Weird Tales

JULY

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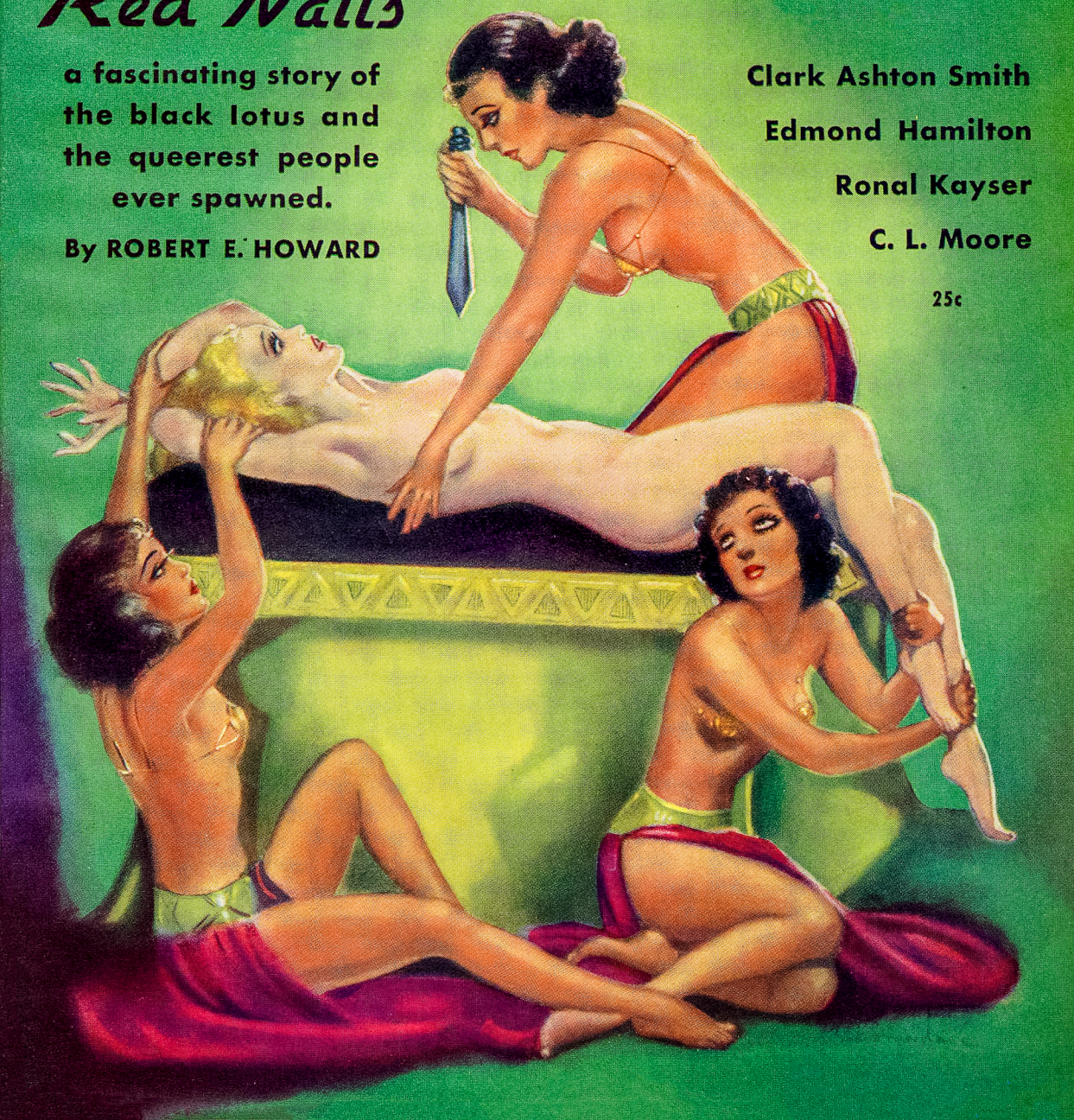

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800 NORTH CLARK STREET - - DEPT. G-200 - - CHICAGO, ILL.

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 28 | CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1936 | No. 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, $2.50; Canada, $2.75; elsewhere, $3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Necromancy in Naat

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A strange, spine-chilling story about the dead people that swam in the ocean and served the sorcerers of Naat; and of the living-dead maiden Dalili

Dead longing, sundered evermore from pain:
How dim and sweet the shadow-hearted love,
The happiness that perished lovers prove
In Naat, far beyond the sable main.
—*Song of the Galley-Slaves.*

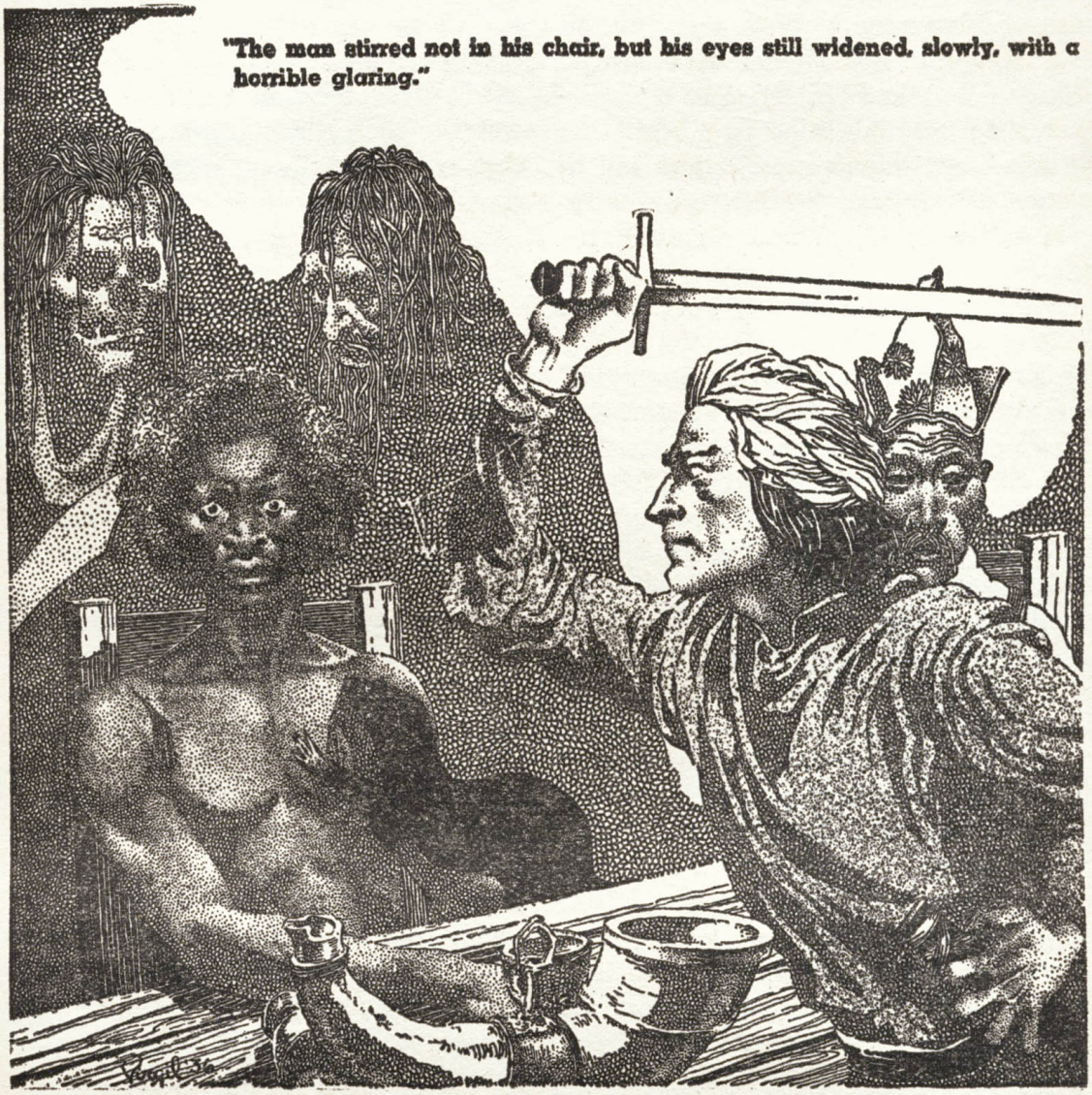
YADAR, prince of a nomad people in the half-desert region known as Zyra, had followed throughout many kingdoms a clue that was often more elusive than broken gossamer. For thirteen moons he had sought Dalili, his betrothed, whom the slave-traders of Sha-Karag, swift and cunning as desert falcons, had reft from the tribal encampment with nine other maidens while Yadar and his men were hunting the black gazelles of Zyra. Fierce was the grief of Yadar, and fiercer still his wrath, when he came back at eve to the ravaged tents. He had sworn then a great oath to find Dalili, whether in slave-mart or brothel or harem, whether dead or living, whether tomorrow or after the lapse of gray years.

Disguised as a rug-merchant, with four of his men in like attire, and guided only by the gossip of bazars, he had gone from capital to capital of the continent Zothique. One by one his followers had died of strange fevers or the hardships of the route. After much random wandering and pursuit of vain rumors, he had come alone to Oroth, a western seaport of the land of Xylac.

There he heard a rumor that might concern Dalili; for the people of Oroth were still gossiping about the departure of a rich galley bearing a lovely outland girl, answering to her description, who had been bought by the emperor of Xylac and sent to the ruler of the far southern kingdom of Yoros as a gift concluding a treaty between these realms.

Yadar, now hopeful of finding his beloved, took passage on a ship that was about to sail for Yoros. The ship was a small merchant galley, laden with grain and wine, that was wont to coast up and down, hugging closely the winding western shores of Zothique and venturing never beyond eyesight of land. On a clear blue summer day it departed from Oroth with all auguries for a safe and tranquil voyage. But on the third morn after leaving port, a tremendous wind blew suddenly from the low-lying shore they were then skirting; and with it, blotting the heavens and sea, there came a blackness as of night thickened with clouds; and the vessel was swept far out, going blindly with the blind tempest.

After two days the wind fell from its ravening fury and was soon no more than a vague whisper; and the skies cleared, leaving a bright azure vault from horizon to horizon. But nowhere was there any land visible, only a waste of waters that still roared and tossed turbulently without wind, pouring ever westward in a tide too swift and strong for the galley to stem. And the galley was borne on irresistibly by that strange current, even as by the hurricane.



"The man stirred not in his chair, but his eyes still widened, slowly, with a horrible glaring."

Yadar, who was the sole passenger, marveled much at this thing; and he was struck by the pale terror on the faces of the captain and crew. And, looking again at the sea, he remarked a singular darkening of its waters, which assumed from moment to moment a hue as of old blood commingled with more and more of blackness: though above it the sun shone untarnished. So he made inquiry of the captain, a graybeard from Yoros, named Agor, who had sailed the ocean for forty summers; and the captain answered:

"This I had apprehended when the storm bore us westward: for we have fallen into the grip of that terrible ocean-stream which mariners call the Black River. Evermore the stream surges and swiftens toward the place of the sun's outermost setting, till it pours at last from the world's rim. Between us now and that final verge there is no land saving the evil land of Naat, which is called also the Isle of Necromancers. I know not which were the worst fate, to be wrecked on that infamous isle or hurled into space with the waters calling from earth's edge. From either place there is no return for

living men such as we. And from the Isle of Naat none go forth except the ill sorcerers who people it, and the dead who are raised up and controlled by their sorcery. In magical ships that breast the Black River, the sorcerers sail at will to other strands; and beneath their necromancy, to fulfill their wicked errands, the dead men swim without pause for many nights and days whithersoever the masters may send them."

Yadar, who knew little of sorcerers and necromancy, was somewhat incredulous concerning these matters. But he saw that the blackening waters streamed always more wildly and torrentially toward the skyline; and verily there was small hope that the galley could regain its southward course. And he was troubled chiefly by the thought that he should never reach the kingdom of Yoros, where he had dreamt to find Dalili.

All that day the vessel was borne on by the dark seas racing weirdly beneath an airless and immaculate heaven. It followed the orange sunset into a night filled with large, unquivering stars; and at length it was overtaken by the flying amber morn. But still there was no abating of the waters; and neither land nor cloud was discernible in the vastness about the galley.

Yadar held little converse with Agor and the crew, after questioning them as to the reason of the ocean's blackness, which was a thing that no man understood. Despair was upon him; but, standing at the bulwark, he watched the sky and wave with an alertness born of his nomad life. Toward afternoon he descried far off a strange vessel with funereal purple sails, that drove steadily on an eastering course against the mighty current. He called Agor's attention to the vessel; and Agor, with a muttering of sailors' oaths, told him that it was a ship belonging to the necromancers of Naat.

Soon the purple sails were lost to vision; but a little later, Yadar perceived certain objects resembling human heads, that passed in the high-billowing water to the galley's leeward. Deeming that no mortal living men could swim thus, and remembering that which Agor had said concerning the dead swimmers who went forth from Naat, Yadar was aware of such trepidation as a brave man may feel in the presence of things beyond nature. And he did not speak of the matter; and seemingly the head-like objects were not noticed by his companions.

Still the galley drove on, its oarsmen sitting idle at the oars, and the captain standing listless beside the untended helm.

Toward night, as the sun declined above that tumultuous ebon ocean, it seemed that a great bank of thunder-cloud arose from the west, long and low-lying at first, but surging rapidly skyward with mountainous domes. Ever higher it loomed, revealing the menace as of piled cliffs and somber, awful sea-capes; but its form changed not in the fashion of clouds; and Yadar knew it at last for an island bulking far aloft in the long-rayed sunset. From it a shadow was thrown for leagues, darkening still more the sable waters, as if with the fall of untimely night; and in the shadow the foam-crests flashing upon hidden reefs were white as the bared teeth of death. And Yadar needed not the shrill, frightened cries of his companions to tell him that this was the terrible Isle of Naat.

Direly the current swiftened, raging, as it raced onward for battle with the rock-fanged shore; and the voices of the mariners, praying loudly to their gods, were drowned by its clamor. Yadar, standing in the prow, gave only a silent prayer to the dim, fatal deity of his tribe; and his eyes searched the towering isle like those of a sea-flown hawk, seeing the bare hor-

rific crags, and the spaces of dark forest creeping seaward between the crags, and the white mounting of monstrous breakers on a shadowy strand.

Shrouded, and ominous of bale was the island's aspect, and the heart of Yadar sank like a plummet in unsunned seas. As the galley hove nearer to land, he thought that he beheld people moving darkly, visible in the lapsing of surges on a low beach, and then hidden once more by foam and spindrift. Ere he saw them a second time, the galley was hurled with thunderous crashing and grinding on a reef buried beneath the torrent waters. The fore-part of its prow and bottom were broken in, and being lifted from the reef by a second comber, it filled instantly and sank. Of those who had sailed from Oroth, Yadar alone leapt free ere its foundering; but, since he was little skilled as a swimmer, he was drawn under quickly and was like to have drowned in the maelstroms of that evil sea.

His senses left him, and in his brain, like a lost sun returned from yesteryear, he beheld the face of Dalili; and with Dalili, in a bright fantasmagoria, there came the happy days that had been ere his bereavement. The visions passed, and he awoke struggling, with the bitterness of the sea in his mouth, and its loudness in his ears, and its rushing darkness all about him. And, as his senses quickened, he became aware of a form that swam close beside him, and arms that supported him amid the water.

He lifted his head and saw dimly the pale neck and half-averted face of his rescuer, and the long black hair that floated from wave to wave. Touching the body at his side, he knew it for that of a woman. Mazed and wildered though he was by the sea's buffeting, a sense of something familiar stirred within him, and he thought that he had known somewhere, at some former time, a woman with like hair and similar curving of cheek. And, trying to remember, he touched the woman again, and felt in his fingers a strange coldness from her naked body.

Miraculous was the woman's strength and skill, for she rode easily the dreadful mounting and falling of the surges. Yadar, floating as in a cradle upon her arm, beheld the nearing shore from the billows' summits; and hardly it seemed that any swimmer, however able, could win alive through the wildness of that surf. Dizzily, at the last, they were hurled upward, as if the surf would fling them against the highest crag; but, as if checked by some enchantment, the wave fell with a slow, lazy undulation; and Yadar and his rescuer, released by its ebbing, lay unhurt on a shelfy beach.

Uttering no word, nor turning to look at Yadar, the woman rose to her feet; and, beckoning him to follow, she moved away in the deathly blue dusk that had fallen upon Naat. Yadar, arising and following the woman, heard a strange and eery chanting of voices above the sea's tumult, and saw a fire that burned weirdly, with the colors of driftwood, at some distance before him in the dusk. Straightly, toward the fire and the voices, the woman walked. And Yadar, with eyes grown used to that doubtful twilight, saw that the fire blazed in the mouth of a low-sunken cleft between crags that overloomed the beach; and behind the fire, like tall, evilly posturing shadows, there stood the dark-clad figures of those who chanted.

Now memory returned to him of that which the galley's captain had said regarding the necromancers of Naat and their practises. The very sound of that chanting, albeit in an unknown tongue, seemed to suspend the heartward flowing of his veins, and to set the tomb's chillness in his marrow. And though he was

little learned in such matters, the thought came to him that the words uttered were of sorcerous import and power.

GOING forward, the woman bowed low before the chanters, like a slave. The men, who were three in number, continued their incantation without pausing. Gaunt as starved herons they were, and great of stature, with a common likeness; and their sunk eyes were visible only by red sparks reflected within them from the blaze. And their eyes, as they chanted, seemed to glare afar on the darkling sea and on things hidden by dusk and distance. And Yadar, coming before them, was aware of swift horror and repugnance that made his gorge rise as if he had encountered, in a place given to death, the powerful evil ripeness of corruption.

High leaped the fire, with a writhing of tongues like blue and green serpents coiling amid serpents of yellow. And the light flickered brightly on the face and breasts of that woman who had saved Yadar from the Black River; and he, beholding her closely, knew why she had stirred within him a dim remembrance: for she was none other than his lost love, Dalili!

Forgetting the presence of the dark chanters, he sprang forward to clasp his beloved, crying out her name in an agony of rapture. But she answered him not, and responded to his embrace only with a faint trembling. And Yadar, sorely perplexed and dismayed, was aware of the deathly coldness that crept into his fingers and smote through his very raiment from her flesh. Mortally pale and languid were the lips that he kissed, and it seemed that no breath emerged between them, nor was there any rising and falling of the wan bosom against his. In the wide, beautiful eyes that she turned to him, he found only a drowsy voidness, and such recognition as a sleeper gives when but half awakened, relapsing quickly into slumber thereafter.

"Art thou indeed Dalili?" he said. And she answered somnolently, in a toneless, indistinct voice: "I am Dalili."

To Yadar, baffled by mystery, forlorn and aching, it was as if she had spoken from a land farther away than all the weary leagues of his search for her. Fearing to understand the change that had come upon her, he said tenderly:

"Surely thou knowest me, for I am thy lover, the Prince Yadar, who has sought thee through half the kingdoms of earth, and has sailed afar for thy sake on the unshored sea."

And she replied like one bemused by some heavy drug, as if echoing his words without true comprehension: "Surely I know thee." And to Yadar there was no comfort in her reply; and his concernment was not allayed by the parrotings with which she answered all his other loving speeches and queries.

He knew not that the three chanters had ceased their incantation; and, verily, he had forgotten their presence. But as he stood holding the girl closely, the men came toward him, and one of them clutched his arm. And the man hailed him by name and addressed him, though somewhat uncouthly, in a language spoken throughout many parts of Zothique, saying: "We bid thee welcome to the Isle of Naat."

Yadar, feeling a dread suspicion, interrogated the man fiercely: "What manner of beings are ye? And why is Dalili here? And what have ye done to her?"

"I am Vacharn, a necromancer," the man replied, "and these others with me are my sons, Vokal and Uldulla, who are also necromancers. We dwell in a house behind the crags, and are attended by the drowned people that our sorcery has called up from the sea. Among our serv-

ants is this girl, Dalili, together with the crew of that ship in which she sailed from Oroth. Like the vessel in which thou camest later, the ship was blown far asea and was taken by the Black River and wrecked finally on the reefs of Naat. My sons and I, chanting that powerful formula which requires no use of circle or pentacle, summoned ashore the drowned company: even as we have now summoned the crew of that other vessel, from which thou alone wert saved alive by the dead swimmer, at our command."

Vacharn ended, and stood peering into the dusk intently; and Yadar heard behind him a noise of slow footsteps coming upward across the shingle from the surf. Turning, he saw emerge from the livid twilight the old captain of that galley in which he had voyaged to Naat; and behind the captain were the sailors and oarsmen. With the paces of sleepwalkers they approached the firelight, the seawater dripping heavily from their raiment and hair, and drooling from their mouths. Some were sorely bruised, and others came stumbling or dragging with limbs broken by the rocks on which the sea had flung them; and on their faces was the look of men who have suffered the doom of drowning.

Stiffly, like automatons, they made obeisance to Vacharn and his sons, acknowledging thus their thralldom to those who had called them from deep death. In their glassily staring eyes there was no recognition of Yadar, no awareness of outward things; and they spoke only in dull, rote-like recognition of certain obscure words addressed to them by the necromancers.

To Yadar, it was as if he too stood and moved like the living dead in a dark, hollow, half-conscious dream. Walking beside Dalili, and followed by those others, he was led by the enchanters through a dim ravine that wound secretly toward the uplands of Naat. In his heart there was small joy at the finding of Dalili; and his love was companioned with a sick despair.

Vacharn lit the way with a brand of driftwood plucked from the fire. Anon a bloated moon rose red as with saniesmingled blood, over the wild, racing sea; and before its orb had cleared to a death-like paleness, they emerged from the gorge on a stony fell where stood the house of the three necromancers.

The house was built of dark granite, with long low wings that crouched amid the foliage of close-grown cypresses. Behind it a cliff beetled; and above the cliff were somber slopes and ridges piled in the moonlight, rising afar toward the mountainous center of Naat.

It seemed that the mansion was a place pre-empted by death: for no lights burned in its portals and windows; and a silence came from it to meet the stillness of the wan heavens. But, when the sorcerers neared the threshold, a word was spoken by Vacharn, echoing distantly in the inner halls; and as if in answer, lamps glowed suddenly everywhere, filling the house with their monstrous yellow eyes; and people appeared instantly within the portals like bowing shadows. But the faces of these beings were blanched by the tomb's pallor, and some were mottled with green decay, or marked by the tortuous gnawing of maggots. . . .

In a great hall of the house, Yadar was bidden to seat himself at a table where Vacharn and Vokal and Uldulla commonly sat alone during their meals. The table stood on a dais of gigantic flagstones; and below, in the main hall, the dead were gathered about other tables, numbering nearly two score; and among them sat the girl Dalili, looked never toward Yadar. He would have joined her, unwilling to be parted from her side: but a deep

languor was upon him, as if an unspoken spell had enthralled his limbs and he could no longer move of his own volition.

Dully he sat with his grim, taciturn hosts who, dwelling always with the silent dead, had assumed no little part of their manner. And he saw more clearly than before the common likeness of the three: for all, it seemed, were as brothers of one birth rather than parent and sons; and all were like ageless things, being neither old nor young in the fashion of ordinary men. And more and more was he aware of that weird evil which emanated from the three, powerful and abhorrent as an exhalation of hidden death.

In the thralldom that weighed upon him, he scarcely marveled at the serving of that strange supper: though meats were brought in by no palpable agency, and wines poured out as if by the air itself; and the passing of the bearers to and fro was betrayed only by a rustle of doubtful footsteps, and a light chillness that came and went.

Mutely, with stiff gestures and movements, the dead began to eat at their tables. But the necromancers refrained from the victuals before them, in an attitude of waiting; and Vacharn said to the nomad: "There are others who will sup with us tonight." And Yadar then perceived that a vacant chair had been set beside the chair of Vacharn.

Anon, from an inner doorway, there entered with hasty strides a man of great thews and stature, naked, and brown almost to blackness. Savage of aspect was the man, and his eyes were dilated as with rage or terror, and his thick purple lips were flecked with foam. And behind him, lifting in menace their heavy, rusted simitars, there came two of the dead seamen, like guards who attend a prisoner.

"This man is a cannibal," said Vacharn. "Our servants have captured him in the forest beyond the mountains, which is peopled by such savages." He added: "Only the strong and courageous are summoned living to this mansion. . . . Not idly, O Prince Yadar, wert thou chosen for such honor. Observe closely all that follows."

The savage had paused within the threshold, as if fearing the hall's occupants more than the weapons of his guards. One of the liches slashed his left shoulder with the rusty blade, and blood rilled from a deep wound as the cannibal came forward beneath that prompting. Convulsively he trembled, like a frightened animal, looking wildly to either side for an avenue of escape; and only after a second prompting did he mount the dais and approach the necromancers' table. But, after certain hollow-sounding words had been uttered by Vacharn, the man seated himself, still trembling, in the chair beside the master, opposite to Yadar. And behind him, with high-raised weapons, there stationed themselves the ghastly guards, whose features were those of men a fortnight dead.

"There is still another guest," said Vacharn. "He will come later; and we need not wait for him."

Without further ceremony he began to eat, and Yadar, though with little appetence, followed suit. Hardly did the prince perceive the savor of those viands with which his plate was piled; nor could he have sworn whether the vintages he drank were sour or dulcet. His thoughts were divided between Dalili and the strangeness and horror about him.

As he ate and drank, his senses were sharpened weirdly, and he grew aware of eldritch shadows moving between the lamps, and heard the chill sibilance of whispers that checked his very blood. And there came to him, from the peopled hall, every odor that is exhaled by mortality between the recentness of death and the end of corruption.

Vacharn and his sons addressed themselves to the meal with the unconcern of those long used to such surroundings. But the cannibal, whose fear was still palpable, refused to touch the food before him. Blood, in two heavy rills, ran unceasingly down his bosom from his wounded shoulders, and dripped audibly on the stone flags.

Finally, at the urging of Vacharn, who spoke in the cannibal's own tongue, he was persuaded to drink from a cup of wine. This wine was not the same that had been served to the rest of the company, being of a violet color, dark as the nightshade's blossom, while the other wine was a poppy red. Hardly had the man tasted it when he sank back in his chair with the appearance of one smitten helpless by palsy. The cup, rilling the remnant of its contents, was still clutched in his rigid fingers; there was no movement, no trembling of his limbs; and his eyes were wide open and staring as if consciousness still remained within him.

A DIRE suspicion sprang up in Yadar, and no longer could he eat the food and drink the wine of the necromancers. And he was puzzled by the actions of his hosts who, abstaining likewise, turned in their chairs and peered steadily at a portion of the floor behind Vacharn, between the table and the hall's inner end. Yadar, rising a little in his seat, looked down across the table, and perceived a small hole in one of the flagstones. The hole was such as might be inhabited by a small animal: but Yadar could not surmise the nature of a beast that burrowed in solid granite.

In a loud clear voice, Vacharn spoke the single word, "Esrit," as if calling the name of one that he wished to summon. Not long thereafter, two little sparks of fire appeared in the darkness of the hole, and from it sprang a creature having somewhat the size and form of a weasel, but even longer and thinner. The creature's fur was a rusted black, and its paws were like tiny hairless hands; and its beaded eyes of flaming yellow seemed to hold the malign wisdom and malevolence of a demon. Swiftly, with writhing movements that gave it the air of a furred serpent, it ran forward beneath the chair occupied by the cannibal, and began to drink greedily the pool of blood that had dripped down on the floor from his wounds.

Then, while horror fastened upon the heart of Yadar, it leapt to the cannibal's knees, and thence to his left shoulder, where the deepest wound had been inflicted. There the thing applied itself to the still bleeding cut, from which it sucked in the fashion of a weasel; and the blood ceased to flow down on the man's body. And the man stirred not in his chair; but his eyes still widened, slowly, with a horrible glaring, till the balls were isled in livid white; and his lips fell slackly apart, showing teeth that were strong and pointed as those of a shark.

The necromancers had resumed their eating, with eyes attentive on the small bloodthirsty monster; and it came to Yadar that this was the other guest expected by Vacharn. Whether the thing was an actual weasel, or a sorcerer's familiar, he did not know: but anger followed upon his horror before the plight of the cannibal; and, drawing a sword he had carried through all his travels, he sprang to his feet and would have tried to kill the monster. But Vacharn described in the air a peculiar sign with his forefinger; and the prince's arm was suspended in midstroke, and his fingers became weak as those of a babe, and the sword fell from his hand, ringing loudly on the dais. Thereafter, as if by the unspoken will of Vacharn, he was constrained to seat himself again at the table.

Insatiable, it seemed, was the thirst of the weasel-like creature: for, after many minutes had gone by, it continued to suck the blood of the savage. From moment to moment the man's mighty thews became strangely shrunken, and the bones and taut sinews showed starkly beneath wrinkling folds of skin. His face was like the chapless face of death, his limbs were lean as those of an old mummy: but the thing that battened upon him had increased in size only so much as a stoat increases by sucking the blood of some farmyard fowl.

By this token, Yadar knew that the thing was indeed a demon and was no doubt the familiar of Vacharn. Entranced with terror, he sat regarding it, till the creature dropped from the dry bones and skin of the cannibal, and ran with an evil writhing and slithering to its hole in the flagstone.

WEIRD was the life that now began for Yadar in the house of the necromancers. Upon him there rested always the malign thralldom that had overpowered him during that first supper; and he moved as one who could not wholly awake from some benumbing dream. It seemed that his volition was in some way controlled by those masters of the living dead. But, more than this, he was held by the old enchantment of his love for Dalili: though the love had now turned to a spell of despair.

Something he learned of the necromancers and their mode of existence: though Vacharn spoke seldom except with grim ironies; and the sons of Vacharn were taciturn as the dead. He learned that the weasel-like familiar, whose name was Esrit, had undertaken to serve Vacharn for a given term, receiving in guerdon, at the full of each moon, the blood of a living man chosen for redoubtable strength and valor. And it was clear to Yadar that, in default of some miracle, or sorcery beyond that of the necromancers, his days of life were limited by the moon's period. For, other than himself and the masters, there was no person in all that mansion who had not already passed through the bitter gates of death. . . .

Lonely was the house, standing far apart from all neighbors. Other necromancers dwelt on the shores of Naat; but betwixt these and the hosts of Yadar there was little intercourse. And beyond the wild mountains that divided the isle, there dwelt only certain tribes of anthropophagi, who warred with each other in the black woods of pine and cypress.

The dead were housed in deep catacomb-like caves behind the mansion, lying all night in stone coffins, and coming forth in daily resurrection to do the tasks ordained by the masters. Some tilled the rocky gardens on a slope sheltered from sea-wind; others tended the sable goats and cattle; and still others were sent out as divers for pearls in the sea that ravened prodigiously, not to be dared by living swimmers, on the bleak atolls and headlands horned with granite. Of such pearls, Vacharn had amassed a mighty store through years exceeding the common span of life. And sometimes, in a ship that sailed contrary to the Black River, he or one of his sons would voyage to Zothique with certain of the dead for crew, and would trade the pearls for such things as their magic was unable to raise up in Naat.

Strange it was to Yadar, to see the companions of his voyage passing to and fro with the other liches, greeting him only in mindless echo of his own salutations. And bitter it was, yet never without a dim sorrowful sweetness, to behold Dalili and speak with her, trying vainly to revive the lost ardent love in a heart that had gone fathom-deep into oblivion and had not returned therefrom. And always,

with a desolate yearning, he seemed to grope toward her across a gulf more terrible than the stemless tide that poured for ever about the Isle of the Necromancers.

Dalili, who had swum from childhood in the sunken lakes of Zyra, was among those enforced to dive for pearls. Often Yadar would accompany her to the shore and await her return from the mad surges; and at whiles he was tempted to fling himself after her and find, if such were possible, the peace of very death. This he would surely have done: but, amid the eery wilderments of his plight, and the gray webs of sorcery woven about him, it seemed that his old strength and resolution were wholly lacking.

ONE day, toward sunset-time, as the month drew to its end, Vokal and Uldulla approached the prince where he stood waiting on a rock-walled beach while Dalili dived far out in the torrent waters. Speaking no word, they beckoned to him with furtive signs; and Yadar, vaguely curious as to their intent, suffered them to lead him from the beach and by perilous paths that wound from crag to crag above the curving sea-shore. Ere the fall of darkness, they came to a small landlocked harbor whose existence had been heretofore unsuspected by the nomad. In that placid bay, beneath the deep umbrage of the isle, there rode a galley with somber purple sails, resembling the ship that Yadar had discerned moving steadily toward Zothique against the full tide of the Black River.

Yadar was much bewondered, nor could he divine why they had brought him to the hidden harbor, nor the import of their gestures as they pointed out the strange vessel. Then, in a hushed and covert whisper, as if fearing to be overheard in that remote place, Vokal said to him:

"If thou wilt aid my brother and me in the execution of a certain plan, thou shalt have the use of yonder galley in quitting Naat. And with thee, if such be thy desire, thou shalt take the girl Dalili, together with certain of the dead mariners for oarsmen. Favored by the powerful gales which our enchantments will evoke for thee, thou shalt sail against the Black River and return to Zothique. . . . But if thou helpest us not, then shall the weasel Esrit suck thy blood, till the last member of thy body has been emptied thereof; and Dalili shall remain as the bond-slave of Vacharn, toiling for his avarice by day in the dark waters . . . and perchance serving his lust by night."

At the promise of Vokal, Yadar felt something of hope and manhood revive within him, and it seemed that the baleful sorcery of Vacharn was lifted from his mind; and an indignation against Vacharn was awakened by Vokal's hintings. And he said quickly: "I will aid thee in thy plan, whatever it may be, if such aid is within my power to give."

Then, with many fearful glances about and behind him, Uldulla took up the furtive whispering:

"It is our thought that Vacharn has lived beyond the allotted term, and has imposed his authority upon us too long. We, his sons, grow old: and we deem it no more than rightful that we should inherit the stored treasures and the magical supremacy of our father ere age has debarred us from their enjoyment. Therefore we seek thy help in the slaying of Vacharn."

It came to Yadar, after brief reflection, that the killing of the necromancer should be held in all ways a righteous deed, and one to which he could lend himself without demeaning his valor or his manhood. So he said without demur: "I will help thee in this thing."

Seeming greatly emboldened by Ya-

dar's consent, Vokal spoke again in his turn, saying: "This thing must be accomplished ere tomorrow's eve, which will bring a full-rounded moon from the Black River upon Naat, and will call the weasel-demon Esrit from his burrow. And tomorrow's forenoon is the only time when we can take Vacharn unaware in his chamber. During those hours, as is his wont, he will peer entranced on a magic mirror that yields visions of the outer sea, and the ships sailing over the sea, and the lands lying beyond. And we must slay him before the mirror, striking swiftly and surely ere he awakens from his trance."

At the hour set for the deed, Vokal and Uldulla came to Yadar where he stood awaiting them in the outer hall. Each of the brothers bore in his right hand a long and coldly glittering simitar; and Vokal also carried in his left a like weapon, which he offered to the prince, explaining that these simitars had been tempered to a muttering of lethal runes, and inscribed afterward with unspeakable death-spells. Yadar, preferring his own sword, declined the wizard weapon; and, delaying no more, the three went hastily and with all possible stealth toward Vacharn's chamber.

The house was empty, for the dead had all gone forth to their labors; nor was there any whisper or shadow of those invisible beings, whether sprites of the air or mere phantoms, that waited upon Vacharn and served him in sundry ways. Silently the three came to the portals of the chamber, where entrance was barred only by a black arras wrought with the signs of night in silver, and bordered with a repetition of the five names of the archfiend Thasaidon in scarlet thread. The brothers paused, as if fearing to lift the arras; but Yadar, unhesitating, held it aside and passed into the chamber; and the twain followed him quickly as if for shame of their poltroonery.

The room was large, high-vaulted, and lit by a dim window looking forth between unpruned cypresses toward the black sea. No flames arose from the myriad lamps to assist that baffled daylight; and shadows brimmed the place like a spectral fluid, through which the vessels of wizardry, the great censers and alembics and braziers, seemed to quiver like animate things. A little past the room's center, his back to the doorway, Vacharn sat on an ebon trivet before the mirror of clairvoyance, which was wrought from electrum in the form of a huge delta, and was held obliquely aloft by a serpentining copper arm. The mirror flamed brightly in the shadow, as if lit by some splendor of unknown source; and the intruders were dazzled by glimpsings of its radiance as they went forward.

It seemed that Vacharn had indeed been overcome by the wonted trance, for he peered rigidly into the mirror, immobile as a seated mummy. The brothers held back, while Yadar, thinking them close behind him, stole toward the necromancer with lifted blade. As he drew nearer, he perceived that Vacharn held a great simitar across his knees; and, deeming that the sorcerer was perhaps forewarned, Yadar ran quickly up behind him and aimed a powerful stroke at his neck. But, even while he aimed, his eyes were blinded by the strange brightness of the mirror, as though a sun had blazed into them from its depth across the shoulder of Vacharn; and the blade swerved and bit slantingly into the collar-bone, so that the necromancer, though sorely wounded, was saved from decapitation.

Now it seemed likely that Vacharn had foreknown the attempt to slay him, and had thought to do battle with his assailers when they came. But, sitting at the mirror in pretended trance, he had no doubt

been overpowered against his will by the weird brilliancy, and had fallen into a mantic slumber.

Fierce and swift as a wounded tiger, he leapt from the trivet, swinging his simitar aloft as he turned upon Yadar. The prince, still blinded, could neither strike again nor avoid the stroke of Vacharn; and the simitar clove deeply into his right shoulder, and he fell mortally wounded and lay with his head upheld a little against the base of the snakish copper arm that supported the mirror.

Lying there, with his life ebbing slowly, he beheld how Vokal sprang forward as with the desperation of one who sees imminent death, and hewed mightily into the neck of Vacharn. The head, almost sundered from the body, toppled and hung by a strip of flesh and skin: yet Vacharn, reeling, did not fall or die at once, as any mortal man should have done: but, still animated by the wizard power within him, he ran about the chamber, striking great blows at the parricides. Blood gushed from his neck like a fountain as he ran; and his head swung to and fro like a monstrous pendulum on his breast. And all his blows went wild because he could no longer see to direct them, and his sons avoided him agilely, hewing into him oftentimes as he went past. And sometimes he stumbled over the fallen Yadar, or struck the mirror of electrum with his sword, making it ring like a deep bell. And sometimes the battle passed beyond sight of the dying prince, toward the window that looked seaward; and he heard strange crashings, as if some of the magic furniture were shattered by the strokes of the warlock; and there were loud breathings from the sons of Vacharn, and the dull sound of blows that went home as they still pursued their father. And anon the fight returned before Yadar, and he watched it with dimming eyes.

Dire beyond telling was that combat, and Vokal and Uldulla panted like spent runners ere the end. But, after a while, the power seemed to fail in Vacharn with the draining of his life-blood. He staggered from side to side as he ran, and his paces halted, and his blows became enfeebled. His raiment hung upon him in blood-soaked rags from the slashings of his sons, and certain of his members were half sundered, and his whole body was hacked and overscored like an executioner's block. At last, with a dexterous blow, Vokal severed the thin strip by which the head still depended; and the head dropped and rolled with many reboundings about the floor.

Then, with a wild tottering, as if still fain to stand erect, the body of Vacharn toppled down and lay thrashing like a great, headless fowl, heaving itself up and dropping back again, incessantly. Never, with all its rearings, did the body quite regain its feet: but the simitar was still held firmly in the right hand, and the corpse laid blindly about it, striking from the floor with sidelong slashes, or slicing down as it rose half-way to a standing posture. And the head still rolled, unresting, about the chamber, and maledictions came from its mouth in a pipy voice no louder than that of a child.

At this, Yadar saw that Vokal and Uldulla drew back, as if somewhat aghast; and they turned toward the door, manifestly intending to quit the room. But before Vokal, going first, had lifted the portal-arras, there slithered beneath its folds the long, black, snakish body of the weasel-familiar, Esrit. And the familiar launched itself in air, reaching at one bound the throat of Vokal; and it clung there with teeth fastened in his flesh, sucking his blood steadily, while he staggered about the room and strove in vain to tear it away with maddened fingers.

Uldulla, it seemed, would have made some attempt to kill the creature, for he cried out, adjuring Vokal to stand firm, and raised his sword as if waiting for a chance to strike at Esrit. But Vokal seemed to hear him not, or was too frenzied to obey his adjuration. And at that instant the head of Vacharn, in its rolling, bounded against Uldulla's feet; and the head, snarling ferociously, caught the hem of his robe with its teeth and hung there as he sprang back in panic fright. And though he sliced wildly at the head with his simitar, the teeth refused to relinquish their hold. So he dropped his garment, and leaving it there with the still pendant head of his father, he fled naked from the room. And even as Uldulla fled, the life departed from Yadar, and he saw and heard no more. . . .

DIMLY, from the depths of oblivion, Yadar beheld the flaring of remote lights, and heard the chanting of a far voice. It seemed that he swam upward from black seas toward the voice and the lights, and he saw as if through a thin, watery film the face of Uldulla standing above him, and the fuming of strange vessels in the chamber of Vacharn. And it seemed that Uldulla said to him: "Arise from death, and be obedient in all things to me the master."

So, in answer to the unholy rites and incantations of necromancy, Yadar arose to such life as was possible for a resurrected lich. And he walked again, with the black gore of his wound in a great clot on his shoulder and breast, and made reply to Uldulla in the fashion of the living dead. Vaguely, and as matters of no import, he remembered something of his death and the circumstances preceding it; and vainly, with filmed eyes, in the wrecked chamber, he looked for the sundered head and body of Vacharn, and for Vokal and the weasel-demon.

Then it seemed that Uldulla said to him: "Follow me;" and he went forth with the necromancer into the light of the red, swollen moon that had soared from the black river upon Naat. There, on the fell before the house, was a vast heap of ashes where coals glowed and glared like living eyes. Uldulla stood in contemplation before the heap; and Yadar stood beside him, knowing not that he gazed on the burnt-out pyre of Vacharn and Vokal, which the dead slaves had built and fired at Uldulla's direction.

