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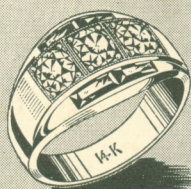
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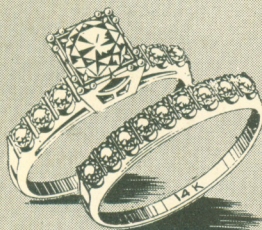
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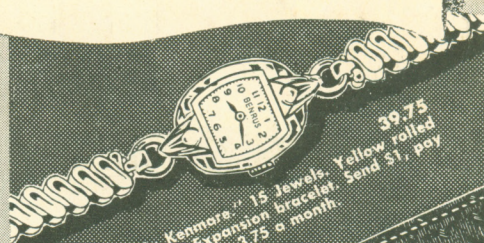


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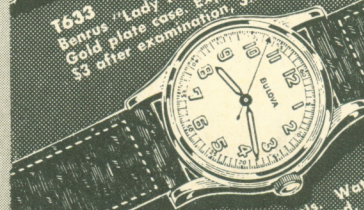
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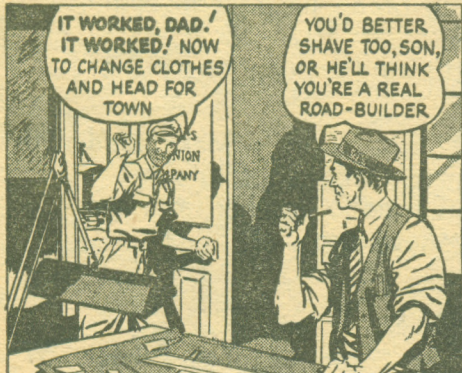
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Vol. 3

MAY, 1949

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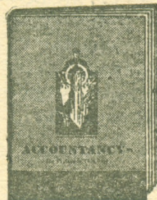
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Address comments to the Letter Editor, Fantastic Novels, New Publications, Inc., 210 East 43rd St., New York 17, N. Y.

FROM THE EDITOR

FANTASTIC NOVELS is now over a year old, having been resumed with the March issue of 1948, and it seems to me a good time to report to our faithful readers that this magazine is as popular as its sister publication, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*.

All indications are that the readers have been pleased with our choice of stories from the Munsey treasure house of classics and that our two artists-in-chief, Virgil Finlay and Lawrence Sanders, are always top favorites with them.

I wish to thank you all, as this third issue of 1949 comes to your hands, for your enthusiastic support of F.N. from the minute its forthcoming appearance was announced. The original floods of congratulatory mail have somewhat abated, but letters continue to pour in with praise, complaints and advice and items of interest to organized fandom. These are always welcome, and we publish as many as space permits. So, keep on writing, readers—and let us know your wishes.

Sincerely yours in Fantasy,
MARY GNAEDINGER.

RESUMÉ OF 1948 F.N.

Well, your first year of being back on the stands is at an end. And what a grand and glorious year this has been for us fantasy fans. No magazine has ever given us such an abundance of good material at such a low price. Even you now have a goal set for yourself. It will take good selections to keep the magazine this good year after year.

Looking back over the last six issues we see that A. Merritt has had a field day by being in four of the issues. What could be better than that? I hate to think of the day when all of Merritt's works will have been reprinted.

Taking F.N. issue by issue, here's what I think. "The Ship of Ishtar" is next to the worst of the stories printed. I know that most fans claim this for their favorite Merritt story. It took an awful long time to get enough interest to finish it.

(Continued on page 123)



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The Eye of Balamok

CHAPTER I

SAND AND SALT

IT WAS an eternity since the young Englishman had had any clear consciousness of his surroundings. When he forced his numbed brain to function, he knew, of course, that he was somewhere in the heart of the most howling, pitiless desert in the world—Central Australia. But that knowledge seemed as unreal as the reeling body which he was driving on by sheer force of will.

He was in the extreme northeastern part of the Great Victoria Desert, upon the boundary—which could be represented only by a longitudinal parallel—between West and South Australia. Three hundred miles eastward lay the Trans-Continental

By
Victor Rousseau

*Over the rim of hell he
went, wanderlust-driven in-
to a land more strange than
his mad dreams. . . .*

telegraph. North, west and south, for twice that distance, there was nothing but sand.

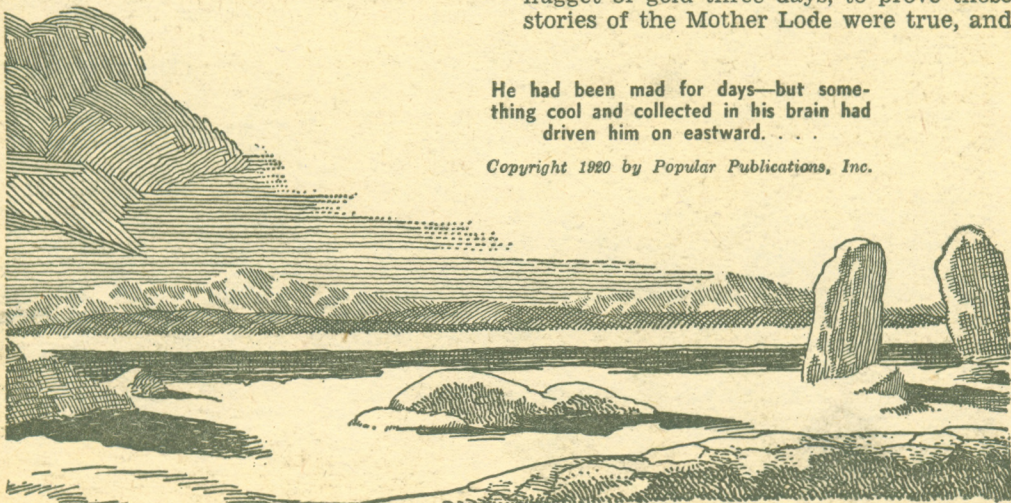
He had been striking eastward, shouldering his "billy"—his dwindling stock of tea, flour, matches and baking-powder. There was plenty of water in this region. But it was all salt. It varied from the salinity of the sea, bitter, purging, maddening stuff, to that of brackish seashore-resort water.

When he reached a pool it was a toss-up whether he would go mad or quell the fever in him with a kettle of tea that did not reek of Epsom. For days together he was mad. He was mad now. But all through his delirium something, cool and collected, sat in his brain and drove him eastward.

"It's been a fool's chase," it said. "But you were warned in the beginning that nobody ever crossed the Great Victoria. Your natives wouldn't go with you. The camel died—died of thirst—and—do you remember how you carried that nine-pound nugget of gold three days, to prove those stories of the Mother Lode were true, and

He had been mad for days—but something cool and collected in his brain had driven him on eastward. . . .

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then threw it away? You weren't mad then, as you are now. If you had been, you would have slipped it into the flour bag.

"Keep going! You've done three hundred miles since the camel dropped. You're half-way to the Trans-Continental. You'll strike a station there. Go, by sheer grit. If you can't make it, just drop down as the camel did. It may be you'll come across fresh water. If you can, the remaining three hundred miles will be nothing. Nobody knows what's in the Great Victoria. Remember those stories at Coolgardie?"

He set his teeth and staggered onward, through the blazing heat that had tanned him brown as a Kanaka.

He was lean, gaunt, staring of eye, white-breasted where the projecting bones compressed the sunken flesh. Sometimes he laughed, and sometimes scowled; he shouted as he saw the school competitors breasting the tape together; two or three times he found himself seated upon the ground straining at an imaginary oar in his college races.

Toward evening the delirium lessened. With it there came a languor of the limbs, the heave of the stomach against the anticipated douche of saline water. The camping place lay plain before him—a large, flat lake, blue and inviting, set in the middle of the inevitable salt crystals fringing it. All around were great, single rocks, aglisten with salt, rising like monoliths out of the hard, salty sand, which gradually began to change from yellow to white, as the salt grew denser.

"I'm going to drop here," he said, stretching out his arm toward the water.

He had said that every night. But this night he meant it. He had meant that every night, too. But he knew that this night was the last of his journeying, unless—miracle of miracles!—unless this were fresh water.

Unless he could soak the salt out of his flesh and bones, he would die as the camel had died. And its death had not been hard. In fact, he had not guessed it was going to die. He had thought camels' humps grew smaller as the beasts went without water. The camel had refused the salt water for five days, but its hump remained the same.

On the sixth morning it refused to be saddled, and, instead of crouching under a rock, lay down in the sun. It died upon its knees within an hour. Not a hard death!

The Englishman let his swag fall be-

neath a rock, took his "billy," and walked out over the salt crystals. This lake looked saltier than any he had encountered. It was one of the vast chain of salt lakes extending across the dead heart of unknown Australia.

Not more than five years ago it was discovered by an explorer that underneath the greater portion of the central continent—at least, beneath the explored portion—there flows perpetual water. Once, in the past ages, it flowed in river-beds upon the surface. Then Australia must have been an earthly paradise. Something happened—some subsidence, such as the sinking of Atlantis; something of which even the blackfellow retains no tradition.

The young man was ignorant of this discovery. It did not tantalize him as he splashed out through the salt-crystal swamp and dipped his "billy" into the pellucid depths. The thirst which always racked him was like a personal enemy. He had personified it in his madness, and he fought it at every lake and pond. Had he done more than moisten his cracked lips upon his journeying he would never have gone half-way to the Trans-Continental telegraph. It was only at eventfall that he made his salt tea and set himself to his night battle with the salt torturer.

He filled the "billy," raised it to his lips, and drank. The water was as fresh as from a bubbling spring.

He drained the "billy," filled it again, and dashed it from his hand before his lips touched it. He flung himself down upon the salt incrustation. At first he thought it was his madness. But the madness which had given him delirious visions had never sweetened his lips with such nectar as that!

Cautiously he tasted of the water again. It was fresh lake water. A sudden revulsion came over him. He knew now how near he had been to death. This was life! This meant the world of men once more! He would rest here for two weeks, till he had grown strong, till he had purged his veins of their incrustations. Then he would continue eastward. What he had done he could do again. And there was water about the station that he was aiming for. His flour would last him. He could do it again. He could face it again. But—

The reaction of joy was followed by that of hopelessness. Could he duplicate that awful eastward march? He staggered wearily toward the spot where he had left his pack.

Then, literally "lifting up his eyes," as

one does in a wilderness, he saw, quite near at hand, a little hut of stone. The stones were great blocks, evidently dragged with great exercise of strength and labor from their resting-places on the sand. And all about were larger blocks, great solitary monoliths, that seemed like ruins of some prehistoric city, now silted with sand up to their pediments.

It was a marvel of toil, for the stones had been squared with other stones, and fitted till the stone hut was constructed. The Englishman went inside, incredulous, half thinking it was a dream, until the shadow of the walls fell about him. The sand had drifted in to a depth of some three feet. It was almost upon a level with the stone bedstead in one corner, made by the same ingenious brain.

Upon a stone peg, chiseled out of a block, hung something that caused the traveler to shout with joy. It was a water-bag, made from the hide of a large animal. Examining a piece of fleece that adhered to it, the traveler concluded that it was a camel foal. Perhaps he, too, had brought a camel with him, and it had given birth to young, though the fleece was almost like that of a guanaco or llama. But of course there were no llamas in the Australian desert.

With this the young man knew that the remaining half of his journey could be accomplished safely. But who had lived there, and what fate had befallen him?

He dismissed his speculations as idle, dragged in his pack, and, before he knew it, he was asleep.

The sunlight, streaming through the opening of the hut, aroused him in the morning. Now, to his surprise, he saw in one corner the top of a stone table, rudely fashioned. Rising, he began to scoop the sand away from about the table-legs. Then it was he came upon the manuscript. It was a skin parchment, probably from the same beast as the water-bag, tightly rolled, and covered with writing in some dark-brown pigment.

It was in English. The traveler began to read, and, pausing only for breakfast, read all that day till sundown.

I SHALL set this down in my own English tongue, though I have no hope that I shall ever again meet with anyone who comes from my native America, or from England, either. I have an indefinite time to wait—it may be days, weeks, years even. There is plenty of time, at any rate, and to write English instead of Fendek gives me

a curious sense of reality, after my life in Eliaborta.

If I had not drifted to Australia after the war, if I had served in France instead of ending where I began, in the training-camp, if—well, if the spice of adventure had only lost its savor for me! But what's the use of speculating? All this was destined. And, besides, it was inevitable that Hita and I should meet. Even Victor Sewell was written across my line of fate at birth, I think.

I had trudged up and down Kalgoorlie for months, never earning more than board and lodging where others were striking gold in paying quantities and growing rich. Anyone, anywhere, can rinse a pan and find a few yellow flecks at the bottom. You don't get much in a day that way. I still had ninety pounds left when I fell in with Sewell in the place where men meet—the barroom of the "Phoenix."

"I can put in seventy pounds," said Sewell. "It don't cost much to start prospecting. And the McDonnell Range contains the Mother Lode of the continent."

I suspected that that was the stage at which most men left Sewell. The Mother Lode is the world Lorelei among gold-miners, and the bugbear of practical men. Nobody has ever found her. To speak of her is the mark of a dreamer.

Sewell was older than I—an Englishman of good family, who had served in the Dardanelles and Turkey. Taken prisoner, he claimed; there were ugly whispers about that part of his career. Not cowardice, but—well, I won't say any more. They were never proved. But he was certainly a drunkard, and I believe the drug story was true. Men shunned him. He had lived among the blackfellows, too, on the fringes of Kalgoorlie, and that gives a man a bad name.

"How long have you been out here?" he broke off in the midst of his talk about the Mother Lode to ask me.

"Two years," I answered.

He gave a short laugh. "My dear Ronald," he said—"you don't mind my calling you Ronald, Gowan?—I've been here seven. And I've never got over the—the queerness of Australia yet. Unique in the whole world, isn't it? Everything different: plants, animals, man. A chunk of the Quaternary Epoch, surviving into the present, but cursed, as if it had witnessed in its day orgies as dreadful as those of the fabled Atlantis."

The man interested me. He was well educated; so was I, and the rough-and-ready

company of Kalgoorlie was no reason why I should avoid an hour's talk with Sewell.

"Mammals that lay eggs!" he went on. "Nature experimenting! A fossil storehouse of early efforts. This piece of prehistoric left-over wasn't plugged down here for nothing. Australia's like the moon, Ronald."

I didn't follow him. He had been drinking just enough to loosen his tongue, and I like to study men when they are themselves. So I offered no objection when he called for two more whiskies.

"I mean, it's as unexplored as the moon, this enormous island," Sewell went on. "And it's like it, too, with its extinct craters, its huge depressions that receive the influx of rivers and have no outlet. Holes in the world that never will be fathomed! I've talked with the blackfellows. I've lived with them. They trust me."

I had read something about them, I think a "filler" in some West Australian paper, how our ancestors had been of the Australoid race, and the men of Spy and Neanderthal. I tried to say something. But Sewell glanced at me a little shiftily, and turned the subject. I could see that, whatever was said about it, he wanted to handle it.

"I want you to go in with me, Ronald," he said. "I've seventy pounds. An aunt died. Yes, she left more money than that. But I know I'm pretty much what the Kalgoorlie people think me—weak, unstable. You'd think me that, wouldn't you?"

He shot his shifty glance at me again, and I knew, as well as if he had told me, that he wanted me to tell him what else the people of Kalgoorlie thought about him.

I began to excuse myself, but he was off again in his erratic way. "I know what I'm talking about, Ronald. There's gold there—tons of it. Nuggets as big as bridal cakes! I've had it from the blackfellows. There's something hidden in the heart of this howling wilderness. And it isn't all gold, either."

Now he was on the other tack once more, and yet as much by design as haphazard, I thought. "Did you ever study the blackfellows? They're our ancestors, Ronald. And they're called degraded, but our school inspectors know few white men have their mental capacity. Did you ever notice the nose? Anthropologists class them as a distinct species because of that depression at the root of it. The monkeyman, Ronald"—he leaned forward, tense with an

excitement that seemed causeless. "They are not rising from the ape, but descending to the ape."

"You mean," I suggested, "that the Australian represents the remnants of some primitive culture?"

"I mean a damn sight more than that!" he shouted, flaming out, and subsiding as suddenly, as if ashamed. "The Australian is the watch-dog, the keeper of the door who absconded when some great catastrophe overtook the cradle of the human race in which our own ancestors were rocked."

"He carries remnants of what his masters taught him. Where did he get the boomerang? Why, we can't even throw it now that we've got it. We haven't been able to work out the exact mathematical formula for making it, which the blackfellow knows by that hereditary memory which we call instinct."

He hesitated a moment. "Did you ever study their marriage system?" he continued. "The most ingenious method of inter-mixture that the world has ever known. Worked out by some prehistoric genius. Now, he only knows he has it."

"I thought the blackfellow was a polygamist," I answered.

Sewell pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil. "Let's take four totems," he said, "the eagle, serpent, wallaby, and ornithorhynchus—that's the beaver with the duck's bill that lays eggs, you know. All the men of the eagle totem have for wives all the women of the serpent totem. All men of the serpent totem have all women of the wallaby totem. All women of the eagle totem have for husbands all men of the wallaby totem."

"We needn't run through the list. The point is, you have to marry outside your totem. Exogamy, the wiseacres call it. Polygamy, polyandry, too, but nevertheless a tie so binding that violation is undreamed of. An eagle man marries a serpent woman. Their child has to be a wallaby. So that the tribe splits up. Infusion of blood. It's wonderful, Ronald. I want to talk to you—"

He broke off again with that crafty expression of his flashing across his face, and drained his glass.

"You've heard of that white race across the desert?" he asked, fixing his eyes on me.

"Everyone has. Is that what you want to look for?" I demanded.

He laughed uneasily. "Good Lord, no!" he returned. "I want you to go in with me."

They say the Great Victoria can't be crossed. It can. The blackfellows cross it and my black, Peter, knows the water-holes. I shot a dingo once when it was at his throat. He'll do anything for me. And he knows where the gold lies."

He glanced cautiously about him. The barroom was empty, save for a prospector lounging at the far end, and engaging in an animated flirtation with the barmaid. Sewell put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a heap of pebbles. They were of virgin gold, and the largest weighed at least ten ounces.

