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JUNGLE

STORIES

20



SUMMER, 1950



KI-GOR—JUNGLE LORD

pits Congo cunning against the most ancient Evil on earth—

The BEAST-GODS of ATLANTIS

MADMAN'S TREK

by R. C. WALKER

Other big jungle stories by JOHN STARR • ALEXANDER WALLACE

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TWO GRIPPING NOVELETS OF DARK MENACE

MATTO GROSSO FURY Gordon MacCreagh 69

Lovely, golden-skinned Jane La-Vieja O'Rorke was held jungle captive, her last desperate hope for life and honor in the trembling hands of one man . . . Carey, the coward!

BLOOD FOR THE JUJU Alexander Wallace 81

What was the strange story behind the vanishing safari and the hidden Intotela temple? Bengel knew . . . but Bengel was dead!

TWO SHORT STORIES OF CONGO ADVENTURE

MADMEN'S TREK R. C. Walker 58

To go out into the mid-African veldt during the feeding time of Python is a matter of two distinct departures: First you must take leave of your senses. . .

THE RED TRAIL TO ZANZIBAR John Starr 62

Back to back they faced the screaming head-hunters . . . yet even in the shadows of death, each swore that nothing would cheat him of his long awaited vengeance!

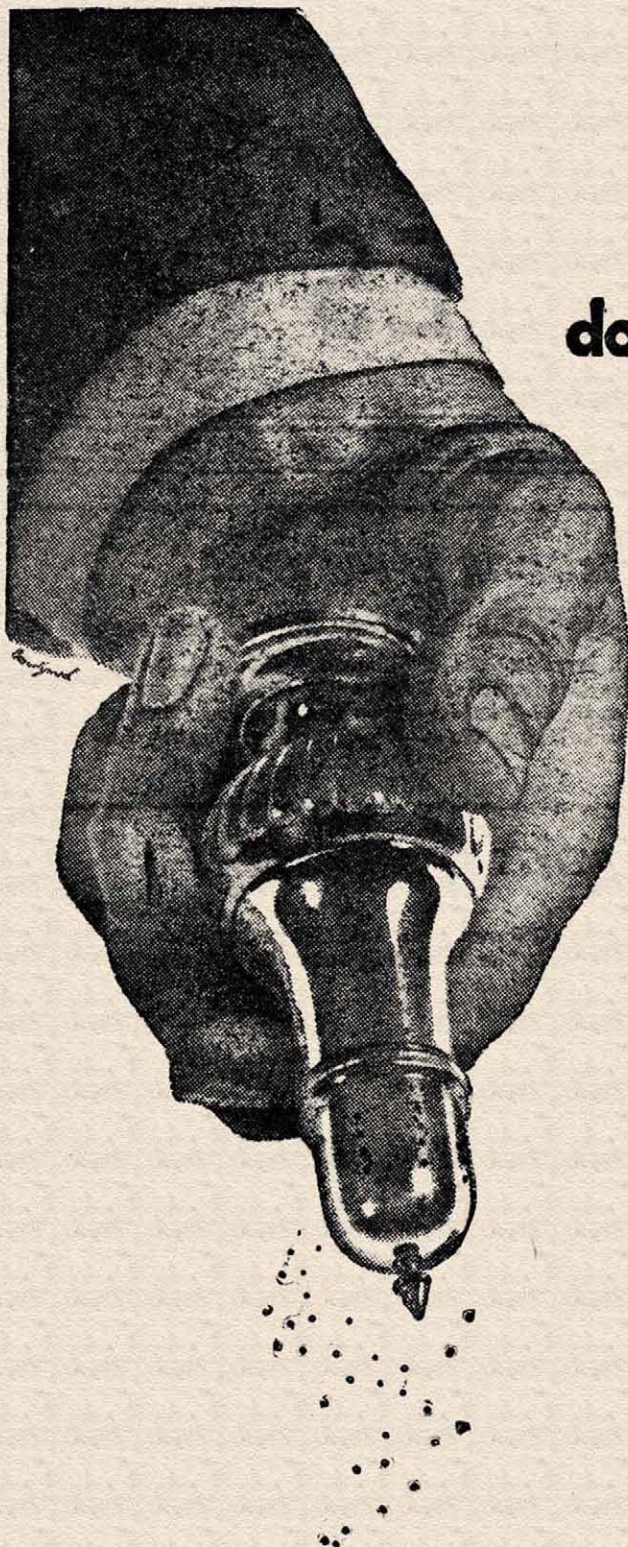
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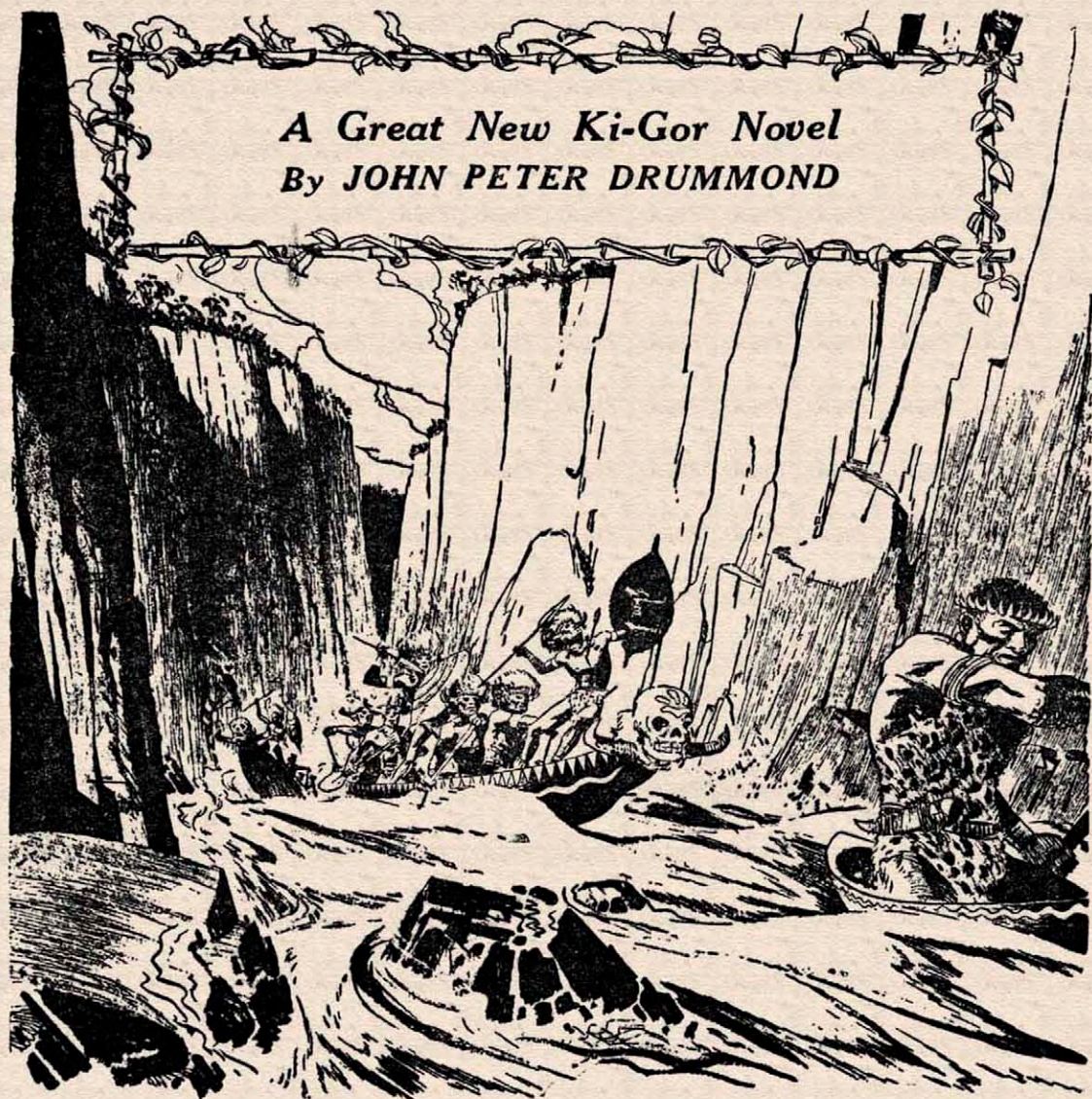
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A Great New Ki-Gor Novel
By JOHN PETER DRUMMOND



Beast-Gods of Atlantis

WITHOUT BREAKING THE swift stroke of his paddle, Ki-Gor snatched another brief glance over his shoulder at the pursuing war canoes.

Like the relentless tightening of a giant hand, anxiety gripped his stomach. Sweat beaded his bronzed face, ran in glistening streaks down his broad, muscle-corded back.

For more than three hours, he and his three companions in the small canoe had strained to stay out of arrow range of the two great thirty-man craft. But Ki-Gor

Into that lost world, that ancient, terrible land of Timeless Evil, came Ki-Gor, White Lord of the Jungle, and his lovely mate, Helene. They came in peace, offering friendship . . . and Shatopat, High Priest of the Sun-God Raa, greeted them at the Temple-Altar of the Drinking Stone — treachery and death like gifts in his hand!



VESTAL

The river leaped and roared with whitecapped fury . . . Ki-Gor drove an arrow at the skull-prowed boat . . .

could see clearly that in the past few minutes the strange warriors had begun to gain.

The White Lord of the Jungle couldn't hope to call forth more speed from his companions. Already they had done the impossible in fending off for so long their savage pursuers. Their tortured bodies possessed no reserves with which to match this latest sprint of the many-oared war canoes.

For the thousandth time, Ki-Gor's glance sped ahead along the sheer, smooth bluffs which walled in the river, searching for a break in the gorge which might offer a way of escape. If they could ever reach the thickly-forested heights above the river, he felt he could lead them to safety.

But every yard further that they penetrated into the canyon, the precipitous rock walls towered higher, grew more impregnable. No wonder the savage tribesmen had followed them with such grim confidence. The blacks had known from the first that they had their quarry trapped.

KI-GOR CURSED the impulse which had led him long miles from home into unknown land expressly to search out this river. Worst of all, he had been stupid enough to let his beloved mate, Helene, and his two close native friends, Tembu George and N'Geeso, accompany him on the foolhardy trek. And the whole business had been for no better reason than to seek the truth behind the black men's legends of the "*Batanya-Abi*", the River of No Return.

Well, he had learned the truth quickly enough, but it would do neither him nor the superstition-ridden black men any good. He would never live to tell them that instead of their fabled devil-city peopled by monsters and ghostmen who preyed on all who entered the gorge, that there was only a pack of murderous river-pirates lying in wait for travellers.

The two skull-prowed canoes had been hidden in a reed-choked cove near the mouth of the canyon. Ki-Gor, Helene and their two friends had paddled leisurely past the cove, debating whether they should enter the gorge in their small canoe or land and attempt to follow the river on foot.

Their decision had been made for them when the war canoes drove suddenly out of concealment, sent them fleeing into the canyon before a shower of arrows. And from that first moment on, the warriors had pursued them with insane ferocity. At least, it seemed insane to Ki-Gor, for he could see no logic in sixty men laboring hour after hour in the burning heat to overtake a small boat which obviously bore no worthwhile spoils.

Only implacable hatred would drive blacks to such exertions, and yet, how or why would warriors hate men they had never seen before? This was the first time Ki-Gor, N'Geeso or Tembu George had visited this isolated area.

The White Lord gave no hint of these thoughts tumbling pell-mell through his mind as in a steady, confident voice he called encouragement to his companions. But even as he spoke, he was thankful he sat in the stern of the canoe, so they couldn't read the truth of his feelings in his face.

Helene was directly ahead of him in the craft. He heard the tortured rasp of her breathing, saw the tremors of weakness beginning to clutch her arm and back muscles. For all her iron determination to keep up with her male companions, her woman's body was unequal to the task. It caused the White Lord unbearable anguish to see her bravely, without a single complaint, drive herself to the verge of collapse. He longed to call out to her to rest, but he dared not, for as she knew, even the loss of her faltering stroke would increase immediately the rate of gain of the two war craft.

In front of Helene sat Tembu George, the giant chieftain of the Masai. Except for the glistening streams of sweat pouring off of him, the huge-thewed warrior showed less the effects of the gruelling race than any of them. Ki-Gor knew, though, from the leaden fatigue numbing his own arms that Tembu George's prodigious strength was being put to its bitterest test.

The squat, wiry pygmy chieftain, N'Geeso, crouched in the prow of the canoe also was weakening. He still dug the water with the same machine-like precision he had an hour before, but the White Lord could tell he was going on

sheer nerve, unwilling to let his comrades down though he burst his heart in the effort.

The canyon made a wide, sweeping turn, and abruptly the high walls began to press closer. Ki-Gor stared ahead down the narrowing gorge, strain penciling white lines about his hard-set mouth. The current was gaining speed.

Not one of them spoke, but in every mind was the same question: What lay before them?

Every sign pointed to turbulent, dangerous water. They were in no condition to cope with rapids. In the fast-narrowing canyon, it would take perfect coordination and boundless strength to keep their light craft from capsizing or being smashed to bits against the walls.

Along the base of the rock, the water swirled whitely. Small whirlpools and strings of dancing bubbles told of converging pressures beneath the surface as the river was forced in upon itself. Already the canoe was beginning to strain and leap as though imbued with a life of its own.

THE GORGE was closing in with alarming speed. Two hundred yards ahead the sheer walls swung within twenty feet of each other. And in that narrow opening the river leaped and whirled in white-capped fury. Could they possibly put the canoe through that swirling corridor without capsizing or smashing themselves to bits against the granite?

Ki-Gor twisted for a last look at the enemy craft, wondering whether they would carry their strangely furious pursuit into the passage.

As he turned back, he cried to his three companions, "The dangos are following us in, so it can't be too dangerous! Hold to the center and we'll make it!"

Ki-Gor deliberately told the merest half-truth. The only thing proved by the war craft following them was that the river beyond this narrow point wasn't impassable. As for going through the perilous corridor itself, what would be safe for the heavy war canoes, steadied by many paddles, would be a veritable hell for four exhausted people in a frail, skittering shell of a boat such as theirs.

But the worst fact of all was that even

if by some miracle they did get through, the large craft would gain tremendously in the swift-running current. And Ki-Gor entirely failed to mention that now braced against the skull-tipped prow of the leading war canoe was a warrior with a drawn bow.

The lead canoe had pushed within arrow range. Since a single hit in those roaring waters might well throw the small craft out of control, the picked Bowman had wasted no time in scrambling up for the try.

Because of his position in the stern, Ki-Gor's own broad back would be the warrior's target. Therefore, he kept his knowledge to himself, seeing no sense in this crucial moment of further upsetting Helene and the two chieftains. They needed to keep all their attention on the passage, and distracting them with worry about whether he might be hit wouldn't help to block off the arrows.

Then with a sudden wild spurt, the canoe drove into the dangerous area. It bucked and leaped like a frenzied horse, shuddering under the river's blows, seeming to fight deliberately to spin out of control and shatter itself against the cliffs.

Above the rising tumult of the river sounded the exultant cries of the pursuing blacks. As they saw the crazy skittering of the small boat, they were confident their long chase was nearly over. Their own great canoes were knifing straight down the center of the gorge.

An arrow, barely seen so swift was its flight, dug the roiling surface beside Ki-Gor's paddle. The next barb was high, whirring overhead. But in the noise and confusion of that hurtling ride, when their whole beings were concentrated on the desperate task of controlling the boat, the White Lord's companions didn't notice either arrow. And to all outward appearances he was no more aware of his danger than were they.

His paddle didn't hesitate in its furious labors. He held his same position unflinchingly, aware that his own broad body shielded Helene. His strong, clear voice as he shouted instructions and encouragement was devoid even of excitement, let alone fear.

The walls swirled past. A dozen times disaster threatened and was turned away

by the swift, coordinated action of the jungle couple and the two chieftains. With death reaching from every side, a sudden strength flared up in them like that last bright burst of flame from dying embers.

Years of trekking together had trained them to act with a single mind in emergencies, so that they strove together against the river in perfect unison. It was this skilled teamwork plus raw courage which kept them afloat, brought them hurtling into the narrowest part of the gorge.

THE spray-splashed walls reached inward for them. Uncounted tons of rock seemed deliberately pressing down to close off that foaming lane of water. An arrow broke against the granite beside Ki-Gor. Another streaked blood across his muscle-swollen left shoulder.

The seeking arrows nosed closer with every shot. The next, or the next, would find its mark. He'd been lucky to last as long as he had. Realizing this, he was braced inwardly for the tearing shock of a death-barb hammering into his back.

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the canyon flared wide.

For a length of a hundred yards on either side, the base of the cliffs had been cut away. Untold centuries of water gnawing at soft strata of rock had carved out the broad, circular chamber. But, as Ki-Gor swiftly saw, the hands of men had done much to augment nature's work.

The moment the canoe drove into the open space a wild, despairing curse ripped from N'Geeso's lips. "Aaaiiee! Trapped!" he shrilled. "They've herded us to the kill like sheep!"

And though Ki-Gor made no outcry, the same black despair burst over him.

Along the cliffs on either side ran broad stone walks two feet above the water. The walks swarmed with armed warriors. Worse yet, a long, sleek war canoe lay protected from the current behind a stone breakwater immediately to their right. The boat was fully-manned, the warriors poised to send the craft flashing into action.

The White Lord saw these obvious dangers in a single fleeting glance, sensed menace, too, in the queer derrick-like structures built of massive timbers at the

ends of the walks. These huge contraptions had heavy stone weights suspended out over the water from their topmost beams. Around the derricks crews of men busied themselves with cables as large as a warrior's arm.

The shocked Masai and Pygmy Chieftains faltered in their stroke. The canoe bucked, skidded about at an angle in the rapid current and threatened to founder. Only the White Lord's skill held it steady. Then under the swift lash of Ki-Gor's voice the two men recovered, dug in furiously with their paddles.

Ki-Gor had no hope of evading the storm of arrows and spears which he expected to burst from the banks in another instant. It was not in him, though, ever to give up, to wait like a fettered chicken for the death-blow to fall. By all the gods, at least they could make the task of the butchers more difficult by giving them a running, twisting target. Perhaps one of them might survive the cruel gauntlet, manage to head the canoe into the gorge leading out of the trap, letting the river rather than gloating enemies claim their bodies.

With the desperation of doomed men, they sent the canoe forward. Five—ten—twenty yards they drove, tearing their hearts out. Yet strangely, not a single spear nor arrow sped from the banks toward them!

ALONG THE CLIFFS all movement had ceased abruptly among the enemy warriors. They stood in tense, watchful attitudes, quite visibly aflame with excitement. But what puzzled Ki-Gor most was their utter silence.

With their prey a perfect target, savage warriors such as these should have been leaping and shouting in bloodthirsty glee, savoring their triumph to the utmost. What was wrong with the devils? It was like having an executioner pause mid-way in his axe-swing, glare fiercely, wordlessly at his trussed victim.

That waiting for the blow to fall scraped Ki-Gor's nerves raw, sent the blood pounding through his veins. Trying to piece the mystery, he snatched a brief look at the war canoe behind the breakwater, wondering if for some obscure

reason the kill was to be left entirely to it.

But the craft, he saw with surprise, still lay motionless in its berth, making no move to intercept them. Then suddenly he realized that the attention of the warriors in the craft was turned not on him and his companions, but on the entrance through which would come the two pursuing boats which had driven them into this trap.

A fierce, impossible hope exploded in his brain. It was a thing that couldn't be—and yet, why else would this force of warriors about them act as it did?

As quick as the thought, he turned and looked back at the two long craft knifing with terrific speed through the narrow strait. The lead boat only yards away from the entrance to the great circular chamber.

The painted warriors wore the same burning, hate-filled expressions as before, showed no relenting in their determination to overtake the small canoe. The native braced against the skull-tipped prow still struggled to draw a bead on the White Lord, his face a mask of rage because the rough water kept him from making an otherwise easy shot.

Like beaters on a hunt, the warriors had driven the game before the marksmen. Their job was done. The trap was closed. It was only human nature that there should be a slackening in the murderous intensity with which they had pushed the long chase.

But there was no slackening!

A thin, bitter smile twisted Ki-Gor's lips. He was certain his suspicions were true. And then with lightning speed, it was happening, the violent chain of events which fulfilled to the utmost his wrathful hopes.

High above the roar of the water blasted the clear, penetrating notes of a primitive trumpet. The crews of men about the huge-timbered derricks sprang into action at this signal. Almost in unison the immense stone weights were loosed, went plunging down into the river, dragging screeching lengths of cable behind them.

And as the weights disappeared in clouds of spray, with equal suddenness up from the river's depths was jerked an iron

barrier like a flexible picket fence which closed off the entrance into the wide section of the gorge. The heavy metal pickets extended fully two feet above the surface, cruel tusks ready to tear out the bottoms of the war canoes, shatter bones and flesh of the crewmen thrown against it by the raging current.

Ki-Gor saw amazement splinter the contorted features of the bowman in the prow of the lead canoe. Then as the full significance of the gleaming iron pickets struck the man, he dropped his bow, spun about, shrieking a warning to his fellows.

His warning came too late. Both canoes were ramming at the barrier with terrific speed.

With the power of the river hurtling them forward, the canoes were like matchsticks being shot through a funnel. The fear-crazed efforts of the crewmen to reverse their paddles were futile.

The first craft slammed head-on into the barrier. The prow tore apart, and the craft gave a great sideways leap, snapping off the stern on the cliffs and then smashing broadside against the iron teeth. An instant later the second canoe struck into the welter of men and debris and ripped to pieces on the iron prongs.

Ki-Gor tore his eyes away from the spectacle to realize that both N'Geeso and Tembu George frantically were telling him that all exit was barred from the circular chamber. Instead of another cruel iron barrier, the White Lord saw that a thick wire netting had been raised across the other opening to close off their escape.

"That means the end for us," gasped Helene.

"Curse the dangos!" snarled N'Geeso. "What odds do they want? We had no chance to escape them as it was."

II

"BY ALL MY FATHERS," SWORE the furious Tembu George, jerking his bow from his back, "I'll see that we have company in death!"

The White Lord's frowning glance again swept the cliffs. The warriors were dancing and laughing jubilantly, waving their spears and bows. But instead of being threatening, their air seemed more a festive, holiday one.

"Wait!" Ki-Gor cautioned the Masai chieftain. "If they meant to kill us, they'd get on with the job instead of doing a victory dance. When men destroy your enemies, they are on your side, aren't they?"

Tembu George grunted doubtfully, but he laid down his bow.

N'Geeso gave a humorless laugh. "We certainly can't loose anything by trying to convince them of that fact."

"Well, what do we do?" asked the big Masai.

Ki-Gor was thinking fast. Against overwhelming odds, sometimes boldness was the most effective weapon a man could use.

"Let's land and thank them for saving us!" he declared. "As N'Geeso says, if it doesn't work, we won't be any worse off than we are now."

They headed for the left bank, pulling strongly, as though they hadn't a single qualm about landing. In their intentness, they failed to notice that the river was losing its turbulence, gradually running slower. When the canoe slid up beside the stone walk, N'Geeso drew in his paddle, preparing to leap ashore and steady the craft while the others landed.

"Sit still!" Ki-Gor said, low-voiced. Then his grey eyes struck hard against the three big blacks standing nearest the canoe. "Ai-ya, ai-ya!" he shouted, imperiously waving a hand in summons.

The three warriors blinked at him, then after the barest hesitation, leaped forward to hold the canoe.

Ki-Gor stepped ashore, and with all the confidence in the world, turned his back on the thronging warriors while he helped Helene up beside him. He felt a surge of admiration for his blue-eyed mate, for she faced the blacks with the poise and self-possession of a queen being welcomed by loyal subjects. He could guess the tremendous effort required for the exhausted girl to achieve that piece of acting.

N'Geeso and Tembu George carried off their part with equal perfection. The pygmy reached up, and with the matchless effrontery of his kind, caught hold of the nearest warrior and swung himself from the canoe.

Tembu George was the last to come ashore. He deliberately took his time,

letting the warriors wait while he picked up his bow and slowly fastened it on his back. It was an effective way of saying that since he was now out of danger he wouldn't need the weapon handy. Then from the bottom of the canoe, he lifted the two great shovel-bladed Masai spears used by Ki-Gor and him and the two lighter spears carried by N'Geeso and Helene.

Holding the weapons carelessly in one huge-thewed arm, the giant Masai finally stepped onto the stone walk, casually glanced over muscular warriors who were dwarfed by his presence.

In the meantime, without appearing to do so, Ki-Gor's eye had searched out the leader of the warriors. He stood beside a door-sized tunnel leading into the cliff. He differed from his men in both looks and dress.

He was a tall, well-set-up man, with finely modeled features, straight hair, and a light-brown rather than black complexion. Instead of the usual native war gear, he wore a plumed silver helmet and a beautifully wrought silver breastplate, was armed with a short, flat sword and a javelin.

Where the warriors were barefoot, his feet were protected by stout sandals, his shins by gleaming metal guards. The strangest part of his apparel to Ki-Gor was the skirt-like leather garment, joined strips of studded rhino hide, with which he armored his middle.

THE LEADER studied them with a peculiar intentness, frowning slightly, apparently undecided as to what move he should make. This slowness in acting encouraged Ki-Gor. For the man's benefit, the White Lord turned toward the two wrecked canoes, laughed grimly at the predicament of the survivors. At the same time, he was listening to the murmured talk of the warriors, noting they spoke the Bantu tongue.

From the corner of his eye, the jungle man saw the leader stroke his chin thoughtfully for several seconds, and then start forward slowly, as though still rather doubtful about what he was going to do. Ki-Gor let him get almost to him, before he registered any consciousness of the man's presence.

Then Ki-Gor turned, and seeming to see the armored man for the first time, broke out in a wide smile. He pointed meaningfully toward the blacks struggling in the water, and laughing loudly, strode to meet the oddly garbed warrior.

"Our thanks to you, Brother," he said heartily. "The scavengers had us finished, run to earth. We came within your protection not a paddle stroke too soon." He was face to face with the man, bearing his searching scrutiny without the least sign of discomfort. "You'll not find us ungrateful."

"Who are you, stranger?" the man asked wonderingly, "to know this place and be so certain of our protection?"

"I am called Ki-Gor," the White Lord replied, "and this is my wife, Helene."

Though in all the jungle there was no better known name than the White Lord's, the warrior's face showed not a flicker of recognition.

"Are—are there many others like you—outside?" he asked. He said the word, "outside", as though he spoke of another world, unutterably remote and mysterious.

Ki-Gor didn't understand. "What do you mean 'like me'?"

"White-skinned!" answered the warrior.

"Why, yes," said Ki-Gor, puzzled, "there are many others. Very many."

The man's eyes narrowed in thought. He glanced quickly, almost nervously, about him, biting his lower lip. Then with a sudden lifting of his chin, a squaring of his shoulder, he seemed to come to a decision.

"This is too important an event," he said loudly, "for a mere soldier to cause delay with questions. I must take you to the Empress Teeva immediately. Generations ago, we of the Second Empire lost hope that any other fragments of the mother country had taken root and survived. But you are proof—living proof!"

He looked about at his men, growing visibly excited.

"We will be great again, as in those lost days before Raa's anger fell upon us." He spoke more to himself now, than to Ki-Gor. "Instead of a scattering of blacks, there will be legions, armies, of true warriors to command."

His face aglow, he put out his arm and clasped the White Lord's shoulder.

"Ho! We must hurry!" he said. "All Atlantis will be set aboil by the news of your coming." Then suddenly remembering he hadn't introduced himself, he said, "I am called Nepah, Captain of the Red Legion."

He turned away to make preparations for their departure, calling lieutenants to him and giving orders.

"Ah-laan-tus?" thought Ki-Gor, frowning. "It's a name I've never heard in the jungle. And how strange he acts, making so much ado about our being white and talking about commanding armies." Then he shrugged. "Oh, well, what's the difference. It was a friendly welcome that we worried about, and we certainly got that."

BUT THERE WAS a startled look on Helene's face. She was remembering her schooling in the United States, remembering the vague, yet fascinating, references in her reading to the Lost Continent of Atlantis, site of a civilization which, according to legend, sank beneath the sea centuries before Greece or Rome was born.

Many men had conjured with the idea of Atlantis. Ancient writings referred matter-of-factly to its existence, explaining how a cataclysmic upheaval of the earth had destroyed the continent. But all attempts to substantiate the legends by locating the sunken cities or connecting the country's culture with that of other ancient, but later, peoples, had come to nothing. In recent years, scholars had termed the whole Atlantis idea a myth, saying firmly that since it couldn't be proved, it could never have been.

"What's wrong?" asked Ki-Gor.

In a hurried whisper, she told him the legend. "It just couldn't be," she concluded, "and yet when he said 'the Second Empire', there leaped into my mind the thought that perhaps cut off here from the world a colony of the old Atlantis could have survived."

"Possibly," said Ki-Gor, unimpressed. He knew the unmeasured miles of Congo jungle guarded many strange secrets, and without Helene's book-knowledge to spark his interest, another oddity more or less didn't excite him. In fact, he took far greater interest in the discovery that the turbulent rush of the river had ceased

while he had talked with the warrior. Water no longer burst in a foaming flood against the iron spikes which sealed off the gorge. Somehow, the flow had been cut in half so that the surface of the river now ran with relative calmness.

The iron barrier had been lowered until only the top few inches were visible above the water. The canoe had come from behind the breakwater and was moving slowly along the barrier passing lines to the half-drowned natives clinging to the spikes. Although most of the men were badly gashed and battered, with several slipping from view while Ki-Gor watched, the boatmen went about their task at a leisurely pace, obviously not caring whether the wreck victims lived or died. Their callous attitude spoke of a deep-seated hatred born of long and bitter warfare.

When the last line had been distributed, the barrier dropped out of sight and the canoe turned toward shore, dragging the survivors through the water behind it. No matter how badly some were hurt, none of the painted warriors were taken into the boat.

As the craft swung close to the bank, the moaning, thrashing blacks were jerked roughly from the water, thrust into a semblance of a line. Many of them were in no condition to stand, but whenever one of the gagging, bleeding men collapsed, he was kicked and heaved to his feet again.

Coldly curious about these warriors who had stalked him so relentlessly, Ki-Gor watched bleakly as they were hauled onto the bank. But his mouth tightened, and he began to clench and unclench his right fist, as he witnessed their harsh mistreatment, saw their wounds go unattended. No man was a grimmer or more merciless foe in battle than the White Lord, but once an enemy surrendered, he accorded him good treatment.

Anger gathered hotly in his eyes. Nepah, the Captain of the warriors, after a single contemptuous glance at the prisoners, had disappeared into the tunnel in the cliff. Ki-Gor glanced restively toward the tunnel, meaning to ask him to control his men. As the seconds drained away and the captain didn't reappear, his patience exploded.

Suddenly, without considering the con-

sequences, he strode forward, pushed between the guards and the prisoners.

"What manner of warriors are you?" he said coldly. "Among true men of battle there is a code of honor which protects a beaten foe. Is this the way the men of Atlantis show their bravery, beating and kicking wounded, half-dead prisoners?"

All along the bank men pivoted in astonishment. The guards nearest Ki-Gor moved back from this mighty, blonde-maned giant whose voice lashed them with contempt. The taunts and curses which had filled the air a second before chopped off.

As she realized what Ki-Gor had done, Helene's face went pale. When that quivering fraction of silence shattered, it could mean death for the White Lord. That crazy, incredible, outlandishly brave man! Even the captured blacks on whose behalf he intervened stared astounded at him.

THEN THE CAPTAIN of the Red Legion was cutting through the crowd, hurrying to reach Ki-Gor's side. "What wrong?" Nepah said, his glance slashing questioningly at the men about him.

Ki-Gor told him.

"But I don't understand," the Captain said. "These scum tried to kill you! What do you care what happens to them."

"Their fangs are drawn now," snapped Ki-Gor, "so it is stupid to mistreat them. They'll never fight against you again, so bind up their wounds. The side that triumphs can afford to be generous."

Nepah stroked his chin, his forehead wrinkling beneath the burnished silver helmet. For the first time, he looked at the prisoners as though they were actually human beings. Abruptly, he shrugged.

"If it pleases you, why not," he told Ki-Gor, and he ordered proper care given the prisoners.

"It's more than a matter of pleasing a friend," Ki-Gor said seriously. "It's a matter of doing the right, the decent thing."

The captain smiled comically. "Ah, yes, but who is to say I do a good thing in prolonging their lives? It is question I will ask of you later—when you have lived a time in the Second Empire."

Though easily spoken, there was an

ominous hint in his words.

"Come! Our boat waits," he invited.

Ki-Gor turned expectantly toward the river. The canoe which had rescued the prisoners, once more was behind the breakwater on the far side of the gorge. No other craft was in sight.

"No. This way," Nepah said, starting toward the tunnel.

Ki-Gor hid his surprise, waved to Helene and the two chieftains to follow him. Only then, when he saw the relief flooding into their faces, did he realize fully how great a chance he had taken for a few hands of savages who meant less than nothing to him. He grinned guiltily at Tembu George and N'Geeso and picking the easiest path to the tunnel, started along the line of prisoners.

Near the end of the line, shoulders bowed, legs widespread with the effort of standing, was a battered native with an ugly gash across his chest and bloody tears on both thighs, from the spiked barrier.

"I do not forget this, White One," he rasped hoarsely when Ki-Gor came abreast of him. "Mercy for my men is something I never expected from one of the devil's breed. You have my thanks—along with my undying hatred!"

Ki-Gor slowed, looked at him closely. Then it dawned on him. This was the man who had tried to kill him with the bow and arrow, the raging demon who had braced himself in the bow of the leading war canoe.

"No matter what tortures are put upon me," went on the prisoner, speaking for Ki-Gor's ears alone, "I swear I will live long enough to one day return your favor. Then—then I will be free to kill you for luring me into this trap." He was panting for breath, his red-rimmed eyes almost crazed with emotion. "That is the promise of Molaki, White One! Remember it!"

No flicker of emotion crossed Ki-Gor's features.

"You're a fool, One-Called-Molaki," he said quietly. "A very great fool."

THE WHITE LORD walked on to the tunnel, sternly repressing the angry words which seethed within him. Nothing was to be gained in talking further with the fanatical black. Though a

civilized man would have scoffed at the native's promise as the meaningless babblings of a hurt, dazed man, Ki-Gor knew Molaki meant exactly what he said.

In intervening successfully for his men, the black felt that Ki-Gor had put him in his debt. Molaki, as their leader, was responsible for his warriors, and if at a time when he was unable to help them, another person assumed that responsibility, then he must personally see that the favor was repaid in full. The fact that he thought Ki-Gor had deliberately led him into a trap made it even more pressing to repay the favor, for it was bitter medicine to accept charity from a hated enemy.

Helene caught up with Ki-Gor as he reached the tunnel. The dim walkway was barely wide enough for them to proceed side by side, and its ceiling was so low the jungle man had to stoop to keep from scraping his head. The corridor bored straight into the rock, with the only illumination being the weak, yellow glow every ten yards of small charcoal-filled braziers set in the walls. Nepah walked briskly ahead of them.

A few steps past the fifth brazier the tunnel opened into a high vaulted cavern. In the light of torches held by natives, Ki-Gor could see that the cavern was fully two hundred yards wide, and down the center of it, like a precisely cut canal, shone the black waters of a stream. There was no way to estimate the length of the underground chamber, for it disappeared into velvet darkness on either side of the jungle man.

A canoe manned by ten paddlers waited in the water. Drawn up on the bank nearby were seven empty craft. "The three of us will go with them," the warrior captain declared.

"Three?" said Ki-Gor. "You're mistaken. There are five of us."

Nepah turned slowly. "There's no rush about your servants," he said. "I'll have them brought along later."

Ki-Gor spoke with sharp emphasis. "These men are a very long way from being servants. They are my friends, the two greatest chieftains of the jungle, Tembu George of the Masai and N'Geeso of the Pygmies."

A fleeting expression of surprise passed over Nepah's face and was hidden. He

inclined his head slightly.

"I meant no discourtesy," he apologized easily. "It is just that our customs . . ." He thought better of what he had meant to say and let the sentence trail away. "It will be difficult with the Empress Teeva, but perhaps it can be managed."

"The Masai and Pygmies could be powerful allies for Atlantis," Ki-Gor said pointedly, "—or very dangerous enemies. You understand, of course, both tribes know that their leaders accompanied me to this place."

Nepah's lips twisted in a cynical smile. "And you must understand, O Ki-Gor," he said evenly, "that the decisions of an Empress are quite beyond me. I am a humble soldier. I do what I am told without regard for allies or enemies."

BRISKLY THEN, he ordered two of the paddlers out of the canoe to make room for the chieftains. He helped Helene into the craft, stood aside while Ki-Gor and his friends stepped in. Ki-Gor was increasingly puzzled by the warrior, or perhaps "intrigued" was more the word.

It was impossible to gauge the man. At one moment he seemed naive, almost ignorant, and the next, sardonically wise. Most of his statements, the White Lord felt, carried two meanings, one which you understood, and another, subtler one, which only he understood. He was a soldier, yes, but an unusual one, and quite lacking in the humbleness he professed.

Nepah was preparing to follow the others into the boat, when his glance fell on the empty canoes. He stopped abruptly, spun to confront the nearest torchbearer.

"One craft is gone!" he cried accusingly. "I ordered that no person was to leave!"

The torch trembled in the native's hand. The whites of his eyes showed, and the pulsing beat of fear shook his belly.