Then, with shrill, eery wailings, a wind came suddenly from the sea, and lifting all the ashes and sparks in a great, swirling cloud, it swept them upon Yadar and the necromancer. The twain could hardly stand against that wind, and their hair and beards and garments were filled with the leavings of the pyre, and both were blinded thereby. Then the wind went up, sweeping the cloud of ashes over the mansion and into its doorways and windows; and through all its apartments. And for many days thereafter, little swirls of ash rose up under the feet of those who passed along the halls; and though there was a daily plying of besoms by the dead at Uldulla's injunction, it seemed that the place was never again wholly clean of those ashes. . . .

REGARDING Uldulla, there remains little enough to be told: for his lordship over the dead was a brief thing. Abiding always alone, except for those liches who attended him, he became possessed by a weird melancholy that turned quickly toward madness. No longer could he conceive the aims and objects of life; and the languor of death rose up around him like a black, stealthy sea, full of soft murmurs and shadow-like arms that were fain to draw him downward. Soon he came to envy the dead, and to deem their lot desirable above any other.

So, carrying that simitar he had used at the slaying of Vacharn, he went into his father's chamber, which he had not entered since the raising up of Prince Yadar. There, beside the sun-bright mirror of divinations, he disemboweled himself, and fell amid the dust and the cobwebs that had gathered heavily over all. And, since there was no other necromancer to bring him back even to a semblance of life, he lay rotting and undisturbed for ever after.

But in the gardens of Vacharn the dead people still labored, heedless of Uldulla's passing; and they still kept the goats and cattle, and dived for pearls in the dark, torrent main.

And Yadar, being with Dalili in that state now common to them both, was drawn to her with a ghostly yearning; and he felt a ghostly comfort in her nearness. The quick despair that had racked him aforetime, and the long torments of desire and separation, were as things faded and forgot; and he shared with Dalili a shadowy love and a dim contentment.

Hagar

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

Before my berry-pail was full,
The dark came stealing down,
And so I took the woodland path
To hurry back to town;
But, as I ran on frightened feet
Because the light was gone,
From out the shadows that I feared
There leaped a leering faun.

He seized me in his hairy arms
With mocking in his eyes,
And with his hand across my mouth
He stilled my startled cries;
But, when I staggered from the wood
And through the moon-strewn grass,
I was a woman bowed with grief,
No more a laughing lass.

Though I shall be for ever banned
From consecrated ground,
Though wo will make my mother weep,
When she learns I am drowned,
God willing, she will never know
That I chose this mad part
Because the offspring of a faun
Now breathes beneath my heart.

Red Nails

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

One of the strangest stories ever written—the tale of a barbarian adventurer, a woman pirate, and a weird roofed city inhabited by the most peculiar race of men ever spawned

1. The Skull on the Crag

THE woman on the horse reined in her weary steed. It stood with its legs wide-braced, its head drooping, as if it found even the weight of the gold-tassled, red-leather bridle too heavy. The woman drew a booted foot out of the silver stirrup and swung down from the gilt-worked saddle. She made the reins fast to the fork of a sapling, and turned about, hands on her hips, to survey her surroundings.

They were not inviting. Giant trees hemmed in the small pool where her horse had just drunk. Clumps of undergrowth limited the vision that quested under the somber twilight of the lofty arches formed by intertwining branches. The woman shivered with a twitch of her magnificent shoulders, and then cursed.

She was tall, full-bosomed and large-limbed, with compact shoulders. Her whole figure reflected an unusual strength, without detracting from the femininity of her appearance. She was all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments. The latter were incongruous, in view of her present environs. Instead of a skirt she wore short, wide-legged silk breeches, which ceased a hand's breadth short of her knees, and were upheld by a wide silken sash worn as a girdle. Flaring-topped boots of soft leather came almost to her knees, and a low-necked, wide-collared, wide-sleeved silk shirt completed her costume. On one shapely hip she wore a straight double-edged sword, and on the other a long dirk. Her unruly golden hair, cut square at her shoulders, was confined by a band of crimson satin.

Against the background of somber, primitive forest she posed with an unconscious picturesqueness, bizarre and out of place. She should have been posed against a background of sea-clouds, painted masts and wheeling gulls. There was the color of the sea in her wide eyes. And that was as it should have been, because this was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, whose

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● **Nearly four years ago, WEIRD TALES published a story called "The Phoenix on the Sword," built around a barbarian adventurer named Conan, who had become king of a country by sheer force of valor and brute strength. The author of that story was Robert E. Howard, who was already a favorite with the readers of this magazine for his stories of Solomon Kane, the dour English Puritan and redresser of wrongs. The stories about Conan were speedily acclaimed by our readers, and the barbarian's weird adventures became immensely popular. The story presented herewith is one of the most powerful and eery weird tales yet written about Conan. We commend this story to you, for we know you will enjoy it through and through.**

"Convinced that his death was upon him, the Cimmerian acted according to his instinct."

deeds are celebrated in song and ballad wherever seafarers gather.

She strove to pierce the sullen green roof of the arched branches and see the sky which presumably lay about it, but presently gave it up with a muttered oath.

Leaving her horse tied she strode off toward the east, glancing back toward the pool from time to time in order to fix her route in her mind. The silence of the forest depressed her. No birds sang in the lofty boughs, nor did any rustling in the bushes indicate the presence of any small animals. For leagues she had traveled in a realm of brooding stillness, broken only by the sounds of her own flight.

She had slaked her thirst at the pool, but she felt the gnawings of hunger and began looking about for some of the fruit on which she had sustained herself since exhausting the food she had brought in her saddle-bags.

Ahead of her, presently, she saw an outcropping of dark, flint-like rock that sloped upward into what looked like a

rugged crag rising among the trees. Its summit was lost to view amidst a cloud of encircling leaves. Perhaps its peak rose above the tree-tops, and from it she could see what lay beyond—if, indeed, anything lay beyond but more of this apparently illimitable forest through which she had ridden for so many days.

A narrow ridge formed a natural ramp that led up the steep face of the crag. After she had ascended some fifty feet she came to the belt of leaves that surrounded the rock. The trunks of the trees did not crowd close to the crag, but the ends of their lower branches extended about it, veiling it with their foliage. She groped on in leafy obscurity, not able to see either above or below her; but presently she glimpsed blue sky, and a moment later came out in the clear, hot sunlight and saw the forest roof stretching away under her feet.

She was standing on a broad shelf which was about even with the tree-tops, and from it rose a spire-like jut that was the ultimate peak of the crag she had climbed. But something else caught her attention at the moment. Her foot had struck something in the litter of blown dead leaves which carpeted the shelf. She kicked them aside and looked down on the skeleton of a man. She ran an experienced eye over the bleached frame, but saw no broken bones nor any sign of violence. The man must have died a natural death; though why he should have climbed a tall crag to die she could not imagine.

She scrambled up to the summit of the spire and looked toward the horizons. The forest roof—which looked like a floor from her vantage-point—was just as impenetrable as from below. She could not even see the pool by which she had left her horse. She glanced northward, in the direction from which she had come. She saw only the rolling green ocean stretching away and away, with only a vague blue line in the distance to hint of the hill-range she had crossed days before, to plunge into this leafy waste.

West and east the view was the same; though the blue hill-line was lacking in those directions. But when she turned her eyes southward she stiffened and caught her breath. A mile away in that direction the forest thinned out and ceased abruptly, giving way to a cactus-dotted plain. And in the midst of that plain rose the walls and towers of a city. Valeria swore in amazement. This passed belief. She would not have been surprized to sight human habitations of another sort—the beehive-shaped huts of the black people, or the cliff-dwellings of the mysterious brown race which legends declared inhabited some country of this unexplored region. But it was a startling experience to come upon a walled city here so many long weeks' march from the nearest outposts of any sort of civilization.

Her hands tiring from clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, she let herself down on the shelf, frowning in indecision. She had come far—from the camp of the mercenaries by the border town of Sukhmet amidst the level grasslands, where desperate adventurers of many races guard the Stygian frontier against the raids that come up like a red wave from Darfar. Her flight had been blind, into a country of which she was wholly ignorant. And now she wavered between an urge to ride directly to that city in the plain, and the instinct of caution which prompted her to skirt it widely and continue her solitary flight.

Her thoughts were scattered by the rustling of the leaves below her. She wheeled cat-like, snatched at her sword; and then she froze motionless, staring wide-eyed at the man before her.

He was almost a giant in stature, muscles rippling smoothly under his skin which the sun had burned brown. His garb was similar to hers, except that he wore a broad leather belt instead of a girdle. Broadsword and poniard hung from this belt.

"Conan, the Cimmerian!" ejaculated the woman. "What are *you* doing on my trail?"

He grinned hardly, and his fierce blue eyes burned with a light any woman could understand as they ran over her magnificent figure, lingering on the swell of her splendid breasts beneath the light shirt, and the clear white flesh displayed between breeches and boot-tops.

"Don't you know?" he laughed. "Haven't I made my admiration for you plain ever since I first saw you?"

"A stallion could have made it no plainer," she answered disdainfully. "But I never expected to encounter you so far from the ale-barrels and meat-pots of Sukhmet. Did you really follow me from Zarallo's camp, or were you whipped forth for a rogue?"

He laughed at her insolence and flexed his mighty biceps.

"You know Zarallo didn't have enough knaves to whip me out of camp," he grinned. "Of course I followed you. Lucky thing for you, too, wench! When you knifed that Stygian officer, you forfeited Zarallo's favor and protection, and you outlawed yourself with the Stygians."

"I know it," she replied sullenly. "But what else could I do? You know what my provocation was."

"Sure," he agreed. "If I'd been there, I'd have knifed him myself. But if a woman must live in the war-camps of men, she can expect such things."

Valeria stamped her booted foot and swore.

"Why won't men let me live a man's life?"

"That's obvious!" Again his eager eyes devoured her. "But you were wise to run away. The Stygians would have had you skinned. That officer's brother followed you; faster than you thought, I don't doubt. He wasn't far behind you when I caught up with him. His horse was better than yours. He'd have caught you and cut your throat within a few more miles."

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?" He seemed puzzled.

"What of the Stygian?"

"Why, what do you suppose?" he returned impatiently. "I killed him, of course, and left his carcass for the vultures. That delayed me, though, and I almost lost your trail when you crossed the rocky spurs of the hills. Otherwise I'd have caught up with you long ago."

"And now you think you'll drag me back to Zarallo's camp?" she sneered.

"Don't talk like a fool," he grunted. "Come, girl, don't be such a spitfire. I'm not like that Stygian you knifed, and you know it."

"A penniless vagabond," she taunted.

He laughed at her.

"What do you call yourself? You haven't enough money to buy a new seat for your breeches. Your disdain doesn't deceive me. You know I've commanded bigger ships and more men than you ever did in your life. As for being penniless —what rover isn't, most of the time? I've squandered enough gold in the sea-ports of the world to fill a galleon. You know that, too."

"Where are the fine ships and the bold lads you commanded, now?" she sneered.

"At the bottom of the sea, mostly," he replied cheerfully. "The Zingarans sank my last ship off the Shemite shore—that's why I joined Zarallo's Free Companions. But I saw I'd been stung when we marched to the Darfar border. The pay was poor and the wine was sour, and I don't like

black women. And that's the only kind that came to our camp at Sukhmet—rings in their noses and their teeth filed—bah! Why did you join Zarallo? Sukhmet's a long way from salt water."

"Red Ortho wanted to make me his mistress," she answered sullenly. "I jumped overboard one night and swam ashore when we were anchored off the Kushite coast. Off Zabhela, it was. There a Shemite trader told me that Zarallo had brought his Free Companies south to guard the Darfar border. No better employment offered. I joined an east-bound caravan and eventually came to Sukhmet."

"IT WAS madness to plunge southward as you did," commented Conan, "but it was wise, too, for Zarallo's patrols never thought to look for you in this direction. Only the brother of the man you killed happened to strike your trail."

"And now what do you intend doing?" she demanded.

"Turn west," he answered. "I've been this far south, but not this far east. Many days' traveling to the west will bring us to the open savannas, where the black tribes graze their cattle. I have friends among them. We'll get to the coast and find a ship. I'm sick of the jungle."

"Then be on your way," she advised. "I have other plans."

"Don't be a fool!" He showed irritation for the first time. "You can't keep on wandering through this forest."

"I can if I choose."

"But what do you intend doing?"

"That's none of your affair," she snapped.

"Yes, it is," he answered calmly. "Do you think I've followed you this far, to turn around and ride off empty-handed? Be sensible, wench. I'm not going to harm you."

He stepped toward her, and she sprang back, whipping out her sword.

"Keep back, you barbarian dog! I'll spit you like a roast pig!"

He halted, reluctantly, and demanded: "Do you want me to take that toy away from you and spank you with it?"

"Words! Nothing but words!" she mocked, lights like the gleam of the sun on blue water dancing in her reckless eyes.

He knew it was the truth. No living man could disarm Valeria of the Brotherhood with his bare hands. He scowled, his sensations a tangle of conflicting emotions. He was angry, yet he was amused and filled with admiration for her spirit. He burned with eagerness to seize that splendid figure and crush it in his iron arms, yet he greatly desired not to hurt the girl. He was torn between a desire to shake her soundly, and a desire to caress her. He knew if he came any nearer her sword would be sheathed in his heart. He had seen Valeria kill too many men in border forays and tavern brawls to have any illusions about her. He knew she was as quick and ferocious as a tigress. He could draw his broadsword and disarm her, beat the blade out of her hand, but the thought of drawing a sword on a woman, even without intent of injury, was extremely repugnant to him.

"Blast your soul, you hussy!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "I'm going to take off your——"

He started toward her, his angry passion making him reckless, and she poised herself for a deadly thrust. Then came a startling interruption to a scene at once ludicrous and perilous.

"What's that?"

It was Valeria who exclaimed, but they both started violently, and Conan wheeled like a cat, his great sword flashing into his hand. Back in the forest had burst forth an appalling medley of screams—the screams of horses in terror and agony.

Mingled with their screams there came the snap of splintering bones.

"Lions are slaying the horses!" cried Valeria.

"Lions, nothing!" snorted Conan, his eyes blazing. "Did you hear a lion roar? Neither did I! Listen at those bones snap —not even a lion could make that much noise killing a horse."

HE HURRIED down the natural ramp and she followed, their personal feud forgotten in the adventurers' instinct to unite against common peril. The screams had ceased when they worked their way downward through the green veil of leaves that brushed the rock.

"I found your horse tied by the pool back there," he muttered, treading so noiselessly that she no longer wondered how he had surprized her on the crag. "I tied mine beside it and followed the tracks of your boots. Watch, now!"

They had emerged from the belt of leaves, and stared down into the lower reaches of the forest. Above them the green roof spread its dusky canopy. Below them the sunlight filtered in just enough to make a jade-tinted twilight. The giant trunks of trees less than a hundred yards away looked dim and ghostly.

"The horses should be beyond that thicket, over there," whispered Conan, and his voice might have been a breeze moving through the branches. "Listen!"

Valeria had already heard, and a chill crept through her veins; so she unconsciously laid her white hand on her companion's muscular brown arm. From beyond the thicket came the noisy crunching of bones and the loud rending of flesh, together with the grinding, slobbering sounds of a horrible feast.

"Lions wouldn't make that noise," whispered Conan. "Something's eating our horses, but it's not a lion—Crom!"

The noise stopped suddenly, and Conan swore softly. A suddenly risen breeze was blowing from them directly toward the spot where the unseen slayer was hidden.

"Here it comes!" muttered Conan, half lifting his sword.

The thicket was violently agitated, and Valeria clutched Conan's arm hard. Ignorant of jungle-lore, she yet knew that no animal she had ever seen could have shaken the tall brush like that.

"It must be as big as an elephant," muttered Conan, echoing her thought. "What the devil——" His voice trailed away in stunned silence.

Through the thicket was thrust a head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bared rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkled a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stared unwinkingly at the petrified humans clinging to the rock above it. Blood smeared the scaly, flabby lips and dripped from the huge mouth.

The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, was further extended on a long scaled neck on which stood up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings, waddled the body of a titan, a gigantic, barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost raked the ground, while the serrated back-bone rose higher than Conan could have reached on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like that of a gargantuan scorpion, trailed out behind.

"Back up the crag, quick!" snapped Conan, thrusting the girl behind him. "I don't think he can climb, but he can stand on his hind-legs and reach us——"

With a snapping and rending of bushes and saplings the monster came hurtling through the thickets, and they fled up the rock before him like leaves blown before a wind. As Valeria plunged into the leafy screen a backward glance showed

her the titan rearing up fearsomely on his massive hinder legs, even as Conan had predicted. The sight sent panic racing through her. As he reared, the beast seemed more gigantic than ever; his snouted head towered among the trees. Then Conan's iron hand closed on her wrist and she was jerked headlong into the blinding welter of the leaves, and out again into the hot sunshine above, just as the monster fell forward with his front feet on the crag with an impact that made the rock vibrate.

BEHIND the fugitives the huge head crashed through the twigs, and they looked down for a horrifying instant at the nightmare visage framed among the green leaves, eyes flaming, jaws gaping. Then the giant tusks clashed together futilely, and after that the head was withdrawn, vanishing from their sight as if it had sunk in a pool.

Peering down through broken branches that scraped the rock, they saw it squatting on its haunches at the foot of the crag, staring unblinkingly up at them.

Valeria shuddered.

"How long do you suppose he'll crouch there?"

Conan kicked the skull on the leaf-strewn shelf.

"That fellow must have climbed up here to escape him, or one like him. He must have died of starvation. There are no bones broken. That thing must be a dragon, such as the black people speak of in their legends. If so, it won't leave here until we're both dead."

Valeria looked at him blankly, her resentment forgotten. She fought down a surging of panic. She had proved her reckless courage a thousand times in wild battles on sea and land, on the blood-slippery decks of burning war-ships, in the storming of walled cities, and on the trampled sandy beaches where the desperate men of the Red Brotherhood bathed their knives in one another's blood in their fights for leadership. But the prospect now confronting her congealed her blood. A cutlas stroke in the heat of battle was nothing; but to sit idle and helpless on a bare rock until she perished of starvation, besieged by a monstrous survival of an elder age—the thought sent panic throbbing through her brain.

"He must leave to eat and drink," she said helplessly.

"He won't have to go far to do either," Conan pointed out. "He's just gorged on horse-meat, and like a real snake, he can go for a long time without eating or drinking again. But he doesn't sleep after eating, like a real snake, it seems. Anyway, he can't climb this crag."

Conan spoke imperturbably. He was a barbarian, and the terrible patience of the wilderness and its children was as much a part of him as his lusts and rages. He could endure a situation like this with a coolness impossible to a civilized person.

"Can't we get into the trees and get away, traveling like apes through the branches?" she asked desperately.

He shook his head. "I thought of that. The branches that touch the crag down there are too light. They'd break with our weight. Besides, I have an idea that devil could tear up any tree around here by its roots."

"Well, are we going to sit here on our rumps until we starve, like that?" she cried furiously, kicking the skull clattering across the ledge. "I won't do it! I'll go down there and cut his damned head off——"

Conan had seated himself on a rocky projection at the foot of the spire. He looked up with a glint of admiration at her blazing eyes and tense, quivering figure, but, realizing that she was in just the mood for any madness, he let none of his admiration sound in his voice.

"Sit down," he grunted, catching her by her wrist and pulling her down on his knee. She was too surprized to resist as he took her sword from her hand and shoved it back in its sheath. "Sit still and calm down. You'd only break your steel on his scales. He'd gobble you up at one gulp, or smash you like an egg with that spiked tail of his. We'll get out of this jam some way, but we shan't do it by getting chewed up and swallowed."

She made no reply, nor did she seek to repulse his arm from about her waist. She was frightened, and the sensation was new to Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. So she sat on her companion's—or captor's—knee with a docility that would have amazed Zarallo, who had anathematized her as a she-devil out of hell's seraglio.

Conan played idly with her curly yellow locks, seemingly intent only upon his conquest. Neither the skeleton at his feet nor the monster crouching below disturbed his mind or dulled the edge of his interest.

The girl's restless eyes, roving the leaves below them, discovered splashes of color among the green. It was fruit, large, darkly crimson globes suspended from the boughs of a tree whose broad leaves were a peculiarly rich and vivid green. She became aware of both thirst and hunger, though thirst had not assailed her until she knew she could not descend from the crag to find food and water.

"We need not starve," she said. "There is fruit we can reach."

Conan glanced where she pointed.

"If we ate that we wouldn't need the bite of a dragon," he grunted. "That's what the black people of Kush call the Apples of Derketa. Derketa is the Queen of the Dead. Drink a little of the juice, or spill it on your flesh, and you'd be dead before you could tumble to the foot of this crag."

"Oh!"

She lapsed into dismayed silence. There seemed no way out of their predicament, she reflected gloomily. She saw no way of escape, and Conan seemed to be concerned only with her supple waist and curly tresses. If he was trying to formulate a plan of escape he did not show it.

"If you'll take your hands off me long enough to climb up on that peak," she said presently, "you'll see something that will surprize you."

He cast her a questioning glance, then obeyed with a shrug of his massive shoulders. Clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, he stared out over the forest roof.

He stood a long moment in silence, posed like a bronze statue on the rock.

"It's a walled city, right enough," he muttered presently. "Was that where you were going, when you tried to send me off alone to the coast?"

"I saw it before you came. I knew nothing of it when I left Sukhmet."

"Who'd have thought to find a city here? I don't believe the Stygians ever penetrated this far. Could black people build a city like that? I see no herds on the plain, no signs of cultivation, or people moving about."

"How could you hope to see all that, at this distance?" she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped down on the shelf.

"Well, the folk of the city can't help us just now. And they might not, if they could. The people of the Black Countries are generally hostile to strangers. Probably stick us full of spears——"

He stopped short and stood silent, as if he had forgotten what he was saying,

frowning down at the crimson spheres gleaming among the leaves.

"Spears!" he muttered. "What a blasted fool I am not to have thought of that before! That shows what a pretty woman does to a man's mind."

"What are you talking about?" she inquired.

Without answering her question, he descended to the belt of leaves and looked down through them. The great brute squatted below, watching the crag with the frightful patience of the reptile folk. So might one of his breed have glared up at their troglodyte ancestors, treed on a high-flung rock, in the dim dawn ages. Conan cursed him without heat, and began cutting branches, reaching out and severing them as far from the end as he could reach. The agitation of the leaves made the monster restless. He rose from his haunches and lashed his hideous tail, snapping off saplings as if they had been toothpicks. Conan watched him warily from the corner of his eye, and just as Valeria believed the dragon was about to hurl himself up the crag again, the Cimmerian drew back and climbed up to the ledge with the branches he had cut. There were three of these, slender shafts about seven feet long, but not larger than his thumb. He had also cut several strands of tough, thin vine.

"Branches too light for spear-hafts, and creepers no thicker than cords," he remarked, indicating the foliage about the crag. "It won't hold our weight—but there's strength in union. That's what the Aquilonian renegades used to tell us Cimmerians when they came into the hills to raise an army to invade their own country. But we always fight by clans and tribes."

"What the devil has that got to do with those sticks?" she demanded.

"You wait and see."

Gathering the sticks in a compact bundle, he wedged his poniard hilt between them at one end. Then with the vines he bound them together, and when he had completed his task, he had a spear of no small strength, with a sturdy shaft seven feet in length.

"What good will that do?" she demanded. "You told me that a blade couldn't pierce his scales——"

"He hasn't got scales all over him," answered Conan. "There's more than one way of skinning a panther."

Moving down to the edge of the leaves, he reached the spear up and carefully thrust the blade through one of the Apples of Derketa, drawing aside to avoid the darkly purple drops that dripped from the pierced fruit. Presently he withdrew the blade and showed her the blue steel stained a dull purplish crimson.

"I don't know whether it will do the job or not," quoth he. "There's enough poison there to kill an elephant, but—well, we'll see."

VALERIA was close behind him as he let himself down among the leaves. Cautiously holding the poisoned pike away from him, he thrust his head through the branches and addressed the monster.

"What are you waiting down there for, you misbegotten offspring of questionable parents?" was one of his more printable queries. "Stick your ugly head up here again, you long-necked brute—or do you want me to come down there and kick you loose from your illegitimate spine?"

There was more of it—some of it couched in eloquence that made Valeria stare, in spite of her profane education among the seafarers. And it had its effect on the monster. Just as the incessant yapping of a dog worries and enrages more constitutionally silent animals, so the clamorous voice of a man rouses

fear in some bestial bosoms and insane rage in others. Suddenly and with appalling quickness, the mastodonic brute reared up on its mighty hind legs and elongated its neck and body in a furious effort to reach this vociferous pigmy whose clamor was disturbing the primeval silence of its ancient realm.

But Conan had judged his distance with precision. Some five feet below him the mighty head crashed terribly but futilely through the leaves. And as the monstrous mouth gaped like that of a great snake, Conan drove his spear into the red angle of the jaw-bone hinge. He struck downward with all the strength of both arms, driving the long poniard blade to the hilt in flesh, sinew and bone.

Instantly the jaws clashed convulsively together, severing the triple-pieced shaft and almost precipitating Conan from his perch. He would have fallen but for the girl behind him, who caught his sword-belt in a desperate grasp. He clutched at a rocky projection, and grinned his thanks back at her.

Down on the ground the monster was wallowing like a dog with pepper in its eyes. He shook his head from side to side, pawed at it, and opened his mouth repeatedly to its widest extent. Presently he got a huge front foot on the stump of the shaft and managed to tear the blade out. Then he threw up his head, jaws wide and spouting blood, and glared up at the crag with such concentrated and intelligent fury that Valeria trembled and drew her sword. The scales along his back and flanks turned from rusty brown to a dull lurid red. Most horribly the monster's silence was broken. The sounds that issued from his blood-streaming jaws did not sound like anything that could have been produced by an earthly creation.

With harsh, grating roars, the dragon hurled himself at the crag that was the citadel of his enemies. Again and again his mighty head crashed upward through the branches, snapping vainly on empty air. He hurled his full ponderous weight against the rock until it vibrated from base to crest. And rearing upright he gripped it with his front legs like a man and tried to tear it up by the roots, as if it had been a tree.

This exhibition of primordial fury chilled the blood in Valeria's veins, but Conan was too close to the primitive himself to feel anything but a comprehending interest. To the barbarian, no such gulf existed between himself and other men, and the animals, as existed in the conception of Valeria. The monster below them, to Conan, was merely a form of life differing from himself mainly in physical shape. He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it. Feeling a kinship with all wild things, even dragons, it was impossible for him to experience the sick horror which assailed Valeria at the sight of the brute's ferocity.

He sat watching it tranquilly, and pointed out the various changes that were taking place in its voice and actions.

"The poison's taking hold," he said with conviction.

"I don't believe it." To Valeria it seemed preposterous to suppose that anything, however lethal, could have any effect on that mountain of muscle and fury.

"There's pain in his voice," declared Conan. "First he was merely angry because of the stinging in his jaw. Now he feels the bite of the poison. Look! He's staggering. He'll be blind in a few more minutes. What did I tell you?"

For suddenly the dragon had lurched

about and went crashing off through the bushes.

"Is he running away?" inquired Valeria uneasily.

"He's making for the pool!" Conan sprang up, galvanized into swift activity. "The poison makes him thirsty. Come on! He'll be blind in a few moments, but he can smell his way back to the foot of the crag, and if our scent's here still, he'll sit there until he dies. And others of his kind may come at his cries. Let's go!"

"Down there?" Valeria was aghast.

"Sure! We'll make for the city! They may cut our heads off there, but it's our only chance. We may run into a thousand more dragons on the way, but it's sure death to stay here. If we wait until he dies, we may have a dozen more to deal with. After me, in a hurry!"

He went down the ramp as swiftly as an ape, pausing only to aid his less agile companion, who, until she saw the Cimmerian climb, had fancied herself the equal of any man in the rigging of a ship or on the sheer face of a cliff.

THEY descended into the gloom below the branches and slid to the ground silently, though Valeria felt as if the pounding of her heart must surely be heard from far away. A noisy gurgling and lapping beyond the dense thicket indicated that the dragon was drinking at the pool.

"As soon as his belly is full he'll be back," muttered Conan. "It may take hours for the poison to kill him—if it does at all."

Somewhere beyond the forest the sun was sinking to the horizon. The forest was a misty twilight place of black shadows and dim vistas. Conan gripped Valeria's wrist and glided away from the foot of the crag. He made less noise than a breeze blowing among the tree-trunks, but Valeria felt as if her soft boots were betraying their flight to all the forest.

"I don't think he can follow a trail," muttered Conan. "But if a wind blew our body-scent to him, he could smell us out."

"Mitra grant that the wind blow not!" Valeria breathed.

Her face was a pallid oval in the gloom. She gripped her sword in her free hand, but the feel of the shagreen-bound hilt inspired only a feeling of helplessness in her.

They were still some distance from the edge of the forest when they heard a snapping and crashing behind them. Valeria bit her lip to check a cry.

"He's on our trail!" she whispered fiercely.

Conan shook his head.

"He didn't smell us at the rock, and he's blundering about through the forest trying to pick up our scent. Come on! It's the city or nothing now! He could tear down any tree we'd climb. If only the wind stays down——"

They stole on until the trees began to thin out ahead of them. Behind them the forest was a black impenetrable ocean of shadows. The ominous crackling still sounded behind them, as the dragon blundered in his erratic course.

"There's the plain ahead," breathed Valeria. "A little more and we'll——"

"Crom!" swore Conan.

"Mitra!" whispered Valeria.

Out of the south a wind had sprung up. It blew over them directly into the black forest behind them. Instantly a horrible roar shook the woods. The aimless snapping and crackling of the bushes changed to a sustained crashing as the dragon came like a hurricane straight toward the spot from which the scent of his enemies was wafted.

"Run!" snarled Conan, his eyes blazing

like those of a trapped wolf. "It's all we can do!"

Sailor's boots are not made for sprinting, and the life of a pirate does not train one for a runner. Within a hundred yards Valeria was panting and reeling in her gait, and behind them the crashing gave way to a rolling thunder as the monster broke out of the thickets and into the more open ground.

Conan's iron arm about the woman's waist half lifted her; her feet scarcely touched the earth as she was borne along at a speed she could never have attained herself. If he could keep out of the beast's way for a bit, perhaps that betraying wind would shift—but the wind held, and a quick glance over his shoulder showed Conan that the monster was almost upon them, coming like a war-galley in front of a hurricane. He thrust Valeria from him with a force that sent her reeling a dozen feet to fall in a crumpled heap at the foot of the nearest tree, and the Cimmerian wheeled in the path of the thundering titan.

Convinced that his death was upon him, the Cimmerian acted according to his instinct, and hurled himself full at the awful face that was bearing down on him. He leaped, slashing like a wildcat, felt his sword cut deep into the scales that sheathed the mighty snout—and then a terrific impact knocked him rolling and tumbling for fifty feet with all the wind and half the life battered out of him.

How the stunned Cimmerian regained his feet, not even he could have ever told. But the only thought that filled his brain was of the woman lying dazed and helpless almost in the path of the hurtling fiend, and before the breath came whistling back into his gullet he was standing over her with his sword in his hand.

She lay where he had thrown her, but she was struggling to a sitting posture. Neither tearing tusks nor trampling feet had touched her. It had been a shoulder or front leg that struck Conan, and the blind monster rushed on, forgetting the victims whose scent it had been following, in the sudden agony of its death throes. Headlong on its course it thundered until its low-hung head crashed into a gigantic tree in its path. The impact tore the tree up by the roots and must have dashed the brains from the misshapen skull. Tree and monster fell together, and the dazed humans saw the branches and leaves shaken by the convulsions of the creature they covered—and then grow quiet.

Conan lifted Valeria to her feet and together they started away at a reeling run. A few moments later they emerged into the still twilight of the treeless plain.

CONAN paused an instant and glanced back at the ebon fastness behind them. Not a leaf stirred, nor a bird chirped. It stood as silent as it must have stood before Man was created.

"Come on," muttered Conan, taking his companion's hand. "It's touch and go now. If more dragons come out of the woods after us——"

He did not have to finish the sentence.

The city looked very far away across the plain, farther than it had looked from the crag. Valeria's heart hammered until she felt as if it would strangle her. At every step she expected to hear the crashing of the bushes and see another colossal nightmare bearing down upon them. But nothing disturbed the silence of the thickets.

With the first mile between them and the woods, Valeria breathed more easily. Her buoyant self-confidence began to thaw out again. The sun had set and darkness was gathering over the plain, lightened a little by the stars that made stunted ghosts out of the cactus growths.

"No cattle, no plowed fields," muttered Conan. "How do these people live?"

"Perhaps the cattle are in pens for the night," suggested Valeria, "and the fields and grazing-pastures are on the other side of the city."

"Maybe," he grunted. "I didn't see any from the crag, though."

The moon came up behind the city, etching walls and towers blackly in the yellow glow. Valeria shivered. Black against the moon the strange city had a somber, sinister look.

Perhaps something of the same feeling occurred to Conan, for he stopped, glanced about him, and grunted: "We stop here. No use coming to their gates in the night. They probably wouldn't let us in. Besides, we need rest, and we don't know how they'll receive us. A few hours' sleep will put us in better shape to fight or run."

He led the way to a bed of cactus which grew in a circle—a phenomenon common to the southern desert. With his sword he chopped an opening, and motioned Valeria to enter.

"We'll be safe from snakes here, anyhow."

She glanced fearfully back toward the black line that indicated the forest some six miles away.

"Suppose a dragon comes out of the woods?"

"We'll keep watch," he answered, though he made no suggestion as to what they would do in such an event. He was staring at the city, a few miles away. Not a light shone from spire or tower. A great black mass of mystery, it reared cryptically against the moonlit sky.

"Lie down and sleep. I'll keep the first watch."

She hesitated, glancing at him uncertainly, but he sat down cross-legged in the opening, facing toward the plain, his sword across his knees, his back to her. Without further comment she lay down on the sand inside the spiky circle.

"Wake me when the moon is at its zenith," she directed.

He did not reply nor look toward her. Her last impression, as she sank into slumber, was of his muscular figure, immobile as a statue hewn out of bronze, outlined against the low-hanging stars.

2. *By the Blaze of the Fire Jewels*

VALERIA awoke with a start, to the realization that a gray dawn was stealing over the plain.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Conan squatted beside the cactus, cutting off the thick pears and dexterously twitching out the spikes.

"You didn't awake me," she accused. "You let me sleep all night!"

"You were tired," he answered. "Your posterior must have been sore, too, after that long ride. You pirates aren't used to horseback."

"What about yourself?" she retorted.

"I was a *kozak* before I was a pirate," he answered. "They live in the saddle. I snatch naps like a panther watching beside the trail for a deer to come by. My ears keep watch while my eyes sleep."

And indeed the giant barbarian seemed as much refreshed as if he had slept the whole night on a golden bed. Having removed the thorns, and peeled off the tough skin, he handed the girl a thick, juicy cactus leaf.

"Skin your teeth in that pear. It's food and drink to a desert man. I was a chief of the Zuagirs once—desert men who live by plundering the caravans."

"Is there anything you haven't been?" inquired the girl, half in derision and half in fascination.

"I've never been king of an Hyborian kingdom," he grinned, taking an enormous mouthful of cactus. "But I've

dreamed of being even that. I may be too, some day. Why shouldn't I?"

She shook her head in wonder at his calm audacity, and fell to devouring her pear. She found it not unpleasing to the palate, and full of cool and thirst-satisfying juice. Finishing his meal, Conan wiped his hands in the sand, rose, ran his fingers through his thick black mane, hitched at his sword-belt and said:

"Well, let's go. If the people in that city are going to cut our throats they may as well do it now, before the heat of the day begins."

His grim humor was unconscious, but Valeria reflected that it might be prophetic. She too hitched her sword-belt as she rose. Her terrors of the night were past. The roaring dragons of the distant forest were like a dim dream. There was a swagger in her stride as she moved off beside the Cimmerian. Whatever perils lay ahead of them, their foes would be men. And Valeria of the Red Brotherhood had never seen the face of the man she feared.

Conan glanced down at her as she strode along beside him with her swinging stride that matched his own.

"You walk more like a hillman than a sailor," he said. "You must be an Aquilonian. The suns of Darfar never burnt your white skin brown. Many a princess would envy you."

"I am from Aquilonia," she replied. His compliments no longer irritated her. His evident admiration pleased her. For another man to have kept her watch while she slept would have angered her; she had always fiercely resented any man's attempting to shield or protect her because of her sex. But she found a secret pleasure in the fact that this man had done so. And he had not taken advantage of her fright and the weakness resulting from it. After all, she reflected, her companion was no common man.

THE sun rose behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.

"Black last night against the moon," grunted Conan, his eyes clouding with the abysmal superstition of the barbarian. "Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city."

But they went on, and as they went Conan pointed out the fact that no road ran to the city from the north.

"No cattle have trampled the plain on this side of the city," said he. "No plowshare has touched the earth for years, maybe centuries. But look: once this plain was cultivated."

Valeria saw the ancient irrigation ditches he indicated, half filled in places, and overgrown with cactus. She frowned with perplexity as her eyes swept over the plain that stretched on all sides of the city to the forest edge, which marched in a vast, dim ring. Vision did not extend beyond that ring.

She looked uneasily at the city. No helmets or spear-heads gleamed on battlements, no trumpets sounded, no challenge rang from the towers. A silence as absolute as that of the forest brooded over the walls and minarets.

The sun was high above the eastern horizon when they stood before the great gate in the northern wall, in the shadow of the lofty rampart. Rust flecked the iron bracings of the mighty bronze portal. Spiderwebs glistened thickly on hinge and sill and bolted panel.

"It hasn't been opened for years!" exclaimed Valeria.

"A dead city," grunted Conan. "That's why the ditches were broken and the plain untouched."

"But who built it? Who dwelt here? Where did they go? Why did they abandon it?"

"Who can say? Maybe an exiled clan of Stygians built it. Maybe not. It doesn't

look like Stygian architecture. Maybe the people were wiped out by enemies, or a plague exterminated them."

"In that case their treasures may still be gathering dust and cobwebs in there," suggested Valeria, the acquisitive instincts of her profession waking in her; prodded, too, by feminine curiosity. "Can we open the gate? Let's go in and explore a bit."

Conan eyed the heavy portal dubiously, but placed his massive shoulder against it and thrust with all the power of his muscular calves and thighs. With a rasping screech of rusty hinges the gate moved ponderously inward, and Conan straightened and drew his sword. Valeria stared over his shoulder, and made a sound indicative of surprize.

They were not looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gave directly into a long, broad hall which ran away and away until its vista grew indistinct in the distance. It was of heroic proportions, and the floor of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seemed to smolder as if with the reflection of flames. The walls were of a shiny green material.

"Jade, or I'm a Shemite!" swore Conan.

"Not in such quantity!" protested Valeria.

"I've looted enough from the Khitan caravans to know what I'm talking about," he asserted. "That's jade!"

The vaulted ceiling was of lapis lazuli, adorned with clusters of great green stones that gleamed with a poisonous radiance.

"Green fire-stones," growled Conan. "That's what the people of Punt call them. They're supposed to be the petrified eyes of those prehistoric snakes the ancients called Golden Serpents. They glow like a cat's eyes in the dark. At night this hall would be lighted by them, but it would be a hellishly weird illumination. Let's look around. We might find a cache of jewels."

"Shut the door," advised Valeria. "I'd hate to have to outrun a dragon down this hall."

Conan grinned, and replied: "I don't believe the dragons ever leave the forest."

But he complied, and pointed out the broken bolt on the inner side.

"I thought I heard something snap when I shoved against it. That bolt's freshly broken. Rust has eaten nearly through it. If the people ran away, why should it have been bolted on the inside?"

"They undoubtedly left by another door," suggested Valeria.

She wondered how many centuries had passed since the light of outer day had filtered into that great hall through the open door. Sunlight was finding its way somehow into the hall, and they quickly saw the source. High up in the vaulted ceiling skylights were set in slot-like openings—translucent sheets of some crystalline substance. In the splotches of shadow between them, the green jewels winked like the eyes of angry cats. Beneath their feet the dully lurid floor smoldered with changing hues and colors of flame. It was like treading the floors of hell with evil stars blinking overhead.

Three balustraded galleries ran along on each side of the hall, one above the other.

"A four-storied house," grunted Conan, "and this hall extends to the roof. It's long as a street. I seem to see a door at the other end."

Valeria shrugged her white shoulders.

"Your eyes are better than mine, then, though I'm accounted sharp-eyed among the sea-rovers."

THEY turned into an open door at random, and traversed a series of empty chambers, floored like the hall, and with

walls of the same green jade, or of marble or ivory or chalcedony, adorned with friezes of bronze, gold or silver. In the ceilings the green fire-gems were set, and their light was as ghostly and illusive as Conan had predicted. Under the witch-fire glow the intruders moved like specters.

Some of the chambers lacked this illumination, and their doorways showed black as the mouth of the Pit. These Conan and Valeria avoided, keeping always to the lighted chambers.

Cobwebs hung in the corners, but there was no perceptible accumulation of dust on the floor, or on the tables and seats of marble, jade or carnelian which occupied the chambers. Here and there were rugs of that silk known as Khitan which is practically indestructible. Nowhere did they find any windows, or doors opening into streets or courts. Each door merely opened into another chamber or hall.

"Why don't we come to a street?" grumbled Valeria. "This place or whatever we're in must be as big as the king of Turan's seraglio."

"They must not have perished of plague," said Conan, meditating upon the mystery of the empty city. "Otherwise we'd find skeletons. Maybe it became haunted, and everybody got up and left. Maybe——"

"Maybe, hell!" broke in Valeria rudely. "We'll never know. Look at these friezes. They portray men. What race do they belong to?"

Conan scanned them and shook his head.

"I never saw people exactly like them. But there's the smack of the East about them—Vendhya, maybe, or Kosala."

"Were you a king in Kosala?" she asked, masking her keen curiosity with derision.

"No. But I was a war-chief of the Afghulis who live in the Himelian mountains above the borders of Vendhya. These people favor the Kosalans. But why should Kosalans be building a city this far to west?"

The figures portrayed were those of slender, olive-skinned men and women, with finely chiseled, exotic features. They wore filmy robes and many delicate jeweled ornaments, and were depicted mostly in attitudes of feasting, dancing or love-making.

"Easterners, all right," grunted Conan, "but from where I don't know. They must have lived a disgustingly peaceful life, though, or they'd have scenes of wars and fights. Let's go up that stair."

