

FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

DECEMBER

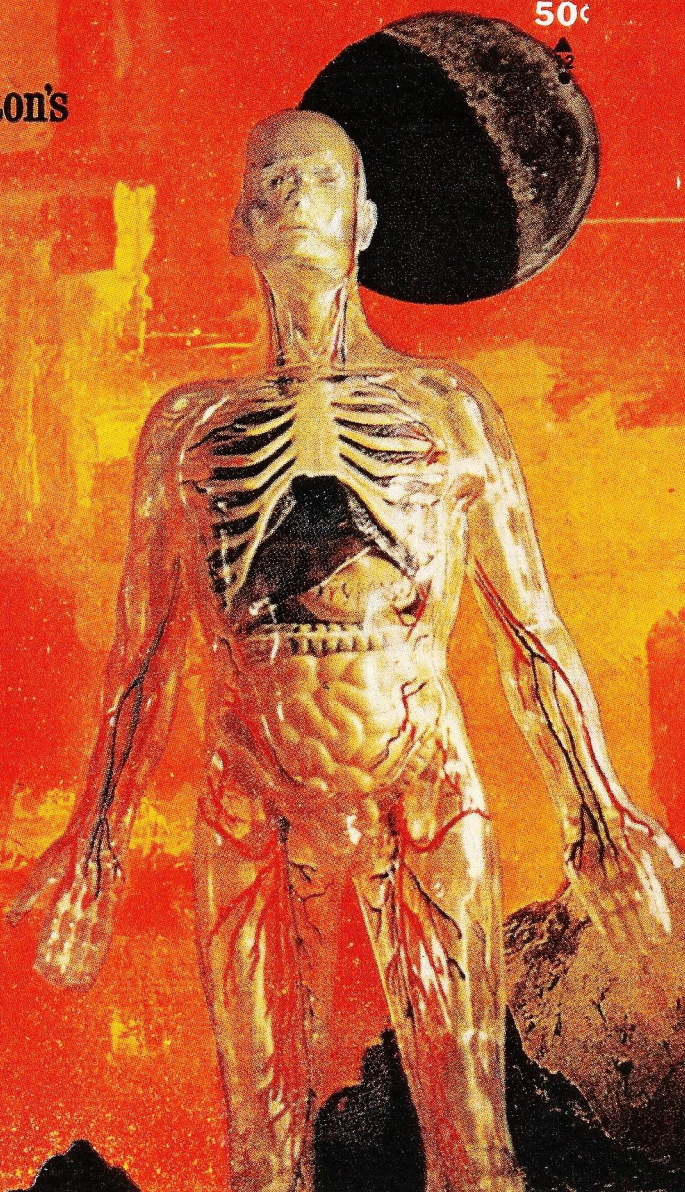
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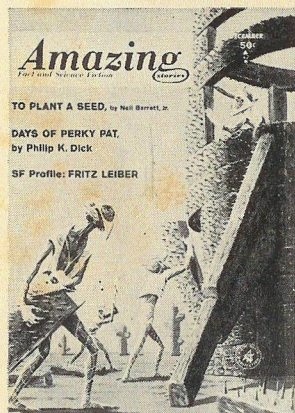
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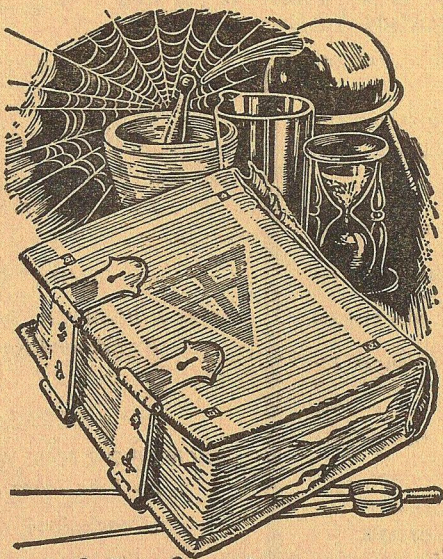
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FANTASTIC

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DECEMBER 1963

Volume 12 Number 12

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Illustrating *After A Judgement Day*

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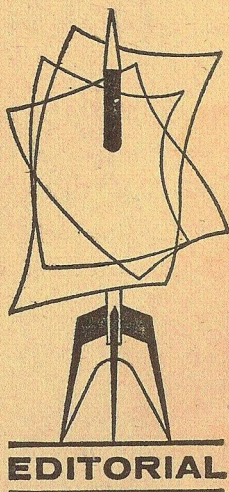
IT begins to look as if the flood of comic coloring books that hit the market during the past couple of years may be augmented shortly by one that will probably be called *The Astronauts Coloring Book*. We make this prediction with considerable confidence as a result of a recent announcement by the NASA Manned Spacecraft Center, to the effect that future Gemini pilots will be equipped with crayons and drawing paper.

No, Virginia, this is not another government boondoggle. It seems that even the best color film and cameras have been unable to make precise records of unexpected things seen by orbiting astronauts: remember the "shining particles" Glenn saw in space; or Gordon Cooper's claim that he saw smoke coming from cottages in the Himalayas? NASA experts feel that even an amateur artist who records what he sees as he sees it can be more successful.

Among the things being considered for "art subjects" on future orbital manned flights are: the color-changes of planets as they sink through light bands at the horizon; moon-set (the halo seen around the setting moon does not seem to register on film); ground details; and the "red arcs", a phenomenon of ionization at an altitude of 150 miles that cannot be photographed.

Among the technical problems to be faced are questions of cabin lighting; whether the crayons will be compatible with the pure-oxygen environment of the spacecraft; and whether the crayons (or colored chalk) will be available in a wide enough variety of hues and shadings.

Oil paint, incidentally, is out. In a weightless cabin, how do you keep the paint on the brush? Leonardo, Leonardo, let us shed a gentle tear.—NL



AFTER A

By
EDMOND HAMILTON

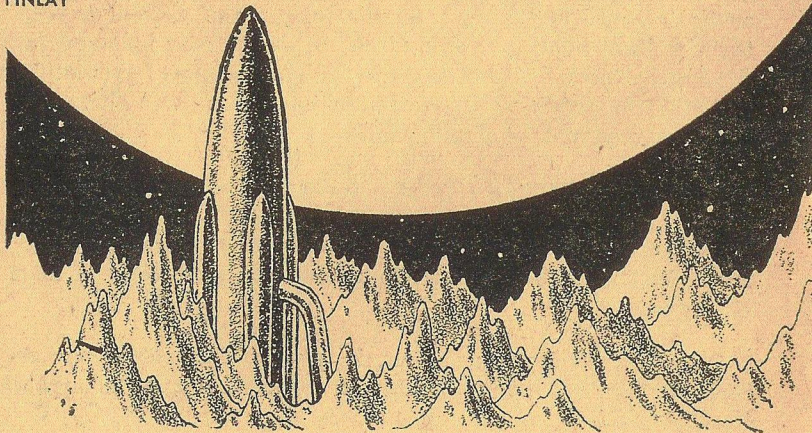
JUDGEMENT DAY

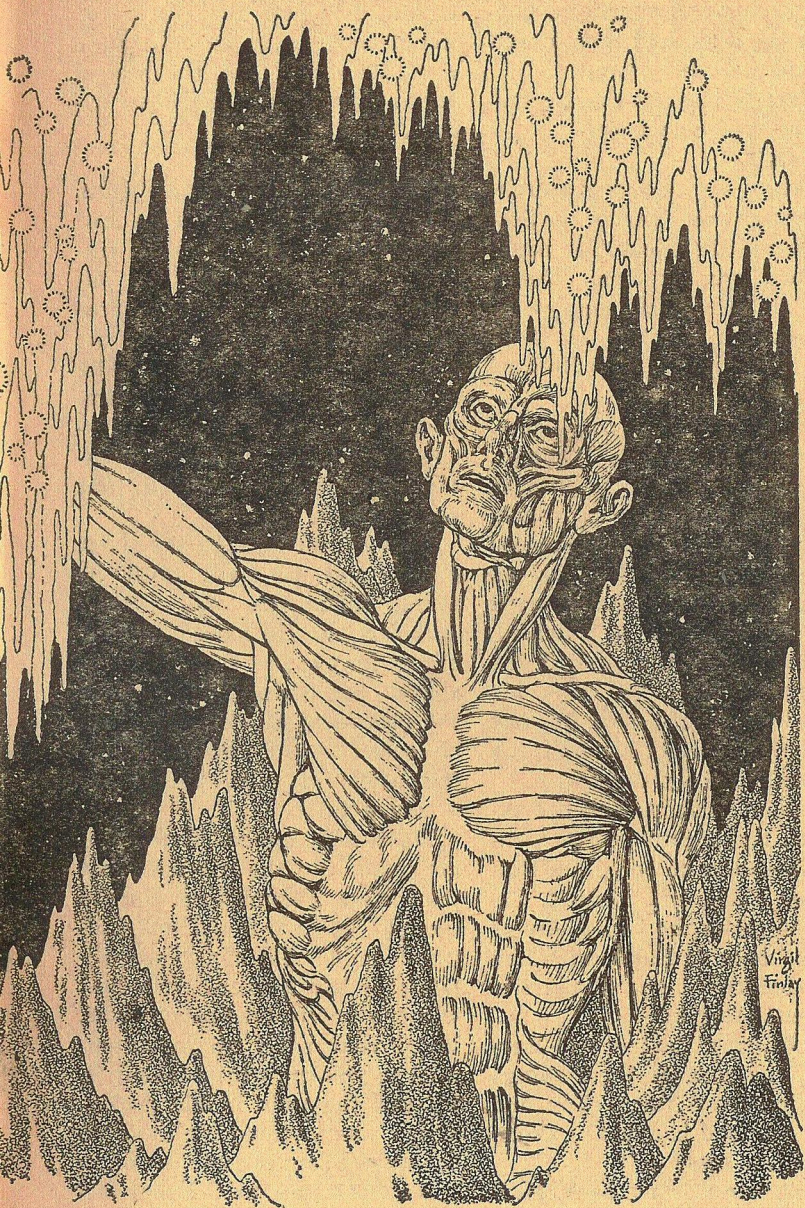
Not to look at Earth, was the main thing. It was such a natural thing to do, to lean back in your chair and look up through the ceiling window and see the gray-and-bluish globe of Earth spinning away there against the blackness and the stars. But if you started looking, pretty soon you were remembering, and there was no use remembering now, no use at all.

MARTINSEN lowered his head so that he would not see the window and the Earth. He looked instead at the complex bank of tell-tales across the room

from him. He looked at them for a long time before he really saw them, and noticed that one had changed. A tiny red star had appeared in that section.

Illustrator
FINLAY





Virgil
Finlay

He reached and punched a button on the desk, and then leaned and said into an intercom,

"Ellam, Sixteen is coming in."

There was no answer.

"Ellam?"

He knew his voice was searching through every part of the Station, down the gleaming metal corridors, into the small laboratories and the rock supply-caverns below. He waited, but there was still no answer from Howard Ellam.

Martinsen made a tired sound, between weariness and anger, and rose to his feet. He thought he knew what had happened, though he had taken precautions against it. He walked across the room and started down a corridor, a rumped, soiled figure in the coverall he had not changed for days, his grizzled-gray head held up, but his shoulders sagging and his feet scuffing the plastic floor.

No sound broke the silence except the gentle purr of the aerators. There was no one in the Station but Ellam and himself. Carelli had taken the two others of the staff back to Earth with him weeks before, in one of the two emergency-ferries.

"I'll be back," he had told Martinsen, "as soon as I get things untangled down there. You and Ellam stay and handle the Charlies as they come in."

Carelli hadn't come back. Mar-

tinsen felt now that he never would come back, he or anyone else. They still had the second ferry. But they also had their orders.

HE walked along in the silence, remembering when he had first walked this corridor, tingling with excitement and anticipation, his first ten minutes inside Lunar Station. How he had thought of the work he would be doing here, of the importance of that work to everyone on Earth, now and in the future. The future? My God, that was a laugh.

He went on through the silent rooms and passages until he found Ellam. He was sitting. Just sitting. He looked normal, except for the fact that he hadn't shaved, but when Martinsen saw the glassiness of his fixed stare, he looked around until he found the bottle of pills, half-spilled across a table.

Martinsen sighed. There was no liquor in the Station, but there were tranquilizers. He had thought he had found and hidden them all, but apparently Ellam still had a store. Well, that was one way to take catastrophe. Wrap your mind up in cotton-wool so you can't think about it. He put the pills in his pocket. There was nothing he could do but leave Ellam to come out of it.

He went back to C Room and

sat there, watching the little red star slowly change position on the board as Probe Sixteen returned toward the Moon. The other probes, all recalled at the same time, would be coming in during the next few days, until all the Charlies had returned. And then?

He found that he was staring up at Earth again. How many people were still alive there? Many? Any? He thought of calling again but there was never any answer any more, and later would be just as good.

It was very much later when he finally went down to Communications and tried the call. He put it through three times, and waited after each time, but there was no answer. Not a flicker.

The anger rose again in Martinsen. *Everybody* on Earth couldn't be dead. Not everybody. The A-Plague might have swept the globe and wiped out hundreds of millions, but surely someone down at Main Base would have survived, and why didn't that someone answer?

But that someone still living at Main Base . . . would he be able to answer if he wanted to? He just might not be able to utilize the complex communications instruments. The whole little staff here in the Station had, as a matter of course, been taught how. But that certainly

did not apply to all the thousands who had worked at Main Base, and if the survivors didn't know . . .

Martinsen shook his head. Even if that had happened, even if Carelli had found Main Base depopulated when he went back down there, still, Carelli could have called and said so. Unless . . . unless Carelli and Muto and Jennings had been hit by the A-Plague before they had had time to find out what conditions were, and to get back to Communications and call back. But if that had happened, it meant that the A-Plague was triumphant over Earth and all its billions.

It was funny, in a way, Martinsen thought. For decades, people had been afraid of atomic destruction. It was nuclear war they had feared most, but also they had been afraid of fallout and what it might do to their bodies. But nuclear war had never happened, and fallout had been cut to a safe level. The only trouble was that a level that did not affect human bodies might very well affect other and smaller bodies. Like the bodies of bacteria.

A SERIES of radioactive-induced mutations had occurred in a species of hitherto not-very-harmful bacteria. The scientists had finally wakened up to what was going on. But by

then it was too late, the most fearful bacteria in the world's history had appeared and were spreading, and the A-Plague was let loose. Its first incursions, with previously unheard-of high mortality rates, had been in South America. The world health organizations had taken alarm. There had been swift measures of quarantine, concentrated searches for a vaccine. But it was too late for all that, and the messages that came through to the five horrified men in Lunar Station were of cities, then countries, then whole nations, going silent. Until Main Base, too, went silent.

And five men were left marooned in Lunar Station, and then after Carelli and Jennings and Muto went back down, there were only two men, and one of them kept doping up on pills to forget a wife and kids, so you might say he was alone, with a dead or dying world down there, and . . .

"Knock it off," Martinsen told himself. "You can cry later."

The telltales showed more little red stars, more probes approaching the Moon. The beautiful, slim metal ships in which no human had ever ridden yet, were returning. They had quested to the nearest stars and their planets, moving in overdrive, and those in them had walked under the radiation of strange suns.

But the quest had been suddenly interrupted, a hyperspace signal had flung an abrupt command, and now the probes were coming back in.

He thought it was probably all for nothing. What use was it to record carefully all the knowledge the Charlies would bring back with them, if there was nobody left alive on Earth to use it? But Carelli had left him responsible and he couldn't just sit and throw away the first rewards of the whole project.

Cybernetic-Humanoid And Related Life Study, was the project's name. CHARLS, it was more often called, and of course the cyborgs that went out in the probes were at once nicknamed Charlies. And after a time, after Probe 16 had automatically made its landing and entered the reception hangars of Lunar Station, Martinsen heard the soft footsteps of Charlie Sixteen in the passageway, going quietly toward the analysis laboratories.

Martinsen got up and went to the labs. On the spot that had his number painted on the floor, Charlie Sixteen stood silent and unmoving. Martinsen started his preliminary examination, and despite his conviction that it was all for nothing now, he was quickly caught up in the routine.

"Heart-pump, kidneys, cardiovascular system, all look good," he muttered. "Looks like more

calcium mobilization than we expected, but it'll take time to find out. Let's see how your hypothalamus reacted, Charlie."

Charlie Sixteen stood and said nothing, for he could not speak. Neither could he hear, nor think. He was not a man, but a mechanical analog of humanity used to study the effect of unusual environments on a pseudo-human body. Cyborgs, they had been called from the first one in the early 1960's . . . cybernetic organisms.

He looked grotesquely like a man with his skin off, for through his transparent plastic tissues you could clearly see his artificial heart-pump, the clear tubes of his arteries and veins, the alloy "bones", the cleverly simulated lung-sacs, visible for close study through an aperture in the rib-cage that gaped like a ghastly wound. People who first saw cyborgs always found them horribly lifelike, but that first impression always faded fast, and a cyborg after that was no more lifelike than a centrifuge or a television set.

THE staff at Lunar Station had had toward the Charlies something of the attitude of a window-dresser handling clothes-mannequins. But these mannequins were far more than stiff wax figures. These could walk, could obey the commands

programmed into their electric nerve-systems. These mannequins were not made to stand in shop windows, but to plumb the stars. In the probes, at accelerations no human frame could endure, they would be sent to the worlds of foreign suns, and would walk those worlds and breathe their air and react to their gravitation, and then the probes would bring them back again to Lunar Station and the men there would ascertain the effects of the alien environments on these human analogs.

It had taken a long time for the Station staff to get the cyborgs ready and programmed to act as humanity's scouts into the stars. And during that time the men had humorously given them the Charlie names, in the way in which one had given a car or a boat a name, and had made small jokes about Charlie Nine being brighter than the others, and Charlie Fourteen being a coward who didn't want to go to the stars, and the like. And now, to the infinitely lonely Martinsen, the joke became almost reality, and he talked to the cyborg he was examining as to a living man.

He had gone to the hangars and had got from Probe 16 the tapes that held a record of the faroff coasts which that slim metal missile had explored. He had run through the tapes, first

the visual ones that showed the tawny-red desert on which Charlie Sixteen had walked beneath two shadowed moons, and then the tapes on which the sensor instruments had recorded all the physical data of that world. He pondered certain points in those records, and had returned to his examination of Charlie Sixteen, not even hearing the muted metallic sounds from the hangers that told of two more probes making their automatic return and re-entry.

"I *think*," he told Charlie Sixteen, "that you're a slightly damaged cyborg. Consider yourself lucky that that's all . . . if you were a man, you'd be dead."

Consider yourself lucky, Charlie! If you were a man, you'd know, and think, and remember and . . .

MARTINSEN pushed that thought out of his mind and went on with his examination. Charlies Eight and Eleven had come in by the time he finished with Sixteen, walking silently into the lab and then standing motionless on the painted numbers where their programming ended. Martinsen got the tapes from their two probes and started on them, unwilling to stop work even when the hours passed and he grew tired, unwilling to go back to the chair and sit and look at Earth.

"Now why is your temperature down six degrees?" he muttered to Charlie Eight. "You went in and out of hypothermia perfectly the first time, but the second time you didn't come quite back to normal, and . . ."

"Are you out of your mind, talking to a Charlie?"

Howard Ellam's voice cut across, and Martinsen turned to find Ellam standing in the doorway, his eyes red-rimmed, his body swaying a little, but looking awake enough.

"Just thinking aloud," Martinsen said.

"Thinking?" Ellam jeered. "Things have got bad, all right, when we start talking to cyborgs."

"I'd as lief talk to a Charlie as to a man coked up on sleep-pills," flared Martinsen.

Ellam stared at him and then laughed. "Want to hear a sick joke? The last two men in the world were lock up together, and what happened? They got cabin-fever."

He laughed and laughed and then he stopped laughing. He said dully, "I'm sorry, Mart."

"Oh, forget it," said Martinsen. "But forget about us being the last two men, will you? No plague, not even an A-plague, takes everyone. There's always a few survivors."

"Sure, there's always a few survivors," said Ellam. "Kill off

all the whooping-cranes, and there still turns out to be a few survivors, for a little while. But they're finished, as a species. We're finished."

"Bull," said Martinsen without conviction.

He went doggedly on with his examination of the Charlies, his notations of their reactions to specific environments. Ellam, as though regretting his outburst, helped him set up the bioinstrumentation, and the measuring of effects. Mineral dynamics was Ellam's special field, and he was quick and precise in this. More probes, more missiles homing from the shores of infinity, kept coming in. Presently all but five of the eighteen Charlies stood in the lab.

"Charlie Six hit it lucky," said Ellam, after a while. "There's a world out there at Proxima that would be just fine for humans. If there were any humans to go there."

Martinsen made no answer, but went on with his work. Presently, with a what's-the-use shrug, Ellam quit and went out of the lab.

Martinsen supposed he had gone back to his pills. But when he finally stopped working, too tired to be accurate any longer, and went back through the Station, he found Ellam sitting in C room looking up through the window at Earth.

"Never a light," said Ellam. "It used to be we'd see the lights that were cities, through the little refractor, but it's all dark now."

"The lights may be out, but people are still alive," said Martinsen.

"Oh, sure. A few of them. Sick and dying, or afraid they'll soon be sick and dying, and all the already dead around them."

"Will you *please* knock it off?" said Martinsen.

ELLAM did not answer. After a moment Martinsen turned away. He did not feel like sleeping now. He went back to the labs.

He had turned out the lights there when he left. He walked back in, dull with fatigue, and the bar of light from the passageway struck in through the dark rooms and littered off chrome flanges and bars, and showed the quiet faces, rows and rows of them, of the Charlies standing there, each on his number, not moving, not making a sound. And of a sudden, after all his long familiarity with them, a horror of them struck Martinsen and he stood shivering. What was he doing in this place upon an alien world, with these unhuman figures, all looking toward him from the shadows? He was a man, and this was not a place for men. Things had gone

too fast. Once he had been a boy in a little Ohio country town, and its quiet streets and white houses and old elms and maples must be still much the same, and oh God, he wanted to go back there. But there would be nothing there but death now, man had gone too far and too fast indeed, he was trapped here with unhuman travesties who stood silently looking at him, looking and looking . . .

He switched on the lights with a shaking hand, and suddenly there was a change, the Charlies were just Charlies, just machines that had never lived and never would live. Nerves, he thought. It had better not happen too often, for if it did he would end up running and screaming through the Station, and that was no way for a man to end. He could take pills like Ellam, but work was a better anodyne. He worked.

For days he worked, making the routine examination of every Charlie, noting everything down and not asking himself what eyes would ever read his notes. And when all that was done, and he knew more about the worlds of foreign stars than man had ever known before, he set himself to repair those Charlies that had been damaged by radiation, poisonous atmospheres, or abnormal gravitation.

Sometimes Ellam would help

him, when he was not in a state of semi-stupor from his pills. He usually worked in heavy silence, but one time when the repair of Charlies was almost completed, Ellam asked,

"What's it all for, anyway? Nobody will ever be sending these Charlies out again."

"I don't know," Martinsen answered. And then, after a moment, "Maybe I will."

"You? The Station will be dead and you with it before they'd ever get back."

"I wasn't thinking of having them come back," Martinsen answered vaguely.

An unusual sound of some kind awoke him later from his sleep. He sat up and listened and then he realized its origin. It came from the hangar of the emergency ferries.

Martinsen ran all the way there. His heart was pumping and he had an icy dread on him, the fear of being altogether alone. He was in time to catch Ellam before Ellam had got the little ferry set up for its automatic launch.

"Ellam, you can't go!"

"I'm going," said Ellam stonily.

"There's nothing but death waiting on Earth!"

Ellam jeered. "What's waiting here? It may be a little longer in coming, but not much."

Martinsen gripped his arm. He

had come almost to hate Ellam, during these last days, but now suddenly Ellam was infinitely precious to him as the last defense against ultimate solitude.

"Listen," he said. "Wait a little longer, till I get the Charlies all repaired. Then I'll go with you."

Ellam stared at him. "You?"

"Do you think I want to be left alone here? Anyway, it's as you say, just a matter of time if we stay here. But I have one more thing I want to do."

After a moment Ellam said, "All right, if you're going with me. I'll wait a little while."

MARTINSEN had no illusions about the implications of his promise. The chances were that he and Ellam would both die of the plague very soon after they reached Earth. Still, death there was only a very high probability, whereas it was a certainty here when the Station machinery stopped operating. And that being so, there was not much room for choice.

But the resolution that had been forming in him was suddenly, sharply crystallized now. Ellam would not wait too long, he knew. He would have little time to do the thing he wanted to do.

He set to work furiously in Communications, preparing master-tapes. The first one was an audio-visual vocabulary tape in

which the visual picture of a thing or an action was conjoined with Martinsen's speaking the noun or verb that defined it. It would not be a very large vocabulary but it would contain the key words, and he thought that with it an intelligence of any reasonably high level could quickly advance to expanding interpretations.

He was engaged in finishing this vocabulary-tape when Ellam came into the Communications room and watched him puzzledly for a while. Then he said puzzledly,

"What in the world are you doing?"

Martinsen said, "I'm going to send the probes and Charlies out, before we leave."

"Send them where?"

"Everywhere they can go. Each one will take with them a copy of the tapes I'm preparing."

Ellam said, after a moment, "I get it. Messages in bottles from a drowning person. In other words, the last will and testament of a dying species."

"I still don't think our species will die," Martinsen said. "But even if it lives, it's bound to slip back . . . maybe a long way and for a long time. Everything shouldn't be lost . . ."

"It's a good idea," said Ellam. "I'll help you. Here, give me the mike." And he spoke mockingly into it, "This is the deathbed

message of a race who were such damn fools that they managed to kill themselves off. And our solemn warning is, don't ever learn too much. Stay up in the trees."

Martinsen took the microphone away from him, but he sat brooding after Ellam had left. After all, there was truth in the bitter assertion that man was responsible for his own destruction. But was it the whole truth?

He suddenly realized his inadequacy for this task. He was no philosopher or seer. He was, outside of his own specialized field of science, a thoroughly average man. How could he take it upon himself to decide what was important to tell, and what was not? Yet there was no one else to do so.

THE documentary factual knowledge, the science and the history, were what he began with and they were not so terribly difficult a problem. The Station contained a large microfilm library, and it was easy enough to set up the microfilm equipment so that selected factual knowledge fed directly onto the tapes. But there were also music, art, literature, many other things, and some of all that must survive. He felt more and more overwhelmed by the task as he muddled along trying to make his selections.

How did you evaluate things?

Were Newton's Laws of Motion more important than Mozart's quartets? Were the Crusades more worthy of being remembered than Plato's Dialogues? Could he throw away forever the work of long-dead master artists, just because there was no room for a picture of the Parthenon? So much had been done in the world, so many causes valiantly fought, so much beauty created, so much toil and thought and dreaming, how could one pick and choose?

Martinsen went doggedly on with it, and when the last master-tape was finished he knew how faulty and wretched a job he had done. But there was no time to try again.

He sat for a while, looking at the last tape. He felt somehow that he could not let this imperfect record end without adding his own small word.

He said, after a little while, into the microphone, "The thing that has happened to us was of our own doing. But it came not so much from evil as from fecklessness."

He brooded for a moment and then went on. "We inherited curiosity from the ape, and curiosity unlocked many doors for us. The door of power, the door of space. And finally, if all perish, the door of death. Let this be said of us, that we preferred the risk of disaster to the safety of

always staying still. But whether this was good or bad, I do not know."

Wearily, he shut off the machine. There was nothing left to do but to run the master-tapes through a duplicator until there was a full set of duplicate tapes for each of the eighteen probes. Then he went to the laboratory where the Charlies were.

Ellam, because he was impatient to get this done and leave, had agreed to program the Charlies. He looked almost cheerful now as he worked with Charlie Three. The endplates of the electrical "nerves" had been removed, and a chattering instrument was feeding code into the cyborg's memory-banks, code-signals that were orders. Orders about course in space, orders covering the landing on any planet which looked habitable or inhabited, orders on delivering the tapes only if certain conditions that indicated civilization were present, orders to go on to other stars and other possible planets if they were not. The probes had an almost unlimited range in overdrive, and some would go far indeed.

"Charlie Three is going to Vega," said Ellam. "And from there, if necessary, on to Lyra 431, and maybe a lot farther. He's going to see things, is Charlie Three. They all are."

Martinsen felt a pang of re-

gret. Once men had thought that in time they too would see those things. But it was not to be, and the cyborgs would go in their place, weird lifeless successors of man.

He thought of a poem he had read during his rummaging of the library. What was it Chesterton had written?

"For the end of the world
was long ago,
And we all dwell today
as children of a second birth,
Like a strange people left on
Earth
After a judgment day."

The cyborgs were not people and instead of being left on Earth they were to fare into the wider universe. Yet, stubborn and lifeless though they were, they were yet in a sense the children of men, carrying out to unguessable places the story of their creators.

The programming was finished. There was a wait. Then, at the ordered moment, the cyborgs walked quietly out of the laboratory, one after another.

From the window in C Room, Martinsen and Ellam watched as the probes took off. They raced into the sky as though eager to go, vanishing from view as they went rapidly into overdrive to cross the vast and empty spaces.

Where would be the final ends

of the Charlies? Some might perish in whirlpools of strange force, in unthinkable cosmic dangers. Others might ironically become the idols or gods of savage, ignorant minds. It could be that in time some would drift to other galaxies. But sometimes, somewhere, one at least might deliver his message to those who could decipher it. The music of Schubert might be heard by alien

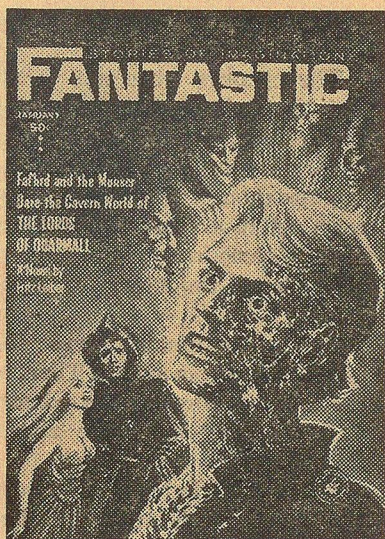
ears, the dreams of Lucretius pondered by alien minds, and the human story would not pass without leaving its imprint on the universe.

