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Novels

MAGAZINE

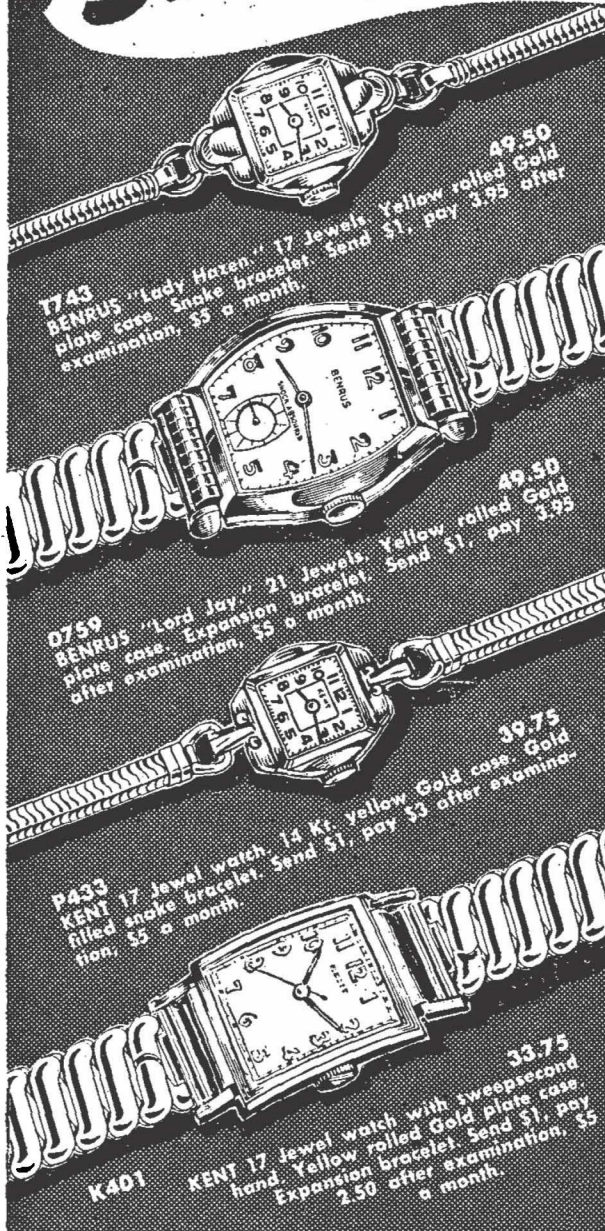
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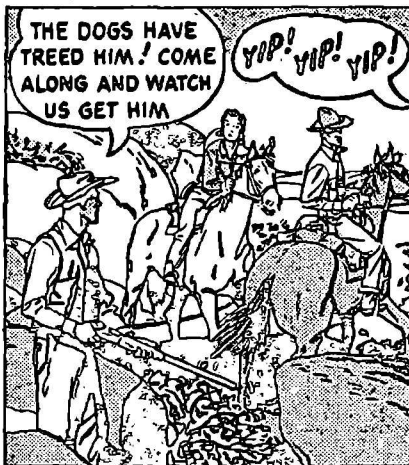
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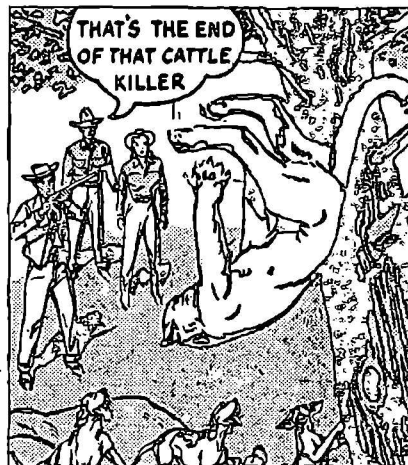


SALLY BRETT AND HER BROTHER JOE, ARE JUST TURNING HOMEWARD AFTER A DAY-LONG RIDE IN STATE CANYON FOREST WHEN...

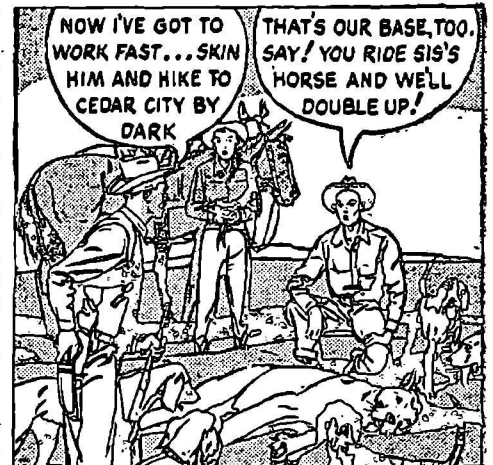


THE DOGS HAVE TREED HIM! COME ALONG AND WATCH US GET HIM

YIP! YIP! YIP!

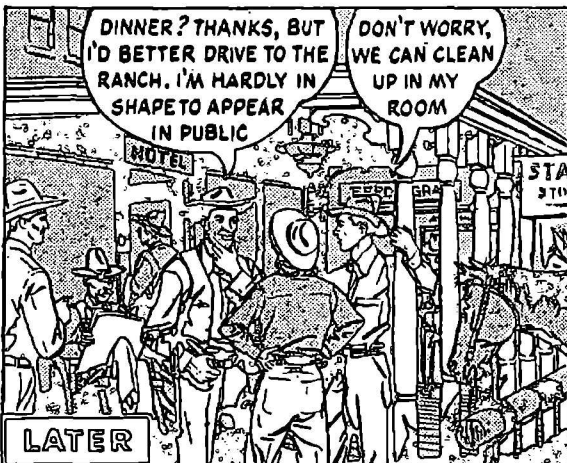


THAT'S THE END OF THAT CATTLE KILLER



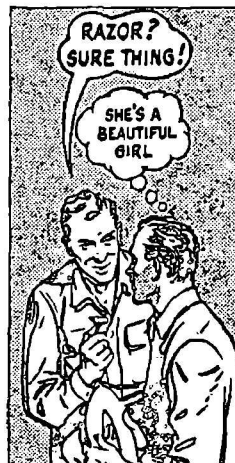
NOW I'VE GOT TO WORK FAST... SKIN HIM AND HIKE TO CEDAR CITY BY DARK

THAT'S OUR BASE, TOO. SAY! YOU RIDE SIS'S HORSE AND WE'LL DOUBLE UP!



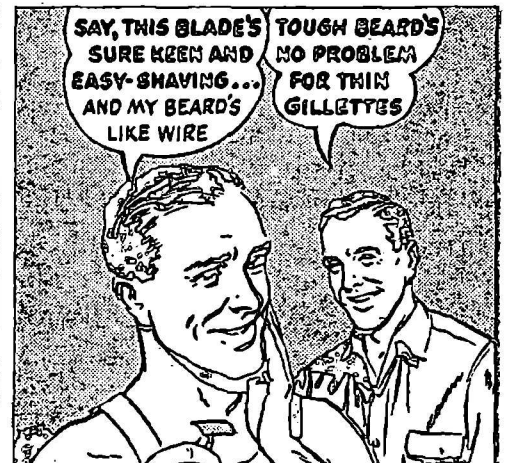
DINNER? THANKS, BUT I'D BETTER DRIVE TO THE RANCH. I'M HARDLY IN SHAPE TO APPEAR IN PUBLIC

DON'T WORRY, WE CAN CLEAN UP IN MY ROOM



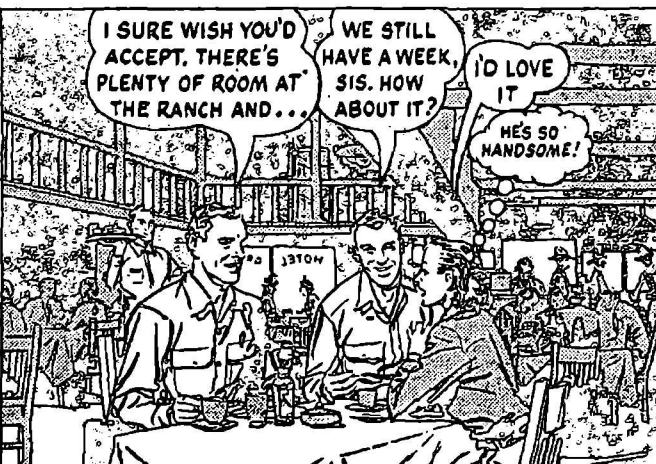
RAZOR? SURE THING!

SHE'S A BEAUTIFUL GIRL



SAY, THIS BLADE'S SURE KEEN AND EASY-SHAVING... AND MY BEARD'S LIKE WIRE

NO PROBLEM FOR THIN GILLETTES

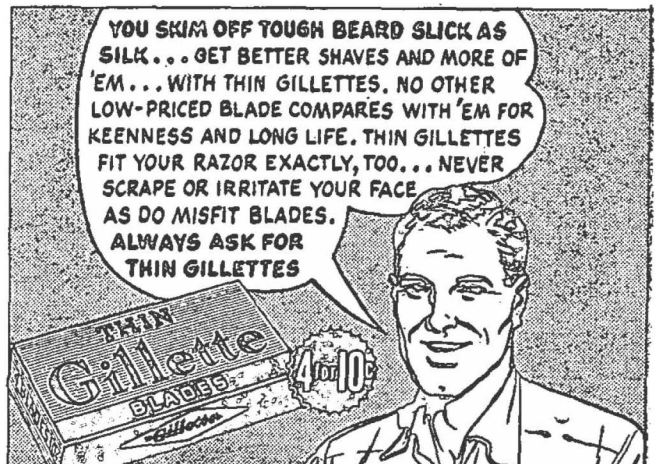


I SURE WISH YOU'D ACCEPT. THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE RANCH AND...

WE STILL HAVE A WEEK, SIS. HOW ABOUT IT?

I'D LOVE IT

HE'S SO HANDSOME!



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FANTASTIC

Novels

MAGAZINE

Vol. 2

MAY, 1948

No. 1

Complete Novelette

THE MOON POOL.....A. Merritt 8

What was the dread cold thing that stole forth from white moonlight—to stalk back with human prey?

Book-Length Novel

JASON, SON OF JASON.....J. U. Giesy 36

He had willed his astral self across the cosmic void, and found his soul-mate on another planet. Could the magnet of love draw him safely to Palos forever, forsaking the mortal chains of his earthbound body?

WHAT DO YOU THINK? 6

The Readers' Department

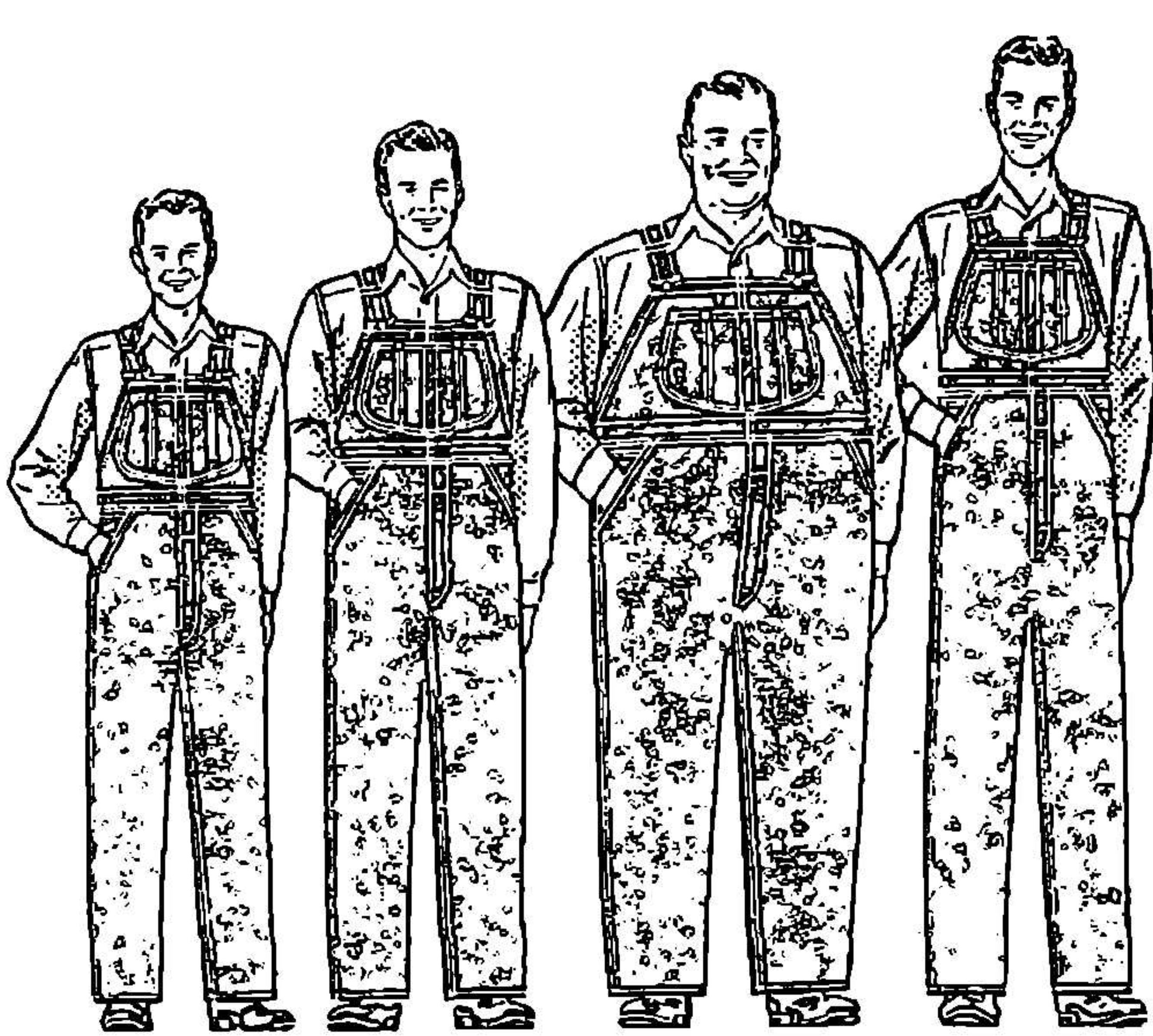
IN THE NEXT ISSUE..... 107

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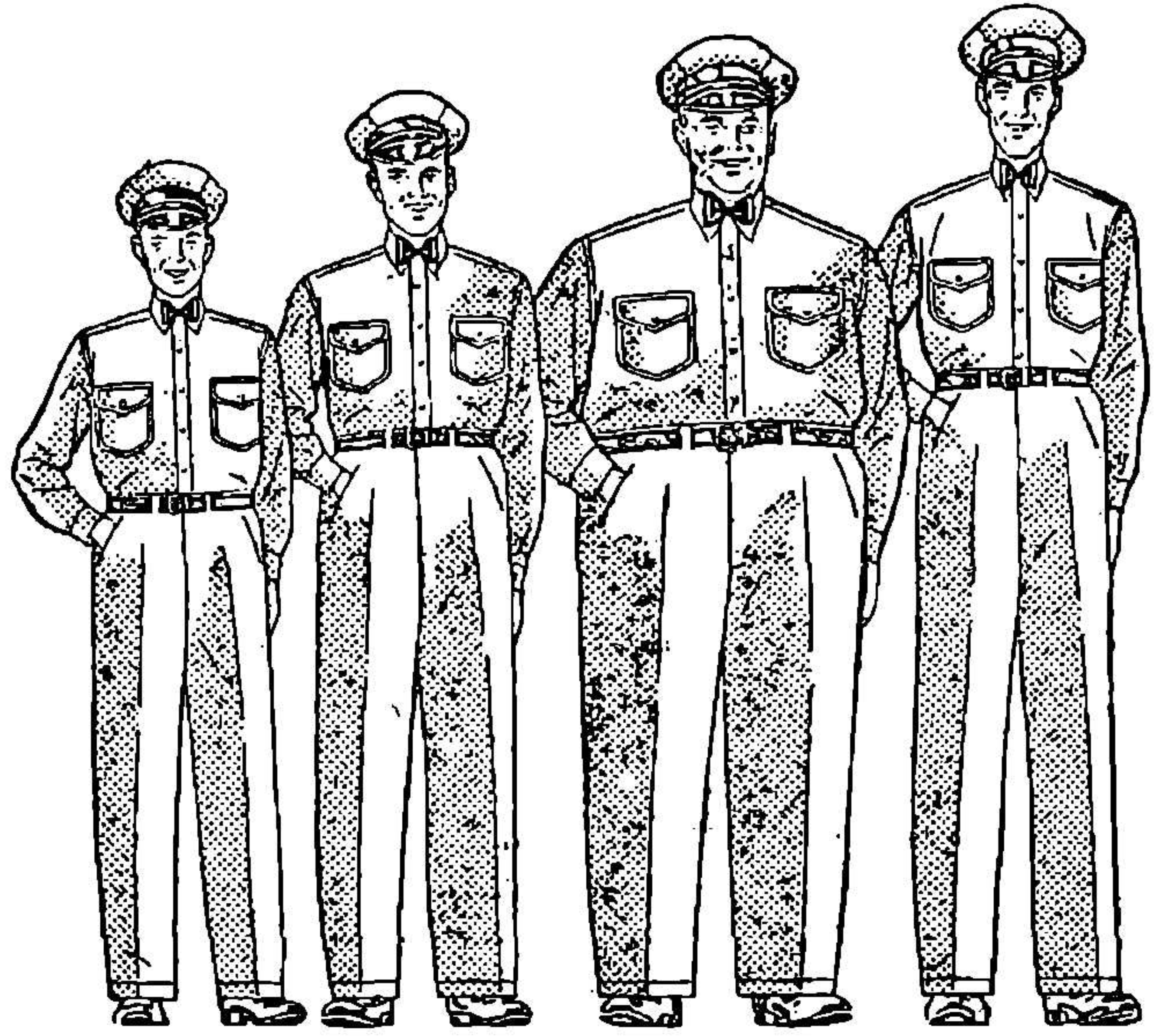
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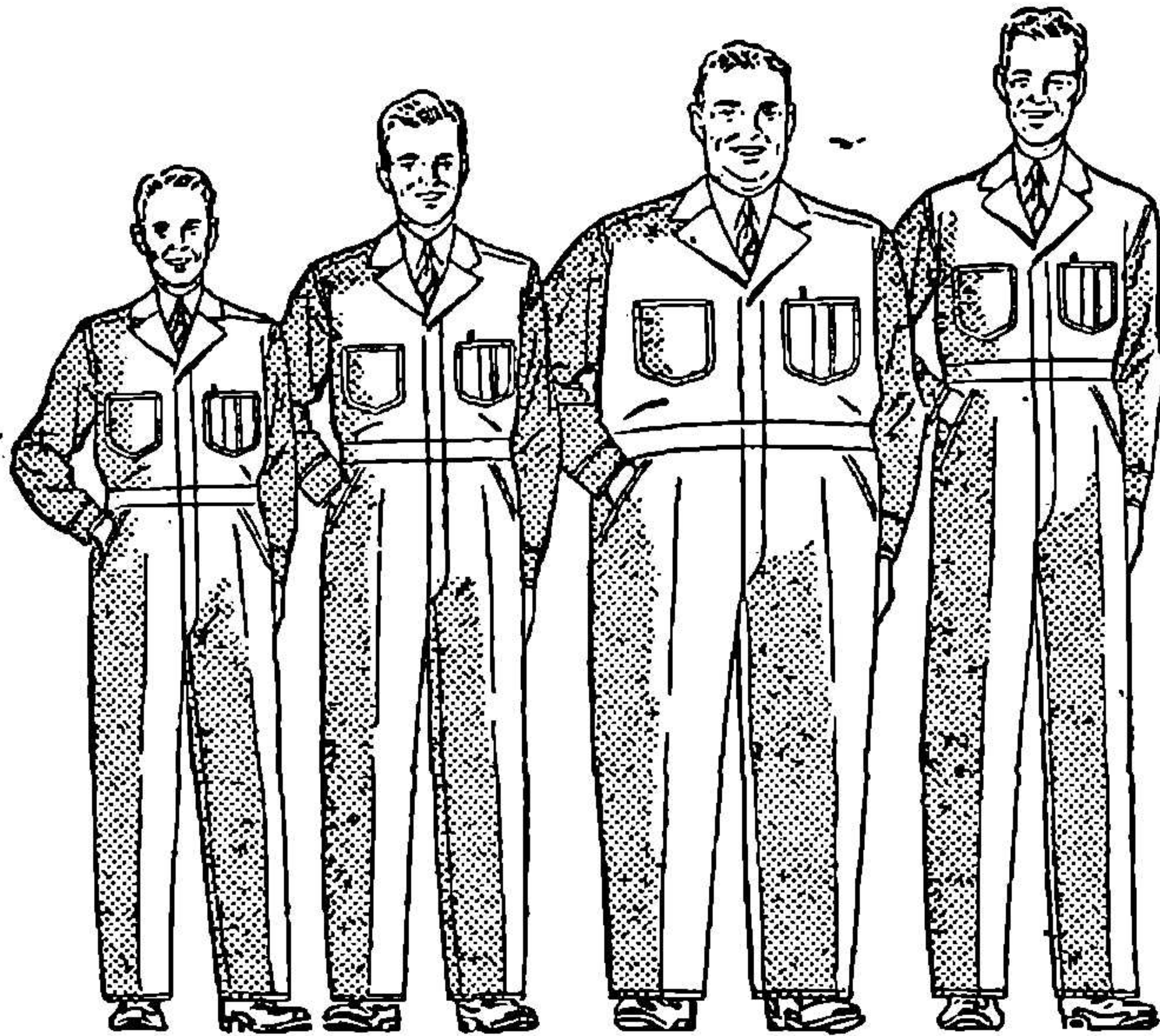


Lee Overalls

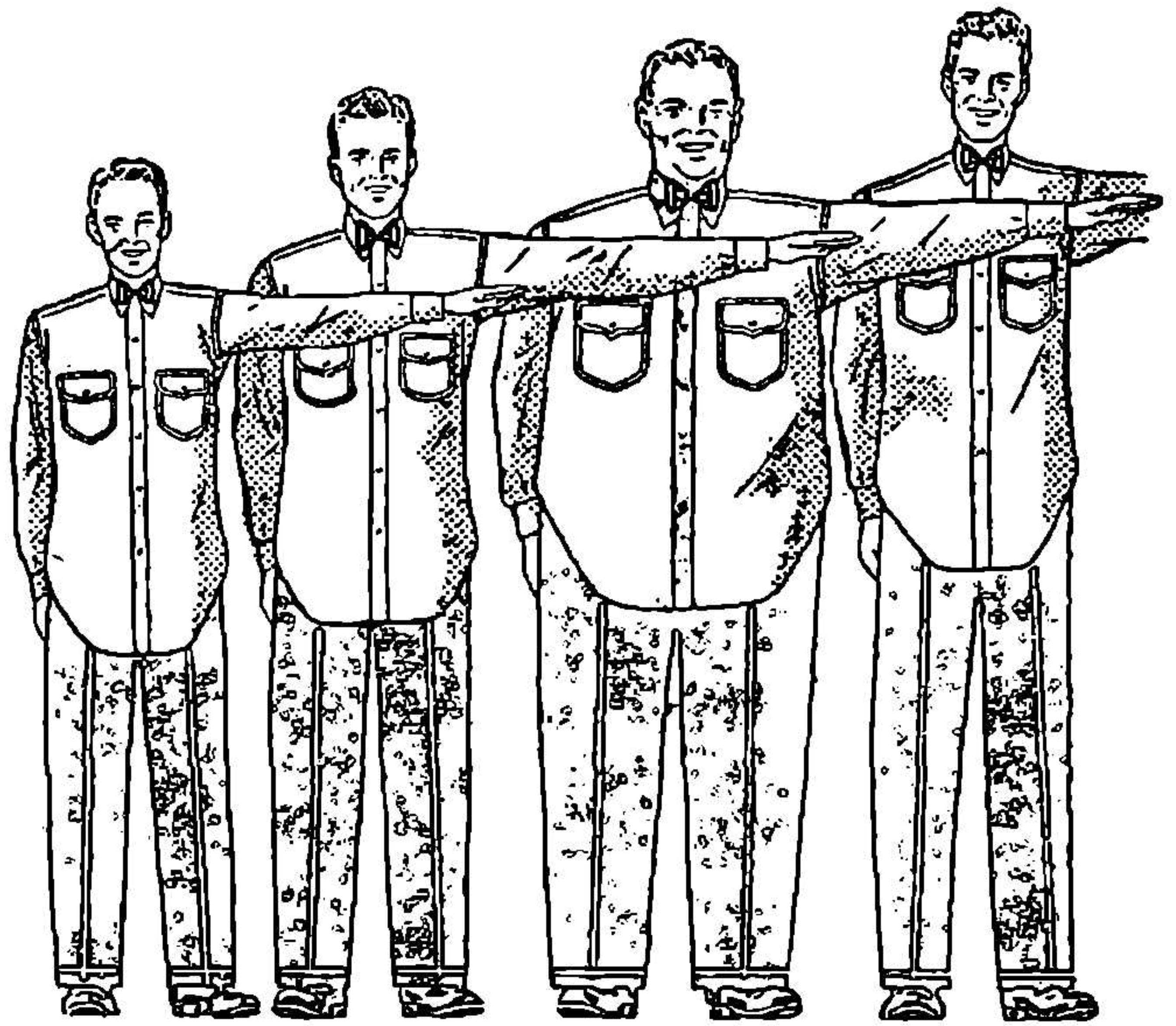


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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Address comments to the Letter Editor, *Fantastic Novels*,
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DREAM COME TRUE

Gosh! Can it be true? I've just read your little wondercard and this note is my first reaction. *Fantastic Novels*! The Munsey Classics! Why, it's like a fantastic dream come true . . . it's like—and is—a whole new world opened up—a world of miraculous Fantasy.

Let me wish this venture all the luck in this world and the world of Fantasy. May *Fantastic Novels* last forever.

Your happy reader,
VERNON HODGES.

c/o Santa Fe R. R. Station,
Hanford, Calif.

"ISHTAR" WISE CHOICE

I received your postcard announcing the revival of *Fantastic Novels* this morning, and I couldn't have had a nicer surprise.

The reappearance of F.N. is a fine thing for fandom in many ways. First, it means we'll have the equivalent of the monthly F.F.M. we've been campaigning for so long.

Secondly, it means that we recent fans can enjoy the superb old stories.

And thirdly, this adds another magazine to the growing field of sfantasy publications, an event I always welcome.

Your choice of an opening story seems wise. "The Ship of Ishtar" has been demanded by fans for a long time, and is worthy of printing. Usually I don't care for Merritt, but I promise to read every word of this one just to decide, once and for all, if Abe deserves the glowing praises of his admirers.

With this happy event forthcoming, I don't suppose we should gripe; but here is one plaintive plea: Please . . . please revive *Astonishing*! And, whenever possible, make F.F.M. and F.N. monthly. Down with the Paper Shortage!

DAN MULCAHY.

4170 Utah St.,
St. Louis, Mo.

BIG THRILL!

Stopping at the little town of Walsh, Colo. on Jan. 23rd, I dropped in at one of the local drug stores. Then came the shock and the thrill. Staring at me among the spines of the many pulp magazines was the title *Fantastic Novels*. I could not believe my eyes. It is probable my hand was shaking as I paid the clerk my quarter and started thumbing through the contents. Sure enough, the old classics were coming back.

The above is an account of personal reactions. I wonder how many others had a similar experience?

As for suggested material to use, it is hardly necessary. You no doubt have a bulging file of letters and long lists of requests. But you will want to finish the Palos and Polaris trilogies soon, and then no doubt high on your list will be such stories as "After A Million Years," "A Man Named Jones," "The Planeteer" and all those old *All Story*, *Cavalier*, and *Argosy* tales of the 1900 to 1920 era. In general I would like to request that those older stories come first. That will give us England, Fisher, Flint, Robbins, Sheehan, Smith, Stilson, Stevens, etc., which are now unobtainable. Then of course will be wanted the great stories of Burroughs, Cummings, Kline, Farley, Leinster, and others which came mostly after the *Argosy-Allstory* merger of 1920.

Another hope. That Finlay will get to do a lot of the covers in his old pre-war style. Do you remember the one he did for "The Snake Mother"?

Thanks again for everything. Although you have been studiously ignored for the last few years, I have continued to buy F.F.M., because it was the best, and you will no doubt hear from me from time to time once more. Meanwhile, let's all buy several copies of the new *Fantastic Novels* to show our appreciation, and assure its success.

Best wishes to you and F.N.

C. W. WOLFE.

821 Lincoln Ave.,
P. O. Box 1109,
Las Vegas, New Mexico.

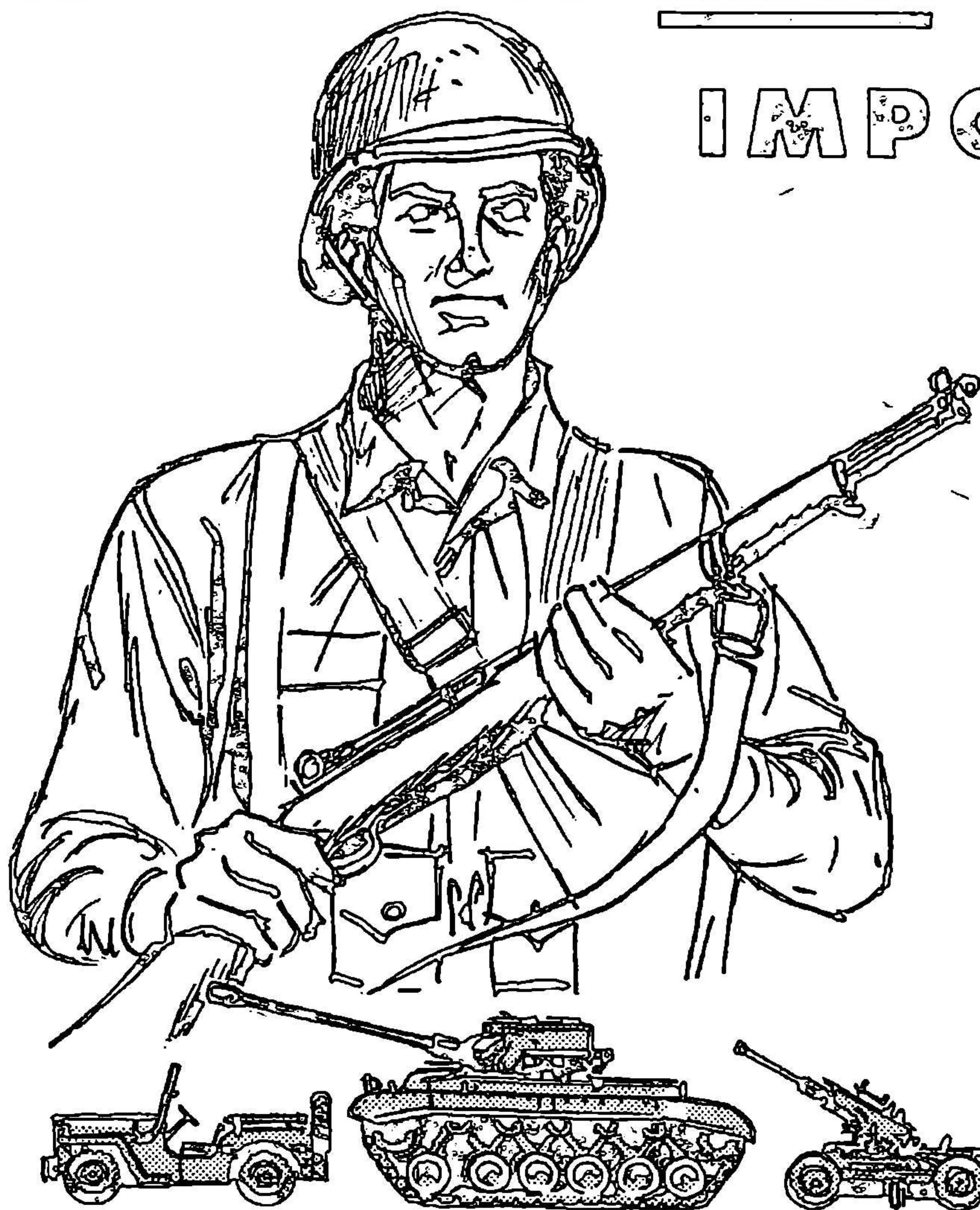
WANTS "POLARIS" SEQUELS

It was with considerable pleasure that I noted the revived *Fantastic Novels* which arrived today. I had a lot of fun last night, digging my file of the previous issues from under my F.F.M.s, and starting a new "current" file for them.

I am especially glad that F.N. has been reserved entirely for the Munsey stories. It is a field which not only deserves, but needs reviving. However, I believe you could have made better choices of material than "The Ship of Ishtar" and "The Middle Bedroom" inasmuch as they are not particularly scarce. Your choice of "Jason, Son of Jason" for the next issue, however, is very commendable. But again, I find fault with your choice of "The Moon Pool" which was republished several times.

You ask us to tell you what we'd like to have reprinted. As a general guide, I'd say, any of the fantasies (which, naturally, includes science fiction), long and short, which have appeared in the Munsey magazines, but never
(Continued on page 124)

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She threw herself squarely within its diabolical splendor. . . .

THE MOON POOL

By
A. Merritt

*What was the dread cold
thing that stole forth from
white moonlight—to stalk
back with human prey?*

TO THE EDITOR:

THE International Association of Science has directed me to place before you the following narrative with the view, if you are agreeable, of publication as soon as possible. Because of your extraordinarily large circulation and its diffusion not only throughout the United States, but throughout the reading world, it was felt that yours was the ideal medium to bring the facts before the greatest audience and so enable the association to right a wrong which, but for Dr. Goodwin's very understandable and perhaps entirely human hesitation, would never have gained headway.

The association, in selecting you as the subject of this request, took into consideration the fact that the space limitations of newspapers are such that the complete narrative of Dr. Goodwin could not be published therein, whereas with you this handicap does not exist. It was also convinced that so important and unusual a document could not communicate its unique impression of truth and sincerity unless read in its entirety exactly as it was before the International Association of Science, April 18, 1918.

I have been authorized to announce that we have discovered that Dr. Goodwin is now actually on his way to the Caroline Islands,

and that the association is preparing an expedition to follow him speedily; to save him if it can arrive in time; at least to investigate and to destroy if possible, and if necessary, the cause of his journey.

The maps which Dr. Goodwin received from Dr. Throckmartin accompany this manuscript. It is our desire that they be published with it for the guidance of other scientists or courageous men who may be impelled on reading it to follow us with another expedition. For it is not at all certain that the human expedients planned by the association can cope with phenomena so clearly beyond the range of present human knowledge as that which Dr. Throckmartin describes as emanating from what he calls "the moon pool," and that which Dr. Goodwin saw on board the *Southern Queen*.

Again it may be that this unearthly dweller in the prehistoric island ruins of the South Seas is only one of many. Further, there is the hint conveyed by the underground chanting heard by Dr. Throckmartin; raising the question of the existence of considerable other forces or creatures possessing powers of knowledge of which we are densely ignorant, and in the exercise of which the world must be deeply concerned.

It is unnecessary to say to you that Dr. Walter T. Goodwin, Ph.D., F.R.G.S., *et cetera*, though in his early thirties, is known as the foremost of American botanists, and that Dr. David Throckmartin's scientific reputation is so great that even the cloud that has gathered about his memory could not blacken his achievements.

For those who would follow us, full information as to the methods of the expedition can be secured at the office of the president of the association.

Our foremost purpose in asking publication is, however, as I have said, to remove the shadow from the name of Dr. Throckmartin, of his young wife, and of his brilliant young associate, Dr. Charles Stanton, who accompanied him on his ill-fated journey.

The association has entrusted this explanation and the narrative of Dr. Goodwin to Mr. A. Merritt, who has courteously volunteered to set it before you together with other facts which we have asked him to communicate to you verbally.

Respectfully yours,

The International Association of Science,
Per J. B. K., President.

CHAPTER I

THE THROCKMARTIN MYSTERY

I BREAK a silence of three years to clear the name of Dr. David Throckmartin and to lift the shadow of scandal from that of his wife and of Dr. Charles Stanton, his assistant. That I have not found the courage to do so before, all men who are jealous of their sci-

entific reputations will understand when they have heard what I have written. How strongly I attest to my belief in the truth of what I am about to lay before you will be equally clear as you listen and realize, as I do, the storm of ridicule and disbelief it is sure to bring upon me. Yet I hope that you will also believe before this narrative is finished.

Let me recapitulate what, until now, has actually been known of the Throckmartin expedition to the island of Ponape in the Carolines—the Throckmartin Mystery, as it is called.

Dr. Throckmartin set forth early in 1915 to make detailed observations of Nan-Matal, that extraordinary group of island ruins, remains of a high and prehistoric civilization, that are clustered along the eastern shore of Ponape. With him went his wife to whom he had been wedded less than half a year. The daughter of Professor Fraizier-Smith, she was as deeply interested and almost as well informed as he, upon these relics of a vanished race that titanically strew certain islands of the Pacific and form the basis for the theory of a submerged Pacific continent.

Mrs. Throckmartin, it will be recalled, was much younger, fifteen years at least, than her husband. Dr. Charles Stanton, who accompanied them as Dr. Throckmartin's assistant, was about her age. These three and a Swedish woman, Thora Helversen, who had been Edith Throckmartin's nurse in babyhood and who was entirely devoted to her, made up the expedition.

Dr. Throckmartin planned to spend a year among the ruins, not only of Ponape, but of Lele—the twin centers of that colossal riddle of humanity whose answer has its roots in immeasurable antiquity; a weird flower of man-made civilization that blossomed ages before the seeds of Egypt were sown; of whose arts we know little and of whose science and secret knowledge and nature nothing.

He carried with him complete equipment for his work and gathered at Ponape a dozen or so natives for laborers. They went straight to Metalanim harbor and set up their camp on the island called Uschen-Tau in the group known as the Nan-Matal. You will remember that these islands are entirely uninhabited and are shunned by the people on the main island.

Three months later Dr. Throckmartin appeared at Port Moresby, Papua. He

came on a schooner manned by Solomon Islanders and commanded by a Chinese half-breed captain. He reported that he was on his way to Melbourne for additional scientific equipment and whites to help him in his excavations, saying that the superstition of the natives made their aid negligible. He went immediately on board the steamer *Southern Queen* which was sailing that same morning. Three nights later he disappeared from the *Southern Queen* and it was officially reported that he had met death either by being swept overboard or by casting himself into the sea.

A relief-boat sent with the news to Ponape found the Throckmartin camp on the island Uschen-Tau and a smaller camp on the island called Nan-Tanach.

known of the fate of the Throckmartin expedition.

Why, you will ask, do I break silence now: and how came I in possession of the facts I am about to set forth?

To the first I answer: I was at the Geographical Club last evening and overheard two members talking. They mentioned the name of Throckmartin and I became, frankly, eavesdropper. One said:

"Of course what probably happened was that Throckmartin killed them all. It's a dangerous thing for a man to marry a woman so much younger than himself and then throw her into the necessarily close company of exploration with a man as young and as agreeable as Stanton was. The inevitable happened, no doubt. Throckmartin discovered; avenged him-

This is "The Moon Pool" Novelette, which originally preceded the full novel-sized "The Conquest of the Moon Pool", which we shall publish subsequently in this magazine.

All the equipment, clothing, supplies were intact. But of Mrs. Throckmartin, or Dr. Stanton or of Thora Helversen they could not find a single trace!

The natives who had been employed by the archeologist were questioned. They said that the ruins were the abode of great spirits—*ani*—who were particularly powerful when the moon was at the full. On these nights all the islanders were doubly careful to give the ruins wide berth. Upon being employed, they had demanded leave from the day before full moon until it was on the wane and this had been granted them by Dr. Throckmartin. Thrice they had left the expedition alone on these nights. On their third return they had found the four white people gone and they "knew that the *ani* had eaten them." They were afraid and had fled.

That was all.

THE Chinese half caste was found and reluctantly testified at last that he had picked Dr. Throckmartin up from a small boat about fifty miles off Ponape. The scientist had seemed half mad, but he had given the seaman a large sum of money to bring him to Port Moresby and to say, if questioned, that he had boarded the boat at Ponape harbor.

That, gentlemen, is all that has been

self. Then followed remorse and suicide.

"Throckmartin didn't seem to be that kind," said the other thoughtfully.

"No, he didn't," agreed the first.

"Isn't there another story?" went on the second speaker. "Something about Mrs. Throckmartin running away with Stanton and taking the woman, Thora, with her? Somebody told me they had been recognized in Singapore recently."

"You can take your pick of the two stories," replied his *vis-à-vis*. "It's one or the other I suppose."

It was neither one nor the other, gentlemen. I know—and I answer now the second question—because I was with Throckmartin when he—vanished. I know what he told me and I know what my own eyes saw. Incredible, abnormal, against all the known facts of our science as it was, I testify to it. And it is my intention, after sending you this, to sail to Ponape, to go to the Nan-Matal and to the islet beneath whose frowning walls dwells the mystery that Throckmartin sought and found—and at the last sought and found Throckmartin!

I attach herewith a copy of the map of the islands that he gave me. I attach also his sketch of the great courtyard of Nan-Tanach, the location of the moon door, his recollection of the probable location of the

moon pool and the passage to it and his approximation of the position of the shining globes. If I do not return and there are any with enough belief, scientific curiosity and courage to follow, I leave them in these a plain trail.

I will now proceed straightforwardly with my narrative.

For six months I had been on the d'Entrecasteaux Islands gathering data for the concluding chapters of my book upon "Flora of the Volcanic Islands of the South Pacific." The day before, I had reached Port Moresby and had seen my specimens safely stored on board the *Southern Queen*. As I sat on the upper deck that morning I thought, with homesick mind, of the long leagues between me and Melbourne and New York.

It was one of Papua's yellow mornings, when she shows herself in her most somber, most baleful mood. The sky was a smouldering ocher. Over the islands brooded a spirit sullen, implacable and alien; filled with the threat of latent, malefic forces waiting to be unleashed. It seemed an emanation from the untamed, sinister heart of Papua herself—sinister even when she smiles. And now and then, on the wind, came a breath from unexplored jungles, filled with unfamiliar odors, mysterious, and menacing.

It is on such mornings that Papua speaks to you of her immemorial ancientness and of her power. I am not unduly imaginative but it is a mood that makes me shrink—I mention it because it bears directly upon Dr. Throckmartin's fate. Nor is the mood Papua's alone. I have felt it in New Guinea, in Australia, in the Solomons and in the Carolines. But it is in Papua that it seems most articulate. It is as though she said, "I am the ancient of days; I have seen the earth in the throes of its shaping; I am the primeval; I have seen races born and die and, lo, in my breast are secrets that would blast you by the telling, you pale babes of a puling age. You and I ought not to be in the same world yet I am and I shall be! Never will you fathom me and you I hate though I tolerate! I tolerate—but how long?"

And then I seem to see a giant paw that reaches from Papua toward the outer world, stretching and sheathing monstrous claws.

All feel this mood of hers. Her own people have it woven in them, part of their web and woof flashing into light unexpect-

edly like a soul from another universe; masking itself as swiftly.

I HAVE fought against Papua as every white man must on one of her yellow mornings. And as I fought I saw a tall figure come striding down the pier. Behind him came a Kapa-Kapa boy swinging a new valise. There was something familiar about the tall man. As he reached the gangplank he looked up straight into my eyes, stared at me for a moment and waved his hand. It was Dr. Throckmartin!

Coincident with my recognition of him there came a shock of surprise that was definitely—unpleasant. It was Throckmartin—but there was something disturbingly different about him and the man I had known so well and had bidden farewell less than a year before. He was then, as you know, just turned forty, lithe, erect, muscular; the face of a student and of a seeker. His controlling expression was one of enthusiasm, of intellectual keenness, of—what shall I say?—expectant search. His ever eagerly questioning brain had stamped itself upon his face.

I sought in my mind for an explanation of that which I had felt on the flash of his greeting. Hurrying down to the lower deck I found him with the purser. As I spoke he turned and held out to me an eager hand—and then I saw what the change was that had come over him!

He knew, of course, by my face, the uncontrollable shock that my closer look had given me. His eyes filled and he turned brusquely to the purser; then hurried off to his stateroom, leaving me standing, half dazed.

At the stair he half turned.

"Oh, Goodwin," he said. "I'd like to see you later. Just now—there's something I must write before we start—"

He went up swiftly.

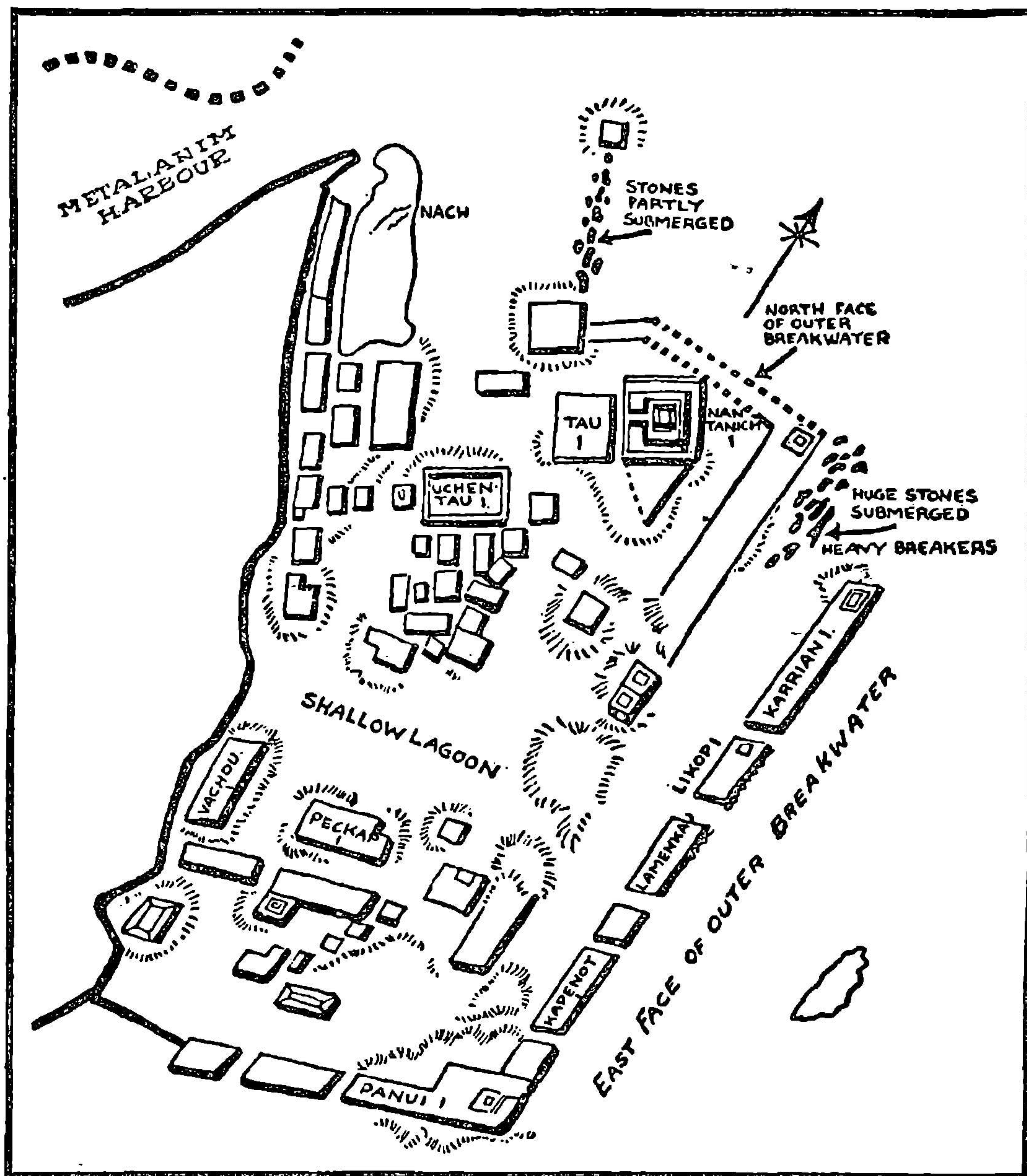
"'E looks rather queer—eh?" said the purser. "Know 'im well, sir? Seems to 'ave given you quite a start, sir."

I made some reply and went slowly to my chair. I tried to analyze what it was that had disturbed me so; what profound change in Throckmartin that had so shaken me. Now it came to me. It was as though the man had suffered some terrific soul searing shock of rapture and horror combined; some soul cataclysm that in its climax had remolded his face deep from within, setting on it the seal of wedded joy and fear. As though indeed ecstasy supernal and terror infernal had, once

come to him hand in hand, taken possession of him, looked out of his eyes and, departing, left behind upon him ineradicably their shadow.

Gone was Throckmartin's old eager look, utterly gone, and in its place was this—

side by side, not contending but in some frightful fashion—harmonious! That was what shocked. For how could hate and love, ecstasy and horror, heaven and hell mix, join hands—kiss? Yet these were what, close embraced, lay on his face.



A copy of the map of the islets of the Nan-Matal, which Dr. Throckmartin gave Dr. Goodwin. It in its turn is a copy of the official sketch plan by F. W. Christian, the first explorer to map the Caroline Islands' mysterious maze.

something—I had never seen before on any face. I caught myself wondering what his face must have been when the seal was stamped freshly upon it. And what in the name of all knowledge was the agency that had done this thing! For it came to me suddenly that the true reason for the distress, the deep perturbation and amaze that he stirred in me was that the two expressions were mingled, inextricably, lay

If I seem to dwell on this, have patience; it is necessary indeed.

Alternately I looked out over the port and paced about the deck, striving to read the riddle; to banish it from my mind. And all the time still over Papua brooded its baleful spirit of ancient evil, unfathomable, not to be understood; nor had it lifted when the *Southern Queen* lifted anchor and steamed out into the gulf.

CHAPTER II

DOWN THE MOON PATH

I WATCHED with relief the shores sink down behind us; welcomed the touch of the free sea wind. We seemed to be drawing away from something malefic; something that lurked with the island spell I have described, and the thought crept into my mind, spoke—whispered rather—from Throckmartin's face.

I had hoped—and within the hope was an inexplicable shrinking, an unexpressed dread—that I would meet Throckmartin at lunch. He did not come down and I was sensible of a distinct relief within my disappointment. All that afternoon I lounged about uneasily but still he kept to his cabin. Nor did he appear at dinner.

Dusk and night fell swiftly. I was warm and went back to my deck-chair. The *Southern Queen* was rolling to a disquieting swell and I had the place to myself. I had looked my fellow passengers over while we were at table. They were a scant dozen. A couple of English officials and their wives, engrossed in "shop" and bulwarked by the English unapproachableness of the first night out; a clerk or two; a shoe salesman from Brisbane; a scattering of others—none of them worth breaking my solitude for, I decided.

Over the heavens was a canopy of cloud, glowing faintly and testifying to the moon riding behind it. There was much phosphorescence. Now and then, before the ship and at the sides, arose those strange little swirls of mist that stream up from the Southern Ocean like the breath of sea monsters, whirl for a moment and disappear. I lighted a cigarette and tried once more to banish from my mind Throckmartin's face—and unsuccessfully as ever.

Suddenly the deck door opened and through it came Throckmartin himself. He paused uncertainly, looked up at the sky with a curiously eager, intent gaze, hesitated, then closed the door behind him.

"Throckmartin," I called. "Come sit with me. It's Goodwin."

Immediately he made his way to me, sitting beside me with a gasp of relief that I noted curiously. His hand touched mine and gripped it with a tenseness that hurt. His hand was icelike. I puffed up my cigarette and by its glow scanned him closely. He was watching a large swirl of

the mist that was passing before the ship. The phosphorescence beneath it illumined it with a fitful opalescence. I saw fear in his eyes. The swirl passed; he sighed; his grip relaxed and he sank back.

"Throckmartin," I said, wasting no time in preliminaries. "What's wrong? Can I help you?"

He was silent.

"Is your wife all right and what are you doing here when I heard you had gone to the Carolines for a year?" I went on.

I felt his body grow tense again. He did not speak for a moment and then:

"I'm going to Melbourne, Goodwin," he said. "I need a few things—need them urgently. And more men—white men."

His voice was low, preoccupied. It was as though the brain that dictated the words did so perfunctorily, half impatiently; aloof, watching, strained to catch the first hint of approach of something dreaded.

"You are making progress then?" I asked. It was a banal question, put forth in a blind effort to claim his attention.

"Progress?" he repeated. "Progress—"

He stopped abruptly; rose from his chair, gazed intently toward the north. I followed his gaze. Far, far away the moon had broken through the clouds. Almost on the horizon, you could see the faint luminescence of it upon the quiet sea. The distant patch of light quivered and shook. The clouds thickened again and it was gone. The ship raced southward, swiftly.

Throckmartin dropped into his chair. He lighted a cigarette with a hand that trembled. The flash of the match fell on his face and I noted with a queer thrill of apprehension that its unfamiliar expression had deepened; become curiously intensified as though a faint acid had passed over it, etching its lines faintly deeper.

"It's the full moon tonight, isn't it?" he asked, palpably with studied inconsequence.

"The first night of the full moon," I answered. He was silent again. I sat silent too, waiting for him to make up his mind to speak. He turned to me as though he had made a sudden resolution.

"Goodwin," he said. "I do need help. If ever man needed it, I do. Goodwin—can you imagine yourself in another world, alien, unfamiliar, a world of terror, whose unknown joy is its greatest terror of all; you all alone there; a stranger! As such a man would need help, so I need—"

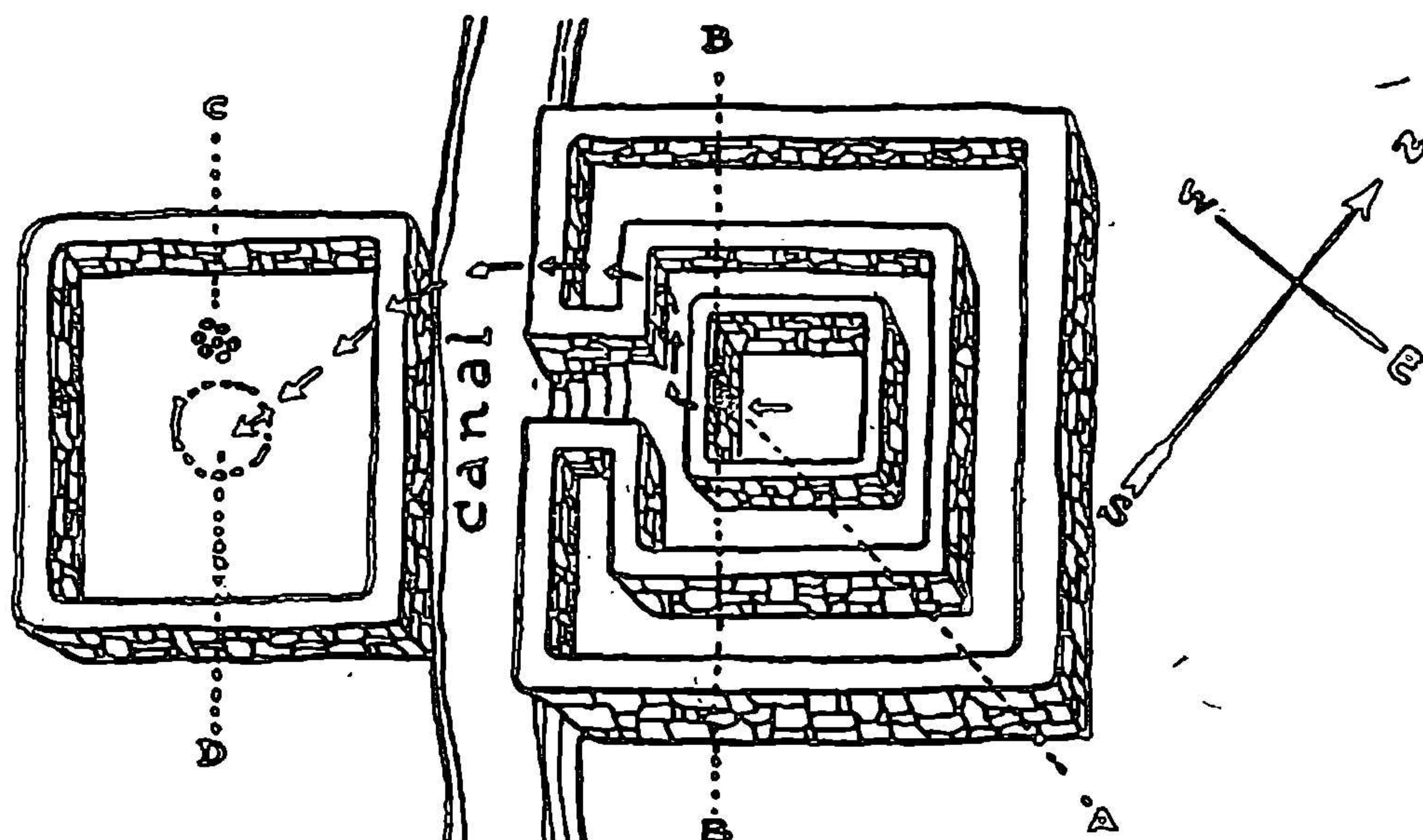
He paused abruptly and arose to his feet stiffly; the cigarette dropped from his fin-

gers. I saw that the moon had again broken through the clouds, and this time much nearer. Now a mile away was the patch of light that it threw upon the waves. Back of it, to the rim of the sea was a lane of moonlight; it was a gigantic serpent racing over the rim of the world straight and surely toward the ship.

Throckmartin gazed at it as though turned to stone. He stiffened to it as a pointer does to a hidden covey. To me from him pulsed a thrill of terror—but terror tinged with an unfamiliar, an infernal joy. It came to me and passed

drawn aside like curtains or as the waters of the Red Sea were held back to let the hosts of Israel through. On each side of the stream was the black shadow cast by the folds of the high canopies. And straight as a road between the opaque walls gleamed, shimmered and danced the shining, racing rapids of the moonlight.

Far, it seemed immeasurably far, along this stream of silver fire I sensed, rather than saw, something coming. It drew into sight as a deeper glow within the light. On and on it sped toward us—an opalescent mistiness that swept on with the sug-



Dr. Throckmartin's sketch of the location of the moon door. The passageways, the probable location of the moon pool deep under Tau Islet, and the conjectured location of the seven lights. A is the moon rock on Nan-Tanach; B B the bosses above it which control its opening; the arrows indicate Dr. Throckmartin's probable course beneath the walls and under the canal. C are the moon lights, and D the cavern of the moon pool on Tau Islet. Proper measurements are not observed in the sketch; the idea being solely to determine position.

away—leaving me trembling with its shock of bitter sweet.

HE BENT forward, all his soul in his eyes. The moon path swept closer, closer still. It was now less than half a mile away. From it the ship fled; almost it came to me, as though pursued. Down upon it, swift and straight, a radiant torrent cleaving the waves, raced the moon stream. And then—

"Good God!" breathed Throckmartin, and if ever the words were a prayer and an invocation, they were.

And then, for the first time—I saw—it!

The moon path, as I have said, stretched to the horizon and was bordered by darkness. It was as though the clouds above had been parted to form a lane—

gestion of some winged creature in darting flight. Dimly there crept into my mind memory of the Dyak legend of the winged messenger of Buddha—the Akla bird whose feathers are woven of the moon rays, whose heart is a living opal, whose wings in flight echo the crystal clear music of the white stars—but whose beak is of frozen flame and shreds the souls of unbelievers. Still it sped on, and now there came to me sweet, insistent tinklings—like a pizzicati on violins of glass, crystalline, as purest, clearest glass transformed to sound. And again the myth of the Akla bird came to me.

But now it was close to the end of the white path; close up to the barrier of darkness still between the ship and the sparkling head of the moon stream. And now it

beat up against that barrier as a bird against the bars of its cage. And I knew that this was no mist born of sea and air. It whirled with shimmering plumes, with swirls of lacy light, with spirals of living vapor. It held within it odd, unfamiliar gleams as of shifting mother-of-pearl. Coruscations and glittering atoms drifted through it as though it drew them from the rays that bathed it.

Nearer and nearer it came, borne on the sparkling waves, and less and less grew the protecting wall of shadow between it and us. The crystalline sounds were louder—rhythmic as music from another planet.

Now I saw that within the mistiness was a core, a nucleus of intenser light—veined, opaline, effulgent, intensely alive. And above it, tangled in the plumes and spirals that throbbed and whirled, were seven glowing lights.

Through all the incessant but strangely ordered movement of the—*thing*—these lights held firm and steady. They were seven—like seven little moons. One was of a pearly pink, one of delicate nacreous blue, one of lambent saffron, one of the emerald you see in the shallow waters of tropic isles; a deathly white; a ghostly amethyst; and one of the silver that is seen only when the flying fish leap beneath the moon. There they shone—these seven little varicolored orbs within the opaline mistiness of whatever it was that, poised and expectant, waited to be drawn to us on the light filled waves.

