

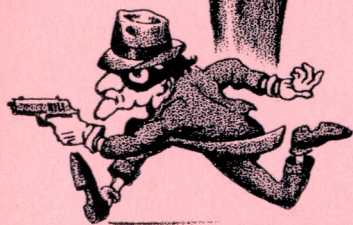
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Risque

Stories

• *Fiction by*
Justin Case
Carl Jacobi
Lin Carter



Poetry by Robert E. Howard

RISQUE STORIES

October 1984

*

Number Two

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Risqué Stories

Number Two

October 1984

"Erzulie" by Justin Case, © 1984 by Hugh B. Cave

"Pawns of the River-King" by Carl Jacobi, © 1984 by Carl Jacobi

"The Love of the Sea" by Lin Carter, © 1984 by Lin Carter

"The Whoopansat of Humorous Kookooyam" by Robert E. Howard,
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Editorial

Hubba hubba!—a new issue of *Risqué Stories*! No doubt, dear reader, you're all worked up and itching to get to all that spicy fiction and saucy verse, but hold on for a minute for a few words of introduction.

The most prolific author for the spicy pulps was, so to speak, prolific beyond imagination. That is, no one imagined that "Justin Case" was a single individual. In fact, only recently did it come out that Justin Case was not only not a house name used by several writers (like *Strange Stories*' "Will Garth"), but was Hugh B. Cave, a pulpster who had also turned out amazing quantities of quality stories under his own name in many other magazines. This issue of *Risqué Stories* opens with "Erzulie," a tale of love and voodoo by the one and only Justin Case himself. And don't worry—the background of the tale is all authentic: Case/Cave is something of an authority on Haiti and the Caribbean, having written several non-fiction works on the region. As to whether the *experiences* in the story are based on fact—he isn't telling.

Carl Jacobi, as most readers know, was a very versatile writer, but none of his work ever appeared in the spices. He had, however, written one tale for *Spicy-Adventure* that never appeared there. We are pleased to remedy this lack by presenting the story, "Pawns of the River-King," written in or around 1943.

It may be that some readers first heard of the spicy pulps when they read that Robert E. Howard had published a few stories there. And to such readers, a spicy magazine just wouldn't seem complete without a How-

ard story. Alas, there are no more Howard spices left: all are contained in *The She Devil* (Ace Books, 1983). There are not even any notes or outlines to complete, as Cerasini and Hoffman did so well in last issue's "She-Cats of Samarkand." So we've asked these two posthumous collaborators to continue REH tough-guy John Gorman's adventures in a series of pastiches beginning with "The Temple of Forbidden Fruit" in this issue. Howard addicts will also relish more of his erotic verse, namely "The Whoopansat of Humorous Kookooyam," which despite the title is pretty good!

Another regular series in *Risqué Stories* from now on will be Lin Carter's warrior-maid Tara of the Twilight, whose new adventures began last issue and continue here with "The Love of the Sea."

One particularly quaint feature of the spicy pulps was the ongoing comic strips they all carried, strips (aptly so called in this case!) including Diana Daw, Sally the Sleuth, and Olga Mesmer. We revive this great tradition in this issue with "Double Cross," the first adventure of Julie de Grandin, Psychic Sleuth, by Will Murray and Robert M. Price.

Finally, a peak at *Risqué Stories* #3: among others, you'll find "Woman of the Witch-Flowers" by Carl Jacobi, "Pale Shadow" by Lin Carter, "The Gift" by Duane Rimel, "The Spicy Scribes" by Will Murray, more Howard poetry, a new John Gorman tale by Hoffman and Cerasini, and "Paris Night Life," the second adventure of Julie de Grandin.

ROBERT M. PRICE
Editor

ERZULIE



by Justin Case

Weylin Corbin's passions throb with the rhythms of Haitian voodoo—but would his forbidden rituals bring love . . . or horror?

"Next left," Allie Corbin directed.

Her husband, Weylin, had the wheel of their station wagon. She sat beside him as custodian of the city map

and the list of garage sales from the morning paper.

"Left it is." He made the turn. "What number are we looking for?"

"Two fourteen."

They passed a mailbox with the number 193 on it. "Could be where those cars are parked, up ahead," Weylin said.

"And it's a real nice neighborhood. Maybe we'll do better here."

Thus far, with four stops behind them, they had picked up only a couple of jazz records and a hardcover copy of *The Occult* by Colin Wilson. Having attended an authentic voodoo service two years ago, when they vacationed in Haiti on the first anniversary of their marriage, Weylin had been trying to build up a library on that and related subjects ever since.

Garage sale-ing was a hobby with them. They went every other Saturday morning, and usually did much better than this.

The car parked, they walked up a driveway between displays of worn furniture. A middle-aged woman seated in the garage doorway smiled and said, "Good morning!" They responded in kind. Farther back in the garage a middle-aged man with a paunch talked to a long-haired youth who appeared to be interested in a nearly antique portable typewriter.

"Right up to last year I typed all my sermons on this machine, young man. It's never given me a bit of trouble."

Without much hope of finding anything at such a house, Weylin flipped through a stack of records. They ranged from a very old Handel's *Messiah* to hymns sung by Pat Boone. While Allie looked at an assortment of bric-a-brac and kitchen things, he passed on to a table of books.

Religious books, mostly. Even a few Bibles carefully wrapped in plastic. But while leaning forward to peer more closely at one of the titles, he kicked a box under the table and glanced down to see what was in it.

His eyes brightened. Kneeling, he lifted out a painted earthenware jar about a foot tall with a wide, round mouth.

"Amateur ceramics?" Allie had

come over to see what he was up to, and obviously did not approve.

"Uh-uh." His voice betrayed real excitement. "This is a govi, hon!"

"A what?"

"See this design?" Done in blue, white, and pale rose, it was a crudely painted heart with something like a cross at its top. "Erzulie," Weylin said triumphantly. "This is voodoo, hon! The real thing!"

The man with the paunch came lumbering around the table then to peer down at him as he knelt there with the jar in his hands. "I apologize for that box." Despite its resemblance to that of an aging cherub, his plump face was grim with displeasure. "I would not have offered those blasphemous things for sale, but my wife insisted we do so and give the money to the church mission fund."

"You've been to Haiti, Reverend?" Weylin asked eagerly.

"Never, sir. When we bought this house, we found that box in the attic. I was shocked, too, I don't mind telling you. Voodoo is the work of the devil, and the man who sold us the house was a minister of the gospel!"

"Then he had been to Haiti?"

"He served there for nearly four years." The clergyman turned away, as though even to look at the box offended him. "You may have everything for—well, for a mere ten dollars, if the devil's work interests you. But I must warn you—"

Weylin was not even listening. Handling the decorated jar up to his wife with a brisk, "Hold this for me, will you?" he plunged his hands into the box to see what else it held. When he rose to his feet with the container in his arms, he was trembling with excitement.

"Ten dollars, you say?"

"And the money will go to the mission fund, I assure you."

Placing the box on the table, Weylin handed over a ten-dollar bill from his wallet. "Just one question."

Reaching into the box, he took out a tape cassette. "This is marked 'Erzulie'—only that. No other information. Do you happen to know what—"

"Sir, I have never had the slightest inclination to play it."

"I see. Well, thanks." Instead of dropping the cassette back into the box, Weylin tucked it into his shirt pocket. "You through here, hon?"

"Uh-huh. I didn't find anything."

"Let's go, then, hey?"

Allie directed an odd look at him before starting for the car. Had he not been behind her, he might have seen a shadow of anxiety, perhaps even fear, darken her lovely face.

After two more stops and lunch at a favorite Greek restaurant, they headed homeward. This was the time, usually, for some lively talk about the treasures acquired and some of the more interesting people—the minister, for instance—they had encountered.

There was not much talk today because Allie was strangely quiet.

"You feeling all right, hon?" Weylin asked with concern.

"I'm fine, Wey. No problem."

"Why so moody, then?"

"Just thinking."

Guessing what she was thinking about, he quickly dropped the inquisition, and Allie went on brooding—about the box of things from Haiti and the voodoo service Wey had attended there.

Wanting to be more than mere "tourists," they had ignored the advice of their travel agent and gone not to a recommended hotel but to a tiny *pension* in the very heart of the capital. A week there with a rented jeep and they would really get to know something about the country, they told each other. No taxi driver was going to take them to second-rate mahogany dealers who would give him a percentage of what they spent, or to phony voodoo rites staged purely for gullible visitors.

For weeks before leaving home they had even studied Haitian Creole from a book found in the library.

But something had gone wrong.

It happened to Weylin, not to her. Keen to witness at least one genuine voodoo ceremony, he at last found someone—a cousin of the *pension's* Haitian proprietor, actually—who agreed to take him. But only he could go, Lucien Lalo insisted. "If your wife goes with us, we will all be turned away."

She had to admit Wey had tried to change the man's mind, because she'd been present when he did so. "Lucien, my wife and I go everywhere together. I can't do this without her!"

But the Haitian would not budge. "No, *m'sieu*. Only you and I may go."

It was probably her fault that Wey did go. Had she been indignant at being excluded, he might have abandoned the venture. After all, they were celebrating a totally successful year of marriage, a year in which they learned everything there was to know about each other's bodies and personalities and were more deeply, more sensually, more spiritually in love than ever.

But she had insisted he go, so just before dark that evening he and Lucien departed in the jeep. The ceremony was somewhere in Léogane, a town said to be a hotbed of voodoo about thirty miles out on the southern peninsula.

Left alone at the *pension*, she had dined by herself on crab soup, bread-fruit croquettes, and *salaise*. The latter was dried beef cooked with a tangy hot sauce the waiter called, with a grin, *Ti Malice*. It was certainly a little malicious, if that was what the name meant. After dinner she made a note of it in the diary Wey and she were keeping, then went for a walk.

Now don't envy him. When he tells you what happened, it will be just as though you were there with him. Better than neither of us getting to see the real thing.

She walked until after ten. Then the streets seemed a little too dark for comfort and just a bit sinister, with dogs slinking after her along the sidewalks and an occasional passing car making her feel, as it pinned her with its headlights, as though she had been stripped of her clothing and were walking along stark naked for its occupants to stare at.

The two men would be late getting back, Lucien had warned. "Sometimes, *madame*, these affairs last until dawn. You must not worry." Of course she would not worry. She *wasn't* worried. Just a little lonely, was all.

Back at the *pension*, in their charming old room with its bare wooden floor and wonderfully high wooden ceiling, she read herself to sleep with one of the books on Haiti they had brought with them. And awoke at eight-thirty in the morning to find Weylin asleep beside her in his pajamas.

"Hey!" Indignantly she shook him. "You promised to wake me up when you got back!"

Her first clue that something was wrong came right then and there, when he sat bolt upright in bed with a look on his face she had never seen before. A look of—what? Not alarm exactly. Certainly not fear. He looked—well, as though something had happened to him that he did not fully understand but *wanted* to.

"What happened, Wey? What's wrong?"

Coming out of it, whatever it was, he turned his head to stare at her. "What time did I get in?"

"How do I know what time you got in? I only just woke up!"

"It was daylight. I remember it was daylight." So it must have been after six, because that seemed to be about when the city shed its nighttime shroud.

"Wey." She was trying hard to be patient. "Never mind what time you got back from there. Tell me what happened."

Swinging his feet to the floor, he

sat on the edge of the bed with his hands pressed to his eyes. "Nothing happened."

"Oh, come on! Shall I fix you a drink?"

"Please."

There was a bottle of Rhum Barban-court on the dresser. She poured some into one of the heavy tumblers the *pension* had provided, and added Coke because t-ey had been told the water might not be safe. Weylin drank it down, then gazed into space as though trying to decide what to say.

He isn't going to tell me. Not everything, anyway. Something happened that he doesn't want me to know about.

What he did tell her was interesting only in the way an incident in a travel book might have been. He described the place Lucien had taken him to: a thatch-roofed peasant *caille* on the outskirts of the town, with a swept-earth yard lit by lanterns hanging from a sacred *mapou* tree. He spoke of crowds of people, not all of them peasants. Of an aging *houn-gan* or priest with his assistants. Of the drumming, dancing, and chanting.

"But what about you, Wey?"

"Lucien and I were just spectators, Allie. What else could we be?"

"Can't you tell me how you *felt*, knowing this was the real thing and those people were in the presence of their *gods*?"

He stiffened as though she had stuck something sharp into him. "Hell, I just didn't buy most of it, hon. A lot of it had to be faked." His hand shook, she noticed, as he thrust his empty glass at her. "Fix me a refill, will you? Have one with me."

That was all he ever told her, really, about his night in the Haitian town where voodoo was said to be so much a way of life. "I didn't buy most of it. A lot had to be faked." Yet he had hunted high and low for books on Haiti ever since,

not only at garage sales but in libraries and second-hand book stores. It was an obsession with him.

"Wey, have you played that Haitian tape yet?"

It was Sunday evening. The two of them had watched television from *60 Minutes* through the 11 o'clock news and were ready for bed. This was the first time since yesterday's garage sale-ing that Allie had felt she could safely mention the box of things from Haiti.

Her husband shrugged as he pushed himself out of his chair. "There's nothing on the damned thing. It's blank."

"Blank?"

"I checked it out this afternoon when you were in the tub."

She looked at him in silence. When you loved someone as much as she loved Weylin, could you tell when that person was lying? Yes, you could. His face was too expressionless, his attitude too casual, his voice too carefully normal.

Recalling how he had carried the tape home in his shirt pocket, she felt he would be more obviously disappointed, even angry, had it truly turned out to be worthless.

"You ready for bed?" Weylin asked.

"Yes . . . I guess so." *Since you seem so anxious to change the subject.*

Detecting a note of suspicion in her voice, Weylin glanced at her sharply without meaning to, then just as quickly forced himself to look like a weary husband after a long day of working around the house and in the yard. Did she suspect anything?

He had lied to her about the tape, of course. Even about when he had listened to it. He hadn't played it while she was taking her bath today, but had sneaked into the den with it last night while she slept.

The night had been warm. She had come to bed wearing her baby-doll pajamas but had taken them off after

a while and gone to sleep naked. Then she had thrown the top sheet off in her sleep, and before sneaking into the study to play the tape he had propped himself on one elbow and looked at her for a few minutes, adoring the smooth loveliness of her breasts and longing to kiss the pale, downy V between her thighs. But, of course, he must not! His slightest touch would wake her.

He was an accountant, and the den was a made-over spare bedroom in which he sometimes worked at home. It served also as a hobby room when Allie and he felt like listening to music or dabbling in photography. There, at 2 a.m., he had listened to the tape through earphones so the sound would not carry.

And the tape was certainly not blank! It contained a pair of voodoo invocations he had heard before, that memorable night in Léogane when Lucien had taken him to the service. First a plea to Papa Legba to "open the gate" for the gods to enter; then one to the goddess Erzulie to come through it from the world of spirits.

Erzulie. The goddess of love.

The rest of the tape really was blank. But what more did he need than those two invocations? It was as though the cassette had been intended for him. As though he had been mysteriously guided to that particular garage sale, and the clergyman somehow persuaded to price the box so low that he would not be able to resist it. (The *govi* alone must be worth much, much more than ten dollars to any collector of the occult.)

What was it the followers of voodoo called their gods sometimes? *Mystères*. Mysteries.

He had looked again at the other things in the box then. Along with the Erzulie *govi*, which if properly blessed was supposed to contain the living spirit of the goddess herself, there were several other items of interest.

One was a gourd rattle webbed with

snake vertebrae and colored beads. Lucien had referred to it as an *anson*, and the *houngan* had used it throughout the ceremony.

Another was a smooth gray stone, the size and shape of a goose egg, which from his reading he knew was called a *pierre loa* and was supposed to endow its possessor with magic powers.

Finally there was a glass jar—it could have been a quart mayonnaise jar—with a folded paper tied to it. Carefully removing the paper, he had discovered it contained a drawing of the same heart-shaped symbol that was on the *govvi*. The jar itself contained a yellow powder that looked and smelled like the cornmeal used in so many voodoo rites. Perhaps it had been blessed?

But to use these objects as he had seen them used in Léogane, he would have to be alone in the house. And sure of being left alone for at least two hours.

So? Every Thursday evening Allie went to an art class at the local high school. Maybe then. . . .

Thursday evening, when ready to leave, Allie said to him, "I'll be picking up Ruth, Wey. She wants to check the class out. If she likes it, she may sign up." Ruth Daley had been her best friend since long before her marriage to Weylin.

"Right."

"And look, hon. If Gimme Gertie comes around, don't give her anything to drink. Please. Remember last time."

"I won't. Don't worry."

"This is her night to howl, you know. And you do remember last time?"

He nodded. The "last time" Allie referred to had been two weeks ago tonight. Allie had gone to class, he'd been alone as he would be tonight, and about an hour after her departure the old crone from across the tracks had rung the front doorbell.

The woman everyone called "Gimme Gertie" lived in a shack on the edge of what the city referred to as its "landfill"—in this case a euphemism for "dump." She had to be at least ninety. Fiercely independent, she scorned charity and lived on what she could scratch out of the dump, either selling it for pennies or consuming it herself. But she did cross the tracks on Thursday evenings, barefoot, unwashed, in rags, to beg for handouts of booze.

Two weeks ago, pressed to meet a deadline on an accounting job, he had broken Allie's iron rule and thrust a bottle of bourbon at the old woman to get rid of her. Not a full bottle, of course. There couldn't have been more than eight ounces in it. But she had passed out at the edge of the road less than a quarter mile away, and Allie found her there when returning home. Then the two of them had to revive her, feed her, clean her up, and finally drive her back to her shack at the dump.

Oh, yes, he remembered! "Trust me," he said. "I won't be that dumb again."

"Love me?" Allie pressed herself hard against him and lifted her mouth for a goodbye kiss, and of course he kissed her thoroughly while stroking her exciting little bottom and then stepped back to caress her breasts for a moment. She would suspect something wrong if he did not. But he was seething with impatience, too. Even before her car was out of the driveway he was in the study with the door shut.

First, the lights. At the ceremony in Haiti the only light had been the flickering glow of lanterns on the *mapou* tree. He didn't have lanterns, but surely a dim bulb in the study wall lamp would supply a proper atmosphere. After attending to it he drew the shades at the room's two windows.

Next, the *pierre loa*. Not much was said about magic stones in the books he had so avidly read, but the

houngan in Léogane had certainly used one, taking it from his pocket time and again and rubbing it between his palms the way a pitcher rubbed up a baseball. Some priests used them and some didn't, Lucien Lalo had explained. Those who did swore by them as a source of power.

