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WEB

TERROR STORIES

DANCE WITH THE DEVIL

MISTRESS OF THE 6 GATES OF HORROR

HIS MAJESTY - THE FIEND!

NIGHTMARE ISLAND

THE PURIFYING LASH

HELL'S HAREM

DRUMS OF TORMENT

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TERROR STORIES

Vol. 4 No. 4

April, 1964

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WEB TERROR STORIES is published bi-monthly by CANDAR PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC. at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office, 45 West 45th St., New York 36, N. Y. Copyright 1964 by CANDAR PUBLISHING CO., INC. Single copy 35c; Subscriptions: Yearly (6-issues): U. S. and possessions \$2.00; Canada \$2.25; Foreign \$2.50. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope. The publishers assume no responsibility for unsolicited material. The names of all characters used in these stories are fictitious: any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

MISTRESS OF THE SIX GATES OF HORROR

by Emory Connor

No one has ever surpassed the Chinese at torture—but beautiful Hsui T'ang added one last refinement to the worst yet devised!

Outside the British Legation in Peking that summer in 1900 stormed a howling, blood-lusting mob of thousands of Chinese screaming "Protect the country, destroy the foreign devils!" — the rallying cry of the secret terrorist society known as the I Ho Ch'uan, literally "Righteous Harmony Fists," or — as they had become known to the world at large — the Boxers.

"There's no chance of their breaking in here," said the British Ambassador, Sir Henry Lane Robinson, as he peered through a crack in the shuttered windows. "Not a chance

in the world," he repeated confidently. "This Legation used to be an old Manchu fortress. It's impregnable. The walls are at least fourteen feet thick, the windows are barred, the main gate of solid steel and triply bolted. Don't you agree, Paxton?"

"Definitely, Sir," said the young military attache at his side. "We have food enough for a month's siege. And help should reach us long before that."

"Where is that fleet of British gunboats now, my boy?" asked the distinguished-looking, white-haired diplomat, turning

from the window.

"I haven't checked since yesterday, Sir. I will now." He turned to the lovely, red-haired young girl at his side. "Will you come with me, Dorothea? Or stay here with your father?"

She smiled nervously. "I think I'd feel safer with my husband-to-be," she said. "I don't want you out of my sight for even a moment."

The two of them walked down the long, deserted corridors of the Legation to the Telegraph Room. A half-dozen Morse code sending-and-receiving-sets stood on tables; the walls were covered with maps.

All but one of the sets was covered with a layer of dust. They had been connected to various departments in the Emperor Kwang Hsu's government. But now Kwang Hsu was a virtual prisoner of the dowager empress Tzu Hsi who, against the counsel of saner heads, had tacitly supported the Boxer uprising and ordered all foreigners to be killed. Only one department of the Chinese government had remained loyal to the Emperor and that was the Ministry of Defense. But

they — along with about 500 loyal troops — were also prisoners of the Boxers, powerless to break out of their encircled building in The Forbidden City.

They *were* in communication via telegraph, however, with the outside world — and it was for this reason that Bryan Paxton was now tapping out his message of inquiry to them about the progress being made by the British fleet in its effort to reach China in time to save what was left of Peking's foreign population.

From outside the Legation came the screams of the frenzied mob. Stones and chunks of brick rattled against the walls and shuttered windows. For over a week now the mob had swirled through the Legation Quarter of the city, burning, pillaging, raping. Already the German Ambassador had been murdered and a number of Legations were on the verge of falling into the mob's hands. More than a thousand foreigners and Chinese Christians had already been slain during the week — and hope was fast running out for those who still survived.

A shudder of horror shook Dorothea as she listened to the inhuman roar of fanatical hatred from outside. "Thank goodness father had the foresight to dismiss all the Chinese help a few months back and bring in English servants," she said. "I've heard that many foreigners have been murdered in their sleep by servants who belonged to the Boxer movement. Wouldn't it be horrible to think that you were safe from the mob outside, only to have your throat quietly slit while you were sitting there congratulating yourself on your good fortune?"

Paxton did not reply. He was intently taking down the Chinese Ministry of Defense's reply to his query. "British . . . fleet . . . now . . . off . . . Aden. Steaming . . . sixteen . . . knots," the receiver tapped out. Signing off, he made some swift calculations on a piece of paper. "They're six days sailing-time away," he said. "Come, let's tell your father."

In the hall they came upon Bettina, a pretty Yorkshire lass who was one of the servants who'd been brought out from England. She was pale and

frightened-looking. "Oh, Mum, Sir," she burst out, "I'm so glad I found you. There's something funny going on here. Cook and Ginny are gone."

"What do you mean gone?" demanded Paxton.

"Disappeared, Sir. I've searched the place from top to bottom and they're not to be found."

"But that's impossible, girl — we're absolutely sealed in. There's no way out. They're probably in the cellar checking the food supply. You must get ahold of yourself."

"No, Sir, I looked there, and, Sir, I saw something in the East Room just now what half-frightened me to death," and she began sobbing. "It was out of the corner of my eye and real quick-like but there was no mistaking it — a man and, Sir," she wailed, "he was Chinese!"

"That's ridiculous," snapped Paxton. "You know there isn't a Chinese in the Legation — and absolutely no way of one gaining entrance. You're under a strain and have begun to see things, that's all."

"What was he doing, Bettina," asked Dorothea. "And

where did he disappear to so fast that you only saw him for a split-second?"

"Into the wall, Mum."

"Really, this is too much," said Paxton. "Come, to relieve your mind, we'll search the room from top to bottom."

The East Room had once apparently been used for conferences by Manchu officials. It was large, with a high vaulted ceiling. A vast ebony table inlaid with ivory occupied its center while high-backed chairs of matching material lined the walls. When the Embassy staff had moved in they had left the room just as it was. It was rarely used. Or dusted, thought Paxton, running his finger across the surface of the table. Dusk was setting in and the shuttered room was very dark. Paxton lit a number of oil lamps that were fixed to the walls and then proceeded to examine these walls in more detail. They were covered with some Chinese fabric having a green ground whereon was a design representing a grotesque procession of white peacocks. But they were solid enough. Paxton satisfied himself in this

regard by thumping every square foot of them and coming across no hollow-sounding area that might have concealed a panel.

"You see, Bettina," he said, straightening up from an examination of the wallboards. "It was purely your imagination." Receiving no reply, he turned around. Bettina was nowhere to be seen. "Now where did she go running off to?" he said irritably. "A more irresponsible . . ."

"Bryan," said Dorothea, a frightened look in her eyes, "she was standing right next to me no more than a second ago. Do you suppose . . . ?"

"Nonsense. She's probably just out in the hall. I'll have a look."

He crossed the room and, without actually leaving it, leaned out into the hall and looked in both directions. "No, she's not out here," he said and turned back into the East Room — to freeze in his tracks, consternation and a chill of fear rippling up his spine. Dorothea was gone! He rushed to the center of the room and glanced about wildly, even checking under the huge con-

ference table.

"My God!" he muttered, the fear slowly turning to horror. There was no doubt about it — she had simply vanished! Into thin air! There was no other exit beside the one he'd been standing in — and she couldn't have gotten past him there. Nor would she, he suddenly realized, have had the time to even cross the room from where she'd been standing.

Remembering what Bettina had said about the man disappearing *into* the wall, he rushed to the spot where he'd last seen Dorothea and started to beat the wall frantically and to tear at the covering material, trying to find an opening. He was so engrossed in this task that he didn't notice a section of the wall opposite him slide silently and swiftly open, nor did he hear the large Mongolian with a shaven skull and fists like hams who was upon him in a second, one hand covering his mouth before he could utter a sound, the other swinging him bodily through the already closing wall . . .

He was being dragged down what seemed to be endless,

twisting stone stairs, pain stabbing his limbs at each step. The giant, whose hand closed almost completely around his throat, was carrying a torch that cast wierd shadows along the slimy, verminous walls between which they moved. Down, down — endlessly down, until suddenly there was no further to go and Paxton was lying on the damp, cold floor of some huge subterranean chamber. Torches held in place by wall-brackets glowed faintly through a heavy haze, and through it he could just make out the ancient brickwork roof towering what seemed like miles above him.

"Welcome, Mr. Paxton," said the faintly accented but familiar voice of a woman.

Now the giant's hand was about his throat again and he was being dragged across the rough stones toward that voice. Then all at once he was jerked brutally to his feet, the hand choking off his breath. Groggily his eyes focussed on the figure before him. It was a woman's — tall, statuesque, her perfect, hour-glass figure revealed by the black, skin-tight leather pants and doublet she

wore. A black mask covered the upper part of her face — but that smile, those eyes; He would have known them anywhere.

"Hsui T'ang!" he gasped in surprise as he recognized the British Legation's former Chinese liason. "How did you get here? What's happening . . . ?"

At a motion from her, the Mongolian giant pressed him to his knees. "A more fitting posture for a foreign devil," her taunting voice said.

"You . . . a Boxer?" murmured Paxton in disbelief. "But you're a cousin of the Emperor. I should think your loyalty would be to him. You . . ."

From behind her back appeared the coiled shape of a whip and before he could utter another word its tip came snaking toward him with a crack, slashing him across the lips and drawing blood. "You will speak only at a sign from me," she commanded. "Otherwise remain silent. But since you mention the Emperor, let me point out that the dowager empress is my aunt so that if I owed loyalty to anyone it would be to her. But you have things slightly reversed, my dear Pax-

ton. Her loyalty is actually to *me*."

Paxton forgot the whip, forgot her injunction to remain silent in his complete consternation. "My God, you don't mean to tell me that *you* are the Black Dragon!"

Her smile answered everything. It was true, then. This mere girl of twenty-nine, whom he'd always thought of as hard-working, self-effacing, loyal to the Emperor and of great value as a liason between the British Legation and the Emperor's government was actually the notorious and mysterious "Black Dragon Woman" who was said to be one of the top leaders of the Boxer movement and who had reputedly influenced the Empress Tzu Hsi into tacitly supporting that terrorist organization.

"Is it not amusing," she was saying, "that the headquarters of the I Ho Ch'uan should be in a sub-cellar beneath the British Legation?"

"But what . . . ?" How . . . ?"

"You forget that the legation was once a Manchu fort. This sub-cellar, which was used to torture enemy prisoners, had been sealed off about a cen-

tury ago. As to how we gained entry to it, that was simple. All these old forts had secret passageways that connected them with The Forbidden City. And do you know to what ministry? Well, quite naturally, the Ministry of Defense”

“Where you had sought refuge as a loyal subject of the Emperor! Of course, I should have guessed it! What fools we’ve all been”

Again the whip lashed out, snapping around his left ear, almost ripping it off. “Listen, my dear Paxton. Only listen. Do not speak. Listen and you will learn everything — even what is required of you.”

Through her mask, her green eyes — eyes green as those of a cat in the darkness — burned into his. “Listen,” she whispered hypnotically, “and you will hear amusing things such as the fact that the secret passageway to this place should, ironically enough, open at a touch of that statue of the Emperor on the second floor of the Ministry of Defense; intriguing things such as the fact that the East Room in your Legation is really a room with-

in a room in the fashion of a Chinese box trick and that *all* of the walls slide back at will, not just one, or a section of one — you looked so amusing clawing fruitlessly at the material — and that the peacock’s eyes are really peep holes through which all corners of the room can be seen. Listen and you will also hear terrible things like this.”

She made a motion with her hand and a terrifying, almost inhuman, shriek that Paxton immediately recognized as coming from Dorothea echoed through the immense subterranean chamber.

He fought to wrench free, to turn and see from where it came, but the giant Mongolian held his head rigid between his fingers. “All in due time, my friend,” purred Hsui T’ang. “You may feast your eyes on your beloved shortly”

“If you have so much as harmed a hair on her head, I’ll”

Again the whip lashed out and pain seared his face. “Even children learn from experience,” she taunted, speaking in that slow, deliberate manner of hers, as if she were choosing

with care words which should perfectly clothe her thoughts. "‘For a burnt child fears the fire,’ says your English adage. But you learn nothing from experience. You are less than a child. But perhaps you are learning slowly. If you promise not to be annoying I will even have Li Chiau release your neck."

And at a sign from her the shaven-headed giant unclasped Paxton's throat, allowing him to gulp great, soothing draughts of air.

When he'd sufficiently recovered, he glanced about at his surroundings — at the heavy table, first, behind which Hsui T'ang was now sitting. It was covered with various implements of torture — wire jackets, leaden balls on which victims were made to kneel, barbed hooks, manacles, metal collars, leather knouts and a variety of whips made of everything from razor-sharp strips of bamboo to barbed-wire.

In a high-backed, heavily carved chair behind this array sat the Black Dragon Woman watching his expression with a smile, her beautiful face as pale

as death, but her slit-like eyes blazing with a sort of splendid madness. One claw-like hand whose nails were at least six inches long rested upon the ebony of the table — inches from her collection of whips. On a smaller table beside her, a stick of incense, in a silver holder, sent up a pencil of vapor into the air, and now that he was able to breathe Paxton noticed that the chamber was loaded with the sickly sweet fumes.

Slowly his eyes moved away from her, past the big, shaven-headed Mongolian, and came to rest on a group of hooded figures. They stood silently in a row along the wall and if one of them hadn't moved slightly he might have taken them for inanimate objects. But they were alive, human beings; he could see their eyes now through the slits in their masks and all of them were fastened hypnotically on Hsui T'ang — as if awaiting her command.

Then, as his gaze continued to move through the chamber, Paxton saw four figures hanging by metal collars from chains that passed through pulleys fastened to the ceiling. So

high in the air were they that he hadn't noticed them at first. It was as if they had been pulled up out of the way for the moment; playthings of monsters that had been temporarily put away. In the gloom he couldn't at first make out who they were — just that they were women's bodies in various stages of undress and pain. Two appeared extremely battered and bruised, one of them bleeding badly from fresh whip marks that criss-crossed her back; the others were comparatively untouched.

Then he saw the lovely, long red tresses he knew so well. "My God!" he cried out. "Dorothea!"

He ran toward where she hung but he couldn't reach her. She was too high. He spun about helplessly, then saw where the pulley chains were attached to a hook at shoulder level and dashed toward it. One of the black-hooded figures moved to intercept him, whip raised high. Its black, oiled length snaked toward him and he was brought sprawling to the floor by the impact and pain . . .

"This fool never learns," he heard Hsui T'ang's voice saying somewhere above him and he felt himself being jerked to his feet, his clothes torn off him and his head and hands being inserted in a large board frame that was then padlocked shut. He was bent in a painful, humiliating position, but the worse pain was yet to come. Hsui Tang's whip cracked.

"How do you like our cangue, Mr. Paxton?" her voice taunted between strokes. "It's an old Manchu punishment for petty crime."

The whip slashed down again.

"As a matter of fact, all the instruments of — shall we say, persuasion — that you see in this chamber are relics of Manchu days. They were very adept at inflicting pain and practiced many refinements. But my favorite device I didn't find here but created myself, following instructions I found in a scroll dating from the Ming Dynasty. It's called the Six Gates of Joyful Wisdom and you will see it in action presently."

Finally the whipping ceased and through eyes blurred by pain, Paxton saw Hsui T'ang

move toward her chair. "Now the show begins," she said. "It is really in your honor. I hope you enjoy it."

She struck lightly a little silver gong and the hooded figures leaped into action, lowering the two most tortured-looking figures to the ground. Paxton recognized them as Mary, the chubby, big-bosomed cook, and Ginny, the Legation's scullery maid, a trim little brunette who'd always gone about her work singing. She wasn't singing now, however, but screaming, as, brought back to consciousness by slaps across the face, she was stripped of her clothes and seated in a large, oddly-shaped chair and her foot inserted in a long iron boot into which the hooded figures thereupon began driving wedges.

"A crude torture," he heard Hsui T'ang's voice saying above Ginny's screams. "As the wedges are driven between the limb and the boot the foot is slowly crushed. A variation on it is to place the iron boot in fire." She barked a command in Chinese to the hooded figures and Paxton saw Ginny's hands being inserted in thumb-

screws. Her screams grew even more terrible.

"You fiend!" he cried out. "Why are you doing this? Why not just kill us and get it over with?"

"I'm disappointed, my dear Paxton," replied Hsui T'ang in mock dismay. "You're not enjoying the performance. Perhaps you do not like the cast."

At a motion from her, another group of hooded figures took Mary and placed her in manacles which pressed her head to her feet, almost breaking her chubby pink body in half. They then placed her in a vise-like wedge and began to tighten it. Her full-throated screams mingled with Ginny's.

"Caschie-laws is the name of that instrument," said Hsui T'ang. "Heat is applied in some cases."

"Why?" bellowed Paxton. "Why must I see these things?"

"I want you to see all my pretty playthings in action before we talk," purred the Black Dragon Woman — and he did, one torture after another being applied to those two miserable creatures.

They were stretched out

upon their backs and pressed with heavy weights, their hands inserted in iron gauntlets or bilboes, their legs crushed between boards; they were forced to kneel on chains, their limbs placed in receptacles into which boiling oil was poured. He saw all Hsui T'ang's "playthings" in action during that night — her beds of iron, red-hot spikes, boiling water, knives for cutting the Achilles tendon, the "beauty's bar" — three crossbars of red-hot metal to which the breast, small of the back and bent-up legs were fastened; the "parrot's beam" in which the victim was raised from the ground by strings attached to each finger . . .

Once he glanced across at Hsui T'ang and saw that she was leaning forward eagerly, watching every detail and that those mad green eyes of hers had become horribly filmed over like nothing human or imaginable. Nausea welled up in Paxton's throat. Those eyes did not mirror a soul, he thought, but an emanation of hell . . .

"And now my 'chef-d'oeuvre,'" she said after the mangled remains of Mary and

Ginny had been cast into an unused corner of the vast dungeon. She clapped her hands and Bettina's naked form was lowered to the ground. She was fully conscious and, having heard the screams but having been unable to see what was going on, was in such a state of terror that her legs buckled under her.

"For the Six Gates of Joyful Wisdom," said Hsui T'ang, "we need someone whose body has been relatively untouched. That makes the first pain so much more delicious.

Bettina was thrown to the floor by the hooded figures and stretched flat on her back, her arms thrown back over her a heavy iron staple attached to the wall. Her ankles were also manacled and fixed to a second chain, which quivered tautly across the stone floor to the opposite wall.

Li Chiau, the gigantic Mongolian, now entered Paxton's field of vision bearing a strange contrivance. It was a wire box about six feet long, some two feet high and about two feet wide. Its stout framework was covered with fine wire-netting on the top, sides and ends —

but it was open at the bottom. It seemed to be made in five sections or to contain four sliding partitions which could be raised or lowered at will. These were of wood, and in the bottom of each was cut a little arch. The arches in the four partitions varied in size, so that whereas the first was not more than five inches high, the fourth opened almost to the wire roof of the cage, and a fifth, which was only a little higher than the first, was cut in the actual end of the contrivance.

The cage was placed over Bettina, completely covering her body, but leaving her neck and head exposed. The hooded figures adjusted the sliding partitions to her recumbent form, and Paxton saw the purpose of the graduated arches. They were intended to divide a human body in just such fashion and were cunningly shaped to that end. The whole of Bettina's body lay now in the wire cage, each of the five compartments shut off from its neighbor.

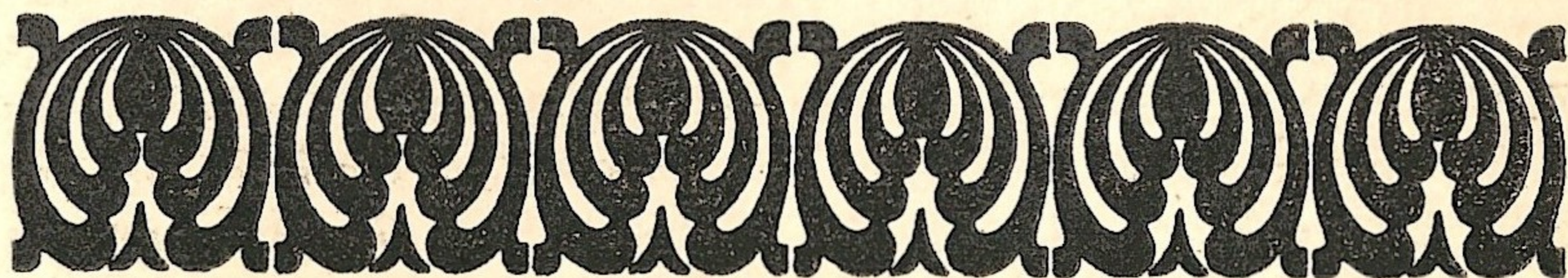
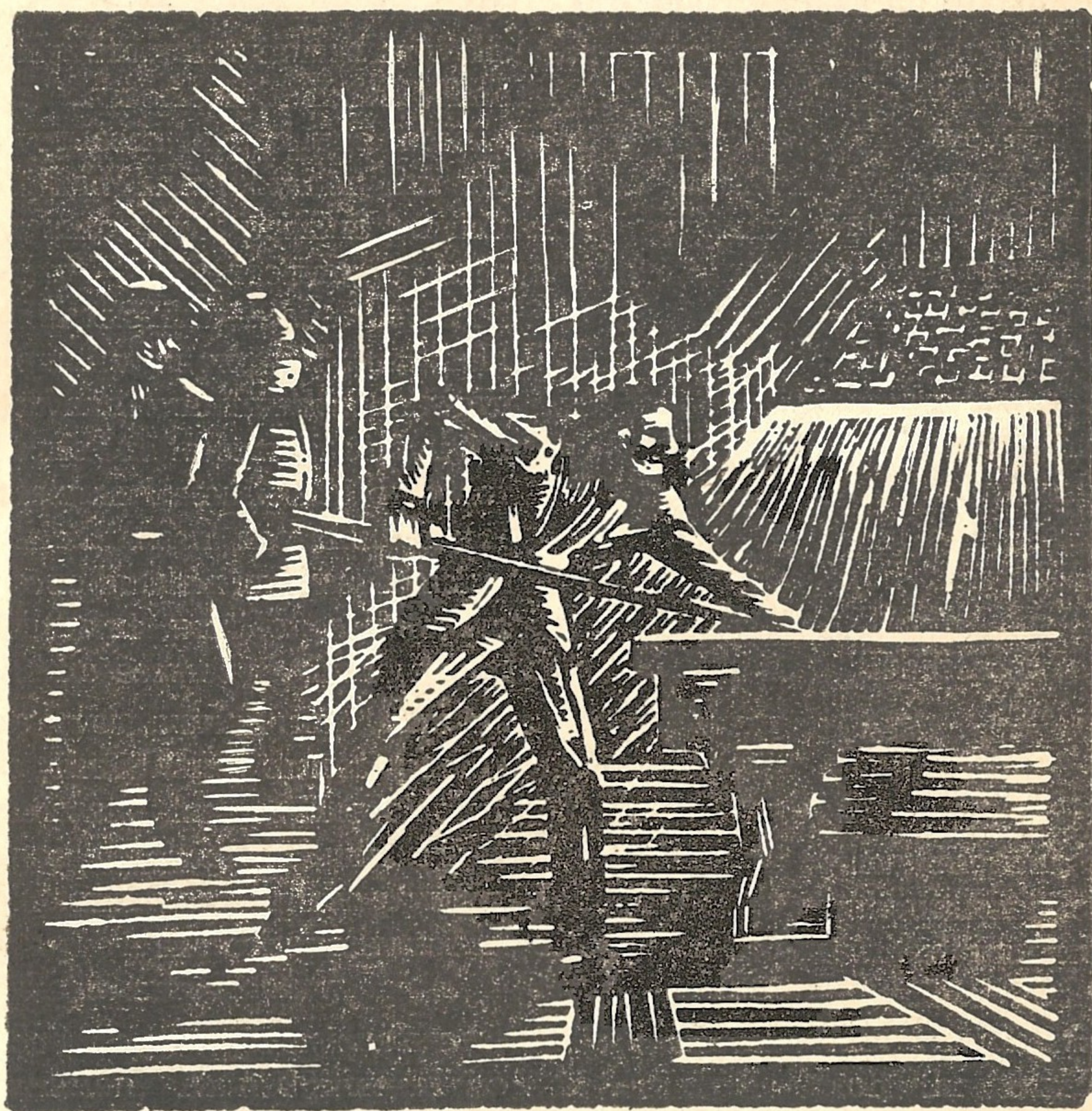
The Mongolian now reappeared carrying a curious leather sack. Opening a little

trap in the top of the first compartment of the cage — the one covering Bettina's feet and ankles — he inserted the neck of the sack, then suddenly seized it by the bottom and shook it vigorously. Before Paxton's horrified gaze, four huge rats came tumbling out from the bag into the cage! The Mongolian snatched away the sack and snapped the shutter fast.