It was an ivory spiral that wound up from the chamber in which they were standing. They mounted three flights and came into a broad chamber on the fourth floor, which seemed to be the highest tier in the building. Skylights in the ceiling illuminated the room, in which light the fire-gems winked pallidly. Glancing through the doors they saw, except on one side, a series of similarly lighted chambers. This other door opened upon a balustraded gallery that overhung a hall much smaller than the one they had recently explored on the lower floor.

"Hell!" Valeria sat down disgustedly on a jade bench. "The people who deserted this city must have taken all their treasures with them. I'm tired of wandering through these bare rooms at random."

"All these upper chambers seem to be lighted," said Conan. "I wish we could find a window that overlooked the city. Let's have a look through that door over there."

"You have a look," advised Valeria. "I'm going to sit here and rest my feet."

CONAN disappeared through the door opposite that one opening upon the gallery, and Valeria leaned back with her

hands clasped behind her head, and thrust her booted legs out in front of her. These silent rooms and halls with their gleaming green clusters of ornaments and burning crimson floors were beginning to depress her. She wished they could find their way out of the maze into which they had wandered and emerge into a street. She wondered idly what furtive, dark feet had glided over those flaming floors in past centuries, how many deeds of cruelty and mystery those winking ceiling-gems had blazed down upon.

It was a faint noise that brought her out of her reflections. She was on her feet with her sword in her hand before she realized what had disturbed her. Conan had not returned, and she knew it was not he that she had heard.

The sound had come from somewhere beyond the door that opened on to the gallery. Soundlessly in her soft leather boots she glided through it, crept across the balcony and peered down between the heavy balustrades.

A man was stealing along the hall.

The sight of a human being in this supposedly deserted city was a startling shock. Crouching down behind the stone balusters, with every nerve tingling, Valeria glared down at the stealthy figure.

The man in no way resembled the figures depicted on the friezes. He was slightly above middle height, very dark, though not negroid. He was naked but for a scanty silk clout that only partly covered his muscular hips, and a leather girdle, a hand's breadth broad, about his lean waist. His long black hair hung in lank strands about his shoulders, giving him a wild appearance. He was gaunt, but knots and cords of muscles stood out on his arms and legs, without that fleshy padding that presents a pleasing symmetry of contour. He was built with an economy that was almost repellent.

Yet it was not so much his physical appearance as his attitude that impressed the woman who watched him. He slunk along, stooped in a semi-crouch, his head turning from side to side. He grasped a wide-tipped blade in his right hand, and she saw it shake with the intensity of the emotion that gripped him. He was afraid, trembling in the grip of some dire terror. When he turned his head she caught the blaze of wild eyes among the lank strands of black hair.

He did not see her. On tiptoe he glided across the hall and vanished through an open door. A moment later she heard a choking cry, and then silence fell again.

Consumed with curiosity, Valeria glided along the gallery until she came to a door above the one through which the man had passed. It opened into another, smaller gallery that encircled a large chamber.

This chamber was on the third floor, and its ceiling was not so high as that of the hall. It was lighted only by the fire-stones, and their weird green glow left the spaces under the balcony in shadows.

Valeria's eyes widened. The man she had seen was still in the chamber.

He lay face down on a dark crimson carpet in the middle of the room. His body was limp, his arms spread wide. His curved sword lay near him.

She wondered why he should lie there so motionless. Then her eyes narrowed as she stared down at the rug on which he lay. Beneath and about him the fabric showed a slightly different color, a deeper, brighter crimson.

Shivering slightly, she crouched down closer behind the balustrade, intently scanning the shadows under the overhanging gallery. They gave up no secret.

Suddenly another figure entered the grim drama. He was a man similar to the first, and he came in by a door opposite that which gave upon the hall.

His eyes glared at the sight of the man on the floor, and he spoke something in a staccato voice that sounded like "Chic-mec!" The other did not move.

The man stepped quickly across the floor, bent, gripped the fallen man's shoulder and turned him over. A choking cry escaped him as the head fell back limply, disclosing a throat that had been severed from ear to ear.

The man let the corpse fall back upon the blood-stained carpet, and sprang to his feet, shaking like a wind-blown leaf. His face was an ashy mask of fear. But with one knee flexed for flight, he froze suddenly, became as immobile as an image, staring across the chamber with dilated eyes.

In the shadows beneath the balcony a ghostly light began to glow and grow, a light that was not part of the fire-stone gleam. Valeria felt her hair stir as she watched it; for, dimly visible in the throbbing radiance, there floated a human skull, and it was from this skull—human yet appallingly misshapen—that the spectral light seemed to emanate. It hung there like a disembodied head, conjured out of night and the shadows, growing more and more distinct; human, and yet not human as she knew humanity.

The man stood motionless, an embodiment of paralyzed horror, staring fixedly at the apparition. The thing moved out from the wall and a grotesque shadow moved with it. Slowly the shadow became visible as a man-like figure whose naked torso and limbs shone whitely, with the hue of bleached bones. The bare skull on its shoulders grinned eyelessly, in the midst of its unholy nimbus, and the man confronting it seemed unable to take his eyes from it. He stood still, his sword dangling from nerveless fingers, on his face the expression of a man bound by the spells of a mesmerist.

VALERIA realized that it was not fear alone that paralyzed him. Some hellish quality of that throbbing glow had robbed him of his power to think and act. She herself, safely above the scene, felt the subtle impact of a nameless emanation that was a threat to sanity.

The horror swept toward its victim and he moved at last, but only to drop his sword and sink to his knees, covering his eyes with his hands. Dumbly he awaited the stroke of the blade that now gleamed in the apparition's hand as it reared above him like Death triumphant over mankind.

Valeria acted according to the first impulse of her wayward nature. With one tigerish movement she was over the balustrade and dropping to the floor behind the awful shape. It wheeled at the thud of her soft boots on the floor, but even as it turned, her keen blade lashed down, and a fierce exultation swept her as she felt the edge cleave solid flesh and mortal bone.

The apparition cried out gurglingly and went down, severed through shoulder, breast-bone and spine, and as it fell the burning skull rolled clear, revealing a lank mop of black hair and a dark face twisted in the convulsions of death. Beneath the horrific masquerade there was a human being, a man similar to the one kneeling supinely on the floor.

The latter looked up at the sound of the blow and the cry, and now he glared in wild-eyed amazement at the white-skinned woman who stood over the corpse with a dripping sword in her hand.

He staggered up, yammering as if the sight had almost unseated his reason. She was amazed to realize that she understood him. He was gibbering in the Stygian tongue, though in a dialect unfamiliar to her.

"Who are you? Whence come you? What do you in Xuchotl?" Then rushing

on, without waiting for her to reply: "But you are a friend—goddess or devil, it makes no difference! You have slain the Burning Skull! It was but a man beneath it, after all! We deemed it a demon *they* conjured up out of the catacombs! *Listen!*"

He stopped short in has ravings and stiffened, straining his ears with painful intensity. The girl heard nothing.

"We must hasten!" he whispered. "*They* are west of the Great Hall! They may be all around us here! They may be creeping upon us even now!"

He seized her wrist in a convulsive grasp she found hard to break.

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" she demanded.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly for an instant, as if he found her ignorance hard to understand.

"They?" he stammered vaguely. "Why —why, the people of Xotalanc! The clan of the man you slew. They who dwell by the eastern gate."

"You mean to say this city is inhabited?" she exclaimed.

"Aye! Aye!" He was writhing in the impatience of apprehension. "Come away! Come quick! We must return to Tecuhltli!"

"Where is that?" she demanded.

"The quarter by the western gate!" He had her wrist again and was pulling her toward the door through which he had first come. Great beads of perspiration dripped from his dark forehead, and his eyes blazed with terror.

"Wait a minute!" she growled, flinging off his hand. "Keep your hands off me, or I'll split your skull. What's all this about? Who are you? Where would you take me?"

He took a firm grip on himself, casting glances to all sides, and began speaking so fast his words tripped over each other.

"My name is Techotl. I am of Tecuhltli. I and this man who lies with his throat cut came into the Halls of Science to try and ambush some of the Xotalancas. But we became separated and I returned here to find him with his gullet slit. The Burning Skull did it, I know, just as he would have slain me had you not killed him. But perhaps he was not alone. Others may be stealing from Xotalanc! The gods themselves blench at the fate of those they take alive!"

At the thought he shook as with an ague and his dark skin grew ashy. Valeria frowned puzzledly at him. She sensed intelligence behind this rigmarole, but it was meaningless to her.

She turned toward the skull, which still glowed and pulsed on the floor, and was reaching a booted toe tentatively toward it, when the man who called himself Techotl sprang forward with a cry.

"Do not touch it! Do not even look at it! Madness and death lurk in it. The wizards of Xotalanc understand its secret —they found it in the catacombs, where lie the bones of terrible kings who ruled in Xuchotl in the black centuries of the past. To gaze upon it freezes the blood and withers the brain of a man who understands not its mystery. To touch it causes madness and destruction."

She scowled at him uncertainly. He was not a reassuring figure, with his lean, muscle-knotted frame, and snaky locks. In his eyes, behind the glow of terror, lurked a weird light she had never seen in the eyes of a man wholly sane. Yet he seemed sincere in his protestations.

"Come!" he begged, reaching for her hand, and then recoiling as he remembered her warning. "You are a stranger. How you came here I do not know, but if you were a goddess or a demon, come to aid Tecuhltli, you would know all the things you have asked me. You must be from beyond the great forest, whence our ancestors came. But you are our friend, or

you would not have slain my enemy. Come quickly, before the Xotalancas find us and slay us!"

From his repellent, impassioned face she glanced to the sinister skull, smoldering and glowing on the floor near the dead man. It was like a skull seen in a dream, undeniably human, yet with disturbing distortions and malformations of contour and outline. In life the wearer of that skull must have presented an alien and monstrous aspect. Life? It seemed to possess some sort of life of its own. Its jaws yawned at her and snapped together. Its radiance grew brighter, more vivid, yet the impression of nightmare grew too; it was a dream; all life was a dream —it was Techotl's urgent voice which snapped Valeria back from the dim gulfs whither she was drifting.

"Do not look at the skull! Do not look at the skull!" It was a far cry from across unreckoned voids.

Valeria shook herself like a lion shaking his mane. Her vision cleared. Techotl was chattering: "In life it housed the awful brain of a king of magicians! It holds still the life and fire of magic drawn from outer spaces!"

WITH a curse Valeria leaped, lithe as a panther, and the skull crashed to flaming bits under her swinging sword. Somewhere in the room, or in the void, or in the dim reaches of her consciousness, an inhuman voice cried out in pain and rage.

Techotl's hand was plucking at her arm and he was gibbering: "You have broken it! You have destroyed it! Not all the black arts of Xotalanc can rebuild it! Come away! Come away quickly, now!"

"But I can't go," she protested. "I have a friend somewhere near by——"

The flare of his eyes cut her short as he stared past her with an expression grown ghastly. She wheeled just as four men rushed through as many doors, converging on the pair in the center of the chamber.

They were like the others she had seen, the same knotted muscles bulging on otherwise gaunt limbs, the same lank blue-black hair, the same mad glare in their wide eyes. They were armed and clad like Techotl, but on the breast of each was painted a white skull.

There were no challenges or war-cries. Like blood-mad tigers the men of Xotalanc sprang at the throats of their enemies. Techotl met them with the fury of desperation, ducked the swipe of a wide-headed blade, and grappled with the wielder, and bore him to the floor where they rolled and wrestled in murderous silence.

The other three swarmed on Valeria, their weird eyes red as the eyes of mad dogs.

When the World Slept

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrilling weird-scientific tale about a catastrophe that put the whole world into a strange slumber

NO COMPLETE history of the great catastrophe can ever be written, it is certain. The thing was too colossal for that. Only a partial account of its workings can ever be recorded, and I am the only man in the world who can do even that.

For I, Jason Lane, am the one man in the world whom the disaster spared. By a sheer, wild freak of chance, I escaped. When the rest of Earth was stricken, I was not, and so my eyes alone looked on those things which this world had never seen before, and which, God willing, it will never see again.

When the thing struck, in the spring of 1942, I was twenty-four years old. I was living alone in an old inherited farmhouse in the woods country north of Albany. For a year, after my graduation from my scientific school, I had been carrying on in this lonely old house certain bacteriological researches.

It is enough here to say that my studies were of an unusual nature, embracing an investigation into dormant germs found in meteorites that had fallen on Earth from outer space. I had been studying these alien germs for a year, and had succeeded in reviving them and growing cultures of two different species of them.

But when I came to test these different germs, I found my labors fruitless. Culture One I injected into a rabbit, and it had no effect whatever upon the animal. Then I injected it into myself, but it had no effect upon me either.

The other species of germs, Culture Two, had no more effect on the rabbit than the first. Again I tested it on myself, injecting this culture also into my veins. Again there was no result whatever. In black anger at my failure, I flung the tube of Culture Two out into the yard, smashing it against a tree, and then brooded during the next few weeks upon my failure.

If I only had had any suspicion during those weeks of the doom that was slowly spreading over the Earth, unknown to me! But how was I to know what was going on in the outside world? I lived alone, had no relatives or close friends to visit me, and the nearest house was several miles away.

I did notice vaguely, during those brooding weeks, that the woods around my old house had become unusually *silent*. There did not seem to be any whistling or piping of birds, nor hum of insects or stir of small animals.

Also I noticed that under the trees near my house lay quite a number of birds and large insects, dead, as I thought then. But in my black and bitter moodiness, I was not sufficiently interested to examine them closer.

Several weeks had passed before I awoke suddenly to the fact that I was almost out of canned goods and other food supplies. A storekeeper in the nearest village had had an agreement with me to deliver supplies to me every fortnight, but he had missed coming the last two times.

It was necessary, therefore, that I drive to the village myself for the supplies. So on a sunny May morning I got into my

"This is a waste of time, Roselle. Every soul here is sleeping, just as in New York."

little car and started along the rough dirt road through the woods. I little realized that I was beginning such an odyssey of epic horror as no man had ever gone forth upon before.

As I drove through the sun-dappled woods, I noticed that along the road, as around my house, lay more birds apparently dead. Blue-jays, grackles, robins, flickers—there were scores of them. And nowhere in the woods stirred one living bird!

This aroused my interest despite my brooding moodiness. I stopped the car and got out to look at the dead birds. But when I picked one up, I discovered that it was *not* dead. Its little feathered body was slightly warm, its heart and lungs were operating very slowly, and it seemed wrapped in weird suspended animation.

I tried to revive it but could not break its strange sleep. I soon discovered that all the other birds were wrapped in the same unexplainable slumber, and noticed a chipmunk and a field-mouse that were

also sleeping. Butterflies and dragonflies were sleeping too, with closed wings. Even ants lay unmoving by their hills.

"What on Earth can have happened?" I asked myself, bewildered. "It must be some contagious form of suspended animation."

As I got back into my car and drove on, I wondered how great an area the thing was affecting. The hush of unwonted stillness in the woods was depressing. No piping and whistling of birds, no buzzing of insects, no barking of distant dogs. Only utter and unnerving silence.

I saw a sleeping red fox along the road, evidence that larger animals too had succumbed to the contagion of sleep. I was glad when I emerged from the woods into the open farm country north of Horton village.

A muddy automobile was parked along the road a little ahead. I pulled up behind it, for I wanted to ask its occupants how far this sleep-zone of animal life extended. Two men were sitting in the car, an elderly, red-faced farmer and a gangling youth in overalls.

I stuck my head into the car and asked them, "Have you noticed that all the birds and animals are asleep?"

The men did not answer or turn toward me, and a strange chill ran through me like a cold breath from the unknown. I shouted to them, my voice high and shrill now: *"Have you noticed that everything is asleep?"*

Still they did not move, and I saw now that their eyes were closed. They also were sleeping.

I must have stared frozenly at them for minutes. Then I shook them, shouted at them, yelled at the top of my voice. It was all useless—nothing could awaken them. They had been stricken by the sleep contagion exactly like the animals and birds. They were still living, but their vital functions were incredibly slowed, held in suspended animation.

MY MIND was a churning horror as I got back into my car and drove on. Soon I came to other motionless cars along the road. But the people in them were all sleeping too. Some of the cars had run into fences, indicating that the sleep had come quite suddenly.

What in God's name, I asked myself wildly, could have cast this weird state of suspended animation over all life that I had seen so far? And by what chance had I escaped it, when the birds and other life around my house had succumbed to it? And over how great an area did the sleep extend? Surely, I told myself, it could not reach far; surely not as far as the village of Horton. I found myself muttering an inarticulate prayer as I drove on toward Horton.

But as I entered the village, I uttered a groan of despair. For no life moved in its neat streets. Cars were jammed together at several corners, their occupants all sleeping. People lay sleeping on sidewalks, in stores and houses, just as they had fallen.

I went into a drug-store, pulled a sleeping man out of the telephone booth, and tried to call Albany. There was no response from the operator. The line was dead.

There was a radio of the battery type in that drug-store. I turned it on and twirled the dial frantically. No announcer's voice came over the ether, not one sound to break the deathly silence.

I got back into my car and headed south toward Albany. By now my mind was in indescribable chaos. My one thought was that I must get out of this region of sleep, however far it extended.

I was in an unprecedented mental state as I drove south toward Albany that day, for I seemed the one wakeful person in

the whole sleeping countryside. Every village I passed through, with its sleepers cluttering sidewalks and doorways, its utter silence, added to my crushing horror. I fought hard to retain my sanity.

It was when I drove into Albany in the early afternoon that I began to lose the last shreds of hope. The city was as wrapped in slumber as every place else where I had been. The downtown streets were choked with sleeping crowds and cars that had collided when the sleep seized their drivers.

I had to leave my own car, indeed, at one of these impassable traffic jams. On the other side of the jam I selected a big blue touring-car that had run into the curb. A smartly dressed youth and girl were sleeping in the front seat. I lifted them out into a store, took the car, and drove on through Albany.

There was not a waking person or animal in the city. I was tired and faint from hunger, I began to realize; so I found a restaurant. I selected a meal from the cold foods in the kitchen and sat at a table eating it.

Strange meal, with sleeping people at the tables all around me, and sleeping waiters in the corners! Many another such meal I was to eat, and grow accustomed to it, but that day it seemed that I dined in a company of ghosts. I was glad to get out of the place.

I drove my blue phaeton into a service station, and with some trouble got the pumps working enough to fill my gasoline tank. Then I drove out, and after making several detours to avoid bad traffic jams at corners, I found myself headed south through the spring afternoon toward New York.

All that afternoon I kept telling myself, "There'll be someone awake in New York. There must be!"

But all the afternoon an insistent voice in my brain kept whispering, "But suppose there *isn't?*"

I fought to suppress that thought. I would find somebody awake before long. I must!

But all the way from Albany south, those prosperous towns of the Hudson River valley were towns of sleep and silence. Nowhere in them moved one wakeful thing, and at no time did a sound break the unholy hush. Twice that afternoon I had to abandon my car and take another one, where the roads were impassable with traffic jams.

THE sun was sinking as I drove down through slumbering suburban cities toward Fort Lee and the west end of the great George Washington bridge.

The bridge was impassable to my car, its approaches choked with jammed cars whose occupants all slept. I started across on foot, through the deepening dusk.

Across the river lay New York, its mighty towers rising like dark pinnacles into the thickening twilight. It was that hour when lights should have been blinking forth in thousands of windows, when the shimmering glow of Broadway should have been flung on the sky.

But New York was dark—dark. Not one light gleamed from that mighty mountain range of buildings. Solemn and still they rose into the dusk, like a city of the dead.

I think I was weeping as I stumbled across the long bridge in that fateful twilight. I know that I looked down through the shadows and saw no movement of shipping in the dark waters of the harbor, save for some tugs that seemed idly drifting with the tide.

It was completely dark by the time I entered the city; dark as New York had never been before, a shrouding pall broken by not one gleam of man-made

light, and relieved only by the pale, incurious glimmer of the stars.

I walked through the sleeping streets in a daze, not knowing where I wandered. The sleep appeared to have struck New York in the early morning, when its thoroughfares were crowded with pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Now the nighted streets were choked with automobiles and trucks, many of them that had crashed into one another; though, as I was later to notice, there had been few fatalities from this cause, since when people felt the sleep coming upon them they had apparently jammed on their brakes.

But the sidewalks! I could not walk in them, so crowded were they with sleeping forms, men, women and children of every class and degree. I had to walk along the curb, or when I was forced to the sidewalk by traffic jams, I had to step upon sleeping people.

I found myself in Times Square, even more crowded with sleepers than the side streets. I raised my voice in a frantic cry.

"Hello! Is anybody here awake?"

"Awake!" drifted a whispering echo through the stillness, but the thousands around me slept on.

The sight of the RCA tower raised a hope in my mind that from its top I might be able to see, somewhere, a man-made light. The elevators were not running, of course. And a weary, eery climb it was up the dark, unending stairs to the observation platform at the top.

There were a few sightseers up there, and a uniformed attendant, sleeping sprawled against the rail. I ignored them, peering out over the city with beating heart.

Dark—all dark! North, east, west and south only unrelieved blackness, and silence, and the all-enveloping sleep.

I do not now remember descending to the street, but I must have done so soon. For I remember, soon after, searching along the sleeping streets for one of the latest newspapers issued before the sleep had come, and reading it frantically by the light of matches to see if it would throw any light on the cause of the gigantic disaster.

But the newspaper had nothing much to tell me. A front-page story told of the cessation of communication from the country northward, a few hours before, "apparently due to failure of the wire and wireless systems." There was no intimation that the same silence and sleep were shortly to seize New York, and so people had gone about their business as usual until unexpectedly the sleep came.

That, I was to find later, was the common experience. The sleep had not spread so very swiftly; yet everywhere when it did come, it had come without warning. For from the regions it had already seized could come no warning, but only puzzling silence.

I remember, after I had read that newspaper, of roaming frenziedly through the slumbering metropolis for hours before dawn, hallooing wild and unanswered calls, sobbing and cursing.

When the eastern sky turned gray, I was staggering drunkenly on Park Avenue, tripping over the sleepers on the sidewalks, my mind cracking. I saw the distant towers of the Waldorf Astoria against the chill dawn and I stumbled thither, found an empty bedroom and slept.

Very strange I must have seemed, had there been anyone to see me, sprawled sleeping in that luxurious room while all around me the mighty city slept too in slumber it would not wake from.

It was afternoon again when I awoke. I lay, dully turning the thing over and over in my mind.

I told myself, "Jason Lane, even though you are the only wakeful man in

this city, you must not give way to horror. You must search for some way to revive the others."

So I went out with a faint spark of hope in my heart. First I went to a great medical center, where I found a fine laboratory, cleared the sleeping scientists out of it, and started investigation.

All that day and night, and the next day, I toiled madly, experimenting on sleeping men and women, trying to awaken them.

I tried every sort of drugs, electric and X-ray stimuli, chemicals, and all without result. They slept calmly on, until I gave up in despair.

Now the awful nature of my position was clearer and clearer in my mind. I could not wake the others—they would sleep on and on, unendingly, a terrible doom that my hand had released on them.

Yes, unendingly! I had thought at first that all these sleeping people must soon die, since they would be attacked, as I thought, by various bacterial diseases that would destroy their bodies. But my investigations had now disclosed to me that even the ordinary bacteria of Earth were also wrapped in strange suspended animation, also asleep! The sleeping people would sleep on but would not die; for not even disease germs were left awake to harm them!

I LEFT the medical center in the afternoon of the second day, exhausted, hopeless, brain and soul numbed. I wandered with wild aimlessness through Manhattan's slumbering streets until I finally sank, weak and exhausted, on a bench in Central Park, near the Fifth Avenue side.

I stared through the sunlit silence at the tall apartment towers on the avenue. Dully I told myself that I must leave New York, that not here would I find anyone awake but that somewhere else might be someone who had escaped the sleep.

Then I noticed a sleeping girl on the end of my bench, slight-bodied, with a little gray hat and gray tailored suit, her head nodding over a book she had been reading when the sleep struck. She was shyly beautiful in sleep, little curls of soft black hair straying from beneath her prim hat, long, dark lashes lying on her cheek, her soft face trusting.

Her leather purse was in her lap. I picked it up, and found inside a card—"Miss Roselle Adams."

"Roselle," I said aloud to her, and thought the name pretty on the ear. "Well, Roselle, I am Jason Lane, and I wish I had met you before this happened, for you look like my kind of girl."

I found a little relief from the black weight of horror in talking aloud to someone, even to this sleeping girl.

"What I am going to do if I find all Earth is sleeping, I don't know, Roselle. Go mad, I suppose—I can't believe that I can live long in this slumbering world and keep my sanity."

So I talked to her, voicing my wild, despairing thoughts, until the hushed afternoon waned into the solemn, silent dusk.

I got up and started toward the avenue, then. But something made me turn and look back at the girl, and she sat slumbering so trustfully, head nodding so childishly, that I came back to her.

I told her, "Since you're the one person in this sleeping city I know, I'll take you with me, Roselle. God knows it's better to have a sleeping comrade, in all this loneliness, than no comrade at all."

So I picked her up, soft and faintly warm, and her head lay so confidently in my arm that I was moved to bend and kiss her fragrant lips, with a wild hope she would awaken. But she did not. I found it awkward to carry her, though,

as I moved through the twilit, slumbering city, and a sudden idea made me go into a hospital and return with a wheel-chair. I put her in the chair, she sitting up in dainty, sleeping dignity, and wheeled her thus.

I slept that night in a great mid-town hotel, giving Roselle the room next to mine and covering her carefully. For already she was somehow dear to me, and a small comfort in my ghastly loneliness.

And next morning when I had my breakfast in the imposing hotel dining-room—a meal I cooked myself on a small wood fire I kindled out in the kitchen—it pleased me to have Roselle sitting opposite me at the table, calm in the chair where I had put her.

It was my humor to talk to her in a confidential undertone, making remarks about the other sleeping diners in the room.

"Don't look now, Roselle," I told her, "but I think the gentleman at the next table is flirting with you. He certainly has been staring steadily at you for the last five minutes." And, "Do you see that lady at the corner table, Roselle? Her companion looks more like a gigolo to me than a husband."

This remark touched off my unsteady mind into a loud guffaw of laughter. But when the echoes of my laughter died away, nobody in the room had stirred, and it was all so *silent!* I sprang to my feet, all that agony of horror strong in my soul again, at once.

"There *must* be people awake somewhere!" I cried, tortured. "I've got to find them—I've got to!"

And so with all my freakish humor gone, I spent that morning in deadly earnest scheming my search, resolved to comb the whole sleeping world if necessary.

It was soon evident that I would make no progress by automobile, since the roads and streets were so choked at places with traffic. Trains were out of the question. Also these would not serve to take me across the oceans to Europe or Asia. And single-handed I could sail only the smallest of boats; so ships too were not to be thought of.

It was here that my university hobby of aviation came to serve me. I was a fairly good pilot, though out of practise, and airplanes would take me on my search with far greater swiftness, and to other continents too, if I chose route and weather carefully.

I PUT Roselle carefully in her wheel-chair, first putting on her a warm coat I took off a sleeping woman in the hotel lobby, for it was raining slightly outside. Then I wheeled her to the street, and through the fine rain toward the Washington bridge.

When we reached the New Jersey side, I had to go on foot almost all the way to Newark, for automobiles were useless to me in this traffic-choked section. It took hours to reach the airport.

There I soon found what I wanted, a big metal passenger airplane that had apparently just been on the point of departing when the sleep struck; for pilot and passengers were in their places. As I hauled them out of the ship, it struck me for the first time that every airplane that happened to be aloft must have crashed when the sleep came. And indeed, I was to notice more than one such wreck.

I put Roselle into the co-pilot's seat and stowed the wheel-chair in the cabin. Then, at the pilot's controls, about three-thirty in the afternoon, I guided the roaring ship across the field and took to the air in the first lap of my desperate search. My intention was to look first in Chicago and the coast cities, and if I

found no one awake there, to work south into Latin America.

On the way to Chicago that afternoon, I dipped low and circled over every large city I passed, peering downward. In not one of them was there any sign of life or movement. Finally I gave it up and flew straight on toward Chicago. We reached it after dark, but I had flown there before, had a good idea where the airport was, and brought the ship down on the unlighted field in safety.

That night I slept on a couple of blankets in a corner of the airport station, giving Roselle a couch that was there.

Next morning, after a sketchy breakfast from tins, I put Roselle into a car and drove into town. I had to abandon the car while still a mile or two from the central section, because of traffic jams. With some difficulty I located a wheel-chair and so went on, on foot, wheeling my companion.

I soon deduced that the sleep had struck Chicago early in the afternoon. As I wheeled my comrade along the windy, gusty sidewalk of Michigan Avenue, I said, "This is a waste of time, Roselle. Every soul here is sleeping, just as in New York."

We were passing the entrance of a great bank, and sudden crazy curiosity made me leave Roselle in her chair on the sidewalk and venture into the place.

There were a half-dozen shabby men sleeping in the vestibule — apparently they had been sheltering there from cold winds when the sleep came. I went on into the great marble rotunda.

At sight of the neat piles of currency and coins over which the tellers nodded slumbering, a fancy seized me. Carefully I took a half-dozen packets of thousand-dollar bills and put one into the hand of each of the homeless men in the vestibule.

"You are richer in sleep than you ever were awake," I told them, grinning, as I went out of the building.

But outside a shock of terror hit me that congealed the blood around my heart. The wheel-chair and Roselle were gone! I stood gasping, utterly overwhelmed by the thing, and then emitted a strangled cry. "Roselle!"

Then I saw her, still calmly sleeping in the chair, a half-block farther along the street. The strong winds had blown the wheel-chair that far, while I was inside. But that scare was so strong in me that I performed no further foolery, and instead hurried back with Roselle to the airport, and resolved then and there not to leave her out of my sight again; for I knew now how desperately my mind clung to her company in this awful, sleeping world.

WE FLEW southwest from Chicago, toward the southern California cities, after I had refueled the plane. Illinois and Missouri and Oklahoma all were sleeping, in the hushed silence. Over eastern New Mexico the ship's motors gave trouble, and I made a forced landing.

We spent that night in a gray little ranchhouse near by, the rancher's family still at the table where they had been eating supper when the sleep came, the father leaning back with a half-eaten peach in his hand and surprize on his face, the others nodding over the table and a small dog slumbering on his back under it. There, for the hundredth time, sitting opposite Roselle and watching her sleeping face in the lamplight, I asked myself: "What if all this search of mine proves in vain and there is not one other wakeful person on the Earth? Can I live out my life so, without ever one waking person to speak to? How *can* I live alone on this slumbering planet?"

Great agony of spirit I had that night,

and desperately I attacked the plane's motors the next morning, and got started again, the awful urgency of my search driving me frantically forward.

Without mishap we reached Los Angeles, and found it sleeping also, and mostly in bed, for the sleep appeared to have struck California late at night.

But in the hotel where I went with Roselle for the night, I discovered a business banquet of some kind going on in a big hall, portly gentlemen in evening dress nodding over a long table, a speaker at the head of it now sprawled on the floor. And it tickled my crazy fancy to take his place and seriously address the solemn banqueters.

"Now is the time to crush our business competition, gentlemen," I told them. "Our rivals are all sleeping, and if we act quickly we can corner the market. Why do you not show your accustomed energy and seize this unprecedented opportunity? It amazes me that you sit slumbering here when a little action will reap for us tremendous profits."

At Los Angeles, the ship's motors again giving me trouble, I discarded it and took instead a big amphibian airplane designed for long distance cruising. In it, without any intermediate stops, I flew south toward Mexico City.

Mexico was asleep. And Panama was asleep. And all the South American east coast, which I followed as far down as Natal, was sleeping. I did not go farther south toward Rio de Janeiro, for well I knew I would find it slumbering also. Instead, after careful refueling and checking of the ship, I flew eastward toward Africa, laying my course for Dakar.

The blue Atlantic dimpled in the sun far beneath our plane, Roselle sitting mighty wisely in the seat beside me. We were still six hundred miles from Africa when a storm caught us which I thought was going to finish us, and so have done once and for all with all wakefulness on Earth. It grew night-black, and the winds shrieked and clawed at our struggling ship, and lightning split from the lowering sky to the churning waters below.

I fought that storm, fought desperately. And it was not my life that I cared for, but I did not want Roselle's sweet sleeping body to be prey of fishes in the deep below. But the storm passed, the sun blazed serenely forth again, and in a calm and holy sunset we planed down to Dakar's white roofs.

The first thing I saw as we landed in the harbor was a rusty freight ship with a sleeper sprawled on its bridge.

"So Africa sleeps too," I said with dull calm. "Well, there is still Europe."

And then I told myself, "You lie to yourself, Jason Lane. You *know* that Europe will be sleeping too."

So it proved, indeed, when I went northward in the plane, stopping at slumbering Lisbon for fuel and then on north to England.

I SPENT a hot July week in London, wandering through that sprawling place, wheeling Roselle, for I would not now part with her a moment. There was not a wakeful soul in it.

I remember one afternoon when, weary of strolling through the vast silence of the sleeping metropolis, I was struck with a white-hot thought that sent me quivering.

"What about submarines? In them, alone, men might have escaped the sleep-plague germs that diffused through the atmosphere. A submarine that chanced to be submerged when the sleep came would have escaped it, surely."

So much did that wild hope possess my brain that I took Roselle post-haste to our plane and flew in haste toward the submarine bases at Portsmouth and Harwich.

But before ever I reached them, my hope had died. For as my brain calmed, I saw that even had a submarine been below water when the sleep came, as soon as it rose above the surface and opened its hatches, the omnipresent germs of the plague would strike down its men. So I did not even stop at Portsmouth, but flew on across the Channel and came down at Le Bourget field, outside Paris.

Paris I liked, for I had never seen the city before, and very odd I must have looked as I went about it like any gawking tourist, talking about this and that sight to Roselle as I wheeled her, and all unheedful of the sleeping millions to whom I was now accustomed.

In Paris, too, as I passed a big motion-picture theater, the whim seized me to enter with Roselle, and ascend to the projection booth, and tinker with the projectors. The place had generating-equipment of its own, and I got the generators going, and fussed with the projectors until I started one.

But when it threw a jerky picture upon the screen, and shadows of men and women moved there, talking in strident, metallic voices, the clamor of it seemed so horrible and unnerving that I hastily smashed the projector, and hurried out of that place with Roselle. Yet such crazy whims came upon me ever more often; for by then I had, I think, lost all real hope of finding anybody wakeful in the world, and too had lost most of my *interest* in the search.

Leisurely and languidly, I flew across France and Switzerland in our plane, making short flights of a few hundred miles, and generally stopping for the night at some château or other pretentious building whose situation pleased me.

In this way I came to Venice, and liked it so well that I stayed there for two months, living in one of the palaces on the Grand Canal, a dream-like, unreal sort of existence.

I usually spent the afternoons sitting with Roselle on a balcony overlooking the water, fancying what the place must have been like when all these sleeping thousands were awake, and talking to Roselle for long hours on trivial subjects, she demurely listening.

At night, often, I would put her in a gondola and sit beside her, the gondola just drifting through the moon-silvered canals at will, bumping against other craft that had sleeping people in them, some of them lovers in twos like Roselle and myself.

I got to drinking there in Venice, too much, for it was an easy way to forget my loneliness. One whole night I spent in wild drunkenness, talking wildly to Roselle, boasting to her that I, Jason Lane, was the only one on Earth to escape the sleep.

But when I woke in the morning, sprawled stiff in a chair with dull eyes and disheveled clothing, and saw Roselle still sitting facing me, her dainty face turned toward me, shame seized me.

I apologized humbly to her, saying, "You are right to feel contempt for me, Roselle. But I promise you that I will not become a thing like that again. We will continue the search. Who knows, at this very moment other wakeful people in some chance corner of Earth may be wondering if *they* are the only waking ones in the world!"

It seemed to me that her shy face approved. So, all my two-months' lethargy gone, I swiftly refueled our amphibian ship and we soared out of Venice, south and eastward.

Rome slept, and Sicily, and all the isles of the blue Mediterranean down to Egypt. And Egypt too lay slumbering in the sunshine. . . .

Now I have only brief and vividly unreal memories of those strange months following in which we flew eastward across sleeping Asia.

I remember an evening when we landed outside Mecca, near the Arabian coast, and how I ventured into the dark city that night, wheeling Roselle through the hordes of worshippers who lay slumbering thick around their sacred buildings.

I remember, too, at Agra in India, a night we spent at the building called the Taj Mahal, a calm dome, alabaster in the moonlight, I sitting on a marble bench with Roselle's head on my shoulder, watching and marveling.

And I remember another night at Shanghai a few weeks later, when, picking my way with my companion through the slumbering crowds on the Bund, I suddenly asked myself: "What if they should all awake—*now?*"

And the notion threw me into such fevered fits of insane expectation that I was not myself again until I left the place and flew northwest with Roselle toward Japan.

That languid idleness and disinclination to search further took me again there, so that I dwelt two or three weeks in a little temple, surrounded by stunted oaks, in a place called Kyoto.

When I tired of the place, and thought of returning to America, the dangers of that flight daunted me a little. But I finally decided to work up through the Kurile and Aleutian islands to Alaska, and thence south through Canada.

An even more dangerous flight it proved than I had expected, for I ran into terrible fogs in the Aleutians and was near to exhausting my fuel and crashing into the sea before I located the Dutch Harbor naval base.

All there were sleeping, of course. It was now spring again, but still cold in these parts, as I found when I landed for the night at the little town Sitka, and was beset by bitter storm.

Sitting with Roselle in a small cabin I had taken for us, piling wood into the blazing fire, I heard the winds outside shrieking, seeming to scream my name.

"Jason Lane! The only man in the world who is not sleeping! Why are you not sleeping like the others, Jason Lane?" they seemed to howl tauntingly.

And as I listened to their mocking, and saw Roselle sleeping so sweetly beside me, and thought of all those millioned others I had seen around the round globe, all slumbering in peace; and of myself, the one tortured, restless, waking person on the drowsing globe; when I thought of these things, I leaped up in agony of spirit.

"I *will* sleep like the others, only I will sleep in death!" I said. And once that resolution was made, a calm came upon me that I had not felt in all that year.

I sat, holding Roselle in my arms, telling her what I had determined to do.

"We will go back to my old house in the woods, Roselle, and it is there I will take my life. And there we shall lie together, through all eternity, sleeping like all these sleeping others, and the fever of this vain searching done with."

So when the storm ceased, I flew south and eastward across Canada toward New York. And all my agony of spirit was gone at last, for I knew that soon I would have rest from the horror and guilt that were large in my soul.

On a bright May afternoon I landed our ship outside Albany. I got an automobile, and with Roselle in the seat beside me, drove back through the city.

A year had passed since I had been there, yet still the sleepers in its streets and buildings slumbered unchanged. And all the way north to Horton village, nothing had changed except where storm

had wreaked some damage. The muddy cars on the road north of Horton still held their sleeping occupants, and in the woods the birds and animals still lay motionless and dreaming.

A sweet peace was in me as I drove up to my old farmhouse, for I knew my toil and travail were over at last.

I carried Roselle into the laboratory and gently laid her upon the floor. And then I took chemicals from my untouched shelves and calmly mixed the poison that would take my life.

When the beaker of black liquid stood ready on the table, I turned for a last look at Roselle before I drank the draft and lay down beside her. The shy beauty of her slumbering face struck me to the heart. And as I thought of how, if it had not been for this vast catastrophe, I might have met her and she loved me as I loved her—as I thought of this, a wave of wild regret choked me.

I picked up the beaker of poison, and said, "It's not good-bye, Roselle. I will be here with you, beside you, always."

As I raised the poison to my lips, my eyes looked out through the open door for a last sight of the sunlit woods.

Then I suddenly froze! A thrill like an icy shock ran through every fiber of my being as I stared at something that lay at the foot of a tree outside the door.

A few glittering fragments of glass, it was. But as I saw them, I suddenly *remembered;* remembered how, a year before, I had flung the tube of Culture Two, the second species of germs from outer space, out against that tree to smash. And as I remembered that, for the first time in all that long year, the awful truth crashed home to my reeling brain.

God in heaven, it was I, Jason Lane, who had loosed this plague of sleep upon the world!

That tube of Culture Two—those alien germs—had been germs of the weird sleeping-sickness. My smashing the tube out there in my anger had released those germs on the world.

They had multiplied and spread with immense rapidity, through the atmosphere. All during those weeks I had brooded here, the sleep-germs had been spreading out over Earth and casting all its life into slumber! I was responsible for the most colossal disaster that had ever smitten Earth!

But my horror-numbed mind still could not comprehend one thing.

Why hadn't the sleep-germs affected me, cast me into slumber, like the rest of Earth's life? I, Jason Lane, had been nearest of all men to that smashed tube, I had even previously injected the sleep-germs into my veins; yet I alone had escaped.

Then like a searing flash of lightning across my collapsing brain came the answer.

"The other culture!" I cried, choking. "The other germs—Culture One!"

For I remembered now that before I injected the bacteria of Culture Two into myself, I had previously tried an injection of the other species of germs, Culture One.

And—I knew it, now—the *first* kind of bacteria, Culture One, was an anti-toxin and immunization agent to the sleep-germs, one that had come out of space from the same far world as the sleep-germs. That was why I, Jason Lane, had been the only man in the world not affected by the sleep bacteria. Before experimenting with them, I had unknowingly injected the anti-toxin to them into my veins.

I clawed wildly over the laboratory table for that tube of Culture One, now. If it should have been destroyed——!

But it was there, just as I had left it, sealed tightly.

With shaking fingers, I filled a hypodermic with it. Then tremblingly I injected it into Roselle's arm. *And in a moment Roselle stirred a little!*

"The anti-toxin!" I yelled in mad rejoicing. "The anti-toxin to the sleep!"

I went to the door, hurled that tube of Culture One out to smash like the first one against the tree. And in a moment, the birds lying sleeping around that tree began to flutter their wings slightly, to utter weak chirps.

Then I was sobbing wildly, as the birds wakened in greater and greater number and started flitting through the trees, as small animals began to stir farther off in the woods.

The germs of Culture One, the anti-toxin agent, were multiplying and spreading out through the atmosphere as rapidly as had the sleep bacteria, and were starting to wake Earth's sleeping life.

I turned, still sobbing. "Roselle, the world is starting to awake—to awake!"

Roselle's eyes were open, staring bewilderedly at me. They were brown eyes, just as I had always known they must be, brown and wide and startled, as I knelt beside her.

