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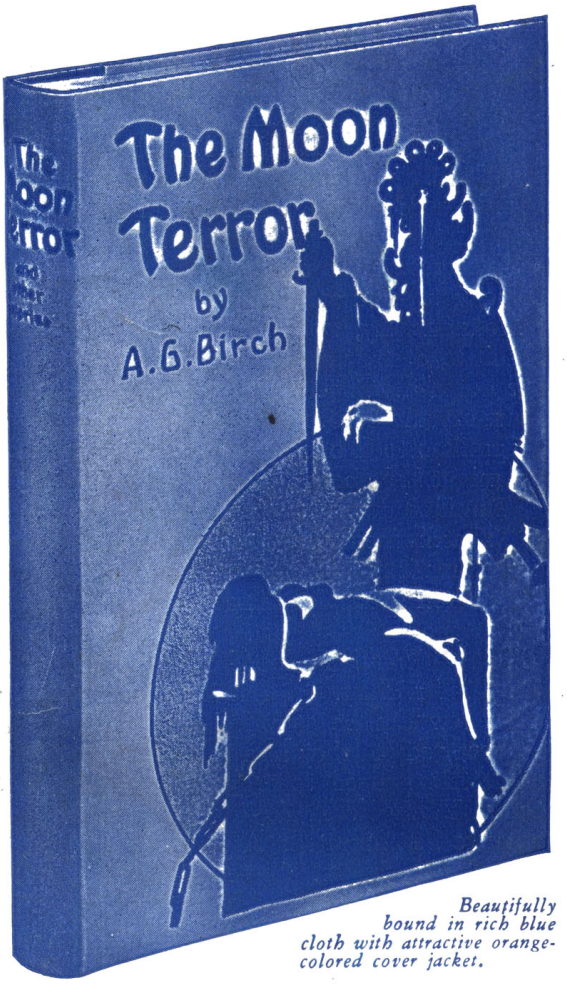

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Wolf-Girl of Josselin

By ARLTON EADIE

An engrossing story of the Ghoul Pack, the Barking Women of Josselin, and the struggle between a mother's love and an ancient curse

"ART is long, but life is short—and I'm as hungry as the proverbial wolf. If you intend to remain much longer perched up there on that bleak hillside, I'd better see if I can get hold of a tent or something, so that we can camp here permanently!"

My sarcasm was entirely wasted, for it fell upon ears that were, for the time being, deaf. Alan Grantham did not even trouble to glance in my direction. He sat, a dim figure amid the bracken, crouched over his sketching-easel, oblivious of everything save the gorgeous hues of the lingering sunset which he was recording on the canvas before him with feverish but deft strokes of his brush.

Now, artistic enthusiasm is all very well in its way—I can be a bit of an enthusiast myself at a fitting time and place—but I'm afraid I'm not made of the right sort of stuff to indulge in scenic raptures at the end of a long and tiring day in the open air. Even a struggling landscape painter needs food occasionally, and I was hungry as well as tired. Alan and I had been on our way back to the little inn where we had taken up our quarters, when my chum had caught sight of the three conical-roofed towers of the distant Château de Josselin starkly outlined against the yellow and crimson of the dying sun. Nothing would satisfy him but that he should get out his traps and make a sketch of it right away.

Thinking that he merely intended to "rough in" a lightning impression with a few broad touches, I had consented. But as the vivid hues of the sunset had become more intense, Alan had become more engrossed, the sketch had become more elaborated—and I had become more famished and impatient to discover what our good hostess had prepared for supper. Moreover, it was at least five kilometers back to the inn, and the muddy country lanes were none too pleasant to traverse in the dark.

My temper was very near the fraying-point as I knocked my pipe out against the stone on which I was seated, and rose to my feet.

"Are — you — coming — home?" I roared in a voice which awoke the echoes of the surrounding hills.

This time he condescended to look round.

"In a minute," he called back. "It's nearly finished."

"You don't say so!" I returned ironically. "But for heaven's sake don't rush your precious picture out of consideration for me. Why not wait another few minutes?—then you'll be able to dash in a moon and a few stars and call the thing a nocturne!"

My friend cut short any further badinage by wiping his palette and brushes and thrusting them into his paint-box. In a few seconds he had rejoined me on the narrow road, carrying the still wet canvas in his hand.

"You won't begrudge your wait when you see this picture," he laughed confidently as he held it up for my inspection.

"I'll admire your daub by daylight," I

told him shortly. "Not being a cat, or an owl, or a mole, I'm not proficient at seeing in the dark—which reminds me that we'll need all our powers of vision to find our way back to Josselin. The night threatens to be as black as a wolf's mouth when the last streak of your wonderful sunset has vanished. We had better put our best foot forward or we shall have Madame Boussac sending out search-parties, thinking we have been carried off by the *Ankou,* the divinity of death which is popularly supposed to wander around the hills and forests at night."

"Or been devoured by the ghoul pack," Alan suggested with a smiling nod.

The name had a sinister sound, but I had never heard of it before. I asked Alan what it meant, but he shook his head.

"Oh, just one of the local superstitions," he shrugged. "The Breton peasantry is one of the most morbidly superstitious races of Europe, and the legend of the ghoul pack is one of their cheery little bedtime stories. I heard some old peasants swapping yarns about it round the fire in the common room at the inn. I could only catch a word here and there, for they spoke in the Breton dialect. What I did manage to pick up sounded pretty ghastly—though it was all nonsense, of course. If the people hereabouts believe a tenth part of their own folklore—well, all I can say is that they must live in a constant state of terror after nightfall!"

"They are an honest and kindly folk," my sense of justice caused me to assert, "though their mentality is a bit on the primitive side."

"You're dead right there," Alan cried with hearty conviction. "For all their veneer of Christianity, the natives of Brittany are pagan to the backbone. They have their wayside shrines and Calvaries, it is true, but they also have their prehistoric Druidical megaliths and dolmens, rude masses of unshaped stone around which queer rites are sometimes enacted on moonlight nights when the parish priest is comfortably snoring in bed. All their superstitions and practises are purely pagan, and some of them date back to the dawn of the very earliest form of civilization. Their firm belief in *loup-garous,* or werewolves, is but another form of the lycanthropy of the ancient Greeks. It's curious, by the way, how widespread this particular tradition is. One finds it occurring in Norway, Russia, France, Bavaria—all over Europe, in fact—and in addition we find variants of the legend in Asia, India, Africa and South America. Considering the universality of the belief that human beings are capable of assuming the forms of wild animals, one might be tempted to suspect that there may possibly be a grain of truth in——"

"WHAT'S that?" I cried, suddenly stopping dead and pointing.

At this point the road threaded its devious way through a dense forest of towering fir trees. High above our heads the interlacing branches and heavy foliage overhung on either side, shutting out the dim light which still lingered in the rapidly darkening sky, so that our path lay like a faint gray ribbon hemmed in by a sea of impenetrable shadows. In the wall of blackness which lay to the left of the road, at a distance of only a few yards from where we stood, I had caught a glimpse of two eyes which gleamed with the lambent reddish glow that could only emanate from the luminous gaze of some night-prowling beast of prey.

"Look—the eyes!" My voice was jerky with excitement as I grasped my companion's arm.

"Where?" he demanded, gazing everywhere but in the right direction.

"There!" But even as I spoke, the luminous points were abruptly obscured.

Alan Grantham turned and gave me a queer look.

"My dear boy, you're dreaming! I can't see a thing that bears the faintest resemblance to an eye. You've been thinking about your supper so much that you've gone light-headed," he chaffed gayly. "Are you sure it was eyes you saw, and not a couple of ghostly mince-pies?"

His skeptical laugh rang out, cheery and confident. But the next instant it was cut short with the abruptness of a switched radio transmission.

"Holy mackerel!" he muttered under his breath.

A dim gray shape had emerged from the tangled undergrowth which bordered the road and was slowly crossing it slantwise to the shadows on the farther side. So closely did the creature's neutral coloring blend with the surface of the ground that it was difficult to distinguish its actual shape in that faint light. We sensed, rather than actually saw, that it was long and lean, with a pointed muzzle and upstanding ears.

Neither of us spoke until the thing had crossed the road with silent, unhurried steps and disappeared in the bushes on the other side. Then:

"It's only a dog," Alan muttered with what sounded like a sigh of relief. "Whew! the brute gave me quite a scare."

I let his remark pass without comment, though I was more than a little dubious about its correctness. My fleeting glimpse of the creature had brought to my mind thoughts unpleasantly reminiscent of the frequency with which the wolf occurs in the folk-legends of the district.

"Yes, it was a large Alsatian dog," my friend repeated. "Must have strayed from some near-by farm."

I knew well enough that there was not a single house or cottage nearer than the village of Josselin, some five kilometers distant, but I didn't feel in the humor to waste time in arguing the point.

"Let's be getting along," I said.

"Still thinking about your supper?" laughed Alan.

But he was wrong. The prospect of enjoying my own long-delayed meal had suddenly taken a secondary position in my thoughts in face of an uneasy apprehension that the creature skulking in the bushes might have hopes and designs of making its supper off me! I was prepared to wager everything I possessed that the thing I had seen was no dog. If it was a wolf—well, I had heard that wolves usually hunted their prey in packs, and if my supposition were correct we would soon have a very definite and convincing confirmation of the fact.

Until that night one of the greatest attractions of Brittany lay in the fact that the majority of its towns and villages are well off the beaten track of tourists. Josselin, for instance, the village which we had made our headquarters, did not even boast of a single-track railroad connection with the outer world, and it was rare indeed for a stranger to be seen traversing its cobbled streets. Just at that moment, however, I would not have minded if whole train-loads of Cook's globe-trotters had been flocking around. But, except for ourselves, the road was destitute of a living soul. And it seemed likely to remain so, for it led nowhere in particular, terminating as it did on the summit of a neighboring hill on which stood a gigantic megalith bearing the designation, the "Devil's Tombstone."

We had proceeded about a quarter of a mile toward the village, and I was just beginning to hope that my forebodings had been groundless, when the sound of a faint, long-drawn howl, coming apparently from the very depths of the forest, caused us to quicken our pace.

"Your bow-wow seems to have a pal handy!" I remarked, giving Alan a mirthless grin. "Several pals, in fact," I added, as the call was answered from various directions. "Perhaps he's calling in his canine brothers and sisters to come and be patted on the back by two benighted artists!"

"Don't talk like an ass!" he retorted, "Anyone would think that you don't believe that they *are* dogs."

"Frankly, I don't," I told him bluntly.

"Of course they're dogs," he answered impatiently. "Dogs howl occasionally, don't they?"

"Yes—occasionally. But wolves always do so—especially when they're calling the pack together for a hunt."

"And whom do you imagine they are going to hunt?" he jeered.

"Us!" I answered grimly. "I don't know what you intend to do, but I'm going to run for the village as fast as I can. What is more, I'm going to dump my easel and paint-box right here in the ditch, so that I can travel faster."

Alan gave a stubborn grunt, as he shook his head.

"What! — run from a few stray curs——"

He got no further, for at that moment a pandemonium of snarling and howling broke out behind us. Round the bend of the road came a pack of a dozen or so unmistakable wolves. The hunt was up, and we were the quarry!

On they came, with muzzles held close to the track we had traversed. Their eyes gleamed redly as they caught the wan rays of the rising moon, and their long, lean bodies stretched in an easy lope which carried them over the ground at an amazing rate. My heart turned to lead as I watched their swift progress. We might as well have tried to outdistance an express train as hope to escape that tireless four-footed horde by the fleetness of our own feet.

"No use running for it," I rapped out. "You'll only exhaust yourself needlessly. If we could find a tree——"

I gazed about me in the hope of finding one up which we could scramble. In vain I looked. The tall, straight trunks offered not the slightest foothold; their jutting branches were hopelessly out of reach.

Still, with our backs against something sold, we might put up some show of resistance against the ravening pack. A large tree trunk—a stone—or——

My eyes, sweeping the hillside in one last despairing search, caught sight of the outline of something which showed a pallid gray in the moonlight. It was the menhir which crowned the hilltop—the solitary mass of unhewn stone known as the Devil's Tombstone. If we could reach it and clamber up its rough surface, we might contrive to hold the creatures at bay until the dawn drove them back to their lairs in the depths of the woods.

"Up, up!" I pointed wildly as I began to mount the slope. "The Devil's Tombstone—it's our only chance of life!"

Then followed a nightmare scramble through briars and bracken, over slippery moss-grown stones and shifting gravel where every upward spring brought down a clattering avalanche of small stones. There was not the slightest semblance of a path, and at any moment we might have found our way blocked by an impassable wall of rock.

I dared not stop to glance behind me, but I heard the chorus of deep-throated growls and yelps which broke from the pack as we quitted the road and dashed up the hill.

Yet, although we must have been in full view by this time, the wolves did not make straight toward us by the nearest route. True to the instinct of countless

generations, their tactics were the tactics of the pack. Hunting by scent rather than by sight, they followed our trail to the very spot where we had left the road, before they commenced to gallop up the hill after us.

Well it was for us that they took the longer route. Had the wolf intelligence been capable of understanding the truth of the twelfth proposition of Euclid, that any two sides of a triangle are greater than the third, they would surely have cut off our retreat. Even as it was, the race seemed fated to end in disaster. A bare dozen yards separated us from the foremost of the pack as we leapt the last of the stunted bushes and began to tear across the clearing which surrounded the ancient pillar of stone.

With a sense of relief which almost amounted to elation I noted that the weatherworn sides of the monolith, though steep, showed signs of fissures which might afford sufficient foothold to enable us to reach its summit, where—for a time, at any rate—we should be safe.

"One more spurt!" I gasped out breathlessly. "Hurrah! We'll fool the greedy brutes of their supper yet——"

My triumphant shout ended in a groan of dismay. Another wolf—a creature of huge proportions—had emerged from the shadow of the Devil's Tombstone, and was advancing straight toward us!

Even in that moment of horrified surprize I was struck by the splendid aspect of the beast—though I would have appreciated its points better had a row of stout iron bars intervened between it and me. Although the animal was much larger than I had hitherto though any wolf could be, it was not its mere bulk that called forth my unwilling admiration. Its coat was sleek and glossy, its body plump and well-nourished, and in its eyes there was an expression of understanding almost human. In contrast to the mangy, lean-ribbed, half-famished pack at our heels, the enormous creature stood out like an immaculate dandy amid a concourse of tattered outcasts.

All this passed through my mind in a fraction of the time it takes to tell. I realized it was a time for quick action, though I was at a loss to understand what possible form of action I could take. The only article in my possession resembling a weapon was a short knife with a pliant steel blade, which I used for scraping the paint off my palette. Its point was so blunt and rounded that I usually carried it loose in my pocket; yet it was better than my bare hands in the encounter which now seemed inevitable.

I pulled the knife from my pocket as I ran, wrapping my scarf round my right hand as some protection from the fangs of the advancing beast. Then, with the courage born of despair, I charged straight down on the wolf which stood between us and our stony refuge.

To my utmost surprize the brute swerved aside and avoided us, leaving a clear path to the monolith!

On we raced with undiminished speed, scarcely daring to believe in our good fortune. A few moments later we had scrambled to the top of the ancient stone and lay, panting and exhausted, a good ten feet beyond the reach of the howling and yelping pack below.

Then ensued the most amazing episode of that eventful night. The lone gray wolf, instead of joining the others in their attempts to scale the rock, at once made a savage attack on the rest of the pack. Crouching back on its haunches, with hackles bristling and fangs bared, it suddenly straightened out its splendid body and, with a loud, menacing growl, hurled itself like a thunderbolt of living bone and sinew, straight into their midst.

I held my breath, expecting to see the

courageous creature torn to pieces before my eyes. It was one attacking twelve—odds desperate enough to daunt the bravest thing that breathed. Yet the very fury of its onslaught seemed to strike terror to the hearts of the attacked. For a few moments I had a confused vision of a maelstrom of writhing bodies and snapping jaws; then, with what sounded like a simultaneous howl of terror, the whole pack turned tail and raced madly for the shelter of the trees, closely pursued by the solitary but indomitable champion that had routed them.

A BREATHLESS cheer burst from our lips as pursued and pursuer vanished into the brushwood.

"Well, Brer Wolf has certainly done us a good turn this time," Alan remarked with a laugh that was slightly unsteady. "I suppose it really *was* a wolf?" he added, glancing at me dubiously.

"What else?" I shrugged.

"It seemed too intelligent, too civilized, if you understand what I mean. It seemed to understand our position and our danger at the first glance, and to do the best thing possible to help us. Now, if it had been a dog, I could understand such a display of friendly intelligence, but—good Lord! who's this?"

Following the direction of his startled gaze, I beheld a sight which filled my mind with wonder. From the very spot where the wolf pack had vanished into the forest a few minutes before, the figure of a tall, slender girl was emerging into the open.

I thought that the events of the night had well nigh exhausted my capacity for feeling emotion, but now I felt my scalp prickling with horror as I realized how narrowly that fair form and shapely limbs had escaped being torn and mangled.

"If the pack had scented her——" I began.

"She does not know her own peril!" Alan broke in as he began to lower himself to the ground. "We must warn her. Come along—you can talk the Breton *patois* better than I."

Very much against my inclinations and better judgment, I found myself climbing down the rock which I had ascended so thankfully a short time since. Alan laughed as he noted the reluctance of my movements.

"Don't funk it," he chaffed. "There's not a single wolf in sight, and I hope you're not going to let yourself be outdone in daring by a mere slip of a girl."

"What business has a mere slip of a girl to be wandering about the woods at this hour of the night?" I grumbled as I reached the ground.

"That's what I want you to ask her, you sap. Gad!" he muttered under his breath, "what a perfect model for a woodland nymph!"

Fancying that I could detect a note of something warmer than mere artistic appreciation in my chum's exclamation, I looked with greater interest at the approaching girl.

I felt my breath catch in my throat as we came face to face in the moonlight. The general standard of beauty among the natives of Brittany is high indeed, but in the girl who stood before me the very pinnacle of flawless perfection seemed to have been reached.

Her features—but how can I describe that which transcends all description? Mere words seem futile and meaningless when applied to that radiant creature who confronted us out of the mystery of the night. Her loveliness seemed more than human—and most assuredly none of it was due to the "art which conceals art" in the estimation of the feminine mind. Her blond hair waved in a profuse disorder of natural curls over her brow and neck. Her smooth skin was deeply tanned by

exposure to the wind and sun. Her cheap cotton frock would have seemed a mere rag but for the superb lines of the figure beneath. Her shapely legs were bare to the knees; her feet innocent of even the wooden *sabots* which the poorest of peasants usually wear. She seemed more like some dryad of the woods than a mundane peasant-girl.

For some reason—possibly it was the memory of my own recent fears—her very calmness irritated me.

"What are you doing here?" I cried as sharply as my halting Breton would allow. "Don't you know that there are wolves about?"

"To my surprize she answered in the purest French:

"Assuredly, *m'sieu,* there are wolves. Have I not just now"—she hesitated—"have I not heard them howling? And you — you did not climb the Devil's Tombstone just to admire the view, *hein?*"

Her self-assurance staggered me. I concluded that she must either be very brave or very stupid. Yet she seemed to have all her wits about her, even to the extent of enjoying some secret joke at my expense. I was in the act of formulating a retort which would convey a rebuke with the requisite amount of dignity, when Alan forestalled me.

"You speak French?" he cried with a boyish laugh. "That's great! I was fearing that I should be left right out of this conversation. Come now, confess. Weren't you horribly frightened when those wolves passed you in the wood yonder?"

She shook her head proudly, almost fiercely.

"I did not fear—for myself."

Alan Grantham smiled.

"But you were just a little nervous on our account? It was very good of you to take such an interest in our safety, but don't you think that your attitude of mind was a little illogical? We were on the top of the high stone, you know, while you were on the ground, at the mercy of the brutes. There was one great wolf in particular, who fought the others and drove them away. Maybe you saw it—rather a fine-looking creature."

"You think so?" she gave a quick smile, almost as though she had misunderstood his meaning and applied the compliment to herself. "Yes, I know the animal you mean. But I am not afraid of it, *mais non!* It will not harm me—or you."

"You seem mighty well acquainted with the nature of the beast," I put in with a sour grin. "How can you possibly tell whom it will hurt and whom it will not?"

The girl lifted her shoulders in a little careless shrug.

"*Calmez-vous, m'sieu.* I know because I know. There are wolves and wolves"—her red lips rippled back in a smile, so that her white, even teeth gleamed in the moonlight—"just as there are men—and men. And," she added as if by an afterthought, "there are women and women, some dangerous, some not; some merciful to save, others eager to destroy." She broke off abruptly and turned on her heel. "Come, it grows very late. I will show you a near way through the woods back to Josselin."

"Through the woods!" Alan echoed in amazement. "The wolves——"

She swung round with a sudden gesture of impatience.

"Have I not said that they will not harm you?" she cried, fixing her dark eyes on my friend's face. "The pack is leagues away by now——"

"But the great gray wolf?" Alan asked softly.

The girl's gaze faltered and dropped.

She hastily swung round, so that her face was hidden.

"Are you coming, or not?" she flung the words over her shoulder.

"I'm certainly not going to allow you to go through those woods by yourself!" my chum declared stoutly.

"*Allons!* Let us go."

She slipped her arm through his with the same lack of self-consciousness that a cat exhibits when jumping on one's knee to be caressed, and together they started to walk across the open space toward the wood. I followed in no very enviable frame of mind.

The whole affair was much too mysterious for my liking. I smiled grimly to myself as I wondered if my light-hearted chum would have been as willing to trust himself to her guidance if the unknown girl had been a toothless hag with a face like a wrinkled walnut!

WE REACHED the village of Josselin without further incident. The wolves had vanished as completely as if such an animal had never existed on the face of the earth. The death-like silence of the great forest was broken only by the scrunching of our feet over the dead leaves and fir-cones which strewed the path.

Alan and the unknown girl led the way, talking gayly and incessantly. I have not the faintest idea of what was the subject of their conversation, but I guessed it wasn't politics. I didn't listen. I had other things to think about as I trudged in the rear, searching the shadows on either side for the first sign of those accursed wolves. I could scarcely persuade myself that we should get back to the inn without another encounter until I saw the turrets of the ancient Château de Josselin loomed near at hand.

Our mysterious guide left us at the entrance to the village, a fact for which I was deeply thankful, for I was in no mood to try to explain to our gossipy hostess things which I had so far failed to comprehend myself. I noticed, however, that the girl's parting salutation was a gay "*Au revoir*" to Alan; to me she merely vouchsafed a cold "*Bon soir.*"

"Maybe you'll be seeing the young demoiselle again soon?" I asked when we had gained our room without overmuch explanations.

Alan nodded, a somewhat guilty flush overspreading his rather handsome features.

"Tomorrow," he admitted; then: "I say, isn't she wonderful!"

"Oh, yes, she's wonderful all right," was my somewhat dry rejoinder. "But who is she?"

"Her name's Corinne and she lives here in the village."

"Very explanatory! But what on earth was she doing alone in the middle of that wood?"

Alan laughed.

"I don't know—and I don't care. I only thank my lucky stars that she did happen to be there."

"Otherwise you might be dead by now?" I queried.

"No," he shook his head with a smile which gave him away completely. "Otherwise I might never have met Corinne."

He uttered the name in such a tone as to convince me that there was nothing more to be said. Seeing that my young friend was suffering from a bad attack of love at first sight, I did the only thing possible. I turned over and went to sleep.

THE next morning I retrieved my painting-materials from where I had dumped them during our hurried flight, and resumed work on my picture. But Alan apparently had other fish to fry. He did some work, it is true, in a desultory sort of way, but most of his time was

taken up by the fascinating young lady who was not afraid of wolves.

It does not take much to set tongues wagging in an out-of-the-way, dead-and-alive place like Josselin; in a week the love affair of the handsome young English artist was the talk of the village. If ever a man was head over heels in love, that man was Alan Grantham. I was scarcely surprized, therefore, when, just ten days after our midnight adventure, he announced his forthcoming marriage and asked me to act as his best man.

You don't need to send out wedding invitations in Brittany. The notary draws up the marriage contract and spreads the good news, and the able-bodied inhabitants of the village rally round as a matter of course to wish the couple every joy and to mop up all the free eats and drinks that may be going. The number of guests who thus invite themselves is a fair criterion of the degree of esteem in which the bride and groom are held. I confess that I was rather curious to see how many would show up at this particular festivity, for I had somehow gathered the impression that the fair Corinne was not exactly popular in the village. The other young people seemed to shun her.

The Breton peasantry may be much the same as other folk in their own family circles, but to strangers—especially to foreigners like us—they are taciturn and suspicious. The most garrulous individual in the place was, strangely enough, the very man who one would think was likely to be able to keep a still tongue in his head. For he was a Government official, the public notary, the man who—with the possible exception of the village priest — was most conversant with the family history and affairs of those around him.

Nicolas Didier was, naturally, a man of some education, and even culture of a superficial sort. He had, he was careful to inform me early in our acquaintance, studied law at Paris in his younger days, and from chance remarks which he let fall from time to time I gathered that he considered himself a cut above the simple-minded villagers—which was probably the reason why he sought the company of Alan and me whenever he could find an excuse for doing so. I came to the conclusion that he was a man of some ability, who had been side-tracked into a paltry but assured Government post amid surroundings which he found particularly irksome.

He called at the inn on the night before the wedding, to get some particulars about the bridegroom which were to be embodied in the marriage contract. Alan, as usual, was out, but I was able to supply the necessary informatiion.

His business completed, the old man seemed in no hurry to take his departure. He sat talking about inconsequent subjects, his beady eyes straying from time to time to the sideboard on which stood the goodly array of bottles which Alan had laid in for the approaching festivity. I took the silent hint and drew the cork of one of the oldest vintages.

"Come," I said, "a glass of wine in which to pledge long life to the happy pair."

I poured out a generous measure and he drained it with relish, with a little neatly-turned oration which was evidently a stock speech that he had used on many previous similar occasions.

"I very seldom indulge in alcoholic liquor, *monsieur,*" he wound up, "but on such an auspicious occasion——" He twiddled the stem of his glass between his lean fingers and gazed dreamily at the bottle.

Now, when a man starts emphasizing his extreme moderation, I have usually found him quite able and willing to drink his share, and maybe a bit over.

"It's a pity to cork such good liquor up again," I said, taking up the bottle. "Do me the honor of joining me in another glass."

"The honor is mine, *m'sieur,*" he assured me, a flush coming into his parchment-like features as he sipped the rich amber liquid. "The village of Josselin is honored too, I am sure, that your esteemed friend should have chosen his consort from its daughters. But the excellent Monsieur Grantham is a stranger from across the sea. He does not know—has never heard of our peculiar legends and—er—traditions. It is not everyone who would choose his bride from the women of Josselin!"

His manner, no less than the words themselves, caused me to stare at him across the lamplit table. Moved by a sudden impulse, I pushed the bottle, still three-quarters full, toward him.

"Help yourself, *mon ami.*" When he had obeyed with alacrity I continued in as casual a voice as I could assume: "Ah, so your village has its legends, *hein?*"

He paused to empty his glass before replying.

"Legends?" His voice had a sardonic ring that conveyed a world of meaning. "*Ma foi!* we have more than legends! Strange things have happened here—not in the remote past, but recently, mark you!—strange things, the meaning of which has been debated by learned societies in solemn conclave; things about which eminent professors have written books—weighty volumes—in their vain effort to solve their meaning. Tell me, *mon cher monsieur,* have you never heard of *The Barking Women of Josselin?*"

Dimly, very dimly, I was conscious of a faint inner stir in the recesses of my memory. I *had* heard or read those words before. But where? and in what connection? My brain was humming with a hundred half-formed doubts and suspicions as I turned again to the old lawyer.

"Tell me more about these women who bark."

"You want the legend"—his shrewd eyes narrowed—"or the truth?"

"Let's have the legend first."

MAITRE DIDIER refilled his glass and settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Very well, *m'sieur.* Like most tales of its kind, it dates back a long way. I've traced it back two hundred years, but it probably originated much earlier. Once upon a time (you perceive, do you not, that it begins like the usual fairy-tale?) a beggar-woman passed through the village of Josselin. She was clothed in rags, hungry, weary and footsore, and in a fold of her tattered shawl she carried a little baby boy—her son."

"Who was she?" I asked, but the old man shrugged his narrow shoulders as he reached for the bottle.

"One version of the legend says that she was a witch, a powerful enchantress; another version credits her with being no less a personage than the Blessed Mother of God, and the babe her Divine Son. You can believe either—or neither—as you please. But both versions are in agreement as to what followed. The women of the village were down by the riverside, as you may see them any fine day even now, washing their family linen in the stream. The wandering stranger begged them to give her food and shelter, showing them her blistered and bleeding feet and endeavoring to evoke their compassion by holding up her starving child. But they drove her away with cruel and bitter words—some say they even loosed their dogs upon the helpless creature. Be that as it may, the woman and her child were hounded from the village. At first she went meek and uncomplaining, but

as she passed the door of the church she chanced to look into the face of her babe —and saw that she held a tiny corpse!

"Only then did she turn on the women who yet mocked her. Laying her dead infant in the church porch, she faced them, her eyes blazing with hatred through the bitter tears, her arms upraised in furious menace.

" 'Women of Josselin!' she cried; 'over the dead body of my son I hurl my curse at you—aye, and at your daughters, and their daughters' daughters for ever! May the all-merciful and all-pitying Father on High showyou no more pity or mercy than ye have shown to me and mine! May ye be accursed unto the tenth generation! Like ravening wolves have ye denied us food; like baying hounds have ye driven us from your doors. Henceforth, ye women of Josselin, ye shall be dogs and wolves in very truth!' And so saying, she died."

The old man paused and sat staring straight before him with lack-luster eyes, as though he were indeed visualizing the scene he had so vividly described.

"A sad story," I commented. "But that is not the end?"

"No. That night there were wild scenes in the streets of Josselin—horrifying and dreadful sounds, and deeds scarcely to be described. Women and girls rushed from the houses, tearing off their garments with frenzied abandon—barking like dogs—howling like wolves! And such they were, not only in outward aspect, but also in their very nature. Back into the houses they rushed, their menfolk too paralyzed with terror and amazement to interfere, and when they emerged again each wolf-woman held in her reddened fangs a young child—her own or another's—which she had snatched from its cot or cradle with as little mercy or remorse as the beast into which she had been transformed! But—and note this well—it was only the *male* children that were slain. The girls were spared that they might grow up to maturity and inherit the dreadful curse that had been called down upon them, and transmit it to their female descendants, as they do even to this day. That, *monsieur,* is the legend of the Barking Women."

"I thank you for your courtesy in relating it so graphically. And now for the *real* truth about the matter?"

There was an inscrutable smile on Didier's thin lips as he poured the last of the bottle's contents into his glass.

"The truth is not quite so easy to define," he returned with portentous gravity. "Certain it is that a proportion of the women-folk of this village—the descendants, let us assume, of the women who mocked and ill-treated the homeless outcast—are at certain seasons afflicted with a mysterious complaint, or plague, or curse—call it what you will. Here we leave the realm of musty legend and come down to solid, incontrovertible facts. You will find references to the Barking Women of Josselin in innumerable scientific works. Distinguished savants have devoted years to the study of the phenomenon, though it is true that each has endeavored to find a solution which fits his own particular bent or mental outlook. Theologians, for instance, are convinced that it is a direct visitation of God. Physicians are equally certain that the howling and barking are caused by some obscure and hereditary disease which gives rise to spasmodic movements and contractions of the muscles of the throat. Psychologists advance the theory that it is due to some form of auto-suggestion, or mass hypnotism. Anthropologists profess to find a parallel, if not a solution, in the totemism of savages and primitive races, and point to the almost universal belief that certain human beings are able to transform themselves into animals. Sci-

ence, in short, in seeking to prove too much, proves nothing whatever. I have merely mentioned these conflicting theories to show you that the actuality of this horrible curse is sufficiently well attested to merit the serious consideration of savants who do not usually pursue shadows or investigate fables. As to a solution—well, as men of plain common sense we must take the facts as we find them and explain them as best we can."

My mind flew back to the huge gray wolf that had haunted the Devil's Tombstone—the creature that had disappeared into the forest at the very spot where Corinne Lemerre had emerged a few moments later, calm and unafraid. At that moment I required very little convincing that the old legend had a firm basis of truth in it.

I LEANT forward and laid my hand on the old notary's shoulder.

"Tell me, Maitre Didier," I said earnestly, "what is your own theory about the matter?"

I felt the shoulder on which my hand rested twitch in a tiny shrug.

"*Mère de Dieu!* If I told you my secret thoughts you would think I was sunk as deep in black superstition as are the ignorant peasants. I only know that this affliction—this curse, if you like to call it so—it still exists in our midst. But the people of Josselin do not publish their shame openly to the world. When the time of their periodical transfiguration approaches, the women lock themselves in their rooms, or hide in the depths of the forest, where no human eyes shall see the ghastly form they assume, where no innocent child shall tempt the hellish fury of their fangs."

In the depths of the woods! The words dinned through my brain with devilish insistence. Was it not in the depths of the wood that we had encountered Corinne Lemerre? Was my unfortunate friend about to take to himself a beautiful vampire for a wife?

Amid the whirlpool of my thoughts I became dully aware that the old man was still speaking:

"*Certainement,* considering the way in which our dread secret has been hidden, it is small wonder that the learned savants could gather such slender data on which to base their theories," he was saying. "That is why I have spoken tonight, that you may in turn warn your friend."

"And persuade him to abandon Mademoiselle Lemerre on the very eve of her wedding-day?" I cried.

"*Doucement, doucement,*" remonstrated the old man. "Softly, my impetuous friend. I am the last man to counsel creating an open scandal by breaking off the match. Besides, there is no need to fear anything for the moment. Your friend himself stands in not the slightest danger, for the werewolves of Josselin do not attack and devour grown men. It will be later, when the little ones arrive, that the tragedy will commence. If you love your friend, warn him of the peril that will come. There is no need for you to repeat my words to him yet; not for many months—many years, maybe. But, as you value his happiness, his peace of mind, his very reason, relate to him the legend of the Women of Josselin on the day that his son and heir is born."

AFTER the old man had gone I sat for a long time by the dying embers of the fire, smoking incessantly and thinking deeply as I awaited Alan's return.

My mind was a seesaw of doubt and indecision. One moment I had determined to tell my chum everything the moment he arrived; the next, I had just as firmly decided that no word should pass my lips.

Would he believe me if I did speak?

Even if he were capable of crediting my fantastic story, would he have the hardihood and strength of mind to cast off his beautiful bride at the eleventh hour? And, above all, was I justified in blasting the reputation of a young girl on the mere unsubstantiated theory of a misanthropic notary whose tongue had been loosened by a bottle of wine?

Yet in my own heart I knew the legend was no chimera. Now that I possessed the clue I could recall a host of incidents, insignificant and meaningless in themselves, which confirmed it. Why, the villagers even had a special name for the afflicted women. *Aboyeuses*—"the barkers"—I had heard the strange term whispered furtively dozens of times, though at the time it had conveyed nothing to my mind. But now——

I rose to my feet and threw back the heavy window-curtains, pressing my burning forehead against the cool panes as I gazed out into the night.

The moon, now slightly past its full, rode high in the cloudless heavens, bathing the whole valley of the river in its soft silver glow. At the riverside end of the village the triple towers of the ancient château reared themselves sheer from the shining waters, an imposing monument of feudal power and tyranny. Just beyond were the shallows, lined with low grassy banks, the washing-place of the village from time immemorial. It was there that the homeless outcast had vainly begged for charity. In the square open space immediately before me was the church from whose porch she had launched the fatal curse. In my mind's eye I could picture the lean, famished figure standing at the head of the steps, facing the affrighted crowd like an avenging fury over the dead body of her child. . . .

For the first time I understood why it is that no beggar now asks in vain for alms in the streets of Josselin.

A faint sound on the pavement immediately below my window abruptly switched my train of thought. Two persons were staanding at the door of the inn, talking in low, intimate tones.

"Au revoir, ma cherie," It was Alan's voice, vibrant with deep passion. "Till tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow then," came the answer, breathed so low that I could scarcely catch the words. *"Viens m 'embrasser——"*

Her voice ended in the sound of a laughing struggle—a lingering kiss. . . .

I turned away from the window, sick at heart. How could I speak now? How could I rob them of their happiness?

That night I held my peace. The next morning they were married as fast as ring and Book could bind them.

THE warmest friendship grows dim and faint before the fiercer fires of love. I heard from Alan occasionally during his protracted honeymoon in Italy; then his letters became briefer, and came at longer intervals, until they finally ceased altogether.

I stayed on for a while at Josselin, putting the finishing touches to the pictures I had in hand. Then I wandered farther afield, through southern France, past the frontiers of Spain—just where my fancy and the appeal of the natural scenery led me. Fresh scenes, new interests, new hopes and ambitions gradually caused the memory of Alan Grantham and his mysterious bride to fade from my mind. Beneath the glorious sun-bathed skies of Castille I could almost smile at the former fears conjured up by the grisly legend of Josselin's beast-women.

It was two years later, while seated before a little wayside *posada* overlooking the swift-rushing waters of the Tagus, near Toledo, that the memory of the past

overtook and overwhelmed me like some invisible, soul-chilling sea.

A letter was handed to me by the greasy, unshaven *patróna,* a letter which bore an English postage-stamp and numerous pencilled superscriptions showing that it had followed me from place to place for weeks. Its message was brief but pregnant with dire possibilities:

For the sake of our former friendship, come at once. I need your advice and help as I have never needed them before. I dare not attempt to explain, in case you think that my mind has given way beneath the strain. Come—and come quickly!

Below was a hurriedly scrawled postscript that was actually longer than the body of the letter:

Corinne is in excellent health and sends her best regards. She bore the birth of our baby boy well, and is looking more beautiful than ever. The kiddie is a delightful little chap—you will love him. We have named him after you. I should be the happiest man alive, yet I am harassed by fears which are all the more terrifying because so utterly grotesque. Come quickly—for the sake of old acquaintance.

It was an appeal to which I could not remain deaf. I glanced at the post-mark. The letter had been posted nearly two weeks before.

It took me just five minutes to pack my few belongings and settle the bill. Crossing the river, I had the good luck to catch a train that was on the point of starting from the Toledo terminus. I had two hours' wait at Madrid, but the wasted time was more than made up by the swiftness of the Trans-Continental Express which bore me to Paris, where I entered the early morning boat-train for the coast.

Thirty hours after receiving the message I walked down the gangway of the cross-channel steamer—to meet the hearty handclasp and eager greeting of the man who had summoned me back to England.

"I GOT your cable from Paris," he said, as though in explanation of his unexpected presence on the landing-stage. "I can't describe how relieved I was to know that you were on your way."

I started to tell him about the way in which his letter had wandered about before reaching me, but he cut me short with what seemed unnecessary haste.

"Come on." He seized my grip and, ignoring the waiting train, made for the gate which led to the road. "I've got a car waiting. We can talk as I drive. My place is only in the next county—a few miles over the Sussex border. We can get there quicker by road than by the local trains."

The luxurious appointments of the waiting auto seemed to indicate that, whatever Alan's trouble might be, it certainly was not connected with his financial standing. I ventured a remark to that effect as the car started into motion, but he almost ignored it.

"Oh, yes. I've not been doing so badly. But I've been too worried lately to attempt much serious work. Do you know—don't think me crazy because of what I'm about to tell you—but, you remember that large gray wolf that we saw that night at the Devil's Tombstone?"

"Yes," I answered, tense with interest. "Well?"

"That damned brute has followed me over here!"

I managed to force a laugh, but, had my friend not been so engrossed in his driving, I fear my face must have betrayed my real feelings.

"Come, come," I said chaffingly. "Isn't that rather a tall yarn, old man? It's rather a long jump from Brittany to Sussex, and there's a slight obstacle known as the English Channel in between.

"I don't care how far it is, or what obstacles have to be crossed to get here. I would recognize the brute anywhere,

and I'm certain that the same animal has been haunting our house for weeks—in fact, ever since the baby was born."

The baby! Here was another link of the old notary's tale that rang true.

"It's a boy, isn't it?" I asked, more for the sake of covering up a pause than anything else.

"Of course its a boy!" he answered testily. "Didn't I tell you in my letter that we'd named it after you?"

"And you think that this wolf means harm to the little fellow?"

"What else?" he demanded bruskly. "The creature has tried half a dozen times to get into the nursery, but luckily it was seen and driven away before it could do any mischief. The strange part about it is that it never attempts to attack grown people. That ought to make our task all the easier."

"Our task?" I echoed.

"Yes. You must help me track down this beast to its lair and send a bullet through its heart. Not until I see it stretched dead before my eyes shall I feel that Corinne and her child are safe."

It took all my self-control to refrain from bursting into sardonic laughter. I mumbled some answer—heaven knows what!—and for the remainder of the drive sat silent, or spoke in heedless monosyllables. My own grim thoughts were quite sufficient to occupy all my attention. Once again I had become enmeshed in a tangle of mystery and lurking peril—but little did the man beside me guess the real nature of the task in which he had solicited my aid!

THE fifty-odd miles of coast roads were soon covered; then we turned inland at a spot not far from the traditional site of the Battle of Hastings. Twenty minutes later the car swept through the gates of a long, tree-bordered drive, and I got my first glimpse of the house.

"'Lone Croft" it was called, and the name seemed well chosen. The rambling old house stood on a hill, surrounded by well-wooded grounds, and though its position rendered it somewhat exposed to the fierce gales which occasionally sweep in from the sea, it commanded a superb view. Southward was the long sweep of coastline, from Beachy Head to Dungeness; every other point of the compass was bounded by the vast chalk downs, desolate and deserted for the most part, though here and there one could catch a distant glimpse of the roof of an isolated farmhouse nestling in a fold of its rolling contours.

Lone Croft, as its name implied, had originally been built as a farmstead of the more substantial kind—though that was in the days when Queen Bess held sway. It was a delightful example of the rural architecture of the period, with half-timbered gables and quaint nooks and corners in its oak-raftered rooms. Its long, rambling passages had so many queer little flights of stairs leading up and down, that it was sometimes a matter of difficulty to guess on which floor one was, without glancing out of the window. It was, in short, exactly the kind of house that any ghost with a respect for old-established traditions would choose for the scene of its midnight rambles.

I was on the point of making a laughing remark to that effect as I alighted from the car. But I caught a glimpse of Alan's set features, and refrained. At that moment he did not seem in the humor to appreciate a jest on any subject, occult or otherwise.

My friend entered the house without a word and led the way to the great, stone-flagged kitchen, now converted into a very comfortable dining-room. On the

threshold he paused with a low exclamation of surprize.

"Hullo! it seems that we have visitors."

Two men, both stout and red-faced, and dressed in tweeds and gaiters, had risen from their seats near the wide fireplace and were advancing to meet us.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Grantham," said the one who appeared to be the elder, a gray-bearded man of about sixty. "I think you know me, sir? I'm Enoch Varden, from Vale Farm, down yonder. My friend here be Farmer Sowerby, from——"

"Yes, yes, I know you both," Alan broke in somewhat impatiently. "I take it that you have been awaiting my return, and that you wish to see me about something?"

"We do that, sir," answered the man with the gray beard, in a tone that was a curious mixture of deference and half-suppressed anger. "We two be come here on most unpleasant business, Mr. Grantham." He paused and cast an inquiring glance in my direction. "Axing your pardon, sir, but be this gen'man a friend of yourn?"

"Indeed he is," Alan replied warmly, "my oldest chum. You need not be afraid of saying what you have to say in his presence."

Farmer Varden seemed reluctant to take advantage of the invitation to state his errand. He stood before the fireplace, clearing his throat noisily at intervals and shifting uneasily from one foot to the other.

"'Look'ee here, sir," he burst out at last. "I be a peaceable man, and one as likes to keep on as good terms as may be with my neighbors, and I hopes you will take what I'm going to say in the spirit that it's meant. Three nights ago seven sheep were killed and mangled at Sowerby's Farm, and this morning I found a round dozen o' my own flock had been treated the same way."

"Indeed?" Alan's voice did not betray much surprize. "That's very unfortunate. I suppose you've come to warn me that some ferocious animal is at large in the district?"

