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VOLUME 2 OCTOBER, 1950 NUMBER 1

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CALLING ALL FANTASY FANS!

HELLO, Fans! We are very glad to be with you again and to be bringing you an issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY that is literally packed full of fantasy thrills. There is a greater variety of stories than ever before—besides the portrait of A. Merritt.

Now on to some inside information regarding the current authors.

Our first fantasy writer, George Allan England, is best known for his "Darkness and Dawn," "The Flying Legion" and "The Elixir of Hate." Born around 1880 in Fort McPherson, Nebraska, he moved East while he was still very young. He attended English High in Boston and then went on to Harvard where he graduated in 1902 with a B.A., and received his M.A. in 1903. Shortly thereafter he started working for a life insurance company in New York City. His job with the insurance company entailed a great deal of imaginative writing, and it was, Mr. England claimed, this that gave him a starting point for his later writings. He sold his first story to *Colliers* and sold every thing he wrote from then on!

Mr. England was a widely travelled man both at home and abroad. He had been in almost every state of the union besides visiting Cuba, Canada, Newfoundland, and St. Pierre. He travelled extensively in England, Italy and France. His itineraries supplied him with invaluable material which he has drawn upon throughout his writings.

He was a member of the Authors' League of America, as well as of Alliance Francaise, Club Español de Boston and the Folk Lore Society. One can readily see that his interests were varied and that

(Please continue on page 8)

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A. MERRITT'S FANTASY

(Continued from page 6)

he was constantly in touch with a great many different kinds of people. He died in June, 1936, at his home in Bradford, New Hampshire.

The second writer that we want to tell you something about is Jack Williamson whose "Racketeers in the Sky" appears in this issue. He was born in April, 1908. His parents were school teachers who, when Jack Williamson was only seven, moved in a covered wagon from Pecos, Texas to Sonora, Mexico to take up ranching. The nearest neighbors to their new home lived several miles away.

Mr. Williamson became increasingly interested in science and imaginative fiction as his years grew. It was not only a good pastime in a thinly inhabited region, but a possible escape from a way of life that left the family fortunes at the mercy of the weather. His first story, "The Metal Man," was sold the summer before he started college at Canyon, Texas. Later he transferred to the University of New Mexico where he majored in psychology.

During the last war he went to the Southwest Pacific in 1945 as a weather forecaster. He flew as an observer on several Marine bombing and patrol missions over the nothern Solomons.

At present Mr. Williamson is living with his wife in Portales and is continuing to write science-fiction!

A word now about the next issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY. We are extremely glad to be giving you the sequel to "The Face in the Abyss" —none other than A. Merritt's celebrated classic, "The Snake Mother." No words could do it justice in this very small space—and each one of you fans has either read it or will be looking forward to reading this much talked about and sought after fantasy. Suffice it to say that Graydon's incredible return to the fabulous Cordillera de Carabaya in search of Suarra is magnificently painted by the greatest of fantasy writers.

Completing the issue is a short story by Max Brand entitled, "The Lost Garden."

The January issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY will be published November 3rd.

—The Editor

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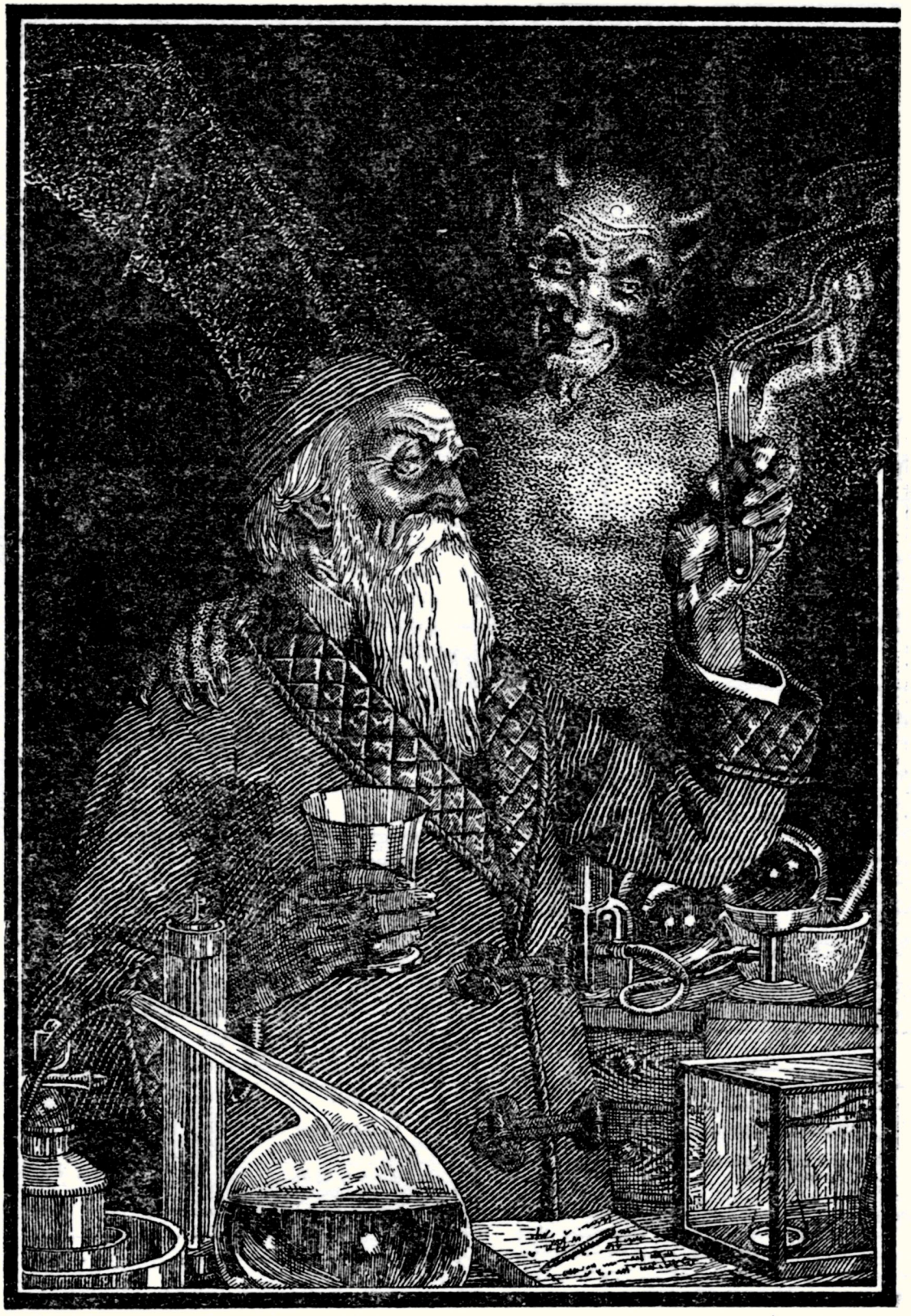
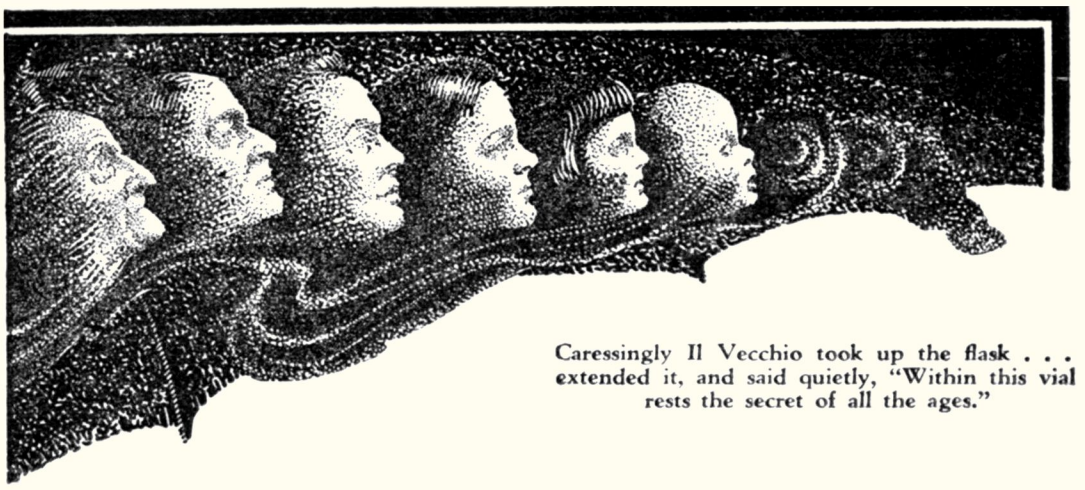




Caressingly Il Vecchio took up the flask . . . extended it, and said quietly, "Within this vial rests the secret of all the ages."

THE ELIXIR OF HATE

A NOVEL OF UNCHARTED TERROR

By

George Allan England

CHAPTER 1

The Message

THE letter was short—only half a page of typewriting—but as Dr. Granville Dennison finished it, an extraordinary change came over his face. His usual pallor gave way to a more yellowish hue; his jaw dropped; and as he sat there at his desk, staring for a moment at the paper which shook in his trembling hand, the wrinkles drew tense across his forehead and his withered cheeks.

"What?" he gulped, rereading the lines which seemed to dance before his eyes. "Witham—knows?"

Up he sprang. His revolving chair, pushed violently back, crashed into a tall instrument-case with such force that a sheet of plate glass rained down in a jingling shower of splinters. But Dennison paid no heed. Unminding the destruction, indifferent to the rest of his mail, despite the fact that a couple of special-delivery letters lay among the others, the doctor fell to pacing the office floor. As with an ague he shook. A fine sweat began to bead his forehead. He stopped, once more read

The tenuous claws of a creeping death tightened their grip on Dr. Dennison—and in his efforts to escape, he found a fate unparalleled in human cruelty.

the letter; then, with a sudden determination, snatched his telephone book from the hook and began violently ruffling the pages in quest of a number.

"M—Med—Mediterranean! Ah, here it is!" he cried, slapping the book down on the desk. He caught off the receiver. As central delayed in answering a minute, he angrily pounded the hook. "Number, please?" came the query.

"Six-0-five-three, Worth!" he ordered. "Quick!"

Then, biting his lip with feverish impatience, he stood there by his desk, hardly able to breathe for very eagerness.

At the office door came a sharp knocking. Dennison paid no heed. The knocking grew louder, more insistent.

"Well?" he shouted.

"Mr. Lamson's here," the voice of Edwards, his assistant, penetrated to him.

"Can't see him!"

"But—he's worse. Heart, you know. And—"

"No use! Tell him to come around tomorrow, or—no, I sha'n't be—hallo? Hallo? This the Mediterranean Transport Line?"

"....."

"All right! Tell me, when's your next boat to Marseilles?"

".....?"

"No, no! Not Marsala! I don't mean Sicily! Mar-seilles! Marseilles, France!"

"....."

"What? This morning? *La Toulouse!* Reserve me an outside room, at once! Name is—"

"....."

"All engaged? No room? Say, I'm going, anyhow! And—"

"....."

"No time? She sails at eleven? But for the love of Heaven! That's only fifteen minutes! Hold her!"

"....."

"Can't? Tide? The deuce! Good-by!"

DOWN onto the hook crashed the receiver. A moment the doctor stood there, gathering himself together for the most strenuous exertion of his life.

Then, paying absolutely no heed whatever to the continued banging on the door, or to the entreaties of his assistant, he set to work with a dumb, desperate haste. He seemed astonishingly agile for a man of fifty-five years.

One after another he jerked open his desk-drawers. From the first he extracted a bundle of papers, clippings and the like, secured by a rubber-band. The next yielded nothing. The third he pawed over hastily, and from it snatched a cash-box of japanned metal.

He wheeled about, seized his medicine-case and, unheeding broken vials, ripped the whole interior arrangements clean out of it—all the rows and rows of bottles went by the board.

"Queer sort of valise," he exclaimed, flinging the papers and the cash-box into it, "but in a pinch—"

The telephone-bell rang sharply. Some patient or other, somewhere in the city, was suffering, dying perhaps; somebody needed him; life and death maybe were at issue. Dennison gave no attention.

He flung himself into his overcoat, clapped his hat on his bald head and seized the bag.

An idea struck him; he must have that letter.

With feverish haste he flung aside the litter on the desk-top, found the letter and thrust it into his pocket. Then without another word he ran to the door, unlocked it and started at a run through the outer office.

Edwards tried to intercept him. Mr. Lamson, the patient, very pale and wan, rose as though to speak, but Dr. Dennison evaded both.

"Impossible!" he shouted. "Urgent business! You, Edwards, take all practice till I return! No address!"

He caught an elevator, and in half a minute was dropped down eleven stories to the street. First of any passenger out of the elevator, he made a quick dive out through the revolving doors and gained the sidewalk.

"Sure, an' it's the hurry call the docthor do be havin' this marnin'!" exclaimed the hall-man, gazing after the agitated figure as it hailed a taxi, leaped in, and with a wave of the hand shouted:

"Pier 57, North River! Twenty-five dollars if you make it in ten minutes! *La Toulouse!* Understand?"

Thereafter came a period blurred and vague, of daring and illegal driving, with

the keen November wind lashing the panes, vistas of cars, trucks, other auto pedestrians, and horses all jumbled in swiftly-changing phantasmagorias, and finally a sweeping dash up a long, asphalt incline. Then into a huge dim shed tooled the taxi.

Rumbling, shuddering over the hoof-worn planks, the machine swept down the pier.

As it squeaked to a quick halt, Dr. Dennison heard, with a sudden stopping of the heart, a many-throated huzzaing. Shouts of "Good-by! Bon voyage! Good luck!" reached his ears.

"Great ghost!" he vociferated. "She's starting! Here, hold on, there!" And as though shot out of the taxi, he sprang toward the gangplank which, visible between mountains of freight, was already swinging aloft on pulleys.

"Hey, there! My money!" yelled the chauffeur. "Come back here, you! Gimme my twenty-five!"

Dr. Dennison flung back a little wad of bills, which he had made ready during the furious race against time. The chauffeur leaped for his prize. At the same instant the doctor found himself headed off.

Before him, to his unspeakable anguish, he discovered an impassable wooden barrier—a sort of high fence on standards, along which a curious crowd had gathered. At a glance, despite his extreme excitement, he realized the futility of trying to clamber over this and storm the gangplank, which had already risen above his head.

"Great Heavens! What—what can I do?" he panted, glaring this way then that, with eyes that blinked strangely wild behind his heavy spectacles. Appeals, he knew, would prove entirely useless. Finally he made a quick run toward an open door which led out of the pier onto a narrow runway.

Through this door he had caught a glimpse of the huge black bulk of the liner. He saw it steadily drawing past the doorway. A port-hole came to view, round and brass-rimmed; before it vanished, the doctor was out on the runway.

Unobserved in the noisy tumult, in the half-dark of the enormous shed, he threaded his way quickly among the high-piled cases. He stood, free and so far triumphant, not two feet from the smooth, slow-moving iron skin of the leviathan.

FAR above him, along the rails, which were white with fluttering kerchiefs, vociferous folk were shouting platitudes at equally banal folk upon the pier-head. The doctor cursed them hotly in his heart. They aboard, faced no such problem as his! Here was he, almost an old man, comparatively feeble and spent with the excitements of the past quarter-hour, facing the task of boarding a liner already under way—ticketless and unbooked—against all rules and regulations. Small wonder that for a moment he stood there clutching his medicine-case, unnerved and despairing.

But it was only for a moment. Then his will and his inflexible determination reasserted themselves.

"By Heaven, I will make it!" he glared up savagely at the unheeding passengers above. His heart began to thump with painful acceleration. A bad heart, at best, now it skipped and performed astonishing feats. The doctor caught at his breast, as though to still it.

But how? Scale the smooth side of *La Toulouse?* Impossible!

Eagerly he craned his neck. Toward him he beheld sliding a great open freight-port, yawning black in the vessel's side. This port had not yet been closed by its sliding iron plate. As each side a double length of chain hung down.

Calculating with a cool eye, Dennison judged that by making a leap he could lay hold of one of these chains. Black and greasy they were; and right above the boiling swirl of brine that surged among the piles they hung.

Now the doctor did not hesitate. The forward chain was moving directly toward him, not more than ten feet away and perhaps five out from the string-piece.

Upon that beam he stepped. Carefully, as though judging where to make the first cut in a delicate operation, he gaged the space.

Then he flung the hand-bag. Far through the port it hurtled; it vanished in the black of the hold.

Dennison leaped. Nerved with the strength of a savage resolve, he made the distance.

His hands caught the chain. They held. For a second, they slipped a little on the oily links; but like forceps they grappled and held fast. Once the doctor had been an athlete and a man of power. His college records proved that. And even though all such days were "long and far away," yet something of skill and strength still remained in him, half-instinctive, ingrained in his being.

Summoning all his power, he drew himself up, grasped the edge of the port, and—now realizing that excitement had burst forth above him, that there were cries and shouts and wild, profane commands—managed to struggle through the gaping aperture.

Booming into resonant, deafening echoes, the liner's whistle blared with titanic uproar; it blurred the doctor's spent and shaken senses as he crawled, trembling violently, between packing cases in the gloom of the hold.

Down on his knees he dropped. Feeling here, there, he sought the little valise. He found it.

Bells trilled and jangled. A more powerful shuddering gripped the hull as the engines quickened their pace. The doctor heard footsteps questing along the iron floor-plates of the hold.

"Hey, you!" hailed a voice. "Come out o' there!"

But he answered nothing. Clasping the hand-bag to his breast, he smiled.

"In a fortnight, Marseilles!" thought he. "And then—"

CHAPTER 2

The Little Gate

ON December 2, just ten days after *La Toulouse* dropped the Fire Island light below the western horizon, Dr. Dennison climbed down from the Bordeaux express at the little white-stone station of Cette, on the Mediterranean, some hundred miles west of Marseilles.

Despite a rather better color than he had shown in New York—due to the long sea-trip—the doctor seemed to have lost strength. New lines had graven themselves in his face; the former ones had grown deeper; he looked old and tired.

For a moment he peered around him, as though to make sure his presence was attracting no undue attention. Then, finding that to all appearances he passed as an ordinary tourist, he hailed a fiacre, climbed in, ordered, "To the Chateau d'Eau," and promptly pulled down the green silk shades.

Not until the carriage had reached the little park stretching up the first steep slopes of Mount St. Clair did he show himself again. Here he ordered the coachman to stop. He got out, paid liberally, and, without a single word, set off up the mountain.

Though it was winter, here on the Riviera the temperature was that of an American June. Presently the doctor, swabbing his heated forehead, stopped, exhausted, and gazed back at the wide panorama already beginning to spread out beneath him.

The vast azure sheet of the sea stretched away to its horizon of hazy gold. Nearer, the town lay maplike in the sheltering arms of the breakwaters. Ordinarily Dennison might have seen and pondered on the beauty of this southern landscape; but now he turned away to scan the heights above.

"How much farther?" he demanded petulantly, with overwrought nerves. "Great Heavens, what a climb! I ought to have known about this, and started six months ago. What if anything should have happened to him? And me with sclerosis and—but there's no use thinking about that. Up, and at it!" And once more he began the long, steep, weary ascent. To his tired, weak eyes the bright glory of the scene brought no relief. "If I'm only not too late!" he panted as he labored upward.

Narrower now and steeper grew the way, with terraced steps and high boundary walls topped with broken glass set in cement. These walls were pierced only by an occasional gateway, inscribed with some fanciful name or other to denote the villa hidden far inside among the groves of cedar, olive, and dark-foliaged orange. The doctor gave them no more than a passing glance. For now the brow of the mountain lay not far above him.

He judged it just a few minutes more as he topped the crest of the height and came out upon a sort of plateau which

slanted downward to the south till, cut off by a sheer thousand-foot drop of the cliffs abutting the sea.

This plateau, he found, was—like the mountainside itself—covered with villas and cottages safe-hidden behind winding walls. An occasional tiled roof or chimney-pot showed through the groves. Here and there, on either hand, other winding alleys opened from the one wherein Dr. Dennison walked forward. A regular labyrinth of runways developed.

A few hundred feet farther along the walled road he came to a still narrower, curving alley. This he followed. Before long he found himself cut off even from sight of the way he had come.

AN OMINOUS stillness brooded on the mountain-top. He could see nothing but the walls on either side, and the slow-drifting clouds that now and then dimmed the blue above him. The doctor, his fists clenched with intense excitement, strode forward.

All at once he came to a low, heavily hinged gate in the wall which terminated the alleyway. Set into the solid masonry, this gate of oaken beams showed row on row of hand-hammered copper rivets. A tiny peep-hole permitted any one inside to observe whomsoever might demand admittance. The single word "Science" was painted in dull white on the weathered planks.

For a brief moment he pressed his hand—wasted and big knuckled, with the swollen and distorted veins of age already prominent—over his eyes. Then with a singularly harsh laugh, which echoed eerily in the narrow-walled space, he seized the old bronze-bell-handle at the right of the gate. Eager, yet as though half reluctant, too, he gave it a vigorous pull.

Sharply he stepped back. He waited. No result. Approaching the gate, he tried to peer in through the little hole; but the aperture was stopped by a slide within. His hands closed and opened; he licked his dry lips, blinked, fidgeted, and paced back and forth. In feverish expectation he waited.

Once more he was about to ring, when somewhere inside the wall he heard a crunching of gravel, a shuffle of steps, a grumbling in surly tones. Some one was drawing nigh.

Dennison stepped up to the gate again, and knocked hard with his bony knuckles.

"Patience! Patience! I come!" adjured a voice within. Though the words were spoken in French, the accent was strongly Italian.

All at once the doctor saw an eye peering at him through the little hole. For some fifteen seconds this eye took cognizance of him with careful and deliberate inspection. Then, "Well, m'sieur?" queried the voice.

"Is—is this the—villa of Dr. Alessandro Pagani?" faltered Dennison. Now that he had need of utmost assurance, his lips trembled and his throat would hardly serve him.

"Oui, m'sieur," answered the owner of the eye.

"I—that is—is he at home?"

"He is. And then?"

"I want to see him."

"He sees very few visitors, m'sieur, and no strangers at all. But perhaps m'sieur will leave some word? Or make some arrangement to see him tomorrow, or next week?"

"No, no!" snapped the doctor, his natural irritability reasserting itself. "That won't do at all. I must see him today, at once. Must! You understand?"

"Is Monsieur expected?"

"Of course! Didn't the doctor receive a telegram some days ago? By wireless?"

"Ah! So monsieur sent that?"

"Yes. Now admit me at once. Here is my card."

A lock turned and bolts slid back. Dennison, trembling with strong emotion, stepped inside the enclosure. Then the gate closed again.

The doctor found himself confronted by a singular Janus—a short, fat little fellow with bristling mustache, wattled cheeks, and a reddish cast of hair which clearly showed his Lombard strain.

Snapping both heels together like a soldier, this odd individual saluted stiffly in military fashion. Dennison judged him correctly as an old ex-conscript.

"Well?" demanded the American.

"Follow me, m'sieur."

He turned, and with no further speech, set out. Dennison, glancing nervously

round, his fatigue now all forgotten, walked close behind him toward the object of this long, exhausting pilgrimage.

CHAPTER 3

Il Vecchio and Stasia

THE path, neatly sanded, led, with many a turn and twist, in the general direction of the sea. Excited as the doctor was, he nevertheless perceived the unusual beauty of the estate. Cypresses, palms, fruit-trees, and strange exotics grew in profusion—some with flame-hued blossoms, others crowned with yellow or with purple splendor. On either side well-kept lawns extended.

Through the greenery sparkled a fountain, and far beyond, blue as turquoise, glinted a stretch of the wondrous inland sea.

Without a word of comment or of information, the Lombard guided Dennison toward a long, low, red-tiled dwelling which now became visible through the clumps of cedar and old olive. Presently he stopped to speak with an aged man whom the American took to be a gardener. Casually observing, in his keen impatience to stand at once before Pagani, Dr. Dennison beheld a tall, somewhat stooping figure clad in the long, blue smock used commonly by French peasants.

This old man wore on his hoary head a beret of white felt, very large and full, with a little tassel at the crown. His gray-stockinged feet were thrust into sabots. From under the smock projected loose corduroy trousers. A red sash completed the costume.

Even as the Lombard spoke to him he continued industriously digging round a rose-bush with a clumsy, old-fashioned spade. Dennison saw him nod, observed the long, white beard move in speech a moment then beheld him turn and gaze as though in careful contemplation of the newcomer.

Flushing with sudden ire, now accentuated by long fatigue and gnawing fears, the American stepped forward.

"Come, come!" he exclaimed, "I've got no time to waste like this. Where's your master? Take me to your master at once. Do you understand?"

The Lombard stared in sudden astonishment. He made as though to speak. But the gardener, raising a hand, mildly inquired in almost faultless English:

"Master? What word is that, sir? We do not understand it here. Inside our gates, so long as we all keep good faith, there is no servant and no master. We live, here, that we may serve."

Dennison stared with growing irritation.

"Why, who the deuce are you, anyhow?" he cried. He swung about to his guide. "Say!" he snapped. "I haven't come four thousand miles to bandy words like this. Dr. Pagani—take me to him at once."

"But, m'sieur," began the Lombard. The patriarch, however, gestured for silence.

"Here is the doctor now!" he announced.

Dennison turned and peered all about him, squinting in the hot sunlight. His trembling fingers gripped the handle of the bag. Burning with rage, he faced back again. Were these yokels mocking him?

"The doctor?" he cried. "Where?"

"Come, now, do you really want to see him?" smiled the aged man.

With a sniff the American glared at him.

"If you should come face to face with him, would you deign to grasp his hand?" continued the gardener in a sort of amused tolerance.

Dennison tried to bring words to utterance but failed.

"Well, give me your hand, my son, friend of my friend!" exclaimed the patriarch. He straightened up to his full height—a tall broad-shouldered, and imposing figure of a man, noble of chest and loins, with a strong-corded throat visible through the open folds of the smock. And, standing thus, he stretched out a large, strong palm by no means guiltless of contact with the soil.

FOR a moment Dennison stood amazed and speechless, all sorts of conflicting thoughts assailing him. Then cried he:

"You—you mean—"

The old man bowed his head in affirmation.

"Yes," he replied, smiling. "I am Pa-

gani. My few friends and the people here, inside my gates, hardly think of me as a doctor at all. I am merely one among them; I am only Il Vecchio—the ancient one."

"But," stammered Dennison, "but—I expected—"

"Of course!" assented Pagani. He seized the American's hand in a warm, hearty grasp. "I understand. You probably expected to find some formidable savant immured in a den with dried bodies, skulls, bats, and all the rest of the regulation alchemistic mummery. Well," and he shrugged his powerful shoulders, "if so, I must disappoint you.

"I am only a common ordinary man among men, the least of any, albeit of great age. I, too, serve. Even among the rosetrees, which I love to favor with a little more sunlight and warmth and life, I find simple, quiet satisfaction. But of these things we can speak later. You are weary now. Come on in the house and rest a while. Then we can talk. Not now.

"Even thought you come from Witham, to whom I owe my life—even though all I have is yours, to my last bit of bread and wine—I must bid you rest before you state your errand."

Releasing Dennison's hand, he dismissed the Lombard with a gesture of finality.

"Come, now," he queried of Dennison, "will you honor me by entering my door?"

He took the satchel from his guest and led the way toward the house. With a smile, he stood aside for Dennison to enter first. Quiet and a trifle slow, his every gesture was courtesy embodied—the perfect, poised courtesy of the cultured European.

In the hallway Dennison faced him with growing excitement. Now that the first surprise of this meeting had a trifle worn away, the object of his mission, ever-urgent, incessantly burning in his mind, forced the American to speak.

"I—I'm not tired!" he exclaimed in a hoarse, quivering voice that utterly belied his words. "Never felt better in my life. Let me have just a few minutes' talk with you now. I've come all the way from New York to ask you a question. Can't wait much longer. Won't you—"

"My friend," interrupted Il Vecchio, raising a hand for silence, "no, no, I must refuse. Out of regard for you, and for the man in whose name you come to me, I must decline. Rest—you need rest. After that, as many questions as you please. But for the present, even were you Witham himself, I could not talk with you. Come!"

And now he led the way up a broad stone flight of steps, which turning at the half-way landing, led to the second story. Here he showed Dennison to a large sunny room, furnished in the manner of a hundred years ago, and with a curtained bed set in an alcove. The windows gave a magnificent view of the grounds, with a wide stretch of seascape beyond. But even this peaceful chamber could not calm the American's overwrought nerves. Impatiently he turned to the old man, who, smiling, said:

"In an hour from this time you can find me in my study. But would it not be wiser to wait till tomorrow for whatever business you may have with me? We have much time. Nothing presses. Tomorrow, then?"

"No, no!" hastily objected Dennison. "I'm all right now! Can't you give me just a few minutes' time immediately? If—"

Il Vecchio shook his head.

"Au revoir," he murmured, bowing himself out.

Dennison, astonished, watched the singular figure in peasant garb retreating down the hall. The sabots clinked on the tiled floor. With a grimace of vexation the American turned back into the room, closed the door, and, planting both hands on his lank hips, stood there in deep thought.

By the way his lower lip projected, and by the scowl on his tired, travel-worn face, his vexation was apparent.

At length, with an exclamation of "Well, he holds all the cards!" Dennison began taking off his coat and collar, and started to remove the stains of travel.

"Am I crazy—or is he?" wondered the American.

HALF an hour later, somewhat restored by cool water and by some fruit and wine which the Lombard had brought him, the doctor wandered down-stairs again. He felt the need of constant activity. Fe-

vered mind and body alike demanded it. Though he himself hardly realized the fact, the last fortnight had burned up energies in him which might have sufficed for five years of ordinary, tranquil life.

Knowing not which way to go, in the wide-reaching grounds, and caring less, he idled down a broad path which led from aloes, palms, and mulberry-trees to a sort of vine-covered belvedere, perched on a jutting outcrop of yellow-white volcanic stone a full fifth of a mile above the sea. The wide and splendid prospect he viewed with no more than languid interest. His every thought was centered on Il Vecchio, and on the question that he hoped would soon be answered.

So, there he stood on the steps of the summer-house, a lean, bent, eagerly introspective figure, with coming senility apparent in every feature, every line, and look.

"Half an hour yet to wait!" growled he, in petulant impatience. "Half an hour, when every minute's a month to me! But he's got the whip-hand. If he takes it into his head not to answer, why—it's all over. I've got to humor him, give in, and suit his own convenience, worse luck!" And with hot anger in his eyes, he went on up into the summer-house, intending to pass there the hateful yet unavoidable delay.

Suddenly he stopped, peering into the strong sunlight. For, at the far end of the pergola, half-hidden in the mottled shadow, he all at once perceived somebody sitting—a girl clad all in white, with a crimson scarf thrown loosely over her hair.

"I—I beg pardon!" stammered the doctor, raising his hat. "Didn't know there was anybody here. Not intruding, I hope?"

"Oh, not in the least," replied the girl, smiling at him with friendly interest. She spoke in French, which Dennison knew thoroughly. "No friend of my uncle's could possibly intrude. Will you come up and rest?"

She laid aside the embroidery-hoop which she had been very busy with, and, rising, graciously indicated a seat on the vine-shaded bench that circled the end of the pergola.

"Pray, don't rise! Don't let me disturb you!" exclaimed the doctor, momentarily forgetting even his keen impatience and annoyance in presence of this unexpected beauty. And, still hat in hand, he stood a moment undecided whether to retreat or to accept the invitation and remain a while. Half-consciously he seemed to realize the glaring discrepancy between the youth and charm of this French girl, embowered in blossoms and with the eternal splendor of the Riviera for background, and his own anemic, withered ugliness. Yet for all that he sat down heavily upon the bench.

"The—the warmth here—" he began. "We Americans, you know, are used to a more rigorous climate—more bracing, you understand."

She answered nothing for a moment, but merely regarded him with a half-puzzled smile. Then she sat down, too, and once more began busying herself with her embroidery.

"So you are an American?" asked she. "Like Dr. Witham, of whom my uncle so often speaks. We see very few Americans here. Sometimes a German doctor comes, or an Italian. Once we had a Swedish surgeon. Uncle—and I—we always welcome everybody who comes in good faith and in the name of science." Thus, in the sweetest conceivable accent, she concluded.

And with a serious expression quite surprising to the doctor, she gazed at him with level eyes. No child was she, though he judged her at no more than one or two-and twenty, yet (as is common with women of warm climates) she seemed to have developed far beyond the expectation of her years. As Dennison, still a trifle confused, returned her look, he could not help noting the perfect oval of her face, her piquant chin and finely modeled throat, clearly revealed by the soft folds of the organdy.

Her frank inspection of him completed, she once more resumed her task. In spite of the doctor's intense perturbation of mind and the burning impatience which possessed him, he could not suppress feelings of admiration in watching her deft fingers ply the needle. Thoughtfully he observed her as she turned the tight-stretched linen, or held it out for inspection.

"Oh, were I only thirty!" the thought flashed to him, and his heart leaped. A momentary giddiness possessed him. Over his eyes he pressed his hand, and for a moment sat thus, with the warm breeze on his cheek, the sound of the breakers, far below, making dull undertones to the little air the girl was humming.

Presently he calmed himself again. Nothing could be gained, he knew, by permitting the fire of impatience to burn away his energies even before his strange quest was begun. And so, striving to steady his voice, he spoke to her of Witham, of her uncle, and of the privilege he, the newcomer, esteemed it that he was now enabled to enjoy acquaintance with a man of world-wide reputation like Dr. Allesandro Pagani.

From the girl, by seemingly careless, yet really deeply thought out questions, he strove to gain some knowledge of the Italian's latest discoveries and of their results. But she quite evidently knew little or nothing of all this.

"Why should he tell me?" smiled she. "I live here, simply, quietly, and ask few questions of that sort. What? Is it different in America?"

And so they came to speak of contrasts, of Cette, and of the life which to her seemed so commonplace, so matter-of-fact, then of the States—that land to her unknown, and romantic.

At last, glancing at his watch, he arose.

"Pray, pardon me," said he, his voice betraying emotion so strong that the girl glanced up in wonderment. "I—I must go. Tomorrow—"

"You will tell me more about the new world?" she queried, smiling a whole-souled smile which showed her flawless milk-white teeth. "How kind you are! It is for you to pardon me, if I have kept you from an appointment with my uncle. Au revoir!"

He bowed again, and returned to the house, the girl, parting the vines that shielded the pergola, watched him with an expression of keen interest.

"His eyes, how eager!" thought she. "They burn as with a fever. His hand clasp and unclasp. He bites his lips, and the lines of his face have not all been engraved by time. What can it mean? Why does he seek my uncle?"

For a few minutes she sat pondering, while the sea boomed in the clefts and caverns far below. Then, with an unsatisfied shake of the head, she took up her embroidery-hoop again, and once more resumed her pleasant task.

But even that could not restore her calm. A new expression had possessed her features. In her eyes lay shadows as of uneasiness, of vague and prescient fear, as though her soul unconsciously could read the writing in the book of fate.

CHAPTER 4

The Question

THE Lombard directed Dr. Dennison to Il Vecchio's study. With the usual military salute he pointed the way toward the room, which was reached by a flight of stone steps leading down from the main hallway of the house. It seemed to occupy a sort of basement, for on three sides were no windows; but on the fourth, which looked out over the olive-grove, both light and air came freely in. For not only did all four windows stand open there, but also rose-trees and the wisterias idled the thyme-scented breeze of the French Riviera.

The savant rose to meet his visitor, who saw that the smock and sabots had been laid aside. Il Vecchio now wore a loose, comfortable velvet jacket of old-fashioned cut, and a pair of well-trodden morocco slippers. The white beret had been exchanged for a round skull-cap, which covered the old man's baldness.

Dennison noted at a glance the half smoked cigar which lay upon a copper tray and whence blue perfumes wafted upward. He observed the plain comfort of the room; the tiled floor, covered with rugs, the strong, serviceable furniture, which showed the good taste of the master. A broad leather couch, disorderly crowded book-shelves, and—in one corner—a by no means depleted wine-closet proclaimed that Il Vecchio, despite all his erudition, knew and appreciated the good things of life.

"This is favorable," thought the American, as his host shook hands with him. "He's no narrow, crabbed misanthrope, that's plainly to be seen. Just a humane,

simple, kindly old man. Couldn't be better!" Thus did he analyze the physicist; and behind his glasses his eyes grew hard, cold and calculating.

But Il Vecchio left him little time for consideration.

"Will you smoke, my friend?" asked he, hospitably extending his cigar-case. "It's a bad habit I have—one of many. Without our human frailties, our weaknesses, and our habits, what would life be worth?" And he smiled in his beard, a whimsical, humorous smile, as of a man who, understanding all things, was tolerant of all.

Dennison refused with a shake of the head.

"No," replied he, "I'm sorry, but I mustn't. Haven't touched tobacco for two years. Wine has been denied me for the past five. One by one all the pleasures of life have been gradually taken away. One by one my senses have betrayed me." His tones grew bitter. "First, sight began to fail. That was in 1901. A gradual dimness, you understand. Then hearing became impaired. And I a physician, too! Then—"

Il Vecchio interrupted him with a raised hand.

"Come, come, my friend!" he exclaimed. "What words are these? You are overtired even yet. Unnerved, perhaps by the long journey and the heat and all the unaccustomed conditions of life here in the south. Put aside these thoughts! Let us speak of pleasanter things. If you have come to consult me, as from your telegram I infer you have, there will be time enough for that in a day or two, when you are rested and quite yourself again."

"But doctor, I cannot wait! The question I have come four thousand miles to ask you—"

"No, no; if I am to be your adviser, I must dictate the terms! Come, sir, be seated. Calm yourself." With a single turn of his muscular wrist he wheeled an easy chair round for his visitor. "Try this," he commanded. "It cannot fail to rest you." He laid his hand on Dennison's breast, and gently yet irresistibly forced him to sit down.

"Ah, you Americans!" he ejaculated, bringing up another chair and choosing a fresh cigar from the box. "So impetuous, so full of business, so hurried! With you, the first thing is always business. Not so with us, monsieur. My niece Stasia and I together with Bartolommeo and the old peasant woman who cooks for us all—we have a different regime, restful, quiet, rational, as you shall see. But, come, come," he added more quickly; "tell me, first of all, how is Witham? When did you see him last? What is he doing now? Always that splendid research-work of his, I take it? His welfare lies very close to my heart. You come to me from him. I welcome you again because of that! Tell me about him. Tell me all, everything—forget no detail!"

Dennison, thus constrained, yielded as gracefully as his shaken nerves and his infirmity would permit. With a strong effort he forced himself into some semblance of composure. And while the old man gravely listened, smoking the while, he told all that he knew of the great American surgeon through whose kindness he had now gained such instant and unusual favor with Pagani.

The Italian, listening, keenly observed his guest. He noted how Dennison fidgeted in his chair, how the man's fingers twitched, and how, from time to time, the facial muscles involuntarily contracted.

"NEURASTHENIA, complicated by general physical breakdown, and premature senility due to overwork and strain," he diagnosed the case in his own mind. "Only too common among Americans. Ah, well, a few weeks here will very largely remedy all that." And with a word here or there, he continued to draw out Dennison regarding Witham, who had been his university mate at Budapest many years before, and who, at the time when the great fire had destroyed the Kaiserhof Theatre, had saved the Italian's life.

At length, fully satisfied, Il Vecchio tossed his smoked-out cigar in the fireplace.

"I thank you," he remarked. "This news has been of vital interest to me. Now, how can I serve you? Why have you come so far to seek me, an obscure experimenter? Command me. You have but to speak!"

Dennison, abruptly confronted with his

opportunity, went pale. Nervously he blinked, then fell to fingering his close-cropped bristly white mustache.

"I—I—" he stammered.

"What is it you wish? Treatment at my hands? Rest? Retirement for a time from the world? Speak freely. All I have is yours!"

For a moment the American, overwhelmed with emotion, found no words. Then he leaned forward in his chair. Straight at Il Vecchio he peered, his eyes burning with new fire.

"Is—is it true," he queried in an almost inaudible voice— "is it indeed true, as I have heard from Witham in a letter, that your—your experiment has at last succeeded?"

"My experiment? Why, which experiment? I always have a dozen or two under way in my laboratory." With a wave of the hand he indicated a door at the rear of the study. "Which particular one do you mean?"

"The one dealing with—with life and its essence! *The immortality of the body!* The renewal of youth!

Il Vecchio frowned. Two deep lines formed between his brows. For a moment he regarded Dennison, who, in his intense agitation, had gripped the arms of the chair and now sat there panting with uncontrollable excitement.

"Well, what if I have?" suddenly asked the patriarch. "What then?"

"Have you found it? Tell me!" asked Dennison eagerly.

"Tell you? What are you asking? Suppose I have discovered the vital principle—"

"You admit it?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" cried the old man, for the first time stung into visible irritation. "Why?"

"Why?" shouted the American, his self-control fast dying. Up he sprang. "You have this secret, and you—you ask me why I want to know? Here!" He flung out his trembling hands. "I am dying! Give me life!"

Il Vecchio, a slow fire beginning to smolder in his deep-set eyes, still sat motionless in the easy chair beside the table.

"Life!" choked the American.

The old man raised a warning, an imploring hand.

"Not so loud," commanded he. "You forget yourself, good friend. Some one may overhear you. Be calm!"

"But—"

"No, no; you can gain nothing by undue haste or importunate demands." And Il Vecchio smiled again, that wise, shrewd, tolerant smile of his. "Here," he added, rising, "let me pour you a soothing drink." He took down from the wine-closet a flask of crimson liqueur. Filling a glass, he held it out. But Dennison refused.

"No, no!" he cried. "Is isn't that I want! It's—"

"Very well, then," sternly interrupted the savant, "let the conversation cease. You are overwrought and weary. Let us take a little walk through the grounds. My roses and—"

"I implore you, doctor, hear me! My time is very short, much shorter, perhaps, than you suspect. I, too, am a physician; I understand. Why weary you with symptoms? Look at me, as I am, and judge! Only by straining my last fag-ends of strength to the very breaking-point have I been able even to reach you at all. Now, every hour is precious. Every minute! Let us talk!"

Il Vecchio peered sharply at him from under those pent-house brows of his. He set down the wine-glass.

"Very well," he conceded, with a curious look. "What then?"

For a moment the American bent his head, as though ashamed of his outburst. Then he glanced up.

"On what terms," he asked in an even, toneless voice, "will you permit me to be the subject of your experiments along this line? The risks are all my own. Gladly I will assume them. You will accept me on what terms?"

"Terms?" cried Il Vecchio in surprise.

"Yes. That's the plainest and most honest way to put it. All that I possess—"

"Stop! Do not speak to me of money!" interrupted Il Vecchio deprecatingly.

"But I—"

"No, no! What should I do with wealth? I have here everything I need. Money would but prove a dross and burden. As I am, behold me, content. Science takes no thought for wealth. Speak not of money!"

Dennison remained a moment in thought. Then said he:

"Well, in the name of humanity, I make my appeal. And for the love you bear the friend who is mine, too, as well as yours."

"Ah, now you speak a better language," answered the philosopher. "Viewed thus, the question is less sordid. Yet it is formidable. You ask me to divulge to you, in a moment, the crowning secret of my whole life-work. Nay, more than that—the climax of three thousand years' unending search. You ask that I should give it all to you. Why, by what title, pray?"

Dennison, abashed could not meet the piercing eyes of the old man. Over his face he pressed both hands, and for a moment stood there, shaken and unnerved.

"Three thousand years," repeated the scientist as in a sort of retrospective reverie. "Think of what you are asking! At one blow you are seeking to cut through the whole fabric that began with the black arts of Khmi, in Egypt, and that only now seems ended here on the summit of this mountain by the sea. In one moment you would consume the results of centuries of toil! Toil begun far back in the twilight of civilization, carried on by Aristotle and the Greeks, nurtured by Albertus Magnus, Bacon, and Aquinas, developed by Parcelsus and Basil Valentine, by Lully and Spinoza, by Newton and an innumerable host of others. Come, come, my impetuous friend, by the shades of Hermes Trismegistus, you know not what you ask!"

"I know only that I am dying—dying before my time! Save me!"

"Save you? You, an individual, by sacrificing what should eventually belong to all mankind? This is no secret, I tell you, with its toil-worn pedigree, its record of human agony and heart break, of suffering, madness, and death, to be divulged in a five-minute chat, or administered after meals in a tablespoon, like any patent nostrum! First ask yourself whether you have the knowledge, the faith, the understanding, and the fortitude, the purity of heart to risk—"

"Why, what have all those got to do with my merely taking your drug?"

cried Dennison, anger suddenly overcoming discretion. "If you accept me as a patient, agree in my diagnosis, and—"

"Ah, my friend," interrupted the patriarch sadly shaking his head, "I see you understand very little of the nature of this thing. How should you? Without a long novitiate—"

"What? When, at this rate, I have at most only a month or two of life?"

Il Vecchio gazed thoughtfully for a moment at his guest. Then said he, with sudden determination:

"Come, I will show you at least the thing you beg for. After that, we shall see."

He led the way toward the rear of the study.

Dennison, trembling and faint, came close behind.

CHAPTER 5

Arch-Treason

IN THE wall, Dennison saw a solidly built door, provided with what seemed strikingly out of place in the environment—a combination lock.

At the American's startled glance, Il Vecchio smiled.

"One does not leave one's life-work exposed even to a well-meaning niece and man-servant," he explained. "A little dusting or cleaning or setting things in order might wreck years of toil. Hence the precautions."

Speaking, he stooped, and fell to working over the dial. Dennison's breath choked him. His head swam. For support he had to set a hand against the wall. The time seemed endless; yet in reality it was but a minute till the door swung open.

Then, as the old man snapped a switch, the room within became bathed in a soft, purple light. Dennison had never seen its equal for calm radiance. He stared, astonished, even despite his burning eagerness, at the ceiling, which glowed like a huge firefly. Lamps there were none, but from above, the illumination flooded down in wondrous beauty.

Il Vecchio noted his astonishment.