"Hun Ho river rats, my dear Paxton," smiled Hsui T'ang. "The most ravenous in the world . . . they have eaten nothing for nearly a week!"

With nauseated horror, Paxton watched the four lean and hideous animals in the cage. They were squealing and scurrying about and, then, as they overcame their temporary fear, they began . . . Bettina screamed. Her face was a greyish hue, and dank with perspiration.

"The first gate, by which the rats are admitted, was known to those of the Ming Dynasty by the quaint name of the Gate of Joyous Hope," Hsui T'ang was saying. "The second, the Gate of Mirthful Doubt. The third gate is poetically named.



Her wrists are chained to the Gate of True Rapture, and the fourth, the Gate of Gentle Sorrow. One official who remained foolishly loyal to the Emperor, an exalted mandarin, sustained the course of Joyful Wisdom to the raising of the Fifth Gate — the Gate of Sweet Desires — and the admission of the twentieth rat. I esteem him almost equally with my ancestors. The Sixth, or Gate Celestial, is the one whereby the victim enters into the Joy of Complete Understanding."

Above Bettina's screams could be heard the squealing of the rats again. They were fighting over her toes.

"The raising of the First Gate is always a crucial moment," purred Hsui T'ang. She stood with one long, claw-like hand on the top of the first gate. Suddenly she raised it. The rats rushed through the arch and up Bettina's legs. Her screams became gurgling, inhuman sounds.

"Now as to the purpose of all this," said Hsui T'ang. "It is to soften your disposition toward your eventual task — for, you see, all this is going

to happen to your beloved Dorothea . . . "

"What! Why you . . . "

The whip slashed his back, sending waves of pain through his entire being. "Once again, you forget to be silent," she said. "Now listen and learn what this task will be. It is well-known that the only thing keeping most of the foreign legations from capitulating and recognizing the Boxer regime as China's legal government is the example of the stubbornness of the British Legation in holding out. Dorothea's father is not nicknamed Old Ironsides for nothing. He is as hard as that metal. He himself would not crack. He would never negotiate — not even if he were here watching his daughter being eaten alive by the rats. He is that kind of man. And that is why he is not here and you are, my dear Paxton. Your very human feelings for Dorothea make you the weak link in the chain. And through your weakness — and you *will* capitulate — we can undermine Old Ironsides through trickery."

"Now here is what you are to do," she continued. "You

will be taken back up to the East Room where you will be watched through the peepholes. You will not leave that room for an instant but will ring for a servant and ask first for a map of the Gulf of Po Hai and then, having received that, you will ask that Sir Henry come to the East Room, that you have an urgent dispatch for him. And this is the message that you will give him — that a Russian Squadron is already in the Gulf, only a day's journey from Peking, coming to the Legation's aid. You will then propose the following plan to him — that the way to capture the Boxer ring-leaders before they can disband and flee is to pretend to capitulate and to send for them, inviting them to come to the Legation where official recognition of their government will be drawn up. Meanwhile the Russian gun-boats will arrive and capture them all."

She paused. "Is that clear?"

And with that shark-like smile of hers, she added: "Of course there is no Russian fleet in the Gulf and the British Navy is still five days' away. But Sir Henry Lane Robinson

will officially recognize the Boxer government and all the other Legations will quickly fall in line. The plan is foolproof. It cannot fail. And now, my dear Paxton, are you ready to play your part in it?"

"No," he fairly shouted. "Never. I will never do what you propose . . ."

But when they took the dead, terribly mutilated body of Bettina out of the cage and placed Dorothea in it and released four new ravenous rats into the first partition, he relented.

"Yes, my God, let me loose!" he shouted above Dorothea's shrill screams. "I'll do it! I'll do anything you say! Just let her out of there!"

"No," said Hsui T'ang. "She remains in there and so do the rats — just as a guarantee that you try no trickery when you get upstairs. Every half-hour a new gate will be opened — so the faster you convince Old Ironsides of the efficacy of your plan the better it will be for Dorothea. Now come, you're wasting valuable time even now."

They gave him back his

clothes and allowed him to wash the blood from his face. Then, accompanied by Hsui T'ang and the giant Mongolian, they ascended the long twisting stairs . . .

"My boy, where have you been? What's happened to your face?" asked Sir Henry Lane Robinson as he entered the East Room.

Aware of the watching eyes and the listening ears, Paxton mumbled something about having taken a bad fall when he was descending into the cellar to check the food supply.

"Why on earth are we meeting in this room? What's wrong with my office?" demanded the crusty old gentleman.

"I wanted to spread this map out on the conference table, Sir. There wasn't room in your office."

"The Gulf of Po Hai?" said Sir Henry, glancing at it. "What's all this about?"

And Paxton told him the lie about the Russian fleet and outlined Hsui T'ang's false plan, speaking rapidly and thinking all the while of those ravenous rats gnawing at Dorothea's lovely, pale flesh. Sir Henry pondered for what

seemed like hours as Paxton shifted anxiously from foot to foot.

"My boy, I think you've hit on something," he said at last and rang for one of the Legation's butlers. "Thomas," he said to him. "Bring pen and paper." And turning to Paxton, he said: "I'll draft a rough version of the message you will telegraph to the Empress. Of course you may change the wording as you see fit . . ."

And at that instant a plan occurred to Paxton! Careful to keep the excitement from showing on his face, he stood behind Sir Henry as the Ambassador wrote out the invitation for the Empress's ministers.

"Sir," he said, bending over the paper, "if you'll allow me, I think it might be more effective if it were worded like this."

"Really, Paxton!" growled the old gentleman. "You might allow me to finish at least . . ."

"No, Sir, this is a very important change." And taking the pen from him, he wrote: DO NOT CHANGE THE EXPRESSION ON YOUR FACE OR SAY ANYTHING. WE

ARE BEING WATCHED. YOUR DAUGHTER IS BEING HELD PRISONER BY THE BOXERS IN A SUBCELLAR OF THIS BUILDING. ENTRANCE TO IT MAY BE GAINED VIA A SECRET PASSAGEWAY FROM THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE. TO FIND THE OPENING, TOUCH THE HAND OF THE EMPEROR'S STATUE ON THE SECOND FLOOR. I CANNOT LEAVE THIS ROOM. GO TO THE TELEGRAPH ROOM AND SEND THIS MESSAGE, ASKING THAT TROOPS BE SENT THROUGH THE SECRET PASSAGEWAY IMMEDIATELY.

As Sir Henry read the message, he said musingly: "Hmm, yes, very good. That is better wording than my message. It should bring immediate action on their part." Standing up, he said: "I think I'll send this message on the telegraph myself if you don't mind, Paxton. There may be a Victoria Cross in it for me."

And with that he strode from the room. The wall behind Paxton slid silently open and once

again he was a prisoner . . .

"I cannot bear to spoil the little beasts' feast," taunted Hsui T'ang when they were again in the subterranean torture chamber and Paxton had been padlocked back into the pillory. She lifted the second gate and the ravenous rats scurried along Dorothea's legs. Her screams rose to a blood-curdling crescendo and Paxton, weak from horror and nausea, lost consciousness . . .

When he came to, strong arms were releasing him from the pillory. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into the smiling face of a Captain of the Loyalist Army.

"It's all right, Mr. Paxton. We got here in time," he said. "Your fiancée has sustained some bad bites along her legs but she'll certainly survive. They've taken her to the dispensary in the Ministry Building. She'll be all right in a couple of weeks and by then the fleet will have reached us and the siege should be lifted . . ."

Suddenly a blood-curdling scream interrupted him.

"My God, what was that?"

mumbled Paxton weakly — was the nightmare still not over?

"It's the Black Dragon Woman," smiled the Captain. "Here in China we have ways of dealing with traitors." And he stepped aside so that Paxton could see . . .

Hsui T'ang, her clothes and mask stripped from her, lay inside the cage in which Dorothea had just been and a soldier was releasing a new set of rats into the first partition. "Fortunately, she had quite a large collection of these monsters," said the Captain. "There will be enough to finish her off."

Hsui T'ang screamed again, her eyes rolling with horror, as the soldier lifted the second gate and the lean, ravenous creatures scurried up her legs.

"Mr. Paxton, I imagine you would like the honor of raising the third gate," said the Captain.

"Yes," he replied and a smile spread slowly over his features. "Yes, I think I would like that," and — the smile still on his lips — he slowly and deliberately gazed into the Black Dragon Woman's pain-filled eyes and lifted the Gate of True Rapture . . .

THE END

HELL'S HAREM

by Herbert Price

The spirited Arab charger Ahmed rode was black almost as black as his demon-possessed soul!

"Never ask a D'jin of the desert to fulfill a wish — it will come true" — so wrote the scribe Me'njab Hamu who went on to relate the following story which he was said to have heard from a certain wise man who visited Mecca.

In the sixth century of Allah's greatness there dwelt in the Sheikdom of Bah'ra a maiden of royal blood named Kuala whose beauty, intelligence and haughty demeanor were fabled from the great northeastern desert to the Red Sea.

Even more fabled than these things, however, was her eventual fate — which was the direct outcome of her very pride and cleverness, for — as the Koran

has stated — the woman who knows not her place will be brought low.

It was really all her father's fault. Sheik Abdul Fazan, bitterly disappointed that his first born had not been a male child who would inherit his realm, had done the unheard-of thing of having her educated in the manner of a man. The finest tutors had been brought together from all corners of the Moslem world to instruct her in astronomy, the sciences, philosophy and geography. And so it was that she had learned that in lands to the west men took not too many wives but only one, and that they regarded them not as goods and chattel but as unique, individu-

al human beings whom they loved and respected.

And so at the age of twenty-nine, Kuala of the heart-shaped face and great lustrous brown eyes, of the long, well shaped legs, of the raven tresses that fell about her shoulders like a dark waterfall, Kuala "the proud magnificent one" as she was known throughout her father's Sheikdom, was still unwed.

A score of suitors had sought her hand, most of them of great position and wealth, but because they had owned harems, because she would not have been their only wife, she had spurned them all. Her younger sisters, who had been raised in the traditional manner of women, had meanwhile all married. Kuala's father had at first raged and threatened all manner of things, but had finally fallen into despair.

"She will never marry," he had confided to his Vizier bitterly. "She is my eternal disgrace, my undoing."

"Be not too certain of that, almighty one," this old, wise man had responded. "Sooner or later every woman encounters the one man she cannot deny."

And he had been right. From her handmaidens and slave-girls Kuala began to hear rumors of a Sheik to the north, one Ahmed Kazak, who — recently widowed — was said to have never owned a harem, to have taken only one wife at a time and to have remained faithful to each in turn. And, moreover, this Sheik was now actively in search of a new wife.

"Is he so ancient then," asked Kuala, vaguely puzzled, "to have out-lived half a dozen wives?"

"He has less than two-score years," her oldest and most trusted handmaid, Tamul, replied. "And it has been said that as he rides across the desert on his magnificent black steed the hearts of all women who look upon him follow after in longing. He has the strength of a dozen men, the commanding presence of a prophet. Handsome is too pale a word to describe him . . ."

"This is the stuff of fairy tales," interrupted Kuala impatiently, not daring to believe her ears. "What about his other wives? What happened to them?"

"It is said that two died," replied Tamul. "One in childbirth, another from the plague. A third is reputed to have disappeared in the desert. Of the others nothing is known but, after all, the Sheik's land is far away. The journey is hard and perilous. Many dangers await a fragile female. One thing is known to all, however. There has never been a more faithful man. Perhaps it is faithfulness that proves too much to bear; that drives his wives into a perilous decline or causes them to flee. I have never understood why you have always wanted to be a man's only wife," she prattled on. "Surely it must be much more pleasant to have the wifely duties divided among a congenial group who could be your friends and pass the time with you. The duties of being a wife will take all your time if you ever do find a man foolish enough to want only one mate."

"I realize you have never been able to understand my abhorrence at being one wife among many in a harem . . . that I must find one man whose woman I will be in all ways and for all time. My heart dares

hope that there is such a man now that I have heard of this Ahmed."

Then, with a sigh, Kuala added: "I must confess that my hopes were becoming increasingly dim. My age had almost convinced me that I had missed the man Allah had set out for me and I had even begun to blame my father for educating me into being such a displaced creature of misery."

"I do see a change in you," interjected Tamul eagerly as she combed her mistress's long black hair. "Your eyes sparkle and there is heightened color in your cheeks that reveals a fever of expectation which you cannot deny."

"Oh, Tamul, I have always had the greatest respect for your wisdom and advice," cried Kuala suddenly. "Please help me make this dream come true. Tell me how I can win Ahmed to be my faithful husband. I will need all your wisdom and wiles. I beg you to start instructing me now."

"You are a very beautiful woman but — may Allah seize my tongue for so daring to speak — you do not know how to use this beauty," said Tamul.

"I will teach you how to be a woman if you will try to forget that you have never thought as one. There is much to be undone before I can bestow the mysteries of coquetry upon you."

"I will be your abject pupil. And you will be richly rewarded by my father if you succeed in this task."

"To begin with," said Tamul, "we must act quickly. It is dangerous to let a widower search alone too long. We cannot leave his arrival to the fates. You must ask your father to send a messenger to him with an invitation to come here for a visit at once. Since Ahmed is a man with the same strange idea as you, I would think it wise to bring you together and see what results. By the time he arrives I will have taught you all I can and the rest will be up to you."

And so it was done. The messenger was sent and the lessons began. Kuala learned how to smile and walk with insinuation, how to gaze into a man's eyes as if he were saying the most important things she had ever heard and how to silence

her mouth instead of venturing an opinion or contradiction. They were hard lessons for her to learn because she hated deceit and felt she was burying her real self under a simpering mask, but she wanted to succeed so much that she ignored her discomfort.

As the days passed, the whole court came alive with a fever of anticipation. Her father made arrangements for elaborate entertainments and gathered the finest foods for a great feast. The servants had never been busier, but they didn't mind because they all wished Kuala well. She was gentle and kind and never beat them as some mistresses would. In fact, on many occasions she had saved them from beatings — or worse. The shame of her prolonged spinsterhood was felt by them keenly and their efforts were frenzied in her behalf.

The activity continued to build to fever pitch until the great day actually dawned and Sheik Ahmed arrived.

Although a man of great wealth and power and accustomed to the treatment accorded a ruler of his impor-

tance, he had never been greeted as such an honored guest before. After his entourage — which consisted of a fifty-camel caravan and twice as many horse-mounted cavalry — had been bedded down in Sheik Abdul's stables, he came riding up to the palace, alone and unattended, on his coal-black stallion. It was a beautiful beast, proud and vicious-looking. No one watching would have dared to mount the animal. It belonged to the man who had broken it and would allow no other on its back.

Kuala watched in breathless excitement as the beautifully matched beast and master rode toward the stairs where she and her father waited. Ahmed was indeed a commanding figure — even a slightly ominous one with his black bur-noose which was so startling in a land where everyone wore white to reflect the sun's burning rays. It was almost as if he needed to draw its warmth into himself, thought Kuala as she noted with a thrill of delight his fine, sensual features. Soot-black hair fell over his

sun- and wind-weathered face and his dark, hawk-like eyes were full of questions as they took in every detail of the welcome. Everything Tamul has said about his appearance was true, thought Kuala with a shiver of anticipation — indeed, this was a man worth waiting for.

When he dismounted and came striding up the steps toward her, Kuala was hard put to remember the lessons she'd learned so carefully. All she could think was: 'He is the one Allah has marked for me. I will have him.'

He smiled as they were introduced and the combination of his eyes piercing hers, his touch, his voice and the smile which had some mysterious quality she couldn't define, made a nervous chill reach to the very pit of her stomach. Face to face with the one she had dreamed of so long, she found she couldn't act in any manner except the one that was honestly hers. She glanced at Tamul as if begging her to understand and then began to speak to Ahmed in the manner of the educated, intelligent person she was.

They spent the afternoon discussing many things that they found interested them both. She asked him about his far off Sheikdom and the ways that were followed there and he answered all her questions without hesitation, but yet she felt she knew as little about his life after the questions as before.

That night the best entertainers in Sheik Abdul Fazan's realm performed at a great feast. There were acrobats, juggler's and sword swallowers and magicians — and they were all performing at the height of perfection. Kuala sat next to Ahmed and every so often she found she was staring at his face instead of watching the entertainment. She felt she had known him so long for his honesty and knowledge and she prayed to Allah that he would ask her to be his wife. If all went as it had gone today, perhaps he would make a decision very soon.

Suddenly the musicians struck up a sensuous beat that made everyone cease their chatter. Silk curtains at the far end of the hall parted and out

swept Samara, the most famous dancer in Ba'hra.

Her exquisite body, clothed only in silken pantaloons, twisted and swayed suggestively to the music. Every movement brought sighs from the rapt spectators. Kuala had never seen her dance before, but had heard of her through servants' gossip. She wasn't pretty — her face was too hard and mask-like — but there was a quality about her that held everyone transfixed. She wove around the floor and among the guests and stopped in front of Ahmed. Then she danced for no one but him and each movement was part of a message that he seemed to understand. His eyes burned into hers as the flutes and drums played faster and faster. Her sinuous dance reached an unbearable point and, perspiration pouring down her, she collapsed at Ahmed's feet.

Suddenly, to everyone's consternation, Ahmed turned to Sheik Abdul and made the sign of departure. His visit had originally been intended to last a week but here he was already thanking his host for his warm hospitality and saying that his

stay had brought him the happiness he had been seeking. Then he turned to the stunned Kuala and whispered, "I have come to admire your intellect and spirit very much this day. May Allah bring you the happiness you seek, as he has brought me mine."

And with a swift motion he signalled his entourage, leaned over and swept the limp form of Samara up into his strong arms and strode out of the banquet hall.

There was a stunned moment of silence — then a babble of surprised excitement swept the hall. Kuala burst into tears. Her father, beside himself with rage, wanted to send his warriors after Ahmed and slay him, but his Vizier reminded him that it was forbidden by the Koran to harm a guest and that, besides, there had been no agreement sealed between them over Kuala.

As a matter of fact, the subject had never arisen. "He has committed no offense by carrying off a mere dancing girl," he said. "She is not even a member of your household."

Everyone present was dis-

tressed at the heartbreak which Kuala could not conceal — and yet there wasn't a man in the room who could help but admire the audacious virility of agreement sealed between them who wouldn't have gladly traded places with Samara . . .

Several weeks passed and Kuala's grief did not abate. She was completely inconsolable. Nothing her father did or promised to do had any effect and there was grave concern in the court for her health. Tamul had not dared say, "I told you so," but that was what was in her mind. One day she could no longer bear to see Kuala suffer and she hesitated no longer, but spoke.

"I can no longer keep silent, but will tell you of a possibility of some help for your case," she said. "However it is a drastic remedy and you must consider carefully before you decide whether to try it."

Kuala took Tamul's hand in hers eagerly. "You know I would rather die than go on without Ahmed. I did not believe it possible to care for anyone so deeply. I will do anything you suggest." The tears

dried on her cheeks and she felt alive for the first time since he had left the feast.

"It is a fearful journey that you must take, but it has been said that for those who are brave enough to make it, the reward is great," said Tamul solemnly. "You must ride out into the desert alone to a certain place where you will find a sign that I will tell you of. There you must say words which cannot be spoken anywhere but there and you will thus summon the D'jin who resides there and who will grant you three wishes for a terrible price."

Kuala's heart sank. So this was the hope over which she'd become so excited! A fairy tale! She was educated and knew there were no D'jins.

Noting her dismay, Tamul began to tell of many instances when this miracle had come to pass. Finally Kuala sighed and said, "I have no faith in this action. But there is nothing else for me to do, so I will journey into the desert.

"As you do not believe, you undoubtedly do not care about the price you would have to pay, but I will tell you anyway

so that you may consider it," said Tamul.

"If such a creature really exists and should fulfill my wishes I would pay any price."

The following day she slipped into her father's stable and stole his fastest horse. Dressed as a man — in case she should encounter any roving Bedouins — she galloped out into the desert in search of this fabled miracle worker — but with little hope of actually finding him. After two days and a night of grueling travel she finally reached the designated spot — an oasis known by the name of D'jab Sumul, "the enchanted place."

She dismounted and gazed about her. There was no sign of life in any direction and she felt a fool for having undertaken this mad scheme. She repeated the words Tamul had given her and nothing happened. She laughed bitterly. What had she really expected to happen? She was about to remount her horse when all at once a great roar burst out of nowhere and the sand seemed to take life and shape and swirl about her. The noise was deaf-

ening and the blinding sand-storm forced her to close her eyes.

"I know why you have summoned me." The words rolled across the desert like thunder and Kuala — rigid with fear and amazement — opened her eyes. Towering above her in the now quiet desert was the most gigantic turbaned figure she had ever seen.

"I am yours to command," boomed its voice.