The tinkling music was louder still. It pierced the ears with a shower of tiny lances; it made the heart beat jubilantly—and checked it dolorously. It closed your throat with a throb of rapture and gripped it tight like the hand of infinite sorrow!

Came to me now a murmuring cry, stilling the crystal clear notes, it was articulate—but as though from something utterly foreign to this world. The ear took the cry and translated it with conscious labor into the sounds of earth. And even as it compassed, the brain shrank from it irresistibly and simultaneously it seemed, reached toward it with irresistible eagerness.

"Av-o-lo-ha! Av-o-lo-ha!" So the cry seemed to throb.

The grip of Throckmartin's hand relaxed. He walked stiffly toward the front of the deck, straight toward the vision, now but a few yards away from the bow. I ran toward him and gripped him—and fell back. For now his face had lost all human

semblance. Utter agony and utter ecstasy—there they were side by side, not resisting each other; unholy inhuman companions blending into a look that none of God's creatures should wear—and deep, deep as his soul! A devil and a God dwelling harmoniously side by side! So must Satan, newly fallen, still divine, seeing heaven and contemplating hell, have looked.

And then—swiftly the moon path faded! The clouds swept over the sky as though a hand had drawn them together. Up from the south came a roaring squall. As the moon vanished, what I had seen vanished with it—blotted out as an image on a magic lantern; the tinkling ceased abruptly—leaving a silence like that which follows an abrupt and stupendous thunder clap. There was nothing about us but silence and blackness!

Through me there passed a great trembling as one who had stood on the very verge of the gulf wherein the men of the Louisades say lurks the fisher of the souls of men, and has been plucked back by sheerest chance.

Throckmartin passed an arm around me. "It is as I thought," he said. In his voice was a new note; of the calm certainty that has swept aside a waiting terror of the unknown. "Now I know! Come with me to my cabin, old friend. For now that you too have seen I can tell you"—he hesitated—"what it was you saw," he ended.

As we passed through the door we came face to face with the ship's first officer. Throckmartin turned quickly, but not soon enough for the mate to see and to stare at him with amazement. His eyes went questioningly to me.

With a strong effort of will Throckmartin composed his face into at least a semblance of normality.

"Are we going to have much of a storm?" he asked.

"Yes," said the mate. Then the seaman, getting the better of his curiosity, added, profanely, "We'll probably have it all the way to Melbourne."

Throckmartin straightened as though with a new thought. He gripped the officer's sleeve eagerly.

"You mean at least cloudy weather—for"—he hesitated—"for the next three nights, say?"

"And for three more," replied the mate.

"Thank God!" cried Throckmartin, and I think I never heard such relief and hope as was in his voice.

The sailor stood amazed. "Thank God?" he repeated. "Thank—what d'ye mean?"

But Throckmartin was moving onward to his cabin. I started to follow. The first officer stopped me.

"Your friend," he said, "is he ill?"

"The sea!" I answered hurriedly. "He's not used to it. I am going to look after him."

I saw doubt and disbelief in the seaman's eyes, but I hurried on. For I knew now that Throckmartin was ill indeed—but that it was not a sickness the ship's doctor nor any other could heal.

THROCKMARTIN was sitting on the side of his berth as I entered. He had taken off his coat. He was leaning over, face in hands.

"Lock the door," he said quietly, not raising his head. "Close the port-holes and draw the curtains—and—have you an electric flash in your pocket—a good, strong one?"

He glanced at the small pocket flash I handed him and clocked it on. "Not big enough I'm afraid," he said. "And after all"—he hesitated—"it's only a theory."

"What's only a theory?" I asked in astonishment.

"Thinking of it as a weapon against—what you saw," he said with a little wry smile.

"Throckmartin," I cried. "What was it? Did I really see—that thing—there in the moon path? Did I really hear—"

"This, for instance," he interrupted.

Softly he whispered: "Av-o-lo-ha!" With the murmur I seemed to hear again the crystalline unearthly music; an echo of it, faint, sinister, mocking, jubilant.

"Throckmartin," I said. "What was it? What are you flying from, man? Where is your wife—and Stanton?"

"Dead!" he said monotonously. "Dead! All dead!" Then as I recoiled in horror—"All dead. Edith, Stanton, Thora—dead—or worse. And Edith in the moon pool—with them—drawn by what you saw on the moon path—and that wants me—and that has put its brand upon me—and pursues me."

With a vicious movement he ripped open his shirt.

"Look at this," he said. I gazed. Around his chest, an inch above his heart, the skin was white as pearl. This whiteness was sharply defined against the healthy tint of the body. He turned and I saw it

ran around his back. It circled him. The band made a perfect cincture about two inches wide.

"Burn it!" he said, and offered me his cigarette. I drew back. He gestured—peremptorily. I pressed the glowing end of the cigarette into the ribbon of white flesh. He did not flinch nor was there odor of burning nor, as I drew the little cylinder away, any mark upon the whiteness.

"Feel it!" he commanded again. I placed my fingers upon the band. It was cold—like frozen marble.

He handed me a small penknife.

"Cut!" he ordered. This time, my scientific interest fully aroused, I did so without reluctance. The blade cut into flesh. I waited for the blood to come. None appeared. I drew out the knife and thrust it in again, fully a quarter of an inch deep. I might have been cutting paper so far as any evidence followed that what I was piercing was human skin and muscle.

Another thought came to me and I drew back, revolted.

"Throckmartin," I whispered. "Not leprosy!"

"Nothing so easy," he said. "Look again and find the places you cut."

I looked, as he bade me, and in the white ring there was not a single mark. Where I had pressed the blade there was no trace. It was as though the skin had parted to make way for the blade and then had quietly closed again.

Throckmartin arose and drew his shirt about him.

"Two things you have seen," he said. "It—and its mark—the seal it placed on me that gives it, I think, the power to follow me. Seeing, you must believe my story. Goodwin, I tell you again that my wife is dead—or worse—I do not know; the prey of—what you saw; so, too, is Stanton; so Thora. How—" He stopped for a moment. Then continued:

"And I am going to Melbourne for the things to empty its den and its shrine; for dynamite to destroy it and its lair—if anything made on earth will destroy it; and for white men with courage to use them. Perhaps—perhaps after you have heard, you will be one of these men?" He looked at me a bit wistfully. "And now—do not interrupt, I beg of you, till I am through—for"—he smiled wanly—"the mate may be wrong. And if he is"—he arose and paced twice about the room—"if he is I may not have time to tell you."

"Throckmartin," I answered, "I have no

closed mind. Tell me—and if I can I will help."

He took my hand and pressed it.

"Goodwin," he began, "if I have seemed to take the death of my wife lightly—or rather"—his face contorted—"or rather—if I have seemed to pass it by as something not of first importance to me—believe me it is not so. If the rope is long enough—if what the mate says is so—if there is cloudy weather until the moon begins to wane—I can conquer—that I know. But if it does not—if the dweller in the moon pool gets me—then must you or someone avenge my wife—and me—and Stanton. Yet I cannot believe that God would let a thing like that conquer! But why did He then let it take my Edith? And why does He allow it to exist? Are there things stronger than God, do you think, Goodwin?"

He turned to me feverishly. I hesitated.

"I do not know just how you define God," I said. "If you mean the will to know, working through science—"

He waved me aside impatiently.

"Science," he said. "What is our science against—that? Or against the science of whatever cursed, vanished race that made it—or made the way for it to enter this world of ours?"

With an effort he regained control of himself.

"Goodwin," he said, "do you know at all of the ruins on the Carolines; the cyclopean, megalithic cities and harbors of Ponape and Lele, of Kusale, of Ruk and Hogolu, and a score of other islets there? Particularly, do you know of the Nan-Matal and Metalanim?"

"Of the Metalanim I have heard and seen photographs," I said. "They call it, don't they, the lost Venice of the Pacific?"

"Look at this map," said Throckmartin. He handed me the map. "That," he went on, "is Christian's map of Metalanim harbor and the Nan-Matal. Do you see the rectangles marked Nan-Tanach?"

"Yes," I said.

"There," he said, "under those walls is the moon pool and the seven gleaming lights that raise the dweller in the pool and the altar and shrine of the dweller. And there in the moon pool with it lie Edith and Stanton and Thora."

"The dweller in the moon pool?" I repeated half-incredulously.

"The thing you saw," said Throckmartin solemnly.

A SOLID sheet of rain swept the ports, and the *Southern Queen* began to roll on the rising swells. Throckmartin drew another deep breath as of relief, and drawing aside a curtain peered out into the night. Its blackness seemed to reassure him. At any rate, when he sat again he was calm.

"There are no more wonderful ruins in the world than those of the island Venice of Metalanim on the east shore of Ponape," he said almost casually. "They take in some fifty islets and cover with their intersecting canals and lagoons about twelve square miles. Who built them? None knows. When were they built? Ages before the memory of present man, that is sure. Ten thousand, twenty thousand, a hundred thousand years ago—the last more likely.

"All these islets, Goodwin, are squared, and their shores are frowning sea-walls of gigantic basalt blocks hewn and put in place by the hands of ancient man. Each inner waterfront is faced with a terrace of those basalt blocks which stand out six feet above the shallow canals that meander between them. On the islets behind these walls are cyclopean and time shattered fortresses, palaces, terraces, pyramids; immense courtyards strewn with ruins—and all so old that they seem to wither the eyes of those who look on them.

"There has been a great subsidence. You can stand out of Metalanim harbor for three miles and look down upon the tops of similar monolithic structures and walls twenty feet below you in the water.

"And all about strung on their canals, are the bulwarked islets with their enigmatic giant walls peering through the dense growths of mangroves—dead, deserted for incalculable ages; shunned by those who live near.

"You as a botanist are familiar with the evidence that a vast shadowy continent existed in the Pacific—a continent that was not rent asunder by volcanic forces as was that legendary one of Atlantis in the Eastern Ocean. My work in Java, in Papua, and in the Ladrões had set my mind upon this Pacific lost land. Just as the Azores are believed to be the last high peaks of Atlantis, so evidence came to me steadily that Ponape and Lele and their basalt bulwarked islets were the last points of the slowly sunken western land clinging still to the sunlight, and had been the last refuge and sacred places of the

rulers of that race which had lost their immemorial home under the rising waters of the Pacific.

"I believed that under these ruins I might find the evidence of what I sought. Time and again I had encountered legends of subterranean networks beneath the Nan-Matal, of passages running back into the main island itself; basalt corridors that followed the lines of the shallow canals and ran under them to islet after islet, linking them in mysterious chains.

"My—my wife and I had talked before we were married of making this our great work. After the honeymoon we prepared for the expedition. It was to be my monument. Stanton was as enthusiastic as ourselves. We sailed, as you know, last May in fulfillment of our dreams.

"At Ponape we selected, not without difficulty, workmen to help us—diggers. I had to make extraordinary inducements before I could get together my force. Their beliefs are gloomy, these Ponapeans. They people their swamps, their forests, their mountains and shores with malignant spirits—*ani* they call them. And they are afraid—bitterly afraid of the isles of ruins and what they think the ruins hide. I do not wonder—now! For their fear has come down to them through the ages, from the people 'before their fathers,' as they call them, who, they say, made these mighty spirits their slaves and messengers.

"When they were told where they were to go, and how long we expected to stay, they murmured. Those who, at last, were tempted made what I thought then merely a superstitious proviso, that they were to be allowed to go away on the three nights of the full moon. Would to God I had heeded them and gone too!"

He stopped and again over his face the lines etched deep.

"We passed," he went on, "into Metalanim harbor. Off to our left—a mile away—arose a massive quadrangle. Its walls were all of forty feet high and hundreds of feet on each side. As we passed it our natives grew very silent; watched it furtively, fearfully. I knew it for the ruins that are called Nan-Tanach, the 'place of frowning walls.' And at the silence of my men I recalled what Christian had written of this place; of how he had come upon its 'ancient platforms and tetragonal enclosures of stone-work; its wonder of tortuous alleyways and labyrinth of shallow canals; grim masses of stone-work peering out from behind verdant screens; cyclopean barricades,' and

of how, when we had turned into its ghostly shadows, straightway the merriment of our guides was hushed and conversation died down to whispers. For we were close to Nan-Tanach—the place of lofty walls, the most remarkable of all the Metalanim ruins." He arose and stood over me.

"Nan-Tanach, Goodwin," he said solemnly— "a place where merriment is hushed indeed and words are stifled. Nan-Tanach—where the moon pool lies hidden—lies hidden behind the moon rock, but sends its diabolic soul out—even through the prisoning stone." He raised clenched hands. "Oh, God," he breathed, "grant me that I may blast it from earth!"

He was silent for a little time.

"Of course I wanted to pitch our camp there," he began again quietly, "but I soon gave up that idea. The natives were panic-stricken—threatened to turn back. 'No,' they said, 'too great *ani* there. We go to any other place—but not there.' Although, even then, I felt that the secret of the place was in Nan-Tanach, I found it necessary to give in. The laborers were essential to the success of the expedition, and I told myself that after a little time had passed and I had persuaded them that there was nothing anywhere that could molest them, we would move our tents to it. We finally picked for our base the islet called Uschen-Tau—you see it here—" He pointed to the map. "It was close to the isle of desire, but far enough away from it to satisfy our men. There was an excellent camping-place there and a spring of fresh water. It offered, besides, an excellent field for preliminary work before attacking the larger ruins. We pitched our tents, and in a couple of days the work was in full swing.

66¶ DO not intend to tell you now,"

¶ Throckmartin continued, "the results of the next two weeks, Goodwin, nor of what we found. Later—if I am allowed, I will lay all that before you. It is sufficient to say that at the end of those two weeks I had found confirmation for many of my theories, and we were well under way to solve a mystery of humanity's youth—so we thought. But enough. I must hurry on to the first stirrings of the inexplicable thing that is in store for us.

"The place, for all its decay and desolation, had not infected us with any touch of morbidity—that is, not Edith, Stanton or myself. My wife was happy—never had she been happier. Stanton and she, while

engrossed in the work as much as I, were of the same age, and they frankly enjoyed the companionship that only youth can give youth. I was glad—never jealous.

"But Thora was very unhappy. She was a Swede, as you know, and in her blood ran the beliefs and superstitions of the Northland—some of them so strangely akin to those of this far southern land; beliefs of spirits of mountain and forest and water—werewolves and beings malign. From the first she showed a curious sensitivity to what, I suppose, may be called the 'influences' of the place. She said it 'smelled' of ghosts and warlocks.

"I laughed at her then—but now I believe this sensitivity of what we call primitive people is perhaps only a clearer perception of the unknown which we, who deny the unknown, had lost. It is a *rap-prochement* toward an acknowledgment of other forces which, no doubt, betrays them to the very forces they sense and fear. It was what made Thora first to feel—what was to happen. A prey to these fears, she followed my wife about like a shadow; carried with her always a little sharp hand-ax, and although we twitted her about the futility of chopping fantoms with such a weapon she would not relinquish it.

"Two weeks slipped by, and at their end the spokesman for our natives came to us. The next night was the full of the moon, he said. He reminded me of my promise. They would go back to their village next morning; they would return after the third night, as at that time the power of the *ani* would begin to wane with the moon. They left us sundry charms for our 'protection', and solemnly cautioned us to keep as far away as possible from Nan-Tanach during their absence—although their leader politely informed us that, no doubt, we were stronger than the spirits. Half-exasperated, half-amused, I watched them go.

"No work could be done without them, of course, so we decided to spend the days of their absence junketing about the southern islets of the group. Under the moon the ruins were inexpressibly weird and beautiful. We marked down several spots for subsequent exploration, and on the morning of the third day set forth along the east face of the breakwater for our camp on Uschen-Tau, planning to have everything in readiness for the return of our men the next day.

"We landed just before dusk, tired and

ready for our cots. It was only a little after ten o'clock that Edith awakened me.

"'Listen!' she said. 'Lean over with your ear close to the ground!' I did so, and seemed to hear, far, far below, as though coming up from great distances, a faint chanting. It gathered strength, died down, ended; began, gathered volume, faded away into silence.

"'It's the waves rolling on rocks somewhere,' I said. 'We're probably over some ledge of rock that carries the sound.'

"'It's the first time I've heard it,' replied my wife doubtfully. We listened again. Then through the dim rhythms, deep beneath us, another sound came. It drifted across the lagoon that lay between us and Nan-Tanach in little tinkling waves. It was music—of a sort; I won't describe the strange effect it had upon me. You've felt it—"

"You mean on the deck?" I asked. Throckmartin nodded.

"I went to the flap of the tent," he continued, "and peered out. As I did so Stanton lifted his flap and walked out into the moonlight, looking over to the other islet and listening. I called to him.

"'That's the queerest sound!' he said. He listened again. 'Crystalline! Like little notes of translucent glass. Like the bells of crystal on the sistrums of Isis at Dendarah Temple,' he added half-dreamily. We gazed intently at the island. Suddenly, on the gigantic sea-wall, moving slowly, rhythmically, we saw a little group of lights. Stanton laughed.

"'The beggars!' he exclaimed. 'That's why they wanted to get away, is it? Don't you see, Dave, it's some sort of festival—rites of some kind that they hold during the full moon! That's why they were so eager to have us keep away, too.'

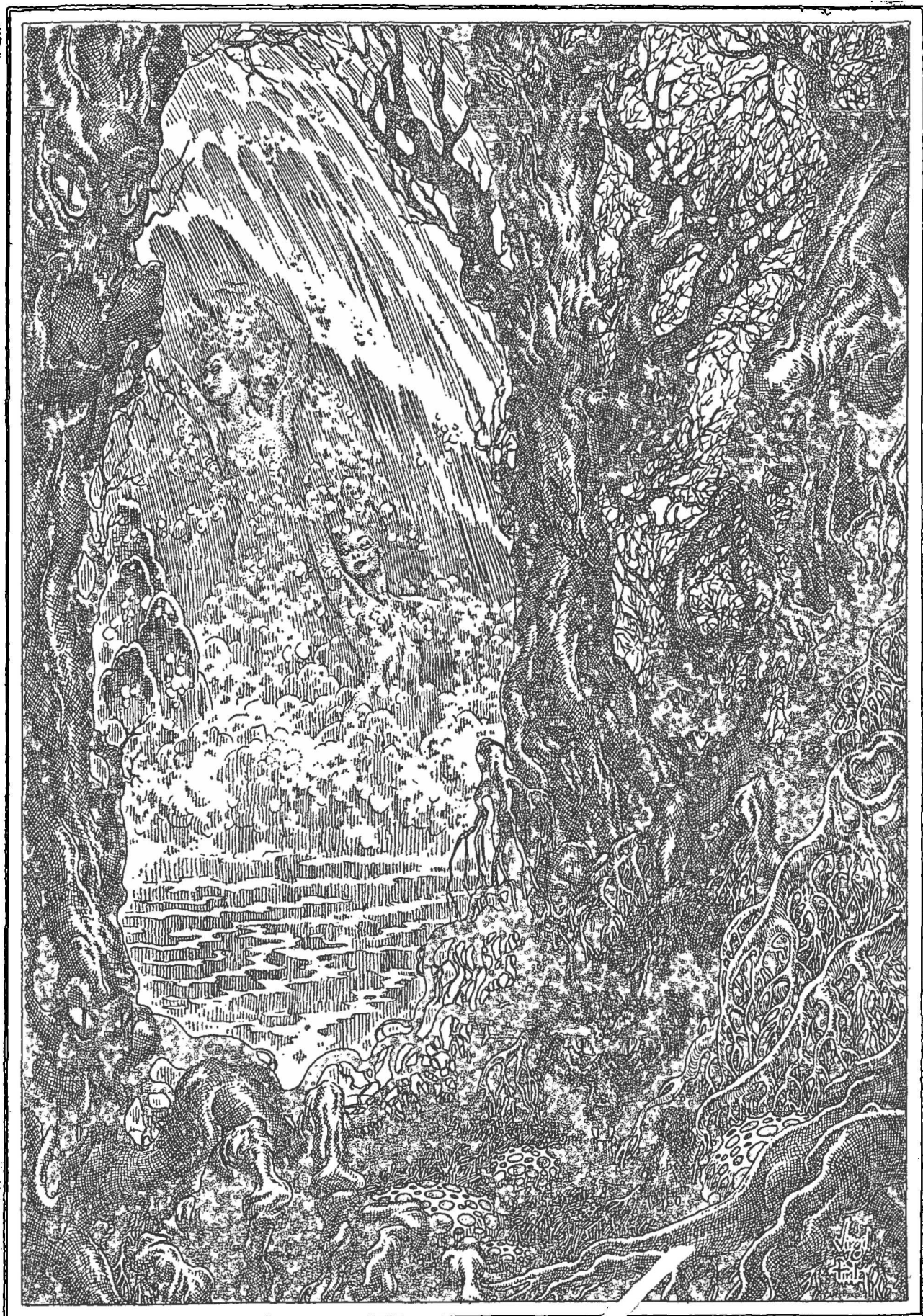
"I felt a curious sense of relief, although I had not been sensible of any oppression. The explanation seemed good. It explained the tinkling music and also the chanting—worshipers, no doubt, in the ruins—their voices carried along passages I now knew honeycombed the whole Nan-Matal.

"'Let's slip over,' suggested Stanton—but I would not.

"'They're a difficult lot as it is,' I said. 'If we break into one of their religious ceremonies they'll probably never forgive us. Let's keep out of any family party where we haven't been invited.'

"'That's so,' agreed Stanton.

"The strange tinkling music, if music it can be called, rose and fell, rose and fell



In her blood, ran the beliefs and superstitions of the Northland . . . beliefs of spirits of mountain and forest and water . . . werewolves and spirits malign.

—now laden with sorrow, now filled with joy.

"There's something—something very unsettling about it," said Edith at last soberly. "I wonder what they make those sounds with. They frighten me half to death, and, at the same time, they make me feel as though some enormous rapture was just around the corner."

"I had noted this effect, too, although I had said nothing of it. And at the same time there came to me a clear perception that the chanting which had preceded it had seemed to come from a vast multitude—thousands more than the place we were contemplating could possibly have held. Of course, I thought, this might be due to some acoustic property of the basalt; an amplification of sound by some gigantic sounding-board of rock; still—

"It's devilish uncanny!" broke in Stanton, answering my thought.

"And as he spoke the flap of Thora's tent was raised and out into the moonlight strode the old Swede. She was the great Norse type—tall, deep-breasted, molded on the old Viking lines. Her sixty years had slipped from her. She looked like some ancient princess of Odin." He hesitated. "She knew," he said slowly. "Something more far-seeing than my science had given her sight. She warned me—she warned me! Fools and mad that we are to pass such things by without heed!" He brushed a hand over his eyes.

"She stood there," he went on. "Her eyes were wide, brilliant, staring. She thrust her head forward toward Nan-Tanach, regard—the moving lights;—she listened. Suddenly she raised her arms and made a curious gesture to the moon. It was—an archaic—movement; she seemed to drag it from remote antiquity—yet in it was a strange suggestion of power. Twice she repeated this gesture and—the tinklings died away! She waited a moment longer and then turned to us.

"Go!" she said, and her voice seemed to come from far distances. "Go from here—and quickly! Go while you may. They have called—" She pointed to the islet. "They know you are here. They wait." Her eyes widened further. "It is there," she wailed. "It beckons—the—the—"

"She fell at Edith's feet, and as she fell over the lagoon came again the tinklings, now with a quicker note of jubilation—almost of triumph.

"We ran to Thora, Stanton and I, and picked her up. Her head rolled and her

face, eyes closed, turned as though drawn full into the moonlight. I felt in my heart a throb of unfamiliar fear—for her face had changed again. Stamped upon it was a look of mingled transport and horror—alien, terrifying, strangely revolting. It was"—he thrust his face close to my eyes—"what you see in mine!"

For a dozen heart-beats I stared at him, fascinated; then he sank back again into the half-shadow of the berth.

"I MANAGED to hide her face from Edith," he went on. "I thought she had suffered some sort of a nervous seizure. We carried her into her tent. Once within, the unholy mask dropped from her, and she was again only the kindly, rugged old woman. I watched her throughout the night. The sounds from Nan-Tanach continued until about an hour before moonset. In the morning Thora awoke, none the worse, apparently. She had had bad dreams, she said. She could not remember what they were—except that they had warned her of danger. She was oddly sullen, and I noted that throughout the morning her gaze returned again half-fascinatedly, half-wonderingly to the neighboring isles.

"That afternoon the natives returned. They were so exuberant in their apparent relief to find us well and intact that Stanton's suspicions of them were confirmed. He slyly told their leader that 'from the noise they had made on Nan-Tanach the night before they must have thoroughly enjoyed themselves.'

"I think I never saw such stark-terror as the Ponapean manifested at the remark! Stanton himself was so plainly startled that he tried to pass it over as a jest. He met poor success! The men seemed panic-stricken, and for a time I thought they were about to abandon us—but they did not. They pitched their camp at the western side of the island—out of sight of Nan-Tanach. I noticed that they built large fires, and whenever I awoke that night I heard their voices in slow, minor chant—one of their song 'charms,' I thought drowsily, against evil *ani*. I heard nothing else; the place of frowning walls was wrapped in silence—no lights showed. The next morning the men were quiet, a little depressed, but as the hours wore on they regained their spirits, and soon life at the camp was going on just as it had before.

"You will understand, Goodwin, how the

occurrences I have related would excite the scientific curiosity. We rejected immediately, of course, any explanation admitting the supernatural. Why not? Except the curiously disquieting effects of the tinkling music and Thora's behavior there was nothing to warrant any such fantastic theories—even if our minds had been the kind to harbor them.

"Our—symptoms let me call them—could all very easily be accounted for. It is unquestionable that the vibrations created by certain musical instruments have definite and sometimes extraordinary effect upon the nervous system. We accepted this as the explanation of the reactions we had experienced in hearing the unfamiliar sounds. Thora's nervousness, her superstitious apprehensions, had wrought her up to a condition of semisomnambulistic hysteria. Science would readily explain her part in the night's scene.

"We came to the conclusion that there must be a passageway between Ponape and Nan-Tanach, known to the natives—and used by them during their rites. Ceremonies were probably held in great vaults or caverns beneath the ruins—for certainly a race which could have cut a set into place the enormous basalt blocks that formed them would have had little difficulty in hollowing out caverns, even had none existed before. Evidence of such subterranean passages we had already discovered. We decided at last that on the next departure of our laborers we would set forth immediately to Nan-Tanach. We would investigate during the day, and at evening my wife and Thora would go back to camp, leaving Stanton and me to spend the night on the island, observing from some safe hiding-place what might occur.

"The moon waned; appeared to crescent in the west; waxed slowly towards the full. Before the men left us they literally prayed us to accompany them. Their importunities only made us more eager to see what it was that, we were now convinced, they wanted to conceal from us. At least that was true of Stanton and myself. It was not true of Edith. She was thoughtful, abstracted—reluctant. Thora, on the other hand, showed an unusual restlessness, almost an eagerness to go. Goodwin"—he paused—"Goodwin, I know now that the poison was working in Thora—and that women have perceptions that we men lack—forebodings, sensings. Would to God I had known it then—Edith!" he cried suddenly. "Edith—come back to me! Forgive me!"

I stretched the decanter out to him. He drank deeply. Soon he had regained control of himself.

"When the men were out of sight around the turn of the harbor," he went on, "we took our boat and made straight for Nan-Tanach. Soon its mighty sea-wall towered above us. We passed through the water-gate with its gigantic hewn prisms of basalt and landed beside a half-submerged pier. In front of us stretched a series of giant steps leading into a vast court strewn with fragments of fallen pillars. In the center of the court, beyond the shattered pillars, rose another terrace of basalt blocks, concealing, I knew, still another enclosure.

"And now, Goodwin, for the better understanding of what follows and to guide you, should I—not be able—to accompany you when you go there, listen carefully to my description of this place: Nan-Tanach is literally three rectangles. The first rectangle is the sea-wall, built up of monoliths—hewn and squared, twenty feet wide at the top. To get to the gateway in the sea-wall you pass along the canal marked on the map between Nan-Tanach and the islet named Tau. The entrance to the canal is hidden by dense thickets of mangroves; once through these the way is clear. The gigantic steps lead up from the landing of the sea-gate through the entrance to the courtyard.

"This courtyard is surrounded by another basalt wall, rectangular, following with mathematical exactness the march of the outer barricades. The sea-wall is from thirty to forty feet high—originally it must have been much higher, but there has been subsidence in parts. The wall of the first enclosure is fifteen feet across the top and its height varies from twenty to fifty feet—here, too, the gradual sinking of the land has caused portions of it to fall.

"Between the terrace of this enclosure and the sea-wall is, on each side, a considerable space. It is covered with little thickets of fern, of eucalyptus, shrubs; hibiscus vines run riot, covering the fragments with their flowers.

"Within this courtyard is the second enclosure. Its terrace, of the same basalt as the outer walls, is about twenty feet high. Entrance is gained to it by many breaches which time has made in its stonework. This is the inner court, the heart of Nan-Tanach! There lies the great central vault with which is associated the one name of living being that has come to us out of the

mists of the past. The natives say it was the treasure-house of Chau-te-leur, a mighty king who reigned long 'before their fathers.' As Chau is the ancient Ponapean word both for sun and king, the name means, without doubt, 'place of the sun king.' It is a memory of a dynastic name of the race that ruled the Pacific continent, now vanished—just as the rulers of ancient Crete took the name of Minos and the rulers of Egypt the name of Pharaoh.

"And opposite this place of the sun king is the moon rock that hides the moon pool.

IT WAS Stanton who first found what I call the moon rock. We had been inspecting the inner courtyard; Edith and Thora were getting together our lunch. I forgot to say that we had previously gone all over the islet and had found not a trace of living thing. I came out of the vault of Chau-te-leur to find Stanton before a part of the terrace studying it wonderingly.

"What do you make of this?" he asked me as I came up. He pointed to the wall. I followed his finger and saw a slab of stone about fifteen feet high and ten wide. At first all I noticed was the exquisite nicety with which its edges joined the blocks about it. Then I realized that its color was subtly different—tinged with gray and of a smooth, peculiar—deadness.

"Looks more like calcite than basalt," I said. I touched it and withdrew my hand quickly, for at the contact every nerve in my arm tingled as though a shock of frozen electricity had passed through it. It was not as cold as we know cold that I felt. It was a chill force—the phrase I have used—frozen electricity—describes it better than anything else. Stanton looked at me oddly.

"So you felt it too," he said. "I was wondering whether I was developing hallucinations like Thora. Notice, by the way, that the blocks beside it are quite warm beneath the sun."

"I felt them and touched the grayish stone again. The same faint shock ran through my hand—a tingling chill that had in it a suggestion of substance, of force. We examined the slab more closely. Its edges were cut as though by an engraver of jewels. They fitted against the neighboring blocks in almost a hair-line. Its base, we saw, was slightly curved, and fitted as closely as top and sides upon the huge stones on which it rested. And then we noted that these stones had been hol-

lowed along the line of the gray stone's foot.

"There was a semi-circular depression running from one side of the slab to the other. It was as though the gray rock stood in the center of a shallow cup—revealing half, covering half. Something about this hollow attracted me. I reached down and felt it. Goodwin, although the balance of the stones that formed it, like all the stones of the courtyard, were rough and age-worn—this was as smooth, as even surfaced as though it had just left the hands of the polisher.

"It's a door!" exclaimed Stanton. "It swings around in that little cup. That's what makes the hollow of the cup so smooth."

"Maybe you're right," I replied. "But how the devil can we open it?"

"We went over the slab again—pressing upon its edges, thrusting against its sides. During one of these efforts I happened to look up—and cried out. For a foot above and on each side of the corner of the gray rock's lintel I had seen a slight convexity, visible only from the angle at which my gaze struck it. These bosses on the basalt were circular, eighteen inches in diameter, as we learned later, and at the center extended two inches only beyond the face of the terrace. Unless one looked directly up at them while leaning against the moon rock—for this slab, Goodwin, is the moon rock—they were invisible. And none would dare stand there!

"We carried with us a small scaling-ladder, and up this I went. The bosses were apparently nothing more than chiseled curvatures in the stone. I laid my hand on the one I was examining, and drew it back so sharply I almost threw myself from the ladder. In my palm, at the base of my thumb, I had felt the same shock—that I had in touching the slab below. I put my hand back. The impression came from a spot not more than an inch wide. I went carefully over the entire convexity, and six times more the chill ran through my arm. There were, Goodwin, seven circles an inch wide in the curved place, each of which communicated the precise sensation I have described. The convexity on the opposite side of the slab gave precisely the same results. But no amount of touching or of pressing these spots singly or in any combination gave the slightest promise of motion to the slab itself.

"And yet—they're what open it," said Stanton positively.

"'Why do you say that?' I asked.

"'I—don't know,' he answered hesitatingly. 'But something tells me so, Throck,' he went on half earnestly, half laughingly, 'the purely scientific part of me is fighting the purely human part of me. The scientific part is urging me to find some way to get that slab either down or open. The human part is just as strongly urging me to do nothing of the sort and get away while I can!'

"He laughed again—a little shamefacedly.

"'Which will it be?' he asked—and I thought that in his stone the human side of him was ascendent.

"'It will probably stay as it is—unless we blow it to bits,' I said.

"'I thought of that,' he answered, 'and—I wouldn't dare,' he added soberly enough. And even as I had spoken there came to me the same feeling that he had expressed. It was as though something passed out of the gray rock that struck my heart as a hand strikes an impious lip. We turned away—uneasily, and faced Thora, who was coming through a breach in the terrace.

"'Miss Edith wants you quick,' she began—and stopped. I saw her eyes go past me and widen. She was looking at the gray rock.

"Her body grew suddenly rigid; she took a few stiff steps forward and then ran straight to it. We saw her cast herself upon its breast, hands and face pressed against it; heard her scream as though her very soul were being drawn from her—and watched her fall at its foot. As we picked her up I saw steal from face the look I had observed when first we heard the crystal music of Nan-Tanach—that unhuman and weird mingling of opposites!

CHAPTER III

INTO THE MOON POOL

"WE CARRIED Thora back, down to where Edith was waiting. We told her what had happened and what we had found. She listened gravely, and as we finished Thora sighed and opened her eyes.

"'I would like to see the stone,' she said. 'Charles, you stay here with Thora.' We passed through the outer court silently—and stood before the rock. She touched it, drew back her hand as I had; thrust it forward again resolutely and held it there. She seemed to be listening. Then she turned to me.

"'David,' said my wife; and the wistfulness in her voice hurt me—'David, would you be very, very disappointed if we went from here—without trying to find out any more about it—would you?'

"Goodwin, I never wanted anything so much in my life as I wanted to learn what that rock concealed. You will understand—the cumulative curiosity that all the happenings had caused; the certainty that before me was an entrance to a place that, while known to the natives—for I still clung to that theory—was utterly unknown to any man of my race; that within, ready for my finding, was the answer to the stupendous riddle of these islands and a lost chapter of the history of humanity. There before me—and was I asked to turn away, leaving it unread!

"Nevertheless, I tried to master my desire, and I answered—'Edith, not a bit if you want us to do it.'

"She read my struggle in my eyes. She looked at me searchingly for a moment and then turned back toward the gray rock. I saw a shiver pass through her. I



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felt a tinge of remorse and then of pity!

"'Edith,' I exclaimed, 'we'll go!'

"She looked at me again. 'Science is a jealous mistress,' she quoted. 'No, after all it may be just fancy. At any rate, you can't run away. No! But, Dave, I'm going to stay too!'

"'You are not!' I exclaimed. 'You're going back to the camp with Thora. Stanton and I will be all right.'

"'I'm going to stay,' she repeated. And there was no changing her decision. As we neared the others she laid a hand on my arm.

"'Dave,' she said, 'if there should be something—well—inexplicable tonight—something that seems—too dangerous—will you promise to go back to our own islet tomorrow, or, while we can, and wait until the natives return?'

"I promised eagerly—for the desire to stay and see what came with the night was like a fire within me.

"And would to God that I had not waited another moment, Goodwin; would to God that I had gathered them all together then and sailed back on the instant through the mangroves to Uschen-Tau!

"We found Thora on her feet again and singularly composed. She claimed to have no more recollection of what had happened after she had spoken to Stanton and to me in front of the gray rock than she had after the seizure on Uschen-Tau. She grew sullen under our questioning, precisely as she had before. But to my astonishment, when she heard of our arrangements for the night, she betrayed a febrile excitement that had in it something of exultance.

"We had picked a place about five hundred feet away from the steps leading into the outer court. I would have preferred going into the inner enclosure, but I feared for Edith. Besides, it was better to go slowly until we knew what was opposed to us. And there was no place in the heart of the ruins where we could hide—except in the vault, and none of us liked to think of that. The spot we had selected was well hidden. We could not be seen, and yet we had a clear view of the stairs and the gateway. We settled down just before dusk to wait for whatever might come. I was nearest the giant steps; next me Edith; then Thora, and last Stanton. Each of us had with us automatic pistols, and all, except Thora, had rifles.

"Night fell. After a time the eastern sky began to lighten, and we knew that the

moon was rising; grew lighter still, and the orb peeped over the sea; swam suddenly into full sight. Edith gripped my hand, for, as though the full emergence into the heavens had been a signal, we heard begin beneath us the deep chanting. It came from illimitable depths.

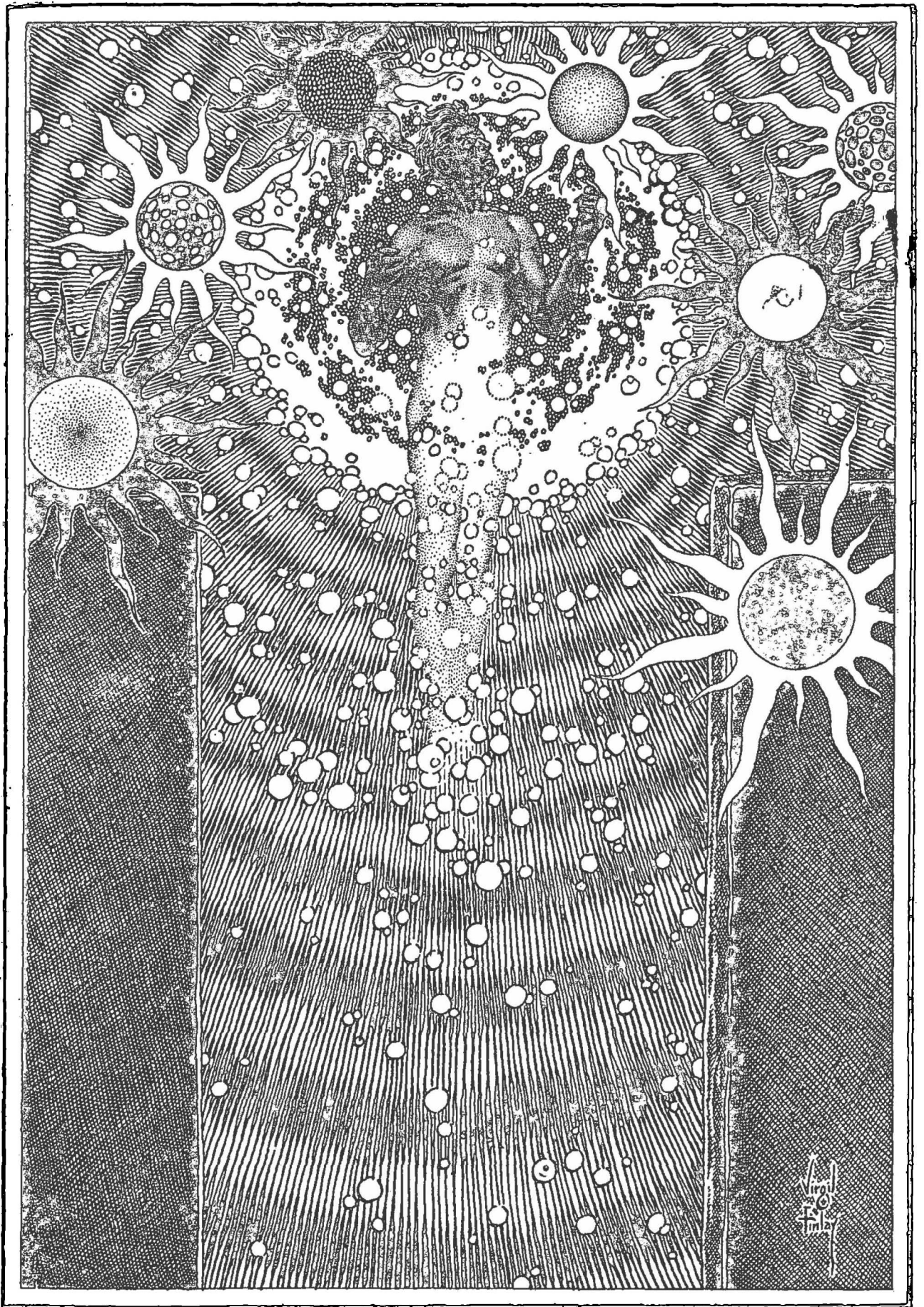
"The moon poured her rays down upon us, and I saw Stanton start. On the instant I caught the sound that had roused him. It came from the inner enclosure. It was like a long, soft sighing. It was not human; seemed in some way—mechanical. I glanced at Edith and then at Thora. My wife was intently listening. Thora sat, as she had since we had placed ourselves, elbows on knees, her hands covering her face.

"And then suddenly from the moonlight flooding us there came to me a great drowsiness. Sleep seemed to drip from the rays and fall upon my eyes, closing them—closing them inexorably. I felt Edith's hand relax in mine, and under my own heavy lids saw her nodding. I saw Stanton's head fall upon his breast and his body sway drunkenly. I tried to rise—to fight against the profound desire for slumber that pressed in on me.

"And as I fought I saw Thora raise her head as though listening; saw her rise and turn her face toward the gateway. For a moment she gazed, and my drugged eyes seemed to perceive within it a deeper, stronger radiance. Thora looked at us. There was infinite despair in her face—and expectancy. I tried again to rise—and a surge of sleep rushed over me. Dimly, as I sank within it, I heard a crystalline chiming; raised my lids once more with a supreme effort, saw Thora, bathed in light, standing at the top of the stairs, and then—sleep took me for its very own—swept me into the very heart of oblivion!

“DAWN was breaking when I awakened. Recollection rushed back on me and I thrust a panic-stricken hand out toward Edith; touched her and felt my heart give a great leap of thankfulness. She stirred, sat up, rubbing dazed eyes. I glanced toward Stanton. He lay on his side, back toward us, head in arms.

"Edith looked at me laughingly. 'Heavens! What sleep!' she said. Memory came to her. Her face paled. 'What happened?' she whispered. 'What made us sleep like that?' She looked over to Stanton, sprang to her feet, ran to him, shook him. He turned over with a mighty yawn, and I saw



Stanton's whole body pulsed with light . . . seemed to be lifted . . . levitated up the unscalable wall. . . .

relief lighten her face as it had lightened my heart.

"Stanton raised himself stiffly. He looked at us. 'What's the matter?' he exclaimed. 'You look as though you've seen ghosts!'

"Edith caught my hands. 'Where's Thora?' she cried. Before I could answer she ran out into the open calling, 'Thora! Thora!'

"Stanton stared at me. 'Taken!' was all I could say. Together we went to my wife, now standing beside the great stone steps, looking up fearfully at the gateway into the terraces. There I told them what I had seen before sleep had drowned me. And together then we ran up the stairs, through the court and up the gray rock.

"The gray rock was closed as it had been the day before, nor was there trace of its having opened. No trace! Even as I thought this Edith dropped to her knees before it and reached toward something lying at its foot. It was a little piece of gay silk. I knew it for part of the kerchief Thora wore about her hair. She lifted the fragment; hesitated. I saw then that it had been *cut* from the kerchief as though by a razor-edge; I saw, too, that a few threads ran from it—down toward the base of the slab; ran to the base of the gray rock and—under it! The gray rock was a door! And it had opened and Thora had passed through it!

"I think, Goodwin, that for the next few minutes we were all a little insane. We beat upon that diabolic entrance with our hands, with stones and clubs. At last reason came back to us. Stanton set forth for the camp to bring back blasting powder and tools. While he was gone Edith and I searched the whole islet for any other clue. We found not a trace of Thora nor any indication of any living being save ourselves. We went back to the gateway to find Stanton returned.

"Goodwin, during the next two hours we tried every way in our power to force entrance through the slab. The rock within effective blasting radius of the cursed door resisted our drills. We tried explosions at the base of the slab with charges covered by rock. They made not the slightest impression on the surface beneath, expending their force, of course, upon the slighter resistance of their coverings.

"Afternoon found us hopeless, so far as breaking through the rock was concerned. Night was coming on and before it came we would have to decide our course of action. I wanted to go to Ponape for help.

But Edith objected that this would take hours and after we had reached there it would be impossible to persuade our men to return with us that night, if at all. What then was left? Clearly only one of two choices: to go back to our camp and wait for our men to return and on their return try to persuade them to go with us to Nan-Tanach. But this would mean the abandonment of Thora for at least two days. We could not do it; it would have been too cowardly.

"The other choice was to wait where we were for night to come; to wait for the rock to open as it had the night before, and to make a sortie through it for Thora before it could close again. With the sun had come confidence; at least a shattering of the mephitic mists of superstition with which the strangeness of the things that had befallen us had clouded for a time our minds. In that brilliant light there seemed no place for fancies.

"The evidence that the slab had opened was unmistakable, but might not Thora simply have *found* it open through some mechanism, still working after ages, and dependent for its action upon laws of physics unknown to us upon the full light of the moon? The assertion of the natives that the *ani* had greatest power at this time might be a far-flung reflection of knowledge which had found ways to use forces contained in moonlight, as we have found ways to utilize the forces in the sun's rays. If so, Thora was probably behind the slab, sending out prayers to us for help.

"But how explain the sleep that had descended upon us? Might it not have been some emanation from plants or gaseous emanations from the island itself? Such things were far from uncommon, we agreed. In some way the period of their greatest activity might coincide with the period of the moon, but if this were so why had not Thora also slept?

"There, indeed, we faced an impasse. It might be, of course, that Thora had been resistant to such emanations, as certain of us are resistant and immune from various bacteria. It was possible. And it might still be that our first theory was correct and that Nan-Tanach was a sacred place; a gathering point for priests possessing fragments of the ancient secrets, vanished knowledge, and they resented intruders. We knew the command certain primitive folk have of sleep sounds and vapors. It might be that here was the explanation.

"But whatever the truth, our path lay clear before us. We had to spend that night on Nan-Tanach!

AS DUSK fell we looked over our weapons. Edith was an excellent shot with both rifle and pistol. With the idea that the impulse toward sleep was the result either of emanations such as I have described or man made, we constructed rough-and-ready but effective neutralizers, which we placed over our mouths and nostrils. We had decided that my wife was to remain in the hiding-place. Stanton would take up a station on the far side of the stairway and I would place myself opposite him on the side near Edith. The place I picked out was less than five hundred feet from her, and I could reassure myself now, as to her safety, as it looked down upon the hollow wherein she crouched. As the phenomena had previously synchronized with the rising of the moon, we had no reason to think they would occur any earlier this night. From our respective stations Stanton and I could command the gateway entrance. His position gave him also a glimpse of the outer courtyard.

"A faint glow in the sky heralded the moon. I kissed Edith, and Stanton and I took our places. The moon dawn increased rapidly; the disk swam up, and in a moment it seemed was shining in full radiance upon ruins and sea.

"As it rose there came as on the night before the curious little sighing sound from the inner terrace. I saw Stanton straighten up and stare intently through the gateway, rifle ready. Even at the distance he was from me, I discerned amazement in his eyes. The moonlight within the gateway thickened, grew stronger.

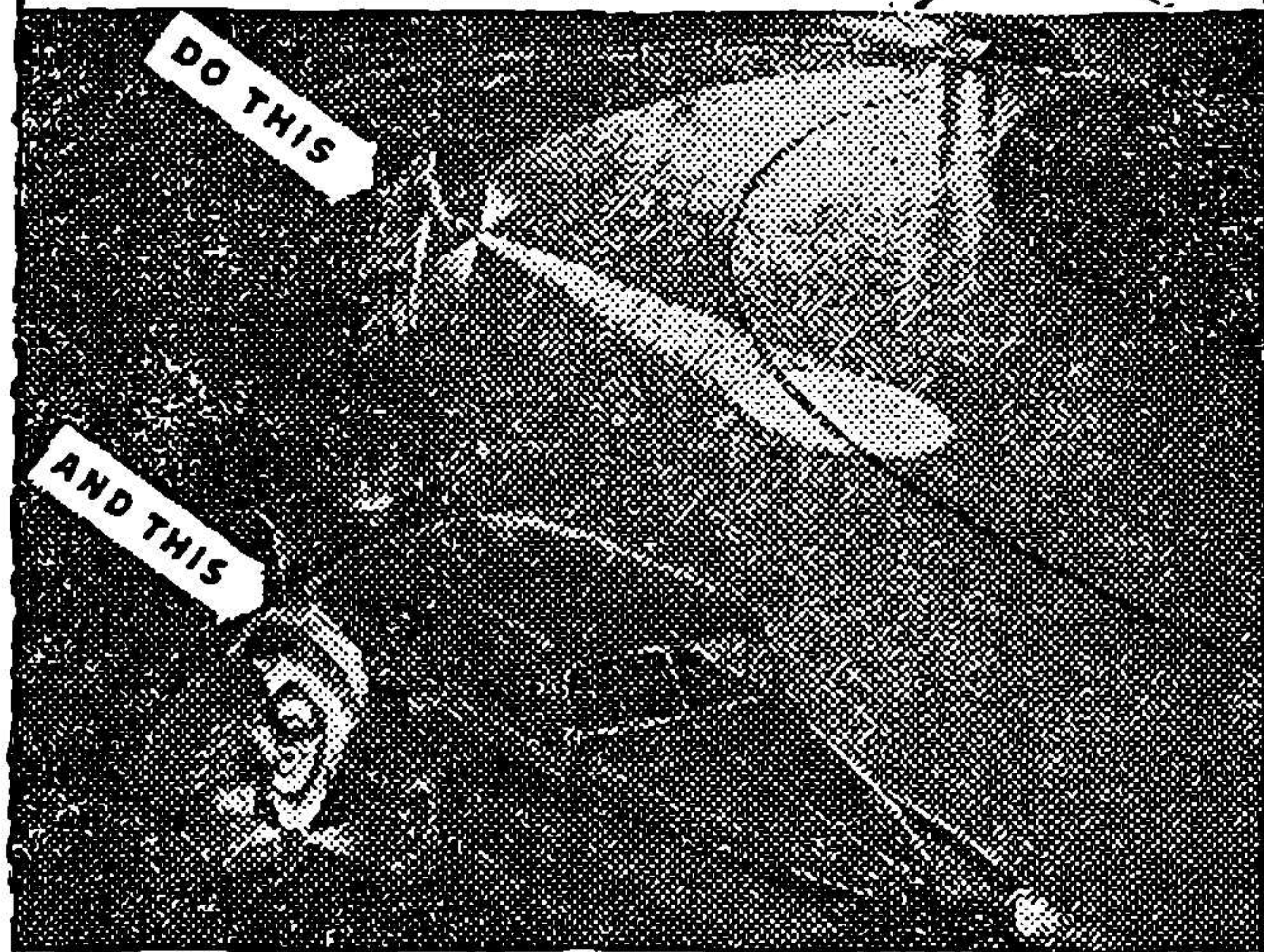
"I watched his amazement grow into sheer wonder.

"I arose.

"Stanton, what do you see?" I called cautiously. He waved a silencing hand. I turned my head to look at Edith. A shock ran through me. She lay upon her side. Her face was turned full toward the moon. She was in deepest sleep!

"As I turned again to call to Stanton, my eyes swept the head of the steps and stopped, fascinated. For the moonlight had thickened more. It seemed to be—curdled—there; and through it ran little gleams and veins of shimmering white fire. A languor passed through me. It was not the ineffable drowsiness of the preceding night.

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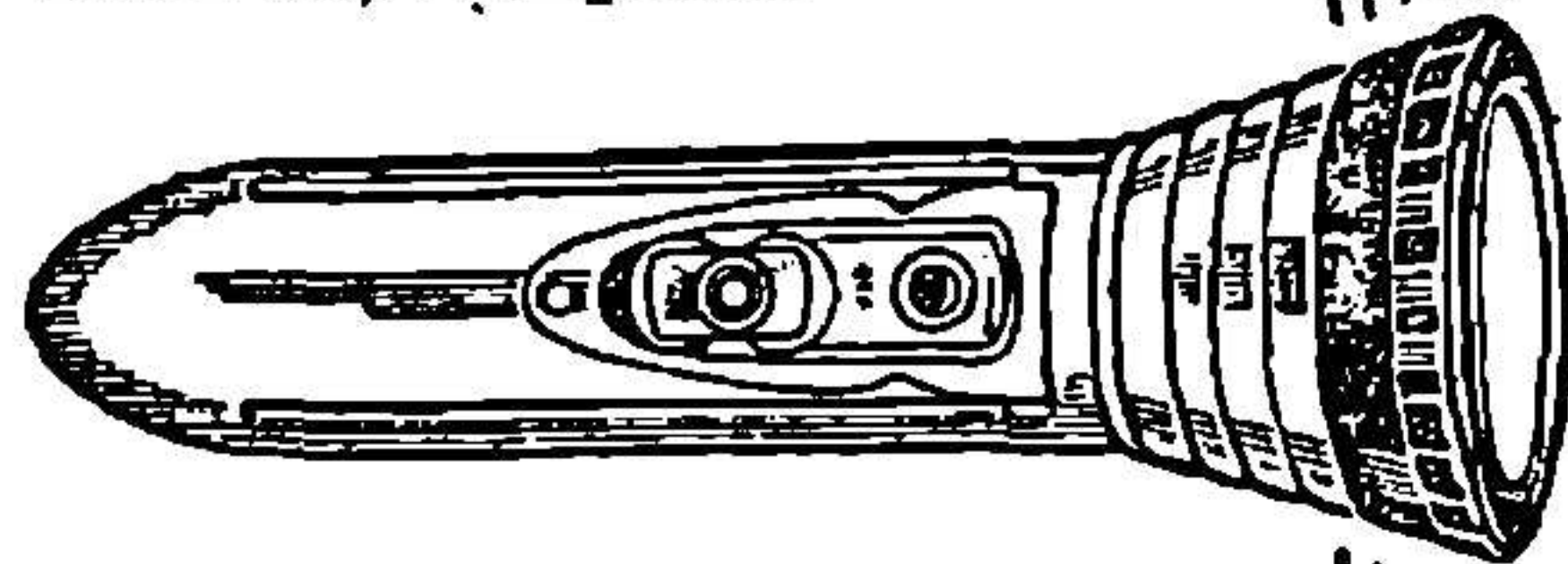
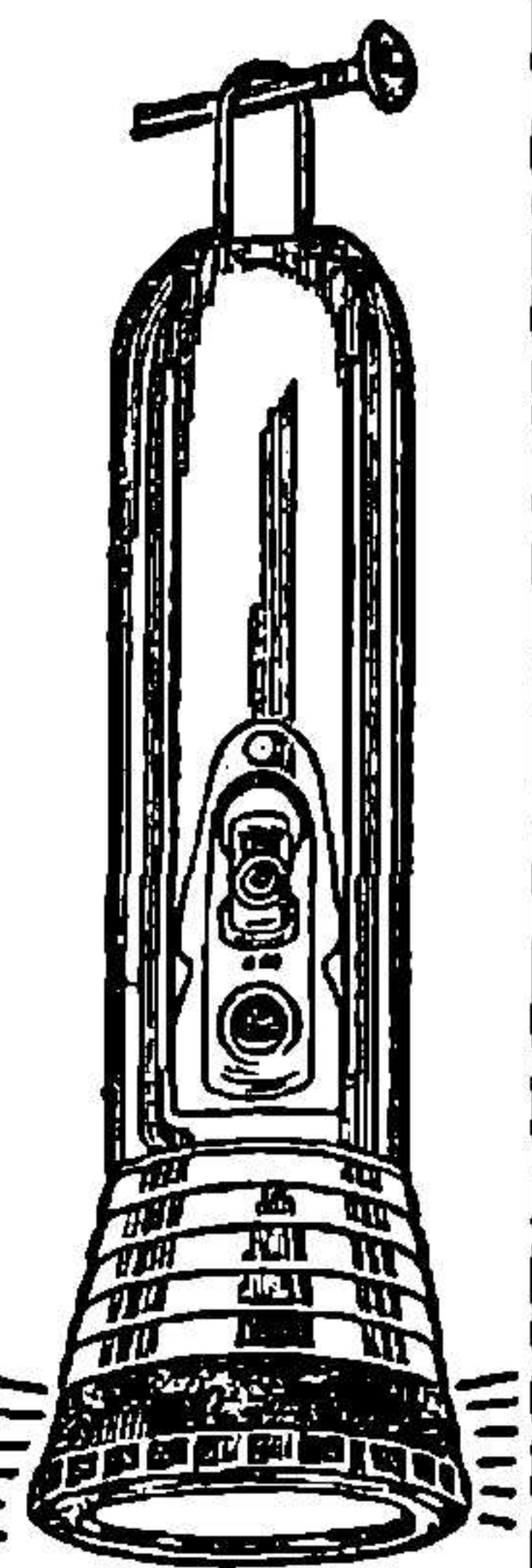
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It was a sapping of all will to move. I tore my eyes away and forced them upon Stanton. I tried to call out to him. I had not the will to make my lips move! I had struggled against this paralysis and as I did so I felt through me a sharp shock. It was like a blow. And with it came utter inability to make a single motion. Goodwin, I could not even move my eyes!

"I saw Stanton leap upon the steps and move toward the gateway. As he did so the light in the courtyard grew dazzlingly brilliant. Through it rained tiny tinklings that set the heart to racing with pure joy and stilled it with terror.

"And now for the first time I heard that cry '*Av-o-lo-ha! Av-o-lo-ha!*' the cry you heard on deck. It murmured with the strange effect of a sound only partly in our own space—as though it were a part of a fuller phrase passing through from another dimension and losing much as it came; infinitely caressing, infinitely cruel!

"On Stanton's face I saw come the look I dreaded—and yet knew would appear; that mingled expression of delight and fear. The two lay side by side as they had on Thora, but were intensified. He walked on up the stairs; disappeared beyond the range of my fixed gaze. Again I heard the murmur—'*Av-o-lo-ha!*' There was triumph in it now and triumph in the storm of tinklings that swept over it.

"For another heart-beat there was silence. Then a louder burst of sound and ringing through it Stanton's voice from the courtyard—a great cry—a scream—filled with ecstasy insupportable and horror unimaginable! And again there was silence. I strove to burst the invisible bonds that held me. I could not. Even my eyelids were fixed. Within them my eyes burned.

"Then, Goodwin—I first saw the inexplicable! The crystalline music swelled. Where I sat I could take in the gateway and its basalt portals, rough and broken, rising to the top of the wall forty feet above, shattered, ruined portals—unclimbable. From this gateway an intenser light began to flow. It grew, it gushed, and into it, into my sight, walked Stanton.

"Stanton! But—God! What a vision!"

He ceased. I waited—waited.

66 "GOODWIN," Throckmartin said at last, "I can describe him only as a thing of living light. He radiated light; was filled with light; overflowed with it. Around him was a shining cloud that whirled through and around him in radiant

swirls, shimmering tentacles, luminiscent, coruscating spirals.

"I saw his face. It shone with a rapture too great to be borne by living men, and was shadowed with insuperable misery. It was as though his face had been remolded by the hand of God and the hand of Satan, working together and in harmony. You have seen it on my face. But you have never seen it in the degree that Stanton bore it. The eyes were wide open and fixed, as though upon some inward vision of hell and heaven! He walked like the corpse of a man damned who carried within him an angel of light!

"The music swelled again. I heard again the murmuring—'*Av-o-lo-ha!*' Stanton turned, facing the ragged side of the portal. And then I saw that the light that filled and surrounded him had a nucleus, a core—something shiftingly human shaped—that dissolved and changed, gathered itself, whirled through and beyond him and back again. And as this shining nucleus passed through him Stanton's whole body pulsed with light. As the luminescence moved, there moved with it, still and serene always, seven tiny globes of light like seven little moons.

"So much I saw and then swiftly Stanton seemed to be lifted—levitated—up the unscalable wall and to its top. The glow faded from the moonlight, the tingling music grew fainter. I tried again to move. The spell still held me fast. The tears were running down now from my rigid lids and they brought relief to my tortured eyes.

