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SPAWN OF DAGON

By HENRY KUTTNER

Robert Bloch • Seabury Quinn • Edmond Hamilton • David H. Keller

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Spawn of Dagon

By HENRY KUTTNER

An eldritch, fearsome tale of the worship of the fish-god in the ancient world, and the prowess of a doughty swordsman in old Atlantis

Under all graves they murmur,
They murmur and rebel,
Down to the buried kingdoms creep,
And like a lost rain roar and weep
O'er the red heavens of hell.
—*Chesterton.*

TWO streams of blood trickled slowly across the rough boards of the floor. One of them emerged from a gaping wound in the throat of a prostrate, armor-clad body; the other dripped from a chink in the battered cuirass, and the swaying light of a hanging lamp cast grotesque shadows over the corpse and the two men who crouched on their hams watching it. They were both very drunk. One of them, a tall, extremely slender man whose bronzed body seemed boneless, so supple was it, murmured:

"I win, Lycon. The blood wavers strangely, but the stream I spilt will reach this crack first." He indicated a space between two planks with the point of his rapier.

Lycon's child-like eyes widened in astonishment. He was short, thick-set, with a remarkably simian face set atop his broad shoulders. He swayed slightly as he gasped, "By Ishtar! The blood runs up-hill!"

Elak, the slender man, chuckled. "After all the mead you swilled the ocean might run up-hill. Well, the wager's won; I get the loot." He got up and stepped over to the dead man. Swiftly he searched him, and suddenly muttered an explosive curse. "The swine's as bare as a Bacchic vestal! He has no purse."

Lycon smiled broadly and looked more than ever like an undersized hairless ape. "The gods watch over me," he said in satisfaction.

"Of all the millions in Atlantis you had to pick a fight with a pauper," Elak groaned. "Now we'll have to flee San-Mu, as your quarrels have forced us to flee Poseidonia and Kornak. And the San-Mu mead is the best in the land. If you had to cause trouble, why not choose a fat usurer? We'd have been paid for our trouble, then, at least."

"The gods watch over me," Lycon reiterated, leaning forward and then rocking back, chuckling to himself. He leaned too far and fell on his nose, where he remained without moving. Something dropped from the bosom of his tunic and fell with a metallic sound to the oaken floor. Lycon snored.

Elak, smiling unpleasantly, appropriated the purse and investigated its contents. "Your fingers are swifter than mine," he told the recumbent Lycon, "but I can hold more mead than you. Next time don't try to cheat one who has more brains in his big toe than you have in all your misshapen body. Scavenging little ape! Get up; the innkeeper is returning with soldiers."

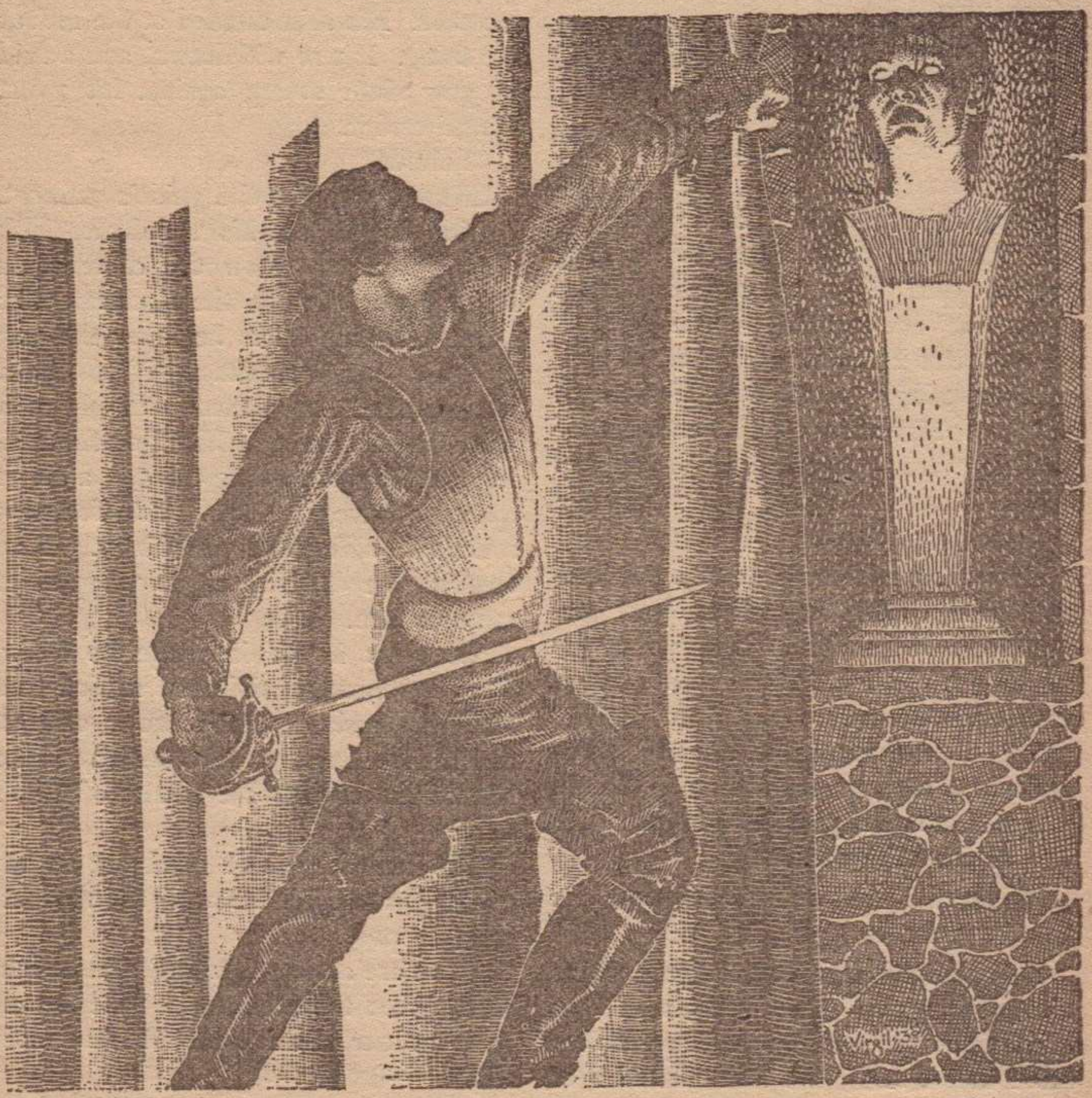
He thrust the purse into the wallet at his belt and kicked Lycon heartily, but the small thief failed to awaken. Cursing with a will, Elak hoisted the body of the other to his shoulders and staggered

toward the back of the tavern. The distant sound of shouting from the street outside grew louder, and Elak thought he could hear the querulous complaints of the innkeeper.

"There will be a reckoning, Lycon!" he promised bitterly. "Ishtar, yes! You'll learn——"

He pushed through a golden drapery and hurried along a corridor—kicked open an oaken door and came out in the alley behind the tavern. Above, cold stars glittered frostily, and an icy wind blew on Elak's sweating face, sobering him somewhat.

Lycon stirred and writhed in his arms. "More grog!" he muttered. "Oh gods! Is there no more grog?" A maudlin tear fell hotly on Elak's neck, and the latter for a moment entertained the not unpleasant idea of dropping Lycon and leaving him for the irate guards. The soldiers of San-Mu were not renowned for their soft-heartedness, and tales of what they sometimes did to their captives were unpleasantly explicit.



"Ishtar!" Elak breathed. "What wizardry's this?"

However, he ran along the alley instead, blundered into a brawny form that sprang out of the darkness abruptly, and saw a snarling, bearded face indistinct in the vague starlight. He dropped Lycon and whipped out his rapier. Already the soldier was plunging forward, his great sword rushing down.

Then it happened. Elak saw the guard's mouth open in a square of amazement, saw horror spring into the cold eyes. The man's face was a mask of abysmal fear. He flung himself back desperately—the sword-tip just missed Elak's face.

The soldier raced away into the shadows.

WITH a snake-like movement Elak turned, rapier ready. He caught a blur of swift motion. The man facing him had lifted quick hands to his face, and dropped them as suddenly. But there was no menace in the gesture. Nevertheless Elak felt a chill of inexplicable uneasiness crawl down his back as he faced his rescuer. The soldiers of San-Mu were courageous, if lacking in human kindness. What had frightened the attacking guard?

He eyed the other. He saw a medium-sized man, clad in voluminous gray garments that were almost invisible in the gloom—saw a white face with regular, statuesque features. A black hollow sprang into existence within the white mask as a soft voice whispered, "You'd escape from the guards? No need for your rapier—I'm a friend."

"Who the—but there's no time for talk. Thanks, and good-bye."

Elak stooped and hoisted Lycon to his shoulders again. The little man was blinking and murmuring soft appeals for more mead. And the hasty thunder of mailed feet grew louder, while torchlight swiftly approaching cast gleams of light about the trio.

"In here," the gray-clad man whispered. "You'll be safe." Now Elak saw that in the stone wall beside him a black rectangle gaped. He sprang through the portal without hesitation. The other followed, and instantly they were in utter blackness as an unseen door swung creakingly on rusty hinges.

Elak felt a soft hand touch his own. Or was it a hand? For a second he had the incredible feeling that the thing whose flesh he had touched did not belong to any human body—it was too soft, too cold! His skin crawled at the feel of the thing. It was withdrawn, and a fold of gray cloth swung against his palm. He gripped it.

"Follow!"

Silently, gripping the guide's garment, bearing Lycon on his shoulders, Elak moved forward. How the other could find his way through the blackness Elak did not know, unless he knew the way by heart. Yet the passage—if passage it was—turned and twisted endlessly as it went down. Presently Elak had the feeling that he was moving through a larger space, a cave, perhaps. His footsteps sounded differently, somehow. And through the darkness vague whisperings came to him.

Whispers in no language he knew. The murmurous sibilants rustled out strangely, making Elak's brows contract and his free hand go involuntarily to the hilt of his rapier. He snarled, "Who's here?"

The invisible guide cried out in the mysterious tongue. Instantly the whisperings stopped.

"You are among friends," a voice said softly from the blackness. "We are almost at our destination. A few more steps——"

A few more steps, and light blazed up.

They stood in a small rectangular chamber hollowed out of the rock. The nitrous walls gleamed dankly in the glow of an oil lamp, and a little stream ran across the rock floor of the cave and lost itself, amid chuckles of goblin laughter, in a small hole at the base of the wall. Two doors were visible. The gray-clad man was closing one of them.

A crude table and a few chairs were all the furnishings of the room. Elak strained his ears. He heard something—something that should not be heard in inland San-Mu. He could not be mistaken. The sound of waves lapping softly in the distance . . . and occasionally a roaring crash, as of breakers smashing on a rocky shore.

He dumped Lycon unceremoniously in one of the chairs. The little man fell forward on the table, pillowing his head in his arms. Sadly he muttered, "Is there no mead in Atlantis? I die, Elak. My belly is an arid desert across which the armies of Eblis march."

He sobbed unhappily for a moment and fell asleep.

ELAK ostentatiously unsheathed his rapier and laid it on the table. His slender fingers closed on the hilt. "An explanation," he said, "is due. Where are we?"

"I am Gesti," said the gray-clad one. His face seemed chalk-white in the light of the oil lamp. His eyes, deeply sunken, were covered with a curious glaze. "I saved you from the guards, eh? You'll not deny that?"

"You have my thanks," Elak said. "Well?"

"I need the aid of a brave man. And I'll pay well. If you're interested, good. If not, I'll see you leave San-Mu safely."

Elak considered. "It's true we've little money." He thought of the purse in his wallet and grinned wryly. "Not enough to last *us* long, at any rate. Perhaps we're interested. Although——" He hesitated.

"Well?"

"I could bear to know how you got rid of the soldier so quickly, back in the alley behind the tavern."

"I do not think that matters," Gesti whispered in his sibilant voice. "The guards are superstitious. And it's easy to play on their weakness. Let that suffice!" The cold glazed eyes met Elak's squarely, and a little warning note seemed to clang in his brain.

There was danger here. Yet danger had seldom given him pause. He said, "What will you pay?"

"A thousand golden pieces."

"Fifty thousand cups of mead," Lycon murmured sleepily. "Accept it, Elak. I'll await you here."

There was little affection in the glance Elak cast at his companion. "You'll get none of it," he promised. "Not a gold piece!"

He turned to Gesti. "What's to be done for this reward?"

Gesti's immobile face watched him cryptically. "Kill Zend."

Elak said, "Kill—Zend? *Zend?* The Wizard of Atlantis?"

"Are you afraid?" Gesti asked tonelessly.

"I am," Lycon said without lifting his head from his arms. "However, if Elak is not, he may slay Zend and I'll wait here."

Ignoring him, Elak said, "I've heard strange things of Zend. His powers are not human. Indeed, he's not been seen in the streets of San-Mu for ten years. Men say he's immortal."

"Men — are fools." And in Gesti's voice there was a contempt that made Elak stare at him sharply. It was as though Gesti was commenting on some

race alien to him. The gray-clad man went on hurriedly, as though sensing the trend of Elak's thoughts. "We have driven a passage under Zend's palace. We can break through at any time; that we shall do tonight. Two tasks I give you: kill Zend; shatter the red sphere."

Elak said, "You're cryptic. What red sphere?"

"It lies in the topmost minaret of his palace. His magic comes from it. There is rich loot in the palace, Elak—if that's your name. So the little man called you."

"Elak or dunce or robber of drunken men," Lycon said, absently feeling the bosom of his tunic. "All alike. Call him by any of those names and you'll be right. Where is my gold, Elak?"

But without waiting for an answer he slumped down in his chair, his eyes closing and his mouth dropping open as he snored. Presently he fell off the chair and rolled under the table, where he slumbered.

"What the devil can I do with him?" Elak asked. "I can't take him with me. He'd——"

"Leave him here," Gesti said.

Elak's cold eyes probed the other. "He'll be safe?"

"Quite safe. None in San-Mu but our band knows of this underground way."

"What band is that?" Elak asked.

Gesti said nothing for a time. Then his soft voice whispered, "Need you know? A political group banded together to overthrow the king of San-Mu, and Zend, from whom he gets his power. Have you more—questions?"

"No."

"Then follow."

Gesti led Elak to one of the oaken doors; it swung open, and they moved forward up a winding passage. In the dark Elak stumbled over a step. He felt the cloth of Gesti's garment touch his hand, and gripped it. In the blackness they ascended a staircase cut out of the rock.

Half-way up, Gesti paused. "I can go no further," he whispered. "The way is straight. At the end of the stairway there is a trap-door of stone. Open it. You'll be in Zend's place. Here is a weapon for you." He thrust a tube of cold metal into Elak's hand. "Simply squeeze its sides, pointing the smaller end at Zend. You understand?"

Elak nodded, and, although Gesti could scarcely have seen the movement in the darkness, he whispered, "Good. Dagon guard you!"

He turned away; Elak heard the soft rush of his descent dying in the distance. He began to mount the stairs, wonderingly. Dagon—was Gesti a worshipper of the forbidden evil god of ocean? Poseidon, a benignant sea-god, was adored in marble temples all over the land, but the dark worship of Dagon had been banned for generations. There were tales of another race whose god Dagon was—a race that had not sprung from human or even earthly loins. . . .

GRIPPING the odd weapon, Elak felt his way upward. At length his head banged painfully against stone, and, cursing softly, he felt about in the darkness. It was the trap-door of which Gesti had spoken. Two bolts slid back in well-oiled grooves. And the door lifted easily as Elak thrust his shoulders against it.

He clambered up in semi-darkness, finding himself in a small bare room through which light filtered from a narrow window-slit high in the wall. A mouse, squeaking fearfully, fled as he scrambled to his feet. Apparently the room was little used. Elak moved stealthily to the door.

It swung open a little under his cau-

tious hand. A corridor stretched before him, dimly lit by cold blue radiance that came from tiny gems set in the ceiling at intervals. Elak followed the upward slant of the passage; the red sphere Gesti had mentioned was in the topmost minaret. Up, then:

In a niche in the wall Elak saw the head. The shock of it turned him cold with amazement. A bodiless head, set upright on a golden pedestal within a little alcove—its cheeks sunken, hair lank and disheveled—but eyes bright with incredible life! Those eyes watched him!

"Ishtar!" Elak breathed. "What wizardry's this?"

He soon found out. The pallid lips of the horror writhed and twisted, and from them came a high skirling cry of warning.

"Zend! Zend! A stranger walks your——"

Elak's rapier flew. There was scarcely any blood. He dragged the blade from the eyesocket, whispering prayers to all the gods and goddesses he could remember. The lean jaw dropped, and a blackened and swollen tongue lolled from between the teeth. A red, shrunken eyelid dropped over the eye Elak had not pierced.

There was no sound save for Elak's hastened breathing. He eyed the monstrous thing in the alcove, and then, confident that it was no longer a menace, lengthened his steps up the passage. Had Zend heard the warning of his sentinel? If so, danger lurked all about him.

A silver curtain slashed with a black pattern hung across the corridor. Elak parted it, and, watching, he froze in every muscle.

A dwarf, no more than four feet tall, with a disproportionately large head and a gray, wrinkled skin, was trotting briskly toward him. From the tales he had heard Elak imagined the dwarf to be Zend. Behind the wizard strode a half-naked giant, who carried over his shoulder the limp form of a girl. Elak spun about, realizing that he had delayed too long. Zend was parting the silver curtain as Elak raced back down the corridor.

At his side a black rectangle loomed—a passage he had overlooked, apparently, when he had passed it before. He sprang into its shielding darkness. When Zend passed he would strike down the wizard and take his chances with the giant. Remembering the smooth hard muscles that had rippled under the dead-white skin of the man, Elak was not so sure that his chances would be worth much. He realized now that the giant had seemed familiar.

Then he knew. Two days ago he had seen a man—a condemned criminal—beheaded in the temple of Posedion. There could be no mistake. The giant was the same man, brought back to life by Zend's evil necromancy!

"Ishtar!" Elak whispered, sweating. "I'd be better off in the hands of the guards." How could he slay a man who was already dead?

Elak hesitated, his rapier half drawn. There was no use borrowing trouble. He would keep safely out of sight until Zend was separated from his ghastly servitor—and then it would be an easy matter to put six inches of steel through the wizard's body. Elak was never one for taking unnecessary risks, as he had a wholesome regard for his hide. He heard a shuffling of feet and drew back within the side-passage to let Zend pass. But the wizard turned suddenly and began to mount the steeply sloping corridor where Elak lurked. In Zend's hand was a softly glowing gem that illuminated the passage, though not brightly.

Elak fled. The passage was steep and narrow, and it ended at last before a blank wall. Behind him a steady padding

of feet grew louder in the distance. He felt around desperately in the dark. If there was a hidden spring in the walls, he failed to find it.

A grin lighted his face as he realized how narrow the passage was. If he could do it——

HE PLACED his palms flat against the wall, and with his bare feet found an easy purchase on the opposite one. Face down, swiftly, with his muscles cracking under the strain, he walked up the wall until he was safely above the head of even the giant. There he stopped, sweating, and glanced down.

Only an enormously strong man could have done it, and if Elak had weighed a little more it would have been impossible. His shoulders and thighs ached as he strained to hold his position without moving.

The trio were approaching. If they should glance up, Elak was ready to drop and use his blade, or the strange weapon Gesti had given him. But apparently they did not notice him, hidden as he was in the shadows of the high ceiling.

He caught a glimpse of the girl the giant carried. A luscious wench! But, of course, Zend would undoubtedly choose only the most attractive maidens for his necromancy and sorcery.

"If that dead-alive monster weren't here," he ruminated, "I'd be tempted to fall on Zend's head. No doubt the girl would be grateful."

She was, at the moment, unconscious. Long black lashes lay on cream-pale cheeks, and dark ringlets swayed as the giant lurched on. Zend's hand fumbled out, touched the wall. The smooth surface of stone lifted and the gray dwarf pattered into the dimness beyond. The giant followed, and the door dropped again.

With a low curse of relief Elak swung noiselessly to the floor and rubbed his hands on his leather tunic. They were bleeding, and only the hardness of his soles had saved his feet from a similar fate. After a brief wait Elak fumbled in the darkness and found the concealed spring.

The door lifted, with a whispering rush of sound. Elak found himself in a short corridor that ended in another black-slashed silver curtain. He moved forward, noticing with relief that the door remained open behind him.

Beyond the silver curtain was a room —huge, high-domed, with great open windows through which the chill night wind blew strongly. The room blazed with the coruscating brilliance of the glowing gems, which were set in walls and ceiling in bizarre, arabesque patterns. Through one window Elak saw the yellow globe of the moon, which was just rising. Three archways, curtained, broke the smooth expanse of the farther wall. The chamber itself, richly furnished with rugs and silks and ornaments, was empty of occupants. Elak noiselessly covered the distance to the archways and peered through the curtain of the first.

Blazing white light blinded him. He had a flashing, indistinct vision of tremendous forces, leashed, cyclopean, straining mightily to burst the bonds that held them. Yet actually he saw nothing —merely an empty room. But empty he knew that it was not! Power unimaginable surged from beyond the archway, shuddering through every atom of Elak's body. Glittering steel walls reflected his startled face.

And on the floor, in the very center of the room, he saw a small mud-colored stone. That was all. Yet about the stone surged a tide of power that made Elak drop the curtain and back away, his eyes wide with fear. Very quickly he turned

to the next curtain—peered apprehensively beyond it.

Here was a small room, cluttered with alembics, retorts, and other of Zend's magical paraphernalia. The pallid giant stood silently in a corner. On a low table was stretched the girl, still unconscious. Above her hovered the gray dwarf, a crystal vial in one hand. He tilted it; a drop fell.

Elak heard Zend's harsh voice.

"A new servant . . . a new soul to serve me. When her soul is freed, I shall send it to Antares. There is a planet there where I've heard much sorcery exists. Mayhap I can learn a few more secrets. . . ."

Elak turned to the last alcove. He lifted the curtain, saw a steep stairway. From it rose-red light blazed down. He remembered Gesti's words: "Shatter the red sphere! His magic comes from it."

Good! He'd break the sphere first, and then, with no magic to protect him, Zend would be easy prey. With a lithe bound Elak began to mount the stairs. Behind him came a guttural cry.

"Eblis, Ishtar, and Poseidon!" Elak said hastily. "Protect me now!" He was at the top of the staircase, in a high-domed room through which moonlight crept from narrow windows. It was the room of the sphere.

Glowing, shining with lambent rose-red radiance, the great sphere lay in a silver cradle, metallic tubes and wires trailing from it to vanish into the walls. Half as tall as Elak's body it was, its brilliance soft but hypnotically intense—and he stood for a moment motionless, staring.

BEHIND him feet clattered on the stair. He turned, saw the pallid giant lumbering up. A livid scar circled the dead-white neck. He had been right, then. This was the criminal he had seen executed—brought back to life by Zend's necromancy. In the face of real danger Elak forgot the gods and drew his rapier. Prayers, he had found, would not halt a dagger's blow or a strangler's hands.

Without a sound the giant sprang for Elak, who dodged under the great clutching paws and sent his rapier's point deep within the dead-white breast. It bent dangerously; he whipped it out just in time to save it from snapping, and it sang shrilly as it vibrated. Elak's opponent seemed unhurt. Yet the rapier had pierced his heart. He bled not at all.

The battle was not a long one, and it ended at a window. The two men went reeling and swaying about the room, ripping wires and tubes from their places in the fury of their struggle. Abruptly the red light of the globe dimmed, went out. Simultaneously Elak felt the giant's cold arms go about his waist.

Before they could tighten, he dropped. The moon peered in at a narrow window just beside him, and he flung himself desperately against the giant's legs, wrenching with all his strength. The undead creature toppled.

He came down as a tree falls, without striving to break the force of the impact. His hands went out clutchingly for Elak's throat. But Elak was shoving frantically at the white, cold, muscular body, forcing it out the narrow window. It overbalanced, toppled—and fell.

The giant made no outcry. After a moment a heavy thud was audible. Elak got up and recovered his rapier, loudly thanking Ishtar for his deliverance. "For," he thought, "a little politeness costs nothing, and even though my own skill and not Ishtar's hand saved me, one never knows." Too, there were other dangers to face, and if the gods are capricious, the goddesses are certainly even more so.

A loud shriek from below made him

go quickly down the stairway, rapier ready. Zend was running toward him, his gray face a mask of fear. The dwarf hesitated at sight of him, spun about as a low rumble of voices came from near by. At the foot of the stairway Elak waited.

From the passage by which Elak had entered the great room a horde of nightmare beings spewed. In their van came Gesti, gray garments flapping, white face immobile as ever. Behind him sheer horror squirmed and leaped and tumbled. With a shock of loathing Elak remembered the whispering voices he had heard in the underground cavern—and knew, now, what manner of creatures had spoken thus.

A race that had not sprung from human or even earthly loins. . . .

Their faces were hideous staring masks, fish-like in contour, with parrot-like beaks and great staring eyes covered with a filmy glaze. Their bodies were amorphous things, half solid and half gelatinous ooze, like the iridescent slime of jellyfish; writhing tentacles sprouted irregularly from the ghastly bodies of the things. They were the offspring of no sane universe, and they came in a blasphemous hissing rush across the room. The rapier stabbed out vainly and clattered to the stones as Elak went down. He struggled futilely for a moment, hearing the harsh, agonized shrieks of the wizard. Cold tentacles were all about him, blinding him in their constricting coils. Then suddenly the weight that held him helpless was gone. His legs and arms, he discovered, were tightly bound with cords. He fought vainly to escape; then lay quietly.

Beside him, he saw, the wizard lay tightly trussed. The nightmare beings were moving in an orderly rush toward the room in which Elak had sensed the surges of tremendous power, where lay the little brown stone. They vanished beyond the curtain, and beside Elak and the wizard there remained only Gesti. He stood looking down at the two, his white face immobile.

"What treachery is this?" Elak asked with no great hopefulness. "Set me free and give me my gold."

But Gesti merely said, "You won't need it. You will die very soon."

"Eh? Why——"

"Fresh human blood is needed. That's why we didn't kill you or Zend. We need your blood. We'll be ready soon."

An outburst of sibilant whispers came from beyond the silver drape. Elak said unsteadily, "What manner of demons are those?"

The wizard gasped, "You ask *him?* Did you not know——"

GESTI lifted gloved hands and removed his face. Elak bit his lips to choke back a scream. Now he knew why Gesti's face had seemed so immobile. It was a mask.

Behind it were the parrot-like beak and fish-like eyes Elak now knew all too well. The gray robes sloughed off; the gloves dropped from the limber tips of tentacles. From the horrible beak came the sibilant whisper of the monster:

"Now you know whom you served."

The thing that had called itself Gesti turned and progressed—that was the only way to describe its method of moving—to the curtain behind which its fellows had vanished. It joined them.

Zend was staring at Elak. "You did not know? You served them, and yet did not know?"

"By Ishtar, no!" Elak swore. "D'you think I'd have let those—those—what are they? What are they going to do?"

"Roll over here," Zend commanded. "Maybe I can loosen your bonds."

Elak obeyed, and the wizard's fingers worked deftly.

"I doubt—no human hands tied these knots. But——"

"What are they?" Elak asked again. "Tell me, before I go mad thinking hell has loosed its legions on Atlantis."

"They are the children of Dagon," Zend said. "Their dwelling-place is in the great deeps of the ocean. Have you never heard of the unearthly ones who worship Dagon?"

"Yes. But I never believed——"

"Oh, there's truth in the tale. Eons and unimaginable eons ago, before mankind existed on earth, only the waters existed. There was no land. And from the slime there sprang up a race of beings which dwelt in the sunken abysses of the ocean, inhuman creatures that worshipped Dagon, their god. When eventually the waters receded and great continents arose, these beings were driven down to the lowest depths. Their mighty kingdom, that had once stretched from pole to pole, was shrunken as the huge landmasses lifted. Mankind came—but from whence I do not know—and civilizations arose. Hold still. These cursed knots——"

"I don't understand all of that," Elak said, wincing as the wizard's nail dug into his wrist. "But go on."

"These things hate man, for they feel that man has usurped their kingdom. Their greatest hope is to sink the continents again, so that the seas will roll over all the earth, and not a human being will survive. Their power will embrace the whole world, as it once did eons ago. They are not human, you see, and they worship Dagon. They want no other gods worshipped on Earth. Ishtar, dark Eblis, even Poseidon of the sunlit seas. . . . They will achieve their desire now, I fear."

"Not if I can get free," Elak said. "How do the knots hold?"

"They hold," the wizard said discouragedly. "But one strand is loose. My fingers are raw. The—the red globe is broken?"

"No," Elak said. "Some cords were torn loose as I fought with your slave, and the light went out of it. Why?"

"The gods be thanked!" Zend said fervently. "If I can repair the damage and light the globe again, the children of Dagon will die. That's the purpose of it. The rays it emits destroy their bodies, which are otherwise invulnerable, or almost so. If I hadn't had the globe, they'd have invaded my palace and killed me long ago."

"They have a tunnel under the cellars," Elak said.

"I see. But they dared not invade the palace while the globe shone, for the light-rays would have killed them. Curse these knots! If they accomplish their purpose——"

"What's that?" Elak asked—but he had already guessed the answer.

"To sink Atlantis! This island-continent would have gone down beneath the sea long ago if I hadn't pitted my magic and my science against that of the children of Dagon. They are masters of the earthquake, and Atlantis rests on none too solid a foundation. Their power is sufficient to sink Atlantis for ever beneath the sea. But within that room"—Zend nodded toward the curtain that hid the sea-bred horrors—"in that room there is power far stronger than theirs. I have drawn strength from the stars, and the cosmic sources beyond the universe. You know nothing of my power. It is enough—more than enough—to keep Atlantis steady on its foundation, impregnable against the attacks of Dagon's breed. They have destroyed other lands before Atlantis."

Hot blood dripped on Elak's hands as the wizard tore at the cords.

"Aye . . . other lands. There were races that dwelt on Earth before man came. My powers have shown me a sun-lit island that once reared far to the south, an island where dwelt a race of beings tall as trees, whose flesh was hard as stone, and whose shape was so strange you could scarcely comprehend it. The waters rose and covered that island, and its people died. I have seen a gigantic mountain that speared up from a waste of tossing waters, in Earth's youth, and in the towers and minarets that crowned its summit dwelt beings like sphinxes, with the heads of beasts and gods and whose broad wings could not save them when the cataclysm came. For ruin came to the city of the sphinxes, and it sank beneath the ocean—destroyed by the children of Dagon. And there was——"

"Hold!" Elak's breathless whisper halted the wizard's voice. "Hold! I see rescue, Zend."

"Eh?" The wizard screwed his head around until he too saw the short, ape-featured man who was running silently across the room, knife in hand. It was Lycon, whom Elak had left slumbering in the underground den of Gesti.

The knife flashed and Elak and Zend were free. Elak said swiftly, "Up the stairs, wizard. Repair your magic globe, since you say its light will kill these horrors. We'll hold the stairway."

WITHOUT a word the gray dwarf sped silently up the steps and was gone. Elak turned to Lycon.

"How the devil——"

Lycon blinked wide blue eyes. "I scarcely know, Elak. Only when you were carrying me out of the tavern and the soldier screamed and ran away I saw something that made me so drunk I couldn't remember what it was. I remembered only a few minutes ago, back downstairs somewhere. A face that looked like a gargoyle's, with a terrible great beak and eyes like Midgard Serpent's. And I remembered I'd seen Gesti put a mask over the awful face just before you turned there in the alley. So I knew Gesti was probably a demon."

"And so you came here," Elak commented softly. "Well, it's a good thing for me you did. I—what's the matter?" Lycon's blue eyes were bulging.

"Is this your demon?" the little man asked, pointing.

Elak turned, and smiled grimly. Facing him, her face puzzled and frightened, was the girl on whom Zend had been experimenting—the maiden whose soul he had been about to unleash to serve him when Elak had arrived. Her eyes were open now, velvet-soft and dark, and her white body gleamed against the silver-black drape.

Apparently she had awakened, and had arisen from her hard couch.

Elak's hand went up in a warning gesture, commanding silence, but it was too late. The girl said,

"Who are you? Zend kidnapped me—are you come to set me free? Where——"

With a bound Elak reached her, dragged her back, thrust her up the stairway. His rapier flashed in his hand. Over his shoulder he cast a wolfish smile.

"If we live, you'll escape Zend and his magic," he told the girl, hearing an outburst of sibilant cries and the rushing murmur of the attacking horde. Yet he did not turn. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Coryllis."

"'Ware, Elak!" Lycon shouted.

Elak turned to see the little man's sword flash out, shearing a questing tentacle in two. The severed end dropped, writhing and coiling in hideous knots.

The frightful devil-masks of monsters glared into Elak's eyes. The children of Dagon came sweeping in a resistless rush, cold eyes glazed and glaring, tentacles questing, iridescent bodies shifting and pulsing like jelly—and Elak and Lycon and the girl, Coryllis, were caught by their fearful wave and forced back, up the staircase.

Snarling inarticulate curses, Lycon swung his sword, but it was caught and dragged from his hand by a muscular tentacle. Elak tried to shield Coryllis with his own body; he felt himself going down, smothering beneath the oppressive weight of cold, hideous bodies that writhed and twisted with dreadful life. He struck out desperately—and felt a hard, cold surface melting like snow beneath his hands.

The weight that held him down was dissipating—the things were retreating, flowing back, racing and flopping and tumbling down the stairs, shrieking an insane shrill cry. They blackened and melted into shapeless puddles of slime that trickled like a little gray stream down the stairway. . . .

Elak realized what had happened. A rose-red light was glowing in the air all about him. The wizard had repaired his magic globe, and the power of its rays was destroying the nightmare menace that had crept up from the deeps.

In a heartbeat it was over. There was no trace of the horde that had attacked them. Gray puddles of ooze—no more. Elak realized that he was cursing softly, and abruptly changed it to a prayer. With great earnestness he thanked Ishtar for his deliverance.

LYCON recovered his sword, and handed Elak his rapier. "What now?" he asked.

"We're off! We're taking Coryllis with us—there's no need to linger here. True, we helped the wizard—but we fought him first. He may remember that. There's no need to test his gratefulness, and we'd be fools to do it."

He picked up Coryllis, who had quietly fainted, and quickly followed Lycon down the steps. They hurried across the great room and into the depths of the corridor beyond.

And five minutes later they were sprawled at full length under a tree in one of San-Mu's numerous parks. Elak had snatched a silken robe from a balcony as he passed beneath, and Coryllis had draped it about her slim body. The stars glittered frostily overhead, unconcerned with the fate of Atlantis—stars that would be shining thousands of years hence when Atlantis was not even a memory.

No thought of this came to Elak now. He wiped his rapier with a tuft of grass, while Lycon, who had already cleaned his blade, stood up and, shading his eyes with his palm, peered across the park. He muttered something under his breath and set off at a steady lope. Elak stared after him.

"Where's he going? There's a—by Ishtar! He's going in a grog shop. But he has no money. How——"

A shocked thought came to him, and he felt hastily in his wallet. Then he cursed. "The drunken little ape! When he slashed my bonds, in the wizard's palace, he stole the purse! I'll——"

Elak sprang to his feet and took a stride forward. Soft arms gripped his leg. He looked down. "Eh?"

"Let him go," Coryllis said, smiling. "He's earned his mead."

"Yes—but what about me? I——"

"Let him go," Coryllis murmured. . . .

And, ever after that, Lycon was to wonder why Elak never upbraided him about the stolen purse.

Fortune's Fools

By SEABURY QUINN

A thrilling weird story out of the Dark Ages—a tale of wolves who were men and men who were wolves—a story of a Provencal soldier of fortune and a beautiful girl, who indeed were Fortune's fools

1. A Solitary Horseman Rides

COLD as polar ice, thin-strained as a sophisticated schoolman's logic, the moonlight flooded down the smalt blue sky, a spilth of argent luminance that laid a silver plating upon tree and bough and twig, on rock and scanty, frost-scarred turf, struck a thousand glittering reflections from the stars that glinted diamond-bright against the purple heavens, and picked dazzling highlights from the million tiny facets of the hoarfrost's rime. So bitter cold it was that whip-sharp crackings sounded from the frozen tarns where ice twice frozen ruptured into spider-webs of splayed-out fissures. The dry, dead leaves that clung like corpses hanged in chains upon the oak-trees' branches beat against each other with a clacking rustle like the brittle crackle of a crumpled parchment. The horse's hooves struck on the frozen earth as on the flints of a paved street.

The horseman hunched his shoulders forward in the rising wind and dropped his bridle on the saddle-bow as he beat his hands together to restore stagnated circulation. From crown to knee he was enveloped in an almost shapeless garment made of sheepskin with the wool turned in, a sort of loose surtout topped by a hood which hid his features as a friar's countenance is hidden by his raised capoch. His legs were cased in boots of Spanish leather decorated at the heels with star-shaped brazen rowels. Behind his left knee swung the metal sheath of a long sword. His palms struck on each other sharply; presently their tempo quickened, beating out the rhythm of a song:

"Nicolete o le gent cors,
Por vos sui venuz en bos. . . ."

His voice rang through the frost-bound uplands and echoed back among the stark tree boles:

"Bel compaignet,
Dieus ait Aucassinet . . ."

Like an echo to his final note there came an answering voice, but not in song. It was knife-sharp, edged with terror, shrill, uncontrolled, despairing, the cry of one who has the terrible foreknowledge of swift doom upon her, yet offers up a last despairing prayer for help although the possibility of help is hopeless.

Silhouetted like a shadow in a lantern show against the cold effulgence of the moonlight, a figure raced across the hill brow, running with such light swift grace the horseman could have sworn its feet scarce spurned the frost-rimed rocks. Yet even as he watched, he saw the runner reel and stumble, then dash on again, but more slowly, with less sure-footed certainty. The fugitive was tiring rapidly.

Now an eery, long-drawn howl came quavering through the quiet night, and across the hilltop swept three furry shapes, wide-jawed, loose-tongued, eyes gleaming with a light as green as jealousy's consuming fire. If the hunted ran

as though she rode the wind, the hunters traveled as though borne by lightning, and every leap they took made shorter the short gap that stretched between them and their quarry. No hunting-dogs, these; no sleuths or boarhounds. The watching rider knew their cry. He had not hunted in the forests of the Languedoc for nothing.

"Lupins, by the Holy Child!" he exclaimed softly. "Wolves!"

The hunted woman stumbled to her knees, then caught herself and raced with tripping feet along the frost-paved pathway leading down the mountainside. The horse shied violently as she fell almost between his forelegs, struggled to her knees and held her hands up piteously.

"Succor!" she begged between retching sobs. "Help me, beau sir, or I perish!" Beneath her tippet of bright fur her bosom heaved tumultuously, her supplicating hands were trembling as with palsy. He could hear her fighting to regain her breath in hard gasps.

"Dom Dio, mistress, hast brought thy goods to the right market!" he replied as he swung a leg across his saddle-bow.

The horse gave a sharp neigh of terror as the gray pursuers swept down on them,

"Against the blackness of the entranceway the woman showed in aureate silhouette."

but the man showed neither fear nor hesitancy. "And art thou hungered, Sire Lupus?" he demanded as the foremost wolf leaped at him. "Taste this. 'Twill satisfy thy appetite, methinks!"

His sword flashed forward like a streak of frozen lightning, and the great wolf fell back with a strangling cry so human it seemed it could not possibly have come from lupine throat, then rolled and thrashed about with impotently clawing forepaws, as though it choked upon a bone. But it was no bone that throttled back its gurgling cries, as the ever-widening pool of blood about the furry head attested.

Across the writhing body of their mate the two remaining wolves leaped like twin missiles from an arbalest, one from the right, the other from the left, with the swordsman as the apex of their triangle. When he closes for the kill the wolf is silent; but these were not as other wolves, for as they leapt they gave tongue, and one of them laughed like a man and one seemed growling curses in a guttural tongue, but both bared long white tusks as cruel and sharp as Paynim simitars.

THE man dropped back a pace, half turning in his stride so that his angle shifted and the wolf upon his right was nearer than its fellow. The creature lowered its head as though it had observed the fate its first companion suffered, and was not minded that the sword's point should be thrust into its gaping mouth. But if the beast was cunning the swordsman had more skill, for instead of thrusting with his point he lowered his blade and swung it upward, and the sharp steel struck the leaping monster just behind the point where legs and body join, so that man's weight and wolf's leap blent to give more power to the blow, and fur and hide and belly were ripped open like a muslin sack slit with a knife, and blood and entrails gushed out on the frozen ground and sent a thin white steam up in the moonlight.

Now the final wolf was on him, and its mouth snapped like the jaws of a sprung trap as it laid its forepaws on his shoulders and worried at his throat.

"Ha, wouldst thou, by the tresses of the Sainted Maid?" gasped the man as he writhed beneath the wolf's great bulk. The monster fought with human cunning, putting forepaws on his arms to pinion them to earth, while it tore and ripped at the fleece hood which wound his neck in its protective softness. They wrestled thus an instant; then the man's hand disappeared in the loose sleeve of his coat and flashed out quickly with a short curved knife. The beast's cry heightened to a scream of pure anguish as the knife-blade ripped from groin to brisket, then sheared a transverse cut across its belly, so that the figure of the Rood was carved upon the monster's underside.

"By'r Lady, had thought that I was finished with the world, madomna," he said as he kicked the dying wolf aside and got unsteadily upon his feet. "Myself have hunted wolves almost since I exchanged my swaddling-clothes for breeks, but never have I met a wolf that fought like these. I know not if they're more like wolves that fight like men than men who fight like wolves."

Of his companion he could see but little, and that little gave him cause for wonder. Like his, her face was hidden by a fur-lined hood, and a tippet of rich fur hung down her shoulders and joined across her bosom with a pin of hammered gold shaped like a coiling serpent. A coat of wolfskin reached her knees, and from knee to ankle her slim legs were wrapped in layer on layer of scarlet cloth. On feet so small they might have been a child's she wore a pair of felt-soled shoes bound

to her ankles sandal fashion with long strips of gilded leather. But whether she were fair or dark, or young or old, he could but guess, since her sable hood concealed her features. He only knew her eyes shone greenly, like a cat's at night, whenever a stray beam of moonlight pierced the little cavern of her camail, and when they rested on him in calm speculation he felt small ripples of swift chill run up his neck and through his scalp—the eery warning feeling he had known when, walking in the forest, he had almost trod unwittingly into an adder's den.