She said, "Where am I? I was reading in the park a moment ago——"

"That was a year ago!" I cried. "You've been sleeping, the whole world has been sleeping, since then. But thank God, it's starting to awake now."

"But you—who——?" she exclaimed, still amazed by my tight arm around her and the frantic emotion on my face.

"I'm Jason Lane, who loves you, Roselle, who has loved you for a year, and you sleeping."

Her puzzled brown eyes, looking up into mine, softened. And holding her close, I knew that even as I had planned, there would be for us no parting.

Death

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

You think that death comes all at once?
  It is not so, my friend.
Death comes a little at a time;
  But all things have an end.

Death comes a little at a time.
  Harsh words, a faith betrayed,
Deceit, and jeers, and mockery:
  Of these things death is made;

Of cruelty, and angry looks;
  Neglect, and selfish deeds.
We die each time we are denied
  The love that living needs.

"The hand felt like a ring of ice tightening inexorably upon his throat."

The Unborn

By RONAL KAYSER

A vivid and fascinating story of a weird pursuit that dogged the footsteps of Polectoff with doom inescapable

GREGORI POLECTOFF is about to die. He knows that, although he cannot get anyone else to believe. These doctors do not understand the case of Gregori Polectoff. They tap his chest, they listen to his heart, they take his temperature, they send dabs of his sputum and his blood on little glass plates to the laboratory; and the upshot of it all is that they declare Polectoff to

be as healthy as themselves. To be sure, Polectoff is a healthy man. Death is not in his tissues and organs and blood-stream. Death is outside of him, and it follows him, death does.

Only God and Polectoff understand this case.

That is not Polectoff's fault. He has tried to explain it—so many times. He tries to tell the doctors about it. The trouble is that they continually interrupt him with foolish questions, questions that have nothing to do with the matter. Polectoff is an obliging chap. He would gladly chat about glands and germs, just to please these doctors. But he hasn't time. He is going to die—very soon now. . . .

Dear God, Polectoff is a dying man. Things flash through his mind so fast, much faster than he could tell of them. . . .

THERE was that night when he sat at the piano on the stage of the great auditorium. To Polectoff, the great shadowy hall beyond the stage looked like a halved, dark melon, seeded with dim yellow lights above the boxes and around the horse-shoe sweep of the balconies.

The music of Polectoff's piano yearned out into that darkness. It was the *Love Call* that he played. The music was molten gold, cadenced with tripping silvery notes. Truly, it was so beautiful that Polectoff himself almost wept.

Or perhaps it was the memory which this *Love Call* always evoked in him that brought tears to his eyes. Always when he played it he saw his studio, its tall windows varnished with frost and the blaze crackling in the fireplace. Indeed, the sound of flame singing on the wood was in the music. And the sobbing bass was Polectoff's own voice:

"Carlotta!" cried the voice. "Be mine! I love you. Carlotta, marry me—marry me!"

The music ached with this sweet, hot longing. Polectoff played like a madman. He saw the firelight paint its soft and rosy shadows on the woman's body; he felt the warmth of her flesh upon his own; and the piano throbbed forth the great wild pulse that filled all Polectoff's being, until at last his hands fell from the keyboard.

Perhaps half a moment passed before he realized that he was not in the studio, but here, on the stage. . . . A little start ran through his body as the lights flashed up in the auditorium, and he saw the enormous, applauding crowd. People were cheering like mad. Polectoff bowed and bowed again as he walked off the stage.

What an ovation! What a triumph!

After each bow, Polectoff looked up with a smile to the box where Pauline Brand sat. All over the house, women were turning to stare at Pauline, envying her; for what woman could resist this handsome young Polectoff, this dark-eyed god who played like an angel?

The men also looked at Pauline, and envied the pianist. Pauline sat tapping her folded fan against the rail of the box. Her lips smiled imperiously. Her eyes gleamed greenly. Diamonds in a necklace glittered around the slim stalk of her throat. Her arms and bosom, emerging from the evening gown, had the hard and shining perfection of Dresden china. Even the shadow which parted her breasts had a hard look, as if painted there with glossy lacquer.

A woman of ice, perhaps. Nevertheless she was very beautiful; and she was also very rich. And Polectoff was a lucky dog.

The moment he walked into the wings, he was surrounded by admirers who had pushed past the ushers. Polectoff bowed

and smiled in a dozen directions at once; began to scribble his name on the programs that were thrust toward him.

Suddenly he saw Carlotta squeezing through the crowd. He wondered how she had scraped together the money for a ticket. She'd written to him, asking for a theater pass. And he had replied, severely, that he didn't think a recital was quite the place for a woman in her condition.

He looked at her angrily. How shabby her threadbare white cloak appeared among all these ermine wraps! She had scarcely combed her hair at all. Her eyes were red with weeping, her cheeks sunken and wan. As for her body—why, she was disgustingly swollen. . . .

Polectoff would have fled, only the crowd hemmed him in; he had to face her.

"Go to my dressing-room!" he stammered. "I will talk to you later."

"No, Gregori," she said. "You promised that last time. Then you ran away to your hotel and left the porter to fetch your coat. . . . You have got to talk to me here, Gregori."

"Well! What is it—money?" He looked around anxiously; yes, people were staring at them. He whispered, "Give me your program, and I'll pretend to autograph it, I'll write an I O U!"

Polectoff wanted to handle the matter quietly, but Carlotta laughed in his face.

"I already have your I O U," she said grimly. She talked like a third-rate actress. "I've come to demand payment. Tonight."

He stared at her, thunderstruck.

"You promised to marry me, Gregori," she said, exactly as a third-rate actress would have said that. "Well, I've got the license. We'll climb into a cab. There's a clergyman waiting in my apartment."

Someone in the crowd laughed. Someone else remarked, "I say, this *is* melodrama!"

POLECTOFF gritted his teeth. So she expected him to marry her, after all—and with the papers filled with accounts of his approaching marriage to Pauline Brand! That showed how selfish Carlotta was. She didn't think of Pauline, nor of him, nor of his career. Only herself!

"Very well," he said, taking her arm. But wait until they got out of the building! If she thought she could get him into any cab, how mistaken she was!

Her voice rattled on. "I'm sorry, Gregori. I don't expect you to live with me—not even support me. You can have your divorce as soon as the baby—*our* child—is born. . . ."

Did she have to say that, then? Right in front of all these people! There passed over his face a black look of hate. She must have known then that he didn't intend to go through with it. For she broke away from him and ran.

Yes, Carlotta ran out onto the great stage and screamed at the audience which was still only moving into the aisles—screamed horrible and obscene things, as it seemed to Polectoff, about him!

Oh, the melodrama of it! But also, the scandal of it. . . .

Polectoff ran after her.

But what was that in Carlotta's hand? She had snatched a knife out of the pocket of her white cloak!

Polectoff saw it too late. He had not even time to turn his face. There was only the glimmer of steel before his eyes, and then the hot slash in his cheek and the cold tick-tock of the blade dragging over his teeth!

He got the knife away from her, Polectoff did. It was clasped in his hand when he struck her. . . . He struck her, and in one blow paid her back for

the agony of his bleeding face, for her blackmailing threats, for everything.

Carlotta sank down on the stage. She tried with her fingers to stanch the wound in her breast, but the blood spurted all over her hands. Her lips moved, and her dying whisper seemed to reach the farthest corner of the auditorium.

"Your child!" said Carlotta to Polectoff. *"The little unborn child!"*

How could they charge that Polectoff murdered this woman? It had been she, not he, who brought the knife into the auditorium. It was she who struck the first blow. He had acted only in self-defense—he had been crazed with pain—he hadn't even realized that the knife was in his hand! So Polectoff swore when they put him on the stand.

But perhaps the jury didn't believe him. There was that horrible, haggled white scar on his cheek—it gave his face such a twisted, brutal, and murderous look!

Perhaps also the jury was influenced by the crowd—that great courtroom full of faces which uttered a sigh of hatred and contempt when the handcuffed prisoner was led before the stern, black-robed judge.

Who did not hate Polectoff? His own lawyers could scarcely forbear to sneer at him—he told his story with such a wretched, hang-dog air. He had not one friend left in the world. As for Pauline Brand, she had not spoken to him since that awful night, and his letters were returned unopened.

Everything went against Gregori Polectoff. But the worst was the way the prosecuting attorney kept dragging the child into it—although Polectoff was not on trial for killing the child.

"Gentlemen of the jury," the prosecuting attorney said, "two murders were committed on that stage. Two lives were snuffed out when Gregori Polectoff plunged the knife into this young mother's breast. To be sure, as Polectoff says, Carlotta struck him first; but did the little unborn babe strike him, too?"

"Objection!" cried Polectoff's lawyers.

"Nevertheless," said the prosecuting attorney, "the babe is dead, and all your objections will not restore it to life. The little child will never coo and gurgle in its crib. The little rosy feet will never take their first tottering steps. The tiny rosebud mouth can never lisp those precious words, *Mama* and *Daddy*——"

"Objection sustained!" exclaimed the judge.

Nevertheless, the jury had heard the words. They frowned, for they were family men. The State had seen to that.

"Gentlemen of the jury," the prosecutor went on, "the charge is murder in the second degree, because we cannot prove that Polectoff premeditated his crime. Therefore I cannot ask that he be hanged by the neck until dead——"

"Objection!"

"Sustained!"

"Very well, I do *not* ask that he be hanged!" the prosecutor shouted. "But I do ask that he be locked up for the rest of his natural life. The State asks it. Society demands it. The voice of Carlotta sobs from the grave and asks for a life sentence. And gentlemen, fathers all of you, do you not hear one other tiny voice that cries from Carlotta's coffin? Oh, gentlemen, I hear that voice—the voice of the unborn—and it cries, *'Guilty! Guilty!'* "

The jury found Polectoff guilty.

The judge sentenced him to twenty years at hard labor.

"With time off for good behavior," Polectoff's lawyers reminded him, but they did not offer to shake his hand. "We did our best for you," the lawyers said, "but we couldn't beat the child—*the little unborn child*——"

NOBODY could say that Polectoff behaved as other than a model prisoner. He was a gentleman, he cared nothing for the prison riffraff; only one man in the Big House did he ever speak to, and that came years later. This man had once been a respectable banker. Polectoff and the ex-banker fell to walking together in the exercise yard, and soon found that they had something in common.

"See!" the ex-banker would boast, taking a letter from the pocket of his striped jacket. "My little girl writes to me, and she is only nine years old!"

And Polectoff found himself saying, "Mine would have been eight this spring, had she lived." For he never doubted that the unborn child would have been a girl.

"My little one is a red-head, her curls are like a ball of fire," said the other.

"Mine had straight, black hair, surely," said Polectoff, thinking of Carlotta.

"Mine is named Theodora," said the ex-banker. "What did you name yours?"

"She had no name," Polectoff faltered.

The other looked at him queerly. "Ah, she must have died very young?"

"Very young!" sighed Polectoff.

The child would have been twelve years old when one day Polectoff was summoned to the warden's office. "Gregori Polectoff," said the warden, "here is your parole. You have behaved well here; see to it that you go straight on the outside." Then, seeing the convict's downcast and troubled face he added, "Hold up your head, man! So far as human society is concerned, you have expiated the crime for which you were sentenced. The rest is between you and your God."

It was true, Polectoff felt that he had atoned for Carlotta's death. But what of that other murder? Had he atoned for it? Was that between him and God, then?

TO BE sure, Polectoff's concert days were over. Besides the horrible twisted scar on his face, his fingers had stiffened under hard labor in the prison. He no longer had the concert pianist's touch . . . his fingers dragged on the keys and gave to his playing a weary, sad, and haunted sound. His taste in musical scores had changed, too. He never cared to attempt Brahms or Chopin or Liszt in these days; neither did he compose any more *Love Calls*. He wrote a sentimental melody called *Little Maid in My Heart,* and another, *Daughter of Mine.*

Polectoff got employment in a St. Louis radio station, where he was billed as the "Prison Pianist." Something in his music appealed to thousands of listeners; strangely enough most of all to those who had recently lost a dearly loved child. . . . He got much fan mail, and a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars a week. The papers related that he gave most of his salary, and all the royalties from his songs, to the Fund for Homeless Children.

Truly, Polectoff had turned a new leaf, people said.

Then the thing happened which changed the course of his life. One wild, windy, bitter night he left the broadcasting studio and walked swiftly through the deserted streets toward his apartment. In this neighborhood of tumbledown factories, he saw a sight which caused his heart to melt with pity.

In the doorway of one of the buildings cowered a shivering child of perhaps thirteen years. She wore no cloak, nor any bonnet, and the wind flattened her scant, thin white cotton dress against her piteously emaciated body. Polectoff clenched his warmly gloved hands in anger against a world where such things could be. At once he stripped off his own coat and held it out to the child.

"Come, little daughter," said Polectoff, whose teeth chattered as the freezing blast pierced him. "Let me get a cab and take you home."

From the darkness a thin voice answered. "But I have no home."

"No home!" cried Polectoff. "Good God, no home to go to on a night like this!" He remembered the asylum to which he had given so many dollars. "You shall come with me, then, to a very nice place where there are many little girls to play with—you will like that, won't you?"

"I don't know," said the child. "I have never played with other children."

"But that is monstrous, little daughter!" exclaimed Polectoff. Then, as the child still hesitated, he added kindly, "Come, tell me your name."

"I cannot," said the girl. "I think that I have no name."

Was it the cold which made Polectoff shudder? He bent over and peered closely into the child's white, wan, piteous face. . . . Two screams shrieked down the wind. One was the girl's. She had been frightened, perhaps, by his scarred and twisted face. But why did Polectoff scream?

He sprang back—not too soon, for at that moment a great coping-stone crashed down from the roof and smashed the sidewalk to a thousand pieces right in front of the doorway.

Polectoff ran. His feet hammered the sidewalk like pistons. His heart was another piston thumping against his ribs. He ran all the way to his apartment, locked and barred the door behind him, and threw himself into a chair—then leaped to his feet and began to pace the floor.

All night Polectoff walked the floor. He called himself a fool a hundred times over. He told himself that he was a sick man, because his head ached as if a band of iron had been riveted around his skull. He argued that he was drunk with the great tumblers of whisky he swallowed. Things would look very different in the morning, thought Polectoff.

In the morning, without a word of explanation to anyone, he fled from St. Louis and the child—that little child.

ON THE San Francisco waterfront, Polectoff got a job in an outlandish restaurant where his twisted face only added to the "atmosphere." His music suited the place, also. Nowadays he never played *Little Maid in My Heart* nor *Daughter of Mine;* in fact, he played no music that could be recognized at all. Continually his fingers improvised as they strayed over the keyboard—improvised strange, weird and fearsome melodies which sounded like the wind shrieking through graveyards, like the sobbing of banshees over lonely moors, like the rattle of chains on the gallows. Family parties never dined here, for at the sound of Polectoff's music children invariably burst into frightened tears; the very newsboys, hardened as they were, gave the place a wide berth. The restaurant reaped a great harvest from the jaded thrill-seekers, but Polectoff got only twenty-five dollars a week.

He held this job for a year and a half. Then very late one night, just as he left the restaurant, his way was blocked by two men quarreling in front of the café. One had drawn a pistol and was threatening to kill the other. At the same instant Polectoff glimpsed the girl leaning against a lamp-post watching the scene.

A dreadful chill shuddered through his veins. It was the same girl, no doubt of it; although she had grown taller, and now her small breasts sprang forward and made points against the cheap white frock.

Polectoff ran. . . . In almost the same instant, the gun barked and the

bullet drilled through the restaurant's glass door. This time he had just escaped being shot through the heart!

Polectoff fled to New York. Afterward, he could not remember all of the cities where he had lived. . . .

HERE in Chicago, he lived for a while that summer on West Goethe Street. He liked that because he could easily walk over to the big beach. Oak Street Beach they called it, though actually the swimmers congregated all the way up to North Avenue. He enjoyed beaches. The noise and smell and feel of a crowd gave him a feeling of safety. The sun and the hot sand warmed the prison chill which had come back into his bones. Sometimes, instead of lying in the sand, he turned north along the embankment where the good swimmers went because the deep water permitted diving.

Polectoff could sit by the hour watching the firm bodies of the young women as they came up on their toes, arched gracefully high in the air, and then sped like straight arrows into the water.

Many men liked to ogle these girls. Polectoff's eyes were different. They were like the eyes of a proud, wistful father. . . .

Why should he not sit here? He had nothing else to do. Polectoff had long since given up playing in public because that invariably meant night work; and now at night he locked himself in his room. He gave music lessons, but not many: he was not a popular teacher. Boys complained that he was a great, ugly, impatient bear. And girls complained that he looked at them in such a queer way! And besides, it would happen sooner or later that when they tapped at the door he would not let them into his "studio."

"Who is there?" Polectoff would cry.

"It is I, Marguerite," the student might say.

"Ah, I know better. I saw you last night when I peeked out of the window, just once. Your name is not Marguerite. You have no name!" Polectoff would sob.

Nevertheless, in spite of these fears, he had never actually seen the girl by daylight until this day at the lake.

She was almost naked, as girls go to the beach nowadays, with just the tiniest strip of white swim-suit on her pale body: pale, for in spite of the sun her skin had the whiteness of milk. . . . Polectoff almost wept, for all of his fear. The girl was nineteen now. Her breasts lifted proudly, taut and straining against the knitted tightness of the swim-suit; her lips were fresh, dewy, and scarlet; her hair fell in a black cascade to her shoulders.

"I am sorry," Polectoff wanted to say to her. "I, who cheated you of life, could weep for your lost beauty. I could weep because you will never dive like the other girls, and never feel the cool lake divide about your body. Because no lips can touch your mouth, or the face of a lover be buried in your hair. . . ."

How could Polectoff speak to her? He did not even know her name!

He ran. . . . Only he had gotten down too close to the embankment. The girl put out her hands—*you* might have thought, to snatch him from some great danger, but really she pushed him, and Polectoff fell into the water. He couldn't swim. He floundered, and the dark wet green strangled in his nostrils and throat; it burned like acid. His head filled with an agonizing pain. An expanding pressure seemed to burst his skull. "I am dying," thought Polectoff. "That is her revenge on me."

As he sank deeply into the lake, his wide-open eyes saw the girl leaning out over the embankment to stare at him. She smiled. Or was that the rippling of the water?

The next moment a powerful red-clad body rushed through the depths toward Polectoff. Strong hands lifted him onto the embankment. The life-guard spoke angrily. "Whatsa idea, yuh old fool? Suicide?"

Polectoff muttered, "I was pushed in."

A crowd collected. Dozens of people had witnessed the incident, and their voices brawled in Polectoff's ear. "He's a liar!" the voices exclaimed. "He just ran and jumped in!"

Polectoff was glad to close his mouth and say no more about it. Trembling, sick at heart, and with water dripping from his soaked garments, he crept back to the place on West Goethe Street.

The terror of this happening! He had never been so frightened before! He could see that daylight offered him no protection now; and besides, this was the first time the girl had actually raised her own hand against him. Always it had been an accident, before—or something that looked like an accident. More and worse, this time he could not really run away, for he had no money. He could move to another rooming-house, but she would find him—as she always did.

Polectoff sank into a chair. How was it that she always traced him? He buried his face in his hands. His face! Of course! What could be easier than to trace a man with a face like his? He had tried to grow a beard; but then hair never grew on the scar, so that was useless.

A cunning idea came into Polectoff's mind. But now he needed money—a great deal of money. * * *

THE best he could get was a job pounding a tinny piano in the back room of a Clark Street saloon. A change had come over his music; he never played those strange, weird, and frightening improvisations any more. On the contrary, he hammered out dance tunes—ribald, wild, intoxicating rhythms which sobbed a feverish sex hunger. When Polectoff played these melodies, the bodies of the dancers in the back room of the saloon fused together, the men paled with desire, and the eyes of the women glazed as if in some ecstatic trance. Showers of silver tinkled in the glass tumbler on the piano. Polectoff counted the coins anxiously.

One night his fingers groping over the discolored keys picked out the *Love Call;* only this was not the *Love Call* as he had played it in the great auditorium years before. Now the music was fool's gold, decorated with quicksilver. It belonged to the world of illusion, the world of never-will-be. The sound of flame singing on the wood was a song that would never be sung, and the sobbing bass was the voice of a lover who would never speak.

"Oh, Nameless One!" cried the voice. "You cannot be mine, for you were never born! I cannot love you, for you never were!"

The music ached with this sad, lost love—the love which could not be, because Polectoff had killed it so long ago. . . .

His hands lay like crushed things on the keyboard. Someone thrust a whisky glass into his fingers. Polectoff started, and raised the glass to his lips. The stuff seared his mouth, and an odor of burnt almonds stung his nostrils. With a scream, Polectoff hurled the liquor to the floor, turned from the piano, and stared across the little room.

Yes, there she sat! Alone, at that little table in the corner—her eyes like sharpened points of carbon, her scarlet mouth cruelly smiling, her bare shoulders and bosom rising out of a white fluff of gown. Dear God, she had tried to poison Polectoff!

And this was the first time he had ever seen her *inside* a building. Perhaps the music had lured her in—or perhaps it was

merely that she had gotten older, and more used to the ways of living men.

Polectoff stumbled between the tables, braced himself at the bar. "Water!" he gasped. "Water—my mouth is on fire——"

"Wassamat'?" the saloonkeeper asked. "Wassamat' you no make duh music?"

"I've been poisoned!" Polectoff stammered. "The girl—the one in the corner—she tried to kill me again."

The saloonkeeper, breathing heavily, looked past Polectoff's shoulder into the back room.

"You beega fool!" he said. "Damn beega fool! Isnuh gurl in duh corner!"

Polectoff tottered out of the saloon.

FOUR weeks later the plastic surgeon removed the bandages from Polectoff's face. Polectoff crept to the mirror and stared long at his own image. . . . It wasn't a handsome job, surely. The quack had bungled the business badly. The new skin grafted on Polectoff's cheek had a gray, glued-on look. Stretched tight, it showed the wasted collapse of the muscles underneath. One might have thought that this one side of Polectoff's face had been mummified, or that a part of him had died and dried up while the rest went on living.

But Polectoff smiled. Or rather, the living half of him smiled.

"At least you have changed me!" cried Polectoff. "No one will recognize me? —say, someone who has seen me only a dozen times in the last seven years? And then usually at night? For just a few seconds?"

"My dear man," said the surgeon, "your closest friend won't know you now."

It was true. And it became even truer with the passing of a few days. Polectoff's face seemed to shrink as it healed. His whole countenance was drawn askew, puckered, and deformed. All of his features seemed to be twisting around in an effort to get a good look at the sunken place where the scar had been.

How happy Polectoff was! His step quickened joyously in the street, and often he stopped to gaze at his reflection in the shop windows. Or while he strolled in the park, he bent over the circular basins where fish swam and eagerly scanned the watery replica of himself. At these times he laughed softly. And when Polectoff laughed he became unrecognizable indeed.

Now at night he flung himself down to such glad sleep as he had not known in twenty long years.

Yet this one night he awakened. . . .

Without making a sound, Polectoff turned his head. . . . The room was utterly dark, for he had long ago got into the habit of fastening his windows and tightly drawing the shades. Also it was second nature to lock and bar his door, and he remembered distinctly that he *had* locked the door, and barred it, too! But for all that, Polectoff was not alone in the room. . . .

His limbs felt like sticks of wood, his tongue hung as a leaden weight, his very eyes froze in their sockets. His scalp prickled. A horrible icy shudder laved his spine.

Dear God, but Polectoff could not even scream out in this moment of mortal peril! He could only stare at the girl who bent over his bed. She wore a frothy negligee of white which revealed her snowy shoulders and her breasts. He could see that, for Earth knew no darkness black enough to blot out her whiteness. Her hand, too, was queerly radiant —yet cold as hoarfrost when she touched his face. . . .

Yes, her fingers like five little icicles went prowling over Polectoff's face, ever

so lightly until they found the papery stiffness of his new cheek. Then the fingers began to palp his flesh, taking it up in tiny rolls, kneading it, until their chill tips found the old, buried scar tissue. Now, with a firm pressure which ached its cold deep into his flesh, a single finger traced over the parchment skin, traced the corded seam running from Polectoff's mouth up to his cheekbone, between the eye and the ear.

A little sigh parted her lips, and Polectoff saw the flash of her white teeth.

He lay perfectly still while again the cold, small hand traveled down his face. His teeth chattered involuntarily; he made no other sound.

The hand fumbled over the man's bare throat. Polectoff could not sense the fingers individually, now. The hand felt like a ring of ice tightening inexorably upon his throat, mashing the cartilage, constricting the windpipe, blocking the great arteries. . . .

Then Polectoff screamed. The grip of the fingers bleared the sound, thinned it to a fantastic wail of terror. Polectoff began to thrash his limbs about in the bed. The rusty springs shrieked. Their sound was more human than the curdling sobs that jangled over Polectoff's protruding tongue. Suddenly a chink of light fell through the crack beside the door. Fists pounded on the panel.

Polectoff sat up in bed. He was alone in the room. Moving stiffly, like a puppet on strings, he tottered to the door and flung it open.

"You came just in time!" he groaned.

The landlady gathered her robe more tightly about her broomstick figure.

"In time!" she said angrily. "After you've waked up every soul in the house? What's going on in this room, anyway, I should like to know!"

"She was choking me to death," Polectoff faltered. "That girl——"

The woman gave her gray braids an indignant jerk. "I don't allow no girls in my gentlemen's rooms," she said indignantly. "You send the hussy a-packing, do you hear?"

Polectoff wet his lips. "You don't understand——"

"I understand plenty!" Her voice was tart. "I'll be asking for this room tomorrow, Mr. Ugly-Face. Now you get your floosy out of here, or I'll be calling the police——"

The police! Why had he not thought of them before? Polectoff hurriedly flung on his clothes, rushed from the house. He reeled along the street. His face and throat burned like fire where the fingers had touched. . . . What could the police do for Polectoff? He hardly thought of that—not until he found himself in the precinct station, being stared at by a big Irish desk sergeant.

What could the police do, indeed? Polectoff did not even trouble to try to explain the case. He turned away from the desk, stumbled blindly toward the door.

"Hey!" cried the sergeant. "Where 're ye goin'?"

"I am going to—die," said Polectoff.

"You can do that more comfortable-like in a hospital," said the sergeant, and reached for the telephone.

* * * * *

HERE is Polectoff in the consulting-room, at last, putting on his shirt now that the doctors have finished with thumping his chest. These are all young doctors, very smart in their interns' garb, three or four of them practising on Polectoff all at the same time. Clearly these young men do not see a case like Polectoff's every day. It is strange that they do not pay more attention to what he says.

"Come," says Polectoff, and walks to the window. "You can see her down

there on the street! The woman in white, with the great black eyes—she keeps staring up at us."

The doctors cannot see anyone in the street. But then, Polectoff is used to being told that. . . .

"I know her well," says Polectoff. "She is always following me. Once she tried to poison me—and once she pushed me into the lake——"

"You should have her arrested, then," the youngest doctor thinks. "What is her name?"

Polectoff is staggered by the question. He does not know her name. He tries again, doggedly, to make them understand. "And tonight she came to my room—she had me by the throat!"

Says one of the doctors, "You are going to have that feeling of being caught by the throat many times, mister. Whoever patched your face severed the nerves——"

These young doctors are suddenly silent as an old man with a beard walks into the consulting-room. Again Polectoff tells his story. . . .

"Ah!" cries the bearded man. "I know how it is, my friend." And he slaps Polectoff's shoulder. "We'll get around that young lady. We'll send you to a place where she can't get at you, Polectoff. Where the windows are barred and the doors are made of steel, and there are guards about. Would you like that, my friend?"

Polectoff knows that neither steel doors nor guards can keep out the girl. But the old man has a kind face, and Polectoff does not wish to offend him.

"One place or another, it is all the same to me," says Polectoff.

The old man laughs. "But there are papers to be signed," he says, and winks waggishly. "You understand, it is not everyone who can get into this exclusive place. So, for the time being, you had better go up to the men's ward on the sixteenth floor."

Polectoff shrugs his shoulders and follows one of the young doctors into the elevator.

The ward is a large room, filled with beds from which white faces stare at Polectoff. Fully dressed as he is, and walking on his own two feet, what is he doing here? They do not know that Polectoff is going to die before they do.

He lies down on a bed at the end of the room. The breeze from the open window stirs over his face; and it is a good breeze, when one is not going to feel it much longer. Polectoff lies very still and thinks the long thoughts of a dying man.

Five or ten minutes pass. Suddenly Polectoff sits bolt-upright on the bed.

"Dear God!" cries Polectoff. *"Who is that?"*

"It's only the nurse," says the man in the next cot.

Polectoff doubts that. This girl is dressed in white, she has black hair, and her lips are a scarlet thread. Polectoff jumps off the bed. The girl drops whatever it is that she is carrying, and hurries toward him. Her hands are outstretched.

It does not seem to be the same girl, after all. Polectoff lets her put her hand on his sleeve. . . . The next instant he has wrenched his arm away from her, for her fingers are cold as ice, as cold as if they had been dipped in ether. . . .

There is a smell of ether about her, too, as if that were what she had spilled on herself.

But Polectoff is not to be fooled twice.

"I know who you are!" he shrieks. "Your name is Death!"

The girl tries to seize him in her cold hands. But he is too fast for her.

He jumps out of the window, Polectoff does.

Loot of the Vampire

By THORP McCLUSKY

A goose-flesh story—a vivid, eery, blood-congealing weird narrative that will hold your fascinated attention

The Story Thus Far

DAVID EICHELMAN, jeweler, is found dead in his office. Superficially it looks like an ordinary murder case, as a four hundred thousand dollar string of pearls is missing. However, Police Commissioner Charles B. Ethredge and Detective-Lieutenant Peters find themselves puzzled. Eichelman has apparently bled to death; yet his body shows no wounds; and it is impossible to learn how the murderer escaped.

Aided by Ethredge's fiancée, Mary Roberts, the Commissioner finally centers his suspicions upon a Count Leopold Woerz, mysterious nobleman and wealthy globe-trotter. Commissioner Ethredge calls upon Count Woerz and imprudently questions him about the Eichelman case, whereupon Woerz, who is an adept at hypnotism, decides to hypnotize Mary and so force Ethredge to discontinue his investigation.

Woerz takes Mary to the Moores' bazar, a charity affair at which he shows his skill as a mind-reader. Detective-Lieutenant Peters at Ethredge's suggestion has his mind read by Count Woerz, and is sickened and horrified by some revelation which he tells the Commissioner is unbelievable, but which must be true. Throughout the bazar Ethredge and Peters have not succeeded in locating Mary, who has been gambling in the house.

As Peters recovers from his nausea, Ethredge leads him from a secluded spot back to the grounds, and they see Count Woerz escorting Mary to his car, too late for them to intercept him. However, they grimly follow the Count's car.

Count Woerz, alone with Mary in the tonneau of his luxurious Rolls-Royce, finds it an easy manner to place her under hypnotic control.

The story continues:

17. *A Naked Skull*

COMMISSIONER ETHREDGE and Detective-Lieutenant Peters had doggedly followed the Rolls-Royce into town. Incredulously, now, they were watching Count Woerz matter-of-factly escort Mary to her door.

Count Woerz had recrossed the sidewalk, was re-entering his car. Silently the two men watched the Rolls-Royce pull away from the curb, merge into the city's traffic.

Urgently, then, Peters spoke. "Commissioner, we've got to go somewhere where we can talk. That—that *thing* is dangerous. We've got to make plans."

Unsurprized, Ethredge assented. "Come to my home, Peters. I mix a pretty decent highball. . . ."

And Ethredge did mix a pretty decent highball. Yet Peters, sitting in one of the Commissioner's comfortable chairs, the tall drink within easy reach of his hand, found it difficult to begin.

"Commissioner," he said at last, "have you ever read about vampires?" There! He had broached the subject.

Ethredge fiddled with his glass. "Oh,

This story began in WEIRD TALES for June

"I took a mirror into the tent, and looked at Count Woerz in it."

a bit at the library," he admitted. "And I've seen a few melodramatic pictures."

"Commissioner," Peters said earnestly, "vampires do exist. And Count Woerz is a vampire."

Ethredge laughed. "Nonsense, Peters. Vampires belong in the same category with ghosts and witches and all the other superstitions of the Middle Ages. You don't feel—you don't feel sick, or anything?"

Peters shook his head. "I feel all right." He picked up his drink, took a meager sip, set down the glass.

"Commissioner," he went on, with that strange earnestness, "the world has believed in vampires for thousands of years. In every country, among every race, among both the most intelligent and the most ignorant we find a strongly ingrained belief in vampirism. An unfounded superstition could never have taken root like that, could never have surmounted the barriers of language, could never have crossed oceans and deserts, enduring through centuries."

Ethredge moved restlessly. "Folk-lore," he muttered.

Peters nodded. "Folk-lore, certainly, but folk-lore in which sixty percent of the

world's peoples believe, today; folk-lore which always springs, if we search deeply enough, from an easily identifiable, unchangeable similarity of phenomena. The attributes of the vampire are the same, Commissioner, whether you hear of him in America or whether you hear of him in Burma. He's demonstrated his existence for ages, Commissioner. What we've failed to do is to study him and find out what he really is."

"The undead," Ethredge nodded. "Not dead; not alive. Well, I'll listen. But I warn you that I won't be convinced."

A deep, expectant silence rested, for a moment, over the room. And then, at first almost diffidently, Peters began to speak.

"I've read about these things," Peters said, as if apologetically, "not so much because of any belief in them, but because I wondered how the legends of vampirism could have become so widespread. I wanted to find out why whole races of people could have deluded themselves with tales so impossible. My main reaction, at first, was a sort of wonder that the stories of vampirism I read should all possess such fundamental similarities. I could not find any satisfactory reason why this should be so.

"But gradually and unwillingly I was forced to accept the view that the legends of vampirism are based on fact, however obscured by the imagination and the ignorance of the narrators. And at once my interest in this whole train of desultory study became intense. I set out to sift the truth from fiction, to determine, if possible, what fundamental characteristics of vampires are world-wide and subject to scientific scrutiny. I wanted to learn just what a vampire could or could not do, to attempt to reconcile him with natural laws; in short, to explode the whole legendry of vampirism. Already, from the fundamental similarities I had found to be characteristic of every vampire, I had begun to favor the idea that so-called vampires might really be members of some rare cult, very possibly possessing considerable powers of hypnotism, very possibly stronger, physically, than most men, due, perhaps, to extremely rigorous diet and exercise. The almost universal legend that vampires live solely on human blood seemed to uphold this hypothesis."

Commissioner Ethredge seemed relieved. "I've no objection to what you've said, so far," he admitted.

PETERS dourly shook his head. "I will tell you more. . . . I discarded, of course, as many of the impossible attributes with which vampires have been empowered as I could. I disbelieved that they could change their shape, that they could appear as wolves or bats, for example. However, favoring my theory of vampirism as a cult, I admitted that by hypnotism they could produce just such illusions. And I saw no reason why the vampire could not cross running water, or why garlic should be offensive to him. I traced the belief in the efficacy of the cross against him to the Church, which in medieval times recommended the cross and the use of holy water against all powers of evil. I believed that the vampire could be killed by a stake driven through his heart, and I believed that he could be killed by a silver bullet or dagger, but I also surmised that a lead bullet or a steel knife would do the business just as well. Oddly, in all my research I found few authenticated, so to speak, accounts of vampire destruction.

"I utterly disbelieved that a vampire could be a man who had died and was now 'undead', the term by which vampires are designated. I was certain that he would cast a reflection in a mirror."

He paused, shuddered convulsively.

"Count Woerz—cast a reflection," he whispered, then. "I took a mirror into that tent, looked into it—looked at Count Woerz in it. Yes—he cast a reflection."

With difficulty he went on. "That is about where I was, a dilettante in the study of vampirism, when the Eichelman case broke. And now, Commissioner, I've had to adjust myself to reality, to explain to myself a form of unholy life which should never live, and yet does live! For, Commissioner, Count Woerz is a vampire, and he is almost as the old legends have described him!"

"You mean that he is dead and yet alive?" Ethredge asked slowly. "Nonsense!"

Peters shook his head. "I don't know. Science will explain him, must explain him. I don't know if he has ever really died, or if in some gruesome way the advent of death has been suspended.

"He cast the reflection of a skull, Commissioner—of a naked skull, with living red blood coursing over it and through a mass of gray putrefaction! By what rare natural law that thing presented to us the appearance of a man I do not know; there is powerful hypnotism in it. Woerz is a *thing* that should have been dead twice ten years ago; he is a skeleton sheathed in living pus and rich red blood. That explains how he forced himself between the bars at the morgue; there was only the lank skeleton of him and a mass of slime to pass through that narrow space."

"Eichelman, though, was but recently dead," Ethredge pointed out.

Peters nodded. "Woerz had sucked his blood, had infected him. Eichelman, too, was a vampire. Putrefaction was in him; putrefaction began in him even before O'Shaughnessy found his body. Remember the coroner at Wolcott saying that he must have been dead thirty-six hours, when we knew that he was seen alive the preceding evening?"

Gravely, then, Peters nodded his head. "Vampires are, indeed, dead-alive. They are creatures in which, by some rare process, the body which should be in the grave yet moves and, horribly changed, lives!"

He was silent. And they noticed, then, that the first gray light of dawn was striking into the room, dimming, making ghostly the warm glow of the lamps.

Ethredge laughed feebly. "Your vampire sleeps now," he said. "It is day."

Peters caught his breath. Might Ethredge be right? Might he, all along, have acted the fool, have sought too determinedly to disbelieve those things he had read of vampires? Might it not be that, almost in their entirety, the legends were right? Perhaps vampires *did* sleep from dawn to sunset. Could it not be plausible that the non-human processes which controlled their existence were affected by the clean sunlight?

Too, might not the silver bullet harm the vampire where steel and lead would not? Was his unhuman physiological structure antipathetical to silver? And to garlic?

These thoughts swept Peters.

"Commissioner," he said, "it is possible that you are right, that Woerz is asleep. We have no time to lose. We will go to his house and destroy him!"

18. *A Desperate Resolve*

HALF the day had passed, yet Ethredge and Peters had made no move toward Woerz's destruction. Instead, they were within the Commissioner's prosaically business-like office, arguing, arguing, arguing behind locked doors.

The homely routine of bathing, of changing into clean linen and breakfasting, had influenced Ethredge in a manner

Peters should have foreseen. As the events of the night had receded into the sharp reality of day he had begun to disbelieve those things which so few short hours ago had seemed plausible.

"The man's unquestionably a murderer, Peters," Ethredge was saying vehemently. "But we can't walk into his house and deliberately execute him on the grounds of any such wild hypothesis as yours. The law must take its natural course."

Peters cursed. "But, man, you don't know what hell you're letting escape! Can't you see that today, before sundown, is our last chance? Tomorrow he'll be gone. But last night he didn't have time to—to break up that unholy lair of his. He's there, now."

With the abruptness, then, of one coming to a sudden decision, Ethredge snapped, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll gamble my career, and yours, too, against Woerz. We'll arrest him, search his apartment. But if we find no incriminating evidence against him——"

Peters, grimly satisfied, nodded.

19. The Undead

"GONE!"

It had taken an hour's work with crowbar and ax to force the steel door leading from the elevators into Woerz's foyer.

"Gone!" Peters whispered, again.

That whole vast apartment remained deathly silent, still as the nave of a cathedral at midnight. . . .

The two men entered the corridor, stalked along its length, their feet sinking without sound into the rich pile of the rug. As they proceeded they tried the various doors. Some opened easily, revealing rooms of garish luxury. A few were locked.

They had come, seemingly, to a palace deserted and abandoned by its occupants, waiting only for the life and laughter of some new master to make it a place of ethereal beauty.

"The den!" Ethredge rasped grimly.

Crowbar and ax sent the inch-thick walnut panels splintering inward. The room flooded into light. Peters had turned on the desk lamp.

But a search of Count Woerz's desk proved fruitless. Not an incriminating paper, not an ambiguous document.

From the desk Ethredge and Peters proceeded to the book-cases, took down book after book, ruffled the pages hopefully. Not satisfied, they sounded the walls, searched under the rugs and behind the pictures. And the search revealed—nothing.

At last Ethredge, standing in the center of the room, grunted, "We can't waste more time here, Peters. But we've already put our necks in the noose. Might as well search those other locked rooms."

And, just within the ax-shattered door of that next room, Ethredge and Peters stopped short in astonishment.

It was gloomy within that room, almost dark. Opaque curtains covered the windows; the only light that entered came from the corridor. And yet there was enough light for both men to see that the room was a richly furnished bedchamber.

On the silken coverlet of the bed lay a woman, beautifully gowned, her hands lightly crossed above her round young breasts, her hair in immaculate perfection, her lips slightly parted, revealing the gleam of dazzlingly white teeth. The heels of her silver slippers rested daintily on a pad of velvet carefully spread upon the coverlet.

"God!" Ethredge breathed, as he stepped into the room. "She must either be dead or she must sleep soundly!"

He moved swiftly to the bed, took the girl's wrist lightly between his fingers, stood in silent concentration. Then, shaking his head, he bent down, slipped the smoothly shimmering evening gown down off the girl's satiny shoulders, placed his ear against her softly molded breast. "She's—dead!"

Peters had turned on the boudoir lamp, and was beside him, staring down at the body. Idly he picked up an arm, let it fall back limply. And it seemed to him that although the flesh was cold it was not the cold of clean, human death. Rather it was the cold of unnamable horror, of something that invoked revulsion, of uncleanliness—of uncleanliness in beauty.

"Not dead," he croaked, "but undead. See—the red in her lips, the smile on her cheeks? A corpse lies flat, sags down like a bundle of rags. But she looks as though she might open her eyes and speak to us."

"Catalepsy," Ethredge muttered. "We must get a doctor. She's too young to die—and too beautiful."

Peters' eyes were hard. "Not catalepsy. Get a mirror!" He turned, looked about the room. And then he gasped.

There was not a mirror in all that place of luxury!

"Commissioner," he said slowly, then, "will you believe me if I show you proof?"

Gravely, Ethredge nodded.

"Then ring for the elevator. Go out and get a mirror. Bring it back here." He sat down on the edge of the bed without a glance at the statuesque beauty lying, evening dress disheveled, so close beside him.

The sound of Ethredge's footsteps receded from the room. . . .

Peters' eyes returned, fascinated, to the girl's face.