"I have said my gaze was fixed. It was. But from the side, peripherally, they took in a part of the far wall of the outer enclosure. Ages seemed to pass and I saw a radiance stealing along it. Soon there came into sight the figure that was Stanton. Far away he was—on the gigantic wall. But still I could see the shining spirals whirling jubilantly around and through him; felt rather than saw his tranced face beneath the seven lights. A swirl of crystal notes, and he had passed. And all the time, as though from some opened well of light, the courtyard gleamed and sent out silver fires that dimmed the moon-rays, yet seemed strangely to be a part of them.

"Ten times he passed before me so. The luminescence came with the music; swam for a while along the man-made cliff of basalt and passed away. Between times eternities rolled and still I crouched there, a helpless thing of stone with eyes that would not close!

"At last the moon neared the horizon. There came a louder burst of sound; the second, and last, cry of Stanton, like an echo of his first! Again the soft sigh from the inner terrace. Then—utter silence. The light faded; the moon was setting and with a rush life and power to move returned to me. I made a leap for the steps, rushed up them, through the gateway and straight to the gray rock. It was closed—as I knew it would be. But did I dream it or did I hear, echoing through it as though from distances a triumphant shouting—*Av-o-lo-ha! Av-o-lo-ha!*"

"I remembered Edith. I ran back to her. At my touch she wakened; looked at me wanderingly; raised herself slightly on a hand.

"*'Dave!'* she said, *'I slept—after all.'* She saw the despair on my face and leaped to her feet. *'Dave!'* she cried. *'What is it? Where's Charles?'*

"I lighted a fire before I spoke. Then I told her. And for the balance of that night we sat before the flames, arms around each other—like two frightened children."

Suddenly Throckmartin held his hands out to me appealingly.

"Goodwin, old friend!" he cried. "Don't look at me as though I were mad. It's truth, absolute truth. Wait—" I comforted him as well as I could. After a little time he took up his story.

"Never," he said, "did man welcome the sun as we did that morning. As soon as it was light we went back to the courtyard. The basalt walls whereon I had seen Stanton were black and silent. The terraces were as they had been. The gray slab was in its place. In the shallow hollow at its base was—nothing. Nothing—nothing was there anywhere on the islet of Stanton—not a trace, not a sign on Nan-Tanach to show that he had ever lived."

"What were we to do? Precisely the same arguments that had kept us there the night before held good now—and doubly good. We could not abandon these two; could not go as long as there was the faintest hope of finding them—and yet for love of each other how could we remain? I loved my wife, Goodwin—how much I never knew until that day; and she loved me as deeply.

"*'It takes only one each night,'* she said. *'Beloved, let it take me.'*

"I wept, Goodwin. We both wept.

"*'We will meet it together,'* she said.

And it was thus at last that we arranged it."

"That took great courage indeed, Throckmartin," I interrupted. He looked at me eagerly.

"You do believe, then?" he exclaimed.

"I believe," I said. He pressed my hand with a grip that nearly crushed it.

"Now," he told me, "I do not fear. If I—fail, you will prepare and carry on the work."

I promised. And—God forgive me—that was three years ago.

"It did take courage," he went on, again quietly. "More than courage. For we knew it was renunciation. Each of us in our hearts felt that one of us would not be there to see the sun rise. And each of us prayed that the death, if death it was, would not come first to the other.

66 **WE** TALKED it all over carefully, bringing to bear all our power of analysis and habit of calm, scientific thought. We considered minutely the time element in the phenomena. Although the deep chanting began at the very moment of moonrise, fully five minutes had passed between its full lifting and the strange sighing sound from the inner terrace. I went back in memory over the happenings of the night before. At least fifteen minutes had intervened between the first heralding sigh and the intensification of the moonlight in the courtyard. And this glow grew for at least ten minutes more before the first burst of the crystal notes. Indeed, more than half an hour must have elapsed, I calculated, between the moment the moon showed above the horizon and the first delicate onslaught of the tinklings.

"The sighing sound—of what had it reminded me? Of course—of a door revolving and swishing softly along its base.

"*'Edith!'* I cried. *'I think I have it! The gray rock opens five minutes after upon the moonrise. But whoever or whatever it is that comes through it must wait until the moon has risen higher, or else it must come from a distance. The thing to do is not to wait for it, but to surprise it before it passes out the door. We will go into the inner court early. You will take your rifle and pistol and hide yourself where you can command the opening—if the slab does open. The instant it moves I will enter. It's our best chance, Edith. I think it's our only one.'*

"My wife demurred strongly. She wanted

to go with me. But I convinced her that it was better for her to stand guard without, prepared to help me if I were forced from what lay behind the rock again in the open.

"The day passed too swiftly. In the face of what we feared our love seemed stronger than ever. Was it the flare of the spark before extinguishment? I wondered. We prepared and ate a good dinner. We tried to keep our minds from anything but the scientific aspect of the phenomena. We agreed that whatever it was its cause must be human, and that we must keep that fact in mind every second. But what kind of men could create such prodigies? We thrilled at the thought of finding perhaps the remnants of a vanished race, living perhaps in cities over whose rocky skies the Pacific rolled; exercising there the lost wisdom of the half-gods of earth's youth.

"At the half-hour before moonrise we two went into the inner courtyard. I took my place at the side of the gray rock. Edith crouched behind a broken pillar twenty feet away, slipped her rifle-barrel over it so that it would cover the opening.

"The minutes crept by. The courtyard was very quiet. The darkness lessened and through the breaches of the terrace I watched the far sky softly lighten. With the first pale flush the stillness became intensified. It deepened—became unbearably—expectant. The moon rose, showed the quarter, the half, then swam up into full sight like a great bubble.

"Its rays fell upon the wall before me and suddenly upon the convexities I have described seven little circles of light sprang out. They gleamed, glimmered, grew brighter—shone. The gigantic slab before me turned as though on a pivot, sighing softly as it moved.

"For a moment I gasped in amazement. It was like a conjuror's trick. And the moving slab I noticed was also glowing, becoming opalescent like the little shining circles above.

"Only for a second I gazed and then with a word to Edith flung myself through the opening which the slab had uncovered. Before me was a platform and from the platform steps led downward into a smooth corridor. This passage was not dark; it glowed with the same faint silvery radiance as the door. Down it I raced. As I ran, plainer than ever before, I heard the chanting. The passage turned abruptly, passed parallel to the walls of the

outer courtyard and then once more led abruptly downward. Still I ran, and as I ran I looked at the watch on my wrist. Less than three minutes had elapsed.

"The passage ended. Before me was a high vaulted arch. For a moment I paused. It seemed to open into space; a space filled with lambent, coruscating, many-colored mist whose brightness grew even as I watched. I passed through the arch and stopped in sheer awe!

"In front of me was a pool. It was circular, perhaps twenty feet wide. Around it ran a low, softly curved lip of glimmering silvery stone. Its water was palest blue. The pool with its silvery rim was like a great blue eye staring upward.

"Upon it streamed seven shafts of radiance. They poured down upon the blue eye like cylindrical torrents; they were like shining pillars of light rising from a sapphire floor.

"One was the tender pink of the pearl; one of the aurora's green; a third a deathly white; the fourth the blue in mother-of-pearl; a shimmering column of pale amber; a beam of amethyst; a shaft of molten silver. Such are the colors of the seven lights that stream upon the moon pool. I drew closer, awestricken. The shafts did not illumine the depths. They played upon the surface and seemed there to diffuse, to melt into it. The pool drank them!

"Through the water tiny gleams of phosphorescence began to dart, sparkles and coruscations of pale incandescence. And far, far below I sensed a movement, a shifting glow as of something slowly rising.

"I looked upward, following the radiant pillars, to their source. Far above were seven shining globes, and it was from these that the rays poured. Even as I watched their brightness grew. They were like seven moons set high in some caverned heaven. Slowly their splendor increased, and with it the splendor of the seven beams streaming from them. It came to me that they were crystals of some unknown kind set in the roof of the moon pool's vault and that their light was drawn from the moon shining high above them. They were wonderful, those lights—and what must have been the knowledge of those who set them there!

"**B**RIGHTER and brighter they grew as the moon climbed higher, sending its full radiance down through them.

I tore my gaze away and stared at the pool. It had grown milky, opalescent. The rays gushing into it seemed to be filling it; it was alive with sparklings, scintillations, glimmerings. And the luminescence I had seen rising from its depths was larger, nearer!

"A swirl of mist floated up from its surface. It drifted within the embrace of the rosy beam and hung there for a moment. The beam seemed to embrace it, sending through it little shining corpuscles, tiny rosy spiralings. The mist absorbed the rays, was strengthened by it, gained substance. Another swirl sprang into the amber shaft, clung and fed there, moved swiftly toward the first and mingled with it. And now other swirls arose, here and there, too fast to be counted, hung poised in the embrace of the light streams; flashed and pulsed into each other.

"Thicker and thicker still they arose until the surface of the pool was a pulsating pillar of opalescent mist; steadily growing stronger; drawing within it life from the seven beams falling upon it; drawing to it from below the darting, red atoms of the pool. Into its center was passing the luminescence I had sensed rising from the far depths. And the center glowed, throbbed—began to send out questing swirls and tendrils—

"There forming before me was *that* which had walked with Stanton, which had taken Thora—the thing I had come to find!

"With the shock of realization my brain sprang into action. My hand fell to my pistol and I fired shot after shot into its radiance. The place rang with the explosions and there came to me a sense of unforgivable profanation. Devilish as I knew it to be, that chamber of the moon pool seemed also—in some way—holy. As though a god and a demon dwelt there, inextricably commingled.

"As I shot the pillar wavered; the water grew more disturbed. The mist swayed and shook; gathered itself again. I slipped a second clip into the automatic and another idea coming to me took careful aim at one of the globes in the roof. From thence I knew came the force that shaped the dweller in the pool. From the pouring rays came its strength. If I could destroy them I could check its forming. I fired again and again. If I hit the globes I did no damage. The little motes in their beams danced with the motes in the mist, troubled. That was all.

"Up from the pool like little bells, like bubbles of crystal notes, rose the tinklings. Their notes were higher, had lost their sweetness, were angry, as it were, with themselves.

"And then out from the Inexplicable, hovering over the pool, swept a shining swirl. It caught me above the heart; wrapped itself around me. I felt an icy coldness and then there rushed over me a mingled ecstasy and horror. Every atom of me quivered with delight and at the same time shrank with despair. There was nothing loathsome in it. But it was as though the icy soul of evil and the fiery soul of good had stepped together within me. The pistol dropped from my hand.

"So I stood while the pool gleamed and sparkled; the streams of light grew more intense and the mist glowed and strengthened. I saw that its shining core had shape—but a shape that my eyes and brain could not define. It was as though a being of another sphere should assume what it might of human semblance, but was not able to conceal that what human eyes saw was but a part of it. It was neither man nor woman; it was unearthly and androgynous. Even as I found its human semblance it changed. And still the mingled rapture and terror held me. Only in a little corner of my brain dwelt something untouched; something that held itself apart and watched. Was it the soul? I have never believed—and yet—

"Over the head of the misty body there sprang suddenly out seven little lights. Each was the color of the beam beneath which it rested. I knew now that the dweller was—complete!

"And then—behind me I heard a scream. It was Edith's voice. It came to me that she had heard the shots and followed me. I felt every faculty concentrate into a mighty effort. I wrenched myself free from the gripping tentacle and it slipped back. I turned to catch Edith, and as I did so slipped—fell. As I dropped I saw the radiant shape above the pool leap swiftly for me!

"There was the rush past me and as the dweller paused, straight into it raced Edith, arms outstretched to shield me from it! God!"

He trembled.

"She threw herself squarely within its diabolic splendor," he whispered. "She stopped and reeled as though she had encountered solidity. And as she faltered

it wrapped its shining self around her. The crystal tinklings burst forth jubilantly. The light filled her, ran through and around her as it had with Stanton, and I saw drop upon her face—the look. From the pillar came the murmur—‘Av-o-lo-ha!’ The vault echoed it.

“‘Edith!’ I cried. ‘Edith!’ I was in agony. She must have heard me, even through the—thing. I saw her try to free herself. Her rush had taken her to the very verge of the moon pool. She tottered; and in an instant—she fell—with the radiance still holding her, still swirling and winding around and through her—into the moon pool! She sank, Goodwin, and with her went—the dweller!

“I dragged myself to the brink. Far down I saw a shining, many-colored nebulous cloud descending; caught a glimpse of Edith’s face, disappearing; her eyes stared up to me filled with supernal ecstasy and horror. And—vanished!

“I looked about me stupidly. The seven globes still poured their radiance upon the pool. It was pale blue again. Its sparklings and coruscations were gone. From far below there came a muffled outburst of triumphant chanting!

“‘Edith!’ I cried again. ‘Edith, come back to me!’ And then a darkness fell upon me. I remember running back through the shimmering corridors and out into the courtyard. Reason had left me. When it returned I was far out at sea in our boat wholly estranged from civilization. A day later I was picked up by the schooner in which I came to Port Moresby.

“I have formed a plan; you must hear it, Goodwin—” He fell upon his berth. I bent over him. Exhaustion and the relief of telling his story had been too much for him. He slept like the dead.

CHAPTER IV

THE DWELLER COMES

ALL that night I watched over him. When dawn broke I went to my room to get a little sleep myself. But my slumber was haunted.

The next day the storm was unabated. Throckmartin came to me at lunch. He looked better. His strange expression had waned. He had regained his alertness.

“Come to my cabin,” he said. There, he stripped his shirt from him. “Something is happening,” he said. “The mark is smaller.” It was as he said.

“I’m escaping,” he whispered jubilantly. “Just let me get to Melbourne safely, and then we’ll see who’ll win! For, Goodwin, I’m not at all sure that Edith is dead—as we know death—nor that the others are. There was something outside experience there—some great mystery.

“There’s a natural explanation, of course,” he said. “My theory is that the moon rock is of some composition sensitive to the action of moon rays; somewhat as the metal selenium is to sun rays. There is a powerful quality in moonlight, as both science and legends can attest. We know of its effect upon the mentality, the nervous system, even upon certain diseases.

“The moon slab is of some material that reacts to moonlight. The little circles over the top are, without doubt, its operating agency. When the light strikes them they release the mechanism that opens the slab, just as you can open doors with sunlight by an ingenious arrangement of selenium-cells. Apparently it takes the strength of the full moon to do this. We will first try a concentration of the rays of the *nearly* full moon upon these circles to see whether that will open the rock. If it does we will be able to investigate the pool without interruption from—from—what emanates.

“Look, here on the chart are their locations.

“Here,” he said, “is where I believe the seven great globes to be. They are probably hidden somewhere in the ruins of the islet called Tau, where they can catch the first moon rays.

“They are certainly cleverly concealed, but they must be open to the air to get the light. They should not be too hard to find. They must be found.” He hesitated again. “I suppose it would be safer to destroy them, for it is clearly through them that the phenomena of the pool is manifested; and yet, to destroy so wonderful a thing! Perhaps the better way would be to have some men up by them, and if it were necessary, to protect those below, to destroy them on signal. Or they might simply be covered. That would neutralize them. To destroy them—” He hesitated again. “No, the phenomena is too important to be destroyed without fullest investigation.” His face clouded again. “But it is *not* human; it can’t be!”

Again— “We need half a dozen diving-suits. The pool must be entered and searched to its depths. That will indeed

take courage, yet in the time of the new moon it should be safe, or perhaps better after the dweller is destroyed or made safe."

We went over plans, accepted them, rejected them, and still the storm raged—and all that day and all that night.

I hurry to the end. That afternoon there came a steady lightening of the clouds which Throckmartin watched with deep uneasiness. Toward dusk they broke away suddenly and soon the sky was clear. The stars came twinkling out.

"It will be tonight," Throckmartin said to me. "Goodwin, friend, stand by me. Tonight it will come, and I must fight."

I could say nothing. About an hour before moonrise we went to his cabin. We fastened the port-holes tightly and turned on the electrics. Throckmartin had some queer theory that the electric rays would be a bar to his pursuer. I don't know why. A little later he complained of sleepiness.

"But it's just weariness," he said. "Not at all like that other drowsiness. It's an hour till moonrise still," he yawned at last. "Wake me up a good fifteen minutes before."

He lay upon the berth. I sat thinking. I came to myself with a start. What time was it? I looked at my watch and jumped to the port-hole. It was full moonlight; the orb had been up for fully half an hour. I strode over to Throckmartin and shook him by the shoulder.

"Up, quick, man!" I cried. He rose sleepily. His shirt fell open at the neck and I looked, in amazement, at the white band around his chest. Even under the electric light it shone softly, as though little flecks of light were in it.

"Oh, yes," he said drowsily, "it's coming—to take me back to Edith!" Well, I'm glad."

"Throckmartin!" I cried. "Wake up! Fight."

"Fight!" he said. "No use; keep the maps; come after us."

HE WENT to the port and drowsily drew aside the curtain. The moon traced a broad path of light straight to the ship. Under its rays the band around his chest gleamed brighter and brighter; shot forth little rays; seemed to move.

He peered out intently and, suddenly, before I could stop him, threw open the port. I saw a glimmering presence moving swiftly along the moon path toward us, skimming over the waters.

And with it raced little crystal tinklings and far off I heard a long-drawn murmuring cry.

On the instant the lights went out in the cabin, evidently throughout the ship, for I heard shoutings above. I sprang back into a corner and crouched there. At the porthole was a radiance; swirls and spirals of living white cold fire. It poured into the cabin and it was filled with dancing motes of light, and over the radiant core of it shone seven little lights like tiny moons. It gathered Throckmartin to it. Light pulsed through and from him. I saw his skin turn to a translucent, shimmering whiteness like illumined porcelain. His face became unrecognizable, inhuman with the monstrous twin expressions. So he stood for a moment. The pillar of light seemed to hesitate and the seven lights to contemplate me. I shrank further down into the corner. I saw Throckmartin drawn to the port. The room filled with murmuring. I fainted.

When I awakened the lights were on.

But of Throckmartin there was no trace!

Gentlemen, there are some things we are doomed to regret all our life. Born in me then was a great fear. I suppose I was unbalanced by what I had seen. I could not think clearly. But there came to me the sheer impossibility of telling the ship's officers what I had seen; what Throckmartin had told me. They would accuse me, I felt, of his murder. At neither appearance of the phenomena had any save our two selves witnessed it. I was certain of this because they would surely have discussed it.

The next morning when Throckmartin's absence was noted, I merely said that I had left him early in the evening. It occurred to no one to doubt me, or to question me further. And so it was officially reported that he had fallen or jumped from the ship during the failure of the lights.

Afterward, the same inhibition held me back from making his and my story known to my fellow scientists.

But this inhibition is suddenly dead, and I am not sure that its death is not a summons from Throckmartin.

I go to Nan-Tanach, gentlemen, to make amends for my cowardice by seeking out the dweller.

And, gentlemen, I stake all my reputation, all my faith, all that I hold sacred and dear that what I have written here is absolute truth.

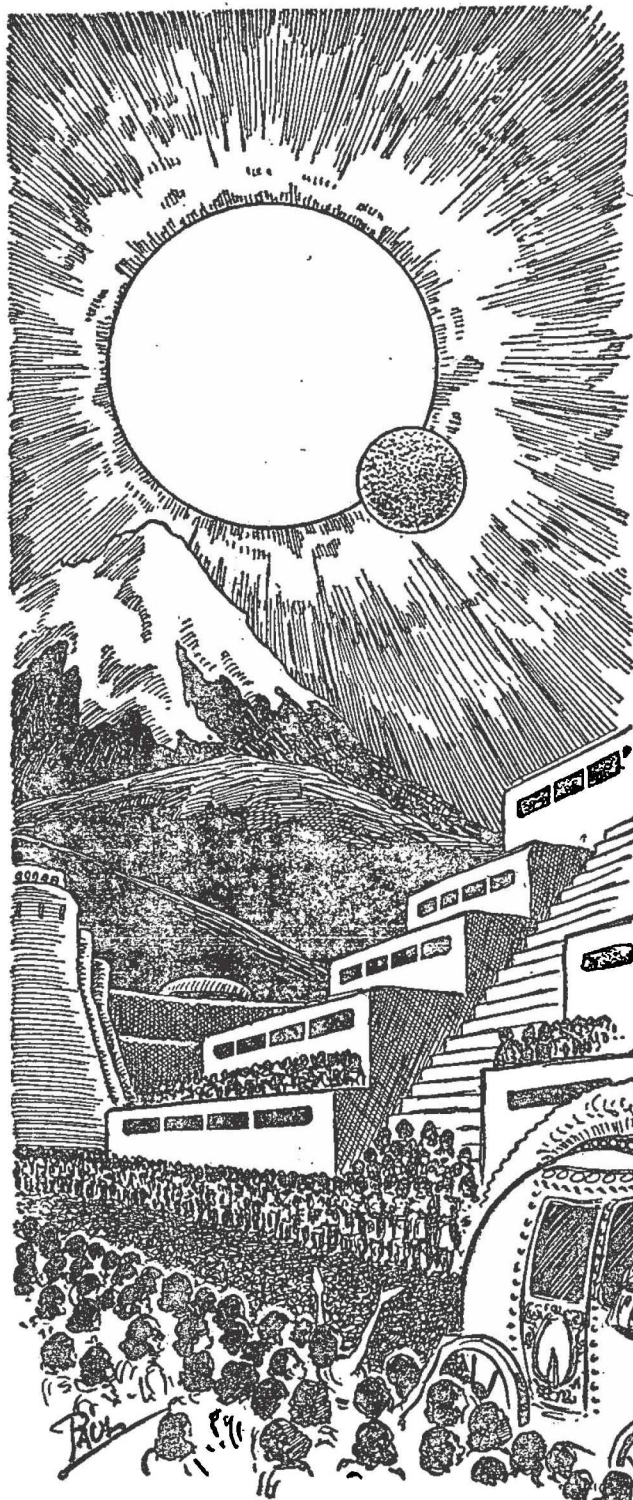
JASON, SON OF JASON

CHAPTER I

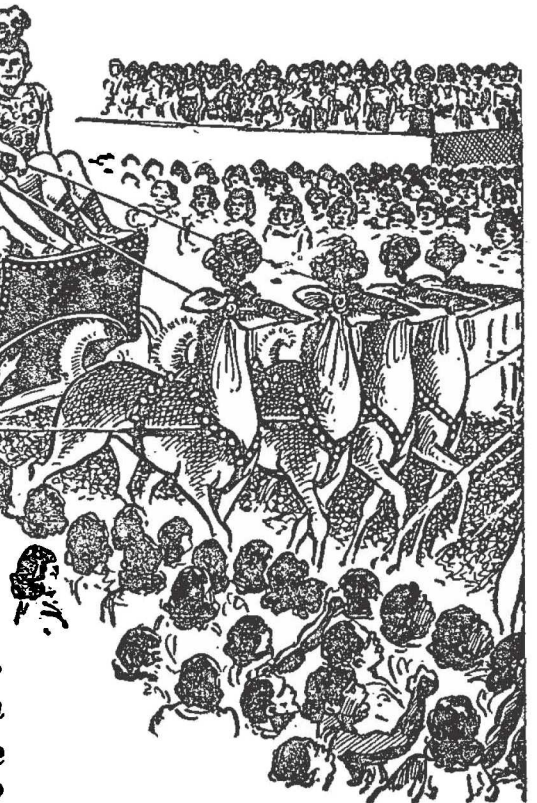
THE GATEWAY OF LIFE

IT WAS midnight when the night superintendent called and told me No. 27 had died. I rose. The thing was no surprise. I had known it was going to happen. No. 27 had told me so, himself. None the less, I went to his room. Routine in the mental hospital had nothing to do with that strange secret held in common between myself and the man—that strange state of affairs which had enabled him to

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*He had willed his astral self
across the cosmic void, and
found his soul-mate on another planet.
Could the magnet of love draw him
safely to Palos forever, forsaking the
mortal chains of his earthbound body?*



By
J. U. Giesy

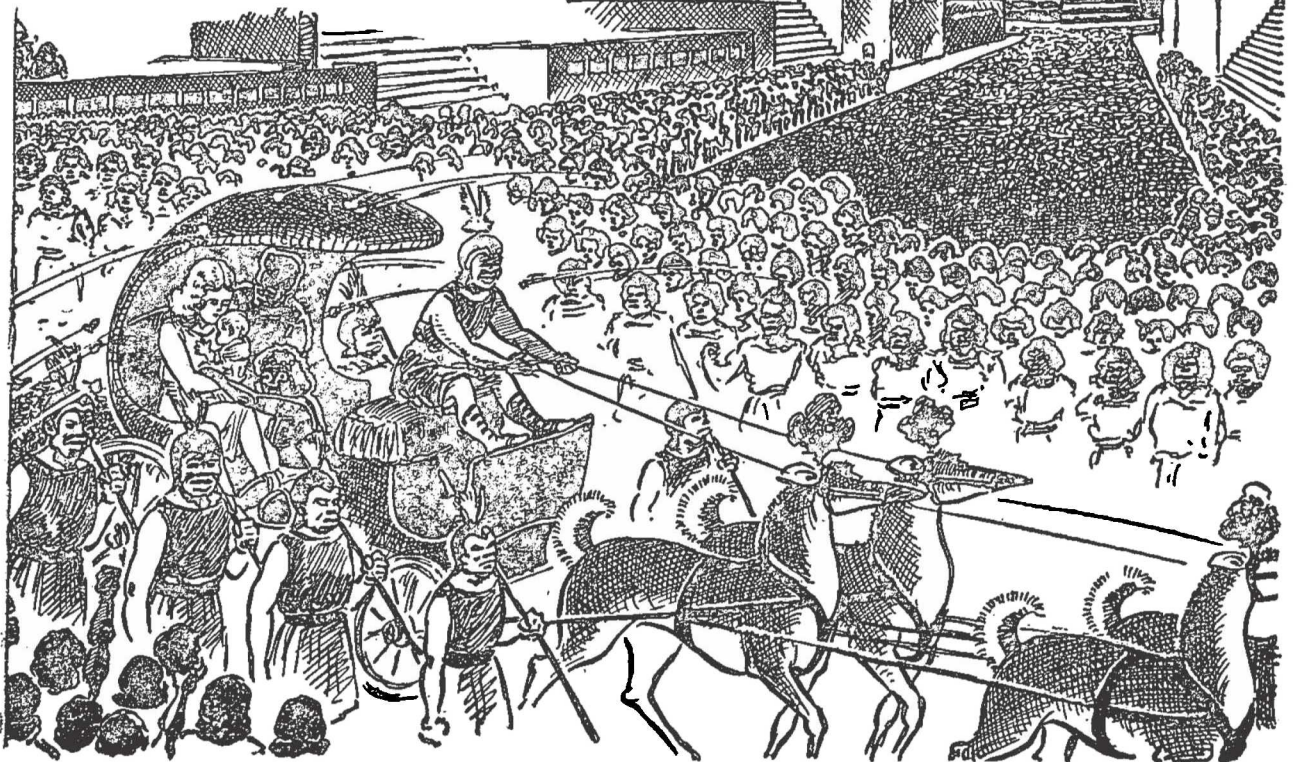
predicate his own death so accurately.

And yet as I mounted the stairs to the room where his body now lay as a worn-out husk I had none of the feeling which so customarily assails the average mortal in such an hour. To me it was not as though he had died. To my mind in those moments it was no more than the casting aside by the activating spirit of that instrument which for its own ends it had used. The body then was a husk indeed—an emaciated, worn-out thing which, because of our mutual secret, I knew had been kept alive by the sheer force of the spiritual tenant, now removed.

I stood looking down upon it, with very much the same sensations one might have in viewing the tool once plied by the hand of a friend. It was nothing more than that really. Jason Croft had used it while he had need of its manipulation, and when his need was accomplished he had simply laid it down.

Jason Croft. Dead? I felt an impulse to smile in most improper fashion. Not at

The mob jostled—pressed closer
to the carriage of the captives.



all. The man was not only not dead, but I knew—as positively as I knew I was presently going to leave the room where his dead shell lay on a hospital bed and return to my own quarters—exactly where he had gone.

The statement sounds a bit as though I were better qualified as an inmate than the superintendent of an institution for the care of the insane. And I don't suppose it will help any for me to add that I had seen Jason Croft die before—or that he had informed me on the former occasion, though in less specific fashion, of his approaching end.

That was after he had told me a most remarkable tale, which, in spite of its almost incredible nature, I found myself strongly inclined to believe. It had concerned Croft's adventures on another planet—Palos—one of the spheres in the universe of the Dog Star Sirius, to which he had traveled first by astral projection, but on which he had found means to establish an actual existence in the flesh.

"Unbelievable—can a man be dead and yet live again?" you will say. Well, yes, but—Croft's earth body died just as he had told me it would, and was buried, and time passed, and this patient No. 27 was committed to the institution of which I was the head; and when I went to examine and inspect him, he asked me to dismiss the attendants, and then he spoke to me in the voice of Jason Croft.

More than that, he took up the story of his adventures where he had left off in the previous instance, admitted freely that he had reversed the experiment by which he had gained material existence on Palos, and, driven by the necessity of gaining knowledge for use in his new estate, had deliberately returned to earth. Unbelievable, you will say again. And again I answer:

"Yes—but wait."

Croft was a physician, even as am I. He was a scientific man. In addition he was a student of the occult—the science of the mind, the spirit, and its control of the physical forces of life.

He was an earth-born man. The home in which I first met him contained the greatest private collection of works on the subject I have ever seen. In dying he left them to me—I have them all about me. They are mine. According to his statements and his notations on margins, he had gone so far in his investigations that he could project the astral consciousness

anywhere at will. And when I say anywhere, I mean it in the literal sense.

Many men have mastered the astral control on the earthly plane. Croft had carried it to an ultimate degree. He shook off the envelope of the earth atmosphere, led thereto, as he frankly confessed in our conversations, by the attraction of a feminine spirit, though he did not know it at the time, and recognized it only when he first viewed Naia—Princess of Tamarizia—on a distant star.

I had dabbled in the occult to some extent myself. Hence when he spoke of the doctrine of twin souls he had no further need to explain. He alleged that since a child the Dog Star had called him subtly through the years in a way he could not explain. Once having come into her presence, however, he knew that it was Naia—the feminine counterpart of his nature—whose existence on the other planet had called across the void to him. Or so he claimed. And certainly his portrayal of the events on Palos were characterized by a detail that made the atmosphere of his alleged other existence most vividly plain.

To an accomplishment of his marrying her, Croft declared that he had done a weirdly wonderful thing. Discovering a Palosian dying of a mental rather than a physical ailment, he had waited until his death occurred, then appropriated the still physically viable body to himself, as he most comprehensively explained, describing his act in a scientific way that counseled belief while staggering the mind.

Over that body he obtained absolute control, exactly as he had gained the same ability with his own. For a time thereafter he led a sort of dual existence, sometimes on Palos, sometimes on earth, until he had fully shaped his plans. Then, and then only, did he voluntarily forsake the mundane life to enter that other and fuller existence he felt that Naia of Aphur could make complete.

I QUESTIONED him closely. I was faced by a most amazing thing. I took up first the question of time required in passing from earth to Palos. He smiled and replied that outside the mental atmosphere a man time ceased to exist; that it was man's measure of a portion of eternity, and nothing more, and that he could not use what was non-existent, hence reached Palos as quickly in the astral

condition as I could span the gulf between that member of the Dog Star's Pack and earth in thought. All other points I raised he met. Even so it was a good deal of a shock to find my new patient speaking to me with Croft's evident understanding, looking at me out of what seemed oddly like Croft's eyes.

But in the end I was convinced. The man knew too much. He was too utterly conversant with Croft's accomplishments, his aims and ambitions and hopes, to be anyone but Croft himself. And, too, he naively explained that it was a poor rule that would not work two ways, and that

Jason Croft really, secondly from the pitiable wreck he had employed on his return, that worn-out husk which had just died—had produced on me a somewhat odd effect. So clearly had he portrayed the events and emotions which had swayed him in his almost undreamed courtship of the Aphurian princess that I had come to accept the characters he mentioned as actually existent persons, acquaintances almost, just as, in spite of all established precedent, I still regarded Croft himself as alive.

Naia of Aphur—many a time as I listened to his account of their association

Those who read "Palos of the Dog Star Pack" (Famous Fantastic Mysteries, October 1941) and "The Mouthpiece of Zitu" (November 1942) will remember that Dr. Jason Croft, having during his psychic investigations gained complete control over his astral form, lands while wandering among the planets of outer space upon Palos, one of the spheres of the universe which includes the Dog Star. There he sees and falls in love with Naia, Princess of Tamarizia, and, seizing upon the body of a Palosian about to die, he enters into it, and in this form, with his advanced knowledge soon makes himself a power on the planet. Several times he returns to his own body on earth; but finally, having won the love of Naia, married her and made himself practical dictator of the planet, he allows his earth body to die and goes to Palos for good. This is the status of things when in the present story he again gets into communication with his friend (the narrator) Dr. Murray. Of the present story we will only say: "You know that the first one was good and the second better; the third is undoubtedly the best of the trilogy."

he had therefore repeated his experiment in gaining a Palosian body when he felt the pressing need of a return to earth.

This night, earlier in the evening, he had bidden me goodbye—told me he was going back to Naia, the woman he had dared so much to win, his mate who ere long was to bear him, Jason Croft of Earth, a child. And now—well, now as before, it would seem he had kept his word. Jason Croft was dead *again*.

Is it any wonder that I felt that strange, almost amused desire to smile? Dead! Why, Croft, in so far as I knew him, could practically laugh at death—he was a man who had actually demonstrated, if one believed his narrative, of course, the truth of the saying that the spirit is the life. He was a man, who, because of the needs of his spirit, had deliberately switched his existence from one to the other of two spheres.

I gave what directions were needed for the disposal of No. 27's body, returned to my bed, and stretched myself out. But I didn't sleep all that morning. I buried myself in thought.

Both the narratives to which I had listened—first from the man I knew to be

I had thrilled to the picture of that supple girl with her crown of golden hair, her crimson lips, her violet-purple eyes. So real she had come to seem that I had felt I would know her had I seen her with my physical rather than my mental vision. So real indeed was her mental picture that when he told me she was about to become a mother I had cried out, on impulse, that I wished as a medical man I might attend her—would be glad to see the light in her eyes when they first beheld his, Jason's, child.

And Croft had replied, "Man, I could love you for that," and he flashed me an understanding smile.

So now that he was gone back to her—I lay on my bed unsleeping, and let all he had told me unroll in a sort of mental panorama, dealing wholly with the Palosian world.

Tamarizia! It was into the empire Croft blundered blindly when he went to Palos first—a series of principalities surrounding the shore of a vast inland sea, with the exception of a central state—the seat of the imperial capital, embracing the island of Hiranur located in the sea itself,

and Nodhur to the west and south. From the central sea a narrow strait led into an outer ocean to the west.

This was known as the Gateway. To the north was Cathur, a rugged, mountainous state, the seat of national learning, in its university at the capital city of Scira, and east of Cathur was Mazhur, known as the Lost State at the time of Croft's first arrival, because it had been wrested from the empire some fifty years before, in a war with Zollaria, a hostile nation to the north.

Croft, after gaining physical life on Palos, succeeded in winning it back, and in gaining thereby the consent of Naia's father, Prince Lakkón, and her uncle, Jadgor, King of Aphur, to their marriage. It was at this point his narrative had ended first.

East of Mazhur, still hugging the sea and extending into the hinterland of the continent was Bithur. And Milidhur joined Bithur to the south. West of Milidhur, completing the circle, was Aphur—the name meaning literally "the land to the west" or "toward the sun." Aphur was the southern pillar of the Gateway, ending at the western strait. Nodhur lay south of Aphur, gaining access to the sea by the navigable river Na, on whose yellow flood moved a steady stream of commerce driven by sail and oar until Croft revolutionized transportation by producing alcohol-driven motors. And—if I were to believe his second account—since then he had actually electrified the nation, harnessing mountain streams to generate the force.

Except for the waterways, traffic prior to Croft's innovations was by conveyances drawn by the gnuppa—a creature half deer, half horse, in appearance—or by means of caravans of the enormous beast called sarpelca, resembling some huge Silurian lizard, twice the size of an elephant, with a pointed tail, scale-armored back, camel-like neck, and the head of a marine serpent tentacle-fringed about the mouth.

They were driven by reins affixed to these fleshy appendages, and streamed across the Palosian deserts, bearing huge merchandise cargoes upon their massive backs.

INDEED, it was a wonderful world into which Croft had projected himself. Babylonian in seeming he had described it to me at first.

North of Tamarizia was Zollaria, in-

habited by a far more warlike race. Its despotic government had long cast a covetous eye on the Central Sea, through which, and the rivers emptying into its expanse, most of the profitable trade lanes were reached. Tamarizia, controlling the western Gateway, had remained master even after the fall of Mazhur, collecting toll from the Zollarian craft on her rivers despite the foothold gained on her northern coast.

East of Tamarizia, beyond Bithur and Milidhur, lay Mazzeria, peopled by a race little above the aborigine in their social life. Tatar-like, the Mazzerians shaved their heads of all save a single tuft of hair, with a most remarkable effect, since the race was blue of complexion and the prevailing color of their hair was red.

Mazzeria, at the time of Croft's incursion into the planet's affairs, was the acknowledged ally of Zollaria, although at peace with Tamarizia. In earlier times, however, numbers of them had been taken captive in border wars and brought to both nations as slaves. These, in so far as Tamarizia was concerned, had later been freed and given citizenship of a degree constituting in their ranks the lowest or serving caste.

Each state was governed by a king, by hereditary succession, in conjunction with a national assembly consisting of a delegate elected by each ten thousand or deckerton of civil population. The occupant of the imperial throne was elected for a period of ten years by vote of the several states.

On Croft's advent, Scythys—a dotard—had been king of Cathur, with his son Kyphallos, the crown prince, a profligate of the worst type, sunk under the charms of Kalamita, a Zollarian adventuress of great beauty, with whom he had plotted the surrender of Cathur to her nation in return for the Tamarizian throne with Kalamita by his side.

Jadgor of Aphur, scenting the danger, had sought to bind the northern prince to Tamarizian fealty through a marriage with Naia, his sister's child. To win Naia and overthrow Zollaria's scheme had been Jason's task. The introduction of both the motor and firearms enabled him to overthrow the flower of Zollaria's hosts on a couple of bloody fields. Victory gained and Zollaria forced to cede Mazhur after fifty years of occupation, Croft prevailed upon the nation to accept a democratic form of government, it being at the end of Emperor

Tamhys's term. This was accomplished without too much difficulty.

As to the Tamarizians themselves, they were a white and well-formed race. Their women held equal place with men. They believed in the spirit and a future life. They had made no small progress in the sciences and arts. They worked metal, gold being as common as iron on Palos.

They tempered copper also and used it in innumerable ways. They wove fabrics of great beauty, one being a blend of vegetable fiber and spun gold. They cut and polished jewels. They had a system of judiciaries and courts and a medical and surgical knowledge of sorts.

They were a fairly moral and naturally modest people. Their clothing was worn for protection and ornamentation, rather than for any other purpose. It was donned and doffed as the occasion required, without comment being aroused. In women it consisted, rich and poor, of a single garment falling to the knee or just below it, cinctured about the body and caught over one shoulder by a jeweled or metal boss, leaving the other shoulder, arm, and upper chest exposed. To this was added sandals of leather, metal, or wood, held to the foot by a toe and instep band and lacings running well up the calves.

Men of wealth and soldiers generally wore metal casings, jointed to the sandal to permit of motion and extending upward to the knees. Men of caste wore also a soft shirt or chemise beneath a metal cuirass or embroidered tunic. Save on formal occasions the serving classes wore a narrow cincture about the loins.

Agriculture was highly developed, and they had advanced far in architecture, painting and sculpture. They lavished much time and expense in beautifying their homes. They had well-constructed

caravan roads. As Croft had pointed out, he found them an intelligent race waiting, ready to be trained to a wider craft.

And among them, in Naia of Aphur, he believed he had found his twin soul. And he had set about winning her in a fashion such as no other man, I frankly believe, would have dared.

He had won her according to his belief and returned to earth, for the last time, ere he should return and make her his bride. He had told me about it, and he had cast off his earthly body, severing the last tie that held him from his life in Palos. He had died.

He had gone back and found his plans disarranged through the actions of Zud, the high priest of Zitra, the capital city of Hiranur, where he had left Naia waiting his return in the Temple of Ga, the Eternal Mother—the Eternal Woman, in the Zitran pyramid. Zud, moved by Croft's works and by a story told him by Abbu, a priest who knew Jason's story, had proclaimed him Mouthpiece of Zitu, thereby raising an insurmountable barrier, as it seemed, between him and Naia, since celibacy was one of the tenets of the Tamarizian priests. And yet Croft had won to her, overcoming all obstacles, even winning a second war, with all Mazzeria egged on, her armies officered by Zollarians in disguise this time, ere he gained the goal of his desire.

These things had been told me inside the last few weeks by No. 27—the man who had been committed to the institution for a dissociation of personality, at which he quietly laughed after he had obtained my ear; because he wished to gain contact with me, who knew his former story, and win my aid toward the fulfillment of his mission.

Only he wasn't dead, and I knew it as I

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lay there with the names of men and women of the Palosian world buzzing in my head. He had gone back to them, now that his work was ended—to Naia, his golden-haired, purple-eyed mate—to Lakkon, her father; to Jadgor, her uncle, and Robur his son, governor now of Aphur in the palace where his father, president of the Tamarizian republic, had been king; to Robur, who, like a second Jonathan, had ever been Croft's loyal assistant and friend, and Gaya his sweet and matronly wife; to Magur, high priest of Himyra, the ruling red city of Aphur, by whom Croft and Naia were bethrothed to Zud himself, to whom he had taught the truth of astral control. And I found myself portraying them as Croft had described them, predicating their thoughts and feelings, as I might have done those of any man or woman I knew on earth.

Actually I was projecting my intellect, if not my consciousness, to Palos. The thought came to me. In spirit, if not in perception, I was there for the moment with my friend. In spirit at least I was bridging with little effort billions of actual miles. Thought and spirit and soul. They are strange things. Croft, if I was any judge, had gone back to Naia—and there was I lying, picturing the scene, where she waited for his coming in their home high in the western mountains of Aphur, given to them by Lakkon, a wedding gift, after the war with Mazzeria was won. Croft had gone back to Palos, and here was I picturing the thing in my spirit, certainly as plainly as any earth scene I had ever known.

His body would be lying there, covered with soft fabrics, waiting for its tenant on a couch of wine-red wood such as the Tamarizians used—or perhaps of molded copper. And Naia—the woman who had given him her life, would be watching, watching for the first stir of his returning.

Only—I smiled—Croft had told me he could gain Palos as quickly in the consciousness as I could project myself there in my mind—so, by now, that stirring of her strong man's limbs, beneath the eyes of the fair watcher, had occurred, and once more those two were together.

I smiled again.

The picture of that reunion appealed. There was nothing else to it at the instant. For even in my wildest imaginings I did not in the least suspect what its nearness, its clearness, the vividness of its seeming, might portend.

NO, EVEN though I myself had delved more or less deeply into occult lore, with a resulting knowledge of the subject that had brought about the sympathetic understanding of all Croft had told me from first to last, I had little or no conception that night of the inward meaning of the distinctness with which I could conjure up the scene of his return to Naia, or to where the ability might lead. Rather, I felt merely that through his narrative of her wooing he had built up within my mental cells a picture of the fair girl now his bride, so clear, so positive in seeming, that to me she appeared no more than a charming personality—a feminine acquaintance, such as one might on occasion meet. She was no more removed, so far as my feeling of familiarity with her was concerned, than had her residence been not on Palos, but simply across the street. It is so easy to bridge distance in the mind.

I slept after a time, as one will, drifting from continued thought upon one subject into slumber. And I woke with the thought of Croft's weird homecoming still in mind. It stayed with me more or less, too, in the succeeding days.

Naia of Aphur! Oddly I dwelt upon her. Jason himself had told me that she knew me—had actually seen me—that he had brought her to earth more than once in the astral body—had pointed me out to her as the one earth man who knew and believed his story—that she looked upon me as a friend.

The thing seemed some way to establish a sort of personal bond, just as the secret Croft and I had kept between us made me feel toward him as I have never felt toward any other man.

Jason Croft and Naia of Aphur—the interplanetary lovers. It was certainly odd. I knew her, even though I had never seen her; save through the instrumentality of his description of her, and the resultant picture printed on my mind. Yet I could close my eyes at will and see her, slender, golden-haired, with her lips of flaming scarlet, and her violet-purple eyes.

And I knew her home. I could lift it into my conscious perception as a familiar scene. I could imagine her moving about it, young, vibrant, happy, alone or with Croft by her side. I could fancy her bathing in the sun-warmed waters of the private bath in the garden—the gleam of her form against the clear yellow stone of which it was constructed—until she seemed the little silver fish Croft had called her,

disporting in a bowl of gold, behind the white, screening, vine-clad walls. Or I could dream of her walking about the grounds, with the giant Canor—the huge, doglike creature she called Hupor, who was at once her pet, her companion, and guard. Distant? Why, she seemed no more distant to me in the days after Croft had gone back to be with her when her child would be born than some fair maid of earth waiting for the coming of her lover across a dividing wall in an adjacent yard.

And yet so blind is the objective mind, that even then I did not suspect I had established a sympathetic chain of interest between the atmosphere of her existence and myself, capable of stretching out to a most peculiar climax in the end. Then, one night something over a month after No. 27 had died and been laid away, I dreamed.

I don't say I thought of it as a dream at the time. Then it was all too seriously, too grippingly, real to seem other than the actual thing. It was only after it was over that I thought of it as a dream—perhaps because, despite the occurrence and all Croft had told me, I was still not fully convinced.

Later—well, that's the story. I'll let it unfold itself.

I went to bed that night and fell asleep. How long I slept I do not know. But a voice disturbed my slumbers after a time. At least it disturbed the restful unconsciousness of my spirit. To this day I am not sure whether or not my body moved.

"Murray—Murray." I heard it, dimly at first, but insistent. It kept repeating itself over and over. Beyond doubt someone was demanding my attention. I sought to rouse.

"Murray—in the name of Zitu—and Azil—"

I stiffened my attention. It was nothing short of startling to hear those words spoken.

Zitu was God in the Tamarizian language, as I knew, and Azil was the Angel of Life—as Ga was the Virgin Mother. Ga and Azil—the mother and the life-bringer—they were the ones to whom the Tamarizian women most frequently prayed. I gave over my endeavor to waken my sleeping body and lay straining the ears of my spirit to the voice.

It came again. Whoever the speaker was, he seemed to know he had stirred my conscious preception.

"Murray—I need your advice—your council. Naia needs you. It's life and death,

Murray. You told me you would gladly render her assistance as a physician. Murray—will you come?"

My spirit staggered. It was most amazing. For now I knew that the speaker was Jason Croft.

I knew that he was appealing to me in the name of Zitu and Azil—in the name of motherhood—that he was calling on me as a brother physician, by the oath of my profession—in the name of all that was highest and holiest in life.

I knew that Naia's hour was upon her—and I knew it as clearly as if the thing were taking place somewhere within a neighboring home on earth. I lay and let the knowledge beat in upon me. I recalled in a flash all he had told me concerning medical knowledge on Palos. If some complication in the birth of their child impended, there would be none on that far planet to whom he could turn for aid. He knew more than all the physicians of Palos put together, but—

"Murray!" the voice repeated. "Murray, in the name of God!"

THERE was a desperate urge—a desperate plaint about it. I reached a decision. I had never married. There was no one dependent upon me. With a strange thrill I realized the fact. If I failed to return from this strangest of calls to which a medical man was ever bidden, if the body of me were not to be revived, I would be little missed.

So what did it matter? A man—or most men—surely could die but once; and how better than in performing the duty of a physician, in an endeavor to save other life? I recall now that such thoughts flitted swiftly through my brain, and left me ready to dare the venture suggested by Croft's voice, if thereby I might render an intimate service to him and Naia of Aphur, in spirit if not in the flesh.

"Murray!"

Again the agony of a strong man's appeal for all he held dearest in existence.

I think the lips of my sleeping material being must have moved at last. Be that as it may, I know I answered:

"Yes."

And I know Croft sensed my acquiescence, for his response was beating into my consciousness in a flash.

"Then—fix your mind on our home in the western mountains, visualize it, Murray, as I have described it to you. Will your conscious presence within it. I shall

be waiting for you. Call up the scene and demand that our will be granted. Think of nothing else."

Save for the directions for reaching to him, the thing was as real as a telephone message, and the assurance that the husband of your patient would be waiting your arrival at his house. But there was about Croft's promise to await my coming a definite note of conviction in my ability to encompass our mutual purpose that aided me most materially in what followed, as I now confess.

He was so seemingly sure that I would not fail them—that what assistance I could render would be granted—that for the time being it overthrew all doubt of success. Too, I had grown so accustomed to thinking of Naia of Aphur as a woman—a palpitant creature of radiant flesh and blood—that the very reality of her seeming robbed somewhat of its weirdness, its eery quality, the fact that I was about to respond in the astral body to an urgent medical call. Consciously then I sought to follow Croft's directions.

I fastened my thought on his Aphurian home.

I strove to exclude everything else from my mind. I brought up the picture of it as a thing at the end of a distant vista, down which I must pass to attain it, and—all at once that picture moved!

I say it moved, because that is how it at first appeared. At all events, it seemed to come toward me with amazing swiftness.

For an instant my comprehension faltered, and then I knew. I knew I had gained my purpose—that I was astrally out of my body, even though I had not known the instant when I had left it; that I was speeding with incredible rapidity toward the scene into which I had wished to be projected; that darkness was all about me, like an impenetrable wall; that I was like one in an infinite, an interminable tunnel, with the lighted picture I had conjured up at the end.

Then that too faded, dissolved, lost its comprehensive quality, and gave place to more finite detail, and—I was in a room. But it was not strange. I knew it—recognized it instantly, thanks to Croft's previous words.

Its walls were hung with purple hangings shot through with threads of gold. There was a shallow pool of water in its center edged round with white and golden tiles. Beside it on a pedestal of wine-red

wood there stood a figure—the form of a man straining upward as if for flight, with outstretched arms and uplifted wings, translucent—formed of a substance not unlike alabaster—the shape of Azil.

That too I recognized in a flash, and I seemed to catch my breath. At last I was on Palos! This was Azil, the Angel of Life, before me—poised by the mirror pool in the chamber of Naia of Aphur—ablaze now with the light of many incandescent bulbs in copper sconces against the walls. All this I saw, and became conscious that, as well as light, the chamber was now full of life.

Naia of Aphur! She lay before me on a copper-moulded couch—and I turned my eyes upon her, her body beneath coverings of silklike fabric.

A woman, of whom two were in attendance, wearing the blue garment embroidered with a scarlet heart above the left breast—the badge of the nursing craft, as Jason had told me—spoke to Naia in soothing accents the words of which I could not understand.

"Murray!"

Whirling, I beheld Jason Croft. Rather, I seemed to see two Jason Crofts, instead of one. One sat in a chair of the same wine-red wood of which the pedestal supporting Azil was formed, in the posture of a man in more than mortal slumber. One floated toward me, ghostlike—a shimmering, shifting, vaporlike semblance of the other as to physical shape.

And it was this second Croft that seemed to speak.

I say seemed, because as I recall the episode now I know that communication was in reality by thought transference, although it appeared then to reach the understanding in the form of spoken words. It came over me instantly that Jason had purposely assumed the astral condition to welcome me on my arrival here.

I HAD been too much occupied with my surroundings until then to give thought to my own possible appearance. But as I put out a hand in answer to his single word of greeting, I found it no more than a thin, diaphanous cloud. I was even as he was—a nebulous something. Still, that was to be expected. I put it aside and considered the man before me. The features of his astral presence were actually haggard, marked by a suffering plainly mental, yet akin in its way to the lines that contorted

Naia of Aphur's face in her present mortal woe.

"Croft, in God's name what is the trouble?" I asked as once more a low sound of smothered anguish came from the couch behind me.

Nor do I think I overshot the mark in declaring what followed to have been the most remarkable medical consultation mortal man might know. He lost no time in explaining the situation. It wasn't his way.

He gave me at once an exact and scientific understanding of her condition, ending his narration simply:

"Murray, you know how I love her. I faced the thing as long as I could have alone. And then—knowing all that depended on me—I became unnerved, and called for you. There was no one else—and you'd said you'd be glad to attend her. Can you blame me, my friend, now that you see her?"

I shook my head in negation, turning it for an instant toward the glorious woman shape on the copper bed. "Can she see me? Does she know I am here? Can I speak with her?" I questioned.

"She will sense your presence at least," Croft said. "I shall revivify my body and draw the chair in which it is sitting close beside the couch. You will sit there, Murray, and I shall tell her you are present, watching, nerving me to my task, before I set to work. She knows I called you,

Murray, and now you must help us both. Your brain must use my hands to save her. Come—what do you advise me to do, Murray?"

I told him as soon as he had brought his almost panting response to an end. His exposition of the problem we faced had made it dreadfully plain.

He heard me out and then nodded with set lips.

"I—I'll do it, Murray," he said. "I—I felt it was the thing, but—without counsel—simply on my own judgment, I could not do it. And—you must coach me. I'll work in a purely subjective condition. That way, even in the body, I'll be able to sense the guiding impulse of your brain. God, man, how I need you! Come!"

The form beside me vanished. The body in the chair flung up its head and rose. It pushed the chair it had occupied quite to the side of the copper couch, and bent to speak to the woman who lay upon it.

I followed. I sank into the seat provided. Croft straightened. Naia turned her head directly toward me.

I looked for the first time into her violet-purple eyes.

They were clear, steadfast, flawless as a perfect amethyst, though darkened by the ordeal through which she was passing—the eyes of a true woman, high-spirited, brave, loyal, and pure. They strained toward me. And suddenly she threw out a



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perfectly rounded arm, a slender hand, as one who asks for succor. Her lips parted, and once more she smiled, a smile so wistfully yearning that my whole heart answered its appeal.

This was Naia of Aphur—wife of my friend Jason Croft. In that instant I felt she was worth all that he had dared to win her. This was Naia, the woman who months ago had told him that in the silence of the night she had heard the beating of the wings of Azil, the bringer of new life, because of which I was here now beside her in that holiest of moments in a medical man's existence, when with hand and brain he waits to welcome a new life's birth.

Her lips moved. Distinctly I heard her speak:

"Dr. Murray—good friend of my beloved, who tells me of your presence in response to his appeal for your assistance to us—I bid you welcome to our home. Thrice welcome are you, upon whose coming depends, as he tells me also, our future happiness together, as well as the life of our child."

She addressed me most surprisingly in English, until I bethought me that Croft had doubtless taught her the tongue, exactly as he had taught her so much else; to fly the first airplane in Palos, the control of the astral body itself. Her words moved me oddly. I rose to answer:

"I am more than happy to be here, Princess Naia, and to bid you be of good cheer, remembering that even now Azil stands close by the gateway of life, in charge of a newborn soul."

And then I sank back, confused. I had spoken wholly on impulse, voicing the inmost emotions of my heart, forgetting my nebulous condition entirely for the instant, in the spell of what seemed so real. With a feeling akin to acute annoyance at my inability to speak thus to her directly I resumed my chair.

But even so, it seemed that I had reached her—that in some way akin to that in which Croft had assured me he would be able to follow my mental direction while working, she had sensed my meaning and intention. Women are intuitive by nature, more susceptible to the waves of a personal or thought vibration. Her lips moved again as I ceased speaking.

"Azil," she whispered. "But—that new soul is so long in passing, my friend."

I turned to Croft.

"Come," I hurled my thought force to-

ward him. "Let us spare her more bodily anguish than must be endured. Let us make an end."

Of what followed I shall say no word. Suffice it to state that Jason Croft labored, grim of lips and pallid of feature; that I sat in that weirdest position of assistance capable of conception; that the lights burned on in that room where the pale form of Azil spread his wings on the pedestal of wine-red wood; that the eyes of Naia of Aphur widened until they were two dark pools no more than fringed by the purple iris; that the two female attendants waited, intent on naught save the catching, the rendering of obedience to each of Croft's intense though low-pitched words.

And then suddenly the man turned to me a face transfigured past anything I had ever pictured—a thread of sound—a wailing, trailing vibration—the first note of waking vocal strings, pulsed through the room—and Jason Croft the physician, the father, was kneeling beside that couch of copper, no longer the iron-nerved worker, the laborer for unborn life, but the husband, the lover, clasping the slender body of Naia of Aphur in his arms, and shaken by a strong man's sobs. I turned away my eyes.

And then his voice boomed out, strangely exalted and triumphant:

"Murray—we win—win, man—thanks to you and—God!"

I turned back. Croft spoke to one of the attendants. She crossed to a curtained doorway and lifted the purple drapings. There stole into the room a girl of Mazzeria—a graceful creature, for all the odd blue color of her skin. Twin braids of ruddy hair fell from her head to her waist. Her figure held all the untrammelled lithe-ness of a panther as she advanced. Across her outstretched arms she bore a pure white cloth.

Upon it, the child of Jason Croft and Naia of Aphur was placed.

She wrapped the fabric about it, cradling it against her breast. She turned to Naia, smiling, sinking down beside her on her supple rounded thighs.

And then—for one brief instant I saw the light of the Madonna flame in those wonderful eyes—the light with which Naia the mother looked first on Jason's—son.

Croft addressed me.

"Maia," he said softly. "I've described her to you before if you remember, Murray. She asked that you might be per-

mitted to attend the—the little one.”

His voice broke. His face was weary, overstrained, worn. I understood. The graceful girl was Naia's personal attendant—the Mazzerian woman, who had aided her mistress in saving Croft's life at a time when he was taken captive during the Mazzerian war. I nodded my comprehension. He bent again as though by irresistible attraction above the couch where the blue girl still was kneeling, and Naia seemed waiting his undivided attention. Once more I turned my head. It was the holy moment—the hour of realization between man and woman.

Through the half-drawn curtains of a window, light stole into the room. It shamed the incandescents in their sconces. A finger of golden glory touched the tips of the upflung wings of Azil. With a start, I realized that the night of anguish was ended—that new life had come into the house of Jason with—the dawn.

CHAPTER II

THE CHRISTENING

I WENT toward the curtains and stood looking out between them, removing so far as I could even my invisible presence from the tableau behind me.

The attendants were moving about. I heard the soft pad of their gnuppa-hide sandaled feet, the softened tones of their voices. I heard Naia speaking and Croft's deeply quivering answer, and once more the wail of the child.

“Murray,” Jason was speaking to me. I sensed his touch on my arm. Again he was in astral form. “Come, while the women perform their task.”

My glance shot beyond him to where his physical body was seemingly lost in a lethargy of exhaustion, once more in the red wood chair. It did more. It fell on Naia. The ray of sunlight had lowered as Sirius had mounted above the eastern horizon. It made her golden tresses seem more than ever an aureole about her face on the pillow—a face grown exquisitely tender, lighted not merely with the sun of morning, but by the inner, the newly ignited glow of motherhood. I turned from it and followed Croft through the curtained doorway of the chamber, onto the balcony, along which one approached the room.

He had described it minutely to me, but even so I marveled at it as we stood together, sensing its proportions, its brilliant

yet not offensive blendings of yellow and white and red. White was the balcony rail about it, red and yellow the alternating tiles that paved its floors. Red and yellow, too, were the steps of the stairs that mounted to the balcony from either end of the court, and red the carven pillars that supported the balcony on a series of arches, between which pure white examples of Palosian sculpture showed. Golden were the plates of glass in the roof above us—open mainly now to the air of heaven, that the flowers and plants and shrubs which dotted the unpaved portions of the court beneath us might breathe.

And then I think I must have started very much as Croft himself had done the first time he beheld such a sight, as I became conscious of a man, blue as the blue girl of Mazzeria in the room behind me, wearing upon his shaven poll a single flaming tuft of red. He was a stalwart man, and he bore a skin equipped with a sprinkling-nozzle upon his back while he sprayed the beds of growing vegetation—accompanied in his occupation by a slow-stalking beast remarkably like a hound.

Croft noted the direction of my glance and manner. “Mitlos—our majordomo, and Hupor,” he said and smiled. “Zitu man, when I told you about them, the last thing I dreamed was that some day you should see them.”

“And now?” I returned with a strange inclination to chuckle as I thought that Jason was no longer alone in being the first mortal to reach Palos in the astral presence, even though his potent will had helped me to my present position.

“And now”—he laughed in a tone of exultation—“you see not only them, but me, husband of Tamarizia's most beautiful woman, and thanks to you—the father of her child.”

“Nonsense,” I exclaimed, doubly abashed by his praise and my thoughts of a moment before, “I did nothing—what can a ghost accomplish?”

He turned fully toward me. His eyes burned with the strong fire of his spirit.

“I came here even as you are, Murray, and”—he waved a hand in a comprehensive gesture—“I have accomplished this, and other things besides—yet not so much that this morning—the most wonderful of all my span of existence, I have either words or deeds in which the assistance your presence within the last few hours gave me, may be repaid.”

