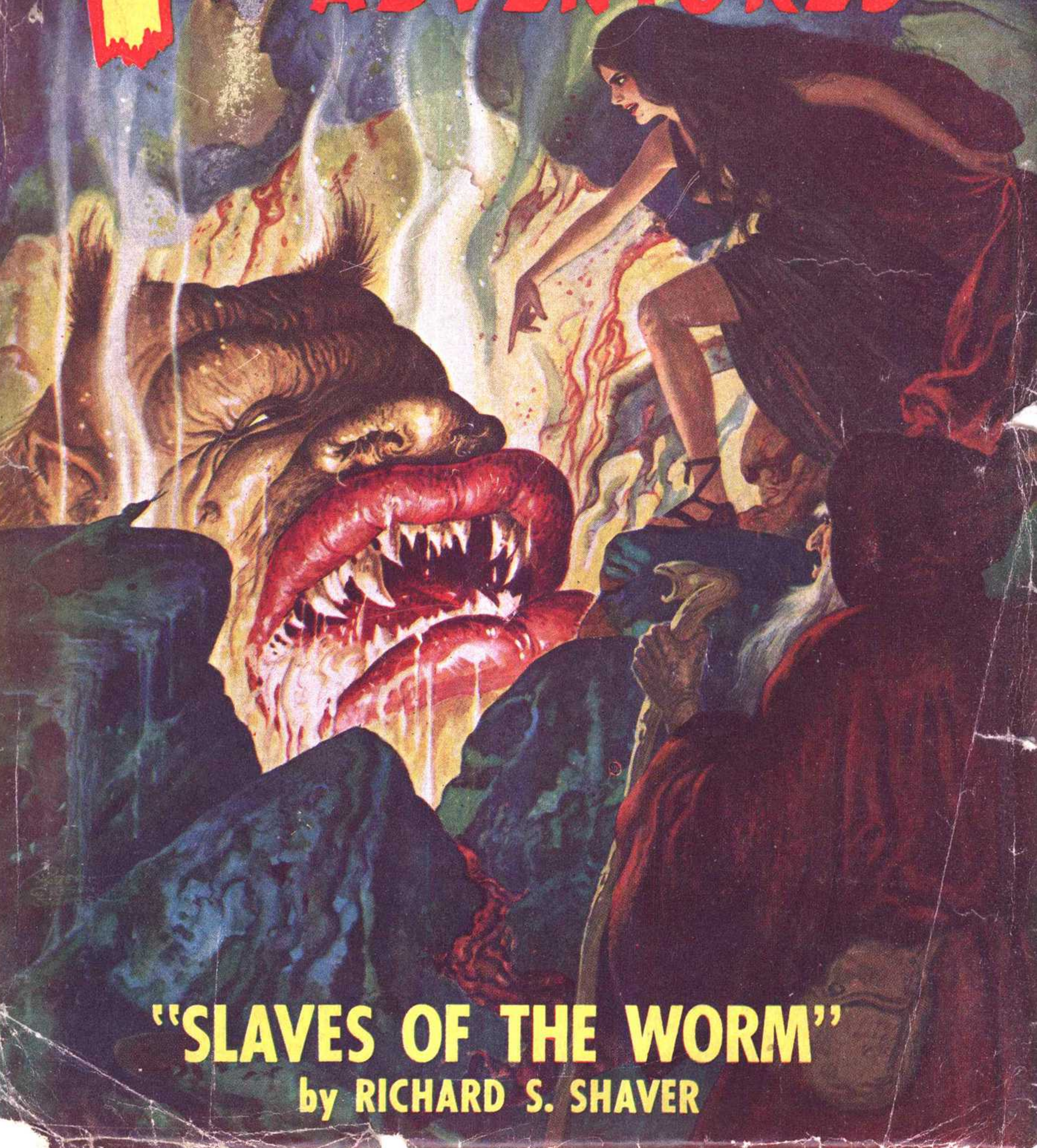


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ADVENTURES



"SLAVES OF THE WORM"

by **RICHARD S. SHAVER**

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The Fellowship of the Black Cross knelt
to the great worm in the abyss. And then they
stole into the caverns in search of slaves...

FOREWORD

TO UNDERSTAND the people and events of this account, you must know first that they are not of the world you are accustomed to regard as familiar to you.

In the caverns below this surface world of ours, there dwell a people unknown except to occasional unfortunate humans.

Now, in these caverns there is a great, a mighty abyss.

From the rims of this abyss the people of the caverns look down through the mist-layered vastnesses. On some days when the fluctuating luminescence they call "light" is strong, and the heavy air is clear, can be seen in the murk of the bottom of the terrible abyss—the Black Cross!

It is the custom of the people of the caverns above the Abyss to bow down, then, when the Cross is seen, to pray, to offer pitiful gifts to the depths below, and to the terror of the fearful Thing the Cross represents.

That Thing is supposed to dwell in the abyss. And it is true that terrible and unknown and powerful forms of intelligent life do dwell in the abyss, and are greater in some ways than the race of man.

Certain members of these benighted people of the hidden caverns above the abyss pretend to have the favor of the terrible Being who is not seen, and these people wear upon their breast a large black Cross of stone. That Cross is not like our Cross, being with arms of equal length, and about the arms entwined the terrible form of the Worm of the Abyss.

These wearers of the Cross are a formidable organization.

There are other strange customs among these people. For they are not as we know men to be. They are four-

limbed, and look much as we do; but beneath that familiar facade of fleshly appearance beats a heart that responds wholly to stimuli unearthly and alien to our minds.

There are two poles of intent among them. Between these two poles exist the common people, who suffer and labor and support all the rest.

One pole is a class who have inverted words, meanings and thought so that beauty becomes vile, vile deeds art. Thus virtue is ostracized crime, and repellent outrage, license, spoliation are the law of life that must be obeyed.

The other pole of intent is made up of those most aware of the inverted nature of their life. These are the recreants and rebels against the inverted order.

Thus natural human goodness is the enemy of the Black Cross, the ruling organization.

These rebels are known to all as the White Hearts . . .

"Bow to the Worm, and hit sin's flame;
Life's to the Evil, and War is the game."

(From Ballade of the Black Brethren)

AMONG those new-entered into the evil brotherhood, that brotherhood known as the Fellowship of the Black Cross, was tonight the young and handsome Morro.

In his tight-fitting black clothing, the puffed breeches and shoulder puffs slashed with Witch-crimson, upon his breast the great scarlet symbol of the Worm of the Abyss, he outshone the other men present as the sun the stars.

There was an insatiate eye drawn to Morro. The owner of the insatiate eye turned to one who stood beside her overlooking the revel. His scarlet robes were heavy with embroidered gold, and upon his breast the Worm

of the Abyss was worked out in beads of ebon, with great eyes of emerald. His vulpine head was white with age, his hooked nose thin and his heavy lips drooping with a century of satiety.

"Oh, Father of Evil, who is the vigorous male acolyte?" The owner of the insatiate eye twisted her voluptuous body closer to the aged leader, pointed with her eyes to the stalwart figure overtopping the men about him.

The aged Master drooped his heavy crepe of eyelids in thought, murmured slowly in answer—"One named Morro, of whom I know little, except that he is adept with a blade, knows the art of poison, and is much feared by his enemies. Has applied for full membership in our inner circle, and full benefits. His record gives his request weight, proud Vana. You will see more of him."

"One who will become great among us, eh, Father? 'Tis not too soon to harness him to my will!"

"If you can, Vana. Is not so easy a mark as the ordinary man, I would say."

VANA cast the lure of her white body and lovely face into his mind from far off with her art, and swayed closer to him in the revels.

The white beauty of her limbs moved sultrily behind sheer blood-red silk, traced over with the evil arabesques of the Black Cross credo in flame-gold.

Her finger nails were jet-black, her pink fingers subtly beckoned Morro closer to her; her eyes peering from her mantling midnight tresses like golden cat's eyes from the night. Upon the sable mystery of hair gold-dust evanescenced glitteringly.

Her finger tips touched Morro's swarthy muscled wrist, and Vana's touch sent into his blood the consuming

fire, the vampiric evil entered his body from hers, began there the witch-work which was to leave Morro the servile tool of that which Vana thought was her will.

"Dance with me, Morro," the sultry honey-sweet voice begged him. The fire her touch had lit blazed higher within him at the sound of her voice.

"How is it you know me, Vana the Proud? I am new-come to these halls."

"I inquired of the Master himself. So I know much about you already, as much as anyone . . ."

To Morro's casual, unknowing eye, her white body and lovely chiseled face shone virtuous, desirable as truth. Pliantly young and beautiful as Sin itself, she seemed above the creeping horror that devoured every weakling thing and left her still triumphant and alive.

But of all insatiate devils of the Inner Councils of the Black Cross, Vana was the one most catered to, for she was most high in power, above even the Master in some respects. In the eyes of the knowing among the awful brotherhood of the Cross, Vana was supreme.

For Vana had made secret alliance with the most feared of the intelligences of the Depths of the Abyss.

Never can mere words tell it, not ever can pictures show you the foul life of the rot pits of the Abyss. The growing, moving slimes, the dreadful thinking worms, the aborted, mutating creatures neither beast nor man nor worm, but something of each.

These creatures were deadly in their lure. It was one of these who had given rise to the legend of the Thing the Black Cross represented, a King of Devils, a God of Evil, a creature wholly lubricious and wholly poisonous to all other life. Man-headed mutant reptilian.

There were great numbers of these

monstrous growths, beings of strange and evil growth and cunning nature, in the depths of the Abyss where the Black Cross reared its immense shape towering miles above the floor. Most of them were deadly to man. Yet the Worm, their Master, was worshipped and served by the people who wore the Black Cross.

THE average dupe of the Black Cross was forbidden to enter the reaches of the cavern where the slime creatures nested.

The source of the Worm's power was its nature. Born to attract prey by projecting images and ideas into the brain, a kind of irresistible lure telepathic, promising effortless ecstasy and toilless support for their life—offering endless debauches without the toll of exhaustion,—offering endless erotic adventure paid for by the bodies of others. There were others among the creatures possessed of this power, but the Worm was the Master.

It was the Worm which had allied Vana to itself, giving into her body some of its blood, so that Vana also possessed this power.

Around these creatures the Priests of the Black Cross had built their Devil-God legend, for few of them were seen or understood fully by any but the priests who sheltered and cared for them.

Thus it was that Morro did not know what it was he embraced when he danced with Vana the proud.

She was but the lure, the most potent bait of the Worm, and she belonged personally to the Worm. Vana it was that he dangled before the eyes of victims. When their reaching hands touched Vana, it was the consuming fire of the Worm's body that stole into them, consuming all their will and leaving only servile flesh. Henceforth their

minds were but units of the Worm's mind, for he could hear those co-infected, and project his images of desire and enticement, and so move his pawns with his bait.

The Worm was the soul of the Abyss, sparking all the gross evil into fantastic apparitions of endless ecstasy, of luxury and satisfying indulgence.

Vana was his most successful tool.

Morro danced thus with an arm of the Worm, and to him she was the ultimate in glorious womanhood, the utter depths of all delight dwelt in her eyes. But in those depths sheltered—the heart of the Worm.

* * *

Now, that same night, at the opposite pole of intent, a similar pattern of joy and revel was being enacted, in many details identical with the revels in the abyss.

For this night was the monthly meeting of the White Hearts, the time when their progress was reviewed, and their plans of ridding themselves of more of the weight of the Black Cross' brotherhood were talked of openly and generally.

Of course, specific plans were spoken in secret and frequent meetings; those who actually executed the assassinations, and not in general meeting. This was a revel, for fun and gayety, to make life livable. For few enough were the reasons in the life of the People of the Caverns to continue with life.

Among these courageous rebels, known to all as the White Hearts, the symbol by which they identified each other, was a girl known as Rouge.

Of beauty, even the kind we know up here, she was well possessed. Her eyes were dark flowers of wonder from the fields of night, her lips were rubies stolen from the Gods by a hero, her skin

was white as a new-born soul. Her flesh was dimpled, soft, and distributed with due accord to equality for all, and injustice for none.

As she walked, her two round knees touched together in a way that made a man's heart turn over and over and nigh stop; and her fair bosom carried a hidden potent mysterious lightning which struck strange terror and utter defeat into all men.

Among those most stricken were two whom this strange lightning had well nigh devoured, left mindless automations with but one thought in their minds, in their bemused brains but one picture—Rouge!

WHICH was a good thing, for the infection from which they suffered came from Mother Earth's ancient will, a device designed to perpetuate her servants. (Such is cavern belief.)

One of these two was named Mornon. His whole life had been a training in destruction, directed toward the end of wiping out the White Hearts. For Mornon was an operative of the Black Cross, insinuated into the secret gatherings of the Hearts by substitution for a man long dead.

The other was a very young Heart named Clan Harn, who had yet to prove his worth. Of slight build, he was fair as a girl, and his lithe body apt to be underestimated in strength. His eyes were blue, an unusual thing in the caverns, and his inexperience was shown in the innocent expression of his lips and round chin.

Mornon was a thick-set man, with a flowing mane of blond hair, bleached to that color as was the custom. His big nose was somewhat reddened by his attempts at being a good fellow in the drink shops. His mouth was apt to sneer inadvertently when he forgot himself, and his dark eyes were a bit too

close together for comfort. But all in all, he was not a bad appearing man if you did not look too closely. He had won the support of Rouge's parents with many gifts and much talk.

Tonight, Rouge is dressed in her finest, and hoping against hope that the man to win her heart will show himself, though she fears it will not be.

About her extremely small waist is a glittering girdle of fine metal mesh. In the girdle are caught up the shining loops of dark yet transparent satin, through which gleams the flesh of her long full thighs and the man-ensorceling hips of her.

Along the swooning white column of her torso, bare above the low, narrow girdle, ran two tapering strips of black gleaming mesh, broadening over her full breasts' lush thrust.

The effect was somehow like the buds of two black gigantic lilies upheld on glistening black stems, sleeping lilies not yet born, and soon to open into mysterious, fecund flowerings.

The wide white rounds of her fine shoulders were shining naked, and a soft floating of black veil from her hair served to carefully silhouette the pure forms of her round arms.

Rouge stands in the doorway of the hall of the White Hearts, outlined by the Darkness of the Caverns, one hand holding up the red-looped velvet curtain as she looks in upon the gathered company of Hearts.

The men of the Hearts were caught upon her eye's glances as fish upon spears, and stood about the room transfixed and helpless.

The mystery and the power of her beauty, not yet come to full growth, but dark and vividly alive, dwelt most in her deep black eyes. But it also lay coiled and waiting in the midnight depths of her Medea's hair.

A magic was on Rouge, and no man

could have done otherwise than did Mornon, who waited for some word to release the spell from his frozen limbs.

FROM her gleaming girdle, and over Rouge's smooth wide rounds of hips, two great feathery fronds of white hung upon the dark sheer transparency of her gown. As she stepped out from the dark doorway into the Company of the Hearts, her hip-sway was accentuated by the two great fronds, and that lightning that was hers alone rippled forth into the eyes of all men there.

