myself. It is as if my sickness called forth some urgent message—hell, I'm not psychic, or anything like that—but there seems to be something rational and also pretty urgent to it. So if I can let myself relax and let this thing unfold without tightening up on myself as I naturally would if I were alone, maybe we can find out if it really is anything.

"Just in case this is lucid and of any account, I want you to get it down in shorthand. There are pencils and paper, my friend. You will forgive me, I hope, if this is babbling insanity. I am sure that it will be a relief to me if there is nothing to it. It is for you then, to copy and record. And it is for me to prepare the apparatus, plug in, as it were, the electricity, and adjust the phonograph, so that if a record is inserted it will be transmitted.

"Very well. My mind focusses as before on a beech tree with the word 'Croatan' crudely carved on it with a hasp-knife. I know something of this. . . . Maybe you, too, are acquainted with the grim jest of fate wherein the last survivor seeks to express the enigmatic end of his tribe by carving letters on a tree-trunk before his end also comes. His word can serve only to point up the mystery. Let us hold to this mystery which I recognize as the sign of doom of the lost colony at Roanoke, here in Virginia, in 1587, under Sir Walter Raleigh's patent. Perhaps the matter of the mystery will be thus. . . .

"Surely we should know, for if it happens again—and well it might—there might be none left on the face of the earth to puzzle over the few, hastily-scribbled words of the last to be snatched up, and that would be ironic, too. It would be the ultimate irony, deserving to outlast paper, beech-bark, and even the slow-crumbling face of stone, a cryptic 'Croatan'—or whatever the word would then be—unread in empty continents, one word nearer an explanation than the empty shells of New York, London, Paris, Moscow. . . .

"Yes, we are on the trail. My hunch has hit it. We are on the low shores of Roanoke, in what was to be Virginia. . . ."

JOHN SAUNDER'S voice changed somewhat at this point, being a little less polished, more "rough and ready." I was busy transcribing, and could not notice it too closely. I continue, without the burden of quotation marks, the story that John Saunders dictated to me from the hospital bed.

—In the autumn of 1587 our party of eighty-nine men, seventeen women, two children and the newborn Virginia Dare watched the ships of the Virginia Company put out to sea. Most of us stood by the shore until the ships had disappeared over

the horizon. Then, just as the sails dropped from sight and we were turning back, tiny Virginia Dare commenced to cry, a piteously small noise against the vast expanse of sea and woods. For my part I felt in that moment the loneliness and weight of work of the winter ahead more than at any other time before. We would indeed have our hands full until the return of the ships, due to arrive a year hence with good supplies and capable colonists to add to our numbers.

It was as carpenter that my name went down on the register—"Amos Martin—carpenter"—and I was busy from dawn until dark, and sometimes by torchlight for even longer, working with axe and adze, saw and sledge completing the necessary buildings, amassing firewood, and building fishing vessels. Others, women as well as men, were busy hunting and trapping, and gathering such herbs and mushrooms as they could be sure of in a new world. Still others were out fishing. Four of us, all bachelors, shared one log hut, with a stone chimney in whose fireplace we did our cooking, using a number of devices contrived by Ashur Dakin, the large, amiable, bearded blacksmith who slept on the balsam boughs of the bunk below me.

At first we were fortunate in that our work went well, and our health remained good. Nothing beyond comprehension had then assailed us, either from the vast width of water behind us, nor the unknown forest before us. Work was our friend against the natural uneasiness that was otherwise our portion, with winter approaching.

Do you know the feeling of waiting that comes before a snowstorm? The air is a-rush with the countless tiny particles. One night was ominously like that. If only that night had brought nothing but snow with it!

The next morning the sky was clear, and on the ground six inches of snow had fallen. It was a strange, brown snow, with particles of some sort in it. As we gathered in the clear air that morning we asked one another whether this was the kind of snow to expect in the new world. I have reason to remember that snowstorm well, for from the time of its descent we were in the custody of unknown and baleful forces. . . . Not that there was any marked change as we stood at the doors of our huts and surveyed the snow-covered ground. But during the day some of us felt uneasy—I know I did. Four times I saw from the corner of my eye alien black blobs, in rapid flight, waist-high, going fifty feet before I lost sight of them.

That night began the epidemic of chills and fevers that put to bed an increasing number of us. We were thus burdened with the problem of keeping one well person in each hut to look after the others, and above all, to keep the fires going. The first two weeks were terribly hard for sick and well alike.

It was then that something occurred that terrified me so that I could not decide whether my reason or my memory were affected. I went to the spring one evening, carrying two buckets and an axe to cut the ice, in the chance that it had frozen since the last man had chopped it. There I met a man whom I had never seen before! I gasped, "Who are you?"

He replied, "Charles Swain. What? You don't know me, Amos Martin?"

I stammered something about being tired, so that I hardly knew myself. The man acted as if he understood, and passed off my original ignorance as a fault of overwork. I looked at him as I filled my buckets. He wore his clothes strangely, with an exactness as if they were costumes and alien to him. His face was strangely pale, and its lines and wrinkles had an unnaturalness to them as if they had been erased by some shock and come back awry. He stood there, presumably waiting to fill two buckets of his own, though I'm sure I don't remember, for I was preoccupied by the unhuman strangeness in his pose and manner, which I could not understand, but could only ask myself, "What in hell is so horribly wrong here?"

IF YOU had been aboard the ships with fewer than two hundred men, and then ashore with eighty-nine as I had, you would know each of them by name, so that you could call them off. That is exactly what I did. I counted, as I walked back with my two full buckets, *and I had eighty-nine names without "Charles Swain!"*

And yet, the man knew my name. He

was surely no Indian; he acted as if he belonged, his errand at the spring being presumably as legitimate as my own.

I told Ashur Dakin of my strange encounter. He knew of no such man, either by name or description. He thought, quite naturally, that I might be suffering from the unknown epidemic, a thought which I had conceived of, but rejected as unlikely. For I had not felt dizzy, nor as if the core of me were frozen, as all the others had.

Were these things to be expected in the New World? Brown snow? A strange plague? The coming into being of a strange man or his semblance? One would know if one were back in England—one would know indeed with fear—but who could say here; or where could one seek among writings? Perhaps the snows are often brown here, and mean nothing, or that one adapts one-self to the plague and can defy its hurtful humours. Perhaps.

THEN came the first of the plague deaths, coming in the cold night. And only after the moment of death's impact was it recalled that those who gathered in the night, and likewise those who in the morning interred the body in the sea, had seen a man whom they did not know among their number. There was, then, a belated alarm, and there was greater credence of my account of meeting "Charles Swain." Some attempts were made to link the death with this man's appearance, though no headway could be made with this idea.

During the next five days there were seven deaths. And several times he who called himself Charles Swain was seen, though he avoided seizure largely by the unexpectedness of his appearance. Ashur Dakin saw him leaving one hut. Rufus Pinchbeck met him while hurrying to the Lipsbury's, where a woman had died. Once, Alan Duncan came toward his cabin with an armful of firewood and saw Charles Swain leaving. Duncan dropped the wood, and futilely hurled one stick after another at the departing figure who leered like Silenus over his shoulder. And Duncan pursued him, though with no success. Returning, he found that one of his cabinmates had died, and the other two, both sick men, were nowhere in sight. Yet the snow bore only the trace of Charles Swain's footprints, coming and going!

After that we went armed.

Occasionally at first there was hope of help from Indians, those near us being friendly. But now they shunned us, and we saw them only extremely rarely, and then in apprehensive flight.

Our meetings were desperate affairs, with far-fetched plans hazarded and rejected. It was at one of these, however, that the idea was considered that Charles Swain was not human, but something which had borrowed human form. Evil. The pestilence that walketh—

Among us then was death, and yet more terrifyingly, disappearance, for there was no trace of the two men who had been plucked from the snowbound cabin.

I talked with an older man, Walter Pinchbeck, an able husbandman and something of a scholar, who was stricken with the plague. What he said was not sense, I thought then, but I remembered it.

"I have dreams. Dreams that terrify me in a way that no thought of death or aught else ever has. There is within me, I dream, a teaming host of tiny atomies, alive and a-swim, that engineered this plague. Terrible Behemoths, yet encompassed in each drop of my ichor. Their writhing is my torment.

"And these atomies in turn are but earthly projections of kindred life from far space. They are seeds, spawn, germens of space-creatures. And I have seen them, too, these space-creatures. Also alive and a-swim, or afloat upheld in a vast, dense cloud of the brown particles which make the snow brown. Totally alien, they live within this cloud, not as we live on the earth, but suspended as in a sea, only a sea of dry particles. It is a fearful, blind world, and in my dream it was as if I went among ghosts. But most terrible of all were the creatures themselves. One came toward me, a huge tower of glossy leather, topped by numerous tentacles which took the place of eyes and ears in that dense medium. Beyond the sense of feel, whatever senses and capacities this creature had must have been within itself, so that it could learn only by taking up smaller objects into the orifice at its top for examination; or by hitching itself with its flat base clinging to any of the larger.

lifeless objects and somehow feeling and communicating with its kind. But of that I do not know, for it was then that my son woke me, in a cold sweat."

SHORTLY after this Walter Pinchbeck, too, had vanished. And in the days that followed I thought of his unbelievable tale of atomies within him—surely I had no such atomies within me—or of creatures haunting a cloud in the depths of space. Then, as time went on, I wasn't so sure in my disbelief. Perhaps a fever would make me feel, and then make me know things that I now doubted. And those things might some day be known to be so.