In obedience to his whistle his frightened horse came to him and he vaulted to the saddle. The woman placed her foot on his and leaped effortlessly to the steed's back, where she sat behind him pillionwise, her arms about his middle, her fur-framed face across his shoulder. The spicy, bracing tang of mint was on her breath; from her fur garments came a subtle, luring scent of mingled myrrh and sandal that made him think of the bazars beyond the Bosporus where merchants from Arabia and Cathay brought stuffs so precious that a single invoice equaled a king's ransom.

"Meseemeth I arrived in good time for your purpose, Domna," he remarked as they clattered past the stiffening bodies of the wolves and mounted the hard, winding trail. "What didst thou in the wilds on such a night?"

"I sought a—flower."

"A flower? Domna Marye! In God's good name, what sort of flower grows i' this cruel air? Nor e'en the blanchflors of the snows could lift its head in such a biting cold."

"I sought a flower," she insisted. "I have need of it. Only in the dead of winter does it bloom, and then by moonlight only. I strayed beyond the castle gates to seek the blossom, and Count Otto's huntsmen were on quest. But for you, beau sire, I had been killed." A purring undertone, sardonically provocative, cynically seductive, seemed to underlie her slowly pronounced words and run from syllable to syllable.

He pondered her reply. At length: "What sort of men be these who course with wolves for dogs, and in the dead of night?"

"They do not course with wolves, messire."

"No? Then by the Devil's teeth——" He broke his query half pronounced, and instead:

"Whither would you we should go?" he asked. A vague uneasiness possessed him, a feeling of malaise that seemed to blow a warning trumpet in his inward ear. The woman's arms were wound about him tightly, and beneath the soft fur of her surtout he could feel the supple play of muscles firm and hard as though they were a youth's.

"There is no shelter but the Wolfberg, and that, belike, is worse than none for thee."

"The Wolfberg—Wolves' Hill?" he replied. This everlasting emphasis on wolves annoyed him. Wolves coursing in the moonlight, running women down like rabbits, attacking travelers in the hills; the very castle of the local noble named for them. "Ah pah!" he blew his breath out gustily. "Sayest thou? Then let us go there quickly. Myself am nearly frozen to the bone, and thou must be near perishing. Stray dogs are given bones to gnaw and place beside the fire in Christian homes. Surely this Count Otto cannot offer less to us."

2. *Otto von Wolfberg*

THE Wolfberg limned its turrets black against the pallid moonlight. It crowned the highest peak that pierced the barren countryside, commanding from

its lookout view of both the highway and the river, so that no merchant floating goods to market and no farmer with wains of provender for man and beast could pass without the count's permission and the payment of such boot as he was pleased to levy. It had no barbican or outworks, nor any moat or drawbridge, for the hill fell steeply on three sides so that nothing without wings might scale its height, while approach was by a causeway barely wide enough for two mailed men to ride abreast. Who sought to singe Count Otto's beard must come upon him two by two and brave a storm of arrows from the loopholes set above the gate, then batter down a coulisse made of timbers thick as a man's girth and studded with great harrow spikes of sharpened iron. Around the castle's base a stain of shadow showed as black as ink, but through the tunneled entranceway a light gleamed feebly, and by it could be seen a dolphin-headed horn chained to the post beside the postern.

The rider blew a blast upon the trumpet; then, as there came no answer to his hail, sucked in his breath and sounded such a call as set the echoes bellowing among the crags. The tread of iron-shod feet came clumping down the passageway in answer to his second hail, a bearded, unkempt face scowled at him through the wicket.

"What want'st thou, sirrah?" the porter growled. "We feed no beggars here. This is no hospice——" His eye fell on the woman and a grimace of amusement spread across his porcine features. "Ha, Lady Basta, hast been picking florets in the gentle night?" he queried jocularly. "These hills be dangerous for rare morsels. Wot ye not——"

"Open up thy gate, thou crop-eared knave," the rider interrupted, "or by Veronique herveil, I'll have thee whipped for incivility. Go tell thy master, an he be not in his cups too deep to understand the niceties of gentle usage, that a knight and lady wait without. And mark ye, fellow, let him understand that though I wait, I do not wait with patience."

Surprizingly, the porter broke into a loud guffaw, but he swung the postern back and louted low as the horseman and his saddlemate rode down the entry to the courtyard.

"Be not afeared," she whispered as they left the tunnel and halted while a hostler shambled forward for his bridle. "I thank thee civilly for thy good service, and will protect thee if harm comes——"

"Afeared—I?" he laughed as he swung her to the ground. "Marry, while my sword hangs at my side I have small fear of anything——"

"Thy sword may not be always ready to thy hand," she murmured as a pike-blade swung a glimmering arc behind him and he fell face forward to the kidney stones.

OTTO VON WOLFBERG, twelfth owner of the title and least favored of a line to all of whom the gift of beauty was denied, sat in his hall at meat. The table was ten ells in length and spread with plate of gold and silver, cream of the spoil a dozen generations of the wolf's breed levied on the commerce of the highway and the river. Beside him, right and left, his captains and commanders sat, an uncouth, loutish lot with unshorn hair and beards that grew as rankly as a churl's. All were men of mighty stature, great-boned, wide-shouldered, barrel-chested, with hands as huge and red as fresh-smoked hams. Shock-headed pages passed the wine and beer horns, and shoved platters bearing meats before the company, to every man a joint of beef or leg of mutton, or a haunch of half-baked brawn or venison. But there was neither bread nor green thing on the table, no

cabbages, no sweets, no food that grew upon the fields or in the forest; only meat, and that so lightly cooked that it was almost raw.

At the lower tables were the men at arms, coarse of body and unkempt as those who sat above them, and the air was heavy with the shouting of obscenities and the bellowing of drunken laughter. The rushes on the floor had not been changed for days, and sucked-out marrow-bones and bits of rotting food lay in them, festering like offal on a swill heap.

Frowzy slatterns, some thin as witches, some obscenely fat, some almost toothless, some with more hair on lips and chin that any stripling in his sixteenth year could boast, shared the half-cooked meat and sour beer and matched gross jest with ribald answer. But no brats ran squalling round the tables or fought for marrow-bones or chunks of meat among the rushes.

Through the stench of putrefying food and unwashed bodies ran another odor, a rancid, acrid smell to make the nostrils quiver and bring tear drops smarting to the eyes. It was not the odor of the kennel, for there were no dogs to be seen; yet it was something similar, only stronger, heavier, and, vaguely, terrifying.

The hubbub was so great that it was not until the provost guardsmen dragged their prisoner half-way to the table dais that Otto noticed them and brought his fist down on the board with a dish-rattling thump to enjoin silence. Otto of the Wolves' Hill did not rule by love. His frown was a sword and his sword was death. Even the most drunken of the company faltered into silence as the count's fist smote the oaken board, and the guardsmen hauled their captive to the well before the dais in silence still as midnight in a churchyard.

"What have we here?" Count Otto roared, glowering ogrishly at the captive stranger. "Speak, fellow, and declare thyself. Who art thou, and how darest thou trespass upon our demesne?"

They had stripped him of his sheepskin surtout while he lay unconscious in the courtyard, and now he stood in smallclothes, a soft suede jerkin of light brown laced high about his neck and topped with a brass gorget at the throat; snugly fitting breeches of the same soft leather cased his legs, tall boots of cordovan were pulled well up his thighs. He was a slightly built, small man with fair soft hair that hung in rippling waves about his neck and ears and gave him from the side and back a youthful, almost feminine appearance. But looked at from the front he showed no trace of femininity, for his upper lip was adorned with a pair of fierce mustachios reaching almost past his cheeks and twisted in the Spanish fashion into horn-like points. Upon his pointed chin a tuft of wheat-blond pointed beard thrust truculently out. His brows, in contrast to his hair, were vivid black, and arched so sharply that they gave his face a rather mocking, questioning expression. Deep set, his little round blue eyes might have seemed humorous had it not been for the curiously cold directness of their gaze. Bound though he was and still half fainting from the pike blow which had rendered him unconscious in the courtyard, he stood with martially squared shoulders and gave Count Otto glare for baleful glare.

"Come, sirrah, speak, or must I twist an answer from ye wi' the rack?" roared Otto, rising half-way from his seat. "Who art thou?"

Cold hatred blazed like frigid lightning in the captive's eyes. "I hight Ramon Nazara y de Grandin, gentleman of Provence and knight of Aragon, and here before thy varlets, trulls and lick-spittles I brand thee traitor to thy chivalry, if such thou ever had, Otto von Wolfberg, and

tell thee to thy ugly face thou art a rogue and villain!"

In the silence that ensued, the moving of a foot among the stinking rushes rustled like a gale among the oaks, and the swiftly indrawn breath of slut and squire and man at arms was like a wind among the crags, for never within memory had any man dared twit ill-favored Otto with his ugliness.

"Now, by the mass, you mew a right brave song for such a little cat, my malkin!" Otto's thick lips bared strong white teeth beneath his unkempt mustache, but there was no trace of smile in his hard eyes, even though a roar of gusty laughter swept the hall in applause of his sally.

"Yea, and the cat hath claws to back his mew," de Grandin answered as the laughter quieted. "Do but unloose my hands and give me back my weapons, and I'll engage to write his title as a churl on any of ye; on thee, von Wolfberg, or on that one-eyed oaf who sits upon thy right, or on the pox-marked boor upon thy left, or on yon tangle-headed lout——" Straight down the table swept his cold, contemptuous glance, pausing on the captains and lieutenants one by one, and for each he had some stinging word of insult as he challenged him to combat. At last, when he had called the roll of those at the high table, he cast a scornful glance across the men at arms and shouted: "If any of ye louse-bit underlings dare take the gage your betters fear to lift, step forward boldly and declare yourselves." Only sullen murmurs answered him, and: "What, lack ye guts to fight?" he mocked. "Fie on ye for the dastard cravens that ye be!"

Otto's fang-like teeth flashed in a savage grin. "Had thought to have thy head struck off, but since thou'rt such a strutting little cockerel thou'lt have a cockerel's fate. Conrad Miller's Son" — he turned to the gigantic one-eyed captain seated at his left—"get thee down and wring me yonder chicken's neck."

"While I be bound?" de Grandin asked sarcastically. "Surely such a bulk of bone and brawn cannot fear of me—or does he tremble lest I strangle him bare-handed?"

"Unloose him," bade the count, "and stand between him and the door to catch him as he flees."

But de Grandin made no move to run. As his great antagonist advanced he fell into a stooping crouch and, blue eyes blazing, circled slowly around until his back was to the table and his opponent facing it.

With a bellow Conrad rushed and aimed a blow with his great fist sufficient to have felled an ox. But the blow went wild as the small Provençal dodged nimbly and Conrad cannoned on, unable to regain his balance. As he neared the table his opponent thrust his foot out, tripping him so that he fell head foremost up against the heavy oaken bancal and sprawled full length, face downward on the floor, unconscious as a pole-axed beef.

"One!" cried de Grandin. "Hast other champions to send against me, Otto Wolfberg, or wilt thou fight for thine own honor, if so be thou hast such?"

THE gleeful shouts with which the rabble had watched Conrad Miller's Son set on his small antagonist were hushed, and through the hall there was no murmur of applause for the small Provençal's agility.

"A compact, Otto," came the prisoner's challenge. "Do thou appoint three others —choose them as thou wilt—and send them to do battle with me with such weapons as they may select. I will undertake to overcast them all. Should they prevail thou'lt have revenge for this humiliation"—he stirred the still unconscious Conrad with his boot—"and some

small sport as well. If I overcome them, I go my way in peace. What sayest thou?"

"The wolf does not make compacts with the rabbit," Otto Wolfberg snarled. "Tie him up again, some of you. To the dungeons wi' him!"

Two men at arms went down, one gasping with sick anguish as de Grandin's boot heel caught him in the stomach, another with a bloody mouth where a small fist had mashed his lips against his teeth, but the struggle was unequal, and within a minute they had laid him with his face against the floor, hands bound behind him, clothes gaping in a dozen places, but cursing with such poisonous bitterness that at last a guardsman stuffed a knot of rushes in his mouth. Even then his eyes were venomously bright, and not until they thrust a pike-staff through his back-bent elbows were they able to propel him toward the door, for more than one stout ruffian felt his boot when they had bound his hands.

Half-way to the door they halted, as a tinkle of small cymbals sounded at the entrance, and all heads craned that way. Against the blackness of the entranceway a woman showed in aureate silhouette. From chin to instep she was sheathed in gleaming golden tissue, its clinging folds no more obscuring her long, slender lines than an apple's skin conceals its shape. Slim neck and tapering shoulders, high, outward-pointing breasts, sleek hips, beautifully turned legs, were outlined as in plastic gold which seemed to flow and ripple with each supple movement. She moved with a slow, gliding, effortless precision, taking short smooth steps which suggested, somehow, that her ankles had been fettered with a weightless gyve. Behind her head, like the nimbus of a saint, she held a tambourine which she fluttered till its brazen cymbals rang a high, thin, laughing note.

De Grandin started as he saw her face. Veiled and only half guessed at, it had been mysterious, intriguing; naked it was utterly inscrutable. Immobile as a carven ivory mask, it was bone-white, calm, bland, contemptuous, with upward-slanting eyes, slashed scarlet mouth, brows black as jet and delicately arched, as though they had been laid on with a stick of sharpened charcoal. Her hair was black as ravens' plumage, but dull as burnt-out candle-wicks, and seemed to soak the flambeaux' flickering light up as black sand might soak up blood, giving back no answering gleam, no hint of scintillation. Smoothly parted in the middle it was drawn tight across her ears and twisted at her skull base in a heavy knot of dull matte ebony.

Recognition flooded through his brain. He had journeyed to Byzantium with Venetian merchants, seen the fabled Hippodrome and visited the Bucoleon and seen its great rooms walled with damask and floored with ivory inlaid with silver. Women like no others in the world graced the City of the Caesars, dark-skinned Persians, ruddy-maned Circassians, Greeks as beautiful as the figures carved upon the cameos they wore. He had seen the travelers from Cathay, too, and, riding on their wiry little ponies, Mongols from the Gobi, slim, high-shouldered men with braided hair and drooping, fierce mustaches, arrayed in lacquered leather armor inlaid with bright gold, and in their wake were women such as this. A woman of the Tartars! What did she in this den of less than semi-civilized Almayns?

She passed so close she might have brushed him with her trailing gown of golden thread, but though she looked at him with moss-green eyes there was no recognition in her glance. For captive and for captors she seemed to hold a cold, aloof contempt, as though she were a princess stepping through a foul street

and they the muck that strewed the paving-flints.

For a moment she gazed at the Wolfberg chief as she stood in the well before his table. Then, aloofly, icily, as though she were alone and did it for her own amusement, she began to dance.

Like a birch tree when the leaves are new and lacy green and sweet winds blow through whispering branches, she swayed and undulated while the tambourine behind her matte black head shrilled softly in repressed crescendos. Then beat by plangent beat the music deepened till it seemed to mimic distant thunder in the hills and growled a warning of approaching storm. The little cymbals in the hoop's ring fell together titteringly, softly . . . softly. The patter of spring raindrops sounded through the branches of the swaying trees. Then the rhythm changed. The roll of Tartar kettle-drums came booming from the vellum head, the beat of unshod hooves upon the frozen earth . . . the thunder of the Golden Horde's resistless charge . . . the rumble of war chariots . . . the clash of arms, the lust of fighting men. The madness that percussion long continued breeds beat in the brains of every man within the hall, and hands reached out unconsciously for swords, or tightened suddenly on dagger-hilts.

Now she held the tambourine at arm's length before her, and round its vibrant rim her fingers raced and fluttered in a wild, staccato, stuttering tremolo while her serpent-supple body shivered in a sympathetic ecstasy. Her shoulders shook and shuddered to the throbbing of the pulsing, roaring rhythm of the beaten instrument. She was quivering faster . . . faster . . . her shoulders jerked and rolled convulsively, twitching back and forth. Not only shoulders, but entire torso writhed and shook, she seemed dancing with her chest, her lungs, her abdomen. She whirled the tambourine high overhead in her right hand, and its cymbals shrieked as if in breathless laughter of unholy glee. With her left hand, long, slim-fingered, white as ivory tipped with points of coral, she rent her golden gown from throat to waist. A narrow strip of pale white body showed through the wounded garment as she writhed more violently, as if in mortal agony, and from the riven golden gown there was a gleam of pointed breast, ivory white, rose-tipped, peering out an instant, then disappearing like a frightened pink-nosed kitten.

A deafening roar of approbation sounded from the feasters, but Otto Wolfberg gave no sign. He was gazing at her, glassy-eyed, his mouth half open, his face as blank as that of any drunkard in his final cups. Saliva trickled from the corners of his lips, his barrel chest was heaving with quick, labored breathing, like the respiration of a runner nearly spent, or the retching of a swimmer who has almost ceased to battle with an overwhelming current.

Suddenly her maddened swaying ceased. Stock-still she stopped, cutting off the frenzied motion as if she had been turned to stone. Then gold-sheathed arms shot right and left out from her rigid body, and with a jerking quiver she threw her shoulders back, and her young, firm breasts burst from the chrysalis of her torn gown, bright as ivory against gold, beautiful almost beyond imagining. An instant she posed thus, then with a mad crash dashed her hand straight through the tambourine and flung the ruined instrument upon the table before Otto Wolfberg.

The roar that greeted the finale of her dance was like the bellow of a mountain torrent when the ice jam breaks in spring, but she paid it no attention. Calm, aloof, composed, oblivious, she turned and glided from the room with that short,

flowing step which somehow seemed suggestive of bound ankles, and like the shadow of a shifting shadow, or the figment of a half-remembered dream at waking, she was gone.

3. *Seen from a Dungeon Window*

THEY took de Grandin to a cell that looked through iron-latticed windows to the base court, but before they fastened shackles on his wrists they stripped him to his shirt and hose and left him cursing like a hissing serpent in the almost zero cold of the stone-floored, stone-walled, stone-ceiled room. The algid floor tiles chilled him to the bone each time he stepped, and in a little time the iron loops about his wrists turned almost white with frost and burned his flesh like fire. His skin began to itch and prickle as goose-flesh formed upon it, and his teeth were chattering like the beating of a drum at muster roll as he felt his way across the almost pitch-black dungeon. Presently his foot struck rotting straw, and he dropped upon the stinking heap and pulled its filth-encrusted shreds about him as if he were a dog that sought cold comfort in its heatless kennel. The night dragged by on leaden feet. Somewhere in the castle was a horologue that beat the hours out upon a brazen gong, and the intervals between its bellings seemed as long as years with endless days. But in spite of chill and wrath and injured pride he fell asleep at last, and cold gray daylight fingered at his cell bars when he woke to hear the castle tocsin beating out a dirge. Shivering, he got upon his feet and looked out into the courtyard.

A little cavalcade of men at arms was entering the gate, and six of them bore litters formed of pike-staves crossed with boughs of evergreen. On the litters lay three corpses, stark, stone-stiff and naked, and as the funeral procession passed his window he could see the wounds upon them. One showed a sword mark on the throat, a little wound that pierced the skin close by the neck base, and round it was a frozen necklace of bright blood. Blood smeared the corpse's lips and beard, too, and told a tale that any leech or veteran of the battlefield could read as plainly as a priest could read a hornbook. The sword that killed the man had entered through his mouth and struck down through his neck.

The body on the second hurdle bore a cut almost an ell in length, beginning at the level of the arms and running down until it struck the navel.

The final litter bore a corpse on which the Midas hand of winter had laid fingers in the instant of death agony, freezing into immobility the writhing limbs and tortured features, holding in stone-hard embrace the twisted arms and drawn-up legs, the hands that pressed with impotent futility against the knife-hewn abdomen from which the frost-glazed entrails gushed, tracing with a transverse line the vertical and horizontal cuts made by a knife-blade on the thorax and abdomen.

"Dom Dio!" gasped de Grandin as he looked. "The wounds upon those human bodies are such as I inflicted on the beasts that beset Domna Basta yesternight! *Sancta Dei genitrix*—it cannot be! And yet——" He dropped down to the straw again and scratched a heap of stubble over him. The misery of cold was sharper than his curiosity.

NO FOOD was thrown into his dungeon, and by nightfall the torment of hunger had been added to the scourge of freezing. Miserably he huddled in the straw heap, almost too weak to move, so cold that he could hardly feel the pangs of gnawing famishment. But he leaped up from his bed as the sound of wailing

voices came to him across the base court. Through the window of his dungeon he beheld a little knot of miserable creatures herded by a company of men at arms. Like him, they had been stripped down to their shirts, and as their naked feet trod frost-bit paving-stones they winced and skipped and hopped about in dreadful parody of dancing. Their jailers roared with laughter and prodded them with pike-butts as they drove them to the center of the court. One of the captives, an aged man with thin gray beard and scanty locks, fell to his knees, and though the burning of the icy stones wrung groans from him, he raised his hands in prayer:

"Mater purissima, speculum justitiae,
Mater castissima, mater inviolata . . ."

he besought, and: *"Ora pro nobis!"* chorused all the others in an agony of hopelessness and woe.

Now the men at arms were on them, beating, shoving, kicking. They flogged the aged man up from his knees and drove him toward the castle gateway, herding his companions after him. Then at a signal they wheeled round and ran, dodging through a doorway, making fast the portal after them.

Like echoes from the banging door there came a chorus of deep growlings and wild howls, and from another door a pack of wolves came rushing out into the court. Gaunt, gray, green-eyed, with gleaming tusks and lolling tongues, they dashed across the frosted stones, their long nails clicking on the flints.

A thousand feet or less they had to run to be upon the shivering, almost naked wretches by the gateway, and as they raced across the court they passed so close beside de Grandin's window he could hear their panting breath . . . panting and something more! He could have sworn he heard one wolf growl to its fellow: "Poor sport tonight. They will not travel far."

The harried prisoners ran with panic-stimulated feet out in the desert of the frost-bound mountains and untimbered rocks, and after them the wolf pack scurried with yelps and howls of savage exultation.

"Mo' Dio," through chattering teeth de Grandin swore, "men coursed with wolves, herded into dungeons like rabbits in a warren, that they may be the quarry of four-footed beasts!"

He shook the dungeon bars in fury. "Hear me, ye saints of Paradise, grant I may work justice on these monsters, and I will plant your altars thick with candles long as my sword-blade. Aye, for every one I slay, a brace of candles sword-blade long! Attend me, Holy Ones—a pair of candles for each one I slay, tall candles of smooth wax as fair and straight as Easter lilies, candles which shall burn so brightly that a half-blind priest may see to read his office by their glow! You cannot refuse such an offer, but act quickly, Sacred Ones, or I may die before I have a chance to keep my vow!"

As with most Provençals, mingled Almayn and Moorish blood ran in his veins, strengthening and spicing the main strain of Languedoc, and like most Provençals and Gascons he had learned much from the Moslems. At bottom he believed in good and evil, and in very little else, but this never kept him from communing with the saints in almost jovial comradery, addressing them with all the blunt directness that he used to fellow soldiers, making out-and-out commercial compacts with them or, at times when things were more than usually desperate, laying them a wager of his life against their sanctity. More than once he was assailed by doubts concerning saints' existence, but this did not prevent his praying to them on occasion. The blessed saints were patient lis-

teners and did not force unwelcome counsel on him. So now he prayed with all the fervor of an orthodox believer, expatiating on the beauty of the candles he would give as if he were a prentice hawking wares behind a fair booth and they indifferent or unwilling customers.

Perhaps it was his fervid salesmanship, perhaps the sainted host took pity on his misery; at any rate, while he was still engaged in invocation, a rattle sounded at the dungeon door.

4. *Two in a Tower*

"BEAU sire — Messire de Grandin!" came a guarded whisper from the wicket.

"Aye?" he returned, alert. "Who calls?"

" 'Tis I, Basta, messire. Come quickly, while the chance remains." There was a snap and squeaking from the unoiled lock and hinges, and the heavy oaken door swung back. Slim hands were on his hands, slim fingers fluttered at the gyves upon his wrists, a key was thrust into their locks and in a moment he was free. "Quick, but be silent," she admonished, and he felt a cloak draped round his shoulders and a hand grasped his to lead him toward the door.

Like a blind man following his guide he crept along the inky passage, mounted stairs as dark as Erebus, sneaked through half-lit corridors, then climbed a final flight of winding stairs which seemed to lead up to the Mountains of the Moon, so endless was their spiral. At last his leader paused before a door and fingered at some secret mechanism, then stood aside to let him pass.

The blazing brightness of the candlelight confounded him at first, but as his eyes adjusted themselves to the glare he saw they stood in a small circular compartment hung with tapestry and carpeted with bearskins. Two chairs of carven wood stood by the walls, and on one of them was flung a fur-lined robe of heavy woolen stuff, with a pair of monkish sandals underneath. But most important was the object in the center of the room, a wine cask sawn in half and almost filled with steaming water. Beside it was a little dish of almond meal, a hyssop of sweet fern leaves and a pile of linen towels.

" 'Twill thaw the dungeon's chill away," she told him as she nodded toward the tub. "When thou hast bathed I have that which will break thy fast above. I wait thee there."

As on the night he met her, her features were obscured by a drawn hood, and her body was enveloped in a loose gown of brown stuff, shaped like a friar's habit. As she stepped he saw her feet were cased in velvet shoes that made her tread as silent as a cat's. "Gramercy, *domna mia,*" he returned. " 'Tis like heaven after purgatory to be thus entreated. Methinks that I shall sleep more peacefully tonight than last."

Her green eyes gleamed sardonically from the shadow of her cowl as she turned to mount the flight of narrow winding steps that led up from the chamber.

De Grandin wallowed in the steaming water to his heart's content, lathering himself with suds of almond meal and scrubbing vigorously with the fern leaves. By the time he dried himself upon the towels of coarse linen he was in a glow, and despite the need for caution he began to hum a snatch of song:

"Isot ma drue, Isot ma mie!
En vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!"

Like a summer breeze that stirs the greenwood in the long still days when lovers wander with joined hands beneath

the verdant bowers came the couplet capping his:

"Belle amie, ainsi va de nous,
Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!"

"L'enfer, you know it too?" Eyes shining with delight, a boyish laugh upon his lips, de Grandin threw the fur-lined robe around him, thrust his feet into the sandal straps and bounded up the stairs. He shoved the brocade curtain at the doorway back and leaped across the threshold, then stopped as suddenly as if he had encountered a stone wall. "Domna Marye!" he exclaimed, and let the breath out slowly through his teeth.

The room in which he stood was circular, conforming to the rondure of the tower, and not of any great size. Its walls were without windows, or even loopholes, and covered with a yellow brocade, gold-embroidered. The floor was spread with deerskin of a light fawn shade, and in the center stood a wide low couch on which a coverlet of baby wolfskins, almost silver-gray in hue, was laid. A candle of sweet-scented wax emitted a soft light, caught and reflected in a ceiling mirror of Venetian glass. Beside the bed was a small table with a top of tight-stretched pigskin which bore a silver platter heaped with food—a bowl of steaming mortrew, a salmon pasty, cubes of game soused in the juice of muscatels and ginger, cakes soaked in liqueurs and glass goblets of sweet wines from Cypress, Sicily and Hungary. Throughout the place there hung a curious, clinging, evanescent odor which seemed to come and go like zephyrs through an open window, and which mounted to his head like strong, spiced Grecian wine. But all of this was only the jewel casket, the setting for the gem on which his eyes were fixed.

The Lady Basta had put off her loosely draping cloak and velvet shoon, now she was cased in a slim gown of bright vermilion that sheathed her slender body as a scabbard sheaths a sword. Her little feet were bare and white as lily petals, their tiny nails as pink as rose leaves. So must have looked the feet of Lady Enid as she paced beside Sir Geraint when he rode forth to do battle for the three-pronged lance hight Sparrow Hawk. If she had been bewitching wrapped in folds of clinging gold, she was utterly exquisite in her clinging gown of Tartar red with the ivory of her changeless face above, the snow-white of her tiny feet beneath.

De Grandin's pagan soul that worshipped beauty for its own sweet sake wherever found was thrilled down to the bases of its being. He felt himself go weak with longing so intense it was akin to breathless adoration as she raised herself into a sitting posture with her arms behind her, hands resting on the wolf-skin coverlet.

Smooth, white, impassive as a mask, her face seemed strangely alien to the slim-lined, red-sheathed body set beneath it. The smile upon her vivid scarlet lips was delicately aloof, ironical. She knew her charm, this passionlessly-passionate seductress; her irresistible allure for men was like an instrument she played on with a sure, skilled touch, and yet she was contemptuous of it. Her oblique, moss-green eyes were like a cat's, their pupils black, enormous, almost empty of expression. Her teeth were very small and very white and even—very sharp, too, thought de Grandin as her red lips parted slightly and she smiled at him, half closed her eyes and threw her head back gently.

She drew her child-small pink-nailed feet up from the deerskin rug, swung them upon the bed, and with a lithe contortion got up to her knees. He watched the play of muscles under her close-fitting robe. They rippled like a wrestler's, like the finely drawn, strong sinews of a prac-

tised acrobat. Seductive she might be, alluring as a houri out of Mahound's Paradise, but alien characteristics marked her; she was Atalanta, champion of the race, and Trojan Helen in one form, a combination of the chaste Diana and the wanton Venus in a single body.

"Thou must e'en be famished after thy long fast, messire," she murmured in her oddly purring voice. "Take, eat; those viands are not such as they serve in Otto's banquet hall." With a gesture of her pink-tipped hand she indicated the small table by the wall.

DE GRANDIN fell to with a will. Beauty was a thing to fall down before and worship, certainly, but an empty-bellied worshipper was languid in his reverence, and he had not tasted food for thirty hours. He downed a goblet of red Cyprian wine and a glass of golden wine from Sicily to keep it company, wiped his lips upon a wisp of damask and helped himself prodigiously to salmon pasty.

Feet tucked demurely under her, hands demurely folded in her lap, the Lady Basta watched him as he ate. "Dost know the character of thine hosts here?" she asked.

"Aye," he cleared his mouth of salmon with a draft of Magyar wine, "methinks I do, madomna. I have traveled far afield and over the seas, but never have I seen such monsters in the flesh. Yet me-seems I recognize them from the tales I've heard. Are they not of that cursèd company of those not yet made fast in hell who slough off human shape at will and run wild-questing through the night in lupine form to kill and eat those so unfortunate as to cross their paths? Are they not members of that crew who dance on Christmas Eve, deriding the nativity of Christ, and sell their sinful souls to gain the power to change their shape to fit their bestial nature? Are they not——"

"Yea, they are *lobis-homem,* known in this land as *währwolf.* 'Tis said the first von Wolfberg bribed a sorcerer to give him power to take on wolfish shape, for so savage was he that he needs must have the beast his form as well as his base nature. However that may be I do not know, but this I know full well: Count Otto and his company are gifted one and all with this dread power. In all this place we two alone cannot shift shape at will."

"And those poor wights I saw them harry from the base court——"

"Were cattle for the slaughter. Their craving and blood-lust runs at spate tide at the full moon, and they scour the countryside between times, bringing in such folk as they can capture and housing them within the donjon till the time appointed. Then they turn them loose and course them, as it were a rabbit drive or deer hunt. A few are liberated every night, and the count and his retainers take turns following and slaying them. The night you found me on the mountainside a pack of them took wind of me and left their kill to follow in my tracks. Had not you met me when you did I had been food for them long since."

"You told me then you sought a flower in the moonlight. Surely you did jest?"

Her red lips writhed back in a soundless snarl, displaying small white teeth. "I jested not, messire, believe me. I sought a flower which should give me power to work my vengeance on these monsters. They took my scent ere I came on it, but haply I shall find it yet." Plainly, she did not wish to talk about her moonlight quest.

He thrust a morsel of stewed lamprey in his mouth and washed it down with wine. "How art thou truly clepèd?" he asked. "Have heard them call thee Basta,

but whether that be surname or forename——"

Her smile became less mocking and more bitter. "I hight Basta, nothing more."

"Naught else? How meanest thou——"

"I was born a slave. Like animals, slaves have no names save those their owners choose to give them. My mother was one of a thousand Tartar women sent by Tama Khan to Byzantium as an offering of good will to the Emperor Romanus. My father—perhaps he was a noble of the Emperor's suite, perhaps a guardsman or a muleteer. Who troubles to record the bedmates of a slave-girl, or a slave's paternity?

"At nine years I was sold to a bear-keeper in the circus. For the next three years I studied music, dancing and contortionism. I was a dancer in the Hippodrome at twelve. At thirteen I was given to a leader of the Greens, and taken by him to Ravenna when he went upon an embassy. *Eyah!* He lost horse and hound and hawk—and me—to a Borussian at the gaming-table, and my newest master carried me with other winnings to Cologne when we passed Count Otto's castle on the river."

She paused and shuddered slightly, as with sudden cold; then: "It was fortunate for me that I am beautiful. There were thirty members in my master's company. Ten were killed in trying to beat off Count Otto's men; the rest, including him who owned me, were pent up in the dungeons till the wolves desired sport and blood." She cupped her empty palms before her: "All are gone."

He dipped his fingers in a golden fingerbowl and dried them daintily on a damask napkin, for he had been most gently reared at the court of Ramon of Toulouse.

"And thou?" she asked.

"Tránseat!" He laughed, but not with mirth. "We be a well-assorted pair, we two. A slave-maid and a landless fugitive! My country is the Languedoc, the blessed land of Provence. It was a pleasant place, with smiling fields and bowered orchards and the warm sun overhead. Men lived happy and contented there. The husbandman worked in his fields and vineyards, in the halls the troubadours composed and sang gay songs, or gathered in the courts of love around the fairest of their ladies.

"Then came the wars—the Holy Wars—God save the Mark! Simon de Montfort and his butchers swept across the pleasant land as they had been a bloody plague. We fought them off, we Provençals, and Pedro, the good King of Aragon, rode in the field beside us with his chivalry, but we might as well have tried to beat the rising tide back with our swords. Our foemen showed no mercy. Captured knights were crucified on their own olive trees, or dragged to death at horses' tails. Seven thousand helpless babes and women suffered massacre when de Montfort stormed the town of Beziè-res, and beneath their flailing swords and pounding hooves the music of our troubadours and the chanting of our poets has been stilled for ever. Our fields are sown with corpses and our orchard trees are turned to gallows. All who remain alive are in one class or other, those who have yielded lands and goods and conscience to de Montfort, or those who fled with nothing but their lives. I was pushing toward the Polish kingdom with sword and services for sale when I met thee upon the mountainside. We be Fortune's fools, we two."

"Perhaps thy troubles near an end. Come, sit beside me," she commanded. "I'll rede the riddle of thy future, an it please thee."

He dropped beside her on the fur-draped bed and gave a sigh of satisfaction. Bathed, warmed, fed to repletion, with the embers of the fire of southern wines aglow in his blood, he stretched in animal content as he kicked his sandals off. "Canst truly foretell things to come?" he asked.

"For others, yes, but not for my own self. Mine eyes are holden there." She took a little phial of red glass from a small cabinet and poured its contents in her cupped palm. It was thick as soured cream and black as ink. She gazed into the little sable pool a moment, and he saw her eyes grow fixed and glazed, with opal lights in their green depths. Her lips were moving soundlessly, like those of one who kneels in silent prayer before an altar. At last she spoke in a hushed voice, soft and murmurous as water flowing in a covered runnel.

"I see thee well beloved and at ease in thine own castle, and round thee cluster sons and daughters to do thee honor in thy age. A woman sits at thy right hand, but I cannot see her face, mayhap because I strive so desperately to see it. But I see thy generations marching down the corridors of time, and some of them strive valiantly on land and sea with those who raise the banner of oppression, and some there are who wrestle manfully with ghostly foes. Thy progeny shall overcome the forces of the phantom world. It is a birth-gift. Ghouls, ghosts and warlocks, vile witches and the mighty company who traffic in hell's commerce shall not prevail against them. In lands as yet unknown thy name and blood shall spread confusion in the hosts of evil."

She drew her gaze from the black pool as though it were a pain to look in it, but a greater pain to look away. "That woman whose veiled face I cannot see, thy consort and the mother of thy children, I—wish—her—joy!"

Her panted words trailed slowly into silence, and he looked at her amazed. It had not seemed to him that she was capable of emotion—except, perhaps, to hate—yet now her eyes were like twin pools of melted glass, their moss-green depths suffused with tears.

He roused upon an elbow. "Marry, but thou read'st a brave tale of the bye and bye," he whispered. "What sayest thou of the here and now?"

She gave a laugh, the first that he had heard her utter—low and rippling-sweet, but with a bitter undertone of tears—as she pressed her forefingers against her lips, then joined them tip to tip and laid them on his brow. "A kiss for thee, beau sire, until the morrow," she replied as she slipped down from the bed and slid pale feet into her velvet shoes.

"Nay, Basta, loveliest of women, hear me," he besought, but she draped the monkish cloak about her and drew its cowl up so it hid her face.

"Must e'en now hie me back or have them come in search of me," she whispered. "Rest thee well, Ramon de Grandin. Thou'lt need refreshment 'gainst the morrow's work."

5. Two Ride Forth Together

The gentle shaking troubled him. He was snugly comfortable beneath the wolfskin coverlet, and he had not known snug comfort in a long time. Also, his dreams had been most pleasant: of the gay court at Toulouse, of song contests and knightly jousts and tournaments and fair women with pale hands; and through them all, mingling with the happy visions of the times long lost, there ran the figure of a lissome damozel with night-black hair and moss-green eyes that brightened sometimes with the flashing fire of opals. "Begone, avaunt, aroint thee!" he complained, snuggling down

more deeply in the soft fur robes. But the shaking was repeated and, awake at last, and angry, he sat up in the corded bed.

"Let be!" he ordered curtly. "May not a man sleep peacefully—ha, is't thou, *ma bella?*" He broke his petulant complaint abruptly as Basta's face showed in the semi-darkness of the candlelight. "I crave thy pardon for such churlish words——"

"There is no time for courtesy, messire," she interrupted in a whisper. "Arise and do thy harness on. We must away right quickly!" She dropped his clothing on the bed and laid a sword and dagger and a set of body armor by it. "The moon e'en now is fading in the sky and dawn is not far off. Count Otto and his men-wolves will return anon, and it were well we put as many miles of road as possible 'twixt them and us ere they discover our departure."

He caught her hand and kissed it as he saw his good Toledo blade once more within his reach. "By all the saints, hast given me new courage, *domna mia,*" he declared as he hastened to attire himself. "Is the castle then deserted while Otto quests his prey?"

"Nay, the entranceway is guarded, but by a handful only," she told him as they crept down the winding stair. "Some lie in swinish drunkenness, most range the hills with Otto, a few keep ward. It is for us to force our way through them. . . ."

He loosed his long sword in its sheath as they stepped warily into the base court and tiptoed toward the stable.

Basta had donned a page boy's livery and tucked her long hair in a velvet cap. High boots encased her slim straight legs and a sword hung by her side. Across her shoulder draped a pair of saddle-bags and in her hand she held a flint and tinder box.

Swiftly they clapped saddles on two horses, his own and a Wallachian cog, short-legged and heavy-set, but an easy steed for woman's riding. "Await me here a moment," she directed as he led the horses from the stable. There was a click of steel on flint, and looking through the stable door he saw the fire-glow on her features as she blew the tinder into life. Then she stooped quickly, and in a moment came the curl of smoke and a soft crackling, as of eggshells trodden underfoot, that told him she had set the heaped-up stable straw afire.

They tarried till the ruddy orange red of leaping flames began to paint the gray stone with bright hues, then vaulted to the saddle and with a mighty shout of "Fire!" charged clattering across the courtyard.

The provost's men on guard about the gate rushed forward to dispute their passage, but the billowing clouds of smoke that burst and tumbled from the stable door made them loom dim and indistinct as phantoms in a fog, and the roar and crack of quickly mounting flames made the confusion greater. A warder aimed a pike thrust at de Grandin; he swept the partizan aside and thrust out savagely. The fellow fell back with a scream as steel crashed through his lips and teeth and tongue. An arbalest bolt came whining past them and struck the vault above their heads, and as another pikeman hurried up he trod upon the quarrel and went stumbling as it turned beneath his foot. Basta leant across her saddle-bow and thrust her sword into the sprawling varlet's spine, and de Grandin clove another to the eyes as their horses reached the outer gate.

No time to fold the great gate's leaves back. They thrust the postern's bar aside and, bending low upon their horses' necks, rode through the narrow opening. Then while he held the watchmen back

with darting point and flailing edge his partner in escape hacked at the hawsers which upheld the coulisse. The spike-toothed grating crashed behind them with a mighty bang as they fled down the causeway leading from the castle, and de Grandin turned and shook his fist back at the gloomy pile. "Trapped by Verigod!" he shouted. "The wolves are in the deadfall!" A shower of crossbow quarrels answered him, but all fell short, and he rocked with laughter as they rode away. With the portcullis down, its hawsers cut, the men within the castle were securely prisoned. They must run howling through their burning pen until the flames consumed them, as surely doomed to death by fire as if found guilty in the bishop's court and sentenced to be burnt for heresy and witchcraft.

They clattered down the mountainside through groves of evergreen and oak and out across the pleasant valley where the rising sun began already to shoot rosy darts and drive the clustering shadows back. Far off, in a sequestered franklin's cot, a cock crew with an elfin, silvery note. De Grandin sent a mocking *"coque-rico"* echoing back and burst into a song:

"Isot ma drue, Isot ma mie!
En vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!"

Her rich contralto matched his lyric baritone:

"Belle amie, ainsi va de nous!
Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!"

The horses drew together as the trail-way narrowed, and he leant toward her and kissed her on the mouth. *"En vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!"* he quoted in a whisper.

"Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!" she answered, and her lips clung against his like iron to the lodestone.

6. *The Wolf Pack Hunts Again*

NIGHT was falling quickly. The sky's bright blue was stained to steel-gray, tawny, finally a dull slate, and presently the hard, cold moonlight crept between the branches of the trees as if to search the riders out, to say to something that pursued them: "Here they be!" No caw of rook or raven's croak came through the thick pine boughs, only the moaning of a wind that seemed to grow more cold each instant, and, occasionally, the crackle of a dry, dead leaf.

But was it just the crackling of dead leaves? About them, right and left, behind, before, marching with them, following, waiting for them, was a stealthy pad-pad-pad of tufted feet. It grew and multiplied till from every quarter it seemed closing in on them. Something streaked across the road before them like a flash of dancing light reflected from a mirror. A rabbit, flying with wings of terror on its heels. The rustling increased till it sounded like the slashing drive of hailstones on the dry-leaf carpet of the forest, and a deer shot by, running with the speed of desperation.

Basta's teeth were chattering. "This likes me not!" she whispered, drawing nearer to de Grandin.