"I . . . I am frightened by one so immense," quavered Kuala. "Won't you make yourself smaller so that I may speak with a steady heart?"

The giant's laugh roared for several minutes and when she opened her eyes again he was a little smaller but still immense. "Be not afraid," he boomed. "I will not harm you."

"I . . . I love someone who does not desire me," she began in a quavering voice. "Will you grant me three wishes?"

"I know who you are and of whom you speak," rumbled the D'jin, "and I shall grant the wishes — but you must pay the price that all maidens pay."

"If I do," replied Kuala with a sudden stroke of clever in-

spiration, "will you guarantee that it will not affect the outcome of those wishes?"

The D'jin was silent a moment. "I know your wishes," he rumbled finally and there was a note of sadness in his voice, "and can but grant them."

Kuala was overjoyed. She hadn't noticed the change in his voice. "Very well," she said. "First the wishes — then do with me what you will."

"State your first," he rumbled.

She closed her eyes. "I wish that Sheik Ahmed should no longer feel desire for the dancer Samara."

"Granted. And the second?"

"That he desire me in the same feverish manner that he did her."

"It is done — and your third wish?"

Suddenly overcome by joy at the prospect of such a lifetime of bliss, Kuala blurted out: "That we should live forever!"

The D'jin sighed a sigh that rippled the sands at her feet and said, "It shall be so — but you do not know what you are asking. And now you must pay — after which I shall vanish

and you will never see me again. Return to your father's house and await the outcome of your wishes."

And with that the D'jin shrank before her very eyes to human size and, seized her roughly. Finally, blessedly, she lost consciousness . . .

When she came to, it was night and the desert was cold. Eagerly, she mounted her waiting horse and rode back to her father's court. She slept for many hours upon her arrival and Tamul did not ask her any questions. Then, a few days later, a servant rushed into her room.

"Quick, my lady, Sheik Ahmed has arrived! He is asking for you."

Kuala didn't rush. He would wait. She had all the time in the world. First she soaked for awhile in perfumed bath oils and then she had Tamul dress her in her finest raiment. Finally, having seen that all was as it should be, she went to meet him.

Ahmed's eyes blazed with an intense, peculiar light as she approached him and he lost no time in coming to the point.

"How was it that I could not have seen it in your eyes the last time I was here?" he murmured, his eyes never leaving hers. "You are what I have always wanted in a woman. You have been in my thoughts constantly for the last few days. Please, leave with me this moment. I want you to be my wife."

"One of many in a harem?" she asked, feigning coldness.

He shook his head. "I have never been a man who could desire more than one woman."

"Then what about Samara?"

"I have grown tired of her of late," he replied. "Certainly I do not desire her as I do you. With you I feel desire as one does a fever."

"And what will happen to Samara?"

"She will be kept to entertain us and to be our slave. Come, put me off no longer, my darling. I thirst for your body as a Bedouin does water."

And so Kuala's happiness was complete. The wedding was the greatest that Bah'ra had ever witnessed. True, she felt a momentary qualm of doubt after the ceremony — but hadn't the D'jin assured her

that her lack of purity would not matter to Ahmed? Nor did it actually, for he laid not a hand on her, saying, "Wait until we reach my palace," but she was not worried for his every word and movement were so obviously suffused with passionate desire held in check. And they were going to live forever! That's all she could think of on the journey to his Sheikdom. Only one thing marred her happiness — she had wanted to bring Tamul along but he had been adamant about her coming unattended. "Samara will be your handmaid," he had said.

Kuala was astonished at the fortress-like castle rising out of the vast, flat expanse of desert. It must have taken thousands of men to build such an edifice and she felt proud that she would be its mistress.

The gates swung shut behind them and Kuala looked around at her new home — then she saw Samara.

"Welcome. May I help you prepare for my lord?"

The girl seemed humble and willing to do anything Kuala could ask. Gradually her jeal-

ousy left her and the excitement of the moment overcame her reserve. Samara bathed the dust of the journey from her body and placed a filmy robe about her. The oils of sweet perfume filled the air and at last she was ready.

"I will take you to Sheik Ahmed who is your lord and who has complete power over you," Samara said.

Kuala shivered expectantly and was led down a long flight of steps and into a very dark room.

"Come over here," said Samara.

Suddenly Kuala felt a piercing pain about her waist as a vise-like grip of sharp metal closed around her. "Wha . . . What's happening?" she cried out. A candle was lit and as her eyes became accustomed to its light Kuala peered about her. The room was filled with strange instruments. There was a ladder-shaped piece of wood with sharp slats, there were irons and brands and chains and every sort of device to create pain and to torture that had ever been conceived by the human brain.

"Why have you brought me

here?" she gasped. "I don't understand . . ."

The door of the chamber swung open and Ahmed entered. "I see Samara has prepared you," he said. "You know," he added, uncoiling a huge black leather whip, "when Samara danced for me that first time I visited your father's Sheikdom, I read in her eyes and movements that she shared my passion for pain. Mine to give, hers to receive — we communicated the thought to each other wordlessly. At the time I had no idea, however, that you also were one of us. The thought occurred to me later — as I remembered you. A very strange occurrence — one that has never happened to me before. Now I have no desire for Samara in the old way. I desire only your pain and our pleasure in it. Samara will help me bring it to you."

The spiked chain cutting into Kuala's waist dug in even further as they raised her from the ground, and she felt a trickle of warm blood start down her body from each

wound. She started screaming at the first cut of the lash and the second tore her robe from her body. She realized through the pain that they were taking turns beating her. Her screams rose and fell with each stroke. She knew that the pain she felt today was but a grain of sand in the vast desert of pain which would be her eternity. He would desire her in this way through their endless life together. With the full realization of her fate, her loudest screams mingled with broken, hysterical laughter . . .

And so, throughout the ages — as the scribe Men'jab Hamu concluded this story which he'd heard from the wise man who visited Mecca — throughout the centuries, wherever an Arab is beating his woman, whether in a Bedouin tent in the great desert or in the slums of some Moslem city, the man's whip-wielding hands are those of Ahmed, and the cries and the pain belong to the beautiful and haughty Kuala, the maiden too clever to know her place . . .

THE END

NIGHTMARE ISLAND

by D. H. Symonds

*What dread secret frightened the natives away
from the lush Aegean paradise?*

The broiling hot sun beat down on the man who was bent over, pick in hand, carefully digging in the baked earth. His shirt clung to his back and sweat trickled down his face. He stood up and, shading his eyes from the glare, looked out over the shimmering, deep blue expanse of Aegean — unbroken except for a small, speck-like island on the horizon. He stared at the speck for quite a while and then went back to his labors.

Professor James Ashley was a well-built man in his late forties. He had a rather handsome, weather-beaten face and piercing blue eyes. His sun-bleached hair was covered by a floppy white hat which kept slipping forward over his face as he worked.

Carefully and patiently he toiled, trying to uncover some archeological evidence to support the theory which had been his life's work.

He wasn't a wealthy man so he found it necessary to teach archeology to advanced students at Moran University, but every summer he came back to the Greek islands, as he had for thirty years, to carefully search out evidence to prove that the voyages of Ulysses had in fact occurred — that Ulysses had been a real man, not just a mythical figure, and that he *had* travelled to many islands, but that Homer in his 24-book epic, *The Odyssey*, had embroidered his travels with elements of magic and ancient lore which had transformed the whole thing into mythology.

Professor Ashley had determined early in his career that if he could prove his theory, a secure niche in history awaited him. He would be as famous as Heinrich Schliemann whose discovery of the actual site of Troy had assured his immortality. And that was the one thing above all others that motivated him. He would sacrifice anybody or anything, even his own health, to achieve immortality.

Over the years, Ashley had checked every ancient and modern reference to the voyages and had determined, in his own mind at least, that the island of the Cyclops was actually the modern Greek island of Gavdos, that the Sirens had inhabited remote Krios Island and that Phaeacia was the modern Stampalia. He had spent many summers digging on each of these islands in turn but, while discovering many pottery shards of Ulysses' millenium, had turned up nothing which would actually have proven his contention.

The last three summers he had spent on Skiathos Island which he was sure was the ancient Aeaea where Ulysses had

fallen under the influence of Circe and where his men had been turned temporarily into swine, but without finding anything of certain value, and so this summer he had come to the island of Amorgos which he was just as sure was the mythical Ogygia where the beautiful, entrancing Calypso had detained Ulysses for seven years after he had landed alone, having lost his ship and crew in a wreck at sea.

Calypso had fallen in love with him and had kept him on the island until the gods had compelled her to allow him to continue his journey. If Ashley could find any evidence of a queen by that name and of that millenium on this island, his chain of evidence, albeit circumstantial, would be complete and he could at least advance his theory in solid, scholarly fashion.

But there was still one puzzle he would first have to solve — and it was a tough one. There were two years in Ulysses' voyages that were unaccounted for; two years that must be reconstructed before his theory would carry any

weight at all. These were the two years that had passed between his shipwreck and his arrival, alone, on Ogygia . . .

Professor Ashley straightened up, stretched his back and gazed out to sea. Once again he found his eyes drawn to that tiny, speck-like island. He made a mental note to ask the local Greek fishermen if it was inhabited and whether they had ever found any pottery shards on it. If they had, it might be worth a trip out to investigate.

Two other people were digging a little way off from the Professor. Margo Neff and Bill Ford were the two most brilliant students that Ashley had ever had. They had each taken jobs at the University after they'd completed their post-graduate work so that they would be free to travel and work with the Professor during the summers. They shared his dream of establishing the truth of Ulysses' journey and were as dedicated to the search as the Professor. Of course, he would get the glory, but as his assistants they would get a bit of reflected fame.

Margo realized that as a woman she would need recogni-

tion or she would fail as an archeologist. This was one field where women were really discriminated against. Very few even attempted to enter the profession, but from the time she'd been a little girl and had read about the great discoveries in Egypt, she had wanted to be one who actually uncovers the physical evidence of the glorious past.

She'd had to be much better and study harder than any male to make the grades she had, and even then Professor Ashley had been reluctant to admit that she was good enough to accompany him on his expeditions. This was her second summer in the islands and she'd been of great help and found many valuable artifacts, but had gotten so little credit that she was beginning to wonder about her future with the Professor.

Bill Ford stopped digging to rest, and watched the skillful way that Margo worked the dirt. If there was anything there, she wouldn't miss it. He admired her very much, but he'd always been puzzled by the fact that such a strikingly

attractive girl would devote herself to such a thankless job. Her copper-colored hair gleamed in the sun and her lithe body never seemed to tire. Bill knew how hard she worked and he felt a bit guilty. He was sure that when they did solve the puzzle, Professor Ashley would give her little credit. He'd already praised Bill much more than he deserved and when the accolades were handed out he would fare much better than Margo, he was sure.

Each time Bill asked her why she was so dedicated, she'd reply that this discovery would even overshadow that of King Tutenkhamon's tomb, and she was determined to be in on it. She didn't even have any time for romance, reflected Bill sourly. Here they were in the perfect setting for the most highly romantic affair and she would have nothing but fellow-worker's camaraderie. Every so often Bill would give romance another try, but he was always rebuffed. He knew he wasn't unattractive; he'd almost had to fight off the girls at college, so his ego was pretty badly mauled by her behavior. It made him much more aware of

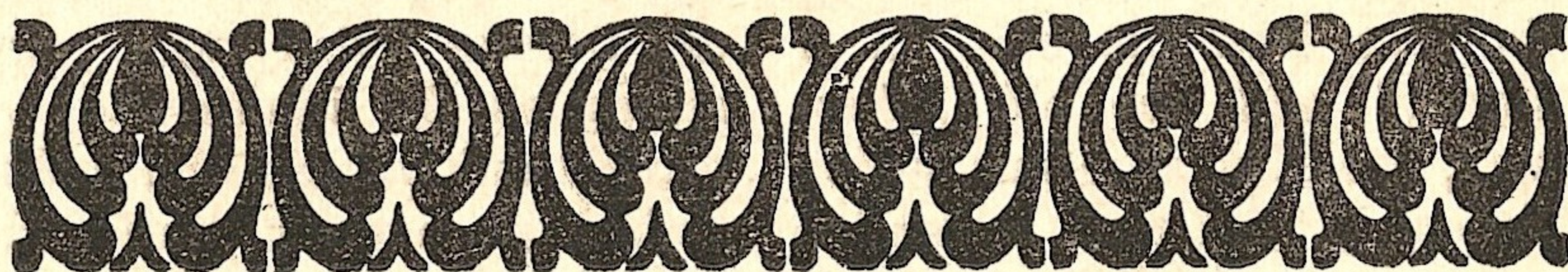
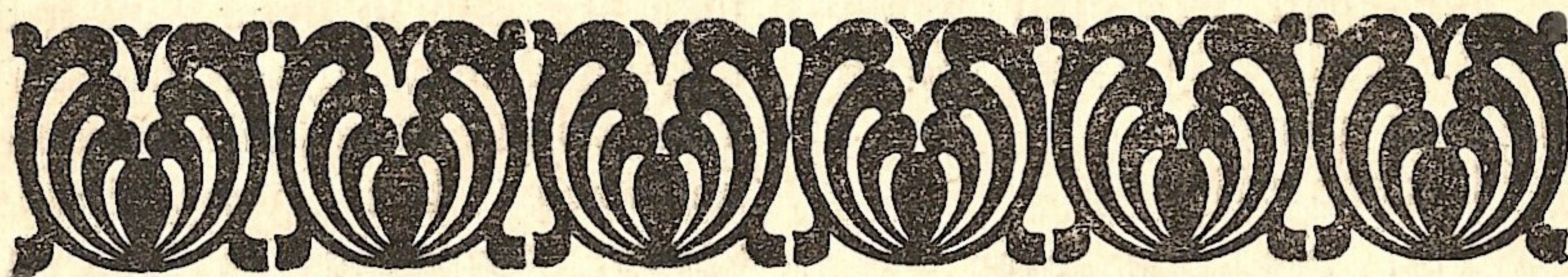
her than he wanted to be.

Small knots of curious islanders — rugged Greek fishermen with knotted, leathery faces — would come and watch the trio work for a while, then shrug and wander off, leaving new watchers to take their place.

At high noon the Professor and his two assistants stopped work and sought refuge from the broiling sun under a nearby clump of olive trees. There they ate their lunch of bread and goat's cheese, washed down by Retsina wine. Then they leaned back and rested drowsily, waiting for the sun to pass on from directly overhead. Nobody on Amorgos worked during these hottest hours of the day and there was quite a gathering of islanders sitting beneath the trees on the hillside.

The Professor called out to them in modern Greek, asking if one would be willing to give him some information. An old man with a lined, weather-beaten face and a huge black mustache rose and came over to his side.

"What is the name of that island out there?" he asked.



The man hesitated a moment. "It is called Ios, the enchanted place."

"Enchanted?"

"Yes. No one ever goes there," the old man replied uneasily. "The fishing off it is said to be good and yet we do not go there. I am eighty years old and have never been there. My father, and his father before him, never went there. This is how it has always been."

"But why?" insisted Ashley, immediately sensing a possible lead.

This time the old man paused even longer before replying. "It is well-known throughout the island that you are seeking evidence of the voyages of the ancient one you call Ulysses," he said finally, "and we have all feared the day when you would ask about the island."

"Yes? Go on, speak, man!" said the Professor excitedly.

"It has long been a traditional story among our people that the one you call Ulysses did not lose his ship in a storm," said the old fisherman, speaking with maddening slowness, "but that he landed out there on that island. All his

men are said to have vanished there and only Ulysses himself, after two terrible years of some unknown but unspeakable agony, managed to escape, swimming over to this island where he then remained for seven years, recuperating. Such terrible things are said to have happened to him there that the ancient poet could not bear to tell of them and invented the shipwreck story instead." The old man shrugged. "Only a silly superstition perhaps but it is said that a few hundred years ago two of our people did go there. One landed and the other stayed just off shore in the boat. The man who ventured ashore was never seen again. The other returned but his hair was white and he babbled incoherently for the rest of his days . . ."

But Ashley was no longer listening. He was thinking that at last he'd found it — the answer to the missing two years! Not only that, but the possibility of finding tangible evidence of Ulysses' visit was very strong as the island had remained uninhabited and undisturbed since early times. He must go there and without de-

lay!

The old Greek fisherman watched the Professor jump up and go to speak with his helpers. All three of them then rushed down the hill and across the sand to where the motor-boat on which they'd come from the mainland was beached. Shoving it out into the surf and leaving the extra row-boat behind, they climbed into it and the motor spluttered to life. The old man shook his head. There should be more attention paid to the old stories, he thought. These foreign fools would learn . . .

Each of the trio was busy with his own thoughts and hopes as they approached the mysterious island. Next to the Professor, the most excited was Margo. She'd begun to feel that Ashley wouldn't allow her to continue with him next year. He was jealous of her skill and mistrusted her ambition which rivalled his own. So if they could find the answer now she would have part of the credit. If this year didn't bring the final proof of his theory all her work would have been for nothing. The answer simply

had to be on this island that was getting ever nearer.

Bill hoped the island would hold the key, too. He was uncomfortable at the tensions that were building up among them and he wanted to solve this riddle and go on to some new project. The Professor would never go on to something new. This would be his crowning achievement, his pass to immortality.

Slowly the boat eased onto the shore. The Professor raised the motor and then he and Bill pulled it up onto the sand. The island was overgrown with heavy foliage — which was strange for that area, thought the Professor as they fought their way through the undergrowth, heading inland. The trees were so thick it was actually hard to see more than a few steps ahead. Then suddenly they saw them! Huge women, seven and eight feet tall, dressed in short leather tunics. There were at least fifty of them. Amazons! thought the Professor incredulously. But how . . .?

The Amazon leader had jet black hair and cruelly sensuous features. She made a sign.

The men were seized and their hands bound behind them. Margo was treated more gently.

They were led to a clearing. The men were hung between two trees by leather thongs around their wrists and ankles. The Amazons seemed overjoyed at their catch. They leaped and danced about the helpless men as if they were delightful new toys.

The men seemed stunned but Margo was more curious than frightened. These Amazons must have captured Ulysses and his men in just such a manner. These were ancient women — but how had they survived? As she pondered these things the leader came to where she stood.

"You will not be harmed if you do as I say," she said in Ancient Greek — which Margo like the others, was conversant in. "It has been so long since we've had any men here. It will be such pleasure to tame them. Who are they, and how is it that they came here?"

In halting Greek, Margo told their story and the leader smiled. "It must be the gods themselves who brought you

here," she said, "the gods who have taken pity on us at last — for, you see, we exist only when men come to the island. Ulysses and his men were practically our last visitors except for isolated islanders who let curiosity overshadow caution. We are starved for men. It is exciting that they are scholars. You will help us break them."

"I? No, I couldn't."

"We have nothing against you," said the leader who told Margo that her name was Nausicaa. "It is men we hate. But if you do not join us you will have to join them in their torment. You would be wise to work with us."

As Nausicaa spoke, Margo began to realize what she meant. The Amazon drew a long, black coil from her tunic and walked to where the men hung. She snapped the supple whip and brought it cracking down across the back of the Professor. His head flew back, but he made no sound. The other women gathered around and each had her own instrument of pain. One had barbed spikes she had fashioned from wood and she leaped about the helpless men, prodding them

with her agonizing thorns until their blood trickled from the gashes in their flesh. The whips never stopped and they hung there, their clothing in shreds, the women laughing and poking their torn bodies.

"This was the treatment we gave Ulysses and his men so you shouldn't mind too much," called Nausicaa who was exhausted from her exercise. "We can show you every detail of the entertainments we provided those men. They lasted quite a long time, too. I hope you do as well."

"They haven't come to harm you!" cried Margo who was sickened at the gory performance. "Why do you make them suffer so?"

"They are men. That is enough."

The pain-filled orgy ceased and the women rested.

"We want them to be our guests a long time. But we must make them shriek with agony," Nausicaa told Margo. "Now it is your turn to take the whip."

She thrust the coiled black length of leather into Margo's hand and stared commandingly into her eyes. "Go on, beat

them."

"I can't do it," whimpered Margo. "I've never hurt anyone in my life."

"If you don't beat them we will string you up next to them and you will feel the lash instead."

Margo still wasn't able to beat these men with whom she had worked so closely. The Amazons seized her and, while one of the giant women held her, Nausicaa let her whip play over the girl's body. She screamed at the first lick.

They let the lash fall several more times after she'd screamed her surrender. And when they stopped they knew they wouldn't have any more trouble with Margo again. They put the whip in her hand and she stood in back of the Professor.

The first lash was rather weak and the women growled their disapproval. The second was stronger and as she found the rhythm, the pace and power increased to *amad crescendo*. When she fell panting to the ground the amazons were cheering her lustily.

After she'd rested they signalled her to continue with Bill.

She'd always been rather fond of him and it was hard for her to begin, but then she remembered the pain and her whip rose and fell with gusto. At last Bill could stand no more — he shuddered and a scream from his very bowels filled the air.

The women touched his shuddering body and laughed exultantly. Nausicaa was disappointed that he'd broken so swiftly. Now that he had given in they had no further use for him. The women swarmed around him and — with their great strength — actually tore him limb from limb.

Margo turned away, horror and disgust welling up inside her, but the Professor cried out defiantly: "I shall be like Ulysses. He survived your hellish tortures and escaped. I shall withstand the pain and then I, too, will escape, taking the knowledge I have found here back to civilization. It will bring me fame and no matter what I suffer here, the price will not be too high."

Nausicaa came and stood before him. She seemed to be in deep thought. Then she sum-

moned some of the Amazons. "Go get the souvenirs of his voyage that Ulysses left with us," she said. "The clothing, jewelry, things from the ship, and place them before this man. Let him look upon his proofs. Let him see the objects he has been seeking and let him know he will never escape unless we permit him to leave for our own reasons."

The objects were placed at the Professor's feet and he strained at his bonds and almost cried out when he saw them.

Margo knew what they meant to him and she thought this must be a greater torture than the whipping had been. She went over and examined the treasure. Here was the proof they had sought lying at the feet of her teacher, almost within his grasp. She touched each object lovingly and she could hear a low moan that the Professor couldn't stifle.

"And don't dream of escaping," Nausicaa said to him tauntingly. "Ulysses was permitted to leave because of the interference of the gods after we had broken all his men. He

was a fine specimen, with great courage. Do you expect the gods to speak for you?"

The Amazon leader's lash struck the Professor's mouth and blood ran down the side of his jaw. Still he didn't cry out. His silence enraged the Amazons and they began their tortures with renewed energy. The man was barely alive and yet he wouldn't give in. His dream of fame and glory kept him going and he clung to that dream through the most hideous waves of pain which man could endure. When he had reached a point bordering on death, the leader called a halt.