Farmer Varden gave a quick shake of his head.

"We be come to warn you to keep your dogs chained up at night!" he said bluntly.

"Dogs!" Alan laughed loudly. "But, my dear good man, I don't keep any dogs. My wife can't bear to have one anywhere near her, and, naturally, there isn't such a thing about the place."

The two farmers stared at him with palpable incredulity.

"Nary a one?" asked Sowerby, speaking for the first time.

"Not a single hair of one!" was my friend's firm reply. "You must seek elsewhere for the animal that worried your sheep."

Enoch Varden raised his horny hand and scratched his head.

"Of course, if you say that, sir, we're bound to take your word——"

"You can do that with the greatest confidence," Alan said quietly.

"No offense, sir, no offense," Varden hastened to say. "But all the same I must say that things seem mighty queer. Old Miles—Mr. Sowerby's shepherd, sir—he tracked the beast's footprints on the morning after his sheep were killed. He's no wit-lacker, is Old Miles, and he says that the tracks were those of a big dog—the biggest he'd ever seen. I can bear him out in that, for I was up at four on the morning after the raid on my own fold, and I followed the footprints over the soft ground for miles."

"And where did they lead?" Alan asked.

"They led straight to this very house,

sir—and what's more, they didn't go any further! There they were, as plain as print on paper, right up your drive. There were even a few on the doorstep, going into your front door—*but there weren't none coming out again!*"

I saw Alan Grantham suddenly go pale. Well enough could I guess the tragic poignancy of his thoughts at that moment.

"It must be the large gray wolf that I've seen hovering about the house!" he exclaimed.

The farmer's eyes grew round as saucers at his words.

"Wolf!" cried Varden. "Who ever heerd tell of such a critter on the Sussex Downs?"

"Well, there it is," shrugged Alan. "It may have escaped from somewhere—a circus, for instance. Anyway, the remedy is in your own hands. Of course you both possess guns?"

"Aye, sir," came in unison from the pair.

"Well, arm all the men you can, and lie in wait for the brute. That is what I and my friend intend to do. I hope we have the luck to get a good chance of a shot at it!"

BEFORE nightfall, ample proof was forthcoming that my friend's theory was correct. The identity of the mysterious four-footed marauder was established by the member of the Mobile Section of the County Constabulary who rode up on a motorcycle while dinner was in progress.

"Yes, sir, it's a wolf all right," the constable stated. "One of our patrols sighted the beast while he was on his rounds. Chap of the name of Morris. He's an old soldier who served with the Expeditionary Forces in Russia, and he's seen wolves where they grow natural. He got a near view of the creature as it trotted past him on the road, making toward this house. He was unarmed, so that he could do nothing to stop it. But he got a good look at it, and he's prepared to swear it's a wolf and not a large dog. Moreover, it's a bitch-wolf and has recently had a litter of whelps."

"Whew!" whistled Alan. "That complicates matters—we shall have the countryside overrun if they are allowed to breed! Did the lady have her family with her?"

The policeman shook his head.

"No, but the creature's dugs were heavy with milk—Morris breeds dogs himself, and he knew the signs all right. He says that such a state usually makes such animals fiercer, more cunning—and more dangerous! Thought I'd call in to put you on your guard."

"I'm much obliged to you, officer," said Alan, as he did a little sleight-of-hand with something which rustled crisply.

"Thank you, sir," the man touched the peak of his cap. "Good night."

Listening to the conversation from the dining-room doorway, I felt my last doubts vanish in a wave of horrified conviction. The mystery wolf had recently littered—Corinne's baby was just a fortnight old! It was the last—the clearest—the most convincing link in the long chain of evidence which proved that the ancient legend of Josselin was no myth!

The time had come for me to speak. Whatever might be the consequences of the revelation, my conscience would not permit me to conceal it any longer. A tragedy must be risked if an even greater tragedy was to be averted.

The moment the door had closed on the policeman's departure I took my friend's arm and drew him into his study, which adjoined the dining-room we had recently quitted.

"Why, what's in the wind?" he said as he saw me close the door.

"Alan," I said gently, "I am about to take advantage of the privilege of an old friend. But believe me, it is my duty rather than my inclinations which prompt the words I am about to utter. Corinne, the girl you married, is"—my mind groped for fitting words to break the blow that was about to fall—"is—not like other girls——"

"Don't I know it!" he broke in enthusiastically, entirely failing to grasp my meaning. "She is a pearl beyond all price! I'll thank heaven till my dying day for the strange chance which threw her across my path, and enabled me to link my life with hers!"

The fervor of his declaration almost made me falter in my purpose. The thought that I, his dearest friend, was fated to be the instrument of his coming disillusionment was like an agonizing knife-thrust in my heart. But it was too late to stop now.

"It was not of her personal beauty, or of her mental qualities that I was speaking," I steeled myself to go on. "There is something else—something entirely beyond her own power to control. My poor boy, the girl you love so deeply is——"

"Not dead?" He caught me by the arm with a grip that made my muscles numb. "Don't tell me that Corinne has fallen a victim to that accursed wolf! Don't tell me that she is dead!"

"Would that she were!" I exclaimed almost involuntarily.

"What!" His grip tightened like a crushing vise. "In God's name—what do you mean?"

"Corinne Lemerre was, and still is a——"

Four crashing reports, fired in quick succession just outside the window, cut short my words like the stroke of a knife.

Glad of the respite, short-lived though it might be, I dashed to the front door and threw it wide. On the steps was a burly blue-clad figure. It was the constable who had just left us, and in his hand he held a heavy automatic pistol.

"The wolf!" he gasped in hurried explanation. "As I passed through the shrubbery I saw it leap from one of the lower windows. It was carrying something in its mouth. Looked like a fair-sized bundle of clothes——"

"My God!" shrieked Alan. "The child! We must follow—wait here while I get the guns."

"Did you hit the thing?" I asked.

"I think so, but the light was bad." The man flashed his lantern on the graveled path and gave a cry. "Yes, I hit it all right. Look at the blood on the stones!"

"Here, take this." Alan thrust a sporting-rifle into my reluctant hands as he pushed past and took the steps with a flying leap. "It's loaded, but don't risk a shot unless you can make sure of not hitting my boy. Which way did it go?" he asked as he caught up with the hurrying policeman.

"Couldn't say, sir. It just disappeared in the darkness. There's its trail, though!" He flashed his light at the wavering line of crimson splashes.

"Badly wounded—it can't go far," jerked Alan, almost snatching the lantern in his excitement and pressing forward.

The next moment he uttered a cry of disappointment. The sinister trail had swerved into the dense bushes, where it was utterly lost.

"We must separate," Alan whispered urgently, "and comb this plantation thoroughly. Shoot at sight—but for God's sake mind the boy."

WE OBEYED and did our best to pick up the trail. But it was a weary, nerve-racking business, hunting aimlessly in the dark. Presently the police-con-

stable and I gravitated toward each other and met in a little clearing not far from the house.

"Some hunt!" the man muttered grimly. "Like searching in a haystack for a needle that isn't there! Probably that wolf is miles away by now—and your friend can say good-bye to his kid."

His words gave me a sudden inspiration.

"That wolf may have returned to the house," I exclaimed.

"To the house?" He looked surprized, as well as he might be. "What's the idea?"

"Oh, just an idea. But I think it's worth following up. Will you come back there with me?"

"If you think it's worth while. Shall I call the guv'nor?" he asked, jerking his head toward where Alan was noisily beating the bushes.

"I think not," I advised. "If my suspicions are correct, he'll be better out of what is coming."

We gained the house unobserved, and I immediately led the way upstairs.

"You were right, sir!" cried the man, pointing to a red smear on the white paintwork of one of the doors.

I nodded without speaking and shifted the gun so that it would be ready for instant action. The blood-stained door was the one which gave access to Corinne's bedroom.

The room was in darkness as I flung open the door, but the low, menacing growl which greeted our entrance showed that it was far from being empty.

I pressed the switch—then stood staring at the unbelievable tableau which the light revealed.

It was not the sight of the huge wolf lying curled up on the bed that caused my breath to catch in my throat with a sound very much like a sob—I was prepared to see that. No, the thing that staggered me and shook my nerve was the sight of the tiny baby nestling between the huge animal's legs, crooning contentedly as it gently kneaded the soft gray fur with its little dimpled fists.

The gun slipped unheeded from my hands and fell to the floor. My brain could scarcely credit what my eyes beheld. Then, like a ray of glorious light from heaven itself, understanding rushed upon me.

Mother-love, divine and all-conquering, had triumphed over the dread, age-old curse. The great, fierce she-wolf was actually suckling the babe it had been condemned to destroy!

This much I saw, but the policeman behind me had eyes only for the hunted beast. I caught the glint of polished steel as he threw his hand forward.

"Don't fire, you fool!" I shouted, and switched off the light to baffle his aim in case he had not understood.

But even as the light snapped off, the darkness was split by a tongue of flame and the crash of his automatic followed like a miniature thunderclap.

"Fool!" I cried again. "What have you done?"

"I guess I've put 'paid' to that——"

His boast died away to a meaningless mumble as I again pressed the light-switch.

The wolf had vanished. In its place, marble-white and still in death, was the body of Corinne Grantham—the girl who had for ever broken the curse which had for centuries lain like a hideous blight over the women of Josselin.

THAT police officer faced the music like a man at the subsequent inquest. The poor fellow came in for more than his fair share of the nasty remarks that were made about "the careless handling

of firearms." But he had the sense to hold his tongue about the wolf changing into the woman at the moment of its death.

Probably he guessed that such a story would not be believed, and had no desire to exhibit himself as a clumsy liar as well as a clumsy marksman. Thanks to Alan's open-handed and unquestioning generosity, I was able to ensure that the constable was no worse off for his reticence. Today he's probably the richest policeman in Sussex—if he hasn't retired from the force long since.

The coroner's verdict was "Death by misadventure." And so the matter stands to this day.

Alan Grantham, his mind torn between grief at his wife's death and the joy of having his baby son so unexpectedly restored to him unharmed, never so much as suspected the real nature of the "misadventure" which had mercifully cut the Gordian knot of the sinister web of fate in which she was entangled.

Nor will he ever know the truth—unless it be on the day when, beyond the horizon of the grave, all secrets will be revealed.

Empty House

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

Its windows stare like gaunt and tear-dimmed eyes—
Perhaps awaiting one who comes no more,
Or listening for a voice that once was gay
Down avenues where mocking winds now roar.

An apple tree, long stranger to the shears
That once, in eager pride, pruned through the years—
Its slender twigs leaned low—a broken thing
Whose fitful blossoms thirsted dewy tears.

A door sags wide, like empty arms that yearn
For something they once held and loved, and lost,
And all the while the fitful wind moans low,
And dry leaves stir, with restless memories tossed.

Alone, aloof, this old house stands and yearns
For half-remembered songs that once it heard
In glowing warmth and sweet companionship—
But now its only song comes from a bird.

That, and the moaning sob of fog-wet winds,
And trees that sigh and lash in frenzied pain
Their arms in supplication to night skies—
And know the bitter tears that are in rain.

The Venomed Breath of Vengeance

By SEABURY QUINN

A curious story about Jules de Grandin, occult detective and scientist, and an East Indian whose very breath was death to those upon whom he blew

I SHOOK my head reprovingly as Jules de Grandin decanted half an ounce of cream into his breakfast coffee and dropped two sugar lumps into the mucilaginous concoction.

"You're sending out an invitation to gastritis," I said warningly. "Don't you realize that mixing two such active ferments as cream and sugar in your coffee——"

He leveled an unwinking stare at me. "Am I to have no pleasure?" he demanded truculently. "May I not have the doubtful joy of getting sick without your interference? How do you amuse yourself while you preach of creamless sugar, I ask to know?"

"All right, how do I?" I responded as he paused for comment.

"By reading the obituary columns of *le journal,* to see how many of the poor misguided ones who follow your advice have gone to their long rest, where doctors prate no more of cream and sugar——"

"These don't happen to have been my patients," I cut in laughing, "but there's something queer about the way they died. Listen:

"Third Shervers Dies Mysteriously

"Truman Shervers, 25, son of the late Robert Shervers, well known importer, and brother of the late Jepson Shervers, yachtsman, of Larchmont, N. Y., was found dead in bed at the family residence in Tuscarora Avenue yesterday morning by Mazie O'Brien, a maid in the household, when she went to his room to ascertain why he had not come down to breakfast with the family, as was his usual custom. Doctors MacLeod and William Lucas, hastily summoned, pronounced him dead of heart failure. The deceased had never been heard to complain of illness of that character, and seemed in perfect health when he went to bed the night before.

"An air of gruesome mystery is lent to the occurrence by the fact that Mr. Shervers is the third member of his family to suffer sudden death within a month. His father, the late Robert Shervers, noted as an authority on Oriental art, was found dead in the library of the family home about a month ago, while his brother Jepson was discovered in a dying condition when a New York state trooper found his car crashed against a tree beside Pelham Park Boulevard, Mount Vernon, N. Y., two weeks later. He died without regaining consciousness. Members of the family when interviewed by Journal reporters declared all three deaths were ascribed to heart failure.

"What do you make of it?" I asked as I laid the paper by and helped myself to salted mackerel.

"*Tiens,* what does one ever make of death? The gentlemen appear to have been afflicted with a cardiac condition which they did not know about, and down they went, like dominoes in line, when it attacked them."

"Humph," I nodded, unconvinced. "I knew Jepson Shervers rather well, and saw him only three days before he died. He was feeling tiptop at the time and jubilant because he'd just received reports from his insurance broker that his application for fifty thousand increase in his policies had been approved. Insurance

doctors don't usually overlook such things as cardiac conditions, especially where fifty thousand dollars is involved. Truman's death is even harder to explain. I saw him at the Racquet Club last Monday, and he'd just completed half an hour's work-out on the squash courts. That's pretty strenuous exercise for a cardiac."

"No autopsy was held?"

"Apparently not. The doctors all seemed satisfied."

"Then who are we to find fault with their diagnoses?" He drained a fresh cup of unsweetened coffee and rose. "Luncheon at half-past one, as usual? Good. I shall be here. Meantime, I have some matters to attend to at the library."

"THIS way, gentlemen," the frock-coated young man with smooth brushed hair, perfectly arranged cravat and mild, sympathetic manners met us at the door and ushered us to the back parlor of the Shervers house, where folding chairs had been set out in concentric semicircles with the casket as their focal point.

Nothing in the way of mortuary service had been omitted by the Martin Funeral Home. Behind a bank of palms a music reproducing device played the Largo from the New World Symphony so softly that its notes were scarcely audible:

"Going home, going home,
I'm just going home . . ."

A linen runner spanned the scatter rugs that strewed the polished floors, making it impossible for anyone to trip or stumble as he passed from door to sitting-room. When folding chairs were broken out for late arrivals they opened with the softest clicks instead of sharp reports. We followed soundlessly in our conductor's wake, but as he paused beside the archway to permit us to precede him, I halted involuntarily. *"Comment?"* demanded Jules de Grandin in a whisper.

"That youngster," I returned, nodding toward the young mortician; "he's enough like Truman Shervers to have been his twin."

"I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth . . ." Doctor Bentley began to office for the burial of the dead. A subdued flutter of fans, the soft swish-swish of unaccustomed black silk garments being adjusted by their wearers in the semi-hysteria women always show at funerals, the faint, muted murmurings of late arrivals at the front door, occasional low, distance-softened noises from the street outside accompanied the words.

". . . We brought nothing into the world and it is certain we can carry nothing out . . . the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away . . ." the solemn words of the liturgy proceeded. De Grandin raised his hand and thrust his forefinger between his neck and collar. It was hot as only August in a rainy spell can be, and with Gallic worship of convention he had donned his cutaway and stiff-starched linen, disdainfully refusing to put on a mohair jacket and soft shirt as I did. The air was almost unsupportable in the close-packed room. The heavy, cloyingly sweet perfume of tuberoses fell upon our senses like a sickening drug. Next to us a woman swayed upon her chair and turned imploring eyes upon the tight-shut window. Why hadn't they availed themselves of Mr. Martin's chapel? I wondered. His rooms were large and air-conditioned; people need not sit and stifle in them, but . . . The lady on my left moaned softly. In a moment, I knew, she'd be sick or fainting.

Softly, treading noiselessly on feet accustomed to step without sound, the young mortician who had ushered us into the parlor tiptoed to the window, raised

the lace-bordered blind and took the sash knobs in his hands. Watching idly, I saw him straighten with the effort of forcing up a sash warped in its casings by the spell of humid weather, and heard the faint squeak as the sash gave way and slid slowly upward. Something like this always happened when they had a funeral in the home, I ruminated. If only they had used the Martin chapel . . .

Like a flash de Grandin left his seat and dashed across the room, clasping arms about the young man's shoulders. In the act of opening the window the youngster had swayed back, almost as from a blow in the chest, and was sagging to the floor, sinking with a look of almost comical surprize upon his small, well modeled features.

"*Courage, mon brave,*" de Grandin whispered, closing ready arms about the fainting man. "Lean on me, it is the heat."

I rose and joined them hurriedly, for despite his reassuring words I knew that it was neither the humidity nor temperature which had stricken the young undertaker. His face was pale with a blue tinge, his lips were almost purple, as though he stood beneath the neon light in a quick-picture photographer's. "Easy, son," I comforted as we helped him down the hall; "we can't afford to have folks getting all excited at a time like this."

We reached the passage leading to the kitchen and eased our charge down to the floor while de Grandin bent to loose the black and white cravat which bound his stiffly starched wing collar.

"Ah—so. Is not that better?" he asked as he bent above the gasping youth. "You will be all well in just one little minute——"

"My God, sir, he popped up right in my face!" the boy cut in, his words mouthed difficultly, as though something soft and hot lay upon his tongue. "It was as if he waited there for me, and when I put the window up——" Thicker and thicker, softer and more soft his utterance came; finally it died away in a soft, choking gurgle. His head fell back against my arm, and I saw his jaw relax.

"Lord, let me know my end, and the number of my days; that I may be certified how long I have to live. . . ." Doctor Bentley's voice came smoothly, sonorously, from the room beyond. "O spare me a little that I may recover my strength before I go hence. . . ."

Despite the almost suffocating heat I shuddered. There was something horrifyingly appropriate in the service being read beyond that archway.

The young funeral director lay dead at our feet.

DE GRANDIN drummed a tattoo on the silver head of his black walking-stick as we drove homeward from the funeral. "My friend," he announced, suddenly, "I do not like that house."

"Eh?" I responded. "You don't like——"

"By blue, I do not. It is an evil place. It has the smell of death and tragedy upon it. I noticed it the moment that I entered, and——"

"Oh, come, now," I derided. "Don't tell me you had a psychic spell and foresaw tragedy——"

"Indeed, I did. Not that poor young man's deplorable decease, but——"

"I understand," I interrupted, "but I don't believe there's anything partaking of the superphysical about it. Just one of those coincidences that make life seem so curiously unreal at times. The average person finds something faintly grotesque in an undertaker's death—just as there's something faintly comic in a doctor's being ill—and the fact that he happened to die so tragically during the funeral serv-

ice, when so much emotional energy was focussed on the thought of death——"

He squeezed my elbow with a quick grip of affection. "My good friend!" he exclaimed. "I understand you. You will not scoff at me, and so you rationalize the entirely illogical death of that poor young man to let me down without hurt feelings. I wish I could agree with you, but I cannot. When I declare there is an aura of misfortune, tragedy and death about that house I speak no more than simple truth. Some things there are we see without beholding, or hear without sound. Attend me carefully: As a spider lurks in secret at the center of her web, so death waited in that place. And just as many flies pass by the spider's snare unharmed, yet some eventually are caught, just so I knew the moment that I crossed the threshold that death would strike again, and soon, inside those portals. I think that we are lucky to have come away with whole skins."

"Perhaps you're right," I murmured. "It was certainly a most uncanny——"

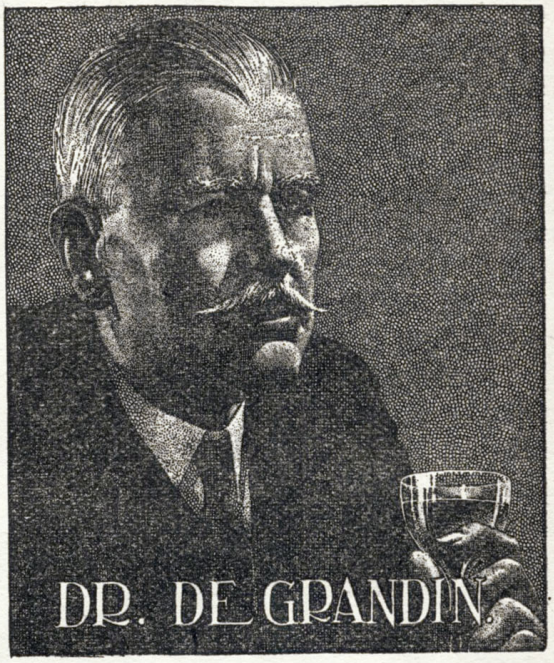
"You saw him die," he interrupted. "Would you certify the cause of death?"

"It looked like some sort of heart seizure, there was marked cyanosis, labored breathing, difficulty in enunciation——"

"Agreed," he broke in, "but what was it that he said as we assisted him?"

"Oh, something about someone's waiting for him; you know what strangely garbled statements dying people make. The boy was agonizing, dying. His entire system of co-ordination was deranged, the nerves connecting thought and speech were short-circuited——"

He prodded me with a stiff forefinger. "Three persons, three members of a single family, have met death within a month. In every case the cause assigned was heart failure, an almost meaningless term, medically speaking. In no instance was there any history of cardiac disturb-



ance; in one case the deceased was certified as being in sound health within a day or so of dying. No autopsies were had, nothing but objective symptoms led the doctors to ascribe the deaths to heart conditions. Now a young and healthy man succumbs in the same way. Tell me, if you were asked to give his cause of death, would you say it was heart failure?"

"Yes," I answered. "If it were impossible to have an autopsy and I could not have his medical history, I'd say, with no other evidence than that we have at present, that his death was due to heart failure."

His noncommittal exclamation was half a swallow, half a grunt.

"Now then," he faced me at the dinner table the next evening, "we are somewhat farther in our quest."

"Are we? I didn't know we had one."

"Indubitably. The so strange deaths among the *famille* Shervers, the equally inexplicable dispatch of the young mortuarian, the insistence on heart failure as the cause of each—*ah bah,* they did not

make the sense. They outraged my ideas of propriety, they intrigued me. Yes. Assuredly."

"And so——"

"And so I got permission to attend the autopsy on the young man's body at the morgue today."

"And the finding was——"

"A failure of the heart, by blue!"

"I take it you do not agree?"

"Name of a piebald porcupine, my friend, you take it right! I begged, I pleaded, I entreated them to analyze the poor one's blood, for it was of a chocolate color, and I thought I smelled a characteristic odor. But would they do it? *Non!* Parnell, the coroner's physician, he laughed at me. At Jules de Grandin! 'See,' he said while grinning like a dog, 'here are the heart. It have ceased to function. Therefore it was a failure of the heart which killed him.'

"There was nothing one could do. One was present as a guest, and entirely without official status. And so I made him a most courteous bow. *'Monsieur,'* I said, 'permit me to congratulate you on your sublime ignorance.' Thereupon I came home to my dinner."

For upward of an hour he was busy in the surgery, and I had begun to wonder if he planned to spend the evening there when he emerged in shirt sleeves, his cuffs rolled back and a look of exultation on his face.

"Behold, observe, give attention," he commanded as he waved a test-tube like a banner shaken out in triumph. "When Parnell *l' idiot de naissance* refused to test the poor young undertaker's blood I held my lips—as much as could have been expected—but though my tongue was circumspect my hands were not. Oh, no; I was a thief, a pilferer, a criminal. I filled a little so small vial with blood wrung from a sponge and hid it in my pocket. I have subjected it to an analysis, that blood, and these things I have found: The blood are chocolate brown, not red as blood should be; on distillation I found tiny yellow globules which smelled of crushed peach kernels; when ether had been added and permitted to evaporate I found an aniline apparent by its odor, and the isonitrille test confirmed its presence. What do you say to that, *hein?"*

"Why, it sounds like poisoning by nitrobenzol, but——"

"Précisément, that but, he puts an obstacle before us, *n'est-ce-pas?* That nitrobenzol, he kills quickly; one cannot take him in his mouth, then walk around while he awaits his action. No. He asks by making it impossible for blood to take up oxygen, therefore his victims have the blue face—cyanosis. Yes?"

"Yes, of course, but——"

"Very well, then. If this odor of the kernel of the peach has not been smelled, and we see his victim fall, we might be led to think he suffered failure of the heart, *n'est-ce-pas?"*

"That's so, but——"

"Bien oui. Here in this mortuarian we have a case which might be heart failure. It misleads my good Friend Trowbridge, who is nobody's fool, it misleads that *sale chameau* Parnell who is everybody's fool, but it does not mislead me. Oh, no. I am a very clever fellow, and follow where my nose directs. Now, if the young man dies of nitrobenzol poisoning, and everyone but Jules de Grandin thinks he dies of a weak heart, are it not entirely possible those members of the Shervers family succumbed to the same subtle poison? Are it not even probable?"

"Possible, of course," I nodded, "but not highly probable. In the first place, there's no earthly reason for any of them to have committed suicide, yet nitrobenzol's not the kind of drug one can administer murderously. Its characteristic odor and sharp bitterness of taste would

warn intended victims. Besides, we were right beside him when that poor boy died. One moment he was well, next instant he was falling in profound narcosis, and within two minutes he was dead. No one could have given him the poison; he could not have taken it himself and walked across the room to attempt to open the window. No, I'm afraid your theory isn't tenable, de Grandin."

He regarded me a moment, round-eyed as a puzzled tom-cat. At length: "You said the young mortician bore resemblance to the Monsieur Shervers in whose funeral he participated? We may have something there. Is it not possible some evilly-intentioned person mistook him for a member of the Shervers family, and struck him down——

"By administering $C_6H_5NO_2$ in broad daylight, without anybody's seeing him?" I asked sarcastically.

"*Précisément.* Exactly as you say."

"But that is utterly fantastic——"

"I quite agree with you. It is. But fantasy may be fact, too. If a thing exists we must accept it, whether it is capable of proof or otherwise. Meantime"—methodically he turned his cuffs down and snapped the fastenings of his smoked pearl links—"let us go and tender our condolences to survivors of the Shervers family. It would be a gracious gesture—and we may find out something which we do not know at present."

OLD Eustace Shervers cowered in the tufted Turkish armchair set before the fireless fireplace of the stiffly formal parlor of the house where he had brought his bride some six and sixty years before when, a young lieutenant fresh from service under Farragut, he had come home from war to take his place in the importing business founded by his Anglo-Indian father. He was a pitiable figure, vulture-bald and crippled with arthritis, half blind with presbyopia, bent with the weight of eighty-seven years. Almost destitute of blood-kin, too, for all his family had preceded him except his great-grandson Elwood, Jepson's son, back from school in England to attend his father's funeral, and still at home when tragedy deprived him of his uncle. Now the old man fumbled with his blackthorn cane and stared at us with blue, almost blind eyes.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said in the cracked voice old age imposes on its victims, "it almost seems a curse is on our family. First came Robert's death, from heart failure, they said, though he seemed as vigorous as anyone could be, then Jepson, and now Truman. Jepson wanted more insurance, you know, and when the doctors said it was his father's heart that killed him he went down at once for examination. The doctors looked him over carefully, and certified his health as perfect. His application for $50,000 more insurance was approved, although the policies had not been issued when they found him dead in his car on the Pelham Road.

"Now Truman's gone the same way. He'd been designated for examination for the Marine Corps, and the naval surgeons gave him perfect ratings. Although he'd studied hard to pass his written tests, he'd kept in perfect trim, and apparently he was in the best of health. Why, on the day before the night he died he played six games of squash and won them all. Could anyone about to die of heart failure have done that?"

"It seems unlikely, *Monsieur,*" de Grandin answered as he gazed with more curiosity than courtesy at the family portraits hanging on the walls. Abruptly: "Who is that one, if you please?" he asked, nodding to an oval picture done indifferently in oils and representing a young man in scarlet tunic piped with

blue, a small mustache and rudimentary goatee.

His sudden change of subject shocked me hardly more than his unconcealed curiosity, and I saw old Shervers draw his bloodless lips across his false dentition at the exhibition as he answered rather stiffly, "That is my father, sir, Captain Hardon Jennings Shervers of the artillery corps of the British India Company, who fought with marked distinction through the Mutiny and helped to execute the white man's justice on the bloody dogs who massacred the women in the Cawnpore dungeons. He emigrated to America shortly afterward and engaged in Oriental trade——"

"*Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur,* is one to understand your father was commander of a battery which blew the Mutiny ringleaders from the cannon's mouth?"

"That is correct, sir. I was a lad at the time, but I well remember how the terror of those executions spread throughout all India, how the Hindoos cringed away in fear whenever a *sahib* passed"—his purblind eyes turned backward on the savage memory and his rheumatism-knotted fingers tightened on the silver knob of his thorn stick—"I tell you, gentlemen, not for a century will those heathen forget what we did to them that day!"

"*Tiens,* I damn think you have right, *mon ancien,*" de Grandin murmured; then, irrelevantly: "Tell me, if you please, how did your most respected father die?"

Once more the old man's withered lips were puckered back against his false teeth as though a drawstring tightened them. "He died of heart disease."

"And had he suffered long with the complaint?"

"He had not; no, sir. Like my son and grandsons, he was in what seemed to be good health up to the time he died. He passed away while sleeping."

"One sees." For a moment he was silent, studying the bent old man as an Egyptologist might look upon some relic of a vanished time and race. At length he rose and bowed with Continental courtesy. "Thank you for your information, and again we ask you to accept our sympathy," he said.

"NOM *d'un nom d'un nom d'un nom,*" he muttered as we drove home, "it is a puzzle with two tails we have here, good Friend Trowbridge! I have grasped one of them, but the other still eludes me."

"What the deuce?" I queried.

"Precisely, exactly, quite so. I ask the same. Consider: We have here a family descended from a British officer who officiated at the blowing from the guns of sepoy mutineers. We heard the old one boast about the white man's vengeance and say that never in a hundred years would Indians forget. *Tenez,* I think he spoke more truly than he knew when he said that, for the corollary of the white man's vengeance is the vengeance of the Indian. If they hold the memory of those executions for a hundred years who shall say they do not hold the thought of retribution for an equal time?"

"But holding grudges and satisfying them aren't necessarily the same thing."

"*Mais non,* but think: Old Monsieur Shervers' father died of heart disease. He was in good health, there were no warning symptoms, but he died. So did his grandsons. In every case it was the same. All were apparently in good health, all were stricken dead by heart disease. Even the young mortician who had the sad misfortune to resemble one of them was smitten by the same malady, apparently. *Mordieu,* coincidence's arm is long, but these happenings pull it out of joint. It does not make the sense. Death is not obliged to give us notice of our dispos-

session from our bodies, but usually he does so. Not so with these ones. First they are strong and vigorous; then *pouf!* they are not even sick. They die. What is the answer?"

"But your blood tests seem to indicate the undertaker died of nitrobenzol poisoning."

"They do, indeed, and I should like to wager that if we could perform similar tests upon the others' blood we'd find that they too died of just that sort of 'heart disease.' I am convinced these so-called natural deaths are most unnatural. That dying lad was not delirious when he declared one was waiting for him by the window."

"Who was it, have you any idea?"

"Not the slightest, or, to be more accurate, only the slightest. I think that I can guess what he was, but who? *Hélas, non.* I grope, I feel about with searching fingers like the blind man who has lost his dog and stick, but darkness shuts me in on every side. I am at fault. It is as well that it grows late. Let us go to bed and sleep upon the problem. Tomorrow I may see more clearly."

"IT IS unfortunate we could not see young Monsieur Elwood last night," de Grandin told me at the breakfast table next morning. "He might have added something to the old one's statement which would help us understand the case. Old people have their eyes set on the past; the modern viewpoint might be helpful——"

"I'll call and ask him to drop over," I volunteered. "We'd better not go over there, it might excite the old man."

Picking up the breakfast room telephone I dialed the Shervers' number, heard the smooth purr of the dial tone give way to the rhythmic buzzing of the automatic signal; then, "Hello?" I called as a woman's muffled voice came to me on the wire. Queer, I thought, it seemed almost as if her words were choked with crying, but:

"Good Lord!" I dropped the monophone back in its cradle and stared at Jules de Grandin in incredulous dismay.

"Comment?" he looked up from his plate of sausages and cakes.

"Eustace Shervers died last night. They say that it was——"

"Non! Do not tell me; let me guess; it was the heart disease, *n'est-ce-pas?"*

"That makes the fourth death in a month——"

"And unless we act with speed a fifth will follow quickly, I damn think!"

Dashing to the telephone he called the Martin Funeral Home, found that the old man's body had not yet been taken from his house, and with a muttered farewell ran full-tilt toward the front door and out into the street as though he were pursued by all the fiends of Pandemonium.

In half an hour he was back and shut himself up in the surgery. Occasionally I could hear the clink of glass on glass mingled with the low hum of his voice as he sang his private and entirely indecent version of a French translation of Saint James' Infirmary Blues. When he emerged there was a look of triumph on his face as he thrust a test-tube forward for inspection. *"C'est tout de même,"* he declared. "The old one's blood test shows the same reaction as the poor young mortuarian's. He too was poisoned by administration of nitrobenzol, and died of 'heart disease'."

"How'd you get a specimen——" I began, but he waved my question airily aside.

"One does not serve for years as agent of *le sûreté* and not learn tricks, my friend. I met the body of Monsieur Eustace as it came to the embalming-room. I requested that I be allowed to look at

it, and while no one was looking I filled a syringe with his blood. *Voilà.* I brought it back with me; I tested it, and here it is, with every evidence of poison in it."

"But why, how——" I began.

"Why? *C'est tout simple.* The father's sins were visited upon the son—and on the sons' sons and their sons. The white man's vengeance which old Eustace boasted of last night begot the vengeance of the Hindoos. Did he not say they never would forget? *Parbleu,* it seems that they have not!

"As to the how, the *modus operandi* of the poisonings, that is for us to find, but find it out we must, unless we wish to see the funeral of the last one of the Shervers family."

"SURELY, you're not serious, Doctor?" Young Elwood Shervers looked curiously at the small Frenchman. "Why, it's utterly preposterous! Who would want to wipe the Shervers family out? We've never injured anyone that I can think of, and as for a family curse, or Nemesis, as you have termed it, it's too absurd to talk about. Of course, I'm grateful for your interest, and all that sort o' thing, but—well, we're English stock, you know. If we were French or Irish we might have family *Dames Blanches* or banshees, but"—the slightest trace of patronage showed in his voice—"we're not, and we haven't. And that's definitely that."

De Grandin took a quick puff at his cigarette and narrowed his eyes against the smoke, looking hard at Elwood. "*Monsieur,* this is no laughing matter, I assure you. Inspect the record, as your so magnificent Al Smith advises: Your first American ancestor fell victim to a heart attack, yet no one suspected he was menaced by the ailment. Your father and your uncles died, all in the prime of health, two of them with fresh certificates of health from doctors trained and paid to find the slightest defect. 'Heart disease—heart failure,' the cause of death is given as monotonously as the chanting of an auctioneer who invites bids——"

"Oh, yes, we've been all over that," young Shervers interrupted. "But it's not a bit of use, sir. There must have been a strain of cardiac weakness somewhere, although no one suspected it. When Truman died, the strain and shock were just too much for poor old Grandpa Eustace. The wonder is the poor old chap hung on so long. Now, I'm a different temperament, I'm——"

"You are most woefully mistaken, *Monsieur.* Granting sorrow joined with shock to bring death to your relatives, what of the other one, the young mortuarian who died in this house during your uncle's funeral?"

Elwood fumbled at the red and blue necktie which marked him as a public school man. "Coincidence?" he muttered.

"Coincidence, my friend, is what the fool calls fate," de Grandin shot back. "The coincidence which caused the young man's death was that he happened to resemble Truman Shervers. We saw him cross the room to raise a window; we saw him stagger back as though he had been struck; we heard him say that someone waited for him at the window; we saw him die within two minutes. And did he also die of heart disease? By blue, he did not! Listen carefully:

"Human sight is fallible. A skilled physician looking at the blue-hued face of one who dies from nitrobenzol poisoning might be misled to think that he had died of heart failure. But chemistry makes no mistakes. When this and that is mixed with that and this, reactions are invariable. There is no room for argument. So when I tell you that I made a test of the young undertaker's blood and

found that he was dead of nitrobenzol poisoning I do not make a statement which can be debated." He paused, then, earnestly: "The same tests prove your *gran'père* died of nitrobenzol poisoning, *Monsieur.*"

"What?" Elwood looked to me for confirmation or denial.

I nodded. "We can't explain it, Elwood, but undoubtedly the tests were positive. It was poison and not heart disease that killed them both."

Elwood Shervers' patronizing manner vanished like a morning mist before the rising sun. "Good Lord!" he almost wailed. "If that's so, what's to hinder them from killing me?"

"Only Jules de Grandin, my young friend."

"Then what do you advise, sir? I'll do anything in reason——"

"Ha, the fear of death, like fear of God, is the beginning of wisdom, it appears. Your behavior is a matter of concern, *Monsieur.* Walk, ride, play golf, do exactly as you please, but always in the company of others. Meanwhile, at home, be careful not to stand by any opened door or window, and permit no one to interview you while you are alone. You comprehend? It is not a rigorous routine."

"Oh, I say, you must be spoofing, aren't you? If someone's out to do me in, as you seem sure he is, why should I give 'em opportunity to slip the old stiletto in my back by walking in the street, yet keep away from open doors and windows in the house? Are they like the influenza, coming in on drafts?"

"*Mais oui,* they are as subtle as *la grippe,* but infinitely more deadly, I assure you. This evening we shall call upon you. If they run true to form your periods of greatest danger will be between sunset and daybreak."

"Right-ho, I'll follow through with your prescription, Doctor, and we'll gather round the festive board for dinner about seven."

DINNER was not what might be called a jovial meal. Shervers forked vaguely at the food upon his plate and I did little more than play with mine. De Grandin, as always appreciative of good food, did full justice to the soup and fish and roast and kept Ordway, Shervers' butler, occupied with the chablis bottle and the claret cruet. But time and time again I caught his keen glance straying to the long windows at the north end of the room. As for me, my eyes were hardly turned away from them, for the observation he had made as we drove over rang insistently against my inner ears: "We do not know in what guise death will come, but we are certain it will try to enter through the windows."

At last we had completed the ordeal by food and moved into the little drawing-room where Ordway brought us coffee, chartreuse and cigars. The room was rather small, not more than twenty long by eighteen feet in width, and in its furnishings one read the Shervers family's traits and history. A few examples of Georgian mahogany were almost lost among an assemblage of more exotic pieces, a Dutch-Chinese highboy, a teakwood table set with tortoise-shell, Chinese panels, Japanese prints, old Russian and Greek ikons, carved Italian candlesticks, books bound in Persian covers, Bokhara rugs upon the floor. In the bow-window was a tabouret of Chinese red and on it a tall vase of Peking blue held a bouquet of summer roses. Above a fireplace fashioned in Damascus tiles was crossed a pair of swords, that worn by Eustace Shervers when he fought with Farragut at Mobile Bay and the one his father wore when he served the guns that

blasted back the Sepoy Mutineers at Lucknow.

Shervers filled his chartreuse glass and his hand shook so the green liqueur slopped over and dripped down on the silver tray. "Damn!" he muttered, then, half peevishly, half challengingly to de Grandin: "You're certain that my ancestor's connection with the execution of the mutineers is what's behind all this?"

"I am convinced of it, *Monsieur.*"

"Well, I'm convinced you're off your rocker. Of course, I don't know much about these Hindoo Johnnies, but they can't be quite as fierce as you make out. There were some of 'em at school with me in England, and they seemed as mild as milk-and-water. Suppose my great-great-grandfather did officiate at ante-mortem exercises for some of 'em, that was a hundred years ago, almost, and you'd hardly think these crumpets would retain a grudge that long. Why, they always seemed a cross between white rabbits and black guinea-pigs to me. Nothing vindictive about 'em."

There was something almost pitying in the look de Grandin gave him. "Mild-mannered, did you say, *Monsieur? Bien oui,* so is the serpent when he lies at ease and suns himself upon a rock; so is the tiger, in repose. Have you never stood before a tiger's den at the menagerie and wondered how the lovely, sleepy-seeming creature lying there like an enlarged edition of the fireside tabby-cat could be considered fierce and dangerous?

"My friend, if you had said these so demure ones were bred from cobras crossed with tigers you would have come much nearer to the truth than when you said they seemed like cross-breeds of the rabbit and the guinea-pig. Your father's grandsire's father knew the breed much better, I assure you. He had been born and reared in India, he knew of Nana Sahib and the things he did at Cawnpore."

"Nana?" echoed Elwood. "I always thought that was a woman's name. Didn't Zola write a novel——"

"*Morbleu* — and you have been to school! Attend me, if you please, while I amend your education: Nana Sahib was the leader of the mutineers at Cawnpore. After he had put the British garrison to death with most revolting tortures, he forced two hundred Englishwomen and their children into a small cellar, then sent professional butchers in to kill them. *Parbleu,* for upward of two hours their cries and screams and prayers for mercy filled that dismal cellar while the ruthless killers slaughtered them as if they had been sheep, sparing neither infirm beldame, tender toddling babe nor young and lovely maiden. There we have a sample of the so mild manners of the cross-bred guinea-pigs and rabbits which you spoke of. It was an act of useless cruelty this Nana Sahib did; he knew the British under Havelock were almost within striking distance of his trenches. He ordered these assassinations only that his innate lust for cruelty and blood might be appeased. Now hear me, if you please" —he thrust a finger rigid as a bayonet at our host—"these ones we have to deal with, I believe, are lineal descendants of the men who carried out the bloody Nana's orders, or others very like them. India sleeps, you think? *Mais certainement,* but while she sleeps she dreams a dream of vengeance. The recollection of the crushing defeat fifty thousand Englishmen administered to almost as many million Indians rankles in her racial consciousness like a splinter in a festered sore. They owe a debt of deep humiliation to the English, and every Briton killed is so much interest on the long-delayed account. You comprehend? It is more than merely probable that you and

yours have been marked for assassination since the day the guns your grandsire served blew captured mutineers to bits in vengeance for the Massacre at Cawnpore. Yes, certainly. Of course."

The look upon young Shervers' face reminded me of that a half-grown child might wear while listening to an adult tell a tale of Santa Claus. He drained his pousse-café glass at a gulp. "I think you're talking rot," he growled. "Furthermore, I'd just a lief be killed by those assassins whom you talk about as smother here with all the windows down." He glared defiantly at de Grandin, then rose and crossed to the bow-window. "I'm goin' to let some air in here."

"Don't!" I cried, and:

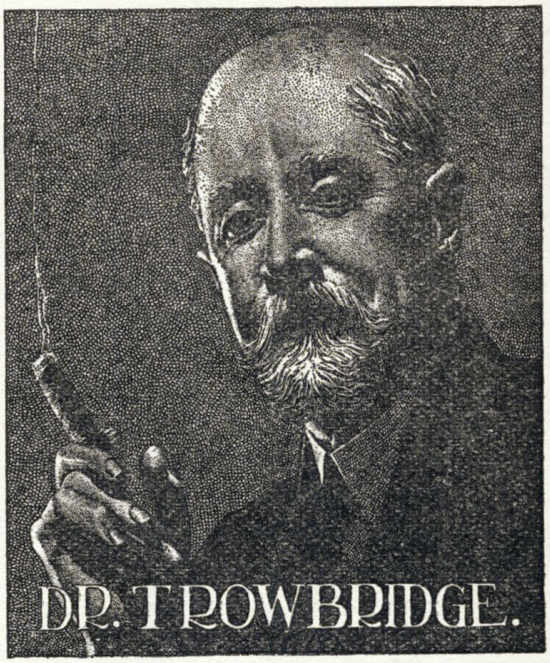
"Insensé, imbécile, nigaud!" de Grandin shouted. *"Nom d'un sacré nom,* you will destroy yourself completely!"

