

PULSE POUNDING

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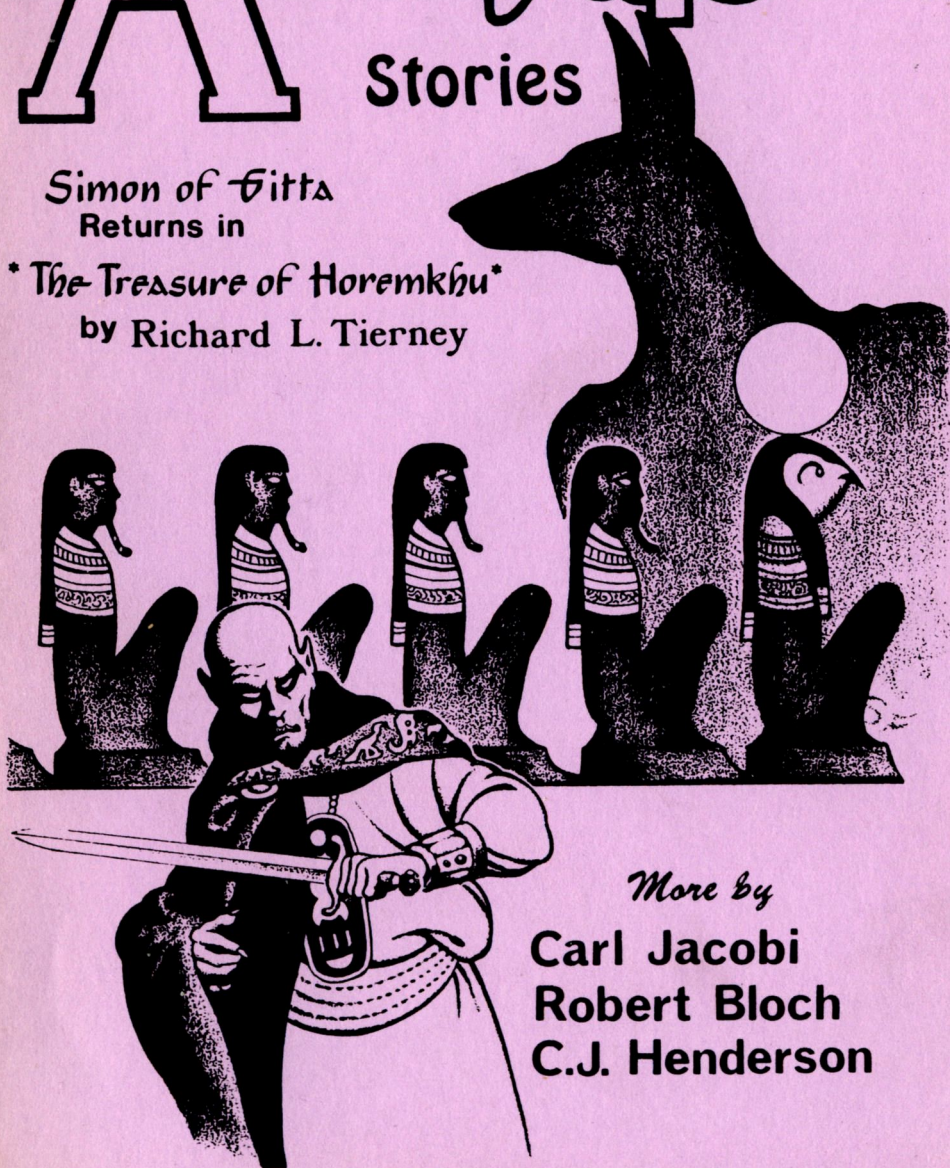
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Adventure

Stories

Simon of Titta
Returns in

** The Treasure of Horemkhu **
by Richard L. Tierney



More by

**Carl Jacobi
Robert Bloch
C.J. Henderson**

PULSE POUNDING ADVENTURE STORIES

December 1987

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Number Two

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A few seconds later Menophar heard sharp blows resounding from below—blows that were directed against the temple's lofty main portal. The old priest leaned forward and called down from the casement: "What do you want, soldiers?"

Their officer looked up and yelled back: "I think you know well, priest. I am Centurion Aemilius Acer. I come with a warrant for the arrest of one Simon of Gitta, a Samaritan renegade who is suspected of murdering Valerius Argonius, Nomarch of Thebes, and burning his ship. Open at once!"

Menophar scowled, hesitated. Then: "The man you call Simon is innocent. Argonius' own evil

"Don't dawdle," shouted Aemilius. "Your is a stout temple, but I can order up an entire legion from Alexandria if necessary. Are you prepared for such a siege, old priest?"

Menophar was not. He sent down an underling priest and, when informed that Aemilius' warrant appeared authentic, reluctantly admitted the detachment.

While the troops began to search the temple, Aemilius Acer, accompanied by two of his legionnaires, met with Menophar alone in the priest's high chamber.

EDITORIAL

Knapsack filled? Pistols loaded? All ready for another exciting trek into exotic adventure and epic intrigue? This second sizzling safari into desert sands and daredevil gunplay features pulse-pounding adventure stories by some of your favorite purveyors of pulp!

The Gnostic swordsman-and-sorcerer Simon of Gitta returns in another of Richard L. Tierney's exciting chronicles, "The Treasure of Horemkhu." This tale is a sequel to "Curse of the Crocodile" (Crypt of Cthulhu #47), but it can be read on its own quite well.

Carl Jacobi shares another gem from his file of unpublished manuscripts from the classic era of the pulps. "Your Witness, Tuan" is another of his stories of the sultry and sinister South Seas, written in 1937 or 38, now appearing a half-century later.

Robert Bloch has allowed us to

rescue from the flaking pages of the pulps his "Indian Sign," a western (yes, that's right, a western) that first appeared in West magazine (January 1943). Thanks to Dan Gobbett, omnivorous pulpologist, for this one!

Finally C. J. Henderson, whose work you may have seen in Eldritch Tales, Shudder Stories, Super Cycle, Espionage, and Oracle, tells "A Desert Story," which all fans of Robert E. Howard should especially enjoy. (Make sure you start this one with a full canteen!)

Given all of our other projects here at Cryptic Publications, it is most likely that Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories #2 will be our last issue, though you will see more fiction by these writers in our various other titles.

Robert M. Price, Editor

The Treasure of Horemkhu

By Richard L. Tierney

Menophar, high priest of Ptah in Memphis, peered tensely from the casement of his high room as the boots of two dozen Roman legionnaires tramped in rhythm upon the flagstones of the courtyard below. The light of early dawn glinted from the soldiers' iron helmets, as it did from the priest's own bald and oil-slicked cranium.

"They return, O mentor," said a hollow voice at the old priest's side, "even as we have expected during this past month."

Menophar turned and regarded the tall, grim-faced young man. "Yet we are not unprepared, Simon. Quickly—don your disguise and leave by the secret northern tunnel. Spend the evening guiding the tourists through the tombs of the ancients, as usual. When you return tomorrow, all should be well here."

"Are you sure?" The glitter in the young man's dark, deep-sunken eyes reflected his unease. "These Romans are ruthless—brutal."

"I shall handle them. It is you they seek. Hurry—go!"

The young man bowed slightly, then vanished away into the shadows.

A few seconds later Menophar heard sharp blows resounding from below—sword-pommels, pounding against the temple's lofty main portal. The old priest leaned forward and called down from the casement: "What do you want, soldiers?"

Their officer looked up and yelled back: "I think you know well, priest. I am Centurion Aemilius Acer; I come with a warrant for the arrest of one Simon of Gitta, a Samaritan renegade who is suspected of murdering Valerius Argonius, Nomarch of Thebes, and burning his ship. Open at once!"

Menophar scowled, hesitated. Then: "The man you call Simon is innocent. Argonius' own evil

brought him to his doom—as you well know, Aemilius Acer, for were you not the mad nomarch's chief henchman when he plotted to overthrow Rome's rulership of Egypt by means of dark magic?"

The Roman officer glanced briefly about the courtyard, empty but for himself and his soldiers, but then responded in a firm voice: "Don't stall, bald-head. Open the gate. My troops here are hand-picked for loyalty to me. Moreover, I come with a warrant of power."

"Whose warrant?"

"That of Aulus Flaccus, Governor of Egypt—and his mandate comes from Gaius, Emperor of Rome. Flaccus has empowered me to do anything—and I mean anything—to capture this Simon of Gitta. Look!" Aemilius waved a parchment in the air. "Send down one of your priests to read it, Menophar, and you will learn that I speak truly."

Again the old priest stood silent, hesitating as long as he dared, his lean fingers gripping the stone windowsill. This was more serious than he had thought. He hoped that Simon, his former pupil, was by now fleeing rapidly north through the narrow alleys of Memphis and beyond them into the desert.

"Don't dawdle," shouted Aemilius. "Yours is a stout temple, but I can order up an entire legion from Alexandria if necessary. Are you prepared for such a siege, old priest?"

Menophar was not. He sent down an underling priest and, when informed that Aemilius' warrant appeared authentic, reluctantly admitted the detachment.

While the troops began to search the temple, Aemilius Acer, accompanied by two of his legionnaires, met with Menophar alone in the priest's high chamber.

"Do not fear, Egyptian," said the centurion, seating himself in the room's only chair—a spare but ancient and valuable antique. "I want only the magician Simon, not you. Tell me where he is and you will be richly rewarded."

"I do not know where he is. He was here, but now he is gone. Moreover, he is skilled in the art of disguise; you would not find him even were I able to tell you his whereabouts."

"Not even if I should offer you a great deal of money?"

Menophar pretended to ponder for a moment. "How much?" he asked finally.

Aemilius' handsome yet hard features relaxed into a grin. "Name your own price. The emperor Gaius has offered a huge reward for this Simon of Gitta. Moreover—just between you and me—Governor Flaccus has fallen somewhat from the imperial favor since the death of Emperor Tiberius, who was his friend and patron; he would love to present Simon to Gaius, thereby gaining the latter's indebtedness and so ensuring his own continuance as governor of Egypt."

"No power is secure save that which comes from within," said Menophar, his voice and dark eyes emotionless.

"By Hades, don't pull that mystic tripe on me!" snarled Aemilius, rising. "This Simon whom you shelter had a hand not only in Argonius' recent death but also in the death of the emperor Tiberius last year. I suspect you know something about that, Menophar, but I won't press it. I'll say only that if you do not turn Simon of Gitta over to me, I am authorized to ransack this temple and slay every priest and acolyte in it—which is exactly what I will do."

Menophar paled slightly, though his features remained impassive. "This is one of Egypt's most ancient and revered temples," he said sternly. "Should you thus profane it, the people of the land would rise in rebellion."

"The people?" Aemilius spat on

the tiled floor. "That would be a shame, for then our legions would have to blade them down by the thousands, and that would cost Rome a great deal of money. She might even have to import Syrian slaves to harvest Egypt's grain for herself. Gaius would not like to see Rome incur such an expense, and he is not known for his restraint when he is angered. Nor am I, old priest."

Though Menophar maintained his outward composure, his heart sank. The centurion's hawklike features were hard, merciless. Menophar read men well, and he knew this one was not bluffing.

"Well, Menophar, which is it to be—Simon delivered to me, or Egypt running red with blood?"

There was but one answer. With an effort that was almost an agony the old priest said: "I will lead you to Simon if I can."

The Roman grinned, then sat back down and laughed. "I think that wrenched your guts a bit, sphinx-face! But you're a wise man, and maybe an honest one. Now that I've declared my official mission, we can relax. Order us some wine, and perhaps we can arrange a bargain more to your liking—one that will endanger neither Egypt nor your precious Simon."

Menophar betrayed surprise despite himself. "There is no wine here—"

"No matter. We'll bargain better clear-headed." Aemilius Acer opened a large pouch at his belt and drew forth a tightly-rolled scroll. "The Nomarch Argonius did indeed study dark magic, as you mentioned so loudly in the courtyard, and while assisting him I saw enough to learn that the powers he pursued were not illusions. As governor of Thebes he was able to acquire a number of ancient books containing magical knowledge from Egypt's earliest days. Most of these perished, I suspect, in the mysterious fire that destroyed his ship some weeks ago." The centurion smiled, struck his left palm with the scroll he held in his right hand. "Most—"

but not all."

Menophar, who had begun to feel a slight relief, suddenly experienced a tingling chill. "What scroll is that in your hand?"

"A partial Greek translation of a work which I think you know well. It was in a box of personal effects which Argonius left in my care the very day before he perished; doubtless he overlooked it. It was written long ago by one Luveh-Keraph, a priest of the cat-goddess Bast."

The old priest's chill deepened. Luveh-Keraph's Scroll of Bubastis contained dark and disturbing lore handed down from Khem's earliest centuries and even the forgotten Stygian centuries preceding them. Only the most learned of Egypt's priests were supposed to know of its existence, let alone its contents. Menophar's own scroll-shelves contained a near-complete copy in the original Khemite hieratic script, including the dangerous "Black Rites" section deleted from most copies, but he was disciplined enough not to glance in its direction.

"I—I've heard of the work," he said, allowing a touch of worry to creep into his voice. "If the Nomarch Argonius attempted any of the magical spells within it, he was unwise, and perhaps that is why he and his ship perished in fire. Only an adept would dare to probe such dark things—or a fool."

"That's where you come in," said the grinning Aemilius. "And don't play me for a fool. I've no doubt, Menophar, that you have a complete copy hidden somewhere in this place, which is said to be, as you pointed out, one of the oldest fanes in Egypt. Well, I'll leave that copy with you, never fear." Again the Roman slapped his left palm with the scroll he held. "I'm interested only in this portion of it, which the good Nomarch inadvertently left to me."

Menophar did not doubt that Aemilius had stolen it. Inwardly he shuddered at the thought of such a thing, even in partial trans-

lation, in the hands of this ruthless, untutored centurion to whom Egypt's foolish governor had given so much authority. Then a thought struck him.

"How did Argonius, a Roman Equestrian, manage to translate that scroll from Egyptian into Greek?"

"He hired an underling priest of Thebes, who is now dead," said Aemilius. "But now let's get down to business. This scroll says that Egypt's greatest treasure is hidden but a few miles north of here, beneath the great Sphinx. You will lead us to it."

Menophar gasped, his composure shattered. "The Treasure of Horemkhu! But, you don't understand—"

"Enough." Amelius Acer scowled sternly. "Don't try to fool me, priest. Every field-hand in Egypt has heard of the vast treasure that lies somewhere beneath the Sphinx or the pyramids. I used to doubt these tales, thinking them the usual lore of hopeful and ignorant peasants—but now, having read of the treasure in this ancient document penned by one of your land's most learned sorcerers, I doubt no longer."

"You are a fool!" hissed Menophar, no longer even trying to maintain his inscrutability. "The blackest secrets of Khem's history lie hidden beneath the Sphinx and the Three Pyramids, which were carved and built before the pharaohs, before the Stygians—aye, before even the first man built his first mud hut!"

The Roman laughed harshly. "You're a good actor, Menophar, but I'm not one of your superstitious peasants. Luveh-Keraph writes that the secret of the Sphinx—the secret of Egypt's greatest treasure—is handed down through the highest priests of the land's most ancient temples. That means you, friend—don't deny it. Now, lead us to the treasure and I'll forget all about ransacking this temple and the reward Gaius has offered for Simon of Gitta."

Menophar composed himself with an effort. "You would defy Flaccus, the governor of Egypt, and even the emperor—?"

"Why not? With the greatest treasure of Egypt, I could bribe Gaius' own legions away from him, and—" Aemilius tapped the scroll in his hand—"with the powers Argonius sought to control, no other armies could stand against me. Or, rather, against us, Menophar—for you would be foolish to deny me your aid. We could achieve great power working together."

"You're mad—like so many of the untutored who have dived into ancient sorceries more deeply than was good for them."

The Roman abruptly stood up, his features again hard and stern, and strode to the open window. "Come here, priest, and look outside."

Menophar did so, foreboding in his heart. Below, in the courtyard, he saw the company of soldiers, a score of them, with drawn swords. Nearby, white-robed and ranged motionless along one wall, were all the priests and acolytes who had been on duty in the main temple, some thirty of them.

"Look well upon your underlings, Menophar, for unless you do my bidding you shall see them alive no more."

The old priest swallowed. "What would you have me do?"

"Tonight is the night of the full moon nearest the spring equinox—the night when, according to the Scroll of Bubastis, an instructed adept may open the hidden way beneath the Sphinx. A blood-sacrifice is required—"

"You know not what you ask! Forces could be unleashed—"

"Silence! I warned you not to play me for a superstitious fool." Aemilius raised his arm and yelled out to an officer below: "Decurion Sporus, begin your appointed task!"

The decurion saluted, then gestured to two legionnaires who immediately grabbed one of the youngest acolytes—a lad perhaps

sixteen years of age—and hauled him away from the wall, each of them holding him firmly by one arm. The officer stepped forward, bared shortsword gleaming in his right hand. The youth screamed madly as the soldiers tipped him forward, struggling and kicking. Then, expertly, the decurion swung; the blade flashed and the screams abruptly ended as the youth's head spun away and rolled on the stone flags.

Casually the soldiers flung down the body; it twitched slightly while blood gushed from its severed neck.

"How's that for a blood-sacrifice?" snarled Aemilius. "Shall I bid my men continue?"

For a fleeting instant fury blazed in Menophar's dark eyes. In the next instant, however, those eyes had set as hard as the Roman's own and his features had become as expressionless as those of a stone-carved pharaoh.

"No, centurion," he said, his voice level. "Slay no more. I see that you are a commander who must be obeyed. Tonight I shall open for you the way to the treasure of Horemkhu."

* * *

Simon of Gitta, ragged-cloaked and with a slender walking-stick in hand, hurried northward with long, smooth strides that wasted no energy. For more than half the day he had hastened thus, the muddy Nile far away across the fields to his right, the cliffs marking the edge of the Libyan Desert close upon his left. His angular, high-cheekboned face, formerly clean-shaven, was now half hidden by a scraggly brown beard, while his dark locks were concealed by the folds of a soiled linen turban.

The trail he followed abruptly led up to the desert plateau, bringing into full view the three enormous pyramids which sat there. Despite their familiarity he felt, as always, a tingling awe at their looming presence—an awe inspired not only by their overwhelming, superhuman grandeur but also by

the things he had read of them in Menophar's library of sinister ancient texts. Just to the east of them, apparently half buried in the sands, crouched the enormous lion-bodied, human-headed eidolon of Horemkhu, which the Greeks and Romans called the Sphinx.

Then Simon saw two men approaching. As they drew near he recognized them as guides who made their daytime living showing travelers the pyramids and reciting to them what purported to be Egyptian history; by night, he suspected, they plied more sinister trades. Both wore soiled linen kaffans and turbans not unlike Simon's.

As they drew near, the Samaritan allowed his stride to become slightly shuffling, his deep-set eyes to shift and wander a trifle bewilderedly.

"Well, well, Sinuhe," said the shorter of the pair—a scruffy-bearded man whose beady dark eyes and prominent curved nose made him resemble a rat. "What luck! Kabir and I have been hoping all day to run across you."

"Aye," said Kabir, a man as tall as Simon, lean and wiry, whose stubbly face was both darkly handsome and sinister. "The month is over. Today is the day you must pay up."

"Pay? Pay? Simon jiggled his head nervously, avoiding the eyes of the two men. "I have hired no one."

"Don't act stupid," said the short man. "I think you're smarter than you've let on, Sinuhe—if that's your true name. We've told you often enough lately that half of your take goes to the Guide's Fellowship. So, take that pouch off your belt and let's see how much is in it."

Simon recognized extortion when he saw it, but he merely touched the pouch with his left hand and said in a trembling voice: "It is mine, Arfad. Please let me keep it, for tomorrow I must travel. I will go away and not return. You and the others will lose no more cus-

tomers to me."

"No, indeed we shall not." Arfad laughed harshly. "When you first arrived here, Sinuhe, we thought you too addle-minded to be a competent swindler of tourists, but we were wrong. We thought we had some tall tales to tell, but yours top them all—and now, every rich sightseeing fool who hires you comes back for more. They come to you, who are not even an Egyptian, despite your name! Where did you ever hear such stories, Sinuhe? Like that one, for instance, about the Eater of the Dead who dwells beneath the Sphinx?"

"I . . . I do not hear these tales. I dream them."