"Eighty or ninety pounds there, if I wanted to cash in," said Sewell. "But I'm not going to have half Kalgoorlie on our trail. I'll let them go on miscalculating me for a while. Let's have one more, and we'll talk it over in the morning. By the way, that's a strange tattoo mark you have on your right forearm. Ingeniously done. An eagle, isn't it?"

I showed it to him. It had been well done by a Malay in Honolulu, but I had been sorry afterward. My father was an Englishman, and it had been a family crest. I had worked at it till I blurred the motto round it, but I couldn't get rid of the thing.

Sewell looked at it casually, and rose. We had our drink together, and he left me abruptly as soon as he had drained his glass. I was wondering at his peculiar manner, and whether it was the result of drugs, when a middle-aged prospector whom I knew to nod to, came up to me.

"If I was you, I'd steer clear of that fellow," he said.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Oh, no offense, partner. He's jest—he's—well, let's put it up to Miss Polly here. Miss Polly, how'd you like to be seen at the races in Victor Sewell's company?"

The girl tossed her head. "He gives me the creeps," she declared.

"If there is anything known against him, I'd like to know it too," I said. "That is, anything provable." I spoke less warmly than I wished, for I confessed to myself that Miss Polly's feeling was not very far from mine.

"Oh, there ain't nothing known, partner," the prospector answered. "Jest instinc', I reckon. There ain't nothing known against him, except jest instinc'."

I SLEPT over it. I was sure that there was something more than gold behind Sewell's proposal, and a great deal in his mind that he had not told me. But the

idea fascinated me, and I set down the girl's objections to the influence of popular opinion.

A mining town is a strange mixture of propriety and devil-may-careness, and like the army or a sewing-circle, full of gossip. In the end, when Sewell appeared at the door of my shack next morning, I brushed away my doubts.

There was nothing the matter with him that I could see, except that he looked handog and furtive. And most men would acquire that look when they were victims of a prejudice. It's hard not to live down one's reputation.

He brought a blackfellow and his gin with him: the first, his man Peter, a wizen old aborigine, with the strange, world-old look on his flat features; the second, Peter's wife, who Sewell assured me was a better carrier than Peter.

Once I had made up my mind to go partners with Sewell, we buckled to. It was a share and share alike agreement, for all that Sewell knew where the gold was, or Peter, rather. By midday we had loaded the black and his woman with our requisites. To me the burden looked enormous, but Sewell insisted that it was nothing to them.

We had a tent, a prime requisite in that land of shadeless hell, a pestle and mortar, sluicing pans, and a small cradle. These comprised Peter's load. His woman toted a fifty-pound bag of flour and a side of bacon. We carried the sack containing the rest of our scanty provisions and cooking utensils, a blanket apiece for the chill nights, and, most precious of all, a great goatskin, for water, which, when full, would make a load for a man. We were to spend ten weeks upon our journey, which was all our stock would allow. If we struck gold in paying quantities, we would return and invest in a camel, or even two, load up, and prepare for an extended trip.

It was rather a desperate scheme—I can see that now; but at the time it seemed reasonable enough. Besides, there was something hypnotic about Sewell—not power, but a sort of jumpiness that he seemed to exude. A man would take desperate chances with him, but he would not take them because he trusted him to get him out of danger.

We went on for days into the salt desert. Kalgoorlie is very near the fringe of habitable land. Day by day the herbage became scantier, the salt thicker, the heavens brassier. And Sewell was hopeless. He

shirked his burden. He drank his share of water and whined for mine. Peter was a wonder, though, and so was his *gin*. They never failed to find the water-holes, even if the water was brackish. And it is not for some time that the taste of brackish water becomes insufferable.

We had brought no rifle or gun, because there is nothing to shoot—nothing edible—in the Great Victoria; but I had slipped in a couple of handfuls or cartridges, and I knew Sewell carried an automatic. There was no liquor; I had insisted on that. It's no use, except for a mad spurt at the end of a day, and the effects are bad, even then. But Sewell had brought drugs. I couldn't find out what it was he took, but I knew it was that that parched his throat and made him whine for my water as he staggered along under half a man's load.

I grew accustomed to him as the days went by. It was I who gave Peter his orders and directed the hours of marchings. After a week in the desert one becomes largely an automaton. Heaven knows how faraway my thoughts were, as I trudged behind the blackfellow and his *gin*, under the blazing sky, cursing the folly that had brought me on that fool's errand with Sewell, and yet—

Why didn't I turn back? Well, there was something, some indefinable sense of adventure, that grew on me as the days passed, perhaps through the very monotony of them. I knew afterward that I could have foretold what was going to happen—when it would happen, rather—almost to the day. The expectancy began to increase, as when a looked-for thing is awaited. And it was a shivery instinct that drew me on. At night the sense became stronger, and the instinct more profound.

It was the sense of something coming to meet me. Something that was crossing from one diagonal of that checker-board of yellow and brown, as I from the other. A sense of fate. At night I would listen to Sewell's drug-crazed mutterings, and try to weave something out of them.

We had quarreled, of course, as even good men do when they are alone in a howling wilderness. I suppose my face was just as hateful a breakfast sight to Sewell as his became to me. We never spoke without a sneer or a scowl. One night, when I had thought him asleep, he sat up suddenly and turned toward me.

"What's that you were saying about gold this afternoon?" he demanded.

"I was saying that the McDonnell Range will have to assay mighty well to tempt me to go back," I answered, with a bitter taunt in my tone that I couldn't conceal.

"Damn the McDonnell Range!" he blustered. "Did you think I came on this trip simply to pick up a few pebbles?"

"I hope so," I answered, seriously enough. "That was the purpose of our partnership."

He sat silent awhile, and then he began to crawl out of his blankets toward me. There was a full moon, patching the entrance to the tent with white, the silence was hideous, and I was shivering with the cold, and mad for a drink of clean, fresh water. To be hot and thirsty is bad enough, but to be cold and thirsty is hell. Every prospector can tell you that. The sight of him, crawling like a great snake across the strip of sand between our blankets, rolling the yellows of his eyes, made me want to scream with panic.

If he had touched me I should have struck him. But he stopped a foot away, and sat up at my side, his blanket over his head and shoulders. "Listen, Ronald," he began. It was the first time in weeks he had called me that. "I'm going to tell you something. There's something better than gold here, though there's gold, too. Did you ever hear of the white queen of the McDonnell Range people?"

"I've heard that yarn of the old prospectors. But nobody's ever seen her—or that white race either."

"The blackfellows have."

"White men who have come down from the north coast, once in a blue moon, Sewell." I was thawing toward him; he could make one like him, though never respect him.

He leaned toward me, and I saw his eyes turn upward, as if the drug he had swallowed had its grip on him.

"Peter has," he said. He bent closer. "He's seen her!"

It was the creepiest moment I had ever experienced. There was no adequate cause for my sensation; even Sewell's words might have any simple explanation. And yet I was actually trembling, half terror, half eagerness.

"He won't tell," Sewell exploded. "He knows something—a whole lot of something, I suspect—something lying behind the Great Victoria. He won't say what it is. It's my belief"—his lips were at my ear now, and I had forgotten my revulsion—"it's something not—exactly—human—in our sense of the word."

"Rot!" I ejaculated.

He had an infernal cunning intuition. He knew I was afraid. It was the desert. It gets on a man's nerves. I never knew an old prospector, for that matter, who was quite sane.

"Look here, Sewell," I said. "Those yarns—white races, white queens—are the common property of all countries with an unexplored hinterland. Let's forget them. I didn't come here to look for that. I came to look for gold. If you're out of the game, you can leave me Peter and go home. Or you can take Peter with you and I'll go on alone."

He did not even trouble to answer me, and I fell to silence, listening for his next words, and all the while listening, as if with my whole body, and not alone my ears, for something creeping over the sand without. I knew that, whatever it was that I had come to meet, it had not very far to go—nor I.

"When I was taken prisoner," said Sewell, "they sent me to Aleppo. They put me to work upon the Taurus Tunnel at first. But I picked up Arabic—I have a born faculty for languages. I made myself their companion in a few weeks. The Tommies didn't like it. They thought I was betraying them. I wasn't. When I turned Moslem they'd have had my life if they could. But I was in Damascus then, studying.

"Queer thing, Mohammedanism. A sort of hotchpotch of left-over wisdom from the older peoples. You know the desert Arab's half a heathen still. He knows about the early races. Solomon wasn't a myth. Nor his powers, either. Nor the *djinns* and elementals and half-human things that come to you under hashish and poppy extract. Good Lord, Ronald, those visions are true! They're not imagination. You can't imagine anything that never had material existence.

"When I found traces of this primitive learning among the blackfellows I studied it. They had quite a clear conception of some white lords whom they stood in fear of. Sort of gnomes, or earth men, only not dwarfs. I overheard a lot before they knew I understood their language. Then they shut up. I thought when I got Peter and his *gin* out here I'd make him talk. But he won't. And she says she doesn't know.

"D'you know what was in my mind when I asked you to go partners with me? Because I knew—I knew this white race lived somewhere in the McDonnell Range, I had the idea of going there, getting their

gold, and—well, ruling them. Those stories of the old prospectors have some truth. You know they'll tell you there's a white queen the sight of whom drives men mad. That's true. A survival of the matriarchate. They're mad with thirst when they see her."

Heavens, how he rambled on in his disjointed, drug-crazed way! And yet, though I would never have admitted it, I was a credulous listener.

"It took me some time to get over my impression that the blackfellows had the power of seeing this world of elemental beings. It was not until I realized that this race is human—in a sense—that I got my idea of going there. And yet they're not human, Ronald, as you and I are. They are descendants of one of the primeval races that inhabited the world aeons ago. We're a million years ahead of them, as the world is a million years in advance of the kangaroo, the duckbill, and the blackfellow. Some things they'll teach us. We'll bring that knowledge back to the world and use it for power. Some things we'll teach them. And we'll get their gold and strip them bare as a bone."

His eyes were glowing with fire. I loathed him, and I was fascinated by him. What a mind, to have conceived that, to have worked over that huge conception; and what a mind to have turned it to the base purpose of robbery!

"You'd better go to sleep, Sewell," I said.

He touched me for the first time. His hand was as cold as a snake's coils.

"You're with me on it, Ronald?" he almost whined.

"I'm with you on our partnership," I answered.

It seemed to satisfy him, nevertheless. He crawled back and lay down on his back, muttering and twining his fingers. Presently his mumblings stopped. He began breathing slowly and heavily, as the drug-user does.

I lay still. But the sense of foreboding grew stronger in me. What was it I was afraid of? I tried to shake away the influence of the desert, but I could not sleep. It was too cold, for one thing; and then—something was calling me.

At last I could stand it no longer. I slipped out of my blankets and went out of the tent. The moonlight flooded everything. Far away I saw a moving black object looking like a spot on the white surface of the sand.

I gripped my revolver, slipping a cartridge into the nearest chamber, and, my

heart beating fast, strode out toward the object. I need not have feared. When I drew near I saw that it was a white man, dressed in tatters and rags, and ambling aimlessly toward me. How he had struck us in that howling wilderness I never knew; nor indeed, how he had found the strength to move his limbs.

For he was hideously tortured, blinded, mutilated. And, as he trudged along, uttering a parched cry, I knew him for old Joe Mulock, a prospector who had disappeared a year or two before from Kalgoorlie.

CHAPTER II

PRIEST AND PRINCESS

HE SENSED my presence long before he could have heard me, but, not knowing that he was blind, I did not wonder when he turned round and stretched out his arms toward me. He dropped unconscious, and it was not until I got him into the tent that I realized the extent of his mutilations.

Cunning devils had wrought them, for there was hardly an inch of him that was not defaced. They had gone over him, nerve by nerve and sinew by sinew, armed with some infernal knowledge of anatomy. They had inflicted the maximum of pain with the minimum of damage before they turned him loose into the Great Victoria.

I remembered it was Joe who had told me of the white queen. He had talked of finding her and marrying her, and we had all thought him mad. But then he had been a hale man of about fifty-five, and now he was in the extremity of old age.

I got him into my blankets and poured the last drops of our water down his throat. Dawn broke soon after. Sewell lay in his drug slumber, and Peter did not come, as was his custom. Perhaps he had gone to look for water, I thought; the pool where we were encamped was undrinkable.

I could see at a glance that old Joe had not long to live. What the torture had not effected the Great Victoria had completed. His tongue was black, his body—what there was left of it—mummified with salt crystals. As soon as I had done what I could for him, I went to Sewell and shook him until he awakened.

He sat up growling, and his eyes fell on the wreck of a man beside him. He knew Joe—I could see that by his expression, though he must have known him anyway, for Joe had been a figure on the

Western goldfields. Then his eyes lit on mine in a cunning way, and I knew that he was resolved not to admit that knowledge.

"Joe Mulock came to the tent early this morning," I said. "I picked him up outside." And, as I was about to tell him what some fiends had done to him, I found myself cut short by some interior impulse. Somehow the shame of old Joe Mulock's body was mine—at least so far as Sewell was concerned.

Sewell growled, "Well, what are we going to do with him? We can't take him along with us."

"We'll have to stay here till—" I began.

"Till he dies? He won't die. Those old men are tougher than *malle* grass."

"Did you ever have any feeling in your blasted wisp of a soul?" I demanded, feeling a mad rage at Sewell's presence in the tent at all, and a sense of helpless impotence at the knowledge that old Joe's presence had more than complicated matters. For we could neither go forward nor back, and our flour was half gone.

Generally he would sneer back at me, but now he simply got up and stalked out of the tent. I went to the opening and saw him squat down beside the blackfellow and his *gin*, who were lighting the fire in the shelter of a rock. I went back to Joe and tried to drain out a few more drops of water for him. Sewell had raided the water-bag the morning before, after his night of drug thirst.

There was nothing that I could do for Joe. Sewell looked in once or twice, but soon realized that I would not start that day—not until old Joe died. Peter brought some bacon and damper, and about nine told me that he was going to find water. Sewell sulked under the rock. I was watching old Joe, and it was not long before I saw that the problem which I had faced was no problem at all. The old man was growing gray, and the breath began to hiss more loudly through his windpipe.

He stirred, his twisted hands began to pick at the blanket, pulling up the threads and trying to wind them into yarn. I knew what that meant, and I knew he might recover consciousness at any time before his death. He could not last more than a day or two.

Suddenly the blinded eyes opened. "Partner!" gasped the tortured throat in a choking whistle.

I bent over him. "Listen, Joe!" I said. "You're safe, now. It's Ronald Gowan speaking. Gowan of Kalgoorlie—you knew

me there. We used to chum together evenings outside your shack."

He was too far gone to remember me, but he knew I was a friend. "Them black devils gone?" he whispered huskily.

"They're gone, Joe. You struck our camp. Cheer up, old man! You'll be all right now!" Heavens, what lies we can tell when we have to! That twisted ruin of flesh was less like a man than some misshapen animal.

HE SOUGHT my hand and held it to his breast. "I can tell you where—water," he mumbled. "Not far. A day's march, maybe, or two; due north, where you see the edge of the McDonnell Mountains sticking up into the sky. Follow that. You'll think it's salt, but it ain't. Fresh water, bubbling up in the middle of salt crust."

He broke into a babbling cackle. "You'll hev to be spry," he whispered. "Them black fiends is there. Look what they did to me! They'll get you if you ain't spry. But they don't come out till night. They can't stand sunlight. It withers 'em, like worms. I found that out when I got away from 'em. They couldn't follow me into the sunlight. Only don't let 'em catch you after dark."

Curious as I was, I would not question the old man. "Go to sleep, Joe, and forget it," I said.

"Forget it?" he screeched. "That's the white queen the old prospectors told of, in the Never Never country. If you was to know—"

He clutched at me fiercely. "Listen!" he cried. "I ain't mad, and I swear it's true. I was a king there. They made me king. They're waiting for somebody from the world outside. They thought it was me. But it wasn't. And it don't pay. My God! Listen! I swear I ain't mad. Them people's witches. They don't live—"

He fell back on the sand, and, as the eyes closed, an awful horror gleamed in the sightless orbs.

He was unconscious again, and in the slow coma that dissolves imperceptibly into death. I rose from beside him to see Sewell at the entrance, the empty water-bag in his hand, and a look of fury in his face.

"Damn it, it's dry!" he blurted out. "You've given our last drops of water to that old incubus, who'd have died anyway in a day or two! Great guns, Gowan, d'you realize what this is going to mean for us?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I might have told him that the thirst caused by the

drugs he took was responsible for most of our sufferings. But some men are too mean for argument. Sewell struck me that way.

He subsided, grumbling. "What are we going to do?" he demanded.

"Stay here till he dies."

He came nearer and looked at Joe. "You think he'll die today?" he asked with suppressed eagerness. "Peter thinks he can find water. But he isn't sure. And we've got to start, we've got to start, I tell you, or go back to our last camping-place. And the water there was like Epsom salts. What are we to do? My God, it's the end of everything, and just when—"

He stopped short and looked at me in his cunning way. It occurred to me that he had been talking to Peter.

Our throats were too parched to eat. We chewed some dry tea leaves. It was very drowsy in the tent, and I had not closed my eyes the night before. And it was long, waiting for Peter and the *gin*, who had gone off with him. I felt my eyes closing. Before I knew it I was asleep.

When I awoke the sun was nearing the horizon. I had slept all through the merciless heat. I awoke, weak and faint for water. Sewell must have been sitting outside; he looked in as he heard me rise.

"Peter came back an hour ago, and he's found no water," he informed me. "We're going to start back at dark to our last camp. It's the only chance for us."

"Old Joe didn't wake up while I was asleep?" I asked, bending to look into the face of the prospector. The slow, stertorous breathing had ceased.

"Him? Oh, he's dead," retorted Sewell. "Crossed the divide about an hour after you went to sleep. Peter's hollowing out a grave yonder."

The callousness of his tone infuriated me. Old Joe had lived his life, and death had been a mercy to him; but this dog's death in the desert hurt me.