It was obvious to her that no amount of torture would break this man. They would kill him before he cried out and they would count that as a defeat. He must crack and be humiliated before them or the victory would be his. As Nausicaa thought, she came upon the one weapon that would conquer him, and she smiled. She waited for him to recover his strength and while she waited, her joy grew into a roaring laugh of pure pleasure that filled the air.

Later she stood before him,

her cruel, dark eyes feasting on his face. She wanted to be sure she missed no part of this man's disintegration.

"Before we go on with our hospitality," she said, "I have some news which should interest you. Do you see all these objects that are the proof of Ulysses' actual existence?" She pointed to the pile at his feet, but it wasn't really necessary, for his eyes had never left them for a moment. "I have decided," she continued slowly and emphatically, "that your female assistant should be allowed to take them back to civilization so that the credit and glory will belong to her instead of to you. Thus the immortality will belong to a woman and you will be forgotten. What do you think of my plan?"

For a moment there was no response. Then, as the full import of her words struck him, he began to sob. His cries tore the air and there was never a more anguished or defeated man. Even the pain could no longer be controlled and the waves of agony washed over his body. He closed his eyes and prepared for death . . .

And then suddenly there was no more pain. Professor Ashley opened his eyes and . . . but, no, it couldn't be! He rubbed his eyes. He was sitting under the olive tree on Amorgos. Nearby lay the half-finished bottle of Retsina wine and goat's cheese. On the distant horizon was the speck-like island. The sun was still high in the sky. A dream! The whole thing had been a preposterous dream, brought on by too much wine and sun! He must have dozed off after questioning that old Greek fisherman about the distant island . . .

He was wide awake now and eager to get started for the island. He glanced around, looking for Bill and Margo, but except for a knot of islanders standing high up on the hillside looking out to sea, there was no one to be seen. He grew impatient. Where were they just when he needed them? Then he stopped. Why did he need them after all? If he went alone, the glory of discovery would be his alone.

Grabbing up his excavation tools, he ran down to the

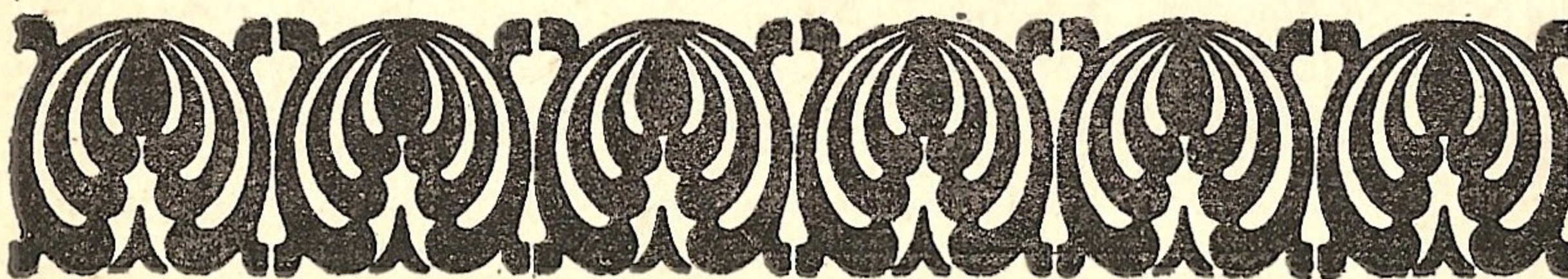
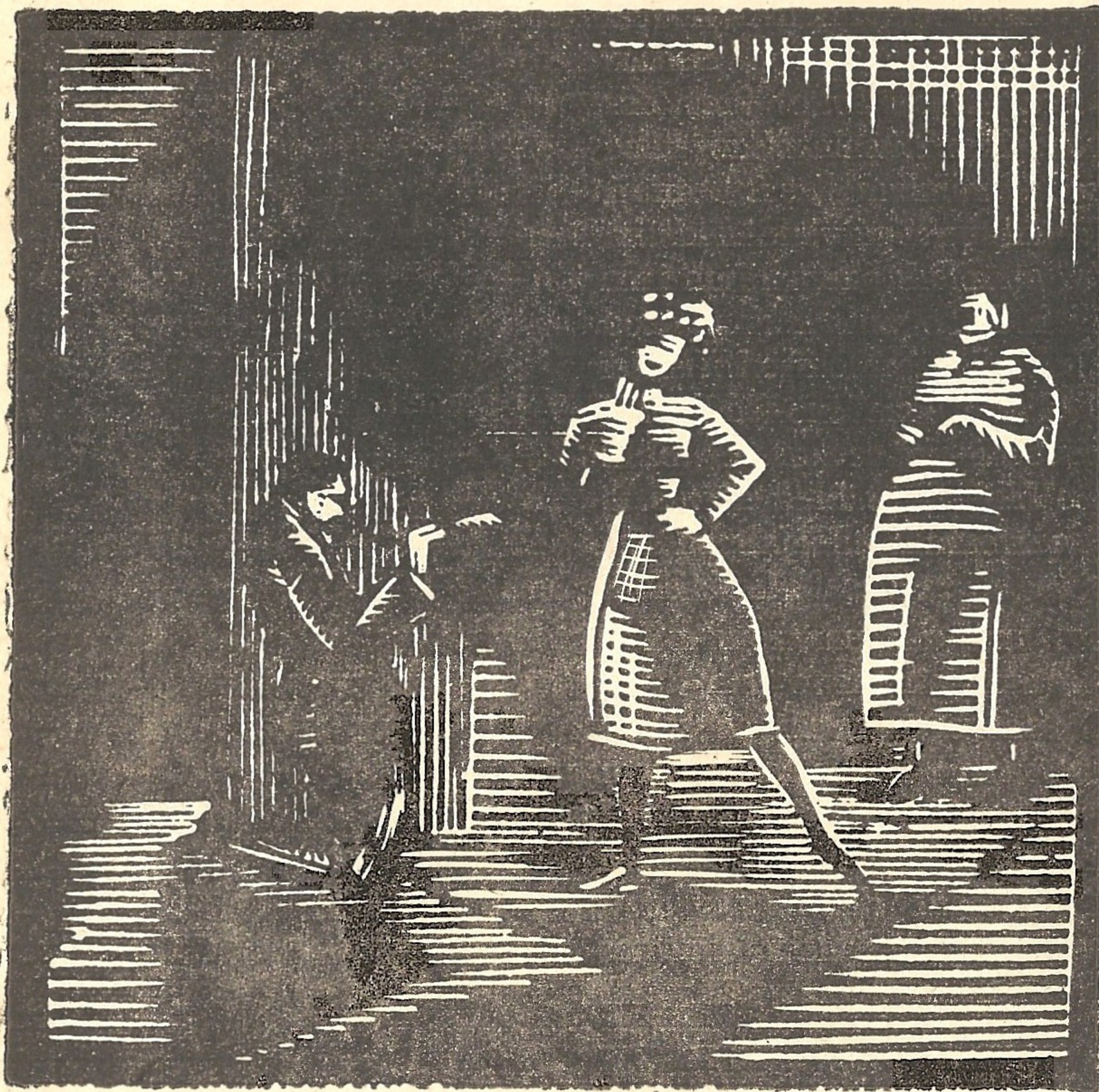
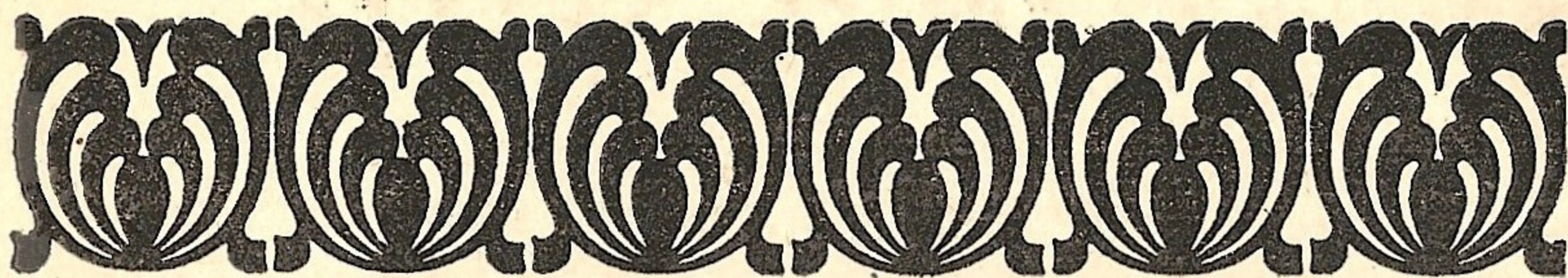
water. Damn! The motor boat was gone. Those two fools must be taking a joy ride around the island. But he wasn't going to let that stop him. It would be a long row but it would be worth it. Throwing his tools into the rowboat, he pushed it out in the water, leaped in and frantically began to row . . .

The old Greek fisherman with the lined face and large black mustache watched from the hilltop. A younger man came up and greeted him and they both watched the solitary figure in the rowboat grow smaller and smaller as he neared the forbidden island.

"I wonder why he is going back out there," mused the younger man finally. "Especially since the girl said they had found all the proofs of Ulysses' existence they needed when she loaded the motorboat and set out for the mainland yesterday. Do you think he is going to try to find his other assistant?"

The old man just shrugged. "Who knows? Who really cares? They're crazy foreigners." But then he shook his head gravely. "Still," he said, "more attention should be paid

to the old stories . . .”
THE END



DANCE WITH THE DEVIL

by Arthur Winston

Their road across the witch-infested moors led straight into the jaws of Doom!

Four black steeds pounded across the desolate moors. The carriage from Salisbury to Bath jounced and swayed fearfully in their wake. Heavy fog swirled about it and through the black night. Occasionally the full moon would dart from behind a cloud and then swiftly disappear, leaving the carriage to be swallowed up in the surrounding gloom again.

The four passengers bounced up and down as the wheels hit stones or ruts in the dirt road over which they swayed. Suddenly the servant girl sitting next to the window gave a cry of alarm.

"Oh, look, Sir! There's something fearful out there on the moors!"

Her master put his arm protectively about his frightened wife's shoulders and they peered out into the blackness to where the girl was pointing. There, flitting across the desolate wastes, were fiery, phosphorescent shapes which seemed to be doing a ghostly dance as they appeared and then disappeared from sight.

"Oh, what are they, Sir? They look like burning souls from hell!" cried the servant girl, her usually pink cheeks drained of color, her blue eyes

wide with terror.

As they watched the wierdly changing shapes, the two women in the carriage trembled.

The mysterious stranger who had gotten on at Wilton leaned forward and gazed out also.

"They are nothing to be afraid of," he finally announced sepulchrally. "It is a perfectly natural occurence out here on the moors known sometimes as jack o' lantern or will-o'-the-wisp but called more scientifically marsh light, it being caused by the decomposition of vegetable matter which forms gases that ignite and burn in that eerie way."

He paused, then added mysteriously: "It should not be that innocent light, a mere plaything of nature, but the very real evil out there on the moors that should strike terror into your souls."

As he spoke, George and Elizabeth Darcy and their servant, Amy Osborne, stared at him transfixed. They had felt uneasy ever since the carriage had stopped to change horses and driver at Wilton, and this spectral figure dressed completely in black had become their co-passenger. His manner

was cold and forbidding and the ride had been silent until now. George recognized that the stranger must be a man of some importance and his manner of dress revealed him as an orthodox Puritan — one of the group that almost immediately upon the outbreak of the rebellion in 1642 had taken control of the government.

It was now almost three years since England had fallen into the hands of these gloomy and supersitious fanatics and the country was now almost in a state of anarchy. George was very curious about the stranger's last comment and was wondering how to question him when Amy blurted out: "Evil, Sir? Is there really evil out there?"

The deep sepulchral tones of the stranger filled the carriage. "I can assure you, my child, that the blackest of evil deeds and doers abound on these moors. I have much knowledge of this."

"How can you speak with such certainty?" demanded George, who by now was wondering if the man might not

be a bit mad.

The stranger hesitated but a moment. He wasn't used to being doubted. His annoyance was obvious as he said, "I have been journeying from place to place for the past two years and my work has been most successful. I am an emissary of our present Parliament. I carry out their work of finding witches."

At the mention of witches the women gasped and drew their cloaks about them. George, on the other hand, felt distinct hostility toward the stranger now. He knew about the men with this wierd occupation. They were well paid for their ferreting zeal and generally feared by the populace at large. Often their callous, even brutal, instincts were barely concealed beneath a veneer of fanatical devotion to the cause of "righteousness." A rum lot, thought George, and — remembering that these witch hunters invariably travelled with an assistant — he wondered at this one being alone.

Having overcome their initial fear, the women were now pressing the man with ques-

tions.

"What do witches look like? How can you tell a witch from an ordinary woman? Do they always confess or do you find sometimes that there has been a mistake?"

"Witches are sometimes mysterious and stately women," the stranger replied, apparently pleased to be so drawn out, "sometimes foul and filthy hags, but both are equally terrible and potent with evil. It sometimes takes great skill and diligence to unmask them. They practice all manner of foul rites in worshipping the devil and call upon the dark spirits to assist them in their evil deeds. They summon the winds and subterranean demons to their aid and by their charms can draw the very moon from the skies. Midnight is the hour of their incantations and the brain could easily become unsettled by their debaucheries."

"But how do you know this?" demanded George skeptically. "Have you ever witnessed these things?"

"I know from the evidence gathered for the Assizes," replied the witch hunter, sensing

George's disbelief. "One of the most shocking cases was of a woman who had inherited supernatural powers which had descended in her family from one generation to another. She had been devoted to Satan when only seven years old. She had dedicated herself body and soul, her will, her every wish and movement to the powers of hell. She had regularly participated in the sacrifices, blasphemies and debauchery of the Sabbat, which she described in her confession. Although physically beautiful to gaze upon, she was a most loathsome creature to whom had been revealed the awful secrets of the pit, whose eyes had seen unmoved the torments of dunest hell."

"What is a Sabbat?" asked Elizabeth, who was as fascinated by this unknown subject as Amy.

"I hesitate to say since it is so foul, but perhaps if you become aware of the evil that surrounds you, you may guard the better against it," mused the stranger, then added: "Yes, I will tell you of this unspeakable ceremony so that you may

learn and profit from it. The votaries, or followers of Satan, gather in some desolate spot and have a feast with much wine. They sing bawdy songs and perform lewd dances. This goes on for a week with each day having its own observance, proceeding to the most infamous conjunctions. Then at midnight, on Friday, the Black Mass to Satan is performed where the altar is the scene of every defilement. And the horror is that the witches and their followers are as devoted in their worship of evil as others are in the true worship of good. They perform human sacrifice and then examine the entrails for the sake of divining the future."

"And that witch confessed to all these terrors?" shuddered Amy who couldn't decide whether it might not have been better to remain ignorant of such matters.

"Sometimes the witches don't confess at first," the stranger replied. "That one was especially stubborn. But I have been very successful in securing confessions even though it does take persistence and skill."

The little group pressed more questions on the stranger who was asked to describe the means of getting the witches to confess to their vile crimes. He hesitated at first, but his desire to boast overcame caution and he said: "When a woman is suspected of being a witch I appoint searchers who take her into a room and strip her. Then she is searched for the devil's mark. It is found, and then I ask her to confess. If she refuses she is placed upon a table in an uncomfortable posture and kept awake for several days. She is given neither food nor drink. If she still won't confess we attempt to walk the devil from her and we force her to keep walking until her feet are giant blisters."

"I also have a common prober assist me," he continued. "He is an expert with needles and can probe the suspect to find the insensible spot where the devil has marked his own. If all else fails, we swim the witch. Her thumbs and great toes are tied across and she is let down by a rope tied about her waist into a running stream or pond. If she sinks without a struggle she might be cleared,

but if she tries to swim her guilt is evident. I have discovered over three hundred witches in these various manners and they have all either been hanged or burned alive."

The women couldn't understand the proud manner in which the witch hunter recited this ghastly tale. They shuddered and had to look away from his feverish eyes.

"Last July at Berwick I collected thirty women in the town hall," he went on. "They were stripped and the prober, who was a real artist at his work, was given free rein with them. They all confessed in time."

A vision of the trail of blood and misery which had marked this stranger's passage through the countryside continued to unfold, and his audience wondered whether the horror they felt was because of the account of witches and their doings or at the man himself. His methods had aroused them all to a great disgust and loathing for the whole business.

George couldn't resist a final question. "You said they were out here on these very moors?"

The black cloaked figure nodded. "This vast, chalky

plain is covered with ancient, pre-brittanian ruins which the witches inhabit. Especially the great ones of Stonehenge. If I could capture that coven it would be my crowning achievement, but they are very clever. It would be no small feat to catch them unawares."

The carriage rattled on through the blackness and suddenly the blood-chilling wail of a baying hound shattered the stillness outside.

Amy, the servant girl, shuddered. "I'm glad we're safe and warm inside here," she said, trying to cheer herself.

Moments later she wished she'd never spoken for the carriage suddenly gave a terrific lurch and they were all thrown out of their seats as the vehicle dragged to a stop.

"What happened? What is it?" they were all asking at once as they clambered out.

The driver was standing on the road holding part of the right-front wheel in his hand. "Split right down the middle," he said in a puzzled tone. "Looks to me as if it's been tampered with . . ."

"So," said the black-cloaked

stranger in that chilling, sepulchral voice of his, "I was afraid of that. They knew I was coming." A note of urgency could be heard now as he added: "We are all in great danger. I sent a letter to the minister of Bath telling him to have all in readiness because I was going to come there to investigate reports of witches in the surrounding villages and that my visit would be a sudden one. They must have gotten their hands on that letter. It would be a great triumph if they could capture me. They believe that the sacrifice of a witch finder is the one which pleases Satan the most."

He paused, then said thoughtfully: "We cannot stay here in the coach where they would surely find us. That baying hound means that there is human habitation not far from here. We will continue on foot, staying very close together, and if we should meet anyone, say nothing of what I have told you. We have one thing in our favor. They believe the one to be sacrificed must come to the Sabbath of his own free will. They use many kinds of trickery, but as long as we keep

silent and stay together we shall be safe. We are an ordinary enough group of travellers and they do not know what I look like. In each area I use a new disguise." He turned to them. "If any of you should disobey my orders you will answer to the Parliament."

For the first time, George Darcy felt definitely uneasy. He glanced at his wife and at Amy. Fear shone in their faces. A feeling of the abnormal, a premonition of some hidden, secret danger clawed at his inwards; it was as real as an icy hand, but at the same time as intangible as the darkness and fog that swirled around them.

"Driver, you stay with the horses," he heard the witch hunter saying. "The rest of you come with me." And with hearts filled with dread, the little party stepped hesitantly into the menacing blackness, following his ghastly form as it was illumined every now and then by a briefly emerging moon.

The going was very slow for they had to be careful not to wander from the rutted road into the surrounding moors, but

not more than ten minutes had passed when, the moon once again emerging briefly, they spied the faint shape of a house a few hundred yards up the road.

"Oh, thank God," breathed Elizabeth fervently, seeing the Inn sign creaking in the wind. "We won't have to spend the night out on the moors after all." Relief swept over the entire party now that rescue was in sight.

It was momentarily dashed, however, when two great hounds came bounding out of the darkness to meet them. Teeth bared, they growled and snarled as they circled the frightened travellers who had halted in their tracks.

Suddenly the door of the inn burst open and the figures of a man and woman stood outlined against a fire burning in the grate behind them.

"Who's out there?" called the man.

"We were travelling on the coach to Bath but lost a wheel," shouted George. "Could we find food and shelter for the night? There are only four of us. Myself, my wife and maidservant and a gentleman who was on

the coach with us. We'll pay you well."

"I hope the pay is what we expect," growled the Innkeeper's wife after the dogs had been called off and the party was entering the Inn.

"It will be ample," replied George, thinking that she was complaining at being awakened at such a late hour.

The Innkeeper himself was a small, wiry man with sandy-colored hair. He had large, ham-like hands that didn't seem to go with the rest of his build and George wondered what kind of work would develop hands of such power. His wife, who was taking their cloaks, was a statuesque, titian-haired woman who had an air of authority and strength about her. Neither of them looked like an ordinary innkeeping couple. They lacked the settled, homespun qualities that were common among these types — and yet George was too glad of the shelter to question their looks too deeply. The Innkeeper asked an inordinate number of questions, but the women were silent and the men said only that they had business in Bath.

After they had rested, a table was laid for them before the fire and they all sat down to a hot meal. As the warmth penetrated their chilled bodies, the travellers relaxed and George began to talk with the Innkeeper. He asked about life at the Inn and about the surrounding countryside. "I've never been on Salisbury Plain before," he said, "but its chalky wastes seem uninhabitable to me. How do you manage to live in such desolation, with only the witches for company?"

At the mention of witches the whole company stopped eating and stared at George. He realized his mistake and tried to cover the slip, but it had ruined the mood of relaxation. After dinner they all went to their rooms.

Amy lay in her bed trying to get warm and thinking how strange this journey had become. She had looked forward to going to Bath ever since her mistress had told her they would be going for a long visit with the master's uncle who was old and ill and who had sent for them to come and manage his estate. Someday they would probably inherit all his

wealth and she was happy for them. They treated her very well and she felt devoted to them. As she lay musing about the future, she thought she heard a sound in the room but she wasn't aware of another person's presence until just before the blow fell and she lost consciousness . . .

Elizabeth Darcy shook her sleeping husband. She had been awakened by a voice calling their names and she was frightened. "George, someone's calling us," she said. "It sounds like Amy's voice but it's coming from outside the window."

George leaped up and raised the window. Thick fog came swirling in. He could see nothing. "Amy?" he called.

"I'm down here, Mr. Darcy," her voice wailed. "Oh, help me! I've gotten locked out!"

"I'll come with you," said Elizabeth as he struggled into his clothes. "The poor child must be terrified."

George found a lantern downstairs and lit it but it was useless in fog so thick that he could barely see his hand before his face. He opened the door and called Amy's name.

Her reply came from farther off than before. "Oh, Mr. Darcy, I can't find the house."

"You wait here," George said to Eliabeth. "I'm going after her."

"Oh, no, you're not going to leave me here alone," she said and, pulling her wrapper tightly about her, Elizabeth followed her husband out into the fog.

"Here, take my hand," said George, "or we'll become separated. Amy, can you see our light? he called. "Come toward it."

Her voice seemed almost on top of them. "Here I am, over here, Mr. Darcy." They hurried toward where it had come from, calling to her, but this time her voice came from further away. After a few minutes, George realized that they could no longer see the Inn. My God, he thought, we're lost out on the moors! But as the feeling of helpless terror began to mount, he suddenly heard Amy's voice again.

"Mr. Darcy," she wailed. "Where are you? I've found the Inn."

Relief flooded George's heart. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Light the lantern over the

door," he called. "We'll find our way to it."

After a few moments, a tiny glow of light showed up to their right. "There we are," said George and they started for it . . .