With an impatient gesture Elwood threw the curtains back, ran up the lace-edged blind and raised the sash.

Something like a long-drawn, venomous hiss—yet strangely like a cough—came to us from the outside darkness. There was a flash of white eyes in a swarthy face, the gleam of white teeth in a smile of gloating triumph, and the window-shade cord swayed as though a light breeze blew it.

Shervers staggered backward, both hands raised to clutch his throat, then stumbled crazily as though a cord had stretched across the floor to snare his feet, and dropped full length, face-upward, on the Mosul carpet.

Crash—tinkle! The shattering of splintered glass accompanied the roar de Grandin's pistol made as he snatched the weapon from his dinner jacket pocket and fired point-blank at the momentary silhouette of the dark face and evil smile that showed outside the window. A mocking laugh responded and the tap of fleeing feet came back to us from the



brick walk that circled round the house and let into the alley.

"See to him—artificial respiration!" de Grandin cried as he vaulted through the window in pursuit of the dark visitant.

I turned the fainting man face-downward, rolled my dinner coat into a wad and thrust it underneath his chest, then began applying Schaefer's method, pressing firmly down upon the costal margins, swinging back, then bearing down again, counting twenty rapidly between each alternating pressure. "Ordway!" I shouted. "Ordway, bring some brandy and water!"

"Yes, sir?" The butler tiptoed through the doorway, his disapproval of my rowdy manners written plainly on his smoothly shaven face. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing much," I answered tartly. "Only someone nearly murdered Mr. Elwood. Get some water and brandy, and be quick about it!"

IT MIGHT have been five minutes, though it seemed much longer, before the boy began to breathe in shuddering sighs instead of stifled gasps. I bent my arm be-

hind his shoulders, raised him and poured brandy mixed with water down his throat. "Easier now?" I asked.

He shuddered as though he were chilled. "He—he seemed waiting out there for me—popped right up in my face! It"—he coughed and retched—"it was like fire—like smoke—like something that exploded in my face!"

A grisly feeling of malaise came over me. "He seemed waiting out there for me"—the words the dying funeral director gasped when we helped him from the window where he had been stricken! I had the eerily uncomfortable feeling that small red ants were running up my spine and neck and through my hair. "Ordway," I called again, "see to Mr. Elwood. Give him a sip of brandy every few minutes, and fan him steadily with something. I'll be back directly."

Climbing through the window I looked around for Jules de Grandin. There was no sign of him. "Hi, de Grandin!" I called. "Where are you?"

"Ohé, mon vieux—à moi!" the hail came from the rear of the garden. "Come and see the fish that we have caught!"

The gleam of his white shirt-front guided me to where he sat upon the grass, a cigarette between his lips, a smile of utter satisfaction with himself upon his face. Thirty feet or so away something writhed upon the shadowed lawn and cursed venomously in a whining voice with thick-tongued words. "Good heavens, what is it?" I asked.

For answer he drew out his pocket flashlight and shot its beam upon his quarry. In the diffused circle of pale orange light I saw an undersized dark man, emaciated as a mummy, sparsely bearded, turbaned. There was something horribly reminiscent of a June-bug on a string about the way he clawed a little distance on the grass, then stopped abruptly with a cry or curse of pain and slipped back, as if he had been pinioned by a tether of elastic. Then I saw. Biting cruelly on his left leg were the saw-toothed jaws of a steel trap, and anchoring the trap was a strong chain made fast to a stout peg.

"Good Lord, man! What——" Involuntarily, I stepped forward to release the tortured prisoner.

"Keep back, my friend!" de Grandin warned. *"Retirez vous!"*

The warning came a thought too late. As I leant forward the trapped man roused upon an elbow, pursed his lips and blew his breath into my face. I stepped backward, choking. Overwhelmingly powerful, the fumes of some gas, hot and scalding-bitter, stung my throat and nostrils, strangling me. The world seemed whirling like a carousel gone crazy, blindness fell upon me, but it was a blindness shot with bursting lights. My head seemed swelling to the bursting-point. Dully, I felt, yet scarcely felt, the impact of my fall. Half senseless, I realized I lay upon my back, weak, limp and sick as though anesthetized with ether, yet with slowly rising consciousness returning.

"Wha—what?" I gasped, then choked and coughed and gasped again.

"C'est un empoisonneur vicieux!" I felt my wrists seized in a firm grip as Jules de Grandin pumped my arms up and down vigorously. Gradually the breath refilled my lungs, the dizziness subsided, and I sat up, staring round me in bewilderment. "You said it was a vicious poisoner——"

"Mai oui. I did, indeed, my friend. He is just that, the naughty fellow. Everything is all clear now, but there remain some things to be attended to." Methodically he cut a long switch from a lilac bush and stripped its leaves off. "Behold how I apply the antidote," he ordered as he advanced upon the prisoner

and struck him a cruel cut with the peeled withe.

I watched in a paralysis of fascination. Oddly, repulsively, the pantomime was more like the torture of a snake than the torment of a man. The wretched creature on the ground writhed and wriggled like a serpent, clawed the grass, whined and hissed. Time and time again he tried to reach de Grandin, rearing up upon his elbows, thrusting forth his head and blowing at him with a hissing sibilation.

"Sa-ha!" The little Frenchman leaped back nimbly, as from a physical attack, and struck and struck the prisoner again, now on his skull-thin face, now across the writhing shoulders or the twisting back, now on the legs.

The poor wretch slowly weakened in his efforts to defend himself. Between the pain of merciless beating and the torture of the steel trap clamped about his ankle, he was tiring rapidly, but de Grandin was relentless. "Blow, breathe at me, exhale, *diablotin!*" and the swish and clapping impact of his lash gave punctuation to his orders.

"Stop it, man!" I cried, almost sickened at the spectacle.

The look he turned on me made me shrink back, a hand involuntarily raised in defense. Once as a lad I'd tried to take a baby chick from my pet cat, and the recollection of the transformation of my gentle playmate to a snarling small edition of a tiger had never quite been banished from my mind. It was such a transformation that I witnessed now. His lips curled back in a snarl that bared his small, sharp teeth, his little blond mustache reared upward like the whiskers of a furious tom-cat, de Grandin seemed an incarnation of the god of vengeance.

"Keep clear!" he ordered savagely. "This affair is mine, to handle as my judgment dictates."

I retreated. It would have taken one far bolder than I was to try to take his prey away from him.

Cut—lash! His whip descended on the groveling man until it seemed that he desisted more from weariness than mercy. At last he threw the switch aside and stood looking at the trembling, sobbing wretch stretched on the grass before him. "I think that is enough," he told me matter-of-factly. "His venom-sac should be exhausted now."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Tout à l'heure," he cut me short. "At present we have duties to perform, my friend." Twisting his handkerchief into a cord he bound the prisoner's wrists securely at his back; then: "Put your foot down here, if you will be so good," he ordered, pointing to an arm of the steel trap, and rested his foot on the other prong, heaving downward at the saw-toothed jaws and releasing the man's ankle from their grip.

"Go, march, *en avant!*" he commanded, digging the muzzle of his pistol in the captive's back and pushing him toward the house. To me:

"Will you be kind enough to telephone the police and inform them that we have a tenant ready for the bastille?"

All spirit seemed to have been whipped out of our prisoner. The demoniacal gleam had faded from his eyes, his shoulders sagged, once or twice he shuddered and shook as if with overmastering sobs. *"Jo hoegha so hoegha*—what is written must come to pass!" he muttered.

"Beard of a green goat, never have you said a truer word, my wicked one!" de Grandin agreed as he thrust his pistol deeper in the small of the man's back.

"BUT no, my friends," he told us as, highball glass in hand, he faced us in the Shervers' little drawing-room, "it was all most beautifully simple, or, more exactly, beautifully complex."

Resting his glass on the mantelpiece he spread his finger fanwise and ticked the first point off upon his thumb.

"To commence at the beginning: It seemed strange to me when Doctor Trowbridge first related how the Shervers family was being stricken by heart disease in series. Such things do occur, of course, but they are of sufficient unusualness to excite our wonder. However, I was but mildly interested until that day we came here to the funeral and saw young Monsieur Oldham, the mortician, die. His death seemed due to heart disease, but there were certain things about it which rang warning bells inside my brain. His face was cyanotic—blue-hued—which is evidence of heart failure, but not the sort of evidence which excludes all other diagnoses. Also, about him, on his linen, in his breath, there was a subtle, faint perfume. Not of *l'eau de Cologne,* not *parfum social,* but of bitter almonds—crushed peach kernels. Why?

"That odor is found in a number of strong poisons, in prussic acid, in its deadly volatile derivative, hydrocyanic gas. But these kill very quickly. The young man had seemed well and strong—then he was dead. He could not have committed suicide by such means, and it seemed impossible anyone had killed him; yet he was very dead, and my experiments were later to convince me that he died from breathing fumes of nitrobenzol. However, we anticipate.

"When we called upon your venerable ancestor and saw his father's portrait on the wall, I found a basis for these deaths, but still I did not see the way the murders were committed.

"It is a matter of historic record that some of those who helped to execute the Sepoy Mutineers—and their children and their children's children—died in circumstances so unusual as to point to vengeance killings, and in some instances these were of a nature which precluded anything but magic having been involved." Elwood Shervers gave vent to a snort of incredulity; de Grandin stared him down as a master might stare down a noisy pupil in the class room, and proceeded:

"But if a ghost pursued the Shervers family, working out an ancient blood-feud, he would be discriminating. He would not kill the poor young mortuarian because he was unfortunate enough to bear a close resemblance to the Shervers. Human beings make such errors in the flesh, they do not make them when they are translated into spirit form. Furthermore, a ghost would not employ the simple way of poison. They have other ways of doing violence, those ones. Accordingly, I was obliged to seek a human agency in this.

"The young Monsieur Oldham had gasped out something of a man—or thing—which waited for him at the window just before he had his fatal seizure. Well then, we were to seek for one who lurked at windows. Your uncles died in bed or sitting in the house. A murderer could enter at the window and administer the poison to them while they slept. Your father died upon the highway, presumably of a heart failure. But he was in a closed coupé. Had someone asked a ride of him and been taken in his car, conditions would have been ideal for that one to have gassed him as they rode. Your grandsire died in bed, but he was old and weak. A burglar might have entered through the window, released the deadly gas upon him, then left all quietly. The gas of nitrobenzol is highly volatile. In half an hour there would remain no telltale odor to arouse suspicion. Only an autopsy would disclose the true nature of his death, and the mistaken diagnosis of heart failure precluded the necessity of a post-mortem.

"There seemed a ritual in these killings. One of the oldest Eastern curses is: 'May you see your children and your children's children blotted out, and live to die alone in bleak despair, without the hope of progeny.' Such a course, it seemed, these killings took. Sons and grandsons perished, called to death from perfect health, while your grandsire lingered on. You alone were spared, perhaps because the killer thought he had dispatched you when he killed young Monsieur Oldham.

"This we could not have. We must act with speed if you were to be saved. The killer might go home, believing his work done, then months or years afterward find he was mistaken, and come back to complete the extirpation of your family. We had to force his hand immediately. Therefore I asked you to display yourself in public, but to have a care of open doors and windows.

"Our strategy succeeded. The miscreant who sought your life became aware of his mistake; he would come back, I knew; but how or where he'd strike I did not know. Accordingly, I made the preparation for his coming. I visited your house this afternoon and saw the way a man would take if he desired to hasten from a ground-floor window to the alley, whence he could make his get-away unseen. Then in his way I placed a steel trap, trusting he would step into it as he ran. I desired you should be seen through the window, but I did not wish to have you open it. But you disobeyed my orders, and almost forfeited your life in doing so. Into your face he blew the poison fumes; then off he ran pellmell and —stepped in Jules de Grandin's trap.

"The fact that Doctor Trowbridge was at hand to give first aid enabled you to live where others died. Had we known the nature of his illness we could have saved the poor young Monsieur Oldham, too, but"—he raised his shoulders in a shrug—"ignorance has cost more lives than one.

"Now I had thought the poisoner was armed with some sort of a tank in which he kept his gas in concentrated form; therefore I followed him with caution until I saw him stumble in the trap and saw his hands were empty. Then I almost made the fatal error. I advanced on him; he roused upon his hands and blew his breath on me. *Parbleu,* I thought that instant was my last! But we were in the open air, and he struck too quickly, before I had come near enough. I revived, and Doctor Trowbridge came and suffered as I had.

" 'Jules de Grandin, what sort of man is it who breathes out sudden death?' I asked myself.

" 'Think, Jules de Grandin, you great stupid-head,' I reply to me, 'are he not an Indian, a Hindoo, and in India do they not have persons who are bred from infancy to ply the trade of poisoner?'

" 'It is exactly as you say, my clever Jules de Grandin,' I reply. 'Some of these poisoners are so venomous the mere touch of their hand will kill an ordinary man; others can blow poison breath, exactly like the fabled dragons of the olden days——' "

"You mean to say that man could kill a person merely by breathing on him?" I interrupted. "I've heard about those Indian poisoners, but I'd always thought the stories old wives' tales."

"The beldame's tale is often just a garbled version of a scientific truth," he answered. "Consider, if you please:

"You know how quickly human bodies set up tolerance to medicine. The man who suffers pain and takes an opiate today will take a dose three times as large next year, a dose which would be fatal to an ordinary man, yet which will hardly register upon a system which has been

habituated to the drug. The pretty ladies who take arsenic for the sake of their complexions become habituated to the poison till they can take an ounce or more a day, yet not be inconvenienced by it. It is like that with these ones, only more so. Habituated to the deadliest of poisons from their early infancy, these naughty men can ingest doses large enough to kill a dozen ordinary persons, yet feel no evil consequences.

"How did this one work? It was as simple — and as subtle — as a juggler's trick. Nitrobenzol, known commercially as oil of mirbane or artificial oil of almonds, is highly deadly. Fifteen drops compose a lethal dose, and its fumes are almost deadly as its substance. Upon inhaling them one becomes unconscious quickly — remember the young mortuarian—and death comes in a few minutes. The victim's face is cyanotic, having a blue tinge, as though heart failure were responsible. That is because the poison works by making it impossible for blood to take up oxygen. One cannot greatly blame the doctors who were misled. External symptoms all said 'heart disease,' and there was no reason why foul play should be suspected.

"Very well. Before going on a foray this one drank a quantity of nitrobenzol. It is highly volatile, and his stomach's warmth rendered it still more so. He approached a victim all unarmed. Could anyone suspect him? *Non.* Ah, but when he came within a breathing-distance, by a sudden torsion of the muscles of his thorax and abdomen, he induced an artificial eructation—the poison gas was belched forth from his mouth, his victim fell and —*voilà tout!*"

"I see," I exclaimed, "that's why you beat him so unmercifully! You wanted him to discharge all the poison gas his stomach contained. . . . I'm very glad, de Grandin; I'd thought that you were merely taking vengeance on him——"

He flashed his quick, infectious grin at me. "You are very good and very kind—too much so, sometimes, good Friend Trowbridge—but there are times when I have serious reason to believe you are not as well equipped with brains as you might be. Of course, I beat the miscreant. Was it his life against ours? While he still retained the power to spew the poison gases out we dared not go near him, nor could the police take him, for he needed but to breathe to free himself. I am not a cruel man, but I am logical. I do the needful when the need for doing it arises. Yes.

"But this poison——" began Shervers.

"Poison assumes many guises," interrupted Jules de Grandin. "At present, if you please, I should like some from that lovely bottle standing at your elbow." He drained his highball glass and held it out to be replenished.

The Fire Princess

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrill-tale of intrigue and weird horror in the terrible valley of Koom, the hidden city—a story of the Place of Power that was the tomb of the Ancient Ones

1. Secret Agent

IT SEEMED to Gary Martin that the malign mood of alien Asia was stronger tonight, that all this black labyrinth of Tientsin was sullenly brooding, listening darkly to the whispering west wind. And that furtive wind out of the mightiest and most mysterious of continents seemed muttering tonight of menace, and of an ancient hate.

The tall young American swore inwardly. After six years, he told himself, the East was getting on his nerves. Those six years of subterfuge and peril had taken their toll; his very soul was weary and homesick. Well, he'd soon be out of all this, for a while at least. And Gary's tired mind warmed with a yearning, precious emotion at the thought of home.

Tientsin had never seemed so squalid to him as it did tonight. The ill-lit, narrow streets of dingy shops and blank house-walls, the worn cobbles and stinking gutters, the infinity of indescribable smells—these did not rasp as much as the noisy crowds that buffeted him. Dignified Chinese merchants and stocky peasants, dusty donkey-drivers and wretched beggars and barrow-men—all the classes and almost all the races of Asia seemed represented in this whirlpool.

Gary Martin saw over the heads of the crowd the sign, "American Book Store, William Cray, Prop.", just ahead of him. He was glad to push out of the noisy crowd into the dim, quiet little shop.

Mr. Cray was arranging two-month-old magazines on a rack. He turned, a commonplace, gray little man with a colorless face and eyes that blinked uncertainly through thick-lensed spectacles.

"Ah, Mr. Martin!" he exclaimed, coming forward with a cordial smile. "I am glad to see you back, sir. I hope your latest paleontological researches up in the Gobi were successful."

"I didn't do badly—found some interesting fossils up there," Gary admitted. "You've saved my mail for me?"

"Of course. It is in my office, Mr. Martin."

He locked the shop door, and then Gary followed him back into the office. It was a lamplit, shabby little room with an old desk and a couple of chairs.

Gary sat down, his long, rangy form slumping wearily. His dark head sagged a little, but his earnest gray eyes held an anxious hope.

Cray had taken off his spectacles, and the little bookseller's face had subtly changed, as though something hard and ruthless had come alive in his pale eyes.

"You did fine work up in Mongolia, Gary," he was saying evenly. "Your reports on the Japanese military infiltration up there were thorough. I've already forwarded them to Washington."

Gary nodded uninterestedly at the compliment. Then he leaned forward, his tanned, tired young face suddenly eager.

"My leave, Cray?" he asked. "Has it come?"

For answer, Cray reached into the desk and took out a long envelope. He handed it over.

"It came last week," he said. "You can read it later—in consideration of your fine services to the United States Army Intelligence, you are granted six months leave, and so on."

"Six months?" Gladness leaped into Gary Martin's hungry gray eyes. "Lord, but that's good! Six months away from Asia, back in the States—football games and theaters and people talking my own language, and nobody trying to stick a knife into me——"

He stopped suddenly. There was something in Cray's pale eyes, as he watched. It was a shadow of pity. Gary stared hard at this commonplace little man who was the head of the American spy network in the Far East. Dim alarm checked the jubilation of the young secret agent.

"Cray, there's something on your mind. What is it?" Then, in dismayed divination, Gary added suddenly, "You've got another job for me? That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes, Gary, that's it," said William Cray slowly.

An intense bitterness came into Gary's gray eyes. His voice took on a rasping quality.

"I might have expected it," he said bitterly. "For six years I've been roaming up and down Asia, posing as a paleontologist, spying out the things you wanted to know. Now, when at last I'm granted my leave of absence, you're ordering me out on another mission."

"Not ordering you, Gary," corrected the little spymaster. His face was very grave, his pale eyes very steady. "There is a job, yes—the most terribly important any secret agent has ever had. I want you to take it, for I think you're my one man who might succeed. But I can't order you to take it," Cray continued, "since your leave is already in effect. I can only tell you about it, and then if you wish to accept this mission, it is yours."

"Cray, I can answer that at once," Gary told him in hard accents. "I'm not taking your job! I want this leave and I'm going to have it."

Not a shadow of perturbation crossed William Cray's colorless face, but he asked a quiet question.

"Even so, will you let me tell you about this?"

"Go ahead," Gary said harshly. "It'll do no harm to tell me, as long as you understand I've refused the job."

CRAY idly twisted a little slip of paper in his fingers, staring broodingly at the wall. He did not turn his head when he finally spoke.

"Gary, did you ever hear of the legended kingdom of Koom?"

Gary frowned. "You mean that hidden kingdom that's supposed to exist in eastern Tibet?"

The little spymaster nodded. "Yes, that's what I mean. Just what have you heard about it?"

Gary made a brusk, impatient gesture. "It's just another Tibetan legend—though it is believed by every race in Central Asia. The story is that there's a sacred, wonderful valley in the unexplored mountain ranges there, a valley that was once the home of the ancient gods. In that hidden valley of Koom is supposed to dwell a kingdom of people who keep guard upon the secrets of mighty power left there by the gods."

"What do you think lies behind this legend of the kingdom Koom?" Cray asked keenly.

Gary shrugged. "Koom is probably just a valley in those mountains inhabited by a people a little different from the ordinary tribes. That would be enough to start all kinds of superstitious stories."

"You've never been near the mountains

where the place is supposed to be situated?" the other asked. Gary shook his head.

"Not within four hundred miles of them. You see, the legended kingdom Koom is to the Tibetans the most sacred spot on earth. Not one of them will go into those mountains, for they think it's forbidden. And they would instantly kill any foreigner whom they suspected of trying to pry into the hidden valley."

"But you know at least where Koom is supposed to be located?" Cray persisted.

"It's supposed to be in the unexplored mountains beyond the desert plateau south of the Kun-Lun range, deep in northeast Tibet," Gary said, frowning. He asked, "Why all this interest in a Central Asian legend? What's it got to do with the big job you were talking about?"

"It has a lot to do with it," Cray said heavily. He swung around, his pale, intent gaze fixed now on the younger man's lean brown face.

"Suppose," Cray said quietly, "that a woman came out of the hidden valley Koom and announced to the peoples of Central Asia that she had been sent by the gods to lead them to war and conquest. Would they believe her? Would they follow her?"

Gary's tanned forehead furrowed deeper. "A woman who did that could stir up the nomad peoples, plenty," he admitted. "Tibetans, Mongols, Turks—all of them, even most Chinese, believe that legend." Then he asked sharply, "Is there a rumor like that among the interior peoples?"

"There is," the little man said shortly. "Our agents in the interior have heard it from every hand. All the nomad races of Central Asia are seething with undercover excitement. A whisper, a burning prophecy, has spread that out of the hidden kingdom Koom is coming a great princess or queen named Shirani, who will lead them to conquest."

"Shirani?" Gary repeated frowningly. "It's an unusual name. I suppose she is some witch or priestess of this valley Koom who has decided to play on the superstitions of the nomads. She could start a lot of tribal wars and conquests in the interior with that story, all right."

"Gary, she can do more than that," Cray said earnestly. "That woman, unless she's stopped, can plunge our whole world into another destructive war!"

Gary stared incredulously. The little spymaster leaned suddenly forward, and his words crackled like snapping firecrackers.

"Suppose Japan gets hold of this woman Shirani? Or Russia or one of the other powers? *Then* what will happen?"

Gary looked startled. "You think one of those nations might use her to stir up the nomad tribes for their own purposes?"

"They will if they can!" Cray declared. "They'll utilize the superstitious veneration of the nomad tribes for her to set those millions of nomads moving in whatever direction they wish. Whatever power gets hold of this woman can use her to get a death-grip on all Central Asia, to dominate this whole continent!"

"It's true, it might be done," muttered Gary through tight lips, a frown on his tanned, lean face. "But there's nothing to show that any of the powers will try such a game as that."

WILLIAM CRAY smiled mirthlessly. "I had a report yesterday from our agent in Tokyo. He says that Major Okara has just left Japan, for a secret mission in Tibet."

"Major Okara?" The name came sharply from Gary's lips, his dark head jerking up.

"Yes, Okara," Cray repeated. "The ace spy of Japan, the most ruthless and diabolically cunning secret agent in the East.

If Okara's started for Tibet, it's for something big. It's to penetrate to that hidden valley and get hold of this woman Shirani, and make her a tool of Japan.

"Think what *that* will mean. That woman today is the key to control of all the nomad tribes, to domination of all interior Asia. If one nation gets hold of her and makes a tool of her, it means the end of all other nations on this continent. America must prevent that!"

"And the big job you spoke of is to prevent it, to get into that hidden valley and bribe or cajole this woman into refusing the offers of the other powers?" Gary stated grimly.

"Yes, Gary. I must send someone in there to play the game for America, against Japan and Russia and the rest. Some agent of America must keep them from making a tool of this Shirani, even if he has to *kill* her."

"Of course you know," Gary said harshly, "that whoever tries to get in there will probably be killed by fanatic Tibetans?"

"There's a chance that an agent can get through into the hidden valley," Cray said doggedly. "I must gamble on that chance."

Then he rose heavily to his feet, his face sagging as he told the younger man, "That's the big job I was hoping you'd take, Gary. You know something of Tibet, and you'd have the best chance of making it. But I don't blame you for refusing it—you've earned your leave of absence and you've got a right to enjoy it."

He held out his hand. "You'll be sailing for the States soon, so this is goodbye. I hope you have a fine leave, Gary."

Gary Martin looked up, his gray eyes bitter, something near to hate on his lean, taut face.

"Damn you, Cray," he said harshly, "you know I can't refuse the job, the way you've put it. You knew that if I listened, you could talk me into it!"

William Cray's colorless face lit to one of his rare smiles.

"I knew that *America* could talk you into it," he said.

2. *In Mysterious Tibet*

REINING in his pony sharply, Uluk, the Mongol leader of the little caravan, pointed across the barren, rocky plateau.

"Look, khan!" he exclaimed. "Someone waits for us, ahead."

Gary Martin halted his own shaggy pony abruptly, while the two Chinese who rode behind with the pack-horses also stopped apprehensively. The young American squinted against the noonday glare, whose pale radiance made everything as unreal as moonlight.

This was the barren, semi-desert plateau of northeast Tibet, a drab, rocky plain thinly covered with scanty grass; an untraveled, unexplored waste fifteen thousand feet above the sea, inhabited only by fierce, wandering Tibetan tribes. Studded with great boulders, cut by deep gorges, it lay like the surface of an old, withered, dying planet. The winds that blew fitfully across it were bleak and chill.

A wall of huge mountains sheathed with perpetual snow and ice loomed far ahead, a marching range of icy peaks and cliffs that stretched a giant barrier obliquely across their path. For weeks Gary and his little caravan had been forging deeply southward into this unvisited region, toward those unknown mountains that were supposed to contain the legended valley of Koom. They had only sighted the distant white peaks this morning, and Gary had eyed them tensely as he rode toward them. Somewhere inside them must lie the fabled kingdom Koom, and the mysterious woman Shirani upon whom the peace of the world depended.

"It is one man on foot, waiting for us," Uluk was saying. The little Mongol's fierce, swart, high-cheekboned face was puzzled.

Gary Martin felt perplexed too as he stared at the small figure waiting ahead on the barren plain.

"It may be a trap—an ambush of the Tibetan nomads," he muttered. "I've been expecting them to try to stop us, ever since we sighted those mountains this morning."

Uluk nodded agreement, his sloe-black eyes fixed ahead. "The Tibetans have been watching us," he said grimly. "I have glimpsed them trailing us today, and that means no good."

Gary loosened his heavy pistol in its holster, and gave the order to ride on. The tired ponies plodded slowly forward, their hoofs raising fine clouds of dust.

The two Chinese looked more scared by the minute, but Uluk remained impassive. The little Mongol whom he had met and hired up in Koko Nor was a good man, Gary thought. He'd been a big help.

Then Gary uttered an ejaculation of surprize, his lean, brown face stiff with astonishment, as they rode up to the small figure waiting for them. It was a girl, dressed as he was in whipcord coat and riding-breeches and felt hat—a white girl, alone here in the barren waste, without horses or servants.

"What the devil are *you* doing here?" Gary cried in amazement as he dismounted. "Who are you?"

"I'm Joan Laird—and I never believed in rescuing angels until I saw you coming!" she told him. "Have you any water?"

He handed her the canteen from his hip. She drank eagerly, holding it in both small hands, and when she lowered it, sighed.

"That *was* good! I haven't had a drink since last night," she told him.

Joan Laird had a firm-looking little figure, with a sturdy strength in its rounded feminine outlines. There was something of childish stubbornness and tenacity in her obstinate chin and business-like mouth and slightly snubbed nose. Her clear brown eyes were unafraid and self-reliant.

There was a smear of dust on her nose, and stray locks of dark, curly hair had fallen across her forehead. But though she looked more than a little fatigued, there was no worry in her face. Her eager eyes were bright and excited as she handed the canteen gratefully back to him.

"I'm Gary Martin, an American paleontologist down here on a surveying-trip," he said, frowning at her. "I can't for the life of me understand what an English girl is doing alone in this unknown country."

Joan Laird drew a long breath. "It's soon explained. My father is a missionary, up in Mongolia. Three months ago he came down here into Tibet, in the hope of converting some of these unknown nomad tribes. He was to return in a month, but he didn't come back! Finally I got so worried about him I decided to come down here and search for him.

"I had a lot of trouble getting any servants to come with me—they all said this part of Tibet was sacred and forbidden, and that the Tibetans were now expecting some kind of superhuman revelation and would be likely to kill any intruding foreigners. I finally got a few Chinese to come, by offering them exorbitant pay.

"The Chinese got more and more frightened during the last few days. Yesterday, for the first time, we sighted those big white mountains in the south. My

servants became panic-stricken, said that those were the forbidden mountains, and wanted me to turn back. I wouldn't. When I awoke this morning they had deserted with the horses, food, and everything else but my tent. There was no use trying to go back and catch them, so I just started ahead on foot."

"You've got yourself into a dangerous fix, Miss Laird," Gary rasped. "You had no business coming down into this unknown region."

Joan Laird's chin set stubbornly. "I had to find my father. And I'm sure he must be somewhere near those mountains ahead."

"He may be, if he's still alive," Gary said bluntly. "Your father picked the worst possible time to come down here into Tibet. All the Tibetan tribes are seething right now with fanatic superstition, and if your father was fool enough to try preaching to them now, they've probably killed him."

He saw her catch her breath, and whiten. He thought hard, then told her, "There's not much I can do for you. I can't take you back, for it's imperative for my purposes that I get into those mountains before I'm blocked off by the Tibetans. The best I can do is to give you a pony and rations. You'll have to find your own way back."

Gary knew how little chance there was that the girl could get safely back out of this country, alone. Yet he couldn't offer her any more help. Bigger things depended upon him than the fate of one English girl. For all he knew, Okara of Japan might already have sought out the legended valley Koom in the mountains ahead, might already be warping the mysterious woman Shirani into a tool of his nation. Even if this girl's life depended on it, Gary couldn't take the time now to see her safely back out of the country. But to his surprize, Joan shook her head firmly at his offer.

"I'm not going back. I'm going ahead and look for my father until I find him. He's somewhere this side of those mountains."

"Are you clean crazy?" Gary exploded. "The chances are ten to one that your father's dead. And if the Tibetan nomads catch you near those mountains you'll likely die too."

"Yet *you* are going to the mountains, just to look for fossils," Joan Laird pointed out. "If you can run the risk for that, I can do so to find my father. I'm going on—even if I have to walk."

Gary swore. "Damn all missionaries and their families! All right, Miss Laird, it will be on your own head. You can have a pony and rations. You can go with us as far as the mountains. And there we part company—I'm going with my men into the mountains, and you can wander around outside them looking for your father until the Tibetans catch you."

"That's fair enough," Joan replied sturdily, quite unperturbed by mention of danger.

Gary felt a strong desire to shake the dusty, stubborn little figure before him. Instead he ordered the staring Chinese servants to dismount, and then after he and Uluk had made a careful inventory of their supplies, he jettisoned some empty water casks and extra clothing, and redistributed the rest.

WHEN the packs were made up again, it left one of the pack ponies unburdened. The girl climbed onto its back. Gary watched her harshly, telling himself that he was a fool to jeopardize his chances to help her. Yet he knew that he could not just ride ahead and leave her here to perish.

As they rode on, Uluk looked at him oddly and said, "Khan, I heard you tell

the woman that we go into the mountains ahead. That will be very dangerous."

"What makes you think so?" Gary asked, watching the Mongol closely. He had not yet told the man his ultimate objective, and watched now to see how he would take it.

"The Tibetans, and many other peoples too, hold those mountains very sacred," Uluk replied. "They permit no one to enter them, for they believe that in them is the most sacred place in the world, the hidden kingdom Koom."

"Do you too believe that the kingdom Koom is in those ranges?" Gary asked him bluntly.

The Mongol looked at him squarely. "Yes, khan, I do believe it. And I think that we go to our deaths if we enter the mountains. For all our race know that it was in there in the valley Koom that the gods dwelt long ages ago, and that the hidden people of Koom still guard the secrets of the gods."

"You would like to turn back, then, and save your skin?" Gary asked caustically.

Uluk raised his head proudly. "No, khan, I did not say that. I think we are all doomed if we enter the mountains. Yet I go with you, for when you hired me, did I not swear fealty to you? And a Mongol's word is good."

Gary felt a little ashamed of his doubts. The stocky Mongol added, "But I think the Chinese are afraid. They have been whispering to each other that we are moving toward the forbidden kingdom Koom."

He and Gary had spoken in Mongol. And Gary was astonished when Joan Laird, riding beside them, spoke up in the same tongue.

"What is this place Koom you're talking about?" she asked interestedly. "It seems to me I've heard legends——"

"You didn't tell me you knew Mongol," Gary said, eyeing her accusingly.

"You didn't ask me," she replied coolly. "Of course I know it, after spending four years at a Mongolian mission. But that doesn't answer my question. What is Koom?"

"It's the name the Tibetans give a certain valley in those mountains ahead," Gary answered curtly. "It's where I'm going."

They forged on for a dozen miles that afternoon, over the rocky plateau, climbing steep little ridges, going far out of their way to head deep gorges. Except for a few scurrying marmots and a circling eagle, no life was to be seen. Yet Gary had the uneasy sense of human eyes watching them from the broken barrens, and he saw Uluk turn often and scan the horizon with keen, fierce black eyes.

Sunset came, casting a beautiful tinge of pink upon the white, mighty peaks far ahead. The air began swiftly to grow cold. Gary ordered a halt for the night amid a group of huge boulders. The two Chinese tethered and unpacked the shaggy ponies, under the sharp orders of the Mongol. They erected the little khaki tent in which Gary usually slept, and then started the erection of their own *yurta,* or conical tent of black felt stretched on wooden hoops.

Gary led Joan Laird into his little tent and made a brusk motion around its dark interior.

"It's yours. I'll bunk in the *yurta,* with the men."

"Thanks, a lot," she said, a little uncomfortably. And then she added impulsively, "I know I'm an awful drag on you. But I *had* to go after dad. You understand, don't you?"

Gary's hard, lean face relaxed a little. "Sure I understand," he said ruefully. "I think you've got a lot of pluck—too much of it for your own good. I wish I could get you to turn back, even now,"

he added earnestly. "We're only a dozen or so miles now from those mountains—and there must be Tibetan tribes outside them. I'm almost sure some of those nomads have been trailing us. Can't you use common sense?"

Joan bristled slightly. "I am using common sense. I'm sure father is alive, and I've got to——"

"Ah-h-h-h!"

That shrill, wild cry from the darkness outside came from one of the Chinese. Gary, his hand leaping to the butt of his pistol, ran out into the night with the girl after him.

A wonderful sky of white stars now tented the dim plateau. Uluk and the two Chinese, dark, squat figures in their shapeless sheepskin cloaks, were standing like statues beside their half-erected *yurta,* gazing rigidly south.

"What is it?" Gary snapped. "The Tibetans?"

Uluk turned, his flat face stiff with strange emotion. He said huskily, "No, khan. Look—to the south——"

Gary turned and stared. His heart skipped a beat. Miles to southward in the starlight, like dim ghost mountains, rose the mighty wall of white peaks. But now he could see something about them that had not been visible by daylight. It was an ominous glow of crimson light, a pulsating red glare flung up into the sky from far inside the distant, lofty ice-peaks. The light was not static, but wavered and shifted in great bands and beams, menacing the white-starred sky with shaking spears of red radiance.

He stared frozenly at that weird, blood-tinged aurora, his heart racing unaccountably. He heard Joan gasp beside him and knew that the English girl had seen also. Steadily the furnace-like glare flamed, wild and wonderful above the frosty fangs of the distant peaks.

"It is from the sacred valley of the gods!" one of the Chinese wailed, terrified. "That glare is from the mighty fires of hidden Koom!"

3. *In the Nomad Camp*

"GARY — Mr. Martin — what *is* it?" gasped Joan, clutching his sleeve in her small hand, staring petrifiedly.

"I don't know," he muttered. "There must be a volcanic area inside those mountains, that throws up that glare."

"It is the awful fires of forbidden Koom that light the sky!" the Chinese was crying. "And the hidden people who dwell in Koom will slay us all if we do not turn back!"

"We're not turning back," Gary said sternly. He noticed that Uluk was still staring rigidly at the ominous red sky-glare. "There's nothing in those mountains to harm you. Do you wish to lose the rich rewards I promised you for accompanying me?"

"Lord, no riches are of value to a dead man and we shall all very soon be dead if we go nearer to Koom," answered the terrified Chinese, his slant eyes dilated with his fear.

"Aye," shrilled the other Chinese in terrified agreement. "We go no further—we must flee this haunted region."

They started frantically toward the tethered ponies. Gary snatched out his pistol, but Uluk was ahead of him. The Mongol bounded in front of the two Chinese, his long knife drawn.

"Grandsons of dogs, return to your duties or I will give your entrails to the vultures!" he hissed, his eyes glittering.

"Kill us, then!" wailed one of the Chinese wildly. "It is better to die here than to enter the forbidden mountains.

Uluk raised his knife with a hiss of rage. Joan gasped in horror, and Gary cried hastily, "Wait, Uluk!"

He started toward the furious little

Mongol. But suddenly Gary stopped, listening tensely. Then he heard again the sound that had startled him. The click of a horse's hoof, out in the darkness.

"Someone's out there!" Gary exclaimed swiftly.

"Tibetans!" Uluk rasped. "I hear them too."

All were silent, the Chinese frozen now by new terror, Joan's sturdy little figure petrified, as they stared tensely. In the dim starlight, they could make out nothing but the looming boulders around the camp. Then Gary discerned a shifting of shadows out in the dark.

"It's the Tibetans, all right, and they're all around the camp," he said. Uluk darted to pick up a rifle but Gary stopped him. "No, Uluk! We can't hope to fight off a crowd like that. Our only chance will be to talk our way out of this."

"Is there really danger?" Joan asked tautly.

"Plenty of it," Gary said curtly. "Those nomads have been trailing us the last two days. They're probably convinced by now that we're heading for the forbidden mountains.

"Act as though you had nothing to be afraid of," he ordered. "Uluk, you and the Chinese build a fire and start cooking supper."

The dung fire built by Uluk and the trembling Chinese burned up smokily, casting a tremendous light on the huge purple boulders around the camp. Joan sat beside Gary, her stubborn little face unafraid as she pretended to chat casually. His dark head was stiffly erect, listening.

A tenseness grew on them every minute as the muffled click of hoofs outside the firelight grew louder, nearer. The suspense became unbearable. Then, almost before they had realized it, mounted men became visible all around the edge of the firelit camp.

They were Tibetan nomads, more than a score of them, mounted on wiry little ponies and armed with old rifles and swords; tall men in shapeless sheepskin cloaks and queer fur hats with upturned lugs. Their flat, yellow-brown faces were impassive, but their oblique eyes gleamed fanatic hatred at Gary Martin and his companions.

A chief, at whose belt swung a sword in an ornamented brass sheath, dismounted. He stumped toward Gary in the rolling waddle of those who spend most of their lives on horseback. Cold black eyes stared malignantly out of the swart mask of his face.

"Ku-sho," Gary greeted him calmly, standing up.

The Tibetan chief did not answer the greeting of honor. His eyes swung over the others, then back to Gary.

"What do you here, traveling toward the sacred mountains?" he demanded harshly in the guttural Tibetan tongue, gesturing toward the glare-crowned peaks. "No man may enter those holy ranges."

Gary had already decided on his explanation. He said in surprize, "We have no intention of entering the mountains. We have come searching for this girl's father, who wandered into this country."

Joan stiffened a little as she heard his untruth, and he realized that she understood Tibetan. Uluk was glaring.

"I think you lie," snapped the Tibetan. "I think you came to violate the forbidden range, like the Urussu."

"The Urussu—the Russian?" Gary exclaimed. "Do you mean that there is a Russian down here?"

"Aye, a dog who tried to enter the sacred mountains and whom we caught," the Tibetan replied harshly. "We are keeping him to be killed on the great day of the coming forth of Princess Shirani."

Shirani? Gary stiffened as he heard the name of the mysterious woman of

Koom, whom he was seeking. So these nomads *were* expecting the princess of that fabled land to come forth soon?

And who was this Russian who had been captured trying to enter the mountains? A Soviet spy, a secret agent of the Kremlin down here on the same mssion as himself? He was convinced it must be so.

"We take you to our Dzong-Pon—a chieftain of our tribes," the Tibetan was rasping. "He will know if you lie."

He ordered two of his men, "Disarm these people."

"Shall we fight now, khan?" asked Uluk in Mongol, his eyes blazing. But Gary shook his head quickly.

"No, our only chance of getting out of this is to convince their Dzong-Pon that we're just innocent travelers."

THE Tibetans snatched up the rifles and took Gary's pistol and the Mongol's knife. They roughly slapped Joan's garments to make sure she carried no weapons.

But when the Tibetans moved toward the two Chinese the nerve of the latter gave way. Their frozen terror dissolved into blind panic and they bolted wildly out of the firelight into the darkness.

Instantly Tibetan horsemen were after them like cats, drawing their swords. There was a brief, awful squealing out in the dark. Then the mounted men rode back, sheathing blades now stained red.

Joan shuddered uncontrollably. Gary, burning with rage, yet restrained himself. He muttered to her, "Keep your chin up! We'll be next if we make a slip."

"Your servants tried to escape!" the Tibetan chief cried fiercely, glaring at Gary.

"They feared you were going to kill them," Gary replied calmly. "And perhaps their consciences were evil. We did not try to escape, for we have done no wrong."

"Mount your horses," the chief ordered harshly.

Gary saw Joan climb bravely into the saddle as he mounted. Uluk followed their example.

"We ride!" called the chief.

With a sudden burst of wild yells that shattered the tense silence, the troop galloped into the darkness, keeping Gary and his two companions in their midst.

They rode straight southward over the plateau, the ponies running in the short, jerky lope that the horses of the Central Asian nomads can maintain almost endlessly. In the distance, ahead, reared the starlit white ranges, crowned with that shaking crimson glare.

Gary felt cold premonition of disaster as he rode. Unless he could talk their way out of this, convince the Tibetans that they had no design of seeking out fabled Koom, his all-important quest was ended. And, he thought sinkingly, probably Okara of Japan was already in those mountains.

They rode on for hour after hour in the tireless, jolting gallop. Dawn came, the breaking gray light finally banishing the mysterious fire-glow above the mountains. They were now but a half-dozen miles from the first tremendous slopes, that climbed with sharp steepness to snow-hung peaks and passes. Far across the rocky plateau stretched the colossal barrier of the white range, walling the unknown.

Beneath the mountains stood a great Tibetan nomad encampment. There was a whole town of black tents, hundreds of them, with smoke curling from their peaks, ponies tethered outside of them, and great herds of pasturing sheep and horses grazing for miles on the scant grass.

"Why, there must be thousands of

them here!" Joan called to Gary as they galloped forward.

He nodded grimly. "They've probably been gathering here, to await the great revelation from inside the mountains."

As they reached the big encampment, the Tibetan riders urged their horses faster and swept through the camp in a wild run. Women and children scurried excitedly out of the way, and dogs barked as the troop galloped to the center of the encampment and stopped with a crash of hoofs in front of a black tent of unusual size, outside of which many sheep-clad tribesmen stood, eyeing them fiercely.

Gary could hardly stand when he dismounted, his muscles were so sore and stiff from that long, jolting ride. Joan's face was drained of color and she swayed against him, but smiled strainedly. He heard Uluk muttering curses against the Tibetans under his breath.

The Tibetan chief emerged from the big tent into which he had gone when he dismounted.