So before beginning his preparations he set the painted *govi* on his desk and stood before it for a moment, rubbing the stone between his hands. And, yes, he could feel something. If nothing more, he felt a surge of *anticipation*.

She would come; he was sure of it. Just as she had come before.

Now, putting the magic stone into his pocket, he took up the jar of cornmeal and moved back from the desk to give himself room. This next ritual was a key one, he knew. The drawing of *vèvés* was an art not learned from books but handed down from priest to protégé. But he didn't have to know all the hundreds of intricate drawings a *houngan* must learn. Only the one.

Placing the paper from the cornmeal jar on the carpet, where he could refer to it as he worked, he poured some of the meal into his cupped left hand. Then bending from the waist but keeping his knees stiff as he had seen the *houngan* do, he began the *vèvé* to Erzulie.

Problem: This was no easy thing to do. The meal refused to dribble between his thumb and bent forefinger in a neat, thin line as it had for the man in Haiti. Before the intricate design was even half finished, he knew he would have to erase it and begin again.

Damn!

Storming out of the study, he hurried to the kitchen closet for the vacuum cleaner. On returning with it, he glanced with a frown at the clock on the study wall. Allie had been gone forty minutes already!

Her class lasted only two hours!

The carpet clean again, he began the *vèvé* over, this time drawing it

more slowly. His legs ached, then filled with pain that climbed to the small of his back and became excruciating. How could old men stay bent over like this, with their knees straight, long enough to decorate a whole peristyle floor? But the design slowly took shape and was a reasonably accurate copy, now, of the one on the paper and the *govi*.

Surely he would be allowed a few insignificant deviations. Didn't one of the books say that *vèvés* sometimes varied according to locale? That those of Jérémie, for instance, were not precisely the same as those of Cap Haïtien? Or those of the mountains not line-for-line copies of the ones used in the Plaine de Cul-de-Sac?

It was done. He stepped back for a final inspection, moved in again to fill an inch-long gap he had missed, then placed the Erzulie *govi* in the center of the heart and took up the gourd rattle. At the ceremony, the priest had walked around the *vèvé* shaking such an *asson* while the *houns* called on Papa Legba to "*ouvri bayé pou nous!*"

It was time for the tape.

He turned it on, and while the chant to Papa Legba filled the study, he paced back and forth at the edge of the cornmeal drawing and shook the rattle. But this was only a necessary preliminary. The real invocation would be the one to Erzulie!

That was the magic which had brought the goddess to the service, to possess the incredibly beautiful girl seated beside him.

From the moment Lucien Lalo had led him across the swept-earth floor of the dancing area and told him to sit, he had been aware that the girl on his left was different. Not just because she was so obviously a member of the elite, either. Several others were of the same wealthy class, different in dress and skin color from the peasants. This one was so exquisitely lovely, her nearness caused his heart to race.

He could scarcely stop staring at

her face and bosom. The former was classic perfection yet sensuous in every detail. At her bosom the beginning of a golden vale between beautiful breasts was enticingly revealed by the cut of her expensive white blouse.

Then when the drums began their thundering, she smiled at him.

Yes, smiled. The chairs were so close that his thigh had touched hers when he seated himself. It continued to do so because there was no room to break the contact. And she turned herself toward him, smiling, and murmured in a beautifully musical voice, "*Bon soir, m'sieu.*" And then in English, which of course many of the elite spoke fluently: "Are you here to greet our beloved Erzulie when she comes?"

He said he was, and was eagerly looking forward to it. But before he could talk further with her, the service was under way.

The drums. The ritual chanting and dancing. The *houngan* bending from the waist with a dish of cornmeal in one hand, drawing on the peristyle floor the heart notif that was Erzulie's *vèvé*, then sprinkling it with water as he retired.

The plea to the guardian of the spirit gate. Then the invocation to Erzulie herself.

Her sudden appearance took him altogether by surprise because in the excitement of attending his first voodoo service he had forgotten something. The gods, when summoned, did not come as themselves. Damballa did not appear as a snake, or Ogoun Feraille as a blacksmith. The *loa* took possession of someone at the service, and their presence became known only when the one so possessed began to act the part.

A man possessed by the prankish god of death, Papa Gédé, for instance, could be expected to don a black top hat, mouth two cigarettes at a time, and swagger around the peristyle clutching a bottle of rum in one hand while pinching female

bottoms with the other. And a woman possessed by Erzulie, the goddess of love, might claim for her "husband" any man who caught her fancy.

Having forgotten those fine points of possession, he was unprepared when the beautiful creature at his side suddenly rose, moaning, and began to dance.

The crowd held its breath.

Had the girl expected Erzulie to single her out for possession? She was dressed in white, and that was Erzulie's color. She wore a rather intoxicating perfume, too, and the goddess of love was fond of that. Now as she swayed gracefully about the central post, the thunder of the drums diminished to a soft throbbing and the crowd began to murmur her name.

"Erzulie Freda . . . Erzulie Freda. . . ."

Weylin turned to the man beside him. "My God, Lucien, she's beautiful!"

"Sh-h-h!"

The girl stopped dancing and let her gaze travel over the crowd. In search of something, perhaps? Or of someone? It finally came to rest on the only non-Haitian face present. Then with one golden arm upraised she came slowly across the peristyle and halted before Weylin's chair.

Again the crowd held its breath.

Her fingertips brushed Weylin's cheek and she smiled. "*Vini!*" she murmured!

He stared up at her, knowing that "*Vini!*" meant "Come!" and wanting to obey, even though not knowing what would happen if he did. At his side, Lucien Lalo muttered almost angrily, "You must go, *m'sieu!* You have been chosen!"

His heart was the only drum that still throbbed as he rose to his feet. The others were silent as the *houngan*, his followers, and the crowd of spectators watched. Then as the girl's fingers entwined with his and he took his first obedient step, there was a vast exhalation of breath

from stoppered lungs and the beginning of a prolonged murmur.

Of approval? How could he know? All he could be sure of was that he was being led across the peristyle to the doorway of a peasant house at the end of the voodoo yard. And that he was holding hands with their love-goddess, who in her virginal white dress and mystic perfume was the most desirable woman he had ever seen.

And he had been chosen.

Who cared whether they approved or not?

Still holding his hand, the girl led him through an open doorway into a room just large enough to contain a mahogany double bed and a chest of drawers. Both pieces of furniture appeared to be very old, perhaps dating back to the time when Haiti, as a colony of France, had been regarded as the pearl of the West Indies. The room contained only one other item. On the chest of drawers was a wide-mouthed earthenware jar, about a foot high, that bore in white, blue, and pale rose the same heart-shaped symbol of Erzulie that the priest had done in cornmeal on the peristyle floor.

Releasing his hand, his companion smiled at him again and began to unbutton his shirt. Ah, but her fingers were gentle as they did so, and when they caressed his bare chest after the shirt fell to the swept-earth floor! Lowering her hands to his belt then, she unbuckled that with maddening slowness and drew down the zipper of his slacks and let the slacks slide to the floor too. And again her hands caressed what they had exposed. And when, trembling uncontrollably now, he at last made himself step out of the slacks, she unsnapped his shorts and caressed him yet again.

In anticipation of a long, hot night he had not worn an undershirt or socks, so when he stepped out of his shorts and sandals he was naked.

In a moment she was, too. Naked and gorgeous and golden. And lowering her exquisite body backward onto

the bed, she stretched both arms toward him and spread her lovely legs and murmured something in Creole.

"Please," he begged in a whisper, "I know you speak English."

But she did not, it seemed. Not when she was Erzulie. Briefly her lovely face registered unhappiness; then she shrugged and murmured again, "*Vini!*" And he was on the bed with her, caressing her breasts and thighs while his mouth fused with hers and her tongue set him on fire.

It had never been like this with Allie, despite their lasting love for each other. It had never been like this with any of the handful of girls he had known intimately before his marriage to Allie. This woman, this goddess, knew everything there was to know about pleasing a man . . . even when ever-so-gently persuading him to delight himself by pleasing her.

He lost all track of time, all sense of where he was. He could have made love to her for an hour or a year. When he was fulfilled and had held her quietly in his arms awhile, she spoke again.

"I don't even know your name, *m'sieu*," she said softly in English.

Astonished, he turned to look at her.

She smiled. "But I had a feeling I would choose you if Erzulie possessed me. You are American?"

"Yes, yes!" Eagerness sent his voice soaring out of control. "I'm—"

"No." She put a golden finger on his lips. "Don't tell me about yourself. We shall never meet again."

"But—"

"Are you married, *m'sieu*?"

"Yes, but—"

"Go back to your wife, then. Tell her nothing. Shall I tell you something?"

Not knowing how to answer, he could only gaze into her eyes. With a feeling he had lost his soul in them.

"One is not allowed to remember what happens when one is possessed," she said. "You know what took place

in this room, but I do not." Gently she extricated her scented body from Weylin's embrace. "Now you must go. At once, *m'sieu*."

He felt himself becoming frantic. "My God, I can't leave you like this! Who are you? Where can I find you?"

She shook her head. "We live in different worlds." A touch of sadness affected her smile. "Just go, *m'sieu*, and if you remember this night, remember only Erzulie. It was she you made love to, not I."

Like one only half awake and haunted by a dream but half remembered, he dressed and walked out into the peristyle. To his surprise it was silent, dark, deserted except for three persons. Two well-dressed women sat on a bench near the exit—waiting, he guessed, for his golden girl to reappear. Lucien Lalo, his face colored by the glow of a cigarette, leaned against one of the poles that held up the roof.

"Tell me about it," Lucien said as they walked together to the jeep.

Weylin shook his head. "No."

"No? Have you forgotten it was I who brought you here?"

"I'm sorry, Lucien, but I'm the one to remember what happened in that room, not you. And I'll remember it, believe me."

"You made love to that beautiful girl, eh? You—"

"Shut up, Lucien."

Lucien chuckled. "Let me tell you something, *mon ami*. You are a most fortunate man. Erzulie does not always select the most beautiful woman at a service."

"What?"

"I was present once when she chose the ugliest hag in the place. Then the old hag took the hand of the *houngan* himself—a handsome young man who could have bedded any woman present—and led him off to the bridal chamber."

Weylin stopped in his tracks. "For God's sake, what are you saying?"

"What I said before: you were lucky."

"Damn you, Lucien, I don't believe —"

"As you wish, *m'sieu*." The Haitian shrugged. "But now let us go home, eh? It has been a long night."

The return trip to Port-au-Prince was an exercise in silence and brooding. For Weylin it was also a time to weigh his feelings and admit to himself that his life after this night of magic might never be the same.

Would it be a heaven of remembering?

Or would it be a hell of longing?

In a state of mind close to panic he glanced at the clock on the study wall. Forty-five minutes from now Allie would be home if she didn't stay to chat at the Daleys' when she dropped Ruth off.

Forty-five minutes! And what he had done was not working.

The tape player was running. The hauntingly beautiful invocation to Erzulie filled the room. But nothing was happening.

Frantically he took stock.

The light was no brighter than the lanternlight in the peristyle that night. It couldn't be all that important anyway, could it? He had first drawn the *vèvé* badly, yes, but then had cleaned it up and done it over. The *govi* with the same Erzulie symbol on it in miniature was on the floor in the middle of the cornmeal heart. . . .

Was that it? At the service in Léogane the *houngan* had sprayed the *vèvé* with water from a bottle—at least, Lucien had said it was water, though the bottle bore the familiar Rhum Barbancourt label—and after that he had placed the *bottle* in the center of the drawing.

I didn't see the govi until the golden girl led me into the bedroom.

Sinking to his knees, he reached out wildly for the earthenware jar and nearly lost his balance. Had he fallen on the design and spoiled it, he would have had to draw the whole

thing again! With the *govi* in both hands and every pore oozing sweat, he staggered to his feet.

Where to put it? The bedroom there had been prepared for *her*: a place for her to retire to if, when she answered the summons and came to the service, she wanted love. But she could have a special bedroom here too! Of course! Not the one Allie and he used, but the guest room. He ran to it and set the jar on a lamp table between the twin beds, then raced to the kitchen for a rum bottle from the liquor closet.

It was even Haiti's own Rum Barbancourt, one of a dozen they had brought back with them.

The bottle was nearly half full, but there was no time to look for a container in which to save the rum. He poured it down the sink, impatiently shaking the bottle to hurry the process. When with water in place of the rum, he stormed back into the study and sprinkled the *vèvé* as the *houngan* had done.

But the tape player was silent now.

Never mind! Play the tape again! Call on Legba to open the gate. Summon Erzulie! There was still time. There had to be!

He fumbled frantically with the controls, all but weeping with frustration while the sluggish rewind mocked him with its uncaring hum. Hurry up, damn you! Hurry! But even that came to an end in time.

"Papa Legba, ouvri bayé pou nous. . . ."

Stepping back, he took the magic stone from his pocket and rubbed it between his palms. Put it back and snatched up the *asson* with its lace-work of beads and bones and shook it in time with the chanting. Shutting his eyes, he concentrated on a mental image of the beautiful golden girl he had slept with.

Nothing. The call to the gatekeeper throbbed on, nearly hypnotic in its subtle rhythm, and his heart thudded an accompaniment as he fran-

tically awaited a sign. But nothing.

What, oh God, am I doing wrong? Think! Think!

When it suddenly came to him, the fantasy changed from a magic cloud of shimmering colors into a dark rain of dust, lead heavy, that threatened to smother him. The goddess of love was not a person; she was a spirit. To respond to his summons she must enter into someone of flesh and blood in the place to which she was called.

A woman. There had to be a woman.

He had failed. He was stupid. And, anyway, the doorbell was ringing. Allie had forgotten her key again.

As he trudged out of the study and through the living room, he asked himself what he would say to her. Because the tape player was still throbbing out the chant to Legba, the *vèvé* to Erzulie still covered half the study floor, and going into the guest room to put away her art-class things, she would see the *govi* on the table there.

Tell her you were trying to duplicate the service you attended. Just out of curiosity, to see if anything would happen. She'd buy that. Didn't she ask all kinds of questions when you got back that morning?

"All right, all right," he called out when the bell buzzed again. "I'm coming." Behind him, in the study, the invocation to Legba ended and the one to Erzulie began.

"Erzulie, wai-oh! Erzulie nanan oh! . . ."

He swung the door open and the woman standing there was not his wife. She was at least ninety years old, wrinkled, grubby, in filthy rags that smelled of the dump. And through the greasy strings of hair that hung down over her face, her eyes glittered as she thrust her hand out.

Gimme Gertie. And she wanted booze, of course.

But was that what she wanted?

"Let me tell you something, mon ami. Erzulie does not always select the most beautiful woman at a ser-

vice. I was present once when she chose the ugliest hag in the place."

"Oh, my God!" If he had to go to bed with this horror. . . .

Slamming the door shut before her groping hand could touch him, he stumbled back into the study and sagged onto a chair, shaking with terror.

The tape played on, commanding the presence of the love goddess.

He stopped shaking and lifted his head. Stared toward the living room while the music—or something else—calmed him. He, too, was being commanded. Breathing heavily, he rose from his chair and began to retrace his steps to the door he had slammed shut.

He could not help himself.

Behind him the invocation ended, but he knew it had done its job. The chant, the *vèvé* on the study floor, the sprinkling of water and the shaking of the sacred rattle . . . he had, after all, put the thing together correctly. Erzulie had come. The crone from the shack at the dump was calling him.

Deep in the agony of his mind he heard the voice of Lucien Lalo mut-

tering, "You must go. You have been chosen!"

His hand trembled out and closed over the doorknob. Drew the door open.

Strange. He hadn't heard a car come up the driveway. His tortured mind must have been closed to everything but the ceremony and its consequences. But the woman standing there, smiling at him, was not Gimme Gertie. It was his wife.

Yes. It was Allie. And so lovely, so incredibly lovely tonight. So desirable.

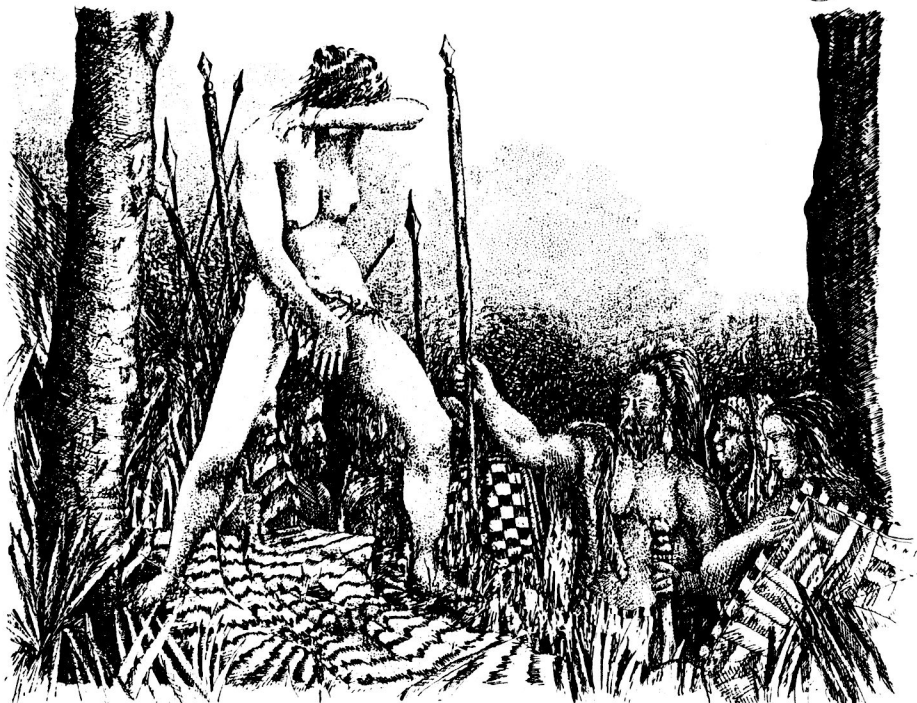
She stepped over the threshold and gently pushed the door shut behind her. She put out her hand. "*Bon soir*," she murmured, still smiling. And what followed was in Creole.

Not the basic Creole they had studied together before going to Haiti, but fluent Creole of which he understood scarcely a word.

Her fingers entwined with his. "*Vini!*" she softly commanded.