He smoothed his restless horse's neck and wondered which particular saint to approach with a proposition. The Blessed Ones had never failed him yet, but this situation was unprecedented. Intermediate help was not to be despised, but in the circumstances it might be best to make direct petition. He bent his head and signed himself.

"*Dom Dio,* look on us," he whispered reverently. "We are very weak and full of sin, and oftentimes have transgressed Thy commandments. Nathless, Senhor Lord, we are very sorry for our misdeeds, and if it be Thy will to save us from the

perils that encompass us, we promise to amend our ways as far as in our sinful nature lies. Grant, therefore, that we may come safely through this danger—or if it be that we must perish, let us take such toll of those who came against us that their children and their children's children shall turn pale and tremble when our names are spoken. Amen.

"Now let what is to come come quickly," he looked up smilingly from his devotions. "Sweet mistress, no man dies more times than one, and who would wish to live alway?"

They had ridden out into a little clearing and the stars were twinkling infinitely remote and chill above them. Far off, but belling nearer, even as it sounded, came the howling of a wolf, and its quavering wail was answered by another, and another—and another. On every side, completely circling them, rose the hunting-cry, and suddenly a gray form glided from the shadows, followed by two more, three, a score, and they found themselves the center of a ring of greenly gleaming eyes, white teeth and hairy breasts. The howling had ceased now, but the silence that enfolded them was infinitely more frightening. Standing head and shoulders above others in the pack, a gigantic wolf wove through the hairy circle, seeming to give orders and plan strategy.

De Grandin slipped down from his saddle, for his horse was mad with terror and unmanageable. He held his hand to Basta, helping her alight, and as she dropped beside him clipped her to his breast. "One kiss before we meet them steel to tusk, *querida,*" he whispered as they took their stand against a lightning-blasted pine. "If so be we must die and the Lord wills I must rot in hell for ever, the memory of thy kisses will console me in the midst of fire and brimstone everlasting."

"Again!" she pleaded. "Again!" She wound her arms about him and strained herself so tight against his armor that it seemed their two forms would be merged in one. "Oh, beloved, why must we stop to breathe?"

But need to stop was urgent, for even as they embraced the pack charged. A leaping chaos of red mouths and flashing teeth surged on them, and into it he plunged his sword with lightning strokes, stabbing, slashing, hacking till his arm grew numb with killing.

He saw Basta fighting like a thing possessed; then suddenly he heard her give a cry and fall down writhing as two wolves leaped on her.

But it did not seem as if they bore her down. Rather, it appeared she went down voluntarily, and while she stabbed and slashed at her assailants with her dagger her right hand dropped the sword and reached out for an odd-shaped fungus growing like a mushroom between two branches of the dead tree's rotting roots. Her fingers closed upon it and she thrust it in her mouth.

"Perhaps that way is best," he murmured as he wrenched his sword-blade from a cloven skull and thrust it through the brisket of a leaping wolf. "Death cannot be far off, and if the poison fungus kills her quickly she will not feel the agony of being torn to pieces — ha, would'st thou, by the sandals of Saint Bride?"—this to a wolf which clamped its teeth upon his sword arm and sought to drag him down. "Taste this and see how well it likes thy belly!" He drove his dagger in the creature's throat and turned the blade so that the red blood spurted out like wine from a burst cask.

Basta had rolled upon her back and four shaggy beasts were on her, tearing at her gorget and breast armor.

De Grandin started toward her, hewing out a lane for passage with his sword, but the mighty leader of the pack leaped

on him, and he fell beneath the impact of the monster's driven weight.

Now the other wolves drew back and the frenzied yelping ceased. The leader was about to make his kill.

A thousand times de Grandin had looked straight-eyed in the skull-faced countenance of death, and always he had grinned at it. But now he did not grin. The snarling face above him was a wolf's, the fur was wolfish and the fangs were bestial, but through the beastly lineaments he recognized the face of Otto Wolfberg. His stomach retched with loathing as the grinning mouth drew near his throat. In a moment he would feel the sharp teeth tearing through his flesh, and he was powerless, for the man-wolf crouched upon him, holding down his legs with his back legs, pinioning his arms against the earth with his forepaws. "*Mater salvatoris,*" he besought, "comes now a sinful soul. Pray thou for it——"

His panted prayer was interrupted by a wild, fierce cry the like of which he'd never heard. Not quite a roar nor yet a scream, but blending the most fearsome part of each, it echoed and re-echoed through the werewolf-haunted wood.

The wolves heard it and were afraid. For the first time in their savage, man-beast lives they knew the paralyzing gripe of sheer, stark terror. And even as they turned in fright they knew the realization of their fear, for, apparently from nowhere, a dreadful thing was in their midst. It was a creature like a catamountain, but four times larger, with rippling soot-black fur and flashing eyes of green, and teeth like simitars and claws like sabers. It rushed among them, spreading death so swift it might have been a lightning bolt. At a single blow from its great paw a wolf lay belly-down with twitching legs and whimpering breath, its back snapped like a rotten twig; a sweep of its sword-studded talons, and skin and flesh and pelage ripped away from staring bones. The creature seized a great wolf in its jaws and shook it as a cat might shake a mouse, then tossed the carcass by contemptuously and struck two more beasts from its path as it made for the wolf-thing that worried at de Grandin's throat. Then with a roar it sprang.

The wolf-man turned to flee. The great cat-monster held its stroke and watched him till he almost reached the tangle of the undergrowth, then leaped in a long arc and seized his flanks between its claws, dragging him to earth as though it were a tabby, he a luckless rat.

Then began a dreadful parody of cat-and-mouse play. The werewolf trailed a broken leg behind him, for the panther's mighty jaws had crushed his bones at its first onset, and at each fresh capture the black leopard gave him further hurt, now raking him from huckle-bone to rump, now clawing him across the shoulders, now wallowing him upon the frozen ground and slapping at him soft-clawed till the breath was almost beaten from his body. Then it would crouch, its tail atwitch, and watch him with inscrutable green eyes as he limped off to seek the shelter of a thicket, only to leap and drag him back each time he almost reached asylum.

It seemed a metamorphosis was working in the werewolf. When first the panther's torturing play began he was as much in form a wolf as any natural beast, but as cruel claws and ruthless fangs ripped quivering flesh from his tormented bones he seemed to take on semi-human shape. His paws appeared to lengthen into hands, his shoulders widened and his body straightened, so that while he was still cased in unkempt, matted fur, he was more like a man dight in a hairy garment than a wolf. And from the tortured mask of fur the terror-stricken features of von Wolfberg looked in hopeless fright.

Now the wolf-man found the semblance of a human voice. "Mercy!" he croaked hoarsely. "Have pity on my misery! Castle, followers, chattels, heritage, are all gone. Grant me but the boon of life! Let me drag my broken body to some sanctuary where I may repent my sins!"

Repentance! He had full measure of it now as the great panther sported with him. Otto of the Wolves' Hill, twelfth werewolf of his line, robber and tormenter of the helpless, now knew the pangs of torture. He who never yet had granted mercy to a man or child or woman prayed in vain for mercy. Craven at the last, he offered no resistance to the claws that ripped his shuddering flesh or the strong teeth that crushed his bones, but screamed and squealed and pled for pity more abjectly than the weakest victim of his wolf-lust ever begged.

At last the catamountain wearied of its play. It struck von Wolfberg's head with a great paw, then as he reeled in dizziness beneath the blow, seized his neck between its teeth and shook him till he hung limp as an empty glove.

De Grandin watched the pantomime of vengeance to its end. Around him on the turf there lay a ring of werewolves, some gasping out their lives with wheezing breath, some beginning to assume their human shapes, now that the spell of evil magic had been ended with their evil lives; all were smeared with blood and scarred with gaping wounds. Crouched on the lifeless form of Otto Wolfberg the great panther stared at him with green unwinking eyes. *"Mo' Dio,* Domna Cat," he complimented, "had thought myself a valiant dealer-out of death to evil-doers, but I must yield to thee. I know not who thou art nor whence thou comest, but I am very much beholden to thee."

The catamountain rose from Wolfberg's body, arched its back and stalked majestically into the wood.

"O Basta, my beloved, why could'st thou not have waited for a little?" moaned de Grandin. "Thou wotted not that succor was so near when——" He kicked a stiffening carcass from his way and bent to seek for Basta's body underneath a mound of furry corpses.

She was not there. His search grew frantic. Here and there, wherever corpses lay in groups, he hurried in his quest. "Basta! Basta!" he cried piteously. "O saints, grant I may find her!"

He heard a rustling in the pine copse at the clearing's rim. Perhaps she lived; perhaps she'd dragged herself into the underbrush to die. . . .

He forced the evergreens aside and halted with a gasp of sheer amazement. Seated cross-legged on the ground, Basta wove the tresses of her hair in plaits and bound them round her head.

7. *"We Be Fortune's Fools!"*

"FANTINA—*novia!*" he called, his eyes almost incredulous with happiness. "Is't truly thou, my love? Thou art not dead? Count Otto and his monstrous minions are no more, pursuit is at an end—the road lies open to our feet!" He bent to seize her in his arms, but she pushed him gently back.

"Unclean!" she warned. "Lay not your hand on me. I am unfit for Christian touch!"

"Who says it?" he demanded. "Who dares say that the flower——"

"The flower!" she burst in. "Aye, thou sayest—the flower! I sold my soul for vengeance. Now I pay the price, e'en though it breaks my heart in twain." The sudden unexpected laugh that broke her words clanged hard as coins rung on a money-changer's table. "Who cares?" she challenged. "Who cares what happens to

the soul of a slave-wench? Her body is the property of any two-legged beast that claims it; why should not Sathanas have her soul?"

"Nay, Basta, hear me," he entreated. "I jested not when I declared my love——"

"Let be!" her voice was thin drawn to the breaking-point. She dipped her hand into the pocket hanging from her girdle. "An thou'lt accept a gift from one whose soul is forfeit, take these in parting." She let a cataract of jewels flash through her fingers to the earth. "Yesternight thou named thyself a landless fugitive. These be the pick of Otto Wolfberg's treasure. I took them ere we fled. Take them with thee to rebuild thy fortunes; 'tis the ransom of a king——"

"What talk is this of parting?" he demanded. "Have I not said I love thee? Come, come thy ways, my love. The road is open to our feet, and there is none to say us nay. I know not where the nearest town may be, but sure there is a priest there who will——"

Her gesture halted him. "I am become as one of them," she told him, pointing to the clearing where the dead and dying werewolves lay.

"Sayest thou?"

"Indeed. Bethink thee: Upon the night we met I told thee that I sought a flower. It is a bloom of hell, and whoso eats of it straight shifts his shape into the beast he most resembles. Thereafter for three twelvemonths he must live in bestial form, with only little intervals of human shape. I found the flower not when I first sought it, but e'en now when the wolf-men came on us I saw it growing at my very feet. I knew the price required, but I paid it willingly that Otto Wolfberg and his followers might be destroyed. Farewell, my love, my heart, my very dearest . . ." Her voice broke on a choking note, as if her throat were stopped with sobs, and she dropped to hands and knees as if she sought some lost thing in the leaves.

"Basta, *carissima,*" he cried, "it boots not what your outward form may be, if so be that your heart inclines to me——"

Like one who flees quick death she scurried on all fours into the bracken. There was a thrashing in the conifers. Then the branches parted. A great black panther looked at him with moss-green eyes. For a long moment it stood there, regarding him unwinkingly. Then it turned and padded silently away into the whispering wood.

HE STOOPED and took a palmful from the pile of gems that glittered at his feet and let them trickle slowly through his outspread fingers. Emeralds . . . rubies . . . pearls.

Emeralds for the green of eyes that looked into his heart, rubies for her vivid lips, pearls for the white skin of her.

Rubies, pearls and emeralds. The ransom of a king she'd named them, soothly. With such gems as these he could buy houses, lands and goods and live like any lord. The King of Sicily offered refuge to the fleeing Provençals. He could live richly there for a long lifetime and not expend the tithe of that which glittered in his palm.

Yea, he could live wrapped in the arms of luxury. But his own arms would be empty.

One look he cast into the thicket where the panther disappeared, then raised his shoulders in a shrug. The Moorish sages had the right of it. No man could overcome his fate.

"Aye, we be Fortune's fools, we two," he murmured as he turned to seek his horse.

Untouched, the little pyramid of gems glowed like a fallen star against the brown leaf-mold.

Dust in the House

By DAVID H. KELLER

A weird mystery story about an old house that had been closed for a century, and the two skeletons that sat across the table from each other in that house

"IT IS a good thing for you that you happened to see our advertisement," commented the lawyer. "It means that the Hubler estate, worth at least several million, will go to you instead of being distributed among various charitable institutions of the city of New York."

The man seated on the other side of the table smiled. "It was rather singular that I just happened to see your advertisement in a Paris paper. I do not know how I happened to read it in a part of the paper I seldom look at. Of course I knew I belonged to the family, but I never bothered to look them up. Are you sure there are no other heirs?"

"None that we can be sure of. Of course the usual number of claimants; that was bound to occur, but all of them are fraudulent. There was one other genuine heir, the daughter of a great-uncle of yours. We know she was born; we do not know that she died; we simply cannot find her. We have satisfied all legal requirements in our search for her. If she does not appear in a week, the fortune is yours. Of course there are conditions but that only makes it more interesting. The whole affair is interesting. Think of it! A valuable estate tied up for one hundred years, meantime increasing in value simply because of the real estate connected with it. Our legal firm has cared for it all these hundred years, as a trust. And meantime the house has been unoccupied, unopened and unentered for all those years. It has often been painted on the outside and the roof repaired as needed, but no one has been inside since the windows were boarded shut and the front door locked by your great-grandfather.

"It seems that he locked the door and stayed near the house till the windows were boarded shut. Then he came to our law office, had this most peculiar will made, and then killed himself. His heirs were to enter the house at the end of the hundred years, spend one night in the dining-room and then divide the estate among them. Then the house was to be torn down, all the furniture burned, and the land sold."

The man smiled rather sourly. "One night alone in the house?" he asked.

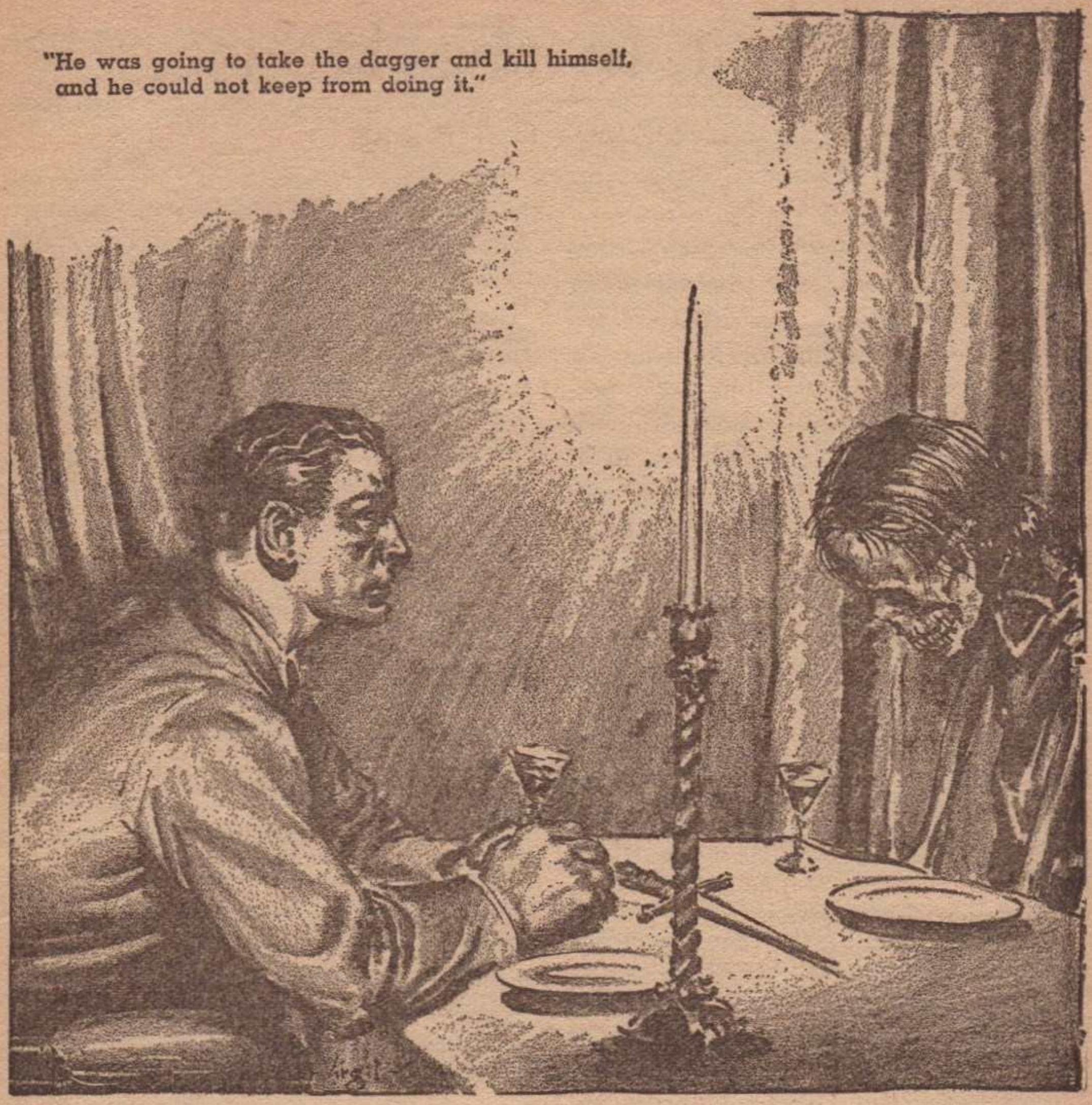
"Yes," replied the lawyer. "A representative of our firm is to go there with you, and see that you are escorted to the room. The next morning that man will call for you. Then legal application will be made for the dissolving of the trust and the closing of the estate."

"And I am the only heir?"

"Yes, except for this lost woman. As I told you, we know she was born. Her mother died and her father disappeared, taking the baby with him. And we have proof that he died, but where his daughter is we do not know. We have tried to find her, but failed."

"How old would she be if she were living?"

"He was going to take the dagger and kill himself, and he could not keep from doing it."



"About thirty years, if the birth certificate is correct."

"And her baptismal name?"

"Lilith Lamereaux."

The man drew himself forward in the chair as he said slowly, "Lilith Lamereaux! I knew a woman by that name; in fact, I knew her rather well. She tried to kill me several times."

"What happened to her?" asked the lawyer, rather sharply.

"I do not know. Perhaps I do not care. She passed out of my life. I would like to know what actually did happen to her. Of course she did not kill me, only tried to. The fact that I am here today talking to you is confirmation of the fact that she did not kill me. But I will give her credit for trying. Her attempts were intelligent and genuine. I am alive today because I outguessed her. Evidently she was one woman who became discouraged by repeated failures. At least she stopped trying and disappeared."

"A singular coincidence," mused the lawyer. "Of course there may have been two women by the same name; but the name is an odd one. We have been unable to find anyone of that name in America, and our advertisements in Eng-

land and the Continent have been unanswered. Of course we have no description of her; so it would be useless to have you tell us what your Lilith looked like."

"She was very beautiful," sighed the man.

"And evidently very dangerous," commented the lawyer. "But fortunately our firm has never interested itself in the criminal side of the law, and I can simply say that I have a human but not a professional interest in your story of triple escape from a potential murderess. Will you meet me at the front door of the house at five-thirty tonight? Better bring an overcoat, rubbers and something to eat and drink during the night."

"Rubbers?" asked the man. "I thought you said the roof had been kept in repair."

"It has. But the dust, man! Can you imagine a house unopened for a hundred years? Unopened, unaired, unentered, uncleaned? We cannot tell what state it is in."

"That is true. I will wear them, and bring along something to eat and a bottle of wine, and perhaps some candles. Of course there is neither gas nor electricity in the house."

"Of course not. The house has not been opened for a hundred years, and gas and electricity were unknown when it was occupied. I have often wondered just why it was to be occupied for one night and then torn down. Evidently some peculiar fancy on the part of your ancestor. And here is something interesting. He had two sons. One simply disappeared and the other lived on to keep the family alive. There is something that has always interested me. One son disappears, the father shuts the house, makes his will and kills himself. And now one hundred years later the only one of the family alive enters the house with a lawyer, and whatever mystery there is will be solved."

"And I suppose you will represent your firm tonight?"

"Absolutely. I grew up with this mystery as one of the most precious parts of our legal firm. In fact I think I would have died years ago. But I was determined to be there when the house was opened, and that kept me alive. I simply had to stay there in the office, as the oldest member of the firm, year by year waiting till I could enter the house. So I will be seeing you at five-thirty, and don't forget the rubbers."

"I will be there," answered the man. "And the more I think of it, the more determined I am to bring whisky instead of wine. I may need something like whisky before the night is over—to wash the dust down my throat."

PROMPTLY the two men met at the front door of the old house. The old lawyer, who evidently thought of everything, pulled a large key out of one pocket of his overcoat and a can of oil out of the other pocket.

"The lock may be rusty," he explained as he oiled the key and squirted some oil gravely into the keyhole. "A lock unused for a hundred years may be very rusty, but it was a good lock and a stout key, and with a little oil and patience we can open the door. Ah! I can feel it turn. Now you will excuse me if I pause and take a tablet of nitroglycerin. An anginal attack at this time would certainly spoil my pleasure."

He waited and then swung the front door open.

"We will wait a little while and then we will go in. I have two electric searchlights. You take one. Turn it on. Just as I expected! This front room is the parlor, with elegant draperies, furnishings and carpet. Look at the dust! Several inches

thick! Over everything! Look at the little waves in the dust where the winter winds blew through the cracks. Like the sand waves of the Sahara. I spent some weeks there as a young man. This parlor is a little Sahara. Suppose we go upstairs first and save the dining-room till the last. It should be back of the parlor. Excuse me, but I am going to tie a handkerchief over my nose. I would advise you to do the same. No telling what germs are in that dust. Of course it may be almost sterile, as most of the family you represent has been. Walk carefully up these steps. No matter how hard we try the dust will rise."

The two men wandered through the second floor of the old house, through long-deserted bedrooms, once gayly decorated.

" 'Life and love have gone away, leaving doors and windows wide; careless tenants they,' quoted the old man. "How appropriate! I never married, but I have always been a sentimentalist. What tales of love this house could tell, these furnishings relate, could they but talk!"

"I wish," said the young man sharply, "that I could ask you to stop quoting poetical nonsense. To me this is simply an old dirty house."

"But to me it is mystery, romance," countered the old man. "Well, at least there is nothing on the second floor, and above is the attic, which I can leave unexamined. And now for the dining-room."

"Yes. And twelve hours without your rambling poetry. Sorry," apologized the heir, "but I am really nervous, jittery, and all that sort of thing. Are you sure you cannot spend the night with me?"

"I could and I would like to, but if I did, the will would be broken and you would not receive a cent."

"But who would know?"

"We would, and honor to our law firm is the most priceless of our possessions."

THEY went down the broad stairway and through the parlor. There was only one door at the back of the room and that was closed. The lawyer opened the door and announced,

"This must be the dining-room."

They turned their flashlights on the open doorway. And then the young man almost gasped,

"No dust!"

"Correct!" agreed the lawyer. "No dust. Spotlessly clean. I would suggest that we take off our rubbers. It would be a shame to spoil the spotless waxed floor. And now the mystery hangs over us as the dust hangs over the rest of the house. Do you see what I see? A mahogany table in the center of the room. Two empty candlesticks on the table. Two plates and two glasses. And three chairs. In one chair there is something that may have once been a woman. At least the remnants of a woman's clothes cover the dried skin and bones of one long dead. She must have been tied to the chair before — or after — she died. Don't move. Let us think about this first. Across the table are two chairs. One is empty. The other chair holds something long dead, and from the general appearance that was once a man. There is a cane on the floor, a gold-headed cane. See how the gold shines? As though it had been recently polished. Look at the oil paintings on the wall, and the sideboard with its shining glass. The candlesticks are of silver and they glisten as I throw my light on them. Excuse me. This calls for another tablet of nitroglycerin. I would not have missed this for anything. I am glad I lived to see it. And now suppose we walk through the room and open the door on the other side. — The mystery deepens. There is

the kitchen, and it is as dusty as the rest of the house. Well, whatever the explanation is, you will have to tell me in the morning. The will states that the heirs must spend the night here; twelve hours from six to six. Of course the old man probably thought there would be more than one heir."

The heir took a package of sandwiches out of his pocket, wrapped them and placed them slowly on one of the plates. On one side of the table he placed his quart of whisky. Then he placed two candles in the candlesticks and carefully sat down in the empty chair, and turned to the old lawyer.

"You said the house had been unopened for a hundred years."

"That is what I said."

"You said no one had been here."

"I was sure of it."

"Yet you see this room?"

"I do. I have seen everything in it. This dead man and this dead woman seem to have sat here for a hundred years. Since I opened the door I have asked myself a hundred questions and none of them has an answer. Now I will ask one more. See that dead man? Over his long-dried and dusty heart there is still the handle of a dagger. He was killed with the dagger and it was never withdrawn. Now I will take that dagger and withdraw it. The blade should be almost gone. But look at it! Long, the steel polished, the point like a needle. Answer that. Did this piece of steel kill this man? Or has the steel been replaced by a new blade? Or was this dagger the one that killed? I will place it on the table. The ivory handle is yellow with age, but it is clean. You see it is a very unusual handle; an artistically carved body of a nude woman. Well, if I keep on thinking about this I shall have to take another tablet of nitroglycerin. I will leave you with the two candles burning, and at six in the morning I will unlock the front door and bid you good-morning. And now good-night. I cannot say 'pleasant dreams,' for I think that you will not sleep."

The young man opened the bottle of whisky, and took four fingers full.

"You will find me here, you Ancient Mariner, and inside me you will find the quart of whisky. I should have had two quarts. If there was much less than a million at stake I would go with you and let the sick and the motherless of the city have the old man's money and be damned to him. But a man will do a lot for money. Good-bye. I will answer some of your questions in the morning."

The old lawyer left and shut the door. Then the front door creaked shut on its rusty hinges. The heir took another drink and wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand.

"I will drink some," he whispered to himself, "and then I will try to solve this mystery. Of course someone has been here. These dead bags of skin and bones did not wax the floor and dust the table and polish these candlesticks. And that dagger. It seems to me that I have seen that somewhere before. Perhaps another drink will clear my brain."

MINUTES passed, and hours. At eleven he looked at his watch and started to eat the sandwiches. Meantime the bottle was rapidly being emptied. And then came midnight.

He started to laugh. "If anything was going to happen it would have happened by now," he whispered to himself. "So, as nothing has happened, nothing will happen. I will empty the bottle in one last, long drink and go to sleep for the rest of the night. I thought for a while—but that was simply silly—to think of that. I never saw that dagger before. I know that I never have seen it before. I

simply saw something that looked like it; but this one, no! I am going to keep on telling myself that I never saw it before and at last I will believe it."

He emptied the bottle. And then he must have slept.

Waking with a start, he looked at his watch. He held it to his ear, and cried, "It stopped! I must have forgotten to wind it. It stopped at midnight and I never knew it. And now I do not know what time it is. I may have to wait only a few minutes or hours or an eternity till the lawyer comes for me. If only I knew what time it was I would be happier. How long was I asleep? How long must I stay awake?"

And then he heard a tap, tap, tap, tap, little heels walking on a wooden floor, drawing nearer, more distinct; little heels tapping in mincing steps on a clean wooden floor. They sank noiseless in the thick dust of the house, and all the house was covered with thick carpeting of century-old dust except this room. His head whirled; he shut his eyes and shook his head to clear it. And then he opened his eyelids and there was a woman walking toward the table. She was dressed in flounces and furbelows, hair-ribbons, pantofles and jewelry of the past century. In one hand she carried a candlestick with lighted taper, in the other hand a bottle of wine. She placed them both on the table.

And then she took a handkerchief and started to dust the table and the pictures and the glasses. She went around the room like a little wren, making the place spotless, and all was quiet save for the tap-tap-tap of her little heels on the waxed and spotless wooden floor. Finally she replaced the half-burned candles with new ones. She poured two glasses of wine and silently placed one in front of the man.

"Well," she said finally, "how very, very odd to find *you* here! Who would have thought that you would be here? And why did you come? For the two million, I suppose. I might have known it. You were always so anxious to do anything for money. And now that you are here, and I am here, shall we drink to each other as we did in the past? You will recall the wine and the vintage. Or have you had too much whisky to recall anything? That was the trouble with you. You would have been a fine man and a faithful lover, only you had to drink too much at the wrong time. Drain the glass. You need it. But I will not drink mine, for you may need all in the bottle to keep your brain going till morning."

He picked the glass up and slowly drained it, and then started to laugh.

"Think of you being here!" he sneered. "I might have known it. Whenever there was any deviltry you were somehow at the bottom of it. But I am going to be rich now, and I will give you half of it if you go away and leave me here till the morning. You give me your name and address and I promise you that I will give you half of it. Come on, be a good girl and get out."

She simply laughed at him. "You have not changed at all," she said, "and you still think that all a woman thinks of is money. Drink another glass of the wine. It is perfect. Do you remember when we drank this same wine in the little patio in northern Italy?"

"I remember very well. That was the third time."

"And I told you there would be one more time and then I left you, and now you meet me here. How appropriate! I sent you the newspaper with the advertisement in it; I knew that would bring you back to America. And of course I knew about the will. I could have had half the estate had I been willing to disclose my identity. I did not care for the

money. It was something more than wealth I wanted. Drink the wine, past lover of mine, drink the wine."

HE DID as she ordered. It seemed that he had lost all power of self-control. He had to do as she told him. There were anger and hatred in his eyes, but there was also terror. He tried to rise from the chair. He wanted to scream for help. He thought of falling to his knees and crying for mercy. Instead he simply sat still and looked at Lilith Lamereaux.

She picked up the thing on the chair near him and walked away. She was in back of him and she simply vanished, tap-tap-tapping on the waxed, polished, dustless floor. He wanted to turn around and see where she had gone, but instead he simply kept looking at the burning candles. Then he heard the tap-tap-tapping of her little heels and there she was back again, arranging the plates on the table, one in front of him and one in front of the dead woman on the other side of the table. She arranged the glasses and the bottles and wiped a speck of crumb and a drop of the wine off the polished table.

"I always like to have things neat," she commented, with her little bird-like laugh. "You know I always was neat. My soul was so clean till I met you some years ago. And now I am going to take this dagger and carefully wipe all the finger prints off the handle and put it cautiously on the table in front of you. I will not try to use it on you again. I tried three times and failed, so why should I try again? But—take another glass of the wine—empty the bottle—that is good; it is like old times to see you drinking. You always thought such curious thoughts when you were drunk — and you are drunk now. In fact you are very drunk. And you are wondering if this is not a hundred years ago. Can you do that? There are two of you at the table drinking. And in desperation the little lady kills you, and then perhaps she poisons herself.

"The father comes in and finds you both dead. Perhaps he blames himself. At least he leaves you there and locks the house. Now the poor little lady is dead; so she cannot kill you again, but you could kill yourself. How easy it would be for you to kill yourself! And if they examined the dagger for finger prints they would find there your finger prints. It would be suicide; they certainly could not blame this poor dried-up lady tied so carefully to the chair and seated across the table from you.

"And you have wanted to kill yourself so often. Keep that thought—you wanted to kill yourself so often. And now with the whisky and the wine and the perfect stage-setting and your memories of how you treated me, it should be so easy for you to do so. All you have to do is to take the dagger and plunge it into your heart. I will tie you to the chair so you will not drop over—after you are dead. And all the money will go to poor people who need it; to little children who have no parents. It will be the only act of kindness you ever thought of doing in your life; it will even atone for the way you treated me. Go ahead and do it; in fact, after I leave you, you cannot help yourself."

She walked in back of him and he could hear the tap-tap-tapping of her little heels on the waxed and polished and dustless floor. He looked at the candles burning with steady flame in the silent room. It was too silent. He thought he could hear his heart beating, or was it the tap-tap-tap of her little heels pounding his life away? No! It was her heels. She was in back of him. She was passing a sheet around his body, tying him in the chair so that he would not fall to the

floor when he died. She stroked his hair, and she dropped a kiss on his hair and she whispered that she was sorry that he was going to do what he was going to do because they might have been happy if things had been different, and now he should listen to her little heels tap-tap-tapping out of the room and out of his life because he was going to take the dagger and kill himself and he could not keep from doing it if he kept looking at the candles and thinking of Lilith Lamereaux and the past years when he might have been happy if he had been different.

And then tap-tap-tap and she was gone. And he was alone.

Across the table the woman dead a hundred years looked at him, and it seemed that she smiled and urged him to be a man at last and not be afraid, because it was not such a hard thing to be dead, if there was love, even a dead love in your life. And the more he looked at her and at the two candles the more he knew that he had to kill himself, and the more sure he was that he would kill himself. The woman across the table seemed to change to Lilith, and there was the tappity-tap-tappity-tap of his heart and the tap-tap-tap of her heels on the floor—or was she tapping on the table with her polished finger nails? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears and everything was beating rhythmically to the tune of the tap-tap-tap, and words came and kept time with the music in his ears, and he heard her say again and again, "You have to kill yourself—you have to kill yourself—tap-tap-tappity-tap-tap—*you have to kill yourself.*" Little white drops of sweat came out on his face, and slowly, very slowly, he reached for the dagger and with clenched hand did the thing he had to do.

Two weeks later the old lawyer sat alone in his office. Now and then he reached in his pocket, took out his little bottle and placed a tablet of nitroglycerin carefully under his tongue. He was trying to think, and his thoughts did not make any sense. His stenographer brought in a card. He glanced at it, took another tablet and simply said,

"Have her come in."

In came a little lady, beautifully dressed in black. Her little heels tap-tapped on the bare floor.

"Please do not say a word till I am through," urged the lawyer. "Where have you been, and why did you fail to answer our advertisements? Don't you know it cost you nearly two million? If you know me now, you knew me then and knew about the will. And where were you that night? Let me tell you something. I took your cousin to that house and left him there. There were two bodies there, tied to chairs around the center table, and I left him there in the third chair. The room was spotless; there was no dust. I was afraid; so the next morning I brought a witness with me, the very best detective I could find, and when we entered that dining-room there was only one dried body there, that of the woman. The other body was gone. And your cousin was dead. He had been killed with the dagger that I found in the room, and the detective took finger prints of the dead man and the dagger and he says that the man killed himself. And it does not make sense; and where is the other body, and where were you that night? I will tell you in confidence that the dead man was afraid of you. He said that you had tried three times to kill him, and now everything points to the fact that he got drunk and killed himself. But why was the room so clean?

"Of course there is nothing I can do

now, and perhaps it is just as well that he died when he did, because he was not worth much anyway, but how about me? Here I have waited all these years to find out about the house and its mystery, and instead of finding out anything there is simply more mystery. Won't you please tell me what happened? Or don't you know? And did you really try to kill him three times and did he really kill himself?"

"You poor dear man," cooed the little lady. "You know I heard that you were worrying yourself sick; so I just simply had to see you before I left for Europe. Now I tell you what to do. You are to have the house torn down. When they tear down the dining-room you be there, sort of puttering around aimlessly, and you will see them tear into the wall by the fireplace and there you will find a passageway to the house next door. And in that passageway you will find the man who was dead for a hundred years, or what is left of him and his clothes.

"Then you will find that the house next door is empty but it was rented by a lady named Susan Smith, but she has moved because she is going to Europe tomorrow. And of course I read the will and I knew that the dining-room was going to be used, and I simply detest dust and dirt; so of course the room had to be cleaned, but I had lots of time, and it was a beautiful room when everything was dustless and polished. I even patched up the clothing of those two poor dear dead things, and when you and the man walked in I was really proud of how nice everything looked.

"I did not want the money and I am not sure that I wanted my cousin to die. I am sure that I did not want to kill him. In fact, I tried to forget; but I guess I went too far and suggested something to him, and so that is the way it goes in life when men are not kind to women who love them. And he must have killed himself. I was not at all sure he would, but when I read about it in the papers, I knew he had.

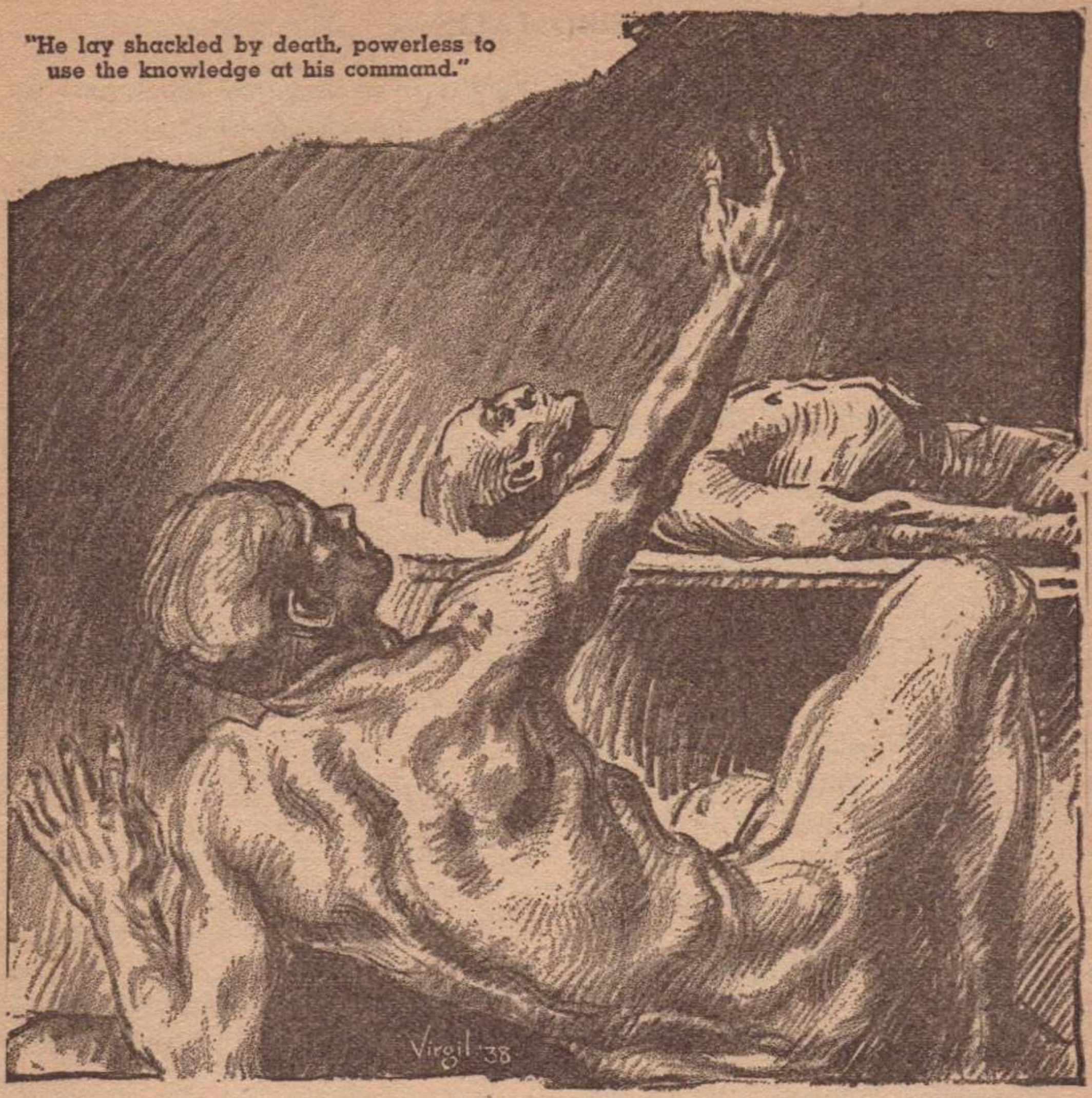
"And now I have one question to ask you. I am going to hold your hand when you answer it, because I want you to be very careful to give me the right answer. Perhaps you had better take one of those silly little pills first. Your stenographer said to me, 'Good God! Are you Lilith Lamereaux? The old Boss will sure have to take a pill when he hears you are here!' So take your silly little pill and hold my hand and look me in the eye and tell me. Do I look like a woman who would murder a man? Or do I look like a little wren who just loves to tap-tap-tappity-tap through life with her high heels lightly pounding beautiful waxed dustless floors?"

The old lawyer took a deep breath.

"I don't know, Lilith. I really don't know. But I do know that if I were thirty years younger I would go to Europe with you tomorrow even though I was sure that on the third day out you would toss my dead body to the fishes."

"You are a dear," she laughed, and gayly tapped her way out of the office and out of his life.

"He lay shackled by death, powerless to use the knowledge at his command."



The Defense Rests

By JULIUS LONG

The weird story of a heartless criminal lawyer who nevertheless wanted to acquit his own murderer

JASON SANDERS sat impassively while the twelve jurors filed importantly into the box. Out of the corner of his wizened little eyes he regarded with derisive contempt the perspiring individual who cowered beside him. The individual perspired because upon the verdict of the jury hinged his life. He cowered because he was guilty. Jason Sanders enjoyed a mental laugh. It was a foregone conclusion that his client would not fry in the electric chair. No jury had ever sentenced a man to death in a scant half-hour. So a pleasant sense

of triumph was delightfully intermingled with Jason Sanders' enjoyment of his client's anxiety.

Crowded in the doorway nearest the telephones were a group of newspaper men ready to turn and run at a moment's notice. They watched Jason Sanders.

"He doesn't give a damn," whispered one.

"He knows damn' well what it's going to be," said another.

"He doesn't care—he's been paid," was the significant statement of a third, under whose dissipated eyes bulged pockets of cynicism.

The jurymen subsided heavily into their chairs, and the room became soundless save for a few whispers of the newspaper men. A bailiff eyed them ominously, and they quieted. All eyes were now turned on the foreman of the jury.

The judge eyed the foreman wearily.

"Gentlemen, have you reached a verdict?"

The foreman rose. "Yes, Your Honor we have."

"You may hand it to the clerk."

The foreman produced a folded sheet of paper and proffered it to the clerk, who carried it to the bench. The judge accepted the sheet, glanced over it, frowned and returned it to the clerk.

"The defendant will rise while the clerk reads the verdict of the jury."

His cheeks streaming with perspiration, the defendant rose. The clerk cleared his throat and began to read in an unpleasant tenor.

"We, the jury, being duly impaneled and sworn, do find the defendant, Louis Padullo, not guilty as charged in the indictment."

The clerk folded the sheet and gave it to an assistant. The judge threw up his hands and discharged the jury.