"Ha!" barked Kabir, drawing a long, curve-bladed knife. "You seem crazy, you jackal, but your craziness has gotten you a lot of money this last month—more than the rest of us have taken in despite all our experience. You're a good actor, whoever you are, but not good enough to fool us forever."

"I—I will leave tomorrow."

"Yes, we know," said Arfad, drawing a knife similar to Kabir's, "for today we learned that the rich Greek, Spargos of Megalopolis, has hired you to tell your tales tonight at a party he plans to hold in front of the Sphinx. Such parties are infrequent, Sinuhe, and they bring in a lot of money."

"Aye," snarled Kabir, "—money that should go into honest Egyptian purses. So, Sinuhe, hand over that pouch and we'll let you keep half of what Spargos pays you tonight. That alone should enable you to travel far."

"You—you would rob me?" cried Simon, feigning astonishment and indignation, clumsily staggering back a step while shaking his thin walking-stick at the pair like a wagging finger.

"Very well, then," said Arfad, teeth flashing in a wide grin from his stubbly beard. "If you'd rather not travel, you may stay here—forever!"

"Forever!" shouted Kabir.

The pair leaped forward, and in

that instant Simon's clumsiness vanished; his short walking-stick, whirled with the expertise of gladiator-training, smacked sharply against Arfad's wrist and sent his curved knife flying. Arfad squealed shrilly and leaped back. In the same instant Simon twisted smoothly, barely avoiding Kabir's blade as its point ripped the fabric of his tunic; his left fist cracked soundly against the side of the Egyptian's head, sending the man flopping unconscious to the sand.

Snatching up Kabir's dagger, Simon whirled, crouching—but Arfad was already dashing away among the boulders along the top of the bluff, squealing like a terrified rock-rabbit. Simon hurried after him, but immediately the dwarfish cutpurse vanished over the rim; the sound of his scrambling flight came up faintly from the narrow draw that led steeply downward.

"He runs fast for such a little twerp," muttered Simon to himself. "Well, maybe I've blown my cover, but it's not long till sundown. Arfad's not likely to stop running for awhile, and this other cutthroat will be out for a few hours. I'll hide amid the tombs until after dark, then join Spargos and his party when the moon comes up. With any luck he'll pay me off before midnight and I'll be well on the road to Memphis before dawn."

* * *

Menophar and the Romans left the boat as the sun was touching the western horizon. Its rays glinted briefly on the many gold coins that passed from the hand of Aemilius Acer into that of the skinny, dirty-robed captain, after which the boat silently shoved off and drifted slowly downriver.

Uneasiness stirred again in the old priest's heart. Acer had evidently hired the most disreputable crew he could find along the wharves of Memphis to bring his party here, then had paid them well to vanish away. Obviously the centurion wished to leave no trail for other Roman officials to follow,

and Menophar doubted that he himself would be allowed to return to his temple in Memphis or even live to see tomorrow's dawn.

They strode westward in silence along the dikes that bordered the fields and canals where brown-skinned fellahin, too weary from the day's toil to exhibit much curiosity about the passing military procession, were preparing to return to their huts. The two dozen legionnaires kept themselves in a tight formation about the old priest—as much to hide his white-robed form from the laborers, Menophar guessed, as to prevent his escape.

Finally the fields were left behind and the dikes gave way to a rocky ascent—the edge of the Libyan desert where, with uncanny abruptness, the most fertile land within the Roman Empire gave way to the barren bleakness of stone and sand. A few minutes later they topped the rise and saw, looming close in purple-shadowed grandeur against the last red rays of the vanishing sun, the three monstrous pyramids that had towered there for centuries beyond man's reckoning.

The troop stopped there abruptly, spontaneously, without any command from its leader. Several of the soldiers muttered awed invocations to their various gods, and Menophar saw that even Centurion Aemilius was impressed, though the man strove not to show it.

"Evidently you have not visited this place before," said the priest. "The mass to the right is Khufu Khut, the 'Throne of Cheops'; the middle one, no less grand, is Ur, 'The Great,' appropriated by the pharaoh Khephren to be his memorial; and the smallest of the three is Hur, 'The Southernmost,' which the pharaoh Menka-ra chose for his tomb and protected with his terrible curse."

"Jupiter!" exclaimed one of the legionnaires. "No mortals could have built these . . . these mountains! Surely the very Titans reared them up—"

"Silence!" snapped Aemilius.

"Yet the man is right," said Menophar evenly. "No humans built these gigantic piles; the three pharaohs I named merely took them for their own use and built their temples, cemeteries and causeways around them. No, they and the Sphinx, as well as the passageways and caverns deep beneath them, were constructed by monstrous beings in ages long past, and their entrances are guarded by mighty prehuman curses."

"Shut up!" repeated Aemilius. "If you're trying to get on the nerves of my men, it won't work. Where is the Sphinx?"

"There." Menophar pointed straight ahead to where something humped out of the sand.

The centurion, gazing beneath his shading hand at what he had taken to be a natural rock formation, realized that he was staring at a distant human face hewn from living rock and cowed with the head-dress of a pharaoh—a calm, staring face whose gigantic features, though indistinct in silhouette, somehow chilled his soul. Though it was still about a third of a mile away, Aemilius felt a strange reluctance to approach more closely.

"We'll rest here, men," he ordered impulsively, then turned and confronted Menophar. The sun had set, though its glow still suffused the world with twilight; the round moon had just risen in the east, golden above far desert hills beyond the Nile—and its light, eerily, seemed to encircle the old priest's head like an aureole.

"That stone face up ahead—that's the Sphinx?"

"Aye. Its giant form, hewn in one piece from a solid stone outcropping, was carved before even these mighty pyramids were raised. It is the eidolon of Horemkhu, the Dweller Upon the Horizon, whose worship antedates mankind and whose subterranean realm receives all human souls at the end of life."

"Ha! They why, priest, does it sport a human face?" The Roman turned, pointed toward the distant, looming head—then gasped. The

light of the vanished sun behind it was less intense, the moonlight upon its face greater . . .

"Hades!" blurted the decurion Sporus. "Those features—they're the same as this priest's!"

Half a dozen soldiers gripped their sword-pommels nervously. Aemilius did likewise—for, as he could now plainly see, the decurion's words were true. Those distant stone features, cold and noble and godlike, judgmental and menacing in gigantic grandeur, were the exact duplicates of those of the priest Menophar!

But then, even as he fingered his sword-hilt, Aemilius heard the old priest chuckling softly, mockingly.

"Do not fear," said Menophar. "That face is the likeness of the pharaoh Khephren, who obliterated the original features and had his own carved in their place. Perhaps that is well—for, what man or woman could bear to gaze, living, upon the face of Horemkhu, God of Death?"

"Then why," asked Aemilius tensely, still gripping his sword-hilt, "—why do those features so strongly resemble your own?"

"Do they?" Menophar shrugged. "Perhaps it is because Khephren was my ancestor and his traits still run in my blood. Though Ptah's temple is open to acolytes of many ancestries, some of us who are of Egyptian stock go far back. Who can fully trace such things?" He looked around, saw uneasiness on the faces of several of the legionnaires. "Surely you Romans are not superstitious!"

"Enough!" said Aemilius firmly. "I see your game, Menophar, but you'll do better by far to cooperate with me than to try to unsettle my men. Come on—we've less than half a mile to go."

Menophar nodded. "Very well, centurion. Nevertheless, we should wait here awhile. Sightseers sometimes linger about the Sphinx until sunset to place offerings upon its altar—the worship of Descending Ra has been found to be good for

local business. But few linger after dark. In any case, the—the thing you wish me to do cannot be done until the moon is at least halfway toward the zenith."

Aemilius scowled in thought for a moment, wondering if this priest could be trusted. Menophar knew too many ancient secrets. Yet, the stakes were high—Egypt's greatest treasure . . .

"Very well," he said finally. "Break out rations, men. Eat and get some rest. We'll bide here two or three hours."

* * *

Simon woke from strange dreams. He seemed to recall a pharaoh, whose face resembled that of his old mentor Menophar, telling him strange things, warning him of impending evil, asking his aid, beckoning him down to dark realms.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. He had slept but lightly and the snatches of dream, vague at best, were already gone beyond recall.

Rising, Simon donned the robe he had used as a blanket, then strode away from the half-buried mud-brick tomb in whose shadow he had slept. The sun was down and the last of its afterglow was vanishing beyond the western desert. In the east, well above the far-off cliffs which lay like a long wall beyond the Nile, the moon glowed full and silvery. Beneath its light, which made his way plain among the tombs and ruins, Simon continued on toward the great Sphinx.

As he drew near the mighty image he saw its moonlit profile which, as he had often noted before, resembled that of his mentor. No doubt the memory of that resemblance had helped inspire his recent dreams—for, despite Menophar's mundane explanation, the similarity had never failed to inspire Simon with awe.

Now, drawing nearer still, he noted again that the Sphinx was not really half-buried but rested within an enormous squarish pit from which the sand had been

largely cleared. East of its front paws extended an open, stone-floored expanse, also freed from sand, and several human figures moved upon it. Sounds of merriment came to Simon's ears—laughter and snatches of song.

Descending by the gentle slope of sand and stony debris that bounded the cleared space on its eastern side, he joined the eight or ten people gathered there. They were clad in Grecian robes and tunics, and some of them held silver goblets. A score of torches, bracketed upon the stony paws of the Sphinx and the altar that stood between them, augmented the moonlight and gave a flickering tinge of flesh-and-blood color to the scene.

"Sinuhe!" exclaimed a lean, short man with a graying goatee. "You are late. Here—you must quaff a full goblet to make up for lost time. Then, you must tell us one of your tales." He snapped his fingers at a young fellow, evidently a slave. "Bring wine for our most excellent guide."

"Oh, Sinuhe!" A young, dark-haired woman whom Simon recognized as the short man's wife ran to him, gripped both of his hands in hers. "You came, as you promised."

"Did you think I wouldn't—?"

"Of course not." She lowered her voice in mock-conspiracy. "But Spargos wondered if you would. He said I was a fool to pay you a third in advance. I'm glad he was wrong."

Spargos laughed politely. "Well, you did come, Sinuhe," he said, shaking Simon's hand, "just as my little Catella said you would. I'm glad you didn't disappoint her. This so-called party needs enlivening."

"Did you expect me to run off with your advance?"

"Frankly, I wasn't sure. Come, join us."

Simon could detect no sarcasm in Spargos' comments, only honesty. He accepted the goblet from the young servant, took a long swig from it. The wine was of

good quality, soothing to his parched throat. Spargos of Megalopolis was evidently no piker when it came to funding a party, and Simon decided he liked both him and his wife; they were frank of speech and, despite a bit of genteel reserve, respectful and friendly toward their guide and even their own slaves—unlike so many of the haughty Roman and Greek tourists he had guided these last few weeks. Moreover, both were genuinely and deeply interested in Egypt's ancient monuments and the stories Simon told of them.

"Yes, join us." Catella tugged at his arm. "Your cloak is sandy—you must have come many miles across the desert, and I can see that you are thirsty. Have you been gathering more tales of antiquity from scrolls hidden in dusty tombs? Here—finish that goblet and have another."

Simon nodded, smiling. When he had first met Catella he had been somewhat taken aback by her forthright manner. He knew by now, though, that the young woman, though little more than half her scholarly husband's age, was deeply devoted to the man. Her enthusiasm was for Simon's tales, not for him—a facet of her passion for mysterious antiquity, nothing more. An unusual woman, pretty and vivacious, yet dominated by scholarly passions akin to her husband's rather than by flirtatious or maternal ones.

"My wife is trying hard to make this a gala occasion," said Spargos, sipping sparingly from his cup. "However, most of our invited guests have not come, and the atmosphere of this place seems less than conducive to a festive mood. How old did you say the Sphinx is, Sinuhe?"

"No man knows. Some say it and the pyramids are older than Egypt, older even than mankind."

"That is scarcely credible," said Spargos, grinning wryly. "Herodotus tells us that pyramids were built by the pharaohs Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinus—"

"But there are still older writings," Catella interrupted, "which explain how these three pharaohs merely appropriated pyramids which already existed, adding divers structures of their own. And the Sphinx, which Herodotus strangely refrains from mentioning at all, is described in these ancient documents as being older still."

Simon, halfway through his second cup of wine, felt a slight uneasiness that dampened its glow. "Might I ask, my lady, what those writings are in which you have read such things?"

"Why, very old ones indeed, or so I was told by the Alexandrian peddler who sold them to me. I think they were stolen from tombs, for they have a faint odor of embalming-spices and are very yellow and brittle."

"Papyrus is easily scented and yellowed," Spargos commented drily, "by those who wish to sell them to gullible collectors. Your documents are in Greek, my dear, and so can be no earlier than the Ptolemies. Anyone could have written them."

"I don't think so, husband," countered the lady, unruffled, "for I doubt your average forger has the imagination or the craft to dream up such things. The writings purport to be fragments of such legendary works as the Text of Meidum and the Scroll of Bubastis—"

Spargos, daintily sipping his wine, noticed that Simon started slightly. Nevertheless, he said only: "Such titles are well known from Egyptian folk tales of magical wonders. Anyone could have used them."

Simon glanced up at the moonlit face of the Sphinx which loomed so near and massively, then sipped his own wine. He had read from those very books in Menophar's library in the temple of Ptah, and now his uneasiness had deepened. Were strange forces weaving strands of destiny about the Sphinx this night?

"This may not be a good time or

place to speak of such things," he ventured.

"Why?" Spargos regarded Simon sharply. "I've just noticed, Sinuhe, that the more wine you drink the more sober you become! Your eyes don't dart about anymore and you've lost that engaging yet half-witted grin you used to sport. And you speak a better Greek than you did yesterday. Did you perhaps get these wild tales of yours from old books similar to those my dear wife has collected?—for, surely none of the other guides hereabouts tells tales half so entertaining. It wouldn't even surprise me, Sinuhe, if it turned out that you can read.

Simon shrugged, deciding that denial was not worth the effort. After all, he would be long gone by sunrise.

"You're a shrewd observer, Spargos. It's true—I'm not what I seem. But don't ask who I am or why I chose this way of life for awhile. You're wrong about the old books, though. They're authentic. I've read them—not just in the Greek but in the original Egyptian."

Catella's dark eyes widened in astonishment. "You can do that?" She gripped his arm again and dragged him forward. "Oh, Sinuhe—look here! Only today the workmen we hired unearthed this slab of stone which you see leaning against the altar. So far, we have found none who can read it. Can you?"

Simon peered down at the short stela inscribed with closely-written Egyptian hieroglyphics. "It is very old, but—yes, I can."

"Oh!" Catella clapped her hands excitedly. "Please, Sinuhe, read it to us in Greek. Please!"

Simon nodded. Then, by the light of the flickering torches, with Spargos and the others looking on in fascinated silence, he slowly read aloud:

I, Khaphra, Pharaoh of Khem, Lord of the Two Lands, Beloved of Horemkhu, cause this to be written that those who shall seek here in later

ages may be warned or instructed, according to their natures and the nature of that which they seek. For know, O seekers, that mine eyes are even now upon you and that they read the intent of your souls.

To those who seek the olden wisdom, I say: My dreams shall instruct you as you sleep here upon the sands beneath the moon; and, should you do even as I instruct, you shall attain unto realms of wonder and the gods, even as did I. But to those who would despoil my tomb, thinking to take forth mere treasure for their own worldly aggrandizement, I say: Deluded fools, turn back!—else doom surely awaits you. Your bodies shall be devoured by the Devourer, even Horemkhu, Lord of Death, and your souls shall wander lost in His black domains forever.

For I, Khaphra, like those pharaohs before me, delved deeply into the secrets of Those who of old built the pyramids, even Those who did in the dawn-time descend to Khem from the starry bosom of Nout. And, like those before me, I became Their servant. Yet then, delving still more deeply into olden lore than any pharaoh before me, I learned at last the secret of Horemkhu, Lord of Death, and of those primal ones who carved His image, and the chambers beneath it, before even the Pyramid Builders descended from the stars. And, having sacrificed to Horemkhu in that manner which He had not known since the forgotten days of Stygia and Acheron, I became His Favored One who shall not die as die other men, but who shall guard Khem's greatest treasure in His name for all time.

Therefore did Horemkhu instruct me to replace His olden features with those of a man,

even with mine own, that His worship might be resumed the more readily by humankind.

And now, unto those who shall one day seek Khem's greatest treasure, as did I, and seek also to understand its true nature, I, Khaphra, say this: Perform the blood sacrifice and the rites, even those which I have instructed my priests to preserve in the sacred temples of Khem throughout the ages. And then, having performed them, you shall enter . . .

Simon paused. His hand, gently fingering the graven hieroglyphs, trembled slightly.

"Go on!" cried Catella, gripping his arm. "Please, Sinuhe—"

"I cannot. The last few lines are obliterated—deliberately, from the looks of it. Probably it's just as well."

"How can you think that? I wanted so much to know the ending!"

"You're amazing, Sinuhe!" Spargos cut in. "And that's true even if you were just faking that reading. Strange, how closely this correlates with the things you've told us, and the things my Catella has read in her old documents. And, what about this matter of 'Khem's greatest treasure'?"

"Aye—the treasure!" a voice screeched raucously. "At them, lads—cut them down!"

* * *

Simon whirled at the menacing screech, whipping out his sharp-bladed sica. A score of lean, brown-skinned rogues were charging down the sand-slope, brandishing knives and twirling looped ropes, and in the forefront were two Simon recognized—Arfad and Kabir.

"Spargos, rally your servants!" he yelled. "Defend yourselves—!"

Then the rushing rat-pack was upon them, stabbing and slashing. Spargos' few guests, bleating in terror, turned tail and fled between the paws of the Sphinx; lean, lop-

ing figures followed them, knives gleaming, and instants later death-shrieks rang out from the shadows. Spargos and his wife, protected by four of their loyal staff-bearing slaves, crouched back in terror against the stonework of the Sphinx's left paw.

So much Simon glimpsed before a wave of attackers rushed him. He ducked a slash and countered; the curved blade of his sica, nearly as long as a Roman short-sword and designed for arena combat, shore halfway through an attacker's neck; the man flopped to the sand, throat arteries spurting twin jets of blood.

"Take him alive, fools!" shrieked Arfad. "And those rich Greeks, too—they're all worth money!"

A cast noose settled about Simon's neck. Just as it drew taut he severed it, and his follow-through stroke spilled the guts of another assailant. But other ropes were looping toward him and he could not dodge or sever them fast enough. He heard screams, knew that the slaves of Spargos were being butchered. Then two nooses simultaneously gripped him, one about the shoulders, the other about his sword-wrist, and jerked him off his feet.

Instantly the pack was upon him. Simon's left fist smashed the jaw of a third assailant, but he could make no headway against a band of nearly twenty sinewy barbarians, and in another moment his hands were bound behind his back, his knees bent to their fullest extent and his wrists and ankles tightly lashed together with unyielding cords.

The ruffians drew back, and Simon saw that Spargos and his wife had also been bound, though not so elaborately as he. Their servants lay motionless, blood staining the sand about them, together with bodies of two of their attackers.

"Good job, men!" said Arfad, swaggering forward. He stooped and untied the money-pouch from Simon's belt. His men were similarly relieving Spargos, Catella and

the slain guests of their cash and valuables.

"You won't get away with this, you—you bandits!" sputtered the little Greek, his goatee bristling.

"Bandits?" Arfad chuckled. "The Romans will not think so when we present your—guide—to them. I think they will consider you guilty of harboring a criminal. No doubt they will pay us a great reward when we turn the three of you over to them."

"You're insane!"

"You think so? Then, look!" Arfad gripped Simon's turban with one hand, his beard with the other, then abruptly ripped both away and cast them aside. Catella gasped. The man she had known as Sinuhe was clean-shaven, square-jawed, dark-haired—and younger by a decade than he had formerly seemed. Moreover, she now saw a dark sinister intelligence in his deep-set eyes which were fixed in hate on the short Egyptian who led the bandit-gang.

"Don't you know who this man is?" yelled Arfad. "He is Simon of Gitta, the Samaritan magician on whose head the emperor Caligula has set a great price. He was clever at disguise, but not clever enough to fool me. Several weeks ago, after committing a great crime in Memphis, he came here pretending to be a guide but refusing to pay his honest fee to the Guides' Fellowship. He posed as a half-wit, yet told strange stories about the pyramids to his patrons—stories which none of us had ever heard. He lived in no local village, preferring to camp in the desert, and every few days vanished away altogether for a day or two. On one of these occasions Kabir and I followed him and found that he went to the temple of Ptah in Memphis, which confirmed my suspicions. Now they are doubly confirmed, for it is said that this Simon is also an escaped gladiator—and indeed he fights like one!"

