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WEIRD TALES

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Weird Tales

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A Strange Tale of the Future

By SEABURY QUINN

Robert E. Howard

Edmond Hamilton

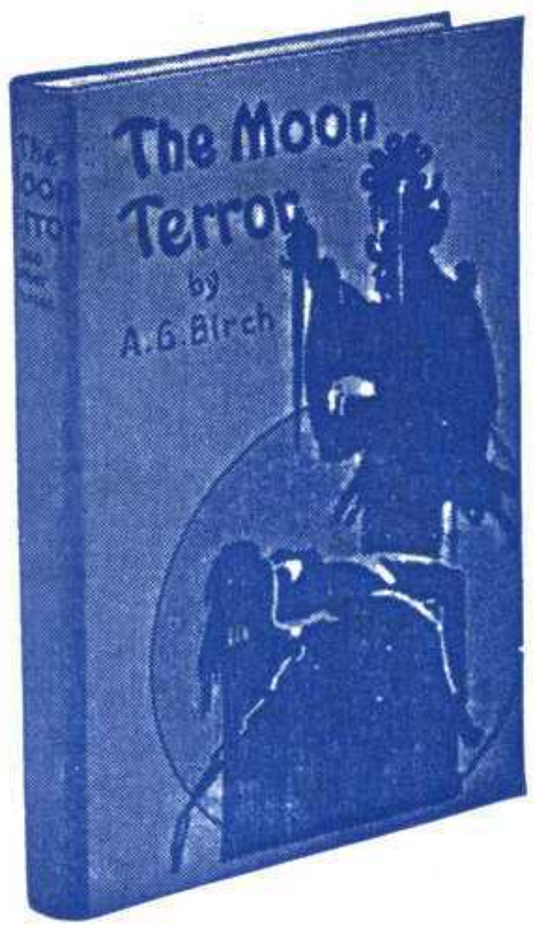
Jack Williamson

Henry Kuttner

The No. 1 Magazine of BIZARRE and UNUSUAL Stories

The Phantom of the Ether

The first warning of the stupendous cataclysm that befell the earth in the fourth decade of the Twentieth Century was recorded simultaneously in several parts of America. At twelve minutes past 3 o'clock a. m., during a lull in the night's aerial business, several of the larger stations of the Western hemisphere began picking up strange signals out of the ether. They were faint and ghostly, as if coming from a vast distance. As far as anyone could learn, the signals originated nowhere upon the earth. *It was as if some phantom were whispering through the ether in the language of another planet.*



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"I am the dictator of human destiny. Through control of the earth's internal forces I am master of every existing thing. I can blot out all life—destroy the globe itself. It is my intention to abolish all present governments and make myself emperor of the earth.

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"As a preliminary to the establishment of my sole rule throughout the world, the following demands must be complied with:

"First: All standing armies shall be disbanded, and every implement of warfare, of whatsoever nature, destroyed.

"Second: All war vessels shall be assembled—those of the Atlantic fleets midway between New York and Gibraltar, those of the Pacific fleets midway between San Francisco and Honolulu—and sunk.

"Third: One-half of all the monetary gold supply of the world shall be collected and turned over to my agents at places to be announced later.

"Fourth: At noon on the third day after the foregoing demands have been complied with all existing governments shall resign and surrender their powers to my agents, who will be on hand to receive them.

"In my next communication I will fix the date for the fulfillment of these demands.

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"KWO"

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But ere the key-stane she could make,
The fient a tail she had to shake!
For Nannie, far before the rest,
Hard upon noble Maggie prest,
And flew at Tam wi' furious ettle.

—Burns: *Tam o' Shanter.*

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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"The titan hand swept upward, carrying Elak and Solonola."

Thunder in the Dawn

By HENRY KUTTNER

A story to stir the pulses—a tale of warlock and wizard and valiant men of might in the far-off olden time—a gripping tale of Elak of Atlantis

1. *Magic of the Druid*

THE tavern was ill-lighted and cloudy with smoke. Raucous oaths and no less rough laughter made the place a bedlam. From the open door a cold wind blew strongly, salt-scented from the sea that lapped restlessly against the wharves of Poseidonia. A small, fat man sitting alone in a booth was muttering to himself as he drank deeply of the wine the innkeeper had placed before him, and Lycon's quick, furtive glances searched the room, missing no detail.

For Lycon was a little frightened, and this prevented him from getting drunk as quickly as usual. His tall friend and fellow adventurer, Elak, was hours overdue from a clandestine visit to a lady of noble blood, the wife of a duke of Atlantis. This alone might not have troubled Lycon, but he was remembering certain curious events of the past fortnight—an inexplicable feeling of being trailed, and an encounter with masked soldiers in the forest beyond Poseidonia. Elak's dexterity with his rapier had saved them both, and, later, he had attributed the attack to the soldiers of Granicor, the Atlantean duke. Lycon was not so sure. Their opponents had not been the swarthy, sinewy seamen of Poseidonia—they had been yellow-haired, fair-skinned giants such as were native to the northern shores of Atlantis. And for many moons Atlantis had been looking northward with apprehensive eyes.

The island continent is, roughly, heart-shaped, split down the middle by a waterway which runs from a huge bay or inland sea at the north down to a lake nearly at the southern extremity, thirty miles from the seacoast city of Poseidonia. For as long as men could remember the northern shores had been harried by red-bearded giants whose long black galleys had swept down from the frozen lands beyond the ocean. Dragon ships they were called, and those who manned them were Vikings—sea-pirates, plunderers who left ruin and desolation wherever they beached their craft. Lately rumors had spread of a great influx of these Northmen—and in taverns and by campfires men met and boasted and sharpened their blades.

There were two men in the brawling clamor of the inn who had attracted Lycon's intent gaze—one, a gross, ugly figure clad in a shapeless brown robe, the traditional garb of the Druid priests. Beneath an immense bald head was a hairless, toad-like face glistening with sweat. These Druids, it was said, wielded immense power secretly, and Lycon habitually distrusted priests of any order.

Beside the Druid, Lycon watched a bearded giant whose skin showed traces of being darkened artificially, and whose hair was probably dyed, as it showed blue in the lamps' glow. Casually the small adventurer touched the hilt of his sword. Somewhat reassured by the feel of its smooth metal, he banged his cup on the table and yelled for more wine.

"What watery swill is this?" he asked the innkeeper, a wizened oldster in a liquor-stained tunic. "It's fit for babes and women. Bring me something a man can drink, or—or——"

On the verge of uttering a grandiloquent threat Lycon subsided, muttering softly. "Gods!" he observed to himself as the innkeeper moved away, "what's got into me? These past weeks have made me a coward. I'll be jumping at shadows soon. Where in the Nine Hells is Elak?"

He paused to throw a gold piece on the table and to lift a replenished cup to his lips. That was but the first of many cups, and presently Lycon's apprehension and worry had crystallized into belligerency. The bearded giant was watching him, he saw.

Lycon drained his cup, set it down with a crash—and sprang to his feet, overturning the table. Dark faces were turned to him; wary eyes gleamed in the lamplight.

FOR all his fatness Lycon was agile. He leaped over the table and headed for the giant, who had not moved, save to set down his liquor.

Lycon was, by this time, very drunk indeed. He paused to drag his sword from its scabbard, but unfortunately it stuck,

marring the impressiveness of the gesture. Nevertheless Lycon persisted, and pulled out the weapon at last. He flourished it beneath the other's nose.

"Am I a dog?" he demanded, glaring malevolently at the giant, who shrugged.

"You should know," he said gruffly. "Go away before I slice off your ears with that toy."

Lycon gasped inarticulately. Speech returned with a rush.

"Misbegotten spawn of a worm!" he snarled. "Unsheathe your sword! I'll have your heart out for this——"

The blackbeard cast a swift glance around. He did not look frightened, but, oddly, annoyed, as though Lycon had interrupted some important project of his own. Yet he stood erect, and his blade came out flashing. The innkeeper hurried up, clucking his annoyance. In one of his hands was a bungstarter, and watching his chance he brought this down toward Lycon's head.

From the corner of his eye the little man saw the movement. He ducked, whirled, felt his shoulder go numb beneath the blow. The giant's sword swept out at his unprotected throat.

Something hit Lycon, sent him sprawling back, while razor-sharp steel raked his chest. He fought frantically to regain his footing. He came upright with his back to the wall, sword in hand—and stood staring.

Elak had at last arrived. It was his blow that had hurled Lycon from the path of the giant's steel, and now the lean, wolf-faced adventurer's rapier was engaging the blackbeard's weapon in a dazzling flash and shimmer of clanging metal, while Elak's laughter brought fear to his opponent's eyes. The innkeeper crouched near by, the bungstarter gripped in his hand, and swiftly Lycon caught up a heavy flagon and crashed it down on the man's head. He fell, blood spurting, and Lycon turned again to watch the battle.

The blackbeard was being forced back by the rapidity of Elak's onslaught. Few could stand successfully against the electric speed with which the adventurer wielded his rapier; already the giant was bleeding from a long cut along the forehead. He cried, "Wait! Wait, Elak——"

And his sword came down, leaving his throat unprotected.

But Elak also lowered his rapier. His wolfish face cracked in an ironic grin.

"Had enough?" he taunted. "By Ishtar, but you've little courage for your size."

The giant fumbled with the fastenings of his tunic. Abruptly he brought out something thin and dark and writhing coiled about his arm. He flung it at Elak.

The rapier screamed through the air, but missed its mark. Elak sprang aside just in time; the dark thing shot past him and arched up to avoid the swinging cut of Lycon's sword. For a brief moment it hung in empty air, while the silence of stupefaction stilled the tavern's clamor.

It was a serpent—but a winged serpent! A snake, with two webbed, membranous wings sprouting from its body. Beady eyes glittered in the triangular head as the monster hung aloft. Then down it came, swift as an arrow's flight.

Chairs and tables crashed over, and the thunder of frantic feet sounded. Lycon's thrust almost spitted Elak. The winged snake, unhurt, flashed away, but its fangs had grazed Elak's shoulder. The brown leather of his tunic darkened swiftly, while a stench of foul corruption was strong in his nostrils.

"Bel!" he ground out. "I can't——"

Suddenly a bulky figure loomed before him—the Druid, huge arms lifted, shielding the adventurer with his own body. Elak made to thrust him aside. Then, staring, he paused.

From the upthrust hands of the Druid a pale flame was rising, twin fires that burned fiercely, dwarfing the yellow glow of the lamps. Incredibly the flames swelled and grew and abruptly took flight. The winged serpent twisted in midair, its wings whirring. But inexorably the flames raced down upon it.

They spread out lambent fingers, interlacing, till around the monster revolved a sphere of silently glowing fire. The serpent was hidden from view by a globe of flame.

And it swiftly diminished, shrank to a tiny glowing point—and vanished. Where flame and serpent had been was nothing. A gray dust filtered slowly to the rough planks of the floor. . . .

2. Northmen in Cyrena

"SO MAY all traitors die!" the Druid said harshly.

He was staring at an outsprawled giant figure that lay broken across a splintered table, a man whose black-bearded, swarthy face was upturned to the lamplight. On his brow a circle of reddened skin was burned and blistered, and blood bubbled in his throat.

Before either Lycon or Elak could move, the Druid had bent above the dying man, gripping his hair with rough fingers.

"Who sent you?" he snarled, his toad-like face aglisten with sweat. "Tell me, you dog—or I'll——"

"Mercy!" the wretch gasped, blood gushing from his mouth.

"I'll give you such mercy as will send your soul screaming down the Nine Hells! Who sent you? Tell these men!"

The man croaked, "Elf! He——"

Callously the Druid turned away. A frown creased Elak's brow as he saw the fear-glazed eyes roll up in death. "Elf?" he repeated. "I know that name."

"You should," the Druid growled. "Perhaps you know mine, then—Dalan. Come on, we've no time to talk. The guards will be here in a moment."

Lycon hesitated, shrank back. But Elak gripped his arm and urged him in the wake of the Druid.

"We can trust him," he whispered. "I've heard tales of this Dalan. And I think——" There was a wry smile on Elak's lean face. "I think we'll be safer with him than anywhere else."

A wan moon hung low over Atlantis. Keeping in the shadows, the three cautiously made their way along the waterfront. Once they shrank back into a doorway while a troop of guards clattered past. And at last they came to a low hut into which Dalan ushered them, barring the door carefully before he turned to take a lantern from a peg on the wall.

Even then he paused to lift a trap-door in the floor before setting the lantern on the rough table in the center of the bare, gloomy room. "In case of surprize," he explained; "though I think we're safe enough here."

"In Bel's name, what's this all about?" Lycon demanded. The drink was wearing off, and he was trembling a little with reaction. Gratefully he sank down in a chair the Druid indicated. "Did you kill that bearded swine? Winged snakes—magic fires—haven't you anything to drink in this cavern?"

"You'll need a clear head for what I'm going to tell you," Dalan said. "There's magic in it, yes, or at least a science you can't understand. I slew that traitorous dog with a power we Druids have had for ages—a power over fire. And thus I slew Elf's messenger."

"The snake? Who is this—Elf?"

Dalan sent a somber glance toward Elak, whose face was grim and cold. He asked, "This man—does he know nothing? Have you told him of Cyrena?"

Elak shook his head. "Tell him, Dalan."

"Cyrena? The northermost kingdom of Atlantis?" Lycon asked. "I know Orander rules it, but that's all."

"A dozen years ago Norian ruled Cyrena," the Druid said. "He had two stepsons, Orander and Zeulas. Zeulas killed him."

Elak moved uneasily.

"Zeulas killed him," Dalan repeated, "in fair fight, and both men had provocation. Because of this, Zeulas, though he was the elder, did not assume the crown. He left Cyrena to wander, a homeless vagabond, through Atlantis."

Lycon turned to stare at Elak. "By Ishtar! You don't mean——"

"He is Zeulas," the Druid said. "His brother, Orander, rules over Cyrena. Or —did rule."

"The Vikings?" Elak asked.

"Yes. They've invaded the land, with the aid of Elf the warlock. Elf has always hated your brother, who would never give him the freedom he wanted for his black sorcery and human sacrifice. So Elf made a pact with the Northmen to destroy Orander, in exchange for power and for the victims he needs for his necromancy."

"Did he——" Elak did not finish, but a cold fire blazed in his eyes.

"He couldn't kill Orander; my magic was too strong for that. But he has taken him captive and left the armies of Cyrena without a head. So the chiefs argue and battle among themselves, and the Vikings slay them at leisure."

Lycon was nearly sober now. A smoking oath came from his throat. "Your kingdom, Elak? This is your kingdom? And the Northmen and this stinking wizard rule it? Dalan"—he stood erect, teetering a little—"we head north tomorrow—tonight! I'll slit this Elf's throat like a pig's."

Elak pulled him down. "Wait a moment. Dalan—you want me to return to Cyrena? To lead the armies against the Vikings?"

The Druid nodded. "That's why I'm here. Elf caught me unawares, and he has your brother captive. But if you'll come north, you'll give Cyrena the leader it needs. My magic will aid you."

"To free Orander?"

"Yes. And to destroy Elf, to drive out the Northmen!" The toad face grew hideous with rage. "They desecrate the Druid altars, crucify our priests! They worship Loki and Thor and Odin, devils of the blackest abyss—and they worship Elf's evil gods, as well. By Mider!" Dalan's hand moved in a strange quick gesture as he named the Druids' greatest deity. "You'll come—you must come, Zeulas—Elak—whatever you name yourself now!"

Elak stood up. "Yes, I'll come. I'd sworn never to enter Cyrena again, but this is a different thing."

"And I'll go with you," Lycon put in. "You'll need a strong sword in the forests. It's a far distance to Cyrena."

"Good!" Dalan's great hands swept down, gripped Lycon's shoulders. "You have courage—and you'll need it. But we'll not go through the forests. Look."

He bent to scrawl, with a bit of charcoal, a rough map on the table's top. "Here we are at Poseidonia. We go inland thirty miles to the Central Lake, where I've a ship waiting. Then north, down the river through the heart of Atlantis, into the Inland Sea that touches Cyrena. We'll go with the current, and my oarsmen are strong."

"And we start——" Lycon's face was eager.

"Tomorrow, at dawn. You'll stay here with me tonight."

ELAK hesitated. "Dalan, we may not return. And I promised — well, there's a girl I'll have to see tonight."

"Velia?" Lycon asked. "Duke Granicor's wife? I should think you'd had enough of her by now. And, by the way, what kept you tonight?"

"Her kisses," Elak said frankly. "I told her I'd see her before leaving Poseidonia."

Dalan grunted, "The guards——"

"I can evade them."

"What about the man I killed in the tavern tonight—and Elf's messenger? I tell you, Zeulas—or Elak—Elf fears you. He knows I came to Poseidonia to bring you north to fight him, and he knows, too, that if you're dead, the Vikings will sweep unopposed over Cyrena. He has servants besides the Northmen — renegades, traitors!"

"I see Velia tonight," Elak said stubbornly. He turned toward the door.

"Wait." Dalan's huge hand spun him about. "There's no need to take unnecessary risk. We'll leave tonight—and, on the way, you can stop for a kiss or two with this wench. But you're a fool to do it."

"It isn't the first time women have made a fool of Elak," Lycon said, grinning. "But Dalan's right. We'd better leave Poseidonia now. I'll feel safer in the forest."

Elak shrugged and waited while the Druid hastily erased the map from the table. That done, the three cautiously let themselves out into the moonlit alley. . . .

THE palace of Duke Granicor shone whitely, towering on a hillock above Poseidonia. To the southeast the ocean swept out to a dim horizon. In the other direction was the forest, dark, menacing. In the shadow of a gate Lycon and Dalan waited while Elak dextrously mounted the wall. He moved quietly through the perfumed blossoms of the garden till he reached the trellis beneath Velia's window.

He had climbed it often before, and it gave no trouble now. The girl came upon the balcony as he softly called her name. He was briefly silent, studying her golden beauty in the moonlight.

Her transparent robe concealed little; she seemed like an amber statue draped in gauze. Bronze hair fell disheveled about an oval, elfin face; amber eyes were upturned questioningly to Elak's. Without a word he drew her close.

"I'm leaving Poseidonia," he said after a time. "I may not see you again for a while."

She clung to him. "Elak, I wish—I'll go with you!"

"No. You——"

"I will! I can't stand it here with Granicor. He's a beast, Elak—a devil. You know how he bought me from my father—I'm little better than a slave to him. I—I'd have killed myself if I hadn't met you."

"Don't be a little fool," Elak said gruffly. "You'll get used to him in time. Though, by Ishtar, his face is enough to frighten babies! Well——"

"You're frank, at least, vagabond," a new voice growled. "And you'll be franker on the rack, with this harlot beside you!"

Elak released the girl and swung about quickly to face the man who came on to the balcony from the shadows. Duke Granicor was smiling, baring stained, discolored teeth through a gray-shot beard. In his silks and velvets he looked incongruously bedecked, a huge ape masquerading in borrowed finery. Bloodshot small eyes glared at Elak from little pits of gristle.

"You skulking dog!" Duke Granicor roared, lifting a dagger. "Your face'll

frighten soldiers when I'm through with you!"

From the garden below came the clash of armor, and the swift thud-thud of racing feet.

3. *Through the Black Forest*

ELAK had no time to draw his rapier before Granicor was upon him. He twisted lithely beneath the dagger's blow, felt the blade tear and scrape along his ribs. Then he closed with his opponent, grimly silent.

Granicor's arm rose up, blade red and dripping, but before it could descend Velia had gripped it. Before the duke could wrench his weapon free the girl had bent swiftly, set her teeth in hairy flesh. Granicor roared on oath; but the dagger dropped, went clattering over the rail to the garden below.

Someone was climbing the trellis. Elak dropped swiftly beneath Granicor's encircling arms, and his own sinewy arms went about the duke's knees, gripping them tightly. With one swift movement he hurled himself up and back, sent his opponent crashing over the marble balustrade, hurtling down into the shadows. A yell of alarm and a scrambling in the foliage, ending in a smashing thud, told of a guard wrenched from his perch by Granicor's descending body.

Elak seized Velia's hand. "Come on," he snapped, and dragged her from the balcony within the room. A glance told him that there were no enemies here. Apparently the duke had been alone, save for his cohorts in the garden.

Now Velia took the lead. "I know the palace," she said swiftly. "There's a door Granicor may have overlooked. If there's no guard——"

They sped along dimly-lit halls, draped with tapestries and rugs of somber magnificence. Faintly there came to Elak's ears the sound of men's voices shouting. Into a narrow hall—down a steep winding staircase. . . .

Elak gripped a heavy iron door, flung it open. Someone rose up before him, startled and menacing; armor glinted in the moonlight. But the slim rapier sheathed itself in flesh, and blood spurted from a pierced throat as the guard sank down groaning. They hurdled his body and raced into the garden.

Blades shimmered frostily; shadows closed in on them. Elak saw Granicor, his face blood-smeared and horrible, one arm dangling uselessly, bellowing commands to his men. But surprize was in their favor, and they made the gate safely.

To their surprize it was open. Elak pushed the girl through and turned to find the pack yelling at his heels.

Huge hands gripped him; he was drawn through the gateway. Metal clanged. The gross figure of the Druid stood briefly between him and the soldiers. Then, without warning, a tongue of fire licked up from the ground. It spread and lifted, filling the gateway with its red blaze. Dalan turned.

"That will stop them," he grunted, "for a time, anyway. Hurry!"

Lycon came out of the shadows, and the four raced into the dimness, seeking shelter in a near-by grove of trees before Granicor remembered to use arrows. As they came panting among the shielding trunks a menacing roar came from the palace, and a rout of men, armor glittering, came pouring down the hill.

"More than one gate," Elak muttered. "Well, shall we fight—or run?"

"Run," Lycon advised. "I'll stay here and hold them, for a while, at least. You can——"

The Druid whispered, "Come. I know the forests. Follow me—and they'll never find us. You too, Lycon."

VELIA'S hand was warm in Elak's as they silently trailed Dalan. Like a shadow for all his gross bulk the Druid slipped from tree to tree, taking advantage of every bush and shrub, till at last the noise of pursuit died in the distance. Only then did he pause to wipe the sweat from his ugly face.

"No enemy can find a Druid in the forests," he informed the others. "If necessary, our magic can send the trees marching against those who follow."

Elak grunted skeptically. "Well, I've let us in for something now. Velia's coming with us. I'm not going to leave her here to be skinned alive by Granicor."

She pressed closer to him, and Elak's arm went about her warm slimness.

"It's no hardship," Lycon said, glancing slyly at the girl. "And my sword is yours to command."

Velia thanked him with a glance, and the little man expanded visibly. Elak's expression was none too cordial.

"Let's get started," he said. "We've a long march to the Central Lake and your ship, Dalan."

The Druid nodded and took the lead. They set out through the moonlit forest. . . .

Presently the moon sank, but Dalan guided them unerringly, even in the vague starlight, where they would have been separated had they not joined hands. Weird noises came out of the night; the shrill calling of birds and the rustle of underbrush. Once the ground shook beneath the tread of some giant beast that lumbered past unseen in the gloom. And once Elak spitted with his rapier a spider as large as his hand, which squirted venom a dozen feet as it writhed and died.

As dawn came they reached the Central Lake, a chill blue expanse whose depths had never been plumbed. Zones of sapphire and aquamarine and deeper blue lay across its surface. Floating at anchor not far away was a long galley, sails furled, waiting.

Sand crunched beneath their sandaled feet as the four hurried to the water's edge. Dalan made a speaking-tube of his hands and bellowed lustily till a small boat left the galley, heading shoreward.

"That's done, at least," Lycon said with satisfaction. "My poor feet!"

He sat down and rubbed them tenderly. His own sandals had gone to protect Velia's feet, but the girl's flimsy nightrobe had been ripped to shreds by thorns and branches. She kicked off the sandals, slipped out of her garment, and ran into the lake, laughing with pleasure as the cool water caressed her aching muscles.

Lycon eyed her enviously. "I'd join her, if I had time," he observed. "Well, a few buckets of water will do the trick on deck. Here's the boat."

Two oarsmen rowed it; Dalan greeted them and quickly clambered aboard, his brown robe fluttering in the breeze. The others joined him; Lycon and Elak and Velia, who, after a few abortive attempts to adjust her robe, gave up the effort and made it into a brief kirtle.

"You may swim along the shore," the Druid warned her, "but not out where the waters are deeper. This lake goes down to hell itself, I think, and there are devils below its surface."

Lycon stared curiously around, apparently disappointed because no devils appeared. Then he fell to polishing his sword. . . .

In the galley's pit men lounged on benches. Brawny, half-naked oarsmen, not slaves, for they were not shackled to the benches. Dalan shouted an order as he climbed on board. Men scrambled to obey, settling in disciplined order, gripping their oars. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a golden collar mounted a platform. He gestured, cried a command.

The oars swept down, cleaving the blue waters of Central Lake. The galley sprang forward, plunging north.

North to Cyrena!

4. *Power of the Warlock*

So THE strong oars dipped and plunged, and the galley ran northward to where two shores converged in the river that cleft the heart of Atlantis, rushing between granite precipices, lazing through sunlit meadows, thundering swiftly and more swiftly toward the Inland Sea and Cyrena. And these days seemed the happiest of all to Elak and Velia; while Lycon divided his time between drinking steadily and arguing with the overseer about navigation, a subject of which he knew nothing. Only over Dalan a shadow seemed to hang, and this grew darker as they swept north. When the sails were unfurled they hung loose and useless, though stormclouds gathered each night to the southward. At last Dalan called Elak to the cabin.

"Elf works magic," he said grimly. "Duke Granicor has not given up the pursuit. He sails after us, with Elf's wizardry helping him."

Elak whistled between his teeth. "That's not so good. How do you know?"

Dalan lifted a dark cloth from a pedestal; light glinted from a crystal sphere large as Elak's head. "Look," he said. "I've known this for days. . . ."

At first Elak saw only the transparent depths of the crystal, and very slowly, very gradually, they clouded and became translucent. Light images began to flash before his eyes, a vague succession of darting colors . . . and these crystallized into a scene, a tiny picture within the sphere: a galley, sails set and straining, racing between shores which Elak remembered passing only a day before. He looked up quickly.

"Wind? But our sails——"

"Calm follows our galley, but Elf's magic speeds Granicor's. We're nearly in the Inland Sea now, though, and—wait!"

Something was happening within the crystal. The sharply-defined image shook and wavered, like a reflection in water. It misted and faded and changed—and a face swam into view: the face of a youth, rounded as a child's. Blue eyes, clear with candor, met Elak's; soft flaxen hair fell about the man's shoulders. And, for all the innocence of that cool gaze, Elak subtly sensed an ageless, malefic evil that dwelt within the blue eyes, a black horror utterly incongruous with the beauty of the face.

"Mider!" the Druid snarled. "Elf—watches us! He——"

The red lips parted in a singularly sweet smile. Dalan thrust his face down close to the crystal.

"Elf!" he roared. "Hear me! Ho, you stinking spawn of devils—hear me! Not all your foul wizardry can keep me from Cyrena, or the man I bring with me. Tell Guthrum that! Let him pray to Odin and Thor—and I'll grind their faces in the dust as I'll grind yours." He cursed the warlock bitterly, foully, while Elak watched fascinated.

The smile did not leave Elf's face. The crystal dimmed, grew cloudy—and was transparent. The vision had gone before Dalan paused in his tirade.

Sweating, he mopped at his gross face. "Well, you've seen Elf now. For the first time, eh?"

Elak nodded.

"What do you think of him?"

"I—scarcely know. He has my brother captive?"

"He holds Orander. And Guthrum, the Viking king, does as Elf wishes. You

must fight Guthrum, Elak, as I Elf. And Granicor's galley comes swiftly."

"I don't see why you fear him," Elak said. "Your own powers——"

"Are limited. And Mider knows what magic aids Granicor. D'you see that storm?" He gestured toward a port-hole. Black clouds were drifting up from the south. "All the winds of hell are there—yet our sails hang without a breeze to lift them. Look."

He turned to the north. "See that land, far distant? It's Crenos Isle, a place best shunned. We go past Crenos to Cyrena—but I think Granicor will find us first."

DALAN was right. The long galley of the duke swiftly drove before the storm, and just off the southern extremity of Crenos Isle the two ships met.

"One thing's in our favor," Dalan grunted, issuing weapons to the oarsmen. "Slaves man their oars. But ours are men, and warriors—men from Cyrena who'll not ask for quarter. But we have no fighting crew, and Granicor has."

"It's my fault," Elak said morosely. "If I hadn't got the duke on our trail——"

"Forget it!" Lycon swaggered up, brandishing his sword and exuding a strong aroma of spirits. "We'll run that dog up by the heels at his own masthead. Besides, Velia's a girl worth fighting for, by Ishtar!"

Velia, looking like a slim youth in her soft tunic, laughed almost gayly. "Thanks, Lycon. At least I'll not have to go back to Granicor. There are many ways to die here—to die easily."

"None o' that," Elak told her; "though I suppose you're right. You can't enjoy life with your skin off. And that's the duke's favorite torture."

The sky darkened. Wind buffeted them. The oarsmen bent to their oars, swords at their sides. Granicor's ship lowered sail, but double banks of oars propelled it swiftly forward.

"They mean to ram," Dalan muttered. "Well, two can play at that game. Ready, now——"

He roared an order into the gale. Oars were lifted; the ship came around, and timbers cracked and groaned and shuddered at the shock as the galleys scraped almost prow to prow.

"Up oars!" Dalan bellowed. "Cast off grappling-irons!"

His intention had been to cripple Granicor's galley by smashing one bank of oars, but he was too late. A dozen hooks snaked out, were drawn taut. The ships were locked together—and a wave of shouting, blood-hungry men came pouring over the gunwales.

"Get in the cabin," Elak commanded Velia, but she did not heed; there was a slim blade in her hand, and she stood coolly at his side. Dalan and Lycon flanked the two. The oarsmen seized their weapons, met the invaders. Swords clashed blindingly.

"Stay here, Lycon," Elak said suddenly. "Guard Velia." He sprang down into the pit among the mob of yelling swordsmen. A few arrows fell, but the galleys swayed and pitched so that accurate marksmanship was impossible. Still stronger came the storm wind, darker grew the clouds.

" 'Ware, Elak!" Lycon's voice.

The tall adventurer ducked a sweep of steel that came out of nowhere, saw a grinning swarthy face rise up behind him. The rapier danced into a dazzling shimmer and the man went down coughing blood. Then Elak caught sight of Granicor fighting his way toward him, gray beard blood-spattered, shouting furious oaths. He sprang to meet the duke.

The ships heeled, rocked sickeningly in the trough of the waves. From the

corner of his eye Elak saw a flicker of red fire, realized that Dalan was battling too. The Druid's magic turned the tide.

Cold steel men could battle, but not this searing flame that sprang out of empty air to leave blistered corpses in its wake. The struggle went back to the gunwales, back and back to Granicor's galley, carrying Elak and the duke with it. Dimly Elak heard Dalan's exultant shout, the shrill cry of Velia. . . .

Without warning disaster struck. A blast of frigid, resistless air, a maelstrom of wind that smashed down on the two craft and ripped them asunder, sent them plunging through waters gone insane. Elak saw Dalan's galley being swept away, heard Granicor roaring in triumph as he plunged forward. He tensed for a leap, realizing as he sprang that he would fall short.

Salt water drove into his nostrils, choking him. He went down like a plummet, clinging grimly to his sword. Somehow he held his breath, fighting up toward a dim, hazily translucent green light. And somehow he kept afloat in a madness of racing seas, hanging to the fragment of an oar that drifted within his reach . . . but at last darkness took him, and he went down into the shadows.

Shadows that whispered, mocking him. Dim shadows, with cool blue eyes of Elf, moving swiftly in errands of mystery . . . vague visions of strangeness and of magic . . . and the faces of Velia and Lycon and the Druid, anxious and afraid. They were searching for him, he knew, and he tried to call a reassuring message. But the dreams faded and were gone. . . .

5. *The Dwellers on the Isle*

ELAK awoke very slowly, conscious of a dull pain in his chest. A sullen gray sky lowered above him as he opened aching eyes. Near by waves crawled up whispering on a slate-dark beach. He tried to sit up, and discovered that his arms were bound tightly.

He turned to see tall rocks hemming him in, monolithic eidolons that rose up in all directions save seaward. His attention was drawn by a flicker of movement to a slab of rock that towered twenty feet above him; there was a very narrow crevice splitting it, and from it came a man.

Elak could not repress a start. Before him was a Pikht—a member of the almost legendary race that had held Atlantis so many eons ago that their very existence had almost been forgotten. White men from the east had warred upon the Pikhts, exterminating them ruthlessly, until, on Crenos Isle, there dwelt what was probably the last survival of the race.

The man was dark-skinned and very short—scarcely five feet in height—and hairless. Not even his pale eyes were fringed by lashes. He wore no more than a loin-cloth, and great muscles crawled beneath the smooth skin. His somber face had an indefinably bestial cast—and Elak thought suddenly of tales he had heard of the kinship of Pikhts to the beasts—that these men were the first beings who had possessed the true human form, and who had possessed powers lost to those of a higher stage of evolution.

The Pikht bent over Elak, a knife in his hand. His voice was thick, guttural, and Elak could scarcely understand the Atlantean tongue he spoke. "Get up, stranger. Slowly!"

Elak, with some effort, got to his feet, careful to make no hasty movement. His rapier, he saw with regret, was gone. Also his legs were bound together by a thong about a foot long.

The Pikht urged him toward the crevice in the rock. It narrowed until his broad shoulders scraped the sides, then widened as he led down. Elak debated the advantage of trying to take his captor

unaware, but, bound and unarmed as he was, he knew only death would result. Presently he felt stairs beneath his feet, invisible in the shrouding darkness.

"'Ware!" It was the Pikht's harsh voice. "Not too fast!"

Obediently Elak slackened his pace. Before him a slit of light widened, and he looked down a corridor cut out of solid rock.

Perhaps two hundred feet long it was, lit by bronze lamps that stood in niches in the wall. Iron doors, with barred windows set in them, broke the monotony of gray rock on one side; the other side was blank, roughly chiseled stone. Elak paused.

The Pikht's blade gouged skin from his captive's back. Glancing around, Elak saw that behind the dark-skinned dwarf were two other men, replicas of his captor, hairless and smooth-skinned and dark. They carried long blades, longer than themselves.

Elak let himself be prodded along the passage. As he passed the barred doors he realized that they guarded captives, Atlanteans all, some clad in leather or armor, others in furry skins. In the silent faces that watched him Elak saw fear—fear so great that none spoke aloud. In whispers men cursed the Pikhts, and the dwarfs smiled mockingly, their eyes coldly alight with malicious amusement.

At a door near the end of the tunnel the Pikht halted. He gestured, and one of his companions lifted a great metal bar that locked the panel. The iron door was swung open, and Elak was thrust across the threshold.

Metal clanged; the bar was thrust into its socket. The cell, cut from solid rock, held nothing; but in the further wall was another door—an iron slab whose smooth surface was featureless and unbroken.

Elak heard the Pikhts go padding along the passage. And, very slowly, the iron slab began to swing outward.

A man crept into the cell. His emaciated body was clad in a tattered jerkin, and tangled, yellow hair hung about a bearded, pain-ravaged face. His eyes were vacuous, filmed with a blue glaze. Spittle drooled from the slack mouth. Behind him the door swung silently shut as Elak sprang forward. He had only a flashing glimpse of a gray corridor—no more.

The man huddled in a corner, shuddering and moaning. Elak looked down at him with pity.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Can you understand me?"

"Yes . . . yes, I can understand. The Shadow took Halfgar, my son. The Shadow on the pool . . ."

The bearded face was contorted with grief and horror. Elak cast a swift glance at the iron door, cryptically shut. What talk was this of—a Shadow?

The blue stare focussed on Elak. "Elf the warlock gave me to the Pikhts, and my son Halfgar went with me because he fought at my side against Elf's men. They——"

Elak leaned forward tensely. "Elf? These dwarfs—Pikhts—know him?"

"Yes; they serve him. They give him magic in return for strong men whom they sacrifice to their god. For ages they've dwelt on Crenos Isle worshipping——" The man's voice dropped to a thin reedy whisper, and madness crept into his eyes. "The Shadow took my son. The door opened, and I went out into the passage where the pool was. I saw water below me, and a Shadow lying upon it. The Shadow leaped up at me, and as I drew back it touched my brow . . . it was not hungry then. It had just fed on Halfgar . . . it took him from my side as I slept . . . there are doors which are not to be opened. . . ."

The whisper stopped. The man's eyes

widened. He sprang to his feet, clawing at his breast with ripping fingernails, tearing away skin and flesh in long ribbons. He screamed, a frightful, agonized shriek that resounded through the cell.

And he fell, a boneless huddle in the corner. His bearded face stared up blindly, and Elak saw that he was dead.

A soft rustling made him turn. Very slowly, very gently, the iron door was swinging outward. From the vagueness beyond the portal a misty gray light crept into the cell.

Elak heard the lapping of water . . .

DALAN'S black galley lay beached on Crenos Isle, battered and bruised by the storm. The same gale that had flung the ship ashore had sent Duke Granicor's craft driving northward till it had been lost to view in the scud. Now the oarsmen were busy calking seams, mending the ruin the tempest had wrought.

But Dalan, in the cabin, crouched over his crystal globe, his ugly face set in harsh lines. Velia and Lycon stood beside him, curiously eyeing the sphere, watching the flashing images that swept through its depths.

"Elf's magic is strong," the Druid muttered. "He battles me at every step. But——"

"Is Elak alive?" Velia asked anxiously. "Why won't you tell me?"

"Because I don't know. Keep quiet, girl! Elf's spells war with mine, and I see nothing—yet."

He peered into the shimmering sphere. Lycon squeezed Velia's arm reassuringly. And, suddenly, Dalan expelled a long breath of relief.

"So! He lives—see?"

Within the crystal a picture grew, a tiny image of a beach flanked by towering gray rocks. On the slope a man lay bound and unconscious.

"Praise Ishtar!" Lycon said. "Is he far? I'll go after him——"

"Wait," the Druid commanded. "I know that beach. Elf's allies, the Pikhts, have an underground temple there. And —look!"

Velia gave a soft little cry. There was movement within the crystal; a man emerged from a cleft in one of the tall rocks and approached Elak's prostrate figure. As they watched they saw Elak prodded to his feet by the Pikht, urged into the darkness of the fissure. For a second the sphere was a ball of jet; then it brightened and showed a long corridor cut out of solid rock. Three dark-skinned dwarfs thrust Elak forward. . . .

"Mider!" Dalan said tonelessly. "He's in the temple! And that means he's to be sacrificed to——"

"Not if I know it!" Lycon snapped. "How far is this temple? The crew have swords, and know how to use them. Tell me how to go, Dalan—north or south?" He was at the door, grinning unpleasantly as he fingered the hilt of his blade. "I'll butcher those little devils for you!"

"Good! Go south, Lycon—and swiftly. You'll know the place?"

"I'll know it. How far have we to go?"

"Half an hour's march, if you travel fast." The Druid turned to his globe. "I'll stay here. You must fight the Pikhts —but I battle Elf. And——" His huge hands swept down, gripped the crystal. "Hurry, Lycon! Elak's in danger now—deadly danger!"

Lycon thrust the door open, sprang on deck. His shrill voice shattered the morning calm. And in response the crew leaped to obey, dropping oar and hammer, taking up sword and ax, dropping over the rail to the beach. A half-naked, villainous-looking band, they trotted south, urged on by Lycon's searing oaths and the flat of his blade.

And with them came Velia, keeping

always at Lycon's side, eyes flashing with battle-hunger, lips parted in a smile that was not pleasant to see. They went so swiftly that they reached their destination before the time Dalan had allotted. Recognizing the black cleft in the stone, Lycon halted his men to take the lead.

He stepped into the darkness with a strange crawling of uneasiness, sword bared, blinking in an attempt to pierce the gloom. Something moved, and he cut at a menace he sensed rather than heard. Steel gashed his thigh, but he felt his blade rip through flesh and grind against bone. A squealing, scarcely human cry sounded. In a frenzy of loathing he struck and struck again, cutting his way forward against soft bodies that resisted briefly and then broke and retreated under his onslaught.

The oarsmen poured into the cleft, led by Velia, and in the darkness the Pikhts rallied and came at them, snarling rage. For a little while there was a black madness of battle, a chaos of yells and oaths and death cries. In the end Lycon won through, and the Pikhts scattered like rats before the sweep of thirsty blades.

Before Lycon now was a dim-lit corridor, one wall set with barred doors. He cut down a screaming dwarf that plunged at him, dagger bared, and left the rest to Velia and the crew. Swiftly he raced along the passage, casting hasty glances into each cell as he passed. Captives stretched out imploring hands, begging for release, but Elak was not among them.

Near the end of the corridor, one door was open. Lycon sprang over the threshold, saw a bare, empty cell with an iron slab ajar in the opposite wall. He went forward, sword dripping red on the stones as he lifted it.

Water was lapping softly near by. . . .

6. *The Night of Gods*

ELAK stepped through the portal and found himself in a narrow passage. Gray light bathed him. In the distance he saw a sparkling surface that rippled in the cold glow.

And suddenly he heard Dalan's voice. It came softly from empty air, urgent, peremptory, calling his name.

"Elak! *Elak!*"

Searching the bare walls with incredulous eyes, Elak whispered, "Dalan? Where are you?"

The Druid's voice rang out sharply. "No time now, Elak—the Shadow comes as I speak. Leap into the pool—dive into it, now! At the end of the passage——"

Still Elak hesitated. "But where are you——"

"There's no time to talk now! Hurry——"

The stark urgency of Dalan's words spurred Elak to action, sent him racing along the corridor. He checked himself sharply on the brink of a square basin. Little menace in that, or in the blue-green water that filled it. But within the pool dwelt horror. A Shadow lay upon it.

The shadow of a man, cast by—nothing! An opaque outline that lay incredibly on the surface of the pool. And it darkened into blackness, while the gray luminescence of the corridor dimmed.

"'Ware, Elak!"

Dalan's voice, loud in warning! Elak whirled, saw a dark-skinned dwarf almost upon him, pale eyes blazing, bestial face menacing. In the Pikht's hand was a dagger.

The two men smashed together on the pool's brink, went down, clutching and tearing, the oily body of the dwarf squirming like a snake in Elak's grasp. Steel grated on the stones. Elak's fingers closed relentlessly on his opponent's knife-wrist.

With a powerful lunge the Pikht brought his dagger down, its point touching Elak's chest. The two rolled over, snarling oaths, and—dropped into emptiness!

The pool took them—dragged them down into water icy as polar seas, blue as turquoise. Elak could see nothing but that illimitable blueness as he went down, choking for breath, battling against blinding panic. Was the pool bottomless?

The sapphire tint deepened to indigo, foamed in fantastic patterns before Elak's eyes. He realized abruptly that this was not water surrounding him—could not be, or he would have drowned minutes ago. There was a swift accelerating rush, and abruptly frightful cold, incredible agony, tore at the citadel of Elak's brain. He was conscious of a *change*.

Air rushed into his lungs—air stale and dead, as though it had never been breathed, yet curiously refreshing. Dim, flickering shadows were all about him. And the swarthy devil-mask of the Pikht's face swam into view from the vagueness.

Pale eyes glared into Elak's; the dagger came down viciously and buried itself in the ground as he writhed aside. He clutched at the dwarf's wrist, missed, and flung himself bodily upon the Pikht, bearing the smaller man down by his weight. But he could not maintain a hold upon the muscular, oily body.