Then, still smiling, she led him to the guest room, where Erzulie's *govi* stood on the table between the beds.

Pawns of the River-King



by Carl Jacobi

*Pilot Jim Regan battles white slavers and foreign agents
in the depths of the Venezuelan rain-forest.*

Regan lay rigid on the ramshackle bed, listening. It came again through the silence of the Venezuela night, the soft unmistakable sound of footsteps climbing the wooden fire-escape along the outer wall.

He sat up cautiously, reached into the pocket of his coat hanging on a chair and drew forth his revolver. Then, an inch at a time, he crept out of bed and moved into the darker shadow behind a table.

The footsteps stopped. The barn-like hotel was steeped in silence.

Yet Regan knew someone was there. Vaguely through the window he could see a head peering inward. Native footpads? But no, he had declared

nothing of value on entering the Caracas customs, and he had talked to no one since inspecting his plane on the outskirts of town. He had not even chosen to explore the streets as was his first intention before coming to this hotel.

The figure at the open window placed a knee on the sill, drew itself into the room. Erect, it stood there an instant, then moved forward.

Only one! There was no need for the revolver. Regan braced and launched himself in a flying tackle.

A startled cry rang out as the American's six feet of brawn and muscle struck. Then the two of them were crashing backward to the floor.

But only for a moment. Bewildered, Regan released his hold and got to his feet. His outstretched hands had contacted, not a rough body of sinew and muscle, but soft, yielding, feminine flesh.

Fumbling for a match, he lit the grimy oil-lamp on the table, tilted its tin shade—and stared.

A girl lay on the floor before him, a girl whose eyes were closed, whose thick black hair hung down to her shoulders and whose features were unmistakably white. She wore a black rain coat, but the single button had been ripped off by the force of Regan's attack, and the garment lay open now, revealing a liberal expanse of creamy white skin.

Regan felt the blood pound in his veins. Under the rain coat the girl was clad only in a filmy black chemise. Even in the lamplight he could see the perfect curve of her figure, the twin outlines of her full breasts. The chemise was torn at one side, and the top of one breast peeped out enticingly.

Her eyes fluttered open then, and she uttered a deep sigh. Quickly Regan took a flask from the table, bent down and held it to her lips.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded.

She swallowed, gasped and pushed the flask away. Then she jerked to her feet, wrapping the folds of her coat about her.

"Let me out of here. They . . .!" Eyes wide with fear, she stumbled to the door, fell reeling against it.

Regan caught her in his arms, led her firmly but gently to a chair. He massaged her wrists, spoke to her soothingly.

"I don't know who you are or why you've come here," he said slowly. "But you're in no condition to leave just yet. Take it easy a moment. You needn't be afraid," he added. "I'm Jim Regan, pilot for Trans-Caribbean Air Lines, and I won't hurt you again."

"They saw me come in here," the girl whispered. "They're . . . out

there waiting."

Frowning, Regan strode across to the window and looked down. Semigloom met his eyes at first; then twenty feet beyond in the dim light of a single street lamp he saw a shadowy figure pacing back and forth slowly.

He went back to the girl.

"Suppose you tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help you."

Color was swiftly returning to her cheeks. Her dark, heavily lashed eyes regarded him a long moment.

"I'm Claire Doyle," she said at length. "I'm looking for my brother, Frank Doyle. Maybe you've heard of him?"

Regan's eyes widened as he nodded. Heard of Frank Doyle? Who in Venezuela hadn't? Six months ago he'd left Caracas, heading into the interior to make a rubber survey of the Upper Orinoco country. Somewhere near the headwaters he had come upon a district rich with high-grade rubber which the United States in its war effort needed so badly. The trees he found were of a superior type than any yet discovered in South America. With a minimum of trouble the latex could be processed, transported to the coast and rushed up to the States. Then the carrier pigeons with which he contacted the coast suddenly stopped coming. The man had disappeared.

"I arrived in Caracas yesterday," Claire continued. "I had ample funds to organize a rescue expedition, and I set about to look for a reputable guide. On the street a man came up to me, introduced himself as Barton Craig. He offered to make up a party of Indio boatmen for a fee. He suggested we go to the waterfront and talk to a friend of his who had a gasoline launch on the Rio Pulmra which flows into the Orinoco."

The girl's voice had grown husky. She leaned back in the chair and the rain coat slid away from one leg. Regan's eyes drank in the girl's loveliness. The coat fell farther

to reveal a rounded knee and a shape-ly thigh.

"When we got to the place," she continued, "I saw in a moment that it was nothing more than a drink and gambling den. I tried to leave, but Craig forced me upstairs to a room on the second landing. There he informed me I could consider myself a prisoner of Jose Legado.

"Jose Legado!" cried Regan.

Claire nodded. "Yes, the white man renegade who has established himself as absolute ruler of the Guahibo Indians. The man whom the Venezuelan authorities have so far found too elusive to capture. And I have reason to believe my brother is still alive, a prisoner of Legado's."

Regan sat down on the edge of the bed, took out a cigarette and lit it slowly. Outwardly he appeared calm, but inwardly as he stared at the girl his heart was racing. Her breath was coming in short gasps now, and her rounded breasts straining at the black lace covering were clearly visible.

"I managed to escape from the drink dive by a rear door which they neglected to lock," she went on. "Outside in a side alley I was discovered. I ran for miles, it seemed, until I came to this hotel. The doors were locked for the night, and they were right behind me. So I . . . climbed those stairs, hoping to find an empty room."

Regan stood up, but the girl waved him into silence.

"They took my clothes," she said. "In the pocket of my dress was a map, the one which accompanied the last carrier-pigeon message sent by my brother, Frank. It showed his route and the location of his last camp. I've got. . . ."

Her voice hissed a warning. Regan jerked around.

Outside on the fire-escape had come the soft padding of naked feet.

Regan leaped to the table, seized his revolver and handed it to the girl. Then, moving like a well-oiled

machine, he blew out the lamp and crossed to a position at the side of the window.

The drama of a few minutes before was repeated. A head and shoulders appeared over the casement. A figure climbed stealthily into the room. But this time the invader was no girl. It was an Indian, clad in a pair of dingarees.

Regan didn't wait for details. He took a half step forward, gripped the Indian by the shoulder and spun him around. His right fist catapulted squarely into the man's jaw.

Hell broke loose then. Snarling, the Indian reeled backward, sent the table crashing on its side. In an instant he was on his feet, closing in. The American caught a glimpse of grey steel as something cold and sharp ripped across his arm. Again the knife stabbed out at him.

Regan sidestepped, began to place blows with skillful regularity. Twice with satisfaction he felt the sting in his arms as his fists drove home. The third time he put everything he had into the blow.

The Indian gave a gasp of breath and collapsed on the floor.

With a sobbing cry Claire Doyle was in Regan's arms then, trembling with emotion. He held her close, felt her soft body press yieldingly against his own. For a mad moment his blood flamed within him. He felt the smooth roundness of her scantily covered breasts press against him. His hand stole under the rain coat, caressed the luscious curves of her back.

Then abruptly he stood away, moved to the table, picked up and lighted the lamp.

"You can't stay here," he said. "We'll go to my plane. It's a small cabin job at a private air-field a short distance out of town. You can spend the night there."

The girl nodded, then frowned. "But my map," she said helplessly. "Without it I'll never be able to find my brother. Without it. . . ."

"I'll have that map in your hands by morning," Regan said quietly. "Or I'll know the reason why."

An hour later the American was striding once again through the darkened streets of Caracas. Claire Doyle was safe in his plane a quarter mile out of town. He passed down tree-lined boulevards, flanked at intervals by equestrian statues of Simon Bolivar and other patriots, continued into blacker narrow streets, headed for the waterfront.

Claire had said she had been taken to a large drink and gambling dive near the wharves. By reputation Regan knew that only one establishment fitted that description—Portugee Lil's.

He found the place presently, a two-story structure sunk in the salmagundi of the wharf alleys. From within came the roar of drunken voices, the banging of a tin-pan piano.

Regan pushed through the door, gave the place a quick survey and strode to the bar in the rear.

"Portugee Lil," he said. "Where is she?"

"Upstairs." The rat-faced bartender jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

Eyes moving from side to side, Regan strode down the narrow aisle between the rows of tables. The room was thick with tobacco smoke and the smell of cheap liquor. A motley crowd was grouped in a far corner watching a Carib dancing girl, clad in the most revealing of breast plates and skirt of beads.

On the second landing Regan hesitated to loosen the revolver in his coat pocket. Then he knocked on the first door on his right.

Inside a murmur of voices suddenly hushed into silence. An inner door clicked open and shut. An instant later the hall door swung wide and Portugee Lil stood framed on the threshold.

She was a large buxom woman with gleaming yellow hair. A crimson neg-

ligee was wrapped tightly about her and through the gossamer cloth every contour of her body was visible. The bodice was cut daringly low, so low that Regan felt a hot wave within him as he looked upon the deep valley between large full breasts that strained tightly against their thin covering.

"Like to talk with you alone a moment," Regan said quietly. "Can I come in?"

The woman surveyed him coldly. Then she smiled and nodded.

In the room she led the way to a low couch, adjusted the pillows and sank down upon it. She crossed her legs, and the red negligee fell apart almost to the waist.

"Now," she said. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Regan came to the point abruptly.

"Tonight," he said, "a man named Burton Craig brought a girl here, attempted to make her prisoner. That girl was a friend of mine. I'm Jim Regan, pilot for Trans-Caribbean, and my company doesn't tolerate interference with its friends of employees."

A glitter entered Portugee Lil's eyes to vanish as her reddened lips turned in a sensuous smile.

"Bringing that girl here was a mistake," she said softly. "Craig thought she was someone else, a half-caste girl who was supposed to arrive in Caracas today. I am very sorry."

Regan nodded. Much as he wanted to find this man Craig and pound his fists into his face, he realized he couldn't do that now. He must play his game carefully if he wished to recover Claire Doyle's map.

Once again that glitter entered Portugee Lil's eyes. Then she sighed, folded her hands back of her head and leaned back against the pillows. The sight of her large breasts pushing upward like two ripe melons, clearly outlined under the negligee, sent hot blood pulsing through Regan's veins.

"Must you be so businesslike," she murmured. "There is plenty of time."

Afterward he didn't know how it

happened. She was in his arms, and he could feel the warmth of her body close against his own. He pushed her head back, thrust his lips hard against hers, held them there in a passionate kiss. The woman had nothing on beneath the negligee. Regan's hand, stealing beneath its folds, touched soft flesh as he embraced her.

And then suddenly the inner door behind them banged open, and a voice snarled,

"All right. You can reach for the ceiling."

Regan whirled. Before him, leaning against the closed door stood a heavy-set gorilla of a man, gripping a revolver. His face was moonlike and florid with a week's growth of beard and his iron-grey hair was close-cropped. The stiffness of the Teuton was in his carriage.

"Barton Craig, I presume," Regan drawled slowly.

The man sneered. "Yes, I'm Craig. So that Doyle girl picked you out to tell her blabbing story, did she? And you came here, figuring to give us the run-around all on your lonesome. Well, now that you're here, you might as well stay."

His hand snaked upward. Even as Regan poised there on the balls of his feet, he saw the man's finger tightening on the trigger. Then, simultaneous with the roaring report, the American threw himself sideways.

The slug screamed past his ear and buried itself in the far wall.

With a lurch Regan vaulted across the intervening space and closed in. The two struck like blocks of wood. Regan's fingers closed vice-like over Craig's gun-wrist, twisted the weapon free. He planted two blows in quick succession straight to that bearded jaw.

A cruel kick caught him in the groin, sent a wave of nausea sweeping through him. Back and forth the two men surged, pounding each other mercilessly.

Then Craig dropped to his knees

and attempted to retrieve the fallen revolver. Regan steeled his right arm, drove his fist in and up with every ounce of strength he possessed. The man dropped without a sound.

The American scooped up the gun then, swiveled it on the cringing Portugee Lil.

"Now," he panted, "hand across that girl's clothes."

The woman tried her last trick. She came forward, hips swinging, lips turned in a fawning smile.

"Move!" Regan snapped.

White with rage, Portugee Lil snarled an oath. Then, as the revolver continued to hold her in its range, she turned, strode across to a closed door and pulled it open.

A moment later she returned with a dress, hat and stockings. One swift touch of the dress as he tossed it over his arm told Regan the map was still in the pocket. He smiled.

"Next time," he told her, "watch your step when you start kidnapping American citizens."

He went out, ran lightly the length of the balcony and took the steps to the main level three at a time. As he emerged into the street, a gun roared behind him, and a bullet ricocheted against the cobblestones.

But he was safe now. Continuing his swift pace, he groped his way back through the streets of the town and onto the dark palm-lined road that led to the air field.

Half an hour later he reached his plane.

Claire Doyle had stretched a blanket on the floor of the empty cabin and was sleeping quietly. Regan stood there a moment in the dim light of the dome bulb, entranced by her loveliness. Then gently he touched her forehead.

She came awake with a start.

"Steady," Regan said. "I've got your clothes and your map. We can start any time."

She stared at him with puzzled eyes.

"Start . . .? You mean . . .?"

Regan laughed quietly. "I mean I'm assigned to fly this ship as far as Ciudad Bolivar anyway. Trans-Caribbean is expanding its South American service in line with the 'good neighbor' policy. And since your brother's disappearance is tied up with the present rubber situation which is vital to the Americas, I know my company would want me to help you."

Gratitude and relief showed in her eyes. She stood up and took the dress. For a fleeting second as she dropped the rain coat and pulled the dress over her head, Regan had a glimpse of nude white shoulders and legs. Then she pulled the map from her pocket and shook her head.

"I can't ask you to do it," she said. "It . . . it's too much of a gamble. The chances are a hundred to one against Frank being alive. And if he is, I'm almost certain he's a prisoner of Jose Legado, the white king of the Guhijos."

Regan studied her. "What makes you think that?"

"Because"—her voice wavered—"in his last letter sent by carrier pigeon Frank said he was close to the district where Legado was thought to operate. No one knows exactly who Legado is or whether he really exists, of course. But Indian rumor has declared him to be somewhere at the headwaters of the Orinoco. But why Legado should want to prevent Frank from returning to the coast I can't quite see. The rubber would be of no value to him there in the interior."

Regan nodded. "I've always wanted to see these Guahibo Indians," he said. "They're supposed to be pretty tough customers. Let's go."

He strode into the control room. An instant later the huge motor burst into a roar. The American let it warm while he squinted out at the dark field. But he had no time to give lengthy consideration to his take-off.

To the rear somewhere a hoarse shout went up, and a bullet spanged

against the side of the plane. Looking out, Regan saw three figures racing toward him. He couldn't be sure, but the man in the lead seemed to be the gorilla-like Barton Craig.

Regan smiled. The silver ship leaped forward, began to rumble down the field. More shots and yells, and then with a lurch, the earth dropped downward. Up into the night sky the plane soared, circled over the town and then headed south toward Ciudad Bolivar.

Hours of brooding darkness, of steady, deafening roar. The night merged into mist-cloaked dawn. Steadily the plane zoomed on, following the course of the yellow, silt-heavy Orinoco. Below the jungle unfurled itself like a dense green carpet.

But it was a poisonous green, Regan knew. The Orinoco here was filled with snags, and landing upon it was impossible, even with his retractable pontoons. The bush was alive with poisonous snakes and head-hunting savages. One slip, one hitch of that droning motor meant death.

They had flown directly to Ciudad Bolivar and spent one day there, taking on supplies and more gas and gathering information. Regan spent some time at the American consular agency and at the office of the British consul. There were documents to sign, officials to interview. In the end a radio message to the head office of Trans-Caribbean gave Regan the *carte blanche* he needed.

Now they were far over the interior, following the winding Orinoco. Abruptly Regan sighted a larger Indian village flanking the shore where the river appeared wider and more open. He circled and made a safe landing in a wide glade not far from the village. Regan leaped out and disappeared down a jungle trail. In a short time he was back.

"As I expected, it was a Cuiba village," he told Claire Doyle. "Thank heavens the Cuibas are friendly and not like the Guahijos. I

learned something. A white man and a party of Indian boatmen passed through here."

"And Jose Legado?" Claire asked.

"Only rumor there. The Cuibas spoke of an evil river-king somewhere to the west. He has a large stronghold somewhere in the jungle."

Half an hour later they were on their way again. A frown of anxiety crossed the American's face now. Several times he banked the plane and sent a searching look below.

Then began a struggle with sleep. Exhausted, Regan set the controls and dozed at intervals, while Claire sat ready to waken him at the slightest trouble.

On the morning of the second day Regan said, "We're over the Alto Aripuauna district where Legado is supposed to hide out. Watch closely and see if you see anything suspicious."

But they saw nothing. The plane turned south, then west again. Below them lay impenetrable jungle. Hours passed, and Regan began to cast glances at his fuel gauge. And then abruptly Claire Doyle stiffened.

"There!" she cried. "That clearing . . . ! Isn't that . . . ?"

Regan followed her gaze, banked the plane sharply and headed toward the open spot in the jungle foliage. An instant later he was swerving back toward the river, gunning the motor for altitude.

"We've found it," he said grimly. "We'll land up the river a ways and cross back on foot."

With pontoons replacing the retractable landing gear, he brought the plane down to a gull-like landing. Then, making a mooring to overhanging lianas, he and Claire leaped ashore.

"Use your revolver at the first sign of danger," Regan warned her. "And stay close behind me."

They pushed boldly into the bush. Before they had covered fifty yards Claire's filmy dress was torn to ribbons, and even Regan's stouter clothing was badly ripped. With the Am-

erican pilot in the lead the two fought through the dense undergrowth.

The jungle here was cloaked in perpetual shadow, but a moist, stifling heat pressed down upon them. Insects gathered in hordes about their perspiring bodies. Once as Claire reached out to grasp a branch for support Regan seized her arm and jerked it aside. She shuddered as the brownish coils of a tree viper slid out of sight.

At the end of an hour the girl was close to exhaustion, and Regan halted by a brackish stream to rest. He dipped his handkerchief in the yellow water, pressed it gently to her forehead.

"We haven't much farther to go," he said hopefully. "But have you any idea what we're going to do when we get there? Jose Legado isn't likely to be friendly to visitors."

Claire shook her head vaguely. "I . . . I only want to find my brother," she said. "After that, things will . . . must take care of themselves."