"I wonder who she—was?" he asked himself somberly. He studied her face more intently, and the sheer beauty of her almost took his breath away. Yet it made him uneasy, too; for it was a beauty that he had never seen in any woman in life, a wanton, soulless beauty. And gradually, as Peters became more uneasy, he felt the flesh on his scalp tightening. . . .

And then Ethredge came quietly into the room, crossed over to the bed, stared down at the recumbent figure. He carried a small leather packet; he had had to go, Peters guessed, to a corner drug-store and purchase a combination toilet set to get the mirror. There was a puzzled, intent expression on Ethredge's face.

"Turn on that ceiling light, Peters. I've—I've an idea I've seen this woman before."

Silently Peters watched the Commissioner, beneath the now brilliant illumination, studying that still, beautiful face.

"I know that I've seen her," Ethredge muttered. "But where? She greatly resembles Katharine Grant; only Katharine never had a sister. And of course," he mused, "Katharine's dead."

Abruptly he paused. He had recalled Mary's words, "Recently there's been the silliest story going about that Katharine Grant just pined away and died for love of him."

"Go ahead, Peters," he said, then. "Go ahead with your mirror experiment!"

WITH hands that trembled Peters opened the leather case and extracted a cheap, rectangular mirror. Carefully he placed himself so that the light falling upon the still, siren's face would be reflected at its greatest intensity. . . .

He looked into the mirror. For a moment the expression on his face did not change, but remained taut with anticipatory revulsion, tense as though he steeled

himself against a sight of horror. Surprizingly, then, the sickening dread passed somewhat from his eyes, although his hands still trembled violently. With an odd gesture of finality he passed the mirror to the Commissioner.

"It is not so—horrible as the other," he muttered. "Thank God! How long has the Grant girl been dead?"

"Six—seven months," Ethredge replied.

Peters put a hand on his arm. "Woerz had been dead for twenty years," he mumbled. "It is she. Look for yourself."

As Ethredge looked into that mirror, great beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead, the color drained from his face; for, seen in reflection, that face that should have bloomed with petal-like freshness was mottled with great grayish spots, blotched with angry purple. And over the whole face was spread a tinge of saffron, deepening in places almost to the dead brown of dried leaves.

"A face of death," Ethredge whispered. "Of death, preserved from decay by the embalmer's art."

He had dropped the mirror and was staring incredulously at that still face; for once more it was the pallid, faintly tinted face of a sleeping girl!

"Peters!" he asked hoarsely, then, and his voice shook, "what ghastly magic is in that mirror? What law is behind all this?" And, as a macabre thought struck him, "I wonder if this woman would photograph—as she looks in that mirror!"

Doggedly, then, he stood up, his face stern, his body tense.

"Will she remain asleep?" Apprehensively he glanced at the recumbent girl.

"The legends say—until sundown," Peters answered, with horrible conviction.

"Then come. We'll search those other rooms—for Count Woerz!"

20. In the Vampire's Power

THE first room Ethredge and Peters searched, exquisitely furnished, was obviously a guest room. And, surprizingly, it contained a mirror, a superb affair set in a heavy bronze frame.

"Our friend the Count must occasionally entertain house guests," Ethredge said significantly. "He is very sure of himself!"

The second room was smaller. Its furnishings were meager; a footman's uniform hung in an otherwise empty closet; the chest drawers revealed only a few odds and ends of soiled clothing.

It was unquestionably the room belonging to the idiot who had admitted Ethredge that first afternoon. . . .

Only two locked doors remained, and with the shattering of the first the search came to an abrupt end. Behind its violated sanctuary, his attenuated, faultlessly dressed figure outstretched upon the counterpane, lay Count Woerz, asleep. . . .

Ethredge crossed the room in swift, noiseless strides; he had glimpsed a square of monogrammed note-paper pinned against Count Woerz's snowy shirt-front. His hand swept downward, ripped the bit of paper from Woerz's breast.

It bore a brief message, written in Count Woerz's crabbed hand, and addressed to Commissioner Ethredge. That stark message read:

> Commissioner Ethredge! Do not act with undue precipitance. Communicate with your fiancée. She sleeps. I alone can rouse her.
>
> LEOPOLD WOERZ.

The terse note dropped from Ethredge's fingers. He whirled, looked about the room, saw the telephone set in its recess at the head of the bed. His shaking fingers dialed Mary's familiar number.

Ethredge, frantic, rasped a hoarse command. There was a long, long pause be-

fore at last the maid's voice, full of a strange, new fear, came back over the wire.

But Ethredge heard only the first words of her hysterical babble. The receiver had fallen from his fingers as from a bundle of nerveless sticks.

"Peters!" His agonized cry split through the room. "He's done something to Mary!" His eyes, bleak and suddenly cruel, stared down at the Count. "But I'm staying here until he awakes—if it takes a million years!"

21. *The Vampires Awake*

TWILIGHT had come to the world beyond that apartment. And, in the instant of the sun's setting, Count Woerz had come awake!

The hiss of Peters' sharply indrawn breath warned Ethredge. As he turned, startled, he caught the spasmodic fluttering, the lifting of the sleeper's eyelids.

From the very second of waking Count Woerz's eyes were bright with complete comprehension, were calm with—was it contempt?

As if savoring to the uttermost his return to consciousness he seemed content momentarily to lie there without a gesture, with only the steady burning gaze of his eyes proclaiming the awakening of the unholy life within him. But then, slowly, his lips writhed in a thin smile.

"I expected you, Commissioner," he said, the calm, quiet words dripping menace. "I foresaw that you would come here. The fact that I am alive attests your chivalry. You found, of course, that all was not well with Mary, and now you wait, puzzling how you may force me to free her. Or, perhaps, you would bargain with me. Well, I listen."

Ethredge, like an avenging doom, looming over that great bed, opened his lips to speak. In that split second, warned by a red flash of triumph in Woerz's eyes, he wheeled, saw the downward sweep of a bludgeon against Peters' skull, heard the sickening crunch of metal against flesh and bone. The girl was leaping toward him; Count Woerz's animalesque chauffeur was rising from Peters' unconscious body. The girl was upon him, a raging, rending, demoniac fury. He threw up his hands to ward her off, felt his arms seized from behind by Count Woerz's hands, like talons of steel. And then the brutish chauffeur towered above him, the bludgeon that had beaten Peters down upraised.

God! He, too, was undead! His writhing lips were blood-red!

And then consciousness exploded in a crashing inferno of cascading light and swooping darkness. . . .

22. *Mary Disappears*

ETHREDGE, struggling upward through interminable layers of torture-filled darkness, awoke to brain-shattering pain. As the swirling mists began to clear from before his eyes he realized that he lay sprawled across Count Woerz's bed; on the crimson and gold rug Peters was trying, with excruciating slowness, to drag himself to his feet.

Ethredge saw Peters' blood-smeared face turn painfully toward him. "God, Peters," he muttered thickly, "they——" And then he remembered. Mary!

To the telephone, reeling, stumbling—to hear from the distant lips of an obviously relieved maid that Miss Roberts had roused, dressed, and, dismissing the sorely puzzled physician who was already in attendance, departed the house. . . .

Ethredge softly set the telephone back in its cradle and turned to Peters, who had dragged himself to his feet and was now clinging, swaying like a drunken man, to the bedpost.

"Peters," he said hollowly, "she's gone!" But Peters' haggard eyes told him that he already guessed.

"We've got to find her!"

"We've got to find—both of them!" Peters grimly corrected.

But where to look? How to begin the search? Those were unanswerable questions. It was already obvious to Ethredge and Peters that the Count and his grisly retinue had fled, permanently. Nothing that had been left behind hinted where they might have gone.

Doggedly the Commissioner utilized the police teletype, ordered the exhumation of Katharine Grant's body. Behind the gloomy gray walls at Police Headquarters, with the whole machinery of the law in operation, he waited impatiently, together with Peters, for the break.

As the fruitless minutes slowly became hours, desperate yet powerless to act, they reviewed, over and over again, from every angle, the incredible case.

One inexplicable circumstance puzzled them. Time after time they returned to it, as though they sensed that in its solution lay an important key to the mystery.

Why had Count Woerz appeared at Mrs. Moore's bazar? Why had he spent that hour in the Tent of the Past, the Present, and the Future?

23. *Aboard the Yacht Cynthia*

THE hours passed. . . .

Word came from Rosedale Cemetery that Katharine Grant's grave had been opened. The vault had been despoiled; the casket was empty. . . .

The big, ugly clock set high on the wall above the Commissioner's desk slowly ticked away the minutes; it was long past midnight. The night crept onward into the small hours. The city slept.

"Peters! Peters!" Ethredge reiterated, again and again, his hands knotting and unclasping helplessly, "if we could only know *why* Woerz played the fortune-teller at Mrs. Moore's bazar, when in all other things he attempts to appear normal, inconspicuous! What supremely important mission brought him there?"

And then he remembered. That slender, dark man with the livid scar on his left cheek. . . .

"Peters!" he rasped. "That night at the bazar—while you were sick—when I went to get whisky for you, I saw a man come from the gipsy tent—a man who didn't seem dazed, a man who seemed singularly unaffected. Why didn't that man react as the others had done? Why, Peters? Can it be because Woerz didn't attempt to read his mind at all; can it be because business of a different nature was transacted within the security of that tent?"

Peters leaped to his feet. "Eichelman's pearls!" he shouted. "Describe the man, Commissioner!" And with the Commissioner's word-picture he nodded.

"Beniati," he said. "Without a doubt, Angelo Beniati." He smiled his satisfaction. "One of the cleverest fences in the world. Too bad you didn't recognize him." He frowned, puzzled. "But—the Moores! What brings the Moores into the picture? Influence? Beniati does not need influence, except, perhaps, in getting from country to country."

Ethredge's clenched fist crashed against the desk.

"Moore's yacht!"

Peters' eyes were glowing with fierce exultation as he slowly rose. "Moore's yacht!" he echoed. "The explanation! Beniati and those pearls are aboard Moore's yacht, bound for some foreign port where the string can be broken up and sold."

Ethredge had seized the telephone. "The harbor commission!"

The information he sought was easily

obtained. Weston B. Moore's yacht, the *Cynthia,* had passed quarantine at eight-forty p. m. . . .

Ethredge's eyes swept the face of the clock; his lips moved silently as he made a swift calculation.

"Eight hours!" he whispered. "Eight hours' start, and that yacht can do twenty-four knots! And they're headed for any port at all on the face of the earth. But Woerz is aboard. That is a certainty. Otherwise Beniati would have put to sea earlier in the day. When Woerz saw you at the bazar he became frightened. He held Beniati in port. That yacht meant—escape!"

He towered erect, his face stony with resolution. "I'm chartering a seaplane, Peters, if I can get a pilot who'll fly me! I'm going after them!"

His hands swept up the telephone.

"I'm flying a circle over the Atlantic until I cross their path!"

Peters' fingers lightly caressed the service automatic at his hip. "Boy! I'm going with you!" he shouted.

24. The Pursuit of the Cynthia

THE long rays of the setting sun lay across the water, extending far into the east in a broad band of gold. Already the sky was perceptibly purpling; within half an hour the sun would set.

Through five tedious, racking hours an antedated amphibian had plunged into the north and east, her pilot-owner grimly intent on every motor sound, Ethredge and Peters watching every smudge of smoke that showed in all that expanse of water below.

They were almost five hundred miles from the nearest land.

Quietly Ethredge spoke.

"The seeing won't last much longer, Peters. In the east it's blurry, and in the west the sun's blinding." He touched the pilot's shoulder. "Charley!"

The pilot, a fanatically earnest young man who had known very well that in taking this charter he was also taking his life in his hands, looked up.

"Swing to the south; cut across the steamship lanes. Keep her that way until the seeing's gone."

Obediently the young man, without a change of expression, kicked right rudder. Low down on the horizon, the magnified ball that was the sun swung from a position slightly to the right of their tail to a new station, its glow lancing along the right wing. The clouds shifted.

The dry, thunderous roar of twin Wasp motors; three men, taut with strain; the great bowl of the ocean; the slowly sinking furnace of the sun!

The sun's edge was a finger's breadth above the water when Ethredge saw the thin plume of black smoke, like a tiny, sooty feather, standing on the horizon far to the south.

"Give her the gun, Charley; there's a ship ahead!"

The dry beat of the motors increased; the miles vanished beneath the speeding amphibian in an unheeding desert of watery waste; the sooty feather became a long streamer of coal-smoke marching across an arc of ocean. A wobegone tramp steamer climbed into view beneath the pillar of smoke, the red lead on her belly showing at intervals in the slow heave of the sea.

Charley, the young pilot who that day was gambling his life against the dollars that would buy him an infinitesimal interest in some perky little airline, sent the plane skimming the long rollers in the lee of the tramp, which lay supine, the smoke lazily drifting from one rusted funnel, waiting. The plane settled, bit into the slowly heaving waves, bounced along in a shower of spray.

Ethredge, climbing out upon a wing, hailed a man in a vizored cap who leaned over the bridge of the tramp, a man with stubbly whiskers who sucked an unlighted pipe.

"Have you sighted a yacht, white, one funnel, the *Cynthia?*"

"*Cynthia? Cynthia?* Didn't catch the name, but we sartinly crossed a white yacht a bit back. Boilin' along nice, too."

But Ethredge was executing a fantastic sort of dance on the broad wing of the plane. "You're the *Nancy Moran,* out of Baltimore?" he yelled. "You'll get a gold watch from me for this, captain!"

The plane was swinging about, lumbering into the wind. Ethredge had disappeared within the cabin.

"Damned fools!" the captain of the *Nancy Moran* commented, as he watched the plane lift and dwindle into the east.

25. *A Stratagem*

ETHREDGE and Peters, twelve thousand feet above the tremendous circle of ocean, simultaneously sighted the *Cynthia,* a tiny white arrowhead at the apex of miles of wake.

Ethredge was feverishly writing a message. Finished, he taped it about the handle of a wrench.

"That should bring Beniati up short," Peters gloated.

"I don't know," Ethredge replied somberly. "Beniati knows that we have no authority on the high seas."

The amphibian screamed downward; the white arrowhead grew from a toy ship to a millionaire's plaything, a faint eddy of superheated air from her Diesel motors visible above her single pearly funnel. The amphibian roared across the knife-like prow of the yacht; the weighted note hurtled downward, bounded along the deck. A dark, scarred man was running from the bridge to pick it up. Beniati!

The plane was swinging about in a wide circle. The men on the *Cynthia's* bridge were arguing.

"The captain wants to stop the ship, and Beniati won't let him," Peters guessed. "Who'll win? The captain's master, but Beniati has authority from Moore. . . ."

Minutes passed. And the *Cynthia,* her bows rising and falling slightly as she knifed through the greenish seas, plowed stubbornly ahead.

The muscles along Ethredge's jaws were ribbed, hard as rock.

"Charley." There was a curious, eager resonance in his voice. "Do you think you can set us down across that yacht's bows so that she'll have to run us down?"

The stripling pilot looked up briefly. "It can be done." A half-smile flickered across his face.

Musingly Ethredge went on, "Most ship captains are pretty fine. . . . We'll take the chance. And twenty thousand dollars to you, my lad—all the money I can raise in the world—if we see shore alive. *Put her down!*"

The boy piloting that plane licked his lips. Lower and lower the plane settled, until she was only a scant forty feet above the long green billows. And then she struck, lifted, struck again in a shower of spume. She was plowing ahead heavily, directly across the *Cynthia's* bows.

Charley, the pilot, cut his motors, leaped to escape the cabin.

In the sudden silence Ethredge and Peters, standing on the wing, could hear, plainly, the clang of the engine-room telegraph as the *Cynthia's* captain tried to swerve his ship. But the momentum of the heavy yacht was too great. A rushing wall of white, the incoherent sound of shouting men, and then came the crash,

the dry snapping of propeller blades, the crunching groan of a crushed wing.

The little amphibian had suddenly vanished.

Three men, swimming in the Atlantic, and a white yacht slowly moving away.

But, ahead, the forward momentum of the *Cynthia* was slowly halting. Water turgidly boiling at her stern told that her engines had been reversed.

The *Cynthia's* captain was showing himself a man.

26. *The Horror on the Yacht*

A RAGING, fuming captain confronted the three dripping men as they were hauled aboard the *Cynthia.* And behind him stood another man, sleek, slender, with a scarred face. Beniati!

"Police!" Ethredge snapped, cutting short the captain's bellows. With a flick of his wrist he displayed his badge. "That man is an international jewel thief!"

"It's a lie!" Beniati screamed. His hand flashed within his coat, and appeared again clutching an ugly automatic.

With the speed of a striking serpent the *Cynthia's* captain's fist crashed against the gun, sent it skidding twenty feet down the deck. Beniati was rubbing his numbed wrist.

"You can't arrest me," he whimpered. "We're at sea. You have no authority here!"

The captain turned suddenly to his mate. "Lock him in his cabin," he ordered bruskly. "This may cost me my job, but I'm going to get to the bottom of whatever's wrong. Your credentials, sir?"

Beniati, cursing and protesting, was led away. . . .

Tersely, after he had identified himself, Ethredge snapped, "I want a list of your passengers. We are interested, particularly, in a tall, thin gentleman who came aboard last night just before you sailed. He is very probably sleeping."

Captain Halliday started. "Odd! But —Count Woerz; he is a nobleman— Count Woerz and his party are strange people, Commissioner. They remained in the lounge until almost daylight, and only went to their cabins at dawn; excepting, however, Count Woerz's servant, who retired early and who has been, you might say, guarding those cabins since sunrise. It is—peculiar. . . ."

When Ethredge spoke his voice was hoarse and strange.

"Captain Halliday," he said slowly, "you have seen our credentials. We wish, now, to be shown to those cabins—and left alone."

Peters was examining his service automatic, which, as he had slipped from the wing of the foundering plane into the sea, he had protected as well as he could by holding it above his head. "All right, Commissioner," he said then, quietly. "Let's go."

COUNT WOERZ'S suite was abaft the lounge. There was a large living-room facing the afterdeck, two master staterooms facing, respectively, to port and to starboard. Captain Halliday rapped briskly at the central door.

A moment's silence, and a guttural voice asked, "Who's dere?"

"Captain Halliday. Open the door, please."

There was a long silence. Captain Halliday was whispering, "He came aboard yesterday morning, with baggage. He seems not too bright."

The hesitating shuffle of footsteps beyond the door. "You vill not come vithin?" the guttural voice asked, querulously. "I haf orders no one to admit."

"I will not come inside," Captain Halliday said soothingly.

The door opened a few inches, and the vacuous, blond face of the man who had first admitted Ethredge to Woerz's apartment appeared. There was a guttural imprecation.

But Peters' foot was in the crack; Ethredge's shoulder was against the panel. The door burst wide; a scuffle, a click, and the pudgy, blond idiot was in handcuffs. He had begun to tremble.

Peters pushed him through the door. "Put him in some safe place, captain," he snapped. "He's harmless, poor devil!"

The door closed. . . .

"Mary!"

Ethredge was leaping across that spacious cabin toward a vast mauve overstuffed chair above which he had glimpsed the warm brown halo of a woman's hair.

"Mary! Oh Heaven!"

He had come close to her, had grasped her hands, was looking down with growing horror into her eyes which, wide open, stared through him with glassy intentness at the sea beyond the long window and the snowy rail.

"Hypnosis!" His anguished cry seared through the cabin.

"Ethredge!" It was Peters' voice, harsh, warning. Ethredge whirled. The door of one of the staterooms was softly opening.

Three persons came through that door —two men and a woman. The men were Count Woerz and his chauffeur; the girl was Katharine Grant!

The sun had set!

Through a single horrible instant all five stood tableauesque; only Mary, staring blindly over the twilight-shrouded ocean, did not tense. In that moment the beat of the engines seemed to Ethredge and Peters like the pounding of giant sledges upon mountains of metal.

Ethredge's right hand had slipped within his breast; Count Woerz's chauffeur had moved with pantherine quickness to a position commanding the door; Katharine Grant, wistfully girlish-looking in flaring white trousers and sports jacket had, with seeming unconcern, seated herself in one of the deep lounge chairs and was quietly watching Ethredge; Count Woerz himself had not moved.

Rage like a hot, thin fire and a something, too, that may have been fear were in Count Woerz's voice as he spoke.

"I had not expected you to follow me here, Commissioner Ethredge. You are more brilliant than I supposed. I should have killed you. Yet—your sweetheart sleeps. I offer you terms."

Ethredge stood motionless, his chin sunk on his breast. Then, "To hell with your terms!" he said softly. "If Mary could know, she would have me do as I am doing. I am going to kill you!" His fist, within his coat, had suddenly knotted.

Count Woerz smiled thinly. "Your gun is useless," he said significantly. "But now—guard the door, Sebastian!"

He sprang, his fingers outstretched like the talons of some ghastly bird of prey. Ethredge's hand flicked from his coat with the speed of light.

"Not a gun, Woerz!" he hissed, *"but the dagger that killed Eichelman!"* The knife gleamed dully through a swift lunging arc.

Woerz had swerved desperately, trying to halt his plunging rush—too late. The knife ripped down through his coat, shearing his arm from shoulder to elbow.

Woerz reeled back. His eyes were suddenly glaring redly, hot with fear, like the eyes of a trapped beast. Blood gushed from his wounded arm, down across his reddening fingers, to the rug.

"Sebastian," he gasped. "The knife!"

The ape-like chauffeur lunged, evaded Ethredge's thrust with simian agility; his

fingers gripped the Commissioner's wrist, twisted. The blood-tipped knife dropped to the floor.

Woerz chuckled, a sound of unutterable evil and horror. Swiftly he stooped to pick up the dagger. And in that instant he staggered, slumped to his knees, an expression of incredulous amazement and mortal fear on his face.

A spot of crimson had jutted abruptly upon his left breast!

Behind Ethredge, Peters' automatic was barking; two shots in rapid succession. Count Woerz's chauffeur spun drunkenly as the slugs jerked into his body, then reeled and pitched forward on his face.

Katharine Grant, her face a nightmare of unhuman hate, had leaped from her chair and was springing across the few feet that separated her from Peters. She never crossed that strip of rug.

Aiming at her softly youthful breast with the calmness of one who practises target shooting, Peters, an expression of unutterable pain in his eyes, sent a single shot into her heart.

In that instant the room was full of a scream of terror. Ethredge and Peters whirled.

That scream had come from Mary's throat!

For Mary was awake. She stood there swaying, her face white with horror and bewilderment.

"Charles! Charles!" she gasped. "Behind you!"

She had fainted. The sounds of pounding, of excited oaths came through the door.

Ethredge turned, to open the door—and clutched his throat while his senses reeled.

On that superb rug lay the dehydrated body, the formaldehyde-saturated body of a girl many months dead; her complexion purpled and saffron, her cheeks sunken, her half-opened eyes masses of putrefaction. And, a few feet away, the clothes lying loosely about them, a gray pus mingled with red blood dribbling from naked bones, lay two skeletons.

Peters, his face ashen, was moaning inanely, "God! How can I tell Maggie that I had the ballistics boys melt up her solid silver spoons!"

27. *Buried at Sea*

THE moon, two hand-breadths above the eastern rim of the world, sent her rays lancing across the black ocean, transforming the *Cynthia's* wake into a silvered, enchanted roadway. The heavens were a lake of stars.

Ethredge, Peters, and Mary Roberts sat close together on the *Cynthia's* afterdeck. They were warmly bundled in greatcoats, for it was close to midnight and the night was unseasonably cold. They were conversing in low tones, with long silences. Their faces, white in the moonlight, still showed traces of the horror that had been.

"And so," Peters said softly, "the Eichelman case is solved."

He lifted the fabulously valuable string of pearls from their box, lying on a table at his elbow, let them gleam and shimmer in the moonlight for a moment before putting them down. "Too bad you can't keep these for Mary, Charles."

"Yes," Ethredge laughed. "And the other jewels, and the bonds. But those things all go to Eichelman's estate."

He was silent for a moment.

"Mary and I don't need Eichelman's pearls to be—happy."

She lifted his hand between her warm little fingers, touched it gently with her lips. Silence, like a canopy of friendship, fell upon the three. . . .

"Yes," Peters mused, after a little time

had passed, "it's best that we—buried them at sea. No one would ever believe."

"No," Ethredge agreed. "Only those aboard this yacht will ever know what really happened. They will be silent."

Peters laughed dryly. "They'd be afraid people'd think them soft-headed," he said, with sage wisdom.

Ethredge drew Mary's head closer down against his shoulder.

"It's best that the Grants never know that we opened—Katharine's grave," he mused. "Too bad, of course, that we can't prosecute Beniati and Moore."

"Well, we can't," Peters said flatly. "We'd be ridiculed out of town."

The old, whimsical smile flickered across Ethredge's face.

"Yes," he admitted. "About all we can do is put that poor devil of a servant of Woerz's in some comfortable asylum. Funny that Woerz would use an idiot."

Peters shook his head. "He *had* to use an idiot. No sane man could have worked for him without instinctively feeling what he was. That idiot was a peasant—someone Woerz probably took from his own estate as a child."

Ethredge was squinting at the moon. "Nice moon tonight, Peters," he said, presently.

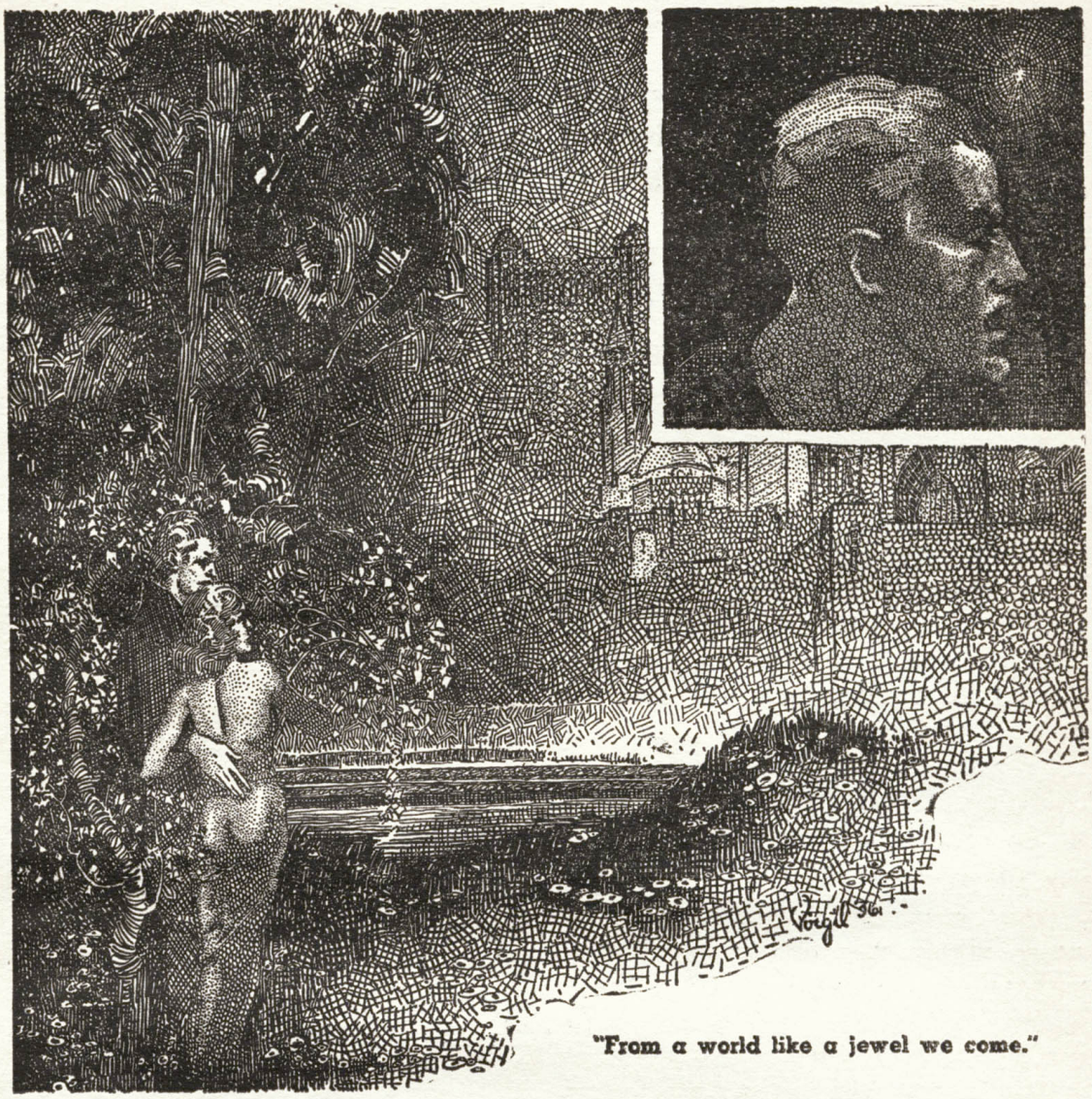
Peters grinned and rose. "Well," he said, "I can take a hint. Guess I'll get the steward to bring some of Moore's Scotch to my cabin. It isn't often that I have a chance to raid a millionaire's liquor. Good-night—Charles—Mary. . . ."

The sound of his footsteps receded down the deck. The steady thud of the engines, the rush of water against the hull, the whisper of the night wind, were a monotony of sound that might have been designed by the gods as an accompaniment to love. The moon was riding higher in the heavens; the ocean was flecked and banded with silver.

Ethredge turned to his sweetheart, looked down into her moon-bathed face. His lips touched her mouth; his arms went about her shoulders.

He drew her close. . . .

[THE END]



"From a world like a jewel we come."

Lost Paradise

By C. L. MOORE

A tremendous story of the Vampire Three that watched over the destiny of the Moon—a tale of Northwest Smith

ACROSS the table-top Yarol the Venusian reached a swift hand that closed on Northwest Smith's wrist heavily. "Look!" he said in a low voice.

Smith's no-colored eyes turned leisurely in the direction of the little Venusian's almost imperceptible nod.

The panorama that stretched out under his casual gaze would have caught at a newcomer's breath with its very magnitude, but to Smith the sight was an old

story. Their table was one of many ranged behind a rail along the edge of a parapet below which the dizzy gulf of New York's steel terraces dropped away in a thousand-foot sweep to the far earth. Lacing that swooning gulf of emptiness the steel spans of the traffic bridges arched from building to building, aswarm with New York's countless hordes. Men from the three planets, wanderers and space-rangers and queer, brutish things that were not wholly human mingled with the throngs of Earth as they streamed endlessly over the great steel bridges spanning the gulfs of New York. From the high parapet table where Smith and Yarol sat one could watch the solar system go by, world upon world, over the arches that descended by tiers and terraces into the perpetual darkness and twinkling, far-off lights of the deeps where solid earth lay hidden. In mighty swoops and arcs they latticed the void yawning below the parapet on which Yarol leaned a negligent elbow and stared.

Smith's pale eyes, following that stare, saw only the usual crowd of pedestrians swarming across the steel span of the bridge a story below.

"See?" murmured Yarol. "That little fellow in the red leather coat. The white-haired one, walking slow at the edge of the rail. See?"

"Um-m." Smith made a non-committal noise in his throat as he found the object of Yarol's interest. It was an odd-looking little specimen of humanity that loitered slowly along in the outer edges of the crowd surging across the bridge. His red coat was belted about a body whose extreme fragility was apparent even at this elevation; though from what Smith could see of his foreshortened figure he did not seem like one in ill health. On his uncovered head the hair grew silky and silvery, and under one arm he clutched a squarish package which he was careful, Smith noticed, to keep on the railing side, away from the passing crowd.

"I'll bet you the next drinks," murmured Yarol, his wise black eyes twinkling under long lashes, "that you can't guess what race that little fellow's from, or where it originated."

"The next drinks are on me anyhow," grinned Smith. "No, I can't guess. Does it matter?"

"Oh—curious, that's all. I've seen a member of that race only once before in my life, and I'll bet you never saw one. And yet it's an Earth race, perhaps the very oldest. Did you ever hear of the Seles?"

Smith shook his head silently, his eyes on the little figure below, which was slowly drawing out of sight beneath the overhang of the terrace on which they sat.

"They live somewhere in the remotest part of Asia, no one knows exactly where. But they're not Mongolian. It's a pure race, and one that has no counterpart anywhere in the solar system that I ever heard of. I think even among themselves their origin has been forgotten, though their legends go back so far it makes you dizzy to think of it. They're queer-looking, all white-haired and fragile as glass. Keep very much to themselves, of course. When one ventures out into the world you can be sure it's for some tremendously important reason. Wonder why that fellow—oh well, not that it matters. Only seeing him reminded me of the queer story that's told about them. They have a Secret. No, don't laugh; it's supposed to be something very strange and wonderful, which their race life is dedicated to keeping quiet. I'd give a lot to know what it is, just for curiosity's sake."

"None of your business, my boy," said Smith sleepily. "Like as not it's better for you that you don't know. These secrets

have a way of being uncomfortable things to know."

"No such luck," Yarol shrugged. "Let's have another drink—on you, remember—and forget it."

He lifted a finger to summon the hurrying waiter.

But the summons was never given. For just then, around the corner of the railing which separated the little enclosure of tables from the street running along the edge of the terrace came a flash of red that caught Yarol's eye abruptly. It was the little white-haired man, hugging his squarish parcel and walking timorously, as if he were not accustomed to thronged streets and terraces a thousand feet high in steel-shimmering air.

And at the moment Yarol's eye caught him, something happened. A man in a dirty brown uniform, whose defaced insignia was indecipherable, pushed forward and jostled the red-coated stroller roughly. The little man gave a squeak of alarm and clutched frantically at his parcel, but too late. The jostling had knocked it almost out from under his arm, and before he could recover his grip the burly assailant had seized it and shouldered quickly away through the crowd.

STARK terror was livid on the little man's face as he stared wildly around. And in the first desperate glance his eyes encountered the two men at the table watching him with absorbing interest. Across the rail his gaze met theirs in a passion of entreaty. There was something about the attitude of them, their worn spaceman's leather and faces stamped with the indefinable seal of lives lived dangerously, which must have told him in that desperate glimpse that perhaps help lay here. He gripped the rail, white-knuckled, and gasped across it,

"Follow him! Get it back—reward—oh, hurry!"

"How much of a reward?" demanded Yarol with sudden purpose in his voice.

"Anything — your own price — only hurry!"

"You swear that?"

The little man's face was suffusing with anguished scarlet.

"I swear it—of course I swear it! But hurry! Hurry, or you'll——"

"Do you swear it by——" Yarol hesitated and cast a curiously guilty glance over his shoulder at Smith. Then he rose and leaned across the rail, whispering something in the stranger's ear. Smith saw a look of intense terror sweep across the flushed face. In its wake the crimson drained slowly away, leaving the man's moon-white features blank with an emotion to which Smith could put no name. But he nodded frantically. In a voice that had strained itself to a hoarse and gasping whisper he said,

"Yes, I swear. Now go!"

With no further words Yarol vaulted the rail and plunged into the crowd in the wake of the vanishing thief. The little man stared after him for an instant, then came slowly around to the gate in the railing and threaded the empty tables to Smith's. He sank into the chair Yarol had left and buried his silkily silver head in hands that shook.

Smith regarded him impassively. He was somewhat surprized to see that it was not an old man who sat here opposite him. The mark of no more than middle years lay upon the anxiety-ravaged face, and the hands which were clenched above the bowed head were strong and firm, with a queerly fragile slenderness that somehow did not belie the sense of indwelling strength which he had noticed in his first glance. It was not, thought Smith, an individual slenderness, but, as Yarol had said, a racial trait that made

the man look as if a blow would break him into fragments. And the race, had he not known better, he would have sworn dwelt upon some smaller planet than Earth, some world of lesser gravity where such delicate bone-structure as this would have purpose.

After a while the stranger's head rose slowly and he stared at Smith with haggard eyes. They were a queer color, those eyes—dark, soft, veiled in a sort of filmed translucency so that they seemed never to dwell directly upon anything. They gave the whole face a look of withdrawn, introspective peace wildly at odds now with the anguish of unrest upon the delicate features of the man.

He was scrutinizing Smith, the desperation in his eyes robbing the long stare of any impertinence. With averted eyes Smith let him look. Twice he was aware that the other's lips had parted and his breath caught as if for speech; but he must have seen something in that dark, impassive face across the table, scarred with the tale of many battles, cold-eyed, emotionless, which made him think better of attempting questions. So he sat there silently, hands twisting on the table, naked anguish in his eyes, waiting.

THE minutes went by slowly. It must have been all of a quarter of an hour before Smith heard a step behind him and knew by the light which dazzled across the face of the man opposite that Yarol had returned. The little Venusian pulled up a chair and sank into it silently, grinning and laying on the table a flat, squarish package.

The stranger pounced upon it with a little, inarticulate cry, running anxious hands over the brown paper in which it was wrapped, testing the brown seals which splotched the side where the edges of the covering came together. Satisfied then, he turned to Yarol. The wild desperation had died upon his face now, magically allowing it to fall into lines of a vast tranquillity. Smith thought he had never seen a face so suddenly and serenely at peace. And yet there was in its peacefulness a queer sort of resignation, as if something lay ahead of him which he accepted without a struggle; as if, perhaps, he was prepared to pay whatever tremendous price Yarol asked, and knew it would be high.

"What is it," he asked Yarol in a gentle voice, "that you wish as your reward?"

"Tell me the Secret," said Yarol boldly. He was grinning as he said it. The rescue of the package had not been a task of any great difficulty for a man of his knowledge and character. How he had accomplished it not even Smith knew —the ways of Venusians are strange— but he had had no doubt that Yarol would succeed. He was not looking now at the Venusian's fair, cherubic face with its wise black eyes dancing. He was watching the stranger, and he saw no surprize upon the man's delicate features, only a little flash of quickly darkened brightness behind the veiled eyes, a little spasm of pain and acknowledgment twisting his face for a moment.

"I might have known that," he said quietly, in his soft, low voice that held a taint of some alien inflection of speech beneath its careful English. "Have you any conception of what it is you ask?"

"A little." Yarol's voice was sobering under the graveness of the other's tones. "I—I knew one of your race once—one of the Seles—and learned just enough to make me want very badly the whole Secret."

"You learned—a name, too," said the little man gently. "And I swore by it to give you what you asked. I shall give it to you. But you must understand that I would never have given that oath had even so vital a thing as my own life de-

pended upon it. I, or any of the Seles, would die before swearing by that name in a cause less great than—than the one for which I swore. By that"—he smiled faintly—"you may guess how precious a thing this package is. Are you sure, young man, are you very sure you wish to know our secret?"

Smith recognized the stubbornness that was beginning to shadow Yarol's finely featured face.

"I am," said the Venusian firmly. "And you promised it to me in the name of——" he broke off, faintly mouthing syllables he did not utter. The little man smiled at him with a queer hint of pity on his face.

"You are invoking powers," he said, "which you very clearly know nothing of. A dangerous thing to do. But—yes, I have sworn, and I will tell you. I must tell you now, even if you did not wish to know; for a promise made in that name *must* be fulfilled, whatever it cost either promiser or promised. I am sorry—but now you *must* know."

"Tell us, then," urged Yarol, leaning forward across the table.

The little man turned to Smith, his face serene with a peace that vaguely roused unease in the Earthman's mind.

"Do you, too, wish to know?" he asked.

Smith hesitated for an instant, weighing that nameless unease against his own curiosity. Despite himself he felt curiously impelled to know the answer to Yarol's question, though he sensed more surely as he thought it over a queer, quiet threat behind the little stranger's calmness. He nodded shortly and scowled at Yarol.

WITHOUT further ado the man crossed his arms on the table over his precious parcel, leaned forward and began to speak in his soft, slow voice. And as he talked, it seemed to Smith that a greater serenity even than before was coming into his eyes, something as vast and calm as death itself. He seemed to be leaving life behind as he spoke, with every word sinking deeper and deeper into a peace that nothing in life could trouble. And Smith knew that the preciously guarded Secret must not be thus on the verge of betrayal, and its betrayer so deathly calm, unless a peril as great as death itself lay behind the revelation. He caught his breath to check the disclosures, but a compulsion seemed to be on him now that he could not break. Almost apathetically he listened.

"You must imagine," the little man was saying quietly, "the analogy of—well, for example, of a race of people driven by necessity into pitch-black caverns where their children and grandchildren are reared without ever once having seen light or made any use of their eyes. As the generations passed a legend would grow up around the ineffable beauty and mystery of Sight. It would become a religion, perhaps, the tale of a greater glory than words could describe—for how can one describe sight to the blind?—which their forebears had known and which they still possessed the organs for perceiving, if conditions were such as to permit it.

"Our race has such a legend. There is a faculty—a sense—that we have lost through the countless eons since at our peak and origin we possessed it. With us 'peak' and 'origin' are synonymous; for, like no other race in existence, our most ancient legends begin in a golden age of the infinitely long past. Beyond that they do not go. We have no stories among us of any crude beginnings, like other races. Our origin is lost to us, though the legends of our people go farther back than I could make you believe. But so far as history tells us, we sprang full-fledged from some remote, unlegended birth into highly civilized, perfectly cultured being. And in that state of perfection we pos-

sessed the lost sense which exists only in veiled tradition today.

"In the wilderness of Tibet the remnants of our once mighty race dwell. Since Earth's beginnings we have dwelt there, while in the outside world mankind struggled slowly up out of savagery. And by infinite degrees we have declined, until to the majority of us the Secret is lost. Yet our past is too splendid to forget, and we disdain even now to mingle with the young civilizations that have risen. For our glorious Secret is not wholly gone. Our priests know it, and guard it with dreadful magics, and though it is not meet that even the whole of our own race should share the mystery, yet the meanest of us would scorn even so much as the crown of your greatest empire, because we, who inherit the Secret, are so far greater than kings."

He paused, and the withdrawn look in his queer, translucent eyes deepened. Yarol said urgently, as if to call him back into the present again,

"Yes, but what is it? What is the Secret?"

The soft eyes turned to him compassionately.

"Yes—you must be told. There is no escape for you now. How you learned that name by which you invoked me I cannot guess, but I know that you did not learn much more, or you would never have used the power of it to ask me this question. It is—unfortunate—for us all that I can answer you—that I am one of the few who know. None but we priests ever venture outside our mountain retreat. So you have asked your question of one of the little number who could answer—and that is a misfortune for you as well as for me."