"Perhaps we should kill him," said Kabir, scowling and fingering his knife. "A sorcerer who also

fights like a gladiator is doubly dangerous. Surely the Romans will pay us as much for him dead as alive—"

"No, for Caligula has a personal grudge against him and wishes to see him die by the torture. But, enough of this talk. Lift him up, and also these foolish Greeks who employed him—with any luck, the Guild will be awarded Spargos' estate in Alexandria for having captured Simon. We'll turn the three of them over to the Roman authorities at dawn, unless—" Arfad bent closely over Simon's bound form, leering and grinning—"unless they choose instead to tell us the secret of Egypt's greatest treasure."

Simon, straining against his bonds, glared up at the rat-faced Arfad. "Fool! There is no such treasure—"

"There is!" Arfad kicked the bound man savagely. "Did not you and these rich Greeks discuss it even as we listened? Don't deny it. Every Egyptian has heard of a treasure hidden beneath the Sphinx, and evidently this woman has discovered ancient writings which reveal the way to it. Well, here's my offer: Lead us to the treasure and we'll let the three of you go, maybe even give you a big cut; refuse, and we'll still get rich by turning you over to the Romans—"

"That won't be necessary!" bel-lowed a stentorian voice. "Hack them down, soldiers of Rome!"

Simon, twisting painfully in his bonds, saw a score or more sword-wielding legionnaires rushing down the slope. Madness! This was the second time such a thing had happened within a space of minutes—

Then the two groups clashed. For a moment the mad melee of battle raged; blades rang together, curses and death-screams shrilled. A body flopped on the stone a mere arm's length from Simon, and he saw that it was Kabir, face twisted in death-agony, blood gushing from a great chest wound—

Suddenly the Egyptian rat-pack

scattered and fled, leaving at least a third of their number gashed and bleeding on the stone pave. They dashed off around the Sphinx on both sides, and immediately the disciplined Romans split into two groups and pursued them.

As the roar and clash of renewed battle sounded, Simon set to work on the ropes that bound him. Despite his training by Persian escape artists, he could tell that he faced a difficult task. The Egyptian rogues—some of them doubtless amateur kidnappers and slave-procurers—had tied him about as securely as he had ever been tied. This would take time, and he had little of that . . .

Suddenly he realized that he had no time at all. Four men were standing over him. Two were legionnaires, another a Roman officer and the fourth—to Simon's amazement—was his old mentor Menophar.

"Forgive me, Simon," said the priest. "I had hoped that you would be gone by now. I had no choice."

The legionnaires had quickly laid hold of Spargos and Catella and cut free their legs, though not their arms. Now they roughly ushered the pair to their commander.

"What shall we do with them now, sir?"

"Why, keep them," said Aemilius. "Did not the rat-pack leader say that the woman had discovered a way to the treasure?"

"He did indeed, commander."

The sound of battle, which had diminished, now died out altogether. The Romans had apparently driven the bandit-gang into the cul-de-sac behind the Sphinx and slaughtered them there. A minute later Simon's suspicions were confirmed as a score of legionnaires emerged from the Sphinx's shadow into the torchlight, singly or in small groups, their blades dark with blood. Their number seemed undiminished, a fact which Simon did not find surprising. Roman legionnaires were the most formidable troops in the world, and these men of Aemilius' were doubtless

hand-picked. Little wonder that they had prevailed unscathed against the undisciplined pack of Egyptian cutthroats.

A decurion strode forward, his right fist clenched in the hair of a human head whose severed neck dripped blood. In the torchlight Simon recognized the head's features as those of the rodent-faced Arfad.

"We've killed all the bandits, Commander Aemilius," the decurion announced, "and executed their ringleader, as you ordered."

"Good, Sporus." Aemilius grinned. "Good. Give it to me." He snatched the head from his subordinate's hand, strode between the gigantic paws of the Sphinx and plunked it down atop the stone altar which stood there. Then, turning, he cried: "Well, Menophar, how's all this for a sacrifice to old Horemkhu?—More than twenty rogues butchered and bleeding about his image and the head of their leader gracing his altar! I'll wager he's not enjoyed such a sacrifice since the Pharaoh Khephren revived the rites of Stygia here."

"You may well be right," said the old priest somberly.

Catella, trembling in the grip of two Romans, suddenly cried out: "Gods—that evil priest! He has the features of the Sphinx!"

"Nonsense, my dear," said Spargos evenly. "There is some resemblance, perhaps, but no more than one might expect in an Egyptian of ancient lineage." He turned to Aemilius. "I thank you, commander, for rescuing us. Would you now be so kind as to have your men unbind our arms? These ropes are most uncomfortable."

Aemilius ignored him. "Decurion Brutus, you and two other men stay here. Guard Simon of Gitta and this rich Greek well—they'll be worth a lot to us if the Egyptian treasure proves to be a fool's quest." Then, turning to Menophar: "All right, priest, lead on. As for this woman, we'll bring her along. If she really has read much in the old writings, she may prove

useful."

Menophar nodded, turned toward the Sphinx and made a few brief, intricate passes with his hands, then said to Aemilius: "Follow me."

The Romans, led by the priest, vanished around the northern side of the sand-slope.

When they had gone, Simon set to work upon his bonds. Those intricate hand-gestures of Menophar's, ostensibly directed ritually to the Sphinx, had actually been a sign-language which conveyed a message to Simon—one which made him break out into a cold sweat.

For Menophar intended to open the Way.

Then he heard Spargos saying plaintively to the guards: "Why did they take my wife? Why have you not unbound us? If it's a ransom you want, I'll see that you are well paid. Free me now, soldiers, and I'll pay you more than you could ever expect to gain by pursuing some foolish Egyptian legend—"

The decurion's fist smacked crisply into Spargos' face. The little Greek sprawled heavily to the stone, then lay trembling and twitching for a moment, his face not far from Simon's. His eyes registered shock; blood trickled from his lips and stained his ridiculous goatee.

"My Catella!" he moaned. "Why did they take her? What does the commander intend to do with her—?"

The three legionnaires, restless-ly pacing, ignored him. Their boots scuffed against grit and pebbles; their shadows grew shorter as the moon rose toward the zenith.

Forcing all thoughts from his mind, Simon focused his attention upon his bonds and continued to work on them.

* * *

For perhaps an hour, under Menophar's direction, the soldiers cleared rubble and boulders from the base of an ancient wall. The work was hot and close, for they were within a narrow passageway to which the priest had led them by

way of an obscure cleft in the ruins outside, through which only one man at a time might pass.

"What place is this?" asked Aemilius as the work proceeded.

"A temple which once stood in front of the Sphinx. It, too, was built by those who preceded mankind—as you can see by the enormousness of the hewn stones which comprise these walls. After Stygia fell the sands buried this temple for ten thousand years; the Pharaoh Khephren uncovered it, together with the Sphinx, but since his dynasty it has lain buried for nearly three thousand years more."

Aemilius, outwardly calm, felt his inward arrogance shaken. Rome could boast but a few paltry centuries of history.

"Why do we clear this wall?" he demanded. "The recess in front of us seems to be merely one of those many 'false doors' that were carved by the ancients to symbolize gateways to eternal realms."

"Aye, and mere symbols most of them are. Yet the most ancient ones, such as this, are not symbols. The Pharaoh Khephren, and the pharaohs before him, still knew some of the lost arts the Stygians inherited from Those who came down from the stars in the dawn-time. They knew how to construct gates into other realms, other worlds. Such is the gate which lies before you, Commander Aemilius. Even a legion of your most skilled siege-engineers would not easily bring it down, and only an adept of the Ancient Way, such as myself, can cause it to open to you."

"Well, get to it, then," said the centurion impatiently, "for I see that my soldiers have now cleared all the rubble away."

Menophar nodded, then walked forward and settled down, cross-legged, before the lofty recess carved into the rock. From his robe he drew a small bronze brazier and set it on the floor before him, then filled it with what appeared to be herbs.

"Now, commander," he said,

"give me your torch."

Aemilius, wondering, complied. Menophar applied the torch to the herbs, which commenced to glow and smoulder. A pungent odor filled the narrow passage.

"What is that substance you burn?" demanded the centurion suspiciously.

"The seeds and petals of the yellow lotus. It will enable my spirit to go forth and inhabit the body of Horemkhu, the great Sphinx, whence I may control the opening of this portal. Be silent now, for I must concentrate."

Bending over the tiny brazier, Menophar breathed deeply of the smoke rising from it, then sat erect and gazed intently at the high recess in the stone. For many long minutes he sat thus, motionless as a statue. Aemilius, nervous at first, relaxed slightly. The fumes were not toxic, evidently, or the priest would not breathe them into his lungs in such concentrated form. He felt himself relaxing, even exulting inwardly; soon Egypt's greatest treasure would be his . . .

Suddenly, without warning, a vertical line of blackness appeared in the wall of stone before the Romans. It widened; the "false door," evidently not false at all, swung inward slowly, almost soundlessly save for a slight scraping of sand particles beneath it—and then a lofty black aperture gaped before the astonished soldiers.

"By Pallas!" gasped one of them. "What magic is this? Has the priest opened the very gate to Hades?"

"No!" cried Aemilius excitedly. "Rather, the gate to wealth, fame, power!" He turned to Menophar. "Get up, priest, and lead us on to—"

But Menophar was no longer sitting upright as if in spiritual contemplation. Instead, he was sprawled on the stone floor as if in death.

"Get up!" yelled Aemilius, leaning forward and shaking the priest's shoulder. "Get up!"

"Is he dead?" asked Sporus.

Aemilius rose to his full height. "He seems so, but I suspect not. He is in a trance—a state these tricky Egyptian priests are adept in achieving. But it matters not—he has opened the Way. All we need do now is go forward and find the treasure."

"And leave him here?" said the decurion. "Suppose his spirit causes the door to close behind us, trapping us in yonder blackness for all eternity?"

"A good thought, Sporus. We'll carry him with us; then if we're trapped, he'll be trapped also. In addition, we'll roll that broken column fragment into the aperture to block the door in case it tries to close. Hurry, now, men—I want to find that treasure and I think you do also."

* * *

Spargos, having given up his struggles in despair, suddenly felt supple fingers working at his bonds. In a moment, incredibly, he felt them slacken and fall away. Straining to peer back over his shoulder, he saw the guide he had known as Sinuhe lying close to him, back to back, still apparently bound, ankles drawn up close to wrists.

"Do not move or speak," whispered Simon. "I am free. When one of the guards comes near, ask in a faint voice for water . . . wait! Here comes one now. Do it!"

The Greek's bewilderment lasted but a moment. Hope sparked within him. He moaned as the Roman came close, then gasped hoarsely: "Soldier—I need water."

"Water, is it?" said the guard, bending close. "I'll piss in your face if you don't shut up—"

Simon's right hand shot out, stiffened fingers crunching into the base of the Roman's throat. The legionnaire went down, wheezing and strangling, and even as he hit the ground Simon whipped the man's sword from its sheath and sprang erect. Instantly the decurion Brutus and the other guard, yelling in astonishment, drew their own blades and charged. Then for

a few seconds steel rang on steel in a flurry too rapid for Spargos to follow, but he saw that Simon was being driven back; the Romans, though taken by surprise, were skilled fighters and had rallied instantly.

"Die, Samaritan!" yelled Brutus.

Furiously, without thought, Spargos dove at the legs of the decurion and gripped them. Brutus roared as he flopped forward upon the stone pavement, then twisted about, glaring furiously at the little Greek. Spargos heard a death-yell, the clatter of another armored body falling to the pave—but then twisted frantically to avoid the stroke of the decurion's rising sword, realizing even as he did so that it was no use—

Then, incredibly, Brutus' mouth gaped, spouting blood; his sword clattered on the stone as the tip of another blade protruded a hand's length from his breast; then he pitched sideways and lay still.

"Zeus!" gasped Spargos, striving shakily to rise. "Then it's true, Sinuhe—I mean Simon—that you were trained to fight as a gladiator?"

"Aye." Simon helped the little Greek to his feet. "Romans slew my parents in Samaria, then sold me into the arena—but I escaped, and since then many a Roman has paid for my training with his life. And yet, Spargos, I might have died even now but for your aid."

"And my Catella may still die!" cried the Greek, anguish in his voice. "That mad centurion seems to think that her knowledge of ancient writings may help him in his foolish quest for treasure."

"Foolish indeed," said Simon. "But I have no time to explain more. Stay here."

So saying, he snatched up one of the burning torches and ran around to the north of the sand-slope. In a few moments he found the crevice in the rock wall and glided cautiously within, and a moment later was standing in a narrow corridor and gazing at the monstrous black aperture, propped

open by a fragment of a massive limestone column, which gaped in its western wall.

Footsteps sounded. Simon turned and saw that Spargos had followed him. The Greek held a torch in his left hand, a Roman shortsword in his right.

"I've practiced swordplay in the gymnasium," he said. "I may not be a gladiator, but I'm not useless—and if I can't help you in rescuing my wife, I'll at least die trying."

Simon nodded, feeling admiration for the man. "Come on, then—hurry!"

They stepped through the aperture and immediately confronted a blank wall. The corridor in which they stood extended to the right and left.

"Which way shall we go?" asked Spargos.

"It doesn't matter. Each way leads to a long descending stairway which ends at a pillared hallway far below. Come—we'll take the north route to our right. And, go carefully."

A few moments later they were descending a flight of stairs evidently carved from the living stone—stairs which seemed to descend interminably.

"How do you know of these passageways, Sinu—Simon?" asked Spargos, amazed.

"From ancient books in the library of my mentor Menophar. Do not speak above a whisper—we don't know how far ahead the Romans might be, and these passageways carry echoes far."

The steps continued down, down into the blackness, and Spargos felt a crawling fear as the descent continued. He had heard the tales, told by money-seeking guides, of vast chambers beneath the Sphinx, yet never had he credited them until now.

At last the stairway doubled back upon itself, descended a bit farther—and suddenly ended in a vast hall. The blank wall to their left, Spargos noticed, extended ahead of them to the barely-dis-

cernible steps of a descending stairway identical to the one behind them; to the right, a double row of lofty stone pillars vanished away into blackness.

Simon gestured, and Spargos followed him westward, between the twin rows of pillars. Their torches illuminated only the lower parts of lofty columns which vanished upward into illimitable darkness.

"This is the Reception Chamber," said Simon, "in which the acolytes of Stygia's ancient priesthood were initiated ten thousand years ago. We are now farther beneath the ground than the Sphinx is in height, and these pillars and the roof they uphold are carved from solid rock."

Spargos' torch trembled in his hand. For the first time he wondered whether mere humans could indeed have constructed the pyramids, the Sphinx and this monstrous underground chamber. Yet his next question to Simon was a practical one: "Where are the Romans?"

"Ahead, evidently, and proceeding at a rapid pace. Follow me."

The pillared hall led westward for perhaps two hundred feet, then opened into a huge circular area about a hundred feet in diameter. Pillars flanked its walls; its central space was empty and, like the grand hallway, its ceiling was lost in darkness.

"This is the temple," said Simon, "where the ancient acolytes were instructed in the most ancient mysteries of Stygia and Acheron. Beyond this place, say the ancient writings, it is death for the uninitiated to venture."

"Is that true?" Spargos' sword trembled as he gripped it more tensely. "If so, then the Romans must be doomed, and—alas!—my poor Catella with them, for they have all evidently ventured beyond here. Tell me, Simon—are you one of the initiated?"

"No," said Simon uneasily. "I know only what I have read in the old books my mentor possesses."

Spargos swallowed nervously.

"The same old books, evidently, that Catella was so avid to collect and read." Here in the aeon-old darkness his rational assessment of the world seemed to have left him; he felt the weight of an ancient, brooding menace. "What shall we do, then, Simon?"

"I'm going on. I must rescue my mentor if I can, but I suggest that you go back."

"Not while there's a chance that my wife lives!"

Simon nodded, then led the way onward, his liking for the little Greek augmented. He, too, had once lost a loved woman to the Romans but had had no chance to fight them in order to save her life. Now, though the chances were against it, he found himself hoping that he might somehow help Spargos and his wife . . .

They left the great circular temple and followed a short corridor which widened suddenly into a chamber where five black doorways gaped in the west wall. Here they smelled a strange odor as of naphtha and bitumen mingled with embalming spices and felt a chill draft of air from the doorways.

"Gods!" muttered Spargos despairingly. "Which way shall we go?"

Simon racked his memory. "The middle three tunnels go to regions beneath the Three Pyramids. It would be death to proceed any of those ways, for beyond them lie the Caverns of Set. The other ways lead to twin staircases that descend to the Lair of the Sphinx. I fear it is death to proceed there also, but we must if we are to attempt to rescue my mentor and your wife, for look—fresh pitch has dripped within the right entryway. Here the Romans have surely passed in their mad quest for the treasure of Horemkhu."

"Mad," repeated Spargos. "You think, then, that there is no such treasure?"

"There is," said Simon, "yet no man who comes upon it shall live."

The Greek looked into Simon's shadowed eyes and saw no madness

there, only grim concern and a touch of fear.

"Let's hurry, then," he urged, "and hope they haven't yet found it."

Simon nodded, then hastened into the right-hand tunnel. This time it was a steeply inclined plane rather than a stairway—a straight passageway carved through the solid rock, smoothly descending, doubling back upon itself occasionally as it led ever more deeply into the darkness of inner earth . .

* * *

Catella stared about her in terrified awe. She and her Roman captors had descended through pillared halls and endless inclined passageways to incredible depths, until she feared that they were nearing the realm of Hades and would never again regain the outer air. Finally they had descended a long, straight flight of stairs, a cliff-high wall on their right and a vast, columned gulf on their left. Now they stood upon a stone floor amid a ranked forest of titan stone pillars whose tops could not be seen and whose bases were carved with strange and enormous hieroglyphs. The widely-spaced columns, each perhaps three man-lengths in diameter, stretched away in ranks farther than the light of twenty torches could reach. The natron-scented wind, which had increased as they descended, now carried an almost charnal odor.

"By all the gods, Commander Aemilius!" exclaimed Sporus. "Is there no end to these chambers and caverns? Where is this accursed treasure?"

"My manuscript does not say. Damn Argonius for not having it translated in its entirety! Woman—you also have read portions of it. What do you know of this? Do not hide anything from us if you wish to see the outside world again."

By now Catella would have done anything to leave this awesome realm of darkness. She searched her memory, trying to recall everything she had read in the Ptolemaic

Greek of the yellowed fragments the tomb-robbers had sold to her. "I remember reading that one must descend to 'the gulf of pillars and winds,' and . . . and then, 'Egypt's greatest treasure will reveal itself to the seeker.' That's all I can—"

"Well, that's a help. This certainly seems to be a 'gulf of pillars and winds,' so we can't have far to go. Here, men—lay this damned old priest down and let's see if we can shake him back to consciousness."

After a fruitless effort of shouting and prodding, the decurion said: "He's still in his trance, if not dead."

"Then spread out and explore this hall. The treasure's here somewhere."

They dispersed, their torches gleaming like scattering fireflies in the immense dark, but in less than a minute one of the men called out: "Commander, there's a big cave here!"

When the group had regathered they saw that the soldier's description was quite an understatement. The aperture before which they stood was one in which the tallest apartment-building in Rome would have fitted easily. To its left, along the cliff-high wall from which the cave mouth opened, was the long stairway by which they had descended, its far-off lower end lost in shadow, and to the right was an identical stairway. From the colossal aperture the charnal wind, stronger here than ever, poured up from unknown gulfs, while before it lay a cluttered profusion of objects—skulls, bones, scraps of armor and yellowed linen.

"This is the mouth of Hades!" gasped the decurion. "Commander, perhaps we should not stay here—"

"Calm down, Sporus." The centurion strode boldly forward to the cave mouth, deliberately ignoring the noisome wind, and examined the bones. All were human, and most were broken or mashed. The ancient shields and armor-fragments, none more recent than Ptolemaic

times, were strangely bent and dented. For a moment Aemilius felt that his decurion might have a good idea. Did still more enormous caverns yawn far beneath these? From what unimaginable regions did this charnal wind originate? And what sort of monstrous things might those regions conceal?

Then, hearing some of his men exclaiming excitedly, he turned and saw that Menophar was now on his feet, motionless, facing away from the wind-belching cave, arms outstretched toward the columned blackness. The priest's white robe fluttered in the flow of charnal air.