The bodice of her dress as she sat there was torn almost to the belt, and one rounded breast peeped out. An overwhelming desire to gather the girl in his arms and hold her close seized Regan. He forced his eyes away. Now, if ever, it was essential that he keep his head clear.

They pushed on. Abruptly they emerged onto a man-made trail. Here Regan halted a moment to get his bearings, then pushed on like a hunter stalking his kill.

And then abruptly a wide clearing opened before them. In the center stood a sprawling thatch building, with a wide veranda completely encircling it. Regan's jaw sagged as he took in the details. Mounted at intervals on that veranda, their barrels peering menacingly over the railing, were a dozen machine guns. Twenty feet before the house a Guahibo, armed with a rifle, paced back and forth.

Regan turned to Claire. "It would

be utter madness to attempt to enter that house alone. We'll circle around to the other side, see if we can get close enough to a window. Then . . ."

His words died on his lips. Behind them a laugh sounded.

Regan wheeled. A man stood leaning against a tree five yards away, an automatic in one hand. It was the man Regan had fought in Portuguese Lil's in Caracas, the man who had kidnapped Claire Doyle—Barton Craig!

Craig's bearded face twisted in a taunting sneer.

"You're wondering how I got here, eh, Regan? Well, you're not the only one who has access to a plane. You're not the only one who can fly over these jungles. In case you're interested, I'm Jose Legado."

"Legado!" A hot wave of surprise and consternation swept through Regan.

"Legado, Craig . . . I use various names to suit my convenience," the man went on. "The real name, in case you're interested, is Schmidt—Hans Schmidt."

Regan swept his eyes over the intervening space, studying the situation. His revolver was still gripped in his right hand, but Craig waved his own weapon now, snarled,

"Drop it."

Even as the gun clattered to the ground, the American poised to launch his attack. He let his arm fall as in defeat, then suddenly braced and hurtled forward.

Craig anticipated the move at the same instant. He yanked the trigger of his gun.

For an instant Regan felt as if some powerful magnet had checked his onrush in mid-air. Then a flame of agony lanced through his left shoulder. He felt himself falling into a pit of blackness. . . .

When he opened his eyes, he felt a soft hand on his brow, sensed the vague perfume of a woman near him. His left arm was stiff and numb; his head throbbed.

"What happened?" he gasped.

"We're prisoners." Claire Doyle's voice was tremulous. "Craig wounded you in the arm, brought us into his stronghold. You've been unconscious for hours."

Regan sat up weakly. Outside in the grounds he heard the steady booming of native drums, loud voices and confusion.

"They're having some kind of a celebration," Claire continued. "There must be hundreds of Guahibos out there."

Before Regan could reply heavy steps sounded in the corridor outside the room. An instant later the door swung open, and Barton Craig loomed on the threshold.

"You arrived just in time for the entertainment," he said mockingly. "I am marketing a few of my possessions to the Indians out in the compound, and I'm going to let you see the show."

He opened the door and motioned them out into the corridor. Following the narrow hallway they emerged onto the veranda. Regan saw that the compound before them was crowded with a milling mass of naked Guahibo Indians. There was a kind of platform constructed on one side, and upon this stood three Guahibo chiefs.

At the sight of Barton Craig on the veranda one of these Guahibos on the platform raised his right arm and uttered a guttural command. Instantly silence fell upon the throng.

Craig nodded and gave a signal. From around a corner of the thatch bungalow a strange and grotesque procession came into view. Guarded by Guahibo Indians armed with knives a file of young women entered the compound. Each was garbed in a loose-flowing cloak of some rough-knit material.

As they passed the veranda, Regan uttered a gasp. They were white girls!

Across to the platform the procession advanced, the girls climbing like automatons to the higher level.

And then Barton Craig leaned forward and struck a small gong. One of the chieftains pushed a girl to the center of the platform, seized her robe and jerked it free. Naked save for a narrow cloth about her waist the girl stood there.

And then the silence in the compound was broken. Cries and haggling yells rose up as the Guahibos began milling forward. Claire Doyle's face went white.

"It's . . . it's an auction," she whispered. "They're bartering for that girl. I . . . I didn't think such things were possible."

Regan heard the girl as from far off. He was watching the scene closely and he was seeing other things farther in the background. Hulking, brutal-looking men with close-cropped hair and the heavy Germanic features. Interspersed among them Regan thought he saw several Japs, but he couldn't be sure.

Presently Barton Craig struck the gong again, indicating that the bargain had reached a satisfactory conclusion. The girl was led into the horde of natives, and a shout of approval went up.

Five times Regan and Claire Doyle saw the slave bargaining repeated. Five times a beautiful white girl was led to the platform, stripped nude in the glaring sunlight and auctioned to the highest bidder. Then Craig swung about, an evil sneer on his bearded face.

"I have three more whites to dispose of," he said. "The two of you and a man whose name I think will interest you. A man you were foolish enough to rescue. Frank Doyle, the rubber survey man."

Craig lit a cigarette. "Doyle came up here looking for rubber," he continued. "He entered my kingdom without my permission, and he intended to ship that product to the country I hate most, the United States. Of course the Guahibos will not pay as much for a white man as they will for a white girl, but I fancy they'll

pay just the same. They're still head-hunters at heart, you know."

Claire gave a short cry as she heard these words. Craig moved to strike the gong again, but he was interrupted half way.

For five grinding minutes Regan had been struggling unseen at the bonds which Craig had fastened about his wrists a moment after they had come upon the veranda. The ropes fell free now and with a sudden lurch he leaped forward. His fist drove into an Indian guard standing at his side. The man dropped like a log.

Regan swiveled, bounded to one of the machine guns mounted on the veranda rail and spun it to cover Craig.

"The game's up," he drawled. "One false move, and I'll drill you like a yellow dog. Tell those Guahibos to get out. And tell them to leave the white girls here."

Craig's face went black with rage. He spat an oath, took an uncertain step forward. The machine gun moved a notch.

"Tell them!" snapped Regan.

Slowly the man who called himself Jose Legado turned. Lips quivering, he raised his right hand and addressed the jungle men before him.

"The bargaining is over," he said in Guahibo. "Go back to your villages. The white girls must remain here."

The jabbering began anew, then quickly faded as the Guahibos rose to their feet and quickly melted into the bush. When they had gone, Regan nodded quietly. "Now untie Miss Doyle. Move, damn you!"

Barton Craig advanced a step. Suddenly with a guttural cry he sprang straight for the American.

Regan had no time to use the machine gun. He lunged erect and closed in. A heavy, brutal blow slammed into Regan's mouth, split his lip. A jamming uppercut bludgeoned him back of the ear.

Reeling, he dropped back, fainted and pounded his fists with machine

gun rapidity into that bearded face. Again and again he struck, using every ounce of strength he possessed. The blows seemed to have little effect. Craig swore and rushed in for the kill.

And then the American found an opening. He lifted his right arm, brought it smashing upward in a sweeping haymaker. Like a battering ram that fist crashed into Craig's solar plexus. The man threw up his arms, groaned and toppled to the floor.

The silver plane flew high over the jungle, heading west. Below, a tiny ribbon of yellow gold, snaked the Orinoco. In the cabin Jim Regan sat at the controls and in a corner, securely bound and tied, lay the renegade Barton Craig. Claire Doyle sat across from a tall middle-aged man whose haggard face showed the months of suffering and struggle he had been through. Frank Doyle, Claire's brother, told his story simply:

"Craig captured me shortly after I sent that last message by carrier pigeon," he said. "He knew I was after rubber, and he was determined that I should send none of it to the States. As Craig told you, he was known as Jose Legado and wielded control over all the Guahibos in this district. But he was more than that. He was Hans Schmidt, special saboteur

agent for the Nazi Government sent here to organize all interior Indian tribes and lead them in a revolt.

"With his plane Craig flew to Caracas and Ciudad Bolivar at intervals where he had formed a syndicate to bring girls, kidnapped white girls, into the interior from those towns and surrounding ports. These girls were to be sold at a low price to Guahibo chiefs, a policy which would win the Indians more solidly to his command.

"Even that far in-country the beauty of a white woman is recognized, and the Guahibos would do anything to obtain them."

Claire nodded. "And the girls . . . were there others before we came?"

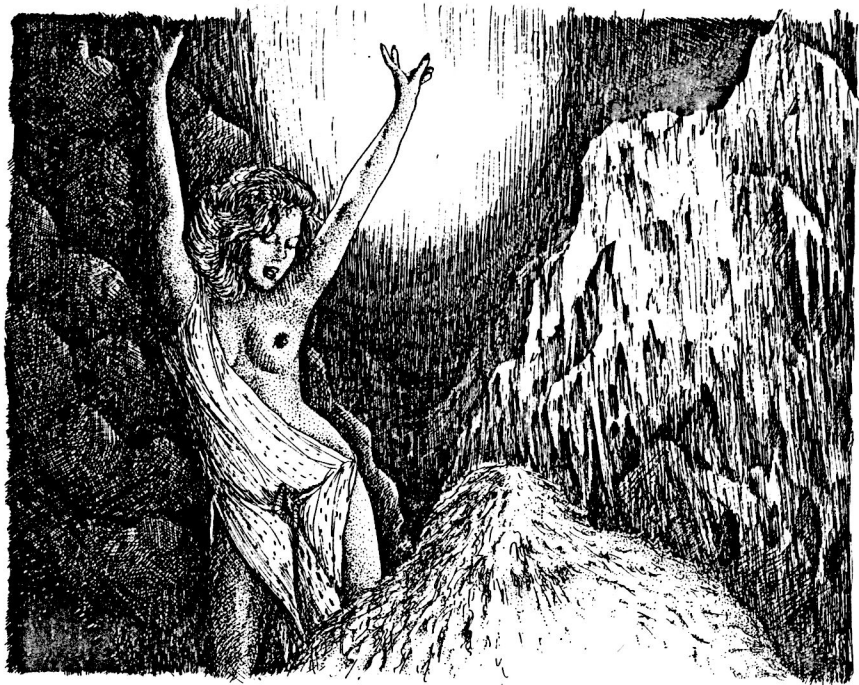
"No." Frank shook his head. "Craig was just beginning to put his plan into operation. The five you saw were the first. They'll be brought downriver with trusted Indian guides who were captured with me."

"How about the rubber?" Regan asked.

Frank Doyle smiled triumphantly. "It's there," he said. "Better latex in a wild state than formerly came from what is now Jap-controlled Malaya. All that remains is for modern American engineers and machinery to get it to the coast."

Regan nodded and then looked across to Claire. Abruptly he drew her into his arms and placed a kiss on her lips.

The Temple of Forbidden Fruit



by Marc A. Cerasini and Charles Hoffman

*An American adventurer, an Eternal woman, an ageless City
and the weirdest race ever spawned—a new John Gorman Adventure. . . .*

1. Death in the Mountains

The foreboding crags of the bleak Himalayas loomed vast and eternal from horizon to horizon, their rugged peaks thrust against the clean, wind-swept skies of the Tibetan hinterland. Clinging to the sheer face of one of the cliffs, a man groped his tortuous way ever upwards, a single flyspeck of agonized life against a seemingly endless vista of utter desolation. His broad back ached from days of unceasing toil, the thick muscles that corded his rangy limbs were knotted with fatigue, and his swollen tongue licked unconsciously

at parched lips as he gazed longingly at the whiteness that capped the surrounding peaks. With powerful frame wasted by hunger and thirst and his keen brain numbed by days without sleep, the man struggled to reach the snow line high above, and the moisture there, before it was too late.

The man's bleary eyes focused on a rivulet of blood that ran sluggishly down his abraded arm and hung suspended before a large drop broke free to splash onto his blackened lips. As he paused to savor its wetness, his mind swam back from the trance-

like haze that clouded it during his long ascent, and he recalled that he was John Gorman, and that the pick-axe he clutched in his calloused hands was no mere tool, but the weapon and symbol of the death cult that had hounded him here, to the very ends of the earth.

Looking up, Gorman discerned a ledge a few feet above. His exhausted muscles screamed in protest as he heaved himself up, kicking wildly, until he could plant his elbows on the outcropping. He rested briefly before extracting the deeply embedded pick-axe from the cliff and dragging his lower body onto the ledge. Rolling over onto his back, he drank in the cold dry mountain air in great gulps which burned his throat. The blood rushing to his head roared in his ears, drowning out the dismal moan of the wind in the crags. As the pulse hammering at his temples slowed and his breathing became regular, Gorman heard—or imagined?—an inhuman howl distinct from that of the wind, yet unlike any animal he had ever encountered.

As the echo of the strange cry died away, Gorman rose on unsteady legs to examine his surroundings. The ledge on which he stood, which from below had seemed nothing more than an outcropping, was actually a break in the cliff's sheer expanse: a flat table of rock nearly as wide as a house. A narrow path led away from either side of the ledge to disappear around the curve of the mountain. Exhausted, Gorman felt relief at having to do no more climbing for now. Turning towards the face of the cliff, he noticed a curious mound bulging outwards, an area worn smooth by the elements or, as seemed more likely after a closer scrutiny, by human design. The mound was covered by a spongy moss and split by an oval-shaped cleft wide enough to admit a man.

Entering the aperture, Gorman was not surprised to discover further evidence of human handiwork. He was,

however, unable to grasp the significance of the carving he found etched on the wall of the cave.

It depicted a piece of fruit, not unlike an apple or pomegranate, growing from a stalk or vine that resembled a twisted ladder. Gorman shifted the pick-axe to his left hand and ran his fingers over the carving. As his skin touched the stone, he felt an eerie tongue run up his arm, and involuntarily he shuddered. Perplexed, he backed away from the strange engraving and out of the cavern's shallow recesses.

Instantly upon emerging, Gorman's ears were split by an inhuman howl of savage glee. He whirled, and was immobilized as a jolt of icy terror shot up his spine. A shambling, ape-like horror from some primeval nightmare squatted on the ledge not ten yards away. The man knew instantly that he confronted either a freak of nature or the long-sought missing link, for the thing stood erect unlike a true ape and towered fully nine feet in height. Shaggy white fur covered a torso as massive as the bole of a great tree, legs large as pillars, and long sinewy arms. The simian aspect of the monster's leathery face was offset by the red eyes that burned in its center with almost-human malevolence. Snarling, the thing charged, and Gorman saw the twisted yellow fangs arrayed in its gaping maw. Huge misshapen hands designed for rending flesh groped at Gorman from extended forearms thicker than a man's thigh. Recovering himself, Gorman sought to get clear of the shallow cave where he would surely be cornered. But with a speed belying its massive bulk, the thing was upon him. A crippling swipe of its huge, hairy arm laid Gorman face down and breathless on the frozen earth. Then a massive paw grasped the adventurer and hauled him high into the air before he was even aware he had been on the ground. Gorman writhed helplessly in the creature's grip as it shook him like a rag doll; his

stomach churned and his clenched teeth loosened in his bleeding gums. He felt the hot, foul breath of the monster blast his face, its spittle splashed him, and his ears ached with its incessant howling. Now the thing stared John Gorman in the face, and for an insane instant the man thought the beast might speak, so human-like did it appear. But the feral gleam in its bloodshot eyes revealed the monstrosity was nothing but a raging, elemental force, savage and capricious.

Through it all, Gorman had clutched the pick-axe in a vise-like grip. As the thing raised him high above its head to cast him into the valley below, the American's fighting instincts finally took over. Even as the monster cast him free, Gorman swung the axe with all the strength of both arms, bringing it down on the creature's shoulder, where it bit deep and held. For a terror-filled second Gorman danced on empty air, his only anchor the axe buried in the beast's sinewy flesh. Then came blinding agony as he impacted with the earth once more. The axe had ripped free, but not before bringing the man back over the ledge. The creature roared its rage and pain as it clutched its upper arm where the axe had torn a ragged furrow. Quickly, despite the pain, the American dived between the hairy columns of the beast's legs and sprang to his feet behind it. Gorman swung the axe once more, striking at the creature's unprotected back. The point sank into flesh once again, but not so deeply—it had struck the monster's iron spine. Gorman clung to the weapon as the thing thrashed about, swinging its arms, trying to dislodge the human from behind it. Suddenly, the axe came free and Gorman leaped back. Off balance, he attempted to keep out of the creature's range of vision. Confused and in pain, the abomination continued to bellow, but the blood streaming from its wounds weakened it and it moved more slowly now. Seeing

an opening, Gorman climbed atop a large boulder that thrust out over the cave mouth and, gripping the pick-axe in his bloody hands, leaped full on the monster's neck. Wrapping his legs about the hairy neck, he anchored himself firmly, raised the axe and brought it down squarely in the middle of the beast's sloping forehead. With another deafening bellow, the creature reared back, slamming the human against the mountain side with bone-crushing impact. Choking down his bile, Gorman finally released his hold on the weapon. He felt himself falling, then struck the ledge with numbing force.

Gorman rose on his battered elbows and shook blood from his eyes. Looking up through a red haze, he beheld a nightmare vision as the creature reeled drunkenly, the pick-axe embedded grotesquely in its thick skull, its hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically. Croaking hoarse bleats of agony, its pig-eyes glazing, the thing swayed like a falling oak and pitched headling over the cliff, into the abyss that yawned there. Seconds later, as Gorman lay unmoving on the stone floor, he heard the distant crash of the heavy body as it struck . . . far below.

For a long time, Gorman lay motionless, his entire body a twisted knot of pain. Keeping as still as possible to lessen his suffering, he took stock of himself, fully aware that the damage done to him was probably mortal. He felt the agony of every abrasion, fracture, broken bone and wrenched ligament. He suspected that he had sustained a concussion, and the taste of blood in his mouth told him he was bleeding internally. Night was falling, and the air grew colder. Bubbles of blood breaking on his lips with every breath, Gorman struggled to crawl back into the sheltering oval-shaped cave. Despite his heavy garments and the vest of yak fur he had acquired in a village in the foothills, Gorman knew that without a fire the bitter cold would

kill him before morning—if his wounds didn't. Huddled in the cave, shaking uncontrollably, Gorman relived the events that led to his imminent death in these forsaken wastes.

He had been living in Delhi when a friend, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, informed him that a team of journalists from the *Northern Star* were investigating rumors of a resurgence of the Sect of Kali in central India. The American reporter foolishly attempted to learn more of the Thugs' activities; it was Gorman himself who had helped the authorities retrieve the man's mutilated remains from a muddy river bank weeks later.