Snarling, the dwarf lunged forward, teeth bared. Elak smashed his forehead into the Pikht's face, felt blood spurt into his eyes, blinding him. He shook the scarlet drops away.

Abruptly he released the Pikht's wrist. His hands shot up and gripped the dwarf's throat—sinewy hands that had been trained on battle-ax and rapier. The knife bit into his body, ripped flesh from his breast as he twisted desperately. But the Pikht had struck too late.

Elak's tapering brown fingers almost met in oily flesh. Tendons stood out like rigid wires; there came a brittle cracking sound. A bubbling scream of agony died in the dwarf's throat before it could emerge.

The pale eyes glazed. The stunted body went limp.

Elak stood up, bracing himself. He stared in sheer astonishment.

It was no earthly landscape which he saw. Obscure color-patterns, shifting and dancing strangely, weaved in the cool air all about him. He thought of the shadows of trees painted on white rock, flickering arabesques of dancing leaves fluttering in the wind. Yet the weird pattern was not only on the pale clay-colored plain on which he stood, but rather all about him in the air. He stood alone in a fantastic weave of somber shadows.

Colorless shadows, dancing. Or were they colorless? He did not know, nor was he ever to know, the color of the grotesque weavings that laced him in a web of magic, for while his mind told him that he saw colors, his eyes denied it.

SUDDENLY darkness swept down, engulfing him. And very faintly a thudding sounded, and swiftly grew louder. With a giant pounding of cyclopean feet something strode past Elak in the blackness, something that shook the plain with the thunder of its passing. There was no other sound save for the tremendous booming thuds of the titan feet.

They died in the distance; the darkness lifted. Again the flickering shadow patterns grew in the air. And again they darkened into blackness.

The sound of wings came to Elak. Something was flying far overhead, something that wailed endlessly and mournfully, keening the cry of one lost and wandering in eternal night. A sense of overpowering awe touched Elak, and horror beyond all imagination—the horror

one feels in the presence of a thing so alien that the flesh of mankind instinctively shrinks and shudders. Elak knew, somehow, that he had entered a land in which men had not been intended to exist.

"Elak . . ."

Faintly, from very far away, the thin whisper came—Dalan's voice. Elak whispered the Druid's name as the darkness changed into the vague shadow-patterns. The distant voice came again.

"You are in a perilous place, Elak, but you live. Lycon's swordsmen slay the Pikhts now, the crystal tells me . . . you are very far away, Elak, but I come swiftly. Mider aids me. . . ."

Blackness again, and a roaring as of great winds. Power unimaginable shuddered through Elak's body like a spear shattering on a shield. And it passed, and the darkness lightened to the crawling shadows.

"You are with the gods, Elak," came Dalan's far whisper. "You are no longer in Atlantis, or even on earth. You are in a far land. And with you are those the Shadow has engulfed—the gods! Not the gods of Atlantis, nor the Viking gods, but the gods that have died. Around you move those whose flesh is not our flesh, whose lives are alien to ours. I come, Elak. . . ."

Piercingly sweet, throbbing almost articulately, a harp-string murmured through the gloom. Dalan's voice faded into silence, and again the note sobbed out. Above it a soft-toned song lifted in the words Elak knew were in no earthly language.

Startled, apprehensive, the Druid called, "Elak! Elf's magic battles mine —he——"

Then silence, till a gentle voice spoke.

"Dalan," it whispered. "Dalan, Elak . . . my enemies. Now you shall die, Elak, for the Druid cannot reach you. The power of my harp keeps him from your side."

Very faintly Dalan called Elak's name. Once again he called, and was silent. Shifting shadows moved through the dim air. Elak's hand went involuntarily to his side. Remembering that he was weaponless, he stooped and pried the dagger from the Pikht's cold fingers. But despair was mounting within him. How could he fight Elf, alone in this lost hell, without Dalan to aid him?

"Your doom comes," Elf murmured, and the harp-string twanged eerily, laden with bitter sweetness. "You live, Elak, and there is no life in Ragnarok. Only the dead gods, and the dust of the souls of men."

The dancing shadow-patterns slowed their fluttering and became motionless. The sound of Elf's harp died; it was utterly silent.

And, far in the distance and gigantic, towering above the horizon, a Shadow began to form in the air. In form it was human, but from its darkening nucleus there breathed chill horror that made Elak grip his dagger with desperate fingers. Fear shook him—the fear that attacks the citadel of man's soul when it faces the Unknown.

7. *Solonala—and Mider*

A SOUND behind him made Elak turn swiftly, his weapon ready. What he saw made him pause in wonder. Even in the shadowy gloom he sensed something fantastically unreal about the figure that came stealing out of the dusk with curiously rocking gait.

But there was friendliness in the gesture with which the half-seen being beckoned. It glanced beyond Elak to where the Shadow grew and darkened on the horizon, and then swiftly bent above the dead Pikht. Dark hands moved quickly—

and suddenly the dwarf moved, raised himself stiffly to his feet and stood motionless as an automaton!

The Pikht had died—that Elak knew. Even now the bald, misshapen head lolled monstrously on one sagging shoulder. Elak could scarcely see the dwarf's face, but he knew intuitively that the shallow eyes held no life. An icy shudder shook him.

The Pikht turned. Swaying, the squat figure raced forward, past Elak, toward the Shadow that loomed in black horror in the distance. A soft hand was thrust in Elak's, and he looked down to see a white girl-face peering anxiously up at him.

He felt himself being tugged along, and yielded, smiling a little wryly. After all, into what worse hell could he be guided? The patterns flickered all around them as they moved, and presently Elak heard a low voice say:

"We should be safe now."

"You speak Atlantean?" he asked involuntarily, and quiet laughter mocked him.

"I speak my own tongue. All languages are one here. Just as the Shadow appears differently to everyone, and yet is the same to everyone after being—taken—so do all tongues seem alike here. The world from which I came is far from yours. How are you named?"

"Elak. The—Shadow?"

"It has faded. See?"

Elak glanced over his shoulder, but could make out nothing but the dancing patterns of alien color. The invisible girl went on, "I put life into the dead being and sent him to the Shadow, so that we could escape while the Shadow fed. We are safe for a little while, Elak."

She paused as the air lighted; they stood before a cave that opened into the side of a rampart which towered up until it was lost in the dimness. A misshapen, flat-topped boulder guarded the entrance of the tunnel mouth, and behind this Elak's companion stepped swiftly.

"Come," she urged. "We can hide here—for a time at least."

But Elak had reached her side—had gripped her slim arms with fingers rendered cruel by his amazement. He stared at the girl in wonder, knowing that she sprang from no earthly race.

A satyr-girl! A faun-maiden, slender and white and virginal as cool marble, round-breasted, with red-golden hair that hung in velvet coils about the smooth shoulders. To her waist she was human. Below that all semblance of humanity ended, and sheer fantasy began.

Her legs were golden-furred and crooked like those of a beast—not ungainly goat-legs, but rather the limbs of some graceful deer, ending in tiny hoofs that glinted golden in the dim light. Her face was as unearthly as her nether limbs, for all its classic beauty. No earth-girl had ever possessed *golden* eyes—eyes like flaky pools of pure gold, without white or pupil, that stared at Elak as unwinkingly as those of a cat. Her face was curiously feline in contour as she smiled at Elak, looking up at him fearlessly.

"I am strange to you?" she asked. "But *you* are strange too. There are many worlds besides your own, Elak."

"So it seems," the Atlantean gasped. "By Bel! This must be some mad dream I'm having!"

The girl urged him further into the cave. A dim light irradiated its further recesses, which were draped with violet samite that hid the rough rock walls. Cushions carpeted and hid the ground.

"I am Solonala," the faun-girl told Elak, relaxing gracefully in a little nest of soft pillows. "Has Elf's magic sent you here, too?"

Elak did not answer; his eyes watched the eery golden-furred legs in fascinated

wonder. Solonala glanced down, smiling, and clicked her hoofs gently together.

"We are made in different patterns, you and I."

Elak nodded. "Yes. Though — Elf, you say? D'you know him?"

"I know him, and I fought him. The land where I once ruled is far from here, and far from your own earth. But Elf's powers enable him to go from world to world, and when he came to mine I saw that he was evil, and tried to destroy him. He was the stronger."

She shrugged slender shoulders. "So I came here, or rather Elf exiled me here. He couldn't kill me, for I'm not human, as you are—decay cannot touch my flesh, as it will touch yours in time. But he imprisoned me in this land, where in time I'll be taken by the Shadow. . . ."

"What is this Shadow?"

Golden eyes watched Elak, luminous in the glow. "You saw it as a man's shadow—eh? A man such as yourself? But I saw it as Solonala's shadow. Every being sees the Shadow as his own. For it is his own. It is the ultimate death. It is destruction. This land is its home, but it can come to other worlds when gateways have been opened."

Gateways—such as the pool in the Pikhts' underground den!

"And it is here that the gods come when they die, Elak." Her voice was hushed. "You heard them pass, I think. Darkness always comes when the dead gods go by, for they wander this lost land alone in eternal night. . . ."

FAINT, infinitely far away, there sounded a thin murmur—the hum of a plucked harp-string. Dim and drowsy, it stole into Elak's mind until, scarcely aware he heard it, he realized that he was nodding sleepily. Solonala watched him alertly out of great golden eyes.

"I hear magic," she said.

The harp-string throbbed on, blanketing Elak in drowsiness. As he went down into slumber he was conscious of Solonala leaning toward him, cat-face puzzled . . . and then darkness. . . .

He dreamed. He dreamed of the black galley's cabin, and of Dalan, crouching over his crystal globe. Within the sphere a flame rose up like a blossoming flower. It grew and lifted till it towered above the Druid's glistening bald head.

Its scarlet tip bent down, expanded into a lambent rose of fire. It swayed and trembled in midair. Dalan prayed.

"Mider, hear me. God of the Druids, Lord of Flame, let your hand draw back this man from the Shadow——"

The vision faded. The dim murmur of a harp-string put a period to it. Vaguely Elak saw Solonala's face swimming in silver mistiness, her lips parted.

Again the harp sent its sorcerous whispering into Elak's sleeping mind—Elf's harp, fraught with deadly magic!

"Elak!"

Dalan's voice!

The harp-string twanged angrily. Above its noise came a harsh cry.

"Elak! Mider aid me—Elak! Hear me!"

The tall adventurer sprang to full wakefulness, his hand racing to the dagger at his belt. A low murmuring sounded from without the cave. Elak got quietly to his feet and moved toward the portal.

There he paused, his eyes wide. On the flat rock before the cave mouth crouched Solonala, her white body gleaming in the shifting shadow-patterns, and all about her, genuflecting and abjecting themselves in ghastly worship, was a horde of tiny, hideous white things that moved so swiftly Elak could not clearly define their outlines. Indeed, he had no chance, for as he appeared Solonala lifted her head, saw him, and flung out a slim

arm commandingly. The white beings streamed away and were lost in the distance.

Now Elak saw what had previously escaped him. Towering to the sky beyond Solonala, menacing and terrible, loomed—the Shadow!

The girl let her arm drop to her side. Without moving she watched Elak.

"Elf's magic brought the Shadow here while you slept," she said. "I could not waken you, though I tried. Those little ones—I made them. Living things, to appease the Shadow's hunger while we flee. Perhaps we can escape." She paused doubtfully.

From empty air roared the voice of Dalan.

"Courage, Elak! I come—and with aid!"

And the voice of Elf, disembodied, gentle—mocking.

"What can Mider do against the Shadow, Druid? Your god lives—and there is no life in Ragnarok."

The immense Shadow on the horizon grew darker. The flickering patterns in the air seemed to weave faster, troubled.

Without warning Elak saw the Shadow fold down tremendously and swoop upon him. He felt Solonala's soft body shuddering against his, and his arms went instinctively about her. The faun-girl cried out—and her voice was clipped off into utter silence. Blackness abysmal and unearthly smothered them.

They were one with the Shadow. They were *nothingness*—annihilation, complete and final emptiness. And yet Elak was dreadfully conscious of a feeling of power—cosmic power, terrible in its illimitable vastness. Aside from this, nothing existed for him. Solonala's body no longer pressed against his. He felt the fortress of his soul, his mind, crumbling under the assault of the Shadow.

And, suddenly, hope came. How it first manifested itself Elak did not understand, but he realized that no longer was he being absorbed into the Shadow. Something was pulling him back—lifting him from the sucking void that was annihilation.

He heard the Druid's voice, strained, triumphant. "Mider! Save him, Mider—god of oak and fire——"

Light flashed out all around—warm, rose-tinted, luminous flame. In its fierce glow was revealed the figure of Solonala, unearthly in her beauty—and also the incredible thing on which the two stood. It was a hand.

Eight-fingered, colossal, it was no earthly hand. The hand of Mider himself, reaching down into the hell of the Shadow at the Druid's prayer. The titan hand swept upward, carrying Elak and Solonala. . . .

It checked itself. Blackness crept back, dimming the rosy flame-walls. A sea of shadow rose like a tide, and the hand began to sink down, slowly at first, and then with ever-increasing speed.

Dalan's cry came, despairing, inarticulate. And Elf's soft laughter.

Solonala knelt beside Elak. She put her arms around his neck; tender lips brushed his. Then, before he could move, she sprang away and flung herself into the void. For an intolerable, age-long second her white-and-gold-figure loomed against blackness—and was gone. A cry, gull-plaintive, drifted to Elak's ears as he started forward.

He was too late. The hand of the god swept up. Elak fell to his knees, struggling to drag himself to where Solonala had vanished . . . and then there was only darkness around him, and the howling and shrieking of great winds. . . .

You will not want to miss the stirring and exciting and inexpressibly weird chapters that bring this fascinating story to an end in next month's WEIRD TALES. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

Pigeons From Hell

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A fearsome story of frightful death, a whistle in the dark, and three women whose bodies hung in that dreadful room of horrors—
by a late great master of weird fiction

1. *The Whistler in the Dark*

GRISWELL awoke suddenly, every nerve tingling with a premonition of imminent peril. He stared about wildly, unable at first to remember where he was, or what he was doing there. Moonlight filtered in through the dusty windows, and the great empty room with its lofty ceiling and gaping black fireplace was spectral and unfamiliar. Then as he emerged from the clinging cobwebs of his recent sleep, he remembered where he was and how he came to be there. He twisted his head and stared at his companion, sleeping on the floor near him. John Branner was but a vaguely bulking shape in the darkness that the moon scarcely grayed.

Griswell tried to remember what had awakened him. There was no sound in the house, no sound outside except the mournful hoot of an owl, far away in the piny woods. Now he had captured the illusive memory. It was a dream, a nightmare so filled with dim terror that it had frightened him awake. Recollection flooded back, vividly etching the abominable vision.

Or was it a dream? Certainly it must have been, but it had blended so curiously with recent actual events that it was difficult to know where reality left off and fantasy began.

Dreaming, he had seemed to relive his past few waking hours, in accurate detail. The dream had begun, abruptly, as he and John Branner came in sight of the house where they now lay. They had come rattling and bouncing over the stumpy, uneven old road that led through the pinelands, he and John Branner, wandering far afield from their New England home, in search of vacation pleasure. They had sighted the old house with its balustraded galleries rising amidst a wilderness of weeds and bushes, just as the sun was setting behind it. It dominated their fancy, rearing black and stark and gaunt against the low lurid rampart of sunset, barred by the black pines.

They were tired, sick of bumping and pounding all day over woodland roads. The old deserted house stimulated their imagination with its suggestion of ante-bellum splendor and ultimate decay. They left the automobile beside the rutty road, and as they went up the winding walk of crumbling bricks, almost lost in the tangle of rank growth, pigeons rose from the balustrades in a fluttering, feathery crowd and swept away with a low thunder of beating wings.

The oaken door sagged on broken hinges. Dust lay thick on the floor of the wide, dim hallway, on the broad steps of the stair that mounted up from the hall. They turned into a door opposite the landing, and entered a large room, empty, dusty, with cobwebs shining thickly in the corners. Dust lay thick over the ashes in the great fireplace.

They discussed gathering wood and building a fire, but decided against it. As the sun sank, darkness came quickly, the thick, black, absolute darkness of the pinelands. They knew that rattlesnakes and copperheads haunted Southern forests, and they did not care to go groping for firewood in the dark. They ate frugally from tins, then rolled in their blankets fully clad before the empty fireplace, and went instantly to sleep.

This, in part, was what Griswell had dreamed. He saw again the gaunt house looming stark against the crimson sunset; saw the flight of the pigeons as he and Branner came up the shattered walk. He saw the dim room in which they presently lay, and he saw the two forms that were himself and his companion, lying wrapped in their blankets on the dusty floor. Then from that point his dream altered subtly, passed out of the realm of the commonplace and became tinged with fear. He was looking into a vague, shadowy chamber, lit by the gray light of the moon which streamed in from some obscure source. For there was no window in that room. But in the gray light he saw three silent shapes that hung suspended in a row, and their stillness and

"It was the windowless chamber I saw in my dream, with the three bodies hanging there."

their outlines woke chill horror in his soul. There was no sound, no word, but he sensed a Presence of fear and lunacy crouching in a dark corner. . . . Abruptly he was back in the dusty, high-ceilinged room, before the great fireplace.

HE WAS lying in his blankets, staring tensely through the dim door and across the shadowy hall, to where a beam of moonlight fell across the balustraded stair, some seven steps up from the landing. And there was something on the stair, a bent, misshapen, shadowy thing that never moved fully into the beam of light. But a dim yellow blur that might have been a face was turned toward him, as if *something* crouched on the stair, regarding him and his companion. Fright crept chilly through his veins, and it was then that he awoke—if indeed he had been asleep.

He blinked his eyes. The beam of moonlight fell across the stair just as he had dreamed it did; but no figure lurked there. Yet his flesh still crawled from the fear the dream or vision had roused in him; his legs felt as if they had been plunged in ice-water. He made an involuntary movement to awaken his companion, when a sudden sound paralyzed him.

It was the sound of whistling on the floor above. Eery and sweet it rose, not carrying any tune, but piping shrill and melodious. Such a sound in a supposedly deserted house was alarming enough; but it was more than the fear of a physical invader that held Griswell frozen. He could not himself have defined the horror that gripped him. But Branner's blankets rustled, and Griswell saw he was sitting upright. His figure bulked dimly in the soft darkness, the head turned toward the stair as if the man were listening intently. More sweetly and more subtly evil rose that weird whistling.

"John!" whispered Griswell from dry lips. He had meant to shout—to tell Branner that there was somebody upstairs, somebody who could mean them no good; that they must leave the house at once. But his voice died dryly in his throat.

Branner had risen. His boots clumped on the floor as he moved toward the door. He stalked leisurely into the hall and made for the lower landing, merging with the shadows that clustered black about the stair.

Griswell lay incapable of movement, his mind a whirl of bewilderment. Who was that whistling upstairs? Why was Branner going up those stairs? Griswell saw him pass the spot where the moonlight rested, saw his head tilted back as if he were looking at something Griswell could not see, above and beyond the stair. But his face was like that of a sleepwalker. He moved across the bar of moonlight and vanished from Griswell's view, even as the latter tried to shout to him to come back. A ghastly whisper was the only result of his effort.

The whistling sank to a lower note, died out. Griswell heard the stairs creaking under Branner's measured tread. Now he had reached the hallway above, for Griswell heard the clump of his feet moving along it. Suddenly the footfalls halted, and the whole night seemed to hold its breath. Then an awful scream split the stillness, and Griswell started up, echoing the cry.

The strange paralysis that had held him was broken. He took a step toward the door, then checked himself. The footfalls were resumed. Branner was coming back. He was not running. The tread was even more deliberate and measured than before. Now the stairs began to creak again. A groping hand, moving along the balustrade, came into the bar of moonlight; then another, and a ghastly thrill went through Griswell as he saw that the

other hand gripped a hatchet—a hatchet which dripped blackly. *Was* that Branner who was coming down that stair?

Yes! The figure had moved into the bar of moonlight now, and Griswell recognized it. Then he saw Branner's face, and a shriek burst from Griswell's lips. Branner's face was bloodless, corpse-like; gouts of blood dripped darkly down it; his eyes were glassy and set, and blood oozed from the great gash *which cleft the crown of his head!*

GRISWELL never remembered exactly how he got out of that accursed house. Afterward he retained a mad, confused impression of smashing his way through a dusty cobwebbed window, of stumbling blindly across the weed-choked lawn, gibbering his frantic horror. He saw the black wall of the pines, and the moon floating in a blood-red mist in which there was neither sanity nor reason.

Some shred of sanity returned to him as he saw the automobile beside the road. In a world gone suddenly mad, that was an object reflecting prosaic reality; but even as he reached for the door, a dry chilling whir sounded in his ears, and he recoiled from the swaying undulating shape that arched up from its scaly coils on the driver's seat and hissed sibilantly at him, darting a forked tongue in the moonlight.

With a sob of horror he turned and fled down the road, as a man runs in a nightmare. He ran without purpose or reason. His numbed brain was incapable of conscious thought. He merely obeyed the blind primitive urge to run—run—run until he fell exhausted.

The black walls of the pines flowed endlessly past him; so he was seized with the illusion that he was getting nowhere. But presently a sound penetrated the fog of his terror—the steady, inexorable patter of feet behind him. Turning his head, he saw *something* loping after him—wolf or dog, he could not tell which, but its eyes glowed like balls of green fire. With a gasp he increased his speed, reeled around a bend in the road, and heard a horse snort; saw it rear and heard its rider curse; saw the gleam of blue steel in the man's lifted hand.

He staggered and fell, catching at the rider's stirrup.

"For God's sake, help me!" he panted. "The thing! It killed Branner—it's coming after me! *Look!*"

Twin balls of fire gleamed in the fringe of bushes at the turn of the road. The rider swore again, and on the heels of his profanity came the smashing report of his six-shooter—again and yet again. The fire-sparks vanished, and the rider, jerking his stirrup free from Griswell's grasp, spurred his horse at the bend. Griswell staggered up, shaking in every limb. The rider was out of sight only a moment; then he came galloping back.

"Took to the brush. Timber wolf, I reckon, though I never heard of one chasin' a man before. Do you know what it was?"

Griswell could only shake his head weakly.

The rider, etched in the moonlight, looked down at him, smoking pistol still lifted in his right hand. He was a compactly-built man of medium height, and his broad-brimmed planter's hat and his boots marked him as a native of the country as definitely as Griswell's garb stamped him as a stranger.

"What's all this about, anyway?"

"I don't know," Griswell answered helplessly. "My name's Griswell. John Branner—my friend who was traveling with me—we stopped at a deserted house back down the road to spend the night. Something——" at the memory he was choked by a rush of horror. "My God!" he screamed. "I must be mad! *Something*

came and looked over the balustrade of the stair—something with a yellow face! I thought I dreamed it, but it must have been real. Then somebody began whistling upstairs, and Branner rose and went up the stairs walking like a man in his sleep, or hypnotized. I heard him scream—or someone screamed; then he came down the stair again with a bloody hatchet in his hand—and my God, sir, he was *dead!* His head had been split open. I saw brains and clotted blood oozing down his face, and his face was that of a dead man. *But he came down the stair!* As God is my witness, John Branner was murdered in that dark upper hallway, and then his dead body came stalking down the stairs with a hatchet in its hand—to kill me!"

The rider made no reply; he sat his horse like a statue, outlined against the stars, and Griswell could not read his expression, his face shadowed by his hatbrim.

"You think I'm mad," he said hopelessly. "Perhaps I am."

"I don't know what to think," answered the rider. "If it was any house but the old Blassenville Manor—well, we'll see. My name's Buckner. I'm sheriff of this county. Took a nigger over to the county-seat in the next county and was ridin' back late."

He swung off his horse and stood beside Griswell, shorter than the lanky New Englander, but much harder knit. There was a natural manner of decision and certainty about him, and it was easy to believe that he would be a dangerous man in any sort of a fight.

"Are you afraid to go back to the house?" he asked, and Griswell shuddered, but shook his head, the dogged tenacity of Puritan ancestors asserting itself.

"The thought of facing that horror again turns me sick. But poor Branner——" he choked again. "We must find his body. My God!" he cried, unmanned by the abysmal horror of the thing; "*what* will we find? If a dead man walks, what——

"We'll see." The sheriff caught the reins in the crook of his left elbow and began filling the empty chambers of his big blue pistol as they walked along.

As they made the turn Griswell's blood was ice at the thought of what they might see lumbering up the road with bloody, grinning death-mask, but they saw only the house looming spectrally among the pines, down the road. A strong shudder shook Griswell.

"God, how *evil* that house looks, against those black pines! It looked sinister from the very first—when we went up the broken walk and saw those pigeons fly up from the porch——"

"Pigeons?" Buckner cast him a quick glance. "You saw the pigeons?"

"Why, yes! Scores of them perching on the porch railing."

They strode on for a moment in silence, before Buckner said abruptly: "I've lived in this country all my life. I've passed the old Blassenville place a thousand times, I reckon, at all hours of the day and night. But I never saw a pigeon anywhere around it, or anywhere else in these woods."

"There were scores of them," repeated Griswell, bewildered.

"I've seen men who swore they'd seen a flock of pigeons perched along the balusters just at sundown," said Buckner slowly. "Niggers, all of them except one man. A tramp. He was buildin' a fire in the yard, aimin' to camp there that night. I passed along there about dark, and he told me about the pigeons. I came back by there the next mornin'. The ashes of his fire were there, and his tin cup, and skillet where he'd fried pork, and his

blankets looked like they'd been slept in. Nobody ever saw him again. That was twelve years ago. The niggers say they can see the pigeons, but no nigger would pass along this road between sundown and sun-up. They say the pigeons are the souls of the Blassenvilles, let out of hell at sunset. The niggers say the red glare in the west is the light from hell, because then the gates of hell are open, and the Blassenvilles fly out."

"Who were the Blassenvilles?" asked Griswell, shivering.

"They owned all this land here. French-English family. Came here from the West Indies before the Louisiana Purchase. The Civil War ruined them, like it did so many. Some were killed in the War; most of the others died out. Nobody's lived in the Manor since 1890 when Miss Elizabeth Blassenville, the last of the line, fled from the old house one night like it was a plague spot, and never came back to it—this your auto?"

They halted beside the car, and Griswell stared morbidly at the grim house. Its dusty panes were empty and blank; but they did not seem blind to him. It seemed to him that ghastly eyes were fixed hungrily on him through those darkened panes. Buckner repeated his question.

"Yes. Be careful. There's a snake on the seat—or there was."

"Not there now," grunted Buckner, tying his horse and pulling an electric torch out of the saddle-bag. "Well, let's have a look."

He strode up the broken brick-walk as matter-of-factly as if he were paying a social call on friends. Griswell followed close at his heels, his heart pounding suffocatingly. A scent of decay and moldering vegetation blew on the faint wind, and Griswell grew faint with nausea, that rose from a frantic abhorrence of these black woods, these ancient plantation houses that hid forgotten secrets of slavery and bloody pride and mysterious intrigues. He had thought of the South as a sunny, lazy land washed by soft breezes laden with spice and warm blossoms, where life ran tranquilly to the rhythm of black folk singing in sun-bathed cottonfields. But now he had discovered another, unsuspected side—a dark, brooding, fear-haunted side, and the discovery repelled him.

The oaken door sagged as it had before. The blackness of the interior was intensified by the beam of Buckner's light playing on the sill. That beam sliced through the darkness of the hallway and roved up the stair, and Griswell held his breath, clenching his fists. But no shape of lunacy leered down at them. Buckner went in, walking light as a cat, torch in one hand, gun in the other.

As he swung his light into the room across from the stairway, Griswell cried out—and cried out again, almost fainting with the intolerable sickness at what he saw. A trail of blood drops led across the floor, crossing the blankets Branner had occupied, which lay between the door and those in which Griswell had lain. And Griswell's blankets had a terrible occupant. John Branner lay there, face down, his cleft head revealed in merciless clarity in the steady light. His outstretched hand still gripped the haft of a hatchet, and the blade was imbedded deep in the blanket and the floor beneath, just where Griswell's head had lain when he slept there.

A MOMENTARY rush of blackness engulfed Griswell. He was not aware that he staggered, or that Buckner caught him. When he could see and hear again, he was violently sick and hung his head against the mantel, retching miserably.

Buckner turned the light full on him, making him blink. Buckner's voice came

from behind the blinding radiance, the man himself unseen.

"Griswell, you've told me a yarn that's hard to believe. I saw something chasin' you, but it might have been a timber wolf, or a mad dog.

"If you're holdin' back anything, you better spill it. What you told me won't hold up in any court. You're bound to be accused of killin' your partner. I'll have to arrest you. If you'll give me the straight goods now, it'll make it easier. Now, didn't you kill this fellow, Branner?

"Wasn't it something like this: you quarreled, he grabbed a hatchet and swung at you, but you dodged and then let *him* have it?"

Griswell sank down and hid his face in his hands, his head swimming.

"Great God, man, I didn't murder John! Why, we've been friends ever since we were children in school together. I've told you the truth. I don't blame you for not believing me. But God help me, it is the truth!"

The light swung back to the gory head again, and Griswell closed his eyes.

He heard Buckner grunt.

"I believe this hatchet in his hand is the one he was killed with. Blood and brains plastered on the blade, and hairs stickin' to it—hairs exactly the same color as his. This makes it tough for you, Griswell."

"How so?" the New Englander asked dully.

"Knocks any plea of self-defense in the head. Branner couldn't have swung at you with this hatchet after you split his skull with it. You must have pulled the ax out of his head, stuck it into the floor and clamped his fingers on it to make it look like he'd attacked you. And it would have been damned clever—if you'd used another hatchet."

"But I didn't kill him," groaned Griswell. "I have no intention of pleading self-defense."

"That's what puzzles me," Buckner admitted frankly, straightening. "What murderer would rig up such a crazy story as you've told me, to prove his innocence? Average killer would have told a logical yarn, at least. Hmmm! Blood drops leadin' from the door. The body was dragged — no, couldn't have been dragged. The floor isn't smeared. You must have carried it here, after killin' him in some other place. But in that case, why isn't there any blood on your clothes? Of course you could have changed clothes and washed your hands. But the fellow hasn't been dead long."

"He walked downstairs and across the room," said Griswell hopelessly. "He came to kill me. I knew he was coming to kill me when I saw him lurching down the stair. He struck where I would have been, if I hadn't awakened. That window —I burst out at it. You see it's broken."

"I see. But if he walked then, why isn't he walkin' now?"

"I don't know! I'm too sick to think straight. I've been fearing that he'd rise up from the floor where he lies and come at me again. When I heard that wolf running up the road after me, I thought it was John chasing me—John, running through the night with his bloody ax and his bloody head, and his death-grin!"

His teeth chattered as he lived that horror over again.

Buckner let his light play across the floor.

"The blood drops lead into the hall. Come on. We'll follow them."

Griswell cringed. "They lead upstairs."

Buckner's eyes were fixed hard on him.

"Are you afraid to go upstairs, with me?"

Griswell's face was gray.

"Yes. But I'm going, with you or with-

out you. The thing that killed poor John may still be hiding up there."

"Stay behind me," ordered Buckner. "If anything jumps us, I'll take care of it. But for your own sake, I warn you that I shoot quicker than a cat jumps, and I don't often miss. If you've got any ideas of layin' me out from behind, forget them."

"Don't be a fool!" Resentment got the better of his apprehension, and this outburst seemed to reassure Buckner more than any of his protestations of innocence.

"I want to be fair," he said quietly. "I haven't indicted and condemned you in my mind already. If only half of what you're tellin' me is the truth, you've been through a hell of an experience, and I don't want to be too hard on you. But you can see how hard it is for me to believe all you've told me."

Griswell wearily motioned for him to lead the way, unspeaking. They went out into the hall, paused at the landing. A thin string of crimson drops, distinct in the thick dust, led up the steps.

"Man's tracks in the dust," grunted Buckner. "Go slow. I've got to be sure of what I see, because we're obliteratin' them as we go up. Hmmm! One set goin' up, one comin' down. Same man. Not your tracks. Branner was a bigger man than you are. Blood drops all the way—blood on the bannisters like a man had laid his bloody hand there—a smear of stuff that looks—*brains*. Now what——"

"He walked down the stair, a dead man," shuddered Griswell. "Groping with one hand—the other gripping the hatchet that killed him."

"Or was carried," muttered the sheriff. "But if somebody carried him—*where are the tracks?*"

THEY came out into the upper hallway, a vast, empty space of dust and shadows where time-crusted windows repelled the moonlight and the ring of Buckner's torch seemed inadequate. Griswell trembled like a leaf. Here, in darkness and horror, John Branner had died.

"Somebody whistled up here," he muttered. "John came, as if he were being called."

Buckner's eyes were blazing strangely in the light.

"The footprints lead down the hall," he muttered. "Same as on the stair—one set going, one coming. Same prints—*Judas!*"

Behind him Griswell stifled a cry, for he had seen what prompted Buckner's exclamation. A few feet from the head of the stair Branner's footprints stopped abruptly, then returned, treading almost in the other tracks. And where the trail halted there was a great splash of blood on the dusty floor—and other tracks met it—tracks of bare feet, narrow but with splayed toes. They too receded in a second line from the spot.

Buckner bent over them, swearing.

"The tracks meet! And where they meet there's blood and brains on the floor! Branner must have been killed on that spot—with a blow from a hatchet. Bare feet coming out of the darkness to meet shod feet—then both turned away again; the shod feet went downstairs, the bare feet went back down the hall." He directed his light down the hall. The footprints faded into darkness, beyond the reach of the beam. On either hand the closed doors of chambers were cryptic portals of mystery.

"Suppose your crazy tale *was* true," Buckner muttered, half to himself. "These aren't your tracks. They look like a woman's. Suppose somebody did whistle, and Branner went upstairs to investigate. Suppose somebody met him

here in the dark and split his head. The signs and tracks would have been, in that case, just as they really are. But if that's so, why isn't Branner lyin' here where he was killed? Could he have lived long enough to take the hatchet away from whoever killed him, and stagger downstairs with it?"

"No, no!" Recollection gagged Griswell. "I *saw* him on the stair. He was dead. No man could live a minute after receiving such a wound."

"I believe it," muttered Buckner. "But —it's madness! Or else it's *too* clever— yet, what sane man would think up and work out such an elaborate and utterly insane plan to esecape punishment for murder, when a simple plea of self-defense would have been so much more effective? No court would recognize that story. Well, let's follow these other tracks. They lead down the hall—here, what's this?"

With an icy clutch at his soul, Griswell saw the light was beginning to grow dim.

"This battery is new," muttered Buckner, and for the first time Griswell caught an edge of fear in his voice. "Come on—out of here quick!"

The light had faded to a faint red glow. The darkness seemed straining into them, creeping with black cat-feet. Buckner retreated, pushing Griswell stumbling behind him as he walked backward, pistol cocked and lifted, down down the dark hall. In the growing darkness Griswell heard what sounded like the stealthy opening of a door. And suddenly the blackness about them was vibrant with menace. Griswell knew Buckner sensed it as well as he, for the sheriff's hard body was tense and taut as a stalking panther's.

But without haste he worked his way to the stair and backed down it, Griswell preceding him, and fighting the panic that urged him to scream and burst into mad flight. A ghastly thought brought icy sweat out on his flesh. *Suppose the dead man were creeping up the stair behind them in the dark, face frozen in the death-grin, blood-caked hatchet lifted to strike?*

This possibility so overpowered him that he was scarcely aware when his feet struck the level of the lower hallway, and he was only then aware that the light had grown brighter as they descended, until it now gleamed with its full power —but when Buckner turned it back up the stairway, it failed to illuminate the darkness that hung like a tangible fog at the head of the stair.

"The damn thing was conjured," muttered Buckner. "Nothin' else. It couldn't act like that naturally."

"Turn the light into the room," begged Griswell. "See if John—if John is——"

He could not put the ghastly thought into words, but Buckner understood.

He swung the beam around, and Griswell had never dreamed that the sight of the gory body of a murdered man could bring such relief.

"He's still there," grunted Buckner. "If he walked after he was killed, he hasn't walked since. But that thing——"

Again he turned the light up the stair, and stood chewing his lip and scowling. Three times he half lifted his gun. Griswell read his mind. The sheriff was tempted to plunge back up that stair, take his chance with the unknown. But common sense held him back.

"I wouldn't have a chance in the dark," he muttered. "And I've got a hunch the light would go out again."

He turned and faced Griswell squarely.

"There's no use dodgin' the question. There's somethin' hellish in this house, and I believe I have an inklin' of what it is. I don't believe you killed Branner. Whatever killed him is up there—now.

There's a lot about your yarn that don't sound sane; but there's nothin' sane about a flashlight goin' out like this one did. I don't believe that thing upstairs is human. I never met anything I was afraid to tackle in the dark before, but I'm not goin' up there until daylight. It's not long until dawn. We'll wait for it out there on that gallery."

THE stars were already paling when they came out on the broad porch. Buckner seated himself on the balustrade, facing the door, his pistol dangling in his fingers. Griswell sat down near him and leaned back against a crumbling pillar. He shut his eyes, grateful for the faint breeze that seemed to cool his throbbing brain. He experienced a dull sense of unreality. He was a stranger in a strange land, a land that had become suddenly imbued with black horror. The shadow of the noose hovered above him, and in that dark house lay John Branner, with his butchered head—like the figments of a dream these facts spun and eddied in his brain until all merged in a gray twilight as sleep came uninvited to his weary soul.

He awoke to a cold white dawn and full memory of the horrors of the night. Mists curled about the stems of the pines, crawled in smoky wisps up the broken walk. Buckner was shaking him.

"Wake up! It's daylight."

Griswell rose, wincing at the stiffness of his limbs. His face was gray and old.

"I'm ready. Let's go upstairs."

"I've already been!" Buckner's eyes burned in the early dawn. "I didn't wake you up. I went as soon as it was light. I found nothin'."

"The tracks of the bare feet——"

"Gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, gone! The dust had been disturbed all over the hall, from the point where Branner's tracks ended; swept into corners. No chance of trackin' anything there now. Something obliterated those tracks while we sat here, and I didn't hear a sound. I've gone through the whole house. Not a sign of anything."

Griswell shuddered at the thought of himself sleeping alone on the porch while Buckner conducted his exploration.

"What shall we do?" he asked listlessly. "With those tracks gone, there goes my only chance of proving my story."

"We'll take Branner's body into the county-seat," answered Buckner. "Let me do the talkin'. If the authorities knew the facts as they appear, they'd insist on you being confined and indicted. I don't believe you killed Branner—but neither a district attorney, judge nor jury would believe what you told me, or what happened to us last night. I'm handlin' this thing my own way. I'm not goin' to arrest you until I've exhausted every other possibility.

"Say nothin' about what's happened here, when we get to town. I'll simply tell the district attorney that John Branner was killed by a party or parties unknown, and that I'm workin' on the case.

"Are you game to come back with me to this house and spend the night here, sleepin' in that room as you and Branner slept last night?"

Griswell went white, but answered as stoutly as his ancestors might have expressed their determination to hold their cabins in the teeth of the Pequots: "I'll do it."

"Let's go then; help me pack the body out to your auto."

Griswell's soul revolted at the sight of John Branner's bloodless face in the chill white dawn, and the feel of his clammy flesh. The gray fog wrapped wispy tentacles about their feet as they carried their grisly burden across the lawn.

2. The Snake's Brother

AGAIN the shadows were lengthening over the pinelands, and again two men came bumping along the old road in a car with a New England license plate.

Buckner was driving. Griswell's nerves were too shattered for him to trust himself at the wheel. He looked gaunt and haggard, and his face was still pallid. The strain of the day spent at the county-seat was added to the horror that still rode his soul like the shadow of a black-winged vulture. He had not slept, had not tasted what he had eaten.

"I told you I'd tell you about the Blassenvilles," said Buckner. "They were proud folks, haughty, and pretty damn ruthless when they wanted their way. They didn't treat their niggers as well as the other planters did—got their ideas in the West Indies, I reckon. There was a streak of cruelty in them—especially Miss Celia, the last one of the family to come to these parts. That was long after the slaves had been freed, but she used to whip her mulatto maid just like she was a slave, the old folks say. . . . The niggers said when a Blassenville died, the devil was always waitin' for him out in the black pines.

"Well, after the Civil War they died off pretty fast, livin' in poverty on the plantation which was allowed to go to ruin. Finally only four girls were left, sisters, livin' in the old house and ekin' out a bare livin', with a few niggers livin' in the old slave huts and workin' the fields on the share. They kept to themselves, bein' proud, and ashamed of their poverty. Folks wouldn't see them for months at a time. When they needed supplies they sent a nigger to town after them.

"But folks knew about it when Miss Celia came to live with them. She came from somewhere in the West Indies, where the whole family originally had its roots—a fine, handsome woman, they say, in the early thirties. But she didn't mix with folks any more than the girls did. She brought a mulatto maid with her, and the Blassenville cruelty cropped out in her treatment of this maid. I knew an old nigger, years ago, who swore he saw Miss Celia tie this girl up to a tree, stark naked, and whip her with a horsewhip. Nobody was surprized when she disappeared. Everybody figured she'd run away, of course.

"Well, one day in the spring of 1890 Miss Elizabeth, the youngest girl, came in to town for the first time in maybe a year. She came after supplies. Said the niggers had all left the place. Talked a little more, too, a bit wild. Said Miss Celia had gone, without leaving any word. Said her sisters thought she'd gone back to the West Indies, but she believed her aunt *was still in the house*. She didn't say what she meant. Just got her supplies and pulled out for the Manor.

"A month went past, and a nigger came into town and said that Miss Elizabeth was livin' at the Manor alone. Said her three sisters weren't there any more, that they'd left one by one without givin' any word or explanation. She didn't know where they'd gone, and was afraid to stay there alone, but didn't know where else to go. She'd never known anything but the Manor, and had neither relatives nor friends. But she was in mortal terror of *something*. The nigger said she locked herself in her room at night and kept candles burnin' all night. . . .

"It was a stormy spring night when Miss Elizabeth came tearin' into town on the one horse she owned, nearly dead from fright. She fell from her horse in the square; when she could talk she said she'd found a secret room in the Manor

that had been forgotten for a hundred years. And she said that there she found her three sisters, dead, and hangin' by their necks from the ceilin'. She said *something* chased her and nearly brained her with an ax as she ran out the front door, but somehow she got to the horse and got away. She was nearly crazy with fear, and didn't know what it was that chased her—said it looked like a woman with a yellow face.

"About a hundred men rode out there, right away. They searched the house from top to bottom, but they didn't find any secret room, or the remains of the sisters. But they did find a hatchet stickin' in the doorjamb downstairs, with some of Miss Elizabeth's hairs stuck on it, just as she'd said. She wouldn't go back there and show them how to find the secret door; almost went crazy when they suggested it.

"When she was able to travel, the people made up some money and loaned it to her—she was still too proud to accept charity—and she went to California. She never came back, but later it was learned, when she sent back to repay the money they'd loaned her, that she'd married out there.

"Nobody ever bought the house. It stood there just as she'd left it, and as the years passed folks stole all the furnishings out of it, poor white trash, I reckon. A nigger wouldn't go about it. But they came after sun-up and left long before sundown."

"WHAT did the people think about Miss Elizabeth's story?" asked Griswell.