Stooping over him, I saw that his face was curiously discolored; there were mottled spots upon the wrinkled tan. I glanced up at Sewell, and what I read in his eyes confirmed my suspicions.

Sewell had suffocated the old man while he was in his last coma. He could not wait for death; he was afraid that there would be no water.

I leaped at him, and for a moment I had lost command of myself. I think I would have strangled him. He saw what was in my eyes and ran. He was faster than I, and he stopped about twenty paces

distant and then began to blether at me.

"I swear I didn't do that!" he cried. "The old man got his face caught in the blanket. He was dead when I looked at him. I knew you'd be unjust to me."

He was something like a woman in his appeals. But even the evidence in the tent didn't teach me what a murderous dog he was. Beneath his softness he had the ferocity of the hyena.

Peter came up carrying the spade. I wasted no more words on Sewell just then. We carried out the stiffening body and deposited it in the shallow grave. Luckily there were no beasts that could desecrate it.

"Now, you hear me, you dog!" I said to Sewell. "Here you and I part company. Take Peter and his *gin*, and half the supplies. The outfit I'll leave here. I'm going back to start again with proper supplies, and a human partner. But I'm going back just one day's march behind you. And if I see your face, or your back, before we reach Kalgoorlie, by the living God I'll shoot you!"

I THOUGHT afterward that it had given Sewell some sort of justification, my making that threat. But I was mad about Joe, and mad with the torturing thirst. Sewell saw I meant business, for he and Peter started striking the tent at once, and divided the supplies fairly. But then there came the question of the goat-skin. We could not divide that, and to travel without it meant death. We saw that simultaneously.

"Well, it looks as if we've got to travel in company after all," said Sewell.

I had to assent. Sewell let himself go. He began whimpering that we could never retrace our course; that the water at the last place was almost as bitter as this. Then it was that I remembered old Joe's words about a fresh-water spring.

I did not know, of course, how much truth there was in them, but it struck me that the old man must have found drinkable water on his journey; better than ours, or he could never have made the last stage in his condition.

And already I was in the beginnings of delirium. Though I was perfectly conscious of all that was taking place, things were whispering to me, and pictures kept coming in place of the eternal undulating sand. At first I thought it was a mirage. But it was not. It was home scenes; I had but to let myself go, and I should be back among them.

No, we could never make the last pool. "Old Joe said there's water a day or two ahead," I said to Sewell. "He says it's fresh. Maybe it was delirium, but he must have got water somewhere. I'm going to start for it." I made a reeling clutch for the water-bag and swung it about me.

"I'll go with you—or, rather, you can come with me, Sewell," I said. "It's a toss-up whether we find it. It's a toss-up whether or not it's drinkable. Once we get water, I'll talk things over with you."

He agreed, whimpering. After all, I was master, with the possession of the water-bag. We tried to map out the route old Joe had taken. I was pretty sure that what he called a day's march or two was very much less—possibly no more than two hours' journey. I told Sewell so, to reassure him, because I didn't want a helpless man on my hands.

What puzzled me was old Joe's instructions to travel due north toward the edge of the McDonnell Range, which had been faintly visible on the far horizon for some days past. How had old Joe known north, or found his way southward? This increased my belief that the fresh-water spring was much less than a day's march distant.

It had grown dark when we started, but there was a brilliant moon, making the whole land as light as day. The wind had long since obliterated Joe's footprints. We aimed at the edge of the McDonnell, and trudged steadily under our burdens, Peter leading, then I, then Sewell, and the *gin* bringing up the rear. So the hours of night began to wear away.

The eeriest thing was the utter solitude. There was not even a bird to cross the black vault above us, wherein the stars blazed like diamonds. I felt utterly insignificant, a human ant plunged into that wilderness. A fitting setting for anything that might lie beyond!

By this time I knew that the thing which was coming to meet me was close at hand. Perhaps delirium contained that germ of truth within itself. And somehow my fears vanished. But the hours passed, and the stars circled the sky, and nothing happened until suddenly Peter stopped in front of me.

"What's the matter?" I asked. But he waited for his master.

"Me no go on," said Peter.

"I tell you we'll come upon fresh water by dawn!" I cried. I was sure of it now. I knew ever so many things that had hitherto been hidden from me.

Peter wrinkled his flat nose. "Plenty debbil-debbil," he said simply. "Me no go on."

"Rot!" muttered Sewell. I have said that I had hidden the truth about old Joe's mutilation from him. There was nothing particular about his face except the eyeless sockets, and the devils who did that work had left the eyelids. They were fiends at their job. Sewell knew nothing of old Joe having met with those black devils.

"Plenty debbil-debbil," Peter muttered obstinately. "If catch um white fellow, all same black fellow. Debbil-debbil catch um when sun come, white fellow dead fellow, same black fellow."

That startled me. Old Joe had said that. They "withered like worms" in sunlight. I gripped my revolver and slipped charges into the empty chambers while Sewell and Peter were holding a *corrobooree*.

Sewell's thin voice rose into an exasperated scream. But he could not persuade Peter. He came to me presently. "This damn fool says that there are devils in this country that catch men and mutilate them," he said. "He won't go on, but he'll wait for us. What we going to do, Gowan? What we going to do?"

I was sorry for the broken creature before me. Sewell's thick tongue clove to his furred palate, and the words were almost undistinguishable. He was shaking from head to foot. "For God's sake tell me what to do, Gowan!" he pleaded.

I told him, "Leave everything with Peter, if you can trust him. You can? I'll take your word for it. All we want is the water-skin, and I'll carry that. It doesn't weigh much now. Keep by my side, and by daylight we'll find that water. If we don't—then it won't be any use to worry."

So we went on, leaving Peter and his *gin* seated upon the baggage, looking after us. Heavens, what a journey that was! The chill air froze us to the marrow, the salt creaked in our very bones, and the thirst was yelling at us in every artery. All I knew was the McDonnell Range in the far distance.

I fixed my mind on that as a sort of focus, and I let myself go—all but that little point of consciousness. I was at home again, I was at the training-camp, I met a dozen old friends, including several dead ones. What talks we had! All the while I wouldn't let go of the McDonnell. I knew that would mean death, and something in me didn't want to die.

All the while, too, I knew that the Thing and I were on our last lap.

It lost its horror, too. It was something that froze my blood, but no longer with fear. It was a woman, exquisitely beautiful. I saw now that what had terrified me was the idea that she was not human. But she was. She was warm, yielding, supple in my arms. Only she was of a race that had lived a million years before.

SOMETIMES I came back to consciousness with a start, to see Sewell shambling along beside me. He was muttering, too. I wondered where he was in mind. Then I was off again.

I don't know how many hours had passed. I think old Joe had not been so wrong in his first estimate after all, and that it was not far from dawn when the sand grew firmer. We trod on rock now, white and brittle as bones. We reached the summit of an elevation. Beneath us extended a flat plain, in which huge boulders stood up, curious shaped boulders, as if man's hands had wrought them. They might have been the posts and pillars of a prehistoric city.

And in the midst of them was a large, flat lake, ringed with white salt crystals. It was a lake saltier in aspect than any that we had seen.

A groan burst from me. Then I remembered old Joe words: "You'll think it's salt, but it ain't. Fresh water, bubbling up in the middle of the salt crust."

I left Sewell and staggered across the crystals. I reached the edge of the water. I leaned over the salt, made a cup of my hands, and drank—fresh water!

My yell must have been what apprized Sewell, though I did not know I had called to him. He was beside me, and we were both upon our faces, drinking up the life-giving fluid. Then we were plunged in it, rags of clothing and all, sucking it in at every pore of our bodies. Never was nectar sweet as that!

I dragged Sewell away, or he would have killed himself. It took force; but at last we stood, dizzy and gleeful, on the crystals again.

I was just about to fill my bag when something happened.

First it was a nameless fear, then the sense that we were no longer alone. Then I knew what that fear was, bred as it is into our bones from the beginnings of man, so that even the garden worm nauseates us. For the whole level surface of the plain beside the lake appeared alive.

Something was crawling under the sand. Imagine a mole not far below the surface,

increase its length a thousandfold, and picture the sand desert heaving as the invisible coils of vertebrae beneath stirred it!

I could not stir, but watched the outlines of the monster until it drew its great bulk through some hole in the bank of the lake, agitated the water, and disappeared. Everything grew still.

I glanced at Sewell. He had not seen it. He was looking the other way, his eyes wide, his mouth agape. And I had not seen what he saw, for, fronting us in a half-circle were a dozen of the most ferocious-looking savages imaginable.

Black Australians—but more Australioid than any of the black races of the continent. The hair covered face and head as thickly as on a dog, leaving only the thick lips and the great wen of a bridgeless nose, and the little, glaring eyes visible. They carried boomerangs and shields.

I drew my revolver and aimed at them. I yelled at Sewell, but he only stood gaping.

Then, remembering old Joe, I began firing steadily into their midst. One dropped, another—then a boomerang struck me upon the temple and I dropped helpless upon the salt.

A minute later we were in the hands of the savages. A huge fellow shouldered me and carried me toward a sort of wall of the great rocks, about a quarter of a mile away. He flung me down, and stood guard over me and Sewell, while his companions disappeared inside a sort of natural doorway.

Perhaps a minute passed. I was beginning to recover my full consciousness. I was speculating on the possibility of a rush upon the savage who strutted over me. Then, at the entrance, there appeared—she whom I had gone to see.

A girl of twenty years radiant with youth and beauty. Something of the Australioid type showed in the slight tilt of the nose, in the abundant hair. But she was white! Milk-white! Peach-skin and milk and roses, and tawny copper hair, in the heart of the Great Victoria!

She wore a long cloak of some blue material, sandals of polished wood on her bare feet; under the cloak there was a hint of white garments. Bangles of copper on her wrists and ankles, and a heavy torque of some milky gold about her slender throat.

She motioned to the savages, and we, too, were dragged inside a circle of monoliths. I knew them for that now. The place was a sort of temple, open to the sky, like

that on Salisbury Plain. In the middle was a flat altar-table.

Sewell and I were dragged up and flung down upon it. Ropes were procured, and we were bound, hands and feet, to four horns of stone, apparently chiseled out of the solid block of which the altar was composed. Sewell was chattering with fear.

The blacks stood round us, gloating like evil monsters. The girl, standing among them, looked passively and unemotionally on the proceedings. I waited for the sacrificial knife.

But no knife descended. Instead, one of the savages raised a sort of stone lid at the bottom of the altar and whistled into the aperture, a long, strident call that hissed like escaping steam.

Presently, as it were out of the bowels of the earth, a hissing shriek answered him. Louder and nearer came that hellish response; then the whole surface of the sand inside the circle of the monoliths began to agitate, as the coils of the great body glided upward.

And out of the altar-lid appeared the head of a disgusting and unbelievably abominable monster.

It was a serpent's head, in size no larger than the flat coil of the striped neck that followed it. The brain-pan was no larger, for all its bulk, than that of a snake. I saw two gleaming eyes, intense with the unorganized evil of that primitive intelligence, gloating on me, a hollow, spoonlike yellow tongue, rows of tiny fangs set in the palate and jaws. One of the natives tore the clothing from the upper part of my body. The head shot forward with an undulating, graceful sweep. I closed my eyes, every muscle tense against the sucking of that yellow tongue, the clinch of the tiny fangs in my flesh.

Suddenly a cry broke from the girl. She screamed again, and caught the chief savage by the arm, pointing to my own arm—to the tattoo of the eagle there.

And instantly Sewell and I were dragged from the altar-top, the monster was hissed back into its hole, and the savages untied us and were circling round us, with slow movements of adulation.

The girl came nearer. She took off her cloak of blue and placed it about my shoulders, standing before me enveloped now in a single, clinging garment of sheer white material, woven from some plant fiber unknown to me, and caught in at the waist with a flexible girdle of the same silver-gold, with the head of a serpent. She bent before me as if in adoration.

A shaft of light flickered across the monoliths. The sun was rising.

INSTANTLY a sort of panic seemed to seize the blackfellows. They seized Sewell and me, forcibly enough, but no longer as if we were captives, and hurried us toward a hole which I now perceived under the altar. We stopped and crawled for a few feet; then I felt steps under me, and suffered myself to be led down in pitch darkness which very gradually dispersed, until a dim and misty light began to permeate the scene.

Lighter it grew, though we were far underground. At last the mists seemed to gather above us, and, halting among my captors, I looked about me.

My amazement was so great that I could hardly believe I was not still upon the desert. I was standing upon a broad platform at the turn of a huge stairway, more grandiose than anything conceivable. It ran straight for five hundred feet up the side of an immense mountain, then began a succession of graceful spirals which carried it five hundred feet more, towards the cloud-veiled summit, on which, as I surmised, rested the circle of the monoliths.

Each stair was wide enough for a dozen horses to stand abreast on it. The platforms at the curves would each have held a company of soldiers. And, from the base of the mountain to the plain stretched out beneath me, rose a rock city of enormous size, but apparently deserted.

What staggered me was the realization that all this was underground. Above the city, level with the mountaintop, was the solid surface of the earth. Yet there was light here, as if from some invisible sun, and the flat plain beneath me gradually sloped downward, so that the horizon was perpendicular instead of horizontal. And over everything hung the steamy vapor, forming an impenetrable roof above.

I had forgotten my disgust at Sewell in the new companionship born of our common adventure. "What do you make of it?" I whispered.

He shot his quick glance at me, and I could see that he had already recovered his composure. "Keep your nerves, Ronald, old man!" he answered. "You see, I wasn't so far wrong. Have you got your revolver with you?"

"It was knocked out of my hand," I answered. "Have you your automatic?"

He shook his head. "I lost it, somehow," he stammered. "But we'll win, if we don't let them see we're afraid of them.

We'll carry out our program. Gold, Ronald, and—"

The blacks came between us. With the princess preceding, we continued the descent, with a sheer drop of five hundred feet on either hand. At the next stage, I was amazed to see three natives, each holding a strange animal like a large llama, saddled for riding, with finely polished leather and stirrups of the same milky gold. And they were shod with the white gold. I saw Sewell glance covetously at the delicate cloven feet that they lifted up.

The princess and we two mounted, and the beasts began to pick their way easily down the stairs, until we reached the topmost street of the rock city. Rock houses rose on either side of us, but it was evident that they had long been used only as camping-places for the blackfellows. They were heaped about with dust and debris. And the whole city had the appearance of a gigantic ruin.

We traversed innumerable streets of the same character, always descending, until we neared the base of the mountain. It was evident by now that thousands of years had passed since the place had been a center of civilization, and I began to surmise what I later verified—that the great public buildings had occupied the summit of the mountain, above the wreath of clouds, and had been involved in the catastrophe which had flung the whole place beneath the earth. At the base, however, we came upon evidence of habitation. There was a long street paralleled by a half-dry irrigating canal, with pools of water here and there, underhung by a straggling growth of trees. Patches of a sort of dwarf millet were growing along the edge. As we turned into this thoroughfare, which seemed the sole occupied street of the ruined city, a little group came forward to meet us.

Their leader was a venerable old man, with a mild face, and heavy white beard reaching to his waist. He was clad in a coarse black robe roped about with a cord. He was surrounded by some score of men and women, all wearing blue cloaks of the same consistency as mine. And they were white as the princess and us two prisoners!

At the sight of us they halted and bowed their heads, crossing their hands over their breasts, staring at us with a sort of pathetic hopelessness. Then the princess spoke, and suddenly a roar of welcome rang out from their throats.

The transformation was astounding. Seldom had I seen people wearing an air of deeper dejection, seldom so swift a transition. They thronged about us, clasping our hands, stroking our hair and faces, and all the while chattering in a musical tongue unlike any language I ever heard.

Then we were moving through the crowd, which grew larger every moment as new additions poured out of the houses—moving toward a low structure set at the edge of the city upon the flat of the plain, with the old man preceding, and the princess at his side, Sewell and I behind, and then the blackfellows.

At the doors of the building the old man turned and made a gesture of dismissal to the blacks, who turned and ran loping back. We entered a small hall, perfectly plain, with a row of low stone benches at one end, roughly hewn, and an increasing crowd that filled the interior.

Then, to my utter amazement, the old man, when the princess had seated herself, turned and addressed me in English.

Fluent English, though the pronunciation was strange, as if he had learned it from books, without vocal practise.

"I am Nasmamaxa, priest of the unknown god," he said, "and this is Hita, Princess of the Fendeks, and lawful ruler of Ellaborta, where her throne has been usurped by her half-sister Thafti, who has driven her into exile in this desolate ruin of Ethnabasca. Who are you, and how and why have you come here?"

I gave him my name, and told him Sewell's, and the purpose of our journey across the Great Victoria. As I spoke, he repeated my words to the princess, who sat with her eyes fixed on mine, while the crowd muttered its great astonishment, and murmured in an undertone of running comment.

"We know," said old Nasmamaxa, "that there are many peoples in the world above, to which we once belonged, until the anger of the unknown god plunged us back into the cradle of the race, the heart of the hollow globe. Now you must learn what your coming portends, for it was expected by us, and for that purpose the captive Jim-Smith was hidden from the wrath of the Serpent Priest Kammoda, until he had taught his speech to the wise men among the Princess Hita's party. Yet know that, but for the death of Kammoda, the serpent priest, five days ago, in the abode from which he watched us and carried out the orders of Thafti, in Ellaborta, you had not entered Ethnabasca alive, but had as-

surely been fed to the great serpents."

Jim Smith! That was the name of one of the band of old prospectors who had been supposed to have perished in the desert.

"AGES ago," continued Nasmamaxa, "the hollow earth, which had nursed her brood among the mists, sent them up to people the lands that lie beneath the eye of the great sun. And long after, the anger of the unknown god drew us back again, and filled the surface of earth with uninhabitable deserts, though we know the fair lands lie beyond them.

"We the remnant of the true worshippers, who offer no sacrifice but the prayer within the heart, were persecuted by the serpent priests. It was at their orders that the white men who found their way here, once in a century, were tortured and slain. Nor dared the Princess Hita here, who follows the true faith, restrain her black slaves, descendants of a race of captives, for fear of the vengeance of the serpent priests upon her people. But five days ago the evil Kammoda died, and the city of Ethnabasca is free until a new priest is sent from Ellaborta, the capital."