"It was the priest, Sire," explained the black shakily. "I told him your orders, but he pushed me aside and had his men launch the canoe." His voice almost failed him, and for a second all he could utter was an incoherent clucking noise. "I—I couldn't kill a priest, Sire! I couldn't do that. And he sped off before there was a chance to call you."

The captain stood rigidly, his fists clenched, his face dark with anger. "That cursed priest!" he snarled. "I should have known better. I forgot he had his crew to row him."

Then he snatched the torch from the black, whirled with catlike speed, and springing into the canoe, roared to the oarsmen to pull their backs out or he would have them flayed alive.

The canoe leaped ahead at his order, knifing away from the landing down the dark channel of water. Affixed to a metal holder on the prow of the boat was a torch which strove ineffectually to light the way for the oarsmen. But the straining men seemed to know every inch of the stream so well that illumination was unimportant.

Noting the dark scowl which persisted on Nepah's features, Ki-Gor asked him why the priest's departure had upset him. The jungle man sensed that he and his companions were somehow involved in the matter.

"I wanted to get you and the red-haired woman to the Empress," gritted Nepah, "before Sha-Topat even suspected your presence. Your coming will deal a blow to the prestige of the whole priesthood."

He shook his head worriedly, leaned to stare ahead into the cavern's darkness.

"Now, though, there's no knowing what to expect. He's as dangerous as a cobra, and a thousand times more cunning."

"But why should our presence harm him?" Ki-Gor wanted to know.

The warrior captain smiled thinly, malice gleaming in his eyes. "Because the priesthood has kept us locked within our stronghold, rotting away to weakness year by year, by preaching that no help lay on the outside for us. We were the last segment of the white race alive, they swore. Outside only endless hordes of black barbarians existed. By your very presence, you prove Sha-Topat isn't divinely infallible."

"Surely, some of you go out," declared Ki-Gor. "Those painted devils who chased us wouldn't be patrolling the river if they weren't on the lookout for your war parties." Molaki's angry speech had shown that he mistook the White Lord for a citizen of Atlantis.

The captain nodded agreement. "Parties go out, all right—but only Sha-Topat's men." Bitter irony edged his voice. "Only the Anointed of Raa can be safely exposed to the evils beyond our gates. Conveniently therefore, they are the only ones who can loot enemy villages and capture slaves."

KI-GOR flexed his fingers, regarding them studiously. The talk of ancient empires was beyond him, but he understood thoroughly the struggle of ruthless leaders for power over people. He had no desire to become a pawn in the battle between the unseen religious and temporal heads of Atlantis.

"For an humble soldier, who thinks no further than his immediate duty," Ki-Gor said lightly, "you seem unusually, even personally, concerned in the affairs of your superiors."

The soft-spoken gibe went home. Nepah was immediately more guarded, realizing that in his anger he had revealed more of himself than he had intended.

"I think you mistake my motives," he said. "After all, bringing you to the Empress is quite a feather in my cap." He added meaningfully, "When you've been on guard in that damp, sunless gorge as many moons as I have, you remember longingly how easy life was in the palace guards."

But Nepah's protestations didn't ring true to the White Lord. There was more than personal ambition mixed in his desire to outwit Sha-Topat. Though possessed of a sardonic handsomeness and a courtier's smooth tongue, Nepah was no soft-handed palace dandy.

Helene turned and smiled at the captain. "You belittle yourself," she chided, showing she had been following their talk. "It's unfortunately true that the best warriors draw the most dangerous and unpleasant duties. We saw how efficiently you handled your job."

"You flatter me," murmured Nepah. "Would that the Empress thought as you do!"

"That reminds me," put in Ki-Gor; "how in the world do you control the flow of water in that gorge? It was a roaring deathtrap until those two canoes piled up and then it got as quiet as a pond."

Nepah's eyes roved the darkness. He called for more speed from the oarsmen. Despite his calm flow of conversation, it was apparent that inwardly he grew more anxious by the minute when they didn't bring the priest's boat into view.

"It's a simple, but very clever trick devised by the Second Empire's builders," he said. "Just above the narrow portion of the gorge, they cut a tunnel from this cavern through to the river, coming in well beneath the surface so no opening would be visible. By the use of flood gates, we can divert as much or as little water from the gorge as we like, thus making the river run rough or calm."

Ki-Gor was impressed, and complimented the method by which the river was used as a powerful defense weapon. Obviously, the builders of the Second Empire possessed a high order of intelligence.

"But why do we travel this cavern?" asked Helene. "Surely, your people don't live underground."

"No, not quite underground," said Nepah, with a trace of laughter, "but this stream is the one and only way to reach Atlantis. You'll understand in a moment. We're almost there."

He pointed to a rapidly growing circle of light ahead of them. Helene and Ki-Gor leaned forward, tensely awaiting their initial glimpse of Atlantis.

In the canoe, all was quiet except for the hard breathing of the oarsmen and the gentle splash of paddles digging the water in unison. Daylight reached through the darkness toward them, faintly outlining in grey, the wet rock of the cavern.

Then with the suddenness of a tropical storm, the attack broke over them.

Their first intimation of trouble was the heavy crash of a grappling hook against the prow of the craft. The forward torch was knocked from its metal holder into the river. Then came the pain-crazed shriek of an oarsman impaled in the back by a second hook. Sitting in the middle of the boat, the man was jerked upright and pulled overboard with a wild flailing of arms and legs.

The craft rocked dangerously. Panic blasted among the oarsmen. Showering out of the grey murk came more of the grappling irons. One hammered over the side by Helene, narrowly missing her

arm as it bit into the wood.

Then shadowy figures came leaping from their hiding places behind piles of debris along the edge of the stream. The ropes connected to the grappling irons snapped taut. Almost immediately the canoe angled in toward the bank, drawn by the furiously straining attackers grouped at the end of each rope.

III

NEPAH WAS ON HIS FEET, screaming orders to his oarsmen. But the men were in utter confusion, their paddles forgotten, some of them struggling to tear loose the irons with their bare hands, others fighting to get out of the boat.

"The ropes! Cut the ropes, you fools!" roared Nepah.

If any heard him, they paid no heed. The canoe was nearly against the bank. Nepah's torch picked out a score of hooded black-robed figures as they dropped ropes and drove forward, ripping short, broad-bladed swords free of black sheaths as they came.

As a stranger in a strange land, Ki-Gor had waited for the men of Atlantis to take the lead. He had felt they would be familiar with such attacks, would know better than he how to combat this one.

But now as he saw utter disaster engulfing them, realized the fear-crazed crewmen weren't going to make any effort to defend themselves, Ki-Gor came to his feet in a flaming rage. He rode the heaving sway of the boat on braced legs, his long knife making a glittering sweep as he whipped it out.

His great voice beat through the uproar to reach the faithful Tembu George and N'Geeso. "Get ashore!" he cried. "We've no chance in the boat!" Beside him, Helene started to rise. His left hand caught her shoulder, pressed her down. "Stay here," he told her. His fingers brushed her cheek, her hair, in brief caress.

Then with lightning speed, he whirled, snatched the torch from Nepah's grasp. Like a great cat he sprang out across the narrowing strip of water separating the canoe from the bank.

When he landed on the shore, the at-

tackers were almost on him. Had he wavered for a moment he would have gone down under the solid rush of their bodies. But as soon as his feet touched the rock, his steel-thewed legs were catapulting him forward.

Moving with all his unbelievable speed, he blasted straight at the closest robed figure. His knife sang with the terrible violence of his stroke. Like a felled tree the man toppled aside, cut nearly apart in the middle.

Before the gouting rush of the man's blood stained his black robe, Ki-Gor was past him. His blade clanged against the short sword of his second victim, knocked it in a gleaming arc. With a short, quick slash, he laid open the man's throat.

Then he spun to the left, sweeping his heavy knife down on a thin man's hooded head. He jerked it free, and laying a wall of steel about him to send the last two attackers leaping out of his path, he broke free of the group.

By his swift and deadly charge, he had burst through the whole line of robed men. They hadn't had a chance to converge on him. Now, instead of being backed against the river, he had gotten into the clear with plenty of room to maneuver in when they tried to mob him.

Thrown offstride by the White Lord's action, the whole enemy plan of attack went to pieces. A few robed men drove on at the boat and others turned to go after Ki-Gor, but the majority wavered uncertainly. The jungle man had counted on causing enough disruption to give Tembu George and N'Geeso time to get ashore, but it seemed odd to him that the enemy should let him draw them off the greater target of the boat so easily.

Another thing that puzzled him was the utter silence in which the attackers fought. There was none of the shouting, cursing bedlam which accompanied most hand-to-hand fighting in the jungle. There were no orders given, and even those men he struck down, died with nothing more than gurgling grunts of pain.

ACTING DELIBERATELY to rivet more attention on himself, Ki-Gor threw back his head, made the cavern reverberate with the chilling Masai war cry. Standing with the torch held high in

his left hand, his red-stained blade ready in his right, the White Lord was like some awesome, pagan god of battle come to life.

He seemed infinitely larger, more massive in the shifting, changing light. The brute, animal vigor of the man was a pulsing, crackling force that struck one like an electric shock. Granite-hard sheaths of muscles ridged out across his abnormally deep chest, girded his lean, flat middle and long, powerful legs.

Battle wrought an amazing change in Ki-Gor. Though normally he was a quiet, pleasant, almost shy, person, in combat he became a raging machine of destruction, his whole character and look altering completely. He was far above most men in strength and speed, and he had a lion's courage, a leopard's cunning. It was not that he liked fighting, for he labored endlessly to end tribal warfare and bring peace to the jungle. But he seemed endowed by nature to be a warrior, fated always to be cast into situations where he must exert his battle prowess. He knew by instinct more tricks of combat than most men would learn in a life-time, and in addition he had amassed bitterly won experience from countless deadly jungle struggles.

Now by his swift, daring action, his willingness to draw the full fury of the enemy attack on himself, he saved Nepah's men from massacre.

As the bulk of the enemy turned away from the river to rush him, Tembu George and N'Geeso entered the fray. Ki-Gor had given them time to recover their spears from the bottom of the boat. Like twin demons they came ashore, fighting as a team as was their favorite custom.

Against the short swords of the attackers, the chieftains' spears gave them a decided advantage and they utilized it to the fullest. The robed killers hacking at the fear-stricken oarsmen were the Masai and Pygmy leaders' first targets. They struck in among them, thrusting and stabbing with terrible accuracy, knowing without an order from Ki-Gor that their first job must be to insure Helene's safety.

In a thrice, they had swept the bank clear, scattering all the surprised attackers except for four grotesquely flopping forms

who would never again be a danger to anyone.

And with their blood lust whetted by those initial four victims, Tembu George and N'Geeso sped in behind the men who were rushing the White Lord.

Unlike Ki-Gor, these two fierce black men revelled in battle, taking savage joy in the dispatching of a foe. For centuries, war had been the wine of life, the ultimate goal of every male's training for both their tribes. The proud Masai and Pygmies had been the greatest troublemakers in the Congo before they came under the White Lord's influence.

THE CHIEFTAINS went to the jungle man's aid in the nick of time. For despite his skill and agility, he was hard put to keep from being borne under by the swarming attackers. There was a fanatical desperation in the way the raiders hurled themselves in upon him. Only by twisting, turning, and rapidly giving ground, while his blade wove a glittering shield about him, did he manage to beat them off.

It was a brilliant display of swordsmanship, but the man didn't live who could long sustain such exertions, and Ki-Gor's strength already had been drained by the gruelling canoe race down the gorge.

"Ho! We come!" boomed Tembu George, and with his shovel-bladed Masai spear he impaled a foe, tossed him aside like a spade-full of dirt.

"Death to the jackals!" shrilled N'Geeso. He darted forward, jabbed viciously with his shorter weapon. A robed figure, in the midst of a sword slash at Ki-Gor, whirled off-balance drunkenly and fell, legs literally cut from under him by the pygmy.

And then as they bounded forward, intent on hacking a path through to Ki-Gor, suddenly Nepah was fighting beside them. With his armor, he was a valuable ally. He threw himself boldly at the enemy, more than matching the chieftain's hurried advance.

Nepah was the first to reach the White Lord's side. "Back to the boat," he shouted. "There may be more of these devil's servants on the way." He blocked an enemy's thrust expertly with his short sword. "Thanks to you, I had time to cut away the ropes and beat some sense into

the crewmen."

As the four of them wheeled in a solid front, the hooded men slackened their assault. They obviously were stunned by the swift turn of events. Instead of cowering sheep for victims, the attackers found they had stirred up maddened lions. Instead of killing, they were being killed.

Tembu George's spear flicked out, and a man staggered back with his shoulder laid open. "Into them! Into them!" cried the Masai leader.

There was no holding the chieftains. They were wild with battle. They swept Nepah and Ki-Gor along with them in a new charge. Impotent against those merciless spears, the hooded raiders went reeling back. Then abruptly, like frightened chickens, they broke and ran.

Only by leaping in front of Tembu George and N'Geeso did the White Lord prevent the chieftains from giving chase. "Oh, no, Little Ones," he panted. "Let's get out of here while we can."

"But that carrion!" squealed N'Geeso in protest. "By all the gods, we've got them finished."

"If this is my sample of Atlantis hospitality, you'll have fighting aplenty before you see your home kraal again," Ki-Gor predicted, and with the firmness of a parent handling excited children, he herded them toward the boat.

Nepah watched them wonderingly for a moment. "Breath of the Black One," he muttered under his breath, "what manner of man is this Ki-Gor!"

THE CANOE lay a safe distance out of the stream, manned by about half the original number of crewmen. The missing ones had deserted, diving in their panic into the dark water, or leaping ashore to flee blindly into the cavern. Very few had been slain.

As Nepah called the boat closer, Ki-Gor asked what was to be done about the deserters. "They can worry about themselves," declared the captain angrily. "Their duty was to protect you, yet they ran like rats, so they deserve whatever fate they get."

"Why was it their duty especially to protect me?" asked Ki-Gor in surprise.

Nepah looked at him curiously. "You mean you didn't realize that you were the

whole reason for that attack?"

"You must be mistaken," Ki-Gor said. "No one but you knows I'm here. I have no enemies in a land I've never seen."

Nepah's lips twisted bitterly. "Sha-Topat knows you are here! He was willing to slaughter us all to get his hands on you." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It is interesting to know that he would go to such lengths to keep you from entering Atlantis. Very interesting. Perhaps you're of even greater value than I thought."

His words reminded Ki-Gor of the priest who had slipped away from the gorge against Nepah's orders. No wonder the captain had been so concerned. He had feared some kind of interference.

"I don't understand any of it," the White Lord said brusquely. "But if what you say is true, then let's confront this Sha-Topat and have an accounting. If there is any justice in Atlantis at all, surely we will have the backing of your Empress."

Ki-Gor took his place in the boat, beside Helene. The others had preceded him. They began to move toward the circle of light again.

"You make no answer," the jungle man said to Nepah. "Don't you agree with me?"

The captain sucked in his breath slowly, selecting his words with care.

"In the Second Empire, one does not pit his word against Sha-Topat's," he said. "The power and prestige of the priestcraft is too great a shield to be pierced by accusations from us."

Helene had been listening tensely. She burst out indignantly, "We have proof enough! Every person in this boat is a witness to the attack."

"And you think men who stand in such superstitious dread of the priestcraft," said Nepah, "that they won't defend their own lives would speak out against Sha-Topat." He snorted in disgust. "For that matter, even if they shouted all over Atlantis that the priests had loosed trained killers on them, it would prove nothing except that they were tired of life. The loudest of them would be arrested for speaking heresy. The others as the days passed would begin to die of strange maladies, meet with unexplained acci-

dents."

He spat into the water, his eyes narrow in the torchlight.

"And the priests would say," he went on, "'Poor misguided men, they should have known that Raa's vengeance falls swiftly on those who would do harm to his servants.'"

KI-GOR AND HELENE listened incredulously to his description of how the hooded terrorists killed and kidnapped great numbers of men and women every year. All efforts to curb them came to naught. The common people feared them far more than they did the Empress' soldiers and would never give information against them or admit any knowledge of their activities.

"You don't seem to be afraid to oppose them," declared Ki-Gor. "If you can fight them and live, why can't others do the same."

"My case is a little different from most," Nepah said without elaboration.

N'Geeso jabbed the air with his right fist. "Haiee! Gather a few more like yourself and take some prisoners," he exploded impatiently. "It's a simple thing to make such carrion babble their heads off about their masters."

Nepah received the savage little pygmy's open suggestion of torture with faintly amused tolerance. After seeing them in combat, his manner toward N'Geeso and Tembu George had become much friendlier.

"The odds are always in their favor when they attack," the captain explained. "They made a rare misjudgement today, the first I've ever known them to make. It was a natural error, though. Who would ever have expected you three to react as you did? Most strangers would have shared the crew's panic." He added prophetically, "They won't make that error the next time."

The undermanned boat moved sluggishly into the brightening light of day. Then they were out of the cavern, with the deep, blue waters of a lake beneath them.

"But what I started to say," Nepah went on talking, "was that you seldom get a chance to capture one of the dangos. They strike out of the darkness and are gone. If one of them is cornered, or too

wounded to get away, he'll kill himself rather than to be taken alive."

N'Geeso, who was much more interested in the thought of future battles with the robed assassins than in anything so commonplace as scenery, continued to give his entire attention to Nepah, but the jungle couple and Tembu George stared raptly about them.

They had entered an immense crater. The almost perpendicular walls towered hundreds of feet above them. Apparently in some long-past age, a tremendous volcanic explosion had blasted the whole heart out of a sprawling mountain, spewing out immeasurable tons of rock like a cork shot from a bottle. Green moss, lichens and thickly tangled vines clung to the crater walls, a wild, brilliantly colored tapestry through which Ki-Gor could spy the flitting forms of monkeys and bright-plumed jungle-birds.

Except for a single, broad, level island in its center, the floor of the crater was covered by the lake. Along the nearest shore of the island lay a walled city, grey and ancient and brooding. The massive stone walls came down to the very edge of the water, and above and beyond them could be seen rooftops, towers and temples strangely out-of-place on this hidden Congo island.

Broad, cultivated fields were visible on either side of the city, but the rest of the island, fully four-fifths of it, was a wild tangle of jungle, seemingly no more touched by the hand of man than the White Lord's own forest retreat.

KI-GOR SAT SILENTLY, his probing eyes missing no detail of the scene as they drew near the island. Without ever entering the walls, he knew many things about this forgotten fragment of a long-dead civilization.

He knew that the fabulous talent and industry which had raised this impressive citadel in a hostile wilderness had long since been lost. The walls on closer inspection were sagging and broken, the weathered towers in many cases in dangerous disrepair. Far from improving on the work of their fathers, the people of Atlantis weren't even able to maintain what had been left them.

Though right beside them, the jungle

was a riot of luxuriant growth, the fields about the city bore sparse, scraggly crops. Surprisingly few boats were in evidence along the bank. And on the walls, in the fields and along the waterfront, not a single white-skinned person was in evidence, only slow-moving, lackadasical blacks.

Nothing Ki-Gor saw spoke well of the Second Empire's rulers. In fact, the use of the word "empire" was a pathetic farce to the practical jungle man. But Helene, sitting beside him, saw the city in an entirely different and far less critical light. Her view was colored by the romance and drama of the place, for she saw it through the veil of history, was awed by the knowledge that she was penetrating a secret kept for centuries.

Tembu George's feelings about the Second Empire were far less complicated. He regarded it from a strictly military viewpoint. "Using a handful of men, you could fight off forever a hundred armies," he said.

N'Geeso heard him and turned with a look of mock amazement. "What?" he hissed. "You mean the Masai couldn't take this place?"

"You put words in my mouth, 'Small One,'" grinned the Masai Chieftain.

"I've waited all my life to hear a Masai admit he could be beaten," gloated the impish pygmy. "Ho! Will wonders never cease? You admitted it without blinking an eye."

Tembu George squinted at the high walls of the crater. "I admitted nothing about the Masai," he said contentedly. "I spoke only of ordinary, run-of-the-jungle warriors—" he paused to flick an imaginary gnat from his arm—"men like yourself, if I must be plain." He smiled and winked at the White Lord. Then the boat nosed up to a small stone dock and Nepah hurried them ashore. Obviously, they weren't being taken to the city's main landing. A narrow door was set into the wall. Nepah hammered it with the hilt of his sword.

Though the entrance looked unused, Ki-Gor noted that the door opened swiftly and without a single protesting squeak. Nepah pushed past a black guard, led the way down a musty, yard-wide corridor into a low, torchlit room where sat four

more guards.

The men came hastily to their feet the moment Nepah entered, seemingly surprised to see him. Ki-Gor had served with too many warriors not to recognize the respect of the natives for the captain. It was more than mere deference to rank.

"See that my crewmen are cared for," ordered Nepah. "Get them out of sight. No one is to talk with them or even know where they are for the time being." He stabbed a finger at two of the men. "Light the way to the Red Palace. I want to avoid the streets."

FOLLOWING THE CAPTAIN and the torchbearers, Ki-Gor and Helene went through a door down two flights of dank stairs and into a chill, wet tunnel. For long minutes, they hurried through twisting passages, slowing only to skirt piles of debris where the sides or roof had given way. Whatever the original purpose of the network of tunnels beneath Atlantis, it was obvious they had long been abandoned.

Ki-Gor was troubled by the excessive secrecy with which Nepah was bringing them into the city. It boded no good for their future well-being. He felt more and more that Nepah regarded them as important pawns to be used in a struggle between the Empress and Sha-Topat.

And it occurred further to Ki-Gor that they were placing a great deal of trust in the captain. He could be a scoundrel for all they knew, despite his brave words about devotion to country. He could be using them in a private intrigue of his own. There was bound to be something seriously wrong when a servant of the Empress, instead of approaching his ruler openly in her own capital, chose a furtive, backdoor route.

Though Tembu George and N'Geeso appeared utterly unperturbed, soon after they entered the tunnel Ki-Gor realized that they shared his doubts. They had brought their spears into the passage, and for men who were always so careful with their weapons, they seemed to Ki-Gor suddenly to become unbelievably careless and awkward. Time after time they let their spear-points grate against the walls, and at every turn into a new passage they were particularly clumsy.

If they even heard the sounds, Nepah and the Guards paid no attention. But after wincing several times at the rough treatment of valuable weapons, the White Lord looked questioningly back at his friends. He saw N'Geeso, holding his spear firmly about two feet back of the point, deliberately gash the soft, damp-rotted stone.

Then he realized what the chieftains were doing. By acting as if they were having trouble with their spears in the cramped underground corridors, they were gouging white slashes out of the moss-covered stone to mark their route. Ki-Gor's eyes sharpened appreciatively. Never too trusting of strangers, the chieftains were leaving open a way of retreat.

The guides finally brought them into a passage which slanted upward for a hundred yards and came to a dead end. "You may go back now," Nepah said, dismissing the blacks. Without a word, they turned and hurried away down the ramp.

As the torch-carrying natives disappeared, utter darkness closed over the blocked tunnel. Tembu George and N'Geeso moved in beside the jungle couple, fearing a trap. Nepah never knew how close to death he came in that moment when he failed to explain what he was about.

Ki-Gor was poised to spring, his sword already half-drawn, when there was a faint creak and a widening line of light in the tunnel's dead-end revealed Nepah shoving open a small door. Apparently he had waited until the guides were gone so no one could learn the trick by which he opened a door through seemingly solid rock.

As wary as a leopard, Ki-Gor followed the captain through the opening, shielded Helene behind him. They were in a small room, bare except for two dusty racks of armor and weapons. From the little-used armory, Nepah led them into a hall, up two high, narrow flights of stairs.

Four powerful black warriors stood guard before an ornate door. They stiffened to attention when they saw the captain. Lounging in a nearby window was the first white man beside Nepah, they had seen in Atlantis. He wore the metal and leather armor, but he was a small, languid man, with little of the look of a warrior about him.

"What have we here that excites you so, Nepah?" he asked nasally. His glance ran over the group as he took his time about getting up. "You take quite a chance leaving your border post to visit us. If anything should go wrong, I wouldn't want to be in your place." He screwed up his thin face disapprovingly. "What's the story back of these people? They look as white as we do." There was a malicious insolence about him.

Nepah flushed red with anger. "Announce me, Tal, you stupid, self-important fool! Think you that I came here to prattle with you?" He moved threateningly toward the man. "Quick now, before I take your worthless duties on myself!"

Startled by Nepah's outburst, the man backed nervously toward the door, his mouth twisting. He apparently had expected the captain meekly to submit to his insulting posturing and prying, and when he didn't, Tal's air of superiority abruptly disappeared.

But with his hand on the door, he recovered enough assurance to snarl, "Still trying to be the old, arrogant Nepah, eh? Maybe after a few more moons in that gorge you'll realize you're finished. It is friends at court, not more enemies, that you should be trying desperately to make." Then he slid through the door and was gone.

IV

NEPAH GLOWED, STUNG BY Tal's parting shot. "Lice!" he said by way of explanation to Ki-Gor. "Human lice! I'll see them all cleaned out of the palace one day." His jaw was firmly set.

The black guards hadn't shifted a muscle during the entire exchange, but the White Lord noted an approving glitter in their eyes.

Tal came out of the room. "I told the Empress you had left your post," he said venomously, "and were outside with some visitors asking to see her." His pale lips curled triumphantly. "She said for you to come in—only you! She seemed rather angry."

"I'm sure you presented my case quite well," said Nepah sarcastically. Then he brushed Tal aside disgustedly and strode into the room to undo whatever harm the

man had caused with lies.

Tal straightened himself indignantly, noted that Ki-Gor was staring stonily at him.

"All right! Who are you," he demanded, "and what are you doing here? The Empress has no time for persons dragged in by the likes of Nepah. He's finished himself for good by turning up at her door today, so whatever you've got to say, say it to me and quickly."

Completely unperturbed by his blustering, the White Lord continued to look through him, not saying a word.

"Answer me, dolt!" cried Tal, moving threateningly toward Ki-Gor. "I'm in command here. I'll bear no insolence from you."

Helene glanced up at her mate. "If the rest are as unpleasant as this little barking dog," she said in the pygmy tongue, "I'd prefer that we make it short."

Tal whirled on her. "What was that gibberish?" he snapped. "Out with it. I'll have no talking in a strange tongue."

When she didn't immediately reply, he grabbed at her shoulder. That was when he made his mistake. Ki-Gor would have borne Tal's ranting, but even if a hundred instead of four armed guards had stood behind the man, he wouldn't have permitted him to touch Helene.

Too swiftly for the eye to follow, the jungle lord's right hand shot out, snapped tight about Tal's wrist. Before the soft-muscled warrior realized what was happening, he was jerked bodily into the air and plunked down joltingly on his haunches a good six feet away from Helene.

He looked like a limp, boneless rag doll, legs spraddled, head awry, an expression of stupid, uncomprehending amazement frozen on his too-small face. Ki-Gor retained his grip on Tal's arm.

"You do not shove Helene!" warned Ki-Gor ominously. He pulled the armored man to his feet. "Now if you must have trouble, I'll give it to you. Even the lowest bushman respects the rights of a guest."

The White Lord released his grip. Tal was beginning to recover his faculties. He tottered back a few steps, his face white as a fish's belly, his mouth sagged open.

Then abruptly a hysterical mixture of hate, rage and fear ripped his features.

He scuttled crab-like another ten steps, stopping only when his back was against the window. He stabbed a trembling hand at Ki-Gor.

"You dare hit me—ME!" he screamed. "Death is the penalty for harming an imperial officer!" He had lost all control of himself. "Seize them, guards!" he commanded. "Seize them all!"

For a bare moment, the four blacks hesitated. They knew their officer was in the wrong. But still it was their duty to obey him unquestioningly, so years of discipline prevailed, and with well-drilled precision, they fanned out preparatory to rushing the strangers.

Ki-Gor wasn't in any mood to allow himself or his companions to be man-handled. He'd given that insane pipsqueak fair warning. When he realized the blacks meant to attack, he seized the initiative, relying once more on a swift, unexpected move to pull them out of trouble.

He swerved and, like a shot out of a gun, drove at Tal, who thought he had placed himself out of danger. Since he had to cross directly in front of two of the guards, either of them could have brought him down with a quick javelin thrust, could they have acted fast enough.

But the White Lord had seen their hesitation, guessed that they were inwardly confused about the rightness of their officer's orders. Uncertain men act slowly. He was past them and diving at Tal before it dawned on them that he, not they, had become the aggressor.

TAL CRINGED BACK against the wall, fumbling for his sword. He saw Ki-Gor come at him with incredible speed. He forgot his sword, and shrieked like a terrified woman. Giving up all thought of resistance, he wrenched away from the wall, hoping to flee. It was too late.

The White Lord was lunging for him with outstretched arms. His screams ended in an explosive grunt as he was thrown hard against the wall. Then Ki-Gor lifted him bodily and whirled around to face the guards. Torn loose, Tal's helmet clattered across the floor.

The two men he had outfoxed were running to aid their officer. The other two stood indecisively, suddenly finding them-

selves faced by the longer spears of Tembu George and N'Geeso.

"Stand back or he dies!" snarled Ki-Gor.

He held Tal in front of him like a stick of wood, poised to plunge the officer head-first against the walls.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" pleaded the gasping, fear-palsied officer. "Get back," he screamed at the blacks.

The guards slowed, stopped. It was in their minds to try swift javelin throws. The weapons balanced in upraised hands, they tensely eyed the jungle man, gauging their chances of felling him before he could swing Tal against the stone.

Ki-Gor read their intentions. As they sidled apart, trying to divide his attention and pin him in a corner, he clasped Tal protectively in front of him with his left hand, snatched the man's sword free with his right. He held the blade across Tal's throat.

"Order them to drop their weapons and face the wall," commanded Ki-Gor fiercely. "One more threatening move from them and I'll slit your throat from ear to ear."

"We won't do it, white man," declared one of the guards hoarsely. "Our duty to protect the Empress comes above our duty to him. You'll never get past us."

Veritable spasms of fear shook Tal. Without the support of Ki-Gor's arm, he couldn't have stood upright.

"Forget her, you cursed dingos!" he screeched. "Can't you see this madman will kill me? Do as he says."

Before Ki-Gor had a chance to explain that he had no intention of entering their ruler's chamber, that he was acting strictly in self-protection, suddenly a woman's voice, husky, calm and ominous, sounded in the room.

"So you would forget your Empress, eh, Tal?" the woman said. "The fact that you are sworn to die for her means nothing. Your loyalty is as impressive as your battle prowess, Tal. The Empire should do something special, I think, for a man of your worth."

BESIDE NEPAH in the doorway which the warriors sought to guard stood one of the most beautiful women Ki-Gor had ever seen. Her hair was like

midnight, her skin a luminous white. Beneath the arched line of her brows, her large eyes were changeful pools of darkness, as though strange black tongues of flame curled and twisted in their depths.

She wore a sheer robe of purest white, bound close about her slim waist by a narrow circlet of gold. The very simplicity of her dress served to accentuate the striking beauty of her lithe, curved body. She was of medium height, but her air of certain and absolute authority made her appear taller.

Tal gave a convulsive gasp. His eyes bulged like the large ends of two yellow eggs. "Teeva!" he blurted, and his voice blurred into incoherent gurgling and moaning.

When they realized their sovereign was watching them, the guards lost their hesitancy, once more began jockeying for positions from which they could successfully attack the strangers. But with the single word, "Hold!" Teeva quieted them. "What is the meaning of this?" she demanded of Ki-Gor.

Unintimidated by her haughty tone, Ki-Gor heatedly replied, "It should be quite clear. We are defending ourselves against this vicious little mad dog you permit to command your guards."

Teeva's mouth tightened and the dark fire of her eyes swirled high. Yet it was against the White Lord, not Tal, that her displeasure now was directed. The fact that he dared address her so abruptly, as though he were her equal, angered her.

Nepah read her mind. "Remember Shatopat!" he reminded her softly, but not so softly that Ki-Gor didn't hear.

She drew a long breath. In another moment, a slight smile flickered about her lips. The officer's brief reminder worked an immediate change in her.

"Tal again, eh?" she said. "I think I've overlooked too much of his trouble-making. Perhaps he needs to learn I still rule Atlantis."

"Oh no," begged Tal. "It's his fault! He tried to force his way past me. I was defending you."

Teeva seemed not to hear his babbling. She came toward Ki-Gor, and the knowledge of her beauty was in her walk.

"Probably you wonder why I've tolerated him," she went on. "He's the last

male descendant of one of the Empire's greatest families. On that terrible day when the very earth sank away beneath the First Empire, it was an ancestor of his who brought the royal family away to safety."

Her lips curled in disgust. She was close to Ki-Gor then, looking searchingly into his grey eyes.

"Since that time, by tradition the elder son of the family has been given a high post in the armies of Atlantis."

Tal writhed in the White Lord's grasp, his pasty face working and twitching. "It is a sacred debt," he whined. "There would be no Second Empire had it not been for my fathers! Raa will curse you if you turn against me."

With the queen within easy reach, the jungle man no longer needed Tal as a hostage. He threw the weakling sprawling across the floor. Teeva's brows arched with interest at the effortless ease with which Ki-Gor handled the armored officer.

"Why should an Empress concern herself with such carrion?" asked Ki-Gor. "For all his ancestry, wouldn't it be wiser to give your attention to servants who have your own good at heart?"

"You hardly understand," said Teeva matter-of-factly. "Within three moons I must marry. It is the ancient law." She glanced out of the window, a wicked smile gathering at the corners of her mouth. "Until you came, it seemed that Tal would have to be my choice as husband. Naturally, I did everything possible to make him look like less an idiot than he is."

Tal was thunderstruck by her words. His dead-white pallor changed to green.

"Until he came?" he exclaimed. "By all the gods, what do you mean? What has he to do with us?"

TEEVA TURNED COOLLY to the two guards standing behind her. "Escort him to his house," she ordered, "and see that he remains there out of sight."

As the two blacks advanced on him, Tal shook his clenched fists at Ki-Gor and the Empress in impotent rage.

"You won't get away with this," he screamed. "Sha-Topat will deal swiftly with both of you. He won't let you go back on your word." Then he turned and drove out of the room ahead of the

guards.

The feeling of being a pawn in some unseen game fastened more firmly than ever on the jungle man. And it was Nepah, standing silent and cynically amused in the background, who was guiding the invisible mechanations.

"Exactly what," he asked bluntly, "have I to do with changing your marriage plans?"

Teeva put her hand on his arm, smiled up at him.

"Everything," she declared with silken satisfaction. "The marriage was Sha-Topat's idea. Since my father's death he has gradually fastened his coils about me and this was his final move to make me no more than a puppet."

Her fingers tightened on the White Lord's arm.

"But by your very existence, you will destroy his crushing hold on Atlantis and discredit the whole priestcraft. They've held us all, even the Imperial Household, in bondage."

The two remaining guards had taken up their stations beside the door. Helene and the chieftains gathered about Teeva, listening warily as she related how the priests originally had gotten the populace under their thumb following the First Empire's destruction.

"They saw their opportunity and made the most of it," she continued. "They drummed home the idea that Raa destroyed Atlantis because the people had turned their faces from him, refusing to heed and properly honor the priests who were his earthly representatives."

It was the priests, she said, who had sealed the Second Empire off from the world, making it a crime punishable by death for anyone outside their order to venture out of the hidden stronghold.

"Perhaps in the beginning they were sincere in trying to protect Atlantis from the black barbarians and give it time to regather its strength," she stated frankly. "But that was long, long ago. Now their entire purpose is to perpetuate their power and rich, easy life. Now I can prove that while they kept the Imperial family imprisoned here, while they smothered the growth and progress of my people, other colonies free of their lying prophecies and divine decrees were prospering in the

outer world."

Her lips were parted, her breath coming fast. There was a question in Ki-Gor's eyes and he looked at Helene. If conditions were as bad as Teeva painted them, wouldn't he be doing wrong not to aid her in unseating the priestcraft? From a personal angle, he already had a score to settle with Sha-Topat. The high priest had declared war on the jungle man before he set foot in the city and it wasn't in Ki-Gor's nature ever to forgive a cowardly attack.

THE WHITE LORD at that moment became conscious of Nepah's intent scrutiny. He looked up to find that the officer had come quietly up beside the Empress as she talked. And the look he surprised on Nepah's face was strangely tense and strained.

At the time, the jungle man put down the officer's expression to feelings against the priestcraft aroused by Teeva's story. But later he was to recall that look and put a different interpretation on it.

"If my wife and I are such a threat to the priests," Ki-Gor pointed out guardedly, "I hardly think they will greet us as long lost cousins. Why should they accept nothing more than a white skin as proof that the blood of Atlantis flows in our veins? Would you do it, if it meant your ruin?"

Teeva frowned. "Sha-Topat and his pack have no choice," she stated. "Only the children of Raa are white. Surely, you don't expect him to try to twist a fact like that."

Better than most, Ki-Gor could understand how narrow and limited was Teeva's idea of the outside world. His own idea of it had once consisted of no more than the jungle where he grew to boyhood. He looked helplessly at Helene.

But before he could say more, he heard the muffled, distant sound of trumpets. Teeva's red lips thinned, showing the straight white line of her teeth.

"He wastes no time in coming," she said. "Let us go into the throne room. This is once I will enjoy seeing the High Priest of Raa." And with a quick, lithe stride, she went toward the door.

Ki-Gor hesitated, not liking the deception into which he was being hurried, no

matter how worthy its end might be.