Can anyone know the loneliness that was upon us? There were other deaths and disappearances, including as missing, the two men who shared the hut with Ashur Dakin and myself. As Dakin and I committed a body to the waves it seemed to me as if we had suddenly grown smaller against the vastness of the ocean and clear cold sky with the solitary gull wheeling and crying overhead.

We became moody. Each person wondered if the number of human faces he would live to see was becoming daily smaller. We ached for the Old World, though I did hear conjectures that these strange times might somehow be affecting our homeland too.

Then, late one afternoon I returned to our hut. Inside the cabin was dark, coming in out of the snow. I saw a figure on the bench by the fire. I thought it was Ashur, and started to greet him. And then I saw with horror that it was not Ashur at all, but Charles Swain! Indescribable was my terror at that meeting, which by its absolute unexpectedness and the bold indifference of my adversary completely stunned me. I could only stand and gape, now noticing that Swain's neck-cloth was missing, and the flesh of his throat showed signs of a rope's abrasion.

"Well, Amos Martin, we meet again. Since this is obviously my doing, you must content yourself that you can do nothing about it. Nothing but listen to your fate. For soon we from the Great Cloud in the Outer Marches of Space will have taken those of your colony whom we have chosen. For your part, it is my grim jest that you be left alone after we have taken our desired number for experimentation, allowing that some will be broken in death. We are obviously choosing your little colony for our experiments because it will give us a working supply of human beings who will not be missed. Why should we raise a hue and cry? As for you, Amos Martin, one human more or less—"

By then I had put down the sack I was carrying, and with a dart seized up one of Ashur's hammers and hurled it where I had last seen Charles Swain. Even before the hammer skittered futilely along the table I saw that Charles Swain had gone. Mockingly, a pile of clothes was left.

I ran. I hardly knew where, but at last I was tolling the bell in the community hall. When the men came I gasped out my story and we went up to my cabin. They listened with apparent belief and sympathy, I thought, and they saw the clothes on the floor as I had left them. But as time went on, and it was certain that Ashur, too, had vanished, and that three others had gone that same night, there was muttering against me, as if I were in league with this devilish Charles Swain and the unearthly forces. For I had been told that I was to live, and that they would die.

But could not these people see that my fate promised no better than theirs? True, my chance of being rescued by the relief expedition would be the greatest, though somehow I felt the ships would never come in time. I knew that it would be diabolic to wait as the slash of fate cut all around.

ONCE again our numbers were heavily cut. I did what I could along with the rest, but more than once the sick refused the cup which I held at their lips, and more than once I was warned off with threats.

Some of the cooler-headed men of the colony came to see me, and they expressed concern that I was becoming more of an outcast in the eyes of their colleagues when another pair of hands was so earnestly needed. There was little they could do, they and I realized, understanding that despair was undermining reason.

There were now barely forty persons left in the colony, and all of them were men.

And I could help no longer, for desperation had made many of the remaining men little better than beasts as concerned me. So I fretted and stirred impatiently, realizing that I was thought of as lurking here, a warlock scheming evil in my solitude or possibly harboring the evil genius, Charles Swain.

And then one night there was a clatter at my door and young Pinchbeck burst in.

"You better leave, Amos Martin. They're coming to hunt you down. Grab what you can and run. There. Now I've told you. I better not be here when they come."

Was it cowardice that made me set to work gathering up what I needed? I wondered at the time whether I should wait it out. However I set about packing, impelled to flee with the little I could gather quickly.

I didn't know when they would attack the cabin, but believed I would have a good chance of taking my hastily-gathered supplies and skirting camp to an inlet where I could get a rowboat. Believing I should put ten miles between us, I chose as my destination an island we had called "Croatan," for thus the Indians had named it.

I found the boat all right and had rowed five miles when I saw a glow from the camp that I believed was my cabin burning. What misguided souls, wasting their precious substance thus wrathfully and vainly! Now, indeed, I reflected, they would surely think me a warlock for escaping them, and I would be outcast indeed.

For the next week I was busy building a passable shelter, as well as hunting and fishing. My struggles to live were occupying me again, though I still fretted about the colony and longed to be with my fellow men again, deluded though they were. Now I made no attempt to hide—I had merely removed myself, feeling that I should not let my blood be shed too readily—and my axe-blows rang freely. If anyone chose to kill me they might do so, merely at the expense of search and contrivance.

Finally my yearning to be among men impelled me to return by boat to the mainland and, afoot, to the edge of camp. I took up a number of positions and watched to see who remained alive. Watching all morning I could count only a dozen men, and allowing for those absent hunting or otherwise occupied, I felt their numbers had dwindled to thirty. So I returned to my camp, cold, hungry, and in anguish at the lot of my fellow men.

On the sixth day following I was out hunting and heard a shot nearby. I placed myself in a likely position and soon saw it was young Pinchbeck. I hailed him. He was startled both at being hailed and at finding me still alive. He was extremely nervous, and apprehensive in talking to me. Obviously the mounting anxiety of the men was wearing him down, for I knew what a terrible thing the restlessness of a doomed group is.

"There are twenty-four of us alive now. Edgerly drowned himself, and Thomas went mad and was killed. The plague seems to be over, and no one else dies from it. They just disappear. And some of those who remain are dangerous in their desperation—unwilling to work, drinking liquor when they find it, and brooding murder on anyone whom they fancy a Jonah."

And then he begged me that he might stay with me, urging that it would be as if he had disappeared, and he would thus be saved from the fear-crazed men, for neither he nor I were of a humor that made for such madness. I accepted his offer. Maybe I was wrong, but I accepted. Thus to draw from the strength of the main body seemed sinfully wrong to me, yet I was grateful to have young Pinchbeck's company. And perhaps, I argued, he might somehow escape through this change of scene; for all this while I believed the hateful prophecy of Charles Swain that I alone would linger alive.

So we two lived apart for three weeks, as under our occasional observation the desperate colony dwindled more alarmingly. Then one evening as we gathered wood for the fire, Pinchbeck, who was between me and the fire chopping at a log, dropped his axe and screamed, clawing at his shirt. Suddenly he was no longer there. Nor was there any use searching, for I knew that the earth no longer held him.

That night I wept. And under the vast, clear starlit sky I cried out at the terrible void. I don't know what I did. I was distraught. The air seemed to weigh heavily about me and yet be limitless, and I felt

that ruthless, unearthly creatures observed my every move, seemingly touching and handling me as surely as if I were in some unimaginable marketplace. The depths of the air swallowed my screams, and I knew not whether the creatures heard me and mocked, or whether I went unheeded.

THE next morning, weakened in mind and body as if only a spiderweb held me from the collapse of the one or the other, I went back to the colony. I drew my boat up on the beach. I walked up the path to the community hall. No one was in sight. I cried out; no one answered. I broke into a sprint, and staggered from cabin to cabin, peering at empty interiors, calling, calling in vain. . . .

And then I opened the sixth cabin door. On the floor was a man, white-haired, outstretched, writhing. I rushed forward and clasped him to my bosom. But the man to whom I opened my heart was hopelessly crazed, I saw. He whom I had known as Darius Maleham, a twenty-year-old youth, lay gibbering incoherently, his whitened hair and fumbling, useless hands a jest to me. I went no further in my search, but stayed, seated on a bench watching the brain-broken creature on the floor. I knew that he was the last man.

And as I sat there, face in hands, in utter despair, the voice of Charles Swain spoke from the idiot lips of the unheeding man on the floor.

"So. You came back. You are now the witness and the listener, and this is as it chanced through our contriving. One mortal was to stay, we agreed, so that if none of the others were carried across successfully we could come here instead, as I did, taking the form of 'Charles Swain' from a hanged body which I plucked from an English gibbet.

"You see, we who live within the Great Cloud whose particles are like that which you saw in your brown snow, have not senses like yours, our mode of living being quite different. We have taken human beings to study their structures that we can *will* adaptations in our own, or possibly take over the earth, after clearing it of its mortals and other uncongenial elements. Oh, there are various courses open to us as long as we're careful. Thus we prudently leave alone the main body of mankind to pick this colony. You, however, I shall use for one more experiment."

Then Darius Maleham was again incoherent for a moment. But suddenly he gripped my ankle, stared straight at me, uttered my name, and was gone. Gone, and I alone remained.

It is strange that the will carries on when the mind no longer can. I left that cabin and going to a beech tree nearby hastily carved the word "Croatan" on its bark with my hasp-knife, hoping that men from the rescue ships would see it and come, and with faltering feet I left the colony for my island retreat, taking nothing with me, caring little what would come to pass.

Numb.

I remained there, my mind mercifully dulled so that I was quite beyond minding the solitude, and existing through habit. Fortunately, winter was quite over and living was easier, though my nerves made me a poor marksman, being afraid instead of eager to shoot when I heard a noise in the underbrush or sighted game. I avoided camp still, doing without its supplies though realizing that in time I would have to return or add measurably to the burden and futility of my labor. I held out until late summer before I went back to the colony to fetch supplies, choosing a warm, sunlit morning for this unpleasant scavenging. I had drawn my boat up handily on the beach, and entering the nearest hut quickly chose an armful of necessary items.

Thus laden, I turned. I had reached the doorway when I saw it. My God, but the horror I saw there, the vast, leathery horror —topped by a ring of tentacles—with a gaping orifice in the center of this top—a towering, twenty foot height looming up scarcely twice its length from me—

I clung to the sides of the door-frame, my knees refusing to support me. I must be mad, I told myself over and over. This thing cannot be. But it was there, twisting and posturing on its base, now towards me, now away. How I broke away, kicked clear my utensils and swung shut the door I will never know. I know only that I am inside, leaning against the door which I have barred. I hear strange noises outside, rub-

bings against the log-walls, a weird, throaty humming out of which well strange syllables. And now, as I hastily shred up the blanket, the voice of Charles Swain comes clearly.