"Na ka ku-tho ithmus!" cried Menophar. "Ku-nokomis inkubu!"

Aemilius did not recognize the chant but knew that the words were not Egyptian. He ran forward, gripped the priest by the shoulder and spun him around—then stepped quickly back in shock as he saw that Menophar's eyes were now gleaming with an unnatural yellow luminosity.

"Idiot!" hissed the priest. "You have sought Egypt's greatest treasure—and now you shall find it!"

Even as he spoke a new sound broke through the whisper of the wind—a far-off sound that came from beyond the columned gulf and slowly grew louder. Aemilius felt his spine prickles, for what he heard was impossible: measured and definite sounds like drums, flutes and sistrums, slowly increasing in volume, suggesting some advancing ritual procession.

"Hades and Persephone!" gasped Sporus. "What is that?"

Then, incredibly, faint glimmerings of light became visible far away between the columns. As they brightened, new sounds became audible—paddings, clickings, slitherings, shufflings, as if of many strange feet advancing to the rhythm of the drums and flutes.

Aemilius drew his sword. "Form ranks, soldiers!" Then, turning to Menophar: "Who are these who approach? Who dwells down here—?"

"Idiot!" repeated the priest. "Have you not guessed? What is it

that the ancient Stygians and Khemites were most anxious to preserve and protect throughout the centuries? For what cause above all others did they labor to rear their mighty tombs and temples? What did they hide within them to be preserved even unto the Second Rising? You fools! Egypt's greatest treasure is her dead—and now her dead are coming for you!"

Then moving forms became barely visible under the light of the advancing torches—and Catella screamed.

* * *

Simon emerged cautiously from the passageway on to the ledge and peered down into the darkness. The natron-scented wind seemed stronger here. Far below he saw the gleaming torches of the Romans and, in their light, the vague shapes of colossal columns whose tops were lost in the vast blackness above.

The Samaritan shuddered, and not because of the chill of the wind. His worst fears were realized. The Gulf of Pillars truly existed, even as the old writings said, and that gulf was vast beyond all his imaginings. No human engineers could have hewn this monstrous space from the solid rock, let alone the even vaster caverns that were said to lie below. And what of the things that were said to lurk within those caverns and creep upward on certain nights of the year—nights such as this one . . . ?

Abruptly he suppressed the thought and stole back to where Spargos waited with both their torches.

"Stay here," he said. "I'm going down to see if I can free Menophar and your wife. Be ready to run up the passage ahead of us, lighting our way, when we come."

"I'd rather go with you, Simon."

"I know, but the Romans would kill two of us as easily as one. This calls for stealth. Keep within the passageway—those torches mustn't be seen."

Then, before the Greek could

reply, Simon hurried away and began to descend the right-hand stairway as rapidly as he could in the darkness, keeping his right hand in contact with the smooth stone of the artificial cliff face. Hopefully there would be no pitfalls—the Romans had apparently descended safely before him . . .

When he reached the bottom he was in almost complete darkness. The distant light of the Romans' torches faintly silhouetted the massive rows of columns ahead of him. Rapidly yet cautiously he stole forward between the mighty bases of those columns—and, as he did so, he became aware of strange sounds, faint but increasing in volume . . . drums, flutes and sistrums—or something suggestive of them—and then, far off between the massive pillars, beyond the Romans, the dim glimmerings of strange torches, paler than those of the soldiers, like corpse-lights . . .

Simon halted, his hackles rising. Luveh-Keraph's Scroll of Bubastis had evidently told truly of what took place within these aeon-old caverns each full moon nearest a solstice or equinox: the Procession of the Dead to honor Horemkhu, God of Death. The Romans were doomed—and so also was he, Simon, if he did not at once turn back . . .

Then he heard a woman scream.

Anger partly overruled Simon's fear and he dashed forward, less careful now to hide the sound of his approach. The Romans, he sensed, were intent upon others who were approaching them.

In another moment he had reached the last pillar between himself and the soldiers. Peering out from its shadow, he saw that the Romans were drawn up in a double line, backs to him, each man with a torch in his left hand and a sword in his right, facing in the direction from which the strange music, footfalls and corpse-lights were approaching. Just behind them stood Menophar, arms outstretched, eyes glowing with a weird light, and also Catella, her arms bound behind

her, backing away in terror toward the very pillar behind which Simon stood concealed.

Then Menophar began to chant in what Simon recognized as the long-forgotten Stygian tongue to the cadence of the strange, advancing procession: "Ko ithamu nokomis itu—"

"Damn you, sorcerer!" yelled Aemilius, whirling from the ranks with bared blade. "Here's your death!"

Simon sprang from concealment, sprinted past the startled Catella and reached the pair barely in time to interpose his sword-blade between that of Aemilius and Menophar's bald cranium. The blades rang together sharply, and then Simon's fist cracked into the Roman's face and sent him sprawling.

Sporus and several others, astonished, whirled and dashed at Simon. With a desperate effort the Samaritan gripped the slight form of his mentor about the waist with his crooked left arm, lifted him and dashed off toward the shadows of the columns.

"Run!" he yelled at Catella—who, having paused by the nearest pillar, stood gazing horror-struck at the Romans and what was advancing toward them. Instantly she turned and, despite her bound arms, hurried awkwardly away into the darkness between the columns.

Then Simon heard Aemilius bawl: "Stand firm, men! Hack the bastards down! No foe can stand against soldiers of Rome!"

In the same instant, hearing footsteps close behind, Simon dropped Menophar and whirled. Most of his pursuers had evidently turned back at Aemilius' shouted command to rejoin their ranks, but one still came on—Sporus the decurion.

"Damn you, magician!" shrieked Sporus, lunging. "You and your devil-priest shall die for luring us into this hell-pit!"

Simon, reacting instantly with all the skill of his gladiator-training, barely evaded the decurion's thrust. He swung his own short-

sword and its keen blade shore through Sporus' neck, sending the decurion's helmeted head tumbling from its shoulders to roll clattering into the shadows; the body collapsed instantly, blood spurting from neck-arteries to stain the stone floor.

Simon stooped and hauled Menophar erect. The priest's eyes were no longer glowing but darting about as if in bewilderment. Simon slapped his face, shook him, then ran to Catella and quickly cut the rope that bound her wrists.

"Follow me, both of you," he commanded. "Hurry!"

They obeyed, only half aware of what they did, and as they fled they heard the yells of the Romans rise behind them in tones of rage and horror. Then came the furious sounds of metal ringing upon metal, and of metal chopping into something like dry and brittle wood. And all the while the eerie sounds of drums and flutes increased, together with the measured shuffle of many feet muffled as if bound in layers of linen . . .

After what seemed a tense and interminable groping through pillared blackness, Simon and his two companions found the foot of the stairway and hurried upward. As they neared the top Simon realized that Menophar had regained full consciousness.

"We must hurry, Simon," gasped the priest. "The drug has worn off and I can no longer control the entrance to this place."

"Don't worry. The door has been jammed with a stone pillar—"

"Hurry!" insisted Menophar.

Then they saw Spargos hastening down the stairs toward them, a torch in either hand—a welcome sight, for as the battle between the Romans and their unseen foes had raged below, the light of their torches had diminished considerably. Howls of rage and terror still rang up from the gulf.

"Catella!" cried the little Greek. "Is that truly you? Praise all the Gods!"

"We're not out yet," snarled

Simon. "Hurry—lead us!"

Spargos nodded, turned and led the way up with his two torches.

As they gained the wide ledge at the top of the stair, Simon paused an instant and peered over the edge. Far below the battle still raged, though the torches of the Romans were now few and the corpse-lights of their foes far greater in number. Those foes were unnaturally silent, save for the sounds of the eerie drums and flutes, and Simon felt his fears returning—the deep, atavistic fears his anger had temporarily submerged. The Romans, yelling in fury and terror, were slowly retreating toward a point directly below—the area just in front of the now-concealed cavern mouth which belched its noisome wind into the vast columned hall. Both the Romans and their assailants appeared indistinct in the wavering torchlight, but in that instant the forms of the latter seemed to Simon to be something other than human—yellow-eyed, linen-wrapped humanoid forms, a few with heads resembling those of hawks, ibises and jackals, others headless altogether—

And then, more terrible than all that had come before, a gigantic, clutching, five-branched thing suddenly extended itself from the cave mouth below and descended upon the combatants, Romans and gulf-spawn alike. To Simon it appeared yellowish-gray and hairy, and its titanic claws grated upon the stone as it pulled its madly shrieking prey into the bone-cluttered mouth of its lair. Instantly all the Romans' torch-sparks below vanished, and above the shrieks of the legionnaires as they were pulled down into tartarean gulfs rose the wild beating of dark drums and the keening of eldritch flutes—and in that instant Simon realized that he had been cursed with a glimpse of the forepaw of Horemkhu, God of the Dead, in whose monstrous image the Sphinx had originally been carved.

"Look!" gasped Menophar, pointing to a moving cluster of the

corpse-lights. "They're heading toward the stairway. We must run!"

Spargos, lean and nimble in spite of his sixty years, led the way, a torch in each hand, and the other three fled after him up incredible inclined planes, along pillared corridors and finally up the last stairway that led to the outside.

Here on this final stair, gasping and drenched with the sweat of their frantic and prolonged exertions, the four of them paused fearfully as they heard a new sound ahead of them—a slow, resonant boom . . . boom . . . boom . . .

"Hurry!" cried Menophar. "I am no longer in control—the Sphinx is trying to close the door upon us—!"

They dashed on, Simon's fear increasing. The very rock beneath their feet was now vibrating to each ponderous boom. Were there also legions of the dead behind them, advancing to the beat of the Drums of Horemkhu—?

They gained the top of the stairway—and stopped, frozen in fear. The lofty stone door, swung back to its fullest extent, slowly and ponderously closed—

Boom!

—then bounded back from the section of limestone pillar that blocked it.

"Quick—through the door!" yelled Menophar. "The pillar is cracking— It won't hold up for long."

Spargos dropped one torch, gripped Catella's hand and dragged her through the doorway. The great stone portal, swinging purposefully to, uncannily like a living thing, again crashed against the pillar, causing it to crack and crumble.

BOOM!

Again the stone door swung wide, and this time Menophar leapt through. Simon, about to follow, heard a rushing scuffle down the passage behind him, turned—and was horrified to see linen-wrapped shapes approaching out of the blackness, their eyes gleaming an

unearthly yellow. In their left hands they carried strange torches that gleamed with a greenish-yellow corpse-light, and in their lead was a figure, crowned with the high double crown of Khem, whose mummy-brown visage was the exact duplicate of the face of Menophar.

Simon, yelling with rage and terror, cast his shortsword with all his might. It spun true and thudded solidly into the breast of the charnal pharonic figure. The apparition staggered and stumbled, pierced through—but then regained its balance and came on, eyes gleaming demoniacally.

The great stone door was again swinging ponderously shut. Simon leaped through the narrowing aperture with frantic haste, feeling the wind of the passing stone—

BOOM!

The pillar-section shattered, crumbled and was shoved aside, divided in two. Simon, rolling on the floor of the outer passage, heard the door thunder shut behind him. Rising, he faced it, fearful lest it should open and allow the flame-eyed liches behind it to emerge . . .

But it remained shut, apparently a "false door" once again, and Simon trembled as he realized how close all of them had come to being trapped forever within the dark domain of Horemkhu.

"By Mot, God of Doom!" he exclaimed shakily. "I thought, Menophar, that I saw your likeness, the pharaoh Kheperen, and some of his lich-servitors pursuing me like flame-eyed demons . . ."

"They serve Horemkhu, Lord of the Dead," said Menophar, "and so possess a sort of eternal life. These undead Favored Ones are the 'treasure' which Aemilius and his legionnaires so foolishly sought and, to their undoing, found."

"Catella," said Spargos nervously, attempting a smile, "I hope this will be a lesson to you. Henceforth, do not peruse silly old documents . . ." Then, seeing his young wife's anguished face and outstretched arms, his own counte-

nance dissolved in tearful relief and he gathered her to him, sobbing.

A few minutes later the four of them staggered out of the corridor into the moonlit, corpse-strewn area before the great Sphinx, Spargos and Catella still gripping one another's hands like new lovers.

"Well, Simon," said Menophar, "you have again proven yourself an adept pupil of mine of whom I can be proud. This time, in fact, I might not now be alive had you not learned well the things I have taught you. But now, let us escort this brave couple whom you have rescued to the shore of the Nile and see them safely aboard a boat for Alexandria—which destination will be much to their liking, I am sure! After that, you may return with me to Memphis, where we shall arrange for you to travel

upriver and hide there in one of Pthah's temples—"

"No." Simon glanced up at the moon-illuminated face of the Sphinx, so similar to the face of his old mentor, then shook his head violently. "No. I will accompany this honest pair to Alexandria—and then, fortune favoring, I'll take ship thence for lands unknown. I fear Caligula's threat, but I now fear the dark evil of Egypt even more. Khem is a land of ancient terrors, as I have learned repeatedly during these last months, and tonight most of all. No doubt Horemkhu, God of Death, shall one day lay claim to me as he has this night lain claim to Aemilius and all his legionnaires—aye, as he lays claim to the souls of all who have been and shall be—but when that day comes I hope to be far from dark Egypt, beneath cleansing breezes and blue skies."

Your Witness, Tuan

By Carl Jacobi

The operator in the Bandjermasin office of the Dutch East Borneo Telegraph Company was smoking a cheroot and listening to the sounder rattle off the quarterly district-report from Keranji, listed on the chart before him as Station No. 5, one hundred and sixty-five miles east of Long Kai on the upper Mahakam.

The report was the usual routine stuff, and the Bandjermasin operator jotted down only the high points in the monotonous flow of message, pausing at intervals to mop the perspiration from his face.

. . . Kenyah tribes in this district quiet. Rice feast over, with little or no trouble. River medium to high, with reports of cloudbursts to the north. No overflowing as yet, and fields along south bank in good condition . . . Thirty-six Punan nomads, probably from Saboi district, passed by in February; report Kenans on war-path, Kotah-Hoh, kapala. . . Operators' condition: Good. Conway bitten by water snake in left arm 8 February. Applied serum . . . Native conditions: 3 cases smallpox Senlah kampong . . . Supplies to be added to list for transport-delivery: 10 lbs. coffee; 10 lbs. tea; 5 doz. cans condensed milk; 1 doz. . . .

At this point the telegraph sounder suddenly lapsed into silence. The Bandjermasin operator flicked his cheroot ash in a tray and muttered irritably.

"You'd think these jungle ops could finish a report in one sitting," he grumbled. "Lord knows they haven't much else to do."

He got up, crossed the little room and poured a glass of water from the vacuum pitcher on the table. Outside the open window

a ceaseless stream of Chinese coolies, Malays and helmeted Dutchmen strolled along the white glare of the street.

The operator returned to his desk, threw over the switch and began to pound the key:

"Keranji," he clicked off, "Sta. No. 5. Quart. rept. Continue."

There was no reply. Lifeless, the sounder squatted there in its sounding box, an inanimate thing of brass and wire. With an impatient oath the operator reached for the key again.

"Sta. No. 5. Van Doorn, on. Continue."

But communication with Station Number five was broken. And it remained broken, though the Bandjermasin operator, his impatience gradually growing into alarm, continued to hammer out its call, begging for a reply. Nor did the trouble lie in native-severed wires. Stations four and six, relay posts to the east and west, answered promptly, expressed the hope that nothing was wrong.

Something was wrong. For the ensuing eighteen hours the fate of the two operators at Number five remained a mystery. Eighteen hours! Long enough for one man to die and another to be reborn!

Conway paddled slowly, keeping the one-man dugout well midstream. It was early morning, and the copper ball that was the sun was just beginning to press its oven heat down on the silt-heavy river. Conway was tired. He had been on the trail most of the night, and his eyes looked across at the south shore now with a sense of relief.

Around the next bend would be that familiar jetty and—home. He could call it home at least in comparison to this odorous, croc-infested waterway. He could rip off his mud-encrusted mosquito boots,

wash and shave, and enjoy potential security for another two weeks.

His lips curled bitterly. Security? They might call it that on the coast where they didn't know. Out here, a hundred and sixty-five miles from the nearest white man, it was hell. A green hell that slowly rotted a man's soul and wore his nerves to the breaking point.

In two weeks, maybe more, maybe less, the wires would break again. Stone-age natives, their eyes caught by the simple glitter of green insulators, would climb a tree and yank down the slender copper strands. Wires that connected Bandjermasin on the south-west coast with Bulungan on the east.

Conway dug his paddle deep to avoid a floating log. Next time it would be Van Doorn's turn. And while the assistant op was legging it through miles of fever bush, searching for a break that might be anywhere, he would be a virtual prisoner in a one-room, nipa-thatch hut, his only connection with the outside world, a piece of brass that rattled unimportant messages for hours on end.

He jammed an unlighted pipe between his lips. Life had certainly changed for him during the last year.

A year ago he had been an up and coming lawyer in New York City. Conway of Hartwell, Marlin and Conway. If he had kept his hands clean, he might have been assistant district attorney by now.

But he hadn't kept his hands clean. He had met and become associated with Dave Carlotto, the shrewdest, most unprincipled racketeer since "Legs" Diamond. With Carlotto to furnish him an unlimited supply of money, Conway had swiftly embarked on his career as defense lawyer, snatching cheap crooks and gun-men from the clutches of the law.

From "that young and able barrister," the tabloids had quickly changed their reference to him as "Carlotto's mouthpiece," a man to be cordially hated by every judge on the bench.

"But it was the Blaine case that did for me," Conway muttered aloud. "That damned . . ."

The dugout swept around the bend, and the jetty loomed before him. Beside it, angling from the river shore, was a bamboo pole with a rude sign fastened to its top end.

DUTCH EAST BORNEO TELEGRAPH COMPANY

RELAY STATION NUMBER 5

Conway turned his clumsy craft sharply. And then abruptly a sharp report cracked out over the water. For an instant its echo traveled back and forth from shore to shore. Then—silence.

Paddle rigid, he sent one searching look toward the ungainly shack on piles that loomed through the foliage. Van Doorn hunting? But no, the report had sounded hollow as if . . . as good Lord, as if it had come from within the hut itself.

The water churned behind him as he sent the dugout streaking to the jetty. An instant later he swung the mooring line around the bollards and climbed stiffly to the planking.

He stood there a moment, listening, every sense alert: a tall, square-shouldered man whose sharp brown eyes were shaded by the ellipse of his sun helmet.

Then he unbuttoned the flap of his side holster, drew out his revolver and began to pace forward.

Desertion! He knew something was wrong now. Van Doorn should be on the veranda, shouting his welcome after hearing the thump of the dugout against the jetty. But there was only the drone of insects and the tok tok tok of a distant skipping-on-the-ice bird.

Slowly he followed the short path to the bamboo steps, mounted them, opened the screen door. His finger tightened on the revolver trigger.

He had no opportunity to use the weapon. A voice close at hand said quietly:

"Drop the gun, Conway. Drop it quick!"

In the doorway, half hidden by the shadows of the inner room, a short, heavy-set man stood, automatic leveled before him.

Quietly Conway lowered his hands, let his revolver clatter to the floor. He stared at the man, saw that he was a total stranger, dark-faced with coarse, bushy eyebrows, a bristly mustache and thin lips.

"Who the devil are you?" Conway said mechanically. "Where is . . .?"

His eyes were accustoming themselves to the gloom, and that section of the inner room visible through the doorway etched itself into his sight now like an optic scar. There was a second stranger inside, leaning casually against the instrument table. On the floor lay the assistant op, Van Doorn. A blackened hole marked the center of his forehead, from which blood was oozing slowly.

The man in the doorway nodded coldly. "Walk inside slow and sit in that chair," he said. "And no tricks or I'll plug you sure."

Conway walked like a man in a dream. Van Doorn dead! Good God, it wasn't . . . it couldn't be true!

But it was true. As he lowered himself stiffly in the wicker chair, his eyes turned again to that motionless figure on the floor, and his nails ground deep into his palms.

The second man was tall and thin with soft features apparently untouched by the tropic sun. He was clad in whipcord breeches and boots and a Cawnpore sun helmet, with a neck-protecting puggree cloth. His appearance, save for the gimlet eyes, was almost feminine.

"Conway," the man said, seating himself on the instrument table, "you must excuse us for what happened here. I want you to know I had anticipated no bloodshed. But Van Doorn here reached for a gun before we had a chance to explain. Under the circumstances, it was his life or ours."