"We really haven't too much choice," Helene whispered. "With the priests already after our heads, we've got to play along with Teeva. I'm as bewildered as you, but I do know we've got to have somebody on our side in this crazy place."

"I want a look at this Sha-Topat, anyway," Ki-Gor answered gruffly, still refusing to commit himself. "Let's go."

Nepah let the jungle couple and the two chieftains go past him before he moved. Then he drew a long, deep breath and turned after them, the odd, strained look on his face changed to one of relief.

Teeva led the way through two small rooms, apparently used for conference purposes, went down a hall past a door opening into an ornate bedchamber, and paused in a curtained arch.

"Wait here until I summon you," she told Ki-Gor. "You'll be able to see and hear without being seen."

As she slid through the curtains, the White Lord held them apart a few inches and stared after her. He was looking into an immense, square room lit by scores of torches set in brackets along the walls. The floor was polished black marble, the walls milky white, the ceiling a checkerboard combination of the two colors.

At the end of the room where Ki-Gor stood, a huge gold medallion, symbolizing the sun, was set in the ceiling. Sitting directly beneath it on a raised block of white marble was Teeva's throne, a massive, benchlike chair of black wood worked with shining gold. The low-backed throne was the only piece of furniture in the entire room.

And Ki-Gor got his first opportunity to see Teeva's courtiers and their ladies. Both men and women were slight-statured, with a frail, inbred look. Despite their bright armor and many-colored capes, the men, for the most part, had that feminine, unconvincing appearance of girls dressed as warriors for a pageant. The women, many of them heavily made up, were like replicas of the same empty-faced doll.

The languid hum of the courtiers' conversation quickened as the Empress entered the room. As one person they knelt, remaining on one knee until she had settled herself on the dais. Then like a gaudy swarm of butterflies, they drifted

in toward the throne.

From the black guards stationed every fifteen feet along the walls, six giant natives detached themselves and came to stand between the Empress and her subjects.

Through the open doors at the end of the room the brazen tones of the trumpets sounded again, very close this time. Ki-Gor could see Teeva's profile. She was perfectly composed, her face giving no hint of the bombshell she meant to explode for the High Priest's benefit.

THEN INTO the throne room marched the first of Sha-Topat's retinue. The trumpeters were in the fore, six swaggering blacks, wearing lionskins thrown across the shoulders, their golden trumpets held before them like glittering weapons. Next came ten priests in double file, pink-faced, well-fed men, magnificently gowned in rich, yellow robes. They were followed by a dozen native guards, splendid in golden helmets and breastplates, big, scarred fellows with the walk of cats and the faces of devils.

Ki-Gor couldn't help but contrast the calculated pomp of this entrance with the way Teeva had gone into the throne room, alone and unannounced. One might as well wonder who was sovereign here.

As this thought passed through the jungle lord's mind, Sha-Topat stepped through the door, becoming immediately the center of all eyes. He wasn't at all as Ki-Gor had imagined him.

He was tall, a good five inches taller than any person in the throne room. He wore a sweeping black robe, with a circular design of the sun emblazoned across the chest. This gaunt, big-boned man had none of the paunchy softness of the lesser priests.

His stride was long, quick, aggressive. He walked with his broad, slightly stooped shoulders angled forward as though by sheer physical force he would drive through any obstacle erected to stop him.

There was a restless movement of his hands even as he walked, a steady opening and closing of the fingers, a twisting of the wrists. And Ki-Gor's quick eyes went to them before they touched Sha-Topat's face for much of a man is told by his hands, and these seemed strikingly ill-

sued to a person of the High Priest's size and character.

In contrast to his long, powerful arms, his hands were oddly small and frail looking, the puffy fingers like short, fat, squirming grubs.

It was hard to relate those hands to the man's heavy-featured, immobile face. He had a broad, high brow, deeply cut by a perpetual frown. His iron-grey hair, confined by a gold circlet, fell to his shoulders. His eyes, so light a brown as to appear yellow, were sunk deep in large, bony sockets, further shadowed by the bristling black eyebrows above them. The gauntness of his cheeks served to emphasize the predatory quality of his beaked nose and thin, wide mouth. His chin was hidden by a wiry, square-cut beard.

With an irritating arrogance, the High Priest's entourage bore straight down the center of the room toward the throne. The hundred-odd courtiers gathered in a loose group before Teeva were forced to break apart, leaving an open lane for the newcomers.

Twenty feet in front of the Empress, the procession halted. All except for Sha-Topat knelt in hollow obeisance. He granted his ruler no more than a perfunctory inclination of his head. Then at a signal from Teeva that they should rise, the long double file of trumpeters, priests and guards broke apart into two single lines, leaving a protected aisle for their master to follow in approaching the throne. Apparently, a person as holy as the High Priest had to be protected from jostling contact with ordinary mortals.

And as Ki-Gor noted, though Sha-Topat kept his face toward the Empress, his eyes beneath the shaggy brows probed right and left among the crowd. He seemed guardedly searching for something or someone.

Teeva watched him approach, a faint smile pouting her sensual lips. "Two visits in one and the same day," she said, emphasizing the fact that the High Priest was breaking precedent by this appearance. "The Empress of Atlantis is honored, indeed. What great matter brings you to the palace again, O Chalice of Raa."

Her light manner immediately brought surprised looks from the watching nobles. Though to an outsider her tone and words

might seem commonplace enough, clearly to them it sounded like open mockery. But if Sha-Topat was aware of any difference in her attitude toward him, he betrayed no sign of it.

"O Daughter of the Sun," he intoned, "I come on a serious mission, one which I would discuss with you in private."

"Oh?" she said, affecting mild surprise, "and what could be so serious as to call for privacy? I had thought that you enjoyed doing your thunderings in public."

This was no hidden mockery. Though her voice was yet mild, her gibe was understandable to all: Sha-Topat did prefer to humiliate her in public, openly displaying the fact that his authority was greater than hers. An instantaneous stir rippled the crowd.

Sha-Topat, though, was undisturbed by her interruption. "The matter I come on is not one for jesting, O Empress. Serious signs and portents occurred in the Temple when the regular sacrifice to Raa was made at high noon, omens of the most forbidding kind."

He threw back his head, stared meaningfully at her. He was a forceful, dramatic figure in his long, black robe.

"Before proclaiming their meaning to the people," he said with an insinuating softness, "I deemed it—shall we say—best to inform the ruler of Atlantis of these omens. It could well be that they are concerned with your—ah—immediate future."

He paused significantly. His eyes were yellow flames in their cavernous sockets as he held Teeva's glance.

V

BEFORE THE HIGH PRIEST even knew the moves Teeva intended against him, he was countering with an attack of his own. Ki-Gor could see that he was a wily, dangerous foe. By the very fact that he made no mention of the jungle couple's presence in Atlantis, he was telling Teeva that either she would talk to him in private about the strangers, or he would loose a mysterious lightning bolt of his own on her.

But Teeva was amused, not frightened, by the threat he voiced. She had seen how swiftly his eyes had gone in search of Ki-Gor and Helene, had noted the faint re-

laxation of his stern features when he was certain no public introduction of the white strangers had yet been made.

"Isn't it strange, Sha-Topat," she said, "I have been toying with the notion of an announcement to the people myself." She laughed huskily. "They will be quite overcome with so much attention, won't they?" Her face sobered. "As a rule, they don't get too much notice from either one of us."

The High Priest drew himself erect. "Then you refuse me?" he asked ominously.

Teeva laughed silently. "Oh, no!" she said. "You may have your audience. In fact, I rather look forward to it." She gave a careless wave of her hand. "Be-gone, all of you!" she commanded. "And I mean guards and priests alike!"

The courtiers and their ladies, and the Empress' guards along the walls immediately started for the door. However, not a single one of Sha-Topat's retainers so much as moved until their master himself half-turned and motioned them to leave. It was yet another insulting way in which the priesthood made it plain that their only allegiance was to their own High Priest.

When the great doors had been swung shut, for almost a minute the priest and the girl faced each other in silence. So far as the frowning, black-robed man knew, they were alone.

"Well?" coolly asked Teeva.

Sha-Topat's face was hard. "I'm a direct man," he snapped, "I'll waste no words. You will turn these strangers over to me immediately! You will reinstate Tal to his former place in your guards and in your personal favor. Then both of us will promptly forget that these two foolish matters ever happened."

Teeva studied her fingernails.

"I thought you wanted to speak of signs and portents," she said calmly. "Aren't you a little confused?"

Sha-Topat's jaw loosened. He was astounded by her growing effrontery. He had come to regard her as no more than one of his servants, and yet suddenly she was acting the disdainful superior.

"You must be out of your mind, woman," he snapped roughly. "You seem to be forgetting that you live your life of

ease only through my sufferance. A few more insults and you'll learn how difficult life can be for my enemies."

"The time is past when you can frighten me, Sha-Topat," the dark-haired girl declared, her chin lifting belligerently. "At last I've found the medicine to rid me of priestly leeches—to rid all Atlantis, if need be."

He retreated a step before this swift storm of words. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that from this day forth I shall rule the Second Empire in fact instead of in mere name," she went on. "The Temple of Raa will become a place of worship again instead of a fortress of evil manned by thieving scum!"

SHA-TOPAT'S wriggling, crawling fingers splayed wide as anger fountained in him. He lunged forward and caught Teeva by the shoulders, jerking her sideways with cruel strength.

"Enough!" he cried, his voice cracking in the empty chamber like the lash of a *kiboko*, the brutal native whip made of hippo hide. "Drunk or mad, I'll hear no more from you. I'm master here and I'll stay master." He began forcing her to her knees, twisting her down with the relentless pressure of his grip.

Standing behind him in the curtained alcove, Ki-Gor's companions couldn't see what was transpiring, although they had heard the verbal exchange between the priest and the Empress. But Ki-Gor saw it all, as Teeva had guessed he would. A low snarl sounded deep in his throat, and in an instinctive action, he went to the woman's aid.

Nothing was more despicable in the White Lord's eyes than for a man to mistreat a woman. And this feeling of his wasn't one of the civilized niceties taught him by Helene. He was simply following the immemorial rule of the animal world, where though the male is sovereign, the surliest brute does not vent his temper on a female of his same species.

Ki-Gor didn't angle directly in toward the throne. Shadow-quiet, he went straight down the room past the High Priest and then cut in behind him.

"Turn her loose," he said loudly in Bantu, "or I'll loosen your head on your shoulders!"

Sha-Topat had been so intent on Teeva that he had neither seen nor heard Ki-Gor's approach. He had felt no need for watchfulness, for it was unheard of for anyone to dare break in on them. Now he wrenched violently about, his gaunt face murderous with wrath.

The thick bristle of his brows lifted in surprise. His baleful yellow eyes locked with Ki-Gor's steady grey ones. His wide thin mouth twisted to reveal big, ugly teeth.

"You!" he said, and the word was like a thrown knife. "*The stranger!*"

Teeva was on her knees on the dais. Sha-Topat's brutal fingers had ripped open the fastening on her gown, so that it had fallen from her shoulders. Her head was thrown back as if in pain, her long, black hair framing the whiteness of her face and shoulders.

But what Ki-Gor could not know was that despite the red mark of the priest's grip on her fair skin, the look in her eyes was one of triumph, not hurt.

Teeva had a knowledge of men far beyond her years, the intuitive knowledge of a born temptress. She had guessed Ki-Gor would come to her aid, so she had not only submitted without a struggle to Sha-Topat's mistreatment, but had deliberately goaded him into the attack.

By bringing the White Lord into an open clash with the High Priest in their first meeting, she was assuring his allegiance to her side. The enmity generated between the two men in this initial contact could be harnessed for her own purposes.

"Yes! I'm the stranger," Ki-Gor answered. "But it's through no thanks to you that I'm here. Cowardly attacks seem to be a habit of yours."

"Scum!" shrilled Sha-Topat. "You dare address the High Priest of Raa in that tone? The penalty in Atlantis is death for anyone who insults or threatens a priest!"

NEPAH, HELENE and the two chieftains had hurriedly followed Ki-Gor into the room, approaching from behind the robed man.

"And will you carry out the penalty?" asked Nepah with a mirthless laugh. "That should be interesting. I watched our brother here send a band of would-be execu-

tioners scurrying for their holes earlier today."

Sha-Topat's head jerked about. His eyes narrowed viciously when he saw the officer.

"So you've come out in the open against me at last, have you, Nepah?" he spat. "This time you won't get off so lightly. I've scented out your sneaking intrigues before." His hands squirmed and worked in the folds of his robe. "I've been too soft in the past. I'll not make that mistake again."

Helene glared contemptuously at Sha-Topat, and then while he was still talking, stepped up on the dais and went to the Empress. With gentle strength she helped her to her feet, straightened her gown.

"You've deserted your post," the priest raged on. "And worse, you've let dangerous strangers penetrate into the heart of Atlantis."

"Dangerous?" mocked Nepah. "Dangerous to whom? Certainly not to the Second Empire. When the people hear his story, they'll hail him as a savior." The officer smiled bitterly. "Of course, how they will regard the holy servants of Raa after that will be something else again."

Sha-Topat seemed momentarily confused. He looked quickly from Ki-Gor to the Empress, taking short, nervous backward steps along the dais so he could better regard them.

"I've warned you against this renegade officer, Teeva," he said hoarsely. "A dozen times he has caused trouble. I know what's been in his heart all these years. He thinks to win the throne for himself, to trample over those who stand above him in rank and seize the crown, no matter if he tears the Empire apart doing it."

In a strikingly unpriestly gesture, he spat twice on the floor as though to clear a nasty taste from his mouth. He jabbed the air with his arms. "He's done for himself," he declared, "but by acting swiftly, perhaps we can save you, O Daughter of the Sun, from being destroyed by this terrible indiscretion."

Nepah watched the High Priest go into this act with sardonic amusement. "I suppose," he drawled, "that you mean no breath of this scandal must ever reach the ears of the people. You will see that everyone connected with it—excepting the Em-

press you are so loyal to—will disappear abruptly." He probed his cheek with his tongue.

"Exactly!" snapped Sha-Topat. "For the Empress' sake, it will be as if the whole thing had never happened."

TEEVA glided toward him, the strange dark fires swirling and twisting in her eyes. "How thoughtful and generous you've become," she said in a deceptively soft voice. "By your actions of a moment ago, I could have sworn you weren't my friend."

The sarcasm and the girl's look made Sha-Topat hesitate, but he quickly recovered.

"I don't deny that we're often at odds, Daughter of the Sun," he said smoothly. "And unfortunately I'm only a rough-handed priest instead of a courtier, too crude and direct in my anxiety to see Atlantis prosper, too thoughtless of court niceties. You should realize, though, my devotion to the throne."

His stern features struggled to take on a benevolent expression. He willed his twisting fingers to stillness and held out his arms to Teeva in a fatherly gesture.

"Why else, my Empress," he asked, "would I have rushed here if it weren't that I was terribly upset to learn of the danger into which you were being led? No wonder I was so upset that I forgot myself. My anger was not at you, but at those who would destroy you!"

Teeva snapped her fingers under his nose.

"You sing a pretty tune, my little priest," she said, clipping the words angrily, "You must think me a fool, though, to believe I could be wooed with such lies."

The yielding, helpless woman who had submitted so meekly to Sha-Topat's bullying had undergone a startling metamorphosis.

"This man whose life you are so anxious to take," she said, pointing at Ki-Gor, "happens to be an envoy from a lost branch of my people."

She pressed her face closer to Sha-Topat. She was like a sleek, well-fed cat arched to spring at some larger, duller animal.

"Do you understand me?" she de-

manded loudly. "While you and your cursed priests have kept us entombed here with your lies, in the outside world people of our own flesh and blood have flourished and grown."

Her red lips were drawn back to reveal her small, white teeth. Sha-Topat looked at her as though he were seeing her for the first time. And, indeed, this was a Teeva he had never suspected existed.

"Where I can barely muster enough men to officer a small slave army of blacks," she said, "he tells me of countless legions of pure-blooded warriors in his homeland. Look at him, Sha-Topat!" she commanded. "Can you find me a man in the Second Empire who is his match in size and strength? As to courage and skill in battle, your own skulking assassins can attest to those qualities."

Since Ki-Gor had told her none of these things, it was apparent that all her information came from Nepah. The jungle man glanced at the officer, wondering suspiciously just exactly what he had told the Empress when he entered her chamber alone. How much had he elaborated on the scant information he had gleaned from the White Lord? Could it be that Nepah was using both Ki-Gor and Teeva for his own ends?

BUT BY NOW the High Priest had recovered his tongue. "Oh, ho! So that's the vile trickery Nepah attempts on you?" He looked at Ki-Gor aghast. "Any idiot can see that this savage and his woman are *N'nunka's*"—the native word for "albinos"—"freaks he has bought from our enemies. A lost branch of Atlantis, indeed! As if such a thing could be possible." He gave a quick, harsh laugh. "Let us see how well this supposed brother understands the tongue of his fathers."

And turning on the White Lord, the robed man began to speak swiftly in the language of the long-dead First Empire instead of the Bantu dialect which he had employed along with the others up to that moment.

"You see," he said when Ki-Gor registered nothing at his words, "he doesn't understand a bit of it."

Nepah arched an eyebrow. "Then I suppose that also makes the Empress and me *N'nunka's*," he said wryly. "We didn't

understand you either—or have you forgotten, in your disturbed state, that except for a handful of your priests, no one in Atlantis can speak the ancient language? Like all other learning, it is reserved for the privileged few."

"You are excited, aren't you," joined in Teeva, "you who are always the calm master of every situation." Her voice dripped venom. "Well, you should be, because at high noon tomorrow on the very steps of your Temple I mean to present our visitors to the people of Atlantis."

She ran the tip of her tongue along her lips. It was a feline gesture of relish.

"I will tell them the truth about you 'holy' men. I will tell them what you tried to do today. Rage will unite them behind me—rage and the knowledge that a new glory dawns for Atlantis."

With a triumphant toss of her head, she stepped back, rested an arm on the massive, gold-worked chair.

"And before sunset tomorrow, an embassy will be on its way into the outside world to call my lost people to me."

Even realizing her complete ignorance of what lay outside Atlantis, Ki-Gor was amazed that Teeva should be so naive as to think that after centuries of independence any people would hurry to accept her domination. And Sha-Topat revealed a greater sophistication than the Empress when he seized on this same point. The High Priest had seen that bluff and deception had no effect on Teeva. That son of darkness, Nepah, had done his work too well.

"You're walking in a dream world," he said belligerently. "Should you carry out this crazy plan—which I promise you I'll never let happen—you'd be destroying the Second Empire and yourself in one stroke. Instead of being the conqueror, you'd find yourself the conquered!"

He stabbed a finger at Ki-Gor.

"Look at this man! Whatever his origins, he is obviously a savage, living on no higher plane of life than those two blood-thirsty blacks who pad at his heels. Open our gates to his kind and you'll see Atlantis sacked and looted, and a blonde barbarian will rule over the ruins, with you as just another one of his miserable slave girls."

His hands, never still, crawled and

twisted over the black folds of his robe. He hunched forward with the intensity of his rapidly hurled words. He reminded her of the vast Temple treasures, wealth dating back to the days of the First Empire. He spoke of the culture which had been kept unchanged since the ancient days. He spoke of their rigid caste system which had kept the same noble houses on top since the distant day they landed in Africa.

His voice softened. "Come now, my Empress, would you destroy all this merely because your youthful mind has been poisoned against me by a wild-eyed officer?"

There was a lengthening silence as Teeva looked at him.

"Tomorrow at high noon my people will learn the truth," she said in slow, precise accents. "It is a fitting time, the opening of the Festival of Raa, the Day of Re-birth."

SHA-TOPAT turned white with anger. Nothing he had said had swayed her. He actually shook for several moments, so violent were the emotions seething within him.

But he controlled himself finally, and in a surprisingly polite voice said, "I know when I am beaten, O Daughter of the Sun. Since your mind is made up, I will struggle against you no longer." He took a deep, sighing breath. "Harbor no bitterness against me for what I have said or done today or in the past. Though I may seem a harsh and willful man, believe me, I have always acted for what I believed were the best interests of the Empire. I will prove that to you now."

He stepped from the dais to the floor, bent his head to the Empress. Teeva and Nepah both were openly surprised by his complete surrender.

"You have wished to be rid of me, O Empress," he said quietly. "Actually, that is why you are taking this terrible step. Therefore, let me make you an offer: Don't do this awful thing and I promise you will be rid of me, finally and forever."

Hope flamed in Teeva's eyes. "You mean . . ." she said, letting the sentence trail away unfinished.

"I mean if it will prevent the destruction of Atlantis," he said hoarsely, "I will gladly destroy myself."

"No," warned Nepah. "This must be another of his tricks."

Sadness and weariness mingled in Sha-Topat's hard face. "How can there be any trickery when by midnight tonight you will have ample opportunity to assure yourself that I am dead," he demanded bitterly. "From here I will go straight to the Temple to prepare myself to meet the Great God Raa. At midnight I will offer myself up as a sacrifice."

He looked away into a far corner of the room. All arrogance and fight were gone from him.

"You may view my body then on the altar," he said thickly, "or—if you wish to withhold the last vestiges of respect from me—I can leave orders that my remains be borne here for your inspection." His eyes calmly met Nepah's. "Now can you think of any further ways in which I should abase myself?"

He failed to embarrass Nepah. "I'll believe you're dead when I see it, not before," he said flatly.

"He's not asking us to change our plans," Teeva told the officer. "I think, for once, he is speaking the truth. After all, if he goes back on his word, he'll only be gaining a few more hours of life which I meant to allow him anyway. If he doesn't die by his own hand, I'll go on and introduce our guests." She shrugged her shoulders. "We have nothing to lose."

Sha-Topat inclined his head again in the slight gesture of respect. He backed another two paces away from the throne, which brought him parallel with Ki-Gor.

"Wait!" Nepah called. "What about his successor? The priestcraft must agree to let you name the next High Priest. We won't be gaining a thing if we don't put one of our own men to clean out that thieves' den."

Sha-Topat glowered at this last demand, but offered no resistance. "In my helplessness, I must agree," he muttered.

"Very well, Sha-Topat," Teeva said. "Then there's no need for you to take up any more of my time. As soon as I'm notified of your death, I'll come to the Temple, appoint the new High Priest and dictate some major changes."

Ki-Gor found himself feeling almost sorry for the robed man. Sha-Topat hesitated awkwardly, seemingly bewildered by the swiftness of his downfall, by the lack of any shadow of sympathy on the Empress' face.

Teeva didn't give him another look. With a perfunctory wave of her hand, she said, "Nepah, see him to the door."

KI-GOR WATCHED TEEVA seat herself on the ancient throne of Atlantis. Her eyes were alight, her lips half-parted, and a curious cruelty was in her smile. Despite the woman's sheer animal beauty, the White Lord at this moment felt revulsion for her.

As representatives of a civilization that was flourishing long before other nations were even born, he had expected these people to be gentle, cultured, with their ruler an especially humane and enlightened leader. But he found himself in a harsher, far more dangerous environment than the fang-ruled jungle deeps.

For all her talk of freeing her people and restoring the Empire's glory, Teeva's unhesitatingly had agreed to continue her country's isolation if only she gained complete dominion.

Immersed in thought of her triumph, she was unaware of his scrutiny, until his deeply masculine voice recalled her.

"And what of us, O Teeva?" asked the White Lord. "Somehow we seem to have been forgotten in the bargaining."

She looked at him absently. "Forgotten?"

Nepah had come back in time to hear Ki-Gor's questions. Before the Empress could collect her thoughts, he answered smoothly, "Why, of course not, my friend!" He turned toward Teeva. "But let's not waste our time in more talk. The occasion calls for a celebration, the best food and drink in the palace!"

Ki-Gor didn't like the way his inquiry was turned off.

"We are ready to drop with weariness," he said. "But before we think of rest, we'd like to know whether you mean to abandon us as completely as you have your brave dream of a reborn Atlantis." Acid was in his voice.

Teeva showed displeasure at his frank-

ness. "I'm afraid I don't understand," she said stiffly.

"I believe you do," he retorted. "Your part of the bargain with Sha-Topat was to keep your people ignorant of our presence. I want to know whether you mean to give us safe passage out of Atlantis or exactly what fate we should expect."

The girl's mouth tightened. Once more Nepah intervened to answer for her, but his low, easy laugh was at variance with her look.

"Oh, ho," he chuckled. "I see now what he means. He thinks we might be ungrateful enough to have him quietly put out of the way, since he is no longer needed as a weapon against the priesthood."

He clapped the jungle man heartily on the back.

"Have no fear," he went on. "The Daughter of the Sun isn't one to trade two valuable gems for a worthless bauble."

Teeva's features relaxed, though the sharpness remained in her eyes. "Aye," she agreed. "Sha-Topat's life lost its value when you appeared. You doomed him, for the people would have slain him once they learned of the outer world. I'd be a fool to let myself be held by any promises made to him. I pretended to agree merely because suicide is by far the easier way of being rid of him. When he is out of the picture and I have full control of the priesthood, then I'll do exactly as I please."

Though the two meant to reassure Ki-Gor, the effect of their words was just the opposite. They were utterly without principles by his unyielding code, for once the White Lord gave his word on any matter, only death could keep him from carrying it out. But Teeva and Nepah were willing to adopt any course, ride before any wind which would bring them more swiftly to their objective.

"I see," he said, as though wholly satisfied. He had realized suddenly it would be better not to let them suspect how little he trusted them.

But inwardly he did some fast figuring. Even if Teeva had no notion of opening Atlantis to the outside world, he and his companions could be certain of good treatment for at least one more day, and probably for several days.

Politely, therefore, the jungle man asked that they be shown to sleeping quarters. The Empress seemed reluctant to let them go, but Nepah supported them by relating the grueling experiences they had undergone that day.

"They'll be quite safe, your majesty," he said. "I'll post some of my most trusted men to protect them during the night."

VI

BUT AS NEPAH LED THEM BY back halls to their rooms, the White Lord wondered whether the guards weren't cast more in the roles of jailers than protectors. He knew the same thought was in the minds of Helene and the two chieftains, but he saw no sense in fanning their fears.

The nervous and physical strain they had endured since morning had left them so bone-weary, that once Nepah had gone and they had relaxed, they were too tired to be very interested in the food which he thoughtfully had secured for them.

They were quartered in two small adjoining rooms. Ki-Gor chose for Helene and himself the room which contained the only door into the outer hall. The door had a heavy bar inside, which reassured Ki-Gor. Also, each room had a large window looking down on a stone court three stories below. The wall all the way to the ground was smooth and windowless.

Sleep quickly came to both of them, the light, wary napping of the hunted at first, but as their utter weariness asserted itself, they slid deeper and deeper into the nerveless sleep of exhaustion.

In the hours before midnight, Ki-Gor did rouse briefly twice. The first time it was a muffled cry from N'Geeso which brought him struggling up through layers of sleep. As the slurred, unintelligible murmuring continued, the jungle man realized the little chieftain was only dreaming of some battle or hunt, and he was asleep again before the 'pygmy' quieted.

The second time he was awakened by a mounting bustle and stir all about them in the palace. He blinked at the window, saw that it was still night. Then he raised on one elbow, listening. Slowly, he remem-

bered that Teeva was to go to the Temple at midnight, realized it would be typical of her to go with all the trappings of her station. With a sigh, he lay back again, and had no memory of the Empress' entourage leaving.

A deepening silence fell over the emptied palace. Outside Ki-Gor's door, the black guards relaxed. There was no movement in the shadowy halls except the eerie dance of shadows cast by the infrequent torches.

The two false alarms automatically made Ki-Gor less vigilant. That part of his mind which kept watch for danger signals grew less willing to accept alarms sent in by his senses. Like a sleeping animal, Ki-Gor's nose usually remained sensitive to the scents about him, his ears continuing to sift the night noises.

But the Empress' departure meant she had received the message that Sha-Topat was dead. Therefore, the jungle man felt he no longer had to worry about a murder attempt by the priestcraft, and Teeva would be too occupied for the next few hours to concern herself with her well-guarded prisoners.

Thus, lulled by fatigue and a false feeling of security, Ki-Gor failed to hear the faint scuffling noises outside his window. A dark, muffled shape slid down into the opening, balanced a moment on the window frame and then dropped softly inside. The rope released by the figure wavered and moved in the dim light.

Almost immediately the bulk of another man dropped into view, felt for the windowframe and moved inside. One after another they came in rapid order until eight men stood within the room.

They seemed untroubled by the blackness. The man who had first entered went swiftly to the door, satisfied himself that it was locked. He whirled, came back to the bed, motioning to the others with his arm. As though they had been carefully coached beforehand, one black remained at the window, another hastened to the door separating Ki-Gor's room from that of the chieftains, while the others advanced on the bed.

Ki-Gor was stirring now, muttering in his sleep, disturbed by the harsh scent of the men. Then abruptly he opened his eyes. The three men who had come to his

side of the bed were almost upon him.

HE STARED DUMBLY, blindly, for a fraction of time, his reflexes clogged by sleep. He saw the attacker nearest his head draw back his right fist for a blow. The mists in his brain exploded apart as he realized what was occurring.

The White Lord writhed with sudden violence and the blow missed, thudding into the bed. He started up, grasping for the naked knife he'd left beside the bed. As his fingers grasped the weapon, the three robed figures were on him, pounding at him with their fists, straining to batter him into quick insensibility. His knife was torn from his hand and fell to the floor.

Helene's fear-stricken scream tore at his eardrums. The sleeping girl was being snatched up by the three men on her side of the bed. Too bewildered to clearly understand what was happening, she only knew that hands were clawing at her in the darkness, locking cruelly over her arms and legs.

She tried to fight, but her strength was nothing against the brute power of the men. Terror seared her. She screamed again, and then a hand was clapped over her mouth and she felt herself rushed toward the window.

The men paused there, wrenching her arms behind her and lashing them together with a rawhide strip. One of them reached out the window, snatched in a rope from which dangled a leather harness. With lightning speed he slipped the straps over her shoulders, snapped the belt closed about her waist.

The same man gave a quick jerk on the rope, then the three of them shoved her out of the window. The harness cut into her skin and she swung dizzily along the face of the wall, feeling herself being pulled upward in uneven jolting tugs.

Ki-Gor was carried backward by the concerted rush of his attackers, bowled over before he could get his feet under him. The bed splintered and broke under their weight. His body was a pulsing mass of pain as knees and fists rained punishment on him.

A lesser man would have lain helpless, stupified by that brutal hammering. But

Helene's first scream had struck him like an electric shock as he fell backwards. The pain he felt was as nothing to the red fury against these murderous night-prowlers which that cry evoked in him.

A berserk roar burst from his lips. They tried to hold him, but they couldn't. All the insane, tearing might of his giant-thewed frame seemed to erupt at once. He flogged about the collapsing bed like a wounded python, tearing free of their frantic hands.

He used his forearms like clubs. He kicked one man half across the room and fought up to his knees. He was almost free of them when Helene screamed for the second time.

Prematurely, instinctively, he turned to go to her. And like savage wild dogs the men were on him again, pitching him forward onto the stone floor. By breaking his furious counterattack when he did, he lost all the ground he had gained. Once more he was under them, absorbing a terrible beating.

The sound of their battling filled the room. Ki-Gor was snarling and roaring like a beast, and though his attackers never once cried out in either hurt or rage, explosive grunts and odd, rasping sounds burst from their throats.

Then came wild shouts and a brief, furious clash of steel as N'Geeso and Tembu George plunged into the room, cutting down the robed man who tried to bar their entrance. The four men who had just swung Helene out of the window, whirled around, two of them drawing swords and running to halt the chieftains, the others rushing to help subdue the White Lord.

KI-GOR HAD FOUGHT to his feet again. He saw Helene being lifted upward outside the frame of the window. He smashed his huge fist into the face of the nearest black. There was the snap of bone and the contorted features suddenly collapsed and gave like jelly. The man gave a queer, disjointed leap and falling, began to flop underfoot like a beheaded chicken.

Men were clinging to Ki-Gor's back, his arms, his legs. A single thought was in his mind—to reach Helene before she was drawn from view. He plunged forward,

the strength of a bull gorilla in his charge. For one, two, three paces, he carried the whole mass of them with him.

Then they slowed him. In a frenzy of despair, he tried to fling them off. He crushed a man's throat with his bare fingers. But his legs were beginning to give under the strain, trembling beneath his. Like bursting flares, dazzling lights kept exploding in his brain as the murderous hammering he was absorbing took its toll.

Suddenly, they knocked his legs from beneath him. He went down under the mass. For an instant, they swarmed around and over him like ants about a stricken bug. Then lifting together, they heaved him up between them and rushed for the window.

He struggled fiercely, but at last they had the advantage they had sought, and they got him across the room. However, there were only four of them now, and when one of them had to release his grip to try to lash Ki-Gor's wrists, he tore free again. As soon as his feet touched the floor, his fingers closed on the nearest man and he reared to his full height, threw the robed black hurtling out of the open window.

The three remaining blacks leaped away from him, grunting like angered hogs, when they saw their fellow thrown to his death into the stone court. They knew then that they would never be able to get the White Lord into the harness dangling outside the sill. And assailing their ears was a rising clamor outside the door as Teeva's shouting guards battered at the thick wooden planking with some kind of improvised ram.

Immediately their reluctance to use weapons against him vanished. If they couldn't take him alive, at least they would chop him to bits before making their escape. From scabbards hidden beneath the folds of their robes, they snatched out short, thick swords.

They had the unarmed jungle lord hemmed against the window. There wasn't a chance he could get past them without sustaining a fatal wound. And behind him was a sheer three-story drop. The faint, cold sheen of starlight falling on their greasy, sweaty faces revealed the bestial rage which gripped them. The insanely stubborn white man had frustrated their

carefully laid plans. They hungered for his death.

But his strange calmness, his utter lack of fear held them at bay for a moment. And that moment was time enough for twin devils to smash out of the darkness behind them screaming, "Kill! Kill!"

Accustomed to no more than a pretense of resistance from black men, the night-raiders had been confident that their two swordsmen could dispatch Tembu George and N'Geeso, or at least hold them at bay for as long as was necessary. Too late, they discovered that the Masai and Pygmy chieftains were of a different mettle than the men of Atlantis. With the skill garnered from innumerable battles in their attack, the chieftains had made quick work of their arrogant opponents, leaving them choking in their own blood as they leaped to Ki-Gor's assistance.

TWO OF THE THREE raiders threatening Ki-Gor died before they could make a move. N'Geeso's spear sheared open the belly of one, and Tembu George cut the whole top of the skull away from the other. The third man's eyes started from his head. He gurgled with terror and bounded toward the window, slashing at the White Lord.

The jungle man jumped aside. The black made no attempt to strike at him again. The man was intent on escape. He leaped for one of the ropes down which he and the others had come, dropping his sword as his hands reached for it.

The momentum of his body swung him far outward away from the wall. Like a startled monkey, he skittered upward on the rope, straining to get beyond reach before he should swing back.

And his frantic efforts were successful, for though Ki-Gor sprang up on the window sill, as the rope swayed back he found that the black was safe inches above his fingers.

With a snarl, Ki-Gor caught the rope, looped it about his hands. He swayed back, bracing his feet against the ledge, drawing the rope taut. Great muscles writhed into a tortured outline across his bowed back, strained out along his arms. An agony of effort contorted his features. It seemed his heart must burst with the terrible effort

he laid on it.

Then all at once the rope gave, snapping inward with the violence of a released rubber band. The White Lord staggered back and would have fallen when he landed in the room if Tembu George's hand hadn't steadied him.

"Help me hold it!" he cried.

The chieftains caught the slack which lay curled over the sill. Hurling down past the window, his face frozen with fear, came the raider who had tried to escape. He was still gripping the rope, his muscles bunched with the effort of climbing.

Ki-Gor and his two friends braced themselves, withstood the shock as the rope snapped taut a few yards from the window. Miraculously, the raider managed to hold on, but his desperate efforts to save himself were expended in vain. Past the window shot the flailing body of one of the hitherto unseen blacks who had been anchoring the line on the roof. He had been foolish enough to tie several loops around his waist and Ki-Gor had dragged him over the edge.

As the second black fell, he clawed at the man on the rope, wanting to cling to anything which would break his death-plunge. He tore the raider away from the line and like grappling cats they plummeted downward.

Then as though a giant whip had been snapped, they came to the end of the rope. The one who was securely tied gave a huge bounce and lay joggling and spinning in mid-air. The other black, though, was torn free and dove on head first into the stone courtyard.

Withstanding the arm-tearing jolt, Ki-Gor and his companions waited for feeling to come back into their strained muscles and then drew their limp catch up to the window. They had stretched him on the floor and cut the constricting line away from his stomach when the door crashed open and guards came stampeding into the room.

THE CHIEFTAINS and the White Lord sprang up, ready for battle. Many of the guards carried torches and as they saw the grim, dangerous faces of the three men at the window, they halted.

"Hold!" cried their leader. "We fight

for you, not against you." His glance took in the crumpled forms of the dead raiders. "Are you outlanders mad, not to open the door so we could aid you?"

Ki-Gor's eyes were grey steel. "There was no time for that," he snarled. "But if there had been, how could one tell in this place of treachery that your swords wouldn't be against us, too? You're Teeva's guards, aren't you? Well, this has all the mark of her doing."

The tall, scarred guard leader looked astonished. He pointed at one of the lifeless raiders.