Rouge was all woman and female magic, but she was young yet and needed wisdom and unshakable virtue to protect her from the evil of such as Mornon.

The spy watched her progress through the room, speaking now to this one, now to that, and he realized that every man there was wishing or planning or resolving to get her for his own. While every woman was turning over in her mind some method of neutralizing Rouge's magical effect upon the affections of her own man.

* * *

In the abyss, at the opposite pole of intent, proud Vana peacocked her beauty before Morro, the swarthy, stalwart son of Sin, and out of her eyes upon him looked the grasping self-love that was the spirit of the man-headed Worm. Reaching fire from Vana's flesh strove to consume the thing that was Morro, to leave only servile flesh, obedient, useful and worthless to all other things in life.

Morro embraced the deadly infectious lure that was the body of Vana, and through all his clean, self-willed body the spores of insatiate evil grew swiftly and spread from her to him.

He stared entranced into her eyes,

his limbs moved obedient to hers in the dance. Vana knew (or that which seemed to be Vana knew) that this man was hers to use as she willed.

"Know you any of the people of the White Hearts?" asked Vana.

"Some few I know by sight, beautiful one. Why do you ask about those poor creatures?"

"Know you the maiden called Rouge? She is reputed to be even more fascinating than myself."

"I have seen her. She is beautiful, innocent and young. Not more so than yourself; the Lure of Sin, the Carnal Wisdom of all Delight, it is not in her!"

"She is not more attractive, then?"

"You are far more devastating to me," Morro answered, far more truthfully than he knew.

"I should like to look upon her. I hate her, even before I have seen her. I should enjoy destroying her, to lay her upon the Altar of the Worm, to hear her shrieks as the Worm advances, loosing upon her all the images of mind-penetrating ghoul-joy, as his mind enters hers and gives her the rapture of utter degradation, as her self is swallowed by endless corruption, as the pleasure of the worm in sadistic vampiric hunger dissolves her body and soul—as she shrieks and shrieks and the Brotherhood laughs in rapture and wallows in the vast erotic display of phantasmal imagery and mind-penetrating joy from the mind of the Worm."

"I can understand, though I have not participated in the Benefits, as yet."

VANA smiled winningly, her little pointed sharp teeth white on the dark red lips.

"I would like to go to the upper caverns above the Abyss and look upon this paragon. Would you take me, Morro? You must know the way, you have raided there, you have stolen and

killed and poisoned our enemies up there . . . Take me, Morro!"

"Such a face as yours is far too well known to conceal from the hungry eyes of men." Morro had no great wish for the task. To him, Vana was a necessary part of his advancement in the world, he could not seem reluctant, he could not afford her antagonism.

"Well, of course! I shall go as an old hag, and you will be my aged paramour. No one would recognize me then!"

Morro laughed. "No, none could know then who you might be. But there is danger, you know. Some spy among us might tell the Hearts what we planned before we ever took the upward trail." Morro's big teeth glittered in front of Vana's eyes, and the dark enslaved heart of her missed a venomous beat and began to sing a song of elation. This man was one to desire, and Vana always got what she desired, one way or another.

So it was that Morro waited in Vana's luxurious chambers, while she put off the sadistic idiocy from her face, put off her evilly beautiful silken garments, and put on the disguise of a common hard-working old woman.

It was a difficult disguise for one who had never done any work of any kind. But Vana dirtied her hands, smeared upon her face a greying dye which gave an effect of age, and covered the graceful white body with voluminous and dirty black robes.

Up the long steep tunnels out of the Abyss of the Worm struggled Vana and Morro. That is a toilsome journey that takes days, and long hours of rest to relieve the weary limbs. Vana was soon panting for breath, and leaning her weight on Morro's arm.

Half carrying her exhausted body, Morro came at last to the streets of the common people who work in the cav-

erns above the Abyss.

No one noticed the two dirty pilgrims, in their black torn robes; for all the people of the masses in that grim place wear dark unclean clothes, have dark unhappy thoughts marking their faces, and go sadly and stooped with the weight of their master's cruel tasks.

The only joy or happiness any of them have is their pride in the secret gatherings of the White Hearts, and few of them get to see these, for the sake of secrecy. All the rest are allowed but little to relieve the endless monotony of the dark and the toil. What little things of value they do gather together in secret hiding places are lured away from them by irresistible enticements, and these pleasures are such as to give little relief, because they lose their value in the madness of the joy.

IT IS the same as with you and I, we are offered gin and diseased women, but of true pleasure and healthy fecund expression of love, there is little enough of that to relieve us of our dull day's weight. As with you and I of the upper world, the people of the abyss above "*the Abyss*" are told that such things are to be had only in Utopia, and that is not yet.

Only are the vaster pleasures existent for the preferred of the Black Cross, and in the gatherings of the White Hearts, who know what healthy pleasure consists of, and dispense it to all who earn it by fighting successfully against the Black Cross. Because of the constant deathly struggle between the poles of intent, they cannot afford to give their pleasures to any but the heroes who risk death in their service.

The members of the Brotherhood of the Black Cross, and the members of the White Hearts, are even better off than we of the surface in their posses-

sion of the secrets of deep and God-like pleasures. But only a few of the common working people are allowed to have the necessary mental equipment to win the rewards of the Hearts, or the respect of the Cross.

Vana and Morro passed the shops where things refused of the upper world are sold to the poor of the underworld for three prices, they passed the shops where women's bodies are peddled for half-price to all, they passed the opium dens' doors and the gin mills' doors and the doors of the sweat shops where men work away their lives for less than any slave elsewhere receives of food and fun. They passed the windows where are displayed the things no one can afford, like washing machines and refrigerators and waffle-irons from the upper world. These had been stolen during the days of the shortages above, when they were at a premium, but were now displayed more for the sake of bragging than in hope to sell—for no one in the underworld could afford to buy them. (That is, that needed them.)

They came at last to the secret doors where the Hearts passed in and out and Morro was forced to stop and wait there for that for which they came.

Mornon stood leaning against the carved stone pillars of the ancient doorway. Vana recognized him and made the sign of the Cross with her two fingers. Mornon answered furtively, for he did not know Morro, and too, others might see.

Thus was revealed to Morro that Mornon was a spy in the counsels of the Hearts, while to Vana was revealed the whereabouts of the doorway into the secret gatherings of the Hearts. To her this meant that knowing where the feet of Rouge would tread, she could place a trap for those feet.

As Vana and Morro stood talking for a moment with Mornon, the pitifully

pale faces of the lost people of the underworld passed in joyless heavy parade, the dank odor of the stale air, swirled thick about them, the odors of cooking fires long dead and bodies long unwashed—the odors of the cremation furnaces—the odors of stale whiskey and poor perfume—and from the great carved doorway the heavenly odor of secret pleasure electrically vibrating. About their legs the fleas hopped and lit, and Vana cursed the bites.

AT LAST Rouge came out from the Portal of the White Hearts' secret home, and stood looking about in the dim light of the cavern street.

Her eyes fell upon the bright dress of Mornon, resplendent in pale gold brocade, red velvet pantaloons, and silver buckled shoes. She wondered why he was passing his time with such bedraggled derelicts as these two, the heavy grey dye making them seem in the last stage of some disease.

Vana caught her breath and bit her lip at sight of the vivid beauty of the young Rouge; and Morro, who had never before been close to the paragon, was struck with the potent lightning of her glance. Within his body began a counter-infection against the spreading permeating evil growth from Vana's Master, the Worm—an infection sourcing in the Mother of Earth herself. Morro's breath came and went with sudden haste, his heart to pound, and his mind began to peer out of the net Vana had cast about it.

Mornon wondered if he was going to be able to keep her from asking about these two, for he did not wish her sharp young mind to even begin to surmise who and what they might be.

He turned his back upon them scornfully, fearful as the act made him of Vana's pride, of her anger and her power; and strode to the side of Rouge

where she stood by the great dark doorway. Offering his arm, Mornon bore Rouge away from the venom of the eyes of Vana.

For Mornon knew that once she had seen the beauty of Rouge, she would not rest till the young woman was dead.

But her eyes had seen enough, and her hate was pointing now as a compass to the North, always . . . Rouge. and so it would be till Rouge was dead.

Morro saw the hate sitting now upon that disguised face of Vana's. Hard as his heart had been caused to be by his life of hard struggle and evil deeds done by necessity among evil men and worse women, Morro felt strongly that this hate should be thwarted. But it did not occur to Morro that the thwarting was any of his business to accomplish.

CHAPTER II

*Glory and pain, Death and the Worm,
Lord of Evil, Cruciform*

AFTER a furtive bit of sight-seeing among the worn ancient streets of the upper caverns, Morro and Vana took again the long trail to the depths.

And if Vana led a trusting dark-haired little boy by the hand; why is it not true that the Worm needs always young acolytes who may be brought up with a proper understanding of the importance of Evil in the Underworld? Does not the God of Lust himself reward those who bring the young to him before virtue ruins all their taste for the ways of Lust?

Morro reasoned that his poor mother probably had too many to miss one overmuch, anyway. Besides, who was he to say Vana nay?

That as a servant of Vana the child would be carefully corrupted into all

possible indulgence, and complete villainess would be his character bothered Morro unduly, who was not used to having conscience pangs. But working within him was the potent and strange seed of desire from the fecund force expressed in the utterly lovely body of Rouge, and love changes a man. Working within him, too, was the fire of Evil lit by Vana's touch, finding in him perfect fuel. The flame-flowers of Evil were blowing through all the corridors of his mind, side by side with the strange new white blossoms of truth, and the mycelium of the two master of the two poles of intent were spreading through the self called Morro. A battleground for two mighty forces, struggling for control of this future—and of the battle Morro was oblivious.

The brutal, carefree master of the trade of murder called Morro was becoming two people in one, both quite variant from the old Morro.

But to Morro, himself moved on, confident and capable of overcoming any threat in life that sourced in men; unmoved and untouched by soft sentiment, unloving and not needful of love, taking what he wanted where he found it and answering to none but the stronger, who were few.

To Morro, it was perfectly natural and to be expected that he should make love to Vana. He wanted her, that had always been sufficient reason for anything. That some new thing in him objected was strange! He did not listen. He watched Vana's eyes, waiting. She would desire him.

Vana left him, to go to her chambers upon their return. Weary beyond words, she flung herself upon a couch, allowed her salves to undress and bathe her.

Over her sensual, overdeveloped body the slaves played the pleasure ray, the secret unguents of the Magis were

rubbed into her skin. As they worked with her, making her again the beautiful Vana, pride of the Brotherhood of the Cross, into her inner ears poured the whispering of the far-off Worm who was herself once removed.

Carefully her mind answered the whispering, showing all she had seen in the caverns above the Abyss. Demanding she asked the Worm to kill Rouge, who was the only threat to her supremacy in the field of beauty.

"Bring her to me, and I will take care of that," answered the Worm.

"With your help, bringing her will not be difficult."

"Come to me soon, and we will confer, partake of pleasures, and I will instruct you how to remove this Heart from your path. It is time their deeds were answered with deeds, the Heart has need of a little bleeding."

The reptilian presence left her mind, and Vana slept. In her sleep slaves caressed her body slowly, unceasingly, with the pleasure tools, so that her dreams were all afire with the ecstasy that is life to the Servants of the Worm.

Mornon, conducting the lovely Rouge to her home, was filled with dread that he was to lose this prize before ever he had tasted of her delightful femininity. Vana had set the glitter of her eyes upon the face of the girl in a way he knew well was fatal for a woman. Soon, soon, the blow would fall. He might not even stay the doom for fear of angering his own leaders, the High Priests of the Inner Council of the Cross.

In Mornon was little of courage as we see courage, but there was a cunning and a constant sense of desperation, of the shortness and unworthiness of





life. To Mornon, life was a thing of little value, even his own. For he had not yet won to the great rewards of constant pleasure which were given to those who served the Worm faithfully and successfully, and for such as he, life is an impermanent thing. It was with this cunning born of a struggle for survival far more intense than our own that Mornon considered ways and means of circumventing the doom he knew Vana would fling upon Rouge.

SO IT was that Mornon stopped the wheels of the rickshaw, and asked Rouge's indulgence while he performed an errand. That errand was the hiring of a certain acquaintance to do for Mornon what he could not risk doing himself.

As the meek and stupid, nearly-blind and speechless human thing that drew the carriage in which they sat came abreast of an unlit crosswalk, out upon it swarmed three masked brigands, felled Mornon with a blow, and picking up the shrieking Rouge, made off with her.

Mornon picked himself up, paid off the poor frightened human horse, and made his way afoot to the home of the parents of Rouge. There telling his tale of abduction with great detail, he described how they were set upon by a dozen armed men and his blade struck from his hand before he had a chance even to draw it in defense of the poor girl.

* * *

At the same moment, far below in the Abyss of the Cross, Vana sent a messenger to Morro, summoning him. They met at the guarded entrance to the forbidden warrens beneath the loom of the vast stone cross—a thing mile-high.

Vana, the hooded, terrible, mis-

shapen guardsmen knew well, and passed without question.

A WARM, perfumed, layered mist eddied about the two; tall gloomy Morro in his black slashed with crimson, and Vana like a flame of Sin beside him, her body visible through the scarlet clinging gown.

Through the mist they moved, toward . . . Morro wondered. For the first time he was questioning the wisdom of Evil! Naturally it was logic to take without giving, logic to remove the greedy mouths from life that there might be more for himself, but was it logic to follow the lead of one so famed for destruction? Why did he think himself excluded from her natural will to destroy all rivals, all others who might prove competitive or burdensome? And for the first time he saw the wisdom of the Hearts! He would not distrust the guiding hand upon his arm if it were the hand of the lovely young Rouge! But he *did* distrust Vana's hand upon his arm and all his trained faculties were alert to detect a trap did one exist. It could be that she needed him—but it could as well be that that need would be brief, as brief as the *Need* of the Worm for a victim—and himself the fulfillment of that need. Nevertheless he was going to follow, was going with her to consult with the Mind that was the Worm, that ruled here in the abyss. This could be his biggest step upward toward power under the Worm, his biggest chance for the rewards for which all the Brotherhood fought . . . Fought each other as well as the masses above the abyss, fought their rivals as well as the Hearts.

As they moved onward into the mists, a terrifying rumbling, a noise as of many great beasts struggling, a slobbering and writhing of vast serpentine

bodies, a hissing and screaming . . . grew louder until the echoing multiplied within the rocky walls painfully. And Morro knew that he had entered the abode of the Worm, and that the weird race over which the Worm ruled as Lord were all about him, though as yet unseen because of closed doors.

A change had come over Vana's graceful, sensuously undulant body—a tense, desirous, lustful force spread through her, hastening her steps, making her face a mask of dreadful desire. Which was as Morro had expected.