The last probe was gone. Martinsen looked up at the globe of Earth, and then he took Ellam gently by the arm.

"Come on, Howard. Let's go home."

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



Any fan of Fafhrd, the Mouser and Fritz Leiber cannot afford to miss the January FANTASTIC. The issue features the beginning of a great two-part novel of magic, adventure and mysticism: THE LORDS OF QUARMALL. Follow the Mouser and Fafhrd through underworld caverns where at every turning lurk death, wizards, and voluptuous slave girls.

For those not sated by Leiber's wondrous prose, there will be other short stories, plus our usual features. Be sure to get the January FANTASTIC, on sale at all newsstands December 19.

If it seemed strange to you that in all the years since Swift "wrote" Gulliver's Travels there has been no sequel, here is the answer: a family mystery, unraveled by the perseverance and imagination of Gulliver II, who herewith tells his tale of . . .

Lilliput Revisited

By ADAM BRADFORD, M.D.

Illustrator LUTJENS

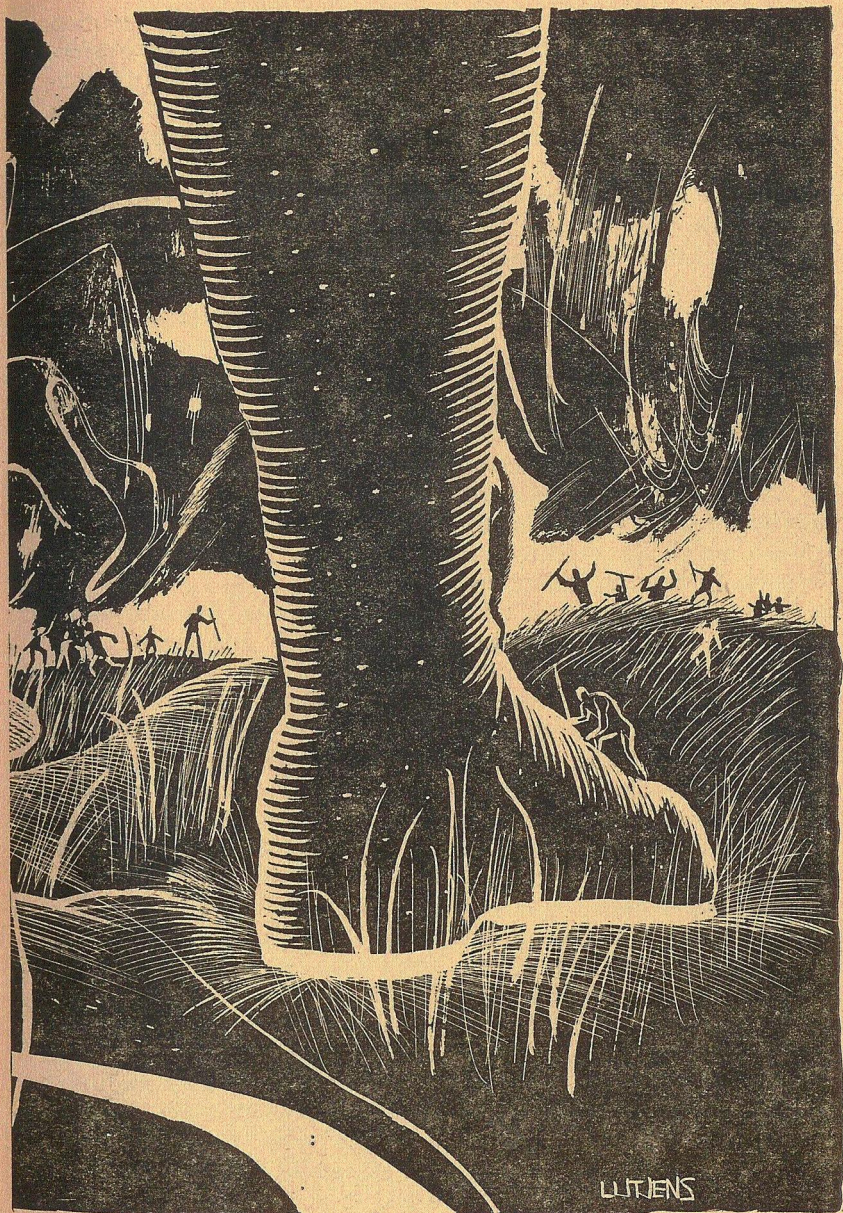
WHENEVER I mentioned "Lilliput" to my friends and told them that I had been there, their reply was either an incredulous raising of an eyebrow or a more outspoken, "You're insane!" So, for years, I stopped talking about Lilliput and my adventures.

But truth cannot be suppressed. It squirmed inside my brain and prodded at my consciousness as if it were probing for a way out. Truth turns the sleeper in the night as if he were being basted on a spit. It provokes utterances that seem unintelligible. For example, in discussing the recent election with Dr. Hetherton, I said, "I'm sure the Tramecksans will be elected." "Who?" he asked as a fleeting glance of bewilderment shot

across his face. "The Tramecksans," I replied, and, then, quickly realizing that I had confused Lilliputian political parties with our own, I corrected myself and blurted, "The Democrats." Then I said no more. But I knew my mind was still back in Lilliput and, unless I recorded my adventures, I would be unable to rest.

Perhaps I am getting ahead of my story. Let me see if I can find some beginning. I had graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1945, took one year in Pathology at the Mallory Laboratory and then, following my uncle's footsteps, went to the Massachusetts General Hospital for a three-year residency in Orthopedic Surgery. When I completed this training, I discussed my future again with my uncle* and





he agreed that I should round out my education with additional study abroad. I was fortunate in obtaining an exchange fellowship for one year at Oxford University where I was to study in the Bone Metabolism Laboratory under the direction of the eminent Dr. Tracy Purvis-Freemont.

I mention all of this for two reasons. First, to indicate to the reader how I happened to come to England, and, secondly, to establish the fact that I am not an idle wanderer, or a deluded madman. All of the above data are completely verifiable by anyone curious enough to consult the College or Hospital records. Furthermore, lest it be considered that I am interested in sensationalism for publicity's sake, let me point out that I might be described by some (with whom I might differ) as a "bluenose Bostonian," a descendant of Watch-and-Ward morality. I despise the sensation-seeker, the writer of cheap fiction, the novelist who makes the best-seller lists by his liberal use of four-letter words. Conversely, I believe that truth should not be suppressed and that each man's constitutional right to free speech should be safeguarded.

And so, in the Fall of 1951, I found myself (happily, I might

* Dr. LeRoy Bradford, whose name is familiar to many of you, I am sure, for his world-famous skills in total rehabilitation.

say) in the laboratory of Dr. Tracy Purvis-Freemont studying oxidation-reduction potentials of isolated plasma cells in multiple myeloma. The investigations proceeded slowly and laboriously, but we were making progress. Best of all, I could continue my interest in medical history, for I had access now to old journals and periodicals that were not available to me in the States, not even in the Harvard Medical Library. This, as I shall shortly point out, was, in a sense, my undoing. It was a curious letter that I discovered one night that started me off on my trip to Lilliput.

WORKING in the laboratory after the others had gone home, I wandered into a corner of Dr. Purvis-Freemont's cluttered library, searching for a recent (but mislaid) issue of *Physiological Reviews* when I accidentally caught a glimpse of an old, dust-covered volume with the intriguing title, "Neurographia Universalis." The author, Dr. Raymond Vieussens, was a name I quickly recognized. He was one of the leading physicians of his time (1614-1716), an anatomist and neurologist, who, in 1684, after years of study at the Hospital of St. Eloys (he had performed over 500 autopsies), had assembled his notes and published them in this book. He had

been a favorite physician of Louis XIV and had been granted a pension of one thousand pounds a year. "Neurographia Universalis" was a volume I had sought in libraries and from booksellers for years, but unsuccessfully. Now a copy was in my hands.

As I blew the dust off the cover and excitedly opened the book a letter dropped from between the pages. It was crisp and dry with age. My curiosity prompted me momentarily to lay the book aside, open the crumpled note and scan its contents. It read as follows:

Fetter Lane
London, England
April 30, 1689

My Dear Doctor Vieussens:

I am writing to You upon the Encouragement of my Master, Sir James Bates, under whom I am shortly to complete my Apprenticeship in Chirurgie and whom I have faithfully served these past four years. I am to studie Medicine at Leyden and shall then, if it be goode Will, to pursue my Studies further at the Hospital of St. Eloys. Then I shall return to practise Medicine and Chirurgie in London. Since I do not yet know where my Lodgings in Leyden shall be and since I wait expectantly for your Permission to studie with You, I would be most grateful if You would forward your reply to my Request to my Cousin, Richard Sympson, in Nottinghamshire.

Sir James Bates sends his highest and personal Regards and Greetings.

Sincerely and
Hopefully Yours,
(Signed)
Leumuel Gulliver

I must admit that, when I first read this letter, its full significance did not strike me because the signature was partially obscured with age and, in my haste, I misinterpreted it as "Lionel Gallagher." I had returned the letter to the book and had begun to glance through its pages when the signature again flashed through my brain—*LEMUEL GULLIVER*. Again, I tore open the letter, reread it, and critically analyzed its contents and signature. This time, there was no doubt about it. It was "Leumel Gulliver"—and no one else.

But, I asked myself, was this, perhaps, a hoax? But why? A hoax for what purpose? Still, I knew that Gulliver wasn't *real*. He was a fictional character, a figment of Jonathan Swift's imagination. I also knew by now I was too excited, too tired, too confused to think. Absent-mindedly, I put the letter in my pocket, switched off the lights in the laboratory, locked the door behind me, and returned to my apartment on Purdy Lane.

I tossed in my sleep. I waited for the dawn. I must go to the library, obtain a copy of Gulliver's Travels, and then check the

facts. I had read about the Lilliputians and the Yahoos in English A, but that was so many years ago. Who was Richard Sympson? Who was Sir James Bates? Why would a hoax be so carefully elaborated? As for Dr. Raymond Vieussens, I already knew that he was a *real* person. I was familiar with his biography. And, last night, I held in my hands a copy of his book.

I must have waited outside the library door for an hour before the librarian arrived. She glanced at me suspiciously, and I knew that I had to compose myself, to exert better self-control. "Do you have an old copy of *Gulliver's Travels*?" I nevertheless almost blurted out. "One moment, please," she replied with icy formality. "Sit here," she pointed to a chair, "and I'll bring you a copy shortly."

That morning was the first that I failed to appear at the Bone Metabolism Laboratory in spite of the fact that a symposium was being held on multiple myeloma, and I was to be one of the discussors of the papers that were being presented. It was my first unannounced absence, but it was to be followed by many others, for I knew, even then, that honest and truthful explanations would only invite ridicule or, perhaps, a hurried telegram to my uncle that I was in need of psychiatric treatment. I

determined, therefore, to feign illness on these occasions or find other excuses that seemed reasonable at the moment. I knew that I had to get to the bottom of the matter, hoax or no hoax.

WHEN the librarian appeared with the volume, I must have practically snatched it from her hands. I hurried with the book to a corner near a window, sat down at a small desk, and opened the pages. In a few moments, I had verified most of the salient points in the letter. *Richard Sympson* was *Gulliver's* cousin, and it was to Richard Sympson that Gulliver had given authorization for the collection and publication of his travels. *Mr. James Bates* was "an eminent Surgeon in London," with whom Gulliver was apprenticed four years. The title "Sir" had probably been confirmed later, perhaps just before Gulliver left for Leyden to continue his studies. Gulliver had probably failed to receive his appointment from Dr. Raymond Vieussens, since there was no mention of his having travelled to Paris or of his having studied at the Hospital of St. Eloys. On the contrary, Gulliver says, "Soon after my Return from Leyden, I was recommended by my good Master, Mr. James Bates, to be Surgeon to the Swallow, Captain *Abraham Pannell*. Commander."

But, there was more that I learned that eventful morning. According to a foreword in the volume that I held so eagerly in my hands, much of Gulliver's written adventures had been deliberately omitted in the *published* editions because of Richard Sympson's carelessness or conceit. I quote verbatim from Sympson's record:

"This Volume would have been twice as large if I had not made bold to strike out innumerable Passages relating to Winds and Tides, as well as to the Variations and Bearings in several Voyages; together with the minute Descriptions of the Management of the Ship in Storms, in the Style of Sailors. Likewise, the Account of the Longitudes and the Latitudes; wherein I have Reason to apprehend that Mr. Gulliver may be a little dissatisfied. But I was resolved to fit the Work as much as possible to the general Capacity of Readers—And if any Traveller hath a Curiosity to see the Whole Work at Large, as it came from the Hand of the Author, I will be ready to gratify him."

Gulliver, of course, was angered by his cousin's free hand in the condensation and abbreviation of his works, for he chided him in a letter published almost as a foreword to his Travels. He wrote, "But I do not remember I gave you Power to consent, that anything should be

omitted, and much less that anything be inserted; Therefore, as to the latter, I do here renounce every thing of that Kind."

Now the real truth of the matter was apparent to me. Jonathan Swift had not created a fictitious character in the person of Lemuel Gulliver. He had simply taken this intrepid traveller's notes, plagiarized them, and published them as his own work. Their plagiarism would still have remained undetected had I not found the letter which, this very moment, I again read and compared with the printed text. The hoax was not my letter. The hoax was not Lemuel Gulliver. The hoax, skillful, but now apparent, was that perpetrated by Swift after Gulliver's death.

There was more work to be done. The clue lay in Richard Sympson's notation: "And if any Traveller hath a Curiosity to see the Whole Work at large, as it came from the Hand of the Author, I will be ready to gratify him." My mind was as cool and logical now as a syllogism. I reasoned that, if Gulliver actually lived, then Lilliput was real. If Richard Sympson once had the full record of Gulliver's travels, then it was possible that this record might be "lost" somewhere, and not destroyed. Finally, if the "Account of the Longitudes and Latitudes" could be discovered, it might be possible to retrace Gul-

liver's travels and revisit the islands and countries that had been "lost" from our civilization for almost three hundred years. My next move, I knew, must be to find the descendants of Richard Sympson in Nottinghamshire or to locate Gulliver's family (he spoke of his son and daughter in one of his travels) in Redriff.

THE next few days remain a blur in my mind. I hardly recall how or when I left the library or whether I returned to my lodging or to the laboratory. I know that my replies to Dr. Purvis-Freemont's queries thereafter were evasive and vague. My medical project was all but forgotten. I had to find Richard Simpson's descendants somewhere in Nottinghamshire. In this search, I enjoyed exemplary good luck.

First, I drove my Jaguar through the countryside the short distance from Oxford to Nottingham, where I had determined that I would first check with the police and then at the church. The police could give me no help, but one statement in the records of the church caught my eye. It read,

August 9, 1703:

Richard Sympson. Died
In checking backward, I found two other significant notations:

April 12, 1675: Born: To Richard Sympson and to his goode Wife, Helen (Arlington) Symp-

son, a daughter, Elizabeth. March 3, 1962: Married to Robert Cooper, Miss Elizabeth Sympson, Daughter of Richard Simpson.

I had thus determined that Richard Sympson had left a family, and it was my task to find them. I shall not bother my readers with the remaining details of my search which extended over the next three months. The course I had to follow was a tortuous one and could provide enough material for several volumes which would rival, I am sure, some of the best detective fiction. Suffice it to say, the search led from Nottingham to the towns of Long Eaton and to Melton. It was there, in Melton, at a haberdasher's, that I knew that I might be at the end of my long manhunt.

"Does Mrs. Richard Schroppe live here?" I inquired.

"Yes," replied the slight, elderly man who was arranging some ties in a display case. "Who shall I tell her is asking to see her?"

"I am Dr. Adam Bradford," I answered, "but I am here on a personal, non-medical matter. I wonder if I might have a few moments of her time."

"Certainly," he said, and then turning toward the back of the store, he called, "Nellie, there's a gentlemen here who wishes to talk with you. Can you come out?"

The curtain that closed off the doorway at the rear of the store now parted and out stepped a middle-aged, rather stout, energetic woman wearing a plaid skirt and a knitted shawl thrown loosely over her shoulders.

"And what is it you want?" she asked in a faint cockney accent as she looked me over both inquisitively and suspiciously.

As blandly as I could (for I didn't want to alarm her), I explained my mission, that I was endeavoring to locate the descendants of Captain Lemuel Gulliver or Mr. Richard Sympson, his cousin, and that I was anxious to purchase any papers or other effects that these gentlemen may have left to their families or heirs since I was interested in these old manuscripts because of family ties. As a matter of fact, I had asked this same question of so many different persons in so many towns that I had concocted an innocent fable about my being an American tourist who was interested in tracing his family tree. My great-great-grandmother, I fabricated, had been a Sympson when she married Lowell Bradford and had emigrated to America. She had been born in Redriff, near Newark, in Nottinghamshire, near the birthplace of Lemuel Gulliver. I implied, too, that, as a wealthy American, I would pay as much as ten or

twelve pounds for any letters or old manuscripts that my ancestors might have left. As I related my simple yarn to Mrs. Schroppe, I could see her face brighten and her suspicions disappear.

"I have a trunk full of old papers that my grandfather asked me to keep," she said, "but I can't make 'eads nor tails of them. Come with me," and she lead me through the curtained partition to a tiny flat in the rear of the store. Her husband, the haberdasher, accompanied us, muttering something about how he had encouraged her to save the trunk because "it might be valuable some day."

On the floor of the closet in the bedroom, an old seaman's trunk was finally dislodged from under a heap of old clothing. With the three of us tugging and pulling, we finally dragged it into the center of the living room and Mrs. Schroppe thrust open the unlocked lid. It seemed to be filled with old clothing, a few muskets, a sword, much as anyone would find in an old sea chest. But, as she shook out one old overcoat, a small, round, gold object fell to the floor. Picking it up, I noted it was a plumed helmet, but so small that it could only fit a doll that was seven or eight inches high. A Lilliputian helmet? The thought flashed through my brain and I knew

that I would have to try much harder to mask my excitement. I said nothing but pressed on with the search.

IN a few moments, all my effort was completely rewarded. In one corner of the bottom of the trunk lay five volumes of manuscript bound together by leather thongs. I needed only to glance at the manuscript on the top of the pile. Even though it had partially deteriorated with age, I recognized the handwriting and the salutation. It read, "A Letter from Captain Gulliver, to his Cousin Sympson." The handwriting was identical to that of the letter from Gulliver to Dr. Raymond Vieussens in Paris, which was still in my pocket. My search was over.

The Schropes, realizing that the trunk contained coins and other objects of some value, dickered over the purchase price, and agreed to sell the manuscripts to me only if I bought the trunk and its entire contents. At first they asked for 100 pounds, but we finally agreed on a figure of 60 guineas. The deal was rather quickly concluded, but I couldn't get the trunk into my car, so I emptied its contents on the seat and floor beside me and told the Schropes that I would return for the empty trunk on some later date.

I returned to Oxford and my

lodgings in Purdy Lane in wild excitement. The trip was a short one since, fortunately, in England there is no legal speed limit, and my little Jaguar moved along as if it were actually sharing in the pleasure of the chase. Still, it was almost quarter past seven before I had my newly-discovered treasures behind the locked door of my flat.

In addition to the articles of clothing (presumably Gulliver's or Sympson's) which I have already mentioned, I discovered that the manuscripts in my possession contained the precise geographic locations of many of the places visited by Gulliver, including some of his less known and uneventful voyages to places such as the Levant (when he was Surgeon to the Swallow), to California and to Japan (on the Helmsford). Besides, I discovered that Gulliver had not only collected significant mementoes of his trips, such as a pair of high-heeled shoes worn by members of the Tramecksan party of Lilliput, low-heeled shoes of the Slamecksans, a giant pair of spectacles of the Brobdingnagians with the glass of one lens broken, and a multitude of coins and pieces of gold, but that he had also devised a glossary or dictionary of the various languages of the countries he had visited. For example, at the bottom of one page of a manuscript

dealing with his adventures in Lilliput, the following words were translated and clearly legible:

Hurgo=great Lord (Emperor)

Quinbus Flestrin=Great Man Mountain

Ranfu-Lo=Breeches

Kelmin=Peace

desmar=with him

lon=his

My greatest joy and satisfaction came from the study of the precise data on maps and nautical charts that Gulliver had kept and detailed so carefully concerning his sea voyages. I had no trouble at all in interpreting his nautical instructions since I had not only served in the Coast Guard Reserve at College, but had, since a child, practically lived on the sea, myself. Even before I went to Groton, I had successfully competed in the Marblehead Sailing Races and, later, in College, had sailed in races in Narragansett Bay and in Bermuda on our family yacht. One summer, as a matter of fact, I sailed on a fishing schooner out of Gloucester to the Grand Banks. Sailing was as much of my life as medicine and orthopedic surgery. The man who has not felt the salt spray against his cheeks or who has not unfurled a sail has missed much of life. I feel genuinely sorry for all those who

have not been as fortunate as I, but this is beside the point.

At any rate, I practically did not leave my quarters the next week since I was completely preoccupied with reading Gulliver's original accounts of his adventures and becoming more and more incensed at the liberties Richard Sympson had taken in editing these works prior to their publication. Gulliver, I discovered, was as blunt and outspoken as any sea captain and, I suppose, Sympson must have had to do some editing to exclude the libelous and slanderous statements that he made. But, now, almost three hundred years later, it seemed as if the bluntness were gone and only the gentle satire remained. What annoyed me most was that Sympson, in his editing, had excluded so much of the nautical information pertinent to the voyages. In a way, though, I was delighted because, to the best of my knowledge, here were places on earth untouched by three centuries of "civilization," countries presumably that had not been visited since they were so fully described by Gulliver, himself.

AS my days of reading and investigating went by, I became more and more overwhelmed by the determination to revisit Lilliput (and perhaps some of the other countries).

The maps I now had seemed more than adequate to locate Lilliput. My next step was obvious. I must purchase a sloop with an auxiliary motor. To avoid detection or embarrassment, I had to make this trip myself. A crew would be worse than useless; it might cause problems of discipline and management that might lead to grief. My mind was made up. I had to travel alone.

In a copy of the *Manchester Guardian*, I found an advertisement that practically coincided with the vessel I had in mind. The advertisement read:

For Sale: Due to a financial reversal, I am compelled to sell my yacht, *Stella Nova*, for 2000 pounds or a reasonable offer. This yacht is a forty-foot Cabin Cruiser built three years ago by Thomas Winham, Ltd., and in excellent condition. Twin-screw propelled, the motors are Rolls Royce, 100 horse power each. There are auxiliary sails. For further information, please contact owner, Geoffrey Trambourne, 10 St. Francis Place, Wapping."

The next morning found me at the above address. Mr. Trambourne, I discovered, was a barrister whose chief law practice was in London but who had speculated heavily in the market and who had speculated unwisely. It was a desperate situation and

he needed money quickly to pay off his debts. The *Stella Nova* had been built to his specifications and was in an excellent and seaworthy condition. I told Mr. Trambourne (here, again, I admit to a mild fabrication) that I was looking for a boat with which I could spend a year or so on a vacation in the Mediterranean. I had asthma, I said, and had been advised by my physician that a sea voyage in a milder climate would be therapeutic. I could not afford to disclose the real purpose of my purchase.

Mr. Trambourne drove me to the dock at the Eagle's Nest in Wapping where the *Stella Nova* was moored so that I could inspect the vessel myself. A short cruise down the Thames at speeds at times approaching 30 knots convinced me that the craft was sturdy and rugged enough to make the trip I had planned. Furthermore, the *Stella Nova* was equipped with a bunk, a galley and a head, and had ample storage facilities for fuel and provisions. There was even a short-wave radio for both reception and transmission. In the States, a similar craft would have cost two or three times as much. The following day I bought the *Stella Nova* and paid Mr. Trambourne 1850 pounds cash. It was the biggest bargain of my life.

It took almost three additional months of planning and preparation (and I shall not bother my readers with the details) because of delays during the winter and the necessity of extending my excuses to Dr. Tracy Purvis-Freemont at the Bone Metabolism Laboratory for not attending to my duties there. However, on April 3, 1952, I finally cast off from the Eagle's Nest in Wapping on my voyage to Lilliput.

SINCE, according to Gulliver's map, Lilliput lay in the Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar at approximately $30^{\circ} 30'$ south longitude and 58° east latitude, I decided that my course would proceed across the channel and follow the coast and thus proceed through Gibraltar to the Mediterranean. There would be many ports along the way in which I could refuel and obtain additional provisions as necessary. I could travel leisurely then to Port Said, through the Suez Canal and into the Red Sea and through the Gulf of Aden. Any additional time that I had on board could be spent familiarizing myself with the language of the Lilliputians and the acquisition of some additional information concerning their history and government during Gulliver's stay there.

Suffice it to say that on May 22nd, I was well on my way through the Suez Canal and had had no mishaps. I had always been close to some port in stormy and inclement weather and the *Stella Nova* had proved most seaworthy. But the greatest test was yet to come. Having reached the Gulf of Aden, I headed south to Mogadiscio in Somaliland just above the equator for additional storage of provisions and fuel and, from there, I planned to touch Madagascar and then head South by Southeast in the general direction described by Gulliver. In case of trouble, I could land in Madagascar and find some port there. I calculated that, with my accessory fuel tanks, I could have enough fuel to get to Lilliput and return to Madagascar. Besides, I planned to use my sails as much as possible and to rely on my fuel only if I were becalmed.

All went well at first but, on June 3rd, according to my log, I discovered that the Indian Ocean could be far more treacherous than I had anticipated. A violent electrical storm knocked out my compass and, for two days, incapacitated my radio. All I know is that I drifted off course the next few days. To save precious fuel, I unfurled my accessory sails and hoped that the currents and winds would direct me to my destina-

tion. The *Stella Nova* had remained tight during the storm and I still had an adequate supply of fuel and provisions.

On the morning of June 11th (as best I can reckon), I sighted land on my port side, furling my sail, started up my engine and headed to the land that was now clearly visible through my binoculars. At first, I could see no sign of life although, from the distance, the land seemed to be divided into large, regular patterns of what appeared to be tilled earth and smaller rows of houses and villages. Everything, however, seemed to be on a miniature scale, like a three-dimensional model on a movie set. Within another hour, I found a suitable cove to beach the *Stella Nova*, for I could not make out any definite harbors or wharves. I no sooner beached my craft, though, when I saw tiny, human figures scurrying through the grass. I knew I was either in Lilliput or Blefuscu, but I did not know which. Cautiously, I anchored my boat off shore and began to row in toward the beach.

Landing quickly, I started to pull my rowboat on to the beach when a shower of tiny arrows, each no larger than a toothpick, and a murmur of voices in the underbrush repeating words which sounded like "Quinbo Flestro" answered my curiosity as to my location. "Quinbus Fles-

trin" was an expression meaning "Great Man Mountain" and it was the term used by the Lilliputians in addressing Gulliver. "Quinbo Flestro," I reasoned, might be a corruption of those words, and I was therefore most likely in Lilliput. The Blefuscuns had called Gulliver "Strabdo Nearin" which meant "Tallest Tree." I shielded my face from the flying arrows, quickly swooped down and picked up a handful of Lilliputian soldiers, disarmed them, and threatened to dash them to the ground unless we could arrive at an immediate truce. The barrage of arrows ceased as I called out, "Kelmin," "Kelmin," repeatedly to indicate that I sought peace. When I heard the reply, "Kelmin-re," "Kelmin-re," spoken by several voices, I knew that I could drop to the ground on my knees so that I might better inspect the "enemy" Lilliputian forces.

MY first request was to see the Emperor. "Gristig Hurgo?" (Where is the Emperor?) I asked. The request was greeted with incredulence and confusion. One of the warriors, however, presumably the leader, since he was about nine inches tall whereas the other Lilliputian soldiers were only about seven or eight inches, stepped forward. "Hurguto Tranus," he replied, meaning, "We are all Emperors," and

the masses of soldiers laughed and cheered. Since Lilliput, at the time of Gulliver, had been ruled by an Emperor, I was at first baffled by the statement, "We are all Emperors." What could this mean? How could a government be composed exclusively of Emperors? Could Lilliput have become a democracy? Perhaps it was a communistic state. Although this latter suspicion ultimately proved true, I think I should first inform my readers about the soldiers and their weapons, before I describe their present government.

Although neither gunpowder nor atomic energy are known to the Lilliputian professional army they regard themselves as the greatest military power on earth. Their arrows are poison-tipped, but they have discovered an antidote (a closely guarded secret) for this poison and also for the poison of the arrows of their enemies in Blefuscu. Because of the discovery of this antidote, they were able in 1846, (as best as I could make out by comparing their calendar to ours), to wage a major, successful war against the Blefuscuns and completely conquer that country. "Gring Blefuscu Bra" or "Blefuscun Victory Day" is their major national holiday and has already been celebrated for 122 moons according to their calendar.

With this victory, the conflict between the ideologies of the big-enders and the little-enders was terminated and it was decreed that the official way of breaking an egg was to break it at the little end. The victorious Lilliputians decided that it was "right" to let the egg rest on its broad or stable end before breaking it open. At present, however, the modern Lilliputian is both amused and embarrassed at the naivete of his ancestors, and the topic is hardly discussed for fear of reviving ancient animosities. Although it is still "official" to break eggs at the little end first, an attitude of *laissez-faire* prevails and no one appears to be concerned any longer over which end of the egg is broken first.