"You do not understand even that?" asked he, with good-humored patronage. "Yet after all it is a mere trifle compared with the mystery which but a minute ago you were asking me to plunge you into, all unprepared! My light is nothing but a perfect vacuum in flat glass accumulators masked in the ceiling. A little mechanical agitator raps the central accumulator and sets up ether-waves. By varying the rhythm of the agitator, I easily change the ether wave-lengths and the color of the light—you see?"

He moved a pointer on a dial under the switch, swiftly running the gamut of the spectrum from the most unearthly brilliant violet to dazzling green and deep red. Then, bringing it immediately back to purple, he laughed with a touch of malice.

"Suppose I really wanted money," queried he, "and made this invention public? Can you conceive the millions that would be mine? Save for the creation of the initial vacuum—which is my secret, shared only by the humble glowworm—and for the negligible expense of the agitator, this light costs nothing. One franc a year will illuminate all Paris. And I alone understand the method. Yet you offer to bribe me?"

"But," stammered the American, burning with shame, "is it ethical to withhold such powers from the world?"

Il Vecchio only laughed, and motioned Dennison to follow. The door closed behind them. Together they advanced into a spacious underground room.

Confused and shaken, the visitor glanced round. He got an impression of a well-equipped and busy laboratory. He saw long tables, shelves, and stands covered with a profusion of bottles, flasks, retorts, and test-tubes. At one side was a marble sink with running water. Some process was in operation there, for a trickling stream fell from a spigot into a funnel lined with filter-paper. White and clear it entered the funnel, to emerge blood-red and collect in a huge carboy.

Here, an acetylene-flame burned under a graphite crucible. Strange fumes rose. There, an intensely brilliant little point of light, clear blue, sparkled inside a twisted apparatus of flint glass. Other activities were also going forward. Il Vecchio assured himself that all was well. Then with a searching look he turned.

"Think," he said, twisting a strand of his white beard between thumb and finger, "think what Empedocles would have given to have been able to spend an hour, even ten minutes, in this place! Think what the Alexandrine monks, the Arabs under the Abbassids, even Geber himself would have suffered, to see the fruition of their labors here at last an actuality!"

"Where is it, this fruition?" exclaimed the American eagerly. "The Elixir! Is it here?" Weak with excitement and wild hope, he leaned for support against a table whereon an alembic was boiling. Swift little phosphorescences played over the surface of the liquid. Dennison felt a strange, shuddering uneasiness. For a moment he seemed strangling, there in that window-less, pungent-aired, glowing chamber. Unsteadily he stretched out his hand.

"Where is it?" he cried again. "Let me look upon it! Let me see it—only see it! Life!"

With an odd, wondering, critical expression, the savant observed him.

"So, my friend," queried he, with a ghost of a smile— "so you become agitated here, even in the vicinity of the secret? Yet only a minute ago you wanted to know all, at once! Ah, you Americans are hard to understand!"

HE TURNED away. Dennison, shaking all over, trying in vain to moisten his lips, with his dry tongue, watched him as in a dream.

The old man made his way slowly to a steel door about eighteen inches wide by two feet high. This door, set into the solid masonry in the left wall of the chamber, was some three and a half feet above the cement floor. Like the outer door, this also was secured by a combination.

Saying not a word, Il Vecchio spun the knob. Dennison, breathing heavily, remained beside the table, staring through his glasses. The strong purple light that gushed from the vacuum-ceiling, suppressed all shadows. It cast an eery, unnatural radiance over everything. Save for the bubbling of the reactions and the click-click-click of the wards as Il Vecchio labored over the combination, an unnatural and deep silence drew tense between the men.

Dennison's heart was beating with dull haste. In his temples he felt the blood painfully hammering. He tried to clear his throat, in a vain attempt to speak, but made only a hoarse, unintelligible sound.

Now Il Vecchio had got the door open —at last! Now he was reaching inside the small, thickly padded aperture which lay within the frame of steel. Now he was taking out a strong little box of cedar-wood, with brass hinges and a padlocked hasp.

With this he turned to the American.

"Come!" he bade in a deep voice.

Dennison faltered nearer.

"Is it—in that box?" he gasped, his voice all but inaudible.

"Impatient, still?" chided the old man. "Yes, here it is. In a minute, now, you shall see it. Presently, presently."

From his pocket he extracted a silver ring, with many keys.

"Yes, I will show you the crowning essence of my years of toil," he continued, choosing the proper one and inserting it in the padlock. "The supreme result of all my study, care, and long research. Even though you may not taste, yet you may look upon it. Wait only one minute now; then you shall see!"

Speaking, he unlocked the little chest and threw back the lid.

"Behold the miracle of miracles!" he cried. "The solvent of death, sought by sages and scholars since the dim, nebulous beginning of things!

"For this, their crucibles and furnaces burned, through all the long dim ages of antiquity. For this they labored with their adudels, their fixations, lixiviations, transmutations! For this they suffered, some starvation, others death by the stake, the rack, the noose. For this, for this!"

Forgetting even to breathe, Dennison half-crouched there at his side, staring with wide eyes and fevered passion of eagerness at the thing that lay within.

On a bed of softest white cotton-down reposed a metal flask about four and a half inches long. Curiously wrought and chased in arabesques it was; and where the graver's tool had bitten deep, the unmistakable luster of pure gold shone forth.

Caressingly Il Vecchio took up the flask from its bed. In his aged fingers he held it, turned it this way and that;

then, extending it toward Dennison, said more quietly:

"Within this vial rests the secret of all the age. Can you believe it? Does it not seem manifestly impossible? Do you not think me vainly boastful in making the assertion? Yet it is true, and I have proved it!"

The American made no answer. Il Vecchio continued:

"Where Roger Bacon and Geber failed with their gold dissolved in hydrochloric acid, I have succeeded. Where Aquinas and Lully got only disappointment with their aqua vitae ardens, I have achieved success. They were all working on mistaken lines, yet in them, too, inhered a grain of truth. Crookes, Lodge and Becquerel, and all that school, with their surmises as to radio-activities and the transmutation of elements, have come near the facts. I give them credit. Yet even so, I, combining all, have won the prize. And here it is at last—the truth and only Aqua Regia, the Alkahest!"

"You—you mean," stammered Dennison, "that you've really got the—Elixir of Life in—in that flask?"

"Nothing else!" replied the aged doctor. "Here I have it, fast prisoned. There is but an ounce and a half, true; and so far I have been unable to create any more of the base on which this solution is formed. To be frank with you, a little luck entered into my final result, a still elusive reaction. Were this destroyed I am not positive that I could ever manufacture any more. But so long as I still keep this I can increase the quantity by slow, elaborate distillations. So you perceive its value, this thing which you are rashly begging for?"

Dennison nodded.

"YES," answered he hoarsely. "It is life!"

"Life itself," assented Il Vecchio, holding up the vial. "Life, in a few scant drops. And it is mine! Like Faustus, I know the mystery. But unlike him, I have not been obliged to barter my soul away for it. At least, not yet! No, I have only had to follow some twelve thousand experiments to an arduous conclusion, by strict scientific methods. The result has justified the inhuman labor. See,

now, I will show you a little of the thing itself!"

Smiling, he took up a graduated glass from the bench. Carefully he inspected it. He rinsed it in a sterilizing solution, which he washed away with distilled water. Then, setting it close at hand, he began unscrewing the gold top of the vial.

"The Alkahest!" exclaimed he. "Yes, I have christened it with the name that Paracelsus gave to his imaginary universal element. Not that his idea was right, for there is not, nor can there ever be, any one substance which will both transmute the baser metals into gold and also renew the protoplasmic Urschleim which lies at the base of all life. Paracelsus's theory that life is a fire and the body a kind of fuel is utterly untenable. I have proved that life itself is the material thing. And this is the fuel—the fire which burns out the dross and frees the body forever from all pain, decay and death."

Even as he spoke he had finished removing the flask-top. Then with a steady hand he poured out, into the graduate, seven drops of a most brilliant, scintillating liquid.

Golden as the vital itself, with iridescent blends of color, it lay lustrous and beautiful at the bottom of the flint glass.

"You see?" queried Il Vecchio. "Can you compute the value of this thing? Can you conceive the treasures that would deluge me if I but made it known and were willing to sell it?" He held the graduate up to the light, and turned it this way, then that. "Millionaires, kings, emperors—can you not behold them undertaking pilgrimages to me, and doing homage, and making my life intolerable? Do you wonder that, save to Witham and to you, who come from him, I have divulged this to no living soul?"

The American, sick with emotion, leaned heavily against the edge of the long table. Instinctively he stretched forth his hand as though to clutch the glass; but Il Vecchio shook a forbidding head.

"No, no!" he cried. "You do not understand! You fail to realize the dangers that lie in this essence. Even I do not know as yet just how little or how much is needed to render the life-process static or reverse decline. I must yet immolate hosts of guinea-pigs with my solution and hpyodermic needles before I shall be fully informed. Be patient!"

And already he began pouring the liquor back into its receptacle.

"You see," he added, "I cannot leave it long exposed to the air, for it is highly volatile."

"You—you—cannot—give—" stammered Dennison.

"How can I?" answered Il Vecchio, once more screwing on the cover. "Be reasonable, my friend; be satisfied. You have seen what no other human eyes than mine have yet beheld. Let this suffice!"

"But, listen!"

"No, no, anything but this. Science forbids. It is impossible!"

"That's your last word?"

"Come, come, where is your sense of professonal ethics? You cannot really mean to ask for the Alkahest! My house is yours, my garden, my table, my library and all I have; but—not even I myself would buy back youth at the price of drinking this!"

"So, then, you putter with guinea-pigs and rabbits, and decline to accept me as a subject for experimentation? You refuse to save my life?"

"No, not that," replied the old man, showing now a trifle of vexation. "How can a man of your intelligence misunderstand me so egregiously? Koch or Pasteur with a new serum, Ehrich with his '606' —would they have been justified in using all their new-found power, undeveloped as yet, for one man's benefit? Would not the whole world condemn and execrate such an action? Wait! Be patient, I say. We shall see, if, as I hope, you are mistaken about your own condition, and you stay with me a few months, who knows what may not happen? Calm yourself, my friend, and we shall see."

An oath burst from the American's pale, writhen lips. With a sudden, passionate outbrust of strength, which he hardly dreamed lay in him, stark-mad with baffled hopes and overstrung nerves, he flung himself suddenly upon Il Vecchio.

The old man, before he could turn or strike, or even cry for help, found his breath cut clean off by the twisting grip of the American on his shirt-collar. It was

All at once dazzling lights spread before his vision—strange phantasmagorias of the retina. Tense as wire, a band seemed closing around his brain.

a trick Dennison had learned long years before in college-hazing days. And now, unthought of for decades, it served his purpose.

Il Vecchio struggled, choked, gasped, and flung up both arms. The golden vial flew wide, clanked dully on the cement, and rolled away.

Dennison, with one final upsurge of strength, hurled the strangling patriarch sprawling over on the work-bench, stunned and breathless, amid a crashing wreck of apparatus.

Then, with catlike agility, he sprang to where the little flask lay, dented, near the sink.

A second and he caught it up.

"Life! Life!" he shrilled with the cackling laughter of a madman.

And, twisting off the cap, at one quick draft he drained the vial to its last clear golden drop.

CHAPTER 6

The Birth of a Mystery

FINE, subtle, as the wandering topmost notes of a cathedral organ—warm, tingling, and elusive—instinct with potent, vital forces far beyond the range of human words, the Alkahest burned its way down the American's throat.

Staggering back a step or two, he stood there; one hand supported him against the wall, the other clutched his breast. In his face the color came and went. He gasped; his eyes closed, then opened in a wild, half-terrified stare. All at once a quivering, an uncontrollable tremor, violent and sudden, possessed his body. Giddy and reeling, he clutched the table. There for a moment he clung, blinded and dazed, while round and round him the laboratory seemed to spin in grotesque, exaggerated flight.

But through his much half-consciousness a dim perception now began to force itself. Distorted, far-off appearing, unreal as in a dream, he saw the figure of Il Vecchio struggle up from where he had been hurled. Came a moment's blankness, with flickering mental image like kinetoscope pictures from a torn and "rainy" film. In his ears sounded a buzzing, a roaring that waxed and waned—a thundering like sea-caves in storm; then a huge inertia seemed to overcome all thought, all feeling and emotion.

All at once dazzling lights spread before his vision—strange phantasmagorias of the retina. They drew to an intensely brilliant ring, then burst outward in flying shreds of glory. Tense as wire, a band seemed closing around his brain.

He felt that he was falling.

With a cry he opened his eyes. His sight grew steady. The noises rang away in dying echoes, vanished and left him in what seemed a huge, hollow sphere of silence. A new, strange quality of being quivered through his flesh. The visions disappeared. He found himself, gasping, wide-eyed, staring about him in the subterranean room.

"Doctor! Dr. Pagani—where—" he managed to pant with tingling throat and lips.

No answer.

Both hands grasping his head, he glared about.

"Oh, doctor!" he cried again. For now he caught sight of Il Vecchio. "What—what are you—doing?"

Still the Italian made no reply. He had slid off the work bench, and now, tottering, moaning, bent half double, was dragging himself toward the steel door that gave exit from the laboratory.

Dennison perceived that the aged man was weeping. Through the gnarled fingers which sprawled unsteadily over Il Vecchio's face, he caught the glint of tears by the strange purple light overhead.

"Doctor!"

Il Vecchio merely quickened his pace. Helping himself along by clinging to benches and tables, he seemed—despite his anguish and the physical injury which Dennison had inflicted on him—determined to reach that door immediately.

Why? For what sinister purpose?

A keen wonder, followed by a dreadful fear, sobered the American.

"Stop! Stop!" cried he, reeling after Il Vecchio.

Instinctively he knew that, once the steel door should close upon him, the laboratory would become his prison-cell, a living tomb where he, perhaps for years and years, might vainly beat his hands, un-

heeded, against the walls of masonry; an oubliette whence nevermore his voice could reach the outer world.

What agonies—what mad, ingenious tortures—might not this aged scientist devise? Confidence violated, life-work negatived and swept away in one brief second by stark treachery, what vengeance too horrible to pay the debt?

And, sick with sudden terror, Dennison made a staggering run after the Italian.

"Stop! Hear me! Stop!" he screamed.

Il Vecchio whirled upon him.

The old man stood transformed. His eyes glared, catlike, in his unnaturally pale face. Across his cheek glowered a dull red welt, where something had struck him as he had fallen across the bench. Through the trembling mustache and beard showed the worn teeth; and the veined fist, upraised, vibrated with impotent passion.

Dennison, horribly aghast, even despite the complex of strange sensations that burned within him, started back at the sight of the old man.

Head lowered and thrust forward, one shoulder turned toward Il Vecchio, the other drawn back to give the clenched fist more impact if a blow were needed, Dennison stood there.

Conventions all swept clean away, every scrap and shred of civilized veneer stripped from their naked souls, they glared upon each other, man against man, with only brute strength the arbiter between them.

THUS for a moment they remained, guest and host, betrayer and betrayed. No word from either. In the laboratory no sound save the bubbling of the reactions, the drip-drip of the filter, the panting breath of these two human creatures, which for a second had reverted to the beast, across ten million years of time. No word, no sound. Yet to Dennison it seemed as though the rapid throbbing of his heart filled the whole room with hammer-blows. He choked, gasped, tried to speak, and he found he could accomplish nothing.

Again Il Vecchio turned toward the door.

"You—you lay a finger on that knob," gasped the American with a supreme effort, "and by Heaven I'll—I'll brain you!"

Up he snatched a heavy earthen jug from the bench. He gripped it in a hand which, though still tremulous, now felt a strength unknown for years.

He poised it, waiting.

"Well?" he demanded, "you hear? Make one move to lock me in and down you go—forever!"

And toward Il Vecchio he took a sudden, menacing step.

Erect to meet him stood the Patriarch. Their eyes clashed. Dennison's hand tightened on the handle of the jug till his knuckles whitened.

"So, then," sneered Il Vecchio, his face strange and wan under that vibrant purple glow, "so then, this is American honor?"

Raising his head, he crossed his arms upon his panting breast.

"I—you—" began Dennison, but the old man lifted a hand for silence.

"So this is your payment for my confidence? I trust you, and you—you rob

me of all—everything. Then, having taken life, you threaten death. Why, when—"

"No matter about that," retorted Dennison passionately, a strong intoxication possessing him so that he reeled where he stood. "No matter." And, shaken by his own pulses, he raised the weapon over his head. "You aren't going to lock me in here like a rat in a box! You understand? So don't—don't you try it! Out I go—now!"

"Fool!" spat Il Vecchio. "One word to my Lombard, and he tears you up and flings you over the cliff as I might tear and throw away waste-paper! Your safety as my guest demands—"

"My safety! Ho—ha! Much that concerns you now. Let me pass!"

"You have eaten beneath my roof," retorted the old man. "Now—alas! — I, I with my own hands— I cannot take your life!"

"Are you going to let me out of here, or aren't you?" howled Dennison once more, racked by a periodic spasm of the drug.

Il Vecchio, answering not, remained silent a moment as in thought. Then, with a sudden, quick determination, he burst into a laugh—strange, discordant, unnatural.

"As you will!" he exclaimed. "So be it! Better thus it may be, after all. Not for man, the mere toy and puppet of nature, to judge a crime like this against her laws and to avenge it. This should be for nature herself. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord; I will repay.' Let my god, which is science, judge between you and me."

"Out! Out of here!"

"Out, yes; out of this hidden room, a free, untrammeled man!" replied Il Vecchio. "It is for you to guard the monstrous secret. As for me"—and with an added dignity he drew himself up—"neither by word nor sign shall I betray it to a living soul. The problem now is yours to solve, mine to observe. I cannot violate the inborn traditions of my race; nor would I if I could. Remain with me; still be my guest. Come!"

And, his face a study of inexplicable, hidden motives, he threw open the door into the study.

"Pass freely," bade he.

Dennison eyed him suspiciously a moment, as though fearing some ruse against which he must be on his guard. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders and a wry smile, he dropped the earthen jug.

Speaking no word, shaken with alternate chills and hot spasms which set the blood boiling in his arteries, he strode unsteadily past the Italian.

When he was in the study Il Vecchio also emerged. Locking the door carefully behind him, he turned and faced the fever-racked American. Dennison saw new lines, strange portents in that aged face.

But it was with a smile—though the old man's lips were pale and trembling—that he said:

"To speak of right, of wrong, or of forgiveness, becomes absurd and wholly banal at such a crisis. This problem bulks too vast for mere petty conventions. There," and he pointed toward the fast-locked door of steel, "there and in your own body lies the riddle; there lies the secret and the answer. Only the future can declare the ends of justice."

"I—I—what do you mean?" beseeched Dennison hoarsely, taking a step toward him. He staggered in his tracks as he stood there. Only by a strong effort could he hold himself upright.

"Pray leave me now," commanded Il Vecchio. "Go to your room and rest and think. Then—"

"But—"

"No. I cannot talk with you. Let all this be between us for a while, as though it had not been. Perhaps," he added, waving a hand in stern dismissal, "perhaps we both may have many and strange things to learn."

CHAPTER 7

The Dawn of Life

DENNISON, with a set, staring face, turned and blundered out of the study. Unsteady, dazed, he groped his way upstairs and sought his room. With a shaking hand he shot the bolt; across the floor he stumbled, and spent with emotion, fell upon the great four-posted bed.

For some moments he lay huddled in

a singular heap, face buried in his hands. A thousand disjointed images, thoughts, hopes, doubts, questionings flitted across the screen of his consciousness, weaving into strange forms, changing, dissolving, recombining like the colors of a huge kaleidoscope. And all this time—pulsing, tingling, burning through his every fiber, cell, and tiniest capillary—the subtle essence of the Alkahest worked on.

Came a moment of lucidity.

"Rest. Sleep, at all hazards. I must have it, or I shall go mad!"

He ran to his little satchel. Snapping it open, in haste before another paroxysm of the Elixir should engulf him, he quickly rummaged out a few small bottles—some potent remedies he had bought on the way, to quell his extreme and growing neurasthenia.

Choosing one, he poured out a stiff dose and gulped it.

"Now," cried he, "for at least a few hours' oblivion! If I live, I live. If I die, this is the last time I need ever drug myself to sleep. Either way, so be it!"

He pulled the shutters—for late afternoon had not yet given place to dusk—and quickly undressing, slipped into his pajamas. A moment later, he was in bed.

But, though he composed himself to slumber, nothing came of it. The well-known effects of the powerful opiate failed utterly to supervene. Instead, he broke into a fine, cold sweat; then fever burned him, and in half delirium he tossed an hour or more. Again through his mind passed the solemn warning of Il Vecchio:

"You do not understand the nature of this thing. Ah, my impetuous friend, by the shades of Hermes Trismegistus, you know not what you ask."

With an oath he sprang up. He doubled the dose of narcotic. All through his body seemed to be working, infiltrating, seeping, some strong and unknown force.

And again pacing the floor, he tried to collect his scattered thoughts.

All in vain. His attempts were futile as those of a drunken man. Now flashed dazzling perceptions, only to be followed—before he could order and arrange his ideas—by a huge, monstrous charivari of disorder.

Now came the vision of the girl in the pergola, serious and sweet; again, a wild desire to flee, to leave the aged doctor, the mountaintop, France itself; to return home at topmost speed, there to fight out his battle amid familiar surroundings; still again, a great and numbing fear of quitting the place, lest unforseen and hideous contingencies befall.

Then, last of all, came darkness and pain and wildly disordered dreams.

Thus passed a time, how long he could not tell; but all at once Dennison came to clear consciousness. He found himself standing before the mirror which was set into the door of his clothes-cabinet, with a lighted candle in his hand.

Into his own wide, staring eyes, the pupils unnaturally dilated, he realized that he was gazing fixedly, like a self-hypnotizer at his mystic, soul destroying task. For a moment he stood, thus peering. Then a sharp cry escaped his lips.

AND suddenly, realizing the truth, he fell a-trembling with a sick madness of joy; like a miser, perhaps, who might by chance have stumbled on the secret of transmuting lead to gold.

For already—already—he could see a change! Yes, slight though it was, an alteration, distinct and unmistakable!

"My eyes—my eyes are different!" he panted, leaning forward in a passion of eagerness, the candle shaking in his hand till hot wax dropped and spattered on the floor.

"My hair—see!—and those deep lines in the forehead! Half obliterated! And—oh!—and the cheek—fuller—the—the—"

He could speak no more.

His teeth chattered as though he had been flung into an icy bath. He staggered, catching for breath. The candle fell from its holder. Extinguished, it left the bedchamber in a soft darkness.

Dennison perceived that night had come. He felt, too, that he was stifling. The indoor air seemed to choke and sicken him. It was as though the turning tides of life—the new, mystic, upspringing flame within him—demanded oxygen, free and pure, without stint or limit.

To the window he staggered, feeling before him like a blind man—for, indeed, at that first moment of realization he could hardly see—and with one wild, impatient gesture flung open the shutters.

Then, holding to the jamb, he breathed in great lungfuls of the cool night air. And through him, like a living fire, he felt the mingled oxygen and essence of the Alkahest run swiftly, gloriously, in sovereign power over weakness, suffering, and death.

For a while he stood there, asking no more, wishing no other thing, content merely to be alive, to feel the old dead weight of disease, of fear, of pain momently dropping from him.

Could you by any magic of telepathy feel what the dragon-fly must feel when, crawling in the heavy, foul inertia of its larval stage up to some lakeside pebble, it sheds this filthy covering and emerges, free, out into the sunlight and sweet summer air—soon to spread gossamer wings and flick its lightning way over the shining surface of the pool—could you understand such a metamorphosis as that, you might perhaps know something of what Dennison felt as he stood there at the open window.

Out over the wide, fair garden-spaces he looked, with eyes no longer dim or aching. The moon, he saw, was poised in a bright lucent sickle high above the olive-trees, which, weird in the half-light, raised their twisted limbs distorted like the souls drawn by Doré for the "Inferno."

Beyond, a glimmer of wavering silver bespoke the presence of the sea. A little green light, very far and small, crept slowly westward—a craft of some sort—perhaps a steamer bound for far America.

And as he looked upon it, and on all this calm, pure, southern night, flooded with the faint moonbeams and made vocal by the nightingales in the orange-grove along the cliff, a sudden gush of tenderness for life, for beauty, a wave of unutterable gratitude swept over his soul.

Forgotten in a second, now, the treason whereby he had profited. Forgotten the stern problems of his future, of his place there in the household of the wronged scientist. Forgotten all but this—that life, life again was coming back to him! Life and all its hope and joy once more, replacing the head husks and ashes of approaching age!

And, whelmed by his tremendous ecstasy, such as never before in the whole world's history had been known to man, or ever shall be known, Dennison sank on his knees before the window.

In the strip of moonlight there he knelt. He bowed his head. In both shaking hands he hid his face. The eyes that for long, long years had known no weeping, now grew hot with tears. The soul which for decades had felt no up-gushing impulse to prayer, voiced an inarticulate cry to the night, the wind, the sea—to nature, nurse and mother and all-wise guardian of human weaklings.

THUS for a while the American remained there, his thoughts too deep, too burning with intensity, too poignant for translation into words.

Then, humbled yet exalted, trembling with eagerness yet conscious of a vague, half-formulated fear, he rose. More calmly now he looked abroad upon the night. And, since no thought of sleep at such a time could even lodge within his brain, the idea came to him that he best might walk down through the garden as far as the cliff, to sit and think and plan what should be done.

"Yes," said he, half aloud, "if this be not all a dream, if this be reality and not some mad deception of the drug, tonight marks an epoch in the story of the human race. I, I in my own living person, am experiencing the miracle which all the alchemists have sought in vain; which lured Ponce de Leon to the everglades of Florida; which for three-thousand years has danced, an intangible will-o'-the-wisp—elusive and death-dealing—before the dreamers of the world."

And, dazed by the magnitude of his imaginings, he stepped out into the iron balcony before his window.

Leaning over, he saw stout trellis-work up which the clematis and ivy ran. Hastily he dressed. Then down the trellis, with an agility, a vigor which he had not known for years, he swung himself; and presently—pushing his way through dense, perfumed thickets of oleander—came out into the graveled path that led to the cliff.

Here, in fresh wonder, he stopped again.

"Can it be?" he exclaimed, standing there bareheaded and with garments in disarray, the moon casting his wan shadow

out before him. "Can this be true? Am I really Dr. Granville Dennison, of New York City?" And, taking out his card-case, he eagerly read his own name upon a bit of pasteboard. Even that proof, dimly visible in the pale light, could hardly convince him. Tranced with the mystery, the wonder of it all, he wandered down the path. Deeply he breathed the incense of that tropic night; with ecstasy he harkened to the mad, trolling cascades of melody from the orange-grove. Up to the large, white, southern stars he turned his face, where still showed traces of glad tears. And so, walking as perhaps Balder might have done, on his return from the lower regions, he came to the vine-bowered pergola and entered there.

Far below, the threnody of the eternal surf rose, fell, resounded with rhythmic cadence. He leaned and looked down through the blue air; gleaming in the moonlight he saw the crawling lacery of foam that fingered up, up, then burst in fans of spray and fell, asparkle, back into the restless flood. And suddenly, inexplicably, a huge desire assailed him to plunge to swim, to battle with the brine there at the base of the huge cliff.

Shuddering a trifle, he retreated. For a moment he stood looking through the garden. Peace, calm and tenderly benignant, brooded over the world. Far through the groves, a dull black shadow betrayed the presence of the house. All was dark there, save for one tiny chink of light in an upper window. This slit of radiance glimmered fitfully and eerily through the half-obscurity.

"Il Vecchio's room?" thought he. "Or maybe Stasia's?" And recollection stabbed him. For a brief instant he realized the enormity, the horrible treason of his deed. But only for an instant. The fresh-pulsing tides of life within his veins seemed by their very intensity to banish retrospection. His thoughts refused to dwell upon the past. As oil withdraws from water, so his mind slid from regrets or self-accusation. It was as though the past were dead, and only the present, the future, endowed with the essence of reality.

"That's over and gone!" cried he, raising both arms on high, his face to heaven. "Done! Irrevocable! From now on, life! Life anew! Life eternal, indestructible! Life, and love, and happiness beyond the dreaming of the human soul!"

CHAPTER 8

Down The Precipice

DAWN, glowing in turquoise and crimson over the sea, found him transfigured and aglow with wondrous hopes, with keen, delicious, intoxicating foretastes of immortality; the name of Stasia on his lips, her memory and magic in his heart.

As the lighthouse on Les Saintes Maries, far up the curving coast, ceased its intermittent stabbing gleam, and as the gray sea mists rolled up in billowing golden fleece before the sun, once more that passionate longing possessed the American to try his returning strength in the surf.

"No, no, this is mere madness," he exclaimed, trying to quiet the desire. "Why, these twenty years past I haven't even so much as ventured to dip in salt water! I've had to confine myself to tepid splashings in porcelain—and even those only in the greatest moderation. What am I thinking of? I, who only yesterday was a dying man!"

Pacing the length of the pergola, he sought to banish his unruly thoughts. Yet they would not down.

"Why not?" the question still recurred. He stopped and looked at his hands. Surely, these were quite different from the meager, flabby things of yesterday! The morning light showed them already filled out—firm, strong, like those of a man in his prime. Dennison stripped up his sleeve.

"Ah!" he breathed in overwhelmed surprise. He doubled his biceps, clenched his fist, and stood there a moment, working his fist, and stood there a moment, working his regenerated fingers, to watch the lay and interplay of the cords and tendons.

Wide-eyed, he stared in frightened realization of the miracle. Too new, too strange yet for it to have won through the realms of firm belief. Still he half doubted. "Can it be?" he cried. "Science denies it, the whole world scoffs at it—yet it is!"

He tore open his shirt, felt his shoul-

ders, made the muscles flex, relax, and draw; bent his legs and straightened them; then, in a wild burst of exultation, cried again: "It is! No dream—no dream! Reality!"

Abroad across the sea he looked, where now a tiny laten-sail or two, outcreeping, bespoke the early morning fisher fleet just starting from the harbor to eastward. The heave and murmur of that always-summer ocean called him more strongly than before. Its fascination grew irresistible.

Already in imagination he could feel the cool embraces of the surf, the buoyant, vigorous thrust and parry of the clashing breakers, the jetting spray, the tang of brine.

Again he peered across the rail, in the now strengthening light, judging if any way there were to reach the bottom of that dizzying cliff.

His sharpened vision suddenly descried a tiny, broken path which, clinging to the face of the perpendicular rock, wound out of sight around its farther curves.

Here it appeared, there vanished, further on again became once more visible. Whether it led to the bottom, whether it was continuous or broken by impassable gaps, he could not tell. He had no means even of knowing that it was a path for human feet; of surety that, once half-way down, it might not crumble under him and hurl him headlong down, down, to mangled annihilation.

Yet all this counted not with him. Again within, his heart thrilled and burned the strong, adventurous spirit, the lure of the unknown, the perilous, which for long years had lain buried and forgotten.

And, already determined, he left the summer-house. Along the brow of the cliff he quested in the dawn, seeking the embouchure of the tiny path.

Far down toward the eastern boundary wall of the estate, beyond a mulberry thicket and a patch of barren, boulder-strewn ground, he discovered it—a mere cleft in the rock, long since unused by even the feet of the hardy native goats.

It gave him pause a moment; but with a smile, an impatient snapping of the fingers, he set foot upon the perilous descent. Moment by moment, though not since the fruit and wine brought him in his room by the Lombard had he eaten anything, the strength of manhood was returning in him. He wrenched a sapling from its rooted hold upon the cliff-edge, broke it with naked hands to a convenient length, and—thus supplied with an alpenstock—started down.

For a few minutes all went well. Undizzied by the vast emptiness below him, unterrified by the uncertain footing and by the jagged towers of the cliff-wall that shot up, overhanging, at his right hand, down, down, down he kept.

FROM time to time he lashed out gaily with his stick at a flaunting red or yellow bloom clinging upon the lip of the abyss. The beheaded flower, spinning away from his sight, amused him. The task of picking his dangerous way gratified his sense of exuberant vitality, delighted him. Long a brain-worker and an invalid, unused—since the far-distant days of his athletic youth—to any physical exertion, now he felt reviving in him a thousand forgotten satisfactions in the use of muscle, nerve, and skill.

The daring judgment of every step, the firm hold of his clutching fingers on the cliff, the clear-headed defiance of the nothingness below him, and of the jagged, waiting rocks, were like oil upon the fire of his great excitement.

In this unusual, needless peril, the new vitality that, like a living flame, was growing in and through him found vent. And, now clinging to a jut of the volcanic gray-stone, now peering into the vague depths, again leaping a break in the path, crawling on all-fours across some narrow, crumbling causeway flushing up a gull from its rocky nest, or letting himself slide bodily from ledge to ledge, so great a happiness thrilled him that song welled to his lips.

Re-echoing from the rugged face of rock, out rolled that devil-may-care student melody from "Faust" summing up in long forgotten words the cycle of the joys of youth:

Good beer, a maiden smartly dressed.
Stinging tobacco—these I love the best!

Startled by the sound of his own voice, he stopped suddenly with a strange cry.

"Why—what's that?" he exclaimed.

"Is this I myself? What? Am I dreaming, or dead and resurrected, or a ghost—or crazy—or what the blazes am I? Less than twenty-four hours ago I, a spent old man—why, I crept up a decent enough road, breathless, my heart ready to burst. And now—now—"

For a moment he stood still, his feet braced against the outer edge of the pathway, peering down with bold yet startled eyes into the void. Then over his face he passed a hand.

"Well, no matter," he laughed suddenly. "As Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I exist.' Let it go at that. Whosoever I really am, that doesn't matter. Nothing matters, hang it!" he added with sudden eagerness, "except that cold salt plunge."

And once more he started down the perilous trace that once had marked a path down the abyss.

But now the way was growing rougher and more difficult. Fallen masses of stone, from far above had here blocked the way, there broken it entirely, so that he was forced to extraordinary efforts to continue downward. Once or twice he paused, with still some hundreds of feet gaping below him, uncertain whether after all it were not the part of reason to return. But his fixed determination still drove him on and on.

At last, however, he came against a veritable cul-de-sac on the way. Beyond, a break in the path, some feet in width, it seemed as though the narrow ledge abutted in an outcry, beyond which no passage showed itself.

Puzzled, Dennison stood still. What should he do? Give up? Climb back that toilsome way, without having attained his object? Admit himself beaten in this, his first endeavor since the Alkahest had been his?

And, not even knowing whether in case of failure he could get back at all, he measured the distance, leaped, and for a moment tottered desperately upon the crumbling edge, beyond.

One sick, dizzy moment he felt that he was overbalanced, that he must fall. But, desperately clutching at the face of the great wall, his fingers found a hold.

He steadied himself. Grunting with exertion, he drew himself to safety.

Swabbing his forehead, he advanced along the narrow way toward the outcrop where it seemed to terminate. Then, with a cry of sheer astonishment, he stopped.

THERE in the face of the cliff, masked by a tangle of wild aloes that had struck root into a cleft, he saw a dark, narrow opening.

Across it hung the remains of what must at one time have been a stout door. From staples let into the rock, an iron frame sagged drunkenly. Some of the bars had rusted wholly through; others still held. And to these adhered a few worm-eaten scraps of oak, pierced with rivets. The wreckage of a padlock lolled in mockery at one side of the now defenseless aperture.

On the pathway, below the door, bits of iron had gathered, where the rain had washed them clean at the same time that it had carried off the detritus of rotting wood. Beyond this little pile the path extended less than three feet, ending in a moraine of rubbish along the jutting ridge. Dennison perceived at once that now his

way was definitely blocked. Puzzled, he stood there a moment in contemplation.

"How now?" cried he, peering at the door. "What the deuce does this mean?"

Holding to one of the iron staples, he bent, thrust his head in, and squinted round. By the vague light that illuminated the vicinity of the door he perceived a roughhewn flight of steps leading downward, parallel to the face of the cliff. A dozen or so were visible; beyond, darkness swallowed them.

He stood up again, and, still keeping his hold upon the iron, looked down the surface of the precipice.

No way to climb down farther—that was plain. The path was quite obliterated; and, besides, the rocky wall here overhung, so that by no means, save a long rope, could any human creature descend.

Away below him, beckoning, calling, he could see the blue rollers as they creamed in crawling windrows of surf along the base of the titanic wall.

"It's down those stairs, or not at all!" said he decisively.

Suddenly he understood the cause of the uneasiness which, till now only half perceived, had for the last hour or two been making him blink and squint.

"My glasses!" he exclaimed. And as he spoke he snatched them off impatiently. "Ah, now that's better; now I can see!" With a broad smile he gazed about him, holding the glasses in his hand the while.

Then, actuated by a sudden impulse, he flung them far out into space. He watched them spin, twinkle, flash as they fell.

"Drat you!" he cried, as they vanished into the sea. "You've given me your last day's bother! And you, too, and you!" he added, dragging from his pocket first a blue bottle, then a brown one. These likewise he hurled away with angry force.

The glitter of the hurtling bottles was grateful to his eyes as they whirled in a vast arc through the sunlit morning air. The pill-box cover spun off; he saw a scatter of white pellets. Surprised at the keenness, the accuracy, of his vision, he uttered a cry of "Splendid! Fine!" and faced the direct sunlight.

These rays, level with the heaving bosom of the sea, already burned with southern ardor. But he did not squint.

"Why," he wondered, "this is the first time in—in heaven knows how many years that I've been able to look Old Sol in the face!"

From somewhere out there in the tides he heard a faint plop, plop!

"Eh? What's that?" he exclaimed. "Oh, those infernal medicine bottles! Good riddance for me; worse luck for the fish, as Dr. Holmes well said. But—I—I heard them? At what distance? Great Heavens! It's true—true as I'm alive. And only yesterday I couldn't have heard a horse fall in from here."

Marveling, thrilled with the miracle, the glory, the ecstatic wonder of it all, he raised his regenerated arms to the sun, as though he had been a Parsee fire-worshiper.

Then, turning, he crept through the little door and started down the rough-cut stairs of stone.

CHAPTER 9

Lost!

DUSTY, festooned with a fly-filled webs, the way led downward steeply but with no great difficulty. Dennison judged, from the primitive cutting, that the steps were of vast antiquity, dating perhaps from far back in pre-Roman times when Phoenician traders had been tempting prey for the pirate hordes which once infested these rocky coasts.

But he had scant time for any such considerations. For hardly had he descended a score of steps, hoping he might meet other openings cut through for light, when he perceived that the stairs veered sharply to the right. Thus, darkness absolutely enveloped him.

He looked back. There above him he could still see a blotch of light from the doorway. A vague illumination grayed down the steps, but around the corner it ceased.

"Lord knows what pitfalls may exist below!" said he tentatively. "No use being positively reckless, just as everything's commencing. Some way or other, I've got to have a light!"

A moment he reflected, his heart beating a trifle fast, dilated pupils staring down

in a vain attempt to fathom the invisible.

Hastily he pulled from his inner coat-pocket a sheaf of papers and personalia. From among them he chose a long, rather thin book, bound in red-leather—a costly treatise, stamped in gold letters: "Dietetics and Senility, by H. K. Hoffman-Browne, A.M., M.D." The other papers he replaced.

"Deuce take him and his musty old asceticism, too," growled Dennison as he ripped the hundred-odd pages clean out of the binding, which he flung away. "I've got a better use for all this poppycock now than to read it!"

Speaking, he rolled a couple of the leaves into a spill. This he quickly lighted with a match from his silver case; and now, for the moment provided with a feeble though sufficient light continued downward.

The spill guided him down a dozen steps or more. When it was almost out he lighted a fresh leaf. And so, one by one, burning the pages of this most erudite monograph—which but the day before had been like Holy Writ to him—he then made good progress.

Presently he began to note a chill in the dead air, a damp and sickly odor. The walls grew patched with leprous fungi. On the stairs a slippery moisture increased as he went down. Here, there, through some vein or fault in the volcanic rock, seeping water made weird, discolored patches, sulfurous and slimy.

"Uh!" he exclaimed, disgusted, lighting still another paper. "This place hasn't been visited for centuries. Small wonder! Next time I start for a sea-bath I'll go round some way or other. Nice place, isn't it? I'm rather glad, on the whole, there's not much more of it ahead!"

Down, still down, he kept. He must have made some hundred and fifty steps or more, when all at once he perceived a little draft of air. Slight, almost unnoticeable at first yet it attracted his attention by flickering the flame of his improvised torch. He paused, sniffling. A musty smell came to his sharpened senses.

"H-m!" thought he. "That can't be any sea air, working up through this passage!" And for a moment he remained there, attentive, wondering, while the raw flame cast his dancing shadow grotesquely against the fetid walls surrounding him.

Again he went on. Then all at once he saw whence this air current came. Off to the right and below him, opening down into the stairway at an angle so obtuse that it was almost parallel, he saw the dim, uncertain mouth of another stair.

"What?" cried he, startled. "So, then, this cliff is worm-eaten with runways like a rabbit-hutch? That's odd! Why—why, there may be dozens of them!"

A few steps lower down he came to the entrance of the other stairway. But though he lighted half a dozen pages at once, and held the flambeau high above his head, he could make little of it. Just a dark, curving, sinister cleft in the rock, entirely similar to the one wherein he stood, and, like it, leading upward. So—since his supply of paper was far from unlimited—he wasted no more time on speculation.

"No matter, after all, where it goes or doesn't go," he told himself. "I'm after that salt bath; and if this stair ever gets to the bottom of the cliff I'm going to have it!"

Down, down, down he clambered. Now the other passageway lay very far behind. Now the drip and moisture were rapidly increasing.

"How much farther, I'd like to know?" exclaimed the doctor, with growing impatience.

ANOTHER turn. Then, quite suddenly, he whiffed the freshness of outer air. To his ears penetrated a dull, muffled, booming ebb and flow of sound, seemingly far away, murmuring idly like the echo in a conch.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dennison, and hastened on. Five minutes later he emerged, blinking in the sudden light of day, from a cleft at the base of the precipice. Before him lay a tiny cove, let into the massive crag. There, pools among the rocks reflected the calm sky, while over an outer ledge of rocks, in periodic ebb and flow, the surges tumbled in bursting chaos of white, hissing beauty.

Dennison lost scant time in admiration. Hastily reconnoitering the spot, he flung off his clothes, and a moment after stood there, naked and glad, glorying in the new power of his arms, the fresh, returning vigor of his frame.

Exclamations of wonder and delight burst from his lips as, with the trained observation of a doctor, he took note of the rounded contours which but so short a time before had been hollowed, scrawny, despicable. He inflated his chest, he beat upon it with both fists till it resounded like a drum. The excess of oxygen dizzied him. He staggered, drunk with power.

"Life! Life!" cried he.

Then clambering up a wave-worn mass of rock that rose amid the surf, he plunged. And—all his one-time skill instinctively reverting—he reveled for a full half-hour in the invigorating flood.

Out through the yeasty toss he struck, boldly out toward the open sea; he turned and swam back, under water. He let the breakers bear him in, up, up; then, clutching a barnacled rock, clung while the thunderous green surges spilled over him, recoiled, and once more swung him seaward.

Weary a little, he climed ashore. He sat there by a pool, wherein prawns and claw-fingered little mollusks, star-fish, and hermit crabs were carrying on their tiny businesses. Delighted as a child at play, he dabbled his feet in the miniature lake; he found a bit of driftwood, and with it stirred the denizens to flight or masterly inactivity. Tired of this, he plunged again; and finally, when an hour or so was past, emerged to sit upon a little sandy strip at the end of the cove, where the soft summer breeze dried his glowing body. Then he dressed again.

"H-m! What's the matter with my clothes?" asked he. "This coat's certainly too tight under the arms, too loose around the belt-line, the equator, as it were! These sleeves seem rather skimped too; and—well—the whole outfit's out of shape. I'll have to take a trip down to Cette in a day or two, and have another wardrobe, if—if this sort of things keeps on!"

Impatiently he jerked the lapels of his waistcoat, to bring them together over his enlarged chest.

As he did so, a tiny flash flicked through the air. He heard a click of metal as his match-box glinted off a huge boulder. Came a quick splash.

"Thunder!" he cried, scrambling after it. "Can't afford to have that get wet!"

Wet, however, it was when he recovered it. For by ill luck it had fallen into one of the little pools, far in under a half-ton boulder; and before Dennison with his stick could poke it within reach again, the salt water had seeped in around the spring which controlled the cover.

Anxiously he snapped the match-box open.

WITH an exclamation more of disgust than of alarm, he drew out the matches, one by one. All alike, all ruined. He tried two or three with no success. Beyond producing a disagreeable paste of sulfur and sending out a thin white vapor, they remained inert.

Cursing the luck, Dennison got out his remaining sheets of paper, sought a sheltered nook and successively experimented with every match. Should only one ignite, he could then light a sheet and keep the fire going until he could reach the little door half-way up the cliff. But no, never a one would serve. And finally, surrounded by a litter of broken, soggy, useless matches, he stood up and darkly eyed the entrance to the stairway.

He cast a farewell glance about him, at the friendly little cove, the rocks, the sandy strip, the surf and the bright sea, then with confident step entered the narrow slit in the cliff and addressed himself to the long climb through wet and dark and slime, up toward the free air of heaven once more.

The splendid energy that now coursed through him, the keen invigoration of his salt dip, proved by no means superfluous for the great task ahead of him. For now, after that fresh, vital air, the fetid black on the stairway seemed doubly mephitic; the slimy walls along which he had perforce to feel his way, ten times more repellent. Still, on he kept, along the left-hand wall step by step working his way upward. And three minutes lengthened into five, five into ten, yet the little door at the top seemed as far off as ever.

All at once, puzzled, he stopped and thought a moment.

"What?" he asked, peering about him, behind him, then in front, as though by any possibility he might make out his situation. "Why haven't I felt that same cross-current of air going up, that I felt

in coming down? Surely I must have more than passed the place! And now that I think of it—this wall, here, isn't as it should be!"