He paused, and continued speaking in a slow and very impressive voice, in order, I believed, that those among the crowd who had learned English from Jim Smith, might follow him.

"The Princess Hita is of the serpent clan, and heir to the Fendek throne. But she follows the mild unknown god, and when her father died, two years ago, the priests of the serpent raised up her half-sister, Thafti, to the throne in her place, though two days younger, and sentenced Hita to wander in exile until a certain prophecy was fulfilled. Now there were two reasons for this. One was that Thafti favored the cruel serpent worship. And the second was that the Princess Hita may never give an heir to the Fendek throne until the coming of him whom old prophecies have spoken.

"For women of the serpent clan may mate only with men of the eagle-clan, and the eagle clan was exterminated in the rebellion of ten years ago, and no men of it were left alive.

"Now, Thafti, the usurper, is of the Wallaby clan, inheriting from her mother, as is our custom; but all the clans obey the serpent priests, and rather did the priests ordain that the Wallaby clan should rule than permit the unknown god to reign over Fendika. And Thafti may wed any male

of the Fish clan, but, being ill-favored, has not yet found a suitable mate.

"Thus you see that Hita must wander in exile until the fulfillment of the old prophecy.

According to this, there shall come from the regions outside the earth a white male of the Eagle clan, who shall mate with the Princess Hita and place her on the throne. But whether he rule with her, it says not. Therefore, Gowani, it seems you are the predestined mate for the Princess Hita here.

"Now, therefore, you must go with her to Ellaborta, after Queen Thafti and her councillors have been apprized of the prophecy's fulfillment, and claim the throne on the princess's behalf."

He ended, and such a storm of applause broke out as showed me that the English tongue had been generally studied among the exiles. I glanced at Hita. She was watching me from her seat on the stone bench, but now her eyes fell, and a red blush spread over her face and throat. Of a sudden the old instinct for adventure, which I had lost during the hardships of the long desert journey, flamed up in me again, and with it love for this woman, the fairest that I had ever seen; and I

vowed I would win her throne for her and make her mine.

Then I glanced at Sewell, and saw that he was eyeing me with a look of malignant rage. And suddenly I realized that I had his rivalry to face; he had thought to be the leader in this adventure which he had designed, and had all the jealousy of his type for the man who had unintentionally supplanted him.

Nasmaza turned to me again.

"There is much to be done, and there are many perils to overcome before you can claim the Princess Hita as your mate," he said. "To Ellaborta you may journey safely, for none will dare openly to molest you. But the serpent priests and the usurper, Thafti, will not lightly render up their power, if they can win the people to their side. And, though the people hate them, and their cruel sacrifices, understand that the serpent priests are upheld by the fierce horsemen of Thaxas, the Avian Prince, while we have but the footmen of Aonoria, of which this city was once the capital, and they are disunited.

"Therefore"—he extended his arms over me—"let us pray, my son Gowani, that the unknown god keep you and the Princess Hita in his keeping until this mission be

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fulfilled and the serpent priests banished from the Fendek land forever."

CHAPTER III

A GRAIN OF TREACHERY

I WAS touched by the words, and by the attitude of the little throng about us—exiles of noble birth, for the most part, as I learned afterward, who had voluntarily accompanied Hita in her journey to the Ethnabaskan ruins.

Thahti and the serpent priests were cruel and unscrupulous, but they had not dared risk the popular anger that would have followed on the imprisonment or death of Hita, nor the inevitable outbreak of the Aonorians—for Hita's mother had been of Aonorian birth, a princess of the Serpent clan, and of a line that had once ruled all Fendika, from the capital of Ellaborta.

We kneeled down, and the simple prayer that old Nasmaga uttered in the English tongue would have been done credit to any assemblage of Christian worshipers. The adherents of the unknown god were simple deists, believing in a loving and protecting spirit who detested sacrifices. I think that they were not far from truth, for all that, like the Athenians of old, they gave their god no name.

Hita knelt at my side, clad in her simple robe of white, and we stretched forth our hands together in prayer. With her, I felt that the long journey had been well, that all was well; and the look on her face when we rose told me that our marriage might become more than a matter of statecraft.

There followed a simple betrothal ceremony. We faced each other in the circle of worshipers, and old Nasmaga took our right hands in his.

"Do you pledge yourself, if you succeed in overthrowing the usurper Thahti and the serpent priests, to take this maiden Hita, to be your wife, and Queen of the Fendeks, according to the Fendek law and the customs of Fendika?" he asked.

And, when I had assented, "Do you, Princess Hita, pledge yourself that, if you are placed upon the Fendek throne, you will mate with this man of the Eagle clan, as becomes a true maiden of the Serpent clan?"

Hita whispered assent. She did not look at me until our hands were joined, and Nasmaga spoke a few words of some archaic ritual; then she raised her eyes, and again the vivid red dyed her face, setting my heart to leaping.

After that we were conducted back, no longer captives, but free men, to a rock house at the end of the street not far from the little temple, and there that afternoon, and on successive days, the leaders of our band of exiles visited us.

I learned that it would require two weeks for the dispatch of messengers to Ellaborta, apprizing Queen Thahti of our arrival. Probably another week would be spent in debate at the capital, whence a guard of honor would be sent for us. There was, therefore, a period of about five weeks at our disposal. I resolved to spend that time acquainting myself with the Fendek tongue, which, I was told, was very similar to Avian and Aonorian, and could be learned readily in that period. Nasmaga also intimated that it was hoped to bring some of the leaders of the Aonorian, or popular party, to visit me before we started, to concert measures in case Thahti refused to yield the throne to Hita, as was morally certain.

But as the days passed we foresaw, and my increasing knowledge of conditions told me that my arrival and championship of Princess Hita's cause must plunge the land into sanguinary civil strife.

From Nasmaga I learned the cosmogony of this land beneath the surface of the globe, according to the records of the ancient wisdom. It appeared that the earth, as many of our own scientists had suspected, was not a solid, but a hollow sphere. The centrifugal force imparted by its revolution had hollowed out the interior so that there was a superficial crust no more than a few miles in thickness at the Equator, which gradually increased until it formed a solid mass at either Pole. The old scientists who had imagined the entrance to the interior of earth to be at the Poles, and had hence been disconcerted when the North and South Poles were attained, had not reflected that, since earth's revolutions were along an axis, the northern and southern points were stationary, and, therefore, centrifugal force had no play in these directions.

Of course the Poles were not the true points of the earth's axis; but, roughly, it might be said that there was a hollow diameter of nearly eight thousand miles at the Equator, diminishing as one went north and south, the whole forming a concave sphere upon whose inner surface life existed in rich profusion.

And this, of course, explained many of the unaccountable discrepancies of geology. It showed how the disturbances of

this thin crust produced earthquakes. Then it had been erroneously supposed that we lived on a thin crust above an interior of fiery heat. But how could man have lived on the exterior of a fiery ball? The fluid lava of volcanoes was molten, not by interior fires, but by compression which, in turn, when suddenly released, generated heat.

Nevertheless, there was heat in the interior, and also light, produced by a small interior sun, Balamok, having a diameter estimated at five hundred miles, and constantly shrinking as it radiated its heat on either concavity of earth's interior. But this sun had rarely been seen by mortal eyes, owing to the constant mists, generated by the steam of seeping water, which at the same time veiled it and shut off its fiery rays.

Annoryii, as they called the interior world, was a land wrapped in perpetual giant ferns and evil monsters lurking in the veiled light of the perpetual day.

For of course there were neither seasons nor night beneath the eye of Balamok, and our first sleep was a source of the greatest astonishment to the Fendeks, who themselves merely sank into a half-comatose, torpid state when they took their leisure. They passed some six hours out of the twenty-four in this condition, but never sank into absolute unconsciousness—and they could remain awake for days together without distress.

It occurred to me that our need of sleep might prove a dangerous weakness in an emergency.

I learned from Nasmaka that the Fendeks were the possessors of many inventions indicating a high degree of culture. Thus, though he spoke of swords and shields, as if firearms were unknown, there were flying-machines—at least, so I gathered—and many mechanical appliances, unknown to us, used principally for purposes of construction.

And in all things we were free and honored guests, save one. It had been in my mind to try to retrace our steps to the summit of the great mountain, for the purpose of investigation. But at the great midway platform I found a guard of the black Australians drawn up with spears and shields. They saluted me, raising the shields above their heads and shouting, but—I could not pass!

Sewell's attitude puzzled me in those days. He must have had a prodigious supply of drugs with him, for he appeared constantly under their influence. He was

listless and irritable, and totally disinclined to listen to any plans that I suggested. Knowing him to be a coward, I was surprised that he appeared to acquiesce in our situation, for I had expected that he would rather attempt to escape into the desert than to face the unknown perils confronting us.

I noticed that he made it his business to go about among the Fendek exiles, among whom he soon produced a favorable impression. I realized, too, that there was little hope of our cooperation; Sewell never broached his schemes to me as he had done that night in the tent, and I was compelled to await his move, which I suspected would not be a friendly one.

Old Nasmaka had his own suspicions. He came to our house one night and crossed his hands upon his breast in salutation.

"Oh, Gowani, I would speak with you," he said, glancing at Sewell, who lay in a stuporous slumber, snoring loudly and breathing heavily.

When I had left the little house he put his hand on my arm and said, very earnestly:

"Who is this servant of yours, Gowani; and what is his clan?"

"He is not my servant, but my comrade," I answered. "He has come with me to dig gold from the rocks, which is used as a means of barter among our people."

"I know it," answered Nasmaka. "For that purpose the Jim-Smith came to the Fendek land. That custom came to you from us, for we, too, seek the *toclansi*" (he meant the electrum or alloy of gold and silver which was plentiful in the Aonorian country). "But are there not, then, clans among your people?"

"Clans there are," I answered; "but they do not regulate the marrying. A man of a clan may marry any woman of the same clan, or another."

He made a gesture of horror. "It is a strange custom," he murmured, politely veiling his repugnance. "Then, do you not know that, being a clanless man, as, indeed, there exist men among us, your comrade Seoul may be made a member of any clan among the Fendeks?"

"I did not know it," I returned indifferently.

"But it is so. And I fear that he is ill-disposed toward you."

"Well, Nasmaka?"

"Watch him well! I understand the tie of comradeship; vile the man who breaks it. Yet, if signs of treachery appear, put him to death without scruple; otherwise

you shall hardly succeed in overcoming Thafti and the wicked serpent priests. For the people regard you with fear, as beings from the other world, and they do not know what we wise men know, that you are men as we are. A grain of treachery," he said sententiously, "is like the bark of the *adaura* tree; it swells into a mountain in the water of evil counsel."

"I shall remember your advice, Nasmamaxa," I answered.

That was all he said at the time. But two days later an event occurred that raised the hopes of all of us.

THE arrival of Sar, the young Prince of the Aonorians, who had come four hundred miles, by forced marches, across the desert, with a body-guard of fifty llamen, in answer to our summons, was an event of the first importance.

He was a young man of no more than twenty years, who had acceded to the throne the year before upon the death of his father, Metaxastahaba, and was bent, Nasmamaxa told me, upon regaining for Aonoria the ancient freedom which she had had before the Fendek domination. With his curling, fair hair, blue eyes, and resolute expression, he made a very favorable impression upon me.

A meeting was summoned at once, and the pros and cons debated earnestly. With the exuberance of youth, Sar was all against our going to Ellaborta, unless accompanied by an army.

"From my capital, Zelryli, my lord Gowani," he said, "I can fling an army of forty thousand footmen against the walls of Ellaborta in as quick a time as you will take to traverse the desert. A peaceful army," he said with a chuckle, "which, nevertheless, shall meet you there to add weight to your demands upon Thafti and the Serpent Priests under Ptuth, the magician, who holds the whole empire in fear. Otherwise, surely you and the Princess Hita shall become victims of Ptuth's wiles."

At that the exiles shouted, and leaped up from their seats, waving their arms eagerly. "Many will join us from the Fendek marches!" shouted one of them.

"And I have fifty henchmen who are still loyal to me in my exile!" cried another.

"My brother who administers my lands will pledge himself with five score and baggage llamas!"

Nasmamaxa stood up, and they subsided, looking at him eagerly. "We must not forget," he said, "that our chance lies chiefly

in the populace of Ellaborta. What can ardor and right do against the horsemen of Thaxas? Have we horses, or will they live? Can they be bred in the Aonorian desert where there is little herbage?

"Yet, even though these might be overcome, do not forget the flying warriors of the magician Ptuth, in number fifty. None but Ptuth and the Serpent Priests know the secret whereby they can move through the air. These alone can rout any force opposed to them, and on them rests the power of Thafti, the usurper."

Deep dejection was evident as the force of his words came home to the assembly. Unless the secret could be learned, or Ptuth and his followers overcome, it was clear that our cause was foredoomed to failure.

Then Hita stood up, and I was astonished at the expression of command upon her face.

"Nasmamaxa, and you, Sar, Prince of the Aonorians, accept my thanks for your wise counsel," she said. "In part, Prince Sar, I accept your offer. You shall assemble what troops you can on the Aonorian border. But you shall not lead them over the boundary until I summon you, for I would not plunge my empire into war if it can be avoided.

"You, Nasmamaxa, and you, my friends, shall accompany my Lord Gowani and me to Ellaborta, as an escort of honor, if you are of the mind to risk so much. But we shall rely chiefly upon the righteousness of our cause and the knowledge that the unknown God is mightier than the Serpent Priests, and can overthrow them, be they entrenched never so strongly with all the evil wiles of Ptuth."

And at that they sprang to their feet and cheered her to the echo.

* * *

Prince Sar departed on the following day, and two days later Thafti's escort, consisting of twelve llamen, under the command of a captain, arrived for us. And here it seems to me that I have set down in familiarity many names of men and places which will not remain clear to anyone who may come upon this history. I shall therefore recapitulate them briefly:

The Fendek Empire, with its tributary provinces of Avia, supporting Thafti, and Aonoria, supporting Hita.

Ellaborta, the capital of Fendika, and Ethnabasca, the ruined ancient capital of Aonoria.

Thafti, the usurping princess; Hita, the rightful and dispossessed heir.

Thafti's supporters: Thaxas, Prince of

the Avians, with his wild horsemen, and Ptuth, the Serpent Priest, with his band of flying warriors.

Hita's supporters: Sar, Prince of the Aonorians, and many exiled nobles, and most of the population of Fendika, and nearly all Ellaborta.

I had a long talk with Nasmamaxa before we started, occupying the greater part of the night, during the course of which he enlightened me as to political conditions in the Fendek empire.

It appeared that the three lesser priest-hoods, that of the Fish, the Wallaby, and the Ornithorhynchus were under the control of the Serpent Priests, headed by Ptuth. And the origin of these priests was a singular one.

According to the traditions of the wise men, who alone knew that the earth, Annoryii, was a hollow sphere, Balamok, the veiled sun, revolved at the same rate as earth herself—which, of course, I knew to be a fact, because it formed part of it. Hence it followed that Balamok always kept the same side of his orb facing the same interior of earth. Now it was supposed that the other side of Balamok was dark—that is to say, the heat within the little sun was unevenly distributed, so that a dark crust, like the great spot of Jupiter, had formed on the other side. Here, then, was a region of perpetual darkness, which could not be illumined; and here was a fabled city of darkness, the origin of the Serpent Priests.

These had originally been a caste of warriors, who had learned the secret of flight, and, flying past the scorching rays of Balamok, had landed on Fendek soil and made

themselves masters of the country. By their power of flight and other magical arts these priests held the people in terror. Ptuth was supposed to have the power of causing Balamok to unveil, an event which had occurred once or twice within human record, the rays causing the death of thousands—for, as old Joe had said, the inhabitants of earth's interior could not bear sunlight. Else they had overrun earth's surface as well.

Ptuth was thus the real ruler of the country, and it was certain that he would not allow Thafti, his protégée, to lay down her power at the bidding of a handful of exiles. Therefore we must be most wary in our plans, and be constantly on the watch for treachery.

All the exiles wished to accompany us; there was a pathetic scene when it became necessary to select those who were to come on the journey. But Hita and Nasmamaxa insisted, and I agreed, that a certain number must be left behind to protect Ethnabasca against the blacks. This race had once been enslaved, but subsequently banished from the empire, except for a fringe on the remote borders; they were servile, but of a thievish disposition, a race very low in the human scale and useful only as trackers and body-men.

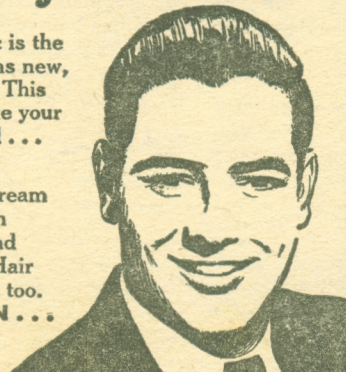
It was also considered necessary to have a nucleus of our supporters in Ethnabasca, in case any untoward event made this necessary. There, in the hills and caves, the fortunes of Hita could be upheld.

So we set off, riding on llamas, Nasmamaxa and some twoscore accompanying us, and Sewell behind us. I noticed that Sewell was constantly in the company of

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the leader of the escort, and that a good deal of conversation passed between them, but I thought less of this than I should have done. We were all armed with swords, but carried no shields, which etiquette forbade an embassy. Hita had presented me with a splendid weapon, a finely tempered piece of steel, with a serpent inlaid into the blade in yellow electrum leaf.

The journey across the desert occupied us fourteen days. I speak of days, but of course it was perpetual day, and our need of periodical sleep amazed our escort as much as it had astounded the exiles. It was the custom to pass the day in marches of three hours, alternating with a three hours' period of torpor, during which the Fendeks lay on the ground in dreamy contemplation. This habit was shared by the llamas, and, as I learned afterward, by all living things above the low scale of the serpent.

I do not think the Fendeks ever lost consciousness. I remember the first day, when I was sleeping upon the ground, being awakened by a sudden outcry from Hita. I started up, to see her kneeling with clasped hands beside me, and terror on her face.