But the reader should not conclude that all ideological conflict has been resolved. The momentous issue at present which divides the Lilliputians and Blefuscuns rests on another problem. Lilliputians are convinced that the left shoe should be put on first, while Blefuscuns are equally determined that it is better to get into the right shoe initially. While determination of which end of an egg should be broken first is nowadays considered trivial, the tying of shoes has loomed large and important. I must admit that this ideologic conflict was not immediately ap-

parent to me when I arrived in Lilliput. It was only weeks later after I noticed that the Lilliputians were watching me closely as I put my shoes on that I was able to determine the reason for their intense curiosity. Fortunately, it is a habit of mine to put on my left shoe first and the Lilliputians, noticing this, regarded my action as providing additional support for their viewpoint. During the remainder of my stay in Lilliput, I continued to put my left shoe on first.

To return to the soldiers, the dress of the average soldier is comparable to that of a Roman soldier of about Caesar's time, but the chariots which they use in battle are more Grecian in character. Some of the footmen are equipped much like Robin Hood's archers and their precision with the bow and arrow is truly remarkable. They are apparently fearless fighters and, had I not sued for "Peace" when I first landed on the island (knowing what Gulliver's fate had been when he fell asleep), I am certain that they would have continued to fire their arrows, blistering my skin until I had succumbed or until I had trampled them all under my feet.

I MUST describe one curious military device which the Lilliputians possess. It is a large kite which is sailed aloft by one

of the stronger soldiers and contains two mirrors which are skillfully manipulated by strings and pulleys by another soldier standing by. This kite not only circles Lilliput but, since the path of the wind is east by southeast, it also passes over Blefuscu. This device, which they call a "Flabrac," flies over the countryside every hour or so at a height of about seven feet (I could easily touch it with my outstretched hand) and its ostensible purpose is to provide the Lilliputians with military information concerning their enemies. However, it also enables the Lilliputians to spy on each other. According to their calculations, the "Flabrac" circles the entire "earth" every 58 minutes. The Blefuscans are prohibited from building this device. My own impression was that the "Flabrac" mirrors were kept more actively in motion when the instrument was above Lilliput than when it was above Blefuscu. Spying on one's friends and neighbors seemed to be far more actively pursued than spying on one's enemies.

To avoid embarrassment, I sought no shelter for myself on Lilliput nor did I ask the natives for food. Recalling what had happened to Gulliver and the tremendous burden he had imposed on the Lilliputians to provide him with food and shelter, I de-

cided to return each night to the *Stella Nova* which was safely anchored near a beach. Luckily, a short row of forty or fifty yards took me easily to my floating home. In this way, I was able to spend several months on the islands of Lilliput and Blefuscu and could take detailed notes about the mores, the customs and governments of these peoples.

Furthermore, I did not desire to form too close an association with the Lilliputians. I had no wish to be a public spectacle as Gulliver had been. It was I who was to interrogate and investigate these people and not vice versa. The thought of little men or women crawling through my pockets, scurrying through my hair, was not an appealing one. To attempt to convince them that there was an "outside" world populated by Quinbo Flestinstri would have fallen on deaf ears now as it had then. Furthermore, I wanted to remain aloof, not mingle with their internal affairs or encourage any conspiracies against me as some of their ancestors had conspired against Gulliver. I have no knowledge, therefore, beyond speculation of what the Lilliputians thought of me. It is likely, therefore, that some of my readers may consider my notes incomplete and not exhaustive enough to satisfy them. I hope I shall be partly forgiven,

at least, since I am a physician and not a sociologist or a writer of historical novels.

I made peace with the Lilliputians in much the same way as Gulliver had. After placing my handful of soldiers gently to the ground so as not to hurt them, I fired one of my revolvers into the air to impress them further with my strength and power and then, by gestures and by my limited Lilliputian vocabulary, endeavored to converse with the leading "Hurgo," the soldier who had given the cease-fire order and who now stood on a platform before me. I tried to make it clear that I would not harm them, that I had simply come to visit as a traveller and as a friend and that, for the most part, I would continue to live on my boat.

Apparently I made myself sufficiently clear, for, from that time on, I was able to crawl or creep through the streets of Lilliput without being molested. As a matter of fact, I was able to clear up many confusing situations that had puzzled the Lilliputians for these past three hundred years.

FIRST, when I arrived, they believed that I was Gulliver, himself, (Quinbus flestrin or Quinbo flestro) who had returned to deal additional vengeance or punishment upon

them. But, after a few days, during which time I demonstrated that I could work for them better than any of their machines, I won their support. For example, if any of my readers will visit Lilliput in the near future, they will find a canal about 1 foot wide, 2 feet deep, and about 40 yards in circumference surrounding their capitol, Mildendo. The Lilliputians had started this canal and had only completed one third of it in about two years. I finished it in one afternoon. On another occasion, I quickly diverted a rampaging river that was about to flood the countryside so that the flood (about 3 feet deep) poured harmlessly into the sea.

Gulliver, himself, had become an evil legend. Time and history had distorted fact, as it often does. The prevailing belief was that Gulliver had set fire to the Queen's palace by means of a magic glass that concentrated the sun's rays, and this devilish bit of work was attributed to the fact that he had been an agent of the Blefuscuns. His heroic effort at extinguishing the fire had apparently failed to be recorded. As additional evidence, the Lilliputians cited Gulliver's "return" to Blefescu and his assistance to their navy. Gulliver is credited with a Blefuscudian victory over Lilliput that lasted 200 years (Apparently, after Gulliver left

Lilliput, the Blefuscuns were aroused to arms and recaptured the fleet which Gulliver had diverted to the Lilliputians.) Although there is no record anywhere of Gulliver's assistance in the Blefuscudian victory over the Lilliputians, Lilliputian history gives Gulliver credit for this remarkable feat. Today, therefore, in Lilliput, "Quinbo fles-tro," the term once applied to Gulliver, no longer means only "Great Man Mountain" but has the more serious connotation of traitor or spy. It is a term of utmost contempt in this country. The great statue erected to Gulliver by the Blefuscuns in their capitol was destroyed by the Lilliputians in 1846 on "Gring Blefescu Bra" when the Lilliputian military might again vanquished their traditional enemies.

As I mentioned before, social changes have been made in Lilliput as it has in so many other countries of our "civilized" world. No longer does the benevolent Emperor or Empress rule this mighty little country. The ruling class was deposed shortly after 1846 by the military junta who came into power not only through the use of force and deceit, but by the use of intriguing slogans, which are still used today. In Lilliput, government by slogan has reached its epitome. Although the military powers are ostensibly at the head, the slo-

gan-makers are the real power in the government. I can only present, at this point, some of the more impressive slogans that came to my attention.

One of the older slogans, "Makra lakta Niski bakta," was devised shortly after the Lilliputian victory over Blefuscu and, translated to the best of my ability, means "More of Everything for Everybody." Another slogan popular today is "Gramus takis, Pharnus Takis" which, translated literally means, "Work more, Money more." There are still other slogans useful not only in political and military life, but also in domestic relations, and Lilliputian conversation in daily life is often sprinkled with such circumlocutions.

ALTHOUGH the slogan-makers are highly paid and respected citizens, the highest paid Lilliputians are still the Rope Dancers. Over the centuries these acrobats have become extraordinarily skilled at balancing themselves on ropes or leaping over sticks. The Rope Dancers and Stick Jumpers seem to enjoy a universal popularity no matter what the time, the custom, or the country. In Lilliput, however, whereas red, blue, and green silks were the popular colors among the contenders for favors from the royalty at Gulliver's time, the popular colors of

the present Rope Dancers are grey or drab olive green. In Gulliver's time, Rope Dancers often broke an arm or a leg in their fall, but today they have learned how to bounce.

The Rope Dancers have also acquired another skill which endears them to the Lilliputians. This concerns their ability in changing their shoes even while in mid air. The Tramecksans with their high-heeled shoes are now in favor in contrast to the Slamecksans and their low-heeled shoes popular at the time of Gulliver. A skilled Rope Dancer, however, can start his jump in low heels and land in high heels or vice versa. Observing their acts closely, I found that Rope Dancers wore one pair of shoes and concealed the other pair but, by dextrous sleight of hand, could change shoes even while doing a most complicated somersault. As a matter of fact, acrobatics have become exceedingly complicated to allow the few seconds that are necessary to change shoes while tumbling this way and that.

The government of Lilliput is hard to describe, since, theoretically, it seems to be based on communistic principles but, actually, it is run by a committee or council called a "Vargu" presided over by a "Hurgo" chosen by the committee. During several conversations with the pres-

ent Hurgo, I was told that the basic philosophy of the government could be expressed as follows:

"Lapus fraget, Milus naget," which, translated, seems to be "All is One. One is Nothing." In other words, the state, as in the communistic governments of our own time, denies completely the worth of the individual and elevates the state to a position of omnipotence. Unlike communists' ideologies which are familiar to us, however, in Lilliput, communism has existed for over 100 years and it no longer makes any pretense of endeavoring to help any of the individual citizens or to improve their status. Activity in the city seemed organized more along the lines of an ant hill or a beehive than even the most communistic societies which are familiar to us. The people have already forgotten what freedom means. Everyone is assigned his chores and work by the state, and the thought of not complying or rebelling apparently no longer exists. Everyone with whom I spoke appeared contented with his lot or, at least, quietly acquiesced to the wishes of the present order. The genial attitude and demeanor of the workers were a curious mixture of numbness and contentment something like one finds in persons who may have been drugged or tranquilized. As a matter of

fact, I discovered later tranquilization of the leaders of government was an approved national policy.

Unlike some of the communistic or socialistic countries which we recognize today and who maintain peace by force of arms, peace between Blefuscu and Lilliput had been maintained for 200 years by an extraordinary method. In both Lilliput and Blefuscu, war can be declared only by the Hurgo and his Vargu. The general population has no voice at all in this matter. There is, however, one condition that each Hurgo and Vargu must fulfill before taking office. As a matter of fact, all elected and appointed officials must be tranquilized by a "Gramcar."

THE Gramcar is a little device which Lilliputians possess that apparently emanates a double frequency, heterocycle, electromagnetic wave, the precise nature of which I was unable to determine. Each person elected or appointed to office must have six "treatments" with the Gramcar before assuming office. The Gramcar ritual is truly a fascinating one, although I am not certain that I have every detail accurately recorded. To the best of my understanding, however, the elected or appointed official lies on a couch, a Gramcar is applied to each temple and the

levers are depressed. Almost immediately, the person treated falls asleep, the sleep lasting for eight to ten minutes. These "treatments" apparently tranquilize the recipient so that, when he awakens, he has lost all animosity toward his fellowman and behaves much like our own politicians prior to their election to office. Since all officials are thus tranquilized, war between Blefescu and Lilliput has become impossible. Although I would have wished to obtain the secret of the Gramcars so that they might be used in our own civilized world, these devices are carefully guarded by the Lilliputians (who attribute their security to them) and they would not permit me to take any from the country. Perhaps it is best that I was unable to bring any Gramcars back home with me, because I am certain that their use would not be countenanced by "civilized" people.

In some ways, however, the Lilliputians have made progress beyond what we have come to know. For example, once when I had stretched out to observe more closely the citizens of Miledendo, I was intrigued to see that the women who were walking along the boulevards and streets apparently were moving their mouths as if they were talking. When I tried to determine with whom the conversations were be-

ing held, I was completely at a loss until I asked one of my guides (or military guards) assigned to my care. "They are talking," he said, "to their friends and neighbors by means of a *bragnac*." I could not discover any more about this *bragnac* from the guard (who must have been uneducated), but later, when interviewed by several of the Professors of the University (who were trying to learn about *me*), I turned the interview to further inquiry about this method of conversation.

Bragnac, I learned, is a wireless method of communication based on a retarded, pulse-frequency, micromagnetic wave in a range which we have not yet discovered. The citizens of Miledendo and, for that matter, much of Lilliput, wear a small earpiece in their left ear and a tiny microphone applied decoratively, like a jewel or ornament, to the neck over the larynx. The men wear a fairly simple and uniform device, but the women vie with each other in the purchase of the more attractive throat-pieces which they call *Laptahs*. Later, when I looked closely, I could see that almost all of the women of Miledendo wore such *Laptahs* and some were quite attractive, indeed. When the Professors asked me about the women in my own country, I had to admit with some embarrassment that we

were not so advanced. In our country, women are completely immobilized when they talk to friends and neighbors at any distance. To converse as they do, our women must hold onto a wire that sticks out of a wall, an act which they may continue for hours at a time. The Professors laughed incredulously, for it was inconceivable to them that any man could tolerate such a woman who was attached to a wire.

SINCE I am a physician, I naturally spent most of my time in Lilliput studying and observing their medical practice. Lilliputian scientists and physicians apparently are unaware of bacteria or antibiotics, and their concept of health and disease probably has an oriental origin. The term for "health" (also "good") is "Yic" and the term for "disease" (or "bad") is "Yac". In every individual there is a constant interplay of "Yic" and "Yac" and one's state of health at any one time is determined by a balance of these forces. As best I could determine, in spite of this naive doctrine, the health of the citizens of Lilliput is not better or worse than that which we enjoy in our own country. Cleanliness, almost approaching our concept of asepsis, is rigidly observed and good nursing care is emphasized. There apparently is no distinc-

tion between doctor and priest, and psychiatry as a specialty of medicine is unknown, although psychotherapy is universally practiced by all members of the healing arts. I could not escape the conclusion that the foundations of good medicine are psychotherapy, cleanliness, and basic hygiene (obesity is practically unknown in Lilliput and tobacco is considered only another noxious weed). What the theoretical basis for medical practice is seems to make little difference. Actual practice seems more important. Good hygiene and good health are apparently partners the world over.

Most of all, since Lilliput is now a strongly socialistic, if not communistic country, I was anxious to discover how the medical welfare program was handled. In this, I was aided by the *Franen-Lu*, the chief medical officer of Mildendo, who invited me to spend as much time as I wished with him, observing his medical practice. He has what we would consider to be a large general practice, since specialization, as such, is not as highly developed in their country as it is in ours.

In general, Lilliputian physicians are not concerned as much with the *cause* of illness as they are with its *cure*. "We would rather have a patient live," said Franen-Lu, "and not know why

he lives, than to have a dead one, and know what killed him." Disease, he pointed out to me, does not necessarily have a cause, or one cause, but many. The objective is to get the patient better. Preoccupation with causes encourages rumination on the part of the patient and the physician, and rumination or excessive introspection is a disease in itself. Accordingly, in their *Magra Krata*, the chief textbook of medicine, diseases are classified not under etiology and pathology as they are in our country, but under remedial agents. The total emphasis is on cure and recovery. Whereas, in our country, the diagnostic clinics and diagnostic hospitals are accorded an untoward amount of reverence, the Kraat or *Healing* Institutions have achieved a deserved recognition. This attitude has apparently reduced both the cost of illness and the degree of disability. Certainly, no Lilliputian physician would ever bother to subject his patient to a multitude of laboratory tests that only serve to confuse him. In our country, of course, the more astute physicians wait for the laboratory to make the diagnosis for them.

It is in the field of medical economics, however, that the Lilliputians have reached a most advanced state. "What are the chief causes of disease in your coun-

try?" the Franen-Lu asked me. "Mental illness, arteriosclerosis, cancer and infections," I replied. "You are probably wrong," he conjectured. "Those may be the leading causes of death, but they are not the chief causes of illness. In Lilliput, as probably in your land, the chief cause of illness is anxiety—and the chief cause of anxiety is money or, rather, the lack of it."

THE health and welfare program of the country is, accordingly, very simple. There are no Welfare Departments, no social workers, and no politicians pressing for votes by offering top-heavy health and welfare programs to prospective voters. Instead, each physician is given authority to spend up to twenty thousand *Bings* (one Bing is equivalent to 100 Sprugs of Gulliver's day) a month in behalf of his patients.

For example, if a middle-aged man comes to the Franen-Lu with a headache, an attempt is made to obtain a socio-economic history as well as a medical one. In his evaluation of the case, the Franen-Lu may determine that the patient's headache is caused by his recent failure to earn as much as he had anticipated from the sale of his crops. "How much money do you need?" the Franen-Lu asks. "Rakta-Kla Bings (Thirty-six Dollars?)" answers

the patient. The Franen-Lu then makes out a prescription for the necessary Rakta-Kla Bings and the patient takes them to the local bank to get his money.

In our country, such a patient would only be given a prescription for sedatives or tranquilizers which would only increase his indebtedness and aggravate his headache. At best, the symptom would only be masked and not cured. In Lilliput, a physician's prescription may be filled at the druggist's or at the bank, whichever seems best suited to the immediate problem. In our own country, if a patient needs money to cure his headache, it would probably cost \$150 or more to give him \$36, since the welfare workers, the social workers, and the whole bureaucratic staff would have to be paid before the sick patient received a penny of the money he needed. I mention this only, not because I expect any radical change in our own ideas of social welfare and state medicine, nor do I see any need for reform, but simply to point out how directly these people deal with matters of health.

Similarly, the Lilliputians have not changed their ideas about Law. Their image of Justice still has two eyes before, two eyes behind, and one on each side, as in Gulliver's day but, since the rise of the present regime, Justice has also acquired

winged feet. False accusers are still severely punished and fraud is still considered a greater crime than theft, but the Lilliputians are equally convinced that, when Justice is delayed, it is likely to be subverted or tampered with. Therefore, trials are held promptly before rumors can fly or witnesses are lost by death or intimidation. When I told one of their lawyers that accident cases in our country may not come to trial for three to five years (or longer), he could not control his laughter for, as he told me later, he was certain that I was simply joking.

Crime, like disease or treatment, is considered an emergency, and the courts of law, like our own hospitals, function on a round-the-clock basis. Juries consist of three adult Lilliputians (male or female), and they may be called at any hour of the day or awakened at night to serve in the cause of justice. If a crime, such as a robbery, is committed at night, the judge, jury and lawyers are all awakened from their sleep and proceed to the Drafnu (courthouse) where they assemble with the witnesses and the trial *must be held within six hours* or the defendant is judged innocent and acquitted. Since Lilliputians are no more desirous of allowing criminals or possible criminals to be free to roam the streets, there is not a

single case on record where trial has ever been delayed beyond this time. Justice is served almost at once and it is not strange in Lilliput to see oil lamps burning in the windows of the Mildendo courthouse at all hours of the night. Since the life of the Lilliputian lawyer (with its irregular hours) and the Lilliputian physician are so much alike, there is a deep empathy or sympathy between these two professions that would be difficult for an American attorney or physician to understand.

FROM my descriptions of the legal and medical professions, the reader might be led to believe that my opinions are based on a cursory or an inexact recording of what my eyes witnessed, and I am sure there are many who will doubt my observations. However, I had stayed in Lilliput for over three months and had even had several opportunities to visit Blefuscu. The citizens of that neighboring island welcomed me and even reacted as if I were some sort of a savior who, again, had come to vanquish the Lilliputians in their behalf, but I had determined not to interfere in their internal affairs. Sadly, however, I must report that the statue of Gulliver, which was eight feet tall and which had been erected

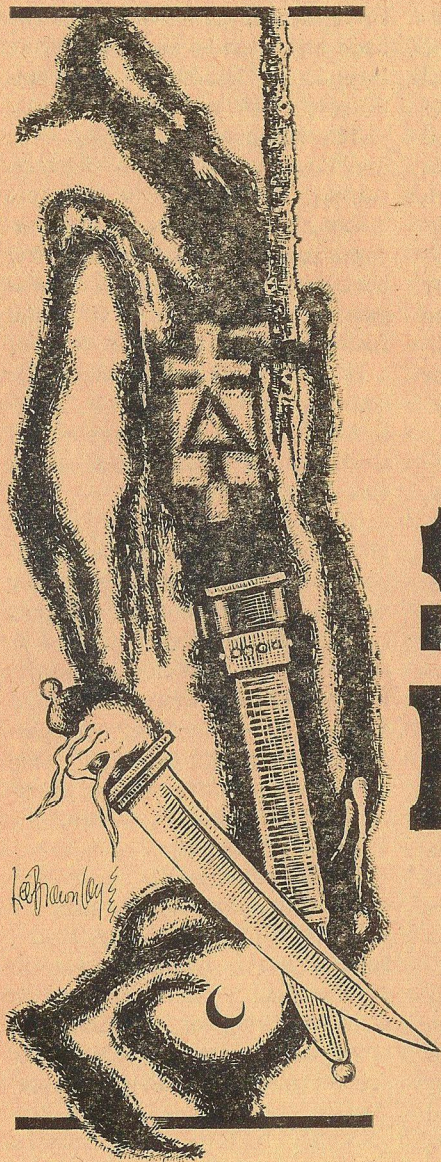
in the square of Trapolo, their capitol city, was destroyed by the Lilliputians in 1846, but the base still stands and the heroic legend, "Quinbus flestrin-Hurgo," still remains.

The summer was almost over and I began to think of the late summer monsoons and possible damage to the Stella Nova. I became anxious to move on. I knew that I would have to get to Madagascar for additional fuel and food before I could dare venture a trip to Brobdingnag along the course pursued by Gulliver. I still had the maps and charts which Gulliver had bequeathed to his Cousin Sympson.

The Lilliputians seemed not at all displeased at news of my departure. They offered me every assistance and all the food that they could possibly spare. For souvenirs and for further study, I took several of their arrows and a supply of poison. They were also gracious enough to provide me with several copies of their medical text, the Magna Krata, for more detailed study.

On September 9th, as best I could determine, I unfurled my sail, left Lilliput behind, and headed north by northwest to Madagascar. With that island as a base, I hoped, if time and strength permitted, I would next set forth to visit Brobdingnag.

THE END



A servant with frustrated needs is a poor servant. So it has been across the Galaxy through the ages. But give a creature what its heart desires and it is your slave forever. Or almost forever.

THE SOUL BUYER R

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrator COYLE

THE cards fell on the baize-topped table with a soft slap, slap. The fat man with the purple-veined nose reached out a meaty hand with rings, lifted the corner of his down-card. He puckered his lips, counted off bills, tossed them in.

"Up five hundred."

Tony Adair breathed a six-inch smoke ring across the table, propelled a tiny one through the center, not watching as rubber bands snapped against rolls, bills dropped on the green drift under the shaded billiard light.

"To you, Adair," said a freckle-blotched man with red hair like an eyebrow over each ear.

Behind Adair a small man, dapper in a yellow vest and black shirt leaned forward. "Take it easy, Tony boy."

Adair reached a slim wallet from an inner pocket, laid two crisp bills on the table.

"See the five and up a thousand."

The fat man beetled small eyes in a red face. "You're playing it cold as an eight-hour corpse, mister. You got a four-card flush working against three aces and kings over on the board, and you ain't even looked."

Adair smiled gently. The fat man snorted, counted out money. "Okay, smart man. I'm calling the grand—and up a grand."

Two players cursed and folded. The freckled man cursed and

added money to the pot. Adair spread two more new bills on the table.

"And up another thousand."

The color drained from the fat man's jowls. He riffled his roll. "Table stakes," he snapped. "I got six cees that say you're lying." He tossed the money in.

"I hadda mix in this," the freckled player muttered. He turned his cards face down. The fat man grinned with one side of his face, flipped over his down-card and prodded four aces into a row.

"Tough I was short," he started, reaching for the heaped bills.

"Yeah," Adair cut in. "I could have used the money." Negligently he turned his down-card face up. The fat man's mouth opened.

"Jeez, a king-high straight flush," someone muttered.

The fat man's eyes were glints behind puffed lids. His hand moved toward his hip pocket. "A cold-deck artist," he grated.

"Watch the lip, lard bucket," the freckled player said. "It's your deck—and I dealt it."

ADAIR gathered in the money. Behind him the small man rose, buttoning his jacket.

"That's enough for tonight, Tony. We got no time for sore losers."

"Sure, Jerry," Adair drawled.

"I get no chance to win it back, huh?" the fat man snarled.

Adair considered. "We'll cut the deck," he said. "You first. Look at your card and then name your bet."

"Hey, Tony—" Jerry Pearl began.

"Okay, you named the game, smart man." The fat man riffled, passed the deck for a cut, then lifted off cards, showed a king of hearts. He glanced at Adair, bright-eyed. "My check's good, everybody knows that." He took out a checkbook and pen, scribbled, tore off the green slip.

"King bets five grand," he purred.

Adair reached, eased the top card off the deck, dropped it before the fat man, face up: a black ace. He picked up the check, looked at it, then tore it in two and dropped it on the table. He rose, a big man with coal-black eyes.

"No hard feelings, I hope," he said softly. Nobody answered.

Outside, Adair lit a thin cigar, looked up past ragged roof-lines at a lop-sided moon the color of a bruise plowing through a dark sky bright with clouds. From somewhere down the street music murmured, as faint as old memories. Beside Adair, Jerry Pearl mopped at his face with a white-monogrammed black nylon handkerchief.

"That game was good for another ten gees, Tony," he complained. "You could have strung them rubes along for another hour."

"Why?" Adair said mildly.

"Why?" Pearl raised his shoulders. "Why does any guy gamble? For the dough . . ."

"How many card players do you know who fill inside straights like they were beer glasses?"

Jerry grinned, showing crooked teeth linked by gold bridge work. "Nobody, Tony. But nobody. You got a million-dollar talent there, kid."

"Uh-huh. It's a neat trick. How do I do it, Jerry? And why?"

"Jeezus, Tony, what's the difference? You're a guy with a permanent hot fist."

"I had a pretty fair education once, Jerry. By now I might have been a big-shot engineer—but I dropped it in favor of the galloping dominoes." He spread his hands, looked at the strong tanned fingers—skillful fingers. "Win or lose, it was my hand, my brain, my eyes—against the other guy."

"Sure, Tony—"

"That's finished now. I bet—I win. It's not me doing it, Jerry. I'm like a rigged slot machine; I come up three bells every time."

"So you got lucky; why knock it? Look, we can still hit Maxie's."

"Forget it, I said no more."

"Tony, you were always a guy that loved the action—"

"It was the game, Jerry—not just the money. Now—the game's dead."

"Look, Tony, when I took you on to manage—"

Adair smiled at the small man.

"I need a manager like Heinz needs a pickle. I haven't lost a bet since the night that old geezer sold me the Bolita ticket . . ."

"Come on, Tony. We'll have a drink—"

Adair looked at Jerry Pearl thoughtfully. "Funny about that ticket. The old bird headed straight for me like a Salvation Army lassie for the two-dollar window."

"I remember, Tony. A bum, a Bowery grifter. That overcoat—down to here—and smelling like a dog's bed. You only bought the ticket so he'd go breathe on somebody else."

"Uh-huh. But why did he pick me to breathe on?"

"He liked your looks, Tony."

"It was in a joint on 26th. What was the name of it?"

"I couldn't tell you, Tony—"

"Angelo's."

"Maybe. So what? Since then you've made real dough—"

"I think I'd like to talk to that old fellow, Jerry."

"Huh? Cripes, Tony, that's a couple of months ago. The town is full of pan-handlers—"

"You've got contacts. Ask around. There can't be too many hustlers in the business sporting a beard, eyes like cherry gumdrops, a nose like two fresh bullet holes in yesterday's corpse, and trailing an aroma of over-aged gorgonzola."

"Forget it, Tony. You're riding a hot streak. Don't louse it up."

"What's the matter, Jerry? Superstitious?"

"All I know is, leave it lie, Tony."

"Will you find the old boy—or shall I?"

"Okay, okay, Tony. But I ain't guaranteeing nothing . . ."

"That suits me, Jerry. I never asked life for a guarantee."

THE telephone woke Tony Adair from a light doze. He blinked at the clock on the table. Eleven A.M.—about time Jerry was reporting in . . .

"Mr. Adair?" a brisk female voice stated. "You're an acquaintance of Mr. J. Pearl?"

"That's right."

"This is the supervisor at All Saints'. There has been an accident. I'm sorry to alarm you, but your name was among—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Adair. Perhaps if you'd come down . . .?"

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

* * *

A plump woman in white

looked up as Adair entered Jerry Pearl's room.

"Ah . . . are you . . .?"

"That's right, Miss Umnnn. Leave me alone with the patient, please." Jerry Pearl's eyes fluttered as Adair swung a chair around and sat down beside the bed.

"What happened, Jerry?" he said softly.

"The . . . driver." Pearl's voice was a whisper through bandages. He moved his head from side to side, eyes closed. "His face . . ."

"Take it easy, Jerry . . ."

"Red eyes. Red eyes . . ."

A step sounded at the door. A portly man in broad grey lapels and rimless glasses blinked at Adair over pursed lips.

"How bad is he?" Adair asked.

"Who are you? You're not a physician . . .?"

"My name's Adair—"

"Visiting hours are from two to four." The man stepped back, inviting Adair to precede him from the room.

Adair rose, assumed a grave expression. "I should think a hundred-thousand-dollar contribution to the hospital fund ought to buy a man an answer to a civil question."

"Eh?" The portly man whipped off his glasses, cleared his throat, smiled without gaiety, replaced the glasses.

"I understand a car hit him,"

Adair said. "Do you know the details?"

The portly man frowned. "There are some curious aspects to the case. Mr. . . . ah . . . Pearl was in shock. He was difficult to handle, hence the sedative. Quite frankly, he was raving. He seemed to feel he'd been—ha ha—run down intentionally."

"How do you know he was not?"

"What? Why, the car crashed and the driver was at least as badly injured as this . . . Mr. Pearl."

"You've got the driver here too?"

"Why, yes. Three twenty-three, if I'm not mistaken."

Heels clicked in the corridor. A starched nurse in a tight gray permanent appeared at the door, whispered in the portly man's inclined ear.

"Eh? what's that, Miss Perch?"

The nurse nodded grimly, lips pressed tight.

Adair followed along the corridor, around a corner, past a screen, into a small room with pale green walls and curtains that fluttered at an open window. The rumped bed was empty. A faint miasmatic odor hung in the air.

"Where is he?"

"Why, doctor, I can't imagine . . .!"

"Get Leonardi up here immediately! And call Johnson in Admissions . . ."

Miss Perch hurried away. The portly man turned to Adair. "The woman's gone mad," he snapped. "My apologies, Mr. Adair. I assure you we operate a modern medical facility here, not a bedlam—"

"Some people are allergic to hospitals," Adair said. "He was not badly hurt, I take it?"