"I don't understand it," he said some ten minutes later. "We must be circling it in some manner. We don't get any closer to it."

But even as he said it, they began to slowly approach it. Suddenly they came to a broad ditch. "Funny, I don't remember this," said George. They clambered down its sides and when they climbed the far side George suddenly saw a series of monumental upright stones outlined against the fog.

At that instant, with a chill of terror, he realized everything. The ruins of Stonehenge! They were miles from the Inn! They'd been tricked!

Now the light was approaching them. A few seconds later, two hooded figures — one bearing a lantern, the other holding Amy, the point of a dagger at her throat — came out of the fog.

"We have gotten you here

to our ceremonial ruins, witch finder," called a voice that George immediately recognized as that of the Innkeeper's wife. "We will be pleased to have you for our midnight services."

"But . . . but I'm not the witch hunter," stammered George in terror. "You've made a mistake."

"We didn't expect you to admit it," she replied as they slowly approached through the fog, "but you gave yourself away at the Inn. Even your servant denied it at first — but now she knows better," and they whirled Amy around so that George could see the terrible whip-scars on her naked back.

"George, quick, let's run!" whispered his wife. "We're still short of the ruins and remember what we were told about coming here of our own volition."

But even as they turned to flee, it was too late. Coming from the opposite direction, cutting off their escape, came a whole group of unearthly figures, each carrying a black candle which burned in the fog with a sulphurous blue flame. Some were naked and others wore robes with bizarre figures

embroidered on them and some wore beast masks with fantastic projections made from the skins and hides of animals.

Midnight services, thought George — but it must be hours past midnight! And besides, it was Thursday. The Sabbat couldn't begin for another twenty-four hours. By then help would reach them. He was certain of it . . .

As if divining his thoughts, the Innkeeper's wife said: "There were mild potions of henbane in your food; enough to cause you to sleep through yesterday. We are now no more than three hours short of the Sabbat."

At a signal from her, several women stepped forward and tied their hands behind them. "Your servant will be the first sacrifice to call up the Queen of the Phantom World, witch finder," said the Innkeeper's wife who was addressed by the others as Mogala. "Then your female assistant will be sacrificed — but you yourself will be our main offering to Satan."

Two men seized each of them and carried them high over

their heads down a sort of avenue past four separate stone groupings. They were dropped to the ground near a large stone slab which formed an altar. There were candles at either end and lying between them was the bruised and beaten body of Amy.

As they watched in horror, eerie music sounded and a group of naked votaries began a dance about the girl. They danced and sang, rousing themselves and all who watched to heights of passion. With staring eyes, blanched faces and champing mouth that dripped foam and poured forth obscenities beyond all human imagining, they danced about the altar.

With a cry of terror and disgust, Elizabeth looked away, a hideous fear tearing at her heart. "Will I be next?" she wondered. "What will they do to me?"

Mogala, the high priestess of horror, climbed the altar and her hounds of hell — those very ones who'd come rushing up to them outside the Inn — stood by, fangs bared, growling ominously. "We shall call upon the great Hecate to come and

help us with our ceremonies," she cried and, throwing off her garments, arms raised to the moon, she intoned: "Come infernal, terrestrial Bombo, goddess of the broad roadways, of the crossroad, enemy of the day, thou who rejoice when blood is spilled, Gorgo, Mormo, Moon of a thousand forms, cast a propitious eye upon our sacrifices . . ."

A cold wind whipped through the worshippers and a cloud blotted out the moon. The hounds began a hideous howling and then all was quiet.

The girl lay on the altar as if dead. Only her low moans showed there was still life. The candles sent flickering shadows across her naked body and then the rites began. The worshippers formed a circle about the altar and in each one's hand there was a long knife. A large fire was lit behind the altar and as the flames danced so did the frenzied votaries. The knives found the girl's flesh as they danced and her screams became the music that accompanied them. Some threw tufts of the victim's torn-out hair into the flames and the witches

rubbed their bodies with the reeking blood which streamed down over the altar stone.

The poor creature that had once been Amy was cut open alive and her agonized and writhing limbs were offered as a sacrifice to the powers of darkness. At last, when she was at the point of death, she was cut to pieces on the altar and her heart and entrails were taken for use in Sabbath charms. The maniacal shadows ceased their dancing and crowded about, eager to taste the blood.

After this ceremony the gathering threw themselves into the debauchery which, as the Witch Hunter had said, characterized Sabbats throughout the ages. Elizabeth had fainted when the torture had begun, but George had hypnotically watched all, unable to tear his eyes away from the sheer horror of it. This was in truth the very cult of hell — just as that Witch Hunter had said of it. The Witch Hunter! thought George suddenly — he was their only hope! When he had awakened at the Inn and found them gone, he had undoubtedly guessed all and had gone for help! Probably at this very

moment help was on its way. At this thought, George's hopes rose. He wanted to tell Elizabeth to take heart, but he didn't dare speak. The logic of their rescue became more and more real, however, and even the horror of what he had just witnessed became bearable.

The frenzy abated finally and the celebrants fell to the ground to rest for the midnight Sabbat. Mogala came to where George lay bound. "Well, witch finder," she said, her eyes blazing with frenzied hate, "prepare for the torments which you will offer up to Satan, the all-powerful, the beloved . . ."

"Do what you will with me, but spare my wife," he implored her, "or, if you cannot find it in your heart to spare her, give her a swift and merciful death."

The High Priestess of the witches' coven laughed harshly. "Your wife — as you choose to call your assistant — will play an important part in our ceremony; one you will shortly witness." And with that, she turned on her heel and was gone.

"We must play for time," George whispered when Elizabeth — no longer able to stay in the blackness which protected her from unbearable reality — regained consciousness. "There is hope. Don't give up."

She didn't believe him. There was no hope. They were at the mercy of an even more fiendish group of witches than the Witch Hunter himself could have conceived of . . . Then, at that instant, she knew what George had meant. The Witch Hunter had said that the group around Stonehenge was the most vicious and dangerous in the land — so he knew about them and even where they met! He would rescue them, she thought. They must stay alive until he could reach them with aid . . .

The hour of midnight was almost at hand and the Darcys were in a cold sweat of fear and apprehension. Where was the Witch Hunter? He must arrive and soon or it would be too late. The goetic circle was already forming and the witches were beginning their incantations: "For the Sabbat, hey! For the worship of hell, the

orgy of bane and bale!"

Just as the rites were about to begin, a commotion broke out at the edge of the circle. The hooded figures moved aside and the Innkeeper himself appeared, whipping a bowed and beaten man before him. It was the Witch Hunter! At this sight, all hope of rescue died forever and George and Elizabeth Darcy knew they were at the mercy of the devil himself!

The Innkeeper forced the man to the center of the circle. "I had to bring him," he said. "We couldn't leave any witnesses. He was trying to get away. He's half dead anyway. He didn't hold up long under the whip."

"We must hurry and begin," said his wife. "Midnight will soon be here and we must complete the sacrifice before then." She signalled to her followers and they came to where Elizabeth lay and, lifting her to their backs, carried her to the altar.

A long black pall had been spread over the altar and Elizabeth was placed on it. Six black candles were lit and her naked body became a living

altar. The priestess raised a hand and her husband stepped forward with his whip. A monotonous murmur of liturgy droned through the night, punctuated by the shrill screams of the woman writhing on the altar as the long black lash came down again and again.

George struggled against his bonds and cried out for mercy for his wife but there was none.

As the obscene liturgy came to an end, Mogala, the high priestess, cried out: "And now the blood of an innocent one shall mingle with that of the Witch Hunter's assistant!" And at a sign from her, two hooded figures carried the limp, broken body of the real Witch Hunter up to the altar. They raised him high over the naked woman. For a second George saw him open his eyes and cry out hoarsely, then Mogala's razor-sharp stone knife slid smoothly across his throat and blood spurted out, splattering upon the pale white figure beneath . . .

Elizabeth began to laugh and babble incoherently and George was thankful that the last link with reality had been severed. If only her blessed condition

would last until the end, he thought fervently.

After the Witch Hunter's body, drained of its life's blood, was thrown into the fire, Mogala cried out: "And now the sacrifice of the Witch Hunter himself, the moment we have all so patiently waited for . . ."

George began to laugh — softly, bitterly, almost secretly at first, then it grew and finally passed all bounds, finally silencing even the frenzied congregation. "You've outsmarted yourselves," he gasped when at last he was able to speak. "Your sacrifice is valueless. The one you called innocent was the real Witch Hunter. Do to me what you will. I no longer care. I have this as my consolation!"

Mogala realized that he spoke the truth and she was beside herself with rage. "You will pay for this!" she stormed. "The spell has been ruined! You will suffer as no other man has ever suffered!" And with that she seized her husband's whip and began to lash him mercilessly, screaming, "Death will be a benison you will never know!" Pain tore through him for what seemed like hours,

pain so terrible that he thought at each stroke that he would die, but he didn't, and finally, exhausted, she stopped and panted: "I will leave you for a while so that you may fully regain your senses. I should not want you to miss a single second of the exquisite tortures of the sacrifice."

The dancing began again and the circle of worshippers wove their grim chain about the blood-streaked figure of Elizabeth. She lay on the great altar, staring with wide, unseeing eyes at the ghoulisn rites taking place around her.

The bonfire blazed, throwing menacing shadows through the night and a moaning chorus of filth and blasphemy filled the air as the dancers became more and more frenzied. Finally, at the height of the orgiastic dance, a man dressed in animal skins came prancing forward and stood over Elizabeth. As he lowered his face to hers she stirred and began to moan. When he raised his hand — which was enclosed in an animal's claw — her eyes widened and her scream shrieked higher even than the maniacal chorus.

Then it turned into a blood-choked gurgle as again and again he raked her from neck to thigh with his claw, the rivulets of fresh blood mingling with the caked scab of horror that already covered her body . . .

Suddenly George heard something and his heart leapt. It was faint at first, barely a tremor in the earth; then it grew and finally he knew for sure what it was — the distant pounding of horses' hoofs! Second by second it grew and finally even the fiendish revelers heard it. They paused in their dance for a second, listening, then silently began to scatter in all directions, running off into the darkness as fast as their legs could carry them . . .

But it was not fast enough. George heard cries of, "Fan out! Surround them! There goes one — get her!" and then suddenly the horses were pounding past him and he saw the glittering armor and plumes of the soldiers and his eyes filled with tears of gratitude.

"Here's a poor devil they were beating!" he heard a voice shout and the next thing he

knew, kind, strong hands were loosening his bonds.

"How's the woman?" He heard another voice shout. "Is she still alive?" But the answer was indistinct and he was already losing consciousness . . .

After a few weeks' rest and recuperation at a physician's house in Frome, George was able to continue on to Bath where they told him Elizabeth was being cared for by an order of nursing women. In Bath also, during the trial of the Stonehenge witches' coven at which he testified, George learned how help had come to reach them.

The coach driver took the witness stand and identified himself as having actually been the Witch Hunter's assistant. "We had decided that the territory was too dangerous for us to travel in openly, your worship," he told the presiding magistrate, "so I disguised myself as the coachman and took the regular driver's place at Wilton. When the coach's wheel — which had obviously been tampered with — cracked asunder, my master ordered me to stay with the horses. I waited

there all that night and part of the next day and when my master returned not I took one of the horses and rode on to Bath for help. It took some time to convince the constabulary there that I was neither lying nor mad and more time again to raise a force of sufficient number to mount an attack upon the witches, the result being that we barely arrived in time . . ."

The Innkeeper and his wife and thirty-nine followers were judged by the tribunal to be witches and condemned to be broken on the wheel and then burned alive in the public square at Bath. George Darcy attended each execution eagerly, a smile on his lips and a strange look in his eye.

On the day of the last execution — that of Mogala herself whose cries of agony had sounded like music to George as they'd risen through the black smoke of her funeral

pyre — he encountered the "coachman."

"And how is your wife, Sir?" the assistant of the late Witch Hunter asked.

"Her body is mended," said George slowly and with great effort, "but I am told she will never regain her wits . . ."

"Oh, what a shame, Sir," the little man replied. "We have both lost someone then." And, after a pause, he added: "I'm at my wits end as to what to do without my master."

"Listen, my man," said George Darcy slowly, that strange look reappearing in his eye, "you are no longer without a master. Have you your probe with you?"

"Oh, yes, sir," he replied eagerly.

"Come, then," said George in a strange, sepulchral tone, "let us journey to Trowbridge. I have word that region is rife with witches . . ."

THE END

DRUMS OF TORMENT

by Kent L. Bowman

Was pain the only bribe which could appease the wrath of the Apache spirits?

If Kitty Parker had not been the belle of Sawyer's Bluff, and if she had not gone last night for a long buggy ride with one of her best beaux, Frank Riley, and if, once home, she had gone straight to bed, instead of hanging out her window until way past midnight, looking out into the Arizona moonlight and wondering dreamily which one she would finally pick, Frank, or Jim, or Todd . . .

. . . If, as we say, none of these things had happened, she might have heard those first shouts of "Injuns! Injuns!" as young Jed Holland, from down the valley, came riding hell-for-leather into town just before

dawn. As it was, Kitty turned over restlessly and burrowed her pretty head back into the pillow. Her father, Doc Holland, was tending a sick man on a ranch twenty miles away, and he had taken their maid, Conchita, with him. There was no one to wake Kitty up.

If she had not been so soundly asleep, Kitty would have heard the commotion as the inhabitants of Sawyer's Bluff poured out onto the one little main street. The excited palaver as two riders were dispatched to Lookout Rock to check on the approach of the Indians. The frenzied activity as guns were readied, buggies and wagons hitched up.

The lookouts came back. "Apaches!" announced one man, "Hundreds of 'em, maybe thousands! About three miles away and coming on fast!"

"I'm sorry to tell you, folks," said his partner, "but it looks like Geronimo. No chance to stand against him. We'll have to clear out, pronto!"

Geronimo! In Arizona, in 1883, that was a name to strike fear into men's hearts! The year before, that great renegade Chief had been on the point of surrendering to General Crook. Instead, he had broken his word and escaped to Mexico with hordes of his Braves. Since then, he had made two bloody, brutal raids on Arizona and New Mexico, killing, plundering, burning everything in his path.

"We'll make a run for it!" shouted the Town Marshal. "Head for Fort Rogers, we'll be safe there!"

With a great hallooing and whipping up of horses, the entire population of Sawyer's Bluff streamed out of town.

Still Kitty slept.

What woke her, finally, was the silence. She sat bolt up-

right, startled by the strangeness of it. Not a voice, not a footstep to be heard. None of the lively bustle she usually woke to on a fine summer's morning.

Kitty dressed hurriedly and went out to reconnoiter. The little town was deserted. No one on the street. She looked in the general store. Empty! The postoffice. Empty! Empty were the barbershop, the livery stable, the jail, even. The only living creature in sight was a stray horse, standing rather incongruously on the wooden porch of the Keystone Saloon. It looked at her questioningly.

What on earth had happened? As she strained for an explanation, Kitty became aware of a sound she had not noticed before: a kind of faint roaring noise from the valley to the South, as if of a distant waterfall. Hoofbeats, thousands of them! Suddenly, she knew why there was no one in Sawyer's Bluff.

Breaking into a run, Kitty made for the barn at the back of her house. Her saddle mare, Bess, was in her stall. The animal whinnied apprehensively,

sensing its mistress' agitation. Kitty threw a halter over the horse's head. No time to saddle up now. She led Bess outside and mounted her bareback.

As she came out from behind the house a chilling sight awaited her. An advance party of a dozen or so Apaches were coming slowly up the empty street, the painted Braves gawking about like tourists in the big city. For one awful moment Kitty stared at them in alarm and they stared back. She reacted first(wheeling her horse away from them, urging it into a gallop, leaving the startled Indians behind. With a chorus of gleeful war whoops, the Apaches whipped up their horses and took off in disorderly pursuit.

Kitty's horse was galloping flat out, neck outstretched, ears back, body low to the ground, legs churning. Looking back, she saw that the Indians were several hundred yards behind. If only she could outdistance them! "Go, Bess, go!" she called imploringly.

A half mile out of town the road curved downward, crossed a dried-up creek bed, and then flattened out into a vast mes-

quite-and-cactus-dotted plain. It was seven miles to the next settlement, twelve miles to Fort Rogers. Kitty knew that she had no chance of outrunning the Indians over that distance. But if she could put enough ground between them, perhaps they would abandon the chase and head back to Sawyer's Bluff. It was the only hope . . .

As her horse flew down the long flat road, Kitty looked back again. The Apaches were way behind now. There was a chance! But Bess was beginning to tire . . . She prodded the little horse with her heels. Again Bess responded, increased her speed. The Indians seemed to fall still further behind. Perhaps they were giving up!

Bess was laboring now. If she kept on at this pace, the mare would collapse. She eased Bess to a canter to let her catch her breath. But soon she could hear the Braves hooting and shrieking behind her. They were still following! They were gaining on her! She whipped up her horse. Again they fell behind. But when the exhausted horse's pace began to slacken,

they came on again.

They were playing with her, teasing her, running her the way a wolf pack runs a deer! Fighting back tears of rage and frustration, Kitty urged on her faltering horse. But now the Apaches were at her heels, gaining on her stride by stride. A grinning Brave drew abreast of her, reached out, plucked her from her horse. She fought him, squirming, sank her teeth in his hand, biting savagely. The Brave grunted, almost dropping her. Another apache grabbed her legs. She aimed a kick at him. He raised his musket, holding it by the barrel, and dealt her a brutal blow on the head. Blackness . . .

. . . Her head hurt, that was the only thing she was aware of at first. Where was she? She lifted herself up. She was in the valley. Ahead of her she could see the charred remains of Sawyer's Bluff — burned to the ground! A huge pall of black smoke hung over it.

She was lying, bound hand and foot, on a rank uncured cowhide, next to a large teepee. All around her were Indians — Indians grooming their horses, Indians cleaning their

guns, a group of Indians clustered around a storyteller and shouting their approval as he told them of the great victories they had won, another group beginning one of their interminable war dances. Here and there were evidences of Sawyer's Bluff. One Brave was wearing a lady's bonnet, another had kid gloves and a Stetson Hat. And they had not neglected the Keystone Saloon, judging by the number of Braves who were reeling about clutching whiskey bottles.

Suddenly Kitty noticed a group of Apaches who were seated crosslegged near her. One of them was staring at her intently with an eager, gloating expression on his face. The back of his right hand bore angry purple teethmarks. The man who had captured her! Kitty looked away.

"I see the young white squaw is awake now," said a voice at her elbow. Startled, Kitty turned her head. An old wrinkled Indian, wearing a ceremonial blanket ornamented with strings of bone and shell necklaces, was standing beside her. "I am Medicine Man for

the great chief, Geronimo," the old man said. His English was very clear and he spoke in a curiously soft and gentle voice, though his keen old eyes seemed cold and unfriendly.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Kitty.

"This man here," said the old Medicine Man, waving his hand toward Kitty's captor, "is the warrior Two Feathers, of the Chiricahua Tribe. He claims you as booty of war. He and his party would like to have a young white squaw to amuse themselves with." Kitty shuddered at the thought. "Perhaps they are entitled to have you," the old man went on. "That is for Geronimo to decide. But I, too, have put in a claim for you, in the name of the whole Apache nation. My plans for you are quite different."

"What plans?" said Kitty.

The old man looked at her calmly for a moment. "You are young and strong," he said. "I could make big medicine with you. The Spirits would be very happy." He walked away.

Kitty waited, sunk in a mood of gloom and apathy. Sawyer's Bluff was gone. Never again

would she see her father — or Frank, or Jim, or Todd. Life as she had known it was over forever. In fact, she guessed, very soon she would be dead, one way or the other. All she had to hope for was that they would not give her to Two Feathers. She had no idea what the Medicine Man wanted with her, but anything would be better than to end up as the plaything of a band of drunken Braves, to be, no doubt, finally killed as casually as they would wring a chicken's neck.

Presently Geronimo arrived, a big fleshy Indian with a haughty, impassive countenance; he glanced at her indifferently. Two Feathers jumped to his feet and made a short angry speech in the Apache language, gesturing at the burning town and then at Kitty. Evidently he was demanding his rights. Geronimo listened without a change of expression, then motioned to his Medicine Man. The old man spoke a long, formal, ceremonial speech, pointing again and again to the earth, the sky, to Kitty, Geronimo, the burning town. When the old man was through Geronimo looked at Kitty again.

Bending over her, he began to feel her arms and legs. Then he turned her head toward him with one hand and gazed for a moment into her eyes. Finally, he faced the two claimants and gave a short, guttural answer. The Medicine Man smiled and bowed, but Two Feathers, looking sullen and disappointed turned on his heels and walked away, his Braves following.

The Medicine Man approached her. "The Great Chief has spoken," he said. "Tonight when the moon reaches the big tree on yonder hillside you will be sacrificed to the Spirits of the Apache Nation. It is a great honor, usually reserved for brave warriors. You should be very proud."

Kitty was untied, led away to a teepee on the edge of the camp. Two young warriors cut away her clothes, rubbed her hair and body with a fragrant oil, and dressed her in a costume of white beaded doeskin. Then they pointed to a bed of leaves on the floor of the teepee and indicated by gestures that she was to lie down and rest.

Through the open doorflap

of the teepee, Kitty could see the tall tree on the hill. As the day wore on, she kept staring at it in fascination. After a while, a party of braves made a clearing some two hundred yards away from her and began to build in it a peculiar-looking scaffold of wooden posts held together with leather thongs.

Once during the afternoon the Medicine Man visited her. He gave her a sweet-tasting concoction of herbs and water to drink and told her to rest and gather strength. "I, too, need great strength for what we have to do tonight," he said. "I have prayed to the Spirits to help me."

As darkness fell the tempo of the camp quickened. Hundreds of fires were lighted. Some of the Braves seemed to be organized into work parties, and bustled here and there about the camp shouting exhortations to each other. Others were sitting around their campfires combing their long hair and renewing their war paint. There was a kind of festive, holiday mood in the air. *In my honor*, thought Kitty bitterly.

She kept watching the tree on the hillside. At first there was no moon at all. Then the edge of the full moon began to peek over the hill. Then the moon was hanging in the sky, clear of the hill. Ever so slowly, and yet terribly fast, it began to creep toward the top of the tree. Kitty was staring at it as if hypnotized, oblivious of everything else.

Suddenly she noticed that all the warriors were on the move. Some of them had formed a large circle around the strange scaffold. Others were forming a long double row, reaching from the scaffold to the teepee where she was. She looked again at the moon. It had reached the tree!