"Well, most folks thought she'd gone a little crazy, livin' in that old house alone. But some people believed that mulatto girl, Joan, didn't run away, after all. They believed she'd hidden in the woods, and glutted her hatred of the Blassenvilles by murderin' Miss Celia and the three girls. They beat up the woods with bloodhounds, but never found a trace of her. If there was a secret room in the house, she might have been hidin' there — if there was anything to that theory."

"She couldn't have been hiding there all these years," muttered Griswell. "Anyway, the thing in the house now isn't human."

Buckner wrenched the wheel around and turned into a dim trace that left the main road and meandered off through the pines.

"Where are you going?"

"There's an old nigger that lives off this way a few miles. I want to talk to him. We're up against something that takes more than white man's sense. The black people know more than we do about some things. This old man is nearly a hundred years old. His master educated him when he was a boy, and after he was freed he traveled more extensively than most white men do. They say he's a voodoo man."

Griswell shivered at the phrase, staring uneasily at the green forest walls that shut them in. The scent of the pines was mingled with the odors of unfamiliar plants and blossoms. But underlying all was a reek of rot and decay. Again a sick abhorrence of these dark mysterious woodlands almost overpowered him.

"Voodoo!" he muttered. "I'd forgotten about that—I never could think of black magic in connection with the South. To me witchcraft was always associated with old crooked streets in waterfront towns, overhung by gabled roofs that were old when they were hanging witches in Salem; dark musty alleys where black cats and other things might steal at night. Witchcraft always meant the old towns of New England, to me—but all this is more terrible than any New England

legend—these somber pines, old deserted houses, lost plantations, mysterious black people, old tales of madness and horror —God, what frightful, ancient terrors there are on this continent fools call 'young'!"

"Here's old Jacob's hut," announced Buckner, bringing the automobile to a halt.

Griswell saw a clearing and a small cabin squatting under the shadows of the huge trees. There pines gave way to oaks and cypresses, bearded with gray trailing moss, and behind the cabin lay the edge of a swamp that ran away under the dimness of the trees, choked with rank vegetation. A thin wisp of blue smoke curled up from the stick-and-mud chimney.

He followed Buckner to the tiny stoop, where the sheriff pushed open the leather-hinged door and strode in. Griswell blinked in the comparative dimness of the interior. A single small window let in a little daylight. An old negro crouched beside the hearth, watching a pot stew over the open fire. He looked up as they entered, but did not rise. He seemed incredibly old. His face was a mass of wrinkles, and his eyes, dark and vital, were filmed momentarily at times as if his mind wandered.

Buckner motioned Griswell to sit down in a string-bottomed chair, and himself took a rudely-made bench near the hearth, facing the old man.

"Jacob," he said bluntly, "the time's come for you to talk. I know you know the secret of Blassenville Manor. I've never questioned you about it, because it wasn't in my line. But a man was murdered there last night, and this man here may hang for it, unless you tell me what haunts that old house of the Blassenvilles."

The old man's eyes gleamed, then grew misty as if clouds of extreme age drifted across his brittle mind.

"The Blassenvilles," he murmured, and his voice was mellow and rich, his speech not the patois of the piny woods darky. "They were proud people, sirs—proud and cruel. Some died in the war, some were killed in duels—the menfolks, sirs. Some died in the Manor—the old Manor——"His voice trailed off into unintelligible mumblings.

"What of the Manor?" asked Buckner patiently.

"Miss Celia was the proudest of them all," the old man muttered. "The proudest and the cruelest. The black people hated her; Joan most of all. Joan had white blood in her, and she was proud, too. Miss Celia whipped her like a slave."

"What is the secret of Blassenville Manor?" persisted Buckner.

The film faded from the old man's eyes; they were dark as moonlit wells.

"What secret, sir? I do not understand."

"Yes, you do. For years that old house has stood there with its mystery. You know the key to its riddle."

The old man stirred the stew. He seemed perfectly rational now.

"Sir, life is sweet, even to an old black man."

"You mean somebody would kill you if you told me?"

But the old man was mumbling again, his eyes clouded.

"Not somebody. No human. No human being. The black gods of the swamps. My secret is inviolate, guarded by the Big Serpent, the god above all gods. He would send a little brother to kiss me with his cold lips—a little brother with a white crescent moon on his head. I sold my soul to the Big Serpent when he made me maker of *zuvembies*——"

Buckner stiffened.

"I heard that word once before," he

said softly, "from the lips of a dying black man, when I was a child. What does it mean?"

Fear filled the eyes of old Jacob.

"What have I said? No—no! I said nothing."

"*Zuvembies,*" prompted Buckner.

"*Zuvembies,*" mechanically repeated the old man, his eyes vacant. "A *zuvembie* was once a woman—on the Slave Coast they know of them. The drums that whisper by night in the hills of Haiti tell of them. The makers of *zuvembies* are honored of the people of Damballah. It is death to speak of it to a white man—it is one of the Snake God's forbidden secrets."

"You speak of the *zuvembies,*" said Buckner softly.

"I must not speak of it," mumbled the old man, and Griswell realized that he was thinking aloud, too far gone in his dotage to be aware that he was speaking at all. "No white man must know that I danced in the Black Ceremony of the voodoo, and was made a maker of *zombies* and *zuvembies.* The Big Snake punishes loose tongues with death."

"A *zuvembie* is a woman?" prompted Buckner.

"*Was* a woman," the old negro muttered. "*She* knew I was a maker of *zuvembies*—she came and stood in my hut and asked for the awful brew—the brew of ground snake-bones, and the blood of vampire bats, and the dew from a night-hawk's wings, and other elements unnamable. She had danced in the Black Ceremony—she was ripe to become a *zuvembie*—the Black Brew was all that was needed—the other was beautiful—I could not refuse her."

"Who?" demanded Buckner tensely, but the old man's head was sunk on his withered breast, and he did not reply. He seemed to slumber as he sat. Buckner shook him. "You gave a brew to make a woman a *zuvembie*—what is a *zuvembie?*"

The old man stirred resentfully and muttered drowsily.

"A *zuvembie* is no longer human. It knows neither relatives nor friends. It is one with the people of the Black World. It commands the natural demons—owls, bats, snakes and werewolves, and can fetch darkness to blot out a little light. It can be slain by lead or steel, but unless it is slain thus, it lives for ever, and it eats no such food as humans eat. It dwells like a bat in a cave or an old house. Time means naught to the *zuvembie;* an hour, a day, a year, all is one. It cannot speak human words, nor think as a human thinks, but it can hypnotize the living by the sound of its voice, and when it slays a man, it can command his lifeless body until the flesh is cold. As long as the blood flows, the corpse is its slave. Its pleasure lies in the slaughter of human beings."

"And why should one become a *zuvembie?*" asked Buckner softly.

"Hate," whispered the old man. "Hate! Revenge!"

"Was her name Joan?" murmured Buckner.

It was as if the name penetrated the fogs of senility that clouded the voodooman's mind. He shook himself and the film faded from his eyes, leaving them hard and gleaming as wet black marble.

"Joan?" he said slowly. "I have not heard that name for the span of a generation. I seem to have been sleeping, gentlemen; I do not remember—I ask your pardon. Old men fall asleep before the fire, like old dogs. You asked me of Blassenville Manor? Sir, if I were to tell you why I cannot answer you, you would deem it mere superstition. Yet the white man's God be my witness——"

As he spoke he was reaching across the hearth for a piece of firewood, groping among the heaps of sticks there. And his voice broke in a scream, as he jerked back his arm convulsively. And a horrible, thrashing, trailing *thing* came with it. Around the voodoo-man's arm a mottled length of that shape was wrapped, and a wicked wedge-shaped head struck again in silent fury.

The old man fell on the hearth, screaming, upsetting the simmering pot and scattering the embers, and then Buckner caught up a billet of firewood and crushed that flat head. Cursing, he kicked aside the knotting, twisting trunk, glaring briefly at the mangled head. Old Jacob had ceased screaming and writhing; he lay still, staring glassily upward.

"Dead?" whispered Griswell.

"Dead as Judas Iscariot," snapped Buckner, frowning at the twitching reptile. "That infernal snake crammed enough poison into his veins to kill a dozen men his age. But I think it was the shock and fright that killed him."

"What shall we do?" asked Griswell, shivering.

"Leave the body on that bunk. Nothin' can hurt it, if we bolt the door so the wild hogs can't get in, or any cat. We'll carry it into town tomorrow. We've got work to do tonight. Let's get goin'."

Griswell shrank from touching the corpse, but he helped Buckner lift it on the rude bunk, and then stumbled hastily out of the hut. The sun was hovering above the horizon, visible in dazzling red flame through the black stems of the trees.

They climbed into the car in silence, and went bumping back along the stumpy train.

"He said the Big Snake would send one of his brothers," muttered Griswell.

"Nonsense!" snorted Buckner. "Snakes like warmth, and that swamp is full of them. It crawled in and coiled up among that firewood. Old Jacob disturbed it, and it bit him. Nothin' supernatural about that." After a short silence he said, in a different voice, "That was the first time I ever saw a rattler strike without singin'; and the first time I ever saw a snake *with a white crescent moon on its head.*"

They were turning in to the main road before either spoke again.

"You think that the mulatto Joan has skulked in the house all these years?" Griswell asked.

"You heard what old Jacob said," answered Buckner grimly. "Time means nothin' to a *zuvembie.*"

As they made the last turn in the road, Griswell braced himself against the sight of Blassenville Manor looming black against the red sunset. When it came into view he bit his lip to keep from shrieking. The suggestion of cryptic horror came back in all its power.

"Look!" he whispered from dry lips as they came to a halt beside the road. Buckner grunted.

From the balustrades of the gallery rose a whirling cloud of pigeons that swept away into the sunset, black against the lurid glare. . . .

3. *The Call of Zuvembie*

BOTH men sat rigid for a few moments after the pigeons had flown.

"Well, I've seen them at last," muttered Buckner.

"Only the doomed see them, perhaps," whispered Griswell. "That tramp saw them——"

"Well, we'll see," returned the Southerner tranquilly, as he climbed out of the car, but Griswell noticed him unconsciously hitch forward his scabbarded gun.

The oaken door sagged on broken hinges. Their feet echoed on the broken

brick walk. The blind windows reflected the sunset in sheets of flame. As they came into the broad hall Griswell saw the string of black marks that ran across the floor and into the chamber, marking the path of a dead man.

Buckner had brought blankets out of the automobile. He spread them before the fireplace.

"I'll lie next to the door," he said. "You lie where you did last night."

"Shall we light a fire in the grate?" asked Griswell, dreading the thought of the blackness that would cloak the woods when the brief twilight had died.

"No. You've got a flashlight and so have I. We'll lie here in the dark and see what happens. Can you use that gun I gave you?"

"I suppose so. I never fired a revolver, but I know how it's done."

"Well, leave the shootin' to me, if possible." The sheriff seated himself cross-legged on his blankets and emptied the cylinder of his big blue Colt, inspecting each cartridge with a critical eye before he replaced it.

Griswell prowled nervously back and forth, begrudging the slow fading of the light as a miser begrudges the waning of his gold. He leaned with one hand against the mantelpiece, staring down into the dust-covered ashes. The fire that produced those ashes must have been builded by Elizabeth Blassenville, more than forty years before. The thought was depressing. Idly he stirred the dusty ashes with his toe. Something came to view among the charred debris—a bit of paper, stained and yellowed. Still idly he bent and drew it out of the ashes. It was a note-book with moldering cardboard backs.

"What have you found?" asked Buckner, squinting down the gleaming barrel of his gun.

"Nothing but an old note-book. Looks like a diary. The pages are covered with writing—but the ink is so faded, and the paper is in such a state of decay that I can't tell much about it. How do you suppose it came in the fireplace, without being burned up?"

"Thrown in long after the fire was out," surmised Buckner. "Probably found and tossed in the fireplace by somebody who was in here stealin' furniture. Likely somebody who couldn't read."

Griswell fluttered the crumbling leaves listlessly, straining his eyes in the fading light over the yellowed scrawls. Then he stiffened.

"Here's an entry that's legible! Listen!" He read:

" 'I know someone is in the house besides myself. I can hear someone prowling about at night when the sun has set and the pines are black outside. Often in the night I hear *it* fumbling at my door. *Who* is it? Is it one of my sisters? Is it Aunt Celia? If it is either of these, why does she steal so subtly about the house? Why does she tug at my door, and glide away when I call to her? Shall I open the door and go out to her? No, no! I dare not! I am afraid. Oh God, what shall I do? I dare not stay here—but where am I to go?' "

"By God!" ejaculated Buckner. "That must be Elizabeth Blassenville's diary! Go on!"

"I can't make out the rest of the page," answered Griswell. "But a few pages further on I can make out some lines." He read:

" 'Why did the negroes all run away when Aunt Celia disappeared? My sisters are dead. I know they are dead. I seem to sense that they died horribly, in fear and agony. But why? *Why?* If someone murdered Aunt Celia, why should that person murder my poor sisters? They were always kind to the black people.

Joan——'" He paused, scowling futilely.

"A piece of the page is torn out. Here's another entry under another date—at least I judge it's a date; I can't make it out for sure.

" '——the awful thing that the old negress hinted at? She named Jacob Blount, and Joan, but she would not speak plainly; perhaps she feared to——' Part of it gone here; then: 'No, no! How can it be? *She* is dead—or gone away. Yet—she was born and raised in the West Indies, and from hints she let fall in the past, I know she delved into the mysteries of the voodoo. I believe she even danced in one of their horrible ceremonies—how could she have been such a beast? And this—this horror. God, can such things be? I know not what to think. If it is *she* who roams the house at night, who fumbles at my door, who *whistles* so weirdly and sweetly—no, no, I must be going mad. If I stay here alone I shall die as hideously as my sisters must have died. Of that I am convinced.' "

THE incoherent chronicle ended as abruptly as it had begun. Griswell was so engrossed in deciphering the scraps that he was not aware that darkness had stolen upon them, hardly aware that Buckner was holding his electric torch for him to read by. Waking from his abstraction he started and darted a quick glance at the black hallway.

"What do you make of it?"

"What I've suspected all the time," answered Buckner. "That mulatto maid Joan turned *zuvembie* to avenge herself on Miss Celia. Probably hated the whole family as much as she did her mistress. She'd taken part in voodoo ceremonies on her native island until she was 'ripe,' as old Jacob said. All she needed was the Black Brew—he supplied that. She killed Miss Celia and the three older girls, and would have gotten Elizabeth but for chance. She's been lurkin' in this old house all these years, like a snake in a ruin."

"But why should she murder a stranger?"

"You heard what old Jacob said," reminded Buckner. "A *zuvembie* finds satisfaction in the slaughter of humans. She called Branner up the stair and split his head and stuck the hatchet in his hand, and sent him downstairs to murder you. No court will ever believe that, but if we can produce her body, that will be evidence enough to prove your innocence. My word will be taken, that she murdered Branner. Jacob said a *zuvembie* could be killed . . . in reporting this affair I don't have to be too accurate in detail."

"She came and peered over the balustrade of the stair at us," muttered Griswell. "But why didn't we find her tracks on the stair?"

"Maybe you dreamed it. Maybe a *zuvembie* can project her spirit—hell! why try to rationalize something that's outside the bounds of rationality? Let's begin our watch."

"Don't turn out the light!" exclaimed Griswell involuntarily. Then he added: "Of course. Turn it out. We must be in the dark as"—he gagged a bit—"as Branner and I were."

But fear like a physical sickness assailed him when the room was plunged in darkness. He lay trembling and his heart beat so heavily he felt as if he would suffocate.

"The West Indies must be the plague spot of the world," muttered Buckner, a blur on his blankets. "I've heard of *zombies*. Never knew before what a *zuvembie* was. Evidently some drug concocted by the voodoo-men to induce madness in women. That doesn't explain the other things, though: the hypnotic powers, the

abnormal longevity, the ability to control corpses—no, a *zuvembie* can't be merely a madwoman. It's a monster, something more and less than a human being, created by the magic that spawns in black swamps and jungles—well, we'll see."

His voice ceased, and in the silence Griswell heard the pounding of his own heart. Outside in the black woods a wolf howled eerily, and owls hooted. Then silence fell again like a black fog.

Griswell forced himself to lie still on his blankets. Time seemed at a standstill. He felt as if he were choking. The suspense was growing unendurable; the effort he made to control his crumbling nerves bathed his limbs in sweat. He clenched his teeth until his jaws ached and almost locked, and the nails of his fingers bit deeply into his palms.

He did not know what he was expecting. The fiend would strike again—but how? Would it be a horrible, sweet whistling, bare feet stealing down the creaking steps, or a sudden hatchet-stroke in the dark? Would it choose him or Buckner? *Was Buckner already dead?* He could see nothing in the blackness, but he heard the man's steady breathing. The Southerner must have nerves of steel. Or was that Buckner breathing beside him, separated by a narrow strip of darkness? Had the fiend already struck in silence, and taken the sheriff's place, there to lie in ghoulish glee until it was ready to strike?—a thousand hideous fancies assailed Griswell tooth and claw.

He began to feel that he would go mad if he did not leap to his feet, screaming, and burst frenziedly out of that accursed house—not even the fear of the gallows could keep him lying there in the darkness any longer—the rhythm of Buckner's breathing was suddenly broken, and Griswell felt as if a bucket of ice-water had been poured over him. From somewhere above them rose a sound of weird, sweet whistling. . . .

Griswell's control snapped, plunging his brain into darkness deeper than the physical blackness which engulfed him. There was a period of absolute blankness, in which a realization of *motion* was his first sensation of awakening consciousness. He was running, madly, stumbling over an incredibly rough road. All was darkness about him, and he ran blindly. Vaguely he realized that he must have bolted from the house, and fled for perhaps miles before his overwrought brain began to function. He did not care; dying on the gallows for a murder he never committed did not terrify him half as much as the thought of returning to that house of horror. He was overpowered by the urge to run—run—run as he was running now, blindly, until he reached the end of his endurance. The mist had not yet fully lifted from his brain, but he was aware of a dull wonder that he could not see the stars through the black branches. He wished vaguely that he could see where he was going. He believed he must be climbing a hill, and that was strange, for he knew there were no hills within miles of the Manor. Then above and ahead of him a dim glow began.

HE SCRAMBLED toward it, over ledge-like projections that were more and more taking on a disquieting symmetry. Then he was horror-stricken to realize that a sound was impacting on his ears—*a weird mocking whistle.* The sound swept the mists away. Why, what was this? *Where was he?* Awakening and realization came like the stunning stroke of a butcher's maul. He was not fleeing along a road, or climbing a hill; he was mounting a stair. He was still in Blassenville Manor! *And he was climbing the stair!*

An inhuman scream burst from his

lips. Above it the mad whistling rose in a ghoulish piping of demoniac triumph. He tried to stop—to turn back—even to fling himself over the balustrade. His shrieking rang unbearably in his own ears. But his will-power was shattered to bits. It did not exist. He had no will. He had dropped his flashlight, and he had forgotten the gun in his pocket. He could not command his own body. His legs, moving stiffly, worked like pieces of mechanism detached from his brain, obeying an outside will. Clumping methodically they carried him shrieking up the stair toward the witch-fire glow shimmering above him.

"Buckner!" he screamed. "Buckner! Help, for God's sake!"

His voice strangled in his throat. He had reached the upper landing. He was tottering down the hallway. The whistling sank and ceased, but its impulsion still drove him on. He could not see from what source the dim glow came. It seemed to emanate from no central focus. But he saw a vague figure shambling toward him. It looked like a woman, but no human woman ever walked with that skulking gait, and no human woman ever had that face of horror, that leering yellow blur of lunacy—he tried to scream at the sight of that face, at the glint of keen steel in the uplifted claw-like hand—but his tongue was frozen.

Then something crashed deafeningly behind him; the shadows were split by a tongue of flame which lit a hideous figure falling backward. Hard on the heels of the report rang an inhuman squawk.

In the darkness that followed the flash Griswęll fell to his knees and covered his face with his hands. He did not hear Buckner's voice. The Southerner's hand on his shoulder shook him out of his swoon.

A light in his eyes blinded him. He blinked, shaded his eyes, looked up into Buckner's face, bending at the rim of the circle of light. The sheriff was pale.

"Are you hurt? God, man, are you hurt? There's a butcher knife there on the floor——"

"I'm not hurt," mumbled Griswell. "You fired just in time — the fiend! Where is it? Where did it go?"

"Listen!"

Somewhere in the house there sounded a sickening flopping and flapping as of something that thrashed and struggled in its death convulsions.

"Jacob was right," said Buckner grimly. "Lead can kill them. I hit her, all right. Didn't dare use my flashlight, but there was enough light. When that whistlin' started you almost walked over me gettin' out. I knew you were hypnotized, or whatever it is. I followed you up the stairs. I was right behind you, but crouchin' low so she wouldn't see me, and maybe get away again. I almost waited too long before I fired—but the sight of her almost paralyzed me. Look!"

He flashed his light down the hall, and now it shone bright and clear. And it shone on an aperture gaping in the wall where no door had showed before.

"The secret panel Miss Elizabeth found!" Buckner snapped. "Come on!"

He ran across the hallway and Griswell followed him dazedly. The flopping and thrashing came from beyond that mysterious door, and now the sounds had ceased.

THE light revealed a narrow, tunnel-like corridor that evidently led through one of the thick walls. Buckner plunged into it without hesitation.

"Maybe it couldn't think like a human," he muttered, shining his light ahead of him. "But it had sense enough to erase its tracks last night so we couldn't

trail it to that point in the wall and maybe find the secret panel. There's a room ahead—the secret room of the Blassenvilles!"

And Griswell cried out: "My God! It's the windowless chamber I saw in my dream, with the three bodies hanging—ahhhhh!"

Buckner's light playing about the circular chamber became suddenly motionless. In that wide ring of light three figures appeared, three dried, shriveled, mummy-like shapes, still clad in the moldering garments of the last century. Their slippers were clear of the floor as they hung by their withered necks from chains suspended from the ceiling.

"The three Blassenville sisters!" muttered Buckner. "Miss Elizabeth wasn't crazy, after all."

"Look!" Griswell could barely make his voice intelligible. "There—over there in the corner!"

The light moved, halted.

"Was that thing a woman once?" whispered Griswell. "God, look at that face, even in death. Look at those claw-like hands, with black talons like those of a beast. Yes, it was human, though—even the rags of an old ballroom gown. Why should a mulatto maid wear such a dress, I wonder?"

"This has been her lair for over forty years," muttered Buckner, brooding over the grinning grisly thing sprawling in the corner. "This clears you, Griswell — a crazy woman with a hatchet—that's all the authorities need to know. God, what a revenge!—what a foul revenge! Yet what a bestial nature she must have had, in the beginnin', to delve into voodoo as she must have done——"

"The mulatto woman?" whispered Griswell, dimly sensing a horror that overshadowed all the rest of the terror.

Buckner shook his head. "We misunderstood old Jacob's maunderin's, and the things Miss Elizabeth wrote — *she* must have known, but family pride sealed her lips. Griswell, I understand now; the mulatto woman had her revenge, but not as we'd supposed. She didn't drink the Black Brew old Jacob fixed for her. It was for somebody else, to be given secretly in her food, or coffee, no doubt. Then Joan ran away, leavin' the seeds of the hell she'd sowed to grow."

"That — that's not the mulatto woman?" whispered Griswell.

"When I saw her out there in the hallway I knew she was no mulatto. And those distorted features still reflect a family likeness. I've seen her portrait, and I can't be mistaken. There lies the creature that was once Celia Blassenville."

Goetterdaemmerung

By SEABURY QUINN

There was a moment of stunning impact as the two cars crashed together, then a strange awakening—but what was the inscription on the tombstone in that ancient graveyard?

THE predawn chill was in the air and wisps of vapor indistinct and intangible as dreams dreamt in another dream were spiraling and swirling from the Hudson's slowly heaving surface as Stacy passed the barricades which marked the Jersey terminal of the George Washington Bridge. Behind him reared the topless minarets and spires of New York, dull black as sharply serrated basalt cliffs with only here and there a firefly jet of light to show where janitresses labored late to clean the miles of checkered corridors that floored the towering office buildings, or bookkeepers worked tired eyes to exhaustion to make their reports ready for the morning. Against the crenelated skyline the east turned tawny gray, then steel, lightened to pale, cold blue. To his left lay Palisade, Coytsville on the right, and straight ahead the long, smooth ribbon of the concrete road.

He pressed his foot on the accelerator as he cleared the Port Authority police booths and the pointer on the dial of his speedometer swung in a sharp arc, forty, sixty, then eighty. The party that the boys had given him had been a grand success; cocktails, sherry, sauterne, burgundy, finally champagne with dinner; brandy and Chartreuse with coffee, then the evening's serious drinking. "All very well, my boy; quite the thing for bachelors, but tomorrow — no, today!—your bachelor days are done." There were forty miles of road between him and an hour or two in bed, a hot bath and cold shower, an ice massage and careful toilet, then St. Dunstan's and the oh-ing and the ah-ing of the crowd when the organ started playing Lohengrin and Emily and Mr. Taylor started up the aisle with the bridesmaids pacing stiffly as automatons before them. Fumes of Scotch and Irish mixed with bourbon clouded through his brain, and he smiled the fatuous grin of the half drunken as he urged the car to greater speed.

Eighty — eighty-five, the indicator registered. "Tum — tum — te-tum," he hummed the opening bar of Wagner's Bridal Chorus—"here comes the bride . . . dearly belovèd, we are gathered together here . . . swell condition you'll be in to go through with it, you half-baked, drunken lout . . . so what? Who cares? What'll be the difference two hundred years from now——"

The red light swinging from the stalled truck's tail came at him with a breathless rush. Like a meteor, a comet, a world gone blazing from its orbit it dashed at him, red as flames reflected in a pool of blazing oil, red as hell-fire licking at a sinful soul, red as the blood that seemed already spurting from his face to meet the smashing impact of collision. "O, God have mercy!" he exclaimed, and his voice though scarce above a whisper had the knife-edged sharpness of a shrilling scream. "O, God——"

THE voices had an oddly alien intonation, not quite English, not quite any foreign speech, but puzzlingly mixed, thick-tongued, queerly slurred, yet understandable. Stacy set his teeth and shut his eyes more tightly. The pain would be upon him any moment now! Presently the anodyne of shock or drugs would wear away, and he'd begin to feel the torment of mashed bones and mangled flesh in every nerve. Dully, he remembered the collision. He must have struck that stalled van like a cannon ball. Lucky to be alive . . . or was he? When he raised his lids he'd see 'em standing over him, nurse and doctor, looking at him with professional cheerfulness, but underneath the bandages he knew his body would be maimed and broken like a china doll dropped from a tower. Crippled for life, probably; bed-bound, tethered to a wheel chair, helpless as a six weeks' babe. . . .

"You like get up now; mebbe so, Mister, please?" the softly slurring, slightly hissing intonation broke his gloomy mental monolog. "Long time you lie here like one piece dead man. You all right now, mebbe so?"

Slowly, lid by cautious doubtful lid, Stacy's eyes came open. This was no sterile-walled hospital room he lay in,

"What nameless horror sat enthroned upon a face that must be hidden from the eyes of men?"

nor were these people nurse and doctor. He lay upon a bank of rankly growing grass flecked here and there with brilliant trumpet-runner blossoms, and across the heaving mounds of sward-upholstered earth there sprawled a jungle growth of wild blackberry bushes. Oak and pine and poplar trees grew clustering on the row of hills that cut his vision on the west; eastward rose another thickly matted forest, its tree-trunks bound together by an undergrowth as unkempt as a giant's beard.

The men who bent above him were as hard to place as the wild countryside. They were short and thickly built, and while their skin was white it had a sallow tint that hinted at an underlay of tan. Their hair was straight and black and coarse, their eyes dark brown and slanting upward at the outer corners, their noses short and rather flat, with flaring nostrils. Vaguely Stacy tried to catalog them. White skins with Mongoloid features. Finns, perhaps?

Resolutely he reclosed his eyes. "'Tisn't so," he muttered. "Can't be. I hit that truck ten miles outside of Hackensack; so if they didn't take me to a hospital I'd be lying by the road. There's no road here, and I'm dam' sure this is no hospital. I'm still under. That's it, they gave me ether when they operated, and I'm still under it. Go away, little men," he waved a hand impatiently. "You're not really here. You're just the figments of a fantasy. Pretty soon I'll wake up and begin to hurt like hell. I'd like to sleep till then. Go away, please."

The little men looked at him stolidly, showing neither pleasure nor displeasure at his words. They seemed more inquisitive than friendly as the smaller of them asked again, "You like get up now, mebbe, please? You come along us?"

"Anything to be obliging," Stacy answered as he got unsteadily upon his feet.

The small, queer-looking men assisted him, one on either side, and as he spread his arms out, resting them upon his helpers' shoulders, he noticed that they wore a costume which combined the Orient and Occident grotesquely. Tight trousers cased their legs, and short jackets with wide sleeves and round necks sheathed their upper bodies. Upon their heads they wore round caps of knitted fabric, while their feet were shod with heavy knitted socks and sandals made of plaited straw. Each had a girdle belted round his waist and in it was a short, curved-bladed sword. One had a bow and quiverful of arrows slung across his back; the other bore a long spear which he used now as a staff, leaning on it heavily as Stacy's weight pressed on his shoulder.

Their path wound up a thickly wooded hillside, and as they mounted, Stacy's strength revived. By the time they reached the crest he walked alone, drawing back to let his helpers lead the way. But this, it seemed, they had no mind to do. When he motioned them to take the lead they stared at him, not hostilely, but, it seemed to him, suspiciously, then shook their heads decidedly. Finally a compromise was reached and the spearman stepped ahead while the archer dropped back several paces, pointing down the path which wound between the clustering pine trees. Stacy motioned him to come abreast, but the fellow laid his hand upon his sword and scowled.

"O. K., brother," Stacy answered. "If I'm to be brought in under guard it's quite all right with me. But don't prod me with that sticker or you'll wake me up; then you'd both go glimmering back to dreamland's storehouse."

As they crossed the little brook that trickled through the valley, Stacy saw the tracks of deer pressed in the sand, and an eery feeling rippled up his spine as, close beside a pool made by the brooklet's sud-

den winding, he noted larger paw-prints. Mountain lion tracks, he recognized them from his western hunting-trips. Farther on, a tree showed ragged gashes on its bark, and a tuft or two of brown-black fur. Bear! This was the wildest dream a fellow ever had, no matter how much he'd been drinking. Less than thirty miles from New York, and a country wild as California in Kit Carson's day, with deer and bear and mountain lion roaming through the woods!

They followed the rough track across another hill, dipped down into a deeper valley, then began a steep ascent. On the summit of the hill he saw a group of buildings set against the sky, and drew his breath in sudden wonder. The nearer structures were no more than huts, low, single-storied cabins with swooping overhanging eaves; foundationless, set flat upon the ground. Arranged in circular formation, they clustered round a knot of larger buildings reared on the summit of the hill. These were surrounded by a dry ditch six feet deep and possibly twelve wide; an earthen bank sloped upward from its inner rim, set with a palisade of pointed stakes. A wide gateway with massive overhanging roof led through the crude outwork. Within the compound was a group of low, ignoble-looking houses, larger than the huts outside, but still far from impressive, and rising like skyscrapers from the meaner buildings were two pagodas, one two floors high, the other three, the upward sweep of their veranda roofs described in crudely chiseled puncheons, their sides rough logs. As they passed through the gate Stacy noted that the earth before the taller structures had been scraped free of grass, and that a doorless gateway stood before the higher one. It was a simple thing of logs, two uprights with a projecting crossbar at the top, and underneath a shorter horizontal beam with unprojecting ends.

"Great Scott," breathed Stacy, "pagodas and a torii. Japan in Jersey! What the——"

His question broke upon a scream, echoed by a shout of terror from his guards. In the sun-splashed foreground of the taller of the two pagodas stood a female figure, rigid as if carved of stone, and before it, sunbeams burnishing its tawny scales until they shone like polished copper, coiled a six-foot rattlesnake, head reared for a stroke, its little fork-tipped tongue alive with flickering menace.

The fellow with the bow reached into his quiver for an arrow, but the spearman waved him back. "No shoot," he ordered hoarsely. "If arrow miss, the Singing One bites Holiness! Pray!" And down upon their knees they went, striking foreheads to the earth and gabbling frenzied prayers so fast their words seemed strung together in a rosary of unintelligible syllables.

Stacy ripped his topcoat off and held it by the shoulders, draped curtainwise before him. *"Hi!"* he yelled, stamping on the hard-packed earth till little puffs of dust came up around his feet. *"Hi-yah!"* The reptile's tongue shot out again with death-tipped menace as it swung its head inquiringly in his direction, but it made no move toward him.

Slowly, step by cautious, shuffling step, Stacy advanced toward the snake. Now he was twenty feet away, now fifteen—ten. The distance seemed incalculable, his progress like the heavy-footed motion of one who tries to run while held fast in the clutches of a nightmare. Two more feet nearer to the snake, another.

Again he shouted as he drove his heel against the earth, and this time action followed. Like a lance of summer lightning darting from a gravid cloud the serpent struck at him and the impact of its ar-

mored head against the fabric nearly jerked the topcoat from his hands.

He threw the garment forward, blanketing the reptile's coils, gathered up the edges till the squirming deadly thing lay bagged within it, then swung it high above his head, beating it against the hard-packed earth with stroke on flailing stroke, finally flinging it down with all his might and stamping on it till the writhing billows underneath the coat's folds ceased.

With a grin he turned to reassure the rescued woman, but a shouted order sounded in his ears and he felt himself seized in a flying tackle. "Down! Down and kiss the earth before the feet of Holiness! It is the law that none may stand before her till she gives permission!"

Strong arms wound round his legs, strong hands pressed on his shoulders, and as he stumbled to his knees a hand upon his neck forced his face down until his forehead bumped against the earth.

"Holiness!" The spearman's voice was hoarse with terror. "This one did not know the law! We kill him now if you will give permission——"

"Silence, you wooden thing, you less than nothing!" the sharp command cut off the spearman's offer. "Unloose the stranger who risked life to save me from the singing serpent, and get you to the guard room. When the tribe assembles I will deal with you who would have let me be a victim to the singing snake while you had weapons in your hands." The men rose trembling and the voice continued:

"Come, stranger. Come with me, and we shall talk."

Obediently, Stacy followed through the torii's open gateway to the log pagoda's entrance. His guide turned for an instant at the doorway and commanded: "Off shoes before you enter in the place of Holiness," and, suiting her own action to the order, slipped her clumsy wooden clogs off and preceded him into the lamplit dimness of the building.

The place was larger than he had expected. The lower story seemed to be a single room hexagonal in shape with walls of carefully smoothed planks and ceiling beamed with rough squared logs. What the floor was made of he could not determine, for it was entirely covered with a smooth straw matting on which were laid round mats of softer straw some three feet in diameter. Lanterns made of parchment dangled from the ceiling beams, giving off a soft dim light which made the great room even larger in appearance. As he looked about him curiously he was surprized to see the place contained no article of furniture except the round straw mats. On one of these his guide had dropped down to her knees, tucked her feet demurely under her, then rocked back till she sat on them. Now she regarded him with bright-eyed curiosity as she motioned him to seat himself upon a near-by mat.

He tried to kneel, but found the posture tiring, then thrust his feet before him, only to be made aware that sitting so without a back support was most uncomfortable. Finally he compromised by squatting in tailor fashion on the soft straw disk, and:

"How are you called, and from what tribe do you come?" she asked as he completed his experiments and faced her with a rather shamefaced grin.

He had an idea she was laughing at him, for her long blue eyes were bright beneath the lanterns' mellow glow, but he could not tell certainly, for from the eyes down a veil of heavy cloth obscured her features, leaving only brow and eyes and base of nose exposed to view. For the rest she wore a woolen mantle of a dark plum purple embroidered round the hem and bottoms of the sleeves with wor-

sted of a lighter shade of the same color. In general outline it was like a kimono, and the Japanese effect was heightened by the broad band of soft woolen stuff that circled three times around her waist and tied in a coquettish bow in back. Her hands and what he could see of her face were almost ivory pale, her hair red-brown and glowing, "like embers burning in a bed of autumn leaves," he thought. She wore it piled in heavy coils around her head with strands of bright blue worsted plaited in it, and the general effect was like a crown of rose gold set with sapphires. The eyes above the purple veil were blue, sea blue which seemed to deepen as they looked at him, long and slightly lifted at the outer corners like an Oriental's. Her feet were naked, for she wore no stockings and her wooden clogs were left outside the door. He gazed embarrassedly at her. There was something strange in those long eyes that had a trick of lingering on his a second longer than he had expected, something pregnant with a knowledge far beyond her years, something which showed learning in the lore of things which he could only guess at.

"How do they call you, stranger, and from what tribe do you come?" the question was repeated softly, but the tone betokened one whose habit was to have an instant answer to her questions.

"Stacy is the name; Robert Atwood Stacy, attorney and counsellor at law," he answered with a smile, "but my friends all call me Bob."

"Boob?" she repeated tentatively.

"I hope not. Bob, you know, as in bobbing for apples at Halloween."

"Boob," she decided firmly. "Whence come you, Boob?"

"H'm," he rubbed his chin. "I wish I knew the answer. An hour ago—this morning—maybe it was yesterday—I was on the road to Hackensack from New York, then"—he spread his hands and broke off with a chuckle—"first thing I knew your little playmates were inviting me to rise and come with them, and here I am. What's your name?"

"What is your tribe, your nation?" her eyes came up to his with something more of seriousness in them. "Are you from across the high hills?"

Something, some flickering threat in her blue eyes, perhaps, warned him to be careful in his answer. "No, I'm from New York," he replied. "Just a poor boy from the little town——"

"New Yowork" — like the men who brought him in, she seemed to have some trouble in pronouncing *r*'s, though her speech was not as thick as theirs—"I do not know that tribe."

She looked at him in silence till: "What's your name?" he repeated.

"I ask, I do not answer questions, Boob."

"But—oh, come, be clubby, what do they call you?"

"I am the Holiness."

"Holiness? That's an odd name. Who wished it on you?"

"I am the Holiness, the priestess-servant of the Great One, the mouth through which He speaks. My wish is law, my whim is life or death, all must kiss the dust before me, none may stand or sit until I give permission. My words declare the Great One's will." She did not make the statement boastfully or arrogantly, she said it quietly and evenly, a statement of fact as it existed.

"My word, you are important in the social register," grinned Stacy; then as she answered nothing: "Now that we're duly introduced and have our hair down, how about removing the appendage?"

"Ap-den-dage?" she echoed tentatively.

"The masquerade, the veil, you know."

"No man may look upon the Holiness unveiled and live."

"Oh, come," he urged. "Don't be so coy. I'll bet you're pretty as a picture, and I never saw a pretty girl who didn't like to show her wares. Take the disguise off, Ho—Holiness!" He half rose from the mat, putting out a playful hand to lift the shrouding mask, then paused inert as though gripped by paralysis.

The pupils of her eyes seemed spreading till the blue corners gleamed black as polished onyx, and the rage in her was all at once a living thing, coiling venomously behind her hate-filled stare. "Fool, I'll have you flayed alive for this outrage, aye, and the raw flesh rubbed with salt!" The threat was scarcely louder than a whisper, but he saw the violet veil that masked her features flutter with the violence of her breath.

Before he knew what she designed she reached beneath a kneeling-mat and seized a metal disk strung from a length of cord. With one hand she swung the plate before her till its keen edge whistled through the air as though it were a lashing sword-blade; then, adeptly, she struck the knuckles of her free hand on the whirling circle. The metal shrieked as if in torment; a living quality seemed in the sick, shrill cry of pain that issued from it and thinned into a high sharp wailing whine which hung upon the air for second after agonizing second. Before the shuddering echo of the metal's whining scream died a squad of men came boiling through the door. They dropped upon their knees and struck their foreheads to the floor, but they knelt four deep before the exit, and the long knives in their hands gave promise of their readiness to act. Stacy reconsidered his intent to hurdle them in a wild dash for freedom.

"Take him to the castle," he heard the Holiness command. "Hold him there with those two others till I work my will on him."

TWIN bonfires blazed at each end of the stockade when the guards led Stacy and his fellow prisoners from their dungeon. All afternoon he had lain in the prison, a well-like room with rough log sides and an open wooden grating at its top, floored with earth and utterly devoid of furniture. Toward evening hunger had assailed him and a searing thirst made his sufferings more acute, but no one came to give him food or drink, and when he shouted one or twice there was no answer but the booming echoes of his voice reverberating in the barrel-like enclosure and the whimperings of his fellow convicts. When he sought to talk to these he had no answer but their hopeless groans. Plainly, the fear of punishment was on them, and its poison penetrated to the marrow. Gradually the cancellated pattern of the sunlight sifting through the dungeon's latticed roof had moved across the floor, climbed the rough log wall, and vanished. For an hour or more the condemned trio lay in utter darkness; then a torch flare blinded them as guards flung back the grating and dropped knotted cords of plaited rawhide down to them. Impatient at imprisonment, Stacy seized the rope that dangled by his shoulder and was drawn up quickly, but his fellows crouched in terror on the damp earth floor till several guardsmen dropped into the hole and dragged them screaming to the room above. A dozen pairs of rough hands seized each culprit, ripped his garments off and clothed him in a long loose robe of purple wool, bound his hands securely with a twist of cord, finally dropped a steeple-shaped straw basket on his head; so that while he saw the ground before him dimly through the meshes of the hamper he could see nothing at the sides and was, of course, entirely masked from all who looked at him. Thus penitentially arrayed they were led out.

Men and women squatted kneeling in the compound, and Stacy saw they wore an oddly semi-Oriental dress, the men in short, loose, full-sleeved jackets, long tight trousers and straw sandals, the women in loose mantles fashioned like kimonos and belted at the waist with wide, bright-colored scarves.

A sort of dais had been set up before the lower of the two pagodas, and on this squatted an old man whose brilliant red attire marked him as a personage of some importance. Around him grouped a knot of spearmen. Across the compound by the taller pagoda was another dais, unoccupied, and at its foot there stood a larger guard of men with bows and arrows.

Whispers, strident but repressed, rose in mounting susurration as the condemned trio made the circuit of the area, and it seemed to Stacy that the audience looked more with pleased anticipation than with dread upon whatever lay in store for him and his companions.

A deep-toned gong beat slowly somewhere in the tall pagoda, and as if it had been formed of puppets actuated by a single string the whole concourse bent swiftly forward till every forehead rested on the ground. Stacy stiffened resolutely, but a spear-shaft struck him in the back and, hand-fettered as he was, he stumbled till he stretched full length upon the ground beside his two prostrate companions.

The gong reverberated twice again and, turtle-like, he raised his head and peered between the meshes of his basket helmet. In the dark pagoda doorway stood a figure white as something carved of Parian marble in a niche of burnished onyx. It was the Holiness, he knew, for he recognized her red-gold hair, but the transformation that was wrought in her was startling.

She had laid aside her purple mantle and stood starkly nude save for a sash of red and green and yellow circling round her waist and hips and fastened in the front with a half-knot; he thought that never had he seen a thing as perfect as her pale, slim body with its slender hips, its tapering legs and full, high, pointed breasts. Oddly, she seemed more mysterious and aloof in the candor of her nakedness than when bundled in voluminous robe and veil.

Her veil. He had forgotten that. Now he might see her face. Eagerly he peered between the basket's criss-crossed straws. Would it match her blue, mysterious eyes? Would the lips be warm and soft and red, the nose sharp-cut and clearly modeled, the chin . . . an exclamation almost of dismay escaped him.