The man snorted. "Heaven knows. Miss Perch's report was incoherent."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss case histories—" He broke off, showed Adair the pained smile, let it fall. "Grateful though we are for the endowment—"

"Don't waste any diplomacy on me, Doc. I never gave the hospital a nickel. I just queried the price of a civil answer in this pill factory."

On the ground floor Adair encountered Miss Perch. "I was most interested in your observations on the driver," he said. "Very unusual. The doctor seemed rather skeptical . . ."

Miss Perch raised her eyebrows. "In twenty-eight years no one has ever before questioned my competence—"

Adair raised a hand. "I would not dream of doubting you, Miss Perch. If you said—what was it again . . .?"

Miss Perch set her jaw. "Body temperature fifty-two," she said. "And no pulse."

ADAIR drove four blocks west to the precinct station house, asked for the patrolman who had been the first on the scene.

"The Chevy was making an illegal U-turn, for my money," the cop said. "I helped get the driver out. The ambulance guys took him and that's the last I seen of him. Wow, did that guy need a bath! Even the car stinks."

"Where's the car now?"

"In the lot. I figure it for a hot car. I—"

"I'd like to take a look at it."

"You the owner?"

"I'm a friend of the pedestrian that was hurt."

"Well . . ." The cop led Adair along a dark corridor, out into a cindered car park lined with rusty hulks, some with crumpled fenders and broken glass, one with a bullet-starred windshield. He pointed to a late-model sedan with a crushed grill and a flat-tired wheel twisted out of line. Adair went across, opened the door on the passenger's side. An odor of mouldy wool and long-dead fish struck his nostrils. Behind him the cop snorted. "See what I mean?"

"What have you got on the driver?"

"Like I said: the ambulance

guys took him to the hospital. They won't release him without we say so."

"Prints?"

"Beats me."

"Mind if I dig around?"

"Nix, buddy. If it's a hot car . . . you know how it is."

A glint of metal caught Adair's eye. He leaned into the car, casually scooped a tiny ring of keys from the floor, dropped it in his pocket. "You'd better start checking that hot car angle," he said. "The driver left the hospital via the fire escape about half an hour ago."

THE lobby lights were on when Adair entered his hotel an hour later. The desk clerk called, "Oh, Mr. Adair. Will you call this number . . .?"

Adair dialed. A female voice said, "All Saints'. Oh, Mr. Adair? Doctor Pherson wants to speak to you . . ." There was a long pause, then a male voice cut in:

"Sir, I assume you're aware of the gravity of interfering in the routine of this institution?"

"What's the matter, Doc, still sore about that hundred grand I didn't give you?"

"Your impertinence is intolerable, sir! I'm warning you, I'll have the law on you—"

"Give me a break, Doc. I'm already a three-time loser on library fines—"

"Kidnapping is a considerably more serious crime than book theft, you wiseacre."

"If you think I stole your smelly patient, you're barking up the wrong fireplug."

"I'm warning you: Mr. Pearl is in serious condition. I don't know what your game is, but the consequences—"

"What's that about Pearl?" Adair cut in sharply.

"The man has probable internal injuries; I suggest you tell me his whereabouts at once—"

"You mean Jerry Pearl has left the hospital?"

"You know as well as I that you spirited him away—for what fantastic reason, I fail to imagine—"

"The last I saw of Pearl he was flat on his back in room 305—supposedly too doped up to talk. Get the police, fast. I'll check back with you in an hour."

* * *

"Key, Mr. Adair?" the clerk offered as he hung up.

Adair shook his head. "I'll be back in an hour. If the hospital calls, take a message."

It was a ten-minute drive to the blighted area of second-hand stores and sagging warehouses between which Angelo's showed a narrow facade of crumbling brown paint. A grimy window was blanked off by a green cloth shade. Through a triangular tear in one corner a dim light glowed.

Adair tried the door, stepped into the sour-smelling gloom of a long room lit by a neon beer sign behind a zinc-topped bar. A thin man with an acne-scarred face under lifeless blond hair looked up, shifted a frayed toothpick in the corner of his mouth, made a quick motion with his hands out of sight.

"We ain't open," he said flatly. Adair nudged the door shut behind him.

"Pour four ounces of the best Scotch in the house into a clean water glass," he said. He glanced around the room. There was a narrow rear door with a new Yale lock, another door with a chipped white-enamelled plaque lettered TOILET, and a dozen wire-legged tables still showing the rings of yesterday's beers. The bartender poured out a four-finger jolt.

"A buck."

Adair picked up the glass, sniffed it, put it back on the bar.

"I met a man here three months ago. Long black overcoat, Smith Brothers beard, hat down over his eyes . . ."

The bartender's eyes shifted left, right . . . "So?"

"Seen him lately?"

The bartender reached for a towel, began mopping at the bar. "You think I keep track of all the bums hustling drinks in the joint?"

"About five-three," Adair said.

"Snub nose, enflamed eyes, and a breath you could saw up and nail to the wall."

"Get lost, Mac. Must be some other bar—"

"For ten you could try a plausible lie," Adair said softly. "What's got you scared, Slim?"

The bartender tilted his head toward the street door. "On your way, Jack," he growled.

"What about a man of forty-five, five-six, thin hair, wearing a black shirt, yellow vest, and a brown suit. He could have had a bandaged head."

"He could've had sideburns and a monocle. I ain't seen him."

"Thanks, pal. You've been a big help. Okay if I use the phone?"

"It's your dime, brother."

Adair dialled his hotel. "Any calls for me?"

"My, Mr. Adair, but we're popular tonight. I have a call for you on the line right now. If you'll hold on, I'll tie it in . . ."

There was a loud pop on the line. Then—

"Tony . . ." There was a sound of heavy breathing.

"Jerry! Where are you?"

"It's . . . a hotel. Around . . . the corner . . . from that joint, Angelo's . . ."

"What's going on, Jerry? What's the idea of jumping the hospital?"

"Tony . . . can you come . . . right away . . .?"

"Sure. Stay put. Don't go anywhere."

"And, Tony . . . don't . . . bring anybody with you . . ."

A MERCURY vapor lamp on a tall pole shed a wan light on drab store fronts and empty pavement as Adair walked the fifty yards to the corner, and along to a sagging marquee edged with dead forty-watt bulbs. He pushed through a grease-blurred glass-panelled door into a dim, cluttered lobby full of the odor of failure and cheap cigars smoked long ago. A strip of worn red carpet led across scuffed brown linoleum to a black varnished counter with a battered goose-neck lamp and an edge-curved register anchored by a length of knotted twine. A gnome-like ancient in armbands and a warped wicker eye-shade darted a look at Adair.

"Got a telephone here?" Adair asked.

The gnome tipped his head toward a shadowy corner. Adair went to the booth, glanced in at scribbled walls, came back to the desk.

"Friend of mine made a call from here—just a couple of minutes ago. Five-six, bandaged head, brown suit with no gravy stains. Which way did he go?"

The man pushed the book toward Adair. "Clean bed cost you four dollars."

"Not tonight, pop. How about my friend?"

The old man plucked at a flaccid, veined cheek with fingers like a wooden Indian's. "I don't remember so good these days." He flicked a craft look at Adair. "I remember better for paying guests."

"I've got a room. Where did he go?"

"Ain't no law says you got to use the room . . ."

Adair took four singles from his wallet, folded them longways, tapped them on the counter-top.

"He was nervous," the gnome said, watching the bills. "Prob'ly up to something crooked. Walked up and down, looking at a strap-watch. Then the other feller come along, and they left. Didn't make no call from here. But that was no couple of minutes ago. More like an hour."

"What did this other fellow look like?"

"Looked like some kind of foreigner. Overcoat down to here, beard, mean-looking eyes. Would not have him in the hotel." He reached for the bills suddenly. Adair moved the money out of reach. The old man stooped, came up with a sawed-off ball bat.

"You gimme my money, you chisler," he shrilled.

"Your ball-playing days are over, pop. Did the man with the beard have a gun?"

"I'll call a cop, you chiseler—"

"Skip it. We know all about you at Headquarters."

"Huh?" The bat disappeared.

"You never showed me no buzzer," he said reproachfully.

"Naw, I didn't see no gun."

"Thanks." Adair dropped a single on the counter. "And by the way, better make book from another phone from now on; you're running out of wall space."

A LIGHT rain was falling in the dark street as Adair pushed out through the heavy doors. Fifty feet away, a round-shouldered figure in shabby black detached itself from the gloom of an alley mouth, shuffled forward, holding up an arthritically curled hand.

"Mr. Adair," a voice like burning straw hissed.

Adair halted, eyed the broad-brimmed hat, pulled low over the wizened face, red-edged eyes, an unkempt beard.

"Mr. Adair, for you I have advice—good advice, worth a small payment, perhaps . . ."

Adair looked both ways along the street; in the bleak light from the lamp at the far corner, nothing moved.

"Maybe I could use some advice at that," he said.

"Luck good these days, eh, Mr. Adair?" The voice was a thin rasp.

"I can't complain." Adair moved casually between the bearded man and the street. The other pivoted to face him.

"A sad thing, when a man's luck turns . . ."

"You know a lot about luck, do you?"

A wheeze that might have been laughter came from the direction of the beard.

"It is enough," the thin voice went on, "perhaps to cause a man to think."

"Think about what?"

The clawed hands spread in a wide gesture. "The wisdom of . . . complacency." (The bearded man edged closer. Adair caught the reek from the mouldy overcoat.) "But let us step out of the wind and the harsh light." The hunched shoulders twisted to indicate the dark mouth of the alley. Adair looked past the other into the opening, black and narrow.

"Don't be afraid . . ." the hunched man said.

"You're right. I hate to do business in the street. After you."

The man backed past a rank of overflowing garbage cans; Adair followed. The scarred bricks underfoot gave back an oily glistening. Thirty feet from the street, the alley ended in a brick wall. Adair's guide turned, his face dark under the wide hat.

"Now, we can deal in peace."

"Start talking," Adair challenged.

"Do I detect a note of concern in your voice, Mr. Adair? You find the surroundings . . . disturbing?"

Adair shook his head. "I was raised in dark alleys. Now where's Jerry Pearl?"

"Don't trouble your head, Mr. Adair. Just take the old peddler's advice: (drift with the tides and let fortune come your way untroubled by unwholesome curiosities.)"

"You've put your finger on it; my unwholesome curiosity is aroused by a couple of things—"

"Much as poor Mr. Jerry Pearl's was, I fear . . ."

"Keep talking."

"You didn't know? Alas, he . . . had an accident."

ADAIR stepped close, caught the smaller man by the coat, pushed him back against the wall. The hat fell off, rolled away.

"I don't know who you are—or what . . ." Something crunched under Adair's hand. He choked at the odor that came in waves. "You come apart easy," he grated. "Better get gabby while you're still in one filthy piece."

The matted head twisted; angry red eyes glared up at Adair. "I laugh at pain, foolish Tony Adair! Is not your skill with dice, with cards, your incompa-

rable knack of selecting the fleetest quadruped enough? The gift is yours alone, among the faceless masses. Take it and go in peace."

Abruptly, the small man twisted, lashed out with a thin arm. Adair saw a tiny glint of glass, felt a blow, a sharp sting in his forearm. He thrust the other back, struck at the wizened face, saw the overcoated figure go down. A small silvery cylinder flopped against the left sleeve of his jacket; he jerked the hypodermic free, pulled back his sleeve, sucked at the minute wound. A pervasive, bitter taste filled his mouth. He spat, sucked again, then pressed a thumb deep into the great vein of the upper arm, leaning against the wall as a wave of vertigo rocked the pavement underfoot. From a remote distance, an ache crept along his arm. Before him the dark-coated man scrambled to his feet.

"Adair, can you hear me?"

Adair grunted. A needle-like tingling had begun in the hand, starved of blood circulation.

"Be at peace, Tony Adair," the hissing voice went on. "The drug kills slowly, first robbing the limbs of will, while keening the senses . . ." The bearded, insect-like face waggled in mock commiseration. The baleful eyes were a glint of crimson from deep sockets.

"Wealth and good fortune would have been yours, Tony Adair, but, monkey-like, curiosity gnawed at you . . ."

Adair moved his left hand, as heavy as an anvil, inside his coat, felt the cold butt of the Mauser 6.35 automatic. With an effort he curled numbing fingers, brought the gun out and up, jammed it hard into the muffling layers of the other's garments, and squeezed the trigger. The shock kicked his arm back hard against the brick wall as the figure before him lurched, rictal mouth gaping pinkly, fell in a swirl of coat-skirts, kicking lean black-bristled ankles in the muck of the alley, then lay still. Adair dropped the gun in his coat pocket, fumbled out a pen knife. The keen blade made a one-inch cut across the bluish puncture wound; crimson blood welled. He sucked hard, spat, massaging the forearm toward the wound.

He bound a handkerchief tightly above the cut, pushed away from the wall, and moved with painful slowness past the inert body toward the alley mouth.

THE street glistened, empty in the night rain. Adair swayed, feeling the working of the drug. Over the pain of the numbed arm, he was aware of an unnatural sharpness of the senses: his ears caught the

stealthy rustle of a rat, the tap and ping of raindrops in a thousand keys, the minute creak of masonry under the pressure of the wind. Far away, horns blew, machines whined and muttered, elevator doors clashed, music tooted and thumped. Nearer, there was the rustle of clothing, hoarse breathing. Adair slitted his eyes against the actinic glare of the street lamp's multi-colored corona, walked toward the marquee of the hotel. Ahead, door hinges screeched, shoe leather rasped on grit. Jerry Pearl stepped into view. His head jerked as he saw Adair.

"Tony boy . . ." The bandages were gone from his head. He came toward Adair, his feet clapping loud against the pavement. Adair felt the wet coat across his shoulders, hair damp against his forehead. He drew a breath and steadied himself against the wall.

"I ran into a little delay, Jerry," he said briskly. "What's up?"

"Ah . . . what kind of delay, Tony?"

"I met our friend, the numbers peddler . . ."

Jerry's eyes met Adair's—and slipped aside. "Oh, yeah? What'd he have to say, Tony?"

"I didn't pay too much attention. You're looking better, Jerry; a fast recovery."

"Ahhh, them medics; they

doped me, Tony. I'm okay. Say, ah, where'd he go?"

"Who?"

"You know. The . . . uh . . . old man."

"He didn't go anywhere, Jerry. I shot him."

Jerry Pearl stared at Adair. Arcs as black as mascara marked the hollows under his eyes. "Dead . . .?" His voice was a strained whisper.

Adair didn't answer. Pearl stepped past him, walked quickly to the alley, turned in. Adair followed, watched as Pearl knelt by the huddled figure. A matted wig had fallen away, revealing a flaccid, leathery crest. A tongue like a scarlet worm trailed from one corner of the puckered mouth.

"I guess maybe it's time for some law, Jerry," Adair said. "After the cops are through scratching their heads over this, we'll pass it along to the medical boys to pickle in a bottle of alcohol."

Pearl looked up quickly. "No. No police, Tony. This had gone too far already—"

"Uh-huh. I guess I messed things up by getting here a few minutes early. It happened I was just around the corner when you phoned. Mr. Smelly here wasn't quite ready."

"You're wrong, Tony. It's not what you think—"

"How do you know what I

think, Jerry? And your Bronx dialect has slipped. Maybe you'd better tell me what it's all about."

"Tony, what do you mean . . .?"

"You were here an hour ago casing the set-up with our pal. And I don't remember telling you which garbage can he was back of—but you went to it like a rat to cheese."

PEARL rose. "I was careless," he said slowly. "I'm sorry, Tony—but you shouldn't have killed him." He looked at Adair. "You may have killed your luck."

"Luck wouldn't interest a dead man."

"What do you mean? He only meant to talk to you—frighten you—"

"I guess he forgot to tell you; there was a change in plan."

"I see . . ." Pearl straightened his back. "I see how it must look to you, Tony—"

"Yeah. Now let's go find that copper."

"Tony . . . there are some things I have to tell you now. It would be better for you if I did not, but I can hardly expect you to trust me after . . . this."

Adair said nothing; Pearl shook his head impatiently.

"You're a stubborn fool, Adair. You have the gift of wealth in your hands; why not forget

what's happened here, and just go on winning at cards?"

"Maybe I'm tired of cards, Jerry. And maybe I'm tired of being the counter in somebody else's game."

The two men stood toe to toe. "You have no conception of what you're meddling in, Tony."

"Why don't you explain it to me, Jerry?"

Pearl sighed. "Tony, I have to admire you; you're a fighter. But the forces that oppose you are—unconquerable."

"Meaning . . . you, Jerry?"

Pearl shook his head. "I've neither opposed nor helped you, Tony. I'm an observer—nothing more."

"What about this?" Adair jerked a thumb toward the corpse. "What is it? and why?"

"Merely a tool: a slave of a powerful master."

"Why the interest in me?"

"You were a thread in the pattern; someone else would have served as well."

"Maybe better; I don't take kindly to serving."

"You would have lost nothing, Tony. It was in the interest of the grand design that you prosper."

"What does this grand design have to do with brownies with B.O. peddling Bolita and handing out free advice in dark alleys?"

Pearl's face tightened. "I've

told you too much already, too much for your good as well as mine."

"But not quite enough to soothe my curiosity, Jerry. Where does this leather-upholstered freak come from? And why should my luck at the track interest anyone outside of me and the Internal Revenue boys?"

"You wouldn't understand, Tony. As for the Niss, it's a native of . . . a very distant place."

"It must have some kind of quarters—probably near here, I'd say. Let's take a look at them."

Pearl considered. "If I show you the Niss headquarters, will you take it as an indication that I'm . . . not working against you?"

"I don't know. Try me."

"I don't want you to believe I was involved in a plan to kill you, Tony. I'd like you to accept the fact that I'm at least neutral. But for your own sake, I wish you'd walk away and put what you've seen out of your mind."

"Not a chance, Jerry. I'd just sit around and brood."

"Come along, then. But you won't like what you see."

PEARL led the way past dusty store fronts to a blind-eyed godown, rattled a chained hasp, stepped into darkness and the smell of mouldy burlap. Adair followed, glanced around at sagging board shelving, drifted lit-

ter, a scurry of bright-eyed rats. Pearl moved suddenly. Adair pivoted, facing him. Pearl laughed softly. "Just checking your vision, Tony. Not bad, for a . . . city man."

"Just consider me one of the night people, Jerry. And don't bother testing my nerves; just lead the way."

Pearl crossed the rubbish-strewn room to a metal-covered fire door, threw a bolt, pushed the door open. He stepped through, moved his hands over the wall near the door; a section of the partition folded back. Through the narrow opening, Adair saw a red-lit passage. Pearl gestured him in. Adair stood fast.

"After you, Jerry." Pearl smiled sourly and stepped through. At once he took four quick strides, reached out and passed a hand over a metal plate set in the wall. The dusky crimson glow faded. Adair watched as Pearl's dimly glowing figure flattened itself against the wall. He listened to the other's breath sigh out, once, then stop.

Half a minute passed. Adair stood quietly, waiting. Pearl moved from the wall, stepped carefully across to the opposite side. The rustle of cloth against skin, the creak of muscles, the rasp of feet against concrete were loud to Adair's ears. Pearl's hands scraped as he moved them

over the wall. Adair glanced along the rough-plastered surface, saw a small button set in a round plastic plate. He stepped forward quietly, pressed the button. A panel like the first folded back with a clatter. Pearl froze.

"Was that what you were looking for?" Adair asked.

Pearl took out a lighter, thumbed it aflame. He stared at Adair.

"I see you've made a fool of me, Tony. How the devil you can see here is beyond me . . ."

"I'm full of little surprises, Jerry. Now let's make another try at finding that Niss headquarters."

"Tony—you're not . . . another observer . . .?"

"Just a local boy, trying to get along."

"Listen to me, Tony. This is no place for you. You were always decent to me. I don't want to see you hurt—"

"You didn't intend to lead me anywhere, did you, Jerry? This was just a gag to get me in off the street and ditch me."

"That's right. For your own good, Tony."

"Nice try. Now let's cut out the kidding and get down to business. Lead on, Jerry."

"Tony, you're meddling with forces that can destroy you as effortlessly as you'd swat a fly."

"You seem safe enough, Jerry. What's your secret?"

"Try to understand, Tony. I am the agent of a mighty power—an empire of a vastness inconceivable to you. And even I have to move with the utmost care." As Pearl spoke, his hand moved behind his back; Adair heard the rustle of fingers on the rough wall, then the clatter of static as an electric circuit closed. Far off, a bell shrilled supersonically.

"Somehow your explanations don't seem to simplify matters, Jerry," Adair said.

"The less you know, the safer you'll be, Tony," Pearl said smoothly. Over the background sighing of moving air, the crackle as the surrounding walls flexed under load, Adair picked out the vibration of distant foot-falls.

"Why did he run you down, Jerry? Didn't you tell him you're neutral?"

"A little disagreement. I was wrong. I should have listened."

FROM beyond the board partition at his side, Adair caught the tiny whisper of breathing, the stealthy movement of feet. He scanned the wall, made out the hairline rim of a hinged panel. He moved forward a step, waiting . . .

The section of wall snapped aside. Through the opening a spider-lean figure in tight-fitting black leaped with a hiss, crouched, poised, rounded shoul-

ders hunched, long arms spread. For an instant, Adair looked into pupilless red eyes in a puckered face; then the Niss sprang, hands clawed—

Adair's shot was a vivid stab of flame across the gloom, a roar in the closed tunnel. He saw a mouth like a wound gape, the flick of a crimson tongue past needle-like white teeth. Then the creature was down, bucking scorpion legs in the dust of the floor.

"It looks like Mr. Friendly was twins," he said. "Any more in the family?"

"You murderous fool!" Pearl burst out. "You'll have the horde down on us . . ."

"We'll surprise them and meet them halfway."

"That wouldn't be convenient for me." Pearl moved to step past Adair. Adair blocked his path.

"Don't attempt force with me." Jerry Pearl stared up at Adair. "Remember the car that ran me down? If you'd examine the wreck, you'd find the left front wheel nearly torn off. I did that with my hands as the wheels passed over my chest."

"I wondered about the car crashing. Funny, that explanation never occurred to me." Adair brought the gun up to cover Jerry Pearl's chest. Pearl shook his head impatiently.

"That won't help you, Tony. Don't you understand yet?"

"Sure, I understand, Jerry. You're no more human than—that thing is."

"Then stand aside."

"These steel-jacketed slugs pack a wallop. Want to bet I can't poke a hole through whatever it is you're made of?"

"I'm trying to protect you, Tony—to keep you out of this. My reflexes are twice as fast as yours. I could knock the gun from your hand before you could pull the trigger."

"Want to gamble on it, Jerry?" Adair said softly.

Pearl half-smiled. "I doubt that you'd have the cold-blooded nerve to shoot me—"

He spun, fell to his knees as the shot slammed in the narrow way. Dazedly Pearl shook his head, climbed to his feet, holding his arm close to his side. He looked at Adair warily, then laughed shortly.

"You see how easy it is to subvert a being? The threat of pain and death—and I do your bidding. Come, then. I'll lead you to the Niss. But I wish you'd turn back."

"It's too late to turn back now, Jerry. I was dealt into this game; I'll play my hand out."

THEY were in a low, earth-floored tunnel, walled with time-stained masonry, shored with ancient timbers that glowed with a dim greenish light. The

clay underfoot was thickly patterned with strangely narrow footprints with prominent heels. A rhythmic thumping sounded monotonously at the threshold of audibility. A draft of icy air carried a faint, foul odor.

"We're two hundred feet under the streets now," Jerry Pearl said. "We've been lucky—but we won't get much farther without blundering into a party of Niss."

"Maybe I can take one alive. He might even part with some information if I find the right place to squeeze."

"You're talking like a madman. *You'll* be lucky to get out of here alive. The main assembly area is just ahead. Move quietly now . . ."

Adair followed, listening to the rising level of sound. The clay underfoot gave way to a glossy dark paving, beaded with moisture. The walls here were narrow, high, meeting in an arch ten feet overhead. The passage curved; ahead, a ruddy glow shone. Pearl halted. Adair moved up beside him.

"There they are," Pearl whispered softly.

It was a domed chamber, ribbed with lime-encrusted buttresses, floored with a glossy slime of clay, lit by spheres of blackish-red light atop ornate stands, divided by a murmuring streamlet of dark liquid and pervaded by a stench of raw sewage.

From the dark side tunnel Adair and Jerry Pearl watched a dozen or more black-uniformed Niss, devoid of false hair, some with long knives strapped to their sides, who prowled the cave restlessly or stood in nervous groups, hissing among themselves.

"This is the club house, eh?" Adair breathed. "A charming air of informality and bad drains."

"I think you can see that it would hardly reward you to charge in, gun blazing. They're as vicious as ferrets."

"You might find it expedient to pitch in on my side, Jerry—under the circumstances."

"I've spent a great deal of time building my position here; I'm hardly likely to throw it away now."

"They don't know the truth about you, eh, Jerry? Your disguise has them fooled—just like it did me."

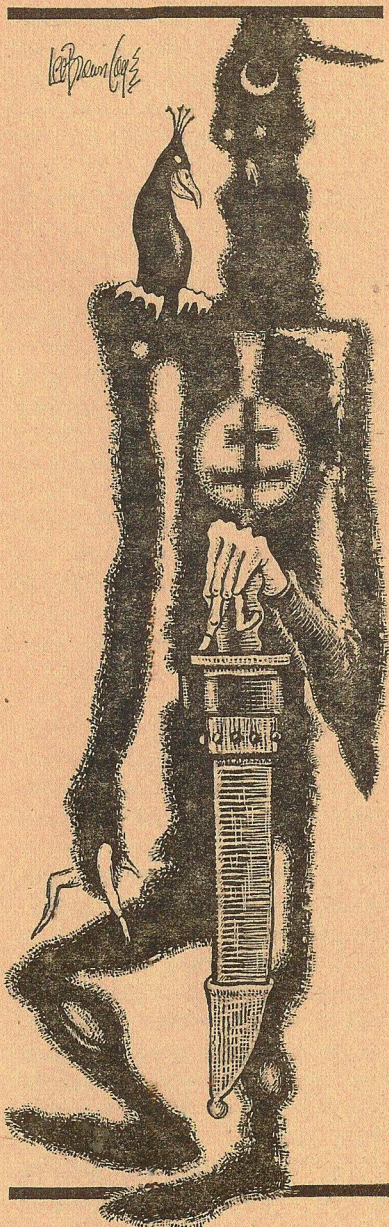
"They accept me as a Terrestrial. Otherwise they'd have known better than to try to eliminate me with feeble methods."

"They almost succeeded. You were out cold when they hauled you into the hospital."

"Yes—I was stunned—but don't let it give you false ideas."

"Let's both avoid false ideas."

"Yes. Underestimating you could be dangerous—for both of us. Now come away—before we're caught here . . ."



"I think I'd like to stick around, Jerry. One of them might just wander over this way. They're as nervous as a roomful of expectant fathers."

"At least withdraw to a better position," Pearl urged. "There's a small alcove a few yards back."

Pearl moved back, indicated a side chamber eight feet square, with closed doors set in its three walls. "In here . . ."

Adair stepped in, noting a faint line of discontinuity across the floor and up the walls. At his side, Pearl moved quickly; Adair whirled—

A grill of one-inch bars slammed down an inch from his foot; beyond the barrier, Pearl dived for the cover of the corridor. Adair fired from the hip, spattered masonry chips beside Pearl's hand.

"Next one's in, Jerry!"

Pearl froze, crouched two feet from safety. "Don't shoot again, Tony! Wait until you've heard me . . .!"

"I've got five left in the clip. Better talk fast before the neighbors get here . . ."

"No. The Niss are totally deaf in our sound range without their hearing aids." Pearl straightened, eyes on the gun. "I would have come back and released you, Tony. After—"

"Do it now."

"No. You'll have to believe me, Tony. If you shoot me, you're

trapped permanently. There is something I have to do—The culmination of years of work. Then I'll return for you."

"You can do better than that, Jerry."

"You asked what it was the Niss and I fell out over. It was you, Tony. They planned to kill you for your curiosity. I argued. They turned on me. I was neutral, Tony—but not any more!"

"So you're launching a vendetta against the Niss—"

"The Niss are nothing. Once they were a power in the Galaxy; now—they're slaves—as your people will be slaves—and mine as well, in the end."

"Oh? Who's our new owner going to be?"

"A creature who manipulates the lesser breeds as man manipulates fruit-flies. That's what you're challenging, Tony—not the Niss. But no living being can stand against the Norn."

"I don't believe in bogey-men. Nobody's that tough."

"Tough? Oh, no; the Norn's no tougher physically than many another species. It can't wreak destruction even as well as you Men, with the raw violence of your H-bomb. Its power is a subtler one—against which there can be no defense."

"Keep talking—and don't make the mistake of thinking I'm too spellbound to shoot."

THE Norn's power is the power over the human soul. It offers no punishment—only reward: wealth, power, the woman of your dreams—subject only to . . . the Norn."

"The woman of my dreams wouldn't be for sale, Jerry."

"Tony, the time is running out; minutes could make the difference between abject slavery and a . . . more limited form of submission—for my race, and yours too. Let the explanations wait."

"Not a chance, Jerry. Show your cards or fold."

"What kind of man are you?" Pearl stared with agonized eyes at the gun. "After so much—to be balked by a puny human and his primitive weapon . . ."

"A Neanderthal with a stone axe could put up a pretty potent argument too, Jerry. Give."

Pearl's shoulders slumped. "Very well. Listen to me, Tony. I'll try to make you understand. Then I'm going. You may shoot if you wish; if I wait any longer everything's lost anyway."

"The Norn lives in a different world of awareness than you or I—or the Niss. It perceives the universe as a tangled skein of lines of living force. Past, future—these are only parts of a pattern; a confused fabric of the potential and the actual."

"The Norn has the power to manipulate these strands; it lies

in its den—like your spiders in their webs—and rearranges the pattern to suit its needs. By human standards, it has near-moronic intelligence. Its drives are simple: food and a nesting place. But it eats, Tony. It eats enormously—and burgeons.