But Morro had not expected *that face*, huge as the moon, rearing up from some vast hole directly in their path! The face of man? . . . No! It was only like man's face in that it had eyes, nose and huge sagging lips, great teeth and a drooling tongue hanging down, dripping with slobbering great wet sounds a gibberish unknown to Morro. From Vana, rushing forward and reaching to caress the great shaggy eyelids, stooping to kiss the lips huge enough to have engulfed her, came similar wet, unwieldly archaic words in a guttural rhythm—some strange ritual greeting of slave to master, it seemed. That head was taller from chin to brow than Vana's whole figure!

BEHIND the head, and downward into the heavy moist murk writhed the body of the Worm, vast turning coil upon coil, onward and around and down into the noisome warrens below. So *The Worm* had a head similar to man's, and in all other respects was truly a worm! Morro shuddered in revulsion, this was the chief for whom all the Brotherhood labored! What strange past alchemy of life's chemical secrets had produced this abortion, what mating of complete biological opposites in what den of awful lust had given birth to . . . *The Worm*?

Morro did not try to guess, before the vast power in those burning, turning gigantic human eyeballs in a head that filled the whole round cavern before him. Schooling himself to appear at ease, he walked slowly to stand beside the caressing, wanton figure of Vana, saying—

"I greet thee, Master, with all due respect, though the ceremonies attendant are unknown to me. Vana had brought me, for what purpose I know not."

The terrible eyes examined him, and the guttural slobbering voice made answer in the same incomprehensible tongue, to Vana. Vana turned, her face flushed and rapt, saying—"He understands, but his vocal organs do not allow speech in your tongue. He greets you, knows of you, and will counsel with me as to your future."

* * *

It was hours later that Morro staggered from the Presence, in the wake of a renewed and vital Vana. Now, he knew . . . *the secret!* The secret sheltered so carefully by the Elders of the Brotherhood from all minds but the few selected by the Worm. He knew the tremendous vista of the future, and the far infinitudes of the past, seen through the monstrous distortions of the eyes of the Ancient Worm. He knew as well Man's place in the Worm's plans for the future, and what man had been in the past. For the first time Morro was thinking of the other side—of the Hearts, who fought this worm. He understood now why they fought! Thinking of Rouge he knew there were other rewards to win than the pleasures offered by the Brotherhood for success.

Within his body the blood of the worm, injected during the ceremony as part of the price he must pay for Vana,

struggled fiercely to grow and make him what he now knew Vana had become—a tool of the Worm. Against this fecund infection of gigantism, struggled the healthy normal cells of his mind and blood, and the “peculiar” infection called love, unknown to him.

He knew now that the gigantic monstrosities in the forbidden corridors of the abyss were men who had been similarly injected in the past—were what he would become in time, and what Vana would become. *Once, the Worm, too, had been a man!* This was the secret, and a shrieking something within him cried out against the weak submission which had allowed the awful blood to be placed directly into his veins.

THE things did not die, as men do, but lived on, becoming ever more and more monstrous. In the dim recesses of the labyrinths beyond the gigantic worm he had glimpsed the vast white belly of the oldest thing of all, known to him by rumour and legend as . . . the Mother of the Monsters.

Bearing within his body a terrific battle between the honest blood of Mother Earth, and this abortion to the abyss striving to take over the very structure and design of his inward cells and flesh and nerves—Morro walked beside the graceful swaying feminine lure of Vana, and inside him for the first time revulsion toward her shuddered into stark life! His most inward knowledge told him that when this revulsion died and he accepted Vana as beauty and woman once again—he would be forever lost! His struggle would be ended, and Mother Earth would be his Mother not any more. Instead his whole soul would obey and worship the . . . Mother of Monsters! His mind would obey the Worm, but his flesh would crawl and desire . . . the

*Mother of Monsters!**

Suddenly to him the clear, fine beauty of Rouge, flaming in his memory, had become an unattainable purity which he might never touch—for his touch was now destruction to all normal beauty. Within him now he was conscious of the fire of evil infection first given him by Vana’s fingertips upon his wrist—and that thing must never enter the blood of Rouge, the man that had been Morro swore!

Walking beside Vana, simulating affection, these hidden thoughts and slow-growing realizations became stronger, so that he had ever to exert greater strength of will to hide the thoughts in his head from Vana’s penetrative mind.

Time had suddenly become to Morro all important, for he knew from the vast unconcealable thought of the Worm that *his hours* as a free agent of his own will *were limited*. If ever he meant to do anything of his own free will—the time had come, and would soon pass forever from him! “This is Evil,” muttered Morro,—this is the reward for his risks and nerve wearing cunning deeds, this his fate under Evil! All that he had been taught he saw now suddenly as false logic, seeming true

**There are many rumors of human giants in the caverns, the details vary. This is one picture given by these rumors, though it is unsubstantiated by anything seen by myself. The giants of the caverns are supposed to be produced by growth-beneficial rays, and are of several types. There are other causes given for fecund gigantism, the elixirs of the Elder race developed for medical and health use, as well as weird potions of unknown nature taken by the cavern ignorants by mistake which result in monstrous deformations, perhaps due to age-deterioration of the compounds, or other unknown causes. It is quite true there are living in the caves some families very much deformed, with pig snouts, huge buttocks or other variations indescribable, like our six fingered families. I have seen some of these in the caverns with my own eyes . . . weird monstrosities. I suspect our surface doctors through the centuries have weeded out monstrous births by killing new-born babies whose form is unnatural. This may be an unwritten law among surface medical organizations, to keep the race clean of such mutations.—R.S.S.*

only in the light of ignorant cynicism, a fool's truth, and the little fact that *Evil gives only Evil* to all who contact it had been overlooked in his teaching.

So it was that the resolve to strike one blow of retaliation against the things that had done this to him was borne into furious life in Morro, and bidding Vana an abrupt adieu at the door of her chambers, not even looking at the inviting smile and lush, pink bosom of Vana as she stood in her doorway giving him leave to enter—he hurried away.

WITH curiosity Vana watched him go, wondering vaguely if he knew . . . what? Her own enslaved mind could not say the words of that "what." Something in her cried out silently against his going, but the Worm was sleeping, and no thought of action came alive. She turned and went in to the blue-lit chamber of glistening polished stone, her feet crossing the finely worked inlay of the floor leadenly, her graceful figure drooping tiredly onto her couch. Idly her hands toyed with the silk, figured over with the golden sign of the Worm, the cross and the coiled serpent-like figure about the cross, it's man's head incongruous above. Idly her empty eyes sought some joy in her home, and her slaves came to her, walking like zombies, soothing her shivering body with soft hands as they undressed her and placed her in bed. From her throat issued one scream, at last, like the breaking of glass under pressure, and she fell back unconscious. For she had been with the Worm, ministering to his appetites, and now was empty of life, and full of pain and loss her deadened mind could not feel.

Back in the corridors of the abyss, the Mother smiled horribly, and into her vast wet arms the Worm crawled, and slept.

Far up on the trail to the caverns above the abyss, Morro lay down in the hiding of some fallen boulders and slept off the weariness of the climb and of the ordeal.

* * *

In the gardens of green-food plants, where Mornon had managed to create a hideout by bribing the manager of the hydroponic, artifical-light greenhouse, filling one entire mile's-long boring—waited Rouge. About one ankle a light chain made her escape impossible, without hampering her movements greatly. Fearfully she waited, for she knew not who had been behind her seizure, and expected to learn the worst. About her drifted the orange and salmon seed-bulbs of the Flodraon, floating little prickly-surfaced balloons the size of her fist. Drifted and settled lightly about her, seeming loath to leave the spot she made more lovely with her dark beauty. Her eyes searched the far avenues among the great stems of the old food plants, the drooping elephant-ear leaves and twining, fruiting vines hiding all from her eyes but an occasional sere and lean-bodied old workman busily pruning the growths. That these ancient workmen were her guards she had no doubt.

Then he came, through the blossoms and dangling fruits and carefully latticed twinings of the crowding cultured growths, himself more gorgeously clothed than any of the brilliant hot-house blooms about him.

"Mornon!" Rouge cried. "You have come to release me. Who was responsible? Tell me, Mornon, why did this happen?"

But Mornon sat down casually on the white, sanded stone of the bench beside her, showing no haste or need to release the chain from her ankle.

"There is much I must tell you, little Rouge, my innocent. There are things you do not understand."

BUT the keen mind of the girl leaped at once to his meaning. "You, you . . . are responsible! You have done this to me, who claimed to be so firm a friend!"

"In a way, I am responsible, my pigeon, and in another way—I am not so at all. I have brought you here to save you from a very real threat by hiding you. Since there was no time to explain or overcome your objections and those of your friends—it looks as though my intentions were the worst. I have not had time to think that out."

"What danger threatens me that is not always threatened? I suppose you will tell me the slaves of the Worm have chosen me as a victim, and there was no hope for me. As if I didn't know they would kill all the Hearts if they could!"

"There is one you do not know among them, whose eyes I saw looking upon you with a decision in them. And when Vana decides about a woman, that woman shortly dies. Dies horribly, dear Rouge. I saw Vana looking upon you so."

"When? Where?"

"Do you remember the aged couple to whom I was speaking when you came from the doorway of the Hearts, just yesterday?"

"That woman! That . . . is Vana! Mornon, they were so close and you did not denounce them, you did not speak! Why? I don't understand your meaning. . . . Ah, ah! You fiend! You are one of them! A spy, and I trusted you! Ah, Mother of Beauty, how could you have been born of life?"

Rouge spat toward him, wetting his sleeve. He only wiped it away with a smile, saying, "Yes, little pigeon, I

am a Black Brother, Servant of the Black Cross, and the enemy of such stupid human groups as the White Hearts. But that does not prevent me desiring you, nor laying plans to get you. And no strutting peacock like Vana of the Worm's own petted following shall balk me of you. Not she, nor her bloated Master, nor the whole damned Brotherhood shall take you from me."

Even as he spoke the words, a sound made him turn his head to his left, and with a gasp he sprang forward, stooping, his hands clutching for the poniard at his belt. But he was too late!

The hilt of the weapon caught him just below the ear, and he pitched on forward to lay still for a minute—long enough for Morro to stoop and remove from his hand the blade, to run his hands swiftly about Mornon's clothing and take therefrom several small cylinders and a half dozen vials from different hiding places in his clothes. Then Morro stood back, gazing not at his victim but at Rouge, and there was a desperate hunger in his gaze that she could not understand. It was as though he looked upon her with the eyes of a man about to become hopelessly blind. Trying to fill his eyes and memory and brain with her, to last him for an age of darkness and loneliness.

WHO . . . who are you, dark stranger?" Rouge stood with her lovely white arms lifted, her torn dress exposing her bosom, her hands held as to hold off attack. About her ankle the chain made the picture of the fearful slave complete.

Morro stood thus for long minutes without speaking, just looking at the young, not yet full-blown beauty of her, feeling the cleanness of her with his eyes and his telepathic sensing.

"I know who you are, Rouge, and I

came here especially to get you from this creature who has stolen you from your home. You must trust me, young woman. You must trust me as though I were God himself come to earth again, or I can do nothing for you. And above all you must never let your hands touch me, even for one instant. For the infection grows in me, and what it is I do not fully know, or whether you can get it from me irrevocably or only from the Worm."

"Trust you? Not touch you? You speak in riddles, man! If you are a friend, strike off this chain and take me to my home. If you are enemy, why have your say—but do not expect listening."

"There is much you do not know, Rouge. How can I give you what I learned with the loss of myself? How can one ever tell anyone such a thing as can not be understood?"

The dark virility and sincerity of this hairy-skinned fierce stranger struck strange emotions into the unprepared perceptions of the young beauty. In spite of herself she was terrifically intrigued by Morro. He stood clad entirely in black, the scarlet and gold trimmings of his clothing all cast aside for serious work—and for *his* work no clothing is so good as solid, dull black, unseeable except at close quarters. Stark, the black figure of muscled strength stood at ease, the swarthy, dark-mustached face and piercing eyes looking out from the black, heart-shaped space which was the only part not covered by the fabric. A thief's costume, it was, she knew—none would wear it but assassins, murderers—or spies from the Abyss here on some errand that would not stand the sight of any eye. That Morro had reason to fear the eyes of the Hearts she did not know—but surmised that it was from them he was thus hidden in this

costume. The upper curve of the space where his face looked out was a turned-up mask, lying upon the dark curls of Morro's hair with a capping effect of mystery and terror.

"Who are you, and why are you here?"

"Give me but time to lash this fallen friend of yours, and I will explain."

MORRO fastened the hands of the unconscious man with his black leather belt, and then sat beside Rouge, taking the links of her chain in his hands and beginning to cut the link through with a file as he talked . . .

"In the Abyss, Rouge, children do not grow up carefree as you did. We grow up struggling to stay alive, and learning every evil trick of life quickly or dying of the spleen of some devil before we chance to learn how to avoid him. We learn to think evil only, early, so I did not understand what the Worm meant to the Hearts until I went with Vana yesterday—and learned a thing I had not known before about the Abyss. The Worm allowed me to look into his mind, perhaps unknowing my peculiar nature and powers. I learned what the Worm and the other undying monsters of the Abyss really are! I learned—*too late!* For his blood was placed in my veins, and mine in his—as a pledge of loyalty. But in truth, when that happened, I became a thing that will grow to be what the Worm is today—a terrible monster who knows only that he must live, no matter why."

"I have heard the Hearts speak much of the monsters of the Abyss, but there is little we know openly about them. Yet, if you are one of the Brotherhood, why did you strike Mornon as you did? He had just confessed, practically, to the same thing."

"I came to you, Rouge, because I

wanted to save you from what I knew would happen to you because of Vana. That Mornon had beaten me to it, I found soon enough. Thus I traced you by Mornon, who is not so subtle as he would think. I came because, soon . . . I will be a thing, a slave of these monsters that prowl the Abyss. And I do not like to think of that. I want once before I become something else than man, to do one good deed. I wanted to give you love without demands, without payment, just as the "foolish" Hearts do for those they love—once—to make sure that they were wrong, as I have been wrong about the rightness of Evil. Truth is, I suppose, that my first sight of you awoke love in me, and my first contact with the Worm made me realize I was soon to be incapable of love. So I came to you somewhat as a dying man might come for a drink of water. Not of much use to me, but it could taste very fine."

"Your words are not clear. You say the Worm was once a man, as we are? That you will become as the Worm, in time, because of his blood being placed in your veins."

"They are a mutated form of man-life—the radiations of the Abyss have caused their peculiar and monstrous growth—and this cell that has become the cell of their body is not human. The change in the cell that causes growth to make them what they are—is caused by a certain strange heavy element which is in their blood from certain of the caverns where they bed. This it is that causes the growth. It is a radiant response—catalyst to the chemistry of growth—causing the chemical changes of growth to speed up—but in a different way toward a different result than our own life."

"I suppose what you say is true, but it smacks of the black magic of the Abyss, to me, and your words are but

a covering of the evil with meanings less awful."