And no matter how he voiced it, I knew

he meant it. The sincerity of his feeling forced itself upon me.

"Let us not speak of payment," I said—and I confess I felt embarrassed by the value he seemed to place upon what was no more than my agreement with his own valuation of a now favorably passed condition. "As it happens, Croft, my presence here was no more than the granting of an expressed wish."

He nodded. "The thought is father to the deed—isn't it, Murray? I thought of that last night. Come—I'll show you about the place."

Turning he led the way along the balcony to one end. We went down the red and yellow stairs.

At their foot was a group of sculpture—the figure of a man straining to defend a crouching woman from the fangs of a rending beast. It was of heroic size and wonderfully perfect in detail. I recalled it from Croft's description of it, and how once he had told Naia that so he would defend her were his right to do so granted. Well—last night I had seen him do it. I had seen him strain body and soul to guard her from the yawning jaws of death. I said as much.

He gave me a glance. "You're an odd sort, Murray. You've a lot of the symbolism, the mysticism of life in your make-up. Come along. Let's get a breath of the morning air outside."

ONCE more I followed his lead across the red and yellow court where unknown plants bloomed about us on every side. Mitlos, intent on his duties, knew not of our passing, but Hupor sensed us, I think, and turned his huge head toward us, and stood looking at us out of amber eyes. Then we were outside the arch of a doorway at the head of a flight of pure white steps, on a far-reaching esplanade.

On every hand there were mountains, wooded on their sides. The house stood on one side of a natural mountain valley, in the emerald cup of which was a tiny lake, its waters gilded now by the rays of the Dog Star. And winding past it, and off along the flank of the hills in a series of perfect tangents was a wonderfully metalled road. I followed its turnings until I lost them, and my vision found itself baffled by a further reach of the landscape, blanketed as it seemed beneath a singular dun-colored haze.

In its way the scene was not unlike that of a morning on earth. I turned my eyes

back to the dim shape of Croft beside me. He lifted an arm. "Over there is Himyra," he said, pointing, "but a ground fog is hiding the desert. If you'll look across it, however, you'll see a silver sort of shimmer. That's the Central Sea."

Himyra—the capital of Aphur—the Central Sea. And this was Palos. The weirdness of the whole adventure came upon me. It was hard to realize. And the sun up there was Sirius and not the sun to which I was accustomed.

Abruptly Jason chuckled. "Murray—do you remember the night my housekeeper thought I had died, and routed you out in a storm, and you came to my house and compelled me to return from Palos by the infernal insistence of your will? Well, tit for tat, old man. That night I did your bidding, but last night I called you here."

"Quite so," I assented, smiling. In a way his remark seemed to lighten the atmosphere between us. I caught sight of a rapidly moving object. "Look there, Croft—that's one of your motors or some sort of speedy contraption coming up the road."

He glanced down the course of what I could not but agree he had done well at first to compare to the ancient highways of the Romans because of its permanent type of construction.

"Lakkon, by Zitu!" he exclaimed. "I telephoned him last night, but—I'd forgotten all about him. He said he'd drive out the first thing in the morning, and he seems to be burning the wind. See here—I'll have to leave you, Murray, long enough to welcome grandpa, if you don't mind."

I nodded. Lakkon was Naia's father. And it was no more than natural surely that he should be hastening to her, especially as she was the old noble's only child.

"Run along," I said. "There's plenty to look at. I'll amuse myself." Then, as an afterthought, I added, "Only don't spend too much time with him. I've got to be getting out of here, Croft, or someone's likely to fancy Dr. Murray is dead."

It had just occurred to me that it was morning also on earth and that unless I returned to my body, I couldn't tell what might happen in the institution of which I was the head.

Croft understood my meaning.

"You're right. I'll be as brief as possible," he agreed and vanished, leaving me quite to my own devices.

I smiled. If one considered it was rather odd to be telling a man to go get back in-

side his own body in order to welcome his father-in-law in the flesh—or to contemplate a return flight across billions of ethereal miles to accomplish a reunion between my material body and myself. Myself. I took ~~a deep breath of the mountain~~ air—at least, I went through the conscious effort with all the satisfaction of fulfillment. I was myself, really. I felt it, knew it—and I felt a buoyancy, a lightness, such as I had never known before now that the weight, the restraint of the body was removed.

I stood and watched Lakkon's motor arrive. I saw Croft's material form stalk forth to meet him at the head of the stairs. I saw Lakkon descend from his car and hurry upward, the strong figure of a man with graying hair, an expectant light in his beardless face. I marked his dress.

It consisted of a tunic of purple, embroidered with an intricate design in small green stones, skirted, falling to just above the knees, and the metal, ankle-jointed combination of graeves and sandals Croft had described, plainly fashioned of gold, and reaching above the bulge of his muscular calves.

He met Croft and crashed his flat palm upon his shoulder with an exultant gesture. Croft extended his arm and laid his hand on Lakkon's shoulder. The two men passed inside.

I turned away. There was something vastly formal, vastly ancient, about that greeting—an old world atmosphere—that spoke of age-long custom, despite the throbbing motor in which the noble had reached the house of his daughter. There was almost something Biblical about it, the thought came to me. They had met and laid their hands on each other's shoulders—two strong men, and looked into one another's eyes. I knew it the Tamarizian greeting of unfaltering friendship, no more a greeting than a pledge.

Well, then, Lakkon had gone to see his daughter. I gave a glance to the driver of his motor—a chap dressed plainly in blue unembroidered tunic, and copper leg-casings, with a fillet supporting a sun screening drape of purple fabric, about his head. Then I turned and made my way into the garden. It had occurred to me to examine the private bath.

I found it, screened behind vine-clad walls, and slipped inside it, past a staggered entrance wall that screened its gate. It lay before me, a limpid pool in a basin of lemon stone like onyx save that it was

neither mottled nor veined. It shimmered in the Sirian ray, an oblong of water as brilliant as a bit of polished silver, inside the expanse of the enclosure, paved with alternating squares of rock-crystal and pure white stone. I stood gazing upon it, recalling that it was here Croft had once met Naia of Aphur—the first time when in defiance of all social custom on Palos, she had yielded him her lips.

THEN I went back to the front of the house, and seated myself on a carved stone bench. I lifted my eyes to the light-filled heavens. This was Palos—and up there somewhere or down or sidewise—or however you chose to call it—was earth. It was like Omar as to direction when he says:

*"For Is and Is not though with rule and line
And Up and Down without, I can define—"*

Anyway, out there somewhere in the void there floated the mundane sphere, where the body of me might even now be exciting consternation among the staff of the hospital, where it had been moved and held a little prestige in its work. And here was I. Suddenly there stole over me the sensation that the whole thing was a dream excited by Jason's stories—a feeling that I ought to rouse myself and get about my business. I rose. I felt all at once restless, vaguely disturbed. I turned and found Jason beside me.

"I was longer than I meant to be, Murray," he said. "And, see here—I know you'll understand me when I tell you it's past ten o'clock on earth."

I nodded. It was no time for misunderstanding or niceties of speech. More and more I was finding myself filled with a vital urge—to be away from here and about my own affairs.

"To tell the truth, with all respect to your feelings and those of Naia, I was getting impatient of your coming," I replied.

"She sends you her deepest thanks, and the blessings of Zitu and Ga the Mother," he responded quickly. "I know you know how I feel, old fellow. Now fix your mind on your body—and try to open its eyes."

I was ready. I put out a hand and laid it on his shoulder. He did the same. We looked into one another's faces.

"Some time—you'll come again," Croft told me. "And—now that we've established the astral power, I'll come to you, Murray

—and when I speak you will answer. Don't forget it. Man—mayhap we'll build Tamarizia up together—at least, I can come to you like this from now on for knowledge—conversation. Can you see where the thing may lead to?"

"Yes," I said. "It's big, Croft—big. But if I don't get out of here now it may lead a very important part of me to the grave. Make my adieus to Naia. I'd envy you, man, if you weren't my friend. Now—do what you can to help me, for I'm going to try a pretty-broad jump, as such things are considered."

I closed my eyes.

A sound like splintering wood assailed my ears. A blended sound of voices beat upon them.

"Murray—Murray—doctor!"

There was no doubt about it. A very human voice was calling to me—a hand laid hold upon my shoulder—only it wasn't the hand Jason Croft had laid upon it in farewell. The thing bit into the flesh. It seemed trying to shake me.

With an effort I lifted my lids and stared up into the face of a hospital orderly, strained and anxious. I was back on earth. there wasn't any doubt about it. I was on earth, in my room in the mental hospital and in bed.

"Yes," I said; "yes."

The man's breath actually hissed as he let it out. He stammered. "You'll excuse us, doctor, but you didn't show up and you didn't answer when we rapped—and—well—we broke in the door at last. It seemed best."

His use of the pronoun arrested my attention. I made another effort and sat up. The orderly had fallen back from my bedside as he spoke, and beyond him I saw a nurse—a woman—not blue-robed like those I had seen in Naia of Aphur's apartments, but crisply gowned in white—and back of her the door of my own chamber, sagging open with a broken lock.

"It's all right, Hansen," I made answer. "I must have been pretty sound asleep." There wasn't anything else to say, any use to attempt fuller explanation. "What time is it?" I asked.

"Ten thirty," said the nurse, consulting a watch on her wrist. "You're sure you feel all right, doctor?"

"Perfectly," I nodded. "If you'll withdraw, I'll get up."

She left the room and Hansen followed. I rose and began to dress. Outside a brilliant sunlight was visible through my win-

dows. It showed me familiar objects. The Palosian landscape had faded. It had been after ten when Jason had come to me, to, as it were, speed a parting guest, and now it was half after ten, and I was back on earth. Well, he had told me the gulf could be bridged by the spirit in a flash.

Or had he? I fumbled my way into my garments in a somewhat clumsy fashion. I felt odd. Just what had happened, I asked myself. And it was then that the thing began to seem like a dream to me, really, no matter how vividly real it had seemed while it occurred. Save only for that vividness I think I would have considered it no more than a dream indeed.

But dream or not, it continued to go with me through all the familiar routine of the succeeding days. It kept bobbing up, in all its colorful details. I kept recalling that gorgeous chamber in which I had seen, or seemed to see, Naia of Aphur. I could even recall the soft thud of Lakkon's metal sandals as he mounted toward Jason, waiting to welcome him at the top of a flight of pure white stairs. And I could see again that light I had seen in the purple eyes of Naia—that exquisite look of the Madonna, I had seen in the faces of other new-made mothers, and in their eyes. Yes, if it had been a dream instead of an actual occurrence, it had been very, very real.

For the life of me, I couldn't decide. The mind of me balked no matter what the spirit decreed. As an actual fact, I wanted to believe I was in a somewhat similar position to men I have known, who tried to accept a religion, feeling their salvation depended upon it, and yet could not quite compass full acceptance in the end.

At the last I settled down to a sort of compromise with myself, based on my recollection of Croft's assertion that he would come to me some time for an astral conversation, similar to those meetings with Naia he had employed to sway her decision, before he finally won her and that I myself should visit Palos some time again. If those things happened I felt I could give credence without reservation. I did a lot of reading in Croft's books and waited. But he did not come.

A month passed and a little more, approximately such a span of time as they called a Zitran on Palos, where the year was a trifle longer than ours, though divided in similar fashion into twelve peri-

ods. I had about settled back into acceptance of a completely corporeal routine, and then—once more I had word of Jason's son.

"Murray—Murray," a voice whispered to me in my slumber.

It roused me. I sat up, distinctly conscious of an intelligent presence in my room.

"Murray—get out of that cloud, and let's talk," what seemed a whisper prompted.

Something happened. Suddenly I was intensely awake, and I saw—the nebulous form of Jason, seated against the metal rail at the foot of my bed.

"That's better. How would you like to take another trip to Palos?" he inquired.

He smiled as he said it, and I answered in similar fashion. "If I can make the round trip a little quicker I wouldn't mind it. What's wrong up there now?"

"Nothing's wrong up there. Everything's all right."

His expression quickened. "But what happened?"

I told him, and he nodded. "Well, this will be different as you'll get back before morning. Murray, both Naia and I want very much that you should be present in so far as you can, two nights from now, at the christening of our son."

The christening of his son. The thing thrilled me. It was real then, and not a dream after all. I had really gone to Palos that night over a month ago, and now—Croft had kept his promise. He was here asking me to essay the venture again.

"Of course," he said as I delayed my answer in the grip of full realization, "you'll see without being seen, but—after it's over—Naia wants to meet you astrally at least. Will you come?"

Naia wanted to meet me. After the thing was over and the others were gone, we three would meet as Croft and I were meeting now and establish a personal relation.

"Will I?" I exclaimed. "Well, rather."

Croft smiled. "It will be a somewhat brilliant spectacle. You'll enjoy it."

We talked for an hour after that, before he vanished, and I found myself sitting bolt upright in bed, staring into the darkness and filled with the firm conviction that on the second night from this I would witness the christening of Jason's son.

THAT conviction went with me during the two succeeding days and it was with the positive expectation of its ful-

fillment that I locked myself in my room and stretched myself out on my bed the second night.

I lay there and fixed my mind on the home of Lakkon in Himyra—the great red city of Aphur, where Croft had said the ceremony would occur. I pictured it even as I had pictured Jason's home in the mountains, its splendid court paved with the purest of rock-crystal—he had fancied it was glass when first he saw it—its circling balcony reached at either end of the court by yellow onyxlike stairs.

I focused every vestige of my will on reaching to it, and—suddenly—it seemed that I heard Croft calling me just as he had said he would do; the sense of lightness, of untrammelled freedom I had experienced on the other occasion came upon me—and—I was there.

Light, color. They were all around me. The flawless crystal of the floor caught the radiance from the lights above them in a million facets, broke it into a myriad flashing pin-points of refraction until the whole, vast court seemed paved with a shimmering iridescent carpet. White was the balcony about it, and the pillars on which it was supported, and the gleaming bits of sculpture between. And the shrubs, the banks and hedges of vegetation, in the unpaved beds of the court were green, save that they were blooming, loaded down with colorful flowers everywhere.

Tables a-glitter with gold and glass stretched down the central portion of the sparkling pavement in the form of three sides of a rectangle, with a purple-draped dais at the closed end. Guests thronged the vast apartment, seated on chairs of wine-red wood or reclining on couches interspersed among the beds of flowering vegetation. Nodding plumes of every hue and shade graced the heads of the women. Of every grade of richness were their jewel-embroidered robes. Nor were their men-folk any whit behind them in the lavish ornamentation their tunics or metal cuirasses displayed.

Men and women, they were like birds of brilliant plumage, and as the lights struck down upon them, save for the gleam of the bared arms and shoulders of the women, the glint of their fair limbs through the intricate slashings of their leg-casings and sandals of softest leathers, the rose tint of their knees, they blazed. A babble of voices—the rhythm of music from concealed harps, was in the room. I

indulged in a single comprehensive glance and looked about for my hosts.

But I did not find them anywhere among their guests. Nor did Jason appear to greet me, though that I did not expect. We had arranged between us that he should summon me just before the ceremony occurred, and that we would meet only after the departure of the guests. Hence, failing to sight either Croft or Naia or even Lakkon, I made shift for myself.

A trumpet blared with a softened tongue. I became aware of a page in purple garments, standing with the instrument at his lips, on the topmost tread of one of the flights of yellow stairs.

The thrum of the hidden harps quickened. The assembled company rose. They stood and faced the stairway where, now, something in the nature of a ceremonial procession showed.

Naia and Croft came first, Naia in white from the tips of her slender sandals to the feathers that nodded from a fillet of shimmering diamondlike jewels in the masses of her golden hair. Croft led her downward. He was in all his formal harness, golden cuirass, on the breast of which glowed the cross ansata and the wings of Azil in azure stones—golden graeves and sandals gem-incrusted, golden helmet supporting azure plumes.

And after them came Maia, the blue girl of Mazzeria, bearing on a purple cushion, the child.

Lakkon followed, walking side by side with a man, stalwart, grizzled, strong-faced, clad in a cuirass of silver, rarest of all Tamarizian metals, wearing the circle and cross of Zittra, the capital city of the nation, done in more of the diamondlike stones upon his armor.

Jadgor, I thought; Jadgor, president of the Tamarizian republic, recognizing him from Croft's former descriptions and the quality of his dress.

Behind them, azure-clad—the cross ansata on his breast, a flame of vivid scarlet gems—stalked a man, white-haired and most benign of appearance in company with a second, more stalwart, also in azure robes. They carried staves tipped with the looped cross and were followed by a boy supporting a tray of silver, on which were two silver flasks and a tiny, blazing lamp.

A man with a cuirass, on which showed a rayed sun, and wearing plumes of scarlet, and a woman, scarlet-robed, with the same ruddy feathers above her soft brown hair brought up the rear.

Zud and Magur, and a temple boy, Robur and Gaya, his wife—high priest of Zittra and his deputy of Himyra, governor of Aphur and his consort, I named them to myself.

WHILE the company kept silent and the harps filled all the air with a sort of triumphant paeon, the little procession advanced. It reached the foot of the stairs and crossed to the dais, mounted its steps. It formed itself in a shimmering semicircle, Croft and Naia—and Maia kneeling before them in the center—the others on either side, and before them the boy of the temple and the two priests.

Him I named Zud, because of his bearing and his mane of snowy hair, raised his stave. The music died. Silence came down for a moment, and then the voice of Magur rose:

"Hail Zitu, giver of life, and Ga, through whom life is given, and Azil, bringer of life, we are met together that a name may be given unto this new soul, thou hast seen fit to assign to the flesh.

"Greetings to you, Naia, daughter of Ga, and to you, Jason, Hupor, named Mouthpiece of Zitu among men through whose union Zitu and Ga have expressed their will that life shall remain eternal, renewing its fire from generation unto generation, in the name of love. Is it your will that a name be given this, thy child?"

"Aye, priest of Zitu." Naia and Jason inclined their heads.

"And how call you it between yourselves?"

"Jason, son of Jason," came Croft's voice.

"Then present him unto Zud, high priest of Zitu, that he may receive Zitu's blessing at his hands," Magur said.

The girl of Mazzeria raised the cushion of her arms with the child upon it. The temple boy advanced his silver tray, and knelt. Zud uncorked the silver flasks.

"Jason, son of Jason, in the name of Zitu, the father, and Ga, the mother, and Azil, the son, I baptize thee with wine and with water and light," he began. Moistening his fingers from one of the two flasks, he went on, "With wine I baptize thee, which like the blood, invigorates the body, and strengthens the heart and makes quick the brain." Bending, he touched the child on the forehead, poured water from the other flask into his palm and continued, "I baptize you with water which nourisheth all life, purifies all with which

it comes in contact, makes all things clean."

He paused and sprinkled the glowing little body before him, took up the light and a tiny bit of silver I had not noted before and threw into the little face a golden reflected beam. "With light I baptize thee Jason, Son of Jason, since by the will of Zitu it is the light of the spirit which fills the chambers of the brain. May that light be with thee ever and forever, nor be absent from thee again."

Of course I didn't understand it. It was only afterward when Croft had translated it to me that its inward meaning was plain, but the solemnity of the ritual, the rhythm of well-balanced words, the quiet attention of the assembled guests and the reverent voice of the priest affected me, who stood unseen with the company on the dais, as he baptized Jason's son.

And then he took the cushion from the kneeling girl of Mazzeria, lifted it, turning to face the brilliant assemblage.

"Jason, Son of Jason," he cried, holding the infant toward them.

"Hail, Jason, Son of Jason," the guests responded like a well-drilled chorus, and the thing was done.

Followed a feast, similar I fancied in every detail to those Croft had told me he had witnessed at first and been privileged to attend. Men and women reclined at the tables on padded divans. Blue servitors moved about, filling the golden and crystal goblets with wine, loading the golden plates with food. Once more the harps broke forth. And suddenly from under the farther yellow stairway there broke a band of maidens, clad in garlands of woven flowers, and danced to the music of the harps, with a waving of slender arms, a bending of supple, unrestrained bodies, a flashing of whitely rounded limbs. With dances and music the feast ran to an end.

The guests departed, last of them, according to Tamarizian custom, Jadgor, president of the Republic, the guest of honor, and with him Gaya and her husband Robur, governor of Aphur and Jadgor's son. Naia took the child into her arms from the hands of its Mazzerian attendant. She and Jason moved toward the stairs. I knew that the hour I had waited had come.

I followed up the stairway and along the balcony and to a room—hung here in golden tissues, furnished with wine-red woods and twin couches of molded copper

—with the mirror pool in its center and once more the figure of Azil close beside it as in Jason's home.

Naia placed the child on a tiny couch and covered its sleeping form with a bit of silken fabric. She turned to Jason, her blue eyes shining. He drew her into his arms and held her, smiling.

"There is yet one guest, beloved," he said in English.

"Aye," she responded softly; "but—one who understands the heart both of the wife, and the mother of Jason's son."

"And awaits a welcome from her," said Jason. "Come, beloved." He led her to one of the copper couches and sat down with an arm about her white-sheathed form.

From it there crept a lovely thing—an exact replica of it—the very essence of it, as indeed it was and seemed, as the lights in the chamber flooded down upon it. And that shape stretched out its slender hands. It swayed toward me, with Croft's astral presence close behind it.

"At last," said Naia of Aphur, "I may welcome you, Dr. Murray, as mine and Jason's friend."

"At last, I may converse with Naia of Aphur, and thrill with the glory of her—a thing I have long desired," I replied, and took her shadowy hand and raised it to my none less shadowy lips, yet with a distinct sensation of the contact none the less.

She smiled, and glanced at Jason. "Beloved, are all the men of earth so courtly? It was even so if you remember that you met me first in the flesh."

Croft chuckled.

"Life is much the same on earth or Palos," he made answer. "Well, Murray, what do you think of Palosian life?"

"Babylonian," I said. "You were right in the simile beyond question. I was thinking tonight when I watched it that it was almost a pity in one way you should be changing it all with your innovations."

He nodded. "In a way I've thought as much myself. I get your meaning. But I'm going to try and preserve it at least in part."

"Babylonian?" said Naia in a tone of question.

Jason and I explained, and she heard us out.

"Oh, but—things must change, must they not, Dr. Murray?—and the common people will be so much happier for the knowledge Jason brings to Palos. And even I—think where I and my child would be now

save for the knowledge possessed by a man of earth. It is to you and Jason that we owe our lives. Think you not that I carry your name to Ga and Azil in my prayers—that I have wished to meet you in order to express my thanks myself?"

HER words gave me a feeling of something like exaltation, even while in a way they embarrassed. "I, too," I faltered, "am very glad of the meeting, to be able to assure you that it was my happiness to serve you, and to wish you and Jason the happiness of each other, and your son a long and useful life."

She glanced toward the tiny couch and back again, smiling. "Life," she said softly. "It is so wonderful to hold him—to realize that his life is but the blending of Jason's and mine. Sometimes I even think that I understand in a measure what Ga must feel as she guards the eternal fire."

And what is one going to say to a wife and mother when she talks like that? I know I mumbled something to the effect that what Ga probably felt was an all compelling compassion and love. And then I asked Croft to translate the words of the baptismal ceremony as voiced by Magur and Zud the high priest.

He complied and I questioned him of Jadgor and Gaya and Robur, confirming my recognition of Naia's relatives and his friends. Conversation became general for something like an hour, and then Jason prompted. "Beloved, shall we accompany Murray somewhat—show him Himyra in passing when he returns?"

"Aye, as you like," she assented. "And he must come to us again. Now that our need has rendered possible such communion it will not be necessary for you to seek earth in the flesh when you need additional knowledge, or leave me overly long again."

Croft nodded. "Yes, Murray is going to have his hand in Tamarizian affairs from now on, and the boy there will know more than any man ever born on Palos in the end. Well, Murray, want to see Himyra?"

"I've always wanted to see it since you told me about it first," I assented.

"Then come along."

"But," I added as he led the way with Naia through one of the open windows of the chamber. "I never expected to see it exactly like this."

Naia turned her eyes and smiled as we floated free of the house and upward under Croft's guiding will. "Dear friend," she

said, "you know so much of us that to me it does not seem strange to find you one of us at last."

"Behold Himyra," said Croft, and flung out a shadowy arm.

The city lay beneath us. I saw the double row of lights that fringed the flood of the Na, the mighty pyramid of Zitu, up-reared against the skyline, black now instead of red, save where the lights threw ruddy splashes upon it, banded with white at the apex with the pure white temple of Zitu upon its truncated top—the long line of the houses of the nobles of the old regime, fronting a wide street at the top of the river embankment in an amazing vista, set down each in its private grounds among night-darkened shrubs and trees, the wide-flung palace of the governor of Aphur, once the palace of Jadgor, Aphur's king. The thing swam a shimmering vision before me under the light of the Palosian moons. I strained my eyes and saw the mighty sweep of Himyra's shadowy walls.

It moved me oddly. Already I knew so much of the city's history as involved in Croft's romance. I turned my eyes.

"Himyra," I said, "I shall not forget it—nor Naia of Aphur, nor Jason, mouth-piece of Zitu, nor Jason, Jason's son. Zitu guard you, my friends. I must be going."

"Zitu guard thee," Naia answered.

And suddenly I was back in my own room, remembering her parting smile.

These things have I narrated in order to show how there was built up between Croft and Naia of Aphur, his mate, and myself, a subtly intimate relation that must, as I hope, make what followed plain.

Life went on pretty much with me after that for some further eight months, however, before the events I intend to relate occurred. Now and then during the interval Jason Croft came to me in the astral presence, and on several occasions I succeeded by my own endeavors in visiting him and Naia in their home.

Between them they taught me somewhat of the Tamarizian tongue, Croft explaining that as all life was the same in reality, and the thought back of the word similar in intent even though the word itself might vary in sound, all languages were really one in thought and purpose. With that as a key, I soon discovered that the spoken words of those about me were not difficult for one in the astral condition to understand—that the vibrations of their thought affected the astral shell in

a manner that made their meaning plain.

I suggested to Croft that it was because of that very thing he had so readily apprehended the speech of Tamarizia when he first projected himself to Palos and came down outside Himyra's walls, rather than because of the similarity of their speech to the Sanscrit, now nearly a forgotten tongue on earth, and he nodded and smiled.

"Exactly, Murray," he agreed, "but then I didn't realize it altogether, and—" He broke off and glanced at his wife.

"And you had something else to think about," I said, grinning as I recalled how he had seen Naia that first morning and followed her to Lakkon's house, drinking in her beauty.

"It's true I wasn't very logical in my considerations the first time I heard the language," he replied, and Naia of Aphur dropped her eyes. The inner fires of her spirit seemed to quicken. I think she would have blushed had she been in the flesh instead of sitting there with us like an inexpressibly lovely wraith.

So at least in those months I acquired a fair understanding of their speech, and I came more and more to regard their home in the western mountains of Aphur, across the desert from Himyra, on Palos, with the same intimacy of feeling I might have experienced for the home of two friends of earth. My conversations with Jason came more and more to resemble consultations on modern affairs. He asked me constantly concerning this and that fresh progress in mundane matters. He discussed with me his plans for improving material and social conditions on Palos.

He had already established a series of public schools for the masses where, before his arrival, education of a sort had been provided only for the nobles and men of wealth. Plainly the man was planning to do more where he had already done so much. He had given them moturs—as they called them—airplanes, electricity, printing, telephones of short radius at least, weapons by which Zollaria's schemes had been overthrown. And now he planned to lead them toward higher standards of national and commercial and individual life. And but for what occurred there is no telling what, working together as we were at the time, we might have accomplished.

Indeed Croft had established both wireless and telegraphic communication between Zittra and Himyra, and was plan-

ning railways on which he intended to run motor-driven trains—was dreaming of a great beltline about the Central Sea, with lateral branches to reach every part of the nation.

And then—one night he called me to him as he had called me the night of Jason's birth—and I found him in the self-same chamber, with the purple draperies half torn down and trampled—the fair form of Azil drowned in the mirror pool, beside which the dead body of Mitlos the Mazzerian majordomo lay sprawled.

CHAPTER III

NAIA OF APHUR

VIOLENCE, conflict. The marks of the thing were on every side. The ghastly gash in the breast of Mitlos bore dumb testimony to the fact that the man had battled grimly till he died.

I gazed into Jason's face, even in its astral semblance haggard.

"Croft," I stammered, "what in Zitu's name has happened?"

He jerked out an arm in an all-embracing gesture.

"Gone, Murray," he told me with a vibration of agony in his answer; "both of them—both Naia and the—child."

"Gone?" For a moment my senses seemed whirring. "Croft—what do you mean? Gone—where?"

"Into the western mountains, toward the outer ocean—she told me, Murray. She came and told me as soon as she felt it safe to do so. She came to me tonight in the Zitran pyramid—astrally, of course. You know I told you I was going to Zittra to see Jadgor in a matter concerning the government railroad control—"

I nodded.

"She found me there tonight. She had been afraid to leave the body before, lest something happen to little Jason. It was last night this thing occurred—and my body's still in Zittra." I sensed the tenseness of his emotion. "I'm so utterly impotent to help her, Murray. Would Zitu I were here, to follow and wrest her from them."

"From whom?" I questioned. Plainly he knew more of the matter than I did—as much at least as Naia had told him. "See here, Croft—"

He appeared to grip himself as he answered. "Forgive me, Murray. The Zollarians, of course. It was an armed band of

those Sons of Zitemku that attacked here in my absence. There"—he pointed at the body of Mitlos—"lies an example of their work."

His words whipped my attention—brought up a vivid picture of all the abduction of Naia and her child by men from the northern hostile nation might embrace.

"Zollarians?" I said. "She told you?"

"Yes." He nodded. "They—they must have been planning it, Murray—they must have been using spies."

"Unless," I rejoined, "it was merely a wandering band of marauders." I had a general knowledge of the western coast of Aphur and the intervening country. Practically uninhabited, wild and rugged, it would be easy, I thought, for men of such ilk to have landed on its shores.

"Wandering band?" Croft said with something like impatience. "Murray, talk sense. They knew enough to seize Naia of Aphur—the fairest woman of her nation, of its best blood—the wife of the Mouth-piece of Zitu, who has twice defeated their schemes and their armies—and her child."

I nodded. He had not lost his ability to judge the situation even then, and judge it clearly. I ceased offering either suggestions or comment and asked a question:

"Then what do you intend?"

"I intend to follow her—learn what is behind this damnable action first."

"Astrally?" I recalled that more than once ere this he had adopted such means to gain information toward Zollaria's undoing, and I began to comprehend.

He gave me a glance. "Of course. It's the only way I can follow with the cursed hulk of me in Zud's pile of rock in Zitra. And I want you to go with me tonight. Man, I'm trying to keep as cool as I may, but—I'm in need of sympathetic support. Before Naia left me she said they stopped for an hour's rest, but that before daylight faded they had seen the outer ocean from a hill, and a ship. I think that ship is waiting for her, Murray—and that once we are on it, to see and not be seen; hear and not be heard, we shall learn something of the truth."

"Then let's get on it," I suggested. "This is a terrible ordeal for her. When she came to you tonight, was she frightened?"

"Frightened?" Suddenly Croft drew himself up before me. "Naia—Naia of Aphur frightened—" And then abruptly the force of his thought wave, beating upon me softened. "Or if she felt fear, Murray, it

was for the child, and not for herself."

He turned toward the tiny couch where the infant had been wont to sleep between the twin couches of its parents, and stood brooding down upon it. "Now Zitemku take the scum of life who have made my house empty," he burst forth, and seized my hand. "Come."

In a flash we were outside. And as on that night after the christening of Jason, Son of Jason, when Croft and Naia showed me Himyra, we floated upward. Only now there were no lights to fasten the attention, no mighty piles of architecture, no wide embracing walls. There were just the tumbled masses of the mountains, their sides cut and gashed by night-filled ravines and tortuous canons, and the silvery radiance of the Palosian moons, and the stars. I recalled that once in the past Croft had called Naia of Aphur, still then a maiden, forth from her body and floated thus over Aphur's hills from the house we now were leaving.

And then his voice was in my ear.

"Look, Murray—they've reached the shore-line, and—they're building a flare."

I turned my gaze into the west, where low down on what might or might not be the horizon, but was certainly not the heavens, there winked a point of light, too ruddy, too unsteady, to be a star.

We swept toward it. For the first time I saw the Zollarian manhood in the light of the leaping fire they had built upon a beach. Tawny-haired they were, for the most part, stalwart, with muscular arms and heavy limbs, as they stood straining their vision across the water toward the moonlighted shape of a ship—or perhaps galley were a better term, since it seemed to be equipped with banks of oars as well as sails.

So much I saw—the ship, the bodies of the men, the glint of the firelight on spearheads, and the short metal scabbards of swords, not unlike the ancient Roman weapons, to judge by their dimensions, and then Croft led me to where Naia and the blue girl of Mazzeria were seated, little way apart.

MAIA was speaking softly as we reached them. "My mistress, you are quite assured then that the Hupor Jason understands?"

"Aye." Naia bent her cheek to rest it against the head of the infant. "Be of good courage, Maia, and fear not."

"I fear not for myself, but for you and

that one against your breast," the blue girl answered. "Had it been my part to do so, I had done as Mitlos and died in your defense."

"I know." Naia stretched out a hand and touched the girl upon the shoulder. "May Zilla bear Mitlos as tenderly as my thoughts shall hold him—and did I not name you my sister Maia, after you rendered me aid in preserving my lord—and did you not insist on coming with me, though these men did not desire to take you, saying you were the child's attendant?"

"I came gladly," the blue girl said quickly, "yet do I not understand these sleeps in which you lie as dead, and I remember once when Mitlos and I worked above you thinking Zilla had taken your spirit, before you were the Hupor Jason's bride—and it was even so with the Hupor himself in the camp of the Mazzerian army, when we went to save him—"

"Peace, girl," Naia interrupted, and paused and caught her breath sharply, as Jason bent the force of his presence on her.

She smiled, handed the child to Maia, and reclined her body on the warm sand of the beach. Then she let the fair astral tenant of her body steal forth!

"Beloved," said Jason Croft, and drew her close. "Beloved—woman of gold—we have heard your words, I and our friend of earth."

Naia turned her head toward me from the shelter of his arms.

"Once more," she addressed me, "you come to our aid, good friend. Did Jason, my lord, call you to him?"

"Aye, Princess of Aphur." I inclined my head, finding the Tamarizan idiom in that moment best fitted to my tongue.

She spoke again to Jason. "You have followed me, beloved; what else lies in your mind?"

"Naught for the present," Croft told her. "It is plain that they intend taking you upon yonder ship, and we shall follow you aboard it. It is our purpose to learn, in so far as we may, what these spawn of Zitemku and Lith, his filthy consort, have in mind. Yet fear not—though I do no more than this in the spirit, I shall do much more in the flesh, once the spirit is informed."

"I shall not fear," said Naia of Aphur. "Have I not given myself wholly into your keeping? My part it shall be to meet what Zitu sends upon us boldly and without fear, and safeguard that smaller Jason,

who even now is a mirror of his father."

"And thyself, beloved," Croft added quickly. "Look to thyself. It were hard choice for a father between child and mother, but—"

"Nay! Say no further," she stayed his almost passionate answer swiftly. Yet something like an inward fire seemed to light her mistlike form until it glowed.

"By Bel—they are awake out there at last," the sound of a rough voice drifted to my ears.

Croft turned his head at the same instant, toward the group of Zollarian raiders and the ship beyond them, between which and the beach a boat now appeared.

"Aye," growled another speaker. "And time enough. Look to the women and the slave."

"The time is at hand, beloved," I heard Jason speaking. "Return, soul of my soul, to your beautiful mansion—and think not I shall not be near."

For a moment he clasped her closer and sank his lips to hers uplifted, and then—she was gone and her body stirred, sat up as two of the Zollarians approached and ordered her to rise.

"What did they mean by 'the slave'?" I questioned Jason.

"Wait," he said as another group of Naia's captors led a blue man into the light of the fire. "Bathos—one of my house servants," he went on. "Now, for what purpose in Zitu's name have they brought him along?"

I could offer no suggestion, and I didn't try. The boat had reached the beach by the time the woman and the blue man had been brought to the edge of the water, and now they were thrust in. Part of the Zollarians crowded aboard, and the boat shoved off, leaving the rest of the band to await its return.

Croft and I followed, as propelled by the straining muscles of well-nigh naked rowers, it moved across the waves. With a sense of the bizarreness, the weirdness, of it all, I found myself perching upon a gunwale, while Croft actually took his place at Naia's side.

It was an odd sensation to realize myself a part of that strange archaic scene, wherein a beautiful woman had been abducted, and her captors, bronzed men dressed more in the fashion of the soldiery of forgotten empires than anything else, drove their boat across a moonlight silvered tide. I found myself wondering how they would have acted could they have

seen us seated there among them. But they did not, and the steady sweep of the oars brought us presently close to the side of the galley, up which the Zollarians swarmed on down-flung ladders to reach the deck.

Naia and Maia followed, climbing a ladder with surprising ease until I recalled what Croft had told me of the wiry strength in Naia's supple figure in the past, and I considered the bodily freedom allowed by the Tamarizian fashion in dress. Last of all to leave the boat, before it returned to the beach, came Bathos, whom, being blue, the Zollarians had termed a slave, as were all of his race born of captive parents, in the nation to the north.

I glanced about me, recognizing the craft as similar in the main details at least to those Jason had found in common use on the Tamarizian rivers and the Central Sea, when he had reached Palos first. There was a high deck forward, a lower deck in the waist, where the oarsmen sat on benches, close to a series of ports in the skin of the vessel, through which were thrust the butts of the heavy oars. Aft again was a second higher deck, covered by an awning beneath which were placed padded divans and several quaintly shaped and ornamented chairs. Indeed, the vessel was nothing less than regal, as I perceived. Green was the awning and the sail on the gilded mast running up between the banks of rowers' benches.

Gilded too were the railings of the twin stairs that led up to the after-deck on either side, from the lower level of the waist. And the sheathing of the decks seemed to be made of closely fitted strips of the wine-red wood, customarily used for the fashioning of couches and divans and chairs.

PLAINLY, then, we had come aboard the craft of someone of more than ordinary station, I thought, and gave my attention to a man standing on guard beside a door in the facing of the space between the level of the after-deck and the waist, where, as I judged, whatever private cabins there might be on the vessel would be placed.

Huge he was and florid, muscled like an ox, his mighty thorax banded with metal, fitting him so closely that the bellies of the shoulder muscles bulged above their upper edge. Head, shoulders, and arms were naked, as were his legs save for a short cloth skirt below his armor, falling halfway down his thighs, and the metal casings

on his heavy calves. Thick-lipped, flat-nosed, bulging of forehead, he was a veritable giant, his appearance little short of ferocious as he leaned on the haft of a spear and watched, straightening to attention only when the captain in charge of the raiding party advanced with his captives toward him. But only for a moment. Then as the captain paused, without speaking, he shifted his spear, put out a hand, and opened the door.

It gave into a passage, with curtained doorways on either hand and a lighted apartment at the farther end, toward which Naia, her maid, and Bathos, with the Zollarians who led them, passed.

They reached it, and then, in so far as sensation went at least, I gasped. The room was ablaze with lights that struck back on every hand from woodwork carved and tooled in most magnificent fashion, hung with woven fabrics of green shot through with threads of gold. But if the apartment was amazing in its appearance, its occupant was in no way overcast. Rather, she seemed the center of all its blended richness of furnishing and color. I say she, because it was a woman who lay stretched on a couch of what seemed molded-silver. And such a woman! For a single instant, as I saw her, she seemed more gorgeous in her voluptuous physical perfection than anything in all that gorgeous place.

Tawny she was as a lioness, of hair and eyes, as she lay there on that splendid couch, draped with the mottled hide of some tawny beast; lithe as a tigress she appeared in all her supple, wonderfully rounded length, save for a jeweled girdle supporting a drapery of almost transparent tissue. And as she lifted her fine torso, raising herself to a sitting position before the captain, who sank with uplifted hand to a knee before her, one sensed there were tiny bells on the jeweled bands about her tapering ankles that tinkled as she moved.

Suspicion, swift as a lance-thrust, came upon me as I saw her, even before the captain spoke. "Hail to thee, Kalamita, Priestess of Adita, goddess of beauty; thy servant returns from that mission on which it was thy pleasure to send him, bringing with him those thou named."

Kalamita! Kalamita, the Zollarian, magnet of the flesh, by whose shameless charms and yet more shameless favors Kyphallos, Prince of Cathur, had been seduced. Well I thought was she named magnet—and one could fancy how she might draw men to her as irresistibly as the moth

is drawn by the flame, and with equally fatal results. I glanced at Croft.

His face was a blended thing of conjecture and consternation on thus once more beholding Zollaria's lovely magnet of the flesh. But he said no word, though his hand crept out and touched me as we stood side by side to watch.

Kalamita smiled. "'Tis well, Ptoth," she made answer. "Arise. You have proven faithful, and you shall have your reward. Found you any obstacle worth naming on your mission?"

"Nay, Sister of Bandhor," said Ptoth, rising. "None but the house slaves lay there to oppose us—one we brought with us, since so it was ordered—the rest were slain."

I glanced at Croft again, and he nodded. I understand that, although he had made no mention of it, the fact to him was already known. And I felt my own anger harden. Mitlos was not the only one of Jason's retainers who had paid the penalty of their fidelity to his trust. The entire foray had been a deliberate bit of murder.

"'Tis well," said Kalamita again, turning her tawny eyes beyond Ptoth to where Naia and the others stood. "Found you any trace of this Mouthpiece of Zitu?"

"Nay," the captain answered, smiling, "but we left him ample trace of us."

Kalamita's whole expression darkened. Her amber eyes flashed. "Aye—and may Adita forsake my beauty and blast it if I give him not another. Let this woman wait, and bring me his slave."

Ptoth turned to Bathos, seized him by an arm, and flung him at the feet of the woman on the couch.

The blue man groveled. He made no attempt to rise.

Kalamita put out a pink-nailed foot and touched him.

"Come, get up," she prompted. "How are you called?"

"Bathos," the servant faltered, lifting himself on limbs that shook beneath him, to stand with downcast eyes.

"Listen, then, Bathos," Kalamita continued. "Canst find the way over which my captain led you, and return?"

"Aye, if I be granted the chance." Bathos glanced toward the end of the passage.

"It will be granted, provided you will bear a message."

"Aye, I will bear it," Bathos assented promptly.

"Then give ear. It is for your lord. Return to his dwelling and from there to Himyra; seek out one in authority, and bid

him send word to the Hupor Jason that the woman he has taken to wife and her child are in Kalamita's hands. Say further that they shall be taken to a place I know of and held until I have received word from him, and that I shall await his coming in a hunting house, one of my possessions, in the mountains north of Cathur's border, half a sun's journey, where, when he comes to listen to my requirements, he will be led by men who will lie in watch. Repeat now my own words to me, Tamarizian canor, and make no mistake in the telling. I desire that this Hupor Jason fails not to understand."

Bathos complied. He mumbled the message quickly, too fired by the thoughts of freedom, as it seemed, to resent in the least Kalamita's use of the word canor, the Tamarizian equivalent of dog. "So shall I say to the one I find to send word to the Hupor Jason," he made an end.

Kalamita nodded and turned to Ptoth. "He has his lesson. Take him and see him put ashore. That done, see that we turn north at once, and say to Gor that I deny my presence to any, as you pass him. Take also the blue girl with you. I would deal with the other alone. You may leave her the child."

Ptoth threw up an arm in flat-handed salute and bowed, motioned Bathos to precede him, and caught Maia by an arm. Gor, I fancied, must be the name of the giant on guard at the outer door. And, too, I fancied that, under the conditions, Bathos's message was going to be old news when delivered.

I glanced at Jason, and found his expression one of intense attention. He seemed to feel my gaze, however, and shook his head slightly, as though to say this was no time for anything more than observation.

I turned back to the two women, now confronting one another.

Ptoth and his charges had vanished. They were alone, Kalamita, the Zollarian adventuress, the lure of men, and Naia, Princess of Aphur, with the son of a man in her arms.

For a moment each seemed appraising the other.

Then Kalamita rose.

IT WAS like Aphrodite rising, the tissue of the draperies dependent from the gem-incrusted girdle clasping her rounded body seeming no more than a white foam, a shimmering streaking of froth, more than half revealing what it concealed. She went

a lithe pace forward and paused, still holding the woman before her with contemptuous yellow eyes.

"So," she said, "at last I see Tamarizia's most beautiful woman, and find her rather pale of feature, rather wide-eyed, possessed of a not unattractive figure, but scarcely so favored of Adita as I have been led to believe."

"Favored rather by Ga, the true woman, Kalamita," Naia returned in level accents, glancing down at the child in her arms. "You do well to call on Adita, goddess of the unclean love."

For the moment the Zollarian made no answer. Once more her yellow eyes flashed. Scarcely, I thought, had she looked for the cold taunt from Naia's lips, aimed at her own unsavory reputation.

Then, "By Bel, you dare such speech to me!" she cried. "Think you I have it in mind to treat you as my prisoner or a guest?"

"As prisoner, I pray Zitu," said Naia of Aphur. "Other treatment from Kalamita were disgrace."

"By Bel!" Kalamita mouthed again, her face distorted with passion, and flung herself back on her couch. "You have a bold tongue at least." I thought she seemed disconcerted. She was breathing deeply. "How think you your Mouthpiece of Zitu will accept your being prisoner to Kalamita?" she asked.

For the first time Naia's pale face twitched. But only for an instant, before she controlled it and rejoined with proudly upflung head, "Jason, my lord, will answer that question to Zollaria and Kalamita in person."

"Bel grant it." All at once Kalamita laughed. "If so I shall have something to say to that self-exalted spirit—that panderer to priests, who scorned the open offer of my favor for the softer affection of yours."

Once more I glanced at Croft, and found his face contorted at the woman's reference to the time he was captive during the Mazzerian war. And, too, I found myself thinking that, no matter to what extent Zollaria might be involved in the abduction of Naia and Jason, Son of Jason, Kalamita as her agent was bent on glutting a personal revenge—that here was the old situation of a woman scorned.

Then once more Naia of Aphur was speaking. "Jason, my lord, like to the wild gnuppa of the mountains, prefers that the fountain at which his thirst is slaked be

clean—and like it once it is captured, when led to a foul spring, he refused."

"Thou fool." Kalamita sprang up. The action held all the lithe menace of a tigress's spring. She began pacing the floor with an undulant swing of her body, a tinkling of her anklet bells. "Thou fool," she said again. "Think you not I shall make you repent these words—or that, save this Mouthpiece give heed to my demands and those of my nation, he shall return to your arms, or see your offspring again?"

"Nay," Naia said, as Kalamita came to a panting pause before her, "these things lie with the gods, Zollarian magnet. Once ere this, when you fancied you had tricked me to my undoing, the plans of Zollaria went amiss, and the menace was removed by death. Bzad, the Mazzerian to whom I was to be betrayed, paid for his attempted aid to you with his life, and his body was spewed forth from the Central Sea, refused even by Tamarizian waters, to lie rotting on the shores of Anthra, where it was your custom to dally with Cathur's prince."

"Whom you consented to wed," Kalamita sneered with a curling lip.

"To whom it was planned to give me as a sacrifice," said Naia, "if so by it were possible to stay his hands from treason and offset the work of your unholy charms. Tell me, Zollarian, stand I prisoner to all your nation, or to Kalamita alone?"

I felt a quiver shake me. For all the scathing tongue-play in which she had been indulging, Naia of Aphur had herself in hand. She knew Croft and I were present, that we could see and hear and understand. And she asked a question, fully aware that our presence was something Kalamita could not know.

Nor did she. Something like gloating leaped into her tawny eyes as she turned again to her couch and sat down.

"So," she said, smiling coldly, "we begin to stand on common ground. You stand prisoner to all Zollaria, wife of Jason, you and Jason, Son of Jason. There be two forms of warfare, Aphur, that of wits as well as that of arms. Wherefore, in your capture and that of your child, I serve both the interests of my country and my own. It was so Bandhor, my brother, and I planned."

Naia nodded. Her tone became one of musing. "Bandhor and Kalamita, his sister, on whose beauty he mounted to his position as general of all Zollaria's armies, rather than by any ability of his own, and

the court of Zollaria at Berla, have planned before."

"Aye," said Kalamita quickly, "we planned, and had won, save for the undreamed weapons this Mouthpiece of yours brought against us—weapons against which no army might stand. Yet before he reclaims Naia of Aphur and her suckling—the secrets of those weapons shall be known. The Zollarian and the Tamarizian armies shall stand on equal footing again. Your Mouthpiece and your nation shall go down through Naia of Aphur—and what then of Jason's son?"

Once more I caught my breath. Once more Naia of Aphur went pale as the full scope of Zollaria's scheming was revealed with its undoubted future crop of bloody war, wherein Zollaria would indeed take the field on equal footing with the Tamarizian forces, should Naia's welfare compel the Mouthpiece of Zitu to yield to the demands for ransom the Zollarian woman so confidently proposed. I saw the astral form beside me clench its shadowy hands, sensed something of Jason's emotion, and then Naia of Aphur made answer.

"Yet not so surely on equal terms, Zollaria, since he who made the weapons of which you desire the secret may have others still in mind. 'Tis a poor plan to purchase or barter with unlaidd eggs."

Croft's presence beside me breathed an exclamation softly. "By Zitu—woman of gold."

But Kalamita stretched her rosy arms and limbs with a tinkle of little bells, and remained upon the couch. A glint of something like amusement waked in her narrowed eyes.

"Your position is worth considering, Aphur," she said slowly. "It may even be put in the agreement that he shall refrain from attempting what you suggest—or that, should he attempt it, the act be an excuse for war."

"In which, were the excuse used against her, Zollaria would perchance again be foiled?"

"And Naia of Aphur, and Jason, Son of Jason, be emptied of the spirit."

"Nay—that is with Zitu," Naia made answer. "Ere this my lord has saved me from the embrace of Zilla. I trust him wholly." And all at once she smiled.

Kalamita frowned.

"By Bel, at least you have spirit," she said in almost wondering fashion.

"Which will not break before you, Priestess of Adita." Naia began a slow rock-

ing of the infant Jason in her arms.

The act seemed to drive Kalamita to fury. Once more she lifted herself to a half-sitting posture. She threw out a jewel-banded arm and pointed. Her voice came shrilly—the voice of the termagant robbed of all pretense of control, or poise. "Go—hide yourself in one of the rooms yonder—get out of my sight."

Then, as Naia moved toward the mouth of the passage and the curtained doors of its rooms, she relaxed. A quiver shook her. "Now, Bel and Adita befriended me, and give me my will of this woman. Adita judge between us and blast her beauty. Her son to thee, Bel, if Tamarizia refuses our demands, as a sacrifice. I swear it," she cried.

"Come." I sensed Croft's emotion-clogged direction.

WE MADE our way outside. The ship was in motion, the benches filled with straining rowers, between whom stalked men in armor bearing knotted lashes—the green sail spread to what there was of breeze. Kalamita's galley was straining north, bearing Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, helpless captives aboard her.

"Where now?" I asked.

"Zitra." Croft seized my arm in his grasp. Then the creeping galley, the moonlighted flood of the outer ocean, were behind us, the tumbled region of Aphur's hills were beneath us. They too fell away and gave place to the shimmer of the Central Sea. An island appeared in its center—the walls of a mighty city. White they were as milk in the moonlight—white as the foam of the sea. And the city was white when we reached it, all white and purple shadows, with the mighty pyramid of Zitu lifting the pure white temple on its lofty top above the walls.

"Zitra," said Croft again. "I've got to get back in the flesh."

And even as he spoke, I sensed that we were in a room somewhere within the pyramid itself. Bare was its floor of tessellated paving, bare were its walls save for here and there a light in a metal sconce. Bare, too, it seemed of furnishings, save for a chest of metal, a stool and a couch, on which the body of Jason found a place.

The astral Jason seated himself beside it, and fastened me with his eyes. "You heard, Murray. You see what they intend." And then his expression altered. "Saw you ever a more glorious woman than Naia, wife of Jason? Well, I've got to get to work. I've got to save her."

"Just how?" I questioned, baffled, I confess myself, as to how the thing might be accomplished.

"I don't know," he admitted rather slowly. "Beyond the first step, that is. I'll explain things to Jadgor and Lakkon, of course, and I'll have a wireless sent to Robur at Himyra. After that—well—you heard the instructions given Bathos. There's no denying Kalamita has won the first trick by her unexpected attack—or that she'll enter largely into the rest of the affair until it's finished, but—since she's sending me word to meet her, I think I'll fall in so far with her proposal and meet her face to face."

"You mean, you'll go up there north to Cathur in the mountains?" I asked, surprised he should consider the action for a second, and with a feeling that his sense of bereavement, the anxiety of the husband and father to extricate his loved ones from the hands of their captors quickly, were certainly swaying his mind.

He nodded without other answer, his expression one of a frowning consideration.

"And thereby lose the second trick and the game altogether," I rejoined. For it had come to me that Kalamita's suggested meeting was in the nature of nothing more nor less than a trap.

"Eh?" Croft threw up his head. His glance burned into mine.

"Do you really think if you went up there to meet that tawny she devil, the Mouth-piece of Zitu—Tamarizia's big man—would be given chance to return?"

For a moment after I finished Croft said nothing, and then, "By Zitu—Murray, you're right! I must have been blind! I'll—I'll have to send another than myself. We've got to keep a few cards in our hand. But—consider my position."

"I do," I said. "I understand it perfectly, old man. I don't expect a man to keep cool in a game where the stakes are his wife and son."

He shook his head. "It isn't that only, Murray. I dare not sacrifice Tamarizia, either—and I won't fail Naia. Think, man—think—there must be a way to serve both ends."

"Perhaps what Naia herself suggested," I made tentative answer.

Pride flashed momentarily in his eyes and died. "The invention of another—a superior weapon," he said. "Zitu—the thought fired me when she named it. Hah!

She knew we were present—and she led the conversation to inform us in advance of what was proposed. It was like her, Murray, but—man, how can I risk it? You heard that fiend of Adita's oath after Naia left her—to Bel with Jason's son."

"I know," I said slowly.

"But do you know its meaning?" Croft's question was strained.

"No," I admitted.

"Murray"—he leaned toward me; there was agony in his thought vibration—"they practise the hellish rites of ancient Phoenicia in the northern nation. The child would be burned."

Burned—Jason, Son of Jason—a living sacrifice! The rites of the Phoenicians! The thought staggered me, revolted, as it lifted to mind the picture of Moloch—the brazen god into whose insensate arms children and babes and maidens were cast—and I recalled that, as well as Moloch, that savage divinity had been known as Bel, and marveled at the similarity of names. A tremor of horror shook me. And yet by a strange association of thought, as it seemed to me then, another thought was born. Bel—Moloch—flame. On impulse I named the thing to Croft, and waited, until:

"Zitu—God," he said, and then, "Man—it may be the answer, if there is nothing else. Now, I've got to let Zud and Jadgor and Lakkon know what has happened. And I've got to get a message off to Robur. He's Naia's cousin, as I've told you, and I love him like a brother. Will you go with me on my missions, or will you return to your body, as I must to mine?"

"If you don't mind," I decided, "I'd like to know all that happens, and I'll linger around until dawn."

He nodded. "I'll be glad to feel you with me, and as soon as I reach Himyra I'll manage to visit you again. Look into the thing you suggested, won't you?"

"Go on. Get about your business," I told him. "I'll have the information for you the next time we meet, if I can find a certain man."

The body beside which he had been sitting raised itself on the couch and swung its feet around. It rose. "You've got to find him, man," Jason's physical voice told me without making the least break in the conversation, as he began to dress. "You know, Murray, I can perceive you dimly even so, and I can get your thought waves, of course—just as Naia was able to do the same thing the night of Jason's birth—so if you have any more suggestions to offer

in what occurs inside the next few hours, make them of course. I'm not exactly myself. My spirit is still hot within me, where presently I think now it is going to grow deadly cold."

He jerked the fastenings of his leg casings into position and clasped the belt of a short sword about him. "Now, I'm going before Zud first."

He turned to a door that slid back before his touch into a recess in the massive wall. I followed him into a corridor, constructed top and floor and sides of huge blocks and slabs of stone, lighted at intervals by a lamp whose rays served to no more than partly dispel the night-shrouding gloom. Age—age—the age of the pyramids of Egypt. The thing impressed me. Countless generations had passed since mortal hands had set those walls in position, where Jason's sandals now clanked along the passage. And then he paused before another door, lifted his sword, and rapped with its hilt for admittance. From somewhere a night breeze sighed along the hall and stirred the plumes of azure on his helmet.

"Who calls on Zud?" a voice came muffled through the door.

"Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, man of Zitu," Croft replied.

The door slid back. Zud stood before us, blinking aged eyes.

"Mouthpiece of Zitu," he questioned, "what does this visit betide?"

"Work of Zitemku and his agents," Croft said hoarsely, stepping inside the high priest's apartments and pausing while Zud closed the door.

"Thou knowest of my sleeps, O man of Zitu—and what occurs at times when my body lies sleeping, and how my spirit gains knowledge beyond the power of most men in the gaining—for I have explained to thee, and shown thee somewhat, O Zud, so that by thyself something of the same power was attained," he went on.

"Hence will ye give credence when I declare to you, in the name of Zitu, that this night the woman whose union with me was blessed by thyself appeared to me, saying my home in the mountains of Aphur had been assailed by a Zollarian band, and that she had been carried from it with our child—and ye will credit me still further in that I left the body and went to my house, and found things even as she had described them, and that I followed her to the shore of the outer ocean, and aboard a ship, whereupon was Kalamita, the Zol-

larian woman of whom thou knowest—and that even now she is carried to Zollaria, captive, to be returned to Tamarizia and my house only for a price."

He paused and caught a heavy breath, the fingers of his left hand toying with the jeweled hilt of his sword.

"Zitu," stammered the high priest, advancing a step to lay a withered hand on Jason's shoulder—"may he befriend thee, and guard the woman I know thou lovest. In what way may I aid thee, Jason?"

"In no way, save that I desired your acquaintancē with the knowledge. I go now to Jadgor, and Lakkon, her father," Croft replied. "Grant us thy prayers, Zud, and those of the Gayana, since once she lay among them waiting to be my bride." He turned to the door, crashing it back with a wholly unneeded force, and strode off, clanking down the passage, leaving old Zud staring after, out of troubled, aged eyes.

CHAPTER IV

JASON TAKES THE TRAIL

AT ANOTHER door he stopped, wrenching it open and laying hands upon a cord that hung within it. He jerked upon it, released it, and stood waiting with hands clenched as though in impatience, until there rose slowly into sight a platform, upon which he stepped. The platform sank slowly, carrying him downward inside a rock-faced shaft, which ended in a dimly lighted chamber, where blue men strained about a capstan and windlass by means of which the primitive lift was controlled.

"Hai! The Mouthpiece of Zitu requires a motur and one to drive it," Croft addressed the man in charge.

The fellow saluted and turned away. I saw there were several moturs parked against one of the chamber walls. And too, I recalled that Croft had found a similar arrangement in the pyramid of Himyra when first he called on Magur, save that then the room had been used to house the carriages and gnuppas of the priests.

Croft strode toward one of the waiting cars, and a man appeared. As Jason climbed to a seat he took his place at the wheel and the engine roared. Blue men set open a heavy door and stood aside. Through it the car darted out of the base of the pyramid to reach the street beyond it.

"To the palace of Jadgor, and hasten!" Jason cried.

Then, as the motur fled between the white-walled houses of Zittra, he leaned back, his face pallid in the moonlight beneath his plumes of azure. His lips parted. "Zitu—Zitu," I caught a whisper, and knew that to him in the urge of his need its progress seemed slow, no matter how swiftly it moved. Yet in reality the time was very short ere the official residence of the President of Tamarizia was reached.

Jason was out of the motur almost before it paused. And then for the first time, save as he had described it, I saw the inside of the former imperial palace, with its silver-sheathed beams supporting the roof of varicolored glass above the inner court, its tessellated pavement of sparkling crystal and silver and gold, across which, once he had gained admittance, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, strode toward the captain of the guard.

The soldier came to attention, saluting with uplifted palm.

"Go," Croft directed. "Say to Jadgor, President of Tamarizia, and Lakkon of Aphur, that the Mouthpiece of Zitu seeks speech with them concerning a matter of importance.

"Aye, Hupor and Mouthpiece of Zitu." The captain saluted again and departed at once.

We waited, Jason and I, Croft a commanding figure in his physical presence, clouded of brow and set of lip, standing with bent crest and deep-heaving chest while the guardsmen watched out of speculative eyes this proud man of their nation who came on some urgent, undreamed mission in the night, myself seeing it all but unseen by any save Jason dimly, as he had said.

The captain returned.

"If my lord will follow. . . ." He spoke in suggestive fashion, saluted once more, and waited his superior's pleasure.