From throat to hair-line she was masked in a false face which might have been the work of a mad artist set afire with hashish. Surely, nothing quite so hideous was ever seen outside the frenzy of a nightmare. White it was, bone-white, as though its maker used a twice-bleached skull to fashion it, and on its hoary surface had been painted writhing zebra stripes of staring black, swirling upward in reversed interrogation points above each eye, running vertically from brow to nose, etching lines of age-old cruelty and lustful hate about the mouth; finally, upon the forward-jutting chin, a great black disk was set in obscene simulation of a dimple. The thing was devilish, a dreadful combination of Melpomene's tragic mask and one of those appalling horror-faces shaped by the olden sculptors of Japan. Despite the reassuring realization that he dreamed, Stacy felt a chill of terrified revulsion writhing down his spine. What sort of creature hid behind a mask like that, what nameless, secret horror sat enthroned upon a face that must be hidden from the eyes of men?

In her right hand she bore an eight-foot

rod topped with a hook-beaked halberd, and this she lowered as she passed the prostrate prisoners, tapping Stacy's two companions lightly with the blade. The metal might have been white-hot, for as they felt it on their shoulders the wretched convicts writhed as if in agony unbearable and uttered gasping, whimpering cries for mercy.

SLOWLY the Holiness made the circuit of the compound, then mounted to the straw mats set upon the vacant dais and squatted Buddha-like with slim feet turned sole upward on her thighs, her halberd laid across bent knees. "People of the Shô-gin," her voice though soft was vibrant, "I call you here to witness judgment of the Holiness on cowards. Two of these less-than-nothings yonder saw the Holiness beset by the serpent that sings and made no move to save her, though they had weapons in their hands. Behold the fate that waits those who would hesitate a breathing-space to give their lives to guard the mouthpiece of the Great One!"

Apparently the tribal custom gave no right of hearing to the accused, for as the woman finished speaking a dozen men dashed forward, seized the prisoners by their arms and dragged them screaming to a spot midway between the fires where two rough boxes had been placed. Into these they thrust the luckless convicts, and with wooden mallets fixed tops upon the chests with dowels; then, while Stacy retched and sickened at the sight, twelve more men hastened up with long two-handed saws, took station at the boxes, heads and feet and centers, and at a nod from the masked priestess bent their backs and drew the blades across the chests' closed lids.

Muffled cries came from the coffins as sharp metal bit into the soft pine planks, but the sawyers worked with practised unconcern. Before a dozen strokes were made it was apparent that the men who sawed the caskets' lower ends worked faster than their fellows. The coffined convicts would be sectioned at the knees before the other blades could sever them at breast and throat. Now the screams of torment rose more shrilly and the mounting piles of sawdust showed a ruddy tinge as drops of blood began to dye the serrated teeth that gnawed inexorably at the writhing wretches prisoned in the chests. At last the gruesome bloody work was done and the coffin sections with their grisly contents tossed into the leaping flames.

"Now it's my turn," Stacy gritted. What had she promised him? To be flayed alive and have salt rubbed into his raw and bleeding flesh? Please Heaven he'd not weaken too much as the flayers' knives bit into him; only let him show these savages how a man could stand the torture!

Now they had seized him by the arms and set him on his feet before the dais where the Holiness was seated, and at a sign from her they took the basket from his face. "Look well, O people of the Shô-gin," the voice behind the skull mask ordered. "What those craven ones with weapons dared not do this stranger did bare-handed. Alone and weaponless he faced the singing serpent and did battle for the Holiness' life. They had brought him in a prisoner, and he owed no duty to the tribe, but when he saw the coiling death he did not hesitate, not even long enough to arm himself, but did the needful with his naked hands. He is a hero worthy of your homage, and I declare that henceforth he shall wait on me and bear my spear and guard me while I sleep and wake. The Holiness has need of such as he. I have spoken."

"Not so!" The shrill denial sounded from the crowd of women gathered by

the fire that blazed before the smaller of the two pagodas. "The law demands that strangers die by flame, lest spies come in among us and take news of us to enemies. Our men were put to death for lack of courage, yet they dared not fight the thing that sings lest their movements anger it and make it give the Holiness the kiss of death. It was for the Holiness' safety, not from fear, they held their hands. The stranger risked the Holiness' life when he approached the singing serpent. For that if for no other reason he should suffer death by fire. *I* have spoken!"

"And for the last time, worm!" The Holiness' voice was low and soft, but charged with anger till it trembled like a harp-string in the wind. "Cast her in the fire, some of you. Such is the fate of those who speak unbidden to the Holiness."

Four archers leaped to execute the order, but the condemned woman cast herself on hands and knees before the dais on which the red-robed chief was squatting. "The law, O Shu-gan; I ask the law!" she wailed. "Let me die the death by fire, as Holiness decrees, but let the stranger also suffer as the law demands!"

The bowmen paused irresolute, and glanced back questioningly as the old chief nodded. "The law commands that strangers suffer death," he began hesitantly, but:

"Silence, beetle, would you too feel the flames' caress? How dare you speak without permission?" the masked woman demanded. "The law? The Holiness' wishes are the law which none may question. Down, down upon your face and lick the earth before my feet, or die the death!

"Throw that creeping slug into the fire," she continued to the archers, "and throw yourselves in after her, you who dared delay or question my authority."

The woman screamed and fought with savage despair, but her captors forced her toward the roaring flames, paused a second, then, ranged each side of her, marched straight into the flames without a backward glance. Her dying shriek still echoed as the aged chief, helped by two spearmen, descended from his throne, hobbled through the firelight and cast himself upon the earth before the Holiness' dais where, obedient to her order, he thrust his tongue out and began to lick the ground.

"Enough!" the priestess gave him leave to stop and waved him back. "You are excused, old man, but see that you do not offend again. Next time I may not have such patience with your insolence." She nodded her masked head toward Stacy, and two archers took him by the elbows to lead him to the chief's pagoda, where they stripped his long robe off and clothed him in a jacket of deep purple edged with scarlet, a pair of almost skin-tight trousers, coarse woolen socks and sandals made of plaited straw. Last of all they wound a yellow sash around his waist and thrust a sword into it.

"Humph, I must look like a chorus man in *The Mikado,*" Stacy muttered as he glanced down at his costume. "Haven't you a fan? That would lend the final, necessary touch."

The archers had not spoken as they worked, but now one of them smiled. "You like fan?" he asked. "O. K."

"What?" Stacy asked amazed. "What did you say?"

"O. K.," the other answered. "You like for have a fan. I get one."

He shuffled off, returning in a moment with a folding fan and thrust it into Stacy's belt. "O. K.?" he queried.

"Where in blazes did you learn to say 'O. K.,' you blighted heathen?"

The fellow shrugged a shoulder. "Always knew it, never had to learn," he answered. "You know what it means?"

"I'm hanged if I know if I do or not. Nothing in this blasted place makes sense. If——"

"Hurry," bade the other archer nervously. "The Holiness will not forgive delay."

"You're a duly initiated member of the lodge, now, son," Stacy told himself as he crossed the compound with his guides; "you might as well go through the ritual." Accordingly, when they halted at the dais on which the priestess sat he dropped upon his knees and bumped his forehead three times on the ground with business-like efficiency.

Taking cue from his companions he rose when they did and at the summons of the priestess' nod stepped forward. She leaned a little toward him, and he caught the glimmer of blue eyes behind the peepholes of her hideous mask as she handed him her halberd.

"Take this, my Boob," she ordered. "It has been my staff of office; it shall be your symbol of authority, and under me you use it as you wish. With it I give my life and safety to your keeping. Come."

GUARDING one whose attributes were those of queen and goddess was no onerous task, Bob found. The pagoda which the priestess occupied was sacred ground, and save for the women who went over it with brooms of pine boughs and small dusters made of knotted feathers no one but the Holiness and he set foot across the threshold. The girl slept on the upper floor, mounting to her dormitory shortly after dark and drawing the light ladder of spliced willow withes up after her. From dark till daybreak Bob rested on a bed of soft straw matting with his halberd close at hand, and for the first ten nights his chief concern was staying wakeful. On the eleventh evening, wearied with his sinecure, he dropped off in a doze, confident he would be wakened by the rattle of the priestess' ladder when she let it down at dawn.

"Good Lord," he murmured drowsily, "what wouldn't I give for a regular bed with a shower in the morning——" Drowned in rising tides of sleepy weariness, his voice trailed off. Bed or no bed, shower or no shower, a whole night's rest would be a luxury. . . .

Something stirred upon his chest, a thing no warmer than the night-chilled air, a thing that slid and slipped and seemed to melt into itself. He put a hand up sleepily to brush it off and the fluent weight went rigid, hardening like the knotted muscles in a boxer's arm as they tighten for a blow. Instinct—there was no time for reason—warned him to lie still, and from half-closed lids he strove to see the thing that rested on him. At first he could not make it out; then, distinguished from the outlines of his woolen blouse, but only half distinguishable, he saw flattened coils of body, wedge-shaped head, smoothly undulating, threatening length of upreared neck—a copperhead, silent cousin of the rattler, furtive, lightning-quick and deadly. The snake's head swung across an arc; its questing tongue flashed like a lambent flame between its fang-set jaws; finally, its evil temper lulled by Stacy's stillness, the wicked, deadly head went down again and came to rest upon the looping coils.

The minute hand of a run-down old clock moves faster than Bob Stacy as he let his hands down to the floor, spread rigid fingers on the matting and with infinite, slow patience bent his knees until his heels were braced. A deep breath, taken slowly lest the rising of his chest alarm the reptile, then—quick! A sidewise turn, a leap that brought him to his feet, a frenzied jump that took him out of reach of the mad, lashing death that coiled upon the matting, struck and

coiled again, then struck once more, like a steel spring bent and loosed by some infernal mechanism.

Now he had the halberd in his hand, now he chopped it down across the serpent's circling folds. Then using the wide, flat blade for shovel, he scooped the quivering segments up and flung them through the temple door.

The scuff of shuffling sandals sounded on the hard earth of the compound as he threw the dead snake from the door, and a shaft of moonlight showed the shadow of a figure darting round the angle of a house. But when Stacy raced across the clearing there was nothing to be seen, and though he searched the unkempt streets between the rows of cabins there was no sign of life in any of them, nor any gleam of light within the huts.

"Probably the thing crawled on me to get warm," he told himself as he retraced his steps, but the memory of those fleeing footsteps haunted him. Why should it be a copperhead rather than a rattler that came seeking warmth? Snakes did crawl into houses in the night, but the temple door was raised a full yard from the ground; could so small a snake have climbed the entrance ladder, or would it have been likely to have gone to all that trouble when the village houses were equipped with three-inch door-sills? "You'd better do your sleeping in the daytime, son," he muttered as he took his station in the temple's lower room again.

THE man bled from a dozen wounds, and an arrow's feathered butt protruded from his shoulder as he stumbled through the stockade gate. "Yoshi!" he gasped breathlessly, hiccupped once and fell face forward on the compound earth, blood gushing from his punctured lung.

Signal drums beat thunderously, the women raised a high-pitched, wailing keen, from the near-by woods the hunting-parties and the workers in the fields rushed like frightened chickens to the shelter of the brood-hen's wings. The stockade gate was closed and barred and earth-filled baskets piled behind it while the men seized bow and lance and the women scurried to the armory in the chief's pagoda for supplies of javelins and arrows.

Stacy stood irresolute. Plainly an attack was coming, but what would be his duties? Did the Holiness remain inside the temple to make prayers for victory, or did she lead the warriors of the tribe? In either case, what should he do?

His doubts were quickly set at rest. At the first throb of the drum the girl leaped from the mat on which she knelt while two serving-women combed her hair, bound her yard-long tresses in a hurried knot and swung nimbly as a monkey up the ladder leading to her sleeping-room. In a few moments she was back, kimono doffed and a suit of armor bound upon her. The breast and back guards were of hammered metal laced together by long thongs of rawhide, about her throat in place of gorget was a strip of knotted wool, her arms were cased in tubes of leather fastened to the body with thong lacings, about her thighs and lower legs were other leather tubes, upon her head she wore a leather cap with elongated back-peak like a fireman's helmet. In the sash that wrapped her waist was thrust an unsheathed sword, while with both hands she held an oval shield of wicker covered with a sheet of rawhide. This she thrust at Stacy, motioning him to hold it over her.

A man crouched at the temple doorstep and at sight of him the girl paused. "What do you here, Nashomo?" she demanded. "You are our foremost fighting-man; get upon the wall——"

"I come to bear your shield in battle,

Holiness. It is my right as Shu-gan's son——"

Above the veil that hid her face from eyes to chin a furrow formed in her smooth brow, and Stacy saw the darkening in her eyes that told of sudden deadly rage.

"Are you so tired of life that you would quit it in the fire or by the saw?" she asked. "Get to the walls, or by the god whose will I speak I'll have you sawn apart as soon as we beat off the Yoshi dogs!"

"Burn me, Holiness, give me to the sawyers, let my skin be torn away with red-hot knives, but let me bear your shield in battle first!" the young man choked. "Do not let the stranger take my ancient right."

Heedless as though the crouching man had been a log of rotting wood the girl marched toward the walls, Stacy close behind her with his halberd in his left hand and the shield swung from his right arm.

Now they could see the Yoshi coming at them, short, bandy-legged men, darker-skinned than the Shô-gin, and as they neared it was apparent that their faces were more Mongoloid. They charged in close formation, bent nearly double, long lances in their right hands, shields of rawhide in their left. Arrows flew to meet them, but the Shô-gin bows were weak and their adversaries cunning in defense; so the darts fell harmlessly upon their targets as they crossed the space of cleared ground by the moat, paused a moment, then, with a screaming battle cry, let fly their lances. At the close range the execution was terrific, and a dozen Shô-gin warriors fell impaled upon the long sharp spears, while many who survived fell from the walls demoralized.

"Stand firm, you men of Shô-gin; would you burn upon the Yoshi altars?" cried the priestess, leaping to the stockade top and brandishing her long sword. "Are you men or are you rabbits to run off because the Yoshi dogs have bared their teeth?"

A lanceman of the Yoshi hurled his spear at her, but Stacy thrust the shield before her so the weapon glanced aside, and a yell of fierce defiance sounded from the Shô-gin.

Now the Yoshi leaped into the trench, hurling lances at the men upon the walls, stabbing every time a face appeared, shooting short, fish-hook barbed arrows from their bows and clattering their swords against their shields as a wild accompaniment to their war cries.

Shô-gin soldiers answered dart for dart, toppled boulders on the men who swarmed close packed in the dry moat, hurled great baskets filled with glowing charcoal down; finally, at a motion from the Holiness, brought closely woven hampers of stout wicker filled with hissing, writhing snakes and opened them upon the Yoshi battling in the trench below.

It was their trump card. What neither steel nor fire could do the snakes did quickly, and the Yoshi scrambled from the moat with screams of horror as the maddened reptiles struck them through their flimsy leggings or, fallen on their shoulders, sank poison fangs in cheek or neck.

The gates were opened and pursuit began, Yoshi and Shô-gin engaging in detached combats, more, it seemed to Stacy, for the sake of taking prisoners than to kill off any number of the enemy. They fought without much skill but with a reckless bravery that astounded him, and when he saw an overwhelmed Yoshi turn his sword upon himself he wondered at the pride that made a savage select suicide in place of capture.

It was not long before he understood. That night the council fires lit up the Shô-gin stockade and the captured Yoshi

were paraded past the gathered tribe. With sticks and clods and filth the Shô-gin women pelted them. Some of the prisoners were thrown living in the fires, others were encased in coffins to be sawn apart, still others were stripped naked and impaled on blazing stakes.

Among the captured Yoshi was a woman, bandy-legged and ill-favored like her tribesmen. Stacy marveled at the stoicism which enabled her to watch the torment of her men-folk, but when her turn to die had come her iron, savage nerve gave way, and she sank upon her knees before the priestess.

"I ask pity, Holiness," she sobbed. "You have had your will of me, my man lies crisping in the flames of yonder fire. Let it be that I may serve you as a slave."

Something close akin to pity, perhaps the instinct that makes women merciful to other women as the climax of their being nears, stirred in the priestess' cold eyes. "So be it," she assented. "Let her live."

"Not so!" Nashomo the chief's son raised his lance in protest. "I lost a brother in the fight today and claim the right of blood-feud on the captured enemy. Mine is the right to give the death stroke—now. What say you, men and women of the Shô-gin?"

"Let him give the death stroke in accordance with the law!" the tribesmen roared.

The Holiness inclined her head and a pair of posts were set up in the earth between the fires. They were about eight feet apart and a rawhide thong hung from the top of each. Working with a skill and speed that showed long practise, women of the Shô-gin stripped the wretched captive to the skin, then tied her by the ankles to the dangling rawhide thongs so she swung head downward, stretched between the uprights like a wishbone ready for the pulling. Nashomo thrust a sharpened stake of pitch-pine in the bonfire nearest him, and when it flowered into flame walked slowly toward the pendent woman, waving the bright burning torch to keep it lighted. His horrible intent was obvious, and Stacy felt a wave of revulsion run through him.

"Are you going to let him get away with this?" he asked the priestess. "You say your word is law around here, and you gave your word to spare her life. Now you let this dirty scoundrel make a liar out of you. How long d'ye think you can rule these savages if you let 'em flout your word like that?"

BEHIND the peepholes of her ceremonial skull mask he saw the girl's eyes darken; then they softened momentarily. "You are right, my Boob," she answered. "I have passed my word that she shall live. Have you courage to enforce my orders?"

"I'll say I have. I'll stand off the whole bloody tribe if you'll command it."

The priestess raised her hand imperatively. "Stop!"

Nashomo halted in midstride and the flame upon his blazing pine stick died as he forgot to fan it. Every eye within the firelit circle turned upon the Holiness and above the snap and crackle of the blazing logs the rasp of quick-drawn, half-rebellious breathing sounded.

"It has come to me from the Great God whose will I speak that I cannot recall my spoken word. I have promised life unto this woman. She must live at least until——"

"Not so!" Nashomo shouted. "It is not the Holiness who speaks, my brothers, but the outland stranger who would have her break our ancient laws, the stranger at whose bidding she refused to give the ancient shield-right to the chieftain's son,

the stranger who according to our laws should have died long since instead of being honored as the Holiness' guardian. Men and women of the Shô-gin, I demand the right of blood-feud. I ask——"

"Will you wage battle for the woman's life with me?"

"It is unlawful for a man to offer violence to or even look upon the Holiness unveiled. How then can I battle with you?" asked Nashomo.

"I appoint a champion in my stead. Boob, my guardian and shield-bearer, dares to face you; you with all your weapons, he with nothing but bare hands —do you consent, my Boob?" she added in a whisper.

"To fight that swine bare-handed? I'd take on ten like him and never know that I'd been working."

"O thou Nameless One, thou fountain-head of might whose voice the thunder is, whose lance the lightning and whose breath the tempest, choose between these two and say which fights for right and which for wrong!" apostrophized the priestess as she raised her hands above her head and brought them down until they touched the dais, then bent her head until her forehead rested on the mats between them.

"Aye, let the judgment of the Great One show itself!" the tribe roared, and the champions moved toward each other.

Nashomo's lance was eight feet long, its staff a shaft of seasoned ash, its head a half-yard length of hand-forged metal, needle-sharp at tip, razor-keen at edges, fitted with two fish-hook barbs at bottom. He tossed it in the air so that the firelight glinted on the polished wood and glistening metal, caught it by the butt as it flashed down and swung it round his head as if it were a sword.

Stacy balanced on his toes, shifting his weight from foot to foot, shoulders hunched, head forward, hands alert. A heavy pulse was throbbing in his ears, a quivering sensation ran through him, a mist seemed hovering before him. Nashomo shuffled a step forward. His leering face, vindictive, confident of victory, showed redly in the leaping firelight. The mist in Stacy's vision cleared as if a gong had sounded. He took a forward step, danced back upon his toes, raised his right hand to guard and drew his left fist back, then balanced waiting with bent knees. "Close in at the first opening and let him have it on the button," he advised himself. "Don't play with him, he's dangerous, and whole dam' pack's behind him."

Nashomo whirled his lance around his head until it whistled through the air, threw his arm back suddenly and whipped the weapon forward, letting go the handle as the point came level with Bob's breast. The spear shot forward like a rocket, but as it left Nashomo's hand Bob threw himself face downward on the ground and rolled quickly to the right. The lance struck quivering in the ground where he had stood a second earlier. Bob snatched the weapon ere it ceased to vibrate, jerked it from the earth and snapped the shaft across his knee as if it were a reed.

Contemptuously he threw the broken spear aside and leaped with flailing fists to meet Nashomo who was dragging at his quiver as he sought to fit an arrow to his bow.

Nashomo jumped back nimbly and Bob's savage right swing missed his chin, but the blow had not been wasted, for as his fist shot past his dodging foeman's face Bob spread his fingers wide and closed them round the bowshaft. Nashomo jerked away, and with a whip-like crack the weapon parted in his hand.

He let go of the ruined bow and

dropped his hand upon his sword-hilt, but the long blade fouled in his sash and before he had a chance to free it Bob struck up from the hip, landing a left uppercut upon his chin.

Muscles trained and hardened on the squash and handball courts backed up the blow, and behind them was contempt and loathing powerful as dynamite. Nashomo's teeth clicked like a snapping castanet. He fell back a pace, stepping slowly, heavily, and a look of wonder spread across his face. Then his knees gave, and he went down backward on the hard-packed ground, folding in upon himself so quickly that it seemed he must have been a rubber mannikin inflated and then ripped to let the air come from him with a rush. A tremor shook him; then he lay there quietly, as still as any of the Yoshi upon whom he had worked his savage vengeance.

"Behold, O people of the Shô-gin," cried the priestess, "the judgment of the Great One has been shown. Barehanded he I chose has vanquished your best fighter with his weapons in his hands. Let the Yoshi woman live. It is the judgment of the Great One."

They cut the writhing captive from her bonds between the posts, and presently, when she regained the strength to walk, she tottered to the priestess' dais and laid herself face forward on the earth, sobbing her thanks.

When Stacy and the priestess came into the compound the next morning the first thing they beheld was the body of the Yoshi woman laid before the temple door-step. The eyes had been gouged out with burning sticks, the lips and nose sliced from the face, the tongue cut out. Transversely on her abdomen, like a crude Cæsarean section, there gaped a raw-lipped wound a foot and more in length.

SPEARS were thrust butt downward in the earth to form a circle, and in its center squatted Nokomo the old chief, the Holiness, Nashomo the chief's son, and the elders of the Shô-gin. Stacy occupied his usual post behind the priestess. All the men wore their best costumes; save for skull mask and silk loincloth the girl was ceremonially nude, for this was a high council and the guidance of the god must be invoked and his protection sought.

"Our store of metal has grown low again, O Holiness," the old chief said. "Weapons lost in battle and the chase have weakened us until our hoard is well-nigh spent. We must seek the ruins of the Old Ones ere another freezing-time arrives or our fires shall lack for meat; perchance our enemies may hear of our condition and swoop down on us."

"The Old Ones guard their metal well. You know how they take toll of life through pestilence each time we raid their stores?" the girl returned. "Are we prepared to pay the price?"

"We must, O Holiness. In all the village we have scarce a hundred weapons in reserve, and every arrow lost or lance left unrecovered on the battlefield reduces our reserve. Twenty moons have passed since last we spoiled the treasures of the Old Ones, and scarce a moon has passed since then without a battle. Perhaps if we make fitting offerings the Old Ones will be satisfied and forbear to lash us with the scourge of pestilence this time."

"Perhaps," the priestess echoed. "Let the drums be sounded and the people warned to gather at the council fires tonight. Tomorrow I will lead the raiding party to the Old Ones' hoard."

A BASKET half the height of a tall man was placed between the council fires and by it stood a girl with bandaged eyes. Slowly, fearfully, the people of

the village filed past, everyone from toddling child to doddering graybeard and hobbling crone taking part in the procession. As each reached the basket he held out his hand and the hoodwinked girl drew a chip of wood from the tall hamper and offered it to him. Stacy watched the drawings curiously. Fear was on each face in that parade, fear so gripping and abysmal that he was minded of a verse of Oscar Wilde:

"And Horror stalked before each man,
And Terror crept behind."

Now a young woman paused beside the fateful basket and the girl with bandaged eyes reached out a chip. The woman's scream was terrible. "No, no, not me; I am but three months wed, I am too young——"

"Not so, let me go for her!" cried a man's voice, and a young warrior left his place in the procession, snatching at the chip the woman held. "O Holiness, let me go in her stead," he besought. "It is my right. I am her husband and protector. Let it be that I go for her——"

The eyes behind the skull mask on the priestess' face seemed shining with a softer light than was their wont, but her voice was cold and even as she interrupted:

"Let be, O fool! Perhaps you, too, will draw the cross-marked chip. Seek not to meddle with the judgments of the Great One. Go to your place in line!"

Obediently he slunk back to his place, but his eyes were on the trembling girl who drew the cross-marked chip as she dropped out of line, nor did they leave her face when he came level with the basket. But when he glanced down at the chip the bound-eyed girl had handed him he gave a shout of joy. "I, too, dear love! We go together!" As though he went to keep a lovers' tryst he left the line and took the trembling woman in his arms.

The dreary lottery of death progressed until ten victims had been chosen, men, women, even little children being in the list.

The sacrifices took leave of their families with tears and lamentations, then formed themselves in line between the fires, kneeling with their heads outstretched, hands folded in their laps. Nashomo, first-born son of the Shu-gan, strode down the line with his long sword, paused behind each crouching victim and with a single blow struck off his head. Last of all he came upon the married couple, and as he stopped behind the man a smile spread on his heavy features. Tentatively he laid his sword-edge on his prey's bent neck, then drew back for the stroke and — missed. The steel shore through the victim's shoulder, striking almost to the collar-bone, but the neck remained intact, and it was not until three strokes were given that the head came off. The woman knelt with eyes tight shut, but she could hear the flailing of the purposeful skill-less strokes, and her body shook so that a soldier had to loose her hair and wind his hands in its thick coils before her neck could be sufficiently extended for the death stroke. Nashomo's helper dropped the girl's long tresses as the sword blade circled down, and the small head with its curling strands of light brown hair fell bouncing on the trodden earth until it came to rest against the husband's severed head and lay there, lip to lip.

"Better few should die than many!" swelled the chant as Nashomo raised his bloody sword in a salutation to the Holiness. "Accept these sacrifices, O ye Old Ones; let them speak for us, and visit not your pestilence upon us!"

"HERE we halt," the Holiness commanded as the party reached the hill crest. "Make camp and wait for us, Nashomo. See to it that the fires are ready and the water hot for us to bathe when we return."

The chief's son looked at her, surprized. "Do not I go with you to brave the Old Ones in their dwelling-places, Holiness?"

"Not so. You watch the woods for sign of enemies, and hold your men in readiness for our return. Give Boob the food-bags and the sacred cords to drag the metal back when we have found it."

The way grew rougher with descent, for here there was no path, and often Bob was forced to beat a way with his halberd through the thick underbrush. Between the hills a little river gushed and they turned down its bank, following the tumbling torrent for a mile or more, crossing on a reef of moss-bound rocks, then fighting an ascent against the tangled briars and brush growth on the farther hill.

Memory, quiet-footed as a cat, elusive as the shadow of a shadow, stirred in Stacy's brain. The hill was steep and overgrown, the gently rolling land beyond was dark with pine and oak and poplar, there was no sign of man, no faintest trace of cultivation or restraint in all the tangled wilderness, but somehow he felt certain he had walked that land before. Not in its present state. Not when weeds and briars and scrub pine choked it, but in another day, another time. He needed but to shut his eyes to see the landscape carpeted with fresh shorn turf, to hear the *spat* and whir of golf balls driven down the fairway; there was little need to call on memory to hear the hoot of distant motor horns or the droning of an airplane overhead. There, to the left a quarter of a mile, should be a low-eaved, wide-porched house where one could rest with a long drink. . . .

"Let us rest on yonder hilltop, Boob," the Holiness' voice cut through his revery; "the way is steep, but when we get there we shall find soft grass and bright sunshine."

They clambered up the slope, and as they came upon a place where wind-felled trees formed an obstruction Bob automatically put out his hand to help the girl across the barrier. She drew back from the outstretched palm as if it offered insult, then, as one who dares defy conventions, laid her fingers in it. Her skin was firm and cool, fine-textured, smooth, and he thrilled as it met his, for it seemed a current of galvanic force ran from her hand to his, quickening his pulses, quickening his breathing till a lump formed in his throat. Her eyes were on him steadily as he helped her from the fallen log; it was as if a lamp had flickered into life behind their somber velvet. Faint, but perceptible, a light flush tinctured the smooth brow above the veil.

"Give me to eat," the girl commanded as they sank down on the soft grass of the little clearing on the hill crest. Bob opened one of the food-bags and produced a little bundle of baked meat wrapped in birch bark and a pack of fat, hard bread-cakes. She took them from him, laid them in her lap, then broke them, flinging half upon the grass.

"None is here to see that custom is observed my Boob," she said; "you may feed upon the scraps I throw away before I finish eating."

"Er—thanks for the concession," he returned as he picked the scattered food up from the grass.

"Good Lord!" He paused, a piece of meat raised half-way to his mouth. He had an answer to a puzzle, but one which posed another, and a harder query. Why, he had wondered, was this plot of grass so short and fresh-appearing, almost like a lawn instead of being wild and weed-

choked like the grass that overran the other clearings? As he leant to pick the food up he received his answer. It was not ordinary grass, but creeping bent, the hardy, wiry, short-leaved grass which roots itself so firmly that it chokes out weeds and dandelions. Bent, the pride of the green-keeper. How in heaven's name did it come here in this abysmal desert?

She fed herself with dainty skill, holding out her veil's edge to permit her hand to reach her mouth. He watched her musingly. What sort of face was hidden by that curtain which was never lifted, even when she ate?

"Who are these 'Old Ones' that you talk about?" he asked.

"S-s-sh, Boob, do not speak so here. It is perilous to call their names in this place."

"Why?"

"Because they hate us, hate us for the things our fathers did, because we come to steal their precious metal and violate their sleep."

"Are they gods or demons?"

"Who can say? No man has ever seen them, though once I saw one of their dead——"

"Their dead? How could that be?"

She glanced about half fearfully, then took the bread and meat remaining in her lap and cast it from her. "I make you sacrifice of this my food, you Old Ones," she exclaimed. "Forgive us if we speak your names in this place, and do not send your pestilence upon us."

The libation made, she turned to him:

"Long and long ago, when the world was very young, a race of men like gods lived in this land. We know but little of them, for none remembers them, and the little that we know is from tradition which is like a child's tale that grows greater with each telling. But we have heard they tilled the land until in all the country there were fertile fields and herds of beasts which gave them food and milk, and roads as hard as rock and wide as rivers joined the mighty cities where the buildings towered mountain-high and night was turned to day by some strange light they had which glowed as brightly as the sun yet gave off neither smoke nor flame. They were very wise, those Old Ones; they knew how to fly like eagles through the air, and when they rode upon the earth they rode in strange things like a moving house that traveled faster than the wind.

"But presently there rose a mighty war among them, and other Old Ones, not so wise, but fiercer, came upon them in their flying houses and dropped great thunderbolts upon them so their mighty cities fell and broke like forest trees beneath the wind and lightning's fire, and tumbled down in ruins. Then these invading Old Ones went through all this land with fire and sword, and whenever they came on a man of the inhabitants they killed him, whether he were young and strong or old and gray, or just an infant at the breast. And they burned and broke the houses of the Old Ones so that in all the land no dwelling-place was left intact, and they broke the fine hard roads and burnt the flying houses and the houses that ran swiftly on the earth until the land was desolate and ruined, with none to live in it except the women who had run for shelter to the woods.

"Then the conquerors turned to go to their own land, which some say lay across a mighty river called the ocean, but a pestilence fell on them, so they died by scores and hundreds, and there were none to work the mighty floating houses that they came in. They tried and tried again to get word to their homeland, but no answer came, and some say that a mighty earthquake came and struck that land from which they came and sank it in the waters. We think it was the magic of the

Old Ones working, for they are very terrible in vengeance. At any rate the pestilence they sent reached into every land, so that it ran like fire among the brushwood, and nearly all the people in the world were killed by it.

"Then these men who came to break the Old Ones' cities had to stay here; so they sought among the woods to find the women who were hidden there, and took them to wife.

"Their leaders were all dead, and those remaining were all crude and untaught men who could not duplicate the wonders that the Old Ones wrought; neither did they have the skill to build the ruined cities up again. Besides, there was a curse upon those places, and whoever tried to live in them, or even visit them, took sick and died of pestilence. So the conquerors built their villages in the waste spots of the land and settled in them with the women they had taken for their wives.

"They were little men, these conquerors, their skins were brown as autumn leaves, their eyes were not like those the Old Ones had, so when their children came some looked much like their fathers, while others were more like the women of the Old Ones. Then a law was made and by it every man child who was like the Old Ones was at once destroyed, while girls were spared. So it was that there grew up a race whose women seemed of a stock different from their men. Also, girl children took names from their mothers' tongue, while all the boys were called by names their fathers knew."

"But you speak English," Bob objected. "How is it——"

"English? What is English?"

"The language that you speak. From what you've said I think these conquerors might have been Mongols; certainly your dress and architecture hint at it, yet you speak——"

"The captured women could not speak the conquerors' tongue, so their husbands had to learn the Old Ones' language."

"But how'd you get your horrible religion? These Old Ones whom you speak of must have passed beyond the point of human sacrifice, and Mongolians are either Buddhists, Taoists or Shintoists. How did such a cult grow up?"

HER eyes came slowly up to his from under her long lashes. "It is from my mother's people. When the small brown conquerors first set up their houses in the wilderness there came a plague among them, and it seemed the vengeance of the Old Ones would destroy them utterly. Then arose a woman of the conquered race who knew the secret of the pestilence and how to stem its rising tide. She wore a mask upon her face so none might see her nose or mouth or chin, and she went among those stricken by the plague in safety. "Do this or that," she told them, and those who followed her instructions lived, while those who disobeyed her died. Then when the plague was gone she told the people that the spirit of the Old Ones was upon her, that her words were theirs and her will law, and they who disputed her must surely die. At first they scoffed at her, but those who mocked her died. Then they believed, and from that day her lightest wish was law unalterable. It was she who ordered human sacrifice, and it is said she always chose her victims from the men and boys, but spared the girls and women. We no longer have that custom, and those whose lot it is to die as sacrifices bear their fate, whatever be their sex.

"When the years came on this wise old woman, she chose a young girl from the tribe and took her to a place where once the Old Ones dwelt. There she schooled her in the wonders of the olden days, and instructed her in government of the people. When this was done she veiled her

pupil's face and told her none must ever look upon it, for if a woman looked upon the Holiness unveiled her eyes must be put out; the man who looked on her must surely die before he told what he had seen. If the Holiness unveils her face to any man both she and he must suffer death. When she had given these commands she sent her pupil back to rule the village while she walked off into the ruined city of the Old Ones and was never seen again."

"But why must you obscure your features with a veil?" Bob asked.

The shadow of a smile shone in her eyes, he knew her lips were smiling underneath her mesh as she replied:

"Men fear the thing they do not understand. If Holiness walked like an ordinary woman in their midst the people would not fear her; they might even dare to disobey. I am but a girl so weak that any half-grown tribesman could bend me to his will with his bare hands, did he but dare. They have no love for me, these people whom I treat like dirt beneath my feet, but they have fear of me. Do I not order them to death by torment for the slightest fault? Do I not make their chiefs and headmen kiss the earth before me? I cannot rule as king or warrior, I cannot rule by love, they would not understand it; but I can rule by fear. Have you not seen them tremble as I pass for fear that I may touch them with my lance and order them to death? Had they not feared me as they fear the grave, could I have made them break their ancient law and let you live, my Boob?"

"I've wondered about that. Just why did you spare me?"

"You saved me from the singing snake——"

"That's true, but I almost tore your veil away that day; you were going to have me skinned alive, and then relented. It would have been safer to get me out of the way, especially when your sparing me almost brought on mutiny."

"Listen carefully, my Boob. When I was being taught by her who wore the veil before me I was told about the Old Ones while I lived in what remained of a proud city. The Holiness who taught me took me to a ruined temple where they worshipped in the ancient days and there I saw the gods they reverenced, a beautiful young man nailed naked to a cross and a weeping woman kneeling at his feet. Also, my Boob"—her breath came quicker and a look of fear came in her eyes, shadowing their cerulean blue as a drifting cloud obscures the noonday sky —"also I saw one like you!"

"Like me? Good heavens!"

She nodded slowly. "He was in a small stone house which stood near by the temple. The conquerors' thunderbolts had broken it, but some of it remained, and in it was a metal coffin with a crystal top. The body of a man lay in it, not beautiful and young like you, my Boob, but old, with thin gray hair and a face of strength and power. He lay there in his endless sleep with hands crossed on his breast and a string of beads in them. The clothes he wore were like your garments when you came into our village and saved me from the singing snake. Of all the people in the village I alone knew the clothing that the Old Ones wore. Think you those others would have let you live if they had known?"

Bob stared at her in silence. There was a dizzy, baffled feeling in his brain, as if he had just landed from a tossing ship or stepped off of a whirling carousel. The vague familiarity of the brush-grown countryside . . . the ruins of a Christian church . . . a man long dead found in a

broken, long-forgotten tomb, dressed in modern dinner clothes. . . . Something terrible, unformed and undescribable as the shadow of a specter seemed leering at him from the ambush of a half-matured suspicion.

"The conquerors had little metal," she went on, "and without it they were helpless; so they took it from the ruins of the Old Ones' cities. But the ancient race was jealous of its treasure, and for every ounce of metal that was stolen they took toll of lives till none dared seek the precious stuff, and a law was passed that made it death to trespass past the boundaries of the Old Ones' ancient dwelling-places. Only the Holiness who is immune to the swift death that visits those who dare the Old Ones' wrath may go beyond the boundaries, and with her she may take one man to bear the metal out. Under her protection he is safe, but any others who transgress the taboo are given the flames, lest they infect the rest."

STACY scarcely heard her. His thoughts were busy with a question, yet he dared not think the question through. The answer might be . . . but he had to know!

"Let's go," he told her almost roughly. "I'd like to see this ruined city."

They crossed a weed-grown field and climbed another slope. "Here is a dwelling of the Old Ones," she announced, bending back a branch of pine to show the vestige of a path.

He followed her across the turf-ringed flagstones of the ruined walk till the circling trees gave back on a small clearing. Almost obscured by weeds and thick-grown brambles curved the remnants of a concrete drive; here and there among the raffish undergrowth a rosebush struggled like a thoroughbred pulled down by mongrels. Leaning crazily from marble bases were two rust-gnawed iron urns. A pile of twisted metal and broken stone marked the outline of a summerhouse. Beyond, almost effaced by pine and oak trees, stood a pair of shattered chimneys, all that remained of a once stately mansion.

Recollection beat against the doors of Stacy's mind with muffled hammer strokes. "Here — here — here ——" it seemed repeating in an endless monody. "See—see!"

A little patch of color showed among the straggling growth of weed and lichen — phlox, marigold, larkspur. Beyond there showed a dim white form, broken, stained, leprous with a growth of rust-brown moss, but recognizable. It was the marble image of a Naiad holding out a conch-shell from which there feebly dribbled a small stream of water.

Stacy's lips were trembling, his teeth were chattering, little hummocks of horripilation roughened on his forearms, he felt the short hair bristling on his neck. He had to know—he had to!

With a leap he cleared the circling briars and scratched frantically with his dagger, stripping off the moss that scaled the fountain's base. Dear God, if it were there! . . .

The thick moss flaked away, the pallid stone showed clear. Scratched into it with schoolboy crudity was a heart encircling the initials: "ET and RAS—Emily Taylor and Robert Atwood Stacy."

Fifteen years since, a century—God knew, it might have been a thousand years ago!—he scratched those letters in the stone when he wore knickerbockers and Emily's hair hung down in braids.

His shriek of laughter split the quiet of the little glade, mounting like a licking flame, higher, thinner, a scream of awful, macabre mirth which seemed to

mock the ghosts of long-forgotten years that hovered round the place. "Goetter-daemmerung!" he shouted while tears as hot as smelted metal coursed his cheeks. "Goetterdaemmerung!

"They say the lion and the lizard keep
The courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep.

"The gods are dead; the world is dead, and I remain! *Ave tempus Cæsar! Te morituri salutamus!*"

"Boob, my Boob," her voice came softly through his scream of sharp hysteria. "Look, Boob, I show you something no man living ever saw before!" With a wrench she tore her veil away and stepped toward him.

His geysering laughter stopped abruptly as he looked at her. She was lovely with an odd, uneven kind of beauty. Very young, not more than eighteen, he surmised, with a skin as fine and creamy as a child's. Beneath her long blue eyes, deep-shadowed by their silky curling lashes, he saw her straight, proud, narrow nose, her red mouth chiseled in long lines, her small, sharp chin. Now her eyes were languishing and passionate, inviting, teasing, promising. They seemed to probe his very heart's depths. A quince-hued flush was on her cheeks, her throat, her smooth, white brow. She smiled at him, a curious smile that added mystery to a face instinct with mystery.

She made a forward step, feet soundless on the moss around the fountain, and stood close to him. Then without warning she bent toward him, seized his cheeks between her palms and kissed him on the mouth, hungrily, greedily, with an avidness in which the sterile longings of her years of isolation blazed like fire among the trees in rainless August.

His response was instinctive. Too quick for thought the man in him rose to her siren challenge. The lure of her raced through his nerves like voltage through electric wires and crashed against his brain with devastating force. He staggered back a step and felt himself go weak with desire.

"Holiness—O lovely little Holiness!" he gasped, tearing his lips free from her red, clinging mouth. "In all this awful barren world there's only you and——"

The savage *spat* of a wild missile striking stone arrested him. In the little pool that gathered at the fountain's base an arrow lay, its head bent by its impact on the marble. The fretful *zing* of a bowstring sounded in the near-by thicket, and with a rageful hornet's whine another arrow whipped toward them, burying itself half shaft-length in the earth.

A crackling sounded in the shrouding circle of dark evergreens and a man stepped out into the glade, fitting a third arrow to his bow.

"Nashomo!" cried the priestess. "What do you in this taboo place; how dare you stand unbidden in my presence? Down, down upon your face, you dog, or I will have you sawn apart——"

"The Holiness who shows her face to any man no longer speaks the Great One's will," the fellow interrupted. "It is the law that she must die, and he who looks upon her naked face——"

The force of Stacy's halberd, thrown with all his weight behind it, drove him back upon his heels as though he had been pushed by a gigantic hand. The wide blade sheared his breast-bone as if it had been butter. "Damn you, that'll pay you something on account," cried Stacy, but the girl's sharp warning stopped him:

"Run, run, my Boob, it is a mutiny—they are surrounding us!"

He glanced around the clearing. From behind the thick-grown pine trees heads appeared, before them, to the right, the

left. An arrow whined at them, followed by another, and another, and another.

"Run, make for the old temple," the girl panted. "That is a very taboo place. They may not dare to enter it!"

CRASHING through the bracken, snatching back their garments from the clutching claws of bramble bushes, they ran across the thickly wooded slope, broke out in another clearing, and hastened toward another copse of pine and cedar. As they ran they heard the view halloo of their pursuers; the pack was circling, cries were coming not alone from side and rear, but from the front as well. An arrow whistled at them, clipped a pine branch overhead and struck the tree-bole with a vicious *pung*. Another struck the ground before them, a third came whizzing past Bob's face so close he felt the draft of it upon his cheek. Here and there among the trees they saw flitting shadows as the hunters closed their cordon.