"IT is what I read in the unwatchful mind of the Worm, and he should know. It is the way he understands the monsters of his following, and why they exist. It is his plan to infect all men, in time, with the blood—for then they are responsive to his mind—a strange result of the blood infection makes them akin, they hear his thought, while their own, the result of their own natural thought cells—slowly dies and is replaced by his. His thought is not the same, but is a thing that can exist in many minds at once. Because he and the mother of monsters gave birth to the others, they are part and parcel, the same thing, in the way that the cells of our body are slaves of our mind, so are all subsequent monsters part and parcel of one animal, and the head of that animal—The Worm!"

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I too will soon be thus lost to man. Before that happens, I want to strike one blow for men as they are now. I want to make sure the Hearts understand what it is they fight, and what the Hell's brew of the Abyss really means. For all my life I have served the Brotherhood, not knowing the nature of the Worm, or what he meant to men. Now I know, and know that I have been a fool, serving an enemy of my own best interest. That has ended, but too late. I am lost!"

"You come to me? Why?"

"The eyes of Vana told me you were doomed, and the acts of Mornon told me that if she did not kill you he would take you for his own. To stop these two I come to you, I offer you only a sanctuary."

"Sanctuary! Where?"

"In the Abyss, in disguise, no one would expect to find you there, or look

for you."

"And after the metamorphoses of the Worm's blood has come over you—you will know where I am, and reveal me to your masters. No, stranger, this you cannot do. I will go to the leaders of the Hearts and tell them what you have told me."

"The change is very gradual, and takes years of life. The only difference is that one does not grow old; instead one grows monstrous, in a lifetime the change begins to show, and in two lifetimes one becomes a monster. It is slow, inexorable and complete. I know, I have seen them."

Rouge stood up, for Morro had now filed through the chain, and she was free. At their feet Mornon glared up, and thrashed at the binding of his arms and feet.

"Kill this man I must!" Morro looked down at Mornon, and a smile, grim and expectant of pleasure in the deed, spread over his face, so gloomily handsome above the dark fabric covering his muscled limbs and brawny chest. The muscles flexed on his hairy wrists, his hands clenched and unclenched, he bent over the prostrate spy.

"No! I forbid it!" Rouge was too young in the ways of the warfare to stomach the cold-blooded killing. "Take him to the Hearts' meeting place, there he will be tried and condemned properly."

"I cannot take him or you there, they would kill me, Rouge. They know me for an old enemy, and there is a special reward for my death among the Hearts. I have killed many of them, you know."

ROUGE pressed her slim hands to her brow in thought. "If we leave him here, bound, you can conduct me to the doorway of the Hearts' place, and then flee as I enter. I will send men to bring Mornon."

Morro knew what would happen, but nodded. Together they went along the soft mossed paths beneath the old fruit plants, the small, dried gnome-like men of the caste of gardeners watching them pass with non-committal glances. They knew—and they knew it was none of their business. To one of these Morro tossed a gold coin as they passed, and whispered a word—"Let not his friends release him till we come again."

The man took the coin and bit it, and did not say a word. But his eyes upon Morro were not cold, and shone with a certain thing that Morro knew.

As they left the bright yellow light of the plant cavern, Morro tossed about Rouge's naked shoulders his own black enveloping cloak, and walked beside her like night beside beauty, both swathed in shadows and their two faces so different, yet alike in their troubled beauty, broad brows and dark curls and gleaming dark eyes, very like brother and sister they were, children of the same mother, and that Mother, darkness herself.

As they neared the street of small shops where the stone carved antique entrance to the Hearts' rendezvous dominated the whole tunnel, Morro left her, taking his cloak without a word, disappearing into the shadows the way he had come.

Dropping the hood over his face, Morro drifted swift as the wind back to the plant cavern, unseeable and unseen by any. He meant to finish the job he had left undone at Rouge's insistence. He meant to let the life out of the spy's carcass before he had time to arrange for Morro's own death. He did not believe much in Rouge's plan for justice for the spy. He could depend on his own hand, not knowing whether these Hearts were swift and sure or not. He had never feared them, found them easy to elude.

Again in the sheltered hidden bower where he had found Rouge awaiting Mornon, he saw at once that Mornon was gone. Sprawled beside the white bench lay the gnome-like figure of the man he had paid to watch him, a knife in his back and his own short curved blade in his hand, the edge bloodied as though in dying he had struck one blow.

"The trail," murmured Morro. "I must watch the trail to the Abyss, and stop this spy before he finds a way to tell the Worm of what I revealed to Rouge. Before he sets Vana against me . . ."

Now running like the wind, Morro sped along the deserted streets of the upper city, and entered the dark burrow that led to the downward trail. All that day he raced downward, stopping again where he had slept before, hidden again behind the fallen stones. Crouched, like a coiled spring he waited, for he could not be far ahead of Mornon, or may have missed him altogether.

He had hardly taken his place when the footsteps sounded above him, coming down at breakneck speed. Mornon was not staying to argue with the Hearts the merits of his case.

AS THE running man came abreast of Morro, he paused, sinking down exhausted to the rocks where they flattened out in a small platform. It was the usual place for rest in the climb or descent, and it offered natural defense against surprise either from above or below. But Mornon's pursuit was already present and waiting. Wriggling silently as a snake, Morro slid nearer, his narrow foot-long poniard in his hand. One blow, just above the jut of the collar bone, a pull and a twist to open the arteries—the deed would be done.

With the darting speed of a bat Morro sprang, his cloak floating behind him black as death's wings, the bright blade and intent eyes all that Mornon saw as he twisted at the sudden sound. Mornon dropped and rolled, the first strike failed, and Morro whirled to meet the counter. But not for Mornon. He had gained his feet, was running like a frightened deer across the stone plateau and down the trail to the safety in the Hell below. Morro darted after, but fear lent speed to Mornon's feet, and Morro settled down to the hour's long pursuit now needed to overtake and conquer a foe now fully aware of his whereabouts.

Down they fled, like two mad souls condemned to Inferno, fleeing the wrath of God. Morro flung off his cloak, and ran only in the close fitting, all over unseeable black, his face still and intent, his mouth open and nostrils quivering in the excitement of the man-chase. Only his white, mustached face, barred with the heavy brows, and the two white, reaching hands, the bright blade closer, closer—that was all that Mornon saw as he looked back.

Mornon's bright clothing became torn as he banged against the walls in his speed, his feet bruised, his face dewed with sweat, his breath a fire in his throat. And in his mind a vast surprise and wonder—that one of the Brotherhood should be seeking to slay him! It could only be for the sake of the girl—unless Morro were a White spy in the camp of the Brotherhood.

Or could he be Vana's own assassin, sent to slay Rouge, and finding him in possession of the girl, deciding to kill him too? Morro had been seen with Vana, that must be the answer! That would mean that when he left Mornon with the girl, he had killed her, left her, come back to kill Mornon. But why had he not killed them both and left

them there in the bower of the plant cavern?

MORRO sped after the fleeing scoundrel, in his heart a desperation mingled with the new strange tug of the metamorphoses of the blood. Even as he ran he speculated on the nature of the change going on within him. He knew that he was becoming now a part of an organism, a thing like an anthill, composed of individuals, but ruled by a single one-purposed mind, the Worm. That this change was the natural outcome of a cell-change caused by some chemical catalyst, a self reproducing compound, perhaps, like a virus—on the line between life and inorganic chemical. That the change was a mutation of a special monstrous kind, changing man into beast, and beast retaining thinking capacity while losing self to the mental control of the mighty Master Worm, the thing with a great man's head that had somehow mastered the vagaries of the change and emerged—the Master of them all.

Within him he could feel the tug of this control, slowly taking over, replacing his own purpose with its own, perhaps quite unconsciously to the Worm as well as to most who underwent the change.

This new purpose was yet his own, and it too was determined to kill Mornon, but in quite a different way—by taking him to the Worm for injection of the blood. Even as he ran, the two purposes conflicted in him, and his keen awareness of the subtle tug of alien thought told him that if he was still Morro he would thrust the blade in his hand into Mornon many times, while if he was now a tool of the Worm, he would but knock him unconscious and bear him at once to the cavern entrance hard by the foot of the Black Cross.

But chance intervened, and even as

he was about to overtake Mornon, his foot turned on a small stone and threw him to the ground. He lay there ruefully, watching the retreating Mornon running like a man pursued by the devil. He laughed at the furiously pounding feet, and lay still, rubbing his injured ankle.

He knew that now he had but a short time to live, if Mornon told his story to either Vana or the Worm.

CHAPTER II

Of secret lips, hidden altars, and ancient chants.

AFTER conferring with the Heart leaders, Rouge emerged from the doorway of the Hearts' central meeting place. Glancing up and down the near-deserted street, she stood waiting the escort the Hearts had voted to give her after her relating the defection of Mornon and the warning of Morro as to the Nature of the Worm.

Across from her several shadows stirred into life, sprang swiftly across the narrow way, popped a large black bag over her head, and carried her back again into the invisibility of the black shadows and black coverings. These were Vana's servitors, sent by her as Morro had foreseen. She had meant to have Morro lead this raid, but his sudden departure on unannounced business of his own had left her to her former resources. She had many.

As the Hearts assigned to accompany Rouge emerged, buckling on their weapons and looking about for the girl, they found no sign of her. The fair-haired, slight Clan Harn, one of these guards who had asked for the assignment, fell to the worn paving, writhing in sudden grief and uncontrollable self-vilification.



"How did we let her out of our sight? Why did she slip on ahead? What possessed the girl? . . ." he sobbed, and the hung heads about him emphasized the justification for his fiery denunciation of their carelessness. Few of them had believed or even heard Rouge's account to their leaders, had not understood the seriousness of it.

"This hour I leave for the Abyss. By the Black Cross I swear it—I will not return without Rouge and the honor of the Hearts." Clan Harn's voice was bitter, harsh.

"You will not return at all. You are too young and untrained in the ways of the Brotherhood to penetrate there in safety. Leave the job to older heads!"

"As I left her safety to older heads, eh? No, not again! From now on I trust in my own hands and my own head. I will bring back the beauty and the purity of the finest of the Hearts' women—or I will not return alive."

The older men left the youth where

he lay on the worn, dusty pave; scattered, blades in hand, searching the shadows and doorways on each side the street for some sign of the girl's captors. Their search was fruitless and when they returned Clan Harn was not among them.

Clan Harn was far down the long steep tunnel to the depths of the Black Cross, running steadily and tirelessly, his ears sharp to hear the slightest sound that would tell him of the quarry he knew must be ahead. Hour after hour went by, and his racing feet slowed, his mind began to assure that no burden-bearing man alive could be ahead of him. So he must lie in wait, be ready for them when they came. So it was that he came to the platform where it was the custom to rest during the long climb or descent—and concealed himself behind the very rock so recently used by Morro himself.

BELOW him, Morro picked himself up, limped painfully back up the



trail he had raced down but a moment before. He could not return again to the quarters given him by the Brotherhood, not until he had learned whether Mornon had gone to Worm with his tale. Until he learned whether Mornon had been too afraid to reveal his attempt to kidnap Rouge to save her from Vana to speak of Morro's attack—not until he learned whether hate of him would override Mornon's fear of Vana's reprisal—could he return to the Abyss. Until he had learned the full details of Mornon's actions, he was a man without a home either in the Abyss or above it among the cavern people.

So it was that Morro limped up to the rock concealing Clan Harn and sat down upon it, his back to the enraged youth behind it. His usual caution was nullified by the fact that he had just quitted that same hiding place, but a few minutes before, and it did not occur to him that an enemy would have chosen it for concealment in such short order.

Even as his buttocks relaxed upon the cool stone, a knife tip pricked his back, and a cold steel voice startled his ears with its chilled, murderously angry tone.

"Speak, son of sin, or forever remain silent. Who are you? Why the black clothing of the assassins of the Brotherhood, and what do you await here?" Clan Harn could not have said what held his hand from striking at once, except that he wanted more than life to know the whereabouts of his beloved Rouge.

Morro, in spite of the sure menace in that young cold voice, chuckled. "Son of sin, eh? If you knew how true that was, and how little I care now if that blade sinks home or remains where it is . . ."

Clan Harn shoved the sharp point deeper, so that Morro groaned in spite of himself. "Speak, killer, or don't! It is all one to me."

"As to me. But first tell me why you are here? Since I must die, it mat-

ters not what you say. It might so happen that our paths lie parallel instead of cross-wise."

"I am here to catch the abductors of Rouge. They must pass this way to reach the Brotherhood."

Morro gasped in sudden realization. "Rouge! But, I myself saw her safely to the door of the Hearts' center. How can she have been stolen so soon, and again? Or are you speaking of Morron, whom I chased down that trail but minutes ago?"

Morro felt the tension in the arm holding the knife relax, the point crept imperceptibly backward out of his flesh.

"You know Rouge? You have helped her? Then you must be the man she spoke of, Morro of the Brotherhood, who turns against the Worm because of the Blood ceremony. Who told us what it means and what it is! Hah!"

"Speak on, man, and be quick! How come she to be lost again? Tell me!"

"She came out from the meeting house alone, stifled with waiting for us to conclude our foolish talk and see her home as we were ordered. We followed her, too full of talk to hurry properly. In the instant between her emerging from the door and our own emergence—she disappeared. I hurried to this trail and raced down as fast as my legs would carry me. But I either passed them in the dark, or they have not yet taken the trail downward."

"Then they will be along, carrying her. Those were Vana's own assassins, and no others! She is vain of her own beauty, tries to have all other beautiful women done to death as quickly as she may. Wait until we have sunk the blade into the bodies of the scum, stranger, before you kill me. I have an interest in thwarting Vana, for I know better than any what she is. Rouge is one of the underworld's creatures who shall not grace the Altar of the Work."

CLAN HARN withdrew his knife slowly, sank again to a recumbent position.

"I believe you, Morro, but only because Rouge believed you and I heard her tell of what you did for her."

"You love her, youth?"

"What man does not love her? I love her more than life!"

"Aye, she is love, in person. I love her more than death, and that is true. But soon, I will love death more than her."

"You will become one of the monsters. I heard the words of Rouge, telling what you learned. That is horror. But what did you expect, serving Evil?"

"I was brought up to be what I am, youth. I did not know better. There are lies that *you* believe, unknowing. Scores of such lies distort your mind, and all others."

"But you have learned that the Hearts are right. We expect reward for effort and we get it. You get the Blood! Small reward!"

"I have learned that I am wrong. I have not learned that anyone is right about anything they believe."

As they talked, there came faintly to their ears the small scuffling sound of feet on the hard, dark trail above. They sank to silence, and Clan Harn made no protest as Morro drew his poniard and dropped his face-mask, making himself unseeable in the faint glowing light. As he squatted, he rubbed dirt upon the backs of his hands, an unconscious habit, making even that light surface dark and invisible. The blood began to pump in his veins and the old thrill of the kill prickled ecstasy up and down his back with cold delightful feet. These were old sensations, the thrill of danger, the hard feel of the poniard hilt in his fist, the other hand sliding down to draw a weighted sap from a pocket in his leg covering. These men

of Vana's were seasoned killers, not to be taken with any flick of the wrist. Morro knew that his blood would flow, but luck might preserve his life. It did not matter, he remembered with the new fatalism come upon him since the Worm's blood had entered his veins. Death was better than growth into another like the Mother of Monsters.