"Those are Sha-Topat's devil men," he exclaimed. "Even you should know that. He has spies among our men in the palace, yes, that's how he knew so quickly the room where you slept."

"I hardly think Sha-Topat is interested in us anymore," declared Ki-Gor. He was still tense, ready for trouble. Did the fools think he didn't know the High Priest was dead?

The guard leader shook his head in exasperation. "Have your own way, then," he said angrily. "Since by some miracle the devils seem to have brought harm to no one but themselves, I won't argue with you."

"*To no one but themselves?*" shouted Ki-Gor. "You blind toad, they kidnapped my wife! While you're babbling here, she may be dying!"

Shock ripped the black's countenance. By the stern laws of Atlantis, his life would be forfeit for losing so valuable a prisoner.

"But how . . ." he began. Then he saw the rope. He ran to the window and leaning far out, stared upward. He whirled back toward his men, shouting orders that sent small groups of them sprinting for a half dozen different stairways to the roof, sent runners to alert the skeleton force left behind in the palace by the Empress.

His frantic reaction swept away Ki-Gor's growing suspicion that Teeva was behind the plot.

"Of all times to have this happen!" cursed the native. "There are a thousand rat-holes in this stinking ruin for them to disappear into and there aren't a hundred men in the palace to use in our search."

"That's why I hauled this one in," explained Ki-Gor, pointing to the unconscious raider. "It won't take long to bring him around, and by all the gods, I swear he'll talk fast about where they are taking Helene or I'll break every bone in his body. If we act swiftly enough, we can trap them before they get out of their robes."

The guard shook his head impatiently. "You wasted your time," he said. "Shatopat makes certain his devil-men won't betray him."

He stepped closer to the senseless raider and with a brutal jab of his spear butt, forced open the man's lax jaws.

"His trained killers are all this way," he said.

Ki-Gor looked into the thick-lipped mouth and his face tightened. He understood why the raiders fought and died in silence. The black's tongue had been cut out. Later, he was to learn that the priests took the children of slaves and deliberately moulded them into beasts of prey, bringing them up in a cult of terror and death.

"They must have wanted you and your wife badly, though," the guard went on, "to strike so openly and recklessly. They usually risk no chance of failure."

Ki-Gor's hopes of trailing Helene had been fastened on the prisoner. "He doesn't need a tongue to lead us," he gritted. "We'll make him do it."

But even as he spoke, the supposedly unconscious raider flipped over on his hands and knees, leaped between N'Geeso and Tembu George like a great frog and dove out the window.

"If it hadn't been that way, it would have been some other," said the guard with an irritating matter-of-factness. "They always kill themselves when they are certain there is no escape. He wouldn't have helped you, no matter what tortures you used."

THE WARRIOR'S AIR of resignation infuriated the White Lord. If he had known how the prisoner would react, why hadn't he spoken up sooner. Instead of trying to help, he seemed convinced that Helene was irretrievably lost. Despite his lament about how few men he had to use in the search, he had kept a

dozen guards in the room with him, letting them stand idle while he babbled his defeatist talk.

"Well, don't just stand here!" cried Ki-Gor. "We've got to do something! Take us up to the roof and let's try to follow their spoor."

The guard leader's eyes glittered warily. He stepped backward two strides so that he stood among his men.

"Oh, no," he said grimly. "I'm taking no chances of losing you, too. You're staying right here where you'll be safe. It's hard on you, I know, but that is the way it's going to be."

Ki-Gor balanced on the balls of his feet, his big fists knotted, weighing his chances to get past the hard-faced warriors.

"Don't try it," the man warned. "You'll only force us to tie you up."

Ki-Gor slowly relaxed. "All right," he growled. "You are too many for me. But at least stay out in the hall, so I don't have to see you loafing while my wife is being carried to her death."

Tembu George and N'Geeso blinked at the White Lord in amazement. They had been ready to sell their lives in cutting a path open for him to the door. Never would they have guessed that he would back down at such a moment.

It seemed at first that the guard leader would deny the jungle man's request, but after glancing at the shattered door and seeing that it couldn't be closed again, he nodded agreement. Ki-Gor stood motionless while the warriors filed into the hall. The leader had taken a place where he could watch the White Lord.

"What's wrong with you?" demanded N'Geeso. "Surely, you are not just going to stand here?"

Ki-Gor turned his back to the door so the guards couldn't see his lips move.

"Of course not!" he said gruffly. "Now listen closely. You and I are going to fake an argument. I'll accuse you of not coming to my aid quickly enough. You get mad and stalk into your room, saying you won't stay and listen to my lies. In a fit of temper, I'll throw this rope after you so it will land in the doorway, out of sight of the guards."

N'Geeso pricked up his ears, sensing almost immediately Ki-Gor's plan.

"Then while I walk around in here and

hold their attention, you take the rope and lengthen it with strips of cloth from your mattress. Anchor one end of it to the frame of the bed and drop the other out the window."

Tembu George's eyes flared with eagerness. "Good, good!" he rumbled. "Once out of this accursed palace, we'll turn the city upside down."

In another minute, Ki-Gor and N'Geeso were exchanging angry words, realistically carrying out their mock argument. Suddenly, the pygmy cried he would hear no more of the White Lord's insults and flung into the next room. In an apparent excess of rage, Ki-Gor scooped up the loosely coiled rope and threw it after N'Geeso. Then he began pacing up and down, furiously telling Tembu George how stupid and useless the pygmy was. He paused once to recover the sword and knife he had lost in the fight, return them to their sheaths at his waist.

After sufficient time had passed for N'Geeso to complete his work with the rope, Tembu George said loudly enough for the guards to hear, "Perhaps he was in the wrong, but still we've got to stick together at a time like this. Come now, let's make it up with him."

He went on in this conciliatory vein until at last the White Lord stopped his pacing. "I guess you're right," he said. "It's being cooped up here that made me say those things. Let's go get him and bring him back in here."

Still talking, they walked together to the doorway separating the two rooms. The bed was braced against the window. The mutilated mattress lay on the floor. N'Geeso had already disappeared down the rope.

"Go quickly," Ki-Gor whispered to the Masai leader.

Then in case the guard should grow suspicious and look in from the hall, the White Lord leaned against the doorjam in plain view and began an awkward, rambling apology to the non-existent pygmy supposedly sulking in the room.

Tembu George hurried to the window, grasped the rope and disappeared from view. Ki-Gor watched the rope stretched across the sill and the moment the strain on it relaxed, he ran across the room and started down the swaying line.

VII

THE DEMONIAC FURY WHICH had possessed the High Priest of Raa on his return to the Temple now was subsiding. The final harshly snarled order was given, the last frightened underling sent running. The die was cast. Sha-Topat could do no more.

So with the unshakable confidence of a man who has never known defeat, he reviewed for a moment as he sat alone all he had done in the past few hours and allowed himself a nod of approval. Though the tension which attends any struggle of magnitude was still with him, he was well satisfied with his plans.

He slowly became aware of his thirst, and reaching out to the silver wine container on the great, rectangular table behind which he sat, he poured a bowl-like silver cup to the brim. Lifting the cup with both hands, he emptied it with deliberate gulps. He drank without any particular sign of enjoyment. Wine would quench his thirst and renew his strength, and for that reason alone, he took it.

He had nothing but contempt for the weaknesses of ordinary men. He played on those weaknesses. His hands tightened on the empty cup. Only that accursed Nepah had been immune to his lures. He had tried to tempt him from his trouble-making by offering honors, position, riches. Then he had tried threats. All attempts had failed.

Underestimating Nepah had been one of Sha-Topat's few mistakes. He usually drew men of that type into the priestcraft while they were young, or failing that, he saw that some "accident" befell them the moment opposition to his regime began crystalizing around them.

But even in that, Nepah had outsmarted him. Despite evidences of unusual ability, he deliberately had assumed a docile air until he had won the friendship and loyalty of the Imperial Guards, and strangely enough, the confidence and affection of the common people. He had made himself a hero to them, an always accessible benefactor, whereas the rest of the nobility looked on them as dirt.

Thus, when Nepah at last felt himself strong enough to oppose the priestcraft, he was too much a public figure for Sha-

Topat to dispose of easily. The High Priest had chosen a more devious way. By exerting pressure on Teeva, he had gradually reduced Nepah's power in the palace and the army, edging him out of affairs, reducing him in station on first one trumped-up excuse and then another, until at last he had had the Empress send him to the frontier on permanent assignment. Public blame had fallen on Teeva instead of Sha-Topat for the officer's unfair treatment.

Sha-Topat had thought he had the man hopelessly pocketed, and was waiting for the army and the people to forget him before contriving the "accident" which would dispose of him permanently.

Yet he realized now that Teeva and the young upstart had been in contact all the time. They had wanted him to think he had won. They had been hatching some plot, exactly what he couldn't say, but it was bound to have some connection with the sullen unrest growing among the people the past few moons. Not even the bloody efficiency of his night raiders had been able to crush that unrest.

The two outlanders, Ki-Gor and Helene, hadn't inspired this plot against him. They were merely convenient tools which fate had provided Nepah and Teeva. Aye, those two had played it smart all along, but the guiding brain had been Nepah's.

A COLDLY VENOMOUS look glittered in Sha-Topat's yellow eyes. Yes, he had been too complacent for once, too contemptuous of an enemy. But they had brought him to his senses tonight.

What fools they were to think that he, Sha-Topat, would ever surrender so abjectly. Well, they both were in for a shock.

The eerie bass bray of the giant trumpet in the main altar room was beginning. To civilized ears, it would have sounded like the dismal wailing of a foghorn. To the people of Atlantis, it signaled the presence of the Great God Raa in the Temple, told that his living spirit was speaking with the priests.

Sha-Topat raised his head and listened to the slow, measured braying. "The voice of the God," he thought. "That's actually what it is to the people." His lips curled in contempt.

He pushed away from the table and stood up.

"I am their god and the fools don't realize it," he abruptly cried aloud. "I am Raa! And that sniveling pair thought I would give up my power!" With a sweep of his hand, he knocked the wine cup across the room.

He still stood in the same position when a scarlet-clad priest, his fat face pale with anxiety, came hesitantly through the door. Sha-Topat gazed fixedly at the man, noting the beads of sweat gathered on his hog-like jowls.

"So they are coming, eh?" he said.

"They can be seen from the steps of the Temple," fluttered the priest. "From the number of torches, the whole Imperial Guard must be with the Empress."

In the face of the man's nervousness, Sha-Topat seemed to grow calmer. "You are quite the roaring lion, Nabu, when you're torturing a prisoner or flogging a Temple girl, but you aren't so brave when your precious person is in a little danger."

"But a single slip, All-Highest," gabbled the fat man, "and we'll all be slaughtered."

Sha-Topat laughed mirthlessly. Moments like this proved why he was the master and these others his servants. Like pale spiders his hands crept back and forth along the edge of the table. An almost sensual pleasure throbbed in him.

"Without me, what would happen to you jackals?" he asked pityingly. But in his heart was pride, not pity. "Come! Let us prepare to meet our guests."

He strode out of the door, his black robe flapping about long legs. He hurried down a narrow corridor to a gallery overlooking the main altar room. Standing two deep along the walls of the dark gallery were heavily armed native warriors. From this height they could command any part of the main temple floor with their weapons. The High Priest paused, fingering the stone railing as his yellow eyes checked the scene below. The fat priest, Nabu, hovered restlessly about him, like an awkward beetle unable to decide where to alight.

SHA-Topat's glance started at the back of the huge chamber, passing along the kneeling rows of priests, each in the distinctive color of his order. In the pauses

between the deep, eerie brays of the great horn, the sorrowful wailing of the men could be heard.

In the front rank before the altar were ranged, as befitted their high station, those priests who wore the scarlet robes. Only Sha-Topat held greater authority. They were the men who offered blood sacrifices to Raa, who actually picked the victims and wielded the knives. When they walked abroad, men blanched with fear and women hid themselves, for they were guided by the basest motives in their selection of victims. Nabu was the chief of these executioners, a lustful, sadistic man who reveled in the liberties which his job allowed him.

The altar itself was a huge crystalline slab, faintly gold in color. But it possessed a property stranger than its color, for being porous, it would slowly absorb the blood spilled on it, shifting in hue as it drank, until it too became a deep, ugly red.

This drinking of blood by the stone was regarded with awe by the people, doubly so since always when they returned to the temple the next day, it had regained its original golden color and was as translucent as ever. "The God has drunk and been nourished by the blood of his victims," the priests would say. About their trick of washing the pores of the stone clean with water, they said nothing, and since no one but a priest could approach the altar close enough to inspect it, none of the superstition-ridden worshippers had ever thought to doubt the explanation.

And on the altar now, newly slain, lay a native, his warm blood filtering into the heart of the stone.

Standing behind the altar was a tremendous upright statue of Raa, a golden colossus dominating the entire room. This one towering figure was the only actual statue of Raa permitted in Atlantis. Except in the Temple, only the Sun-Symbol could be worshipped.

The massive idol was expertly wrought but it was no representation of beauty and goodness. The ancient craftsmen who had fashioned the giant had caught in metal all the ugly brute powers, the lustful greed-crazed emotions, the repressed evil of mankind. Naked and hideous and sickening, magnified and exaggerated a

thousand-fold, the Beast-In-Man was the diety before whom the degenerate Second Empire of Atlantis knelt in trembling worship.

From an opening in the ceiling above the idol protruded the mouth of the great horn, fully ten feet across at its widest point.

"Good!" said Sha-Topat. "They'll never suspect a thing until it is too late." He led the way to a circular staircase, started down. "Remember, Nabu," he warned, "hold them at the door until the trumpet is stilled. That will be the signal that my hunting dogs have returned with the two outlanders."

"But suppose the Empress pushed past me?" quavered the distressed Nabu. "You know how headstrong she is."

The High Priest snorted in disgust. "Not even Teeva would dare interrupt the Prayer to the Dead. Why else did I gather all the priests and set them to chanting, if not to make it possible to hold her as long as necessary. She'll be able to see my body on the altar from that door so she won't mind a slight delay, and it won't be more than that, for the outlanders will be rushed here through the underground tunnels on zebras, whereas Teeva has taken the round-about route through the city in her litter."

The priest ran a fat hand over his wet face. He bit his lip as though he had pains in his stomach.

"Suppose our men fail!" roared Sha-Topat. "I planned this myself. There'll be no blundering this time!"

THEN THEY WERE at the bottom of the steps. Two priests, their arms filled with gear, awaited Sha-Topat. He hurriedly tore off the robe he was wearing.

One of the men advanced with a vest-like garment of leather which Sha-Topat donned. As he buckled it tight about his chest, he looked down and smiled, his good humor restored.

The hilt of a ceremonial sword and some five inches of blade stuck straight out from his chest. The trick knife was fastened to the leather vest, making it appear that the High Priest had stabbed himself. In addition the odd garment was shaped to allow room inside so that he

could breathe almost normally and yet at the same time hide the rise and fall of his chest.

Next he slipped on a magnificent black and gold robe which one of the men held open for him. But when the robe was fastened about him, the whole chest of it was disclosed to be wet with blood, the blood of the man slain on the altar. A small slit in the front of the garment allowed it to fit snugly down over the fake sword.

"Now the powder," said Sha-Topat. "I must look the part. But be careful not to whiten my beard."

As they carefully applied a grey-white pallor to his face, he frowned, looked about inquiringly. "Where's that ridiculous idiot, Tal? He hasn't been forgotten, has he?"

A small, mincing figure hesitantly detached itself from the far shadows of the room.

"I—I'm here, All-Highest," Tal stammered. "But when your men rescued me from Teeva's guards, they wouldn't say why you wanted me. You—you aren't angry with me?"

"You aren't important enough to be angry about," snapped the High Priest. "Just don't wander away!"

Tal looked about him apprehensively. "All this bustle—what does it mean? Is there going to be any trouble?"

"No, no," said Sha-Topat shortly.

"But me—why do you need me?" persisted the narrow-breasted little man. He knew something dangerous was afoot and he didn't want to be involved in it. His meeting with the white savage had been harrowing enough to last him a lifetime.

"Because, you little jackal, I mean to make you Emperor of Atlantis this night!" growled Sha-Topat. "Now stay out of the way until I call for you."

And with that, the High Priest strode into the main Temple. The priests ran ahead of him and lifted the dead native off the altar, carried him away. Sha-Topat climbed up on the reddening stone, lay down on his back, with his head turned toward the door.

In the uncertain, shifting light of the torches which illuminated the Temple, his sprawled black form with the knife hilt protruding from the chest made a realistic

enough corpse.

Rushing back from disposing of the dead native, Nabu stopped before the altar to inspect his master. A grudging smile of admiration wreathed his fat lips.

"By the bowels of the god himself," he swore, "I never thought until now that it would work, but I'll even believe it myself when I see you come back to 'life'. Teeva's guards will dissolve into jelly when they see this 'miracle'."

WITH SUDDEN CONFIDENCE, Nabu turned and scurried toward the door. He was standing on the outside steps, a sorrowful, dejected figure when Teeva took Nepah's arm and stepped from her litter.

Surrounded by brawny guards with drawn swords, Teeva and the officer hurried up the steps. Nabu moved in front of them, opened his arms wide.

"By Sha-Topat's last order, I stand here to receive you, O Daughter of the Sun," he said shakily. "He said you might wish to view his remains and commanded me to oblige you."

"Then he is really dead?" asked Teeva.

They stood on the top step. Nabu turned and pointed through the dim Temple toward the altar. "You can see him there, he who was both father and son to me."

"Pfaugh!" declared Nepah. "You've never had a kind feeling toward anyone but yourself." He inspected the priest suspiciously. "Well, take us on down to the altar," he said impatiently. "From this distance, that could be anybody lying down there."

"In a thrice, we can go, O noble Nepah," said Nabu humbly, "but you wouldn't want to interrupt the Rites to the Dead. It would be an affront to Raa. The chant is almost ended."

"You priests had the rest of the night to carry on your gabbling," muttered Nepah. "There was no rush about this ceremony. He will be dead for a long time."

But despite his grumbling, both he and Teeva waited outside the Temple. Religious taboos which have been observed since childhood are not easily broken. The strong force of guards stirred restively as the eerie chanting of the priestcraft rose and fell, and the unearthly roar of the great horn thundered out into the night

like the voice of doom. As Sha-Topat had known, the chanting and trumpeting would wash against the guards like a poisoned wind, whipping up their superstitions and fears, reviving their awe of Raa and his servants.

"Patience!" Teeva soothed the officer. "Since this is the last time Sha-Topat will ever obstruct us in anyway, I can wait quite happily. There is a pleasure in hearing his death chant."

Within the Temple, a red-robed priest entered from a side door carrying a jeweled wand topped with a golden sphere. He approached the altar and turning his back toward the door, made ritualistic passes of the wand over the supposed corpse. His real mission was to tell Sha-Topat that the raiders had returned with only Helene, and if Nepah could have seen the man's frightened face, he would have known something was wrong.

It had taken the priest quite a time to gather up enough courage to tell Sha-Topat that Ki-Gor hadn't been captured. And while he had delayed, a second message had come from the palace, relayed by one of the priestcraft's spies, telling that Ki-Gor and the two chieftains had gotten away from Teeva's guards and disappeared into the city.

Sha-Topat's face swelled with rage when he heard the report. But it was too late to stop the machinery he had set in motion, and since his own life hung in balance, he forced himself to remain calm.

"We will go on as planned," he said grimly. "But get Teeva and her warriors into the Temple quickly and close the doors behind them, so no messengers from the palace can reach them."

His yellow eyes glared into the priest's cringing ones.

"And the instant we are finished here," he said fiercely, "turn out every available man, priest and warrior alike, to hunt down that white savage. If he isn't killed or captured by sunrise, I'll see that one-third of you jackals are put to the sword."

Then arranging his face into a mask-like calm again, Sha-Topat dismissed the priest. As the man retreated into the ranks of his red-robed brothers, the braying of the great horn suddenly ceased, and a fraction later the chanting of the priests chopped off.

THE MAN who had just left Sha-Topat thrust his jeweled sceptre high. "Mercy, O God of Atlantis!" he cried, his voice ringing loud in the hushed Temple. "Desert us not in our hour of need! Strike terror among those who would defile your Temple and defy your holy edicts!"

And swelling up from the crowded ranks of the priests came the cry: "Hear us, O Raa! Hear us, as you always have!"

In the utter silence which followed this demonstrations, Teeva stood stunned for a moment. Then her eyes blazed and anger ripped the calm of her face.

"Did you hear those dogs?" she exclaimed to Nepah. "At a time like this, they dare defy me! By all the gods, they'll suffer for this last insult. And I'll guarantee it will be their last one!"

She shoved Nabu aside and stormed through the door. Nepah waved the ranks of waiting guards into the Temple. "Protect her," he ordered and he ran to walk by her side.

Under ordinary circumstances, the warriors would have gone leaping forward of their own accord to clear a way for the Empress and shield her with their bodies. But now, even with a direct order, they obeyed slowly and hesitantly. Fear of the god and the merciless priests who served him had had time to rise in them during their wait outside the Temple.

The priests moved back, leaving the center of the Temple open. None of them looked at Teeva, or showed any awareness of the armed men marching toward the altar. Standing in utter silence, they kept their eyes focused on the black form sprawled at the feet of the golden idol.

The line of red-robed priests before the altar stood firm as Teeva approached, forming a living barrier between her and Sha-Topat.

"Out of my way, you carrion!" she burst out at them. "Your master there should be an example of what happens to those who oppose me."

When they didn't budge, Nepah stepped in front of her with a curse, sent two of them reeling out of the way. His face dark with blood, he whipped his sword free of its sheath. This final arrogance of the priests infuriated him.

"Back," he snarled, "or Raa will have

more than his fill of sacrifices."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the thunderous bray of the great horn shattered the air. The monster instrument roared through the Temple like a voice of doom, shaking the very stones of the building. Again and again that gargantuan blast of sound rolled and reverberated, growing ever louder and more unearthly.

Moans and cries of fear broke from the assembled priests. Teeva's guards looked nervously about them, disturbed by the feigned terror of the robed men, wondering at the significance of the trumpeting.

Sword in hand, Nepah stiffened. He knew too much about the priestcraft to be taken in by their display of superstitious dread. But what was the purpose of their play-acting? What could they hope to gain by this further angering of the Empress? He half-turned, searching the floor of the Chamber with narrowed eyes.

Then he felt Teeva's fingers clench tightly on his arm, heard her queer, strangled cry. He jerked about, thinking some threat had come from the red-robed men. But the priests were standing transfixed, their eyes bulging, their faces shocked and unbelieving as they stared at the altar.

Nepah looked at the blood-soaked stone. For a moment, his breath caught in his throat. The dead man on the altar had rolled over on his side and with blind, awkward and incredibly slow fumbings was trying to get up!

SHA-TOPAT'S eyes were glazed and blank. The awful pallor of his skin added to the natural gauntness of his face gave him a grisly, realistic look of death. His motions at first were the futile, mindless twitchings of a broken machine trying to start.

The black warriors saw how the whole front of his robe was a red wetness, how from the very center of the once-gold sun-symbol on his chest, protruded the sword, the visible guarantee that he couldn't be alive.

And yet he was alive, or coming alive! Yes, that was it: This dead man was coming alive! That terrifying thought seared the minds of Teeva's guards. *The*

Great God Raa was forcing life back into the body of the High Priest!

While the trumpet thundered and the priests wailed and screamed and prayed, Sha-Topat fought to his knees. He still seemed sightless, utterly without knowledge of anything or anybody.

His hands searched the air. Twitches of pain jerked the blankness of his face. His mouth opened and closed as though motivated by an agonized want for air, and yet as the blacks could see, there was no movement of his chest to indicate that he was breathing.

Teeva, herself, shrank back. "Look at him, Nepah! Look at him!" she gasped. "How can it be?" A moan escaped her lips.

And as she spoke, the awful, nightmare figure on the altar reeled on upward to his feet, swaying, sagging, seemingly in danger of collapsing any moment.

Sha-Topat tilted his head back, his glazed, staring eyes fastening on the ceiling. Slowly, as though drawn by invisible strings, his arms crept upward in supplication. He seemed to grow and strengthen as if taking energy from some unseen source.

Abruptly the roar of the trumpet ceased. "He lives! He lives again! Raa has given him back to us," shrieked a priest.

"It is a sign," cried another. "The god has sent him back to save Atlantis from its enemies."

"Aie-e-e—!"

One of the red-robed priests whirled and stabbed a finger at the Empress' party. "Down on your knees, False Ones, before Raa sweeps your rotten souls into oblivion. You and your evil leaders are the ones the god rejects!"

Nepah blinked like a man suddenly coming awake. "Why you dirty tricksters," he shouted.

All about him terror-stricken guards were dropping to their knees, writhing and moaning abjectly. They knew that Teeva had ordered the High Priest to destroy himself. And they saw now how Raa himself had raised up Sha-Topat's blood-wet corpse, and in a miracle of miracles, had restored life to it. To their simple minds, there could have been no more terrible, no more damning rejection of Teeva's authority and ambitions. The god himself had spoken out against her!

A FRENZIED WILDNESS shook Nepah as he realized what was occurring. He, who always was so calm and sardonic, seemed to go insane. Screaming incoherently, he leaped for the altar, jabbing and slashing with his sword.

But the red-robed priests had been warned to watch him. The instant he moved, they leaped forward like a pack of dogs. It was a good ten steps to the shoulder-high altar and the agile officer covered it with darting speed.

For all the alertness of the priests against just such a move, Nepah almost reached Sha-Topat. If he hadn't disdained the use of stairs built on either side of the altar, he probably would have been successful. But he chose to vault up on the stone from the front. Under ordinary circumstances it was a jump he could have made easily, but chance directed that he should put his hands on a section slippery with blood.

Instead of lifting himself easily over the edge, his arms slid from under him and he thudded against the side of the altar. Before he could leap again, the priests were clawing at him. Like a madman, he fought free of them. He saw, though, that his opportunity to reach the High Priest was gone.

He could have turned his sword against the red-robed pack and wreaked dreadful havoc before they bore him under. But his one flaming thought was to cut down Sha-Topat, prove to Teeva's guards the trickery being played on them. He unhesitatingly gave up all chance of defending himself against them to seize on a last fleeting hope of driving his blade into the hated man's flesh.

As he tore away from his attackers, he grasped his sword like a javelin. There was no time for careful aim. A priest was diving for his legs even as he threw.

"Let's see Raa send you back this time," he cried.

He was falling then, but his burning eyes were still glued to the glinting streak which marked the course of the sword as he went down. The distance was too far for the blade to drive true. The weighted hilt had time to drag downwards.

And thus, when the sword struck Sha-Topat's chest, it didn't hit him point-first with the full weight of the throw plunging

it straight in. The lower edge of the blade hit him, and then as it encountered the resistance of the thick, hard leather jacket, the whole momentum of the weapon was transfixed into a downward lash of the heavy hilt. The sword tore free of the leather as the hilt struck the High Priest's leg.

The force of the blow sent Sha-Topat staggering back, but the sword fell harmlessly at his feet. The concealed leather jacket had saved him from injury. And best of all, Teeva's guards thought they had witnessed a second miracle.

As warriors, they knew that the sword blow, even though glancing, had had enough force behind it to lay open an ordinary man's chest. Yet the edge had bitten into Sha-Topat, bounced away, and he was no worse for the experience. Clearly, the hand of Raa was upon him. He had been brought back from death once and now he was beyond hurt.

SHA-TOPAT TURNED his back on the crowd. He raised his arms in thanks to the idol. Then he dropped his hands to the sword hilt sticking from his chest, tugged the fake weapon free. His position and his guarded motions kept the audience from actually seeing the blade and he immediately cast it down on the floor behind the altar. Before turning around again, he intoned a prayer to the god.

Swiftly now, life and expression came back to the High Priest. His eyes blazed out at the assembled throng. He pointed an accusing finger at Nepah who was being held face-down by a mass of red-robed men.

"I lay the eternal curse of Raa on this man," he declared, "and on anyone who from this time on dares cleave to him. I decree his death on the altar tomorrow. When I went into the arms of Raa, thinking that by sacrificing myself, I might save Atlantis, the full evil of this traitorous dango was revealed to me.

"And from his throne of flame, the god spoke to me in a voice that shattered the heavens: 'As a sign of my power and my wrath, I shall send you back,' he said, 'to cleanse Atlantis. And from the lowest person in the land to the highest, let my punishment fall on all those who have con-

spired against me and my holy servants'."

Sha-Topat turned his fierce visage on Teeva. She was pale and shaken by the bewildering turn of events. But she had no fear of bodily harm at the hands of the priestcraft. Not even Sha-Topat would dare slay the last descendant of the blood-line which had ruled Atlantis since beyond the memory of man, the line which had supposedly been sired by the Sun-God himself.

"And you, O blind and foolish woman," he said, "let Nepah lead you into a vile plot against your people. I thought by my death to shock you to your senses. In shame, you should go down to your knees and cry that you repent. Let the people hear how in your youth and innocence you let yourself be ensnared in the web of this traitor. Tell them that your eyes have been opened by the god tonight and that it is your wish too that Nepah pay the penalty for his crimes!"

The wily High Priest was careful not to place Teeva in the same category with Nepah. He made her seem a victim rather than a partner of the officer. And he left her a way out of her difficulties by the simple expedient of denouncing Nepah and admitting she had been victimized.

Sha-Topat knew only too well how completely self-centered the Empress was, how shallow were her loyalties. Like most selfish persons, the principal basis of her friendship revolved on how much a person could advance her personal interests and ambitions. He had provoked her into abandoning many supposed favorites in his time.

Teeva saw that her cringing guards were useless, or in her mood, she would have turned them loose on the priestcraft. She realized that this was the final and deciding moment in her long struggle with the High Priest. If she capitulated now, she was forever lost. Therefore, in her desperation she grasped for the only weapon left her.

"If it's a confession you want," she cried shrilly, "let it be about the two white outlanders in my palace—about the two envoys from another and great colony of my people beyond our walls who have been lost to us since the First Empire's ruin!"

There was no beauty in her face then

as she shook her clenched fists at the hated man of the altar. He must have lost his wits to think she wouldn't use this last means of destroying him.

"None of your tricks can sweep those two away," she went on. "When I bring them before the people, we shall have a confession! Yes, a confession from you of all the things that a greedy priestcraft has denied them!"

SHA-TOPAT WANTED to throw back his head and laugh. But he restrained himself, kept his expression aloof and severe.

"I fear, O Teeva," he said condescendingly, "that the trick has been played on you already by Nepah. Those two weren't whites. If you remember, he never let you see them in anything but a dim light."

"Not whites?" she screamed in outrage. "We'll let the people decide that in the morning."

"Why wait?" he said. "Why not decide now?" He clapped his hands three times. He went on talking smoothly. "You see, my dear, native witchdoctors have many tricks. One of them is to prepare a solution, any color desired, which dries on a person like a second coating of skin. It will last several days without beginning to peel—*unless it is scrubbed off.*"

He then turned and looked toward the small door to the left of the altar. Through it came two burly blacks roughly pushing and shoving the jungle girl. Helene was before them. But she was a startlingly different, an almost unrecognizably different Helene from the girl Teeva had seen a few hours before.

Teeva stared speechlessly at her. Instead of a fair-skinned, red-haired white woman, this captive being forced into the Temple had jet-black hair and the dusky, earth-brown skin of a high-born native girl.

At first, the Empress couldn't understand. Did Sha-Topat think he could foist this wench off as the outlander? The outlander? The High Priest read her thoughts.

"Look more closely," he said with sly satisfaction. "The freak color of this black baggage's eyes is unchanged, the lines of her impudent body are the same. Those features, so much like a white per-

son's, are the reason she was selected by Nepah for her role."

The black guards had dragged Helene up on the altar while he talked. They kept her arms twisted behind her, brutally punishing her, muttering warnings that they would snap the bones if she dare speak a word.

"Yes, this is your 'white' woman," he said so all might hear, "with the false whiteness scrubbed off with nothing more complicated than a brush and warm water!"

Teeva's limbs were trembling. "You—you devil! You've changed her!"

"Nepah was the one who changed her," he stated coldly. "I show her as she really is. If you had faith in your god, you'd never have been taken in by this tawdry scheme. Raa made us, and us alone, white! O weak and foolish woman, never again can you have our trust!"

Teeva was like a frightened animal at bay. They were all against her, all condemning her. "The man—where's the man?" she demanded, hysteria edging her voice.

With wild hope, it had suddenly occurred to her that the High Priest would be showing Ki-Gor, too, if he had been able to capture him. Everything would be all right if Ki-Gor were still safe in her palace.

"The man is white," she went on. "Why don't you show him?"

"Unfortunately, Raa did not see fit to deliver him into my hands alive," snarled Sha-Topat. "He is dead, cut to ribbons. I hardly think anyone but you would care about having his remains gathered up in a basket and brought in for display."

HIS LIPS above the bristling black beard twisted scornfully. "Before he sent me back," he continued, "the god said he would deliver them over to me, one dead and one alive, and he did just that. And he spoke into the minds of these two simple slaves, telling them exactly how to wash the girl clean of her false color and deliver her here as I awakened."

He turned to the two guards, demanding of them to say whether it had been as he described.

"It is true, master," they said, speaking the lines they had been taught. "We

tremble yet."

Never deigning to look at Helene, the High Priest waved his hand in dismissal. "Take the wench away," he said. "She will die with the traitor—or do you wish the people of Atlantis to believe that you yourself were the leader in this awful treachery."

Teeva knew what he meant. Either she humbled herself before the priestcraft and denounced Nepah, or he would make her the goat of the whole affair. She envisioned his priests spreading their lies through the city, parading Nepah and Helene as exhibits, using her own guards to relate how an angry Raa had brought the holy, self-sacrificing High Priest back to life to save Atlantis from its vicious ruler.

It was possible that he might whip the people into such a frenzy that they might try to storm the palace. Teeva's nerve shattered. She must save what she could from the wreckage. A few words spoken and she would still be safely seated on the throne of Atlantis.

"I—I see now what a fool Nepah has made of me," she began, her voice trembling. Her eyes avoided the officer. "He must have cast a spell on me! I thought I could make Atlantis strong and rich again by aiding him. But I realize he was betraying us all."

She looked shrunken and old and ugly as she deliberately lied to save her own skin.

"If he learned one witchdoctor's trick," she went on, "he must have learned others equally as vicious. I was his main victim." She had to try twice before she could manage the final sentence. "Praise Raa for lifting the blindness from my eyes in time—and—and I give humble thanks to you, Sha-Topat, for . . ." Her voice trailed away. She couldn't finish the last bitter words.

But she had said enough to suit the High Priest. From now on, everything would be easy. Teeva would never again be more than the merest figurehead, a puppet utterly dependent on him.

He announced that the Imperial guards would remain in the Temple until dawn praying to Raa for forgiveness. "I will return then to speak the god's judgment on you," he added. "You have committed acts

of arrogance against the sacred persons of the priests and you must atone for these acts."

Then with the guards effectively immobilized, giving his own men an opportunity to search the city for Ki-Gor unhampered, he had only one last matter to settle with Teeva, the matter of her marriage to his creature, Tal. That could be better worked out in private, and he knew that it would take only a few hard, flat threats to make the Empress agree to accept Tal immediately.

"You have publicly repented, Teeva," he said loftily. "Let us retire to a private chamber and together seek to assuage the wrath and grief of your father, The Sun-God."

As he strode confidently from the altar and started for the door, the badly-shaken girl meekly followed him. Nepah followed her with hurt and angry eyes. Not once did she look at him. He didn't resist as the guards led him away to a cell to await his hour of death.

VIII

KI-GOR WAS TWO-THIRDS OF the distance to the ground when the sudden clamor above him told that his escape had been discovered. Without breaking his swift descent, he looked up. Two warriors thrust their heads out of the window from which he had just come, bellowed excitedly to their fellows.

Almost immediately the rope gave a violent jerk. The blacks were hauling him upward. He let himself slide dangerously fast then, letting the rope burn his fingers, risking a slip which would dash him to the courtyard.

Below, he heard N'Geeso's alarmed curse, Tembu George's angry bellow. Their voices told him he was losing his race for freedom. The guards were hauling him upward so swiftly that even though he would reach the end of the rope in another second he would be too high above the ground to let go. Then like a hooked fish, he would have to dangle helplessly to the end of the line while they pulled him in.

But the two chieftains weren't about to let him be recaptured. "Hold tightly!" warned Tembu George, and then he and

the pygmy were running outward away from the building, ripping their bows free of the thongs which fastened them to their backs. When they were far enough out in the courtyard for the men bending from the window to make good targets, they spun and began to feed arrows into the opening, slashing them in over the sill with deadly accuracy.

Ki-Gor heard one of the Bantu guards give an agonized scream. The upward movement of the rope ceased. For the barest fraction of time, though to the White Lord it seemed an endless interval, he hung motionless.

Then with sickening abruptness, he was plunging toward the ground. The rope was still gripped in his hands, but he had the sensation of falling free. N'Geeso and Tembu George had driven the guards away from the window, forced them to drop the rope.

Down and down he fell, skimming frighteningly close to the rock wall. And ten feet above the ground, just as he felt he was hurtling to his death, the slack in the rope gave out. The tremendous strength and skill acquired through years of tree-travel acrobatics kept him from being snapped off the line or battered senseless against the wall.

He gave his numbed arms and shoulders a moment to regain feeling. Then he slid down the remaining few feet of rope, dropped lightly to the ground. The chieftains kept lashing arrows into the window until he reached them.