"Your world was chosen as a nesting place long ago. The Norn came here as a minuscule spore; it drifted, altering the microscopic lives around it, drawing the unwary amoeba within reach. It grew—and its radius of effectiveness grew. It led beetles and mice into its den, tempting them with food and ripe females. The time came when it needed better concealment, more elaborate arrangements. It summoned a slave race—the Niss—as its attendants. Now it worked on a larger scale, diverting a workman from his duties, while the Niss slaves moved about its business; or delaying a watchman for the moments needed to allow necessary supplies to be pilfered."

"How many of these Norns are there?"

"Only one; the presence of another Norn disrupts the pattern. Now, it's entering the second phase of its life cycle. It's growing rapidly, and requires more nourishment than can be supplied by a casual herding of rat packs or stray dogs or derelicts. A massive logistical program

will be necessary—soon. This will require measures that can no longer be concealed. Human servants will be recruited—in every walk of life. Nourishing the Norn will become the chief business of the planet—until the day when the planetary resources can no longer support it. Then it will spore. Its seed will be flung into space—and new worlds will be colonized from the husk of the old.”

“I see. Help wanted, male, to loot planet—”

“It will take a while, Tony, the looting. Perhaps a thousand years. And the Norn can offer its servants the fulfillment of every dream of avarice that’s haunted man since he crept down from the treetops.”

“Why was I collecting goodies? I hadn’t signed a contract.”

“The Norn works blindly; it was in its interest that you prosper—for reasons buried in the pattern.”

“If its workings are blind, how does it manage the payoff?”

“Picture the Norn mind, suspended in a net of awareness, surrounded by the filaments of the fabric. Its only aim is a cosy nest. Here’s a line that threatens its comfort: Snap it short, or shunt it away. Here’s a line that means food, security; weave that thread close and strong. The Norn smooths away the irritation—and the slave gains its

dearest wish; it becomes your servant forever.”

“My heart desires a slice of this Norn.”

Pearl’s laugh was a humorless bark. “Could you cut that slice—knowing you were turning your back on all the treasures of the world—for yourself, and your descendants, for a thousand years?”

“Where is the Norn’s nest?”

“I’ve said all I’m going to say, Tony. I’m going now—and hope I’m not too late. Shoot if you must—and you’ll rot here—unless the Niss find you first.” He turned and walked away.

ADAIR felt over his jacket pockets for the key ring he had palmed from the floor of the car that had run down Jerry Pearl. The doors facing him on three sides were featureless, tight-set in the plain wall. Half a minute’s search turned up a tiny hole at the edge of each. Adair tried the center door; with the third key the lock snicked open on a narrow corridor like the one he and Pearl had followed, empty and dark to normal eyes. Adair stepped out, followed the passage as it meandered, then turned abruptly to open into the Niss common-room. He watched, narrow-eyed, as the lean uniformed Niss paced and muttered: What were they waiting for . . . ?

Adair's ears caught a sharp sound from the far side of the chamber. The Niss ignored it. In the gloom of a dark corner, a figure stirred. It was Pearl, unnoticed in the shadows, leaning forward over something held in his hands. He stooped, working quickly, then stood, faded back out of sight. A harsh hissing cut across the background sounds. Adair sniffed, caught a faint hint of a half-familiar odor . . .

A Niss near the corner where Pearl had appeared tottered suddenly, fell, kicking its legs convulsively. Nearby, others turned to gape. One of them raised its knife, dropped it, and fell backwards; another took two drunken steps and pitched on its face. A hiss of alarm spread across the room. Those Niss who had surged forward toward the fallen ones collapsed, twitching. Others sprang toward dark exits, hammered vainly on closed doors—and reeled, fell, and lay still.

Adair jumped back, sprinted for the cage he had escaped, snorting the reek of cyanide from his sensitized nostrils. He slammed the door, tried keys, swung the left-hand door wide, and moved off quickly along the tunnel, visible to him by the minute glow from the natural infra-phosphorescence of the walls. The passage branched; Adair took the right turning, working his way toward Jerry Pearl's

last position. There were more branches, an intersection with a wider corridor. Adair stopped, listened; there was no sound other than the steady rustle of the air and the muffled, rhythmic thumping. He went on, reviewing in his mind the turnings of the passage. He was, he estimated, very close to the point where Jerry Pearl had tossed his cannister in among the Niss. Ahead, a hairline marked a closed door. The odor of cyanide was sharp in the air.

Fifty feet farther, an interesting tunnel led sharply down. Adair studied the wet clay of the floor; in the maze of footprints, Pearl's were not discernible. He turned, started down the descending way.

It dropped in a sharp spiral, debouched into a circular room a hundred feet across. Far above, sounds whispered back from a vaulted ceiling festooned with stalagmites, from the tips of which water drops fell in a restless tattoo. A water-filled pit ten yards wide filled the center of the room. Adair took a step, his feet sinking into soft clay; then he froze. The black surface of the pool stirred; liquid mud streamed back from a great bloated form that rose up like a surfacing corpse, with a hissing sigh of released air. Two flaccid, boneless arms lay coiled like dead-white cobras across the

swollen slope of a body like black jelly. Two other limbs, multi-jointed, black and shiny like the chitinous tail of a king crab, lay folded, claws parted. One twitched, moved out, groped among heaped carcasses of small animals at the edge of the pool, popped a dainty into a loose-lipped mouth bisecting an otherwise featureless head the size of a washtub.

Abruptly, the great body rippled, heaved its bulk around to face Adair. One of the boneless arms moved out, slapped mud, sent small bones flying. Then:

"Come closer, Tony Adair," called a voice like footsteps in deep mud. "Tell me of your dreams . . ."

IN the muck rimming the oily pool, bristly rats the size of rabbits played among the heaped debris of the Norn's feeding, indifferent to the blind arms that groped among them.

"Come closer, Tony Adair," the Norn's voice rumbled. "Have no fear. You are more pleasing than the Niss-things: ugly creatures, and evil-smelling . . ."

Gun in hand, Adair studied the sheer walls that rose around him; the shadowy recesses of the chamber were almost totally dark, even to his drug-sharpened vision. High up among the arches of the vaulted ceiling, he caught a hint of furtive move-

ment. Nearer at hand, there was a quick rasp of horny joints; Adair stepped back; with a snap of pincers, a chitinous limb spat-tered mud at his feet.

"What is your fancy?" the heavy voice droned as though unaware of the murderous blow. "The crown of a kingdom? Power of life and death . . .?"

"Maybe I've already got it . . ." Adair raised his voice. "Come down and join the party, Jerry."

The Norn stirred in its mud-bath. The snake-like arms gathered in tidbits, feeding the great mouth. Water-drops pattered in an incessant restless rain. Adair raised the gun, took aim, fired. Muck splattered beside the bulbous, eyeless head. The Norn gobbled, waving a horny arm.

"The next one will poke an eye in that head, Jerry," Adair called. "You've got sixty seconds to make it down here; and I think I ought to tell you: this gun is kind of special. I reworked the action myself. If I release the trigger, it fires—and at this range, I can hardly miss."

"You're lying . . ." Pearl's voice echoed from above.

"Want to bet, Jerry?" Adair laughed softly. "No, you can't risk it, can you? Now get a move on."

Pearl moved into view on a platform twenty feet above.

"I'll summon the Niss," he

said hoarsely. "If you've harmed the Norn, they'll tear you to living shreds."

"A good thought, Jerry—but I was watching from the wings when you gassed them all."

Pearl groaned. "Hold your fire, for God's sake, Tony; I'm coming down."

STANDING before Adair, Pearl took an elaborate, long-barrelled weapon from his pocket, tossed it aside.

"All right, Tony, you hold the initiative. But listen to me: I was sent here to find the Norn's weakness. It has none. There's a saying: *The Universe was created for the pleasure of the Norn.* I understand that now. It satisfies its enormous greed by feeding the lesser greeds of others. I wanted to make myself indispensable—to earn for my race the role of useful servants. It would have been better than death—"

"Would it?"

"You haven't seen a world in the last phases of the Norn life-cycle: the remaining populace, toiling like madmen to feed the immense maw that sprawls over continents, sea-bottoms, fills every cave and crevice. Then the final frenzy as the Norn, maddened by hunger, devours its slaves, then in convulsions that rive continents, spores—"

"And you wanted to MC the

show, eh? What could it pay you that would make it worthwhile?"

"While I lived, every whim satisfied, every impulse indulged. Fame, glory, happiness, riches—for a thousand years. And if I could resist—then someone else would serve in my place. There's no escape, once the Norn chooses a nest-world."

"I could end that right now—with one bullet. It looks soft enough."

Pearl choked. "Throw the gun away, you fool! You don't know what you're saying. We can reach some agreement—" He moved toward Adair.

"Don't try any slick moves, Jerry. I'm full of some swell stuff the Niss slipped into my arm. I can practically hear your brains working."

"Tony . . ." Pearl's voice was shaken. "I understand now. You've been injected with *Mus*. No wonder you can see in the dark. You're dying, Tony; did you know that? But of course you do. That's why you're willing to threaten the Norn."

"Tony Adair," the Norn burbled. "I offer you a world—the wealth of all its mines, its fairest shes as slaves—and more: I pledge you life eternal . . ."

Pearl half sobbed, half laughed. "Life eternal—to a man who'll be dead in half an hour." He shook himself. "The only creature in the Universe who

could be immune to the Norn's bribe—and I brought you here myself."

"Life eternal," Adair said. "I have to admit, that's quite an offer. If I wasn't already a dead man—could it do it?"

Pearl stared at Adair. "It can do anything, Tony—anything that serves its own survival."

"Yes, quite an offer," Adair repeated. "But still a little too stingy."

"What do you mean, Tony? What do you want?"

"I want it all . . ."

I DON'T understand, Tony," Sweat glistened on Pearl's face. "You blundered into this—"

"Your ideas about the natives die slow, don't they, Jerry? All right, we've wasted enough time. Let's get moving. Go back into the room where you left the Niss breathing cyanide. Bring me one of their knives."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll show you when you get back."

Adair waited, holding the gun. The Norn fed restlessly, muttering of gold and emeralds. Pearl returned carrying a two foot weighted blade.

"The part that's talking does not even know what the rest is doing, does it, Jerry?" Adair asked.

"It's almost mindless. It picks concepts from the minds around

it and mouths them like a parrot—whatever it senses will please. It's blind, lying in its web of Psi, plucking at the strands of the fabric that only it can see—"

"Deaf, too. Move in closer, Jerry. Just out of reach of the arms."

"Tony—I have to know what you're planning."

"You say you have fast reflexes, Jerry. I want you to entice it to strike. When it does—cut off its arm."

"Are you mad—"

"Do as I say, or I'll put a bullet through the head."

"Wait, Tony. I . . . I'll do as you say . . ." Pearl edged closer to the multi-ton creature sunk in its wallow. With a sudden surge, a white arm lashed out—and in a motion too quick to follow, Pearl whipped the machete down—

With a bellow, the Norn coiled back the wounded member, churning the pool to a brown froth—and a two-foot section of severed tentacle lay twitching in the muck.

"Rake it over here," Adair snapped. With the knife, Pearl dragged the pale flesh back. It writhed, flopped, then began to contract on itself. The raw, yellowish flesh of the cut end puckered, drew in.

"It acts as though it were alive—"

In the pool, the violent activity

ceased abruptly. The armored members went slack, sprawled out, claws lax. The boneless arms sagged. The wide mouth gaped, regurgitated a gallon or two of lumpy fluid. Then the head, with a sigh like gas escaping from a swamp, sank from sight, lifeless limbs trailing.

"It's . . . dead." Pearl turned on Adair, a wild look in his eyes.

"But this isn't." Adair nodded toward the severed tentacle tip. It had formed itself into a rough sphere now. A lump grew on the upper surface; four buds bulged lower down on the ten-inch globe of brownish jelly. Two buds burst and thin grey crab-legs poked forth. The other buds elongated, formed tiny pink fingers that coiled and probed the air. A slit formed in the dorsal bulge, opened.

"I will give you riches, Tony Adair," A tiny voice piped. "I will make you happy . . ."

"It was a guess," Adair said. "You told me how it propagated parthenogenetically when the parent dies. You also said there could be only one Norm to a world. Since nature favors the young at the expense of the old, it figured."

"Do you realize what this means, Tony? We can control the Norn, keep its growth within bounds—"

"We'll install it in a fancy pri-

vate sewer with the kind of atmosphere it craves, and feed it plenty of rat meat. All it wants is food and a nest that smells like home. That's where it has it all over us, with our complicated desires. And it will attend to our needs—"

"Tony—have you forgotten—"

"What did you call that stuff? *Mus*? Don't let it bother you, Jerry. I bled most of it out of my system; I just got enough to put a fine edge on my night vision."

There was a pause. "Why don't you shoot me now, Tony? How do you know I won't wait my chance to kill you and take it all?"

"You need me, Jerry. I could kill the Norn if I had to; you couldn't. Kill me, and in the next breath you'll be back on your knees, begging it for favors. You haven't got what it takes to run the bluff."

There was a harsh laugh from Pearl. "You're right. You're willing to risk it all—to gain it all. And I'm not."

"There's another reason, too, Jerry. I need you. I've got a yen to see this galaxy you keep talking about; you've got the contacts . . ."

"Yes, you'll have the stars, Tony," said the being who had been Jerry Pearl. "The Norn made one fatal error. It tackled a race greedier than its own."

THE END

Witch of the Four

Synopsis of Part One

JOURNEYING from his homeland in the high steppes to the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward, Brak the barbarian is riding through a small

mountain kingdom when a cry for help rings out. Elinor, a shepherd girl, has fallen into a pit—the den of the Manworm, a serpent-like monster, the last of



Winds

Conclusion

By JOHN JAKES

Illustrator FINLAY



a primitive specie. A sudden, mysterious burst of strength in his arm enables Brak to rescue the girl.

But when he tries to learn the source of that strength, he receives incoherent answers from the old man perched upon a rock pillar outside the pit entrance. The man is Ambrose the Pillarite, a mystic possessed of strange, occult mental powers. Meantime, Brak's pony is slaughtered and Elinor disappears.

At a caravanseri, Brak meets Iskander, general of the small army serving the wise, kindly ruler of the country, Strann of the Silver Balances. Iskander's soldiers are deserting, lured by promises of wealth. The source of the promises is a girl called Nordica the Fire-Haired.

Iskander relates that Nordica's father, the alchemist Celsus Hyrcanus, disappeared—presumably slain—after he discovered the ultimate alchemical secret: how to transmute lead into gold. Nordica's partner in this plot was Tamar Zed, a Magian from the south. Now the entire country cringes before Nordica's increasing power.

The red-haired witch-girl and her consort Tamar arrive at the caravanseri. Brak then encounters one source of her power—a gigantic hound called Scarletjaw. To its body an iron-like hide has somehow been engrafted,

making the beast impervious to spear-and sword-thrusts. Scarletjaw, Brak discovers, killed his pony.

Eager for revenge, Brak attempts to kill the great dog. As his mighty broadsword glances harmlessly off the beast's hide, Brak nearly loses his life. Nordica calls the dog to heel. She warns Brak not to interfere with her plans and vanishes into the night—though not before she grudgingly admires Brak's strength, thus earning him the enmity of the violently jealous Magian.

Next day, the king's son, Prince Pemma, arrives, having heard of Brak's bravery. Pemma is a man of the earth, more peasant than warrior. Through Pemma, Strann gifts Brak with a new pony and offers him the hospitality of the palace while Pemma returns to the vineyards to work. At the palace, the ringing of the Doomsbell signals disaster at sundown. Brak gallops to the vineyards, too late to save Pemma from being kidnapped by Nordica's outriders.

Several days later, having learned that Pemma is imprisoned in Nordica's almost impregnable mountain stronghold, Brak climbs the cliff below the castle wall in the night mist. He enters Pemma's cell and sends him to freedom down a rope. To prevent discovery of the ruse,

however, Brak is forced to remain behind. Next morning he is taken to Nordica Fire-Hair.

The beautiful witch-girl explains that she does indeed possess her father's secret of transmutation, but that she cannot put the ritual to work until the seasonal winds rise—very soon now. She will summon the four winds of the world and, using four human sacrifices as symbols of creation's four elements—earth, air, fire, water—somehow perform the transmutation. Pemma, she reveals, was to represent the earth in the ceremony. Since he's escaped, Nordica plans to use Brak instead.

DESPITE her cruel coldness, the witch-girl is attracted to Brak. She suggests he enjoy her favors before he dies. The big barbarian refuses. There is a wild commotion as Nordica discovers Tamar Zed watching through a spy-hole, crazed with jealousy. After she chastises the Magian, she tries to tempt Brak once more. He rebuffs her and she sends him down to a dungeon which holds the other three sacrifices.

One is the shepherd girl Elinor, kidnapped to represent the element air. Another is a one-legged sailor, Darios, who represents water. The third is a burly smith named Runga, representing fire. Runga takes an instant

dislike to Brak. And it soon becomes clear that Runga is fatally attracted by Nordica's beauty. Despite the fate in store—a fate which Brak explains as fully as he can—Runga rants that he would do nearly anything to possess the witch-girl even for an hour.

Late that night, two guards arrive to take Brak to Nordica. Since he is chained in tandem with Elinor, she accompanies him, down to a dim chamber at the bottom of the castle. The summons is a trick—not Nordica but Tamar Zed awaits.

The Magian is anxious to dispose of Brak secretly, since he sees the big barbarian as a rival. His method is simple—a stone is rolled away, revealing a dank tunnel which Tamar says runs to the bottom of the earth. Down this tunnel Celsus the alchemist was sent to die by Tamar and Nordica.

Brak is given a sword and thrust into the tunnel. At the last moment Elinor, terrified, breaks free of the Magian's grip and joins Brak just as the stone rolls into place.

But the tunnel does have an ending after all—a ledge midway down the inner wall of the Manworm pit. Armed only with a sword, Brak stands horror-struck beside Elinor as the great Manworm rears up from stygian depths to destroy the intruders.

CHAPTER 7.

Prisoners in the Pit

ELINOR the shepherd girl suddenly recognized the creature into whose lair the Magian had unwittingly thrust them. Her fingers constricted on the barbarian's thick forearm. She pressed close against him, her face a terror-mask in the weak light drifting down from the opening of the Manworm's cave at ground level, far overhead.

Brak whispered, "Be silent, girl! Perhaps if we make no outcry, the creature will never see us."

But Elinor had seen far too much herself. Before Brak could prevent her, she screamed. Her whole body trembled violently. As she tried to burrow against Brak for protection, she kicked several small stones on the ledge. The stones showered down over the rim of the ledge into the chasm.

Cursing, Brak clapped his free hand over Elinor's mouth to stifle her shrieks. Half out of her wits with fright, the young girl struggled against the grip of his heavy palm. She twisted, moaned, bit his hand.

Brak's temper blazed up. He shook the girl roughly, his voice low but savage: "*I say keep silent!* you've already roused the beast with your racket."

Elinor's eyes flew wide. She understood at last what he was

saying. She gave a low moan, nodded weakly. Brak relaxed his grip slightly. Then the walls of the chasm seemed to give off a rumbling sound.

The ledge rocked as the Manworm lashed out with its great tail. All around, the creature's putrefying stink floated. Elinor's sobbing died completely. Brak released her, slowly thrust her back against the wall of the narrow ledge.

Carefully Brak eased his broadsword out from beneath his knee, gripped the haft and leaned forward to peer over the rim of the ledge.

The Manworm's head on its long, scaly and tubular neck, seemed to be rising like a kind of hideous cloud. The skull of the thing looked to be three times as long as Brak himself was tall. Within the skull oval black-pupiled eyes shone a deep, luminous scarlet.

The yellow-haired barbarian couldn't be sure what kind of body the Manworm had, because most of the creature was hidden by the darkness below. But it seemed to be long and serpent like, although Brak glimpsed two supple forepaws, each armored with a dozen claws big as scythes. The creature used its claws to grasp the chasm wall and lift itself. As it rose, the scaled head turned while the red eyes searched the gloom.

Now the Manworm's head was almost level with the ledge. The creature let out another of its shattering bellows, so loud Brak's ears ached. The mammoth tail came lashing up from the darkness, whipping back and forth in rage, striking the pit walls and sending roars and tremors through the entire cavern. Beneath his feet Brak felt the ledge shiver. A narrow fissure perhaps as long as his arm opened in its surface.

THE Manworm's head was directly opposite the shelf. Brak pressed back against Elinor, his face turned outward toward the monster. Cold perspiration bathed him as he held the broadsword ready. Like a statue he crouched there, barely breathing as the Manworm's head darted forward.

Its huge jaws opened to reveal teeth sharp and long and spears. A gust of rotted air clouded out of its mouth, making Brak's belly turn over.

The Manworm dipped its head, as though sniffing at the edge of the shelf. Behind Brak, Elinor began to moan again, softly but uncontrollably.

He dared not turn to silence her. The slightest movement might attract the beast's attention. She moaned louder, louder still—

The Manworm bellowed again,

a raw scream of frustration. The red eyes blazed bright as beacons, so close to Brak and the girl that the barbarian could have extended his right arm and touched the scaly snout with his broadsword.

Behind the monster's head, its great tail appeared, waving in the air. Abruptly the tail struck out at the chasm's opposite wall in a whiplash of anger. From higher in the cavern, more rocks tumbled down. The whole earth seemed to shake.

As the dislodged boulders crashed down on it, the Manworm's head flicked upward. It reared still higher on the serpentine neck, bellowing and hitting out with its tail. But the rockshower diverted it long enough for Brak to whirl and clap his hand across Elinor's mouth again.

Wrenched into this awkward position, breathing between clenched teeth, Brak heard the rocks clatter into the bottom of the pit.

A moment later, slowly, the Manworm's head began to sink down out of sight.

For long, agonized moments Brak kept his hand pressed tight against the girl's lips. He prayed that the falling rocks had caused the Manworm to miss seeing its prey on the ledge. A weird, echoing bellow from some distance below told Brak he was right.

He released Elinor. "No sound yet! Else it'll rear up again. If it doesn't, we may be safe a while."

Bracing his palms against the ledge, he leaned forward and glanced over.

The opening at the roof of the pit, up at ground level, was so far away that the light this far down was weak, deceptive. Yet Brak thought he could make out great glistening coils folding and re-folding upon themselves. The two red eyes floated like bloody lanterns down there. Presently the eyes narrowed, as though lid-membranes were sliding shut. The eyes then went black altogether.

BREATH whistled out through Brak's lips. He managed a smile he did not feel.

"Girl? You can sit up now. The hell-thing has gone back to sleep."

Elinor sat up. Her trembling stopped but her cheeks still were white.

"For how long?" she whispered.

"I can't say. But perhaps long enough for us to try to escape from this hole. Now if we—what's wrong?"

Elinor was shaking her head. "I can't. I have no strength."

Angrily he seized her shoulder. "Would you rather wait here until it comes for us?"

"No, Brak. But the way is closed. Tamar Zed's men rolled the great stone into place." She indicated the blackness further back along the ledge, the ending of the tunnel down which the Magian had thrust them, unaware that the passage ended in the Manworm's lair.

Brak used his broadsword to point overhead. "The way up there is open."

"How can we reach it?"

"Climb," said Brak grimly. "Climb up the wall of the pit and out."

The thought of such an effort set Elinor to sobbing again. Rubbed raw by the terror of the last few moments, Brak pushed her roughly back against the ledge wall.

"Mewling and crying will do no good at all, girl! Either we try to flee this place while the thing sleeps, or we remain and let it devour us. Or, if it never finds us, we starve. Which prospect appeals to you most? I say we should take the chance and try to climb."

Controlling herself with effort, Elinor nodded. "Yes, Brak," she said weakly. "Yes, you're right."

"Rest a moment or two. Then we'll start." Brak stood up, leaned his broadsword against the ledge wall. "In a crevice back there I saw growing things. Wait—"

And, testing the fissured surface of the ledge with every step, Brak moved warily down the ledge until he reached the spot in the wall where dampish, green and moss-like plants with fluffy stalk-heads grew in a declevity.

Brak tore out several of the stalks. He sniffed them. He crushed a bit of one in his palm, then munched on it. The fiber was sweet, and relatively tender. After a time he ate a little bit more.

Then he gathered all he could find and carried the plants back to Elinor.

"Fit to be eaten, I think. Take some, for a little strength."

Seeming to welcome some commonplace, physical act like eating, the shepherd girl crushed several stalks the way Brak showed her, and ate. Brak's belly no longer rumbled quite so emptily. A measure of calm returned to both of them.

Elinor brushed at a lock of her long, silken brown hair which had fallen across her cheek. "How far is it to the top, Brak?"

"We mustn't think that way, girl. Else we'll never get out. Just tell yourself it's not so far that a strong man and a strong woman cannot make it. Tear off a strip of the hem of your gown. I want to make a sling for the sword."

THE girl turned her back. Her modesty brought a faint, weary smile to the lips of the brawny man with wide shoulders and the garment of lion's hide about his hips. That Elinor would fall back into a habit of feminine shyness at such a moment was a hopeful sign.

He glanced down into the pit again. Total darkness. Only the powerful decay smell served as a reminder that the Manworm slept in the blackness. No doubt the slightest sound would rouse it again. And climbing up would be noisy.

Still, Brak didn't intend to remain on the ledge, starving or going out of his mind or both. That was precisely what Tamar Zed wanted. Brak had scores to settle with the Magian, and with Nordica Fire-Hair too.

Elinor handed Brak the strip of cloth. He tied it to the broadsword hilt and also around his left shoulder.

"Ready," he said.

"Where do we begin?"

"There, yonder, on the left. See that outcrop? The cavern wall looks rough from that point upward. Let me go first." He took Elinor's hand briefly, gripped it hard, trying to give her reassurance he himself did not feel. "Hold to the lion-hide around my middle, girl. I'll support both of us as we climb."

Straining outward with his

left arm, Brak reached for the outcrop. He stepped across the short gap between the ledge and the boss-like thrust of stone on which he found a foothold. Seizing the rock wall with his left hand, he extended his right hand back to Elinor.

She grasped his wrist, jumped across. She stumbled against Brak when she landed. For a moment both the girl and the big barbarian were in danger of teetering into space.

But Brak held fast to the wall, muscles twisting and bunching in his mighty shoulders. Elinor gripped the lion-hide which was tied tightly around Brak's belly. When they had both regained balance, she drew back, forced another smile.

This time, though, her eyes shone with a little courage, a little hope. The first small step to the outcrop had demonstrated that they did have a chance to survive.

Brak smiled in return, but it was a hollow smile. The cavern wall stretched far, far upward. The dim opening at ground level was a mere blur of grayish radiance. Yet Brak never showed his own uncertainty, only grasped the stones over his head and pulled himself upward.

A moment later he drew Elinor up behind him. How much time passed in that frightful ascent, Brak was unable to say.

They moved cautiously, Brak testing each hand - and foothold. Their line of climb was not direct. Many times they were forced to move wide around the tunnel wall, to left or to right, to find the next secure step.

AFTER a bit Brak's brawny arms began to ache. He said nothing. Elinor must be flagging too. The dim light far above began to seem unreachable.

Resting on another narrow ledge, Brak panted, "How are you faring, girl?"

"I hurt, Brak. Every part of me hurts. But we've come this far. We can go the rest."

Lost in the alien cave where the Manworm slept, abandoned by their enemies and facing obstacles many a saner man would have surrendered to without fighting, Brak suddenly felt a burst of affection for the slim, shy girl. He reached out clumsily, for on the high steppes, the wild lands of the north where he had been born, fine manners were unknown. He touched her cheek.

Elinor's flesh felt warm. She closed her hand over his fingers, then, embarrassed, let go. Brak let out a low, rattling laugh. The emotion within him was strange, new. But it lent him added strength.

"We're nearly half way up," he said. "Just there—see where

that black shadow juts?—there seems to be another ledge. It looks big. We'll go that far and rest."

Elinor nodded. Brak stood, lifted his right leg to climb to the next little thrust of rock. The large shelf was not more than twice his own height above them. It seemed a simple matter to reach it now, and then the perilous climb would be half finished.

Brak brought Elinor up beside him, strained high, touched the lip of the ledge which extended some distance out into empty space, behind him.

"Difficult," he grumbled. "I'll have to lean backward, then jump and catch it. After I do, you catch hold of my legs. I'll pull us both up."

Elinor's intake of breath said that she knew the danger of the maneuver. Still, she said nothing. Brak adjusted the cloth sling holding his broadsword. He swiped his forearm across his mouth. He pushed his yellow hair back from his forehead. He gathered his legs under him, and jumped.

For one mad instant he had the sensation of sailing helplessly in empty space, suspended, it seemed, high above the sleeping Manworm. Then, with an involuntary yell, he flung his hands out and caught the ledge.

His left hand slipped.

He held on with his right. His muscles wrenched and strained while he dangled in space, supported only by five fingers.

Gradually, by struggling, he brought his left hand back up. He clung to the ledge and called:

"Now, girl. Leap and catch my legs."

Brak tensed, waiting for the added weight. It struck him suddenly, a dragging, a wrenching that threatened to pull him into the void.

"Brak?" she called. "Brak, I can't hold on—I'm slipping down—"

HE felt it. Her arms, wrapped around his mighty legs, slid. He dug his upper teeth into his lip and, slowly, slowly, with inhuman effort, began to draw himself upward.

His forehead cleared the rim of the ledge.

Then his chin.

But Elinor's weight was pulling on him, and she was failing now, slipping faster.

Higher Brak pulled himself—
Higher—

Now his torso had cleared the rim.

Elinor screamed softly, slipped again.

Brak slammed his head and chest forward, striking hard against the surface of the ledge. Doubled over, he lay that way only an instant. Then, groaning,

he began to drag his body forward.

"Get one hand on the edge, girl," he shouted. "Then I can drag you up."