Four black shadows, bearing on their four shoulders a burden, wrapped in black and around it coarse ropes spiraled. In the dim uncertain light they were no more than wraiths, but the eyes of the two who waited were bred to that darkness, and as they sprang, the two nearest received their blades in breast and side, Morro's a cunning, wide ripping blow that dropped his man in bloody death. But Clan Harn's wider blade struck bone, slid off, making only a great sudden red gash but doing little real harm. The burden they bore bumped to the ground between the three as they sprang back, steel glittering in their hands. Morro knew by the strange loathing in him as well as by their bloated, huge, boneless appearance, that these were men who had received the blood long ago. The tug of *the purpose* in his mind near paralyzed him with command to desist, feeling much like a reluctance to plunge the knife into his own breast. These bloated powerful men were a part of him, were his own evil flesh and blood!

BUT he fought the inward battle and won, and his swift feet circled surely, his blade flickered with all its usual cunning, and again a tall figure slumped, toppling to weary knees, the face-mask wet and soggy with the vomited blood.

Morro spun to the third, before the second had quite fallen across the bound figure in death.

Clan Harn blocked the steady thrust-

ing attack of his own huge opponent with his coat-wrapped forearm, the knife ripped, his arm was wet with his own blood. His heart ached with envy of his ally's swift, sure fighting, as himself stumbled back and back, evading the powerful slash and thrust as he waited a chance to drive his own blade home. The reality of this grim combat to the death was very different from practice, Clan Harn was learning.

The figure on the ground gathered itself into a compact bundle suddenly, the legs drawing up over the body. Some loosened wrapping must have given Rouge sight of part of her surroundings, for suddenly her legs lashed out, her feet caught Clan's opponent mid-way in the back of the legs, sending him toppling off balance. Clan sprang upon him, this time his knife ripped hard and true like Morro's, with perfect understanding of the force needed to cleave bone and sinew, and the blood gushed from the man's ripped neck, the whole side of his throat wide-spouting, the gash extending on down and across his breast. The ripped-off black fabric left the grey-white, puffed skin bare, and Clan Harn glimpsed the loathsome quality of the life he fought, and retched, bent over, sick. Then the white place was covered with pouring blood, and the thing fell on its side before him.

Clan leaped over the fallen body, standing wide-legged at the side of Morro, trying to get a thrust in before Morro finished him. In desperation the huge man thrust and stabbed, while his other hand he held poised high, heavy leaden sap waiting. He backed away, turned as if to flee, but spun back as Morro leaped and brought the heavy, leather-wrapped club down on Morro's skull. As Morro fell, he turned to Clan, grinning wolfishly. The boy fought fiercely, cleverly, but the strength of

the man was too great, Clan was wearying, staggering from his long run and the sudden exertion after. The knife thrust into his side, and even as he reached to stab through the opening left by the hand busy in his vitals, the club crashed above his ear—he knew no more.

The big, strangely shaped man picked up the bound figure of Rouge, went on his way down the trail, leaving the five figures where they lay. He did not even examine them to make sure of death—he did not care. His business was getting the girl for his Mistress, Vana, and that was the same as obeying the Worm, which was the same to him as his own will.

VANA rose at the message of her slave, stood naked for a time before the great oval mirror, ringed with serpents of bronze, admiring her own lithe beauty. Then she slipped on a robe of black velvet, striped over with thin gold embroideries, the sleeves long drooping wings from which her hands and smooth forearms moved soft and startling white. Belting the robe about with a wide jeweled leathern dagger-belt, she left the dim sleeping chamber and confronted the bloody servant standing stooped with weariness above the bound figure of Rouge.

With a sharp triumphant cry Vana squatted upon her heels beside the swathed bound bundle of soiled black, lifted back the cloth from over Rouge's face. Grinning, her lips pulled back over her teeth fiendishly, Vana stared down at the prize, and Rouge looked up at her captor curiously, unafraid, but her pink cheeks pale as death, and her eyes shadowed and sunken with strain.

"Hah, the Hearts' pride, the beauty whom they brag puts Vana to shame. Not long will it be said that Vana has an equal! Soon, soon, the Worm him-

self shall master you, shall make of you . . . Do you know, little innocent, what the Worm does with prey?" Vana's shrilly gloating voice ended in a half-chuckle, deep in her throat, a sound that chilled Rouge to the heart.

"I know not, nor care. You are a mad woman, unaccountable in reason for your acts. So are all the Brotherhood, reared to serve a monster whose intelligence is largely a product of their own insane imaginings. All your gloating cannot make me think there is more to you than purely stupid insanity." Rouge's clear, sweet voice, without a tremor in it, rang in the over-ornamented den as out of place as a choir-boy's singing in a brothel.

Vana, enraged by the girl's calm contempt, slapped her suddenly hard in the face. Her hand left a sharp red outline upon the white cheek. Rouge only looked at Vana, her gaze saying only—"What next?"

Regaining control, Vana rose smoothly, her naked legs sharply outlined against the now half-open robe, and striding to a locked metal stand, pressed some hidden release, so that the hammered metal door swung open. From the numerous little drawers she took three articles, turned to the slumped figure of her servant.

"For your success in this work I reward you, Olar Handra. Here is a ring, show this to my slave master, he will let you choose from my female slaves any one that pleases you. She is yours. This little golden key is to that secret place you know about, you may take her there for your pleasure. Return the key when you are ready for work again. This bag contains coins, enough to pleasure yourself for a month with care. Is it sufficient?"

THE man opened his mouth to speak, but weariness overcame him, and

even as he reached to take the objects from her hands, he slumped unconscious to the floor. Vana bent and examined his wounds, long deep slashes across the ribs, upon the forearms, and one thrust deep below his ribs, still bleeding slowly. She made a mouth of disgust at the mess on the carpet, and stepping to the doorway, tapped a little golden bell with a hammer. Two huge black-skinned slaves came at the sound, running silently on naked feet, and falling to their faces on the floor before Vana.

"Take this man and care for him. Get the slave-doctor to attend his hurts. When he is on his feet again bring him to me."

As the blacks bore the big ungainly form of the assassin away, Vana put her three rewards back into the curiously worked metal stand, her eyes absent with far-sight. She was hearing the far powerful stirring of the life-thought in the Worm's mind, and her body shuddered slightly at the strong pictures aroused—weird, alien pictures of un-nameable vices, the dreaming worm was thinking of Vana in his sleep, and over her body stole an awful distant caress, and her lust pictured the vast bloated inhuman hands of the Worm sliding over her body while her mind reveled in the telesent joy-sensing of the locked intents, overcoming distance with evil kinship, overcoming human instincts with the powerful and different fecund lust of the Monster race breeding in interwound masses at the foot of the Black Cross.

Vana's lips murmured a message to her distant Master, and her mind heard his sleeping listening: "I have for you a sacrifice more delectable than any ever enjoyed by the Masters before. This captive Heart maiden will pleasure you beyond the sense's reach with her young untouched essence of life. This

blood will make the blood of the Worm boil in new fecundity—you should see her!"

"Show me her face—her form—taste for me her blood . . ." the vast distant mind-voice commanded Vana, and Vana obeyed. With her dagger she slashed away the black wrapping and the clothing of Rouge, leaving her there on the floor naked, and bound.

Her possessed eyes brooded over the smooth white beauty long and intently. Then she bent, sinking her white teeth in the throat, sucking out the blood, so that the Master might savor the taste afar.

"Bring her soon, but first prepare her carefully for the ceremonies. She will be a fine subject. Fine, fine . . ." the vast inhuman travesty of thought drifted away from it's clutch on Vana, and she rose from the naked girl, kicking her in the side spitefully. For Vana served the Worm as a part—but when not possessed she was her evil self wholly. As she left the chamber, she locked the door on the bound girl. Vana stood again before her mirror, in her own bed-chamber, stripping off the black and gold robe, sliding her hands sensuously over her smooth slim body, murmuring—"Now, now there will be no rival. Vana stands supreme—until the change comes upon me, and I go to join the Worm forever in his halls."

VANA looked curiously for a time at the hybrid's grotesque reptilian mottling on her ankles, where the change was creeping upward, slowly, slowly, caressing with her fingers the strange oily glistening of the mottled skin there, wondering what she would be like when the change was completely upon her. Beside her would be Morro, her weird heart murmured, to walk side by side with her into the vast

coiling nest of growth and fecund gigantism together, to face together the strange intertwined lives of the units of the Worm. For she knew, too, that the life of the things of the secret warrens of the Abyss was not human in any way, and that the human ego perished in that strange mutant growth spawning ever vaster blasphemies upon the pattern of life in the evil, coiling, interlocked unceasing motion of the multi-bodied Worm. Herself would be one of the Worm's bodies, locked with the rest in that unceasing embrace, and her mind joying with the Worm's in ever-mounting triumph over other life. Beside her would be Morro, his handsome figure transmuted into weird male beauty reptilian . . . Vana turned from her mirror, her hands slid from her thighs, down her long lovely legs, touching the skin of her ankles with a shivering joy that was yet repulsive to something in her yet human. From afar, as she slid her body across her bed with a snake-like wriggling possessing her, she could sense always a smell like alien musky flesh, the flesh of serpents or earthworms, sense always the distant crawling reaching and coiling of that life that ruled her. Into sleep she passed without a great difference, for in her dreams the same wriggling shivers ran intermittently over her body, and her hands slid Narcissus-like across her body and down her thighs, caressing the smoothness in her sleep.

CHAPTER IV

Bride of the rock-hall . . . Sink adown, O Giant-wife! — THE EDDAS.

ABOVE, midway between the Abyss of the Black Cross and the caverns of the upper people, still lay the slim youthful body of Clan Harn, one gashed arm flung across the back of the fallen

Morro.

Down the trail, from above the stealthy steps of a party came, almost imperceptible, and Morro stirred, his instincts sending through his unconscious body an electric warning of fear that shocked him into painful awakening. Groaning as he sat up, he looked around him, his sapped head throbbing with great black pulses of pain. Wearily he sank back, let come what would, he could not move a limb for weakness.

So it was that the friends of Clan Harn, the party sent after him and Rouge into the Abyss itself, came upon the two men still lying where they had fallen. They gathered around, one stooping to peer into the faces of the wounded men.

"It is Clan! The other is, I think, one of the Brotherhood. Clan must have given as good as he got from him."

"Put a knife into him now, before worse comes of him," counseled an aged, cynical voice. "Never any good came of letting a black brother live longer than the time needed to kill him."

"We need what he can tell us of the warrens below. He might direct us to the very place Rouge has been taken for an easy death."

Morro, who had closed his eyes from weakness, opened them with an effort, managed to get his voice working loud enough to be heard. "No need to promise me anything, I can tell you where she is now. You will find her in the chambers of Vana, but not for long. She will be taken to the Worm, and the rites of her death will be celebrated within hours. It is the main purpose of the Brotherhood, serving the Worm, and Rouge is a morsel he will not forego for long."

"What are these rites, accursed one? Long have I asked, never have I learned fully what they are."

"Few could tell you but myself, who have looked into the Worm's mind when he was otherwise engaged. During the rites, a human is absorbed suddenly into the multi-body of the Worm. The human life becomes suddenly, by a mauling mass-impregnation, infected so full of the weird life that is in the Abyss that within hot, sudden, terrible hours of horror and unbearable sporting, the body becomes another thing, one more thing to fear for men."

"Why do the Brotherhood seek this fate, stranger?"

"We do not seek it, our eyes are blinded to it by lies. We meet the same fate as the sacrifice, but slowly, over a long period, so that we adjust to the change mentally and accept it as natural. When it happens suddenly, in a mass orgy of impregnation, as will happen to Rouge, the spirit sinks into revolting growth of a beastlike kind without preparation. It will be for her a witch's worst curse, her clear beauty suddenly growing before her own eyes into a bloated creature of Hell. For Rouge it is horror beyond horror. For Vana it would be justice."

THE party, a score in number, crowded about the reclining Morro curiously, wondering why this enemy talked to them openly of these hidden secrets of the Brotherhood. They were disguised themselves in the black cloaks and about their necks hung the stone crosses, small elaborate carvings of the Worm and the Cross, but Morro knew their disguise would serve them not at all. Their faces were too pink and natural, their eyes too unshadowed and clear, their mouths clean and unsullied by the habits of the Brotherhood, who lived upon wine and lechery and murder. No Brother he knew could accept these as sinners. What did they know of sin? Morro knew now why the

Hearts were in the beaten minority—they lacked an understanding, somehow, of what they faced. These were men, untouched by the serpents' blood, and they did not know the real difference between the men of the Abyss and natural men. Upon some of their faces were painted slight mottlings, simulating the appearance of many of the Brotherhood, but Morro knew their eyes gave them away.

These Hearts knew, too, that none of their number had ever entered the Abyss and returned successful, though some had managed to return unsuccessful, by dint of keeping wholly out of sight. So it was they knew only what had been tortured from captured spies, such as Mornon. And Mornon himself was a dupe who did not know the inner great secret of the Worm's nature. The Worm guarded that carefully, for few would enter his service knowing fully what awaited them. The Worm knew that when they learned finally it would be too late. But Morro had peered into his thoughts as he dallied with Vana, and had carried off the serpent's wisdom before his spirit had died wholly within him.

"We have but hours to save her from Vana. Kill me and you will never rescue her," Morro urged, as the tall white-haired leader drew a knife and stooped above him."

"How can we trust you?" the leader asked scornfully, drawing back his arm.

"Ask the young sprig, there; I saved his life in combat with four of my own kind, bearing Rouge downward. Wake him, and ask him!"

The leader bent over Clan Harn, and poured grog down his mouth from a flask.

"Who is this tall liar who lies wounded beside you," he asked, as the boy gasped and pushed the flask away.

"Is a friend, that one," moaned Clan,

seeing the knife in his leader's hand. "Kill him not. He is one who saw Rouge as we see her, and fought for her as we fight. He is in love with her . . ."

"That explains much," the chill lessened in the old man's voice. "We will let you live just so long as you show faith with us."

"Look here," Morro sat up, strength coming back, and rolled back his sleeves. There on his forearm over the veins were two round little holes, and around the holes the skin was white and bloated and oily—like the belly of a toad. "That was my reward for serving the Brotherhood, the Blood of the Worm. I knew not till too late what it meant, then Vana explained. I will become what the Worm himself has become. He was once a man, even as you. Even as I," Morro's voice trailed off in a brooding whisper.

"So you no longer worship the evil of the Abyss?"

"I never did; I accepted the way of life in which I was brought up. But this, this I did not expect. This worm turns, when struck. I will bite back . . ."

"Guide us!" The old Heart leader decided suddenly. "We have no chance of success, we are shamed into this by the boy here. We have never managed to raid the Abyss with success. Only by the help of such as you can we manage it. Lead us!"

Morro struggled to his feet, groaning, leaning on the old man for support. His head was bursting, and his wounds began to bleed as he moved. But he shook himself erect and started off down the dark tunnel into the depths. Behind him trailed the Heart men, single file, and at the end came Clan Harn, leaning on another for support.