"This way!" he said, sprinting toward a narrow archway. "Those half-witted guards will be glad of the excuse to switch their chase from the raiders to us. Every man in the palace will be on our trail."

They raced through the arch, down a walk and into another and larger courtyard. The indistinct grey shape of wall rose in front of them. By its height, Ki-Gor guessed it to be the outer palace wall.

A hundred yards to their right they heard running footsteps and a hoarse voice called to them to identify themselves. One of the outer guards had been alerted by the uproar in the palace. Without breaking his stride, Ki-Gor ran straight for the wall. Reaching it, he stopped, ordered N'Geeso to join crossed hands with him.

"You first," he told Tembu George, and as the Masai leader stepped up on their hands, they catapulted him upward with all their strength.

WITH A SLAP of his big hands, the chieftain caught the edge of the wall, whirled himself to the top. It was a maneuver the three had executed many times in their adventures. Because of the Masai's great weight, it took the combined efforts of both Ki-Gor and N'Geeso to lift him over any high barrier.

N'Geeso went second, because Ki-Gor could fling the pygmy upward without assistance. The White Lord went last, since he alone of the three had both the agility and flashing power to get up without being boosted.

As soon as N'Geeso was safe, the White Lord backed off from the wall, judging the height. The guard had located them now and was pounding forward, roaring the information to other men on watch nearby. The iron-nerved Ki-Gor seemed unconscious of his danger, but in truth he knew he would have time for only one attempt and he forced himself to be calm and make it right.

He took one, two, three short measured steps. Then he was driving head-on at the barrier with terrific speed. As he neared it, he gave a tremendous leap, and his legs pistoning, ran straight up the face of the wall.

Above him, Tembu George leaned forward, his whole body rigid with anxiety. Up and up Ki-Gor came, and then all at once it seemed, his momentum was gone. Inches below the the Masai's outstretched right hand, the invisible grip of the earth halted him. He wavered, started to skid downward.

Then for a fraction of time, his toes dug into a rough place on the stone. He plunged his arms upward and caught Tembu George's wrist just as his footing broke from under him. Grunting with strain, the Masai and the pygmy hauled him over the edge.

"That was too close," gasped Tembu George. "We won't take a chance like that again."

Ki-Gor sucked a great breath into his lungs. "We made it, didn't we?" he growled. "Come on!" He caught the far edge of

the wall and dropped to the ground. The two men followed him.

They were in a narrow, deserted street. In the darkness, a grey confusion of stone buildings stretched away on both sides of them. They were far more confused in this alien environment than they would have been in a stretch of trackless, uninhabited jungle.

"By the black beard of Gimshai," swore N'Geeso, in his despair unconsciously speaking his thoughts aloud, "in this rabbit warren how can we ever find her? How can we know where to go?"

Though Tembu George shared the feelings of the more emotional pygmy, he had kept silent, waiting for the White Lord to take the lead. And now, watching the dim outlines of Ki-Gor's face, a chill came over the black giant.

"We will find Sha-Topat," the jungle man said, and his voice was abnormally flat and toneless. "After that, I believe we'll be able to find Helene."

And hearing him speak, not for all the riches in the world would either Tembu George or N'Geeso have changed places in that moment with Sha-Topat. No longer did they have any doubt in the final success of their search. They were three men alone in a city of treachery and death, and henceforth every man's hand would be against them, but the two blacks knew that somehow, someday, the White Lord would bring them to the High Priest.

AS THEY STARTED down the empty street at a run, Ki-Gor's sensitive ears picked up the first faint, distant pulsations of the great trumpet in the Temple. Neither of the black men heard it. It didn't take him long to decide that at this hour of the night the sound could only mean that a religious ceremony of some kind was in progress.

Fortunately for Ki-Gor, fear of Sha-Topat's raiders kept the people of Atlantis in their homes during the dark hours. Except for dodging an occasional patrol of searchers from the palace, he and the two chieftains were able to thread their way through the rutted alleys of the city in comparative safety. And the clank of weapons and armor always warned them of the approach of guards.

By the time the trumpet fell silent, Ki-

Gor had the location of the Temple firmly fixed in his mind. After that, no matter how often he had to retrace his steps out of streets with blind endings or streets that twisted off at crazy angles, an animal's sense of direction always set him right again.

Two hours after leaving the palace, he reached the immense Temple of Raa. It was by far the greatest building in Atlantis, and even in darkness the huge tiers of stone pyramiding upward, the massive columns, were enough to give pause to those who thought to challenge the priestcraft's power. This building and the evil caste it symbolized both had survived for thousands of years.

The Temple was surrounded by a broad plaza. The sound and glint of armor and weapons told the White Lord that Shatopat's personal guards stood watch around the building. Though he said nothing to the chieftains, his heart sank. The minutes drained by while he studied and restudied the scene, his mind grappling futilely with the problem of passing the guards.

It was a cool night, yet sweat beaded his forehead, broke out over his body. He felt a terrible, soul-rending responsibility for every wasted minute. The torture of knowing Helene was in the hands of the priests while he hid in the streets like a frightened, helpless cur was unbearable. He had to fight the crazed impulse to fling himself at the guards. His whole body cried out with the desire to kill and rend, to seek in frantic action some release from the pressure which threatened to burst his mind.

Yet of his inner feelings, Tembu George and N'Geeso guessed nothing. He seemed like a rock of confidence to them, a guarantee that all would be well. They despised themselves for moving nervously, fretfully, when he showed no least sign of anxiety.

Then near the right corner of the building a square of light suddenly appeared. A door had opened. Through it flooded robed figures—the devil-raiders! Scores of them carrying torches came pouring into the plaza, breaking into squads of five and scattering out toward the different streets which came up to the Temple.

4—Jungle—Summer

Ki-Gor saw many of the squads head for the narrow street where he was hidden. The shallow doorway in which he and the chieftains stood would be a death-trap if the raiders caught them there. He didn't realize yet that these squads were being sent out for the specific purpose of finding and killing him.

"Back down the street!" he warned.

HE SPED ALONG, seeking a place to hide. The block was a long one, with the houses jammed wall to wall so that there were no alleys which offered escape. He glanced back, saw how swiftly the raiders were crossing the plaza. He couldn't let them trap him now.

His eyes searched desperately along the building fronts, stopped on one house with a roof far lower than the others. He halted the two blacks in front of it.

"Our best chance is to get on the roof," he told them, "and lie low. They'll spread over every street around here in a few minutes."

His hands were swiftly exploring the house wall as he talked. The mortar had crumbled away between stone blocks, leaving narrow toe and finger holds. He and N'Geeso boosted Tembu George up to the low roof, using their crossed hands as they had in scaling the palace wall. Then he tossed N'Geeso up and the Masai caught the little man's wrists and pulled him to safety.

Ki-Gor himself climbed the face of the wall like a monkey scampering up a bluff. The raiders were half-way down the block when he pulled himself over the edge, fell flat beside the chieftain.

All three of them held their breath, wondering if they had been seen. But the robed men sprinted past without hesitating. For several minutes squads of raiders kept going by, their only sound being a swift brush of bare feet. Then came groups of priests, muttering among themselves at being sent out on such a hunt.

Ki-Gor caught enough snatches of their conversation to know definitely that Shatopat was very much alive. "They search for us," he told the blacks. "It's lucky we got this close to the Temple when we did, because they naturally won't expect us to be hiding on their own doorstep."

With the acid of impotent rage eating

at his vitals, he listened to the footsteps of the priests dying away and despised himself. In the quiet, he lay with his face pressed against the roof, and the darkness hid from Tembu George and N'Geeso the fact that his fists were knotted, his arms rigid with the effort of hiding his true emotions.

After a time, he heard the soft, quick shuffle of bare feet in the street below. He raised up, straining his eyes to distinguish the three figures trotting from the city. They were three of Sha-Topat's devil-men returning from some mission apart from the great hunt just launched.

He started at them, hating them in that moment as he had never hated anyone before. And then suddenly, unexpectedly, there flashed full-born in his mind a desperate idea.

He turned to the chieftains. His voice lashed them to their feet. "Stop those three with arrows!" he said.

THEN HE FLUNG HIMSELF flat, twisted his legs over the edge of the roof, and finding a toe-hold, climbed downward toward the street. The raiders were nearly abreast of him as he reached the ground. At such close range, they could see his white body clearly.

They stopped dead, startled for a moment. One of them gave an explosive grunt of recognition. Then as one man, they wheeled toward him, tearing their swords free.

There was a rapid "thump, thump" as though two ripe melons had been burst apart by twin hammer blows. N'Geeso and Tembu George had driven their first arrows home almost simultaneously.

The black in the center flung up on his toes, the whites of suddenly bulging eyes gleaming like twin moons. He stumbled backwards and fell. The man on his left was spun half-around by the arrow that took him in the chest, lurched three crazy steps down the street, dropped to his knees and crawled another two yards before sprawling on his face.

The third raider had whirled when he heard the arrows blast into his companions, sprinted toward the Temple. He ran with straining speed, knowing if he could get a short distance from the bowmen his black robe would merge with the darkness.

He hadn't gotten twenty paces when their arrows caught him, tumbled him head-first into the gutter.

When the chieftains reached the ground, Ki-Gor already had stripped the three raiders of their hooded robes. "Put these on," he ordered. "They'll get us into the Temple, if anything will."

He gave the largest robe to Tembu George and even then had to open some of the seams across the back and under the arms with his knife so it would fit over the Masai's barrel chest. He fitted the pygmy by the simple expedient of cutting off the foot and a half of excess cloth which piled up around the little man's feet. Ki-Gor's own robe fit him reasonably well.

He disposed of the corpses by tossing them on top of the low-roofed house. The chieftains' spears and bows followed the bodies, for it wouldn't do for them to be armed with any weapons other than the short swords and daggers used by the raiders.

Then the three of them in single file, with N'Geeso bringing up last, so the two larger men to some degree could hide his smaller stature from view, started for the Temple. They had their hoods pulled well forward to hide their faces.

They didn't hesitate as they reached the plaza. They moved boldly out into the open space at a dog-trot, with Ki-Gor in the lead. Along the edge of the Temple harness glittered as several edgy guards moved out to view them.

The sight of the black robes apparently satisfied the guards for no hail came, and after staring a moment, the men drifted back to their stations. Since the raiders were tongueless, Ki-Gor knew he wouldn't have to give a password or undergo any questioning. But the problem that worried him most was whether there was some particular procedure for entering the Temple.

He had to gamble on getting in the same door through which the men hunting him had flooded. He had its location roughly placed in his mind. As he neared it, he saw that an armored guard stood wide-legged before the closed door.

His nerves tightened when the man merely stared at him, giving no evidence of budging. Yet still the White Lord kept

on, holding the same course. And then at the last instant, as Ki-Gor's fingers were curled to grasp his sword, the man partially turned and struck the door with his spear.

AS HE STEPPED ASIDE, the door swung open. A yellow-robed priest stood revealed in the lighted passage. "Now what?" he said, his bloated face surly with annoyance. Then he saw the three robed figures waiting. "Well, get in here, you stupid dingoes," he snarled. "Don't keep me standing here all night."

Keeping his head well down, Ki-Gor pushed quickly past the priest. Tembu George and N'Geeso were close at his heels. The door banged shut.

"Wait!" cried the priest.

Ki-Gor turned. The priest was staring at N'Geeso, his little red eyes measuring and remeasuring the pygmy's slight stature. There were no men that small among the night-prowlers.

"You! Let me see your face!" he commanded.

But it was Tembu George, not the pygmy who whirled and threw back his hood. "Aye, master," he said. He took two lightning steps toward the man, his hand still poised above his head, holding the hood away from his face. "Surely you know me?"

Horror carved the priest's rotten features. His mouth flew open to scream. Tembu George was too swift for him. The Masai brought his doubled fists crashing down on the man's skull, and as he sagged forward, the huge chieftain caught him, hit him another fearful blow at the back of the neck.

With Tembu George lugging the dead priest, they hurried on down the corridor. At the first stairs they encountered, they threw the body on the lower step, hoping to make it look as if the man had killed himself in a fall.

A half dozen times they dodged out of sight to keep from encountering priests or guards. But at last, realizing they were doing nothing more than losing themselves deeper and deeper in the priestcraft's hive, Ki-Gor decided they would have to capture one of the robed men and take the risk of making him lead them to Sha-Topat.

He remembered from his encounter with Sha-Topat in the palace throne room that the red-garbed priests were the elite, so therefore one of them would better be able to help them pass the High Priest's personal guards. Not two minutes later he sighted a paunchy man in scarlet hurrying across an intersection a hundred feet in front of them.

"We'll come up behind him," he told the Masai and Pygmy. "But don't hurry. We mustn't attract attention."

AND SO THEY BEGAN to stalk him through the silent, shadowed corridors, drawing up behind him with painstaking caution. But when they were almost within striking distance, he turned suddenly into a side passage. When they reached the turn, he had disappeared.

Along the left side of the passage were three open doors. Signaling the chieftains to remain in the main corridor, Ki-Gor crept to the first door, found the room deserted. Then as he neared the second door he heard voices, one of them ringing a chord of memory.

"Ah, it's you, Nabu," the thin, overbearing voice was saying. "It's about time I saw someone with a little authority around here. By the flaming beard of Raa, do you priests mean to leave me sitting here until I perish of thirst and weariness."

"I'm sure you are undergoing great hardships, Highness," Nabu answered drily, "but by those two empty wine flasks on the table, I doubt that thirst is one of them."

Ki-Gor glanced into the room. The fat priest he had been following was walking toward a circular flight of stairs. The man whose voice Ki-Gor had recognized was Tal. The narrow-chested little man took a few steps after the priest, wavering unsteadily on his pipe-stem legs.

"Oh, by the way, my friend," Tal called, trying to make his tone unconcerned and failing completely, "what did you do with that—uh—that jungle girl? I strolled down to the women's prison awhile ago and she wasn't there."

The priest paused on the second step of the stairs, half-turned to appraise Tal. His round, red-streaked eyes glinted evilly.

"Forget her," he said softly. "She is

beyond your reach."

Ki-Gor's blood turned to ice.

"What do you mean?" cried Tal.

The red-robed man's thick, loose lips quivered in a smile. "She had the misfortune to stab a priest," he said, "when we were staining her skin brown. She gave us a good deal of trouble. We had to punish her."

Tal frowned stupidly. "But she looked all right when they had her on the altar. Not a mark on her."

The greasy smile spread over the priest's whole face. "Ah," he said unctuously, "but we waited until after that to punish her. You see, we threw her in the slave pens, those where we keep blacks captured in the gorge and in our night raids on outland villages. We told them she was an outcast temple priestess . . . one who had been responsible for much of their suffering, but who had now incurred the displeasure of Raa!"

He started up the stairs.

"I wonder if we'll find her alive," he added, "when we go to get her for the sacrifice tomorrow."

IX

KI-GOR'S MIND EXPLODED.

Brute, berserk rage shook him. He leaped into the room, and miraculously, a sword was in his hand.

In three great strides, he reached Tal. He struck him a single blow with the flat of his sword, hitting him across the side of the head. It was as if he were knocking an insect from his path.

Tal careened out of the way and fell full-length. He didn't move. His glazed eyes were wide open, but they saw nothing.

Ki-Gor was over halfway up the stairs when Nabu saw him. The black hood had fallen away from the White Lord's face. Nabu looked into that face and went dead-white. He threw up his arms, his flabby mouth flying open in terror.

And then Ki-Gor struck! He hammered the sword into the precise center of the priest's forehead, cleaving Nabu's whole face and head into separate halves. And the terrifying force of the blow carried deep into the evil man's chest.

The jungle man tore his sword free.

With quick strides, he retraced his way to Tal. He lifted the scrawny officer as though he were weightless, sped out the door and down the corridor to rejoin the chieftains. Tal was beginning to rouse when Ki-Gor turned into an open room.

"What happened to the priest?" asked N'Geeso.

"I killed him!" snarled Ki-Gor. "I'll kill them all!" He jammed his blood-wet sword back into its sheath. Then giving the alarmed pygmy no chance to question him further, he brutally slapped Tal to his senses. The chieftains had never seen him mistreat a man before. They watched wide-eyed as he grasped the terrified officer about the neck, throttled him to his knees.

"You'll lead us to her!" he commanded. "And if you ever hope to see another sun, you'll get us to her safely!"

Tal's legs threatened to give under him, but with fear this time, not drunkenness. His first look at Ki-Gor had sobered him. Patches of green mottled his pale face. He quivered and shook uncontrollably.

Ki-Gor pulled the hood over his head again, and grasping Tal by the back of his ornate sword belt, shoved the cowardly nobleman into the hall ahead of him.

Tottering, retching, but forced onward at a run by the iron hand gripping at his back, Tal led them down a series of stairways, along increasingly damp and narrow passages. Convinced that if they encountered trouble with guards he would be the first to die, he avoided every possible danger point.

At last, in the far depths of the Temple, he reeled against a corridor wall, begged Ki-Gor to listen to him. He pointed to a yellow bloom of light in the section ahead of them. Along the way they had come there had been only a scattering of charcoal braziers to illuminate the slimy passages.

"The slave pens are there, beyond the light," he panted. "There'll be guards. Many of them! I can't get you by them."

Ki-Gor's hand was at Tal's throat. "You will," he gritted, "or you'll die where you stand!"

"Listen to me," pleaded the nobleman. "You don't understand. They check every visitor. It's insane to think you can get into the slave pens, let alone get out with the girl."

The White Lord drew his dagger, slid it point-first up the sleeve of his robe. He had only to flick his arm downward and the blade's hilt would be in his palm. Seeing what he did, N'Geeso and Tembu George promptly followed suit.

"Take us to the one in command," he said flatly. "We'll do the rest."

A DOZEN GUARDS were scattered along the corridor. Beyond them was a great barred door. The tortured sounds and the stench that drifted past that door left no doubt that it closed off the slave pens.

Despite Tal's fears, the heavy-eyed guards, weary and bored as their long night shift dragged near its end, hardly glanced at the four newcomers. Neither Tal nor black-robed night raiders were any novelty to them.

Tal went past the first four guards, turned right, into a small, cell-like room. A yellow-robed priest sat behind a table, his head dropped forward on his chest, snoring softly. After one glance at him, Ki-Gor took a deep breath of relief.

"Close the door into the corridor, Tembu George," said the jungle man softly, "and stand beside it." He had N'Geeso walk behind the priest and clap a hand over his mouth.

The robed man jerked upright, his eyes flying open. N'Geeso set him back down with a thud. Ki-Gor flicked his hidden dagger into his hand.

"We have come for the girl," he said. "Tal is going to call in one of your guards. Tell him to take me to her. Say Sha-Topat sent us to get her."

Ki-Gor gestured with his knife, his grey eyes freezing the priest.

"N'Geeso will stand behind you, his knife at your back," he continued. "If you so much as stutter, he'll kill you. And while I'm in the pens, N'Geeso and Tembu George will stay here to guarantee that I get back safely."

"Do what they say. Please!" quavered Tal. "They're worse than Sha-Topat's killers. I know them, I tell you!"

In a matter of moments, the great door had swung open and the White Lord was inside a cavernous room. Water dripped from the ceiling and the floor was slimy with filth. The stench which hung in the

dead air was choking.

In the gloom, he saw the blacks huddled about the walls. The only sound in that vast room was the hoarse, murmurous breathing of the prisoners. At first he thought they were sleeping. But as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he could see that every head was turned in his direction. Like animals, they crouched there in the shadows and watched.

"All right, you carrion," cried the guard with Ki-Gor, "where's the girl?"

THERE WAS MOVEMENT in a group of prisoners near one of the torches. Someone was slowly getting up. He heard the words, "Here I am." It was Helene, struggling to keep her voice from trembling.

"You go get her," said the guard. But Ki-Gor was already striding toward her. He felt as though a knife were being rapidly stabbed into his brain.

Then he was in front of Helene, his fear-crazed eyes searching her. He let the hood slide far enough back so that she could see his face. "What have they done to you?" he said brokenly. "My darling, my Helene."

Helene had seen the dark-robed figure advancing and thought she was to be taken to the altar for sacrifice. Then suddenly the man was before her and his face was Ki-Gor's.

She couldn't speak, couldn't move. Ki-Gor was dead! She had heard Sha-Topat say that. They had killed him.

And yet here in the stinking depths of the Temple was Ki-Gor, speaking to her.

"She is unharmed, white man," rasped a Bantu voice.

Then sanity came back to her. It was her mate! Words rushed to her lips and her hands went out toward him.

"Don't touch him or speak," warned the same Bantu voice. "The guard watches!"

She checked herself in time. "Thank you, Molaki," she murmured. "May your gods bless you for the help you've given me this night."

The black's answer was a rasping whisper. "Do not be misled, woman. I have only hate for both you and this man. I had my men protect you because it frees me of my debt to this white devil!"

"And now you are free to kill me, is

that it?" asked Ki-Gor gently, remembering Molaki's angry pledge when after his capture, the jungle man had intervened to halt mistreatment of the prisoners and get their wounds dressed.

"That's right," the black declared. "I know you shouldn't be here, that the priests are hunting you. The ones who brought us from the gorge were talking about it."

His legs had been badly cut when he was captured. He sat with his legs extended in front of him. His eyes were feverish.

"I could call out to that guard now and you'd be a dead man," he went on. "But I'm going to wait until you start toward the door, or maybe until you are just stepping through the door." He looked up at Ki-Gor, his lips drawn back from his teeth. "Then I'll call out. Then I'll have my vengeance."

Ki-Gor drew the hood back around his face. "Very well, Molaki," he said. "No matter what you do, you have my undying gratitude."

AND THEN grasping Helene roughly by the arm, the White Lord led her across the room. Still grumbling at Ki-Gor's slowness, the guard moved ahead of them toward the door. Helene was tense, expecting every step to hear Molaki's betraying cry. She caught up with the guard, reached the door and still the Bantu hadn't called.

Then suddenly Ki-Gor raised his knotted right fist, sledged the guard on the back of the neck. The man collapsed without even a grunt. The White Lord caught him before he hit the ground, hefted him over his shoulder and trotted back to Molaki, saying simply, "Wait!" to Helene.

The Bantu struggled to his feet, a bewildered frown on his hard features.

"You didn't give us away," said Ki-Gor.

The black shook his head. "I wanted to," he said, "but I couldn't do it. I thought how precious freedom would be to me."

Ki-Gor smiled. "I didn't think you would. Quickly now, get your men up. You are going to have a chance at freedom." Urging them to silence, he told them his plan.

He gave Molaki the guard's sword. Then with the aroused prisoners massed at his back, he went to the door, and mocking the unconscious guard's voice as well as he could, he hammered on the door, crying, "Open up! The wench is giving us trouble!"

The guards never knew what hit them. As the door opened, Ki-Gor and Molaki cut down the first two men. Then like water from a burst tank, the prisoners drove out of the slave pen and engulfed the other armored men.

Few of the guards even had time to draw their swords before a maddened, screaming mass washed over, clawing them down by sheer weight of numbers. Those that survived were thrown into the slave pen, and their priest leader followed them, after Ki-Gor had made him lead them to the separate cell-block where Nepah was imprisoned. For once in his life, Nepah was neither calm nor sardonic. Tears of joy ran down his face.

Ki-Gor kept Tal with him, made him take them to one of Sha-Topat's armories, where the newly freed prisoners obtained swords and javelins. After that, they swept like a swift dark tide through the Temple corridors, capturing or killing priests and guards as they went.

A score of guards were drawn up outside the chamber in which Sha-Topat laid down the hard rules of his victory to Teeva. The sudden appearance of Ki-Gor's makeshift army almost took them unawares. But they were picked men, hard and fearless, and they held their ground before the door.

When Sha-Topat heard their cries of alarm, he burst out of the room. His eyes almost started from his head when he saw Ki-Gor and a horde of filthy, wild-eyed barbarians smashing at his guard. He staggered back a step, his white hands clawing and twisting over his robe.

"No!" he shrieked. "How can this be?"

He spun then, darted back into the doom, slamming the door behind him. With a bellow of sheer animal rage, Ki-Gor struck against the line of guards. The sight of Sha-Topat was the lash of whip to him.

The guards broke apart before the blonde-maned madman. He burst through the gap in their ranks and in one great

leap had reached the door. He flung it wide just as Sha-Topat sped through an arched opening in the back of the room.

KI-GOR DROVE past Teeva without seeming to see her. Through a narrow hall and down twisting stairs he hurtled in pursuit of the long-legged High Priest. Sha-Topat was armed, a drawn sword gleaming in his right hand. But the last desire he had in the world was to face the raging jungle man in battle.

He reached the huge chamber, raced toward the altar screaming to the kneeling guards to save him. The shocked guards came up in a mass. But they had no chance to reach the High Priest before Ki-Gor did.

As Sha-Topat reached the Altar, Ki-Gor was on his heels. The High Priest whirled, slashed wildly at the jungle man, knowing he could run no longer. His one hope was to keep the White Lord from mounting the altar long enough for the stunned guards to reach him.

He might as well have tried to ward off a thunderbolt with his sword. Ki-Gor battered his way up the steps without even pausing. All the accumulated hate and anger of that long and awful night had flamed in his mind when he saw Sha-Topat.

He drove the frantic High Priest back to the center of the altar. He lunged forward and slashed open the front of Sha-Topat's robe. Immediately, he was back again, seeking for the opportunity to plunge his blade to the hated man's heart. Two more close strokes and the whole upper part of the priest's garment hung in tatters.

The leather vest he wore was revealed. In the center was the metal catch where the fake sword had been held. And lower down was the gaping cut where Nepah's sword had struck him.

Ki-Gor's eyes narrowed when he saw the leather vest. Then, his mouth twisting with contempt, he leaped forward, beat Sha-Topat's sword aside and drove the point of his blade through the gash in the leather.

He stabbed with such violence that he plunged his sword up to its hilt. Sha-Topat shuddered, horror contorting his face. He dropped his weapon and stiff-

ened. Ki-Gor stepped away, his features pitiless.

Sha-Topat went down slowly, his hands scrabbling the air. He kept opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water, but no sound came out. Then he slid to his knees, leaned forward and toppled on his face. One violent spasm shook him and the High Priest of Raa was dead.

Ki-Gor came to his senses gradually. He looked about him and blinked. Crowded all about the altar were Teeva's guards, staring strangely at the dead man. They made no move to harm Ki-Gor.

Through the door at a run came Tembu George, N'Geeso, Helene and Nepah. He understood the attitude of the guards very soon then, for Nepah leaped to the altar beside him, harangued them savagely for having let Sha-Topat fool them. He had Ki-Gor walk down among them so they could see his skin was truly white. Then he showed them in the close light of the altar how Helene's hair had been dyed and her skin stained.

"Now that you are warriors again, cleansed of stupid fears," he said, "lead us back to the palace."

BUT TEEVA HAD APPEARED as he spoke. Like a pale shadow, Tal hung close to her. "Let us avoid all the bloodshed we can," she urged. "Tal knows the priest underground passage to the palace. Let us go that way and we won't lose any more men through battle with the bands of priests roving the city. The priests will have to deal with me now, so we can get everything we want without fighting."

Nepah looked surprised, but he agreed her request was reasonable, so trailed by both the guards and the released prisoners, they sought out the tunnel. In half an hour they were in the throne room of the palace. Teeva's first move was to send messengers calling all available warriors in the Empire to mass for her protection. Then she had food and drink brought for the prisoners Ki-Gor had freed.

The White Lord waited until the starved men had eaten. Then he approached Teeva.

"You wanted two things," he said, "to break the hold of the priestcraft on your subjects, and to establish contact with the

people and the plenty of the outside world."

Teeva stirred nervously, her eyes seeking over the chamber.

"Your first desire has been achieved," Ki-Gor went on. "Now let us speak of the second one. My friends and I are ready to leave Atlantis, and I would advise that you send a mission with us to gather information on . . ."

Teeva abruptly straightened. She didn't let him finish.

"I am sorry," she said curtly, "but neither you nor any of these prisoners are leaving Atlantis. I am prepared to be generous with you. You may live here as free men." She leaned forward and stared at him. "But none of you can ever leave."

"But you said . . ." began Ki-Gor.

She cut him off again. "I know what I said—but I didn't mean it. It was the best reason to give you to get your help against Sha-Topat."

Ki-Gor couldn't believe his ears. "What of the lost colony you and Nepah were so anxious to regain?" he asked.

"There is no lost colony," she said coldly. "We know we are not the only whites in the world—that is, those few of us who rule know that—but the people are taught differently. It makes them more content with their lot."

Nepah had stood silently, shamefacedly as the Empress talked. Low-voiced now, he said, "But Teeva, these people saved your throne for you. You can repay them this way. You must let them go."

"Must?" she said. "Never again will there be anything I 'must' do!"

Ki-Gor drew a deep breath. He had taken all he intended to take from Teeva. "If we can't go with your approval," he stated with slow emphasis, "we will go without it. And we are starting now!"

She smiled mockingly. "Oh no. By this time, the palace is overrun with warriors, and Tal has instructed them to let no one leave."

"That traitor?" cried Nepah. "You put him in command? By all the gods, this is more than enough. You betrayed me, deserted me in the Temple, and I tried to pardon you because you were my Empress."

He was trembling with emotion.

"Did I fight and slave to rid Atlantis

of one tyrant," he demanded, "only to see another and more stupid one take his place? No! I thought the lot of our people would be improved. But it won't! It never will! I see that now."

He whirled on Ki-Gor, his face ashen.

"Come, I will lead you out of this accursed place," he said hoarsely. "She can't stop us."

TEEVA LEAPED from her throne, raced screaming toward the lines of guards along the wall. "Attack! Attack!" she commanded.

The guards hesitated, then sluggishly moved out from all four walls to box in the prisoners. Teeva sped toward the door crying for more guards from outside to enter.

The prisoners, suddenly alive to their danger, clustered about Ki-Gor and Nepah. The officer ran toward the back of the room.

"Break through these guards," he cried. "We'll reach the same tunnel by which I brought you into Atlantis."

The men surged after him. Ki-Gor, N'Geeso and Tembu George formed a shield about Helene. The line of guards held for a few minutes, but their heart was not in this battle and Ki-Gor's forces swept them aside. Nepah led them through the queen's rooms and into the abandoned armory where they had first entered the palace. They had snatched every available torch from the walls as they ran.

He fumbled at the wall, and a block of stone eased open. "Take Helene!" Ki-Gor told N'Geeso. "You can follow the marks you made with your spear in the tunnel."

Then the White Lord, Tembu George and Nepah stood back and helped speed the excited prisoners into the tunnel. A clash of arms in the hall told them that Teeva's forces were closing.

They pushed their way to the door as the rear guard retreated into the room. Molaki was the last man in.

"Get in that tunnel," ordered Ki-Gor. "You're in no condition to be fighting."

Molaki gave him a taut smile and stood firm, helping beat off the guards trying to force the door until the last of his men were in the tunnel. Then with Ki-Gor, he ducked into the opening after Nepah and Tembu George. The officer pressed the

hidden lever manipulating the secret door and it closed, crushing two guards who had tried to follow them in.

By the time the guards broke the door open, Ki-Gor's men were far down the tunnel. They reached the lake without being molested. Dawn had broken. N'Geeso had already sent parties out along the wall to gather in every available boat.

Within a short while, the little flotilla was on its way across the lake. As they reached the cavern, the bumbling Tal was just beginning to put boats out from the city. Molaki's tribesmen pulled the oars with a will, following Nepah through the cavern. With freedom almost in their grasp they had no intention of being overhauled.

When they reached the end of the cavern, Nepah led them to the opposite side of the river from the one where the landing was. He brought the boats up to a small opening in the wet wall, after reassuring the guards stationed on the landing that nothing was wrong.

"We haven't the boats to go up the gorge," he said, "and anyway this passage is far safer. It will take us to the top of the cliff and Teeva's men won't follow us, because I will collapse the entrance."

WHILE THE OTHERS were unloading, the officer took his boat to the farthest end of the cavern, where the water from the gorge entered. Ki-Gor saw his torch moving along the wall, and wondered what he was doing, but by the time Nepah returned, the White Lord had forgotten about it.

Ki-Gor and Nepah were the last ones into the passage, they climbed twenty steps and then the officer stopped to locate a certain stone. He got Ki-Gor to help him heave on it. When it finally moved, there was a grinding of stones, and with a sudden rumble, the lower end of the passage collapsed.

An hour later they reached the top of the bluff, came out into light of the morning sun. The Bantus had walked back to the edge of the great crater and stood looking down at Atlantis. Ki-Gor and the officer joined them.

Nepah stared moodily at the distant city.

"At long last, their evil will be at an end," he said.

"Unfortunately," Ki-Gor declared, "it will probably go on for a long, long time yet."

Nepah shook his head. "I broke the locks which control the flow of water into the lake. The full weight of the river is turned out of the gorge and into the cavern. In a hand of days water will run in the streets of Atlantis. In two hands, it will be hip-deep over the whole island and the entrance to the cavern will be covered." He clenched his fist. "And they haven't a chance to repair the locks."

He turned to Ki-Gor, placed his hand on the jungle man's shoulder. "I will say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" exclaimed the White Lord. "Why, you are going with us!"

"No," Nepah said wearily, "I'm going back. One of my ancestors helped build the Second Empire. He dug out the river bed in the cavern, built the water lock, fashioned the whole system of defense which made it possible for them to survive."

He dropped his hand from the White Lord's shoulder.

"He helped build it. Now I am destroying it," he went on. "I must share their fate."

"But you blocked the passage," Ki-Gor told him. "You can't go back."

Nepah looked away. "I didn't tell the whole truth," he said. "There's another passage."

Ki-Gor argued with him, but he wouldn't be swayed, so at last the White Lord and Helene set out with the Bantus. As they topped a rise which would hide Nepah from view, Ki-Gor turned and looked back.

Nepah stood at the edge of the crater. As Ki-Gor watched, the officer lifted his arms toward the sun. Then he took a step forward and was gone. He had leaped to his death in the lake!

Ki-Gor involuntarily raised a hand as though to stop him. He felt Helene's soft fingers on his arm. He turned slowly to rejoin the others. She walked beside him. Neither of them spoke until the crater was far behind them.

MADMAN'S TREK

By R. C. WALKER

To go out into the mid-African veldt during the feeding time of Python is a matter of two distinct departures: First you must take leave of your senses . . .

THE AZURE BLUE NIGHT, studded with gleaming stars, gently embraced the mission house which shone white and cool on the eastern slope of Merembe Hill. Great spreading Iroko trees framing the building seemed to reach up their arms to taste the breeze and shake off the heat of the African day.

Wearied from the long safari from Nairobi the two younger priests were already fast asleep, as Father Francis Dill could tell by their sonorous breathing. He, too, was tired from a busy day helping his native boy prepare rooms and a fine dinner to celebrate the arrival of the new missionaries from Great Britain.

But Father Dill's mind, attuned to the stirring of living things at night, would not rest. He contemplated how strangely different African days and nights were from days and nights in other parts of the world. Here in the heart of Uganda, days were hot and all living things seemed to sleep, while in the darkness of African nights there was no peace.

He became conscious of drums, far away and drifting still farther away towards the northeast. The insistent pulsations were spelling out a message. Possibly a birth or a death was being relayed to relatives in outlying villages.

He hoped the message would not upset his plans to spend a quiet day with his new friends who were to take his place while he returned to England on leave. He had run the mission alone for many years, but, as the number of converts to Christianity had increased, the need for help had arisen. Not only did he administer to the souls of the Lakuria tribal people but also to their minor illnesses and grievances.

The tranquil sleep that finally over-

took him was abruptly shattered by a voice frantically calling, "Father, Father, it is I, Mbogo. Please, Father come!"