She was weeping. "My Lord Gowani, I thought you were dead," she sobbed.

When I explained to her, in my halting Fendek, she was more amazed than ever, for, though she had heard of our strange habit, she had never, of course, seen me asleep. And then she said something which, had I but understood her, would have saved me much suffering.

"I think, my Lord Gowani," she said, "that your lives would be half wasted, unless they are longer than our own."

So we rode over the stony wilderness, a replica of the Great Victoria beneath us, and doubtless once one with it. The eye of Balamok was always veiled with clouds; and I was told that in fertile regions the fogs generally enwrapped the land for days together.

Knowing now that the center of gravity lay in the center of the earth's shell, and not in the center of the hollow sphere, I was not surprised to realize that our position was antipodean to that we had occupied in the Great Victoria.

Insensibly, in descending the mountain we had reversed ourselves till we were literally walking head-downward, and looking up toward the veiled orb that gave us light and warmth. And the desert always fell away beneath us as we moved toward the heart of the hollow ball. Soon

signs of verdure became apparent, and the mists descended lower. We traversed a pastureland, thronged with great herds of llamas. This gave place in turn to a forest of giant fern-trees. We picked our way along a wide path cut through this jungle, occasionally passing villages and small walled towns in clearings, but skirting these without entering, probably at the direction of Thafti and her counselors. On the eve of the fourteenth day, as I shall reckon periods of four marches, we camped outside Ellaborta.

THE next morning was clear. Beneath the low-lying clouds in the sky, uniformly gray, we saw the capital. Ellaborta was situated in a wide plain, with patches of tree-fern forest along the two rivers that flowed through it. It was ringed with a wall, evidently of immense strength, pierced at short intervals by massive gateways. The central part was occupied by a great mass of buildings, roofed with electrum.

Sewell and I had occupied separate tents upon the journey. We had hardly spoken, but the last few days I had noticed him endeavoring to make up to me. Now he took the opportunity to ride to my side.

"Ronald, old man," he said, "there's been a sort of misunderstanding between us since—since you suspected me of helping poor old Joe Mulock out of his misery—hasn't there?"

"There has," I answered.

"Of course," he continued, "you're master now, and you can literally put it all over me when you choose. But you'll acknowledge that it is I who brought you here. I told you about it—you remember?"

"Well?" I said.

"Remember our talk in the tent that night? I told you we'd strip these fools as bare as a bone. And you told me to forget all about white queens and so forth. You said that you came here to look for gold. You said you were with me on our partnership. Am I correct?"

"You are," I answered. "But suppose you come to the point and enlighten me as to what you are driving at."

"There's gold enough to shoe these llamas with," said Sewell. "There's gold enough on that temple roof, or whatever it is, to make us millionaires. Let's play up to these savages—they're white savages, nothing more—and keep that central fact of gold in our heads first, foremost, and all the time. If we can organize a caravan we can take it back across the Great Vic-

toria. And then we can come back with Maxims and Gatlings and wipe the place clean. What do you say?"

"I say that our partnership ended with the death of old Joe," I answered. "I have done my best for your safety since; I am going to continue to do my best for you. You can go back—if you can. Or you can stay with me. But we're not partners. We are on different enterprises. Is that clear to you?"

He flashed a vicious look at me. "Oh, perfectly, Gowan," he answered. "But have you thought that two can play at the same game? Remember, I understand these people, their origin, and what they stand for. You're making a big mistake. You'll find it out. Sure that's your last word?"

"It's my last word so far as you are concerned," I answered.

He scowled again, and then a sinister smile came over his face, as if he were brooding over the fulfilment of plans already under way. He drew back his llama and rode behind me.

By now we were approaching Ellaborta along a white road, densely lined with people. They were shouting welcome to us, as if the news of our coming, and its purport, were already public property. They swarmed about our llamas, despite the whips which the escort plied unmercifully about them, cheering us, and casting down flowers.

Suddenly the great gates before us opened, and out there came at a gallop a company of warriors on horses. They wore corselets of leather armor, embossed thickly with plates of steel, and carried long sabers. Dark men, for the most part, with flowing black hair and curled beards clipped short about the chin, Avians, and men of Thaxas' famed bodyguard.

But the sight of their horses made me gasp. They were huge beasts, almost as large as elephants, armored with three thicknesses of leather, and their flanks protected with plates of iron. But the hoofs, which were shod with the same electrum, were threefold in division.

It was the three-toed horse of prehistoric times, here a survival, and here, by some law of compensating development, grown to prodigious size.

They raced over the ground faster than a railway train, and with a fierce shout the warriors of Thaxas were riding down the people, sabering them, and leaving many upon the ground, while the heads of the fugitive mob streamed blood behind them.

In a twinkling the approach was deserted, and Thaxas' cavalry, forming into columns of six before us, led the way through the water-gate.

The drawbridge spanned the noble river that wound through the lower part of the capital. On either side rose the strong walls of stone. We passed within, and along a broad avenue, now absolutely deserted—though I knew that eyes watched us from every window—toward the great pile of buildings crowning the summit of the slight elevation upon which we rode.

At last the tall houses fell away on either side, and we entered upon a stately quadrangle, surrounding a low hill, flat-topped, and the only elevation of any extent for miles around. This was the heart of Ellaborta, at once the keep and the administrative and religious center.

The hill was strongly walled, and there was a clear space a hundred yards in width about it, evidently for defensive purposes. Within the center rose the great temple with the roof of electrum; clustering about this were smaller temples; on one side was a massive building which I gaged correctly to be the palace; upon the other the council hall, built like the Parthenon, without doors to guard the entrances in the walls of granite.

Looking back, as we left the city proper behind us, I saw that the mob had swarmed out of the houses again, and stood congregated at the edge of the quadrangle, looking after us. There was something ominous in their fear-stricken silence.

We passed through another gateway, guarded by Fendek warriors with swords and shields, and, dismounting, made our way afoot up a flight of long steps toward the summit.

Reaching this, I paused involuntarily in admiration at the scene before us. The great Serpent temple, set in a grove of dwarf trees, lost nothing by the nearer view. Its massive, squat proportions, like those of an Assyrian fane, had diminished the effect of its height, yet now it towered above all, and the gold dome, which seemed to float on air, so gracefully was it poised in place, dominated everything.

Beneath the dome was the representation of a coiled serpent in gold, or, rather, of one of those prediluvian monsters which we had seen at the entrance to this buried world. And on each side of the parallelogram was a smaller temple, a replica in little, whose service could be discerned from the gold effigies upon their walls.

One was the Wallaby temple, another the Fish temple, another the Ornithorhynchous temple. The fourth, which stood in the rear, and hence was invisible to us, was the Eagle temple.

Our Avian guards, dismounting at the inner gates, had left us, in accordance with the etiquette which forbade the presence of horsemen within the citadel. Preceded by our llamamen, we crossed the empty quadrangle in a complete and eery silence. The whole place was deserted.

We halted before the council hall. And suddenly a trumpet rang out, and of an instant an immense multitude, all wearing scarlet cloaks—the colors of the Queen Thafti, as I discovered afterward—came pouring out and formed a double line between us and the main entrance.

Then, advancing slowly, a score of priests in yellow robes, with heads shaven as clean as billiard balls, advanced and took their station on either side of the approach. One of them held above his head a banner, depicting one of the hideous monsters of the place of sacrifice; and under this, an aged man, clean shaven, shorn of head, in sweeping yellow robes and shoes of blue, stood watching me.

He might have been a century old, so wrinkled was his parchment face; but the black eyes within the red-rimmed orbs burned with a malignant fire.

And I knew him for Ptuth, the evil magician and the chief priest of the Serpent.

Again the trumpet pealed. Our escort now advanced, and halted at the entrance of the council hall.

Ptuth strode forward and bowed low before Hita.

"Queen Thafti bids you welcome, O princess; and you, chief of the Eagle clan," he said.

He led the way into the interior. It was a massive hall, containing nothing but a circle of stone seats, covered with scarlet cushions, and in the center, two thrones of gold. At first I could see little, but suddenly a blaze of soft light burst forth, like sunlight, diffused from some undiscovered source within the walls, and almost blinding me after the sudden plunge into the obscurity.

Then I heard Sewell's voice in my ear. "Those thrones are four parts gold to one of silver, Gowan. Think! Think! Don't be a fool! You'll have your chance to change your mind if you act quickly!"

The words passed my consciousness like the wind. Hita and I were standing side

by side, facing the thrones. Without the circle of stone benches had assembled the escort, with all the crowd of Thafti's courtiers, resplendent in their scarlet. Ptuth sat upon his throne, and the Serpent Priests were ranged behind him, their yellow cloaks aglow in the brightly lit chamber.

Before the second throne stood a veiled woman wearing a scarlet cloak over white robes, adorned with woven wallabies. And I knew her for Thafti, the usurping Queen of Fendika.

HITA bent low before her, and I imitated her gestures, crossing my hands upon my breast as I had learned to do.

"Greetings, sister," she said simply, giving to Thafti honor, but not the royal honor.

I could see nothing of Thafti's face, which was completely hidden by her white veil, but she looked regal as she stood before us, restrained, and yet poised as if for instant decision. She was a splendid-looking woman, too, and every inch a queen in her scarlet and white.

Then Thafti's voice broke the silence, and her melodious tones rang out like silver bells.

"Greetings, half-sister," she said, emphasizing the relationship by the suffix, and using, somewhat to my surprise, the particle which denotes equality, instead of that denoting address to an inferior. "And to you, Gowan," she continued. "And likewise to you, Nasmaza"—she stood for a moment to where the old man stood outside the circle. "Your letters were received, and have been read by my council and my priests and servitors. We have studied them closely, in our anxiety to do our duty toward this Fendek realm. But now, since this matter is one of much perplexity, I call my faithful counselors once more to my assistance."

With that she resumed her seat upon the throne, and instantly the mob in scarlet scrambled into the stone seats. Their looks were haughty and derisive, and boded no good to us.

I saw them fingering the long swords that hung in their scarlet scabbards at their sides, and suddenly I realized how hopelessly we were entrapped among them, with the horsemen of Thaxas holding the gates behind us.

Ptuth rose from his throne, and of a sudden the immense hall was silent.

"Queen Thafti," he began, "long and keenly have we debated this matter at

issue. It is true that, through the spells woven by the priest Nasmaza, who has neither god nor altars, thy birth was delayed until two days after that of thy sister Hita, so that she was appointed heir, in conformity with the Fendek laws. But inasmuch as she refused to perform the sacrifices to the Serpent god, she was declared outlawed and banished from this realm.

"Moreover, as is known to you all, there remained no male of the Eagle clan with whom she could mate, and so give an heir to the throne, and therefore to have crowned her would have been to bring the dynasty to an end. Wherefore it seemed good to the people to choose thee, Thafti, for queen."

At this the courtiers, sensing what the decision would be, rose in their seats, brandishing their swords in their scabbards, since etiquette forbade them to draw the blades in council.

"And how know we that this stranger is of the true Eagle clan?" continued Ptuth. Is it by virtue of the brand he bears on his arm, as llamas do? How know we that the Eagle clan without the world is of descent from that within Annoryii? Moreover, by coming hither he has exposed himself to judgment of the law which proclaims that all strangers shall be sacrificed to the Serpent. My judgment, therefore, is that these men be taken to the Serpent temple and—" He broke off, for of a sudden the quadrangle outside resounded with the yells of an angry mob.

We turned and looked through the doors. The whole enclosure was filled with a crowd of the populace, many wearing blue cloaks, some, the poorer, patches of blue upon their garments. They streamed toward the council hall, brandishing swords, staves, clubs, carrying stones, and

obviously bent upon a hostile purpose.

"Hita!" they howled. "Queen Hita of the Fendeks!"

Instantly the courtiers had sprung to the entrance and ranged themselves in a serried array, their swords in their hands.

It was not difficult to see what had occurred. Taking advantage of the dismounting of the horsemen of Thaxas, the Ellabortan populace, probably by a concerted plan, had rushed the inner gates.

And, in token of their victory, they carried, high in the air, a grisly spectacle—a horse's dripping head.

I learned afterward that only a body-guard of Thaxas' men were then in the capital. Half of these had been captured, and their horses either killed or chased from the city; for so great was the fear of these ferocious monsters that none dared try to mount them.

But the remaining half had secured themselves, and were now riding against the populace from the rear. The great horses, agile as antelopes, were leaping among the crowds that hampered them, and a ferocious battle was taking place just inside the central gate.

At the entrance to the council hall the populace halted for an instant, facing the ranks of the courtiers. Then, with a sudden rush, they were upon them.

The courtiers fought with desperation, but so tense was the mob, so strong the pressure of the packed masses, that the line broke, and dissolved instantly into little groups, standing back to back, and keeping a ring of Ellabortans, mad with hate, at bay.

Whether or not the horsemen overcame their assailants, it was clear that Thafti's men and Ptuth and his priests would have short shrift. They, in turn, were now pent up and at the mercy of the Ellabortans.

Suddenly Thafti, who had sat impassive-

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ly upon her throne, leaped to her feet and cried:

"Hold, people of Ellaborta! Am I Queen of the Fendeks, and shall I not be heard?"

A huge man, black from head to foot, wearing a tanner's apron, sprang forward before the people.

"Aye, queen who veils her face, you shall be heard. We shall hear you pronounce your abdication in favor of your sister Hita!"

"Hita! Queen Hita!" yelled the crowd. Thafti glanced through the doorless entrance. There was now no sign of Thaxas' horsemen, and the quadrangle was packed from end to end with the revolting populace.

Queen Thafti spoke again. "Is it the custom of the law-abiding Fendeks to fight in the council chamber? Put up your weapons and assemble to hear my judgment on this matter!"

"Aye, but you shall judge truly, or we pull you from your throne and Ptuth, the arch-rascal!" muttered the tanner in surly fashion.

I saw Ptuth's white face grow dark with blood. But a moment later the populace were gathering outside the ring of benches, on which the courtiers had again assembled, and more were streaming in at the doors, until the council hall was as packed as the outer courts.

And, with the curious inconsistency of the mob, I heard shouts raised for Queen Thafti. She resumed her seat upon the throne and, bending, whispered to Ptuth, who nodded. I wondered what rascality the old devil was contriving.

I was soon to know.

A PRIEST departed toward a door at the far end of the council hall, and presently returned, accompanied by an aged Fendek woman, whom he brought to the foot of Thafti's throne.

Queen Thafti spoke: "Hear me, ye men of Ellaborta!" she cried in ringing tones. "Ye know this matter at issue, and how my half-sister Hita, having found an Eagle man to mate with, claims my throne, as having been born two days before me."

"Hita! Queen Hita!" yelled the crowd.

"Queen Thafti! Hear Queen Thafti!" answered others.

Thafti made a little ironical obeisance. "I thank you, my people, who still have faith in my good-will and honorable intentions," she said quietly.

Instantly the hall was ringing to the mob's plaudits. Thafti was swaying them,

I knew not toward what devilry of Ptuth's.

"Know, then, my people," she continued, in her melodious voice, "that this old woman is the nurse who had the care of both myself and my sister at birth. She shall speak for me, and you shall judge this issue, according to the ancient Fendek laws."

The old hag came forward to the center of the circle, chuckling and grimacing and displaying her toothless gums. But her voice was clear as a bell, and from the fluency with which she spoke it was plain that she had been thoroughly coached to her part.

"I am Ros Marra," she said. "You know me, Fendeks. Many a year I served our late lord the King and also his princess wives."

"We know you, Ros Marra, liar and trickster!" the tanner shouted. "Many an evil deed thou hast hidden from sight of men!"

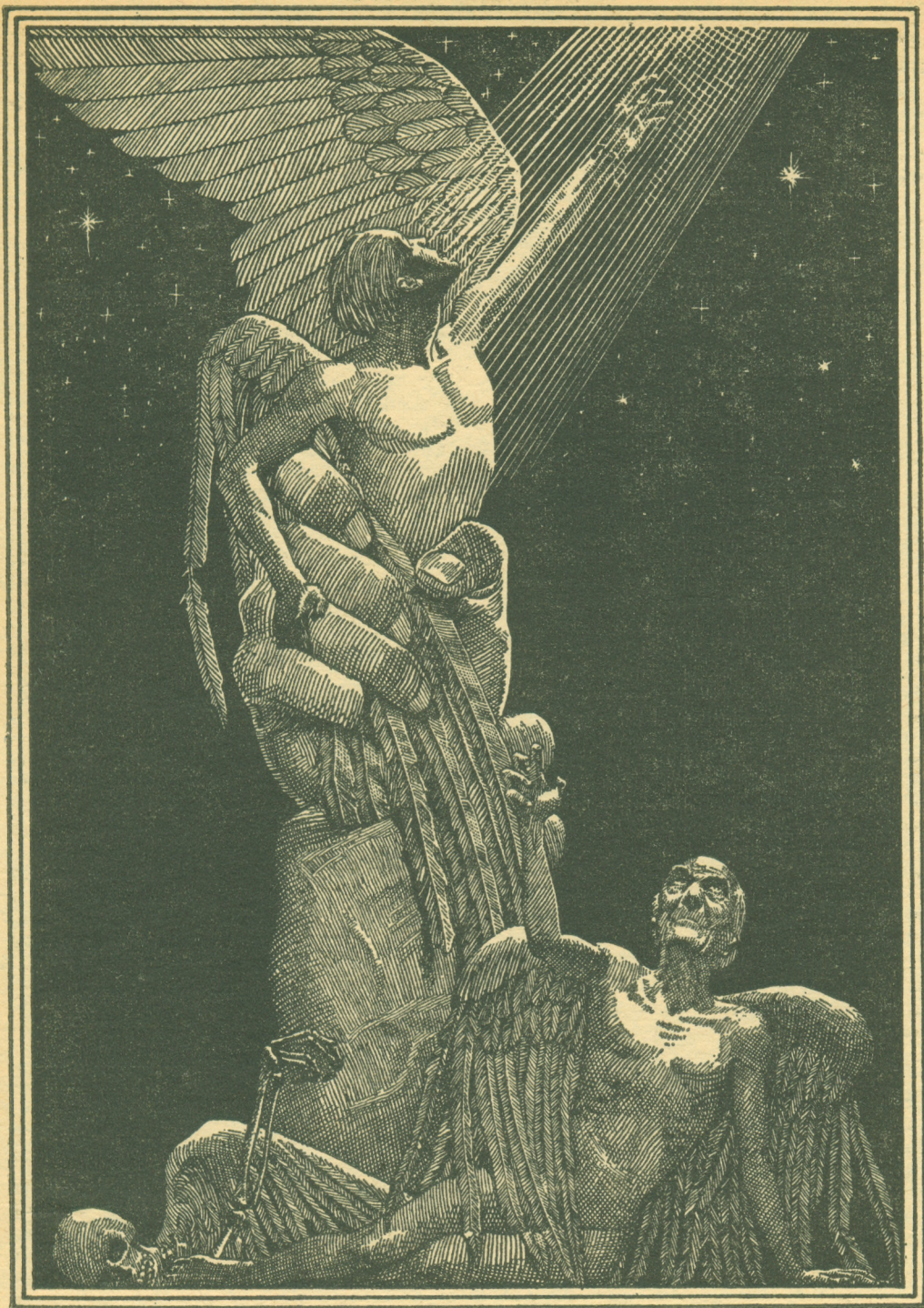
"I have served my master," muttered the crone. "Now hear this story. Upon a certain time, twenty-nine years after the calamity of Balamok's unveiling, which brought death to thousands who saw his fiery eye, a princess was born to our late master. And two days later a second princess was born. Now, my lord, having looked upon the second princess, found fault with the elder, because she was less well-favored. Now the first princess was a Serpent, but my lord, who had slain all men of the Eagles in his anger, knew that she could never mate. And the second princess was a Wallaby, with whom many nobles of the Fish clan would mate to their great honor. Therefore my lord gave orders that the princesses should be secretly changed—"

"Ah-h-h!" A roar broke from the mob. Their dramatic sense was mightily impressed by this astounding revelation.