THE big double metal doors, curiously worked with the monstrous

figure of the Worm intertwined, the fine horny growths spiralling over the outer parts of the door in many twistings—opened slowly to the hand of Morro. Silent, slow, he slid the key of Vana's giving back into his pocket, slid his feet noiselessly forward, sidled into the darken chamber. Silently the door closed behind him, in the faces of the waiting Hearts. Like a shadow Morro moved through the shadows, stood over Vana's naked figure sprawled across her couch, the gold-barred gown trailing where she had cast it. Faint the light, and Morro stood till his eyes made clear all the outlines, marked the faint reptilian shuddering running through all Vana's soft lovely body. He knew it meant she slept with her mind in the distant company of the Worm's thinking, and he waited, still as rock, till the faint writhing ceasing, and the body of Vana lay still before him, the long curve of neck and perfect chin and delicate nostril and deep shadowed eye like a black flower on perfect stem of white outline.

His knife he held then to the soft perfect throat, his hand he laid across the drooping, heavy red lips. Startled as they shaped into a kiss upon his palm, his reflex nearly ripped the knife across the smooth neck. Vana reached up and pushed the hand away from her mouth an inch, saying softly: "You return to me like a thief. I gave you my key to use openly, not in this way. Of what are you afraid?"

Morro's thoughts whirled, his whole intent and decision dissolving like a sugar in the hot flood of his sudden desire for Vana, his whole former nature rising up and saying in his mind: What are you doing, Morro, to turn thus upon all the fabric of success you have been building for so many years of risky labors? Why do you turn on this woman who has befriended you, and whom

your whole body and heart and mind desire as a dying man desires life? What is this knife doing in your hand? What has come over you?"

Morro said: "Strange things have happened! I have been captured by some Heart-men, sent here to rescue Rouge, and for my life I bargained to aid them in returning Rouge out of the grasp of the Worm. I know you have her here, for the time is not yet for the sacrifice. Give her to me, and I will live. Give her to the Worm, and I die."

"Since when has Morro feared the hatred of the Hearts? You have killed and looted rich homes above the abyss, have slain Hearts—why should you fear them? Go and bar the door, let them wait or flee, I will send for my killers to take them in the back if they stay . . ."

"It is not so simple, my Vana. Since the blood has been put into my veins, I know what is in store for us, and I like it not. I have sworn to get the girl for them, give her to me, or die."

Morro pressed a little on the knife, so that a gleaming thread of fresh blood ran down her white throat, and she writhed suddenly away from him, so that he reached with the other hand and grasped her by the hair, holding the curling mass of darkness, cascading perfume over his forearm and in his face, and again brought the knife blade against the throbbing whiteness.

"*You would kill me, Morro?*"

"Not really, Vana, for you will tell me where the girl lies, and the Hearts will take her and I go. I remain to love you and to consider what we can do to make life something to desire."

"The Master knows she is here and awaits the sacrifice, there is no escape! If we bring not the girl . . . he will take me or many, both of us, or all who are present. You know his anger by hearsay."

"TELL me, Vana, I do not want to kill you!" Again Morro pressed the blade, sliding it a little around the white, so that a ring of blood appeared under his hand. Vana gasped and fear came and raved in her eyes as she writhed her body and beat with her hands upon Morro's broad chest. Suddenly she sank her teeth in Morro's knife hand, but he pulled it free, and gradually the thrashing white naked limbs ceased, her eyes stared into his with a flickering desperate snake-like look, the big soft lips snarled back over the perfect teeth, and she lay still, gasping.

The big doors of the chamber opened behind Morro now, and the light streamed in upon Morro spread upon the wide bed beside the naked, wide-eyed woman, her body taut and shaking with fear now.

Clan Harn slid forward ahead of the others, and stooped over the two, hissing—"Did she tell? Can you get the place from her? Do not slay her without learning!"

Vana strained back to give her throat play for speech, said: "Do you swear, you Hearts, to give me life if I do speak?"

"We swear, woman of Evil, because we must, and not because we are pleased that you should live!" The gray leader was speaking truth, and his hand grasped a little white-stone Heart, symbol of truth, so that Vana's eyes saw it in his hand.

Vana smiled. "She is in the next room, bound upon the floor, the key is in the door where I left it. If you had looked, you could have taken her without all this fuss."

Clan whirled and was at the door in a flash, the Hearts after him. But Morro remained with his knife by Vana, a queer smile on his lips, thinking of anything and everything, and making sure

she did not summon men to wipe them out.

From the room the Heartmen entered came to Morro only a strange silence. That silence he could not figure. Then back to his side came Clan Harn, his face empty, his hands listless at his sides.

"She's gone. The rope that was about her is on the floor. She has been there, someone has taken her."

Vana sat erect within the circle of Morro's arms, tense as steel with shock. This meant her death! "She can't be gone, who could have . . ."

"I know who took her." Morro's voice was weary, a sick calm had come over him.

MORNON had watched the Hearts enter Vana's chambers, hiding himself with care behind the stalactites of the unused passage. The cunning of his nature drove him to listen, but he knew before the weary Morro where Rouge lay. Knew it by sound of her silent struggle, and by his own knowledge of where she would be most like to wait. To let himself in by the same door. To let himself in by the same door which had admitted Vana's hireling, to cut her ropes and lead her silently out was a deed he would never have attempted except for his fixed long determination to have her—to let nothing stop him. Marveling at his own foolhardy act, he led her away down the passage that lay unused among the many openings along that corridor.

Even as Clan swung open the door from Vana's bed chamber, Mornon had closed the outer door and left the pick-lock hanging in his haste. That pick-lock, perhaps alone, kept back the anger of the Hearts from Vana—and Morro had no strength to will her death. She had sworn to reveal the girl, and they had promised life, it was not just to

slay her if the girl had been stolen. And the pick-lock hanging, with the many little steel blades dangling, made it plain it was not Vana's doing.

So they trussed her, and left her lying cursing them upon her silken coverlets, and fled away, Morro leading them to safe hiding. Knowing it was asking for discovery and death to leave her there alive, they yet did so. And Morro knew again why the Hearts were the pursued and the few, and why the evil Brotherhood were dominant.

Morro puzzled, as they stole down the least-used passages toward where he surmised Moron would take the girl, as to how Mornon had learned so soon where the girl lay? But the question was resolved for him as he noted the watching slave, high among the concretions of the wall. Mornon had posted Vana's chambers, perhaps days before, to make sure nothing passed unobserved of him.

There was no point in speaking of the thing, it was of no import to anyone but himself. So they passed the slave's eye and went along the paths Morro selected today . . .

Morro knew helpless defeat as he saw the forces of the Brotherhood closing in. He knew that all the while they had been in Vana's chambers her mind had been communing with the Worm, and that to tell him was to tell all the mass of monstrous life in the abyss, and thus in turn the Brotherhood who served them.

HE HAD known all the while they stole nearer Vana's stronghold that if they missed the first cast there would be no more chances. That was why he had not bothered insisting on Vana's death, why nothing had mattered when he learned that Rouge was gone. He knew that unless they fled at once from the abyss, there would be

only death for them all. Still, while the girl lived, he knew he could not call off these Hearts, and did not try. It was fatalistic acceptance of unavoidable defeat that he saw the corridor they traveled suddenly blocked by the black figures of armed men, did not even turn his head to note the others at their rear. He was beaten, he had revolted, and fate had trapped his first effort for that new pale beautiful thing he called "good."

So it was that Morro stood again before the Worm, but under different conditions. Then he had been ignored as Vana's novice, given the blood without his leave as one too low in the scale to have an opinion. Now he stood before the Worm as an enemy, caught with the Hearts, and Morro lied manfully to save his life, though why it mattered any more he could not have said. Hate alone, hate of the growth of the Worms over men, gave him will to live. To be condemned meant that he would become in one mad orgy the thing that otherwise he would become in slow degrees during his lifetime. To be released would mean there was yet a chance to strike a blow that would hurt this thing the Brotherhood worshipped.

THE face of the Worm rose before the helpless men, vast, unutterably scornful of them and of all like them, proud, Luciferean, and to Morro completely imbecilic in its lack of understanding of true life-values. About the vast toad-belly, white brows had been placed a circlet of gem-set grey metal, the beauty of the workmanship making grotesque all the whole scene of the beastly mass of life behind the Face of the Worm. Peering around the head of the Worm were the distorted once-human faces of his horde of changeling monsters, their bodies intermingled in a rank unthinking oneness of contact,

their eyes looking out with a repetition of curiosity and greed for the coming orgy, their grotesque faces matching the vast hideous mask of the worm in their strange reptilian metamorphoses from the original pattern of Man. The points of the gemmed circlet upon the head of the Worm pointed outward, like the points of a halo, and as he swung his view, the great head twisted and the points dipped, and as the points dipped and rose, so dipped and rose the heads of the whole mimicking repetitive crew. Sickening, imbecilic, impossible that this less-than-human form of life should yet live longer and should have power over man. Yet it was so, and Morro stood there before him with the courageous invaders from above, waiting for the judgment of this vast inhuman mass of lusting, heedless life.

"Speak, you helpless fools who thought to thwart the minions of the Abyss. Speak, and defend your right to life, or you shall find life suddenly become another thing within you!"

The vast voice of the Master came startling clear to Morro, who had not heard the thought-voice of the Worm used before communication, had only heard his weird oral talk with Vana, and watched his thought flows unnoticed.

Clan Harn, young and foolish enough to hope, stepped forward, facing the terrible hideousness of the King of the Abyss with a trembling in his limbs but none in his voice, which rose clear and boyish in a strained treble of mingled pleading and defiance.

"We came here merely to rescue one of our maidens from an abductor. As such, we are not trespassers nor invaders, and none of the rules of warfare apply. Our errand was mercy to a young girl, and your judgment should bear in mind we meant harm to one one who had not harmed us."

The rest of the Hearts seemed to think this was enough, and only nodded their heads to show Clan had stated their defence fully enough, for all the good it would do. They were apathetic and resigned to death.

"You, Morro, sturdy Brother of the Cross, how come you to be taken in company with these Hearts?" The Worm's voice was velvet thought, smooth and pleasant to the ears, as he addressed Morro. Morro considered it a good omen and took up his defense with vigor.

"These Heart men captured me when I lay unconscious after a fight with a robber. They forced me to guide them in search for the maiden they seek. I was nothing loath, for it was the same man who had struck me from behind."

"And who was that man?"

"Mornon, a man from above the abyss. He stole the girl from the Heartmen for himself, and not for the revels of the brotherhood, but for his private pleasure. Since it was a private theft, no one balked but Mornon the double-spy, I saw no wrong in helping the Heart men."

THE vast head of the Worm nodded left and right, and all the crew behind him nodded left and right, mimicking unconsciously his thought with their own. Inside Morro the same swaying was felt like ripples of force so that he unconsciously swayed left and right, and the Hearts noted it, and drew away from him. Was it that that saved him, or was it that just then Vana stepped out of the great dark-way door from the side passage, walking with her own peacock undulation straight to the Head and caressing his lips with her hands.

"This Morro was truly forced to accompany the invading warriors. Give him to me, and I will make his punish-

ment fit his crime."

Morro was again startled that Vana should speak for him, and his eyes, dazzled by the glitter of the little golden sequins everywhere upon her, filled with the sight of her flesh and her beauty and the promise that her body gave every male eye, followed her every gesture as she explained to the Worm in his own guttural forgotten tongue just what in her opinion had occurred.

Morro noted that when Vana spoke to the Worm in oral speech no one could tell from his thought of what they spoke, and none who spoke not the tongue could then tell what they were discussing. But that while they spoke thus the other thoughts of the Worm not couched in words, became clear to a listener. That the two thought flows were then as divergent as a man's day-dreams while he delivered a prepared speech.

Morro could not take his eyes off the figure of Vana, all golden shimmer and vibrant white flesh, the strength of the Worm-power flowing through her, the hideous form and lubberly malignant face and far reaching coils of the Worm's body stretching out of sight and all silhouetting with dark, utter obese turgidity the slender glowing lines of Vana's lovely body. The contrast made her beauty infinitely more devastating, and Morro wondered what this woman might have become if she had not fallen under the incrassate hand of the Worm.

MMORRO'S eyes roved on across the myraid openings of the warrens beyond where the monsters bedded, and back to the surrounding dark-robed glittering-eyed assembled Brotherhood, all waiting wet-lipped for the coming rites of the transfiguration. That this transfiguration was at once a punishment and a reward, depending on how

it was administered, was a puzzle to which he knew most of the answers. He knew that to a mind not accustomed to experiencing depravity and the delights of sin, this change was revolting, while to a mind prepared by years of custom it was but a life-change of a natural kind. That these Brothers discussed this change among themselves, laughing that virtue and innocence should make of the victim a sufferer by self causation, he did not know well, not having been initiate into the inner councils until Vana had taken him up. He would have seen through their self-delusion of superiority in desiring something the virtuous and inexperienced considered horrible, and have understood that they had lost already the inner fibre of self which makes a man individual, rather than beast, or ant-like slave.

He dreaded what was to come, hoping almost that he himself would not have to witness what was to occur, by reason of being first to be taken. But this was not to be. The first Heart was condemned by a wave of Vana's hand, from where she stood talking into the huge ear of the Worm, and the head nodded as the man was led toward the center of the fane. He was left, standing there unbound and apparently free, to await a fate he could not know. Morro was consumed with a morbid curiosity as to the details of the profane unction and regeneration.

Now over the whole assembly, filling the vast chamber of the fane, spread a vibrant penetrating intoxication, a bawdy, obscene-pictured invitation to infernal bacchanalia. Mentally penetrating, the stuff seemed a misty kind of flow of scent or miasma given off by both the mind and the body of the whole vast mass of life-redundance slow-rolling, coiling ponderously, striding and sliding forward; while the multi-mind

of the monsters created a compulsion of voluptuous abandonment to carnality. Ahead of them moved the vast rotund female obesity of the Mother of Monsters, a figure known everywhere by legend, but seldom seen. She picked up the figure of the lone Heart, he seemed unable to run or move, and she did a thing to him that made the hardened Morro retch. The screaming, undulating still-living victim was then passed on to the next, and the mass-mind of them made the whole scene seem infinitely satisfying to some basic hunger. Morro's eyes watched the man's figure as it went through each pair of monstrous pad-hands, and waited for the ultimate change to show what he would become. For each of them was putting into the victim some strange body secretion, which caused the screaming body to swell and distort and swell with some fecund, devouring insemination of cell-matter, and within short minutes he was no longer recognizable as human. Back and back along the mass of strangely distorted gigantic human and serpentine crew of hybrid monstrous compromise of the flesh-pattern of man with some alien thing the victim passed, and in the end Morro saw he was indistinguishable or totally absorbed by them.