A reddish blur was forming before Conway's eyes. "Who . . .

are you?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Our names would probably mean nothing to you. Let us say we represent the Nickerson Development Company. I am Nickerson. My friend here is Frank Thiel."

In the ensuing pause there was no sound save the distant humming of insects. Then the sounder on the instrument table began to rattle spasmodically:

"Sta. No. 5. Quart. rept. Van Doorn, op. Continue."

Nickerson smiled. "They're wondering in Bandjermasin what happened here. Let them wonder. But for you a little explanation is necessary."

He reached in his pocket and drew out a small square of greenish substance, turned it over slowly in his fingers.

"Jade," he said abruptly. "Not the Oriental variety, but pure oceanic jade with its peculiar silken lustre. Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

Conway was a bent spring in his chair. Three feet away Thiel smoked a cigarette and fingered the automatic.

"Let us go out on the veranda," Nickerson said. "You will perhaps be more at ease there."

Swiftly he transferred Thiel's automatic to his own hand, motioned Conway to rise and pace before him through the doorway. On the veranda, with the body of Van Doorn out of sight, the operator relaxed slightly as he fought for control.

Nickerson slid a Burma cheroot between his lips and lit it slowly. Then he placed the piece of jade on the table between them.

"Oceanic jade," he repeated. "The same type one finds in New Zealand. A slab of it, let us say four foot square would be immensely valuable. Now bear with me a moment longer while I recount a little history."

He flicked his cheroot ash daintily to the floor and crossed one leg over the other.

"Three months ago a white man and a party of six Dyak Dyak car-

riers passed through here. That white man was Granton Lenier, who had come upriver ostensibly to make ethnological studies of Punan and Kenyah tribes.

"Lenier visited practically every large kampong in the district before he was stricken with fever. He then returned to the Mahakam and made his way back to the coast. The man, as you probably know, is still in a Bandjermasin hospital."

Only the mounting glitter in Nickerson's eyes told that he was not chatting idle conversation.

"But before Lenier left this district he stopped in at this telegraph station and sent a message to the coast. That message was most interesting in part. It stated that Lenier had found in a Kenyah village a large slab of pure oceanic jade, which the natives were using as a grinding stone for their grain and which they kept hidden from all eyes. The piece you see on the table is a chip from that stone which Lenier brought back. How it came into my hands is unimportant. What I—what Thiel and I want to know is simply this: Which village has that jade block? If a man were going to hunt for it at random, it might take him twenty years. You tell us which one, and we go our way."

Conway looked across the table into the bore of the automatic. Slowly he picked up the piece of jade, revolved it in his fingers. Seconds passed, and still he made no comment.

So it was the jade block they were after, was it? Simple enough in essence, but no matter what happened Conway couldn't reveal its whereabouts. To the Dyaks who owned it, that stone was more than a block of jade; it was an object of religious veneration. The gods of growth, of bountiful crops, were supposed to live within it. Steal that stone, and the entire onderaf-deeling would be an inferno of rebellion. The Dyaks would rise up en masse and . . .

"Well?" Nickerson's voice had lost its softness and was brittle

with impatience.

"The answer is—" Conway laid the jade back on the table—"you can go to hell!"

With a lunge the operator catapulted out of his chair, seized the weapon wrist of the man before him and twisted the automatic free. Doubling back his arm, he pounded two heavy blows into Nickerson's jaw. Nickerson snarled an oath, sought clumsily to defend himself.

Conway was fighting mad. He had but one thought, to crush the face of the man who had killed . . . murdered Van Doorn. Twice he saw with satisfaction his fist rip open the skin of the other's cheek. Twice he connected hard with Nickerson's solar plexus. Then . . .

Then a terrific weight crashed down on his head. For one agonizing instant he felt himself rock and sway while his arms fell useless to his sides. Then the scene before him seemed to slide out of focus. With a roaring in his ears, he slumped downward.

He was still on the veranda when he opened his eyes. Hours must have passed, for the jungle without was a pocket of blackness. A gasoline lantern, suspended from the ceiling, had been lighted, and under its white glare Nickerson and Thiel sat at the table playing cards.

Nickerson, bits of adhesive tape dotting his face, shook his head and frowned.

"You shouldn't have struck him so hard," he said softly. "You must learn to control that excessive strength of yours."

Thiel grinned as he shuffled. "He'll come around all right. When he does, he'll talk. Cut the deck."

Eyes closed to slits, Conway sat motionless while his brain rapidly cleared. His fists clenched. Van Doorn! The only decent friend he had had in a long time. The men and the women who had clustered around him back in the States didn't count. Without exception they were a cheap, worthless crowd who thought only of hard drink and

methods to evade the law.

Take the Blaine case for example. It was the Blaine case that had driven him from New York, sent him fleeing from port to port, a fugitive.

The Blaine case was a murder charge. Madeline Blaine accusing Dave Carlotto of killing her father. Carlotto was guilty, Conway knew. But the racketeer had slipped a check into Conway's hands and said: "Give her the works, Connie; give her the works. You're my mouthpiece."

The trial had gone along smooth enough. But when it was over someone had discovered the jury had been bribed. Carlotto's work, of course. Public indignation rose high. Conway had slipped out of town on the first boat, made well aware by the screaming press that pursuit was close behind.

He had gone to Hong Kong first, then to Singapore. From Singapore to Dutch Borneo. And finally—because of his earlier telegraphic experience—here to Number five where, cut off from the world and its memories, he had hoped to start anew. Now . . .

Now he turned to stare hopelessly out the mosquito screening over the black jungle. There was a full moon rising above the tops of the sago palms, and . . . Conway stiffened.

A new moon! He had almost forgotten. A new moon meant the regular peace visit of Tanah Batu and his warriors from Senlah village across the river. Tanah Batu, the most powerful chief in the district, paid a call each month to the telegraph outpost, promising security to the operators in return for an agreed indemnity of tobacco and white men's trade goods. It was the accepted order of the country.

Even as a glitter of hope entered his eyes, Nickerson rose and stepped to his side.

"Comin' around, eh?" The man nodded. "All right, Conway, now that our little argument is over, we'll . . ."

His voice broke off, and he

looked up sharply. In the dark clearing before the telegraph shack footsteps were suddenly sounded and the low mutter of native voices.

An instant later three stalwart Dyaks materialized out of the gloom, mounted the steps and entered the veranda. Thiel was on his feet, scowling, automatic leveled. Nickerson swung about, reaching for his own weapon.

The taller native of the three gave the two renegades but a glance. Advancing to Conway's side, he bowed shortly, began to speak in Malay.

"Tuan, I am Marudi, son of Tanah Batu. I bring promises of peace and good will by the gods. I speak for my father who is kept to his house, sick with fever."

Weakly but stiffly Conway returned the bow. "I am sorry to hear of your father's illness," he replied. "I have a thousand hopes he soon will recover. You are well?"

"Yes, Tuan, my health is good."

But while these formalities were exchanged, Nickerson suddenly interrupted.

"What does the dirty devil want?"

Conway looked up, stroked his jaw. "He is from Kampong Senlah across the river," he said unemotionally. "According to custom, he has come for his monthly allotment of trade goods and tobacco from the station's stores. He . . ."

Nickerson gave a hiss of irritation. He strode forward, placed himself before the native and snapped in Malay:

"Get out!"

Marudi turned his gaze slowly.

"Who is this man, Tuan, who . . ."

"Get out!"

Naked save for a bark loin cloth, the Dyak drew himself up proudly.

"I am Marudi," he said, "son of Tanah Batu. I have come for what is rightfully mine. I do not leave until it is given to me."

It happened then without warning. Thiel, five feet away, sud-

denly advanced, seized Marudi by one arm, whirled him around sharply. Lifting his heavily booted foot, he caught the native a sharp kick in the thigh. Then bowled the two other natives aside and gave Marudi a mighty push toward the door.

The Dyak stumbled, jerked erect, a low exclamation issuing from his lips. He whipped a heavy parang from his loin-cloth scabbard and lunged at Thiel.

But he got only half way. With a swiveling motion Thiel twisted his revolver upwards and yanked the trigger. The report that followed seemed to Conway to come from a long way off. Before him he saw Marudi poise rigid for an instant, then slowly crumple to the floor.

Nickerson opened the screen door.

"Get out!" he said to the two remaining Dyaks.

Through the hot air the sound pulsed rhythmically, a low deep-pitched booming whose vibration seemed to tremble the very piles of the house. Two hours ago it had begun. Each minute it seemed to mount in pitch and grow in volume.

Drums!

Conway, still in his chair on the station veranda, watched Nickerson pace nervously back and forth. Thiel, smoking cigarettes chain-fashion, sat with his revolver in his lap, staring out at the jungle.

"Why in hell didn't you tell us he was the son of a chief?" Nickerson suddenly demanded. "Why didn't you tell us . . .?"

"You didn't ask me," Conway replied, a grim smile turning his lips. "But that's so much water under the bridge now. Those Kenyahs from Kampong Senlah will be in a fighting frenzy in another few minutes. They'll attack the station then, and they won't leave until they've killed all three of us. The question is: What are you going to do?"

Quietly he spoke, voicing a kind of grim satisfaction. He didn't care what happened now. His own safety was an abstract thing to be disre-

garded in the face of more important facts. In some respects he could sympathize with those savages out there. They had lost a warrior who some day would have been their chief. He had lost Van Doorn—a friend.

Nickerson halted his pacing abruptly. The drums were louder . . . nearer now. The sound seemed to travel in waves down the black river.

Seizing a heavy Singapore chair, the renegade trundled it across to the door and turned it on end as a barricade. An instant later Thiel was at his side helping. Every scrap of furniture on the veranda was piled high against the railing, forming a rude breastwork.

Then Nickerson motioned Conway inside, into the main room of the station. They had but shot the bar on the door when the attack began.

It began with a soft rush of air and a loud thwack as something ripped through the outside mosquito screening. Blow pipe dart. Conway stood before one of the windows, gazing through the openings in the bamboo shutters.

Ironical, he thought. He must fight, of course. Self-preservation demanded that. He must fight side by side with these two murderers, struggling for a common cause. His revolver had been returned to him and a handful of cartridges.

But further thought was driven forcibly from his mind. A spear tore its way through the flimsy nipa thatch wall to land quivering on the floor. After that it was open hell! Conway fired through the shutters as a horde of brown shadows mounted to the veranda. The drums were a pounding thunder now. And above them sounded the shrieks and yells of the Dyaks.

He fought in a dream, pressing the trigger mechanically. Beside him Thiel swore and cursed, shouting unintelligible orders above the uproar. Nickerson moved from window to window, firing only when a target showed itself at close range.

And it ended as Conway knew it

would end. The door crashed open, ripped from its hinges. A horde of naked Dyaks surged into the room, armed with parangs. Swiftly, before more than a single disabling shot could be fired, the three white men were prisoners.

A tattooed Dyak, wearing a feathered headdress strode forward then, spoke in gobbling Malay.

"You have killed Marudi," he said, "Marudi, son of Tanah Batu. For that you must die. Your heads will join the others on the ridge pole of our long-house."

Conway was never to forget the events that followed. Bound hand and foot, lashed by a connecting length of hemp to Nickerson and Thiel, he was marched out of the station, across the little clearing and into the jungle trail. The Dyaks, yelling excitedly, formed a compact mass about him.

They made their way to the river shore, followed the bank a hundred yards upstream. There a line of dugout canoes were drawn up in the long reeds.

The three prisoners were pushed into the largest boat. Then silently, like so many ghosts, they drifted out on the black river.

An hour later they reached the kampong. A huge fire of brushwood in the center of the open space weirdly illuminated a long-house on stilts and several smaller nipa-thatch huts. Before the fire squatted ten old men of the village. And on a rudely built palankeen litter lay a thin, half-naked figure, eyes bright with fever. Tanah Batu!

The voices of the Dyaks died away, and in silence the three white men were led forward into the light of the fire. Feebly the old chief raised himself on one arm.

"You have killed my son," he said hoarsely. "Why?"

Conway shrugged. What good to explain that the murder had not been of his doing, that the two renegades were as much enemies of his as they were of the Dyaks. To these upriver natives a white man

was a white man, alike in nature and appearance, representing a power they did not understand.

"You have killed my son," the wasted figure repeated. "For that you must pay with your lives. But first we will hear what you have to say."

Conway opened his lips, then suddenly shut them again with a click of his teeth. These were Kenyahs, were they not, Dutch Borneo's highest developed tribe. Not Kayans or Punans, but Kenyahs. They went on regular head-hunting expeditions, yes, but they loved to palaver, to apply their stone-age logic to matters before them.

Suddenly Conway realized that given half a chance he could be in his element. For ten years he had trained and schooled himself to deal with logic, to present facts in such a manner that the most doubtful jury would be convinced. In this group of ten old Dyaks squatting by the fire he had a jury, more doubtful than ever before, but still a jury. And he was to be permitted to talk, was he, to present and argue his case. All right, the challenge was accepted. Open the court!

"Remove my bonds!" he ordered. "Can a man tell the truth when he is tied like a captive pig?"

The fever eyes of Tanah Batu regarded him quietly. Then with a wave of his hand the old chief motioned one of the Dyaks to cut the hemp ropes. His wrists free, Conway massaged circulation back into them, then swiftly peeled off his coat. In a loud voice he began to speak in Malay:

"I am a white man," he said, "a tuan, and as such I am entitled to a fair trial. We will conduct this trial in white men's fashion. Otherwise my spirit will return to my people and tell them you convicted me through trickery. If that is done, shame will be upon you; your rice fields will rot under water; and your people will be set upon by the plague."

He paused and saw that to a

certain extent at least his words had reached their mark. The ten old Dyaks sat in silence, watching him.

"For a long time," Conway continued, "I have been your friend. You have come to the station, and I have given you part of our stores. And yet now you are ready to take my life for an act committed by someone else."

"We know it was not your hand that struck my son," Tanah Batu interrupted. "But these two other white men . . . they were in your house. He who keeps company with a leopard, is he not also a leopard?"

But Conway didn't hear the objection. Slowly the fantastic scene was fading away before him. No longer did he see a group of painted savages with the black shadows of the jungle for a background. He was in a courtroom in a crowded city, standing between paneled walls. Once again, as he had done so many times in the past, he was arguing a case.

But there was a difference now. He began at the beginning, stating fact after fact. No, it was not true that he who was in the company of a leopard was always a leopard also. Did not the leopard prey upon the mouse-deer? And did not the leopard and the mouse-deer often drink at the same pool?

In this case the two white men were not his friends; they were his enemies. If Tanah Batu would send a warrior back to the station he would find the dead body of Van Doorn.

Van Doorn had not been killed by a sumpitan dart or by a thrown spear. He had been murdered, shot in cold blood by one of these two evil tuans. The bullet hole in his head was evidence.

Why had they killed Van Doorn and Marudi, the chief's son? Why? Because they wanted no interference in their plans. And what was their plan?

Dramatically he strode forward to the far side of the fire and waved his arm toward one of

the smaller nipa-thatch huts.

"Their plan was to steal the green stone with which you grind your grain," he said. "The stone sheltered from the rains in that hut which has belonged to your people for generations, and without which the evil gods would be able to destroy your crops!"

A low muttering rose from the ten old Dyaks and from the onlooking natives. Anger glittered in the fever eyes of Tanah Batu.

"Is this true?" he demanded.

In five quick strides Conway was back before the chief. Balancing a moment on the balls of his feet he suddenly whipped an accusing finger toward Nickerson and Thiel.

"Can the condemned deny it?" he shouted. "They cannot. As a white man, I demand justice."

For a moment, as he ceased speaking, a hush fell over the kampong, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Then Nickerson's voice rose in a strident scream.

"He's lying!" he cried. "Lying to save his own throat."

Now was the moment for Conway's bombshell, and he delivered it to the old chief in swift terse sentences.

"Give us parangs," he said. "Let each of them fight me one at a time. If I lie, the gods will direct their blades to my throat. If I speak the truth . . .!"

His words were caught up in a shout of excitement. Only Tanah Batu remained quiet, gazing at the operator with widening eyes.

"You speak wisely," he said. "It will be done."

In an instant everything was made ready for the combat. More brush was heaped on the fire. Nickerson and Thiel's bonds were removed. Each of the renegades was handed a curved, gleaming parang-knife. The natives fell back, forming a compact semicircle.

And, gripping his weapon, Thiel strode forward first. His shirt was open, exposing his short neck and barrel chest. There was a flush in

his face and a gleam of confidence in his eyes. More than that, Conway saw that the renegade was not unfamiliar with the handling of a parang. He held the wooden handle with that peculiar finger-locking grip.

"All right, Conway," he snarled. "You may be able to talk, but you can't beat me with one of these. Come on."

Gripping his own knife tightly Conway closed in. Warily he moved, knowing his only salvation lay in disarming Thiel. If the renegade were permitted to retain his weapon, sooner or later he would wear the operator down by sheer brute strength.

Simultaneously their arms shot forward, and steel rang on steel. Quick as light, Thiel feinted, then drove in hard, aiming at Conway's throat. The operator sidestepped to the barest fraction of a second.

Back and forth they surged, hacking at each other in calm and cold deliberation. In and out they fought, weaving in the flickering light of the fire. And then Thiel with a smile splitting his lips, suddenly tried trickery.

He advanced, slashing his blade right and left like a man mowing grain. Abruptly he poised rigid and sent a down-sweeping thrust straight for Conway's abdomen. But Conway had been expecting that very play. It was not for naught that he had spent his free hours watching the Dyaks practice with this weapon. He leaped back, swiveled his parang and caught Thiel's knife in the hook of the blade. Thiel's parang jerked from his hand and went flying into the air.

Dropping his own weapon, Conway brought his right fist pounding up and forward in a powerful haymaker. Thiel dropped like a poled ox.

"Next witness," Conway said quietly.

Nickerson emerged from the crowd then, and the operator realized instantly that in him he had an entirely different kind of oppo-

nent. Shrewd, silky, knowing that his all depended on the next few minutes, Nickerson looked across at Conway through crescent eyes.

There was the barest kind of a salute. Then, stark and terrible, the duel began. But Nickerson's movements were the opposite of Thiel's. The soft-faced renegade moved in and out cautiously, searching for an opening. He, too, Conway saw at once, had used such a knife before. He broke and parried the operator's thrusts with the skill and dexterity of long usage.

And as he fought Conway realized he was doing two things: Obtaining the revenge for the murder of his friend, Van Doorn. And turning a new page in the book of his life. For once and for all he was erasing his sordid past, opening the way to the future.

Yet he did not wish to kill Nickerson. He wanted only to . . .

It happened then without warning. Nickerson suddenly leaped back, retreated three lightning paces, whipped his arm over his head. With a low cry he launched his parang into the air, threw it straight at Conway.

Conway saw the motion, and his blood froze. He gasped, leaped . . . and the weapon shot past his ear with a dull whiz.

He was an unleashed tiger then. Lunging forward, he pounded his fists three times in machine-gun succession into Nickerson's jaw. A cruel kick caught him in the groin, sent a wave of nausea surging through him. Staggering, he bored in, striking hard and clean lefts and rights until his arms ached in their sockets.

And at length he saw the figure before him waver and go down. Nickerson collapsed on the ground by the fire and lay still.

Swaying, Conway stood erect and surveyed the ten old Dyaks by the fire.

"May it please the court," he panted in English, a slow smile forming on his lips. "The defense rests."

Thirty-six hours after the dis-

strict-report from Keranji had been interrupted, the telegraph operator in Bandjermasin received the following message from that same Station No. 5.

Sorry to report trouble here and the death of Van Doorn, assistant operator. He was killed by one of two white men, Nickerson and Thiel, who entered this district, via the Mahakam, to steal the jade grain stone at kampong Senlah. Marudi, son of the local chief,

was also murdered.

Am sending Nickerson and Thiel down-river under native guard as far as Long Kai, together with full written incriminating report. Had some difficulty convincing the Dyaks these two men should be dealt with by a Dutch court-of-law, but they assented finally.

Send two relief operators with quarterly supply transport to take over here. I'm going back home.