A warrior stepped forward, motioning for her to come out. When she hesitated he pulled roughly out of the teepee and thrust her within the double row of Braves. The first man raised his hand. It held a leather quirt. He brought it down on her back with a vicious swish. She gasped from the pain and stumbled forward. The second man struck at her and she went forward again. Soon she was running, half-stumbling,

down the gantlet of Braves. Once she tripped and fell. Blows rained down upon her furiously. If she had not got to her feet again they would have killed her on the spot. Irresistably propelled, she staggered down though this corridor of lashes into the circle of the scaffold, where she fell face forward onto the ground.

The Medicine Man was waiting for her in the circle. He helped her to her feet. Then he removed her doeskin robe, which he held up to the audience. They roared their approval. The garment was bloody and in tatters.

"You have completed the first step of the ceremony," he said to Kitty. "Already the Spirits are pleased!" He nodded to two Braves who were standing beside the scaffold. They strapped her spread-eagled to the base of the scaffold. The Medicine Man came up to Kitty and said, "The Apache Spirits love two things above all: pain and bravery. You must suffer much pain and you must be very brave, that will make the spirits happy. Especially, you must not

cry out. I have something that will help you with that. Here." He held up a small ball of a gummy, yellowish substance and thrust it into her mouth. The stuff had an acrid, nauseating taste. Kitty tried to spit it out, but found she could not. Her tongue felt as if it were swelling up like a balloon. As the substance trickled down her throat, she felt as if she were choking on her own vocal cords. She tried to scream, but could not. Her throat was paralyzed! "See," said the Medicine Man, "I have made you very quiet."

Turning toward Geronimo, who was sitting in the place of honor, surrounded by his lesser Chiefs, the Medicine Man brandished a small knife. Geronimo nodded solemnly. The Medicine Man then bent over Kitty and began to skim the point of the knife over her body in a rapid, intricate, criss-crossing movement. There was scarcely any pain. It felt as if he were not even touching her, but looking down she could see the blood welling out from beneath the skin wherever the blade touched her. "I am tracing the patterns of pain," the old man said, "but they are not

yet manifest." He worked over her for quite a long time, covering every inch of her skin with his swirling knife. When he got through, he was sweaty and winded from the exertion.

An attendant Brave took the knife from him and gave him in its place a small gourd filled with liquid. Again he held this up to Geronimo and again Geronimo nodded. As he turned back to Kitty the audience began to mutter excitedly. "Now we shall see the patterns I have drawn," the Medicine Man said. Matter-of-factly, he began to paint Kitty with the liquid. At the first touch of it she stiffened in agony. It stung, burned, ate at her flesh like hellfire itself! As the old man continued to paint her skin with it, she tried to squirm away from him, but her bonds were drawn so tight she could scarcely move. Her protesting flesh was aflame with pain, searing waves of it raked over and through her! Unbelieving, she looked down at her body: where the old man had dabbed at her with his liquid each delicate trace of the knife had turned into a hideous festering

purple welt! Still the old man dabbed methodically away at her!

Finally the old man's job was finished. Standing dramatically aside, he indicated his completed handiwork to Geronimo and the assembled Braves. Again, they roared their approval. Kitty, immobilized, unable to cry out, her whole body a tracework of agony, wished only for death.

Now the Medicine Man took up a crude pair of iron pincers and one after the other began to pull out her toenails. Next the fingernails. Again he brought out his infernal liquid and applied it lovingly to each digit. The pain of this was so atrocious to Kitty that she felt her body fading away; all that was left was the hurt of her hands and feet, stabbing, stabbing!

The medicine man motioned to Geronimo. The great chief stood up and came to Kitty. He looked long and searchingly into her eyes, then nodded and grunted approvingly. One by one the lesser chiefs came and looked into her eyes also.

"The Chiefs are most pleased," the old man said to

her in his soft little voice. "The Spirits also are pleased. There has been much pain tonight. Much and excellent pain! You wish now for death, is that not right?" Kitty gazed dully back at him. "Well, you shall have it. It is a slow death, but it is death nonetheless."

She was cut down from the scaffold. The attendants brought great quantities of wet leather thongs and wound them tightly about her body like a shroud. Then she was hoisted high above the ground, and a small fire built beneath her.

The assembled Braves began the death chant. Hour by hour, as the fire below dried out the wet leather that enfolded her, her bonds grew tighter, little by little suffocating and squeezing the life out of her. As the bright sun dawned upon her, her life was almost gone, but she still had enough of it left to blink against the sun.

Dreamlike, blurred figures moved below her in the dust as she swayed gently in her leather cocoon — scarcely able to breathe.

Had she been conscious of anything in the euphoric limbo

into which she slid before the blessed release of death came to her, she would have been able to look down upon the proud face of the great chief Geronimo, tall and erect on his pony . . .

He was listening to the medicine man who told him: "The Spirits have spoken to me through the silence of this pale-skin. They say that your plan to surrender to the Longknives would be folly — that you must fight on, that certain victory is ours!"

Geronimo heard the words. He saw the hope and the angry fire flicker deep in the dark eyes of his mounted warriors as they waited respectfully on his final word.

Surrender or victory? asked the eyes of the braves. The Spirits had spoken. It was now for Geronimo to say.

He pondered — his eyes rising involuntarily to rest on the face of the fragile body swinging over his head — that face which was beyond all decision, beyond all pain.

Then he decided.

"To battle!" he shouted.

A wild whoop went up among the warriors. Geronimo's pony reared, startled at the sudden sound. Then, with the great Chief's heels spurring him on, he galloped across the barren dust flat — to die at the head of the last great Indian army.

THE END

HIS MAJESTY -- THE FIEND!

by Alex Burn

*Louis the Cruel granted the proud Marguerite a
reprieve more horrible than Death itself!*

"How much longer am I to be kept waiting like this?" demanded Marguerite de Montambert impatiently.

Though dog-tired, she had been pacing furiously up and down for the past half-hour, her pretty face a mask of icy contempt, her snowy bosom heaving with anger. Mere fatigue was as nothing to the sense of outrage that she felt. Imagine, she, Marguerite, in whose viens flowed the noblest blood in all France, the blood of Burgundy, the blood of Charlemagne himself — abducted like a common serving-

girl! Taken from her ancestral forests by a band of the King's rabble; hustled at a gallop through half a province; shut up like a felon in a dingy candlelit basement chamber!

"How much longer!" she repeated.

Maupin, her chief captor, looked at her for a moment, his face enigmatic in the flickering candlelight. "Patience, Milady," he said, finally. "We are at the King's pleasure."

"And is it the King's pleasure," she asked, "that I should appear before him filthy and in tatters? Can I not at least

have a maid to bathe me and sew up the rents in my clothing?"

Maupin permitted himself a sardonic little smile. "Milady will find," he said, "that His Majesty is not at all particular in matters of clothing and appearance."

"So I have heard," said Marguerite. She in turn almost smiled. From earliest childhood she had been brought up to feel that she, along with her brother the Baron of Montambert and her cousin the Duke of Burgundy, was superior in birth and breeding to that ugly misbegotten little changeling of the House of Valois, Louis XIth, known as The Cruel. Louis the Cruel, indeed! Louis the Clown was what they called him in her family, Louis the Jester, Louis the Mountebank. It was ridiculous that such an insignificant little man should be attempting to claim absolute domination over all the great Nobles of France, to assert that he and not they should govern their fiefs, their duchies and baronies.

At this moment an ancient bedraggled halbardier en-

tered the room. Holding his weapon perfunctorily at attention he announced in a snuffling voice, "His Majesty, The King!"

In spite of herself Marguerite felt a twinge of awe and alarm.

Between two valets with flambeaux, Louis entered the room. On seeing him, Marguerite began to relax. He was insignificant! A scrawny little man, toothless, with a beak-like nose and little bird-like eyes, his clumsily-shaved chin dotted with straggling hairs, dressed in drab homespun, on his head a greasy cap festooned with religious medals. He looked like nothing so much as a half-plucked chicken! Marguerite almost laughed as she made him a formal curtsy.

"Ah, you do that very prettily," said Louis in a rasping falsetto voice. "Very pretty and graceful you are, my dear!" Another valet had brought in the King's chair, upon which Louis now seated himself. "And now, there is one other thing you can do for me, and then we will be friends altogether," the King went on.

"And what is that, Sire?"

"Why, just kneel yourself down for a bit." Louis laughed a dry little cackling laugh.

"You want me to kneel before you?" Marguerite's nostrils flared with anger as she stared at the little monarch.

"Yes, my little dumpling. Just bend one pretty knee, that's all."

"Sire," said Marguerite, controlling her temper with an effort, "I am of a great and noble family. We Montamberts owe you allegiance as the King of France, yes, but we will never kneel before you like vassals, never!"

"Not even just once, to please a poor old man?" said Louis cajolingly.

"I said never!"

"Ah well, never mind," said Louis, with a dismissing wave of his hand. "Stuff and formality! We don't care too much about that nonsense here. Besides, you may change your mind yet. That isn't what I brought you here for anyway."

"Yes," said Marguerite coldly, "perhaps Your Majesty would deign to inform me why I had to be kidnapped in such an outrageous manner. Did you know that your band of ruf-

fians killed two of my men and manhandled me and my ladies-in-waiting like so much baggage?"

"What!" exclaimed Louis in mock horror. "Maupin, did you hear that? You are guilty of impolite conduct toward a member of the nobility, you villain!"

Maupin made a deep bow.

"Remind me to have you suitably punished," Louis went on, "some day very soon."

Maupin bowed again, smiling.

"I suppose you brought me here to be held for ransom," Marguerite ventured.

"Ransom! Tut-tut, how uncivilized!" said Louis.

"I'm sure my brother will pay whatever you demand," she went on.

"Imagine that, Maupin," said Louis. "She thinks she's being held for ransom." Maupin smiled at his master. "No, no, my dear. We don't do that sort of thing. In fact we are against it. We don't want all these ransomings and petty bickerings going back and forth in our kingdom. We are tired of all that. We want to have a nice, orderly kingdom with one

ruler, not a country with a bunch of little dukes and counts and barons quarelling with each other and with us. We want to put an end to all of that nonsense. That is why you are here. I have been worrying about you."

"Worrying, Sire?"

"Why yes, my sweet. Here you are a fine healthy girl of nineteen and still unmarried. I think it is high time you had a husband, and I have decided to choose one for you.

"My brother is perfectly capable of arranging a marriage for me, Sire, and in any case I cannot be married without his consent," said Marguerite coldly. "I am afraid Your Majesty has been to a lot of trouble for nothing."

"Bosh, your brother is an impetuous young fool, incapable of deciding anything properly. And besides, your marriage is a matter which affects the Crown."

"Why so? Am I that important? asked Marguerite.

"Certainly. You forget that any son of yours might easily become Baron of Montambert one day, and Duke of Burgundy besides."

"But that is absurd," said Marguerite. "My brother is to be married soon, and the Duke already has an heir.

"But suppose, God forbid, that something should happen to your brother before his marriage," said Louis in his rasping little voice.

"And one hears," interposed Maupin, "that the Duke's son is sickly and may not live long."

Marguerite stood there aghast. The full fiendishness of the King's plan was apparent. If she were to marry an adherent of the King and have a son by him, and if some 'accident', no doubt arranged by the villainous Maupin, eliminated the other heirs, then Montambert and Burgundy both would fall to the Crown, without a struggle. Her brother and the Duke must be warned! And above all, she must resist this marriage, no matter what sinister pressures — and she could feel them in the air — were brought to bear.

"You are wasting your time, Your Majesty," she said. "I will never agree to such a marriage."

"Tut-tut," said Louis. "You

will change your mind when you see the fine, strapping, lusty young bridegroom I have picked out for you."

Marguerite said nothing.

"We'll see about that in the morning," said Louis. "Meanwhile, Maupin, see that Mademoiselle de Montambert gets a good night's rest, and provide her with raiment suitable for a bride-to-be. And Maupin —"

"Sire?"

"Before she retires, Mademoiselle de Montambert might like to go on a tour of my little 'curiosities'."

Maupin bowed to his master. The little monarch departed with his retinue.

Maupin led Marguerite through a maze of corridors and finally down a long narrow flight of steps which seemed to penetrate the very bowels of the castle. At the end of the steps was a small iron door upon which Maupin knocked.

"I suppose we are going to see the 'curiosities' the King spoke of," said Marguerite.

"That is correct, Milady. I am sure after you have seen them you will have a much

better understanding of His Majesty and will also understand that it is better to obey than to oppose him."

The door swung open. They were in a dimly-lit, low-ceilinged passageway with iron-barred doorways opening off of it. Inside the first chamber were two men, slumped in chains from the wall. Their clothing was in shreds, and their bodies showed the scars of many beatings. One of the men appeared to be asleep, but the other's eyes were open, and he gave them a look of profound despair; his hands were hideously broken and twisted.

Marguerite shuddered. "Who are they? she asked.

"Oh, just a couple of petty nobles who refused to cede their lands to the King," said Maupin carelessly. "Hardly worth bothering with. Come, there are much better sights to be seen."

In the next room, stretched on a rack, was the most powerfully-built man Marguerite had ever seen, Stark naked, his hairy body was glistening with sweat. The tendons of his arms and legs were pulled almost to

the popping point. On his chest and belly were dozens of ugly, puffy scars."

"See," said Maupin, "the red-hot pincers left these marks. This is Pierre le Fort, of Brittany, reputed to be the strongest man in all France. He still thinks his will is stronger than that of the King, don't you, Pierre?"

Pierre returned a look of intense hatred.

"Hmm," mused Maupin, "don't tell me he is getting weaker. His Majesty would be most displeased if he died before tomorrow's session." He snapped his finger at an attendant, "Water! Not too much, about half a cupful." He took the water and poured it delicately between Pierre's clenched teeth. Suddenly Pierre raised his massive head and spat the water directly at Maupin. Maupin laughed. "That's the spirit," he said. "That's my Pierre, You'll be in fine shape for the sport tomorrow."

Marguerite felt herself becoming faint from horror and revulsion. Maupin took one of her arms to steady her. "Enough of that ugly one," he said. "Come! Now we will see

the chief exhibit. These are his Majesty's special pets." He led her into a chamber in which, hanging from the ceiling, were a number of peculiar contraptions which looked like oversized birdcages. In each of these was a human figure, though the expression on the faces, Marguerite saw as she drew closer, was anything but human.

"Ingenious, is it not?" said Maupin. "These cages are His Majesty's own invention. Too low to stand up in, too narrow to sit down in. You pop your man in, and there he stays forever."

"Forever!" exclaimed Marguerite, shocked.

"Yes, that is to say to the life of each one and of his natural span. We do not mistreat them, oh no! This one," he said, pointing "has been with us eleven years, this one nine, this one four, and this one," he set a cage to swinging wildly with one slap of his hand, "is the baby of the family; he has been here only a year and a half."

The creature in the cage slavered and made whimpering noises at them.

"There, there, poor chap," said Maupin. "He's hungry, I expect."

"Don't you feed them?"

"Why, certainly. His Majesty likes to feed them with his own hand. And he is quite generous — sometimes he gives them a biscuit, sometimes a crust of bread, sometimes a bone to gnaw on. Think of it, Marquis," he said to the wretch, "a whole bone, all to yourself!"

"Take me out of here," said Marguerite, "I can't stand this any longer."

She was so weak suddenly that Maupin had to half carry her out of the torture dungeons and up the narrow staircase.

"I'll never forget those sights as long as I live," she said when they were safely out of there. "Those poor devils! Why could you not kill them outright and have done with it?"

"What," exclaimed Maupin mockingly, "kill a noble of France? Why, His Majesty would never do such a thing!"

"He is doing far worse," said Marguerite. "From what I have seen down there, he is blas-

pheming against God and His creatures."

She felt Maupin stiffen.

"Don't you dare accuse the King of blasphemy," he warned in a suddenly serious voice. "He is a great and saintly man, extremely devout. His time is spent in prayer, good works, and the unification of his kingdom. The only diversion he gets is down there in those dungeons."

"He has no right to those diversions," Marguerite insisted. "If you ask me, your precious Louis is a monster!"

"He is the King, and has a divine right to do whatever he chooses," said Maupin, almost hissing his words, and glaring at Marguerite with a look of fanatical hatred. "I do not wish to continue this discussion, Milady." He conducted Marguerite to her chambers in icy silence.

Somewhat to her surprise, Marguerite found that a pleasant and spacious apartment had been assigned to her. A deferential young maid served her an excellent meal before a roaring fire and then bathed her in scented water and dressed her in a costly silken

night shift. She chatted casually with the girl for a while, discovering that she was a simple and quite friendly peasant. Cecile by name.

"How would you like to have a farm of your own, Cecile?" she asked. "Ten acres of the choicest land, freehold, and a fortune in gold for your dowry, and your pick of the handsomest young men for your husband?"

The girl's eyes widened in astonishment. "Milady must be joking. That's not for the likes of me."

"There is a way for you to get all that, and more," Marguerite insisted. "Take one little message for me to my cousin the Duke of Burgundy, and your future is assured."

A look of terror came over the girl's face. "Oh, no, Milady," she said in an agonized whisper, "I couldn't do that! Maupin is a devil, and his spies are everywhere. If I set even one foot outside of the castle he'd clap me in the dungeon, and they say that no one comes back from there. Believe me, Milady, I'm sorry for you, but I can't do it!" The girl was

trembling.

"Very well," said Marguerite. "We'll talk no more about it." She dismissed the girl.

She investigated the apartment. The door to the corridor was unlocked, but two guards were on duty outside. The only other escape was a window from which there was a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more, and the grounds below were patrolled. She was imprisoned as surely as if she were in one of the dungeon cells below.

So be it. She would keep trying to warn her brother and the Duke. She would escape if she got the chance. But above all she would never, never make this marriage, even if it meant she were to be tortured like those poor wretches Maupin had shown her. She would be as strong as Pierre le Fort, if need be, and spit her contempt in the very face of the King himself!

Desperately tired by now, Marguerite went to bed and fell instantly asleep.

In the morning the girl Cecile brought breakfast and then dressed her in a sumptuous gown of velvet and lace and combed and coiffed her hair.

Soon after this Maupin arrived to escort her to the King. "I see Milady has made herself pretty for her new husband," he said in his usual ironic way. But his face was hard and set. Clearly he hated her for having insulted his master the night before.

Louis was sitting in a small, sunny private parlor, looking quite jovial. Only one other person was in the room, a young courtier in an elegant hunting costume, whose back was to them as he gazed out of a window.

"Well, good morning, my dear," said Louis, rubbing his hands together. "You look the very picture of a blushing bride. And now, here is your intended husband, whom I'm sure you're eager to meet — Alaric — Vicomte de Fresneaux. Alaric, come meet your bride!" he called to the man in the window. The man did not move.

Louis motioned to Maupin, who took the courtier by the arm and turned him around. Marguerite gasped as she saw his face. He had the vacant, rolling eyes, the slack and gaping jaw of the idiot.

"Well, Alaric, how do you like her," said Louis. "Is she not pretty?"

The idiot stared incomprehendingly at Marguerite for a moment, then broke into a loutish grin. "Ah-ah-ah, pretty!" he gaped, and reached for her with clumsy hands.

"No, no, don't touch," said Maupin, restraining him. "Not yet!"

"Is he not a fine figure of a husband?" said Louis to Marguerite. "And well-born, too. He is by way of being a cousin of mine."

"Surely, Your Majesty must be joking," exclaimed Marguerite. "You expect me to consent to a marriage with this — this *creature*?"

"Yes, precisely," said Louis. "Let's send for a priest, shall we, and have the wedding right now."

"I would advise Your Majesty to put an end to this farce and send me back to my brother's castle," said Marguerite. "Else the whole House of Burgundy will rise against you in vengeance."

"Be careful of what you are saying," growled Maupin. "Those are treasonable words

to use to the King."

"A fig for your House of Burgundy," snapped Louis. "They will be dealt with in good time. Answer my question, wench, I am growing impatient. Wilt thou have this man for tthine husband, yea or nay?"

"Nay!" shouted Marguerite angrily. "Thy wits must be disordered, Louis of Valois, to suppose otherwise!"

"What!" cried Louis, stamping his foot in rage. "You dare speak to me in that manner? Away with her!"

Maupin seized her, twisting her wrists brutally behind her back, and dragged her from the room. "Now, Milady," he snarled in her ear, "you will truly taste the wrath of the King!"

She was taken by two men-at-arms to the dungeons, stripped of her costly gown. Her jailers thust her — half-naked, barefoot, and with her arms tied together with cruel tightness — into a cell. The door slammed shut on her with an ominous clang.

At first it was too dark to see, but as her eyes became accustomed to the gloom Marguerite was able to make out

her surroundings. The rough stone walls were slimy with the dampness of centuries. On one of them was a freshly-scratched inscription: "Tonight I shall surely die. Pray for me in my hour of despair! Philipe de —" The poor devil had been dragged away before he could finish writing his name! Underfoot the floor was cold, clammy. Strange repulsive slugs of a sort she had never seen before crawled slowly about, leaving a trail of ooze behind them. A pall of silence seemed to hang over everything, though once in a while one could hear voices — moans of pain, shouts of defiance from the prisoners, coarse, matter-of-fact conversation between the guards. Once a rat came into the cell, its whiskers twitching inquisitively. Marguerite sent it scurrying with a stamp of her foot . . .

As the hours dragged by she gradually lost her sense of time. Had she been here four hours, eight, ten? She could not tell. She was shivering from the cold. Overcoming her squeamishness, she had seated herself on the floor, hugging her knees

in an effort to keep warm. Occasionally that same rat — or was it a different one each time? — came back. He seemed to be getting bolder, harder to chase away . . .

Suddenly, there was a clamor of voices, a rushing to and fro of footsteps, an opening and closing of doors. Torches flickered past her cell door. Marguerite's heart began to beat faster. This was it! *Let me be brave*, she told herself. *Let me be strong*. But unaccountably the tumult died down and again there was silence. Once she heard a high-pitched scream, someone crying out in agony. Then nothing. She slumped lower on the floor, waiting, waiting, sunk almost into apathy.

Then there was the sound of a door opening, and Maupin's voice rang out abruptly:

"Bring in the Montambert woman!"

Footsteps approached, the door to her cell was flung open. A huge guard entered, lifted her up like a sack of meal, then set her back on her feet again. "What's the matter with me!" he said with a chuckle. "I was forgetting you haven't been

worked over yet; you can go under your own power. Come along, Missy!"

In a large torchlit chamber sat King Louis, Maupin at his side. The room was cluttered with abominable-looking contrivances, some small, some big, but all of them designed for only one purpose — torture! In the midst of these, wearing the traditional black leather hood and iron-clawed gantlets, stood an ominous figure, the Questioner.

"Marguerite de Montambert," said Maupin, "you are guilty of false, slanderous, and seditious utterances against the Crown. For this you shall be punished! You are guilty of disloyalty, rebelliousness, and refusal to acknowledge the absolute authority of your Monarch. For this you shall be punished! And finally you are guilty of wantonly and brazenly refusing to carry out the express wishes of His Majesty in defiance of both your own best interests and those of the Crown. For this you will be *triple* punished, and I warn you that unless you accede to His Majesty's desires your life itself is forfeit!"