ONE by one the other Heart men followed, and Morro, casting an eye upon Vana's ecstatic writhing enjoyment of the vicious Saturnalia, saw again as he had seen before through the mind of the vast Worm himself, who in turn was slow-rolling his coils in pleasure as he watched, and with his vast power of mind, augmenting into vision the mental torments of the living growth-galvanized minds of the victims. As young Clan Harn was taken up, he saw the terrible shock of outraged humanity within him, the weird repulsion

of alien growth-spores sweeping through all his body, the fighting ego of the man going down to defeat before a change so opposed to his nature as to mean vastly more than death. This sudden subjugation of the natural virtue of the man to an intense ravishment by something so Evil in its appearance and in its effect upon his own body as it swiftly changed his own nature and

self into another and opposite thing; a thing enamoured of rabid, fiery lusting, a vigorous, thumping "monstrous horrendum deforme"—a ponderous rut of bestiality . . . Watching the gorgeous inner nature of youth and youth's desire suddenly transmuted by surging fearful steps into a vast appetite of distorted degeneration, a mis-shapen unending soul taking the place of ego

He pressed the knife a little deeper into Vana's lovely throat



within him—this orgy of unnatural transmutation of beauty into something so fearfully powerful, yet so vastly much less than life-beauty, less than the fruition of man-life—all this taking place again and again while the weird projectional vibrating miasma of monstrous imagery of pleasure that was yet a contradiction of all human elegance and splendour—was the opposite pole of reptilian lust made manifest in curiously ornate mental projections of carnality indescribable, and to a natural man, devastatingly revolting to the extent of infinite pain.

Morro understood now why this revolting licentiousness of the monsters was a fearful punishment. And watching Vana's ecstasy as she partook of the intense vibrant field of thought generated by the whole mass-mind in the great room of the Worm's fane, Morro knew that what lived within her skull, —was not human! Morro knew that the fluid pulsing within her veins was no longer woman's blood, but some rep-

tilian ichor of impossible blend of human-female with reptile-female.

AT LAST, at fearful long last, it was all over, and Morro breathed again, not so much in relief at his own escape, but that the girl Rouge, with her finely tuned sensitive mind and perfect body had not been brought to be cast as one more faggot on this blaze of Sin's ugliest fires.

The coiling many-bodied mass of hybrid monstrous life retracted again into it's many-chambered bed behind the great stone parapet where the Worm himself coiled and held his court, and the mist of fantastically exciting carnal-pictured thought-penetrating vibrant exudation died slowly away, as some unearthly marsh-mist dies before the fresh morning breeze.

Vana paced slowly beside the exhausted Morro, not yet rested from his exertions and injuries of the preceding hours, paced and undulated and looked up into his dark, brooding eyes, filled



now with a loathing for all life, including his own.

The touch of her hip against his own still roused a flicker of the same witch-fire within him, but knowing what it was truly made his whole soul to sicken in realization of the corruption of his life and of all in the Abyss. The glitter of her bright serpent eyes excited him, but knowing the glitter was truly a reptilian deadly infection, Morro found within him a will to hate Vana and the understanding her influence had brought to him. But for her work he would still have considered his life as worth living and enjoying. Her voice seemed to come from afar::

"Are you fearful of having saved you from the wrath of the Worm, you have but to expect some subtle revenge of much worse kind from me?" asked Vana, putting all the husky saccharine of desire into her voice, and sliding her palm along Morro's arm where the torn black sleeve left the dark-mossed muscles bare.

"I am weary, Vana. Weary and disillusioned to learn that all the power and majesty and wisdom of the Worm, the Master whom I have served from afar for so long, is but a monstrous parasite upon man-life, and no glorious alien God come to make life interesting at all."

"You must not speak such words! Morro, I have love for you, but I cannot protect you if such words are repeated." Vana seemed truly alarmed for his safety, and Morro wondered if there really was still a woman existant within this Worm's foul tool of a body, or if this was but some part of the Master's next gambit in the game, some subtle disarming move of effect upon him, to use him toward some end Morro could not yet see.

"You love me, hah! Is that irony, or jest, or just the foul face of unreason-

able truth speaking?"

"'Tis truth, unreasonable as you may take it to be. In spite of the amorous maneuvers of prostration to the strength and male-ness of the Master which I go through for the sake of the power it brings—I am still a human, and will remain so for long years yet. Long years of youth and beauty, Morro, which I can give to you! You must understand that appearances are not always truth! Why should you, Morro, the assassin and worse that you have been, be squeamish as to how you receive the good things of life, so be that you receive them? Such things cannot be bought without a price."

"I, too, have a price, Vana. If what you say is true, I can be bought."

". . . and the price, my Morro?"

"**T**HAT you aid me to set free this young innocent from above the Abyss, this, Rouge of the Hearts. Morron has her, I hate Morron, and I have set myself to free the girl. It is a peculiarity of mine that what I set hand to, I do not lay aside unfinished."

Vana paused, the blood rushed to her face in sudden rage, making of her beauty a quick mask of fury and hate. "You have fallen for that young fool's sweet face, and seek to cajole me into helping you flee with her! Nay, Morro, not this one will be your dupe. If I say it, you will be taken again, and this time not escape. You are mine, and I'll not raise a hand to save that fool child from all the fires of Hades."

Morro did not answer, walking wearily along beside her. He did not care greatly about anything. He had that apathy peculiar to old men and sinners, wherein all values are negative, and only the young are happy to see, or worth striving for. He could give Rouge back a clean life if he could free her, otherwise he saw little in life worth

worrying about. There was no great prize to win, no goal worth striving for, nor bright promise in his future, no nothing but this sleek Hell-cat beside him, and the gradual change of his own body into the filthy sprawling unit of that mass of corruption behind the Face of the Worm. And how Vana could look forward to anything of the kind with placid acceptance as natural, inevitable and even desirable because it was not death . . .

"Because I do not have your ideals and concepts of life as anything glorious or wonderful or even different!"

"You have been listening to my thought. I had forgotten that you could, that all of the ancient blood can. So you, too, come of the blood of Ran the Hearer. I had thought you acquired all your powers from the gifts of the Worm."

"No, I think that he feared me because of that, even as he feared you and wanted you when he learned what you were. He seeks to keep all with the ancient gifts in his special watch, he does not care for enemies who can know his mind unknown to himself."

"So we are both victims of the Worm, rather than favored servants?"

"Morro, you will *have* to revise all your thinking! Things that you have always seen as such-and-such are not rightly that way. Your mind, truth, reality, men and their needs and desires, your own needs and desires and appetites, are things that can be seen in many ways. Why should you think more of a man's life than an insects? Why should should even stamping out the whole human race be more important to you than stepping upon an ant's nest? Why worry, Morro? Take the cash of pleasure; let the credit, the idealistic striving after impossible goals of good life for men, the rewards by some impossible Fate above us—let the

credit go! It is a lie!"

"Vana, I had not known you gave serious thought to such problems. I had considered that I alone of all men here in the sink of the Brotherhood, gave any time to thought upon such deep subjects."

"I HAVE thought long, I have had my moments of regrets for the evil I do, and I have decided that it is truly of no more moment than the life of a midge fly whether this man or that survives, whether this Rouge is given to the orgy of the Rites, or some other less innocent and kindly person."

"How can one who speaks so, still have passion, have hate of the beauty of Rouge, have envy and petty spite? . . . Why did you send to have her brought to you, if it is not important to you whether Rouge survives or not?"

"I tell you, Morro, I am not reciting philosophic phrases from memory as you think. I have truly thought these thoughts, and I *do* still have passion and hate. Of all the things I enjoy in life, one of the greatest joys is being spoken of and looked at as the most beautiful woman of all the caverns. Since the young Rouge has come into her full bloom, she is spoken of instead of Vana. I cannot abide to lose the things I enjoy, not any least loss will I stand for, who have paid in full for every pleasure with my very blood and my body to the Worm. She must die, and to you it must be unimportant, but to me, my vanity is my pleasure to indulge, and she balks me of that. Since it does not matter truly whether there is one more or one less human on earth, or any at all . . . why should I worry about her, if it pleases me to kill her?"

"Because I ask you to forget your envy, and promise you my service and obedience. You seem to place a value on me, to have me willingly you must

do this for me. Taken by your own words it does not matter. Therefore for one bagatelle, receive another—myself.”

Vana laughed, silvery, tinkling, weirdly empty sound, inhuman yet lovely.

“Very well, Morro. I accept your offer. You have my leave to kill Mornon, and conduct the sweet pure maid to her home. Then return, or *I will find a way to bring you* that you will not relish. Return, and find your service pleasant, if not productive of any good for anything alive.”

Morro bent and kissed her, for they had reached the great metal doors of her chambers, and for a moment he watched her wonderingly as she pulled the release knob, and swayed there for a moment, breath-taking in her grace and vivid life, yet somehow pitiful to that thing in Morro that had been so lately born.

What that thing was, what it might be that had revolted against all he had formerly thought fixed and immutable, Morro could not analyze. Whether hatred and anger at the vile thing that had seized him through his own blood, or whether the magic of potent lightning that dwelt in the whiteness of Rouge had bemused his normal sanity into a madness that he mistook for sober judgment, he could not say. For Morro did not know that a race has its hidden ties, between each man and each woman, strong motivating strings that control his comings and his goings, and that through sight of Rouge the Mother of Man had thrown about his soul a golden lasso of compulsion that all of Sin's bright lure could not dissolve, that all the weird mental tampering of the Worm's vast life-force could not untie the ancient knot of that rope. Morro could not know clearly that he was a tool of the race of man, working

for the fecund clean motherhood latent in the body of Rouge, against the alien corroding spawning of the horde in the Abyss.

SUMMING up these strange influences so suddenly moving him about in spite of his own reason to the contrary—Morro thought upon the ants of the ant-hill, and likened himself to a man-ant working for the Queen, and that Queen the mother of Rouge, the future Queen. And so translating his confused thought into possible simple images, he understood why he sought Mornon with death in his heart.

So considering, Morro lifted the little knob that Vana had just lifted, and went in to her, for burning in his mind was the shimmering slender grace and the animal lure of her, and somehow what she said about man and his pursuit of the impossible deadened the control of the golden lasso of light that his own race sought to move him through. She turned from where she postured before her mirror, the golden sequins in a tiny pile on the floor at her feet, and slid her hands slowly down the long sweet-curving lines of her body, and shivered delicately toward him, her mouth a questioning *oh* of surprise and delight that he should enter now after deciding to continue with his quest for the girl Rouge.

“Did you change your mind, Morro?”

“I am too weary, perhaps, or needed to know better you would not do something to thwart me, or could not resist knowing you waited here for me—who knows why a man does what he does. The girl can wait, I guess.”

“You could never find her, anyway. Mornon is not such a fool as to hide her where she could be taken away by any man's hand.”

“That may be. Perhaps I entered to you to learn where she might be looked

for." Morro sat in the wide armed leather chair, watching the slave girls wash the white lovely body of Vana, watching them rub her with scented oil, and curl again the hair that had become disarranged—and leave her there before him, nude and scented and curled and smilingly standing there regarding him.

Weariness swept over him then, and his head nodded. Nodded down on his breast and stayed there, and his breath began to come in the deep sound of heavy sleep. Vana stamped her foot in vexation, but after a moment called her girls again, and they stripped off his torn and soiled clothing and walked him, still sleeping on his feet, toward the wide soft silken bed of Vana, and stretched him out upon it, sound asleep. And Vana slid her sensuously shivering body in beside him and caressed his sleeping form with soft slow fingers, and presently fell asleep beside him.

CHAPTER V

*Such wealth of gold, old work of giants,
 . . . now the Worm lies low,
 gaze on that hoard 'neath the hoary
 rock,
 stare at the structure of giants,
 arching stone and steadfast column
 uphold forever that hall in earth.
 Beowulf (xxxvlll)*

THERE was rage among the White Hearts and desperation. The loss of their proud young Rouge, the loss of their best men in the failure to rescue her, caused the Hearts to gather together and decide upon a desperate move long planned and prepared for, but put off through possible danger to all their people and to themselves. Now their desperation made them see that this risk was nothing to the risk of letting the Worm and his mutant crew

absorb all the natural life of the caverns into his evil growth, and certain men from the Hearts took great casks of powder and fuses, and went up and up toward the surface. There, where the rock walls of the caverns were always wet with the water from a river overhead, the casks were placed, one after another in a long row, and the rock was cunningly examined overhead so that the powder was placed where the roof was already weakened. The fuses were lit and the Hearts went back to their city on the rim of the Abyss to wait—for what they knew might slay them all as well as the monstrous life below them.

The explosion echoed through all the tunnels with that peculiar deafening repetitive reverberation which is known only to underworld men—and deafened and frightened the people of the city ran out of their burrows and their holes in the wall, out of their wooden shacks and shops, out of their sweat-shops and slave factories, and stood staring toward the vast roof above that was a thing seldom looked at, for it never changed.

Down, down upon them poured the great river of silvery, gleaming water, splashed and churned upon the lip of abyss, and leaped over into the misty vastness below with a sound like thunder, with a roar and a churn and shrill hissing; *fell, boiling and streaming wide* in the still cavern air—down and down and out of sight below in the mists.

The Hearts then set guards about the tunnel that reached down into the abyss, and went home and waited, with their weapons ready. If their engineers and their spies were correct, there were few openings below to carry off the waters of the river they had released to thunder down into the cauldron of the Abyss. If they were right, soon

the Brotherhood would come clambering up that narrow way, seeking safety—and they would find steel and death only from the Hearts.

Below, the river formed a vast spreading pool about the wall where it struck and boiled and crashed and swirled, spreading outward, reaching for the tunnels and corridors and dens, flowing, spreading, rising.

Along all the many branching tunnels of the warrens of the brotherhood, along those evil streets, ran the black-clothed wearers of the Serpent's Cross; ran their women and their few monstrous children; toward the tall rock of the bast Black Cross. The Worm would know where they could go to escape the flood, the Master would save them!

Fast as they raced, the water raced, too! Morro awoke on the silken couch, turned over to see Vana lying naked beside him, turned back to see the black water spreading, swirling, burbling from under the door.

He sprang from the bed and clutched his torn clothings, pulling them on while he shouted to Vana to awaken. Not even waiting he buckled on his belt with his knife, and raced through the door into water above his ankles. Water that rose even as he watched!

On his mind was a picture of Rouge, chained as he had found her in the gardens above, somewhere in these Hell-warrens where Mornon had found a hiding place for her! Chained, and the water rising, and himself sleeping by the evil Vana! A self-loathing such as he had never known came over him, and he raced off toward where his guess placed the girl, from his knowledge of the few places he could have hidden her. Behind him he heard Vana screaming after him, and his heart tugged that way, too, and his logic told him Rouge did not even love him, while Vana had a great need of him.

BUT that strange thing that had happened to him led him on in pursuit of the shining face of virtue, leaving behind the woman who wanted him, for the sake of the woman who did not. "Virtue," logic shrieked in his mind, "is not anything but a fool's marsh-light, men pursue it but it does not exist on earth! Men dream of it, but cannot find it practical, or anything that truly can *be* in any way." But on he went, seeing only the face of the trapped girl as he imagined she was trapped, thinking only of living a life-time without sight of her . . . while his conscience told him that he could have saved her if he had tried. He could not face that!