"Lead on." Croft lifted his bended head and followed his clanking escort up a flight of crystal stairs and down a far-reaching corridor, resplendent with scarlet hangings on walls of silver and gold.

Before a door of silver embossed with the circle and cross of Zittra, the captain paused, striking three times against the metal surface with the butt of his copper sword.

Jadgor himself set the portal open, peering at Croft from dark eyes set on either

side of a high-bridged, slightly aquiline nose. Seen so, he seemed a less commanding figure than in official dress, for now he was gowned merely in a shirt of silken fabric, reaching from his strong neck nearly to his heels.

"Hai, Jason, what cause, in Zitu's name, brings you to disturb our slumbers?" he began as Croft passed inside.

"Cause in plenty," Croft made answer, his glance sweeping the apartment, "of which I would speak with you and Lakkon. Cause enough to warrant the driving of sleep from your eyes."

Jadgor closed the door and turned.

"Come, then," he said, and led the way toward a farther room, hung in scarlet, furnished with a silver bed and table and carven chairs of the usual red wood, in one of which sat Lakkon.

Croft followed, and just inside the door of the sumptuous apartment he paused.

"Behold in me, Jadgor, and Lakkon, father of Naia, my wife, a messenger of evil tidings," he said hoarsely, "in that the house of Jason in the mountains has been betrayed, and the light of it removed."

"Betrayed?" Lakkon stiffened.

"Removed?" Jadgor repeated. "Jason, what mean you?"

"Sit, Jadgor," Jason suggested. "My heart is heavy within me, and there is much to be made plain concerning the affair."

Jadgor complied without shifting the scrutiny of his keen eyes from Croft's face. Croft himself drew a chair to the silver table, where the other two men had taken place. And then he told them all that had happened, from first to last, save that he omitted any mention of my presence.

AS HE spoke, I watched each face. Plainly the men believed him. Their expressions gave no evidence of doubt. They had been given sufficient proof of his astral ability in the past, and they did not question the truth of what he alleged he had discovered in the spirit while his physical body seemed wrapped in heavy sleep. Jadgor held his thick-set figure stiffly. He clenched his heavy hands. Horror waked on Lakkon's sternly molded features. And at the end it was Jadgor, the soldier, the patriot, the man who had labored to make strong his nation, who spoke first.

"Now, by Zitu, and by Zitu," he roared the Tamarizian double oath, and struck the burnished top of the table with his

fist, "are the affronts—the annoyances—the ceaseless schemings of these spawns of Zitemku beyond Tamarizia's borders to never cease! And if not, what duty lies to Tamarizia before that in the fulfillment of which Zollaria shall be crushed? Jason, twice have you led the armies of Tamarizia against them and their allies. Gather them once more together, with my approval, and punish these treacherous beasts."

And if I had thought him more the man and less the statesman when first I entered the room and viewed him in undress, I felt myself moved to reverse my judgment now. This was no lesser spirit, stern of visage, glaring half risen from his seat toward Croft, leaning slightly toward him, still resting his weight upon the knotted knuckles of his heavy fist.

Croft, too, I am sure, was momentarily moved by Jadgor's swift readiness to resort to arms, since for an instant, as the president faced him, his own eyes fired. But then he shook his head slightly, setting the azure plumes on his helmet nodding.

"Nay," he said slowly. "Nay, Jadgor—I am a man, as thou art, and the notion quickens my pulses, but—in my judgment this matter is less to be settled by force of arms than by a resort to craft."

"Hilka!" Suddenly Lakkon's voice broke forth. "Hold! You would balk the issue? You would seek by a use of trickery—a matching of wits—to answer an insult to Tamarizia and thyself? Was it for this I gave my consent to your union with my daughter—or that she went down to the gates of Zilla's realm in the bearing of your child? Has marriage softened you so much, Jason, that the blood turns to water in your veins? Now, by Zitu—"

"Hilka! Hold!" Croft mouthed his own words at him. His face was pallid, its eyes narrowed, its lips gone livid. "Father of Naia—I respect thy surprise and grief, and therefore forgive your words. Yet speak not so concerning my position in this affair, until you consider all sides of the matter. Think you that, had I any suspicion of what was intended, I had left her whose love is the crowning glory of my existence unguarded in my house? Nay, by Zitu—she had lain in the house of Robur, son of Jadgor—safe within Himyra's walls. And take thought on what I have told you, Lakkon. Recall the oath of Kalamita. Consider, in judging my position, that a resort to arms would forfeit

the life of your grandson and my child. Since you are a father, take heed of a father's fears."

His voice faltered. He bent forward, resting his head upon folded arms on the table. For the first time in all his life on Palos, Jason's haughty crest was bowed.

Jadgor glanced at Lakkon. He nodded. "By Zitu, my brother, we were overquick. It were well that Jason appears to have kept his wits."

The anger faded from Lakkon's face and he rose. Passing about the table, he laid a hand on Croft's bended shoulder.

"Your pardon, my son," he stammered in the embarrassed fashion strong men use on such occasions. "I was overhasty. What, then, do you propose?"

"As yet I know not." Jason lifted his head and turned clouded eyes on Lakkon. "Nor would I have you in this matter think me cold. Word I will send to Robur, and myself shall depart for Himyra at once. Let Jadgor give me orders for the captain of his swiftest galley. Even so my man Bathos will reach the city ere I arrive. And since this Kalamita proposes a meeting at which Zollaria's demands will be presented, it occurs to me that as a first step she should be met."

Jadgor appeared to consider. "But not by the Mouthpiece of Zitu?" he said at last.

"Nay?" Croft eyed him sharply.

Jadgor nodded. His first flash of spirit appeared to have passed. "Think you Zitu's mouthpiece would be permitted to return from such a meeting? And we are to match treachery by craft, we must guard ourselves from traps. Ill as are the circumstances that confront us, were they not a hundredfold increased with Jason in Zollaria's hands? Then indeed would Tamarizia find herself in evil case!"

Lakkon's old eyes widened under his grizzled brows. "You suspect a trap, then, Jadgor?" he questioned.

"Aye, and this lure of the flesh, this Kalamita, is connected with it," Tamarizia's president declared. Warrior, he was prone to think first of arms, but as it seemed to me now, not lacking in statecraft either, once he gave his mind to it. "To me it seems she has taken into account the hearts of men, in sending word of the meeting—deeming the husband and father would rush to his and his country's undoing without due consideration of where his act might lead. Against such an ending, thanks be to Zitu and Jason's

ability to obtain knowledge in his death-like sleeps, we are forewarned, and Tamarizia keeps what yet she has. What say you, Jason?"

"That Jadgor's words lighten my position somewhat," Croft made answer. "Since, had his mind not so clearly seen what in my belief was intended, it had been no easy task to make my stand in the matter understood, and perchance I would have seemed to him and Lakkon rather a man of milk and water, than one of blood—"

"Nay," Lakkon interrupted, his face gone haggard, "forget my words. Horror of what had befallen had dulled my understanding, husband of Naia. How mean you—that Zollaria's terms shall be refused?"

"By Zitemku, the fiend of the foul pit of damnation, what else?" Jadgor roared before Croft could answer. "Does Tamarizia weaken herself or yield one hand's-breadth to that northern horde?"

Croft nodded. "Zollaria's demands may not be granted. Let that be understood," he replied to Jadgor's outburst. —

Lakkon winced. "Thou canst say so, who having asked me not to think thee cold, seem yet so little moved?"

FOR the second time Croft stiffened at his father-in-law's words. His face flushed deeply, and he rose, towering, the splendid figure of a man, against the end of the table, while Jadgor and Lakkon watched.

"Tamarizia must not be weakened," he reaffirmed his position. "Cold I may seem to Lakkon, and little moved, and now, thanks to him, I am cold indeed. Yet have I sworn an oath not to fail her who looks on me to save her. And I shall succeed in what I am undertaking, without forgetting the interests of this nation, or—by Azil himself I swear it—let all men cease to speak of Jason as one among living men. From here I go to send a message to Robur, and after that upon a galley. Come, Jadgor, give me your order to its captain that he may prove bidable to my commands."

For a moment as he ceased speaking silence came down in the room where the lights pricked out the azure cross and wings of Azil on his cuirass, as he waited. Cold he had said to me he would become and to Jadgor and Lakkon cold—as cold as some deadly tempered weapon, in all outward seeming now he was. Lakkon's

expression altered, became embarrassed. He glanced from Croft to Jadgor, and moistened his lips with his tongue.

Jadgor moved. He left his seat, found wax-coated tablets and a stylus, and returned. For a moment or two he wrote rapidly, cutting his official mandate to the captain of the galley into the virgin surface. Then, rising, once more he handed it to Croft.

"Go," he said, "and Zitu go with you. You will keep us informed in this matter?"

"Aye, as it progresses." Croft accepted the tablet. "Zitu keep you, Jadgor." He turned to leave.

"Jason," Lakkon quavered.

Jason paused.

"Depart not from me in anger. I sought not truly to give you fresh offense. And—and carry my blessing to my daughter when next you meet her in the spirit, as she has told me thou canst."

For a barely perceptible interval Croft appeared to hesitate, and then he caught a heavy breath.

"Against the father of Naia of Aphur it were hard indeed for anger to find a place in my heart. Zitu be with you, Lakkon, also," he said, and left.

Outside the room he made his way, outside the palace of Jadgor, once more to a seat in the motur, and in it toward the city walls and the foot of a mounting flight of stairs.

A sentry stood with sword and spear before them. Croft addressed him. He saluted and permitted him to pass. Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, climbed up in the silvery moonlight, his shadow a purple blot beside him, to reach the top at last. And there strangely in all that archaic scene he paused before the door of a hut, above which towered the spidery outline of a wireless mast. For an instant he turned his eyes outward over the expanse of the Central Sea, and then he passed inside.

A man seated at a table, with the key of the wireless before him, started to his feet.

"A message to Robur, Governor of Aphur in Himyra, and quickly," Croft said.

The operator regained his seat and produced his headdress, clamping it against his ears. Croft gave the message. There came the hissing crash of the spark. Strange, I found myself thinking as I watched—an anachronism surely that this youth of Palos, clad in plain tunic and sandals and leg casings of leather, above



"With light, I baptize thee Jason.
Son of Jason."

which showed the sinewy flesh of his lower thighs and knees, should be sitting here on top of the ramparts of a walled city, hurling forth across the ocean beyond him the potential Hertzman waves. And yet it was no more strange than that I should know it—than that the grim-visaged man in the metal harness of a Tamarizian noble was the one through whose genius it was inspired.

And then the thing was done. The crashing of the spark was silenced. Croft tossed a coin on the table and passed outside and down the stairs. And when next

the motor paused he gave the driver another coin and dismissed him. He stood before a galley, moored close to the semi-circular quays of Zittra's inner harbor, stretching like a pool of liquid silver beyond him to the mighty sea doors that closed the entrance to it in the overarching walls.

But though I thrilled to the massive grandeur of the picture, Croft heeded it little. To him it was an old scene, and, too, he was ridden with the spur of haste.

"Hal! Captain of the watch, aboard the galley!" he hailed sharply and stood waiting until a head appeared above the rail of the waist and a voice replied:

"Who calls?"

"Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, with the mandate of Jadgor from the palace of Jadgor. I would come toward you," Croft made answer.



The head disappeared. For possibly two minutes nothing happened, and then a gangway was shoved out to reach the quay.

Croft strode along it, presented Jadgor's tablet to a suddenly wide awake captain,

and was led to an apartment under the after-deck, richly furnished in red woods and hangings of scarlet, the personal color of Jadgor's house.

Life woke on board the galley. There was a tramping of feet, a sound of voices bawling orders, suddenly the sibilant hiss of water past the hull. The galley heeled slightly on the long arc of a circle, straightened back to an even keel. Through the windows let into the stern I became conscious of a graying of the eastern heavens, and then a shadow fell upon us. It came to me that the monster sea doors were opened to permit our passing.

Croft sank down upon a couch of burnished copper and sighed. He turned his glance about the apartment. "Are you still here, Murray?" he questioned.

"Aye," I bent my thought upon him, and he smiled a trifle wanly as he caught the form of my answer.

"Better be going," he said. "But give me the benefit of your thoughts in the next few days. If you've waited until now, you've had recent proof of how hard it is for the father to hold his personal interests of lesser importance than matters of state."

"Nonsense, man," I returned. "We'll beat them. Once you're in Himyra, you and Robur will get your heads together, and I'm going to work collecting all the information I can obtain on the device I suggested earlier tonight."

"Do so." He nodded and stretched himself out on the couch. "I'll use it if we can think of nothing else. You and Rob—" All at once he used a diminutive form of Robur's name, of which he had told me before. "Murray, I thank Zitu for you both. I know I have your sympathy and understanding, and—I'll find the same things once I am in Himyra. I'll see you inside the next few days, of course."

FROM now on this narrative must become, until the end, an account of Croft's efforts toward the rescue of Naia and Jason, rather than of things experienced by myself. For now I was become little more than his lieutenant on earth—a collector of knowledge to whom, when he came in the astral presence to gain it, he told how that knowledge was to be employed.

In the body he went to Himyra first. But astrally he willed himself back that morning after I had left him, aboard Kalamita's gilded craft, where rather than the

tawny siren, the lure that led him was his wife and child. Naia of Aphur—the love of her, as ever since first he had seen her, was a flame in Jason's breast.

Gor he found sleeping within the passage, sprawled barrierlike inside its door. Kalamita, too, lay wrapped in slumber, her scheming brain at rest. Inside one of the curtained apartments Maia slept also on a couch drawn crosswise of the door. Naia of Aphur alone was wakeful, brooding with troubled eyes above the sleeping infant.

To Croft, as he saw her, she seemed then the embodiment of all the meaning involved in the wonderful statue of Ga the Eternal Mother he had seen once in the quarters of the Gayana—the Tamarizian vestals brooding above the altar of the sacred fire, with the form of a babe on her knees.

Thrilling at sight of her so, he stood before her.

"Beloved," he called her.

She stiffened to attention, lifting her head. Her lips moved.

"I have waited thy coming, Jason," she whispered, her fair face lighting as she responded to his summons.

"You heard all, know all?" she questioned as Croft drew her wraithlike form inside his yearning arms.

"Aye—golden woman—and marveled at thy spirit," he made answer, ere he told her what he had accomplished and gave her Lakkon's message, mentioning at the end the possible means of rescue I had suggested.

"Zitu!" Naia faltered. "It were strange indeed, were it not, if the answer to this riddle be found by our friend of earth?"

"Aye, strange," said Jason, "yet not more so than that, despite their knowledge, I stand here now before you."

"Yet he is wise," she replied, clinging closer to him, "in that he saw quickly the true meaning of the meeting between you and herself this Zollarian woman saw fit to propose. Myself have I promised throughout the night that, once you had come again to me, I would see you warned."

Croft smiled in rueful fashion. "Jadgor, too, was against it. It would seem that all perceived the motive of it, save only Jason alone."

"Ah, but"—Naia lifted a hand to lay it against his cheek—"Jason, my beloved, was overwrought."

"Aye," he confessed; "and now it appears

to him that it was on that Kalamita counted to lead him into a trap."

"And will count," said Naia, "not knowing the strange power you have taught me, by which we meet."

Croft nodded. "And through which their every move may be watched. To my mind, beloved—this meeting on which she is bent at present must be brought about."

"But not by Jason!" The fires of Naia's astral body paled in swift alarm. "Not by you, beloved."

"Nay," Croft reassured her, "not by Jason, but another, in a fashion, once I am in Himyra, Robur and I shall devise."

"Hold, then." Naia paused to consider before she went on quickly. "Perchance against a woman, a woman's wits may aid you. Told she not Bathos to say this meeting would be north of Cathur—and sought she not once ere this, when before you fought to make me thine, beloved, to work harm to Tamarizia through Cathur's prince, so that the succession was lost to Koryphu, his brother, and in the elections for governor, even though he sought to gain the station, he was ignored? Think you not that in Koryphu, Scythys's young-

er son, you may find one with hate in his heart for this woman and an agent to your hand?"

"Aye, by Zitu!" Croft cried, gazing into her lifted face out of startled eyes. "Naia, you have said it. Koryphu, and he will consent, is the man."

And so to Scira, capital city of Cathur, he willed himself.

Long familiarity with Scira made it easy for him to reach the residence, which, after the overthrow of his family, had become the home of Cathur's lesser prince. And there he found Koryphu, always unlike Kyphallos, his brother, more or less of a student, already busy with the tablets and scrolls that as yet in Tamarizia took the place of books. Satisfied that his man would be easy to locate when needed, he returned to the galley at once.

THEREAFTER followed a weird four days and nights, during the lighted portion of which Croft occupied himself as best he might, while the galley plowed across the Central Sea toward the mouth of the Na, up which lay Himyra. And when the daylight faded he stretched himself

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on the couch in his apartment and joined Naia in the spirit, going with her north to a Zollarian seaport, and from it in gnuppa-drawn conveyances wherein the passengers reclined on deeply padded cushions, toward Berla, discovering thereby that no matter what Kalamita may have said to Bathos regarding the place of Naia's holding, she was to be taken to the seat of the Zollarian government first. So much he had learned both from his astral conversations with her and the remarks of the guards which reached his ears, by the time Himyra was reached.

Himyra. Croft stepped upon its quays, where lapped the yellow Na, with a feeling of relief. Himyra—home. It was so he regarded that red city more than any other place on Palos outside his own house. Himyra—it was here he had labored—here he had molded the present strength of the Tamarizian nation—from here he had gone twice to make good his claims of that strength—here, outside the circling walls towering like ruddy buttes above the sands of the Aphurian desert, he had seen Naia of Aphur, read love in the depths of her purple eyes first.

"Jason!"

He whirled, to behold Robur coming toward him from a motur.

"Rob!" He turned in his direction.

They met, and Robur clasped him to his breast.

"My brother in all but birth," he said with emotion. "Would Zitu he had not sent this thing upon you. Gaya sends her greeting. Myself I timed your arrival, and so soon as the gatemen reported your galley's passing, drove down to carry you to a friendly house."

"Like thee, Rob," Croft said, his heart warmed by such a meeting. "In Himyra, and thy presence, I breathe easier than for days. Bathos, my servant, has arrived?"

"The sun before this," Robur returned as they moved toward his waiting motur. "Himyra, Aphur, and Robur stand ready to aid you in all things toward the rescue of our cousin. Jason need but say the word."

"Presently," said Croft, "when I sit in the presence of Gaya and Robur, my true friends."

Suddenly he found himself yearning for the compassion of the gentle, brown-haired matron, Robur's wife, who ere this had listened with patient understanding to his troubles—had aided him more than

she knew herself in Naia's wooing. He laid a hand on Robur's knee as the Aphurian drove the motur up the easy grade of the embankment to reach the thoroughfare fronting the Na. "Then, Rob, must you aid me both as a man and an avenger indeed."

"Zitu!" Robur eyed him. "Are you, then, so broken?"

Croft's expression hardened, his voice deepened.

"Aye—I am shaken, Rob, but—once let my course in this be plain, and you shall find me far from a broken reed."

"Hai!" Robur nodded. "That is better—more like the old Jason. For a moment you dismayed me."

He reached the top of the embankment and increased the motur's speed.

In through the wide doors of the palace, with their doglike guardians of stone, and their weblike wings, to the red court where blue men sprinkled water upon the ruddy pavement, he drove. Past sentries armed with spears and short swords, who sprang to swift attention at sight of Aphur's governor, and the Mouthpiece of Zitu—the wonder worker of their nation, descending from one of his own creations—he led Croft into a private wing of the palace, and through it to the inner court, where Gaya waited on a couch beneath a striped awning, close to the sun-kissed waters of the bathing pool.

Croft's heart swelled as he once more entered the well-known lounging place. Here Naia and Robur and he had played at ball more than once together. Here it was she had called him Aquor, when they bathed. And in those shimmering waters he had caught his "little silver fish". For a moment his eyes dimmed as he bent above Gaya's hand, in silent salutation, not trusting himself to speak—so that, moved by a swift emotion, the woman caught his face as he raised it between her palms and kissed him on the cheek.

"Jason, my friend," she said softly, "take thought that the ways of Zitu are past understanding, and that from this further ordeal now laid upon you may come a double peace."

"Hai!" exclaimed Robur quickly. "Give heed to her, Jason. At times she seems given prophetic vision. Perchance this double peace is for thee and Tamarizia also."

"Zitu grant it," said Croft, deeply affected by Gaya's greeting. "It is of that we must speak after I have made certain things plain."

Robur nodded. Gaya returned to the couch. The two men drew other seats beside her, and Croft narrated his story.

"First in my mind comes this meeting with the woman herself. Since she journeys first to Berla, it is certain some time must still elapse ere she goes to her hunting lodge. And as regards the meeting itself, here is what I propose." He rapidly outlined a plan for sending a Tamarizian party into the mountains north of Cathur, and at the last he mentioned Koryphu's name.

"**HAI!**" Robur's face lighted. "Now, by Zitu, Jason, you have found the proper man. True is he in his heart, as I believe, and a sufferer from his brother's treason. He should welcome this task as a means of proving his loyalty to his nation and in so much reestablishing himself—and where were a better agent to represent us before this unclean woman, by whom his brother was disgraced?"

"Naia brought the man to my mind," said Jason, unwilling to appropriate the credit.

"Aye"—Gaya smiled—"the step savors of a woman. Kalamita will gain small satisfaction when she meets him face to face. It is a proper choice."

"He lies at Scira?" Robur questioned.

Croft nodded. "Aye—I have visited him in spirit inside the last five days—and found him busy with tablets and scrolls, more student than man of affairs."

"Then," Robur declared with quick decision, "we go to Scira and lay the matter before him without delay."

"Nay"—Croft shook his head—"first shall I be present in Berla in my own fashion when Naia arrives. Meanwhile, Robur, you and I arrange other details for the mission to this meeting, and prepare to reopen the shops."

For a moment Robur regarded him out of narrowed eyes, and then he nodded. "Has the Mouthpiece of Zitu some new device for the making, he will find me ready to work with him upon it as in the past."

Jason smiled at his ready acceptance. There had been no time when he had failed to find Robur's interest in the modern innovations he had introduced on Palos lacking, or had been denied his aid in their production. The Aphurian was of a most progressive mind.

"Nay," he said now, "I know not, nor will till after this meeting with the Zol-

larian woman. And after that it may be I shall revisit earth."

"Earth!" Robur exclaimed. "When last you attempted such a matter, the thing was an affair of Zitran. Think you—"

"Hold, Rob," Jason interrupted. "Within the last cycle—I have visited and conversed with a man of earth in the spirit rather than the flesh."

Gaya caught her breath sharply. Both she and Robur knew the history of Croft's former mundane existence. Yet now she seemed shaken.

"Jason," she faltered, "as man I know you, yet are there times when to me you seem more like to a spirit in man's form even as on a time Zud of Zitran said." Her eyes were wide.

Croft turned to her.

"Man is a spirit, Gaya, my friend and wife of my all but brother," he said slowly. "Yet now my spirit is heavy, in that I am a man bereft. Wherefore, ere this thing be finished, I shall work in body and spirit to regain what I have lost."

"Enough," Robur prompted. "This is between ourselves. Man thou art, and husband and father. This visit to earth has somewhat to do with a new device?"

"Aye—should nothing develop from the meeting after Koryphu's return, if he accepts. Rob, have you stores in plenty of metals, rubber, and cloth?"

"Aye, in plenty—and if not, since Koryphu's mission will take the best part of a Zitran to arrange and carry out, it were possible to put double shifts at the forges and send the weavers to their looms."

"Then do so," Jason accepted, filling his chest with a heavy inhalation, "for it is in my mind that ere Naia and Jason, Son of Jason, shall see Aphur again strange things shall be seen in the skies."

"In the skies!" Robur cried, his dark eyes flashing.

"Aye," said the Mouthpiece of Zitu, "in the skies."

CHAPTER V

IN BERLA

FREEDOM of action, cooperation, a friendly understanding, marked the following days for Croft. That night he visited Naia while his body lay in a room in Robur's part of the palace, covered with a silken tissue, worked over by Gaya's own maids, whom she sent to rub into its stalwart muscles, soft, nourishing,

perfumed ointments, such as the Tamarizian nobles used.

He found the Zollarian party not far from Berla, confident that the succeeding day would see them inside the city itself. He returned to Himyra for a few hours, spoke with Gaya and Robur, stretched himself out once more, and willed himself back to Naia, and slipped into the conveyance where she rode with Maia and Jason, very much as he had sat and gazed upon her, drunk with the beauty of her, the day he had seen her first outside Himyra's lifted walls. So it was he had promised her the night before he would accompany her into Berla when she arrived.

The entry itself was made a spectacle for the crowds. In fact, it was clear to Croft that the thing was staged. Whatever doubts he may have entertained concerning Zollaria's participation in Kalamita's abduction of Naia and Jason as a state, vanished, leaving a cold conviction that the woman had acted less as an individual than in an agent's place.

Outside the walls of Berla the party was halted by a patrol. The curtains on Naia's carriage were drawn back, leaving the occupants exposed. Guardsmen approached and placed golden bands joined by a golden chain upon her slender ankles, and on her arms. A chariot such as the Zollarians used in war, save that it was burnished to the last degree, as it advanced behind green-plumed gnuppas harnessed four abreast, emerged from Berla's gate and deposited a massively built warrior, in splendid harness, beside the conveyance in which Kalamita rode.

Croft recognized Bandhor, general of the Zollarian army, as Kalamita appeared. She flung herself from her carriage, her face distorted with displeasure, almost before his chariot had paused with lunging steeds.

"By Bel, what is the meaning of this interference with my entry into the city?" she broke forth in a voice of passion.

"Interference! Nay, it is a triumph. They make a holiday of your return with your captives, priestess of beauty," Bandhor roared.

"Holiday? Triumph?" the woman repeated with a curling lip. "Are we then at war, Bandhor, since I departed?"

"Nay," he returned, viewing her rage with what seemed a sense of amusement. "Nor will be—since Kalamita brings with her the guarantees of peace. Come, I will lead you into the city."

For a moment his sister considered, tap-

ping the metal of the roadway with a sandaled foot. Plainly her displeasure in this change of whatever plans she may have had was in no way diminished, but in the end she accepted. "So be it. But wait." She turned and disappeared into her carriage, from which after some few moments she again emerged.

She had altered her dress, and now in the Sirian sun she blazed. Jeweled shields, supported against her fair skin by a gem-incrusted harness, covered her breast—a green skirt embroidered with flashing stones fell from a scintillating girdle about her hips and thighs. Green were the plumes above her tawny hair, and the sandals on her feet, the casings on her calves. A barbaric picture, she strode toward Bandhor's car with its restive gnuppas.

"If we triumph, let us triumph fitly," she said in scornful fashion, and stepped into the driver's place. "It is my pleasure, Bandhor, my brother, to lead my triumph myself."

Gathering the reins into her hands, she turned the gnuppas back toward the gate of the city in a swirling smother of dust.

"Thou tawny devil!" Bandhor cried, his eyes flashing with admiration as he caught the tail of the rocking car and sprang aboard. "Forward, Zollarians—into the city!"

The patrol that had stopped them formed on either side of Naia's carriage. Kalamita's party fell in behind it. They passed through the gate, and between the living banks of a swarming, jostling, neck-craning crowd that lined the main avenue of Berla as far as the eye could reach.

Their advent excited a roar. Small doubt but their identity was known—or that this halting of the wife and child of the strong man of Tamarizia, captive, seemed a triumph to the minds of the Zollarian populace indeed. Yells, shrieks, and screeches filled the air. Curses of every degree of vileness were mouthed. The mob jostled, pressed closer to the carriage of the captives. Someone threw a stone. Naia lifted Jason and placed him under the rear wall of the conveyances, where it curved upward to form the canopy or top.

Her body formed a shield before him. For the rest, her pale face remained unmoved in its haughty calmness. Watching her, Croft's heart was filled with pride. Maia crept to her and crouched on the cushions beside her, plainly frightened. But save for that instinctive guarding of

her offspring, Naia of Aphur gave no sign of fear.

"Hail to Kalamita, priestess of beauty. Hail Bandhor. Hail to Kalamita, who brings to Zollaria those through whom she shall be made once more stronger than the strongest," the populace roared.

It occurred to Croft to see how Kalamita herself was receiving the acclamation. He left Naia's vehicle briefly and joined himself to the woman, reining the prancing gnuppas with a practised hand.

He found her face wreathed in a forced smile, and her tawny eyes, back of their fringing lashes, ablaze.

"Who has spread the report that these shall make Zollaria strong?" she hissed at her brother.

"Helmor," he told her after a moment's hesitation. "So soon as your advance messenger reached Berla, he commanded the success of your mission announced."

"Helmor," said Kalamita thickly. "Him whom Tamarizia has most grievously defeated. Is the emperor one to gain credit from my work before the masses, or a fool to consider a thing as accomplished ere it is done? Was it not agreed between us, Bandhor, that after she should have been brought quietly to Berla she should be taken into the mountains until I had tricked this Tamarizian Mouthpiece?"

"To a meeting?" Bandhor muttered.

"Aye, to a meeting," said his sister, "after which he also would have been in our hands."

"Provided he came to the meeting."

"Came?" Kalamita curled her lips as she answered. "You, Bandhor, are one to whom women are no more than a moment's toys, but to that one, that pale-faced creature, behind us, means more. Aye, he had come, for I sent word that I held the woman, and bade him to a meeting to give ear to *my* demands."

"By Bel," growled Bandhor, "Helmor believes it not, and who was Bandhor to stay his hand? Say what you will to me, my sister, but, once we reach the palace, curb your tongue."

"Nay—I fear him not." Kalamita shrugged her shoulders. "This display is a mistake, as I shall show him. The matter should have been conducted in quiet, till it was past."

VASTLY pleased that Kalamita's plans were already going contrary to her liking, Croft returned to Naia, and remained throughout the noisy progress until the

palace was reached, and she was led inside between double rows of guards.

Into the palace of Helmor, Emperor of all Zollaria, her golden head proudly lifted, Naia of Aphur passed, walking with steady footsteps once her shackles were removed. And Maia followed across a huge interior similar in most respects to the Tamarizian structures, bearing in her blue arms Jason's son. Palace guards opened a door before them. They passed into an audience chamber to stand before Helmor at last.

He sat there on a silver chair upon a dais, the steps leading to which were spread with gorgeously colored rugs. And as her guards led Naia of Aphur toward him, with Kalamita and her brother close behind them, he glowered.

Croft knew him by sight. There had been a time when he had forced him on a stricken field to enter his own armored motor, prisoner of war, and guarantee of an early peace, on the day Zollaria's hopes of conquest over Tamarizia had gone down in red defeat. And now he watched as he opened his lips to speak, in a somewhat taunting fashion:

"Greetings to Naia of Aphur, whose presence gives all Zollaria pleasure, in that times are changed, and that where once Helmor was held hostage for Tamarizia's demands, Naia and her child are now the guests of Helmor until their ransom be paid."

For a moment the woman before him said nothing, staring straight back into his gloating visage out of steady purple eyes. And then her lips parted. "And were apt to be a guest overlong, should Zollaria ask more than Naia of Aphur, or any other woman, were worth?"

"Say you so?" Helmor seemed somewhat taken aback by that haughty response, at which the quick fires of admiration stirred in Jason's spirit. "Yet perchance the Tamarizian Mouthpiece will place upon her a greater valuation than she lays upon herself."

"Those things lie with the gods, Helmor of Zollaria," Naia said, though at mention of Jason her delicate nostrils twitched.

"Did Helmor say that this woman lies as *his* guest?" Kalamita cut into the ensuing pause.

Helmor turned his eyes upon her. "Aye, priestess of beauty, now that you have so faithfully accomplished the task entrusted to you."

"The first step, Helmor," Kalamita dared to correct him, advancing close to the foot of the dais. "Naught save that is accomplished as yet. And was it not agreed between us that she should remain in my charge until after I had met this Mouthpiece and spoken with him?"

"Aye," Helmor admitted somewhat sharply. "But—since you departed upon your mission I have taken thought."

"And Helmor has thought what?" Kalamita stiffened, drawing up her supple, unrestrained figure to its fullest height.

Helmor's visage darkened. "That were this Mouthpiece as clever as he appears, he will not fall into your trap. Wherefore, it were best to retain the woman and child he values in a strong place."

"And forsake the meeting on which we were agreed and of which I have already sent this Mouthpiece word?" Kalamita questioned further.

"Nay." Helmor smiled. "The meeting shall take place. Said you aught in your message, save that she was held by you in a place he knew not of, and that he needs must speak with you of her ransom?"

"Does Helmor think Kalamita a fool?" The Zollarian adventuress smiled.

"Nay—the question were useless, since it was in her mind the matter first had shape," said the man on the dais.

"And Helmor, who changed his form, sending Bandhor and his guardsmen forth to change into a paltry triumph what had been better carried out in secret, nor mentioned until the matter were concluded, in the judgment of her who, as Helmor himself declares, conceived it first," the woman before him retorted and broke off. Her tawny eyes were flashing, the green plumes above her upflung head were aquiver, the jeweled shields against her rosy bosom rose and fell quickly as she panted rather than breathed.

For a time Helmor regarded her closely before he answered.

"Enough," he said at last. "Much may be forgiven to beauty—and much I forgive to Kalamita. Yet lies there a point beyond which Helmor grants it not to any man or woman to question his words. Wherefore give ear, and heed to Helmor. This meeting shall take place. Since naught was said of Zollaria's part in the woman's capture, wherein falls it out any different from what was planned—save that she lies in Berla rather than in another place, under Helmor's protection

rather than in fair Kalamita's hands?"

"Helmor does not trust his agent with a thing of so much value?" Kalamita flung her challenge full at the emperor of her nation, taunting him, daring him, as it seemed, to answer.

And all at once it seemed that Helmor evaded.

"Nay," he said slowly. "None doubts Kalamita's loyalty to the interests of her nation. Yet were it best for her to lie doubly safe should Zollaria's demands be refused, or this Mouthpiece fail to appear at the meeting she has proposed."

Once more the form of Kalamita stiffened into a haughty posture.

"Refused?" she flared. "Nay, Tamarizia dares not refuse, since I shall say to their Mouthpiece that I have taken an oath that unless Zollaria's demands are quickly granted I shall offer the child in sacrifice to Bel. And by Bel himself—"

Naia of Aphur caught her breath and drew back a pace, staring at the woman before her out of widened eyes, as innocence may always stare at the incarnation of vice.

So for a horrified instant she stood, and then, turning to Maia, swiftly she seized the child, straining it for a moment to her breast, and then extending it on quivering arms, uplifted to the man above her.

"Helmor of Zollaria—in the name of Zitu!" she cried.

"Hold!" Helmor roared. "Peace, Naia of Aphur. It seems well I have decided on your safety."

He turned to Kalamita. "And it seems clear to me, sister of Bandhor, that in this you would serve your aims of vengeance as well as your country's ends. Ere this it has come to my ears you have cause for anger against this Mouthpiece because of a slight placed upon you. And in that it is not my wish to in any way obstruct you, save only as toward a glutting of your hatred against him, you would lessen Zollaria's chances of gain. Yet an oath to Bel is not to be lightly broken. And—should Tamarizia finally refuse to yield in this matter or chance a resort to arms against us, we may surely need his favor. Wherefore I pledge you the word of Helmor that, should those things transpire, I shall place the child directly in your hands."

"Helmor has spoken." With an unholy light in her voluptuous face, Kalamita knelt before him.

CROFT writhed in his spirit, at the meaning of Helmor's words—the picture of Jason, Son of Jason, torn from the breast against which now he rested all unknowing, and fed into Bel's foul body filled with flame. The thing was unthinkable to a man or woman of a nation where the gods were no longer savage spirits to be appeased by blood and suffering, but divinities actuated by mercy and love.

And, too, a sudden swift regret assailed him that though he had known of Kalamita's purpose from the first, he had said nothing concerning it to Naia, thinking thereby to save her from the consideration of it. For now the horror came upon her without warning, and she swayed upon her feet so that Maia put out a hand and drew her back against her body in support, and Kalamita, noting the action, turned to her from Helmor.

"What now of that spirit you boasted would not break before me, Tamarizian?" she hissed.

The thing struck Naia of Aphur like a whip and saved her from what seemed an impending collapse. She forced up her head to meet her tormentor's taunt.

"As yet it has not broken," she denied. "Rather will Zollaria's footmen, her horsemen, her nobles, all that strength of which she has boasted in the past, be broken if this thing is dared. And think not the blood of a suckling will give Bel strength enough to aid you, against the vengeance Zitu's Mouthpiece shall send upon you. Zollaria may call upon Bel in that day, but—by Zitu, I swear it—she shall call in vain."

"Enough," said Helmor. "Guards, let this woman be removed, with her child and slave, and kept in a safe place under penalty of death to them who watch her, if save by Helmor's orders, they be harmed. Kalamita, arise. You will depart to the place appointed for this meeting, so soon as we have considered together concerning Zollaria's demands."

Kalamita rose to her feet. Naia's guards led her and Maia out.

Croft went with them. Already he knew in the main what Zollaria would ask—knew in his soul that her demands must be refused for Tamarizia's good. There remained then naught for him save to support Naia in so far as he could in the spirit, and devise some means of freeing her from her present position, other than any true consideration of what Zollaria might propose.

And now it appeared to him that the best he could do was to bring about delay in whatever negotiations might grow out of the situation—to see them dragged out without a definite decision—to gain time, wherein he might think and scheme. Or if there were no other way, seek to perfect some such device with which to strike a counter-blow against Kalamita's nation as that I had proposed.

Such thoughts held him, therefore, as he followed out of the audience room and along a corridor and down a flight of steps to a room deep amid the foundations of the palace into which Naia and her maid and child were thrust.

A little of straw was upon the floor. It was dimly lighted by a single oil-lamp in a scone against one wall. There was a copper couch with a none-too-clean sleeping pad upon it, and nothing more. With a quick rebellion of the spirit, Croft found himself thinking that it was not so Helmor, when a prisoner of Tamarizia, had been housed.

Yet he had no fear of Naia's welfare, the measure of her endurance, remembering how she had lain in the forests of Mazzeria, her fair skin blue so that she might seem one of their own women to any Mazzerian prowler, when she had flown to his rescue over Atla's walls, during the Mazzerian war. Wherefore he waited until Maia had induced her to stretch herself upon the couch, and taking the child in her arms had crouched beside her on the straw, rocking it gently and crooning to it a quaint Tamarizian song. And then as Naia's lips moved and he caught her whisper, "Beloved," he answered:

"I am here."

She sighed, and her body relaxed as its astral tenant stole forth.

"You heard all, beloved?" she questioned as they sat together in the weird communion of spirit with spirit that was theirs.

"Aye," Croft told her.

"Now Zitu help us!" Naia of Aphur cried. "For if my spirit be not broken, as I said to that fiend in the form of woman, yet it is shaken within me, Jason, because of that little life Maia now holds in her arms."

"Nay—fear not." Jason drew her to him and told her his plan to gain delay while perfecting his other plans. "Azil gave not the spirit of our son to us, beloved, to be set free in Bel's unclean arms."

"Zitu grant it." Naia glanced about the barren chamber. "Forgive me my weakness, Jason. If delay seems best to you, I shall endure it, so you come to me frequently; to tell me of all of your progress."

"Aye." Croft's soul rebelled at the thought of her durance in such quarters, though there seemed nothing else for it. Still the thing hardened his purpose, drove one more argument nail-like into the determination forming in his mind. "Here we may meet in safety since Helmor himself denies all access to you. And I shall visit earth, beloved, ere I come to thee again."

"Earth?" Naia's glance flamed with quick understanding.

"Aye." For a moment man and woman looked into one another's eyes, sensing those things as yet in the dark womb of the future, before Croft concluded his answer with a grim assurance. "And when I return, unless our good friend has failed in his efforts, strange things shall come once more out of Aphur, and even as Naia of Aphur warned them in a prophecy of horror, Helmor and Bandhor's shameless sister shall call on their impotent god in vain."

"Zitu!" Naia's astral form lighted with comprehension of his meaning. "Now are you Mouthpiece of Zitu again wholly."

Behind them the blue girl of Mazzeria still crooned to the child which she was holding in her arms.

THESE things Croft told me on the night he kept his promise to visit me again. From Berla he went to Himyra first, speaking with Gaya and Robur, directing the latter to mobilize the workmen who had labored on the airplanes, before the Mazzerian war. Croft also visited the motor shops and gave command for the immediate inception of work on engines of a somewhat more powerful, design than any used on Palos heretofore.

Robur accompanied him on his rounds, his lips set, his dark eyes flashing as he listened to Croft's directions concerning his as yet, to Rob, not fully understood plans, his admonitions for the production of a certain quality of cloth, the mixing of vast quantities of what was in reality little more than a rubberized paint. But at least here was work to hand in plenty—and work that spoke of more work to follow, to the Aphurian's mind.

Furthermore, Croft requested that he see what airplanes were already con-

structed, thoroughly overhauled, as part of the preparation for Koryphu's mission into the mountains north of Cathur. And that part of his intentions he explained.

"They follow a course of deception already, Rob, and two may play at the game. Much must be done ere we attempt a rescue, and toward the doing we must needs gain time. Wherefore since to the minds of Helmor and Kalamita it is unknown that I am forewarned of their intent to hold Naia in Berla, rather than in the place of which by Bathos she sent me word, it appears best to me that we make it seem we are deceived. These planes shall mount the air from Cathur, therefore, and fly above the mountains in advance of Koryphu's party, as though seeking for some place of concealment, wherein her captives may lie hid. Thus we shall help Kalamita play her part to her mind at least, and perchance throw at least some dust in Zollaria's eyes."

Robur nodded. "I sense your plan, Jason," he agreed. "Yet I have taken thought that a plane may fall, and that it is the secret of the moturs which Zollaria wishes in part to gain. How then if disaster comes upon one of your men? Would it not in so much weaken Tamarizia's hand?"

Croft smiled rather grimly. "Aye, Rob. The point were well taken, nor has it escaped my mind. To such an end each flier must be provided with a device by which his motor may under such conditions be destroyed, and with orders to burn his machine, escaping thereafter by the aid of the other planes on duty with him, or in any way he can."

Once more Robur nodded.

"Aye," said he, "you think of all things. And this other device toward the forming of which you are preparing?"

"Nay," Jason replied. "It depends upon my visit to earth, after which I hope to give you plans and figures."

"Zitu grant you be successful," said the Governor of Aphur. "You will seek this knowledge when?"

"Tonight," Jason told him; "after which Scira must be visited and the consent of Koryphu to head the party to this meeting with Kalamita gained. She will lose small time in hastening to it, hoping to add another prisoner to her number, despite the fact that Helmor has altered her plans."

"Aye, and were swift moturs or an airplane to descend upon her lodge after

Koryphu has reached it, it might be that Tamarizia would have a prisoner to exchange with Zollaria without a longer waiting," Robur growled, and laid a tense hand on the hilt of his sword.

Croft eyed him for a moment of heavy silence.

"That, too, have I thought of, Aphur, yet though we match craft with craft and violence with violence, if the need arises, let none say that Zitu's Mouthpiece counseled the violation of an embassy's seeming or used it as a mask to another purpose than that to which it sets forth."

"But—if this Zollarian plans to trick you into her hands by such a meeting?" Robur flushed a trifle under the implied rebuke of Croft's words.

"Nay, she will fail," said Jason. "Yet think not, meaning to seize me if so it falls out according to her wishes, she will come to that place so poorly guarded that an attempt to make her captive would result in aught save a clash of arms. Wherefore let her fail of her aim and return to Berla the next time with empty hands. How stands Zollaria then, save to deal direct with Zittra, which shall quibble with her—neither accepting nor refusing, appointing a place perhaps for a more representative meeting, while you and I, Rob, labor over our designs?"

"I have talked with Zittra by means of the message tower you have placed in Himyra and upon Zittra's walls," Robur replied. "Jadgor, my father, stands ready to aid you in whatsoever way he can, and the spirit of Lakkon writhes with thoughts of his daughter. May I say to them those things, with which you have made me acquainted?"

"Aye," Croft assented. "Say also that Naia sends a greeting to her father, and that at present she lies safe from harm. Come, let us return to the palace since things are now arranged."

Robur nodded. They entered his motor and drove back toward the red court, and the residential wing of the Aphurian government buildings, side by side, as they had on many another occasion when they labored together in Himyra's shops.

And that night it was Croft made his promised visit to me to discover what I had learned concerning the thing on which more than anything else Naia's rescue appeared to depend.

I was ready for him. I had not delayed in instituting my efforts at gaining the knowledge the use of which I had sug-

gested, and I had been fortunate indeed. I had found the man I wanted almost at once—one who had served his country well in the chemical arm of the service, and was therefore qualified to give me the information of which I stood in need. My greatest difficulty had been in convincing him that I desired the knowledge for no improper use, but in the end I surmounted the task. And that night after Jason had roused me to his presence I recited the formula to him, and he cried out:

"Zitu! Murray, the thing can be accomplished! Palos holds all that will be required."

CONSIDERING the stage of life on the other planet, that was a self-evident fact, but I knew he meant more than that. Before the Mazzerian war he had established a laboratory at Himyra in which he and Naia had gone more or less fully into chemical matters, and I felt he was fully assured concerning the things of which he spoke.

"Good," I said "then you can make it?"

His thought waves beat back at me in a very passion of conviction. "Yes, and we'll carry it to them in something like your earth-born blimps—isn't that what you told me you called them when I was here in your institution as a patient?"

"Blimps—dirigibles, you mean?" I questioned.

"Yes," he said. "That's what I've been considering making, though I haven't told Rob about it yet. They'll be far more stable for the purpose than planes."

"Why, yes," I agreed. "Croft, it's a rather peculiar thing, but before the armistice was signed in Europe each side was planning to blot out the major cities of the opposing nations beneath a fiery rain."

For that was the thing I had proposed to Jason, and the secret for the production of the unquenchable liquid fire which could be stored and carried, and sprayed in a rain of death upon those against whom it was used, was the thing I had gained from Captain Gaylor, formerly connected with the department of gas and flame.

Horrible—well, yes, but surely subtly suited to Croft's needs for use against the nation which, enraged by the defeat of its former plans for aggrandizement at the expense of the country he served, had struck against the most sacred, the highest

and holiest interests of his life—seeking in such fashion, rather than by any legitimate method, to finally effect their aims—a nation, a representative of which I myself had heard in the spirit at least vow that, unless those aims were thereby accomplished, an innocent child should be sacrificed to a savage deity by fire.

Yet because of Kalamita's oath and Helmor's agreement, a move to exercise force in her rescue would be equally fatal, unless—well, unless it was a force that could strike silently and swiftly—a force in the nature of a total and terrifying surprise. And surely the blimps—the dirigible balloons Croft suggested, equipped with a flame-spraying device and plenty of liquid fire, might well prove a terrifying, a paralyzing spectacle to even Helmor's and Kalamita's eyes. Paralyzing not only to the body, but to the brain itself—warranted to make simple any bargain which would preserve themselves and Berla from a blazing rain of death.

His whole astral presence glowed with the intensity of his emotions, the deadly determination by which he was stirred. For the first time I realized fully how he had won Naia against all opposition, and had carried all before him in Palos after he gained existence on the planet in the flesh. No ordinary mind could stand against such concentrated mental force.

"By Zitu," I cried, "I believe you!" I felt a quiver shake me. It was as though already the doom of Helmor's plans and Kalamita's vengeance was sealed. "Croft," I questioned, "you know the general nature of these blimps?"

"Aye," He nodded. "But if you have any suggestions, Murray—"

"Well," I said, "Captain Gaylor gave me the general plan in describing how the stuff you're going to demonstrate to Helmor was to be carried—as well as a description of the fire bombs they meant to carry aboard their planes. You know just before the armistice, Jason, there was talk of a new deadlier gas. In reality it wasn't gas at all, but this stuff of which I've told you. The gas talk was just a mask."

"Go on—tell me, Murray," he prompted tensely. "Give me all you can to begin with, though if I get stuck I'll be back again, of course."

"Of course," I said, and told him all I knew myself, while he drank in my descriptions, storing them in his mind for future use, his expression firing now and then as he pictured the creation of the

monster envelopes, the suspended cars, the motive power by which they should be flown across the Central Sea and Mazhur, to hang a sudden embodiment of Tamarizia's answer, above Berla, freighted with their deadly stores.

"Murray," he exclaimed when I had finished, "Naia of Aphur, and Jason, Son of Jason, will owe you their salvation."

I couldn't answer, and I didn't try. I said instead, "The thing seems plausible to me, Croft."

"Plausible," he repeated. "It shall be accomplished. Now, Koryphu may start upon his mission, while every shop and forge in Himyra roars."

I asked a question. "By the way, how does the populace cotton to this fresh Zollarian move?"

"They don't know it yet, old fellow." He gave me a glance. "You know, Murray, Tamarizia, even yet, isn't earth. There's only the wireless between Himyra and Zitira, and a telegraph across the Gateway to Scira in Cathur—but in view of what's going to happen in Himyra almost at once—the preparations, I mean—I think I'll tell them, and suggest that in Zitira the masses be informed by Zud—that Zollaria has struck at the Mouthpiece of Zitu in order to coerce the nation. It won't do any harm to have the sympathy of the populace behind us in this."

"Nor in Scira," I said. "Cathur hasn't forgotten how nearly she was enslaved, I imagine—or that her fate would have been the same as Mazhur's for fifty years, if it had not been for the Mouthpiece of Zitu's intervention in hers and Tamarizia's behalf. And see here, Croft—if you've a telegraph up there, why don't you send Koryphu a message instead of going after him yourself? You've enough to tend to in the matter of the blimps without trapezing about."

HE smiled for the first time. "It might do here, but not on Palos, Murray. They're great for delegations, personal representation—the old ways. You can't change them all at once. But—it won't do any harm to announce my coming or its reason, or that the Mouthpiece of Zitu comes in person to the house of Koryphu. That in itself might even serve in preparing the mind of Cathur's prince for the proposition I shall make him once I arrive. According to Palosian standards, Murray, even though it sounds bald for me to say so, such an occasion should be

an important event in Koryphu's life."

"Yes," I agree and nodded. More and more it impressed me that Croft's mind was working again in its normal fashion, now he had actually decided on a definite course. "Being honored by a visit from the Mouthpiece of Zitu, publicly announced in connection with Zollaria's action, ought to impress him favorably, I guess. His fellow citizens can scarcely fail to draw the connection, and besides it will give him a chance to put a spoke in Kalamita's wheel, perhaps—at least to meet the woman who brought disgrace and death upon his brother face to face. If he's human, Jason, he'll accept."

"He's human enough," said Croft. "Murray, I actually feel as though I were facing some positive action at last. It's a relief. Ever since this thing happened I've been in an even worse state than I was after I'd seen Naia first—and before I'd managed to acquire a physical life on Palos. There was a barrier between us then that seemed insurmountable, as you know, and yet I knew her, the one woman, in all the teeming multitudes of feminine spirits I had ever longed to know. I—I knew her—mine. And now there's another barrier between us, scarcely less fatal, though of a different kind."

"But—you overcame the first, and—"

"I'll overcome the second," he interrupted in a flash. "I get your meaning, and I'll do it. Zitu, what did I not overcome to reach her in the first place! But I reached her, and I'll reach her again."

I didn't doubt it. Again I felt to its full the driving power in the will of Jason Croft. And at last the man was aroused—at last he had become less man, torn and harried by the loss of his dearest possessions, than an intelligent fighting force. Or so he impressed me as he sat there in the astral body, while his physical form lay billions of miles beyond us both, in Himyra, at Robur's house.

"Aye, you'll reach her," I said, and looked him in the eyes. "You'll reach her, Croft, and Naia and Jason, Son of Jason, will come back to Aphur and to Jason's house."

"Aye, by Zitu! Murray, your words fire me. I go to make them true, and Zitu guard you!"

He vanished, leaving me to open my bodily eyes.

Darkness met them. There was naught but the night in the room. Yet I had seen Jason's figure plainly while we conversed, and I did not doubt he had been able to

equally perceive mine. What, then, was the answer? Was there no darkness to the spirit, even as between Palos and earth outside of the atmospheric envelope there was no time? Was the riddle held in that? Was there no such thing as darkness; concealment to the understanding mind?

Was it only the objective eye for which light was a necessity toward making the truths of creation plain? Was it only the physical ear that required the vibration of sound? Were time, light, sound, touch, but material things? Was rhythm the basic principle of soul existence as expressed in mind? Certainly Croft and I conversed as easily by thought transference, a variant of astral vibration, as in the body we would have used spoken words. What, then? Were life, consciousness, rhythm, all, but expressions of a universal force—existing already bridgelike between God's far-flung world?

CHAPTER VI

PREPARING THE PEOPLE

CROFT went not to Himyra, however, as I fancied, but to Zittra, after he left me, and the sleeping apartment of Zud, taking his stand close to where the high priest lay wrapped in slumber on a copper couch.

"Zud! Zud! Man of Zitu!" he let the call of his spirit steal forth. Once in a past time he had taught the high priest something of the astral body, finding it necessary to his purpose then to convince him of the truth. And he had told him that when he should call him in the future he would answer.

"My lord," he muttered. "Aye—my lord."

"Spirit of Zud—come forth!"

Zud of Zittra's body relaxed. His spirit obeyed. Mistlike it hovered above his physical form.

"My lord," it faltered again.

"Peace," said Croft. "Ye have answered me, Zud, in such wise. Give ear and obey me in the flesh, when dawn comes again to the world. I, Mouthpiece, say unto thee this:

"Word of the abduction of Naia, wife of Jason, and of Jason, Son of Jason, shall be noised abroad. Be it said that Zollaria, envious of Tamarizia's progress, has seized them and borne them into her country, holding them ransom to her demands against this nation, under penalty of death to Jason's son.

"Let it be understood. Let Zud himself sponsor the announcement, first going to Jadgor's palace and saying to Jadgor that Jason, the Mouthpiece of Zitu, gives the word.

"Say also to Jadgor that Jason requires him to send, from the tower on Zittra's walls, word to Mutlos, Governor of Cathur, requesting him to see that word is spread in Scira—also that Jason himself shall not come to Scira to hold speech with Koryphu on the matter—and that he notify Scythys' younger son. Let this be done by command of Jadgor. The message being received from him in Himyra will be forwarded to Scira at once."

"Aye, Mouthpiece of Zitu," Zud made answer. "Once ere this have ye appeared in such guise before me, and I obeyed thee. Even so shall I obey you now. These things shall be done."

"Yet counsel the people to remain calm in the announcement," Jason said. "Zitu's Mouthpiece desires no more than their sympathy in this."

"But the woman—my lord has word of her and the infant?" the high priest questioned.

"Aye," Croft told him. "As Zud knows, I may meet with her in the spirit even as with Zud himself."

"Aye"—Zud inclined his astral head—"that Zud no longer doubts, since within his knowledge it is proved."

"Say also to Jadgor that Jason goes to Himyra to labor in the flesh with Robur, son of Jadgor," Croft continued. "Now return to thy body and finish thy slumbers, man of Zitu. Yet, waking, see that in all things my counsel is obeyed."

"Aye, Zud obeys on waking," the high priest promised.

"In Zitu's name," said Croft, and with that he left.

Dawn was breaking over Zittra as he emerged from the pyramid and made his way swiftly north.

Dawn was breaking over Berla when he reached it. It struck him through a tiny orifice for ventilation high in the wall, and fell in a golden shaft of light across the dungeon in which Naia of Aphur prayed to Ga, Mother of Life Eternal, for aid.

Then as she moved and rose from her knees, he called her, as always:

"Beloved."

Naia of Aphur heard, and smiled. Seating herself beside the child, she let the soul of her womanhood steal forth.

"Jason, Jason," she cried, the flame of life within her swiftly glowing with the meaning of his presence, "you come to me with the dawn, from whence, my dear one?"

And Jason Croft answered her simply, "From earth."

"And?" She stood before him—searching his soul for some hint of those things he had brought within it. "Jason—"

Croft replied to that appeal in almost cryptic fashion, yet knowing she would understand. "True, woman who prays to Ga for courage, it is a new dawn for us indeed."

"Praise Zitu." She wavered toward him. For a moment it was as though their two beings blended, lost each itself in the other, became one. And then Naia lifted a face exalted by a new hope. "Yet not so much for myself do I praise him, beloved, as for the little one. Knowledge, waited you then when you arrived?"

"Knowledge," said Croft, still holding her to him. "Aye, knowledge enough to make Zollaria a waste of scorching bones, a burned-out world, if so by I may hold not only thy spirit but thy body again in my arms."

Naia's astral being quivered; she lifted her eyes to the fading spot of sunlight. "Then," said she in a whisper of understanding, "this dawn on which I lifted my woman's cry to Ga is a new dawn for us indeed—and once more courage fills my being. Go, beloved—hasten that other day which shall bring me again to thee. The past sun Kalamita departed for, as she hopes, a meeting with you. She and the giant who attends her, Gor by name, came, ere she left, to this chamber, asking what message I would send to the Mouthpiece of Zitu."

"And Naia of Aphur told her what?" Croft questioned, looking into the eyes beneath his.

"To tell you when she met you that Naia loved both Tamarizia and thee."

"And what said Zollaria's magnet to such a message?" Jason asked.

Naia of Aphur smiled as she answered. "Nay—she seemed not overly well pleased with it. She bade Gor strip my signet ring from my finger. Be warned against any message wherein it may be used as a seeming proof of word from me."

"Aye," said Jason, scowling at this fresh proof of duplicity in Zollaria's dealing; "such trickery shall gain them nothing."

Naia nodded. "Yet I think I puzzled her

somewhat, since I myself took the ring from my hand ere Gor could touch me, and gave it to him, knowing full well I could explain when next we spoke together, and liking not the thought of his hands upon me—or the touch of any man save only Lakkon and thee.”

Croft bent his lips to those below them, thinking even in that instant that Kalamita had gained small satisfaction thus far in her meetings with Naia of Aphur, and asking himself what use the Zollarian siren might mean to make of the ring—a bit of purple stone into which was cut the ideographic symbol of Naia’s name.

“Kalamita plays an impossible game,” he said, “since, thanks to our ability thus to speak together, her moves and even her intent is known. Be of good courage, therefore, beloved. I go now to Himyra to prepare against the day when in truth you shall feel *my* touch again.”

The waters of the Central Sea were a golden ripple in the early sunshine, as he sped back then to Himyra and opened the eyes of his body to Robur’s wing of the palace and sat up on his couch.

THROUGHOUT the next day Jason and Robur passed from one place to another, calling the captains, whom Croft himself had trained, before them, explaining, issuing their orders, bidding them put night shifts to work upon the task—giving here the commands for the forging of copper beams and trusses—there the design for huge tanks in which the death-dealing liquid fire would be stored.

Late in the afternoon, bulletins struck off Jason’s presses appeared posted on the corners—flaunting the news of Zollaria’s latest move before the people’s eyes. Those who could read gathered about them and translated the message of ink and paper to their less erudite fellows. Inside an hour Himyra was howling with anger and amaze.

Leaving the metal foundry, where they had been giving orders for the making of the fire-containing tanks, Croft and Robur found their motur all but mobbed by a wildly inflamed crowd. The caution for a quiet acceptance included in the bulletins was temporarily ignored. Naia of Aphur, the beauty of the state, was captive. The Mouthpiece of Zitu—the strong man who had twice brought the northern nation’s plans to disaster—was robbed of wife and child.

“To Zollaria! To Berla! Seize and punish! Death to the spawn of Zitemku—the

torturers of women and children!” the populace howled.

Corner orators appeared and harangued their fellows, giving way as Robur’s car approached with the sun flag of Aphur flapping above it, to point toward Jason, and shriek that here was the Mouthpiece himself.

Time after time Croft was forced to rise and address the seething press of men and women that blocked the thoroughfare, begging them to give him passage on an errand connected with the safety of Naia and Jason—counseling a quiet demeanor—asking the sympathy and support of the men of Aphur in his endeavors to meet the situation—suggesting that any move of a violent nature would hinder rather than help him in the present instance—promising action—declaring that in order to keep spies from Himyra all vessels mounting the Na would be searched by Aphurian guardsmen, and that all strangers would be stopped at Himyra’s walls.

Time and again Robur rose to stand beside him in the motur. “Zitu’s Mouthpiece has spoken. Aphur hears and obeys. Give way. The Mouthpiece goes to Scira to organize a mission!” he roared.

“To what end?” a strong voice questioned on one such occasion. Despite their royal caste, the Tamarizians were a democratic nation.

“To meet an emissary of the northern nation,” Robur replied.

“Then let the mission be one of the sword.”

“Nay. Not so says the Mouthpiece of Zitu, who plans already a different measure,” Aphur’s governor answered.

“Silence. Give ear to the Mouthpiece of Zitu!” yelled the crowd. “Make way—he desires a passage! Make way! He goes to Scira.”