THE freed man sank limply into his chair. Sanders stood up, straightened his tie and gazed across the room at Roberts, the district attorney, who sat immobile, his reddened face in his hands. Beside him sat a pallid, sickly youth, who glared at Sanders with burning eyes. Sanders shrugged and moved away.

"Better luck next time," he called to Roberts.

Roberts sprang to his feet, reached Sanders in three long strides and shook his finger under his nose.

"Sanders," he exploded, "I want to tell you that in all my years at the bar I've never seen such palpably manufactured evidence, so many paid perjurers in one case!"

"It is so nice," cooed Sanders, "to know that your experience has been broadened."

"Sanders," Roberts fairly shouted, "you are a disgrace to the bar!"

"I'm not a poor loser," returned Sanders icily.

Roberts seemed about to hurl another denunciation, then he stopped short and said in a deliberate, even tone:

"Let me tell you something, Sanders. There will be one murderer you won't get off, and that will be your own! Mark my words."

Sanders dropped his mask of indifference and eyed the district attorney interestedly.

"Is that a threat?"

"No. I'm simply telling you. Some day, somewhere, someone is going to give you your just deserts. And whoever it is, you won't be there to defend him."

Sanders stared quizzically into Roberts' eyes, then laughed in his face and sauntered away.

"He's probably right," he muttered under his breath, "and that's one case I can't win."

THE newspaper men ganged him. He was photographed—alone. His client was forgotten. He rather enjoyed having his picture in the papers. He made a good picture, looked precisely what a great criminal lawyer is supposed to look like. He was fifty, and he showed it, but not a few of the youthful reporters about him would have given up their youth for that distinguished countenance. Such a man as Sanders would have to be very shrewd to live up to his face.

"A statement to the press, Mr. Sanders?"

The newspaper men fawned. Sanders' brow wrinkled slightly as he drew upon the reservoir of his memory for another of his well rehearsed bits of impromptu wit.

"My distinguished opponent, District Attorney Roberts," he said lightly, "has hinted rather bluntly that in the conduct of this case I have not had justice on my side. You may say to the imbeciles who read your newspapers that any man may go ahead when he is sure he is right, but it takes a good lawyer to go ahead when he's sure he's wrong."

With that off his chest, Jason Sanders walked away.

The several persons who made obsequious way for him as he entered the elevator strained their ears to make out his mumbling. They failed. They would doubtless have succeeded had they been close by when District Attorney Roberts announced so heatedly: "There will be one murderer you won't get off, and that will be your own!" For it was this that Jason Sanders repeated as he rode downstairs.

Outside, his chauffeur awaited him, smiling broadly. The chauffeur shared vicariously the celebrity of his employer and felt a personal triumph in this latest victory.

"Great goin', boss!"

Sanders tried deperately not to show his pleasure at this very sincere flattery. It irked him to know that he was really fond of this big fellow. All his life he had tried to care as little about as few people as possible. Whenever he began to love his fellow men he knew he was drunk and went home to bed. Nevertheless he beamed. He would have to give the chauffeur an extra day off.

He had placed one foot on the running-board of his limousine when he felt a hand upon his sleeve. He turned quickly with annoyance.

His features relaxed with recognition. The thin, tapering fingers that clutched his arm were those of the sallow, sickly youth who had sat all through the trial with the district attorney.

"Hello, Costello," said Sanders patiently. "What can I do for you?"

Costello did not answer. He withdrew his hand and thrust it into an outside coat pocket. When it was withdrawn it contained a small single-shot pistol of foreign make. The little barrel was pointed directly at Sanders' heart.

With his arm Sanders carelessly restrained his chauffeur, who had made a vigorous movement forward.

"Here, here, Costello!" he said indulgently. "This is no way for you to behave! I've only done my duty for my client. You say he killed your sister. The jury has just said he didn't. That's that. So put away that toy pistol and shake hands."

Costello's lips quivered slightly as he watched Sanders extend his hand. Then he shot Sanders through the heart.

LYING alone in that strange room, Sanders was in a panic. How long he had been there he did not know. He had awakened a few minutes ago and tried to sit up. But he had been unable to do so. At first he had not been seriously per-

turbed. No doubt he was still numb with sleep. Within a few moments all his muscles would be thoroughly awake, and he would be able to rise.

But seconds accumulated into minutes, and Sanders rapidly lost his confidence. Obviously something very strange was the matter with him. He had never been like this before. His head was perfectly clear. Yet his body remained numb, and his muscles would not respond to his commands.

He had stared at one particular spot of ceiling many minutes before he became aware that he could stare at that spot and no other. He could not, try as he might, change the focus of his eyes. He could not even flicker his eyelashes. He must lie there, immobile, staring fixedly at that one spot of strange ceiling.

Realization of this drove him into a rage. No prisoner bound fast by his most hated enemy could have been more angered by his predicament.

Then, after a few seconds of this futile rage, Sanders controlled himself, called his reason to his rescue. He began to think, to trace his movements backward.

A blinding flash. A sallow, sickly face. "So put away that toy" . . . "Ive only done my duty" . . . "Here, here, Costello!"

So he had been shot! That little fool, Costello, had really fired that tiny pistol. Sanders would have laughed, only his frozen muscles would not evoke laughter. He felt not the least anger toward Costello. Being quite without a sense of justice, he had no excuse to bear malice.

He forgot Costello at once, thought only of his present disconcerting state. Obviously the bullet from Costello's little gun had struck a vital spot in his nervous system and left him paralyzed. Despair staggered him. Would he be like this always, a paralytic charge? Perhaps not. Maybe he was only temporarily stunned. But he must know the truth at once.

Certainly there was a doctor or a nurse close by, for this strange room must be the room of a hospital. So Sanders decided at once to call out.

But his lips did not move. His tongue lay immobile in his mouth. Again he became enraged. How was he to let anyone know that he had returned to consciousness? Why was no one about to look after him? A fine hospital this! Didn't the staff know any better than to leave alone a man so critically injured?

Again and again, he tried to utter a cry for help. If only he could move his lips ever so little! But they were numb, incapable of motion. He could only lie there and wait.

HE DID not have to wait long. Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and voices murmured. Probably a doctor and a nurse, Sanders decided. For a moment he endured agony, fearful lest they would go by the door of his room. Heaven be thanked! They were coming in.

But the two who had entered did not approach him. They crossed the room and halted. Sanders tried to face them, but his neck remained rigid, his eyes refused to remove their focus from that spot of ceiling. He heard a familiar rasping. One of the newcomers was dialing a number at the telephone close by.

"Hello," said a coldly professional voice. "This is Doctor Asman. We're all through now, and you can come for the body any time. It's in the general receiving room, third from the left." A pause. "Very good. Either Gowans or I will be here—probably both."

The receiver clattered in the hook.

Sanders was puzzled. He knew Doctor Asman well. Asman was superintendent of the city morgue.

"Shouldn't we close his eyes?" asked a second voice.

Sanders knew that voice, too. It was the voice of young Gowans, Asman's assistant.

"It makes no difference," Asman replied. "The undertaker will take care of that when he comes."

"But," insisted Gowans, "rigor mortis might set in by that time."

"*I don't think so. He's been here* only two hours. The undertaker will arrive within an hour. There's plenty of time."

"Maybe, but Sanders had worked hard all day. When a man talks a jury out of burning a rat like Padullo, he uses up a lot of energy. And such enervation would bring on rigor mortis plenty fast."

"Well, let's have a look at him."

The two men approached.

Sanders lay dazed. He wasn't in a hospital. He was in the morgue. And these men thought he was dead!

He, Sanders, dead? Impossible! He must show them that he was alive. Anything would do—the flutter of an eyelash, the twitching of his fingers—anything. In a panic he exerted all his will to make some small movement. He tried to form words with his lips, to double his fingers. But this was quite impossible —it was as if he had forgotten how to move.

He had a picture of himself lying there —naked, of course. So many times he had come here to look indifferently at the white bodies of the victims of the murderers he had been employed to defend. This thought, at the same time horrifying, was in one respect encouraging. Any movement that he might make would be noticed. He tried again. This time he would move his toes—certainly it would not be asking too much, just to wiggle his toes. Yet they did not move. Sanders struggled now, not to convince Asman and Gowans that he was alive, but to convince himself.

The two physicians were feeling of his body now. He could not feel their hands, but he could catch part of their movements as they came within the range of his eyes. Now Asman was chucking him under the chin.

"See how readily his mouth closes? Look at this."

And Sanders' gaze swept the ceiling and came to rest on a shrouded figure close by as his head was turned. He could catch a glimpse of another white object beyond. "Third from the left." That was he, Sanders. He pictured himself as he must be, lying there, one member of a row of corpses. One of the corpses? Sanders was now taking this for granted.

"I'll admit he's in pretty good shape right now, but you wait a few minutes. I've seen it happen too often. When a man's as mentally and physically exhausted as Sanders was when he was killed, rigor mortis is bound to come fast —and violently."

"But not that fast. The undertaker will be here in plenty of time. He should congratulate himself on this job. Very neat; no mess. Did you ever see a cleaner hole? Right through the heart. Sanders was dead before he hit the ground."

"Yes. He still looks surprized."

"Even so, his face is still intelligent. A wonderful brain there, strong, wilful."

"Yes," conceded Gowans, "but it doesn't mean a thing now. He'll never have another murderer acquitted. He's fooled his last jury."

Asman sighed.

"The Costello boy killed the only lawyer in town who could get him off. I understand he's hired Billy Williams to defend him. Well, Billy's a bright young fellow, but he's no Jason Sanders."

"I'm afraid not. You know, I'd kind of like to see the Costello kid get off. If

the newspaper stories are true, he didn't kill Sanders for having Padullo acquitted, but because of the mud he threw at his sister during the trial."

"Well, that's all in the game. The only way Sanders could get Padullo a Chinaman's chance was to make the jury lose sympathy for the girl. When they found out she was ten times as bad as the man that murdered her, they didn't feel a grudge against him."

"But was she?"

"Probably not. The Costello kid says all the evidence against her character was trumped up. He worshipped the girl, thought she was an angel. So he plugged Sanders."

"And now he'll burn for it."

"I suppose. Still, if Billy Williams can prove that Sanders' witnesses perjured themselves to ruin the girl's name, no jury in the world would convict the boy."

"But how's he going to do it? Sanders was no fool. He wasn't the kind to leave loose ends for the grievance committee of the bar association to pick up. He'd played this game a hundred times before. He once told me that a murderer had one foot out of his cell when it could be shown that he was no worse than his victim. Said that was always the first thing he tried to do."

"There's something in what you say," conceded Asman. "Take this case, now. D'you know what Sanders would do if he was defending Costello? He'd dig up a lot of witnesses that would convince a jury that he—Sanders, I mean—deserved killing. He'd show how he'd coached all his witnesses in the Padullo case to lie on the stand. There must be somebody somewhere who could tell the truth—but only Sanders knows where."

"Well," said Gowans with a chuckle, "you can't expect Sanders to get his own murderer off."

"No," Asman agreed. "That's a little too much even for Sanders. Well, let's get out of here. We've got work to do."

Asman started away. Before Gowans left he moved surreptitiously toward Sanders. Suddenly Sanders saw no more. Gowans had closed his eyes. Then both Asman and Gowans were gone.

SANDERS made no effort to call after them. He understood the futility of that now. He was dead. A realist, he could no longer hope. He could only lie there and think.

The whole content of his thinking was strangely reoriented. All his life his thought had been focused exclusively on himself. Absolute, unqualified selfishness—that was his ethics. If he inadvertently committed an unselfish act, that was cause for remorse, for an aching conscience. That was weakness, inexcusable weakness. On this ethical basis he had lived all the mature years of his life.

But Jason Sanders was gone now, dead. No longer could he scheme cunningly for his personal advancement. His little ambitions struck him as trifling, utterly unimportant. He found it impossible to think of Jason Sanders save in the third person, objectively and impersonally. He was merely one of many faces that crowded his memory.

Of these faces only one stood out clearly, in bold relief. That was the sallow face of the boy, Costello. And he was inclined to think kindly of Costello, pityingly. The youth had been a fool. He had committed his crime openly in the sight of many men. He had killed to avenge a wrong, and for that he was to die.

The two physicians had reasoned well. Despite the legal talents of Billy Williams, he could not hope to untangle the maze of perjury that had successfully blasted the reputation of Maria Costello. It was true that there existed a key wit-

ness who could conclusively prove this perjury, but only he, Sanders, knew his name or where to find him. Place him on the stand, and the world would know to what inexcusable lengths Sanders had gone to save his client. The last shred of sympathy for him would be gone. But only Sanders could locate this witness, and he was dead.

As from the dim and remote past he recalled the gloating words of the district attorney, Roberts: "There will be one murderer you won't get off, and that will be your own!" And Jason Sanders would gladly have sacrificed all his famous courtroom triumphs if only he could gain the acquittal of Costello, his murderer.

This, he reflected bitterly, would be a very simple thing to do—if he were alive. But he lay shackled by death, powerless to use the knowledge at his command. Mechanically he planned the conduct of the case for the defense. He marshaled his facts, formulated his questions, summoned witnesses available only to himself. At length the horrible irony of the situation weighed unendurably upon him and caused him to end this futile planning.

If only he could somehow communicate with Billy Williams, give him a few names and addresses! Given this information, Williams' whole case would unfold of itself and lie snugly in his lap. . . . The telephone close by. If only——

Then it happened, quickly and without warning. Sanders was quite unprepared. It seemed that the chains which had held him were smashed into bits. He bounded from the table, staggered on his feet. His eyes burst open, stared at the telephone on the wall. Without an instant's hesitancy he lunged forward and clasped the mouthpiece of the phone. Impelled by one fixed idea, he jerked the receiver from the hook, began frantically to dial.

DOCTOR ASMAN stared at Billy Williams with perplexity.

"I'm sure you must be mistaken. Gowans and I have been right beside this phone for the last three-quarters of an hour. I assure you that we haven't once touched it. And no one has been inside this office except ourselves."

Williams shrugged. "But I tell you I had the call traced. Whoever called left the receiver off the hook, and tracing was easy. They told me at the exchange that the call was made at the city morgue."

Both Asman and Gowans gave Williams a deprecating look.

"After all, was the call so important?"

"I don't know yet. Whoever called gave me a whole list of names and addresses. I took them down just in case. I'd just been hired to defend Costello, you know, and I had a hunch this had something to do with it."

"You didn't recognize the voice?"

"No. Never heard a voice even remotely like it."

The three men sat silently, puzzled. Gowans suddenly looked up at his superior.

"Say, what about that phone in the receiving-room?"

Asman cut him off short. "Nonsense. I've had my eye on that room ever since we left it. I've been on the lookout for the undertaker."

Williams looked interested. "Is that the only other phone in the place?"

Both Asman and Gowans nodded. The next instant they froze in their chairs as a horrible, weird wailing sounded throughout the morgue. Williams bounded to his feet.

"My God! What's that?"

Asman and Gowans rose shakily. The wailing, which continued as loud and as terrifying as ever, came from the receiving-room.

"Come on," snapped Asman, and he walked stolidly from the office. Shakily Gowans and Williams followed at his heels.

The three men halted in the doorway of the receiving-room. Slowly their glazed eyes lost their fear, and their tense features relaxed into a grin. The weird wailing, which still continued, came from the receiver of the telephone. The exchange had put on the howler to give warning that the receiver was off the hook.

Gowans stepped quickly forward, then stopped short, uttering an exclamation. He turned to Asman and pointed at the thing at his feet.

"See! I told you so! Rigor mortis! I told you it would be premature—and violent. See—Sanders jumped clear off the table and almost to the phone. I wonder what——"

He stared at the receiver, which hung suspended from its cord.

Billy Williams, too, was staring at the receiver and at the doubled figure of Jason Sanders on the floor. Suddenly he turned on his heel and walked briskly outside to his car. He had to find out about those names and addresses at once. It couldn't be, but——

The Messenger

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

The Thing, he said, would come that night at three
From the old churchyard on the hill below;
But crouching by an oak fire's wholesome glow,
I tried to tell myself it could not be.
Surely, I mused, it was a pleasantry
Devised by one who did not truly know
The Elder Sign, bequeathed from long ago,
That sets the fumbling forms of darkness free.
He had not meant it—no—but still I lit
Another lamp as starry Leo climbed
Out of the Seekonk, and a steeple chimed
Three—and the firelight faded, bit by bit.
Then at the door that cautious rattling came—
And the mad truth devoured me like a flame!

The Black Drama

By GANS T. FIELD

A strange weird story about the eery personality known as Verduk, who claimed descent from Lord Byron, and the hideous doom that stalked in his wake

The Story So Far

GILBERT CONNATT, the narrator, once a motion picture idol but now penniless, is persuaded by Jake Switz, kindly utility man of the theatrical world, to accept a rôle in the play *Ruthven,* opposite Sigrid Holgar, Connatt's ex-sweetheart, who since her break with Connatt has become a glamorous film favorite. The play is being produced by Varduk, mysterious new genius of the theater. Other players will include

This story began in WEIRD TALES for June

Elmo Davidson, Varduk's Man Friday, and Martha Vining, character actress.

Ruthven is announced as the lost vampire-demon drama of Lord Byron, and its authenticity is vouched for by Judge Keith Pursuivant, antiquary and occultist, who is convinced that the writing is genuinely Byron's, therefore more than a century old; however, he tells Connatt that the paper on which the play is written was watermarked less than ten years previously.

The play is to open in July at the Lake Jozgid Summer Theater, among upstate New York forests. Connatt arrives, accompanied by Judge Pursuivant, who is vacationing near by. Jake, meeting Connatt, tells a disquieting story of how he and Sigrid were attacked and almost overcome at night by strange, half-defined shapes.

The story continues:

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6. *The Theater in the Forest*

JAKE'S narrative did not give me cheerful expectations of the Lake Jozgid Theater. It was just as well, for my first glimpse of the place convinced me that it was the exact setting for a play of morbid unreality.

The road beyond Pursuivant's cabin was narrow but not too bad. Jake, driving nimbly over its sanded surface, told me that we might thank the public works program for its good condition. In one or two places, as I think I have said already, the way was cut deeply between knolls or bluffs, and here it was gloomy and almost sunless. Too, the woods thickened to right and left, with taller and taller ranks of trees at the roadside. Springtime's leafage made the trees seem vigorous, but not exactly cheerful; I fancied that they were endowed with intelligence and the power of motion, and that they awaited only our passing before they moved out to block the open way behind us.

From this sand-surfaced road there branched eventually a second, and even narrower and darker, that dipped down a thickly timbered slope. We took a rather difficult curve at the bottom and came out almost upon the shore of the lake, with the old lodge and its outbuildings in plain view.

These structures were in the best of repair, but appeared intensely dark and weathered, as though the afternoon sky shed a brownish light upon them. The lodge that was now the theater stood clear in the center of the sizable cleared space, although lush-looking clumps and belts of evergreen scrub grew almost against the sheds and the boathouse. I was enough of an observer to be aware that the deep roofs were of stout ax-cut shingles, and that the heavy timbers of the walls were undoubtedly seasoned for an age. The windows were large but deep-set in their sturdy frames. Those who call windows the eyes of a house would have thought that these eyes were large enough, but well able to conceal the secrets and feelings within.

As we emerged from the car, I felt rather than saw an onlooker. Varduk stood in the wide front door of the lodge building. Neither Jake nor I could agree later whether he had opened the door himself and appeared, whether he had stepped into view with the door already open, or whether he had been standing there all the time. His slender, elegant figure was dressed in dark jacket and trousers, with a black silk scarf draped Ascot fashion at his throat, just as he had worn at his hotel in New York. When he saw that we were aware of him, he lifted a white hand in greeting and descended two steps to meet us coming

toward him. I offered him my hand, and he gave it a quick, sharp pressure, as though he were investigating the texture of my flesh and bone.

"I am glad to see you here so soon, Mr. Connatt," he said cordially. "Now we need wait only for Miss Vining, who should arrive before dark. Miss Holgar came yesterday, and Davidson this morning."

"There will be only the six of us, then?" I asked.

He nodded his chestnut curls. "A caretaker will come here each day, to prepare lunch and dinner and to clean. He lives several miles up the road, and will spend his nights at home. But we of the play itself will be in residence, and we alone —a condition fully in character, I feel, with the attitude of mystery and reserve we have assumed toward our interesting production. For breakfasts, Davidson will be able to look after us."

"Huh!" grunted Jake. "That Davidson can act, manage, stage-hand, cook—he does everything."

"Almost everything," said Varduk dryly, and his eyes turned long and expressionlessly upon my friend, who immediately subsided. In the daylight I saw that Varduk's eyes were hazel; on the night I had met him at his hotel they had seemed thunder-dark.

"You, too, are considered useful at many things around the theater, Switz," Varduk continued. "I took that into consideration when Miss Holgar, though she left her maid behind, insisted on including you in the company. I daresay, we can depend on you to help Davidson with the staging and so on."

"Oh, yes, sure," Jake made reply. "Certainly. Miss Holgar, she wants me to do that."

"Very good." Varduk turned on the heel of his well-polished boot. "Suppose," he added over his shoulder, "that you take Mr. Connatt up to the loft of the boathouse. Mr. Connatt, do you mind putting up with Switz?"

"Not in the least," I assured him readily, and took up two of my bags. Jake had already lifted the third and heaviest.

We nodded to Varduk and skirted the side of the lodge, walked down to the water, then entered the boathouse. It was a simple affair of well-chinked logs. Two leaky-looking canoes still occupied the lower part of it, but we picked our way past them and ascended a sturdy staircase to a loft under the peaked roof. This had been finished with wall-board and boasted a window at each end. Two cots, a rug, a wash-stand, a table and several chairs made it an acceptable sleeping-apartment.

"This theater is half-way to the never-never land," I commented as I began to unpack.

"I should live so—I never saw the like of it," Jake said earnestly. "How are people going to find their way here? Yesterday I began to talk about signs by the side of the road. Right off at once, Varduk said no. I begged like a poor relation left out of his uncle's will. Finally he said yes—but the signs must be small and dignified, and put up only a day before the show begins."

I wanted to ask a question about his adventure of the previous night, but Jake shook his head in refusal to discuss it. "Not here," he said. "Gib, who knows who may be listening?" He dropped his voice. "Or even *what* might be listening?"

I lapsed into silence and got out old canvas sneakers, flannel slacks and a Norfolk jacket, and changed into them. Dressed in this easy manner, I left the boathouse and stood beside the lake. At once a voice hailed me. Sigrid was walk-

ing along the water's edge, smiling in apparent delight.

We came face to face; I bent to kiss her hand. As once before, it fluttered under my lips, but when I straightened again I saw nothing of distaste or unsteadiness in her expression.

"Gib, how nice that you're here!" she cried. "Do you like the place?"

"I haven't seen very much of it yet," I told her. "I want to see the inside of the theater."

She took her hand away from me and thrust it into the pocket of the old white sweater she wore. "I think that I love it here," she said, with an air of gay confession. "Not all of the hermit stories about me are lies. I could grow truly fat—God save the mark!—on quiet and serenity."

"Varduk pleases you, too?" I suggested.

"He has more understanding than any other theatrical executive in my experience," she responded emphatically. "He fills me with the wish to work. I'm like a starry-eyed beginner again. What would you say if I told you that I was sweeping my own room and making my own bed?"

"I would say that you were the most charming housemaid in the world."

Her laughter was full of delight. "You sound as if you mean it, Gib. It is nice to know you as a friend again."

It seemed to me that she emphasized the word "friend" a trifle, as though to warn me that our relationship would nevermore become closer than that. Changing the subject, I asked her if she had swum in the lake; she had, and found it cold. How about seeing the theater? Together we walked toward the lodge and entered at a side door.

The auditorium was as Jake had described it to me, and I saw that Varduk liked a dark tone. He had stained the paneling, the benches, and the beams a dark brown. Brown, too, was the heavy curtain that hid the stage.

"We'll be there tonight," said Sigrid, nodding stageward. "Varduk has called the first rehearsal for immediately after dinner. We eat together, of course, in a big room upstairs."

"May I sit next to you when we eat?" I asked, and she laughed yet again. She was being as cheerful as I had ever known her to be.

"You sound like the student-hero in a light opera, Gib. I don't know about the seating-arrangement. Last night I was at the head of the table, and Varduk at the foot. Jake and Mr. Davidson were at either side of me."

"I shall certainly arrive before one or the other of them," I vowed solemnly.

Varduk had drifted in as we talked, and he chuckled at my announcement.

"A gallant note, Mr. Connatt, and one that I hope you can capture as pleasantly for the romantic passages of our *Ruthven*. By the bye, our first rehearsal will take place this evening."

"So Miss Holgar has told me," I nodded. "I have studied the play rather prayerfully since Davidson gave me a copy. I hope I'm not a disappointment in it."

"I am sure that you will not be," he said kindly. "I did not choose disappointing people for my cast."

Davidson entered from the front, to say that Martha Vining had arrived. Varduk moved away, stiff in his walk as I had observed before. Sigrid and I went through the side door and back into the open.

That evening I kept my promise to find a place by Sigrid at the table. Davidson, entering just behind me, looked a trifle chagrined but sat at my other side, with Martha Vining opposite. The dinner was good, with roast mutton, salad and apple

tart. I thought of Judge Pursuivant's healthy appetite as I ate.

After the coffee, Varduk nodded to the old man who served as caretaker, cook and waiter, as in dismissal. Then the producer's hazel eyes turned to Sigrid, who took her cue and rose. We did likewise.

"Shall we go down to the stage?" Varduk said to us. "It's time for our first effort with *Ruthven.*"

7. *Rehearsal*

WE WENT down a back stairway that brought us to the empty stage. A light was already burning, and I remember well that my first impression was of the stage's narrowness and considerable depth. Its back was of plaster over the outer timbers, but at either side partitions of paneling had been erected to enclose the cell-like dressing-rooms. One of the doors bore a star of white paint, evidently for Sigrid. Against the back wall leaned several open frames of wood, with rolls of canvas lying ready to be tacked on and painted into scenery.

Varduk had led the way down the stairs, and at the foot he paused to call upward to Davidson, who remained at the rear of the procession. "Fetch some chairs," he ordered, and the tall subordinate paused to gather them. He carried down six at once, his long strong arms threaded through their open backs. Varduk showed him with silent gestures where to arrange them, and himself led Sigrid to the midmost of them, upstage center.

"Sit down, all," he said to the rest of us. "Curtain, Davidson." He waited while the heavy pall rolled ponderously upward against the top of the arch. "Have you got your scripts, ladies and gentlemen?"

We all had, but his hands were empty. I started to offer him my copy, but he waved it away with thanks. "I know the thing by heart," he informed me, though with no air of boasting. Remaining still upon his feet, he looked around our seated array, capturing every eye and attention.

"The first part of *Ruthven* is, as we know already, in iambic pentameter—the 'heroic verse' that was customary and even expected in dramas of Byron's day. However, he employs here his usual trick of breaking the earlier lines up into short, situation-building speeches. No long and involved declamations, as in so many creaky tragedies of his fellows. He wrote the same sort of opening scenes for his plays the world has already seen performed—*Werner, The Two Foscari, Marino Faliero* and *The Deformed Transformed.*"

Martha Vining cleared her throat. "Doesn't *Manfred* begin with a long, measured soliloquy by the central character?"

"It does," nodded Varduk. "I am gratified, Miss Vining, to observe that you have been studying something of Byron's work." He paused, and she bridled in satisfaction. "However," he continued, somewhat maliciously, "you would be well advised to study farther, and learn that Byron stated definitely that *Manfred* was not written for the theater. But, returning to *Ruthven,* with which work we are primarily concerned, the short, lively exchanges at the beginning are Aubrey's and Malvina's." He quoted from memory. " 'Scene, Malvina's garden. Time, late afternoon—Aubrey, sitting at Malvina's feet, tells his adventures.' Very good, Mr. Connatt, take your place at Miss Holgar's feet."

I did so, and she smiled in comradely fashion while waiting for the others to drag their chairs away. Glancing at our scripts, we began:

"I'm no Othello, darling."

"Yet I am
Your Desdemona. Tell me of your travels."

"Of Anthropophagi?"

" 'And men whose heads
do grow beneath——' "

"I saw no such,
Not in all wildest Greece and Macedon."

"Saw you no spirits?"

"None, Malvina—none."

"Not even the vampire, he who quaffs the blood
Of life, that he may live in death?"

"Not I.
How do you know that tale?"

"I've read
In old romances——"

"Capital, capital," interrupted Varduk pleasantly. "I know that the play is written in a specific meter, yet you need not speak as though it were. If anything, make the lines less rhythmic and more matter-of-fact. Remember, you are young lovers, half bantering as you woo. Let your audience relax with you. Let it feel the verse form without actually hearing."

We continued, to the line where Aubrey tells of his travel-acquaintance Ruthven. Here the speech became definite verse:

"He is a friend who charms, but does
not cheer,
One who commands, but comforts not, the world.
I do not doubt but women find him handsome,
Yet hearts must be uneasy at his glance."

Malvina asks:

"His glance? Is it so piercing when it strikes?"

And Aubrey:

"It does not pierce—indeed, it rather weighs,
Like lead, upon the face where it is fixed."

Followed the story, which I have outlined elsewhere, of the encounter with bandits and Ruthven's apparent sacrifice of himself to cover Aubrey's retreat. Then Martha Vining, as the maid Bridget, spoke to announce Ruthven's coming, and upon the heels of her speech Varduk moved stiffly toward us.

"Aubrey!" he cried, in a rich, ringing tone such as fills theaters, and not at all like his ordinary gentle voice. I made my due response:

"Have you lived, Ruthven? But the horde
Of outlaw warriors compassed you and struck——"

In the rôle of Ruthven, Varduk's interruption was as natural and decisive as when, in ordinary conversation, he neatly cut another's speech in two with a remark of his own. I have already quoted this reply of Ruthven's:

"I faced them, and who seeks my face seeks death."

He was speaking the line, of course, without script, and his eyes held mine. Despite myself, I almost staggered under the weight of his glance. It was like that which Aubrey actually credits to Ruthven —lead-heavy instead of piercing, difficult to support.

The rehearsal went on, with Ruthven's seduction of Bridget and his court to the nervous but fascinated Malvina. In the end, as I have synopsized earlier, came his secret and miraculous revival from seeming death. Varduk delivered the final rather terrifying speech magnificently, and then abruptly doffed his Ruthven manner to smile congratulations all around.

"It's more than a month to our opening date in July," he said, "and yet I would be willing to present this play as a

finished play, no later than this day week. Miss Holgar, may I voice my special appreciation? Mr. Connatt, your confessed fear of your own inadequacy is proven groundless. Bravo, Miss Vining—and you, Davidson." His final tag of praise to his subordinate seemed almost grudging. "Now for the second act of the thing. No verse this time, my friends. Finish the rehearsal as well as you have begun."

"Wait," I said. "How about properties? I simulated the club-stroke in the first act, but this time I need a sword. For the sake of feeling the action better——"

"Yes, of course," granted Varduk. "There's one in the corner dressing-room." He pointed. "Go fetch it, Davidson."

Davidson complied. The sword was a cross-hilt affair, old but keen and bright.

"This isn't a prop at all," I half objected. "It's the real thing. Won't it be dangerous?"

"Oh, I think we can risk it," Varduk replied carelessly. "Let's get on with the rehearsal. A hundred years later, in the same garden. Swithin and Mary, descendants of Aubrey and Malvina, on stage."

WE CONTINUED. The opening, again with Sigrid and myself a-wooing, was lively and even brilliant. Martha Vining, in her rôle of the centenarian Bridget, skilfully cracked her voice and infused a witch-like quality into her telling of the Aubrey-Ruthven tale. Again the entrance of Ruthven, his suavity and apparent friendliness, his manner changing as he is revealed as the resurrected fiend of another age; finally the clash with me, as Swithin.

I spoke my line—"My ancestor killed you once, Ruthven. I can do the same today." Then I poked at him with the sword.

Varduk smiled and interjected, "Rather a languid thrust, that, Mr. Connatt. Do you think it will seem serious from the viewpoint of our audience?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was afraid I might hurt you."

"Fear nothing, Mr. Connatt. Take the speech and the swordplay again."

I did so, but he laughed almost in scorn. "You still put no life into the thrust." He spread his hands, as if to offer himself as a target. "Once more. Don't be an old woman."

Losing a bit of my temper, I made a genuine lunge. My right foot glided forward and my weight shifted to follow my point. But in mid-motion I knew myself for a danger-dealing fool, tried to recover, failed, and slipped.

I almost fell at full length—would have fallen had Varduk not been standing in my way. My sword-point, completely out of control, drove at the center of his breast—I felt it tear through cloth, through flesh——

A moment later his slender hands had caught my floundering body and pushed it back upon its feet. My sword, wedged in something, snatched its hilt from my hand. Sick and horrified, I saw it protruding from the midst of Varduk's body. Behind me I heard the choked squeal of Martha Vining, and an oath from Jake Switz. I swayed, my vision seemed to swim in smoky liquid, and I suppose I was well on the way to an unmasculine swoon. But a light chuckle, in Varduk's familiar manner, saved me from collapsing.

"That is exactly the way to do it, Mr. Connatt," he said in a tone of well-bred applause.

He drew the steel free—I think that he had to wrench rather hard—and then stepped forward to extend the hilt.

"There's blood on it," I mumbled sickly.

"Oh, that?" he glanced down at the blade. "Just a deceit for the sake of realism. You arranged the false-blood device splendidly, Davidson." He pushed the hilt into my slack grasp. "Look, the imitation gore is already evaporating."

So it was, like dew on a hot stone. Already the blade shone bright and clean.

"Very good," said Varduk. "Climax now. Miss Holgar, I think it is your line."

She, too, had been horrified by the seeming catastrophe, but she came gamely up to the bit where Mary pleads for Swithin's life, offering herself as the price. Half a dozen exchanges between Ruthven and Mary, thus:

"You give yourself up, then?"

"I do."

"You renounce your former manners, hopes and wishes?"

"I do."

"You will swear so, upon the book yonder?" (Here Ruthven points to a Bible, open on the garden-seat.)

"I do." (Mary touches the Bible.)

"You submit to the powers I represent?"

"I know only the power to which I pray. 'Our Father, which wert in heaven——'"

Sigrid, as I say, had done well up to now, but here she broke off. "It isn't correct there," she pointed out. "The prayer should read, 'art in heaven.' Perhaps the script was copied wrongly."

"No," said Martha Vining. "It's 'wert in heaven' on mine."

"And on mine," I added.

Varduk had frowned a moment, as if perplexed, but he spoke decisively. "As a matter of fact, it's in the original. Byron undoubtedly meant it to be so, to show Mary's agitation."

Sigrid had been reading ahead. "Farther down in the same prayer, it says almost the same thing—'Thy will be done on earth as it was in heaven.' It should be, 'is in heaven.'"

I had found the same deviation in my own copy. "Byron hardly meant Mary's agitation to extend so far," I argued.

"Since when, Mr. Connatt," inquired Varduk silkily, "did you become an authority on what Byron meant, here or elsewhere in his writings? You're being, not only a critic, but a clairvoyant."

I felt my cheeks glowing, and I met his heavy, mocking gaze as levelly as I could. "I don't like sacrilegious mistakes," I said, "and I don't like being snubbed, sir."

Davidson stepped to Varduk's side. "You can't talk to him like that, Connatt," he warned me.

Davidson was a good four inches taller than I, and more muscular, but at the moment I welcomed the idea of fighting him. I moved a step forward.

"Mr. Davidson," I said to him, "I don't welcome dictation from you, not on anything I choose to do or say."

Sigrid cried out in protest, and Varduk lifted up a hand. He smiled, too, in a dazzling manner.

"I think," he said in sudden good humor, "that we are all tired and shaken. Perhaps it's due to the unintentional realism of that incident with the sword—I saw several faces grow pale. Suppose we say that the rehearsals won't include so dangerous-looking an attack hereafter; we'll save the trick for the public performance itself. And we'll stop work now; in any case, it's supposed to be unlucky to speak the last line of a play in rehearsal. Shall we all go and get some rest?"

He turned to Sigrid and offered his arm. She took it, and they walked side by side out of the stage door and away. Martha Vining followed at their heels, while Davidson lingered to turn out the lights. Jake and I left together for our

own boathouse loft. The moon was up, and I jumped when leaves shimmered in its light — I remembered Jake's story about the amorphous lurkers in the thickets.

But nothing challenged us, and we went silently to bed, though I, at least, lay wakeful for hours.

8. *Pursuivant Again*

WHEN finally I slept, it was to dream in strange, unrelated flashes. The clearest impression of all was that Sigrid and Judge Pursuivant came to lead me deep into the dark woods beyond the lodge. They seemed to know their way through pathless thickets, and finally beckoned me to follow into a deep, shadowed cleft between banks of earth. We descended for miles, I judged in my dream, until we came to a bare, hard floor at the bottom. Here was a wide, round hatchway of metal, like a very large sewer lid. Bidding me watch, Sigrid and the judge bent and tugged the lid up and away. Gazing down the exposed shaft, it was as if I saw the heavens beneath my feet—the fathomlessness of the night sky, like velvet all sprinkled with crumbs of star-fire. I did not know whether to be joyful or to fear; then I had awakened, and it was bright morning.

The air was warmer than it had been the day before, and I donned bathing-trunks and went downstairs, treading softly to let Jake snore blissfully on. Almost at the door of the boathouse I came face to face with Davidson, who smiled disarmingly and held out his hand. He urged me to forget the brief hostility that had come over us at rehearsal; he was quite unforced and cheerful about it, yet I surmised that Varduk had bade him make peace with me. However, I agreed that we had both been tired and upset, and we shook hands cordially.

Then I turned toward the water, and saw Sigrid lazily crawling out into the deep stretches with long, smooth strokes. I called her name, ran in waist-deep, and swam as swiftly as I could, soon catching up. She smiled in welcome and turned on her side to say good-morning. In her brief bathing-suit she did not look so gaunt and fragile. Her body was no more than healthily slim, and quite firm and strong-looking.

As we swam easily, I was impelled to speak of my dream, and she smiled again.

"I think that was rather beautiful, I mean about the heavens below your feet," she said. "Symbolism might have something to say about it. In a way the vision was prophetic—Judge Pursuivant has sent word that he will call on us."

"Perhaps the rest was prophetic, too," I ventured boldly. "You and I together, Sigrid—and heaven at our feet——"

"I've been in long enough," she announced suddenly, "and breakfast must be ready. Come on, Gib, race me back to shore."

She was off like a trout, and I churned after her. We finished neck and neck, separated and went away to dress. At breakfast, which Davidson prepared simply but well of porridge, toast and eggs, I did not get to sit next to Sigrid; Davidson and Jake had found places at her left and right hands. I paid what attentions I could devise to Martha Vining, but if Sigrid was piqued by my courtliness in another direction, she gave no sign.

THE meal over, I returned to my room, secured my copy of *Ruthven* and carried it outdoors to study. I chose a sun-drenched spot near the lodge, set my back to a tree, and leafed through the play, underlining difficult passages here and there. I remembered Varduk's announcement that we would never speak the play's last line in rehearsal, lest bad

luck fall. He was superstitious, for all his apparent wisdom and culture; yet, according to the books Judge Pursuivant had lent me, so was Lord Byron, from whom Varduk claimed descent. What was the ill-omened last line, by the way?

I turned to the last page of the script. The final line, as typewritten by Davidson, contained only a few words. My eyes found it:

"RUTHVEN (placing his hand on Mary's head):"

And no more than that. There was place for a speech after the stage direction, apparently the monster's involuntary cry for blessing upon the brave girl, but Davidson had not set down such a speech.

Amazed and in some unaccountable way uneasy, I walked around the corner of the lodge to where Martha Vining, seated on the door-step, also studied her lines. Before I had finished my first question, she nodded violently.

"It's the same way on my script," she informed me. "You mean, the last speech missing. I noticed last night, and mentioned it before breakfast to Miss Holgar. She has no last line, either."

A soft chuckle drifted down upon us. Varduk had come to the open door.

"Davidson must have made a careless omission," he said. "Of course, there is only one typescript of the play, with carbon copies. Well, if the last line is missing, isn't it a definite sign that we should not speak it in rehearsal?"

He rested his heavy gaze upon me, then upon Martha Vining, smiled to conclude the discussion, and drew back into the hallway and beyond our sight.

Perhaps I may be excused for not feeling completely at rest on the subject.

Judge Pursuivant arrived for lunch, dressed comfortably in flannels and a tweed jacket, and his performance at table was in healthy contrast to Varduk, who, as usual, ate hardly anything. In the early afternoon I induced the judge to come for a stroll up the slope and along the main road. As soon as we were well away from the lodge, I told him of Jake's adventure, the outcome of the sword-accident at rehearsal, and the air of mystery that deepened around the omitted final speech of the play.

"Perhaps I'm being nervous and illusion-ridden," I began to apologize in conclusion, but he shook his great head.

"You're being nothing of the sort, Connatt. Apparently my semi-psychic intuition was good as gold. I did perfectly right in following this drama and its company out here into the wilderness."

"You came deliberately?" I asked, and he nodded.

"My friend's cabin in the neighborhood was a stroke of good luck, and I more than half courted the invitation to occupy it. I'll be frank, Connatt, and say that from the outset I have felt a definite and occult challenge from Varduk and his activities."

He chopped at a weed with his big malacca stick, pondered a moment, then continued.

"Your Mr. Varduk is a mysterious fellow. I need not enlarge on that, though I might remind you of the excellent reason for his strange character and behavior."

"Byron's blood?"

"Exactly. And Byron's curse."

I stopped in mid-stride and turned to face the judge. He smiled somewhat apologetically.

"I know, Connatt," he said, "that modern men and women think such things impossible. They think it equally impossible that anyone of good education and normal mind should take occultism seriously. But I disprove the latter impossibility, at least—I hold degrees from three world-famous universities, and my

behavior, at least, shows that I am neither morbid nor shallow."

"Certainly not," I assented, thinking of his hearty appetite, his record of achievement in many fields, his manifest kindness and sincerity.

"Then consent to hear my evidence out." He resumed his walk, and I fell into step with him. "It's only circumstantial evidence, I fear, and as such must not be entirely conclusive. Yet here it is:

"Byron was the ideal target for a curse, not only personally but racially. His forebears occupied themselves with revolution, dueling, sacrilege and lesser sins—they were the sort who attract and merit disaster. As for his immediate parents, it would be difficult to choose a more depraved father than Captain 'Mad Jack' Byron, or a more unnatural mother than Catherine Gordon of Gight. Brimstone was bred into the child's very soul by those two. Follow his career, and what is there? Pride, violence, orgy, disgrace. Over his married life hangs a shocking cloud, an unmentionable accusation—rightly or not we cannot say. As for his associates, they withered at his touch. His children, lawful and natural, died untimely and unhappy. His friends found ruin or death. Even Doctor Polidori, plagiarist of the *Ruthven* story, committed suicide. Byron himself, when barely past his first youth, perished alone and far from home and friends. Today his bright fame is blurred and tarnished by a wealth of legend that can be called nothing less than diabolic."