"The Dzong-Pon awaits you," he said roughly.

They stumbled stiffly after him, followed by Tibetans with rifles and drawn swords, into the tent.

Its interior was like a dim, smoky cave, at the center of which burned a smoldering dung fire whose smoke partly escaped through the hole at the peak of the roof. Wooden chests standing around its walls, and a few cooking-utensils and silk hangings worked with figures of gods and demons were all the furniture.

THE Dzong-Pon, or chieftain of these tribes, sat upon a sheepskin and stared at the three captives with expressionless black eyes. His face was as cold and hard as a mask of brown stone. Beside him sat on old lama, huddled in his yellow robe and hood, his dim, filmy eyes peering up at them out of an incredibly wrinkled saffron face.

"Why did you come to the sacred mountains?" the Dzong-Pon demanded of Gary, paying no attention to his polite *"Ku-sho."*

"We knew nothing of the mountains," Gary said with assumed bewilderment. "We came searching for an old white man, the father of this girl, who is somewhere in this region."

"No old white man has been in this country," the Dzong-Pon answered coldly. "I think that you lie, that you came like the Urussu to spy upon us who wait the coming of the princess Shirani."

"You cannot convince him, khan," Uluk muttered to Gary. "Shall we snatch swords and try to cut our way out?"

"No, wait!" Gary urged him in a low voice.

An interruption had come. As the Dzong-Pon pronounced the name of the princess, the aged lama's filmy eyes had flashed and he made a sacred sign with his claw-like hand. All were tensely silent as his cracked, quavering voice intoned:

"Aye, out of age-old Koom shall soon come Shirani, daughter and princess of the people of the gods! The ears of our peoples have heard the prophecy she has sent forth from the hidden kingdom: 'There shall be a Day of Destruction, and in that one awful day shall be cast down the wicked nations of Earth. And then I, Shirani, will come forth from Koom and lead the peoples who await me to conquest of all the dazed earth!' Such is the promise of the princess!"

The lama's voice was shrill with deep reverence and awe, and that awe was reflected on the fierce, fantastic faces of the rest. Then the claw-like hand pointed to Gary and Joan and the Mongol.

"If these have come with blasphemous intent to enter the secret kingdom, then

they must be kept and killed upon the day that the princess Shirani comes forth, that she may know we have kept faithful vigil."

The lama sat back, huddling again inside his yellow robe, and a fierce sigh ran through the Tibetans in the tent.

"Gary, what did he mean by the Day of Destruction?" Joan whispered, her brown eyes wide and startled.

Before he could answer, the Dzong-Pon raised his voice. "Bring the Urussu here! We shall soon see if these people are lying."

The Urussu? The Russian? Gary's mind raced as a chief left the tent to execute orders. But before he had time to think of possibilities, the chief and two guards entered with the captive Russian.

He was a big, bear-like man, with huge shoulders and a barrel chest and a bullet head with a great shock of black hair. He had the round, red face of a merry peasant, and small eyes that were always twinkling as though at some secret joke.

"Borchoff!" exclaimed Gary, stiffening.

Borchoff turned, and saw the captives for the first time. Sheer astonishment froze his features as he perceived Gary. He stared at the young American and at Joan. And then a deep, rumbling explosion of laughter burst from him. He laughed like a man who has been told the funniest joke in the world, his great shoulders shaking, his round face convulsed.

"Martin!" he gasped in accented English when he could speak. "This is funny—this is killing me——"

He went into another paroxysm of gasping laughter. Gary's heart was cold within him. For he knew this big Russian.

Boris Borchoff had long been the most trusted spy of the Soviets in the Far East. Gary had clashed with him twice—once in Siberia and once at the headquarters of a Chinese Communist general. He knew that that merry, stupid peasant exterior concealed a feline cunning.

"Do you know these people?" the Dzong-Pon was demanding of Borchoff.

The chuckling Russian's pig-like little eyes gleamed cunningly at the stony-faced Tibetan.

"Will you let me go free if I tell you who they are?" he asked craftily.

"No, by Gesar!" spat the Dzong-Pon. "You die when the princess Shirani comes, for your crime of trying to enter the mountains. And if these others intended to commit the same crime, they die with you."

Borchoff seemed unsurprized by that answer. Still chuckling, he gazed at Gary and Joan. Then he turned back to the Tibetan.

"Yes, I know them," he declared. "The white man is an American spy who undoubtedly came here to make his way into Koom and prevent the princess from ever coming forth. The girl is a spy also."

"Damn you, Borchoff, that's a lie!" cried Gary wrathfully. "This girl is no spy—you're condemning her to death!"

"So you are spies, like the Urussu?" hissed the Dzong-Pon, rising and glaring at Gary and his companions. Hate raw and appalling was now on the fierce face of every Tibetan in the dim tent.

"Then you share the Urussu's fate!" the Tibetan cried. "Guards, take them and keep them with him until the day of death!"

4. The Struggle in the Pass

THEY were hauled out into the daylight without ceremony. A crowd of nomad men, women and children shrilled fierce maledictions at them, and wolfish Tibetan dogs barked savagely at them as

they were marched roughly through the camp toward another black tent.

Into this rude prison they were thrust, and two Tibetans armed with rifles posted themselves outside its door, while another went around to guard the back of the tent. In the dim, smoky interior, Gary turned on Borchoff, a deadly rage in the American's gray eyes.

"Don't be angry, Comrade Martin," chuckled the Russian. "I knew as soon as I saw you that you were down here too after this woman Shirani. I'd been sent on the same quest for my country, had failed and been captured; so naturally I had to keep the spies of other countries from succeeding. It is all part of the great game."

"It's part of the game for me, yes," Gary said savagely. "But why did you tell them that Joan is a spy? There was no need to doom an innocent girl to death by that lie."

"Lie?" echoed Borchoff blankly. His round, red face amazed, he stared at the English girl and then back to Gary Martin.

"Comrade Martin, do you mean to say you didn't *know* that this girl is a British government spy?"

"Of course I didn't know it, because it isn't true!" Gary flared.

Borchoff's big body shook with mirth. "My poor American, you have been deceived. This Joan Laird has for four years been a British spy, working from Hongkong. I know because she nearly got me executed down in Indo-China two years ago."

Gary was stupefied by the accusation. "Why, that's impossible. She's simply down here hunting for her father——"

Sudden doubt hammered at his brain, and he broke off and swung around to Joan Laird. His gray eyes narrowed as they bored into her stubborn face.

"*Are* you hunting for your father?" he demanded suspiciously. "Or are you what Borchoff says, a British spy?"

"Of course I'm not a spy," Joan said indignantly. "This man lied, simply because he was doomed himself and didn't want one of us to escape." Her brown eyes flashed at the chuckling Russian.

"I wonder," said Gary slowly, his cold gaze searching her face. "Your story of a missionary father who'd come down here seemed a little strange to me, from the first. And the Dzong-Pon said that no elderly white man had been near here —and *he* had no reason to lie." Gary's eyes were suddenly hot. "By heaven, if I thought you'd been lying to me——"

"Of course she's been lying," Borchoff grinned. "Without doubt, she has her identification card on her right now."

"This is all insane," Joan said scornfully, turning her back on them.

Gary grasped her arm and whirled her around, his lean brown face dangerous. "Maybe it is—but I'm going to find out," he rasped.

Joan struggled suddenly like a wildcat, but he held her with an iron grip while he used his free hand to search the pockets of her jacket and breeches. He found nothing in the pockets but a miscellaneous assortment of feminine odds and ends.

"I hope you're satisfied now!" flared Joan.

"No, not yet," Gary said grimly, still holding her. His brown hand seized the collar of her white silk blouse.

"No!" she gasped, pounding him furiously with little fists. "You can't——"

"A spy has no room for chivalry," Gary grated. "I forgot that once, but I'm not going to forget it again."

Ruthlessly he ripped the blouse, which parted to disclose the silk bandeau that confined her firm breasts. A pattern of tiny stitches on the front of the silken band caught Gary's eye. Holding the fiercely struggling girl and prisoning her

clawing hands, he thrust his own hand rudely down into the bandeau.

He felt a little oblong of thin cardboard inside the silk. Instantly he tore the scanty little garment completely away, and pushed the raging, struggling girl away from him. The thrust brought Joan up against the side of the tent, and she stood, her small hands covering her breasts and her brown eyes blazing.

Gary tore apart the silk, while Borchoff and Uluk watched in wonder. In a moment he had the thin gray card, with its official red seal, in his hands. The seal was that of the British Foreign Office. The card ordered all British consular and police officials to accord full co-operation to Miss Joan Laird, accredited agent of the Intelligence Department.

"You and your missionary father!" snapped Gary savagely to the girl. Joan met his harsh, accusing gaze defiantly as she rebuttoned her blouse.

"I had to tell you something," she retorted. "I was sent here to get hold of this Shirani, just as you and Borchoff were. Because I knew more about Tibet than anyone else available, my superiors thought that I had the best chance of getting to that legended valley Koom. My Chinese *did* desert, as I told you. Then when you appeared, I guessed you were an American spy on the same mission as myself, so naturally I lied to you. You'd have done the same, in my place!"

Gary Martin's lean face was still harsh with wrath, but he admitted bitterly, "Yes, I suppose I would have."

HE STEPPED to the door of the tent and looked out tautly. The Tibetan guards outside raised their rifles, watching him. The encampment was stirring with the indolent activity of nomad life —herdsmen riding back and forth to the grazing herds outside the camp, women preparing food, snake-eyed youngsters riding unsaddled ponies.

He stared beyond the camp at the looming mountains. His yearning eyes made out a crack in the huge barrier, a narrow pass. The pass climbed steeply up through the looming, snowy peaks.

"If I could get into that pass, I could get on into the mountains," he muttered. "It would be hard going, but possible."

Borchoff chuckled. "I've thought that many times in the week they've held me here. But none of us will ever get into that pass. America and Britain and Russia will have to send new spies down here."

"It'll be too late, by then," Gary responded. "Okara of Japan is somewhere near here, probably ahead of us."

The Russian swore lividly. "Okara! I might have known it! That cursed little Japanese whom nobody knows will succeed where we three have failed. *He'll* get into Koom and find this Shirani!"

He began to rave and curse in his own tongue. "I don't mind dying so much, but to let Okara beat me! To let Russia be cheated out of the domination of Asia, by those little yellow devils!"

Gary said harshly, "An Asia dominated by Russia, or Britain either, would be as bad for the world as a Japanese-dominated one. America sent me in here to stop any of those things from happening."

"Maybe even Okara will not be able to succeed, inside those mountains," muttered Borchoff, staring at the mighty, icy range. "Maybe there is something in there too big for even Japan to handle."

"What do you mean?" Gary asked sharply. "You don't believe these Tibetan superstitions about Koom and its people?"

"I don't know what to believe," hedged the Russian. "There's something damned weird in there—you saw the fire-

glow that flares above the peaks each night? And all these people are sure that in there are still guarded the secret, mighty powers of ancient gods. And what's more, these Tibetans are sure that before Shirani comes out of Koom, she will do something that will shatter all the great nations of the world. That will be the Day of Destruction they talk about, and after that the broken nations will be easily conquered."

Uluk stirred uneasily. The little Mongol told Gary, "That is the story that has spread among my people too, khan."

The morning hours passed slowly. Soon after noon a sullen Tibetan woman, wearing a long woolen robe and queer cap, brought them food which she set down hastily inside their tent, and then left. The food consisted of *tsamba* or ground barley meal, mixed with strong butter.

Borchoff ate largely and Uluk fed himself stoically, but Gary and Joan hardly touched the food. Gary sat staring, cold despair in his heart. In his brain was ringing the single somber thought, "You've failed. You've failed Cray, and America."

"Damn it, there must be some way to get out of here," he exclaimed fiercely, rising to his feet. They stared hopelessly.

Then Uluk suddenly stood up, eyes flashing. "Khan, there *is* a way by which we might win to freedom! I have just thought." He asked the Russian, "Will we be brought another meal, tonight after dark?"

Borchoff nodded, his red face perplexed. The Mongol said quickly, "Then when the Tibetan woman brings in our food tonight, we can overpower her and I will walk out in her robe and cap. I look enough like a Tibetan to fool the guards in the dark. Once outside, I can steal horses and weapons and come back here, and you can crash out and escape."

"By heaven, it is a chance!" Gary cried, his desperate gray eyes kindling. "Once you and I get outside the camp, Uluk, we can ride straight for that pass in the mountains."

Boris Borchoff's eyes narrowed. "You don't go without me, Martin! If you try to leave me behind, I'll give the alarm."

"And I'll do the same," Joan Laird declared instantly. "You'll take me with you or I'll spoil the whole plan."

Gary gazed furiously from the grinning Soviet spy to the girl's stubborn little figure and determined face.

"All right, damn you," he swore, "you can both come along, and once we're out of here and inside that pass, we'll settle as to which of us is going on into the mountains to Koom."

For the rest of that afternoon they were tense with the desperate plan. Gary knew now that even if he got into the mountains he would still have Joan and Borchoff to contend with, but he told himself that with Uluk's help he should be able to handle them.

NIGHT swept down on the great Tibetan camp. As darkness fell, above the looming white peaks flared the mysterious fireglow, painting the starred sky with wavering bands and rays of red light. They watched from inside the tent, and the Tibetans outside also were watching, talking excitedly. Then the nomads began to retire into the tents.

"What if the woman does not come with food tonight?" Joan asked tensely in the darkness.

"In that case——" Gary began, then suddenly stopped and hissed, "She's coming now!"

The guards outside were speaking gutturally to someone. Gary and Borchoff flattened themselves on either side of the door. The Tibetan woman's shapeless figure entered with the wooden bowl of food.

Instantly they jumped on her. It was no time for gallantry—Gary got his hands at once over her mouth, preventing an outcry, while the Russian held her thrashing arms and legs.

Joan swiftly and efficiently gagged her with a big handkerchief. They tied her arms and legs with strips of cloth they had made ready. Uluk had already pulled off the woman's long outer robe and cap, and the little Mongol was by now attired in them.

"Now get going!" Gary hissed at him. "Get four ponies and a couple of rifles if possible, and ride back here slowly. We'll be waiting, and will jump those guards when we see you coming."

"Yes, khan!" whispered Uluk, slant eyes gleaming.

Then he moved boldly out of the door of the tent, keeping his head bent and walking in the same ungraceful waddle the Tibetan woman used. One of the guards outside said something to him.

Uluk only shrugged, and moved on. In a moment he was out of their sight in the darkness of the encampment.

"So far, so good," Borchoff muttered. "If he can just get the horses now, we've a good chance."

"He'd best hurry," Gary grated. "The moon rises soon."

Joan Laird, taut with excitement, was crouching beside him. They waited in unutterable suspense.

Suddenly a wild yell of alarm floated across the nomad camp. It was echoed by other alarmed cries, and over them sounded the thud of galloping hoofs, rapidly receding in the night.

"Uluk was discovered!" cried Gary dismayedly. "He's had to flee out of the camp."

"Then we're done for!" exclaimed Borchoff.

The Tibetan encampment was rousing to the fact that something had happened. Voices were calling shrill questions, dogs barking wildly. The din of alarm still came from the south end of the camp.

Gary saw the guards outside the door staring in that direction, and realized that in this confusion there might still be a slim chance of escape. Fiercely he resolved at once to take that chance.

"We've got to make our break anyway —now!" he snapped to Borchoff and Joan. "Once they find one of us has escaped, they'll guard us so closely we'll never have another chance. Come on!"

There was no time for him to discuss details with them. Action was the paramount necessity now, for the confusion in the dark Tibetan camp could not last long.

Gary acted. He sprang out of the tent with the Russian and girl close behind him. Instantly the staring guards heard him and whirled around, leveling their rifles to shoot.

Gary struck up the muzzles and leaped in. The guns banged crimson flame over his head as his fists smashed the stomach of one of the two Tibetans. The man went down, falling on his rifle. Gary snatched the sword from his belt and whirled wildly.

Borchoff's huge fist had smashed the other guard's face to red pulp. The Tibetan guarding the back of the tent was running around it, aiming his rifle. Joan thrust him fiercely off balance, as he pulled the trigger. Then the Russian's great fist knocked him flat.

"Quick—here are horses!" Gary yelled, running toward a near-by tent outside which a half-dozen ponies were tethered.

The ponies were saddled and bridled, waiting to be used by the herdsmen who lived in that tent. Gary slashed the tether-lines with his sword and the three sprang into the saddles.

Now Tibetans were running out of all the tents and through the encampment

toward them, drawn by the shots. Men grabbed for their bridles. Gary slashed down with the sword and they recoiled.

"Ride!" Gary yelled, digging his heels into the flanks of his wiry steed.

The horses, maddened by the gathering uproar, bolted wildly between the dark tents. Rifles blazed behind them and bullets whistled past their heads. The whole camp was in wild excitement.

Tibetans ran out in the dark to stop them, but the desperate trio crashed through them, Borchoff shouting hoarsely, Gary wielding his sword like a madman. Then they were out of the camp, galloping wildly over the dark plateau.

Full before them, five miles away, loomed the majestic white barrier of the colossal mountain range, crowned by that weird, shaking red fire-glow. Gary headed his bolting steed for the narrow crack of the snowy pass. Behind, the Tibetan camp was a din of raging yells.

"They'll be after us!" Joan cried above the wind, her small figure jolting on the plunging, galloping pony.

"I don't think they'll follow us into the sacred mountains," Gary called. "We may be safe once we get up in that pass."

Gary grimly resolved that even if they gained the pass, neither Joan nor Borchoff—neither Britain nor Russia—would go farther inside the mountains with him. Somehow, he'd stop them from that, even though he did not now have the help of Uluk to count on.

Now they were riding up the first long slopes toward the cliffs and buttresses of the mighty range. The moon was rising, its blank white shield casting a silver light over the vast, snowy range and the plateau behind them. Far back, a dark mass was following them.

"The Tibetans are after us, all right," Gary called.

"Those mutton-faced dogs will never catch us now!" came Borchoff's exultant laugh.

They were at the mouth of the pass, a moonlit, narrow canyon strewn with great boulders. It was hardly more than a crack in the range, its upper walls hung with great masses of snow and ice. It twisted and turned, winding steeply upward. The air became freezing.

Gary saw moonlit snow ahead of them, on the floor of the narrow canyon. At these altitudes, the snow-line was soon reached. It was thin at first, but rapidly deepened until the ponies were struggling upward through yard-deep drifts. Huge white masses of ice and snow hung over them, bulging out from the rock walls high above their heads. There were places where such masses had fallen, showing that slides were common.

Gary suddenly perceived that there were fresh horse-tracks in the snow *ahead* of them. Instantly he understood.

"Uluk must have come up into this pass when he was discovered and had to flee the camp!" he cried. "He's somewhere ahead."

He shouted joyfully up the moonlit canyon. "Uluk!"

His shout reverberated between the snowy walls. Then came a whispering, echoing answer. "Here——"

GARY'S hopes soared as he urged his tired pony upward through the snow. Uluk's presence here meant that he could easily keep Joan and Borchoff from following him into the mountains. He, and he alone, would yet win to secret Koom!

They came soon upon the little Mongol standing in the moonlit snow, a rifle in his hand, a pony beside him.

"Thank the Lord you knew enough to make for this pass when you had to run!" Gary cried as he dismounted.

Uluk said calmly, "I was discovered by the Tibetans when I stole this rifle. I did not think you others could escape then."

Joan and Borchoff had ridden up by now, and they too dismounted in the snow. "So it is really the Mongol!" Borchoff exclaimed. "Good—now we can get on into the mountains."

Gary laughed mirthlessly. "*I* am going on into the mountains, with Uluk. You and Joan go no further." He told the Mongol, "Keep them covered, Uluk, and shoot to kill if either tries anything."

"So America wins?" Joan said bitterly.

"America wins, yes," Gary told her harshly. "You two can freeze here in the snow or go back and give yourselves up to the Tibetans—I don't care which. I'm going on in to Koom and Shirani."

"You are wrong, Martin," said the new, cold voice in English. "American does not win. *Japan* wins."

Gary spun amazedly. Uluk was covering him with the rifle, as well as the other two. And the Mongol's fierce face was changed.

"What are you talking about, Uluk?" Gary cried.

"Let me introduce myself," Uluk said calmly. "I am Major Doijji Okara, of the Imperial Japanese Intelligence."

"*Okara of Japan!*" cried Joan. Borchoff stared, his red face gaping. Gary burst into stupefied speech.

"You *can't* be Okara!" he cried wildly. "Why I hired you myself, up in Koko Nor——"

"Certainly you did," Okara answered quietly. "I was in Koko Nor ready to start south into Tibet on the same mission as yourself. I recognized you as an American spy on the same quest as I, so I thought it good strategy to hire myself to you and accompany you most of the way—then dispose of you. Thus I could be sure you did not beat me.

"Tonight," the Japanese added coolly, "I had no intention of helping you escape the Tibetans. I simply escaped myself."

Gary plummeted the black depths of despair. Of all the crushing blows that had ever been dealt him, this was the worst.

Tricked, fooled—he, the ace American spy in the East, gulled by both Joan Laird and the renowned Okara of Japan, and his all-important mission ruined by his own crass stupidity!

Okara said calmly, "There are enough bullets in this rifle for all of you. I am sorry, but I never take chances. Inside these mountains lies the key to control of Asia for Japan, and three lives are nothing against that."

A fanatic patriotism flamed in the little Japanese eyes as he deliberately raised the rifle. And Borchoff began to laugh! The huge Russian choked, strangled, with unaccountable mirth.

Okara's burning eyes fixed on him, and he said, "I am glad to see that you can meet death so bravely."

"We *all* meet death—together here," Borchoff roared in laughter. He pointed back down the moonlit, snowy pass.

A half-hundred Tibetans were urging their ponies up the pass!

"We thought they wouldn't follow us into the sacred mountains," Borchoff roared. "But they have—they have!"

The Tibetans had sighted them. Fierce yells came up the snowy canyon, and bullets spat into the snow around them.

Okara's face seemed to sag and wither as he looked down at them, unheeding of their fire. Then he raised his head proudly.

"What is written, is written," he said calmly. "Fate has declared that even Japan shall not succeed in this quest."

"Don't talk like a fool!" Gary cried hoarsely. "We can still get away from those Tibetans."

Okara merely stared at him. "It is useless to feed ourselves with false hopes. We can die fighting, that is all."

"What are you thinking of, Gary?" Joan cried.

Gary pointed wildly up at the great masses of overhanging snow and ice that bulged out far above from the canyon walls.

"If we can bring that ice down in an avalanche it will block this whole pass! Shoot up there just under those overhanging masses and you can loosen them enough that they'll start to slide."

"But once it starts, the slide may run along the whole pass—bury us!" Borchoff shouted.

"There's a chance it won't!" Gary cried. "Take that chance, Okara!"

For answer, Okara whipped up the rifle, aiming just under the great overhanging masses of snow and ice that bulged far outward. His rifle cracked five times quickly, the reports hardly audible over the bursting yells and shots of the oncoming Tibetans below.

He lowered the empty rifle. They all stared up, hearts pounding. A few tiny fragments of ice, dislodged by the bullets, slithered down. Then these stopped, and there was no other change.

"It was a *good* idea, Comrade!" Borchoff told Gary. He turned, clenching his great fists. "But since it failed, we can only——"

A dim, low whispering sound interrupted him, a faint rumble high above that grew slowly to a crackling and groaning and crashing. The vast masses of hanging snow and ice above were beginning to bulge ponderously, majestically, outward.

"It's going to slide!" Gary screamed. "It'll come right down on us——"

They flung themselves wildly through the deep snow, struggling and floundering farther up the pass, forgetting the ponies and everything else in that dim, ominous roar.

The Tibetans who had been charging up the pass retreated hastily with yells of terror and upward-pointed hands. For what seemed an eternity, the crackling roar over their heads gathered, gathered.

Then with an ear-splitting thunder like the crash of doom, from the high walls all along the pass, the tremendous avalanche poured down on them.

5. *Up the Flaming River*

GARY felt dimly that he was floating in a featureless white world, lulled to sleep by cozy warmth and a hushed silence. It was with dull irritation that he felt someone intrude into his sleep, felt a pair of hands clawing at him, chafing his face, trying to awake him. Why couldn't they let him alone, let him sleep?

Then as consciousness came back to him, he was aware of freezing cold, of an urgent voice in his ears. He wrenched open cold-numbed eyelids. He was lying half covered with snow, in the moonlit pass, and Joan Laird was bending over him, seeking to revive him.

"Gary!" she cried. "I thought you were dead—I had to dig and dig to uncover you——"

Gary staggered to his feet, with her help. He looked dazedly down the silent, snowy, moonlit canyon.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely. Then he remembered suddenly. "The slide—the avalanche that Okara started!"

"The edge of that slide knocked you out—covered you, Gary!" Joan exclaimed. "You grabbed me and pushed me forward out of it, and then it thundered down. It buried our ponies and half the Tibetans."

Mention of the Tibetans made Gary turn unsteadily in apprehension. He saw that there was no fear now of immediate

pursuit, for the great avalanche had blocked the narrow pass with masses of snow.

"Where are Okara and Borchoff?" he asked thickly.

"They've gone on, into the mountains," Joan told him. "Okara first—then the Russian, when he revived, trailing him. I wanted them to help me dig you out, but they wouldn't even listen to me."

"They were right," Gary told her harshly. "A hell of a spy you are, saving the life of a rival agent. Why did you do it?"

Joan's voice faltered. "I couldn't leave you to freeze in the snow. You'd saved my life, by pushing me out of the slide."

"That was a purely instinctive action," Gary told her. "Your digging me out wasn't—it was weakness on your part. Women never did make good spies—they don't know how to play the game."

"You talk as though you were sorry I'd saved you," Joan flashed furiously.

"I'm not sorry, I'm glad," Gary said grimly. "For I'm going on, get into Koom and find Shirani, and beat you out by any means that I can possibly employ. You'll find no sentiment in *me.*"

But then, as he stared up the steep, moonlit pass, his face fell, his dark head sagged a little.

"With Okara and Borchoff both ahead of me," he muttered, "I'll be hard put to win out now. Damn that little Jap! I should have suspected that no Mongol would come down here as willingly as he did! And he double-crossed me so neatly, escaping from the Tibetan camp alone——"

He winced suddenly with pain. As circulation returned to his numbed limbs, he found that his left leg had been hurt. Gingerly he rubbed and flexed its injured muscles, then turned to Joan.

"I'm going on," he told her. "I can't very well keep you from coming with me, short of killing you, which I can't do now. But I won't help you in the slightest, understand?"

"I understand," she said shortly, her stubborn face obstinately set.

Gary started on up the steep pass, floundering through the deep snow with the girl close behind him. Inwardly, his heart was leaden. How long could he last in these icy wastes, without food, weapons or shelter? Yet he had to go on, follow the quest for Shirani until the end. He must somehow overtake and defeat the Japanese and the Russian.

Brooding, ice-hung cliffs looked down upon the man and girl as they struggled up the moonlit pass. A whistling wind that froze their cheeks screeched like a demon down the canyon, making snow-whirls dance like white genii around them. They floundered and stumbled in the snow, Gary's left leg now a throbbing pain at each step. Joan Laird made no complaint as she followed him. This was a white, icy world, infinitely inimical to man, a frozen hell through which they struggled.

Gary perceived that the dawn was breaking, a pale light filtering down into the snow-choked pass. As the sky grayed, the crimson fire-glow in it faded. And in the paling dawn, he saw the crest of the pass a thousand feet above them, a narrow, icy crack between towering white peaks.

WINDS that whooped like all the fiends of hell smote and buffeted them as they pressed upward. Snow that felt like fine sand stung their faces, clogged their eyelashes. When they finally stumbled onto the crest, they stood a moment, struggling to retain their balance against the shrieking wind, before they peered ahead.

They looked into the tumbled white mountains that lay inside this first range.

Colossal peaks reared their icy masses like brute survivals of an earlier world. Most towering of all the monsters was a distant, huge white peak from whose truncated summit curled a thin plume of smoke. And now Gary and Joan perceived that it was the highest of a whole ring of peaks from whose summits drifted wisps of black smoke.

"A ring of huge volcanoes!" he exclaimed, shouting to Joan over the yelling wind. "That's where the fire-glow in the sky must come from—those volcanoes must encircle the legended valley Koom."

"Gary, look down there!" cried Joan, pointing. His gaze dropped to the wide, snowy valleys that lay below them.

Through those snow valleys, coming from the direction of the volcano-ringed land, crawled a river. But it was a river that glowed bright cherry red, and upon whose surface danced changing flames.

"A river of fire!" Joan was exclaiming, gazing in wide-eyed awe at the incredible spectacle.

"It can't be——" Gary started to mutter, then he shouted. "Yes, it is—a river of molten lava, that comes out of that volcanic valley of Koom and flows away through the mountains. By heaven, who'd have believed it—a flaming river, flowing through these icy peaks!"

His gaze swept swiftly back to the brooding, ring of volcanoes in the distance.

"If that's Koom, and the lava river comes from there, we can reach the valley by following the river back to it."

He started down the snowy slope into the valleys, Joan following. Forgotten now was the throbbing hurt of his leg, the cold and exhaustion he felt. Gary vibrated with excitement, with new hope.

The shrieking, hellish winds abated as they floundered down the snowy slopes in the light of the sunrise. In an hour, they stood at the edge of the glowing lava river, staring at it, appalled.

It was like a river out of hell itself—a crimson-glowing snake that wound sluggishly through the valleys, a groaning, hissing, slow-moving mass of molten lava, thirty feet wide, flowing in a deep bed which it had carved out for itself in the snow and rock.

Dancing flames of lurid green and blue moved here and there on the cherry-red surface. From it there came to their nostrils whiffs of overpowering sulfurous vapors, drifting, strangling smokes.

"See there!" Gary exclaimed, pointing to footprints in the snow along the bank of the flaming river. "Okara and Borchoff have both followed this river inward—and Okara was ahead."

He started along the bank, tramping in the footprints of the Japanese and the Russian.

"It can't be ordinary lava, to flow so long like this without hardening," he muttered as they trudged on. "It must be some wholly different kind of molten rock."

The groaning and bubbling of the lava stream was loud in their ears as they moved beside it through the snowy valleys. For three hours they followed it, winding deeper and deeper into the mountains toward the ring of volcanoes. Finally they reached the point where the flaming river emerged from that great ring of towering fire-mountains.

They stopped short, Gary Martin's heart sinking. For now they saw that the lava river emerged from a tunnel in the great ring of peaks, a natural passage it had burned for itself out of the solid rock of the mountains. Coming closer, they found that the tunnel was about twenty feet in diameter, filled with choking vapors and illuminated by the lurid, dancing flames of the crawling lava.

"We can't go in there!" Joan panted.

"There must be some other way into this volcano valley."

"There isn't any other way, or the lava would flow out by it," Gary rasped. "Both Okara and Borchoff went into this tunnel—you can see their footprints leading to it. I'm going to follow."

He limped to the mouth of the tunnel, and peered into it. The sulfurous vapors that rushed out of it choked and almost blinded him, but by the lurid light, he discerned at each side of the tunnel a rough ledge a few feet wide, formed by the hardening of lava that had flowed higher in the passage in past time. It was a narrow, jagged, precarious shelf, a few feet above the glowing lava.

"There's the way," he gasped, gulping in clean air as he reeled back, "the only way into the valley Koom."

Gary tied his handkerchief around his nose and mouth, as a rough respirator, his cold-stiffened fingers fumbling. Joan followed his example, her brown eyes large and strained above the mask.

Then the American limped forward. There was just room enough to edge into the tunnel and onto the narrow ledge. He made it, but Joan slipped in following him, and he swiftly steadied her.

"I thought you weren't sentimental enough to help a rival spy," she said, her voice muffled by her rude respirator.

"It's the last help you'll get from me," he exclaimed, stung. "Once inside Koom, I'll kill you as quickly as I would Okara or Borchoff, to keep you from reaching this princess Shirani."

He had to raise his voice, for inside the tunnel the groaning, straining and crackling of the slow-flowing lava was very loud. They started forward along the narrow, uneven ledge.

It was a nightmare scene. The molten rock stream was only a foot or so below the ledge that Gary and Joan trod. The heat of the river was terrific in these confined quarters, and the air was so filled with sulfurous fumes that it was hardly breathable. The cherry-red glow of the lava lit up the rough black rock sides and roof of the gloomy tunnel. Fierce blue and green flames burst incessantly along the lava stream.

Gary, limping forward, coughing and choking, had a vivid picture in his mind of what would happen if either of them stumbled and fell into the molten rock. Yet he pushed blindly on. Okara and Borchoff had gone this way, and where a Japanese and Russian had gone, an American could go.

The tunnel was not straight, but wound this way and that. Here and there were spots where the narrow ledge had crumbled away, and these had to be jumped. Each time he leaped, Gary felt agonizing pain as his injured leg hit the rough rock. Then a wider gap faced them.

"You can't jump *this!*" Joan cried, dismayed.

"I've got to," Gary gasped. "Stand back."

He threw himself forward in a stumbling run, and shot clumsily through the air. He knew as he did so that he had leaped short. His upper body hit the rock beyond the gap, but his legs dangled.

He heard Joan scream and at the same moment felt an agonizing burning in his left foot as his boot touched the molten lava below. With a convulsive effort, he drew his legs up onto the ledge.

Joan leaped, landed beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"No," choked Gary, staggering up. He added, "If—if you were a real spy, you'd have tripped me when I jumped. Women—no good as spies——"

THEIR progress was now a fantastic and torturing nightmare. The tunnel of the fire-river appeared to have no ending, and Gary knew his strength was fail-

ing fast. With the former injury to his left leg and the new burn on that foot, he could hardly hobble forward. His eyes were blinded by the fumes and glare of the groaning lava. He set his teeth, kept his mind fixed on one thing, the picture of Okara or Borchoff reaching Shirani before he did.

Shirani! The woman's name danced in his head like a mocking phantom. Whoever she really was, she was somewhere inside the volcano valley ahead. And the peace of the world depended upon his preventing the three other spies from gaining ascendancy over Shirani.

The infernal tunnel made still another turn. Gary felt that they had already come miles. Each step was a fresh agony to him now as he and Joan stumbled on. Then into his tortured lungs came a breath of fresher air. And he looked up to see a circle of bright sunlight far ahead. They were almost through.

Gary forced his crippled muscles, his unsteady steps quickening. He heard Joan retching behind him. But after a few more minutes that seemed eternities, he and the girl staggered out of the tunnel into bright sunshine and soft, warm air, onto a green, grassy bank.

Gary's bleared eyes blinked ahead, and then a numbing awe invaded his mind as he took in the scene before them.

"God!" he muttered thickly, stunnedly. "This—it's impossible——"

"The hidden valley of Koom!" whispered Joan.

Before them lay a green, warm valley, that was oval in shape and about twenty miles along its longer axis. Part of it was a fertile, grassy plain, but most of the valley floor was covered by a forest of green, leafy trees and bushes. The sunlight poured down on foliage and plain, and the airy breezes were soft and balmy.

This oval valley was walled all around by monstrous, ice-sheathed volcanoes, a looming, surrounding barrier of smoking white peaks, towering thousands on thousands of feet from the valley floor. At the other end of the long valley from Gary and Joan, miles away, bulked the highest, biggest volcano, whose colossal, vertical white side closed that whole end of the valley, a sheer, stupendous buttress.

Half-way up the side of that mightiest volcano, there was a crevice from which jetted forth an unceasing stream of molten lava that fell sheer for hundreds of feet in a cataract of living fire. It fell into a great lake or sea of glowing crimson lava, a fire-sea from which the lava river flowed down through the valley and into the tunnel out of which Gary and Joan had just emerged.

"Koom!" Gary was saying hoarsely. "The valley of the hidden kingdom—but where here will we find its people and princess?"

"Gary, look!" cried Joan suddenly. *"Okara!"*

Not a hundred yards from them, near the green back of the glowing river, stood the Japanese. Okara had been dragging a senseless form toward the flaming river. The unconscious body of Borchoff!

But at Joan's cry, Okara looked up and saw them. Instantly he dropped the senseless Russian and came toward them. His flat, swart face and slant black eyes were fierce with excitement.

"Okara!" Gary exclaimed. "You got through, then!"

"Yes, I got through," said the Japanese, his voice high and pulsing. "The Russian followed me, but I was waiting for him and stunned him. He is going into the lava—as you two also are going."

Okara's voice rose shrill. "We have all four reached Koom, but only one of us is going on into this valley to find Shirani! It is Japan whose instrument that woman must become. You two and the Russian shall not interfere——"

Quick as a flash, with the words, the little Japanese launched himself at Gary. The American struck out with all his strength, but Okara had a hold upon him, was twisting his arm.

The ju-jitsu hold tore at Gary's muscles with claws of agony, sent him crashing to his back. Joan rushed forward, pounding the Japanese with furious little fists, but Okara knocked her back with a vicious sweep of his hand. The thumbs of the Japanese dug into Gary's throat in the death grip, his eyes glaring down.

Gary's exhausted muscles fought to break the scientific hold of the Japanese. He glimpsed Borchoff reviving and rising drunkenly to his feet, reeling toward them. He heard a roaring in his ears and saw Okara's contorted face terribly outlined against the sunlit sky.

He heard Joan Laird crying, "Horsemen are coming!"

"All three of you—going to die," Okara was panting as he throttled Gary. "Japan's great chance——"

With a crazed, convulsive effort, Gary tore away the Japanese's hands and thrust him from him.

Okara came to his feet like a cat as Gary staggered erect. Borchoff was stumbling half consciously toward them, but the spy of Nippon paid no attention. Crouched like a leopard, he started toward the American again. But suddenly he and Gary and the Russian all three froze rigid.

Joan was shouting and pointing wildly up the valley. A thunder of hoofbeats was loud on their ears. A troop of horsemen were galloping at top speed toward them along the bank of the fiery river.

They were white men, tall, fair-haired, garbed in silver helmets and woven chain armor of silver mesh. As they came on at a dead run they were shouting, waving glittering swords aloft in the sunshine. And Gary saw that at their head rode a woman, a girl whose gold hair flashed like bright flame behind her, a slim figure in white silk. She was leading the charging troop right down upon the four half-frozen spies. Gary saw her leaning forward over her horse's neck, glimpsed a dynamically beautiful white face and electric blue eyes that seemed filled with lightnings.

Her pealing voice called an order, and the whole troop halted with a crash of hoofs a dozen feet from the frozen four. And amid the shouts of the armored men, Gary recognized one word.

"Shirani!"

Reckless of danger, the dazed young American staggered forward toward the mounted girl, his eyes on those imperious blue ones.

"Shirani!" he cried hoarsely. "Shirani!"

6. The Kingdom of Koom

SHIRANI stared challengingly down at them from the stamping black stallion she sat. The princess of the hidden kingdom looked like some warrior maid of archaic times, imperious as a tyrant, dangerous as a leopard, wild as a hawk poised for flight. Her small hand rested on the hilt of a heavy dagger that hung at her belt.

A high-necked tunic and loose trousers of fine white silk molded the perfect lines of her figure, the long, boyish legs and thighs, the proud shoulders and high little breasts. The flaming golden torrent of her hair fell down her back to her shoulders, confined only by a silver circlet around her brows. It glowed with dazzling tints of changing light, like burning gold.

Gary stared up into her face. He had never seen a face of such royal, vibrant young beauty. Her brow was high and white, nose small and straight, the sweet red mouth squared now to a merciless

line. Her electric blue eyes were clear as storm-washed skies, with a hidden pulse of wild force beating in them. But they were clouding and darkening, tiny lightnings flashing far back in them.

"Who are you, man from outside, that know my name?" she demanded of Gary, her dynamic blue gaze searching his face, her fine nostrils flaring, her silvery voice ringing like sweet, dangerous chimes.

Gary understood her words! For she spoke in a tongue very similar to the Tibetan and Mongol languages, though seemingly much older.

"I—I——" He reeled for a moment, unable to say more. With a little cry, Joan ran forward to him and supported him.

Okara stepped swiftly forward, slant black eyes burning with excitement as he looked up at the imperious girl on the black stallion.

"You *are* Shirani, then?" he cried in the Mongol.

"Yes, I am Shirani, princess and ruler of Koom," she flashed. "And my questions are not answered with questions, stranger!"

The wonderful eyes flashed down at the Japanese, the little menacing lightnings in them flaring forth threateningly.

"No people from outside are permitted to enter Koom and live!" she warned. "That is why a watch is always kept upon this tunnel, which is the only connection with the outside world. An hour ago," Shirani continued, "the watchers reported to me that a man had emerged from the tunnel. We rode here at once to investigate, and find that now, instead of one, there are four strangers here, seeking to kill each other. You had best explain, and quickly!"

Her fingers tightened threateningly around the hilt of her dagger. And the silver-armored horsemen behind her urged forward ominously, their drawn swords glittering in the sunlight.

Foremost among those fair-haired horsemen, Gary noted a big, splendid figure of a man, with powerful limbs and an arrogant, handsome face. He was staring down with strong suspicion at the four spies.

Okara said hastily, "Princess Shirani, I am of the nomad peoples who dwell outside the mountains. There came word to us that you, princess, were coming out of hidden Koom to lead our tribes to conquest, so I came hither to be first to join your standard."

Gary Martin, swaying half dazed against Joan Laird, heard the lie of the Japanese but was too dizzy at that moment to contradict.

"It was I who sent that word out to the nomads by messengers through the tunnel!" Shirani exclaimed to Okara. "Are your peoples waiting now outside the mountains to follow me when I come forth?"

"They are, princess!" the Japanese replied quickly. "All our nomad tribes wait in wild excitement for your promised coming."

Gary saw something flare in Shirani's electric blue eyes, a wild, leaping eagerness.

"Who are these others?" Shirani asked imperiously, gesturing toward the American and Joan and the gaping Borchoff. Her blue eyes rested on Gary as she asked, "Why were you seeking to kill them?"

"Because they are my enemies—and enemies of you and your plans, too, princess!" Okara hastily asserted. "They came after me into this valley Koom, to prevent you from going forth as you plan."

"This man is lying!" Gary cried, stumbling forward desperately. "He is not of the nomad peoples, nor did he come to join you. He came to make you the tool

of his nation, and this other man and girl, who are of other nations, desired the same thing."

"And you—why came *you* here, tall one?" Shirani demanded of Gary, her imperious blue eyes searching his face.

Meeting that imperious, half-scornful gaze, Gary felt something hard and fiercely resentful rise in his mind to meet it. He straightened his exhausted body, his dark head jerked up squarely.

"I came to *stop* you from going forth to disturb the peace of the world!" he said savagely. "And by heaven, I'll do it."

Gary knew as he spoke the words that they were insane, that now above all was the time to use subterfuge and falsehood as Okara was doing. He glimpsed the swift satisfaction on the Japanese's face, the amazement on Borchoff's round, red countenance, and Joan Laird's dismay. But for the life of him, Gary had been unable to restrain the reckless words. The half-contemptuous gaze of Shirani had challenged something deep within him, something that could not resist flinging back challenge in her face.

The armored men behind the princess uttered a shout of anger as they heard Gary's savage avowal. They rode forward toward the American with swords raised, but a sharp cry from Shirani halted them.

"Kill him not!" the princess exclaimed.

The handsome, arrogant rider beside her exclaimed roughly, "And why not kill him, princess? Did you not hear the outland dog threaten *you?*"

"Who commands here, Jhulun?" Shirani flamed at the man. "You or I?"

"You do, of course," Jhulun answered angrily. "But why should you spare a dog who has shown his teeth at you?"

SHIRANI looked down at Gary's hard, defiant face, and something approving flickered in her stormy blue eyes.

"You are brave, outsider, to threaten me to my face in my own kingdom," she said, and her silver laughter suddenly chimed. "How are you named, and of what people are you?"

"Gary Martin is my name," the American told her unbendingly. "And my people are the mightiest in the world."

"Proud, as well as brave," commented Shirani approvingly. "You carry your head high for one whose life is already forfeit—but I like you for it."

She turned to the lowering Jhulun and his fierce companions and said, "We take these four strangers to my palace in Koom."

Disapproval showed in the faces of the men, and fury in the handsome, heavy face of Jhulun.