"So now you have seen me as I am, and I have shown myself that I can appear visibly on this earth. Even as I am I will still be when one day the race of man is no more and we have come."

BUT now I have twisted my blanket-rope and made it fast to the rafter. But wait —I must prevent my body being used as was that poor unfortunate's on the gallows back home. Yes, fire will do it if anything will, if only time permits. There—a blaze, now—another, now two more. Now a kick of the stool and Roanoke is no more, and "Croatan" yields nothing either.

But I can hold no longer save in seeking death. . . .

Slowly the figure of John Saunders on the hospital bed began to stir, the mind to come back into its own.

"Well, was it babbling idiocy that we heard?"

I nodded negatively.

"Do you think that it was an unconscious rationalization of my own of this virus-bringing brown snow?"

"I don't think so, John, since it is hardly likely your mind would work out unaided a number of details; consider for instance that the deaths yielded to the disappearances, which occurred to me later as likely if this cosmic cloud's spawn were engaged in kidnaping the colonists—their earlier attempts would be less likely to succeed than their later, naturally. And deaths would result. Then, too, the brown snow itself, and your own sickness cannot be denied, and remain to be explained."

"Yes, but we can hardly depend upon ourselves to come up with the correct solution to such phenomena out of hand."

"It's worth consideration, though. Imagination is often the father of invention, if we can allow, as here, that projection is part of it."

"Let us agree then to this story's validity, since it seems unlikely that a new virus could come from an earthly source thus late in the game of cataloguing, and more likely that it came from space. As to the possibilities of a cosmic cloud harboring a higher form of life, that is admittedly new to me. But if these things are so, we must begin to venture preventive steps.

"We have advantages. These cloud-creatures are predisposed by their more limited senses to inductive reasoning, whereas we can use deductive reasoning more fully. We may be able to immunize ourselves. And I think we will find that projection of impulses to their cloud, if the cloud can be found in good time as is likely, may be effective. I think that both electricity and fire may be inimical to them."

John Saunders was going to add something, but stopped, his features suddenly contorted, galvanized into an alarming rictus. And then it was that I made an error that may have proved fatal, for in a moment a voice from John Saunders said, urgently, "Open the window, quickly, for heaven's sake." And I turned to do so. Fool that I was!

For in the moment that my back was turned something materialized in that hospital room, seized up a water-pitcher and knocked me senseless. Something—something, I dimly remember glimpsing from the corner of my eye before I went down, like the mummified figure of a man, head a-loll and the dried flesh of his neck twisted and pulled a-wry as if by a hangman's noose!

When I recovered consciousness John Saunders was gone. And I now realize that possession of his mind came just before his injunction about opening the window. There are forces loose in the world that must be controlled. I fear that the acute mind of my friend John Saunders will be sorely missed in time to come.

Dhoh

BY

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

"Part man, part bear—all legend," is what they said

REUBEN PIPE FEATHER was an assured young man with a brown vain face. Eighty years earlier, he would have been one of the most accomplished warriors and hunters of his tribe, and one of the most boastful. He wore movie-rodeo cowboy clothes. The orange shirt had tan collar, cuffs and pocket flaps. His dark gray pants hugged his slim saddle-bowed legs, and were tucked into high-heeled boots of glove leather. Around his neck was a cherry-red scarf, on his wrist a silver bracelet, on his forefinger a turqoise ring. He carried his wide hat in one hand so as to let the hot afternoon sun strike lights from the oiled glory of his long, straight black hair. He had the noble face of a Hiawatha and the manners of a small-time actor.

"Now we're off the Katonka reservation," he assured James Randolph as the white tourist stopped his car where a vile dirt road dwindled to a grass-grown trail. "And we're away from those ignorant blanket bucks and squaws that gloom at you and sell you fake jewelry and pottery made in Germantown. You're lucky I was home on vacation from Hollywood. Those old fools wouldn't tell you anything if they knew it, and they don't know it in the first place."

The old fools were in reality dignified middle-aged Indians, shabby in blankets and moccasins, but respectable, reserved and mannerly. Among them were Reuben Pipe Feather's own father and grandfather, and these he probably scorned above the rest. Reuben Pipe Feather had gone for two years to a little Kansas college, and thence to the film capitol to do extra and bit work in several western and historical pictures. Now he was back on the Katonka reservation with the air of a tribal hero looking for recognition and deference. At the trading post he had readily begun chatter with James Randolph, who was interested in Katonka folklore.

"You said," reminded Randolph, getting out of the car, "that here was where the old-timers say that Dhoh—the bear-witch demon—used to be reported." Randolph was

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

plump, forty-two, mustached and spectacled. He edited a small daily paper in the east, and American myths were his hobby. His two-weeks' holiday among Indian reservations would garner, he hoped, tags of stories for what might some day be a book.

"Yeah," agreed Reuben Pipe Feather, fanning his brown face with the hat. "This is free range, government-owned. The folks might graze their ponies here—but they don't." He laughed, teeth white as sugar lumps. "They're afraid of Old Dhoh. He might eat the ponies, they think. And them."

The country might be haunted, Randolph reflected as he gazed. The reservation land was mostly gently rolling prairie, with tufts of willow or cottonwood scrub, but here the rolls became hills. From lesser rises near at hand lifted more distant heights, crowned with brush and trees and cobbled with boulders.

Wild-looking, yes; and, to a superstitious imagination, baleful. "Dhoh lives here," said Randolph. "This bear-witch. What's he supposed to be?"

"He'd scare even American kids," said Reuben Pipe Feather, grinning more widely. "They say he's part man and part bear—one side like each, I guess. A couple of old granddads say they saw old Dhoh's tracks. One foot like a man, one like a bear. You know." Fluidly, Reuben Pipe Feather's free hand sketched in the air. "What do you reckon? Too much firewater, or a trick shoe to make scary marks?"

Randolph had a camera slung on a strap over his tweed-clad shoulder. He focussed it, snapped the shutter at the hills. "Nice bit of landscape," he said. "What's that sparkle in front of us—beyond the high grass next to the cottonwoods?"

"That's one of the things I mean," Reuben Pipe Feather shaded his eyes to peer. "Dhoh's bathtub. When I was a kid, one of the squaws showed me a couple of others. Dhoh's supposed to wash himself there now and then. I was scared—but plenty."

THEY walked toward the brown sparkle. It was a sort of muddy tank-like pool, like a big bathtub at that in size and shape. Nestling among grass-grown rocks, its brown surface stirred as though with a gentle simmer of heat. "There's a spring in there," said Randolph.

"Sure, sure. The old folks say the spring oils up your joints or cures your bellyache. But nobody uses it, not if Dhoh's reported around." Reuben Pipe Feather laughed again. "I wonder how that yarn started, and how fast and far it's grown." producing tobacco-sack and papers, he vindicated his Hollywood cowboy training by rolling a cigarette with one hand.

Randolph squatted and dipped fingers in the pool. It felt faintly warm, perhaps from the sun. Then he studied the scum on his fingers. It was oily, sticky. Still squatting, he peered at the overflow in the waterside grass, then rose and studied a stretch of earth beyond, damp and bare. "You say nobody comes here."

"Nobody." Reuben Pipe Feather's brown lips pursed and blew a smoke ring in the still bright air.

"But I see tracks." Randolph pointed. "Fresh, they look to be."

He walked around the edge of the pool. The damp earth held two tracks at the very brink and two more beyond, pointing away.

Behind him Randolph heard the sudden, sharp intake of his companion's breath. He glanced back. Reuben Pipe Feather's face was brown and jaunty no longer, but gray and sick. Reuben Pipe Feather's lips sagged, the cigarette fell from him. His eyes were wide.

"Will you look at that?" he whispered hoarsely, and Randolph looked. A moccasin track, but the other—

Broad, strong, flat, it looked like the impress of a great long axehead. The toes—yes, the toes had, each at its end, a slash-lean mark. Even James Randolph, who was no woodsman, knew what a bear track must look like.

"Mr. Randolph." Reuben Pipe Feather was badly frightened. "Let's get out of here."

"Why?"

"You know what those tracks are, Mr. Randolph." The young Indian was walking away.

"You said you didn't believe—"

"I do now. And I'm not going to stay. Come on." Randolph did not move, and Reuben Pipe Feather was heading for the

trail. "Then I'll foot it back to the post." And he moved faster than one would think possible in those cowboy boots.

Randolph smiled under his mustache. Undoubtedly the youngster had brought him out here to play a joke. Must have made the tracks himself and pretended. . . . But nobody, Indian or white, could have made his face grow gray like that.

Another study of the tracks. Randolph wished he knew more about animals and their feet. This might be a mockery of a bear track, achieved by a distorted, claw-fringed moccasin. Again, it might not. He focussed his camera again and snapped it.

The metallic click was answered by a deep grunt from one side, and Randolph fairly whipped up his head and stared.

No wonder he thought he had been left alone at the pool. Even with a grunt to give him direction, he looked twice before he saw the grunt-maker, squatting crumpled beside and half behind a clump of big dried weeds.

It was a lean figure, swathed in an ancient blanket of a brown that was bleached and weathered to a dead-leaf paleness. Abundant and untidy gray hair bushed over a swarthy face, from which bright eyes watched Randolph. A second grunt acknowledged Randolph's gaze.

"*Ahi*," Randolph managed an Indian greeting.

"Good afternoon," replied a deep, gentle voice. "It is hot."

"You speak American," said Randolph gratefully.