"Yet he wasn't all unlucky," I sought to remind my companion. "His beauty and brilliance, his success as a poet——"

"All part of the curse. When could he be thankful for a face that drew the love of Lady Caroline Lamb and precipitated one of London's most fearful scandals? As for his poetry, did it not mark him for envy, spite and, eventually, a concerted attack? I daresay Byron would have been happier as a plain-faced mechanic or grocer."

I felt inclined to agree, and said as much. "If a curse exists," I added, "would it affect Varduk as a descendant of Byron?"

"I think that it would, and that his recent actions prove at once the existence of a curse and the truth of his claim to descent. A shadow lies on that man, Connatt."

"The rest of the similarity holds," I responded. "The charm and the genius. I have wondered why Miss Holgar agrees to this play. It is archaic, in some degree melodramatic, and her part is by no means dominant. Yet she seems delighted with the rôle and the production in general."

"I have considered the same apparent lapse of her judgment," said Pursuivant, "and came to the conclusion that you are about to suggest—that Varduk has gained some sort of influence over Miss Holgar."

"Perhaps, then, you feel that such an influence would be dangerous to her and to others?"

"Exactly."

"What to do, then?"

"Do nothing, gentlemen," said someone directly behind us.

We both whirled in sudden surprize. It was Elmo Davidson.

9. *Davidson Gives a Warning*

I SCOWLED at Davidson in surprized protest at his intrusion. Judge Pursuivant did not scowl, but I saw him lift his walking-stick with his left hand, place his right upon the curved handle, and gave it a little twist and jerk, as though preparing to draw a cork from a bottle. Davidson grinned placatingly.

"Please, gentlemen! I didn't mean to eavesdrop, or to do anything else sneak-

ing. It was only that I went for a walk, too, saw the pair of you ahead, and hurried to catch up. I couldn't help but hear the final words you were saying, and I couldn't help but warn you."

We relaxed, but Judge Pursuivant repeated "Warn?" in a tone deeply frigid.

"May I amplify? First of all, Varduk certainly does not intend to harm either of you. Second, he isn't the sort of man to be crossed in anything."

"I suppose not," I rejoined, trying to be casual. "You must be pretty sure, Davilson, of his capabilities and character."

He nodded. "We've been together since college."

Pursuivant leaned on his stick and produced his well-seasoned briar pipe. "It's comforting to hear you say that. I mean, that Mr. Varduk was once a college boy. I was beginning to wonder if he wasn't thousands of years old."

Davidson shook his head slowly. "See here, why don't we sit down on the bank and talk? Maybe I'll tell you a story."

"Very good," agreed Pursuivant, and sat down. I did likewise, and we both gazed expectantly at Davidson. He remained standing, with hands in pockets, until Pursuivant had kindled his pipe and I my cigarette. Then:

"I'm not trying to frighten you, and I won't give away any real secrets about my employer. It's just that you may understand better after you learn how I met him.

"It was more than ten years ago. Varduk came to Revere College as a freshman when I was a junior. He was much the same then as he is now—slender, quiet, self-contained, enigmatic. I got to know him better than anyone in school, and I can't say truly that I know him, not even now.

"Revere, in case you never heard of the place, is a small school with a big reputation for grounding its students hock-deep in the classics."

Pursuivant nodded and emitted a cloud of smoke. "I knew your Professor Dahlberg of Revere," he interjected. "He's one of the great minds of the age on Greek literature and history."

Davidson continued: "The buildings at Revere are old and, you might say, swaddled in the ivy planted by a hundred graduating classes. The traditions are consistently mellow, and none of the faculty members come in for much respect until they are past seventy. Yet the students are very much like any others, when class is over. In my day, at least, we gave more of a hoot for one touchdown than for seven thousand odes of Horace."

He smiled a little, as though in mild relish of memories he had evoked within himself.

"The football team wasn't very good, but it wasn't very bad, either. It meant something to be on the first team, and I turned out to be a fairish tackle. At the start of my junior year, the year I'm talking about, a man by the name of Schaefer was captain—a good fullback though not brilliant, and the recognized leader of the campus.

"Varduk didn't go in for athletics, or for anything else except a good stiff course of study, mostly in the humanities. He took a room at the end of the hall on the third floor of the men's dormitory, and kept to himself. You know how a college dorm loves that, you men. Six days after the term started, the Yellow Dogs had him on their list."

"Who were the Yellow Dogs?" I asked.

"Oh, there's a bunch like it in every school. Spiritual descendants of the Mohocks that flourished in Queen Anne's reign; rough and rowdy undergraduates, out for Halloween pranks every night.

And any student, particularly any frosh, that stood on his dignity——" He paused and let our imagination finish the potentialities of such a situation.

"So, one noon after lunch at the training-table, Schaefer winked at me and a couple of other choice spirits. We went to our rooms and got out our favorite paddles, carved from barrel-staves and lettered over with fraternity emblems and wise-cracks. Then we tramped up to the third floor and knocked loudly at Varduk's door.

"He didn't answer. We tried the knob. The lock was on, so Schaefer dug his big shoulder into the panel and smashed his way in."

DAVIDSON stopped and drew a long breath, as if with it he could win a better ability to describe the things he was telling.

"Varduk lifted those big, deep eyes of his as we appeared among the ruins of his door. No fear, not even surprize. Just a long look, traveling from one of us to another. When he brought his gaze to me, I felt as if somebody was pointing two guns at me, two guns loaded to their muzzles."

I, listening, felt like saying I knew how he had felt, but I did not interrupt.

"He was sitting comfortably in an armchair," went on Davidson, rocking on his feet as though nervous with the memory, "and in his slender hands he held a big dark book. His forefinger marked a place between the leaves.

" 'Get up, frosh,' Schaefer said, 'and salute your superiors.'

"Varduk did not move or speak. He looked, and Schaefer bellowed louder, against a sudden and considerable uneasiness.

" 'What are you reading there?' he demanded of Varduk in his toughest voice.

" 'A very interesting work,' Varduk replied gently. 'It teaches how to rule people.'

" 'Uh-huh?' Schaefer sneered at him. 'Let's have a look at it.'

" 'I doubt if you would like it,' Varduk said, but Schaefer made a grab. The book came open in his hands. He bent, as if to study it.

"Then he took a blind, lumbering step backward. He smacked into the rest of us all bunched behind him, and without us I think he might have fallen down. I couldn't see his face, but the back of his big bull-neck had turned as white as plaster. He made two efforts to speak before he managed it. Then all he could splutter out was 'Wh-what——' "

Davidson achieved rather well the manner of a strong, simple man gone suddenly shaky with fright.

" 'I told you that you probably wouldn't like it,' Varduk said, like an adult reminding a child. Then he got up out of his armchair and took the book from Schaefer's hands. He began to talk again. 'Schaefer, I want to see you here in this room after you finish your football practise this afternoon.'

"Schaefer didn't make any answer. All of us edged backward and got out of there."

Davidson paused, so long that Pursuivant asked, "Is that all?"

"No, it isn't. In a way, it's just the beginning. Schaefer made an awful fool of himself five or six times on the field that day. He dropped every one of his passes from center when we ran signals, and five or six times he muffed the ball at drop-kick practise. The coach told him in front of everybody that he acted like a high school yokel. When we finished and took our showers, he hung back until I came out, so as to walk to the dormitory with me. He tagged along like a frightened kid brother, and when we got to the front door he started upstairs like an

old man. He wanted to turn toward his own room on the second floor; but Varduk's voice spoke his name, and we both looked up, startled. On the stairs to the third flight stood Varduk, holding that black book open against his chest.

"He spoke to Schaefer. 'I told you that I wanted to see you.'

"Schaefer tried to swear at him. After all, here was a frail, pale little frosh, who didn't seem to have an ounce of muscle on his bones, giving orders to a big football husky who weighed more than two hundred pounds. But the swear words sort of strangled in his throat. Varduk laughed. Neither of you have ever heard a sound so soft or merciless.

" 'Perhaps you'd like me to come to your room after you,' Varduk suggested.

"Schaefer turned and came slowly to the stairs and up them. When he got level with Varduk, I didn't feel much like watching the rest. As I moved away toward my room, I saw Varduk slip his slender arm through Schaefer's big, thick one and fall into step with him, just as if they were going to have the nicest schoolboy chat you can imagine."

Davidson shuddered violently, and so, despite the warm June air, did I. Pursuivant seemed a shade less pink.

"Here, I've talked too much," Davidson said, with an air of embarrassment. "Probably it's because I've wanted to tell this story—over a space of years. No point in holding back the end, but I'd greatly appreciate your promise—both your promises—that you'll not pass the tale on."

WE BOTH gave our words, and urged him to continue. He did so.

"I had barely got to my own digs when there was a frightful row outside, shouts and scamperings and screamings; yes, screamings, of young men scared out of their wits. I jumped up and hurried downstairs and out. There lay Schaefer on the pavement in front of the dormitory. He was dead, with the brightest red blood all over him. About twenty witnesses, more or less, had seen him as he jumped out of Varduk's window.

"The faculty and the police came, and Varduk spent hours with them, being questioned. But he told them something satisfactory, for he was let go and never charged with any responsibility.

"Late that night, as I sat alone at my desk trying to drive from my mind's eye the bright, bright red of Schaefer's blood, a gentle knock sounded at my door. I got up and opened. There stood Varduk, and he held in his hands that black volume. I saw the dark red edging on its pages, the color of blood three hours old.

" 'I wondered,' he said in his soft voice, 'if you'd like to see the thing in my book that made your friend Schaefer so anxious to leave my room.'

"I assured him that I did not. He smiled and came in, all uninvited.

"Then he spoke, briefly but very clearly, about certain things he hoped to do, and about how he needed a helper. He said that I might be that helper. I made no reply, but he knew that I would not refuse.

"He ordered me to kneel, and I did. Then he showed me how to put my hands together and set them between his palms. The oath I took was the medieval oath of vassalage. And I have kept my oath from that day to this."

Davidson abruptly strode back along the way to the lodge. He stopped at half a dozen paces' distance.

"Maybe I'd better get along," he suggested. "You two may want to think and talk about what I have said, and my advice not to get in Varduk's way."

With that he resumed his departure, and went out of sight without once looking back again.

10. *That Evening*

JUDGE PURSUIVANT and I remained sitting on the roadside bank until Davidson had completely vanished around a tree-clustered bend of the way. Then my companion lifted a heavy walking-boot and tapped the dottle from his pipe against the thick sole.

"How did that cheerful little story impress you?" he inquired.

I shook my head dubiously. My mustache prickled on my upper lip, like the mane of a nervous dog. "If it was true," I said slowly, "how did Davidson dare tell it?"

"Probably because he was ordered to."

I must have stared foolishly. "You think that——"

Pursuivant nodded. "My knowledge of underworld argot is rather limited, but I believe that the correct phrase is 'lay off'. We're being told to do that, and in a highly interesting manner. As to whether or not the story is true, I'm greatly inclined to believe that it is."

I drew another cigarette from my package, and my hand trembled despite itself. "Then the man is dangerous—Varduk, I mean. What is he trying to do to Sigrid?"

"That is what perplexes me. Once, according to your little friend Jake Switz, he defended her from some mysterious but dangerous beings. His behavior argues that he isn't the only power to consider."

The judge held a match for my cigarette. His hand was steady, and its steadiness comforted me.

"Now then," I said, "to prevent—whatever is being done."

"That's what we'd better talk about." Pursuivant took his stick and rose to his feet. "Let's get on with our walk, and make sure this time that nobody overhears us."

We began to saunter, while he continued, slowly and soberly:

"You feel that it is Miss Holgar who is threatened. That's no more than guesswork on your part, supplemented by the natural anxiety of a devoted admirer—if you'll pardon my mentioning that—but you are probably right. Varduk seems to have exerted all his ingenuity and charm to induce her to take a part in this play, and at this place. The rest of you he had gathered more carelessly. It is reasonably safe to say that whatever happens will happen to Miss Holgar."

"But what will happen?" I urged, feeling very depressed.

"That we do not know as yet," I began to speak again, but he lifted a hand. "Please let me finish. Perhaps you think that we should do what we can to call off the play, get Miss Holgar out of here. But I reply, having given the mattter deep thought, that such a thing is not desirable."

"Not desirable?" I echoed, my voice rising in startled surprize. "You mean, she must stay here? In heaven's name, why?"

"Because evil is bound to occur. To spirit her away will be only a retreat. The situation must be allowed to develop—then we can achieve victory. Why, Connatt," he went on warmly, "can you not see that the whole atmosphere is charged with active and supernormal perils? Don't you know that such a chance, for meeting and defeating the power of wickedness, seldom arises? What can you think of when you want to run away?"

"I'm not thinking of myself, sir," I told him. "It's Sigrid. Miss Holgar."

"Handsomely put. All right, then; when you go back to the lodge, tell her what we've said and suggest that she leave."

I shook my head, more hopelessly than

before. "You know that she wouldn't take me seriously."

"Just so. Nobody will take seriously the things we are beginning to understand, you and I. We have to fight alone—but we'll win." He began to speak more brightly. "When is the play supposed to have its first performance?"

"Sometime after the middle of July. I've heard Varduk say as much several times, though he did not give the exact date."

Pursuivant grew actually cheerful. "That means that we have three weeks or so. Something will happen around that time—presumably on opening night. If time was not an element, he would not have defended her on her first night here."

I felt somewhat reassured, and we returned from our stroll in fairly good spirits.

Varduk again spoke cordially to Pursuivant, and invited him to stay to dinner. "I must ask that you leave shortly afterward," he concluded the invitation. "Our rehearsals have something of secrecy about them. You won't be offended if——"

"Of course not," Pursuivant assured him readily, but later the judge found a moment to speak with me. "Keep your eyes open," he said earnestly. "He feels that I, in some degree familiar with occult matters, might suspect or even discover something wrong about the play. We'll talk later about the things you see."

THE evening meal was the more pleasant for Judge Pursuivant's high-humored presence. He was gallant to the ladies, deferential to Varduk, and witty to all of us. Even the pale, haunted face of our producer relaxed in a smile once or twice, and when the meal was over and Pursuivant was ready to go, Varduk accompanied him to the door, speaking graciously the while.

"You will pardon me if I see you safely to the road. It is no more than evening, yet I have a feeling——"

"And I have the same feeling," said Pursuivant, not at all heavily. "I appreciate your offer of protection."

Varduk evidently suspected a note of mockery. He paused. "There are things, Judge Pursuivant," he said, "against which ordinary protection would not suffice. You have borne arms, I believe, yet you know that they will not always avail."

They had come to the head of the front stairs, leading down to the lobby of the theater. The others at table were chattering over a second cup of coffee, but I was straining my ears to hear what the judge and Varduk were saying.

"Arms? Yes, I've borne them," Pursuivant admitted. "Oddly enough, I'm armed now. Should you care to see?"

He lifted his malacca walking-stick in both hands, grasping its shank and the handle. A twist and a jerk, and it came apart, revealing a few inches of metal. Pursuivant drew forth, as from a sheath, a thin, gleaming blade.

"Sword cane!" exclaimed Varduk admiringly. He bent for a closer look.

"And a singularly interesting one," elaborated Pursuivant. "Quite old, as you can see for yourself."

"Ah, so it is," agreed Varduk. "I fancy you had it put into the cane?"

"I did. Look at the inscription."

Varduk peered. "Yes, I can make it out, though it seems worn." He pursed his lips, then read aloud, very slowly: "*Sic pereant omnes inimici tui, Domine.* It sounds like Scripture."

"That's what it is, Mr. Varduk," Pursuivant was saying blandly. "The King James Version has it: 'So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord.' It's from

Deborah's song — fifth chapter of *Judges*."

Varduk was plainly intrigued. "A war-like text, I must say. What knight of the church chose it for his battle cry?"

"Many have chosen it," responded the judge. "Shall we go on?"

They walked down the stairs side by side, and so out of my sight and hearing.

WHEN Varduk returned he called us at once to rehearsal. He was as alert as he had been the night before, but much harder to please. Indeed, he criticized speeches and bits of stage business that had won his high praise at the earlier rehearsal, and several times he called for repetitions and new interpretations. He also announced that at the third rehearsal, due the next day, he would take away our scripts.

"You are all accomplished actors," he amplified. "You need nothing to refresh good memories."

"I'd like to keep my book," begged Martha Vining, but Varduk smiled and shook his head.

"You'll be better without," he said definitely.

When we approached the climactic scene, with Swithin's attempt to kill Ruthven and Mary's attempted sacrifice, Varduk did not insist on stage business; in fact, he asked us flatly to speak our lines without so much as moving from our places. If this was to calm us after the frightening events of the night before, it did not succeed. Everyone there remembered the accidental sword-thrust, and Varduk's seeming invulnerability; it was as though their thoughts were doleful spoken words.

Rehearsal over—again without the final line by Ruthven—Varduk bade us a courteous good-night and, as before, walked out first with Sigrid and Martha Vining. I followed with Jake, but at the threshold I touched his arm.

"Come with me," I muttered, and turned toward the front of the lodge.

Varduk and the two women had gone out of sight around the rear of the building. Nobody challenged us as we walked silently in the direction of the road, but I had a sensation as of horrors all around me, inadequately bound back with strands that might snap at any moment.

"What's it about, Gib?" asked Jake once, but at that moment I saw what I had somehow expected and feared to see.

A silent figure lay at the foot of the upward-sloping driveway to the road. We both ran forward, coming up on either side of that figure.

The moon showed through broken clouds. By its light we recognized Judge Pursuivant, limp and apparently lifeless. Beside him lay the empty shank of his walking-stick. His right fist still clenched around the handle, and the slender blade set therein was driven deeply into the loam.

I did not know what to do, but Jake did. He knelt, scooped the judge's head up and set it against his knee, then slapped the flaccid cheeks with his open palm. Pursuivant's eyelids and mustache fluttered.

Jake snorted approvingly and lifted his own crossed eyes to mine. "I guess he's all right, Gib. Just passed out is all. Maybe better you go to Varduk and ask for some brand——"

He broke off suddenly. He was staring at something behind me.

I turned, my heart quivering inside my chest.

Shapes—monstrous, pallid, unclean shapes—were closing in upon us.

In the thrilling chapters that will bring this strange novel to its end in next month's WEIRD TALES, the veil is swept aside, and the weird monstrosity known as Varduk stands revealed in all his hideousness. We suggest that you reserve your copy at your magazine dealer's now.

He That Hath Wings

By EDMOND HAMILTON

The story of a modern Icarus—David Rand was a freak of nature, a glorious winged freak, who had experienced the freedom of the sky and could no longer be tied to the ground

DOCTOR HARRIMAN paused in the corridor of the maternity ward and asked, "What about that woman in 27?"

There was pity in the eyes of the plump, crisply dressed head nurse as she answered, "She died an hour after the birth of her baby, doctor. Her heart was bad, you know."

The physician nodded, his spare, clean-shaven face thoughtful. "Yes, I remember now—she and her husband were injured in an electrical explosion in a subway a year ago, and the husband died recently. What about the baby?"

The nurse hesitated. "A fine, healthy little boy, except——"

"Except what?"

"Except that he is humpbacked, doctor."

Doctor Harriman swore in pity. "What horrible luck for the poor little devil! Born an orphan, and deformed, too." He said with sudden decision, "I'll look at the infant. Perhaps we could do something for him."

But when he and the nurse bent together over the crib in which red-faced little David Rand lay squalling lustily, the doctor shook his head. "No, we can't do anything for that back. What a shame!"

David Rand's little red body was as straight and clean-lined as that of any baby ever born—except for his back. From the back of the infant's shoulder-blades jutted two humped projections, one on each side, that curved down toward the lower ribs.

Those twin humps were so long and streamlined in their jutting curve that they hardly looked like deformities. The skilful hands of Doctor Harriman gently probed them. Then an expression of perplexity came over his face.

"This doesn't seem any ordinary deformity," he said puzzledly. "I think we'll look at them through the X-ray. Tell Doctor Morris to get the apparatus going."

Doctor Morris was a stocky, red-headed young man who looked in pity, also, at the crying, red-faced baby lying in front of the X-ray machine, later.

He muttered, "Tough on the poor kid, that back. Ready, doctor?"

Harriman nodded. "Go ahead."

The X-rays broke into sputtering, crackling life. Doctor Harriman applied his eyes to the fluoroscope. His body stiffened. It was a long, silent minute before he straightened from his inspection. His spare face had gone dead white and the waiting nurse wondered what had so excited him.

Harriman said, a little thickly, "Morris! Take a look through this. I'm either seeing things, or else something utterly unprecedented has happened."

Morris, with a puzzled frown at his superior, gazed through the instrument. His head jerked up.

"My God!" he exclaimed.

"You see it too?" exclaimed Doctor Harriman. "Then I guess I'm not crazy after all. But this thing—why, it's without precedent in all human history!"

He babbled incoherently, "And the bones, too—hollow—the whole skeletonal structure different. His weight——"

He set the infant hastily on a scale. The beam jiggled.

"See that!" exclaimed Harriman. "He weighs only a third of what a baby his size should weigh."

Red-headed young Doctor Morris was staring in fascination at the curving humps on the infant's back. He said hoarsely, "But this just isn't possible——"

"But it's real!" Harriman flung out. His eyes were brilliant with excitement. He cried, "A change in gene-patterns—only that could have caused this. Some pre-natal influence——"

His fist smacked into his hand. "I've got it! The electrical explosion that injured this child's mother a year before his birth. That's what did it—an explosion of hard radiations that damaged, changed, her genes. You remember Muller's experiments——"

The head nurse's wonder overcame her respect. She asked, "But what is it, doctor? What's the mater with the child's back? Is it so bad as all that?"

"So bad?" repeated Doctor Harriman. He drew a long breath. He told the nurse, "This child, this David Rand, is a unique case in medical history. There has never been anyone like him—as far as we know, the thing that's going to happen to him has never happened to any other human being. And all due to that electrical explosion."

"What's going to happen to him?" demanded the nurse, dismayed.

"This child is going to have *wings!*" shouted Harriman. "Those projections growing out on his back—they're not just ordinary abnormalities—they're nascent wings, that will very soon break out and grow just as a fledgling bird's wings break out and grow."

THE head nurse stared at them. "You're joking," she said finally, in flat unbelief.

"Good God, do you think I'd joke about such a matter?" cried Harriman. "I tell you, I'm as stunned as you are, even though I can see the scientific reason for the thing. This child's body is different from the body of any other human being that ever lived.

"His bones are hollow, like a bird's bones. His blood seems different and he weighs only a third what a normal human infant weighs. And his shoulder-blades jut out into bone projections to which are attached the great wing-muscles. The X-rays clearly show the rudimentary feathers and bones of the wings themselves."

"Wings!" repeated young Morris dazedly. He said after a moment, "Harriman, this child will be able to——"

"He'll be able to fly, yes!" declared Harriman. "I'm certain of it. The wings are going to be very large ones, and his body is so much lighter than normal that they'll easily bear him aloft."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Morris incoherently.

He looked a little wildly down at the infant. It had stopped crying and now waved pudgy red arms and legs weakly.

"It just isn't possible," said the nurse, taking refuge in incredulity. "How could a baby, a man, have wings?"

Doctor Harriman said swiftly, "It's

due to a deep change in the parents' genes. The genes, you know, are the tiny cells which control bodily development in every living thing that is born. Alter the gene-pattern and you alter the bodily development of the offspring, which explains the differences in color, size, and so forth, in children. But those minor differences are due to comparatively minor gene-changes.

"But the gene-pattern of this child's parents was radically changed a year ago. The electrical explosion in which they were injured must have deeply altered their gene-patterns, by a wave of sudden electrical force. Muller, of the University of Texas, has demonstrated that gene-patterns *can* be greatly altered by radiation, and that the offspring of parents so treated will differ greatly from their parents in bodily form. That accident produced an entirely new gene-pattern in the parents of this child, one which developed their child into a winged human. He's what biologists technically call a mutant."

Young Morris suddenly said, "Good Lord, what the newspapers are going to do when they get hold of this story!"

"They mustn't get hold of it," Doctor Harriman declared. "The birth of this child is one of the greatest things in the history of biological science, and it mustn't be made a cheap popular sensation. We must keep it utterly quiet."

THEY kept it quiet for three months, in all. During that time, little David Rand occupied a private room in the hospital and was cared for only by the head nurse and visited only by the two physicians.

During those three months, the correctness of Doctor Harriman's prediction was fulfilled. For in that time, the humped projections on the child's back grew with incredible rapidity until at last they broke through the tender skin in a pair of stubby, scrawny-looking things that were unmistakably wings.

Little David squalled violently during the days that his wings broke forth, feeling only a pain as of teething many times intensified. But the two doctors stared and stared at those little wings with their rudimentary feathers, even now hardly able to believe the witness of their eyes.

They saw that the child had as complete control of the wings as of his arms and legs, by means of the great muscles around their bases which no other human possessed. And they saw too that while David's weight was increasing, he remained still just a third of the weight of a normal child of his age, and that his heart had a tremendously high pulse-beat and that his blood was far warmer than that of any normal person.

Then it happened. The head nurse, unable any longer to contain the tremendous secret with which she was bursting, told a relative in strict confidence. That relative told another relative, also in strict confidence. And two days later the story appeared in the New York newspapers.

The hospital put guards at its doors and refused admittance to the grinning reporters who came to ask for details. All of them were frankly skeptical, and the newspaper stories were written with a tongue in the cheek. The public laughed. A child with wings! What kind of phony new story would they think up next?

But a few days later, the stories changed in tone. Others of the hospital personnel, made curious by the newspaper yarns, pried into the room where David Rand lay crowing and thrashing his arms and legs and wings. They babbled broadcast assertions that the story was true.

One of them who was a candid camera enthusiast even managed to slip out a photograph of the infant. Smeary as it was, that photograph did unmistakably show a child with wings of some sort growing from its back.

The hospital became a fort, a place besieged. Reporters and photographers milled outside its doors and clamored against the special police guard that had been detailed to keep them out. The great press associations offered Doctor Harriman large sums for exclusive stories and photographs of the winged child. The public began to wonder if there was anything in the yarn.

Doctor Harriman had to give in, finally. He admitted a committee of a dozen reporters, photographers and eminent physicians to see the child.

David Rand lay and looked up at them with wise blue gaze, clutching his toe, while the eminent physicians and newspapermen stared down at him with bulging eyes.

The physicians said, "It's incredible, but it's true. This is no fake—the child really has wings."

The reporters asked Doctor Harriman wildly, "When he gets bigger, will he be able to fly?"

Harriman said shortly, "We can't tell just what his development will be like, now. But if he continues to develop as he has, undoubtedly he'll be able to fly."

"Good Lord, let me at a phone!" groaned one newshound. And then they were all scrambling pell-mell for the telephones.

Doctor Harriman permitted a few pictures, and then unceremoniously shoved the visitors out. But there was no holding the newspapers, after that. David Rand's name became overnight the best known in the world. The pictures convinced even the most skeptical of the public.

Great biologists made long statements on the theories of genetics which could explain the child. Anthropologists speculated as to whether similar freak winged men had not been born a few times in the remote past, giving rise to the world-wide legends of harpies and vampires and flying people. Crazy sects saw in the child's birth an omen of the approaching end of the world.

Theatrical agents offered immense sums for the privilege of exhibiting David in a hygienic glass case. Newspapers and press services outbid each other for exclusive rights to the story Doctor Harriman could tell. A thousand firms begged to purchase the right to use little David's name on toys, infant foods, and what not.

And the cause of all this excitement lay and rolled and crowed and sometimes cried in his little bed, now and then vigorously flapping the sprouting wings that had upset the whole world. Doctor Harriman looked thoughtfully down at him.

He said, "I'll have to get him out of here. The hospital superintendent is complaining that the crowds and commotion are wrecking the place."

"But where can you take him?" Morris wanted to know. "He hasn't any parents or relatives, and you can't put a kid like this in an orphan asylum."

Doctor Harriman made decision. "I'm going to retire from practise and devote myself entirely to observing and recording David's growth. I'll have myself made his legal guardian and I'll bring him up in some spot away from all this turmoil — an island or some place like that, if I can find one."

Harriman found such a place, an island off the Maine coast, a speck of barren sand and scrubby trees. He leased it, built a bungalow there, and took David

Rand and an elderly nurse-housekeeper there. He took also a strong Norwegian watchman who was very efficient at repelling the boats of reporters who tried to land there. After a while the newspapers gave it up. They had to be content to reprint the photographs and articles which Doctor Harriman gave to scientific publications concerning David's growth.

DAVID grew rapidly. In five years he was a sturdy little youngster with yellow hair, and his wings were larger and covered with short bronze feathers. He ran and laughed and played, like any youngster, flapping his wings vigorously.

He was ten before he flew. By then he was a little slimmer, and his glittering bronze wings came to his heels. When he walked or sat or slept, he kept the wings closely folded on his back like a bronze sheath. But when he opened them, they extended much farther than his arms could, on either side.

Doctor Harriman had meant to let David gradually try flying, to photograph and observe every step of the process. But it did not happen that way. David flew first as naturally as a bird first flies.

He himself had never thought much about his wings. He knew that Doctor John, as he called the physician, had no such wings, and that neither did Flora, the gaunt old nurse, nor Holf, the grinning watchman, have them. But he had seen no other people, and so he imagined the rest of the world was divided into people who had wings and people who didn't have them. He did not know just what the wings were for, though he knew that he liked to flap them and exercise them when he was running, and would wear no shirt over them.

Then one April morning, David found out what his wings were for. He had climbed into a tall old scrub oak to peer at a bird's nest. The child was always inordinately interested in the birds of the little island, jumping and clapping his hands as he saw them darting and circling overhead, watching their flocks stream south each fall and north each spring, prying into their ways of living because of some dim sense of kinship with these other winged things.

He had climbed nearly to the top of the old oak on this morning, toward the nest he had spied. His wings were tightly folded to keep them out of the way of branches. Then, as he reached up to pull himself the last step upward, his foot pressed on the merest rotten shell of a dead branch. Abnormally light as he was, his weight was enough to snap the branch and he fell cleanly toward the ground.

Instincts exploded in David's brain in the moment that he plummeted toward the ground. Quite without will, his wings unfolded with a bursting whir. He felt a terrific tug on them that wrenched his shoulders hard. And then suddenly, marvelously, he was no longer falling but was *gliding* downward on a long slant, with his wings unfolded and rigidly set.

There burst from his innermost being a high, ringing shout of exultation. Down—down—gliding like a swooping bird with the clean air buffeting at his face and streaming past his wings and body. A wild, sweet thrill that he had never felt before, a sudden crazy joy in living.

He shouted again, and with instant impulse flapped his great wings, beating the air with them, instinctively bending his head sharply back and keeping his arms flattened against his sides, his legs straight and close together.

He was soaring *upward* now, the ground swiftly receding beneath him, the sun blazing in his eyes, the wind screaming around him. He opened his mouth

to shout again, and the cold, clean air hammered into his throat. In sheer, mad physical ecstasy he rocketed up through the blue with whirring wings.

It was thus that Doctor Harriman saw him when he chanced to come out of the bungalow a little later. The doctor heard a shrill, exultant cry from high above and looked up to see that slim winged shape swooping down toward him from the sunlit heavens.

The doctor caught his breath at the sheer beauty of the spectacle as David dived and soared and whirled above him, gone crazy with delight in his new-found wings. The boy had instinctively learned how to turn and twist and dive, even though his movements had yet a clumsiness that made him sometimes side-slip.

When David Rand finally swooped down and alighted in front of the doctor with quick-closing wings, the boy's eyes streamed electric joy.

"I can *fly!*"

Doctor Harriman nodded. "You can fly, David. I know I can't keep you from doing it now, but you must not leave the island and you must be careful."

BY THE time David reached the age of seventeen, there was no longer any need to caution him to be careful. He was as much at home in the air as any bird living.

He was a tall, slim, yellow-haired youth now, his arrow-straight figure still clad only in the shorts that were all the clothing his warm-blooded body required, a wild, restless energy crackling and snapping in his keen face and dancing blue eyes.

His wings had become superb, glittering, bronze-feathered pinions that extended more than ten feet from tip to tip when he spread them, and that touched his heels with their lowest feathers when he closed them on his back.

Constant flying over the island and the surrounding waters had developed the great wing-muscles behind David's shoulders to tremendous strength and endurance. He could spend a whole day gliding and soaring over the island, now climbing high with mad burst of whirring wings, then circling, planing on motionless wings, slowly descending.

He could chase and overtake almost any bird in the air. He would start up a flock of pheasants and his laughter would ring high and wild across the sky as he turned and twisted and darted after the panicky birds. He could pull out the tail-feathers of outraged hawks before they could escape, and he could swoop quicker than hawk on rabbits and squirrels on the ground.

Sometimes when fog banked the island Doctor Harriman would hear the ringing shout from the gray mists overhead and would know that David was somewhere up there. Or again he would be out over the sunlit waters, plummeting headlong down to them and then at the last moment swiftly spreading his wings so that he just skimmed the wave-crests with the screaming gulls before he rocketed upward again.

Never yet had David been away from the island, but the doctor knew from his own infrequent visits to the mainland that the world-wide interest in the flying youth was still strong. The photographs which the doctor gave to scientific journals no longer sufficed for the public curiosity, and launches and airplanes with moving-picture cameramen frequently circled the island to snap pictures of David Rand flying.

To one of those airplanes occurred a thing that gave its occupants much to talk about for days to come. They were

a pilot and cameraman who came over the island at midday, in spite of Doctor Harriman's prohibition of such flights, and who circled brazenly about looking for the flying youth.

Had they looked up, they could have seen David as a circling speck high above them. He watched the airplane with keen interest mixed with contempt. He had seen these flying ships before and he felt only pity and scorn for their stiff, clumsy wings and noisy motors with which wingless men made shift to fly. This one, though, so directly beneath him, stimulated his curiosity so that he swooped down toward it from above and behind, his great wings urging him against the slip-stream of its propeller.

The pilot in the open rear-cockpit of that airplane nearly had heart failure when someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind. He whirled, startled, and when he saw David Rand crouching precariously on the fuselage just behind him, grinning at him, he lost his head for a moment so that the ship side-slipped and started to fall.

With a shouting laugh, David Rand leaped off the fuselage and spread his wings to soar up past it. The pilot recovered enough presence of mind to right his ship, and presently David saw it move unsteadily off toward the mainland. Its occupants had enough of the business for one day.

But the increasing number of such curious visitors stimulated in David Rand a reciprocal curiosity concerning the outside world. He wondered more and more what lay beyond the low, dim line of the mainland over there across the blue waters. He could not understand why Doctor John forbade him to fly over there, when well he knew that his wings would bear him up for a hundred times that distance.

Doctor Harriman told him, "I'll take you there soon, David. But you must wait until you understand things better—you wouldn't fit in with the rest of the world, yet."

"Why not?" demanded David puzzledly.

The doctor explained, "You have wings, and no one else in the world has. That might make things very difficult for you."

"But why?"

Harriman stroked his spare chin and said thoughtfully, "You'd be a sensation, a sort of freak, David. They'd be curious about you because you're different, but they'd look down on you for the same reason. That's why I brought you up out here, to avoid that. You must wait a little longer before you see the world."

David Rand flung a hand up to point half angrily at a streaming flock of piping wild birds, heading south, black against the autumn sunset. "*They* don't wait! Every fall I see them, everything that flies, going away. Every spring I see them returning, passing overhead again. And I have to stay on this little island!"

A wild pulse of freedom surged in his blue eyes.

"I want to go as they do, to see the land over there, and the lands beyond that."

"Soon you shall go over there," promised Doctor Harriman. "I will go with you—will look out for you there."

But through the dusk that evening, David sat with chin in hand, wings folded, staring broodingly after the straggling, southing birds. And in the days that followed, he took less and less pleasure in mere aimless flight above the island, and more and more watched wistfully the endless, merry passage of the honking wild geese and swarming ducks and whistling songbirds.

DOCTOR HARRIMAN saw and understood that yearning in David's eyes, and the old physician sighed.

"He has grown up," he thought, "and wants to go like any young bird that would leave its nest. I shall not be able much longer to keep him from leaving."

But it was Harriman himself who left first, in a different way. For some time the doctor's heart had troubled him, and there came a morning when he did not awaken, and when a dazed, uncomprehending David stared down at his guardian's still white face.

Through all that day, while the old housekeeper wept softly about the place and the Norwegian was gone in the boat to the mainland to arrange the funeral, David Rand sat with folded wings and chin in hand, staring out across the blue waters.

That night, when all was dark and silent around the bungalow, he stole into the room where the doctor lay silent and peaceful. In the darkness, David touched the thin, cold hand. Hot tears swam in his eyes and he felt a hard lump in his throat as he made that futile gesture of farewell.

Then he went softly back out of the house into the night. The moon was a red shield above the eastern waters and the autumn wind blew cold and crisp. Down through the keen air came the joyous piping and carolling and whistling of a long swarm of wild birds, like shrill bugle-calls of gay challenge.

David's knees bent, and he sprang upward with whirring wings—up and up, the icy air streaming past his body, thundering in his ears, his nostrils drinking it. And the dull sorrow in his heart receded in the bursting joy of flight and freedom. He was up among those shrilling, whistling birds now, the screaming wind tearing laughter from his lips as they scattered in alarm from him.

Then as they saw that this strange winged creature who had joined them made no move to harm them, the wild birds reformed their scattered flock. Far off across the dim, heaving plain of the waters glowed the dull red moon and the scattered lights of the mainland, the little lights of earthbound folk. The birds shrilled loud and David laughed and sang in joyous chorus as his great wings whirred in time with their own, trailing high across the night sky toward adventure and freedom, flying south.

All through that night, and with brief rests through the next day also, David flew southward, for a time over endless waters and then over the green, fertile land. His hunger he satisfied by dipping toward trees loaded with ripening fruit. When the next night came he slept in a crotch high in a tall forest oak, crouched comfortably with his wings folded about him.

It was not long before the world learned that the freak youth with wings was abroad. People in farms and villages and cities looked up incredulously at that slim figure winging high overhead. Ignorant Negroes who had never heard of David Rand flung themselves prostrate in panic as he passed across the sky.

Through all that winter there were reports of David from the southland, reports that made it evident he had become almost completely a creature of the wild. What greater pleasure than to soar through the long sun-drenched days over the blue tropic seas, to swoop on the silver fish that broke from the waters, to gather strange fruits and sleep at night in a high tree close against the stars, and wake with dawn to another day of unfettered freedom?

Now and again he would circle unsuspected over some city at night, soaring slowly in the darkness and peering down curiously at the vast pattern of straggling lights and the blazing streets choked with swarms of people and vehicles. He would not enter those cities and he could not see how the people in them could bear to live so, crawling over the surface of the earth amid the rubbing and jostling of hordes like them, never knowing even for a moment the wild clean joy of soaring through blue infinities of sky. What could make life worthwhile for such earthbound, ant-like folk?

When the spring sun grew hotter and higher, and the birds began to flock together in noisy swarms, David too felt something tugging him northward. So he flew north over the spring-green land, great bronzed wings tirelessly beating the air, a slim, tanned figure arrowing unerringly north.

He came at last to his goal, the island where he had lived most of his life. It lay lonely and deserted now in the empty waters, dust gathering over the things in the abandoned bungalow, the garden weed-grown. David settled down there for a time, sleeping upon the porch, making long flights for amusement, west over the villages and dingy cities, north over the rugged, wave-dashed coast, east over the blue sea; until at last the flowers began to die and the air grew frosty, and the deep urge tugged at David until again he joined the great flocks of winged things going south.

North and south—south and north—for three years that wild freedom of unchecked migration was his. In those three years he came to know mountain and valley, sea and river, storm and calm, and hunger and thirst, as only they of the wild know them. And in those years the world became accustomed to David, almost forgot him. He was the winged man, just a freak; there would never be another like him.

THEN in the third spring there came the end to David Rand's winged freedom. He was on his spring flight north, and at dusk felt hunger. He made out in the twilight a suburban mansion amid extensive orchards and gardens, and swooped down toward it with ideas of early berries. He was very near the trees in the twilight when a gun roared from the ground. David felt a blinding stab of pain through his head, and knew nothing more.

When he awoke, it was in a bed in a sunlit room. There were a kind-faced elderly man and a girl in the room, and another man who looked like a doctor. David discovered that there was a bandage around his head. These people, he saw, were all looking at him with intense interest.

The elderly, kind-looking man said, "You're David Rand, the fellow with wings? Well, you're mighty lucky to be living." He explained, "You see, my gardener has been watching for a hawk that steals our chickens. When you swooped down in the dusk last night, he fired at you before he could recognize you. Some of the shot from his gun just grazed your head."

The girl asked gently, "Are you feeling better now? The doctor says you'll soon be as good as ever." She added, "This is my father, Wilson Hall. I'm Ruth Hall."

David stared up at her. He thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful as this shy, soft, dark girl with her curling black hair and tender, worried brown eyes.

He suddenly knew the reason for the puzzling persistence with which the birds sought each other out and clung together

in pairs, each mating season. He felt the same thing in his own breast now, the urge toward this girl. He did not think of it as love, but suddenly he loved her.

He told Ruth Hall slowly, "I'm all right now."

But she said, "You must stay here until you're completely well. It's the least we can do when it was our servant who almost killed you."

David stayed, as the wound healed. He did not like the house, whose rooms seemed so dark and stiflingly close to him, but he found that he could stay outside during the day, and could sleep on a porch at night.

Neither did he like the newspaper men and cameramen who came to Wilson Hall's house to get stories about the winged man's accident; but these soon ceased coming, for David Rand was not now the sensation he had been years ago. And while visitors to the Hall home stared rather disconcertingly at him and at his wings, he got used to that.

He put up with everything, so that he might be near Ruth Hall. His love for her was a clean fire burning inside him and nothing in the world now seemed so desirable as that she should love him too. Yet because he was still mostly of the wild, and had had little experience in talking, he found it hard to tell her what he felt.

He did tell her, finally, sitting beside her in the sunlit garden. When he had finished, Ruth's gentle brown eyes were troubled.

"You want me to marry you, David?"

"Why, yes," he said, a little puzzled. "That's what they call it when people mate, isn't it? And I want you for my mate."