Elinor let out a low sob. Brak felt her weight shift. He wrenched his head around, saw white fingers straining for purchase on the ledge. The moment she caught hold, he flung his legs up and over so that his whole body was on the shelf. At the same time he grabbed frantically backwards, caught Elinor's arm just as her right hand slipped and she started to drop.

But he had her. First by one arm, then by both.

A moment later, weak with exertion, Brak had lifted the shepherd girl to safety on the wide ledge. Panting and shuddering uncontrollably, they lay side by side a long time.

Then Brak rose to survey the shelf. It was roughly triangular, its two upper sides converging into a patch of darkness at the rear. The black seemed more stygian than the rest of the pit.

About to take a step in that direction because he wondered whether the intense dark might signal a cave, Brak froze.

"Elinor?" He whispered it without turning. "Lie very still. Something is breathing back there."

There was no mistake. He'd heard the hissing sibilance.

Carefully he unslung the broadsword, braced his legs wide.

Their noise climbing up had roused whatever thing dwelled in the shelf cave. Now, in addition to a rush of breath, there was a shuffling, a slithering, as of someone or some thing crawling out of its den.

Brak dropped into a crouch, took a step forward—

With a flapping, a screeching, a rush of moldy air, the apparition hurled out of the cave.

Claws raked Brak's cheek. Musty cloth whipped around him. He heard a dull, frightened moaning.

Unable to clearly see the thing which had come lunging from the black, and blinded by the flapping cloths, Brak fastened both hands on the sword haft, hurled the blade back over his head for a downstroke to cleave the thing in half.

"Brak!" Elinor shrieked. "*'Tis a ragged old man—*"

SAVAGELY Brak wrenched the sword aside, leaped back. His spine collided with the ledge wall, and the thing which had come stumbling from the cave was outlined against the dim radiance filtering down from overhead. Brak goggled.

The tottering, shaking man was incredibly filthy and covered with matted hair. His eyebrows and beard were white,

tangly forests. The arms of this human skeleton twitched and the robes flapped again, no more than long tatters of cloth. On one of the tatters Brak glimpsed a faded crescent moon sewn with tarnished gilt thread.

The creature moaned, "Uhhh, uhhh, uhhh," apparently terrified of Brak. Tiny eyes all buried in wrinkled, filthy-yellow skin darted back and forth from Brak's broadsword to his face.

Brak's spine crawled. He knew the human horror's name.

"Alchemist? Celsus Hyrcanus? Can you understand me?"

The trembling figure spoke words that sounded like, "Go, go." Then the awful moaning began once more. "Uhhh, uhhh, uhhh." The man waved his arms wildly, as if to protect himself.

Brak darted around the man, who scabbled back against the wall. Dropping down beside the shepherd girl, Brak whispered: "Look at the moon-sign stitched on the robe."

"I saw it. And a radiant sun, too. Is it—?"

Brak nodded. "Nordica's father, Celsus Hyrcanus. I think it must be. Neither the witch-girl nor the Magian understood that the tunnel led into this pit. They thrust the old man down here to die. He survived long enough to somehow reach this ledge. That is to say, his body survived. The rest of him, his mind

could hardly be considered—"

"Uhhh, uhhh, uhhh."

VOICE rising into a shriek, the apparition stepped away from the wall. The old man jiggled his arms frantically. His face was more fully illuminated for a moment, and Brak saw with horror that the few patches of skin showing where the beard did not grow were covered with unwholesome grayish-green sores. Out of the old man's face the tiny eyes gleamed with the terror of one whose mindless domain has been invaded. Moment by moment, the moans grew louder.

"Quiet, old one. Listen to me. We'll not harm you."

The man paid no attention to Brak. He stumbled forward:

"Uhhh, go, uhhh, go—"

"Celsus Hyrcanus" Brak shouted. "We're your friends!"

"No use, no use," Elinor was crying. "There's nothing left in his skull but terrors—"

And Brak saw it was true. The pitiful creature shambled, stumbled, lurched ahead step by infantile step. His long-grown fingernails raked the air with slashing strokes. The only instinct still stirring in his mind must be the dim one that prodded him to protect his fouled nesting-place on the ledge.

Abruptly Brak realized how loudly Celsus Hyrcanus was yelling, that dreadful cry repeat-

ed over and over—"Uhhh, uhhh, uhhh."—and Braks gut knotted up.

Far below, there was a rumbling, an abortive bellow.

Brak raced forward. He overpowered the old man, locked his elbow around the alchemist's scrawny neck.

"Be silent, old one!" Brak wrestled the man toward the cave, finding him surprisingly strong, with the power of the demented in his slashing hands and kicking legs. "Be silent, I said, or you'll rouse the beast sleeping down there and we'll all be—"

The shelf shook. A sound of thunderous lashing rose out of the dark.

Celsus seemed to stiffen in Brak's grasp, as if he too understood the nature of the sound.

Bellow followed bellow. Brak thrust the old man away, cursed in despair. Elinor ran back from the lip of the ledge. Brak's sword-arm felt heavy as metal.

Reeling, Celsus rushed back into his cave. But the moans persisted, ringing from the shelf walls until the cry of the Manworm drowned them out.

Brak took up a position at the shelf edge. To Elinor he said:

"Get behind me, girl. And stay hidden."

For the red eyes in the great head were rising swiftly out of the dark now. The tail lashed the

pit walls furiously. This time, Brak knew, there was no avoiding the battle.

CHAPTER 8.

Sword and Demon

MANY strange, awesome sights in many unfamiliar lands had startled and amazed Brak in his long journey down from the high steppes of the north country to the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward, where he meant to seek his fortune. Time and again, in one exotic locale after another, he had been confronted with sights of terror, cruelty, blood and savagery. Several times too he had encountered the forces of black magic. Yet all these past experiences were as nothing, were forgotten in the moment when he stood upon the ledge, watching the Manworm rise from the darkness.

The stench gusting from the creature's open jaws was the smell of earth itself, but earth decayed through endless centuries. The smell was overpowering, sickening.

Indeed, compared with the huge beast from the pit, Brak seemed a puny figure despite his big size. He stood with powerful legs wide apart, head slightly lowered, eyes glaring warily down at the head of the clawed serpent-thing.

Then, as though he'd taken a cooling draught of wine, Brak raised his head. And laughed, harshly, low. He hitched up the garment of lion's hide about his hips, chuckled again. For though he was afraid, he realized that he had probably lost his life anyway when Tamar Zed cast him into the tunnel. Therefore, with life worthless, he need not let the fear of its loss hamper him when the Manworm attacked.

Behind him, Elinor clung to the shelf wall. The mad moanings of old Celsus issued from the cave into which the alchemist had fled. And the Manworm was nearly up to Brak's level—

For the moment, the huge serpent-thing could not locate its prey. The scaled tail flicked back and forth, back and forth, so long and strong that each flick against the sides of the cavern dislodged great chunks of slate, sent them thundering down into the depths.

The Manworm bellowed as its great red eyes came up level with the shelf. From the open jaws and between the man-sized fangs, a wet-dripping tongue uncoiled, triple-forked at the end.

The tongue shot out between the jaws as if hoping to snatch some morsel out of the air. Brak hauled his broadsword back over his shoulder. Hot excitement churned inside him. The triple fork was questing at him blindly

—the beast still did not know Brak was on the shelf, quite close.

The tongue reached nearer, nearer, now almost fully extended. In the heartbeats before the Manworm finished its bellow and the tongue started to draw back, Brak cut downward with his blade, all the power of his great arm behind the blow.

LIKE mammoth bonfires, the Manworm's eyes grew a deeper scarlet in an instant. Its long, tubular neck twisted as the head swung around, instinctively jerking back from the sudden agony of naked steel hacking through its tongue-flesh. But Brak's blade was already slicing deep—

The cutting edge bit into the suety surface of the tongue forks. Suddenly two of the three forks dropped off. From their roots blackish ichor, putrescent, sprayed over Brak.

The Manworm saw him then, saw and knew Brak was the tiny thing which had caused him so much pain.

Back against the cavern's opposite wall the Manworm reared, bellowing, bellowing, *bellowing*—

The roar was so thunderous, Brak felt as though a spike had pierced his brain. The droplets of ichor on his flesh stung, burned. Brak leaped back from the edge as the Manworm struck the far

cavern wall, then shot its head forward on the long neck.

More ichor showered over Brak, hellishly painful, still gouting from the hacked tongue. The roar in the cavern was continuous now. The Manworm lashed its tail side to side in steady rhythm, an indication of its mounting rage.

Retreating, Brak watched the tongue shoot forth again. It twitched across onto the shelf, almost like an exploring hand. Brak raised his sword for another blow, yelled in alarm.

His foot skidded in a pool of the monster's black life-fluid.

Somewhere in the dark, Elinor saw Brak go down, and screamed like a lost soul. The Manworm's tongue slid across Brak's belly. It twitched around beneath him. It coiled and coiled, winding around his middle like a great rope.

Clouds of foul air from the beast's gullet washed over him. Hacking futilely with the sword, Brak was picked up by that huge enwrapping tongue and lifted across the edge of the shelf.

He was carried through the air toward the Manworm's jaws. He had a nightmare impression of rows of fangs rushing toward him. The tongue threatened to crush the life from him. In another instant, Brak knew he would either be broken in half or sucked down inside those gi-

gantic jaws, which were already beginning to close.

Brak was over the pit now, burning from head to foot with the ichor that leaked from the severed forks. Closer the jaws loomed, *closer*—

Brak twisted, so hard his upper body ached with unbearable agony. But he managed to clamp both hands on the broadsword and hold it high. He aimed the point at a bony pinkish-white ridge of cartilage just above the sockets of the Manworm's great upper fangs. Brak's life was done unless that ridge was as bony-hard as it looked in the failing light—

Brak braced his body for the contact of the sword point against the jaw cartilage. Just as the tongue dragged him between those white, moisture-dripping fangs, the broadsword struck and dug into the cartilage.

The tongue constricted, tightened around Brak's belly. Wildly he kicked out. His naked soles slipped on the damp and rough surfaces of two of the huge lower fangs.

EXERTING every ounce of strength, feeling his eyes begin to stand out in their sockets and his temples ache as though the blood would burst out through their bony walls, Brak stiffened his entire body, legs jammed against two of the

beast's lower teeth and broadsword above his head, point buried into the cartilage. He became a grisly human wedge holding the Manworm's jawbones apart.

Only this back-breaking stance prevented him from being drawn into the beast's mouth. How long he could stay thus braced was another matter. The Manworm sensed the resistance. The muscles in its tongue began to constrict again.

Brak's belly felt crushed, pulped, awash with hurt. His right foot slipped off the fang against which he braced. Desperately he shifted the foot back, hunting for something to push against.

Instead of exerting a steady pressure, the Manworm began to jerk its tongue rhythmically. Each jerk tightened the hellish coils around Brak's midsection, until he shouted aloud in agony.

He knew he could stay in his present position just a moment more. Any longer and his spine would snap.

He resisted the tremendous pressure of the next rhythmic constriction around his middle. When the tongue relaxed briefly, Brak jerked the broadsword out of the jaw cartilage, slashed it downward into the central stalk of the tongue itself.

The Manworm reared again. Brak was near-blinded by the

sudden increase in reddish light spilling from the beast's eyes, but he knew he had scored a wound on the tongue-stalk because his legs were awash with stinging ichor once more.

The coiled pressure around his middle relaxed a bit more. Hacking and gouging with sword-point, Brak pushed himself upward through the coils. His hips came free, then his entire lower body. The tongue was beginning to droop.

Brak leaped high, caught the beast's snout, a horny protrusion big as a small burial hill, and went scrambling up the spine which ran up the middle of the snout.

Again the Manworm wrenched its head. Brak was hurled against a plate-like place directly between the scarlet eyes. The scales of the hide were large enough to give Brak a handhold, and he clung to one of them while the Manworm hurled itself from side to side in torment.

The great head dipped, swayed, bucked. To either side Brak saw the huge scarlet eyes burning, reddish ovals twice his height. Like a pestiferous insect Brak held on between those eyes while the Manworm tried to shake off the irritant it knew crouched on the crest of its snout but which it could not see.

Almost mad with the delirium of the struggle, Brak breathed

in wild gulps. His body ached in a hundred places. Yet he could not flag now, and he would not. A divine insanity overcame him, his heritage from the wild people of the northern steppes who were his forbears. Brak became a beast with only one aim, that of the Manworm—to kill its enemy.

THE Manworm's convulsions dislodged more big stones which sailed down into the pit with mighty crashes. Indeed, the entire cavern was trembling, and the light had grown dimmer somehow. But Brak saw a chance for victory—

If he could slide over to one of the great eyes and ram his broadsword into the socket, he might strike the brain.

The black ichor covering his body reflected the baleful scarlet glare from those eyes. Carefully Brak fastened his left hand upon one of the scales and moved a step closer to the right eye.

Although the Manworm's hide was tough, it seemed to have its own bizarre sensitivity. Brak's moving foot somehow told the creature where its quarry was.

Out of the pit rose one of the monster's forepaws.

The other paw had fastened around the edge of the shelf where Brak had begun his battle. The paw traveling through the air twisted inward. Brak

slammed himself back against the scaly wall between the Manworm's eyes as twelve scythe-like claws on the paw closed slowly, reaching to pluck Brak from his hiding place.

The claws formed a white circle of sharp points, raked suddenly down the Manworm's snout. The claw-tips gouged the armored hide but missed Brak.

Again the Manworm tore at its own snout, grappling blindly, hoping to snare the thing it felt but could not see. One of the claws grazed Brak's right thigh, opening a long gash.

A third time the claws raked down, missing Brak by the barest margin. Then he realized that the longer he waited, crushed back against the scales, the smaller became his chances for living to deliver a mortal blow.

The Manworm drew its paw away in preparation for another strike. Its bellowing deepened amid the thunder of tumbling rocks. Before the paw came slashing in again, Brak leaped at the right eye.

His toe caught in a joint between scales. He pitched forward. The claw descended. Brak knew he was finished—

Like a projectile from a siege machine, one of the falling boulders struck the monster's paw. The Manworm screamed, the claws opened, clamped shut frantically on empty air. The rock,

which the beast had mistaken for Brak himself, went tumbling on down into the dark.

Spared a moment more, Brak used the opportunity to brace his legs beneath him, then spring forward with his right arm thrust out. The broadsword shimmered like fire, reflecting red light from the great eye—

The point struck hard scales. Brak wrenched to the side, driving in with all his might. Suddenly the sword-tip scraped across one more scale and into the soft joint at the edge of the socket.

With a maddened scream of triumph Brak grasped the hilt with both hands and rammed, rammed deep, pushing the weapon in up to the hilt, twisting at the same time—

THE killing stroke drove the Manworm upward, upward, as the right eye, so ruby-bright a moment ago, began to flow beneath the surface of its membrane with a black, misty cloudiness, as though some supernatural pall had dropped across a polished red mirror.

Higher the Manworm's head shot up through the cavern, higher, as the beast arched in ultimate pain. Brak grappled to hang onto the scale between the eyes. The other left eye was darkening too.

Then, at the height of its arch,

the Manworm let out a bellow louder than any that had preceded it. The cavern seemed to crumble on all sides. Beneath Brak's feet the snout scales were awash with ichor beginning to flow out around the sword-hilt. Brak slipped, tumbled, as the Manworm plunged downward again, trying by its convulsions to free itself of the iron spike imbedded through its eye into its brain.

Down, down it fell. Brak was hurled into space, no hand or footholds left, only the spinning dark—

He had won, yet he was finished. The Manworm had flung him off. He would die somewhere in the bowels of the pit, crushed beneath the stinking carcass that was collapsing, falling like a juggernaut.

Suddenly Brak's legs struck something firm but slime-covered. Brak threw his arms out wildly, closed them around it. He was whipped from side to side, his head jerked until he thought his neck would break.

Through his pain and confusion he understood that he'd caught hold of the Manworm's tail. But the tail, like the creature was dying, and demented. Brak was carried toward the cavern wall by the lashing tail. In an instant more, he would be smashed against that wall, pulped—

The moment before the tail struck the rocky side of the cavern, Brak let go.

The force of the tail's swing threw him wide, slammed him against rock with brutal force. By sheer instinct alone Brak fought for a grip as his legs dropped from beneath him. He managed to drag his knees up onto a knob-like protrusion of rock and thrust his fingers into a tiny crevice, pushed them in, wedged them in despite the pain.

He closed his eyes and hung on.

Jagged boulders still dropped through the darkness. But the Manworm had fallen far down into the pit now. Its dying red eyes were mere dull spots of radiance without definition. Its belated sounded feeble.

Presently there was a last crash, a last scaly scrape of the tail against the rock, far down. The red lights vanished. The rocks ceased to fall. The grinding roar of cave-in went echoing away to silence.

Cheek against the cold stone, fingers jammed into the crevice, Brak closed his eyes and let the hot, salt-rich tears of exhaustion and triumph wash down his cheeks a long time.

WHEN he regained his senses, he managed to pull his fingers from the crevice. Driving all thought of the pain in his

body from his mind, he began to climb in the general direction of the shelf where he had left Elinor.

He felt terribly alone, helpless in the near-dark. His broadsword was gone. Perhaps he had been mortally hurt. He seemed unable to see clearly whereas before, the light from the opening high in the cavern had enabled him to see details on every hand. He climbed mostly by feel and instinct, calling up into the black:

"Elinor? Girl? Shout and tell me where you are."

When he had nearly abandoned hope of hearing her voice, thinking perhaps that old Celsus Hyrcanus in his madness had killed her, she called back:

"Brak? Brak?"

Quick new strength surged through him. He climbed faster, shouting, "Girl, keep calling out. Loudly as you can, so I know which way to climb."

And, somewhere overhead, he heard the shepherd girl's exclamation of surprise and joy as she realized he lived.

As he ordered, she cried his name down into the chasm, over and over. Brak used the last remaining bits of his strength to negotiate a path up to her. Suddenly the rock wall flared outward above him. Elinor's voice sounded very close.

He pulled himself up, flung a

leg over. Gasping, he crawled on to the shelf beside the kneeling girl. He stunk of the Manworm's ichor and his own hot blood.

The girl shrank from him, sickened, afraid.

"The—thing—died," he whispered through bloodied lips. "The thing—perished—and now—we can find our way out—out of—"

His skull was full of dancing tiny lights. Waves of pain swept over him. A dark gulf widened in his mind, sucked his whole being into it and he rolled over on his great back, unconscious.

WHEN he wakened, the big barbarian was conscious of a faint chittering noise. And a different feel to his flesh.

With a groan he turned onto his side, shook his head to clear it. Haggard, pale, Elinor knelt beside him again. Brak sat up.

The effort cost him a severe pain or two. Otherwise, all his bones seemed to be in their proper places. He localized the source of the chittering—the cave.

"Is that the alchemist?" he wanted to know. "Hiding back there in his warren?"

"Yes, Brak. Several times I called to him for help. He would not answer."

"How long have I slept?"

"I don't know. Many hours, I think. I dozed myself, sitting

here, keeping watch." She indicated a litter of crumpled moss-like plants nearby. "I used those to scrub away as much of the black filth that covered you as I could. What was the hideous stuff?"

"The blood of the Manworm. Well, it flows no more."

He stood up, grasped her hand, pulled her close to his side, stared up at the dim roof of the cavern. He said nothing about the dimmer light in the pit, the light which was now hardly light at all. Instead he told her:

"We must try to get out now. I will climb up alone to scout the way. Stay here until I come back."

"No," she said instantly. "Not here. Not with that—that old man hiding."

The mewings and chittering, a meaningless mockery of human speech issuing from the cave, had a weird, grisly sound. Brak studied Elinor's face as best he could. Her eyes had a faint glassy shine, as though their experiences thus far had been almost more than her mind could bear.

"Very well," Brak said tiredly. "We will climb up to the next resting place. I will leave you there and go on alone."

To this Elinor silently agreed. Brak took her hand, led her over to the shelf's edge. Once more,

with the big barbarian leading the way and the girl clinging to his lion-hide garment, they began to climb.

A short distance above the large shelf they found another, smaller one. Here Brak left the girl huddled, setting out to climb the rest of the way to the top. His body still hurt from his ferocious death-battle with the Manworm, but he forced himself to think only of escape, of the thick red thirst in him for revenge against Nordica Fire-Hair and Tamar Zed.

Long before he reached the pit's upper opening, however, he saw the reason for the dim light.

Heartsick, he climbed the rest of the way. He spent a long time, and many curses, struggling to move a large boulder. It was one of dozens which had tumbled in upon the entrance tunnel. He got nowhere.

He struck his fist against the boulder, damning all the dark gods of the earth. Then, laboriously, he began to climb downward again.

WHEN he rejoined Elinor he said simply:

"The Manworm's thrashings dislodged much rock. At the top there is only a tiny opening, hardly big enough to poke a hand through. Beyond, in the tunnel leading outside, there is more fallen rock. The tunnel is blocked

nearly its whole length, as well as I could tell. We could never move it all in a year. That is why the light is so feeble now."

Seeing the desperate mask Brak's face had become, Elinor said, "Then—we're imprisoned here after all?" Her voice rose, panicky. "Prisoned here until we die, or—"

"Girl, don't screech at me!"

"Brak, I'm afraid."

"Let me think. There is one other way we might try, though it's a slim hope. And it depends on how much strength you have left. We could go back through the tunnel into which Tamar Zed put us. We might be able to rouse someone in the castle. Once back with Nordica, our chances for life would be poor. But here, they don't exist at all."

Swiftly Elinor rose. Perhaps terror lent her courage. "We must try. The castle is better than this dark."

They climbed down to the large shelf. Brak called into the cave:

"Celsus? Celsus Hyrcanus? We are your friends. We are going to try to return to the house of your daughter Nordica, and deal with her as she deserves. Let us take you along."

The chittering stopped in the cave. Then:

"Uhhh, uhhh, uhhh."

The chittering began again.

Elinor and Brak exchanged

hopeless looks. They left the demented old man where he clearly wished to remain, lost in the dark of the pit and the deeper dark of his own poor brain.

Slowly, painfully, with many rests, the pair scrambled down the rock wall until they came at last to the shelf which led into the tunnel.

The shelf was sheared half away. The tunnel mouth was partially blocked with rubble, but they entered it without difficulty.

All along the dark passage, stones had fallen and fissures had opened in the walls. But after a seemingly interminable time, Brak let out a gasp.

Ahead, beyond another pile of fallen rock, yellow light gleamed.

The round stone blocking the entrance to the subterranean room displayed a ragged edge. The Manworm's fury had reached this far, had cracked the stone in half. The way was open.

Turning, Brak looked down at the trembling shepherd girl. They could pass through into Nordica's house again. But Brak was weary, had no sword. He was not sure whether the cracked stone was a blessing or a curse.

Still, the hope shining in Elinor's eyes again gave him his answer. At least life remained. Grasping the girl's hand, Brak led her forward in silence into the house of their enemies.

CHAPTER 9.

In the Catacombs of the Blood Bats

BRAK'S eyes swept from corner to corner of the underground room. It was empty.

The oil lamp had nearly burned out. The wick floated in a tiny pool of the stuff. Occasionally the flame flared out, only to puff alight again, feebly, throwing the massive shadow of Brak's shoulders on the damp wall. The grim lines around his mouth relaxed a little.

"The jackals did their work and ran back aboveground to bark about their victory." He pointed to the second of two openings, black, musty-smelling passages leading out of the chamber. "That must be the way up to the castle. For I remember the other one is the entrance through which they brought us here."

"I was so frightened," Elinor said, "I don't remember well. But I think you're right, Brak."

"We must try to reach the dungeon and the other two prisoners. That one-legged sailor and the other one, Runga the smithy—though I like him very little—have strong fighting arms. Three men together might have a better chance to break out of these walls than one alone."

So saying, Brak started for the left-hand entrance. Elinor followed, her eyes fearful.

Their descent to the underground room had been easy due to the slope of the rock floor. Going upward was more difficult. Brak had only instinct to guide him, his sense of the spoor, the trail. That sense had often put food in his belly when he was traveling through lands where it seemed no animal life existed. Yet somehow, he always found the track.

This time his instinct served him equally well. Though the path upward was dark and hard, still at each junction of stone-walled passages Brak would pause, breathe sibilantly a moment, then grunt, "This way, girl."

The duel with the Manworm had taken its toll, however. Brak's mighty legs began to ache again as they climbed. Elinor fell several times.

Abruptly, yellowness shone ahead. Brak raced forward. The wall on his left ended suddenly. Brak whirled around, surprised. In turning, his shoulder struck Elinor's. She cried out.

Too late, Brak attempted to draw back out of the intersection of two passages which crossed each other at right angles. A short way down the left corridor, a helmeted guard had been leaning on his spear, drowsing. His eyes flared open the moment Elinor made her outcry.

Dropping to one knee, Brak pulled her head against his shoulder and kept his own head down so that their faces would not shine in the reflection of the guard's niche lamp. The glossy-wet walls of the underground corridors had contrived to trick Brak's weary eyesight—he had thought the light shone from directly ahead, while actually it reflected from the cross-corridor.

THE guard hefted his spear. "Who is it? Who walks there?" Though he sounded somewhat hesitant, the guard advanced down the passage. "Answer, whoever it is!"

Desperately Brak flogged his tired brain for a way out of this new dilemma. Beneath his knee he felt loose pebbles. Quickly he scooped up a handful, tossing them off in the dark. At the same time he let out a strange, high-pitched *scree-scree* cry.

The weird noise bounced from the echoing walls. The guard started, peered into the gloom. Brak hoped that the ticking of the tiny stones as they fell, coupled with the faint cry, would convince the guard that only fat gray rats ran in the darkness.

Elinor's cheek was cold against Brak's side as he scooped up more pebbles, tossed them. The tick-ticking sound was softer, and so was Brak's cry, muffled behind his hand.

The guard's shoulders slumped with relief. "More of those filthy four-legged things—" he muttered, and faced around. He returned to his post near the lamp niche and resumed leaning on his spear.

Breath whistled out between Brak's lips. Once more they had been spared. But how many more times would he be able to outwit Nordica's men before weariness overcame him, addled his brains, slowed his reactions to the fatal point?

No time to fret over that now. Brak concentrated on watching the guard. When the man began to doze again, Brak and the girl darted across the open intersection and soon left the dim light behind.

Once more the passage sloped steeply upward. But the air seemed a trifle fresher, less tainted with the greenish-musty aroma of the deep underground.

Distantly Brak heard shouting. He stopped to listen.

"Either my brain has cracked, girl, or that's the clamor of an army in battle."

Elinor was quick to agree: "No, Brak, you're right. Men are yelling—"

The barbarian pointed. "Look ahead. The grayness. Perhaps it's a window. The noise is coming from that direction, anyway."

They hurried on. The oblong of light did turn out to be a tall,

narrow embrasure. Pearly mist drifted through the window in the castle wall, congealing in cold droplets on Brak's skin as he leaned across the sill in effort to see out.

The night mist, not yet burned away, whirled and gusted. Brak had a sense of being high above the battle scene, for the shoutings and armor-rattles occasionally grew faint. But once he glimpsed a yellowish flare, as of massed torches. And, listening carefully, Brak identified the rattling of swords, the neigh of horses, the wooden creaking of equipment wagons.

Joyfully he whirled back from the window. "Girl, that's an army out there right enough. Small, probably. There aren't many fighting men left in the kingdom. But an army."

As Elinor's eyes glowed with fresh hope, the sweet, sharp notes of a silver military trumpet drifted through the gray dawn. Elinor caught her breath.

"Is it Prince Pemma? Or Lord Strann?"

"I expect so. They've brought men to storm the walls. Can you hear that heavy rumbling? Siege machines. We must hurry and free the other prisoners. With an attack going on, we have our best chance to escape while Nordica's soldiers are occupied. Hurry!"

THE big man turned and raced on up the corridor, battle-fury stirring him. Elinor darted along close behind him. Even as he ran, Brak heard a new sound—the heavy crashing of siege boulders striking the walls.

Around a bending in the corridor light glimmered again. So eager was Brak to use the outside attack to good advantage, he failed to see the soldier's shadow approaching along the wall.

The guard hove into sight around the bend, running, carrying a signal bugle. Elinor screamed, "*Brak!*"

The men saw one another simultaneously. The guard snaked his broadsword from its scabbard, dropped the bugle, charged Brak to run him through. Even as he attacked, the guard opened his mouth to scream out an alarm.

With a long leap Brak dove against him, stifling his shout. Brak's thick fingers closed on the man's windpipe. Brak felt the broadsword whip past his ribs, nearly slicing his side open.

The guard flailed, struggled to bring his sword hand into position to chop at Brak's skull. By that time the big barbarian had closed all ten fingers on the soldier's scrawny neck, was throttling him savagely.

Here at last was solid flesh, the enemy. Here at last was a

tangible foe Brak could fight. Rivers of primeval blood-fury were racing wildly, savagely inside him.

The guard struck for Brak's head. The blade clanged against the wall. Brak blinked in a shower of blue sparks, dodged the next hack, then hurled the guard against the wall with all his power.

The man's helmet tipped off his head and went rolling away down the sharply-pitched floor. Growling, Brak jerked the man away from the wall, then smashed him against it again, just as the guard's sword came arcing down on Brak's muscle-thick neck.

Hands on the soldier's windpipe, Brak crashed the soldier's skull against the stone an instant before the sword reached his throat. The angle of the blow changed as the back of the guard's head popped open against the rock.

Eyes huge, horror-struck, the guard went limp. His sword fell from his hand. Brak stepped away, panting. The guard toppled over. Brak laughed low, gave the corpse with its purple-gougued throat a kick, spinning it over and over down the sloping corridor until it bumped against the wall at a bend. The corpse thumped to a standstill, the back of the head a grisly ruin of brains and oozing blood.

BRAK seized the fallen broadsword. The touch of cold iron against his palm, cold, mighty iron, lent him new strength. As he turned to signal Elinor to follow he saw, with something akin to amusement, that she was now frightened of him as much as of anything. In truth Brak's face had turned ugly, as it did when the battle-heat sang and bubbled in his blood.