Carefully, with a slightly accelerated heart, a heart that beat a trifle faster than even the exertion of the climb could warrant, he ran his fingers over the invisible wall.

"H-m!" he grunted. "Dry, and granular! Not wet and homogeneous! It's—it seems—different, some way. My Lord, what a fool I was not to have looked out for those matches!"

Not yet even admitting to himself the possibility that he could feel uneasiness, he remained there for a full minute, motionless, trying to think.

"What's the matter?" he at last queried aloud. "What can be—if anything? Steps. I've followed them. They lead to the door, don't they? Well, then, all I've got to do is go ahead!"

Yet though this seemed indisputable, he did not start. Still he stayed there, a clutching sensation at his heart, while a little creeping chill began to tingle up his spine.

"What?" he ejaculated at last, with sudden fear.

Forward he pressed, eagerly, feeling, tapping along the walls, hoping for some touch of the wet, sulfurous exudation. But there was none. Distinctly, positively, he now understood that he was in a location where he had never been before.

Then he stopped short.

"Why, where am I?" he exclaimed. "I—I don't know! All I know is that this isn't the—right way. And, and—why, then!" he choked with a quick taking of the breath, "Why, then, I'm—I'm—I must be lost...!"

CHAPTER 10

The Chamber of the Dead

DR. DENNISON had always been one of those analytical, rational men, priding himself upon his powers of reason, his ability to solve a problem by the exercise of his logical, inductive mind.

Yet, even so, when he realized that now he had indubitably strayed into a network of passages honeycombing the mountain, over him ran a thrill of sick, animal terror very like that of the most stupid, the least reasonable man of earth.

Down on one of the stone steps he sat, took a long breath, and—restraining as best he could the instinctive trembling of his body—sought to constrain his mind to approach this question impersonally with calm, deliberate judgment.

"Why," he articulated slowly, "if I—if I've gone astray, it must be that, having no light, and feeling along the left-hand wall I've followed that other passage-way or spur through which I felt the draft. Why I don't feel it now, I don't know—provided I'm in it. But that seems the only logical conclusion. If so, all I've got to do is retrace my steps till I come to the original way, and then follow that to the top. Nothing simpler!"

It sounded reasonable; yet through it all, the doctor felt a numbing subconscious suspicion that perhaps the execution of this maneuver might not be so simple as it seemed. He sat there in the velvet black, staring with wide eyes which could detect no ray of light. Even though he passed his hand repeatedly before his face, no sensation resulted. So intense was the night, there in the bowels of Mount St. Clair, that the retinal hallucinations within his eyes were clearly visible—spreading rings and blotches of purple crimson green. Even when he closed his lids, the darkness was no greater.

Up he started.

But before he set out he did a very prudent thing that showed the value of his training, the worth of an educated mind.

"Even if I'm right," said he, "and easily find that other stair, it will do no harm. If I'm wrong, it will be invaluable for me to be able to make my way back here again and take a fresh start from this place. Otherwise, in case there are many passages and stairways, I may get hopelessly involved. I've got to leave some trace, some way of locating my position. And the only way to do that is to imitate Theseus in the labyrinth at Crete, and carry a string wherever I go!"

So judging, he sat down once more. Quickly he removed his shoes and socks. And carefully, with the dexterous fingers

of a trained scientist, he cut away the toe-stitch of the first one, then the other, with his pocket scissors. Then, most attentively experimenting till he found the right yarn, he began cautiously unraveling.

The socks, hand-knitted from Germantown wool disintegrated softly, easily, with never a drop or flaw in the stitch. As Dennison raveled them, he wound the resulting yarn into a neat ball. Each sock yielded a full hundred yards. Together, they gave him more than six hundred feet of yarn.

He replaced his shoes, groped about till he found a fair-sized chip of rock scaled from the walls tied the end of his yarn to this chip; and then, carefully unwinding the ball as he went, started downward again on what he hoped might be a way leading him directly to the passage he sought.

Some minutes passed. Already he had reached and passed the knot in the yarn marking the place where that from one sock had been tied to that from the other. He knew that he had made three hundred feet or so. From time to time he crossed from one wall to the other and felt for any opening, but he found none. Still that dry, crystalline structure of the rock continued; feel as carefully as he might, nor could he discover the least traces of seepage or of moisture.

Puzzled beyond all words, a sickening dread now at his very soul, he stopped to think again.

It seemed to him, indeed, the steps were flatter, broader, and less worn, here, than he remembered any to have been.

"Where am I?" he wailed suddenly, with terror; and, for an instant out of hand, sent yell on yell reverberating through the horrid black.

The echoes died out quickly, deadened by the close, oppressive atmosphere which weighted upon him like a pall of lead.

"On! On!" cried he, in the first rush of panic. And, letting the yarn quickly unroll, he stumbled blindly down the curving stairs, blundered along a level "drift" and all at once fetched up with a dazing blow against some solid thing which was not stone.

The impact sent him staggering back, his eyes filled with sparkling darts of fire. But he caught himself; and, bruised though his forehead was, stretched out his arms, his hands, to find this thing once more. As he did so, the woolen thread escaped from his fingers.

THIS, however, in his excitement he did not perceive. For now exploring with hands that trembled in their eagerness, he found that the object which barred the end of the passage was of iron—a plate, it seemed, which by the sense of feeling he knew was badly pitted with erosion.

"An iron plate? Here?" exclaimed the doctor, his mind a daze.

And, stooping eagerly forward, he explored its surface with shuddering haste.

"Hinges!"

On the other side he felt.

"A latch!"

He pressed it. For a moment it resisted. Then, exerting his new found strength, he forced it upward.

Against the plate he pushed. It remained fixed. He set his shoulder to it. The plate vibrated; came a creaking of the hinges.

He hurled himself against it. With a complaining, grinding stridor, the plate swung inward. And though the dark, within, equaled that in the passageway, Dennison knew by the close, stagnant air and by a certain sense of instinctive perception, that he had penetrated into a crypt or chamber in the solid rock.

For a moment he hesitated upon the threshold. A sudden fear assailed him lest, inside, there might be some well, some pit of terrifying, unknown depth, waiting sinister and black to swallow him. He listened. Nothing. No drip of water, no sound of moving air—nothing save the thick, fast beating of his own heart, the labored breath between his lips.

Crouching, at first, then down on hands and knees, he crept into the vault. Before him and all about him he felt cautiously. No aperture. The floor seemed smooth and uniform, covered here and there by little drifts of an unusually heavy and cohesive dust.

"How big?" asked Dennison aloud. "How big a room? And is there any other opening out of it?"

Mind and soul were riven by the frightful truth, realized in a lightning-flash of intuition. "Coffins!"

The quick echoes told him the space was contracted. Forward he crawled, slowly, cautiously, pausing at almost every foot to feel about him as far as his arms would reach. Nothing obstructed him. Nothing, until his hand once more touched the wall of solid rock.

"I've crossed it, one way," said he, now calmer. "I'll see how big it is!" And, following the wall, he crept along.

All at once he found no wall.

He turned and crept into this seeming passage. But almost at once he found his way barred. The passage turned out to be a sort of niche, or alcove, cut in one side of the crypt.

Out went his hand again.

It recoiled as though from a cold reptile. For, startled, Dennison recognized that he had touched a plank, a box, or casket of wood.

Waiting a second, vainly peering straight ahead of him, he once more laid hands on this box. It proved to be of some smooth, solid wood. He stood up, and, bending over it, explored its whole upper surface.

"So?" he commented, strong curiosity almost overcoming his anguished fear. "Six feet long, I should judge. Maybe two and a half or three wide. Strongly screwed together. Ah! What's this?"

At one end, affixed with small tacks, he perceived a thin metal plate, some two inches square. Running his finger-nail over this, he discovered that the surface of the plate was scratched with lines, though what they meant he could form no idea. And for a moment, having now learned all that could be determined about this singular find, he straightened up and stood there ruminating.

"No, no," exclaimed he. "Can't get it. Don't understand! Treasure? Heavens above! If I had a screw-driver now, I'd soon—Hallo! What the deuce?"

For, as he spoke, he took a step backward; and now, quite suddenly, he found himself sprawling on his back, legs higher than his head, supported by something invisible.

Quickly he scrambled up, unhurt.

"Another?"

He hastily examined it.

Like the first, it was strongly put together and bore a metal plate at one end.

"Any more?" asked Dennison, in fast-rising excitement.

And, cautiously feeling before him, he crouched along.

"Number three!" he announced. "This one's smaller. And—another! Smaller still!"

Forgetting his previous fear of pits in the floor, he crept quickly along the row of boxes.

"Here's one—and here—and here!" he panted, a new, strange uneasiness gaining possession of his heart. "How many, I'd like to know? Smaller and smaller—eight, nine—this one's no longer than a woman—a small woman—here's some child-sizes—twelve—fifteen of 'em—eighteen in all! Why, a baby'd go in the last one!"

He staggered back, mind and soul riven by the frightful truth, realized in a lightning-flash of intuition.

"Coffins!" he screamed, and then shivering, he stood there, gasping, staring wide-eyed at the unseen horror.

CHAPTER 11

A Strange Exit

PHYSICIAN though he was, well-used to sights and sounds of ghastly import, Dennison for a minute or two felt himself sickened with terror by his gruesome discovery. It is one thing to deal with death professionally, impersonally; another, to find oneself confronted unexpectedly, suddenly and in the dark of an unknown cavern, with a long, horrible row of wooden caskets.

But even so, Dennison's fright lasted hardly the space of a hundred heart-beats. Then his sang-froid reasserted itself. The revivified force that now pulsed through his veins gave him strength for any problem, any task. And, folding his arms as he stood there in the impenetrable night, he pondered.

"What does it mean?" thought he. "Who are these people? Why are they here? Does Il Vecchio know of them? Could he, by any possibility—"

A sudden, illuminating suspicion darted through his mind.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Why, in that case, maybe I—understand some things!"

And now, all aquiver to learn more,

for more of this ghastly mystery, he once again approached the coffins.

Quite calmly now, with careful and trained mind applied intently to the problem, he again felt the caskets, one by one, from end to end of the row.

Yes, there were certainly eighteen of them, grading from large to small, and each bearing a metallic plate. Passing his fingers over the tops of the coffins, he determined that some were far more recent than others. The wood of several had, despite the dryness of the cavern, begun to molder a little. These, he inferred, were much the oldest, though by how many years he could of course form no idea.

Having determined this point, he set himself to examine the plates.

"Perhaps," thought he, "there may be some clue here." But he could discover nothing. The scratches on them, if indeed these formed letters and inscriptions were too shallow, too fine for him to read by the mere sense of touch.

So, after many fruitless efforts he abandoned the attempt.

"I'll take two or three of them along with me, anyhow," he decided. "They may be useful—in case I ever get out of here. If I don't, no harm's done."

With his stout pocket-knife he carefully and laboriously pried the nails from three of the plates. One blade broke, but he persisted with the other. It was a matter of perhaps twenty minutes to dig the plates clear, but he stuck to the job, and after a time had them safely pocketed.

With excellent judgment he chose one from the largest, one from the smallest, and one from a medium-sized casket.

"These," he meditated, "ought to give me some idea of the contents of them all. I wonder if I couldn't find my way out now?"

He was half minded to attack one of the caskets with his knife. But a moment's reflection convinced him that with no other tool than this the task would be tremendously difficult.

Time, too, was passing. The prisoner seemed as far as ever from any exit out of this clinging dark, any return into the light of day. The black sightlessness, the close and fetid air, were once more beginning to oppress him heavily. Over him surged a passionate wave of longing for liberty and for the sunlight.

And, stretching up his arms, clenching his fists, he cried: "Out! Out of here!"

Taking his bearings as best he could, he began creeping toward the point where he judged he had entered the chamber. And in effect he did presently find himself in a passageway once more. This he followed for some minutes, noting its gradual rise, a turn here, an angle there, without seeming to feel that he was (after all) making any particular progress. Then all at once he remembered the woolen thread.

Hastily he dropped to his knees, and, groping about him, sought to recover the clue. But though he minutely explored the entire floor of the passageway, he found nothing.

Up he got, and now, aimlessly, began to blunder along. Lacking the thread, he could not even get back to the place where he had first realized he was astray. He might, indeed, have tried to find the death-chamber again, and thence again

sought the passage containing the yarn, but this plan did not appeal to him. For every time he had turned back he had succeeded only in losing himself.

"Now, now," said he, "I go forward! Forward—till I find some way out, or—till I die!"

How long he wandered, sightless, in those branching, turning, baffling labyrinths, he could not tell. It seemed like days and weeks, though in all probability it was no longer than a couple of hours. For without light, the judgement of time becomes impossible.

THUS the doctor, sightless, aimless, knowing neither whence he came nor whither he was going, struggled on and on and on.

His only attempt, now, was always to keep getting higher and higher. If he found a passage going down, as he groped his slow way along it, he turned back and sought another, which might lead him up.

Well-judged, this bit of logic. For after a weary and disheartening time, when Dennison's courage was almost at an end and he himself more than half ready to sink down exhausted in those interminable, pitch-black ways, his outstretched hand struck against an opposing barrier that closed the passage before him.

In spite of the fact that all this time he had been slowly working upward, Dennison's first thought was that through some singular chance or other he had again come in contact with the door of the chamber where the coffins lay.

But a moment's investigation convinced him that this was not so. For that other door had been of iron, while this, as he passed his eager hands over it, seemed to be of planks studded with rivets.

Against it he threw his weight, quite uselessly. He perceived at once that the door was bolted on the other side.

"And now," thought he, his heart beginning to throb with wild hopes, "now, if I can only get this open, I may be free! It must be that I'm very near the top of the labyrinth. This door probably stands between me and liberty. But how open it?" There was but one answer: Dig through with the pocket-knife!

And having made up his mind to that he set resolutely to work. At about the middle of the door, where certain large bolts indicated the attachment of the bolt beyond, he began excavating. Fortunately the wood, chosen for its resistant power against dampness rather than for strength, cut easily. The rivets bothered him a great deal, however. Though, as he soon discovered by their softness, they were but copper, they seriously impeded his operations. And an hour passed before the point of the knife, hard-driven, penetrated to the other surface of the door.

Dennison, breathless and with aching palms, rested a few minutes, then once again attacked the door. Digging now with renewed energy, he presently made a peep-hole, but though he strained his eyes he could not detect the faintest ray of light. There came to him, however, a pungent, familiar, yet elusive odor.

Eagerly he sniffed it, then set to work again. And by dint of tremendous exertion he eventually cut out a section large enough to permit his hand and wrist to pass.

By turning his hand upward he just managed to reach what he at once perceived to be a heavy metal bolt. But try as he might, till the veins in his forehead swelled and his breath came hard, he could neither force his arm any further nor budge the lock.

"Got to cut some more," he judged, disheartened by the prospect of still-continued painful toil. "Before I took that Elixir my arm would have gone clear to the elbow through that. But now—" And with an oath or two he once more began his task.

Now the blade was growing brutally dull. He had to hack and tear the wood rather than cut it. Blisters had begun to form on his hands, and even though he wrapped in his handkerchief the hand that wielded the knife, and changed hands frequently, the pain was growing intense.

But he persisted, gritting his teeth and throwing the whole of his new-found strength into the labor, and at length he found by experiment, that by stripping naked to the waist he could slide his arm in above the elbow.

"Now its got to give!" he exclaimed, savagely yanking the bolt.

It yielded more easily than he had

expected. Back with a dull clank it slid. And a moment later the door was swinging open toward him, on noiseless hinges.

For a moment Dennison stood there listening, sniffing with wide nostrils the odor of the place beyond. Then he advanced, forgetting in his eagerness even to address himself again. But he did not go far.

Because just beyond the door his hand touched another obstacle. Quickly feeling this over, he perceived that it was the back of a cabinet, or of a piece of furniture of some kind.

Down to his knees he dropped. Yes, now he could feel the turned legs of this thing.

"What?" exclaimed he. "What the dickens does this mean—a cabinet blocking a rock passage? Ah! I can crawl in under it!"

Snakelike he writhed and wriggled flat along the floor of rock. To his surprise this rock suddenly gave place to some smooth substance—tiling!

Then, a moment later, he was standing in a room which now by the sense of smell he clearly recognized. And in a hushed, awed voice he exclaimed to himself:

"The old man's laboratory, so help me heaven!"

CHAPTER 12

A Letter and a Clue

THE shock of this surprise robbed him, temporarily, of all power to move or speak or even think coherently; but soon he pulled himself together.

"So then," said he, "one branch of this infernal maze connects here, does it? Masked, too, with a bolted door behind a cabinet, eh? Looks nice and honest, doesn't it? Maybe—"

He stopped short, struck by a horrid thought. To banish it he stretched out his hands and began feeling about him in the dark. Though he well knew where he was, yet for the first few minutes he could not get his bearings. Everybody knows the sensation of getting "turned around" in the night. The faint trickle of water from the sink should, it seemed to him, be coming from absolutely the other direction. Hence he had to move with great care, lest in his confusion he tip something over and thus raise the alarm.

"If what I suspect is true," thought he, thrilling with a kind of repugnance at thought of Il Vecchio, "it mightn't be the healthiest thing in the world, just now, to be discovered here. The old man might not enjoy my having blundered first into that mortuary, down below, and then into the laboratory. Evidently he's a bit set on keeping that a secret, the entrance from the lab into the caverns. Though—why? Can't tell, yet. Anyhow, the way that door is placed, looks so, and—"

Crash!

Dennison stopped short, catching his breath with fear. A bottle against which he had inadvertently struck his hand lay shattered on the tiling. With restrained breath he stood there listening intently a second. But from the study beyond came no sound.

Even though he waited full two minutes, he heard no alarming noise, nothing to indicate that this mishap had been detected.

"Maybe the old man's out with his rose-trees," thought Dennison. "If so, the quicker I make a light and get out of here the better. It would be pleasant under the circumstances, now wouldn't it, to have him just happen in on me, in this particularly guestlike situation?"

A light! That was what he needed most. What he must at all hazards find, and quickly. But how?

"Ah! That switch—if I can find it!" he thought.

A moment he stood taking his bearings. Then, creeping in what seemed exactly the wrong direction, guided by the trickle of the sink, he cautiously proceeded toward the spot where he knew the door into the study must be.

In three minutes he had reached it. His hand sought and found the regulator of the vacuum-apparatus.

Click!

Instantly the room glowed with a soft and penetrant light, which, despite its moderation, seemed blinding to the American after his long immersion in total blackness.

At first he could not stand it, but had

to turn it off. Then, after a moment, he set the switch at the lowest contact-point. The dull red, he found, he could endure without any great discomfort. And, now able to see, he found everything had resumed its normal, natural position, just as he had seen it the day before—here the sink, there the little safe-door in the wall, yonder the table over which Il Vecchio had been flung.

Dennison stood gazing about him, blinking, shading his eyes with his hollow palm. Strange were his emotions as he gazed upon that place once more, where only a few hours ago—though it seemed a week—the robbery of the Alkahest had taken place. He noted that Il Vecchio had evidently been there since; for now, save the filtration process in the sink, no activities were going on. An air of desertion, of profound abandonment, lay upon the laboratory. It seemed as though, with that master-treason, the life and interest and energy of the strange room had all gone from it. And Dennison shuddered a little, partly with reminiscence, partly because the underground chamber was cold, and he was now beginning to feel it.

"Well, this won't do at all!" he thought. "Some way or other, I've got to get out of this. Some way I've got to keep Il Vecchio from even knowing I've been here. Upon my word if he detects that, if he knows I've come all the way up through those cursed caverns of his, if he even suspects I've seen that Bluebeard-room, down below, my life won't be worth a pin! I've got to cover all my tracks!"

At first he could see no way. Even had he been able to escape by means of the door into the study, that would betray him. He dared not pound upon the door or wall and cry for help; he dared not stay there. The only possible plan was a retreat via the way he had come, and from this plan he at first shrank in terror.

Yet he saw at once that he must come to it, so like the man of action he now was, he began making preparations.

FIRST he hastily gathered up every shred and fragment of the broken glass resulting from the bottle he had knocked off the bench. With a spunge in the sink he washed up the spilled liquid. Then he squeezed the spunge carefully and replaced it. The bits of glass he dropped behind a heavy packing-case in one corner.

Next he set to work to find a light for his guidance back through the labyrinth. At first he could discover nothing that would serve but presently the idea occurred to him that one of the alcohol lamps might do.

"The only trouble," he reflected, "is that this sort of lamp gives a flame almost without light. What shall I do to improve it?"

Turning to Il Vecchio's shelves, he searched and found a bottle of sodium. With this he made a saturated solution in the alcohol of one of the little lamps. Lighting it with a match from Il Vecchio's holder on the work-bench, he rejoiced to see that the flame burned yellow. Ghastly the effect was, but after all it was a light.

He carefully set everything in order, took a score of matches in case of accident, then stepped to the switch and once more extinguished the vacuum-lights.

Guided now by the eery sodium-flame, he went to the cabinet which concealed the exit.

Here he shoved the lamp underneath, and followed it at once. Through the door he found his clothing, which he hastily put on. He closed the door behind him, and again stood there in the upper corridor of the maze.

The idea occurred to him that he ought to shoot the bolt again, but he instantly dismissed it.

"For," thought he, "if the old chap sees the door at all, by any chance, he'll know well enough what's happened. The wreckage will give me away, bolt or no bolt. My best chance is simply that he won't happen to come this way. Not till I'm some thousands of miles west of the Mediterranean, anyhow! After that, no matter!"

Thus saying, he finished dressing himself, and now with the alcohol lamp in hand started back the way he had come.

To his surprise, as he followed the irregularly excavated passage, he noted on the right-hand wall a dull red line, about two inches wide, painted at a distance of three feet from the floor.

Here and there, as he progressed, side-runways led off on either hand, but the

red line followed regularly its course.

"I wonder now," said Dennison with sudden comprehension, "if this doesn't lead straight to the coffin-room? If so—I ought to go back at once and see what it all means!"

And, fired with a new ambition, he hastened his steps.

The passage, so hard to traverse in the dark, now—even by the feeble, garish rays of the alcohol-flame—seemed plain and easy. Dennison wondered at the fears and mental anguish which but so short a time before had been his. Already he had quite recovered his nerve and poise. He smiled at his previous alarm. The vigor of his body, the splendid, ever-increasing keenness of his mind, set at naught a situation which might have disconcerted the average man. And, eager to probe this mystery, he hastened forward along the rough and winding passageway.

But all at once, to his intense chagrin, he noticed that the lamp was burning dim.

"What?" cried he, stopping short and staring at it. Yes, indubitably the yellow flame was dimming. Whether impeded by the strong sodium, whether combated by some subtle, noxious, subterranean gas he knew not. The fact remained that this, his only hope of escape, was beginning to flicker and sputter unsteadily.

"That means," thought he, "no time for any more investigation! I must get out of here. Out, out, before it dies entirely!"

And, once more assailed by many fears, he hastened onward.

A side-passage, leading sharply downward, attracted him. Whereas before, his idea had been to reach the top of the maze, now he desired the bottom, there to make a fresh start toward the little door in the cliff. So, taking this way to the left, he hurried on. The tiny flame, as he went, he sedulously guarded behind a curved palm.

Among the walls, which here sparkled with millions of tiny quartz facets and crystalline spicules, the shadow of his hand danced in grotesque, gigantic flights. Before him, dark; behind him, dark; only for a little space could the feeble glow drive back the pressing hordes of darkness. Clinging to this weak help, his very life dependent on it, he stumbled onward.

Suddenly he uttered a sharp cry.

"There! There!" he exclaimed, stopping short.

For all at once he recognized the place. All at once he knew where he was. Down around a curving flight of steps, before him, he saw a dankly-dripping wall.

Hastily he descended. A perceptible draft of air struck his sweaty forehead.

"The stairway!" cried he. "The passage from the beach to the door!"

PETRIFIED with astonishment, still hardly able to realize his situation, he stood gazing a moment. Then, turning into the original stairway, the way he had first come, he began to climb.

The strong current of air harried, and finally blew out the tiny flame. But Dennison, now sure of his way, cared not. He did not even bother to relight it, but kept on with perfect assurance.

Five minutes later he had reached the door at the stair-head, had crawled out through it onto the tiny ledge in front, and was filling his lungs with the pure crystal air of morning.

Revived, he wondered that the sun was no higher. To him it seemed that the time must be long past noon—even verging toward night. But, no, the sun still hung hardly more than a third of the way up the sky.

At his watch he glanced.

"Eh?" he exclaimed, setting it to his ear. It marked only eight-forty-five. "Surely it must have run down." But, no, it was still ticking busily. "Hang me, if I understand it!" said the American. "If I've only been four hours altogether on this expedition, it's the longest four that ever I knew anything about."

An idea struck him.

"Perhaps," thought he, "if I make good time now I can dodge letting Il Vecchio know where I've been, or anything about it."

And, acting immediately on the inspiration, he started up the narrow, broken path. The alcohol-lamp he first thought of hiding in some crevice, against a possible future need, but this idea he at once abandoned.

"If ever I come again—as I surely will—I'll have a better light than that," he assured himself. "A little electric flash

now would just about do the business. As for this alcohol affair, I'd better keep it. Maybe I can find a chance later on to slip it back unnoticed into the lab.

Thus he pocketed it, and so with renewed vigor and a thankful mind continued his perilous climb.

No mishap befell. Before his watch marked nine he stood once more at the clifftop, down at the rear of the sheltering hedge of sumac at the end of the garden.

Through this he cautiously peered. Nothing alarming presented itself. All was calm, bright, peaceful. Far off, in the olive-grove, he could discern the stock figure of the Lombard at work spading the roots of a tree. But neither Il Vecchio nor the girl was visible.

So Dennison brushed his clothes as best he might, turned down his trousers over the tops of his shoes, to conceal the fact that he was sockless, set his hat straight, and with an air of slow nonchalance emerged casually from the thicket. Here and there he stopped to pick a blossom or to toss a pebble from the top of the cliff. To all appearance he seemed the most unconcerned of idlers.

Apparently unobserved, he sought the pergola, where for a time he rested, thought, and spied out the lay of the land.

At length, convinced that he could in no possible way be suspected of having invaded the caves beneath the cliff, he sauntered up the gravel-path toward the old house with its leprous, white-plastered walls overrun with clematis and honeysuckle.

As he went he invented a likely tale of exploration over the wall of the estate and across the adjoining properties, toward Cette. But it was not needed. Nobody came to meet him. The Lombard paid him no attention. Stasia, much to his relief—untidy as he was—did not appear. In safety he rounded the corner by the magnolia-beds, reached the broad piazza with its vine-clad pillars, and so presently attained his room.

With an exclamation of relief, he hastily locked the door and began stripping for a good wash-up and a change of clothes.

But hardly had he begun this welcome task when his eye caught a square white envelope upon his dressing-table.

"What?" he wondered. "For me?"

He snatched it up, strangely agitated. Yes, the envelope bore his name, in a fine, cramped, constricted hand.

Hastily he tore it open. A single sheet of paper dropped out. He read:

Pray pardon me, my friend, but unavoidable business calls me away for a few days. When I shall be back I cannot tell, as yet. My house, my library, my study, everything is yours, Au revoir.

Pagani.

For a moment Dennison studied this brief note with frowning brows and an expression of intense suspicion. Then all at once a thought struck him.

"Those metal tags!" he cried. And hastily he rummaged them from the pocket where they reposed in safety.

Out on the table he strewed them. Beside them he laid the note.

Each bit of metal bore, written with some mordant, a cipher inscription whereof he could make nothing. Letters and numbers mingled here and there with a Greek character and a date.

Though he could not decipher the meaning of those records, as he studied them they sent him shrieking back with a sharp cry.

For, beyond any possibility of doubt, the same hand which had traced those cabalas of death had also written the cordial message which lay before him there!

CHAPTER 13

The Black Book

AN HOUR later, Dennison — his mind made up to at least one step, one undertaking—had breakfasted and had gone down into the garden to interview the Lombard.

At the meal he had tried to get some information out of old Marianella, the cook, waitress, and factotum; but she, dim-sighted and hard of hearing, had proved entirely hopeless. She had been unable, even if not unwilling, to give him the slightest satisfaction regarding the

absence of Il Vecchio and the lovely girl.

Nor did the Lombard prove more enlightening. All Dennison's questionings, even reenforced by the passage of coin of the realm, elicited nothing. Hard-pressed, the surly fellow merely shrugged his shoulders, spread his palms, and answered:

"How do I know, M'sieur? He tells me nothing. They have gone away, that is all. Early this morning they went. Whither? To Arles, perhaps; possibly to Tarascon. Who can say? Luggage? Only a couple of hand-bags, M'sieur. Who am I to inquire of the doctor his errands? When will they return? Heaven knows!"

Dennison cursed the fellow mentally, turned on his heel, and strode away. Past the house he walked. Over him lay the compelling imperative of action. His new found strength and life could no longer tolerate a mere passive attitude, a waiting for things to happen. He must be up and doing. Past now and gone were all desire for rest, for idleness; gone the exhaustion of but a day or two ago. Through the orange-grove he took his way, pausing only to pick one of the golden spheres.

"It may come in handy on my way," thought he. "The day's hardly begun yet, and already the heat is coming on."

He glanced about. Nobody was to be seen. From the kitchen piped a thin song as Marianella labored among her casseroles. The Lombard was invisible.

"Good!" exclaimed Dennison, taking the path toward the gate. No one impeded him. He reached it, unseen, found it opened with a spring-lock which permitted anybody inside to go out easily, while preventing ingress from without, and presently—making quite sure he was not followed—struck into the walled road leading down the mountain.

Striding down the steep; singing, slashing with a stick at the roadside flowers, he wondered that so short a time before he could have found the ascent a crucifying task. Away below him lay the city; he could see the azure of the Mediterranean to the right. To the left, the reaches of the canals and of the Etang de Thau. Fifteen minutes later he was in the town.

Quickly he walked to the railway station. Tipping liberally, he made inquiries of a porter. Yes, Dr. Pagani and his niece had left Cette that morning on the eight-sixteen. The porter knew them well. Had he not often carried the doctors luggage, and—

Dennison had to check the man's verbosity. Where were they bound for? Ah! That would be hard to say. Could the porter find out at the booking-office? Impossible! Dennison redoubled the tip. Still impossible. Convinced at last that he was confronting a real sphinx, he withdrew. No, evidently nothing could be gained that way. He must wait as patiently as possible. All in good time he would know the object and the purpose of this hasty departure.

On the way back, after a late lunch, he stopped at a hardware shop in the Rue de l'Esplanade and for six-francs fifty purchased an electric flash-lamp and a stout screw-driver.

"Now," said he, as he headed for the mountain once more, "perhaps before long I shall learn a thing or two—something extremely vital to my plans. We'll see."

He returned slowly, thoughtfully, by way of the Citadel and the Phare St. Clair. By the time he reached the gate in the wall it was already growing dark. Not wishing to knock, as that would have given the Lombard more information than would have been prudent, he scaled the wall—unmindful of a few cuts from the broken glass set in cement—and dropped soundlessly into the high grass inside.

He regained the house, rang for the Lombard, and ordered dinner. The fellow, outwardly polite enough, nevertheless regarded him with a disquieting expression. His eye, small and muddy and fringed with piglike lashes, was far from being one to inspire confidence at any time. Now, as it fastened itself on Dennison's face, the American felt a strange uneasiness. He noted, too, that the man's clothing looked dirty and disorderly, and that it was flecked here and there with peculiar whitish spots.

But from all this he could infer nothing. Very likely the gardener had been doing some rough outdoor work.

He ate heartily of the excellent mutton and salad, which he followed with a half-liter of Chambertin. Then he betook himself to the study, where the man-of-all-work had already lighted the student-lamp and had started a welcome little blaze in

the fireplace. The fragrant cedar, as it burned, the shaded glow of the lamp, the warmth and comfort of this quaint room, with its big chairs and broad leather divan, all filled Dennison with well-being. What place, here, for suspicious or unpleasant thoughts?

"Time enough for brooding later," he thought, choosing another of Il Vecchio's manilas. "Time enough for my explorations after the old cook and the Lombard are snoring in their attic rooms! Now for an hour or two of solid comfort."

OVER THE chimney of the lamp he lighted his cigar, and, drawing the first rich whiffs, stood there, hands on hips, feet wide apart before the fire, a strong and virile figure, looking with a new interest at the door leading into the laboratory.

"What a room in there!" he mused. "What a story I could make of all this, if anybody in the world would print it or believe it! I wish, now, I could get back into that same place, beyond that combination-lock, for just about an hour. It would be infinitely easier that way, than by going down the cliff in the night and searching for that woolen thread.

"Seems odd to think that this very morning I actually stood on the other side of that locked door, groping in the dark, for the vacuum-switch, after that infernal perigrination through those caves! Well, no matter; since there's no possible way to work the combination without betraying everything to the old man, I suppose I must do the next best thing and go the way I came. Let's see, now, what Pagani has for reading matter, till it's time to start."

Luxuriously smoking with all the old forgotten pleasure he had once found in nicotin, suffered with a glow of strength and sheer animal pleasure from the hearty meal and the generous drafts of wine which sent the new-returning strength vitally pulsing through him, he walked over to the reading-table and began idly pawing over the medical reviews which lay there.

But he found nothing quite to his taste. The book-shelves looked more inviting. Slowly he inspected their contents. Treatises, monographs, scientific works in every language of Europe, crowded each other in profusion. One shelf contained a row of volumes, great and small, all bound in uniform red morocco, with the author's name, Pagani, stamped in gold on the backs.

"So then, the doctor's written all these, has he?" queried Dennison in surprise and admiration. "Why, I used to think I was something of a writer, with my half-dozen, brochures on neuropathy; but this—hallo! What the deuce, now?"

At the end of the shelf, looking singularly out of place, stood a fat, black volume with a curious label. Even in that rather dim light, reflected from the student-lamp, Dennison made out immediately that the writing on this label was a cipher such as he had found on the metal coffin-tags.

This fact alone whetted his curiosity beyond bounds. Eagerly he snatched the volume from its place and quickly turned to the table with it.

Stopping not even to sit down, he flung it open.

His surprise was well grounded. The book, much worn by years of handling, contained no word of printed matter; but instead, voluminous records carefully kept and indexed in that peculiar and wholly incomprehensible script.

Perplexed and uneasy, with a recurrence of that strange, indefinable fear which urged him now and then to flee while there was yet time, he sat down in one of the armchairs and planted the book squarely in front of him under the rays of the lamp.

Though he studied over it the better part of an hour, he could make positively nothing of it. Dates there were, clearly written in French and going back as far as September 11, 1839. Figures in plenty were scattered through the text; and among these Dennison recognized some which he felt certain were anthropometric data of some kind or other. But beyond this, he gained nothing of any moment from his study. Page after page in baffling monotony the writing continued, under widely different dates and with various colors of ink. The script contained many Greek letters; but even though Dennison transliterated these, and tried every language whereof he had even a smattering—some seven or eight in all—

he got positively no enlightening results.

"Curse the thing!" he cried at last in a sudden rage, and flung it down upon the table.

The back cover flapped open with the impact. There, under the end-paper, he perceived a kind of slit.

"What's this?" he exclaimed, poking with an inquisitive finger. To his surprise he found a pocket in the cover, masked with a flap which, had not the shock of throwing the book uncovered it, would in all probability have escaped his attention.

A moment later he had drawn out a wide, thin envelope.

His hand trembling now with a strangely prescient sense of important discovery about to be made, he opened this envelope.

But, having spread the contents on the table before him, his face fell with disappointment.

"What? Only a packet of newspaper clippings, after all?" said he in deep disgust.

And he was about to replace them, when the idea occurred to him that he ought, perhaps, to read a few of them.

THIS HE began at once to do. They were cut from a large variety of papers. Some were in Spanish, others in Italian, French, and German. Two even seemed to be in Swedish, though of this the American could not be certain; they might have been Norwegian or Danish, for all that he could tell. There was one cutting from the Hong Kong Herald, one from the Hellas of Athens, and a scattering of most peculiar items from places as far apart as Liberia and Hawaii, Moscow and Cape Town, San Francisco and Petropavlosk.

Utterly astounded, Dennison sat there staring at the bizarre collection. He looked them slowly over.

"Yes," said he, "they're all arranged according to dates. They run from—let's see— from 1867 to—well, this last one from Raivaaja of Helsingfors, is dated November 7, 1911. And—what? They're all about—what the deuce?—as I live, they're every one disappearances of persons!"

Quickly he ran over the headings, his eyes widening with astonishment.

"Yes, yes!" he added. "Every one! Unaccounted-for disappearances! Men—women—children—gone, vanished, never heard of again! What in heaven's name does it mean?"

And, half-starting from his chair, both hands clenched, he stared about him, wild-eyed, as though expecting that some Borgain executioner, ax in hand, stood summoning him at the stairway door that led to the main hall above.

But no, there was nothing. On the mantel the old-fashioned bronze-gilt clock ticked evenly, peacefully. The fire snapped and sputtered, sending its sweet-perfumed warmth through the cheerful room. Calmly burned the student-lamp. In the dim regions outside the yellow circle of light it threw upon the clippings and the book, he saw the ranged rows of scholarly treatises, tomes, and pamphlets.

"Am I crazy, or what?" gasped Dennison, shaking and trembling. "What short of a fool web of suspicion and horror am I weaving? Great Heavens!—am I mad?"

He left the clippings for a while, lighted another cigar with a wisp of paper which he ignited at the grate, and some few minutes paced the tiling of the study. Hands clasped behind him, head bowed, he thought.

Then, the puzzled, hunted look still in his eyes, but with a calmer pulse, he came back to the table. Down he sat, and for over an hour busily employed himself in making shorthand notes of all the clippings. This done, he carefully stowed his notes away in his pocketbook, along with the metal tags. He replaced the clippings in their proper order, put them into the envelope, and shoved that into the secret pocket at the end of the mysterious record book.

This he put back onto the shelf, just as he had found it. He felt certain, now, that he had left no indication anywhere of his indiscreet investigation.

Ten strokes from the clock recalled him to the fact that the hour was growing late.

"Now," said he—"now that I've established—now that I seem to have established the fact—that Il Vecchio has for a number of years been taking the most vital interest in unaccounted-for disap-

pearances of human beings of all ages and races, I think perhaps the flash-lamp and the screw-driver, and I might find something of exceedingly great interest down below!"

He poked the fire down for the night, extinguished the lamp, and went up to his room.

A few minutes later, equipped with his tools, and leaving his room in darkness so that the Lombard, if indeed he were not long ago sleeping, should think the guest in bed, he noiselessly climbed down the trellis just as he had done the night before.

Cautiously, soundlessly as a wraith, he reached the pergola on its jutting outcrop of volcanic stone. The aloes, palms, and mulberry trees seemed to offer complete protection from any spying eyes. He thanked his tutelary gods there was no moon.

But save for the big-eyed wonder of those half-tropic stars above the sea, the night was black.

He paused a moment to watch the far lighthouse on Les Stes. Maries, to harken the soughing wash and crumble of the surf a full fifth of a mile below.

Then, awed with the majesty of the night, yet thrilled with so keen a passion of discovery as banished any wish to dwell upon it, he took the little path leading to the clump of sumacs.

Half an hour's hard and perilous toil by the flickering light of the little electric flash, half an hour's risks and perils along that narrow, broken runway down the face of the cliff, brought him, sweating and panting for breath, to the cul-de-sac where he had found the little door earlier that day.

Dark though the place was, doubly dark behind its masking screen of bushes, he recognized it.

"Now for the stairs!" gulped he, his heart beginning to leap with long-pent eagerness.

Against the place where he expected to enter he threw the electric beam.

Then, staring as though he had seen a ghost, he stood there speechless, shivering, sick with the shock of his unspeakable astonishment.

"Great Heavens!" he cried. "The door! It's been walled up!"

CHAPTER 14

Love and Fear

FOR A LONG minute he stood there, peering, unable to believe the evident testimony of his senses. In his supreme astonishment, his bitter disappointment at being thus baffled on the very first step of his investigation, he felt there must be some mistake, some self deception, in this thing.

But soon the touch of stone and mortar, fresh-laid yet already solidified into an impregnable mass, dispelled any such idea.

And, as he swept this imcomprehensible barrier with his shaft of white light, he began to take cognizance of how the thing must have been done.

"This looks," said he to himself, "as though it had been laid up from the inside. The absence of trowel-marks on the mortar, the way the mortar has oozed out and fallen here and here, proves that clearly enough. Yes, so it must have been. There's no room here for a man to stand and work. It would have been impossible to transport this amount of stone down the face of the cliff. Of a certainty the mason stood inside, at the top of the stairway. The mason? Lombard, of course! Ah! Now I understand!"

To him recurred the memory of the man's dirty and disordered clothing and of the peculiar spots upon it.

"He—he did it!" exclaimed the American bitterly. "And if so—what then? By whose order? How did he get into the labyrinth? Has he access to the laboratory? Does he know the combination of that door from the study into it? Il Vecchio expressly told me that nobody knew it but himself! Then—is there some other way into that maze? Great Heavens, what a mass of riddles, complications and cross-purposes! What webs of mystery! And I—I seem caught at the center of them all!"

He did not stay there long, on the ledge above the sea, in face of that impassable barrier which for the time being cut off all his hopes of solving the great secret of the death-chamber. Dejected, angry, and not without a self-unconfessed qualm of fear as to the outcome of all this, he presently

turned and began again the long, perilous climb to the cliff-top.

It was with a sense of infinite relief that he eventually regained his room by clambering up the trellis. Then he shut the blinds. Even in spite of all this new, magnificent strength, the labors and excitements of the past two days and nights were beginning to tell on him. Some forty hours had passed since he had slept. Nature was beginning to make strong demands for rest upon him. And, like a sensible man—since for the present he could follow no further the clue of his investigation—he yielded to that injunction.

Not venturing to strike a light, he undressed in the dark and turned in. Soon all his speculations, all the hundred and one questions of his perplexed mind, resolved themselves into a delicious warmth and drowsiness. He slept.

Mid-morning of the next day was more than past when he awoke, refreshed, invigorated, splendidly strong and full of life.

Dispelled were all the fears and haunting visions of the night. Entirely healed, without scars, the cuts on his hands, made the night before by the pieces of broken glass on top of the wall. As he sprang out of bed and stretched luxuriously reveling in his newfound suppleness and force, a great primal gladness surged through his heart.

"Life! Life!" he cried again. "Thank God for that, whatever may befall!"

The big mirror set into the door of his clothes-press caught his eye. Over to it he strode, and for a while stood there examining his features.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "How can this be? And yet, it is! If anybody had tried to tell me, a week ago, that such a thing could happen, I'd merely have recommended him to see an alienist. Yet—look! See! The impossible has happened. The unbelievable is an accomplished fact!"

Wondering, he studied his face, where notable changes had taken place.

Already the deeper wrinkles about the eyes and mouth, and across the forehead, had begun to lessen. The smaller ones had practically all disappeared. In the eyes no longer lay the yellowish cast of age, that muddly and unhealthy look which Dennison so well recalled. No, the whites were now clear and true, the pupils sparkling, the expression strong and vigorous.

The cheeks, he noted with pleasure and astonishment, were no longer hollow and deep-lined with care, suffering and malnutrition. Full and smooth, they showed the healthy blood coursing in full tide beneath the skin. From grizzled white his hair was already beginning to reassume the brown of middle life. Upon the heretofore bald expanse of his cranium a vigorous new growth was pushing forth. Quite similarly, his eyebrows had grown darker and more glossy. The mustache, too, had begun to win back its earlier hue and to lose something of its stiff and wiry character.

Even the nose, which but so short a time before had shown the aquiline curve indicative of approaching senility, had modified its form and now seemed returning to straight perfection of earlier days. The jaw had once more grown strong and firm, the lips full and red, the whole face indicative not only of the strength and vitality of a man hardly past his prime, but even of a greater force.

ASTOUNDING as all these metamorphoses were, a still more overwhelming surprise awaited him. For, baring his teeth, he was amazed to perceive that they had whitened and apparently strengthened; and, most marvelous of all—in his right upper canine a gold filling had been slightly displaced.

"What?" ejaculated Dennison, staring with incredulity. Carefully he studied this phenomenon.

Yes, no possible doubt of it could exist; the filling was being pushed out of place by a new growth or deposit of enamel and dentine underneath!

Hastily he looked at his other fillings. Without exception they all manifested the same tendency.

Too deeply whelmed in astonishment for any words, he stood there staring, gasping open-mouthed in wonder for a minute.

His every concept, all his scientific training, his ideas of cause and effect, evolution, development, and progressive decay, the irrecovable nature of catabol-

ism—all, everything, was being swept into the mental junkheap. Tremendous readjustments, mental as well as physical, were thrusting themselves upon him. And, in a kind of stupor, he exclaimed:

"Why—why, then—it's only a matter of time when I'll have the sound, perfect teeth of my young manhood again! When in every way I shall not only stop decay, but reach absolute physical perfection! When I, I myself, only the other day a wreck and doomed to die, shall be Hermes, Balder, Apollo, Ormuzd—youth eternal—life everlasting and imperishable!"

Dazed, half-stunned, he dressed and went out for a walk in the grounds.

"No, no," his only conclusion was, "I cannot understand it. It passes human reason. Yet—it is!"

And to his eyes, strangers to weeping for many a long, decadent year, rose a resistless gush of tears—tears of a joy so deep, a happiness so unspeakably profound, that in no other way could it find outlet or expression.

For the next three days Dennison lived a strange life there in the walled estate on Mount St. Clair and in the environs; a life blent of poignant new sensations, keen curiosity, intense scientific speculation and observation of his somatic changes, acute loneliness and longing for Stasia, ennui mingled with an undercurrent of inexhaustible excitement, long—long thoughts, strange plans and hopes and fears.

Pleased at first with the absence of Il Vecchio, he soon came to miss him terribly. For the Italian, whatever his ultimate purpose as regarded his treacherous guest, would at least have furnished the companionship that Dennison at this most critical period in his whole life so urgently demanded. The American felt a wild desire to talk of his condition, to discuss it, analyze it with some other mind, record it and attempt to set its metes and bounds.