She said, distressed, "But David, your wings——"

He laughed. "Why, there's nothing the matter with my wings. The accident didn't hurt them. See!"

And he leaped to his feet, whipping open the great bronze wings that glittered in the sunlight, looking like a figure of fable poised for a leap into the blue, his slim tanned body clad only in the shorts which were all the clothing he would wear.

The trouble did not leave Ruth's eyes. She explained, "It's not that, David—it's that your wings make you so different from everybody else. Of course it's wonderful that you can fly, but they make you so different from everyone else that people look on you as a kind of freak."

David stared. "*You* don't look on me as that, Ruth?"

"Of course not," Ruth said. "But it does seem somehow a little abnormal, monstrous, your having wings."

"Monstrous?" he repeated. "Why, it's nothing like that. It's just—beautiful, being able to fly. See!"

And he sprang upward with great wings whirring—up and up, climbing into the blue sky, dipping and darting and turning up there like a swallow, then cometing down in a breathless swoop to land lightly on his toes beside the girl.

"Is there anything monstrous about that?" he demanded joyously. "Why, Ruth, I want you to fly with me, held in my arms, so that you'll know the beauty of it as I know it."

The girl shuddered a little. "I couldn't, David. I know it's silly, but when I see you in the air like that you don't seem so much a man as a bird, a flying animal, something unhuman."

David Rand stared at her, suddenly miserable. "Then you won't marry me—because of my wings?"

He grasped her in his strong, tanned arms, his lips seeking her soft mouth.

"Ruth, I can't live without you now that I've met you. I can't!"

It was on a night a little later that Ruth, somewhat hesitantly, made her suggestion. The moon flooded the garden with calm silver, gleamed on David Rand's folded wings as he sat with keen young face bent eagerly toward the girl.

She said, "David, there is a way in which we could marry and be happy, if you love me enough to do it."

"I'll do anything!" he cried. "You know that."

She hesitated.

"Your wings—they're what keep us apart. I can't have a husband who belongs more to the wild creatures than to the human race, a husband whom everyone would consider a freak, a deformed oddity. But if you were to have your wings taken off——"

He stared at her. "My wings taken off?"

She explained in an eager little rush of words. "It's quite practicable, David. Doctor White, who treated you for that wound and who examined you then, has told me that it would be quite easy to amputate your wings above their bases. There would be no danger at all in it, and it would leave only the slight projection of the stumps on your back. Then you'd be a normal man and not a freak," she added, her soft face earnest and appealing. "Father would give you a position in his business, and instead of an abnormal, roaming, half-human creature you would be like—like everyone else. We could be so happy then."

David Rand was stunned. "Amputate my wings?" he repeated almost uncomprehendingly. "You won't marry me unless I do that?"

"I can't," said Ruth painfully. "I love you, David, I do—but I want my husband to be like other women's husbands."

"Never to fly again," said David slowly, his face white in the moonlight. "To become earthbound, like everyone else! No!" he cried, springing to his feet in a wild revulsion. "I won't do it—I won't give up my wings! I won't become like——"

He stopped abruptly. Ruth was sobbing into her hands. All his anger gone, he stooped beside her, pulled down her hands, yearningly tilted up her soft, tear-stained face.

"Don't cry, Ruth," he begged. "It isn't that I don't love you—I do, more than anything else on earth. But I had never thought of giving up my wings—the idea stunned me." He told her, "You go on into the house. I must think it over a little."

She kissed him, her mouth quivering, and then was gone through the moonlight to the house. And David Rand remained, his brain in turmoil, pacing nervously in the silver light.

Give up his wings? Never again to dip and soar and swoop with the winged things of the sky, never again to know the mad exaltation and tameless freedom of rushing flight?

Yet—to give up Ruth—to deny this blind, irresistible yearning for her that beat in every atom of him—to know bitter loneliness and longing for her the rest of his life—how could he do that? He couldn't do it. He *wouldn't*.

So David went rapidly toward the house and met the girl waiting for him on the moonlit terrace.

"David?"

"Yes, Ruth, I'll do it. I'll do anything for you."

She sobbed happily on his breast. "I knew you really loved me, David. I knew it."

Two days later David Rand came out of the mists of anesthesia in a hospital room, feeling very strange, his back an aching soreness. Doctor White and Ruth were bending over his bed.

"Well, it was a complete success, young man," said the doctor. "You'll be out of here in a few days."

Ruth's eyes were shining. "The day you leave, David, we'll be married."

When they were gone, David slowly felt his back. Only the bandaged, projecting stumps of his wings remained. He could move the great wing-muscles, but no whirring pinions answered. He felt dazed and strange, as though some most vital part of him was gone. But he clung to the thought of Ruth—of Ruth waiting for him——

And she was waiting for him, and they were married on the day he left the hospital. And in the sweetness of her love, David lost all of that strange dazed feeling, and almost forgot that once he had possessed wings and had roamed the sky a wild, winged thing.

WILSON HALL gave his daughter and son-in-law a pretty white cottage on a wooded hill near town, and made a place for David in his business and was patient with his ignorance of commercial matters. And every day David drove his car into town and worked all day in his office and drove back homeward in the dusk to sit with Ruth before their fire, her head on his shoulder.

"David, are you sorry that you did it?" Ruth would ask anxiously at first.

And he would laugh and say, "Of course not, Ruth. Having you is worth anything."

And he told himself that that was true, that he did not regret the loss of his wings. All that past time when he had flown the sky with whirring wings seemed only a strange dream and only now had he awakened to real happiness, he assured himself.

Wilson Hall told his daughter, "David's doing well down at the office. I was afraid he would always be a little wild, but he's settled down fine."

Ruth nodded happily and said, "I knew that he would. And everyone likes him so much now."

For people who once had looked askance at Ruth's marriage now remarked that it had turned out very well after all.

"He's really quite nice. And except for the slight humps on his shoulders, you'd never think that he had been different from anyone else," they said.

So the months slipped by. In the little cottage on the wooded hill was complete happiness until there came the fall, frosting the lawn with silver each morning, stamping crazy colors on the maples.

One fall night David woke suddenly, wondering what had so abruptly awakened him. Ruth was still sleeping softly with gentle breathing beside him. He could hear no sound.

Then he heard it. A far-away, ghostly whistling trailing down from the frosty sky, a remote, challenging shrilling that throbbed with a dim, wild note of pulsing freedom.

He knew what it was, instantly. He swung open the window and peered up into the night with beating heart. And up there he saw them, long, streaming files of hurtling wild birds, winging southward beneath the stars. In an instant the wild impulse to spring from the window, to rocket up after them into the clean, cold night, clamored blindly in David's heart.

Instinctively the great wing-muscles at his back tensed. But only the stumps of his wings moved beneath his pajama jacket.

And suddenly he was limp, trembling, aghast at that blind surge of feeling. Why, for a moment he had wanted to go, to leave *Ruth.* The thought appalled him, was like a treachery against himself. He crept back into bed and lay, determinedly shutting his ears to that distant, joyous whistling that fled southward through the night.

THE next day he plunged determinedly into his work at the office. But all through that day he found his eyes straying to the window's blue patch of sky. And week by week thereafter, all through the long months of winter and spring, the old wild yearning grew more and more an unreasonable ache inside his heart, stronger than ever when the flying creatures came winging north in spring.

He told himself savagely, "You're a fool. You love Ruth more than anything else on earth and you have her. You don't want anything else."

And again in the sleepless night he would assure himself, "I'm a man, and I'm happy to live a normal man's life, with Ruth."

But in his brain old memories whispered slyly, "Do you remember that first time you flew, that mad thrill of soaring upward for the first time, the first giddy whirl and swoop and glide?"

And the night wind outside the window called, "Remember how you raced with me, beneath the stars and above the sleeping world, and how you laughed and sang as your wings fought me?"

And David Rand buried his face in his pillow and muttered, "I'm *not* sorry I did it. I'm not!"

Ruth awoke and asked sleepily, "Is anything the matter, David?"

"No, dear," he told her, but when she slept again he felt the hot tears stinging his eyelids, and whispered blindly, "I'm lying to myself. I want to fly again."

But from Ruth, happily occupied with his comfort and their home and their friends, he concealed all that blind, buried longing. He fought to conquer it, destroy it, but could not.

When no one else was by, he would watch with aching heart the swallows darting and diving in the sunset, or the hawk soaring high and remote in the blue, or the kingfisher's thrilling swoop. And then bitterly he would accuse himself of being a traitor to his own love for Ruth.

Then that spring Ruth shyly told him something. "David, next fall—a child of ours——"

He was startled. "Ruth, dear!" Then he asked, "You're not afraid that it might be——"

She shook her head confidently. "No. Doctor White says there is no chance that it will be born abnormal as you were. He says that the different gene-characters that caused you to be born with wings are bound to be a recessive character, not a dominant, and that there is no chance of that abnormality being inherited. Aren't you glad?"

"Of course," he said, holding her tenderly. "It's going to be wonderful."

Wilson Hall beamed at the news. "A grandchild—that's fine!" he exclaimed. "David, do you know what I'm going to do after its birth? I'm going to retire and leave you as head of the firm."

"Oh, dad!" cried Ruth, and kissed her father joyfully.

David stammered his thanks. And he told himself that this ended for good all his vague, unreasonable longings. He was going to have more than Ruth to think about now, was going to have the responsibilities of a family man.

He plunged into work with new zest.

For a few weeks he did entirely forget that old blind yearning, in his planning for things to come. He was all over that now, he told himself.

Then suddenly his whole being was overturned by an amazing thing. For some time the wing-stumps on David's shoulders had felt sore and painful. Also it seemed they were much larger than they had been. He took occasion to examine them in a mirror and was astounded to discover that they had grown out in two very large hump-like projections that curved downward on each side along his back.

David Rand stared and stared into the mirror, a strange surmise in his eyes. Could it be possible that——

He called on Doctor White the next day, on another pretext. But before he left he asked casually, "Doctor, I was wondering, is there any chance that my wings would ever start to grow out again?"

Doctor White said thoughtfully, "Why, I suppose there *is* a chance of it, at that. A newt can regenerate a lost limb, you know, and numerous animals have similar powers of regeneration. Of course an ordinary man cannot regenerate a lost arm or leg like that, but your body is not an ordinary one and your wings might possess some power of partial regeneration, for one time at least." He added, "You don't need to worry about it, though, David. If they start to grow out again, just come in and I'll remove them again without any trouble."

David Rand thanked him and left. But day after day thereafter, he closely watched and soon saw beyond doubt that the freak of genes that had given him wings in the first place had also given him at least a partial power of regenerating them.

For the wings were growing out again, day by day. The humps on his shoulders had become very much larger, though covered by his specially tailored coats the change in them was not noticed. They broke through late that summer in wings —real wings, though small as yet. Folded under his clothing, they were not apparent.

David knew that he should go in and let the doctor amputate them before they got larger. He told himself that he did not any longer want wings—Ruth and the coming child and their future together were all that meant anything to him now.

Yet still he did not say anything to anyone, kept the growing wings concealed and closed beneath his clothing. They were poor, weak wings, compared to his first ones, as though stunted by the previous amputation. It was unlikely that he would ever be able to fly with them, he thought, even if he wanted to, which he didn't.

He told himself, though, that it would be easier to have them removed after they had attained their full size. Besides, he didn't want to disturb Ruth at this time by telling her that the wings had grown again. So he reassured himself, and so the weeks passed until by early October his second wings had grown to their full size, though they were stunted and pitiful compared to his first splendid pinions.

ON THE first week in October, a little son was born to Ruth and David. A fine, strong-limbed little boy, without a trace of anything unusual about him. He was normal of weight, and his back was straight and smooth, and he would never have wings. And a few nights later they were all in the little cottage, admiring him.

"Isn't he beautiful?" asked Ruth, looking up with eyes shining with pride.

David nodded dumbly, his heart throbbing with emotion as he looked down at the red, sleeping mite. His son!

"He's wonderful," he said humbly. "Ruth, dear—I want to work the rest of my life for you and for him."

Wilson Hall beamed on them and chuckled, "You're going to have a chance to do that, David. What I said last spring goes. This afternoon I formally resigned as head of the firm and saw that you were named as my successor."

David tried to thank him. His heart was full with complete happiness, with love for Ruth and for their child. He felt that no one before had ever been so happy.

Then after Wilson Hall had left, and Ruth was sleeping and he was alone, David suddenly realized that there was something he must do.

He told himself sternly, "All these months you've been lying to yourself, making excuses for yourself, letting your wings grow again. In your heart, all that time, you were hoping that you would be able to fly again."

He laughed. "Well, *that's* all over, now. I only told myself before that I didn't want to fly. It wasn't true, then, but it is now. I'll never again long for wings, for flying, now that I have both Ruth and the boy."

No, never again—that was ended. He would drive into town this very night and have Doctor White remove these new-grown second wings. He would never even let Ruth know about them.

Flushed with that resolve, he hurried out of the cottage into the windy darkness of the fall night. The red moon was lifting above the treetops eastward and by its dull light he started back toward the garage. All around him the trees were bending and creaking under the brawling, jovial hammering of the hard north wind.

David stopped suddenly. Down through the frosty night had come a faint, far sound that jerked his head erect. A distant, phantom whistling borne on the rushing wind, rising, falling, growing stronger and stronger—the wild birds, southing through the noisy night, shrilling their exultant challenge as the wind bore their wings onward. That wild throb of freedom that he had thought dead clutched hard of a sudden at David's heart.

He stared up into the darkness with brilliant eyes, hair blowing in the wind. To be up there with them just once again —to fly with them just one more time——

Why not? Why not fly this one last time and so satisfy that aching longing before he lost these last wings? He would not go far, would make but a short flight and then return to have the wings removed, to devote his life to Ruth and their son. No one would ever know.

Swiftly he stripped off his clothing in the darkness, stood erect, spreading the wings that had been so long concealed and confined. Quaking doubt assailed him. Could he fly at all, now? Would these poor, stunted, second wings even bear him aloft for a few minutes? No, they wouldn't—he knew they wouldn't!

The wild wind roared louder through the groaning trees, the silvery shrilling high overhead came louder. David stood poised, knees bent, wings spread for the leap upward, agony on his white face. He couldn't try it—he knew that he couldn't leave the ground.

But the wind was shouting in his ears, "You can do it, you can fly again! See, I am behind you, waiting to lift you, ready to race you up there under the stars!"

And the exultant, whistling voices high above were shrilling, "Upward—up with us! You belong among us, not down there! Upward—fly!"

He sprang! The stunted wings smote the air wild, and he was soaring! The dark trees, the lighted window of the cottage, the whole hilltop, dropped behind and below him as his wings bore him upward on the bellowing wind.

Up, up—clean, hard battering of the cold air on his face once more, the crazy roaring of the wind around him, the great thrash of his wings bearing him higher and higher.

David Rand's high, ringing laughter pealed out on the screaming wind as he flew on between the stars and the nighted earth. Higher and higher, right up among the shrilling, southing birds that companioned him on either side. On and on he flew with them.

He knew suddenly that this alone was living, this alone was waking. All that other life that had been his, down there, that had been the dream, and he had awakened from it now. It was not *he* who worked in an office and had loved a woman and a child down there. It was a dream David Rand who had done that, and the dream was over now.

Southward, southward, he rushed through the night, and the wind screamed, and the moon rose higher, until at last the land passed from beneath and he flew with the flying birds over moonlit plains of ocean. He knew that it was madness to fly on with these poor wings that already were tiring and weakening, but he had no thought in his exultant brain of turning back. To fly on, to fly this one last time, that was enough!

So that when his tired wings began at last to fail, and he began to sink lower and lower toward the silvered waters, there was no fear and no regret in his breast. It was what he had always expected and wanted, at the end, and he was drowsily glad—glad to be falling as all they with wings must finally fall, after a brief lifetime of wild, sweet flight, dropping contentedly to rest.

Microcosms

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

In this strange thing we call today
  Are all the ages that have gone
Since Beauty with her mystic sway
  Bid Chaos flee before the dawn.

In this strange thing we hold so dear,
  This flesh that crumbles into dust,
Are souls of idiot and seer,
  The dead years' godliness and lust.

Mother of Toads

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Weird and powerful was the effect on the young apprentice of the potion given him by Mère Antoinette, known by the villagers as "the Mother of Toads"

"WHY must you always hurry away, my little one?"

The voice of Mère Antoinette, the witch, was an amorous croaking. She ogled Pierre, the apothecary's young apprentice, with eyes full-orbed and unblinking as those of a toad. The folds beneath her chin swelled like the throat of some great batrachian. Her short flat fingers, outspread on her soiled apron, revealed an appearance as of narrow webs between their first flanges.

Pierre Baudin, as usual, gave no answer but turned his eyes from Mère Antoinette with an air of impatience. Her voice, raucously coaxing, persisted:

"Stay awhile tonight, my pretty orphan. No one will miss you in the village. And your master will not mind."

Pierre tossed his head with the disdain of a young Adonis. The witch was more than twice his age, and her charms were too uncouth and unsavory to tempt him for an instant. She was repellently fat and lumpish, and her skin possessed an unwholesome pallor. Also, her repute was such as to have nullified the attractions of a younger and fairer sorceress. Her witchcraft had made her feared among the peasantry of that remote province, where belief in spells and philtres was still common. The people of Averoigne called her *La Mère des Crapauds,* Mother of Toads, a name given for more than one reason. Toads swarmed innumerably about her hut; they were said to be her familiars, and dark tales were told concerning their relationship to the sorceress, and the duties they performed at her bidding. Such tales were all the more readily believed because of those batrachian features that had always been remarked in her aspect.

The youth disliked her, even as he disliked the sluggish, abnormally large toads on which he had sometimes trodden in the dusk, upon the path between her hut and the village of Les Hiboux. He could hear some of these creatures croaking now; and it seemed, weirdly, that they uttered half-articulate echoes of the witch's words.

It would be dark soon, he reflected. The path along the marshes was not pleasant by night, and he felt doubly anxious to depart. Still without replying to Mère Antoinette's invitation, he reached for the black triangular vial she had set before him on her greasy table. The vial contained a philtre of curious potency which his master, Alain le Dindon, had sent him to procure. Le Dindon, the village apothecary, was wont to deal surreptitiously in certain dubious medicaments supplied by the witch; and Pierre had often gone on such errands to her osier-hidden hut.

The old apothecary, whose humor was rough and ribald, had sometimes rallied Pierre concerning Mère Antoinette's pref-

erence for him. Remembering certain admonitory gibes, more witty than decent, the boy flushed angrily as he turned to go.

"Stay," insisted Mère Antoinette. "The fog is cold on the marshes; and it thickens apace. I knew that you were coming, and I have mulled for you a goodly measure of the red wine of Ximes."

She removed the lid from an earthen pitcher and poured its steaming contents into a large cup. The purplish-red wine creamed delectably, and an odor of hot, delicious spices filled the hut, overpowering the less agreeable odors from the simmering cauldron, the half-dried newts, vipers, bat-wings and evil, nauseous herbs hanging on the walls, and the reek of the black candles of pitch and corpse-tallow that burned always, by noon or night, in that murky interior.

"I'll drink it," said Pierre, a little grudgingly; "that is, if it contains nothing of your own concoction."

"'Tis naught but sound wine, four seasons old, with spices of Arabia," the sorceress croaked ingratiatingly. "'Twill warm your stomach . . . and . . ." she added something inaudible as Pierre accepted the cup.

Before drinking, he inhaled the fumes of the beverage with some caution but was reassured by its pleasant smell. Surely it was innocent of any drug, any philtre brewed by the witch: for, to his knowledge, her preparations were all evil-smelling.

Still, as if warned by some premonition, he hesitated. Then he remembered that the sunset air was indeed chill; that mists had gathered furtively behind him as he came to Mère Antoinette's dwelling. The wine would fortify him for the dismal return walk to Les Hiboux. He quaffed it quickly and set down the cup.

"Truly, it is good wine," he declared. "But I must go now."

Even as he spoke, he felt in his stomach and veins the spreading warmth of the alcohol, of the spices . . . of something more ardent than these. It seemed that his voice was unreal and strange, falling as if from a height above him. The warmth grew, mounting within him like a golden flame fed by magic oils. His blood, a seething torrent, poured tumultuously and more tumultuously through his members.

There was a deep soft thundering in his ears, a rosy dazzlement in his eyes. Somehow the hut appeared to expand, to change luminously about him. He hardly recognized its squalid furnishings, its litter of baleful oddments, on which a torrid splendor was shed by the black candles, tipped with ruddy fire, that towered and swelled gigantically into the soft gloom. His blood burned as with the throbbing flame of the candles.

It came to him, for an instant, that all this was a questionable enchantment, a glamor wrought by the witch's wine. Fear was upon him and he wished to flee. Then, close beside him, he saw Mère Antoinette.

Briefly he wondered why he had thought her old and gross and repulsive: for it seemed that he looked upon Lilith, the first witch. . . . The lumpish limbs and body had grown voluptuous; the pale, thick-lipped mouth enticed him with a promise of ampler kisses than other mouths could yield. He knew why the magic warmth mounted ever higher and hotter within him. . . .

"Do you like me now, my little one?" she questioned. . . .

PIERRE awoke in the ashy dawn, when the tall black tapers had dwindled down and had melted limply in their sockets. Sick and confused, he sought vainly to remember where he was or

what he had done. Then, turning a little, he saw beside him on the couch a thing that was like some impossible monster of ill dreams: a toad-like form, large as a fat woman. Its limbs were somehow like a woman's arms and legs. Its pale, warty body pressed and bulged against him, and he felt the rounded softness of something that resembled a breast.

Nausea rose within him as memory of that delirious night returned. Most foully he had been beguiled by the witch, and had succumbed to her evil enchantments.

It seemed that an incubus smothered him, weighing upon all his limbs and body. He shut his eyes, that he might no longer behold the loathsome thing that was Mère Antoinette in her true semblance. Slowly, with prodigious effort, he drew himself away from the crushing nightmare shape. It did not stir or appear to waken; and he slid quickly from the couch.

Again, compelled by a noisome fascination, he peered at the thing on the couch—and saw only the gross form of Mère Antoinette. Perhaps his impression of a great toad beside him had been but an illusion, a half-dream that lingered after slumber. He lost something of his nightmarish horror; but his gorge still rose in a sick disgust, remembering the lewdness to which he had yielded.

Fearing that the witch might awaken at any moment and seek to detain him, he stole noiselessly from the hut. It was broad daylight, but a cold, hueless mist lay everywhere, shrouding the reedy marshes, and hanging like a ghostly curtain on the path he must follow to Les Hiboux. Moving and seething always, the mist seemed to reach toward him with intercepting fingers as he started homeward. He shivered at its touch, he bowed his head and drew his cloak closer around him.

Thicker and thicker the mist swirled, coiling, writhing endlessly, as if to bar Pierre's progress. He could discern the twisting, narrow path for only a few paces in advance. It was hard to find the familiar landmarks, hard to recognize the osiers and willows that loomed suddenly before him like gray phantoms and faded again into the white nothingness as he went onward. Never had he seen such fog: it was like the blinding, stifling fumes of a thousand witch-stirred cauldrons.

Though he was not altogether sure of his surroundings, Pierre thought that he had covered half the distance to the village. Then, all at once, he began to meet the toads. They were hidden by the mist till he came close upon them. Misshapen, unnaturally big and bloated, they squatted in his way on the little footpath or hopped sluggishly before him from the pallid gloom on either hand.

Several struck against his feet with a horrible and heavy flopping. He stepped unaware upon one of them, and slipped in the squashy noisomeness it had made, barely saving himself from a headlong fall on the bog's rim. Black, miry water gloomed close beside him as he staggered there.

Turning to regain his path, he crushed others of the toads to an abhorrent pulp under his feet. The marshy soil was alive with them. They flopped against him from the mist, striking his legs, his bosom, his very face with their clammy bodies. They rose up by scores like a devil-driven legion. It seemed that there was a malignance, an evil purpose in their movements, in the buffeting of their violent impact. He could make no progress on the swarming path, but lurched to and fro, slipping blindly, and shielding his face with lifted hands. He felt an eery consternation, an eldritch horror. It

was as if the nightmare of his awakening in the witch's hut had somehow returned upon him.

The toads came always from the direction of Les Hiboux, as if to drive him back toward Mère Antoinette's dwelling. They bounded against him like a monstrous hail, like missiles flung by unseen demons. The ground was covered by them, the air was filled with their hurtling bodies. Once, he nearly went down beneath them.

Their number seemed to increase, they pelted him in a noxious storm. He gave way before them, his courage broke, and he started to run at random, without knowing that he had left the safe path. Losing all thought of direction, in his frantic desire to escape from those impossible myriads, he plunged on amid the dim reeds and sedges, over ground that quivered gelatinously beneath him. Always at his heels he heard the soft, heavy flopping of the toads; and sometimes they rose up like a sudden wall to bar his way and turn him aside. More than once, they drove him back from the verge of hidden quagmires into which he would otherwise have fallen. It was as if they were herding him deliberately and concertedly to a destined goal.

Now, like the lifting of a dense curtain, the mist rolled away, and Pierre saw before him in a golden dazzle of morning sunshine the green, thick-growing osiers that surrounded Mère Antoinette's hut. The toads had all disappeared, though he could have sworn that hundreds of them were hopping close about him an instant previously. With a feeling of helpless fright and panic, he knew that he was still within the witch's toils; that the toads were indeed her familiars, as so many people believed them to be. They had prevented his escape, and had brought him back to the foul creature . . . whether woman, batrachian, or both . . . who was known as the Mother of Toads.

Pierre's sensations were those of one who sinks momently deeper into some black and bottomless quicksand. He saw the witch emerge from the hut and come toward him. Her thick fingers, with pale folds of skin between them like the beginnings of a web, were stretched and flattened on the steaming cup that she carried. A sudden gust of wind arose as if from nowhere, and bore to Pierre's nostrils the hot, familiar spices of the drugged wine.

"Why did you leave so hastily, my little one?" There was an amorous wheedling in the very tone of the witch's question. "I should not have let you go without another cup of the good red wine, mulled and spiced for the warming of your stomach. . . . See, I have prepared it for you . . . knowing that you would return."

She came very close to him as she spoke, leering and sidling, and held the cup toward his lips. Pierre grew dizzy with the strange fumes and turned his head away. It seemed that a paralyzing spell had seized his muscles, for the simple movement required an immense effort.

His mind, however, was still clear, and the sick revulsion of that nightmare dawn returned upon him. He saw again the great toad that had lain at his side when he awakened.

"I will not drink your wine," he said firmly. "You are a foul witch, and I loathe you. Let me go."

"Why do you loathe me?" croaked Mère Antoinette. "I can give you all that other women give . . . and more."

"You are not a woman," said Pierre. "You are a big toad. I saw you in your

true shape this morning. I'd rather drown in the marsh-waters than stay with you again."

An indescribable change came upon the sorceress before Pierre had finished speaking. The leer slid from her thick and pallid features, leaving them blankly inhuman for an instant. Then her eyes bulged and goggled horribly, and her whole body appeared to swell as if inflated with venom.

"Go, then!" she spat with a guttural virulence. "But you will soon wish that you had stayed."

The queer paralysis had lifted from Pierre's muscles. It was as if the injunction of the angry witch had served to revoke an insidious, half-woven spell. With no parting glance or word, Pierre turned from her and fled with long, hasty steps, almost running, on the path to Les Hiboux.

HE HAD gone little more than a hundred paces when the fog began to return. It coiled shoreward in vast volumes from the marshes, it poured like smoke from the very ground at his feet. Almost instantly, the sun dimmed to a wan silver disk and disappeared. The blue heavens were lost in the pale and seething voidness overhead. The path before Pierre was blotted out till he seemed to walk on the sheer rim of a white abyss, that moved with him as he went.

Like the clammy arms of specters, with death-chill fingers that clutched and caressed, the weird mists drew closer still about Pierre. They thickened in his nostrils and throat, they dripped in a heavy dew from his garments. They choked him with the fetor of rank waters and putrescent ooze . . . and a stench as of liquefying corpses that had risen somewhere to the surface amid the fen.

Then, from the blank whiteness, the toads assailed Pierre in a surging, solid wave that towered above his head and swept him from the dim path with the force of falling seas as it descended. He went down, splashing and floundering, into water that swarmed with the numberless batrachians. Foul slime was in his mouth and nose as he struggled to regain his footing. The water, however, was only knee-deep, and the bottom, though slippery and oozy, supported him with little yielding when he stood erect.

He discerned indistinctly through the mist the near-by margin from which he had fallen. But his steps were weirdly and horribly hampered by the toad-seething waters when he strove to reach it. Inch by inch, with a hopeless panic deepening upon him, he fought toward the solid shore. The toads leaped and tumbled about him with a dizzying eddy-like motion. They swirled like a viscid undertow around his feet and shins. They swept and swirled in great loathsome undulations against his retarded knees.

However, he made slow and painful progress, till his outstretched fingers could almost grasp the wiry sedges that trailed from the low bank. Then, from that mist-bound shore, there fell and broke upon him a second deluge of these demoniac toads; and Pierre was borne helplessly backward into the filthy waters.

Held down by the piling and crawling masses, and drowning in nauseous darkness at the thick-oozed bottom, he clawed feebly at his assailants. For a moment, ere oblivion came, his fingers found among them the outlines of a monstrous form that was somehow toad-like . . . but large and heavy as a fat woman,

Escape

By PAUL ERNST

A brief weird tale about the escape of a madman

HE HAD the craziest form of craziness I've ever seen.

Of course, I hasten to add, I hadn't seen much. I'd been through an asylum once before, as now, to get a story for my paper on treatment and conditions of State inmates, and that was all. On that former trip I'd witnessed nothing like this; nor had I, till now, on this trip.

The man didn't look crazy. So often they don't. He was a medium-sized chap with gray in his hair and a look of sadness on his thin, mild face. A look of sadness — and determination. Neatly dressed, precise of movement, he was very busy in his cell. He paid no attention for a while as the guard and I stood at the barred door and watched him.

He was building something. He would pick up a tool, adjust it carefully, work with all the delicacy of a watchmaker for a moment. Then he would lay the tool down and pick up a gage and check his work. All very accurate and careful.

The only thing was that you couldn't see what he was building. And you couldn't see any tools, nor gages nor work-bench. There was nothing in the cell but the man, and a bolted-down cot and chair.

Nevertheless, the fellow was extraordinarily industrious. He would seize a nonexistent tool, examine it with a frown, and then use it on thin air, after which would come the inevitable measuring movements.

"It certainly looks," I said in a low tone to the attendant, "as though there should be something there."

The attendant grinned and nodded. And I continued to watch, fascinated.

You could follow the man through his whole box of tools, from his rational movements. Now he was boring a hole, obviously a very small hole, with a tiny metal-drill equipped with an egg-beater handle. Now he was just touching a surface with a file. Now he was sawing something else, after which he took the sawed part from an imaginary work-bench and tried it in its place—whatever and wherever that was.

I got still another glimpse of unity of effort as I watched him. Each little period of accurate workmanship ended with a trip four steps to his left, to a corner of his cell which was bright with sunlight. There, his motions said, was the thing he was working on. There was the object, slowly growing bit by accurate bit, which he was making and assembling.

It was uncanny. There simply ought to have been something there — a cabinet, chair, whatnot—and there wasn't.

The man slowly screwed an imaginary part to an imaginary whole, then laid down his imaginary screw-driver and walked to the door, for the first time acknowledging our presence there.

"Hello, Nick," he said to the attendant. His voice was as mild and as sad and as oddly determined as the rest of him.

"Hello," said the attendant affably. His good-natured, broad face turned from the man in the cell toward me.

"Meet Mr. Freer, Mr. Gannet. Mr. Freer's with a newspaper."

"Oh?" said Gannet, politely. He put out his hand so that I could shake it if I reached through the bars of his door a little. I hesitated, then grasped it. He didn't look dangerous.

"How're you doing with your what-is-it, Gannet?" the attendant said, nodding solemnly toward the bright corner where lay the object of the man's attentions.

"Pretty well," said Gannet. "This damned floor isn't quite level. It's three thirty-seconds of an inch to the foot off. I have to allow for that in every line and angle, and it makes it needlessly difficult."

"*What* is it you're building?" asked Nick wheedlingly. "You won't tell any of us, but won't you tell Mr. Freer, for his newspaper story?"

"There it is," shrugged Gannet, pointing to the corner. "See for yourself."

I stared involuntarily at the corner, then, feeling like a fool, back at his mild, sad face. Was there a ghost of a twinkle in his gray eyes? Or was it my imagination? I couldn't tell. I was beginning to feel a little crazy myself.

WE WALKED away. The big library and lounging-room where the almost-cured could sit and read was left for me to see. But I looked around without much interest as we passed through. I kept thinking of Gannet.

"Has he been going through that set of motions very long?" I asked the attendant.

"He started right after he got here," said Nick. "That was a year ago. He came here raving, trying to fight free and get back to the house where he'd lived with his son and daughter-in-law. There was something in his room he had to get, he said. Then he calmed down, and next day began going through the routine you saw. Some days he 'works' only a few hours, sometimes all day long and up until lights-out at night."

"The way he puttered around that corner made me think I was off myself, for not seeing something there," I said. "It was amazingly realistic. As though you could surely *feel* what he was working on, even if you couldn't see it. Has anybody ever felt around that corner where he spends his time?"

"Hey, boy," said Nick, "easy, now. Pretty soon we'll be sending a wagon for you."

"But has anybody?" I persisted, smiling.

"No. That's the one thing that brings out Gannet's kink: If anyone gets too close to that corner he gets quite violent. So we don't even clean there. We're trying to cure these folks, not upset 'em needlessly."

We went out the massive door of the main building, where a stalwart attendant eyed us sharply. There were nicely kept grounds, and then a high fence with inward-slanting barbs on its top.

"You don't want anybody to escape from here, do you?" I said, nodding toward the heavy door and the high fence.

Nick grinned. "Nope. And nobody ever has. Or ever will, I reckon. See you in church."

But he saw me sooner than that.

I kept thinking of the spare, mild-mannered man with the sad, determined eyes all evening, after I'd handed my story in to the paper. I kept thinking about him next morning. And next afternoon saw me at the asylum again, standing in front of Gannet's barred door.

He was as busy as he had been yesterday. But his activity seemed more mental than physical today. He would stand in the center of his cell, hand rubbing jaw, while he stared at the sunny corner. Then he would walk to the corner and touch a spot in midair with an inquisitive fore-

finger. Then he would step back and survey the atmosphere again, eyes running slowly up and down as though over the lines of a quite tangible thing.

Finally he took something out of his pocket and walked with a more decisive air to the corner. I saw his hands move close together, for all the world as though he were adjusting a micrometer or other delicate measuring-device. He applied his hands to the questionable point in nothingness.

As he had done yesterday, he paid no attention to observers at his door, at first. But finally he spoke, without looking up from his task.

"Hello, Freer."

"Hello," I said. Gannet had an unimpaired memory, at any rate.

"Come for another story?"

"In a way," I evaded.

He shook his head, meanwhile stepping a foot to the right and staring critically at nothing.

"I don't see how you stand it."

"Stand what?"

"Your work. The madness and despair of humanity—that's your stock in trade. You deal in war and famine and flood, in social injustice and political and civil brutalities. They're the intimate facts of your life. I don't see how you can live among such things. I can't even read about them."

I stared at him. I'd never met a man who seemed less crazy.

"Whether you face the facts intimately or detachedly," I said, "they are still facts and they're still there. You can't avoid them."

"But you can. At least *I* can. And I'm going to. I'm getting out of all this."

He squatted on his haunches, and began running his hands slowly over space, up and down, then horizontally. He straightened and repeated the process. I'll swear I could make out what he had in his mind. It was a sort of chair, with a very high back and unusually high arms.

Just as I had decided this—he sat in it.

You've seen stage tricksters sit in chairs with arms folded, when there are no chairs there to sit in? Well, this was the same. I gaped at Gannet, sitting in thin air. Not an impossible stunt, but always an arresting one.

He got up and came to the door.

"I can't take life as it's lived today, Gannet. A weakness, no doubt, but there you are."

"So you're getting out of it," I nodded.

"So I'm getting out of it. It's not for nothing that I am a mathematician and an inventor."

What a shame! I almost said it aloud, but didn't. I'd conceived a positive fancy for the sad-faced Mr. Gannet.

He stared at me quizzically.

"You needn't hunt up Nick," he said. "I'm not hinting at suicide. It's a more literal escape, I mean."

"Escape? With these barred doors, the high wall outside?"

"Oh, walls! Bars!" He waved his hand, dismissing them.

He walked back to his sunny corner and resumed his critical ocular and manual examinations of—nothing.

"You may have another story tomorrow, Freer," he said mildly. And then he turned his back, thereby dismissing me as he had the walls and bolts of his confinement.

I HUNTED up Nick on the way out. I felt like a traitor, but I knew it was for my new friend's own good.

"Gannet's talking of an escape," I said.

Nick's customary grin appeared on his broad face.

"Forget it. He's handed out that line before. Nobody could get out of here."

He walked to the high gate in the

fence with me, and waved as I got into my car.

I wasn't coming back any more. I didn't want to see Gannet again. He was such a nice little guy. But next noon saw me knocking for admittance a third time, summoned by a call from Nick.

"Got an exclusive for you, if you want it," he said. "An escape. I don't know that it's very important to you, but we've never had one before. That might make it worth a couple of inches."

"Escape?" I said.

"Yeah. Your man, Gannet."

"So he did it! But how?"

Nick grunted. "Suppose you tell me."

"In the night?" I asked.

He shook his head. "A little while ago, in broad daylight. He was seen in his cell at ten. An hour later the room was empty. He was gone."

"But he couldn't have simply walked out of the place in broad daylight."

"No," said Nick, "he couldn't."

"Was his door unlocked?"

"It was not. It was locked, from the outside, when we came to investigate the report that he was gone. His window bars are all right, too."

"You've searched the grounds?"

"Of course. He isn't in them. He isn't in any of the buildings. Nobody saw him after eleven o'clock. He's just gone, with his cell still locked so even a monkey couldn't slip out."

"You must have some idea how he got away."

"No idea. Because it can't be done. Only, it was."

"How am I going to get a story out of that?" I asked.

"How in thunder would I know? That's *your* worry."

I put a cigarette between my lips unlit because smoking wasn't permitted here.

"What in the world do you suppose he . . . thought he was building?" I mused.

Nick snorted. "I don't suppose anything about it. If I did, I'd be as crazy as he was. Well, there's your exclusive, if you know what to do with it."

I didn't know what to do with it, so I finally handed it in as it stands now. This very story, in fact. And the little man with the big vizor at the editor's desk promptly handed it back. Not that I blame him.

Nobody ever saw Gannet again. Nobody ever thought of him again, I guess. Except me. I had a rush of curiosity to the head a few days later, and went to his cell armed with a level and a steel rule.

The floor of the barred cubicle Gannet once occupied *is* three thirty-seconds of an inch off level. Now how do you suppose he could have determined that without tools of any kind to aid the naked eye?

Return to the Sabbath

By ROBERT BLOCH

A shuddery weird tale of Hollywood and the film industry—a story of the gruesome thing that emerged from the burial crypt

IT'S NOT the kind of story that the columnists like to print; it's not the yarn press-agents love to tell. When I was still in the Public Relations Department at the studio, they wouldn't let me break it. I knew better than to try, for no paper would print such a tale.

We publicity men must present Hollywood as a gay place; a world of glamor and star-dust. We capture only the light, but underneath the light there must always be shadows. I've always known that—it's been my job to gloss over those shadows for years—but the events of which I speak form a disturbing pattern too strange to be withheld. The shadow of these incidents is not *human*.

It's been the cursed weight of the whole affair that has proved my own mental undoing. That's why I resigned from the studio post, I guess. I wanted to forget, if I could. And now I know that the only way to relieve my mind is to tell the story. I must break the yarn, come what may. Then perhaps I can forget Karl Jorla's eyes. . . .

The affair dates back to one September evening almost three years ago. Les Kincaid and I were slumming down on Main Street in Los Angeles that night. Les is an assistant producer up at the studio, and there was some purpose in his visit; he was looking for authentic types to fill minor rôles in a gangster film he was doing. Les was peculiar that way; he preferred the real article, rather than the Casting Bureau's ready-made imitations.

We'd been wandering around for some time, as I recall, past the great stone Chows that guard the narrow alleys of Chinatown, over through the tourist-trap that is Olvera Street, and back along the flop-houses of lower Main. We walked by the cheap burlesque houses, eyeing the insolent Filipinos that sauntered past, and jostling our way through the usual Saturday night slumming parties.

We were both rather weary of it all. That's why, I suppose, the dingy little theatre appealed to us.

"Let's go in and sit down for a while," Les suggested. "I'm tired."

Even a Main Street burlesque show has seats in it, and I felt ready for a nap. The callipygy of the stage-attraction did not appeal to me, but I acceded to the suggestion and purchased our tickets.

We entered, sat down, suffered through two strip-tease dances, an incredibly ancient black-out sketch, and a "Grand Finale." Then, as is the custom in such places, the stage darkened and the screen flickered into life.

We got ready for our doze, then. The pictures shown in these houses are usually ancient specimens of the "quickie" variety; fillers provided to clear the house. As the first blaring notes of the soundtrack heralded the title of the opus, I closed my eyes, slouched lower in my seat, and mentally beckoned to Morpheus.

I WAS jerked back to reality by a sharp dig in the ribs. Les was nudging me and whispering.

"Look at this," he murmured, prod-

ding my reluctant body into wakefulness. "Ever see anything like it?"

I glanced up at the screen. What I expected to find I do not know, but I saw—*horror.*

There was a country graveyard, shadowed by ancient trees through which flickered rays of mildewed moonlight. It was an old graveyard, with rotting headstones set in grotesque angles as they leered up at the midnight sky.

The camera cut down on one grave, a fresh one. The music on the soundtrack grew louder, in cursed climax. But I forgot camera and film as I watched. That grave was reality—hideous reality.

The grave was *moving!*

The earth beside the headstone was heaving and churning, as though it were being dug out. Not from above, but from *below.* It quaked upward ever so slowly; terribly. Little clods fell. The sod pulsed out in a steady stream and little rills of earth kept falling in the moonlight as though there were something clawing the dirt away . . . something clawing from beneath.

That something—it would soon appear. And I began to be afraid. I—I didn't want to see what it was. The clawing from below was not natural; it held a purpose not altogether *human.*

Yet I had to look. I had to see him—it—emerge. The sod cascaded in a mound, and then I was staring at the edge of the grave, looking down at the black hole that gaped like a corpse-mouth in the moonlight. Something was coming out.