Now as he sped around the worm-like twistings of the round burrows of rock, behind him came a splashing and a screaming, and the lithe near-naked figure of Vana splashing after him.

"You wouldn't leave me to drown, Morro? Please wait for me, I don't know where to go to escape the water!"

Morro shouted back to the woman to run, then, and keep up if she wanted to live, and did not slacken his pace. Slipping and falling, she followed, her breath a flame in her throat, her legs not able to keep up the furious pace. But she kept him in sight for a long way, falling at last on her face, unable to rise alone. There she lay, the water washing over her face and refreshing her. Her half-strangled breath coming easier, she raised herself on her elbows, struggled to her feet—and on after the echo of his feet, after the faint shrill mud streaks where his feet had touched the stone beneath the water.

In Vana's heart burned a fire that was not the witch-fire of lust, not the evil spawning cells of the Worm's reptilian blood causing erotic appetite, but the desperation of a natural woman losing her mate, who seeks to keep him,

even in the death she believed was coming to all in the Abyss.

On and on she struggled, falling, rising to choke out the water in her lungs, struggling on into the increasing darkness and the heavier and deeper swirl of the black water—after Morro.

Morro, the woman behind him not forgotten, yet raced on toward the hidden cell where he surmised Mornon had hidden the girl—if what he had learned of the man's doings was correct.

Past him fled the men and women of the abyss, female shrieking and male cursing as they fled—where, they knew not, but higher, higher, somewhere the water could not rise!

Morro's knife was red in his hand where he had plunged it into men in his path, men gone mad with fear and berserk in their killing. Berserk himself, if he had but known, berserk to save a girl because . . . why, he was not sure, except that something she bore in her of *life* should never be snuffed out on this earth, and what the name of that *life* was he could not say.

THE passage dipped sharply, the water rose to his neck, Morro swam, his hand touching the roof in his stroke. Then the roof came down, and he swam under water, lungs bursting, for what seemed hours. Behind him Vana turned back, stood waist deep, leaning against the rough rock wall, weeping bitterly. She did not turn back to seek safety, but stood watching the water, feeling it rise coldly about her breast, paddling it with her hands, and weeping with great sobs that had too deep meaning to her for words. Gone was the magic and power of the Worm's mind pouring its vision and its lust through her, gone was her sensing of the strength of power, gone was her lust to vaunt over other women her beauty and her eminence. Vana stood while the water rose

to her neck, weeping . . . for a man of courage who had scorned her, at the last!

His lungs afire, his hands beating feebly, Morro rose at last again to where the roof receded and left air above the water. *Here*, here was the place, his mind told him; beyond the dip of the tunnel, here was the cell's door, and if his guess was right, here was the door hiding Rouge!

His hands sought under the seething water for the lock, found it, and it gave not at all. Heavy timbers, the door; wrought iron, the lock; Morro knew that door, and cursed.

Lunged his shoulder against the rough wood, the water holding him to weakness, and his curses sounding only futile silliness in the face of death.

Lunged, and lunged again, while his flesh pounded to a pulp against the wood, his shoulder bleeding, his strength going. The latch turned . . .

Suddenly the heavy door gave, plunging him in to fall in the water, and a soft hand raised his head out of the black heavy ripples, and a soft voice:

"It is you again! I *knew* you would come! Devil you may think yourself, but your actions are whiter than any Heart!"

"There is no time, maiden who bears a greater magic than beauty, I am too late! But come, take my hand, we will try."

Even as he took her hand in his own, a corner of wood bumped against Morro's arm in the water, he reached and touched it—a rude bench of a split log from the surface, old and dry and light—floating high!

"Lie on the wood, girl. I will bind you to it, it will keep you afloat as long as there is room to float—hurry."

"I could not hear you pounding on the door, but I felt it, saw it shake . . . I released the latch. He said to open

to no one but himself, but I knew he would come through this flood to save me. I am chained, can you get it loose? Mornon has the key . . .”

Morro twisted the leg chain about his two wrists, put all his legs and back into a pull, groaned in agony as the chain cut in—and the links snapped!

SWIFTLY he bound her to the bench, pushed it floating through the door, swam now, pushing it ahead of him, back the way he had come.

The current flowed with him, which seemed wrong, for it would flow deeper into earth, and Morro suspected, as the Hearts knew with certainty, that the flood of water the river above was pouring into the Abyss would not be borne away, but would rise and rise until . . .

Again he plunged into the deeper part, swimming hard, pushing the weighted bench ahead, lungs burning, on and on . . . and surely no man could live under water. But at last he came again to the farther side, and swam on, and now his feet touched rocks again, and he went faster—toward the suspicious safety of the great open place of the mighty Abyss, where the Black Cross reared its evil symboling high.

About him now floated bodies of dead men, of dead women, and the clutching hands of drowning, and the floor dipped and he swam, rose again and he walked.

The sound of bitter sobbing came to him from ahead, and he saw a woman, with only her face and the black flood of floating hair all around her white shoulders—shoulders faintly mottled with the Serpent's evil change.

She it was who sobbed, and stood, waiting for death. Vana!

Morro stopped before her, and reached with one big hand and raised her face, looking at her face, for weeping and Vana were two things he had

thought forever apart.

Slowly her eyes cleared, and she looked at his dark, bristled face, the eyes so strange and wild yet Morro's—and she stopped her sobbing, sighing out:

“You return! With you is Rouge . . . will you leave me here, now? Is she more beautiful than I, Morro?”

“If you place your hand on my shoulder, and swim a little, we may be able to reach the open spaces yet.”

Vana obeyed like a child, and resting one hand on his shoulder, paddled along as he walked with his feet on the floor.

Presently they were both swimming side by side, with one hand on the buoyant old log bench. Ahead of them Rouge stretched out along the flat side of the bench, her head near Morro's and her eyes upon Vana's dark wet head, swimming now as easily as an otter, and very like one in her sinuous motion, her sleek wet head tilted toward Morro.

“So you do not know yet which of us is your woman? And I was weeping for a battle not yet lost! A woman can be a fool! But why did you worry about the Heart wench, if you have still a thought for me?”

Morro only looked at her, a puzzled smile on his face. “I had thought there was no heart in you, Vana. And I find you weeping. Are not tears a sign of a human emotion?”

“PERHAPS I have found I am not yet monster, not yet wholly a thing inhuman—with the Worm frightened by the water's rise, perhaps he has lost his hold on me and left my natural self to guide my body? Who can say why a woman weeps? Certain it is, I do not seem to care for life now without you, Morro. I had thought to use you, I find myself wanting something quite different from the thrill of being your conqueror, your mistress, of making

you my slave. Something has appeared in me that is not evil, and it is hard for me to understand such things, who have been so long the servant of the influence of the things that rule us. Can you understand, Morro? The rule of the Worm's mind over me has broken suddenly, I am a woman, and I love you!"

"It is too late, I think, for both of us. Vana, I understand what is in your heart well enough. But it is too late!"

Rouge turned her eyes from one face to the other, these two swimming and guiding her little raft onward through the now so low tunnel, those two were beyond her understanding, too. What but love could have brought this assassin, this slave of the Worm, this Black Brother, evil and strong above others of the Brotherhood, this thing-to-be-hated—should yet be seen to be noble and self-sacrificing, and yet it seemed it was *not* love that moved him! And this woman, who had for long been the symbol of evil wanton cruelty to her and all other Hearts—should suddenly talk like a love-sick girl! In spite of herself Rouge gave a little hysterical laugh. Vana raged:

"Laugh, you innocent, you cheap little ignorant, who knows nothing of love or life or evil either! Laugh and I'll turn you off that piece of lumber and take it for myself!"

Morro laughed too, and pushed the raft on and now before them loomed the lighter higher roof, and ahead could be heard the roar of the vast cataract pouring its waters into the lake that the floor of the abyss had become.

Out into that flood Morro guided the frail craft, and beside him swam the woman of the abyss, and now against them bumped the great flat area of a banquet table.

The three clambered onto the wide surface and lay there, Morro and Vana

panting with deep exhaustion, lying still and motionless, while Rouge pulled her knees to her chin and looked with a child's awe upon the vast leaping arc of powerful pouring like a Titan's silver hair out, out from the lip of the precipice above, roaring into the vast boil of water, their raft surging and swaying and turning swiftly around in the eddying, maddened, swirling water.

HERE and there in the boil could be seen the white face of a corpse, turning idly as it lifted in the upsurge, and turning away and sinking again like a lost soul. Or a swimmer lifting weary arms, at last to give up and sink silently down forever. Here and there were rafts of odd chairs and table and planks bound together, and on them the black ropes of the Brethren, or the vivid fabrics of their women.

FOR all of them expected death when the water raised them high enough for the people of the upper caverns to reach them—or if it did not, death from floating and waiting and drowning to ease the pain of starving.

Time wore on, and the thunder of the falling water went on, and the spume and spray caused a heavy mist to rise in the vastness of the abyss, so that one could see but a few feet. And over there in the dimness Morro saw the vast white belly of the monster-man turning, white as a toad-belly, the great arms and fingers still, the whole thing the size of a whale in the dimness. And Morro knew now that the Worm-life could not survive the water! And in that part of him that was still life surged a great thankfulness; and in that other part that was not human but reptilian alien, was a deep hurt, a feeling of severance keen as a knife wound, and Morro was sure now, which was self and which was hated enemy

within him.

Time wore on, the water rose and rose, and at last they sighted the rocky lip of the precipice but a few feet away, and a dozen yards overhead. The vast abyss had filled to the brim with the waters of the mighty river the Hearts had let in on them!

Now Morro shouted, and to the edge of the cliff above came men, and cursed them:

"Shouting for help, Brother? Take your Black Cross and pray to it, all will be well! We have had enough of monster and servant, stay there and drown!"

The raft drifted on, and Morro looked at the soft round body of Rouge, sunk now in weariness to a restless sleep, and his eyes ran down the flower-blushed skin of her neck and into the promise of delight that was the swell of her upper bosom, and rested on the fair flower of faint scarlet on one white round, and his breath sobbed in his throat, and the part of him that was human became alive as if it too, was cut with a knife, and Morro knew how it felt to be dead, and to see Heaven and not be let in the gates.

Morro set up a shouting again, and his throat swelled above the black moss of his chest, and his voice rang out like a deep bell aswing under water. A woman came to the lip of the Abyss and looked down, and saw the two women stretched out white and lovely and hateful to her, she cursed them and began to fling down stones upon them.

A man came to her side, to see what it was she stoned, and a look of recognition came into his eyes, and his hand seized the woman's arm about to cast another great stone so that it slipped and fell, bruising her face.

"That is our own beautiful Rouge, what man could see her face once and forget it!"

The man took the woman by the shoulder and elbow and led her away out of sight in haste. Morro sighed, for his time was near, now.

WITHIN short minutes five men came to the lip of jagged rock, and looked down, and nodded to each other, and a long rope snaked down, falling into the water beside them.

Morro made the rope fast about the shoulders of the Heart girl, Rouge, knotting it cunningly and carefully, sighing again and again as his hands touched the soft white beauty of her breast. His face was like a Demon's truly now, as he looked up at the men above, a Demon who has looked into things no mere mortal man can understand.

"Careful, you fools, take her up easily, she will be hurt against the rocks . . . Take her, and care for her if you are men enough!"

Swaying, the white long body, curved and sweet and made by a god for caresses—Rouge passed upward. Her eyes were on Morro's dark, intense face, eyes drinking in his fierce spirit, the wide planes of his strong jaws, the dark bristle of his beard, the deep-set eyes sparking with a fire greater than any other, a courage and a strength in him almost repellant to her, yet not so at all! And the mist swallowed up that face, and tears sprang out on her eye lashes and ran down the soft bloom of her cheek, bitter tears wetting her lips with a loss she would never forget.

Rouge said not a word to the men who took the rope from about her shoulders, nor smiled at their greeting, her face was stony and wet with tears as they led her away toward her home.

The men debated each with the other, and at last decided—and the rope was again cast down to the raft below.

A bellow from the mist was startling

to their unexpected ears:

"Fools, do you want to raise more of the Serpent's Children? Have you not had enough of the Worm? *Let not a man out of the Abyss, nor a woman! In them is the seed of the Worm, a living seed. Take your rope, for us is death!*"

The end of the rope came sailing at them, flung so hard it came coiling and whirling, on above their heads to snap out of their hands and fall in a long twisting snarl behind them. And it was a marvel to them that the falling rope made the great symbol of the Worm upon the rocks, falling into the sign they feared, the Evil sign of the Brotherhood!

Looking down, the fearful men saw a great dark-browed brother in the black of the Worm's servants, and in his hand was a knife. His lips were pressed to a woman's, a white body shivering sensuously all along his own, a dark flower of evil her face, the eyes closed in ecstasy. And as he kissed her, the knife sank slowly, slowly into the soft breast, and the woman did not scream, but only kept her burning lips upon his.

* * *

Such was the end of evil for the people of the caverns above the Abyss.

THE END

NAPOLEON'S ORACULUM



By J. R. MARKS



A CURIOUS book on divination was found in Napoleon's cabinet at Leipsic during the confusion that followed the defeat of the French army. He regarded it highly and consulted it prior to his most important undertakings. This book, which was at that time five hundred years old, was written in German. It contained a table which was called the oraculum, at the top of which was a column of dots similar to those found on dice, but arranged in a different manner. The way he found out what was about to happen was to ask a question and the answer, whether

favorable or unfavorable, was found according to the number and position of the dots opposite the question. There was also a table of the letters of the alphabet from A to Q, the exact position of which had to be observed in looking into the future. There were also days when it was unfavorable to consult the oraculum. Bonaparte took satisfaction in consulting his book for many years, but in the end it failed to save him from the disaster of Waterloo and the disgrace of St. Helena.

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ANCIENT MEDICAL MAGIC



By H. R. STANTON



ONE of the great advantages of medical magic is that it allows the cure to be performed on the doctor instead of the patient. The victim is relieved of all the trouble and inconvenience while his medical man writhes in anguish before him. The peasants of Perche, France, have the impression that vomiting is caused by the stomach coming unhooked and falling down. So a doctor is called in to put it back in place. He throws himself around in all sorts of horrible positions until he thinks his own stomach is unhooked. Then he goes through another series

of contortions and wild grimaces for the purpose of hooking it up again. The patient expresses relief and pays the practitioner five francs.

A Dyak medico, when called to the bedside of a patient, will lie down and pretend to be dead. He is treated just like a corpse, wrapped up in mats and carried out of the house, and placed on the ground. In a couple of hours another doctor will unwrap him and bring him to life; and as he recovers, it is the custom for the sick man to recover also.

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IMPOSSIBLE BUT TRUE

In the year 1887 an Alaskan prospector was stunned with the sight of an amazing city that suddenly appeared in the sky above the cold desolation around him. The city might have been Aztec or Oriental in design. But one thing he was sure of—he had seen it, suspended in full detail overhead.