"I have learned many tongues," was the rejoinder. "Among them, the American." The crumpled figure stirred and rose. The blanket fell from chin to earth, covering an ancient leanness like a toga. "Is that what they call a camera?"

"Yes," said Randolph. "I took a picture of these tracks."

The old man came forward slowly, stiffly but not shakily. Randolph saw beneath the abundant gray hair a face that matched the toga-blanket, a face dark and Roman, with a firm mouth, great hooked nose, deep steady black eyes, a crisscross and labyrinth of aged lines and wrinkles. "Yuh," said the gentle voice, deeper still. "Dhoh's tracks. What will you do with the picture?"

"Publish it. Show it to other people. Find out what it is."

"Dhoh's tracks," repeated the ancient. From inside the blanket crept the left hand, to gesture. It was a lean and withered hand, brown and dry-seeming as a sheaf of twigs, but it had flexibility, even grace. "I heard the young fool talking. *Ahi!* He lost his doubts in the time it takes to draw one quick breath."

"You believe in Dhoh?" prompted Randolph hopefully.

A BRIEF nod of affirmation. "Yuh. Because I know. I am older than any, perhaps, of those others." The thin hand wafted a little gesture toward the reservation. Glancing that way, Randolph saw that Reuben Pipe Feather had gone out of sight around a bend of the road. "They have funny beliefs. Most of them they made up. But I know about Dhoh. American, where are you going?"

"Back to my car." Randolph pointed with his thumb. "Will you ride with me?"

"You do not want to trail Dhoh by his tracks?"

Randolph shook his head. "The damp earth ends here in the coarse grass. I'm no trailer."

"Not you. But I, I am a good trailer." The draped old leanness moved away through the rustling grass, and stooped. Another grunt. "Here are more marks. Will you come?"

Randolph felt excited, mystified. "Wait. Dhoh—isn't that a name of an evil spirit? Something half man and half bear?"

"So it has been believed." The brown face peered back. "But I am not afraid, American. Are you?"

Randolph scoffed away the notion. "Of course not, old man."

"Then come on. We will follow Dhoh's trail."

Side by side they did so. At least Randolph kept pace and tried, without success, to see what the bright old eyes kept finding among the grass. Once or twice Randolph spied a broken stem, a crushed leaf—that was all. He remembered that the old wild Indians could follow a trail across a naked rock. But maybe this old chap was joking, pretending, like Reuben Pipe Feather.

"See," said the ancient, and again his left hand moved free of the blanket-folds. "Dhoh was here."

A bald splotch of ground among the grass-tufts, full of fine dust—and in it a single track, broad and flat and fringed with claw-slashes. Randolph paused, scolding himself for feeling cold. "How did he make that mark?"

"With his naked foot."

"He doesn't wear a trick shoe?"

"American," said the old man in dignified protest, "even that young idiot tells a true track from a false one."

"Maybe it's a real bear track," offered Randolph. "Not a witch's track."

"There have been no real bears here since the Americans took the country from the Indians. I would be more surprised to see signs of a real bear than to see signs of Dhoh."

He moved ahead, with his stiff but nimble gait, "*Ahi*," he said. "Another mark. See, the claw-touch on those broad leaves. Dhoh headed into this little ravine. It will lead to where he lives among the hills."

So confidently and promptly did the old Indian take his way in the direction of the ravine that Randolph was ashamed to linger. One backward glance showed his car parked on reservation ground, far away and alone. "Come," his companion urged him.

Randolph decided to come. "Tell me about Dhoh," he asked.

"Dhoh is Dhoh. There is nothing like him."

"Apparently not," agreed Randolph, but his mind was on other bear-demons in tales he had heard. The Lapps had a bear spirit, alternately to be feared and prayed to. The Ainus, those inexplicable white savages with beards on Japan's northernmost islands, believed that they descended from a bear hero. And only Mudjekeewis, the Chippewa wind-god, dared challenge Miche Mokwa, a monster bear—that was in Hiawatha. What did the Piegans say, the tribe called Blackfeet? Bear is near kin to man. Do not eat it, or kill it without a muttered apology for killing a brother.

"But you said you knew about Dhoh," persisted Randolph. He hoped that the old Indian would not fall silent. If they did that, there was no talking with them.

The firm mouth was touched with a close smile, like the smile of a patient grandfather. "I will tell you, American. It all happened an old man's lifetime ago. In those days the Indians worshipped their own way, before the Americans forbade them."

"The Americans don't forbid now," Randolph made haste to remind. They had entered the gully between two bluffs and he had a little difficulty with his footing, for the low point had been washed by recent flows of rainwater until the stones were loose underfoot. He slipped and stumbled, but the old Indian stalked surely along. On either side of them rose boulders and thickets of brush above, shading away the sky and the sunlight. It reminded Randolph of the strange rough country into which Rip Van Winkle strolled to meet the dwarfs with their cask of enchanted liquor. "The Indians are allowed their old beliefs," elaborated Randolph. "The Indian Bureau has seen to that for more than a dozen years. Ever since Secretary Ickes and Collier—"

"*Ahi*, that is true, now. But in the meantime," and the old man spat, "the tribes have forgotten most of their old worshipways. They forgot the fasting that young men must undergo to find their friends among the animal spirits. I want to tell you about a young man, a boy, whose fast was one of the last held by his tribe."

"Do tell me," begged Randolph.

"The boy was growing into a man. His uncles and grandfathers prepared him by singing and telling him things at night. On the chosen morning he left his father's lodge and came somewhere out here." Once again the thin old hand made a flourish of indication. "He made a shelter of brush and spread his blanket and lay there. He had water in a clay pot, but no food. He must not eat or sleep or move until he heard the voice he had come to hear."

RANDOLPH remembered hearing or reading something of that old custom. A youngster waited until hunger and lonely quiet half hypnotized him into what he fancied as a vision, generally of some animal spirit. That became his secret medicine, his focus of personal worship.

"The boy stayed a long time," the quiet

voice continued. "Most fasts in those old years lasted three days or four at most. But the boy watched the sun rise and set six times. Seven times. Eight. He was afraid that he was not wanted by any spirit, but then he remembered that if such a wait happened, the waiter was destined for something big in medicine. At the ninth rise of the sun it was that the spirit of the bear—Naku-ma, came and spoke to him. The bear stood thus."

The old man stopped and drew himself up, straight and dignified. For all his leanness he suddenly put on an aspect that was ursine. He gazed solemnly at Randolph.

"The bear," continued the old Indian, "spoke to Dhoh, the boy. It called him brother and son. Naku-ma, the spirit of the bear, saw that Dhoh was weak and faint, and brought him food for them to eat together. Naku-ma said that he had waited long to try Dhoh, to find him worthy of receiving the power of the spirits, that could do almost anything and everything. Naku-ma gave the powers to the boy."

"What powers?" Randolph was a little tired. He sat down on a projecting gnarled root against one bluff that hemmed in the gully. The car, the trail, the muddy pool were out of sight and worlds away.

"Naku-ma showed him how to cure a wound by breathing on it," said the old man, standing straight and motionless. "Naku-ma showed him how to heal the sick by chewing medicine plants and breathing on the sick ones. Naku-ma showed him how to mix war paint that would turn the blows of an enemy, and gave him a power in his right hand that would strike a blow of death every time. Naku-ma whispered in his ear, and Dhoh could understand all languages. Naku-ma hugged him in his arms, and Dhoh had strength greater than the strongest warrior." Again the firm mouth smiled, close-lipped. "Why do you ask me to tell you these old things? You are an American. You laugh at me inside yourself. You do not believe."

RANDOLPH remembered his high-school reading, the essays of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America,* teeming full of wisdom and understanding. . . . "Savages we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; we think the same of theirs." And that anecdote about the colonial missionary who called the beliefs of an Indian host "fable, fiction and falsehood." To that accusation that dignified savage had returned: "My brother, it seems that your friends have not done you justice in your education; they have not well instructed you in the rules of common civility. You say that we, who understand and practice those rules, believed all your stories; why do you refuse to believe ours?" . . . Wonderful Poor Richard, well might Hume call him the first philosopher of the New World. He, Randolph, would profit by this very lesson.

"But I do believe, old man," he protested, and as he spoke he almost felt that he did believe.

"Maybe you say that because you think you must," demurred the Indian, still straight, dignified and motionless in his close-drawn blanket.

"Why must I believe if I do not want to?" demanded Randolph plausibly. "I believe, I tell you. Your words are honest. Do me the favor to think that my words are honest, too."

"Then," and a courteous duck of the head, "I can tell the rest. It it not much. Dhoh came home with those powers of which I speak, and used them to help his friends. But he had changed in some ways that frightened the Indians. He seemed to have a bear's weight and strength sometimes. When angry he would growl as a bear growls, and his teeth grew big and sharp, something like a bear's teeth. Because his people were afraid of these things, they avoided him." The gentle old voice sounded sad. "They did not trust him, even when he showed himself a great healer and a great chief in war. When the Americans came, and he called on them to fight for their lands and freedom and children, they turned from him. The Americans, they said, were men, and he, Dhoh, was not a man."

Silence. "And then?" Randolph made bold to prompt him.

"Dhoh was angry. He growled and roared like a bear. He cursed them in the name of Naku-ma. He spit on the ground and went away from them. It was then that he

changed even more than at first. One of his feet became a bear's hind paw, one of his hands became a bear's front paw. No more did he ever help men. All his powers he turned against them. It was bad, to live alone and hate his kind. But his kind had turned against him."

"Yes, that was bad," agreed Randolph diplomatically.