But, with only the dogged Lombard and Marianella at hand, both of whom he felt to be covertly hostile, no possible opportunity existed for any such discussion. So Dennison had to possess his soul in patience, read, walk, think, and in tense awe and wonder watch his years slip off him, one by one, observe middle age come back, see signs of youth return, live, all alone, through a crisis such as never since the world evolved from primitive fire-mist had come to any living creature.

Though mentally hungry, starved for companionship and understanding, yet his bodily wants were well served by the two domestics. Lombard and the cook spread for him a plentiful table either in the dining-room or, if he so desired, outdoors on the terrace overlooking the sea. Dennison never spoke a word to either of them concerning the caves beneath. He asked no question.

Toward these two people he maintained a close reserve, punctuated with an occasional five-franc piece. Yet, though Marianella seemed a simple soul, he felt the eye of Lombard always on him. And, sensing rather than seeing the expression of this man as perhaps he came and went behind the guest's chair, to serve him, Dennison felt a strong instinctive uneasiness, a conviction that certain matters were shaping which spelled no good for him.

ONE INCIDENT occurred which set him very ill at ease. On the morning of the second day he had gone down to the study with the intention of trying once more to puzzle out the cipher in the black book. He had this volume open before him, and was busily copying out a page of the record, meaning to preserve it for future reference, when all at once he heard a step behind him.

Turning he perceived the Lombard.

"Well?" cried he angrily. "What is it? What do you want?"

"Nothing, m'sieur," replied the man, saluting. "I only came because you rang for me." And he nodded at the push-button in the wall close to the bookcase.

"I? I rang for you?" exclaimed the American. "No, you're mistaken! I need nothing—only to—" Then he recovered his aplomb. "Yes, now you're here, you might—er—clean out the fireplace. You see, it's quite clogged with ashes."

No further word passed between them; but Dennison understood the look on the fellow's face as he turned to the menial task.

When Lombard was gone, the American put up the black book, which now he

could no longer bring himself to pore over, chose a heavy cane of Il Vecchio's in the hallway and went for a long walk along the crest of the mountain, to the rough cobblestone chapel at its northern extremity. The rest of the morning he spent talking with an aged peasant whom he met close beside that very curious building, dressing a few vines in a terraced plot of ground. This somewhat relieved his mind. Anything, it seemed, was better than brooding introspection all alone.

"Ought I not to sieze this opportunity to make good my escape from here?" he seriously asked himself, as the next afternoon he sat smoking one of his host's cigars, and watching, from the summer-house the feluccas of the Cette fishing-fleet tacking homeward under the declining sun.

"Now that I have attained the object of my long, painful pilgrimage; now that the Alkahest is mine and its effect already has far exceeded anything I dared hope, would it not be the part of wisdom, this very night, secretly to take my things, make off down the mountain, and catch the midnight express for Bordeaux?

"Why should I remain here, surrounded by mystery, espionage, and probable hate, subjected to great possible dangers in the future, when Il Vecchio returns? Why should I run these deadly risks? Why?"

Though he turned these questions every way in his mind, he could frame no satisfactory answer. In the first place, a compelling desire had taken fire in his soul to solve the mystery of the black book, of the caves, the mortuary chamber, and all connected therewith. Until time and opportunity should solve that monstrous riddle, he felt he could not possibly desert the place.

Then again, thoughts of Stasia acted like a powerful magnet to hold him from departure. Now that through his veins a new, strong life was pulsing, now that the passing of every hour brought him greater vigor, a finer strength, and a renewal of his youth, now that he felt again a return of all those long-forgotten impulses and thoughts which his prime had known, he understood the bonds which had grown up about his heart.

Stasia was very beautiful. Young she was, and dowered with that charm which invests the European woman in her first, delicious bloom.

And as he dreamed on, Dennison's mind reverted to her as naturally, as inevitably as water flows down hill. Though, had he asked himself the question pointblank, he would have scouted the idea that he was already in love, yet he felt that at all hazards he must remain a while, till she returned; that he must see her again, talk with her, look upon her, be with her for a few Elysian days in that terrestial paradise.

Thus, half-unconsciously, he mused; and, musing, fed the flame within his breast.

Even more potent than all this, far off at the back of his mind, half-unrealized, yet compelling, dwelt another thought, as insinuating fear which even to himself he dared not voice—a fear which impelled him to remain near Il Vecchio, fear which vaguely hinted that perhaps in the elixir might lie other, still unknown forces. Forces which, once set at work as they might already have been, it would require all the knowledge and the power of the aged scientist to overcome.

Thus, all things considered, Dennison found he could not flee. He was bound by the desire of knowledge.

"No," he summoned up everything, "no, I must stay a while. A week or two, at any rate. Time enough, time enough then to make good my escape, if need be. But for the present, for me, it will me quite impossible!"

His decision taken, he pitched the smoked-out cigar over the cliff. For a few minutes he sat there thinking deeply, gazing out upon that Homeric sea, over the board, blue floor which, seeming to slant upward till its horizon lay at the level of his eye, was dotted here and there by a sail—brown or dull red or vermilion, triangular and bellying with the urge of the southern breeze.

He was overwhelmed with the beauty.

"Perfect! Divine!" he mused, as the warm, thyme-scented breeze fanned his face. "A heaven on earth, an Eden, if there ever was one. And I, the Adam just created here, must stay a while to revel in it! Ah, if my Eve were only here!"

CHAPTER 15

The Ring

THE NEXT day was a day of dolce far niente and of Spanish castle-building, with Stasia as the inspiration of each dream. To the first flush of activity, a delightful restfulness had succeeded, as though the perfect interplay of every function, the harmony of his regenerated body now demanded rest in place of action. All day long Dennison read and smoked and idled, supremely blissful. Once or twice he went up to his room to examine his face in the tall mirror. And, slight though the changes were, he still felt positive he could detect a little rejuvenescence that progressed and, by its wondrous action, thrilled him with new and ever new delight.

Yet, somehow, as late afternoon drew down toward evening, and the wide expanse of sea and sky began to burn in a golden haze, a vague uneasiness, insinuating, evasive, began to fill his mind.

He moved about, sought now the shelter of a gnarled olive, now the exposure of the bald cliff-top, wandered through the poppy and tulip beds, even tried to talk with Lombard; but nothing would serve.

"What's the matter with me, I wonder?" he now exclaimed at last, with petulance. "Haven't I everything I need? Everything—save her—that human heart could wish? My friends, back home, are fighting through fog and snow and storm. Here am I, lapped in eternal summer, in never-fading beauty! And yet—"

He shrugged his shoulders, turned, and went into the house. Lonesome all through, he was glad when Lombard announced that m'sieur was served, that dinner was prepared. As long as he could, he extended the meal. It kept him, for a while at least, from ennui; the ennui which, so he assured himself, must be all that was disturbing his peace of mind.

After dinner he looked again at his face, in the mirror. This time, whether because of the dim light, or his somewhat disturbed state of mind, or however it may have been, the sight still further upset him.

"I'm looking a bit too young," he exclaimed nervously, trying in vain to smile. "Jove! But my skin certainly does seem smooth, though! And my mustache, why, it's positively quite silky again—almost like—h-m—like it used to be, Lord knows how long ago! I—I hope this thing isn't a continuous performance, as it were. Because, in that case, it—it might be a trifle embarrassing, might it not?"

Anxiously he studied his features. Certain it seemed to him that a disquieting change had set in, as though vigorous maturity had been succeeded—or was beginning to be—by a less virile, less masculine look.

Something seemed to have left his face; something which he did not wish to lose. Already a sort of adolescent freshness was creeping in.

But, as he brought a lamp and closely scrutinized every line and feature, he could not clearly trace or analyze this thing; and now, with better light, he could not be quite positive he even saw it.

With a laugh at his own foolish fears, he betook himself to the study once more, there to pass the lonesome evening as best he might, before Il Vecchio's open fire, with Il Vecchio's cigars and books.

At first, having reached this room, he thought of renewing his study of the black book; but soon dismissed this from his mind.

"I can learn nothing from it, anyhow," thought he, possessed by a certain languor, a lazy sense of wishing to be amused rather than to think and ponder. "Sometime I will fathom it; not now. Ah! Here's something! De Maupassant, as I live!"

Gladly he pulled from the shelf a volume of short stories in French, by Maupassant. And, two minutes later, he was settled comfortably for a long evening's pleasure.

The first story in the book was "Le Horla," which he had never read. The weird, fanciful, terrifying descriptions of a mind fast approaching insanity—Maupassant's own mind, reflected in the novel—fascinated him. Seated in a long, low wicker-chair, with the student-lamp at his left hand, he passed two hours and a half in deep absorption.

Temporarily, not even the idea of Stasia had been able to force itself between him and this tale of ghostly doom. Through the wide-open window the night breeze

ebbed and flowed, swaying the smoke of his cigar into fantastic forms almost like those of the vicious Brazilian ghoul whereof the French text told him.

Far away, far below, a low, rolling thunder, rising, falling, yet never still, spoke of the hungry surf under the cliff. A nightingale was singing somewhere in the groves; its melting raptures of melody fell on deaf ears as Dennison, fascinated by this other man's experiences of strangling fear, read on and on and on, eagerly turning the pages toward the inevitable catastrophe at the end.

DENNISON'S book lay on a reading-stand, which he had adjusted so that he might lean back easily in the long chair and get a perfect light on the page. His right hand held the cigar. His left hung carelessly over the arm of the chair, almost touching the floor, which, like all the flooring in that old-fashioned house, was of red octagonal tiling.

All at once, as he stopped for a moment to rest from the strain of the horrible narrative and to ponder the dread consequences of the Horla's parasitism, a little clink attracted his attention.

Something small and hard rolled on the floor, spiralled, and came to rest—a thin little wavering band of gold, it seemed.

He sat up, suddenly, for some strange reason instinctively seized him with a new and strange alarm. His heart began to pound unnaturally. Eagerly he strained his ears, listening whether or not that sound would come again.

No, nothing.

"What the deuce?" he ejaculated with some heat, as though to banish the impending evil which he realized subjectively was about to smite him.

A long minute he waited, peering round with wide eyes. His nerves were suddenly drawn taut.

Up he brought his left hand—up, up, into the range of vision. He flung it out before his eyes.

His face went gray. He understood. It typified the end.

Over he flung the reading-stand, book and all. Down on both knees he fell, and there on the tiles began scrabbling round for the little circlet.

He found it presently. Quickly he put it on again. He turned it round and round, massaged the flesh of his finger, held his hand out before him, tried the ring again, and in every possible way sought to convince himself his hand had not decreased in size since the previous day.

In vain! He could not compass it. He knew at last the truth, proved to him now by the unimpeachable evidence of cold metal. He knew! He understood! He had already passed the meridian of life; now he was shrinking back toward youth again!

"Merciful Heaven!" he choked, bowed with horror and with a sick revulsion of all his hopes, his dreams. "Where will all this end? Where—"

"Ah! That, my friend, is now the vital, the truly crucial point at issue!" sounded a deep, resonant voice. "If we knew that, we should hold the key to all!"

Despite his anguish, his distress, the American looked up with startled, haggard eyes.

There in the doorway, tall and stern and

ominous in the shadow, stood Il Vecchio.

Dennison started back as though he had seen a specter; as though the Horla itself had risen up before him.

"You?" croaked he hoarsely. "You—here?"

"Why not?" replied the Italian, a cynical smile upon his bearded lips. "Too long already have I deprived myself of the pleasure of your society. And now—but what is this? Why do you cringe? Why are you pale and shaken, my guest, my friend?"

Seized by a sudden, invincible loathing for this man whom he suspected of so much, against whom he could really prove so little, Dennison recoiled still further.

Then, racked with terror, impelled by a mad, burning lust to know the truth, once and for all, about this thing, he staggered to his feet.

Toward Il Vecchio he reeled, hands outflung, and shaking as with palsy.

"Tell me! Tell me!" he wailed. "What will the end of all this be? The end! The end!"

"How can I?" smiled Il Vecchio grimly.

"Tell me!"

"Tell you the end? When this, my dear young guest, is hardly the beginning!"

"You mean—" gasped Dennison; then, brain and body yielding alike to the horror of the thought, he staggered and fell fainting on the floor.

Il Vecchio, a strange, exultant gleam in his sunken eye, folded his arms and gazed down at the prostrate figure there before him.

"The end?" said he. "Ah! if he only knew!"

CHAPTER 16

The Promise

THE waving of a curtain in the breeze, slow, gentle, soothing, formed the first definite impression that brought Dennison back to consciousness again. Rousing, he peered out through that curtain, out into the dark green eucalyptus hedge and the pale aloes that bounded the path opposite his window. Then he realized that it was morning; that he was lying in his own bed; that many hours must have flown, leaving no trace in consciousness, since the horror and distress of the past night.

And now, entirely refreshed again, once more all life and energy, he sat up quickly in bed. He rubbed his eyes to dispel the last clinging traces of sleep. Deeply he inhaled the fresh, crisp morning air that idled in at the window; and through him the tides of strength returned.

"Why—I must have dreamed it all!" his first thought was. But, looking out again, he clearly saw the long, white frock of Il Vecchio half-hidden among the olives.

"No," he added, hardly understanding as yet. "No, that can't be. The doctor's home again. But—well, I guess I must have fainted, what? Something happened! What was it? They carried me off to bed, that's evident. Probably the old man gave me some potassium bromid, or something of that sort. I'm certainly here, at any rate; and I've had one grand sleep! No matter—everything's all right!"

Vague, as half-forgotten nightmares, now seemed to him the terrors of the night before, down in the doctor's study. Already obliterated was the anguish of his discovery. And even though he raised his hand and looked at it, found the ring still missing and knew it had in all reality fallen off, he only smiled.

"Pshaw!" he sneered, ashamed of his last night's weakness in presence of the patriarch. "What of that? There's nothing to be alarmed about, is there? I must have been overcome by the gruesome fascination of the infernal Maupassant yarn. What if I am a trifle reduced in bulk? So much the better! So much nearer the perfect standard. It's a gain, instead of a loss! What else could have been expected? Nothing's more natural, after all, than that a human body, returning from senility to the prime of life, should grow more solid, more compact!

"It's—it must be—only the bagginess of age that's left me; a sort of taking-in of the slack, so to express it. Reasonable, natural, eminently right and proper. Jove, what a fool I was to have raised an outcry, to have kicked up such a row about so simple a detail!"

Vastly reassured, he clambered out of

bed, stretched, breathed deeply, and felt with an immense joy the perfect response of his revivified muscles, the lithe play of his strongly graceful body.

Quickly he washed and dressed. Upon him lay the imperative demand for breakfast, for tobacco, for exertion—for life! All his black and ugly thoughts, whether of personal fear, or of suspicion relative to the caves, dislike of Lombard, hatred of Il Vecchio—all these, all, every one, was for the moment swept away in the blight, glad outburst of his new-born life that sang within him, greeting another radiant day.

Far back the pendulum of anxiety, of introspection, and spying doubt had swung. Now the reaction was carrying him into enthusiastic pleasure in the mere animal enjoyment of his strength, in the marvelous glow and warmth of that new day upon the enchanted coast of the Riviera.

"I'll take a hand at the gardening myself, today," thought he, humming an old love-tune. "It's been twenty years, if it's been a day, since I've dug the good black earth. Gad! The smell of it beats any perfume in this world!"

Eagerly he scented the breeze, as he stood there at the window overlooking that sunbathed quietude of the walled estate. New instincts were awakening, old long-forgotten ones reviving in his breast. "Give me a mattock or a spading-fork," quoth he, "and I'll soon make the dirt fly!"

Some minutes later, Il Vecchio greeted him in the olive-grove with a smile and an outstretched hand which Dennison warmly pressed.

"Well, and how are we this morning?" asked the old man very kindly. "The little nervous upset of last night, I see, has quite gone by. Your eye is clear and firm, color excellent, hand steady as a rock Health, in short, absolutely perfect, is it not? Ah, my friend, if only more men would do as you are doing—quit their cares and worries for a while, and seek retirement from the world! Seek nature, in her never-failing youth and joy! Like Antaeus, the fabled giant of old, who rose nine times stronger every time he was thrown to earth by Hercules, so can men, even today, find life and strength thus."

SMILING, he nodded at his long-handled spade, to which the dark, rich Mediterranean soil clung thickly. Neither in look nor tone lay any slightest reminiscent hint of the wrong that Dennison had done him, nor yet of any ulterior thought whatsoever. And, as though washed away by some subtle, quiet power, impossible to understand or to resist, the apprehensions and distrusts of Dennison—already greatly weakened—seemed to disappear.

It was less that any problem had been solved than that all questionings for the time merely faded into other, brighter, happier thoughts. And Dennison, looking at the old man (apparently so simple, so unaffected) as he stood there in the checkered, moving shadows, leaning upon his spade, smiled back with joy.

He filled and lighted the pipe which he had bought in the village, took a long inhalation, and, with a light-hearted laugh, exclaimed:

"Come! Give me some tools! The call of mother earth is on me, strong, this morning. I haven't heard it since Heaven knows when; but I hear it now. And I obey! To work!"

That was a day of days for the American; a morning such as few men ever know.

The air, sun, sky—a turquoise bowl inverted on the green—bird-songs and breeze all blended to a symphonic wonder of sound, light, color, and emotion; and, like a counter-bass to everything, now rose, now fell the far, low, booming threnody of surf.

Together, speaking or in silence, the two men gladly labored, with Lombard doing the bidding of Il Vecchio for all the coarser toil. And as Dennison delved, smoked, felt once more the thrilling touch of earth—our all-mother—or, resting a moment, stood up, dashed the sweat from his glowing forehead and looked abroad across that summer sea, white-flecked with felucca-sails, so glad his heart was within him that it almost burst for joy. Song rose to his lips; and through his soul welled the floodtides of perfect happiness.

Perfect? Not quite. Though no exhaustion followed his toil, though it was godlike bliss to feel the strong, resilient

muscles obey his will, to sense "the married harmony of form and function," yet the thought of Stasia still obtruded. He wanted her! He needed her!

To him the sight of her sweet, wistful face, the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand, had become almost obsessions, in their intense evocation of desire. And, as the memory of her rose before his mind, he thrilled with unspoken hopes, with passion he himself dared not admit or give free rein to.

A score of times he found his tongue shaping her name, his lips about to speak, to question Il Vecchio. Where was she? he burned to ask. Why had she thus been taken from him? How long must she remain away? Yet, though everything impelled him to these queries, he restrained himself. For nothing, he knew could be gained by exciting the old man's already evident uneasiness in this respect.

That Il Vecchio had taken her away for the very purpose of avoiding any possible romance between her and the American, Dennison did not for a moment fail to suspect. Well he knew the European idea, the old dowry system, the marriages often arranged by proxy years before they can be consummated.

"In all probability," he thought, setting his jaw a little grimly, "In all probability she's already betrothed to some petty bourgeois down in Cette, or in someone of those provincial towns. What thoughts are these of mine? Why should I, a foreigner, a stranger, a chance arrival, entertain such mad ideas?"

Yet he could not put them away. Again and again he found himself dwelling on this one train of reasoning. And not all the old man's talk of olive-growth and viticulture, phylloxera, and parasites, not all his own labor with the hoe and pruning-knife, not all his stern self-prohibition, could for long hold nature's thoughts from surging back again.

"Bah! What folly is this?" he angrily demanded of himself, at last, when—all the trees of the southernmost tier having been spaded round—Il Vecchio bade Lombard bring a huge, brimming jug of milk, with figs, cheese-cakes, and honey. "What madness? What am I thinking of? Why should I entertain such chimeras? Am I insane, to think such thoughts?"

Down in the shade he sat, at ease, and looked with a strange frown at the sunlit parterres, the lawns, and groves of this delightful place.

"Is not all this," he wondered, "merely the physical reaction of the great change which has taken place and still is taking place in me? Surely, my thoughts are not of Stasia, but of womankind in general! Had any other woman been at hand, would it not have been the same?"

THROUGH his mind passed a memory of "Midsummer Night's Dream," and of Lysander's waking after Puck had anointed his eyes with the magic blossom; of Lysander's love for Helen; of all the strangely whimsical complications following that sport of the fairy-people. Well-used to psychic analyses, he seemed to see a parallel in his own case. Silently he ate, while the old man watched him with a shrewd, yet unobtrusive eye.

"What?" thought the American. "Am I so foolish as to consider marrying a little French girl of hardly twenty years, who's never even been to Paris and who knows practically nothing of the world? Whose principal diversions seem to be her music and her fancy-work, with a little landscape painting now and then? Come, come! This cannot, must not be!"

Il Vecchio, pouring him another glass of foaming milk, interrupted his reflections.

"Let us drink deep of this," remarked the old man. "Next to my lost Alkahest, this is the veritable elixir. You know Mechnikoff's work, of course? I have all my milk, here, inoculated with his lactic bacillus. Have been doing so ever since he first announced it. A marvelous discovery, that; and a more marvelous man! I place him and Gabriel Petit together on one plane. You know Petit's researches with radium injections?"

Dennison shook his head absent-mindedly. Abstruse scientific speculation was not what he wanted today. Something very different lay in his mind. Il Vecchio's words hardly penetrated his consciousness. The patriarch gazed at him with a dry, calculating look, which Dennison failed to note.

Between the American's eyes a wrinkle of perplexity creased his brow. Still

was his mind running in the forbidden channel; still was he trying to convince himself that the obvious was impossible.

"No, no!" he sternly thought. "No follies, now! No indiscretions! Here am I, Granville Dennison, surgeon and man of means—an American, experienced, shrewd—dreaming preposterous dreams! It's the elixir in my blood, the air, the sun, the warmth, the eternal springtime, here. I must pull together! Come, this won't do at all. To work, to work!"

He beckoned Lombard and handed him his glass, then made as though once more to seize a spade. But Il Vecchio detained him with a smile.

"Haste not, my friend," he bade. "Here we have time enough, time for all things." Dennison eyed him thoughtfully, as, resting there beneath the trees, the old man appeared to meditate with benign retrospection. And, looking thus at him, he shivered slightly. Lombard, at a glance from his master, withdrew.

Something, the American knew not what, seemed to have passed between them; something hostile, something ominous and dread. As on a summer afternoon you have perhaps seen a cloud shadow steal down a sunlit valley, while yet the cloud itself had not yet reached the sun that shines on you, so Dennison felt the chill of some subtle premonition.

A haunting reminiscence of suspicion and of fear flitted through his mind, blighting the happiness of that past, perfect hour. A memory of the caverns, rising unbidden, numbed his heart. Instinctively he moved a trifle farther from Il Vecchio. A vision of imperative flight, of escape while time still remained, crossed his apperception. Yet he concealed his thought.

"For all things? There is time for all?" asked he, in level tones.

"All!" answered the patriarch, unmoved.

"Save love!" ejaculated Dennison. The words, despite him, burst unbidden from his very soul. And, following them, came a jangling and discordant laugh.

"No; that, too, you shall have," said Il Vecchio, nodding very gravely. "Last night did I not tell you that everything thus far accomplished was but the beginning, the overture of your life-symphony? You perhaps misinterpreted me. But I repeat it: This is only the beginning! And—"

"What?" cried Dennison, starting up. "You—you mean—"

"As the gods loved on cloud-capped Olympus, so shall you! As the Aztec golden youth loved on his high, sacred teocallis, you too shall love! Thus I repay—"

"I—?"

"As mortal man has never loved before, you shall know love! Never since time was, has a romance shaped like this; never has one so perfect or so passionate been even dreamed! In you the epic of youth and joy shall blend to an unspeakable perfection. Lacking this, my life-experiment, all but destroyed by you, were lost, my ineffable harmony made discord! Ah, you shall see. You will not leave me; you will not, now! Behold the heavens open out before you!

"But come, come, my friend; enough of words. There is still work to do among my olives. Come, let us lay hands to the task before us, ere the noon-day heat comes on!"

Smiling again, he rose and grasped his long-handled spade.

But Dennison, suddenly going very pale, stared at him a long moment with tremulous lips and wide, passionate eyes; then, turning, strode unsteadily away.

Il Vecchio watched him a moment, craftily. He nodded, stroked his beard, and muttered something to himself. Then, with a thin and quiet smile he once more turned to his task among the olive trees.

CHAPTER 17

Stasia's Return

A WEEK passed, then a fortnight; and, save for his growing fever of impatience to see the girl once more, Dennison noted no disquieting symptoms. Perfect in bodily health and vigor, he seemed to remain static. No further changes occurred. The only abnormality in him—one which he hardly perceived—was a sort of mental inhibition, a lack of spontaneity, of initiative.

No longer had he the will to struggle, to resist or to combat the power of Il

Vecchio over him, even had he been so minded. No longer did his thoughts revert to the cave-mystery; no longer had he any impulse or desire to study out that cipher book, to ponder the questions at issue or to prosecute the investigations so eagerly begun.

Lulled in a drowsy well-being, lapped in physical perfection, surrounded by every comfort, every beauty, he fell gradually into a beatified half-somnolescence, a land-o'-dreams condition, a lotus-eater's bliss, such as Tennyson tells of in the country "where it was always afternoon." And so, drifting, happy, beyond the rightful happiness of man, glorious in perfect bodily grace, beautiful as Narcissus, he felt the magic of the Alkahest mold him to symmetry in every part.

Only once, during that enchanted fortnight, did strange, uneasy thoughts cross his mind. It was on the evening of the twelfth day since Il Vecchio had promised him the love of Stasia. Idly he had been looking over a pile of medical and popular reviews, down in the pergola.

All at once his eye fell on a marked paragraph in the Annales Contemporaines. Had Il Vecchio arranged so that he must see it? Dennison did not know. He hardly wondered, so keen his interest suddenly had grown.

"What's this?" said he, scanning the heading with eager eyes. "Another treatment for senility?"

And quickly he translated:

PROFESSOR PETIT'S EPOCHAL DISCOVERY

Astonishing Results
of Intravenal Radium Treatment

PARIS, Dec. 12.—The scientific world has just received with astonishment the latest news from the experimental station of Professor Gabriel Petit, at Alfort. According to well-authenticated reports, Professor Petit's claim seems to be substantiated that he has discovered in radium a veritable elixir of life.

Having recently injected two doses of radium, of two milligrams each, into the jugular vein of an old and worn-out horse, he finds that now the animal is to all appearances young again. It has put on fat, its coat is glossy, it has grown frisky and supple. A microscopic examination of its blood shows a marvelous quantity of new red corpuscles.

Dr. Petit is continuing his experiments, which may prove of great value to mankind. He refuses to be interviewed further on the subject, though he claims to have discovered definitely that radium, administered in intravenal injections, produces a lasting radioactivity in the whole organism, and that the effect is lasting.

Most surprising of all his discoveries is this: that, having treated a second horse in the same manner, and then having administered a solution of sulphate of lead, reverse effects have been obtained, and the process of senility once more set in action. Lead, as is well known, is one of the few metals practically impermeable by radioactive emanations. Further developments are awaited with intense interest in the world of science.

For a moment Dennison stared with astonishment at this momentous news. In these few paragraphs, thus singled out with heavy blue-penciling, he seemed to read something—though just what, he could not tell—far deeper and more weighty than the words themselves made manifest. And, with a clenching of the fist, a muttered oath, he flung the paper down upon the bench beside him, then fell to pacing up and down the summer-house.

BUT presently this temporary uneasiness, this formless agitation passed. The lure and magic of the scene, the soft air and the blue rollers, creaming into windows of surf along the base of the titanic cliff, won him back to dreamy indolence again.

"Ah, well," thought he, relighting his cigar, "what matter, after all? How does this concern me? Let them delve and pry and dig for the unattainable, if they will! I—I have no further need to care!"

Yet next morning again the indefinable uneasiness possessed him, would not let him rest, drove him out for a walk. And, once more down the mountain and in the little city, he half-instinctively stopped in at a chemist's shop and—impelled by some subconscious force—bought a flask of lead sulphate. At the Hotel des Anglais, he wrote a letter to Dr. Petit, requesting details as to the administration of the sulphate. The reply he requested to be sent to Cette, "poste restante," or general delivery.

Had you asked him, point-blank, the meaning of these moves, very likely he could not have told with any clearness. Almost as the Horla itself controlled the

thoughts and acts of the hero in De Maupassant's tale, so something far deep down in Dennison's subjectivity dictated itself orders. And he, understanding not, obeyed. Fear? No; for he feared nothing now. Prescience? He foresaw nothing save happiness and joy and long continuance of life such as no man before him ever had so much as dreamed. What then? He knew not. He obeyed.

"I must be little better than a fool," he sneered at himself with curling lip, as he once more climbed the mountain, "a fool, to have done that! What possible reason can I have? None! This Alkahest, this all-perfect essence, can have nothing in common with such coarse materialism as mere radium! This is no Brown-Sequard fiasco, heralded to all the world for a few brief weeks, then falling into ridicule and impotence! This must have the property of bringing organic life to its climax of perfect development and there maintaining it. How long? God knows! Indefinitely, perhaps. For many years, at any rate. So, why this uneasiness?"

And, cursing his own unformulated suspicions, he took the plane-tree avenue of the Chateau d'Eau Park, and so struck into the steep, little cobbled road which, bounded on either hand by squat stone houses, zigzagged up the steep.

Twenty minutes later he had reached the gate in the wall, had rung, and been admitted by Lombard. On the broad path he noticed fresh wheel-tracks. Like a flash the thought surged over him: "Stasia—back again!"

Paling slightly, he stopped. He stared at Lombard, his heart beginning to pound.

"Is—is—has somebody come?" he stammered.

"Oui, m'sieur."

"Who?"

"M'sieur has but to look," answered the surly fellow, with a nod toward the lawn in front of the house.

Dennison, strangely excited, too agitated even to curse the man's grudging answer, hastened forward. Down along the side of the building he hurried, past the beds of tulip and flaming poppy, and thus turned the corner, out of breath with overmastering emotion.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, and there stopped motionless in his tracks.

Stasia was there.

Out on the lawn, under a spreading lime tree, a table with a snowy cloth had been set for an al fresco dejeuner. On one side sat Il Vecchio; opposite him, the girl!

At first Dennison gained only an impression of a mass of dark brown hair, coiled low upon the neck; a white, short-sleeved gown; moving golden lights and purple shades that interplayed through the wind-stirred leaves above. The picture, in all truth, beautiful enough, seemed to his super-excited perception some mirage of the imagination, a thing too exquisite to be approached, lest as he should draw near it might dissolve and vanish.

Yet, presently advancing, he found it very real. The fruit, bread, and wine upon the table, the tall silver coffee-percolator diffusing its aroma, the roll of white unsalted butter and the comb of honey—all these vouched for the materiality of the vision.

Stasia and her uncle rose to greet him.

"Ah, friend, just in time to join us!" exclaimed the old man with deep cordiality, grasping the American's hand. "Stasia," and he turned to the girl, "Stasia, see! He has come!"

And, taking her hand, too, he laid it quietly in Dennison's.

Strange, sudden fire burning in his eyes, the American looked at her. Pale his face was; his expression intent and very eager. He spoke no word. The rounded contour of Stasia's arm, bare to above the elbow, the warmly swelling curve of her breast thrilled him with primal emotions such as he had never known. In silence he let the sight of her stamp itself upon his soul.

A moment their hands thus clung; then very gently the girl loosed her fingers from his grasp.

Instinctively he laid his hand upon his heart, drew back a little and so remained standing there before her, gazing as perhaps some devotee to Isis might tremblingly look upon the mystic veil behind which the supreme mystery of mysteries lay hidden.

Il Vecchio, meanwhile, watched them with a keenly observant eye, crafty and

full of guile. Smiling at length, he coughed slightly, then remarked:

"Come, my children, come; now let us eat. One cannot live, even here, on soft breezes, landscapes, blue waters or—sweet thoughts!"

With a gesture he indicated his own chair to Dennison, then, turning, bade Lombard bring another from the house.

That was a breakfast such as Dennison had never known, or dreamed. The little white table out there in the warm beauty of that walled garden, with its vistas of pines and fruit-trees, its view of the Mediterranean, its shade and sunlight, became for him enchanted. Whether he ate or not, he could not tell. Stasia's voice, her every gesture, the mere sight of her, the knowledge of her presence, filled him with a wondrous, an unspeakable happiness.

A bird-note, here or there among the branches, the thyme-perfumed breeze, the slow drift of cloud-fleeces across the sky, blended to a perfect background for the wizardry that thralled him. In all his life never had he experienced a moment so entrancing, never known so blissful a situation.

Every element of romance seemed to enter there—youth, beauty, perfection, all, everything, there on that massive height beside the Homeric sea. Forgotten was Il Vecchio; yet as the old man watched Stasia distil the coffee or listened to his guest's happy speech, a something in his thin-lipped smile was eloquent of evil.

At length he spoke.

"Now, my children," said he, "you must pardon me. I have a new experiment under way, this morning. So, au revoir!"

Rising, he left them. They, scarcely noticing his departure still sat at table with laughter that echoed among the olive-trees and fragrant sunlit aisles.

Breakfast over, they strolled down to the summer-house. Often as Dennison had studied every detail of the curving coast all the way from Cap d'Agde to Les Stes. Maries, the sweep of that segment of the golden Riviera never had seemed so perfect as now.

The clustered fishing villages, the little towns and bathing resorts with their gleaming red-tiled roofs, their tiny spires and belfries pricking up through the verdure; the shining flash of surf for miles each way; the twinkle of the copper-domed lighthouse in the sun; even the smudge of a Marseilles steamer far off over the horizon—all, everything, appeared beatified.

Thus an hour sped by—the happiest in Dennison's whole life.

He knew not, and had he known he would probably not have cared, that from a window of the house Il Vecchio was keenly watching them.

For to a soul in paradise what matters anything outside it? And this return of Stasia was to him far more than "paradise anew."

CHAPTER 18

A New Horror

DENNISON'S courtship, thus cavalierly begun, proceeded with well-favored facility. Each day he rose, feeling the strength and vigor of a perfect prime pulsating through him; each day became more deeply infatuated with this charming girl, with her fascinating ways, her varying moods, her thoughts and turns of sentiment, her delightful speech and never-failing tendernesses. Merely to sit and watch her at her embroidery was for him a pleasure so poignant that it banished all thoughts of the future, stilled all questionings, put far away from him the last of his haunting fears.

Such petty details as the status of his visit bore no longer any weight with him. He had almost forgotten his treason to Il Vecchio; he was forgetting his duty, his long-overdue return to his own work and his own life in America; everything had gone by the board—everything, save her!

Yet Il Vecchio murmured not, nor by any word or sign or look was aught than the personification of cordiality. Witham's name was often on his lips, as though that alone constituted an inexhaustible letter of credit for Dennison. And right royally did the American draw upon it.

His days were idleness and adoration; his nights, visions of Stasia. Sometimes, of an evening, he and she would sing to-

gether. Or again, they would play duets on the old-fashioned piano in the salon on the second floor. Under Dennison's long-unpractised fingers, which now had regained their one-time suppleness and skill, American airs for the first time echoed through the quaint, high-ceilinged room with its mahogany panelings.

When the girl played, Dennison never tired of sitting in a long chair, dreaming and smoking, watching her, marveling at her extraordinary beauty and at the miracle which had brought him, already an old man, back to enjoyments he had thought forever dead.

Sometimes uneasy recollections of New York crossed his mind; memories of his friends and associates there, of his abandoned profession, his deserted patients "some critically ill", and of the stir which his abrupt disappearance must have caused.

"But never mind," thought he. "No man's worth more than nine days of newspaper-wonder. They've long since given up speculating about me! All in my own good time I'll go back to the old life again; no hurry. Mañana! Next week will be time enough to start. Next month. Next summer!

In their many hours together, their walks and talks, their occasional drives down the winding mountain roads out to Beziers or Montpellier, he learned some valuable details concerning Il Vecchio and the peculiar life led thereon the summit of the heights above Cette.

He found that Stasia was an orphan, adopted in infancy by the Italian savant, and—save for a few years' schooling in a convent at Tarascon—quite inexperienced in the ways of the outer world.

To her America seemed like a dreamland of enchantments. She never wearied hearing of the marvels which Dennison, by no means minimizing them, poured into her eager ears. American civilization, in reality so noisily crude, pictured itself to her like the visions of a new "Arabian Night." Artfully he inoculated her with the lure of adventure.

"When the time comes," thought he, "when the hour is ripe, this will be useful, this new longing for the unknown. Once her eyes are opened to the constrictions of this isolated existence, who knows—?" He let his imagination wander.

Temptations, sternly compelling, assailed him; but for the time being he still held them in check.

Then, one night, happened an accident which suddenly broke down the barrier between them, revealed them to each other, changed all their relations each to each, and once for all made forever impossible any resumption of the thin-woven fiction of mere friendship.

Down below the lighthouse, near the Fort St. Pierre abutment of the breakwater, was a boat-livery kept by an old veteran of the war of '71. Rowboats and shallops, small craft of every sort, this ancient worthy let out for little trips along the coast or to the rocky volcanic islets in the bay.

And here, by way of varying their almost daily excursions, Dennison one evening hired a yawl for a run out to the Ile des Oiseaux, some two miles off shore. Il Vecchio, seemingly immersed in his studies and in some new experiments now under way, made no prohibition. With a paternal kindness he acquiesced.

"Only," warned he, "be careful of the gulls' nests. No one disturbs them. They cling by thousands to the rocks along the seaward side. There is a story, still told in Cette, of an English tourist who once tried to collect a dozen eggs, for specimens. And do you know what happened? Well," with an expressive shrug, "well, the gulls picked his eyes clean out, my friend. Blind. Stone blind. Therefore, disturb them not. They're not aggressive; but, once aroused, they fight to kill!"

Dennison merely smiled.

"I know," said he. "Come, Stasia. And bring the guitar."

THAT was the night of nights. The full moon, round and yellow and warm, flooded the sea with molten gold. A broad path of light opened before them as the little boat, under his skilful guidance, sailed with a favoring breeze away from the high, rugged shore.

At the tiller sat Dennison. Stasia half-reclined amidships, banked in with rugs and cushions. The moonlight on the waves reminded Dennison of "Colomba," and of the wild romance which had

taken place in Corsica, not far away to eastward. He thrilled, with strange emotions.

"Will you not sing?" asked he.

She, smiling with a grave sweetness, let her fingers wander a moment upon the strings; then, striking a minor chord, lifted her voice in the old love-song: "Par Une Nuit de Réves." And, blending with the ripple of the sea, the solemn breathing of the night, the song floated up, away, in melody such as, perhaps, the blest may hear in paradise. Far from the mountain flashed the stabbing beam of the Pharos. A few mild, wondering stars looked down upon them. Dennison, suffused with ineffable passion, so exquisite as to partake of pain, listened and looked and held his breath for very wonder.

Safely they landed on a beach of silver sand, on the landward side of the island. He helped the girl out, drove the anchor firmly into the beach, and for a moment stood breathing the charm, the magic of that half-tropic splendor. Then said he, pointing upward at the summit of the isle:

"Come, Stasia!"

He offered her his hand. Together, tranced, beatified, they climbed the winding path that led to the top, two hundred feet above.

As they went, pausing now and then to listen or to look, the dark, gold-banded floor of the inland sea opened out to their gaze. Millions of tiny sparkling flashes wove that ribbon of glory. On Stasia's face the moonlight, warm as only it can be in that enchanted region, fell with a soft effulgence.

And Dennison, yearning toward her, found no word to speak.

They had already reached a point more than a hundred feet above the beach, when all at once the girl uttered a sharp cry of pain, staggered and fell. Her hand escaped his. Crying out in fear, she clung to the very edge of the dark and precipitous path, her ankle turned by a loose, rolling stone.

On the instant, Dennison seized her. Before she had had time to fall, his powerful arms had dragged her back to safety.

"Are you hurt?" he cried, kneeling beside her. "Tell me you're not hurt!"

She, biting her lip to restrain herself, answered not. But in her eyes he saw the gleam of involuntary tears of pain.

And, a great passion sweeping through him, he caught her in his arms.

The perfumed masses of her hair intoxicated, maddened him. The warmth of her burned away his last remaining vestiges of self-control. Close to his breast he drew her; he sheltered her; with a surging, an unspeakable up-rush of love he called her name.

About his neck he felt her arm. It tightened, tremblingly.

And then his lips sought her mouth.

So did their brief, and all-too-transitory, hour of bliss begin. So for them were fleetingly opened the gates of paradise. Ah me, the pain and pleasure, the joy and tragedy of human life!

At length, beautified by love, they two came back over the summer sea, from the high, rocky Ile des Oiseaux.

And there were other kisses, other words and plightings in the garden, among the odorous rose-trees, before she left him.

Then for a long, long time he walked in the fading moonlight; for a long time he sat and thought, alone, down in the vine-shrouded darkness of the pergola.

Midnight tolled from the far cathedral in the town, solemnly marking one dead day from another yet to live, but still Dennison remained there, far above the surf, communing with his own inspired soul.

At last, when the moon began to pale, he arose. Filled with the joy of it all, he sought his room.

Five minutes later, pale as chalk, wild eyed and with disheveled hair, he cringed before his mirror, a candle in his palsied hand.

The face he saw in the glass was hardly recognizable.

"Merciful God!" he gasped, and stared again, then burst into hysteric laughter.

Then, choking, unable to make any sound at all, he stood there gripping the edge of his dressing-table; with panic-smitten eyes he gazed at his livid countenance. Cold pinpoints of sweat prickled out on his forehead. His heart beat with dull haste. So horribly he shook that he could scarcely hold himself erect.

"The Alkahest—again!" he whispered raucously.

Only too true. During the night the hellish elixir, periodic in its action, had been at work again.

The features he now looked at, with wild and horror-blasted eyes, were no longer those of a man in the full, virile prime and flood of life.

No; save for the color of the eyes and the general contour of the face, Dennison could hardly have recognized himself.

At the utmost estimate, he now appeared scarce one-and-twenty. And the end—the end was not yet come.

CHAPTER 19

Flight!

ALMOST fainting with numb terror, Dennison set the candle down, staggered back to his chair, fell into it, and burying his head in both hands, began rocking to and fro in an abandon of hideous despair.

Wordless and dumb, save for a little moan from time to time, he fought his fight.

At last, unable to keep quiet any longer, he sprang up and fell to pacing the floor. Every few minutes he stopped, and by the wavering candle-light, again studied his transformed face, hoping against hope that his eyes might have deceived him. But no—always the same sight met his gaze.

Anguished beyond the limit of anything he had thought possible, his brain a whirling maze of torture, a thousand thoughts, fears, wonders, agonies all beat upon his racked and riven consciousness.

Fear, now at last, had driven its grip right through and through his soul. Fear so sickening, so hideously inexorable, that his face grew gray, his eyes glared wildly at thought of what the future might bring forth—what it must!

"No, no, no!" he cried, shivering, his teeth beginning to chatter. Out he threw his arms, as though to ward off this intangible, this merciless vampirism of the Alkahest, this thing he could by no means on earth reach or deal or grapple with. "No, no! It must not be! It cannot!"

Yet, all this time, far down in the depths of his soul he knew it could—it must!

For the first time in all his life, he stood now face to face with a train of thought he dared not carry to its logical, its only possible conclusion. For the first time, confronted by a series of scientific crises, by a new kind of involution—a natural process, an inescapable concatenation—he found himself shrinking like a mere child that fears the darkness of an empty, unseen room.

And, strong man that he still was, he covered his eyes with his crisp hands, sank to the floor and for a long time remained there, stupefied with horror.

Only from time to time some disconnected words escaped him, some meaningless, futile scrap of prayer to a power which heeded him no more than it might a crushed worm or wounded ant.

Low burned the candle. It smoked, flickered, and at last went out, drowned in a little pool of melted wax. The charred wick glowed red a while, filling the room with a smell of charred cotton.

Darkness fell.

Dennison roused himself. Unsteadily he crawled on hands and knees to the bed, got up onto it, and lay there distorted. Then, after a long while, his troubled breathing grew calmer. He slept.

After a certain while, a soft step crept along the hallway, outside the American's door. It stopped there. Silence. Then very gently the door-knob turned. The door soundlessly opened two or three inches. Dennison did not awake or even stir.

For a minute or two, no sound save the American's sighing breath. One sensed, rather than saw, that a tall form was standing in the doorway, listening acutely, watching with eyes which by some special power or secret of their own could penetrate the gloom.

Finally, as though quite satisfied, the watcher slowly closed the door again, and —quiet as a cat—withdrew along the pitch-black corridor.

Dennison awoke, at early dawn, dazed and in a thoroughly confused state of mind.

At first he could not understand what had happened, or why he should be lying there fully dressed upon the bed, with the windows and blinds fast-closed, the

scent of the burned-out candle still fouling the air.

ALMOST immediately he recollected everything—the happenings upon the Ile des Oiseaux, the horrible discovery, all. The sight of the mirror, of the candlestick, and the disordered bed recalled him to himself. And with a sick, unreasoning surge of terror he leaped up, flung open the windows, ran to the dresser and, haggard with fear, again studied his face by daylight.

"A nightmare—a horrible dream it must have been!" he cried. "The candlelight must have deceived me!" Against certainty he still hoped that no reality lay in these frightful terrors.

But no! By the garish, unsparing glow of morning, which pearled in myriad hues along the eastern sky, the horrible truth stood out more patently than ever. At once he realized that it was all too true, that fate already was outstretching its inexorable claws to grip him, that now he could foresee some hideous tragedy impending.

And, sick, shaken, trembling, he was forced to admit what he already knew. Despite the marks of suffering which the broken night of terror had left upon him, his face looked unmistakably, even younger than when he had stared at its pale reflection by candle light.

Though he could not yet analyze this thing, yet it seemed as though the realization of the truth had in some psychic manner acted on his physical structure; as though the barrier of denial, once definitely swept aside, had let the flood of admission sweep through and had accelerated the fatal process.