"And why should we take them there, princess?" he demanded wrathfully. "They are liars, schemers who have penetrated here for no good purpose. Remember the law of the Ancient Ones—that should any from outside ever come into Koom, they must be killed."

Shirani threw back her head and laughed. "Do *you* quote the law of the Ancient Ones to me, Jhulun?" she exclaimed mockingly. "Why, man, you have no more respect for those moldering commandments of the long-dead Ancient Ones than have I."

"Nevertheless, I say these outsiders are a menace," Jhulun declared harshly. "What reason can you have for letting them live?"

His steely eyes, narrowed with hate, were on Gary Martin as he spoke. But Shirani answered him coolly.

"I wish to question them about the outside world. There is much we need to know, before we go forth on the great day."

"If you take them to the city," Jhulun persisted, "the high priest Dridim will demand their deaths according to the law of the Ancient Ones. Is it wise to an-

tagonize Dridim further, now of all times?"

"I care not what Dridim may demand," Shirani retorted contemptuously. Then suddenly she blazed: "Why do you continue to question my commands? I say they go to Koom. Four of you dismount and give them your horses!"

Even Jhulun recoiled a little from the lightning-like blaze of imperious force in her face and voice. Hastily four of the silver-armored warriors dismounted and led their horses forward.

Okara scrambled onto the back of one like a cat. The little Japanese had been watching and listening with intent alertness, apparently storing up in his mind everything he learned.

Gary clambered painfully into the saddle. His injured leg was almost throbbing. Joan and the Russian were already mounted. The four warriors who had given up their steeds climbed up behind some of their companions.

"Forward!" Shirani exclaimed.

The horses sprang ahead, the Koomian princess and Jhulun slightly in the lead, Gary riding on Shirani's other side. They headed straight up the valley, following beside the fiery lava river.

Gary felt a sudden surge of strange elation as he rode. He had penetrated to secret Koom, at least! Even if death was ahead, it was something to gallop up this unearthly valley before he died. He laughed aloud in sheer reckless excitement, his dark head high.

Shirani heard, and her blue eyes flashed at him. "Why do you laugh, stranger?" her silver voice called. "Are you so happy to be riding to an unknown fate?"

"Who ever knows his fate?" Gary replied. "Death lies at the end of every road; so if the road be but new and strange as this one is to me, a man should not complain."

"So have I always thought, too," Shirani exclaimed vibrantly. "I, too, mean to dare everything to seek new, strange roads."

Her nostrils expanded, her wonderful eyes flaring. And she added suddenly, "I like you, stranger!"

"Best not like me too much, princess," Gary laughed recklessly. "Your friend looks as though he's jealous."

Jhulun was frowning past Shirani at the American, as they rode up the valley, his eyes slitted in dislike. Shirani laughed at him in sheer, mocking deviltry, a gay, taunting chime, as she spurred on.

They were following the smoldering red lava river right up the middle of the oval valley. On either side of the terrible stream stretched park-like green plain and forest, to the bases of the titanic, snow-crowned volcanoes that walled the valley. Miles ahead, the hugest volcano at the valley's head frowned like a thunder-cloud over the fiery sea.

Joan urged her horse to Gary's side as they galloped. The English girl's stubborn little face was pale with emotion.

"Gary, what does it all mean? This warm green valley in the icy mountains—these white people—that girl? *She* is the Shirani we were all seeking?"

"She is, yes," Gary replied, his lean face strange. "Those legends of Koom and its people had more truth than we realized. Of course, this valley is warm because of its shelteredness and volcanic heat. But these people——"

"Gary, I don't like this Shirani—she's beautiful as a lightning-flash, but as dangerous!" Joan exclaimed. She added almost fiercely, "She looks at me as though I were an insect under her feet!"

"She can't be as bad as all that," Gary defended stiffly, "or she'd not have spared our lives."

"Spared *your* life, you mean!" Joan flashed. "You were the only one of us she was interested in."

They were nearing the head of the valley, galloping now through cultivated fields and pastures of grazing horses and cattle. The source of the crawling lava river they followed lay just ahead.

"Shade of Lenin!" gasped Boris Borchoff, his stupefaction almost toppling him from his horse.

"The sea of fire!" hissed Okara, staring.

Gary felt his senses reeling at the terrible spectacle before them. He heard Joan cry out in awe.

There stretched before them the fiery sea they had already glimpsed from afar, the source of the flaming river. It was a huge lake of crimson, molten lava that was all of two miles across, an evilly glowing red-hot lake upon whose sluggishly rippling surface danced lurid flames, and whose superheated, sulfurous breath beat in their faces.

Far across the fire-sea loomed the sheer rock side of the huge, snow-crowned volcano that headed the valley. Four hundred feet up its side was the crevice out of which gushed the cataract of molten lava they had glimpsed, a terrible Niagara of fire that tumbled down, down, with a dull, distant thunder, into the molten sea.

"God!" muttered Gary shakenly. "It's like a scene from hell itself."

"The glare in the sky at night comes from *that!*" Borchoff exclaimed, staring stupefiedly.

Shirani was now leading their galloping troop along the shore of the fire sea, leaving the lava river behind them. And now Gary perceived that ahead was a great mass of black buildings close to the molten lake.

"The city Koom—*my* city!" called Shirani, as, still shaken by sight of the burning sea, they rode into the black town.

KOOM was like no other city on earth. It brooded here little more than a mile from the edge of the lava sea. Yet, though the air here was slightly sulfurous and very warm, it was not too hot—the heat of the near-by molten sea was counteracted by the natural cold of these icy altitudes. And the black city was belted and laced with green gardens blooming luxuriantly in this unvarying warmth.

It had an archaic, oriental look, like some eastern city of ancient times. Its flat-roofed buildings of black stone were mostly of one or two stories, pierced by unglazed windows, the dwellings and open shops and stalls stretching along narrow, black-paved streets.

Men, women and children crowded the streets, all of them white-skinned and fair-haired. They looked a handsome, high-bred race, but one in an archaic state of civilization. The soldiers wore the silver chain-armor, the lower classes, both men and women, wore tunics and trousers of blue silk, while the nobles or upper classes wore white silk.

"Princess Shirani!" ran a cry along the crowd as they saw her vibrant figure at the head of the troop. She acknowledged the enthusiastic shouts with upraised hand. As they saw the strangers, the people of Koom fell silent in wonder.

"How many are your people in number, princess?" Okara asked keenly as they rode through the crowded black city.

Shirani looked at the little Japanese with open dislike, but she answered, "No more than five-score thousand. All of them dwell here in the city, and the lower classes work the fields and watch the herds."

Her eyes flashed suddenly. "But do not think because of that that I am weak! There are powers here you will learn of——"

She broke off. They were riding out into a great triangular plaza, paved with

black blocks like the streets. At the apex of the triangle rose a squat, black, octagonal tower, massive and immeasurably ancient in appearance. A few men in somber black garments and cowl-like hoods stood outside it, watching them.

The whole base-line of the triangular plaza was occupied by an enormous, long structure of a half-dozen stories, a vast ebon stone pile with rows of high windows and many jutting balconies and stairs. It reminded Gary of the great Potala in Lhasa. Guards in silver armor stood at the foot of its steps.

"The palace of the kings of Koom," Shirani told Gary as she rode up with the clattering troop to this vast black pile.

"And that other building?" he asked, glancing back at the somber, massive tower at the apex of the plaza's triangle.

"That is the temple in which skulk the priests of the Ancient Ones, muttering their outworn creeds," Shirani answered contemptuously.

The guards outside the palace flashed their swords in salute as Shirani went up the steps into the building, Jhulun and the troopers following with the four prisoners. Her boyish figure moved with a lithe, free swing, her gold head proudly high.

They went through small vestibules into a huge, dusky stone room, its walls pierced with high windows that admitted the sunlight in long, slanting shafts. It was an audience hall, its only furniture a raised dais bearing a silver chair. Several dozen Koomian nobles, in silver armor or white silk, had gathered here and now moved aside from their princess' path.

Shirani suddenly stopped, and Gary saw her face stiffen, her blue eyes darken. Three men in the somber black cowls and robes of priests were advancing through the slanting sun-shafts, across the middle of the hall.

"What do you here, Dridim?" Shirani demanded imperiously of the foremost. "The place for a high priest is in his musty temple, and not in my palace."

"The high priest of the Ancient Ones," answered the man calmly, "goes where his duty calls him."

Gary saw that the speaker, Dridim, was past middle age. But under the black cowl, his face was as cold and ageless and passionless as that of a statue. His skin had the unnatural pallor of a recluse, and his frame was slight. But in his pale, grayish eyes there burned a fanatic flame.

Shirani's head jerked up scornfully. As she stood in the slanting shaft of sunlight, all the lights in her gold hair blazing out, her white figure was in strong contrast to the somber priests. The two priests behind Dridim seemed to shrink a little from the imperious princess, to avert their eyes. But the dark form of the high priest was rigid and unbending.

"And what duty is it that brings you here now?" Shirani demanded of him, her silver voice rising in repressed wrath.

"Shirani, but a little time ago I was informed that you and Jhulun had gone with warriors to seize strangers from outside, who were reported to have entered the valley Koom," said Dridim calmly, his icy eyes on hers. "And now I see that you have brought the strangers here."

"And what has that to do with you?" Shirani retorted insolently. "I brought them here, yes. What of it, priest?"

"This," answered the high priest Dridim, unfalteringly. "It is the law left us by the Ancient Ones when they passed to death, as well you know, that whenever any strangers entered Koom they must be

put to death by the priests of the law, lest they learn of the Place of Power. Therefore, Shirani, you must hand these four strangers over to us of the temple, so that we may put them to death and the law be fulfilled."

You cannot afford to miss the next installment of this story, which tells of the descent of Gary and Shirani into the weird Place of Power where sleep the Ancient Ones.

Lines Written in the Realization That I Must Die

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

The Black Door gapes and the Black Wall rises;
  Twilight gasps in the grip of Night.
Paper and dust are the gems man prizes—
  Torches toss in my waning sight.

Drums of glory are lost in the ages,
  Bare feet fail on a broken trail—
Let my name fade from the printed pages;
  Dreams and visions are growing pale.

Twilight gathers and none can save me.
  Well and well, for I would not stay:
Let me speak through the stone you grave me:
  He never could say what he wished to say.

Why should I shrink from the sign of leaving?
  My brain is wrapped in a darkened cloud;
Now in the Night are the Sisters weaving
  For me a shroud.

Towers shake and the stars reel under,
  Skulls are heaped in the Devil's fane;
My feet are wrapped in a rolling thunder,
  Jets of agony lance my brain.

What of the world that I leave for ever?
  Phantom forms in a fading sight—
Carry me out on the ebon river
  Into the Night.

Green Horror

By H. THOMPSON RICH

What was that hideous apparition that lured Joan to the greenhouse and swayed beside her father as he worked? A tale of horror

EAGERLY young Herbert Ames broke open the square feminine envelope. But one glance at its contents, in Joan's fine, vertical script, and he went numb.

Others of her recent letters had disturbed him vaguely, with their veiled inklings that all was not right and she wished he were with her. But this was a direct, almost hysterical plea for help. She urged him as her best friend to come at once, to save her, save her father and herself from some nameless horror.

The letter bore the postmark of the little town of Harwood, in southeast Georgia, where they had been spending the summer—the distinguished biologist, Doctor Burton Kendall, and this charming, usually so poised but now so distraught daughter of his, with whom Herbert Ames was very much in love.

It was a dismal town, Harwood, according to Joan's reports. Hovering on the north edge of Okefinokee swamp—a vast, mysterious morass of black gum and cypress that spread to the Florida border —it was scarcely the ideal place for a summer outing. They had gone there not on a vacation but so that her father might conduct certain experiments on the plants of the region.

Just what these experiments were, young Ames didn't know, though Joan had told him they had to do with mutations; which meant, it seemed, that Doctor Kendall was trying to effect some sort of radical change that would result in a new species. Had he succeeded, and was this what she feared?

Eery tales of scientific monstrosities, hideous Frankenstein monsters that destroyed their creators, rose in Ames' mind. But he shooed them from it as sheer nonsense, being a level-headed young man, and sought some more rational explanation of what might lie behind this panicky letter.

It was not forthcoming, however, though the fact remained that Joan was in some desperate trouble. Then there was the added fact of his personal feeling for her. Could he therefore, with these facts as premises, fail to deduce from them the logical conclusion? He could not.

So this young lawyer, junior partner in the prominent New York firm of Eaton, Ames & Ames, shunted his writs and processes to other desks and boarded the first train for Georgia.

AT TWILIGHT the next day, after a change at Atlanta and another at Waycross, Herbert Ames was drawing into Harwood.

The view from the window toward the last, with its dreary wastes of marsh and quagmire, had been depressing. He was relieved when the creaking local dragged up to the little station—doubly so when there on the platform, in response to his telegram, stood Joan. Slim, appealing,

her dark hair merging with the dusk, the sight of her quickened his pulses.

"Oh, Herbert, I'm so glad you're here!" was her fervent greeting.

Her hand was cold. It trembled in his. He wondered, as they stood there talking a moment, what this thing could be that had so obviously shaken her. He was soon to learn, in part.

She led him to an old Model T parked by the platform, and presently they were headed out over a rutty road that seemed to be leading straight into the swamp. As they drove on, she told him, calmly, yet with a tense note in her voice that spelled nerves taut to the breaking-point, of the strange house she and her father had been living in.

It had been the property of a certain Miles Denniston, eccentric retired merchant of Savannah, whose hobby had been growing orchids. He had died there the previous year, and her father had leased the place from the heirs for the summer, because of its isolated location and facilities offered for his work by its well-equipped greenhouse.

All this Joan had touched on before, in her letters. But now she struck a new note.

"Herbert, you may think I'm perfectly mad," she said, "but the place is haunted —yes, and worse!"

"Haunted?" He gave a start. "Good Lord! By whom — old Denniston's ghost?"

"Yes, among others," she replied, slowly. "Don't scoff, Herbert. You don't know. Please—just wait!"

"Oh, I'll wait!" he assured her. "Nothing I'd rather see than a genuine, practising ghost. But seriously, dear, you don't believe any such——"

"Nonsense!" she flared back. "Call it that, if you want. Call it anything. As I said, you may think I'm perfectly mad. But please, Herbert—wait! Don't be practical and hard-headed now, or you'll surely fail me. Oh, can't you understand? It's this that has stood between us, all along."

She was hysterical, beyond a doubt. But something had made her so. What? The loneliness of the place, probably, rather than its ghostliness. Still, he wasn't going to fail her. No fear! So Herbert Ames adopted a conciliatory attitude.

"I'll wait," he said, pressing her hand on the wheel. "I'm willing to be shown, even if I'm not from Missouri. So tell me, tell me everything — or what you can."

"You're a darling!" she murmured, patting him on the arm.

And then, as they drove on through that dismal twilit swamp, she continued her narration about that strange house, and its effect on them, principally on her father.

He had been acting strangely of late, she said, working all day long and half the night at the greenhouse; working secretly, furtively, behind locked doors, and behaving in other ways almost like a different person.

"You don't mean," Ames ventured, "that you think he, he's——"

"No, not insane, but under a spell," was the way she put it. "Oh, Herbert, something fearful is happening down there! This Miles Denniston was a fiend. They tell the most shocking tales about him. There was something he was trying to do when he died—something too hideous for words—and now he's forcing father to go on with it."

She trembled, was silent, and Ames sat silent too, as they drove along. A man under the spell of a ghost, he was thinking. What utter absurdity! Yet he had assured her he was willing to be shown. And in truth, he was eager to see—whatever there was to be seen.

Presently the road turned, skirted the edge of the swamp for half a mile. Then Joan swung the wheel and headed into a weed-grown drive to the right. It led through a long line of sycamores to a dim, old-fashioned house of the spire and gable type, set upon a slight rise some distance off. Beyond it, Ames could see the greenhouse, its whitewashed glass windows glowing with light from within.

Dusk had given way to dark and a dull half-moon hung in the summer sky, obscured by a miasmal mist that rose from the swamp. Ames shivered, but not with cold, for the air was warm, almost humid.

"Well, here we are," said Joan presently, as she brought the car to rest under a wide portico.

That mist, he thought, as he glanced around uneasily. There was something uncanny about it! He began to wonder if perhaps there wasn't some peculiar influence at work here, after all.

THE front door opened, as they stepped out, and an old negro hobbled toward them.

"The only servant we've been able to keep," said Joan, under her breath, adding aloud: "Peter, this is Mr. Ames. Take his bag and show him to his room. I'll put the car up."

"Yes, sah, Mr. Ames, sah," bowed the man. "This way, sah."

"And Peter, I'll go down and get Father. You may have dinner ready."

"Yes, Miss Joan."

Whereupon the old negro led him inside, up a wide Colonial stairway, down a long hall and into a spacious room on the left.

"There you are, Mr. Ames, sah," he bowed. "Ah hope you will be comfortable heah, sah."

But his quavering voice bore no conviction and in his bleared eyes was a look Herbert Ames would have sworn was terror.

"Thank you, Peter," he said, as the man withdrew. "I'm sure everything will be quite all right."

His voice, however, bore no more conviction than the other's.

Nevertheless, as he dressed for dinner, he made a valiant effort to free his mind from the oppressive thoughts that were crowding in on it. He even whistled, or started to. But after a few bars he stopped, peered swiftly around, as though half expecting to see someone.

There was no one to be seen, of course. Yet something was in that room! He could have sworn it.

Cursing his nerves, he strode to an open window through which eddies of fetid mist whirled in, and slammed it shut. But the eery sense of some unseen presence persisted, and he hastened his dressing, eager to get below and rejoin Joan.

She was not there, when he descended at last, but her father was, and Ames was shocked by the way the man had changed.

Doctor Burton Kendall had been of distinguished appearance, tall and well set up, with piercing black eyes and thick brown hair with scarcely a streak of gray in it. But now he was stooped, worn, his eyes dull, his hair sprinkled with white. In fifteen weeks, the man had aged fifteen years.

"Glad to see you, Herbert my boy," he quavered, extending a bony hand. "Glad to see you."

But Ames sensed it was not the truth, fancied he saw in those dull eyes a light of smoldering resentment.

"Strange!" he mused. "The old bird would have been a lot better pleased if I'd stayed home and minded my business. Why?"

As he was pondering the question,

Joan joined them, and presently Peter appeared, announced that dinner was served.

THAT dinner! It was the weirdest meal Herbert Ames had ever sat down to. Not that there was anything strange about the food, which was excellent, considering the limited facilities. But the atmosphere contributed by Doctor Kendall, in his amazing discussion of his work, was bizarre in the extreme.

What he was trying to do, he confided, was find the common denominator between life and death. He had approached the subject first by a study of the essence of life, examining certain lowly forms from the near-by swamp, notably the slime molds—those repulsive ameboid growths, part plant and part animal, that are the parasites of rotten logs and decaying leaves.

"Curious little devils, the slime molds," he smiled. "They develop in colonies — plasmodia — mere spreading masses of naked protoplasm, unlike the fungus molds, which are true plants. And like amebas, these voracious creatures engulf the tissues of whatever they attack, devouring their victims with the rapacity of animals."

Ames shuddered, as Doctor Kendall paused. A singularly ill-chosen topic for dinner-table discussion! Glancing at Joan, he saw her shrink, though her eyes urged him to listen attentively.

"To facilitate my observations, I found it necessary to stimulate the growth of my plasmodia somewhat," Doctor Kendall went on. "Then, once I had learned the essence of life, as expressed in the protoplasm of the slime molds, I sought to study the essence of death, as expressed in the ectoplasm of spirit emanation—which is provided abundantly hereabout," he added slowly, then paused again.

Ames' mental processes paused, too. He waited, scarcely daring to look at Joan now.

"In that research, too, I have been successful," her father declared after a moment. "Protoplasm and ectoplasm embody a single basic principle, and I have found it. I have found, in short, what I set out to find—the common denominator between life and death!" His thin voice rose on a crescendo of triumph, as the smoldering light burned high in his dull eyes. "Yes, and I have produced that denominator—have succeeded, my dear Herbert, in combining protoplasm and ectoplasm in a mutation that is a being neither alive nor dead!"

Whereupon Ames' mounting conviction of the past few minutes became settled. The man was mad, absolutely raving!

There was more of that weird discourse, but nothing to match what had gone before. Doctor Kendall seemed to draw into himself now, as though he had already disclosed too much.

AMES was relieved when the fantastic meal was over at length and the man had gone back to the greenhouse. He wanted to talk with Joan, see what could be made of this insanity, what could be done to save her father from himself, save her too from whatever ghoulish thing was threatening.

As he had surmized, Doctor Kendall had come down here to perform quite different experiments.

"You see, Herbert, it's as I told you," said Joan, her voice strained. "He's under a spell, the spell of Miles Denniston. It's that fiend who was trying to do these terrible things, and now his ghost is making father do them for him."

A man under the spell of a ghost! As before, the utter absurdity of it struck this logical-minded young lawyer, but not

quite so forcibly, now that he had sensed the eery atmosphere of the place and had heard Doctor Kendall talk. Still, the insanity theory was infinitely more comforting.

"Are you sure the whole matter couldn't be explained," he risked, "by—well, assuming that perhaps your father's mind has become temporarily unbalanced from overwork?"

But she shook her head.

"No, Herbert. It won't do. Father isn't any more insane than you are—and you're really quite the most maddeningly sane person I know! He's merely under a spell, the spell of Miles Denniston's ghost. You must accept that, or at least assume it, if you are to help me."

"But have you actually seen this ghost you speak of?"

A long pause, then:

"Yes, I have. You'll see it, too, Herbert—and worse things!"

Something in the way she said it, more than the words themselves, gave him the shivers. He looked up swiftly, saw with a pang how pale, how tense she was. Poor girl! What she must have been through, these past few weeks! He longed to take her in his arms. Instead, since that had never been and now seemed no time for it, he pressed her hand instead.

"Well, I'll be prepared, at least!" he smiled. "And Joan, I want you to know I'll do all in my power to help you and your father through this thing, no matter what."

"I knew you would," she smiled back, returning the pressure. "That's why I asked you down, Herbert. I knew my—my best friend would never fail me."

Was there in that little hesitation the thought that he might some day be more, if he didn't? At any rate, it spurred him on, steeled him for what lay ahead.

THE air was close when Herbert Ames returned to his room that night, and he strode forward resolutely, flung open the window again, despite the feeling that had led him to shut it while dressing for dinner.

As he stood there, peering out into the night, he could see the greenhouse below, agleam with light through the mist. Doctor Kendall was down there. What diabolical experiment was he at work on?

Ames was half tempted to go down, find out. But no, he wouldn't do that. Instead, he turned away, started undressing. And again, as the miasmal breath of the swamp whirled in on him, he wheeled, peered swiftly around, as though half expecting to see someone.

But as before, he saw no one. Yet something was in that room! He knew it now, and the knowledge sent chills up and down his spine. Then suddenly, out of nothingness, came a voice:

"Go down to the greenhouse!" It was an icy whisper. "See what Doctor Kendall is doing there!"

Rigid, and with goose-flesh prickling over him, Ames peered into every corner of the room. Still nothing. Yet actually nothing? That cigarette of his, smoldering on a tray—he fancied its wavering haze of bluish smoke was taking form. Sheer rot, of course, he told himself. Better buck up or he'd go off his bean too, for all Joan's confidence in his sanity. But even as he tried to reassure himself, came again that icy whisper:

"Go, Herbert Ames! Go to the greenhouse!"

That was all. Though he waited through tense seconds that dragged into minutes, there came no more. But it was enough!

He re-dressed swiftly, stole down and out.

The mist was thick, ominous, and he shuddered as he made his way through

its clammy shroud to the greenhouse that glowed phosphorescent on the edge of the swamp.

Arriving near, he crept up on tiptoe, reluctant to spy on this madman yet led irresistibly on, almost as though he too were under some sinister spell.

Now he reached it, searched for some flaw in its coated glass panels that would let him see through, found at last a place where the whitewash had peeled off, and as he looked, he recoiled as though struck.

There stood Doctor Kendall, by a laboratory table littered with microscopes, test-tubes and other biological equipment—and at his side hovered a vague, translucent figure he knew intuitively was the ghost of Miles Denniston.

WITH a gasp, Ames backed off, beat a hasty retreat to the house. He had seen enough for one night — too much!

Once in his room again, he sank into a chair, tried to analyze his state of mind. *Was* he sane, or as mad as that madman down there? Had he, or had he not, seen a ghost? And how explain the whole episode?

Finally, after a period of ineffectual thinking, he undressed again, slipped into bed—and strangely enough, slept. But in the middle of the night he was awakened by a piercing scream—a quaver of horror, so long, so agonizing, that there seemed no doubt it marked some tragedy.

His heart in his throat, Ames leaped out of bed, struggled into a dressing-gown, lunged into the hall.

The first person he confronted, to his relief, was Joan, in a negligée that in other circumstances would have been intriguing.

"Herbert!" she gasped. "What was it?"

"God knows!" he replied. "Your father—where is he?"

"Right here, my boy," came a voice at his back, as a door opened. "What is wrong?"

Turning, they both saw Doctor Kendall standing there, and Ames noted that he was fully dressed.

"That scream!" he exclaimed. "What was it?"

"Exactly what I would like to know," declared the scientist, calmly. "But since we all seem to be here, why——"

"Father!" begged Joan, rushing up to him. "What has happened? Oh, I thought—thought——"

"Steady yourself, my dear!" he urged her. "I am quite all right. Whatever it was, I am sure it will not trouble us again tonight. So since the hour is late, I suggest we all put it from our minds and try to get a little sleep."

He gave her a fatherly pat, sent her off to her room, and urged Ames to return to his own.

Ames did so, but there was no more sleep that night.

NEXT morning at breakfast they received another shock. Peter was not there to serve them.

They had searched his room, searched the premises, Joan explained, but could find no trace of the old negro. Something had evidently frightened him away in the night, as with the other servants. That long-drawn, piercing scream had been his.

But the agonizing horror of it! That was Ames' thought. Had the poor devil actually been frightened away, or——

"You've notified the police, I suppose," he said.

"No, not yet," she replied, blanching. "You—think we'd better?"

"Yes, I think we had," gravely. "But first——"

He told her how he had stolen out

last night, what he had seen in the greenhouse.

"Yes," she admitted slowly. "I heard you go. And oh, Herbert—I know! For as I told you, I've seen it." And when he made no comment, she added, "But the police, dear—they wouldn't understand. Don't you think we should keep *that* to ourselves, for the present?"

He acceded, though he wasn't so sure he agreed.

So when the police came, they gave them only the fact of Peter's disappearance, plus that mysterious scream in the night. And with nothing to work on, the police found nothing.

One clue they had, however, which might have led to something.

"Damn' funny business!" Sergeant Griffin, the officer in charge, confided to Ames. "This is the third disappearance we've had from this place in less than three months. First there was a maid, then a cook, and now this nigger butler."

"Yes, strange!"

"And get this. Before that fella Denniston died, we had half a dozen other cases of missing help from this same estate. Of course, we know as how the place is supposed to be haunted, and all that. But some say there's something here does more than scare folks off. Some say there's something here does away with 'em. You ain't seen anything like that, Mr. Ames, have you?"

"Good God, no!"

But in his mind was the thought of that gruesome dinner-table discourse of the night before, and he wondered what connection there might be between this wild rumor and the facts—resolved he would not let another night go by without learning what fearful experiment Doctor Kendall and that specter were collaborating on.

THE hours passed slowly. Doctor Kendall was in a bad humor the rest of the day. The police investigation had affected him deeply. He seemed to feel that they held him in some way responsible for Peter's disappearance, and no amount of persuasion could alter the conviction.

As for Ames, his persuasion was none too heartfelt. He could not shake the belief that this man, although the father of the girl he loved, was somehow bound up in the whole mysterious business.

There was a brooding menace, too, that seemed to hover over them all day, something sinister and evil from the swamp, for all the bright summer sunshine that poured down from the cloudless skies.

They almost felt relieved when night came at last and they retired to their rooms, after an admirable meal Joan had prepared and served by herself.

For a half-hour or more Ames waited, fully dressed—waited for a repetition of that peculiar icy command of the night before. At length, just as he was on the point of going to the greenhouse anyway, it came:

"Go, Herbert Ames! And do not come back alone tonight!"

Whereupon, numb but resolute, he went.

If Joan heard him, well and good. He fancied she must have known all along he would go, voice or no voice. His legal mind, with its passion for the facts! Grimly he smiled, as he stole down the wide Colonial stairs.

Outside, he was engulfed once more in that eery mist. Strange, with the night so clear! He shuddered, and an ironic laugh burst from his taut lips. He had been so sure there was no such thing as this, yet now he was experiencing it, overwhelmingly.

At length he gained the greenhouse,

sought that panel where the whitewash had peeled off, peered in.

There stood Doctor Kendall, puttering around with his test-tubes. He was alone, and the sight of him thus innocently engaged was a shock. For an instant, Ames' suspicions seemed to vanish. Then suddenly they reappeared in a new direction, as a step sounded behind him. Or was it only a sense, not a sound? At any rate he wheeled—and went cold with horror, at the sight that now met his gaze.

A vague, translucent figure had loomed out of the mist—the ghost of Miles Denniston!—and at its side, clearly under some occult spell, moved Joan.

Like a man in a nightmare, Herbert Ames stood beholding this harrowing scene. He tried to call out but had no voice. Paralyzed, he watched the helpless girl and her hideous escort draw near.

When they were scarcely ten feet off they turned slightly and headed toward the door of the greenhouse. There followed a scratching knock, and looking in, Ames saw Doctor Kendall stiffen, then advance like an automaton to the door, unlock it. He saw them enter, Joan and that malevolent ghost—saw the latter lift a skeleton hand, point commandingly at something out of sight—saw Doctor Kendall back off, utter a cry of protest at the gesture. But the phantom was adamant. It advanced like Nemesis, that fleshless hand still pointing, and the quaking scientist retreated helplessly before it.

To the far end of the greenhouse they went, Joan following with trance-like steps. Now the specter lowered its hand, indicating the ground; whereupon, to Ames' amazement, Doctor Kendall bent, shoved aside a tray of slips, lifted a trap-door.

What happened then was baffling, incredible. An emanation seemed to rise from the dark pit that yawned there—an emanation invisible at first but so powerful, so all-pervading that its evil breath reached Herbert Ames, chilled him, even where he stood—a vague, loathsome vapor that was the very stench of hell. Something was down in that pit, something horrible beyond all thought.

A wild conjecture leaped into Ames' mind. Those disappearances! They were sacrifices, sacrifices to some hideous thing lurking there, something the fiend Denniston had created, or had forced Doctor Kendall to create for him.

Yes, and even now Joan was to be fed to that nameless horror! But not unless *he* died first, was his grim thought. And rushing to the door of the greenhouse, he burst in.

As Ames lunged forward, the specter loomed in his path, on its face an expression of such malignant fury that for an instant he paused, stunned. And as the smoldering phosphorescence of its hollow eyes fixed him, he felt himself swaying under its evil spell.

But the sight of Joan and her father standing there helpless beside that yawning pit gave him strength. By a supreme effort he rallied, flung off the spell, lunged on.

Reaching the trap-door, he seized it to hurl it shut. But too late! For already a vast protoplasmic form was oozing out—undulating from that foul pit like a tide of gray filth, weirdly vague, translucent.

Backing away with a cry of revulsion, Ames seized Joan, seized her father, staggered with them to the door of the greenhouse, that malevolent phantom protesting vainly.

"Quick!" he gasped. "This way!"

With an arm linked in the arm of each, he raced with them across the lawn toward the house, through that eery mist—and as they sped on, behind them rose the crash of breaking glass, mingled with a screeching, wailing sound that curdled the night.

Somehow he gained the house, got them inside, locked and bolted the door, stood waiting as though for doom. But nothing happened, and presently the hideous sounds outside died down.

Now Joan turned to him. She had recovered somewhat, and that dazed, trance-like look had gone from her face, but she was white as a sheet and still shaking with terror.

"Wh-what has happened?" she begged. "Oh, Herbert—am I going mad?"

It seemed to him as though they all were, but he curbed his own fears and assured her the worst was over. Then, turning to her father, he added:

"Tell me, Doctor, what is this thing? Let me know, so that we can fight it."

The man lifted his dull eyes, opened his thin lips as though to speak; then slowly he shook his head, collapsed.

BETWEEN them they managed to get him upstairs and to bed, where he lay for a while moaning and mumbling incoherently, then fell into a heavy sleep —leaving them alone in that house of horror, with only four frail walls between them and God knew what.

After a few moments they returned below, sat tensely waiting, scarcely daring to speak. But as time wore on and nothing happened, they began to breathe easier.

The atmosphere of the house seemed purged—the atmosphere of the whole estate, in fact. It was as though some evil spell that had long clung to it was dissipated. There was no longer the sense of ghostly presences among them. The mist outside seemed no longer to hold a menace.

Finally Joan spoke what was uppermost in her thoughts, urged Ames again to tell her what had happened. He said he would, but asked her first to tell him what she remembered.

"I'm not so sure," she replied, with a shudder. "I was asleep, I think, when suddenly I woke to see that terrible ghost in the room. It was Miles Denniston, I knew. He told me to get up and follow him, and I did. Or perhaps I only dreamed I did. It's all so vague, yet so terribly clear."

"No, you didn't dream it," Ames assured her, "for I saw him leading you down to the greenhouse." And he went on to explain how he had come to be there himself.

Together they pieced out a picture of that harrowing experience, a picture Ames softened in some of its stark details, to spare Joan a little.

"How awful!" she shuddered, when she had heard it all. "Oh, Herbert—if you hadn't been there! I—I owe my life to you."

"I only want your love, dear," was his answer to that.

And her answer, in turn, was to slip her hand in his an instant. Then, as she removed it:

"Poor father! He is blameless. You believe that, Herbert, don't you?"

"Yes," he assured her. "He is absolutely so."

"But the police?" voicing her inmost fear. "They may not think so. Oh, I'm so terrified at what they may find down there in that pit!"

Ames said nothing, though a sudden chill ran through him.

"Yet we must send for them, must we not?" she went on.

"Yes, I fear we must." His voice was low, reluctant. "And I think we'd best send for a doctor, too."

IN the early morning, both police and doctor arrived.

Leaving Joan with the latter and her father, Ames accompanied Sergeant Griffin and his men to the greenhouse.

As he had suspected, it was demolished, literally upheaved as though by an earthquake, and over it hung the reek of the grave. The odor was emanating from the pit, which still yawned open.

They made their way to it, through the debris, peered down into that foul hole, while Griffin flashed his light—and what they saw there filled Ames with nausea.

The pit was littered with bones—*human* bones.

Old Peter's were among them, he thought with a shudder, as they turned away. Yes, and Joan's would have been there, too, had he not gone down to the greenhouse last night, had he not found strength to defy that phantom fiend.

But what would the police make of this? Would they hold Doctor Kendall on the evidence?

Fortunately, since the stricken man was still in a coma and could not be questioned, they made of it what police generally make of such matters.

"I figure something the old duffer was working on blew up," was the way Sergeant Griffin put it. "Lucky for us, too, otherwise we'd never of got the low-down on this fella Denniston. Wish it could of happened when he was alive. I'd of liked the pleasure of seeing him hang."

"You and I, too!" said Ames fervently.

But at least the ghost of the fiend was laid, he reflected. With that grisly secret exposed at last, there would be no more of those hideous experiments. Yes, and the ghosts of his victims were laid, too. They had wreaked their revenge. That house would be haunted no longer.

On his return with the police, Ames broke the news of their grim find to Joan as gently as possible, told her what Griffin thought; and the relief in her eyes, as they lifted to his, was eloquent.

But something more was in them than relief.

Herbert Ames learned what it was, in time. Joan is now his wife and those tragic days are behind them for ever.

Doctor Kendall recovered, moreover, mercifully remembering nothing of those fearful experiments he made in collaboration with a ghost.

As for that horror in the greenhouse, Herbert and Joan now know that it is laid for ever, that it will no longer throw terror into the hearts of men or wreak its vengeance on their bodies. For a group of hunters, emerging from the swamp some three days after its disappearance, brought back with them such nauseous evidences of the monster they had tracked there from the greenhouse as to leave no doubt in anyone's mind that this hideous creation had succumbed as horribly as it had been born.

Naked, reeking masses of half-flesh they had brought back, asserting some huge animal had floundered there and perished—but no one could be found to believe them.

Only Herbert and Joan, and poor Doctor Kendall, knew what they were talking about, and none of them had any comments to make. As for Herbert and Joan, they have made none since, for they are too happy, too preoccupied with plans for the future to dwell much on that episode.

Doctor Kendall, it is true, is preparing a technical thesis on the subject, but it may be some years before he is ready to reveal his findings to the public.

The Black Drama

By GANS T. FIELD

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

The Story So Far

GILBERT CONNATT, the narrator, once a film idol, now penniless, takes a rôle in Lord Byron's newly-recovered play, *Ruthven,* opposite Sigrid Holgar, who has become a dramatic success since she and Connatt terminated their Hollywood romance.

Varduk, the brilliant but mysterious producer of the play, intends to present it for the first time in July at the Lake Jozgid Summer Theater, and the cast migrates to that remote, timber-girt spot. The party includes also Elmo Davidson, Varduk's Man Friday, Jake Switz, Sigrid's personal representative, and Martha Vining, character actress.

Judge Keith Pursuivant, eminent occultist and antiquary, who tries to rationalize the apparently authentic Byron handwriting of the play with the fact that it is written on paper less than ten years old, is vacationing near by.

The first unchancy happening is the narrow escape of Sigrid and Jake from strange, half-shaped entities in the dark near the theater building. Then, in a rehearsal, Connatt accidentally stabs Varduk with a sword—but does not hurt him. Pursuivant and Connatt, discussing these events, are warned by Davidson not to challenge Varduk, who is a man of tremendous and uncanny powers.

Later that night, Connatt and Switz find Pursuivant's unconscious form near the forest road from the theater. At the same moment, the half-shaped creatures that threatened Sigrid appear and surround them.

The story continues:

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11. Battle and Retreat

I DOUBT if any writer, however accomplished, has ever done full justice to the emotion of terror.

To mention the icy chill at the backbone, the sudden sinewless trembling of the knees, the withering dryness of throat and tongue, is to be commonplace; and terror is not commonplace. Perhaps to remember terror is to know again the helplessness and faintness it brings.

Therefore it must suffice to say that, as I turned and saw the closing in of those pale-glowing blots of menace, I wanted to scream, and could not; to run, and could not; to take my gaze away, and could not.

If I do not describe the oncoming creatures—if creatures indeed they were—it is because they defied clear vision then and defy clear recollection now. Something quasi-human must have hung about them, something suggestive of man's outline and manner, as in a rough image molded by children of snow; but they were not solid like snow. They shifted and swirled, like wreaths of thick mist, without dispersing in air. They gave a dim, rotten light of their own, and they moved absolutely without sound.

"It's them," gulped Jake Switz beside me. He, too, was frightened, but not as frightened as I. He could speak, and move, too—he had dropped Pursuivant's head and was rising to his feet. I could hear him suck in a lungful of air, as though to brace himself for action.

His remembered presence, perhaps the mere fact of his companionship before the unreasoned awfulness of the glow-shadowy pack that advanced to hem us in, give me back my own power of thought and motion. It gave me, too, the impulse to arm myself. I stooped to earth, groped swiftly, found and drew forth from its bed the sword-cane of Judge Pursuivant.

The non-shapes—that paradoxical idea is the best I can give of them—drifted around me, free and weightless in the night air like luminous sea-things in still, dark water. I made a thrust at the biggest and nearest of them.

I missed. Or did I? The target was, on a sudden, there no longer. Perhaps I had pierced it, and it had burst like a flimsy bladder. Thus I argued within my desperate inner mind, even as I faced about and made a stab at another. In the same instant it had gone, too—but the throng did not seem diminished. I made a sweeping slash with my point from side to side, and the things shrank back before it, as though they dared not pass the line I drew.

"Give 'em the works, Gib!" Jake was gritting out. "They can be hurt, all right!"

I laughed, like an impudent child. I felt inadequate and disappointed, as when in dreams a terrible adversary wilts before a blow I am ashamed of.

"Come on," I challenged the undefinable enemy, in a feeble attempt at swagger. "Let me have a real poke at——"

"Hold hard," said a new voice. Judge Pursuivant, apparently wakened by this commotion all around him, was struggling erect. "Here, Connatt, give me my sword." He fairly wrung it from my hand, and drove back the misty horde with great fanwise sweeps. "Drop back, now. Not toward the lodge—up the driveway to the road."

We made the retreat somehow, and were not followed. My clothing was drenched with sweat, as though I had swum in some filthy pool. Jake, whom I remember as helping me up the slope when I might have fallen, talked incessantly without finishing a single sentence. The nearest he came to rationality was, "What did . . . what if . . . can they——"

Pursuivant, however, seemed well recovered. He kicked together some bits of kindling at the roadside. Then he asked me for a match—perhaps to make me rally my sagging senses as I explored my pockets—and a moment later he had kindled a comforting fire.

"Now," he said, "we're probably safe from any more attention of that bunch. And our fire can't be seen from the lodge. Sit down and talk it over."

Jake was mopping a face as white as tallow. His spectacles mirrored the firelight in nervous shimmers.

"I guess I didn't dream the other night, after all," he jabbered. "Wait till I tell Mister Varduk about this."

"Please tell him nothing," counseled Judge Pursuivant at once.

"Eh?" I mumbled, astonished. "When the non-shapes——"

"Varduk probably knows all about these things—more than we shall ever know," replied the judge. "I rather think he cut short his walk across the front yards so that they would attack me. At any rate, they seemed to ooze out of the timber the moment he and I separated."

He told us, briefly, of how the non-

shapes (he liked and adopted my paradox) were upon him before he knew. Like Jake two nights before, he felt an overwhelming disgust and faintness when they touched him, began to faint. His last voluntary act was to draw the blade in his cane and drive it into the ground, as an anchor against being dragged away.

"They would never touch that point," he said confidently. "You found that out, Connatt."

"And I'm still amazed, more about that fact than anything else. How would such things fear, even the finest steel?"

"It isn't steel." Squatting close to the fire, Pursuivant again cleared the bright, sharp bodkin. "Look at it, gentlemen—silver."

It was two feet long, or more, round instead of flat, rather like a large needle. Though the metal was bright and worn with much polishing, the inscription over which Pursuivant and Varduk had pored was plainly decipherable by the firelight. *Sic pereant omnes inimici tui, Domine* . . . I murmured it aloud, as though it were a protective charm.

"As you may know," elaborated Judge Pursuivant, "silver is a specific against all evil creatures."

"That's so," interjected Jake. "I heard my grandfather tell a yarn about the old country, how somebody killed a witch with a silver bullet."

"And this is an extraordinary object, even among silver swords," Pursuivant went on. "A priest gave it to me, with his blessing, when I did a certain thing to help him and his parish against an enemy not recognized by the common law of today. He assured me that the blade was fashioned by Saint Dunstan himself."

"A saint make a silver weapon!" I ejaculated incredulously.

PURSUIVANT smiled, exactly as though we had not lately feared and fought for our lives and souls. His manner was that of a kindly teacher with a dull but willing pupil.

"Saint Dunstan is not as legendary or as feeble as his name sounds. As a matter of fact, he flourished heartily in the Tenth Century—not long before the very real Norman Conquest. He was the stout son of a Saxon noble, studied magic and metal-working, and was a political power in England as well as a spiritual one."

"Didn't he tweak Satan's nose?" I inquired.

"So the old poem tells, and so the famous painting illustrates," agreed Pursuivant, his smile growing broader. "Dunstan was, in short, exactly the kind of holy man who would make a sword to serve against demons. Do you blame me for being confident in his work?"

"Look here, Judge," said Jake, "what were those things that jumped us up?"

"That takes answering." Pursuivant had fished a handkerchief from a side pocket and was carefully wiping the silver skewer. "In the first place, they are extra-terrestrial—supernatural—and in the second, they are noisomely evil. We need no more evidence on those points. As for the rest, I have a theory of a sort, based on wide studies."