"The other Indians called him dangerous. Once or twice they tried to kill him, but he killed them. Killed them like beetles. *Ahi*!" The smile faded, then came back. "Well, that is all the story of Dhoh." The thin old hand made a motion as if casting away a pinch of sand. "I have finished."

"But after that?"

"After that, Dhoh has kept his own place, and men have learned to leave him alone. You are sure you believe all this?"

"I believe it," Randolph told him dutifully.

The gray-thatched head turned, peering. "I see more tracks—fresh tracks—and beyond. Look!"

He led Randolph to a great dead stub of a tree, a dozen feet high, that was still rooted strongly to the rocky floor of the gully.

"Dhoh's marks."

The rough bark was rent and torn by great talons, high and low. Randolph remembered his Ernest Thompson Seton—bears marked threes like that.

"See," said the old man, "he rubbed himself here. There are hairs."

"Let me take a picture of it," said Randolph, and did so.

"Take a picture of that, too."

The skinny hand pointed, and Randolph saw, under a rocky projection a dozen yards ahead, the black mouth of a cave or hole.

FROM that manifest den of something large and wild Randolph involuntarily started back, but his companion stumped toward it. Randolph made himself approach. "What is inside?" he whispered.

The gray head shook. "Nothing. Dhoh is not inside."

"Be careful!" warned Randolph. "You can't be sure."

"But I know," the gentle voice told him.

"Wait. Stay back. Look at the tracks." Randolph pointed to a string of them, here plainly visible in earth dampened by recent showers. Alternately the moccasin track and the taloned breadth of the bear-mark led straight to the cave and in.

"Let's go back," said Randolph, his voice a shaky hoarseness.

"Did you forget my story, American? . . . No, I left something out. When Dhoh left his people, the spirit of Naku-ma changed him more. It turned his feet so that they pointed backward on his ankles. Those tracks," and the old man pointed, "lead out, not in the cave."

"Now wait!" protested Randolph. "I've heard that story in other places, too—about a demon monster's feet being turned around. But it's a stupid impossibility. How could they be turned backward?"

"Like this."

The brown hand took hold of the blanket and lifted it a few inches. And Randolph could see the old Indian's feet.

Lean, pole-like shins came straight down to the ground, as if driving into it. Two flat projections extended backward. The blanket hiked higher. Randolph saw a moccasin, and something else. Broad, heavy, shaggy with grizzled hair, a foot like a bear's, but pointing backward.

"I am truly sorry," said the gentle voice. "But back there near the reservation line you used that camera. You took pictures of the tracks. You would have talked about it in other places. More Americans might come, many more. And the Americans have powers of their own, that might even defeat and destroy the powers given by the spirit bear Naku-ma."

Randolph tried to back away, but he felt his knees quivering, and he feared that he would stumble and fall.

"And you," he stammered. "You—are—"

"Yes, that is right." The old man dropped the blanket. He was naked, lean, brown. Up one flank, over his shoulder and arm and talon-armed paw, ran a thick tangle of course fur. He opened his mouth, and Randolph saw the light gleam on great pointed fangs.

"I am Dhoh," said Dhoh, and leaped upon him.

The Undead Die

BY E. EVERETT EVANS

There is no resignation for true members of the confraternity of the Undead

HE WAS a Jack-in-the-box. Sunset up, sunrise down. And repeat, forever and forever. He was a thing in a box in a cold deep cellar. He was a container for red wines. There was no label on him, but there were little drops of red liqueur upon his sleeping lips. He was the contents of a mahogany box, in a cellar of webs and upside-down things hooked to the ceilings. He lived in a land of dropping midnight waters and soft gray web. He was a white hand, a rouged mouth, a glass eye, a set of white teeth, and a cold heart. He was a pedestrian who walked the nights. He was a sleeper with original ideas as to hours. He was a leaf, a pelt, a flame, a wing. He was Robert Warram, dead these hundreds of years.

"Lisa."

In the cellar came the sound of a woman's name.

"Lisa."

His white hand lifted from his bosom. He put it against the lid firmly. His eyes opened whitely. He pressed upward.

The lid would not open.

"It has *always* opened." He lay back a moment, waiting.

"It *must* open," he declared. With a sudden movement of strength he pushed. The lid gave. Things fell with a loud roar in the cellar world. He was free of the coffin in an instant. He was the only moving thing, the only white thing in the crypt. And he was afraid.

He turned to Lisa's coffin.

It was covered with ash and leaf and

Heading by Boris Dolgov

bark and limb of tree. During the day a storm had arisen and the castle walls had tumbled. A mighty tree had leaned, hesitated, and fallen, driving a splintered limb of cedar through panel of coffin, through soft body, through heart. There was no sound in the cellar world. He did not move. Someone spoke her name again. But she was as dead as though a crowd of desperate men had descended with a stake and driven it into her.

He did not touch the coffin. He did not try to open the lid. He was cold and trembling and he could not see where he stood, swaying, and the night wind blew without ending.

Her dark hair flowed and trailed from the crack in the edge of the long, cellar box, and this moved and whispered in the night wind. He bent and touched reverent fingers along the soft dark length of it. One white hand protruded in delicate grace, like a small white toy lost in the netherworld, dropped in flight from some falling death.

He left her. He walked up the vast crumbled stone stair of the castle and went out into the rain. Such an old place. It had taken but a little wind to set it crashing like a structure of web and cardboard.

He sat down upon the edge of the ruin and his face was rigid and showed no expression. How many years? And the places they had traveled and how had they loved? It was not to be forgotten now or in any future time. How long ago, and on what day in what century had they met? He closed his eyes. The world rushed about him. Now there was nothing but memory.

THEY had been farm children. They had grown with the trees, and they knew the hill lands and the meadow lands. They counted sheep together and sat bathing their feet in chill streams on warm summer afternoons.

They ran along shaded paths, laughing, pelting each other with summer apples, trailing showers of blossom behind them from full hands after excursions to pick the wild flowers of the fields and the singing forests.

That was the summer of their eighteenth year. Day after day she danced by and looked at the team of oxen he drove ahead of a clean blade of plow. She tilted her elfin head, laughed, and flung a stone at him. When he did not follow, she ran, took hold of the goad, and kissed Robert Warram full upon his amazed lips.

This one day they ran, shouting, through the Large Land of the Forest, very much alive, very much mortal, very unafraid of anything in the whole of the dreaming summer mid-day world. They knew nothing of the dark and the blood and the deep-buried box. They twisted and turned and ran again yet deeper into the gloomy cathedral of trees where water crept into green secret rivulets, and echoes were softed and the song of birds was hushed.

"Ho, see what we have here!" She came to a stop in delight, and pointed. "The *old* place!"

And there was the castle, ancient and perfect as a Dead Sea apple, still unfallen after four centuries of rain and animal and time.

It was a place spoken of by grandmother tongues and grandfather tongues. It was a place of the rustling night and the fancied wraith. Sometimes people came to look at it and were never seen again, so the tales went, not a nose nor a limb nor an eye of them was ever to be found.

"But I am quite brave!" laughed Lisa.

"So am I!" cried Robert Warram. "Let's go in!"

For hours they climbed about, awed by the great statues and old, dim paintings, by wide winding stairs leading up to cloistered tower rooms, by huge furniture, and tremendous hanging draperies. They peered into vasty rooms, excited and happy over their little discoveries. Then Robert found a great stone stair that led downward, and they descended quietly, whisperingly, into the ancient cellars.

Here was wonder after new wonder. Huge storerooms filled with old armor and the arms of ancient warriors. Great carven chests filled with the rotting but still gorgeous clothing of the former lords and ladies of the castle. Gloriously beautiful, though faded, tapestries and carpets. More furniture, some broken, some merely stored.

For long they investigated the many dusty, cob-webby passageways and dark rooms. Where it was too dark to see, they

used torches made of the resinous wood which they found about the place.

In their preoccupation they forgot time; forgot hunger; forgot weariness. The unnoted minutes multiplied themselves. Finally they came to a great crypt. They could dimly make out a number of old coffins resting there and here on the dusty floor. There was a strange and musty odor here that differed from the smell of the other long-unused rooms and passages. It had a curious, foetid quality to it that caused them to stop, stand uneasily, not moving.

"Let's go back," Lisa looked behind her, trembling.

"Nonsense." Robert laughed quietly and threw an arm across her shoulders. He walked her forward into the room, their feet made soft shuffling sounds in that immense space of silence. "It is only a burial place. The tombs of the people who once lived here, I suppose."

"I don't care, I don't like it here. I want to go home now. It's late, and it's cold. The air feels different. Our folks are probably keeping supper for us by now."

"All right," he agreed. "We'll find the stone stairs and go." He led her through several halls and rooms. Slowly some of his confidence left him, he glanced back over his shoulders from time to time. His mouth grew dry, his eyes smarted.

Occasionally he held high his torch as he peered down some cross-passageway.

AT LAST he turned to her. "There's no use lying. We're lost." They gripped hands tightly, looked into each other's eyes, noting the white, strained face. "But we'll find the way, although it may take time. Believe me, Lisa, we'll get out."

She nodded in mute agreement and on they went, their flickering torches making strange patterns along the dark walls, sometimes showing fitfully some great armored figure, or an ancient tapestry with its pictured fighting men, whose faded eyes now glinted dully. Echoes gamboled about them, before, beside, behind. The air grew colder, with a peculiarly penetrant chill. The cold filtered into their heads, chests, fingers, settling in their bones, and their hearts.

"There must be a way out," he said, stopping.

"Must be a way out, a way out, out," the echoes taunted them.