John Gorman vowed to avenge his friend's death. In subsequent weeks he endeavored to uncover the location of the Thuggee stronghold and the identity of the sect's depraved leader. During the Holy Months, the sect had been busy slaughtering a number of pilgrims abroad in the land. Coming upon the aftermath of a caravan massacre, Gorman disguised himself as a member of the sect and accompanied the Thugs to a secret conclave where the ritual of *Tuponee* was to be enacted. The leaders of the sect were all present, but before Gorman could get away to notify agents of the British government, he was invited to partake of the sacred *goor*—the Thuggee "communion sugar." The American, knowing well the legends of the *goor's* power to make any man who tastes of it a follower of Kali, reacted with instinctive horror and revulsion when the leader proffered it to him. Thus exposed, Gorman killed the leader with the man's own *ruhmāl*—strangling cloth—and fled into the night.

Since then, the death cult had dogged his every step, pursuing him across India and northwards into Tibet. In a small village in the Himalayan foothills, several Thugs caught up with him. Gorman killed them with a consecrated Thuggee pickaxe, the *kussee*, that he wrested from one, and escaped once more into the

mountains. There, just now, he had wielded the pick-axe in his desperate battle with a being more savage and bloodthirsty than even the Thugs. Gorman had always dismissed reports of an "abominable Snow Man" as myth and fantasy. Discovering the truth had cost the American his life.

John Gorman could no longer feel the cold, and even the numbness had passed to give way to a langorous warmth that spread throughout his entire body. He knew the hour of his death was at hand, and as his feverish brain slipped into unconsciousness for what seemed to be the final time, he thought he could see a shadowy hooded figure bending close. . . .

2. *Fatima*

Gorman awoke to the tinkle of wind chimes and tiny silver bells. Somewhere water bubbled in a fountain. A warm breeze scented with the perfume of amaranthine blossoms wafted over him, causing his eyelids to flutter open. He lay on a couch in a large, airy room that opened onto a courtyard and garden. His first sight was a dazzling multitude of exotic and unearthly flowers, painted in hues so brilliant they would have been painful to behold had they not been muted in the golden sunlight that precedes dusk. For a split-second Gorman imagined that he had entered some heavenly afterlife before his unerring instinct told him he was unmistakably, though miraculously, alive.

Sitting up, Gorman felt no pain. Injury, fever and fatigue had disappeared. More, his body now seemed filled-out and well-nourished, although his muscles felt stiff and weak from disuse, as though he had lain unconscious for many days. His body had been cleaned and dressed in robes of yellow silk that felt pleasant against his skin. Touching his face, Gorman found that his beard, grown long during his flight, had

been cleanly shaven. He peeled back a bandage on his arm to discover some sort of fungus or herb had been applied to his wounds, wounds that had vanished leaving not even a scar.

He was about to rise when a panel at one end of the chamber slid open. Six yellow-robed Tibetan monks entered silently and took positions on either side of the doorway. They looked not at Gorman, but expectantly into the corridor outside, as if in anticipation of some important personage. A moment later, a tall man, robed like the others, stepped through the portal. This man wore a mask of yellow silk that revealed only a dark pair of sinister, burning eyes, and Gorman noticed something odd about the shape of the features that remained hidden.

The masked figure spoke, addressing Gorman in perfect English, "So, you have reached the end of your dark journey. Welcome to our order. I am the High Lama of the Plateau of Thang."

"How did I get here?" Gorman asked, the sound of his voice surprising him, so long had it gone unused.

"One of our monks found you almost dead in a place not far from here. Who are you, and why have you struggled so hard to visit us?"

Though the voice was calm and measured, the adventurer could not help but shudder; perhaps instincts honed in the wild places of the world were warning him of something. Gorman knew he must choose his words carefully.

"My name is John Gorman. I'm an American. I didn't exactly come to visit. I was lost in the mountains and. . . ." He hesitated, debating the wisdom of telling these monks the truth, then he continued, "I was being chased by Thugs, sworn to track me down and kill me. In the mountains I was attacked by an animal—some sort of white ape. I fought and killed it, but was injured and could not go on. The next thing I know, I'm here."

"So, white man, you came here because you were a fugitive. How disappointing." The High Lama turned to one of the monks and said in English, undoubtedly for Gorman's benefit, "I told you, Rangpo Yun, the white race has little interest in the spiritual."

"Perhaps he has come seeking our treasure," the one called Rangpo Yun replied with a note of cold sarcasm.

At that, the High Lama laughed softly. In the quiet beauty of the chamber it sounded like the hiss of a cobra. Gorman shuddered once more, but remained outwardly calm. He felt the burning eyes of the High Lama fall upon him again.

"Well, Pandit Gorman," he said, "you shall remain among us for a time as our guest. You need not fear . . . your enemies. The followers of Kali cannot reach you here."

Again, the soft laughter raised Gorman's hackles. The Lama concluded: "You have the freedom of our Temple, but you must abide by our rules. Any breach of conduct on your part will be met with death! Enjoy your stay, John Gorman."

Without turning from the American, the High Lama backed slowly out of the chamber. Behind him filed his monks, bowing low. Alone once more, Gorman felt as if he had entered a viper's nest. Then, as he stretched to flex his stiffened joints, he laughed aloud.

"Yesterday I was doomed," he thought to himself, "and now I worry because I may die tomorrow. At least I live today!" The thought made him giddy, and he laughed once more.

His full-bodied laugh was echoed by that of another, the musical laughter of a woman, followed by an equally melodious voice that caressed his ears, "A hardy laugh, O man, and one filled with life. . . . It has been long since I have heard such a sound."

Gorman turned, to behold an impossibly beautiful woman. By far the loveliest he had ever seen—she might have been a goddess, for all he knew,

and he stared at her in mute amazement. A white woman, her skin was as pale as milk, yet suffused with life, like a child's. Her eyes were a shade of blue seen only in the interior of large diamonds. Long, luxurious billows of hair the color of warm honey cascaded onto her divinely sculpted shoulders and upper arms. Her tunic of yellow silk ended a handsbreadth above her knees and subdued, rather than obscured, the glory of her form. Undraped, the brilliant beauty of her incredible body would have been excruciating to look upon directly, like the flowers in the strange garden. Her legs were molded for treading stars and her breasts were perfect. She looked about thirty, yet seemed ageless. Her bearing bespoke a quiet dignity and a profound but uncomplicated wisdom. To Gorman she was like a promise fulfilled, and gazing upon her for the first time he felt that all desire had been satisfied, all troubles soothed, all conflicts resolved, all tasks completed, all mysteries explained.

The woman spoke again, shaking Gorman from his private reverie.

"I am sorry, sirrah, to disturb your rest. Your silence tells me my presence is unwanted. Forgive me my impertinence. I shall call again, later, perhaps." As the vision turned to go, Gorman called out.

"No, please . . . stay!" His voice sounded harsh in his ears, compared to the woman's dulcet tones, and Gorman was instantly embarrassed. He made to move from the couch, but a look of concern crossed the woman's countenance to replace one of playful teasing. She glided toward him, as graceful as a dancer, and said, "No, stay—you must rest. Our elixirs have sustained you while you lay unconscious, but you have not eaten in many days. I will send one of my monks to bring you sustenance."

Gorman leaned back again as the woman took a seat near him. "I must admit, I have felt better," he said,

"but I guess I looked worse when I first got here."

The woman smiled. "Indeed you did. I thought you were surely going to perish, but you survived. You are strong."

"But not strong enough to rise when a lady entered the room," he remarked. "My name is John Gorman. And you?"

"I am Fatima . . . only Fatima. We use no surnames here . . . John," she said softly.

Feeling uncomfortable, Gorman sought to change the subject. "I was told that I'm on the Plateau of Thang, only I don't quite know where that is." After a pause, he continued, "I suppose I still haven't recovered from my journey."

"Most of those who find their way here never do," Fatima said ominously. "Those who do are often not out of danger when they believe they are." After a second she added, "I think you need a protector, John, and a friend. . . ."

3. *Citadel of Mystery*

In the ensuing weeks, as John Gorman regained his strength, he learned much about the Plateau of Thang and the reclusive cult that flourished there. The woman Fatima was a willing tutor—albeit an inquisitive one, for she hungered as much for knowledge of the outside world as Gorman yearned to unlock the secrets of the mountain stronghold.

Stronghold it was—as Gorman learned later, when he felt well enough to wander with Fatima through the labyrinthine maze of stone that squatted obscenely atop the otherwise barren table of rock. The tales told by the woman concerning the history of the citadel filled the adventurer with wonder—and fear.

No man knew when the main structure was built. The monks were taught that the place existed before mankind ever appeared on earth. This

the American could well believe, for in his travels he had seen the sprawling pyramids in Egypt, the ancient ruins of the Arena in the seven-hilled city of Rome, and he had felt their age. But the worn masonry in the central portion of Thang reeked of antiquity—of vast gulfs of time rolling endlessly back through unfathomable eons.

Fatima asserted that the temple was built by ultratelluric beings who walked the earth when man's closest kin were tiny shrew-like creatures who scuttled between the legs of saurian titans. Other beings, so legend had it, had inhabited the citadel since. Humans were the present occupants, and undoubtedly they, too, would pass away, as the former masters had.

Each race had left its mark on the temple. Gorman studied miles of walls with cryptic cyclopean runes—the signature of a long-vanished species of sentient polypi. Vast corridors of bizarre angles and disorienting configurations, which Gorman could not stare into overlong—let alone traverse—bespoke the original, extraterrestrial builders. Weird sculpture, from a much later epoch, abounded—none knew its creators.

Man, too, had left his mark. In one of the larger domes, the monks had tapped into volcanic heat, and through arcane means harnessed it to create a veritable paradise in which to pass the ages in tranquil contemplation. Sprawling gardens, lush with the flora and fauna of many climes and a hundred lands, furnished the monks with food, clothing, and the stuff of their thaumaturgical philtres.

The order resided in a newer portion of the structure, scaled to human dimensions and furnished in the manner of more familiar dwelling places. Here, the walls and ceilings were constructed with stout wooden beams brought up from the valleys below. Here, too, stairways were built

over the inclined planes once used by previous inhabitants. In this portion of the temple, Gorman was given quarters in chambers which opened onto an idyllic miniature garden. There, he studied the books that Fatima brought him. Though the adventurer possessed a smattering of a dozen tongues, none of the crumbling parchments were written in any language Gorman could recognize, much less read. The alienness of the script itself was enough to make his skin crawl.

At length, Gorman questioned Fatima about the religious beliefs and practices of the Plateau. She explained that the cult centered on the worship of a deity known as "The Nameless One". The god's likeness, carved in black stone, resided atop a nearby peak in a hidden Holy Place a day's journey from Thang. The monks were the god's custodians, and at prescribed times during the year, monks from the various ruling factions climbed the altar to perform ceremonies of obeisance to the god. Fatima would not elaborate upon what these rituals comprised—and her reticence to discuss them aroused suspicions in the adventurer. He had come in contact with fanatics of many sects, and he had come to conclude that the very nature of religion was foul; a cancer of superstition that made otherwise sane men into fools or worse.

Gorman learned of the political structure of the lost city as well. The Plateau was ruled by the Council of Nine—the nine most powerful and influential members of the order. Gorman was surprised to find that his beauteous companion for these past weeks was one of the ruling council. The adventurer found it incredible that such responsibility should go to one as young as Fatima, and when he said these very words to her, she laughed strangely. This piqued Gorman's curiosity all the more, but try as he might, he never managed to learn anything about her life before

coming to the temple. But as Gorman's feelings for the woman grew, he pushed aside his suspicions.

As time passed, the American found himself increasingly under the woman's spell. There was no doubt in his mind that she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, her face and form so perfect that they seemed supernatural. Yet it was not only her physical beauty, but her gentle wisdom and wise counsel that drew Gorman to her as a moth to the flame. He found a peace when he was near the woman that he had never experienced before in his strife-torn life. The very thought of her permeated his being, until at length he could not think of a life without her near.

One morning Fatima came to Gorman bearing a bundle of furs and rugged travelling clothing. She informed him that they were going to explore some of the oldest unused portions of the citadel, where the arcane climate control did not reach. Suitably bundled, they both set out, Fatima leading the way while Gorman carried some provisions for a mid-day meal. In an hour's time they were deep in the heart of the mysterious city.

4. *Fatima's Tale*

In a spacious subterranean chamber, amid wavering shadows cast by unsteady torchlight, Fatima bade Gorman seat himself beside her on a broken slab of ancient stone, and there she told him her story.

"You look upon me, O man, and see a woman in the full flesh of her youth; no longer a girl, but not yet disfigured by the slightest wrinkle of age or experience. Yet I am old—not so old as these mountains, but older by centuries than the country of your birth. The greatest of Thang's many secrets is the secret of life eternal, and all who dwell here are immortal. As nearly as I can recall, I came here one thousand, one hundred and sixty years after the

death of Christ. You tell me it is now the early part of the twentieth century, so I have dwelt here for nearly eight hundred years. And yet I am as a babe compared to the monks of Thang."

Gorman was startled by this revelation, but having thus glimpsed the depth of Fatima's soul he did not for a second doubt the truth of her assertion. He remained silent and she continued.

"I was but a child, born in Sussex on the British Isles, when my father wed me to one of the king's knights. I was considered a beauty, but no more so than many another girl. My husband, Geoffrey of Aylesbury, was a harsh man whose coarse lovemaking left me feeling cold and unmoved. When he joined the Pope's crusade to free the Holy Land from the Saracen, I was taken along because he did not trust me alone in his lands.

"The journey was long and arduous. I still recall the hardships of life in the camps, the filthy, overcrowded ship, the tortuous trek across the desert. When we finally reached the Holy Land, the Christian armies were ambushed and massacred, and I was sold into slavery.

"My husband's cruelty was nothing compared to that of my various masters, to whom I was naught but an exotic plaything. But while the other women of the harems in which I was kept submitted to their masters' whims and so lived a life of ease, I would not bow. The eunuchs whipped me regularly and the other women hated me because I was an infidel. At last, I resigned myself to abuse and degradation for the rest of my life. My spirit finally broken, a part of me died. I was an empty vessel waiting to be filled with the corruption of my latest master, a jaded Sultan who could think of no better way to while away his useless life than the exploration of new excesses of debauchery. It was he who gave me the name Fatima. Now I can recall no other.

"The sensual appetites of the Sultan were insatiable, and he attempted to glut them in diverse ways. Exotic banquets set amid sumptuous surroundings were replete with numerous courses of rare viands expertly prepared, heady wines imported from afar, pungent hasheesh and other intoxicants. These were followed by endless rounds of loveplay, intimate sessions where he taught me various erotic practices and vast orgies in which the Sultan could display his lewd prowess publicly. Eventually I came to accept, then to welcome, then to thrive on this existence."

The woman paused and looked long into Gorman's eyes. The American's face was unreadable, but seeing no disapproval there, Fatima continued her tale.

"The Sultan did not hesitate to use me in any way that pleased him. Eventually he tired of me and, having stained my soul forever and cultivated in me a taste for the sensuous, he thought it a fine jest to present me as a gift to a celibate mystic who was passing through the land on his way to the Orient."

"My new master was a European, a somber ascetic with dark burning eyes under thick black brows. His gaunt face was surrounded by wildly flowing hair and beard like that of a Holy Man. When first he looked at me, I felt fear—for he practiced sorcery and some vestige of my former faith caused me to abhor black magic. But, in time, I learned there is no one truth, no one true religion.

"He was gentle, and as we headed further East, he taught me to hear what the desert wind was saying, what the movement of the heavens portend, and many another secret of his wisdom. In Egypt he had read forbidden tomes and learned of a land beyond the furthest mountain, deep in the Orient. There the world's oldest city had been built ages before on a high plateau . . . he had heard of Thang, though he knew it by another name.

"After years of travel, we arrived

in the foothills of the surrounding peaks. My mage then bade me farewell and placed me in the charge of a kindly Tangut family. But I loved him madly and desperately wished to go with him, though I could never be more to him than a mere servant. I ran away from those charged with my safety and followed him into the mountains.

"For days I was lost, yet some unerring instinct guided me to him."

Here Fatima paused and withdrew into herself for a moment. Gorman was about to speak when she continued. "I came upon him at a ledge; he had battled a hairy giant like the one you encountered, called *yeti* by the hill people, though the people of Khitai know of them as *Ye Ren*—wild man. It did not occur to me to flee; instead I stood and wept and screamed like a madwoman for the giant to turn away and leave him unharmed." Gorman noticed tears gathering in Fatima's eyes, and she paused again, her delicate hand brushing a tear away.

"It dismembered him before my eyes and would have done the same to me had not the monks of Thang intervened. They drove the creature away with a few words uttered in an ancient tongue. I had reached the outpost of the order, a small cave concealing a carving of the plateau's mystic symbol." Here, Gorman recalled the carving of the strange fruit he himself had discovered, before his own struggle with the *yeti*. Fatima concluded, "The monks took me back to Thang, and I have been here ever since. I completed my master's quest for him."

Long minutes passed in silence as Gorman absorbed all that he had heard. At length he questioned Fatima about various aspects of her centuries-long existence that puzzled him. He asked her what the secret of immortality was, but she begged him ask no more of that until later. She explained that her presence and that of the few other women on Thang caused the monks no distress; their sexual desires had vanished after ages of

immortality. As for herself, memory of the excesses of the Sultan's harem deadened any desire for further sexual activity, though she lived another ten thousand years. In Thang she had passed the long centuries attempting to reach new levels of mental and spiritual perfection. Her physical beauty also increased with the passing decades, and now surpassed that of any woman Gorman had seen in the outside world. She claimed that the monks regarded her flawless face and form as objects for contemplation and meditation, nothing more. She further added that the monks sought their "entertainment" elsewhere. Gorman felt he understood; in the weeks he had known this phenomenal beauty, he had felt no overwhelming urge to seduce or possess her. Her mere presence seemed somehow eminently satisfying in itself.

As they retraversed the path by which they had come, Gorman told Fatima something of his own early life. He had previously related many of his adventures to her, but now he spoke of things he had shared with no other person: his boyhood in rural Texas, his mother who had died while he was in his early teens, his father, the doctor, who had denied her illness so long it was too late to save her. He described how he had felt severed from his ties to home, and how the wanderlust first called to him.

5. *Passion's Fruits*

Gorman and Fatima returned to her quarters to find one of Fatima's disciples awaiting her. He was Kosigi Minowara, a Japanese samurai warrior who had come to the monastery some time during the eleventh century. Though robed in yellow like all the other monks, the Japaner still wore the two swords that had marked his caste in feudal Nippon, centuries before. As Fatima approached, he seemed pensive, and unconsciously gripped the hilt of the larger sword.