"What is it, sir?" I seconded Jake. Once again the solid assurance of the judge was comforting me tremendously.

He pursed his lips. "I've given the subject plenty of thought ever since you, Connatt, told me the experience of your friend here. There are several accounts and considerations of similar phenomena. Among ancient occultists was talk of elementary spirits—things super-normal and sometimes invisible, of sub-human intelligence and personality and not to be confused with spirits of the dead. A more modern word is 'elemental', used by sev-

eral cults. The things are supposed to exert influences of various kinds, upon various localities and people

"Again, we have the poltergeist, a phenomenon that is coming in for lively investigation by various psychical scholars of today. I can refer you to the definitions of Carrington, Podmore and Lewis Spence—their books are in nearly every large library—but you'll find that the definitions and possible explanations vary. The most familiar manifestation of this strange but undeniable power is in the seeming mischief that it performs in various houses—the knocking over of furniture, the smashing of mirrors, the setting of mysterious fires——"

"I know about that thing," said Jake excitedly. "There was a house over in Brooklyn that had mysterious fires and stuff."

"And I've read Charles Fort's books—*Wild Talents* and the rest," I supplemented. "He tells about such happenings. But see here, isn't the thing generally traced to some child who was playing tricks?"

Pursuivant, still furbishing his silver blade, shook his head. "Mr. Hereward Carrington, the head of the American Psychical Institute, has made a list of more than three hundred notable cases. Only twenty or so were proven fraudulent, and another twenty doubtful. That leaves approximately seven-eighths unexplained — unless you consider supernormal agency an explanation. It is true that children are often in the vicinity of the phenomena, and some investigators explain this by saying that the poltergeist is attracted or set in motion by some spiritual current from the growing personality of the child."

"Where's the child around here?" demanded Jake. "He must be a mighty bad boy. Better someone should take a stick to him."

"There is no child," answered the judge. "The summoning power is neither immature nor unconscious, but old, wicked and deliberate. Have you ever heard of witches' familiars?"

"I have," I said. "Black cats and toads, with demon spirits."

"Yes. Also grotesque or amorphous shapes—similar, perhaps, to what we encountered tonight—or disembodied voices and hands. Now we are getting down to our own case. The non-shapes—thanks again, Connatt, for the expression—are here as part of a great evil. Perhaps they came of themselves, spiritual vultures or jackals, waiting to share in the prey. Or they may be recognized servants of a vast and dreadful activity for wrong. In any case they are here, definite and dangerous."

Again I felt my nerve deserting me. "Judge Pursuivant," I pleaded, "we must get Miss Holgar out of here."

"No. You and I talked that out this afternoon. The problem cannot be solved except at its climax."

He rose to his feet. The fire was dying.

"I suggest that you go to your quarters. Apparently you're safe indoors, and just now the moon's out from behind the clouds. Keep your eyes open, and stay in the clear. The things won't venture into the moonlight unless they feel sure of you. Anyway, I think they're waiting for something else."

"How about you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'll do splendidly." He held up the sword of Saint Dunstan. "I'll carry this naked in my hand as I go."

We said good-night all around, rather casually, like late sitters leaving their club. Pursuivant turned and walked along the road. Jake and I descended gingerly to the yard of the lodge, hurried across it, and gained our boathouse safely.

12. *Return Engagement*

ONE of the most extraordinary features of the entire happening was that it had so little immediate consequence.

Judge Pursuivant reached his cabin safely, and came to visit us again and again, but never remained after dark. If Varduk knew of the attack by the non-shapes, and if he felt surprize or chagrin that Pursuivant had escaped, he did not betray it. By silent and common consent, Jake and I forbore to discuss the matter between ourselves, even when we knew that we were alone.

Meanwhile, the moon waned and waxed again while we rehearsed our play and between rehearsals swam, tramped and bathed in the sun. Not one of us but seemed to profit by the exercise and fresh air. Sigrid's step grew freer, her face browner and her green-gold hair paler by contrast. I acquired some weight, but in the proper places, and felt as strong and healthy as I had been when first I went from the Broadway stage to Hollywood, eight years before. Even Jake Switz, whose natural habitat lay among theatrical offices and stage doors, became something of a hill-climber, canoeist and fisherman. Only Varduk did not tan, though he spent much time out of doors, strolling with Davidson or by himself. Despite his apparent fragility and his stiffness of gait, he was a tireless walker.

One thing Jake and I did for our protection; that was to buy, on one of our infrequent trips to the junction, an electric flashlight apiece as well as one for Sigrid. These we carried, lighted, when walking about at night, and not once in the month that followed our first encounter with the non-shapes did we have any misadventure.

The middle of July brought the full moon again, and with it the approach of our opening night.

The theatrical sections of the papers—Varduk had them delivered daily—gave us whole square yards of publicity. Jake had fabricated most of this, on his typewriter in our boathouse loft, though his most glamorous inventions included nothing of the grisly wonders we had actually experienced. Several publishers added to the general interest in the matter by sending to Varduk attractive offers for the manuscript of *Ruthven,* and receiving blunt refusals. One feature writer, something of a scholar of early Nineteenth Century English literature, cast a doubt upon the authenticity of the piece. In reply to this, Judge Pursuivant sent an elaboration of his earlier statement that *Ruthven* was undoubtedly genuine. The newspaper kindly gave this rejoinder considerable notice, illustrating it with photographs of the judge, Varduk and Sigrid.

On July 20, two days before opening, Jake went out to nail signs along the main road to guide motor parties to our theater. He was cheerfully busy most of the morning, and Sigrid deigned to let me walk with her. We did not seek the road, but turned our steps along the brink of the water. An ancient but discernible trail, made perhaps by deer, ran there.

"Happy, Sigrid?" I asked her.

"I couldn't be otherwise," she cried at once. "Our play is to startle the world—first here, then on Broadway——"

"Sigrid," I said, "what is there about this play that has such a charm for you? I know that it's a notable literary discovery, and that it's pretty powerful stuff in spots, but in the final analysis it's only melodrama with a clever supernatural twist. You're not the melodramatic type."

"Indeed?" she flung back. "Am I a type, then?"

I saw that I had been impolitic and

made haste to offer apology, but she waved it aside.

"What you said might well be asked by many people. The pictures have put me into a certain narrow field, with poor Jake Switz wearing out the thesaurus to find synonyms for 'glamorous'. Yet, as a beginner in Sweden, I did *Hedda Gabler* and *The Wild Duck*—yes, and Bernard Shaw, too; I was the slum girl in *Pygmalion*. After that, a German picture, *Cyrano de Bergerac,* with me as Roxane. It was luck, perhaps, and a momentary wish by producers for a new young foreign face, that got me into American movies. But, have I done so poorly?"

"Sigrid, nobody ever did so nobly."

"And at the first, did I do always the same thing? What was my first chance? The French war bride in that farce comedy. Then what? Something by Somerset Maugham, where I wore a black wig and played a savage girl of the tropics. Then what? A starring rôle, or rather a co-starring rôle—opposite you." She gave me a smile, as though the memory were pleasant.

"Opposite me," I repeated, and a thrill crept through me. "*Lavengro,* the costume piece. Our costumes, incidentally, were rather like what we will wear in the first part of *Ruthven.*"

"I was thinking the same thing. And speaking of melodrama, what about *Lavengro?* You, with romantic curly sideburns, stripped to the waist and fighting like mad with Noah Beery. Firelight gleaming on your wet skin, and me mopping your face with a sponge and telling you to use your right hand instead of your left——"

"By heaven, there have been lots of worse shows!" I cried, and we both laughed. My spirits had risen as we had strolled away from the lodge grounds, and I had quite forgotten my half-formed resolve to speak a warning.

We came to a stretch of sand, with a great half-rotted pink trunk lying across it. Here we sat, side by side, smoking and scrawling in the fine sand with twigs.

"There's another reason why I have been happy during this month of rehearsal," said Sigrid shyly.

"Yes?" I prompted her, and my heart began suddenly to beat swiftly.

"It's been so nice to be near you and with you."

I felt at once strong and shivery, rather like the adolescent hero of an old-fashioned novel. What I said, somewhat ruefully, was, "If you think so, why have you been so hard to see? This is the first time we have walked or been alone together."

SHE smiled, and in her own individual way that made her cheeks crease and her eyes turn aslant. "We saw a lot of each other once, Gib. I finished up by being sorry. I don't want to be sorry again. That's why I've gone slowly."

"See here, Sigrid," I blurted suddenly. "I'm not going to beat around the bush, or try to lead up diplomatically or dramatically, but—oh, hang it!" Savagely I broke a twig in my hands. "I loved you once, and in spite of the fact that we quarreled and separated, I've never stopped. I love you right this instant——"

She caught me in strong, fierce arms, and kissed me so soundly that our teeth rang together between lips crushed open. Thus for a second of white-hot surprize; then she let go with equal suddenness. Her face had gone pale under its tan—no acting there—and her eyes were full of panicky wonder.

"I didn't do that," she protested slowly. She, too, was plainly stunned. "I didn't. But—well, I did, didn't I?"

"You certainly did. I don't know why, and if you say so I won't ask; but you

did, and it'll be hard to retire from the position again."

After that, we had a lot more to say to each other. I admitted, very humbly, that I had been responsible for our estrangement five years before, and that the reason was the very unmanly one that I, losing popularity, was jealous of her rise. For her part, she confessed that not once had she forgotten me, nor given up the hope of reconciliation.

"I'm not worth it," I assured her. "I'm a sorry failure, and we both know it."

"Whenever I see you," she replied irrelevantly, "bells begin to ring in my ears—loud alarm bells, as if fires had broken out all around me."

"We're triple idiots to think of love," I went on. "You're the top, and I'm the muck under the bottom."

"You'll be the sensation of your life when *Ruthven* comes to Broadway," rejoined Sigrid confidently. "And the movie magnets will fight duels over the chance to ask for you name on a contract."

"To hell with the show business! Let's run away tonight and live on a farm," I suggested.

In her genuine delight at the thought she clutched my shoulders, digging in her long, muscular fingers. "Let's!" she almost whooped, like a little girl promised a treat. "We'll have a garden and keep pigs—no, there's a show."

"And the show," I summed up, "must go on."

On that doleful commonplace we rose from the tree-trunk and walked back. Climbing to the road, we sought out Jake, who with a hammer and a mouthful of nails was fastening his last sign to a tree. We swore him to secrecy with terrible oaths, then told him that we intended to marry as soon as we returned to New York. He half swallowed a nail, choked dangerously, and had to be thumped on the back by both of us.

"I should live so—I knew this would happen," he managed to gurgle at last. "Among all the men you know, Sigrid Holgar, you got to pick this *schlemiel!*"

We both threatened to pummel him, and he apologized profusely, mourning the while that his vow kept him from announcing our decision in all the New York papers.

"With that romance breaking now, we would have every able-bodied man, woman and child east of the Mississippi trying to get into our show," he said earnestly. "With a club we'd have to beat them away from the ticket window. Standing-room would sell for a dollar an inch."

"It's a success as it is," I comforted him. "*Ruthven,* I mean. The house is a sell-out, Davidson says."

That night at dinner, Sigrid sat, not at the head of the table, but on one side next to me. Once or twice we squeezed hands and Jake, noticing this, was shocked and burned his mouth with hot coffee. Varduk, too, gazed at us as though he knew our secret, and finally was impelled to quote something from Byron—a satiric couplet on love and its shortness of life. But we were too happy to take offense or even to recognize that the quotation was leveled at us.

13. The Black Book

OUR final rehearsal, on the night of the twenty-first of July, was fairly accurate as regards the speeches and attention to cues, but it lacked fire and assurance. Varduk, however, was not disappointed.

"It has often been said, and often proven as well, that a bad last rehearsal means a splendid first performance," he reminded us. "To bed all of you, and try to get at least nine hours of sleep." Then

he seemed to remember something. "Miss Holgar."

"Yes?" said Sigrid.

"Come here, with me." He led her to the exact center of the stage. "At this spot, you know, you are to stand when the final incident of the play, and our dialog together, unfolds."

"I know," she agreed.

"Yet—are you sure? Had we not better be sure?" Varduk turned toward the auditorium, as though to gage their position from the point of view of the audience. "Perhaps I am being too exact, yet——"

He snapped his fingers in the direction of Davidson, who seemed to have expected some sort of request signal. The big assistant reached into the pocket of his jacket and brought out a piece of white chalk.

"Thank you, Davidson." Varduk accepted the proffered fragment. "Stand a little closer center, Miss Holgar. Yes, like that." Kneeling, he drew with a quick sweep of his arm a small white circle around her feet.

"That," he informed her, standing up again, "is the spot where I want you to stand, at the moment when you and I have our final conflict of words, the swearing on the Bible, and my involuntary blessing upon your head."

Sigrid took a step backward, out of the circle. I, standing behind her, could see that she had drawn herself up in outraged protest. Varduk saw, too, and half smiled as if to disarm her. "Forgive me if I seem foolish," he pleaded gently.

"I must say," she pronounced in a slow, measured manner, as though she had difficulty in controlling her voice, "that I do not feel that this little diagram will help me in the least."

Varduk let his smile grow warmer, softer. "Oh, probably it will not, Miss Holgar; but I am sure it will help me. Won't you do as I ask?"

She could not refuse, and by the time she had returned across the stage to me she had relaxed into cheerfulness again. I escorted her to the door of her cabin, and her good-night smile warmed me all the way to my own quarters.

JUDGE PURSUIVANT appeared at noon the next day, and Varduk, hailing him cordially, invited him to lunch.

"I wonder," ventured Varduk as we all sat down together, "if you, Judge Pursuivant, would not speak a few words in our favor before the curtain tonight."

"I?" The judge stared, then laughed. "But I'm not part of the management."

"The management—which means myself—will be busy getting into costume for the first act. You are a scholar, a man whose recent book on Byron has attracted notice. It is fitting that you do what you can to help our opening."

"Oh," said Pursuivant, "if you put it like that—but what shall I tell the audience?"

"Make it as short as you like, but impressive. You might announce that all present are subpenaed as witnesses to a classic moment."

Pursuivant smiled. "That's rather good, Mr. Varduk, and quite true as well. Very good, count on me."

But after lunch he drew me almost forcibly away from the others, talking affably about the merits of various wines until we were well out of earshot. Then his tone changed abruptly.

"I think we know now that the thing —whatever it is—will happen at the play, and we also know why."

"Why, then?" I asked at once.

"I am to tell the audience that they are 'subpenaed as witnesses.' In other words, their attention is directed, they must be part of a certain ceremony. I,

too, am needed. Varduk is making me the clerk, so to speak, of his court—or his cult. That shows that he will preside."

"It begins to mean something," I admitted. "Yet I am still at a loss."

Pursuivant's own pale lipes were full of perplexity. "I wish that we could know more before the actual beginning. Yet I, who once prepared and judged legal cases, may be able to sum up in part:

"Something is to happen to Miss Holgar. The entire fabric of theatrical activity—this play, the successful effort to interest her in it, the remote theater, her particular rôle, everything—is to perform upon her a certain effect. That effect, we may be sure, is devastating. We may believe that a part, at least, of the success depends on the last line of the play, a mystery as yet to all of us."

"Except to Varduk," I reminded.

"Except to Varduk."

But a new thought struck me, and for a moment I found it comforting.

"Wait. The ceremony, as you call it, can't be all evil," I said. "After all, he asks her to swear on a Bible."

"So he does," Pursuivant nodded. "What kind of a Bible?"

I tried to remember. "To tell the truth, I don't know. We haven't used props of any kind in rehearsals—not even the sword, after that first time."

"No? Look here, that's apt to be significant. We'll have to look at the properties."

We explored the auditorium and the stage with a fine show of casual interest. Davidson and Switz were putting final touches on the scenery—a dark blue backdrop for evening sky, a wall painted to resemble vine-hung granite, benches and an arbor—but no properties lay on the table backstage.

"You know this is a Friday, Gib?" demanded Jake, looking up from where he was mending the cable of a floodlight. "Bad luck, opening our play on a Friday."

"Not a bit," laughed Pursuivant. "What's begun on a Friday never comes to an end. Therefore——"

"Oi!" crowed Jake. "That means we'll have a record-breaking run, huh?" He jumped up and shook my hand violently. "You'll be working in this show till you step on your beard."

We wandered out again, and Sigrid joined us. She was in high spirits.

"I feel," she said excitedly, "just as I felt on the eve of my first professional appearance. As though the world would end tonight!"

"God forbid," I said at once, and "God forbid," echoed Judge Pursuivant. Sigrid laughed merrily at our sudden expressions of concern.

"Oh, it won't end that way," she made haste to add, in the tone one reserves for children who need comfort. "I mean, the world will begin tonight, with success and happiness."

She put out a hand, and I squeezed it tenderly. After a moment she departed to inspect her costume.

"I haven't a maid or a dresser," she called over her shoulder. "Everything has to be in perfect order, and I myself must see to it."

We watched her as she hurried away, both of us sober.

"I think I know why you fret so about her safety," Pursuivant said to me. "You felt, too, that the thing she said might be a bad omen."

"Then may her second word be a good omen," I returned.

"Amen to that," he said heartily.

Dinnertime came, and Pursuivant and I made a quick meal of it. We excused ourselves before the others—Sigrid looked up in mild astonishment that I

should want to leave her side—and went quickly downstairs to the stage.

ON THE property table lay the cudgel I was to use in the first act, the sword I was to strike with in the second, the feather duster to be wielded by Martha Vining as Bridget, a tray with a wine service to be borne by Davidson as Oscar. There was also a great book, bound in red cloth, with red edging.

"That is the Bible," said Pursuivant at once. "I must have a look at it."

"I still can't see," I muttered, half to myself, "how this sword—a good piece of steel and as sharp as a razor—failed to kill Varduk when I——"

"Never mind that sword," interrupted Judge Pursuivant. "Look at this book, this 'Bible' which they've refused to produce up to now. I'm not surprized to find out that—well, have a look for yourself."

On the ancient black cloth I saw rather spidery capitals, filled with red coloring matter: *Grand Albert.*

"I wouldn't look inside if I were you," warned the judge. "This is in all probability the book that Varduk owned when Davidson met him at Revere College. Remember what happened to one normal young man, ungrounded in occultism, who peeped into it."

"What can it be?" I asked.

"A notorious gospel for witches," Pursuivant informed me. "I've heard of it—Descrepe, the French occultist, edited it in 1885. Most editions are modified and harmless, but this, at first glance, appears to be the complete and infamous Eighteenth Century version." He opened it.

The first phase of his description had stuck in my mind. "A gospel for witches; and that is the book on which Sigrid must swear an oath of renunciation at the end of the play!"

Pursuivant was scowling at the fly-leaf. He groped for his pince-nez, put them on. "Look here, Connatt," he said.

I crowded close to his elbow, and together we read what had been written long ago, in ink now faded to a dirty brown:

Geo Gordon (Biron) his book

At 1 hr. befor midnt, on 22 July, 1788 givn him. He was brot to coeven by Todlin he the saide Geo. G. to be bond to us for 150 yers. and serve for our glory he to gain his title & hav all he desirs. at end of 150 yrs. to give acctg. & not be releasd save by delivring anothr as worthie our coeven.

(Signed)

For coeven Terragon — For Geo. Gordon (Biron) Todlin

"And look at this, too," commanded Judge Pursuivant. He laid his great forefinger at the bottom of the page. There, written in fresh blue ink, and in a hand somehow familiar:

This 22nd of July, 1938, I tender this book and quit this service unto Sigrid Holgar.

George Gordon, Lord Byron.

14. Zero Hour

PURSUIVANT closed the book with a loud snap, laid it down on the table, and caught me by the arm.

"Come away from here," he said in a tense voice. "Outside, where nobody will hear." He almost dragged me out through the stage door. "Come along—down by the water—it's fairly open, we'll be alone."

When we reached the edge of the lake we faced each other. The sun was almost set. Back of us, in front of the lodge, we could hear the noise of early arrivals for the theater—perhaps the men who would have charge of automobile parking, the ushers, the cashier.

"How much of what you read was intelligible to you?" asked Pursuivant.

"I had a sense that it was rotten," I said. "Beyond that, I'm completely at sea."

"I'm not." His teeth came strongly together behind the words. "There, on the flyleaf of a book sacred to witches and utterly abhorrent to honest folk, was written an instrument pledging the body and soul of a baby to a 'coeven'—that is, a congregation of evil sorcerers—for one hundred and fifty years. George Gordon, the Lord Byron that was to be, had just completed his sixth month of life."

"How could a baby be pledged like that?" I asked.

"By some sponsor—the one signing the name 'Todlin.' That was undoubtedly a coven name, such as we know all witches took. Terragon was another such cognomen. All we can say of 'Todlin' is that the signature is apparently a woman's. Perhaps that of the child's eccentric nurse, Mistress Gray——"

"This is beastly," I interposed, my voice beginning to tremble. "Can't we do something besides talk?"

Pursuivant clapped me strongly on the back. "Steady," he said. "Let's talk it out while that writing is fresh in our minds. We know, then, that the infant was pledged to an unnaturally long life of evil. Promises made were kept—he became the heir to the estates and title of his grand-uncle, 'Wicked Byron,' after his cousins died strangely. And surely he had devil-given talents and attractions."

"Wait," I cut in suddenly. "I've been thinking about that final line or so of writing, signed with Byron's name. Surely I've seen the hand before."

"You have. The same hand wrote *Ruthven,* and you've seen the manuscript." Pursuivant drew a long breath. "Now we know how *Ruthven* could be written on paper only ten years old. Byron lives and signs his name today."

I felt almost sick, and heartily helpless inside. "But Byron died in Greece," I said, as though reciting a lesson. "His body was brought to England and buried at Hucknall Torkard, close to his ancestral home."

"Exactly. It all fits in." Pursuivant's manifest apprehension was becoming modified by something of grim triumph. "Must he not have repented, tried to expiate his curse and his sins by an unselfish sacrifice for Grecian liberty? You and I have been over this ground before; we know how he suffered and labored, almost like a saint. Death would seem welcome—his bondage would end in thirty-six years instead of a hundred and fifty. What about his wish to be burned?"

"Burning would destroy his body," I said. "No chance for it to come alive again."

"But the body was not burned, and it has come alive again. Connatt, do you know who the living-dead Byron is?"

"Of course I do. And I also know that he intends to pass something into the hands of Sigrid."

"He does. She is the new prospect for bondage, the 'other as worthie.' She is not a free agent in the matter, but neither was Byron at the age of six months."

The sun's lower rim had touched the lake. Pursuivant's pink face was growing dusky, and he leaned on the walking-stick that housed a silver blade.

"Byron's hundred and fifty years will end at eleven o'clock tonight," he said, gazing shrewdly around for possible eavesdroppers. "Now, let me draw some parallels.

"Varduk—we know who Varduk truly is—will, in the character of Ruthven, ask Miss Holgar, who plays Mary, a number of questions. Those questions, and her answers as set down for her to repeat, make up a pattern. Think of them, not as lines in a play, but an actual interchange between an adept of evil and a neophyte."

"It's true," I agreed. "He asks her if she will 'give herself up,' 'renounce form-

er manners,' and to swear so upon—the book we saw. She does so."

"Then the prayer, which perplexes you by its form. The 'wert in heaven' bit becomes obvious now, eh? How about the angel that fell from grace and attempted to build up his own power to oppose?"

"Satan!" I almost shouted. "A prayer to the force of evil!"

"Not so loud, Connatt. And then, while Miss Holgar stands inside a circle—that, also, is part of the witch ceremony—he touches her head, and speaks words we do not know. But we can guess."

He struck his stick hard against the sandy earth.

"What then?" I urged him on.

"It's in an old Scottish trial of witches," said Pursuivant. "Modern works—J. W. Wickwar's book, and I think Margaret Alice Murray's—quote it. The master of the coven touched the head of the neophyte and said that all beneath his hand now belonged to the powers of darkness."

"No! No!" I cried, in a voice that wanted to break.

"No hysterics, please!" snapped Pursuivant. "Connatt, let me give you one stark thought—it will cool you, strengthen you for what you must help me achieve. Think what will follow if we let Miss Holgar take this oath, accept this initiation, however unwittingly. At once she will assume the curse that Varduk—Byron—lays down. Life after death, perhaps; the faculty of wreaking devastation at a word or touch; gifts beyond human will or comprehension, all of them a burden to her; and who can know the end?"

"There shall not be a beginning," I vowed huskily. "I will kill Varduk——"

"Softly, softly. You know that weapons — ordinary weapons — do not even scratch him."

THE twilight was deepening into dusk. Pursuivant turned back toward the lodge, where windows had begun to glow warmly, and muffled motor-noises bespoke the parking of automobiles. There were other flecks of light, too. For myself, I felt beaten and weary, as though I had fought to the verge of losing against a stronger, wiser enemy.

"Look around you, Connatt. At the clumps of bush, the thickets. What do they hide?"

I knew what he meant. I felt, though I saw only dimly, the presence of an evil host in ambuscade all around us.

"They're waiting to claim her, Connatt. There's only one thing to do."

"Then let's do it, at once."

"Not yet. The moment must be *his* moment, one hour before midnight. Escape, as I once said, will not be enough. We must conquer."

I waited for him to instruct me.

"As you know, Connatt, I will make a speech before the curtain. After that, I'll come backstage and stay in your dressing-room. What you must do is get the sword that you use in the second act. Bring it there and keep it there."

"I've told you and told you that the sword meant nothing against him."

"Bring it anyway," he insisted.

I heard Sigrid's clear voice, calling me to the stage door. Pursuivant and I shook hands quickly and warmly, like teammates just before a hard game, and we went together to the lodge.

Entering, I made my way at once to the property table. The sword still lay there, and I put out my hand for it.

"What do you want?" asked Elmo Davidson behind me.

"I thought I'd take the sword into my dressing-room."

"It's a prop, Connatt. Leave it right where it is."

I turned and looked at him. "I'd rather have it with me," I said doggedly.

"You're being foolish," he told me sharply, and there is hardly any doubt but that I sounded so to him. "What if I told Varduk about this?"

"Go and tell him, if you like. Tell him also that I won't go on tonight if you're going to order me around." I said this as if I meant it, and he relaxed his commanding pose.

"Oh, go ahead. And for heaven's sake calm your nerves."

I took the weapon and bore it away. In my room I found my costume for the first act already laid out on two chairs—either Davidson or Jake had done that for me. Quickly I rubbed color into my cheeks, lined my brows and eyelids, affixed fluffy side-whiskers to my jaws. The mirror showed me a set, pale face, and I put on rather more make-up than I generally use. My hands trembled as I donned gleaming slippers of patent leather, fawn-colored trousers that strapped under the insteps, a frilled shirt and flowing necktie, a flowered waistcoat and a bottle-green frock coat with velvet facings and silver buttons. My hair was long enough to be combed into a wavy sweep back from my brow.

"Places, everybody," the voice of Davidson was calling outside.

I emerged. Jake Switz was at my door, and he grinned his good wishes. I went quickly on-stage, where Sigrid already waited. She looked ravishing in her simple yet striking gown of soft, light blue, with billows of skirt, little puffs of sleeves, a tight, low bodice. Her gleaming hair was caught back into a Grecian-looking coiffure, with a ribbon and a white flower at the side. The normal tan of her skin lay hidden beneath the pallor of her make-up.

At sight of me she smiled and put out a hand. I kissed it lightly, taking care that the red paint on my lips did not smear. She took her seat on the bench against the artificial bushes, and I, as gracefully as possible, dropped at her feet.

Applause sounded beyond the curtain, then died away. The voice of Judge Pursuivant became audible:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have been asked by the management to speak briefly. You are seeing, for the first time before any audience, the lost play of Lord Byron, *Ruthven.* My presence here is not as a figure of the theater, but as a modest scholar of some persistence, whose privilege it has been to examine the manuscript and perceive its genuineness.

"Consider yourselves all subpenaed as witnesses to a classic moment." His voice rang as he pronounced the phrase required by Varduk. "I wonder if this night will not make spectacular history for the genius who did not die in Greece a century and more ago. I say, he did not die—for when does genius die? We are here to assist at, and to share in, a performance that will bring him his proper desserts.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I feel, and perhaps you feel as well, the presence of the great poet with us in this remote hall. I wish you joy of what you shall observe. And now, have I your leave to withdraw and let the play begin?"

Another burst of applause, in the midst of which sounded three raps. Then up went the curtain, and all fell silent. I, as Aubrey, spoke the first line of the play:

"I'm no Othello, darling. . . ."

15. "Whither? I Dread to Think—"

SIGRID and I struck on the instant the proper note of affectionate gayety, and I could feel in the air that peculiar audience-rhythm by which an actor knows that his effort to capture a mood is successful. For the moment it was the best of all possible worlds, to be exchanging thus the happy and brilliant lines with the woman I adored, while an intelligent and sympathetic houseful of spectators shared our happy mood.

But, if I had forgotten Varduk, he was the more imposing when he entered. His luminous pallor needed no heightening to seize the attention; his face was set off, like some gleaming white gem, by the dark coat, stock, cape, books, pantaloons. He spoke his entrance line as a king might speak in accepting the crown and homage of a nation. On the other side of the footlights the audience grew tense with hightened interest.

He overpowered us both, as I might have known he would, with his personality and his address. We might have been awkward amateurs, wilting into nothingness when a master took the stage. I was eclipsed completely, exactly as Aubrey should be at the entrance of Ruthven, and I greatly doubt if a single pair of eyes followed me at my first exit; for at the center of the stage, Varduk had begun to make love to Sigrid.

I returned to my dressing-room. Pursuivant sat astride a chair, his sturdy forearms crossed upon its back.

"How does it go?" he asked.

"Like a producer's dream," I replied, seizing a powder puff with which to freshen my make-up. "Except for the things we know about, I would pray for no better show."

"I gave you a message in my speech before the curtain. Did you hear what I said? I meant, honestly, to praise Byron and at the same time to defy him. You and I, with God's help, will give *Ruthven* an ending he does not expect."

It was nearly time for me to make a new entrance, and I left the dressing-room, mystified but comforted by Pursuivant's manner. The play went on, gathering speed and impressiveness. We were all acting inspiredly, maugre the bizarre nature of the rehearsals and other preparations, the dark atmosphere that had surrounded the piece from its first introduction to us.

The end of the act approached, and with it my exit. Sigrid and I dragged the limp Varduk to the center of the stage and retired, leaving him alone to perform the sinister resurrection scene with which the first act closes. I loitered in the wings to watch, but Jake Switz tugged at my sleeve.

"Come," he whispered. "I want to show you something."

We went to the stage door. Jake opened it an inch.

The space behind the lodge was full of uncertain, half-formed lights that moved and lived. For a moment we peered. Then the soft, larval radiances flowed toward us. Jake slammed the door.

"They're waiting," he said.

From the direction of the stage came Varduk's final line:

"Grave, I reject thy shelter! Death, stand back!"

Then Davidson dragged down the curtain, while the house shook with applause. I turned again. Varduk, back-stage, was speaking softly but clearly, urging us to hurry with our costume changes. Into my dressing-room I hastened, my feet numb and my eyes blurred.

"I'll help you dress," came Pursuivant's calm voice. "Did Jake show you what waits outside?"

I nodded and licked my parched, painted lips.

"Don't fear. Their eagerness is premature."

He pulled off my coat and shirt. Grown calm again before his assurance, I got into my clothes for Act Two—a modern dinner suit. With alcohol I removed the clinging side-whiskers, repaired my make-up and brushed my hair into modern fashion once more. Within seconds, it seemed, Davidson was calling us to our places.

The curtain rose on Sigrid and me, as Mary and Swithin, hearing the ancestral tale of horror from Old Bridget. As before, the audience listened raptly, and as before it rose to the dramatic entrance of Varduk. He wore his first-act costume, and his manner was even more compelling. Again I felt myself thrust into the background of the drama; as for Sigrid, great actress though she is, she prospered only at his sufferance.

Off stage, on again, off once more—the play was Varduk's, and Sigrid's personality was being eclipsed. Yet she betrayed no anger or dislike of the situation. It was as though Varduk mastered her, even while his character of Ruthven overpowered her character of Mary. I felt utterly helpless.

IN THE wings I saw the climax approach. Varduk, flanked by Davidson as the obedient Oscar, was declaring Ruthven's intention to gain revenge and love.

"Get your sword," muttered Jake, who had taken Davidson's place at the curtain ropes. "You're on again in a moment."

I ran to my dressing-room. Pursuivant opened the door, thrust something into my hand.

"It's the silver sword," he told me quickly. "The one from my cane. Trust in it, Connatt. Almost eleven o'clock—go, and God stiffen your arm."

It seemed a mile from the door to the wings. I reached it just in time for my entrance cue—Sigrid's cry of "Swithin will not allow this."

"Let him try to prevent it," grumbled Davidson, fierce and grizzled as the devil-converted Oscar.

"I'm here for that purpose," I said clearly, and strode into view. The sword from Pursuivant's cane I carried low, hoping that Varduk would not notice at once. He stood with folded arms, a mocking smile just touching his white face.

"So brave?" he chuckled. "So foolish?"

"My ancestor killed you once, Ruthven," I said, with more meaning than I had ever employed before. "I can do so again."

I leaped forward, past Sigrid and at him.

The smile vanished. His mouth fell open.

"Wait! That sword——"

He hurled himself, as though to snatch it from my hand. But I lifted the point and lunged, extending myself almost to the boards of the stage. As once before, I felt the flesh tear before my blade. The slender spike of metal went in, in, until the hilt thudded against his breast-bone.

No sound from audience or actors, no motion. We made a tableau, myself stretched out at lunge, Varduk transfixed, the other two gazing in sudden aghast wonder.

For one long breath's space my victim stood like a figure of black stone, with only his white face betraying anything of life and feeling. His deep eyes, gone dark as a winter night, dug themselves into mine. I felt once again the intolerable weight of his stare—yet it was not threatening, not angry even. The surprize

ebbed from it, and the eyes and the sad mouth softened into a smile. Was he forgiving me? Thanking me? . . .

SIGRID found her voice again, and screamed tremulously. I released the cane-hilt and stepped backward, automatically. Varduk fell limply upon his face. The silver blade, standing out between his shoulders, gleamed red with blood. Next moment the red had turned dull black, as though the gore was a millennium old. Varduk's body sagged. It shrank within its rich, gloomy garments. It crumbled.

The curtain had fallen. I had not heard its rumble of descent, nor had Sigrid, nor the stupefied Davidson. From beyond the folds came only choking silence. Then Pursuivant's ready voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a sad accident has ended the play unexpectedly—tragically. Through the fault of nobody, one of the players has been fatally——"

I heard no more. Holding Sigrid in my arms I told her, briefly and brokenly, the true story of *Ruthven* and its author. She, weeping, gazed fearfully at the motionless black heap.

"The poor soul!" she sobbed. "The poor, poor soul!"

Jake, leaving his post by the curtain-ropes, had walked on and was leading away the stunned, stumbling Davidson.

I still held Sigrid close. To my lips, as if at the bidding of another mind and memory, came the final lines of *Manfred:*

"He's gone—his soul hath ta'en its earthless flight—Whither? I dread to think—but he is gone."

[THE END]

Dead Dog

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A huge black dog it was, with but one reason for existence: to avenge its dead master

"Dead dogs may bite the careless feet.—*Umbundu proverb.*

THEY brought the rebel chief Kaflatala out of the jungle to Father Labossier's mud-brick house, brought him in a *tepoia* because he still limped from a Portuguese bullet in his thigh. Twenty black warriors, clicking their spears respectfully, followed the hammock-litter and formed a row outside the stockade as Kaflatala dismounted and hobbled up the path.

Springing from his seat on the porch, Father Labossier walked swiftly to meet his old friend. The chief was lean, taller by a head than the sturdy priest, and black as basalt save for a gray scar across his proud face from eye to nostril. The two men said the requisite *Kalungu* greetings and sat on a log under the broad-leafed fig-tree. Then Kaflatala spoke:

"Your advice came to me in my hiding. I cannot hope to win against the Portuguese soldiers; now I must surrender and save my people further punishment."

"That is wise, Kaflatala," nodded Father Labossier, smiling. Nine years in west Africa had not dulled the missionary zeal that had stirred him from a pleasant curé of souls near Antwerp, and moments like this repaid him for long toil. "The white man's Savior, of whom I told you," he continued, "will make your sentence a light one."

The scar darkened on Kaflatala's face and his wide lips tightened. "My people will suffer no more, that is all. Rodriguez, the Portuguese captain, will kill me."

The priest held up a hand in protest. "Not all Portuguese are cruel. It is true that Captain Rodriguez's heart is sick; he was sent here because he had sinned against the laws at home——"

"However he came here, he will kill me." Kaflatala fairly jerked out the words, then apologized for interrupting. "Good-bye, my father. We shall meet again."

Still Father Labossier argued. "A power will save you, Kaflatala."

"A power may avenge me," was the bleak reply. "That is all."

Father Labossier brought notebook and pencil from his pocket and scribbled a note as he sat.

"This asks that you be treated kindly," he explained. "My fastest servant will bear it to the fort ahead of you."

The chief thanked him courteously, and rose. "One favor before I go."

"Name it."

Kaflatala emitted a chirping whistle. At once something black and swift sped from behind the row of warriors, dashed through the gate and up the path — a huge, shaggy hound, as black as thunder. It was as large as a calf, and its eyes shone with an uneasy greenish pallor. Yet it seemed gentle, thrusting its long, ugly head under the chief's hand.

"Will you keep my dog for me?" asked Kaflatala.

"Until you come back," agreed Father Labossier.

"I do not come back," insisted the other, and Father Labossier changed the subject by asking how the beast was called.

"Ohondongela," replied the master.

That word means "revenge" in the Umbundu, and Father Labossier, eyeing the dog, thought it as fierce as its name. Black, rough, lean, powerful of jaw and long of fang, it had something of the forbidding wild about it, almost like a forest beast; but all dogs were once forest beasts, at the beginning of time. . . .

Kaflatala again excused himself for cutting the visit short, spoke commandingly to Ohondongela, and smiled when the brute curled himself obediently at the feet of Father Labossier. Then he stumped to the gate, crept into his *tepoia* and gave the signal for the march to continue.

THREE days later Father Labossier was wakened before dawn by the dismal howling of Kaflatala's hound. He grumbled sleepily, then reflected that a man of God must not think unkindly, even of a beast. He rose, took an early breakfast, pottered among the lettuces in his garden and at noon read a marriage service over a giggling young couple that wanted white man's magic for good luck in its new household. Afterward he wrote letters to a favorite nephew, to a group of fellow-priests at home, and to the Dutch trader who sent him supplies from Benguela. At about four o'clock in the afternoon a chorus of shouts from his servants betokened a stranger coming up the trail.

It was a runner, bare-legged and wearing a faded khaki shirt, who advanced to the porch, saluted in clumsy military fashion, and offered a parcel sewn in rice-sacking.

"From the fort," the runner told him. "Captain Rodriguez has sent it."

"Thank you." Some answer, of course, to his plea for mercy to Kaflatala. But why a package and no letter? There must be a note inside.

Producing a clasp-knife, the priest ripped the sacking.

A face looked up at him through the ragged hole—a black, dead face. Upon it a pallid gray scar ran from eye to nostril. Kaflatala had been right; Captain Rodriguez had made short work of him, and thus was answering Father Labossier's recommendations of mercy.

Again rose the doleful wail of Ohondongela the hound. And just before sunset the great beast lay down and died, quietly, quickly and inexplicably.

THREE moons had waned and waxed again, and the same runner from the fort met Father Labossier just outside his stockade. It was midafternoon, as on the runner's previous appearance, and again he had something from Captain Rodriguez — not a package this time, but a letter.

The priest took the envelope and gazed for a moment at the almost indecipherable characters that spelled his own name upon it. They had been set down by a shaking hand, a hand that he knew as the captain's. He had written to Rodriguez on the same day that he had received Kaflatala's head; he had stiffly indicted the officer as a cruel and cowardly murderer, and had sent a duplicate of the letter to the governor at Loanda. Nobody had replied—was this a belated acknowledgment of his message, perhaps a justification of Rodriguez's action or a further sneer at the priest?

He opened the letter and read it, his kindly face spreading over with wonder. For Rodriguez was praying for help and comfort in the name of Christian mercy and priestly compassion. The last phrase, in particular, was out of character: "I know I have sinned, yet ask for the aid I do not deserve."

The priest lifted his eyes to the waiting runner. "Go back and say that I will come tomorrow."

The native paused, embarrassed, then replied diffidently that his master was in dreadful case and that there was no white doctor to do magic for his healing. Could not Father Labossier come at once?

"It will be an all-night trek," demurred the priest. Then he thought better of his hesitancy, and added, "But a moon will shine. I shall go with you."

He changed into flannel shirt, walking-boots and a wide hat. Upon his shoulder he slung a canteen and a musette with medicines. In his pocket were prayer-book and Bible. From his little arsenal he chose a hunting-rifle, for lions might be hunting along the night trail. Then, placing his oldest servant in charge of the house, he set off with the man from the fort.

IT WAS a wearying tramp by moonlight, and an eventful one. At sunrise he came to the fort, where, brooding in his quarters over untasted food, Captain Rodriguez waited for him.

Father Labossier was shocked at sight of the Portuguese. When they had last met, four months previously, Rodriguez had been florid, swaggering, vigorous. Now he sagged shrunkenly inside his dirty white uniform. The face he lifted was pale, its eyes wild, and his once-jaunty mustache drooped.

"Father," he mumbled hoarsely, "I am ridden by devils."

Father Labossier took the captain's hand. It trembled in his grasp. "I do not doubt you, my son," he replied gravely. "Yours has been an evil life."

Rodriguez grimaced in doleful accept-

ance of the reproof. "Come, let us sit on the porch—in the blessed moonlight."

Outside, they took canvas chairs. Rodriguez sighed as if in exhaustion, gazed for a moment across the bare drill-ground toward the barracks of the native soldiers. Then:

"My sins crouch beside my bed at night."

The priest waited for a moment. When his companion did not continue, he said tentatively: "Seek forgiveness from the Lord."

"If I could!" Rodriguez leaned toward him, and his breath in Father Labossier's face was the breath of a sick man. "A Christian God cannot be invoked—only a savage devil, to spare me."

Father Labossier fingered the silver cross that hung from his neck. "That thought is a transgression, my son. Unsay it."

The captain clutched his face in wasted hands and his shoulders shook, as with sobs. Finally he forced himself to speak of what lay upon his soul.

Three nights before, he had retired, as usual, to his lonely bedchamber. He spoke of his habitual preparations; the examination of the windows to see if their gratings and mosquito nets were in place, his locking of the door against possible night prowlers, his placing of a service pistol beside the water glass on his bedside table. Nothing untoward had happened during the day; it had been even tiresome. His thoughts before slumber had taken the form of an idle review of his work and a wistful consideration of his chances to be forgiven certain indiscretions and called home to Portugal. Then he had dozed off, to wake suddenly and in fear.

At this point in his narrative, he hid his face again and shuddered uncontrollably. Father Labossier laid a hand on the captain's arm, and strength flowed from him into that shaken frame.

"I looked toward the window, and there I saw it. Blood of the saints, I saw it! By the window—a great dog!"

"Dog?" repeated the other, leaning forward in his turn. "What sort of a dog?"

"Large—black and shaggy. It was sitting up, and its head and shoulders rose above the window-sill, making a silhouette against the moonlight. Its eyes, like green lamps of hell, stared at me. The hate in them!" Captain Rodriguez's face twitched with the memory.

"I see. And then?"

"I screamed, a thing I have not done since I was a baby. A moment later, my orderly was pounding and calling at the door; and the dog—had gone."

"Gone!" echoed the priest.

"Yes, vanished like a candle-flame snuffed."

Father Labossier clicked his tongue. "Was it not a dream, that?"

Captain Rodriguez laughed, but not merrily. He had thought that very thing, he admitted, though he was too nervous to sleep any more that night. In the morning he had forced himself to forget the adventure and had gone about his duties with a heart that grew lighter as the day progressed. By nightfall the nervousness returned, and he lulled himself to sleep with a bromide.