"There is a way out," a voice said from somewhere in the darkness. A voice, not an echo. They whirled about, lifting high their torches. The light from the burning wood leaped and turned aside the gathering shadows. Some yards away beyond a tumbled archway, a thing of tall darkness, of shining eyes and smiling mouth, white of face, caped in somber black, was moving toward them.

"Robert!" Lisa stumbled toward him, half fell. He caught and held her in his arms. The figure continued its advance, with not a whisper of foot, as if drifting on a tide.

"Who is it?" Robert cried, waving his torch higher. "Can you help us?"

"Of course," said the voice. The man stood before them, his thin face luminous in the torchlight, which also glinted from jewels on shirt front and hands. His eyes were fixed steadily upon them. "If you will but follow, I shall lead you out."

"We were lost," Lisa whispered, hesitantly.

"Yes," the man answered, "I *know.*"

"We hope we were not trespassing. Was it all right to come?"

"Yes, it was all right. Quite all right. Come!" He turned and strode away.

"What shall we do?" Lisa asked in a whisper.

"What *can* we do?" Robert looked at her, perplexed. "We want to get out, don't we? Come along."

WITHOUT a torch, the man was confidently leading them where they had before found only echoes, faint slitherings, unknown fears. Through the ancient cellars, across heaps of ancient rubble, he led. "Tired," murmured Robert after a bit. "So tired, Lisa." He put up a hand to his trembling eyelids. "Tired. Tired."

"What?" her faint voice floated around, around in the shadows. He saw her draw ahead, closer to the strange man. "Lisa, don't run. Come back with me, dear. Don't run away." He was walking in a kind of nightmare sleep. His feet were heavy, as though he was walking through thick, clayey

mud. Now and again he saw the coal-fire eyes of the man, as he turned to stare at him. He saw Lisa moving as in a drift of vapor.

"Can't walk faster," Robert protested, drowsily. He stopped, heard the footsteps dwindling off into a dark emptiness. "Lisa!" No answer. "Lisa!" He was held in a stupor, reasonless. He heard his heart timing away the minutes in his head, in his wrists. Lisa was gone, his tired eyes could see her nowhere.

The scream wakened him where he stood.

He leaped forward, through a half-fallen doorway. Confronting him was the dark man, Lisa held tightly, his head bent over her. As Robert reached out toward them, he sensed a difference, a lifelessness about her.

Robert jumped at the man's back. He clawed to pull him away from the girl's body. Crying out, the man dropped Lisa. He swung about. "So, you want it too, do you? Well, so much the better! Tonight I'll feed well, indeed!"

He struck Robert, a great blow that sent the boy to his knees. As he struggled to his feet, Robert felt a grip about his throat, a grip as of the talons of a great bird. Blows buffeted him about the head and body. He fought back as best he could, got in a few blows. Then another great cuff beside the head sent him reeling to the stone floor. The man flung himself upon the youth. That wild, pale face was coming nearer, and Robert saw that it was flecked with blood, that the lips were pulled back to expose long, white, moving teeth.

The grip about his throat tightened. His head rocked from side to side with the heavy slaps of that bony hand. Robert surged upward, his knee in the other's groin. The dark man groaned. They rolled about the floor, and again the elder was on top. The cold white face moved downward, closer. The cold breath struck at Robert like an icy gale. His head dizzied with the blood smell, the stench of death in the exhalations of the strange man. There was one last movement, one wrenching blow, and the sharp bite of pointed teeth into Warram's neck. After that . . . darkness.

Much, much later, some subtle sixth sense led Robert Warram to open his eyes widely. It was black, blacker than he had ever known. "Am I dead, then?" He moved his hands, and felt a hard substance on either side, like a wall. His fingers explored further, and their questing showed he was confined in some sort of a box. There was an over-powering fetor of dead earth about him.

"I'm buried alive!" It was a silent scream, done with heart and soul and mind. He beat upward with frantic fists. To his surprise, the lid of the box above him moved upward easily. By the dim twilight he saw that he was in a coffin, whose top was not fastened, except for hinges at one side.

"Lisa."

Quickly he sat erect, then sprang out, looking wildly about. He saw the top of another coffin opening. He hurried toward it, for the hand he had seen protruding was that of a woman.

It was Lisa. But such a different Lisa. This was a woman touched with age, white-faced, body half-emaciated.

How long had they lain in those coffins? Suddenly, he held out his own hands. They were little more than claws. He felt of his face; it was, he could tell, creased and leathery.

Lisa was looking wildly about. "Oh, God," she cried. "This taste of death in my mouth; this smell of decay about me." She noticed her hands, held them unbelievingly before her eyes, then felt of her face. She groaned in agony. Robert called her name.

She saw him then. A little half-smile of recognition lighted her face. Yet still puzzled. She pushed herself into a sitting position, then to her feet, stepped from her casket. Half-running, she threw herself into his arms. Her lips sought his. Her arms went around him, half in protection, half seeking protection and solace.

They were interrupted by a sound behind them. They turned. The dark man stood there, quizzically smiling at them. "Imagine, love, here, in this place, between two such as you now are!"

"How long have we been here? What are we now?" Questions asked simultaneously, their arms still entwined about each other.

"It is merely the next night," he replied

quietly. "And as for what you are—you are now the Walking Dead. You will walk the night, you will desire blood, you will live here with me and obey me. By placing your blood-drained bodies at once in the earth-filled coffins where you remained asleep during the day, I have made you true members of the confraternity of the Undead."

Lisa gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. Robert tightened his hold on her as she shivered in his arm.

Robert half-uttered an oath, and stepped forward. He was stopped by an imperious gesture from the strange man. A subtle giddiness gripped him. Suddenly Warram knew he could not advance, unless the Master allowed it.

"You have no chance against me," the elder said. "I have powers of which you do not dream. Behave yourselves, obey my commands, and I shall teach you many secrets, give you many such powers."

"Please, let us go home. Our friends and families will be looking for us. Let us go, please!"

The man merely shrugged. "Escape is not that easy," he said. "You are what you are—and always shall be. Now, come along." He strode off into the darkness. They could but follow him. Amazed, they found they could now see in the dark.

As the shrouded figure ahead of them climbed the great stone stair, they saw a tenuous change; in place of the climbing figure of a man, a great bat was seen winging its way up the well of the stair.

Emerging upon the main floor of the castle, the bat fluttered in the air before them. Into their minds came knowledge. Means of mentally controlling the structure of their very body cells; methods by which they, too, could change their physical form as he had done.

Soon they, too, fluttered in the dim, dust-moted room—small, dark and winged.

At a silent wordless command, the three figures flew away, out of a window embrasure, into and through the dense blackness of the Big Wood. They passed over their former homes, but could not stop. Over moon-drenched fields and rivers and across sleeping towns. They came to a remote cottage miles away.

A dim light shone fitfully through one small open window, the remnant of a hearth-fire. It cast a ruddy glow about the interior. There was a foreboding, perhaps a prophetic color to its dying light. Through the open window the three hovering, fluttering figures saw several silent forms on the straw pallets. The house was slumbering and peaceful.

"Come!"

The two newly-fledged ones fluttered away. "No, ah, no!"

"Come!" It was imperative, commanding. Robert and Lisa tried again to resist; they started to fly away, but a force, cruel and ruthless, changed their wills to weakness; they fluttered back to and through the window. Into that peaceful little cottage . . . and the dreadful thing that was done there.

All during their return through the night sky to the old castle, they felt the laughter of the Master. "Now you are mine. Now there is no escape."

IN THE months that followed, the former Lord of Hensig, as they now knew him to be, taught them the long-forgotten laws and lore of the Undead; the ways of vampirism, lycanthropy; much of witchcraft and poltergeistry. Mischievous tricks to bring dismay and discomfort to humans. Evil vices to cause them horror, pain and death. These ancient powers of the Forces of Darkness at first disgusted the two newly-made lamia. "We won't!" the two stubbornly declared. But under the Master's *compulsion* they usually did. And as the nights sped on swift bat-wings, the vices became demanding, inexorable *must*-habits.

But one thing the dark man could not change in one single degree. Their love for each other. Even the knowledge of what manner of *things* they had become could not touch that peace and warmth between them.

The blood-lust that claimed them was fulfilled as quickly as possible upon each awakening, that they might have time to wander together in the fields that their earthly heritage made their sole avenue to peace.

There they gloried in the rich fruits of the soil; hunted the wild flowers they

loved, stood upon high hills looking down upon the moonlit seas of grain.

On some of the nights the small creatures of the moonlight and the moist dells and hidden glades, of tree-home and pond-home, of burrow and nest, would run, unseen, alongside the man and the woman. There was unheard laughter and ridicule. But as the nights passed the laughter grew quiet in the presence of these two who walked or sat always together, who touched each other, who held hands or embraced, who talked much in quiet tones of their old, happy life. Love was a new thing to these creatures of the night, and the ridicule changed to wonder. On nights when no moon stood in the sky, the coming of these two was like an arisen light. Finally they all wandered together, the small rustling creatures no longer invisible, running, laughing, playing with Robert and Lisa in true friendship.

The two youngsters learned much from these other *creatures* who thus found them acceptable in their communion. From gnomes, elves, sprites, trolls and witches, from naiads and dryads, from any and every kind of half-life being they sought and obtained all manner of information to increase their powers.

They learned more of the telepathy by which they had so often received communications from the Master. They were taught how to become a bright, blue flame, that hovered about some patriarchal tree, or fled, dancing, through the deeps of the great forest or across the moon-flecked meadows. Or how to change into brightly colored leaves that played and skittered before the wind.