"Oh! I'm struck! Run, run on, my Boob, you may win through alone. I—cannot—go——"

He swung the girl up in his arms as though she were a child. On . . . on. Something stung him in the shoulder, viciously. He winced with pain but forged ahead. A high, thin, irritable whine, as if a monster hornet drove at him, was followed by a searing pain in his right arm. He stumbled, loosening his hold upon the girl's light form, circled his left arm more tightly round her, and crashed ahead through the entangling brush.

"Boob, put me down. I—think—that—I—can—run——"

He halted, breathing with deep, retching sobs, and leant against a tree. Blood was soaking through his trouser leg, blood dyed his sleeve, a steady trickle wet his forehead, running down into his eyes and blinding him. He felt the pressure of her hand on his as she drew him forward, then felt her fingers close with a convulsive grip. Dashing the ruddy film from his eyes he saw her sway and stiffen. She gave a dreadful, strangled cry. From her left breast an arrow's feathered butt protruded, and a gush of blood ran from the corners of her mouth. "Boo——" the gurgling welter of fresh blood drowned out his name half uttered, and she dropped limply to the ground. A glaze as of thin isinglass was on her eyes, her mouth fell open and her tongue protruded slightly.

He bent and kissed her swiftly, not on the bloody, gaping mouth, but on the brow, then stumbled on.

Arrows hissed at him, whining past his ears, striking little puffs of smoke-like dust up from the ground about his feet. Sometimes he felt a fresh burn in his arms or shoulders, something like a streak of white-hot iron passed across his neck, and the collar of his blouse went wet and sticky with red soppiness.

He ran mechanically. Right foot up, leg forward, back—left foot up, leg forward, back . . . somehow he was still on his feet, but he had no idea how he kept on them. His breath was wheezing with asthmatic rales. Presently he would fall down on his face, but he wouldn't feel it; he'd not feel anything again; just go to sleep—a long, sweet, dreamless sleep . . . that damned pain in his back, just underneath the shoulder-blade . . . now it was hurting in his chest. . . .

He charged across a little clearing. Shouts came faintly to him—gleeful, savage shouts. Something struck him on the shoulder, not painfully this time, but heartily, almost like a friendly slap. Damn these creepers, they were tripping him . . . why no, there were no creepers

here, he was running over straggling, unkempt grass. To right and left ran aisles like streets, choked with dwarf trees here and there, but still discernible. Bordering them were stone erections, some straight, some leaning crazily this way or that. Where was he, in a cemetery? Nonsense, he was running . . . why was he running, anyway? What was there to be afraid of?

"Oh, here's a fine big stone, just the thing to lean against and rest. Rest, a grand word, that. . . .

"Who is that moving over there? A girl in white, all in white, with a veil upon her head. She has a bouquet in her hand and orange blossoms in her hair. She's coming nearer. Funny, I can't see her face. Why, yes, it's Emily. Emily Taylor in her bridal gown. I'm going to marry her today . . . no, it's not Emily, it's the Holiness. She's taken off her veil. No man has ever seen her face before . . . she loves me.

"What's carved upon this stone? Some sort of epitaph:

To the Glory of God
And the Memory of Capt. Robert Atwood Stacy
Who Met a Hero's Death Defending his Homeland
From the Invasion of the Mongol Horde
A. 1940—1972 D.
Dulce et Decorum est pro Patria Mori

"That's silly. This thing says I'm dead. But I'm alive.

"Or am I?" he amended as the shouting pack closed in and a storm of arrows swept him down.

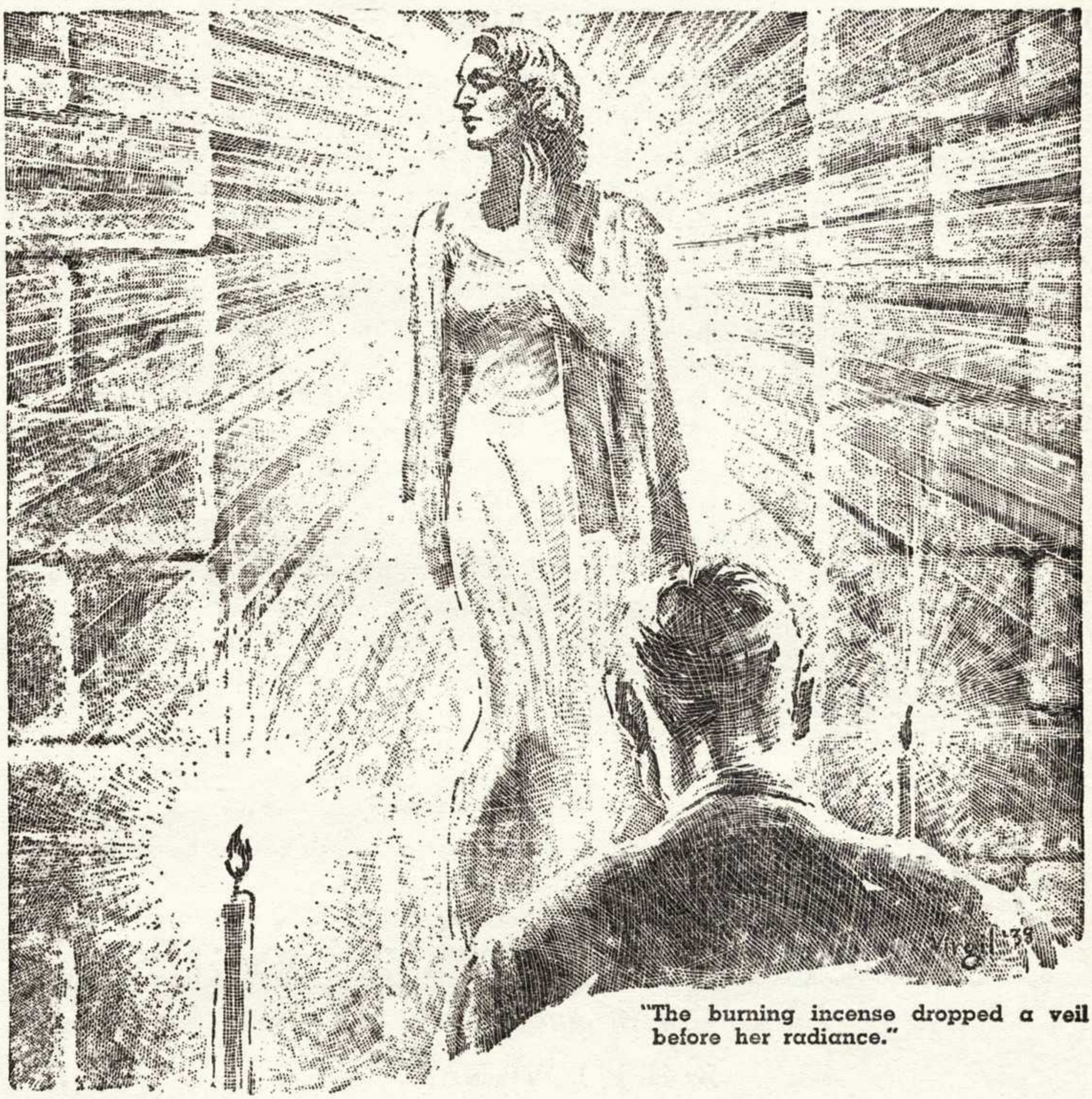
Where Once Poe Walked

An Acrostic Sonnet

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

Eternal brood the shadows on this ground,
Dreaming of centuries that have gone before;
Great elms rise solemnly by slab and mound,
Arch'd high above a hidden world of yore.
Round all the scene a light of memory plays,
And dead leaves whisper of departed days,
Longing for sights and sounds that are no more.

Lonely and sad, a specter glides along
Aisles where of old his living footsteps fell;
No common glance discerns him, though his song
Peals down through time with a mysterious spell.
Only the few who sorcery's secret know,
Espy amidst these tombs the shade of Poe.



"The burning incense dropped a veil before her radiance."

The Secret of the Vault

By J. WESLEY ROSENQUEST

What dread mystery lurked in that charnel chamber beneath the cellars of the old house, and what impious rites of life and death were performed there?

I THINK it was in January that my suspicions first took form and grew. Prior to that, my uncle's visits to the family burial vault had only the appearance of actions natural to grief, and as on all occasions he carried with him into the cold depths a candle and missal, I presumed his intentions to be only the most pious. In all his words to me concerning the matters of the deceased, he exhibited a tender reverence and profound respect for those he called "the immortal spirits,"

As he said, it was not until the recent death and burial of his wife, my Aunt Helena, that he became aware and fully conscious of another world and the need of the dead for prayer. This I believed. Even had I suspected earlier, I could not disprove his words, as out of a timid heart I had never ventured into the mortuary chambers deep below the cellar.

From childhood I had held in my mind an image of supreme gruesomeness, in which the antique burial vaults, in my childish imagination, yawned like some ravenous maw, into which all who vanished never returned. In fancy I constructed a bottomless pit in which nightmarish forms of darkness crept and grew, a pit filled with forms instilled with a grim life that was an insult flung in the face of God and nature. Death itself held no terrors for me, but only those things which I conceived to be the offspring of death, in the imagination-infested region of my childhood, which I associated inseparably with the vaults.

During many of my earlier years I dwelt morbidly on the subject of what happens to the deceased. Perversely, I gave no thought to Paradise or the place where flew the immortal spirit, but father reflected on the husk left behind, and the possibility of an abnormal awareness, a sluggish and impotent *life* clinging thereto, defying time and dissolution, impotent only in that it was static, and could not manifest itself. I filled my boyish mind with terrible subjects. I had read — I think in my twelfth year—of suspended animation, and wondered what was the difference between death from which there was return, and death from which there was no return, and if there was an awareness of surroundings in the poor, crumbling shell. . . .

I would stand at the head of the narrow, steep, stone stairway, holding the heavy oaken door wide open and ready to flee in an instant, gazing fearsomely into a darkness that defied my penetrating stare. And I felt that my gaze was reciprocated. I was above all things conscious of a curious air of watchfulness that seemed to justify my intuition of an unnatural vitality residing in *those* who dwelt there. . . . I knew that there was not mere annihilation, but a transformation into something that was neither annihilation nor true life, a vitality that oozed from and through the dissolving shells, thriving amidst decay and darkness with sickening tenacity.

Then when some member of my once large family descended the narrow stairway, I stood with fixed and fascinated stare, straining to catch a glimpse of the nitrous interior, but seeing only the damp, gray-gleaming walls of a passageway that led still further down. And always the feeble reflections of the taper would yield once more to darkness as the visitant progressed into the vaults, so that it seemed that the ravening maw was indeed filled, satisfied. . . .

As I grew older I witnessed the fateful procession of my family into the vaults. So it came about finally that those who frequented the grim limbo that filled my early years with a superstitious terror failed to return from the black depths below the basement. The living who had descended so often to pray for the already departed themselves surrendered to the encroachment of death on the domain of the living. I personified the vaults as a creeping form, a restless entity burrowing beneath the big old house, waiting patiently for the stream of the living that passed as inevitably into the still chambers as the stars progressed in their courses.

I OFTEN wondered if we do not commit a terrible error by not cremating the dead. Instead, they are placed in vaults

and coffins as things no longer animate, without feeling or consciousness. They are put away whole and intact, as they died, and time wreaks its will upon them. Perhaps we are mistaken to think that life departs abruptly and completely from the mortal frame, and as greatly in error to attempt to draw a distinct line between organic and inorganic, sentient and insentient, living and dead. There are certainly degrees of life and vitality in human beings. In all cases, then, does this vitality depart sharply and cleanly, instead of ebbing away slowly after the abrupt slump called death? The fact that the bodies of saints so often remain intact for long years has led me to suspect that they do not enjoy their heavenly reward as soon as might be expected after death. . . .

There are many cases of suspended animation or catalepsy. At times the victims awake before they are interred, and are saved from live burial. Others are not so fortunate. Who can say where catalepsy tapers off into deeper shades or tones of death? And how deep may the deceased descend into the clouded abyss? If vitality is a fluid, how many drops cling to the interior of the vessel when it is emptied?

My Aunt Helena was a vigorous woman.

She was not very tall, or heavy, or muscular, and yet she possessed that strange force or essence called vitality in superabundance. How can we define this? Neither physiology nor chemistry could ever explain what it was that she, more than any one else I knew except my uncle, emanated continuously during her busy life. I have heard that the human organism emanates a fluid or force deadly to certain minute organisms and capable of affecting delicate instruments. I wonder if this fluid is identical with what is called the soul. Horrible thought! If this is so, the soul must be divisible. It is then constantly radiating out into space, leaving its traces here and there, like the slimy trail left behind by the snail. Where is immortality then? For when the restraining vessel disintegrates, the fluid flows away in all directions and evaporates.

My aunt was a fair, light-haired, blue-eyed woman. Her features were fine and delicately proportioned and her form willowy. Therefore, when I speak of her abounding vitality, I think not of the crude strength of the peasant woman, but the subtile radiations of the full moon, the glow of subterranean fires, the concealed potency of the magnet and the incorporeal energy of the winds. She was the paragon of force and magnetism, of energy that was not born of bone or muscle. She emanated a persuasive magnetism that influenced all about her, a will that bent all before her like wind in the wheat-fields. Life seemed to flow from her high, white forehead and her slender finger-tips.

She was constantly in the best health, and never seemed subject to the maladies that sweep the frail human frame. Her day was filled with activity from dawn to sunset. I remember her today not as she appeared in the lily-glow about the bier, but as she used to move about through the house and in the gardens, leaving her impress on the very walls, her breath on the flowers and shrubs.

It was a great shock when she died suddenly, on a chill December night, without warning and without apparent cause.

The family physician ascribed her demise to heart failure, but I believed—I knew—that this verdict was a mockery. It was impossible that she had died from a heart ailment, as she had never shown symptoms of such a malady. Later I was to understand.

IF HER death was a shock to me, it was an even greater shock to my uncle—so it seemed, for she was the center of his universe.

Where formerly there were three of us in the great house, there were now only two. The house became suddenly and completely empty, cold, cheerless. Under my aunt's hands it had slowly acquired during the years after the death of my parents a warmth and vitality that it must certainly have absorbed from her. The furniture gleamed, ornaments sparkled, the fire burned with fierce joy in the great fireplace. After her death the gleam and the sparkle and the joy suddenly went out, like an extinguished candle, plunging the house into a gloom that weighed down on the roof. All the life and vitality that the place had absorbed under Aunt Helena's care departed with her, was imprisoned in the coffin—casting a last glow on the massed white lilies—and flowed away into the burial vaults like water seeking its lowest level, leaving its former level bleak and dry. Was it for this reason that after her death the vaults acquired a new —shall we call it?—life?

To me, the pitch-black mortuary chambers below the cellar took on a new atmosphere, a new significance. The darkness squirmed, thrived with life, seemed to course fluidly through the grimly tenanted, subterranean rooms. It was not the same pit of my childhood. Where formerly I felt only a sluggish, terrible awareness lurking in the abysmal obscurity of the vaults, there was now an abounding vitality, a burning flame of unexampled brightness, as the torch dims the fitful glow of the *ignis fatuus*. It was Aunt Helena who—I knew—was resisting somehow the sharp fang of the conqueror worm with the superhuman vital force that must have dwelt latent, not destroyed, in her still form, pushing outward against its concrete prison.

After her death I was again subjected to the morbid fascination of my childhood days. I stood in fright and awe at the head of the steep, narrow stone stairway, gazing into the well of darkness at the foot of the damp, mossy steps. I did this often, the strange spell holding me with a grip of iron, and still I did not dare to descend. I stood ready to flee in an instant, holding the ponderous oaken door wide on its massive copper hinges, powerless to descry anything in the gloomy recesses of the vaults and, indeed, not knowing what I should expect to see. And I felt undeniably the presence of Helena. As always, I felt where I could not see. . . .

Uncle Henry seemed grief-stricken, which was to be expected. Yet I say "seemed." I remember his iron composure at the funeral and at the placing of the coffin in the vault, I watching on and not daring to follow the slow procession of pall-bearers headed by my uncle, who carried candelabra to light the precipitous descent and the murky path. Then later I observed him in the library by the fireplace, his head unbowed; the heavy odor of lilies filled the air, the wind whispered drearily outside the windows, light and shadow writhed on the walls like a misty simulacrum of Tartarean vistas; still he sat there, surrounded by a subtile aura of confidence, of expectation. How was I to guess so soon? . . .

In the days that followed, in the weeks that grew out of them, I observed with growing curiosity my uncle's excessively frequent visits to the tomb, always with the missal and single candle. As often as once each day I saw his heavy, muscular form descending into the blackness with slow and steady steps.

In the weeks following the death of his wife, my uncle's bearing and demeanor became more and more confident and expectant, quite different from his earlier,

assumed air of resignation to the will of God. His vigils beside the tomb of Helena were frequent, as I have said; yet he returned each time from the vaults with the utmost composure, with ill-concealed confidence on his rugged face, although I did not perceive this immediately. In the latter days of January he was almost cheerful. He moved with a brisk step, yet with a great air of mystery. Still I suspected nothing, for whenever we spoke with each other, the restrained, sadness-tinged tones of his voice dispelled such perplexity as had grown from observation of his actions.

THE first intimation of horror that I received came to me one evening in the hushed atmosphere of his private library, to which no one but him and Aunt Helena had ever had access.

He had always spent a considerable part of each day in his room and in his library. On two occasions only had I ever caught a glimpse of the ceiling-high shelves; a glimpse and no more. Naturally, I had always felt curiosity about the book-lined room. One day my curiosity was to receive more satisfaction than I had bargained for. . . .

It was on a Sunday, and I had already seen my uncle disappear down the slippery steps into the strangely vibrant darkness. It was on my way to the study that I halted beside the door of Uncle Henry's private library. Who can say what it was that impelled me to try the door-knob? Perhaps it was the old curiosity; perhaps it was caprice; or perhaps I was prompted by something deeper. Then it was that I received the first intimation, in that heavily silent environment.

On the shelves was a staggering collection of books, which, I perceived immediately with growing apprehension, dealt with subjects I felt to be violently incompatible with his professed religious views. Words cannot express my shock, my bewilderment, my doubt upon examining the numerous volumes. Many were inscribed in Latin and were of great antiquity. Those I could not read, however, usually contained remarkable and grotesque diagrams and drawings; interlaced triangles, squares and circles, and charts of the human anatomy covered with astrological and kabalistic symbols appeared frequently in these works. Then, too, there were those books that I could read, and I proceeded to do so at the cost of completely lost equilibrium.

Picking out a heavy, leather-bound volume, I opened it and began to read. My fright was great. Consider, for example, the following:

"It is said among the Greeks," said the paragraph (it was apparently translated from Latin), "that in an impenetrable mountain fastness in the northeast, where Rome's legions have not yet penetrated, dwells a scattered people whose priests and physicians are unexcelled in necromancy and the control of the elements. Frightened and starved travelers have returned from this mountain region with strangely similar tales. Accounts of the raising of the dead and of lightning and wind called out of the heavens are frequent. It has also been said that these people stand unclothed in bitter cold, and melt ice and snow around them with the breath of their bodies. It seems that these strange people, whoever they may be, are the custodians of a very great fund of superhuman wisdom, and hold the keys to many arcana. The tree-worshipping priests of Britannia and the black men of the Southern Continent hold no powers such as these. The soothsayers of the Greeks and the oracles of Delphi are acquainted with mere child's games when one considers the many-times confirmed accounts of the occult might of these people."

The above, however, was the least of the abominations that I found. It took on the appearance of a mere dissertation on the customs of foreign peoples in strange places, compared to that which next occupied my dazed brain, next absorbed my horror-filled intensity of concentration. Opening a large, leather-bound tome at random, I read:

"It is therefore apparent that each soul possesses inherent in itself to effect its own resurrection, a capacity for the special vital fluid possessed by the human organism, a thousandfold greater than the crude, earthy strength of the animal world. In the human being alone is the Solar Force specialized, differentiated, into what might be called mental or spiritual vital force, in contradistinction to the physical vitality of animals and the sluggish animation of vegetable life. In this respect, men are the vessels of power, the most exalted receptacles of the precious fluid that flows from the plenum, of the golden dew of Pleroma, otherwise known to men as *anima mundi*.

"Behold, then, how each man may resurrect his own body, according to the archetype of Christos, and triumph over the Destroyer of Forms. The secret lies in this, that he who aspires to unending length of days must invoke that Power known as the Preserver, and the secret is that each man is his own preserver. By knowledge of the proper means, therefore, one may overthrow the night-clothed and ravening Devourer which forces its way into the most secret tomb, the most cleverly concealed vault, to gnaw at the husk therein. The soul may wrench itself from the smothering embrace of night, from the detestable bosom of decay, from the cold and slimy suck of chaos . . . and radiant and triumphant, emerge from the gaping entrance of its shattered prison, invested with immortality of the body; for, it is the terrifying truth, there is no other immortality. That which men call the immortality of the spirit is a dim dream, and the soul without a body flits like a will-o'-the-wisp from star to star. . . .

"Certain oriental peoples have a method of arousing the dead, wherein the veins of the body are opened and the corpse is cudgeled violently with sticks and flogged with whips, so that a frantic, convulsive and temporary revivification is brought about. This is hardly to be admired or, less yet, to be indulged in; for it is not true immortality, and is a cruel disappointment to the eager, reawakened entity to which the body belongs.

"There is a more subtile, sure method, however, by which animation may be restored to the dead, provided that the period of latency in the tomb does not exceed seven days, or slightly more or less than that figure."

The blasphemous tract thereupon gave minute directions for the raising of the dead. It spoke confidently, in the utmost detail, about the necessary measures, the arrangement of censers and diagrams, of candles and emblems around and above the tomb, and the intricate, sonorous mantras to be intoned daily in the funereal environs, accompanied by slow-traced diagrams and signs in the air.

I CLOSED the book slowly, confusedly, my fingers trembling with a dawning fear. Then I placed the volume back in its proper place, extinguished the light, and fled from the library, closing the door swiftly, silently behind me. As I hurried to my room, I heard slow, heavy footsteps ascending the stairs from the cellar. I considered myself fortunate, indeed, to have escaped observation, as a terrible suspicion had crept into my mind con-

cerning the true purpose of my uncle's vigils in the vaults.

In the seemingly endless days that followed my intrusion into the locked library of my uncle, it was only with almost superhuman exertion of will that I concealed from him, in word or even general bearing, the fact that I had received the first intimation of abnormality in his daily actions, the fact that I had penetrated into the monstrous repository of occult knowledge into which he withdrew daily for study that did not pursue the conventional paths of learning. I would not have succeeded in this deception had I known the measure in which he was succeeding in necromancy . . . though it must be understood that my suspicions were still so unformed that I could not assign any definite purpose to his frequent descents into the funereal chambers deep below the house.

I observed my uncle's actions thereafter with such intensity that his failure to feel my gaze was miraculous. This concentration brought to my attention things I had failed to observe before, such as long bulges beneath his clothing betokening, as I was later to discover, a candle made for ceremonial purposes, and small packages that left in the air fragrant trails of sandalwood and frankincense. Always, however, he carried with him the single candle, the weighty missal, which repeated action became obnoxious to me, as I now knew that he had no need or use for a book of orthodox prayer. It seemed to me at times that I could also hear faint echoes of my uncle's voice in the depths below, a voice whose timbre had acquired a new significance.

What was it that caused him to become so negligent of his actions in those last few days? What inspired the carelessness that led to my ultimate discovery of the events that had been going on in the vaults? Truly, it was merciful that the truth became known to me bit by bit, rather than in one moment that would have cost me my sanity.

First, there was his curiously confident, expectant air as he emerged daily from the vaults. Then followed the discovery of the library and of the packages that he carried with him into the depths. And finally, that last day, I found the diary, which led to the ultimate climax of revelation in the subterranean rooms into which I finally dared to descend.

ENTERING my uncle's room unbidden, while he was absorbed in his daily, subterrene vigil, I found the diary on his dresser. Without knowing what to expect, I opened and read:

"*December 23*—It is now seven days after the interment of Helena, and I have begun the rites of preservation, which are necessary to preserve the Temple from destruction . . . for it will be many days before the marble chrysalis yields up its precious secret, before the final and glorious resurrection of her who lies so pallid but adamant within. I doubt that the rites could recall her to me without her own innate power of resurrection. The force she had in life she now has in death, subdued and concealed, but flouting Conqueror Worm with sublime persistency.

"How can I express the deep humility I feel upon observing daily her imperishable form, white and spotless, unmarked by the tooth of time? In tender reverence and awe I am compelled to genuflect before her quiet immortality, her adamant but subdued and gentle will-to-life. Her hair seems to flow like a golden river in the darkness of the vault, and a faint nimbus clothes her resisting flesh in a secret and unearthly glamor. Her blue-gem eyes are now softly veiled by white-rose lids, but they shall soon open. I

tremble in passion like a leaf in a gale as I stand daily in the circle of glowing tapers, intoning magical syllables in the hushed atmosphere, swinging the censer rhythmically, while her still form is wreathed in plumes of pungent frankincense and sandalwood.

"What a strange passion I am filled with when I view her dormant beauty! It seems to me that now she is more desirable, being for the moment beyond my reach, and I, a humble votary, wreathe the marble goddess with incense. What a strange feeling! I am sure she is aware of my presence, though she is truly dead. I feel some strange and supermundane breath of air flow from the sepulcher, as out of vast spaces.

"A foolish thought. It is as still as death down there, as still as death can be. There is only silence and darkness, and Helena waits patiently in the midst of her gruesome company until the day shall arrive when she strides forth from the tomb. The burning incense drops, for the moment, a veil before her radiance.

"*December 27* — The past days have been filled with a sweet anxiety, an ecstatic impatience. Although I repeat the mantras precisely and trace the diagrams unfailingly, it seems to me that I am not the occult scientist I thought myself, but a bereaved spouse frantically imploring rather than demanding, the return of his loved one. At the end of the ceremony, I unfailingly kneel in adoration before the sepulcher, while my hot and quickened breath congeals on the gray stone. Gray, gray! Gray stone, covered with sweat and niter, the enclosing darkness—these I could not bear but for the presence of Helena. Her calm demeanor soothes and refreshes me immeasurably. How cosmic her thoughts must be, how superhuman and unearthly her mood as she lies there!

"*January 2*—The super-mundane wind again! I feel it flow from the shrouded recesses of the vault, and yet the candles do not flicker, the plumes of incense do not waver. But I think I understand now. It is the breath of *anima mundi,* it is the stirring of the breath of life. It is a psychic wind, and has its origin nowhere on earth, although it flows through Helena, who is a gate ajar to the interstellar forces and the thronging Multitudes beyond the veil of matter. Hasten!

"*January 7*—How long must I wait? How long must *we* wait? Oh cruel time! thy fangs are sharp, they bite deeply. And although thy strength is nothing against *her,* thy tooth has torn my heart. Helena . . . doubt . . . prayer . . . incantations . . . waiting . . . incense mingling with the musty effluvium of the tomb, pungent, aromatic . . . seven candles, tall and quietly burning . . . colored diagrams in chalk on dank, gray stone . . . silence, silence, then the sonorous chant of resurrection. When will it end? Perhaps . . . but God preserve me, *I dare not doubt.* Until now I have had nought but the utmost confidence in the revelations of Ibn Khanu in his work, *Death and Resurrection.* I must not now doubt the potency of the mantras and the symbols, nor Helena's own indomitable will. Long days and weeks have passed since her death, while I have spent every day either beside her tomb or in my library, learning how to hasten the transformation of the human chrysalis, how to break the sooner the marble and mortar cocoon. Endless incantations, dozens of ceremonial candles, a fortune in rare frankincense, what are all these to the price Helena and I would pay if I failed?

"Her sacrifice was sublime. She was not informed as I was in the occult lore of ages, she knew nothing of the greater arcana; yet she consented so readily, so

willingly, with such sublime confidence in my ability to bring her forth again from the tomb! Not the slightest remonstrance, not the least doubt, and of fear there was none. I but explained to her my intention, my glorious purpose of immortality on earth, and though she did not understand fully, she bowed her head and gave her consent sweetly.

"She knew what she was to do that night at the table, and she did it without hesitation, faced death without fear. Two brownish drops in the wine I placed, at dinner, bitter. She drank it swiftly. Helena!"

HOURS later I stumbled up flights of stairs, raced in engulfing fear through the empty house, through long, silent corridors that seemed without end, through great hushed rooms wherein a strange animation seemed to have sprung up, past fireplaces leaping with fiery life and walls alive with writhing shadows, through portals that seemed to fly open before my approach in a terror of their own and out into the cold January air.

Snow was falling outside, thick and fast. I fled up the side of a hill and, reaching the summit, paused there, while my gaze rested on the huge, rambling house below, from which I had just flung myself in an overwhelming access of terror. Beneath me it lay like a slumbering behemoth, while the dull grayness of the walls and the roof was transformed into a living, gleaming white, and the light within blazed brazenly, triumphantly, out over the rime-blanketed earth. Lights sprang into fiery life in every window, lit by an unseen incendiary. The great, snow-bleached structure became suddenly vibrant with light, life. The howling night-wind shrieked triumphantly, and my mind projected itself once more inside. The pageant of past minutes rose up before me.

Gone now was all the old terror of my childhood, replaced by an overwhelming, torturing curiosity. Dazedly, hardly realizing what I was doing, I opened the ponderous, oaken door slowly, silently, on its well-oiled, copper hinges. With silent tread and with a pace of funereal slowness and deliberation, I descended the precipitous, gray, dank steps. Dark, wet walls loomed up on either side, and thick blackness lay before me at the bottom of the descent. A cold, clammy breath blew in my face from the rambling chambers and corridors into which I was venturing at last, heavily laden with the odor of freshly burned incense.

And as I reached the bottom of the stone stairway, and stood quivering in the frigid exhalation of the vault, there beat against my ears the strangely arousing syllables of a low-pitched, vibrant chant. It roamed through the obscurity of the chambers and smote my attentive ears with a peculiar, invigorating quality. Still hardly realizing that I had made the fearsome descent into this chill limbo, I proceeded through the twisting corridor unhesitatingly, as if my feet and legs were inspired with a volition and animation of their own.

Suddenly I came to a turn in the corridor, and there spread before me the first room. Within a circle of seven candles whose light beat in visible pulsations against the inclosing darkness, within a complex diagram made with chalk on the wet flagstones, wrapped in clouds and plumes of incense arising from three censers, knelt my uncle, gazing with a fearful concentration into the recessed vault immediately in front of him. The last syllables flowed from his lips, and then he uttered softly, reverently yet passionately: "Helena, Helena!"

I had halted there at the turn in the passageway, frozen in statuesque im-

mobility, while comprehension dawned luridly on my dazed mind, while the blood withdrew violently from my face, the strength from my limbs, the first courage from my sadly leaping heart. Myself unseen, I watched the mute unfolding of the ultimate climax. My extremities grew cold, my head flushed again with blood, then blanched once more; my pulse raced violently, swiftly. I seemed suddenly suspended in the outer depths of space, while the earth dwindled beneath me like a punctured balloon. My consciousness reeled but, fortunately, did not leave me, so that I was able to *creep* from the corridor to the stairs and up them to the silent quarters above in abject fear. I heard my uncle's expectant cry and would have turned and fled. Too late!

Aunt Helena emerged from the vault slowly, quietly, with a queer delicacy. I never returned to that house.

The Isle of the Sleeper

By EDMOND HAMILTON

If we are but images in the dreams of some supernal being who slumbers, what will happen when the Sleeper awakes?—A strange and fantastic story

GARRISON lay face down on the life-raft and felt the sun slowly cooking his brain. After four days, his only sensations were of heat and thirst; he was too dizzily sick to feel hunger any more. The little raft rose and sank on the long, lazy Pacific swells, and each time it fell, the blue water gently smacked his face.

He knew dimly that he would not last much longer. It was only a matter of hours now until he would give way and gulp up the blue water that slapped so invitingly at his face, and then he would die rather horribly. Of course a sane man wouldn't drink sea-water, but then a man who has been floating in mid-Pacific four days without food or drink is not quite sane.

He thought bitterly again that the others were the lucky ones, those who had gone to swift death when the explosion sank the *Mary D.* Those others of the crew, all of them, were at peace now, gently drifting and bumping down in the cool shadowed ooze of the bottom. It was only he, jumping instinctively from the freighter deck as the explosion ripped it, who had been unfortunate enough to live.

Garrison began thinking of water again. He knew that was only hastening the end, but he couldn't keep his weakened mind from doing it. Greedy visions floated through his brain, of silver brooks running over brown stones, of bubbling springs and placid rivers and blue lakes. He saw crystal tumblers of ice-water, beaded with frost. He sobbed, his face crushed against the hot, salt-crusted canvas.

Hours had become eternities for him.

"Three of the beast-men had left him and seized the girl."

He did not realize the sun had gone down, until the furnace-blast scorching him eased a little. Then he raised his head, opened bleared, red-rimmed eyes. It was night, and the raft drifted on dark, lulling waters, the sky a jungle thick with stars. Garrison let his face fall again.

How many eternities later was it that a new, startlingly unfamiliar sound impinged on his dimmed consciousness? A dull rasping and grinding, close to his ears. It began and ceased in roughly regular rhythm. Rasp, rasp—then silence. And then the rasp, rasp. . . .

The unfamiliarity of the sound roused in his deadened brain a vague desire to investigate. He raised himself, as slowly and stiffly as a corpse coming alive, upon his elbows. He stared numbly. Two feet in front of his face was solid land.

The life-raft had drifted onto the sandy beach of a dark island, and lay now with one end grinding and rasping into the sand. There was no other sound but the sucking of the surf. The wheeling companies of stars looked solemnly down. The island stretched in front of Garrison, a dark, unguessable mass.

"It's land," he heard a dry voice croak.

Then Garrison realized that the voice

was his own. He was conscious that somehow he had staggered to his feet.

"Land," his salt-crusted lips whispered again.

Garrison stepped off the raft, and went to his knees on the sand. He hitched himself up by a miracle of drunken effort, and unsteadily he started forward in a blind, directionless run.

He ran in a clumsy, stooping posture, head sagging, thin hands hanging nervelessly. His dazed eyes could make out nothing in the darkness. He was like a blinded, maddened animal, moving by instinct rather than intelligence.

He slipped in loose sand, and tripped over rocks, but went reeling on. Then he tripped again and fell. And this time he did not get up. His tired body relaxed gratefully, luxuriously. His mind darkened, slipped into a shadowy dusk. He was aware only of the holy, dusky calm taking possession of his mind. This, then, was death? He slipped into darkness with the sigh of a tired child.

But later, Garrison awoke. That was a strange thing, he thought as consciousness first revived, to awake from death. But he knew suddenly that he was not dead. For fierce thirst still burned his throat, and how can a dead man feel thirst? He wrenched open his gummed, swollen eyelids—to the dazzling splash of bright sunshine.

By convulsive effort, he got to a sitting position. Then with numbed, wild gaze he stared about him. His mind was too dazed to appreciate the full impact of the surprize, and he felt only a vague wonder at what he saw.

Around him rose a thick forest of unearthly beauty. Huge, black-trunked trees towered high above him, shutting out the sky with great masses of silvery foliage. Their interlacing branches were twined with dark, arboring vines. And on the vines grew enormous, orchid-like blooms, wonderful, tender-hued flowers that cascaded in spilled beauty toward the green turf.

Brilliant macaws and parrots flashed screeching through the flowers, and liquid notes of bird-song tinkled sweetly. In the long, hushed silences, a soft wind wandered whispering through the trees, laden with strange, spicy scents and haunting undertones of exquisite perfume.

Garrison stared dazedly. Then through the trees he saw a shining thread of water, a tiny, fern-fringed brook singing through the woods. The crazed longing of four days burst into raging life within him. He ran weakly forward, with an inarticulate cry. A minute later he was lying flat, crushing the ferns, his face buried in the cool crystal stream.

It took all his will to force himself to stop drinking. He was trembling when he raised his head from the water, and his parched mouth and withered tongue seemed slowly expanding. Tears twitched his eyelids.

"I'm saved," he sobbed hoarsely. "Saved!"

Garrison forced himself to get up and stumble away from the stream. He felt even yet no hunger, but he knew that he needed food.

Close by he found it, a tall tree heavy with round red fruit. The fruit looked and tasted like an apple but had a hard, stone-like core. When he had eaten some of it, he felt a little stronger. And he saw now that he was in no danger of starving, for there were many trees with fruit.

Also, there was plenty of life evident in this hushed, faery forest. Brown hares bolted through the ferns, and flying squirrels shot in dizzy arcs from branch to branch, and monkeys chattered in the distance.

"Lucky, to stumble on this island," he mumbled. "Most islands in this part of the Pacific are just bare rock. Probably isn't very big—and doesn't look inhabited at all."

He started in an unsteady tramp toward the distant boom of the surf. He was astounded, as he went, by the variety of life he glimpsed. Two spotted leopards, bounding up a distant tree. Grunting wild pigs rooting in thickets. He heard a hyena somewhere near him, barking in the brush. Deer in large number, swift and beautiful. It seemed incredible to find such life on a small Pacific island.

Then he emerged from the thick woods onto a narrow, sandy beach. The white blob of the life-raft lay on the sand where the tide had left it. Sweeping his gaze along the shore, Garrison saw that the island was five miles long, and two across. It was all blanketed by the thick forest, a green isle sleeping on the vast bosom of the sea. There were no signs whatever that humans had ever been here.

Garrison started trudging along the shore, for it was easier going on the beach than in the forest. He had gone less than a half-mile when out of the woods beside him suddenly stepped the girl. She appeared so startlingly that he stood frozen, staring at her.

"Lord above!" he exclaimed. "Where did *you* come from?"

She smiled. "My name is Myrrha," she said.

She was a white girl—he saw that first. Then his stunned brain perceived that this girl was young and lovely. He doubted if she was more than seventeen. Her dress was queer—a scanty tunic of soft white cloth, belted with a jeweled girdle. Her ivory shoulders were left bare by it, and its skirt stopped short of her rounded knees.

Her eyes were steady on his face. They were soft, wistfully tender black eyes, in which doubt mixed with glad eagerness. Her red-ripe lips were parted a little in excitement. Black silky hair was combed back in a soft mass from her broad, low brow.

"Myrrha?" Garrison repeated dazedly.

"From in the forest, I saw you here," she said, with a quick gesture of slim fingers. Excitement was eager in her eyes as she added, "I was so glad that at last there is somebody else."

"You mean that you and I are the only people on the island?" Garrison cried. "That you've been here alone?"

Myrrha nodded. "Yes, except for the Sleeper, of course."

"The Sleeper?" Garrison could not comprehend her. He cried, "How long have you been on the island?"

"Ever since I can remember, of course," she said, looking at him wonderingly.

"But how did you get here?" he exclaimed.

"I don't understand you," Myrrha said perplexedly. "I have been here from the first. I am part of the dream, the same as you and everything else here."

"Part of the dream?" Garrison echoed. "What in the world do you mean by that?"

MYRRHA'S puzzlement increased. She looked at him with astonished wonder in her clear eyes.

"You mean, you don't understand it?" she asked. "Why, that is strange—I understood it all from the first. Though I don't know just *how* I did——"

"Will you quit talking riddles and explain?" Garrison demanded. Then he saw the hurt in her child-like eyes and awkwardly tempered his speech. "I'm sorry. I'm just excited, impatient. What

did you mean by saying you were part of the dream?"

Her answer stunned him.

"Everything here is just a dream," Myrrha said, with the eager quickness of a child trying to explain something. "This island is really just barren rock, and the forest and animals and you and I are only a dream. They all seem real to us, of course, since we too are part of the dream."

"Why—you're crazy!" Garrison exploded. "This forest—the animals—you—a dream? And I, too?"

"Of course," Myrrha said earnestly. "You are part of the dream, the same as I am."

Garrison repressed a strong desire to swear. Then he felt pity for the girl. She believed what she was saying, he saw. She must, he thought, have grown up here alone, and somehow evolved this wild theory.

"Whose dream is it we're part of, Myrrha?" he asked, humoring her. "Who dreamt us?"

"The Sleeper, of course," she said instantly.

Garrison felt a strong desire to laugh. This was, surely, the most insane adventure he had ever had.

"And who is the Sleeper?" he asked.

Myrrha's soft face sobered with a touch of awe. "He is just—the Sleeper. He lies in the depths of the forest, sleeping, never waking. And whatever he dreams has reality on this island. The Sleeper dreamed the forests and brooks you see around you. He dreamed the animals, and the birds. He dreamed *me*—and I was suddenly here. Since I have been here, he has dreamed many other animals, but no other people until you. I am glad he dreamed you. I was lonely!"

And Myrrha's dark eyes broke into a dancing smile of pleasure. Her soft, bare arm hooked through Garrison's with confident affection.

"So the Sleeper dreamed me, did he?" Garrison said amusedly. "I'd like to see this Sleeper."

The awe came back on Myrrha's face and she answered slowly.

"I can take you to see him. But you must promise not to go near him."

And quite simply, she started to lead the way off the beach into the woods, following an invisible trail of her own that led deviously toward the center of the forested island.

Parrots and monkeys scolded them as they trod the green turf between aisles of giant, flower-decked trees. The soft wind swept them with spicy, perfumed breath. In the air hummed a myriad of gorgeous insects.

Myrrha was like a gay little wood-nymph at his side, laughing up at the scolding birds, plucking a great blue bloom from a vine to thrust in her black hair, dancing along on little bare white feet. But once she held Garrison suddenly back, and he saw the dangerously beautiful shape of a leopard fade into the foliage ahead.

"I could wish that the Sleeper hadn't dreamed *them,*" Garrison said dryly.

"Those are only his bad dreams," Myrrha said earnestly. "He has dreamed many beautiful things here, but sometimes he dreams too of evil things."

"Logical enough," Garrison laughed. "How did you figure all that out?"

Myrrha smiled back as she shook her head. "I don't know. It was in my mind, somehow, when the Sleeper dreamed me."

They had threaded through more than a mile of the faery forest, and now entered a long glade of tall, tremendous trees, a natural cathedral of green gloom and hushed silence. Myrrha pressed

against Garrison a little timidly as they went on.

"We are near the Sleeper," she whispered. "Make no loud sound. All life on the island fears to go near him, and even I—I am afraid."

CURIOSITY stirred in Garrison as they went forward. Then as they stopped in a moment, sharp wonder replaced it.

They stood at the edge of a perfectly circular clear space in the hushed green glade. Grass covered it like an emerald carpet. Out there in the center of the circle, in the sunlight there was inset in the grass a low, square dais of dazzling crystal.

On the crystal dais stood a low copper couch, with strangely carved sides. And on the couch, wrapped in a robe of golden cloth ornamented with black figures, lay the motionless figure of a man.

He lay quite unmoving, upon his side, one bare arm flung across his down-turned head. As Garrison went closer, Myrrha fearfully trying to keep him back, he saw that the man's hair was dark, his skin white. Nothing else could be seen, shrouded as he was in the golden robe.

"The Sleeper," whispered Myrrha. She had halted him with plucking fingers, a dozen feet from the crystal dais. Her dark eyes were wide with awe as she stared at the recumbent figure.

"Good Lord, this must be a corpse laid here for burial by some unknown race, long ago!" Garrison exclaimed. "But how it has been preserved perfectly for so long, lying here in the open——"

"No, he is not dead, only sleeping," murmured Myrrha. "Speak not so loudly, lest you awaken him."