Conway

A Desert Story

By C. J. Henderson

Teddy London peeked out from behind a sand-leaking pile of rubble someone had once called a wall. His Colt in hand, he scanned the dunes, watching for those of Acbai Mulask'tar's tribe who had followed them through the night. His companions, those missed by the schools of bullets and arrows which had hunted them across the moon-streaked desert floor, lay behind him in heaps. The other end of the oasis was being guarded by his friend, Kirby Costigan. London was grateful the large Californian was with them, for a tougher man he had never known. Although London was a better shot, he had a healthy respect for Costigan's ability with his fists or a knife, and there was little doubt the troubles they were in would end in such a confrontation.

"Kirby, see any of them?"

"Some." Costigan was not one for conversation. It did not matter—London knew what he meant. The spotting of one Arab on the desert meant at least twenty or thirty hidden from one's view. London had seen four or five himself. Between every weapon in camp, the adventurer knew they did not have a third as many bullets as they did enemies. Sweat beaded on his brow—despite the chill winds, the whipping cry of the slashing air around them, the soak dripped off him freely, mudding the sands below briefly, only to dry and disappear as if it had never been. Swatting at the sand gnats buzzing about his forehead, nipping his ears and neck, London thought of how simply everything had started.

He and Costigan had been in Diyarbakir; each had foolishly found his way to the Middle East, their heads filled with dreams of forgotten treasure and righteous revolution. Testing an American's life in the cradle of civilization soon

destroyed their pulp adventure ideas about life, though. Each had grown disgusted with the incomprehensible ways of the "faithful," their aversion growing not from misconceptions, but from familiarization. On arrival in Turkey, Costigan's honest smile had been a welcoming beacon to those willing to take advantage of a foreigner's romantic notions. Indeed, at the moment he met London, Costigan was in the process of trusting a French entrepreneur gathering men for a mining operation in the African interior. The man's most successful bargaining ploy was a heavy dram of laudanum hidden in a coffee-liquor, an argument which had already begun working on Costigan when London interfered. Bitter over his own treatment by the area, he was not willing to see the youth carted off to whatever fate the white-suited schemer had in store for him.

The pair became partners then, swearing not to leave for home until they had enough money to take them both in style. With what resources they could muster, they spread the word around town they were willing to hire out for any rough jobs available. Their crudely lettered notices were not twenty-four hours old when what seemed the perfect opportunity found them. A team of British archaeologists were searching for several roustabouts for an expedition. They needed men to act as guides, detail bosses and guards. The pay seemed good, the job seemed legitimate, and neither was in the mood to complain. Anything that took them out of Diyarbakir looked to be God-sent.

They left the city two days later, ninth and tenth in command of a party of forty-two men, thirty-five camels and fifteen horses. Now, twelve days after that, they

found themselves second and third in command of a party of eight men, four camels and three horses. They had departed Diyarbakir with nearly four tons of supplies; looking around through the opening dawn, London figured they had at best two hundred and fifty pounds of that left. Twelve pounds was ammunition. Maybe six was food.

"They're movin'!"

London raised his head, searching the sands for the Arabs Costigan had spotted. He found several forms crawling forward, bellying their way across the sand. "Kulkai—get over here!"

The half-caste ran to London's side. The American told him, "Shout out to them. Tell 'em to stop where they are, or we'll poison the well."

Nodding in agreement, Kulkai screeched out toward the advancing Bedouins. Barely into his teens, the boy's voice cracked several times as he stammered out London's warning. While he did, the American called to his partner, "Kirby, drag a body over here. Quick!"

As Costigan sprang to the far wall where they had stacked their slaughtered comrades, London ran to the well, unloosening a length of rope. Tossing it up over the ancient bucket brace, he quickly rigged a lasso. Costigan was next to him seconds later, a corpse dangling from his powerful left hand. "Get his feet in the noose," snapped London. "I'll tie off the end."

While the pair worked, however, the other survivors of their party began to swarm around. "Here, London," snapped Palmer, "what's this all?"

"Quiet," ordered the American. Turning back to Kulkai, he shouted, "Are they listenin' to you?"

"Yes, sir; this they are good for, sir."

Costigan gave London a high sign, indicating he had the body tied off over the well. Running back to the crumbling wall, London scanned the early morning for himself, checking to see if the warriors

had indeed halted, if even for the moment. Costigan hurried back to his own post, doing the same. Neither could see anyone advancing toward them. Both risked standing to extend their fields of vision. No one was in sight. Palmer advanced on London again. "See here—I want a word with you."

The American turned, waiting for the older man to cross the distance between the well and the wall. Sir Jeffrey Palmer was an archaeologist, the man who had put their expedition together. It was his belief that a month earlier he had found the undisturbed burial site of a previously unknown pharaoh. At the time he made his discovery, however, he was short on both men and supplies. Covering his tracks, he packed up his assistants and returned to Diyarbakir to outfit a full expedition.

Palmer rooted his feet before London, staring at him coldly. "This, I suppose, is your idea of a rational ploy." The archaeologist sputtered, "You—you've trapped us here."

London eyed the Britisher with disbelief. "You had a better plan?"

"We should have continued to run for it. Surely we could have reached some better sanctuary than this."

"Surely we could have all been cut down one by one like every other white-skinned body blistering out there on the sand now." The American mopped his neck and brow. "We stopped here because here is all there is. We're fifty miles from anywhere else. Anything! Our one chance is to barter our freedom for their water."

"Our one chance vanished in grey smoke when your nerve ran out and you raced us into this hell-bound way station! If I hadn't set the alarm and gotten us all moving," snapped the frightened man, "as many of us as did survive would be dead also."

"What I don't seem to be able to puzzle up at all," said Nash, another of the Brits, "is what set all this madness to whirl in the first

place."

"Good question." Costigan walked back to where the others were gathering. "You think these bed sheets have a legitimate grievance against us, Teddy?"

London raised his eyes; he had asked himself the same question a hundred times since the first of their party had been cut down until the very second his partner voiced it aloud. Something was out of place, but the American could not spot it. When they had come across Mulask'tar's tribe, each was glad to see the other. They traded supplies back and forth, bargaining under the sharp eye of Allah's laws of hospitality. When the Bedouins discovered the purpose of the foreigner's expedition, they volunteered to hire on as diggers and guides, turning their chance desert meeting into a reason for celebration.

The Arabs had hosted a splendidly wild party, setting their best forward. The "Europeans," as they insisted on calling all whites, had been made the guests of honor, and had been given the finest of everything which could be provided. Tents were filled with fiery dishes of mutton and goat, dessert puddings and curries. Mulask'tar provided jugglers, wrestling matches, a magician and a sort of passion play which brought tears to the eyes of the faithful, and enough color and movement to the foreigners to keep them from being too rudely unentertained.

The Europeans had responded with howling choruses of school songs, and a drunken dance around the central cooking fire.

A professional soldier told a tale of vampires and lunatics, playing to his audience like a Finley Street regular. The necessity for translation seemed to bother neither the teller nor his audience overly.

Not to be outdone, Mulask'tar set about winning the unspoken contest calling for his daughter. She came without a word, wrapped in long, thin shreds of black fabric, laced and stitched in patterns

too delicate to read in firelight. Young, barely in her teens, she moved across the sand around the cook fire, gliding in the footprints of the drunken fire dancers the way grass fills in the scars of a bombed out field.

She raced the breath of all who saw her, even the usually stiff and proper Palmer, and then disappeared into the tents beyond the firelight's edge, the slightest of giggles the only sound she made all the while they watched her.

The Bedouins, pleased with themselves and their chieftain, then insisted their camp be shared that night. The overfed and overwined explorers had been happy to accept. "Maybe we were set up," answered London. "Maybe they didn't want us diggin' up their holy dead, and just suckered us in."

"Seems unlikely," responded Nash.

"I pretty much agree, but what makes you think so?"

Prentiss Nash was one of the assistant directors of the museum which sponsored most of Palmer's expeditions. He had accompanied more than one British team into the Middle East, and seemed to know its peoples fairly well.

"It doesn't have the proper feel." His hand swept the horizon. "These are not a subtle folk; we are talking of a people unchanged in their ways since before the coming of Moses. If they wanted us away from something—they would have told us, bluntly."

"And I think the pair of you are being far too naive," responded Palmer. "Mulask'tar is unfortunately no fool. As much as you do not wish to subscribe to your own theory, Mr. London, I am afraid you are correct. We are not the first to come to this region in search of her treasures. The fact we wish to uncover history to put it on display for the world does not diminish the fact that much of that history is fashioned from hand-beaten silver and gold.

"Don't flaunt your knowledge

here, Nash. You know one dialect in ten of this region. I've lived most of my adult life on these dunes—sifting them for the bits and fragments which make your gloomy, grey-stoned Royal sideshow the attraction it is, and I've done it with a shovel in one hand and a Webley in the other." The archaeologist lifted his sun helmet to wipe his forehead. The dawn was already turning into harsh morning, the shadows beginning their retreat.

"They meant to kill everyone except those of us who knew where to dig. I leave it to your imaginations to decide how long those kept alive would have retained the condition once the tomb had been unearthed."

Nash made to calm the explorer down, but Palmer wheeled in the sand, pointing his finger at the museum director and London and cursing, "Damn both you fools. This affair will end in death. Everyone pays for mistakes eventually, Mr. London. Everyone."

"We shall all pay dearly for you."

The Britisher turned then, retreating toward the few palms growing around the well. The others said nothing. The day was growing far too uncomfortable, from the heat, and the hostile glare of hundreds of unseen eyes.

* * *

London pulled his grandfather's pocket watch from his breast pocket for the thousandth time. It told him they did not have long before the last rays of the sun disappeared, leaving them in the deep, weak-lit grey of the desert night. No clouds masked the stars, but their feeble light only made the shadowy web of the dunes around the oasis that much more unreadable.

Costigan crawled across the encampment, joining London near the well. "Think they'll come?"

"They might. We'd never know it until it was too late." The men sat silently with their backs to the slightly cool stone. Their eyes stung of sweat and their throats of sand. Although they had had

all the water they needed during the day, exposure to the sun and wind had taken its toll. The group could not afford the luxury of tents or lean-tos. The first of their team to try and hide from the sun died quickly as gunfire from the sands riddled the canvas sheet he hid beneath with lead.

The Arabs might not close in, but they were not about to let the "infidels" relax. Throughout the day, random bursts had strafed the camp, keeping the remaining seven hopping. "We'd best post a guard."

"Two at a time," suggest London. "Two hour shifts."

"I'll take da first with Beardsley."

"Fine. I'll second with Nash." London pulled his jacket down from where he had laid it on the well's edge and wrapped it around himself. "What kind of a signal do you want to use?"

"If I see any bedsheets, I'll start shootin'. Good enough?"

London pulled his hat down over his eyes, "Terrific."

Costigan saw nothing to aim at during his two hours, though. At his watch's end, he sent Beardsley to get some sleep, and then woke London and Nash. Making sure they were awake, the young American curled up by the well and dropped off quickly, falling into such a deep sleep he was actually snoring within minutes. London and Nash picked spots and began watching the desert.

The American cautioned the Britisher to unfocus his attention. Staring in one direction too long, listening to the sound of the wind over the sand, was the easiest way to fall under the desert's powerfully hypnotic spell. London whistled to himself, varying the melody from time to time, keeping himself alert. Concentrating on a tune was just enough to stop him from thinking of anything else which might prove too distracting. Men with girlfriends, he reflected, made lousy guards.

Thoughts of their situation, of

the numbingly hot day past, of their collective chances—all had to be driven away. London dwelled on nothing but his whistling, constantly eyeing the sand, listening for everything beyond the range of his own noise. Five bars into "Puttin' on the Ritz," he heard what he'd been waiting for.

It was a sluffing sound, a short scattering noise like the winter breath of a small child. The American's ears perked, his eyes searching for the source. Not moving his head, he shifted his eyes from side to side, looking for whatever was crossing the sand toward the oasis. Getting the direction, he stared intently, watching the crest of an unbroken dune. Nothing happened for several moments. London waited. Slowly, he slid his Colt from its holster; flicking the safety off, he slipped it atop the well wall behind him. Still watching the horizon, he reached down to his left, grabbing up his rifle, careful to remain silent.

Suddenly, a hand inched up over a small dune only a few dozen yards away. Slowly bringing the rifle to his knee, London aimed, waiting for more of a target. His forefinger wrapped the trigger. A burnoosed head followed the hand. London waited, letting the Arab come completely over the crest of the dune. After several more seconds, another Bedouin followed. Crosshairing the second man, the American held his breath and squeezed off his first shot.

Instantly the camp erupted in panic and confusion. London fired again, exploding the head of the first attacker. Costigan was awake and heading toward the well, firing his revolver from the hip. He dropped four running forms with six shots, cursing his misses, reloading while still on the move. London heard Nash's rifle blast over the shouts of their companions.

"Mulkai," shouted the American, "call 'em off—tell 'em we're not bluffin' about their water!"

As the half-caste cried into the

night, Costigan leapt atop the well, his Bowie reaching for the rope still holding the corpse they had suspended earlier. London stood, firing at more Arabs who were now streaming toward the oasis. Bullets sped through the camp from all directions. London fired again and again, emptying his rifle quickly. A scream went up behind him. Beardsley was flopping on the sand, trying to hold the blood leaking through his fingers.

As three Bedouins came over the ruined wall only yards from the well, London grabbed up his Colt and fired, the first's throat bursting in a splatter of red, another knocked backwards by the lead which ripped through his heart. The third, however, was able to get off a shot before London was able to stop him. The bullet whistled next to his ear and then passed on through Costigan's body. The youth grunted, almost losing his footing. Blood jerked from his side as he finished slashing the hemp. Holding the corpse with one hand, he dangled it over the mouth of the well, shouting, "Shoot me again, you bastards—Kill me now!"

Kulkai bleated more entreatments, pleading with the attackers to pull back before the only water for a hundred miles was contaminated. All movement stopped. The Arabs considered their next move silently, the only noise the buzzing of insects swarming around Costigan and his threat.

Finally they turned and disappeared back into the night. As those in the oasis gathered at the well, a lone voice broke through from the darkness. Kulkai told the others: "He says they were fools—serpents sleep with open eyes. But Mulask'tar's heel is wide enough to crush the largest fangs."

"He says Mulask'tar is coming, and that in the morning, he will kill us all very thoroughly."

London took stock of their situation. Costigan had saved their skins for the night, but had gotten himself shot doing so. Beardsley was a red smear on the sand, the

hole through his chest empty and unmoving. That left the American with Costigan and Palmer, two old men, a cook, and a boy. If Mulask'tar wanted to kill them all very thoroughly, thought London, he certainly wouldn't have to try very hard.

* * *

Dawn came and passed without incident. Nothing stirred on the sands. London and the others clung around the well, breathing the scant shade of the scrub palms near it. Costigan was in tolerable condition. The bullet had passed cleanly through. Nash had patched him with only a minimum of difficulty. The young man's side was too sore to allow him a great deal of movement, but he was in no danger of dying—from that bullet.

"Pretty funny," said Costigan. "Nash says I got me no damage. Guess that means I'll live 'til they kill us."

"That sounds about right," agreed London. The American leaned against one of the palms, waiting for the inevitable. As the morning dragged on, he watched the others. There was little doubt in anyone's mind they were all going to die. He hoped that knowledge would not affect the others too severely—knew it would.

Nash had gone off with his assistant, Pickering, the pair of them rooting through the remaining supplies in search of something undiscernible to the others. They went to each box, one at a time, tearing them open and unwrapping whatever was inside, usually tossing the contents about, whispering between themselves all the time. They cast glances back and forth around the oasis and across the desert in between their exploring, alternating between silently staring and cackling wildly. The expedition's Arab cook sat with Kulkai, the pair praying while they eyed the desert vacantly. Palmer was not to be seen.

Finally, as Nash threw a jar high into the air, London suddenly strode across their small claim of

sand and grabbed the museum director by his shirt front, dragging him quickly to his feet. Glass shattered behind them—the smell of ammonia reeking across the dunes.

"Get a grip."

"No need, old chap; none at all."

"Don't hand 'em out, 'cause nobody's buyin'. You and this bad check here better pull yourselves together before the fun gets started."

Nash tried to break London's hold. He bounced and struck out, unable to get away until his shirt ripped, his thrashings sending him toppling. "Pull ourselves together," he screamed. "For what?! So we can straight spine march into a thousand rifles? So we can let them take us and—"

Before he could cry further, Palmer strode into view. "What is this? What in the Crown's name is going on here?" Seeing the ruin Nash and Pickering had made of the expedition's supplies, the archaeologist barked, "What in God's Great Heaven has possessed you all? Are you mad?" His hand swept the ruin of scientific equipment lying about them on the sand. "Have you lost your minds?"

Nash laughed at Palmer, a chokingly bitter sound which disturbed even Costigan. "Shut up," ordered Palmer. The words slapped out at Nash, but their effect was that of the moment. The museum director looked to his assistant in silence and then suddenly, the pair erupted into even greater hysterics. Palmer grabbed for Nash, but the latter dodged away, his eyes rolling as he screeched insanely.

As the archaeologist moved forward, Nash clambered atop the well, tottering around its lip. Palmer chased him around it several times, but the maddened director was able to stay out of his reach. Finally, as they faced each other from opposite sides of the well, Nash grabbed hold of the swaying corpse, shoving the putrid weight at his tormentor.

"For God's sake, stop it, man!"

Nash screeched at Palmer—batting at the dangling body, he sent it reeling back and forth, its arms cutting the air. "Death, Palmer. Death, Sir Palmer. Look at it, deeeep-ly; smell it, deeeep-ly. Mummy's come to nip you home, Palmey."

Palmer drew his Webley, making to fire upon the museum director. His arm came up, but before he could shoot, London grabbed the pistol away from him, backhanding the older man, sending him stumbling into the swaying body over the well.

"London!" Palmer snarled. The archaeologist threw himself at the American, only to be struck again, harder. Palmer fell to the sand, filling his nose and eyes as he hit. London turned his back, walking to where Costigan sat sweeping the horizon with his field binoculars.

"See anything?"

"Yeah." The younger man handed the glasses to his partner. London pulled the distance closer. What seemed a blur to the eye became hundreds of rapidly approaching riders.

He handed the binoculars back to Costigan as the younger man checked the rounds in his rifle. "Been nice knowin' ya," quipped the Californian.

London snorted for reply and looked about; Kulkai and the cook were prostrate toward the East, lamenting their lives in loud wails. Pickering was hidden behind a packing crate, crying. Nash continued to play with the dangling body; Palmer lay where he had fallen.

Checking the chambers in the archaeologist's revolver, London eyed the man, and then yelled to Costigan. "Watch our pals here. Try to keep 'em from each other's throats, if you feel like it, anyway."

Costigan nodded toward his partner and then silently watched as the older man walked out into the desert. London measured each step, moving across the sand at an easy pace. The rising cloud in the

distance had begun settling, dispersing about the oasis at what seemed a mile distant. The Arabs no longer sought to hide themselves. They knew as well as he did there was no need.

Shots rang out, slugs speeding past the American from several directions. He knew the Arabs were toying with him, trying to make him run. He could hear them yelling from one to another. As the shouting increased, so did the number of bullets dancing the sand behind and in front of him.

Realizing the Bedouins could see him clearly, London slowly drew his sidearm from its holster and carefully held it away from his body. His arm extended, he opened his fingers and let the gun fall to the desert floor. As the shooting continued around him, he ignored the tormenting closeness of the flying lead, reaching into his belt for Palmer's Webley.

Again he extended his arm, letting the second weapon fall away to the sand. Never breaking stride, London moved beneath the raging sun, step after step through the waves of bullets and curses and heat. Reaching up, he grabbed the brim of his hat, pulling it from his head. It floated to the desert floor behind him.

The heat struck his scalp like a sledge; the unchecked light stung his eyes, blinking them to slits. His hands started unbuttoning his shirt. The rifle fire around him slackened. When his shirt touched the sand, it stopped altogether.

The sun tore at the exposed white skin, sending burning itches throughout London's body. He ignored the sensations, as he had the bullets—as he did the thought of dying. Stiff-legged, totally exposed, the American marched toward the largest body of the Bedouins. Coming to within a few yards of their horses and camels, he stopped—and waited.

The tension between the Arabs and the American continued for long minutes, both sides unsure as to what to do next, until,

"European . . ."

London turned his head to the speaker. "Mad to die for one of sin?"

"Mulask'tar."

"Give no order. Speak to this one. Do as told. Answer question."

"Mulask'tar."

Stepping down from his mount, the Arab walked up to London, breathing into his face. "You not speak to he of the prophet. You speak to this one. Do as told. Understand?"