And into shadows that floated lightly on the surface of pond and stream. Often they transmogrified themselves into great gray wolves, the moonlight through the wind-danced leaves dappling their silvery coats into a sheen of beauty.

Yes, much they learned in the long, uncounted nights that followed their brutal initiation into the ranks of the Undead. Much, indeed, the Lord of Hensig himself took a perverse delight in teaching them, all the evil which he, himself, practiced with such grim and vicious delight.

Three things now held Robert Warram. First, naturally, his great love for his beloved Lisa . . . the terrible need for warm, fresh blood . . . his ever-mounting hatred of the Master.

The blood-call they found could be partially assuaged with the blood from animals. Not too often, now, were they forced to feed from human throats.

To the third matter, that gnawing hatred of him who had taken from them their human status, Robert Warram daily rededicated himself. Someday, somehow, he would settle that account!

ONE beautiful night in early autumn, Robert and Lisa were walking hand in hand through the fields of rich, ripened grain. Entranced, they stood in the midst of the fields. They tasted the sweetness of each other's lips. Lisa wore a diadem of field-flowers, which Robert had plucked and woven for her.

As they so often did, they prayed. "Oh, great Father of the Earth, rid us of this intolerable burden. Make us again the mortal children we once were. Give us back our humanity!"

Suddenly they felt an immense and mind-shaking *Presence* near them. It brought them apart in an instant. Peer about as they would, every newly-developed sense alert, they saw nothing. But those heightened sensibilities told them that something great and powerful was nearby.

Delicately, probing fingers of thought turned every page of knowledge and memory within their minds, scanning every line and word. There grew bewilderment in the mind of this Seeker.

Soundlessly, words formed deep in their minds. "What manner of creatures *are* you?" it demanded. "Vampires, I can see. But there is a powerful undercurrent of *humanness* that I never before encountered in one of your vile kind. I read 'love' in your minds, and what do vampires know of love. And I read, too, your delight in the good earth, and the ripening grains and fruits which the soil produces. Who and what are you?"

The two received the distinct impression that they were in the presence of the mighty

Earth Elemental. One of those unbelievably ancient and powerful entities who rule all the vast domain of material things. In silence and respect they sank to their knees.

Their linked thoughts answered humbly. "Oh, great Father Earth, we are two children of the soil who were made into that which we now are. Before our change we were to have been wed. We still love as deeply as then. Oh, mighty Spirit, can you aid us to regain our former lives? Can you take from us this terrible curse?"

They perceived sadness in the reply. "No, not even *I* can bring back the mortality which you have lost." There was silence while Robert, at least, felt a further probing in his mind. Then, "I see and approve the hatred which you feel for that vile Lord of Hensig who made you the creatures you now are. And I can help you to attain the revenge you desire. For I shall teach you the control of forces which, when you have mastered their use, will enable you to mete out to him the punishment he so justly deserves."

As one wave follows another along the seashore, so knowledge poured wave on wave into Warram's receptive mind. He learned of those vast fields of force which are everywhere present throughout the universe.

Of the methods by which they may be mentally controlled by one who knows the laws which govern them. Of ways in which they could be utilized to do that which he desired done. Of ways to strengthen his own mind and use all its innate powers.

"Just the knowledge of the forces is not enough," the Elemental warned him. "Study and practice in your control and knowledge of them, gaining strength and facility by so doing. You will not immediately be strong enough to do that which you so earnestly desire to accomplish. For this Master of yours also has great powers, which will not readily be overcome. Seek not that contest too soon, lest you suffer defeat and failure."

They knew complete withdrawal of the mighty Presence from them. The night was silent, hushed. The moon sank among the distant hills.

THROUGH the cold winter that followed, Robert Warram practiced the handling of his vast new fields of knowledge. He learned the art of kinetic control; of dirigible forces. He learned how to enclose himself and Lisa in impenetrable fields of immaterial yet ultimately rigid bands and shields of pure force.

The following spring it happened. The three were enroute to a distant farmhouse for the night's feeding. They passed over a meadow in which a flock of sheep were grazing.

"Let us feed from these," Lisa said, and Robert started to fly down with her. Instantly they felt the *compulsion* of Hensig. "You feed with me, tonight."

Robert, now on the ground, changed to human form. His feet planted apart, his jaw set and tense, he hurled a mental bolt at the hated Master. "We feed when and where we please."

Down dropped the elder, also assuming human form. "You think to contradict and defy me, the Master? We shall see who wields the greater powers."

He, too, as he spoke, countered with a constricting mental compulsion, which Warram blocked from entering his mind, denying it. The youth, using the powers taught him by the Earth Elemental, threw about the form of his hated enemy a force-field, which he was fast tightening into an unforcible sphere. Almost, but not quite.

Hensig wasted precious seconds trying to pierce Robert's mind-block, to impose his will upon the younger man. Quickly discovering that he could not do so, he changed his tactics. His body, too, stiffened as he drew upon his reserves of strength and the strange powers he possessed, to throw off or to break through that field of force which was about him.

This was a strange, weird struggle, for these forces and powers which they were activating were not things palpable to sight. There were no tongues of flame; no visible *material* bands or bonds or weapons. Merely that silent but deadly war of mental powers. Wielding strange and incomprehensible forces. Yet space itself was strained; the grasses of the field laid flat; the mighty trees bent to the earth. Warram's face and body grew more tense as he threw every iota of his splendid strength and new-learned aptitudes into the constriction of his enclosing field, coalescing it into ever-smaller loci of permissible space.

And as silent, strained moment after moment passed, Robert smiled thinly. He felt the sudden access of fear that came to Hen-

sig. Warram's strength grew. Little by little he felt the other's defenses weaken, by steady degrees he intensified his own offensive. More and more of that reserve of youthful enthusiasm and vitality he brought up from the depths of his conscious and sub-conscious mastery. Finally, with a keening, despairing cry, the last trace of Hensig's defenses collapsed. The Master fell!

Instantly, then, Warram shrank his field still further. All his mental strength and hard-won knowledge sùstained the attack. He *willed* that the very *being* of this other should have no permissible place in the universe.

At once the constricted form of his adversary stiffened. His life, his very consciousness, his ego, his eternal spirit were gone; vanished forever from every plane of existence.

Swiftly, then, Robert summoned the scavenger beasts and birds and insects to the feast. Quickly gathered claw and fang, beak and mandible. When the morning sun should look down upon that meadow it would see only bare bones, broken and chewed beyond all recognition.

The battle ended, and that done which had to be done, Robert sank to the ground exhausted. But Lisa, who had hovered nearby, cried to him to hasten. Dawn was about to break, and they were miles from the haven of their coffins.

Warram arose. They winged frantically back toward the ancient castle. Through the window embrasure and great halls, down the well of the great stone stair they plummeted. Into their coffins, whose lids were hurriedly shut just as the sun flashed its first rays across the distant horizon.

Nights grew into long years. Robert and Lisa slept through unnumbered days, lived with what joy they could during the long nights. Lisa's name was the first thing on his lips when he awakened. The years, then, and the storm, the crashing of the tree, the sundering of coffin, flesh and heart.

WITH a gesture of realization of the futility of such rememberings, Robert Warram at last arose. He returned to the crypt, and stood thinking deeply for a moment. Then he moved Lisa's coffin closer

beside his own, the open lids facing each other.

He did some carpentering within the cover of his own casket, then lashed heavy weights on the outside of the propped-up lid.

Looking at his work, a faint suggestion of hope appeared in his eyes, then he smiled gently. "It is said to cleanse," he murmured. "It is at least worth a trial."

He busied himself for some time, gathering great piles of dry wood. This he arranged around, inside and above Lisa's bier, and around his own as well. One of her arms he crossed above her breast, the other he extended over the rim of her coffin, toward his own.

One last lingering look and kiss he gave the peaceful face of his beloved, then crept into his own box. Over his legs and the lower part of his body he strewed more of the resinous wood. Reaching down outside his coffin, he ignited the wood, then lay back, and with his left hand groped for the hand of his Lisa.

In the darkness there was the sound of a great wind rising. The distant, small sound of water dripping. The rustle of leathern wing from the rafters. The patter of tiny rodent feet.

The rising moon, creeping step by slow step down the great stone stair, hesitated, then trembled and illumined the two close-huddled coffins.

Slowly, redly, the light in the ancient crypt was augmented by the mounting flames. As the combined light shone against the sharp-pointed cedar stake which he had affixed to the inside of the casket lid, Robert Warram smiled. Softly he pressed the hand of his Lisa, lovingly he breathed her name.

Then calmly he reached up with his right hand and snapped away the prop which had been holding open his coffin's weighted lid.

There was the sound as of a great door slammed shut.

The night wind blew the scent of wild, sweet spring flowers through the ruin.

The Eyrie

THE VOTERS GET CURIOUS

EVERY now and then, and particularly since our March, 1948 Anniversary number we get letters from readers who say something like: "Look, you ask us to vote on stories—how about telling us the results?"

As you know we print a Readers' Vote in each and every issue of WEIRD TALES (barring a forgetful printer) and we collect them carefully and look them over along with your letters and cards. But we've always looked upon the conclusions as sort of our concern and worry, to be acted upon in future numbers of WEIRD. Too, although these responses per issue run into the hundreds our readers are in the many thousands so at best the vote, and letter returns, represent merely a sampling of opinion. Also, we don't care for the idea, for our authors' sakes, of running a *public* sweepstakes on their popularity. As it is, we follow your likes and dislikes with a peculiar (but discreet!) faithfulness. In other words, if author Joe Smith *never* gets a kind word said about his stories by you readers his name rather suddenly is found missing on the contents page. But Smith may be a dandy detective story writer and what is the use of humiliating him by advertising: "Look, not a single vote for you on the last issue!"