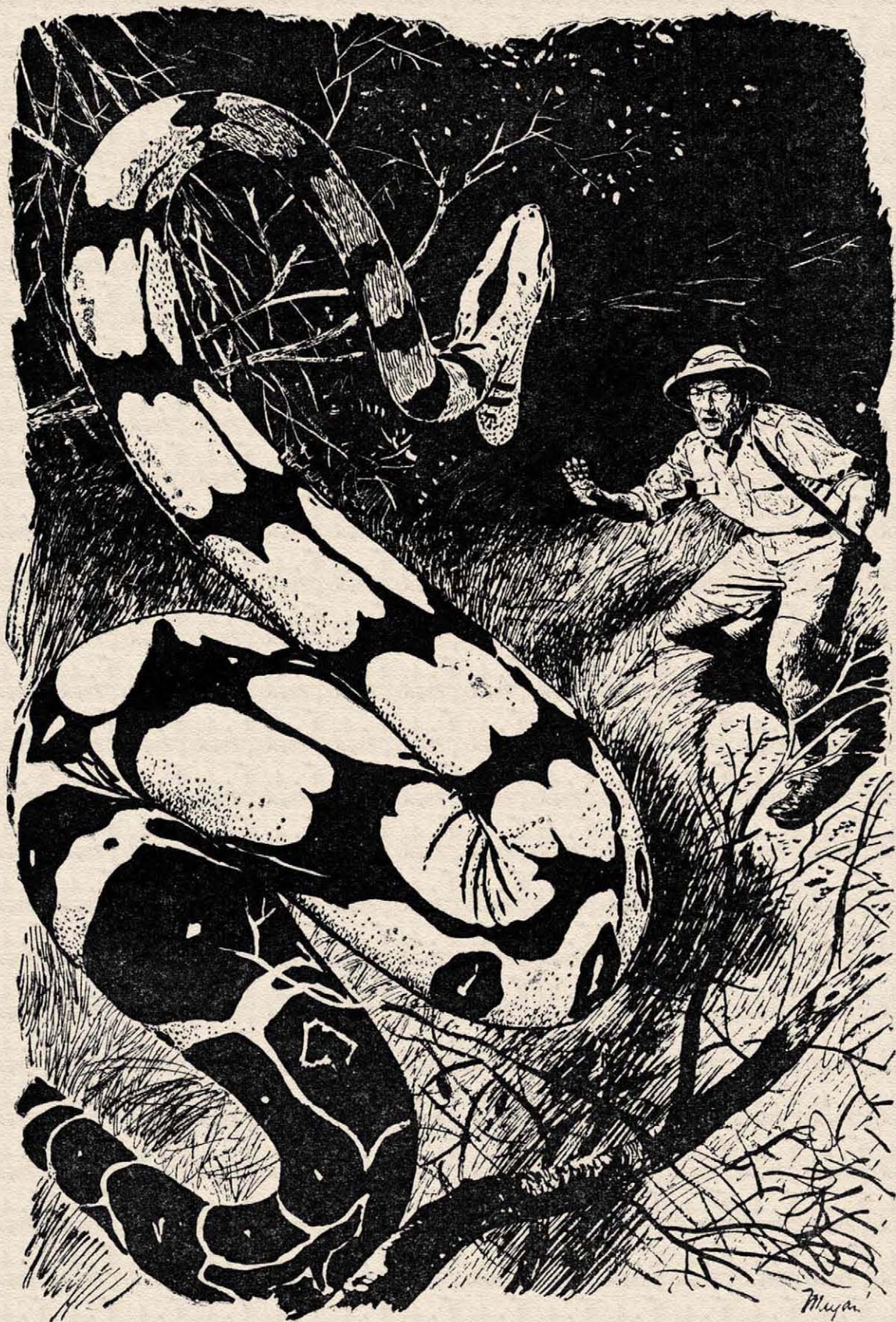
FATHER DILL swung his long legs over the side of the high bed and parted the mosquito netting. In the light of early dawn he saw his native boy, slender and built like a whippet, nervously clasp- ing and unclasp- ing his hands. Perspiration ran in rivulets down his shiny black body. He knew Mbogo never would disturb his sleep unless a matter of great urgency had arisen. He wondered if the beating of the drums had a bearing on Mbogo's agitation.

"What is it, Mbogo? Why have you come back?" he asked in a crisp but kind voice.

The black boy clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "My sister, Maena, she got boy baby and girl baby last night. My grandmother she on way from Nyab- hiki to kill boy baby. Maena, she Chris- tian now. She want both babies."

Father Dill sprang from the bed and hastily started dressing. "Mbogo," he ordered sharply, "you stay here and take care of the new fathers. I will go to your sister at once."

The barbaric custom of killing one twin was the one tradition Father Dill had hoped he never would have to contend with. Though he had taught the Christian ways of right and wrong and Thou shalt not kill, the old natives stubbornly clung to their primeval customs. For generations the natives had believed evil spirits doomed the family that bore twins and that by sacrificing the life of one of the babies, the demons would be driven out. Since the tribal people of Africa put more value on



... At the same moment, the snake saw him!

the life of females, the boy baby would die.

A feeling of gratitude filled Father Dill's heart. He was getting some place with the younger natives. They wanted to follow Christian principles and evidently shared his fear that the grandmother, should she arrive at the kraal first, could incite the older natives to such a frenzy that their savage and primitive impulses would triumph over moral and ethical codes. He must get to the kraal before the old woman could start her evil work. The young natives needed him, for they had sent for him.

"Mbogo, when do you think your grandmother will reach your village?"

"Five hours from now, Father. If you go down the north slope you will get there in two hours," Mbogo said hopefully. His appraising glance of his master's well rounded figure expressed doubts as to the speed the missionary could muster.

"Mbogo, your young legs can carry you faster than my middle-aged ones and you can climb and jump. No, boy, I will take the grass route on the eastern side of the hill. My bicycle will get me there in three hours."

The Lakuria boy's face showed alarm. His tongue clucked in his mouth again. "Father," he pleaded, "take gun and knife. Pythons roaming grassland. They have left the plantations. They want big food."

"Nonsense, Mbogo, a python won't attack me. How could it eat me? Why, it can't even get my head into its mouth."

During his many years as a missionary in Central Africa, Father Dill had had only one encounter with a wild animal. A Cheetah once had scratched his cheek. But Father Dill was adroit with a knife. The skin of that spotted cat now hung on the wall in his sister's house in Sussex.

He knew February was the time the big reptiles would be searching for food to carry them through the cooler weather of the oncoming winter season, but a little black baby's life was in jeopardy and he would not fail these simple people who put so much faith in him.

AS HE PEDALED along the native track through the tall yellow grass he was deeply concerned at what might happen if he did not reach the village in time

to save Maena's child. A man of great faith, still he pondered and weighed every angle of such a possibility.

He was aware that the British Civil authorities, upon learning of the sacrifice—and they surely would find out soon enough—would swoop down on the village and yank the old grandmother off to jail charged with murder. There was a wide chasm between native customs and British law. Example and personality were all very well, but Father Dill knew from experience that cold reasoning cannot suddenly replace the exciting dissipation of magic and ritual.

The cruel sun, already high in the sky, beat mercilessly down. Father Dill's white suit, fresh and neat when Mbogo took it from the closet, was now damp and misshapen and hung in untidy folds around his large body. His face took on a ruddy glow from the bright red lining of the large pith helmet. He stopped beneath an Iroko tree for a brief rest. The native tracks wound sometimes out of the way, but they took advantage of every tree that had sprung up and defied the scorching sun to live.

He drank the tasteless boiled water from his flask. He tucked his sodden handkerchief in his pocket and reassuringly patted the hunting knife he carried in a leather case hung from his light-weight wool belt. A few miles ahead another tree would give respite from the tropic heat.

He knew the grandmother's trek from Nyabahiki would be slower, riding in a machilla. She would make no stops, for her carriers were accustomed to hot sunlight, and those toting the machilla would exchange places with the ones who were walking close by the carriage.

No breeze stirred the grass. No birds were flying. The sun had complete monopoly of the broad valley. Uncomfortable as he was, Father Dill dared not relax his pace.

Less than a quarter of a mile from the next Iroko tree the missionary brought his bicycle to a screeching halt to escape bumping into a great yellow form stretched across the track. His heart froze. He wished he'd heeded Mbogo's warning and brought his gun. He dropped his bicycle and drew his knife and waited for the serpent to strike. But it didn't . . .

Noticing the distended body, he cautiously looked for the snake's head, and when he saw hooves of a buck protruding from the outstretched mouth he breathed easier. He knew the python could not harm him. The snake would stay there for two months until the buck was digested. Replacing his knife in the shield, he carefully lifted his bicycle across the snake's fat belly.

As he walked toward the tree an uneasiness stirred in him. He knew there must be another snake not too far from its mate. He looked nervously over the meadow, but nothing moved. He was more than half-way to the Lakuria village. He would not turn back.

Just as he reached the outer branches of the spreading tree he saw the yellow body stretched lazily along a branch high up in the tree. At the same moment the snake saw him.

Simultaneously, as the python made a flying leap towards its prey, Father Dill tossed his bicycle into the snake's path and threw himself down on the hard dry ground, flat on his back. He pressed himself against the earth, keeping his legs, arms and head rigid and closed his eyes in silent prayer.

THE PYTHON hit the ground, reared up and struck savagely at the missionary's cheek, sinking its long, powerful teeth into his skin. It took all of his courage to beat back the impulse to clap his hand over the wound on his face, but he knew that if the snake could get its head under any part of his body, it would wind coil after coil around him and slowly tighten them until all his bones were broken.

The reptile tried to get its tail under his legs, then under his arms. It pushed its head against Father Dill's neck, but in spite of the excruciating pain from the bite he kept himself taut. He was drenched with perspiration and nearly suffocated by the great body jabbing and crawling around him.

The thrusts were getting less insistent. Father Dill took a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes. The snake was down by his feet, its fifteen feet of body stretched back. Slowly it moved forward, tried to put its mouth over Father Dill's large foot,

withdrew and slithered up to his left hand. It toyed with his fingers, then suddenly gripped his hand with its teeth and began sucking the hand into its mouth.

The pain of the alternate gripping of the teeth into his skin, and the pressure of the pulling of his hand farther and farther down the reptile's throat, was almost unbearable, but Father Dill dared not move. For an interminable length of time he lay there, not daring to cry out lest the python disgorge and attack him again.

Father Dill was a patient man up to a point. But he was not one to wait forever for something to happen. You could go so far, then he became insistent. He never had lost a battle with an element, an animal or a person. His slow, sure-fire will power always emerged triumphant. Now that the initial fright of the attack had died down, he was annoyed at the delay. He must get to the kraal in time to save Maena's child.

When his arm had disappeared up to his elbow, with cat-like stealth he drew his knife from the case at his waist and, watching the snake, carefully drew his right arm slowly across his body. He buried the blade in the snake's body below its throat and slit upward to the jaw. He then withdrew his arm and, not bothering to watch the reptile in its death throes, staggered to his feet and drunkenly made his way to the trunk of the tree. He sank down, utterly exhausted.

Four hours had passed since he left the mission house. The boisterous sun was sinking; darkness soon would come.

Father Dill picked up his bicycle. He was shaky and tired and he had to start slowly in order to balance with the use of only one arm. As he regained his composure, and the heat of the day vanished with the setting sun, he strained every muscle to the utmost.

THE NATIVE VILLAGE was visible before he reached it. He could see flaming torches held aloft. The rythmical beating of the drums had an ominous sound. It was not the regulated code he had heard the night before but the passionate bombilation of celebration. He knew then that the grandmother had arrived. Music and fire were powerful symbols of the natives. Their souls soon would be caught in a current no one could stop.

Father Dill rode furiously to the edge of the village. He clanged the bell on his bicycle and pushed through the excited mob. As the Lakuria men caught sight of him, they gaped and quickly drew aside.

He stopped in front of Maena's hut. A few yards away, a wizened old lady was seated cross-legged on the machilla clapping her bony hands and shouting directions, slowly inciting the men to a frenzy. This was the big moment of her life, her vested right, and she was making the most of it.

As the eyes of the black woman and the missionary met, a quiver of excitement rippled through the crowd. Activity ceased and a hush fell. The violent beating of the drums stopped.

Father Dill was aware from the look on the black faces surrounding him that his grotesque appearance had struck fear into their souls. He seized the opportunity, and before the old woman could ask of Karema, Maena's husband, he answered the question in her eyes.

Speaking in the beautiful Luganda language, he said, "I am the father from Merembe Hill. I have come to Christen Maena's babies."

The watchful eyes of the natives shifted uneasily from Father Dill's inspired face to the dead-pan visage of the old woman.

Painfully, he stretched out his arms. "See, my arm and my face! Torn by a great python."

He saw her shudder and recoil. He raised his voice.

"But the Good Lord spared me and brought me safely to Maena's house."

The black men pressed closer to him. The old woman's eyes, like black pits, darted from one face to another. She started to speak, but Father Dill quickly called to Karema; "Fetch me a large bowl of water. Tell Maena to bring the babies to me."

Karema called to Maena as he shot past the hut. The frightened girl slowly emerged from her home, clutching the new born babies close to her breast. The despair on her face tore at Father Dill's heart. Her eyes clung to his.

"Give me the girl baby," he said, and in an undertone, whispered into Maena's ear: "Have Faith. Don't be afraid. Do

you mind if I name the babies?" She shook her head in the negative.

He dipped his hand into the bowl of water Karema held before him and sprinkled it on the baby girl's face. Lifting up his voice, he said, "I Christen this baby Verbena in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

HE PUSHED the sleeping baby back into Maena's arm and took the other one, holding it firmly in the crook of his right elbow. He rippled the water with the fingers of his mutilated hand. The water took on a red tinge from the blood of his wounds. He raised his hand high and, looking directly into the eyes of the shriveled up old woman who was fidgeting cried out, "I Christen this child Suna, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." The light from the fires flickered through the water and blood dripping from his hand adding to the weird spectacle he made.

The boy baby squalled lustily. Clutching it close to his breast, Father Dill raised his head and began singing in a fine baritone voice, 'Onward Christian Soldiers.' The drummers slowly took up the rhythm, and soon the place swelled with the chanting of the Lakuria men.

The old woman settled back. She sent a fleeting glance of hatred to the bizarre figure before her. She knew she had lost the upper hand, but she was shrewd enough to know she must save face amongst her own people.

She held up her arms, silencing the singers. "Father," she crackled, "you came all the way from Merembe Hill and you nearly lost your life. You did that for a black baby?"

"Madam," Father Dill replied, "color of skin makes no difference to the Christian. We love all mankind. We belong to God, just as these two babies now belong to Him."

The old woman folded her bony hands in her lap. She said, "The ways of the Christian are good. You can keep boy baby."

She shouted an order to her carriers and amidst chanting and beating of the drums her machilla was raised aloft and she disappeared into the African night.

The RED TRAIL to ZANZIBAR

By JOHN STARR



Hunter and hunted—back to back they faced that howling mob of blood-thirsting head-hunters! Yet even in the dark shadow of savage death, each swore that nothing would cheat him of his long-awaited vengeance!

A SWIRL of blue-gray smoke curled lazily from the blackened muzzle of Bruce Kerman's revolver. Feet braced, shoulders thrust back in a swaggering, devil-daunted gesture of bravado, Kerman stood in the middle of the jungle trail.

A hundred feet distant, with naked spear still gripped in rigid fingers, a black savage, clothed only in ragged loin cloth, lay sprawled in the dank mud of the trail, where he had lurched to the ground but a moment before with a bullet through his chest.

With a shrug of his squared shoulders, Bruce advanced slowly toward the figure and bent over his victim. The set features were twisted in a snarl of hate—the same snarl that had curled over the black's mouth as he had swung that long spear back over his naked shoulder, with its barbed point on a direct line with Kerman's chest.

But the white man's hand had been quicker, and a streamer of livid flame had spewed from the black muzzle of his gun.

With a screech the savage had hurtled forward, arms outflung over his head, and crashed headlong to the floor of the jungle.

This was Kilagei, king of the tribe. A burning hatred, half subdued, had long seared his savage breast, and now it was satisfied. Kerman smiled grimly. Satisfied! And there would be more to satisfy before the deal was through. It meant death, in no uncertain terms. In an hour, now, or possibly two, the whole maddened mob would be at his throat, thirsting for vengeance. Then it would be one man—one fighting Yankee adventurer who didn't care a damn for death or the devil—against half a thousand shrieking, blood-mad jungle devils.

Kerman stared silently down at the still form which was to decide his fate. Fate? For the last three years he had dodged it, pounding his way from Zanzibar to the outposts of hell and back. Devil-damned Kerman, the traders called him.

Bruce glanced at the smoke-stained revolver which still twirled on his trigger

finger. A man doesn't seek the hell of loneliness for nothing, and certainly not for the love of it. Usually another force drives him to it. A letter, maybe, with a curt warning from a friend back in the States—a warning which might be worded something like this:

Corony is unrelenting. Swears he will follow you to the ends of civilization. You can't tell him, Bruce—it's impossible. Clear out fast, old man. Go somewhere where he'll never follow.

Yes, there was that. And now there was this lifeless black form sprawled in the trail. And soon, unless some mighty unusual occurrence chanced to prevent the inevitable consequence, there would be a howling, clawing mob of black devils looking for blood. And then the last four years of purgatory (that letter had been dated four years back) would come to a fitting end.

With a careless shrug Kerman turned on his heel and strode back along the trail. In an hour it would be dark, and the dark hides many secrets. With a little luck the silent thing back there in the mud of the jungle floor would not be discovered before then. It would be a reprieve until morning then—and at least he could take it with the sun on his throat.

NIGHT comes suddenly in the fastness of the jungle. An hour after Kerman had moved through the deep grass of the clearing and pushed open the door of his cabin, a solid wall of blackness and silence, broken only by the roar of distant carnivora, had fallen over the trail.

The door of the hut hung listlessly open. A wavering glow of light ventured into the outer darkness, to be snatched in a curtain of intense black. Above, a scattered maze of stars burned over the silent clearing, and the wind sobbed through swaying upper branches of invisible trees.

In the shadow of the smoking lamp Bruce leaned over the table. A row of playing cards stretched across the board before him, and in the center under the lamp, lay a withered stack of them, loosely piled together. His hand reached out mechanically to the middle of the table and

slid the top card from the pack. Half-heartedly he drew it back, turned it to the light, and threw it down again.

The room was dark. Only a yellow glare, wavering and uncertain, hung over the table. Beyond, the shadows crept into a murky, impenetrable blanket of gloom.

Hunched over the table, Bruce did not see the door of the hut swing wide. He did not turn when a disheveled, rigid figure stood framed in the opening.

"Well—"

It was an ironical voice, almost a drawl, yet vibrant with suppressed emotion. Even before the deepness of it had ceased to fill the room, Bruce whirled about in his chair. A dull, motionless revolver brought him to a halt.

"You! Corony—"

The stranger stepped deliberately over the sill and pulled the door shut behind him with a free hand. In the glow of the lamp his eyes gleamed dully, and his mouth twisted into a snarl of hate. But for all that it was a young face which towered above those wide, square shoulders—a face in which youth and the tortures of African desolation had been battling mightily for predominance. And slowly, though the youth was still there in the eyes and mouth, the hard, bitter lines of desolation were twisting that handsome face into a perpetual snarl.

He stood with his back to the door, facing Bruce. The barrel of his gun, which he held low at the hip, did not waver.

"Surprised to see me, aren't you, Kerman?"

The tone was almost a whisper, so tensely were the words spoken. In answer, Kerman's hand swept the cards mechanically into a loose pile on the top of the table before him.

"It's four years, Corony."

For a moment the younger man did not reply. His eyes were half closed; his mouth twitched. Then suddenly he stepped forward and stood over the other. One hand gripped the edge of the table fiercely, so that the knuckles gleamed white under the lamplight.

"Sit there, Bruce. Just sit there, while I tell you something. It's four years now, four of the damnedest rottenest years I've been through. There was a girl back there who had already said yes. The best girl in

the world, Bruce—had already said yes. I had to give her up to come after you, damn you! I was Captain Corony, then, with a life of happiness before me, waiting for me to step into it. Until you—you—"

Corony's voice broke with emotion.

"Four years of torture, following you through these murderous jungles. It's a wonder, Kerman, I didn't go under before I found you."

Bruce stared quietly into the wild eyes. Relaxed, and yet rigid in relaxation, he leaned back in his chair. A sweep of his hand would have knocked the revolver spinning from Corony's fingers—if that deadly muzzle did not spit fire first. For a moment Kerman made no move other than to shrug his shoulders. His face, in the livid, yellow glare of the oil flame, was tense. Above him, silhouetted against the light, the menacing figure of Corony hung like a grotesque spider.

"Corony—" the words came with an effort—"would you believe me if I told you, man to man, that I am not the one you are after?"

"Are you telling me that?"

"I am," returned Bruce deliberately.

"Then—" Corony backed slowly away from the table, away from the light, until he stood once again in the uncertain darkness with his back to the door—"my answer is *no*!"

Bruce nodded. Quietly he folded his arms across his chest.

"I expected that," he said. "When a man has lost four years of his life, and substituted four years of African hell, he wants compensation. Anything will do."

Corony's gun came slowly to a level with the other's head, wavered a moment, and became steady.

"You are right, Kerman, I would kill you anyway to make up for losing—her."

The slow smile still hung on Bruce's lips as he waited. His eyes rested on the finger that crooked around the trigger—the finger that would in a moment send a bullet through his brain. Then, suddenly, ignoring the danger, he sprang to his feet, one hand upraised.

"Listen!"

Outside, like a faint, wailing echo, rose a note of shrill intensity, searing over the jungle silence in a final wild, eerie screech.

5—Jungle—Summer

For an endless moment it burst over the stillness, and then slowly faded into a gurgling whimper and died.

A staccato exclamation broke from Corony's lips as he lurched away from the barrier. A splintering crash answered him. Flying stabs of wood burst from the solid timbers, as a metal spear-head plunged through the heavy structure, half a foot from where he had been standing.

"Quick!" Bruce strode forward, deliberately unconscious of the weapon in his companion's hand. "The natives are up. There'll be all hell and the limit to pay now!"

His flying foot set the door clattering shut, and in a single motion he dropped the heavy wooden bar into place. Then, wheeling about, he faced his adversary.

"Forget it, Corony," he said curtly. "It's whites against natives now, and you're in for one bloody mess of a battle. I know—I've been through it before."

For a fleeting second the two men faced each other. Suddenly Bruce stretched forth his hand. Corony's mouth straightened into a thin line of bitterness. The snarl of hate still clenched his mouth as he ignored Kerman's outthrust hand and stepped to the window.

THE aperture was a crude one built into the meshed walls of the hut. It was small, and covered with a heavy netting to hold out the many poisonous insects which infested the region. Now Corony's fist plunged through it, leaving a jagged gash large enough to give a view of the jungle outside. A black wall of unbroken darkness lay before him, rising dense and solid against a midnight sky.

Outside, now, the shrill wailing had ceased. A heavy, sinister stillness held that black void in its grip, a stillness that gave way only to the whispering movements of swaying trees. Then Corony lurched back from the window with an oath, as a single, padded footbeat resounded through the silence, and a huge black shadow rose in the opening.

Corony's arm spun up. A jagged flash of fire spat from the mouth of his revolver. Framed in the window, the black shadow, with one arm flung wildly over its head, hurtled backward and crashed to the

ground.

"One!" said Corony softly.

And then another figure crouched beside him. It was Bruce, dragging a gaunt, gray metallic thing that gleamed strangely in the uncertain light. Corony stared at it in amazement—at the long narrow barrel and the solid mounting—at the strips of ribbon-like stuff that lay beside it.

"A spitter!"

Bruce nodded without looking up from his task.

"I use it," he answered jerkily, as his fingers strained with the mechanism, "for hunting—mostly. But sometimes it's good in a case like this. Give me a hand here. The thing won't spin."

Corony hesitated. Once again that shrill cry rose over the clearing, penetrating to every crevice of the lonely room.

Suddenly Corony strode from his place at the window and leaned over his companion. His outstretched hand held the revolver.

"Here, take this. Watch the window, Kerman. I'll get this thing going."

Without a word Bruce rose and went to the opening, with Corony's gun gripped tightly in his hand. In the outer darkness, now, shadows were moving about—many of them. Once a great spear buried itself in the wall of the hut and clattered back. Once, too, the little black automatic in Kerman's hand flashed up and barked an answer, dragging a shrill scream from the silence.

For a long time, motionless, Bruce stood at his post. Occasionally he raised his arm and fired, when the streak of flame burst with living intensity through the night. But for the most part he merely stared intently into the wall of blackness and followed the movements of the sinister, half-visible shadows.

"We're surrounded, Corony," he said quietly. "The machine gun is the last resort, and even that may prove to be a dud. Those devils are afraid of nothing."

Corony laughed. "Have you ever seen a man, Kerman, who would walk into a living chain of lead and like it?"

Kerman's reply was to lift his hand and fire into the darkness. A swirl of smoke curled from his revolver.

"Four," he said softly. "Can you fix that thing?"

On the floor beside the gun, Corony worked feverishly. The shadow of his contorted body spread like a great tarantula over the floor, hunched into a knot. He answered without raising his head.

"I don't know. Wait—"

Bruce made no reply. He turned his head at that moment to look out again through the torn window covering, and suddenly, with a cry of warning, jerked backward into the safety of the room.

"They're up! Under here, quick, Corony! Out of the open!"

The other's answer came in a bitter snarl.

"Let 'em come. Get over by the door, man, before it goes down."

A slow smile twisted over Bruce's mouth as he followed the other's command. No wonder this man had followed him for four years through an African hell. No wonder he had given up life for vengeance. There was courage here—guts! That careless, don't-care-a-damn attitude was not surface bravado. It was the real thing!

OUTSIDE, the shriek of clawing devils had risen to a wild racket. No skulking now—no lurking in the protection of the shadow; they were in the open, the whole maddened yelling mob of them. Clawing fingers raked at the door. Something heavy hurtled against the barrier.

"Can you fix it?" Bruce jerked his head around to fire the question at his companion.

"I—don't—know—"

Corony's teeth were clenched. His fingers, wound about a bar of metal, strained stubbornly to bend it back into shape. And the words, when he spoke, came almost in a sob between his lips.

Impulsively Bruce stepped away from the door. With a grim laugh he dropped Corony's revolver on the table, where the yellow light reflected its dull barrel, and then, in a stride, he reached the corner of the room. When he appeared once more in the circle of light, a long, heavy ax lay in his hands.

"Now," he said evenly, "let 'em come."

Almost in answer to his words, a mighty impact shook the door. With a splintering crash of timber it burst inward, and the head of a huge battering ram flung into

the room. The protecting bar fell from the door-slot, cracked into splinters. With a heavy clatter the door swung wide.

For a second a black shape hesitated on the threshold. The big ax in Bruce's hand swung back over his shoulder—and descended. The towering black form gurgled once, lurched forward on uncertain legs, and crashed mightily to the floor. Quickly Bruce thrust the body across the entrance.

They came now in a rush of struggling black shapes, milling and thrashing in the ebony darkness. Only as they came across the sill were they visible, for here the feeble light from the room glowed in a strangely luminous glare on the glistening bodies. And all the while the empty, dead face of the thing on the floor glared up into Bruce's heaving features.

The sweat coursed unheeded down the big man's shoulders. The huge battle ax became a dead weight, leaden, and with a snarl Bruce swung it 'round and gripped it by the head, wielding the wooden shaft with deadly force on the lunging forms that strained to pass him.

"Hurry—Cor—ony—hurry!"

Corony jerked an answer from between his teeth. He was creeping forward now over the floor, dragging the heavy machine gun after him. In a moment he was under the older man's feet, swinging the deadly muzzle around.

"Open—your legs wide, Bruce. And hold 'em that way—"

For a fraction of a second Bruce let his eyes drop from the entrance. And in that flash of time a mighty black figure filled the opening. A great spear arm went back. The light flashed on a hurtling shaft of rigid steel.

Bruce's arm went up too late. The metal shaft burned savagely into his flesh, and with both hands clawing wildly at the grim spear that seared through his shoulder, he stumbled backward over his companion with a groan of pain.

The long, gray barrel swung into a rigid position. Framed in the entrance was the target, the immense form of a snarling native. Corony dropped his head and jerked roughly on the trigger lever. The gun broke into a murderous, spitting sheet of flame. The savage, with the snarl of triumph still on his lips, raised one arm

weakly to his chest and crumpled to the floor.

The sharp staccato of gun shots rattled over the clearing. A livid sheet of fire scorched the darkness, throwing into blazing detail the writhing shadows that lunged away from it with cries of terror. Corony, staring with half-closed eyes down the black barrel, swung the muzzle deliberately in a semi-circle, relentlessly back and forth, as the spitting flame cut into the dark. And, at last there was silence, and Corony knew the attackers were gone.

"Corony—"

Weakly, barely audible after the din of the recoiling machine gun, the name came to him.

"Corony—"

"What is it, Bruce?"

"This thing—for hell's sake, pull it out."

Grim-faced, Corony rose to his feet and crossed the floor. In the chair by the table, where he had stumbled in the agony of his wound, Bruce sagged forward, his head hanging on his chest. In a last effort to remain upright, he strained backward and looked up at his companion. Corony bent over him. Firmly, as his eyes found those of the victim, he grasped the protruding spear.

"It will hurt," he warned without emotion.

"Pull it—out."

Corony pressed one hand firmly against his companion's shoulder. The other, slowly, evenly, pulled against the tortuous shaft. Bruce's teeth clenched together as a half audible, whimpered moan broke through his lips. Finally, with the bloody weapon in his hand, Corony stood up.

Methodically he tore a long strip of cloth from his tattered shirt and wound it about the wound. Then with the lamplight glowing queerly on his face, he stepped back. Deliberately, abruptly, he went to the door and closed it, and as he turned slowly, with his back to the wall, his eyes were once again bitter and the snarl hung on his mouth.

"Kerman, the intermission is over."

BRUCE raised his head wearily. In spite of the pain, a smile found its way to his face.

"You still won't believe me, Corony, when I say I'm not the man?"

"No."

The older man shrugged his shoulders.

"Then—the intermission is over."

Motionless, rigid, Corony faced him. When he spoke at last, the words were almost a whisper, so tensely did they break through the silence.

"I owe you my life, Bruce," he said evenly. "I'm willing to listen, but first you listen to me. There were just two of you in the room with Jerry that night, before we found him. The other man was Jerry's best friend. Are you telling me that Harrington—the other man—is the man I want—and not you?"

Bruce met Corony's accusing gaze.

"Harrington—is the man," he replied.

"You lie!"

With an effort Bruce thrust his hand into the folds of his shirt. For an eternity his numbed fingers struggled to clutch the bit of paper that he was attempting to hold up. In the end he fell back in the chair. The scrap of paper fluttered to the table.

Corony picked it up and held it under the flickering glow of the lamp. It was written in a ragged scrawl on a tiny visiting card—a short, hurriedly composed message.

"Harrington did it. Drunk. Don't tell Corony."

And it was signed with a single sprawling word: "Jerry."

Corony stared blankly at the damning bit of paper. Slowly he shook his head.

"How did you get this?" The words came in a voice that trembled.

"When I came, Jerry was dead—the way you found him. Harrington was gone. This note was on the table, under Jerry's hand."

Corony's fingers tore through the little white card. Fluttering, the shreds of paper dropped to the table.

"Four years—four years of hell. My girl gone. My life gone. Bruce, you've

got to pay for it. You knew who murdered my brother! Damn you, you could have told me!"

Bruce shook his head slowly.

"Not against Jerry's wishes," he said. "I loved him almost as much as you did."

Corony stopped short in his reply. The wild light faded in his eyes. His hand closed over the deck of cards, and in a single motion he swept them up. Quietly he dropped the pack in front of his companion, and in the same motion reached for the gleaming revolver that Bruce had tossed on the table. Without a word he placed the gun beside the cards.

"Cut," he said evenly. "High man wins." Bruce raised his head with an effort. Slowly, deliberately, he reached forward and took the first card. It gleamed a dead black in the circle of light when he turned it over—the ace of spades.

Corony shrugged indifferently. A bare suggestion of a smile crossed his mouth as he leaned back on the table and folded his arms.

"Four years of hell. Thank God it's over, Bruce."

The older man's hand closed over the revolver.

"Corony, is Harrington still alive?"

Corony's eyes opened in surprise.

"Harrington? No."

"Is the girl married yet?"

Corony's mouth twitched. A mist fell over his eyes as he stared into the grim muzzle of Bruce's gun.

"No—" he answered with an effort.

Slowly, with a visible struggle, Bruce rose from the table. With painful steps he went to the door and opened it. For a moment he stood framed in the entrance, staring silently out into the night. Then he turned. Quietly, deliberately, he tossed the revolver on the table.

"Corony, boy," he said softly. "We're going home."

Matto Grosso Fury

By GORDON MacCREAGH

Lovely, golden-skinned Jane La-Vieja O'Rorke was held jungle captive, her last desperate hope for life and honor in the trembling hands of one man . . . Carey, the coward!

DAVID CAREY'S CULTURED friends back home wouldn't have known him here in the Yungas foothill country of the not so cultured side of the Andes. For back home, when those friends disagreed about unimportant subjects such as their infidelities or their religions, or about important ones such as their aesthetic values, they would say:

"One does not settle anything by violence. Let's talk this thing over like civilized people."

They talked, then, with well controlled emotions about this and that and everything and, the most aesthetic group of them, about flowers. Of this group the quite choicest talked beautiful words such as Brasso-Laelio-Cattleya Doris by Alba. Which did not mean that they were any stranger than millions of other Americans who believe in Civilization. It meant only that they grew orchids.

David Carey was one of them. He believed in capital C Civilization along with the rest of them. He was different only in that he went into those unwholesome places where orchids grew to collect them. If the friends could have seen him just now at the jungle fringe of this *Rancho de Vainilla*, a vanilla orchid plantation, they would have held their breaths and raised incredulous eyebrows.

David was, for one thing, not dressed like an aesthetic club man. He wore, despite the heat, heavy cord pants stuffed into high pampas boots—against snakes—and a frayed canvas shirt and a topi hat with a little mosquito net draped round it—just now tucked over the brim for

better vision. He was armed with a rifle and a machete and he was advancing slowly upon a jaguar that snarled its big yellow teeth over a colt that still kicked in short bursts of terror. With its each move the jaguar spread claws as wide as dinner plates over some new portion of it to hold it down. Just as a vastly magnified cat might do with a rabbit. Only David's threatening advance kept it from sinking its teeth into the colt's throat.

Behind him horses snorted and stamped in the white staring hysteria of their kind so that their riders were hard put to hold them from bolting. The girl on one of them stared almost as big-eyed, her teeth bitten over her lower lip as she murmured tensely:

"Be careful there, *por Dios*, *Senor* David. He may charge."

David flashed a tight grin over his shoulder for just a fraction of a second. "My bet is he won't," he said. "Too well fed, this one; not hungry enough."

And there was exactly the reason why David was doing this foolhardy thing. He was pitting his nerve and his experience, everything he knew about animals, against the jaguar's courage to hold what it had. He was, to put it frankly, showing off.

The girl swung round on her companion.

"Do something, Ramon! Don't just sit there and look."

Ramon, the rancho foreman, sat his horse more calmly. He lifted his left arm in a white sling towards the girl to remind her of it.

"Cha!" he grunted. "How am I to shoot

one-handed; and he directly in the way?—And the beast is as he says; well fed. It may break first."

Meanwhile David was remorselessly advancing; bent forward, picking up his feet, feeling out the next step, his eyes narrow on the great orbs that blazed yellow under flattened ears.

Fifteen feet! Ten—within reach of the beast's spring now. Nine!—Eight—Se—even—

"Diablos!" Ramon credited David. "He is mucho hombre, plenty tough, that one—And look! He wins!"

THE JAGUAR spat its last snarl, exploded its furious coughing growl, made a superb turning leap, like a diver in mid air, and faded into the undergrowth behind it that splashed back torn leaves and twigs.

"Ole!" Ramon shouted, as men do for a good stunt in a bull fight.

David ran to the colt, helped it to struggle to its feet.

"Don't!" Ramon shouted and spurred his horse forward. "Car-r-ramba, Hombre! Don't ever drop your machete or gun. It could come back."

"Nah." David grinned at him. "Never heard of one doing that, once it quit."

The girl spurred up, leaned angrily from the saddle. "What silly thing were you trying to do? It's easy enough to get a cat on your neck, without begging for it!"

David wiped a smear of blood from his hand. "The colt doesn't seem to have anything broken. Just clawed up some. We'd better herd it back with us, though; sure to be more than one cat around . . ."

The girl wouldn't be stopped. "And every one of them as dangerous as a bull. Why didn't you shoot it?"

Dave smiled sourly. "For sport? With a high-power rifle at can't-miss range? Might as well hunt chipmunks. Your *Indios* wouldn't eat it, anyhow. And I like cats."

"I think," the girl said, "that you are as mad as all other North Americans."

"Very likely," Dave grinned.

Ramon picked up David's rifle and machete. "In spite of which, amigo," he added, "don't ever drop your weapons. Not in this country."

THEY RODE back through tangled acres of the pale blue little vanilla orchids, all straggling over tumble-down trellises of tall poles, their long brown beans hanging in disorderly clusters. David rode ahead, slashing a way with his machete through encroaching thorny liana vines.

Behind him Ramon looked at the girl and nodded, then pointed ahead with his chin.

"Just such a tough man," he said, "as is needed on this rancho since the good Lord took the padron, your father, away from it."

The sun-tan of the girl's face flushed up to a golden brown. "You talk as foolishly as he does," she said shortly. "Besides, he has been here only a few days. We know nothing of him."

Ramon shrugged. "It would seem, however, enough. There are girls back in the cities who would look no further than that yellow hair of his; or, those who wanted romance, no farther than those almost too sensitive lips."

"I think, Ramon," the girl said, "that you are drooling."

The rancho hacienda was showing its pink-washed adobe walls and jail-grilled windows between flaming poinciana trees that shaded the vanilla. Ramon shrilled an eagle whistle through his teeth.

"That means," the girl explained to Dave, "there will be coffee in the patio, *Senor*, in just ten minutes."

In the patio Dave, relaxed in a grass hammock, sipped at a thick clay cup of coffee flavored with vanilla and gummy with raw cane-syrup.

"This," he said lazily, closing his eyes to the leaf-broken sunlight, "is the perfect way to collect orchids."

"And our *Senorita* here," said Ramon with his native extravagance, "the most perfect orchid of all."

David grinned at Ramon, a gesture of agreement without rudeness.

The girl's name was, rather startlingly in this place, Jane La-Vieja O'Rorke. The middle of it meant The Old One, though that had nothing to do with Jane. It was the name of a family as honored in the history of South American freedom as are, say, Washington or Jefferson in the North. It came to her from a frail little mother



Dave snapped a shot at Laredo over his log . . . as surely as shooting meat!

who still fluttered about the hacienda after the sweatiness of climate and rawness of hewing a vanilla plantation out of those merciless jungles had killed a more robust father of the equally famous filibustering O'Rorkes.