Something slithered through that fissure, fumbled at the side of the opening. It clutched the ground above the grave, and in the baleful beams of that demon's moon I knew it to be a human hand. A thin, white human hand that held but half its flesh. The hand of a lich, a skeleton claw. . . .

A second talon gripped the other side of the excavation top. And now, slowly, insidiously, arms emerged. Naked, fleshless arms.

They crawled across the earth-sides like leprous white serpents. The arms of a cadaver, a rising cadaver. It was pulling itself up. And as *it* emerged, a cloud fell across the moon-path. The light faded to shadows as the bulky head and shoulders came into view. One could see nothing, and one was thankful.

But the cloud was falling away from the moon now. In a second the face would be revealed. The face of the thing from the grave, the resurrected visage of that which should be rotted in death—what would it be?

The shadows fell back. A figure rose out of the grave, and the face turned toward me. I looked and saw——

Well, you've been to "horror pictures." You know what one usually sees. The "ape-man," or the "maniac" or the "death's-head." The papier-maché grotesquerie of the make-up artist. The "skull" of the dead.

I saw none of that. Instead, there was *horror.* It was the face of a child, I thought, at first; no, not a child, but a man with a child's soul. The face of a poet, perhaps, unwrinkled and calm. Long hair framed a high forehead; crescent eyebrows tilted over closed lids. The nose and mouth were thin and finely chiseled. Over the entire countenance was written an unearthly peace. It was as though the man were in a sleep of somnambulism or catalepsy. And then the face grew larger, the moonlight brighter, and I saw—more.

The sharper light disclosed tiny touches of evil. The thin lips were fretted, maggot-kissed. The nose had *crumbled* at the nostrils. The forehead was flaked with putrefaction, and the dark hair was dead, encrusted with slime. There were shad-

ows in the bony ridges beneath the closed eyes. Even now, the skeletal arms were up, and bony fingers brushed at those dead pits as the rotted lids fluttered apart. The eyes opened.

They were wide, staring, flaming—and in them was the grave. They were eyes that had closed in death and opened in the coffin under earth. They were eyes that had seen the body rot and the soul depart to mingle in worm-ravened darkness below. They were eyes that held an alien life, a life so dreadful as to animate the cadaver's body and force it to claw its way back to outer earth. They were *hungry* eyes—triumphant, now, as they gazed in graveyard moonlight on a world they had never known before. They hungered for the world as only Death can hunger for Life. And they blazed out of the corpse-pallid face in icy joy.

Then the cadaver began to walk. It lurched between the graves, lumbered before ancient tombs. It shambled through the forest night until it reached a road. Then it turned up that road slowly . . . slowly.

And the hunger in those eyes flamed again as the lights of a city flared below. Death was preparing to mingle with men.

2

I SAT through all this entranced. Only a few minutes had elapsed, but I felt as though uncounted ages had passed unheeded. The film went on. Les and I didn't exchange a word, but we watched.

The plot was rather routine after that. The dead man was a scientist whose wife had been stolen from him by a young doctor. The doctor had tended him in his last illness and unwittingly administered a powerful narcotic with cataleptic effects.

The dialog was foreign and I could not place it. All of the actors were unfamiliar to me, and the setting and photography was quite unusual; unorthodox treatment as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and other psychological films.

There was one scene where the living-dead man became enthroned as arch-priest at a Black Mass ceremonial, and there was a little child. . . . His eyes as he plunged the knife . . .

He kept — *decaying* throughout the film . . . the Black Mass worshippers knew him as an emissary of Satan, and they kidnapped the wife as sacrifice for his own resurrection . . . the scene with the hysterical woman when she saw and recognized her husband for the first time, and the deep, evil whispering voice in which he revealed his secret to her . . . the final pursuit of the devil-worshippers to the great altar-stone in the mountains . . . the death of the resurrected one.

Almost a skeleton in fact now, riddled by bullets and shot from the weapons of the doctor and his neighbors, the dead one crumbled and fell from his seat on the altar-stone. And as those eyes glazed in second death the deep voice boomed out in a prayer to Sathanas. The lich crawled across the ground to the ritual fire, drew painfully erect, and tottered into the flames. And as it stood weaving for a moment in the blaze the lips moved again in infernal prayer, and the eyes implored not the skies, but the earth. The ground opened in a final flash of fire, and the charred corpse fell through. The Master claimed his own. . . .

It was grotesque, almost a fairy-tale in its triteness. When the film had flickered off and the orchestra blared the opening for the next "flesh-show" we rose in our seats, conscious once more of our surroundings. The rest of the mongrel audience seemed to be in a stupor almost equal to our own. Wide-eyed Japanese sat staring in the darkness; Filipinos muttered covertly to one another; even the drunken laborers seemed incap-

able of greeting the "Grand Opening" with their usual ribald hoots.

Trite and grotesque the plot of the film may have been, but the actor who played the lead had instilled it with ghastly reality. He *had* been dead; his eyes *knew*. And the voice was the voice of Lazarus awakened.

Les and I had no need to exchange words. We both felt it. I followed him silently as he went up the stairs to the manager's office.

Edward Relch was glowering over the desk. He showed no pleasure at seeing us barge in. When Les asked him where he had procured the film for this evening and what its name was, he opened his mouth and emitted a cascade of curses.

We learned that *Return to the Sabbath* had been sent over by a cheap agency from out Inglewood way, that a Western had been expected, and the "damned foreign junk" substituted by mistake. A hell of a picture this was, for a girl-show! Gave the audience the lousy creeps, and it wasn't even in English! Stinking imported films!

It was some time before we managed to extract the name of the agency from the manager's profane lips. But five minutes after that, Les Kincaid was on the phone speaking to the head of the agency; an hour later we were out at the office. The next morning Kincaid went in to see the big boss, and the following day I was told to announce for publication that Karl Jorla, the Austrian horror-star, had been signed by cable to our studio; and he was leaving at once for the United States.

3

IT WAS a stroke of genius on Kincaid's part. We all felt that way about the matter. Horror pictures were on the way in; Karloff and Lugosi were turning out their early numbers over at Universal, and grossing big. Lionel Atwill was doing his usual villainy on several lots, and profitably so. Peter Lorre, the peer of them all, had just been signed for American films after his sensational performances as the psychopathic murderer in *M* and his gruesome spy-portrayal in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.

And we knew that Karl Jorla topped them all. If the fans were really sincere in their liking for the macabre, they were going to get the genuine article. Not since Lon Chaney had I seen such consummate artistry; certainly this man was Chaney's superior in that he had a sincerity which out-distanced the horror of mere make-up tricks.

I printed these items, gave all the build-up I could. But after the initial announcements I was stopped dead. Everything had happened too swiftly; we knew nothing about this man Jorla, really. Subsequent cables to Austrian and German studios failed to disclose any information about the fellow's private life. He had evidently never played in any film prior to *Return to the Sabbath*. He was utterly unknown. The film had never been shown greatly abroad, and it was only by mistake that the Inglewood agency has obtained a copy and run it here in the United States. Audience reaction could not be learned, and the film was not scheduled for general release unless English titles could be dubbed in.

I was up a stump. Here we had the "find" of the year, and I couldn't get enough material out to make it known!

We expected Karl Jorla to arrive in two weeks, however. I was told to get to work on him as soon as he got in, then flood the news agencies with stories. Three of our best writers were working on a special production for him already; the Big Boss meant to handle it himself. It would be similar to the foreign film,

for that "return from the dead" sequence must be included.

JORLA arrived on October seventh. He put up at a hotel; the studio sent down its usual welcoming committee, took him out to the lot for formal testing, then turned him over to me.

I met the man for the first time in the little dressing-room they had assigned him. I'll never forget that afternoon of our first meeting, or my first sight of him as I entered the door.

What I expected to see I don't know. But what I did see amazed me. For Karl Jorla was the dead-alive man of the screen *in life!*

The features were not fretted, of course. But he was tall, and almost as cadaverously thin as in his rôle; his face was pallid, and his eyes blue-circled. And the eyes were the dead eyes of the movie; the deep, *knowing* eyes!

The booming voice greeted me in hesitant English. Jorla smiled with his lips at my obvious discomfiture, but the expression of the eyes never varied in their alien strangeness.

Somewhat hesitantly I explained my office and my errand. "No pub-leecity," Jorla intoned. "I do not weesh to make known what is affairs of mine own doeeng."

I gave him the usual arguments. How much he understood I cannot say, but he was adamant. I learned only a little; that he had been born in Prague, lived in wealth until the upheavals of the European depression, and entered film work only to please a director friend of his. This director had made the picture in which Jorla played, for private showings only. By mischance a print had been released and copied for general circulation. It had all been a mistake. However, the American film offer had come opportunely, since Jorla wanted to leave Austria at once.

"After the feelm app-ear, I am in bad lights weeth my—friends," he explained, slowly. "They do not weesh it to be shown, that cere-monee."

"The Black Mass?" I asked. "Your *friends?*"

"Yes. The wor-ship of Lucifer. It was real, you know."

Was he joking? No—I couldn't doubt the man's sincerity. There was no room for mirth in those alien eyes. And then I knew what he meant, what he so casually revealed. He had been a devil-worshipper himself—he and that director. They had made the film and meant it for private display in their own occult circles. No wonder he sought escape abroad!

It was incredible, save that I knew Europe, and the dark Northern mind. The worship of Evil continues today in Budapest, Prague, Berlin. And he, Karl Jorla the horror-actor, admitted to being one of them!

"What a story!" I thought. And then I realized that it could, of course, never be printed. A horror-star admitting belief in the parts he played? Absurd!

All the features about Boris Karloff played up the fact that he was a gentle man who found true peace in raising a garden. Lugosi was pictured as a sensitive neurotic, tortured by the rôles he played in the films. Atwill was a socialite and a stage star. And Peter Lorre was always written up as being gentle as a lamb, a quiet student whose ambition was to play comedy parts.

No, it would never do to break the story of Jorla's devil-worship. And he was so damnably reticent about his private affairs!

I sought out Kincaid after the termination of our unsatisfactory interview. I

told him what I had encountered and asked for advice. He gave it.

"The old Lon Chaney line," he counseled. "Mystery man. We say nothing about him until the picture is released. After that I have a hunch things will work out for themselves. The fellow is a marvel. So don't bother about stories until the film is canned."

Consequently I abandoned publicity efforts in Karl Jorla's direction. Now I am very glad I did so, for there is no one to remember his name, or suspect the horror that was soon to follow.

4

THE script was finished. The front office approved. Stage Four was under construction; the casting director got busy. Jorla was at the studio every day; Kincaid himself was teaching him English. The part was one in which very few words were needed, and Jorla proved a brilliant pupil, according to Les.

But Les was not as pleased as he should have been about it all. He came to me one day about a week before production and unburdened himself. He strove to speak lightly about the affair, but I could tell that he felt worried.

The gist of his story was very simple. Jorla was behaving strangely. He had had trouble with the front office; he refused to give the studio his living address, and it was known that he had checked out from his hotel several days after first arriving in Hollywood.

Nor was that all. He wouldn't talk about his part, or volunteer any information about interpretation. He seemed to be quite uninterested—admitting frankly to Kincaid that his only reason for signing a contract was to leave Europe.

He told Kincaid what he had told me—about the devil-worshippers. And he hinted at more. He spoke of being followed, muttered about "avengers" and "hunters who waited." He seemed to feel that the witch-cult was angry at him for the violation of secrets, and held him responsible for the release of *Return to the Sabbath*. That, he explained, was why he would not give his address, nor speak of his past life for publication. That is why he must use very heavy make-up in his film debut here. He felt at times as though he were being watched, or followed. There were many foreigners here . . . too many.

"What the devil can I do with a man like that?" Kincaid exploded, after he had explained this to me. "He's insane, or a fool. And I confess that he's too much like his screen character to please me. The damned casual way in which he professes to have dabbled in devil-worship and sorcery! He believes all this, and—well, I'll tell you the truth. I came here today because of the last thing he spoke of to me this morning.

"He came down to the office, and at first when he walked in I didn't know him. The dark glasses and muffler helped, of course, but he himself had changed. He was trembling, and walked with a stoop. And when he spoke his voice was like a groan. He showed me—this."

Kincaid handed me the clipping. It was from the London *Times*, through European press dispatches. A short paragraph, giving an account of the death of Fritz Ohmmen, the Austrian film director. He had been found strangled in a Paris garret, and his body had been frightfully mutilated; it mentioned an inverted cross branded on his stomach above the ripped entrails. Police were seeking the murderer. . . .

I handed the clipping back in silence. "So what?" I asked. But I had already guessed his answer.

"Fritz Ohmmen," Kincaid said, slow-

ly, "was the director of the picture in which Karl Jorla played; the director, who with Jorla, knew the devil-worshippers. Jorla says that he fled to Paris, and that *they* sought him out."

I was silent.

"Mess," grunted Kincaid. "I've offered Jorla police protection, and he's refused. I can't coerce him under the terms of our contract. As long as he plays the part, he's secure with us. But he has the jitters. And I'm getting them."

He stormed out. I couldn't help him. I sat thinking of Karl Jorla, who believed in devil-gods, worshipped, and betrayed them. And I could have smiled at the absurdity of it all if I hadn't seen the man on the screen and watched his evil eyes. He *knew!* It was then that I began to feel thankful we had not given Jorla any publicity. I had a hunch.

During the next few days I saw Jorla but seldom. The rumors, however, began to trickle in. There had been an influx of foreign "sight-seers" at the studio gates. Someone had attempted to crash through the barriers in a racing-car. An extra in a mob scene over on Lot Six had been found carrying an automatic beneath his vest; when apprehended he had been lurking under the executive office windows. They had taken him down to headquarters, and so far the man had refused to talk. He was a German. . . .

Jorla came to the studios every day in a shuttered car. He was bundled up to the eyes. He trembled constantly. His English lessons went badly. He spoke to no one. He had hired two men to ride with him in his car. They were armed.

A few days later news came that the German extra had talked. He was evidently a pathological case . . . he babbled wildly of a "Black Cult of Lucifer" known to some of the foreigners around town. It was a secret society purporting to worship the Devil, with vague connections in the mother countries. He had been "chosen" to avenge a wrong. More than that he dared not say, but he did give an address where the police might find cult headquarters. The place, a dingy house in Glendale, was quite deserted, of course. It was a queer old house with a secret cellar beneath the basement, but everything seemed to have been abandoned. The man was being held for examination by an alienist.

I HEARD this report with deep misgivings. I knew something of Los Angeles' and Hollywood's heterogeneous foreign population; God knows, Southern California has attracted mystics and occultists from all over the world. I've even heard rumors about stars being mixed up in unsavory secret societies, things one would never dare to admit in print. And Jorla was afraid.

That afternoon I tried to trail his black car as it left the studio for his mysterious home, but I lost the track in the winding reaches of Topanga Canyon. It had disappeared into the secret twilight of the purple hills, and I knew then that there was nothing I could do. Jorla had his own defenses, and if they failed, we at the studio could not help.

That was the evening he disappeared. At least he did not show up the next morning at the studio, and production was to start in two days. We heard about it. The boss and Kincaid were frantic. The police were called in, and I did my best to hush things up. When Jorla did not appear the following morning I went to Kincaid and told him about my following the car to Topanga Canyon. The police went to work. Next morning was production.

We spent a sleepless night of fruitless vigil. There was no word. Morning came, and there was unspoken dread in Kincaid's eyes as he faced me across the

office table. Eight o'clock. We got up and walked silently across the lot to the studio cafeteria. Black coffee was badly needed; we hadn't had a police report for hours. We passed Stage Four, where the Jorla crew was at work. The noise of hammers was mockery. Jorla, we felt, would never face a camera today, if ever.

Bleskind, the director of the untitled horror opus, came out of the Stage office as we passed.

His paunchy body quivered as he grasped Kincaid's lapels and piped, "Any news?"

Kincaid shook his head slowly. Bleskind thrust a cigar into his tense mouth.

"We're shooting ahead," he snapped. "We'll shoot around Jorla. If he doesn't show up when we finish the scenes in which he won't appear, we'll get another actor. But we can't wait." The squat director bustled back to the Stage.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Kincaid grasped my arm and propelled me after Bleskind's waddling form.

"Let's see the opening shots," he suggested. "I want to see what kind of a story they've given him."

We entered Stage Four.

A Gothic Castle, the ancestral home of Baron Ulmo. A dark, gloomy stone crypt of spidery horror. Cobwebbed, dust-shrouded, deserted by men and given over to the rats by day and the unearthly horrors that crept by night. An altar stood by the crypt, an altar of evil, the great black stone on which the ancient Baron Ulmo and his devil-cult had held their sacrifices. Now, in the pit beneath the altar, the Baron lay buried. Such was the legend.

According to the first shot scheduled, Sylvia Channing, the heroine, was exploring the castle. She had inherited the place and taken it over with her young husband. In this scene she was to see the altar for the first time, read the inscription on its base. This inscription was to prove an unwitting invocation, opening up the crypt beneath the altar and awakening Jorla, as Baron Ulmo, from the dead. He was to rise from the crypt then, and walk. It was at this point that the scene would terminate, due to Jorla's strange absence.

The setting was magnificently handled. Kincaid and I took our places beside Director Bleskind as the shot opened. Sylvia Channing walked out on the set; the signals were given, lights flashed, and the action began.

It was pantomimic. Sylvia walked across the cobwebbed floor, noticed the altar, examined it. She stooped to read the inscription, then whispered it aloud. There was a drone, as the opening of the altar-crypt was mechanically begun. The altar swung aside, and the black gaping pit was revealed. The upper cameras swung to Sylvia's face. She was to stare at the crypt in horror, and she did it most magnificently. In the picture she would be watching Jorla emerge.

Bleskind prepared to give the signal to cut action. Then—

Something emerged from the crypt!

It was dead, that thing—that horror with a mask of faceless flesh. Its lean body was clothed in rotting rags, and on its chest was a bloody crucifix, inverted—carved out of dead flesh. The eyes blazed loathsomely. It was Baron Ulmo, rising from the dead. *And it was Karl Jorla!*

The make-up was perfect. His eyes were dead, just as in the other film. The lips seemed shredded again, the mouth even more ghastly in its slitted blackness. And the touch of the bloody crucifix was immense.

Bleskind nearly swallowed his cigar when Jorla appeared. Quickly he controlled himself, silently signaled the men to proceed with the shooting. We strained forward, watching every move,

but Les Kincaid's eyes held a wonder akin to my own.

Jorla was acting as never before. He moved slowly, as a corpse must move. As he raised himself from the crypt, each tiny effort seemed to cause him utter agony. The scene was soundless; Sylvia had fainted. But Jorla's lips moved, and we heard a faint whispering murmur which heightened the horror. Now the grisly cadaver was almost half out of the crypt. It strained upward, still murmuring. The bloody crucifix of flesh gleamed redly on the chest. . . . I thought of the one found on the body of the murdered foreign director, Fritz Ohmmen, and realized where Jorla had gotten the idea.

The corpse strained up . . . it was to rise now . . . up . . . and then, with a sudden rictus, the body stiffened and slid back into the crypt.

Who screamed first I do not know. But the screaming continued after the prop-boys had rushed to the crypt and looked down at what lay within.

When I reached the brink of the pit I screamed, too.

For it was utterly empty.

5

I WISH there were nothing more to tell. The papers never knew. The police hushed things up. The studio is silent, and the production was dropped immediately. But matters did not stop there. There was a sequel to that hideous horror on Stage Four.

Kincaid and I cornered Bleskind. There was no need of any explanation; how could what we had just seen be explained in any sane way?

Jorla had disappeared; no one had let him into the studio; no make-up man had given him his attention. Nobody had seen him enter the crypt. He had appeared in the scene, then disappeared. The crypt was empty.

These were the facts. Kincaid told Bleskind what to do. The film was developed immediately, though two of the technicians fainted. We three sat in the projection booth and watched the morning's rushes flicker across the screen. The sound-track was specially dubbed in.

That scene—Sylvia walking and reading the incantation—the pit opening—and God, when *nothing* emerged!

Nothing but that great red scar suspended in midair—that great inverted crucifix cut in bleeding flesh; no Jorla visible at all! That bleeding cross in the air, and then the mumbling. . . .

Jorla—the thing—whatever it was—had mumbled a few syllables on emerging from the crypt. The sound-track had picked them up. And we couldn't see anything but that scar; yet we heard Jorla's voice now coming from nothingness. We heard what he kept repeating, as he fell back into the crypt.

It was an address in Topanga Canyon.

The lights flickered on, and it was good to see them. Kincaid phoned the police and directed them to the address given on the sound-track.

We waited, the three of us, in Kincaid's office, waited for the police call. We drank, but did not speak. Each of us was thinking of Karl Jorla the devil-worshipper who had betrayed his faith; of his fear of vengeance. We thought of the director's death, and the bloody crucifix on his chest; remembered Jorla's disappearance. And then that ghastly ghost-thing on the screen, the bloody thing that hung in midair as Jorla's voice groaned the address. . . .

The phone rang.

I picked it up. It was the police department. They gave their report. I fainted.

It was several minutes before I came to. It was several more minutes before I opened my mouth and spoke.

"They've found Karl Jorla's body at the address given on the screen," I whispered. "He was lying dead in an old shack up in the hills. He had been—murdered. There was a bloody cross, inverted on his chest. They think it was the work of some fanatics, because the place was filled with books on sorcery and Black Magic. They say——"

I paused. Kincaid's eyes commanded. "Go on."

"They say," I murmured, "that Jorla had been dead for at least three days."

Ships

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

There's a far, lone island in the dim, red west,
Where the sea-waves are crimson with the red of burnished gold
(Sapphire in the billows, gold upon the crest),
An island that is older than the continents are old.

Sailing-ships are anchored about that ancient isle,
Ships that sailed the oceans in the dim dawn days,
Coracles from Britain, triremes from the Nile.
Anchored round the harbors, anchored mile on mile,
Ships and ships and shades of ships fading in the haze.

And there's a Roman galley with its seven banks of oars,
And there's a golden bargeboat that knew the Cæsar's hand,
And there's a somber pirate craft with shattered cabin doors,
And there's a sturdy bireme that sailed to Holy Land.

Main-trees lifting like a forest of the south,
Beaked prows looming, and the wide courses furled,
Dim decks heel-marked, marked by rain and drouth,
Spindrift in the cross-trees, drift of southern seas,
Dim ships, strong ships from all about the world.

High ships, proud ships, towering at their poops,
Galleons flaunting their pinnacles of pride,
Schooners and merchantmen, and long, lean sloops,
Kings' ships riding with galleys on the tide.

Saladin's Throne-Rug*

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

"I WOULD cheerfully have committed murder for that rug; but as it is . . ."

Morgan Revell smiled at the memory of his exceeding cleverness, and regarded the throne-rug of Saladin with that fanatic affection comprehensible only to a collector . . .

The savage jest of it is that he did commit murder. Only he doesn't know it. Nor, for that matter, do I absolutely *know*. But, piecing it all together, and taking into account the emotions that take possession of a rug collector, I can draw but one inevitable conclusion. And that is——

But to approach the matter at all, some explaining is necessary. First of all, you who regard a rug as something to hide the nakedness of a floor must revise your conception of things. It is all very true that the machine-made atrocities of this country, as well as the precious weaves of the Orient, are indeed used as floor coverings; something on which to walk, something to give the vacuum cleaner its excuse for existing. But that is only a part of it: Oriental rugs are works of art, the peer of any of the numerous products of man's instinct to create unbelievable and imperishable beauty. And just as there are those who collect the works of ancient silversmiths, armorers, cabinetmakers, and bookbinders, so likewise are there those whose consuming passion and sole aim in life is the accumulating of antique specimens of Oriental weaving: rugs from Boukhara and silken Samarcand, from Shiraz, and Herat of the Hundred Gardens; prayer rugs, palace carpets, or the priceless fabric that graced the floor of a nomad's tent in Turkestan. Rugs are many, and their enumeration lengthy; and the study of their personality and traits is the pursuit of a lifetime. Some are prized for their beauty and matchless craftsmanship; others for their exceeding rarity; and some for the sake of all those qualities.

Once one has succumbed to the sorcery of a Bijar that covered the dirt floor of a Kurdish hovel, or a silken Kashan that hung suspended by silver rings, on the walls of a king's palace, one is beyond redemption, or the desire of redemption. It is even as though one had become addicted to the smoke of the poppy, or to

* From WEIRD TALES for October, 1927.

the grain of hasheesh dissolved in wine. One's house becomes a place designed for the sheltering and storing of rare rugs; though, of course, the collector himself has no moral scruples about utilizing a bit of that same shelter for himself.

One may wear last year's overcoat, and have last year's shoes half-soled; but one can always raise the price, however exorbitant, of a threadbare Ladik, a battle-scarred Ghiordes, or a moth-eaten Feraghan.

Thus, though Morgan Revell was exaggerating when he smiled in a way reminiscent of a cat who has just had a pleasant *tête-à-tête* with a canary, and remarked, "I'd cheerfully have committed murder for that rug," he was well within the limits of poetic license. Not that he would actually consider going as far as rope, pistol, or poison; in fact, I think he would stop short of breaking and entering. But the fact remains that trifles can not stand in one's way when a really rare rug is in sight. And very often a jest is the essence of truth.

Well, and that is that: either you still maintain that a rug is but something to put on the floor, or else you have grasped some conception of the fanaticism that consumes the confirmed collector of antique rugs. If the former, well and good: *de gustibus non disputandum est.* But if the latter, if you have grasped the idea, then perhaps you will understand why I crave a bit of fresh air and a change of scene whenever I catch a whiff of attar of roses, or a glimpse of a fine, hard-spun silken cord.

I WAS making one of my customary reconnaissances, prowling tours in search of the perfect rug, the wondrous prize; though what I'd have done with it is a bit beyond me, unless I'd have tacked it to the ceiling. All other space is occupied. Furthermore, I am at times heretical enough to fancy that it is better to know that the rent, due on the morrow, will be in cash available for payment to the landlord instead of being draped over a lounge, or parked on the last bit of vacant wall or floor space.

A chubby, oily little fellow from somewhere in Asia Minor, with features that combined Mephisto with Kewpie, approached and offered his services, assuring me that some rare bargains would be auctioned off that afternoon. I assured him that I was merely prowling about.

"A fine Kirman. Worth seven hundred dollars," he began, just from force of habit. "Perhaps you will bid on it? Get it for two-three hundred."

I didn't bother to tell him that I'd not use it for a bath mat; that it was a sickly-looking mess, with its flabby texture, its aniline dyes, bleached to unnatural softness, and its fearful, glassy luster gained from glycerin and hot rollers, and that it would hardly be a fit companion for a Kirman rose-rug of the old school. So he left me to my own devices, to tear down several piles, shoulder-high, of rugs of varying quality; mainly atrocities recently woven to satisfy the ever-increasing demand for Oriental rugs: wretched rags which the auctioneer would later exhibit, glassily agleam under a powerful floodlight, and describe as "Royal" Bijar, "Royal" Sarouk, or "Royal" Kashan, or "Royal" whatever travesty it was on some ancient, honorable weave.

Weariness and more weariness. I worked my way through the second pile, and with like result. An old Feraghan tempted me, but I decided that though honest and ancient, it would cost too much to have the worn spots rewoven. Nor did the third pile bring forth anything of interest. Then, poking about in a dark corner, I found behind a baled, room-sized carpet, a scrap of something

which even in that dim light had the look of antiquity, the stamp of personality possessed only by one of the old guard. And it had the feel of ancient weaving.

I dragged it out. Through all its coating of dust and dirt, the unbelievable richness of the dyes, the "bald-headedness" of the back and subdued luster of the face were apparent. Then—horrible sight!—I saw that I had but a portion of a rug, between half and two-thirds of one, the remnant of something which if complete would be priceless. Judging from the fragment, the complete piece would be about five feet wide and twelve feet long, or thereabout. Some barbarian had sliced it in two, crosswise, with a clean, sweeping cut that left in this fragment about half of the medallion which had been the central design of the complete piece.

What fool would commit such a wanton infamy, such an uncalled-for blasphemy? And then I recalled that classic incident of early Moslem history, wherein one of the Prophet's fanatic generals, in apportioning the loot of a Persian palace, had dismembered a gold-threaded carpet, giving each of his captains a portion, saying that it would have been unfair to let any one individual retain the entire rug; and offering the equally good reason that such a pagan vanity deserved mutilation!

Under stronger light, I saw that my instinct for a rarity had indeed been true. The weave was incredibly fine, at least six or seven hundred knots to the square inch; the pile, worn to the warp, was of silk; and the ground inside the main border, and surrounding the central medallion, was of silver bullion thread, woven tapestrywise about the warp threads instead of being tied and clipped so as to make a nap, as is the practise when weaving with silk or wool. Here, certes, was the adornment of a palace, the gift of one prince to another!

Fortunately for my chances of buying the fragment, the silver bullion ground was so tarnished and caked with dirt that its true nature would scarcely be noticed: for if some collector with a bottomless wallet would see, recognize, and bid against my poverty, I'd surely lose out. But the chances were that even a keen observer, unless he had examined the relic closely, would pass it up as a mere scrap unworthy of consideration.

But then I had to take the auctioneer into account. If in handling that fragment, displaying it to the assembled bidders, he ever noticed that its ground was of silver thread, I'd be strictly out of luck. However, there was little chance he'd notice the pile was of silk; for it was worn to the warp; and since all ancient rugs, either of silk or wool, have a greasy, slick surface, his sense of touch might not enlighten him.

I had to buy that ancient fragment; and I had to get it without the auctioneer's realizing what was going on.

Just what device would minimize his chances of noticing the true nature of what was passing through his hands? And then came the solution.

"Boy, come here a minute!"

One of the uniformed porters approached, I gave him his instructions, also a couple of dollar bills, and the promise of as much more if the ruse worked; also the promise that I'd hunt him up and down the earth with a sawed-off shotgun if he failed me.

It was now 1:30, and the auction was to begin at 2. Prospective bidders were already taking seats before the auctioneer's rostrum. The average bargain hunter has such sublime confidence in his or her ability to pick a rug or other precious article at first glance that few bother to examine the treasures before bidding;

and thus no one intruded on my final study of the fragment I had unearthed.

I contrived to decipher the inscription in the remaining half of the central medallion I'd stumbled across. And although I'm no scholar, I can in a pinch hammer out a few words of Arabic, and get enough to supply at least the context of an inscription.

> at the feet of my Lord I fall; I have bowed
> me down seven times with breast and back;
> and all that the King said to me,
> well, well do I hear! Abimilki, a
> servant of the King am I, and
> the dust of thy two feet!

This much I could gather; the upper half of the inscription, in the missing upper half of the medallion, doubtless contained the preliminary honorifics, and perhaps even the name of the prince to whom the rug had been presented. Presented where? At Trebizond, Damascus, Isphahan, Baghdad? What king? Shah Abbas? Nadir Shah? Who had received the servile protestations of this princeling, Abimilki?

THE opening of the daily auction broke into my reflections. I caught the eye of the porter I had bribed, and then found a seat. "Royal" Bijars and "Royal" Sarouks were extolled and lauded with all the dramatic art and perjury at the command of auctioneers hailing from the Near East. And under the floodlights, those pseudo-royal rugs did have a magnificent appearance.

"How much am I offered for this Royal Sarouk? This magnificent, lustrous carpet! It is worth a thousand dollars! Am I offered seven hundred? Seven hundred? They are getting scarcer every day! A genuine, Royal Sarouk! Do I hear five hundred? Is there no one here who really knows rugs? This is not a floor covering, this is—four hundred? Thank you. I am offered four hundred dollars. That shouldn't even buy the fringe! Will someone give me five hundred? Did I hear four fifty? Seventy-five. . . . Eighty? Thank you. Who offers five hundred? . . ."

And thus through the heap of rugs. Then came some Boukhara saddle-bags, one at a time; then more "Royal" Bijars, and Kashans, and Kirmans. Valiantly the plump Mephisto, pleading, groaning, holding out for just one more dollar, perjured his way through the stacks beside the rostrum. And all the while the porter paraded up and down the aisle, giving the bidders a glimpse of the articles in question.

Finally, after an hour's exhorting, after the perspiration was trickling down his cheeks and glistening on his brow, after fatigue had left its marks on the chubby auctioneer, the porter handed him the fragment I had discovered.

Under that powerful light, its suave magnificence glowed forth through the coating of dust and dirt. Devil take that light! But thanks to the nap's being worn so close, the now weary auctioneer, somewhat dulled by fatigue, did not sense that he held the remains of a silken rug in his hands; nor did the silver bullion ground below the medallion betray itself. The porter had handed him the end nearest the original center, where the medallion reached from border to border, and where consequently there was no silver ground to meet his fingertips. Then, scarcely had the orator opened his harangue, the porter snatched the precious fabric and was dashing down the aisle, holding it as well knotted up as he could contrive without seeming to do so.

Noble African! Nevertheless, it was a ticklish moment.

"How much am I offered for this antique rug?" he had begun, flashing it beneath the flaring floodlight, before yielding it to the eager porter. "Yes, sir,

I know it is half of a rug, but it is old and very rare. It is an antique Tabriz. . . ."

Which proved that he'd never seen it before I'd exhumed it from that dark, dusty corner! That he'd not noticed the silver ground! Tabriz . . . pure and simple improvisation on his part.

"Sixty dollars? Thank you. I am offered sixty. It is worth several hundred. A rare old Tabriz. Seventy? Thank you, madam!"

Damn that school-teacher! What made her think it was worth seventy? Though she might be a decoy to raise the bids.

So I came up five.

"Will anyone offer a hundred? Ninety? Give me ninety for this rare old—I am offered ninety! Will someone make it a hundred?"

I rather fancied that my ninety-five would land it.

"Ninety-five . . . once . . . ninety-five . . . twice . . ."

The porter was already thrusting another piece into the auctioneer's weary fingers.

But before the hammer could drop——

"El hamdu li-lláh!" gasped someone at my right. "One hundred!"

A lean foreigner with a nose like the beak of a bird of prey took the seat next to me; a Turk, perhaps, or a Kurd whom civilization had not robbed of his alert, predatory air and desert gauntness.

"And ten!" I snapped back.

"One-fifty," enunciated the newcomer.

Hell's hinges! Who was that fool? And who ever heard of an Oriental, unless he were a dealer, caring a happy hoot about the threadbare, worn fragment of an antique ring.

"And seventy-five!"

That ought to stop him. But it didn't. Not for a moment.

"Two hundred," he pronounced.

And when I raised him twenty-five, he did as much for me, and without batting an eyelash. I prayed that some angel would slip me the handle of a meat-ax, and then offered fifty more.

The auctioneer beamed and gloated and rubbed his hands, and praised heaven for connoisseurs who appreciated antiques. The porter, from force of habit, once more began to deploy the precious piece to egg on the bidders, but, catching my eye, he desisted; though it could have done no harm, for that relentless heathen at my right was out for that rug. That *"El-hamdu li-lláh!"* was the incredulous gasp of one who has stumbled around a corner and met fate face to face; it would be my roll against his.

"Three-fifty!" he announced, scarcely giving the overjoyed auctioneer a chance to acknowledge my last bid.

"Five hundred!" was my last despairing effort.

And "five-fifty" came like the crack of doom.

The stranger rose from his seat, peeled a wad of bills from a roll that would have choked a rhinoceros, and claimed his prize. Have it delivered? Absolutely not! And when I saw the look in his eye, and the gesture with which he draped that scrap over his arm, I knew that all the wealth of the Indies could not separate him from one thread of that ancient relic.

I CLIMBED to my feet and strode down the aisle, talking to myself in non-apostolic tongues. But as I reached the paving, my meditations were interrupted.

"Allow me to thank you, *effendi*."

It was the foreigner, still caressing the nap of the precious fragment he had draped over his arm.

"I owe you a great deal for having discovered this piece. Though I was almost too late."

I couldn't resist that courtly manner,

that cordial good-fellowship. The bird of prey had laid aside his predatory manner and seemed really overjoyed about something; happiness, exaltation were mingled with his triumph.

"Don't thank me; thank my slim bank roll," I laughed, and swallowed the remnants of my disappointment.

"I have been hunting that piece for years," continued the stranger. "In Stamboul, Sultanabad, Tabriz . . . New York . . . London . . . wherever rugs are sold. And now I, or rather you, have found it. I regret your disappointment. But I had to have that rug," he concluded, speaking his last phrase in the tone of a bigoted Moslem announcing his belief in the unity of Allah.

"So I noted," was my reply; though it wasn't as ill-natured as it may sound.

"If you can spare the time, I shall tell you the story. And show you the other half of the rug. You knew, of course, that there was another half."

This was becoming interesting.

"I suspected as much; though who, and where——"

"I am Ilderim Shirkuh bin Ayyub," announced the stranger, and bowed in response to my acknowledgment of the introduction.

Ilderim Shirkuh bin Ayyub. Very impressive. But what of it?—though there was something familiar about that resonant handle.

He led the way to a car parked at the curbing.

DURING our drive north, bin Ayyub maintained a reflective silence that gave me a bit of time for my own thoughts. And as the long, aristocratic car purred its way toward the Gold Coast, I began to sense that I had indeed fallen into something. True, I had lost the prize I had sought to capture; but had I made the grade, I'd probably have remained in ignorance of its entire significance.

A few blocks past the Edgewater Beach Hotel we drew up before an ancient, bulky mansion set back of an acre of lawn; a great house, its dignity still overshadowing its approaching decrepitude; an outlaw, a rebel that still withstood the encroachment of apartments and apartment hotels.

A negro, arrayed in a striped *kuftán* and wearing a massive, spirally twisted turban, ushered us into a dimly lit salon which, though almost bare of furniture, was magnificently carpeted and tapestried with ancient, lustrous Persian rugs. Clusters of arms and armor placed at intervals along the walls gleamed icily in the dull light of several great, brazen floor-lamps. It seemed almost sacrilege to tread on that magnificent palace carpet whose exquisite loveliness, framed by a border of hardwood floor, reminded me of a diamond set off by its background of onyx.

Bin Ayyub finally broke the silence he had maintained; for as we entered, he had with a gesture invited me to be seated, he himself remaining on his feet, preoccupied, regarding the precious fragment he had captured, looking at it as though all the splendor about him was cheap and tawdry in comparison to that threadbare, eroded scrap he held in his hands.

"Unintentionally — and involuntarily also—you have done me a great service," he at last began, as he seated himself. "As I told you, I am Ilderim Shirkuh bin Ayyub."

Again he paused, as if to let that impressive title sink home. And as I saw him against that background of lustrous rugs and damascened simitars and armor, I wondered whether I had been wrong in having omitted a salaam.

Bin Ayyub turned to the negro and—

I can in no other way describe his manner—published an order. Then, to me, "You have heard of Salah ad Din Yusuf bin Ayyub? In your language, Saladin?"

"Certainly. Who has not?"

"I am descended in direct line from Saladin; that fragment is part of the throne-rug of my ancestor, the nephew of Shirkuh of Tekrit, and sultan of Syria and Egypt. Now do you begin to see why I value that scrap?"

"Do you mean to say that that rug covered the throne of Saladin?"

"Exactly. And I shall prove it."

Even as bin Ayyub spoke, the African returned, carrying a small chest of dark wood, elaborately carved, and bound in bands of discolored metal, bluish black, like age-old silver.

"Look how the pieces match!" exulted bin Ayyub, as he took from the chest that which I saw at a glance was the other part of the relic I had discovered. The pieces did indeed match perfectly; though the last-acquired fragment was somewhat the more worn and eroded by the rough use of those who had possessed it, ignorant of its worth.

"Read, *effendi!* Surely you can read, else you would never have bid this afternoon."

But I insisted that bin Ayyub read and translate into English. I felt rather foolish about strutting my halting Arabic before this polished Oriental whose very English was better than my own.

> In the name of Allah,
> the Merciful, the Compas-
> sionate! To my Lord Salah ad
> Din Yusuf bin Ayyub, the Sun of
> Heaven, thus hath spoken Abimilki, the
> groom of thy horse: I am the dust under the
> sandals of my Lord the King; seven and seven times
> at the feet of my Lord I fall; I have bowed
> me down seven times with breast and
> back; and all that the King said to
> me, well, well do I hear! Abim-
> ilki, a servant of the King am I,
> and the dust of thy two feet!

And here it was, threadbare and eroded by the passing of eight centuries, the throne-rug of Saladin, that great prince who elevated himself from the castle of Tekrit, in Kurdistan, to the throne of Syria and Egypt, and reigned as Defender of the Faith and Sword of Islam. . . .

Had the auctioneer's hammer fallen just an instant earlier——

"*Alláhu akbar!*" ejaculated bin Ayyub, sensing my thoughts. "To think of how close a race it was! A second later, and I might now be bargaining with you for your prize, offering you all my possessions for that one fragment of carpet. And you would have refused. . . . I would go barefooted through the tall flames of *Gehennem* for what I took from you an hour ago." Then, to the negro: "Saoud! Prepare some coffee!

"I wonder," he resumed, "if you have any truly rare rugs in your collection? Like that Isphahan, for example?"

Bin Ayyub plucked from the wall what even in that dim light I recognized as an ancient Isphahan: that deep wine-red and solemn green, that classically perfect rendition of the Shah Abbas border and field were unmistakable. It was indeed an old Isphahan, that final, supreme prize of the collector; that rarest and most costly of all rugs.

I admitted that I had not attained, and probably never should attain, to such a fabulously scarce piece of weaving.

"You are wrong, quite wrong. For since I need that wall space for Saladin's throne-rug, I shall give you that Isphahan with my thanks and apologies——"

"Apologies?"

"Yes. For what I am giving you is a worthless rag compared with what I took from you this afternoon."

Such generosity is dizzying. That small, perfect Isphahan would be worth several thousand dollars even had it been ragged

as a last year's bird's nest. I was stumped, stopped dead.

SAOUD, entering with coffee, interrupted my thanks. After having served the steaming, night-black, deathly bitter beverage, the negro took his post at the farther end of the salon, in front of a pair of heavy curtains that I fancied must conceal an alcove.

"In El-Káhireh it is the custom to perfume one's coffee with a tiny bit of ambergris," remarked bin Ayyub. "But I have devised a more subtle combination."

In response to the master's nod, Saoud parted the silver-embroidered curtains and caught them on the hilts of the similtars that hung at each side of the alcove. A great jar, fully as tall as the negro, and gracefully curved as a Grecian amphora, glowed in the level, sunset rays like a monstrous, rosy-amber bead.