Gorman turned to leave, but Fatima bade him stay and addressed the monk in English for the American's benefit.

"What troubles you, Kosigi?" she asked.

"Sensei . . . a thousand pardons. The High Lama has decreed that your followers are to make the next pilgrimage to the House of the Nameless One. He asks that you assign your monks to the duty immediately."

This news seemed to trouble Fatima. She remained silent for a moment, then murmured softly to herself, "So soon. . . ." Gathering her thoughts, she addressed the waiting Japanese. "Does the High Lama demand that I attend the rituals?"

"No, Sensei, he has not specified your supervision. I fear that. . ."

"Enough, Kosigi," she interrupted curtly, "it is my wish that you conduct the ritual in the High Temple. . . . I shall remain here."

His face impassive, the samurai bowed and departed.

The existence of rival factions in Thang had not escaped Gorman's notice. The adventurer had crisscrossed the continents of the world in his wanderings, and had found that wherever civilization had taken root, men vied for power. He himself had been involved in more than his share of power-struggles during his strife-torn life. Now, it appeared that Fatima would soon enlist his aid in yet another. Fatima, as an adept of high degree, exerted great influence in the temple and was the leader of one powerful faction. Gorman was a professional fighting-man, one of the best. Furthermore, he was new to Thang—an unpredictable element. All this Gorman realized almost from the beginning, silent about the affair. Only the machinations of the High Lama remained a mystery to him. Still, he understood one important truth concerning the conflict to come; that he must join one side or die. . . .

The adventurer sighed. The web

of political intrigue extended to even the most primitive of human societies, but here, at least, where an isolated order of immortals enjoyed a carefree eternity of contemplation to perfect their wisdom, Gorman felt that the monks should be above such pettiness. He looked expectantly at Fatima, silently awaiting her request to join her bid for power.

"Important events are underway here," she said. "There is much for me to do. Go to your chamber, John, and remain there for now. I will come to you on the morrow, to talk and . . . do more than talk." So saying, she turned and left Gorman alone in her chamber.

All through the next day the gongs sounded throughout the ancient city. The halls, usually thronged with the monks going about their daily affairs, were all but empty. In his chamber, Gorman paced restlessly like a caged tiger, blind to the beauty of the garden and the scrolls of forbidden knowledge he had wonderingly perused in weeks past. His only concern was for Fatima, the eternal Fatima. He cursed himself or a fool for not having instantly offered her his support in her struggle, regardless of what the conflict might be and what his aid might entail. He feared that it was now somehow too late, that she faced her foes alone. Most of all he feared he could never see her again.

He vowed to himself that, if he saw her again, he would take up her cause as his own. He would promise to serve her in her struggle for all time, even if it cost him his soul.

He could wait like a captive beast longer. He would go forth and find Fatima. As he made ready to leave, he heard the pad of footsteps outside his chamber. A panel slid open. Fatima entered.

Gorman, relieved to see her safe, crossed the room towards her, meaning to take her in his arms and rain kisses on her face and ruby lips.

He closed the gap between them in the space of a second, but upon reaching her he paused for a moment. Gorman was speechless as Fatima's eyes burned hotly into his from beneath half-lowered lids. Her full lips parted, and Gorman pulled her to him gently, without haste. They embraced, and as their open mouths met in a lingering kiss, her hot tongue slid past his lips. It tasted like a sweet, exotic delicacy. Her strong, musky woman-smell made his head reel.

Fatima broke the embrace and stepped back. She touched her garment once, lightly, and it fell away to the floor like spring rain. The undraped glory of her naked body scorched Gorman's eyes like an icy flame, but when his gaze refocused on her nudity, his vision seemed deeper and clearer than ever before. Physical desire and spiritual longing suffused him, welling up from his loins to spread throughout his body to the very tips of his fingers and toes.

Gorman cast away his own garments to face her naked and erect. Fatima's eyes were like living sapphires, her hair like molten gold, her body like warm marble buffed and polished to perfection by the centuries' subtle hand. In contrast, Gorman's hard, muscular body seemed rudely hewn from the trunk of a young oak.

As the man and woman embraced once more, their bodies melted perfectly, flowing together like two mighty rivers. Gorman's lovemaking was as natural and instinctive as that of a stag, devoid of the superfluous flourishes that mark the "technique" of a lesser man. The unflagging stamina that had carried him across deserts and glaciers enabled him to quench the fires of Fatima's passion again and again. Her spirit soared to touch the sky as her body responded to him, convulsing in spasms of sheer ecstasy. The moans and sighs Gorman elicited from her gasping lips were a rhapsodic symphony of total release. As for Gorman, climax

brought a sense of gratification and fulfillment more profound than any he had ever known, as though he had accomplished some great mission he had been placed on earth to undertake.

Their passions spent, the lovers sprawled languorously, naked amid cushions and silks strewn in wild disarray. The chamber was all but silent. The gongs that boomed through most of the day were now mute. Only the quiet murmur of their breathing could be heard as they lay motionless on the divan where they had completed their lovemaking. The silks rustled as Fatima stretched like a contented feline and sat up. Sweat glistened on her, dew-like, and gathered in large drops that clung like fresh honey to her breasts and hair. A smile played on her perfect lips even as a tear welled in her eyes.

"You have made me a woman again," she said huskily. "More, you have restored my humanity."

Gorman's rough hand caressed her shoulder, but he did not speak. He contemplated her coolly as she gathered the silks about her to drape her nude form. Momentarily he found his voice, "You came here today because you needed my help. It's yours, even if it costs me my life. I don't know what's up, and I probably wouldn't understand the reasons for it, but I trust you and I'll see you get what you want if I can. I love you. . . ." His voice trailed off and he looked at her once more.

Fatima looked away, swinging her perfectly formed legs off the divan. She turned her finely molded back to him and said in a low tone, "I had intended to offer myself to you to persuade you to join my cause. I foolishly believed that I could use you to further my own ends. I thought I could bend you to my will with my body." She paused and turned to face him once more, "In my conceit I believed myself free of human passion. So blind was I to my own soul that I

did not recognize the desire I felt for you. I say to you, John Gorman . . . I, who have existed in this place for many centuries, have experienced more life in your arms this day than I have in all those previous years. For this I can never repay you."

Her hand gently caressed his face, and she bent low, raining her hair over his chest. She kissed him full on the lips.

Then, Fatima rose and crossed the room. Gorman sat up, reluctant to leave the peace of the couch. Fatima donned her robes and said, "Please rise, my love. There is much to do and little time to do it. If you would aid me, I must first aid you. Dress and come with me."

Shadows cast by the two conspirators danced fitfully in the unsteady torchlight as they traversed the deserted corridor. Fatima strode with a sense of purpose, a look of quiet but fierce resolve on her face. Gorman followed a few steps behind. He realized that they were now entering a part of the citadel he had never seen.

At length they halted before two massive bronze doors, covered with bas-relief carvings of gods and demons. In the center, where the doors met, was the likeness of a pomegranate such as Gorman had seen on the trail below the plateau. Fatima fingered a hidden lever and the doors swung silently open on well-oiled hinges. Beyond lay a vast cavern, faintly illuminated by natural phosphorescence. In the middle of the cavern a stone monolith rose from amid the stalagmites to tower grandly before the trespassers.

Fatima bade Gorman enter; when he did, the doors closed quietly of their own accord behind them. A warm dampness permeated the cavern, and a musty smell like that of a pharaoh's tomb. Fatima knelt reverently at the base of the monolith and, spreading the fingers of her

left hand, caressed the cold stone. With the grate of stone against stone, a portion of the base slid from view, to reveal a small chamber cut into solid rock. Inside, three dried, black and shrunken fruits rested. Fatima reached into the hollow and drew one forth. As she did, the grating sound returned and the chamber disappeared; no seams could be detected to show where the opening had been.

Holding the small object reverently, she rose and turned to Gorman, as if she had just noticed his presence. She offered the black globe to his gaze and spoke, "Behold the secret of Thang! By offering you this sight, I betray the trust of a thousand years! The Fruit is the center of our lives . . . our Holy of Holies. It is power you look upon, power . . . and much more!"

An unholy light now burned in Fatima's eyes. Her face radiated an exhilaration such as Gorman had never seen on a human face. As she spoke, her voice rose until it filled the vast chamber. "In this temple I have guarded this mystery with my life all these centuries . . . the last remnants of the Tree of Eternal Life. Eat of it, John Gorman!"

The American started at her command. Fatima pressed the black globe into his hand and whispered, urgently, "Eat of the Fruit."

The shriveled thing felt cold and sticky to Gorman's touch. As he raised it to eye-level to examine it more closely, a warm musky aroma, heady and strong, filled his nostrils. His head reeled. The smell seemed to reach into him and he realized that he could not stop himself now, even if he wanted to. The fruit called to his innermost being; he felt as if he could not now be complete until he had tasted of the mystery.

Under the woman's burning gaze, John Gorman bit into the black flesh of the pomegranate. A tangy sweetness, more delicious than any flavor

he had ever known or imagined, filled his mouth and trickled down his throat. Then, abruptly, the sweetness turned to a harsh, acrid burning. Gorman gagged and clutched his throat. Cramps and nausea assailed him. He clenched his teeth against the retching that followed, but to no avail. Bent double by searing abdominal pain he fell to one knee, crushing the remnant of the forbidden fruit in fingers that constricted in involuntary spasms. Through eyes filled with fears, Gorman could see Fatima turn away, hang her head and begin to sob. Gorman writhed in convulsions of helpless agony on the stone floor, the pain welling up like a living thing to overwhelm him. The woman wept.

Suddenly, a harsh note of accusation cut through the grim tableau like a dagger—"Blasphemer! Traitor!"

Fatima whirled to face the doorway. The High Lama had entered the cavern unnoticed and now stood flanked by a dozen disciples, his eyes burning with rage and triumph. Gorman struggled to rise on unsteady legs to face the accusers. The High Lama hissed, "So, vile one, this is how you betray your sacred trust. You feed this animal the Holy Fruit of our temple!" With a careless gesture, the Lama signaled a pair of disciples to seize Fatima.

Gorman attempted to hurl himself at the Lama, but with his reflexes dulled by the poisonous fruit, he was unable to evade the flailing fists of the monks who pounded him to the ground. Fatima returned the High Lama's gaze and for a second they stood toe to toe, their wills clashing. Unexpectedly, Fatima jerked aside one of the arms that held her and reached up to rake the Lama's face with her nails, tearing asunder the silken mask that had forever hidden his features from the sight of men.

Fatima gasped, and rage and rebellion fled from her face to be replaced by shock and horror. Even

the monks that pressed in around her drew back, startled. Gorman's last sight as he lost consciousness was the shrouded visage of the High Lama unveiled for the first time. *It was normal from the eyes up, but below them his face was a rugose mass of worm-like cilia that writhed with hideous and independent life!*

6. Temple of Torture

Gorman had died and gone to hell. Or so was his first impression as he swam back from the oblivion that had swallowed him. As his head cleared, the hapless adventurer found himself chained to a rude wooden post set on one side of a large dais in the center of an immense amphitheater. Surrounding the dais, tiers of stone benches rose away from the arena's center until lost in the gloom that gathered near the ceiling, high above. The benches were throned with the monks of Thang, chanting some obscene litany and clad now in robes of coarse cloth and somber hue that were hooded like those of European monks. Torches and braziers flared murkily throughout the chamber, and through their red glare and the shimmering waves of heat that arose from them, Gorman could see the monks gathered like hooded fiends in conclave. Hugh misshapen shadows danced madly on all sides.

In the center of the dais, a hairy, thick-set monk, his features concealed beneath a black cowl, had stripped to the waist and was stocking a crimson flame that twisted in an iron brazier. Arrayed on a nearby table were exotic-looking implements of torture—scalpels and other delicate instruments that were lain unnervingly next to heavy irons and brutal pincers. Directly opposite Gorman, Fatima had been bound, spread-eagled and stark naked, to an X-shaped pillory. Her wrists and ankles were securely fastened with ropes of silk, and she was held completely

immobile by broad leather straps that crossed above and below her naked breasts, over her thighs, and about her supple waist. She was gagged by a waxen ball held in place by a smaller strap that encircled her head. Her sweat-slicked body glowed redly in the flickering light.

The monks fell silent as the High Lama ascended the steps to the dais. He was now garbed in a flowing robe of shining black silk, embroidered with golden thread, with wide bell-shaped sleeves. His features were once again mercifully concealed behind black silk. Six acolytes followed, similarly clad but for their cowls, which were high, conical-shaped hoods like those of Inquisitors. Each of the six carried a large curved tulwar.

The Lama stood flanked by the acolytes and turned to address the assembled host. Gorman noted that one area of the tiers was unoccupied: undoubtedly the section where Fatima's own cadre of disciples would have been seated had they not been dispatched to the Temple of the Nameless One. Raising his arms, the High Lama spoke, his voice carrying to the farthest corner of the vast chamber.

"For a hundred thousand years, none have betrayed the trust of our order. None have profaned their duty to the Nameless One . . . until today! Behold before you the woman Fatima and her accomplice from the outside world. . . ." A murmur of disapproval swept through the assemblage. The High Lama continued, "The accused has committed the ultimate sin, a sin against each and every person in this room. She has, in her arrogance, given the Fruit of Eternal Life to a non-initiate!"

As the High Lama finished his speech, the chamber exploded into a bedlam of shouts and curses. Gorman was stunned by the enormity of Fatima's transgression on his behalf. So it was true. The fruit that she had insisted he partake of was indeed the secret of the monks' immortality.

Though it was a gift he had not requested, Fatima had offered him eternal life and youth, and in so doing had risked everything. The American was awed by the depths of her love for him thus revealed, and though a lingering death by hideous torture was imminent, his concern was only for the woman. For the hundredth time he strained against his chains with all of his weight and strength, but they did not give.

The High Lama turned from the shouting throng and strode towards the bound Fatima. Standing close to her, his claw-like hands caressed her breasts and nether regions, but his gaze never left the westerner who cursed and struggled against his bonds in helpless fury, and he chuckled softly. Gorman had guessed that he and Fatima had been set opposite each other so that both could witness the other being put to torture, and the malicious subtlety of the psychological torment the Lama now delighted in was not lost on him.

As the monks took up their low, guttural chanting once more, the High Lama turned to Gorman and, leaning close, spoke to him in a sibilant whisper.

"Fatima is quite a wonder, is she not? The living embodiment of feminine perfection whose beauty can never fade. Has she told you the whole truth concerning the immortality we share? No . . . I think not."

Transfixed as though by the hypnotic gaze of some monster serpent, Gorman remained silent as the Lama continued, "Long, and long ago, when the pre-Atlantean kingdom of Valusia was in her prime, the ancient order of the monks of Thang discovered the Tree of Eternal Life and sought to bestow its benefits upon mankind. They established at this temple a society of immortals, beings freed from the shadow of death who, having all eternity, could eventually devise the perfect social order. The boon of everlasting life was granted to many, rather than a few, in those days, and

men from all walks of life, not just holy men, were invited to partake of the Fruit.

"Some tasted of the fruit, were sickened by it as you were, and were politely dismissed from the temple. Others died and their bodies were placed in the catacombs that stretch for miles below Thang. Those who did not sicken or die gained immortality and eternal youth, and flourished and grew wise.

"Centuries passed, and one day, we of Thang began to die. Panic seized us as we realized that the Fruit did indeed prolong life, but not indefinitely. In desperation, we ate of the Fruit a second time and our youth was replenished. We had discovered that it was necessary to eat of the Fruit periodically, at intervals of greater and greater frequency, to sustain the initial effects.

"The temple was then closed to the outside world, and has remained so to this day, though the traitress Fatima would have it otherwise. Millennia went by and those who perished through accident or ennui were placed in the catacombs with the others. New members were admitted only rarely.

"Then, after many thousands of years, that greatest of disasters struck us. The Tree of Life itself succumbed to death. Our best efforts to save it were in vain. The earth itself was changing, its magnetic fields shifting subtly, and the planet could no longer abide such miracles as the Tree. Once again we began to die off, and our ranks shrunk from thousands to mere hundreds.

"It was in that most desperate hour that I, and I alone, offered salvation to those few who remained. For I realized that those who ate of the Fruit absorbed its properties into their very cells . . . even those who had eaten of it and died! and so it was that when the Tree bore no more fruit, we replenished our life and vigor by eating the flesh of those interred below!"

Gorman was overwhelmed by sick horror as his mind raced ahead of the Lama's words. "When Fatima came among us, we admitted her to our order and bestowed the boon of life everlasting with one of the few specimens of the Fruit we had preserved. Centuries later, when aging and death were close at hand, faced with every woman's worst nightmare—age and loss of beauty—she succumbed even as we did. Corpses of poets, scholars, artisans, soldiers, physicians, priests, merchants, and laborers; *this* was the lifeless clay from which was molded the perfect, eternal woman!" The Lama laughed evilly.

Gorman, choking as if he had swallowed venom, gnashed his teeth. Fatima, *his* Fatima, a cannibal, an eater of human flesh . . . a *ghoul*? He could not believe it, but even as his soul shrieked denial he saw Fatima blush with shame and turn her head to avoid his gaze. Bound spread-eagled, she could not even cower in her mortification, but her very spirit seemed to shrink within her.

The American shut his eyes; he could not bear to look upon her now. His lover—a parasite, the worst sort of human monster! Gorman cursed her under his breath, for offering him the Fruit, for enlisting his aid . . . for every word they had spoken together. He could feel a cold emptiness void open in him, a void once filled with the love he had felt for her. That love now dead, killed by her terrible secret.

With a shudder of revulsion, Gorman remembered that he, too, had partaken of the Fruit. By the Lama's words, and by instinct, he knew that its properties had not affected him. Perhaps the centuries had robbed the Fruit of its potency. Perhaps the world had changed, or the nature of mankind. Perhaps Gorman had lived so long with death for a constant companion that a long life was no longer possible for him.

Gorman's head cleared and he heard the chanting of the monks all about him. The High Lama's words had

whipped them into an orgiastic frenzy. All those assembled were on their feet, gesturing madly, yelling and howling with a single voice. Gorman could not understand the ancient tongue they yammered, but he knew with grim certainty that they were screaming for blood and pain and death.