Jane was accordingly exotically golden-skinned and dark-haired and blue-eyed and was quite appropriately called *La Orquidea*, the Orchid. Just the sort of girl before whom it was distinctly worth showing off.

David sipped at his coffee and said, "Perfect. Here is Eden. Peace—beauty—everything."

"Aye," said Ramon, "Where are also serpents—as here comes one now whom our *Indios* reported by drum to be on the way."

THE MAN who topped the steep river bank before the patio did not look so much like a serpent as like an ordinary peon. But not quite. He was as swarthy as Ramon and wore a peon's raggy shirt and frayed pants and wide palmetto hat; but there was a confident insolence in his eyes and a certain swagger in the slouch that grew from his heel-dragging grass *huaraches*. He carried a naked machete in his hand, as men must who travel the jungle paths.

"'Na' dia' a la cas'," he clipped the formal greeting of good day to the household. "I bring a message," he went on, "from my *padron*, the *balatero* of below the great rapid, to say that he will honor himself within the next few days to come and pay his court to the *Senorita*."

"Barbaridad!" Ramon exploded. "And who is this savage to offer the insolence of his court to our *Senorita*?"

The man narrowed his bold eyes down on Ramon. "Everyone knows who he is. And since the *Senorita* now requires a protector, it is reasonable, no?"

The girl's hammock ceased to swing as if stopped by a heavy weight. She turned in it, shrinking into its overlap.

Ramon glowered over the crude usage of the outer borderlands. "Reasonable," he had to concede, "but not likely; since he built for himself a feud with the *estancia* of Roderigo Pena that lies com-fortingly between his rapids and us."

The man smiled thinly. "None the less," he said.

"And since the Rancho O'Rorke is good friends with the *Estancia* Pena?" Ramon left the implication to soak in.

The man slouched to stand over him. He grinned more thinly. "And who are you, *Senor Foreman*, to make suggestions as to what—or whom—your *Senorita* may choose?"

Dave got out of his hammock and moved, long-legged, to face the intruder. "Since our friend Ramon is incapacitated in one arm," he said softly, "perhaps it would be better that you should talk to me."

"Pero seguro." The man smiled even more thinly upon Dave. "Certainly I will talk with you." He let his naked machete swing idly before him. "You will be that Norte-Americano spy of your big business of whom we have heard, no?"

"Caa-nas-s-s-tos!" It was torn from Ramon. "That does it!"

Through fingers to her lips Jane warned: "Be careful, *Senor David*. The man is a machetero!" It was like saying, a 'gunman'.

"So then, *Senor Norte-Americano*," the man smiled easily. "Since we talk of what is better—it would be better that you should go to the devil back to your own country before my *padron* comes. It is I who tell you this, standing here before you."

"Caa-a-nass-s-s . . ."

Ramon held his breath on the fading sibilant. The girl's fingers pressed her lip white against her teeth, as motionless as though a snake had hissed. The whole patio seemed to hold its breath.

"Let us," Dave put his hands ostentatiously into his pockets, "talk this thing over like civilized people."

THE MAN'S narrowed eyes opened in wide surprise. He didn't know about codes other than his own; but that a man, tall and apparently whole, should refuse his challenge meant here *la comida de zopilotes*, a dinner of buzzards, or eating crow. So surprised was the man that he let David take him by the arm and lead him from the patio.

The patio breathed again. The rancho

foreman let his breath go through blown-out cheeks. The girl bit, not her fingers, but her lip till a red spot showed darker than its full carmine. The foreman kicked his hammock to swinging; his eyes remained fixed in a minute examination of a corner of the rancho roof. At last he turned to look at the girl.

"It would seem," he said, "that being tough with just a jaguar is not enough."

Jane looked only at her finger nails, bit at some tiny roughness. "And yet," her frown showed her wonderment, "he has a certain courage."

Ramon shrugged. "They are a difficult people to understand."

Both hammocks swayed in silence but for the rusty creaking of their hooks.

David came back. Alone. Ramon rose to a joyful hope. "You took him away to hew him down where the Senorita would not see, yes?"

David shook his head. His somber look showed his understanding of everyone else's hopeless misunderstanding. "Nothing would be gained by killing the man," he stated his back-home credo.

Ramon shrugged again, with downturned lips, "Or by being perhaps oneself killed, eh?" and addressed himself pointedly to the girl. "Though I may remain desolate, my counsel is to sell this rancho and take the little mother to the safety of the far city. For Laredo Gomez is one who gets what he wants, un bravo endiablo y un—" He bit back obscene descriptions. "Forgive my sentiments, Senorita. But there he is established; and he has been working these four years without a conscience, gobbling up all the territory from his ravine to the upper rapids, until he is now king of the balateros . . ."

"Just who," David inquired, "is this Gomez?"

Ramon gave angry information that none the less had a certain pride in exploit.

"An offspring of ten fathers is Laredo, all of them devils. A gatherer of the valuable balata gum that your northern manufacturers prefer over rubber for insulating under-water cables. He works a crew of collected ruffians whose totally added-up principles would be rejected by a snake. And," he pointed his pessimism, "between his territory and here there re-

mains now only the forest worked by Roderigo Pena."

"He used to work here," Jane added. "Until—" she paused, coloring.

"Until his upstart insolence became unbearable," Ramon growled.

"He was always at least, polite."

"As polite as the Serpent of Eden pursuing his ends."

"And now he's a jungle big shot," David added it up, "and he wants to marry you."

"Or perhaps," Ramon said darkly, "not even marry—now that the Padron, Senor O'Rorke, of whom alone in this region he was, not afraid, but a little wary, has passed to God."

Dave's brows went up. "Is that so?"

"It is exactly so," Ramon snapped. "In return, this rancho needs a man; one as tough as he."

"Perhaps," said Dave, "to sell and get out would be the best thing to do—if I may be forgiven for butting into something that's none of my business; which is orchids . . . Will you be guiding me down-river tomorrow, Ramon, to that place of which you spoke?"

"So the Senorita has ordered," Ramon said shortly. "While this Laredo ladron is already crawling like a viper to establish a footing above his ravine."

"For balata perhaps," Dave's tone was indifferent. "But orchids I have been able to collect even in the gold country that some have called *prohibido*."

Ramon looked at Jane. "Quite beyond understanding," he said sourly.

David didn't understand what he meant.

DAVID STRAINED practised muscles to hold the dug-out canoe in the current that piled up, slick and deep with little under-surface eddies, gathering its strength for its charge into the granite maw of the gorge that thrust out of the close jungle greenery like a forbidding gateway. Down that slaving gullet he could see vivid colors sparkling in the white spray. His voice dropped to match the swish and rumble that welled out of the mist, as though he were reciting verse to the accompaniment of music.

"Those rocks and cliffs, Ramon, where you say nobody has been . . . in their deep shades one might find even a new species."

Ramon's quick surge of negation rocked the canoe. "Not with my help, you won't. Valgame Dios! Nor with anybody in these parts, even though he might be as mad as an Americano of the North. That is a place where canoes don't live. Death lives. Here is the last landmark; here civilization ends. Below is Laredo Gomez' balata kingdom."

There was cynicism in David's laugh. "This is civilization's boundary? Some friends have told me that it ended quite a bit farther North."

"Yes, at your American border, I have heard the Padron say as he fought to hold what he had built. Here, he would say, Life is the accident, Death the surety."

The O'Rourke's experience proved its truth, as thumping suddenly thickly out of the jungle screen, muted and blanketed by the massed greenery, a fat bullet plopped into the water a dozen feet ahead of the canoe and ricocheted out of a little geyser to smack into a tree on the farther bank. The wooded steep caught up the echo and flung it back across the ravine; and that side redoubled it to strike back higher up again; and again; to crackle at last thinly out into the strip of open sky. The stillness of the appalled jungle creatures followed; and then a big red howler monkey shouted its defiance and the ravine roared back at it.

Long seconds before that Dave was furiously plying his paddle, driving the craft to the shelter of the farther bank. Ramon was shouting at him above the uproar:

"Not that way, Madman! The other bank! . . . or he'll shoot again. That is a signal in these parts to come in and be inspected."

"Hell! I don't answer to bullets!" Dave humped his shoulders and heaved on his paddle the harder. The canoe slid into the almost black shadow of low, overhanging branches. Dave snatched up the light rifle and was ashore before Ramon recovered from the grating jolt that had sprawled him. Then Dave had him under an arm and was hoisting him with himself behind the shelter of a vast *soleiman* bole spiked with knife-like thorns.

Ramon's first readiness to obey the rude summons flung from a gun-muzzle was replaced by rage. "That would be one of

Laredo's animals. I told you he was expanding his territory . . . look! Under that purple jacaranda there; eight or ten inches down, where the red flower shows. See his hat? There! See him move! You can perhaps get him from here and a hundred souls will laugh in welcoming hell."

Dave made no move to shoot. "I'm hunting orchids; not men."

"Infiernos! Give me then the gun." Ramon snatched for it. "With but one hand; yet . . ."

But Dave held tight to the weapon. His lips were thin with stubborn conviction. "I'm looking for no war with any balata man. I'm a peaceable collector of . . ."

"It is well, Senores, that your intentions are at least, peaceable." The voice cut down on them with a soft sibilance.

BOTH JERKED AROUND, twisting their necks to see the cold round hole of an old-fashioned rifle muzzle looking down on them from a copal bush, and above it a face. A face smoothly dark, like a handsome cat's, and it grinned. High cheek bones showed that proud Spanish blood had not been too proud somewhere down the line, though dominant enough to have established a jungle dynasty.

"Laredo!" Ramon's recognition was surly.

The man narrowed his eyes in the pretended effort of a famous man to recall some less prominent individual. "You know me, of course." His vanity was gratified. "You will be—let me see now—Ah yes, the so faithful foreman of the Rancho Rorke—who is in love with the Senorita, is it not?"

Dave suddenly stared round at Ramon, whose thoughts, whatever they were, were hidden under a scowl of bitter hatred. Laredo grinned back at it. "You should have known better, my friend, than to disregard an order to go ashore. My good Ruiz over there might have fired again, this time in earnest, had he not known that I paralleled him on this side."

The very extravagance of the man's politeness in his aped idiom of a caballero was a threat.

Ramon had the hardihood to loose a ripple of the personal invective for which his language is so well suited. Laredo's

cat eyes flickered and then grinned from Ramon to Dave.

"And this, then, will be the new Yanqui who now takes up so much of the Senorita's time. A quite providential bag, I would say, all with one shot."

Dave's cheeks were flattened with rage as he threw his standard civilized indignation at the man. "By what the hell right, cabron, do you hold up an American citizen minding his own business?"

Laredo showed clean white teeth in sheer enjoyment. "Aha? A fine spirit of courage? This is not as my reports have had it. And you speak of rights here? Cra! You have not heard, then, that my poor friend Roderigo Pena of the upper ravine has suddenly died and—bequeathed to me this territory?"

"Died? When? Of what?" Ramon exploded in astonishment.

Laredo shrugged his eyebrows and shoulders together. "I am not a physician to discuss deaths. Only a poor balata gatherer, striving to develop some meager livelihood for the, shall we say, backward people of my country; and to protect it—" the man's moustachios laid back on his cheeks in a feline grin—"protect it, Senor, from, should we say again, Northern Capitalistic Exploitation?" He smiled at David. "You from North America understand, of course."

The grin died away to its underlying hate. "The which we shall discuss, Senores, not at this water level where the piume flies are oppressive, but in some shady spot along my jungle path above and under the unbiased judgment of some other young men who are also patriotically interested in my endeavors. Only, with your permission, I shall carry the good rifle."

WITH superb arrogance the man turned to go first, leaving them to follow behind. Any man who would dare that much bravado, Dave was convinced must be deadly sure of the situation. The only precaution the fellow took was to draw his machete and flick at vines that trailed thorns across the way. He zig-zagged leisurely up the steep slope, dropping easy persiflage over his shoulder.

"A collector, I am told you present

yourself, of orchids? An avocation, it would seem, in which there is little profit but much opportunity to spy out the land for what your people call commercial development."

"I have my papers," Dave fell back upon another convention of back home, "to show that I am a collector."

Laredo laughed. "Does one in your North, then, where so many can write, still believe in identity of papers? And even if so—they tell me that vanilla is also an orchid—an enterprising young man could have an ambition, is it not, to collect a whole plantation of them along with their owner?"

"Why, you son of a . . ." Dave's angry words broke off, and he shouted, "Look out!", and snatched at Laredo from behind; his hand closed on the fellow's upper arm, jerked him back and whirled him, his feet trundling the ground; and in the same move Dave had the machete in his own hand.

Ramon spat ferociously. "You've got him, amigo I have his feet. Split him now like a melon!"

But Dave was ahead of them both, hacking swift strokes at the greenery of a bush. Slender coils, splotted ruddy brown and gray green over a leprous yellow belly, slipped reluctantly from the broken twigs.

"You talk too damn careless." Dave was grinding his heel on the thing's head. "Wise guy, huh? So monkey-pleased with yourself that you don't look ahead. That's how a fer-de-lance gets to hit a man in the face; after that, you can't apply a tourniquet anywhere!"

Laredo was scrambling to his feet, a little dazed and his face suddenly haggard with the tight lines that the close finger of death can draw. "Cra-ticulas!" he was mumbling. "Hombre you have an eyesight there."

"Such as is needed," Dave told him grimly, "in looking for orchids."

Laredo shook himself as a cat might that has escaped one death and is instantly bold again in its knowledge of eight good lives left. He could afford to be sleekly apologetic.

"Senor compels me to believe him. Who but a true botanist, as foolish as a virgin, would be so mad as to pass up an oppor-

tunity such as you have just lost? Cra-ass-sissimos! My good friend Ramon here, for example, in his excitement would surely have . . . But we shall let that pass too—for the present."

Sleek and purring. But the claws remained under the silk. "For the present, friend Ramon. Which, speaking of presents, although no caballero, but a poor balatero of the jungles, I can do no other than reciprocate." He cupped fingers ingeniously to his lips and emitted the long drawn yowl of a puma. "A signal, Senor, to my good lads on the path above that you have convinced me that you are not a commercial spy. Thus I present you with permission to go alive from our territory."

DAVE WAS staring at the man, wondering whether he understood all the implications of that gift, only dimly realizing how accidental was Life where the Padron O'Rorke had hewn him an estate.

"Although,"—Laredo shrugged again and showed the white smile—"you convince me, too, that I have a worthy competition for this rarest orchid of our country—to whom convey, please, my respects and my assurance that I, Laredo Gomez, do not relinquish hope—ever; and that I shall present myself losing no time." He bowed like a caballero. "Adios, Senores. Go with God. I shall expose myself upon some rock so that my good Ruiz and his men across the river may know that you have permission."

His mastery of the situation was supreme as he turned and went to the hill, leaving even the rifle behind him.

Ramon looked at it hungrily, his fingers clawing for the feel of it, and then he said, "He will have half a dozen of his ruffians down the path to the canoe. Scowlingly he paddled through a long silence. Then Ramon exploded.

"Death of ten gods! His very thoughts are an insult to the Senorita."

"Perhaps—" Dave paddled through many seconds before he finished it—"he can be stopped—somehow."

"But certainly he can be stopped. You could have stopped him, his machete to your hand! I would have stopped him, had I it, even knowing that his henchmen covered us. With this rifle he could be

stopped now, as look, he has the effrontery to stand upon that eminence, signalling his assistant devil, Ruiz."

Laredo waved the friendliest confirmation of his permission. His voice carried faintly over the water: "Inform the Senorita that, alarmed by your competition, I, Laredo Gomez, shall present myself so soon as I shall have consolidated myself in my new territory, where some upstarts of the Roderigo family are disputing my claim—or perhaps even sooner." He could have been a fraternity member announcing honest rivalry.

Ramon, at the forward paddle, snatched backwards for the rifle. "Son of the Ten Thousand! If I but thought I could get him from here, and the hell with his gang ashore! With God's luck they could all miss us."

But Dave kept his knee, weighed down by all his civilized inhibitions, on the rifle in the bottom of the canoe. He paddled through a half hour's silence. The evening cool was bringing the jungle to life. A troop of cebus monkeys shrilled affright and abuse at some tree cat that stalked them. Macaws screeched raucously and sped in pairs across the widening river with the flash of red and blue rockets. A fat curassow flopped clumsily to perch on a far overhanging branch.

Dave emerged from his tight-lipped introspection. "Good white meat." He let the canoe slide, took up the rifle and fired. The bird plummeted into the water.

"Car-r-rambas!" It broke from Ramon. "You can shoot like that, and you let him go! Or don't you yet understand that he murdered Roderigo?"

Dave said nothing; only directed the canoe towards the floating bird, picked it up, mechanically shook off its surface wetness, paddled on, staring at the mirror sheen of the water as though he saw reflections of himself, most of them scowling derisively at him, to be blinked impatiently away and replaced by others that stared puzzled and in complete lack of sympathy.

IN THE HACIENDA patio, when the tale had been luridly told over the coffee by Ramon and moodily edited by Dave, he found Jane looking at both of them

in the same way.

"But—but a gunshot is the recognized way to signal over the roar of the waters. And he—he was polite, as he has always been. Of course he held a gun on you until he might know who you were. Everybody does that here; and everybody is suspicious, of course, of being exploited by *Yanqui* capital. But as soon as he knew, he did nothing to you. In fact," there was a tinge, almost, of disappointment "nobody did anything."

"But surely," Ramon sulked. "The *Senor* did. Much. Only it was the wrong snake that he killed."

Jane's eyes glowed for the moment on Dave, and then there was a question in them again, wondering whether he agreed in that inexorable opinion. Dave looked away from her.

"I—don't know," was as far as he would commit himself. But he felt that explanation was necessary to placate Ramon. He faced him.

"You have said that your civilization comes as far as the ravine. I will tell you, then, that in the civilization of the madmen of the North there are many millions of people, whole statesful of them, who admit no excuse for the killing of a fellow human; not even by their governments."

Ramon stared at him, searching his face for vacuous weakness. Not finding it, he said slowly, "And the cure for madness, I have heard, is a shock worse than the sickness. The good God give that you remain mad."

Jane's rather forced laugh dispersed the men's seriousness. "Your whole talk is mad. You are attributing all sorts of wickedness to Laredo Gomez only because he—because both of you—" Confusion flamed in her cheeks and she changed the subject. "Come, Dave, and look. I've found an orchid for you; right here in the moist ground behind the kitchen."

She did show him a bloom, plucked a lovely thing that strongly scented the air. But that was not what she brought him away for. What do you really think of Laredo?" Her hand was on his arm, tightly gripping her urgency.

Dave was staring at her eyes, not at the flower. "I—don't know. I don't know conditions here. He was—polite. Ramon seems to think, deadly polite. because

completely master of—I don't know what."

The girl's eyes clouded. "Ramon is a dear. And faithful to the death. Perhaps a lee-tle over-zealous because—Yes, Laredo has always been polite; and masterly too—he has organized a little army down there, they say. He is, at all events, a Man."

Dave stared at her. "You—like him?" His question was almost an accusation.

She didn't answer that. Instead she said, as though neither of them had known it before, "Look, this orchid has a scent. Smell." She held it toward him. He still stared at her, only unconsciously inhaling the flower's fragrance. She too, without conscious volition, drew closer, obeying her own injunction to "smell". Their faces were close over the flower's crimson convoluted lip. Then Dave saw her eyes close. His own too-closely-focused vision swept beyond her and the flower was crushed between their lips.

She drew away slowly; her eyes opened and blinked away an incongruous wetness. "Now I shall feel safe."

Dave was drawing her back to him. Only looking his question.

"Because," she confessed to his khaki shirt, "there have been times, since I have been alone, that I have been afraid—amongst all these lawless men. But as long as you are here I shall feel safe."

"As long as I—" Dave was not conscious of having inspired any such confidence. "Why?"

"Because, foolish one," Jane lifted her lips without any intervening flower, "you are a civilized man—and you will behave like one."

Then she released herself, murmuring "Poor Ramon. I don't know how to tell him. But I know he will be—honestly glad for me. But not this evening. Tomorrow I shall make courage."

"Tomorrow," said Dave, "I shall go into the hills back there and collect a million of these orchids."

TOMORROW. Manana. Everything happens manana in those far places South of the Border. Sometimes faster than the North thinks. Next day, in the foot hills Dave heard a gunshot coming from the direction of the hacienda. He

didn't like that. Nobody there hunted; the peons wouldn't have a gun. Ramon—but why would Ramon want to fire a shot? A signal perhaps? Dave decided he had better go back. He started walking, but the nearer he came to the house, the faster he walked; till he was running; and when he came quite close, his heart was choking off his already strangled breath in his throat, for he could hear the inchoate clamour of South of the Border that takes its emotions noisily.

As he charged past the deserted servants' quarters around to the front that overhung the river, people milled about him; peons, house servants, all buzzing at once, mumbling, murmuring incoherently, like bees, hiveless, who had found a leader. Dave's anxiety flared to fury at their meaningless yammerings. A woman clung to him screeching. He shoved her off angrily; and then he saw that it was the fluttery frail Senora of the house. All she could pronounce was, "My daughter! My poor daughter!"

The mob surged Dave toward a smaller mob; and that one immediately detached itself from its interest to coalesce with the larger swarm and each shrill its complaint.

Its interest had been Ramon. He lay propped up against a moss-grown stone gate post; he had bled frightfully; was still bleeding through the fingers of a woman who had a cloth to his chest. He could speak coherently, saving his words.

"Grac' al buen' Dios! You come . . . at last!" He pointed down river. "He came—as he had said, losing no time. With half a dozen of his thugs."

Dave was losing no time with stupidly obvious questions. "Perhaps some of the Romero balateros down the road can be organized."

Ramon waved the suggestion off with a weak hand. "Under a leader, perhaps; but—Time! He will be going fast—two hours start—to his own country below the gorge."

Dave's heart was thick in his throat again to choke off his voice. Ramon was desperately saving of words. "One chance—the canoe!"

Dave swallowed and said the obvious this time. "Ramon, you will die here if I—"

Ramon's hand pushed feebly at him. "So will she—unless—" His face twisted in a wracked grin. "You said you wanted to go—some day, and I—I told you it would have to be alone." His voice came stronger. "I denounce the fatherless animal before God. I name him for the ten-thousand sins of his mother. I—"

TIME! Dave shoved the chattering peons from before him and tumbled down the river embankment. Over the buzzing of the swarm that he left behind he could hear Ramon's fearful invective that he was taking with him to lay before God. Dave fell into the canoe, nearly swamped it—baled it frantically and shoved off.

He didn't know what he was going to do: or what he could do—alone. The race down the river gave little opportunity to plan; the strain of sheer physical endeavor for speed left scant room for thinking. Speed! For what? Vaguely the pattern set itself in his mind that he must contrive to cut off the raiders somewhere along the path. Vaguely, too, came a small comforting reminder that his rifle that he always carried into the jungles still bumped against his back on its web strap.

Speed! Time! How far might six hurrying men have shoved, hustled, carried a girl along a jungle trail in two hours of start? Too far! The mounting rage of futility burned in each heaving gasp.

The canoe was looking down into the maw of the gorge before Dave had coherent plans. But hope, at least, had come to him. Ten miles of rapids, Ramon had told him, roared through that defile. There, by Heaven, would be speed! Much faster than men on a rocky path. IF—

He shot the canoe into the suck of the dark water between the granite buttresses that scowled their "keep out." The gorge roared in his ears and took hold of him in a liquid avalanche that showed him how puny were strong muscles, and a fine spray that dimmed the bulk of rocks wickedly ahead, rushing up at him, gnashing jagged teeth. Speed, at all events, he had.

Canoes, Ramon had said out of his experience, didn't live in that gorge—and soon, disaster came as easily as disaster always can. An insignificant submerged

rock, hardly big enough to cause any surface flurry, took the edge of the canoe and turned it neatly over. Dave was plucked away and rolled under and over and around like any other flotsam before another rock deflected him again to the surface.

Death, Ramon said, lived in that gorge. Death was undoubtedly preparing to do business; but Death, alone of all contingencies, always had Time. As yet, the river played with Dave; sucked at him, spewed him out, tossed him, hurtled him along, spun him, finally playfully into an eddy where Dave was able to swim to and clutch at a great snag of a tree left stranded from last season's rains. He was able to haul himself along to where its shattered stem was imbedded in a little oasis of clean white sand littered with other flotsam. With the help of a dead gray root he was able to heave himself to his feet and he tried to shout his exultation, but all he succeeded in doing was to belch hugely.

One thought surged in his mind. He had won TIME! Surely that, at least. Nobody could have traveled the twists and ups and downs of a cliffside trail with that fearful speed. They would be coming along presently, dragging Jane with them, damn their black souls. And then what? Six of them. Dave still had had no time to think what he might do but they would be along. Surely they would be coming. Fate, even in this savage country, couldn't be so brute merciless as to have let them already go by.

He must find the trail, wherever it would be winding and dipping along on the hillside behind him. He must contrive something. Some desperate thing that would be good against six armed men. He must—and then Dave knew that the Fates and the gods who ruled here were those sardonic heathen ones who grant favours and take their payment in immediate twisted antithesis.

He lived, and he had won Time. But—he looked madly at his hillside, at the sun, at the river; and he saw it. The trail! There it was, an unmistakable beaten path, dipping down from broken rocks to cross a strip of sandy beach—And the brute gods of the river and jungle had spewed him out on the other side!

THE RIVER raced along, chuckling and roaring its laughter at him. A mile—two miles—he couldn't see how much farther the rapids extended. Thirty feet across—a little thirty feet. But nothing alive could swim across; not even a fish. The best they could do was to let themselves be whirled down a mile in a few minutes and then work their way back, snuggling banks and backwaters, in hours.

Dave's reaction of exhaustion swept over him and he sagged down against his dead tree. Even his futile hope of cutting off the gang was hopeless. He lay a shapeless heap on the hot moist sand, numb in body, dead in mind.

Till suddenly above the roar of the river, he was conscious of a muted shout. More shouts. A fury of cursing. They were coming. Thirty feet away; only a little thirty feet across an uncrossable gulf!

And then those heathen gods laughed at him and told him what a Man could do. It seemed to Dave that he could see their eyes staring at him out of jungle shadows, cynical, malicious. He could hear their voices chuckling in the river:

"Civilization ends at your American border."

Dave's voice coughed some of their water from his lungs to croak a hoarse, "No!"

"Or," the insidious voices chuckled, *"does it end when things come very close to home?"*

Dave said nothing. Eyes! Voices! His inhibited soul was haunted.

Angry shouts dragged his mind out of its black introspection of all his past cherished illusions into the merciless glare of day; of this day; of right now! There they were. Laredo and—only three, it seemed, of his gang. Well, four of them or six, what did it matter? What mattered was that they were dragging the girl between them.

Dave lurched up, not giving a damn, from behind his tree trunk, recklessly waving his arms, yelling, "Jane!"

The men on the other side bunched together. "Cra-ticulas!" Dave could hear the yelp of surprise. Ruiz flung up his rifle. His foot kicked a little shower of sand as he leaned forward to fire. His heavy,

big-bore bullet swatted into Dave's tree.

And with that reminder that Life here was the accident, Dave suddenly knew that the heathen gods of that place were supremely right. He knew exactly what a man could do, what a *Man* must do!

The sensitive lips bit down on hard, unaesthetic words; on heathen words of the renounced faith.

"Principles, huh? Nothing ever settled by—the hell it isn't!" Dave tore at the web strap that held the rifle to his back. He snapped the bolt out and in. A slim brass cartridge slipped smoothly into place.

ANOTHER fat bullet suddenly dragged at the pocket of his jacket. The furious, crafty sanity of a man who fights for things very close to home dropped him behind his log.

Laredo Gomez was tugging at the girl's wrist, cursing her sudden resistance.

"Human life, yeah?" As fast as shooting at a fat curassow, Dave snapped a shot at Laredo over his log. As surely as shooting meat. Laredo let go of the girl's wrist, spun and pitched, head and shoulders in the water.

The river gods who held the agency for Death in this ravine shouted and dragged at him. Dave shouted as savagely.

The gang, as fast as apes, jumped behind sheltering rocks. A fusillade of bullets came. Dave yelled defiance.

The gods were lifting Laredo's shoulders; his body swayed out into the stream, anchored only by his feet. A man dashed from his shelter to clutch at them.

"Fool!" Dave fired again. The man lurched over Laredo. His weight launched both of them into the current. The gods

chuckled and took them away.

Jane was standing, petrified in the pose where Laredo's grip on her wrist had left her. Dave yelled at her.

"Duck, you little fool! Splinters!"

A bullet thumped into his tree and showered splinters into his own face. Blood spurted red before his eyes. His body heaved up and fell back. Yells came from the other side. The redness before Dave's eyes was more than blood. He pushed himself up on dizzy knees to see Jane struggling with one man to deflect his rifle. The other one was eagerly watching for another shot at wherever Dave might show up.

"Damned punk!" Dave fired twice, fast, before that one clutched at his stomach and slowly kneeled and even more slowly dipped his face into the sand. The man with whom Jane struggled yelled and tore himself loose. He darted behind a rock; from that to another. Dave could catch fleeting glimpses of him running between river fringe bushes. Deer ran like that, panicked and without thought. Dave watched now as he had watched many times for deer. He saw his chance and dropped the man as he had dropped deer.

Then he stood up and shouted orders. "Jane!" He had to point up river to supplement his shout. "Go on back to head of rapids. Where I can swim across."

Jane's voice carried back to him. "All right. I think—it's safe—now."

The grimness that looked out of Dave's eyes was something that the friends in their civilized fragment of the map had never seen. Dave's hard-bitten lips barely moved as he spoke.

"You can damn well bet it's safe—now."



A Fiction House Magazine



BLOOD for the JUJU

By ALEXANDER WALLACE

What was the real story behind the vanishing safari and the hidden Intotela temple? Bengel knew . . . but Bengel was dead!



Two reports slammed against my eardrums . . . the Cobra's head disappeared . . .

HE MADE AN ODD LITTLE figure framed in the opening of my tent. He was about forty-five,

6—Jungle—Summer

I judged, with narrow hunched shoulders. He wore a shapeless drill suit, blue goggles and an enormous pith helmet, quite the largest I had ever seen. It made him look

like an animated mushroom. Kula, my Somal headman, who stood grinning behind him, caught my eye.

"Kendi' lu ikoke, Bwana!" said he with his deep chuckle. A phrase which for us had much the same meaning as "angel" has for a bankrupt playwright. Something for Kula to flatter and fleece when my back was turned.

"Bring chop for the Bwana!" I dismissed him with a scowl.

"You're Professor Hurst, of course," said I, offering my hand to the little chap. "A naturalist, I presume?"

"No, I dabble in archaeology, Mr. Buckland," he replied shyly. "I am very happy that you found it possible to accept my offer."

His offer, via native runner and a forked stick, had caught up with me at Senze. Six months on the kind of terms he offered had sounded very good to me and I'd headed back for Ngomano fast. Mozambique was feeling the aftermath of World War I, at that time and "angels" like Hurst were rare game. I had pitched camp about half a mile up-river from the post.

"From your letter I understand that Sir Richard Erskane recommended me to you," I said.

"Oh, yes!" he laughed. "You have quite a reputation in London clubs. You should know how Erskane talks."

I did. I had served under the doughty baronette as a scout during the campaign in Deutsch Oest Africa when we chased, but never caught up with the elusive Memdome, as the natives called him,—famous for his cruelty and his whimsies, for the glass he wore in his eye, for his knowledge of their own language and customs, and for his escape when a giant caravan of porters, impressed on the way, vanished with the German into the menacingly verdant jungles where large scale maps still showed a blank.

"It's not a hunting trip you have in mind, Professor," said I, as Kula came in with the coffee and chop.

"Bless my soul, no!" said he with a laugh. "I've never let off anything more dangerous than a pop-gun."

WHILE WE ATE he told me all about the object of his trip. He was a pleasant little fellow and he did seem to

know a great deal about archaeology. He'd never been to Africa before, but he knew all there was to be known from books. He spoke Portuguese and German and was not at all conceited about his learning. I liked him from the start.

In Lisbon he'd picked up an old manuscript, a journal kept more than two hundred years ago by a Capuchian Friar named Father Jerome who had written an account of an ancient temple he had seen up in the Chengwari country. According to the good Father's account there were inscriptions carved in the face of the cliffs near the temple.

He unrolled two maps on the table; one a large scale map of the district, the best procurable he assured me. The other was a quaint old map made by Father Jerome. There were neat little drawings of castellated towns showing the position of native kraals and all the chiefs thereof were called "Dukes" "Marquises" and "Counts." I gathered that the old missionary must have run into a good deal of lion trouble and had been seeing them in his sleep, for he had written across all the empty spaces; "hic sunt leones." But his map did agree with the modern one in general.

"I'm convinced that Father Jerome saw the temple," said Hurst. "The question is, do you think we can locate it from such a crude map?"

Well, I didn't think I'd have much trouble in finding his temple, if there was one. I was accustomed to finding my way in the jungle. I thought that if the ancient shrine were half of what Father Jerome made it out to be, the Zu-Beni who were said to inhabit the district, would be able to give us information. What bothered me was the fact that I would have to hire porters at Ngomano. Not that I had anything against the Companhia do Nyassa, but I did have plenty against Senhor Manoel Barahona, their agent at the post.

When I was a raw lad, just out from the States, I'd signed up with the Company and they had sent me up to Barahona as his assistant. He was a big brute of a man. He'd been a ship's officer and still thought he was slave driving. He ran the post like a bucko mate. Life had delt kindly with me up to the time I arrived at Ngomano, and mine was the self-assurance, the arrogance of the youngster who has yet to learn

his chastisements. I ran foul of him about a week after my arrival. He gave me the worst beating I've ever taken and kicked me out. I mean that literally. I'd have died of exposure if Kula hadn't dragged me off to his hut and nursed me back on my feet. For a couple of years after that and all through the campaign in German East Africa, I'd been nursing the idea that one day I'd go back to Ngomano just to see what Barahona could do to a man full grown and hardened by years of trekking and the rough and tumble of life in military camps.

"We'll need twelve men, Professor," said I. "I'll send Kula over to Ngomana to hire them. Pershaps you'd care to go along?"

OF COURSE it was my job to hire the men, and he gave me a surprised look, but I didn't think anything would be gained by explaining the situation to him. I expected Barahona would forbid the villagers to work for me. He collected a "gratuity" from the guides and white hunters in his territory. It was not like him to let a catch like the Professor slip through his fingers.

The Professor trudged off with Kula while I sat in my tent to await events.

Kula was back in an hour. I knew it had happened as soon as he came running into my tent. He was bleeding at the mouth and his eyes bulged.

"The Portuguesa," he gasped out. "He say no porters for you, Bwana!"

"He hit you, Kula, eh? Why?"

Kula spat out blood and his eyes flashed; "He is the father of lies, Bwana. I hear him talk to Bwana Hurst. He say you steal from him one time. He drive you plenty, he say! I say that damn lie and he drive me."

It was too much for me. I couldn't sit there while Barahona gave me a reputation a skunk would shudder at; besides nobody could hit Kula, not if I was around and able to hit back. I slammed on my helmet and hit the trail for Ngomana.

"Come along!" I shouted at Kula over my shoulder. "You may have to pick up the pieces again."

The post consisted of half-a-dozen corrugated iron sheds with Barahona's thatched bungalow in the center of the compound with a tall flag-staff beside it. The road up from the river passed through

the native village which crouched on the bare slope of the hill. It hadn't changed much since I'd seen it last. Evidently a caravan had come in recently for a gang of blacks were sacking ivory for shipment down river and making a lot of noise about it. The tapping of coopers' hammers coming from the oil shed made an accompaniment to their toneless chanting. The stench of palm-oil and dried fish hung like a haze over the hard, red earth of the compound.

I headed straight for the store. It was the same big square room, as hot as an oven, with a long counter and shelves piled with trade goods—all the features of a Woolworth department store, except there wasn't anything you could buy for a dime. A couple of white men lounged in rattan chairs with a table between them, drinking gin. I didn't know them, but I guessed that one of them was Barahona's candidate for my job. The Senhor himself was talking to the Professor with his elbows resting on the counter. He hadn't changed much either, a little flabbier, perhaps. His skin was blotchy and the jungle bags under his close-set eyes were more conspicuous than when I'd last seen him. But he was still a very big hunk of man and the old fear and hatred of him struck at my stomach like fangs. He straightened up as I came in and stared at me for a moment; then his booming voice filled the room.

"Holy Saints! It is the Yankee sneak-thief and he has grown a beard!"

AFTER THAT I didn't care what happened. I walked up to the counter. For a moment the power of speech seemed to desert me, then pent-up hate poured out of me like bilge-water. My Portuguese was not of the kind one sees in print but it was fluent, rich in burning oaths and invective and I'd had five years in which to compose a suitable verbal description of Barahona's attributes. The two Portuguese were staring at me with their mouths hanging open. Barahona listened with a fixed smile on his thick lips until I ran down like a mechanical toy. Then he turned to the Professor, shook his head and said in English:

"You see what a man he is? First he robs me. Now he comes back to abuse

me. Some are like that; you cannot beat honesty into them. No, it is deep in them. One must cut it out."

An afflux of blood pounded in my ears. I leaned over the counter and drove my fist into his mouth. It was a sharp, stinging blow and when he wiped his mouth blood showed on the back of his hand. He looked at it with a surprised expression, then roared out a string of oaths and vaulted the counter. The board floor shook and bottles rattled on the shelves as he landed on my side.