He lifted the cover of the jar: and from it rolled a wave of overwhelming sweetness, an unearthly fragrance so curiously blended that I could not pick the dominant odor. Jasmine, or the rose of Naisháp̀úr, or all the mingled spices of Cebu and Saigon . . . with undertones of sandalwood and patchouli. . . . A dizzying madness, a surge of intoxicating warmth and richness poured resistlessly from the glowing, pulsating, almost transparent depths of that great urn.

I wondered how Saoud could endure it at such close range. And then, drinking fully of the potent wave that swept past me, I lost all physical sensation save that of floating in a sea of torrid, confusing sweetness. And then the African replaced the cover of the jar. I fancied that he reeled ever so slightly as he withdrew from that throbbing luminous fountain of unbelievable fragrance, and wondered that he did not collapse.

Bin Ayyub had apparently forgotten my presence. He sipped his coffee, and with half-closed eyes stared into the depths of the urn. The unfathomable, perfect peace which Moslems wish each other with their "*Es-Salaam Aleiḳa*" had descended upon him: *keyf*, the placid enjoyment of wakefulness that is half sleep.

The silence, the utter repose was contagious. I found myself gazing, eyes half out of focus, at the throne-rug. . . .

And then I sensed that eyes were staring at me from some place of concealment. I turned and caught a glimpse of a dainty armful, shapely and elegantly contoured: a girl with smoldering, saracenic eyes, pools of dusky enchantment. Just for an instant I held her level, unabashed gaze which lingered long enough to let me fully sense her imperious calm and composure. It was just a glimpse, barely enough to let me recognize the transparent, olive complexion and faintly aquiline features of a Transcaucasian, a Gurjestani, the most flawlessly lovely of all Oriental women. And then the portières closed on the vision.

What a mad afternoon! The throne-rug of Saladin . . . and then the descendant of that great prince . . . and that girl, with her smoldering, kohl-darkened eyes . . . the familiar spirit of the urn whose Byzantine curves imprisoned that glowing, rosy-amber sea of sweetness . . . wild thought! . . . but she was small and dainty enough to have emerged from that great jar, and then vanished back into its shimmering, pulsating depths. . . .

"The contents of that jar," began bin Ayyub, emerging from the silence, "would make a rich perfume of all the seas of the world. It would be folly to try to imagine the countless myriads of blossoms and herbs, spices and gums that are imprisoned in that essence. A drop, a thousand-fold diluted, and a drop of that dilution, equally diluted, would be more potent than the strongest scents known to your *Feringhi* perfumers."

"It seems you took a fearful risk in shipping such a fragile and precious article into this country," I suggested.

"It was risky. Still, I would rather have had it shattered en route than fall into the hands of the spoilers who looted my house in Stamboul. But as luck would have it, there was a babbler among my enemies, so that I had warning. I packed my treasures, and smuggled them out, one at a time. And the night before the bowstring was to grace my throat, my family and I left in disguise."

Bin Ayyub paused to reflect a moment, wondering, perhaps, whether to carry on or change the subject. And then the darkness of his deep-set eyes flared fiercely.

"Do you see that cord?" He indicated a fine strand of hard-braided silk which hung from the peg that supported the simitar at the right of the alcove containing the Byzantine urn. "My enemy was so careless as to walk by moonlight the evening before a doom was to settle on my house. And as a souvenir of the promenade, I brought with me that fine, stout cord which, for all he cared, I might have left there to chafe his throat," concluded bin Ayyub, as he stroked his black mustache.

And then he showed me how the bowstring is employed; that flickering, swift gesture of his long, lean hands was gruesomely convincing. Bin Ayyub was indeed a versatile man.

"Swift and probably painless?" I volunteered.

"Yes. But if I had my choice of deaths," mused bin Ayyub, "I would elect to be drowned in a pool of that perfume, with my breath so rich with its fragrance that my senses would entirely forsake me. . . ."

A tinkle of bracelets interrupted his

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musings. The portières parted, and the lady from Gurjestan reappeared. In that strange atmosphere, it never occurred to me to commit the *faux pas* of rising as she entered. This was doubtless bin Ayyub's "family"; and, though the United States were on the street, they had not quite penetrated to this dim salon, so that I felt it would be tactful not to seem to take any notice of the girl. Upon more intimate acquaintance with bin Ayyub, I might be presented to her; but not at present.

Bin Ayyub replied to her purring, rippling syllables, speaking some language unknown to me; and then the tapestried portières closed and hid her from sight.

"You will surely pardon me, *effendi.* Though Djénane Hanoum speaks English, she prefers her native language," he remarked, then clapped his hands to summon Saoud.

Fresh coffee was served. And then, as my cigarette smoldered to its finish, bin Ayyub rose, rolled up the precious Isphahan and again offered it to me.

"And in ten days or two weeks the throne-rug of Saladin will be spliced by skilled weavers. I would be very glad to have you return and see it after it is restored."

The clicking of the latch behind me reminded me that I was again in the city of Chicago; and the Isphahan did not let me forget that I had actually been awake the past few hours.

WHENEVER there has been a killing, the vultures assemble. I had marveled that Morgan Revell had not stumbled across the throne-rug of Saladin before I did. Thus it was that I was not surprized to have him call at my apartment that very evening.

"Well . . . most extraordinary, that. Where did you get it?" he demanded, as he paused in the doorway, stripping off his gloves in preparation for the inspection of the Isphahan that bin Ayyub had so generously given me. "Shades of Shah Abbas! Strike me blind, but it seems genuine. And perfect."

He then parked his bulk in my favorite chair, and poured himself a drink, and proceeded to extract the story. And naturally I was not at all averse to enlightening him; for this would about even up for his eternal boasting of the mosque carpet of Eski Shehr: a remarkable tale, but one which eventually wears on one's nerves.

"On the level now, did anyone actually make you a present of this Isphahan?" he inquired as I concluded my account of the day's doings.

"Idiot," said I, "do you think I could have bought it?"

"Well, no. But still——" His features parted in a reminiscent grin. "Perhaps you remember the mosque carpet of Eski Shehr?"

"Lay off that mosque carpet! No, I got this honestly and without any of your clever devices."

"Score one for you! But really now, old egg, don't you know, this is a most unusual tale you're telling. Quite preposterous, quite! First of all, this bin Ayyub person is a *rara avis,* and all that, if at all. Who ever heard of one of those beggars who had any appreciation of an antique rug?"

"What about——?"

"Rot! Whoever you were going to cite is probably a dealer. It's simply preposterous, this bin Ayyub who collects ancient rugs. And that descendant of Saladin; why really, old fruit, that doesn't hold water at all."

I insisted that there were Orientals who did appreciate the beauty of the wondrous rugs which they wove.

"Quite so, quite so. But just consider,"

countered Revell, "that this Isphahan which you treasure as an antique was painfully new in the days when good old Shah Abbas was so partial to fine weaving and inventing new designs. That jolly prince had nothing but antiques on his hands, and he craved new ones; also new patterns. So much so that he sent artists to Italy to study design."

"But, damn it, I tell you——"

"Ah yes, surely. Nevertheless, I insist that the appreciation of antiques is an Occidental taste, and one which is jolly well artificial. Remember that little Armenian in Ashjian's showrooms and how much he felt that we were upset above the ears for preferring a threadbare Kabistan to a new Sarouk?"

I remembered.

"Well, now go to Ashjian's and let that same lad catch you admiring a Kirman rose-rug. Hear him sigh with much ecstasy; see him caper about; get the gallons of praise he pours on the heads of those fine old eggs who really knew how to weave a rug. He knows his litany now; but he wasn't born that way."

Revell scored.

"But bin Ayyub is a cultured gentleman. I'll take you out to his house, and then you'll be convinced about it all, including his being a descendant of Saladin."

"Very well, have it your own way. You know, it really may be quite possible. Only, it's just a bit unusual, if you know what I mean," Revell finally conceded as I completed my repetition of the story, and added bits of color I had omitted the first time. "Not that I doubted your word. But in all honesty, old onion, can you blame me for being a shade skeptical? When even the Shah's palace in Teheran is cluttered with gilt bric-à-brac, and modern Sultanieh rugs, and all that sort of atrocious thing. Beastly taste these beggars show. But this

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bin Ayyub fellow may be the exception; though I contend that whatever the art the Orient provides is the result of instinct and not intent."

I granted most of his contentions. And then we discussed the great jar of attar, and the surpassing loveliness of bin Ayyub's "family."

"Most fascinating, really. This sounds like what people think the Orient ought to be, but never actually is. *Houris,* and incense, and all that sort of thing."

Then, just as he left: "By the way, did you ever read the quaint little tale of Aladdin's lamp?"

"Sure. What of it?"

"Nothing, really nothing at all. Merely curious, you know."

Now what had that buzzard meant by that remark? A subtle way of calling me an out-and-out romancer? Or did he mean that in getting my Isphahan I had stumbled into something Aladdin-like?

And then I carefully examined the Isphahan. No, Revell had not palmed it and left a replica in its place. Strangely enough, he had not even tried to trade or bargain for it.

IT WAS fully two weeks before I could find time to call on bin Ayyub to inspect the restoration of the throne-rug. But finally I did contrive to find some spare time, and just to convince Revell that I had not been releasing an Arabian fantasy, I decided to take him along.

"Cheers, old bean!" greeted Revell. "I was just thinking. . . . But how do you like it?"

It, the throne-rug of Saladin, stared me in the face: rich, lustrous, magnificent, now that it had been cleaned, and the pieces spliced together.

"Where in——?"

Revell laughed at my amazement.

"Most amazing, what? But don't rub your eyes. It is exactly what it looks like: the rug of the justly popular Saladin. I was just thinking of asking you to translate the inscription. Couldn't remember the exact wording you gave me several nights ago."

"Devil take inscriptions! How did you get it? Unless he suddenly needed the money."

"You could have done the same thing," Revell began, as he poured himself a drink, then painstakingly selected a cigar. "Especially after I told you in so many words how to go about it."

"How come, told me how to go about it?"

This was too much for me. He'd been up to dirty work of some kind. It was unbelievable that he had purchased that rug; and I doubted that he was clever enough to have outwitted bin Ayyub. Then what? Breaking and entering? Well, not very likely.

"The last thing I said the other night was something about Aladdin's lamp. I fancy you recollect. But I was jolly well certain you'd not follow my train of thought. Well . . . the magician from El Moghreb paraded up and down in front of Aladdin's palace, offering to exchange old lamps for new ones. And the princess—Mrs. Aladdin—was tickled pink to take an unfair advantage of an old man's foolishness. So she joyously swapped the greasy, tarnished old magic lamp for a nice, new one. Never occurred to Aladdin to tell the young person his wife that the rather crude old lamp was of some value. Simple, really."

"Do you mean to say——?"

"Oh, yes, quite. Exactly, in fact. Mrs. bin Ayyub greatly fancied a lovely Anatolian silk rug about the same size as the revered Saladin's throne-rug, which, by the way, she thought was a bit *passé.* Liked my silk rug; bright colors, and not at all worn, and all that sort of thing. So we swapped; and I fancy I noted a gleam

of triumph or something like that in her most fascinating eyes. Charming creature, yes?"

And then I exploded.

"You ought to be shot! He'll beat the tar out of her. He'll flay her alive——"

"Regrets, and all that, surely. But *caveat emptor* still holds good. She had no business messing around with the master's trinkets. After all, a bit of deceit——"

"And that girl will surely smell hell——"

"Much regret, certainly. But really, would you have me pass up such an opportunity? I'd cheerfully have committed murder for that rug. As it is——"

Revell smiled at the memory of his exceeding cleverness, and gazed at the throne-rug of Saladin with that fanatic affection comprehensible only to a collector.

And that smile drove me mad. Thanks to my babbling, Revell had turned a very clever trick; and thanks also to me, that dainty girl's shoulders . . . no, bin Ayyub wouldn't beat her himself; he'd have black Saoud lay aside his duties of footman, pipe-bearer and coffee-grinder, and peel every inch of skin off her shoulders. The noble Turk is a man of few words and short temper when dealing with his family. All of which went to my head, seeing that it was mainly my fault for having set Revell on the trail.

"Listen, you damned coyote!"

I gripped Revell by the shoulder by way of emphasis. He blinked in amazement.

"Listen and get me straight: you're going to return that rug here and now. Bin Ayyub treated me like a gentleman. And moreover, it's my fault if that girl

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gets the daylights hammered out of her; my fault, and yours."

"Come now, try and act naturally," mocked Revell, who had mastered his amazement at my outburst. "I return that rug? Absurd. Really preposterous. Why, as I said, I'd have committed——"

And then Revell stared as I leaped to the arm of a davenport, reached up, and yanked Saladin's throne-rug from its place on the wall.

"Wait a minute. This is getting a bit thick. I say——"

By this time I was seeing red and also other colors.

"One more word out of you and I'll knock your head off! I'm taking this rug back to its owner. Get me?"

Revell is far from yellow. But somehow, I convinced him. The last glimpse I had of him, he was the color of an old saddle, and choking for breath.

"Really now, but this is a bit thick," he contrived, as I slammed the door. I missed the rest, but I am sure that for the next fifteen minutes it was a bit thick in the Revell apartment.

Throne-rug trailing over my shoulder, I hopped a taxi and proceeded to bin Ayyub's house.

BIN AYYUB himself admitted me. I recognized him simply because no mask could disguise those lean, aquiline features; but this which faced me was but a simulacrum of the vital personality I had met two weeks ago. His face was unshaven; his eyes were cavernous and dull, lifeless; gone was all save the shell of Saladin's descendant. The change was so startling, so dismaying, that for the moment I forgot the throne-rug I carried, rolled up under my arm.

In view of the denunciation and wrath I expected, accusations of having played a part in the trickery of Revell, this listlessness of bin Ayyub left me dazed and wondering.

"I am glad to see you, *effendi,*" he murmured, as he conducted me into the salon. He had not offered to take my hat and coat; had not noticed the bundle I carried.

"The throne-rug," I began, offering him the precious roll. "I regret——"

"Spare your regrets. It was my fault. I should have told Djénane Hanoum of its value."

He took the rug with a listlessness that amazed me, and, moving as one suddenly aroused from sound sleep, spread it across a couch.

"I feared——"

"That I suspected you?" interrupted bin Ayyub. "No. I knew you were not guilty. You know who is guilty; but since he must be one who has eaten your bread and salt, I can not ask you to betray him."

Bin Ayyub seemed to forget that I was not bound by the Moslem's belief in the sanctity of bread and salt. But now that I had returned the rug, why bother about the trickster, Revell?

"Nor have I time to hunt him," continued bin Ayyub. "I have been waiting for you to return Saladin's throne-rug. And now that that is done, I have little time for hunting him."

"But now there's no need of hunting him," I suggested. "You have your rug."

Which I fancied was a sensible answer. But the look that flitted across bin Ayyub's face and took form in his eyes told me that my remark had been the thrust of incandescent iron.

Bin Ayyub rose. I wondered if this was to terminate the interview. It seemed that he might at least have thanked me, despite my having been the cause of his annoyance.

"I have dismissed Saoud for the day.

But I myself will prepare coffee. One moment, please."

The aura of unbounded misery and corroding despair remained, lingering after the portières had hidden bin Ayyub from sight. Not even the clanging of the brazen pestle wherewith he pulverized the freshly roasted coffee could infuse a trace of life into the somber magnificence of that rich salon. The order of nature had been upset: this was the house of one whose spirit had died a thousand deaths without having deprived the body of life. Not even the return of the throne-rug had aroused a sparkle of the vital, predatory spirit of that fierce Kurd whose eyes had but two weeks ago flamed exultantly as he told of the enemy who had unwisely walked by moonlight.

Bin Ayyub's entry with a tray interrupted my reflections.

One of the tiny eggshell cups was white, the other, deep blue.

"No, *effendi,* blue is the color of mourning; take the white one."

A light began to dawn on me. The color of mourning . . . he had taken this tactful way of letting me know that my presence was an intrusion on his sorrow. But, if there had been a death in the family, why that flash of abysmal despair when a few moments ago I had suggested that since he once more had the throne-rug, he need not bother to hunt whoever it was that had tricked Djénane Hanoum?

"Bismillahi!" murmured bin Ayyub, then tasted his coffee. After a moment's silence, he continued, "I bear you no ill will for what has happened. Naturally you would speak to your friends of the Isphahan I gave you, and of the throne-rug. It was my fault; I should have told her."

Worse and worse! That rug again. Hadn't I returned it? Wasn't he sitting on it even as he spoke? Well then. . . .

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"It was my fault. I should have told her," he repeated.

He drained his cup.

The brooding silence forbade even an attempt at making conversation. My nerves were rapidly getting on edge; and I hoped bin Ayyub would end the interview.

"I am leaving very soon, *effendi,*" he finally resumed. "Saoud will pack up my goods. I have been waiting for you to return the throne-rug; and I was right in waiting. For the sake of my illustrious ancestor, I treasure it. But much has happened in the last few days. I do not care to have it in my house any longer. My brother's son in Tekrit will take it."

I could think of no appropriate comment.

"Here is the piece which was exchanged for the throne-rug. Take it with you when you leave, and return it to its owner."

Which was also fair enough; though Revell deserved no such fortune after his shabby trick. The loss might be a lesson to him.

"May I ask you to be so kind as to lift the cover of the jar of attar?" requested bin Ayyub, as he set aside his empty cup.

I could see that he was momentarily becoming paler. There was not a drop of blood beneath his bronzed skin. The corners of his mouth and the muscles of his cheeks twitched perceptibly; so that his request did not seem at all out of order. Though if I myself felt as he looked, the last thing in the world I'd want would be a whiff of that overpowering perfume.

"Certainly," I replied.

Poor devil! He seemed to be having a chill, shivering noticeably. No wonder he wanted me to take Saoud's place in the ritual of the perfume jar.

As I advanced across the wondrously carpeted floor, I heard him mutter to himself, "One is at times hasty. . . ."

I parted the curtains that veiled the great urn of Byzantine glass, and lifted the heavy cover; then, dizzied by the overwhelming surge of sweetness, recoiled a pace.

And then I dropped the cover.

Christ in heaven! But why deny my own eyes? In the throbbing, glowing rosy-amber jar was the shapely form of Djénane Hanoum! Faintly distorted by the refraction of the curved surfaces of the urn and the attar, but nevertheless and beyond any mistake, that was the Gurjestani girl. I stared, fascinated, then looked behind the jar, hoping . . . ridiculous hope! . . . to find that she was standing on the other side, and that I had seen her through, and not in, the urn.

It is strange how in such a moment one notices trifles.

"La illah illa allah . . . wa Muhammad rasul allahi . . ." came the murmuring accents of bin Ayyub, very low, but distinct.

Even in the grip of that horribly lovely sight, I had distinctly caught the Moslem's "There is no God but Allah. . . ." And then, scarcely perceptible, "Djénane. . . ."

My movements must have been those of a mechanical toy.

As I caught the curtains on the hilts of the simitars hanging at each side of the alcove, I noted that the fine, hard-woven cord of silk was missing. And then I found myself wondering what poison the blue cup of mourning had contained.

Not until fully a minute later did it dawn on me why bin Ayyub's eyes had flamed with immeasurable despair when I had reminded him that since I had returned the throne-rug of Saladin, he had

no cause to concern himself about the thief.

That awful sweetness was rolling from the uncovered jar, strangling me with its richness. I wondered how a girl in the heart of an ocean of perfume could endure its fragrance . . . and whether the silken cord was chafing her throat.

Bin Ayyub's drawn features were now overlaid with a shadow of a smile.

"If it were given me to elect the manner of my death, I would choose to be drowned in that perfume . . ." he had once said. So instead of covering the jar, I left Ilderim Shirkuh bin Ayyub enthroned on the rug of Saladin, and facing the loveliness which he had imprisoned in attar.

REVELL was still frothing when I returned and tossed his Anatolian silk rug on the floor.

"I'd have committed murder for that throne-rug," he growled. "And now——"

Some day I'm going to tie an anvil to Revell's ankles and then kick him into Lake Michigan.

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THE EYRIE

MANY of our readers object to our occasional use of weird stories from the classics of the past, and would have us confine our monthly Weird Story Reprint entirely to old tales from this magazine. Others want serials in the reprint section. Still others ask for translations of weird tales in other languages. We would like to hear from you, the readers, regarding this matter, for it is your likes and dislikes that govern us in the preparation of each issue.

Thunder in the Dawn

John Agnew writes from Philadelphia: "The May issue contained some excellent stories, the best of which was Kuttner's *Thunder in the Dawn*. I am anxiously awaiting the concluding chapters of this story, and, if it is as good as the first installment, I will be perfectly satisfied. Another darn good story is *The Isle of the Sleeper*, by Edmond Hamilton. The plot was very ingenious, and the story was well written. Jack Williamson, who, incidentally, is one of my favorites, concluded *Dreadful Sleep* in fine style. I am looking forward to Eando Binder's *From the Beginning*."

Smooth Edges

Seymour Kapetansky writes from Detroit: "Finlay deserves orchids for his careful work on the April issue, and for his garishly overwhelming cover. *The Devil Deals* has a grand start—loathsome, unusual, unworldly—and ends on such a *hacky* note I could scream. Clark Ashton Smith's tale is up to his exquisite and usual standard. He creates a gem of a word pattern, and a truly weird pattern. *Feathertop* is not uncommon enough for WT. Reprints should come from sources that can't be tapped by most readers, not from the public repositories of literature. . . . *The House of Ecstasy*—sex rears its unugly head here, but for a laudable purpose—a *new* idea in WT. I'm racking my brain for that address all my waking hours now. Max Brod, in translation, reads cleverly diabolic. As I read each WT I bless its continual use of smooth edges. Inherent merit is emphasized, although there is a dictum: Don't judge a book from its cover. If Finlay does all the covers like the one he did for the April issue, I'd be pretty proud to judge WT by its cover. But I suppose lots of nice, full-length nudes are scheduled for coming months."

A Letter from Chicago

G. H. writes from Chicago: "Hm—hm—m—m—mM! Seems that Henry K. has got something to suit my taste just fine—Atlantis—tall blond men—magic—and the overwhelming sense of the immense palm that lifts Elak and Solonala, the faun-girl. Boy oboy—am I ever anxious for the next installment! Sompin else new again—liv'n' learn! This time the late Howard gives *zuvembie* in *Pigeons From Hell*. The pigeon theory is still vague to me but the gosh-awfulness of the whole tale is too shuddery—one of those things that makes some folks have nitemares. Now *Goetterdaemmerung* has me up a tree somewhat—it's thoroughly exciting—very unusual—but why, oh, why—must writers, in their tales of the future, have a Mongol horde conquer and ruthlessly destroy this land of ours? Why not give a pleasant tale of the future—a work that is odd, entertaining, weird and yet not have some malignant monster lurking in a corner, waiting to play cat and mouse with the hero and his shero? Edmond Hamilton's *Isle of the Sleeper* was rather amusing. How often in dreams does one walk in delight and suddenly see that which is wholly uncon-

nected with the dream—e. g., the elephants —and the lake and those horrible 'missing links.' Of course, sleeping on a barren rock under the hot Pacific sun is enough to give anyone such delusions. When it comes to worms and squidging out life-cores of jelly-like substances, I don't enjoy myself any more. The previous installments of *Dreadful Sleep* were so absorbing, and I was enthused over it. With the exception of the grub and the mud cocoon, this installment was acceptable. I particularly enjoyed Ron's travels from the Antarctic over solid ocean, and the terrified sea-captain. I wonder if the poor fellow drowned when he ran from his ship, over the glass-like waves—after the world had been redeemed from its rigid state. Yup—I remember reading *Medusa,* and although fascinating, the woman repelled me just as a snake does. 'Nother one of those pussons is Marian Shortess in the Eyrie, who seems to have read only praise letters—I disagree with you quite emphatically! I wonder if you've ever read some of those debates that sprang up, and with very little encouragement would have become heated arguments. Read more carefully, m'dear, and you will learn that most everyone becomes critical at times. . . . If Clifton Hall will re-read the opening paragraphs of *The Teakwood Box,* he will note the sentence reads 'smelly L. A. suburb'—not 'stinking.' There is a world of difference between the two words. Most any place is likely to become 'smelly' in the broiling hot summer weather. Don't get so technical, m'boy! Thankee to the lad from England who finds my letters refreshing. I may add that I like onions and orchids. . . . And so once more we have methodically covered the issue, giving comments. Somehow it's fun. *Auf wiedersehen.*"

Request Denied

Gene Risher writes from Johnstown, Pennsylvania: "Have been a constant reader of WT since its first appearance on the stands. After reading the present issue (May '38) I decided to send in my two-cents worth to the Eyrie for the first time, so here goes. I have few complaints with the authors. I read all the stories. Some I do not

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:

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Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.	Apr.
May	May	May	....	May
....	June	June	June	June
July	July	July	July	....
....	Aug.	....	Aug.	....
Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	Sept.	....
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like, but I don't expect the authors to please everyone. The loss of Howard and Lovecraft is irreparable. . . . To my mind Howard was tops and I hope you will honor Mr. Robert J. Hoyer's request for reprints or a book of Mr. Howard's stories, especially the Conan series. I also propose that one of your other authors study Mr. Howard's style and characters and continue the Conan series. I don't think any Howard fan would be too harsh with criticism. After all, Conan was a strong character, and many weaker ones have outlived their creators. So let's make Conan a monument to his creator. Let's hear what some of the others think of this proposal. . . . As to Quinn, let me say I heartily disagree with Marian Shortess. I think *Roads* was a truly wonderful story. I read it to my children and I am sure it was more acceptable than the age-worn lies told to children down through the centuries. I would like to suggest that our friend Marian look up the real history of our so-called Christian holidays. Then she will find that Mr. Quinn really knew whereof he spoke. As to mentioning Christ and the Virgin Mary in a magazine filled with witchcraft, ghosts, werewolves and vampires, etc.: I would suggest that she borrow someone's Holy Bible and read it. *But* I am afraid that if she did, she might like the horrible and gruesome, as well as the witchcraft stories contained therein, so well she would forget to buy the next issue." [Sorry to deny your request for some other author to carry on the Conan stories of the late Robert E. Howard. His work was touched with genius, and he had a distinctive style of writing that put the stamp of his personality on every story he wrote. It would hardly be fair to his memory if we allowed Conan to be recreated by another hand, no matter how skilfully.—THE EDITOR.]

A Lone Cry

Donald V. Allgeier writes from Licking, Missouri: "Congratulations on the fine May issue. . . . I give first place to *Dreadful Sleep.* Williamson has done it again. I agree with those who compare his style to Merritt's. They are similar, but Williamson is a splendid author in his own right. This seems to me to be as great a story as the now almost legendary *Golden Blood. Pigeons from Hell* gets my vote for second place. It certainly makes one long for Howard to be back again. There's a story that really caused the goose-pimples. Horrible and frightening are the words—a real weird tale. Perhaps it's my preference for serials, but even without that *Thunder in the Dawn* would rank high. I rate it third. It has all the elements of a true weird tale—mystery, black magic, fantastic setting—plus action. That makes it comparable to the Conan saga. Congratulations to Kuttner, a writer who has certainly developed recently. I'm sorry this story is only in two parts. Quinn's latest yarn is so close behind that it's practically a tie. *Goetterdaemmerung* struck me as an experimental type of story—to test readers' reactions. Personally, I prefer a story that I can understand, but, as usual, Quinn delivers a fine job of writing. *The Secret of the Vault* was quite good. I wonder if the style reminded others of Poe. It seemed to me quite like some of E. A.'s masterpieces. Hamilton's latest is little but a clever idea, but is worth reading. The reprint was fair, but the writing seemed strained. Why wait so long to reprint early stories by Howard? The Eyrie is demanding them. . . . In recent issues I particularly liked *The House of Ecstasy.* With Farley's *Abductor Minimi Digit* and *Vallisneria Madness* it completes a trilogy of delightfully unique short tales. I voice a lone cry for less lurid covers."

Reprint from Old Issues

Edith Mulder writes from Lindenhurst, Long Island: "I like the new serial, *Dreadful Sleep,* immensely. I'm eagerly awaiting the finish. I wish you would reprint stories in WT that other readers keep talking about —like *Shambleau, Once in a Thousand Years,* and, oh, so many others that readers write about. They make me long so for all the WTs that were ever printed, so I could read them all! Couldn't you reprint serials that were acclaimed, also? I agree with others that say they would rather have a serial reprint than a lot of new stories."

Where Once Poe Walked

T. Gelbert writes from Niagara Falls, New York: "Features of the April issue are *The Temple Dancer, The Garden of Adompha* and the very charming Hawthorne tale, *Feathertop.* Mediocre and very much so are *Dreadful Sleep* and *Forest of Evil.* I am glad to see Seabury Quinn's tales featuring others besides Jules de Grandin and the

stupid Trowbridge. In the May issue *Thunder in the Dawn, Pigeons from Hell* and *The Secret of the Vault,* in the order named, pleased yours truly best. Honorable mention goes to the poem, *Where Once Poe Walked.* In closing I will say that anyone who derides Poe and his work is not and cannot possibly be a lover of weird tales as exemplified by Lovecraft, C. A. Smith, Kuttner and others in our own Unique Magazine."

The Easter Island Images

John H. Green writes from Washington, D. C.: "No use to tell you how much I enjoy WT, because if I didn't I wouldn't read it and keep on reading it. *Roads* by Seabury Quinn was about the only story I ever read three times and probably will read it again. . . . Current novel by Jack Williamson is great. The Eyrie is as interesting as the stories. Might add to E. Hoffmann Price's statement concerning the Stanzas of Dzyan that there and there only is the explanation of the Easter Island images."

Pride of Place

Francis G. Howes writes from Rugby, England: "I am writing to congratulate you on WT. There is nothing like them in England and they are the only stories that I get a real kick from. I am a research worker and a folk-lore expert who possesses a remarkable library dealing with the occult and the weird, but in the fiction line your magazines take pride of place. I put some of your stories, especially those not overburdened with a superfluity of adjectives, on a par with those of Bram Stoker, M. R. James, and Algernon Blackwood. . . . I have traveled through middle Europe collecting folk-lore and legends and I was astounded at the amount of superstition and credence in the supernatural which abounds among quite civilized people. There are grounds for these beliefs, as I have discovered, especially in the Carpathians and the Black Forest, but to all but my most intimate friends I have remained silent for fear of ridicule. I can assure your readers that some of your magnificent yarns touch alarmingly near to the truth. I was grieved at the passing of H. P. L. Will he ever have a successor? Of recent issues I enjoyed *The Last Pharaoh* most of all. Let us have more of Thomas P. Kelley. Virgil's illustrations are the goods.

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His drawing to the last episode of the foregoing, very reminiscent of *The Faceless God*, was superb."

Just Too Scary!

Margaret Warren writes from Columbus, Ohio: "*Pigeons from Hell* was just too scary, and me alone in a big house when I read it, and it raining too. I walked every stair with Griswell, and all night I heard steps in the hall and on the stairs—me that is not afraid of anything, or I always said I wasn't, but I should have read it on a bright sunshiny day. Virgil's drawing for it! Those three awful things hanging! And that awful old crone sitting there breathing evil as old as the world. I wonder what a person would do if confronted with something like that. I'll tell the world I wouldn't ever go back in that house. But men are supposed to have more courage than we weaker females, ha! While I think of it I must not forget *Roads*. Ah! Quinn, you have indeed given us a masterpiece. That was the loveliest thing I ever read. That's all I can say. Imagine some people saying it shouldn't have been in WEIRD TALES. One is so fortunate to be able to read that story anywhere, any place. It in a way reminds me of *Child of the Winds*—it had that same tender love and genius; a man only writes one such story in his life, and Quinn, bless your heart, you gave us *Roads*. But then he always has been my favorite. May he live for ever!—well, anyway, as long as I do."

A Gifted Writer

Hazel Portelli writes from Detroit: "This present issue of WEIRD TALES is up to its usual standard, which is the peak of perfection. So long as Seabury Quinn is a regular contributor I will keep on reading, and his story, *The Temple Dancer*, is grand. *The Devil Deals* by Carl Jacobi is unique, and almost possible. However, the story that remained in my mind is *Roads* by Seabury Quinn in the January issue. My sincerest congratulations and thanks to that gifted writer."

Really Swell

Clifton Hall writes from Los Angeles: "Congratulations on the best number since December. The April WT was really swell. In an issue like this one it's always difficult to pick the best stories, but after some reflection I'll select the second installment of that magnificent serial by Jack Williamson, *Dreadful Sleep*. It's totally different from anything I recall having read before in our magazine. It takes a master to make the dreary ice-wastes of the south pole seem weird. Next comes *Forest of Evil*, by John Murray Reynolds, who should be heard from more often. Although not so weird as some others, this was an enthralling adventure yarn. Bloch's *The Eyes of the Mummy* is third best. Bloch combines something of Lovecraft's studied horror with a touch of color that H. P. did not possess. These three lead the pack, but *The Garden of Adompha, The Temple Dancer, The House of Ecstasy* and *Feathertop* aren't far behind. The last mentioned, by Hawthorne, was so fine that I am prompted to suggest that we have more reprints from sources other than old copies of WEIRD TALES. There are many short classics that could be printed."

A Reader in France

Juanita Lawrence writes from Paris: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for the last three years, and often I have wanted to write a letter, but somehow I never did. But now, after a three months' stay in Egypt where I couldn't get WT, I just feel like telling you how much I like your magazine, which is really 'unique,' as they say over here in France. And now for some personal opinions: I like Seabury Quinn and Henry Kuttner best of all your authors, and immediately next Robert Bloch. But *please* don't give too many serials! They always make me feel a bit irritated; just when I am dying to know what's going to happen I have to wait another month! Also, I would like to see some more werewolf and vampire stories. . . . Almost all my American friends here read WT, since I 'found' it, and do they love it! Please reprint some more poems by the late master, H. P. Lovecraft."

About Reprints

Norman W. Siringer writes from Lakewood, Ohio: "The May issue of WT is certainly the best issue so far this year, with the first installment of Henry Kuttner's *Thunder in the Dawn* topping the issue. This may be sacrilege, but the first half of the Elak of Atlantis novelette tops all of the Conan stories, and I was a rabid Conan fan. *Thunder in the Dawn* can be favorably

compared with Merritt's works. By all means, H. K., write more about Elak and his friends. In an ordinary issue Jack Williamson's great novel would easily have taken first place, but *Dreadful Sleep,* Williamson's best since *Golden Blood,* must be content with second. *Goetterdaemmerung,* Seabury Quinn's novelette, took third place. The rest of the stories were all good. . . . I don't like short short-stories and I seriously condemn you for reprinting the classics. Short short-stories are nearly always based on the ghost or spirit entity plot and they are usually very poorly developed. My main objection to stories by Hawthorne or Poe being used is that nearly everyone has read them before. I might add that there are scores of good stories from old issues of WT that are now eligible for reprinting *(Bimini, The Skeleton Under the Lamp, The Copper Bowl, The Cult of the Skull, The Tinkle of the Camel's Bell, The Silver Key,* etc.) WEIRD TALES is showing constant improvement. Keep it up!"

Jam-up

H. Sivia writes from Palestine, Texas: "Thanks for a swell May issue. Everything in it is jam-up. Only one complaint: the lack of short-shorts. We must have variety, you know. My vote for first place is split between Quinn's *Goetterdaemmerung* and Hamilton's *The Isle of the Sleeper.* Especially do I like the idea back of the latter. Always glad to see one of Howard's yarns in print. The background for his piny woods stories is always authentic."

Finlay's Illustrations

Henry Kuttner writes from Beverly Hills, California: "Virgil Finlay's grease-pencil work, in the current WT, is as excellent as his pen-and-ink sketches, and seems to reproduce somewhat better on pulp paper. I was particularly struck, in the April issue, with Starrett's *Cordelia's Song,* which succeeded admirably in capturing the outré insane horror of *The King in Yellow.* Why not reprint that classic yarn, and Chambers' even more ghastly *The Yellow Sign?* Clark Ashton Smith's tale, *The Garden of Adompha,* was swell, and Virgil's pictorial inter-

NEXT MONTH

The Fire Princess

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pretations most effective. I read *Adompha* first in manuscript form, up at Smith's place, surrounded by his grotesque statuary and his bizarre pictures, with a Satanic cat—no doubt one of Klarkash-Ton's familiars—eyeing me wickedly from the corner. Lastly, a wreath of mandragores for that ol' davil Bloch, anent his Sebek story, with its really unusual climax."

Concise Comments

George C. Bowring writes from Los Angeles, California: "Allow me to voice my approval of the series of full-page interpretations by Virgil Finlay. They are truly remarkable. The April drawing was done with a restraint which was most admirable. I'm glad to see that he can be so true to the mood of whatever he is interpreting."

R. J. Fugate writes from Hansonville, Virginia: "Permit me to compliment you on your splendid magazine. It is, to my knowledge, the only pulp magazine of actual literary merit. I have frequently taught in my college classes from stories published in WEIRD TALES—classes in American literature."

Benjamin Rafkin writes from Washington, D. C.: "In the May issue of WEIRD TALES, Henry Kuttner's *Thunder in the Dawn* seems to me the story best suited to your type of magazine and most acceptable to an intelligent audience which reads for recreation. Even though visibly an attempt at the Conanesque, it is a fine story and I hope there are more like it in the future."

Nils H. Frome writes from Fraser Mills, B. C., Canada: "Of the short-shorts in the April number, Farley's was the best, and good. Brod's I did not like."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? If you have any comments to make, please address them to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago. Your favorite story in the May issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was the first part of Henry Kuttner's story of the dawn age, *Thunder in the Dawn.*

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE JULY WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1) ----------	----------
(2) ----------	----------
(3) ----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1) ----------	Why? ----------
(2) ----------	----------

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Reader's name and address:

COMING NEXT MONTH

I FELT my breath catch in my throat as we came face to face in the moonlight. The general standard of beauty among the natives of Brittany is high indeed, but in the girl who stood before me the very pinnacle of flawless perfection seemed to have been reached.

Her features—but how can I describe that which transcends all description? Mere words seem futile and meaningless when applied to that radiant creature who confronted us out of the mystery of the night. Her loveliness seemed more than human—and most assuredly none of it was due to the "art which conceals art" in the estimation of the feminine mind. Her dark hair waved in a profuse disorder of natural curls over her brow and neck. Her smooth skin was deeply tanned by exposure to the wind and sun. Her cheap cotton frock would have seemed but a mere rag but for the superb lines of the figure beneath. Her shapely legs were bare to the knees; her feet innocent of even the wooden *sabots* which the poorest of peasants usually wear. She seemed more like some dryad of the woods than a mundane peasant-girl.

For some reason—possibly it was the memory of my own recent fears—her very calmness irritated me.

"What are you doing here?" I cried as sharply as my halting Breton would allow. "Don't you know that there are wolves about?"

To my surprize she answered in the purest French:

"Assuredly, *m'sieu,* there are wolves. Have I not just now"—she hesitated—"have I not heard them howling? And you—you did not climb the Devil's Tombstone just to admire the view?" . . .

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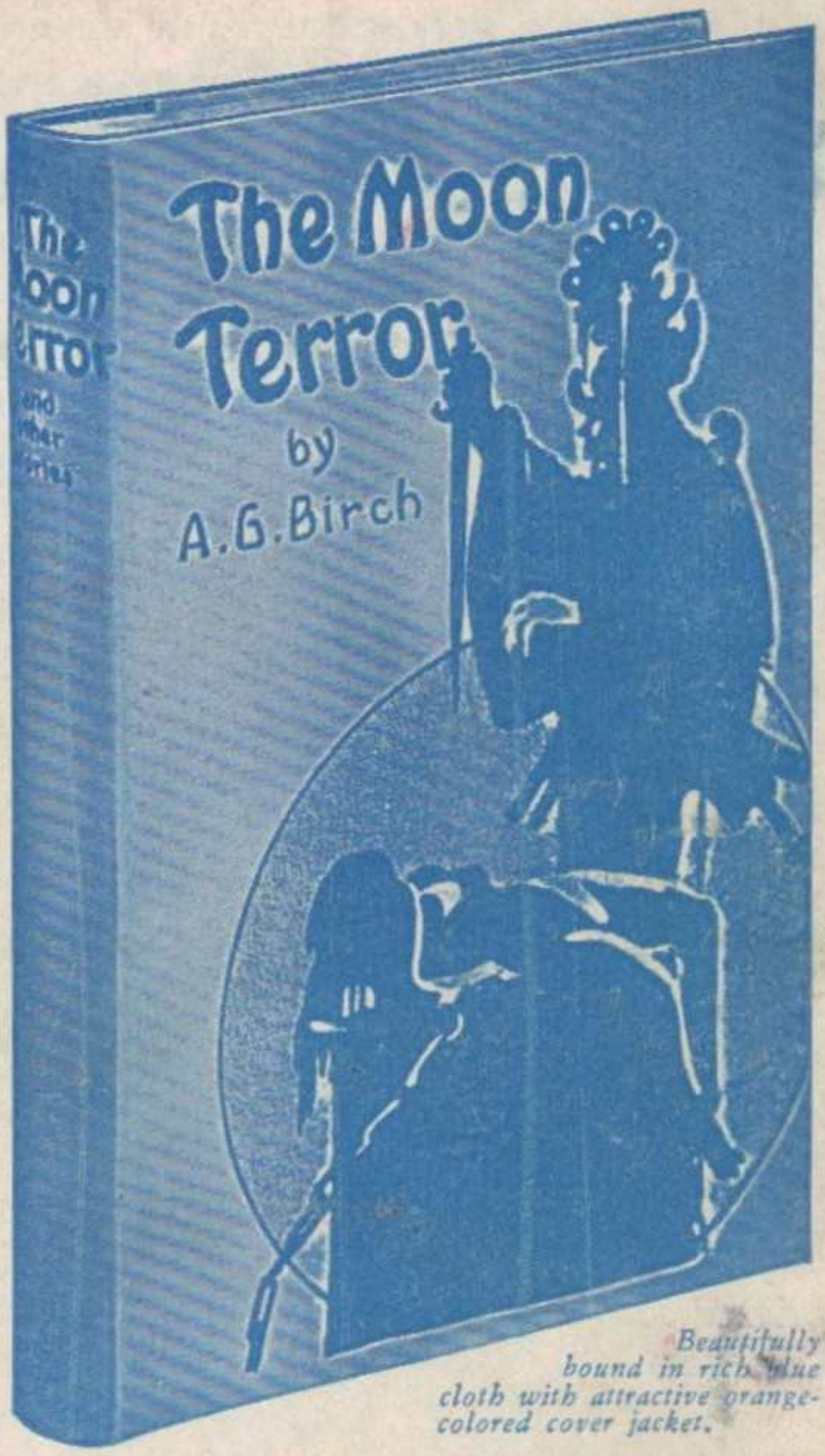

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