His agony of soul could find no fitting expression in the youthful features which now were his. Even the thought of Stasia and his relations with her, his pledges and his vows, though they shot him through with intense, humiliating agony, could make no corresponding impress on his countenance. To him recurred a sinister memory of Hugo's "Man Who Laughs,"—the man so mutilated in youth that, whatever his later sufferings, he still must bear a smile.

Now seeing himself so young and fresh and strong, while in his heart the canker of sick despair was gnawing, he burst into a raw laugh of mockery.

"The Man Who Laughs!" he cackled; then shrank back with a cry. While his wild eyes roved feverishly about the room, he stood there trembling. All at once he burst into sudden tears, and fell to pacing the tiled floor.

He shook his fist at the mockery of the fresh, verdant morning, perfumed with all the beauty of the Riviera. To his lips rose curses against Il Vecchio and all the old man's scientific necromancy.

Like a trapped rat the wretch stood there, unable to do anything, knowing not which way to turn, "cribbed, cabined and confined" within this maze of horror.

All at once he uttered a sharp exclamation. A thought had struck him.

He stopped his pacing. Curiously he looked down at his hands and arms, then felt of his shoulders. He plucked the cloth of his sleeves.

"Loose? Too loose, now?" he gulped.

It seemed, indeed, that the coat was a bit large through the shoulders. What then? His body had also begun to shrink? His very frame was diminishing?

At this frightful realization he turned, very pale, to his clothes-closet, fetched out a bottle of cognac from the shelf, and, pouring himself a stiff drink, swallowed it neat at one draft.

"Ugh!" he shuddered with a wry face. "How I hate that poison, now! I used to like it—before. But now, in this infernal state of physical perfection, the very smell nauseates me!"

Stimulated by the alcohol, he felt better almost at once. Perhaps, after all, something might yet be done to obviate the impending calamity to deceive the girl, even to achieve happiness. A killing anger surged into his breast. At the thought of Il Vecchio his fist clenched and his eyes grew deadly bitter.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, continuing his preparations.

First he got his satchel, packed a few necessary articles and made sure the bottle of lead sulphate was in it—the bottle he had some time before bought secretly down in the village.

Then, sitting down at the table in his room, he drew out his fountain-pen and wrote a note to Stasia. After several

futile attempts, each of which he tore up and flung into the waste-basket he framed this missive:

My loved one:

Unavoidable business calls me away from you for a few days. Much as I hate to leave you for even so short a time, I must. When I shall be with you again, I cannot say, but it will be very soon—at the very earliest possible moment.

Ask no questions, my most dear one. Have no fears, no doubts. Heaven lies before us. What a future shall be ours!

A thousand times I kiss you. Au revoir!

Granville

This he sealed, addressed, and, stealing a-tiptoe out along the hallway, thrust with trembling fingers beneath her door.

For a moment he stood there, head bowed, eyes closed, in silent farewell. Then he bent, and very gently kissed a panel of his sweetheart's door.

"Good-by!" he whispered. "My love, my soul! Good-by. God grant it may be not forever!"

Ten minutes later he had escaped silently from the house, traversed the garden, let himself out of the gate, and, swinging his satchel bravely, was striding down the mountain in the clear glow of early morning.

He caught the six-twelve Mediterranean Paris express, which would land him that same afternoon in the capital. A little study of the "Guide Jaune" informed him that Alfort, where lay Professor Gabriel Petit's laboratories, was a small town some two miles outside the Paris fortifications to southwest of the city.

"I shall be there this evening," he assured himself. "From Petit's lips, at whatever cost, I shall learn the proper method of applying this lead treatment. Till then, patience!"

But though he bought all the illustrated reviews and tried to immerse himself in them, gnawing fear and anxiety still dogged him. Before him rose visions of the rock-chamber and the line of eighteen coffins.

"Oh, my soul!" he breathed, gazing with terror-haunted eye at the speeding valley of the Rhone. "Oh, my soul! When will this torture end?"

Stasia, meanwhile—having found and, with tear-dimmed eyes, read his note—had made pitifully undiplomatic inquiries of her uncle.

Il Vecchio soothed her with a smile. Laying a hand upon her head, he answered:

"Have no fear, my child. Never have any fear. He will return. He cannot stay away for long. I tell you that because I know it. I swear it to you! Within a week he will be with you, here, once more."

"But, uncle, why—?"

"Ask no more, Stasia! All in good time you shall know this—and many other things. Now, leave me. I must be alone!"

Then as the girl, disconsolate and lonely, wandered out with sad longings into the mockery of that sunlit garden, the patriarch took down his volume of hieroglyphic records and set to work making an extended entry.

His smile, as he bent over this unholy work, was one such as no man might wish a second time to look upon.

CHAPTER 20

Two Ounces of Cyanid

EVEN sooner than the old man had predicted, Dennison returned. For on the evening of the fifth day, pale and furtive and notably even younger-looking than when he had taken such unceremonious leave, he scaled the wall, dropped into the high grass, and, peering about him like a thief, crept toward the old-fashioned house.

A moment he halted in the shadows of the olive-grove, to spy out the approach. The billious moon, just rising, cast a reddish, dull glow over everything. Dennison seemed to fear even that uncertain light.

"If only—if only she doesn't see me!" he whispered, eagerly sweeping the open space of lawn, the paths and flower-beds with anxious eyes. "She—she mustn't!"

Careful inspection satisfied him the way was clear to Il Vecchio's study door. And, assuring himself by the light which burned within, showing through the long sea-

ward-looking windows, that the patriarch was probably reading or at work in that peaceful room, he made a quick crouching run for the door which opened off the lawn.

Safely he reached it. Waiting not to knock, he opened the door and crept in.

Dennison found himself once more in presence of his host, now his arch-enemy, destroyer of his manhood and his life. And, standing there a moment, blinking at the old man—who sat comfortably in an easy-chair, long pipe in mouth, feet slippered, and with a tome upon his knees—the American's face twitched with a sudden spasm of hate.

But he controlled it. The hate died out, overcome by the more dominant fear, the terror which obsessed him. In presence of this master of his very soul, Dennison seemed to cringe and shrink, despite his hatred and his rage.

Il Vecchio looked up, smiling a quiet, cordial welcome. But Dennison did not smile in return. Toward the patriarch he staggered. Out he flung his hands, in an abandon of despair.

"Save me!" he gasped. "For Heaven's sake, save me—before it's hopeless! Before it is too late!"

Showing not the slightest sign or mark of surprise Il Vecchio calmly laid down his book. He gazed at the newcomer. Under the lamp-light the rims of his glasses glinted paternally.

"So you are back again?" asked he, very kindly. "Welcome home, my friend! You must be weary. Sit down and rest a while; then we can talk. I will have Lombard bring fruit and wine. Here are cigars." He nodded at the box upon the table.

Dennison, silent for a moment, stared at him with eyes that burned like coals. The studied politeness of the old man was to him like the turning of a knife-blade in a raw wound. But he restrained himself; he checked the scalding words that seethed within him.

"And did you find Professor Petit, at Alfort?" resumed the old man, casually, as though asking the time of day. "A splendid man, a true scholar! One of the few!"

"What?" cried Dennison. "How—how do you know—where I've been?"

Il Vecchio smiled very dryly.

"Oh, that," said he, "that is a mere detail. The really vital thing is that Petit, of course, couldn't do anything for you. Positively nothing at all, is it not so, my friend? And that you have come back here to me, after all, just as I said you would. Yes, to me—to Il Vecchio, here? And now?"

Dennison clenched both fists. Il Vecchio's patronage infuriated him.

"You demon!" he cried, in a trembling voice. "If I told all I knew, if I denounced—"

"Come, come," interrupted the aged man, raising a lean hand. "Come now, no childish follies. Nobody would believe you. You ask my aid. Do not annoy me. Be wise; be reasonable. What do you now require?"

For a moment Dennison, outraged beyond even the possibility of words, grew a shade paler. But he restrained himself. In his heart now, for the first time of his whole existence, he felt the killing impulse. Had he been a crude, an untrained man, giving way to the lusts of murder, gladly he could have flung himself upon that sarcastic smiling patriarch and strangle him with naked hands.

But as it was, he held himself. Biting his lip until it grew dull purple, he managed to articulate:

"Yes, I—have failed. Petit's treatment, quite useless! Unless you rescue me, I—I am lost!"

SUDDENLY he felt a thrill of envy. Even in his torture, he realized for the first time, that he understood at last the beauty and the righteousness of age. As though a veil had been drawn away from before his eyes, he perceived the dignity of Il Vecchio's high, bald forehead, of that aquiline nose, those sunken yet all-comprehending eyes. And an unspeakable yearning possessed him for the boon, the blessing of sanctitude.

The thing which but a few weeks before had seemed to him so hideous, so hateful, now suddenly assumed a different aspect. And with a secret wonder in his keen distress, he found himself yearning for Il Vecchio's ripened years, for the great and lasting peace which soon must come to this old man.

Il Vecchio spoke first.

"Well, my son," said he, judicially, "I understand your request. But I cannot sympathize therewith. I cannot grasp your sorrow. You came to me, seeking to be saved from senile decay. You have been saved; yet still you grieve!

"Had you asked me, before having committed that great treason against my whole life's work, I could have told you the futility of your own striving.

"Do you not remember Dean Swift's famous 'Struldbrugs,' or immortals, and all the horrors of their unnatural lives? You should have thought of things such as that. But no. Rashly you seized the forbidden thing. You have what you desired. And still you sorrow. Illogical, to say the least?"

"Save me!" gasped Dennison, trembling and ashy pale.

"Listen," commanded he. "You must thoroughly understand the truth. You must admit that not the slightest guilt is attached to me. Upon your own head is now falling the inevitable result of your own deed. Your treason, the unspeakable wrong you have done me—from this your punishment has automatically sprung!"

"But now—?"

"Your treachery," continued the old man, quite unmoved, still drawing at his pipe, "has brought ruin to a whole long life of patient and difficult research, has wrecked my whole career, and, by its gross, incredible egoism, destroyed with one single act the summa perfectionis of three thousand years!

"Once for all," Il Vecchio's voice grew cold and keen, "know this: that no threat of yours, no violence has any weight with me. I am too old, too weary now to care. Kill me—no matter. But you dare not! You are afraid to fight your battle to the end, without me! You are afraid!"

"Oh, yes, yes!" groaned Dennison, hiding his face in his hands. "I—I can't go on this way! I can't! Help me! Counteract this fiendish thing! Give me old age again!"

Il Vecchio smiled.

"Be calm," bade he. "This is no time for emotional outbursts. Science knows nothing of such things, takes no heed of joy or sorrow, understands only causation and result, inexorable as fate. You lie in her hands and mine. You are wholly in my power. You have been, from the very first. With what forbearance have I acted! Any other man than I would have taken vengeance, and—"

"Vengeance? You fiend!" shouted Dennison, advancing menacingly. "What vengeance could you have taken that would have equaled this? Here you have kept me like an inoculated rabbit, a mere pathological guinea pig, to study my symptoms and observe—"

"Silence!" commanded the patriarch, half-rising. An angry flush mounted across his sunken cheeks—the first sign of any real emotion since the fatal moment when Dennison had betrayed his confidence. "Silence, I say! Or out you go into the world again, lost, hopeless, doomed!

"Go, if you will! Drag yourself from consultation-room to consultation-room, all over Europe! There can be no help for you, anywhere save here. Outside, your story would suffice to have you judged insane. Lucky would you be to escape the madhouse and a still more hideous death than may befall you here!"

"Death?" gasped Dennison, with bloodless lips. "Death? What? Must I die? Can you not turn back the course of this infernal Alkahest, give me my prime again, and let me live my normal life to its right ending? Oh, heavens! Death, did you say?"

Il Vecchio, sitting down again, smiled quietly, and reached for his tobacco.

"Again I bid you, be calm," warned he. "Here you are in friendly hands, despite all your treason. Had it not been so, my Lombard—who asks nothing better than to serve me—would long ago have flung your body into the forty fathoms of blue water beneath the cliffs. This is no time for mock-heroics or vain lamentations. You must face conditions as they are, and so adjust yourself that the transition shall be as easy as possible. Do you not understand?"

DENNISON answered not, but from his pocket he drew out a little vial. At sight of it, his bloodshot eyes brightened, his writhen lips almost smiled. Il Vecchio, busily lighting his pipe, seemed to take no heed. When the tobacco was

burning well, the old man continued:

"Death, after all," he said, "is not the greatest evil. Blessed are they who can attain it peacefully, lying down to their last long sleep unmutilated and in peace, as nature wills it. Once I fought against the thought of dissolution. It was that fight which led me into the long years of research which, at the very end, you checkmated—you, my guest, my trusted friend!

"No matter; I see more clearly now. Death may even become a boon. Metchnikoff is right when he says that, after the life-work is done, the instinct for dying replaces that for living."

He ceased, then, reaching out, pressed an electric button at the side of his reading-table.

"What are you doing there?" demanded Dennison, with sudden hot suspicion.

"Merely summoning my niece," answered the old man very gently. "She, poor girl, has been mourning her heart away ever since you so abruptly took your leave. She made me promise to let her know at once when you returned. Now you are here, I call her. Well?"

An expression of horror transformed the American's face.

"Why—why—" he stammered. "She can't see me now, this way! She mustn't! I've lost five years since—since last time! Great heavens, this can't be!"

"It can, and must!" replied Il Vecchio sternly.

All Dennison's self-control seemed to slide, to slip away from him like a torn garment, too long held together.

"For God's sake, do not inflict this thing on me!" he wailed.

Gone, now, the stern decision of manliness, the fighting strength, the virile driving power of but a few weeks before. Il Vecchio felt how little he had personally to fear from this weakened, diminished mockery of a man who had been Dennison. The American's voice, now pleading, broke with boyish trebles.

"Spare me this!" he cried. "Have I not suffered enough already, to atone? Is there no way to stop the course of this diabolic thing?"

Il Vecchio shook his hoary head, with a wise, sad, weary smile.

"As you have sown, so must you reap," he answered.

"Can nothing avail?"

"Nothing! I could not save you now, even though I would!"

"No hope?"

"None!"

"Then—then thus I cheat you!" cried the tortured victim.

He uncorked the vial in his hand. Il Vecchio made no move to hinder him, but merely watched with tolerant half-interest.

"Thus now I free myself from you forever!"

"Eh? Cyanid?" queried the old man, calmly as though merely asking the name of some familiar wine.

But Dennison, speaking no further word, set the vial to his lips, and in a spasm of mad anguish drained the fearful poison, whereof—to any other man save he—the smallest drop meant instantaneous, black, annihilating death!

CHAPTER 21

Vecchio Dissects Two Souls

WITH a cry of triumph, Dennison dashed the vial to the tiling. Shattered, it flew into myriad fragments. "Now—now I die!" he screamed, his voice shrill and horrible with desperate exultation.

But, though he closed his eyes, gripped his head between both hands, and stood there swaying, utterly undone by the suggestion of impending death, nothing happened.

A burning, tingling sensation in mouth and throat was all he felt—this, and almost immediately a somewhat stimulated throbbing of the heart.

Dazed, uncomprehending he opened his eyes.

"What?" he stammered. "Am I dreaming? Is this death? Where—where am I?"

"Where, my friend?" smiled Il Vecchio, drawing calmly at his long pipe as he still sat in his chair, observing everything with amusement. "Why, where should you be? Here in my study, of course. Come, now; you are overwrought, exhausted, unnerved, and not yourself."

"But Heaven! The cyanid!" gasped Dennison, staggering back. "Two ounces! And I still—still live?"

"Why not?"

"But—"

"Ah, my friend, you are not now as other men. You—"

"I—what?" cried the unhappy wretch, grasping the edge of the table for support. "You—you mean to say that—nothing—"

"Precisely so," nodded Il Vecchio, puffing comfortable volumes of latakia smoke. "The Alkahest explains it all. A universal solvent, my son. Not only—"

"You demon!"

"—Not only against senility," continued the old man, quite unmoved, "but also against every other noxious drug or poison whatsoever. Nothing of that sort can harm you now. Nothing at all. Voila tout!"

Dennison, sinking down into a chair beside the table, dashed his clenched fist against his forehead.

"No help? No hope?" he wailed. The patriarch merely smiled again; yet those old eyes reflected the lamplight with a hard, metallic glitter.

"Let me advise you, as I said a moment ago," he remarked. "Poisons are now but stimulants to you. The more virulent they would be to an ordinary man, so much the more strongly will they act on you. But from their toxicity you are immune. Entirely, absolute so. A thousand tests, reactions and experiments already have proven this, beyond all range of question."

Dennison merely groaned. Already the preliminary symptoms of strong stimulation were beginning to make themselves felt. As when a man swallows a glass of whisky on an empty stomach, so the cyanid was beginning to quicken his pulse, numb his lips, and completely daze his brain.

"If this were only death!" he longed. "Death, noble and liberating, instead of a mere vulgar intoxication!" With an extreme bitterness of soul he writhed as he sat there, clasped his strained hands together, and, taking long breaths, sought to fight off the hateful and degrading symptoms.

To him, as from a great distance, came the patriarch's voice, even, quiet, cold:

"Venoms can only make you drunk, nothing more. The coral snake, the cobra, the dread kariar—all these have now become innocuous to you. Animal, vegetable and mineral poisons alike are powerless, only certain alkaloidal toxins may in all probability possess a certain tonic quality and somewhat accelerate the progress of your inverted evolution. In which case—"

"Stop!" cried Dennison in a shrill, horrible voice. He started up. Reeling, he stood there, bleared and horrible, despite his perfect bodily health. In his brain a humming, a whirling, had almost banished thought; but one idea, one supreme desire, had struggled through the ruck of disjointed mental images. He must escape!

"Stop, you fiend!" again he choked; and, sickened with fear lest Stasia should find him there, started with reeling steps toward the door.

But before he had traversed half the distance, he started back with a guttural, wordless gasp.

There before him, summoned by the diabolic ingenuity, the cold and calculating malice of Il Vecchio, stood the girl.

FOR a moment all the drunken, poison-bred hallucinations died within him. His back was toward the light, while she framed like a gracious picture in the doorway, was facing it.

He saw her eager, expectant look, the smile upon her oft-kissed lips, the wonder in her eyes.

Then, with outstretched hands, and with a little cry of greeting and of joy, she came toward him. Just a trifle confused by the lamplight, by the issuance from darkness; deeply agitated by her beloved's sudden, unannounced return, she for a moment detected nothing of the hideous change that had come over him.

But as he still stood there, swaying a little, not running to meet her, to seize her hands, to clasp her in his arms, a change drew over her face.

The smile died. A doubt, a sudden vague and indefinable fear, replaced it. Back upon her breast she drew her hands.

"Granville?" she cried. "What—what

is it?" she cried, in dread astonishment.

Harshly he laughed, unable to control the delirium any longer—the madness of intoxication in his dazed and riven brain.

Toward her he took a step. But she, terror in her eyes, shrank back.

"No, no!" she gasped. "Oh, mon Dieu! What is it? What—what has happened?"

"Stasia!" mumbled Dennison, madly fighting for self-mastery, for coherence, even though his subjectivity realized how futile was that fight, how pitiable, how mean a figure he was making. "Stasia—listen! He—he has given me—he—uncle—I—"

"You see," interrupted the calm, dispassionate voice of the old man. "You understand, my dear. Now at last you know the reason of our guest's sudden disappearance and his—"

"Lies! All, all lies!" wailed the miserable wretch, staggering in his tracks. His speech was thick, all but incomprehensible. "Stasia—listen to—me! He—gave—"

But the girl, with a cry of utter disillusionment, of pain and anguish that pierced even the numbing senses of the tortured Dennison, repulsed him.

"No! No! Keep away—away from me!" she cried. "What is it? Uncle, tell me!"

Until this moment Dennison had thought his tortures as acute as any man could bear, and live. Right up to and past the crisis of attempted suicide they had driven him. But now, dazed and stunned as he was by the hellish rack of the cyanid pulsing through his fever-drunken brain, he felt a deeper anguish, sharp as the fabled pangs of Hades itself.

Swimming in a dark haze, with crimson and purple blotches that ever burst and faded and reformed again, he seemed to catch intermittent glimpses of the girl.

And as he saw those wonderful dark eyes widen with fear, then with horror and repugnance and unspeakable scorn, he knew—through all his drunkenness—that not yet had he drained the bitter cup of Il Vecchio's vengeance to its lowest dregs.

The agony of seeing another human being, an innocent and helpless victim—the woman among all women whom he loved!—indissolubly bound up with his fate, inevitably forced to suffer for his treason, drove him mad.

For the first time he knew the torture of dealing death to the soul.

Frenzied with the effort to bring his numb tongue and his palsied body under some control, to tell her what had happened, to explain, he reeled right toward her, babbling like a maniac.

He had a vision of her hair, her warm and lovely throat, her bare arms, the slender hands, wherewith she now repelled him.

"Stasia! Lis—listen to—me!" he panted, fighting as a man fights in the last stage of drowning.

But she, loosed now from the dumbness caused by this awful and, to her, utterly incomprehensible change, screamed something—what he knew not—some wild, passionate terrible thing whereof the echoes rang like tocsins in his humming ears.

Then, outflinging both hands in an abandon of horror, she turned and fled. Like a white bird she vanished into the night.

"Stasia!" he screamed with maniac laughter.

No answer—she was gone!

Dennison laughed again, a weakly foolish laugh, the laugh of a man far gone in liquor.

Nodding to himself, shaking, blearing, he turned to the grim patriarch.

IL VECCHIO was still sitting there, in the same chair, whence he had never moved since Dennison's return a half-hour before. Still comfortably smoking that long pipe, still observing all this wreck and ruin of human lives, as though seated in a box at the opera, he smiled as he sagely shook his head.

And, at the dim-glimmering sight of him, with his last feeble sparks of reason Dennison felt the birth of a hate so bitter, so violent and ghastly, that for a second it cleared the intoxication from his brain.

"You, you die anyway!" he shrieked. "Not for—what you have done to me, you viper! Not—for all your scores of murders! But—for—her!"

On the reading-table lay a Chinese paper-cutter, a long steel blade set in a haft of dragon-carved ivory. The dragon

had ruby eyes set glowing, in the head.

They gleamed blood-red in Dennison's disordered sight.

Up he snatched the dagger. Toward Il Vecchio he lunged. Upon his lips lay froth; his livid face, drawn and distorted, was a mask of living hate. His bared teeth clicked with the lust of the kill.

But Il Vecchio, judging, gaging every movement, every breath and quiver of that tortured being, never even moved.

The only sign of perturbation that he gave was momentarily to stop smoking. For a few seconds the ebony pipe-stem hung suspended, while the thin old lips puckered themselves into a mocking smile.

"You—die!" futilely brawled Dennison.

"Look out there, fool!" warned the patriarch. "You'll hurt yourself with that knife! Look out!"

Suddenly all the springs of Dennison's being relaxed. His hands dropped, palsied and nerveless. Over the tiling clattered the knife.

Forward he pitched.

An instant he caught himself. Then, with a foolish, maundering cry, he fell.

"The idiot!" sneered Il Vecchio, and reached for a match.

With keen, serpentlike eyes he studied the prostrate figure sprawled out there before him in helpless surrender.

Then he rang the servants' call-bell twice.

Presently Lombard appeared.

"Get me the fifth bottle on that shelf there," commanded the master. He poured a draft into a glass. Bending, while Lombard held up Dennison's head, he forced the medicine between the set teeth.

He raised the right eyelid and for a moment studied the dilated pupil, expressionless, horrible.

"H-m!" he grunted non-committally.

Up he straightened. With his slippered foot he stirred the unconscious body.

"Too much wine," said he in Italian. "You understand. Carry him off to bed. And, on the way, tell old Marianella to wait on my niece. She may need something; she may be ill. Remember!"

"I understand!"

"Very well. Now go! And be very careful in undressing him. No harm must befall him in any way. This is important; highly so!" he instructed, with great emphasis.

"Very well, sir," answered the Lombard. Despite his brutish stupidity and his subservience to Vecchio, yet in his eyes lurked a secret fear, a wonder, a superstitious dread which echoed in his voice. "Very well, I understand. He is not sick, the Americano?"

"No; only a little temporary disturbance. In the morning he will be himself again. And—h-m!—Lombard!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Whatever happens, you are to see nothing, hear nothing, and even to ask nothing!"

"Yes, sir."

"Even though something should take place which seems to you contrary to reason—seems like a miracle—you are to ask no questions. No questions now or ever!

"Marianella, she, too, must be as blind and dumb. I will speak to her. But you, now remember this; you see nothing; you speak of nothing! Otherwise—well—it may not be pleasant for you. And you know my power!"

"Yes—yes, sir!" whispered the menial with a scared side-glance, which was filled with awe and fear.

"Very well. Now go, Lombard, take him to bed!"

Lombard bowed, picked up the limp body as easily as though it had been that of a baby, and departed.

When he had disappeared with his burden, Vecchio walked over to the fireplace and for a moment stood there pensively gazing down into the pleasant glow of the cedar logs.

Turning back at length to his easy-chair, he spoke.

"The last outburst," he said under his breath. "The last up-flare, the very last. Henceforth, no danger. None whatever! From now on he is mine. To me—and to my records—he belongs. Body and soul, body and soul! Mine! All mine! If he resists, there is the laboratory. I'm ready for that, too!"

Thoughtfully he sat smoking a little while.

And then, picking up his "Annals of Ophthalmic Surgery," he once more began his interrupted reading.

CHAPTER 22

The Cage

NO DANGER! None whatever, any more! In this, for almost the first time in his long, cold, analytically calculating life, Il Vecchio was mistaken. For when, toward quarter of eleven the next morning Dennison's blurred consciousness again struggled through the weltering abysses of intoxication, and with an aching head and bloodshot eyes he sat up in bed, the first clear thought within his brain was murder.

In spite of his burning thirst, his parched, ill-tasting mouth, and the iron ring of pain that circled his brow, to him came memories of nearly all that had happened the night before, of his attempted suicide, his defeat, the horrible meeting with Stasia, and the foul, dishonorable means employed by his tormentor, forever to discredit and vilify him in the eyes of the woman he adored.

He recalled, too, though only as a vague, distorted nightmare, his abortive attempt to kill the savant with the paper-cutter. And, though only the beginning of that attack remained in his memory, he felt subsonsciously that it had not succeeded.

"If—if it had, and—I'd given him what he deserves," gasped Dennison, with dry, cracked lips, "I certainly shouldn't be here, in bed. So then—I failed, last night? All right—today we'll see! Now, at once!"

Weakly, dizzily he clambered out of bed. So shaken was he, so undone, that for a moment he had to hold fast to the back of a chair to keep from falling. But presently, setting his teeth hard, moving by a sheer imperative of the will, he proceeded to his wash-stand.

His every symptom closely paralleled those of a man recovering from a deep intoxication. Nausea, excessive thirst, headache, all were there. Not all his rage and fortitude could wholly repress the groan that forced itself from between his dry, cracked lips.

Deep drafts of water and a thorough sluicing of his head, neck and chest presently revived him to the point where he was able to find, among his things, some bromide tablets. And now, somewhat soothed by the influence of a tremendous dose, the wondrous physical vigor, the perfect force and life within him rapidly threw off the effects of that annihilating toxin.

"Good Heaven!" he exclaimed, as almost visibly the blood crept back to his wan cheek, the color brightened in his eye. "What inconceivable power must lie in that infernal Alkahest! Two ounces of cyanid—and I still live! Two full ounces of a poison whereof one drop is instant death, and all the harm I take from it is a mere overstimulation! If this be not a miracle, what is?"

But though his scientific mind wondered in awe and trembling at this unbelievable thing, as his vital forces now returned, fresh, full and vigorous, that hatred waxed and grew, and, dressing quickly, Dennison began to lay his plans for what he hoped would be the final act of this heart-racking drama of life, and death, and fate.

"This time," said he, "no failure! This time I take that fiend unaware. Fool that I was to have appealed to him! To have exposed my weakness and my terror. To have dreamed even for an instant that such sentiments as pity or forgiveness could find lodgment in his vulturous heart!

"Fool that I was to have declared myself his executioner! If I had possessed even the elementary common sense to mask my plans, that fiend might even now have paid the price of his crimes against me and against the whole life-process of the universe!

"But—well, what's done is done. I must have been quite hopelessly drunk with the reaction of that poison; there's no other possible way to account for what I did. This time, however, this time—"

For a while he stood in deep and concentrated thought. Then his campaign of action fully matured, he took another deep, refreshing drink of water, carefully adjusted his dress—now notably too big for him—and assured himself that his appearance was almost normal.

This done, he left the room.

"AT THIS hour of the morning," he thought, making his way along the hall toward the stairs, "I shall be prac-

tically sure to find him in the lower garden, down among the new-set orange trees.

"That's a good fifth of a mile from the house. Stasia won't be visible today; I'm positive of that. And Marianella is quite deaf.

"Well, then, there's only Lombard to consider. If he's with the old man, it will be easy enough to send him on some plausible errand or other. Even though I have shrunk so in the past week, the old man is still no match for me in strength. Match for me? Pshaw! I could break him as I might a rotten stick! And, not a hundred yards from the lower garden, the cliff—hallo, what the deuce!"

His calculations ended in a sharp word of surprise as he reached the stair-head and turned to go down.

For there, seated comfortably in a low, cane-bottom chair in the hall below, was Lombard, every line and look of him spelling out "Watchdog" in letters a foot high.

The American, pausing a moment in astonished chagrin, peered down through the cool, close-shuttered gloom of the antique stairway. Instinctively he felt a numbing check upon his plans, his hopes. And, as in a flash of inspiration, he knew that Lombard was to be his guard lest he, by any violence to himself or to the patriarch put an end to Vecchio's diabolical observations, records, tabulations and cold scientific ghoulishness.

"Ah!" he breathed, bitterly, a doubled hate and rage breaking up over him. "So, then, this Shylock is bound to have his pound of flesh? Determined I shall drink the draft down to its lees, while he stands, gloating, over me, pencil and note-book in his withered claws!"

Down the stairs he started, determination bristling out all over him. But, recollecting his previous error, he stopped a moment, then forced a smile to his lips, and with an assumption of casuality inquired:

"Well, my friend, what hour is it? I've been oversleeping. Have you the time?"

Lombard looked up with a surly grimace, from the cheap "Novella" he was reading.

"Half past eleven," he answered gruffly.

"Thank you. Beautiful day for a walk, for working in the garden, isn't it?" And Dennison descended a few more steps.

"Go back, m'sieur."

"What?"

"Go back!"

"Why, you—you—what do you mean?" exclaimed Dennison, with difficulty holding back his sudden anger in the bonds of prudence. "On whose orders?"

"His."

"You mean—I can't come downstairs, or go out in the garden, or—or anything?" His voice broke with passion.

"I cannot talk, m'sieur. You must go back."

"Yes, I will!" shouted the American, red rage blinding him. "You cur! You—you sit there and order me around! I guess not!"

And down the stairs he started again, his face black with passion, fists clenched, chest heaving.

The Lombard rose to meet him.

"Go back!" he shouted angrily. Lost, now, were all the simulacra of respect; lost the "m'sieur." Brutal and plain the order was, thus given by a dull, clodlike beast of a man to this highly sensitive, scholarly New Yorker. Like oil upon a blaze, it sent the madness rushing to Dennison's brain.

Where now the American's thoughts of diplomacy, of ruse and cunning?

STUNG beyond human endurance, frantic with the culmination of all this interminable series of goading insults, abuses, and horrors, Dennison flung himself on the tormentor.

"Take that—from me!" he shouted, leaping down the last few steps and aiming a blow at the bull-necked brute's face.

With surprising celerity Lombard ducked.

Came a clinch; a grunting, straining, breathless clutch and struggle. Then all at once his now-diminished strength no longer any match for the gorilla vigor of this helot, the American went down.

A second later he was lying on the tiles, with Lombard astride his heaving chest.

Vain were his raging struggles. Calmly the huge, hulking creature held him in a grip of steel, till, quite exhausted, Dennison lay still.

Then pulling from his pocket a long

hempen cord, Lombard proceeded to trice up the victim.

Again the American fought, cursed, writhed and foamed with insane wildness. Methodically, slowly, surely, Lombard dominated him.

Presently, securely bound hand and foot, the Italian bore him off to the study.

Dennison, his pride now again reasserting itself, refrained from further speech or supplication, threats or invectives. Only, wide-eyed, panting and undone, he watched what might befall him now.

"Let him only kill me—that is all I hope for now," he thought, with wormwood bitterness cankering his inmost heart. "Death! Can I not find it, soon?"

To his surprise, he saw that the inner door, leading into the laboratory, stood open, and that the vacuum-lights within were flooding the hateful place with radiance.

Acting as though under orders, and knowing just what to do, Lombard carried the American into this place. At the further end, almost opposite the tall cabinet which masked the secret entrance to the caverns, a cage of steel had been constructed—of steel with thickly padded bars.

Some twelve feet long this was, by eight wide and seven high. The floor of it, resting directly on the tiles, seemed to be of thick oak planking strewn with rushes. The door, armed with a formidable padlock, was ajar.

Dennison, divining the purpose of this horrible thing, went white with loathing and a helpless rage so bitter that it sickened him. But never any word escaped him. To struggle now, he understood, meant only further humiliation and added pain.

Unresisting, he closed his eyes and let the inevitable run its course. Even after Lombard had laid him on the rushes, cut his bonds, and, going out, securely locked the door of this degrading, frightful prison, the American made no sound, no motion.

Inert he lay there, his breath choking him, his heart all but bursting with this incredible affront. And so, in silent agony, a certain time dragged by.

Then came a voice: "You see, my friend? See what you have forced me to? What I have had to do in order to preserve you from your own mad suicidal impulses? From your own self?"

Dennison, shuddering with revulsion, opened his eyes.

There stood Il Vecchio, slippered and comfortable, with fountain pen and notebook and that ever-mocking smile.

The American, burying his face among the coarse reeds, stopped both ears with his palms. Only the convulsive twitching of his body showed the agony that racked him.

Il Vecchio, smiling no more, but with a bestial glitter in his eye, wrote for a little while; then turning away, left the laboratory.

Behind him the heavy door clanged shut. The combination-lock clicked twice or thrice.

Dennison was left in silence and in darkness there—in darkness to the eye, in utter darkness of the soul.

CHAPTER 23

Totor's Birthday Present

WINTER, the short Elysian winter of the Riviera, blent almost imperceptibly into spring. Life in the close-walled estate on Mount St. Clair had changed very little—except for a new figure in that very singular of households.

No longer did a tall, vigorous young man labor among the orchard trees with Il Vecchio and the Lombard. Nor did he with Stasia, now grown strangely wan and pallid, walk among the rose-paths, or sit and muse with book, and pipe in the moving shadows and the wavering blots of gold that wimpled through the vine-leaves of the pergola.

Nay, quite gone was this man; vanished utterly; no longer anywhere existent. Not dead, however. Not in existence, dead or living. This was the strangest happening ever witnessed since time began, or since man first emerged from the brute, and destiny rang up the curtain on the long, passionate, suffering drama that through all the ages has been playing on the world-stage!

Not living and not dead, was Dennison now; Dennison as a man among other

men. Yet there still lived a body which had once been his. Yes, in his place there idled listlessly about Il Vecchio's grounds a boy of ten or twelve years—thus at least, that lad appeared; a lonely child, companionless, furtive, scared, and lost, with big eyes and a strange unnatural look upon his wretched face.

Save for the color of those eyes and of his hair (though this had grown considerably lighter), and for the shape of his ears, which in human being never change their contour from birth to death, you could not have recognized this abnormal, inverted mockery of childhood.

Yet it was Granville Dennison, the famous American physician and surgeon, who less than seven months ago had in distress and all the disability of age climbed the straight path up to Il Vecchio's solitude.

Sometimes when fiction of the wildest order passes unchallenged, when impossible lands and wild unearthly adventures find tolerant acceptance, the plain narration of a plain scientific fact, amply verified and easily susceptible of proof excites incredulous hostility.

Yet, seven months from the day when Dennison had robbed Il Vecchio of the Alkahest, four months from the time when he had returned from the fruitless quest to Alfort, he had diminished to a height of four feet six and one-half inches, and to a weight of sixty-seven pounds.

And week by week, day by day, the Alkahest was still at work upon him. He now appeared shorn of every aspect of revolt, seemingly dulled to a certain passive acquiescence in this life of his, apparently thinking no more of the home-land; remembering little, if anything (so Vecchio judged), of what had taken place; a curious creature, neither man nor boy, yet partaking of the nature of both.

The May sun shone brightly on him one morning, as, listlessly holding a red and blue box-kite in his hand, he walked down the gravel path toward the summer-house upon the cliff.

There lying in a corner, he beheld the miscellaneous heap of trifles which Il Vecchio had at different times during the past few weeks bought for him—a dissected map of Europe, a miniature railway system with track, switches, cars and engines; a model aeroplane, and some few other things such as the old man, aided by Stasia's heart-sick suggestions, had provided.

AT SIGHT of them, Dennison's lip curled with deadly scorn. His indifferent eye brightened with a flash of hatred.

Down he flung the kite, as though it burned his touch.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed.

He shoved the playthings away from him with his foot. His impulse was to stamp upon them, to dash them into bits and hurl them over the railing into the sea, far below, but he restrained it.

"No, no, I mustn't do that," said he, quite slowly. "That would never do at all. I've got to go right on pretending till—till—what? Oh! Oh merciful Father! What will be the end?"

Terrified, he stared about him with wild eyes. He cringed as though from some invisible enemy.

"The Horla—that was no impossibility, after all!" he moaned.

For a moment he stood there immersed in sick dejection and fear. Then anger reasserted itself.

"Ugh! The fool!" he hissed. "He thinks he's going to keep me contented, this way? It's like giving a condemned murderer a cheap cigar on the morning of his execution! Oh, if it would only finish! If I didn't have to go on and on, this way—making believe!"

Then tears came to his eyes, glistening there in the clear sunlight. Shuddering, he turned away.

His gaze fell on a book that lay upon the bench—an open book with an exciting picture of a balloon driving through storm-clouds over an ocean in fury.

"Jules Verne—for me!" he gibed, with an exceeding bitterness. "For me, for Granville Dennison, A.B., A.M., M.D.! The idiot! The driveling madman! Playthings, pocket-money—five francs a week for fruit and candy and such nonsense—knickerbockers and Jules Verne for me!"

Clenching his boyish fists, he stood there a moment rigid with hate and overpowering disgust. Then he fell to pacing the length of the pergola.

"Am I going mad?" he wondered. "Will

that be the end? Will the Horla really catch me; must I finish in the darkness of insanity?"

Strangely irrelevant thoughts crowded in upon his feverish brain—that horrible anomaly of a brain, a man's brain in the skull of a mere boy. He recalled his offices in New York, his assistant whom he had so unceremoniously deserted, and all his patients left in the lurch by his mad flight.

Then his mother's face, long dead (he envied her!) flashed on the screen of his mental vision. Quite absurdly the next picture was an inconsequential wrangle he had once had with a French railway porter at Lyons, over an excess piece of baggage. Then came the thought of Stasia—but this he banished with a cry of a wounded animal.

"No, no!" he whispered. "I mustn't dwell on that! For that spells madness—and I need my reason, clear and unimpeded, for the thing I yet must do. To be called back from old age to the prime of life, to love again, to find love turn to dust and ashes on my lips—"

Fused in a glow of gold, the overarching sky flooded that summer land with wonder; but Dennison, the lad, beheld it not. No longer now could the groves, the rose-trees, the gorgeous-hued parterres, hold any charm for him.

A mere mockery had become the warmth and perfume of that delicious spot, the scent of the big purple violets along the crumbling edge of the cliff, the cuckoo-calls among the shrubbery, the bird-songs, and the wonder of the inverted bowl of sky which blended, on the far horizon, with the still deeper hues of the great inland sea.

This, the paradise of the whole world, with its unending delights for every sense and faculty, now wrought in his fear-sickened mind and in his perishing soul only revulsions, nauseating by their very intensity.

"Oh—could I only die!" he moaned. "Did I only dare to end it! The noose, the bullet, the ax, the burning stake, to a being dowered with determination and the courage I have lost—how infinitely preferable! But Vecchio, that fiend incarnate, Il Vecchio has robbed me of my fortitude. Strength he has taken. Courage he has sapped. Life he will yet exact. Will he take my mind, as well?"

The wretch twisted his hands in a spasm of agony. He had spoken the truth. Under the aged scientist's long treatment, under the torment of having seen himself periodically lessen and dwindle and grow physically weaker, his stamina had given way. He moved and lived under Il Vecchio's domination.

A VICIOUS circle held him. So long Il Vecchio lived, and willed that he should live, the wretch no longer dared attempt to take his own life; and he lacked courage, as a house-dog even when abused utterly lacks it, to try to compass Il Vecchio's death.

So, wrung with constant agony, which he labored to conceal, he waited. His speculations as to the future, these constituted his supreme torture. What would the end be? That which, for the aged Italian, constituted the climax of a long series of intensely interesting observations, filled the boy with shuddering abomination.

Imagine a guinea pig in a pathological laboratory endowed with human reason. Imagine the sensations of this creature as, dumb and inhibited from resistance, it sees and feels the daily inoculation with tetanus bacillus or the virus of hydrophobia. In such a way the maddening horror of Dennison's life continued during those weeks and months of captivity on Mount St. Clair.

That he, alone of all the fifteen hundred million human-beings on earth, should have been ordained for such a fate, filled him with savage rage. The thought of shrinking into a little child and thence passing to the state of helpless infancy, borne in a nurse's arms, drove him half mad.

Worst of all was the thought which constantly recurred:

"Must my mind, too, eventually give way, and shrink and weaken with my body: Or shall I, as a crawling baby, still possess all the acumen, knowledge, and intellectual power of a full-grown man?"

The horror of this situation preyed upon him night and day. Robust in body, fatally healthy through the workings of the damnable Alkahest, yet his face—boy-

ish though it now had grown—reflected, when he was alone, the more than infernal torments of his mind.

This train of thought now recurred to him as he paced the summer-house.

"Can't I analyze this horror?" he exclaimed, stopping a moment to compose his mind. "Here is the situation. So far, I find not diminution in the acuteness of my mental processes. My psychological loss, so far, has taken place in the domain of the will, not in that of the reason.

"All my stores of knowledge and experience, my linguistics—in spite of Vecchio's efforts—my apperceptions, and my logical faculties seem untouched. The brain-centers localizing all my special fields of study seem to have escaped the process of rejuvenescence. But from now on, what? With the next periodic crisis, what then?

"All I know is that at some time, some epoch of this involution, a change must come. A change—an ending!"

Again he continued his agitated walking up and down the pergola. Bitterly he thought of Il Vecchio's attempts to weaken his intellect—of the campaign to make him forget English and even his own name (a campaign he had fought against by talking out loud in English when alone).

Of the efforts to interest him in toys and petty things; to deprive him of adult books and put juvenile fiction only into his hands; of the pony-cart Vecchio had bought him; of the little room, small bed, and childish surroundings furnished for him; of a thousand and one artfully conceived devices for his mental extinction.

And, in spite of all his pain, he smiled a bitter smile.

"Yes," said he, "and I have met him more than half-way, all this time. No use to resist. Better submit, until perhaps—perhaps something may happen yet to free me? Vecchio believes even now that it was he who thought of all these things.

"He does not know the sly mental suggestions, slid imperceptibly into his senile brain, that led up to his providing that pony and that room, that brought this toy railway, and this kite to me! Ah, the secret, hidden battle of brain and brain! The conflict not yet ended!"

He paused, sighed deeply, and walked over to the rail, sheer above that thousand-foot drop, down into the depths of the sea.

Down he peered, with anxious, envious eyes.

"If I but dared!" he whispered.

For a moment, holding on with both his boyish hands, he felt a certain dizziness. Incredible now it seemed to him that he had ever scrambled down a narrow, broken pathway along that cliff; half unreal that incident now had become, as had the finding of the caves, the death-chamber, and the eighteen coffins. Was all that a dream?

DENNISON felt in his pocket, where lay a little box. Inside that box, he knew—a box which Vecchio thought contained but pebbles and childish trifles—inside it reposed the metal tags he had pried off three of those very caskets. Yet, in spite of all that he could not make the thing seem real.

Again he gazed far down. Crawling, the surf creamed idly along the base of the cliff. He could see the up-shoot of the spray; could see it fling back and out into the receding billows with a hissing echo. The suspiration of the sea, hardly perceptible out from shore, kept this eternal torment of brine lashing at the volcanic rocks.

"A thousand feet?" he mused. "Higher than the Eiffel Tower—higher than the Metropolitan! I'd never know when I struck the water. It would all be over before that.

"There'd be no pain; only, perhaps, a stifling, choking sensation—just a whirling over and over, an inability to breathe—a mad, wild, fruitless fight—then unconsciousness and—the end of everything! In less than seven seconds it would be all over. Seven seconds!"

Out he drew his watch, almost the only relic of his manhood which Il Vecchio had left to him, and looked at it. Yes, he had calculated correctly. He ran over the computation in his head, the formula for falling bodies: Sixteen and a half feet the first second, thirty-three the second, and so on. Seven seconds!

On the dial of his watch he observed the little needle twitch. He counted off the time—how brief! In the space of ten heartbeats, once he dared take that leap, everything would for him cease to be, forever.

Yet he shrank back. Old Vecchio judged right well in feeling how far gone was now his victim's courage. Vampirelike the patriarch had sapped and undermined it. The boy-man terrified even at the thought of such an overwhelming deed, cringed from the railing.

Weakly he smiled. Then, eager to divert his tortured mind from these horrible thoughts, he looked about him.

Through the vines he peered. Nobody was near; nobody was taking any notice of him. His face grew crafty, keen and alert.

Down on his knees he fell; and groping under the seat, found in the secret hiding-place a thin, brown-covered volume. This book was stamped: "Italian at a Glance."

It summed up the change that had taken place in him. Where a man would have been plotting murder, this boy-creature was devising futilities.

For with the book he sat down, quickly found a marked place and began to study. To himself he mumbled words and phrases. Line by line, rule by rule, Dennison devoured a chapter of irregular verbs. Rapidly his lips moved. A fever for learning possessed him.