"I'm going to examine that body," Garrison muttered with intense interest, starting forward.

But Myrrha held him, clinging frantically, her face chalk-white with terror.

"No, you must not! If you awaken the Sleeper, his dream will end—we and everything else he has dreamed into being on the island will perish!"

"Nonsense," he said, but she held to him.

"Remember, you promised you would not go near him!" There was frantic horror and heartbreak in her voice.

Garrison softened at sight of the girl's terrified emotion.

"All right," he told her. "I'll let him alone."

Myrrha drew him fearfully back out of the sunlit clearing into the glade. She led hastily back the way they had come, looking apprehensively behind her.

"Had you awakened him, you would have destroyed us all," she told him, a catch in her voice. "That is why all the animals, even, do not go near the Sleeper—somehow they sense that."

Garrison felt he understood all this. There must once have been a civilized race on this unknown island, one that had embalmed the dead man so perfectly that he had lain indefinitely on his copper couch, unchanged. The animals, fearing the dead, would avoid him.

And it was natural that Myrrha, growing up alone on the island, would think the corpse a sleeper and evolve her weird belief that everything on the island was the Sleeper's dream. For Garrison had no doubt now that Myrrha was a castaway like himself, grown up here from childhood.

She was happy now with child-like relief as they left the glade of the Sleeper behind them.

"I take you now to my home, Gair'son," she said, trying to repeat his name as he had told it to her.

Garrison looked back thoughtfully and said, "I'd like to have a closer look at that body sometime."

Instantly the panic flashed back on Myrrha's face. She clung to him, desperate entreaty in her eyes.

"Gair'son, you must never touch the Sleeper! It is as I said—if he ever awakes, we who are only his dream will meet our end. Promise me you'll never touch him!"

He could feel her heart hammer with terror. "All right, Myrrha," he said soothingly. "I promise not to touch him."

THEY came soon to Myrrha's home. It was on a wooded slope at the north end of the island, amid great trees. A foaming little stream rushed down there, and right beside it snuggled a dainty bower of twisted green withes, thatched with velvety moss.

Myrrha showed him how she had made a door of boughs that could be closed at night against the animals. And she showed him fruit and nuts she had collected for food, and the soft couch she had made of fragrant ferns.

"It will not be lonely now, with you here, Gair'son," she said fondly.

"But I can't live in this too," he objected.

"Why not?" Myrrha asked, clear eyes puzzled. "It is big enough for both of us."

Garrison tried awkwardly to explain.

Her eyes filled with tears and her soft mouth quivered. "You do not like me, Gair'son."

Hastily, he tried to soothe her. And as he held her, he was suddenly conscious of the appeal of her soft beauty, of her rounded ivory body and graceful limbs that the scanty tunic scarcely concealed, of the pure forehead and wide, hurt dark eyes beneath her silky black hair.

"Myrrha," he muttered.

And somehow then he was holding her tighter, fragrant red lips against his own hungry ones, silkiest of perfumed black hair against his hand. "Myrrha—Myrrha——"

So began Garrison's life with Myrrha on the island. It was a fantastic life, and yet it was more real to him in the next few days than all his past life in the busy, bustling world.

It was Myrrha who made it so warmly real for him. It seemed to him that he had never known what love was until he met this girl, so child-like in her utter simplicity of mind, so wonderfully womanly in her soft loveliness and devotion to him.

He wondered much how Myrrha had come to the island, how she had survived and grown here. And she was able to tell him but little. Her notions of time were vague. She had been on the island just as now, she said, ever since the Sleeper dreamed her.

And when Myrrha talked so earnestly of the Sleeper, Garrison would smile and draw her fondly closer. He made no more attempts to disillusion her of her belief, for he saw that nothing could shake her queer faith. But Garrison wondered much about that lifeless form on the copper couch.

ON THE third morning, Garrison and Myrrha went down the wooded slope from the bower—and stopped in surprize. A small lake had appeared at the foot of the hill—a blue, shining little lake that had not been there the night before.

Myrrha clapped her hands in glee. "Gair'son, look! The Sleeper has dreamed a lake!"

"You think the Sleeper dreamed this lake, too?" Garrison said, though he was himself surprized.

"Of course," she said confidently.

He laughed. "Something happened to dam up that little stream during the night—that's what did it."

"It is not so," Myrrha asserted. "It was the Sleeper's dream."

"'We are such stuff as dreams are made on,'" quoted Garrison, smiling. "No matter how it came here, it looks like a good place to swim. Come on!"

But in the next few days, there were things that Garrison found harder to explain than the lake.

There were the elephants, for instance. Garrison saw them one afternoon, two huge, humped gray shapes pushing ponderously through the distant forest. He stood rooted in amazement.

"Why didn't you tell me there were elephants on the island?" Garrison exclaimed to the girl.

Myrrha shook her head. "There never were any until now, Gair'son. The Sleeper must have just dreamed them."

"Rubbish," he said impatiently. "They've been here—you just didn't happen to see them before."

Yet he had inward doubts. He and Myrrha had been over all the island in the last few days, and had seen no elephants or tracks of any. Yet the great beasts were here now, beyond doubt.

It was the same with the giant, three-foot blue butterflies he saw the next day, and the seals that appeared in the lake a day later. They had not been there before—they were there now. And Myrrha said quite simply the Sleeper had dreamed them too.

"Sleeper, my eye!" Garrison said impatiently. He told her, "I'm going and look at that body again."

"You will not go too near the Sleeper—will not touch him?" Myrrha pleaded anxiously. "Remember, you promised me——"

"I'll keep my promise," he reassured her.

"I will go with you," Myrrha declared.

"Don't quite trust me, eh?" he smiled.

"It is not that, Gair'son," she said earnestly. "But we have been so happy—I fear lest something you do might awake the Sleeper, and bring an end to us and everything else here."

This time his arm was about her waist as they went through the forest, and into that hushed and solemn glade of green gloom where no life seemed ever to venture. And he could feel her heart pounding as they came to that silent, circular space of sunlight.

In its center still dazzzled the crystal dais, and upon it still stood the copper couch on which rested the body of the Sleeper. He lay as before, wrapped in the shrouding golden robe, one arm across his down-turned head.

"A miracle of preservation, that body," Garrison muttered, staring. "Archeologists would go crazy to examine——"

He stopped, for Myrrha had shuddered wildly beside him. The girl gasped, "Look—the Sleeper stirs, and sighs!"

For a moment, Garrison almost thought he *did* see a faint movement of the body under the golden shroud, almost thought he heard a low, singing groan. Then he dismissed the fantastic idea.

"It was just the wind sighing, and stirring the robe, Myrrha," he said. But her face was aghast with fear.

"Gair'son, let us leave here, quickly! The Sleeper is having bad dreams—and that means evil on the island!"

As she led him frantically back through the glade, the girl was quivering with terror.

"I am afraid, Gair'son! The Sleeper groaned and that means his dream was evil."

He held her trembling softness close to him. "Don't be afraid, Myrrha."

But that night, fear came to Garrison himself, for there came—the beast-men. He awoke in the little bower, Myrrha still sleeping in his arms, and heard strange, heavy foot-steps outside, snuffling grunts, a clumsy clawing at the door.

Then the rude door was torn open, and against the starlit sky he saw the dark silhouettes of the creatures outside. Hunched, huge, hairy shapes of men nearer the animal than the human, with bowed, gorilla-like limbs and bestial snouted faces out of which green eyes blazed through the darkness at the frozen Garrison.

"The things of evil that the Sleeper dreamed!" screamed Myrrha, awakening at that moment.

THE bestial figures started to enter, unloosing a babel of chattering and grunting as they heard the girl's voice. Their hairy hands reached in the dark—and then Garrison broke from the trance that had held him, and went mad with terror and loathing.

He smashed wild blows against the hairy bodies, yelling his horror. The creatures recoiled out of the dark hut, running swiftly back on hunched legs into the trees.

"Myrrha, we've got to get out of here before they come back!" Garrison cried unsteadily. "Come on!"

He was half carrying her as he plunged out of the bower, and ran into the dark forest. In a moment they heard the raging, chattering uproar of the beast-men, tearing the bower apart.

Garrison's horror-clouded mind recovered itself only minutes later. His frantic flight had brought Myrrha and him into a dark thicket of tall bushes.

"Gair'son, *they* are what the Sleeper dreamed today as we watched!" cried Myrrha, shuddering wildly. "I knew his dreams were evil."

"Listen!" Garrison suddenly exclaimed. And they both heard an angry, chattering uproar drawing closer in the forest.

"God, they're trailing us!" cried Garrison, aghast. "They want—they want *you,* Myrrha."

He wrenched a great branch from a tree, and with the rude club in his hand, stumbled blindly on through the woods with Myrrha. And after them, veering to follow them, came the pursuit.

Hour after hour they dodged and fled through the nighted forest, and always the chattering, unclean horde pursued. The paling dawn found them at the southern end of the island, Myrrha exhausted and clinging pitiably to him.

"We can't run from them for ever," Garrison said hoarsely. "Sooner or later, they'll catch up to us."

Then sudden hope lit his haggard face. "Maybe they wouldn't follow us to that clearing where the Sleeper lies! None of the animals on the island ever go there."

"No, let us not go there!" Myrrha cried.

But he overrode her protests, stumbled desperately with her through the woods to the hushed, solemn glade that lay silent as ever in the rising sun.

He carried the fainting girl to within a dozen feet of the crystal dais. On his couch, the Sleeper's dark, down-turned head was still immobile under his upflung arm and golden robe.

"I am afraid," Myrrha whispered, looking fearfully at the motionless form.

"We're safe here, I think," Garrison panted. "They won't follow——"

"Gair'son!"

Out of the glade into the clearing had burst the unclean, hairy horde—the beast-men!

Myrrha's scream catapulted Garrison fiercely forward to meet them, to hold them from her. His heavy club swung in

raging blows that crushed the skulls of two of the creatures like eggshells.

But the others came at him, with shrill yells of animal rage, bestial, snouted faces slavering their rage, reaching for him with incredibly powerful hands. He slammed the club wildly against their faces, crushing bone and muscle. Then Myrrha screamed again.

Garrison turned for a split second, and cried out hoarsely. Three of the beast-men had left the attack on him, had circled past him and had seized the girl. Ivory body struggling in the grip of hairy arms—Garrison's blood froze at the sight. And before he could turn back, hands gripped him, too.

"Myrrha!" he cried madly, struggling to smash aside his own attackers, to reach her side.

He glimpsed her white face, her horror-dilated eyes. He heard her frantic cry.

"Gair'son—wake the Sleeper! It's better for us all, for everything here to perish, than for us to die like this——"

He couldn't reach her. The clawing, hairy hands held him back, would have him down in a moment.

"Wake the Sleeper, Gair'son! End everything——"

The beast-men had him to his knees, by now. His red-lit, tortured soul knew that there was no hope of saving Myrrha, no hope except the wild one that her cry had voiced. If he woke the Sleeper—if that did end Myrrha, everything—better for her to end that way.

Garrison made a last effort against the clutching, tearing claws. He swung his club wildly around his head, and threw it straight at the motionless form on the copper couch. He saw the club strike the Sleeper's bare shoulder, saw blood flow from the bruising wound. And then he glimpsed the Sleeper stirring wildly, starting up to a sitting position. . . .

A sudden mistiness came over everything. The trees, the grass, the dais and couch, Myrrha's white body and the hairy beast-men—all seemed suddenly fading, vanishing. And Garrison was aware that his own body, too, was vanishing, fading.

Through dimming sight, as his own body disappeared, he saw the Sleeper sitting up, opening his eyes. And in the final moment before his body vanished, before everything vanished, Garrison saw and recognized the Sleeper's face.

It was his own face! He, Garrison, was vanishing like everything else—but the Sleeper was Garrison, too, and the Sleeper had awakened.

With that incredible realization, his consciousness whirled into darkness. And then instantly he was conscious again. And he found himself sitting stiffly and alone in the sunlight, Myrrha and the beast-men and all else gone. He, the Sleeper, had awakened.

Wildly, Garrison stared. He had been lying on bare rock, and around him stretched a lifeless, barren island of rock without one spot of life, one speck of green. And Garrison sobbed aloud as he realized.

He, who had stumbled ashore and fallen into exhausted slumber here, had been the Sleeper. And his dream had created the forest and animals and Myrrha, and had even created a dream-Garrison like himself who had lived and loved in this domain of dream. And when he had awakened, the dream had failed and vanished.

Something made him turn his sagging head to the sea. The black speck of a ship was out there, heading for the island. . . .

THE captain of the tanker felt sympathetic toward this castaway he had rescued, and who lay now in the berth of his lamplit cabin. He felt glad that his search for survivors of the *Mary D.*, that he had begun on receiving the doomed freighter's interrupted distress call, had saved at least this one man. But the gray-haired seaman's kindly face was troubled, now, and he spoke reluctantly.

"I don't doubt you had a wild dream of some kind," he said. "Lying delirious on that rocky island—who wouldn't?"

"It wasn't just a delirious dream—this dream was a *reality!*" Garrison cried. "Those things I dreamed, the forest and beasts and the girl and the other me—they all had real existence, somehow, as long as I lay dreaming them."

"Oh, come now," the captain told him. "You're too intelligent to believe that."

"I do believe it, though," Garrison said. And his eyes glimmered with tears. "I believe that I met the only girl I'll ever love in a dream that was real and solid while it lasted.

"How was the dream made real? I don't know—I don't know. Maybe some queer force impregnating that island, attuned to the mental force of the subconscious mind. Whatever caused it, I know that it all *was* real. I know—by this."

And he rolled up his sleeve, baring his shoulder. There was a fresh, angry wound on it.

"That is the wound the other Garrison, the dream Garrison, made in the Sleeper's shoulder when he threw the club. I didn't have that wound when I fell asleep on the island. I had it when I awoke."

Dreadful Sleep

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A thrilling tale, a romantic and tragic tale, a weird-scientific story of the awakening of the fearsome beings that lay in dreadful slumber under the antarctic ice, and the strange doom that befell the world

The Story Thus Far

CAPTAIN RON DUNBAR, the polar explorer who tells the story, at first refused to pilot Doctor Aston Harding's expedition to Antarctica in 1960—the fateful year of the weirdly terrible Time Fault.

Maru-Mora came to him, and warned him not to go. She was a strange prehuman being, with the bust of an elfin queen, golden-furred and scarlet-crested, who dwelt somehow in a pylon of purple crystal on a mountain beyond the pole.

She showed him the Tharshoon—dread invaders from Saturn, frozen beneath the ice. She had cast them into a space-time stasis, ages past, as they destroyed her people. She is afraid they will be waked, now, to resume their conquest of the planet.

Believing the warning merely a dream,

This story began in WEIRD TALES for March

"The worm flung itself about, twisted, fought to guard that purple spot."

however, Ron went ahead—for the sake of Merry Bell.

Bell had invented the atomic battery with which they planned to thaw the ice. Another discovery of his, a deadly bacteriophage, stolen by his hunchbacked assistant, Mawson Kroll, and sold to the Asiatics, had killed a million Americans in the last war. Bell was exonerated, Kroll convicted and executed. But Bell, still guilt-burdened, wished to make atonement—by giving humanity a new continent.

They landed in Antarctica. Lured out of camp by the alien beauty of Maru-Mora—for, after all, she was no dream—Bell was found dead on the ice.

Tall gaunt Harding had seemed strangely changed. And now his wife discovered that he was not Harding—but Mawson Kroll! For Kroll's brain had been transplanted to Harding's body by the skill of an Asiatic surgeon. It was the innocent Harding that had died, while Kroll's mad brain lived on to plot new crimes.

For Kroll plans to exterminate mankind. His spineless but brilliant henchman, Veering, has completed Bell's apparatus and learned the secret of Maru-

Mora's stasis ray. He plans to thaw the ice and wake the sleeping Tharshoon.

Fighting them, Ron is joined by Karalee, Maru-Mora's beautiful ward, whom he had seen and loved in the dream. She is really Carol Lee, he learns, daughter of the famous "Flying Lees," Americans who were lost on a polar flight. She promises Ron to go back with him—if they win.

For Maru-Mora has sent the ancient treasure of her lost people, offering it to Kroll if he will give up his scheme and depart.

But Kroll refuses.

And he turns upon Ron and Carol the stasis ray, congealing them to the hardness of adamantine stone.

The story continues:

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14. The World Below the Ice

How long my mental being was lost in that black and featureless abyss, outside of Time itself, I have no certain way of knowing. But consciousness, if it failed at all, recovered long before my body did.

For timeless eternities, it seemed, I dwelt alone in darkness. I had no awareness of my body, no fatigue or pain. Yet my mind became clear. I knew that Carol and I were petrified, at the mercy of Mawson Kroll. And the hatred of him lived and grew in me.

Silent ages passed: eons of flat darkness. I lived all my life again. Boyhood, when I was first filled with the desire to fly. College years, when I was absorbed in the modern science of exploration. My polar expeditions, and the small unsatisfying fame they won. The first strange dream of Maru-Mora, in which I saw Carol, and loved her, and knew that I had glimpsed the supreme goal of my life. And all the weird grim tragedy that had met us at the pole, up to the very flash of the stasis ray.

The body that I could not feel was eternal crystal now, I knew, more than diamond-hard, perdurable. Permanent as Time, it could endure unchanged for a million years.

I wondered if I might live and be awake for ever, and never able to move, even until this drifting continent sank beneath the sea again, and I was covered with the ocean's ooze, and the mud hardened to stone, and the stone crumpled upward again to form a new mountainous land, and the mountains eroded and washed back into the sea again; so that in the end I should be left uncovered and alone, a luckless immortal, lying on some dead frozen desert when the sun went out.

At first I had had no physical awareness. But at last, as the black ages fled, sensation began to return. Still my body was rigidly motionless. But faintly to my deadened ears came some whisper of sound—it might be the crashing of some volcanic eruption, I thought, after a million years. And dimly, then, my fixed eyes began to perceive a glow of light.

I waited, and still millennia crept away. Desperately I strained to move, to hear, to see—to wake, even if it should be alone, on a dead world; even if Carol should be standing still beside me, a statue yet locked in that eternal sleep; or even if she had been waked, by Kroll, and her body dust a million years. Desperately, I wanted to know.

Still my body was rigid as iron. But the gray mist of light grew steadily stronger before my eyes. Vague shapes in it slowly took form. And at last I was able to see what lay straight ahead, though I could not turn my eyes.

At first I thought that indeed I must have survived to some far-off, fantastic

future age. For my adamantine body, its tense pose unchanged since Kroll had congealed it with the stasis ray, stood upon the barren summit of an unfamiliar lofty mountain.

Before me, in the expanding cone of vision, a dark slope tumbled sharply down. Beyond and below, for scores of miles where the glaciers had lain a mile deep, spread a vast strange valley.

On a gentle hill at the foot of that wild slope stood—the white city, a city like a garden of the sea. Its low walls were milky mother-of-pearl. Its towered gates were graceful with the curves of racing waves. Its lofty, wide-set buildings were great shells of opalescent white, lifting spiral cones and fluted domes from paves like shining sand. Silver bridges arched the flowing curves of a thousand wide and mirror-like canals.

But it was a dead city. Nothing moved on pavement or bridge or canal. Gaps loomed in the nacrous wall. Fallen bridges clogged the canals. Exquisite opalescent buildings were shattered, crushed—as if by millennia of abandonment.

Its dead white beauty set up an ache of grief in my heart. Trying in vain to look away from its silent desolation, I discovered, beyond—the other city.

It lay beyond the area of my clear vision, so that I had not observed it at first, and now could not see it clearly. But it was a low, dark city, built, it seemed, all of squat dome-shaped mounds of red-black earth. It was hideous, strangely repulsive, as the other had been beautiful.

And it, too, was dead—a necropolis of evil.

Beside it, and almost beyond the cone of my vision, loomed something red, tremendous, glittering darkly. I strained to distinguish its outline with the corner of my eye. And appalling recognition came to me abruptly.

It was the ship of the Tharshoon—the same colossal machine that Maru-Mora had shown me in the dream, locked beneath the ice! And that squat red city was the city of the monstrous invaders from Saturn. And now the ice was gone, ship and city free again.

Dimly, I thought, at the very edge of my vision, I saw black shapes moving about that cyclopean ship.

Were all the hideous invaders, then, awake?

I could not be sure.

The first city, it came to me suddenly—that canal-woven wonder of shell-curved fairy white—had been a metropolis of Maru-Mora's ancient race. Its exquisite beauty was dead because the invaders had ruthlessly slain it.

This was no world of the distant future, below me, but the world of the age-dead past. The atomic fire of that hot blue orb had thawed the ice as I slept—for weeks, perhaps, or even months; but surely not for years or geologic ages—and the water had flowed down through the eastern pass, uncovering this ice-locked valley of the forgotten past.

WHERE, I wondered, was Mawson Kroll? How far had he gone with his monstrous plan to extirpate mankind? And what of Carol, whom the congealing ray had caught here at my side?

My ears, then, caught the thunder of aero motors. Still my body could not move. But at last my own plane came into the fixed cone of my vision: the *Austral Queen*. It taxied to the end of a tiny level shelf that broke that rugged slope, and turned, ready for a take-off.

Aiding the motors were two monstrous things: headless swollen bodies, black-scaled and belted with purple. They flew

like balloons, tugging at the plane with mighty triple tentacles.

Two!

So I knew that Kroll had waked another besides the Watcher—probably all the invading horde.

It was young Veering who stepped out of the plane as the motors died. Mawson Kroll stalked down to meet him—gaunt and powerful. He stood on a ledge, giving orders, while Veering and the monsters loaded the plane.

They first put aboard the dismantled tower and Bell's atomic battery. Then one of the creatures came flying, carrying in its tentacles the great golden chest that Carol had brought: Maru-Mora's treasure.

Kroll gesticulated. The monster laid down the chest, and came sailing back, directly at me, its tentacles dangling like immense black pythons. It settled above me. A black limb whipped in front of my face. I thought it had come for me. But when I could see it fully again, returning to the plane, it was carrying Carol.

Caught by the stasis ray, her limbs tense with dread, and horror a stark mask on her lovely face, the girl had been instantly congealed. She was a statue of consuming dread, executed by some master of terror.

Moving swiftly to Kroll's harsh-toned command, Veering opened the ancient treasure-chest. Dark tentacles dropped the petrified girl into it: another jewel amid the matchless gems of Maru-Mora.

Veering closed and locked the chest. Living black cables swung it aboard the plane. Veering clambered after it, as if to secure his cargo, and Kroll came stalking toward me up the barren slope, tall and haggard, almost gigantic in his stolen body. He still wore whites and pith helmet, although the sky had turned dark and cold since the atomic ray had stopped. I could see his eyes, hideous in my old friend's long ruddy face—one sharply contracted, its dark iris strangely flecked with evil red; the other dilated to a black well of horror.

I felt his hand on my rigid shoulder. I heard his voice—the familiar voice that had belonged to genial Doctor Harding. It was heavy with a mocking triumph.

"Well, Captain Dunbar, we're going to say good-bye. You look almost as if you could hear me, Captain. As if you could speak. But you won't move or speak, Dunbar, till the end of Time."

Chuckling thickly, he drummed his knuckles on my iron-hard shoulder.

"We're going north, to take things over. Your verminous breed is finished, Dunbar. I'm going to give the Saturnians a chance. And if the stasis ever wears off, you'll wake in a different sort of world.

"Because we're leaving you for a sort of statue, Captain. A memorial of error." His fingers ceased their idle tapping on my shoulder. "A monument to the species that failed."

He turned and strolled back down the naked slope.

The sky was filled with a dim gray twilight. Faintly, low above the northern horizon, I could see white Spica in the Virgin. A wind was rising, though my rigid body could not feel its cold. Clouds were drifting from behind me, and snow began to fall over the white fantastic city in the valley below.

Again I fought desperately to move my petrified body. But I might as well have set my will against the granite beneath my feet.

Meantime, at last, Veering started the motors again, let them thunder, one by one, warming up. Kroll turned to wave me a mocking farewell—though he must not have realized my awareness of the gesture—and climbed aboard.

It would have been difficult for the

laden ship to take off safely from that snow-swept shelf, alone. But the two black monsters wrapped their tentacles about the wings, flew forward with it, helped to lift it. And it soared away over the valley, toward that titanic dark-red ship.

Thickening storm-clouds sometimes hid the ship from Saturn. And it was at the very faint verge of my vision. But dimly, at last, I saw the *Austral Queen* drop like a white mote upon one of the vast flat vanes that extended from its hull. A port opened, closed again, and the plane was gone.

Then long rods projecting all about the middle of that vast red hull began to glow with an intense blue-violet incandescence. Tongues of blinding flame flared from them, joined, until the ship was belted with purple fire.

Slowly, then, it lifted, with a grotesque seeming of heavy awkwardness—oddly resembling, in flight, one of its monstrous crew. Swiftly gaining speed, it drifted northward above the abandoned red mound city, and out of my sight.

Only after it had gone did its sound come to me: a monstrous reverberation, crashing, roaring, hissing, that rolled up the mountain like a crushing wave, thunderous and appalling.

That concussion passed me and died. I was left alone, standing petrified on that stark granite peak in the frigid polar world. The brief twilight was gone, those two dead cities lost again in the antarctic night. The clouds thickened. Snow fell steadily, blanketing the dark slope below. The wind made an eery whistling about my rigid body.

For still I could not move.

15. The Dreadful Calm

A SLOW fear crept upon me, as I stood there with the unfelt blizzard whipping the snow about my ankles: a dread more terrible than death. For a time I had hoped that I was somehow slipping from the stasis. Now I was afraid that I would exist for eternities, conscious, yet unable to move, unable even to die.

That huge red ship had been gone a long time—hours or days, I do not know—when the dark scene before me flickered again with the pale magenta of the stasis ray. And again oblivion fell upon me: a second shattering blow that blotted out awareness.

Ages of timeless blackness dragged again. Then sensation, as it had before, came slowly back. No sound, this time, reached my ears. But a gray mist came into my eyes, and imperceptibly increased, and at last I could see again.

It was a world queerly changed and still, in which I woke that second time. The wind had ceased to blow. The snow no longer fell. The ragged, angry storm clouds loomed against the night, dark and permanent as mountains. And a terrible silence filled the world. There was no faintest whisper of sound.

A dread suspicion struck me suddenly, with a cold impact of horror. I remembered Kroll's reckless boast, spoken when I stood like a statue before him. He must have frozen all the world, I thought, with the stasis ray.

The life of all the planet congealed, stopped! All mankind cast into rigid sleep, defenseless—helpless prey to Kroll and his fearful allies! Dread of that vision numbed me, more piercing than the congealing ray itself.

For a second interminable space I stood there, frozen in that silent frozen world. No single object before me on the surface of the planet moved or changed in any way. I stared at a picture of eternal death.

But the brief twilight came and vanished. Pale Spica crossed a rift in the frozen clouds, and passed it again. I knew that the earth still turned.

Bitterly, I thought it might be my fate to stand there, as the Watcher had stood, rooted in the snow on the mountain, and count those same stars crossing that same rift, a million times, or a million million.

But a prickling numbness was suddenly in my left hand. It spread slowly up my arm. I discovered—with amazed, incredulous delight—that I could wiggle my fingers.

Somehow, I was recovering. I could close the fingers. I could move the whole hand, from the wrist. That painful stinging crept over all my body. I gasped a deep breath, took a reeling step. I could walk again!

I had come alive, in a dead world.

For a little time I stood there on the snow, incredulous, bewildered. For nothing else had moved. The terrible calm still ruled. In all the white world about me, there was no faintest sound or slightest motion.

It was only I that lived.

Wonderingly, still dazed and numb, I looked down at the left hand that had first come to life, and started to see a pale lambent gleam—the luminescence of the little trinket that Carol had given me.

Then, with a sudden aching in my throat, I understood: it was that jewel which had restored me!

The stasis ray, I knew, had been Maru-Mora's weapon. Naturally she had prepared a shield against it. And knowing that Kroll had found the secret of the ray, she had given the shield to Carol, to guard her on her mission.

Carol had given it to me, made me promise to wear it in token of our life together, without revealing its wondrous property. Then it was because of me, I thought bitterly, that she was now petrified, amid the loot of Mawson Kroll.

Queer little brick of radiant silver, inscribed in scarlet with the Seeker's spiral emblem. Examining it, I slipped it off my wrist—and at once a piercing numbness warned me that without its precious contact I should be petrified again, and for ever.

Swiftly replacing it, I discovered a little slide along its edge. Its pale light shone more brightly when I moved the knob—which must, I knew, regulate its power. It had been turned very low, I suppose to conserve its energy.

All my aching fatigue had come back in a blinding wave—for there was no rest in the timeless sleep of the stasis. Reeling, I looked about the mountain top. Kroll had left the white tent standing, and beside it lay Carol's empty sledge. Everything else was gone.

I STAGGERED through that silent world to the tent. Its fabric, when I first touched it, was stiffer than metal, hard as a diamond sheet. At first I tugged in vain at the entrance flap. But it slowly softened in my hand—as the fabric was restored to its natural state by the radiation of the little silver plaque.

I entered. The floor was littered with rubbish and discarded clothing. Our extra furs and sleeping-bags were piled there, against a great stack of tinned supplies. I attacked a can of corned beef. It was unyielding as a block of steel, until I held it for a few moments near the shining plaque. Then I was able to open it, and eat. I drove the stasis from a sleeping-bag, in the same way, and crept gratefully into it.

I can claim no heroism for the resolve that came to me before I slept: to follow Kroll and his monstrous allies northward, rescue Carol, and release the planet from the stasis. Or to try. It seemed a completely hopeless thing; for I had no weapon against all the dread instrumen-

talities his mad plan had gathered. I didn't even know where to find him.

But there was nothing else to do.

I woke, ate another lonely meal, and went out to examine the sledge on which Carol had come down from Maru-Mora's mountain. At first it failed to operate, for it, too, was locked in the stasis. But its strange motive force was presently restored by the radiation of Carol's silver plaque.

Carefully, then, I loaded it with crated supplies. For thousands of miles of barren ice and polar seas lay between me and the first outpost of civilization. It would be a hard march, at best, of many weary months. At worst——

I knew how ruthless the polar world could be. But I tried not to think of the worst. The odds, I knew, were overwhelmingly against me, at every turn of the game. But I had no choice except to take them.

Still, however, I clung to one hope of aid: Maru-Mora. Much as I once had dreaded her alien beauty, Carol had convinced me of her benignity. And I knew she had shared my purpose to defeat Kroll and his allies. Her strange omniscient power, I thought, might somehow aid or guide me.

When the sledge was loaded, therefore, I turned it northward, in the direction of Maru-Mora's mountain in the distant Uranus Range.

The brief glow of twilight lit the sky ahead, as I was starting. The clouds piled dark against its silver were all motionless as stone. There was no longer any faintest gleam of the aurora—for the atomic change of the stasis had transformed even the upper air.

The long bright runners of the sledge rang musically upon the snow. But now they left no visible track upon its diamond surface. And their ringing was the only sound in that dead world of absolute calm.

Running behind to steer the sledge, or riding sometimes when the surface was smooth enough, I descended the long northward slope, and made camp on the floor of that great valley that had lain so long beneath the ice.

From the crown of a distant hill, the shattered white walls and the broken delicate spires of the ancient city of Maru-Mora's vanished race called to me, beckoned me to explore the abandoned wonders of its nacrous beauty. But I had no time for that.

THE second camp found me half-way up the towering range beyond. And there I was halted. Carol had come down from Maru-Mora's mountain on the sledge. Since then, however, thousands of feet of ice had been thawed from its slopes. And above me towered the black granite cliffs the glaciers had formed, sheer, jutting out in knife-like salients, utterly unscalable.

For two marches I skirted the base of that awesome ice-carved precipice. But nowhere was its sheer frowning height less than a thousand feet. Nowhere could I possibly ascend it.

Each time as I slept I had hoped that Maru-Mora would come to me, as once she had come in what seemed a dream, to guide or comfort me. But my dreams were no more than dreams—or nightmares of Kroll and the Saturnians triumphant.

No sign had come from her when I left that forbidding rampart and turned eastward toward the passes. Looking back at the end of the next day's march, I chanced to glimpse her pylon. It was a sharp-cut, tiny shape, on the rounded summit of that unattainable mountain. It looked black and dead, against the brief glow of twilight.

The Seeker herself might be fast in the stasis, I thought. Or perhaps the liberated Tharshoon had already turned some annihilating weapon upon their ancient enemy.

This first attempt, in any event, had failed. I could expect no aid from Maru-Mora. I was alone, against all the monstrous invaders and the mad human renegade who ruled them.

From that lonely camp, when I had slept and eaten, I turned the sledge down the unknown slope beyond the pass, toward the unthawed glaciers below, the far-stretching ice-deserts and unconquered ranges of the Weddell Quadrant, and the empty polar seas beyond.

Alone, against the madman who had stopped the world.

16. *The Frozen Ocean*

THAT long march northward was a strange and terrible time. The radiation of Carol's little plaque on my wrist restored motion to the air about me, so that I could breathe. But outside that little sphere of safety in which I lived and toiled, nothing moved or changed.

There was no sound save the ringing of the sledge-runners. The wind never blew. There was no snow. The motionless clouds served as landmarks, like dark fantastic mountains in a world gone mad.

I drove the sledge northward until I was exhausted, rested briefly at a cheerless camp, and resumed the weary march. The season advanced as I went. The lingering dawns were ever longer. The feeble sun at last peered up above the white death of snow before me. Next day all its disk was visible. Every day it was higher.

A month, I suppose, had passed, when I came to the edge of the continental ice. That was queerly startling: to come unwarned to the brink of that rugged ice world across which I had been toiling for so many days. Its vertical precipice fell two hundred feet. Ahead I could see for scores of miles across the fissured sea-ice frozen before the stasis ray had congealed the world.

What, I wondered, of the open water beyond? Had the ray turned that to a diamond plain? And dare I walk upon it? Or must I trust to drifting northward on a floe of ice?

Such burning questions drove me ever northward, in a fever of hope and incredulity and dread. For two days I followed the dizzy rim of the barrier, until I found a sloping fracture and let the sledge go hurtling down its diamond slide to the ice of Weddell's Sea. And for many days, again, I pressed forward across it, until I came to the open polar ocean.

Never shall I forget that view. I had climbed up upon the last tumbled bulwark of the ice, shattered and piled back upon itself by the might of that world-girdling sea. Beyond, dark-blue and glittering under the low northern sun, the vast smooth billows lay solidified, absolutely motionless.

For a long time I stood there on the ice, staring across that heaving frozen plain. A numbing apprehension choked me. To venture across that congealed sea with the sledge seemed fantastically perilous.

It still seemed incredible that Kroll had petrified all the ocean. And there was no assurance that he would keep it so. I might come to liquid water—or the solidified waves might suddenly flow again, to swallow me.

Yet there was no other way.

Cold with a numbing wonderment, I pushed the sledge over that wave-heaped wall of ice, and down the slope of a sea beyond. The water was hard and smooth

as polished diamond, blue and deep beneath me.

The traction of the sledge was somewhat impaired, and I found it difficult to walk upon that glassy surface. Every ascent was a desperate labor, every descent an inglorious slide.

And a fantastic peril haunted me. The surface of the waves, so long as I kept in motion, was diamond-hard. But after I had made camp as usual, eaten a scant meal from my dwindling rations, and gone to sleep, I woke alarmed and gasping to find myself drenched, the sleeping-bag floating in a pool of liquid brine—for the radiation of the plaque on my wrist had released from the stasis the water beneath me.

Thereafter I slept lying on the sledge, and kept that precious radiation adjusted to the weakest power that would prevent my own body from growing solid again. Even so, after a few hours of sleep I would wake to find the sledge sinking into an icy pool.

Still I struggled northward, and the weary weeks dragged away. My carefully rationed supplies were at last exhausted. For two days I had no food save tea without sugar and a small tin of caviar—which I had left because I did not like caviar.

On the third day I found a fish lying on the crystal surface—a tuna which must have leapt at the very instant that Kroll's ray congealed the world. Avidly I restored it to life by contact with the radiant plaque, dispatched it again, and made several meals upon it.

The day the fish was gone I came upon a ship. She was a small Chilean whaler, the *Esperanza,* standing upon that frozen ocean silent and motionless as the poet's painted ship.

She had been stopped in pursuit of a whale, evidently. For swarthy men, rigid as figures of wax, stood about the harpoon gun on her foredeck. Her lean dark captain, on his bridge, was pointing intently ahead, mouth still open as if he had been bawling some command.

I clambered over the side and sought out the galley. Thawing food with the plaque, I made a badly needed meal; and then went to sleep in the captain's bed —for once without fear that I would wake up drowning.

NEXT morning I loaded the sledge again, with food and water casks. Before I departed, however, I tried an experiment. For I felt the desperate need of some ally in my attempt to wake the world. The swarthy captain looked clean-featured and intelligent. I determined to wake him and enlist his aid.

What I needed most was merely to know where I was. The elevation of the polar stars, rudely approximated with a sort of astrolabe I had made from a packing-box, gave me some idea of my latitude. Without watch or chronometer, however, I had no way of arriving at the longitude.

My little magnetic compass was useless—the magnetic field of the planet, like everything else, must have been in the grip of the stasis. Guided by sun and stars, and a rough sort of dead reckoning, I had been trying to make for the mainland of South America. For all I knew, however, I might be a thousand miles too far east or west to strike the Horn, with only empty frozen seas ahead.

And the captain of the *Esperanza* must have kept her log in his head, for I could find no record that gave a clue to her position. Her chronometer, of course, was frozen, useless in this world where Time itself had stopped.

Hopefully, then, I turned up the power of Carol's plaque, and held it against the captain's swart brow. Suddenly he was

alive. His voice bellowed out the unintelligible remainder of the arrested command.

Widening then, his black eyes saw his ship and crew starkly motionless against the frozen sea. They saw me—I must have seemed a gigantic, shaggy, haggard apparition. His dark face drained to a yellow pallor, and terror contorted it.

"Madre de Dios!" he screamed. *"El diablo——"*

He whirled and sprang away from me, in ungoverned fear, over the side of the vessel. He sprawled on the adamantine sea, scrambled to his feet, and started running across the waves, howling with terror.

Swiftly, however, the stasis returned when he was beyond the radiation of the plaque. Suddenly rigid as stone, he fell, and slipped down a glassy billow beyond my sight.

I knew, then, that the battle would be mine to fight alone.

IT WAS four days after I had left the whaler that the sledge failed. It began to falter, ran on for a time with irregular spurts of power, and then stopped altogether.

I had never understood its silent motive power. Now I took down its mechanism, hoping to repair it. The parts were few and simple. There was a hollow transparent tube down each runner, which seemed to contain a trace of some luminous gas. Nothing seemed broken. The fuel, I thought, must be exhausted.

Baffled, I had to leave the vehicle which had carried me so far. I nailed together packing-boxes to build a smaller sled, one that I could pull with my own strength, loaded it with supplies, and went on.

My progress now, however, was heartrendingly slow. The solidified billows were slippery as glass. Sometimes I had to climb a towering sea on hands and knees. And the supplies I had been able to bring on the little sledge swiftly vanished.

I found other fish—when I saw one just beneath the surface I could liquefy the water about it and catch it with my hands. But I had no source of fresh water. Blue-black rain clouds towered here and there, but no drop fell from them in this arrested world.

Rationing the little water that remained in the cask, I toiled ahead. Each night—now using a sextant which I had taken from the whaler—I took the altitude of the polar stars, and estimated the distance to Cape Horn.

Then came the dreadful night when the water cask was empty, and my observation showed that I had crossed the fifty-fifth parallel. I had missed the Horn. Should I turn to right or to left? The wrong guess, I knew, meant death upon that diamond sea—and the failure of my purpose.

I woke with an appalling numbness in all my body: the forewarning of that dread petrification. Yet the slide on the plaque was set as usual. Hastily I moved it to increase the silvery radiation—realizing, with a cold shudder of apprehension, that its power was failing.

Perhaps it contained some sort of atomic battery, which was running down. Clearly, anyhow, my time was limited. I had but a few months, at most, to find Kroll, to strike—or the rigor of the stasis would catch me again, for ever.

17. The Petrified World

I TOSSED a stray worn dime I found in my pocket—it seemed queerly incredible that the fate of the world might turn upon it—and struck out toward the east. I had left the sled, making a little pack

of my sleeping-bag and the few scraps of food that remained.

As the sun rose higher, however, I was astonished to see a low blur of land in the north. I turned toward it, struggled all that day toward its tantalizing promise. Next morning, after a feverish night of little rest, I threw away my pack and stumbled on—toiling up endless hills of polished diamond, and sliding down again.

My tongue was swollen in my mouth. I was half delirious, still wondering if it might be hallucination or mirage, when I dragged myself over the ragged teeth of frozen breakers, and came to the shore.

It was a low, dreary coast. Sheep grazing on the scant, marshy vegetation inland had been turned to frozen blobs of wool. In the distance I saw a thatched cottage that might have stood in the Hebrides.

I knew that I had come upon the Falkland Islands. I had come up east of the Horn, rather than west. And but for the chance glimpse of land, that eastward trek could have led me only to death upon the frozen sea.

Wearily I stumbled up to the cottage, and entered. The shepherd's rudely clad family had been congealed as they sat about the dining-table, before a peat fire —a fragment of emigrant Scotland, fixed in eternal tableau.

I did not disturb them, but restored the water in a tin pail to the liquid state, and drank thirstily. For a time I felt faint and ill. When I could eat, I helped myself to a leg of roast mutton and a plate of scones from the table, and then threw myself uninvited into the big four-poster bed in the other end of the room.

I made another meal when I woke, and then walked northward again, helping myself by the way to such food and clothing as I required. This island was East Falkland, I decided. On the third day, traveling deliberately as I recuperated, I came into the little town of Stanley, on the south side of Stanley harbor.

A silent village, peopled with unmoving statues. I collected supplies and equipment from the stores there, intending to build another sledge and pull it westward toward South America.

But in a hangar down by the docks I found a trim little Starling monoplane, a two-place amphibian which must have belonged to some spirited young officer at the Government house.

That discovery elated me. I didn't know whether the radiation of the plaque could shield so large an object from the stasis, or whether a plane could fly in the motionless air. But I knew that I had no time to search very far on foot for Mawson Kroll. I determined to make the attempt.

With oil congealed in its bearings, the motor was rigidly frozen. I turned the plaque up to full power—wondering apprehensively how fast that depleted its strange energy—and in twenty minutes it was possible to start the motor.

The solidified harbor supplied a flying-field level as a sheet of glass. I tossed the supplies I had collected into the machine, warmed it up, and took off.

It flew smoothly enough, for the air was absolutely still. Owing to an increased resistance, however, at full throttle I could make no more than ninety miles an hour, when the normal cruising-speed of the plane must have been twice that.

Happy, nevertheless, to be flying at all, I circled once over the gelid blue expanse of Port William, and then flew westward toward the mainland. Safely, an hour before sunset, I landed at a drear little village on the great plateau of Patagonia.

Obtaining gasoline at a filling-station

there, I flew up the east coast next day, and by late afternoon landed on a broad airport beside Buenos Aires.

Appropriating a motorcycle, I rode it, in the red light of sunset, into the silent city and up the stately Avenida de Mayo. This was the first great metropolis I had seen, and the sight was infinitely appalling. The streets had been densely crowded, when the stasis ray stopped everything. It was dreadful to see such multitudes, starkly motionless. I think the utter silence, when crowds and streetcars and motors should have made a humming din, was the most terrible thing.