However, as far as the 25th Anniversary Issue goes, you have shouted us down. And the results you've asked for show that the overwhelming favorite in that issue, from your votes, letters and communications to this office, was "The Coming of M. Alkerhaus," by Allison V. Harding. The least popular story? We really don't know. Too many of you were kind to tell us that all the yarns were good!

As for issue-in, issue-out favorites, well, these names come to mind in no particular order, but fresh from a new perusal of our vote and letter comment collection of the last year or so: August Derleth, Seabury Quinn, Bradbury, Bloch, Harding, Grendon, Hamilton, Wellman . . . we could lengthen the list considerably but those names seem to come to your minds first and to ours now.

READERS' VOTE

THE TSANTA IN THE PARLOR	ABREACTION
TWILIGHT OF THE GODS	CROATAN
ISLE OF WOMEN	DHOH
WHAT BECKONING GHOST?	THE UNDEAD DIE

Here's a list of eight stories in this issue. Won't you let us know which three you consider the best? Just place the numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively against your three favorite tales—then clip it out and send it to us.

WEIRD TALES

9 Rockefeller Plaza New York City 20, N. Y.

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a nonprofit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

Not For General Distribution

Sincere men and women, in search of the truth —those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe **J. M. K.**

The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

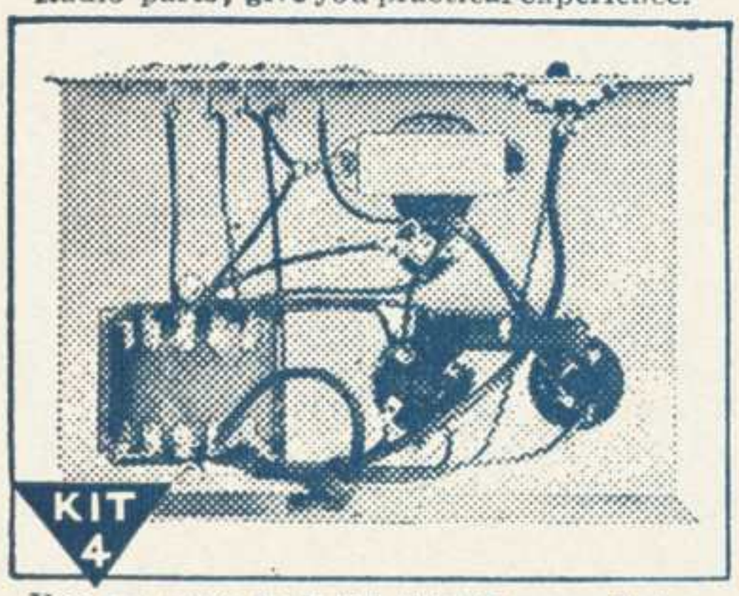
I Will Show You How to Learn RADIO by Practicing in Spare Time

I Send You Big Kits of Radio Parts

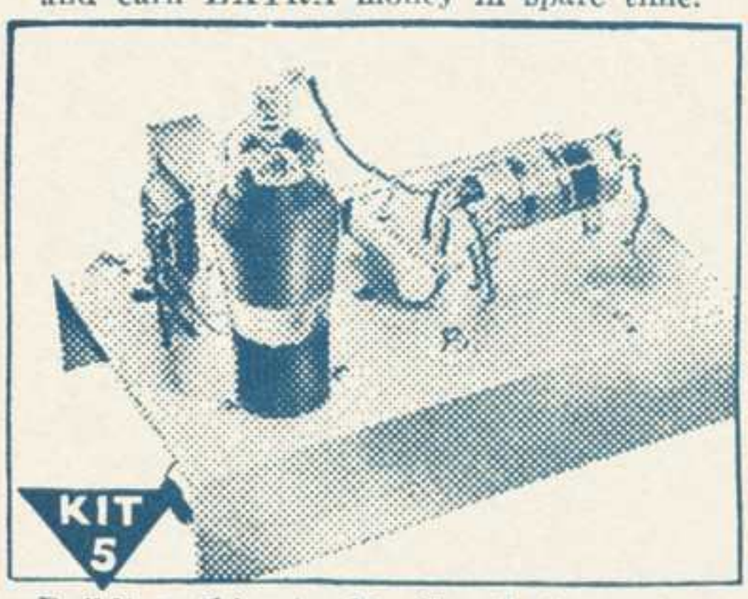
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.

Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.

You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.

You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

KNOW RADIO—*Win Success*

I Will Train You at Home—SAMPLE LESSON FREE

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in RADIO—Television, Electronics," both **FREE.** See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with BIG KITS OF PARTS I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY manuals that show how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even *greater* opportunities as Television, FM, and Electronic devices become available to the public! Send for FREE books now!

Find Out What NRI Can Do For You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my FREE 64-page book. Read the details about my Course; letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal. **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8FM, National Radio Institute, *Pioneer Home Study Radio School*, Washington 9, D. C.**

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National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

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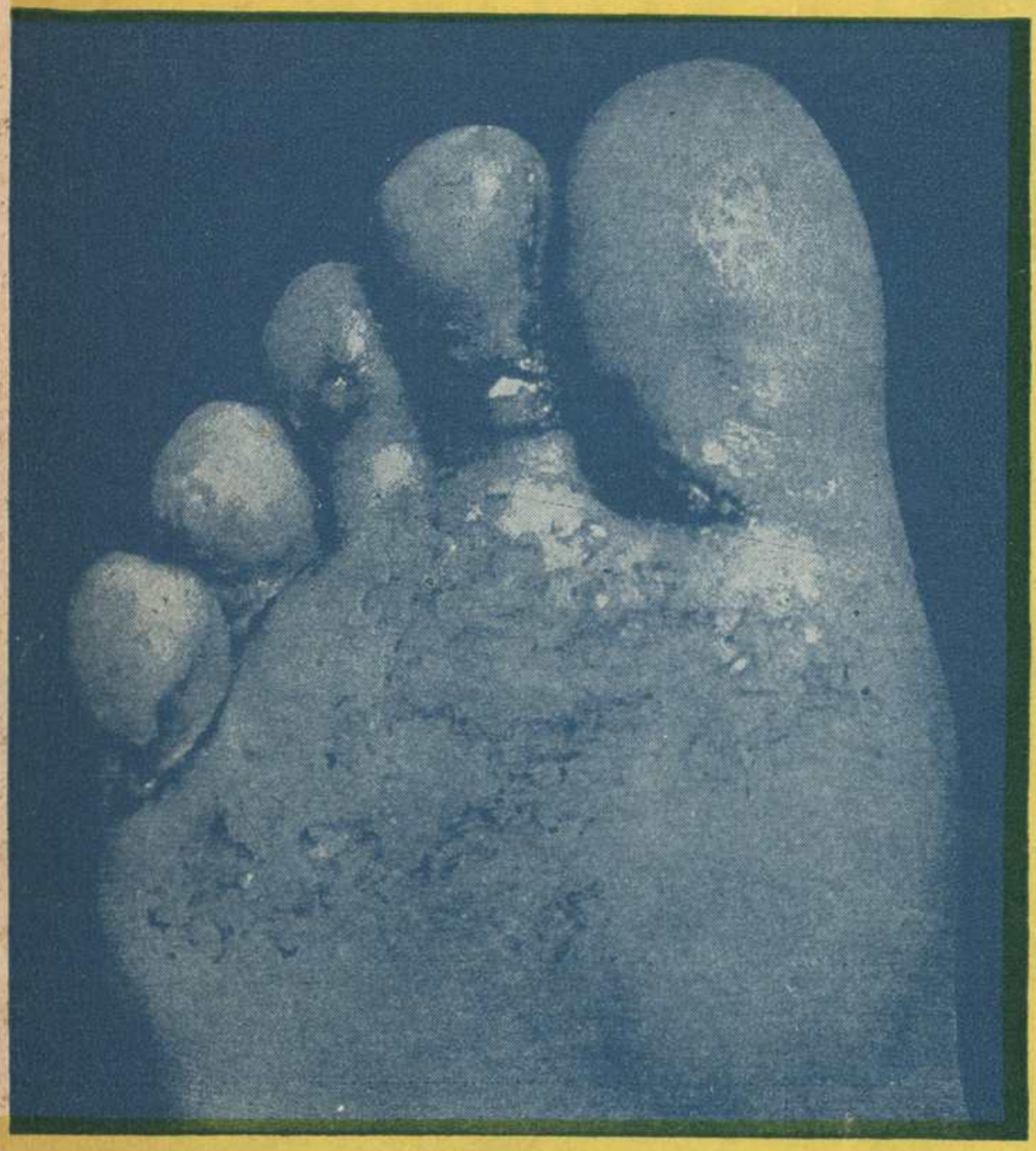
Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

FOOT ITCH
ATHLETE'S FOOT



PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED
Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

DISEASE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD

The cause of the disease is not a germ as so many people think, but a vegetable growth that becomes buried beneath the outer tissues of the skin.

To obtain relief the medicine to be used should first gently dissolve or remove the outer skin and then kill the vegetable growth.

This growth is so hard to kill that a test shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy it; however, laboratory tests also show that H. F. will kill it upon contact in 15 seconds.

DOUBLE ACTION NEEDED

Recently H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's Foot. It both gently dissolves the skin and then kills the vegetable growth upon contact. Both actions are necessary for prompt relief.

H. F. is a liquid that doesn't stain. You just paint the infected parts nightly before going to bed. Often the terrible itching is relieved at once.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. N. F.
823 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....