At last he paused, shut the book, and looked up with a puerile expression of guile.

"Eleven lessons, so far," said he. "When I've done twenty-five, I know I can catch at least the drift of what he and Lombard say to each other. Two weeks more of this, with my Latin and French to help me, and they can't talk about me without my knowing it!"

Again he applied himself to the book. Again his lips moved with the intricacies of "Verbs of the Third Class."

But all at once, down from the house rang a cry, a hail:

"Totor! Totor!"

At sound of this hateful summons, this degrading boy-name for "Victor" where with Il Vecchio had christened him in trying to obliterate the American personality, Dennison's face grew savage. The hate and loathing that sought to find expression through those childish features made a picture which, once seen, could never be forgotten.

Again the shout, in the old man's voice: "To-tor!"

"Coming, uncle!" cried Dennison, as he had been taught by lessons none too mild. And hastily hiding his Italian grammar, he picked up the box-kite and with it hurried from the summer-house.

Il Vecchio met him, part way down the gravel walk among the roses.

"Come, my nephew," he said in French, smiling with an assumption of paternal affection. "The pony is waiting. Time, now, for your drive with Aunt Stasia."

"Yes, uncle," answered the lad, in the same tongue. He raised his eyes not from the ground, but stood there like a dog that fears its master's gaze.

"HERE is a louis d'or for you," continued the old man, pulling out his purse. "This is your birthday, today. Do you not remember?"

"Remember?" said Dennison vaguely. "Remember what? What do you mean?"

"Never mind," parried Il Vecchio, with a smile of secret satisfaction. "Do not bother about—about the past. We will care for you. Everything you wish, you shall have. Tell me, my dear nephew, are you happy here?"

"Yes, uncle," answered the child, still keeping his eyes upon the pebbles at his feet. "But—"

"But what?"

"Sometimes I am lonesome. I—I have no other boy to play with and—"

"I understand. Very well, we will attend to that. Tomorrow you shall have a boy. Lombard has a nephew in Cette. Just as you are my nephew, that boy is his. I think he is about your age. I will ask him this boy's name and where he lives. Then perhaps you can bring him back with you, when you and auntie come home this afternoon. Would you like that?"

"Yes, my uncle."

"Good! We'll have you quite yourself, before long. You've been very ill, you know, as I've already told you. But soon, with little companions to play with, and lots of fresh air, and all that, you'll be the happiest lad in France! Well, here now, take this louis d'or. It is all yours to spend as you see fit."

Dennison extended a hand for the hateful coin. He longed to seize it and dash it to the ground, or, better still, fling it in Vecchio's mocking, wrinkled, hpocritical

face; but he quickly restrained himself.

For, whence it had come he knew not, a sudden idea had been born in his anguished brain. A new thought, a hope, a desire so keen that the mere conception of it left him weak and trembling. But still, with lowered head, he veiled himself from the old man's piercing scrutiny.

He took the gold-piece.

"Thank you, mon oncle," said he. "You are very, very kind to me."

"Ah! Glad to hear you say that! Glad you are duly grateful, my nephew. But now tell me, what will you buy with so much money?"

"Can—can I have anything I want, for —my birthday present?" faltered the child, his face going singularly pale.

"Anything, in reason."

"Well, then, I'd—I'd like—"

"Yes? What?"

"You know that history-book you gave me, a little while ago. The one with William Tell in it?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Oh, I—I wish I could have a little bow and some arrows, like that, uncle, and play William Tell!"

Il Vecchio laughed heartily. How this amused him, to see the one-time strong and lusty American doctor, the man who had robbed him of his Alkahest, now stand cringing there before him in the sunlight, clutching a louis in his little hand and falteringly beg for a toy bow and arrows so he might play William Tell! The old man's heart swelled with pride in his experiment, and with another even sweeter sentiment —revenge!

And, patting the lad upon his shoulder, with a simulation of great affection, he replied:

"So then, my little Totor wants to be William Tell, does he: Well, that's no very unreasonable desire. It's easy to accomplish—just to imitate a myth!"

"You—you mean—I can have it?"

"Of course! Of course you can! There, there, now run along. See Lombard has got the pony harnessed. Auntie is waiting. I'll find out about that little boy to play with you. And tomorrow you and he can play William Tell to your heart's desire. But mind, my nephew—blunt arrows! Don't forget!"

"I won't, dear uncle," answered the child, climbing into the wicker pony-cart, where Stasia sat very pale and quiet. He tried to smile, but had Il Vecchio known what lay beneath the mockery of joy, his own amusement would have turned to Dead Sea fruit and horror.

CHAPTER 24

Bows and Arrows

WITH the old man's golden louis, "Totor" bought, in a toyshop on the Rue de l'Hospice, a stout bow of ash and twelve arrows.

The bow was more than a full meter long, and capable of throwing a shaft easily two hundred yards or more. The arrows, blunted into flat heads, measured about two feet six inches in length. They were gaily feathered with red, blue and green. A quiver, withal, completed the outfit, and a red leather belt with a brass buckle to strap it round the waist. Never was there a prettier toy.

In the days following, now accompanied by Jean-Paul Beziers, the nephew of Lombard the child assiduously practised archery. Neglected were the miniature railways and the box-kite, quite cast aside were the other trifles. Even the secret study of the Italian grammar was forgotten. You never saw a boy so utterly absorbed in a new sport as Totor in this marksmanship of his.

William Tell was acted and re-acted scores of times. Every tree and bush on the estate had to serve as a target. The lad also drew rings on the blind wall at the rear of the pony-shed, and there, for hours at a time, he would stand, gradually increasing his distance till finally at fifty yards he could invariably put every one of the dozen arrows inside at least the two central rings.

He caught the vibration and the set of the bow to perfection, and come to know each individual arrow and what it would do, how to allow for wind, calculate distance and judge heights. The apparatus seemed to become almost a part of him, an extension of his own bodily members, wherewith to do his will.

Thus two weeks passed. And Il Vecchio, pleased by the success of his gift, by its extraordinary efficacy in diverting

the child's mind and in making him forget still more completely (it seemed) whatever faint vestige of the one-time past life remained to him, smiled very sagely.

Sometimes he would even lean upon his spade, of a sunny morning and watch the lad's exploits, or go out with him to the target on the pony-shed and there for a quarter of an hour observe this childish pleasure and enthusiasm—making, the while, a note or two.

A few times he even patted Totor on the head, with words of praise. Once, after an especially creditable score, he remarked:

"You are a brave garçon, my lad! When you grow up," and now his intonation became peculiar, "I know you surely will carry off the Grand Prix of the National Toxophilite Society. Stick to your exercise, Totor. It will keep you strong and well; you need something of this sort to help you, for, remember, you have had brain fever here."

Dennison smiled that shy, elusive smile of his.

"I'll practise, my uncle," he answered. "I love it! And do you think I shall some time make a record score?"

"No doubt of it!" exclaimed the patriarch. "No doubt of it at all! Remember, practise makes perfect." With which salutary motto he returned to his digging and his delving in the garden.

Totor wistfully fondled his bow with an affection touching in its evident simplicity.

The third week Totor did not shoot.

Another of those strange, periodic illnesses of his—which Vecchio called relapses of the brain fever—confined him for a few days within doors.

When little Jean-Paul came eagerly seeking his new playmate who lived in the bighouse and had such an amazing plethora of toys, Lombard gruffly informed him that his playmate was sick and would not be able to see him for a long, long time.

Jean-Paul cried, in spite of the box-kite that Vecchio gave him, and went away down the mountain again, to his own mean hovel on Rue Louis Blanc. Never again was he allowed to visit Mount St. Clair.

For, had he done so, he must inevitably have carried with him so strange a story that it would either have got him a beating for falsehood, or else have raised endless discussions through all the town, concerning Il Vecchio's domain up there on the height.

The little ragged fellow would have told, with fear, that Master Totor no longer seemed a boy of ten or twelve, about his own age, though rather larger. No, he would have said the old man's nephew had in some strange, mysterious manner, changed; that now he had grown smaller, lighter, younger in every way; that now he seemed no more than a mere child of eight.

Such a story nobody could have believed; yet it would have been true in every word. For when again the wretched Totor emerged from the house and once more showed himself, the change which had taken place in him was evident at a glance.

IL VECCHIO, sitting with book and cigar upon the broad, seaward-looking piazza, observed him with tremendous satisfaction.

"See, Stasia," he murmured to his niece, who sat in a big wicker-chair close by, listlessly working at some raffia in which she took no interest whatsoever. "You see, he has quite forgotten. Nothing remains now of his past. I count on you, on you who never yet have disobeyed me, to maintain the illusion. Ah! the admirable effects of science!"

The girl made no answer, nor did she even lift her eyes, which seemed red as with secret weeping, fringed with dark circles as with sleepless nights. Il Vecchio, however, saw nothing of this. His gaze, eager and vulpine, was fixed upon his victim, who now—faithful to his new toy in spite of his recent loss of strength—had begun his archery practise once again.

"You see—" began Il Vecchio. But Stasia, arising suddenly disappeared into the house. Her fancy-work, unheeded, lay on the porch floor.

The old man frowned and stroked his beard.

"So?" he muttered. "Well—we shall see! We shall see—and soon!"

For some days, life went on quietly. Vecchio worked among his trees, read.

studied, made notes and many a long entry in his black-bound book. Lombard seemed to be blind. He said nothing; he obeyed, as always. Stasia kept much to her own room.

As for the little boy, he played.

But, though the patriarch kept close watch on him, something was slowly and surely going forward of which Il Vecchio had not the faintest notion.

It was this: The lad for some time had been saving wire nails of various descriptions and of different sizes. Every nail he could come across, in secret, he hid under a flat rock down behind the thick clump of sumacs at the lower end of the estate.

When he had got together a dozen large nails, he began filing them to needle-points. This for his little hands was a terrible task. Yet he kept at it, using a rusty old file he had abstracted from the pony-shed and stealing now half an hour, now fifteen minutes or even less.

With indefatigable perseverance, he succeeded after a week or so in reducing all his nails to formidable acuteness, and in filing off the heads. He now had in his possession, hidden under the rock, twelve steel points ranging from an inch and half to three inches in length.

The next stage was even more difficult, for absolute secrecy had to be observed. How to barb his arrows without being caught at it caused him prolonged speculation. But at last he hit upon a way.

On the tenth day since his last periodic diminution, he took a childish fancy to play at fishing off the cliff. With a long pole and a reel of fish-line begged from Uncle Vecchio, he sat for an hour in the summer-house, whipping the empty air over the abyss and pretending to haul up an innumerable catch. Vecchio smiled at this innocent amusement.

"So then," he reflected, "his mind is dwindling, with his body. This point I have not yet been positive about. There may have been some auto-suggestive deception about it, so far. But now, with the marked growth of his imaginative faculty, the matter is adequately proved." And he went off to make an extended entry in his records.

Totor returned the fish-line to uncle, that evening; but not intact. With his pocket-knife he had cut off about fifteen feet. By winding the line on the spool again, this loss was not apparent. The fifteen feet of strong silk cord Totor very carefully hid behind a picture in his little room.

That night he took his bow, arrows, and quiver to bed with him, as children often will some very favorite toy. The old man observed this, too, with sovereign pleasure. Rubbing his veiny hands together, he pondered; "Better and better! Soon, now, childhood will be past. Soon infancy will draw near. And then—then! Ah! The great mystery, the riddle, the supreme question of this whole lifelong investigation will be answered! Soon, soon!"

So excited did this thought render him, that until long past midnight he sat smoking in his study, pondering on life and death, the human soul, identity, personality, and all the master-problems that, ever since man left off his simian guise, have baffled human reason.

Totor all this time, was very busy.

IL VECCHIO thought him asleep in his little bed, with the beloved playthings clasped in his childish arms, never had he in his whole long life made a more serious error.

For, laboring in the dark, working as fast as his little trembling hands could serve him, the child was busy with his arrows.

With his knife he first cut down the blunt portion of the head of each. From moment to moment he listened, ready at any sign of alarm to creep into bed, toys and all, and cover up under uncle's blanket. But there was no alarm. So on and on he toiled, by the sense of touch. And after a certain time he had reduced all his arrows to the desired form.

With minute care he gathered up all the shavings. These he hid beneath his mattress.

He next addressed himself to the task of pointing the shafts.

Cutting notches, he lashed the steel points securely with the fish-line. Midnight was past and gone when the last arrow had received its tip. But the child felt no exhaustion. Instead, a wild joy filled him, an elation, a burning eager-

ness resulted from his accomplishment.

"Oh, if it were only morning, now!" he whispered, as he replaced the arrows, points downward, in his quiver, and with it got into bed.

All night long he never closed his eyes. Staring up into the dark, he thought, he planned.

Day broke at length, calm, golden-bright and fair, a perfect day in that most perfect spot on earth.

Toward eleven o'clock, when Marianella was busy in the kitchen, Lombard gone down to Cette with Stasia in the dog-cart to see about a consignment of mulberry cuttings just arrived, and Vecchio on the point of finishing his daily outdoor task, Totor appeared in the garden.

Round his waist was strapped the quiver, very brave with its brass and red leather belt. In his hand the child gripped the ashen bow. Though pale, he was smiling and seemed of good cheer as he stepped out into the sunlight.

Vecchio greeted him.

"Well, now, my little man," he said, setting aside his mattack, "and what are we about, this morning? Still playing William Tell?"

"No uncle, I'm tired of that, now."

"Tired of it? No wonder. Even the nicest game grows wearisome, after a while." He wiped his high, bald forehead, and for a moment stood looking down with calculating eyes at this strange little creature there before him.

Silence, a few seconds. Then said the child:

"Uncle?"

"Well, Totor?"

"Is there anything outside the wall, over there?" He pointed to westward.

Vecchio laughed. "Of course!" said he, marveling the while at Totor's fast-increasing simplicity.

"But, Uncle, Jean-Paul said that was the end of the world, over beyond that wall. He—he said if anybody went over there, they'd fall off into—into nothing!"

The old man stared.

"Come, come!" he answered. "Jean-Paul's a naughty boy. He was only trying to fool my little Totor! He told a wicked lie."

Totor looked up shyly.

"I'd like to see, Uncle," he begged. "Please show me?"

"Why, lad, there's only a stretch of forest over beyond there. Woods, that's all, gradually sloping down to the Etang de Thau. Jean-Paul knows that, quite well."

"Won't you take me there, please, Uncle? Jean-Paul's uncle takes him for a walk, sometimes. And you never take me! I'd like to take a walk there with you. Maybe there might be bears or wolves or something to shoot?"

Again Vecchio laughed heartily, his wrinkled old face breaking into a thousand parchment creases at the thought of wild game in that country. But Totor would not yield.

"Please! Please!" he entreated in childish trebles.

At last the patriarch yielded. Less for the sake of amusing this victim, it was, than for the chance of studying the child-psychology, of observing the workings of this mind—reduced—as he believed—from virile strength to the impotence of almost infancy.

"All right, Totor," he agreed. "Just let me get my big straw hat and my pipe; then we'll start. But I can't go very far, you understand. Or for very long. Uncle's busy. Half an hour's all the time Uncle can give to Totor. Will that be enough?"

"Yes, Uncle. Oh, that will be enough. More than enough for me."

"Unless we meet big game!" the old man gibed, starting slowly for the house.

"Do you think we shall?" questioned the child wonderingly. "I—I can shoot a lot in half an hour!"

Confidingly he slid his little hand in Vecchio's lean, wasted one.

Together, child and patriarch, they walked up the long graveled pathway.

CHAPTER 25

Nemesis

SOME fifteen minutes later, having traversed the grounds to westward and made their way through a long-disused wicket gate that communicated with the woodland on the far flank of the mountain, the strange pair were strolling

among the planes and beeches and tall, swaying pines that clothed the slope.

The shade was cool, refreshing. Among the wind-swayed branches the clear sunlight fell in a million moving patterns on the leaf-mold and the fine, sparse forest-grass. Far off to the left, over a piny ridge, flashed a bright sparkle from the sea. Thrush and mavis, unseen amid the foliage, gossiped the news of the dim aisles. Peaceful beyond all telling, beautiful, and overhung with mystery, the forest stretched away.

For a while they walked in silence. From time to time the old man glanced down at Totor, keenly observing him with a sort of grim exultation on his aged face. Totor, looking about with wonder, seemed to perceive nothing of this. He was thinking of big game.

At last the child spoke.

"Uncle," asked he, "who am I? How did I get here? Why haven't I got any father or mother, the same as Jean-Paul?"

Vecchio frowned. He had hoped all such speculations were already forgotten. But clearly no choice existed save to answer these childish seekings after truth. So said he:

"Who are you, Totor? Why, you're my little nephew, of course. You know that well. Your father and mother both died in Marseilles when you were only a baby. I adopted you, I, your great-uncle. Don't bother about such things. Are you not happy here with me?"

"Y-yes," vaguely answered the child. "But I don't seem to remember—"

"Look!" interrupted the old man, pointing. At all hazards he must break this dangerous train of thought. "See that beautiful bird—ah! catch that flicker of red wings through the leaves? See it?"

Totor looked.

"Yes, Uncle," said he. "It looks just like blood, doesn't it?"

For a while no word passed. But Vecchio stroked his beard with a troubled air.

Now they had come to a sort of clearing on the western slope of the height. Here the grass grew taller, and among it a crimson blossom or two swayed in the breeze.

"This is far enough, Totor," remarked the patriarch, stopping at the edge of the cleared space. "We must go back now. You see, Jean-Paul was telling a naughty story. This isn't the end of the world, here, not at all. But come, come. Now we must turn around."

"All right, Uncle. But won't you wait just a minute, please? I want to get that flower—see? The big red one over there!"

Vecchio released his hand, then stood watching him as the little figure advanced toward the middle of the clearing. But to his surprise Totor did not pick the blossom.

Instead, he drew an arrow from his quiver and fitted it to the bow-string. Vecchio seemed to catch a glint of metal. A formless wonder filled his mind—the vague adumbration of a nameless something, he knew not what—a premonition of some strange, unreal, incredible happening.

"Totor! Come back!" he called sharply. "Come back to me, this instant!"

Instead of answering, the child wheeled on him at a distance of some fifteen yards.

UP CAME the bow. Vecchio, his eyes widening with a pang of sudden fear, saw a steel-tipped arrow leveled at him.

"Totor!" he shouted, taking one forward step. Menacingly he raised his fist.

"Dear Uncle, with my compliments!" cried the boy in a shrill, strange voice. Then, before Vecchio could move from his frozen attitude of terror, back drew the arm. The string grew taut.

Zing-g-g-g!

Low hummed the cord. Like a flick of light the shaft sped true.

Il Vecchio flung up his arms. His wild shout died in a bubbling gasp. Fair in the throat the steel had struck him; and now a gush of blood along his neck, a frothy foam of crimson on his lips—a foam that tinged his patriarchal beard—bespoke the horrible wound.

Clutching at the air, he staggered back. He caught a pine-trunk and stood leaning there against it, fighting to speak, struggling in vain to voice some word, some futile threat or prayer.

Dennison, meanwhile, with calm deliberation had drawn out another arrow from the quiver, and once again had laid it on the buckskin cord.

"I think," said he, "that you have told

your last lie to me, dear 'uncle.' As a matter of fact, I know very well who I am. My name is Granville Dennison, M.D., and every event since I came here is quite clearly fixed in my mind. Furthermore, let me say you are mistaken about this not being the end of the world. It is—for you."

Again the hum, the dart of steel.

A moan broke from the wordless lips of Vecchio. Down he sank, his back still supported by the bole of the big pine. Off fell his big straw hat. Deep through his right shoulder the arrow had sped. Its gaily feathered butt quivered in the sunlight.

"Yes, a good shot. I aimed at the notch in your lapel," remarked Dennison with composure. "At this distance, I simply couldn't miss, you see. I like to observe results. Like you, I have a scientific turn of mind. You have observed my symptoms; now I watch yours. Fair, eh?

"Please sit up, dear Uncle. As you are, I can't do myself credit. You make a wretched target that way!"

He waited.

Vecchio writhing, held up a withered hand for mercy.

"Really, I must thank you for your birthday gift to me. A spendid gift—none better!"

The scientist, smitten unto death, lay motionless and bleeding in the grass. With an expectant air, mingled with impatience, Dennison waited.

"What so soon?" he queried. "Why, this will never do. You kept me six or seven months in torture. And shall I pay you off with fewer minutes? Come, come, Uncle; get up! Give me my due!"

No motion, no sign of further struggle.

Dennison, with an exclamation of annoyance, walked up to the prone figure. He tried to stir it, but in vain.

"Not all your science, not all your super human knowledge helps you now," said the child. "You lie there on a par with the most ignorant peasant on his death-bed. Listen! Listen and hear me! You are still conscious, though you cannot speak. Dumb, helpless, dying, you can still hear and understand for a few minutes yet."

He paused, reflectively contemplating the wretch at his feet, then continued.

"OLD man, in your unnatural, hideous experiments, your seekings after the forbidden and the unknowable, you have violated laws of man and laws of nature, both alike.

"Murder by wholesale has been as nothing in your sight. That you might drag the inmost secrets of life from their mysterious hiding-place and fabricate your devilish Alkahest, you have used men, women, and children, without pity, as so much raw material Their blood and lives and breath, and all their pain and fear have been nothing to you—nothing save so many ingredients to compound your master crime, the crowning infamy of the whole world!

"Coldly you have kept records of your revolting crimes—records! Yes, yes; I know, I understand! Even though your cursed hieroglyphics have escaped my deciphering, yet I have plumbed their meaning.

"Those ravaged, outraged corpses, all ticketed and labeled like so many specimens in a museum, you have preserved. Kept where, in your madness, you believed no one could ever find them. But I—I found them, and I know! See! Look at these, old man!"

From his pocket he drew the little box wherein for so long he had secreted the metal coffin tags pried from the caskets in the cave.

He opened the box. Before the glazing eyes of the dying patriarch he held them up.

"Behold!" cried he. "Your sins have found you out!"

Even in the approaching agony of death, Il Vecchio understood. His eyes grew staring. He struggled to rise. With a last upflare of strength he raised himself to a lolling posture. He stretched out his hand as though to implore silence.

Dennison only smiled. Back into his pocket he slid the damning tags.

"So then, you see that I know all," he sneered. "And furthermore, I judge you justly. The wrong I did you was no wrong—to rob you of the fruits of vampirism and of impious murder! Yet, even had it been a wrong, I have already paid in full. I have paid to the final drop of woe!"

"Now, Vecchio, your time is close at

hand; the time to settle all accounts, to pay your all too inadequate total of possession for the horrors you have wrought. Into my hands you are delivered. My body you transformed into a child's; but my brain, my intellect you could not change, you could not conquer. Have I not acted my part well? Say, have I not duped you richly, dear old Uncle Vecchio?"

The aged man struggled vainly to bring words to utterance. Only a croaking gasp escaped him. Dennison only laughed outright.

"Well spoken!" cried he. "How eloquent you have become! Admirable, indeed! I would that all your murdered victims could hear and see you—as you are now!

"Listen; I am soon at an end of speech. Nothing has ever counted with you, save your infernal research and your damnable records. Nothing has ever restrained you, nothing been sacred. For your elixir and for the sake of observing its effects on me, you offered up the life and love and happiness of a good, pure, unsullied girl. You wrecked and tortured your own niece—Stasia—the woman I adored. You gave her love, only to snatch it from her; and why? Experiments!

"You played with life, with all the inmost sacred passions of two human beings. Experiments! Of that girl you made a plaything, a mere trifling toy. Of me, the same. Experiments!

"Nothing was holy, to you. All things were toys, even the immutable laws of nature and the universe. So now, I do experiment with you, Vecchio; so now by my hand you perish and are damned, through the mediumship of a mere childish toy."

Back he stepped; the last arrow, a plunking shot, pierced Il Vecchio's lagging heart.

With one final look at the white, blood-dappled face, one scornful, curious glance at the filmed eyes that—their lids still open—stared up sightlessly into the depths of summer sky and fleecy cloud above the mountain. Dennison turned away.

He patted the ashen bow and kissed it fondly.

"Well done," he said, and dropped it and the remaining arrows in the grass. Laughing, he unbuckled the belt and let the quiver fall noiselessly into the deep grass.

"Almost finished now," he added. "The end—and peace—they are almost with me now."

Then, with no further look at the strange object lying there so grim and quiet in that sunlit woodland place, he turned and made his way back to the house.

CHAPTER 26

"It Is Finished!"

HE REACHED it, unobserved by Marianella, who alone was there. Quietly, without hesitation, acting as he had long planned, he entered the study.

From the bookshelf he took the backbound volume of records. On the table lay a sheaf of loose notes. These, too, he gathered up.

All of them together, notes and volume, he threw into the grate. Over them he emptied the oil from the student lamp. A moment later he had set a match to them; and, roaring, all those results of many years' unholy work were suddenly perishing.

Thoughtfully, he watched until the red, winking sparks had begun to crawl among the crinkled wreckage. Then to the table he turned. He sat down there. A few words of explanation, of farewell and benediction he penned for Stasia. This note he sealed and left, inscribed with her name, conspicuously in view on top of the desk.

"Consumatum est!" he whispered, quoting those tremendous words with sincere, reverent emotion. "It is finished!"

He kissed the note.

Then, quietly, with a strange dignity for so grotesque a little figure, he left the house. Down the long path among the roses he walked, down toward the pergola.

Only once he stopped, at a rose tree where—that first evening of their acknowledged love—Stasia and he had kissed and said good night.

Blood-red those roses were; wounds of ardent color among the very dark green foliage.

One rose he picked. To his lips he set it. Then, holding it in his hand, he went on down the path.

Aside he turned, to the unguarded brink of the precipice. Smiling, and with no backward glance, he stood a moment there.

Only a moment. Then he leaped. The sea, that primal mother of all life, received him gladly to her everlasting peace.

* * *

And today, no voice is heard within the walled estate on Mount St. Clair. Deserted, falling into wildness, the orange groves and olives struggle with encroaching pines. Weeds choke the marigolds and roses. Grass pushes up in tufts along the pathways and even has found root among the stone steps leading to the broad, rotting piazza.

The old house stands deserted, cursed with traditions of ghostly habitation, untenanted, feared through the countryside. Its tall chimney-stacks are falling into ruin; from its walls, flaked off by the eager fingering of untrimmed ivy, the stucco drops in ugly and uneven patches. Over the crumbling beams of the pergola riot wild masses of wisteria. Nature resumes her reign of beauty over all, hiding man's handiwork, softening the wreck of many things that might have been and were not.

In Tarascon, sheltered with kindly, simple relatives who pity but who do not understand, still lives a gray-haired, bent and broken woman. Stasia, they call her. Still in her vacant face, from which the light of reason and of soul have forever faded, linger faint traces of a one-time beauty.

She never speaks, unless the kinsfolk first address her. Living, yet dead, harmless, already senile, she sits all day long in idleness at her broad window, watching the shadows creep along the walls of the Chateau de René, peering across to Beaucaire, or gazing at the slow dark current of the Rhone which forever and eternally bears down long lines of foam.

And still, along the cliffs below the mountain, there at Cette, the surf breaks in silver spray by moonlight, while in the tangled groves, above, the nightingale pleads with clear-throated ecstasies.

Sea, earth and sky, and the dim wooded heights, the rugged precipice, the ruined walls, the innumerable voices of the night-wind, all—all are questioning.

But what they ask, or what the answer that they quest, no mind shall understand, nor any human tongue dare ever speak.

THE END

A Portrait of ABRAHAM MERRITT

☆ By Virgil Finlay ☆

A GLIMPSE OF A. MERRITT

EVER since the initial creation of A. Merritt's FANTASY, now over nine months ago, many of our readers have suggested that we publish a picture of the Lord of fantasy. Mr. Finlay very graciously consented to copy one of the many photos of Merritt that he had in his personal collection.

While presenting you with this picture, we thought it a good time to insert a few more facts about A. Merritt to fill out partially the thumb-nail sketch we did for you in our introductory issue.

A. Merritt was born of Quaker parents in Beverly, New Jersey in January of 1884. Shortly thereafter the whole Merritt family moved to Philadelphia. Among A. Merritt's illustrious ancestors was James Fenimore Cooper whose "Last of the Mohicans" has thrilled children for over one hundred years. Perhaps a bit of Mr. Merritt's literary talents were inherited from his celebrated forefather.

From an early age A. Merritt showed a very active mind, having studied law and become a newspaper reporter for "The Philadelphia Inquirer" by the age of eighteen. He took a year off to hunt treasure in Yucatan.

In 1912 he joined The American Weekly. But it was not until 1917, when Mr. Merritt was thirty-three years old, that his first literary piece, "Through the Dragon Glass" appeared.

To date very few of Merritt's stories have been changed. "The Moon Pool" and its sequel "Conquest of the Moon Pool" were rewritten and combined into one story for publication in book form. This version should not be confused with the magazine version which has the stories as two separate entities. Much against A. Merritt's wishes the ending to "Dwellers in the Mirage" was changed to a happy one for its first publication. Later, however, the original tragic ending was restored. Merritt also has one movie to his credit. "Burn, Witch, Burn" was made into a film entitled, "The Devil Doll" staring Lionel Barrymore. Did any of you fans ever see it?

—The Editor

THE DEVIL-FISH

By Elinore Cowan Stone

Could Salisbury's medico-science-filled world find a way to bring him back from the embrace of a civilized savagery?

I SAW Ruth Talbert today for the first time since the unrolling of that bizarre drama of unbelievable incident and barbaric coloring to which I was an inadvertent witness two years ago.

She crossed the tile floor from the great stairway of the Welton as I stood in the lobby, and stopped almost beside me at the desk. She did not see me, and I was profoundly grateful, for I could not have greeted her with anything like composure.

In that moment during which she tossed over her mail and murmured a gracious word to the attentive clerk, the florid onyx and gold pillars and arches of the hotel fell suddenly away, and I seemed to stand again, breathless with horror, under the palms of a semi-tropical garden, while a terrible cry fluttered somewhere in the velvety blackness beyond—fluttered and shrilled wildly and quavered into silence. But this is chaotic.

I had crossed with Ruth Talbert to Honolulu that June, two years ago. By that mysterious freemasonry that exists on shipboard every one knew of her romance.

She was crossing to be married. The man, a young scientist, was conducting some mysterious investigations for the government, which took him to the remotest corners of the earth. She had not seen him, I learned, for two years. He had been able to get away only long enough to meet her; and then they were to return immediately after the wedding to Australia.

I had not become well acquainted with the girl, but that I had been singularly interested in her was inevitable: one does not meet a girl every day with that clear, direct look, that gallant bearing, and that exquisite fastidiousness of body and soul that were hers.

It was a fastidiousness that had nothing to do with prudery, for she could face a n ugly truth as squarely as a man. That, of course, was why Jorneaux told in her presence the astonishing story of the tattooed man.

We were sitting—she, Jorneaux, Denton (a New York lawyer) and I—in the passageway just off the smoking room. A young sailor was doing something to a life-boat directly before us.

Denton called our attention to the elaborate tattooing which adorned the boy's arms and muscular bare legs. In fact, save for his face, there was not visible on his brawny young person a square inch of skin in its virgin state.

At his throat peered a serpent's head, evidently protruding from coils tattooed about his body—a nasty thing.

"A tremendous expense of time and labor is represented there," observed Jorneaux, "yes—and a lot of suffering."

"And for such an atrocity," shrugged Denton.

"Well, now," I suggested, "as examiner for the Navy during the war I saw a great deal of that kind of thing, and I happen to know that that is an exceptionally fine example of the art of tattooing. And to the wearer's mind it is a decoration beside which the possession of a Da Vinci would be a matter of small consequence."

Miss Talbert was eyeing the fellow with a kind of speculative repugnance.

"But suppose," she said thoughtfully, "that he sometime evolves from the naive complacency. Some of these boys must.

Under the fringe of palms a low wailing rose, swelled, and mingled wildly with the crash of the surf—the thin, blood-curding ululations of a primitive woman mourning for a lost loved one.

What agonies of mortification and vain regret would he suffer!"

"To the best of my knowledge they are vain regrets," I said. "Once done, it's done forever."

But Jorneaux was smiling; the whimsical expression of his eyes as they absently followed the waves receding from the ship's side promised one of his quaint reminiscences.

"I'm not so sure," he offered lightly.

I SHRUGGED, I am afraid; for in those first days I did not like Jorneaux. I didn't like his heavily-lashed blue eyes, nor his womanishly delicate hands. His whole charming, indolent person was too gracious for a man.

Furthermore, I had heard of him as a "gentleman tramp," known to three continents, without any substantial source of income, his only useful activities being occasional contributions to local papers or talks to exclusive groups of fad-chasing women, whose charity made life beautifully simple for him.

Yet I was obliged to concede that under that gentle, ingratiating exterior lay a wealth of shrewd judgment, an engaging breadth of sympathy, and a fund of uncanny information.

Several times he had startled me by a most unlaymanlike understanding of modern medicine. Scraps of miscellaneous information of so startling a nature that I had been inclined to discredit them, I had afterward verified to my own chagrin. Consequently I waited with interest for what he might have to say.

He shot a tentative glance at Ruth Talbert's face, so delicately patrician with its deep-set eyes, high, slender nose, and firmly planed, yet sensitive lips. As if reassured he meditatively met my skeptical look, and deftly spinning his unlighted cigar in his delicate white fingers, launched into the tale.

* * *

He was cruising with some English friends south of the equator, among the Polynesian atolls, lazily, without objective, one drowsy day dreaming into another until the party had almost lost count of time. They had anchored one evening a quarter of a mile from shore, amid a scene too lovely for belief.

There lay the enchanted isles of childhood, come true in the sunset—somnolent golden beaches lying at the feet of the lordly palms which encircled the island—all floating like a mirage in a sea of opal.

They made no attempt to land, knowing the perils of the outer reefs and ignorant of the channel which might have borne them to the safety of the coral-girt lagoon. As they watched, the tropical night snuffed out the day like an old-fashioned extinguisher.

The villages of grass huts which clustered among the fringing palms looked strangely unreal, like an artificial garden of a theatrical set, twinkling with many gay lanterns. The faint, sweet whine of mellow-stringed instruments penetrated the swish of the breakers.

What happened there was more incredible even then the beauty of the scene.

Quite suddenly out through the twilight surf came a man, swimming with mighty overhand strokes, and clambered aboard, entirely naked save for a loin cloth. At first they assumed that he was a native. Then they saw that, though his skin was an even golden brown, his hair was burned quite flaxen and his eyes were a startling blue. His face was hideously tattooed; the design, a devil-fish, was concentrated at the point of his brow just between his eyes.

In the English of a cultured man he asked them to take him with them, anywhere, so that it was back to civilization. Very disjointly they got his story.

Many months ago—he could not remember how many—he had set out from the nearest of the frequented islands with two Marquesans in an open boat. A squall had blown them far out of their course and capsized even the sturdy native canoe.

The American, for he was an Ameriman, never knew what finally became of his companions. Utterly exhausted, but still clinging mechanically to the canoe, he was washed, hours later, upon this atoll and picked up by the natives. Since his arrival no foreign craft had touched these shores. This much he told his rescuers that first night.

They gave him clothing and tobacco,

and tried to forget and help him to forget that piteously grotesque monstrosity on his brow. Gradually he relaxed to enjoy the ease and grace of his surroundings, and showed himself pitifully eager for news of the world, the world to which he had so obviously once belonged.

Suddenly, however, as they lounged on deck, they were startled to see him break off in the midst of a phrase, grip the arms of his chair, and listen with set, averted eyes and tense muscles. Unconsciously they all fell silent—listening, too.

BACK in the now darkened village under the fringe of palms a low wailing rose, swelled, and mingled wildly with the crash of the surf—the thin, blood-curdling ululations of a primitive woman mourning for a lost loved one.

The effect upon the American was startling. With a crooning exclamation he sprang from his chair as if responding to an expected summons. Then, muttering an apology, he shamefacedly settled back into the cushions and resumed the conversation with a dogged concentration.

Again and again that shrill cry forced itself upon our attention, a cadence whose heartbroken insistence is beyond description. There crept into it and mingled with it the reverberant monotone of a drum.

After his first outbreak the strange guest's only reaction was momentarily to close his eyes and tighten the grip of his chair, until the tortured reed creaked. Finally, however, he rose, and with hands locked behind him, paced in carefully restrained strides up and down the deck.

Here he begged them to leave him when they retired; and here, still pacing up and down, Jorneaux found him hours later, when, unable to sleep, the Frenchman turned out for a smoke.

During the hours before dawn the tortured man told Jorneaux the rest of his story, strangely bared of reserves for a man of the class to which he obviously belonged.

Cast by his mishap upon the hospitality of the natives of the atolls, he had found their courteous consideration equalled only by their delight at his advent. With reverently exploring fingers they stroked his white skin and fondled his fair hair—men, women, and children alike.

Perhaps vague atavistic perceptions recognized in his fine blond virility the race ideal of Caucasian ancestors. Perhaps he was to them a kind of fairy dream come true.

Their speech, varying only as a dialect from the already familiar tongue of the Marquesans, he already understood. No white man had ever visited them before, they told him. They were not seafarers themselves, never venturing out of sight of land; and boats from the outside seldom put into these treacherous shores.

There had been one, many moons ago, from the nearest island; but there might never be another. The channel was very bad, they understood, and there was little here to tempt outsiders to dare it. The pearl fishing was not good.

Three times he ventured alone in an open boat to seek the nearest island. Once the current washed him back upon the reef; once he was rescued from the surf by some of his hosts who had hovered about, hugging to land, to watch his progress; and once, after drifting hopelessly for three days, he was washed in on a phenomenal tide, half crazy with thirst.

He was in despair, for there was a girl at home—a super girl, as he described her to Jorneaux—exquisitely alluring, yet square and sportsmanlike as a man. He must get back to her and to his work.

Gradually, however, as he had become convinced of the hopelessness of his plight, the atolls began to weave about him their dowsy spell. His body, long since naked, no longer felt the fastidious revulsion of race. He somehow forgot why he had ever felt it finer or better than those of the magnificent, clean-limbed sons of the sea about him.

He told Jorneaux that he had read about the baleful magic with which the tropics lull to slumber the race prejudices and traditions of the Anglo-Saxon. It was not until Lamaiia came that he recognized his danger.

She had been for months in seclusion, as is the custom with young girls of the tribe when they approach womanhood. Now the time was ripe for her formal introduction to her world; probably it was because he was permitted—in violation of all tradition—to come upon her alone, one night, that the man, prompted by

some subtle inner warning that he did not at the time coin into words, hastened on his way without a second glance.

Yet he could not forget for hours the inky silhouette of the over-arching palms that the moonlight cast on the white sands at her feet, nor the startled eagerness of her dark eyes, nor the scarlet hibiscus blossoms she had set in her long braids.

Heretofore—for was there not the girl at home—the women of the tribe had meant nothing to him. What might have happened had not Lamaiia immediately marked him for her man it is hard to say.

Her method of attack was the only one which her little world understood, an insistent, bewilderingly frank appeal to sex, by all the arts in which the maidens of her race are carefully instructed from early girlhood.

The girl's beauty was of a kind that did no outrage to his most delicate sensibilities; her features were of the unblended Caucasian type occasionally found among the Polynesians; her eyes, shadowy but lustrous, were full of strange, alluring fires; her lips, sweetly sensitive, though full; her supple young body—the color of pale ivory, firm and satin smooth with much lomi-lomi—was fragrantly clean as a dewey flower, as soft as a cloud, and charged with a sweet madness.

A strangely troubling creature was Lamaiia, who knew passionately what she wanted and cunningly how to get it.

AFTER that evening it was inevitable and very sweet. As evidence of good faith the American permitted her kinsmen to prick upon his brow the emblem of their secret lodge, and submitted to the blood transfusion which cemented the brotherhood.

He regarded the tattooing as a final surrender to his fate. There could be no return now. From some strange inhibition which he did not attempt to analyze, however, he never afterward looked at his own reflection in the water.

There followed months in which he forgot everything but the sunshine and shadow of the tropical days and nights, the glancing of the surf, and Lamaiia. To the girl their relation was the natural culmination of life—the enslaving of the chosen male.

She wove her witchery as one accomplishing her destiny. To the man she was alternately a kindling flame and a narcotic. He yielded—for a time—utterly to the madness that was in her spell.

Yet later, when the first intoxication of the new sweet relationship had worn off and he woke daily to the realization that to break the monotony of the eternal sunshine there could come only the shadow; that day after day must be alike—just the hissing of the breakers and Lamaiia—then he found rising within him the old familiar restlessness.

He was like a man awakening from a long dream to the recognition of hunger and needs to which he had for a time been oblivious. As the long drowsy days merged one after another into long, sleepless nights, his active mind began to crave again the stimulus of the problems, the busy, exacting existence to which it had been accustomed. He faced a growing uneasiness that would not be lulled to sleep. Thwarted, it turned on him and became a gnawing fury. One day a silver sail flitted for hours along the horizon like a tantalizing fairy thing. As long as it was in sight the American lay upon the sand, his chin upon his arms, his eyes never leaving it.

Lamaiia crouched beside him, sometimes putting out a fearful hand to touch his unresponsive arm. That night he did not sleep.

Then one day there washed ashore among other wreckage—perhaps from the very ship he had sighted—some papers and magazines, probably from the locker of one of the ship's officers. As he read he felt rising within him an agony of homesickness.

There was a photograph of his own college campus. The picture of an English nurse, bravely sweet and fine, had the gallant eyes of the girl at home. But the acid touch was applied to his quivering nerves by a brief article which dealt with achievements and successes in his own particular field.

Other men doing the work he had been born to do, achieving triumphs which should have been his, for which he had paved the way. Each new page helped to swell to full tide that cruel restlessness which reminded him that he was Anglo-

Saxon. Yet he was bound here for life, as truly an exile from his own kind—by virtue of the brand on his forehead—as if he were a leper.

In his despair he overlooked for several days an insignificant paragraph tucked away in an obscure corner of one magazine. When he did find it he read it with unbelieving eyes.

It was a brief discussion of the history and significance of tattooing, with a hint that French surgeons, by an operation which involved the treatment of each individual needle prick, were finding the most complicated designs entirely eradicable.

When in a month Journeaux's suddenly anchored one night just outside the lagoon, the climax came.

Journeaux wanted very much to accompany the American to Paris and await there the outcome of the operation but received no encouragement to do so.

* * *

"Frankly," said the Frenchman, at the conclusion of his story, "I was not convinced that the end had come yet. I had seen before these reconversions to civilization; I awaited the real dénounement. What do you think?" He turned to face Miss Talbert.

She met his gaze with a troubled smile.

"I am thinking of course, of the girl," she said.

"Ah, you are sympathetic. You cannot forget the girl of the atolls, waiting for her man?"

She shivered a little, daintily, her deep eyes on the horizon.

Denton interrupted.

"It appears to me," he said didactically, "a question of what he owes the other girl. As I understand these islanders, they have no standards of right and wrong which he could have outraged. But the girl at home he has struck at the very foundations of her world—moral integrity. You agree, Miss Talbert?"

The dimple at the corner of her lips tolerated his suggestion.

"Oh, but much worse than that," she said disdainfully; "he has outraged her sense of dignities. If she ever knows, she will think of him ever after as the grossly primitive thing he must have been with that—brand on his forehead."

Jorneaux and I stood near her as we docked at Honolulu next day. When her eyes fell upon the tall, keen-eyed chap who stood so gallantly erect as he waved his hat to her, she responded only with a smart little salute and a dimpling at the corners of her mouth; but the expression of her eyes was a cry of joy.

IT WAS then that my arms was caught in a grip that was excruciating. Turning, I saw Jorneaux's face, white as paper, as he murmured something unintelligible and vanished into the cabin.

Supposing him to be ill I followed, but he had disappeared among the crowd. Eventually I went ashore alone.

I met young Salisbury that night on the beach. The visit of a congressional committee to the island had been made the occasion for a luau, or native feast, to which some of us had been fortunate enough to receive invitations. Jorneaux secured me mine.

He sought me out at the hotel he had recommended with some inconsequential excuse for his disappearance in the morning, and placed his time very much at my disposal, with the hospitable air of giving me the key to a favorite city. I was beginning, in spite of myself, to find his serene, good-fellowship irresistible.

The luau staged at the beach. Among the palms, hung with primitive native lamps, strolled amply-proportioned kanakas, noisy and care-free as children, in American clothes—their one barbaric touch the fragrant wreaths of many colors about their necks and hats.

Canoes, manned by bare, glistening dark forms, shot toward us in the trail of moonlight on the crest of the breakers. Throned in the doorway of an improvised grass hut, a withered crone, her quavering voice supported by the music of native instruments, intoned in an endless chant the glories and deeds of Kamehameha the Great.

It was among the reverent crowd of natives surrounding her that Journeaux and I came upon Miss Talbert and Salisbury. Almost immediately she saw us and quirked an imperative forefinger.

"Roger," she cried, "I want you to

meet two of the most entertaining men in the world. Monsieur Journeaux has been—why, but where is Monsieur Jorneaux, Dr. Arnold? He was with you only a moment ago."

I was wondering myself, but I answered, "Dipping a finger in the social poi pot, perhaps, or renewing his acquaintance with deposed royalty. You know Jorneaux is the little brother of all the world."

"Isn't he?" she laughed. "Indeed, Roger, you must meet him, too. He is a most informing person. He's been everywhere, even to those out-of-the-way corners of the earth where you used to lose youself for months at a time."

Salisbury's acknowledgment of the introduction struck me as distinctly curt. Almost immediately he turned away with a tightening of the fine muscles of his handsome, slightly arrogant face, and a weary, almost nervous gesture across his brow.

Feeling myself distinctly unwelcome, I was about to withdraw, with a murmured banality, when Miss Talbert's attention was distracted by a spectacle which, descending from the distant cliffs, approached along the edge of the breakers. A score of rude torches, flaming redly, revealed glimpses of long gleaming spears, their tips catching and reflecting the ruddy glare.