"Instructing me that the secret should never be revealed except in case of grave necessity—"

The pandemonium was indescribable. But now it was the Ellabortans who were at odds among themselves—some shouting that the old woman lied, others howling for silence.

"Then know ye, by the truth of the Serpent god, by the great hidden Eye of Balamok, by the Wallaby and Fish gods—aye, and by the Eagle god of the empty temple, that Princess Hita is the younger, and of the Wallaby clan, while Queen Thafti is your lawful ruler, and truly of the Serpent!"



Always, there is the quest of the heart's desire, always the unobtainable, the lure that beckons across the deserts of life to those who watch.

"Queen Thafti!" yelled the mob. "Balamok preserve Queen Thafti!"

Ptuth stepped forward and held up his hand for silence.

"Wherefore, O Ellabortans," he said, "since this stranger of the Eagle clan has come hither, according to the ancient prophecy, to mate with our princess, it is meet that he mate with Thafti, and with her rule this Fendek land."

The mob roared its approval. Poor Hita was already forgotten. And Ptuth was on the job.

He was not going to give the populace any chance to remember her.

He believed in striking while the iron was hot.

I was dumbfounded. I did not know what to do at this awful turn of affairs, and I saw poor Hita trembling at my side. Then Sewell stepped forward, and I saw a look of singular understanding pass swiftly between him and Ptuth.

He spoke in fluent Fendek, though he had hitherto given me the impression that he knew only a few words of that language. "O Ptuth, priest of the Serpents," he said, "wonderful are your judgments! Yet it is not meet that the Princess Hita, having been promised marriage, should again be reduced to disconsolate spinsterhood. Since I am a man of no clan—for the great princes in my own land are clanless, according to our custom—deign to grant that I may be inducted into the Fish clan, and thus become the husband of the Princess Hita."

Hita quailed and shrank back toward me. The mob went wild at this prospect of the double marriage. And now Sewell's scheme stood revealed to me. He meant to become Hita's husband, and then, when the opportunity offered, to declare her the lawful queen.

Ptuth smiled all over his wrinkled face. "It is well said, Seoul, my lord," he answered, "and the people approve. Then let the double marriage be performed legally within the Serpent temple after six *psus*" (periods of three hours of labor, or about eighteen hours). "Queen Thafti, deign to look upon the face of your affianced husband."

Thafti stepped forward, and, standing before me, raised her veil for the first time. I could hardly restrain my horror. For her face was seamed and lined and twisted, so that the very sight of it repelled and nauseated me.

She was the most repulsive woman I had ever set eyes upon.

CHAPTER IV

OUT OF THE SERPENT'S MOUTH

SHE read the horror in my look, and a spasm of fury twisted still more the contours of her features; then she let the veil fall, and, with the mob still howling its applause, we were being led away. A guard of soldiers in scarlet cloaks conducted Hita with all ceremony toward the palace. Yet, before we were parted, she bent toward me and spoke hurriedly the words that set my heart to beating wildly:

"I love thee, my lord Gowani. Fear not, for in life or death I shall be thine!"

And the mob was not all for Thafti, for the great tanner leaped forward out of its midst, waving his arms. "Fair words!" he sneered. "Fine talk, but how know we Ros Marra does not lie?"

Thafti turned upon him as he stood near the circle of benches. She motioned to two of her courtiers, who seized the man and dragged him within.

"O my Councillor Ptuth, what shall be done with one who asperses the honorable birth of Fendika's queen?" she asked.

"Let the serpents be fed," responded Ptuth carelessly.

The tanner's face turned ashen. He glanced wildly toward the mob, but none stirred to aid him. He had counted too long upon the people's favor. Reformers shared the common fate in Fendika.

The guards led him away unresistant, and a moment later Nasmaza and the exiles were being conducted toward the palace, while I followed alone, with four armed men around me, more like a prisoner than a prospective bridegroom and king, though the populace danced about us, cheering me.

The palace was a great, rectangular building of white stone, with innumerable windows, and the same squat appearance, with curiously carved columns about the doors, that had reminded me of an Assyrian temple. Two doors of fragrant, highly polished dark wood gave into a large interior, softly illumined with the same diffused glow, which as I learned later, was very sunlight, drawn from Balamok. The passages within ran irregularly, with no apparent plan, and at intervals were doors of the same wood, leading into rooms.

At the rear was a flight of wide, curving stairs. My guards conducted me toward them, but, instead of ascending, we entered a small room, with a carved stone

Serpent on a pillar on either side of it. Its interior contained two low couches, covered with scarlet pillows, a low table, not more than a foot high, designed for eating from the floor—nothing more, and the single window was heavily barred with a cross-work of iron.

Looking out, I could see the towering proportions of the great Serpent Temple, from whose walls the immense gold dinosaur seemed to rear and hiss at me. Moving along the walk among the dwarf trees, which was paved with blue pebbles, were two of the yellow-robed priests.

My guards left me, and, withdrawing, bolted the door behind me. Presently it was opened, and a servitor, bowing low, brought in a tray of food—grain porridge, and luscious fruits such as abounded in that land of perpetual daylight. I had never eaten flesh while in Fendika, nor did I ever; either the Fendeks were naturally vegetarians, or the llamas were not used for food.

Thus I was left to my reflections, gloomy enough; nor were they lessened by the perpetual daylight. For I find, on considering, that one looks forward to night as putting a temporary term to human ills; here there was only the everlasting day, and neither sunlight nor darkness.

Of one thing I was sure; I would rather die than become husband to Thafti. And my anger against Sewell, and my realization of his treachery, though it kept me from giving way to hopelessness, jangled my nerves and distorted my mind, and kept me from forming any coherent plans, if, indeed, such were possible.

At last, exhausted, I sank into some such torpor as characterized the Fendeks. I was not asleep, and dimly I was listening to a great tumult and shouting outside the inner walls, and trying to analyze it, when a click of the bolt startled me into wake-

fulness. I started up, to see a Wallaby priest confronting me.

He wore the yellow robe, indicating his subservience to the Serpent hierarchy, but there was a wallaby on either side of the breast opening. He was shaven, like Ptuth, except for a long forelock, curling over his forehead.

But there was nothing awesome about him. He was a little round, rubicund man, who looked as if he were not averse from good living, and he stood looking benevolently upon me as I rose to my feet, and made me an obeisance, crossing his hands upon his breast.

"Greetings, my lord Gowan," he said. "I am Mnur, chief priest of the Wallaby temple."

To my astonishment he winked at me, and, without further formality, seated himself upon the low couch at my side.

"If men in my lord's country are as men here," he observed, "he will not wonder that, though her weight in electrum was offered as a dowry with the Princess Thafti, there were no takers."

"I am not surprised at all," I returned morosely.

"Yet Thafti is a splendid woman," he went on thoughtfully. "Never was there one more fitted to rule the Fendek Empire. Yea, and moreover we were considering the sending of a marriage embassy to the blind prince of the Lassayii, with costly gifts; but your coming has wrought grievous confusion. Hark!"

He raised his hand for silence, and I heard the dying tumult in the lower parts of the city.

"Prince Thaxas, who was here on a mission, and had been hunting, has returned," he said. "He has brought reenforcements of his horsemen into Ellaborta, and has taken a bloody revenge for the people's insolent rebellion this past *psus*. Eight

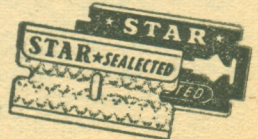
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hundred Ellabortans lie dead beneath his horsemen's swords, and the great serpents will grow fat to-morrow. Ah, Thafti is an excellent queen."

His words made me think swiftly. If Thaxas was now master of the capital, it was highly probable that I was not destined to become Thafti's husband after all—unless Thafti preferred an enforced marriage to the Fendek throne.

"But first," said Mnur, "I speak of the mission on which I have come. My lord Gowani, you possess knowledge of the secret which none here knows, save the magician Ptuth, whereby he lives forever."

"What is that knowledge?" I inquired.

"The secret of eternal life," he returned calmly, fixing me with his large, brown eyes.

"I do not possess it," I returned, "nor any of us, though many would give all they have for it."

He shook his head sadly. "I can hardly believe you, my lord Gowani," he answered. "The knowledge of Ptuth, the secret whereby the Princess Hita is renewed unto perpetual youth, until the coming of him of whom old prophecies have spoken, is reputed to be known to the men of the world without. For you well know that Hita's youth must be renewed forever, through the arts of Ptuth, until he of whom it is prophesied shall come. Whether you be truly he, I know not, but at least you have this knowledge."

"There is no secret, Mnur," I said again. "We die, even as you die."

"I know you die," he answered, "by accident or violence. But—" He checked himself. "Perchance my lord will some day reveal it to me?" he said slyly.

I was not going to waste further breath contradicting this obsession.

"For Ptuth's power is ended," he went on. "The story of Ros Marra was a great blow to us, for it had been planned to make the Wallaby priesthood supreme in the land, and drive back the tyrannical Serpents to the city of darkness and black magic, on the dark side of Balamok. It is only by their possession of wings that the Serpent Priests are able to retain their sway over Fendika, and all hate them.

"Now, my lord Gowani, the moment is ripe. The wings of the Serpent Priests are stored in the chamber above the temple. To-morrow (literally, *psus* seven, with the particle indicative of future time, but I shall not attempt to translate literally) while the assemblage is gathered in the temple, and the attention of the priests is

distracted, we shall seize the room of the wings, possess ourselves of them, and thus master the city. All our plans are made. Thafti shall rule one of the tributary kingdoms, and you shall mate with Hita and reign in Ellaborta, and the old clans shall be abolished and the Wallabies shall be supreme."

This was more than I was prepared to pledge. But I had learned wisdom in these latter days, and did not commit myself; so Mnur departed, assuring me that success was sure.

WITH peal of trumpets and clashing of cymbals I was conducted across the quadrangle, densely packed with a crowd, driven and herded there by the horsemen of Thaxas, who lined all the four sides of it, and, with the remorseless use of whips and swords, showed their resentment for the outbreak of the day preceding, and their contempt for the populace.

Yet there was a sense of the impending revolt brooding in the air, in the very silence, and in the wistful looks which the people cast at me.

And when Hita, arrayed in her blue cloak, passed along the blue-pebble walk into the temple, upon her llama, shod with gold, cheers rang out at which the Avian horsemen could only scowl. For it showed where, after all, the love the people lay; and it was lawful to cheer Hita, though only scowls and muttering greeted the veiled Thafti, in scarlet.

Ros Marra's story was universally discredited, for the old woman was known to be an evil genius of the palace, and many dark and murderous deeds were ascribed to her.

Inside the Serpent temple the yellow lights cast only a faint luminosity, except about the altar, which was dazzlingly lit up.

The temple was packed with the, populace, but there was a clear space about the chancel, which was guarded by a sort of cheval-de-frise of great golden spikes, worth a city's ransom. Inside this were the lines of yellow-robed Serpent Priests, the Wallaby Priests, also in yellow, with the Wallaby emblem; the Fish Priests, in scaly silver, and the priests of the Ornithorhynchus, in green. Ptuth was there, with Sewell at his side; and I noticed that Sewell was now attired in silver, as one who had just been initiated into the Fish Clan, and he bore the silver symbol of a fish upon his breast.

He turned his eyes on me with a look of

hate that showed me there would be no further dissembling between us.

Hita was standing opposite me, and old Nasmamaxa beside her. There was something of hopefulness in the anxious glance that Nasmamaxa turned on me, as if he were privy to Mnur's plot and anxious to reassure me.

Queen Thafti, in white and scarlet, with the heavy veil before her eyes, stood almost at my side. Upon the other side of her was a strongly built man, apparently of about forty years, with a commanding look and a short, curled, black beard. Him, I knew to be the tributary Prince Thaxas, head of the Avian State, and commander of the famous horsemen who upheld the Fendek throne.

I saw him staring across at the Princess Hita with all his might, as if hypnotized. Something about the girl seemed to fascinate him, and it occurred to me that he had probably never seen her, since I knew that he had lived in Asclaxa, the Avian capital, before his accession, which had occurred since Hita's banishment.

And, looking across at her sweet figure and face, in her becoming robes of white and blue, it seemed to me that no man in his senses could avoid worshipping her. Only, if Thaxas worshiped her, it added a new complication.

But the sight of these chief actors in our drama was forgotten as I looked within the chancel and saw the altar. The workmanship was beautiful in the extreme, and yet there was something hideous and degenerate about it, as if it was an evil mind that had conceived this thing and fashioned it.

Picture the whole scene illuminated by the reflected glow of a hundred invisible candles—two spiral stairways of purest electrum, one on either side of the high altar; near the temple room, a flat-topped white stone, with horns of stone at each of the four corners. The white stone floor before the altar was set about a circular orifice, covered with a golden grille, and between the grille, out of which it rose, and the altar-top, where it terminated, was an immense serpent, or rather dinosaur, fashioned of electrum, but so cunningly that it might have been alive.

The little claw feet, with the tiny legs, clung to the bases of the stairways, which separated and came together at the top, or appeared to do so, much as a twisted corkscrew seems to undulate; and at the tops were the claw feet again, as if supporting the altar stone. Now Ptuth came forward, with his priests drawn up about

him, and the lights within the body of the temple went out, leaving the space immediately about the altar densely illuminated.

Ptuth raised his hand. "Ye know," he chanted, in ancient Fendek, "that I, chief of the Serpent Priests, possess the power over this land—yea, over the Royal House, given me by the Serpent God. Ye know that, at my command, Balamok unveils his evil eye, and the world perishes."

A shudder went through the assemblage, which grew as still as death. Ptuth drew a silver wand from his robes and struck the golden serpent.

At once, to my horror, the golden beast began to writhe, the golden head, which was above the grille—for it was molded head downward—opened and closed, and a hissing noise came from its throat. The people shuddered again. Ptuth mounted the altar stairs, until he stood upon the upper platform by the altar, from which he took some grisly thing that I had not perceived, and placed it on the serpent's tail.

The golden mass writhed and contracted, and simultaneously there came a renewed hissing from the grille, the lid of which flew back. A monster dinosaur appeared, flashing its wicked eyes at us as the snout, with the moist tentacles, disappeared inside the golden shell.

The dinosaur was climbing upward for its meal. After a period of horror we saw the head appear at the upper orifice, the scaly body emerged, and the crawling devil, bearing its meal in its distended jaws, crawled behind the altar and coiled itself upon a projecting ledge of the interior building, sunning itself immediately in the glow of the solar lights.

Ptuth descended and stood before us again, striking the golden serpent, which at once ceased to undulate.

"O Queen Thafti, princess, and people of Fendika," he began, "yesterday it was heard that Thafti remains queen of this land, according to the story of the old nurse, Ros Marra, which has been confirmed. Wherefore, we betrothed the Lord Gowani unto her, and gave her sister, Hita, to the Lord Seoul, ordering that the marriage ceremony should take place within the temple after six *psus*. Yet when this contract was made we were not aware of a previous contract, entered into between the late King of Fendika, and the father of Prince Thaxas, nullifying this. For the Prince Thaxas claims the hand of Queen Thafti thereby."

THE old scoundrel's game was perfectly plain. Having subdued the outbreak, he was resolved to eliminate me altogether from the throne by pressing this marriage, which might have been arranged, but had assuredly not been considered binding.

"How say you, Prince Thaxas of the Avian Kingdom, are you willing to take Thafti, Queen of the Fendeks, to mate with her and rule this land with her?" asked Ptuth.

"I am willing," answered Thaxas, still staring at Hita; and I saw Thafti grow rigid.

"And, you, O queen?" asked Ptuth of Thafti.

"I am willing," she answered in a low tone.

Ptuth paused, and a slow grin crept over his wrinkled face. "What, then, shall be done with him who has looked on the face of the veiled queen, not being her betrothed?" he purred. "Shall he not be paid divine honors, according to the ancient laws of this Fendek realm?"

A roar of approbation came from the spectators. The priests closed in about me. A silver cord was slipped adroitly over my body, binding my hands behind me. And, before I could defend myself or attempt resistance, I was wound round and round, as a spider winds a fly in the web that it spins.

I saw the look of horror on Hita's face. She sprang toward me. But she beat impotently against the line of yellow priests, and I was dragged away to where the open mouth of the great gold dinosaur hung over the grille.