The press opened, making a free way. The motur moved forward. “They are with you,” said Robur, speeding the car toward the gates of Himyra according to their plans to visit the airplane hangars beyond the walls.

“Aye.” Croft nodded. That quickly up-flaring spontaneous anger and rage of Himyra’s population acted as a subtle tonic to his spirit, set his heart to beating faster, woke a strange fire of unfaltering purpose in his eyes.

At the hangars he explained the situation and called for volunteers from among the fliers to cross the Gateway and land of Scira, later taking up the deceptive patrol

above the mountains north of the Cathurian border he had already planned.

They heard him and stepped forward in a body. Not one man held back. They pressed close before him with eager faces. Again his heart was warmed. He had organized their force. By himself and Naia most of them had been trained. Nominally at least he was their commander-in-chief. They were the pick of Tamarizian manhood—as eager to dare the venture as restrained hounds on a leash.

He selected a half dozen quickly, telling them they must destroy both moturs and planes if disaster overtook them and forced a landing on Zollarian terrain, explaining that Robur would see them equipped with small grenades by which the moturs could be blown to atoms.

Their faces stiffened a trifle, but they did not falter.

"Aye—they shall not have them," they made answer.

"By Zitu," Jason prompted.

"By Zitu," they returned.

Croft saluted them flat-handed. "It is an oath," he said. "To break it were treason to the nation. In four days you will descend at Scira. Look to your machines."

Back in the motur he found his pulses leaping to the spur of action and the *esprit du corps* among the fliers he had seen. They were men, men—their number would furnish him others—to man the blimps and urge them over Berla—if need be, to blot out the Zollarian city beneath a fiery rain.

"Tonight, Rob, I give you many plans and dimensions," he told Robur, breaking the silence of his introspection. "That done, I board Jadgor's galley for Scira. Till I return, the work lies in your hands."

ALL Scira was *en fête*, or seemed so, though there was a strange sullenness about her crowds, despite the flags, the banners that decked the houses and lined the streets, and flew above her blue walls.

The Mouthpiece of Zitu was coming from Aphur on a mission, and the city was adorned to greet him by the orders of Mutlos, Governor of Cathur himself. The throngs which waited his coming, to welcome him, and escort him to the house of Koryphu, where the sun-rayed banner of Aphur hung beside that of Cathur in the almost breathless air, wore their brightest garments. But his mission forbade holiday spirits in the minds of the crowd.

True, vendors of sweetmeats and light wines in tabur hide sacks slung on sinewy, naked shoulders, passed among them, jugglers and acrobats performed their tricks and feats of strength on mats spread on the pavement. But that was merely the seeking of profit on the part of those who plied their various trades. It had naught to do with the kidnapping of Naia, wife of the Mouthpiece, her carrying into the neighboring nation which had twice endeavored to capture the northern pillar of the Gateway—once over fifty years before, and again at a more recent date.

"Wherefore, Koryphu, the man with whom the Mouthpiece would lie as guest in Scira, was no longer of unimportance in Cathur. Why Koryphu in this hour?" the people asked. And possibly Koryphu asked himself as he prepared to welcome his guests, "Why the honor of the Mouthpiece of Zitu's presence in this time of his bereavement?" When a messenger from Mutlos had come and told him of it, he had gasped.

What was the purpose of the man to whom all Tamarizia looked as little less than a demigod in his knowledge, in visiting Koryphu, who had pored over tablets and scrolls in a semiseclusion ever since the disgrace Kyphallos, son of Scythys, now happily dead, had brought upon Cathur's royal house?

Be that as it may, he prepared his residence for the occasion and on the day of the expected arrival of Jason Croft donned his bravest apparel and waited to welcome his guest.

Yet it was mid-afternoon before Jadgor's galley, bearing the standard of Zittra—the circle and cross—appeared and bore down on Scira's walls.

The giant sea doors swung open, admitting her to the harbor, and closed again when she had passed. Breaking forth Cathur's flag, she advanced across the inner harbor and swung to a mooring. A band of trumpeters ruffled forth from the quay, where Mutlos waited. The gangway was thrust forth, and the Mouthpiece of Zitu, walking alone and unattended, appeared.

"Hail, Mouthpiece of Zitu!" the assembled populace roared.

Mutlos advanced. The two men struck hands on shoulders, and joined their palms in a moment's clasp. Side by side they entered Mutlos's motur. The trumpeters fell in before them, breaking a pathway through the crowds.

So came Jason to Scira once more, somber of mien, yet steady-eyed.

"My sympathy as a man I give thee. Advisor of Tamarizia," Mutlos said as the ear began to move. "My assistance and that of Cathur I pledge you an' it be needed. This thing passes all endurance. Say but the word and Cathur will gather her swords."

"Nay," Jason replied slowly. "Thy sympathy, Cathur, warms the heart of the man. But the time of rescue has not arrived. Armed interference at present were ill-advised, since Zollaria fears it, and should it be attempted, thinks to offer my son to Bel a sacrifice."

"Zitu!" Mutlos gasped. "What then, O Mouthpiece? Where lies a chance of rescue? Zollaria makes demands of ransom?"

"Aye—or will. Even now one approaches a rendezvous in the mountains north of Cathur to meet with an agent of ours. It is because of that I am here."

"To arrange a mission to this meeting?" Mutlos said with ready understanding.

"Aye. Zollaria sends Kalamita of ill-fame to Cathur as her agent. Tamarizia, with the knowledge of Cathur and his own consent if it is forthcoming, sends Scythys' son."

"Now, by Zitu!" Admiration waked in Mutlos's eyes. "'Tis well thought of—to face that tawny enchantress, this creature of Adita, by one in whose heart must burn hot hate against her. Guardsmen I place at your disposal and his. My place lies open to you, and you will honor it with your presence—or plan you to lodge in Koryphu's house?"

"With Koryphu this night at least," said Jason. "Yet with Mutlos things must be discussed ere the mission fares forth. Hence at the palace on the night succeeding the sun after this, I accept the offer of guardsman gladly. A score will be enough."

"They will be forthcoming," Mutlos promised, and spoke to his driver. "To Koryphu's house."

Up to the door of the lesser palace stalked Jason alone, once he had descended from the motur.

But Koryphu had marked his coming, and the door slid open before him.

"Hail to thee, Tamarizia, in the person of Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu," Koryphu exclaimed and drew back a pace before him, that he might enter under the eyes of the watching crowd.

His eyes were a trifle bright with excitement, his features a bit flushed with unwonted color at this sudden prominence thrust upon him—wherein the governor's car, with the governor in it, set down so distinguished a guest at his doors.

"My lord," he said once the portal was closed, shutting them in together after Mutlos had risen in his motur and bowed and he had returned the salutation. "My lord!"

"Greetings to you, Koryphu, son of Scythys," Croft responded. "Behold in me not so much anything as a man bereft and sorely troubled by his loss—one who comes to you thus in a time of trouble to ask you to lend him aid."

Koryphu's eyes widened swiftly. "But, by Zitu—in what can one of fallen fortunes aid you, Mouthpiece of Zitu?" he questioned in uncertain fashion.

"It is of that we must speak together, Prince of Cathur," Croft replied.

"Come then." Koryphu turned and led the way across a court done in blue and crystal, surrounded by a balcony of blue and white to a room at the farther end—the same room in which Jason at the time of his astral visit to him had seen him bending over his tablets and scrolls—his study—the room in which more than any other Koryphu spent his life.

"BE SEATED, lord," he invited, indicating a redwood chair and taking his place in another drawn close to a table of copper, littered with numerous scrolls. "Loss is not unknown to Scythys' son, nor the feeling of it. Yet never, praise be to Zitu and Azil, has he lost either wife or child. Wherefore, only in the mind may he conceive faintly of thy sense of loss, and therein share thy grief with thee. Speak—Koryphu lends his ear to thy voice."

Jason explained—going at some length into past events—advising the Cathurian of the meeting to be held in the mountains, declaring it of vital importance to establish negotiations with Zollaria as quickly and protract them in indefinite fashion, in his estimation, proffering Koryphu the leadership of the first embassy at last.

"I—Koryphu!" The Cathurian noble stammered, his breathing a trifle quickened, his nostrils a trifle tightened. "Zitu's Mouthpiece chooses me for such an errand as this?"

"Aye." Croft inclined his head, watching

the man before him. "Koryphu the Tamarizian."

"Tamarizian!" Koryphu repeated and paused and went on again in a somewhat bitter fashion. "But why, Koryphu—why the son of a discredited house? Why not another, whose loyalty none could question?"

His eyes narrowed slightly and he clenched a hand.

Croft looked him full in the face. In it he saw how deeply his brother's action had affected this man—how the loss of confidence, the lack of support by the people of Cathur, as shown by his overwhelming defeat in the last elections, had rankled without expression in his mind. The thing looked back at him a smoldering fire from between Koryphu's lids. It had quivered in his voice.

"Because," said he, "who heads this mission, will meet Kalamita of Zollaria in the north."

"Kalamita!" Koryphu stiffened. Suddenly his body stirred, he half rose in his chair and sank back, well-nigh gasping. "That—foul sepulchre of dead loves and unholy emotions—that stench in the nostrils of true men, and blot on the name of women. Say you she comes herself to this meeting?"

"Aye," said Jason Croft. "Wherefore, there appears no better agent in all Tamarizia to meet her when she comes to trap me also as she hopes, seeing she had bidden me to this conference in person, than one who loves her not nor is apt to fall captive to her shameless graces—than Koryphu Tamarizian first, and son of Cathur, and loyal in his heart to both, as I believe."

"Thou believest?" Koryphu questioned with an eagerness almost pathetic.

"Aye. Else were I not sitting in his house."

For a moment silence came down, save for Koryphu's audible breathing. For a moment his eyes flamed with a sudden light, and then he turned them away since, in the code of Tamarizian manhood, there was little room for tears. Then he rose.

"Zitu!" he broke forth hoarsely and lifted his arms. "Father of life—hast then given ear in such fashion to my prayers? Is the time of penance ended? Am I again to step forth proudly among men as among my peers? Is it so your Mouthpiece brings this labor to me—placing upon my shoulders a task that through it I may prove my love of nation, tear to ribbons the

garment of sorrow in which I have been clothed? If so, I thank thee, Zitu."

He sank down again, dropping his head upon his folded arms on the table.

For a time Croft watched him, elation and sympathy blended in his regard. Here was his agent ready. There was small doubt Koryphu would accept the chance to prove he had been misjudged as blood brother to Kyphallos. The mere thought of what the opportunity offered had left him too deeply moved.

"Nay, Koryphu," he said presently as the Cathurian kept his face hidden while his shoulders heaved. "None questioned thy loyalty really. Half thy worry was of your own conceiving. Few spake illy of thee. Men deemed rather you had taken for comfort to your tablets and scrolls. By Jadgor and Robur of Aphur, my choice of thee is approved."

"Hai! Jadgor—Robur! Say you so?" Koryphu lifted his head. "Perchance, thou art right," he went on more calmly. "Perchance I have brooded over much. Yet comes this now as the realization of dreams born in nights of brooding, hopes formed in sorrow, and well-nigh dead."

"You accept, then?" Croft questioned.

"Accept. Aye, by Zitu—and I shall serve you loyally. Speak what you wish, Mouthpiece of Zitu. What do I when I face this beauteous slayer of men's souls—shall I slay her for you, watch for opportunity and strike her dead? If so the life of Koryphu were a small price—"

"Hilka!" Croft interrupted the man's hysterical outburst. "Hold now, Koryphu of Cathur—Koryphu does naught save listen to her words. Think you the death of their agent would help us—or render my dear ones more safe—or that the dead body of Koryphu would bring to Tamarizia more swiftly the demands Zollaria will make through her toward those negotiations that shall follow. Nay, small danger lies in this mission so that rather than inflamed with rage when he stands before her, Koryphu appears but one come to return with her words."

"Aye." Koryphu caught his breath quickly. "Yet owe her I a debt of over-long standing."

Croft nodded. "I deny it not. Let Koryphu's vengeance begin when she sees me not of Tamarizia's party—and finds herself outplayed."

"Thinks she the Mouthpiece of Zitu a fool to walk into her trap?" Koryphu questioned.

"She thinks me a husband and father, less well informed of her true purpose than perchance I am," Croft replied. "It were well she be not undeceived. Wherefore I send airplanes north before you—to fly above the mountains as though seeking a place of concealment, that she may not know I am aware Naia of Aphur lies in Berla, and fancy I think her hidden in the mountains as in her message to me she said."

Koryphu narrowed his eyes in appreciation of what was intended. "The thought were well conceived. I do naught then save meet this Zollarian and give ear to her terms of ransom?"

"Naught else, save say that those terms will be brought to my ears and the ears of the nation."

"'Tis well," the Cathurian now accepted. "That shall I do, and naught to endanger the success of the undertaking, because of my personal affairs. When do I depart upon my mission?"

"Presently," Jason told him. "Mutlos will furnish you a score of guardsmen. You will go north after the airplanes have arrived."

"Two alighted before Mutlos's palace this morning," Koryphu announced. "They declared to the crowds they came by your orders, yet said nothing further. Are there others?"

"Six in all," said Jason, smiling, well pleased that his fliers had lost no time. "Doubtless the others will arrive."

DUSK had fallen as they talked. A Mazzerian major domo with lighted lamps appeared and set them in the metal sconces on the walls. Koryphu rose.

"A momentous day in the life of Koryphu," said he, "is drawing to a close. Zitu's Mouthpiece will pardon, if he withdraws to the presence of his wife to acquaint her with his decision and the changed fortune of his house."

"Aye," Jason assented, well enough pleased to let the man carry his news to the ears of his family, and remain with his own thoughts for the time. "Carry my greetings to her and say I wait her pleasure of a meeting."

Koryphu appeared slightly embarrassed. "We have lived much alone of late, Hupor. You will dine with us or shall I have food sent to you?"

"With you if it suits your convenience," Croft replied, forming a vivid picture of

the seclusion that held this house once second in the state only to that of the king.

Later he met Pala, a not uncomely woman, though showing the effects of that selfsame seclusion in face and manner, and her two children, a daughter and a son, and reclined with them at their common table—speaking of general topics with the two elders until the meal was done. Once more back in Koryphu's study he went into the details of the mission with him, finally arranging to go before Mutlos the succeeding afternoon. Long before the oil lamps had burned low in their sconces the thing was done, and his conversation with Koryphu had convinced him that in Naia's suggestion of the former prince, the right man had been found.

Passing from the study to the apartment set aside for his slumbers, the two men intercepted Pala, speeding a parting guest, and she spoke to her husband.

"Laira, wife of Gazor—Koryphu. Thou hast not forgotten."

"Nay." Koryphu bent before the matron in greeting. "Yet it is long since I have given her salutation."

For a moment the face of the caller regarded him almost blankly and then she smiled. "Ah, but—old friends should not be forgotten." She glanced at Jason.

Koryphu made the introduction, and she sank to a knee before Zitu's Mouthpiece.

"Hupor, my obedience to thee. It came to my ear you were present in Scira, and somewhat of the reason. Zitu uphold you in a troubled hour."

"And spare them to you," said Jason, bowing.

And yet when he stretched out on his couch and drew its silken coverings about him, the thought came again as it had come while he watched Laira rise, that life on Palos or earth was very much the same thing, and those with friends were, after all, those on whom those in power smiled.

The next day he spent with Mutlos, arranging for Koryphu's departure and explaining his purpose in the airplanes, the last of which arrived. The evening passed in meeting many of the Cathurian officials, bidden by Mutlos to the occasion and a feast at which Koryphu and Pala were among the more prominent guests. No secret had been made of his mission. In fact, word of it had been given out.

For the time being Koryphu found him-

self again a person of importance—one in whom Tamarizia herself had given evidence of faith. Watching him under circumstances more or less trying to a man of inferior metal, Croft found himself pleased by his demeanor—satisfied that he would see the meeting with Kalamita carried off with what it held of success.

Well pleased then, he gave orders that the planes depart in the morning, and that later Koryphu and his escort should leave for the north. Taking tablets, he wrote rapidly a message to Kalamita, setting forth the fact that the bearer was his representative in person, and gave it to Koryphu after pressing his signet into the waxen surface with instructions to place it in her hands.

It was the last move. In so far as it could serve the meeting on which Kalamita counted for far more than it was fated to bring her was arranged.

Stretching himself on the couch in the sumptuous chamber in Mutlos's palace, to which he had been led, he freed his consciousness from his body and went in search of the woman herself, to find her in the midst of a wayside camp of Zollarian soldiery, asleep on the pads of her gnuppa drawn conveyance, beside which the giant Gor of the galley mounted watch.

Koryphu went north with the dawn, and Kalamita was hastening to meet him. Satisfied, he left her in slumbrous ignorance of his presence and visited Naia, telling her of the progress he was making, and how Robur was stoking the furnaces of Himyra toward the creation of yet another marvel, in the eyes of the population, until they flared red above the red walls of the city in the night.

In the morning he sent Robur a message announcing his departure, said farewell to Mutlos and was driven to the quays and Jadgor's galley. Going aboard he gave the order for sailing. The sea doors were opened. He passed through them, and turned the prow of the craft at his disposal swiftly into the south.

CHAPTER VII

PTAR, PRIEST OF BEL

KORYPHU of Cathur, under the banner of Tamarizia—with seven red and white stripes and a blue field with seven stars—a thing designed by Croft himself after the republic was established, fared north in a gnuppa

drawn conveyance with his escort of Cathurian guards.

Kalamita and Zollaria came down from the north in a similar fashion, but with a vastly heavier escort—strong enough as Croft had suggested to Robur to avoid any chance of surprise. Croft sailed south, but watched their progress each night, when he let his consciousness steal forth. The airplanes sailed north and found themselves a landing place as best they might, to which, after each day spent above the mountains north of Cathur's border, they returned.

Three days brought Jason to Himyra. Jadgor's galley was swift, indeed. Each day he spent in the shops sometimes with Robur, sometimes without him, when matters of state interfered, drafting designs with ruler and calipers and stylus, supervising the makings of patterns, holding consultations with his captains over the production of each part he desired, calling for speed and more speed.

It was the thing that obsessed him now that Koryphu was going north and Kalamita was coming south—speed in the production of the only thing that seemed to his straining mind fitted to meet his desperate need. And a part of each night he spent in the laboratory he had fitted up in Robur's own part of the palace, experimenting in the blending of reagents, the making of the liquid fire.

In Zitra, in Cathur and in Aphur, Tamarizia roared, and by degrees the other states of the nation had the word of the last Zollarian outrage and added their voices to the chorus of resentment and demand for some retaliatory move. Croft had their sympathy and support in his plans of rescue, unequivocally expressed.

Meanwhile Robur took what steps he advised to safeguard the secret of how that rescue was to be made. Guardsmen established a patrol on the banks of the Na, with a port of search at its mouth, where all ascending vessels were compelled to stop by watchful motor craft. Other guards once more went aboard each ship at Himyra's gates, both north and south. For the time being the red city came to be an armed camp, as closely guarded from entry by unvouched for outsiders, as though in a state of siege.

And his labors ended, each night Croft stretched himself out on his couch and closed his physical eyes and maintained weird observation of events taking place in the north.

Three days after his return to Himyra, Kalamita arrived at her hunting lodge. Rather the thing was a small palace, built of native stone from the mountains and massive beams of wood—its central court fur-lined, its walls and floors covered with trophies of the chase—skins of the woolly tabur, which ran wild as well as in domesticated herds. There were skins of the ferocious tigerlike beast, such as the sculptured group in Jason's mountain home portrayed as attacking the man who sought to keep its ravening jaws from the body of a kneeling woman.

And there the Zollarian magnet set herself down with her escort camped about her to await the coming of the man she hoped would be drawn to her out of the south.

She sent her guards farther in that direction to meet and escort him. Koryphu at the time was still distant some half-day's journey, and Jason was assured it would be noon of the next day before the Cathurian appeared.

Wherefore he spent the succeeding morning in the shops and returned at midday to the palace, retiring to his rooms after explaining to Robur that he intended being present in the spirit at the meeting between Kalamita and the Tamarizian agent, even if not in the flesh as the woman desired.

Robur nodded. "Zitu—that such things can be. Not that I doubt you, Jason, but the matter never ceases to excite my wonder. Yet shall I wait with impatience word of what occurs when she beholds Koryphu, brother of Kyphallos, in your place."

"She is apt to show displeasure," Jason told him, and he was thinking as much—that the beautiful Zollarian was very apt to show marked displeasure, covered perhaps as best it might be by a haughty bearing—as he stretched himself out and closed his eyes.

To the mountains north of Cathur. The Central Sea a-sparkle in the sunlight fled away beneath him. Scira was passed and the many weary stretches of winding road over which Koryphu had passed until he found him, advancing with the Cathurian footmen ringed about him, the Tamarizian flag a glorious standard above him, led by the Zollarian guards.

Swiftly then Jason willed himself into the hunting lodge where sat Kalamita, dressed or undressed as one might prefer to express it, for the occasion, in a huge

chair draped with the black and tanhide of some savage creature; Gor, her giant attendant by her side.

Fire—the fire of delayed purpose burned in her tawny eyes—there was the suppressed liteness of the predatory creature already scenting the kill in her every movement, the tremor of suppressed emotion in her words.

"Thou understandest, Gor, that when this one comes before me, I shall demand that we speak together alone. And I have given word to the guardsmen that his men shall be surrounded and at a word from me, after my purpose is accomplished, all save one be put to the sword. After a time as we speak together I shall simulate anger at some word of his, to the speaking of which I shall lead him by taunting speech, and then fling thyself upon him and bind him. This is clear?"

"Aye, mistress, Gor hears and obeys," said Gor, curling back his heavy lips.

Kalamita's breast rose and fell in a deep-caught breath. "See to it, then. Let there be no mistake."

"Nay, mistress—when has Gor failed thee—or to do thy bidding?"

"None fail me save once," said Kalamita. "Enough."

OUTSIDE, a trumpet blew a ruffling blast. There followed a pause, and then Cathur tricked out in his bravest armor, with the twin mountain peaks of Cathur on it done in blue stones, appeared in the doorway of the lodge between two Zollarian captains, and paused.

"Cathur for Tamarizia seeks audience with Kalamita," the senior captain announced.

For a moment the face of the woman twitched with some sudden emotion and then she replied, gripping the arm of her chair till her knuckles whitened. "Let Cathur approach."

The captains fell back and disappeared. Koryphu advanced. A single pace before her he halted.

"These tablets bring I from Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu to Tamarizia, to Kalamita," he said, and placed Croft's message in her hand.

She held them for a single instant, ere she hurled them to the floor. Her lips twitched; hardened, her tawny eyes glared.

Once more, as in Berla, she was faced by an unexpected element in her plans. The thing on which she had counted to

win her country's ends at least—to glut her own thirst for revenge in a measure, was here in the person of the man before her, withheld from her outstretched hand. Inwardly she raged as any vengeful person may rage when the object of their hatred escapes their vengeance—and doubly because, despite her assurance, Helmor had foretold some such ending to the meeting she had planned.

But outwardly she strove for calm. "How are you called, man of Cathur, who come to listen to my demands and carry them to this strong man, who exerts not himself to come before me?"

"Koryphu, brother of Kyphallos, woman of Zollaria," Koryphu replied in a somewhat husky voice.

Kalamita recoiled. Her body shrank back as from a blow, and then she stiffened.

"Koryphu!" she repeated, staring at him out of widened lids. "Now, in Bel's name, what trickery is this that sends before me the weakling student brother, at whom Kyphallos laughed?"

"No trickery, Zollaria, lies in it, but rather purpose," Koryphu returned, still more thickly, "in that Jason chose for his messenger one who had sufficient knowledge of thee to assure his remaining unmoved by your charms, no matter how shamelessly employed—one who would hearken to your demands as regarding Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, yet give no ear to other words."

Mentally Croft applauded even while physically Kalamita, the magnet, gasped.

"The Mouthpiece were a shrewd man," she said after a moment, "yet might he have felt doubly assured in thy choice, had he considered thy presence. Kalamita wastes not her wiles on aught less than a man. Did he send also to guard thee, the things that fly over the mountains the past two days?"

"Nay," said Koryphu as one who considered his answer. "They but seek a place of hiding, since Kalamita said her whose terms of ransom I come to bear to him, would lie hidden in the mountains until such terms were arranged."

Kalamita smiled in crafty fashion, with a vulpine widening of the crimson slit of her mouth. One would have said she was pleased by this information.

"As he wills," she said more lightly. "I might forbid it, but it disturbs me not. He will not find the place, and endangers the terms himself, since a part of my demands were gained already if one of

his devices falls. Even now my guardsmen lie in wait for such a happening in the hills, since I had conceived his purpose, and foreseen wherein it might be turned to my advantage."

"Nay." Koryphu appeared unmoved by the information. "Let your guards beware, since if one of them falls it will be destroyed. Does Kalamita desire the secret of them for Zollaria or herself?"

His lips relaxed slightly in an almost taunting fashion as he regarded the woman before him out of steady, unwavering eyes.

And again Croft applauded his choice of the man who was unveiling the true state of affairs behind the present meeting, and yet leaving Zollaria's agent at least in part deceived. For his words appeared to flick her and she answered quickly:

"Were it not the same, Kalamita being Zollarian, man of Cathur?"

"Aye, perhaps," Koryphu assented. "If perchance the interests be the same. It would seem then that as well as Kalamita's price to Jason, I return to Tamarizia with Zollaria's demands."

"And thy shoulders can support so vast a burden, Cathur—these terms I warn you are not light."

"I await them," Koryphu replied.

"Then hear Kalamita's price for the pale-faced one and her suckling." The woman leaned a trifle forward as she named them. "Mazhur must be returned—the Gateway must be opened without let or hindrance. There must be no tax exacted over Zollarian traffic on the Central Sea. There must be surrendered with men to explain them the secrets of your moturs and your air machines, and of all other devices born of the Mouthpiece of Zitu's brain—the fire weapons, the balls that burst when thrown amidst an enemy's forces. Name these things as the price of ransom to your Mouthpiece when you return."

"These seem heavy terms, indeed." Koryphu threw out his hands in a helpless gesture. His face was pale, even though Croft in their conversations had foreshadowed some such thing. "Were it not wiser for Zollaria to ask less with a chance of obtaining somewhat than to overshoot the mark by asking everything?"

"Nay." Kalamita leaned back well pleased as it seemed by the man's quite natural confusion on being given a message that spelled little less than his country's ruin.

"Nay, by Bel, Cathur—once there was a time when thy brother's plans and mine went down in confusion when Tamarizia demanded and Zollaria yielded. Now Zollaria speaks, and should Tamarizia not accept, or make any move to resist her demands by force of arms, Naia of Aphur goes to the mines with the blue men who labor in them and her puny offspring into Bel's mighty arms a paltry sacrifice. So much herself the woman understands—wherefore she sends this ring to Jason to plead as her own voice that he hearken to Kalamita's words."

Stripping a signet from her finger, she extended it upon her palm.

KORYPHU'S features were strained as he took the ring. "These things I shall carry to Jason's ears. Does Kalamita await his answer?"

"Nay—let Jason arrange the next meeting," said Kalamita. "I go to a place he knows not of, despite his man-made birds and their spying. Yet will a messenger on the highway north from Mazhur be met, and his message accepted. So I shall arrange. Perhaps if he feel need, he may employ one of these self-same flying devices."

She broke off sharply as a commotion arose outside the lodge, then turned to Gor.

"Go learn the cause of this disturbance—"

Gor stalked to the door, and paused.

"Mistress, they come," he declared, and drew back as a group of Zollarian guardsmen in charge of a captain entered, a man in leathern jacket and helmet held captive in their midst.

With a start Croft recognized one of his own fliers. Disaster—already one of the planes had fallen, he thought, and heard the captain confirm his fears.

The man saluted with upflung arm. "Behold, princess, one whom we bring before you—a Tamarizian dog—who fell with the device he rode like an arrow-pierced bird from the skies."

Kalamita's smile was coldly gloating as she regarded the captive, young, slender, grimed by the smirching of his fall and the struggle attending his capture, his leathern flying-suit torn, and gashed where some Zollarian, overardent, had slit it with a spearhead. For a moment she turned her regard on Koryphu as if to say here was her prediction already verified, and back again to the man.

"Well, Tamarizian, found you the hiding place you flew in search of?" she sneered.

"Nay." The youth stiffened. "'Tis not always easy, Zollarian, to discover the hiding places of Zitemku's agents. Nor have we searched over long."

Kalamita's features hardened. She gave her attention to the captain. "What of the machine?"

"The machine, princess, was by this one destroyed ere we could prevent it. It lies burst and ruined by flames."

"So?" Rage lighted the woman's tawny eyes—once more she was baffled in a purpose. "For that he dies."

Under his grime and sweat, inside the circle of his helmet, the aviator's face went pale, but he maintained his poise of body even as Koryphu spoke quickly—"Princess of Zollaria, unsay those words."

"Peace, brother of Kyphallos." Kalamita turned like a tigress on him. "Who are you to interfere? Stand back and watch how Zollaria deals with Tamarizian spies. Gor, take thy spear."

Gor's lips curled back as he advanced slightly, lifted his heavy weapon and poised it.

Impotently Croft's spirit writhed as he gazed upon the scene—on Kalamita leaning forward in all her savage beauty, her sinuous body panting, her nostrils flared, once more gripping the arms of her chair with tightened fingers—at Koryphu, deadly pale because of the contemplated outrage, at the figure of Gor, wonderful in its sheer brute strength and proportion, set for the thrust on the word of command, at the guardsmen, the captain, the figure of his flier, drawn up now to its fullest stature, proudly erect in the face of death, and knew himself powerless to intervene.

And suddenly the aviator threw up his hand toward the other man of his nation. "Hail, Cathur, Aphur salutes thee," his voice came strongly. "Long life to Tamarizia. Say to Zitu's Mouthpiece that Robur—"

"Slay!" Kalamita screamed.

Gor's spear plunged home.

"Carry off that carrion." The woman's arm rose, pointing at the body.

The captain growled an order. The guardsmen lifted the limp form in its suit of leather and bore it out on their spears.

Kalamita swung her whole form lithely about to where Koryphu was standing. "Say to Zitu's Mouthpiece that so we treat his spies."

"Aye," he made answer gruffly. "Small doubt but I shall narrate to Zitu's Mouth-piece many things."

For a moment the eyes of man and woman met and plunged glances lance-like one into the other, ere there rose again an outward commotion, a burst of thunderous sound, which gave way in an instant to groans and cries.

Koryphu stiffened. Kalamita started to her feet, as the outcry continued. Some of the flush of anger faded from her features, and then Koryphu, turning, ran across the floor toward the doorway and outside it.

"The standard—the standard of Tamarizia, let it be unfurled," he roared.

Out of the sky came down a drumming from where an airplane sailed. On the ground lay some half dozen Zollarian guards—the same who had carried out the aviator's body—some of them without motion, some of them that groaned and moved. The vengeance of the flier's fellow had been swift and deadly. But the flag of Tamarizia broke out over Koryphu's party, the Tamarizian in the plane circling to drop another grenade, altered his course, zoomed up above the nearest ridge of hills and disappeared.

(Croft quivered in spirit as he watched him. He could scarcely censor his hot-headed action in dropping the bomb on the murderers of his comrades and yet now—blood had been shed on both sides, and Gor was approaching Koryphu where he stood.

"Go!" he commanded with a gesture of dismissal. "My mistress grants you safety since you are of no value save as you carry her message. Take thy men and get thee on thy mission."

"Aye—be you my messenger to carry her my parting greeting," Koryphu returned, and stalked to his carriage, about which, under the banner of Tamarizia, his Cathurians had already formed.

Entering it he gave the word for marching. Followed by the black looks of the Zollarian soldiery he and his party moved off toward the southbound road.

Bloodshed—bloodshed on both sides. Croft opened the eyes of his physical body in Robur's palace and lay staring into the night. Kalamita had slain one of his fliers. The man's death thrilled him as he recalled it, even while it filled him with sorrow. He had died as a patriot, a man loyal to his nation, his last word a wish

expressed for that nation's long life. And his fellow had retaliated swiftly, dropping a bomb from the skies. And now Kalamita was returning, no doubt—returning raging to Berla, cheated of the major object of her journey south. And a representative of her nation would wait word on the road that ran north from Mazhur's borders. He lay pondering the matter until dawn, and then rose. He sought Robur and told him of all he had seen.

"Send a message into Cathur, Rob, recalling the airplanes," he directed. "Zitu forbid that I waste further the lives of such men. They have served their purpose in a measure. Bid them return."

"And what of the further course of the matter?" Robur inquired.

"Kalamita returns to Berla, in my estimation," said Croft. "She must make report. Yet thus far have we dealt with Kalamita only. Thus far the matter has lain between herself and me alone. It was to me Bathos was sent with his message. Wherefore, so quickly as Koryphu returns, we shall ask Zittra to send one through Mazhur, calling upon Zollaria to confirm or deny Kalamita's acts in a representative parley."

Robur nodded. "By Zitu, I sense your intention. In such a way you safeguard our cousin and gain time for our own endeavors."

"Aye," said Jason, "time in which our work must be pressed with speed."

BY day the forges of Himyra roared, and at night they blazed. Men toiled and sweated. Croft planned, designed, and urged for haste, instructing, advising, passing upon each part of the engines of swift deliverance he had ordered made by day, by night watching in his own peculiar fashion the progress of Koryphu back to Cathur, and that of Kalamita north.

Two days after the meeting in the mountains he sent Jadgor's galley to Scira, to await Koryphu's coming and returning to Himyra with the Cathurian aboard, deeming it best to take the man with him to Zittra to appear before Jadgor in person, that his own statements might be confirmed by Koryphu's words. Himself he determined to be present astrally in Berla, when Kalamita appeared before Helmor to make her report. It occurred to him that at such a time something of importance might transpire, and he wished to see how the Zollarian magnet would seek to cover her defeat.

That her return empty handed was a bitter thing in her heart he was well aware, since his nightly visits to her wayside camps showed her cloudy eyed, haughtily exacting, acrid tongued to all, even her giant bodyguard. Gnawed by her disappointment, she made her way toward Berla in something like a baffled rage, reached it and drove straight to her own and Bandhor's palace, refreshed herself from her journey and loaded herself with jewels, as though thereby seeking by outward show to mitigate the manner of her return in Helmor's eyes.

Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, and Bandhor watched, the former unseen yet seeing, his body stretched seemingly lifeless in Himyra, his astral presence alert to her every move and action, Bandhor sprawled scowling on a copper and silver couch.

"Helmor was right. This Mouthpiece was too shrewd for you, my sister," he sneered.

"Or else lacking in the courage to meet me," Kalamita rejoined, fastening the clasp of an armlet.

"Nay," Bandhor declared, with the respect of the soldier for one of his own profession who had beaten him twice. "He lacks not courage, by Bel, or the ability to look even on thy beauty unmoved, as you should be aware."

"Say you so?" Kalamita whirled, stung by his reference to Croft's refusal of her favor on a past occasion, and brought her hand into stinging contact with his ear.

Bandhor sprang up, wagging his head, to tower above her.

"You devil—you yellow-eyed devil!" he roared with guttural laughter. "No doubt you are angered, and with justice. To have sent Koryphu—the brother of one who fell on his sword for love of thee—his messenger to you. That were a master move."

Kalamita regarded his amusement out of narrowed amber eyes.

"Laugh, fool, an' it pleases you," she said at last, coldly. "A master move indeed. What lies behind it?"

Bandhor frowned. His attention seemed arrested by the question.

"By Bel I know not," he stammered. "Save to learn your price of ransom without walking into the trap you laid, and thereafter to lay a counter proposal before you."

"Counter proposal?" And now Kalamita sneered. "Such things require time, Bandhor. This one seems in small haste to regain a wife and child."

"Or become prisoner to Kalamita," Bandhor suggested.

Kalamita eyed him. Her own expression was brooding.

"Enough," she said. "Your mind reaches not beyond the sweep of your sword. Go—say to Helmor I appear before him, and—say no more, save that I will make all things plain when I arrive."

Bandhor nodded.

"Nay, and thou canst, thou canst do more than Bandhor," he declared, once more frowning, and stalked hugely from the room.

Kalamita remained seated for some time after his departure, her features cast into lines of consideration, tight lipped, a trifle drawn.

"Now Bel aid me!" she cried, at last rising and lifting her jewel-circled arms in a body-stretching gesture, turned and went swiftly down to where Gor waited with her carriage, and its prancing green-plumed gnuppas. Entering the conveyance, she drew the curtains, and reclined on the padded cushions, her tawny head supported on an arm.

Watching her, Croft sensed that once more her wicked brain was busy with its schemes.

Bandhor met her at the palace and escorted her into a small and sumptuously furnished room. Helmor of Zollaria sat there, his face contorted into an expression of displeasure. As Bandhor and his sister entered, he half rose, and Kalamita sank swiftly to her knees.

"Hail Helmor, emperor and lord," she faltered.

"Rise," said the Zollarian monarch. "Thy coming was expected. Bandhor informed me as you bade him, yet seemed unminded to further use his tongue. So, then, you appear before me alone?"

"Aye, Helmor." Kalamita lifted herself on shapely limbs and stood with downcast eyes. Suddenly she had adopted a meekness wholly out of keeping with her usual demeanor. "Helmor foresaw the outcome of my effort in his wisdom. All things fell out as he advised."

"The Mouthpiece came not to the meeting?"

"Nay. Perchance he lacked the courage on which I counted." Kalamita threw up her head. Her tawny eyes flashed for a single instant.

Helmor resumed his seat. His brows knit in a frown.

"I await thy story, sister of Bandhor," he said after a time.

Kalamita explained. Helmor's frown deepened as she proceeded with her story. Once and once only his expression denoted satisfaction, and that when the woman spoke of the airplanes flying above the mountains.

"It would seem then that he knows not the woman lies in Berla," he said, nodding. "It was so I planned. In so much is he deceived. Go on—finish the story."

"Nay," Kalamita resumed. "There is no more save that I stated the requirements of her ransom as it was agreed upon between us, and gave Koryphu her signet which I had taken from her finger, bidding him say to the Mouthpiece that she bade him yield, and that one of the flying devices falling, and the Tamarizian within it, being captured, though not before he had destroyed it, was slain by my orders before Koryphu's eyes."

"Slain?" repeated Helmor sharply. "Now, by Bel, were it wise to slay him, or didst let thy judgment be consumed by rage?"

"Perchance," Kalamita admitted, still adhering to her rôle of meekness. "Yet if so, the act was avenged and quickly, in that one of his fellows flew above my lodge and dropped a fire-ball, which, bursting, slew two in the number of my guard—and would have repeated the attack upon us, save that Koryphu himself bade the flag of Tamarizia unfurled above his party, whereat the flier altered his course and disappeared."

"Helmor of Zollaria—blood has been shed by Tamarizia in this matter. Did not Helmor vow that such an act by the southern nation should give Bel the child of the Mouthpiece, a living sacrifice?" And now as she broke off she looked full into Helmor's widening eyes.

CROFT'S listening spirit quivered, sensing the dark turn in the woman's mind, the deadly purpose of her plans. Tensely he waited while man and woman confronted one another, his soul torn with the strain of the delay that preceded Helmor's words.

And then the Zollarian monarch gathered himself together, controlling what had plainly been no less than a swift shock of surprise. "Aye, so Helmor promised," he returned slowly. "Yet meant he not the act of a man enraged by the death of his fellow—a minor instance—a matter of no consequence along the border. Sister of

Bandhor, you appear over quick to destroy what were a safeguard as well as a price of advantage in Helmor's eyes."

Once more Kalamita lowered her face.

"There were no advantage to Helmor or the nation," she said slowly, "save by favor of the gods. If Kalamita err, be it upon her own head, yet thus far the matter had not gone overly to our liking—and were Bel's favor purchased—"

"Enough!" All at once Helmor roared. "Question not Bel's favor. Has he not placed these two wholly in our power? Is the way not paved for parley and negotiation? Think you the man who waits on the road out of Mazhur will fail to receive an answer to our demands?"

"Nay," said Kalamita, "there will be an answer. Yet now is it in my heart to warn Helmor against permitting that these parleys—these discussions of our demands—be entered into over long."

"What mean you?" Helmor's demeanor was uneasy. "Were time not needful when a matter of so great importance is to be arranged?"

"Aye—none may deny it." Kalamita granted the point without hesitation. "And I know not wherein lies the peril save that these be a crafty people, depending more upon their wits than on their strength, and that this Aphurian woman boasted to me aboard my galley that the one who devised these things, the secret of which we are demanding, might well devise a greater. Wherefore let Helmor be warned against protracting his parlay to great length."

And now once more Croft's spirit quivered. Let Zollaria depend on the power of might as much as she pleased, this tawny woman, standing before Zollaria's ruler with hypocritically downcast eyes, was possessed of craft at least. Again he waited while Helmor weighed her words, until with surprise and a vast relief he beheld the emperor's expression alter, grow from one of startled speculation to a thing amused.

"A greater device?" he questioned. "Now, by Bel, what were it? Has he not brought his fire weapons, his fire chariots across the earth, his fire ships to swarm upon the water, his flying devices into the skies? Where else shall he turn for a new field to conquer? Earth, water, air—their mastery is his—and will remain his only unless Zollaria wrests it from him."

"These airplanes, as he calls them, are

our greatest menace—and now they fly above the mountains, seeking her who lies safe inside Berla's walls. Nay, sister of Bandhor, thy work is finished—leave what remains to be accomplished in Helmor's hands, nor heed the words of a woman. Perchance she meant to raise up a fear thought to affright thee."

Kalamita stiffened.

"Kalamita is not easily affrighted," she made answer. "And being woman, may sense the meaning of a woman's words. Yet has Helmor spoken. May Kalamita retire now that her mission is ended, less happily than she wished, yet ended none the less?"

"Aye." Helmor inclined his head. "Ere the sun sinks I shall send to your palace a chariot filled with silver. Bandhor remain. I would speak with you briefly."

"Bel strengthen Helmor's mind." To Croft it seemed almost as though a hidden meaning lurked in the woman's words as she sank again to her knees, rose and passed from the room.

He followed. Let Bandhor and Helmor talk, plan, plot, devise. There lurked not the danger he feared, but rather in the brain of the woman now making her way toward the carriage across the palace court. Seemingly she had taken her dismissal, had yielded to Helmor's decision. Meekness had characterized her most surprisingly throughout the major part of the conversation. Yet Croft did not believe she had given over her more personal designs.

Little by little he was coming more and more to understand the woman, and to realize that in all her sordid standard of existence there lurked one sincere if superstitious strain. She believed in the power of her gods. She had been thwarted in her purpose to honor the greatest of them, by Helmor's resolve to hold Naia and Jason in safety, but with the quick perception of the spirit, Croft felt assured she would try again.

Hence it was with no surprise as she entered her carriage that he heard her direct Gor to the Temple of Bel, before she reclined upon the cushions and drew a gasping breath.

And he followed close behind her as she reclined upon the cushions and drew to the pyramidal temple itself.

It was built of some dark-hued stone, in color nearly black, set down in the exact center of a mighty open space. Pillared it was on four sides, about a mighty

central court, like a great rectangular funnel, the sides of which were corrugated with steps, leading down once more to the outer level of the mighty base. These steps could furnish a multitude with seats, as he saw at a glance. And in the center of the remaining level—huge—massive—smoke and fire darkened—horrible in its grinning visage, its pot-bellied furnace back of extended arms, the idol of Bel found place.

AT THE head of the inner steps on the side from which she had entered, Kalamita paused. So vast was the structure that standing so alone in her supple beauty, her figure became a pigmy thing, was suddenly dwarfed. Her arms rose above her head. She bent once, twice, thrice from the hips in salutation to the monstrous thing before her, its every detail thrown into revolting relief by the light of the open sides above its uncovered court, turned and made her way among the pillars of the surrounding colonnade toward the end opposite that the idol faced.

It was built in, unlike the other three sides, and here Jason fancied as he followed, would be the quarters of the temple attendants and the priests.

Upon a door of silver, set in the ebon surface of the wall, Kalamita hammered with peremptory fist, and waited, until the portal was swung ajar by a heavy-muscled individual clad in no more than a leathern apron tied about his waist.

"Go," she directed, stepping past him. "Say to Ptah that the Princess of Adita desires speech with him at once."

"Aye, beautiful one."

The man saluted and hastened off along a passage, to return and beckon her after him mutely until he paused before a second silver door.

He struck upon it. A voice rumbled from beyond it. The man set it open and Kalamita passed it into the presence of Bel's priest.

Huge he was, powerful, heavy muscled, thick of neck and nose and lip, with a knotted, shaven poll, gross, in seeming an unwieldy human beast, as dissimilar to the lithe beauty as day to night. Yet she spread her rosy, gem-banded arms and sank down with lowered eyes.

"Hail to Ptah, priest of the Mighty One," she spoke in salutation.

"Rise, Priestess of Adita," said Ptah, his small eyes nearly lost behind the heavy

hids lighting at sight of her kneeling figure. "What seeks the Lamp of Pleasure in the house of Ptah?"

"Counsel, O Wise One," Kalimita answered, rising, and went swiftly on to explain concerning her vow to Bel in regard to Naia of Aphur's child.

"So?" Ptah pursed his heavy lips at the end. "Helmor is headstrong nor listens as closely as his fathers to the voices of the gods. In this case hardly could even I defy him, Priestess of Joy."

"Not Bel's priest?" his caller questioned in a tone of unbelief, and broke off sharply and went on again quickly. "Am I in this then to stand forsworn? And think you what may depend upon it. Does Bel take a promise lightly—and were his favor purchased—" Once more she paused.

Ptah frowned.

"True," he said at last. "Few are brought to the temple, since there are fewer wars—and those in the greater part are children of slaves. It may be—woman of Adita—"

"An augury—an augury, Ptah." Kalamita leaned a trifle toward him. "An augury to foretell how this matter tends. I dare thee to put it to the test—to gaze on the living expression of Bel's pleasure—to harken to the Strong One's choice."

"Hah!" Ptah stiffened. Once more he pursed his lips, and then rising, he took up a metal hammer and struck with it upon a gong which Croft now perceived to be let into the substance of the door.

Casting the hammer aside he waited until the man with the leathern apron appeared.

"Go," he commanded then; "fetch me a suckling tabur and the knife of augury from the hall of sacrifice where it is stored."

Returning to his seat he waited, his eyes never shifting from the shape of the woman before him until the man reappeared bearing the little creature he had named, and a massive knife of copper with a weighted blade.

Rising, he received both and held them until the attendant had disappeared.

"Oh, Bel—thou Strong One—show us thy pleasure in the matter before the nation and in the case of Naia of Aphur's suckling. Speak to us through the life of this creature I, Ptah, am about to sacrifice to thee," his heavy voice rumbled.

Seizing the tabur by the hind legs, he poised the copper blade, and with one muscular sweep of his mighty arm, struck

off his head, and laid the carcass down.

"Let me, O Ptah!" cried Kalamita, seizing the reeking knife from the hands of the priest and kneeling to slit open the quivering belly of the tabur, so that the entrails were exposed. Plunging her pink-nailed hands into the quivering mass, she wrenched them forth and spread them writhing on the blood-stained floor.

Ptah bent above them, marking the fall of them closely. The woman still knelt before him, watching his every change of expression out of questioning eyes, holding forth toward him, palm upward, her crimson-dripping hands.

For a time while Croft sickened both at the sight of the uncouth male and the physically lovely woman—the spectacle of beauty and the beast sunk in the unclean orgy of a filthy rite, and at the decision resting upon it. Ptah said nothing, and after a time he straightened and lifted his hands toward the ceiling. "Bel, I, Ptah, thy servant, hear thee," he intoned hoarsely.

"An augury—an augury!" Kalamita panted. "What says the Strong One? Speak, Ptah, that I as well may know his pleasure."

Ptah lowered his back-tilted head. "Naught but the child may prevail to save Zollaria in this matter," he made somewhat cryptic answer after the manner of his calling.

But Kalamita sprang up, her red lips parted, her nostrils flaring—a light of unholy satisfaction in her eyes. "Then," she began, her tone tensely vibrant—

"Nay." Ptah raised a hand. "It lies with Helmor. Him must you persuade to give ear to Bel's decision."

"Or"—she bent toward him, laying her blood-dabbled hands against his mighty torso—"were the child brought into the temple—"

"Hah!" Ptah's eyes fired. "Bel himself has spoken to thee also, Priestess of Adita. Were the child within this temple none, not even Helmor, would have the power to regain him, and were Helmor to know a third defeat, one more bidable to the gods might mount the throne."

For a moment there was silence, and then Kalamita said slowly, "An' he listens not to Bel's message, perchance the Strong One will show me a way to gain our ends."

Ptah nodded. "Perchance, Priestess."

A glance of understanding passed between them, and Kalimita moved toward the door.



"Enough—enough!" Croft flashed the signal upward, as Kalamita's screams rent the air.

"Be prepared to act quickly should such time arrive," she prompted, and was gone.

False—utterly false—to her womanhood, to her nation, Zollaria's magnet would plot even treason if thereby she fancied she could serve her ends. The realization burst on Croft with a force little short of appalling. Filled with an intolerable sense of loathing, he followed her back to Bandhor's palace, and then returned to Himyra, he opened the eyes of his physical form, and groaned. Sunlight fell into his chamber.

A semi-tropic warmth was all about him, and yet, all at once he shivered as with cold.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DREAM OF HELMOR

KALAMITA and Ptah. He knew not wholly what they plotted, what plans might lie in their brains. Yet whatever they might intend certain it was that the death of Jason, son of Jason, was included in the plan. And whatever that plan might be, Croft was assured that the priest had taken time to weigh many matters while he bent above the entrails of the tabur suckling, before he had given voice to his none too explicit interpretation of their meaning.

Kalamita—beautiful toy of the Zollarian court, and Ptah, priest of the nation's god. And when had there been a time or age wherein the lure of woman, the craft of priest, had failed to largely determine the setting of the stage, when both had not been involved in plot and counterplot? He shivered again and sprang up.

Helmor alone, it would seem, stood now between Jason and destruction. And in that stand Helmor must be encouraged. He must be doubly warned that harm to the child meant nothing less than destruction to himself, the overthrow of his house. Such word might be sent him by the messenger who would carry an answer north to the borders of Mazhur. Yet before he could be sent some time must needs transpire, and, in the meantime, suddenly a thought seemed given birth in full form in Jason Croft's brain.

Like another experienced long before when as a spirit he battled to find a way to reach a physical union with Naia the one woman for whom his spirit hungered, it fired him with its potent meaning, set a light of deep-formed purpose in his

eyes. Helmor of Zollaria could be warned—and warned in such fashion that one of his nature could scarcely fail to give heed—or so Croft believed. Meanwhile his own work waited, work which in view of his latest knowledge more than ever demanded speed.

He left the palace, entered his motor, parked now always in the red court in readiness for his demands, and drove swiftly to the shops, attended to such matters as demanded his immediate attention, and went on to the place where, when once the blimps were ready the hydrogen to inflate them would be formed.

From there he passed swiftly to a monster warehouse, formerly filled with the merchandise of many galleys dragged up by harnessed canors from the quays along the yellow Na through tunnels, but now converted to his purpose—a hive of industry where dozens of men and maidens were busily engaged in varnishing a most amazing extent of cloth.

And that night as he labored in the laboratory he called Robur and Gaya to him and explained to their ready ears those things he had heard and seen.

At the end Gaya's soft eyes were wide with sympathetic sorrow, and Robur's square lower jaw was clamped hard. As Croft paused he broke into exclamation:

"Now, by Zitu, Ptah was right. Naught but the child of Jason can save his unclean nation indeed—and should harm come on him Zitemku will have a foul pit full of Zollarian souls."

Croft eyed him, his heart warmed by Robur's ever ready upflaring of spirit. But in the end he shook his head. "Aye, if he be harmed. But it were an empty revenge after all, my friend, and one which might not bring him again to my house."

Robur nodded. "What then does Jason propose? Many suns must pass ere we are ready to attempt the rescue, and meanwhile Kalamita plans."

"To warn Helmor of her planning," Croft told him and watched him widen his eyes.

"Warn him? In what fashion may Helmor be warned in time—even were he minded to give ear to any word out of Tamarizia? Jason, you speak in riddles."

Croft nodded. "Nay—Helmor would pay little heed to Tamarizian words, but were he to dream—"

"Dream—" All at once Gaya caught her breath. Her glance met Croft's in a subtle

understanding. "Jason, thou meanest—thou canst induce a dream in his brain?"

"Aye." For the second time Croft nodded, well pleased at her intuitive understanding. "Why not? Gaya knows how in the spirit I called Naia of Aphur's spirit to me, before our marriage, and that nightly now we speak so together concerning our love and this present thing; also that I speak so to Zud of Zittra when the need arises, having taught him to answer the call of my spirit. Wherefore, may I not visit Helmor in the spiritual presence and by the same force inspire a vision of his and Zolliaria's danger in his mind?"

For that was the thought that had come to him on waking after his return from Berla—the conception of the manner in which Helmor might be warned and fresh caution inspired in his guarding of Naia of Aphur and Jason, son of Jason, and even Helmor's self against the perils involved in Kalamita's schemes.

"By Zitu!" Robur mumbled again.

But Gaya sat brooding the thought for a moment longer, presently lifting her head to murmur, "Three times. Let the dream be repeated once and yet again, Jason, until it takes possession of him wholly, nor is absent from his thoughts at any time."

CROFT started slightly. He had only considered the one inspired dream of warning, but now, he realized swiftly the value of Gaya's words—the weight attached to the repetition of a dream. Her suggestion demanded acceptance. "Aye, Gaya," he assented. "Ga speaks through you to the benefit of child and mother. The dream shall be repeated three times, on as many nights—until Helmor is convinced of an agency behind it, even though the nature of that agency he fails to suspect."

Robur rose. His manner was restless. Suddenly he whirled around.

"You can do this thing?" he questioned. "Is naught forbidden to you, my friend? You can enter the mind of another and order the shape of the pictures in his brain?"

Jason eyed him for a moment before he answered. "Naught is forbidden to the seeker after knowledge, Rob, so he see not from evil purpose or for merely selfish gain. All life is a rhythm—even as the sound of the harp given off from a vibrating string. And if I alter the rhythm

of Helmor's mind to the preserving of the life of my child, the honor of his mother, the estate of himself, and the lives of his people, were the action vain?"

"Nay, it were a work of justice and mercy," exclaimed Gaya before Robur found words in which to respond.

Croft lifted a tiny vial and held it toward both man and woman. "Behold!" he creid sharply. "Fix your eyes upon it."

Arrested by his sudden words and manner, they complied, and in an instant for them the room faded, gave place to another scene. A straw covered dungeon appeared—a dungeon with every detail of which Croft was familiar in his spirit—a woman, a blue girl of Mazzer—a child. Briefly Robur of Aphur and Gaya his wife beheld that picture and knew it for the room beneath Helmor's palace—and then the whole thing faded and once more they were gazing at a tiny vial in the Mouthpiece of Zitu's hands.

It was no more than an example of mass hypnotism as practised for ages by the Hindu fakers, a trick learned by Croft while still as a man of earth he had lived and studied in India for several years, but to the two Tamarizians it was altogether strange.

"Zitu! Zitu!" Robur gasped, while his wife sat staring no longer at the vial but into Jason's eyes.

"Think you that you have been to Berla?" he questioned, smiling slightly. "Nay, my good friends, the thing was but a changing of the rhythm of your minds into sympathy with mine; but a picture never absent from my thought, which I excited in your brains. Think you now that I may make Helmor behold a vision?"

"Aye." Robur's tone was thick. "Aye, Jason, thou man unlike any other."

"Aye, Helmor shall dream," Gaya echoed his assurance. She smiled, and her smile was strange.

Yet no more strange than the hour passed by Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, before he stretched his body on its couch of copper, in the formulation of a dream—the careful marshaling of the various thought forms he meant of deliberate purpose to instil into Helmor's brain.

Only when their sequence was wholly to his satisfaction did he relax his body, his physical mind, will his astral form swiftly to Helmor's palace and into Helmor's room.

A vast apartment it was, draped in

saffron hangings, lighted by small lamps to a dusky twilight, in which blue maids, slaves of the palace kept up a ceaseless waving of noiseless fans above the silver couch on which the emperor slept.

Unseen, unnoted any more than the trailing smoke of one of the low-burning lamps he drifted to Helmor's luxurious bed and began hurling his thought force upon him, seeking thereby to awaken a sympathetic vibration inside his heavy head.

Over and over he drew the mental pictures he had formed, concentrating all his power on them—Helmor defeated in every purpose—Kalamita and Ptah as co-plotters—Helmor about to be dethroned—the child sacrificed to Bel—and Tamarizia resorting for vengeance to the sword—the Zollarian armies once more beaten into a bleeding rabble—fleeing—leaving their own defenseless monarch to face the future alone—Kalamita haughty and sneering—her mask of meekness cast aside—showing at last as the one by whom these things had been brought to pass.

And suddenly the lips of Zollaria's monarch moved. He muttered in his slumber, "Lost—all is lost—defeat—dishonor." For a moment while the slave girls eyed one another without stilling the sweep of their fans there was silence, and then Helmor groaned.

He stirred, he knotted the fingers of a heavy hand. "Thou — thou treacherous one," he muttered. "Through thee Helmor stands undone."

Croft thrilled. The things was succeeding. In his mind Kalamita answered. "Aye, Helmor, through me, these things have transpired to my ends. Defeat have I brought upon you. Tamarizia would have held back the sword, had you possessed the child to place safely in her hands."

And then suddenly, as though to point the moral, appeared Naia, clasping the form of the infant the tawny siren had announced as slain, lifting it toward Helmor in suppliant fashion, even as in the flesh she had held it to him once. And she spoke sinking upon her knees. "Take him and give him back to his father, O Helmor, and all will be well with thee again." And Helmor, seizing the infant, lifted it toward the skies and—Kalamita screamed, covering her face, and turned to stagger out of his presence, while a multitude of voices sounded, crying, "Hail to Helmor, saviour of his nation! Hail to Helmor the Wise!"

Whereat Helmor surged suddenly up in his bed, and sat blinking in the half dusk of his chamber, from one to another of his attendant slaves.

So for a moment he sat, and then, throwing off his coverings, he rose.

"Go," he directed in a voice that quivered with the emotion of his vision. "Rouse Gazar and say to him that I have dreamed, and require his presence."

AND on the instant one of the slave-girls dropped her fans and ran lithely from the room, leaving Helmor to sink back to a sitting posture on the couch, his heavy hands clasping his naked knees, his expression a thing of brooding, introspection, excited by his dream.

So he remained until a man entered the apartment and advanced toward him shuffling across the rug-littered tiles of the floor.

Old he was, bent, with no more than a fringe of ragged silver about an otherwise bald poll. Reaching the emperor's couch, he paused and bowed before him, in little more than an accentuation of his already stooping posture.

"Helmor of Zollaria calls," he quavered, "and Gazar, servant of Helmor, appears. Speak to me the things thou hast seen in a vision, O Helmor, that I may make plain their meaning to your ears."

Helmor dismissed the remaining slave-girls and complied. Oddly enough Croft had an opportunity to test the success of his endeavor at first hand, as Helmor recited each detail of his dream, and Gazar listened, nodding his head less in silent accentuation of the several points than because of some form of palsy that continually shook him; watching his patron with dark and observant eyes.

He spoke only when Helmor had paused. "Thou didst lift the infant in thy arms, and Kalamita fled from before thee, shrieking?"

"Aye." Helmor inclined his head.

"In which is the meaning plain," said Gazar. "Let Helmor watch closely this woman, sister to him who captains all Zollaria's army—and let him guard closely the child of the Tamarizian Mouthpiece lest harm come upon it through her, who hating the father because of a personal slight put upon her in the past, thirsts now for an act of revenge."

Helmor nodded. "Gazar's words seem words of wisdom," he rejoined, narrowing his eyes, and recalling, as Croft fancied, Kalamita's scarcely veiled displeasure at

his placing Naia and Jason under guard in the palace, her more recent suggestion concerning the sacrifice of the child. "How says he? Were this dream a vision?"

"Perchance," replied Gazar slowly. "It beareth the seeming of it. Were it to be repeated, Helmor should deem it such beyond all doubt."

"Aye and will," said the Zollarian monarch. "If it comes again, I shall safeguard the child, placing a double watch upon it, and also upon this woman, whose beauty is too great to fail to sway men's minds."

Gazar appeared to consider.

"'Twere well to do so," he agreed at length. "The past sun it came to my ears that since her return she has visited the house of Ptah."

"Ptah?" Helmor stiffened. "Now, by Bel himself, he appeared in my dream—those together."

"Aye," the soothsayer made answer. Gazar did not miss the point. It was as but the naming of something already known.

As in his sleep Helmor contracted the fingers of a hand. His lips set. His expression became one of determination.