As the adventurer raged against his bonds in helpless desperation, he realized at last the true nature of the monks of Thang. Isolated from the rest of the world for over a hundred centuries, they had grown apart from the race of man, had turned inward. And yet, all those ages of contemplation and soul-searching had culminated in this—an insane mob of slaving brutes yowling for the torture of one of its own. Suddenly, Gorman understood that this was what Fatima had sought to change. He remembered her many questions about the outside world, her probing for details concerning the politics, science and culture of man's current civilization. She had hinted that her ultimate goal was the opening of Thang to the vast world beyond. Her wish was to share the knowledge of the Citadel with all mankind, and also, as he now knew, to enable the monks to rejoin humanity. It was a laudable ambition, one that could not have originated in a monster. . . .

Gorman's herculean exertions had not weakened his chains by one iota, but he did not slacken in his efforts. The High Lama had just selected a hot iron and was turning towards Fatima. Then from one corner of the huge chamber came shouts of men and the sound of blows. Gorman looked up, his keen eyes searching the ranks of the monks until he spotted a small knot of men struggling on one of the upper tiers, near an entranceway. A blade rose and fell, and a space cleared for an instant. Standing in the center of that space was Kosigi Minowara, sword in hand, and at his feet was the headless body of a monk who had tried to bar his way.

Shouts of warning erupted all a-

round the room now, as streams of monks poured through several entranceways, laying about them with sword and axe. Fatima's followers! They had returned early from their pilgrimage, forewarned by Fatima's suspicions, and were attempting to rescue their leader! Gorman's heart soared with new hope, and he longed to fight at their side. He strained away from the post he was bound to as far as his chains would permit; blood started sluggishly from where the iron manacles rubbed his flesh raw.

The monks were fleeing madly in a blind panic, running this way and that. All exits were blocked, however, and the quickest to reach them were the first to die. The High Lama hastened down the steps from the dais, ordering his six sword-wielding acolytes to cut a path for him through the sea of rushing forms that blocked his way, and exhorting the terrified monks to stand and fight against the attackers. Kosigi Minowara sprang to the attack. Two of the Lama's acolytes met him. As Minowara blocked the sword-stroke of one, the tulwar of the other ripped sickeningly through the samurai's midriff. The Lama and the acolytes rushed past, endeavoring to escape. Throughout the amphitheater, the beleaguered monks were beginning to rally against their attackers; though unarmed, they outnumbered Fatima's men ten to one.

Gorman, every fibre of his being yearning to join the battle, roared his fury to the rafters. It was then that he saw Minowara, his face a white mask of agony, still standing amidst the chaos. Trailing blood, the samurai shuffled forward, towards the dais. One arm folded across his midsection to keep his entrails from sliding from his gaping wound, he struggled up the steps.

The samurai halted before Gorman and raised his sword high with gore-stained hands. As his entrails began to spill, he swung the sword with

all his remaining strength, a strength incredible for a dying man, and brought it down on Gorman's outstretched chains. The shackles shattered even as Minowara fell, and Gorman was free.

The adventurer snatched up the lifeless samurai's sword and sprang to the pillory where Fatima was imprisoned. He wrenched loose the straps that held her in bondage and, gathering the swooning girl in his massive arms, leaped from the dais to land squarely amid the yelling, clashing throng. Across the vast chamber, the High Lama was making good his escape. Gorman set Fatima on her feet and grasped the sword's hilt in an unbreakable iron grip with his scarred hands. With the naked girl clinging closely to his back, he advanced in the direction the Lama had taken, swinging the sword in great arcs.

Gorman strode into the mad monks, cutting them down like grain. Blood splattered as soft bellies were torn asunder and shaven skulls were split like wormy apples. Brains were dashed like water as the sword descended again and again. Wan, ascetic hands raised in feeble protest were severed at the wrists and flew spinning away from stumps that jetted crimson.

In the chaos, Gorman caught up to the heavily muscled torturer and his razor-keen blade sheared cleanly through the torturer's bared midriff, so that the legs fell one way and the torso another. A dozen, two dozen more went down before the American's enraged onslaught, and at his feet the grisly harvest grew and grew. Death, long banished from this place, had returned with a vengeance in the form of the black-haired wild man with blazing, terrible eyes.

Elsewhere in the melee, Fatima's men were taking an equally ghastly toll of their unarmed foes. The superior numbers of the latter were beginning to turn the tide, however. Braziers had been knocked over in the course of the grim struggle, and

small fires had broken out where woodwork and ancient tapestries had been set ablaze. In many places the flames were licking at the bases of large wooden support beams. Even as the flames began to catch, Gorman had reached the outskirts of the battle. As he caved in the breast of another enemy, Gorman saw that the High Lama had already reached an exit, his way cleared by his two remaining acolytes.

Gorman hacked through the last of his foes and, Fatima at his heels, raced towards the High Lama. The two black-hooded acolytes loomed in his path, and Gorman raised his sword as he charged. The first of the acolytes swung his tulwar and blue sparks flashed as it clanged against the American's blade. Out of the corner of his eye, Gorman could see the other acolyte closing in. Gorman feigned, then lunged, opening the throat of the first man. As the robed figure toppled, Gorman heard the whistle of the other's blade and ducked low, cutting the attacker's legs out from under him while the tulwar sliced through empty air.

Emerging from the amphitheater, Gorman saw the High Lama fleeing down the corridor, his trembling hands raised high above his head as he bleated in abject terror. The adventurer gave chase, and as the gap between them narrowed, the Lama seemed to feel the end of his thousand-year existence close at hand. Within seconds, Gorman reached his quarry and hurled his full weight upon the terrified immortal, bearing him to earth like a cheetah taking its prey. As the Lama writhed on the ground, Gorman stood astride him, sword in hand. The Lama's mask had fallen away and helpless panic spread across that part of his face still human. Gorman chopped the Lama's head to pieces, obliterating his hideous visage for all time.

7. *Among the Dead*

The Lama's corpse twitched for several seconds, then lay still. Gorman wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his crimson-stained hand. He felt a presence at his side and turned to see Fatima there, her naked body splattered with the blood of the men he had killed. As his gaze met hers there was neither anger nor reproach in his eyes, merely a kind of disappointment.

Both were about to speak when black smoke began to pour from the chamber they had just quitted, where the roar of the flames mingled with the shrieks of the dying. Gorman knew that the fire raged out of control and would soon spread to other parts of the Citadel. He also suspected that the battle within the chamber was nearing its end, that Fatima's men had finally been overwhelmed by superior numbers, and that the survivors not battling the blaze would soon be taking up fallen weapons and setting out in pursuit of them.

Fatima had guessed that much as well; her look was one of urgency now, and she took Gorman by the hand and led him quickly down the corridor. He was aware that their pursuers would have no trouble tracking their bloody footprints, but he hoped in the confusion to buy time.

The woman led Gorman ever downwards into the deepest levels of the temple until at length they came to a large bronze door on which the likeness of a crouching winged hound stood out in bold relief. This, she told him, was the entrance to the catacombs. Once beyond that door they would be safe from pursuit, for the catacombs were held in awe as a fearsome taboo and entered only by special decree.

Gorman set his shoulder against the heavy door and, straining, pushed it slowly open on groaning hinges. Fatima withdrew a burning torch from an iron fixture and followed him

through the passage. The man swung the door shut once more and together they descended into the tombs.

Traversing a long, dark chamber, they came upon the corpses that had been interred there, piled in niches in the stone walls. Wandering through the necropolis, Gorman shuddered at the presence of so many ancient dead.

Endlessly the stored carcasses spread before them. Here and there rents in shrouds yellow with age exposed withered grey flesh shrunk about skeletal forms. Perhaps it was only an illusion cast by the unsteady light of the torch that flickered in the subterranean gloom, but it seemed to Gorman that the shriveled flesh on many of the corpses rippled and stirred with a life that was not life as he understood it.

Gorman started as a muffled crash came from far above. Somewhere in the Citadel a wall, weakened by the inferno that now raged there, had collapsed. The torch sputtered for an instant, and both feared it would go out. Then Gorman felt a draft of cool air that must, he thought, be coming from outside. He grabbed the woman's hand and they hurried towards its source.

Traversing the deeper recesses of the catacombs, Gorman found ever more numerous legions of the dead, some stacked in niches like cordwood, others propped vertically against the walls. At first Gorman seemed to detect maggots or other larvae swarming on many of the corpses like that which covered the Lama's face, springing from the dead grey flesh itself. On some the cilia had grown into rope-like tentacles two feet long or more, flopping and twisting like blind serpents.

Fatima and Gorman fled deeper and deeper into that nightmarish underground netherworld, passing through narrow low-ceilinged corridors guarded by dead sentinels and emerging into great vaults where men and women who had perished ten thousand years before lay in eternal repose. Quest-

ing about like lost souls, they came at last to the source of the fresh air that circulated through the tombs—a pencil-thin crack in a wall of solid stone.

The mouths of the dead gaped wide in silent laughter.

Then came a thunderous crashing roar from far above as more of the temple's walls came down in flaming ruins. Gorman and Fatima were dashed to the stone floor by a terrific shock wave, and huge sections of the ceiling came crashing down all around them. Seconds later, a dazed Gorman was revived by a blast of frosty air; the tremor had torn a huge fissure in the stone wall before them. Beyond it he could see sky and the peaks of the Himalayas.

Gorman rose and pulled a long shroud from the rock-strewn floor. This he wrapped around Fatima to protect her from the blasting cold. Together the pair clambered over a large boulder onto a rocky ledge running along the mountainside. The pale light of the Himalayan dawn seemed like the blaze of a tropical afternoon after their flight through the nighted charnel-house.

Fatima clung close to Gorman as they descended the narrow trail. The adventurer assured her that they could find refuge in a Tangut village in the foothills. The woman was silent . . . she seemed different now. Mortal. Gorman knew that, away from Thang and its unholy food, Fatima would eventually age and die like any other woman.

The weary pair followed the path for some distance, rounding the base of the mountain and passing between some large crags, until Gorman stopped dead in his tracks, his blood frozen in his veins. They had reached the cliff whereon Gorman had discovered the stone mound—and where he had almost perished battling the monster ape Fatima had called a *yeti*. Now he thrust Fatima behind him and stopped to a half-crouch, tense as a tightly coiled spring. Before them,

squatting among the scattered remnants of a recent feast, six *yeti* held grisly conclave.

The great shaggy beasts had slaughtered what looked like over a dozen human victims. By the tools and shreds of garments about, Gorman could tell the creatures had feasted on the last of the Thuggee cultists who had pursued them out of India, even into the Himalayas.

The *yeti* had already noticed the man and woman; their lips curled back to bare twisted yellow fangs and their red eyes glowered murderously. Gorman remained motionless, not even blinking an eyelid. It was too late to back away up the path. . . .

The nearest creature rose to its full height of over ten feet. The others turned slowly, sluggish after gorging themselves on the Thugs. Gorman knew that any one of them could dismember him as easily as a man might pull apart a chicken. He hoped, at least, to buy Fatima a few seconds to scramble back up the mountain path. The *yeti* began to shamble forward in a group. Gorman fatalistically gripped the sword he still carried with both hands and thrust it out in front of him. . . .

Roars and howls split the American's ears for the space of a second—then the melodious notes of a human voice wafted over them, and the growling beasts fell silent.

Fatima had disappeared from behind Gorman, had clambered over the crags with the speed of a mountain antel-

ope, and climbed atop the stone mound. She now stood poised atop the smooth oblong boulder that overlapped the cleft in the mound.

Arms flung wide, head lifted, she sang her song to the *yeti*. Strange syllables of the pre-human tongue rolled from her lips. The wind came moaning through the passes, lifting the shrouds draped about her shoulders away from her glorious ivory body. Her golden hair floated about her head like a halo and the burial cloths fluttered behind her like great white wings. Her perfect breasts, capped with nipples stiffened by the cold, thrust out as she filled her lungs with the brisk mountain air and sang to her own echo.

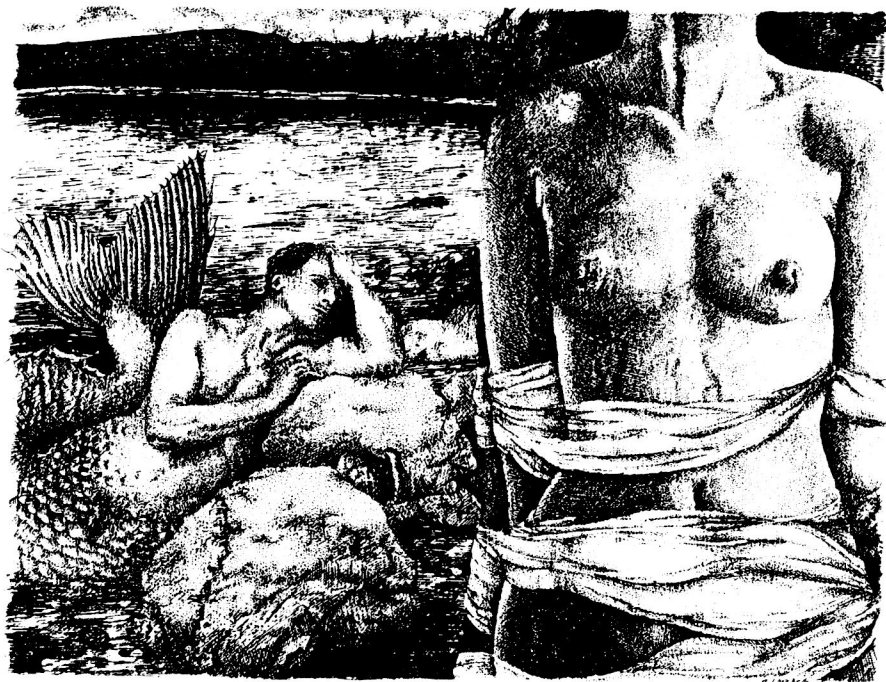
The *yeti* stared up at her, suddenly docile—the unearthly music reaching some unknown center of their tiny brains. The monsters swayed in cadence to the tune, and when Fatima finally stopped, they turned away silently and loped down the path.

When they faded from sight, Fatima climbed weakly down the mound and nearly fainted in Gorman's arms.

"They are gone," she whispered, "you will never see one of them again."

She rested against Gorman for a few moments; then they continued down the path toward the village and safety . . . away from the Plateau of Thang. The chill wind sprang up once more. Fatima, shivering, drew the shroud more tightly about her.

The Love of the Sea



by Lin Carter

In the quiet of a seaside cove Tara of the Twilight finds love—and a struggle for survival!

For two days and one night the frail craft had borne the girl Tara across the waters of the Inner Sea in the very teeth of the great storm. And for two days and one night the yelling winds and the hungry waves had barely given her a moment's respite. By now she was shaking with exhaustion, as if all the vigor of her young body had been drained to the dregs by the ordeal.

When the little craft hit the reef and upended, hurling her into the wind-whipped waters, Tara had sunk like a stone. Still new to this world of Twilight, she had never mastered the skill of swimming. The pure instinct for survival took over,

however: limbs flailed, kicked; lips clamped shut against the salt water. She rose to the surface, where heavy surf lugged her upon the shore and left her limp and weary to the bone.

But the receding surf sucked greedily about her legs and would draw her back down into the wet maw of the thundering waves. With the last bit of her strength, the War Maid dragged herself up the slope of wet sand until she was beyond the reach of the tides. Here a small stream of fresh water fed into the Inner Sea and from it she drank, rested briefly, then staggered to her feet and went lurching up into the trees and bushes to seek a haven from

the whips of the wind and the lash of the rain.

She found an opening in the rocky hills and sought entry, discovering a high-roofed grotto where a pool of fresh cold water rose from the bowels of the world to feed, doubtless, the very stream from whose bountiful breast she had sated her thirst. And therein she found a stranger, a young naked boy, half in and half out of the pool, gasping like one half-drowned. Her Starhonne vows drove her to the poolside, to drag the weak boy to dry earth. And then she stopped and stared with widening eyes.

He could only be a Merling, the boy in the pool. Tara had heard of them, the warm-blooded, amphibian semihumans who dwelt beneath the waves, but had never seen one before. He was both like and unlike the men and boys she had seen here in Twilight: perhaps her own age, but huskier and taller than she, his wet hide slick and cold to the touch, pale and sleeker than human skin, and tougher, perhaps to hold in body warmth against the cold embraces of deep waters.

As she dragged the gasping, half-conscious sea-boy out of the pool, other differences came to her notice. His breast was smooth, devoid of nipples, and his lean belly had no navel indented therein. Evidently, the Merlings bore their offspring live and did not breast-feed them. Also, his genitals seemed withdrawn into the abdominal cavity, for only a fatty slit was to be seen between his strong thighs.

His lips were thick and rubbery, and his mouth was wide, disclosing sharp white pointed teeth. His hair was long and sleek, almost like fur, and darkly green. There were gill-slits in his throat. He had a body odor that was distinctly, but not unpleasantly, fishy.

He opened deep green eyes and regarded her blearily, and with puzzlement. "I thought you were drowning," she explained. He grinned weakly.

"No, it is the water here; it is fresh, and will be the death of me, for I am bred to the salt sea, and this tasteless land-water will kill me in time. . . ." he panted.

He fell into a waking doze; Tara, exhausted, wrapped herself about him, tried to warm him with her own warmth, and fell into a doze herself. And woke therefrom, some time later, to find him suckling at her firm young breasts.

The grip of those full, wide lips was strong . . . and thrilling. As he suckled, he explored her warm rondures of breast with cold hands. The women of his race were breastless, and this difference between them fascinated him. She relaxed in his embrace, and let him suckle, while her shy hand explored his loins, and found his male organ now extruded. It was both longer and slimmer than those she had heretofore seen, and since it seemed to relieve his torment to be fondled, she fisted it with her strong little hand and brought him release and rest.

And that was the first day.

While the boy Merling—his name was Aille—was too weak to go down the slope to rejoin the salt sea from which the storm had slung him hither, he was also too heavy for the slender girl to drag or carry. When Lambence came, thin and weak and watery through thick, damp mists, she foraged from the cave, finding ripe fruits and nuts and berries for herself, and fresh fish flung high on shore, with which Aille assuaged his own hunger.

It was unpleasant to see him tear and gnaw at the raw fish with those strong, pointed teeth, but it was the way of Merlings and therefore natural. When he had devoured the fish she had fetched hither, he fell into a doze and seemed stronger than before. Tara knew the lad could not live long out of salt water, and coddled her wits to think of a means of getting him down the long, tree-clad slope and into the embrace of

the mothering sea.