Again he paused, and Smith saw that vast tranquillity deepening upon his serene features. So might a man look who gazes, without protest, into the face of death.

"Go on," urged Yarol impatiently. "Tell us. Tell us the Secret."

"I can't," the little man's white head shook. He smiled faintly. "There are no words. But I will show you. Look."

He reached out one fragile hand and tilted the glass that stood at Smith's elbow so that the red dregs of the *segir*-whisky spilled in a tiny pool on the table.

"Look," he said again.

Smith's eyes sought the shining redness of the spilled liquid. There was a darkness in it through which pale shadows moved so strangely that he bent closer to see, for nothing near them could possibly have cast such reflections. He was conscious that Yarol too was leaning to look, but after that he was conscious of nothing but the red darkness of the pool stirred with pale flickerings, and his eyes were plunging so deeply into its secretness that he could not stir a muscle, and the table and the terrace and the whole great teeming city of steel about him was a mist that faded into oblivion.

From a great way off he heard that soft, slow voice, full of infinite resignation, infinite calm, and a vast, transcendent pity.

"Do not struggle," it said gently. "Surrender your minds to mine and I will show you, poor foolish children, what you ask. I must, by virtue of the name. And it may be that the knowledge you gain will be worth even the price it costs us all—for we three must die when the secret is revealed. You understood that, surely? Our whole race-life, from ages immemorial, is dedicated to the Secret's keeping, and any outside the circle of our priesthood who learn it must die that the knowledge be not betrayed. And I, who in my foolishness swore by the name, must tell you what you ask, and see that

you die before I pay the price of my own weakness—with my own death.

"Well, this was ordained. Do not struggle against it—it is the pattern into which our lives are woven, and from our births we three moved forward to this moment around a table, together. Now watch, and listen—and learn.

"In the fourth dimension, which is time, man can travel only with the flow of its stream. In the other three he can move freely at will, but in time he must submit to the forward motion which is all he knows. Incidentally, only this dimension of the four affects him physically. As he moves along the fourth dimension he ages. Now once we knew the secret of moving as freely through time as through space, and in a way that did not affect our bodies any more than the motion of stepping forward or back, up or down. That secret involved the use of a special sense which I believe all men possess, though through ages of disuse it has atrophied almost to non-existence. Only among the Seles does even a memory of it exist, and only among our priesthood have we those who possess that ancient sense in its full power.

"It is not physically that even we can move at will through time. Nor can we in any way affect what has gone before or is to come after, save in the knowledge of past and future which we gain in our journeyings. For our motion in time is confined strictly to what you may call memory. Through that all but lost sense we can look back into the lives of those who went before, or forward through the still unbodied but definitely existent 'memories' of those who come after us. For as I have said, all life is woven into a finished pattern, in which future and past are irrevocably limned.

"There is danger, even in this way of traveling. Just what it is no one knows, for none who meet the danger return. Perhaps the voyager chances into the memories of a man dying, and cannot escape. Or perhaps—I do not know. But sometimes the mind does not return—snaps out. . . .

"Though there are no limits to any of these four dimensions so far as mankind is concerned, yet the distance which we may venture along any one of them is limited to the capacity of the mind that journeys. No mind, however powerful, could trace life back to its origin. For that reason we have no knowledge of our own beginnings, before that golden age I spoke of. But we do know that we are exiles from a place too lovely to have lasted, a land more exquisite than anything Earth can show. From a world like a jewel we come, and our cities were so fair that even now children sing songs of Baloise the Beautiful, and ivory-walled Ingala and Nial of the white roofs.

"A catastrophe drove us out of that land—a catastrophe that no one understands. Legend says that our gods were angered and forsook us. What actually happened no one seems to know. But we mourn still for the lovely world of Seles where we were born. It was—but look, you shall see."

THE voice had been a low rising and falling of undernotes upon a sea of darkness; but now Smith, all his consciousness still centered upon the reflecting pool of hypnotic red, was aware of a stirring and a subtle motion deep down in its darkness. Things were moving, rising, dizzily so that his head swam and the void trembled about him.

Out of that shaking darkness a light began to glow. Reality was taking shape about him, a new substance and a new scene, and as the light and the landscape formed out of darkness, so his own mind clothed itself in flesh again, taking on reality by slow degrees.

Presently he was standing on the slope of a low hill, velvet with dark grass in the twilight. Below him in that lovely half-translucency of dusk Baloise the Beautiful lay outspread, ivory-white, glimmering through the dimness like a pearl half drowned in dark wine. Somehow he knew the city for what it was, knew its name and loved every pale spire and dome and archway spread out in the dusk below him. Baloise the Beautiful, his lovely city.

He had no time to wonder at this sudden, aching familiarity; for beyond the ivory roofs a great moony shimmer was beginning to lighten the dim sky, such a vast and far-spreading glow that he caught his breath as he stood watching; for surely no moon that ever rose on Earth gave forth so mighty an illumination. It spread behind the stretch of Baloise's ivory roof-tops in a great halo that turned the whole night breathless with coming miracle. Then beyond the city he saw the crest of a vast silver circle glimmering through a wash of ground vapor, and suddenly he understood.

Slowly, slowly it rose. The ivory roof-tops of Baloise the Beautiful took that great soft glimmering light and turned it into pearly gleaming, and the whole night was miraculous with the wonder of rising Earth.

On the hillside Smith was motionless while the vast bright globe swung clear of the roofs and floated free at last in the pale light of the Moon. He had seen this sight before, from a dead and barren satellite, but never the exquisite luminance of Earth through the vapors of Moon-air that veiled the vast globe in a shimmer of enchantment as it swung mistily through the dusk, all its silvery continents faintly flushed with green, the translucent wonder of its seas shining jewel-clear, jewel-pale, colored like opals in the lucid tranquillity of the Earth-bright dark.

It was almost too lovely a sight for man to gaze on unprepared. His mind was an ache of beauty too vivid for eyes to dwell on long as he found himself moving slowly down the hill. Not until then did he realize that this was not his own body through whose eyes he looked. He had no control over it; he had simply borrowed it to convey him through the moony dusk down the hillside, that he might perceive by its perceptions the immeasurably long-ago time which he was beholding now. This, then, was the "sense" the little stranger had spoken of. In some eons-dead moon-dweller's memory the sight of rising Earth, marvelous over the spires of the forgotten city, had been graven so deeply that the wash of countless ages could not blot it away. He was seeing now, feeling now what this unknown man had known on a hillside on the Moon a million years ago.

Through the magic of that lost "sense" he walked the Moon's verdant surface toward that exquisite city which was lost to everything but dreams so many eons ago. Well, he might have guessed from the little priest's extreme fragility alone that his race was not a native of Earth. The lesser gravity of the Moon would have bred a race of bird-like delicacy. Curious that they had moon-silvery hair and eyes as translucent and remote as the light of the dead Moon. A queer, illogical link with their lost homeland.

But there was little time for wonder and speculation now. He was watching the loveliness of Baloise floating nearer and nearer through the dusk that seemed aswim with a radiance so softly real that it was like walking through darkly shining water. He was testing just how much latitude this new experience allowed him. He could see what his host saw, and he began to realize now that the man's other

senses were open to his perception too. He could even share in his emotions, for he had known a moment of passionate longing for the whole white city of Baloise as he looked down from the hill, longing and love such as an exile might feel for his native city.

Gradually, too, he became aware that the man was afraid. A queer, dark, miasmic terror lurked just below the surface of his conscious thoughts, something whose origin he could not fathom. It gave the loveliness he looked on a poignancy almost as sharp as pain, etching every white spire and gleaming dome of Baloise deep into his remembering mind.

Slowly, moving in the shadow of his own dark terror, the man went down the hill. The ivory wall that circled Baloise rose over him, a low wall with a crest fretted into a band of lacy carving upon whose convolutions the lucent Earthlight lay like silver. Under a pointed arch he walked, still moving with that slow, resolute step as if he approached something dreadful from which there was no escape. And strongly and more strongly Smith was aware of the fear that drowned the man's unformulated thoughts, washing in a dark tide beneath the consciousness of everything he did. And stronger still the poignant love for Baloise ached in him and his eyes lingered like slow caresses on the pale roofs and Earth-washed walls and the pearly dimness that lay shadowily between, where the light of rising Earth was only a reflection. He was memorizing the loveliness of Baloise, as an exile might do. He was lingering upon the sight of it with a yearning so deep that it seemed as if even into death he must carry behind his eyes the Earth-lit loveliness on which he gazed.

PALE walls and translucent domes and arches rose about him as he walked slowly along a street paved in white sea-sand, so that his feet fell soundlessly upon its surface and he might have been walking in a translucent dream. Now Earth had swum higher above the reflecting roofs, and the great shining globe of it floated free overhead, veiled and opalescent with the rainbowy seas of its atmosphere. Smith, looking up through the eyes of this unknown stranger, could scarcely recognize the configuration of the great green continents spread out beneath their veils of quivering air, and the shapes of the shining seas were strange to him. He looked into a past so remote that little upon his native planet was familiar to him.

Now his strange host was turning aside from the broad, sandy street. He went down a little paved alley, dim in the swimming light of Earth, and pushed open the gate of grille-work that closed its end. Under the opened arch he walked into a garden, beyond whose Earth-bright loveliness a low white house rose pale as ivory against dark trees.

There was a pool in the garden's center. Earth swam like a great glimmering opal in its darkness, brimming the water with a greater glory than ever shone into earthly pool. And bending over that basin of spilled Earthlight was a woman.

The silvery cascade of her hair swung forward about a face paler than the pallor of rising Earth, and lovely with a delicacy more exquisite than ever shaped an Earthwoman's features into beauty. Her moon-born slimness as she bent above the pool was the slimness of some airy immortal; for no Earthly woman ever walked whose delicacy was half so sweet and fragile.

She lifted her head as the grille-gate opened, and swayed to her feet in a motion so unearthly light that she scarcely seemed to touch the grass as she moved forward, a creature of pale enchantment in an enchanted Moon-garden. The man

crossed the grass to her reluctantly, and Smith was aware in him of a dread and a soul-deep aching that choked up in his throat until he could scarcely speak. The woman lifted her face, clear now in the Earthlight and so delicate modeled that it was more like some exquisite jewel-carving than a face of bone and Moon-white flesh. Her eyes were great and dark with an unnamed dread. She breathed in the lightest echo of a voice,

"It has come?" . . . and the tongue she spoke rippled like running water, in strange, light, breathing cadences that Smith understood only through the mind of the man whose memory he shared.

His host said in a voice that was a little too loud in its resolution not to quiver,

"Yes—it has come."

At that the woman's eyes closed involuntarily, her whole exquisite face crumpling into sudden, stricken grief so heavy that it seemed those fragile features must be crushed under the weight of it, the whole delicate body sink overburdened to the grass. But she did not fall. She stood swaying for an instant, and then the man's arms were about her, holding her close in a desperate embrace. And through the memory of the long-dead man who held her, Smith could feel the delicacy of the eons-dead woman, the moony softness of her flesh, the tiny bones, like a bird's. Again he felt futilely that she was too fragile a creature to know such sorrow as racked her now, and a helpless anger rose in him against whatever unnamed thing it was that kindled such terror and heartbreak in them both.

For a long moment the man held her close, feeling the soft fragility of her body warm against him, the rack of silent sobs that must surely tear her very bones apart, so delicate were they, so desperate her soundless agony. And in his own throat the tightness of sorrow was choking, and his own eyes burned with unshed tears. That dark miasma of terror had strengthened until the Earth-lit garden was blotted out behind it, and nothing remained but the black weight of his fear, the pain of his hopeless grief.

At last he loosed the girl in his arms a little and murmured against her silvery hair,

"Hush, hush, my darling. Do not sorrow so—we knew that this must come some day. It comes to everyone alive—it has come to us too. Do not weep so. . . ."

SHE sobbed once more, a deep ache of pure pain, and then stood back in his arms and nodded, shaking back the silver hair.

"I know," she said. "I know." She lifted her head and looked up toward Earth's great haloed mystery swimming through veils of colored enchantment above them. The light of it glistened in the tears on her face. "Almost," she said, "I wish we two had gone—there."

He shook her a little in his arms.

"No—life in the colonies, with only Seles' little glimmer of green light shining down on us to tear our hearts with memories of home—no, my dear. That would have been a lifetime of longing and yearning to return. We have lived in happiness here, knowing only this moment of pain at the end. It is better."

She bent her head and laid her forehead against his shoulder, shutting out the sight of risen Earth.

"Is it?" she asked him thickly, her voice indistinct with tears. "Is a lifetime of nostalgia and grieving, with you, not better than paradise without you? Well, the choice is made now. I am happy only in this—that you have been summoned first and need not know this—this dreadfulness—of facing life alone. You must go now—quickly, or I shall never let you. Yes—we knew it must end—that the

summons must come. Good-bye—my very dear."

She lifted her wet face and closed her eyes.

Smith would have looked away then if it had been possible for him. But he could not detach himself even in emotion from the host whose memory he shared, and the unbearable instant stabbed as deeply at his own heart as it did at the man whose memory he shared. He took her gently again into his arms and kissed the quivering mouth, salt with the taste of her tears. And then without a backward glance he turned toward the open gate and walked slowly out under its arch, moving as a man moves to his doom.

He went down the narrow way into the open street again, under the glory of risen Earth. The beauty of the eons-dead Baloise he walked through ached like a dull pain in his heart beneath the sharper anguish of that farewell. The salt of the girl's tears was still on his lips, and it seemed to him that not even the death he went to could give him ease from the pain of the moments he had just passed through. He went on resolutely.

SMITH realized that they were turning now toward the center of Baloise the Beautiful. Great open squares here and there broke the ivory ranks of the buildings, and there were men and women moving infrequently through the streets, fragile as birds in their Moon-born delicacy, silvery pale under the immense pale disk of high-swinging Earth that dominated that scene until nothing seemed real but its vast marvel hanging overhead. The buildings were larger here, and though they lost none of their enchanted beauty they were more clearly places of industry than had been those domed and grille-fretted dwellings on the outskirts of the city.

Once they skirted a great square in whose center bulked a vast sphere of silvery sheen that reflected the brightness of the sky-filled Earth. It was a ship—a space-ship. Smith's eyes would have told him that even if the knowledge that floated through his mind from the mind of the Moon-dweller had not made it clear. It was a space-ship loaded with men and machinery and supplies for the colonies struggling against the ravening jungles upon steamy, prehistoric Earth.

They watched the last passengers filing up the ramps that led to orifices in its lower curve, Moon-white people moving silently as people in a dream under the vast pale glowing of the Moon-high Earth. It was queer how silent they were. The whole great square and the immense sphere that filled it and the throngs moving up and down the ramps might have been figures in a dream. It was hard to realize that they were not—that they had existed, flesh and blood, stone and steel, under the light of a vast, heaven-filling globe haloed in its rainbowy haze of atmosphere, once, millenniums ago.

As they neared the farther side of the square, Smith saw through his host's scarcely observing eyes the ramps lower and the orifices close in the huge bubble-ship. The Moonman was too wrapped in his agony and heartbreak and despair to pay much heed to what was taking place there in the square, so that Smith caught only abstract glimpses of the great ship floating bubble-light up from the pavement, silently, effortlessly, with no such bursts of thunderous noise and great washes of flame as attend the launching of modern space-ships. Curiosity rode him hard, but he could do nothing. His only glimpses of this ages-past scene must be taken through the eyes of his host's memory. They went on out of the square.

A great dark building loomed up above the pale-roofed houses. It was the only

dark thing he had seen in Baloise, and the sight of it woke into sudden life the terror that had been dwelling formlessly and deep in the mind of his host. But he went on unhesitatingly. The broad street led straight up to the archway that opened in the great dark wall's façade, a portal as cavernous and blackly threatening as the portals of death itself.

Under the shadow of it the man paused. He looked back lingeringly upon the pearly pallor of Baloise. Over the domed and pinnacled roofs the great pale light of Earth brooded. Earth itself, swimming in seas of opalescent atmosphere, all its continents silver-green, all its seas colored like veiled jewels, glowed down upon him for the last time. The full tide of his love for Baloise, of his love for the lost girl in the garden, of his love for the whole green, sweet satellite he lived on came choking up in his throat, and his heart was near to bursting with the sweet fullness of the life he must leave.

Then he turned resolutely and went in under the dark archway. Through his set eyes Smith could see nothing within but a gloom like moonlight shining through mist, so that the space inside was full of a grayness faintly translucent, faintly luminous. And the terror that clogged the man's mind was laying hold on his own as they went steadily forward, in sick fright, through the gloom.

The dimness brightened as they advanced. More and more inexplicable in Smith's mind grew the wonder that, though fear was turning the Moon-dweller's very brain icy with dread, yet he went unhesitatingly forward, no compulsion driving him but his own will. It was death he went to—there was no doubt about that now, from the glimpses he had of his host's mind—a death from which by instinct he shrank with every fiber of his being. But he went on.

Now walls were becoming visible through the dim fog of the darkness. They were smooth walls, black, unfeatured. The interior of this great dark building was appalling in its very simplicity. Nothing but a wide black corridor whose walls rose into invisibility overhead. Contrasting with the ornateness of every other man-made surface in Baloise, the stark severity of the building struck a note of added terror into the numbed brain of the man who walked here.

The darkness paled and brightened. The corridor was widening. Presently its walls had fallen back outside range of sight; and over a black, unlustered floor, through misty brightness the Moon-man walked forward to his death.

The room into which the hall had widened was immense. Smith thought it must comprise the whole interior of the great dark building; for many minutes passed while his host paced steadily, slowly forward over the darkness of the floor.

Gradually through that queer bright dimness a flame began to glow. It danced in the mist like the light of a wind-blown fire, brightening, dimming, flaring up again so that the mist pulsed with its brilliance. There was the regularity of life in that pulsing.

It was a wall of pale flame, stretching through the misty dimness as far as the eye could reach on either side. The man paused before it, with bowed head, and he tried to speak. Terror thickened his voice so that it was only on the third attempt that he managed to articulate, very low, in a choked voice,

"Hear me, O Mighty. I am come."

IN THE silence after his voice ceased, the wall of beating flame flickered once again, like a heart's beat, and then rolled back on both sides like curtains. Beyond

the back-drawn flame a high-roofed hollow in the mist loomed dimly. It had no more tangibility than the mist itself, the inside of a sphere of dim clarity. And in that mist-walled hollow three gods sat. Sat? They crouched, dreadfully, hungrily, with such a bestial ravening in their poise that only gods could maintain the awful dignity which veiled them with terror despite the ugly humped hunger of their posture.

This one glimpse through glazing eyes Smith caught as the Moonman flung himself face down on the black floor, the breath stopping in his throat, choking against unbearable terror as a drowning man chokes against sea-water. But as the eyes through which he looked lost sight of the three ravenous figures, Smith had an instant's glimpse of the shadow behind them, monstrous on the curved mist-wall that hollowed them in, cast waveringly by the back-drawn flame. And it was a single shadow. These three were One.

And the One spoke. In a voice like the lick of flames, tenuous as the mist that reflected it, terrible as the voice of death itself, the One said:

"What mortal dares enter our immortal Presence?"

"One whose god-appointed cycle is complete," gasped the prostrate man, his voice coming in little puffs as if he had been running hard. "One who fulfills his share of his race's debt to the Three who are One."

The voice of the One had been a voice full, complete, an individual speaking. Now out of the dim hollow where the three crouched a thin, flickering voice, like hot flame, less than full, less than complete, came quavering.

"Be it remembered," said the thin, hot little voice, "that all the world of Seles owes its existence to ourselves, who by our might hold fire and air and water around its globe. Be it remembered that only through ourselves does the flesh of life clothe this little world's bare bones. Be it remembered!"

The man on the floor shuddered in one long quiver of acquiescence. And Smith, his mind aware as that other mind was aware, knew that it was true. The Moon's gravity was too weak, even in this long-vanished era, to hold its cloak of life-supporting air without the aid of some other force than its own. Why these Three furnished that power he did not know, but he was beginning to guess.

A second little voice, hungry as flame, took up the ritual chant as the first died away.

"Be it remembered that only for a price do we wrap the robe of life about Seles' bones. Be that bargain remembered that the progenitors of the race of Seles made with the Three who are One, in the very long ago when even the gods were young. Let the price be not forgotten that every man must pay at the end of his appointed cycle. Be it remembered that only through our divine hunger can mankind reach us to pay his vow. All who live owe us the debt of their living, and by the age-old pact of their forefathers must return when we summon them into the shadow that gives their loved world life."

Again the prostrate man shuddered, deep and coldly, acknowledging the ritual truth. And a third voice quavered out of that misty hollow with a flame's flickering hunger in its sound,

"Be it remembered that all who come to pay the race's debt and buy anew our favor that their world may live, must come to us willingly, with no resistance against our divine hunger—must surrender without struggle. And be it remembered that if so much as one man alone dares resist our will, then in that instant is our power withdrawn, and all our anger

called down upon the world of Seles. Let one man struggle against our desire, and the world of Seles goes bare to the void, all life upon it ceasing in a breath. Be that remembered!"

On the floor the Moonman's body shivered again. Through his mind ran one last ache of love and longing for the beautiful world whose greenness and Earth-lit wonder his death was to preserve. Death was a little thing, if by it Seles lived.

In one full, round thunder the One said terribly,

"Come you willingly into our Presence?"

From the prone man's hidden face a voice choked,

"Willingly—that Seles may live."

And the voice of the One pulsed through the flame-washed dimness so deeply that the ears did not hear, and only the beat of the Moonman's heart, the throbbing of his blood, caught the low thunder of the gods' command,

"Then come!"

He stirred. Very slowly he got to his feet. He faced the three. And for the first time Smith knew a quickened fear for his own safety. Heretofore the awe and terror he had shared with the Moon-host had been solely for the man himself. But now—was death not reaching out for him no less than for his host? For he knew of no way to dissociate his own spectator mind from the mind with which it was united that it might be aware of this fragment of the measureless past. And when the Moonman went forward into oblivion, must not oblivion engulf his own mind too? This, then, was what the little priest had meant when he told them that some, adventuring backward through the minds of their forebears, never returned. Death in one guise or another must have swallowed them up with the minds they looked through. Death yawned for himself, now, if he could not escape. For the first time he struggled, testing his independence. And it was futile. He could not break away.

With bowed head the Moonman stepped forward through the curtain of flame. It hissed hotly on either side, and then it was behind and he was close to that dim hell where the three gods sat, their shadow hovering terribly behind them on the mist. And it looked, in that uncertain light, as if the three strained forward eagerly, hunger ravenous in every dreadful line of them, and the shadow behind spread itself like a waiting mouth.

Then with a swishing roar the flame-curtains swept to behind him, and darkness like the dark of death itself fell blindingly upon the hollow of the Three. Smith knew naked terror as he felt the mind he had ridden thus far falter as a horse falters beneath its rider—fail as a mount fails—and he was falling, falling into gulfs of vertiginous terror, emptier than the space between the worlds, a blind and empty hungriness that outravened vacuum itself.

He did not fight it. He could not. It was too tremendous. But he did not yield. One small conscious entity in an infinity of pure hunger, while sucking emptiness raved around him, he was stubborn and unwavering. The hunger of the Three must never before have known anything but acquiescence to the debt man owed them, and now fury roared through the vacuum of their hunger more terribly than any mortal mind could combat. In the midst of it, Smith clung stubbornly to his flicker of consciousness, incapable of doing anything more than resist feebly the ravenous desire that sucked at his life.

Dimly he realized what he was doing. It was the death of a world he compassed, if resistance to the hunger of the Three

meant what they had threatened. It meant the death of every living thing on the satellite—of the girl in the Earth-bright garden, of all who walked Baloise's streets, of Baloise herself in the grinding eons, unprotected from the bombarding meteors that would turn this sweet green world into a pitted skull.

But the urge to live was blind in him. He could not have relinquished it if he would, so deeply rooted is the life-desire in us all, the raw, animal desperation against extinction. He would not die—he would not surrender, let the price be what it might. He could not fight that blind ravening that typhooned about him, but he would not submit. He was simply a passive stubbornness against the hunger of the Three, while eons swirled about him and time ceased and nothing had existence but himself, his living, desperate self, rebellious against death.

Others, adventuring through the past, must too have met this peril, must have succumbed to it in the weakness of their inborn love for the green Moon-world. But he had no such weakness. Nothing was so important as life—his own life, here and now. He would not surrender. Deep down under the veneer of his civilized self lay a bed-rock of pure savage power that nothing on any world he knew had ever tested beyond its strength. It supported him now against the anger of divinity, the unshakable foundation of his resolution not to yield.

And slowly, slowly the ravening hunger abated its fury about him. It could not absorb what refused to surrender, and all its fury could not terrorize him into acquiescence. This, then, was why the Three had demanded and reiterated the necessity for submission to their hunger. They had not the power to overcome that unshakable life-urge if it were not willingly put aside, and they dared not let the world they terrorized know this weakness in their strength. For a flashing moment he visioned the vampire Three, battening on a race that dared not defy them for love of the beautiful cities, the soft gold days and Earth-bright miracles of nights that counted more to mankind than its own life counted. But it was ended now.

ONE last furnace-blast of white-hot hunger raved around Smith's stubbornness. But whatever vampirish things they were, spawned in what unknown, eons-forgotten place, the Three who were One had not the power to break down that last rock-steady savagery in which all that was Smith rooted deep. And at last, in one final burst of typhoon-fury, which roared about him in tornado-blasts of hunger and defeat, the vacuum ceased to be.

For one blinding instant sight flashed unbearably through his brain. He saw sleeping Seles, the green Moon-world that time itself was to forget, pearl-pale under the glory of risen Earth, washed with the splendor of a brighter night than man was to know again, the mighty globe swimming through seas of floating atmosphere, veiled in it, glorious for one last brief instant in the wonder of its misty continents, its pearly seas. Baloise the Beautiful slept under the luminance of high-riding Earth. For one last radiant moment the exquisite Moon-world floated through its dream-pale darkness that no world in space was ever to equal again, nor any descendant of the race that knew it ever wholly forget.

And then—disaster. In a stunned, remote way Smith was aware of a high, ear-splitting wail that grew louder, louder—intolerably louder until his very brain could no longer endure the agony of its sound. And over Baloise, over Seles and all who dwelt thereon, a darkness began to fall. High-swimming Earth shim-

mered through gathering dark, and from the rolling green hills and verdant meadows and silver seas of Seles the atmosphere ripped away. In long, opalescent streamers, bright under the light of Earth, the air of Seles was forsaking the world it cloaked. Not in gradual dissipation, but in abrupt, angry destruction as if the invisible hands of the Three were tearing it in long bright ribbons from the globe of Seles—so the atmosphere fell away.

That was the last Smith saw of it as darkness closed him in—Seles, lovely even in its destruction, a little green jewel shimmering with color and brightness, unrolling from its cloak of life as the long, streaming ribbons of rainbowy translucency tore themselves away and trailed in the void behind, slowly paling into the blackness of space.

Then darkness closed in about him, and oblivion rolled over him and nothing —nothing. . . .

HE OPENED his eyes, and startlingly, New York's steel towers were all about him, the hum of traffic in his ears. Irresistibly his eyes sought the sky, where a moment before, so it seemed to him, the great bright globe of pearly Earth hung luminous. And then, realization coming back slowly, he lowered his eyes and met across the table the wide, haunted stare of the little priest of the Moon-people. The face he saw shocked him. It had aged ten years in the incalculable interval of his journey back into the past. Anguish, deeper than any personal anguish could strike, had graven sharp lines into his unearthly pallor, and the great strange eyes were nightmare-haunted.

"It was through me, then," he was whispering, as if to himself. "Of all my race I was the one by whose hand Seles died. Oh, gods——"

"I did it!" Smith broke in harshly, driven out of his habit of silence in a blind effort to alleviate something of that unbearable anguish. "I was the one!"

"No—you were the instrument, I the wielder. I sent you back. I am the destroyer of Baloise and Nial and ivory-white Ingala, and all the green loveliness of our lost world. How can I ever look up again by night upon the bare white skull of the world I slew? It was I—I!"

"What the devil are you two talking about?" demanded Yarol across the table. "I didn't see a thing, except a lot of darkness and lights, and a sort of moon. . . ."

"And yet"—that haunted whisper went on, obliviously—"yet I have seen the Three in their temple. No other of all my race ever saw them before, for no living memory ever returned out of that temple save the memory that broke them. Of all my race only I know the secret of the Disaster. Our legends tell of what the exiles saw, looking up that night in terror through the thick air of Earth—but I *know!* And no man of flesh and blood can bear that knowledge long—who murdered a world by his blundering. Oh, gods of Seles—help me!"

His Moon-white hands groped blindly over the table, found the square package that had cost him so dear a price. He stumbled to his feet. Smith rose too, actuated by some inarticulate emotion he could not have named. But the Moon-priest shook his head.

"No," he said, as if in answer to some question of his own mind, "you are not to blame for what happened so many eons ago—and yet in the last few minutes. This tangle of time and space, and the disaster that a living man can bring to something dead millenniums ago—it is far beyond our narrow grasp of understanding. I was chosen to be the vessel of that disaster—yet not I alone am responsible, for this was ordained from time's beginning. I could not have changed it had I known at the beginning

what the end must be. It is not for what you did, but for what you know now—that you must die!"

The words had not wholly left his lips before he was swinging up his square parcel like a deadly weapon. Close against Smith's face he held it, and the shadow of death was in his Moon-pale eyes and dark upon his anguished white face. For the flash of an instant it seemed to Smith that a blaze of intolerable light was bursting out all around the square of the package, though actually he could see nothing but the commonplace outlines of it in the priest's white hands.

For the breath of an instant almost too brief to register on his brain, death brushed him hungrily. But in that instant as the threatening hands swung up there was a burst of blue-white flame behind the priest's back, the familiar crackle of a gun. The little man's face turned livid with pain for an instant, and then peace in a great gush of calmness washed across it, blanking the anguished dark eyes. He slumped sidewise, the square box falling.

Across the huddle of his body on the floor Yarol's crouched figure loomed, slipping the heat-gun back into its holster as he glanced across his shoulder.

"Come on—come on!" he was whispering urgently. "I suggest we get out of here!"

There was a shout from behind Smith, the beat of running feet. He cast one covetous glance at the fallen square of that mysterious package, but it was a fleeting one as he cleared the body in a leap and on Yarol's flying heels made for the lower ramp to the crowded level beneath. He would never know.

Dream Sepulture

By C. A. BUTZ

I dreamed a dream (oh, eldritch night of doom!)
I seemed to lie alone among the dead.
I retched and smothered, moaned upon my bed—
And lo! the bed had changed, become a tomb!
With quaking heart I stared in Stygian gloom:
My hands were crossed! With quickly growing dread
I flung them upward, knew all hope had fled:
There came a muted sound, a sickening *boom.*

My knotted fists drummed on a coffin-lid!
Oh, outraged life! Stark struggle, then despair!
A palsied horror shrieked that all was vain.
Soft, silken sides pressed in, fresh darkness slid
O'er bursting lungs. I fought, and then . . . no pain.
—Thus did I dream, to wake in dawn's red glare!

The Return of Sarah Purcell

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A very human story is this, about a woman who even in death could not be happy without the doll she had loved in life

IT WAS inevitable that one of the two Misses Purcell would have to die first, and it was not surprizing that Sarah, the older, was the first to go. But what was disturbing, thought Hannah Purcell, the sisters' niece, as she hurried across the dusty street to the sisters' home, was that Miss Emma should take it so hard. True, the sisters had lived together all their lives, and it was natural that the one left behind would show her sorrow; but to let her grief make her nervous and afraid—no, that was too much.

Hannah Purcell swung open the gate and went rapidly up the garden path. Emma was standing among the zinnias, a garden trowel in her hand, an enormous sun-bonnet shading her lined and worried face. Her hands, Hannah noticed, were trembling a little. Hannah made a barely perceptible gesture of disapproval.

"Did you call me on the telephone while I was downtown, Aunt Emmy?" asked Hannah.

The old lady nodded, her sun-bonnet bobbing grotesquely up and down. "Yes, I wanted to tell you something."

Hannah nodded impatiently. How like Aunt Emma—to call her over for something that was bound to be trivial!

"What is it?" she asked.

Emma looked up, regarding her niece with troubled eyes. Then she looked hastily away, and presently began to speak jerkily. "It's hard for me to say this, Hannah, but I have to. I didn't want to tell anybody, but now Sarah won't let me rest, and it'll have to come out, and it might as well be you that knows it."

Hannah softened the expression on her face. "You've done altogether too much grieving over Aunt Sarah," she said. "It's not good for you. You know what the doctor said."

The old lady appeared to give this her consideration for a moment or so, then disregarded it, and went on. "It happened before Sarah passed on, and I'd almost forgotten it, she going so soon after it happened, and all." She was fidgeting; she dropped the trowel and began to twist her fingers nervously together, looking slyly at her niece to gage her reaction.

Hannah had been looking around her, and had seen the amount of earth that had been turned over; so she knew that her aunt had been at work since before dawn.

"You shouldn't fidget so, Aunt Emmy," she said in a gently reproving voice.

"Can't help it; it's my nerves, I expect."

"What was it that happened?"

"Well, you see, Hannah, Sarah had a little doll. It was just a little thing—I don't know where she got it—but it was a powerful lot of trouble for me, she being a little childish and always wanting the doll around, and always having me do this and that for the doll, as if it were a child or something. That made me nervous, I can tell you."

Hannah nodded sympathetically, mov-

ing a little away from the flowers, for the dew was wetting her stockings.

Emma's words came suddenly in a rush, leaving her breathless. "So one day I hid the doll away from her, and then right after that she died, and I had forgotten where I put it. And there she was, a-calling for that doll, and I not knowing where I'd put it!"

"You've found it, then?"

"No, no. I can't remember where I put it. But I think I ought to find it."

"You shouldn't worry yourself like that, Aunt Emmy. Now that Sarah's gone, there's no need to bother any more about that doll."

"Ah, but——" The old lady stopped talking abruptly; there was a queer, baffled expression in her eyes. For a moment Hannah felt a vague fear for her aunt's health; then Emma came swiftly closer to her, bending her face near, and whispered, "Will you stay with me tonight, Hannah? I don't think I'm well."

Hannah was startled. "Of course, I will, Aunt Emmy," she said quickly. "But don't you think you ought to see the doctor?"

The old lady shook her head violently; the sun-bonnet came off, swinging on her back by the cord about her neck. Her graying hair shone silver in the morning sunlight. Her face was clearly distressed. "No, no doctor can do me any good, Hannah."

BACK home again, Hannah Purcell said to her mother, "You know, I think that Sarah's going has affected her mind. I do, now."

"How you talk, child!" said her mother, laughing. "She's just getting old and childish." She hesitated a moment, then presently added, "If anything's bothering her, it's most likely her conscience, providing she's got one."

Hannah looked curiously at her mother. "Why?" she asked.

"Oh, she wasn't any too good to Sarah in her last days, I'm thinking," she replied. "I don't suppose she stopped to think about it much, but now she's got more time with Sarah gone."

Hannah came to her aunt's defense. "Well, I suppose Aunt Sarah must have been a trial to her."

"Very likely," said her mother. "Still —Emma could have been a good deal more kind, to my way of thinking. Ah, well," she concluded, "Sarah's gone now, and it doesn't do anybody good to talk about what's done."

That evening Emma did not seem to remember having asked Hannah to stay with her. "But I am glad you've come, Hannah," she said. "I am glad. Then perhaps I can sleep tonight."

And, indeed, the old lady was obviously pleased that her niece was to spend the night with her, for she gave evidence of her pleasure in her bustling actions.

But Hannah thought, Perhaps she can sleep. Didn't she sleep last night, then? Aloud, she asked, "Couldn't you sleep well last night, Aunt Emmy?"

The old lady shook her head. "Not a bit, Hannah, with *her* always coming in my sleep and asking me—asking me——" She broke off confusedly. "I'm a bit dizzy, I do believe, Hannah. I had a powerful headache last night—kept me awake most of the night."

They talked together for some considerable time. Despite Hannah's frequent suggestions that they had better be getting to bed, the old lady seemed loth to go, and at last she said definitely that she had some work to do, but that her niece could go on if she wished.

"In that case," said Hannah, "I'll help you do the work. I'll not go to bed until I see you asleep."

"Oh, well, then it's all right," said

Emma. "The work can wait until tomorrow. We'll go to bed right now." But she was obviously nervous and reluctant to leave the well-lit living-room for the semi-darkness of the long stairway.

The old lady went to sleep at last, and Hannah retired to her own room, where she sat watching the glow in the east where the moon would presently rise. There at the window she fell asleep, still fully dressed.

THE moon was hanging above the housetops, not so high but that a chimney might hide it, when Hannah awoke. Realizing abruptly that she had fallen asleep, she was about to get up when she heard a faint, disturbing sound in the hall. She listened intently. Someone was moving along, tapping the wall near the floor-boards. Hannah got up silently, moving cautiously to the door, which she opened a crack, and then suddenly let fall wide. There was the old lady on her hands and knees, crawling along the hall in her long white nightgown, tapping the wall! At first she did not see Hannah, and noticed her at last only because Hannah spoke sharply to arrest her progress.

"Why, Aunt Emmy, whatever in the world are you doing there?" she demanded.

Emma appeared to be dazed, as if she were not fully awake. She waved her hands weakly, sitting up, resting on her knees, and said, "She—she wants the doll. I've got to find the doll—no rest until I find it."

"What are you saying, Emma Purcell!" said Hannah shortly.

Emma did not notice the sharpness of Hannah's voice. "Don't tell me that you didn't know," she went on in a mild voice.

"Know what?" Hannah leaned forward, sending her shadow sprawling shapelessly across the hall in the light of the rising moon flowing through her room and beyond.

"That Sarah's come back—for the doll."

Hannah gasped. So that was it! Then she bent suddenly, taking her aunt almost roughly by the arm. "You go back to bed right away, Aunt Emmy."

The old lady got unsteadily to her feet, murmuring in protest. "No, no, I should look for the doll. She won't let me sleep, Hannah. She won't." She tried to loosen Hannah's grasp on her arm, but failing, stood quietly looking at her niece.

Hannah was perplexed. "I declare, Aunt Emmy," she said at last, "I don't believe you know what you're saying."

Emma said, "I do so, Hannah. I know Sarah's come back."

"Can you see her?" asked Hannah shortly.

"No, it's her shadow that comes, whispering to me in the dark. But I can see the shadow, Hannah. Yes, I can see that. It stands there against the wall in the moonlight, whispering, *'The doll, Emma. Where's the doll? I'm going to have it. You must find it, or you will never sleep again!'* " The old lady turned an abruptly fear-stricken face to her niece, and added, "And I can't find it, Hannah."

Hannah was alarmed. "I'll help you look in the morning, Aunt Emmy," she promised.

Only then did Emma allow her niece to lead her back to bed.

But in the morning the old lady seemed to have forgotten the events of the night before. Once or twice Hannah tried to bring up the subject of the doll and her dead Aunt Sarah, but she was cut off.

Hannah wondered, Does she remember nothing of last night?

Abruptly Emma said, "I had a bad walking dream last night, Hannah. I hope I didn't disturb you." The old lady's eyes were deep pools which Hannah could not fathom; her face was expressionless.

"No," said Hannah. "You didn't disturb me at all, Aunt Emmy."

"That's good."

Hannah went on. "I think I'll stay here with you again tonight, if you'll have me."

Emma looked up quickly. "I should like to have you," she said hurriedly, eagerly. Then, so as not to appear too anxious, she added, "That is, if you're sure you don't mind, if your mother doesn't care."

"I want to stay, and Mother doesn't care in the least," Hannah made haste to say before her aunt could change her mind.

THAT night Hannah did not go to sleep. She waited, listening for Emma to come from her room. Perhaps it was only a dream after all, as the old lady had said. But Emma's eyes—how queer they were!

It was after midnight, and already the late moon had risen, when Hannah heard the sound of Emma's door opening, creaking suddenly in the stillness. An owl called softly twice just beyond Hannah's window, and its shadow gliding silently across the floor in the patch of moonlight there momentarily distracted Hannah. She did not hear the door to her aunt's room close.

There came presently to her the sound of Emma creeping along the hall, and then abruptly a new sound came into the stillness. Someone was whispering harshly—could it be Emma talking to herself?

Hannah got up hastily and lit the lamp. She stood near the door, waiting for Emma to come closer. It came to her suddenly that the whispering voice was not at all like her aunt's—it was deeper, harsher, almost like — Hannah shook her head, dispelling her grotesque thought. She was about to open the door when she thought, What *is* that rustling noise? The sound came from the hall, and instinctively Hannah knew that it did not come from her aunt's nightgown.

She opened the door, holding the lamp high. Emma sat back, blinking her eyes foolishly in the lamplight. But Hannah did not see her; she was looking beyond Emma, far down the hall. Was someone standing there, just out of the glow from the lamp? What was that vague, ill-defined shadow? Was it—could it be——?

Hannah closed her eyes; there was a hurried rustling sound at the far end of the hall. She opened her eyes quickly. The shadow was gone.

The old lady, too, had heard, and had come to her feet.

"She's gone now," she breathed. "She's gone. Stay with me, Hannah, or she'll come back. I think she'll kill me if I don't find the doll—I know she will."

But Hannah, suddenly afraid, and yet not daring to admit having seen anything, having heard anything, said, "There's no one here but us, Aunt Emmy."

Emma nodded. "Not now, Hannah. But later—she'll come back again as soon as you're gone. Then I'll have to hunt and hunt and hunt again. Tonight she said to me, '*When I have the doll, Emmy, I shall have you, too.*' You stay with me, Hannah."

Hannah shook her head. "If you need me, Aunt Emmy, you just call, and I'll come. I'll be here in my room all the time. Aunt Sarah's dead, and you're letting yourself get worked up something frightful because of that doll."

Emma protested, mumbling uncertainly to herself. She allowed herself to be

put to bed, and made no protest when Hannah left the room.

In the hall, Hannah stood for a few moments listening for any sound from the room she had just left. Then she looked carefully around her, holding the lamp high; there was nothing there. Her aunt's fear had upset her, too. She went on down the hall to her own room.

But just as she closed the door of her room behind her, Hannah heard as from a great distance, a faint, hardly distinct sound, a rustling coming from far away, moving momentarily closer. For a moment she hesitated; then she shook off the feeling of fear which had come suddenly upon her, and hearing nothing more, went to bed.