As the procession neared we distinguished a line of lithe brown bodies, apparently naked in the moonlight, which strode toward the white line of the surf. Of the barbaric primitiveness of the spectacle, naked savages, threatening spears, flaming torches, words can give little suggestion.

The girl gazed, delighted. But my attention was almost immediately diverted from her by the extraordinary effect of the scene upon the man at her side. He stood for an instant as if unbelieving; then closing his eyes, he again passed his hand across his brow, slowly almost violently, as if he would forcibly erase from his mental vision the thing he had seen.

Almost immediately he turned to us, laughing a little uncertainly.

"Fishing with spears," he said in answer to the girl's eager questions; "the primitive native way. Never happened to see it done here before." Then as the eagerly absorbed girl did not reply, he turned casually to me.

"Your friend's name is—" he hesitated.

"Jorneaux," I replied, adding, "hardly a friend; a ship acquaintance, but a most interesting chap."

"So I gather. A short of scholar adventurer, you say?"

"A sort of itinerant interrogation point; although I do not remember having said so before."

"I say," abruptly he turned to the girl, "are you still keen about this?" He waved a disparaging hand. "There's dancing at the hotel, you know. Mrs. Sartin will be waiting for you there; and you'll like that, too, you know."

"Better than this? Have all the headliners appeared yet" she persisted.

"There's still to be a hula, carefully expurgated of all that makes it a hula, I believe, but—"

"Oh, well, I suppose we've seen the best," she turned a little lingeringly, I thought. "Let's go, then, before something imperfect spoils it all."

With unconcealed relief he took her arm and guided her deftly through the crowd.

WHEN AT last I found Jorneaux, laughing and talking with a group of wreath-crowned Hawaiians, he did not, at first refer by way of apology or explanation to his abrupt desertion of me on the beach.

"You missed meeting the bridegroom," I told him boastfully. Then as he did not answer, I impulsively added something unjustified by our brief acquaintance, "I believe you're deliberately avoiding Miss Talbert; and you seemed rather attracted on the China."

"I was," admitted Jorneaux placidly, "and I am. But not for the reason you imagine. Arnold," he went on, and his expressive voice was poignant with regret, "I'm placed in the peculiar position of being about to have satisfied that most inordinate of my appetites— my curiosity —and not liking it."

We were strolling aimlessly, as we walked, along the warm sand toward the hotel, at our left the wraithlike sigh and flutter of the light surf, at our right the wavering line of little lights.

"I am trying in my stupid way," Jorneaux went on, "to avoid being an instrument of faith in a chain of events in which I have already played a regrettable part."

I stared, I suppose.

"Flatly, it would be much better that Salisbury and I did not meet in Miss Talbert's presence."

"You know Salisbury, then."

"I knew him under circumstances which he must, just now, be very anxious to forget. I wish with all my heart he might."

Suddenly, I don't know why, the explanation of all that had been baffling in Jorneaux's behavior sprang, full-born, into being.

"You can't mean that it was Salisbury—" I began.

"Who swam naked out to our yacht through the surf of the Marquesas that balmy night? Ah, but most unfortunately, that is just what I do mean."

I reflected, appalled.

"And you think Miss Talbert should know?"

"That is a question which I prefer not to be compelled to decide. But I think," he added, "that somehow, sooner or later, Miss Talbert is going to know."

"That girl—and a thing like this!" I murmured aghast as we turned up the walk that led to the softly lighted Hotel Lanaii.

"Exactly," returned Jorneaux softly. "Put her in the equation and it immediately becomes, as she herself suggests, not a question of right and wrong, but of something infinitely worse—the primitive grotesqueness of the thing, an outrage to her dignity and her sense of honor."

We took our position in a shadowed corner of the Lanaii, where we could command a view of the lighted rooms beyond. About us were groups of pretty girls, pale but vivacious, as is the way of the island with white women, and fresh-cheeked young naval officers, in the natty white of tropical dress uniform.

I was watching with great interest the native orchestra, whose spontaneous gayety seemed to be infecting the most dignified of the dancers. They had been intermittently singing in their own tongue as they played. I noticed that many of the male dancers seemed vastly diverted by the songs.

"They improvise verses about some of the most conspicuous of the dancers and sing them as they play," explained Jorneaux. "Luckily for the dignity of some of our prominent social lights, very few of them can understand." It was an amusing trait of this cosmopolitan that he spoke of each city like a native son.

AS WE lounged there outside the doorway, Salisbury and Miss Talbert, evidently tired of dancing, left the floor and took their places at an open window in a corner near us. A great mass of flaming bougainvillea made of the corner a gorgeous bower, beyond which the square of night, framed by the window, was unnaturally black.

Against this vivid background the young man, I noticed, showed pale and jaded; but he was laughing with an exaggerated hilarity, in which the girl joined somewhat uncertainly, her eyes puzzled and a little wistful.

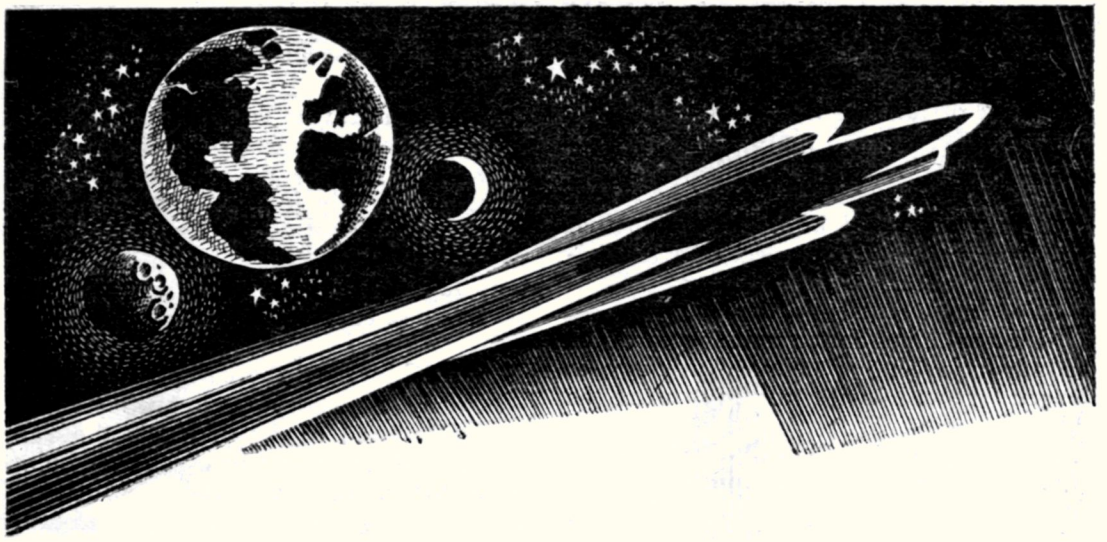
While I watched shameless, the music of the orchestra was gradually muted to a melodious whisper, through which the heavy black stillness of the palm-shaded garden outside became for an instant almost unpleasantly obstructive. For an instant only, however.

My first premonition of the thing that happened came through a consciousness that several of the dancers had suddenly hesitated with raised heads averted eyes, lost step, and then moved uncertainly to the side lines.

Gradulally it got home to others in the hall. I saw a group of the older officers who were lounging among the palms of the lighted Lanaii just outside the door suddenly, straighten and begin to listen attentively, exchanging startled guarded looks. I was only too conscious of it now—a throbbing murmur, at first blending with the plaintive strains of the orchestra like a tragic overtone, then swelling into a high full-throated ululation, piercingly shrill, and freighted with a primitive agony.

I have never heard anything like the quivering heartbreak of the sound. Most of us were listening now, motionless, as if

(Please continue on page 129)



RACKETEERS IN THE SKY

STARTLING NOVELETTE OF AN INTERPLANETARY ATTACK

By Jack Williamson

CHAPTER 1

The Moon of Health

DR. BULL was swimming in his private pool, on Taurus, when the space attacker was discovered. The crystal-walled pool, on the doctor's infinitesimal, independent planetoid, was proportionately as big as a respectable sea.

Dr. Bull was a stout little man, with a smooth pink globe of a head. He had a clean professional white beard, merry blue eyes, and a considerable paunch. Soft pink flesh bulged out above his swimming trunks—which were embroidered with

The telescope could be innocently pointed at any approaching space craft. . . .

gold. Doctor Bull. Altogether, he suggested an incongruously aged and weighty cupid.

Under the sky's depthless inky blue, ruby tiles and gold rails glittered luxuriously. The white sun struck with invigorating force through the thin, cool synthetic atmosphere. A graviscreen under the pool halved the force of the gravity generators at the tiny moon's core, so that one swam with an exhilarating and luxurious ease.

Oblivious of the shadow of menace approaching, Dr. Bull was floating on the warm bright water, watching his companion in the pool. She was a svelte blond nurse, in a green bathing suit. At forty-seven, Dr. Bull still possessed an acute appreciation, and Vera Frame was worthy of it.

The sun glinted on her limbs as she dove. She came up, and made a playful splash. But a mellow gong had chimed over the pool, and the little doctor's eyes went to a hooded telescreen above the water. The nurse looked over his shoulder —wondering a little at his continued interest in a telecast that had been repeated, with minor variations, every hour on the hour for thirteen years.

The dark screen lit with the red outline of an extremely masculine bull, branded with the zodiacal sign. That faded into the neatly bearded face of Dr. Bull himself, telecast from a prepared sound film.

"Hello, all the planets!"

The little doctor's canned voice was brisk and friendly. Above the starched looking white beard, his blue eyes twinkled confidently through gold-rimmed glasses. (He didn't really need the glasses, but they lent an air. The beard was important, too. In the old days, before he could grow his own, he had used a false Van Dyke to launch the original Dr. Bull's Interplanetary Carnival, Clinic, and Medicine Show.)

The image smiled on the screen, with professional cheer. "This is Dr. Bull, the Planeteer, bringing you good news and good health over TAU, the most powerful telecast station in the system—good news of how Taurium and my radiogenic reactivation treatment can bring good health to you."

The telecast power of TAU, indeed, was calculated to penetrate the ionosphere of every planet. Patrol spacemen and ICC officials raged at its roaring, image-blurring interference. But meteor miners and remote colonists depended on it for news of the system, and came to regard Dr. Bull as a crusading saint. Any inhabitants of the hypothetical worlds of the nearer stars were doubtless becoming familiar with the astounding curative powers of Taurium and the radiogenic reactivation treatment.

Dr. Bull was in very bad standing with the Interplanetary Medical Association.

THE IMA, claimed that Taurium was common mud, manufactured from plain water and the blue clay of Taurus—and now largely adulterated with clay from Earth, since the extraordinary demand had threatened to use up the entire little planet. Outraged and impotent officials of the Interplanetary Communications Commission made unkind puns on his name. He had been forbidden to practice medicine or operate a telecast transmitter anywhere within the jurisdiction of the Solar League.

But—

The pink little man floating contentedly beside the feline nurse was the only physician in the system—if, in defiance of the baffled IMA, you agreed that he was a physician—who was also undisputed dictator of a sovereign planet.

TAURUS once had been a dead and useless rock. Exiled from the League, by the combined wrath of the IMA, the ICC, and Sun Patrol, Dr. Bull had spent hundreds of millions, to convert the bleak asteroid into "the moon of health." In a shaft drilled to the little world's heart,

planetary engineers installed gravity equipment and geodesic drive.

After Dr. Bull had pulled sufficient strings to insure the continued independence of Taurus, they had steered it into a new orbit, as Earth's inner moon. Now the naked stone was clothed with lawns and groves and gardens. Taurus glittered with expensive modernistic hospitals, clinics, hotels, casinos. Dr. Bull was always coining new descriptive slogans, for it. Jewel of Space. Hub of Fun. Wonder-moon.

To the relief of the handsome nurse, he touched a golden button on the wall of the pool, to shut off the telecast receiver. After a few thousand repetitions, even the most effective spiel loses novelty. Floating, with his eyes closed, Dr. Bull sighed contentedly. Softly, he murmured three words:

"Imagination. Audacity. Victory."

He was thinking back to the very beginning of his career—when he was just a six-dollar-a-week soda jerker, in a dusty small-town drug store, back on Earth, studying a mail-order course in dramatics, propped out of the view of his patrons behind the counter. Dramatics, he had decided, was more important than pharmaceutics.

Imagination. Audacity. Victory.

Those three words, he was thinking, were the key to his success. Maybe he could work them into the telecast. They had earned him just about everything that any man could want.

It was then that the bad news arrived, brought by a gaunt gray man in the silver uniform of the Planeteers—so Dr. Bull called the two hundred men who formed the military and police force of his private planet. General Berg burst furiously through the crystal door at the end of the pool, shouting:

"Oh, doctor!"

Dr. Bull lifted his pink round head out the water. His smooth face made an annoyed little frown against the Sun—which drove hard even through the filter-gases in the artificial atmosphere.

"Berg," he protested, "I was not to be disturbed. I left explicit instructions."

General Berg teetered on the ruby brink, desperately fought for his balance.

"A ship—" he gasped. "A ship coming!"

Taurus boasted a modern space-port, with docks ample to accommodate the largest interplanetary liners. Vessels arrived every day. They brought the millions of illiterately addressed orders for bottles of Taurium, the thousands of passengers that ranged from honeymooners to tottering oldsters seeking new youth through Dr. Bull's reactivation treatment.

"A ship," said Dr. Bull. "Another million dollars!"

General Berg recovered balance and breath. "A warship, sir," he amended stiffly. "It's a patrol cruiser, proceeding from the direction of Appenine Base. It is showing no lights, and refuses to acknowledge the signals from our forts. It

Pompous, round and rosy-faced, Dr. Bull was the King of Quacks

—a chiseling faker who had built a patent-medicine racket into a cosmic swindle—until death tapped him on the shoulder and he had a whole life to pay for.

has already entered our territorial space."

The continued independence of Taurus, in the face of the patrol's open hostility, was a major political riddle. But Dr. Bull, with the magical combination of Imagination, Audacity, Victory—plus millions, cannily spent—had made it a fact.

The Sun Patrol was bound by several interplanetary treaties to respect the territorial zone of Taurus, a sphere extending a hundred miles from the tiny moon's surface.

Dr. Bull's head abruptly went under the water, and came up looking more red than pink. He splashed furiously with his hands—half-gravity had awkward consequences, when one forgot oneself. Sputtering, he gasped:

"They can't do that!"

The glassy-eyed officer said: "They have done it. The men in the forts are uneasy. And panic is spreading in the hotels and hospitals—some rumor has got out. The telephones are swamped with questions."

Dr. Bull surged out of the pool. "Signal them again," he snapped. "If they don't answer, open fire."

Taurus was not undefended. Since the daring raid of the pirate, Iron Scarr, ten years ago—when the patrol had refused its aid until after Taurus had been looted—Dr. Bull had spent millions to build two massive forts, at the little world's poles. Their twenty-four-inch rifles were capable of dropping shells on Earth itself.

Berg gulped apprehensively. "Our range-finders have identified the cruiser, sir. It's the Valiant."

DR. BULL turned a little pale. Coming from over the graviscreen, he staggered violently to the full attraction of the generators, and caught himself against the crystal wall. He stared at Berg, dripping and gasping.

For the Valiant was the newest and mightiest cruiser of the patrol—built in direct answer to the threat of Dr. Bull's two forts. Her rifles were also twenty-four-inch. The two thousand feet of her armored length exactly equalled the diameter of Taurus. She was invincible and invulnerable.

Dr. Bull's trepidation lasted but a moment, however. "Get back to your post. Prepare the forts for action." He shook water out of his beard. "I'll order Carstairs to cancel all departures from the port. Mustn't let the suckers be scared away. I'm going to speak to the Valiant, on my own telebeam."

General Berg saluted and departed.

The situation appeared extremely alarming to Vera Frame. But she admitted that Dr. Bull—whether she considered him as physician, actor, statesman, or warrior—was a very remarkable man. She regarded him with the confidence of love.

In the steamy luxury of the glass-and-chromium bathhouse, Dr. Bull took a quick hot and cold shower, and slipped into the scarlet-and-silver of the Captain-General of the Planeteers. He refused to be thrown into a panic, but he was alarmed.

He couldn't understand the menacing approach of the Valiant.

The IMA and the ICC, true, were yammering for his scalp—but they had yammered in vain for thirteen years. The patrol had been alarmed by the construction of his two powerful forts, covering in their theoretical range both Earth and the impregnable patrol base on the summits of the Moons Appenines. But Dr. Bull, with his fountain of millions, had deftly developed and exploited the venality existing in the patrol.

"If Batson has crossed me," he muttered, "I'll raise a stench with TAU that will smoke him out of the base like a rat out of a hole." Batson was commander of the Appenine Base, and virtually a silent partner in Dr. Bull's far-flung enterprises.

Out in the open again, striding along a palm-shaded walk toward the graceful white tower that housed the studios and main transmitter of TAU, Dr. Bull shivered with sudden realization of the vulnerability of Taurus.

The sky was almost black. Beneath it, everything was bright. Fountains glittered with the Sun. Sprays on the lawns made rainbows. Green leaves were luminous. Colored glass made the buildings into monster jewels. But the midnight sky was suddenly dead and oppressive. Dr. Bull had an unpleasant sense of the nearness of the cold forbidding mystery of space.

The Valiant was armored against twenty-four-inch shells. But the hospitals and hotels and casinos, the gardens and shops and warehouses, the power and atmosphere plants, TAU and the laboratories and the huge mail-order building and Dr. Bull's several luxurious dwellings—these were protected only by a few thousand feet of gasious oxygen and helium.

Resolutely murmuring, "Imagination. Audacity. Victory," he squared his plump shoulders again, in the natty uniform, and strode briskly into the telecast tower. He paused for a moment to look up at the huge telecast receiver screen at the end of the first floor hall.

For he found new courage there.

Out of a montage of colliding planets, embattled space-craft, tremendous weird machines, and extra-terrestrial monsters, Dr. Bull's own face grinned from the screen. The beard was dyed a youthful black, and a space-helmet had replaced the glasses. An ion-gun rose in his heroic hand, flamed straight from the screen.

The announcer was saying:

"This is TAU, Dr. Bull's own independent station, on Taurus, the hub of health. Now we present—through the courtesy of Taurium and Dr. Bull's radiogenic reactivation treatment—your thrilling serial of interstellar adventure—Captain Planeteer. This favorite character, played by Dr. Bull himself, is based on the true facts of his own youthful adventures, in the days when he was an interplanetary exile, hunted from planet to planet by his jealous persecutors, the IMA, the ICC, and the Sun Patrol—"

Dr. Bull lifted his white-bearded chin. Captain Planeteer, in the serial, never admitted defeat. That was the spirit. Imagination, Audacity, Victory. He hurried into the private automatic elevator that whipped him up to his luxurious penhouse on top of the telecast tower.

CHAPTER 2

Betrayed!

PLATINUM and enamel shimmered richly. The terrace garden was bright and fragrant with blooms from several planets. Looking up at the black hostile sky, Dr. Bull shivered again. Here on Taurus he had made the dream of this life come true—but one salvo from the Valiant could shatter it like a bubble.

The white dome of his observatory gleamed above the garden. Already panting and perspiring, he stumbled into it, and seated himself at the long thirty-inch refractor.

He picked up a telephone, and called General Berg. There was a little delay, and a harried operator told him that a panic among the guests had jammed the system. At last Berg's voice, sounding breathless and worried, gave the Valiant's position.

He found it. A sleek black shadow against the silvered black of space, sliding down toward Taurus in a menacing spiral. Even at the lowest magnification, it looked huge. The details of the turrets, with jutting rifles and rocket-torpedo tubes, were alarmingly visible.

His knees were wobbling, as he hurried down to the tight-beam communicator in

his penthouse office below the silver dome. He sat down in front of the screen between the staring iconoscope lenses. An engineer's crisp voice told him that the private telebeam was tuned on the cruiser's communicator.

"Hello, Patrol-cruiser Valiant." He tried to swallow the shaky rasp in his throat. "Dr. Bull of Taurus, calling Patrol-cruiser—

The prompt reply startled him:

"Hello, Bull." The voice sounded insolent and amused. "I've been waiting for you. Tune your screen to Code N-89."

With trembling fingers, Dr. Bull depressed a series of keys on the console. His small eyes blinked at the suddenly illuminated screen. The face he saw there didn't belong to any patrol officer. But he knew the massive forehead, the sullen lips, the high cheeks, the close-set, piercing eyes.

"Scarr!" he gasped.

The seamed, ray-blackened visage was grinning at him. "Yes, Bull, it's Iron Scarr." The pirate appeared to enjoy Bull's stunned bewilderment. "We've come up together, you and I. You peddled bottles of dirty water, and I cut throats in the meteor miner's dives—and your lies, Bull, probably killed more men than my ion-gun ever did.

"We came up together, Bull—and our games are still the same. Now you can hypnotize all the system with TAU, but still you peddle mud and water. I still kill men honestly, for what I want. But now, I'm looting planets."

Dr. Bull gulped again, and tried to stop the trembling of his white beard.

"You won't loot Taurus—not this time, Scarr." His voice was hoarse and desperate. "I've got a new safe, down at the core of Taurus, that even you can't open. I've got most of my valuables cached safely—elsewhere. And I've got two new forts, strong enough to fight off the Valiant."

Scarr flung back his iron-gray, close-cropped head. His mouth opened cavernously, and his laughter thundered from the screen.

"It isn't Taurus, Bull." The violence of laughter and voice were overdone, Dr. Bull thought uneasily. "I've come up, along with you. I have come merely to offer you an extraordinary opportunity. I need you for an ally to help me conquer and loot the Earth!"

Dr. Bull's mouth fell open. "Scarr, you're insane," he said in a dry faint whisper.

The pirate grinned. "Other great conquerors have been called crazy. I know, because once, when I lay for twelve years in a patrol prison, I devoted myself to a study of Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, the Red Nemesis, and the rest. I know how they succeeded, so far as they did, and why they failed. I have simply perfected a technique that has been three thousand years in development.

"The problems are not essentially different from those met in taking and looting a ship. The technique is necessarily more elaborate, but the reward is proportion. There's no call, Bull, for your outraged stare. Not when you've been looting the whole system, in your own way."

On the screen, Scarr leaned forward.

"I need you, Bull." His voice was swift and persuasive. "The first principle of attack is to secure communications, and TAU is the most effective instrument of communication in the system. Time is vital. I'm going to explain in a few words what I have done, and what remains to be done to make me master of Earth. When you understand, you'll join me gladly."

Dr. Bull's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"CONQUEST by my technique, requires money, men, weapons, military skill, carefully planned fifth column cooperations, timing for surprise, scien-

tific propaganda, and a deliberately ruthless leadership."

Dr. Bull's pink head nodded. Perhaps there was no danger to Taurus, after all. His breathing became easier. He was able to appreciate the cool application of intelligence to the solution of unusual problems.

"Money." The pirate began checking items, on his blunt scarred fingers. "You yourself, Bull, contributed nearly two hundred million dollars." Dr. Bull winced, in memory of the raid; his eyes narrowed again. "The officials of the Moon Syndicate—a reactionary group, afraid of the liberal labor movement—put up a billion more.

"Men." Scarr tapped another hairy finger. "I had my crew, and contacts with various groups—drug runners, labor racketeers, organizers of various disaffected elements. I formed them into a disciplined secret party, the Iron Watch."

Scarr touched an emblem on his coat: a snake twined about the arms of an inverted Maltese cross.

"Weapons," he went on. "I employed research men. They developed a peculiarly virulent strain of the Mercurian lightning death—and a perfect antitoxin for it." Scarr grinned unpleasantly. "You, as a physician, are doubtless familiar with the lightning death."

Dr. Bull's rosy face had turned pale, and he tried to stop his teeth from chattering. The lightning death was the frightful disease that had denied the mineral riches of the hot planet to all save the one man in thousands who possessed a natural immunity to the virus—the fortunate few who showed a negative reaction to killed cultures could demand fabulous wages from Mercury Mines, Inc.

The preliminary symptoms were curiously slight—often no more than a mild headache. But death, invariably following exposure by six to twenty hours, caused by acute encephalitis, was as frightfully sudden as it was certain. Medicine had found no cure. Ships leaving Mercury were elaborately sterilized, returning employees of the mining company held in a long quarantine.

Dr. Bull began to feel that Scarr was going to be an extremely unpleasant ally.

"A peculiarly efficient weapon for breaking morale," commented the grinning pirate. "Because the victims seldom reveal themselves, and they can't be identified. Every man suspects that every other will kill him with a touch.

"That weapon, of course," he added, "is in addition to the guns at the Appenine Base, those of the Valiant, your own batteries on Taurus, and the armament in various Patrol arsenals on Earth—but I'm getting ahead of myself."

Dr. Bull swayed in the little seat before the staring iconoscopes. He watched the screen, with wide and glassy eyes.

"There's no need to complete the catalog," Scarr told him. "But your old friend Batson is supplying the military skill—when a man is for sale, Bull, the best offer takes him."

Dr. Bull rubbed his eyes. "Batson?" he whispered. "Commander Batson?" In his mind he saw the Appenine Base. The barracks and magazines hewn deep into the Moon. The concealed observatories and range-finders. The armored elevator-turrets, with their great torpedo tubes and the biggest rifles ever forged. "Batson didn't give up the base?"

"The base, and the Valiant, too. The members of the Iron Watch were immunized against the lightning death. When the Valiant had landed for supplies, we released the virus through the ventilators of both the ship and the fort. Most of the men died in their sleep. Batson's men, with reënforcements that I marched through a secret tunnel from the Syndicate mines, took care of the rest."

The impact of Scarr's eyes was suddenly terrible.

"We had three prime objectives, Bull." His voice was restrained and hard. "The base. The Valiant. You can guess the third?"

Speechless, Dr. Bull nodded.

"Taurus is vital to our plan," the pirate told him. "First, because of its strategic military importance, with your guns commanding the Moon and the Earth and passage between them. But the vital item is TAU.

"The main transmitters at the base and aboard were sabotaged before we could take them. Control of TAU is essential, to coördinate our several secret organizations on Earth, and for the broadcast of scientific propaganda to check resistance on Earth and prevent any hostile action from the other planets."

Scarr's grin was ferocious.

"You understand, therefore, that I've got to have Taurus—intact!"

Dr. Bull's round face was pale, but his eyes had a calculating glint.

He asked shrewdly: "What's in it for me?"

"Your life," the pirate told him. "So long as you are useful to me. I won't fail, Bull. The Iron Watch is everywhere. Nearly ten thousand important men will be seized, shot, or bombed, when I give the order over TAU." His clenched fist rose, in an alarming salute. "If you aren't with me—"

"I'M AGAINST you." Dr. Bull nodded uneasily, and licked his pale lips. "Taurus is mine, Scarr. I've fought the IMA and the ICC and the patrol, for it. If"—he gulped noisily—"if that's your best offer—I'll fight you, too."

The pirate grinned. "You can't fight. I'll give you thirty seconds."

"I don't need thirty seconds." Dr. Bull stood up before the iconoscopes, trembling in the bright uniform. "If you aren't moving out of my territorial space in thirty seconds, my forts will open fire."

Grinning, unalarmed, Scarr's face faded from the screen.

Dr. Bull snatched up a telephone, called his commander. "Berg!" His voice was cracked and breathless. "The Valiant is in the hands of pirates. Open fire with all your guns."

"Yes, Dr. Bull."

But the commander's voice sounded flat and strained. Dr. Bull suddenly wondered if the Iron Watch had organized men on Taurus also—agents could have come, among the flood of visitors; some of the officers had always spent too much in the casinos.

Apprehensively, Dr. Bull picked up the telephone again. It was dead. He dropped it, listening for the great guns. All the planetoid would tremble to their stunning recoil. But they failed to fire.

He hurried back to the telescope, found the Valiant again. Sliding down against the stars, it was so huge that a small part of it filled the field of the instrument. Dr. Bull stared in cold fascination at the ominous details of a jutting turret.

Still the forts didn't fire.

Dr. Bull snatched up another telephone. He shouted into it, cursed, screamed. No response. He remembered that Scarr's first principle of attack was to secure communications. Cold fear trickled down his spine.

He snapped on a convenient telescreen. That was all right. The armored worldship of the Planeteer careered across the screen. The black-bearded hero leveled his trusty ion-guns against the traitorous IMA officials and their unholy allies, the octopusmen from the invading comet.

The film was still running, and TAU was intact—because Scarr wanted it intact. But the studio and transmitter were already isolated from the rest of Taurus. And, for all Dr. Bull knew, there might be members of the Iron Watch among the engineers or the actors and musicians in the tower itself—suddenly he regretted

that his employees had not been a little more generously paid.

Increasingly agitated, Dr. Bull ran out into the terrace garden. The westering Sun struck with the same cool brightness from the purple-black sky, yet it seemed to the trembling little doctor that a deadly night had already fallen. He peered up into the blackness, but his naked eye could not find the Valiant.

He shrank from a fragrant breath that passed his face. The very air might already be poisoned, for all he knew, with the invisible virus of the lightning death. Even Vera Frame might have been a carrier—few victims of the insidious disease ever admitted or even realized its attack, before death struck.

Taurus supported almost the largest and certainly the most profitable hospital in the system. Above the green bright convexity of the gardens, Dr. Bull could see the white spires rising. He shivered. In a few hours the staff and the patients might all be dead—all save the immunized members of the Iron Watch.

Dr. Bull mopped at his pink forehead. Other disasters were equally possible. A single freak shot from the Valiant, or one act of sabotage by a trusted engineer, could stop the gravity generators—let air and all movables whiff outward in an instant puff of doom.

CHAPTER 3

The Attack

THE cool windless air shuddered to a heavy detonation. For one relieved instant, Dr. Bull thought that at last the forts had opened fire. In a moment, however, he realized that the explosion was in the direction of the space-port.

Apprehensively, he peered eastward across the green bulge of the golf links—Taurus had the most interesting links in the system, as TAU often informed possible visitors, because every drive carried beyond the horizon.

No more than a thousand feet away, the space-port was out of sight, below the curve. Dr. Bull could see nothing unusual. But the tiny planet quivered to a second blast. Probably, he thought, a rocket-shell, An auto-rifle chattered briefly. He heard the ominous purr of a demobilizer pelletgun. Hoarse strained voices echoed faintly.

Open fighting, at the port!

Dr. Bull retreated nervously from the parapet that surrounded the roof, and tried to guess what had happened. The port was guarded by the Special Planeteers, a company of forty men, picked to impress visitors with their physiques and discipline. The Iron Watch must have tried to seize the port—striking, again, at communications.

But the Special Planeteers were fighting back!

Dr. Bull ran back into his penthouse office, and tried to call the port. The instrument was still dead. The Iron Watch, he supposed, had already seized the telephone office.

Aimlessly frantic, he ran back out on the terrace. The rattle of shots was nearer. In a moment he saw men coming into view, along the near horizon. He made out the silver and green of the Special Planeteers.

That was lean young Lieutenant Carstairs, commanding the retreat, taking skillful advantage of clumps of vegetation, the hazards of the golf course, and the very curve of Taurus. Dr. Bull tried to count the men with him. They seemed alarmingly few.

Brrram!

A Planeteer with an auto-rifle had climbed to the tip of a mossy projection of the stony core of Taurus, to cover the withdrawal of his comrades. The miniature peak dissolved into dust, from the

blast of another titanic-loaded rocket shell.

The violent detonation jarred the roof, made Dr. Bull bite his tongue. His hands were shaking, and he felt ill. His own exposed position terrified him, but he had to see what was going on. He dropped on his knees, peered through the red blades of the potted Martian bayonet lilies.

Beyond the ragged shell-crater, he saw the rocket squad. Two crouched men running with their deadly bright projectiles. Another with the flimsy-looking firing scaffold. The corporal silently gesturing. They wore the plain silver of the fortress garrisons. Traitors!

They stopped on a green, swiftly mounted and loaded the tripod.

Dr. Bull wanted to stand up and scream a warning to Carstairs. But fear chained him, until the intense blue needle of an iron-beam stabbed from the edge of a sand trap. The shattering, deafening explosion left a black pit where the green had been. Nothing was left of the rocket squad.

The ion-gunner checked the pursuit. Carstairs, with a little group of men, came running along the walk from green number one. He left a rifleman in a clump of flaming hibiscus. Dr. Bull stumbled into the elevator, dropped to meet him at the tower's entrance.

"Treason, sir," the lean young officer answered Dr. Bull's voiceless question. He was muddy and panting, and red showed through a torn silver sleeve. "General Berg tried to arrest me and disarm the Special Planeteers. Before we smelled a rat, he had the port surrounded. And eleven of the Specials held the arsenal and the control tower. Berg tried to buy us. Nothing to do but fight our way out, sir. Lost sixteen, sir. That leaves thirteen men, fit for duty. Your orders, sir?"

Dr. Bull swallowed and caught his breath.

"Good work, Lieutenant," he said hoarsely. "We'll hold the tower. I don't think they'll shell it, because they want TAU intact. It was planned for defense. The windows are lamanite. Steel shutters, with gun ports. An arsenal in the basement—here's the key."

Dr. Bull dropped the key. Carstairs picked it up, with steady, red-dripping fingers.

"Very good, sir. I'll put men at the windows, and on the roof."

Muddy, breathless men came in by twos and threes. One had a shoulder wound. Another limped. The thirteenth never came. Dr. Bull returned to the roof with Carstairs and four riflemen. The officer walked out to station his men on the parapeted terrace.

"They'll have us surrounded." he warned. "Keep your heads down, and shoot anything that moves. We can hold them off until—"

Dr. Bull heard the thin whine of a bullet, and the young lieutenant dropped beside the scarlet lilies. The hole in his forehead seemed very small, but it took no professional skill to tell that he was dead.

Stunned, Dr. Bull peered stupidly after the diminishing hum—probably the bullet still exceeded the planetoid's velocity of escape; it would fly on, forever, across the black gulf of space.

He was sick and lonely. He had depended on the loyal, fearless efficiency of Carstairs. The loss left him staggered, helpless. In that moment, he realized the utter ruthlessness of the Iron Watch, the full desperation of the situation.

"Keep your heads down." In a dull stupid voice, he repeated the dead man's words. "Shoot anything that moves. We can hold them off, until—"

Until what? Suddenly Dr. Bull became aware of his own exposed position, and retreated toward the observatory dome. Until night fell, perhaps, and the enemy assaulted by darkness? Until another

traitor struck? Until the Valiant landed, with her thousands of the Iron Watch? Or until—

Dr. Bull refused to think of that most ghastly possibility.

STARING with unseeing eyes at the dead man, he suddenly remembered his scarlet-and-silver. The full burden was on him, now. His plump shoulders squared manfully to bear it.

"Take your places," he told the riflemen. "Watch the hospital—your lieutenant was shot from there. Hold out, men. TAU is the key to the whole situation. Defending it, you are defending your jobs and your homes and your families, Taurus and Earth, everything that matters."

Two men with auto-rifles began sniping at the hospital windows. Dr. Bull brought a rug out of his office and spread it over Carstairs. He tried not to flinch when a bullet sang by his ear. Fighting courage was good, but only a fool took needless risks. The Audacity of his slogan had never been physical.

Sweat made him clammy. His brain ran in aimless circles, like a trapped thing. It was already impossible to reach his yacht at the port—even if he had been willing to abandon the reward of a lifetime of Imagination, Audacity, and Victory. But the tower was a prison, as well as a citadel.

His pink hands came up, to fight off a smothering claustrophobia. That sense of buried isolation was broken, to his immense relief, by the sudden buzz of the telephone, back in his office.

"Dr. Bull?" It was General Berg. The formal courtesy in the flat rasping voice was infuriating. "I'm calling you, sir, by Commander Scarr's order."

"Damn Judas!" he gasped. "What do you want?"

"The commander is giving you an opportunity to surrender, sir. March your men out of the tower, unarmed. Leave the telecast equipment undamaged. Scarr will let you leave Taurus with your yacht, as many people as you want to take, and a million dollars."

Dr. Bull tried to swallow his anger. "Berg," he said hoarsely, "I'll make you another proposition. Go back to your duty. Open fire on the cruiser. And I'll give you and every man with you a million dollars a head—"

The flat voice cut in grimly: "What's your answer, sir?"

"Scarr will have it," the little doctor shouted, "inside of two minutes."

He slammed the telephone down violently. He was trembling, ill with fear. But Taurus was his private paradise. He couldn't give it up. Audacity, he breathed. Still he had a card to play.

Crouching out of view from the hospital, he climbed the steps to the observatory. His pulse was hammering. His fingers were numb and awkward, so that he could scarcely manipulate in controls. But he found the Valiant again, a black and deadly monster creeping down across the silver web of space.

His stiff fingers hastily slid open a concealed panel in the mount, to reveal another set of controls. For the instrument in the observatory was more than a telescope. The big lens and the oculars swung out of the way. Motors hummed quietly. A long thick cylinder of shining metal rose smoothly from under the floor, slipped into the empty tube.

If the Valiant had been the patrol's answer to Dr. Bull's twin forts, this was his secret answer to the Valiant. The telescope could be innocently pointed at any approaching space craft, but this cylinder was a torpedo.

A unique torpedo. It had cost as much as a warship. A robot-pilot steered it. The geodesic drive would give it velocity enough to evade any defense, to penetrate any armor. It was loaded with ten tons of titanite.

The finder telescopes, beside the big

tube, functioned as parts of an intricate calculating range-finder. Dr. Bull brought the tiny, divided image of the cruiser together. He centered the cross hairs over the power room of the Valiant—he had paid Batson a high price for her plans. He set and started the silent robot-pilot.

Now—

For a moment, however, with his finger trembling on the key, Dr. Bull hesitated. His throat was dry, and blood roared in his ears. There was still time to surrender.

His white-bearded jaw set stubbornly. This battle was to the death. Imagination, Audacity, Victory—

He punched the key.

CHAPTER 4

Disbelief

WITH a sigh of displaced air, the gleaming spindle was gone. Dr. Bull wet his lips, and watched the image of the target. He saw a tiny flash of incandescence, precisely where he had aimed. A second later, a jet of white flame mushroomed from the hole in that armored flank—evidence of the cataclysm within the vessel's bowels.

Dr. Bull lingered no longer. He flung himself out of the observatory, tumbled down the steps, rolled into the shelter of the farther parapet. Retaliation came before he had caught his breath.

A rocket-shell came bellowing from the hospital roof. The observatory erupted like a volcano. The impact of eight ounces of exploding titanite struck Dr. Bull, like the fall of a gigantic, obliterating hand.

. . . Then he was lying on the long desk in his office, under where the dome had been—plaster littered the floor, but the bomb-proof ceiling had held. He moved feebly, stifled a groan. Adhesive and bandage covered minor contusions. Something throbbed in his head, like the slow roll of a very muffled, distant drum.

He tried to smile, into the blond nurse's pale, frightened face. In her starched white, Vera Frame was still luscious. He wondered why she had risked her life to enter this beleaguered tower. Women always amazed him.

Wanly she answered his smile, whispering: "Imagination, doctor! Audacity—and Victory!"

Dr. Bull didn't hear. He was taking stock of the damage. No bones broken. He could move without much pain. The shell's concussion had simply knocked him out—the air-wave from a few pounds of titanite could be deadly as a falling mountain.

But that far-off drum boomed slowly.

Dr. Bull had devoted more effort to telecast dramatics, vaudeville mimicry, and psychological salesmanship, than he had to the actual science of medicine. The diplomas on the wall had been bought with endowments. But he could diagnose that drumming.

It was the Mercurian lightning death.

A blackness drowned him. His body felt numb and clammy, as if it were already dead. A terrible constriction of terror closed his throat. He couldn't swallow, couldn't speak, could hardly breathe.

The lightning death!

Perhaps the rocket-shell had been deliberately contaminated with the virus. Perhaps he had received it from some enemy within the tower—even from Vera Frame herself.

How it had come didn't matter. No medical skill could aid him. He had only a few hours to live. Probably there wouldn't be much pain, perhaps nothing more than the warning throb. But he was doomed.

Imagination, Audacity—

Vera's whisper sank at last into his stricken consciousness. It was too late for Victory. But he sat up shakily on the edge of the desk. She steadied his arm. He tried

to swallow the dryness in his throat, and asked faintly:

"We're holding out?"

She nodded. "The men think we're safe till dark—two hours. Can you stand up? There's a telebeam call for you. General Berg has arranged it, with the warship."

"That traitor! No good could come of such a telebeam call."

The drumming was louder in the little doctor's ears. Had the torpedo failed, after all? He stood up, uncertainly. Vera helped him across to the seat in front of the little screen and the two staring ikes.

HE TRIED not to show his weakness. She mustn't suspect, nobody must suspect, that he had the lightning death. That would mean panic, surrender, everything lost.

Vera helped his fumbling fingers. The fluorescent screen sparkled. Shadows shaped themselves into the dark, heavy face of Iron Scarr. He wasn't grinning, now. His close-set eyes were veiled and ominous.

"Clever, Bull."

"Not clever enough—if you're still alive."

"The Valiant had twin power rooms," Scarr said, "with an armored bulkhead between. You burned up one, but merely shook the other."

Dr. Bull muttered explosively.

"Yes, Batson crossed you with the plans," Scarr told him. "We're helpless, now. A moon of Taurus. But our repairs will be finished in two hours. We can land men—and new weapons—to take your tower at dark."

"Maybe," said Dr. Bull.

"But I want TAU, right now," the conqueror said grimly. "You know about the antigen, Bull. I am repeating my offer: your life, your yacht, and a million, in exchange for TAU, intact. Yes or no?"

Dr. Bull closed his eyes. The drumming was nearer and more rapid. The virus was already consuming the tissue of his brain. It seemed to swell against his skull. Trembling and cold, his hands pressed against his temples. He wanted to scream.

But he looked at Scarr again, and said flatly:

"That trick's too old. I remember you used to take ships with your promises—but your prisoners were always stripped and dead before you set them free. You said yourself your game hasn't changed."

Scarr's grin was wolfish. "It's your only chance, Bull."

"Maybe." Dr. Bull touched a key, swept that dark face from the screen. "Have an order passed down," he told the nurse. "Every other man report to me on the main floor in five minutes."

And she was gone.

The elevator took him down to meet them. Four of the Special Planeteers. Two engineers, two musicians, a crooner, and actor, equipped from the arsenal in the basement. The crooner's head was bandaged. They all looked tired and bewildered and afraid.

"Men, things are desperate."

Dr. Bull felt confidence returning, as he spoke. This was his specialty: commanding human action, with words alone. A dollar bill for a bottle of Taurium, or a life for nothing—the principles of stimulus and response held true.

"But we are fighting for more than our lives and our homes and our loved ones." He let the slightest quiver of emotion into his voice. "Earth is depending on us. Perhaps all the system. If we let Scarr pass, probably he will never be stopped. All history may be changed.

"But we can stop him!"

Dr. Bull paused dramatically, before those tired troubled eyes.

"I have a plan," he said slowly. "I want you to go back to your posts, and hold out for just two hours more. That will give me a chance to try it—our chance, men, to save everything worth saving."

He dropped his voice, intimately, earnestly.

"Please help me, fellows. You know that my methods have been—well, say off-trail. Now, when we stand in the shadow of death, I see that I owe a debt to mankind. Before I die"—his voice throbbed—"will you help me pay it, fellows?"

"We'll stand by you, doc."

The doctor shook his hand. The crooner couldn't speak. The Special Planeteers saluted grimly. They scattered to their posts, and Vera Frame inquired:

"Doctor, what is your plan?"

"The telecaster," whispered Dr. Bull. "Of course they'll attack when we try it. But it's the only possible weapon left. If Scarr could use TAU to conquer Earth—then we can use it to conquer him!"

The throb was getting louder in his ears. It had an anvil's metal ring. Vera would have screamed and recoiled from him, if she had known. But she helped him, with her lithe and splendid strength, into the elevator.

To a string band's melancholy accompaniment, in the main studio, a large bovine woman was lowing out the unhappy words of "Barbara Allen." Dr. Bull's customers were people who liked homey, oldtime music. And it was a tradition that TAU had never lost a precious minute off the air, not even during the disorder of Scarr's previous raid.

Dr. Bull burst through the sound proof door. He bowled the songstress from before the mikes, gestured to silence the fiddler, nodded at the mike-man and the sound mixer.

"Hello, all the planets!"

Racing against time, against the impact of rocket-shells against the tower, perhaps aganist even the final devastation of a salvo from the Valiant's great rifles—if they could be fired from the disabled cruiser—his voice was hoarse and strained:

"This is Dr. Bull of Taurus. Attention all patrol ships and bases, all government and police officials on Earth! A murderous uprising is now being attempted by the Iron Watch, a secret party headed by the pirate Iron Scarr and traitors in the Patrol.

"I may be cut off in a few seconds. Already the plotters have taken the Appenine Base and the Valiant. Taurus is attacked. We are surrounded, in TAU. Until they silence me, here are the details."

IN THAT insulated room, no crash of guns or shriek of pain was audible. But the whole room shuddered, and Dr. Bull knew that a rocket-shell had burst against the building. He gulped and hurried on:

"Commander Batson was the chief traitor. The Moon Syndicate supported the Iron Watch with a billion dollars. Scarr's men on Earth are prepared to spread the Mercurian lightning death."

The air shuddered again. The double glass wall abruptly crumbled, fell in a crashing avalanche. Abruptly the purr of pellet-guns was audible, and the rapid bark of auto-rifles.

"Listen!" shouted Dr. Bull. "You can hear the fighting—they're storming the tower. I'll talk as long as I can. Phone your friends to tune in TAU. Warn all government and police agencies—"

Then the studio was plunged into total darkness. There was an instant of breathless silence, then every battle-sound seemed amplified. Somewhere a man burned with an ion-beam was screaming with a thin and frightful monotony.

"It's the power, doctor," gasped the mike-man. "They've cut the line from the central station."

"We've got auxiliary power tubes in the basement," Dr. Bull reminded him. "Why don't they come on?"