London brought his fist up, driving into the man's middle like a hammer into bread. The Bedouin fell backwards as if shot through the gut. London continued to stand beneath the sun, feeling his sweat inch its way through the dried grit and dirt on his body, waiting for the tribal chieftan to come forward.

"Mulask'tar!!"

Noise followed his cry; the shuffle of horses and whisper of men grew and fell as the assembly parted to allow Acbai Mulask'tar to ride through their midsts. Stepping down from his horse, the man walked forward, coming to within inches of London. Reaching up, he took the American's face in his hands. London stood still, feeling the calloused fingers, waiting. Bending his head, the desert leader kissed London on one cheek. Then, moving to the other side of the American's face, he spat.

London allowed Mulask'tar to step back, and then he spread his arms, signifying a desire to understand. The chieftan grunted, calling the man the American had felled to his side. As the still groaning Arab hobbled to his master, Mulask'tar spoke in a rapid string; the other interpreted.

"You not one of sin. But you shield one of sin. This not be."

London stared at the warrior leader, probing the man's darkly burnt face through the heat and the silence. Mulask'tar stared back. London told the interpreter, "I know of no sin. This is no ar-

gument. This is truth. If I am to understand, I must be enlightened."

The chieftan had not stopped staring at the American during the entire exchange. Now, he stood silent, watching the drops of water roll over London's forehead, down his nose and chin. He probed the alien, green eyes before him and, suddenly, decided to believe what his instincts told him.

Clapping his hands, he screamed an order to those behind him. Again the sea of men parted to allow another rider to come forward. London stared at the small figure. The rider's robes disguised much, but London could tell the approaching figure was young. The interpreter announced, "Shenra—first born of he of the prophet; she who is all good."

London's mind raced. What did a girl, even Mulask'tar's oldest daughter have to do with anything? She doesn't look to be more than twelve, maybe thirteen . . . and, suddenly, the jagged lines of rage and shame, mixed in the eyes of father and daughter were made clear. London had seen the look before. The eyes were blue and the woman was half a world away, but the look was the same, and London had piled bodies like bur-laps of rubbish because of it.

The Arabs had been coming with hatred and death like a whirlwind, but not for all of them—just one; the one mad enough to chance forgetting where he was, and what he was doing. The one without the control to stay away from a child's body—the one who had awakened them in the night and urged them to flight with terror and lies, using the exodus of all as a cover for his own guilty crime.

"Palmer."

Mulask'tar's eyes glossed over with a hate and desire beyond description. London understood. Mulask'tar knew it. The sheik spoke through his interpreter. "You had no understanding of this sin, did you?"

London shook his head numbly,

his mind still trying to comprehend what Palmer had done. "You have no children, do you?"

The American's head shook again. Mulask'tar stared into London's eyes, understanding the man's inability to comprehend his anger. Taking the edge of his own caftan, he wiped away the spittle still damp on London's cheek. As he spoke, the interpreter said, "Your idea to ransom our water—yes?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Intelligence. You force all leaders talk. Mulask'tar held by desert law. All forced wait."

London stared at the stretched lines of riders disappearing to his left and right off around the oasis. Bitter, hard men, astride equally rough animals, they had come for one thing.

"Tell Mulask'tar his wait is over."

At a hand signal from the warrior chief, two horses were brought forward. London and Mulask'tar mounted, the chieftan slipping his own burnoose onto the American's baking head. Together, they rode for the oasis.

As they reached the crumbling wall, London could see Palmer, being held by a freshly bleeding Costigan. The Californian shouted: "Crazy bedbug took my rifle when he saw you comin'. Tried to shoot the two of you. When I took it, he hit me, and then tried to cut his own throat. I stopped him."

"Good." London unknotted a length of leather stripping from his saddle and threw it to Costigan. "Tie him."

"No!" shrieked the archaeolo-

gist. "Don't give me to them. Please. For the love of Sweet Lord God Jesus Christ, you're a white man—don't give me to them! Please!!"

Costigan lashed the man's hands together, trusting his partner. Silently, London slid from his horse, loosening a coil of chain-threaded rope from about his saddle's horn. Fashioning the end into a lariat, he crossed the oasis to where Costigan struggled with Palmer's hands. London made to put the noose over the archaeologist's head, but the older man thrashed back and forth until the American backhanded him once, twice, and then again, until Palmer was nearly senseless.

"Oh, God," blubbered the Britisher, "oh, please—please!"

London jerked the man roughly across the sand to where Mulask'tar waited. Filigree strands cut into the bleating man's neck. Scarlet smeared from his urgings, leaking slowly into his shirt.

"Why? Why must you do this? Why won't you kill me?!"

Handing the end of Palmer's leash to the desert chief, London told the archaeologist, "Because just like you said, Sir Palmer, everyone pays—Everyone."

Mulask'tar wheeled his steed, dragging his prey behind him. London told Costigan to gather everyone together. Nash's mad laughter mixed with Palmer's burning howls, but London paid neither any heed. As the Californian lumbered toward the well, his partner walked out into the desert to fetch his shirt, his hat, and his revolver.

Nothing else mattered.

Indian Sign

By Robert Bloch

Gunfire snarled its ugly echo through the canyon walls, and Johnny Marsh crouched low against the neck of his pinto, his lean brown face suddenly intent. There was trouble around the bend of the trail, and Johnny Marsh made it his practice never to plunge into trouble. Sneaking up on it would be the wisest policy.

He reined the pinto to a halt. As he slid to earth one hand went to the lariat at his waist, and drew it out. Whirling it gently, he sidled forward along the trail.

The echo of the shots had died, but a plume of acrid smoke rose before his intent black eyes as he rounded the bend on soft, moccasined feet. Then the smoke cleared away, and Johnny Marsh stared through settling dust at the scene before him.

Two men blocked the trail. But Marsh only glanced at the first figure. One glance was sufficient, for the man outsprawled in the dust was obviously dead. Marsh noted the terrible stiffness of his body, the head lolling limply to one side, then turned his attention to the standing figure.

The tall man in the black hat was now bending over the body at his feet. The clothes he wore were obviously of "eastern" cut. Marsh couldn't see his face, but there was no need of that. It would be thin and sallow—the face of a professional gambler.

Marsh moved forward warily, continuing his careful scrutiny. His eyes flickered casually as he spun the lariat that hung from his right wrist.

Suddenly he stopped short, for the man in the black hat rose. He turned, his right hand dropping to his hip and rising again in one, continuous motion.

Marsh stood stock-still. His wrist moved effortlessly. The lar-

iat, hanging no longer, whipped out with chain-lightning speed, and found its mark.

The stranger's gun spat fire through the dust at Marsh's feet. Then it sailed forward in an arc, as the marksman's wrist twisted against the rope that encircled it.

Marsh tugged forward, and the man in the black hat fell to his knees, squirming to get loose. But Marsh flipped another loop that pinned both the prisoner's arms to his side.

Johnny Marsh squinted down at the prostrate figure of the captive. He gave a little shrug of disappointment. The face glaring up at him was not the thin and sallow visage he'd expected. It was plump, smooth-shaven. No gambler's mustachio here. Nothing of the desperado at all, unless the intense hatred in the stranger's eyes implied it.

"What's the idea?" gasped the man in the dust.

Johnny Marsh shrugged again.

"You come with me," he grunted. "Go to town."

"Take this rope off, you fool! Let me explain—you're making a mistake! I've got papers—"

"No read papers," Marsh answered. "You come to town with me, pronto."

His eyes roved to the side of the trail, where two horses grazed. One was his captive's; the other evidently the property of the victim in the fight.

Marsh did what was necessary. He pocketed the killer's gun, jerked the man upright and prodded him into his saddle. This done, he lifted the dead man across the back of the other beast. Another lariat served to tie the grisly burden to its mount, and tether both horses to the lariat Marsh held.

In a few moments the procession

was ready. Marsh rode his pinto ahead, tugging the other mounts behind. His captive, bound in the saddle, mumbled under his breath.

"Dirty Indian!" he growled.

Marsh shrugged. He rode bare-back easily in true Indian fashion. Settling himself, he drew out his pipe, loaded the battered corncob from a pouch at his side. Soon the stifling fumes of rank half-cured tobacco drifted back to mingle with the curses of his captive. Thus half-breed Johnny Marsh rode into Mountain Lodge, victorious.

The street was empty. No throngs lined the wooden walks to cheer Johnny Marsh in his triumphal entry. From far beyond the shacks rose the smoke of Kiowa campfires in wispy greeting, responding to the curling plume from Marsh's battered pipe.

That was all. In silence, Marsh led the horses to the dingy frame building that was city hall, courthouse, jail and sheriff's office all in one.

Fat little Jed Hutchins waddled out just as Marsh dismounted. His amiable smile of greeting faded as he surveyed Marsh's companions.

"What's all this?" he demanded.

"Hey, boys! Take a look at what Johnny's got."

Two more men drifted out of the frame shack. Marsh recognized Deputy Cool and Jim Bemis, a local rancher.

"I find these men on trail, meb-be two miles down. Fight. One man dead. I catch other man."

"A very interestin' story, if somewhat brief," Sheriff Hutchins commented. He stepped around to the horse bearing the corpse. His eyes noted the bullet wound in the forehead of the sandy-haired victim. Then he turned to the man in the black hat.

"Well, what yuh got to say about this?" he snapped. "Murder's a serious charge, yuh know."

The stranger's plump face reddened.

"Get me down from here and I'll explain," he answered. "That crazy Indian didn't give me a

chance."

Sheriff Hutchins helped the bound stranger to dismount.

"Well?" he asked.

The stranger stretched his cramped legs.

"My name's Blinn," he countered. "Rex Blinn."

"Blinn?"

"That's right. You must have heard of me. They surely notified you from Washington."

"Say, yuh're not the feller they were sendin' out as new Indian Agent, are yuh?"

Rex Blinn smiled.

"Reach into my coat-pocket," he said. "I think you'll find my credentials there."

Sheriff Hutchins reached and read. Now his face reddened in turn.

"By golly! There must be a mistake somewhere," he grunted.

"But who's the other feller?"

"Jack Parsons." Blinn frowned.

"A gambler and confidence man from St. Joe. He got wind of my mission out here and trailed me. Thought I was carrying bullion orders, I guess. Anyway, he rigged up an ambush for me on the trail back there. I got the draw on him, but let him fire first. It was self-defense."

"Self-defense, eh?"

"The savage didn't tell you that, did he?" Blinn scowled. "Matter of fact, he didn't even see the shooting. He came sneaking up afterward and grabbed me while I was examining Parsons' body."

Sheriff Hutchins turned to Johnny Marsh.

"This true, Johnny?" he asked.

The half-breed was silent, eyes averted. "True," he mumbled.

The sheriff was already busy untying Blinn's arms.

"Sorry about this," he apologized. "Certainly not much of a welcome for the new Indian Agent. You'll have to forgive old Johnny, though. He's a little simple, I guess. Always making a blame fool of himself. Maybe he just wanted to be a hero."

Blinn wriggled his fingers tentatively, then turned to Johnny Marsh with a grin.

"Of course," he chuckled. "I understand now. Quite a natural mistake. Just upset me a little, that's all. I'll get accustomed to your rough-and-ready tactics, I suppose. Shall we call it quits, Johnny?"

He held out his hand to the half-breed. Johnny shook it, and the two walked a few paces away. In the meantime Deputy Cool turned to Hutchins.

"Blinn's right," he said. "That dead hombre's Jack Parsons. Leastways, here's his name in the hat-band of his sombrero, and he's got a letter with that name on it in his hip pocket." And he handed the two articles to the sheriff.

"I'll take charge of the evidence," said Hutchins as he looked them over. "You take charge of him."

"Another shovelling job. Oh, well." Cool shrugged, then bent to drag the victim off.

Off to one side Blinn spoke to Johnny Marsh. The plump-faced Indian Agent was still chuckling.

"Say, Johnny, maybe it was lucky for both of us you bumped into me that way."

"How come?"

"You're a Kiowa, aren't you?"

"Me half-breed."

"But you live with them don't you?"

"Me stay with Chief Lone Bull."

"Lone Bull? That's splendid. Splendid."

Johnny Marsh stood mutely, awaiting an explanation for this enthusiasm.

"You see," Blinn continued, "Lone Bull's the man I'm coming to see. The Great White Father at Washington sends greetings and a message to Lone Bull. He is to sign the papers I brought."

"Sign paper?"

"Yes. The Great White Father is going to give the Kiowa tribe a reservation. A place of safety, to live and hunt in. A place where no white man will set foot unless

Lone Bull permits it. And in return, Lone Bull will give the rest of this plainland to the Great White Father. That is what the papers say."

"You mean this is treaty?" Marsh's eyes flickered.

"Of course. A treaty!" Blinn exclaimed. "Now here's what you can do for me. I'm a stranger in a strange land, and it would be much better if you were to tell Lone Bull that I have arrived. He has already heard of the treaty, but you can remind him that he is to come here tomorrow and sign the deed."

"Me tell Lone Bull, huh?"

"Right. I'd appreciate it, Johnny. And remember, after I'm established here as Indian Agent, you and I can probably work things out together. I can use a good man like you, Johnny."

Johnny Marsh was silent.

"Is it a deal?" Blinn persisted.

"I go see Lone Bull."

"Fine!"

Johnny Marsh turned slowly and trudged down the street, deep in meditation. He pulled his pipe out as he walked, and soon the smoke drifted back from his hunched shoulders.

His pace did not quicken when he entered the Kiowa encampment. Harsh voices called a greeting in the tongue of the plains tribe, but Johnny Marsh did not respond. He had much to ponder on.

His mistake rankled him. And the epithet, "dirty Indian" needled his mind. Then the discovery of his error and the sudden friendship of his victim mulled in his head. And the gibes of the sheriff served to confuse the whole incident.

All this required thought, and the treaty alone called for a good deal of attention. Johnny Marsh had heard of the treaty. He knew that the Great White Father was sending one of his braves to dwell with the Kiowa as Indian Agent, and, he knew that Lone Bull expected this. But it all required discussion.

The old chief listened patiently in his tepee as the half-breed told his story in monosyllabic grunts, punctuated by puffs of smoke from the inevitable corncob pipe. Expressionless, he heard Johnny Marsh out. Then he shook his head.

"No. That is wrong. Man lies. Great White Father no say we give our lands."

Marsh's eyes flickered again, and he rose abruptly. A new idea came slow to Johnny Marsh. But once arrived, he held on to it.

"I go see agent. Find out."

"Go now?"

"Yes. If agent lies, I come back. If agent speaks truth, you sign treaty tomorrow. Great White Father wishes it."

Lone Bull nodded in assent. If the agent were telling the truth he knew he must sign away the Kiowa lands. In earlier years he would have fought to defend them. But Lone Bull was an old man now, and resignation befitted his age. So he could only hope. Johnny would find out if the story were true.

Johnny Marsh walked through the darkness. He left the circle of fire about the camp. In his heart was a submission akin to that of the chief. Through the familiar yelping of the dogs, the cries of the women and the papooses, the muttered voices of the braves, came the memory of Rex Blinn's words:

"The Kiowa must give up their plain lands."

Always there were these orders. Commands issued to a people that once were free as the air above the plains itself. But Johnny Marsh was only a poor half-breed, and a stupid, blundering fellow. A "dirty Indian," the agent had called him. So be it.

Johnny Marsh walked humbly down the street of Mountain Lodge. Lights glittered from the saloon and the hotel rooms above. He noted that the sheriff's office was empty and dark. But his eyes discerned Sheriff Hutchins' pudgy figure at the edge of the saloon porch.

"What is it, Johnny?" asked the sheriff.

"Where is agent man?"

"Blinn? He's up in his room, I reckon. Couple fellers came in on the stage this evenin' to see him. Government men, most likely."

Johnny Marsh grunted and made his way to the hotel door at the side of the saloon porch. He ascended the stairs noiselessly, eyes burning in the darkness. He halted before the door at the landing, where a dim fan of light shone from beneath the crack.

His brown hand went to the knob, then hesitated. Voices drifted from the room beyond, and Blinn was talking.

"Stupid Indian fool. He almost queered things this afternoon, when I got Blinn. I'd just switched hats and copped the papers when he sneaked around the bend and tied me up. Then he dragged me to town."

"Lucky I'd planted a letter on Blinn's body. That and the hat cleared me, plus a little fast talking. That Indian sure is dumb. Got him working for me now. Told him to go out and hand a story to the Chief, and get him to come in and sign the deed tomorrow."

Another voice rose.

"But listen, Jack—"

"Don't call me that name, you fool! I'm not Jack Parsons any more. I'm Rex Blinn, the new Indian Agent. And don't forget it."

"But that's just the point. What's the idea of all this? Why kill him and pass yourself off in his place? What do you care if the Kiowas sign a deed or not?"

"Don't be silly. I'm just playing this part until I get the deed signed. Then I beat it out of here. But in my pocket is a signed deed from the Kiowas, turning that land over to me. The Indians can't read so they won't know it's in my name."

"What good is a lot of land?"

"What good is it?"

"Sure. All that prairie."

"Listen, chump. That prairie has the only watersheds around

these parts. The ranchers depend on it. Right now the Kiowas give them access to it, but with the land in my hands, the water rights can't be touched. I can make a sweet deal with the ranchers from now on."

But wasn't the government planning to take the land over?"

"Of course not. That's just my story. They were putting an agent out here and giving the Kiowas reservation privileges, that's all. The land was still supposed to be theirs, and the agent was supposed to see they weren't cheated, see?"

"That's rich!"

"Yes, isn't it? And so are we, after tomorrow. I've got that wooden Indian of mine out telling the chief the story now. Tomorrow morning he comes in and signs, then I pocket the deed and clear out of here. Later, we come back with a court order restricting ranchers and Kiowas from touching the land or water."

"Sounds easy."

"Sure, it's—"

The telltale squeak of a stealthily opened door cut his words short, and the sudden hiss of a rope put an end to his bragging conversation.

The "Indian Agent" sprang to his feet. The third man also rose, kicking back his chair. A gun flashed between his fingers.

"Wait," gasped the plump-faced imposter. "No noise."

But there was noise aplenty as Johnny Marsh yanked his bearded captive forward until his head caromed into the body of the man with the gun. The two fell in a tangled heap as Johnny Marsh leaped toward them.

He saw the pseudo-agent wheel behind his back, but turned too late. The heavy butt of "Blinn's" revolver rose and fell, and Johnny Marsh tumbled face forward as the lights blurred out in a mist of all-enveloping pain.

The pain was still with him when he woke, but it had centered itself now in an aching lump against the

back of his skull.

Marsh sat up and stared. Grey daylight filtered his blinking eyelids. He glanced around and found he was no longer in the hotel room. He sat in a different hostelry—the jail. Then he realized his predicament.

"Sheriff!" he yelled, staggering to his feet. His brown hands gripped the bars.

"Sheriff!"

But it was not the Sheriff who entered the dingy office beyond the bars. Smiling, the specious Rex Blinn strode towards him.

"Let me out."

"A very touching plea." The gambler's eyes twinkled. "But I think you are safer where you are at the moment. You seem to get into too much trouble when you're loose, Johnny. You make mistakes—bad mistakes. Why you might have been killed last night."

Johnny Marsh's eyes glittered with hatred, but he said nothing. Blinn's smile turned to a scowl at the Indian's stolidity.

"You might still be killed," he grated. "Now listen, you. Lone Bull's on his way here to sign those papers. If you utter a peep when he comes, I'll let daylight through you."

"That goes for Sheriff Hutchins, too," he continued. "I told him you broke in on us last night and tried to kill me. He thinks you're one bad Indian—holding a grudge against me for your mistake. Well, that's what I want him to think and that's what he's going to go on thinking. Because if you tell him any different—"

He gestured significantly towards his hip.

"You know, one thing puzzles me," he drawled. "Just how did you figure I wasn't a real Indian agent in the first place? You suspected me all along, didn't you?"

Johnny Marsh almost smiled.

"If you real agent, you not call me 'dirty Indian,'" he answered.

"Thanks. I'll remember that."

"Blinn" stepped to the window. Then he turned. Taking a key

from his pocket he entered Johnny Marsh's cell. Marsh wheeled, but the blunt muzzle of a revolver rose in the gambler's pocket.

"Now you remember this," he whispered. "One of my boys is bringing the Chief in to sign over at that desk. And you're going to keep still while he does it. If anybody asks why I'm here with you, I'm just talking things over with you, that's all. But you aren't answering, see? Or this thing in my pocket answers back."