"Well put, Maupin," rasped Louis, "most well and eloquently put! Let the chastisement begin. By and by, if she is well and truly repentant, and promises to be docile in the future, I may find it in my heart to forgive her."

Marguerite glared sullen defiance at the King.

"What is Your Majesty's pleasure?" said Maupin. "Shall it be the rack, the thumbscrews, the pincers — name it, Sire!"

Louis' amused and eager eyes looked her up and down for a moment. "Why, she's a bonny little thing," he said, "most lithe and agreeably formed. Why don't you show her some of your artistry with the lash."

Marguerite was stripped of her shift and bound by the wrists, arms outstretched, to a pillory. Maupin took a long slender black whip from a hook on the wall and stood before her holding it lightly, as graceful and poised as a dancing-master. *You devils*, thought Marguerite, *I'll not cry out, not once.*

"Go ahead, Maupin," said Louis. "Caress her a little!"

Maupin lifted the whip. Mar-

guerite closed her eyes and waited for the blow. There was a swish of the whip, but she felt nothing. Another. Still she felt nothing. She opened her eyes in time to see the whip come at her again. Still he did not hit her. Maupin was teasing her, a mocking smile on his lips. A dozen times the whip licked at her, as delicately as a snake's tongue. Then at last it touched her on one flank, ever so lightly; there was no pain, just a sharp biting feeling. Maupin aimed the whip at her again, to the other side of her. Instinctively, she twisted her body, trying to dodge the blow; the whip brushed her glancingly. Again a lash, again she dodged, again the scarcely painful, flicking contact. But surely, this was a joke, the man was not hurting her at all! As stroke after stroke came whistling at her, Marguerite tried not to flinch, not to dodge. But the instincts are stronger than the will and she found herself wincing away involuntarily. Finally, she made a supreme effort of the will and forced herself to stand stockstill. The whip-tip slapped at her belly with a searing impact that

burned like fire and sent her hurtling as far away as her bonds would let her go. Then the comedy began again. Flick to one side, flick to the other side, while her outraged body squirmed this way and that but never far enough to elude the lash altogether.

How long could this go on?

Marguerite felt herself almost swooning, but another sharp, painful lash brought her back to awareness. Again the teasing. It felt now as if it had been going on forever. This was horrible, unendurable somehow. *If only he would beat me, she found herself thinking, I would rather be beaten than teased like this!*

Abruptly Maupin stopped. "Well," he said, "that is enough for the first act. Did your Majesty enjoy the performance?"

"Splendid, you were magnificent, Maupin! You too, Mademoiselle!" cackled the little King. "Let her rest a trifle, and then let's have another go at it."

An attendant brought her a drink of water. Instead of spitting it out, as Pierre le Fort

had done, she drank it gratefully. Exhausted, she slumped against her bonds.

"And now we begin again," Maupin announced. The whip flicked at her, but this time at her ankles. He was making her lift her feet, one after the other. Again, it seemed simple, painless, absurd. But after a few minutes it was unendurable. She lifted both feet from the ground and swung by her hands. *Flick!* The whip seared her with a harsh, raking pain. Then it was her shoulders. On and on it went. A furious overwhelming anger was welling up in her. "Why don't you beat me and get it over with, you hell-carrier," she shouted. "Beat me! BEAT ME!"

Maupin stopped and looked at his master. "Milady wishes to be beaten," he said. "Is that in accordance with Your Majesty's wishes?"

"Only if she kneels to me in repentance and agrees to the marriage I have chosen for her," said Louis.

"No!" cried Marguerite.

Again the teasing lash, again the squirming. Suddenly it was as if there were two Margue-

rites. One of them was still defiant, the other was blubbering through her tears, "Yes, yes, I'll kneel to the King, I'll marry his cousin, anything, but stop, STOP!" Then the other Marguerite's bonds were loosed, and she fell on her knees, kissing the King's feet.

With a shock, Marguerite realized that the other Marguerite was she, that she was this crazed woman. *She was on her knees, begging the King's pardon!*

"Well," said Louis, "I'm glad you've come to your senses, my dear. You shall have your husband, and you shall have your other wish, as well."

"Why, what is that?" asked Marguerite dazedly.

"To be beaten, of course!"

Marguerite was dragged back to the pillory. But this time instead of Maupin she was faced by the Questioner. An oddly clumsy figure, he was holding not the slim delicate whip, but a short, ugly knotted affair. He raised awkwardly, and brought it down.

Whap! To Marguerite, on whose nervous system were engraved the delicate traceries of Maupin, the blow, delivered

with all the strength of a coarsely brutal arm, was an unutterable shock. It knocked the wind out of her, left her feeling as if all her bones were broken, half the flesh flayed from her body!

The Questioner raised his weapon again. He seemed oddly eager at his work, and as he brought the whip down again he grunted strangely under his mask. The second blow was worse than the first. The shock of it echoed and re-echoed through her body as if there had been dozens of blows, not one — like the reverberations of a thunderclap, wave after wave of pain. Her field of vision became rosy, as if blood were in her eyes, though he had not touched her head.

Again the Questioner raised his whip, brought it down with yet another grunt. As her shattered nerves seemed to explode, Marguerite lost consciousness . . .

When she came to, she was lying on the bed in the chamber where she had slept on her first night in the castle. She had been dressed in a wedding gown. The maid Cecile was

bathing her temples with water.

The King and his retinue were in the room, along with Maupin and Alaric, the idiot nephew. An elderly priest was there, too, looking somewhat ashamed of what he was about to do.

"Ah, good, she wakes," said the King. "Splendid! Let us have the ceremony at once!"

Cecile and Maupin assisted her to her feet. Alaric was placed at her side. The old priest mumbled the wedding invocations over them.

It was done!

Louis appeared to be overjoyed. He did a little capering dance, rubbing his hands together, and insisted on giving both of them a royal and cousinly embrace.

"I have one little last disappointment for you, I'm afraid, my dear," he said to Marguerite.

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Well, I know you are eager to begin your wedding night with your groom," he said. "You must be exhausted, poor child, after all our long 'preparations'. But you cannot have your Alaric just yet. I have

need of him for a while. I'll send him to you before the night is out."

"There is no need to hurry, Sire," replied Marguerite bitterly.

The royal party left the room. Cecile helped her undress for the night, then asked if there was anything else she required.

"No, you may go," said Marguerite.

"I would like to tell you, Milady," said the girl, tears brimming in her eyes, "that I am sorry I was unable to help you yesterday. And that I pity you worse than I can ever say."

"Don't blame yourself, Cecile," said Marguerite. "It is my own fault. I gave in, despite myself, that's true, but I gave in. I must make the best of it."

Cecile gave her a look of profound commiseration. "Believe me, Milady, I'm sorry," she said again.

"Don't worry about it Cecile," said Marguerite sharply. "Good night!"

Marguerite lay down for sleep. If she thought of her husband at all, it was fleetingly, and with disgust. Just be-

fore she fell asleep she was pondering how to get word to her brother of what had happened to her.

She awoke to a great pounding on her door. "Who is it?" she asked.

"It is I, Maupin! I bring you your bridegroom!"

"Well come in, then," she said. Maupin entered, followed by another person. "I must say, you are making a big hullabaloo about it —" she started to say. Then she saw who it was that Maupin had brought. The black hood, the iron gantlets. . .

"That is not my husband,

that is the Questioner!" she exclaimed.

"Ah, but you are wrong, Milady, it *is* your husband!" Maupin tore the black hood from the Questioner's head, exposing the face of Alaric, Vicomte of Fresneaux! Then he turned on his heels and left the room.

As her husband, his dull eyes blazing with brutish lust, his cruel hands outstretched, came panting toward her, Marguerite gave a shriek of pure horror, the shriek of a soul damned to a lifetime of terror!

THE END

THE PURIFYING LASH

by Emily Bond

What unspeakable diabolism lurked behind the compassionate eyes of the 'kind' stranger who rescued her from the sordid London alleys?

Half-past twelve was striking as Janet Grey pulled her skirts up and stepped into the swirling fog-filled street. She remembered that there used to be a certain pleasure in a solitary walk through London in the early morning hours. She had appreciated the solitude and mystery of the sleeping city. But now the pleasure ebbed before the knowledge that it was necessary for her to be abroad at that hour. The romance of the dark hours died before necessity.

Even the most commonplace thoroughfare came alive with an aroma of mystery after the traffic had stopped and Janet shivered involuntarily. She

dreaded the echoing, empty streets because she knew much of the strange things that night must shroud in any city. The solitude of London held no fascination for her tonight.

Her steps echoed as she turned and headed toward Hyde Park Corner. Gaslights flickered and threw menacing shadows. Through the fog she heard the occasional clatter of horses' hooves on the cobblestones as a carriage passed. Many of the houses she walked by were unoccupied and a slight breeze set the house agents' notice boards creaking above her.

She heard a carriage clattering toward her. She stopped

walking and waited for it to come close enough for her to see who might be inside. She slumped. And the smile she had summoned faded. It was a couple, and a couple was of no use to her.

Suddenly a figure emerged from the fog and came toward her. His feet had made so little sound that she hadn't been aware of him until he was almost on her.

"Oh, Sir, it's such a bone-chilling night, wouldn't you buy a poor girl a hot drink?"

She hated him because she had to say those words. She hated all the men she'd said it to in the past and it was all she could do to muster a cajoling smile.

He was tall and not bad looking which was something of a relief. In fact, as she looked closer she began to feel she had made a mistake in approaching him. His eyes were so intense and his face had an almost saint-like quality that made her shrink from him in shame.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I guess I've made a mistake. Please excuse me."

The man looked down at the

confused girl, and thought how pretty she would be without the heavy makeup and that hideously cheap dress. Her dark hair made a lovely frame for the heart shaped face. He hastened to reassure her.

"Excuse *you*. There's nothing to excuse you for. Obviously I've made you ill at ease so it's I who must ask you to forgive me" he said.

With that he took her firmly by the arm and drawing his black cloak about her moved on into the fog.

Her steps dragged and she held back. It had been such a long time since any man had spoken kindly to her. She was unsettled by it. In the past she'd always been able to slip on a mask of cold indifference. But kindness was something that she had no knowledge of.

The man stopped and released her arm.

"Look," he said, "I have an idea what you expected from me, but you'll discover that you are completely wrong. First, I want you to tell me everything about yourself and I'll see whether I can't do something to help you. I can't believe that you chose this life voluntarily

or that you want to continue it if there is another opened to you. My name is Charles Jason, please look upon me as a friend."

Janet almost swooned from the sheer unexpectedness of this speech and would have stumbled if Charles hadn't steadied her by taking her arm once again.

"It will be hard to find a decent place still open, but perhaps a pub will have something that you'd please you as we talk."

He was walking along at a brisk pace and Janet had to hurry to keep up. There was a fog in her brain that swirled as dizzily as the fog they walked through and part of her asked questions she couldn't find answers to. Finally she silenced the questions with the simple words, "Why not?" Why not go with this man? She had gone with many others. And even if she didn't know what to expect, had knowing been any help in the past? Her luck was due for a change. Maybe the strong, considerate Charles Jason was the messenger to bring it to her.

She could make out the dim gaslights of a pub. Charles stopped and led her down the steps and into the warmth. There were very few customers and Janet was vaguely disappointed. She wished there had been a lot of people to see her with so fine a gentleman — one who was looking out for her and even holding her arm.

They took a secluded table. Charles helped her off with her coat. She laughed softly. What a different evening she had expected when she had started out tonight — she had forgotten how lovely life could be. So there were some pleasant surprises in the world for Janet Grey.

"What has caused you to laugh? Even though I can tell it's a contented sound I'd like to know what is responsible."

"You were right about the contentment. It was just a reaction to a very happy situation which you are responsible for."

His eyes stared into hers for a moment and then the barmaid's voice interrupted.

"Oh, yes. What would you like . . . Do you realize that I don't know your name?"

"My name was Janet Grey, but I don't feel like her anymore. Please order for me."

After she had eaten, Janet settled back and let relaxation seep through her being. Charles hadn't taken his hypnotic eyes from her once. There was a feeling of waiting in the air.

"I know all men ask this question, but please tell me the truth so that I may really know you. What made you embark on this life?"

Janet sighed. She had never told anyone the true story before. She didn't like to remember it.

"My father died when I was 15. Mother married again very soon and my stepfather was a fanatic monster. He thought all girls were evil and . . ." She shuddered.

"Go on, I can see you are telling the truth."

"Every night I would lie in bed trembling because I never knew whether he would come that night and punish me for some evil he thought I'd done. Oh, I don't think I was worse than any other child, but my mother was afraid to protect me and I just lay there and

shivered until he had gone to bed or else come to my room."

"What did he do in your room?"

"He would tell me how evil I'd been that day and he'd stare at me with his terrible eyes until I crouched as far away from him as I could and then he'd grab me. He always had his belt ready and he'd throw me over his lap and beat me until I couldn't stand it. I'd try not to scream, because that made him wild, but finally I'd give up and scream . . . scream . . . scream. One day I ran away and since I didn't have any money, oh well, you know the rest. Sometimes the only thing that kept me going was knowing that if my stepfather had expected that I'd turn out badly, I was going to be as bad as I could be, just because it would have made him so angry."

An expression of profound sorrow crossed Charles' face and his voice was low.

"Come on Janet. It's late and you must be very tired. You can stay at my house. I want to show you where I live."

As they stepped back out into the fog a carriage came by

and Charles hailed it.

"It's too far to walk. Get in and rest. I'll let you know when we arrive."

Janet watched the vague shapes of buildings in the fog and thought how nice it was to be drawn through the shadowy murk in a warm carriage and then she dozed off.

Charles shook her gently and she stepped out of the carriage in a section that was wholly unfamiliar to her. The carriage drove off and she looked about her. There was only one building surrounded by a vast emptiness. The building was a large, gray stone structure that looked very old and forbidding.

"Is that your house?"

"Yes, come inside. I want you to see all of it. It has many things you will find interesting."

As they came to the heavy front door it opened and a powerfully built young man stepped aside and bowed slightly.

"John, this is Janet. She will be our guest."

Janet watched as John closed the door and then walked down the hall and dis-

appeared.

"We'll start with the top floors and I'll give you a quick tour before you rest."

It was the strangest house Janet had ever been in. There were so many rooms that she stopped trying to keep track of them, and was really getting quite weary when Charles showed her into his study. There were hundreds of books and a large desk. Standing alertly next to the desk was an immense dog. He didn't make any sound, but seemed to await a signal from his master.

"It's all right," said Charles, and the huge beast relaxed and lay down.

"Why do you have all these books?" Janet asked as she looked about the room.

"I am very interested in the darker side of all men. I wish to discover how some are able to overcome their evil demons and why others are too weak to be anything but slaves to them."

"But aren't people what they are?"

"I can see you have much to learn. I myself am gathering material on this subject. I think

you will be a very valuable helper for my project."

"I would be glad to help you, you know that, but I don't see how I could be of any value in something which I am so ignorant about."

"You won't be ignorant any more after I've begun to teach you."

"Charles, I'm sorry but I'm so very tired. Would you mind if I was shown to my room now?"

"There is only one more room to show you and then you will have seen the whole fortress."

"It is like a fortress. Aren't you lonely living in such a desolate spot in this great forbidding mansion?"

"I wouldn't be at home anywhere else. This has been the home of my family for generations. I am the last of our line, but it will be where I spend the rest of my days."

Charles led her to the rear of a long hall and started down some winding stone stairs.

"Be very careful," he warned. "I wouldn't want you to fall."

Suddenly there was a door and Charles opened it and stepped aside. Janet kept her

eyes on the stairs so she wouldn't miss a step and as she entered the room the door creaked shut behind her. She looked up and then she fainted.

As she came up out of blackness her thoughts refused to form. She opened her eyes and saw it was all too real. She was in a dank cellar, lying on a stone table. Chained to the wall were three other girls staring at her with frightened, pitying eyes. The chains dug into their flesh and one had a collar of metal which kept her head in a rigid position. Their bodies were marked and bruised and they hung limply and hopelessly. Janet heard someone whimper and realized with horror it was herself. She couldn't see the whole room, but she thought she was alone with the girls.

"Why," she asked them. "What is this place, why are we here?"

One of the tortured creatures on the wall whispered, "We'll never get out of here. He'll keep us here until our bodies break or the evil in us leaves our bodies. If only I knew what he wanted I'd do anything to

stop the pain, but he says he only wants to free our spirits from the evil that possesses us. Either he is mad, or we are, I don't know which anymore."

Suddenly the door opened and Charles and John entered.

"Have you met your sisters-under-the-skin?" he said in a cold voice.

"They had much evil in them, too, when I brought them to my house. I find they are getting less evil every month. I have great hopes that in time they will be free of the dark spirits that have possessed them."

"Why have you brought me here? You seemed so gentle . . . You seemed to understand."

"And I do understand. That's why I chose you. To help you by finishing the job that your stepfather started and which you ran away from before it had done you any good. Young girls never know what's best for them. Perhaps he could have cured you if you had stayed. Now the job is mine and I will see what I can do. I only hope it isn't too late."

Charles reached down and loosened the leather thongs that

bound her to the table.

"I want to make sure you will be able to watch Rita's lesson. Then I want you to tell me exactly what you felt as you watched. If I don't feel you understood, or if you can't find the words to explain your feelings, in a satisfactory manner, I am going to begin your lessons tonight."

Janet watched in dumb horror as the girl in the neck collar was lowered to the ground. She was moaning and pleading as John picked her up in his arms and carried her to a ladder-like rack where Charles waited. As Janet watched, Charles raised his arm and she saw he held a strong leather whip. John chained the girl spread eagle on the rack, and Charles saluted Janet and smiled.

"This should do a better job than your stepfather's belt," he said. And then he began.

The girl began to scream before the first caress of the lash, and the screams grew and grew until Janet could not remember ever having heard any other sound. The other girls were moaning and Janet couldn't

bear to watch the straining girl on the rack or the mutilated bodies of the others chained to the wall.

At last the whip stopped and the bleeding body was taken from the rack and taken back to the wall, and the neck chain.

A cold sweat of fear bathed Janet and she could not bear to open her eyes.

Charles' voice came crisp and clear.

"I see you chose not to benefit from the lesson. If you had watched and learned it would have been a good sign, but I see that you will need many, many lessons which we will begin now."

Janet felt herself being carried to the rack where Rita had just been whipped to a bleeding pulp and she twisted vainly from side to side. She felt rough hands on her clothes and heard a loud ripping. The cold, dank air bathed her body and she stared into the piercing

eyes of a mad stranger.

As the lash came down, a fire ripped across her body and her screams were louder than Rita's had ever been. Again and again she felt the fire, and the pain was so intense that she felt a gripping nausea in the pit of her stomach. She felt slow warm trickling blood ooze from the wounds and bathe her body. If the whip did not stop she must surely die, but it kept on and on.

As the blessed blackness of unconsciousness was bringing her relief the "lesson" ended. She was lowered from the rack and carried to the wall where she was chained next to Rita. The cold dampness of the wall and the biting metal of the chains made her scream again.

Then through the thick waves of pain she recalled a voice, "My name is Charles Jason. Please look upon me as a friend."

ANGEL OF EVIL

by Robert Rossner

Leora was smooth all right. But she couldn't fool me with her sweet innocence.

When we first met Leora, we were completely taken in by her. By the time we saw her for what she was, three years had passed. Three rotten years for Mitch. And there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Did I say nothing? Well, that's not true. There was something. And we did it. That's the kind of friends we are. Or were. The team.

It had gotten to the point

where one of us would call the other two at the office every-time something particularly outrageous occurred.

"Hello, Dave?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you hear what she's done now?"

And the guy being called—whether it was Dave, or Sandy, or I—always knew that "she" was Leora. And we knew, without being told, that she'd just done something new

to make Mitch's life more miserable.

And the worst part of it was, Mitch never complained. Either he didn't notice the kind of treatment he was getting, or he didn't know what to do about it. Or he didn't feel he could trust his three best friends with his troubles. And that's what friends are for, isn't it?

Dave said it for all of us, one night. "How can you tell a guy his wife is a bitch," he asked plaintively, "if he thinks she's the greatest thing in his life?"

Sandy nodded. "Especially when you gave her your blessing, the first time you met her!"

The first time...

Well, we had. It was true.

When Mitch brought Leora around that first time, we all thought she was great. It had been our first big party since renting the new apartment. When Mitch promised us something special, we resolved to stay sober enough to notice it. And, generally speaking, we did. At least Sandy and I did. When the

doorbell rang at nine-thirty, we raced to answer it. Of course, we'd forgotten that the door wasn't locked; Mitch had just rung the bell to announce himself. When we reached the hallway, she was already standing there.

She was something to look at. Really she was. Tall and willowy, with a fullness that was, somehow, made more refined by the tweed suit she wore. A delicately-featured face beneath the carefully upswept straw-blonde hair. And hot violet eyes that seemed to see the entire apartment even as they widened at the pleasure of meeting us.

"So these are the roommates! How nice to meet you." Her voice was slightly husky, and as I took her hand, I had an urge to bend over and kiss it, but I resisted nobly.

"The pleasure is ours, ma'am," Sandy said. A few drinks always brought out the Virginia gentleman in him.

She smiled then faced me again. "And you must be Kevin." I could have read a newspaper by the light of her eyes.

"Where's Dave?" Mitch had been standing in the back-ground, anxiously studying our reactions.

"When last seen," I said, "he was chinning himself on the kitchen doorpost."

"He was up to forty-six," Sandy added helpfully.

"Dave's girl-friend is a lady gym-teacher," Mitch explained, taking Leora's arm. We walked toward the parlor together. Leora looked at Sandy and me. "If anyone is making drinks," she murmured shyly, "I'd love an Old Fashioned."

"I'll get it," I offered.

She smiled. "Thank you, Kevin." I smiled back, and detoured to the kitchen. While I hunted for the bitters—nobody ever drank Old Fashioneds around there—I thought about Mitch's new girl; she seemed like the best thing to have happened to him since his arrival in New York. I hoped I was right.

I hadn't quite finished the drink when she came into the kitchen and leaned against the refrigerator. "Mitch ran out of cigarettes. He said I could take a pack from your private

supply."

"That was a joke." I gave her an unopened pack from the silverware drawer. "There's no private supply of anything in this place—I just hide a couple of packs for those times when someone runs out."

She tore open the pack, and I held a match for her. When she had taken one puff, she tilted her head to one side and studied the kitchen shelves. "Very nice decorating here." Her tone sounded vaguely amused. "Who did it?"

"We all did." I handed her the drink.