I walked into an expensive restaurant, lifted a tray from the rigid hands of a waiter, and made myself an excellent meal.

A singular feeling of elation came to me afterward, walking through the silent, darkening streets, the one man alive. It set my blood to pounding queerly to know that any object in the city was mine for the taking, that any of these sleeping millions was at my mercy. Grimly I set my foot upon that feeling, for I knew it was akin to the madness of Mawson Kroll.

And I knew that I dared not awaken another to aid me, even if the plaque's shielding power had been ample for two. Whom could I trust, in a world where law and all restraint were dead?

I SLEPT that night in the lonely silence of a great hotel, and next morning, when I had serviced the plane, flew across the glassy Plata to Montevideo, and then northward up the coast. I planned to search all the world, trying first the more important cities, until I found Mawson Kroll and his Saturnian allies—or until the stasis seized me again.

I cast longing eyes upon a fine new American-built bombing-plane, at the Brazilian military aviation depot, where I landed at Sao Paulo. With its smart crew of six, its racks of bombs, it looked a splendid weapon. But I gave it up with a sigh, for all the power of the plaque was now required to shield my own body and the tiny sport plane from the universal stasis.

I did appropriate a ten-pound bomb, however; and relieved one of the officers of his automatic pistol, a fine pair of binoculars, and a powerful flashlight, wondering grimly what his reaction would be if ever he woke.

It was ten days later that the motor failed when I was circling over Havana. I managed a pancake landing on the Prado, and carried my weapons on a bicycle to the airport, where I was fortunate in discovering a trim little low-wing Cord.

The steady weakening of the plaque, I found, had caused the accident. Crossing to Florida and proceeding up the Atlantic coast, I was forced to travel by hops of only a few hours, stopping to let the precious little instrument recuperate at minimum power.

I had found no trace at all of Mawson Kroll, until one late afternoon when the towers of downtown Manhattan came into view, beyond Staten Island and the glassy upper bay; and I glimpsed dimly, far beyond, a red and monstrous shape towering upon the Jersey Palisades.

It was the ship from Saturn.

18. *The City of Doom*

I DROPPED the plane at once into the shelter of Staten Island, on the diamond floor of Raritan Bay. Now that I had found the enemy, consternation staggered me. What was next?

I had hoped to rescue Carol, overcome Kroll and his allies, unlock the stasis that held the earth. But how was such a program to be carried out? The obstacles,

when now I came face to face with them, appeared overwhelming.

The weapons I had—the ten-pound bomb and a pistol—were nothing against the terrific scientific instrumentalities commanded by Kroll and the Saturnians. I lacked information, moreover, to plan any effective campaign.

Did Kroll live aboard the interplanetary ship, or had he perhaps taken possession of some luxurious penthouse apartment? Where would he keep Maru-Mora's treasure chest, and Carol—if her petrified body were still in it? Where was the projector that maintained the earth-wide stasis? How could I gain access to it, or get the skill to reverse its force? What possible weapon lay to be discovered, against all the power of the enemy?

Waiting apprehensively for the shelter of the night, I pondered those questions and many more, and found no certain answer. I could go nearer, try to see and not be seen. That was all.

Using the binoculars as I waited, I saw dark specks moving above the skyline ahead, dropping toward New York and soaring away again. The Saturnians, I knew. But what was their business in the sleeping city?

The long dusk came at last—I had come from one winter to meet another. In the brief dark hour before the waning moon should rise, I took off again, flew across Staten Island and the upper bay and as far up the Hudson as I dared. I landed hastily when I saw moving lights in the sky ahead, and taxied across the solid river to the Hoboken docks.

Carrying the bomb, I left the plane and hastened up into the shelter of the frozen streets. The cyclopean ship still lay twenty miles away. But, across above Manhattan, I could see the Saturnians. Immense black-armored spheroids, belted with purple fire, they dropped among the sleeping towers, rose again, and soared back toward the Palisades.

Shuddering with the elemental dread those other-world entities never failed to rouse, I crouched back in an entry and fearfully lifted the binoculars to watch. Cold horror came with the impact of what I saw.

For the monsters came like black balloons, with limbs retracted. But each black tentacle was extended when they returned, each wrapped about a rigid human body!

The Tharshoon were carrying away the sleeping people. Why? But one answer came to me, and that was unthinkable.

Keeping fearfully to the shadows, I hurried back from the river. A Western Union messenger stood congealed at the curb, beside his bicycle. That seemed a silent and inconspicuous mode of transport. I commandeered the wheel and rode northward through the Jersey towns, trying to avoid the moonlight.

It must have been after midnight when I passed the low gray building of the Planet Research Foundation, where the modern chapter of this weirdly grim tragedy had begun. I followed the lonely road past its wooded grounds.

The moon shone with an eery opalescence on the fairy shapes of high frozen clouds. It glittered in crystalline splendor on the bright emerald leaves of trees turned to stone. I had turned into Alpine Park, beyond the Foundation, when a thing happened that stopped me, tense with involuntary dread.

A cricket had chirped.

It was the first sound, other than those of my own making, that I had heard for many months. It was queerly startling, unnerving.

LEAVING the cycle, I slipped forward through the park. The vegetation here was no longer diamond-hard and diamond-sharp, but soft and yielding,

natural. I had come, I realized, into a zone shielded from the stasis.

I pushed through an oddly murmurous grove, and came once more in view of that colossal red-black ship—and the city of the Tharshoon.

Squat and repellent, dark in the moonlight, low mud walls rose before me. The invading ship, resting in the center of the park, had been surrounded with a city of low domed mounds—like the hideous city I had seen beyond the pole.

In its midst, looming incredibly vast against the moon-flushed sky, that dark long hull surrounded with its enigmatic rods and vanes suggested some hideous alien creature crouching.

Above the city and the ship I saw scores of the Saturnians, soaring away southward, returning laden with stiffened human forms, dropping with them into those flat mud domes.

What horror waited there?

I crept as near as I dared, and lay in a clump of brush, studying ship and city through the powerful night glasses. High in that tremendous hull, lights came on beyond a row of triangular ports. Shadows moved against them. I watched, and at last glimpsed briefly a gaunt unmistakable outline.

The shadow of Mawson Kroll!

So he was still aboard. The next matter was to reach him. But how? How cross those walling mounds, and evade the monsters wheeling above? How find undetected entrance to that great ship? Or find my way through its colossal mystery, to Kroll's apartment?

I didn't know how. But I was prepared to try.

Waiting until the moon had gone behind a black pillar of the motionless cloud, I got silently to my feet, dug into my pocket for the detonator for the bomb, and started to screw it into place, preparing for action.

Suddenly, behind me, a shoe scraped on the gravel. Turning swiftly, I saw a man standing in the shadow of a tree. A faint steely gleam betrayed his gun. A low voice rasped:

"Drop it, Captain Dunbar."

The bomb, without the fuse in place, was quite useless. I dropped it obediently —and snapped a quick shot from the hip. It struck the gleam of that level gun, sent the weapon spinning into the shadows.

The gasping curse had a familiar flat nasal intonation.

"Stand still, Veering," I said. "I'm going to ask some questions."

But I saw the glint of metal at his mouth, and a whistle shrilled out.

"Quiet——"

Behind me, suddenly, another sound bellowed out: a deep and hideous baying. I had not heard the cry of the Tharshoon before. I spun, and consternation struck me powerless.

For a monstrous fire-banded shape had lifted above a mass of trees behind me. A great triangular eye opened its baleful window of lambent green flame. And a queer, numbing shudder ran through me.

I swung up the automatic, tried to pull the trigger. But the green fire of that eye was suddenly intense, painful. A freezing greenish cloud began to obscure my vision. Sudden screaming agony flashed through my limbs, and the gun dropped out of my fingers.

I must have been within an instant of annihilation by that consuming orb. But, faintly, I heard two short blasts on Veering's whistle, and that deadly mist vanished from about me.

I staggered back, reeling, blinded. I felt faint and sick. The fearful cold of that annihilating ray was still in my bones, yet my body was drenched with hot perspiration.

Veering whistled again. A tentacle darted like an immense black snake from

its armored receptacle, ran toward me, whipped about my middle. Its strong, indescribable earthy pungence made me suddenly and violently ill.

Yet I knew that another tentacle had lifted Veering, at his command, set him on top of that headless body. The whistle shrilled above, and the great creature lifted, carrying me dangling in that tentacle.

In the intervals of vertiginous sickness, I saw that we were soaring over that low wall of clustered dome-shaped mounds. Each dome, I saw, had a black central orifice, through which the flying monsters came and went.

Then the crimson-black hull of the ship was beneath us, vast as an ocean liner's, supported hundreds of feet above the ground on the limb-like struts of its landing-gear. We sank toward it. The black tentacles dropped me unceremoniously into a sort of hatchway. I fell through musty darkness, and sprawled on a bare metal floor.

19. The Emperor of Terror

IT WAS a cold dank space into which I had fallen. The biting pungence of the Tharshoon was sickeningly strong. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I saw a great ophidian tentacle setting Veering down beside me. He held my own pistol in a bleeding hand.

"Stand back from me, Dunbar." His voice was high, quavering. "Make another play, and I'll kill you."

He moved into the beam of moonlight that fell through the hatch. I saw that he was very haggard. His skin had an unhealthy, yellowish pallor. His hollow eyes were deeply sunken. His thin hand shook with the gun.

He looked a man consumed, half crazed, with fear.

"Come along, Dunbar," his nasal voice quavered. "Walk straight ahead. Doctor Kroll will want to see you."

Fighting for time, for any possible advantage:

"Wait a minute, Tommy," I said. "You are afraid. What are you afraid of? Tell me."

His flat laugh had a dry brittle ring.

"You are the one to be afraid, Dunbar, if Doctor Kroll lets them take you down to feed the grubs." Menace edged his voice. "Get on! Straight ahead."

His shaking gun made an imperative gesture, but I stood still in front of it—if I lost now, it would be for ever.

"I've known you a long time, Tommy," I said, keeping my voice as low and steady as I could. "I first heard of you when you had a paper route. You were delivering papers to old Judge Ware. And Jerry found out how you wanted to be an engineer, how you were saving money for books and experiments.

"She told Doctor Harding about you—that was long before they were married. And Harding gave you a chance. He paid your way through tech, and made you a place in the Foundation."

Staring at me with a bright anger in his eyes, Veering caught a gasping breath and started to speak. But I went on:

"This man Kroll killed Doctor Harding, Tommy. And stole his body, his position, his wife. Tommy, don't you remember Jerry Ware? Can you serve the man who tricked and murdered her?"

Veering licked his quivering lips. The gun gestured again. Dry and hard, his voice rasped:

"Don't talk, Dunbar. Move ahead! Or else——"

Standing in front of the wavering gun:

"You're a human being, Tommy," I told him. "Your parents lived in the Bronx. Your father was born Verensky. He had a little tailor shop. He's in it now

—frozen—waiting for these monsters to take him. The others——"

Shuddering, he bit through his lip.

"You had a sister, Tommy—Jerry told me about her. Nada was her name. You loved her. She went to live with a man you hated, a gunman named Ricci. That killed your mother. You haven't seen your sister again, Tommy. You've tried to put her out of your mind. But you love her still. And she's out there, petrified."

Tears burst out of his bright, sunken eyes.

"Shut up!" his hard voice whipped at me. "By God, I'll drill you! Get going!"

I stood still in front of him, in the reeking, mysterious darkness of that colossal hold. Inside, I was sick and cold with fear. But I tried to keep it out of my voice.

"Go ahead and kill me, Tommy," I said. "Kill your father, and Nada. Kill your dead mother's last hope. Kill the last chance that mankind has——"

The gun came up, unsteadily. The bore of it was like a terrible round eye. It stared at me. I was cold all over, waiting for the hard impact of death. But suddenly it fell, and Veering's face drew into a white, quivering mask.

"You win, Dunbar," his choked voice sobbed. "I can't kill you. And don't think that I wanted to be Kroll's slave. But I—I'm afraid of him. He threatens me."

His slight body shuddered to gasping sobs.

"You saw the mud city, outside. Well, the things lay eggs there under the ground. They carry people, and revive them, and seal them up in the burrows. And when the grubs hatch, there is food.

"When they are grown, the grubs undergo a metamorphosis, and come out as mature creatures. They will be sent out, to establish new colonies. All the people of the earth are to be used up for food, left petrified until they are needed."

Veering tried to control his sobbing, looked fearfully behind him.

"Doctor Kroll—he bullies me all the time. He threatens that he will let them take me. I have to obey—there is no choice. And in the end he will send me anyhow—he said he would!

"I don't want to kill you, Captain. But there's nothing we could do. All the creatures obey him—they know he would turn them back to stone if they didn't. There's no use——"

"But there is," I broke in. "We can do—something." And I demanded: "Where's the stasis ray projector? If we could get to that, reverse it!"

"That's no good," Veering insisted. "It's in his laboratory, aft—where he is, now. He won't let me in it, any more. He has one of *them* to guard it. We can't go there."

My voice stuck on the next question:

"Tommy, where—where is Carol? The girl who came with me, back at the pole? Is she still in the chest? Or is—has she——"

Thinking of those stiff victims carried down into the mounds, I couldn't finish. I felt a vast relief, when:

"She is still in the chest," Veering said. "He is keeping her under the stasis. But we can't go there. Doctor Kroll told me that if he found me there——"

"Come on," I said. "Perhaps she can help."

"We can't do anything," Veering whispered. "Doctor Kroll is the Emperor of the World. He makes me kiss his feet."

But, although trembling with fear, he showed me the way through that vast gloomy compartment. It had been planned for no puny human beings. We climbed a ladder to a circular passage. Veering manipulated a combination lock to open

the way to another vast dark room—the Saturnians, of course, made their own light wherever they went.

"THERE is a stasis here," said Veering. "We must use the reactor."

He fumbled with a little metal device he wore on his wrist—it was oddly similar to the plaque that Carol had given me.

"Hold my hand," he said.

He snapped on a flashlight, and we walked into that huge, silent room. Great piles of casks, boxes, drums, and bags, cast fantastic shadows. Vast stacks of tinned food. Bales of clothing. Crates of books and scientific equipment. Heaped golden bars, currency, furs, furniture, pictures.

The loot of New York!

"Doctor Kroll and I used to walk through the city," Veering said, "taking what we wanted." He added: "He sent me to the Foundation today, to look up references for him in the scientific library there. I happened to see you riding past on your bicycle."

His darting light had picked out the yellow gleam of Maru-Mora's ancient chest. I ran to it eagerly. The key was in the lock. I turned it, and Veering helped me lift the massive lid.

He gasped with awe as his light shone on the treasure within: pearls; gems and precious metals wrought by the dead genius of Maru-Mora's people into a thousand unfamiliar shapes, all of haunting beauty; the heavy jeweled sword of yellow metal; and, lying rigid amid that ancient splendor—Carol.

Or Karalee, as I first had known her, strange lovely castaway of the antarctic. Beautiful and white, she lay still in that rigid pose of horror in which I had seen her frozen, months before. On my knees beside the chest, I kissed the diamond hardness of her lips, the frightened oval of her face, the white, icy column of her throat.

"Carol! my darling. Wake!"

Remembering myself, I moved the slide to turn the silver plaque up to full power, held it against her breast.

"Quick!" Veering muttered fearfully beside me. "We can't stay!"

The power of the plaque, I knew, had been ebbing. For a long time, Carol made no motion. Was it too weak to rouse her?

Then I thought she stirred.

"Carol!" I sobbed. "Can you hear? Wake—Carol!"

I heard Veering's breathless gasp of horror beside me, and then, behind us, a hideous deep ululation, like the baying of a monstrous hound.

Paralyzed with dread, I turned, and saw in the circle of the doorway, the tall gaunt figure of Mawson Kroll, and, behind him, staring at us with a green triangular eye, one of the black Saturnians.

20. The Chamber of the Worm

"RON DUNBAR!"

It was Carol's low, bewildered cry. For she was alive again. She sat up suddenly in that great yellow chest, amid the strange heirlooms of Maru-Mora. Her blue eyes stared about the great dark room, startled. Seeing Kroll and the monster she stiffened again, with one hand on my arm, almost as if she were back in the stasis.

Kroll came stalking into the room, with the invader floating like a black cloud beside him. White and sick with terror, Tommy Veering flung himself down on the floor in front of them.

"It was Dunbar, Doctor Kroll," he sobbed frantically. "He made me do it. He got the drop. For God's sake, sir, don't let them——"

That haggard face, beneath Harding's yellowish hair, smiled with an unspeak-

able mockery of Harding's old warm smile—made dreadful by the black, mismated eyes of Mawson Kroll.

Speaking no word, Kroll made some quick gesture to the thing beside him—I think it was the Watcher, that I had seen brooding over the ice — and then pointed to the groveling man on the floor.

A long thick black tentacle ran like a serpent out of the fire-belted spheroid, toward Tommy Veering. Reduced by terror to a shuddering, abject thing, he began to shriek:

"Emperor! Lord of the earth! Exalted majesty! Have mercy——"

With a quickness terrible to see, the tentacle ran round and round his body, tightened, swung him off the floor and toward the black balloon. The breath came out of him in a long bubbling scream of ultimate horror, and he was limp and still.

Carol had not moved again, or spoken. Her rigid hand quivered on my arm, as Kroll stalked toward us. His black, fearful gaze surveyed us. Harding's big mouth twisted suddenly.

"Well, Dunbar," came that ironic, queerly altered voice, "I had meant to leave you two as monuments to the lost race. But you have forfeited that eternal honor. We shall select another couple for the museum. You may go with Veering——"

He gestured again to the monster, and the two remaining tentacles came racing out of their sockets, to seize us. This was the last instant, the last possible chance. I fought the paralysis of fear that held me.

I had come weaponless into the room. But before me, in the chest, was Maru-Mora's golden blade. I reached behind Carol, seized it, and hurled myself forward.

The black whip of that limb came up in my face like a striking python. I swung the ancient blade with all my strength. Its bright edge came whistling against the tentacle, half severed it.

Ghastly white blood gushed from the wound. The ophidian limb jerked back. I flung myself at Mawson Kroll, the heavy yellow blade whirled above my head again. One more instant, and it might have split those mad brains.

But Kroll's long fingers had snatched something off of his belt, a little black box like a small movie camera—his hand projector of the stasis ray. Its thin beam flashed at me, a painful sword of pale magenta.

A crashing wall of darkness struck me. I knew, in the last split second of awareness, that my body was petrified again, and Carol's. We were once more at the mercy of Mawson Kroll.

AWARENESS, as before, came back to me slowly. I was in absolute darkness. The air was close, stifling. The earthy, acrid fetor of the invaders was overpowering in my nostrils. I thought I was alone until Carol moved beside me, fearfully whispered my name.

"Here I am, Carol."

She found my hand, gripped it with the unconscious strength of desperation.

"It's so dark, Ron!" came her dry urgent whisper. "Where are we? What is this dreadful odor?"

Anxiously, I had been feeling about us. We were in a little cylindrical cell, eight feet high, perhaps, and eight feet across. The walls were rough, hardened mud.

Beside us on the floor, my feet found a stiff rugged thing. I bent apprehensively in the darkness to feel it. It was longer and heavier than my body. Muffled stirring sounds came from within it. It reeked with that nauseating fetor.

Carol gasped suddenly with horror, and her hand closed hard again on my fingers.

"We are under the ground, Ron," her dry whisper came at last. "We are sealed up in a little space like a grave. But what is this with us—moving?"

I had to swallow twice before my fear-dried throat would speak.

"I don't know," I said.

But the dread knowledge was already cold in me; and Carol shared it, for she said huskily:

"But I know, Ron. For Maru-Mora has told me about the Tharshoon. They make cells underground, and seal up food with their eggs. The eggs hatch into shining white-fanged worms, and the food is ready for them. We are in an egg cell, Ron. This thing will hatch into a shining worm."

With my bare hands, desperately, I attacked the clay that walled us in. But it had been hardened, perhaps with some secretion of its builders. The rough surface broke my nails, shredded flesh from my fingers. I accomplished nothing: we were trapped.

In the utter darkness we could see nothing, but the long malodorous thing on the floor stirred again, and a sharp, clicking sound came from it—like great fangs snapping.

"Let me see the gift I gave you," Carol whispered. "It gives off a little light."

I felt at my wrist for the little silver plaque. Cold fear stabbed through me when I found that it was gone.

"Kroll has taken it," I gasped, shuddering. "Now there is nothing to keep us from turning to stone again, for ever."

"Better that than to be eaten by the worm," breathed Carol. "But it is gone." Then suddenly she asked: "If that is gone, what wakened us? For we had been frozen by the ray."

Then it seemed to me that another voice spoke beside us in that tiny buried chamber. It was the voice of Doctor Meriden Bell, whom I myself had buried many months before in a shallow grave of ice.

"We hastened your waking, Ron," it said. "I, and the Seeker. To give you warning, against the worm."

I knew that Bell was dead. But I had no time to ponder the uncanny wonder of that voice, for the dry clicking sound came again from the long rough thing at our feet. It writhed and tossed in its crackling leathery envelope, flung itself against my legs. I drew the girl behind me.

"It is hatching," she gasped. "The worm——"

Suddenly, with a loud rending sound, the thing burst along one side. The split was a line of lurid white fire. It widened swiftly. With a writhing, convulsive effort, the great worm hurled itself out of its tough integument.

The thing was longer and thicker than a man, and inordinately fat. Shining with a cold white light—ghastly white as the blood of the Tharshoon—the smooth skin hung in swollen folds.

The head alone showed any kinship to the adult invaders. It was black. The hideous spear of its projecting snout was a triple jaw. Blazing balefully behind each segment was an ice-green, triangular eye.

On the back of it, behind that frightful head, was a small oval dark spot. Not quite black, it shone faintly with the same purple light that came from the radiant belts whose unguessed power of levitation carried the adult Saturnians.

The creature writhed about on the floor. Its ghostly light shone pale against the narrow dark walls that trapped us. Then its shining eyes discovered us. And they shared the deadly power of the eyes of the grown Tharshoon—for a cold penetrating numbness paralyzed me, so that I could not move.

IT CAME toward us, across the narrow floor. Slowly, awkwardly, its gross shining mass climbed over the barrier of its own empty husk.

The triple jaw opened. Three terrible fangs snapped together, hungrily. They were white and shining, terrible. They snapped again, nearer. They grazed my knee. And still I couldn't move.

Then once more, strangely, I thought I heard the voice of Merry Bell.

"The purple spot, Ron!" it seemed to cry. "The worm is vulnerable there."

"But I can't move," I gasped.

I thought I felt a cold touch, then, as if a ghostly hand had brushed my shoulder. And I was free from that dread paralysis. Catching my breath, I strove to put down panic fear. With bare hands I flung myself upon the shining worm.

The white fangs slashed again. The thing writhed to escape my hands. Somehow, rat-like, hideously, it *squeaked*.

My fingers groped vainly for the purple oval. The fangs caught my leg, dragged me down. The worm flung itself about, twisted, fought to guard that purple spot.

Desperately I clung to the thing, sick with its stench. Fangs slashed clothing and skin. But my fingers found that vital oval, gouged into its soft shining jelly, ripped and tore.

And the worm suddenly stopped its wild thrashing. It made a low moaning sound, like the cry of a hurt child, and stiffened, and at last lay still, with the luminescence fading slowly from its skin.

On my knees beside it, with that phosphorescent jelly still dripping from my fingers, I looked up. Pale and anguished, Carol stood above me in that tiny, stifling space, sobbing:

"Ron! Oh, Ron, are you hurt?"

But I couldn't speak to answer. For beside her, tenuous and gray, I could see, or thought I did, the outlined figure of dead Merry Bell, whose advice and touch had saved me in the battle with the worm.

"Ron," it said, "do you hear me?"

21. Those Eternal

SCIENTIFIC training, I think, has made me as free of superstition as most men. But there is in every man, I believe, a deep-rooted horror of the Unknown which no rational materialism can eradicate. Even though I knew that our lives were due to that intangible presence, I was shuddering to an elemental dread.

"Yes, Merry," I managed to whisper. "I can hear you. But you are—dead."

"Yes, my body is, Ron," that pale form said—and I knew that its words were not actual sound, but somehow projected into my mind. "You know that, for you buried it. But I survive, through the agency of a science greater than man has dreamed of.

"Of that—and a love beyond understanding.

"I wrote you a letter, Ron, before I died, and left it for you on the trail. I told you how Maru-Mora had come to me many times, had taken me three times out of my body to the pylon where she dwelt. I tried to tell you of our love, Ron—a thing deeper and purer than any physical bond."

"I found the letter, Merry," I said.

"Maru-Mora had come for me again," that soundless voice went on. "She knew what Kroll was planning. She knew that he meant to learn the secret of the atomic ray, and then to murder me. She asked me to come with her.

"To die. And to live in her dwelling, for ever."

Actual doubt, I had none. But wonder sent the burning question to my lips:

"If you are dead, Merry, how can you be alive?"

"Still the scientist, Ron!" The dim

form smiled briefly—in my own mind, I thought, and not actually before my eyes. "I can't tell you much, for time is pressing. You must try to escape, while there is a chance.

"But I must tell you something, to put your mind at ease. You saw Maru-Mora. She was born a hundred million years ago. Her strange people cared more for the art of living than for knowledge. But she was different. She was a seeker of truth. Physical life was too short to learn all she wished to know. I have ever felt the same thing—that burning thirst to know is a thing we hold in common.

"She yearned to live for ever. And she knew that her body could not. So she perfected a means to divorce mind and body.

"We were materialists, Ron. But you will admit a distinction between mind and matter. What others would term a spirit or a soul, is to the psychologist a synaptic configuration, to the biologist a function of intramolecular dipolar moments and electrostatic tensions. Briefly, mind is merely an energy pattern associated with living protoplasm.

"The science of Maru-Mora was able to free that pattern from the original bodily atoms, as a stable energy vortex in the structure of space itself. Her dwelling—the pier of purple crystal that you saw upon the mountain—was designed to shelter that abstracted vital pattern, to feed it with the energy of radioactive materials fused into the crystal.

"She had entered it, before the Saturnians came. All her people had been destroyed, before she stopped the invaders with the stasis ray. She has been alone, for a hundred million years, and lonely. When she first came to me, a bond sprang between us: a thing too deep, too wonderful, to be defined. But we loved. I followed her. My body died. But she took me into her dwelling, for ever.

"There was one task to do, before we could follow the eternal paths of knowledge and delight opened by her science. Kroll must be destroyed. We tried to reach you, Ron, to guide you. But Maru-Mora's own weapon had been turned against her. We could not penetrate the stasis, until, awakening Carol Lee, you re-established an old *rapport*.

"And even now," finished the soundless voice of Merry Bell, "we may not be able to reach you long. You must hasten to escape, and to strike."

That eery communication had come swift as thought. I stood up, now, beside Carol, in that suffocating clay-walled cell, the dead worm at our feet, its white radiance swiftly departing. Desperately seeking some weapon, my eyes fell upon the fangs in the open triple jaw of the worm. I kicked and tugged at one of them until it came loose: a nine-inch blade of ivory. Vainly, again, I began to search for some opening in the hard mud wall.

"Above your head," that still voice spoke in my brain. "Try the middle of the roof."

I stepped upon the worm, drove my fist upward. A thin shell of clay shattered to the blow. Fragments showered upon us. It was a sort of plug, left thin to be broken by the emerging creature.

Swiftly I broke the plug away, swung myself up through the circular opening into a passage dark as the cell had been before the hatching of the worm. I caught Carol's hands, lifted her up beside me.

"To the right," came the urgent warning voice. "And hasten—one of the monsters is coming from the entrance."

WE STARTED running through the stale fetor of the tunnel. It was cylindrical, some eight feet in diameter. The darkness was absolute. We followed

it only by the feel of the curving wall beneath our feet.

"Remember, we can give you no physical aid," the voice of Merry Bell warned again. "Through Maru-Mora's mastery of space, we can see you, speak to you, even share the illusion of our senses with you. But that is all, for the bridge is mental alone."

A vague purple glow began to shine on the curving walls, from behind us.

"Hasten," urged the voice. "The creature is coming to wake you, to feed the larva. Soon it will discover what you have done."

Carol gripped my hand. We ran on, gasping in that foul air. The tunnel sloped upward, ran level for a space, turned upward again. Once the door of another egg chamber shattered beneath my foot. Almost I fell in upon a shining worm wallowing amid gnawed human fragments. White fangs slashed upward at my foot. But I regained my balance, lifted Carol over the reeking pit. We ran on.

"Here — stop!" Merry Bell's voice commanded suddenly. "You must break through the wall, on the left. Quickly!"

I hammered my fists against the hardened clay, kicked. This was no thin plug, however, but a heavy wall. The effort made no impression.

Behind us, suddenly, I heard a deep terrible baying ululation. My blood ran cold. Shuddering, I must have bitten through my lip, for a salt sweetness of blood was in my mouth.

"It has found the dead larva," Bell's voice said.

Desperately I began to chisel at the clay with the worm's white fang. A dim purple reflection flickered on the walls of the tunnel. That hideous baying was louder. Carol's trembling hand touched my shoulder.

"They are coming," she whispered.

I redoubled my efforts. A thin pale line of light zigzagged across the wall. I drove the fang wedge-like into the crack, kicked and tugged at it. The wall shattered. Fragments clattered down. Fresh air, incredibly delicious, struck our faces.

Carol was helping. We worked furiously. The baying had come terribly near. But the opening at last was large enough for our bodies. I lifted Carol, helped her through, squirmed after her.

We tumbled together on the ground. Overhead the stars were shining. The hole we had broken yawned behind us in the low curving wall of the mound-city. We were outside its circle.

"Run!" Bell's voice cried again to my mind. "Go to my old laboratory in the Foundation building. You must reach it before they can overtake you."

I lifted Carol to her feet. Holding hands, we ran away from that city of horror, toward the frozen silence of the petrified wood and the low gray building beyond.

Behind us the dark purple-belted balloons of the Saturnians were flying on their usual errands about the flat mud domes and the ship that bulked so vast against the stars. Soon again, however, I heard that fearful baying taken up by many. They sank close to the ground, and spread out, searching.

Running desperately, we came out into the stasis. The wood was strangely still. The grass was no longer soft beneath our feet, but rigidly sharp as diamond blades. And I felt the numbing chill of the stasis ray sinking into my body.

22. *The Drops of Doom*

"THE shield I gave you is gone," Carol was sobbing as she ran. "We'll be turned to stone again."

Swiftly our limbs were stiffening, as if we had come to some invisible gelid

barrier. But then, again, I felt a queer, tingling touch. And I heard the voiceless words of Merry Bell:

"This is Maru-Mora's power. For the stasis ray was hers. Go on. You must reach the laboratory. We can guard you —for a time."

That paralyzing numbness was abated, although it did not completely go. We ran on, through the frozen night. The waning moon glittered on the leaves of a crystal forest. There was no sound save the gasping of our breath and the baying of the hunting Tharshoon behind.

My lungs were seared with pain, I was half carrying Carol, when we staggered across the lawn to the Foundation building. We stumbled through the laboratory entrance.

"Lock the door," that still voice said, "and I will tell you what to do."

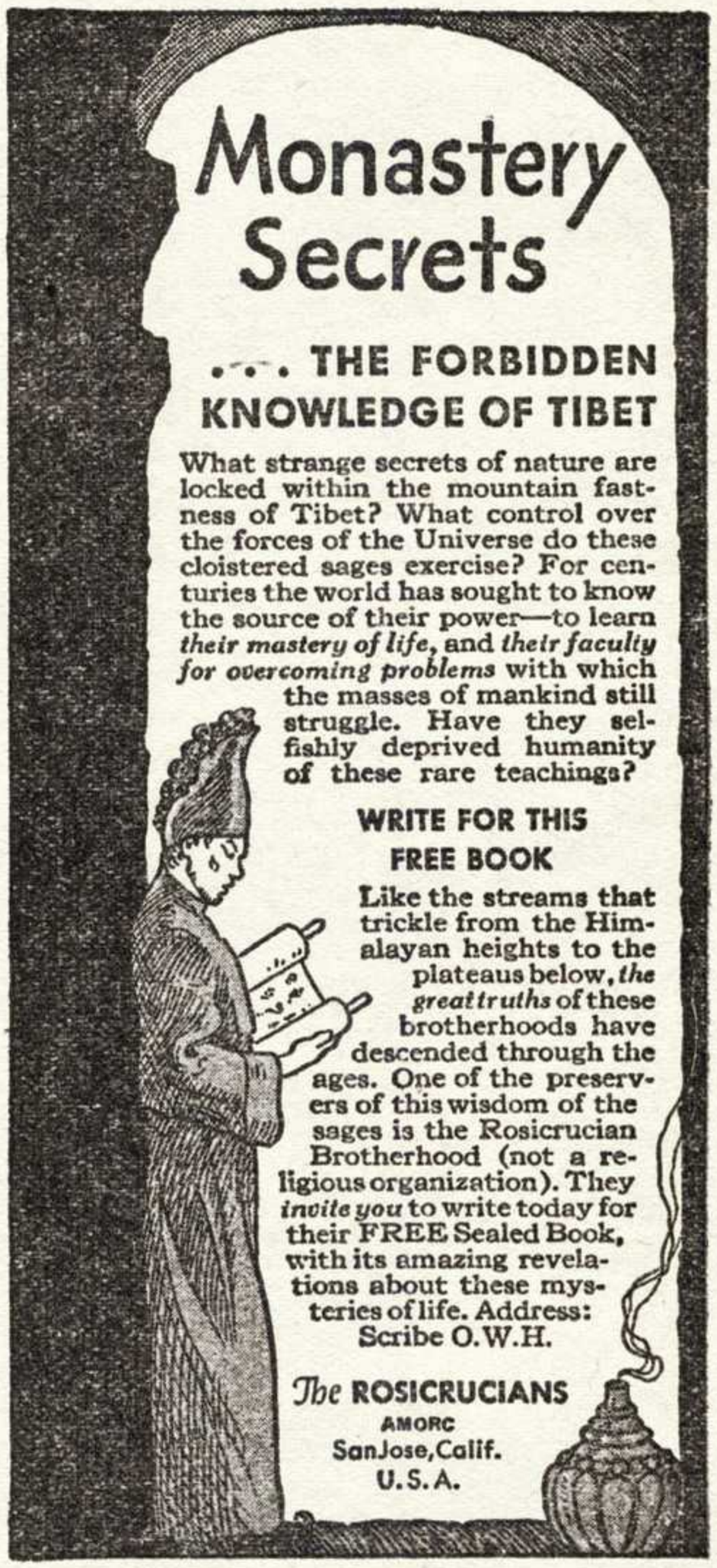
The long laboratory benches, with their orderly rows of gleaming bottles, racks of glassware, delicate balances and great microscopes—all stood neat, silent, petrified. Through whatever power had reached us from the pole, however, everything was restored to normal at our touch.

Together, Carol and I hurried to obey the swift commands that came to us: sterilizing and setting up equipment for some elaborate biochemical process. Not a very good chemist, I soon realized however that we were preparing for the synthesis of a group of complex proteins and polypeptids.

Meantime, through the high north windows, I could see the fire-banded spheroids of the Saturnians flying against the stars, searching. I had begun to hope that they would not discover us. But their awesome baying came suddenly near.

A glass beaker dropped from Carol's fingers.

"Look!" she gasped. "Oh, Ron, it is —*he!*"



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She had pointed, and I saw one of the monsters drop past the window. Standing upon its black-scaled body was the gaunt tremendous figure of Mawson Kroll.

In a few moments there was a pounding at the door, and Kroll's harsh voice demanded:

"Come out, Dunbar—or die."

Still obeying the bodiless voice of Merry Bell, I took a flask from a steaming water bath, poured its black contents into a filter. Slow brown drops began to fall, one by one, into a test-tube beneath.

Carol touched my arm. Her lovely face had drained white. Voiceless with dread, again she pointed.

A greenish mist had gathered about the locked door. It thickened, obscured the metal panels—as once I had seen the same green mist hide the wreck of a plane on the polar ice. It settled. It was gone.

And a vast ragged opening yawned in the wall, where the door had been!

Through it swept a black, monstrous spheroid. Blazing above its belt of purple fire was the green triangular eye whose annihilating ray had destroyed the door.

Beneath it stalked the tall gaunt body that had been Doctor Harding's, the black dissimilar eyes of Mawson Kroll burning from its leering face with a light of hellish triumph.

"Well, Dunbar," rasped that hideously altered voice. "Die——"

A lean commanding arm lifted to that creature we had called the Watcher, and the cyclopean eye bent its green destroying stare upon us.

But then the voice of Merry Bell spoke again, soundless, yet more arresting than any sound I ever heard:

"Mawson Kroll, you killed a million with this thing you stole. You killed me with it, more terribly. You have turned another discovery of mine against all the world. Therefore, this thing I do is just."

Suddenly, as that dread voice spoke, I remembered a long-past afternoon in this same room, when Merry Bell had showed me—before the staring eyes of Mawson Kroll—the few brown drops of his deadly bacteriophage.

"Yes, Ron," that still voice told me, so much swifter than audible speech, "this is the bacteriophage." Then its command was desperately urgent: *"Throw the tube!"*

For already in Kroll's hand was the black projector of the stasis ray. Its pale magenta beam flickered out, probed my body with its terrible chill. My last act of consciousness was the effort to hurl that test-tube straight at Mawson Kroll. But I did not know if the impulse ever reached my fingers, for darkness came down like a toppling mountain.

AWARENESS came back, as always, slowly. And while I hung in that queer state of timeless suspension, there happened one of the strangest things of all. I had been alone in the darkness, but two bright figures came slowly into being before me.

Merry Bell came toward me—transfigured! Unencumbered, his tall body looked youthful and straight. His lean face wore a smile that I had not seen for many years. In his blue eyes was serenity, ineffable, complete.

Beside him was—Maru-Mora!

Golden queen of elf-land, flying in an opalescent shell. Her white pointed face, beneath yellow carapace and scarlet crest, was radiantly alight. Her great purple eyes were warm with a supernal joy, all their agony gone. One slender arm, golden-furred, reached over the shell's bright lip. And her tiny seven-fingered hand held the hand of Merry Bell.

Terribly, in the darkness, I struggled to speak. I could not, but Merry Bell

seemed to sense the question that burned in me, and he answered:

"You moved in time, Ron. The bacteriophage splashed Kroll and the Watcher. And the Seeker's knowledge had gone into it, with mine; it was a thousand times more swift and deadly than the old.

"Kroll perished where he stood—I am glad that you and Carol did not see. And Doctor Harding's body can be desecrated no longer.

"But the Watcher, before it died, carried death back to the rest. Seeking safety, they drove the ship back into space. But the virus was a passenger. Now the ship is an empty hulk, drifting on an eternal orbit that will carry it for ever around the earth like a second moon—and still it carries Maru-Mora's treasure.

"The virus, before it expired, swept the city. It penetrated the deepest burrow. It destroyed every living thing in the vicinity—all except those held in the safety of the stasis ray.

"Now the menace is ended. The Sleepers are dead. We are ready to lift the stasis and let the world go on—but little harmed by the horror that passed while it slept."

Tears shone in Bell's clear eyes.

"All my guilt is absolved, Ron. My old debt is paid. Now I can go ahead. Thank you, Ron. And good-bye."

Beside him in the darkness, Maru-Mora's tiny face seemed almost to smile. From crimson lips came the eery music of her piping.

"She says farewell," Bell told me. "To you, and to Carol."

The darkness around them, suddenly, was no longer black but purple. I saw that they were in the crystal depths of that purple pylon, on the summit beyond the pole. And they fled away from me, into infinite distance.

Then I woke up in the laboratory. My

(Please turn to page 640)

Man Can Now Talk With God

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Medusa*

By ROYAL W. JIMERSON

IN DEFIANCE of fashion and her husband, Marian Bardwell nursed the yard-long, tropical luxuriance of her blue-black hair, stedfastly refusing to have it bobbed. No coiffeuse ever profaned its twining, serpentine profusion; no hands but her own were equal to the ritual of the 4 o'clock brushing that Marian performed with the dreamy-eyed reverence of a devotee who with mystic, ceremonious pass and gesture invokes the deity of some dusky shrine.

Before the dressing-table of her boudoir she sat, confronted by boxes of powder, pots of rouge, lotions and rarely blended essences; but these she ignored, having selected from a bewildering assortment of brushes her favorite, amber-handled, amber-backed, and cunningly carved in the nude, gracious curves of a Medusa whose serpentine tresses crept about and enclosed the oval that the Gorgon's upraised, slender arms supported.

Bardwell entered through the door connecting his room with Marian's.

"At it again! That damned hair!"

Bardwell shrugged his shoulders, grimaced at the thought of his wife's oblivion to his presence, then with an effort erased the somber frown that lined his lean, handsome features. He turned as if to leave, but paused, fascinated by that ceremonial brushing. The lustrous amber disk and its golden bristles gleamed and stirred like a gigantic beetle as she moved it slowly through the abysmal darkness of her hair. Her movements were rhythmic, supple, richly rounded; in some unbelievable way her arm glided in a series of convolutions whose sinister grace made Bardwell shudder.

"That damned hair!" he repeated as he wrenched himself from the fascination of the ritual. And then: "Why don't you cut out all this nonsense and be human? Have your hair bobbed, buy up a bunch of new clothes, and we'll take a second honeymoon in Florida next month. We can afford it now, you know. And . . . we both need a change of scene," concluded Bardwell irrelevantly, knowing well that no change of scene could ever veil the aura of age-old evil that clung to the serpentine blackness of Marian's hair.

The chilly, repellent opulence of that

* From WEIRD TALES for April, 1928.

somberly gleaming, iridescent coiffure haunted Bardwell, distracting his hours of waking and making his sleep a confusion of reptilian nightmares. The living, creeping coldness of those profuse tresses had in four years frozen an indefinable terror into his soul. An age-old horror nightly twined itself on Marian's pillow, separating them as might a limitless expansion of steaming, evil-haunted jungle.

"I'll never cut my hair," declared Marian with the passionless certitude of one pronouncing a law of nature. "Never again mention such a thing!"

Then she set aside her mirror and, after a final lingering reverent caress with the Medusa-handled brush, turned in her low chair to face Bardwell.

"Win, can't you take me as I am and be content to leave me as I am? You knew when you married me that there was something strange about me. I loved you, Win. Still do. Always shall. But I can't——"

"But you must!" flared Bardwell.

"No, I can not. Please don't be unkind to me," she pleaded. "All my life I've been different from other women. I worried my mother into her grave——"

"And now I'm in line," despaired Bardwell. "Marian——"

But even as she spoke, the animation faded from the exquisite oval of her face; she picked up the amber brush and again languidly stroked the coiling darkness that hung heavily on her white shoulders, spelling the wordless syllable of an everlasting prayer to the deity Bardwell hated and—*feared*.

"We'll take a second honeymoon to Florida," he had said. But he knew that it was no honeymoon but rather the fantastic hope that the warmth and unfailing sunlight of Florida might sear to extinc-

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tion the living, chilly blackness before whose shrine Marian worshiped with measured, languid passes of an amber brush.

Drawn by a compelling sorcery, attracted in spite of himself, Bardwell drew closer, catching the sound of the brush that caressed Marian's waist-long hair, strands that blended and writhed, curled and intertwined independently of the golden bristles. He gently laid his fingers on a strand, hoping against hope . . . shivered . . . muttered . . . then turned and strode from the room.