Ptuth struck the serpent again, and now the beast began to undulate once more, but this time the contractions were upward instead of downward. The infernal mechanism within would gradually force me up to the altar, behind which I saw the evil eyes of the abominable reptile watching the preparations.

They dragged me to the serpent's mouth. There was not the least stir among the mob. I fancy that they were thrilled in anticipation of the exciting spectacle of my sacrifice. I saw their eyes all fixed on me.

I heard Hita cry out, I saw her struggling in the arms of the priests; then she had collapsed in an unconscious heap upon the floor of the temple. I looked up. Over my head the gold jaws were opening and closing, with a mechanical movement. I could see, inside them, the undulations of the devilish mechanism. I knew that so

soon as my head was placed in position on the padded gums I would be snatched up and carried painlessly into the moving interior, to the top, where the serpent awaited me.

But there was a formality yet to be pursued. Ptuth turned to Thafti.

"O queen," he said, "deign to look upon the face of your affianced husband."

After a moment of hesitation Thafti raised her veil. Prince Thaxas started back, and a low cry broke from his lips.

He stammered pitifully, "O Ptuth, before the marriage is made I must consult my councilors about a marriage settlement. I must take horse to my capital speedily for that purpose, that the matter be not delayed."

"That, O Prince Thaxas, may not be, since you have looked upon Thafti's face," answered Ptuth, chuckling. And, leaning forward, he touched some mechanism upon the serpent's mouth. He stepped back hastily, still leering at me, and the priests who held me released me at the same moment.

The huge jaws closed on my forehead, but the pads that lined them aided the devilish mechanism in such a way that they grasped me tight without injuring me. In a moment the suction had drawn me wholly within the cavernous interior.

It was pitch-dark, of course, but I could feel that the serpent was about four feet in width, and the scaly sides within lined with innumerable rows of revolving belts, studded with tiny teeth, which hooked into my clothes, and then, being turned to a different angle, released me, and passed me on to the next row. It was quite impossible to stay myself in that fearful progress. I could not hold the teeth, which swung upward, gripped me, and passed me on; and there seemed also an air suction which contributed to my movement.

Suddenly the mouth beneath me opened again. Plainly I saw Hita lying still unconscious upon the temple floor, the lower part of Ptuth's figure, and then—something that came crawling upward through the opening of the grille beneath!

It was a second serpent; the monster, whose scales would nullify the steel teeth in the tube, would follow in swift pursuit of me. My heart beat like an engine in my ears. I was paralyzed with horror and loathing.

Somehow I had had it in my mind that I should at least emerge at the altar top, to meet my fate in light, to struggle for life; not to be mouthed in the dark. The

difference may seem trivial, but it was real enough to me.

At that moment there came another flash of light from above. I saw a dark form glide toward the upper entrance of the gold serpent, and disappear within. It was the first dinosaur; the two would meet me in the interior and devour me from either end.

With a fury of which I had thought myself incapable I strained at the bonds that bound me. I felt them cut deep into my arms—then suddenly a cord snapped. My hands were free, and, as I traversed the rows of teeth, I unwound the cord from about me. I was free!

So far as I could be free. I heard the hiss, as of escaping steam, above and below me. I must be nearing the belly of the monster. In another moment the sucking rending jaws would be fastened into me from either side.

And suddenly I perceived a gleam of pale light in the monster's belly.

There was a plate in the wall, and it was opening! By the light I could now discern the head of the dinosaur above me, the wicked, glancing eyes, the open mouth, lined with the rows of teeth, the yellow, spoonlike tongue.

Then a man had reached in and dragged me forth. At the same time, the hissing mouths above me and beneath me met.

The jaws of the dinosaurs, balked of their prey, met and gripped in violent combat.

I looked into the face of Mnur, Priest of the Wallabies.

FOR a moment I became unconscious, but the subconscious realization of my peril aroused me. He was supporting me, and, seeing that I was already master of myself, he beckoned to me to follow him.

I was in a small, square room, with stairs

of plain stone leading upward. It was the interior of the block that upheld the altar stone, against which a coil of the gold serpent rested, so that the aperture was invisible from the body of the temple.

A flight of steps, almost perpendicular, led upward behind the altar to a small room, used as a robing-chamber by the priests. It was filled with men, wearing short swords, who looked up eagerly as we entered.

They had thrown off their Wallaby robes, which lay heaped on the ground, but I knew they were the Wallaby priests, assembled to carry out the plot to make themselves masters of the serpents.

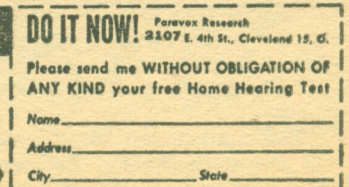
They gathered about me, treading softly and speaking only in tense whispers. One of them thrust a sword into my hand. Mnur gave the signal, and in single file we ascended a second, longer flight of stairs, leading upward, until I saw the interior of the great dome above my head.

Suddenly Mnur grasped me by the arm and made a gesture of danger. We were crouching in the angle afforded by two walls, with an open door set into the masonry a few paces away. Behind this I could see a corridor, with another door opposite, and through this a room, in which a score of Serpent Priests were seated, drinking and jesting together. The sound of their laughter rang out loudly through the apartment.

Pacing the corridor was a sentry, wearing the yellow serpent cloak, and carrying a sword. He passed us, and I heard the tramp of his footsteps die away along the corridor.

Presently they grew louder again. The sentry was returning. Mnur looked at his companions and stepped forward with surprising agility for so stout a man. In his hand he held a short dagger.

As the head of the sentry appeared in



the doorway, Mnur sprang upon him from behind and buried the dagger in his throat. The man dropped with a bubbling gurgle.

Instantly we were across the corridor and among the Serpent Priests, a score against a score.

Taken altogether by surprise, they had hardly time to draw their swords before ours were at their throats. A few blades clashed, one of our opponents dropped, stabbed through the heart; and then they had dropped their weapons and raised their arms in token of surrender.

Mnur issued some order, and sullenly they filed away before us into an interior chamber looking like a large, modern factory. It was filled with the whir of mechanism. Many of the machines were unknown to me, but among them I recognized a variety of dynamo, run, however, by no visible power. Above it streamed a cone of purple light, tapering to a thin point above a glass set into the top of the mechanism.

This was, in fact, the solar dynamo of the priesthood, by which the rays of Balamok, drawn through the clouds, were concentrated and made to run the dynamo, which, in turn, by the conversion of light into a form of kinetic energy, stored them and gave them out again to illuminate the city.

Ranged all about the room were the famous flying-machines of the priesthood. These consisted simply of a pair of tenuous steel wings, attached to a small solar engine. This, resting against the hips when the wings were strapped on, at the touch of a button set them to vibrating furiously, with more revolutions than those of a gas engine.

The Serpent Priests had discarded, centuries before, the old flying-machine, which had evolved much after the cumbersome pattern of our own, and had resolved it into the simplicity of wings, guiding themselves in air by the motion of their own bodies.

Herding the disarmed priests into a corner, the Wallaby Priests quickly adjusted each other's apparatus by means of straps over the shoulders and around the waist, under the directions of a Wallaby who had formerly served in the Serpent Priesthood. Then Mnur turned to the priest nearest him.

"Where are the light bombs?" he demanded.

The man began to stammer and shake. "O Mnur, the oath which we swore by the great Serpent God never to reveal—"

Mnur's sword at his throat cut him short. With trembling fingers he tapped three times upon a panel in the wall, a part of which swung open. Inside, piled in wooden boxes, were about a hundred bombs, the size of baseballs, but tapering at one side, which formed a handle.

They seemed composed of a sort of mica, or flexible glass, and inside was a play of bluish light, changing to red, green—in fact, to all the colors of the spectrum. They were simply compressed light, held in an ether vacuum, and at the time I imagined, although erroneously, that they exploded violently when broken.

Attached to the straps which held our machines in place were large pockets with individual compartments, one on either side, each capable of holding a dozen of the bombs, which weighed almost nothing. Having thus armed ourselves, we left the trembling priests behind, and made our way down toward the entrance to the Serpent.

Arriving in the little chamber I could hear the sound of muffled chanting. Now I perceived that there was another entrance, leading to the altar top itself.

Very softly we crept up the stairs. Suddenly I saw the figure of old Ptuth. He was standing upon the altar-top, chanting a hymn. With a bound Mnur and I leaped forth and seized him.

A deep roar from the assembled multitude greeted this spectacular action. I saw Thaxas and Thafti standing with joined hands. The priest was about to unite them. The expression on the face of Thaxas was pitiful. Neither Sewell nor Hita was to be seen.

Suddenly Ptuth, who had stood as if petrified, made a swift, flying leap, broke from our grasp, and hurled himself to one of the stone stairways about the altar. At the same moment the yellow priests came swarming up at us with drawn swords, while the scarlet cloaks of Thafti's courtiers blended with them.

Mnur, seizing one of the bombs, hurled it full in the face of the nearest man.

With howls of terror the assaulting party dropped their weapons and fled. No discharge followed, but of a sudden the interior of the temple was filled with released sunlight, compared with which the tapped solar light that came through the vents was but of candle-power.

It was real sunlight, dazzling, blinding, and—warm. It was the very essence of Balamok, of which the solar light was a poor shadow.

And the Fendeks could not endure sunlight. As old Joe Mulock had said, they "withered like worms" in it.

JOE had not been far wrong. The stairs were cleared in an instant. The crowd were streaming in panic out of the temple doors.

We stopped, ran down the other stairway. The temple was empty now.

Suddenly I saw Ptuth glide like a yellow shadow across the chancel and disappear. I yelled, and rushed at him, with drawn sword. But he evaded me and slammed the door in my face. With all my strength I forced against it. It yielded.

I saw a flight of plain steps above me, and Ptuth nearing the summit. I went up, taking four at every bound, sword in hand, intent on gaining Princess Hita or killing them.

At the top was a corridor—the same corridor that I had seen before.

Ptuth had turned down a second corridor. I followed him, and saw that he was now bearing a limp figure in his arms. It was Hita, and he was racing for some place of safety which I could not determine. Seeing that I was almost upon him, he let her fall.

He knew I would not dare to hurl a bomb with Hita in the way, and he ran with surprising celerity. I stopped and seized the unconscious girl. I clasped her in my arms. A sigh escaped her lips. Her eyes opened.

She clasped her arms about my neck, and we stood there in our imminent peril, forgetful of it, and of all, save one another. Hita was the first to remember. She pointed toward the end of the corridor, where, now that the vivid bomb-light had worn away, I saw the front of the Council Hall through a large, open window that gave upon a balcony.

We ran toward it. But as we reached it the corridor fell away to right and left, and I saw Ptuth, with a crowd of the Serpent Priests at his heels, running toward me, a bomb in his hands. We hurled ours simultaneously.

A flash of vivid light—and suddenly darkness. The light went out as a candle-flame. The darkness was overpowering. Ptuth had an antidote for the light bombs, in the shape of dark bombs that extinguished them; this was one of the profoundest of the secrets of the Serpent Priests, and none of us had guessed it.

I heard them all about us, clawing at us in the darkness. I fought my way to the

window—the darkness extended like a black cloud without, so that nothing was visible any longer. I set Hita behind me, and slashed about me with my sword. It found the throat of one who came too near, and he fell with a choking groan. My foot slipped in the blood that streamed from him. I staggered, and regained my footing. Then I heard Ptuth speaking.

"You are trapped, my Lord Gowani," he cried, "and you cannot use your wings, because the apparatus is not charged. Yield, and your life shall be spared, and you shall be conducted to the upper world again. Yield—"

I poised myself upon the balcony with Hita in my arms, and leaped. I fell like a stone.

Then, suddenly, the radiant wings behind me opened, and, as the dark began to clear away, they whirled like turbines, despite the load I bore and, holding Hita clasped to me, I alighted upon the ground in the middle of the quadrangle.

CHAPTER V

THE FALL OF THE FAITHLESS

SLOWLY the darkness cleared away. I heard shouting all around me, and through the drifting spirals which the fading blackness assumed I was aware of confused struggling in the quadrangle.

Then I perceived Mnur with a band of Wallaby Priests about me.

"Quick, my Lord Gowani!" he cried. "The Ellabortans are in battle against the horsemen of Thaxas, and we must save the day. Leave the princess in the charge of these two of my priests, who will know where to guard her, and come with me, for our people are hard pressed."

Even as he spoke I saw a squadron of Thaxas' cavalry, upon their ferocious, three-toed horses, surge over the mob, which fled in all directions. The inner wall was lined with Ellabortans, shooting arrows into the Avian horsemen, which, however, had little effect against the formidable leather and iron armor which protected man and beast, and only goaded the huge monsters into greater fury.

It was a terrible sight to see the horses tearing with their great jaws at the flying Ellabortans, and doing hardly less damage than the riders with their sabers, while their fearful three-toed hoofs split skull and face together as they brought them down upon the prostrate men beneath them.

Reluctantly, but inevitably, I consigned

Hita to the care of Mnur's two men. She smiled at me bravely. "You must leave me, my lord," she said. "For, if Ptuth and Thaxas win, all is lost, and our love, too."

I pressed her to me for a moment, and then the two Wallaby Priests extended their wings and, each holding one of Hita's hands, rose with her into the air. I watched her as she ascended to the temple top, and then a drift of darkness swept across her, and, when it drifted away, she was no longer to be seen.

Next moment Mnur and I had risen above the quadrangle, surrounded by a band of our Wallaby Priests. I had discovered, in the brief space of time during which I had flown, that I could direct my course instinctively with my arms and legs, much as a swimmer does.

A confused picture lay beneath us. The Ellabortans had turned out *en masse* to aid in the revolution, and the streets of the lower city were packed with a great armed mob, carrying spears, swords, bows and arrows, and shields, all surging up toward the wall.

Unfortunately, this was a period where armor had outstripped propulsive weapons in development—that is to say, the bow. Fendika appeared to be on the eve of the discovery of firearms, or something of that nature, although at present explosives were known only in the form of a sort of coarse gunpowder, used in construction work.

It was curious that the Fendeks should have invented the dynamo, and learned laws of light which were wholly unknown to us, while in other respects the people were semibarbarians. But of course their situation in the interior of the planet would turn their energies in this direction.

Thus the arrows did little harm, but the fury of the assaults soon won the inner wall. The Ellabortans also held the outer walls of the capital, from which they successfully repelled the hordes of Thaxas' cavalry, who seemed to fill the plain.

But the Avian cavalry were supreme inside the inner keep, and it was here that the decision must be made. And there was no doubt that Thaxas was gaining the day. Once he had the inner part of the city under control, the Ellabortans would be crushed like the meat in a sandwich between the Avians within and without. Then a terrible revenge would be wrought upon them.

Unfortunately there was no doubt but Thaxas was gaining the day. The cavalry swept in furious and untiring charges

across the square, driving the last vestige of the defense before them. And behind them, gathered about Ptuth and Thafti, I saw the columns of red-cloaked swordsmen, ready to regain the inner walls with a rush, as soon as Thaxas had crushed out all resistance.

High overhead, but flying singly, for the most part, were priests of the Serpent, directing the charges of the Avian cavalry with signs, and dropping dark bombs wherever a charge or rally of the Ellabortans temporarily changed the issue.

However, only a few of the Serpent Priests had managed to obtain wings, presumably from some reserve store which we had not discovered, and there were forty of us. Sailing overhead in squadron formation, we forced them to flee before us.

But one, a huge man, carrying a sword in his hand, suddenly turned as we went sweeping past, and made a furious charge at me. I was trying desperately to draw a light bomb, but I was compelled to turn all my thoughts to the endeavor to evade him. Twice the sword came within an inch of my heart, and we circled round about each other for half a minute before I flung the bomb and broke it against his breast.

In the flash of blinding sunlight he seemed to crumple up. I saw his hair catch fire, his clothing begin to char. He yelled out of his twisted lips; then he collapsed and went crashing down upon the court below, a shapeless mass of burned flesh and crumpled iron.

Now, at Mnur's command, we wheeled, and let our light bombs fall among the horsemen of Thaxas, as they swept over the quadrangle, driving the last vestiges of the defense before them. I saw the Ellabortans on the walls bending their futile bows in vain. The horsemen drove madly up the ramp which led to the summit from the interior, Thaxas leading them. They had almost gained the top when our bombs fell.

Instantly the situation was reversed. A panic broke out among the horses, which bolted wildly along the ramparts, the Ellabortans flinging themselves to the stones beneath them, and, as they passed over them, rising to hamstring them, or thrust their long spears into their bellies, or pull the horsemen from their backs and plunge their swords through leather corselet and body.

A squadron, however, managed to regain the quadrangle, and, before they could disperse, we flung our bombs again.

And that restored the fortunes of the day. With shrieks of pain and terror, the monsters flung their riders and bolted in all directions, racing round and round the quadrangle until they dropped exhausted or dying under the withering light. And, with shouts of execration, the Ellabortans leaped down from the walls and rushed upon the red-cloaked swordsmen.

It was now impossible for us to drop further bombs, for fear of destroying our own men. We could only watch; and there followed as gallant a feat of arms as I have ever seen.

For, though outnumbered by a score to one, the red-cloaked courtiers gathered about Thafti and Ptuth. Their weapons, used with terrible effect, worked havoc among their assailants, who soon lay in a ring of dead about them. Foot by foot they fought their way toward the walls. Among them I saw Thaxas, dismounted, his helmet awry, his armor bloodstained, his sword dripping red. He leaped forward alone, scaled the rampart, and held it single-handed against the snarling, crouching, fearful Ellabortans about him, until, with a rush and a cheer, the red-cloaks followed him, bearing Thafti and Ptuth among them, and emerged into the lower city.

Within the streets, a compact legion, they easily scattered the mob, which fled before them, and so, even as we watched, they gained the outer wall, forced it, and were received by the horsemen with a wild cheer that reached us where we flew over the quadrangle.

But Ellaborta was ours, and the remnant of the Avian horsemen within were at our mercy. They came forward with hands upheld in token of surrender. We lodged them as prisoners in the keep, under the inner gate. The ferocious horses, being untamable except by the Avians, who knew the secret of subduing them, were put out of their suffering.