Often I had dreamed of this moment. I had planned what I would do to the last detail. But it didn't happen as I'd seen it. His huge fist smashed through my guard in his first attack and drove me back against the wall. I kicked him off and got a couple of hard blows home to the pit of his stomach. He roared and came at me with his head down. He hit me again and again. The room whirled; I lost all sense of time. Barahona's face grimaced at me out of a red haze; I smashed at it desperately while his punches thudded into my body, and exploded in my face. I wondered vaguely why I was still on my feet. I saw Barahona stagger back against the counter; he reeled along it and his breathing filled the room. Then I knew I was on my feet because he couldn't knock me down. A hoarse yell of exultation came to my lips with bubbles of blood. I leaped at him and struck and struck in a kind of frenzy until he lay at my feet groaning; his face beaten into a bloody pulp.

I became aware of the Professor's voice. He was pulling at my arm;

"Come away, Buckland!" he urged. "Come away!"

I followed him in a daze; my legs feeling as if hundred pound weights were attached to them. Every movement was agony. Half way across the compound my knees buckled under me and consciousness slipped away.

WHEN I CAME TO I was stretched on the cot in my tent. The Professor was dabbing my face with an astringent. It smarted like hell and I sat up.

"How long have I been out?" I demanded.

"Quite some time. Man, you don't know when you're licked! Kula came over and

helped me to get you home."

There was something in the way he said it that made me look at him curiously. He had his goggles off. His eyes were deep-set, blue with a metallic glint in them. They gave him a personality that seemed to contradict my first impression of him.

"I don't know what to think of you, Buckland," said he.

I smiled wryly; "Maybe you like to have another man for the trip," I said.

"No," said he with an amused smile. "Senhor Barahona tells a good story but I prefer Erskane's recommendation and my own judgment."

"Well, thank you for that!" said I warmly. I rose stiffly. My body felt as if an elephant had used it for a foot mat. He watched as I buckled on my gun belt.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Hire a dozen men and get started," I replied. "Barahona's memory is no shorter than mine. We'll trek before he decides what to do about it."

The Professor looked worried; "I got the impression that Senhor Barahona was much interested in this trip, Buckland. What do you know of him?"

I shrugged: "He's the big boss in these parts. Does as much trading on his own account as he does for the Company."

"Do you mean he steals from his employers?" The Professor looked shocked.

"Most agents wouldn't call it stealing," I explained. "He gives the natives short measure for their gold dust and ivory,—saves a pound of beads here and a yard of cloth there, until enough is accumulated to trade for a few prime tusks for himself."

"How ingenious!" commented the Professor thoughtfully. "I can understand how it's done with gold dust, but ivory is rather bulky. How does he manage to get it out of the country?"

"The Companhia do Nyassa would like to know that!" said I with a grin. "But it's a big country, Professor and there are as many 'interlopers,' unlicensed traders, as there are Company's agents. As for Barahona's interest in the trip, don't worry about it. He figured to get the job for one of his pals and take his cut, that's all."

I walked over to the village. The headman produced twelve men without argument, which surprised me a little, for I'd come expecting a refusal. But evidently

Barahona hadn't got around to forbidding them to work for me. I marched them into the compound to pick up the Professor's loads which he had brought up with him. Barahona didn't show himself. One of the Portugues came to the door of the store and stood watching me as I lined up the loads, but he made no attempt to interfere. I gave him a cocky; "*Boa tarde, Senhor*" and marched out again.

THE FIRST FOUR DAYS of our route lay Southward through dense forest and jungle grass ten feet high, until we reached Melaso River and followed its course toward the Chengwari Mountains. We did most of our marching in the early morning and late afternoon and spent the hottest part of the day in camp. The Professor studied his maps, picked thorns out of his legs and kept a sharp lookout for snakes.

Lord, but that little man had guts! The sun burned him cruelly and the mosquitoes feasted on his raw flesh. He went down with fever, but as soon as I'd filled him with quinine and his temperature came down he was clamoring to go on again. I supposed he had the true spirit of the scientist. If he'd been told there was an undeciphered inscription on a red hot stone in Hell he'd have clamped on his goggles and absurd helmet and gone down after it.

We followed the river into wooded foothills. They rose before us in two pitches, enclosing and concealing a labyrinth of valleys, some shallow and several miles in breadth; others deep, narrow and as dark as a mine.

Late that afternoon we came out onto fairly open and elevated country with a gorgeous view of the Chengwari range. In the foreground a massive lump of granite reared two hundred feet above the green palms and mimosa with their cream balls and feathery foliage. It divided the river into twin streams. The streams raced between high wooded banks that threw a cool green light on the swift-flowing water. Herds of gazelles zig-zagged across patches of amber pasture land, their beige and white markings merging with their background so that they were seen and gone in a flash. A path branched off from the river. It was somewhat broader than the usual jungle "road" which is seldom wider than a man's

foot. A little farther on we came across a log buried across the path and dirty rags fluttered from stripped palms on either side of the trail,—charms to keep ghosts and leopards away from the village I knew must be nearby.

Although I had not mentioned it to the Professor, the fact that we'd seen neither hide nor hair of the Zu-Bengi had begun to worry me. We were getting low on supplies. We knew that we must be in the vicinity of the temple, but without a guide, we might wander among the hills and through the maze of canyons for a year and never find it. However, it was dark before we came in sight of the village and, since your African's an unpredictable cuss at his best, especially so if you sneak up on him after dark, I gave orders to make camp.

AFTER WE'D FINISHED our meal the Professor and I sat talking and smoking in the moonlight that filtered through the trees in the glade where we had our camp. All around us were the night noises of the forest, its unaccountable echoing and ghost-like sighing. From across the nearest hill came the muffled sound of drum tapping and the moaning wail of a horn or conch. It had a peculiar tone, or rather two tones, so that one seemed to hear it first with one ear then with the other. I'd never heard anything quite like it before and I sat listening with my head cocked on one side.

"It's not unlike the moan of a lion," observed the Professor.

"Or one of the guardian spooks of your temple," I said jokingly. Then something happened that made me stop joking.

"Bwana! Bwa-na!" Kula's voice rose in a scream that had mortal terror in it. The Professor and I sprang to our feet and ran to the back of the camp. Kula was standing on top of a packing case under the tree where he had set up his oil-tin stove. There was an oil lamp fastened to the trunk of the tree. It's flickering light gleamed on his black, rigid figure and on the white under-belly of a cobra. It was six feet long if it was an inch. It had reared up one third of its length and its distended hood was close to Kula's bare feet. The poor devil was petrified with fright and dared not move. The cobra was

hissing loudly and I knew it was preparing to strike. I clawed at my gun. Before I had it clear of leather, flame flashed before my eyes and two reports slammed against my ear drums. The cobra's head disappeared, blown clean off! Stupified, I turned to stare at the Professor who stood with a smoking automatic in his hand. He gave me a queer little smile, then slipped the gun into a holster under his arm, and turned away. The shots had roused the camp and the men were standing around jabbering like a cage full of baboons.

Kula had gone after the Professor, caught his hand and was pouring out his gratitude. I got the men quieted down and went to join Hurst. I didn't speak as I sat down facing him. I figured it was up to him to do the talking. There was silence for a moment and then;

"You're thinking of pop-guns, of course, Buckland," said he with a quizzical smile.

"You are uncommonly fast with the real thing," said I. "I didn't know it was your habit to carry a gun." I might have added I liked a man to carry his weapons where they could be seen.

"That snake," said he with a dry cough, "was one of the imponderables, the sort of thing a man can't foresee."

"You don't need to apologize for that," said I. "But let me have it straight. To begin with, if you're a professor of archaeology, I'm the King of Timbucto!"

"I suppose I have over-played the part," he agreed with a smile and lapsed into silence.

"I like to know where I'm going," I prompted him. "I don't like being led by the nose into anything."

HE REMAINED SILENT, evidently turning something over in his mind; "Look Buckland," he said at last. "I'm not at liberty to speak too freely. You'll have to fill in some blanks. To begin; for you, the war was over in 1918, but for men of my profession the end of one war is just the beginning of another. That may sound cynical when everyone is quoting Tennyson, talking about the brotherhood of man. But that's the way it is. Well, too many rifles, German Mausers have been found in native hands lately. Who's selling them? Where do they come from? It's my job to find that out."

"British agent, eh?" said I.

"Not necessarily, Buckland. As you know, the sale of modern rifles to natives is forbidden by all interested Governments. You know why. Let us call it an international problem."

"The temple is part of your act, of course," said I gloomily.

"It is not!" he exclaimed. "We know that one of the rifles, according to the story told by the native caught with it, came from what he called a stone kraal in this district. Research produced Father Jerome's map and here we are."

"What made you pick on me?" I urged. "I thought you knew about those rifles," he explained.

"You suspected *me*!" I exclaimed reproachfully.

"Oh, don't look so damned indignant, Buckland!" He laughed and went on; "You were just the type, a white hunter, jungle tramp, picking up whatever came your way. I know more about your past than you'd care to remember."

I gave him a side-long look and decided to say nothing. There were one or two incidents, involving the disposal of a few ivories, where property rights might strike a narrow-minded man as being a little vague.

"Yes," Hurst went on. "It had to be you or Barahona involved in the rifle business. I'm damned glad it turned out to be him. Of course, he's not the man I'm after. But he is disposing of the ivory and gold dust those rifles are traded for."

"Who are you looking for?"

He rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "When we find him, we find the rifles. The job will be done and we can go home, Buckland."

"When *we* find him!" I echoed.

"You don't have to go along if you don't want to," said he with a grin. "But it will be worth your while if you do. Think it over. Sleep on it, Buckland." He went to his tent, leaving me to think it out.

I MUST HAVE SAT THERE for a long time. I don't know what it was that disturbed my concentration, but something did. I rose with a tingling sensation running up and down my spine. The camp was quiet. A light wind was rustling the palm fronds and threw moving shadows

across the clearing. A jackal howled like a lugubrious spirit close to the camp. Thinking that it had been just such a prowler, nosing among Kula's pots, that had roused me I started for my tent. I had taken no more than a couple of steps when the conch we'd heard earlier in the evening blasted the silence. It was followed by the sound of people crashing through the bush. Black figures rushed at me from all directions. I got my gun out but was snatched from my hand before I could pull the trigger, and I went down, kicking and yelling, under a mass of greasy, stinking blacks. I heard Hurst's gun go off. I struggled to my knees, shouting.

A blow from a knob-kerry silenced me. When my head stopped spinning, I saw them dragging Hurst toward me. They yanked us to our feet and bound our hands behind our backs. Then they yoked us together with a pole that had a loop at each end to fit around our necks. It was the sort of thing the slavers had used in the old days. They left us standing while they looted the camp. They were all big fellows, armed with square ox-hide shields and spears. They went through our stuff like a bunch of women at a rummage sale. I got a real shock when I saw our own men join in the fun, and I understood why Barahona hadn't interfered when I had hired them. He was mixed up in the gun-running all right!

A group of blacks bundled up their loot and formed a line on either side of us. They yelled at us in a dialect that struck my ear as similiar to that of the Intotela of Tanganyika, but I couldn't catch the words. However, they made their meaning plain enough when they prodded us into motion with the points of their spears.

I felt sorry for Hurst as we trudged along the narrow foot-path toward the village. He was in the lead and I was about twice his size. The result was that he had the weight of the slanting pole sitting on the back of his neck. He staggered on without a whimper; even flung back a joke or two at me. Just a little guy with more guts than a million. I could have blamed him for fooling me into the mess we were in, but I'm glad I found the fortitude to put up with the chafing of that damned pole and to keep my mouth shut.

It was still dark when we reached the

village which,—thank God,—was no great distance from where we had camped. We got free of the pole and were pushed into a lousy hut that stank like a sewer.

"Lord!" gasped Hurst, as he flung himself down on the dirt floor. "Imagine trekking for a thousand miles with that damned contraption around your neck! Slave women did it."

"The weight was more evenly distributed," said I.

"By George, I never thought of that!" said he as if relieved to know that his powers of endurance lost nothing in comparison with that of a Negress.

It struck me then that I was a lot older than Hurst in a sense. A cynic, he called himself, but actually he was just an enthusiastic boy enjoying an adventure. I wondered if he knew how it was likely to end. For my part I couldn't see any permanent spot for us in the shape of future events. But I didn't tell him what I thought. I figured he'd find out for himself soon enough. Besides I was too tired to talk. In spite of the vermin and stench, I curled up and went to sleep.

I AWOKE with the rumble of drums in my ears. Hurst was already awake and on his hands and knees peering out into the sunlight through the hole-like entrance to our hut. He pulled his head in as I touched his shoulders.

"Lot of fuss going on out there," he commented. "Something to do with us I suppose."

"I don't doubt it," I said with a wry smile.

They came for us before I could answer him. We were taken out, closely guarded but unbound, into sunlight and clamor.

It was a large village. The huts, with thatches that reached to the ground, squatted around a central compound. The ju-ju tree, a gnarled old cotton-wood, stood in the centre, ringed about by stakes, each supporting a skull, two of them human. The village drum stood under a thatched gate-way. Near it there was a huge slab of stone roughly carved to represent a crocodile standing on its tail. The whole population was crowded into the compound and they were in a high state of excitement; but, on the surface at least, there was no sign of hostility toward us, which heart-

ened me a little.

The drums began to roll. Two long lines of women began to dance, weaving to and fro and clapping their hands. Then the warriors began to pound the ground with the butts of their spears and soon they started an interminable chant. As we watched the lascivious wiggling of the women, the words of the chant seemed to strum on a chord of my memory. As the chorus was repeated again and again the words began to make sense and I listened with my mouth open.

"Ha! Memdoma!" (they sang).

"Ha! Memdoma!"

"He has finished killing Muta,

"He has gone to kill the Island people,

"And I must follow Memdoma!"

THE SONG was in honor of the German, Bengel, the fellow we'd chased half way across Africa! It was the Intotela dialect, a little of which I'd picked up in German East Africa. Then the whole thing burst on me. It struck me with the force of a blow and I uttered an exclamation.

Hurst caught my arm; "What's the matter with you, Buckland?" he demanded. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I am,—I mean, I'm hearing one!" I said excitedly. "I know where your rifles came from,—I know who's selling them!"

"What the devil!" he broke off, staring at me.

"Sure," I explained more calmly. "It's Memdoma, the Glass Eye! He got away with a caravan of arms and ammunition."

"D'you mean Colonel Bengel?"

"That's the man!"

"But—but he—" he stammered incredulously.

"He vanished with a caravan," I cut in. "That's all you or anybody else knows. But I say these fellows are Intotelas, part of the caravan."

"By George, it could be!" he cried out. "Either he or some one else got the caravan and cached the rifles—"

The conch bellowed out its double note again. Every time we'd heard it so far, it had meant trouble and I looked around uneasily. The blacks in front of us parted. A white robed figure emerged from a large hut at the far end of the compound, followed by several men and women, evi-

dently attendants.

"Ha! Memdoma!" sang the warriors.

My eyes were glued on the central figure, slowly advancing down the aisle of sweating figures. I think I was expecting to see a man in neat uniform, wearing a monocle. It was with a distinct shock that I realized that I was looking at a woman, and an uncommonly good-looking one, even at that distance! She came to stand a few feet from us and looked us over calmly. She wore a piece of cloth passed under her right arm and knotted over her left shoulder. A beaded belt bound it to her waist which I could have spanned with two hands. There was enough black in her to put a shadow on her skin. But her hair fell to her waist and her eyes were crescent shaped, vaguely Oriental. Around her slender ankles and wrists were strings of blue beads and the whole length of her left arm, almost from shoulder to wrist was ornamented scars, about the size of a wafer. An attendant placed a stool before her, another opened an umbrella, one of the big green variety, a popular article of trade. She sat down under it.

Hurst coughed dryly; "If that's Memdoma," he whispered. "I can see why you chased it."

"She's just one of those things, Professor," I retorted. "An imponderable—"

"Why have you come to Amatupa, white men?" the girl demanded suddenly in sibilant Portuguese.

We hadn't worked out an answer for that and I looked at Hurst helplessly. His wits were sharper than mine. Evidently he'd decided to gamble on what I'd told him of Memdoma, for he started to talk in fluent German! I couldn't understand what he was saying, but the girl did. Her expression changed from open disbelief to puzzlement. She asked questions. Hurst answered glibly. The native name Memdoma was mentioned several times.

At last the girl seemed satisfied. She rose and signified that we were to follow her. Hurst took off his big helmet, wiped sweat from his face and grinned at me.

"What did you tell her?" I asked in a whisper as we followed the girl toward the larger hut from which she had come.

"You were right, Buckland!" he answered with his boyish chuckle. "Now lis-

ten," he went on hurriedly. "You are my Portuguese guide. I'm a German. My Government sent me out to look for Memdoma. This is the game I was trained to play. We are going to see your old play-fellow. Just keep your mouth shut."

BY THIS TIME we had reached the hut. The thatch had been cut away and raised by stakes forming a sort of veranda, and the round holes in the circular daube wall had been enlarged into a square doorway. We followed the girl in.

A shaft of sunlight, striking downward through the smoke vent in the roof, made a pool of light on the mud floor. The interior was furnished with skilfully woven tables and chairs of rattan. There was a ragged tri-color of bunting hanging above a skin couch,—what was left of a German flag. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, they came to rest on the white man that reclined on the couch.

He was the skeleton of a man with knotted fingers and sunken chest, a body wasted by fever and dysentery. A man that might live for a day or a month. Only his eyes were alive. They looked enormous in their shriveled sockets and glowed like emeralds set in a skull.

The girl bent over him and spoke softly, then withdrew. He lifted a bony finger, pointing at Hurst and beckoning him to approach his couch. Hurst spoke rapidly. Memdoma—for I knew that wreck of a man could be no other—listened with his unblinking eyes fixed on the speaker's face. Suddenly he interrupted Hurst with a harsh exclamation; then pointed at me and said something to the girl. His voice sounded like dry leaves crumpled underfoot. The girl touched my arm, pointing to the door. I followed her out.

"Return to your hut," she directed.

I stood looking down at her and I suppose she saw approval in my eyes for she smiled and asked suddenly;

"Who are your people? Why did you come?"

"The fame of your beauty has spread far, Lady," said I with a grin. "I came to see for myself; now I see that no man has lied."

"You lie!" she retorted with a laugh, "but pleasantly. Unless," she added, as if struck by a sudden thought, "The Senhor Barahona has spoken of me."



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"Truly, he has!" I lied glibly. "His words are honey when he speaks of you, Lady!"

The effect was the reverse of my expectation. Her eyes flashed;

"His words are poison!" said she with astonishing vigor. "Better for you if you did not know him, stranger."

She went into the hut, leaving me to regret that I had forgotten Hurst's admonition and opened my fool's mouth. Evidently Barahona's name was no recommendation in Amatupa. I started to walk back to our hut, wondering if I'd knocked the props from under Hurst's flimsy story.

THE VILLAGERS were still dancing under the ju-ju tree, and the compound was full of dust and clamor. Two big Intotelas detached themselves from the crowd and followed me at some distance. As I circled around a group that stood watching the dancers, a native, bent double under a bundle of firewood, jarred into me. I grabbed at his load to prevent him from toppling over.

"I will come tonight, Bwana!" Kula's voice came from under the bundle. I threw a quick glance over my shoulder and saw the Intotela guards bearing down.

"Keep going!" I hissed at Kula and he staggered on. The two Intotelas escorted me to the hut and squatted down in the shade of the thatch near the opening. Goat's milk, cassava and a calabash full of an unpalatable mixture of grain and putrid meat had been placed on the floor. But the milk, after I'd skimmed a handful of bugs from the surface, was sweet. I was hungry enough to tackle the mess in the calabash before Hurst showed up.

"Well, who's the girl?" I asked as he came in.

He gave me an amused look. "I suppose that's natural at your age," said he. "Well, she's one of the many children born to Memdoma by native women. Brought her with him from German East Africa."

"There's not that much black in her," said I.

"Who said there was? German father, Indian mother; make what you like of it. Her name is Mahara. Does that satisfy you?"

"Oh, sure!" I agreed. "Just natural curiosity. Did he mention Barahona?"

He gave me a sharp look. "He did. But

what makes you ask?"

I told him.

"Well, you don't need to worry," he commented when I had finished. "It won't make any difference for us. He's mad, Buckland, stark, raving mad! Disease has affected his brain I suppose. He still thinks he's fighting us. When I told him the war was over and Germany had lost, he flew into a rage and had me kicked out. It was downright pathetic to hear him talk of the campaign he is going to wage to recover all German territory in Africa."

"But surely the others, —" I began.

"No," he interrupted. "All they know of the outside comes through Barahona. Our friend makes a trip up here occasionally, for obvious reasons he has said nothing to disturb Memdoma's illusions. On the contrary, he's been filling him up with stories of German victories."

The reasons were not so obvious for me and I said so.

"It's simple enough, Buckland," he explained. "As I told you, we know that Barahona has been shipping out gold-dust in greater quantities than could be acquired by the usual practice of the Company agents. We also knew that he had acted as an under-cover man for the Germans during the war. Somehow, through the same underground channels he used during the war probably, he got to know what had happened to Memdoma. As you guessed, Memdoma ended his retreat out of German East here at Amatupa. Now, those rifles, traded for gold-dust and ivory, are worth a fortune. Barahona saw that, but he couldn't do anything about it, not while Memdoma lived."

"Sure," I agreed. "The Intetola would have killed him, if he'd lifted a finger against their hero, Memdoma."

"Exactly. All Barahona could do was to persuade him to sell a few of the rifles to pay for his services and to buy supplies for the campaign that poor devil thinks he's going to wage."

"Barahona is just waiting for Memdoma to die, then he's going to take over the lot!" said I.

"You've got it, Buckland! And my guess is that Barahona will follow us here."

I nodded thoughtfully. It was obvious that he had sent his men along just to make sure that we did not get beyond Amatupa.

"The girl must have talked to our fellows," I reasoned. "She knows what we are after. But there's something between her and Barahona." I could have told him what it was, but I didn't think he would be interested.

"Memdoma will hold us till Barahona comes in," said he. "We've got to get out of here before that happens, Buckland."

I told him of my meeting with Kula.

"Do you think he'll show up?" he asked.

I gave him a confident grin; "I know Kula. Just sit down and wait until it's dark."

WE WERE NOT GIVEN that long. Just before sunset, the village drum, used only to beat an alarm or on ceremonial occasions, boomed out an answer to one we couldn't hear at first, then it came faintly from a distance. A couple of hours later Barahona marched in with a string of Swahilis behind him, all armed with muskets. The leading men of the Intotela had gathered in the compound to receive him. As we watched from the door of our hut, they formed in a semi-circle under the ju-ju tree, with Barahona and his men in the centre. I guessed that there was to be a big palavar and that our fate was the topic under discussion.

"It looks ugly," commented Hurst.

I was watching Barahona. He was talking, emphasizing his words with rapid gestures. Right then I would have given ten years of my life to know what he was telling them. I could see that he was working them up to do something. Presently the witch doctors, in hideous masks and grass cloaks that covered them from head to foot, began their capers in the centre of the gathering. They kept up their macabre antics for some time, then suddenly one of them snatched a spear from one of the warriors and flung it in the direction of our hut. I knew what that meant; we had been smelt out.

"This is it, Hurst!" I shouted and pulled his head back into the hut. In a moment the warriors had followed the spear and came, howling like a wolf-pack, to drag us out. I let the first one that thrust his head through the low opening have my boot full in the face. His body blocked the narrow opening and gave me time to grasp his spear. For a while I held them at bay. Then I heard them tearing holes in the



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thatch. They dropped on us from the roof. Ju-jutsu must have been part of Hurst's training. Whenever he got his hands on one of them the fellow screamed as a bone snapped. He stayed on his feet as long as I did. It was hopeless, of course. In a matter of minutes we were flung to the ground and dragged out.

I thought the ju-ju tree was the end of the trek for us. I was wrong. They brought out the yoke and yoked us up again. I could hear Hurst swearing softly and fluently above the excited yapping of the villagers. Barahona was standing with his hands on his hips, watching us with a sardonic grin on his face. Then I saw Mahara. She was seated among the elders. Her chin was cupped in her hand and her gaze was fixed steadily on me. As our eyes met, she moved her hands in a swift gesture, before it came to rest in her lap; for an instant it was extended toward me, palm upwards. My pulse quickened with a thrill of hope. It was the conventional native gesture signifying peace. She had declared herself a friend, as surely as if she had spoken the words.

I lost sight of her as Intotela warriors formed a guard around us. Barahona pressed his way through them and came to stand before Hurst, his puffy eyes gloating.

"Senhor," he said. "By this time you must know that when you came to Ngomano and told me you were an archaeologist looking for a temple, that you told it to the wrong man."

"I don't think so," replied Hurst coolly. "When I told it to my friend, Mr. Buckland, I told it to the wrong man."

Barahona looked puzzled; then he laughed; "Under the circumstances I find it hard to follow you, Senhor!"

"Permit me to explain," Hurst murmured. "When my employers—"

"The German Government, eh?" Barahona interposed with a laugh.

"I refer to the Companhia do Nyassa and other interested parties, Senhor," replied Hurst. "As I was saying, when my employers handed this case over to me I studied all the relevant facts and drew up my plan of action. As I saw it, there were only two possible culprits; Mr. Buckland and yourself. I thought that much time would be saved by getting in touch with both of you, by showing you my map and

telling you the object of my search. Why? Well, Senhor, because the guilty man was a clever fellow. I knew he would not be deceived and that sooner or later, he would reveal himself by trying to prevent me from reaching my objective. Oh, I see that you are beginning to understand!"

BARAHONA was plainly worried. He was staring at Hurst with his loose mouth hanging open. Recovering himself, he twisted his face into a grimace.

"Very well, Senhor," said he. "You know me, but what good does that do you now? You see how angry these people are. I have told them that you have put a spell upon their beloved Memdoma. They believe he is dying because of the evil you brought to this place, Senhor. I would not be in your place for all the ivory in Africa! I do not see what you have gained."

"Naturally," Hurst answered imperturbably. "I omitted to mention that one of my assistants was detailed to watch your movements. His orders were to follow as soon as you left Ngomano with soldiers from Fort Louis Philippe. You follow me, the soldiers follow you. It is as simple as that, Senhor."

"Soldiers!" Barahona's face worked. His hand flew to his gun and I thought he was going to shoot us on the spot. He changed his mind; strode up to Hurst and struck him full in the face. The pole prevented Hurst from falling over backwards; but he sank to his knees. Barahona stood over him raving.

"You lie!" he roared, dragging Hurst to his feet. "A trick! But you cannot fool me. By the Saints, you are both dead men! Even soldiers will not save you." He shouted at the Intotelas and they prodded us into motion. We left the village, surrounded by grim-faced warriors and with the shrill curses of the women ringing in our ears. The witch doctors leaped and shrieked in the van like fiends out of Hell. We crossed the river over stones green and slippery with weeds and stretched out into a long file along a jungle path.

At midnight we halted for an hour or more. Barahona came back from the head of the line with the Intotela headmen. They stood in a group arguing. From the few words I caught I got the impression that Barahona was trying to delay the march.

They met his proposals with vigorous head-shaking and angry exclamations. He came over to us and stood frowning down at Hurst.

"You have yourself to blame for this," he said.

"They'll get the truth from the Intotela and they'll hang you for it, Barahona," Hurst answered coolly. "You had better think it over."

Barahona spat, cursed him and hurried away as the order to march was given. We struggled on.

As the sun came up we followed a spruit into a narrow ravine. The light was sharp and brought out harshly the chalk-rock cliff that rose from one hundred to three hundred feet on either hand. Suddenly Hurst stopped as if something had struck him and the butt end of the yoke jolted up against my chin, nearly knocking me out.

"Look, Buckland!" he shouted back at me. "The temple!"

THERE IT WAS, sure enough! It looked as old as the cliffs themselves,—in fact it was part of them, carved out of the living rock. It had two stories with columns, but was so dwarfed by its massive background that it looked like a toy. Erosian had softened its carvings so that it seemed to blend into the pastel shades of the sandstone. A pile of stone blocks, evidently what was left of a great stairway, spilled out of a black, square hole that was the entrance. As we drew nearer to it, I saw a great, black slab of stone, set up like an altar about fifty yards from the entrance.

Facing the altar, but at some distance from it, the column of warriors was halted. The witch-doctors and the headmen gathered in a group apart. Then the drums began to throb and the warriors rushed forward to form a semi-circle before the altar, all scrambling to get into the front rank. Barahona, I noticed, with his Swahilis clustered around him, had taken up a position on the right horn of the semi-circle. I noticed also that the Swahilis had been disarmed.

Presently we were led into the centre of the circle. Our hands and feet were bound; the pole taken from our necks. Then we were lifted bodily and carried forward while a great shout went up from the Intotela and the drums rolled like thunder.

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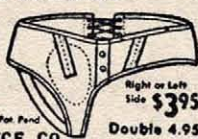
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Hurst was to be the first victim. They laid him on the black surface of the stone, leaving me to stand at his feet.

Without warning the drums ceased. All but two of the witch doctors retired, effacing themselves in the crowd. Of the two remaining, one stood by me; the other stood over Hurst. He took off his mask, revealing a face withered and old. Then he began to chant, contorting his body and muscles until his eyes bulged and his lips were flecked with foam. Fascinated, I watched him work himself up while the resemblance of man slipped from him like a cloak and he became the personification of bestial rage. He had snatched a long curved knife from under his grass cloak and was holding it aloft with both hands for every one to see when the report of a rifle rang out. He fell across Hurst on his face and, still unable to believe my eyes and ears, I saw blood ooze from a hole in the back of his skull. As I turned my head to look in the direction of the temple, a figure came dashing toward me. It was Kula! In the same moment that I saw him, a rifle flashed among the pile of hewn stones. I heard the bullet plop into the black beside me. Then Kula was slashing at my bonds.

"Run, Bwana!" he panted. "Run for the stone house!"

I POUNCED on the witch-doctor's knife and cut the bonds from Hurst's legs while Kula freed his hands. Shrieks of anger and dismay, punctuated by the sharp crack of the rifle filled the canyon as the Intotela, over the first shock of surprise, grasped what was happening. We raced for the door of the temple. As we clambered over the heap of stones, Mahara jumped up from among them. I took the rifle from her and told her to follow the others.

When we reached the temple, even at that moment I was impressed by its magnificent proportions, and the amount of labor that must have gone into its construction.

"Father Jerome wasn't lying," said Hurst enthusiastically. "I think it's Dravidian."

I looked at him and grinned. He seemed to have forgotten that he had just missed getting his throat cut. I thrust the rifle into his hands.

"That's not Dravidian!" I said dryly.

It's what's you came after,—a Mauser."

He examined it quickly, then turned to Mahara and questioned her in rapid German.

"And I wasn't wrong," he said, with evident self-satisfaction after she had answered him. "Rifles and ammunition are cached inside, Buckland."

We went into the temple. The sun was high and a pace beyond the threshold it was as black as night. Bats struck against our faces like soft velvet as we entered and bat guano lay inches thick on the rock floor. The stench was appalling.

"There is one chamber," the Mahara explained. "But there are caves behind the stone image of the god. The guns are stacked there, four in a case."

"Where do the caves lead to?" I asked.

She shook her head, and reading my thought, answered; "There is no escape that way."

"If the Intotela attack we should be able to hold them off until Bates, my assistant, gets here," Hurst cut in.

"You,—you mean you weren't bluffing Barahona!" I gasped.

"Of course not!" said he crisply. "My orders were to find this cache and destroy it. I've never failed in a mission yet. And I made sure that, no matter what happened to me, I would not fail in this one."

LEAVING KULA TO GUARD the door, we went back into the cave. I don't know how many rifles were there. The flickering light of a match showed tiers of cases piled on a wooden platform to keep the damp from them. We broke out a couple of rifles. I saw that we'd have to take them apart and get the grease out of them. We went back to the doorway where it was less painful to breath. It didn't take us long to clean the rifles, but Hurst and I were forced to sacrifice our shirts. While we worked, Kula told his tale. When Bwana Hurst had shot the snake, he said, some of the blood had spattered his legs. An evil thing, the blood of a cobra. A man's legs would shrivel up if it dried upon them. Therefore, he had gone down to the river to wash it off. He had heard a shot and had run back to the camp, saw what was happening and hid himself. Later he had followed us to Amatupa. Shortly after I had left him, two Intotela had caught him try-

ing to leave the village.

"It is easy for a man to get into a village under a bundle of firewood," he concluded. "But only a fool would carry wood out of a village. I did not think of that, so I was caught and taken before the Chiefteness who sits beside you. It was a good thing, Bwana. Oh, yes, it was she who showed me the way here. We travelled all night and swiftly, much swifter than you. We were here before the sky turned red."

I turned to the girl; "Why did you do this, Mahara?"

She returned my gaze steadily; "Because my father, Memdoma, will die before sunset. He promised me to the Senhor Barahona, but I would not go with him, nor would my father force me. But when he is dead—" She broke off, frowning.

"What then?" I prompted.

"My father has told the Intotela that when he dies Barahona will be chief in his place. He will take what he wants."

"What made you think we could help you?" asked Hurst with a puzzled frown.

She laughed softly; "You are his enemies. If your friends come, as I think they will, will they not seize him? Is it not possible that they or you will kill him?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Hurst, with an appreciative gleam in his eye. "And you are on the right side of the fence. What an amazing creature, Buckland!"

I thought so, too.

The conch sounded its double note. We jumped to our feet and crowded into the doorway. The Intotela had taken cover among the rocks and the headmen had retired to the opposite side of the spruit and were grouped on a rocky kopje about five hundred yards distant.

THE CONCH BELLOWED AGAIN.

It was impossible to localize it; the high cliffs threw it back and forth in bewildering echoes. Then the Intotela warriors made a dash forward, dodging from rock to rock. The reports of our rifles sent the echoes rippling up and down the canyon. The Intotela scampered back to cover like rabbits,—all but three of them who lay where they had fallen. I smiled grimly at Hurst. The Intotela were going to find the going tough. Hurst, I knew was a crack shot and I'd seen what Mahara could do with a rifle. As for Kula, if a dozen In-

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totela had stood in a group, and not too far away, it was just possible he would hit one.

We waited tensely for the next rush. Presently a head bobbed up from behind a rock. He was a very dead man before you could count six. He must have been the Intotela *induna*; for, suddenly they broke cover and raced away in panic, giving tongue to those long, wailing cries which natives utter when they are frightened out of their wits. We could have dropped a dozen of them before the range became too long, but Mahara begged us not to shoot unless attacked.

"They would not have harmed you," she pleaded. "If Barahona and the witch-doctors had not turned them against you."

"D'you think they mean to attack?" Hurst asked.

"Not if Barahona can persuade them to sit and wait. That's all he needs to do," I explained.

"He can't risk waiting too long, Buckland."

AN HOUR PASSED. Silence came to the Intotela camp, and we settled down to watch for the rest of the night. As dawn broke, the boom of the drum at Amatupa came faintly to our ears. I looked at Mahara inquiringly. She was listening intently. As the notes of the drum faded, she smiled at me.

"The soldiers have come!" she announced. "They are a day's march from Amatupa."

Hurst gave out a whoop of joy. I didn't believe it until I saw the Intotela break camp and start back up the canyon at a dog trot.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "All we've got to worry about now is Barahona and his Swahilis. I don't see him among the Intotela." I saw Hurst's lips tighten and his eyes harden.

"I'll deal with him now," he said and started for the door. I caught his arm.

"He didn't shoot," I warned. "But that doesn't mean he hasn't a gun. He wouldn't use it. He wanted the Intotela to do the job."

We passed the stone altar and were approaching the spruit before Barahona showed himself. He appeared suddenly from behind a clump of bush and stood

with his hand resting on the butt of his gun.

"Stay here," Hurst directed me. Then he walked to within ten paces of Barahona and stopped.

Barahona was the first to speak; "My men have you covered, Senhor," he said. "If you attempt to interfere with me they will shoot."

I LOOKED AROUND NERVOUSLY, but could see no sign of the Swahilis. I guessed that they had deserted Barahona and that he was about to play his last card. I wondered what he had in mind.

Hurst looked at him steadily for a few minutes and I saw Barahona's eyes flicker nervously; then Hurst spoke;

"Senhor Manoel Barahona," said Hurst formally. "It is my duty to arrest you for inciting the loyal subjects—"

Barahona spat an oath and pulled his gun. He was a dead man, with a neat hole between the eyes, before he could pull the trigger.

"If I could have started with that, Buckland," said Hurst as I came up to him. "It would have saved a good deal of blood shed. Damn him!" he added with the vehemence that comes with the sudden release of nervous tension. "He gave me the worst scare of my life! And the worst of it was I had you on my conscience!"

We decided to camp out that night and time our arrival at Amatupa with that of the soldiers. Kula and I went out after a buck and were lucky enough to be back with one before noon. That night the first watch fell to me. When Hurst and Kula were snoring she came to sit beside me. She was silent for a moment before she said;

"When my father was well, Senhor, he told me of the great towns at the coast. Often I have dreamed I was there."

"It is a long and dangerous trek to the coast," I explained.

She gave me a side-long look and pressed close to me so that I felt the warmth of her body. "You will go the coast, soon?" she asked.

"Truly, Mahara," I affirmed.

"Is there not room in your tent for one more, Senhor?"

Well, I was never one to look a gift horse in the mouth. I said and did what was expected of me.

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