"Now, by Bel," he declared, "shall I indeed have this insolent beauty watched. May Adita withdraw her favor from her for first having induced me to harken to her plans. Gazar, I am half-minded that he himself has shown me his pleasure, since, even though I myself have vowed him the child did Tamarizia refuse our demands or seek to win him from us, yet should she attack with her present weapons, not even Bel might save our armies from them, had we not the infant itself to place in her hands. Go. I shall ponder these things deeply. More lies within this vision than the fancies of a sleep-dulled brain."

Croft quitted the chamber as Gazar turned to leave it. He was wholly satisfied with his success and through it that Helmor, though superstitious, held, even as Ptah had declared on the day before, none too great a respect for his gods. Wherefore, he was determined that the succeeding night would see the dream repeated with far less effort since now the pictures of its sequence were printed on the surfaces of Helmor's mind, and the man would go to his couch, considering the likelihood of his dreaming again.

And being repeated, Helmor would take those precautions to safeguard the price of his own and his nation's safety. This would leave Croft himself free to continue

his work on the means by which the eventual rescue of his loved ones was to be brought about. A vast elation, a reborn confidence thrilled him as he sought another room in the palace—no sumptuous apartment this time where sleepless attendants watched above a master's slumbers, but a deep-set room, soured by the lack of sunlight, where Naia of Aphur lay on the soiled padding of a battered couch, cradling Jason, Son of Jason, in her arms.

He told her of his progress, now he should take Koryphu to Zitira, how there he should let him tell his story before Jadgor, how a message would be sent north through Mazhur, bearing Tamarizia's demands for a meeting between representatives of both nations, whereat Zollaria's demands and Tamarizia's attitude toward them might be discussed.

And then he left her and fled swiftly back to Himyra and the form on the copper couch.

THREE days after Helmor of Zollaria dreamed of the loss of a throne, and his ultimate salvation through the safety of a child, Jadgor's galley arrived at Himyra with Koryphu of Cathur aboard. During the interval Helmor dreamed again twice.

Koryphu's coming announced in advance from Scira was a somewhat stately affair, but seemingly failed to give the one-time prince much pleasure. His mien was solemn as he left the galley and met Robur and Jason on the quays before an observant crowd assembled for the occasion. His face was set into lines of somber consideration and there was a somber light in his eyes. One would have said that Koryphu of Cathur held himself as a bearer of bad news.

Bowing perforce to the welcoming people of Himyra, he took his seat in Robur's motur and maintained the poise of a noble until the palace was reached and he and his two companions were closeted alone. Then he let his feelings loose in a flood of resentful speech, describing all that had transpired at his meeting with Kalamita, and at the end of his narration laying in Jason's palm the purple signet ring.

"Whether this comes from Naia of Aphur of her own choice, or was forcibly taken from her I know not, O Mouthpiece of Zitu, but since it was given to me with the command to say she sent it to you with her plea for an early acceptance of the terms of ransom, I fulfill my mission and place it in your hands."

Croft turned the trinket gently. It af-

fectured him strangely—and he had little doubt of the thoughts unexpressed in Koryphu's mind. The ring spoke to him with almost suffocating force of the slender hand whereon it had been worn, of Naia of Aphur, and all she stood for to him. And he sensed that for the Cathurian the sight of the purple gem had been a most unpleasant surprise—a hint that a woman of Tamarizia had faltered in her Spartan duty to her nation—had sent it to her husband to speak to him as ever now it was doing of herself. Suddenly he whirled on Koryphu with a question:

"Think you, man of Cathur, that Naia, daughter of Jadgor's sister, cousin to Robur of Aphur, wife of Jason, sent this to him by the hand of Kalamita, through any choice save force? In Zitu's name, let me have your answer and promptly—son of Scythys's house."

Koryphu's face grew pale and he licked his lips, ere his pallor vanished and gave place to a mounting flush.

"Nay," he stammered. "Nay, Jason—I meant nought save to make plain the thought that Kalamita had added this to her efforts to persuade you. May Zilla strike me if I sought to question her who is Jason's wife."

Croft nodded. "Then let the matter remain between ourselves. Koryphu of Cathur, so soon as you are refreshed, we go to Zittra, to hold speech with Jadgor in person concerning these things."

"Let not Koryphu delay you," Koryphu said quickly. "Refreshment were not needful in a pressing matter or one involving the safety of Jason's wife and son."

His response gave Croft satisfaction, and he took him at his word.

"Accept Jason's gratitude then instead," he made answer. "So quickly as the galley shall fill her tanks with fuel for the motur, we shall go aboard."

Already he had arranged with Robur to urge the work in Himyra during his absence, taking up all foreseen details with him and assuring him that he could answer questions by the wireless almost as quickly as though present in the flesh, and even before her arrival he had seen to it that the captain of the quays had orders to see the galley refueled.

Consequently, Koryphu having waived all formality in the matter, afternoon found them dropping down the Na, and evening brought the mouth of the mighty river, where its yellow waters tinted the clearer flood of the Central Seas for miles. The galley pointed her trim prow into the

north and east at her maximum of speed.

Haste, haste, haste. The thing gnawed now at Jason Croft's heart. It urged him, spurred him, fired his every thought and action. And as he stretched himself on his couch that night with the signet of Naia of Aphur a purple talisman on a silver chain above his neck, it was with the determination to complete his task quickly in Zittra, and return in haste to Himyra, there to once more speed his work.

Zittra rose white before them the morning of the fourth day, ringed by its shimmering walls, fairylike as a mirage on first appearance. Tamarizia's flag was broken out above the galley and it darted into the inner harbor through the massive silver-faced sea-doors.

Jadgor and Zittra waited. Days before, Robur had warned his father of Croft's coming, by wireless, and the word had gone out that the Mouthpiece of Zitu was returning briefly to the city for the first time since the loss of his wife and child.

Now as he stood on the afterdeck, brave in his metal harness, with the wings of Azil—the Cross Ansata blazing blue upon it—the azure plumes nodding above his helmet, Koryphu beside him, and the galley swung toward her mooring, a wonderful picture was spread before his eyes.

The quays were banked with life. Jadgor, Lakkon, and members of the national assembly showed in metal harness or gem-encrusted garments; Zud, the high priest, stood beside them, backed by a group of harpists, a band of the Gayana, the vestals of the pyramid, mark of Croft's semi-religious position in the nation.

White-clad they were, their hair loosened save for a binding silver fillet, their lower limbs cased in white leather nearly to their rosy knees. And back of them was the crowd, close pressed, necks craning, restrained by members of the Zittran guard, who were patrolling the quays or massed about the moturs, the carriages of the assemblymen, the officials of state, in a glittering phalanx at the end of the street of approach.

CROFT saw it all with a swelling heart as the galley touched the quay and a gangplank was run out. The trumpets of the guardsmen blared and the harpists lifted their instruments into position, their voices mounted in a chant of welcome and blended with the clamor of the crowd.

At the foot of the gangplank, Jadgor and Zud and Lakkon waited. Jadgor and he struck palms.

"Hail, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu," said Naia's uncle, and turned to Croft's companion. "And to Koryphu of Cathur greeting. It has come to my ear that Scythys's son has served right loyally Zitu's Mouthpiece and in him all the people of Tamarizia as well. Wherefore is he welcome to Zittra and Jadgor's palace as an honored guest."

The face of the Cathurian twitched. As at the time Croft had approached him, he seemed deeply moved by the mark of favor from the president of his nation. "Now, by Zitu, O Jadgor," he replied in a tone of quick emotion, "your words make the heart of Koryphu beat once more as the heart of a man."

Zud spoke to Jason. "Thou must speak to them, lord." His glance turned to the close-packed throng of faces. "For many days their thoughts have been upon you. They await the Mouthpiece of Zitu's words at this time."

"Aye." Croft nodded. The thing was inevitable. He must speak—explain his mission to the people, give them some definite understanding of the situation and his motives. No matter how much he might begrudge the time involved in even so short a delay, the thing must be done.

"Here?" he questioned.

"Nay," said Zud, "the matter is arranged."

Again Croft inclined his head and turned to lay his hand on Lakkon's shoulder much as he had done the morning Jason, Son of Jason was born. It was the first time the two men had met since the night he had sworn to carry the present matter through to the bitter end, and he sensed a mutual yearning question in the aged noble's eyes.

"Father of Naia," he said, "this coming marks a step toward the goal to which both thee and Jason turn their hearts. Yet this sun shall make all plain."

Then turning again to Zud, he followed toward the high priest's car, in which the prelate indicated that he was to ride.

Jadgor and Lakkon entered their motur. The phalanx of guardsmen swung about. The trumpeters took the van. The harpists fell in before Zud and Jason. The Gayana—their arms filled with brilliant flowers—ranged themselves on either side, and lifted their voices in song. The procession moved off along the level floor of Zittra's pavements, through the welcoming throng, to pause after a time in the midst of a broad, open space.

Croft recognized it with leaping pulses

as the square in which he had been proclaimed as Zitu's Mouthpiece—saw that once more it held an elevated stage.

Upon it he mounted with Zud and Jadgor and Lakkon, the men of the assembly—the harpists—the Gayana—over a carpet of the flowers they cast before his feet. His eyes swept over the faces of the concourse. His heart swelled oddly at the sight. This was Tamarizia—her people. This was Zittra—her citizens. These were the men and women of the nation he had taken a hand in saving from the nation to the north, in saving and making strong, and leading toward a greater progress, a wider knowledge—a broader individuality than they had ever known. These were the people of Naia's race. Of a sudden he stood before them—the picture of a strong man in his gorgeous harness.

He lifted his hand. The throbbing of the harps—the liquid voices of the Gayana died. Croft spoke. To those lifted faces he told the story of all that had happened, the reason for his coming again to Zittra. To them he gave the substance of Zollaria's demands. A sound ran through them—deep, low-pitched—and unmistakable thing of amazement and resentment. It was as if the multitude groaned.

He waited until it was past and gave them his word—the word of the Mouthpiece of Zitu, that Tamarizia would never yield an acceptance. He bade them to be of good courage, waiting until the steps he was intent on taking could produce results—and then—should his plans fail—should harm befall Naia of Aphur or Jason, Son of Jason—he promised them to call on them to follow him into action—to lead them once more against Zollaria with the sword.

And now the people cheered. "Harken to the Mouthpiece of Zitu. Give heed to his words," a strong voice roared.

Other voices took up the words—they became lost to all articulate seeming, blended into an acclaiming wave of sound, ran together into a composite thunder in a thousand throats that spoke of acceptance, in words no longer, but in unmistakable tones.

Croft lifted his arms, high-flung before them.

"My people," he cried, his face exalted by that mighty response, that rising ululation of lifted voices. "Zollaria shall receive Tamarizia's answer ere long."

Again the roar of voices beat back like the pulse of a human surf upon his ears.

He dropped his arms and turned.

"Come," he said to Jadgor. Together they left the platform and entered the president's car, with Koryphu and Lakkon. They made their way through the swarming multitude, preceded by the trumpeters and guards.

"This night the assembly meets to hear Jason's pleasure," Jadgor said as he took his place at Croft's side. "Robur bade me smooth the path of your mission in a message. Wherefore I have summoned their number to a special session, since he said also that I best could aid you by arranging for your return to Himyra with speed."

"Aye," Croft replied, his heart warming toward Robur. "Speed in all things, O Jadgor. So shall we solve this riddle. Speed in our work of preparation—in the execution of our plans—speed so great that we shall strike in terror upon the sight of Helmor and all Berla, and ere they expect our coming, wake to the threat of our presence over Berla's walls."

"Hai!" Jadgor's eyes flashed at the answer. Old war-horse that he was, the picture fired his imagination, smacking as it did of the methods of the sword. "Robur said naught save that once more the forges of Himyra roar to the making of yet another marvel."

Croft nodded. "Which presently I shall make plain."

And he kept the promise, once the four men were closeted in a small room of the palace, its sliding door covered by a scarlet curtain, its windows partly veiled by crimson tissues, its floors half concealed by gorgeous rugs.

FIRST he called on Koryphu for his story of the meeting with Kalamita, and after the Cathurian had spoken, he explained all he intended doing and all that thus far he had done.

At the end Koryphu was standing rigid, wide of eye and flared of nostril, with back-thrown head, Lakkon was watching, leaning against the end of a table, and Jadgor had thrown a hand across his body and was gripping the hilt of his heavy-bladed sword.

"Now, by Zitu," he exclaimed, his tone a trifle hoarsened, "to fly above them, to rain death upon them—to bring them crawling for mercy where they had thought to tie our hands and despoil us at their pleasure! Mouthpiece of Zitu, O Jason, art thou rightly called. These things fail of mortal comprehension, save they be by Zitu him-

self inspired. Would Jadgor might go with thee on this avenging journey. Fire? Hah! Let them call on Bel if they still desire it. Tamarizia shall bring them fire from the skies themselves—clean fire—unlike that their filthy priesthood builds in their stinking god."

"Aye," said Croft, well pleased by Jadgor's outburst of approval. "The fire of Zitu's justice, O Jadgor—that shall destroy the guilty wholly should the innocent come to harm."

Jadgor opened his lips, paused and relaxed the tightened muscles of his throat by a swallowing movement. "By Zitu—this mission you shall ask tonight is therefore no more than a blind, a means of gaining time?"

"Aye." Once more Croft assented. "Zol-laria expects it. Let it be sent to occupy her mind."

The lips of the Tamarizian president twitched. "Oh, aye—it departs for Mazhur beyond any doubting. We shall demand the naming of an embassy to confer with men of our choosing."

Abruptly Lakkon asked a tense-voiced question—"Thou art assured she lies even now within Berla's walls?"

"Aye," Croft told him, looking him steadily in the eyes. "And the father of Naia of Aphur knows well how Jason knows."

Jadgor nodded, quickly sensing his meaning, and that he cared not to discuss the matter of his astral powers before Cathur's prince.

"Enough," he said, rising, "we have gained an ample understanding and Cathur has been overlong aboard the galley. It were fitting now that he refresh himself."

Summoning an attendant he gave orders that Koryphu be conducted to a room.

Lakkon rose also, remaining until the Cathurian had quitted the apartment, then turned to Croft.

"Thou hast seen her, Jason, my son?" he faltered—"thou hast seen her and the child—hast spoken with her in the spirit?"

Croft smiled as he made answer—"Aye, since last I saw thee, Lakkon, many times."

"She lies in Berla, indeed?"

"Aye—beneath Helmor's palace."

"How fares she?" Emotion thickened Lakkron's utterance. "Sent she no message by thee?"

"Aye, the love and respect of a daughter." Croft explained the situation from first to last, even describing the manner in which Helmor had been warned.

When next he paused Jadgor's eyes were narrowed to rigid slits, and Lakkon's features were pale and drawn.

"Zitu," he said in husky fashion, "I doubt not thy power, my son. Naia, my own child, has named it to me and Zud himself confirms it a thing accorded to thee from Zitu's hands—yet to safeguard your child and hers, by causing Helmor to dream. Thing thing seems passing strange. Think you the man will give heed to such a warning sufficiently long?"

"Aye—Tamarizia's messenger reaches him with a demand for parley," Croft declared from the depths of his inmost feeling. "Think you I had taken time to journey thus to Zittra, save that to my mind the step were one wholly needful to the full success of my plans?"

Jadgor spoke. "Nay, Jason is right. This step is that of a statesman. Let Zollaria lie unsuspecting, while his devices are in the making. Tonight the matter of the messenger and his message will be arranged."

Lakkon sighed deeply. His face was still pallid, but he seemed in a measure reassured.

"Now, Zitu be praised," he said, once more addressing Croft, "since in very truth he appears to guide and strengthen your mind."

CHAPTER IX

THE DEATH PLOT

JADGOR'S faith in the action of the assembly proved justified, in fact. Croft went before the representatives of the Tamarizian states that very same night.

With Koryphu to precede him, telling of the meeting in the mountains north of Cathur, the slaying of the flier by Kalamita's orders—the swift retaliation of his fellow in simple fashion, he waited until the Cathurian had lashed the minds of the men who heard him to a pitch of sullen fury, then rose slowly to his feet.

"These demands bid for no consideration," he began and paused, laying his hand on the hilt of his sword.

An outburst of swift acclaim greeted the words and was followed by silence as he explained the object of his presence in Zittra—emphasized the need of a messenger being sent north, and asked for their sanctioning word.

Now and then he was interrupted by a

question, but for the most part he spoke without interruption. And at the end he cried very much as he had cried in the public square to the citizens of Zittra:

"Grant me this, O representatives of Tamarizia—give me time to prepare Tamarizia's answer to this coward's threat of a treacherous nation, which, daring not again the shock of arms, seeks yet to win back her lost prestige behind the tender bodies of a woman and her child. Grant me the power to meet craft with craft, nor think that the signet given to Koryphu was stripped from the hand of Naia of Aphur save by force, in the treacherous hope that it might seem to support a spurious plea from her that Tamarizia yield."

For a moment no one spoke after he had finished and stood waiting for their answer, and then the man from Bithur rose.

"Nay," he cried, "not that Naia, daughter of Jadgor's sister, daughter of Lakkon—not that Naia, who was wed to Zitu's Mouthpiece within Atla of Bithur when the blue hordes of Mazzer captained by the brother of this same Kalamita, and other men of his nation, lapped like the waves of an unclean sea against Atla's walls. Not of such metal is her spirit. Tamarizians, send this messenger north from Mazhur; let him demand that Zollaria support or deny her woman agent's words."

"Aye—aye," came other voices.

Jadgor rose, his silver cuirass blazing. "Add to the message answer to Kalamita's foul threat, that if aught befalls Jason, Son of Jason—aye, or Naia, mother of Jason—ere parley is held on the matter, Tamarizia waits but the knowledge to unsheathe the sword."

"Aye—aye," again a storm of voices answered his suggestion.

"A vote—a vote!" someone began shouting.

"Let Tamarizia's message be strong."

In the end, once the turmoil excited by the Bithurian and Jadgor had in a measure subsided, a formal vote was taken, and Croft himself was empowered to draft the message entrusting it to one of the regular government couriers—men so employed for years and of trained endurance. Well satisfied, he went back to the palace, worked half the night in formulating it to his liking, interviewed the man who was to bear it, and watched his galley sail out of Zittra and turn north at dawn.

And now Himyra and his work behind

its red walls called him. He lost small time in answering its call. Once more his galley slipped forth from the massive sea-doors. Zitra sank into the Central Sea—or seemed to, slipping little by little beneath the sparkling waters with its shimmering milk white walls.

Speed. He had used the word to Jadgor. And now he called upon the captain of the galley for it—speed to Himyra. And he promised himself speed on the task before him once he reached Aphur's ruddy city—such speed as never before, not even in the heat of his preparation against the Zollarian war, had he employed.

For three days he chafed against the surge and plunge of the galley, the slither of each passing wave, until after dawn on the morn of the fourth, the mouth of the Na was reached. Eight days had been consumed on the journey—eight days wherein Naia of Aphur had lain in the room under Helmor's palace—their light, save for a few brief moments with each dawning, shut away from her purple eyes—growing ever darker and larger in the white mask of her face.

EIGHT days. The thought stabbed Croft almost as keenly as a dagger-thrust might have hurt. Eight days—and how much longer until he finished his work. There were times when his course—the time of her durance, seemed an infinity of days no less to him than to Naia of Aphur herself—times when, save for his unshakable resolution, he would have been tempted to wring his hands, to mouth at the trick fate had played upon him, to curse—perhaps to shriek his protest at the seemingly countless delays by which even in his labors he was faced.

And Naia of Aphur had not even labor to break the ordeal of her waiting. On the morning of that eighth day Jason Croft, Mouthpiece of Zitu, stood looking down to the swirl of the Na's yellow flood past the hull of the galley with a somber face.

Presently he raised it. Before night he would be in Himyra, and he had come back to the same conclusion he always reached. He squared his shoulders and set his lips back into lines of determination. He turned his face up the yellow river as though even then to catch the first glimpse of its mighty walls. In Himyra he would work.

Work! It was the panacea for waiting—it was the answer to the riddle that obsessed him as he himself had said more

than once in considering the matter—the means to Naia of Aphur's and Jason, the Son of Jason's, release. He had forbidden word of his coming preceding him to Robur's city. He wanted no trumpery of public welcomes, no ceremonials, however slight, to delay his purpose now. Almost before the galley had tied fast to the quays he left it, and threw himself into his task.

He gave himself wholly to it. He appeared unexpectedly that afternoon in the shops, the forges, learning that Robur had not been idle, with a mounting satisfaction, finally meeting Aphur's governor face to face on one of his stops.

"Zitu!" cried Robur. "I knew not of your returning. Is it your spirit come to mark my progress, Jason, my friend, or do I behold you in the flesh?"

"Both," Croft answered. "Spirit and flesh united on the work before us, Rob, at last."

"All is arranged?" Robur's eyes flashed with anticipation of Croft's answer.

"Aye." Jason inclined his head. "There should be naught to distract from our labors from now until the end."

"The end—*hai*—the end," said Robur. "Together we shall bring it quickly, my friend."

Little by little each day the work advanced. The liquid fire was an accomplished fact. Trusted men—the best educated in their line in Himyra were engaged now upon its production, its preparation for the final venture, as they filled it into the containing flasks.

The shapes of six blimps were slowly forming—huge, unwieldy seeming bags constructed out of Croft's varnished cloth. Little by little the means of putting the plan of rescue into execution was taking concrete form at last.

Miles of rope and cordage were flowing out of the shops—were being woven into the harness by which the cars should be swung beneath the gigantic envelopes. Vast quantities of chemicals were being collected toward the production of unlimited cubic feet of hydrogen gas.

Through all the seeming chaos Jason moved, ordering, directing, with a fresh certainty of precision now, as something like a definite result to all the days and nights of labor showed.

With him went Robur, aiding and abetting in all ways toward the successful issue of the task. Gaya listened each night to a report of the progress made.

During the war with Mazzer, Croft had perfected a dry-cell battery to solve the

ignition troubles of the armored moturs. Now with the liquid fire in the process of manufacture, he turned himself to the problem of constructing an electric flashlight, by which signals between the blimps could be exchanged.

Days passed. A Zitran had elapsed since his return from Zittra. At its end word came by wireless that Zollaria's answer had been received—that Helmor consented to the naming of a Zollarian delegation to discuss the terms of ransom—that a Tamarizian party would be formed and sent north to meet them, with instructions to protract the negotiations, turn the parleys between the Zollarians and themselves into a useless war of words.

Croft read the message and wirelessly back his ratification of it. He was very well pleased indeed. Let the matter be delayed yet another Zitran as it might without exciting undue suspicion, since it would take well-nigh half that time for the two delegations to be arranged and get together, and he felt he would be practically prepared.

Even now six monster bags were nearing completion in the huge sheds built by swarming workmen for their housing. The cars were ready for attaching, the moturs to be installed. That ceaseless driving of a double shift had crowded the work of two Zitran into one so far as results were concerned. Satisfied with the word from Zittra, Croft flung himself into the last stages of his task with redoubled vigor. The envelopes were inflated and floated clear of the ground.

Workmen swarmed about them on spidery trestles and stages, harnessing each monster inside its network of securely knotted cordage, binding fast with each intricate twist and turning as it seemed to the man who ceaselessly watched them, some part of his desperate hope.

Motur-trucks brought from the shops of their fabrication the cages to be hung beneath each tensely floating shape. Men sweating at their labor, made them fast. The new moturs Croft had designed at first were assembled, delivered and mounted. Propellers were set in place. Day by day the first dirigibles of Palos grew nearer to completion.

Robur was inseparable during those days from Croft. He viewed the monster devices with unbounded enthusiasm and amaze, vowing them the marvel of their age, repeating over and over again his own conception of the consternation they must

cause in Zollarian minds when, without warning, they appeared and hung above Berla's walls. Gaya drove down at his solicitation on one occasion and gazed at the hugely bulking shapes out of widening brown eyes.

Word came again from Zittra that the Tamarizian delegation had gone north.

"Let them go," Croft cried to Robur. "Ere long shall Jason follow."

"Aye, by Zitu," the Aphurian replied, casting his eyes toward the glistening gasbags, beneath which the swarming workmen toiled.

CAME a day when the last rivet was driven home, the last nut screwed into place, when Croft distributed largess to the workmen and a vast roar of human voices filled all the places where his latest creation had been given birth. Croft stood with Robur and viewed them—the mighty engines for the deliverance of his hostages to fate. His heart leaped.

"With the sun," he said, turning to his companion, "let Himyra see them. We make a test."

"I and thou," Robur returned, flashing his even teeth. "Dost remember the dawn you mounted the skies in the first airplane, Jason—and, returning, found Naia waiting to dare the venture with you? Now, by Zitu, Robur goes to try these blimps himself."

Croft nodded. His hand crept out and closed on the other man's. Well he remembered the day his words recalled. His return from the trial flight in the plane to find Naia waiting beside the hangar in her russet leather dress, and how as they rose between the Sirian sun and Himyra, she had lifted her voice and sung in a pure abandonment of emotion. Deep in his heart he vowed that these monsters of his construction should bring her back to Himyra—give her the opportunity to sing again.

Yet, all he said to Robur was, "Aye, Rob, if you wish."

Robur's muscles gripped down upon his fingers. "And not only to the testing, friend of Aphur, but even to Berla itself."

"Berla." Croft loosened his hand to lay it on Robur's shoulder, look into the son of Jadgor's eager face. "It is not in my heart, Rob, to refuse you anything in this."

Dawn came and Himyra gasped—gasped and stood with heads back-tilted, staring upward at a mighty oblong bag that swung in majestic fashion high above the walls.

It hung there like a monstrous bubble, glinting as the rays of Sirius struck upon it—drifting slowly as it seemed before the winds of morning. And yet—even as they watched it, turning and moving against the wind in steady fashion—silently—without seeming reason, too high above the red, red city of Aphur, for the ears of her people to sense how its motors roared.

An hour before—under direction of Croft and Robur—it had been dragged slowly forth from its concealing shed. With filled tanks its engines waited the awakening touch of the engineers—men selected for this first attempt at dirigible navigation from the aviation personnel by Croft himself. A huge flash of the liquid fire, equipped with its spraying device, was attached to the carrier designed to hold it. When this was done Croft and Robur stepped aboard.

A hundred workmen—men who had labored to construct it—held the ropes that still controlled it, ready to release it at a word.

"Let go!" That word came in the Mouthpiece of Zitu's voice.

Two hundred hands relaxed their hold upon the ropes. The blimp soared toward the skies.

Himyra fell away beneath it, became a red gem on the yellow sand of the desert, the breast of Aphur, pierced by the thread of the Na like a sparkling, supporting chain. To the north and east the waters of the Central Sea showed as bright as burnished silver under the first rays of the sun.

Robour made no comment, said no word. He stood tight-lipped, gripping the rail of the platform on which they rode with tensely muscled hands. Croft ordered the engines started—and even so there was no feeling that the mighty fabric moved. Rather it seemed stationary, the only solid thing in all existence, while Palos and all it held dropped away from beneath it, until Himyra's palaces and shops and houses became things no larger than the toys of children, her people, pigmies moving antlike on her streets.

Croft pointed beyond the walls.

"The desert," he said and watched while the blimp answered to the manipulation of her engines—her rudder and vanes.

Then and then only he spoke to Robur for the first time. "The desert. Recall you, Rob, the morn of the first motur in Himyra, when we drove into it from Himyra's walls, and Lakkon's gnuppas bolted, and I

touched the hand of Nala of Aphur first?"

"Aye." Robur turned. Himyra was receding as the blimp followed her new course. "By—Zitu—we are aiming for it again."

Croft nodded. "It is in my mind to try first the liquid fire upon its scanty vegetation, where it can do small harm."

And after that he waited until they flew above a comparatively level tract of country, covered by a low-growing shrub that throve on scanty moisture, before he stationed himself at the spraying device and opened the valve of the flask.

Far below, the scrub blossomed suddenly into tiny points of color like swiftly opening flowers—that grew, expanded, ran together in patches and lines of quivering light, until the whole mass of vegetation vanished, blotted out beneath a leaping sea of flame. A moment before it had lain there unchanged, as it and the desert had lain practically unchanged for years, and now it was a seething, smoking, blazing thing, sinking down in a red destruction unloosed upon it from the skies.

Croft closed the tank. "Back to Himyra," he cried and turned a set face to Robur, to find his features pale and rigid, his eyes narrowed as though the vegetation beneath him, writhing in a swift dissolution, were to his imagination the bodies of men and women caught beneath a rain of death inside a city's walls.

"It is finished, Rob," he said, speaking in a voice that quivered tensely. "As soon as the fliers are trained we go north."

Croft nodded. The strange intoxication of success was upon him.

"Ere night," he said, "we test the others." And then sinking his voice for no ears save Robur's. "And tonight I shall look into Nala of Aphur's eyes and tell her we are well-nigh prepared."

THAT day he entered his motur once the blimp had landed, drove to the airplane hangars, and called for volunteers to man the other five ships.

Returning with the men selected he personally tested each blimp, rising, maneuvering and returning before a constantly growing crowd, which in the end required the use of a detachment of the Himyra guard for its restraining.

Himyra was seething with an excitement augmented with the ascent of each mighty glistening bag. A jostling throng pressed like an impenetrable wall about the sheds, as each new monster was towed out by its

straining attendants, was manned by its waiting crew, and rose. They watched and pointed, gesticulated, and cheered.

"Hail to the Mouthpiece of Zitu!" they roared whenever Croft appeared.

That night, eagerness possessed him when he sought his chamber and laid himself down — an eagerness that had possessed him through the length of the day—an eagerness to visit Naia and tell her that the thing was done.

He closed his eyes and released the bonds of his spirit. North and north he fled across the Central Sea where the giant shapes he had designed and builded would make their way ere long. North and north over Mazhur, where the Tamarizian delegation had gone to meet that of the northern nation. North and north to Berla, and to Helmor's palace and the fetid room beneath it—to stand gazing with eager eyes on Naia of Aphur's form.

Pale as death she sat there; waiting, waiting, as she had waited so long, and she was speaking. "Jason—Jason," over and over she was repeating the word to his son.

"Ja-son—" the baby lips repeated with a scanning effort. And Naia of Aphur smiled and gathered him into her arms.

Jason—with a full heart Croft understood that she was teaching the child the name of his father—that this word was one of the first his tongue had known.

"Beloved—O my beloved!" he sent their meeting call to her.

She stiffened, threw up her head, and turned to Maia.

"Come, take the child, thou faithful one," she directed—waited until the blue girl had complied and stretched her form on the couch, ere she answered his summons, releasing her astral body to steal into Croft's waiting arms.

For a moment he simply held her, and then he told her. "Beloved—the time approaches. The thing is done."

"Done?" she faltered.

"Aye, finished wholly," Jason said, and felt her quiver—sensed the fires of her astral being quicken—found the form he held suddenly glowing.

"Now Zitu be praised." In all her slender length she pressed suddenly closer to him. "Draws then so near the day?"

"Aye, by Zitu," he declared.

"I know not the meaning of it," Naia said, "but Mala lies daily on the straw within the door of our chamber—and she had heard mutterings now and then among the guard. Thy mention of Bandhor recalls it. Kalamita's brother has come among them within the last few suns, if one may credit their speech among themselves."

"Bandhor? To what purpose?" Croft questioned quickly, vaguely disturbed that the Zollarian generalissimo should have held speech in person with members of the palace guard.

"Nay, I know not. Maia but heard mention of his presence—some word concerning Helmor's signet."

"His signet? Hai!" Croft found himself suddenly shaken. "Now may Zitemku

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seize that woman, and Adita turn her favor from her!"

"Thou meanest—Kalamita?" And now Nala clung against him, not in womanly yearning, but with the quick fear of a mother. "Jason—"

"Aye," he said tensely, "have you forgotten how she forced thy own ring from thee—or the foul thing she planned, save Helmor had overruled her? Now Zitu be thanked you have spoken of this in time since, in my own way, those things she plans may be learned, and Helmor warned."

For now it seemed to him, that lost in the press of work in Himyra, supported by the sense of security derived from the dreams he had inspired in the brain of Zollaria's monarch he had indeed been blind, and that while he had labored without ceasing, the woman who hated him as only a woman of her type could hate, and Ptah, priest of Bel, and possibly Bandhor also, had been busy with their schemes. Wherefore, it was best that he learn quickly what those schemes embraced, what new danger to Nala and Jason, Son of Jason, might be involved.

"Fear not, beloved. Zitu means not these spawn of Zitemku to prevail against us—wherefore we are warned. Ga, thou art, priestess of the Eternal Fire, to me—messenger of Azil have I been to thee, and shall be again—but messenger of Zilla will I be to these plotters—making all their plotting vain. Farewell, thou mate of Jason. He goes to learn what they plan."

In a final caress, he sunk his mouth again to hers, seeming as always when he kissed her in such fashion to draw the very essence of her being to him. And then he left her, making his way swiftly out of the palace and pausing where the fire urns flared before it, across a mighty space.

ONCE more, then, it behooved him to bring himself into contact with the woman Kalamita. He willed himself toward her, passed swiftly to Bandhor's palace and failed to find any sign; paused, baffled for a time before he recalled the scene he had witnessed between her and Ptah, Bel's priest, in the latter's quarters in the temple. Then, where better if she were plotting against Helmor, he asked himself, than in that ebon-walled room.

Swiftly he sought it, and there he found her—and not only her, but Bandhor, Ptah, and another, a heretofore unknown man.

The four were seated around Ptah's table, where flaring oil-lamps partly dispelled the gloom, pricking out the intent masks of the several faces, causing iridescent flashes of light from the jeweled bands that circled Kalamita's arms, and brodered her garment's hem. In a way that half light struck Croft as wholly fitting to the scene wherein these four sat together and plotted against Helmor's reign.

For that they were plotting, the woman's first words made plain.

"It is to thee, Panthor," she declared, eying the third masculine member of the party. "It is for thee to say whether thy cousin shall hold Zollaria's throne. Twice have his plans to humble Tamarizia failed, his efforts proved vain. Think not but the people say Helmor has no more Bel's favor—wherefore Zollaria is no longer strong. So then—a quick stroke and the thing is done."

"Aye—a quick stroke." Panthor nodded. He was heavy-set, not unlike Helmor, his cousin, in a way, with full lips of a sensual turn and closely cut hair, the stubble of which was blond. "But—regarding this child. I question not the sincerity of Kalamita, yet were it slain—even to gain Bel's favor, which none more than I admit is needful, would not Tamarizia, according to her own words, descend upon us with superior weapons and bring defeat to our armies again?"

"By Bel, has then Panthor so little faith in his favor?" Ptah exclaimed.

"Peace." Kalamita's red lips curled. "Your question is a man's question, Panthor, and the question not of a man's heart, but his brain. Think you Tamarizia means all she says—or speaks to gain her ends. This Mouthpiece is a man—and Naia of Aphur is a woman—and though a child be slain, still is she a woman and the mate of Jason, and he has twice defeated Helmor's plans to gain. Think you the child's death would change the heart of Tamarizia's strong man, or that he would carry his threat far—were she kept safe from harm to be surrendered once more to his arms?"

"Nay, by Bel!" roared Bandhor, striking the table. "My sister has struck the mark in her words—with Bel's favor purchased—her oath redeemed and the woman still in our possession, Tamarizia may well balk a resort to arms. It remains then to get the child in our hands."

"My hands," said Ptah with an evil grin.

CHAPTER X

THE ATTACK

Bandhor nodded. "Aye, into thy hands, Priest of the Strong One—and there is a way in which it may be done. Let Helmor's signet be presented to the captain of the guard now placed upon him, and our ends are gained."

Kalamita leaned half across the table toward Panthor.

"Thou knowest the device on Helmor's ring?"

"Aye," said Panthor slowly.

"And thou knowest some worker of stones?"

"Aye, Priestess of Adita." A tremor of understanding crept into Panthor's tones.

Kalamita drew back and regarded him out of narrowed lids. "Were it not possible to have him make what we need?"

"By Bel—" Panthor began, and stiffened under her glance. "Aye—so it could be done. Yet time would be required."

"Time?" The woman shrugged. "Is Panthor so anxious then, to mount the throne? Helmor plays into our hands in this in entering into parley with the southern nation. Once we have the child he will seek to regain him—to take from Bel what has been declared his own. Then—Bandhor—is not brother of Kalamita, and captain of Zollaria's men for nothing—Bel's own priest shall declare Panthor emperor in Helmor's place and Bandhor shall support him. How say you—is it not well planned?"

"Aye," said Panthor thickly. "Aye, Priestess of Adita."

"Then let Panthor see Helmor's sign cut on a stone." Kalamita rose. "And let him place it in Bandhor's hand when it is done. Ptah, build you the fires—let them be ready for the torch at the appointed time. Kalamita's oath to the Strong One shall be redeemed. How long, Panthor, before thy part shall be done?"

"Ten suns, perchance twelve," said Panthor, he and Bandhor also rising.

"See to it." Kalamita turned to leave the room. Ptah moved his heavy body to set the door open before her, and Bandhor joined her. They passed out and were gone.

Ptah turned back. "Hail emperor, favorite of Bel," he said, bending his heavy neck to incline his head to Panthor.

Panthor's expression changed. He drew himself up to his fullest height. Already he seemed to sense the weight of authority upon him as he answered. "By Bel—O Ptah—thou and I together once Helmor sits no more upon the throne."

TEN days, at most twelve, before Helmor's spurious sign should be cut on a lying stone. And then one would bear it down to that dungeon where Naia waited a promised rescue, and with it as authority demand the child. And after that. Croft sickened as he left Ptah's chamber—sickened at the thought of what might have happened save for Naia's listening ear as she lay on the straw inside the door of the dungeon—Naia's mention of the words the blue girl had overheard to him.

But—suddenly he stiffened. In ten days a great deal might be done. Helmor might be warned as he had said to Naia—or—the rescue might actually be performed.

Helmor might be warned as before in a dream—yet to make plain to the Zollarian monarch all by which he was threatened, it would need to be an elaborate dream indeed. And to speed the blimps to Berla would necessitate a start with crews but illy trained.

And even were Helmor warned, how much would it avail, when his mind was matched against that of Kalamita, unless he might be induced to act directly against her, unless she and Bandhor and Panthor were arrested and confined? And could such a warning as Croft was able to give inspire the man on Zollaria's throne to such a move—or if it did so, would it not precipitate internal troubles in Berla, perhaps as fatal to Croft's own purpose as Kalamita's schemes? Torn on the horns of such a dilemma, his spirit writhed.

In the end he made his way back to the palace and into Helmor's chamber. The man would be asleep, he fancied, but once he had gained his apartments he met with a surprise. Far from sleep, Zollaria's emperor sat in consultation with Gazar, the soothsayer he had summoned to him the night of his first dream of danger, and a man Croft had once defeated on a bloody field, and learned later to know by sight at the end of the first Zollarian war as Helmon, Helmor's son.

Helmor's face was dark with ill suppressed rage.

"Thou sayest that Panthor, my cousin, entered the house of Bel, upon their heels. What makest thou of it, Gazar? Speak thou who for years have been to me eyes and ears."

So that was it. Soothsayer Gazar might be, but he evidently combined the work of espionage with his other vocation, as it now appeared.

Croft gave him full attention as he began speaking slowly.

"Helmor knows the claim his cousin makes for his house in Zollarian affairs. Were Bandhor to support him it were ill indeed. And Bandhor is the brother of Kalamita—whose power would appear to have made drunk her spirit as her beauty had made drunk the hearts of men. Also there is the matter of the Tamarizian's child."

"Bandhor, Kalamita, Panthor—'tis a pretty trio, my father," Helmor said. "The woman grants her favor lightly where her interest is involved—and Panthor is a man and ambitious—even as Ptah is a man, though a priest. Also has she a debt of hate to be repaid against this Mouthpiece of Zitu—whom I love not myself. Lies anything definite against them, O Gazar?"

"Nay"—the old man shook his head—"naught as yet save what one may suspect—"

"Then"—Helmor leaned toward him to speak in lowered tones—"what would Gazar advise?"

"Look to the woman and the child. To me it is known that Bandhor has been among his guard. Let it be changed from sun to sun, O Helmor, neither captained by or including the same men twice. So it appears to me he shall be safe for the present, unless some unforeseen happening transpire. Let Panthor be watched closely by trusted men—watch for a meeting between any two or all of the four we have mentioned tonight, again."

"It is well." Helmor leaned back in his seat. "See to it, Helmon, that the guard be changed. Distribute also a largess to the palace guard—announce additional pay to the soldiery in Berla of twenty mina, for the Zitran, and afterward as much. Gazar—have me these others watched. By Bel, our cousin may find it requires more to cast Helmor from his throne than the schemes of a woman and a priest."

"Zitu." Croft breathed the word in his spirit. Helmor of Zollaria was far from asleep, indeed. More than that, now that he was awake he was well served. Panthor would seek an engraver of stones inside the next day or two, at latest, and Panthor would be watched. Helmor had more than one pair of eyes.

Croft's confidence returned. After all,

Kalamita and Ptah were not the only ones in Berla who played the game of statecraft, it would seem—and each day Naia and Jason would be watched by a fresh guard. More than that, additional pay would in a measure see the morale of the city's garrison restored. Once more as at the noon hour on the day before, Croft found himself swiftly uplifted as on invisible wings, his spirit filled with thankfulness to Zitu—the Father of all Life—with a voiceless paean of praise, for his everlasting justice, the inscrutability of his ways.

In such a mood he returned again to Naia, and told her what had occurred—watched her astral fires pale and quicken, as side by side they bent above the child.

"By Ga and Azil," he swore, "we shall not lose him. I go now to return in the flesh to Berla, by Zitu's aid inside Panthor's limit of days."

"Zitu go with you and return again with you, Beloved," said Naia of Aphur, with the fire of her womanhood, her motherhood, in her purple eyes.

BACK, back to Himyra, sped the spirit of Jason Croft. It crept into the form on the couch of molded copper and opened its eyes. It urged it up atingle with the knowledge it brought and all it involved. It sent it seeking an attendant, to bid the guardsman find the apartment of Robur and rouse him from his slumbers and summon him to the Mouthpiece of Zitu's chamber at once.

And when Aphur's governor appeared with sleep driven swiftly from him, Croft told him all he had seen and heard.

"Wherefore," he made an ending, "we go north from Himyra in three suns."

"Three?" Robur stared. "But, by Zitu, Jason, think you their crews may learn so quickly to control them?"

Croft nodded. "They are eager. In the morn I explain to them that there comes a need of haste. On the fourth day we go north with such as are able to follow. The rest may remain. Also, we take six of the airplanes with us."

"Aye," Robur said—"yet can they fly not to such a distance. Short of Berla must they descend for fuel."

"At Scira, at Niera," Croft told him, giving the routing of the planes as well as an answer. "Send in my name a message to Scira—that with morn a swift galley depart for Niera, bidding Mazhur send a quantity of the fuel north along the highway to within a day's march of the north—"

ern border of the state. In these things, Rob, lies my reason for calling you to me. Much must be arranged ere we start." Long before this night he had planned each step of the journey in his mind, and he was ready now that the time for the actual work approached.

"Aye." A look of steely purpose crept into Robur's eyes. "As ever, Jason, my friend, you are ready. The message shall be sent without delay." He rose.

"We will take with us the man who sends it, also," said Croft. "Let it be understood. Once we are over Berla it will be needful that there be one who shall understand the signals of the flash-lights I have made, since according to my plans I shall land a plane in the square before Helmor's palace."

Robur's eyes widened swiftly. "*Thou* wilt land a plane before his palace!" he exclaimed.

"Aye," Croft answered, smiling slightly. "Who else? Think you I shall trust the final mission to another? Wherefore I shall require a man on one of the blimps, to read any such message as I may give."

The glances of the two men continued to hold for a breathless moment, and then Robur said with feeling, "By Zitu—thou art a brave man, Jason, yet I sense not your plan in this. They will but fall upon thee—"

"Nay." Croft shook his head. "Nay, Rob—and you think so, you sense not my plan indeed. Ere I make a landing before the palace of Helmor, a part—a small part of Berla—but one adjoining the space about the palace, shall be ablaze. In the light of that conflagration shall Jason of Tamarizia descend—and call upon Helmor for the surrender of the ones he holds to ransom, under penalty of seeing the remainder of Berla destroyed. Think you he will long falter, or seek to injure my person? Nay, he will make the better choice."

For it was so he had planned it in the instant he gazed on the vast expanse of pavement fronting the palace, this same night when he had hung above it in spirit only. Then he had pictured it back by a roaring wall of unquenchable fire, in the leaping radiance of which the flare of the fire urns faded, by the light of which Helmor of Zollaria might cast his eyes up and behold the menace floating above him and all Berla, against the sky.

And so he told himself now once more as well as Robur, the thing would be accomplished. In the light of that ruddy illumination he would descend to demand a parley with Helmor in person. It was so he

would regain his wife and son—that Nala of Aphur—and Jason, Son of Jason, would be rewon. The fire of his determination, of his completed plan, blazed back at Robur with the light of a mighty purpose—a thing conceived in weary weeks of ceaseless thought and labor—a thing not to be any longer changed or swerved from its course.

Before that light Aphur's governor paled slightly and set his lips.

"Aye," he said a trifle gruffly because of his blended emotions, "now I understand thee, Jason. But it would take Zitu's Mouthpiece to undertake it in such fashion. And what does Robur of Aphur to aid the success of the venture?"

Once more Croft smiled. He laid a hand on his companion's shoulder. "He watches from the sky for any message I shall flash with the signal-lamp I shall carry—which, being interpreted to him by the man of the message tower, he shall see translated instantly into deeds. So shall he safeguard Jason's life—perhaps."

"Perhaps, aye," said Robur. "So be it. I shall send the message as Zitu's Mouthpiece directs. As for the rest, I like it not."

Turning, he stalked from the room with a gloomy face.

To himself, Croft admitted perforce that his plan was in the nature of a somewhat desperate chance. Yet he believed that he had read the Zollarian spirit aright—felt assured that he was predicating Helmor's actions correctly, when the final issue should be his to face, that he had erected his counter move on a firm foundation of human nature—was counting not overmuch on the mental attitude to be induced by the menace of a fiery dissolution rained down upon defenseless heads out of space.

Returning with the assurance that he had despatched a messenger with his orders, Robur found him no whit less firm in his resolution, and they discussed all details attendant on the departure of the blimps through the further course of the night.

MORNING ushered in three days of well-nigh ceaseless toil, of practise with the giant aircraft by day—of an overhauling of them, a correcting of minor faults by night, of consultations with the fliers in which every step of the expedition was explained to them by Croft—of a grooming and testing of the six planes that were to accompany the monster dirigibles north.

Mutlos of Cathur sent back word the first day that the galley for Niera had put

forth. That same night Croft and Robur visited the wireless tower, and Croft demonstrated his signaling flash.

The man, trained to receiving and sending, read the code with little trouble, transcribing more than one message correctly and then flashing them back to Croft. Then, seating himself again at his key, he sent word to Zittra that the expedition was about to set forth.

There followed two more straining days wherein Croft gave it out that only four blimps would be taken, and those manned by the crews that showed the greatest aptitude in their work. Four, he had decided, would be enough for the venture, and at dawn on the morning of the fourth day they rose like monstrous glistening bubbles above Himyra's walls, and pointed their blunt noses north.

Three days to Niera, to reach which the swiftest galley took five. So he had planned it. And at Niera he would descend. Long before he had taken the necessary steps for that—sending what apparatus he would require to the capital of Mazhur—that it might be ready for any need.

The night before had seen the airplanes depart for Scira on the first leg of their flight. From there they would go to Niera, and there the entire expedition would once more meet.

Three days, he thought, as he watched Himyra drop away beneath him with the gaping, cheering crowds that had gathered to see the blimps depart. Three days and four were seven. A day at Niera, to overhaul any weakness that might have developed in the flight across the Central Sea, a half day to the northern borders of Mazhur, the last jump, before the final hop off for the planes. And from there to Berla—four hundred miles or a trifle over. He allowed eight hours for that.

Higher and higher soared the blimps. A strong wind raged about them, bucking the roaring kick of the propellers. Higher yet, he gave command. Higher and still higher, seeking a favorable current, higher and higher, until it was found—then north—north—where once more as always the lodestone of Naia of Aphur's being drew him—north and north. He was going north at last!

The thought fired him. There was no sense of motion. Even as in the astral body, it was as though he himself stood silent and all beneath him moved. Overhead the monster gas-bag glinted like a thing of silver under the Sirian ray. Below him lay the no longer yellow ribbon of the Na,

framed in the green band of the irrigated lands.

To the north the Central Sea showed sparkling in the morning sunshine. And beyond the Central Sea was Mazhur—and beyond Mazhur—Naia—Naia and Jason, Son of Jason—captive in a hostile land. And Naia's hair was golden—as golden as the sunshine that glinted now on his flashing armor—and her eyes were as blue as the blue stones upon his breast, marking out in flawless outline the Cross of Life Eternal—the Cross Ansata—and Azil's wide-stretched wings.

A wonderful, a mighty, a vast exaltation of the spirit seized him. He was going to her, borne swiftly out across the Central Sea on a favoring wind, as though Zitu himself had filled the lungs of his Omnipotent purpose, and were wafting him on his mission of salvation with a strong, beneficent blast.

Purposely he had placed the wireless operator aboard the blimp under command of Rob. That night they exchanged signals—flashing message and answer between them, as the tireless engines roared. The moons of Palos rose and turned the Central Sea to indigo and silver—glinted on the monster racing-bags. Far down, their shadows raced across the tossing waves beneath them, like the shadows of weird clouds.

Far off—a blot on the glinting waters—a galley showed. Croft found himself wondering just what emotions the sight of the four huge aircraft might cause aboard. At least he was sure the moons of Palos—those moons by whose light he had first held Naia of Aphur in his arms and kissed her—had never before beheld a similar sight. For a long time after he had ceased signaling to Robur's blimp he sat brooding, staring off across the moon-burnished surface of the waters which showed on every side.

And then, wrapping himself in a robe, since the night was chill at that elevation, he laid himself down and after a time, to all appearances, he slept.

In reality, he came to earth as he had come the night on which he had decided on the step upon which he had now set forth. He came and roused me and told me all that had occurred on Palos during the intervening months since we had spoken together last.

And the thing fired me, woke in me an intense desire, so that as he paused I cried, "Croft, let me be present—let me see the end of the thing, at least."

HE SMILED. "Man," he said, "I knew you'd say that, and the thing will be at night, three, four, five—six nights after this. Listen for my call then, Murray, and after that—you'll have to shift for yourself."

I nodded. "Just the same, I'll stick pretty close to you," I declared.

"You can do it in the shape you'll be in," he retorted, smiling. "On the last hop off from just south of Helmor's country, I'll be aboard a plane. Rob knows his work, and he'll captain the blimps. They'll slip over Berla after dark and light up the buildings fronting the palace square. There is a bit of country outside the city that I'll make just about dusk, and land. From there when I see the light of the fire, I'll simply zoom up over the walls and alight in front of Helmor's doors—or that's the way I've got it planned. So you see it's lucky you're going to be capable of speedy motion, Murray, if you expect to go along."

"But see here," I objected, "won't it be pretty risky coming down outside the city, like that?"

He shook his head. "You haven't quite learned Palos yet, Murray. I'll hit a tract of uninhabited country, of course. If I were a Zollarian, I could pull the same stunt in the desert outside Himyra's walls. Now, do you understand?"

I said I did, and he left me. And that is the way in which I came to witness the ending of the duel between Zollaria and Tamarizia, but more particularly between Kalamita and Jason, the Mouthpiece of Zitu, I shall endeavor to describe.

Of what intervened during the next five days I know of course only by hearsay. Briefly, Croft made Nelra on time, and came down. The airplanes—five of them, that is—arrived. The other had come to grief and been compelled to remain behind. He did not wait for it, but pressed on. The final stopping-place was reached.

Croft, to Robur's horror, made use of a parachute with which he had equipped each ship, and dropped safely to the ground. Robur sailed into the north, and Croft, waiting until the planes had filled their fuel-tanks for the final stage of the journey, rose to follow just after the noon-tide hour of prayer.

Afterward he told me that the thing held a strange significance for him at the time. There was a prayer in his heart as the plane soared up swiftly—a prayer for success and the safety of those he loved—and he knew that, back in Himyra, Gaya was praying in a similar fashion for Robur,

for Naia and Jason, and himself. And he knew that, even if in less definite fashion, the same prayer was in the heart of the nation whose manhood drove the blimps before him—one of whose daring sons controlled the rising plane on which he rode.

The hour of prayer. Eight hours he had allowed himself to cover the last four hundred miles. If nothing went wrong he would come in sight of Berla about dusk—and he would keep the blimps in sight, of course. One hour, two, three passed with the steady drone of the motor in his ears—four, five, six. Another, and the blimps paused and began a majestic circling.

Berla was in sight from their greater elevation, and twilight was falling. Across it he winked his signal—and was answered by a responsive flash. The plane fled on, swerving to one side to find the spot where it should lie waiting. Like a great bat swooping, it sank and went skimming across the darkening landscape, seeking a place to alight. In the end it grounded far out beyond the now shadowy outlines of Berla's walls.

Croft leaned back in his seat. Briefly he spoke to his pilot and seemed to rest, sagging inside his supporting straps. But, as aboard the blimp that first night, his spirit sought the chamber beneath Helmor's palace—found Naia and Jason on the couch together watching the blue girl of Mazzeria, who was busy weaving patterns out of straws. Naia of Aphur—and Jason, Son of Jason—on this night of all nights—safe!

Croft opened his eyes and lifted his body more stiffly in its seat. "Zitu—I thank thee," he whispered, raising his face to the now night-darkened heavens, and then—he sent the call for which I was listening on earth.

BERLA of Zollaria. It lay there, huge, dark, slumbrous, safe; secure as the night pall wrapped it in all, seeming, undisturbed by any alarm of danger—unapproached by any force of foes. For what could harm Helmor's city, behind its darkly outlined walls? Four hundred miles of mountain, plain, and desert lay between it and the Tamarizian border—and as yet, save for the sending of a delegation to parley, Tamarizia had not moved. Dark, silent, it lay, save for where on either side of one of its many gates, the fire urns flared.

And yet on the darkened terrain beyond them crouched the squat, wide-winged shape of the Tamarizian plane, with its

two men, watching, watching. And somewhere—high above it rode the blimps, of which there was no sign. Yet they were there, and the plane was squatted, watching—and they were things that, swifter than any method known to Zollaria's craft—swifter than the swiftest racing gnup-pas—could cross mountain and desert and plain.

Then suddenly—without sound, so high they rode—from out of the blue-black void of the heavens—there showed a winking light. Ruddy it was as a falling star—as it glowed briefly and vanished like a fading spark. And yet, seeing it, one knew that under cover of the darkness, before the moons of Palos wheeling up like racers of the night revealed them, the blimps were stealing in.

Once more the ruddy pin-point winked, twice, thrice, and vanished, and as it faded for the last time it was answered by Croft himself from the plane. Briefly his torch glowed and was extinguished and the spot in the heavens did not appear again. Only Jason spoke to the flier. "Be ready, Avron."

And the man replied, "Aye, lord," climbed into the pit of the fuselage, and began strapping himself in place.

Croft followed suit. The two men sat staring out towards the walls of Berla, where the fire urns still made flickering flares against the gates.

And that was all. Save for their breathing, the whisper of the night wind round them, there was no sound. Silent as death itself was the blimps' approach, and as unsuspected, until presently an arc of silver appeared above the eastern horizon, and up shot the first of the twin Palosian moons.

Its upflung rays fell on a wondrous sight. They struck against the giant dirigibles, turning them into slowly drifting things of silver—huge, unbelievable, weird as the moonlight struck upon them, like monstrous dream shapes—unthinkable bubbles wafted forward on some unsensed breeze. So they must have burst upon the startled sight of Berla's people, first, soaring high above the city, circling as though in search of some definite spot, before they paused, appeared to hover for an instant, and began settling down.

"Zitu!" Avron whispered tensely under his breath.

"Aye," said Zitu's Mouthpiece as though in answer. "Watch ye now, Avron—watch."

Down, down sank those mighty glistening shapes from the Palosian skies—down,

down until at length without seeming cause they checked their descent, and hung gently swaying, until a strange red brilliance leaped up high over Berla's walls.

"Go now—in Zitu's name," Croft spoke to his pilot.

The motur roared—the huge plane quivered, seemed to shake off the lethargy of its waiting, trundled forward, gained headway, tilted, and rose.

Up, up in a reaching slant, Avron drove it toward the growing radiance before it. And then, like a kite striking home upon its prey, it swept above Berla's ramparts and plunged down beneath the moon and flame-illuminated gas-bags, toward the leaping fires.

They leaped, they blazed, those fires spreading in a ruddy band of destruction before Helmor's palace. They smoked. The wind of night caught that smoke and swept it off across the city in twisting, writhing streamers—and billows, like the tatters of a trailing shroud. For an instant it half veiled the racing plane, and Avron coughed. Then the machine burst through it and swam above the square already beginning to fill with a running, shouting, wildly gesticulating mob, beyond which on the steps of the palace itself showed a body of the palace guard.

THE fire struck off ruddy flashes from their massed cuirasses and helmets, pricked out the livid color of their saffron plumes. A captain lifted a sword and pointed toward the hovering gas-bags with a glinting blade. The roof of a house crashed down roaring in a fiery dissolution, casting up a myriad of sparks against the smoke pall of the major conflagration, from which a sickly, unsteady light was filling all the square, casting flickering shadows over the jostling mass of the panic-stricken crowd.

Above that scene the airplane swam with a chattering motur. The milling masses heard it and lifted their faces toward it in a fresh alarm. It turned. It circled back.

"Down," Croft spoke to Avron. "Land me before the guard."

Avron nodded, worked with his controls briefly. The plane tilted, circled again at a lower level—and suddenly with deadened engine volplaned with the steady-winged swoop of a hawk toward the wide expanse of pavement, to trundle forward and pause.

Before it the guard shifted uneasily, watched its slowing advance with widened eyes and paling faces, a slight backward movement of their ranks.

Not so the captain, however.

"By Bel—he has given one of them into our hands at least. Upon them!" he roared, and drew his sword to lead them in an overpowering charge.

"Hold!" Croft rose in his place and faced the quick, forward surge of the guardsmen. "Naught has Bel given thee, captain. Wherefore spare thy praises. By design are we come among thee—for speech with Helmor. Put up thy sword."

The firelight glinted on him as he left the plane and sprang lightly to the ground. It shone on his burnished harness, it struck upon his azure plumes. It pricked out the design of the Cross Ansata and the widespread wings of Azil on his cuirass. And suddenly the captain lowered the point of his weapon in a startled recognition.

"Thou?" he stammered.

"Aye," said Jason gruffly. "I, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu—to hold speech with Helmor, as thou hast already heard. I Jason of Tamarizia—the one man who may save Berla from destruction—by whose order what remains once that fire has burned itself to embers—may be spared. Go say as much to Helmor, and say also that I wait a meeting with him—here."

Followed a tense moment, in which quite plainly the Zollarian debated his course, turning his glance from Croft to the slowly swinging menace of the moonlighted blimps above him—those glinting shapes so remote, so detached in their cold, almost frost-rimmed seeming—and yet as the man before him said the cause of the ravaging flames in whose light that man appeared.

And as though sensing his thought, Tamarizia's Mouthpiece spoke again:

"Think not that save by my order any part of Berla will be spared—neither thou, nor Helmor, nor any of her people. That ye behold done here may be done elsewhere, Zollarian captain."

"By Bel—" The captain sheathed his sword. Seemingly the situation was too much for him to handle unaided. "Restrain the people," he directed a lieutenant. "Hold him securely and in safety until I have seen this carried to Helmor's ears."

The lieutenant saluted. Turning, the captain ran flashing up the stairs. His subordinates growled a command. The guardsmen advanced, split, moved off right and left, formed a cordon about the plane and Jason, facing outward toward the crowds in the square with leveled spears.

Time passed. Jason of Tamarizia stood motionless with folded arms. The people

of Berla pressed up to the very spear points, shrieking and mouthing. The conflagration roared.

And then the palace doors opened. Helmor and Helmon appeared. Slowly and without any sign of undue haste they descended the steps until nearly at the foot they paused.

The Zollarian monarch and Tamarizia's strong man stared into one another's eyes, and Helmor caught a body-filling breath.

"So," he said, "it is thou. Word I had of thy presence, yet hardly it seemed thou hadst dared."

Not a line of Jason's set expression altered as he replied, "Wherein Helmor had right. Naught have I dared indeed. If Helmor doubts it, let him use his eyes. Let him gaze on yonder fire, and lift his vision to the skies. There may he behold the cause in those engines with which I have come upon him, by which Berla shall ere morning lie in ashes, save I and I only give the word that it be spared. Wherefore I dare naught in standing thus before him, to offer him the safety of himself and people. What would it profit Helmor to bid his guardsmen seize me, and thereby lose his one remaining chance of safety? Has he any means with which he may combat them—any cover beneath which he shall lie safe from a rain of unquenchable fire?"