The gambler pressed the revolver against Johnny Marsh's side, and Marsh grunted. The two men sat side by side as the door of the office opened.

Lone Bull entered, with the bearded man Marsh had roped in the hotel room the night before.

Lone Bull's eyes flickered as he recognized Johnny Marsh behind the bars. Marsh opened his mouth. But the gun at his side bored deep, and he lapsed into silence. He nodded once to the chief. That was all.

The bearded man looked at his boss. "Talking to Johnny, eh?" he chuckled. "Well, I've got the papers right here for the chief to sign. Ready?"

Lone Bull nodded. His aged face bore lines of sleepless resignation. His eyes were stolid once more as he watched the bearded man unfold the legal documents on the desk.

Johnny Marsh squirmed. His hand went to his side.

"Hey, there!" hissed the "agent."

"Me smoke," Marsh explained. His voice was dull, hopeless.

He took out the battered corn-cob, loaded and lighted it. Then he puffed.

Lone Bull stared at him, and a look of despair crossed the faces of the two Indians. One was behind bars, and the other was about to sign papers that would make captives of himself and his people.

Johnny Marsh puffed on. Plumes of smoke rose and spiraled.

"Come on, Chief," purred the bearded man, his face eager. "Ready to sign?"

But the chief continued to stare at Johnny. What was he waiting for? A statement? A decision? But Johnny Marsh, with the gun boring into his side, only sat and puffed impassively at his pipe.

Lone Bull turned away, and the bearded man extended a pen.

"Make an X here," he urged.

Lone Bull took up the pen, but his eyes never left the figure of Johnny Marsh. Suddenly, the Chief straightened. He tossed the pen to the table, and spattered the legal forms.

"Lone Bull no sign," he grunted, as he wheeled and stalked from the room.

"What the—" exploded the bearded man. "Come back here, you!"

"Blinn" rose from Marsh's side.

"What's up?" he muttered. "Something's gone wrong. Come on, let's get out of here." He unlocked the cell door, and strode into the office. "There's been a slip," he whispered. "Let's beat it." Then he turned. His eyes drilled Johnny Marsh's inscrutable face, pierced the smoke from the pipe.

"You're at the bottom of this, somehow," he accused. "And I'm going to pay you off."

His hand whipped the gun from his coat. He raised it carefully, aimed—

With a whoop, a flying figure hurtled through the office doorway. A naked brave knocked the revolver from the gambler's hands. Two more figures followed, and a swarm of yelling savages pinned both whites to the floor.

Behind the braves Sheriff Hutchins hustled forward, accompanied by Lone Bull. The old Chief was actually smiling now. But Hutchins was grim as he leveled his revolver at the gambler and his accomplice.

"So that's how it is," he boomed. "Trying to cheat the Kiowas out of their land, eh? You're Jack Parsons, and you killed Rex Blinn. These fellows are your men, too. Wanted to take over the Indian

agent. And you would have, if Johnny here hadn't warned Chief Lone Bull in time."

"Johnny warned Lone Bull?" Parsons gasped. "How? I had a gun on him all the time. Never said a word."

Johnny Marsh grinned.

"No have to speak. Me smoke pipe in front of Lone Bull. Tell him story that way. Make smoke signals."

"Smoke signals with your pipe?"

Johnny Marsh nodded, and grinned again.

"Uh huh," he grunted. "Sure. Like you say. 'Dirty Indian' trick!"

RIP-ROARING REVIEWS

(continued from page 55)

a whim, he makes an enemy-for-life of Alna Savina, the island's ruler. After Tremayne's departure Alna Savina hires a powerful wizard to assassinate him. And the assassination succeeds . . . or so Alna thinks until a new Fel Tremayne rises through the ranks of another band of pirates . . .

PULSE-POUNDING EPISTLES

(continued from page 56)

day. So hooray for you, for you're not only doing it, you're doing it with never-before-published yarns!

Jacobi's "The Dark Circle" should have appeared forty-five years ago. No reason for it not to have met with success. It's quite reminiscent of another of his revenge-oriented yarns, "Crocodile," which Complete Stories ran in 1934.

--Dixon Smith, Ames, IA

Have already read Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories from beginning to end, and loved it. The Howard fragment was a lot better than a lot of his lost stuff that's turned up. El Borak seems something of a louse, with his near-insane hatred of Moslems of all sorts, but at least the story moved. "Blade of the Slayer" was the best thing in the book; "Drums of Bizango" was interesting (an old pulp story with some modern twists thrown in, like the black lady college professor), and the other two stories were not bad either.

--Charles Garofalo, Wayne, NJ

Rip-Roaring Reviews

Journey to the Flame, Richard Monaco, Bantam Books, 1985, 260 pp. \$3.50.

(Reviewed by Lin Carter)

You gotta admit, it takes a considerable amount of chutzpah to try to write a sequel to one of the best books in the world. Well, this is supposed to be a sequel to She, and She is one of the best books in the world, as far as I am concerned.

A bunch of proto-Nazis (of the Holy Grail/Lemuria/Horbiger's cosmic ice theory, type) kidnap Sir Henry Rider Haggard so he can lead them to the lost city of Kor, where they believe there is an upsurge of the Vril force from subterranean caverns where the Coming Race abide—this last stuff from Bulwer-Lytton, you know. They carry him off to Africa in a Zeppelin, while some good guys follow in a biplane.

I will not waste my time, or yours, discussing the plot. Such as it is. It is ridiculous; and quite unpleasant. Instead, for a change, I will discuss Monaco's stylistic tricks. What the hay.

Monaco hates primary colors. Ghod knows why, but he does. As witness: bluishgreen, 1; bluishgreen, 4; grayishblue, 5; bluegray, 6; bluegreen, 9; grayishblue, 10; grayishviolet, 10;—do you feel I am picking on this poor guy? But he goes on and on in this way, until it gets on your nerves! As witness: graygreen, 33; moongray, 66; brownishgreen, 79; grayishbrown, 131; greenishbrown, 134; graygreen, 141; grayishgreen, 146; bluegreen, 147—Ghod help us, you begin to hunger for a good, strong primary color after a while in this book!—grayishgreen, 160; pale gray, 164; whitish gray, 180; greenishblack, 188; brownishgreen, 189; reddishtinted, 208; yellow-white, 210; greenishpale, 219; violetblue, 223; grayishviolet, 230; greenishblack, 237—do you see why

this little stylistic trick becomes intrusive, aggravating, until at length I neglected the narrative (which wasn't very hard to do) and began noting down every time another muted color hove into view?

Monaco thinks he is writing poetry. (When he isn't even writing halfway decent adventure fiction!) As witness his tepid, but annoying neologisms: snowsheen, 1; gold-glitter, 9; roofshadow, 9; cheek-flesh, 24; floridfaced, 30; moon-sheen, 66; sunshimmer, 77; gold-shimmer, 86; flamelight, 106; water-sheen, 117; fogborder, 120; flame-flashes, 166; sungold, 184; mellow-leaved, 184; mythforce, 186; storm-spun, 195; willforce, 202; soulwind, 209; dreamform, 210; muzzleflashes, 219; glitterarcs, 220; sunslant, 255—do you get the idea? These become intrusive and tiresome and interruptive, too . . .

Ghod, but I hate books like this! What's he going to sequelize next, War and Peace? Tolstoi, beware—!

Henry Kuttner, The Startling Worlds of Henry Kuttner. Popular Library, 1987, 357 pp. \$3.95.

Henry Kuttner, Prince Raynor. Gryphon Books (P. O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228), 82 pp. \$5.95.

(Reviewed by Stefan Dziemianowicz)

Of the ten short novels Henry Kuttner wrote for Startling Stories, two appeared in 1946: "The Dark World" (under his own name) and "The Valley of the Flame" (credited to Keith Hammond and reputed many years later to have been written by C. L. Moore). "Beyond Earth's Gates" appeared in 1949, but it was retitled "The Portal in the Picture" and attributed to C. L. Moore and Lewis Padgett when it came out as a book.

Regardless of who wrote them, these very formulaic stories clearly sprang from the same source. The plots of all three involve a man from our world who is sucked into

events that imperil another world—in the first and third, alternative universes; in the second, the empire of a lost race—but that may eventually impinge on our own. Generally, he is asked to put down some sort of rebellion and manages to do so with a mixture of science, sword, sorcery, and the help of a nubile woman.

"The Valley of the Flame," a potboiler about a plot to stimulate the life-force at the heart of the Amazon rain forest, reads like de-adjectivized Clark Ashton Smith. "The Dark World" is an interesting parallel universe of myth that sheared off from our own long ago and in which seemingly supernatural events have rational explanations. When a man from our world changes places with his dark world persona, he becomes a deceitfully self-interested zealot who brings about a questionable happy ending.

If you can get around the notion of a world that sells a car ride through New York's Times Square as an image of paradise in the afterlife, "The Portal in the Picture" has its merits. Its anti-hero is a semi-alcoholic actor shanghaied to an alternate universe where alchemy never gave way to science and the reigning priesthood keeps the populace at bay with its "miracles" (shades of Fritz Leiber's Gather Darkness). When the hero shows that any man can create a miracle by simply flicking a cigarette lighter, he becomes dangerous to some unscrupulous characters and useful to others. The muted political commentary that runs through all three novels is most evident and most satisfyingly exploited here.

In spite of the challenging ideas behind these science fantasies, Kuttner's writing never rises above the merely competent. The same is true of most of his sword and sorcery. Prince Raynor follows in the footsteps of last year's Gryphon Press edition of Kuttner's Elak of Atlantis stories, resurrecting the first two of seven stories he wrote for the short-lived Strange Stories. Raynor is the good blonde prince

regent of Sardopolis, a city that stood when the Gobi Desert was populated. In "Cursed be the City," he unleashes Pan and his minions on the army that has seized his homeland. In "The Citadel of Darkness," he overcomes zodiac menaces and wizardry to rescue his woman, Delphia. Nothing distinguishes Raynor from any other hero of the week, and though he sees plenty of action the battles he fights could probably be won by men of less character. But you won't find these stories anywhere else, so if you're a Kuttner collector you should consider making room on your shelf for this booklet.

Kenneth Robeson, Doc Savage Omnibus #1 (August 1986); Doc Savage Omnibus #2 (January 1987). Bantam Books. \$3.95.

(Reviewed by Stefan Dziemianowicz)

It's a positive sign that Bantam Books is taking longer to reprint all of the Doc Savage novels than it took "Kenneth Robeson" to write them. After all, no publisher would keep a series going for more than twenty years if it wasn't selling. The good Doctor's newest incarnation is a four-novel doorstep that comes out every four to six months. This is more economical for the publisher than the single or double editions, and for the reader, too: at less than a dollar per novel, it's the cheapest Doc has come since the early 70s.

Although Bantam has stopped numbering them (really a pointless reference, since they were not reprinted in strict chronological order), these two books probably put the reprint total at over 130 of the 182 novels. There's no clear rationale behind the grouping of the four stories in each book, except that all are taken from after the midpoint of Doc's crimefighting career. With the pattern for introducing and resolving each caper fixed and the character of Doc's team set in stone, one reads these stories with an eye out for departures from the formula.

By the end of "The All-White Elf" (March 1941), the story of a sense-deranging ray and a white-suited criminal that accompanies it, the attentive reader will notice the absence of "Long Tom" Roberts from the action. Later in the series, Ham and Monk so eclipse the personalities of the rest of Doc's quintet that they're the only two who appear in "The Swooning Lady" (September/October 1948). One of the last in the saga, this novel is unusual for having Doc almost done in by one of his inventions and (temporarily) falling out of favor with the cops. If characters weren't changed or dropped, another way to make things interesting was to introduce the real world: drugs are created to keep soldiers in WW II from starving to death in "The Running Skeletons" (June 1943), and a poison makes the newly partitioned India's Hindus and Moslems hate each other in "The Angry Canary" (July 1948).

The second omnibus gives readers the opportunity to see if Doc Savage novels written by Alan Hathway differed from those written by Lester Dent. Not much if "The Mindless Monsters" (September 1941)—concerning a drug used to turn Doc's team and Doc himself into superhuman slaves of an evil-doer—and "The Rustling Death" (January 1942)—about a destructive force field duped time and again by Doc's gadgets and optical illusions—are any indication. The nemesis of the latter is the earth-bound version of the invisible force that swats planes out of the sky in "The Thing that Pursued" (October 1945), and maybe it was intended that the mindless zombies of the former would resemble the henchmen of Brigham Pope—or the henchmen of any archvillain foolish enough to take on Doc Savage!—in "King Joe Cay" (July 1945).

It should be noted that in the place on the spine of these books where publishers write marketing categories like "Occult" or "SF," all that's written in small print is "Doc Savage." That's not quite the same

recognition as the operator who tells the man in "The Running Skeletons" that the way to get in touch with Doc Savage is to call New York City and ask for him by name—but it's close.

Lester Dent, *The Sinister Ray*. Gryphon Publications (P. O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209), 1987, 176 pp. \$9.95 ppd.

(Reviewed by Stefan Dziemianowicz)

Before Dent could Lash out, he was Savaged!

That's not a line from a pulp thriller. As Will Murray tells us in his foreword to this book, it's a fact of Lester Dent's early career. His debonair scientific detective, Lynn Lash, who appeared in two stories in *Detective Dragnet* in 1932 (a third that went unpublished until after Dent's death is included here) was the immediate precursor of Doc Savage and probably the character who convinced Street and Smith that Dent was just what the Doc ordered to write their new series.

The proximity of Lash to Savage begs the question of how closely they resemble each other. Their adventures are certainly similar: in the title story, Lash has to keep a blinding ray out of the hands of a yellow peril; "The Mummy Murders" pits Lash against giant bloodsucking leeches and "The Flame Horror" has him investigating episodes of spontaneous combustion. If Lash is less well known than Doc Savage, he's as much a whiz with gadgets.

Lash takes the literal and figurative lumps Doc Savage delegated to his sidekicks: he makes mistakes and suffers the sometimes amusing consequences. His adventures don't read as smoothly as Doc's, and we can only speculate whether Dent would have continued to invest effort in them if opportunity hadn't knocked. Consider that in the last story, a major character who almost gets the better of Lash is a fiction writer who says "You're the kind of stuff I make my heroes out of, Mr. Lash."

If adventure writing is a kind of wish-fulfillment, maybe Dent didn't need to write any more Lash stories.

William G. Bogart, The Crazy Indian (Tattered Pages Press, 273 Highland Avenue, Apt. 2, Somerville, MA 02143). \$4 plus 50¢ postage.

(Reviewed by Robert M. Price)

As Will Murray, the seventh member of Doc Savage's amazing crew, makes clear, it is the tangential link between "The Crazy Indian" and Doc Savage that makes the former worth reprinting. It is Doc Savage marginalia. The details of the story as Murray tells it are as fascinating as a pulp detective tale, but the gist is that Bogart, who had ghost-written several Doc Savage novels for Lester Dent, was suddenly closed out of this duty and had to get material ready for quick submission elsewhere. Essentially, he cannibalized material from his 1941 Doc Savage novel The Magic Forest to write "The Crazy Indian," creating "new" adventurers who were thinly-veiled clones of Doc, Monk, and Ham. In fact he carelessly lapses into calling them "Doc," "Monk," and "Ham" now and then in "The Crazy Indian"!

The Crazy Indian is a facsimile reprint from Mammoth Adventures, but the packaging and art are not the best. Nonetheless, the text is clearly reproduced, and that is really what matters, after all. Tattered Pages Press is only getting warmed up, and we may hope their next releases will be even better.

Dan Jordan—Sky Soldier #1 (Andrew C. Anson, Editor/Publisher, 8931 Kittyhawk Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90045). \$16 for a 2 or 3 issue subscription; \$20 foreign.

(Reviewed by Robert M. Price)

Out of the smog-choked skies of Los Angeles bursts forth a truly novel adventure in pulp-oriented small-press publishing: Dan Jordan—Sky Soldier. This fly-boy hero is

obviously a member of the same squadron of pulp aviators as Bill Barnes, G-8, Dusty Ayres, and Terence X. O'Leary. Like them, Dan's adventures were written in the golden age of the pulps. But unlike recent reprises of G-8, Ayres, and O'Leary, Jordan's exploits are not reprints.

In a really remarkable feat of publishing derring-do, Andrew C. Anson has managed to midwife a pulp magazine that never came to birth. In 1934, pulp writer Martin Willoughby and pulp illustrator Konrad Steel planned to put together a new aviation pulp to compete with Bill Barnes Air Trails. They produced loads of material for several issues ahead, but before a single issue could see print, the financial backer for the project had to bail out, and the whole enterprise was stillborn.

But now Anson is in the process of bringing the material to light for nostalgic pulp fans over fifty years later! The result is issue number one, featuring one single story, "Lights, Camera, Death!" The format is that of a magazine-size fanzine, though on high-quality paper with book-quality typeface. Of course in the best of all possible worlds, Dan Jordan—Sky Soldier would have been published in a pulp-mimic format like the recently revived Weird Tales. Nevertheless, it is a wonderful project with, we hope, more to come.

John Gregory Betancourt, Rogue Pirate (TSR/Windwalker Books, June 1987). Cover by Jeff Easley. Interior illustrations by Mark Nelson. \$2.95.

Rogue Pirate is an exciting new sword-&-sorcery novel in the manner of Robert E. Howard crossed with Christopher Stasheff . . . in other words, a light romp that's also filled with action, color, and unusual characters.

When Fel Tremayne, an infamous pirate, sacks an island fortress on
(continued on page 51)

Pulse Pounding Epistles

I look forward to the next issue of Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories; Jacobi, Howard, Tierney, and Wellman were all in fine form.

--Morgan Holmes

Cleveland Heights, OH

As I went to the train today, I picked up #1 of Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories. (Our commuter station has a library stand.) To shorten a long story, The Wall Street Journal did not get read today. I have missed this type of literature for too many years. "For Love of Oloana" was great!

--David Crown

Morton Grove, IL

I loved your new magazine, Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories. I'm a great Francis X. Gordon fan, and when I thought I had seen everything by Howard on Gordon I thought, oh well, I'll just enjoy what gems I've got. But was I pleased and surprised to see "Intrigue in Kurdistan" in this issue! The only thing wrong with this story was that it was unfinished.

"Blade of the Slayer" didn't do much for me as I'm not into sword and sorcery; that sort of thing just doesn't have anything at stake for a modern reader.

"The Dark Circle" was a nice little adventure tale encompassing a locale and situation uncommon to fiction these days, and for that reason it was quite enjoyable. Most weird fiction these days seems to happen in McDonalds, supermarkets and quiet suburban homes. Stephen King, what have you wrought?

"Drums of the Bizango," of course, I eagerly awaited, as I have become a John Gorman fan of late. Cerasini and Hoffman continue to do a respectable job on the character's adventures, but I do detect a change in style. As they move farther and farther away from the original Howard material, they seem to have developed their writ-

ing style. Which is right and proper. And though this tale was enjoyable, there was still one little detail that jarred with me. And that's the references to Gorman as a "youth" or a "young man." This connotes that he is somewhere around 25 or so, and I've pictured him around 35. Which, I think is a more realistic age for a man of his adventures and scope of travels.

"The Love of Oloana" while seeming to me to be in the same genre as Lin Carter's Tara stories (that is, prehistoric amorous adventures), it came more close to what I would expect for this magazine. Not explicit, but enough to keep the imagination busy!

--Pierre Comtois

Lowell, MA

Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories #1 was great! Liked the Howard yarn (though unfinished, still vintage REH). Cerasini and Hoffman's (sounds like a new wine-cooler!) "Drums of the Bizango": these guys are great! Keep them writing for you; this yarn would have found a home in Spicy-Adventure for sure. Also liked Wellman's and Jacobi's yarn, both great pulp authors from the days of yore. A grade A effort.

--Dan Gobbett

Riverdale, MD

You've published so much in the weird and weird-menace veins that it is most welcome indeed to find you dealing with another avenue of pulp history that was once one of its most avidly read staples: adventure fiction. Pulse Pounding Adventure Stories evokes memories of such magazines as Short Stories, Adventure, Thrilling Adventures, Complete Stories, Top-Notch, et al. It is my impression that, excepting Howard, Burroughs, and perhaps a bit of Mundy, very little straight adventure fiction is reprinted to-

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PULSE POUNDING ADVENTURE STORIES

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"The Treasure of Horemkhu" by Richard L. Tierney

"Your Witness, Tuan" by Carl Jacobi

"A Desert Story" by C. J. Henderson

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