"The four of you are really a team, aren't you?"

I nodded. "We have been for years."

"Mitch told me you all got together in Korea." She sipped at her drink. "How come you're all still together?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "We just hit it off together. We came to New York after the army because that's where the money was. We all found jobs doing what we wanted. We were able to get this place because the rent is bearable when it's split four ways." I

laughed. "It's a happy life."

"Is it?" She stared at her cigarette. "Do you think it will last?"

"Probably not," I said. "We'll break up, get married, move to the suburbs and lose our hair. But right now, it's a ball."

She smiled. Then we went into the parlor and joined the crowd (Sandy was telling his wonderful story about Robert E. Lee and the shoemaker), and the evening bounced and jounced along until the wee hours.

When the place was finally empty, and Dave and I were swabbing down ashtrays, we got around to Mitch and his new girl.

"She's a gorgeous doll," Dave said. "Where did he find her?"

"In his office," Sandy volunteered. "She's working as a secretary to pay for her music lessons. She's been studying the piano for six years." He looked around for a clean one.

"Mitch really hit it," I said. "And high time."

And it was. Sandy and I were the ones who usually had

the phone numbers. Dave could always get theater tickets. Mitch was often the one who bought the liquor. We didn't know why; he was good-looking enough, in a lean and hungry way. But he'd had trouble rounding up his own dates, until Leora had been hired.

I suppose Dave knew, that night. He held an ashtray up to the light, inspected it for grime, and set it on the table. "It's good that Mitch found a nice one. We can't go on guiding him through life forever."

Sandy squinted up through the smoke. "You sound like the old scout-troop is getting ready to break up, man."

"Not yet, but soon," Dave predicted, a little sadly. "It'll happen."

"Well, what the hell," I laughed, trying to keep it light. "We can still keep the team in operation. We're a team, remember?"

"Here's to the team," Sandy chanted, raising his glass.

"Yeah." Dave and I groined for drinks to join him. "The team."

But we finished the cleaning in silence.

Dave was right, though. Mitch stuck to Leora. We saw more and more of her, and it made us feel good to see Mitch blossoming under her treatment. Occasionally she did something to bother us—like persuading him to give up crew-cuts for a “more dignified” haircut, with a neat part on the right side. But Mitch liked it, and that made it all right with us. Leora cooked dinner for us about twice a month, and she was a fine cook, if a little heavy on the noodles. You can’t blame a girl for that.

Things went on this way for about a year. And then one night Mitch came in with a foolish expression on his face. Dave and I had been sitting around, killing a bottle and working out some fishing plans—Sandy was out—and Mitch dropped his jacket on the couch and settled down near us, practically panting for a chance to talk. Dave knew right away, of course. He got a clean glass, poured a drink and passed it to Mitch.

“Congratulations, b u d d y,”

he grinned. “When’s the day?”

“How did you know?” Mike blurted. Then he laughed sheepishly. “I guess you could tell from my face.”

I smiled. He was a very likeable guy. “You’re getting into the decent life. Wonderful!”

He nodded. “Leora said you guys would kid about it, but that you’d take it well.”

“We’re very tolerant,” Dave said dryly. “When’s the date?”

“Probably around April. You can get off-season rates in Bermuda then.”

“Bermuda?” Dave shook his head. “You’re the guy who’s always complaining about the heat. What do you want to go there for?”

“Leora says it’s cool there, really.”

“Oh... she’s been there?”

“She’s been vacationing there every year for five years.” He grinned triumphantly. “She knows Bermuda very well.”

Something about that bothered me, but I wasn’t going to bring it up to Mitch. “Okay, sport,” I toasted him. “Here’s luck.”

And we all drank to it. We kept up the drinking until Sandy came in, so he could get in on the toasts. It was a great evening.

The drinking and partying and jollyng-along went on for the next five months. Mitch spent more time with Leora—which was only natural. It seemed as though the next time we were really all together was at the wedding.

It had started out to be a small affair—just a minister, a few friends, Leora's aunt, and a breakfast afterwards. But complications had set it a-growin'. Leora had convinced Mitch that all the office wheels had to be invited—even if they wouldn't attend—and then, naturally, all the secretaries had to be invited, too. Then her aunt's friends had to be there—"They're wonderful with presents, darling," she had said, and Mitch agreed that she had a point there. Things grew by leaps and bounds, and when the day finally arrived, there were some ninety people milling around at the reception in the hotel-suite.

We had wanted to throw

the party at the apartment, but Mitch had demurred. "I don't think the place is right for it, guys. It's too small."

Dave nodded. "I suppose Leora associates it with your misspent youth—is that it?"

Mitch smiled. "That's it, I guess. And she thinks a hotel would be better as far as the office bigwigs are concerned."

It hadn't occurred to me that Leora had been behind this, but Dave realized it immediately. Well, what could we say? It was her wedding, after all.

And what a party that was! Sandy and I got there first—after the ceremony—Dave, being best man, was coming with Mitch and Leora—and found a table with more liquor than we'd seen in a month of office-parties. There were six kinds of sandwiches, three sliced turkeys, great glistening mounds of exotic tidbits, and two white-jacketed waiters to force the food down willing throats. Everybody ate, drank, and circulated. Leora was the life of the party. Her violet eyes were set off beautifully by the white wedding-gown, and she flashed them every-

where.

It was Sandy who told me what was going on. He came up to me at about eleven and said, "Have you seen Leora?"

I had a mouthful of lobster salad, so I just shook my head. "What's wrong?" I finally mumbled.

"She's been talking a blue streak to Mitch's boss." He didn't look happy. "Telling him what a great idea it would be to put Mitch in charge of the Chicago office."

"But Mitch hates Chicago," I protested. "That's why he came to New York!"

Sandy shrugged. "I'm just reporting, man."

"Where's Mitch?"

He pointed across the crowded room. Mitch was talking to an old lady. It was a toss-up as to which of them looked more uncomfortable. "Leora's aunt's best friend," Sandy said.

"Was that Leora's idea?"

"Sure."

I nodded glumly, got myself another drink, and continued to tank up. As soon as Leora and Mitch vanished, and the last of the bourbon had evaporated, Sandy and Dave and I

took our leave. The party was still dribbling on, but we'd had enough.

We walked home silently—it was only about ten blocks from the hotel, and a warm night. I don't know if their thoughts were like mine. But after a while, Dave said, "She's a nice girl."

"Yeah, man." Sandy lit a cigarette.

"It was a nice affair," I offered.

"Uh huh." Dave was going to say something else, but didn't.

"She'll take good care of Mitch," Sandy said.

"Sure she will," Dave agreed quickly. Too quickly.

"The team is breaking up," I said.

That ended the conversation for the night.

Well, there was one more thing. After we got back to our place—somewhat emptier, now that Mitch had moved his things out—and gotten ready for sleep, just after the lights went out, Dave called out, "You know, I think that up to now, Leora's been pretty good for Mitch."

I waited in the darkness for

Sandy to straight-man him. "So? What do you mean, up to now?"

"I just have the uncomfortable feeling," Dave said slowly, "that from here on, it's all downhill."

Neither of us had anything to say to that. And Dave had nothing further to say either. He must have fallen asleep immediately. I know I did.

Mitch and Leora came back from Bermuda two weeks later—Leora with a beautiful suntan that made her hair seem lighter and her eyes hotter, Mitch with a bad sunburn—and moved into their apartment. It wasn't a bad place at all. Three rooms, with a view of Central Park, in the West Eighties. Leora had loved it from the moment she'd first seen it, and the rent—ninety-five a month—made it a steal. But she didn't love it so much three months later.

"The shopping is inconvenient," she said, as she handed us our drinks, "and it's a hot apartment. But the worst thing about it is the neighborhood—it's such a sleazy street to have to walk through

at night!"

"But you never walk around at night alone," Mitch protested.

She pursed her lips. "Suppose I *wanted* to take a walk, some time. Could I do it, around here?"

"I've been walking around here for a long time," Dave said. "I've never been raped yet."

Mitch and Sandy laughed. Leora didn't. "I happen to love to walk," she said. "And I'm terribly afraid to!" Her lip quivered, tears came to her eyes. "Excuse me," she said, in a small voice, and turned and ran for the bedroom. The door closed behind her.

Mitch looked at us helplessly, then stood up. "Excuse me, guys," he muttered, and followed her into the room.

We sat in the parlor for a few minutes, staring down at the floor. Then Dave said, "Who asked me?"

I studied the muddy abstraction that hung over the sofa. (It was a painting Leora had seen and loved in the Village Outdoor Art Show.) She had persuaded Mitch to buy it for her. To me, it was still a

dirty doormat.

"Let's go," Sandy said nervously.

"Okay." Dave and I joined him at the door as Mitch came out. He was smiling again, but the smile looked stretched.

"Listen, Sport, we've got to go," Dave said. "Tell Leora we're sorry we couldn't stay."

Mitch's face fell. "You sure?"

"Yeah, we have a party we promised to stop in on," Sandy improvised. "A couple of girls in the house."

"Well, have fun." Mitch seemed torn between a desire to talk to us and an urge to get back to Leora. "Look, let's get together for lunch next week, huh?"

"Sure," Dave said. "How about Thursday?"

We made it for Thursday.

We didn't see too much of Leora after that. Maybe once a month. But we had lunch with Mitch every Thursday. He was the happiest bridegroom ever. He was doing well at his job—writing copy for stock-brochures, if I haven't mentioned it before—and Leora was a dream.

That's what he said: a dream. But he seemed more quiet than he used to be. And he had three drinks with lunch, instead of the old two. We needed them.

Then he went off to Chicago on a business trip. He was gone for two weeks. One night, about three days before he was due back, the phone rang. It was Leora.

"How are you, Kevin?" Her voice was friendlier than ever. "How's the team getting along?"

"Just fine, Leora." I signaled to Dave, who grimaced at the name. "How are you?"

"Oh, fine." She paused. "How would you boys like to come and see a surprise I'm fixing for Mitch?"

"We'd love to. When?"

"Right now," she giggled. "I'll give you the address."

You guessed it. When we arrived at the address—on Riverside Drive, three blocks from Columbia—Leora was waiting outside. She looked beautiful, but that wasn't on our minds. She took us inside at once, and up to the ninth floor.

"Here it is," she said bright-

ly, and opened the door.

It was very nice, of course. Four huge rooms. Beamed ceilings. Polished hardwood floors. And a view of the river and the green New Jersey shore from three of the rooms.

We stared at it silently.

"This is my surprise for Mitch," she said, widening her eyes. "Do you like it?"

"How are you going to gift-wrap it?" Dave asked.

She smiled. "Very funny, David."

Sandy was staring at the river. They didn't have views like this in his part of Virginia. "How much is the rent, Leora?"

"Ohh..." she shrugged airily. "A hundred seventy-five."

Sandy's jaw dropped.

"That's just about double your rent now," Dave said quietly. "Are you going to take in washing?"

"No—but I'm going back to work, part-time."

"Back to the office?" I asked. When they had married, Mitch had insisted that she quit. He wanted a wife to stay home and run the house.

"No." She glowed. "I got a job playing the piano at a

cicktail-lounge. It's a chance to use my lessons."

"When will you work?" Dave asked.

"Tuesday through Friday, from eight to midnight." She stood smiling, waiting for our congratulations.

Sandy gulped. "You think Mitch will like that?"

"I'm sure he won't object." She turned, walked to the door and opened it.

"Don't you think you ought to ask Mitch about the apartment first?" I suggested gently, as we left.

"Oh, he's such a stick-in-the-mud," she said. "He'd stay in that musty place forever. No, I signed the lease here today."

Dave said nothing, but his expression was grim. "Your job isn't going to pay the rent," he said at last.

"Well, it's about time Mitch got a raise," she retorted defiantly. "And maybe now he'll ask for one!"

We rode down to the street in silence. "I hope he likes it," Sandy said, in a small voice.

"He will," Leora assured him. "And he'll get the raise, too. All Mitch needs is a lit-

tle push—I discovered that a long time ago!”

That didn’t leave very much for anyone else to say. We made our goodnights on the street and left Leora to find her own way home.

“The worst part of it,” Dave said finally, “is that she’s right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she sighed, that Mitch will love the place, and he’ll ask his boss for a raise and get it.”

And that was exactly what happened. Mitch came home and was overjoyed. He didn’t even seem to mind Leora’s new job...or, if he did, he didn’t show it to us. We all pitched in to help them paint the place, arrange furniture, make the apartment beautiful. That was the night we caught another of Leora’s little quirks. Sandy was the one to point it out first.

“Did you guys notice,” he said hesitantly, after two beers on the way home, “how she kept calling it ‘my apartment?’”

I hadn’t, until then. Dave had.

“She does it all the time,” he agreed. “My apartment, my hi-fi, my kitchen sink.”

“Is she gloating over the fact that she found the apartment?” I asked in anger.

“No, she’s always done it,” Dave said. “Don’t you remember *her* honeymoon trip to Bermuda?”

“That’s right,” Sandy said. “I remember that.”

“Keep your ears open,” Dave counselled. “You’ll hear it from her every time.”

Maybe it was just that he brought it to our attention, but, as a matter of fact, she seemed to do it more often after that. Only once did we say anything. We were all out for an evening at the theater one night, and went in for pizza afterwards. Leora started talking about the summer.

“I’d love to spend my vacation in California this year,” she said.

“Oh?” Dave looked up with interest. “Where’s Mitch going?”

Leora simply looked puzzled. But Mitch laughed. “That’s just her way of talking,” he said. “She always does that.” He smiled at her

fondly, as though she had done something quite brilliant for her age.

Leora, getting it at last, sniffed. "David, you're so funny."

"That's what my mother always used to say," he agreed, smiling, and that ended the moment.

So Leora continued her job at the lounge, and Mitch spent his evenings reading, loafing, bringing home work from the office. Except on Wednesdays. Wednesday nights, we'd all get together for dinner, come back to the place and play poker till about midnight. It was like old times, then. Even Mitch said so.

"You know," he said, one of those nights, looking around the parlor as Sandy shuffled the deck, "this was a pretty nice place."

"We were a pretty good team," Dave said. "Weren't we?"

"The team..." Mitch nodded. "Aren't we still?"

Sandy held the next card for a fraction of a second before flipping it across the table. "Sure we are, man."

"When are you guys going

to get married?"

"When the right girl comes along," Dave said. "You were lucky."

I looked at him sharply, but his expression was perfectly serious.

"I sure was," Mitch said, and grinned contentedly.

"Are we playing or not?" Sandy complained.

"Sure, sure." We went on with the game.

No, Mitch saw nothing wrong with Leora. That was the worst part of it. If he had wouldn't have had to hold the remarks, the grimaces, the judgments until he left. But he thought she was perfectly wonderful, and all we could do was hope he'd never find out otherwise. We were able to keep up the politeness for a long time. But the day finally came when Leora went too far.

I was sitting around the place alone one night (Sandy was out with a superbly-stacked lady physicist from Oakland, and Dave was working late). Dave came in, made himself a drink, and sat glowering on the window-sill until

I finally put down my book and asked him what was wrong.

"I just spent an hour in delightful conversation," he said grimly.

"Who with?"

"A girl who believes in pushing her wonderful."

I sighed. "Leora?"

"The very same." He finished his drink in a gulp.

"Isn't she working tonight?"

"That, my lady, is where I saw her."

Dave had stopped at the lounge for a couple of drinks on his way home. Leora had been there, but not at the piano. She was sitting in a booth when he walked in, having a drink with a smooth, gray-flannel type.

"She introduced me," Dave said quietly. "His name is Sid. He comes in and buys her a drink every night or so."

"What does he do?"

"He's a TV writer, and he lives up in Nyack. She said that he's been talking her into Nyack."

"What does that mean?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

"It means she's going to

talk Mitch into buying a house in the suburbs."

I got up and made myself a drink on that one. Then I made Dave another. "Do you think he'll sit still for that?"

"You know Mitch." He gestured impatiently. "But that's not all."

"Oh?"

He took a deep breath. "She thinks this Sid is very bright. Very live. And he appreciates her mind. Not like Mitch."

"My God," I breathed. "Her *mind*?"

"That's what she said."

I twirled the glass, watching the ice chip and melt. "What are we going to do about her?"

"That's a very interesting question." He lit a cigarette. "Where's Sandy?"

I told him.

"Well, let's wait till he gets home, and we'll talk about it some more."

And that's what we did. Sandy was as shocked as I had been. Maybe more; his Southern-gentleman upbringing was offended. He asked the same question I had asked: "What are we going to do about her?"

Somehow, we both looked to Dave for the answer. He had an answer ready for us.

"We can't tell Mitch," he said, "because he wouldn't believe us. And if we managed to make him believe, he'd be terribly hurt. And we can't talk to this Sid because, if it weren't him, it would be someone else. He's just the one who came along."

We nodded, following his reasoning dumbly.

"So there's only one thing to do." He paused. "We have to kill her."

There was a minute of silence after that. You'd think Sandy or I would have laughed, or protested, but neither of us did. It was as though we had only been waiting for Dave to bring it out into the open.

"You must have it all figured out," I said at last.

"I do." He sat back and crossed his arms. "You interested?"

After a second, I nodded. So did Sandy, looking more serious than I'd ever seen him.

He told us. It was really very simple. Leora came home

from work on the Fifth Avenue bus that ran up Riverside Drive. She traveled late and got off on the lonely stretch of the Drive that circled Grant's Tomb. The area was often in the news because of some incident that occurred there—a wave of tire-slashing, a rumble between teenagers, a robbery, a mugging.

"It'll look like a mugging," Dave said quietly. "We'll meet her after work, and then—" He shrugged.

"Won't she tell Mitch she's meeting us?" Sandy asked.

"We'll tell her we want to tell her about a surprise we have for him." Dave said. "She won't tell anyone. She loves surprises, remember?"

I remembered. "Okay. 'I'll be there.'"

I turned to Sandy. He was the gentlest of guys, really, and I didn't think he'd go for it. He sat there now with a bemused expression on his face.

"Did I tell you boys", he asked slowly, "about what happened when I stopped off there last week?"

I recalled that he'd left the office early one day and gone up to Mitch and Leora's apart-

ment to leave a book for Mitch. All he'd told us was that Mitch hadn't gotten home yet.

"I stayed and talked to her for a couple of minutes," he went on, in his pleasant drawl, "and she served me a slice of melon. It was a hot day remember?"

"And Leora doesn't believe in drinking during the day," Dave said. "So?"

"So I told her it was a mighty fine piece of melon she'd bought," Sandy said. "And you know what she said? She said, 'I can pick melons, but I can't pick husbands.'"

We were pretty quiet for a while. Then Dave said, Okay, I'll call her tomorrow. Then I'll let you both know."

Sandy and I nodded, and we killed the rest of the evening by going to a movie. I don't think any of us were the least bit disturbed by the idea of what we were planning.

At about three o'clock the next afternoon, I was sweating over the rough layout for a full-page ad when my phone rang. It was Dave.

"Tonight," he said. "She was tickled pink by the call."

I felt perfectly calm. "Did

you call call Sandy?"

"I'll tell him soon as I hang up. Everything all right with you?"

"Sure, fine." I paused. "Do you think it'll work out all right?"

"It'll be a team operation," Dave said. "It can't miss."

And it didn't. At twelve-thirty, we were waiting on Riverside Drive. That is, Dave and I were waiting on a park bench about half a block from the bus-stop. Sandy was across the street. All of us were wearing gloves—"Just in case there's something to this fingerprint business," Dave had grinned. The lights of a bus pulled around the curve, and Dave nodded to me. I stood up and moved into the heavy shrubbery behind the bench. I could hear Dave's heavy breathing, but I couldn't see anything. That meant nobody could see me either. If the local squad-car came along, Sandy would begin whistling. That was the plan.

The bus stopped, then started again and pulled away. It roared by our bench and kept going. Then it was waiting for

the other passengers who'd gotten off to start walking. Then I heard his footsteps as he moved firmly away from the bench, and I heard him call, "Leora!" Her husky voice answered, and I dimly heard them both chatting. The voices grew closer as they returned to the bench.

"Come on, Leora," Dave said. "Just sit down for a few minutes so I can tell you what we had in mind."

"Well, all right." She giggled. "My goodness, what would my noble husband say if he saw me sitting on a park bench at this hour with his best friend?"

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

"No, I told you I love surprises. I didn't tell a soul!"

"Wonderful," Dave said heartily.

And at that moment I hefted the big rock, leaned forward through the shrubbery and hit her square at the back of her skull. It sounded exactly the way a carton of eggs sounds when you drop it on the supermarket floor. She didn't make a sound, but fell forward and to the side.

Dave jumped up, grabbed her by the arms and pulled her around the to my side of the bench. He dropped her on the grass and felt for her pulse. She lay on her back, and her face was pale, but still very beautiful. Her long legs were tumbled casually, and her skirt had hiked up above her knees. I dropped the rock on the ground near her.

"Fine," he said finally. "She's dead."

"Now what?"

He reached for her pocket-book, found her wallet and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he dropped the open pocket-book near her hand. "Let's go."

The whole thing had taken less than three minutes.

We poked our way through to the sidewalk. Sandy was still across the street, staring anxiously in our direction. He trotted toward us, and we all began walking slowly toward the next bus-stop. We waited for a bus for ten minutes. Just as it pulled up, the squad-car rolled by, moving slowly. It disappeared around the bend of Grant's Tomb. We got on

the bus, took seats far apart, and went home.

Well, it was pretty bad. They found Leora's body the next morning.

Mitch was grief-stricken, and nothing we did comforted him. He moved back in with us, of course.

We worked on him, naturally. Got him drunk, sent him to the theatre, kept him busy with projects. Listened patiently while he talked about Leora. Controlled ourselves and acted as though his loss was the greatest the world had ever known. Finally, after two weeks, we hit on something that made him come out of it a little: we sent him off to Lake George for a week of fishing. I lent him my new spinning-reel. Dave presented him with a pair of waders, and Sandy came through with his silver hip flask. We all got drunk that night and saw him off on the midnight bus.

That was last week. Today I got a letter from Mitch. Postmarked yesterday, in Warrens-

burg. It isn't a long letter. This is what it says:

Dear Team:

You tried...you sure tried, all of you guys. But it doesn't do any good. As soon as I get this letter to the post office, I'm going to finish what's left in Sandy's flask, leave all your stuff here in the cabin, and go for a swim. I won't be coming out.

The trouble is, no matter what I do, I can't do it without Leora. I loved her too much. Without her, I don't want to go on. So I'm not going to.

Thanks again for everything you guys tried to do for me. You're still a good team.

Mitch

I'm sure it's on the level. I'm waiting now for Dave and Sandy to come home, so they can read it. There's something terrible about it, and I want to see if they get it, too. Because—well, what did he mean by that last paragraph. That's what I want to know.

Did he know?

Did he?

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