The tower rocked to another crushing blast. A single shot interrupted the brief pause that followed, and the screaming

man was silent. The darkness smothered Dr. Bull. He backed toward a corner of the studio, croaking:

"The lights—somebody fix the lights!"

He was afraid of the dark. The last traitor might strike beneath it. The enemy without might find entrance. The anvil of death rang louder in his brain. Every measured blow sent out sparks of fiery pain.

But he remembered that it was still day, outside the steel-shuttered building. The sounds of fighting ebbed, as if the attackers were waiting again for night. Flashlights began to cut nervous white cones from the black confusion in the studio. Dr. Bull flinched from a light in his face.

"Doctor!" It was a harassed power engineer. "The auxiliaries failed to come on because they were burned out. Sabotage. We're replacing them with spares. It will take an hour."

"Hurry, man—hurry!"

Dr. Bull's voice was faint and dry. He sat down in the program-director's folding chair. The dark room was rocking. The flickering lights spun in sickening spirals. The throb in his head was the crashing fall of a giant's feet, pursuing his desperate flight through darkness.

He felt the presence of Vera Frame beside him, dragged himself out of that chasm of vertiginous misery to face stark reality. Her flashlight showed him a black-inked teleprinter ribbon, looped in her fingers.

"Victory, doctor!"

From the tone of her voice, he knew she should have said Defeat. She held the light for him to read. He saw that the message was from the firm of Wells and Watterson, the New York attorneys who had served him brilliantly as the unofficial diplomatic corps of Taurus. The world shuddered and spun, as he read:

DR. BULL, PLANET TAURUS.
ADVISE YOU STOP BOGEYMAN TELECAST AT ONCE. HAVE WARNED YOU BEFORE EXCESSIVELY SENSATIONAL AND FALSE NEWS BULLETINS ENDANGER ALL OUR EFFORTS BEHALF CONTINUED GOOD INTERPLANETARY RELATIONS OF INDEPENDENT TAURUS.

SUN PATROL INCENSED AT YOUR INSANE ACCUSATIONS. DANGER COMMANDER BATSON WILL TAKE MATTERS INTO OWN HANDS AND ACTUALLY ORDER VALIANT TO BRING YOU TO YOUR SENSES. BELIEVE US DR. BULL YOU HAVE USED THIS PUBLICITY TRICK TOO OFTEN.

NO RESPONSIBLE INTELLIGENT PERSON PAYS SERIOUS ATTENTION TO TAU. NO OBJECT CREATING PANIC AMONG IGNORANT AND MISINFORMED.

OUR ASSOCIATION WITH YOU HAS BEEN PROFITABLE. HOWEVER IF THIS TELECAST IS NOT INSTANTLY STOPPED AND UNTRUTHS CORRECTED OUR CONNECTION MUST END.

CHAPTER 5

A Fight to Death

DR. BULL'S hands were stiff and cold. The damp tape slipped out of them, and fluttered down into the darkness. The throbbing in his brain became a mocking voice that chanted:

"Wolf boy . . . wolf boy . . . wolf boy . . ."

It was true that the news policy of TAU had always been that sensational interest and tremendous signal power would make up for any possible lack of accuracy. TAU never made corrections, and denials made through other media seldom reached most of its audience.

Dr. Bull looked back with a sudden and

novel regret upon some of the most thrilling bulletins that TAU had telecast, such as the love-nest murder of the director of IMA—a great many meteor-miners and other isolated folk still believed that that outraged gentleman was really dead.

The dim emergency lights came on at last. Dr. Bull peered up at the face of Vera Frame, pale in the gloom. He shook his throbbing head. If Wells and Watterson didn't believe his appeal, it was certain that the indignant patrol and police officials wouldn't. Only the day before, he remembered, a TAU bulletin had stated that Earth police were using patrol ships in a tremendous conspiracy to flood the system with an insidious new synthetic drug.

"Played and lost," whispered Dr. Bull.

Shoes grated on broken glass, and he turned to see a little group of defenders crowding into the studio. They were muddy, bleeding, ray-burned, power-stained. One of them, in his tattered splendor of scarlet-and-silver, came up to the hair and saluted nervously.

"What is it?" rasped Dr. Bull.

The Special Planteer gulped, twisted.

"We've come to ask you to give up, sir," he said huskily. "They keep picking us off. Only five of the Planteers left, sir. And six of the others. Nearly all of us wounded. There's no use trying to hold out, sir."

Dr. Bull tugged uncertainly at his beard. His fat shoulders sagged, in the bright uniform. The drumming in his brain became a measured funeral roll. Perhaps the soldier was right. What did anything matter?

His dull eyes looked up again at Vera Frame. He saw the weary pallor on her face. He was watching, when the stark and frantic terror struck her. He saw the quick, desperate pressure of her hands against her temples.

In that instant, he knew, she had recognized the first onslaught of the lightning death. She had been no traitor, then. Perhaps she had even caught the pestilence from him.

But her pale face, in a moment, was composed again. A light seemed to shine in her eyes. Her lips tried to smile, and she murmured faintly:

"Doctor, don't forget—your three words."

Imagination, Audacity— Dr. Bull's shoulders squared again. He stood up, and calmly polished his gold frame glasses with a spotless handkerchief. His blue eyes twinkled confidently as he walked to face the little group of frightened men in the doorway.

"Hold out, men, till dark." The old magnetic power rang in his voice—the same power that had so long defied the IMA and the ICC and the patrol itself, that had fashioned the jewel of Taurus from a barren rock. "And I'll break the Iron Watch. I'll save your homes and your lives—"

There were apprehensive protests. The bandaged crooner tried to point out that the situation was quite hopeless. But Dr. Bull was used to moving men, in the face of inconvenient practical details. The discouraged defenders found themselves promising to die or conquer.

The whole world rocked, to that throbbing in his head, as if all Taurus had been an anvil beneath some colossal hammer. But she managed to keep smiling. If the lightning death let him live another hour — The rush of details mercifully filled his mind. Once more he was in his element. He was Dr. Bull, the Planeteer.

He bustled into the basement, to encourage the engineers busy replacing the power tubes. He made a hasty, cheerful round of the tower's defenses. He sent to his office for the sound-film record of his telebeam conversations with Scarr. He rushed into the make-up department, barking staccato instructions. Regretfully fingering his snowy beard, he told the

make-up barber to shave it off and make it snappy.

Fifteen minutes later, on nearby telescreens—some four years later, on the telecast receivers of any inhabitants of the possibles worlds of Proxima Centuari—appeared the familiar, professionally smiling features of Dr. Bull, over the red outline of a bull.

As it had done every hour on the hour for thirteen years, the little doctor's crisp canned voice began to announce the glad tidings of Taurium and radiogenic reactivation. Abruptly, however, it was cut off, and his benign face dissolved into blackness.

The blackness was slashed with the bright blades of ion-beams. The silence was shattered with the crash of glass, the hurried rattle of auto-guns, the scream and the obliterating blast of a rocket-shell. Out of the breathless pause that followed, a new voice spoke:

"Hail, comrades of the Iron Watch!"

Iron Scarr's deep powerful voice was quite authentic—the sound engineers of TAU, with their frequency charts, modulators, and filters, were competent to give any actor convincing accents of anything from a bull to a cricket.

IRON SCARR'S battered, high-cheeked face glared from the screen with triumphant close-set eyes. The make-up department of TAU was equally advanced, and Dr. Bull's long dramatic training had not been in vain.

"Comrades," roared Scarr, "we have won three victories. The Appenine Base is ours! The Valiant is ours! Now the forts of Taurus—and TAU—are in our hands! Forward to the Earth!"

Scarr raised his great hairy hand, in the clenched-fist salute—the twin mikes had been moved six inches closer together, to make five-feet-two appear a whole foot mightier.

"Unfortunately, however," the tall conqueror said, "there must be a slight delay in our plans. The glorious attack of the Iron Watch has been crippled by a cowardly stab in the back. Dr. Bull of Taurus, that infamous renegade quack, has disabled the Valiant with a dastardly shot fired from a torpedo tube disguised as a telescope.

"Wait, comrades—and keep your courage burning. Repairs are being rushed. The Valiant will be ready in two hours, to move toward her mission on Earth. Meantime, comrades, keep tuned to TAU, and await my orders for the moment of our splendid attack on the money-stuffed bureaucrats of the police, the patrol, ICC and IMA—"

Iron Scarr caught himself, gulped, hurried on:

"Dr. Bull, tht notorious charlatan, will be punished for his craven stroke, as soon as he can be captured by our fearless legions of the Iron Watch. He has fled from TAU, down into the pits in which are located the gravity apparatus, and the geodesic drive that was used to steer this tiny planet toward Earth from its former orbit.

"But our Iron Watch storm troopers, under the brilliant leadership of loyal Commander Batson, aided by General Berg and his splendid men from the ranks of the planeteer, are preparing to take the pits by assault. Even now they are setting charges of titanite, to demolish the locked bulkheads. Dr. Bull is cornered, like the whiskered rat he is.

"So, comrades, with imagination, with audacity, we march toward victory!"

The conqueror paused. His massive close-clipped head nodded, as if to acknowledge unheard applause. But his seamed face turned very serious. His voice, when he resumed, was hushed and grave:

"While we wait, comrades, I am forced to communicate a matter of the utmost importance. Remember, comrades, that

the Iron Watch knows no fear. Only our enemies can die! Hail, to the conquest!"

The hairy fist shook.

"However, comrades, I am compelled to inform you that our antitoxin against the Mercurian lightning death is less effective than was first announced. Our research men, working in the laboratories of the Moon Syndicate, have discovered that the period of immunity is sometimes only a few days. Re-immunization is unsuccessful.

"We believed it wise to delay this unpleasant announcement, comrades, until the wine of battle was ready to sustain your courage. Hail, comrades of the Iron Watch! Not one of you can die!"

The hairy fist again.

"Therefore, comrades, it is necessary to order you to cancel all plans to use the lightning death in our glorious attack—and to completely destroy all our stocks of the virus at once.

"When that order is carried out, comrades, tune to TAU for further instructions. I am going to take personal command of the assault on the pits, where Dr. Bull is barricaded. Hail, victory!"

The dark rugged visage of Iron Scarr faded from the screen. The TAU Hill Billies, uniforms and instruments hastily painted with crosses and twining snakes, began a nervous but vigorous rendition of the spaceman's ballad: Ten Years in Iron Scarr's Crew.

Pale and sweating under his grease paint, Dr. Bull made a hurried round of the defenses. There was now only a scattering fire from the hospital windows. But the Sun was gone from the tower, the cold dark of space crept down about it.

"The traitors outside are probably a little confused," Dr. Bull told the exhausted defenders. "But when they do find out what's going on, they won't bother any more about taking TAU intact. They'll use everything they've got. But you can hold them off, long enough. Give me twenty minutes more—and you'll all be heroes, and millionaires!"

"Dead ones!" muttered a wounded planeteer.

"But we'll hold them." It was the quiet thrilling voice of Vera Frame. Her sure white hands held a pellet gun. Scarlet, from somewhere, stained her velvet cheek. The terror in her eyes was veiled with shining courage. She moved abruptly, as if to shake off clutching death. Softly she cried:

"Victory! Doctor, that's our battle-cry!"

DR. BULL went reeling back to the studio. The anvil in his brain was ringing louder, the footfalls of racing death was nearer. He felt confused and ill. It was hard to think, hard to remember what he had planned.

But he paused at the mirror, deftly touched the make-up. . . .

On a hundred million telescreens, the long cragged face of Scarr looked tense and worried. It looked almost afraid. But the hairy fist came up in a grim defiant gesture. The voice of Scarr was hoarse and low:

"I have been with our splendid Iron Watch storm troopers, attempting to capture the pits at the core of Taurus, where Dr. Bull, the clever desperado who calls himself the Planeteer, has barricaded himself.

"Comrades, I must confess to you that a very grave situation has developed. The armored bulkheads are strongly defended by the survivors of Dr. Bull's Special Planeteers. Dr. Bull is in control of the important gravity apparatus, and the geodesic drive, at the core of Taurus.

"Already he has started the drive—he is swinging Taurus from its orbit about the Earth! Comrades, we can't yet predict the meaning of this move. Commander Batson is making every effort to storm the bulkheads. But the defense is

stubborn. Dr. Bull's few remaining faithful followers have not yet yielded.

"Our agents had reported that this geodesic equipment was dismantled and sold, ten years ago, when Dr. Bull was in desperate financial difficulties because of my first attack. But it has been rebuilt, instead, and made tremendously more powerful. Comrades, beware! This proves that a traitor exists, within the Iron Watch!"

Scarr looked quickly away, turned excitedly back to the millions.

"Comrades!" His voice was strained and rapid. "I have just received a message from Commander Batson. From the Valiant, which is lying disabled across the north pole of Taurus, he reports that we are being rapidly hurled toward the Moon!

"Afraid of the just punishment waiting for his long catalog of crimes against the ethics of the IMA, Dr. Bull is attempting to destroy himself, and us, by piloting Taurus into a suicidal collision with the Moon.

"Unfortunately, comrades, our brave attack on the pits has failed. Commander Batson has already retired to the Valiant, with his heroic Iron Watch troops. However, all is not yet lost.

"Hail, victory!"

The hairy fist saluted.

"Comrades, we are leaving a time bomb to stop the main power plant. This will cut off both the gravity generator and Dr. Bull's geodesic drive. Our insane plunge toward the Moon will be halted. Taurus will lose its atmosphere—and our mad Planeteeer will perish instantly, when air pressure blows the bulkheads from the pits.

"Farewell, comrades—until Dr. Bull is dead. Aboard the Valiant, we can escape the cataclysm. We shall return in space suits, and repair the power plant. Keep tuned to TAU, and wait for my order."

A hundred million screens went black.

DR. BULL stumbled drunkenly out of the studio. Darkness now had thickened around the tower. Beneath it, the last attack had come. Auto-rifles hammered furiously. Shrieking, smashing, rocket-shells hammered the shuddering building.

Out of a stunned pause, Vera Frame's calm voice rang clearly:

"Guard the halls—they're coming in!"

Dr. Bull reeled back into the studio. "Camrades!" Scarr's mighty voice was frantic. "Our last heroic effort has failed. Dr. Bull has had tremendous banks of auxiliary power tubes installed in the impregnable pits at the core of Taurus—the traitors in the Iron Watch, withholding that information, have betrayed us again. "Betrayed us, comrades—and destroyed us!

"When we stopped the main power plant, Dr. Bull simply switched the gravity generators and the geodesic drive to these hidden tubes. The disabled Valiant is still held fast in the gravity field of Taurus.

"And the mad Planeteer is hurling us all at the Moon!

"Commander Batson, from the cruiser's navigation console, reports that we are going to strike the Appenine Base. Thus, in one titanic cataclysm, all our three strategic prizes—the base, the Valiant, and Taurus itself—will be destroyed."

Scarr's voice broke huskily.

"So, comrades, we are defeated. All the splendid heroism and the ruthless might of the Iron Watch is crushed—through the fiendish cunning of a disreputable little quack doctor. Comrades at the base, aboard the cruiser, and here on Taurus—hail and farewell!"

Scarr choked, cleared his throat.

"To those glorious men of the Iron Watch on Earth," he added huskily, "I have one final word. Now, when all is lost, I can confess to you freely that our researchers, in the matter of the Mer-

curian lightning death, were guilty of a frightful blunder.

"It appears that the serum used for immunization was manufactured from cultures of the virus which had not been completely killed. The very innoculation appears to be fatal, after a period of a few days upward. The lightning death is swiftly breaking out in those groups of the comrades first treated, at the base and aboard the Valiant.

"Therefore, comrades on Earth, you are advised to surrender, and seek medical attention—IMA researchers are reported to have made progress toward actual immunization. Surrender and prompt treatment, unfortunately, seem to offer your only hope to escape a horrible death."

Scarr gulped and wiped his close-set eyes.

"Again, comrades, hail and farewell! With only a few seconds of life remaining—" The iron fist clenched again. "Hail, death!"

ON A hundred million screens, Iron Scarr crashd and flamed into silent blackness. An obliterating backness, in the studio on Taurus, dropped upon the brain of Dr. Bull. The smashing crescendo within his skull swelled to the last fury of worlds colliding. He knew that the lightning death had run its fatal course.

"Imagination," he tried to whisper. "Audacity—"

He fell.

"Victory!"

After eons of struggle in a hot black jungle, where he fled in vain from the thudding drums that followed, fought the sentient rubbery vines that clutched and clung and choked him, Dr. Bull shouted that word in a voice that was surprisingly loud.

He swallowed, whispered it again, doubtfully. He was lying in a clean bed in his own hospital. The throb in his brain had incredibly ceased. He blinked unbelievingly up at pretty Vera Frame.

"Vee?" he whispered. "You're all right? I—I thought—"

Still the thing was too horrible to say. But the tall gorgeous nurse smiled down at him.

"You thought I had the lightning death." Her golden voice was unafraid. "And I did, doc. And so did you." Her cool fingers caught his groping, bewildered hand, squeezed quickly. "I knew you had it, all the time," she whispered. "You were wonderful, to go on."

"We—we—"

For once, he could find no words.

"The patrol squadron that arrived four hours ago brought a new serum from the IMA tropical laboratories at Panama. Doc, we're going to be all right." She stopped to kiss him. "The lightning death is conquered."

The little doctor's blue eyes twinkled. "Scarr?" he asked. "And the Iron Watch?"

The nurse's limpid eyes were shining.

"The Iron Watch just folded up," she said. "The men on the Valiant mutinied, and mobbed Scarr, before the squadron got here. The base was abandoned—and recaptured by three loyal men who had been hiding in cracker barrels. The Iron Watch on Earth has gone to pieces—the police were skeptical when they began to surrender and confess and accuse one another, but the evidence was convincing. It's lucky the IMA really had an antigen!"

Vera Frame caressed his hand. "The loyal patrol commanders can't quite understand how you did it, doc," she said. "Because the simplest kind of triangulation, on TAU, would have told any Iron Watch member that Taurus hadn't actually been moved out of its orbit."

Dr. Bull closed his twinkling eyes. He had spent many years perfecting a technique for causing his listeners to neglect

(Please continue on page 130)

READERS' COLUMN

ALL Fans please note: since A. MERRITT'S FANTASY has gone quarterly some of your letters will pertain to stories two or even three issues back. To bring them up to date and keep them more or less so in the future, try to write us within one month of publication date. This is not absolutely necessary but we feel that it will be more fun for all concerned to read the various opinions concerning one or more stories at the same time . . . for comparison purposes.

Except for one thing the letters have been fine. We seem to have acquired a steady stream of writers (most welcome) but what about an occasional letter from you other fans?

Here's hoping that you continue to enjoy A. Merritt's FANTASY!

—The Editor

TWO CLASSICS

Dear Editor:

Well, A. MERRITT'S FANTASY seems to have become definitely established as an excellent addition to the fantasy field.

Each issue the stories are good. They don't improve because you can't improve on anything so nearly perfect. Some issues may be a mite better than others, but the next issues make up for them.

Take for instance the Merritt story which I have never tried to read, "Creep, Shadow!." The next issue was an improvement. A great improvement! Challis' style of writing was different from the usual run of writers and his story, "The Smoking Land," although not unique, was good.

After reading this wonderful issue I had high hopes for the magazine, but they were dimmed by the next issue. I absolutely gave up trying to get through Mann's "The Ninth Life." Yet, I see that some people liked it. I wonder why. But the latest issue has my hopes back to a new high. Not one classic, but two. "The Face in the Abyss" was really good. The best thing about it was that it wasn't drawn out to excessive length. Just the length I like them.

"The Green Flame" was also of the length that I like. It was not quite as good as Merritt's story and not as good as North's "Three Against The Stars," but it still held my interest. Maybe I'll be the one to find that yellow marble.

I am very disappointed to hear that you are going quarterly. I'll certainly miss your magazine—all that time between issues. I guess you had a good reason, but I still wish you hadn't done it.

Thanks again for the information on the authors which you give in "Calling All Fantasy Fans." To know something about the author of a story seems to increase the enjoyment of that story. I hope that you will continue to give us all those little-known facts.

Callé is really good on the illustrations. If I weren't afraid of being hopped on by all my fan friends I'd say that he's the equal of Finlay and Bok if not better. There, I've said it!

Sincerely,

Tom Covington
315 Dawson Street
Wilmington, N. C.

ED: Hope this issue will live up to your high praises of our last one.

I KNEW HIM THEN

Dear Editor:

I'm quite pleased that you find my story, "Racketeers in the Sky" worthy of reprinting in A. MERRITT'S FANTASY. Especially pleased because I'm an old Merritt fan myself. I remember "The Moon Pool," "The Face in the Abyss" and "The People of the Pit" as vividly as I do most things that have actually happened to me.

Incidentally, Merritt was kind enough to take some interest in my own work, when I was just beginning to write. When the first installment of my first serial was published, he asked for the carbon copy of the rest of it. In later letters he told me something about his methods of work and gave me some very sound professional suggestions.

Once when a friend and I called at the offices of *The American Weekly* while he was editor, he took an hour or so of his crowded time to talk fantastic fiction with us—turning out to be as enjoyable in person as his stories always are in print. I still feel that he was one of the great figures in imaginative literature, and I look back on those casual contacts with a good deal of pleasure. . . . Jack Williamson

ED: We thought that you would be interested in seeing the above letter with Mr. Williamson's personal comments on A. Merritt.

MASTER OF FANTASY

Dear Editor:

I have been a follower of fantasy, supernatural and the occult for many many years. As a result I have naturally come to look upon one author as my favorite. That author is Abraham Merritt.

In my humble estimation Merritt is the absolute master of modern fantasy. There are many writers of fantasy and science fiction but no one has the feeling and the delicate touch that

make all of his writings seem so realistically beautiful and so almost true to life, leaving the reader to wonder.

But I am not writing to eulogize Mr. Merritt. There are others far more qualified to do this than I. My purpose here is to seek information. I would like to know more about my favorite author. A biography in fact. I am prepared to pay a reasonable sum if necessary for such information, although I am a man of moderate means.

Such a biography would fit beautifully with my collection of Merritt's writings, limited though it is. And if you would, you could help me in forming that collection if you could supply me with a list of his writings. I realize that he was not a very prolific author, but he did write several stories, some novels as well as some poetry.

I would appreciate any assistance you might give me and in closing let me add that your new magazine is one of the best on the stands today, filling a long-existing need of the fantasy readers of the world, those like myself whose only chance to possess such great works comes when they are within the reach of our meagre purse.

Respectfully,
L. Perry Dawson
2317 N. Seminary Ave.
Chicago 14, Illinois

ED: Merritt wrote the following stories in the order given here: "Through the Dragon Glass," "People of the Pit," "The Moon Pool," "Conquest of the Moon Pool," "Three Lines of old French," "The Metal Monster," "The Face in the Abyss," "Ship of Ishtar," "Women of the Wood," "Seven Footprints to Satan" "The Snake Mother," "Dwellers in the Mirage," "Burn, Witch, Burn," and "Creep, Shadow!" He also wrote "The Black Wheel" and "The Fox Woman."

WHO WILL SELL?

Dear Editor:

After reading the "Calling All Fantasy Fans" column, I was numbed to see that AMF will be published quarterly instead of bi-monthly. Why the change? Now we'll just have to wait that much longer for the next issue. It's a swell magazine—and typical of the good material that Popular Publications always puts out. Please go back to bi-monthly or even monthly if you can.

Also, don't ever publish stories that aren't fantasy in your magazine. I've seen requests for stories by authors that are not fantasy writers and never will be. We read your magazine for fantasy and that's what we want.

Now to comment on the July issue—Merritt's "The Face in the Abyss" was good and I was pleased to see it appear as I had heard so much about it. However, it did not live up to my expectations. I ranked Eric North's "The Green Flame" above it. The latter story was exciting, scary and very well written—very good stuff.

I'm pretty new at this fantasy game and I haven't read much of the good old stuff or the better stories so will some of you better acquainted fans please help me out? I'd like you to write me if you have any old FN or FFM magazines that you want to get rid of. I'd especially like the "Polaris" stories, the "Palos" triology, the "Skylark" series, and the "Golden Atom" stories. I'd also like other novels recently published in FN or FFM. Can anyone help me? I'll pay for them if you're willing to sell. I'd trade for them, but I don't have any magazines saved up yet. Keep up your swell work.

I remain, a fan,
Bill Caltins
c/o C.A.A.
Panguitch, Utah

ED: We were interested in your comment that certain authors which have been requested, are not fantasy. Which ones are you refering to? Thanks for writing us.

WIRECORDING FANS!

Dear Editor:

It seems that Saunders—are you sure he isn't another Stevens pen name?—did a pretty good cover this time. Blasphemous though it may sound, I liked his Face better than Finlay's!

Though I had read it long ago, I was glad to have an opportunity to reread "The Face in the Abyss." One, it seems to me, of Merritt's best.

Finlay's illustration on page 46-47 was by far the best. Callé didn't seem up to his usual standard.

Could you feature this request: Any fan who has a recorder or access to same, I would like to hear from, in connection with my club, WIREZ. There are no dues. All that is necessary is that he or she has a recorder and is interested in wirezsponding. Please get in touch with—

Shelby Vick
Box 493
Lynn Haven, Fla.

ED: Saunders is no pen name for Stevens! Saunders is Saunders!

BEAUTIFUL!

Dear Editor:

Beautiful! Simple beautiful! "The Face in the Abyss," I mean. Truly one of Merritt's greatest—but still not as good as the sequel "The Snake Mother," which you most certainly must print as soon as possible. In fact, there are only two things which mar the perfection of the entire issue.

Firstly, the presence of Saunders on the cover. Finlay is the only artist capable of catching the mood and beauty of Merritt's works. And secondly, the announcement that AMF is to become a quarterly. Haven't we fans given you enough support to show that, rather than

becoming quarterly, you should become monthly? You know we love you!

There is one puzzling thing about the listing of stories on the contents page: "The Face in the Abyss," really a novelette, is billed as a novel, while Eric North's "The Green Flame," a longer story, is listed as a novelette. Why so? Ah, I think I can guess. Merritt can pack so much into a shorter length that his novelettes are equivalent to novels!

All the interior illustrations were very good especially Finlay's portrait of the living face. Callé has an unusual style that is well suited to the more macabre tales of fantasy.

Stories that would be appreciated in AMF are: Farley's Radio series, Cummings' "The Man Who Was Two Men," "War of the Purple Gas" by Leinster, and Kline's Mars novels. Now that Lovecraft is on your list, why not print some of his scarcer tales such as: "Through the Gate of the Silver Key," "Celephais," and "The Strange High House in the Mist"—all with Bok illustrations, of course! And some Merritt poetry! What little was in "The Ship of Ishtar" has only whetted our appetite for more.

In hopes that AMF will soon be bi-monthly again.

Sincerely,
Robert E. Briney
561 West Western Ave.
Muskegon, Michigan

ED: We'll try to get a Finlay cover for you. As you know now the distinction between a novel and a novelette is very fine. We're glad you think that the Merritt story rated the novel line!

HIS FIRST LETTER

Dear Editor:

My address is only temporary and I cannot give you a permanent one, so all the requests I make in this letter can be answered only in your magazine. I regret this, for I am not one of those who earnestly desire to instruct an editor in his profession. This is my first and probably last letter to a magazine.

I have nothing but praise for A. MERRITT'S FANTASY, and can offer little advice for its betterment. To me, it fills a desire of several years standing. I have grown tired of most of the fantasy writers of today whose simple little stories presumably are written for simple little minds and are reminiscent of the resumés of novels.

If the stories are not of that type, they concern weird shapes creeping through the darkness bent upon sadistic pleasures. I am heartily tired of them.

Sometime in the future, if worthwhile reprints are no longer available, why not publish good fantasies by modern authors, if for no other reason than to encourage new authors to write them?

My request is this: please reprint Merritt's "The Snake Mother" at the earliest possible date. As you know, it is the sequel to "The Face in the Abyss" and I think it a far better story.

How often may a Merritt story be reread before the reader tires of it? The same may be asked of Poe and Shakespeare, for I haven't tired yet. I have read "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" six times and will continue rereading it until the magazine wears out. His tales are really a diversion when I need complete relaxation. His literary accomplishments belong side by side with the immortals.

I have made this letter long and rambling but behind its verbosity is constantly the thought: do not forget "The Snake Mother." It is necessary to have it to complete the tale he told in "The Face in the Abyss."

In conclusion I want to say that I am not really looking forward to seeing this letter in your column devoted to the publishing of letters. I leave that to the ones who wish to see their name in print that way. I only ask the continuance of OUR magazine and the publishing of all Merritt's works in it.

Sincerely yours,
John Smith
Kansas City, Mo.

ED: You should be happy to learn that "The Snake Mother" is scheduled to appear in the next A. MERRITT FANTASY—the January issue which will be on sale in early November.

BRAVO, NORTH!

Dear Editor:

Sorry to see A. MERRITT'S FANTASY going quarterly. I can't see why this must be so. Perhaps if you had used more of Merritt your circulation figures might have been higher, if your trouble lies in reader apathy. I don't see why you wouldn't have rights to many of Merritt's novels. You implied in answering Thomas Ward's letter that this has been the trouble.

It seems to me that if you bought out the Munsey files you ought to have your choice of all Merritt's writings by now. Under the Munsey regime, FFM and FN published: "The Moon Pool," "The Conquest of the Moon Pool," "Three Lines of old French," "The Face in the Abyss," "The Snake Mother," "People of the Pit," "Dwellers in the Mirage" and "Creep, Shadow!" According to my files, then, you have used prior to the time Popular bought out Munsey eleven Merrittales, two of which were fairly short. During that time you were unable to supply us with "The Ship of Ishtar" and "Seven Footprints to Satan". If it was copyright difficulties which prevented your serving us the last two novels I have mentioned, then they must have been overcome recently, since you have printed them in the revived *Fantastic Novels*. Now why would you have troubles with rights to the other eleven when you wish to reprint them in AMF if you already own the novels having supposedly bought all the rights along with the Munsey files?

It is more easily understood that since "The

Black Wheel" and "The Fox Woman" were brought out after Merritt's demise that they would have to be bought from the Merritt estate. By the way, can we have "The Black Wheel" soon?

The only favorable thing about this Saunder's cover (is he the same old Lawrence?) is the preponderance of dark colors. Otherwise, it can't compare with the Finlay cover illustrating the same novel, on the October 1940 issue of FFM. Nor for that matter does Finlay's own newest depiction of the Face on page 13 compare with his earlier work.

I really believe Eric North's "The Green Flame" matches the lead novel for sheer suspense! It packs a terrific, gripping interest! I liked it much better than anything I have read anywhere in a very long time. Only a few things could have happened that North overlooked. As an instance, when Crampton's house burned, two things could have occurred which would have set the nearby river and thus the whole of the world's water on fire. The ignition of the natural moisture in the ground around the house; after the melting of the plumbing fixtures in the house (since nothing was left we can assume they melted) the fire should have gone into the pipes and out to the water mains and finally to the reservoir. The fire hoses, throwing water with much force against the sides of the house, should have splashed burning water into the river.

Callé's drawing of "Toad" is very good. To get the full chilling, or scorching effect of what it would have been like if it had rained while the reservoir or Crampton's house was burning, nature provided me with a heavy rain while reading "The Green Flame." Green fire going up a sheet of rain in a ravenous leap would be as bad as an atom bomb if it happened over a city like Melbourne. Added tension could have been infused into "The Green Flame" if North had thought to bring up a light shower just after the reservoir was ignited, this shower, short-lived and just heavy enough to cause the flame to climb up to the cloud which could have been described as small and widely separated from others—as sometimes they are seen in summer skies, would have been quite a spectacle. Especially after the cloud caught fire.

What would a man like "Toad" think if he had set the water of an ocean on fire? Could he credit himself with the ability to actually do such a thing with the evidence all around him? To get the full terrifying implications of this story, just imagine that all the water in the world suddenly turned to high-test gasoline!

Bob Barnett
1107 Lyon
Carthage, Mo.

ED: Very glad that you liked Eric North's story of "The Green Flame." Several of the Merrittales have been printed fairly recently in FFM or FN. "Dwellers in the Mirage," for example, was printed in FN in September '49. Would you want these stories reprinted in A. MERRITT'S FANTASY so soon?

SOUND CRITICISM

Dear Editor:

It is with considerable misgiving that I noted your announcement of "The Elixir of Hate" by George Allan England for the lead novel of the next issue of AMF. This story ran in FFM in 1942 which is only 8 years ago, and this makes the second reprinting.

I can see the reason for second reprinting of the famous works of Merritt, and perhaps an occasional classic such as "The Blind Spot," but I fail to see the need for so many "seconds" when we have such a large backlog of fine stories still buried in the old Munsey files, which are still waiting to be reprinted for the first time.

There must still be a large number of us old-timers that started with the first issue of FFM, and have been loyal supporters and collectors of it and FN ever since. In fact, many of us trace our interest back to the days when *Argosy* and *All-Story* were in their prime and brought out these stories for the first time. Many of the stories however, we know only by reputation from other fans, and are patiently waiting to see them in print again in one of the three magazines of the Popular group.

Here are some facts to support my argument. Otis Adelbert Kline has had no single story reprinted since FFM and FN started, in spite of the fact his Mars and Venus stories are rated among the best, and must of all appeared in the old *Argosy*. The last story by Ralph Milne Farley was "The Golden City" in 1942, and you still have some half dozen or more of his stories you have not used. There has been nothing by Homer Eon Flint since "The Blind Spot" in 1940, yet he has six or eight short novels of science-fantasy still in your files. We are still waiting for "After a Million Years" by Garret Smith, also his "Treasures of Tantalus."

And what about Garret P. Serviss' "Moon Maiden", "Conquest of Mars", and several others? Then there must be a full two dozen novels by Ray Cummings still waiting. Some of us oldsters are going to die off before we get a chance at these stories. And I must not forget to mention we still have a third story of the "Polaris" series you have not given us yet.

No doubt you have problems of clearance and rights which we as readers know nothing about, and perhaps you get tired of our asking for these same things so often. But I can assure you, we write you because we are interested in these things, and have the best interest of FFM, FN and AMF at heart. If some of these stories are unavailable, let us know and we will stop asking. But for the sake of us older readers, please give us the stories of the older dates first, as far as they are available. Hold back the stories of the late '30s and early '40s until the older stories are out of the way.

Please don't take this letter as being all complaints. I still think the FFM, FN, and AMF group of magazines are the tops in the science-fantasy field, with the best source of material, the best artists, and the best all around format

and general planning. (This is meant as a bouquet to the editor).

On the subject of artists: keep Finlay and Lawrence, as far as possible. Finlay is tops and Lawrence is a close second. You can forget about Bok as far as I am concerned. If you need a nice weird cover some of these days, you might look up Margaret Brundage. Her work used to be excellent and certainly had eye appeal.

Very best regards,
C. W. Wolfe
Box 1109
Las Vegas, N. M.

ED: Thanks for your letter. We like hearing what you want.

VERY SATISFIED

Dear Editor:

I am glad to see, for a change, all of the Popular Publication magazines once more coming out on a steady schedule, with the unfortunate exception of *Super Science Stories* which mostly seems to be about one month late in arriving at certain news stalls. I sincerely hope that this situation will also be rectified soon since, as one of the ASFS members recently put it, ". . . I'm just sitting on pins and needles when I don't see any of the 'Big Four' out on time . . !"

The July issue of AMF was up to its usual standard of its three other predecessors, namely, excellent! Rather sad it was to learn that you are putting AMF on a quarterly basis herewith, and surprising, very surprising news basically when one considers the various pieces of corny and inadequate new SF publications which are flying almost every week to magazine stands all over the nation. A few of the other new ones, let's be fair, aren't bad and may undoubtedly survive; but when one considers in what poor taste and under what untalented hands they are being layed out, it is unbelievable, almost, to conceive how some of these very new, but badly produced, publications cannot in some way lend a bad reputation to notable and highly edifying standard magazines like the ones which are so methodically and artistically handled by you, your designers and the rest of your capable associates.

And all of this brings back to my memory that only, and scarcely, 14 months ago, I was anticipating with fond hopes how soon would the era arrive when a fan or STFantasy connoisseur could gaze across various magazine stands in his town and find an almost equal percentage of SF publications comparable to either the "Love", "Western" or "Detective" fiction mags which were standing out. Well, I'm sorry to say that that era is just not here yet.

In regard to the July AMF again, I must register heated approval over the Merrittale "The Face in the Abyss" and your choice-of-the-month of Eric North's "Green Flame." One question I hope that you won't think too presumptuous of my asking is: Are you still continuing to cut some of the longer presenta-

A. MERRITT'S FANTASY

tions, and if so, why, especially since you have three reprint publications to facilitate you?

Many of us older fans know too much about the excellence of Abe Merritt's works, including "The Face in the Abyss," to spend any time in praising his obvious merits as one of our greatest writers of the world. Suffice it to say that most of all of us look forward to re-reading his works time and time again. And master-artist Finlay is to be appropriately commended for perhaps the millionth time, as I raise my voice in the wilderness in admiration, on the way he can bring outstanding virtues to any story he's been put to illustrate. I am also sincerely looking forward to more covers by him.

Next to Finlay, I feel that artists Paul and Lawrence tie for second place. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't think it ill advice if you could use only the "Big Three" of STFantasy art to illustrate and design all of your four publications. They deserve the work and we deserve seeing more of them. Bok, I'm afraid, is a better author than an artist. Actually, he happens to be one of our greatest STFantasy authors in existence today, which should give you a bit of a hint regarding the usage of any proposed writers in the future. I'd dote on seeing his posthumous collaborations on Merritt's works, a very appropos addition to your files I may say.

Eric North's "The Green Flame" was adequately designated as a "weird novelette of sinister power" on your contents page, and ample credit should be bestowed to artist Paul Callé in dramatizing the eeriness of the tale with his portraits. Callé, incidently, should be appointed work on horror, supernatural and "haunted house" epics only. One can see that these are his stamping grounds.

Before concluding, I would like to have my other fellow readers note the fact that I have about 1,000 STFantasy mags and books for swap; SF magazines from the late twenties up to '49, consisting mostly of *Fantastic Adventures*, *Amazing Stories*, old *Wonders*, old *Weirds*, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, *Fantastic Novels*, *Planets* and several other titles which go into forming a pile of over a thousand SF magazines I'm interested in swapping away. I would appreciate the "want lists" of any collectors, and in turn, I am interested in only the following SF magazines which I need: The first ten issues of FFM up to the end of '43; any pre-'42 FN's; any *Unknowns* and *Astoundings* prior to '46; any *Weirds* prior to '37, and almost any defunct, obscure or small SF publications that came out during the war years prior to '44, and practically any others issued prior to '36. I promise to answer all letters of inquiry immediately but I would appreciate that lists which are sent consist of zines in good to fine condition only.

STFantastically yours,
Rev. Calvin Thos. Beck, Pres.
American Science-Fantasy Society
P.O. Box 877
Grand Central Annex,
New York 17, N. Y.

ED: We plan to cut very long stories only when we cannot make them fit in one of the magazines. As both FN and FFM are bi-monthly, we feel that you would have to wait too long for a continued story. Usually smaller type will be used and that will eliminate or greatly reduce the necessary cutting.

A NEGLECTED TALE

Dear Editor:

It seems strange to have a special magazine dedicated to one particular author, but anything that brings a new magazine into the field suits me fine. It's better to present the Merritt stories this way than in FN. Now a person will know he is paying for Merritt.

I had thought you'd soon run out of Merritt stories and would perhaps then turn to other great fantasies already printed by you—such as "The Blind Spot." In fact, I had some hopes that after you got through printing the most urgently requested stories that you'd print some new fantasies, because I think we could stand a good new magazine devoted exclusively to fantasy. But now that I learn you're using Merritt's short stories too, I know it will take much longer to exhaust the supply.

It seems to me that one of the most neglected and unmentioned Merritt stories is one of the greatest—"The Snake Mother." That story has everything. I have the original Argosy version and your earlier reprint of it, but I like to reread it often. Your readers seldom mention it, but I think it ranks with "Moon Pool" and "Dwellers in the Mirage" to constitute the top three Merrittales. It would be a good bet for your magazine soon, though it would probably be better to print "Face in the Abyss" first, since "Snake Mother" is a sequel. I never cease to regret that Merritt died before he could complete the three or four other tales he was working on. What a loss to the fantasy-loving public.

Congratulations again on the new magazine. I'm glad it's going to furnish us with other fantasy too, besides just Merritt—witness the current "Smoking Land." I've wanted to read that.

Sincerely,
Donald V. Allgeier
1851 Gerrard Ave.
Columbus, Ohio

ED: "The Face in the Abyss" is in the June issue of AMF. "Snake Mother" has already been scheduled for the January issue.

GHOSTS!

Dear Editor:

Since the new Popular Publication is named A. MERRITT'S FANTASY, don't you think it fitting and proper that something of Merritt should be included in each and every issue? It can take the form of an editorial of some sort, a discourse on witchcraft or archeology, a short

fantastic poem, or anything else which may have come from his pen. The April issue was absolutely Merritt-less.

By presenting his life's work to a new generation, some particular moment of his glory would live again. Again I say, you should not let an issue go by without having something from the pen of Abe Merritt, no matter how short the piece. And please, whatever you do, don't discontinue the page entitled CALLING ALL FANTASY FANS. To me, it's like an eagerly awaited introduction—like being presented with the proper suavity, to someone you're most anxious to meet.

Vol. 1. No. 3 of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY rated good as far as the stories were concerned, but the issue didn't seem to pack the punch that made the inaugural such a walloping success.

I thought "The Ninth Life" was quite good. The characters in the story, however, were lacking the one something . . . the something which makes a reader look upon them not as individuals from the printed page, but as real flesh-and-blood acquaintances. Cleo Kefra, the central character, though vivid enough in her portrayed manner, still was weak when compared with Merritt's characterization of the Demoiselle Dehut.

Theodore Roscoe's story "The Little Doll Died" blossomed into a surprisingly good yarn. You could've knocked me unconscious with a feather at the totally unexpected climax. Who'd a thunk Terrence McCoy would turn out to be such a dastardly scoundrel?

Then something almost did knock me unconscious, and it wasn't feathers either. I saw the only letdown in the plot of the story, and that, seemingly, revolved itself around the mystifying patter by the author about zombies. I hung onto his words, expectantly waiting. Then, what happened? Not even one of those "soulless creatures, the un-dead dead," appeared on the scene.

Unaffectedly yours,
Joseph Kankowski
9 Glennon Place
West Orange, N. J.

ED: As to your mystification in regards to the Zombies— The atmosphere, it would seem, was more effectively created by not having any of these soulless creatures appear in flesh-and-blood on the scene. Remember that the voodo priests were promising a second life to all warriors who fell in battle. Also don't forget that the priests had an almost hypnotic power over the natives and the way in which the latter followed so blindly made them appear as if they had no souls of their own. This explanation is brief by necessity and only explains in part the fear always connected with zombies.

THE DEVIL-FISH

(Continued from page 99)

horror had paralyzed us. Finally I looked at Jorneaux. He seemed to feel my question, although he did not turn immediately toward me.

"Native wailing," he explained briefly. "Kanaka woman mourning for her dead. Perhaps a servant in the hotel has—"

Suddenly for the second time he caught my arm in a grip that was excruciating. Looking at him in astonishment I saw him pale and intent, with a genuine suffering of pity and apprehension in his eyes.

Still at the open window were Salisbury and Ruth Talbert. In the utter absorption they might have been alone—save for the author of that thin, wild cry out in the dark.

The girl stood, white and slenderly erect, against the scarlet mass of bougainvellea, gazing with the incredulity of an outraged princess at her lover's face, her fingers pressed protestingly against her breast. Salisbury with one arm half raised as if to ward off a blow, stared awfully into the velvety blackness outside.

And still the cry quavered on, insistently, hideously, beating itself into our brain until the thing became almost unendurable.

At my elbow Jorneaux stirred.

"Ah, so that is to be the way," he murmured to himself. "I should perhaps have known."

As I watched, tense, motionless, I slowly got the horrid impact of Jorneaux's meaning. The horror was reflected in the face of Ruth Talbert as she ran stumbling toward the door.

Salisbury had almost imperceptibly wavered toward the window. His eyes were closed, and one shaking hand was pressed tightly against his brow. But I had seen.

Upon his forehead, at first faintly etched in delicate needle pricks, then scarlet as the guilty blood rushed to the tiny scars, the spider-like image of a devil-fish was burning itself; loathsome, clinging tentacles were writing themselves across his cheeks.

No. I should have had no light conversation for the occasion had I met Ruth Talbert face to face this afternoon.

(Continued from page 120)

to think of simple and common sense tests of the things he told them.

"And here, doc," the voice of Vera Frame went on. "A message just came from Wells and Watterson, in New York." Her strong deft hands raised his head on the pillow, so that he could read the teleprinter strip that she handed to him.

CONGRATULATIONS CAPTAIN PLANETEER. YOUR DEFENSE OF EARTH MAGNIFICENT PUBLICITY. WELLS AND WATTERSON BEG YOU ACCEPT OUR DEEPEST APOLOGIES PREVIOUS MESSAGE. FUTURE OF INDEPENDENT TAURUS NOW SECURE. ANTICIPATE RECORD BUSINESS FOR TAURIUM AND REACTIVATION. WE REMAIN AT YOUR SERVICE ANY FUTURE DIFFICULTIES.

With a bland pink baby smile, Dr. Bull read that message twice. He asked the nurse to snap on the telecast receiver built into the ceiling. The red, reactivated bull was just fading into his own kindly, white-bearded face, cheerily greeting all the planets.

Suddenly Dr. Bull sat up in bed, ruefully fingering the unfamiliar smoothness of his rosy chin.

"Shut it off, Vee," he told the nurse quickly.

"We've got a new war, with the IMA. Call the makeup department, and have them find a false beard for me. I'm going on TAU, right now, to tell the planets that I really conquered the lightning death —in spite of all the jealous claims of the IMA mossbacks at Panama—with Taurium and the extraordinary radiogenic reactivation."

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