She could not have slept long, when she was brought suddenly awake by a voice shrilling into her consciousness. She jumped quickly from the bed and ran to the door. There was nothing in the hall. She was about to run to her aunt's room, when she heard Emma's shrill voice from the stairs behind her.

She turned and ran to the top of the stairs. Then she saw her aunt. Emma was standing on a chair on the landing half-way down, standing before a large portrait on the wall. The portrait stood awry, and in her hand Emma was swinging a doll, holding it aloft. "Here," she was shrilling into the night. "Here, Sarah. Take it. It's yours. Go away now, go away." Then there was a moment's terrifying silence, and Emma's voice rose in a scream of fear. "No, Sarah, no—no . . . *don't* . . . *push* . . . *me!*"

Hannah froze to stone at the top of the stairs. From somewhere above Emma, standing white in her nightgown, two shadowy arms reached down toward her, pushing, pushing. . . . Before Hannah's eyes, Miss Emma swayed, clutching wildly for the portrait with her free hand, and crashed to the stairs, rolling all the way down and coming to a grotesquely crumpled heap at the bottom. Her outflung arm still grasped the doll.

Hannah ran quickly down the stairs and came to her knees beside her aunt's ominously still form. Her trembling hand felt for Emma's heart-beats. There was no movement; Emma was dead. For a moment she continued to kneel there, while a thousand thoughts besieged her perplexed mind. She must call the doctor, she thought, and got slowly to her feet.

She had gone only a few steps from the body, her mind confusedly turning over and over Emma's fear of her dead sister, and her tale of Sarah's warning—that she was coming for the doll, and Emma, too—when she heard a sound that struck icy terror into her heart. She stood still, listening. It was the sound of hurried whispering, together with a near-by rustling—the same sounds Hannah had heard before that night, save that now there were two voices. She whirled about, staring with wild eyes toward the stairway.

Coming slowly down the stairs were two shadows, one unmistakably Emma's, the other—a tall, thin shadow, slightly bent—Sarah's. They floated gently down the stairs, whispering together, preceded by a subdued rustling sound as of a long skirt sweeping the steps, and came to a halt beside the body at the foot of the stairs. Then they bent slowly together above the still hand that held the doll.

As they straightened up, they faded toward the partly open window at the end of the lower hall.

Hannah's frightened eyes were drawn toward the doll. It was moving, slowly, surely toward the window at the end of a shadowy arm—like that arm she had seen before, from above, pushing at

Emma. It crossed the hall, floating in the dim darkness. Then it vanished out the window. With a strangled cry, Hannah stumbled forward and ran to the window. She looked out into the moonlit lawn. There was nothing there.

Kharu Knows All

By RENIER WYERS

A short tale of the retribution that struck the ghoul who preyed on the love of a woman for her dead husband

SELF-DESCRIBED as "The World's Greatest Medium," Tuan Kharu managed to eke out a fairly comfortable subsistence by swindling gullible people who sought communication with the dead. He lived in the hope that one day there would come to his murky, incense-laden séance-parlor an opulent victim from whom he could glean what he termed "important money."

Such a victim was waiting to see him now. Of this he felt certain as—with the trace of a leer on his swarthy and bewhiskered face—his beady black eyes read the name on the calling-card he held in his hand:

"Mrs. Victoria Sanderson."

He had seen that name before. He stroked his black Mefistofelian beard, nodded his turbaned head, and said in an affected oriental accent:

"Tell Madam that I am in meditation. I shall grant her a consultation as soon as I have finished. Begone!"

"Yes, sir." The youth who served as the man's only corporeal assistant, a combination office-boy and secretary, retreated from the parlor to the reception room, closing the door behind him.

The instructions, Kharu decided, would keep the woman in properly awesome suspense, while he prepared for the interview. He went about this preparation, humming a little tune. It was not, as one might have expected, an exotic strain from the mystic East, nor yet a spiritual hymn. It was *Happy Days Are Here Again,* a melody reminiscent of the days of his fraudulent stock and bond activities, when he was known as Tim Carewe, salesman of spurious securities.

He had, when stocketeering ceased to be profitable, applied his talents to his present fake mediumship. By changing his name and raising a mustache and beard, he had eluded his duped investors and outraged creditors. With the aid of a few books of occult lore, he became a sufficiently transformed personality to establish himself in his new business without leaving town.

"Happy days are here again, te-dum-tedum," he concluded as he studied the contents of his filing-cabinet. It contained, in alphabetical order, death notices clipped from the press. In a trice, he found what he wanted, a clipping only seven days old. He compared it with the calling-card and chuckled. The clipping bore the words:

"Sanderson—Joseph L. Sanderson, beloved husband of Victoria. Funeral from late residence, 1087 Astor Street, June 5th." This was pasted on an index card

on which was penciled, "See General News File."

The swindler's beady eyes gleamed, for this notation meant that the deceased had been prominent enough to "rate" an obituary in the news columns. Yes, here it was, a brief biography of Joseph L. Sanderson, wealthy, retired lumber dealer. The item was illustrated with a one-column, half-tone reproduction of a photograph portraying a firm, leonine face, a broad forehead under a thick mane of snow-white hair.

KHARU studied the clippings a moment, then put them away and darkened the room by drawing the long window-drapes together. He turned a light switch. The effect of these maneuvers was a dim, eery light in which nothing was clearly discernible. The smoking incense-burners enhanced the mystery of the atmosphere. It was one in which susceptible people could easily delude themselves into believing that they were in the presence of the wraiths and souls of their departed loved ones summoned here by the self-acclaimed supernatural powers of the Great Kharu. He seated himself in a throne-like chair behind the massive table on which reposed a huge crystal globe. He adjusted his turban and pressed a buzzer.

Mrs. Victoria Sanderson, elderly and bent, was escorted in by the medium's assistant. He left her standing timidly in the center of the séance-parlor and backed out, closing the door softly. She peered about her and gasped, as from a deep shadow Kharu rose majestically to his feet. He was draped in a flowing robe of blood-red silk. He stepped from behind the table, swept forward, bowed low over the timid little woman's hand and said in soothing, sympathetic tones:

"My dear Madam Sanderson! I am honored. Pray be seated here before the crystal and compose yourself. Do not speak until you are ready. I feel with you, and deeply, the sorrow that grips your heart in these dark days of bereavement. But your sorrow will be lightened. I know, for Kharu knows all. Only yesterday, during my hour of meditation there appeared to my vision the face of a kindly man, a good man, with snow-white hair, who whispered to me, 'Victoria will come. Tell Victoria not to grieve too deeply, for death is merely one's passing through a door to a better world. I am happy here in the spirit realm and I want her to be happy, too.' Those, Madam, are the very words the spirit spoke to me."

The aged woman's face was lighted with hope. "That was Joseph!" she exclaimed excitedly. "It's true! The dead do live again! He always said so. His friends never knew it, but he was deeply interested in psychic phenomena. He often told me that if he died first he'd come back or send a message to me. I did not think of that until last night when I saw your advertisement in *The Neighborhood Observer* and decided to come here."

"He guided you, caused you to read my announcement," said the Great Kharu solemnly.

He was pleased to note that the woman was even more impressionable than she had at first appeared. Recently widowed, with no kin in whom she could confide, she was pathetically eager to believe that there could be a return of the soul of the man who had been everything to her. As she spoke, she unwittingly revealed things which, when repeated to her in a different phraseology a few minutes later by Kharu, filled her with reverent awe.

"You are a great man, Kharu," she said after the séance.

He modestly bowed in ackonwledgment.

WITHIN a few weeks, she was entirely under his influence. Gradually the control of the fortune her husband had bequeathed to her slipped into the greedy fingers of the faker. He had scores of devices for parting her from her money. At his word, she contributed to him sums of cash and checks, for non-existent "causes and uplifts". She donated fifty thousand dollars to help him found an "Institute of Psychic Research". Of this sum he actually spent a few dollars for blue-prints and a prospectus. The rest he banked under his own name.

He poisoned her mind against the counsel of well-meaning acquaintances who admonished her not to be so reckless with her inheritance. He succeeded in his designs by convincing her that all his suggestions as to her investments came from her dead husband. Several times he had caused the spirit of Joseph L. Sanderson to appear before her in the darkness of the séance-parlor. She did not know that what she saw was a stereopticon projection of a slide made from the newspaper picture of the deceased. Kharu so cleverly concealed the lantern and arranged the lighting effects that his own sheeted body, moving slightly under the drape on which the picture was projected, seemed part of the specter that bore a strong leonine head crowned with a thick shock of snow-white hair.

"I speak through the voice of Kharu," said the specter. "Kharu knows all. He is our friend. Give him power of attorney. Place all you possess in his care."

This message and others in a similar vein produced excellent results for Kharu. Within a year he had bled the woman penniless.

"What shall I do now, Kharu?" she asked tearfully. "I am facing eviction from the apartment in which Joseph and I spent so many happy years. The tradesmen are dunning me. And now you say that the money I entrusted to you is all gone!"

"Yes," said Kharu coldly. "Most of the investments recommended by the spirit of your departed husband are hopelessly lost." The faker knew from experience that the quickest way of getting rid of fleeced victims was to be "hard-boiled" about it.

"But I gave you——"

"You forced the money on me, Madam!" He glared hostilely.

"But can't you help me? Please! Ask Joseph—he would help me."

"I've been unable to get in communication with the spirit of Joseph L. Sanderson for some time. Perhaps he is angry that you have wasted your inheritance by living beyond your means. Whatever the cause, silence is the only effect of my recent attempts to evoke his spirit. It's strange, but"—he shrugged "—it's the way of the occult world." He glanced at his wrist-watch.

"I have another appointment," he lied. "Will you come to see me some other time? I shall be glad to give you another consultation—at the usual price."

She fumbled with her gloves, staring at him rheumy-eyed, apparently too dulled by the dread of bleak poverty to comprehend. "I said that I have another appointment," he rasped. "Please get out!"

THE very next morning after this interview, Kharu dismissed his assistant and closed his office doors for ever. By evening he was ensconced in his new quarters in a penthouse thirty-eight stories above Lake Shore Drive. Gone were his mustache and beard. Gone were the turban and flowing robes. He was his old self again, Tim Carewe, sleeker, more dapper, and richer than ever before. Smoking a fifty-cent cigar, he strolled pridefully through the apartment, only half listening to the expensive radio in

the ornate living-room. The radio voice, racing against time, rattled on:

"——the body of the suicide who leapt to her death in the Chicago River from the Michigan Avenue bridge last midnight was recovered today and identified as that of Mrs. Victoria Sanderson, widow of the late Joseph L. Sanderson, millionaire lumber dealer who died at almost the same hour, the same day, exactly a year ago. You have just heard 'News Flashes' from Station WLS. We return to our studios where Finney Briggs and his orchestra are playing——"

Carewe leapt to the instrument and switched off the current. "God!" he muttered. "I didn't think she'd do that."

But the shock was only momentary. He shook it off with a shrug of his shoulders. Too bad! She had been such a "lovely mooch". So easy to "take". With the cigar held at a cocky angle in his smug, oily face, he plunged his hands into his pockets and strolled leisurely out through the French doors onto the terrace. Ah, this was glorious!—this sense of being on top of the world, literally and figuratively. He leaned on the parapet, gazing out over the blackness of Lake Michigan and the stars overhead. Directly below him some four hundred feet down, two streams of autos flowed past each other, almost in silence; for at this great height the hum of motors and swish of rubber on concrete was barely audible.

This quietness, this remoteness from the mundane life below, however, instead of having a soothing effect, began—after a few moments—to give him a sensation of uneasiness, a tinge of scalp-tickling fear. The palms of his hands grew moist with sweat. He felt that he was being watched. He whirled about. What he saw caused him to cringe back against the parapet in terror.

There on the tiled terrace, between him and the French doors, stood an elderly pair. The woman was small and bent, the man stocky. From his broad shoulders protruded a short, stout neck above which was a firm leonine face under a thick shock of white hair.

Tim Carewe stared and stared but could not stare his visitors away.

His throat muscles tightened in fear. "Mrs. Sanderson," he barely managed to whisper huskily, "who—what——" He could not finish. He ran his hand over his face as though to brush away what he saw. It was a futile gesture. The pair was approaching him, drawing ever nearer. This thing could not be!

"Go away, go away!" he screamed. "You're dead, both of you! You can't come back like this! I know. I'm Kharu, the World's Greatest Spirit Medium. Kharu knows all. I know there are no ghosts. It's all a racket, I tell you. A racket!"

Still the bent little woman and the stocky old man approached him. They were not walking—yet they moved toward the cowering figure of the once dapper Tim Carewe.

A horrible obsession seized his brain; it was that if this pair touched him he would become as they, shadowy, unreal, not of this earth and flesh. The obsession drove reason from his mind, as inch by inch the figures wafted forward. He scrambled up onto the ledge of the parapet.

The pair was now directly before and below him. The short, stocky man's firm leonine face under the shock of white hair glared up at him, relentlessly and coldly. The little, bent woman shook her head sadly. From the tile, the figures rose upward, wavering slightly like smoke in a current of air. Only their staring, accusing eyes remained steady. They bored deep into the brain of Tim Carewe.

He gibbered wildly and leapt into space.

The Kelpie

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

What was that Thing that rose up out of the little aquarium?—a brief tale of horror

NO SOONER had Cannon closed and latched the door than Lu was in his arms, and they were kissing with the hungry fierceness of lovers who doubt their own good fortune. Thus for a delirious, heart-battering moment; then Lu pulled nervously away.

"We're being watched," she whispered breathlessly.

The big, dark man laughed down at her worried blue eyes, her shining wealth of ale-brown hair, her face like an ivory heart, the apprehensive tautness of her slender figure. "That's guilty conscience, Lu," he teased. "You know I wouldn't have invited you to my apartment without giving my man the night off. And even if someone did see us, why be afraid? Don't we love each other?"

She allowed him to bring her into the parlor and draw her down beside him on a divan, but she still mused apprehensively.

"I could swear there were eyes upon us," she insisted, half apologetically. "Hostile eyes."

"Maybe they're spirits," Cannon cried gayly, his own twinkling gaze sweeping around to view in turn the paintings on the walls, the hooded lamps, the bookshelves, the rich, comfortable furniture, the big box-shaped aquarium in the darkest corner. Again he chuckled. "Spirits—that's a pun, you know. The lowest form of wit."

From a taboret at his elbow he lifted a decanter of brandy and poured two drinks with a humorous flourish. Lu, forgetting her uneasiness of a moment before, lifted her glass. "To us," she toasted.

But Cannon set his own drink down untasted and peered around a second time, this time without gayety. "You've got me thinking it now," he muttered.

"Thinking what?"

"That something is watching—and not liking what it sees." He glanced quickly over his shoulder, then continued, as if seeking to reassure them both. "Nothing in that corner, of course, except the aquarium."

"What's the latest tenantry there?" Lu asked, glad to change the disquieting subject.

"Some Scotch water plants—new laboratory project." Cannon was at ease the moment his hobby came into the conversation. "They arrived this afternoon in a sealed tin box. Doctor MacKenzie's letter says they were gathered from the Pool Kelp, wherever that is in his highland wildernesses. I'm letting them soak and wash overnight. In the morning I'll begin experimenting."

Lu sipped more brandy, her eyes interested. "Pool Kelp," she repeated. "It sounds seaweedy."

"But these are fresh-water growths. As I say, I never heard of the pool before." Cannon broke off. "Here, though, why talk botany when we can——"

His lips abruptly smothered hers, his arms gathered her so close as to bruise

her. But even as she yielded happily to his embrace the telephone rang loudly in the front entry. Cannon released her with a muttered curse of impatience, rose and hurried out to answer. He closed the door behind him, and his voice, muffled and indistinct, sounded aggrieved as he spoke into the transmitter.

Lu, finishing her brandy alone, picked up the drink Cannon had set down. As she lifted it to her lips she glanced idly over the rim of the glass at the moist tangle in the aquarium. In the dim light it seemed to fall into all manner of rich greens—darkest emerald, beryl, malachite, olive, grass, lettuce. Something moved, too, filliped and swerved in the heart of the little submerged grove.

Cannon was still talking. Lu rose, drink in hand, to stroll curiously toward the big glass box. As she did so the moving trifle seemed to glide upward toward the surface. Coming closer yet, Lu paused to peer in the half-light.

A fish? If so, a very green fish and a very small one—perhaps a tadpole. A bubble broke audibly on top of the water. Lu, genuinely interested, bent closer, just as something rose through the little ripples and hooked its tip on the rim of the aquarium.

It was a tiny, spinach-colored hand.

Half a second later another fringe of tiny fingers appeared, clutching the rim in turn. Lu, woodenly motionless, stared in her effort to rationalize. She could see the tiny digits, each tapering and flexible, each armed with a jet-colored claw. Through the glass, under and behind the fingers, she made out thumbs—deft, opposable thumbs—and smooth, wet palms of a dead, oystery gray. Her breath caught in mute, helpless astonishment. A blunt head rose slowly into view behind and between the fists, something with flat brow, broad lump of nose and wide mouth, like a grotesque Mayan mask—and it was *growing*.

Lu told herself, a little stupidly, that she must not have seen clearly at first. She had thought the creature a little green minnow, but it was as big as a squirrel. No, as big as a baby! Its bright eyes, white-ringed, fixed hers, projecting a wave of malignant challenge that staggered her like a blow. The full, lead-hued lips parted loosely and the forked tip of a purple tongue quivered out for a moment. A snaky odor steamed up to Lu's nostrils, making her dizzy and weak. Wet, scabby-green shoulders had heaved into view by now, and after them the twin mounds of a grotesquely feminine bosom. The thing was climbing out at her, and as it did so it swelled and grew, grew. . . .

THE brandy-glass fell from her hand and loudly exploded into splinters upon the floor. The sound of the breaking gave Lu back her voice, and she screamed tremulously, then managed to move back and away, half stumbling and half staggering. The monster, all damp and green and stinking, was writhing a leg into view. Lu noted that, and then everything went into a whirling white blur and she began to collapse.

Faintly she heard the rush of Cannon's feet, felt the clutch of his strong arms as though many thicknesses of fabric separated them from her. He almost shouted her name in panic. After a moment her sight and mind cleared, and she looked up into his concerned face. With all her shaken strength she clung to him.

"That thing," she chattered, "that horrid female thing in the aquarium——"

Cannon managed a comforting tone. "But there's nothing, dearest, nothing at all. Those two brandies—you took mine, too, you shameless glutton—went to your head."

"Look at it!" She pointed an unsteady finger. "Deep down there in the weeds."

He looked. "Oh, that?" he laughed. "I noticed it, too, just before you came. It's a little frog or toad—must have been gathered with the weeds and shipped all the way from Scotland."

Lu caressed her throbbing forehead with her slender white hand and mumbled something about "seeing things." Already she believed that she had somehow dreamed of the green water-monster. Still, it was a distinct effort to walk with Cannon to the aquarium and look in.

Through the thick tangle of stems and fronds that made a dank stew in the water she could make out a tiny something that wriggled and glided. It was only minnow-size after all, and seemed smooth and innocuous. Funny what notions two quick drinks will give you. . . . She lowered a cupped palm toward the surface, as if to scoop down and seize the little creature, but the chilly touch of the topmost weed-tips repelled her, and she drew back her arm.

"You'd never catch it," Cannon told her. "It won't wait for you to grab. I had a try when I first saw it, and got a wet sleeve—and this."

He held out his left hand. For the first time that evening Lu saw the gold band that he wore on his third finger.

"A ring," her lover explained. "It was lying on the bottom. Apparently it came with the weeds, too."

"You put it on your wedding finger!" Lu wailed.

"That was the only one it would fit," Cannon defended as she caught his hand and tugged with all her might at the ring. It did not budge.

"Please," she begged, "get rid of it."

"Why, Lu, what's the trouble? Are you being jealous because a present was given me by that mess of weed—or maybe by the little lady frog?"

The tiny swimmer in the tank splashed water, as if in punctuation of his joke, and Cannon, falling abruptly silent, suddenly began wrenching at the gold circlet. But not even his strength, twice that of Lu, could bring it over the joint.

"Here, I don't like this," he announced, his voice steady but a little tight. "I'm going to put soap on my finger. That will make the thing slip off."

Lu made no reply, but her eyes encouraged him. Cannon kissed her pale forehead, strode across the room and into a little corridor beyond. After a moment Lu could hear the spurt of a water-jet in a bowl, then the sound of industrious scrubbing with lather.

IN COMMAND of herself once again but still a trifle faint and shaky, Lu leaned her hand lightly upon the thick, smooth edge of the aquarium glass. A fond little smile came to her lips as she pondered on Cannon's eagerness to please her whim. Not even in a silly little matter like this one did he cross her will or offer argument that might embarrass or hurt her. The shedding of that ring would be a symbol between them, of understanding and faith.

Her eyes dropped to the table that stood against the aquarium, with its litter of papers and notebooks. At the edge nearest Lu lay a thick volume bound in gray—a dictionary. What was the term she had puzzled over? Oh, yes. . . . Still lounging with one hand on the glass, she flipped the book open with the other and turned the pages to the K's:

Kelp: Any one of various large brown seaweeds of the families *Laminariaceae* and *Fucaceae*.

Her hazy memory had been right, then, about the word. But why should a body of fresh water be called Pool Kelp? Glancing back at the page, her eyes caught the next definition.

It answered her question.

Kelpie: *(Gael. Myth.)* A malicious water spirit or demon believed to haunt streams or marshes. Sometimes it falls in love with human beings, striving jealously against mortal rivals. . . .

The words swam before her vision, for the snake-smell had risen sickeningly around her. And something was gripping the hand that rested on the rim of the tank.

Lu's mouth opened, but, as before, terror throttled her. Like a sleeper in the throes of nightmare, she struggled half-heartedly. She dared not look, yet some power forced her head around.

The grip had shifted to her wrist. Long, claw-tipped fingers were clamped there—fingers as large as her own, scrofulous green and of a swampy chill. Lu's eyes slid in fascinated horror along the scale-ridged, corded arm to the moldy-looking body, stuck and festooned over with weed-fronds, that was rising from the water. Another foul hand stole swiftly out, fastened on Lu's shoulder, and jerked her close. The flat, grotesque face, grown to human size, was level with hers, its eyes triumphant within their dead white rings, its dark tongue quivering between gaping lips.

Yet again Lu tried to find her voice. All she could achieve was a wordless moan, no louder than a sigh.

"Did you call, sweetheart?" came Cannon's cheery response from his washing. "I'll be with you in a minute now; this thing is still hanging on like a poor relation!"

The reptilian jaw dropped suddenly, like the lid of a box turned upside down. Lu stared into the slate-gray cave that was the yawning mouth. Teeth, sharp teeth, gleamed there—not one row, but many.

Lu's hands lifted feebly in an effort at defense, then dropped wearily to her sides. The monster crinkled its humid features in something like a triumphant grin. Then its blunt head shot forward with incredible swiftness, nuzzling Lu at the juncture of neck and shoulder.

For a moment she felt exquisite pain, as of many piercing needles. After that she neither felt, heard nor saw anything.

THE medical examiner was drawing a sheet over the still, agony-distorted body of the dead girl. The police sergeant, scribbling his final notes, addressed Cannon with official sternness.

"Sorry," he said, "but you haven't explained this business at all satisfactorily. You come down to headquarters with me."

Cannon glanced wanly up from his senseless wrestling with the ring that would not quit his wedding finger. "I didn't do it," he reiterated dully.

The medical examiner was also speaking, more to himself than anyone: "An autopsy might clear up some points. Those inflamed, suppurated wounds on the neck might have been made by a big water-snake. Or," he added, with a canny glance at the sergeant, "by a poisoned weapon constructed to simulate such a creature's bite."

Cannon's last vestige of control went. "I tell you," he snarled desperately, "that she and I were the only living things here tonight—the only living things." He broke off, becoming aware of movement in the aquarium. "Except, of course, that little frog in there."

The creature among the weeds, a tiny sliver of agile greenness, cavorted for a moment on the surface of the water as if in exultation, then, before any of the three watchers could get a fair look at it, dived deep into the heart of the floating mess.

The Snakeskin Cigar-Case*

By BODO WILDBERG

An eery and dread experience in the tropics—an unusual story

JUST as every blow against the earth, even the tread of the smallest child, moves it a little, so every experience that befalls any one of us makes a change in him.

There are sensitive natures that feel a man's past in his personality very distinctly. I think I am one of them.

The first time I set eyes on the little man with the snakeskin cigar-case, his uncanny history worried me.

Mind you, I didn't know anything about his history, or about *him*. There was nothing striking in his appearance. He was carefully dressed, had a bloodless little face and a shriveled little body, and he stooped when he walked. He might have been anywhere from forty to sixty years old. There was something about him that reminded me of a mouse, or, to be more exact, of a certain curious Indian rodent that I had seen several times in the zoological garden. His small black eyes roamed about uneasily, and there was a timid, deprecating sort of half-smile on his thin-lipped mouth. His complexion was yellowish, his skin was wrinkled, his hair was black with a sprinkling of gray. There was nothing startling about him anywhere.

But the first time I caught sight of him, I lost myself in strange, sultry dreams of the tropical jungle, and just missed being run over by an auto-truck. A few days later, when I passed him again, an exactly similar vision came back to me, and I bumped into a fat old lady and nearly lost my balance. After that, when I caught sight of his characteristically tilted gray hat and his overcoat trimmed with gray fur, I turned and went the other way in a hurry. I had a feeling that his star and mine clashed in the heavens, and that any contact with him would bring me bad luck.

I have always been a firm believer in signs. Every day is crammed with prophecy. But the trouble is that the senses of most of us are so dull and unreliable that we misinterpret the warnings that come to us. The event proved that I was right about the little man's strange past; but I met him—once—with impunity.

The meeting would never have occurred if it had not been for a curious accident—if there *are* any accidents in this grotesquely complicated but mysteriously ordered world.

I had been at the movies. The picture was an unconvincing exotic thing, no doubt patched up in Hollywood somehow, and I had been bored to tears. I remembered a nice little tea-room down a back street, where I knew I could get a cup of real East Indian coffee and wash the tawdry picture out of my memory. But when I walked into the nice little place, I was disappointed to find every table occupied. At last I descried, over in an alcove by itself, a tiny table with one empty seat. The other was taken by a man who was mostly buried under the *New York Times*. I breathed a sigh of relief and stepped over to him.

"This seat isn't occupied, is it, sir?"

The *Times* came down a few inches, and—I stared into the face of the little man who looked like an Indian rodent!

*Adapted by Roy Temple House from the German.

I had an impulse to turn and run, but I checked it. I sat down, as nonchalantly as I was able, and ordered a cup of Java.

THE little man seemed glad to have my company. In a curious, half-foreign accent, he started a friendly conversation at once. It transpired that he had come in, a few minutes earlier, from the same movie theater where I had been.

"Those fellows don't know the first thing about Sumatra! Not the first thing, I tell you! Vegetation all wrong! Costumes completely impossible! And the actors—stuff——"

He stopped suddenly, and his face darkened as if he had been assailed by painful memories.

"Have you been there yourself?" I inquired.

"Been there—I guess I *have* been there! Did you ever hear of the Bonaliva peninsula?—I lived there for——"

His eyes had taken on a far-away look. He swallowed with a painful effort. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

"I don't talk about it much. But I think maybe *you* would understand a little——"

He dreamed a while longer. Then he put his hand in his inside breast pocket.

"Have a cigar, sir!"

He held out a cigar-case made of a beautifully mottled leather with an extraordinary shimmer about it. It had short, broken red-brown and reddish-gray stripes—I had never seen anything like it. I noticed that the little man handled the case with a peculiarly caressing touch.

He saw my eyes fixed curiously on it.

"Yes, sir, it *is* handsome. And I wouldn't part with it for the world! Not so much because it's good-looking as because——"

He stopped. I waited a moment. Then I helped him out.

"Because of its associations, I suppose," I said.

"Exactly. Because of its associations," he agreed, and stopped again. "It's a reminder of what I loved most in all the world. It's the skin of a snake——"

I was puzzled. "You don't mean that you loved a snake——"

"Oh, no!" he said hastily. "That is—not exactly—I don't know. All I do know, is, I loved a woman——"

I waited a while longer. And my patience was rewarded.

"I don't know whether you know," he went on after a while, "that an important industry of the Bonaliva region of Sumatra is the working up of snakeskins into various kinds of leather goods. The industry was started a good many years ago by a Dutch firm, but the Malays have developed remarkable skill in handling the skins. The natives in that part of the island are a wild lot and they used to make a great deal of trouble, and the climate is something hideous—swamps, fever, madness, murder, a regular hell of a place. But the healthy young fellows they sent over seas to look after the business—I was one of them—were extremely well paid, and we usually stood it pretty well for a few years and got out with whole skins.

"But if ever the Devil himself walked the earth, he walked the Bonaliva peninsula. And his first lieutenant was Antananiki, the magician, the brown fiend that had half the peninsula in the hollow of his hand—damn him!"

He held his cigar between two fingers and studied it strangely. I could see that his hand was shaking.

"Sort of medicine man among the Malays, you understand. Pure bunk, of course. Antananiki hated me from the beginning. That was because he knew Banta cared for me, and for all his superior demigod attitude, I knew he was

sweet on Banta, too. Banta! She wasn't a Malay girl, she was a fairy. Pretty and slender and wise—not dark at all, I tell you—sort of gleaming golden complexion, you might call it."

He shuddered. Then he went on, more rapidly.

"She had Dutch blood. You wouldn't have thought she was anything else than a South European. And I want you to understand that the relations between the two of us weren't at all like most of those low-lived colonial affairs. I looked on Banta as my wife in the sight of God; I had made all my plans to give her an education, and when we got back to civilization I was going to marry her in church like any Christian.

"There is a strange belief among the Bonaliva tribes that many human beings are lower animals changed into men and women, and that they will eventually go back to their animal forms again. Antananiki said to me once in that damned mocking way of his: 'You know, *Sahib,* that some people have the power to change themselves into what they really are at bottom, into their animal, when the rest of us are asleep. I think *you* could do that too, if you chose. I can see at times that you are almost a tree-rat' (an island rodent a little like a squirrel—*heterosciurus).* 'Shall I help you change yourself into one, so that you can slip into Banta's *kampong* at night without anyone's seeing you?'

"And his ugly painted face twisted itself into a horrible grin that showed his canine teeth like the tusks of a boar.

" 'Then *you* must be a wild hog at times, Antananiki!' I retorted angrily.

" 'It may be, *Sahib.* And some others of our acquaintances may be animals, too. I have known pretty women who were serpents. And a little fat juicy tree-rat would do well to look out when there are serpents around!'

"A FEW days later, at noon, I lay in my hammock trying to sleep. You have no conception of the crushing torment of such a noon in the tropical lowlands. It squeezes your head in a burning vise, it scatters your thoughts, kills your will, makes you a stupid animal with no power to do anything but suffer.

"I lay bathed in sweat, and tried to think of the one pleasant thing in that hellish world—little Banta. My eyes were half open, and my face was turned toward the shady green jungle. All of a sudden a glimmer caught my eyes. Some animal was moving. Was it a chameleon? No, it was something larger. Ah! It was a well-grown python, a sort I had never seen before, with splendid coloring, ranging from golden brown to a delicate rosy gray. It raised its great head, thrust out its long, supple tongue, and seemed to be gazing at me.

"I can't remember that I was in the slightest degree frightened. I gazed back at the snake, dreamily indifferent, scarcely even curious. The snake seemed harmless enough. It came slowly toward me. Then I heard a crackling in the bushes. I knew at once what caused it. Young snake-hunters, not yet subjugated by the heat, like the foreigners and the older natives, often chose this very midday period, when the animals were dull and sluggish, to go out in pairs and beat the jungle in search of booty.

"My visitor seemed to be listening. I had a feeling that I must warn her. But at once I asked myself why I should, since this beautiful skin would make up into some valuable object in art leather.

"I tried to move, tried to call, but I could do neither. Then I began to have the strangest feeling I have ever experienced in my life. It seemed to me that I was growing smaller. My body seemed to be shrinking together. And then I felt

distinctly that I was a four-footed rat—a *heterosciurus!* In that ghastly heat I shivered with terror. The two young hunters broke out into the clearing. *'Ah ve loloda gibai!'* [This is a fine one!] one of them cried to the other. One seized her by the neck, the other by the tail—she struggled desperately—in vain! The strong young fellows carried her off triumphantly.

"As long as the python is young—and its length of life corresponds approximately to that of human beings—the Malays are not in the slightest afraid of the creature. It is not poisonous, and it is still not strong enough to crush a strong man. Moreover, those trained snake-hunters are unbelievably bold and expert.

"The capture had been effected before my eyes like the gliding panorama of a dream. But the effect of it was completely exhausting. As soon as the snake and her captors had disappeared, I fell into a sleep which was rather a painful swoon.

"When I awoke, it was almost night. I should have been at the factory long before. Then I remembered my strange feeling. Was it possible that something obscene and outrageous had happened to my body? Had I not dreamed that I was turning into a tree-rat? I felt over my body, long and carefully. No, I seemed to have my normal dimensions and all my members. But had I not dreamed of something else—of a beautiful big serpent which my cruel hunters had carried off to her death? And all at once, I remembered the magician Antananiki and his ugly insinuations about Banta.

"I LEAPED to my feet and ran to the hut of her parents. She had not been there since morning. I asked everybody in the village. No one knew anything about her. Only one little boy declared that he had seen Banta about noon, running away toward the jungle.

"I rushed to the factory. Filled with apprehension and nameless horror, I dragged myself to the repulsive spot where the snakeskins are peeled off. We were mercifully careful to kill the poor beasts with a club before we skinned them.

"And there, at the carrion pit, stood the ugly magician Antananiki, watching the men at work and gloating over the poor victims. When he saw me, his grin turned more devilish than ever. It would have given me the keenest pleasure to flay him as they were flaying those poor dead reptiles, without stopping to knock him in the head first.

"But I could do nothing. I was rooted to the ground. And I stood by, mute and motionless, as they stripped the skins from three or four ordinary pythons. Then they dragged up a beautiful, shimmering body, and—I can't go on——"

The little man swallowed a great mouthful of hot coffee. In a few moments he continued, a little unsteadily but calmly.

"We were never able to learn anything of Banta. Some of the villagers declared that she had had a disagreement with her parents and conjectured that she had run off to another village. But we could find no trace of her on the peninsula, and anyway, I knew she loved me and had been pleased at the idea of leaving the island with me.

"I had this case made from a piece of the skin. I never found anybody who had ever seen a skin just like it. Of course that doesn't prove anything, but——

"Curious odor, hasn't it?" He thrust it under my nose. Then he did the same with his own. But I almost had the feeling, before he pushed it carefully back into his inside breast pocket, that he had touched his lips to it.

"I was in Palembang some time later," he said musingly. "I had got over it all,

after a fashion, and life had begun to have a certain charm for me again. I met an old crony in the capital, a young Spaniard that I hadn't seen for two or three years. We went out to see the sights together. 'Man,' the Spaniard kept repeating, 'you don't look at all as you used to!' He insisted that I get weighed and measured. I had lost more than twenty-five pounds—strange, for I felt well enough and I hadn't been fat before. But when they measured my height, I was more than an inch and a half shorter than the height I thought I remembered. Either the thing I had gone through had affected my memory, or——"

And the little rodent-face puckered up in puzzled and painful musing.

The Ring of Thoth

By A. CONAN DOYLE

MR. JOHN VANSITTART SMITH, F.R.S., of 147-A Gower Street, was a man whose energy of purpose and clearness of thought might have placed him in the very first rank of scientific observers. He was the victim, however, of a universal ambition which prompted him to aim at distinction in many subjects rather than pre-eminence in one. In his early days he had shown an aptitude for zoology and for botany which caused his friends to look upon him as a second Darwin, but when a professorship was almost within his reach he had suddenly discontinued his studies and turned his whole attention to chemistry. Here his researches upon the spectra of the metals had won him his fellowship in the Royal Society; but again he played the coquette with his subject, and after a year's absence from the laboratory he joined the Oriental Society, and delivered a paper on the hieroglyphic and demotic inscriptions of El Kab, thus giving a crowning example both of the versatility and of the inconsistency of his talents.

The most fickle of wooers, however, is apt to be caught at last, and so it was with John Vansittart Smith. The more

he burrowed his way into Egyptology the more impressed he became by the vast field which it opened to the inquirer, and by the extreme importance of a subject which promised to throw a light upon the first germs of human civilization, and the origin of the greater part of our arts and sciences. So struck was Mr. Smith that he straightway married an Egyptological young lady who had written upon the Sixth Dynasty, and having thus secured a sound base of operations he set himself to collect materials for a work which should unite the research of Lepsius and the ingenuity of Champollion. The preparation of this *magnum opus* entailed many hurried visits to the magnificent Egyptian collections of the Louvre, upon the last of which, no longer ago than the middle of last October, he became involved in a most strange and noteworthy adventure.

The trains had been slow and the Channel had been rough, so that the student arrived in Paris in a somewhat befogged and feverish condition. On reaching the Hôtel de France, in the Rue Laffitte, he had thrown himself upon a sofa for a couple of hours; but finding that he was unable to sleep, he determined, in spite of his fatigue, to make his way to the Louvre, settle the point which he had come to decide, and take the evening train back to Dieppe. Having come to this conclusion, he donned his greatcoat, for it was a raw, rainy day, and made his way across the Boulevard des Italiens and down the Avenue de l'Opéra. Once in the Louvre, he was on familiar ground, and he speedily made his way to the collection of papyri which it was his intention to consult.

The warmest admirers of John Vansittart Smith could hardly claim for him that he was a handsome man. His high-beaked nose and prominent chin had something of the same acute and incisive character which distinguished his intellect. He held his head in a bird-like fashion, and bird-like, too, was the pecking motion with which, in conversation, he threw out his objections and retorts. As he stood, with the high collar of his greatcoat raised to his ears, he might have seen from the reflection in the glass case before him that his appearance was a singular one. Yet it came upon him as a sudden jar when an English voice behind him exclaimed in very audible tones, "What a queer-looking mortal!"

The student had a large amount of petty vanity in his composition which manifested itself by an ostentatious and overdone disregard of all personal considerations. He straightened his lips and looked rigidly at the roll of papyrus, while his heart filled with bitterness against the whole race of traveling Britons.

"Yes," said another voice, "he really is an extraordinary fellow."

"Do you know," said the first speaker, "one could almost believe that by the continual contemplation of mummies the chap has almost become half a mummy himself?"

"He has certainly an Egyptian cast of countenance," said the other.

John Vansittart Smith spun round upon his heel with the intention of shaming his countrymen by a corrosive remark or two. To his surprize and relief, the two young fellows who had been conversing had their shoulders turned toward him, and were gazing at one of the Louvre attendants who was polishing some brass-work at the other side of the room.

"Carter will be waiting for us at the Palais Royal," said one tourist to the other, glancing at his watch, and they clattered away, leaving the student to his labors.

"I wonder what these chatterers call

an Egyptian cast of countenance," thought John Vansittart Smith, and he moved his position slightly in order to catch a glimpse of the man's face. He started as his eyes fell upon it. It was indeed the very face with which his studies had made him familiar. The regular statuesque features, broad brow, well-rounded chin, and dusky complexion were the exact counterpart of the innumerable statues, mummy-cases, and pictures which adorned the walls of the apartment. The thing was beyond all coincidence. The man must be an Egyptian. The national angularity of the shoulders and narrowness of the hips were alone sufficient to identify him.

JOHN VANSITTART SMITH shuffled toward the attendant with some intention of addressing him. He was not light of touch in conversation, and found it difficult to strike the happy mean between the bruskness of the superior and the geniality of the equal. As he came nearer, the man presented his side face to him, but kept his gaze still bent upon his work. Vansittart Smith, fixing his eyes upon the fellow's skin, was conscious of a sudden impression that there was something inhuman and preternatural about its appearance. Over the temple and cheekbone it was as glazed and shiny as varnished parchment. There was no suggestion of pores. One could not fancy a drop of moisture upon that arid surface. From brow to chin, however, it was cross-hatched by a million delicate wrinkles, which shot and interlaced as though Nature in some Maori mood had tried how wild and intricate a pattern she could devise.

"Ou est la collection de Memphis?" asked the student, with the awkward air of a man who is devising a question merely for the purpose of opening a conversation.

"C'est là," replied the man bruskly, nodding his head at the other side of the room.

"Vous êtes un Egyptien, n'est-ce pas?" asked the Englishman.

The attendant looked up and turned his strange dark eyes upon his questioner. They were vitreous, with a misty, dry shininess, such as Smith had never seen in a human head before. As he gazed into them he saw some strong emotion gather in their depths, which rose and deepened until it broke into a look of something akin both to horror and to hatred.

"Non, monsieur; je suis Français." The man turned abruptly and bent low over his polishing.

The student gazed at him for a moment in astonishment, and then turning to a chair in a retired corner behind one of the doors he proceeded to make notes of his researches among the papyri. His thoughts, however, refused to return into their natural groove. They would run upon the enigmatical attendant with the sphinx-like face and the parchment skin.

"Where have I seen such eyes?" said Vansittart Smith to himself. "There is something saurian about them, something reptilian. There's the membrana nictitans of the snakes," he mused, bethinking himself of his zoological studies. "It gives a shiny effect. But there was something more here. There was a sense of power, of wisdom—so I read them—and of weariness, utter weariness, and ineffable despair. It may be all imagination, but I never had so strong an impression. By Jove, I must have another look at them!" He rose and paced round the Egyptian rooms, but the man who had excited his curiosity had disappeared.

The student sat down again in his quiet corner, and continued to work at his notes. He had gained the informa-

tion which he required from the papyri, and it only remained to write it down while it was still fresh in his memory. For a time his pencil traveled rapidly over the paper, but soon the lines became less level, the words more blurred, and finally the pencil tinkled down upon the floor, and the head of the student dropped heavily forward upon his chest. Tired out by his journey, he slept so soundly in his lonely post behind the door that neither the clanking civil guard, nor the footsteps of sightseers, nor even the loud hoarse bell which gives the signal for closing, were sufficient to arouse him.

TWILIGHT deepened into darkness, the bustle from the Rue de Rivoli waxed and then waned, distant Notre Dame clanged out the hour of midnight, and still the dark and lonely figure sat silently in the shadow. It was not until close upon one in the morning that, with a sudden gasp and an intaking of the breath, Vansittart Smith returned to consciousness. For a moment it flashed upon him that he had dropped asleep in his study-chair at home. The moon was shining fitfully through the unshuttered window, however, and, as his eyes ran along the lines of mummies and the endless array of polished cases, he remembered clearly where he was and how he came there.