Marian's movements became slower, more and more torpid, more languid, until finally, succumbing to the tropical, overheated atmosphere of her Riverside Drive boudoir, she carefully placed the amber brush on the table and, mustering her ebbing vitality, picked her way to bed.

The black, tentacular strands disposed themselves about the pillow, dark serpents basking on silver-white sand. . . .

2

SARASOTA, rather than glittering Miami or Palm Beach, appealed to Bardwell as being the most suitable field on which to make his final play against that which hung over him like the mantle of an oppressive doom. And there he sought to inveigle Marian into play and festivity, to entice her from the somnolent ritual of everlasting hair-combing, to revive the gayety of their earlier days. He succeeded, for a few days; but on the first morning of the second week he found Marian before her mirror, amber Medusa in hand, and lost in the impenetrable sorcery that had made his life a vortex of madness.

That same afternoon found her asleep at the edge of a steaming lagoon, her hair spread fanwise about her, basking in that fierce damp heat.

"Now, by the Lord, this is too much!" he snarled, as he seized her by the hand, thrust her into their car, and carried her, still dazed and half asleep, back to their hotel. Once in the privacy of their suite, he continued, "This damned nonsense must stop! And I'll stop it, here and now!"

Bardwell seized a pair of scissors and, stifling his repugnance, grasped a handful of that serpentine, black hair. And then he dropped the gleaming steel, recoiling before the chilly flame that came to life in Marian's smoldering eyes.

"Win Bardwell," she began in a calm voice whose deadliness matched the light in her eyes, "this is going too far. Whatever else you may wish to do, at least stop short of mutilating me and killing yourself."

"What?" demanded Bardwell. "*Mutilate* you? *Kill* myself—good Lord, Marian, this is getting worse every day! What's going to become of us?"

The venom faded from her voice, and the fire from her eyes, as she replied: "Win, I've told you a thousand times I can't help being what I am. Can't you remember the old days when my strange ways didn't annoy you?"

And Bardwell recalled the first week of their marriage—mad, ecstatic nights and dream-filled days. The chill contact of Marian's hair, even then, had carried the faint suggestion of some ancient evil that always blended in their love-making, adding piquancy to Bardwell's pleasure, suggesting to him that he had found Eve and Lilith in one person. He had loved the dank chill of her hair, cold strands that burned like creeping living fire; and a curious, pagan fascination lay in that queer gesture, so like an archaic, dimly remembered ritual, with which Marian would toss the great braids about her back and shoulders, where they clung and twined. . . .

"Win," continued Marian, "have you changed, or have I? Leave me if you wish. You needn't stay. I'll play fair with you if you wish to leave me. Only . . . promise me you'll never again attempt to cut my hair. Promise me, and I'll forgive you. And if you can . . . try to remember."

Bardwell remembered, and promised. And that night, and many nights thereafter, Bardwell held stony-eyed communion with bottles branded with three stars marked with the name of Martel.

Yet hope was not entirely gone: for Bardwell would occasionally vary his routine, emerge from the haze, and in the calmness of evening seek anew the means of overcoming that which oppressed him. And thus it was that wandering at random he met old Doctor Berg, who during the many years previous to his retirement from active practise had attended Marian and Marian's parents.

"Doctor Berg! Strike me blind, but it is good to see you!"

In the pleasure of this unexpected encounter, Win Bardwell for the moment forgot that which the undying sun of Florida had not eradicated.

"And just as good to see you, Win. What in the world brings you to Sarasota?"

The doctor paused, hesitating to inquire as to Bardwell's wife, yet knowing that such inquiry must be forthcoming from him. Bardwell's next remark bridged the gap.

"I know you've retired, Doctor," he began, "but I want to have a word with you. In private. And at once, if you're not engaged."

Doctor Berg nodded acquiescence. A cab carried them to the doctor's apartment.

"Either I'm utterly loco," declared Bardwell, "or else——"

"No, lad," interrupted the white-

BACK COPIES

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haired medico, "you're not loco. *It* killed her mother; and *It* has made me wonder, and pass quite beyond the borders of reason and science. In a word, Win, it's that deadly poison coldness of Marian's hair. . . ."

The doctor shivered.

"Yes," agreed Bardwell. "It's driving me nutty. She won't have it cut. She spends hours brushing it. Like some fakir sitting before a heathen god and thinking himself into the silence. Lord in heaven, but I often wonder if she's human! The touch of a single strand of it drives me wild. And at the same time, I think the world of her. That's the worst of it!"

THE old doctor poured a slug of Bacardi. Bardwell swallowed the amber flame and continued, "Either I'm absolutely bughouse, or something is totally wrong with Marian. One of us should be sewed up in a sack and dropped into the Gulf. If she's okay, then I'm due for a padded cell; or if I'm right, then that girl is a monstrosity . . . oh, hell! What do *you* make of it, Doc?"

"I make exactly nothing of it," replied Doctor Berg. "Nothing that any sane man of science could accept. Her parents told me a similar story, when she was about six years old—told me of the ghastly, snaky coldness and clamminess of Marian's heavy hair. I laughed and called it nerves. But when I touched the kid's unusually long hair, I nearly passed out, used as I was to grotesque and repellent deformities. It was as though I had thrust my hand into a nest of serpents all clinging together for warmth."

Bardwell lifted his face from his hands.

"This madness has to stop. I'll clip that poisonous jungle she nurses day and night. Promised her I wouldn't, but promises be damned!"

"No, Win, don't do that. Her mother tried it, *once*. Leave her if you can't stand it any longer. But don't kill her. Or yourself——"

"What? You, too? What in thunder do you mean—kill her, or myself?" demanded Bardwell, recovering himself, and drawing animation from the incredible words the doctor had just spoken in paraphrase of Marian's outlandish speech. "Are you as nutty as she is, and I shall be? For God's sake——"

"Steady, lad. She isn't, and I'm not, and you're not, yet. Listen. . . ."

The doctor drew from his desk a leather-bound, loose-leaf notebook, turned a few pages, remarking as he did so, "Heredity is a curious thing. Marian's outlandish hair inspired me to study the matter in general and in particular. I've never dared publish my thoughts and findings. Like Rabelais, I prefer to die before I am cremated. But I'll tell you as much as I can. It may help you. For we lose fear of that which we understand, even if but partly."

The doctor paused; pinched the end from a long black cigar; sought, found, but forgot to strike his match. And then he read, intoning solemnly, like a judge pronouncing sentence.

"Atavism is an outcropping of tendencies and characteristics that have skipped two generations or more. Such outcroppings are rare enough, though usually not startling. But what of tendencies that have lain dormant, skipping thousands of generations, reappearing only after hundreds of centuries of extinction?

"Your wife, Win. . . . For twenty years I've studied this matter, ever since at her mother's insistence I touched that living, snaky hair."

"For God's sake, Doctor, what do you mean?"

"Just what I said. One thing at a time.

You'll finally grasp what you're up against."

The doctor struck his match, touched light to the lean, dark cigar, then continued: "You've played polo, and witnessed many polo matches. Remember Captain Eric von Ostenburg?"

"Yes. Fierce, heathen sort of fellow. Wonderful player. But what the devil——"

"One thing at a time, Win. Have patience and let me put it across bit by bit, groping with you even as I myself have groped in the dark. He resembles not one of his relatives, distant or near; nor does he resemble any one of his ancestors for ten generations back, if the private rogues' gallery, as he calls the family portraits, means anything at all. That fellow is a Tartar, pure and simple; a throwback to some obscure ancestor who rode in the trace of Genghis Khan. Look at him; look at those eyes, those cheekbones, the contour of his skull, and see the stamp of the Mongol. Look at the way he sits his horse, crouching like some squat demon riding into battle. He might be the Grand Khan himself. That is atavism, but on a small scale. Merely a dozen odd generations."

Bardwell was too much puzzled to interrupt.

"Some Tartar of the hordes of Genghis Khan grafted himself onto the family tree of the house of Ostenburg. And now, centuries later, we have Captain Erich. But this," repeated the doctor, "is atavism on a small scale. Listen again."

And from his notes the doctor read, *"It was Herbert Spencer, greatest of all rationalists, who pointed out that there is a foundation of fact for every legend and superstition of mankind. Was there then a race, back in the mists, that shrouded*

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the prehistoric reptilian slime, whose physical attributes supplied the fact basis for the Medusa myth, the legend of the Gorgons?"

Bardwell stared, blinked, wondered whether or not he had heard aright the madness which dripped from the white-mustached lips of the old doctor. Then Bardwell remembered all too well the serpentine, clinging coldness of Marian's hair and knew that he had indeed married a Medusa whose type for a thousand centuries had been, and would today, but for some ghastly jest of nature, be extinct.

3

DAY after day the amber brush with its carved Medusa flicked like some monstrous golden beetle as Marian, secure in the shelter of Bardwell's promise, devoted more and more of her time to the now endless caressing of the coiling, midnight madness that crowned her pallid features, enshrouded her shoulders, and reached almost to her knees.

Small, swift boats brought Bardwell solace from Bimini: Martel, and Bacardi, and the deadly, pale green Pernod—wormwood distilled with madness. Substitution: serpents for serpents. And through the haze gleamed a pair of long-bladed coupon shears. Martel and Pernod and promises mingle curiously.

Doctor Berg watched from a distance, resigned himself to the futility of further effort, and confined his pity to a slow, sorrowful shake of his white head. His words were unvarying: "Don't attempt to cut her hair. Her mother tried it, *once*. . . . Grin and bear it, or else leave her. But forget those scissors, and remember your promise. . . ."

Martel and Pernod and promises mingle curiously. Yet through it all persisted the memory of ancient days, of mad, ecstatic nights and dream-filled days, and of a lovely, pallid girl whose great dark braids of hair clung and twined about his shoulders, adding piquancy to his pleasure; so that one night Bardwell, deciding that while he could not grin, he might at least bear it, thrust aside the pale green madness that turned milky white as the melting ice diluted it, and sought Marian's boudoir.

A shaft of moonlight filtered in through the thinly draped French window and enriched the pale features and argentine shoulders of his sleeping wife. Her long hair somberly enshrouded the loveliness of her face and spread fanwise across both pillows. A faint, acrid odor mingled itself with the perfume of the sleeping madonna; and apart from, but somehow a part of her even breathing, came the vague sound of things that crept not quite noiselessly, and their sibilant hissing.

As Bardwell stared fixedly, the sable strands moved, stirred, animated by an independent life: black serpents awakening from their slumber on silver-white sands. For the first time he *saw* that which he had suspected, and feared.

From the pocket of his brocaded lounge robe he drew the final solution, the companion of endless nights of grief: a pair of long-bladed coupon shears.

4

"JUST across the hall from 614? Yes, sir, I'll look into it right away," replied the night clerk. And then, slamming the receiver, he addressed the house detective: "Dawson, for the love of Mike see who's got the heebie-jeebies in 640."

Whereat the night clerk yawned and prepared to resume his nap while awaiting Dawson's report as to the cause of that prolonged scream of anguish, the voice of a man and woman mingled in an

(Please turn to page 632)

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(Continued from page 630)

awful cry of horror and despair, the ghastly disturbance whereof the guest in 614 had complained.

But the nap was interrupted ere it was resumed.

"I'll be eternally damned!" gasped the night clerk, paused a moment, then started in pursuit of the house detective who had in three bounds cleared the lobby and gained the street.

A patrolman on the beat several blocks from the hotel collared the frenzied man and clubbed him into a state of comparative calmness. Investigation verified the house detective's outrageous story, thus keeping him clear of a padded cell; but investigation came to a dead standstill when confronted by the scarlet, excoriated mask of what had once been Win Bardwell's lean, handsome features, and the thousand tiny, livid punctures which had pierced the skin. Nor was it any easier to account for the monstrous black coil, wrist-thick, which encircled Bardwell's body, and stranglingly closed about his throat: frosty cold, midnight black, iridescent hair the like of which came from no man or beast . . . but which must have come from the head of the woman who lay dead on the bed beside Bardwell.

Doctor Berg saw, but wisely refrained from venturing an opinion. On returning to his apartment, he drew from his desk a loose-leaf, indexed notebook, turned to the page ending, *"Was there a race in the mists that shroud the emergence of humanity from prehistoric, reptilian slime, whose physical attributes supplied the fact basis for the Medusa myth?"* and completed in a few words his commentary on atavism.

EVERY time WEIRD TALES prints a story by Nictzin Dyalhis, the editor of this magazine receives letters asking where that talented author got such a bizarre "pen name." These inquirers may be surprized to learn that Nictzin Dyalhis is not a pen name at all, but is the actual name of a very real person. *Dyalhis* is one of the oldest of English surnames, as it came into England with the Romans, whose priest of Jupiter was known as *flamen dialis*. The father of Nictzin Dyalhis was an English sea captain. He married a lady from Central America, who mingled in her veins both the blood of Castile and the proud Toltecs, whose civilization amazed the Spanish Conquistadores that came into contact with that amazing race. She bestowed on her infant son a name of her own people: *Nictzin*.

Better and Better

Grant V. Wallace writes from Berkeley, California: "Our magazine is getting better and better as the years go by, even though

we have suffered seemingly irreparable losses in the deaths of some of our outstanding authors. Clifford Ball is well on the way toward replacing Conan with his character Rald—if he will only cause his hero to pull in his neck just a little when his friends are trying to help him, instead of going off half-cocked as he does with Ating in *The Goddess Awakens.* Conan was an out-and-out roughneck, but not thankless."

Roads

Earl Leaston Bell writes from Augusta, Georgia: "As a former contributor to WEIRD TALES, I wish to laud you, and through you Seabury Quinn, for his most excellent story in the January issue—*Roads.* I'm not low-rating WT, of course, when I say a story as great as Quinn's should have been top-copy for any big magazine in America. I wonder if he tried to place it with the 'slicks' before forwarding it to you. My idea is that he did—but that it was not sloppy enough for them. My vote is for *Roads* for the month's first."

Howard's Early Stories

F. T. Torbett writes from Marlin, Texas: "I want to add my voice to those who are requesting reprints of Robert E. Howard's early stories. I am asking this solely because of the merit of Howard's stories and not because he was for some years one of the best friends I ever had. His was a powerful personality, of a type that can never be forgotten. I never knew a man more devoted to home and family, or more loyal to his friends, or more honest and upright. I miss his companionship more than I can say. I am sure that the future of WEIRD TALES will be a bright one, for the quality of the stories is steadily improving."

Oogy

Gertrude Hemken writes from Chicago: "Starting with the ver' beginning—that colorful front cover of the March issue—we will pause to comment only lightly. The picture is a fine temptation to look inside for the tale. Somehow, one feels that only an abominable incense could be burned inside a skull. 'Tis a foine pleasure to be r'adin' of our ould friend Detective Sergeant Costello along with our sidekick Jules (bless his heart!). The yarn was well-spun and I enjoyed every bit of it, for there was noth-

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APRIL 1934—Stories by: E. Hoffmann Price, C. L. Moore, Edmond Hamilton, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Dale Clark, Carl Jacobi, and Arthur J. Burks.

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JULY 1934—Stories by: Arlton Eadie, Harold Ward, Paul Ernst, August W. Derleth, Ralph Allen Lang, Clark Ashton Smith, Elliott O'Donnell, Jay Wilmer Benjamin, Willard E. Hawkins, H. P. Lovecraft, and E. Hoffmann Price.

SEPTEMBER 1934—Stories by: Robert E. Howard, Seabury Quinn, Mindret Lord, Greye La Spina, Howard Wandrei, Julius Long, Bram Stoker, and August W. Derleth.

OCTOBER 1934—Stories by: C. L. Moore, Clark Ashton Smith, Paul Ernst, H. Bedford-Jones, S. Gordon Gurwit, Julius Long, Manly Wade Wellman, and Ronal Kayser.

NOVEMBER 1934—Stories by: E. Hoffmann Price, S. Gordon Gurwit, Paul Ernst, Kirk Mashburn, August W. Derleth, John Flanders, and H. P. Lovecraft.

DECEMBER 1934—Stories by: Robert E. Howard, Bassett Morgan, C. L. Moore, John Flanders, Clark Ashton Smith, Brooke Byrne, August W. Derleth, and Frank Owen.

MARCH 1935—Stories by: Otis Adelbert Kline, Harold Ward, Robert E. Howard, C. L. Moore, Paul Ernst, Loretta Burrough, Richard F. Searight, and Bram Stoker.

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JUNE 1935—Stories by: Dorothy Quick, Arthur William Bernal, Amelia Reynolds Long, Donald Wandrei, John Scott Douglas, Robert Bloch, Walker G. Everett, Ida M. Kier, and Otis Adelbert Kline.

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AUGUST 1935—Stories by: Paul Ernst, John Scott Douglas, Seabury Quinn, L. M. Montgomery, Frances Bragg Middleton, Clark Ashton Smith, Claude Farrere, and John Martin Leahy.

SEPTEMBER 1935—Stories by: John Scott Douglas, Arlton Eadie, Paul Ernst, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert Bloch, Ethel Helene Coen, Kirk Mashburn, Edmond Hamilton, and Kenneth P. Wood.

OCTOBER 1935—Stories by: Edmond Hamilton, Paul Ernst, C. L. Moore, Seabury Quinn, John Flanders, Eando Binder, Robert Leonard Russell, and Arthur Machen.

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DECEMBER 1935—Stories by: Robert E. Howard, Paul Ernst, Clark Ashton Smith, Edmond Hamilton, Harold Ward, Alfred I. Tooke, Robert Barbour Johnson, and Edward Lucas White.

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ing really malignant about it, other than the meeting of the devil-worshippers in the early part of the story. Po'r gal! I'd get mighty tired going around in dripping waters for twenty years, too. . . . Thorp McClusky can make an old theme so intensely interesting—and I just dote on his descriptions, such as Stepan's condition upon the death of his master. 'Oogy' is no word for it. Finlay's portrayal of this Dmitri resembles so closely a fat man I know. Hm! Mr. Jack Williamson is doing a nice job with this *Dreadful Sleep*—I sincerely trust the following installments will be equally exciting. . . . Uh-huh—I sorta figgered it was Doc Zoberg who became the Hairy One—I dunno, but when I read of those muscular wrists of his I jus' sez to m'self: 'I betcha that's the guy that's making all the trouble.' Now *The Girl from Samarcand* is more to my style—of course, I couldn't stand anyone being such a fanatic over rugs—but even so, the tale was somewhat unusual to me—alluring as the Orient—fascinating and somehow restful. I liked it very much. . . . I found sumpin in the Eyrie that I did not like—someone seems to have mistaken our magazine for wot she isn't. Guess most of us, including Ye Editor, have explained the purpose of WEIRD TALES is to bring to the public a selection of unusual tales that are really weird—some folks have an idea we should have science-fiction—but I still howl 'No' to that."

The Piper from Bhutan

L. Jashnoff writes from Cambridge, Massachusetts: "I found David Bernard's *The Piper from Bhutan* quite the most interesting and novel tale in the current issue. One criticism suggests itself, however, and moves me to write: would the narrator of the story actually be threatened with expulsion because of his disagreement with Professor Du Bois? To one schooled to the notion of academic freedom, this phase of the yarn seemed not very convincing. But I believe the story was excellent in idea and presentation, and I am looking forward to more of this author's work."

In Defense of Tait

E. Hoffmann Price writes from Redwood City, California: "I must applaud J. Mackay Tait, Bridgetown, Nova Scotia, for his contribution to the Eyrie in the March issue, re Poe and his school of writing. Mr. Tait, I fancy, will be dodging thunder blasted at him from every side; so in anticipation, I wish to second the motion he introduced. It is high time that someone said what he so well said. True, some of the Poe-ish yarns that have appeared in WT were great *in spite of their admitted modelling after Poe.* And whatever can rightly be charged to Poe in over-writing, how much more can be heaped on the heads of the pseudo-Poes, who have not even the justification of living in an age (as Poe did) when all literary work was tinged with super-heaviness of verbiage and overloading! Me, I consider the greatest weird tales of our time to be those un-Poe-ish classics such as *The Woman of the Wood.* And this in spite of my great personal esteem and personal appreciation of many of the stories of the pseudo-Poe school—which were great yarns in spite of their modelling, not because of it."

Counter-Attack

C. A. Butz writes from Lancaster, Pennsylvania: "J. Mackay Tait of Bridgetown has some important things to say anent Poe and the rationale of horror, and I quite share his liking for Seabury Quinn and Robert E. Howard. Howard's passing was a hard blow to those who had grown to love his Conan stories. But I can't endorse Mr. T's belittlement of Poe as an out-of-date hack once popular because nobody knew any better. To talk thus brands one as a veritable neophyte, a *malinstruit,* a superficial connoisseur, an immature addict of the horrible, in short a mere parvenu, like the fellow who complained that Shakespeare was just a bunch of quotations! Dig up your November 1936 copy of WT, Mr. T, and re-read what H. P. Lovecraft has to say in paragraphs 6 and 7 of *Pickman's Model.* Lovecraft knew whereof he spoke! Mr. T deplores 'the atmosphere of gloom and impending evil' that characterizes some of the finest examples of weird fiction. It belongs only to 'diseased minds,' but horror being always of the abnormal—if not, it is not horror—then certainly the abnormality of certain apparently pathological mental states is legitimate, nay, even appropriate, as 'horror' resides not in external incidents alone but almost wholly in the minds perceiving them. Mr. T says that horror occurs 'unexpectedly' in real life—but a tale is *not* real life, and the technique of short story forbids

the unheralded as unconvincing. There must always be a build-up, suggestion, unity of tone, or the tale falls flat. This is as notable in Seabury Quinn's stories as it is in Poe's, the difference being that Poe's tales are pure studies in horror whereas Quinn's blend a large element of adventure. While Mr. Tait is carving up Poe, he might as well get busy on Clark Ashton Smith, Robert Bloch or H. P. Lovecraft and a few other contributors to WT, who know, or knew, that the horror story differs in its genre as widely as it does in possible modes of treatment. If Mr. T does not think *The Cask of Amontillado, Some Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* and *The Masque of the Red Death* horrible and superb, then there is every indication that his sense of the horrible is jaded or atrophied. Lastly, the Poe-Epstein comparison is palpably absurd. 'This is sacrilege,' he adds, 'but I can't help it.' Maybe he can't! I hope, Mr. Editor, you will be kind enough to print this."

The Old Ones.

Gerald Gard writes from Leichardt, Australia: "It is a matter of wonder to me that you continue to secure so much material possessed of the elements of true eeriness, written reasonably well and not violating the primary rules of literary composition. The recent demise of Lovecraft — undoubtedly your finest contributor—will certainly add to your problems in this respect. My personal preference is for tales of the abysmal, utterly ab-human type—the field which Lovecraft made so peculiarly his own. Despite rather slighting references that have appeared in the Eyrie of late to the persistent intrusion into your pages of the Old Ones, Elder Gods, Nyarlathotep and their train, I, for one, feel that we need plenty of this world of the outré and unutterable. Pleasing, too, are stories of uncanny suggestion, where the horror or terror is not so much stated as hinted, thereby gaining an added power. As one who has made a deep study, from a purely literary angle, of the supernatural in English fiction, I find that the gravest and most frequently encountered defect in so-called weird fiction is the too-literal presentation of supernatural horrors. The very definiteness employed in treating them brings them down to the level of the material.

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1934	1935	1936	1937	1938
....	....	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
....	....	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.	Mar.
Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
May	May	May	May	....
June	June	June	June	....
July	July	July	July	....
....	Aug.	....	Aug.	....
Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	....
Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.	....
Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	Nov.	....
Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	Dec.	....

These back numbers contain many fascinating stories. If you are interested in obtaining any of the back copies on this list please hurry your order because we can not guarantee that the list will be as complete as it now is within the next 30 days. The price on all back issues is 25c per copy. Mail all orders to:

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They lose in eery power through being presented in too concrete terms. How much more effective they become when more suggestion and less of objective reality is employed! The spiritual horror which broods like an unholy atmosphere over Lovecraft's work is the type of thing that makes for a real sense of the weird in the reader's mind. No more forcible contrast could be imagined than that between the sheer artistry of tales like *The Thing on the Door-Step* and the disgustingly over-drawn *Isle of the Undead* (which latter I am pleased to see several of your correspondents denounced!)."

Say It in Verse

Seymour Kapetansky writes from Detroit: "I just got around to my February WT, having been very busy with an accumulation of back issues which I unearthed in a musty bookstore, and lo and behold (to coin a platitude) there on the cover is a defiant, flaming, Brundage nude. And a *nude* that *is* a nude. Which prompts this:

" 'Please foreswear the cover nudes,'
Some say, in dubbing them obscene.
Others call these complainants prudes
And say, 'tis *they* who be unclean!
The latter folk go on to say,
'The nudes are an integral part
Of WEIRD—How do you get that way?
Those Brundage nudes are *art!*'
I've read the comments in this feud
And enter not the fight;
I pity Ye Ed as I conclude,
'I'd rather NOT be *Wright!*' "

Price's Grand Yarn

B. M. Reynolds writes from North Adams, Massachusetts: "Many thanks for reprinting Price's grand yarn, *The Girl From Samarcand*. It represents, I think, one of the finest pieces of weird writing ever to grace the pages of any magazine. I derived just as much pleasure from reading it this time as I did when it was first published some nine years ago. That story has glamor and the mellowness of a rare old wine. While on the subject of reprints, please don't overlook the fact that *Bimini,* now at least ten years old, is another splendid tale and well worth running again. In the current issue, I was greatly pleased with Jack Williamson's new novel, *Dreadful Sleep*. This seems, in truth, a worthy successor to *Golden Blood*. For consistently good pure-fantasy, Williamson stands second only to A. Merritt in that field. His plots are unique, his style smooth and vivid, and his imagination like Merritt's, rich and fertile. I sincerely hope to find him much more often in future issues. *Beyond the Wall of Sleep,* by H. P. Lovecraft, is one of his finest yarns, thought-provoking and weirdly beautiful. Perhaps, in this story, he has really solved the great riddle of Death. Who knows? At least, his conception is unique, and not so impossible as to pass the bounds of credibility. Henry Kuttner served us with something decidedly different in his *Shadow on the Screen*. That boy seems to have several novel ideas either up his sleeve or in his cranium. Keep up the good work, Henry; my hat would be off to you, only I never wear one."

Poetic Magnificence

Bryce M. Walton writes from Twin Falls, Idaho: "What utterly mystic beauty; what haunting, dream-like lines; what perfection in the region of ever lingering refrain! Who else but Howard Phillips Lovecraft could have penned such poetic magnificence as *The Canal,* symbol of some distant place in the long-lost age beyond recall? The best story in the February issue was *World's End* by Henry Kuttner, with Quinn's *Frozen Beauty* running a close second."

Out of Place

Marian Shortess writes from San Francisco: "I notice that all of the letters in the Eyrie praise WEIRD TALES, and I want to say that I usually like most of the stories, too. But I did *not* care for *Roads* by Seabury Quinn in the January issue. I think that the story of Christ and His mother is out of place in the pages of a magazine devoted to witches, werewolves, ghosts and vampires, and particularly when one considers the treatment given to these subjects at times. And as for Santa Klaus, I hardly think that his origin needs any fictional explanation."

Tenuous Nebulosity

J. Chapman Miske writes from Cleveland: "There are four good reasons why I am writing this letter, and one very vehement bad one. I think that the best course would be to get the bad one disposed of, and then devote the rest of the letter to things more enjoyable to both of us. Why do you insist upon printing stories that have no more weirdness to them than a chunk of tenuous

nebulosity? I am not going to mention the name of the story which so irritates me, but please don't take any story that is handed to you merely because it was written by a staff author and concerns popular characters. After all, you know, you have been warned repeatedly about the same author and characters before. Now, for the really important reason for writing this. The story by William Lumley entitled *The Diary of Alonzo Typer* is a real weird masterpiece, and it is a tribute to your judgment and work that such a magnificent story is presented. It is reminiscent of the work of the real masters. I can only fervently hope that Mr. Lumley will endow us with more equally as good. Thanks a lot, Mr. Wright, for the most enjoyable half-hour that WEIRD TALES has given me for quite a while. I also enjoyed very much Mr. Ball's story, *The Goddess Awakes.* Rald is very, very reminiscent of the late Robert E. Howard's famous character, Conan the Cimmerian; as a matter of fact, though, when Rald is combined with Thwaine, I think I like him better. The story was very well told, and held my interest all the way through although it was not what I personally would term a weird story. The only weak spot that made itself manifest to me was his explanation of how Hess was killed. It gave me the impression that Ball had placed the heroes in a predicament that he couldn't get them out of, and had to resort to almost anything. Right, Mr. Ball? H. P. Lovecraft's short gem was, as are all his stories, very vivid and most weird. I realize, of course, that these short stories of his are in the main inferior to his longer stories; that they are the product of a single idea to which too much time was not given. However, everything he turned out bore his inimitable touch, and needs no apologizing for. The translation of Farrère's story was the fourth fiction highlight of the issue. It was very good, I thought."

Fifteenth Anniversary

Richard H. Jamison writes from Valley Park, Missouri: "Congrats on WEIRD's fifteenth anniversary! You really started something with that March 1923 issue, for with that issue the first (and best) of the fantastics was born. There's been a world of improvement in the lusty youngster since he first saw the light of day fifteen years ago.

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DID YOU KNOW

that 34 per cent of the subscriptions received by WEIRD TALES are for a period of three years?

The reason is that a 3-year subscription represents a sound money-saving investment.

The first issue had rough edges, no interior illustrations, and many of the stories were pure and simple detective stories. But now we have smooth edges, the best illustrated magazine on the market, and the stories are uniformly good *weird* tales with quite a number of little masterpieces among them. I noticed a letter in the Eyrie in which the writer asked who had written the most stories for WT. Seabury Quinn has that distinction, having contributed no less than ninety-two stories since his first appeared in October 1923. He has also had two stories reprinted. His closest competitor is August Derleth with sixty-nine stories, no reprints."

A Reasonable Request

Robert J. Hoyer writes from Chicago: "Can't you do something so that we readers of only five years or less can get to read some of Robert E. Howard's earlier works? I've read all his Conan stories, but never have I delighted these old eyes with a tale of King Kull or Solomon Kane. I've heard so much about both of these characters that I'm dying to read about them. And I'll bet many others of the newer readers are too. Couldn't you put out a book containing the best stories of all three of Howard's favorite heroes? How about it? Or at least reprint some. Huh?"

A Whole Banquet

Margaret Gray writes from Steubenville, Ohio: "I cannot praise WT too much. For several years I have read various 'weird-scientific' magazines, but since discovering WT I have read no others. Enough is as good as a feast, say I, and WT is a whole banquet."

Attack

T. Gelbert writes from Niagara, New York: "It is certainly poor policy for an editor of a magazine ranked high as good literature, to print inflammatory letters of the type written by J. Mackay Tait. His tirade against Poe is entirely illogical and uncalled for. You, as editor, should consign all such letters to the trash-container. By his own admittance, J. Mackay Tait has read only three or four of Poe's tales, yet considers himself an authority on his work. If his outburst was less vindictive, it would be laughable."

Weirdness and Horror

P. Cole Emers writes from Baltimore: "I have been an unremitting reader of your magazine for over four years. I find it caters to one of the more subtle appetites of man for genuinely strange and eery fiction. All of us, if we be energetically alive, have a powerful curiosity about things beyond the realm of prosaic and normal experience. This yearning is generated from the same active human dynamo that makes inventors, artists, and creators of all kinds. Basically, they must be curious dreamers of things unknown. As this is my first communication to the Eyrie, I do not feel obliged to say anything definite about any specific story. They are pleasingly varied in content, but always subordinated to the important qualities of weirdness and horror."

Back in 1923

Arthur Lincoln Brown writes from Dallas: "For a number of years now I have been reluctant to write you this letter, but today it rived its fetters and escaped to you. Back in 1923, when your magazine first made its appearance on the news stands, it was primarily a magazine daring to open the way to the inexhaustible field of weird fiction. I have watched it grow, expand, and improve until now it has reached the acme of weird fiction. In my estimation, it is today at the pinnacle of success. WEIRD TALES is a piece of literary art founded on the genius of its authors—on the co-operation of its readers —on the receptiveness the editor holds for each new suggestion of improvement. Readers of fiction sometimes are fortunate to discover WEIRD TALES early; others must advance, explore and read their way through numerous cheap and pulpy magazines that litter the news stands before they discover WEIRD TALES. By this I mean that some of us have had to graduate to it before we became satisfied; but once we have perused our first copy we are enmeshed within its realm of weird narratives. It has finally reached the summit of weird fiction, and may we keep it always superb in its unequaled uniqueness."

The Biggest Man

J. T. Holton writes from New York City: "Concerning your mysterious new novelist, Gans T. Field, he was pointed out to me at

a recent reception by Doctor John D. Clark. Mr. Field is one of the biggest men I have ever seen outside of a circus, and might be his own Judge Pursuivant except that he is dark and not blond. I understand he is a war vet, a world traveler, and has one of the finest private libraries on witchcraft, demonolatry, etc.; also, that Field is not his real name!"

A Tribute to Lovecraft

Jeffrey St. John Casserly writes from Klamath National Forest, Oregon: "It is strange, indeed, that I, who have been a reader of your unique magazine for nearly fourteen years, and who during that period deeply enjoyed the splendid writings of H. P. Lovecraft, should for the first time, moved by the untimely passing of that master of the outré, undertake to express my humble appreciation now that it is too late. . . . In my opinion, Lovecraft ranked first among the five greatest masters of the realm of the unknown, and I think that you may agree with me when I state that Dunsany, Poe, Machen and Blackwood acknowledge no peers in the English language in their field save only Lovecraft. Oddly enough, the man's very name was indicative of the quality of his work, for if ever a man loved an inimitable style and was satisfied with only the finest of polished craftsmanship, that man was he whose passing leaves a place which can never again be filled. We say that he is dead; but surely his personality can never be obliterated, nor his memory fade. His work lives on, while perhaps by now he knows the answers to all of that which he so splendidly endeavored, as much as mortal man can, to bring to the world."

No Stinking Suburb

Clifton Hall writes from Los Angeles: "I would like to criticize a remark made by Johns Harrington in *The Teakwood Box.* He refers to a 'stinking suburb of Los Angeles.' Los Angeles is justly proud of its suburbs, which include such cities as Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Pasadena, and Glendale. Certainly none of them can be described as 'stinking.' Harrington might at least visit our city before he writes about it. Henry Kuttner, for example, fills his Hollywood yarns with authentic local color." [Mr. Harrington lives in one of the suburbs of Los Angeles.—THE EDITOR.]

NEXT MONTH

Suicide Chapel

By SEABURY QUINN

ONE by one they disappeared, young, beautiful girls, with everything to live for, and prospects of a joyous and happy life ahead of them. One was found dead beneath her own window, killed by the fall. The others were found later, in that sinister chapel in the woods, where a giant ape—but you will have to read the story yourself to sense its full horror and mystery.

IF YOU are already acquainted with that suave occultist and scientific detective, Jules de Grandin, you will need no invitation to read about the latest exploit of the mercurial Frenchman. If you have not yet made his acquaintance, you have a treat in store for you in "Suicide Chapel." This intriguing novelette will be published complete

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Concise Comments

A. H. Hitchcock writes from Cleveland: "Thanks for your continued high standards. The Eyrie is always most interesting, especially the letters of Trudy. . . . Thanks also for the reprint, *The Girl From Samarcand.*"

James N. Mooney writes from Palms, California: "I greatly enjoyed Quinn's *Roads* in the last issue of WT, and in the current issue William Lumley's story (I'm not sure about his first name, because I've loaned my copy of WT to a friend) takes first place in my estimation."

Irene Harville writes from National City, California: "WEIRD TALES is coming into its own again at last. Not since Hugh Rankin was the illustrator in years long past has it been so fine. . . . Clark Ashton Smith's *The Death of Ilalotha* is one of the greatest weird tales ever written, ranking with Lovecraft's *The Outsider.*"

James E. Thomas writes from Portsmouth, England: "May I say just a couple of words re Gertrude Hemken of Chicago, whose letters to the Eyrie are so refreshing? 'Dat gal sure knows her onions'—but instead of onions, orchids to my lady. Cheerio!"

Seabury Quinn writes from Washington, D. C.: "*The Hairy Ones Shall Dance* is one of the best stories of the kind I ever read. It has just about everything, though I think the author's restrained style of narration is probably its greatest charm."

Most Popular Story

Readers, which story do you like best in this issue? Three stories ran neck and neck in popular favor in our March issue, as shown by your votes and letters. These were *Incense of Abomination* by Seabury Quinn, *The Girl from Samarcand* by E. Hoffmann Price, and the closing installment of *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance* by Gans T. Field.

Dreadful Sleep

(Continued from page 623)

right hand finished an over-arm sweep—the arrested gesture that had hurled the deadly tube. The force of it carried me around, and I saw Carol, waking. It was odd to watch her lovely face change from frozen horror to swift, incredulous delight.

"Ron!" she whispered eagerly. "You saw them, too? You heard them—Doctor Bell and Maru-Mora?"

Little need to speak. She came into my arms, and I kissed her. It was good to feel the supple warmth of her body, when it had been so stiff and cold; good to feel the tremulous softness of her lips, when they had been diamond-hard.

We came out of the half-demolished laboratory, into a winter's dawn.

Northward, upon the Palisades, we found a strange broad circle of desolation, from which the bacteriophage had obliterated all life. Piled in the center of it were low crumbling mounds of clay, where the hideous city had stood.

But beyond that circle of doom, and all about us, was a world alive again. The south wind was warm as spring. Noisy larks soared on it, unconcerned, to greet the belated sun. The distant humming of bewildered New York was a vast and comforting sound.

The great silence was ended.

Carol took my hand like an eager child, and we walked toward the golden towers of the city awake in the dawn.

[THE END]

COMING NEXT MONTH

HE WAS the last in the line. Six million and more of the metal-bodied, mineral-brained creatures had preceded him. The brain-units of each of them had been destroyed after the precious capsule of activating radium had been removed. The radium was to be added to the stores aboard the space-ship.

Tumilten saw them open the hinged receptacle in the head of the robot in front of him, take out the small radium-phial, and then reduce the brain-unit to a molten blob with a sharp ray of heat. He shuddered mentally. That was death! A sudden erasure almost unknown among his people, except at rare times like this. Ordinarily one lived on and on, for thousands of years, till the final last "fading out," when the brain-unit had burned itself completely out with radium.

The operator of the heat ray turned his multiple eyes on Tumilten. He telepathized, "Come, you. You are the last."

No sympathy, no slightest spark of feeling. The operator had been ordered by the Council to destroy six million brain-units, and there could be no such thing as pity for those doomed. The thing the Council had stressed was that they be sure to retrieve every radium-capsule before using the heat ray.

Tumilten took one step forward, then two backward. The operator looked at him with what might have been surprize.

"Tumilten does not want to be rayed out!" said Tumilten.

"What nonsense is this?" returned the operator. "The Council commands it. You have the cross-mark of the Unchosen on your frontlet. Come here and be rayed."

Tumilten spoke for himself again: "Why should Tumilten be rayed out? He wants to live!"

"Why? Why?" snapped back the operator impatiently. "Foolish one, because there is a shortage of radium. In that long journey through space in search of a new home, only the Chosen few can be supplied with radium. These six million capsules will help to keep them renewed till they find a haven."

The telepathized voice seemed to soften a trifle from its metallic indifference. "It is nothing, Younger. A fleeting moment of heat and it is over. You were created and now you are to be uncreated. After you are rayed, the ray will be turned on its operator, who is also of the Unchosen. Come——"

But Tumilten was thinking otherwise. With a click of internal machinery he whirled, and ran; ran with the smooth speed of high-powered machinery. . . .

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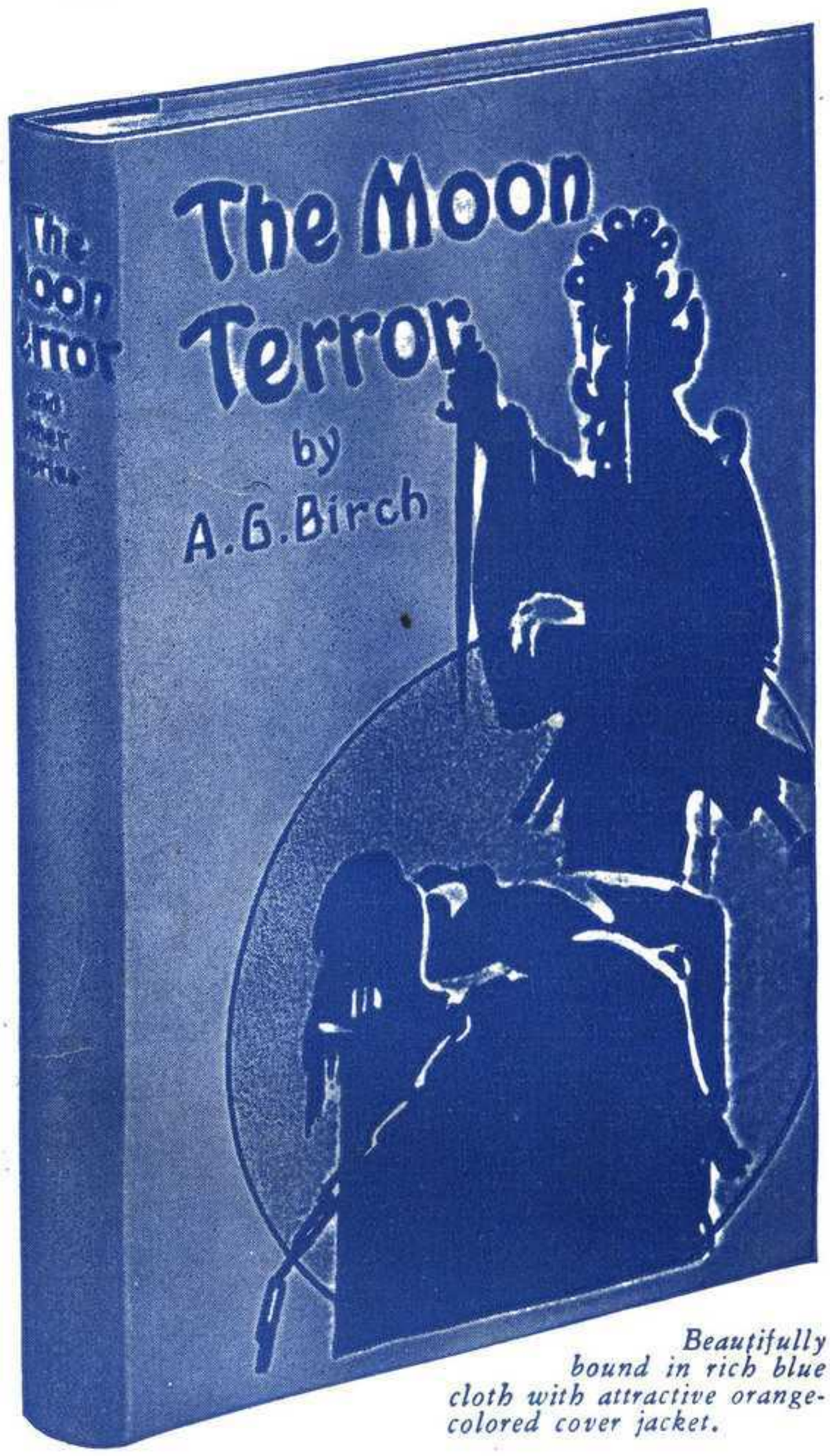

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