Helmor hesitated in his answer—hesitated even as those who know that they are lost. And indeed he must have known it in that instant as he lifted his eyes to the heavens and beheld there the unbelievable creations brought against him too remote for any resistance within his power to reach them, yet near enough to bring swift death upon himself and his people, as witnessed by the blazing wall of the city, at the foot of the palace square. And in that bitter moment of realization Helmor of Zollaria's spirit must have writhed.

NOW was humiliation come upon him—upon him who had sought to bring it upon others in his time. Staggered by the appalling swiftness of it, he found no words with which to meet the situation. And as he lowered his glance and forced it back to that of the man before him, Croft spoke again.

"Nor Berla alone, O Helmor. These things be not of my seeking, nor of Tamarizia's design. Yet if I return not scatheless from this meeting, not only Berla but all Zollaria as well shall burn. If I return not safely that begun this night shall certain-

ly continue, and Tamarizia shall hurl her total strength against a treacherous nation which seeks by unlawful methods to further her ends. And in that day Zollaria as a nation shall go down in a red ruin, from which she shall not rise.

"We sought not war, O Helmor, nor aught save only peace. Twice have you loosed your strength against us—and twice has it proved vain. Yet again you planned our undoing—and this third time you struck not as a man against men, but against the innocent, the weak and helpless—seeking through them to win what had been failed of through force of arms. Helmor of Zollaria struck not at the heart of a man as he hoped to Zollaria's and his own profit. But now must he face strength again.

"Yet even so we come not in war against thee or thy nation, save in so far as it be needful to prove resistance vain. War we make not against the defenseless, the weak, nor wish to—and we hold it a thing for sorrow, were the helpless, the innocent, to perish for Helmor's or another's sin. Wherefore we come before thee and offer thee peace, O Helmor—a peace which Helmor needs but say the word to win."

"Thy price? Name the ransom of Berla, Mouthpiece of Zitu." Suddenly Helmor appeared to find his tongue. His voice rose hoarsely. "By Bel, I would not see my people burn."

"Helmor knowest," Croft said slowly, "I but require of thee my own. Let Naia of Aphur and the blue girl, her attendant, and Jason, Son of Jason, be brought forth and placed unharmed aboard the machine Helmor sees before him."

"And afterward?" Croft's utterly controlled demeanor, the mildness of his demands, seemed in a way to disturb Zollaria's monarch, appeared to excite the suspicion of some hidden trap in his mind.

"Nay, nothing," the Mouthpiece of Zitu returned. "Have I not said that I come not in vengeance upon thee? Hark ye, Helmor, I am not driven by any such intent as that of the woman who having led thee into this position now plans to cast thee from a throne. Yet, if ye yield not, by Zitu, whose Mouthpiece men name me—thy throne itself and all it stands for shall be destroyed."

Helmor started. Croft's intimate knowledge of a plot against his tenure of his power seemed to shake him well nigh as deeply as all else. He stood silent, once more lost to all seeming in a gloomy consideration, into which broke the rising

voices of the crowd. For they too had heard from their places outside the ring of threatening spears in the hands of the guardsmen, and now they cried to him, "O Helmor—yield to him—grant him his demands nor seek to resist him, O Helmor. Let not Berla be destroyed!"

Those cries beat into his ears a very surge of plaint and entreaty. And hearing it Helmor threw up his head and turned to Croft.

"This is the sum of your requirement, Mouthpiece of Zitu, which being granted, shall lead to nothing else?"

"Aye, by Zitu, on the word of Jason," Croft assented quickly, making the words both agreement to Helmor's query and an oath.

"O Helmor—" Once more the plea of a panic-stricken people.

For a moment Zollaria's ruler gazed out across their terror-whitened faces. And then he yielded, lifting a hand and up-flung arm to calm them. "Peace. Helmor bows to thy wishes in this matter. Go, Helmon, son of Helmor, thyself bring forth the women and the child."

"O Helmor. Hail Helmor! All praise to Helmor by whom we are preserved!" In swift transition from plaint to plaudits once more came the voice of the crowd. "Helmor the Wise-One—the guardian of his people! O Helmor! Aye, aye, Helmor—give them to him!"

They surged forward, lifting their hands in acclaiming gestures as Helmor turned and began to mount the steps.

He had won, won! For an instant as the Zollarian prince climbed upward, Croft found himself unnerved. He had won the desperate venture. A few moments, a few heart beatings only, and he would look into Naia of Aphur's eyes, might rest his hand, if so he wished, upon the crown of her golden hair, winning like even to another Jason, that golden fleece of his desire. The thought pleased him and he smiled, and turned his glance toward Avron, staring down unmoved, as it seemed, in all the tumult, from his place in the fuselage.

A few moments—aye, a few moments. He faced back to Helmor, standing with gloomy visage, and let his gaze run past him and up the flight of steps behind him. A few moments and he would lift Naia and Jason, Son of Jason, into the pit of the plane behind Avron and rise with them free of Berla's prisoning walls.

And then he stiffened. Helmor emerged from the palace, and with him, Naia of Aphur, and Maia walking beside her, and

about them some half dozen members of the guard.

AND now no longer was Croft the Mouthpiece of Zitu, but as he watched the approaching party begin the descent of the stairs, noting the slender lines of Naia's figure, the deathlike pallor of her, straining his eyes for a first glimpse of the child. A moment—a single moment his leaping heart told him, and they would be reunited—one moment only remained of the dreary waiting. Naia of Aphur was coming toward him—nay, flying toward him.

For, suddenly, without any warning, she was free of Maia's supporting figure, clear of the guardsmen, past Helmor and speeding swiftly in the firelight down the steps.

Croft opened wide his arms.

And then she was against him, lifting to his bended face eyes so filled with maddening horror that they struck fresh terror to his spirit, beating upon the cross the wings of Azil of his cuirass with tight-clenched, desperate hands, panting rather than speaking, into his startled ears the cry of a mother's frenzy.

"Gone, Jason—gone. They have taken him from me. In the name of Zitu, hasten to Bel's temple and save him. They have gone to sacrifice our son!"

Gone! For a heart's beat the soul of Jason Croft gave ground. Gone. This, then, was the end of his scheming, his months of weary labor. With success in his grasp he was beaten.

"God!" he cried, not knowing in the shock of the moment that he spoke in English, and releasing the grip of his arms about her body, he seized her by the arms. His fingers bit into the white, white flesh upon them. "But—he was safe with thee when darkness fell, beloved."

"Aye, aye!" She nodded in desperate affirmation. "Scarce had Gor gone when Helmon came to release us—"

"Gor!" Croft bent straining eyes upon her.

"Aye—Gor—creature of Kalamita. He it was who tore him from me, after he had slain the captain of the guard—saying it was done by Helmor's order. O Ga and Azil, canst not understand? To the Temple of Bel and save him or else let Berla be destroyed."

"Aye, if he dies, by Zitu." Croft swept her close pressed against his side, and turned to Helmor.

"Thou hearest, Zollaria, what answer have ye to words of Gor?"

And in that moment when the balances trembled with the issue of life and death for himself, his people, his nation, as well as for the other actors in that tight-gripped scene, of every blended human emotion, Helmor more than any time in Croft's knowledge of him proved his right to reign. One quick pace he came toward the Mouthpiece of Zitu, and the half fainting woman he supported, and paused with hand on sword and flashing eyes.

"Nay, by Bel," he answered strongly. "Not by word of Helmor was this thing come to pass, but by the trickery of another, because of a plot against me, of which it would seem from his own words, Jason knows. Helmon, my son—" he turned briefly to the crown prince standing pallid and shaken before this fresh turn of events—"what know you of this foul matter?"

And Helmon answered quickly, "Naia of Aphur speaks truth. Gor slew the captain who denied him entrance to the chamber, and cowed the guardsmen with his mighty strength—saying he took the child by thy orders, O my father; wherein as thou knoweth he lied."

"Aye." Helmor's features darkened. "Yet sought to take advantage of the present instance to accomplish the interests of his sweetheart. By Bel, I swear it. Let Tamari-zia say if he believes."

Deep in his troubled soul Croft knew that he did. The thing was well in keeping with the methods Kalamita would almost certainly have employed. Beaten until the moment of the city's panic in her efforts to gain possession of the son of the man she hated, with a hatred defying reason—it would have been like her once the aircraft hovered above Berla to recall Helmor's words that the child should be given to Bel in the event that Tamariztia refused the Zollarian demands or made any hostile move.

She might well have sent Gor on his mission, trusting to the excitement to gain him access to the palace, to Helmor's former words to overcome any refusal of his demands on the part of the guard. Such things passed swiftly through his brain as the crowd again took up its clamor—"To the temple, O Helmor—to the temple. Death to Gor who has undone us! Seek and slay him!"

Jason Croft inclined his azure-crested helm. "Aye, Helmor," he accepted, "Jason believes. This were the work of Kalamita, not another. Wherefore—"

"To the temple!" Naia of Aphur

screamed. "In Zitu's name, waste no more words about it!"

"To the temple—to the temple!" The words became a beating surf of sound on the lips of the people. "To the temple quickly, O Helmor!"

Helmor acted. "Ho, guardsmen, attend me! To the Temple of Bel!" he roared.

CHAPTER XI

THE TEMPLE OF BEL

TO THE Temple of Bel! To that ebon dark structure, where in its mighty enclosure crouched the figure of the unclean god. It was the one chance—the one remaining hope of a full success in his venture, and Jason knew it.

"To Avron—up and remain with him," he cried to Naia.

"Nay, Jason—nay, my beloved," she denied him, gasping. "With thee. Keep me in this at thy side."

"Come, then." He tightened the arm about her yielding waist and crushed her to him. There was scanty time to argue. Already the guard were forming—massing a wall of their bodies about them. And there was a thing that demanded his attention. Swiftly he drew his signal lamp and pointed it to the skies.

"To the Temple of Bel! Descend above it!" He sent a message with a hand that, despite his stern control, was not wholly steady. "To the Temple of Bel," he repeated, and lowered his eyes to find Helmor's eyes upon him.

"I but signed the airships to follow us to the temple," he voiced an explanation, lest the man misunderstand him, and found himself wondering if the huge craft would be able to identify and find it—decided there was naught he could do to aid them, that the carrying out of the order lay wholly in the hands of Robur.

And Helmor seemed to understand, though he made no answer, speaking instead to Helmon. "Remain and guard the machine. Let no one approach it."

"To the temple!" Once more the voice of the crowd—a seething mass now of jostling, pressing bodies—of white faces and lifted arms in the flickering light of the firelight.

Helmor answered the rising ululation, "Aye, to the temple. Forward, guard!"

Croft lifted Naia of Aphur, holding her terror-shaken figure before him, cradling it in his arms against his metaled breast. Side by side he went forward with Helmor as the guard advanced across the square,

breaking a pathway through the mass of the people with their spears. Slowly at first, and then with a quickened rhythm beat their feet. Their moving mass gathered momentum as their captain lifted his voice and called a rising cadence. The light of the blazing buildings shone sharp upon the spearheads—shimmered and flashed on their glinting harness as they charged toward the shadowy mouth of a street.

To the temple—the temple! The thud and clank of their feet, striking in a measured rhythm, seemed to beat the words into Jason's ears. To the temple—the temple! Naia of Aphur was praying. As he raced inside the cordon of other racing bodies, Croft caught the whisper of her pale lips beneath his own set, straining face.

"Ga—Azil—Ga, eternal mother—Azil—angel of life—have mercy—spread thy wings in shelter above him—"

They reached the street and plunged among its shadows, pounding with a dull reverberation of many feet along it. To the temple—the temple. The walls of its banking structures gave back the echo of that ceaseless rhythm. He glanced at Helmor. Set of lip and narrow-eyed, his features distorted by the rage that burned within him, the realization of this latest menace come upon him, the haste that had made him cast aside all dignity of station, and sent him thus on foot in a last endeavor to offset it, the Zollarian ran with a steady, unfaltering stride.

"Zitu—father of all life—"

Croft tensed his muscles, pressing the yielding form of Naia closer to his pounding heart. Save for her whispers, the clank and thud of the charging body of men, their heavy breathing, there was no sound in all the night. Behind them Berla was burning, with a lessening glare. Here only the moonlight cut in silver bands and purple shadows as they raced. He glanced up toward the azure heavens. His sweat-misted eyes beheld a drifting shape—huge, too regular of outline for a cloud—the glistening, glinting envelope of a blimp.

"They follow us, beloved—Robur follows." He spoke in muffled tones to Naia—and found her purple eyes lifted darkly to his face.

Out of one street and into another raced the straining Zollarian guard, and along it, and into another, and through that into a second monstrous square.

The Temple of Bel! Croft knew it—recognized it, felt his spirit once more

falter as he sensed its dark mass lightened by some interior radiance that shone redly between the mighty pillars, pricking out each massive column in an inky blackness—the light of Bel's lighted fire!

Croft sensed its meaning—that Ptah had done his part and ignited the sacrificial flame in the body of the monstrous god, lifted his eyes from the fire-etched line of the pillars and found smoke curling in whirling streamers above the temple façade, lifted his soul in a prayer that Robur would also see it, mark it a beacon to guide his searching, and ran on toward the serried flight of steps before him, reached them and began to climb.

UP, UP, he made his way with Helmor and the now panting guard. Up, up—and what sight of horror would that radiance between the ebon pillars reveal when they reached the top?

He sickened before the question, found himself straining still ever upward, made dizzy by his anguished thought.

"Ga and Azil—Zitu—father of life—have mercy—"

Suddenly he lifted his arms and shifted the body of Nala, turning it more wholly toward him, as though thereby to hide from her eyes the light of the temple fires.

Up, up—the last step at last. And there, among the pillars supporting the mighty colonnade, Helmor's party paused. Before and below them, the vast pit with its rows of surrounding steps, whereon a multitude might find seats—the idol in its center showed. Men—such as Croft had seen on the occasion of Kalamita's visit to the Priest of Bel, were working about the god. Smoke and flame curled from its flaring nostrils as they fed its inward fires—and its hands, extended flatly, palm up, before its ugly belly shone redly—they glowed. Heated to a dull incandescent, they waited the sacrifice.

So much Croft saw in a single glance, and found his spirit lighten, even as Nala struggled to her feet and gazed upon the scene before her—cried out and covered her eyes.

"Forward." He spoke to Helmor. "Bid the guard surround the idol—seize the men who attend it and hold them, while we make search for the child."

For there was time—time yet to accomplish all his purpose. Bel's glowing hands were waiting, but not yet had the sacrifice been placed within them, and deadly purpose wakening swiftly once more in the

mind of Jason, drove out his former fears. Enough he knew of Bel's worship to know that no sacrifice were acceptable to him, unless placed in the hands of the god.

And Helmor seemed to comprehend both his intent and the situation fully. He addressed the captain of the sweating guardsmen. "Take a portion of your men—surround the image. Let none approach it." Then as the officer, saluting, turned to fulfill his orders, he drew back, with face gone livid, and faltered. "Stay! Nay, now, by Bel I dare not. The sacrifice approaches. Behold!"

Lifting a shaken arm, he pointed. Croft followed the direction of his hand and starting eyes. He turned his baffled glance to the other end of the mighty enclosure, where at the head of the farther tier of steps a processional appeared.

Ptah! He saw him, naked in all his wonderful animal strength save for a scarlet leathern apron about his bulging loins and a headdress of ebon plumes, and the glint of metal sandals and casings of metal on his feet and monstrous calves. And behind him a body of lesser priests.

So much only he saw at first, and then, as Ptah and his satellites descended the upper tier of steps, Kalamita, in the veiled beauty of her physical form, appeared. Kalamita! Woman of flesh and fleshy beauty—Priestess of Adita. Her perfect body shone in the light of the sacrificial fires, an iridescent thing of tinted silk and jewels, and behind her Bandhor and Panthor.

They descended a single step—and behind them came Gor in his banded cuirass of copper, on which the light struck dully, bearing the sacrifice.

Jason, Son of Jason—he lay upon an ebon-colored cushion, and even as Croft's agonized eyes beheld him, he lifted little upflung hands and arms.

"Ga—and Azil," cried Nala of Aphur in an anguish of recognition.

Croft whirled on Helmor. "Forward. There remains yet time to save him!" he roared.

"Nay, Mouthpiece of Zitu, I dare not." At the end, Helmor balked the issue. Life-long superstition proved stronger than all other considerations. "Helmor nor any man may seek to keep from Bel what is consecrated to him."

"Ga—" The prayer of a mother to the Mother Eternal.

The thing was a matter of a few moments. Then Croft cast his glance upward.

A monstrous, glistening oblong hung there, slowly turning. He lowered his gaze and swept it across the floor of the mighty pit, and from that to Ptah and those behind them. And then his voice lashed back at Zollaria's monarch. "Does Helmor fear then the fire of Bel—more than Tamarizia's fires?"

And Helmor answered. "Helmor, Tamarizian, performs not a sacrilege against his god. In his hands be it."

"Then let Helmor behold!" Croft took the only chance remaining. Swiftly he darted down some half dozen tiers of steps and lifted his huge signaling-torch to the skies.

"Set fire to the pit of the temple."

Once, twice, he flashed that message, even though after the first swift sending, the blimp began sinking down. And then as it hovered lower and lower, bulking ever more hugely, he turned and climbed back with limbs that shook beneath him, to Nala's side.

For that was the thought born of his desperate need as Helmor weakened in his purpose—to flood the level space between Ptah and the idol with a mass of impassable flame—to check him, hold him from the presence of his god with fire, since he might not do it with men.

Lower and lower sank the airship. Like a mighty cover settling down above the open enclosure, it seemed. And as Croft slipped an arm about the swaying form of Naia of Aphur, it paused.

Paused, too, Ptah and his fellow priests. They had caught sight of Croft on the steps beyond the idol—marked the upflung posture of his arm. Their eyes had leaped above it and fallen on the glistening shape descending as it seemed, upon their heads. Perhaps consternation seized them—perhaps they waited merely to grasp its presence. But at all events they paused with lifted faces.

And as they stood—the floor of the pit about the idol, beyond it farther and farther, burst into widening lines of flame. Swiftly those lines stretched out, spreading, spreading across the sunken level, as the monstrous shape above it poured down its fiery rain. In it the image of Bel glowed yet more hotly, became a thing of a myriad licking, darting, fiery tongues. The men who had stoked the fires within it vanished, writhing, caught beyond any hope of rescue in the open.

And whether consternation had first seized the minds of Ptah and his party, it

seized them now. They turned to draw back before the deadly menace of the sea of fire, before them. Too late—its ever widening circle swung its arc against them. Ptah—Priest of Bel, shrieked once in mortal anguish, and went down.

ON THE steps of Bel's Temple—on their way to Bel's idol—he and his fellows sank in a horrid dissolution, with a grotesquely terrible twitching of tortured bodies, a tossing of arms and limbs. They fell and, driven by their own contortions, dropped one by one from step to step among the lapping flames.

Above them stood Kalamita—Priestess of Adita—stood as one wholly bereft of motion, until suddenly she shrieked in a voice that rang from end to end of the temple, turned to flee, and shrieked again, and fell forward, beating at her body—and Gor, casting aside the child on its ebon cushion, leaped down and caught her writhing figure in his arms.

"Enough—enough!" Croft flashed the signal upward, and started running off between the pillars to reach the further tier of steps from whence still rang the screams of Kalamita. And as he ran he drew his sword, and went on clutching it in a tightly gripping hand.

"After him! Seize Bandhor, Panthor, and the woman. Hold them! Preserve the child!" Helmor roused from the fear that had held him impotent in the presence of Zollaria's now discredited god.

The guard leaped to obey the order. Croft heard the pound of their feet behind him and ran on.

A hundred feet, two, three. The fires below him having naught to feed them, were burning themselves out. He reached the tier of steps down which Ptah and his fellows had gone to their death. Bandhor and Panthor stood there, and Gor—his mistress's screams now sunk to moanings—her once lovely body marked by angry scars where the spattering liquid fire had sprayed from the lower steps and struck her, yet held a white, jeweled shape against his mighty breast.

Toward them, still with his naked sword in his hand, he made his way. Behind him came Helmor's guard. And yet—as he advanced, oddly enough Croft gave little attention to them. His eyes seemed centered beyond all other purpose, on the shape of the ebon cushion Gor had cast from him ere he leaped to Kalamita's aid—that cushion beside which, wholly unheeded, lay

the form of Jason, Son of Jason—his child.

Then as he stooped to raise him in hands that trembled, the guard flung themselves on the two men.

"Back," Bandhor suddenly thundered. "Back, men of Zollaria! It is thy commander speaking."

And Helmor, bursting through the faltering soldiery, answered, "Nay, not so, Bandhor, thou traitor, any longer—not thou or Panthor, but Helmor rules still in Berla. Seize him—and lead him to the palace, there to stand trial with Panthor for his treason."

Again the guard surged forward, closing about Bandhor and Helmor's cousin, and Croft found a slender form hurled swiftly against him, white hands clinging to him—the purple eyes of Nala of Aphur, lighted with the wild, sweet fires of fulfilled yearning, lifted to him across the body of the child.

His heart too surcharged for words, he smiled upon her and laid Jason, Son of Jason, in her arms.

With the sound of a caught-in sob, a gesture hungry in its passion, she gathered him to her, bent her face above him, rocking him gently with a swaying of her slender figure as one groping baby hand crept up and dug itself into the soft substance of her gown. Turning with him to the girl of Mazzeria, whom Croft now sensed for the first time as having followed from the palace—dogging faithfully her mistress's footsteps to the last.

Ga, the Mother—the Virgin—the Madonna, bending in tender brooding above the infant—pressing it in loving rapture against the greater bulk of the form that had given it birth.

From that sight Croft turned away his misted eyes to find those of Kalamita fixed on him in a stare of well-nigh insane hatred.

She had struggled free from Gor, and, despite the pain of her burns, which in their blindly, upflung course, had spared not even the once beautiful mask of her face, was standing there before him. And, as their glances met, her tightly held lips parted.

"Thou—thou," she mouthed; "thou Mouthpiece of Zitu—thou man of ice and fire—thou wrecker of the plans of Kalamita—thou man like not to any man before thee—by all the fiends of the foul pit of the underworld I curse thee—may they torture thy spirit—and that of her whom I have kept for Zitran from thee, and bring

sickness and loathsome disease on the child. May its flesh rot and its bones grow hollow like blasted reeds—may Adita cause thy mate to shrivel quickly—may she cease to please thee, and yet cling to thee—denying thee the pleasure she herself no longer gives. May Bel visit his wrath upon thee for the sacrilege thou hast shown him. I, Kalamita—"

"Peace." The captain of the guard laid hold upon her. "Thy pleasure with this woman, O Helmor?"

And Helmor eyeing her, answered, "Nay—nothing. That she who has turned the minds of men with her beauty should stand thus now before them, were punishment indeed. Release her—let her go her ways."

"Thy fault—thou Mouthpiece. The curse of Kalamita on thee!" Once more she wheeled on Jason.

"Nay—curse no more," he told her. "Once thou didst challenge Adita to blast thy fairness and thou did not accomplish thy ends against me. And now it is in my mind that thy fickle goddess has taken thee at thy word."

"Aye, peace!" said Helmor. "Get thee to thy palace, woman."

For a moment Kalamita drew herself up before him, and then, flinging clenched hands above her tawny head in an impotent gesture, she turned to Gor standing stolidly waiting, and leaning her weight against him, went with him into the night.

AND THAT is all, as Croft would say, I suppose—since when he described Nala's winning to me at the time of the Mazzerian War he brought his narrative to a close with their marriage, until I demanded that the end of the war itself be told.

So now one may fancy that to him the real ending of the matter would have been in that moment when he stood there with Helmor, and Naia, standing with Jason, Son of Jason, held fast against her breast, and Maia, the girl of Mazzeria, at her side, and knew that Helmor had no longer any thought save to see him depart with them in safety, that he and his city might also know themselves safe.

But to my mind there is more to the story—not so much of an individual nature, as applying to the future of the Palosian life.

For, to the ears of my spirit, which had witnessed all the crowded events, came Helmor's voice addressing Jason:

"How now, Mouthpiece of Zitu—what else?"

And Jason answered. "Naught, O Helmor, save that we return to the machine before the palace, and depart in peace, unless by Helmor's wish."

"What mean you by Helmor's wish?" There was no sign of understanding in the Zollarian monarch's intonation or the now somber lines of his face, as the last rays of the fire in the vast pit of Bel's Temple struck upon it.

Again Croft answered slowly, "Naia of Aphur, wife of Jason, and Jason, Son of Jason, were seized for a purpose—which Helmor knows—and the end is—this."

For a moment he paused and swept an arm about the mighty interior of the temple—embracing all—the still-smoking figure of the idol—the bodies of Ptah and his fellow priests, now lying charred and blackened below him on the serried steps.

And then as Helmor made no response or comment on that scene of sudden death and desolation, he resumed. "Yet have I said that I came not in vengeance against thee, nor in war, nor for any reason save only to regain my own. Wherefore, I say again to Helmor, now, that the purpose he had in mind may be served equally in a different fashion—and that he say the word he may gain in peace what he might not obtain by either treachery or war—and I say to him also that this night's work has preserved not only Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, to me, but to Helmor also, his throne."

And now Helmor spoke, nodding quickly. "Aye—Helmor does not overlook it. Speak, Mouthpiece of Zitu—how may these things you hint at be done?"

Having fully caught his attention, Croft went on, "Let Zollaria and Tamarizia make a pact of peace between them, pledging themselves without reservation to sheathe the sword from this hour, nor draw it one against the other again. Let Helmor subscribe to this, and Helmon, Helmor's son. Let him proclaim the establishment of schools, the education of his people. Let him seek for his nation strength through the growth of knowledge, rather than the strength of arms—"

Once more he paused, and again Helmor nodded.

His face lighted swiftly as he caught Croft's meaning.

"Aye, by Bel," he said. "It is thy knowledge, Mouthpiece of Zitu, that has made Tamarizia strong."

"And not Tamarizia only, but Zollaria also," said Jason, "if Helmor sets his seal to such a bond."

"By Bel," Helmor exclaimed, as all the suggestion embraced burst suddenly upon him. "Come then to the palace. Let us speak of this more fully. Delay thy departure as guests of Helmor and his people till morn."

"Aye." Croft assented without hesitation, his stern face strangely exalted by the thought that out of this night of warring purpose and emotion, peace between age-old foemen might be born.

Back, then, they made their way through the streets along which they had rushed so short a time in so vastly different a fashion to regain the square before the palace—where only the light of the fire-urns now served to show Avron, still sitting at his station in the pit of his machine.

And there Croft, lifting his signaling-flash, sent a final message to the mighty shapes still circling over the city. "Remain until the morning. Watch for the plane at dawn."

Robur's answering flash winked promptly back at him redly, and bidding Helmon join them, they entered the palace, through which Jason had flitted in the astral presence so many times.

Yet different now indeed was the situation, as Helmor summoned slave-girls to attend on Naia, provide for her every comfort. He left her with Croft for the moment and Croft drew her into his arms.

For a long, long moment he held her, sensing her nearness—her dearness—the truth that now again, not only in spirit but in body, was she his own.

"Beloved!" he whispered, and crushed her to him.

"Beloved!" she whispered, and threw back her golden head to lift her purple eyes to him.

So for a long moment, and then she spoke again. "And thou canst accomplish thy purpose, beloved—were it not well worth suffering, indeed? Thinkest thou Helmor is taken with the notion?"

"Aye," said Jason, and he paused as he recalled Gaya's words that out of his bereavement, his agony of spirit, would come not only peace to his soul, but a possible peace between the nations—and found himself undecided, but his own thought of such a peace as he had offered Helmor had been first inspired by a woman's attempt to give him encouragement in a troubled hour of need.

"Zitu grant it."

Naia nestled against him. "Go then and arrange it. I shall pray for thy success upon my knees."

After that, Croft left her, and rejoined Helmor and his son. To that same apartment in which Jason had inspired his dream of warning against Kalamita, the Zollarian monarch led them, and there they took up the matter of a treaty between their nations, at the point where they had laid it down.

THEREAFTER, while the hours passed, Helmor's expression altered; his eyes grew darkly flashing; the deeply graven lines in his somber visage relaxed as Croft expounded the advantages to be gained in a friendly intercourse between his own and Helmor's people, suggested with what must have seemed to the two Zollarians closeted with him, an inspired mental vision. He proposed the terms of the international coalition—teachers from Tamarizia to instruct the Zollarian workmen—the establishment of telegraphic communication—a readjustment of trade relations—the extension north of Croft's interrupted scheme for a system of electrically operated railroads—the opening of shops and schools.

Until at last Helmor, rising in no small excitement, sent Helmon to summon a scribe, and demanded the immediate drawing-up of a provisional bond, which Jason should take with him in the morning for ratification at Zittra. He began a restless pacing to and fro as the scribe set to work upon it, holding his heavy hands clasped together behind his back as he paced and turned.

It was a strange night for Helmor of Zollaria, as he must have thought, wherein Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu—the man who had thrice baffled his purpose, sat with him in his own apartment, and rather than crushing him wholly, now, in his final defeat—placed the objects of his seeking in his hands—a strange night, indeed, whereon he owed not only his own throne to his singular foeman—but the promise of a greater future than ever to his nation—greater than he had dreamed in all his scheming.

And then—the scribe had finished his labors. Helmor strode to the table, removed his signet from his finger and affixed its seal to the agreement. Through the windows of the apartment a faint gray light was stealing—the harbinger of dawn.

He replaced his signet, extended his hand to Jason. Across the promise of a newer dawn for their people Helmor of Zollaria and the Mouthpiece of Zitu struck palms.

And in the light of that double dawn, the fullness of that double peace, Jason and Naia of Aphur, Maia, the girl of Mazzeria, and Jason, Son of Jason, went down to the waiting machine.

Croft helped the women aboard and passed up the child. Cased in his suit and helmet of leather, Avron took his place in the machine. Then ere he followed, Jason turned to look into Helmor's face.

"Hail Helmor—and farewell. And thou, Helmon, son of Helmor," he said.

"Hail, Mouthpiece of Zitu—and Naia of Aphur—and farewell," they replied.

Up, up shot the plane, leaving Helmor and Helmon and the soldiery to mark its swift ascent. Up, up it mounted over Berla, until the sunlight caught it also, turning its wheeling vanes like the greater shapes above them to gold. Up, up—the city fell away beneath it as it swung in an ever widening circle, beneath the mighty ships that all night had waited for its rising. Naia of Aphur lifted her voice.

Clear, strong, true, and perfect as a golden bell, it mounted in a paean of thanksgiving.

"Hail, Zitu—father of all life—and thanks from a grateful heart. Hail, Azil—giver of life—who poured life into the mold of life—from which I was born. Thanks be to thee for the life that is mine—this life—I hold from thee—to be mine own. Blessings—my blessings upon thee, Ga—that I am a woman—my thanks for the tears with which, womanlike, I have washed your feet—not knowing that so I washed out also sorrow—preparing thereby my heart as a flask for the mellow wine of life from which now joy is drunk."

So sang Naia of Aphur, and I recognized the song as one of which Croft had told me—as one she had sung on another occasion when she bore him back from the camp of the Mazzerian army under Bandhor—as a chant—a prayer, used by Tamarizian women for one who had lain at the very door of death, and returned.

Here, then, I think is the logical end of the story—with the great plane driven south by Avron, and behind him, Maia, the girl of Mazzeria, and Jason, mouthpiece of Zitu, and Naia of Aphur singing—with Jason, Son of Jason, held safe in her cradling arms.

(Continued from page 6)

were published in F.F.M. or F.N., nor in pocket-book format in the last decade. Using your editorial page of F.F.M., Dec. '42, as a guide, I'd suggest the use of Stilson's "Minos of Sardanes," and "Polaris and the Goddess Glorian"; Tod Robbins' "Toys of Fate," and the multitude of practically unknown stuff which you've never yet republished.

Now as to your make-up: I greatly appreciate the return to the "lightning panel" which was used so long ago on F.F.M.; it looks so much better than the sun-burst. I also like the plain yellow backstrip. Your contents page is a beauty of arrangement, and the return of an editorial column is likewise appreciated. Finlay's illustrations for the novel weren't up to par, but Lawrence's for the short was better than most stuff he's done for you lately.

Now that the comments are taken care of, I would appreciate a bit of publicity for the following items. I need Aug. 1942 F.F.M. to complete my file. There are also a few other magazines I need in my collection: June '40 *Science Fiction*; Aug. '40 *Strange Stories*, most of the Canadian fantasy mags, many of the pre-'38 *Weird Tales*, all but the Sept. '30 and Jan. '33 *Strange Tales* (Clayton), all *Miracle Science and Fantasy*; *Tales of Magic and Mystery*; and *Thrill Book*; many issues of *Ghost Stories*; and a very few 1930-'34 *Astoundings*. I am also very anxious to obtain old and new fanzines, including FAPA and VAPA mailings—and original fantasy illustrations.

I would prefer to trade. I can supply magazines from 1926 to date, as I have about 1,000 duplicates on hand. Among them are many British fantasy-science fiction magazines, and some books.

I also publish fanzines myself, and still have copies of most of them, available.

WALTER A. COSLET.

Box 6,
Helena, Mont.

CONGRATULATIONS

Heartiest congratulations for the revival of a magazine which should never have been discontinued in the first place. Congratulations also for choosing the greatest Fantasy story ever written to feature the renewal of F.N.

Merritt himself, I believe, would have given an A rating to the Lawrence cover. Finlay's inside drawings were good, but Lawrence deserves the applause for his cover.

As for suggestions: well, don't forget that "Into The Infinite" is yet to be completed. Also, "Minos of Sardanes," more Farley Radio yarns and one or two Cummings Atom stories are still on file.

I would also like to put in a request for "Seven Worlds To Conquer," "Drink We Deep," "Three Against the Stars" and "The Smoking Land." Nor would I be averse to re-reading "Prince of Peril" and "Planet of Peril."

JAMES C. TIBBETTS.

1 Main St.,
Parkville, Missouri.

Editor's Note: "Into the Infinite" was completed in F.F.M., March 1943.

SUGGESTIONS FOR F.N.

The news concerning the revived *Fantastic Novels* is the most exciting I've heard in an age! I had longed for this to happen, but with very little hope. Now that you will resume publication of those long-favorite classics, I'm certain the circulation of both F.F.M. and F.N. will move steadily upward.

Your choice of "Ship of Ishtar" as your first title in the revived magazine is excellent. But then, you're simply keeping your promise—it was announced in the last issue of the Munsey F.F.M. wasn't it?

As for future suggestions, by all means give early consideration to "The Abyss of Wonders" by Perley Poore Sheehan. It was a complete novel in *Argosy* about 1915 or 1916. It's not more than forty thousand words in length, so another short novel could be used in the same issue. I suggest "Worlds Within Worlds" by Philip M. Fisher (*Argosy All-Story* in the early '20s) as a companion story. It's in the science fiction category, and would serve very nicely to balance the fantasy of the Sheehan yarn.

In the shorter lengths—remember "Toys of Fate"? Tod Robbins is the author. And don't ignore those strange adventure shorts and novelettes by Elmer Brown Mason—"Lost—One Mylodon," "Red Tree Frogs," "Black Butterflies," "The Gem Vampire," etc.

And of course, you'll give early publication to "Jason, Son of Jason" by Giesy, and the two remaining Polaris stories, "Minos of Sardanes" and "Polaris and the Goddess Glorian." Check "The Nightmare" by Francis Stevens (*All-Story*, early 1917). And so on and on and on.

As always—best of luck!

L. A. ESHBACH,
Director Fantasy Press.

P. O. Box 159,
Reading, Pa.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

First, let me congratulate you and the directors of Popular Publications for reinstating *Fantastic Novels*. It was indeed like old times to see that "lightning bolt" masthead again, although, ironically enough, it used to belong to F.F.M., whereas, the latter "flash" was F.N.'s. Well, as Mr. Heatter says "So life goes on!"

What's this? Lawrence doing the cover for a Merrittale? Tch, tch. It's good, but as so often happens to his work, is lifeless. Somehow, he has only a hint of this tremendously imaginative and colorful novel. And your use of "sensational" as a blurb is out of taste too, don'tcha think? What's the matter with "beautiful" even "thrilling" or "colorful"?

Finlay's drawings were all right, though not even close to his "Moon Pool" work.

Now I pick a bone. Just *why* did you have to reprint "The Middle Bedroom"? As all readers know, except the newer ones, it was reprinted in the Sept. 1940 F.N. along with Cummings' "People of the Atom." While a good story, it does not bear re-reprinting. There

are many other good shorts you can use—what about Fisher, Giesy, Robbins, etc? Please—let's have no more re-reprinting after this (except for "The Moon Pool"). The magazine is only a bi-monthly, appearing too infrequently to give repeaters.

And say—why not make *Fantastic Novels* a monthly?

Well, I'm pleased to see "Jason, Son of Jason" coming up.

Would it be possible to have some Paul drawings?

Is there any chance for more paper per issue (and thus more stories)?

As for future issues, how about: Cummings' "Man Who Mastered Time" and "Princess of the Atom," Stilson's "Minos of Sardanes," "Polaris and the Goddess Glorian," "Man Named Jones," Farley's "Radio Menace," England's "Flying Legion" and all the others, Serviss' "Second Deluge," "Moon Maid," "Columbus of Space," etc., G. Smith's "Treasures of Tantalus," "After a Million Years," etc. The rest I leave up to you. Don't forget Francis Stevens, Philip Fisher, Tod Robbins, Will McMorro, etc.

Please keep the Letters Section under five pages.

BEN INDICK.

443 Jersey Ave.,
Elizabeth, N. J.

FROM THE TIFFIN CROWD

This letter is coming because I hear that you are going to resume publication of *Fantastic Novels*. Wow! I have this to say. I have about \$5.00 set aside at present with which to purchase 20 copies of Vol. 1 No. 1 of the new F.N. to put in the old collection.

F.N. was always a rare and very good magazine.

Then in the next few years I will have these magazines for trade and personal collection. At present I have only one Vol. 1 No. 1 F.F.M. and one Vol. 1 No. 1 F.N. in my collection. But I have contacted Donald Bump, our local Popular Publications distributor, for these 20 magazines.

I figure I will send about 10 of them to fellows that are not able to buy your magazines off the newsstands.

So Tiffin will be well represented on the first issue. I don't know yet who you will have to illustrate this magazine but as a suggestion: Virgil Finlay. Finlay Fan No. 1 says I. I have a lot of suggestions of stories you can use in this magazine, but you always have good stories so I don't have to suggest anything. All a reader has to do is just wait.

Eventually, Popular publishes the best of all Fantasy Fiction.

Anyway, editors, all of our power to you from Tiffin.

JACK J. ROBERTS.
EARL ESMOTT.
ESSIE.
JOHN GRIMES.
LOIS B. COLLIER.

69 Erie St.,
Tiffin, Ohio.

WANTS FLINT'S STORIES

It was certainly good to hear that *Fantastic Novels* is back again! And with all those fantasy classics! Hard to believe that I'll be reading them again. I certainly hope you'll finish up many of the series that were running in the old F.N. & F.F.M. And please don't overlook the Homer Eon Flint stories, especially such novelettes as "The Planeteer," "The King of Conserve Island," "The Devolutionist," etc.

ERLE KORSHAK.

1713 E. 55th St.,
Chicago 15, Ill.

"THANK YOU" NOTE

After seven long years, you've decided to answer the prayers of your readers, and return *Fantastic Novels* to us.

Congratulations! And I'm predicting you won't be sorry.

Your lead novel "The Ship of Ishtar" is a good choice, and even more so is that of completing the "Dog Star Trilogy" with "Jason, Son of Jason" as a follow up story. I had despaired of ever reading this story.

Now for suggestions! O. A. Kline's name has been out of print for too long. You might try "Planet of Peril," "Prince of Peril," or if possible, "Tam, Son of Tiger," which appeared in a different magazine.

Slater La Master's "Phantom in the Rainbow" would be welcome indeed!

Since you've given us all of Hall's stories that appeared in *Argosy*, how about some or all of Homer Eon Flint's great stories? Perhaps you can follow up "The Lord of Death" with its sequel which is "Queen of Life." Incidentally the former story was the only one of Flint's works to appear in F.F.M. aside from "The Blind Spot" which he collaborated on with Austin Hall.

Whatever you do, restrict F.N. to strictly reprints, as you can print the new stuff in F.F.M.

Well, here's hoping you have complete success with your new venture and thank you for the service you are rendering us readers.

B. WELDT.

785 Blake Ave.,
Brooklyn 7, N. Y.

TO NFFF MEMBERS

It is indeed a pleasure to see the old favorite back again. (Meaning F.N. of course.) And with the Munsey classics to draw from, it is sure to please the most rabid fans:

This is the third time that I have read the "Ship of Ishtar" but it is never old to me. It seems that I always find new thoughts and meanings that I hadn't noticed before.

The one who chose "Jason, Son of Jason" for the May issue is to be commended. J. U. Giesy's "Palos" series are hard to beat. I never get tired of re-reading good stories by good authors.

As to choice of stories, I'll stick with the editor. I've had very few complaints to make

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on F.F.M. and I know that F.N. will be as good or better.

Let's all get into the "What Do You Think" Department, N.F.F.F. members. Let's show our interest by doing.

K. MARTIN CARLSON,
Sec.-Treas. of N.F.F.F.

1028 Third Ave., South,
Moorhead, Minn.

SUGGESTIONS

It's good to see *Fantastic Novels* back again, with stories from the Munsey books—although it would have been equally good no matter what you called the magazine, so long as it continued the Munsey material—and I'm happy to see "Ship of Ishtar," one of the few Merritt novels I still enjoy re-reading.

Since you're going to give second looks at some of the earlier F.F.M. material, how about tossing "The Blind Spot" at us again; pre-war issues of F.F.M. and F.N. are very hard to find, you know.

Suggestions for reprints:

"Drink We Deep"—Arthur Leo Zagat.

"Seven Out of Time," sequel to above.

"The Immortals"—Ralph Milne Farley.

"The Pirates of Venus," etc.—Burroughs.

"The Radio Menace"—Farley.

"Red Twilight"—Harl Vincent.

ROBERT W. LOWNDES.

325 W. 11th St.,
New York 14, N. Y.

F.N. WONDERFUL

Your revival of *Fantastic Novels* has led me, in a spirit of jubilation, to write you these few lines. I have read your two fantasy magazines since their inception and have enjoyed immensely nearly all of the stories.

Fantasy and weird fiction have always been great favorites of mine, starting with Poe, Verne, Haggard, H. G. Wells and working up to the present day.

Through all this time, this initiation, I might say, I kept hearing references to such stories as "The Moon Pool," "The Blind Spot" and "The Rebel Soul." They were, of course, impossible to obtain.

Then, ah then, your magazine appeared with its promise to reprint all those old gems of fantasy. All went well for a few years and then you betrayed me with your change of editorial policy, I mean your decision to print no more of these stories.

Do not mistake me, I enjoyed your new stories but there is a flavor lacking in most of them that was possessed by the old masters like Merritt, England, Stevens and Flint. (It's no accident, by the way, that I placed Merritt first. What a superb writer the man was!)

Your first issue, or should I say the sixth?—is wonderful. Cover, inside illustrations and other format are first-class. Keep Lawrence and Finlay. You could not do better. I have only one tiny request, and I advance it diffidently. How about trimmed edges? They enhance the appearance wonderfully.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Here are some suggestions of favorite fantasy classics which I would like to see in future issues. "Polaris and the Goddess Glorian," "Empire of the Air," "The Nth Man," "The Planeteer," "Queen of Life," "The Emancipatrix," "Treasures of Tantalus," "The Golden Blight," "King of Conserve Island," "The Fatal Gift." Ah, you have a great opportunity to pick the cream of the crop. Do not disappoint me, please.

CHESTER SMITH.

212 W. Barber St.,
Hartford City, Indiana.

"UTOPIA IS AT HAND"

It was with quickening pulses that I saw, for the first time since '42, the words *Fantastic Novels* on the newsstand. Hastening to grasp and peruse a copy of said periodical I was launched forth into a fantasmia of sheer, unparalleled beauty.

But hold! Mean I that I revel in Merrittania? Say not so—say instead that I worship at the shrine of one Virgil Finlay.

And now a word about the cover. It's good . . . so good that I hesitate to say the pinnacle has not been reached in covers. There's a dreamlike quality that bears description but not by one so ill-versed within the borders of polysyllabic verbiage.

Oh, bow down, oh, worshipers at the shrine of exalted literature, Utopia is at hand!

Anybody need any autographed copies of "Slan," "World of A," "Dark Carnival," at list prices? No foolin', I've got them. First come, first served.

With the utmost sincerity,

JOSEPH B. BAKER.

THANKS FOR F.N.

Thank you very much for letting me know that *Fantastic Novels* is coming back. It is a project that I as well as every other reader of *Fantasy* has looked forward to for years. I hope that you will continue from where it left off when publication stopped.

The choice of "The Ship of Ishtar" as the first novel is an excellent one since in my estimation that was and is the best story Merritt has done.

The New Collectors Group is the first fantasy publishing house to start a book of the month club devoted to fantasy. We will publish a book every month and give away premiums as the contemporary clubs do.

The interest in *Fantasy* has risen to such proportions that we felt there was a need for such an organization. In fact all the big publishing houses have a great deal of *Fantasy* and *Science Fiction* books scheduled for 1948. I know that the work of F.F.M. has helped a great deal in bringing to the attention of the general public to the field.

Fantasy is not a new medium for the expression of the author, but today it is on the verge of recognition. It is my opinion that in the not too distant future you will be able to walk into a book shop and find a shelf marked

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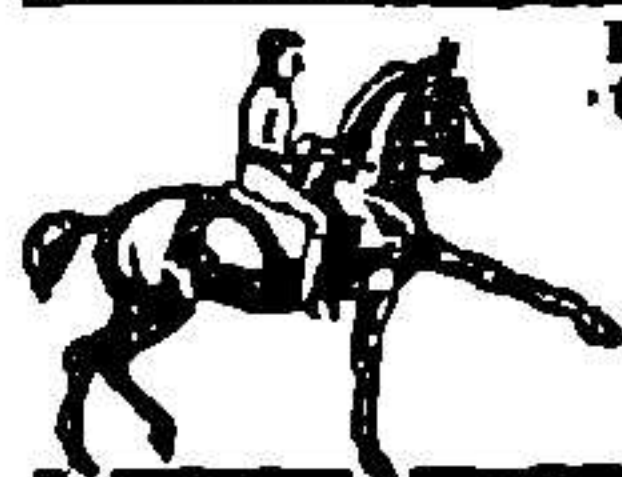
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FANTASTIC NOVELS

Fantasy, just as you can today find sections devoted exclusively to detective and romance.

Thanks again for bringing back *Fantastic Novels*. I feel that another milestone has been passed in the rise of Fantasy to the popularity it deserves with the general public.

A very happy and prosperous new year to you and F.F.M. and F.N.

MARTIN GREENBERG.

421 Claremont Parkway,
New York 57, N. Y.

JUST THINK!

I got your announcement of the revival of *Fantastic Novels*, today. I have been clamoring for more classic stories, and now it looks as if I'll get them. Many thanks to you and your staff.

Just think! "The Ship of Ishtar" with Virgil Finlay illustrations! From now on you're going to be the favorite editor in the field of fantasy and science-fiction.

It is a bit early to suggest titles for republishing, but may I point out "The Elf Trap," by Francis Stevens?

CORDELL MAHANEY.

1252 Magazine St.,
Vallejo, Calif.

MERRITT ADMIRER

I bought the first issue of *Fantastic Novels* today and was pleased to find another good magazine for me to read. For four years now I have bought every issue of *Famous Fantastic* and I liked it so well, I have since read a lot of something to read.

It was four years ago that I first became interested in fantastic literature. I happened to buy a copy of A. Merritt's "Face In The Abyss" and I liked it so well, I have since read a lot of fantastic literature. But none can even compare to A. Merritt.

Although I have the novel "Ship of Ishtar" which is published in your first issue of *Fantastic Novels* I still had to buy the magazine just because Merritt's novel was in it. I have read every Merritt book (that I have) so many times I practically know them by memory and yet I still keep on reading them over and over.

There is one other novel I would like to read and never could find it. I saw the movie a good many years ago and I couldn't tell you who wrote it but I think it was by the same author as "Allan and the Ice Gods" and the novel I want to read is "She."

I shall end this letter, wishing you the greatest success and assuring you that I shall be looking forward to all future issues of *Fantastic Novels*.

MRS. MARGARET LORANCE.

Box 652,
Bridgeport, Ill.

LAWRENCE'S COVER SUPERB

As a postscript to my letter of a few weeks ago and in response to the request in your first revived issue of *Fantastic Novels*, I would like to suggest for publication the following stories:

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

E. R. Burroughs—Beyond Thirty, Moon Man, The Moon Maid, Red Hawk. Ray Cummings—Tama, Princess of Mercury; Tama of the Light Country, The Man Who Mastered Time, The Fire Girl, The Snow Girl. Ralph M. Farley—Caves of the Ocean, Radio Menace, Radio Pirates. Homer E. Flint—Out of the Moon, King of Conserve Island, The Planeteer, Queen of Life. O. A. Kline—Maza of the Moon, Prince of Peril, Planet of Peril. A. Merritt—Seven Footprints To Satan. Charles Stilson—Mimos of Sardanes, Polaris and the Goddess Glorian.

All I have to say about your first issue is that it's more than even I hoped for. Lawrence's cover was superb, Merritt's story was undoubtedly the best he wrote, which is enough said. With my sincerest congratulations on having the *two* best Fantasy Magazines on the stand and the pleasurable expectation of reading Giesy's "Jason, Son of Jason," I remain

JAMES M. PERRIN.

381-3 East 151 St.,
Bronx 55, N. Y.

OVERJOYED

I was overjoyed at hearing the news that *Fantastic Novels* is to appear again. That's the best news a fan could receive now, believe me!

Thanks ever so much, and keep up the good work with F.F.M.

REX WARD,
Fandom Speaks.

428 Main St.,
El Segundo, Calif.

SMALL COMPLAINT

Just got my copy of *Fantastic Novels*. Glad to see it back and all that stuff.

Like Merritt's novel, etc. But why the hell do you print such lousy short stories as "The Middle Bedroom" by Stacpoole? Besides being pretty bad it is old. Don't think it good way to start mag going again. Let's have better, new stuff.

Till the next issue,
FRAN PEASE.

F.N. AND F.F.M. EXCELLENT

Fantastic Novels has been off the stands too long. I am delighted to see it back again, and to prove that I mean that statement, enclosed you will find a check for six dollars for a four year subscription.

Last year, I was fortunate enough to acquire complete sets of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, *Fantastic Novels*.

Some day I'm going to start a Round Robin petition for trimmed edges, just to see how many signatures could be obtained. Or, as an alternative, ask all trimmed-edge-backers to clip some of those jagged edges and mail them to the publishers. However, these idease are probably subversive, and would get us nowhere.

After the sour, the sweet. Other than my

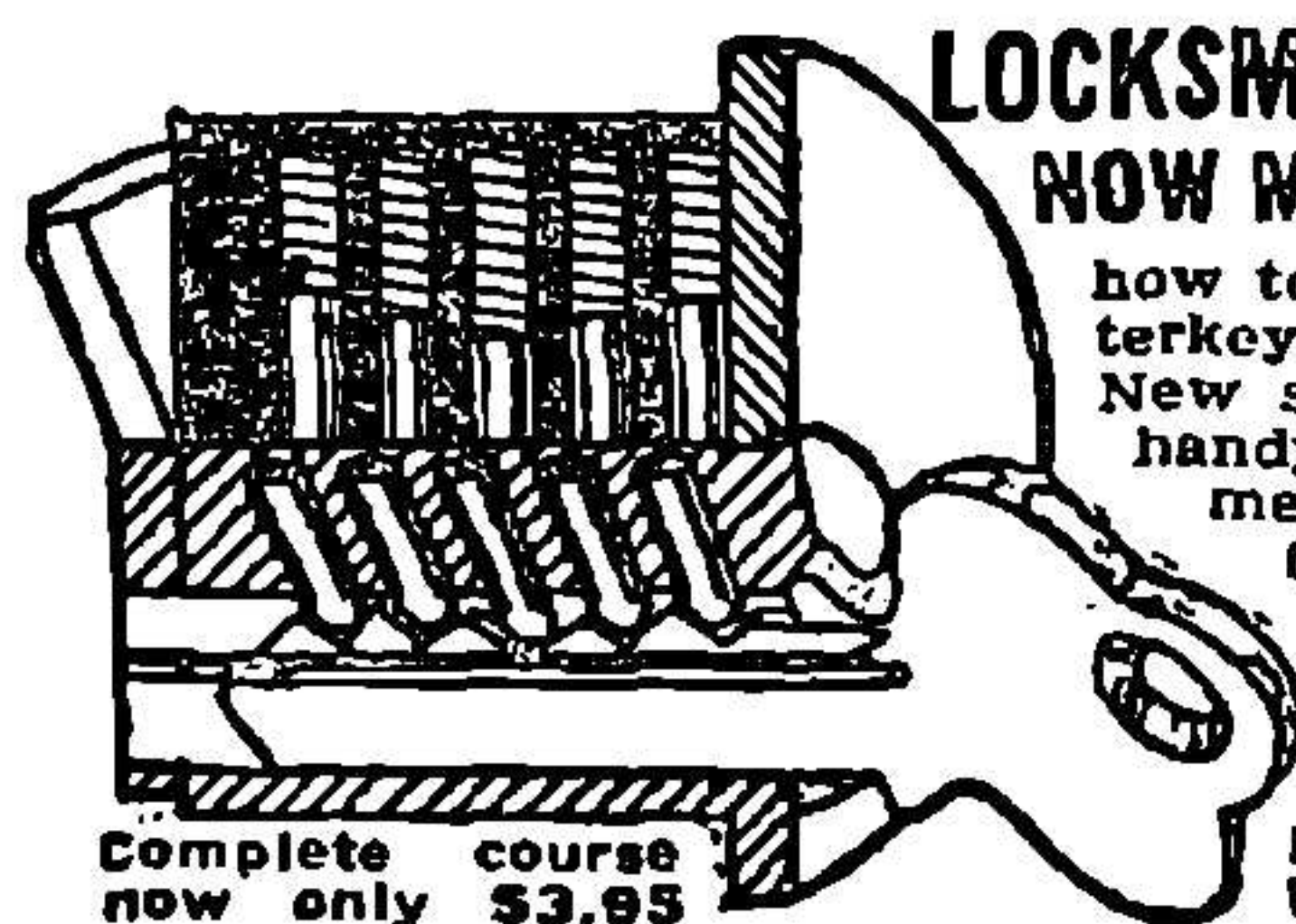
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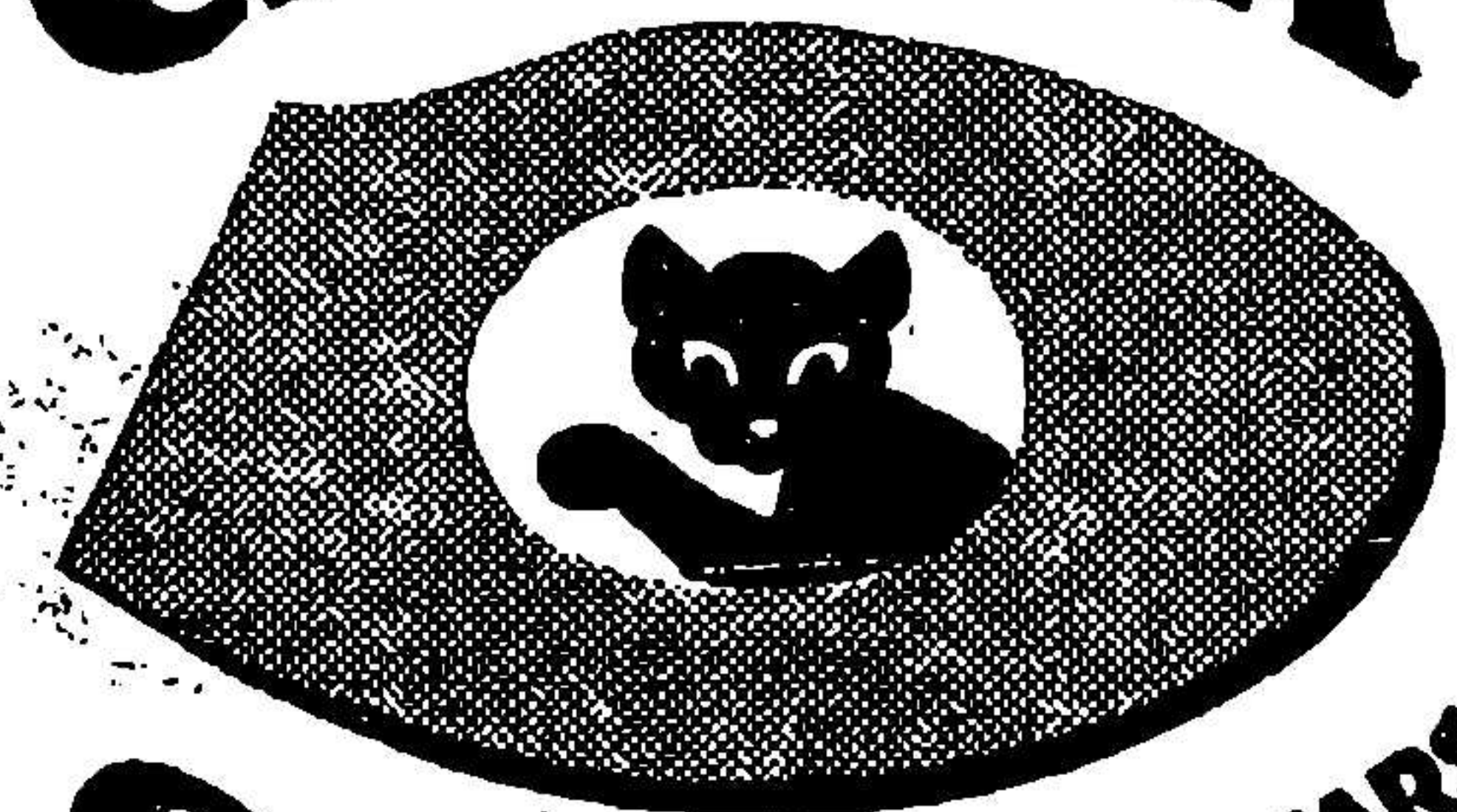
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FANTASTIC NOVELS

plaint about edges, I have nothing but huzzas. I cannot recommend any old Munsey stories, as I have read none except those in the old F.F.M.s. Your present set-up is just right—illustrations by Finlay and Lawrence (any chance of Cartier?) an editor's page, one long novel and a short story, and, it is hoped, a good letter department, with comments. The F.F.M. letter department is excellent; may its sister magazine's be equal to it.

No letter is complete without a request or two. Could any Merrittophile send me a complete list of his works, or tell me where I could find it? Also, I am anxious to buy a good copy of H. G. Wells' "The Short Stories of H.G.W." This volume has 63 or 64 stories, and should not be confused with "The Favorite Short Stories of H.G.W.," containing only 31, which I have already.

MRS. MORRIS G. HEINS, JR.

443 Grandview St.,
Memphis 11, Tenn.

WANTS SOME SCIENCE FICTION

No doubt by this time you have been overwhelmed by the onrush of letters from fandom congratulating you on the return of *Fantastic Novels*. I have no copies of this magazine, but from all reports it was, and will be, a very excellent addition to the Fantasy field. However, as a condescending gesture to the science-fictionists in your following, will it be possible for F.N. to carry stf novels? A good 60,000 to 100,000 word novel by Hubbard, Heinlein, van Vogt or Doc Smith himself would be joyously received by all of the stf fans; not that I don't read fantasy, but out of a year's F.N., 6 issues is it not?, couldn't one of the novels be stf? It isn't necessary to have new authors; something by Wells, or other oldie (!) would be just as gratefully perused.

Now for F.F.M.

TMWB is the fantasy story that I enjoy to the utmost. I like yarns of this type, probably because I am an ancient history student, but I will read this specimen readily. In fact, Deeping so impressed me that I followed up at the library and read some of his non-fantasy works.

Hume was readable. What an ending.

I enjoyed Sherlock Holmes' exploits more than "The Horror of the Heights."

Of the Feb. issue, I say thank you for Leinster's novelet "Planet of Sand." More of this in F.F.M. (That statement will arouse the ire of the "Pure" (?) fantasts. Derleth and his little horrible tale very impressive. Shades of Dracula. Mr. Forester's novel held me to a single reading, interrupted by forages for food only. He showed clearly that you cannot force Man to accept something, even if it is necessary. but a wise peacemaker can trick us into it by camouflaging it with honey and a name-change.

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