"Don't shudder so, girl. The only ones I'll kill are those who serve the witch-woman. Let's hurry. And not be too careful of the noise. Time's running very fast—"

The barbarian and the girl raced along the corridor toward the light. They emerged into the dungeon corridor, finding it deserted. The boots of running men hammered distantly, counterpointed by crashes and tremors which said that Prince Pemma or Lord Strann had siege engines strong enough to make the castle walls shake.

"It was that cell," Elinor called, pointing down the row of barred doorways.

Brak had already hurried to the place at the far end of the short, lamplit corridor where the jailers kept watch. He pulled a set of bronze keys from a hanging-thong. In the clamor of the sudden attack, all the posts had been deserted, it seemed.

Brak ran along the cell

doors shouting, "Darios? Runga?"

The smithy's coarse voice responded, "This door, this one."

Quickly Brak inserted the key, twisted it. He rushed inside. "We have a chance to escape. Lord Strann is attacking the gates with his troops. We must—what's wrong with him?"

He pointed to Darios. The seaman was lying on a straw pallet. His cheeks were chalk-colored, except for twin spots of red in their centers. His eyes shone brightly, glazed. Brak leaned down, felt the sailor's brow. The leathery skin burned against his palm."

"Fever," Runga grunted. "Took sick hours ago."

Darios's papery lips opened. He strained upward, as if he'd recognized Brak:

"The smithy—beware—during the night the smithy was taken—beware—"

Runga kicked the prone man's shoulder. "Taken nowhere, you salt-logged fool. 'Tis only your sick fever dreams talking." Hastily Runga turned toward Brak. "I'm sorry, I did not mean to strike him that way. My temper's short. But the wretch has been moaning and seeing imps in every corner since the fever seized him. Let's leave him behind."

Feebly Darios's right hand lifted.

*"Beware the smith, he was—
was—"*

Darios shuddered, rolled onto his side, shaking violently. His speech became babbled nonsense.

BRAK sorted through the collection of keys, found one which seemed the correct size, inserted it in Darios's wrist cuff. As he unlocked the shackle he glanced up at Runga:

"We will not leave him here or anywhere, smithy. He was a prisoner exactly as we were."

Now Runga began to sense the possibility of escape. "Very well, very well. You're assuming authority again, but I won't quarrel. Take him along if you want. But his shouting and his ranting will only bring the guards on the run, mark my word."

"Nevertheless," said Brak, hoisting the sick man to his feet, "he goes with us."

Runga snatched the ring of keys and quickly unlocked his own iron bonds. Then the smith rushed out of the cell. Brak led Darios into the corridor. The seaman's wood leg dragged raspishly on the stone.

"Help me carry him," Brak said to Runga. Grudgingly the smith took up his part of the burden, but his eyes were oddly bright as he peered at Brak a moment. Was the smith also becoming ill? Brak wondered.

The big barbarian kept his

right hand free, the broadsword ready, as they set out up the tunnel. Darios continued to mutter and mumble, his lips shining with fever-spittle.

The passage turned left, then branched. Along the outer branching, which paralleled the castle's wall, Brak saw an oak door standing open. Beyond the door lay a parapet which Brak remembered crossing on his way down to the dungeon the first time. Soldiers jammed the parapet, discharging crossbows, hurling spears, shouting cursed. Iron arrow-bolts flicked over the rampart from below.

"That way is useless," Brak whispered. "Smithy, take the right turning."

In another moment they were hurrying along a passage where torches hung in brackets at regular intervals. Brak called to Elinor:

"Snatch one of the torches down, girl. 'Twill light our way and give us another weapon if we meet anyone."

He had no notion of where they were heading. But at least flight was preferable to an encounter with Nordica's men. Perhaps they could still find a way out, though Brak was less confident now than earlier.

Darios stumbled along, moaning. His speech grew coherent a moment: "Beware the smith, for he was taken—"

Taken, taken, taken, taken—

With no advance warning, the echo of the reedy voice sprang back upon the hurrying quartet from all directions. Cold, moist air washed against Brak's skin. He halted.

The echo went rising up through what sounded like a vast space. Feeling on both sides, Brak discovered the corridor had vanished and they were in some sort of catacomb or cavern deep within the palace.

The stifling air began to choke out the torch Elinor was carrying. Turgid black smoke drifted from the end of the brand. Brak was ready to order the band to turn back when, high overhead, he heard a rustling, a sinister flapping.

Soft at first, then louder, as of many wings being unfurled.

Brak seized the torch, thrust it high over his head. Light sparkled off tiny scarlet gems, hundreds of them, hundreds. But the gems were in motion, points of brilliance that swooped and darted. The flapping noises increased.

"We've roused a den of bats," Brak yelled. "Go back the way we came—"

DRY wings, heavily veined, struck him in the face. Brak released his hold on Darios, reeled back as the bat swooped down on his forearm. Runga shrieked, turned to flee.

The grayish-white bat, wings nearly as wide as the reach of Brak's outstretched arms, bumped against his forearm flesh below the elbow. Suddenly Brak threw back his head, going rigid with agony.

Through his whole body burned an agonizing pain worse than any Brak had ever endured in his life.

He wrenched his arm, tried to shake the bat away. Then, choking in horror and pain, he saw that the bat-creature had small, nearly transparent pod-like sacs where its claws should be. Into these pods as they pressed, against Brak's skin, darkish fluid was draining. *His blood—*

All around Brak, a cloud of bats flapped, dived. One fastened against Elinor's cheek. She tore at its throat, ripped the pods loose. Each tiny pod had a small sucking mouth on the bottom. Blood-bats. Blood-bats out of hell, draining human blood and human life—

Wrenching, flailing, Brak tried to dislodge the bat from his arm. It hung on with grisly tenacity, the pod-sacs a quarter filled with blood already. How that blood passed through unbroken skin Brak did not know or care, tormented as he was by the excruciating agony of the contact.

The broadsword slipped from his limp fingers. Bats by the dozen whirled and skated



through the air around the huddled group of human beings, each bat hunting a place to strike.

One settled on the forehead of Darios. Brak brought the torch in his other hand whipping over, thrust its tattered flame against the bloated bat's tiny head.

For the first time one of the blood-bats made a sound. The one on Darios's forehead gave out a high-pitched, keening note. The tongues of fire ate half its head away. Suddenly its sucking pods unfastened.

Brak trampled on the filthy thing as it fell on the cavern floor with its pods oozing red drops. On his own bare arm Brak saw a row of purple indentations, deep and bloodshot, left by the bat that had flapped away the moment Brak brought the torch over toward Darios.

Another bat was attacking Elinor. Brak caught its right wing in the fire. The bat flapped loose, went dipping away into the high black, uttering that tormented keening sound. But Elinor was on her knees still, using her bare hands in a futile struggle with another of the gray-white things darting at her face. The tiny sucking-mouths on the bat's pods were nearly in contact with her flesh—

ENRAGED beyond reason, Brak grasped the torch in

both hands like a sword and began to sweep the air with it, back and forth, back and forth, growling savagely with each sweep. The torch trailed fire and sparks. The tiniest of those sparks was enough to send one of the blood-bats flapping away.

Gradually the three prisoners stood in the center of a circle of firelight while the incessant flapping and rustling went on, just out of reach of Brak's firebrand.

"Help—help the old man to rise," Brak panted to Elinor, indicating Darios.

The girl stumbled forward, tried to lift the mariner's shoulders. Darios was limp, exhausted, eyes marble-shiny.

"Pick up my sword," Brak told the girl. "With the fire I can try to lead the way out of here. Runga can carry Darios—Runga! Where is he?"

"Ran—away," Elinor sobbed. "Ran the first moment those—things attacked."

Before Brak could spew out a disgusted curse, he heard a new sound—many running feet.

Momentarily another sound was added—a familiar voice bawling:

"This way, soldiers In the cavern. I told Nordica I'd serve her well and now I've done so. I've led you to the escaped prisoners. Someone give me a torch."

Suddenly one entire wall of the vast cavern seemed to glow with

fire. Brak stared, disbelieving, as a band of Nordica's men swarmed through the entrance, each man carrying a lighted brand in his fist. By the cavern mouth, Runga stood stock still, watching and laughing, holding his own light high overhead to fend off the blood-bats who now went sailing back up to their perches in the black roof of the chamber.

Grotesque shadows twisted over the rock floor as Brak snatched the broadsword from Elinor, dropped the torch, lunged. He heard Darios cry out:

"Beware, barbarian—beware the smith—I tried to warn you he was taken—"

"Seize them!" Runga shouted at the soldiers. "Then go tell Nordica Fire-Hair who ran to fetch you."

Runga's traitorous voice died in the thudding of boots, the curses of the fighting men who swarmed around Brak. The big barbarian stabbed at one guard's neck, missed. Hands clasped his sword arm. The weapon was wrenched away.

Sword hilts and spear butts crashed against his head. Bloodied, angry, he struck out with his hammer-like fists. There were too many of them.

Moments later, hovering on the edge of consciousness, Brak was lifted by three brawny soldiers and carried away.

Nordica's men dragged Darios and Elinor along also. Shortly the party emerged in open air, the castle courtyard. Brak was set groggily on his feet.

A short distance away Brak saw Runga standing alone, arms folded, laughing. There was no man guarding the smith, or even holding him fast.

CHAPTER 10.

The Gates of Sorcery

BRAK'S eyes slitted down as the guards manhandled him to a stop in the high-walled courtyard. Against his lids the wind sent gritty particles of dust. That wind whined, blowing, it seemed, first from one direction, then another.

Hanging between his two guards while the other soldiers formed a circle around him, Brak stared at the peaks of the mountains visible above the ramparts. Clouds of morning mist scudded along past their summits. From the movement of these clouds, Brak judged that the wind was blowing gustily, with mounting force.

But even though the gusting wind blew away much of the low-lying ground mist, the morning still seemed like twilight, lead-colored, dim.

"The winds," Brak breathed to himself. "The winds rising. She said they would."

Held by two more of Nordica's

burly men, Elinor glanced at him. "What winds, Brak? The seasonal ones, when hardly a living creature dares keep to the upper slopes."

"Aye. At that time, Nordica said she'd conduct her ritual. Take our bodies and—" He bit off the words, seeing he had alarmed her. To the armor-clad commander of the guard force he said, "Where is she, soldier? Let's get this finished."

The commander fetched Brak a hard blow across the jaw. The big barbarian was thrown backward in the grip of his captors. His mouth opened in a wild belch of rage as he lunged forward again. A spear-point pricked his naked backbone.

"My man behind you," said the commander, "would as lief gut you as not. But I want to deliver you to Lady Nordica. So stand still. Our friend the smith—" He shrugged his shoulder at Runga. "—did us a service by calling our attention to your escape. Now, as I said, don't move, and speak when I address you and no other time."

Brak bit his lip. His body ached, and bled in several places. He studied the courtyard. The guard commander was striding toward a figure almost invisible in the shadows around the high, barred gates.

High on the mountain, a wild bird flapped in and out of a mist-

cloud, its wings beating frantically, as if it fled from some supernatural force. Brak's spine crawled. He realized he could hear the wind whispering because the clatter of swords and the grind of siege engines outside the walls had stopped.

Nowhere did Brak spy Nordica, though her troops lined the parapets overlooking the road up to the castle. The commander reached the gate, joined the other, shadowy figure that seemed to be bent over, watching something. At the commander's arrival the second man straightened up.

The second man was Tamar Zed.

THE Magian's robes whipped in the wind. He had been peering through a spy-hole cut in the heavy timbers of the gate, obviously watching a scene outside. Perhaps the army's preparation for a new attack?

The guard commander pointed to Brak, Elinor and Darios, who now lay sprawled on the ground, mumbling feverishly. Tamar threw Brak one long, hateful glance. Then he turned back to his vantage hole, clearly more interested for the moment in events outside.

Despite the commander's warning, Brak spoke to another of the soldiers in the group around the prisoners:

"What has happened to Prince Pemma's troops? Have they retreated?"

The soldier snickered. "You might say that."

"You mean they're no longer besieging the gates?"

"Who knows what they're doing, except standing still as sheep?"

"But why would they—?"

"The commander told you to be silent! Obey him."

Brak glared, turned away. He glanced at Runga, who was sauntering toward the prisoners. As the smithy approached, Brak's hands itched for a broadsword to lop the arrogant head from the thick shoulders. Runga shoved by two guards, stood before Brak with his fists on his hips.

"Well, barbarian. Who has the authority now, eh?" The smile left his lips as he lashed out with his forearm striking Brak's jaw, snapping his head back.

Like a great tree Brak stood his ground, shaking from the blow but not falling.

"And to think she fancied she wanted you for a lover!" Runga jeered. "To think she took to a brute like you! She found a better man in me, I'll warrant. I promised I'd repay her. I kept my word."

"Is that why you turned traitor? Because she opened her arms to you? You simpleton!"

"For bliss a fool like you can't imagine," Runga cut in. "Yes, I was summoned. After you and the whimpering shepherd girl were disposed of, and she found out, and was angry with the Magian. What happened to me in her chambers is beyond belief. The kind of experience a man dreams about but never—"

Runga stopped. His brow was suddenly beaded with perspiration. He gripped Brak's arm. The barbarian would have thrown off the faintly clammy fingers, except for the intense light in Runga's eyes which told Brak the smith was possessed. Not of demons or goblins, but by a copper-haired woman. Runga's voice grew hoarse:

"You have no idea what kind of person she is. No idea. To be summoned by her—to be allowed to touch her, to know all the arts she can call upon to make a man's guts boil—and then to be taken away again, with never another chance unless—"

Runga flushed, shook his head, aware that the soldiers were listening, lewd grins on their faces.

"You'll never understand," he repeated to Brak, half desperately, half sorrowfully. "Never comprehend how, after I'd been with her, it was too late. Too late to do anything but try to win her favor again."

"And to do that," Brak said, "you betrayed us?"

"Yes!" Runga shouted, fists bunching. "Yes, barbarian, for that reason. And to see you get what you deserve for your damned arrogance!"

Elinor stared at the smithy. "May the gods curse you."

When Runga laughed it was not a sound of triumph or joy, but a sound of heartbreak, of countless hells opening within his mind and heart:

"They already have cursed me," he said. "The moment I went to her."

And he turned his back and walked off, trying to swagger but making a poor job of it.

THOUGHTFULLY Brak knelt down. The aged mariner Darios gazed up at him with milky eyes, shuddering in a fever dream. Darios could not see Brak's stern face, or the panorama of wind-haunted, mist-torn skies beyond.

The guards, seemingly confident of their ability to confine the prisoners with little effort, had all turned to face the high barred gates where Tamar Zed still crouched before the spy-hole. Brak sensed that the men were waiting for a signal, or some hint of what transpired outside. Surely the army Prince Pemma had brought was regrouping for a new assault. Nothing else could explain the silence.

Brak spoke to Darios. The seaman continued mumbling to himself. Brak rose, addressed Elinor:

"He wanted to warn us. He kept chattering about Runga being taken somewhere. A pity we didn't understand he meant taken to Nordica. Over and over, he tried to tell us that the smith had gone to the witch's chambers to be her lover and—"

Words died in Brak's throat. His glance had slid accidentally past Elinor's face, between the bronze-armored backs of two soldiers, to the gates. A huge oaken log lay in L-shaped prongs, holding the entrance shut.

A plan, risky yet feasible, had suggested itself in the moment Brak again noticed Tamar Zed watching through the spy-hole. Brak glanced quickly back at the jumbled towers and battlements of the castle proper. He hoped suddenly that Nordica would not soon be finished with whatever devil's work was keeping her closeted inside.

He listened. He hoped for a sound—chariot-chains, siege-engine wheels—to tell him that Pemma's force was preparing to move forward again. He heard nothing. Nor could he tell much from the postures of Nordica's men on the ramparts. They stood like so many statues, crossbows and spears ready, their attention centered on the roadway below.

Brak wiped an ooze of blood from his left ribs, drew a deep breath, cupped his hands around his mouth:

"Magain? Magian, listen! I have an amusing joke to tell you!"

At the gateway, Tamar Zed spun from the spy-hole. His bearded face stood out in lines of hatred as the guard commander began running toward Brak and the soldiers crowded in close around him. The soldiers drew their swords.

"Keep him silent!" Tamar shouted to the running commander. "There must be no commotion to disturb things outside."

"The commotion," Brak shouted back, "was here inside, Magian. Quite a lusty commotion, too. Do you recognize this sign?"

And, with a bold laugh, Brak suddenly extended the index and the last fingers of his right hand, both middle fingers bent down to form the horn-symbol.

TAMAR gathered his robes around him, staring open-mouthed at Brak who towered in the rising wind, great right arm outstretched and at its end, the cuckold-mark made by his fingers shaking a little, mockingly.

"Wear these horns, Magian," Brak cried. "Wear them because they fit you now."

And he jammed the back of his

hand against his forehead, putting the horns on himself, jeeringly.

The guard commander broke through the circle of men, tore a spear from the hands of one, aimed it at Brak.

"Stupid lout! I warned you to keep silent!"

"Hold!"

The captain's head whipped around. Brak kept the horns against his forehead. Tamar Zed had called the order to stop.

The Magian came running, white-cheeked. He passed Runga, whose baffled expression was just shading into understanding. The smith took a step forward, another. All at once he noticed that, at a quick signal from the commander, one of the soldiers had hoisted his spear back over his shoulder. The spear-head was aimed at Runga's middle. The smithy froze.

Tamar's black eyes burned fire-bright as he lashed out with his right hand, knocked Brak's horn fingers aside. Brak let his arm drop without protest.

"Be careful, barbarian," Tamar said. "Nordica wishes you alive, but I have something to say about it too." The Magian smiled foxily. "Or I will have something to say. An explanation of an unfortunate incident in which you attempted to escape and these men had no choice but to slay you. How you came back

from the tunnel down which I sent you and the girl, I can't say. But you'll journey down a far darker one—to death—if you continue to mock me with those filthy horns."

"Filthy or not," Brak said, "you must wear them now."

"You're lying," Tamar whispered. "Lying! You would never dare admit to me that you and Nordica—"

Understanding burned then, a black flame in his eyes. His claw-like white hand tore the enamelled dagger from the scabbard hanging at his girdle.

"You're mad," he continued. "Out of your head and making vile jokes. You know what I did once, and what I'd do again if I learned that you and Nordica—"

Then, as if the very contemplation of the thought had become too harrowing, Tamar whipped up his knife-hand.

Elinor cried out softly, covered her face. But Tamar did not drive the point into Brak's throat. He only touched Brak's throat hard enough to bring a glistening dollop of blood shining forth.

"You're frightened, aren't you, barbarian? Frightened and trying to strike back at me, that's it. You could never have been with Nordica. You were in that tunnel all the time. You got out of the tunnel somehow and now you're trying to mock me."

Everything, even his own life, hung in precarious balance on the point of the dagger Brak felt digging the flesh of his neck. But he moved anyway.

With one lightning motion he brought his forearm up and under the dagger and leaped back. So swift and powerful was the blow, the soldiers barely had time to react. Brak grabbed Tamar's outstretched wrist, turned it so the Magian's dagger pointed at Runga.

"Not I, you stargazing fool!" Brak shouted. "Not I but that smithy yonder. Ask *him* about the delights Nordica offered. Ask *him* who summoned him at a time when—apparently—Nordica didn't care to have you around."

TAMAR ZED's lip began to tremble, and for all his swaggering good looks, he suddenly seemed frail, weak, craven.

"Not true," he said. "No, she'd never risk—"

"Ask him!" Brak yelled, still holding Tamar's wrist, pointing the dagger at Runga. "Better yet, ask these men here, Nordica's soldiers. Look in their eyes and see whether you must wear the horns or not."

Slowly Tamar Zed searched each face in the ring. The commander stepped forward, trying to save the situation:

"Lord Tamar, under no cir-

cumstances would we lower ourselves to even acknowledge such a charge by denying it. We—”

The commander stopped. It was too late. Tamar's gaze had traveled on, to the faces of men who were not so swift to dissemble as their leader. In each pair of eyes shone the guilt, the guilt of knowing the truth.

Tamar faced Brak again. “Then I know the one to punish.”

No longer craven but lean and terrible in his fury, Tamar Zed ripped free of Brak's grip. In truth the big barbarian had not been holding the Magian's arm any too securely. Tamar raced across the courtyard to Runga, who tried to flee, a second too late.

Tamar Zed's dagger whipped up, arced down. Runga screamed, threw up his arms to fend off the blow. Because of his awkward posture, his feet tangled. He fell. As he fell, Tamar Zed buried the blade in his flesh.

Blood spouted. Soldiers around Brak gasped. Tamar tore the dagger from Runga's fleshy upper arm, trying to remedy the failure of his first blow by striking another, fatal one. In that instant, when all the heads around him were in profile, watching the jealous Magian, Brak lunged.

His hands closed on a guard's bony wrist, constricted. The man let go of his broadsword, shriek-

ing, his wrist-bones pulped by Brak's mighty squeeze.

“To the ground, girl, and stay flat,” Brak shouted, giving Elinor a shove that sprawled her alongside the semi-conscious Dario. Then Brak laughed, and this time the laughter was bold and genuine. He had killing iron in his hands, and he began to hew his way out of the circle of confused soldiers.

A spear-head flashed for his throat. Brak's sword-swing hacked the spear in half. The tip of his blade ripped in and out of the soldier's left eyesocket. The man tumbled back, spilling into two more guards.

The path out of the ring lay open. But first Brak finished his swing, turning full circle with his blade extended at arm's length. Soldiers leaped back to avoid that scythe of death. Brak went jumping across the knot of three fallen men. He raced for the barred gates.

ON the battlements other soldiers spotted his flight. The air began to whine and buzz, full of iron darts from crossbows. Brak dodged, running in an erratic line. He halved the distance to the gate, quartered it.

He saw that Runga was attempting to rise and run, making a bad job of it because of his arm wound. Then, like a ghost of the awful bats Brak had en-

countered in the catacomb, Tamar Zed was in Brak's path, dagger poised.

The Magian charged, mystically-silvered robes flying on the rising wind. Brak thrust out with his broadsword. Tamar dodged aside, drove the dagger in toward Brak's face.

The point raked a long, pain-hot furrow from the front of Brak's cheekbone to his right ear. But Tamar Zed, arm extended, could not stop his own lunge in time. Brak brought his sword up from below and rammed it with all his might into the Magian's bowels. Tamar Zed shrieked and spun away, dying.

Brak ran on. He was bleeding heavily from the cheek wound, and from another gash opened in his shoulderblade by a crossbow-bolt that grazed him. But he was under the shadow of the battlements, near to the gate where only the heavy oaken crossbar stood between the courtyard and Prince Pemma's army.

Running at top speed, Brak crashed against the gate. Then, thrusting his left shoulder beneath the center of the oak bar at the place where the two gates met, he crouched down, raised up.

The great bar was ponderously heavy. Brak had only lifted it half way to the top of the L-prongs when the remainder of the guard party came at him.

A spear flashed past his face, buried in the right-hand door. The weight on Brak's shoulders was excruciating. His whole body cried out in torment as he lifted, lifted slowly, slashing back and forth with the sword in his extended right hand. As he lifted the bar, he tugged outward, waiting for the moment when the bar would come free—

The guard commander darted in under cover of two long spears held by his men. Brak tried to parry the commander's blade, missed, saw the commander's mouth twist triumphantly.

Time seemed to stop there in the murky, wind haunted courtyard. Brak saw the commander's broadsword racing for his throat, felt the agonizing weight beginning to buckle his straining legs. The sword flew at him like a silvered creature with magical speed—

The great bar came free of the prongs. Brak's pulling dragged it out away from the gate with sudden violence. Brak threw himself backward to keep from being crushed. The commander's sword buried in the free-swinging end of the beam. There was an inhuman cry of pain—

The guard commander lay on the ground, broken in half, his midsection crushed by the bar.

Wildly Brak tugged at a black iron ring, hauled the left-hand door open, slipped through.

"Pemma! Prince Pemma!"

Brak screamed it, breaking from the open gate, brandishing his sword, a grisly figure. His bronzed skin and lion-pelt streamed with blood. His yellow hair flew as he bolted down the slope.

"Prince, order your troops through the gate before they—"

Brak skidded to a halt on the shaly earth which sloped away from the castle wall. After the echo of his voice died away, a snarling filled the silence. Horror, fear swept over Brak.

Nordica Fire-Hair was not hiding within the castle. She stood a few paces ahead, half-turned to look back at Brak. Her jade eyes showed surprise, then amusement.

Her fiery hair danced in the wind, as did the hem of her gown. Around her left wrist was coiled a light chain of silver links. At the other end of the chain a silver collar circled the gray throat of Scarletjaw.

The great hound stirred, rising on its forelegs to swing its monstrous head and glare at Brak with savage eyes.

But worst of all, beyond Nordica on the lower slope, Prince Pemma sat astride a war pony. Near him, lying in an open litter, was Strann himself. Behind them were several hundred ragtag soldiers, heavily armed, and siege equipment, and baggage wagons.

Brak knew the day was lost.

The silence outside the castle walls had been the silence of an army cowed, an army held at bay, an army bewitched—

Bewitched by one slim girl and the great evil dog at the end of the silver chain.

CHAPTER 11.

Blow, Hell-Winds!

INTO Brak's brain that instant, the entire scene imprinted itself for all time: the dark day; the mountains, sharp-craggy and savage, seen only in fragments behind the blowing mist; and the winds.

The winds seemed to swirl first out of one quarter of the sky, then another, rousing clouds of dust on one hand, then on another. At first, Brak did not believe his own senses.

Then, as he looked out over the assembled soldiers, saw their fear, their apathy, a part of his mind recognized what he could no longer deny:

He felt the whip and sting of dust particles windblown against both his cheeks, as though that wind came *from two directions at once*.

Brak's mind rebelled at this. Then his gaze focused on Nordica. She stood silent and proud, gazing back at him across her shoulder. In the gloominess of the day, those eyes shone green, and mirthful.

"Pemma?" Brak shouted again. "Order your troops forward. Order them to attack!"

The young prince's war pony danced, snorted. Its eyes rolled frantically as it shied away from Scarletjaw. The hound's tongue lolled out red and slimy between its long fangs. Behind him, Brak heard a jingle of trappings, terse orders whispered. Already he was too late. Nordica's men were slipping out through the open gates.

Nordica whirled around. "Back! And leave the gates standing wide. Let's see whether the barbarian can rouse these men to strike at me."

The castle soldiers retreated into the courtyard.

Still Nordica continued to watch Brak, amused. Brak took a tighter grip on his sword, walked wide of Scarletjaw as the hound rose on his haunches. The putrescent smell rising from the dog's gray hide-plates nearly made Brak retch.

He passed Nordica, drew closer to Pemma and Strann. The Lord of the Silver Balances looked pale in his dress armor. He supported himself with his elbow on the litter cushions.

Brak swung his blade in a wide arc to indicate the troops. "What's the matter with them? The gate is open. Surely one woman cannot stop you. Nor even that four-legged thing."

Rank upon rank, the men loyal to Strann's standard stood immobile, eyeing one another, or Brak, with open hostility. Before Pemma could speak, Strann leaned forward on the litter.

"You do not know what she has been saying to them. The things she's promised them."

Brak's eyebrow formed a fisher's hook. "Loot? Power? She'll take it all for herself, regardless of what she promises now."

BRAK stalked around Pemma's pony to the front rank of soldiers. He confronted an officer leaning upon his sword.

"Does the loyalty you bear to Lord Strann mean nothing to you?" Brak shouted. "Will you forget it because of a harlot's false words?"

The officer scowled. "Stand aside, whoever you are. *She* speaks—"

Brak would have rammed his broadsword into the craven man's guts had he not seen the same expression the officer wore mirrored in dozens and dozens of faces round about: slack-lipped attention, glistening-eyed, ugly.

Cursing under his breath, Brak whirled and walked back to Pemma. In the interval, Nordica raised her right hand for silence. She cast him a final side-long glance of amusement.

Brak whispered up to the prince on horseback: "What in

the name of the gods has unmanned them? She's alone—"

Pemma's plumed helmet bobbed in agreement. "Aye. And she came out alone, too, save for that dog. What caused them to stop firing at first was the fact that she's a woman. Then, by the time they remembered she's more than a woman—the enemy—it was too late. What has unmanned them—" Pemma looked ill, forlorn. "—is greed."

The sweet, bell-tinkling voice of Nordica Fire-Hair drifted over Brak's shoulder:

"What I have promised you, soldiers, is not empty boasting, not dreams, but a reality. The old man lying yonder in the litter is weak, nigh to death. His power in this land is finished. It deserves to be. For he's a weakling and his blood-line has run thin. Now they tell tales that I learned from my father a certain secret. How to transmute lead into gold. That is true, soldiers. And the time is at hand. So take heed of the bargain I offered you a moment ago. Either remain with Strann—a sick graybeard—and attack my castle and risk your life against my men and my little pet—" On the silver leash Scarletjaw stirred, teeth dripping saliva. "—or follow me. Follow me because I possess the secret the mystics have sought for age upon age. Serve me and your wealth, your power, will

know no end, just as mine will know no end. A small band of men—no larger than the one I see here—can rule the earth from rim to rim. Any man who follows me now, I promise—"

The jade eyes seemed to reach out to every soldier's face, tempting, infernally bright.

"—that man who follows me will live in legend as one of the soldiers of Nordica. The soldiers whom Nordica endowed with wealth made from base metal. So who will join me?"

One more contemptuous glance at Strann. The ruler seemed to be gasping for breath in the mist-clammy air.

"Who will join the host of Nordica?" she cried. "Who will join the army in which the commonest soldier will be rich as Croesus?"

The wind whined, whined in a long silence.

From the back of the ranks a voice called, "How do we know you have the secret, woman?"

"She doesn't," someone else shouted. "She can't have it—because it doesn't exist and never will."

A red-bearded Scythian mercenary towering tall above the rest shook his fist. "I say take the risk! If even a tenth of what she promises is true, we'll be rich as potentates. I say take the chance and let Lord Strann go hang!"