"Again—mark me, Father—again I saw to windows, mosquito netting, lock. I put from me the troublesome vision of the night before. I slept."

Father Labossier took a cigar from his pocket. "The dream——"

"It was no dream, I say. When does a dream come twice in two nights?" The captain's lips twitched, showing teeth that were set as though to hold back a dreadful pain. "The dog returned. I woke in

sudden instinctive fear, and there it was as before. No, not as before."

"What do you mean?" asked Father Labossier, biting the end of his cigar.

"It had been at the window the first time. Now it was at the foot of my bed, nearer to me by half the floor's width." Rodriguez laid his fist to his lips, as though to crush their trembling. "It was so large as to look over the footboard at me. Its green eyes burned into mine."

Father Labossier said, very quietly, that a real dog could not have looked Rodriguez in the eye.

"No, and this was no real dog. It was my gaze that faltered, and I screamed aloud."

"As before?"

"Yes, as before. And my orderly came, bearing a light that shed itself through the cracks of the door. At that beam, the thing was gone, completely and instantly. I rose to let the orderly in—never have I allowed a native to see me so upset."

Father Labossier rubbed a match on the sole of his boot. "And then, my son?"

"In the morning I sent for you. But last night, while you were on the trail—last night, the dreadful dog from hell visited me yet again!"

He flung out a hand, palm vertical. "No farther away than that, it sat at my side. It breathed upon me, I heard the growl in its throat. And somehow I snatched up the pistol from my table and fired into its face—it vanished. But tonight—*it will not vanish!*"

His voice had risen to a wail. Again the priest's strong, steady hand clutched his companion's quivering one, calming the frantic shivers.

"You have fancied these things, my son."

"But I swear they are true, by every saint in the calendar. Come, Father, to my room. You shall see for yourself."

Still murmuring set phrases of comfort, Father Labossier followed Rodriguez back into the house. The captain's sleeping-compartment was comfortable and even luxurious beyond military requirements, appointed as he had described.

"See," urged Rodriguez, laying an unsteady finger upon the door-jamb. "This round hole—my bullet made it."

"I see it," Father Labossier assured him.

"And you observe the gratings and nets at the window? The lock on my door? Well, then——"

Father Labossier cleared his throat. He was well-read, and something of an amateur psychologist. "My son, you knew, perhaps, that Chief Kaflatala had a great black hound."

"Did he? I never saw it."

"You had heard, perhaps, of the beast. Its name was Ohondongela."

Rodriguez bit his lips. "Ohondongela—revenge." He calmed himself and said that he might have heard of it.

"Ah, then," said Father Labossier, "it has become a symbol with you, my son, of the wrong your heart's core has admitted."

Much more he said, drawing upon Freud and the gospels in turn. Captain Rodriguez listened carefully, nodding from time to time as though he comprehended the argument and was disposed to agree.

"But if this is the truth," he said when the priest had made an end, "what am I to do?"

"You have begun by repenting and confessing," Father Labossier told him. "Tonight——"

"Tonight!" gasped Rodriguez, turning pale.

"Do not fear. Go to bed as usual, composing yourself. I shall sit up in the parlor. If the dream returns, call me—softly. We will deal with it together."

Rodriguez drew a deep breath, as of relief. "I am hungry," he said suddenly. "You, Father, have not breakfasted. Forgive me my neglect, and be my guest."

TOWARD nightfall Captain Rodriguez became nervous, meditative and boastful by turns. Once he spoke of native magic and twice of charms against the devil. Again, forgetting his abject admission of wrong, he loudly argued that he was justified in executing Kaflatala. He invited Father Labossier to drink with him and, when the priest refused, drank by himself. He drank entirely too much, and picked up his guitar to sing the sun down with a gay ballad. But as dusk fell he turned solemn once more and threw the instrument aside.

"Father," he muttered, "are you sure all will be well?"

"I am sure of nothing," Father Labossier felt obliged to reply. "I am very hopeful; that is all."

Rodriguez lifted his shoulders, but the shrug ended in a shiver. "Let me sit up with you," he begged. "We will talk."

"We have already talked. The best way to solve this evil is to face it."

Some time later the captain drank yet more, said good-night and went into his bedroom.

Sitting alone in the parlor, Father Labossier examined the bookshelf. It bore several weighty works on military science and tactics, and a row of Portuguese novels. From among these he selected *Rhum Azul,* by Ernest Souza. As he scanned the first page he sighed with relish. It was a mystery-adventure tale, and Father Labossier, though devout, was not disdainful of such fare. Indeed, after the Scriptures and the writings of the saints, he enjoyed best Edgar Allan Poe, Maurice Leblanc and the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.* This story would help him while away the hours. He savored a chapter, a second, a third. . . .

The calm night tore open before a blood-banishing scream of fear and agony.

Dropping the book, Father Labossier sprang to his feet. In three quick strides he crossed to the door of Rodriguez's bedroom. Even as he reached it, the scream rose higher, died suddenly, and a spatter of pistol shots rang out. Then a second voice, inhuman and savage, the jabbering snarl of a beast at the kill——

The door was locked. Father Labossier shook the knob futilely, then turned as a native orderly rushed in from the rear of the house. Together they flung their shoulders against the panel. A second time. The lock gave, the door drove in. The orderly paused to catch up a lamp, and the priest stepped across the threshold.

He shrank back, staring into the gloom. Something dark and hunched was squirming violently upon the bed. Then, as the orderly lifted the light above Father Labossier's shoulder, that shape was gone.

The two men stared and wondered. The gratings and nets were in place. Nowhere along the tight walls could even a beetle find entrance or exit.

But Captain Rodriguez lay still among the tumbled sheets. His throat had been ripped out to the neckbone. One hand clutched his revolver, the other a tuft of shaggy black hair—such hair as had grown upon Ohondongela, the long-dead hound of the long-dead Kaflatala.

Three Gentlemen in Black

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Orto Harper felt safe in his country retreat, but he had not counted on the presence of three malevolent gentlemen in black

IT WAS odd, after the way he had been dissatisfied with everything he had so far looked at, that this house should appeal to him so much. An out of the way place, certainly. He would be safe enough there from any manner of pursuit: the police especially, if it came to that. He need see no one day in, day out; he could grow a beard, if necessary, in addition to the straggly mustache.

The house at the end of the country lane had something compellingly familiar about it: a dream place, with aspects emerging as from a distant past, indistinct and vague. He did not pause to analyze this, apart from thinking it strange. He had thought his search for a suitable house in the country would never end, but here it was: the perfect place. Snug as a bug in a rug, as Uncle Alexander might say. And safe, really *safe:* well away from London, well away from anyone who knew him. And here he could stay until Uncle Alexander was dead; then he could come forward as the modest heir, and, incidentally, the *only* heir.

So far, of course, Uncle Alexander was not dead. He had not thought he might be. He had been, in fact, far too careful. The poisoned capsule had been put well in the center of the second layer in the case of veronal capsules Uncle Alexander carried. So the old man would die sometime, somewhere, within the next month or two. There was really no hurry; Orto Harper could afford to wait, and the thought of what an inheritance he would come into made waiting easy, the memory of how his Uncle Alexander had beaten him years ago—the big, ugly hands striking blindly at his young body; this memory made waiting a pleasure. To know that yours was the hand of Death, to know that sometime, somewhere, within the next two months, Uncle Alexander would die, that everybody he had known would testify about the old man's constant worry about his heart, that Uncle Alexander's considerable estate would shortly be yours!—Orto Harper felt a physical pleasure quite apart from intellectual pride in his work.

So he took the house and moved in—alone; he wanted no one around to say that he had acted queerly when news of his uncle's death reached him; and he set himself to planning a garden, thinking with amusement of the picture it made — a murderer busying himself among flowers. Not the first time, doubtless. But in the back of his mind, in the well of his thoughts, this thought stirred and rankled: this place was familiar, familiar from a distant past.

But try as he would, he could not place his finger on that familiarity. Sometimes certain aspects of the place struck him forcibly; he would come upon them—a brief vision of a distant valley among the

trees, a corner in the house itself, the sunlight falling upon a stair—and know he had seen them before, know without question that these things had passed before his eyes at some distant time. Then again, he would feel all the freshness of something utterly new at certain other aspects of the rambling old country estate. Yet—there was something about the lake, dimly seen to eastward, that kept bothering him subconsciously.

NATURALLY enough, this feeling of vague familiarity irritated him; he had little enough to do—the garden and the press were his chief interests: the garden because it gave his hands something to do and took his mind off waiting; the press, to watch for the notice of his uncle's death. He held the headline he would see already in mind: *Death of Alexander Harper*—and the story of how he died in London or Paris or perhaps somewhere in the country: preferably the latter, for a hurried provincial physician would be far more likely to snap at a diagnosis of heart failure. So he pondered this odd familiarity, he dwelt upon it in his leisure; it began to annoy him with each new-found familiar thing, and presently he began to recognize a nebulous uneasiness; he experienced the conviction that there was something he should know, something he should remember.

But all he could think about at first was his life with Uncle Alexander. A dog's existence! He remembered how, not long after his father had killed himself, he had got into a little trouble, and Uncle Alexander had called him a "nasty wretch, likely to take after his father." And again, that first time his uncle had caught him abstracting an old book from his library with a view to pawning it, how the old man had stood looking balefully at him, his bushy brows pushed down in a grave frown over his eyes, and explained to the man-servant over his head, "He comes by it naturally, I suppose. Unless he's handled right, he'll turn out a bad egg." And then had come the ceaseless, painful beatings, the eternal punishment, the cruel humiliations.

For that, Orto Harper would shortly be repaid. Uncle Alexander took a veronal capsule every night, or almost every night, and one of these nights he would take the poisoned capsule so carefully prepared by his nephew. There was a savage, unholy joy in the thought.

Thinking thus, Orto Harper began to meditate suddenly upon the strange thrill he always got out of doing wrong, the unholy fascination of evil itself. Always, as long as he could remember, he had enjoyed wrongdoing: the first petty things —cruelty to others, bad temper, pilfering —the adolescent thefts, and now: *murder!* Ah, but he was sharp, he was a cute one! This was the burden of his thought, the theme that lay under it always. And he believed in himself.

HE HAD been a week in the house before he noticed anything wrong. And then he thought only that it was a matter of digestion, perhaps some physical disturbance, painless, but still capable of arousing in him a nervousness which was translated into apprehension. For he *was* apprehensive. He noticed, for one thing, the curious absence of visitors. True, the house was well down the lane from the road, and the lane itself, as well as the house, was overhung with old trees. But people did not come near the place. He found his groceries at the end of the lane next the road, and any protest he made over the telephone to the grocer in Willomead was met with an obstinate and aggravating silence.

This made him furious until the night on which he saw the two gentlemen in

black. It was just at the last of the dusk hour, at the boundary of night. He sat in the kitchen of the house, looking down the lane toward the road, when the two gentlemen in black appeared in the lane and came down toward him, walking briskly. Indeed, one of them seemed to be carrying an umbrella. Visitors, thought Orto. He sat still, watching. They came on to the small veranda. Momentarily, Orto expected their knock. It did not come. He peered out, mystified, but there was no one there.

He got up and went around to the front of the house, and almost walked into them. They were standing in the hall, and their aspects froze Orto Harper with terror. In the dim light there, he could see their lips move, but he heard no sound. He could see the bulk of them: fat, heavy men, the acme of British country respectability: but he could also see the outlines of window and door through them. And the door was still locked, as he had left it, his key hanging undisturbed in the lock!

Orto Harper may have been vain, but he was no fool. A man might say what he liked about the supernatural, but Orto Harper knew when he saw a ghost. At this moment, he saw two of them.

But it was not the fact that they were ghosts that frightened him; it was this: *their faces were familiar!* The same maddening familiarity reaching into the present from a distant past, too intangible to grasp, yet there. Somewhere, sometime, he had known these men; he had known them when they still lived. Indeed, he could swear to this: that at one time one of them at least—the one with the sideburns—had jostled him on his knee! Even so, he could not place them, though he racked his memory, standing there, the edge of fright still impinging upon his thought. As he sought to find a clue to their identity, the two of them parted, one to walk soundlessly up the long stairs, the other to enter the study.

Orto waited a moment; then silently he crossed the hall and looked into the study. There was no one there.

He began to feel a cold horror mushrooming up inside him, but above this, he became aware of an intense, insatiable curiosity. Who were these men? Where was this place? Obviously, it was not enough to think of it as a house in the country outside Willomead. For him, at least, there was something more. He resisted an impulse to go upstairs and look for the other one, feeling certain that he, too, would have vanished in the growing darkness.

Whatever fresh questions their appearance may have brought into his mind, at least one thing was explained: the curious reticence of the near-by villagers. Orto felt that he had somehow accomplished something, and, thinking thus, the fear in him began to ebb away, slowly at first, and then with increasing swiftness, until only the odd, rankling sense of something forgotten, some misplaced memory, something he ought to know remained. He resolved to investigate the ghosts of this old house at the first opportunity, making of it a chore to be done at his convenience.

He was still a little nervous and upset when he went to bed that night, and he dreamed. He dreamed about his father, saw the thin, sharp-eyed man with his long predatory fingers he had known in his early years. He saw him in a boat with two gentlemen in black, and he heard him speak to them, calling one "Uncle Robert," the other, "Uncle Henry." Out on the lake they went, despite wind and choppy water, with his father smiling an evil smile, and the clouds darkening, and the wind rising. "My boy, be careful; your uncle and I can't swim." So fast it happened that even as the old one spoke, the boat went

over, and the sly face of the young man, his father, was under water, swimming swiftly toward shore, and the two older men were floundering helplessly, calling vainly, sinking, drowning.

When he woke, Orto knew the men in his dream, the men whose spectral visit had been paid him the evening before; they were his great-uncles, Robert and Henry. And of his dream he dared not think; he pressed himself with query after query: where was this place? Where had he sought the sanctuary he fancied he would need after his crime? As if he did not know! He did. He had been here as a very small child, two years or so. The Harperson place in the country. *Harperson:* that was his grandfather's name, shortened by the old man's sons. And the place? Sold before the old man's death because of some obscure reason no one dared name.

He got up in the dark and looked out. A waning moon had risen and was shedding its pale orange glow over the landscape. Venus had preceded the sun into the eastern sky. Away off along the eastern horizon shimmered the lake. That would be the place, Orto thought, the place where it had happened. He wondered idly whether the two gentlemen in black were still waiting.

That was the first time he thought of them as *waiting*.

IN THE morning he went into the village, pausing at a pub that looked more aged than anything else to be seen along the hamlet's principal street. *Pelham's Place*. He bought himself some ale and sat down where he could talk. Wisely, he waited for the bluff, hearty, John-Bullish man behind the bar to say the first word. This he did presently.

"You at the old Harperson place?" A bit of curiosity in his question.

"Yes, I am," replied Orto.

A grunt was his reply. He waited.

Presently Pelham said, "Quiet place, by the look of it."

"Ah, you've seen it?" said Orto dryly. "Judging by the number of people thereabouts, I'd think nobody'd know the place was there."

Pelham rubbed industriously at a spot on the bar. "Yus," he said, "a quiet place. Not many people go there. Stories about."

"Won't frighten me."

Pelham looked more interested. "Nor me, neither," he maintained stoutly, "But I got a house and no need to go out there. You seen anything?"

"Two men in black, if that's what you mean."

Pelham grinned and nodded. "That's them. That's the Harperson's, all right. You seen 'em, then."

"What's the story?" asked Orto briskly.

Pelham leaned toward him confidentially. "You see, I ain't sayin' anything, I'm not. You got that? It's this way. They was drowned, them two, in the lake over eastward. You see? Couldn't swim; went out in a boat with a nephew of theirs. Windy day, lake choppy, rough. Boat tipped. Nephew couldn't save them. There you have it. But the nephew knew they couldn't swim, and like as not he didn't try to save 'em."

Orto looked at him with a faint feeling of violent illness not unmixed with an equally faint awareness of the same unholy joy that always marked his own evil deeds. "You mean they were deliberately upset?"

Pelham nodded. "Everything aboveboard," he said. "Everything clear. No doubt. Coroner's jury said accident. Maybe it was. But a deliberate accident. You see? The two men were worth good plenty, yus indeed they were. Never married, but one of 'em was going to. That was the reason. That way his brother got

it all—Newman Harperson; that was the man. The nephew's father."

"And I suppose the nephew inherited after his father, is that it?" He asked; but he knew what the answer would be.

"Nah! not a bit of it. Reckon the old man guessed. At least, he wasn't sure himself. He gave it all to his other son, Alexander; every shilling of it. Sold the place right after, too, and changed the family name." He began to chuckle.

"And the nephew?"

"Ah, that was the joke of it, yus. He hung himself. He did it in his brother's house in London. Gone there to beg a bit, I'd no doubt. But the brother was a shrewd one, and the other was going out of his mind, he was. Said they was after him, those two, his uncles—two men in black, he said. That was his story."

Orto looked at him in alarmed surprize. "Was it in the papers?" he asked.

"Not much. My sister got it from a woman whose niece worked in Alexander Harper's place."

Orto left the pub remembering all he knew he should have remembered when first he had seen the old place. And above all his knowledge of why its familiarity should have struck him, he remembered how his Uncle Alexander had stood over him and said, "He comes by it naturally!"

He understood many things, but he was not afraid, stilling the small voice inside. Even if his plans in regard to Uncle Alexander went wrong, he was confident that he could outwit the police. Still, he felt oddly cheated, as if this evil in him in which he had so long gloried was not, after all, entirely of his own doing.

Going down the lane, he began to think of what Pelham had said—that the two Harpersons had hounded his father, had driven him to suicide. Certainly he had made away with himself; there was no doubt whatever about that. Orto could remember that without difficulty. Now that his doubts about the house had been settled, he began to think more about his spectral visitors of the preceding night. Why had he not seen them before? Would he see them again? He waited for night with a curious kind of apprehension, a breathless tension which he could recognize as if he were somewhere outside himself watching.

AS BEFORE, they came down the lane that night: the two of them, talking, gesticulating: two gentlemen in black with the outlines of trees and shrubs seen through them. He sat where he was, in the kitchen, and waited. Presently they were there, in the room with him, their soundless talking constant, and he watched, fascinated. Once or twice they looked at him with a strange, speculative air; they knew him, but for some reason, they were waiting. He could not escape the conviction that they were waiting for something that concerned him.

It seemed to him several times as if he could hear them speak, but he knew he could not; he knew that words formed in his mind alone; but he knew also that somehow those words came from the two long-dead great-uncles Harperson. They were talking about his father, about him, about Uncle Alexander; it was as if he could feel their animated thoughts in the room with him. He began therefore, because he could not help it, to think of his father, how they had found him with his own hands about his neck in addition to the rope, how his father's fingers and thumbs had been sunk into the flesh of his neck. And he shuddered, looking at the great, spectral hands before him, hands so much like Uncle Alexander's.

For the first time he thought of flight.

But he could not flee. Not while Uncle Alexander was alive and he was secure here, could always be secure from prying eyes, until the time came to reply to ad-

vertisements for his whereabouts and he could come modestly forward to claim his uncle's estate—he, a countryman then, isolated and unaware of his uncle's death. He was too smart to do anything rash—not Orto Harper! And even if the police began to make inquiries!

But he need not have feared the police.

THE next night he found it in the paper, the small dark head: *Death of Alexander Harper,* and the story: *A body, identified as that of the late Alexander Harper, K. C. B., was found last night in a first-class compartment in the Orient Express. Mr. Harper, it was asserted by several companions, had been complaining constantly of heart trouble, and had had two attacks within the preceding twenty-four hours. Death was attributed to failure of the heart, pending further examination. At the time of his death, Mr. Alexander Harper was engaged on a delicate mission for the Foreign Office. . . .*

Orto read the story through once and again, and he felt flowering in him that same deep-seated physical sense of evil power, the same thrill he had always known. He folded the paper almost reverently and hurried up the lane to the house. Now he need only wait. A few weeks, a month—and he could come forward, be rich, have all his uncle's money. Now at last, at long last he was avenged for all the beatings, the cruel humiliations, the endless insults he had endured at the bestial hands of Uncle Alexander.

He came toward the porch in the evening halflight and saw them: two middle-aged gentlemen in black, the acme of British country respectability. They stood on the back porch waiting for him, and when he paused, apprehensive, began to move toward him, slowly, patiently, like two great animals with all the time in the world. But this time there was no innocuousness about them; there was the sharp, clear aura of terror and death.

They did not take trouble to conceal their hatred and contempt, did not disguise their intentions, and Orto's courage drained out of him. He stood for a frozen moment, conscious of the horrible fear beating up within him. He knew now how his father had died. He knew how those great spectral hands would catch hold of his own and fix them around his throat, force his own fingers and thumbs into the flesh of his neck. But in a second, his old confidence briefly rose. He could escape, he could run; they would not follow him into the road beyond the lane.

He dropped the paper and turned. He ran down the lane with a kind of fierce exultation pulsing through him, a last insane uprushing of his abnormal vanity, the thrill of working evil and evading punishment.

Looking ahead, he saw someone turn into the lane. He felt safer, even though the two behind him had lost no distance. He was tempted to raise his voice and shout, but in a moment he saw that he would be quite close enough to make shouting superfluous.

At that moment he saw that the figure ahead was a third gentleman in black, nebulous as those other two, with the white line of the road clearly visible through his fragile substance.

He stopped, half turned, and saw his great-uncles waiting, grim, inexorable. He was frozen where he stood, but he felt his legs give, felt himself sinking to his knees, the ground rising to meet him. Slowly, slowly he turned his head and looked at the oncoming third.

It was his Uncle Alexander, grave, grim, determined; his Uncle Alexander coming at him as at the boy he had flogged in the library so often, flexing his great hands!

The Tree

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A brief weird fantasy by a late master of weird fiction

ON A verdant slope of Mount Mænalus, in Arcadia, there stands an olive grove about the ruins of a villa. Close by is a tomb, once beautiful with the sublimest sculptures, but now fallen into as great decay as the house. At one end of that tomb, its curious roots displacing the time-stained blocks of Pentelic marble, grows an unnaturally large olive tree of oddly repellent shape; so like to some grotesque man, or death-distorted body of a man, that the country folk fear to pass it at night when the moon shines faintly through the crooked boughs. Mount Mænalus is a chosen haunt of dreaded Pan, whose queer companions are many, and simple swains believe that the tree must have some hideous kinship to these weird Panisci; but an old bee-keeper who lives in the neighboring cottage told me a different story.

Many years ago, when the hillside villa was new and resplendent, there dwelt within it the two sculptors Kalos and Musides. From Lydia to Neapolis the beauty of their work was praised, and none dared say that the one excelled the other in skill. The Hermes of Kalos stood in a marble shrine in Corinth, and the Pallas of Musides surmounted a pillar in Athens near the Parthenon. All men paid homage to Kalos and Musides, and marveled that no shadow of artistic jealousy cooled the warmth of their brotherly friendship.

But though Kalos and Musides dwelt in unbroken harmony, their natures were not alike. Whilst Musides reveled by night amidst the urban gayeties of Tegea, Kalos would remain at home, stealing away from the sight of his slaves into the cool recesses of the olive grove. There he would meditate upon the visions that filled his mind, and there devise the forms of beauty which later became immortal in breathing marble. Idle folk, indeed, said that Kalos conversed with the spirits of the grove, and that his statues were but images of the fauns and dryads he met there—for he patterned his work after no living model.

So famous were Kalos and Musides, that none wondered when the Tyrant of Syracuse sent to them deputies to speak of the costly statue of Tyché which he had planned for his city. Of great size and cunning workmanship must the statue be, for it was to form a wonder of nations and a goal of travelers. Exalted beyond thought would be he whose work should gain acceptance, and for this honor Kalos and Musides were invited to compete. Their brotherly love was well known, and the crafty Tyrant surmised that each, instead of concealing his work from the other, would offer aid and advice; this charity producing two images of unheard-of beauty, the lovelier of which would eclipse even the dreams of poets.

With joy the sculptors hailed the Tyrant's offer, so that in the days that followed, their slaves heard the ceaseless blows of chisels. Not from each other did Kalos and Musides conceal their work, but the sight was for them alone. Saving theirs, no eyes beheld the two divine figures released by skilful blows

from the rough blocks that had imprisoned them since the world began.

At night, as of yore, Musides sought the banquet halls of Tegea whilst Kalos wandered alone in the olive grove. But as time passed, men observed a want of gayety in the once sparkling Musides. It was strange, they said amongst themselves, that depression should thus seize one with so great a chance to win art's loftiest reward. Many months passed, yet in the sour face of Musides came nothing of the sharp expectancy which the situation should arouse.

THEN one day Musides spoke of the illness of Kalos, after which none marveled again at his sadness, since the sculptors' attachment was known to be deep and sacred. Subsequently many went to visit Kalos, and indeed noticed the pallor of his face; but there was about about him a happy serenity which made his glance more magical than the glance of Musides—who was clearly distracted with anxiety and who pushed aside all the slaves in his eagerness to feed and wait upon his friend with his own hands. Hidden behind heavy curtains stood the two unfinished figures of Tyché, little touched of late by the sick man and his faithful attendant.

As Kalos grew inexplicably weaker and weaker despite the ministrations of puzzled physicians and of his assiduous friend, he desired to be carried often to the grove which he so loved. There he would ask to be left alone, as if wishing to speak with unseen things. Musides ever granted his requests, though his eyes filled with visible tears at the thought that Kalos should care more for the fauns and the dryads than for him. At last the end drew near, and Kalos discoursed of things beyond this life. Musides, weeping, promised him a sepulcher more lovely than the tomb of Mausolus; but Kalos bade him speak no more of marble glories. Only one wish now haunted the mind of the dying man; that twigs from certain olive trees in the grove be buried by his resting-place—close to his head. And one night, sitting alone in the darkness of the olive grove, Kalos died.

Beautiful beyond words was the marble sepulcher which stricken Musides carved for his beloved friend. None but Kalos himself could have fashioned such bas-reliefs, wherein were displayed all the splendors of Elysium. Nor did Musides fail to bury close to Kalos' head the olive twigs from the grove.

As the first violence of Musides' grief gave place to resignation, he labored with diligence upon his figure of Tyché. All honor was now his, since the Tyrant of Syracuse would have the work of none save him or Kalos. His task proved a vent for his emotion and he toiled more steadily each day, shunning the gayeties he once had relished. Meanwhile his evenings were spent beside the tomb of his friend, where a young olive tree had sprung up near the sleeper's head. So swift was the growth of this tree, and so strange was its form, that all who beheld it exclaimed in surprize; and Musides seemed at once fascinated and repelled.

Three years after the death of Kalos, Musides dispatched a messenger to the Tyrant, and it was whispered in the agora at Tegea that the mighty statue was finished. By this time the tree by the tomb had attained amazing proportions, exceeding all other trees of its kind, and sending out a singularly heavy branch above the apartment in which Musides labored. As many visitors came to view the prodigious tree as to admire the art of the sculptor, so that Musides was seldom alone. But he did not mind his multitude of guests; indeed, he seemed to dread being alone, now that his absorb-

ing work was done. The bleak mountain wind, sighing through the olive grove and the tomb-tree, had an uncanny way of forming vaguely articulate sounds.

THE sky was dark on the evening that the Tyrant's emissaries came to Tegea. It was definitely known that they had come to bear away the great image of Tyché and bring eternal honor to Musides; so their reception by the proxenoi was of great warmth. As the night wore on, a violent storm of wind broke over the crest of Mænalus, and the men from far Syracuse were glad that they rested snugly in the town. They talked of their illustrious Tyrant, and of the splendor of his capital; and exulted in the glory of the statue which Musides had wrought for him. And then the men of Tegea spoke of the goodness of Musides, and of his heavy grief for his friend; and how not even the coming laurels of art could console him in the absence of Kalos, who might have worn those laurels instead. Of the tree which grew by the tomb, near the head of Kalos, they also spoke. The wind shrieked more horribly, and both the Syracusans and the Arcadians prayed to Aiolos.

In the sunshine of the morning the Proxenoi led the Tyrant's messengers up the slope to the abode of the sculptor, but the night wind had done strange things. Slaves' cries ascended from a scene of desolation, and no more amidst the olive grove rose the gleaming colonnades of that vast hall wherein Musides had dreamed and toiled. Lone and shaken mourned the humble courts and the lower walls, for upon the sumptuous greater peristyle had fallen squarely the heavy overhanging bough of the strange new tree, reducing the stately poem in marble with odd completeness to a mound of unsightly ruins. Strangers and Tegeans stood aghast, looking from the wreckage to the great, sinister tree whose aspect was so weirdly human and whose roots reached so queerly into the sculptured sepulcher of Kalos. And their fear and dismay increased when they searched the fallen apartment; for of the gentle Musides, and of the marvelously fashioned image of Tyché, no trace of which could be discovered. Amidst such stupendous ruin only chaos dwelt, and the representatives of two cities left disappointed; Syracusans that they had no statue to bear home, Tegeans that they had no artist to crown. However, the Syracusans obtained after a while a very splendid statue in Athens, and the Tegeans consoled themselves by erecting in the agora a marble temple commemorating the gifts, virtues, and brotherly piety of Musides.

But the olive grove still stands, as does the tree growing out of the tomb of Kalos, and the old bee-keeper told me that sometimes the boughs whisper to one another in the night wind, saying over and over again, *"Oida! Oida!*—I know! I know!"

Invaders From Outside*

By J. SCHLOSSEL

A Tale of the Twelve Worlds

ON EVERY hand huge brilliant suns, single or multiple, flashed past with their retinue of small dark planets. Though there was no sound to mark their passage through the heavens, yet one felt that here, indeed, was a roaring inferno. Slowly and steadily did the solar system forge ahead through this veritable whirlpool of mighty blazing suns. It was nothing less than a miracle that the sun should be able to guide his charge of planets safely through this densely star-packed region near the center of the Milky Way. Even though the sun now shone with his greatest possible splendor, he was nothing but a tiny dwarf sun within a region where white-hot giants abounded.

The intelligent inhabitants of the solar system had for ages past been sweeping the heavens with their ponderous astronomical instruments, endeavoring to see farther, always farther. Their telescopes were gigantic. With the aid of those huge eyes that stared unblinkingly out into the starry regions of the night, they were able to record, chart, and compare nearly every star within the island universe of which they were an insignificant part.

It can almost be said that no phenomenon of the sky, great or small, escaped their keen-eyed vigilance. Hot glowing suns and cold dead worlds came equally under their curious, all-penetrating gaze. Their system of research was as near perfect as possible; besides, if one or more of the members of that great body known as the Scientific Society of the Twelve Confederate Worlds missed something through an unavoidable local condition, the other members did not.

Always did they keep watch, and though their instruments embraced the limits of the Milky Way, yet a large number of cold, dark worlds had slipped in past their vigilance, and one of these was now hurtling at an enormous velocity straight toward the solar system.

Ignorant entirely of its coming, of the curious zigzag course it followed, or of its desperate purpose, the inhabitants of those twelve civilized worlds went on con-

* From WEIRD TALES for January, 1925.

fidently with their researches and their dreams of eternal peace.

Peace? To the average inhabitant of the Twelve Confederate Worlds the meaning of the words peace and war was unknown. Those two words were met with only in the oldest archives on each planet. For the perfect and secure peace that the Twelve Confederate Worlds enjoyed had never been broken. They were the masters of the solar system. Peace was even older than the confederacy, and that was old beyond reckoning. No one knew or had the least conception when the Act of Confederation had been passed. It was forgotten in the bottomless seas of the past.

Not even the industrious inhabitants of Mars, though their civilization had reached its apex two hundred and fifty thousand Martian years before and their written records extended back twice that far, knew when that deathless compact had been agreed upon. Wrought deeply in the smooth, imperishable walls of adamant that surrounded the Moon's capital city, Ishree, was the entire history of the ages that had so swiftly glided into the past; but even this greatest and oldest of all histories faded into a mass of criss-crossed lines of undecipherable script long in the ancient past dealing with that memorable event. The records of the other civilized worlds were just as illegible in regard to the period when the twelve worlds had confederated.

One hundred and twenty million miles out beyond the orbit of Mars was the orbit of the next world belonging to the Confederacy. It bore no name, but was called No. 5. It was situated between Mars and the Jovian system of habitated moons. And then came Jupiter with his four civilized moons, each of which was a member of the Confederacy: Callisto and Ganymede, the two largest; Europa and Io, the two smallest. Far out beyond the Jovian system, about four hundred million miles, lay the orbit of Saturn. Out there he was supreme. He owed allegiance to none but his parent, the Sun. He held continual sway over his five habitable moons: Japetus, the outermost; Titan, the largest; while Rhea, Dione, and Tethys came in order named. There were, of course, the moons of Uranus, but life there was still in the savage state.

The thrill that the first few fearless Martians experienced when they dared the unknown terrors of the vast airless seas in their flimsy crude craft can never be recalled. Bridging the space between the worlds was as common now as traveling from city to city. But there was no danger now, and neither was there any thrill in it. Even though the Confederacy was admitted to be old, very old, interplanetary travel was necessarily still older. It was the forerunner of the other.

THE very first trip from Mars was to the Moon, which circled the barbarous planet, Earth. Those intrepid Martian explorers expected to throw their lives away when they shot up into the absolute void of space. They never thought that they would return. And their folk waited season in and season out; still they did not hear from them. Years after all hope had been abandoned their craft was sighted in the clear sky. They were returning at last.

The Martians crowded around that ship after the initial shock and roar of its landing was past. As the captain stepped out of his frail craft he was cheered again and again by the admiring populace. Twenty had started out on that first trip into the infinite, yet only seven others besides the captain dragged themselves wearily on to the Martian soil. The other twelve lay buried in a strange world. They had for the most part succumbed to the frightful rigors of the trip over.

Their folk begged them, then and there, to tell of the terrible hardships and dangers that they must have gone through. Those daring pioneers first rested, and then they began their strange tales. That they were thickly garnished with wild imaginings was suspected, but no one then could tell positively.

The travelers told of the wonderful feeling of lightness that pervaded them as they stepped out of their vehicle; of the Moon's strange vegetation, the great scarlet blossoms that were far larger than any vegetation on Mars. They described the smooth, unbroken plains; the great cities that dotted the lunar landscape; the civilization there that was even older than their own. They recounted in each detail the immense throngs that came to greet them; the perfect hospitality of the Moon dwellers; the genuine welcome.

They next told of the homesickness that had engulfed them and their inability to leave because they were short-handed. More than half of the crew had died and they could not work their vessel back. They had made many friends while they had sojourned there. They told their hosts of their yearning to return to their native soil and the reason why they could not. Their hosts volunteered to help them work their vessel back, and showered them with gifts when they took leave, and invited them to return.

When these first voyagers had told their tales and exhibited metals that were considered almost priceless on their own planet, but which could be had in any quantity on the Moon, their tale so fired the adventurous Martians that there was a stampede to sign on for the proposed expedition that their government was undertaking.

Other explorers started out in the direction of No. 5. They found the inhabitants there as far advanced as they were, but along different lines. The inhabitants of No. 5 were esthetic, pleasure-loving and beauty-loving creatures.

Others went still farther out, to Jupiter and the Jovian system of habitated moons. Everywhere they found civilizations almost equal to their own. They returned to Mars, their home. They had been received with hospitality everywhere, and treated with the respect due to an envoy from one world to another.

The government of Mars entered into a trade compact with the governments of the other worlds. The situation on Mars prior to the return of the first exploring expedition had been critical. The local markets had been overcrowded, and to avoid grave industrial crises it had been absolutely necessary that new markets be found at once.

After the return of the explorers the traders started out. They went in droves. They went almost to the limits of the solar system to obtain markets for their surplus products. That they had found new markets and kept them could be proved by the enormous traffic that each world now carried on with the others. The ancient method of transportation, those old ships propelled by the rocket discharge principle, were too slow. Why, their limit of speed was only about twenty thousand miles an hour. So slow! It took their ancient ancestors from one to eight Martian years to make one round trip. Compared to the modern almost instantaneous method of wireless transmission of solid matter, the rocket-propelled ships were slow and crude.

Though the inhabitants of Mars were the most aggressive, they did not presume to the right of leadership or the right to dictate terms. They were too far advanced to entertain such useless dreams of conquest. What they had or knew they gave without stint to the younger civilizations of the union. All was instantly accessible to every member of those twelve worlds

through the Bureau of Knowledge and the Bureau of Means.

It seems like a paradox to say that they were civilized and still peaceful, that they did not understand the full significance of war. They knew what war was, but not through personal contact. War, they held, was for the savages that lived on the three outer moons of Uranus, or for the nameless four-legged things that so miserably existed on the planet Earth, but not for the highly intelligent beings who owed allegiance to the Confederacy.

That strange, alien world that was speeding toward them, meanwhile, remained totally unknown. Its small size and its tremendous distance might have been the reason why their mighty telescopes could not bring it into view, or perhaps the curious zigzag course it followed.

It made no difference how far advanced their civilization were, they could not read the future. That was admitted to be beyond the realms of possibility. But why couldn't there be one, only one, out of the combined populations of the whole twelve worlds to warn them of the approaching danger, to tell them that a strange world was approaching out of the depths of space at an inconceivable velocity.

THE inhabitants of the Twelve Confederate Worlds were not individualists. They had advanced beyond that stage on the day when their separate worlds had united, for on that day each race had given up its deep-rooted dream that its own peculiar species had been created supreme above all others. It was the intelligence, not the form or color of their fellow creatures, that they held in high esteem.

Messages in the musical tinkling universal language of the solar system were hourly broadcast from the central broadcasting stations on each planet. The latest news and all the improvements in the field of science throbbed through the ether on equal terms with the commercial matter that was being sent out continually.

It was strange that their instruments should be of such strength that they were able to search out and assign to its proper place the smallest and most minute star, yet not know of the approaching body.

A message came from Mars, the most industrious member of the Confederacy, that its scientists were working on an intricate instrument that would easily separate into its component parts the thousands of star clusters that dotted the region beyond the Milky Way. When this new instrument would be completed, the Martians promised, they would be able to see the surfaces of the dark bodies that attended the bright stars throughout the heavens.

The Confederacy was enjoying its golden era of peace and prosperity. There was no sign of war or strife. The tremendous advancements in every field of activity had long since eliminated the drudgery from existence. Life was very sweet, but not cloying. One question loomed up large: would not this perpetual peace and ease breed a race of cowardly degenerates?

The inhabitants of the twelve worlds had never been called upon to risk their lives against an invading force. They might be soft, as compared to their progenitors of the dark and bygone past, in the matter of muscles and in their ability to resist the naked elements. But what of it? Life was not so hard now. There really was no need of brawn. And besides, their science had made them practically immune to all the disease germs that bred within the solar system. Even though they were soft in the matter of muscle, their span of life was from twenty to fifty times the full life span of

their early ancestors. Who could foretell whether they would prove in a pinch to be a race of cowardly degenerates or not?

And then, entirely unexpected (for danger always comes unexpected), from one of the huge observatories on Japetus, the outer moon of Saturn, there came an imperious command that all broadcasting immediately cease. As the broadcasting died down a message was repeatedly flashed through the ether: "A large body of planetary dimensions is hurtling toward the solar system at a terrific velocity."

The Martians worked night and day to complete their intricate half-finished instrument for long-distance observation. It was completed at last and ready to be tested. It lived up to their highest expectations. Without any further delay it was sent to Japetus and there set up for observation.

Nothing further could be learnt with the old instruments. The inhabitants of each world waited for something definite to come from the Martian observatory on Japetus.

Some frightened inhabitants of the Confederacy demanded that governments declare martial law and conscript every individual so that they could commence building and outfitting a fleet of great stellar transports large enough to give every one a chance to flee from the doomed solar system. A few, more learned but equally wild, suggested that the Scientific Society of the Twelve Confederate Worlds concentrate their combined energies toward finding a way to hurl Neptune, the outermost of the solar family, out to meet it. But most of the inhabitants waited quietly, numbed by the terrible threat of doom.

No attention was at first paid to those who let their emotions run away with them, but later, when the hysteria of the few was spreading like wildfire, it was decided to banish all who were inclined to excessive nervousness to some far-off spot until the crisis was either past or their fate definitely settled.

THE first reports, though not officially confirmed, came at last from Japetus. Its distance was estimated to be a little less than the distance that it takes light to travel in half a year. It was much farther away than the first wild reports had led them to believe. Later came its size, speed, and direction.

It was generally considered that it was a dead world—a piece of slag—hurtling through space at the incredible velocity of eighteen thousand miles a second, just one-tenth the speed of light! At that speed it would be upon them in less than five years!

Its diameter was ascertained to be about two thousand miles, or one-fourth the diameter of the planet Earth. It was nothing but a tiny speck, as stellar sizes go. Small as it was, at that rate of speed it was large enough to wreck the civilization of the solar system. The question that naturally came to the inhabitants of those twelve civilized worlds was: was it only a burnt-out cinder thrown off by some mighty sun with such unerring aim and such great force that it should flash through the heavens straight for the solar system? Or was it inhabited by sentient beings?

A reassuring official report was sent out. It said that there was absolutely no cause for alarm; that when the approaching body reached the spot in the heavens where the sun and his attending planets now were, the entire solar system would have moved on many hundred million miles away on its own course. At the rate of speed with which the approaching body was traveling, the attraction of our sun could not swerve it from its course;

no, not even if our sun were ten thousand times his own size.

The astronomers welcomed its coming. Its speed was an unexplainable phenomenon of the heavens. "Nothing but a head-on collision with some larger body could stop it," they declared.

All its surface peculiarities were known by even the youngest inhabitant of the Twelve Confederate Worlds. It was as smooth as a billiard ball—proof of its great age. A snow-like substance covered its surface, probably to a depth of five hundred feet. But the knowledge concerning it extended no deeper than its surface.

If their instruments could have seen beneath the snow-like covering, seen what was going on there, the Confederate Worlds would have begun feverish preparations for one of the most desperate struggles that had ever been fought.

They thought of tracing it back. At that speed (so they reasoned) nothing could have turned it from its course, and so it must have come almost as straight as a ray of light. But they were wrong, very wrong, for its flight was not governed solely by the mechanical laws that govern matter. The Confederate Worlds made no allowance for such a thing as a directing will. If they had known of its curious zigzag course, could they have accounted for it? They knew no laws to explain why it should swerve sharply aside when it came into the neighborhood of some of the mighty suns that had dotted its course as it flashed on its way toward the solar system, and then, after passing them, resume its former course. Instead of repulsing, those mighty suns irresistibly attract any wandering bodies that chance to come within the field of their influence.

It was impossible to trace back its course, but if they could have done so, they would have been dumfounded at the immense distance that the approaching body had covered.

It was a visitor from a far-off region, indeed. Out beyond the borders of the Milky Way the star clusters gleam as thick as the stars shine overhead on a clear, frosty night. But they do not shine with the sharp brightness of nearer stars. It is their distance, impossible to comprehend, that makes them appear nothing but a patch of soft, hazy light, notwithstanding the fact that each cluster shines with the combined light of fifty thousand to one hundred million huge flaming suns!

Everything must in time grow old. The living take their substance from the dead. The suns grow old and die. Everywhere in the heavens the ruins of dead star clusters can be seen—huge, shapeless masses that are absolutely dead-black.

And that approaching world and many others had come from somewhere out there, not from a living, glowing star cluster, but from the outskirts of a dead, intensely black region; from a region, if such a region can be imagined, where all matter has nearly reached a state of perfect equilibrium, where all matter is nearly stable, and so all matter almost dead. There were no flaming suns there to give light to that terrible darkness. Each body within the borders of that lifeless region was breaking down. The molecules were disintegrating, the atoms flying free. In the boundless sea of ether the atoms were moving sluggishly away in vast, cloud-like masses. This was the end of a universe.

Like slinking rats from a sinking ship this approaching body had come from that region. It came with a grim, fixed purpose, nearer, still nearer. It was invisible to the naked eye. It was calculated to soon pass the solar system.

Some of the more hot-blooded members of the Scientific Society of the

Twelve Confederate Worlds requested permission to take one of the society's interstellar vehicles, provision it for a lifetime, and go out to meet and board it. They painted in glowing pictures the advantages that the Scientific Society would gain from their sacrifice, and the perfect descriptions that they would be able to broadcast back.