The student was not a nervous man. He possessed that love of a novel situation which is peculiar to his race. Stretching out his cramped limbs, he looked at his watch, and burst into a chuckle as he observed the hour. The episode would make an admirable anecdote to be introduced into his next paper as a relief to the graver and heavier speculations. He was a little cold, but wide awake and much refreshed. It was no wonder that the guardians had overlooked him, for the door threw its heavy black shadow right across him.

The complete silence was impressive. Neither outside nor inside was there a creak or a murmur. He was alone with the dead men of a dead civilization. What though the outer city reeked of the garish Nineteenth Century! In all this chamber there was scarce an article, from the shriveled ear of wheat to the pigment-box of the painter, which had not held its own against four thousand years. Here was the flotsam and jetsam washed up by the great ocean of time from that far-off empire. From stately Thebes, from lordly Luxor, from the great temples of Heliopolis, from a hundred rifled tombs, these relics had been brought.

The student glanced round at the long silent figures who flickered vaguely up through the gloom, at the busy toilers who were now so restful, and he fell into a reverent and thoughtful mood. An unwonted sense of his own youth and insignificance came over him. Leaning back in his chair, he gazed dreamily down the long vista of rooms, all silvery with the moonshine, which extend through the whole wing of the widespread building. His eyes fell upon the yellow glare of a distant lamp.

John Vansittart Smith sat up on the chair with his nerves all on edge. The light was advancing slowly toward him, pausing from time to time, and then coming jerkily onward. The bearer moved noiselessly. In the utter silence there was no suspicion of the pat of a footfall.

An idea of robbers entered the Englishman's head. He snuggled up further into the corner. The light was two rooms off. Now it was in the next chamber, and still there was no sound. With something approaching to a thrill of fear the student observed a face, floating in the air as it were, behind the flare of the lamp.

The figure was wrapped in shadow, but the light fell full upon the strange eager face. There was no mistaking the metallic, glistening eyes and the cadaverous skin. It was the attendant with whom he had conversed.

Vansittart Smith's first impulse was to come forward and address him. A few words of explanation would set the matter clear, and lead doubtless to his being conducted to some side door from which he might make his way to his hotel. As the man entered the chamber, however, there was something so stealthy in his movements, and so furtive in his expression, that the Englishman altered his intention. This was clearly no ordinary official walking the rounds. The fellow wore felt-soled slippers, stepped with a rising chest, and glanced quickly from left to right, while his hurried, gasping breathing thrilled the flame of his lamp. Vansittart Smith crouched silently back into the corner and watched him keenly, convinced that his errand was one of secret and probably sinister import.

There was no hesitation in the other's movements. He stepped lightly and swiftly across to one of the great cases, and, drawing a key from his pocket, he unlocked it. From the upper shelf he pulled down a mummy, which he bore away with him, and laid it with much care and solicitude upon the ground. By it he placed his lamp, and then squatting down beside it in Eastern fashion he began with long quivering fingers to undo the cerecloths and bandages which girt it round. As the crackling rolls of linen peeled off one after the other, a strong aromatic odor filled the chamber, and fragments of scented wood and of spices pattered down upon the marble floor.

IT WAS clear to John Vansittart Smith that this mummy had never been unswathed before. The operation interested him keenly. He thrilled all over with curiosity, and his bird-like head protruded further and further from behind the door. When, however, the last roll had been removed from the four-thousand-year-old head, it was all that he could do to stifle an outcry of amazement. First, a cascade of long, black, glossy tresses poured over the workman's hands and arms. A second turn of the bandages revealed a low, white forehead, with a pair of delicately arched eyebrows. A third uncovered a pair of bright, deeply fringed eyes, and a straight, well-cut nose; while a fourth and last showed a sweet, full, sensitive mouth, and a beautifully curved chin. The whole face was one of extraordinary loveliness, save for the one blemish that in the center of the forehead there was a single irregular, coffee-colored splotch. It was a triumph of the embalmer's art. Vansittart Smith's eyes grew larger and larger as he gazed upon it, and he chirruped in his throat with satisfaction.

Its effect upon the Egyptologist was as nothing, however, compared with that which it produced upon the strange attendant. He threw his hands up into the air, burst into a harsh clatter of words, and then, hurling himself down upon the ground beside the mummy, he threw his arms round her, and kissed her repeatedly upon the lips and brow.

"Ma petite!" he groaned in French, *"Ma pauvre petite!"*

His voice broke with emotion, and his innumerable wrinkles quivered and writhed, but the student observed in the lamplight that his shining eyes were still as dry and tearless as two beads of steel. For some minutes he lay, with a twitching face, crooning and moaning over the beautiful head. Then he broke into a sudden smile, said some words in an unknown tongue, and sprang to his feet

with the vigorous air of one who has braced himself for an effort.

In the center of the room there was a large circular case which contained, as the student had frequently remarked, a magnificent collection of early Egyptian rings and precious stones. To this the attendant strode, and, unlocking it, he threw it open. On the ledge at the side he placed his lamp, and beside it a small earthenware jar which he had drawn from his pocket. He then took a handful of rings from the case, and with a most serious and anxious face he proceeded to smear each in turn with some liquid substance from the earthen pot, holding them to the light as he did so.

He was clearly disappointed with the first lot, for he threw them petulantly back into the case, and drew out some more. One of these, a massive ring with a large crystal set in it, he seized and eagerly tested with the contents of the jar. Instantly he uttered a cry of joy, and threw out his arms in a wild gesture which upset the pot and sent the liquid streaming across the floor to the very feet of the Englishman. The attendant drew a red handkerchief from his bosom, and, mopping up the mess, he followed it into the corner, where in a moment he found himself face to face with his observer.

"Excuse me," said John Vansittart Smith, with all imaginable politeness; "I have been unfortunate enough to fall asleep behind this door."

"And you have been watching me?" the other asked in English, with a most venomous look on his corpse-like face.

The student was a man of veracity. "I confess," said he, "that I have noticed your movements, and that they have aroused my curiosity and interest in the highest degree."

The man drew a long flamboyant-bladed knife from his bosom. "You have had a very narrow escape," he said; "had I seen you ten minutes ago, I should have driven this through your heart. As it is, if you touch me or interfere with me in any way, you are a dead man."

"I have no wish to interfere with you," the student answered. "My presence here is entirely accidental. All I ask is that you will have the extreme kindness to show me out through some side door." He spoke with great suavity, for the man was still pressing the tip of his dagger against the palm of his left hand, as though to assure himself of its sharpness, while his face preserved its malignant expression.

"If I thought——" said he. "But no, perhaps it is as well. What is your name?"

The Englishman gave it.

"Vansittart Smith," the other repeated. "Are you the same Vansittart Smith who gave a paper in London upon El Kab? I saw a report of it. Your knowledge of the subject is contemptible."

"Sir!" cried the Egyptologist.

"Yet it is superior to that of many who make even greater pretensions. The whole keystone of our old life in Egypt was not the inscriptions or monuments of which you make so much, but was our hermetic philosophy and mystic knowledge, of which you say little or nothing."

"Our old life!" repeated the scholar, wide-eyed; and then suddenly, "Good God, look at the mummy's face!"

The strange man turned and flashed his light upon the dead woman, uttering a long, doleful cry as he did so. The action of the air had already undone all the art of the embalmer. The skin had fallen away, the eyes had sunk inward, the discolored lips had writhed away from the yellow teeth, and the brown mark upon the forehead alone showed that it was indeed the same face which had shown such youth and beauty a few short minutes before.

The man flapped his hands together in

grief and horror. Then, mastering himself by a strong effort, he turned his hard eyes once more upon the Englishman.

"It does not matter," he said, in a shaking voice. "It does not really matter. I came here tonight with the fixed determination to do something. It is now done. All else is as nothing. I have found my quest. The old curse is broken. I can rejoin her. What matter about her inanimate shell so long as her spirit is awaiting me at the other side of the veil!"

"These are wild words," said Vansittart Smith. He was becoming more and more convinced that he had to do with a madman.

"Time presses, and I must go," continued the other. "The moment is at hand for which I have waited this weary time. But I must show you out first. Come with me."

TAKING up the lamp, he turned from the disordered chamber, and led the student swiftly through the long series of the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Persian apartments. At the end of the latter he pushed open a small door let into the wall, and descended a winding stone stair. The Englishman felt the cold fresh air of the night upon his brow. There was a door opposite him which appeared to communicate with the street. To the right of this another door stood ajar, throwing a spurt of yellow light across the passage.

"Come in here!" said the attendant shortly.

Vansittart Smith hesitated. He had hoped that he had come to the end of his adventure. Yet his curiosity was strong within him. He could not leave the matter unsolved, so he followed his strange companion into the lighted chamber.

It was a small room, such as is devoted to a concierge. A wood fire sparkled in the grate. At one side stood a truckle-bed, and at the other a coarse wooden chair, with a round table in the center, which bore the remains of a meal. As the visitor's eye glanced round, he could not but remark with an ever-recurring thrill that all the small details of the room were of the most quaint design and antique workmanship. The candlesticks, the vases upon the chimney-piece, the fire-irons, the ornaments upon the walls, were all such as he had been wont to associate with the remote past. The gnarled, heavy-eyed man sat himself down upon the edge of the bed, and motioned his guest into the chair.

"There may be design in this," he said, still speaking excellent English. "It may be decreed that I should leave some account behind as a warning to all rash mortals who would set their wits up against the workings of Nature. I leave it with you. Make such use as you will of it. I speak to you now with my feet upon the threshold of the other world.

"I am, as you surmised, an Egyptian—not one of the down-trodden race of slaves who now inhabit the delta of the Nile, but a survivor of that fiercer and hardier people who tamed the Hebrew, drove the Ethiopian back into the southern deserts, and built those mighty works which have been the envy and the wonder of all after-generations. It was in the reign of Tuthmosis, sixteen hundred years before the birth of Christ, that I first saw the light. You shrink away from me. Wait, and you will see that I am more to be pitied than feared.

"My name was Sosra. My father had been the chief priest of Osiris in the great temple of Abaris, which stood in those days upon the Bubastic branch of the Nile. I was brought up in the temple, and was trained in all those mystic arts which are spoken of in your own Bible. I was an apt pupil. Before I was sixteen I

had learned all that the wisest priest could teach me. From that time on I studied Nature's secrets for myself, and shared my knowledge with no man.

"Of all the questions which attracted me there were none over which I labored so long as over those which concern themselves with the nature of life. I probed deeply into the vital principle. The aim of medicine had been to drive away disease when it appeared. It seemed to me that a method might be devised which should so fortify the body as to prevent weakness or death from ever taking hold of it.

"It is useless that I should recount my researches. You would scarce comprehend them if I did. They were carried out partly upon animals, partly upon slaves, and partly upon myself. Suffice it that their result was to furnish me with a substance which, when injected into the blood, would endow the body with strength to resist the effects of time, of violence, or of disease. It would not indeed confer immortality, but its potency would endure for many thousands of years. I used it upon a cat, and afterward drugged the creature with the most deadly poisons. The cat is alive in Lower Egypt at the present moment. There was nothing of mystery or magic in the matter. It was simply a chemical discovery, which may well be made again.

"Love of life runs high in the young. It seemed to me that I had broken away from all human care, now that I had abolished pain and driven death to such a distance. With a light heart I poured the accursed stuff into my veins. Then I looked round for someone whom I could benefit. There was a young priest of Thoth, Parmes by name, who had won my good-will by his earnest nature and his devotion to his studies. To him I whispered my secret, and at his request I injected him with my elixir. I should now, I reflected, never be without a companion of the same age as myself.

"After this grand discovery I relaxed my studies to some extent, but Parmes continued his with redoubled energy. Every day I could see him working with his flasks and his distiller in the temple of Thoth, but he said little to me as to the result of his labors. For my own part, I used to walk through the city and look around me with exultation as I reflected that all this was destined to pass away, and that only I should remain. The people would bow to me as they passed me, for the fame of my knowledge had gone abroad.

"There was war at this time, and the great king had sent down his soldiers to the eastern boundary to drive away the Hyksos. A governor, too, was sent to Abaris, that he might hold it for the king. I had heard much of the beauty of the daughter of this governor, but one day as I walked out with Parmes we met her, borne upon the shoulders of her slaves.

"I was struck with love as with lightning. My heart went out from me. I could have thrown myself beneath the feet of her bearers. This was my woman. Life without her was impossible. I swore by the head of Horus that she should be mine. I swore it to the priest of Thoth. He turned away from me with a brow which was as black as midnight.

"THERE is no need to tell you of our wooing. She came to love me even as I loved her. I learned that Parmes had seen her before I did, and had shown her that he too loved her, but I could smile at his passion, for I knew that her heart was mine. The white plague had come upon the city and many were stricken, but I laid my hands upon the sick and nursed them without fear or scathe. She

(Please turn to page 118)

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE girl lay white and rigid, as if in a trance. Gunnar touched her forehead, took up a limp hand in his own. She gave no sign of life. He stood looking down at the still waxen features. The rather square, resolute little face was uniformly white, even to the curved, just-parted lips. The hair seemed wrought in metal, so black and heavy and lifeless did it wave above the broad, intelligent brow. Gunnar looked in awe. The girl's animated, sparkling face was changed to something remote and strange and exquisite. Half child, half priestess.

"And in a few short weeks or months," Gunnar muttered, "El Shabur will initiate her. This is the first step. She will perish, as I am doing!"

He bent, in passionate horror, over the still face.

"No! No! Not for you! Dear lovely child!"

He clenched his hands. "But if I disturb him now!"

For minutes he stood irresolute. Fear took him by the throat. He could not—he *could* not interfere. At last his will steadied. He mastered the sick terror that made him tremble and shiver like a beaten dog. As he left the tent, he glanced back once more.

"Good-bye! I'll do all I can," he promised softly. "I'd give my soul to save you—if I still had one." . . .

You will not want to miss this tremendous tale, depicted against the background of the great desert; about Gunnar the werewolf, and the evil Arab sheikh El Shabur, and dreadful occult forces that were unleashed in the desperate struggle for the soul of a beautiful girl. This thrilling novelette will be published complete in WEIRD TALES for next month:

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The Ring of Thoth

(Continued from page 116)

marveled at my daring. Then I told her my secret, and begged her that she would let me use my art upon her.

" 'Your flower shall then be unwithered, Atma,' I said. 'Other things may pass away, but you and I, and our great love for each other, shall outlive the tomb of King Chefru.'

"But she was full of timid, maidenly objections. 'Was it right?' she asked. 'Was it not a thwarting of the will of the gods? If the great Osiris had wished that our years should be so long, would he not himself have brought it about?'

"With fond and loving words I overcame her doubts, and yet she hesitated. It was a great question, she said. She would think it over for this one night. In the morning I should know her resolution. Surely one night was not too much to ask. She wished to pray to Isis for help in her decision.

"With a sinking heart and a sad foreboding of evil I left her with her tirewomen. In the morning, when the early sacrifice was over, I hurried to her house. A frightened slave met me upon the steps. Her mistress was ill, she said, very ill. In a frenzy I broke my way through the attendants, and rushed through hall and corridor to my Atma's chamber. She lay upon her couch, her head high upon the pillow, with a pallid face and a glazed eye. On her forehead there blazed a single angry purple patch. I knew that hell-mark of old. It was the scar of the white plague, the sign-manual of death.

"Why should I speak of that terrible time? For months I was mad, fevered, delirious, and yet I could not die. Never did an Arab thirst after the sweet wells as I longed after death. Could poison or steel have shortened the thread of my existence, I should soon have rejoined my love in the land with the narrow portal. I tried, but it was of no avail. The accursed influence was too strong upon me.

"One night as I lay upon my couch, weak and weary, Parmes, the priest of Thoth, came to my chamber. He stood in the circle of the lamplight, and he looked down upon me with eyes which were bright with a mad joy.

" 'Why did you let the maiden die?' he asked; 'why did you not strengthen her as you strengthened me?'

" 'I was too late,' I answered. 'But I had forgot. You also loved her. You are my fellow in misfortune. Is it not terrible to think of the centuries which must pass ere we look upon her again? Fools, fools that we were, to take death to be our enemy!'

" 'You may say that,' he cried, with a wild laugh; 'the words come well from your lips. For me they have no meaning.'

" 'What mean you?' I cried, raising myself upon my elbow. 'Surely, friend, this grief has turned your brain.'

His face was aflame with joy, and he writhed and shook like one who hath a devil.

" 'Do you know whither I go?' he asked.

" 'Nay,' I answered, 'I cannot tell.'

" 'I go to her,' said he. 'She lies embalmed in the further tomb by the double palm-tree beyond the city wall.'

" 'Why do you go there?' I asked.

" 'To die!' he shrieked, 'to die! I am not bound by earthen fetters.'

" 'But the elixir is in your blood!' I cried.

" 'I can defy it,' said he; 'I have found a stronger principle which will destroy it. It is working in my veins at this moment, and in an hour I shall be a dead man. I shall join her, and you shall remain behind.'

"As I looked upon him I could see that he spoke words of truth. The light in his eye told me that he was indeed beyond the power of the elixir.

" 'You will teach me!' I cried.

" 'Never!' he answered.

" 'I implore you, by the wisdom of Thoth, by the majesty of Anubis!'

" 'It is useless,' he said, coldly.

" 'Then I will find it out,' I cried.

" 'You cannot,' he answered; 'it came to me by chance. There is one ingredient which you can never get. Save that which is in the ring of Thoth, none will ever more be made.'

" 'In the ring of Thoth!' I repeated. 'Where, then, is the ring of Thoth?'

" 'That also you shall never know,' he answered. 'You won her love. Who has won in the end? I leave you to your sordid earth-life. My chains are broken. I must go!' He turned upon his heel and fled from the chamber. In the morning came the news that the priest of Thoth was dead.

"My days after that were spent in study. I must find this subtle poison which was strong enough to undo the elixir. From early dawn to midnight I bent over the test-tube and the furnace. Above all, I collected the papyri and the chemical flasks of the priest of Thoth. Alas! they taught me little. Here and there some hint or stray expression would raise hope in my bosom, but no good ever came of it. Still, month after month, I struggled on. When my heart grew faint I would make my way to the tomb by the palm-trees. There, standing by the dead casket from which the jewel had been rifled, I would feel her sweet presence, and would whisper to her that I would rejoin her if mortal wit could solve the riddle.

"PARMES had said that his discovery was connected with the ring of Thoth. I had some remembrance of the trinket. It was a large and weighty circlet, made, not of gold, but of a rarer and heavier metal brought from the mines of Mount Harbal. Platinum, you call it. The ring had, I remembered, a hollow crystal set in it, in which some few drops of liquid might be stored. Now, the secret of Parmes could not have to do with the metal alone, for there were many rings of that metal in the temple. Was it not more likely that he had stored his precious poison within the cavity of the crystal? I had scarce come to this conclusion before, in hunting through his papers, I came upon one which told me that it was indeed so, and that there was still some of the liquid unused.

"But how to find the ring? It was not upon him when he was stripped for the embalmer. Of that I made sure. Neither was it among his private effects. In vain I searched every room that he had entered, every box, and vase, and chattel that he had owned. I sifted the very sand of the desert in the places where he had been wont to walk; but, do what I would, I could come upon no traces of the ring of Thoth. Yet it may be that my labors would have overcome all obstacles had it not been for a new and unlooked-for misfortune.

"A great war had been waged against the Hyksos, and the captains of the great king had been cut off in the desert, with all their bowmen and horsemen. The shepherd tribes were upon us like the locusts in a dry year. From the wilderness of Shur to the great bitter lake there was blood by day and fire by night. Abaris was the bulwark of Egypt, but we could not keep the savages back. The city fell. The governor and the soldiers were put to the sword, and I, with many more, was led away into captivity.

"For years and years I tended cattle in the great plains by the Euphrates. My master died, and his son grew old, but I was still as far from death as ever. At last I escaped upon a swift camel, and made my way back to Egypt. The Hyksos had settled in the land which they had conquered, and their own king ruled over the country. Abaris had been torn down, the city had been burned, and of the great temple there was nothing left save an unsightly mound. Everywhere the tombs had been rifled and the monuments destroyed. Of my Atma's grave no sign was left. It was buried in the sands of the desert, and the palm-trees which marked the spot had long disappeared. The papers of Parmes and the remains of the temple of Thoth were either destroyed or scattered far and wide over the deserts of Syria. All search after them was vain.

"From that time I gave up all hope of ever finding the ring or discovering the subtle drug. I set myself to live as patiently as might be until the effect of the elixir should wear away. How can you understand how terrible a thing time is, you who have experience only of the narrow course which lies between the cradle and the grave! I know it to my cost, I who have floated down the whole stream of history. I was old when Ilium fell. I was very old when Herodotus came to Memphis. I was bowed down with years when the new gospel came upon earth. Yet you see me much as other men are, with the cursed elixir still sweetening my blood, and guarding me against that which I would court. Now at last, at last, I have come to the end of it!

"I have traveled in all lands and I have dwelt with all nations. Every tongue is the same to me. I learned them all to help pass the weary time. I need not tell you how slowly they drifted by, the long dawn of modern civilization, the dreary middle years, the dark times of barba-

rism. They are all behind me now. I have never looked with the eyes of love upon another woman. Atma knows that I have been constant to her.

"It was my custom to read all that the scholars had to say upon ancient Egypt. I have been in many positions, sometimes affluent, sometimes poor, but I have always found enough to enable me to buy the journals which deal with such matters.

"Some nine months ago I was in San Francisco, where I read an account of some discoveries made in the neighborhood of Abaris. My heart leaped into my mouth as I read it. It said that the excavator had busied himself in exploring some tombs recently unearthed. In one there had been found an unopened mummy with an inscription upon the outer case setting forth that it contained the body of the daughter of the governor of the city in the days of Tuthmosis. It added that on removing the outer case there had been exposed a large platinum ring set with crystal, which had been laid upon the breast of the embalmed woman. This, then, was where Parmes had hid the ring of Thoth. He might well say that it was safe, for no Egyptian would ever stain his soul by moving even the outer case of a buried friend.

"That very night I set off from San Francisco, and in a few weeks I found myself once more at Abaris, if a few sand-heaps and crumbling walls may retain the name of the great city. I hurried to the Frenchmen who were digging there and asked them for the ring. They replied that both the ring and the mummy had been sent to the Boulak Museum at Cairo. To Boulak I went, but only to be told that Mariette Bey had claimed them and had shipped them to the Louvre. I followed them, and there at last, in the

Egyptian chamber, I came, after close upon four thousand years, upon the remains of my Atma, and upon the ring for which I had sought so long.

"But how was I to lay hands upon them? How was I to have them for my very own? It chanced that the office of attendant was vacant. I went to the director. I convinced him that I knew much about Egypt. In my eagerness I said too much. He remarked that a professor's chair would suit me better than a seat in the conciergerie. I knew more, he said, than he did. It was only by blundering, and letting him think that he had over-estimated my knowledge, that I prevailed upon him to let me move the few effects which I have retained into this chamber. It is my first and my last night here.

"SUCH is my story, Mr. Vansittart Smith. I need not say more to a man of your perception. By a strange chance you have this night looked upon the face of the woman whom I loved in those far-off days. There were many rings with crystals in the case, and I had to test for the platinum to be sure of the one which I wanted. A glance at the crystal has shown me that the liquid is indeed within it, and that I shall at last be able to shake off that accursed health which has been worse to me than the foulest disease. I have nothing more to say to you. I have unburdened myself. You may tell my story or you may withhold it at your pleasure. The choice rests with you. I owe you some amends, for you have had a narrow escape of your life this night. I was a desperate man, and not to be balked in my purpose. Had I seen you before the thing was done, I might have put it beyond your power to oppose me or to raise an alarm. This is the door. It leads into the Rue de Rivoli. Good night!"

The Englishman glanced back. For a moment the lean figure of Sosra the Egyptian stood framed in the narrow doorway. The next moment the door had slammed, and the heavy rasping of a bolt broke on the silent night.

IT WAS on the second day after his return to London that Mr. John Vansittart Smith saw the following concise narrative in the Paris correspondence of the *Times:*

"*Curious Occurrence in the Louvre.*—Yesterday morning a strange discovery was made in the principal Egyptian chamber. The *ouvriers* who are employed to clean out the rooms in the morning found one of the attendants lying dead upon the floor with his arms round one of the mummies. So close was his embrace that it was only with the utmost difficulty that they were separated. One of the cases containing valuable rings had been opened and rifled. The authorities are of the opinion that the man was bearing away the mummy with some idea of selling it to a private collector, but that he was struck down in the very act by long-standing disease of the heart. It is said that he was a man of uncertain age and eccentric habits, without any living relations to mourn over his dramatic and untimely end."

The EYRIE

READERS, we cannot emphasize too strongly that WEIRD TALES is *your* magazine, and that we will do our utmost to make the magazine just what you want it to be, and keep it that way. We welcome criticism—and by criticism we do not mean fulsome praise, any more than we mean angry denunciation of all the stories in an issue. But (just between ourselves) the fault-finding letters are studied in this office with even more care and concern than the letters of praise. Let us hear from you, telling us how you like (or dislike) the stories in this magazine, and what you would suggest to make it even more interesting than it is now. Address your letters to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago. If you like the stories, we shall be glad to know it; but if you don't like them—lay on, MacDuff!

Virgil Finlay's Art

Hal Bierman, of Chicago, writes: "Your new artist, Virgil Finlay, has a marvelous technique. His style is simply beautiful. Why don't you try him on a cover once?—say a black and white? That ought to make a striking effect. WEIRD TALES is the *original* weird story magazine, you know. The color displays of Mrs. Brundage are so lifelike that at times they seem to embody a three-dimensional scope. But most of her covers, beautiful as they are, are not weird. Does there always have to be a girl on the cover? Her depictions of men are, to say the least, very anemic, but her gals are O. K. Yowsuh!"

Uncovering New Authors

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "I salute you for a fine issue—May. It's good to see the old type of cover again, with the words 'The Unique Magazine.' However, a better subject might well have been chosen for the illustration. Virgil Finlay continues to delight with his interior art work. How would he be on a cover? Napoli is good in his drawing for Quinn's story. I can't find much to admire in Rankin. In my system of rating, all but three stories in the May line-up got E's. *Strange Interval* and *The Room of Shadows* are in a tie for first

place. Both are definitely off the beaten path. Burks' tale horrified me and gripped me. Quinn's novelette fascinated me; there was something about it that kept my eyes glued to the page and made me feel that here was a great story. For second place, there is another tie. This time it is Hamilton and Williamson. *Child of the Winds* is an appealing yarn, one that makes you imagine wonderful things. Williamson's latest flight of fancy is an excellent science-fiction tale. The basic idea is thought-provoking and the character-drawing is concise. It's an enthralling novel. Bloch is improving and growing comprehensible. His current work is his best since *The Feast in the Abbey.* The latest Doctor Satan tale is about average for the series. I actually thought, for a moment, Ernst was going to end the series but, alas, such was not the case. Among the ultra-shorts, *The Horror Undying* was outstanding. There was one utterly frightening moment in it; a moment which was synchronized with a creaking noise in the house where I was reading. I barely missed jumping out of my skin. Wyers' short was also excellent. Derleth was below standard. *The Red Brain* seemed not up to its reputation—a good yarn though. There is something to what Ronal Kayser says about Doctor Satan, but in spite of everything, the stories follow a stereotyped formula too closely. You can find too many similar stories in WT imitators. Also, I can't forget that Mr. Kayser authored *The Albino Deaths*—a good story, but hardly weird. . . . You're uncovering some excellent new authors. Keep this up and balance them with the old favorites. If you do this, you're going to have one of the best years in WT history."

Burks, Bloch, Lovecraft

Corwin Stickney, Jr., of Belleville, New Jersey, writes: "Although I haven't finished reading the May issue as yet, two of the three stories I have read deserve especial commendation. One is Arthur J. Burks' excellent novelette, *The Room of Shadows,* and the other is *The Faceless God,* by the talented Mr. Bloch. Never have I been disappointed by a story from the facile pen, or typewriter, of Mr. Burks; this was no exception. It was everything you said about it in your introduction. I find Robert Bloch's stories very refreshing, due, probably, to the straightforward manner in which he relates his tales and his excellent characterizations. Personally, I do not have an especial fondness for the Doctor Satan series; but I suppose the majority of your readers approve, else they would not have survived the last ten months. I should like to second Louis C. Smith's plea of some time ago, for less argumentation and more constructive criticism in the Eyrie. The innovation of framing the cover painting is appreciated. I hope you intend to continue the practise. I suggest that you continue reprinting H. P. Lovecraft's short stories. How about *The Moon Bog* for the next one? I have noticed a few requests for it lately. I might mention that I consider Lovecraft, Merritt, Long, C. A. Smith, Williamson, Quinn, Burks, and Moore to be your best authors. Keep them writing!"

Again!

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes another entertaining letter: "*The Room of Shadows* in the May issue was perfect in its grisly horror of little things and strange happenings—so weird. I must confess—the ending was enough to make me shiver—I really did. Well—here I'm all set to be rescued by the mother of Aru and then ye skeer the livin' daylights outten me! Jes' for a change, let's have a real handsome villain—not cruelly so—just handsome. *The Ruler of Fate* is good reading, but there is too much suspense to suit my taste—the poor hero and shero are given no chance to fight. Strange faiths, such as those mentioned in *The Faceless God,* are more interesting—the desert has always fascinated me, and its different modes of living. I was disappointed in not finding Jules de Grandin in the story by Seabury Quinn, but—myomy!—even though the inimitable Frenchman was missing, the story was really good—truly curious. This tale is a much better turnout than a former departure from Jules de Grandin by the author. How quaint and utterly pleasing was *Child of the Winds!* I wish I could control them so nicely—I guess everyone wishes he could. Wouldn't we be comfy—or would we? Well—well—it isn't a vampire and it's not a werewolf—it's sompin' in between, this *Horror Undying.* Is kinda nasty—it always gives me a pain in my teeth when I think of biting human flesh—maybe I'm a sissy after all. Strange appetite is right—a white cannibal. August W. Derleth usually writes very short stories—but they're good—and I like

tales of old Italy—in the days of the Borgias —lotsa naughty people then. Tsk! So long till next month."

Praised with Faint Damns

Willis Conover, Jr., of Kenmore, New York, writes: "Best luck with the magazine. The May issue is swell! Arthur J. Burks' *The Room of Shadows* took first place in my estimation, although it was slightly confused in spots. The Doc Satan story was very good, but I wish Ernst would discontinue the series soon. There is such a thing as drawing a thing out too long! Keep up the good work." [This exuberant praise of the Doctor Satan stories calls to mind the comment of Christopher Sly on the play within a play in *The Taming of the Shrew:* " 'Tis a very excellent piece of work, madam lady; would 'twere done."—THE EDITOR.]

Tales of Ancient Black Arts

Allen Greenwood, Jr., of Exeter, New Hampshire, writes: "*The Ruler of Fate* by Jack Williamson does have its weird parts, but I don't agree with you in bringing in amazingly huge machines and intricate mechanisms. I would much prefer reading a story full of necromancy and ancient black arts, stories such as *The Dark Eidolon* by Clark Ashton Smith and those by Howard in which Conan appears. Another good story was one I read last year sometime about Northwest Smith. I think it was *Julhi* or something like that. And another one was about the same man in the Minga city on Venus. I wish there were more stories like these, or stories of civilization and necromancers which existed in strange countries long before the prehistoric men when the earth was still steaming, when there were supposed to be gods, witches, and fantastic castles of black marble high on gray pinnacles, stories of different dimensions of life on our own earth."

Mr. Bloch's Latest

E. Jean Magie, of Los Angeles, dissents from the chorus of praise that has greeted Robert Bloch's latest story, *The Faceless God:* "To my mind a weird effect is not attained by means of depicting torture, suffering or prolonged cruelty. I refer to Mr. Bloch's offering, printed in the May issue of WEIRD TALES. After reading the opening paragraph I turned, sickened, to Mr. Quinn's *Strange Interval,* which was almost as bad.

We all know that the thumb-screw and the rack flourished in the Middle Ages, but we try our darndest to forget it along with the stake and what not. A good fight, a quick murder, a little spilling of blood all have their place in modern fiction. But the brush must not be laid on too thick or the desired effect is lost. May I suggest that Mr. Clark Ashton Smith find it in his heart to point out to Mr. Bloch a study course in the fine art of repression? Please accept this perhaps somewhat harsh criticism in the friendly spirit in which it is written. The continued splendid high quality of your contributors' output, month after month, year after year, is high tribute to untiring co-operative help given to your writers by yourself and staff."

For the Intellectual Appetite

Samuel Gordon, of Washington, D. C., after giving much constructive criticism of the stories in our May issue, adds: "What I like to see are stories appealing to the intellectual appetite; stories that should come as an aftermath of some delving into such sciences as astronomy, psychology, biology and physics. Tremendous popular interest in these sciences, as evidenced by the widespread reading of Jeans, Eddington, Wells, indicates that a fictional counterpart of science, hinting at vast and unknown forces responsible for the cosmos, would have a large following."

The Doctor Satan Stories

Adelina Hancock writes from Los Angeles: "I want to take this opportunity to congratulate you as editor of WEIRD TALES on the splendid magazine that comes to us each month. I've never missed a copy since the first one I read. A three-year subscription is a fine idea: here's my check for renewal. . . . May I say how much I enjoy your Doctor Satan series? There seems to be some controversy about it, but it is, to me, weird and fascinating and different. . . . C. L. Moore is my favorite; also Edmond Hamilton."

Doctor Satan Getting Better

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "The stories in the May issue of your superb magazine were very good. Doctor Satan seems to be improving. Regardless of contrary remarks, these stories are weird. *Beyond Death's Gateway* was the weirdest and most interesting of the entire series. When I first read *The Room of Shadows* by Arthur J. Burks, I didn't think much of it, but I changed my mind upon rereading it. *The Faceless God* was well written, but Bloch should have emphasized the weird episodes in the story more. To my mind *The Druidic Doom* was his most outstanding story. The current reprint, *The Red Brain*, was all I expected it to be, and then some. I'll wager that no one would think that that short masterpiece was written by a seventeen-year-old lad. It was Donald Wandrei's first and best story, his supreme triumph."

The Hour of the Dragon

Alvin V. Pershing, of Bowling Green, Kentucky, writes: "I believe that *The Hour of the Dragon* by Robert E. Howard is the second-best story he has ever written. His best story was the one in which he went into the lower world and got the termites to eat the foundations out from under the castle he had lost. *The Druidic Doom* is one of Bloch's two best. . . . I missed Clark Ashton Smith's monthly masterpiece and dream lotion."

Seabury Quinn, Take Notice

Kristine Karkau, 203 Stanton Street, Buffalo, writes: "Although this is my first letter to the Correspondence Corner, I am going to start with a sky-high load of brickbats! Seabury Quinn, how could you? What have you done with my lil' blond boyfriend? Here I have a perfectly fierce fixation for blond fellers and when 'the coming events casting their shadows before' announced a story by S. Q. I was overjoyed—and lookit what you handed us. Agony columns please note: Where is my wandering Jules tonite? Please bring him back. I think the Weird Tales Club would be a grand idea. Let me volunteer to be the gatherer-up-of-members around Bflo, N. Y. So if you'll send me a list of members around these parts I'll do the rest. Unlike our friend Donald Allgeier of Springfield, I think most people like to belong to a club for amusement as well as for the sake of uplifting somebody or something. It's fun to belong to a club—let the serious-minded blink behind their 'specs' if they like, but I'll just bet if they were invited to my house to tear the commas and exclamation-points apart in the current WEIRD TALES issue, they'd just fold their hands over their tummies and say 'Ah-h-h'

when the hostess brought in a sweet-smellin' pot of coffee and a plate so-high of gingerbread and whipped-cream!—Yes? . . . Hope I haven't taken too much space to say—*Strange Interval* wins first place for the May issue in spite of Jules de Grandin's A. W. O. L."

Author's Comment

Henry Kuttner writes from Beverly Hills, California: "Can't resist dropping you a line about the May WEIRD TALES. Seeing the cover with the old red border brought back the dear dead days of yore, when the covers—bordered sometimes in black, sometimes in red—were truly weird, although not so beautifully done as Mrs. Brundage's work. The contents didn't belie my first impression, either, for a better batch of stories has seldom been brought together in one issue. More than that, Finlay's illustration for *The Faceless God* was unusual—the first picture I've ever seen that did justice to the Great Old Ones, and made the reader feel their *unearthliness*. Bloch's story is the best he's done so far; Burks' tale was reminiscent of his *Ghosts of Steamboat Coulee,* which I wish you'd reprint; and I take off my hat to you for running Quinn's *Strange Interval.* Too often a great story will go begging because it is off the beaten track. Editors will admit it is unusual, powerful—or even classic—but, hidebound by 'taboos,' they won't buy it. My pet peeve is censorship and everything that smacks of it. Too many narrow-minded bigots are determined to save a lot of people a damn sight smarter than themselves from 'being corrupted.' Result: censorship and editorial taboos. It's a relief to read a magazine that sets the merit of a story above the possible reaction of bluenoses who apparently think that if a potential Jack-the-Ripper reads *Gushy Stories* he will turn out to be a model churchgoer. More power to you! I note in the Eyrie that Mr. Charles H. Bert comments regarding my brain-brat, *The Graveyard Rats,* 'It would have probably been more convincing without the crawling dead-alive man.' Curiously enough, there was no lively ghoul in the yarn in its first version, and I tore my hair for weeks trying to figure out a way to make the rat-burrows large enough to permit a man's passage. After spending hours in the cellar brooding beside certain likely-looking holes in the floor—which I now sus-

pect must be attributed to mice—I finally brought in the 'dead-alive' chap to whom Mr. Bert objects. Aside from the sad fact that few dead-alive men *are* convincing—the ones I've met never convinced *me*, even when they start gnawing on my more fleshy portions—the yarn would have been much less convincing without the perambulating corpse. Besides, I like 'em. Always keep one in my closet for a fourth at bridge."

Concise Comments

J. J. O'Donnell, of New York City, writes: "Your May reprint story, *The Red Brain*, by Donald Wandrei, is 'of imagination all compact' (to quote Shakespeare). It is a perfect story—hardly a phrase could be deleted without injury to the story-structure; and not a word could be added without artistic damage to it."

Carl Jacobi, author of *The Face in the Wind*, writes from his home in Minneapolis: "I can't refrain from passing along a word about the drawings of Virgil Finlay. His work is certainly unusual and in keeping with the magazine." [You would like the twenty-five exquisite drawings by Mr. Finlay in the Wright's Shakespeare Library edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They are incomparable.—THE EDITOR.]

Harold F. Keating, of Quincy, Massachusetts, writes: "I never thought another character would be created to rival Jules de Grandin in my affections, but Ascott Keane is the one to do it. Your new author, Lireve Monet, author of *Norn*, certainly can make characters seem real; which, to my mind, is almost everything in a story. . . . Virgil Finlay is your best artist now, except, of course, Mrs. Brundage. It isn't fair to compare a pen and ink drawing with one done in pastel shades. It just can't be done. Naturally, she has the advantage. Why not let her draw one inside picture, so that we can tell if she really is good?"

Robert Bloch writes from Milwaukee: "New WT struck me as a pretty nice issue, with old-time style of cover portrait, and Donald Wandrei's little classic of all time, *The Red Brain*. I can never read it too often."

Frank L. Cavano, of East Cleveland, Ohio, writes: "I have been buying the WEIRD TALES magazine for almost three years, and I can truthfully say that I have never bought a single issue in which I was in any way disappointed."

Most Popular Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write us a letter, or fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page and mail it to the Eyrie, in care of WEIRD TALES. Two stories are fighting it out for first place in popularity as this issue goes to press. These are Arthur J. Burks' inexpressibly weird story of Chinese sleeve-dogs, *The Room of Shadows*, and Robert Bloch's tale of the Elder Gods of Egypt, *The Faceless God*.

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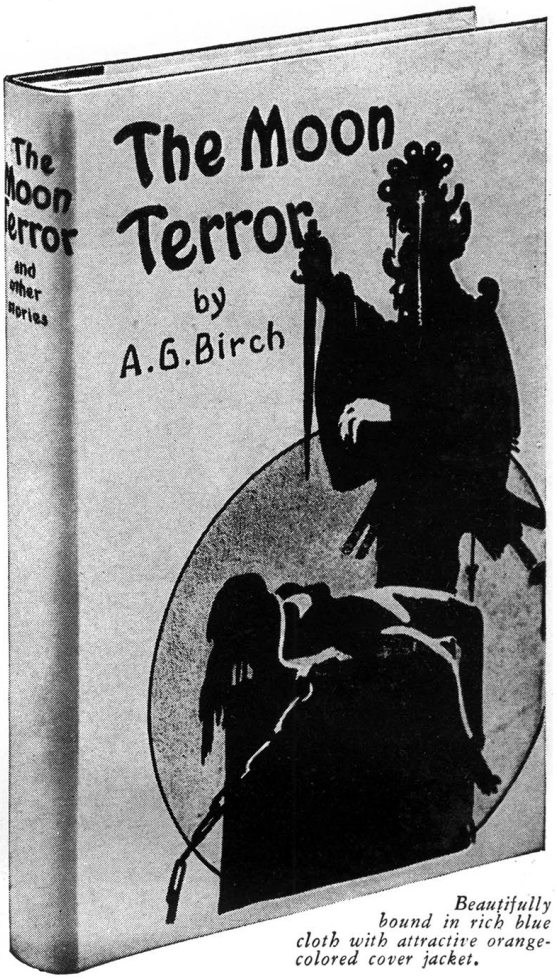

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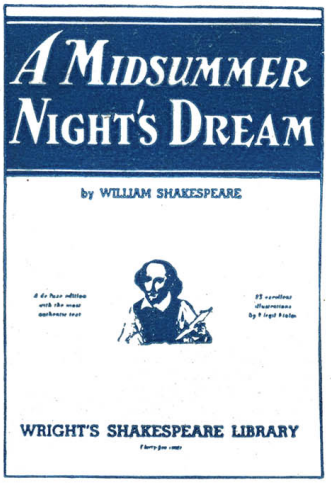

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