When he awoke, he reached for her again and, since it seemed to soothe him in his torment, she gave herself willingly into his embrace and let him kiss and suck and nuzzle at her breasts. Then she guided his mouth down between her succulent thighs: his tongue was long and rough as a cat's and she derived much pleasure therefrom.

But when he strove feebly to mount her, Tara resisted, mindful of her virgin's vow. This time she comforted him with her own mouth and drew the salty seed from him.

This strange half-love between the War Maid and the dying sea-boy would not last long, she knew, for soon death would claim him. But while he lived, she served his needs and he served hers. Fruits and nuts and berries could not sustain his strength, so thrice daily she went down to the tidal pools in the shallows to see what fish had been stranded by the tides for him to feed upon.

"You are the only land-woman I have ever seen," he confessed shyly. "Your hair is of a hue unknown to us, who dwell in our coral grottoes in the deeps, and your luscious breasts are a delight to me. How strange, to live high on the dry land, never knowing the love of the sea, that cradles you and rocks you, cool and sweet and comforting!"

She fed him her perfect breast again, and pleased him with her moist hand until he tensed, gasped, cried out, and bathed his belly with his salty seed.

"Soon I must die," he said sleepily into the warm curve of her shoulder, "never again to see the sea-girls lifted above the wave, combing their long hair with combs of ivory, singing their mournful song . . . never to mount the sportive dolphins, to race among the coral crags, where the sea-bottom lies encumbered with the spars of ships, the bones of drowned sailors, and the great heaps of inestimable gems. . . ."

She felt sad for him, but could

think of no way to succor Aille, save with the comforts of the flesh.

The next Lambence, however, when Tara descended to the shore to find the fish to feed him, she discovered her own little boat. The waves had tossed it high upon the shore, where tree-roots had snagged and held it fast against the suck of the receding surf. The sharp-fanged reefs had not injured it.

Tara dragged it high up the slope, using the little stream as her road. There at the mouth of the cave, where the stream began, flowing from the pool in the grotto, she beached her craft and told the Merling of her plan. Whether it might work or fail, it was at least worth the trying.

It took the combined strength of both of them to get the sea-boy into the bottom of the craft. Then Tara guided the little boat into the bed of the stream, and let the flowing current float both boat and boy towards the salt sea he craved.

At times the prow or keel became wedged in the shallows, caught between rocks. Then Tara must push and shove and lever the boat free. At length they reached the beach, and the War Maid guided the little boat onto the breast of the heaving waters.

The great storm had long since subsided, its wrath somehow appeased. When she had guided the boat deep enough onto the bosom of the sea, Tara overturned it, letting Aille sink like a stone and return to his element.

Then she swam back to shore as best as she might, and found a place to sit on shore rocks slimed with seaweed. She rested, panting for breath, waiting to see if the salt water would revive her young sea-lover, or whether he was too far gone for that.

A time later, he broke water, whipping back slick wet mane with a toss of his head, eyes sparkling, laughing with renewed vigor.

Continued on p. 52

The Whoopansat of Humorous Kookooyam

by Robert E. Howard

Rise, seize your clothes, prepare yourself for flight
For he whose wife you slept with all last night
E'en now ascends the stair; you'd better haste
Else through your carcase he might let the light.

Then, as he beat it, he who stood before
The chamber shouted, "Hey, you, ope the door!
"I know the bird who had my place last night!
"I'll warm your rear for this, you little whore!"

Methought the husband forced his way inside,
Approached his trembling wife with meaning stride—
She drew her gown more close about her loins,
"My Gawd, remember, kid, I'm still your bride!"

Across a lovely couch of gold and blue
He stretched his wife, spite all that she could do,
With pliant slipper spanked her like a child;
He said, "My dear, your end is now in view."

Meanwhile, beneath the glorious sunrise fires,
The thoughtful soul to solitude retires—
For irate husbands rasp upon his nerves—
And for some other climate he aspires.

At last along a strip of herbage strown
Where through tall trees a flowing river shone,
Large ruminations flitted through his soul
The while he meditated there alone.

Come fill the flush (he thought), in fires of Spring,
The winter underwear and bloomers fling;
Haste, for the husband cometh like a thief
And no man knows two aces from a king.

Each hand a thousand chances brings, you say,
Yea, but where went the hands of yesterday?
And that same lucky draw that brings the ace
May give some other bird a deuce and trey.

But let it give them. What have we to do
With poker, strip or draw, yea, faro too?
Let all the cookoos bluster as they will
Or count their straights and flushes—heed not you!

With me in chamber of some buxom dame
It makes the rest seem colorless and tame,
Where name of wife and morals are forgot—
Peace to the husband at his poker game.

For worldly glories some would trade their shirt;
Some leave a sure thing for an unsure flirt—
Say, take the present, let the promise go
Nor heed the rustle of a distant skirt.

Look at the chorus girl about us, lo,
"Laughing," she says, "men's mazuma I blow;
"At once my silken bloomers do I tear
"And all my treasures for their pleasure show."

The worldly forms men set, their couches on,
Stay barren—or grow pregnant—and anon
Like kotex on the body's barren waist
Staying an hour or two, and then are gone.

Think of this much-used caravanserai
Whose skirts are lifted every night and day,
How fellow after fellow with his lust
Abode his destined hour and went away.

And we that now make merry in her room
They left and passion gilds with newer bloom,
Ourselves must we eventually depart
And leave her there—to keep a date with whom?

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend
Ere for some other bird her drawers descend,
Form unto form and on her form to lie,
And thank the gods you are her husband's friend.

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Whorehouses and slums and heard great argument
About it and about, but evermore
Came out by the same door where in I went.

With me the seed of passion did they sow
And valiantly I sought to make it grow
And this was all the answer that I got,
"You plank down seven smacks or out you go."

There was a door to which I had no key,
There was a skirt 'neath which I might not see,
For every time the bouncer came around
He gave a yell of rage and threw out me.

And has not such a story, long and fleet,
Down all the ages come on dancing feet,
Of some such goof as I was in those days,
Kicked by the bouncer out into the street?

As looks the tulip from her morning sup,
Even in ecstasy do you look up
Lest Husband unexpectedly come in
And find you with his wife and beat you up.

Perplex no more with human or divine
Tomorrow's tangle to the winds resign,
Enough your mistress' garter to have flipped
And let your fingers wander o'er her spine.

Why, if a bird can fling his clothes aside
And on some naked harlot sit astride
Were't not shame, were't not shame for him
In last year's suit thus sappily abide?

'Tis but a place where takes his one night's rest
Some lover for the realms of lust address;
He rises and the woman with a smile
Bathes and prepares her for another guest.

Continued from p. 49

"Land-woman, you have saved a son of the sea!" he called to her, shouldering through the soapy foam. She smiled and waved.

"And the bountiful mother of my kind, the sea, repays all favors!" he cried, tossing her a rounded thing which she caught in one fist and cradled.

It was a pearl the size of a cat's skull, round and moony, glimmering and shimmering with cold fires. She stared at it entranced: there were princes here in Twilight that had lesser a treasure than this.

With a joyous shout and one last

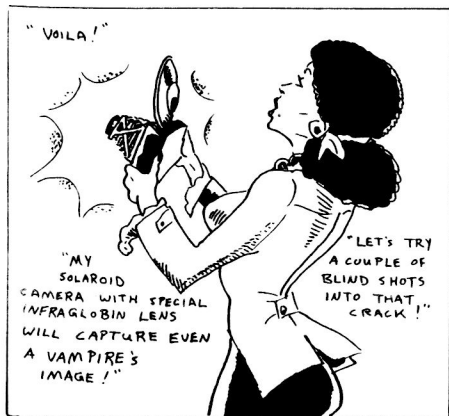
wave of his hand, the Merling sank into the surging foam and was gone forever from view. Leaving Tara with a treasure beyond price, and the memory of a brief love that would not soon be forgotten.

She rose and made her way through the shallows to the slope of the beach. Where the wild wind and wilder waves had carried her, the Starhonne could not say. But all the wide world of Twilight lay before her, and she was young and strong.

She set forth through the woods into another day.

Julie de Grandin

PSYCHIC Sleuth

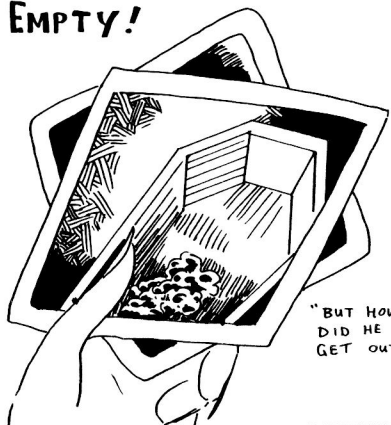


in "DOUBLE CROSS"



BY
WILL MURRAY
&
ROBERT M. PRICE

EMPTY!



"BUT HOW
DID HE
GET OUT?"

NOT THIS WAY, THAT'S FOR CERTAIN!
THIS SLAB HASN'T BEEN MOVED
IN CENTURIES!

SACRE BLEU!
BUT WHAT
OTHER WAY
CAN THERE
BE, UNLESS...
BUT OF
COURSE!



LE CASTLE!
DON'T YOU SEE?

TROY, THERE MUST BE
A CONNECTING
PASSAGE!

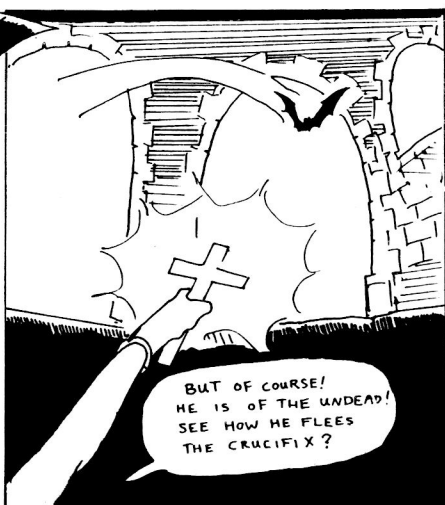
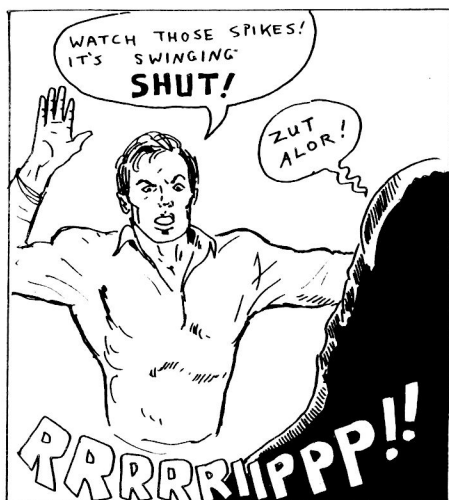


UGH!
SPIDERS!

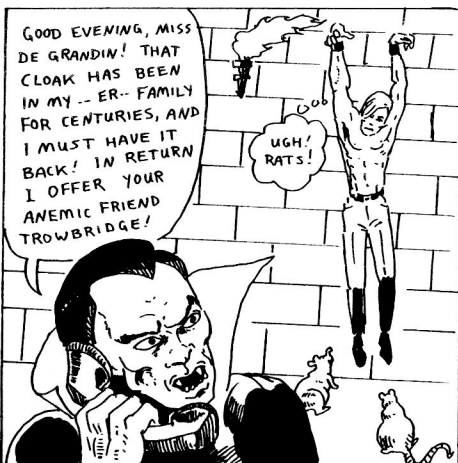
I'LL GO FIRST--
MON DIEU!
LOOK!

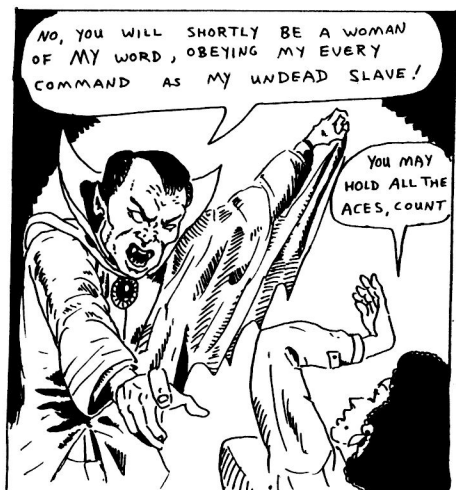
WHAT
THE--?











Readers' Rendezvous

Your editorial material, for me, is naturally more interesting than the fiction you discuss. The volume of fiction I have sold in the past sixty years and some months makes such a reaction inevitable.

Your discussion on "spicies" informed me in various details quite new to me. I knew nothing about the publisher except a cordial meeting with Frank Armer and two of his associates, late 1934, at a cocktail party. I was never interested in personalities—although I found these most congenial. Spicies (Trojan) paid promptly. Good to deal with. Nothing else mattered. To the end, our relationship was cordial. They did NOT begin chiselling (in the matter of unpaid reprints) until business became tough. I could say the same of other publishers.

I must quibble on one detail. In "An Informal History of the Spicy Pulps" you speak of "one cent a word." I began with *Spicy Detective*, early 1934; next came *Spicy-Adventure*; then, I believe, *Spicy Western*; last of all, *Spicy Mystery*. In each, I did my best to do an honestly researched story. Specifically, I researched the adventure line as meticulously as I did any stories which soon made Street & Smith's *Complete Stories*, and *Top Notch*, and *Clues Detective*; same for the Simon Bolivar Grimes western spices—however frivolous and juvenile, those stories got earnest background study, authenticity, based on old diaries in book print, and basic cowboy and outlaw stories, history not hogwash. I was writing trash, yes, but I delivered the best grade I could.

In a house and garden show card or news advt., I saw an offer STEER MANURE, 50¢ a sack; DE LUXE MANURE, 75¢. I never bought a bag of ei-

ther. But, I busted myself to give the Trojan folk deluxe manure.

In those days—i.e., early 1934-35, and onward—the adventure story writer was the top of the field; *Adventure Magazine* and *Short Stories* magazine which bought only 20,000-words and 60,000-word serials from me!, and in a lesser measure, *Argosy*, were prestige pulps; *Black Mask* was the *ne plus ultra* of the crime field; Street & Smith's *Western Story Magazine* was the grand master of its field. *Blue Book* was apart, beyond class or bracket. Legend had it that one had to crash *Saturday Evening Post* in order to make *Blue Book*. Robert Spencer Carr did exactly that, but among professionals, that was the legend, before Carr's time.

What is my mark in all this? Here you have it: I made my mark in the adventure field, peaking when I crashed *Adventure*, ten years after my professional debut (1932). By that time I had crashed *Black Mask*, and all the others except Street & Smith's *Western Story* and *Blue Book*. The last named, I never made. Nor did I make *Western Story* until such as Henry Olmsted had bailed out, and I took his place, at 2½¢ a word, vs. his probably 5¢ or more. Pulps were dying. I paid my respects, face to face, to Harry two months before he died.

Adventure Magazine paid me 2½¢ a word. So did *Black Mask*. I had learned better writing during those grim first couple of years, and my finishing course came 1935-6 (and most of 1934). My studied upgrading of what I offered *Spicy* got me into the Street & Smith mags, into *Adventure*, and into top western and crime. And Trojan paid me 2½¢ before *Adventure* did. Seeing me in "good" magazines moved Trojan to keep raising

the rate—and when, unwittingly, they outbid *Adventure*, my agent told *Adventure*, "Raise the ante, or we'll move to another parish." *Adventure* did so, instantly. And I once hit 3¢, when *Spicy Mystery* rejected "Graven Image," a most authentic fantasy of China. (I have two T'ang Dynasty fantasy novels on the stands now, *Devil Wives of Li Fong*, and *Jade Enchantress*, Ballantine.)

Bluntly and crudely: a weird story could crash the *Adventure Magazine* of song and story fame, if it was good enough. (In 1932, Selma Robinson crashed *Harper's* with a lovely ghost story. See what I mean? The reason good writers as a rule avoided *Weird Tales*, etc., and all science fiction of the early days was lousy slave-pen pay.)

I've told you why Trojan paid me 2½¢ a word. I never fooled with the shudder stuff, except something lousy enough to seek a salvage market. You have, and I am sure honestly and innocently, tagged Trojan as a one-cent-a-word market. It may have been; it started that way with me, but it did not stay that way. You never get a raise unless you get other publishers to outbid what customers you have. And it takes a good agent to create competition.

I have gone beyond my field: I set out to correct what might be mistaken for a valid generalization on "1¢-a-word markets." I told you my story. Whether it is unique, I do not know. I do know that none of my colleagues in Trojan spices ever appeared in "good" magazines. Or did they? The shudder stuff is, to me, unreadable trash. Always was. A spicy could be "adultized" and made sort of readable.

E. Hoffmann Price
Redwood City, CA

Many thanks for the debut issue of *Risky Stories*—doubtless to go down as The Literary Event of 1984!

A shame that your typist "corrected" the hyphen in *Spicy-Adventure*. Of course, now you'll have to pulp the entire print run.

I was particularly interested in Will Murray's article—as much information on the *Spicy* group as I can recall having read. Jones' *Shudder Pulps* pretty much sticks to the weird-menace pulps.

Some additional information: Manly Wade Wellman wrote a few stories for the *Spicy* pulps as "Wade Wells." Only one I have is "Shanghai'd Sweets" in the May 1935 *Spicy-Adventure*.

As for Ed Price's two CAS salvages, "House of the Monoceros" is of course reprinted in *Far Lands, Other Days*. "Dawn of Discord" appeared in the October 1940 issue of *Spicy Mystery Stories*. It's awful.

Hugh B. Cave is indeed the sole writer behind "Justin Case"—Hugh is fond of anagrams; "Geoffrey Vace" was another of his pseudonyms.

Nice to see Sam Walser writing again. I understand he and HPL used to get drunk together and compose bawdy songs.

Please do keep me abreast of future projects.

Karl Edward Wagner
Chapel Hill, NC

Please continue *Risqué Stories*. Takes me back to the good old *Spicy* pulp days of the '30s.

Richard A. Frank
Williamsport, PA

Wow! Great! I really enjoyed *Risqué Stories* #1. Cerasini and Hoffman did a great job on "She-Cats of Samarkand." Also, I found Carter's "For the Blood Is the Life" to my liking. The booklet on the whole was very good and quite enjoyable.

Timothy W. Arney
Granite Falls, NC