Their request was refused on the grounds that the new Martian instrument for observation installed upon Japetus could easily follow its flight for ages to come. It would be only a useless sacrifice of life to attempt to board that strange object.

In the secret code of the Scientific Society word was sent out that this body had actually stopped in its headlong journey. It hung poised, motionless, then began to fall slowly toward the solar system. These new and terrifying facts were not given to the general public. It would not help matters if they knew, but might bring on another attack of hysteria. The Scientific Society could hardly believe the evidence of its observation instruments.

The body continued to drop slowly toward the sun, and then, as it neared the orbit of Neptune, it turned, and at an acute angle it began to head for old Neptune, who was crawling out of the west to meet it. A collision seemed imminent. Its speed was very slow, no more than eighteen hundred miles a minute—just a fraction of its former tremendous speed, and it became still slower. When the newcomer came within a quarter of a million miles of Neptune it began to circle him, as if it were a moon.

The Scientific Society heaved a sign of relief, and gave out the facts then to the public. The changing speed and the deliberate actions of this new member of the solar family were unexplainable; still, all the threatened danger seemed past.

THE instruments that had been brought to bear upon this new member showed that the snow-like substance that covered its surface was quickly evaporating under the warm, kindly glow emanating from old dying Neptune. In a little while all the snow-like substance had evaporated. It had turned into an almost transparent envelope of heavy, bluish gas.

The surface under the covering was then seen for the first time by the observers on the Twelve Confederate Worlds. Nearly the entire area of this new world was covered with square or oblong structures. In some places the square structures had been concentrated for reasons that were as yet unknown. In those places the foundations were truly massive; the structures had been built in tiers, each succeeding tier smaller than the one beneath it; and up, up they went until they formed pyramidal structures several miles in height.

Strange creatures that walked erect on only two feet next made their appearance. The inhabitants of the twelve worlds marveled. The two-legged creatures moved here and there, also seeing, it seemed, the surface of their world for the first time. They must have come up from beneath the surface. They were clad in a uniform, gray, hairy material that hung loosely upon their frames. Their movements were at first listless, but gradually they began to quicken. They looked around for a while and then went below the surface again.

It was not until the next day that they really began to come up in numbers. For the two succeeding days they poured up in a constant stream. In a little while the surface of their world was black with them. They must have hollowed out the very bowels of the planet to have accommodated such vast numbers. Like bees in a hive they were now swarming over their

huge pyramidal structures and the smaller oblong buildings, everywhere.

The Scientific Society now realized that it had not been blind chance that had steered this body toward the solar system. It was evident that those intelligent creatures had directed their world to this, a more favorable location.

Realizing that these creatures were intelligent, and thinking that they would probably need and appreciate aid after their long journey, the Twelve Confederate Worlds generously sent out a delegation to the newcomer to inquire if they could be of any assistance. Form or color meant nothing to the inhabitants of those twelve civilized worlds; it was intelligence that they held in high esteem.

No sooner did the party from the Confederate Worlds land than they were surrounded and killed! Neither a reason nor a warning had been given. They were killed with about as much compunction as one would kill some loathsome insects. After killing them, these strange two-legged creatures were seen to go about their tasks as if nothing had happened.

The inhabitants of the twelve worlds were startled, horrified. They actually did not know what to do. The act had no precedent in all their histories. Something must be done. But what? A reprisal? They did not even think of a reprisal, for they were essentially a peace-loving folk. It was unwise to send out another delegation to demand an explanation. They tried every means of interplanetary communication, but they elicited no response.

A few hours after the killing, a group of those strange creatures, but evidently in high command (for they were dressed in a bright red instead of the usual gray, and the gray-clad creatures prostrated themselves whenever the red-clad group came near them), had come up to view the remains of the slaughtered delegation. They were seen to question in turn those who killed them. Those questioned were seen to point up toward the sun, and toward the Twelve Confederate Worlds. The red-clothed were next seen to go over and examine the interplanetary vehicle that the delegation from the twelve worlds had arrived in.

After the event of the red-clothed group the inhabitants of this strange world were seen to start building some new huge pyramidal structures and repairing the old ones.

Always before had it been the Confederate Worlds who were the masters of every situation, but now they were plainly bewildered. They decided to bide their time and wait. They did not fear the invader. It was quite a different matter, this killing of a few unsuspecting individuals, from attacking the twelve civilized worlds.

FROM the moment when the strange world so suddenly arrived, and with its first ruthless act took up its sullen position as a new member of the solar family, the watchful eyes of the Twelve Confederate Worlds did not leave it for an instant. Every act was viewed with suspicion. Intently did they watch the two-legged creatures repair and build the huge pyramidal structures that reared their heads several miles above the surrounding surface. With deep wonder they watched them bring out from the interior of their planet large, metal, box-like objects. They were not producing them one at a time, but by the thousands, and stacking them up near the huge pyramidal structures. On the very pinnacle of each pyramid there was a square opening that was exactly the size of those metal boxes, and each opening extended down to the very base of its pyramid. The Scientific Society, try as it would, could not dis-

cover to what use those boxes were being put.

The numbers of those strange two-legged creatures were seen to increase, and still increase. The Scientific Society had often discussed, wondering, how so many could exist on so small an area. There seemed hardly room for a fraction of their numbers. Where did they get their supply of food? They did not grow it on the surface, for there was no room. Did they manufacture artificial foods? Several times in past ages the Scientific Society had produced artificial foods, but the inhabitants did not seem to relish them, though they were as palatable and nutritious from the chemical standpoint as any of the foods that nature produced.

It was just three Martian years from the moment when they had arrived in the solar system until they began to leap the tremendous void that separated Neptune from the four moons of Uranus. From each square opening on top of the pyramidal structures a steady stream of metallic cubes flashed out into the bleak void of space on their journey toward the moons of Uranus. Each square box was large enough to accommodate one hundred of those queer two-legged beings.

They landed upon the four moons of Uranus, and with the cubes that had carried them across the void they formed a wall surrounding their first rude camp. They immediately set to work building a city. The structures that they put up were identical with those that covered the surface of their own world. After their first city was completed these ruthless two-legged creatures went out in their thousands and commenced slaughtering for their furs the wild life that had lived there prior to their coming—killed those living creatures just for the bit of skin or fur that covered their backs!

The world of their origin, now the moon of old Neptune, still continued to send those metal cubes in a steady stream to the moons of Uranus. City after city sprang into existence. They flourished, growing so swiftly that the outskirts of each city soon blended into the outskirts of its neighbors.

The Twelve Confederate Worlds still continued to think of peace. It seemed strange that the inhabitants of those twelve worlds did not realize their danger. They went about in the smug belief that they were invulnerable.

The one thing that most amazed those who studied the strange, two-legged aliens was the speed with which they continued to increase their numbers. In a very short time the four moons of Uranus were too small to hold them. An air of intense activity pervaded the four moons. They commenced building pyramids that were to be at least six miles high. As soon as there were completed the square, metallic cubes made their appearance and were stacked up by thousands near by.

The invaders leapt from the moons of Uranus to the five habitable moons of Saturn, which were members of the Confederation. The inhabitants of those five Confederate Worlds were unprepared. There was a steady whiz as the cubes shot through the air of those five worlds. They came in countless hordes.

Rhea, Dione, and Tethys, the three smallest, were snuffed out in a twinkling. Japetus and Titan put up so savage a front that they were able to hold them off. Each sent its desperate appeal for help throbbing through the ether.

Even though the invaders had many efficient death-dealing weapons and used them ruthlessly, the unprepared inhabitants of Japetus and Titan put up so grim a struggle, fought so fiercely with what they could lay their hands upon, that they were able to stop the forward charges time after time. Still it was plain that those pitiless two-legged invaders held

their most desperate attempts at resistance cheaply—held them in sneering contempt—held even the whole combined power of the Twelve Confederate Worlds in contempt—played with them as a cat would play with a mouse!

The Confederate Worlds awoke to their danger at last. Was it too late? They sought in their museums and in the old archives of their early histories for plans of death-dealing devices that their own ancient, blood-thirsty ancestors had used. They discarded their foolish dreams of peace and selected the ideas for the most terrible weapons that they could find; and they began to manufacture these with lightning rapidity. Meanwhile, the inhabitants were conscripted, and the use of the weapons explained to them; and they were soon ready to be sent out against the invaders. The Twelve Confederate Worlds did not make the terrible mistake of underrating their antagonists.

A GREAT force of invaders had surrounded Eelee, one of the largest cities on Titan, and were slowly forcing the weary defenders back. The invaders fought with swift, death-dealing weapons, while the defenders had only sticks and stones to oppose them. Was it any wonder that the dispirited inhabitants of Titan were being forced back on every hand?

The city of Eelee was full of weary, trembling fugitives who had fled before the invaders from the surrounding open country. The morale of the defenders was breaking. Time after time they tried to fight through the slowly tightening ring of those terrible two-legged invaders. The defenders were slaughtered in their thousands. They were driven back from every nook and cranny until they met in the center of their city. This could hardly be called their last stand: they were merely waiting their turn to be butchered. In one solid, compact mass they cowered in the public square in the center of the city. The only protection at their backs was a solidly built public building, Eelee's central station for wireless transmission of matter. Would help never come?

There came a shout of encouragement from the main wide entrance to the wireless transmission of matter building, and a solid line, some thirty deep, of fully armed Jovians from the four Confederate Worlds of Jupiter leapt out to attack. A wide avenue was immediately opened in the tightly packed mass of Eelee's cowering populace, and the Jovians leapt through and spread out fanwise in front of the defenseless inhabitants.

Each of the Jovians in the front lines carried on his back a small tank that sprayed out a hundred feet in advance a chemical, which ignited everything it touched and burnt with a hot, livid flame. Those behind them carried stubby metal tubes, which would bark with short, thunderous reports, and which left ruin and death in the ranks of the invaders.

Help had come in the blackest moment. Similar scenes were taking place in all of the larger cities on Titan.

Back, back they drove the invaders. The Twelve Confederate Worlds (now there were only nine, and two of those threatened with momentary extinction) hurled their conscripted forces across the void so swiftly and in such numbers that the invaders were startled. Reluctant to give ground that they had previously gained, the two-legged warriors contested desperately each inch of their retreat. From every direction they were met by the defenders, who were armed with weapons as good as their own.

Could these be the despised, peace-loving inhabitants of the solar system whom they had meant to destroy so as to have undisputed possession of the entire system? They could hardly believe

it, for the once peaceful Jovians fought with a ferocity that was terrible.

Whenever the invaders stopped and tried to stand their ground, the defenders swarmed up; the chemicals sprayed fire upon the two-legged invaders; and those in the lines behind the first came with their short metal tubes that roared with thunder and wrought havoc in the ranks of the invaders. The Jovians forced them back, always back, and began to surround the isolated detachments of the invaders and destroy them. Not till they had wiped them completely from Titan did they turn their attention toward the beleaguered inhabitants of Japetus.

The inhabitants of Japetus were still fighting desperately when the Jovians came. Following close on the heels of the Jovians came the first detachment from No. 5. There was also a steady influx of invaders. A desperate battle raged for possession of Japetus. Reinforcements were pouring in on both sides.

The invaders, who had successfully destroyed the inhabitants and buildings on Rhea, Dione, and Tethys, now turned again toward Titan. Once more the invaders stormed Titan. They did not drop down upon defenseless inhabitants this time. They were met and repulsed by a strong force of beauty-loving inhabitants from No. 5. Those beauty-loving beings from No. 5, despite their esthetic-ism, fought with an incredible fury in defense of the union of the twelve worlds.

When the news of the first setback reached the invaders, from the four moons of Uranus and from their densely packed parent world steady streams of cubes shot out toward the Twelve Confederate Worlds. They were bringing new and better weapons to combat those of the Confederacy. They were coming at incalculable speed, using their own secret means of propelling the cubes, besides the additional attraction that the sun's gravitational force exerted upon them. But though the invaders could send their forces swiftly, the Twelve Confederate Worlds could transport their defenders ten times more quickly.

Prior to the invasion, the passenger service from world to world had always been subordinate to the commercial traffic of the wireless transmission of matter system of transportation that interlaced the twelve worlds. But with a few slight modifications the whole system of transportation was made available for passenger service. The Twelve Confederate Worlds were now able to hurl their defenders from world to world at the speed of light.

In a steady line the defenders would march into a station for wireless transmission of matter, enter the automatic transmission chamber and there receive the preliminary charge of specific high-frequency current that would cause temporarily suspended animation; then they would automatically be carried to separate vibrating chambers of high intensity, which would cause the electrons that composed the bodies to be impinged upon the sending apparatus in the compartment; a few minutes later, the process reversed, they would be ready to leave the receiving station at their destination. After the experience of leaping millions of miles at the speed of light they would be none the worse except for a slight touch of nausea.

Now the invaders came in countless swarms. The number of cubes that had attacked the five moons of Saturn was as nothing compared to the flood of cubes that whipped past the orbit of Saturn and headed for Jupiter's moons. The remnant of invaders who were still attacking Japetus shot out to

join the main body of invaders as they flashed past the moons of Saturn.

A detachment of cubes, about fifty thousand in number, leapt ahead of the main force of invaders and attacked the moons of Jupiter. The Confederacy hurled its forces there to repulse them. But it was only a feint on the part of the invaders, for their real objective was lone No. 5. They had been taught a lesson on Titan and Japetus. No longer did they hold the fighting qualities of the Confederacy in contempt.

They did not leap down upon the surface of No. 5 as they did upon the five moons of Saturn; instead, thousands of cubes filled with high explosives and noxious gases were directed toward No. 5's surface. After that, the terrible, two-legged invaders landed and killed off all that were left of the half-gassed inhabitants. They also destroyed all the stations for wireless transmission of matter.

The invaders made No. 5 their headquarters. Cubes were pouring in from every direction. It seemed that they were abandoning their own world that circled old dying Neptune. The four moons of Uranus were also being deserted by the two-legged invaders. They were massing for one supreme attack. No. 5 would be the center from which they intended to sally forth.

The inhabitants of the Twelve Confederate Worlds realized it. Thousands of the defenders offered their lives, offered to steer large interstellar vehicles loaded to the limit with high explosives to No. 5. But those in supreme command demurred, for the Scientific Society had just perfected a new, terrible weapon. This was manufactured with all possible speed and sent to the eight remaining worlds of the Confederacy. Hope flamed anew throughout the eight sorely tried worlds.

The invaders did not delay an instant. They had experienced only two setbacks. So far they had the best of it. They sent a stream of cubes filled with explosives and gases toward Callisto, the outer moon of Jupiter, and destroyed all life on it. At the same time they sent a mighty force to Mars.

The Martians had been preparing a fleet of swift interstellar vehicles and were prepared to offer stubborn resistance. As the invaders neared Mars, the Martians left the surface of their world and went out to meet them in the empty void. The two forces met, and from the start the Martians were outclassed. They were slowly forced back to the surface of their own world, for the cubes were superior in every way to the Martian craft.

From the six remaining Confederate Worlds, jets of intense light leapt toward No. 5. This playing of light on the invaders seemed so weak and ineffectual! It was the new weapon. The light at times appeared to be of delicate purple. It would grow until it was a bright purple, then fade into invisibility. It seemed the weapon of a child, and yet whatever it touched was destroyed.

The invaders shot their cubes out in every direction, but were picked off by the jets of all-destroying light. Whenever two jets of light touched a cube, there was a short explosion; that was all. The purple from the twin jets would fade, and the results that followed were the same as if the terminals of powerful electric currents had short-circuited there. The jets of light were merely carriers for an electric current that was capable of vaporizing any substance that came between any two jets.

The jets of light from the six worlds had now reached No. 5, and were destroying everything upon the surface. The invaders came to the bitter realization that this was the beginning of their

end. They had waited too long. They should have attacked the Twelve Confederate Worlds on the day of their arrival. They tried to leave No. 5 by the cubes, but the twin jets of light easily picked them off.

The Confederation turned its attention to Mars. It sent its forces down upon Mars as the rain comes down in a cloudburst. The invaders were cut off absolutely from all reinforcements from their own kind on No. 5. Knowing that they were doomed, they maneuvered their cubes to form a protecting wall between them and their foes. The defenders became the aggressors. They began storming the barricade. The invaders were bunched together behind the cubes, waiting.

A LOW hum came from behind the cubes. It rose and rose. It came from the throats of the two-legged invaders. The sound was not displeasing. It gathered volume every instant. Though it was not very melodious at first, still it teemed with pathos. One by one the invaders joined in the song. It hinted of a mighty, daring attempt and of a bitter failure. It was their death song.

Meanwhile the invaders on No. 5 who had, through their great knowledge of stellar mechanics, guided their own world from out of the depths of space, were now working desperately in their attempt to install machines that would enable them to swing No. 5 out of its orbit. They had failed in their attempt to conquer the Confederation, and their only wish was to take No. 5 from out of the solar system and escape.

They were installing the machines underground. They threw up shield after shield to protect themselves from the death-dealing rays. Two out of every five machines that they installed were destroyed by the twin jets of light.

The number of invaders left on No. 5 was very small. In desperation they started the machines. The speed of No. 5 began to increase, and she was rotating faster, too. Something had gone amiss. The jets of light, in destroying nearly half of their machinery, had upset their calculations. The two-legged invaders on No. 5 were seen to run wildly about. They tried to stop the machinery that they had started, but somehow could not do so.

The rotation of No. 5 became still swifter. Hundreds of thousands of cubes were hurled into the heavens by the centrifugal force of that rotating world. The Confederacy picked off as many as it could with the crossing jets of light, but some managed to escape and were seen heading for Neptune No. 5 was breaking up! The centrifugal force had become greater than its power of gravitation. Huge masses were seen to detach themselves and go whirling off into space.

Saturn, the largest body in the vicinity, was seen to draw fully one-third of the matter that had composed No. 5 in its general direction. The powerful gravitational force of the Sun drew many large pieces, some of which were more than eight hundred miles in diameter, toward himself. The Moon, circling the Earth, came from behind its protection and bore the brunt of a stream of small pieces that struck its surface. Life there was instantly destroyed. The surface of the Moon became partially incandescent. Parts of the Earth, thanks to the Moon, escaped practically uninjured. But there was only a wild kind of life existing there. Jupiter received its share. Two large fragments went hurtling toward Mars.

In destroying No. 5 the invaders had destroyed themselves and nearly all the life in the solar system. The survivors of

the Twelve Confederate Worlds made their way to the Earth, the least injured of the planets, and there they began anew, in a strange environment, to build the civilization that had been wrecked by the invaders from beyond the Milky Way.

In November Only

By MARION DOYLE

Ghosts do not walk the earth in carefree April—
Never believe your eyes if they tell you so:
Those shadowy shapes half hid in feathery hedges
Are only wild-plum cowled with blossomy snow.
Nor where the sensual body of the earth
Lies with her lover in each emerald glade,
For anyone knows that the ecstasy of summer
Would break into bits the brittle heart of a shade.
In winter they cannot rise; they lie in durance,
Bound by the great White Beast with chains of sleet:
The spectral visions you see of a winter midnight
Are only whirlwinds of snow in the silent street.

But when November comes, and the wild geese flying
Above the iron fountains of the trees,
Over the last bloom in the garden dying,
Fling down their call, the dead stir in unease—
Strain at their bonds grown pliant with year's rust,
Arise; shake off the gray sepulchral dust;
Repeat the well-remembered *Sesame*
And walk the ways of men; rebellious, free.

For there is something fey about November:
The arras hung between the quick and the dead
Grows thinner and more fragile than the leaf
A sentient wind whirls lightly overhead.

SOMETIMES a story is published in WEIRD TALES so unusual, so striking, that it remains in one's memory for years after its publication. Such a story was *Shambleau* by C. L. Moore; such was *The Woman of the Wood* by A. Merritt; and such was *The Outsider* by the late H. P. Lovecraft. In our January issue we printed another story that promises to equal the popularity of the stories just mentioned. It is *Roads,* by Seabury Quinn, which combined excellent writing with a strange plot involving the Crucifixion and Santa Claus; surely an incongruous mixture, yet the tale was reverently told and held the reader in a spell of fascination until the story was concluded. It is now six months since the issue containing that story went on sale; yet letters are still pouring in to this office—letters of enthusiastic praise, and a very few that contain brickbats. Not since *Shambleau's* publication has a story in WEIRD TALES had so much popularity.

Best Issue

C. H. Chandler writes from Wooster, Ohio: "The June issue of WEIRD TALES was one of the best, perhaps the very best, issues which you have put out—certainly the best since I began this subscription. The main reason for its excellence, I believe, was the fact that it was all good, genuine 'weird' stuff—the material which *belongs* in your magazine—and the percentage of trash was creditably low. Top honors in a top-notch collection go to Henry Kuttner's *Thunder in the Dawn.* It is a great story, one which future readers will place among the classics of Lovecraft, Howard, and Weinbaum, and which will be referred to in future letters to the Eyrie with the nostalgia that attends the mention of such classics. It is rich in sheer fantasy, but at the same time it is full of vivid action, and clear and virile writing. As a story it belongs on the highest plane—rates A+ or whatever it is—in all respects. You scored again with Lovecraft's *The Doom that Came to Sarnath.* Its leisurely tempo and archaic style gave it an atmosphere that rendered its horror living and convincing. And I'm looking forward to the next installment of *The Black Drama.* Author Field did a good job with *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance;* but werewolf stories are nevertheless a drug on the market. Here is something new, and something which promises to give the writer a real chance to make a story. Bloch abandoned his wonted verbosity in *Slave of the Flames* and, in my opinion, really achieved something. I enjoy good word-pictures, but when it gets 'thick,' then there is no pleasure left in them. The remaining stories were good, too—more than mere filler. You have an opportunity to print some real little gems among those shorter stories."

The Girl on the Cover

Eleanor Braley writes from Kennebunk, Maine: "The lovely, lovely girl on the June cover has such big eyes, but I liked the idea of some clothes, because when they are in the state of nature, the covers remind me of some of those nasty sexy magazines that only that kind of people are apt to buy. It goes without saying that WT isn't cheap literature."

Praise for Smith

Claire Beck writes from Lakeport, California: "I'm drawn to send you a few comments. First I must praise Clark Ashton Smith for his poem *Outlanders*—this magnificently constructed piece displays the whole atmosphere and meaning of fantasy in a few lines. Such a work as this could come

only from the secluded chamber in the halls of fantasy where dwells Clark Ashton Smith. In printing Mr. Smith's poetry, I feel that you're presenting some of the finest things time will ever know. And in his fiction I think we see at first-hand the outstanding prose composition being done in America today. All credit to Finlay for his praiseworthy frontispieces. The best of the group, I believe, is that which illustrates *La Belle Dame Sans Merci.* It is one of the loveliest and weirdest things I have seen."

The June Issue Pleases Her

Caroline Ferber writes from Chicago: "Eando Binder pleased me again with *From the Beginning.* I rather felt sorry for poor Tumilten. Not much to say about the tale—it left me rather speechless, but it's certainly worth reading again — I feel that perhaps I've missed something and must reread to absorb it more fully. From what one of the readers mentioned in an early issue, this Gans T. Field is an interesting person and I feel, too, that his tales are too absorbing for mere expression. His Judge Pursuivant is quite a character—likable, yet surprizing in his knowledge of the occult. *The Black Drama* begins good. Now don't let this Varduk turn out to be a buggy actor who escaped from an upstate sanitarium. Have him be the dead Lord Byron himself—huh? Vell, vell, vell, vell, vell! Bob Bloch puts a new light on fires. This pyromaniac must have lived in a strange world to be a *Slave of the Flames.* There is beauty in dancing flames, but the beauty ceases when they grow too large and become destructive. Quite unusual and most engrossing. Ah—once more we go through thrills, adventure, excitement, magic—a glorious combination with a roaring warrior and a brave lassie. *Thunder in the Dawn* was relished from start to finish. Thanx, H. K. Am glad to see you bring us Elak again in the next issue. Fine! Strange, questioning this *Doom that Came to Sarnath.* Who but HPL could write it so? How wonderful is the thought that this world is but a plaything or experiment for scientists to whom we are but microscopic particles. Leslie Stone writes a most possible thesis on the subject, in *Death Dallies Awhile.* Bring on your Nathaniel Hawthorne—I've no objection to him. Besides, I've found it a good argument in discussing WT with scoffers to state that we reprint tales from Poe and Hawthorne and who you wish of the oletimers. Was much delited to note that some of the Eyrie roosters enjoy Nictzin Dyalhis. Seems to me he doesn't write as often or get as much of a showing as he should. Let's have more of this person with the fascinating name. Let me stop for a moment to frown at James O'Regan's complaint about *The Hairy Ones Shall Dance.* You may not be as quick to jump at conclusions, but when I read the lines mentioning the professor's powerful wrists, a flash came to my mind that here was the guilty person, if any. So you see, it's not always the kind ole gent on the corner. This prof was altogether too subtle and I felt uneasy with him around for the greater part of the story. Thanx to Cliff Ball for fighting back at H. Sivia. Too many readers are much too technical about minor details."

Bundle of Chills

Robert A. Graham writes from Beverly Hills, California: "I wish to take time out from my work and write my first letter of likes and dislikes of that bundle of utter chills in the shape of WEIRD TALES magazine. I quite agree that H. P. Lovecraft and Howard were your best pens. However, this man who lives near myself (whom I do not know) that sends along an utter terror once in a while, Henry Kuttner, really has something there, I think. Speaking of the covers: I would rather see more weird covers than so much of the nude — nudity seems to take away the weird effect and leave pure sex; however, a nude in the dim background would perhaps keep the chilling effect of the magazine. I don't see how a person can get horror effects from looking at a beautiful nude—and this Virgil Finlay, as well as Mrs. Brundage's drawings, really puts on a show when it comes to this."

Quinn Heads the List

William F. Zuckert, Jr., writes from Washington, D. C.: "Just a few lines in praise of the May issue, which I believe should take its place among the best you've given us. Quinn's *Goetterdaemmerung* should head the list, in my humble estimation. That gentleman is really hitting his stride now, following that gem, *Roads,* with his present yarn. Personally, I'm anxiously looking forward to the next de Grandin tale; I have a hunch it will ring the bell. It will be diffi-

cult to try to pick the best from among the other stories; they are all swell. However, I did get some genuine shivers from *Pigeons from Hell.* It was a bit gory perhaps, but it had the stuff. *The Isle of the Sleeper* was grand, having that poignant dream quality well woven through it. This story will remain with me for a long time. I prefer the short story to the serial, but *Thunder in the Dawn* has given me the old 'narrative hook.' Chances are that I will like it in spite of myself."

Slave of the Flames

Violet Nelson writes from Kenmare, North Dakota: "Hurrah for Robert Bloch! He's done it at last! I *knew* he would. He's ceased to copy Lovecraft and is starting to be himself! *Slave of the Flames* is *wonderful.* Keep it up, Robert. You're going to be a master. I haven't read all my June copy of WT yet, but just couldn't hold in about Bloch's story."

Lovecraft

Paul S. Smith writes from Orange, New Jersey: "I was greatly pleased with Lovecraft's story, *The Doom that Came to Sarnath,* which appeared in the June issue. It is so beautifully written that it seems like a poem in prose. Would that the author was still with us! I find it very difficult if not impossible to believe that there will ever be another Lovecraft; but if William Lumley can maintain the high level of excellence he has shown in *The Diary of Alonzo Typer,* I think he will at least prove to be a worthy successor to the late master. This story and *The Horror in the Museum* by Hazel Heald are, I think, the most Lovecraft-like productions you have published. Another story which has always stood out vividly in my mind since its publication some time ago is *The Three Marked Pennies.* For ingenuity of plot I don't think you have ever published anything which has surpassed this. Even our beloved O. Henry—a king among plot constructors—would, I am sure, have been nothing less than proud of this particular plot if it had been one of his own conceptions."

Best of Its Kind

Howard B. MacDonald writes from Yonkers, New York: "In the latest copy of WEIRD TALES you invite your readers to tell you what they think of the magazine. I have been reading WEIRD TALES regularly now for five years; so here goes: In general, I think it is splendid—far and away the best magazine of its type. I spend a great many hours a day in study, and do not care much for the usual run of fiction; but I do enjoy immensely a good weird story, every now and then. I am particularly fond of tales of witches, zombies, werewolves, primitive magic, voodoo, reincarnation, outré adventures, and 'grisly horrors.' I do not care quite so much for interplanetary yarns (most of them seem essentially similar) or too much pseudo-science fiction; although, occasionally, such a story has a unique twist and plenty of human interest. I like mysterious maidens who are witches; descriptions of strange rites, anything dealing with the supernatural, and perhaps above all, time-travel stories, when they are 'logically' worked out and present authentic bits of history or sociology as their backgrounds. I also like pure fantasies, once in a while, such as the stories you have about flowers and trees and living winds, etc. . . . I believe that in general Seabury Quinn is the most consistently good author you have today. Obviously he is a man of considerable culture and literary background; and he uses this knowledge very well in his stories. His literary style is smooth and pleasant to read; while some of his descriptive passages are excellent, and his characters well drawn. I think his *Globe of Memories* is one of the finest weird tales ever written. I am pleased to find so many of his stories in your magazine. I always enjoy the Jules de Grandin ones particularly."

The Deep South

Dale H. Exum writes from Nimrod, Texas: "The May issue of WT contains, I am convinced, the weirdest stories I ever read. *Thunder in the Dawn* is a mighty, wonderful tale. *Pigeons from Hell* did not quite reach Howard's usual height of excellence in my estimation, however. I often wonder why more stories of the Deep South do not appear in WT. The South is steeped three deep in tradition and superstitions that should make her the lover of the weird's paradise. Won't some of you writers lay off the New England witches and warlocks and let us hear more about this black side of the sunny South? . . . *The Secret in the Vault* had a rather Poeish taste, don't you folks think? It had a good atmosphere but sort of

left me flat—the way it ended. Speaking of Poe, may I ask why space is being wasted in the Eyrie discussing an author who's off somewhere fooling around in the Great Beyond? It's generally realized that Poe had both good and bad points, with the good outweighing the bad, at least in his writings. Poe can't smell any of these bouquets you folks are handing him, nor do the rotten eggs hurled at him stain his cloak of fame in the slightest. What say we drop it there and discuss our living authors, whom sincere constructive criticism may help to understand our tastes? I think most of them do great just as they're doing. Let's keep the Eyrie strictly a place in which to discuss our magazine. Right?"

Howard Reprints

Bernard E. Schiffmann writes from Laurelton, Long Island: "For ten years or more I have been a constant reader of your magazine, most of the copies of which I have in my collection. Naturally I have enjoyed and have had many pleasant hours of reading over the course of years. Lately however, I have been a bit dissatisfied with the type of stories in your Weird Story Reprint each month. Let the classics remain classics and don't reprint them in your magazine. Nathaniel Hawthorne might have been tops in his day, but fortunately that day is past. However, a plea, nay actually a prayer for a Conan reprint or at least one of the late Robert E. Howard's stories."

Two Brickbats

Bryce M. Walton writes from Twin Falls, Idaho: "A thousand congratulations on publishing Seabury Quinn's richly and magically composed *Goetterdaemmerung,* the death of the Gods! *Goetterdaemmerung* is a pulsating, unforgettable example of what Mr. Quinn can do in the regions of great prose if he forsakes Jules de Grandin and lets his own inexhaustible imagination, magic poetic narrative, and inimitable style, run rampant. I sincerely adjudge it to be Quinn's greatest yarn to date, and a monument and tribute to WEIRD TALES, the unique magazine, which in this case certainly published a bizarre tale indeed. . . . I could take up the entire Eyrie talking about *Goetterdaemmerung* and *Roads* and *The Temple Dancer,* named in the order of their excellence, but I have two brickbats to hurl at that May issue: There was an appalling absence of two characteristics of WEIRD TALES that are very dear to me: the lack of verse, and the absence of those intriguing 'short shorts' that, as Earl Peirce, Jr. said, . . . 'are not fillers but fillings.' The poetry and those ultra-short stories always leave an unforgettable impression with me that the longer prose fails to provide. And while still on the subject of 'short shorts': how about some more from Rex Earnest, who gave us *The Inn?* I haven't really quite recovered yet from the dire effects of its shadowed atmosphere. However, I'll add this ultimatum: if anything equal to the immortal *Goetterdaemmerung* could be published every month, everything else entirely could be dropped from the pages of WEIRD TALES, and the local news stand would still receive my two-bits regularly—and that's the truth!"

Edgar Allan Poe

Seymour Kapetansky writes from Detroit, Michigan: "This is in reply to J. Mackay Tait, who in the March Eyrie disparaged the name and work of Edgar Poe. I don't claim to be an authority on Poe but as I am writing a 16,000-word paper on Poe and his work for a college English class I do think I'm in a position to dispel Mr. Tait's misconception that Poe's work is a product of 'a diseased mind,' that his stories are 'literary lunacy.' If Poe's horror stories suggest mental caveins, that is a tribute to his genius. But no diseased mind could have turned out the remarkable and vivid poetry, the logical criticism, the careful reviews, the stabbing observations of the marginalia, and the thought-provoking essay on the universe, *Eureka,* that Poe managed to write in his abbreviated lifetime. Mr. Tait writes that 'there is never any situation . . . in which all hope and humor are entirely absent.' Has Mr. Tait ever had a *nightmare?* Poe was poverty-stricken and all his life had to worry about bread and butter; he had an ailing wife—he had feuds with petty *literati* and he had feuds with Longfellow. His troubles led him to drink and to drugs, like other literary iconoclasts and Richard Wagner. It is not admitted by the best authorities that Poe was mentally like an unworked jigsaw puzzle. Poe's mind was not a lost one nor did it even stray. Prejudiced and half-truthed attacks on America's greatest literary genius are out of order."

Superb Covers

Wallie Darker, Jr. writes from Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: "Although I haven't been a reader of WT for very long, because they have just recently started to come out in Australia, I feel I must tell you what I think of your magazine. I first started to read it in this way: I saw the April 1937 cover by Virgil Finlay, and became compelled to buy it, and I was surprized to find it did not contain the pulp found in other magazines. I ordered my copy for each following month, and managed to dig up all 1937 magazines and December '36, as well, and all I can say is that they all are excellent. As for the covers, I can't express my gratitude for them. They are superb. I was overjoyed to find in the December 1937 WT (that is the latest here) that Virgil Finlay was to have a page in each month. It's something to wait for. I think the best author is Earl Peirce, Jr. . . . I could rave for hours about other things in your magazine but I have other things to ask. Could it be possible to get the addresses of some of the authors, so as to write to them? I'd get a great kick out of it." [In common with other magazines, WEIRD TALES has an inflexible rule against giving out the names of its authors without their consent. However, any letters addressed to the authors in care of WEIRD TALES will be promptly forwarded to them.—THE EDITOR.]

Against Logical Explanations

Jorge Thuillier writes from Havana: "*Suicide Chapel* is a good story, but I do not think it fits in WT. It would look better in a detective or 'horror' magazine, with all its careful descriptions of splintered bones protruding through the skin, and its very common plot of girl-stealing gorillas. We readers of WEIRD TALES do not usually care for stories with 'logical' explanations. We like better to meet ghosts, vampires, ghouls, and strange creatures that are able to disappear in a mist. Mr. Quinn has everything to write such stories: style, imagination, and two wonderful characters, Jules de Grandin and Doctor Trowbridge. Let us see them facing supernatural enemies, and not gorilla trainers. I am expecting from Quinn something like *Roads,* the loveliest story ever published."

NEXT MONTH

As 'Twas Told To Me

By SEABURY QUINN

HERE is a fascinating tale of romance and witchcraft in Puritan New England, and the appalling fate of a lovely red-haired girl in that superstitious age.

THOSE were narrow, ugly times, when men and women were doomed by mere suspicion, and haled forth to the gibbet on perjured testimony; when smug, self-righteous men actually believed they were furthering the cause of God by not suffering a witch to live. Mr. Quinn has built an intriguing novelette upon the witch-persecutions of that time, which will engross your interest from the first word to the last. It will be published complete

in the
September
issue of

WEIRD TALES

on sale August 1st

Concise Comments

John W. Eyles writes from Sydney, Australia: "*Roads,* by Seabury Quinn, is definitely *not* a weird tale. But it *is* one of the most beautiful things that I have ever read. So, I'm glad that you printed it."

L. A. Taylor writes from Asbury Park, New Jersey: "May I say that I only wish the magazine could be issued every week? I prefer it to every other I get. I read a good many, but they all wait unopened when I get WEIRD TALES."

Richard Conrad Nicholas writes from New York City: "Let's have more stories like *Incense of Abomination, Roads, Pigeons from Hell,* stories of the supernatural, ghosts, werewolves, devils, and that sort. Keep out robots, planetary and time travel; they belong in science-fiction periodicals."

F. G. Cox writes from Laurel, Mississippi: "I have just finished this month's issue of WEIRD TALES and will say your publication is holding its own remarkably well in face of the stunning loss of several of your most brilliant authors. My orchids this month go to A. W. Calder for *Song of Death.*"

Christopher W. Martens writes from Beechhurst, Long Island, New York: "Being something of an artist, I can appreciate Virgil Finlay's drawings and illustrations. His darks and lights blended together are *knockouts* and worthy of outstanding praise. He has the ability of making one feel terror as well as see it. What he could do with one of Mr. Poe's stories is nobody's business."

Apology

Because of an unforeseen accident, the pictures for this issue did not reach us in time to be used. Sorry!

Most Popular Stories

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? If you have any comments to make, please address them to The Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago. As this issue goes to press, two stories are in an exact tie for favorite in the June issue, as shown by your letters and votes. These are *From the Beginning* by Eando Binder, and *Slave of the Flames* by Robert Bloch.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE AUGUST WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1) ----------	----------
(2) ----------	----------
(3) ----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

(1) ----------	Why? ----------
(2) ----------	----------

Address coupon to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Reader's name and address:

W. T.—8

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE tiger was sinking into a crouch, his wicked old eyes blazing with hunger and fear, strikingly like the expression of an old roué whose wife holds the purse-strings, when he sights a lovely young thing in petticoats. He knew he was violating a beastly taboo; had known it every time he struck down a human being. But necessity knows no law; the hunger of a starving tiger is as important to the tiger as the hunger which impels a striker to break a scab's head is to the striker. And like all forbidden fruit, human flesh produced a strange delirium of ecstasy, setting up wild vibrations in the shadowy thing that is a tiger's soul.

Her screams roused him to madness. His tail lashed the grasses, his stringy old muscles coiled; then, just as Bernice threw up her hands to shut out the sight of doom, she caught a flash of color out of the corner of her eye. That sense which is politely called the feminine instinct told her it was a male human even before she got a good look at him.

The quick, harried glance showed her it was a tall man, apparently a native, clad in whites and a turban. Her heart sank as she saw he was apparently unarmed; though it must be admitted that this emotion was prompted by the fear that he would be unable to rescue her, rather than by the realization of the peril *he* was stepping into.

But he showed no sign of perturbation. His strong, dark face was tranquil, reflecting neither fear nor passion as he walked toward the crouching brute, which had checked its spring and now snarled up at him, whiskers quivering with outraged resentment. The man folded his arms, almost wearily, and stood looking down at the brute. And then a strange thing happened. Bernice felt a distinct vibration in the air, almost like a faint electric shock. The man had drawn no weapon. He had made no hostile move, but she saw a change steal into the great shining eyes of the crouching tiger. They glowed weirdly, then flared wide with the shadow of fear. And with a rustle of the tall grass, the beast was gone, sudden and silent as a shadow itself. . . .

This is a strange weird tale of India that you will not want to miss. Robert E. Howard's part in the story is the last fiction that flowed from his inspired pen before his untimely death. It will be printed complete in next month's WEIRD TALES:

A THUNDER OF TRUMPETS

By Robert E. Howard and Frank Thurston Torbett

——Also——

THE MAGIC MIRROR

By ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

Of all the schemes to beat the bank at Monte Carlo, the method used by this stranger from Tibet was the most fantastic—and the most practical.

AS 'TWAS TOLD TO ME

By SEABURY QUINN

A tale of romance and witchcraft in Puritan New England, and the fate of a lovely red-haired girl in that superstitious age.

THE MANDARIN'S CANARIES

By ROBERT BLOCH

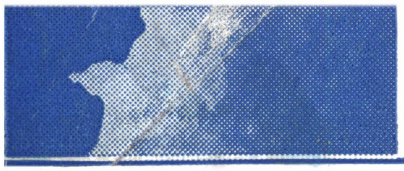
A grim and fascinating tale of a torture-mad Chinese ruler who fed strange food to his feathered songsters in his garden of horror.

THE WHITE RAT

By EARL PEIRCE, JR., *and* BRUCE BRYAN

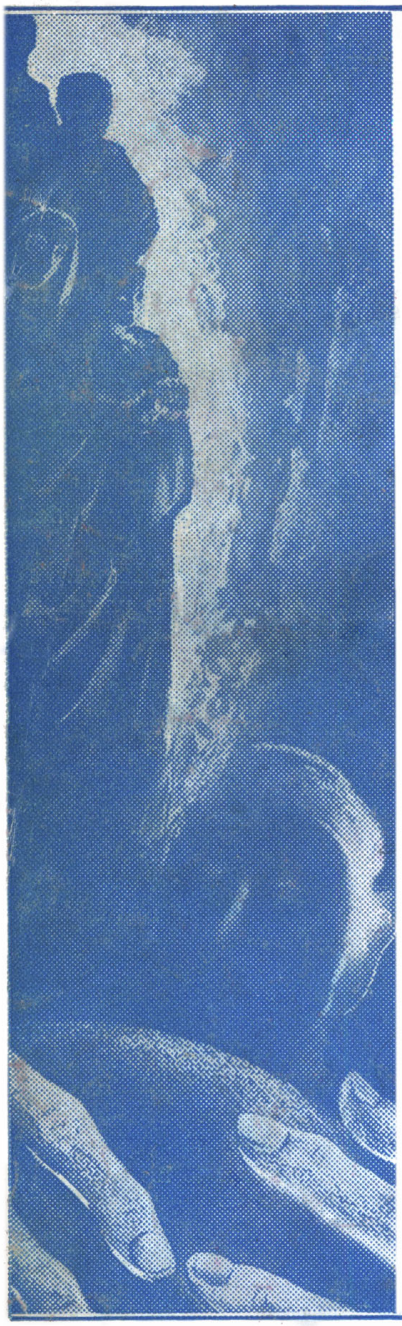
An eery tale of strange surgery, and a weird monstrosity that was created by the daring attempt of an imaginative surgeon to modify nature's laws of heredity.

September Issue Weird Tales - - Out August 1



Have You Had These

Strange Experiences



WHO has not experienced that inexplicable phenomenon of sensing an unseen presence? Who has not suddenly realized that he has been listening to a conversation within himself—an eloquent appeal to self from some intangible intelligence? Who has not had that tenseness, that sensation of a suppressed excitement, as though some power were seeking to manifest through him? Too long have the restrictions of orthodoxy and the ridicule of unenlightened persons kept these common-place occurrences shrouded in secrecy. Millions now admit the existence of *an intimate persuasive power* . . . but centuries of superstition have caused them to fear it.

Learn what the world's greatest thinkers, artists, poets and geniuses found by accident . . . that the emotional self, the infinite intelligence just beyond the border of your thinking consciousness, is the source of the greatest creative power that the human mind can command. It is the region from which ideas spring, the fountain-head of imagination and forethought.

Accept this FREE Sealed Book

You cannot better your place in life by thinking only in terms of what you have read or heard. Only by the intelligent direction of your inner faculties will you receive that needed vision and impetus to carry you beyond the plodding routine-enslaved masses. The ancient sages and mystics were NOT day-dreaming in their secluded sanctuaries and temples, but instead they were invoking these natural God-given powers . . . their feats were not miracles, but the results of the same faculties which you possess.

The Rosicrucians, a time-honored fraternity (not a religious organization) devoted to a study of these Cosmic principles and forces, *invite you* to share this knowledge which they have preserved. With it you can *gain the utmost from every conscious hour* of your life. Use the gift coupon below *and secure* without obligation, the fascinating FREE, Sealed Book, which explains further.

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