THROUGH the army rippled an undercurrent of agreement. Here and there an isolated man shook his head or bit his lips white, recognizing somehow the insidiously sweet evil that lay in Nordica's words. Strann tried to turn on his litter to face his soldiers. He accomplished the movement with effort that turned him pale. But his voice for a moment rose clear, strong, impassioned:

"To betray me is to betray more than the office I hold. You'll betray the people of this kingdom. The families who are trusting you to destroy this sink-hole of magic and murder. You'll betray the men and women and little babes who will have to live beneath this madwoman's heel if we do not win here today. I beg you, don't listen to her. Take up your swords and spears and we'll drive her back into her house and down to hell where she belongs!"

Gasping, Strann fell back upon the litter. Prince Pemma dismounted. He hurried to his father's side, knelt down. Anguish twisted his stocky peasant's face.

Meantime, Brak watched the soldiers. Strann's words had done no more than cause an outbreak of derisive hoots and laughter. Nordica sensed her advantage. She jerked on the silver chain.

Scarletjaw lunged to his feet.

Soldiers in the front ranks shrank back. Nordica laughed.

"Well?" Nordica called. "Whom do you follow now? Me? Or the addle-witted old man who tries to seduce you with catch-penny phrases about honor? Let those who are cowards stand where they are. Let those who would ride with me to conquer the kingdoms of the earth throw down their weapons, turn their backs and return home."

The Scythian mercenary bawled almost at once, "Aye! You can count me as one who's sick of risking my skin for a king not even strong enough to rise off his couch. I'll gladly go, and take my chances later in this woman's new army."

So saying, he cast his spear to the earth, flung his broadsword after it, turned and shouldered through the rear of the gathered troops.

Many heads turned to watch. A stout soldier with an oafish face giggled, an eering sound in the keening wind. He wiped drool from his slack lips. He tossed his helmet and weapons atop the Scythian's and followed.

AT first only a few obviously weak-brained churls turned away. Then, in bands of two or three, then in groups of five, of ten, the soldiers began to cast their armor into great heaps and walk away down the road.

Some of them jested softly. Most seemed to slink. When fully a dozen men in the front rank turned to hurry down the hillside, joining the trickle of men that was becoming a torrent, Brak could stand it no longer.

Scarletjaw leaped out to meet Brak's charge, fangs bared, sharp and bright as the sword Brak was driving for Nordica's bosom.

Nordica's wrist bent as she gave a ferocious jerk to the silver chain and spat out a word Brak did not understand. At once the dog changed direction.

Scarletjaw loped for Strann's litter, beside which Prince Pemma knelt. Brak slowed down, seeing the trap an instant before Nordica sprang it by jerking the silver chain again.

The hound slid to a halt, immense claws digging the shale, a short distance away from Strann and his son.

"Very well, barbarian," Nordica said to Brak. "Strike me. But when you do, my hand will slip the chain. The first to die will be Strann. The second to die will be his son."

Brak's sword was a leaden thing in his right fist. Again her laughter, bright and stinging as a dart, pricked him.

"Let your reason, not your hate, direct you, barbarian. For as much as I despise those two men—that old mountebank with

his empty prattlings about honor and justice, this country dung-pile that passes for his warrior son—much as I hate them and would see them dead, still I need you the more."

Lightly Nordica gestured to the lowering sky, the racing mist-clouds riding the winds across the high peaks.

"By nightfall, Brak, the seasonal winds will have risen to the full. I can summon their power for the ritual. Tonight will be the transmutation, Brak. So give me your answer. Your life—or theirs."

Strann shouted weakly, "Barbarian, do not listen! Kill her!"

Scarletjaw strained on the chain, digging the earth with his claws. Pemma looked unsure, glancing at his father, then at Brak. Nordica's expression changed to impatience.

"Which is it, barbarian? Shall I loose the beast? Or will you return with me and play your part?"

Black fears and red angers consumed Brak in that awful moment as he stood before her. Then he lowered his sword-arm.

"Let them go unharmed," he said.

Nordica smiled. "Yes, barbarian, I will. That is my bargain."

"No, by the lords of war!" Pemma bawled. "No, it's wrong! Even though it's my father's

life, I cannot stand by like a coward and let—*Brak!*”

THE barbarian had dropped his sword in the dust, had turned and was walking to the castle gates.

“*Brak!*” Pemma shouted again. Brak never turned.

The big barbarian was heart-sick as he entered between the high gates he had struggled so hard to open. Pemma’s last entreaty died away beneath the cry of the wind. Nordica’s merry laugh sounded a moment later as she followed with Scarletjaw at heel.

Failure overwhelmed Brak, dimmed his mind, his senses. He heard the gates creak shut. He heard the massive oaken bar drop into place. Then, horror on horror, he heard Nordica’s voice, strong and commanding:

“To the ramparts, archers! Kill them both before they flee. A silver purse to the two men whose arrows strike down Pemma and Strann.”

At once the courtyard was utter confusion. Archers scrambled up ladders. And Brak went berserk, swinging around like a great blind beast until he sighted Nordica near the gate.

Arrows whicked and whispered on the wind as Brak bawled, “Lying slut, you promised—”

“*My lady!*” The man shouted

from the battlements. “Both Strann and his son are fallen with arrows through their bodies.”

“Slut from hell!” Brak was screaming, running at Nordica. “Devil-spawned woman, I’ll—”

Men converged upon Brak from all sides. They clubbed him, kicked him. They held his shoulders, his arms, his legs while he fought wildly. Blow after blow struck his skull.

Into his mind drifted the weird sound of howling wind mixed with the shrieking laughter of Nordica Fire-Hair:

“*Too late, barbarian, too late. Tonight my power comes full circle. Tonight I summon the four winds and change metal into gold by taking your life—*”

Then Brak heard nothing more, as the blows of the soldiers brought total dark.

CHAPTER 12.

Lead Into Gold, Dead Into Living

—*awake, awake, awake, awake, awake.*

The voice beat, echoed, sang far away. It pulsed loud one moment, then diminished.

Brak grumbled to himself. He tried to find a pathway out of the thick, chill darkness which seemed to enwrap him. Then he grew aware of restraints on his arms. He opened his eyes.

The blackness vanished. The soldier holding Brak from behind

repeated, "Lady, the yellow-haired one is awake."

And memory swept back.

The strange keening echo of a moment before had been the guard's words bouncing within the hollow of his semi-conscious mind. Slowly he straightened, glanced around. The wind buffeted him. His belly knotted up as he saw where he was, and with whom.

The chamber was large, round. It opened on all sides through a series of arches which led onto a portico that circled the room. Through one of the arches Brak glimpsed mountain peaks, sharp in the day's graying light.

The chamber had a feeling of spaciousness, of airiness and great height. Brak knew it stood somewhere near the top of the castle, for the perspective of the mountains was different than it had been from the courtyard.

Through the various arches the wind whipped, and it seemed to Brak that, here and there, gusts of it congealed into milky clouds. These clouds disappeared almost instantly, but they suggested that the currents of air boiling into the chamber possessed some awful supernatural life all their own.

Upon the rough hewn-stone floor a great circle had been marked out in chalky white, with peculiar crosses on its rim at four equidistant points. One of

these crosses was chalked directly in front of Brak's feet.

Across on the other side of the circle was another. Standing behind it, not bound, as Brak was not bound, but guarded from the rear by a trio of soldiers with ready spears, was Runga.

The smith's flesh wound had been bound up with linen. His eyes were dull with fright.

To Brak's left, where the next cross was drawn, old Darios the seaman tottered. His beard flapped in the wind. He was likewise guarded by three men. And on his right, Elinor was held captive by a similar group.

All at once Brak understood the meaning of the ring, the cross-marks with their human counterparts:

The four sacrifices stood in the circle of creation, each at a location from which blew one of the four winds of the earth.

In the center of the ring a block of stone made a low dais. All around this dais, leading out to the chalked ring's perimeter, a convoluted maze of mystic symbols had been sketched.

AS Brak vainly tried to decipher the various pentagrams and star-shapes, he heard a rustling above the beat of the winds.

Nordica appeared, face white as her virginal gown. Her hair blew out behind her, a blood-

colored banner. She was bare-foot, strangely expressionless. In her hands she carried a small bar of dull gray metal-stuff. She proceeded slowly to the center of the ring, laid the bar on the dais and gazed down at it, almost pensively.

Nordica's gown danced around her supple calves, blown first one way, then another as the winds changed direction and howled all the louder. Slowly her head came up.

She turned. She looked at Brak. The scarlet lips curved ever so slightly. They said more than words ever could:

On those lips Brak saw victory, hellish cruelty, and even madness. And her jade eyes were calm. Brak felt an immense, sinking helplessness as that calm stare enveloped him.

Nordica had won.

Here and there Brak saw again the pearlescent eddies, like airborne waves, as the winds seemed to take tangible form. Runga began to whimper. One of his guards cuffed him in the side of the head. The disturbance seemed to shatter Nordica's calm. She glared. The guards hastened to keep Runga from staggering forward into the ring.

Brak swiped at his eyes, blurred. There was an incredible weariness in him, an ache in his body born of too many futile

battles against impossible odds.

Runga quieted. Brak dared to look at Elinor. She was trembling as Runga had trembled, but she made an effort to hold herself proudly despite it. The dull lead bar shone ominously in the pearl light. Only Darios the seaman did not see it. His cheeks were still scarlet with fever. He was propped up by the hands of the guards assigned to watch him.

Nordica lifted her right hand. She pointed beyond an arch at the peaks and the boiling sky. She spoke with the barest movement of her lips, yet Brak heard her clearly despite the noise of the wind, a perpetual shriek now. The wind blew so violently that the guards had difficulty standing erect. They leaned off balance to maintain their stances. Only Nordica seemed untouched by the storm-force.

"*The four winds,*" Nordica said, finger extended to the threatening sky. "*The four winds in conjunction bring the power. The four winds from the ends of time, from the ends of creation, from the black abyss beyond the edge of life—the four winds come!*"

A gust whipped into the open-sided chamber. Brak thought he felt the floor sway.

"*Bring the north wind!*" Nordica's voice sang. "*Bring the blue north wind's chill!*"



THROUGH the open archway behind Runga, wind screamed and moaned. Brak felt on his chest a frosty breath. The chamber seemed to swim in bluish mist. Nordica cried:

"Bring the south wind! Bring the green wind of the heat that decays!"

One of the guards behind Brak retched as a belching-hot gust of air tore around them, ripe with the stink of vegetation dead a thousand years in some primeval rain-forest.

"Bring the east wind! Bring the red wind's poppy poison!"

Elinor and her guards swayed as the wind poured through the arch behind them, ripe with a cloying, sickening sweetness.

"Bring the west wind! Bring the black wind's voice from land's end!"

Darios and his captors vanished in a swirling cloud of inky air that drawled and crept and leaped toward the central dais. Suddenly the entire chamber seemed to be caught in a whirlpool of wind. Strange patches of color danced before Brak's eyes. At the center of the malestrom stood Nordica, her gown unruffled by the winds.

The beauty Brak had once seen on Nordica's face had changed to ugliness, to stark, mask-like evil, as though her flesh had become transparent to reveal a second, true face beneath.

Both hands raised suddenly, Nordica spun toward Brak, crying:

"Couple the south wind with the earth and breathe the gold alive!"

In his legs Brak felt a tingling.

The tingling became acute pain.

The pain rose swiftly through his entire body, until he was enveloped by a vast, numbing hurt. Nordica had already turned toward Darios to repeat the incantation:

"Couple the west wind with the water and breathe the gold alive!"

Darios shrieked, clutched his chest. His frail body seemed to wilt, shrink.

"Couple the north wind with the fire and breathe the gold alive!"

Runga was sobbing, tears on his cheeks as he shuddered, fists clenched at his sides.

"Couple the east wind with the air and breathe the gold alive!"

Elinor moaned, would have pitched forward had not one of the frightened guards seized her.

"Earth, air, fire, water!" Nordica cried. *"Gather, creation! Gather, winds! Blow and burn and breathe the gold alive!"*

Brak's weakness increased every moment. His legs felt like rope, his body feeble as a child's. His head pounded. His eyes

misted. He wondered how long he could stand erect.

Then, as if Nordica had magically wished understanding upon him, some still-sharpened corner of his mind told him the answer:

The dull gray bar upon the dais in the center of the wind-whirlpool was beginning to emit a faint yellowish radiance.

As though a kind of life were being drawn into it.

At the same time, life was being drained out of Brak, being sucked and pulled by the wind that tore around him.

LIKE sand trickling in a glass, the strength fled from his muscles. He no longer felt that he had bones within his body, but that he was a creature made of a jelly-like marrow, and when the last drop of life had been taken, he would be limp, dead, a slimed spot on the rock floor.

It was happening to the other three captives as well.

They seemed to shrink, grow pale. The winds had darkened, almost a fog. The chamber swayed more violently. Brak thought he heard a far-off rumbling, as though the very foundations of the castle were being shaken.

He struggled to keep his head up. He saw a jagged fissure open in the stone of the arch above and behind Runga. A guard

cursed faintly to Brak's rear, for he had seen the fissure also, and guessed the threat the winds posed. But Nordica's cheeks shone yellow in the mounting glow from the bar on the dais, and she saw nothing else.

"Winds, bring life from the living, breathe life into dead matter! Winds, bring life from the fire and air, the earth and water, and change base lead to burning gold!"

Brighter, brighter pulsed the lead bar, streaked and dappled with bright yellow patches now as first one section, then another, began to alter while Nordica leaned over it, her hands like claws and her voice crying the incantation, lost suddenly in the ripping, howling fury of the wind that had become a tornado, a mating of the breaths of heaven into one ferocious scream of strength.

Brak had the sensation that he was falling. He knew it was only because the life was being sucked from his body, somehow sucked across the chamber to feed into that shining bar.

Beyond all hope, Brak knew he was finished, and the others too.

Yet a wild, savage will to life, his heritage from the high steppes where he had been born, refused to succumb. His foggy mind ran blindly through passage after passage, hunting escape, escape, or some weapon to

destroy Nordica before Brak's mind itself was destroyed.

He was too enfeebled to fight. The hell-winds gripped him like immense hands. He had very little more time.

But to bow down—to let his life-stuff be drained into a metal bar—*no!*

Nordica Fire-Hair began to move around the dais, slowly, sinuously. Her hands formed signs which Brak did not understand. Her mouth worked, repeating words, but Brak heard none of them. The only sound was the shriek of the winds pouring in and out of the arches, around and around in the whirlpool of force.

Outside, the sky had darkened. From far below, the castle foundations ground and rumbled again.

In that moment, Brak's straining mind remembered.

He remembered because he was cursing the first day he had ridden into this bewitched kingdom. He remembered a cry in the Manworm pit. He remembered how he had almost failed to save Elinor. He remembered how strength had poured into his arm, and he remembered the source of that strength, and the mind which roamed far beyond its own boundaries.

Finally he remembered a crazed figure capering on a cave shelf in the Manworm's pit.

Brak's lips twisted grotesquely. Down in that pit, Celsus Hyrcanus still lived. Mad, yes. But alive.

And Nordica did not know.

Ambrose?

Brak tried to reach out with his mind. Tried to grasp the image of the old man perched upon the pillar.

Ambrose, Ambrose?

The wind howled and spun in the chamber, battering Brak's body like physical blows.

Ambrose, Ambrose, reach here, reach me! Where are you?

Then, feebly, very distant, in a language without words, Brak heard:

Here.

THE pain, the enervating lifelessness which had gripped Brak seemed to retreat a little. Nordica's figure, sweeping and turning around the dais where the bar glowed bright yellow seemed indistinct. In a featureless limbo of black cold, of pure mind, Brak sought Ambrose the Pillarite, crying:

Help us, wise man. Help us before we die and she rides her power like a stallion over the earth.

Cool and faint, the voice without words answered from far off:

I will help. Ask.

In the pit—in the Manworm pit—

Brak had difficulty maintain-

ing the contact. He was reaching into a frightening void whose nature he did not understand.

—an old man lives. Witless. Half dead. Bring him here. Move him as you moved my arm that first day. Lift him and bring him here to this chamber before we all die.

The answer rang back, so ferocious that Brak felt as though a fire-needle had been driven into his skull:

No! I am too far. My power is not great enough. I cannot lift him, nor can I send him that distance—

Nordica's incantation had now become a shrill, steady scream beating above the wind. Runga was slumped to his knees, hands clasped in prayer as his life drained out. Darios already lay on his back, mouth open, apparently dead. Elinor hung in the grip of her terrified guards, but apart from an occasional bob of her head, she too seemed lifeless.

The chamber began to fill with a yellow light that was blinding, hurting to the eye, as the life-stuff of each sacrifice poured faster and faster into the bar upon the dais.

Bring the alchemist! Brak's brain cried out across the fathomless void of minds. Try, mystic! Try or the powers of evil will sweep from this chamber to the ends of the world!

The echoing answer came:

No, I have not the strength—

And Brak shrieked with all his being:

Try before the darkness falls!
TRY!

Suddenly the sharp, cold limbo through which Brak had been forcing his seeking mind vanished. Brak felt weak as before—listless, each limb heavy, growing heavier. He had lost the contact.

Ambrose? AMBROSE?

SILENTLY he cried the mystic's name over and over. His thoughts met a wall of pain past which he could not reach. A low, savage cry of despair left his lips. He abandoned himself to the draining of the winds.

Another fissure opened in an arch behind Elinor, wider than the first. Dust powdered down. One of the soldiers tried to shout a warning to Nordica. She did not hear. She was lost in her obscene, contorted ritual, whirling and turning around the transmuted like, her body an animated gold statue in the reflected light.

Beneath Brak's feet the stone shook again. Even as he wondered how long the chamber would stand, another bolt of pain speared into his belly. He threw back his head and screamed aloud.

The guards backed away from him, utterly terrified now, and

huddling together. Brak fell to his knees. He pounded his own temples as the hurt beat higher, higher within him.

Through the mistiness of the wind-clouds he saw Nordica's golden face crack into a smile.

The pain in Brak doubled—

Tripled—

Then, suddenly, he knew what it was. His mind had broken the wall again, unbidden. He heard Ambrose's voiceless cry of torment:

He will come—though I die, he will come. Brak, be ready. The pain burns me. Tortures me. Yet he is coming from the pit. THE ALCHEMIST IS COMING—

"Woman?" Brak yelled. He dragged himself across the edge of the ring. "Witch-woman? Listen to me! Listen!"

Seeing Brak lurch toward her, Nordica froze. She cried orders to the soldiers, orders Brak did not hear. Within his temples beat a wave of power rising higher and higher, counterbalancing the draining, leeching force of the winds.

Brak forgot the soldiers who struggled with their own terror and tried to force their numbed limbs to move and obey Nordica's commands. The floor of the chamber was opening now, great cracks splitting it, intersecting one another. A keystone in one of the outer arches dropped with a thunderous crash.

"Woman?" Brak shrieked. "Witch-woman, your magic is worthless. Mine is stronger—" The pain-wave beat higher in Brak, unbearably close to a climax. "—I will raise the dead, woman. I will bring the ghost of your father whom you slew out of lust and greed—"

White fire exploded behind Brak's eyes. For a moment he saw nothing.

Then the winds died.

Nordica's voice rang out, worldless, terrified and high-pitched. Brak's eyes flew open.

There, beside the dais where the yellow bar was turning dull again, streaked with grayness, with black—there—

An amorphous whiteness congealed into a trunk, into legs, into limbs, transparent and yet not. Far, far away Brak heard Ambrose the Pillarite's whimper of mind-pain. But the figure of Celsus Hyrcanus was materializing, solidifying.

Nordica shrieked.

"You are not real! A dream, a curse, a vision—"

The mad old alchemist muttered, "Where—where?" His head was turning, turning. Then his eyes fell on Nordica's face.

THE barriers of madness crumbled in an instant. The cracked old tongue licked at the ancient lips, and Celsus Hyrcanus was wholly sane:

"Nordica. My flesh. My flesh of evil. My own flesh that tried to kill me—"

And with his hands groping out, Celsus Hyrcanus, solid, real, a scrawny avenging figure, lunged for his daughter's throat.

A thunderclap of sound, and the lead bar in the dais cracked in half.

In the seconds that followed the rolling, ear-splitting boom, the bar crumbled to dust and the four winds crashed together in the center of the chamber where for an instant the body of Celsus Hyrcanus had held them at bay.

In the aftermath of the sound Brak was running, back toward his guards. From one he grappled a spear.

He spun around, half-crouched, no longer a man but a savage animal, teeth bared, face inhuman. Stones began to drop from the arch where the key-stone had fallen. The floor of the chamber tilted. Other arches began to crack and shatter. Even as Brak raced toward Elinor he saw a great stone fall, smashing a soldier and poor, feeble Darios to red smears beneath it.

Another soldier trying to escape crossed Brak's path near the rim of the chalk ring. He lopped wildly at the barbarian with his sword. Brak rammed the spear into the man's guts, yanked it out, then rushed on.

He reached Elinor and dragged her up from the floor where she'd fallen.

He slung the girl over his shoulder and ran toward what looked like a stair entrance. The winds were battering at the chamber. Stone after stone crashed down. A moment more and the entire structure would topple.

Brak heard nothing but the steady thunder of falling masonry mingled with the tormented, orgiastic cry of the tornado-force winds. Brak stumbled against someone, saw that it was Runga.

The burly smith hammered at Brak with his fists, trying to get ahead of him down the stairs. Encumbered by the shepherd girl's body over his shoulder, Brak still managed to bring his spear around and thrust it deep into Runga's belly.

The smith cried out, pitched backward. Blood sprayed warm and red down Brak's shoulder. Another soldier rushed by, tripped on the first stair and went tumbling into the dark below.

Brak raced down that stair between walls of stone that seemed like silk, so violently did they sway and tremble. At a turning on the staircase he found the guard who had fallen, his neck broken. Brak snatched up the man's broadsword and plunged on.

THE stair seemed to wind downward forever. Brak was growing weaker by the second. He felt Elinor stir against his shoulder. At last light gleamed ahead.

Near to crying from relief, Brak burst through a door onto a rampart that led along the castle wall. At the rampart's far end a ladder led down to the main courtyard, near the great gates through which Nordica's soldiers were fleeing like panicked animals.

Brak halted, put Elinor down, held her until she regained her balance and her senses.

"Girl? Can you walk? We're nearly free—"

"I can walk. Take my hand. That's all the help I need."

"Then let's hurry. The winds around the tower may destroy all of this place before they're done."

Brak's last words were muffled by another loud roar. He turned, saw the high stone tower at the top of which he could dimly make out the arched chamber half-hidden in clouds of mist. That chamber and the entire tower top was falling outward, into the gorge beyond the castle.

"She's done," Brak breathed. "Buried and done, and her magic with her. Girl, we've come through it alive." And he clasped Elinor's hand and began to run.

They had gone half way down

the rampart when the stench swept over them.

Brak skidded to a halt again, whipped around.

And his heart broke with defeat.

Down the rampart, out of the same door through which they had escaped, eyes bright as moons, white fangs shining, iron-like hide supple and rippling, ran Scarletjaw.

Brak's only weapon was the broadsword in his fist, totally useless against the hound's armored skin.

"Beast—"

The cry made Brak turn.

"Beast, take them!"

BRAK goggled. There in the courtyard, white gown flowered with blood, hair filthy with mortar-dust, no longer beautiful but hideous, stood Nordica Fire-Hair.

How she had escaped from the tower, Brak did not know. But he knew somehow that she had left her father behind, dead at last, and it was his blood upon her robes. Now she waited, lips peeled back in a ghastly smile as she watched the dog near Brak in a charging run.

Brak stared at the blade in his hand. Useless, useless.

Elinor began to sob mindlessly. This, Brak knew, was the last battle. Already lost. The sword in his fist shone like tin, of no

earthly good against the gigantic animal—

Swiping his forearm across his eyes to clear them, Brak threw the broadsword away.

Some dim comprehension of what Brak had done penetrated Elinor's terrorized mind. She started babbling senselessly at Brak, telling him of his mistake. But Brak was readying himself, preparing for Scarletjaw's lunge as the beast gathered speed. Louder Elinor cried out, cursing him in her fright, cursing him for throwing away their sole chance for survival—

Scarletjaw left the rampart, leaping high, hurtling through the air, great jaws open.

Brak the barbarian felt his time had come. But he did not run away. He meant to die fighting.

He ran in beneath the belly of the beast as it hurtled down. He thrust upward with both hands. He bit his lips until blood gushed as the monstrous weight of the animal fell upon him. But he was ready for one last push, and he gave it now, upward, upward and out with all his might.

Talons raked his back, his flanks. His spine hurt so much he thought it would crack. Harder he pushed, harder—

Then Scarletjaw was tumbling through the air, lifted and thrown from the rampart down into the courtyard.

Numbly Brak leaned on the battlement. He saw Nordica's surprise as the great hound struck the earth, twitched, then rose shakily.

"Beast?" came Nordica's faint voice. "My beautiful beast, he's killed y— *no!*"

Scarletjaw smelled the blood on Nordica's gown.

Slowly, left hind leg dragging, the animal hitched himself forward.

Nordica turned to run. She stumbled.

Scarletjaw leaped.

Brak seized Elinor's hand, dragged her head against his chest, held it down. There was one high, piercing scream. Then a crunching of bones. Even Brak turned away, as the blood of Nordica the Fire-Haired ran like a river in the yard.

Without quite remembering how they accomplished it, Brak and Elinor reached the ladder which led down to the courtyard floor near the gate. They stole out through the open doors. Once on the road, they began to run, hand in hand.

Before they had gone far the earth began to shake beneath them. Brak turned. All of the upper towers of Nordica's castle were lost in whirling, wind-driven murk. One by one the towers crumbled in upon themselves, in upon Nordica's corpse, and Scarletjaw, and all the immense evil

of that black and cursed place.

When finally Brak and the shepherd girl began to trudge on down the road toward a group of Nordica's soldiers, weaponless and no longer hostile, Brak felt that he was so tired he might never walk again.

They reached the soldiers. The men merely stared sullenly at them, making no move to harm them. The wind beat loud in Brak's ears. Brak took one last look at the accursed castle which, under the battering of the winds from the ends of the earth, was now nothing more than a mammoth rubble-pile, Nordica Fire-Hair's cairn.

SEVERAL days later, in a clear sunlight, Brak the barbarian mounted a pony in the yard of the palace of Strann, Lord of the Silver Balances.

At Brak's flank hung a new broadsword. Nearby stood Prince Pemma, now Lord Pemma. The young monarch, his position symbolized by the ivory diadem that somehow lent his plain, pleasant features a more regal cast, was grave-faced. At his side was Elinor. She was perfumed, bathed, freshly-clothed and considerably rested from her ordeal. Prince Pemma had insisted that she, as well as Ambrose the Pillarite, be housed in the palace until they recovered.

Pemma strode forward. His

doublet bulged slightly beneath his left arm because of the layers of linen wrappings the physicians had applied. Nordica's archers had slain Strann, whose body lay in state in the palace chapel. But the arrow piercing Pemma's back had not sped true. The young man had lived to assume his father's crown.

Brak fingered the fine silver-bossed trappings of the riding gear Pemma had provided. "I will stay, Lord," he said to the young man, "if the doctors are still uncertain about the Pillarite's life."

"No, Brak, we will care for him. Though the physicians don't know the exact nature of his sickness—how can they, when his mind may have been damaged forever by his struggle to destroy Nordica and save you?—still, they're sure he will survive. Regardless of what hurt has been done to him, he'll have a safe, secure place of honor in my household until his dying day if he wishes it."

From the ranks of royal troops drawn up in their armor around the yard, Iskander marched forward.

"Brak, I would welcome you if you'd remain. I could use a strong fighting arm, an aide who had your courage. The pay would be handsome, and the life pleasant now that she's gone."

Brak shook his head. "I am

still bound south, to the lands of Khurdisan."

"Still seeking your fortune?" Pemma asked.

"Yes," said Brak.

Suddenly Elinor broke away from the young lord's side. She rushed up beside Brak's pony, clasped his hand. Though she kept her eyes averted, there was a certain unmistakable pink warmth in her cheeks.

"Many times I have thanked you, Brak. But a thousand would not be enough. Perhaps—if you remained—there would be fortunes enough to last you forever."

And she raised her head, gazed into Brak's eyes.

What he saw, shining through her natural shyness, was the beginning of an emotion that, somehow, stung his heart. She made a lovely figure in the sunlight.

Sighing, Brak reached down to her hand clasped over his, touched it.

"Girl, I'm not a man for a court or a king's house. I'll ride to the end of the earth before I'm done, probably. It was in my blood to do it when I was born. I—"

Brak noticed Prince Pemma watching the scene closely. The

young monarch had a rather familiar expression on his face. It was a tinge of jealousy.

Brak smiled, truly smiled, for the first time in many days. Pemma jealous? As well he might be, of a wench so pretty.

Carefully Brak drew his hand from Elinor's.

"The young lord will make a fine ruler, girl, now that Nordica's evil no longer infests the land. When I'm gone, perhaps your eye will look on him differently. Perhaps you might one day find life in a palace preferable to loneliness on the high slopes. At least," he added humorously, "it's worthy of your thought."

Startled, Elinor glanced at Pemma, hastily averted her eyes again. Brak laughed, clucked to his mount:

"Pony, take me south."

And Brak the barbarian rode out the gate under the tower where the Doomsbell hung silent, down through the pleasant vineyards where the peasants worked again in the sunlight. He heard them singing a work song, lustily, happily, as he followed the road toward the horizon and the warm southern climes where his fortune lay in wait, mysterious and beckoning.

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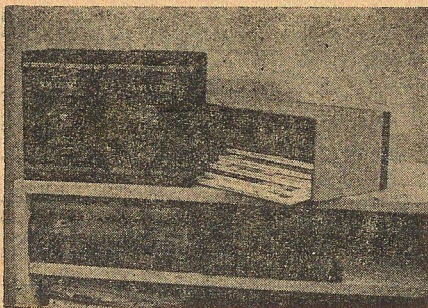
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