My first thought was, of course, for Hita. She had been safely hidden in a secret room in the Wallaby Temple, and our reunion, though we could find time only for a brief exchange of words, filled me with joy and resolution.

We placed strong forces of trained men upon the outer walls, and our fears of an immediate assault disappeared within the next hour, when we saw the vast hosts of Thaxas effecting a retirement to their camp upon the river, some two miles from the city. From this point bodies pushed out to right and left, until they were posted

on all the main roads leading out of Ellaborta. Within a *psus* the capital was surrounded and in a condition of siege.

OUR position was thus a perilous one, for there was little store of food within the walls, and, whether or not Ptuth guessed it, we had used up all our light bombs. My first act, therefore, was to summon the scientists of the capital into the chamber where were the dynamos.

It was soon seen that it would be an easy matter to control the light supply, for the machines were automatic in their action and would run indefinitely. But not even the Wallaby Priest who had once served the Serpent knew the secret of manufacturing the bomb.

This would make our situation more precarious daily, for there was little doubt that Ptuth could set up a laboratory and fashion both bombs and wings. We should have secured his priests when we had captured them.

I sent out criers to summon a popular meeting in the quadrangle for two *psus* later, resolving that the Ellabortans should ratify any decision arrived at. And I must mention something—a trivial matter, but one which rather depressed the spirits of the people, who looked upon it as an omen of ill.

It was the custom to keep the two dinosaurs beneath the grille supplied with victims, chosen from among petty malefactors. These men were tossed alive to them twice weekly, and it was this custom that the people demanded should be abolished forever. They surged into the temple, shouting for the destruction of the monsters.

The grille was quickly pried up with crowbars, and men descended, carrying swords and torches. The floor of the crypt was white with human bones, but the dinosaurs could not be found.

In vain the upper parts of the temple, and all the rooms over the altar, were searched and ransacked. The dinosaurs had evidently ascended through the hollow serpent, and made their escape by way of the roof; but all search proved fruitless.

I thought they might have destroyed each other when they met within the gold serpent, but, after the mechanism that controlled it had been stopped, a venturesome lad ascended, and emerged at the upper orifice, reporting that the gold shell was empty.

At our council, the very first thing decided was that the Serpent worship should

be driven out of Fendika forever, and that of the Unknown God established as the state religion. The lesser priesthoods, however, were to be allowed to exist under the rule of the Wallabies, being of the old Fendek order before the Serpent Priests had overcome the country. This compromise ill pleased Mnur, who had expected to be proclaimed chief pontiff, and he submitted with an ill grace.

Then Hita and I, standing in the center of the quadrangle, were acclaimed by wildly cheering crowds. And the old hag, Ros Marra, being led forward by Nasmamaxa, publicly acknowledged that she had lied at the bidding of Ptuth, and in fear of him.

Nasmamaxa and I had previously decided that so long as the land was in the throes of civil conflict, it would not be advisable for Hita and me to be married, as jealousy of a stranger might cause a change in the fickle Fendek mind. But now, being chief pontiff, Nasmamaxa solemnly reaffirmed our betrothal, and proposed that, after the overthrow of Thafti and the Avians, we should rule the land jointly.

At that there was thunderous applause. I recall Hita, in her blue cloak, wearing the electrum circlet of plain gold that betokened rulership about her forehead, addressing the crowd in simple and dignified words, surrounded by the exiles. She told them that the time had come to expel the Serpent priesthood forever from the land, and to reassert the supremacy of the Fendeks over their hereditary enemies of the Avian province.

And so the meeting dissolved, and every man went to his post, and preparations for the coming fight were made. Swords were hammered out on anvils, and trained officers endeavored to form an invincible army out of the Ellabortan footmen. If this succeeded, there was little doubt that we could overcome Thafti and Ptuth, even with the aid of the Avian horse.

I was assigned new quarters in the palace. And that night—strictly, I should say, to what corresponded to our midnight—when the alternate *psus* of torpor held the city, Nasmamaxa came to me.

I was struck by the old man's look of utter weariness. He seemed to have aged even in the few weeks I had known him.

"My Lord Gowani, would you have your heart's desire?" he asked.

"Who would not?" I returned.

"Listen then. Although statecraft forbids your marriage with Hita to be made publicly, what is there to prevent a private

ceremony, according to our laws, so that your mind may be at ease, knowing that she is wholly yours? Besides, my time is come, and I would see you united before I die."

I sprang to my feet, wide awake, despite the torpor which had overcome me—for by this time I had fallen into Fendek habits, though, where they rested merely, I actually slept.

He smiled and laid his hand restrainingly upon my arm. "Hope not for overmuch," he said, "for in truth I do not know what the ultimate issue shall be. But at least I shall know before I die that the princess is mated with you, whom I have come to look on as a son.

"Soon I go to my rest, but I shall return. For we know that it is our fate, when we are dead, to be born again in other bodies, and perchance next time it will be in the world above us."

"Many *psus* must pass before you die, Nasmamaxa," I answered.

He said nothing to that, but led me out of the palace, past the guards drowsing at their posts, across the quadrangle, and into the Temple of the Eagle, on the further side of the Serpent Temple. The empty fane—for, of course, there were no males left alive to worship there—was a plain structure of white stone, with an altar at the far end, and an electrum eagle, with wings extended for flight, above it.

Before the altar, wearing her blue cloak, stood Hita. At her side was an Eagle Priest—the sole surviving one, who remained as guardian of the empty temple.

Hita came forward, and, as I took her hands, a vivid blush suffused her cheeks, and her eyes, raised for an instant timidly to mine, dropped again.

"Nasmamaxa has told you, my lord?" she murmured.

"He has promised me all that my heart longs for," I answered ardently.

"My dear lord, before this takes place I must say something you do not know," said Hita. "Nor even you, O Nasmamaxa, for I have kept this hidden until now even from you, fearing to distress you and cause you anxiety."

As she spoke I saw a look of fear creep into her eyes.

"Ptuth has revealed to me," she said, "that it is prophesied that my Lord Gowani and I shall indeed be happy for a brief space, but after that he shall lose me. Yet not forever, for some day we shall be reunited; but not until all this has passed away. And more than this I know not.

"And know, my Lord Gowani, that there is a means devised whereby the Princess of the Fendeks who shall be in mortal peril may find respite. And this secret has been from of old in the charge of the Eagle Priest. What it is, I know not, but he knows; and at the appointed time by its means he shall deliver me."

"Aye," croaked the old man, "it is in my keeping for the use of the princess whenever she shall demand it."

"Or I?" I asked.

"If you demand it in her name, my Lord Gowani," he answered.

I made light of Hita's fears, and told her that Ptuth lied, that he could no more foresee the future than he could unveil the dreaded Eye of Balamok. But Hita listened without encouragement.

"O my dear Lord," she answered, "it should be known to you that Ptuth, the magician, has lived since the beginnings of time. Nor can he ever die, and, even were he slain, he would create a new body for himself by his arts. And by this secret I must be renewed unto eternal youth when I grow old, until the dubious prophecy be fulfilled."

"A long time hence, beloved," I answered, thinking of the many years that must elapse before old age stole on us.

But she only glanced at me with a troubled brow, until Nasmaza, coming forward, pronounced the words that secretly united us. And then, as if her fear had gone, she let me take her in my arms.

Standing thus, we heard Nasmaza's benediction die away. Suddenly there came an exclamation from the Eagle Priest. We turned hastily, to find the old man lying upon the ground.

He opened his eyes as we knelt over him. "My time has come, as I foresaw, O my Lord Gowani," he said simply. "May the Unknown God preserve you—and my prin-

cess—against the wiles of Ptuth—against—"

Nasmaza died.

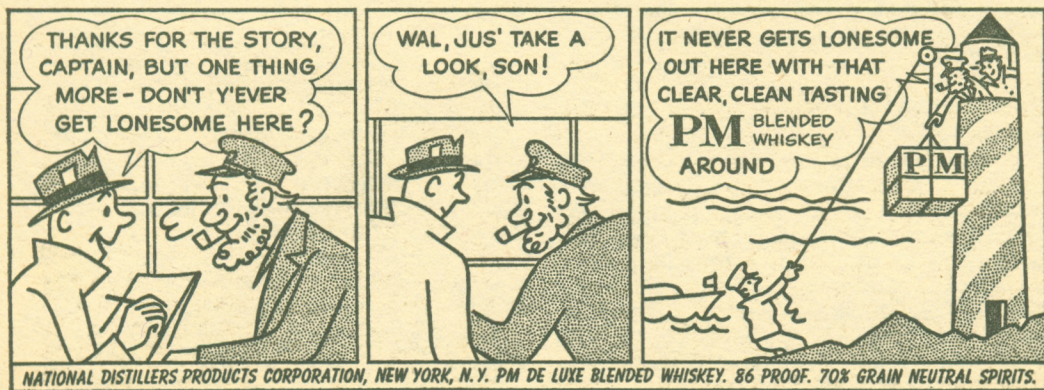
DURING the successive *psus ama* (ten *psus* periods) we perfected our plans of defense. Hopes began to run high within Ellaborta, for the enemy remained inactive, and only those of us who understood the powers of Ptuth feared the outcome.

It was mortally certain that he would attack as soon as he had fashioned new wings and prepared light bombs, and in this predicament it was resolved to send a trustworthy messenger at once to summon Sar, the Aonorian prince, to lead his footmen to our rescue. Then, by a simultaneous sally from the gates, we could hope to place Thafti and Thaxas at our mercy.

But the question whom to send was a perplexity. He would have to fly, and this limited us to the choice of one or other of the twoscore Wallaby Priests. Now the Wallaby Priests were clearly disaffected since the establishment of the Unknown God in place of the Wallaby God, as they had expected. Indeed, Mnur's attitude toward me was constrained and distant. I did not distrust him, but it added worry.

About the fifth *psus ama* an embassy arrived under the llama flag, the symbol of truce, and, when it was admitted within the walls, we were astounded to discover that it consisted of Thaxas himself, with three retainers.

So great was the awe of the great Avian prince, that the people followed only at a great distance. Thaxas was hated more than any of our opponents, on account of the cruelties of his horsemen. Nevertheless, my impression of him had been a favorable one, and it was not lessened when I saw him stand before Queen Hita in the Council Hall.



"Grêetings, queen!" he began—and at that recognition of her a murmur of surprise ran through the courtiers. "I am an Avian, and our speech is short, and not honeycombed with praise like that of the Fendeks, although here there is need of it."

And he bowed low before her, and his compliment left us agape with wonder.

"You know, O queen," he continued, "that I had no part in your exile, nor care I whether you or your sister reign, so far as my desires rule me. I was betrothed to the Princess Regnant after your father's death; therefore, since I do not believe the story of the old hag, Ros Marra, I claim you as my queen."

At this the courtiers were fairly stupefied, and could only stare at Thaxas, wondering what was to follow.

"For a contract cannot be annulled," continued the Avian Prince. "My task is but to support the rightful queen, my duty and my right to mate with her; but I tell you, Hita"—here he made a sudden, violent gesture with his gloved hand—"I would sooner be false to my word, my vow, my duty, and the great Avian God than mate with Thafti.

"My desire is for you, and, where my desire is, there my will is. Aye, and my will is unbreakable. Therefore, bid this foreign lord depart in safety out of the Fendek realm, and let the land have peace."

He ended, and a murmur of admiration stirred the counselors. For the man spoke honest and true, and there was a dignity in him commanding admiration, while the vehemence of his words commanded even sympathy.

Hita rose from her throne, and I think she was a little touched by Thaxas' outspokenness.

"I have heard you, Prince Thaxas," he said. "Truly, I would that all my counselors were as frank and outspoken. But what you say may never be, for I had no part in my father's contract, and no contract can annual a woman's wishes in such a matter as marriage."

Thaxas glared at her. "Aye, queen, well I know it is this foreign lord, this impostor, who hath won thy heart," he answered. "Yet, I swear that within *psus ama hak* (five days) I will have him torn limb from limb and feed the serpents with his flesh. That I, Thaxas, swear. And as for you"—he swung upon the assemblage—"I will level your proud city flat with the earth, and pass the plowshare over it."

He bowed to Hita and stalked away, leaving us silent and troubled. Especially myself, for I well knew that this placed the responsibility for the future on my own head.

I think the counselors perceived that, too, and pondered, for a few of them eyed me askance as we broke up. And it became clearer than ever, what with this new event, added to the disaffection of Mnur, that matters must be brought speedily to an issue.

In fact, the mission of Thaxas so infuriated the people that they surrounded the Council Hall, clamoring to be led out against the Avian hosts. They looked warlike enough, and, being well-armed, and led, it seemed to us might effect at least a sortie that would prove the forerunner of a general victory. Accordingly it was decided that a surprise attack should be made that night upon the main host of the Avians, encamped upon the river bank.

At the same time we selected one of Mnur's priests, and gave him letters for Sar, who lay on his frontier with his army, telling him that Ellaborta was closely invested, and that he must march to our relief immediately.

We watched him rise from the quadrangle and wing his way beyond the walls, where the low-lying mists hid him from view. And then we set about our preparations for the sortie.

Five thousand men, under K'hauls, a veteran campaigner, were to move in a single column upon the main camp of the Avians. Smaller bodies of about three thousand apiece were to make feints against the other positions along the main roads. I myself, with a reserve force of ten thousand, was to string out my men obliquely along the river bank, thus keeping them in touch with the capital, in case of need, and being, at the same time, able to unite forces with K'hauls should his attack prove successful beyond expectation.

It was a splendid sight to see the bodies of Fendek warriors marching out, confident of victory, and to hear their ringing applause as Hita, clothed in her blue cloak, and wearing the royal diadem, stood on the ramparts, surrounded by her counselors. Not a man but would have died for her! I knew that I filled her thoughts, and I resolved that I would make Thaxas' boast meaningless, and strike a blow that should decide the fortunes of the day.

Before us, across the meadows, marched K'hauls' men, first a line of veterans, armed with long spears, then two lines of

youths, with short stabbing-spears, with which to break the columns of our opponents; following them the main body, armed with the wide, straight Fendek swords, capable of terrible execution.

My men, on the contrary, were all swordsmen, and mostly veterans of other wars. I divided them into three parts. One body, under Nohaddyi, a brave and skillful old general, I placed between the main gate of the capital and the road that ran northeast, in support of one of the subsidiary forces. The second, under Hamul, I left encamped about a half-mile from the city, to hold the principal bridge which gave us touch with our right flank. The third I myself commanded, following about a half-mile behind K'hauls.

Overhead flew the winged priests, but useful only for reconnaissance, since our light bombs were exhausted.

At length, having reached the place appointed, I ordered my men to rest, and took my seat upon a small mound in front of them, which partly concealed their number from any Avian airmen. Here and there I saw a winged priest of the enemy floating high above both lines; but he always fled when tackled by our own Wallaby fliers; and very soon the clouds descended so low that aerial reconnaissance proved impossible.

There was, of course, no possibility of surprise in that perpetual day. We had moved out during the last *psus* of work, and we had a *psus* to wait before attacking, since a breach of this resting period would have been considered an abominable atrocity; furthermore, it was very doubtful whether the languid warriors could have been driven to the attack during the rest *psus*, even had they been willing to violate what was regarded as a divine law.

My thoughts were strange as I sat there alone, watching the weary soldiers, devoid of all interest or thought, resting in their habitual torpor. I thought of Hita principally, of Sewell, wondering where he was; then of old Joe, who dreamed that he had been a king, and wondered whether by any chance he had entered this subterranean country. And I, too, drowsed, until at last the thrill of the *psus* of battle ran through my veins, and, turning, I perceived my men rising, and gathering up their corselets to strap them on, and taking their swords in hand.

FROM where I stood I could see the panorama of the whole battlefield.

On our extreme right, across the river,

our outposts were already driving in the skirmishers of Thaxas' cavalry, who circled about them on their ferocious horses, but dared not charge those lines of well-armed spearmen. A few of the hostile forces were reconnoitering the bridge, but, finding it well guarded, also withdrew.

In front of me the hostile camp was throwing out line after line of horsemen, who circled to right and left to find the weak places in our forces. Before Thaxas' camp an enormous force of horsemen was marshaling, and I fancied that the rider who moved up and down before them was Thaxas himself.

Between ourselves and them, K'hauls was quietly and resolutely marshaling his own men into column formation to receive the attack.

It came. With wild cheers, and the flash of swords, and the thunder of thousands of hoofs, the Avian horsemen rode straight at the massed column before them. I caught my breath as I saw that unbroken leading line make straight for our spearmen. In another moment the fight was joined.

Yells dinned in our ears, the clash of sword on spear; a cloud of heavy dust covered the face of the plain. For whole minutes that mad medley continued, a dust whirl like a cyclone, broken by serpentine gleams of light.

Now all along our front the issue was joined. Simultaneously with the charge of Thaxas I saw a large force of horsemen riding toward the bridge. But I had only time to glance at them and pray the Fendeks would hold. Then, to my dismay, as the dust began to settle, I saw K'hauls' line cleft asunder. It was falling back sullenly on either wing, in two irregularly shaped masses; and straight through the cleft, yelling, Thaxas rode at the head of his men.

I gave the sharp command, and our forces moved forward in unison and lined the crest. Beneath us I saw the Avian cavalry riding straight toward us, Thaxas leading them, his helmet half sheared away. Now they were within fifty paces. And Thaxas knew me. I heard his roar of challenge. I saw his monster horse uprear.

Now! *Khoom!*—go at them. We were at them and among them, slashing, receiving blows and fighting like madmen in the midst of those thunderous hoofs. One slit my arm from shoulder to the wrist, as if the three toes had been razors. I felt nothing. Time and again I ran at Thaxas,

but before we could more than exchange blows men ran between us. The Fendeks were fighting loyally to the death.

Dust all about us, everywhere confusion, and no longer the merest semblance of a line. The battle had resolved into a series of individual contests. But presently the tumult thinned, and in the subsiding dust I saw that Thaxas had ridden clear through us, even as he had ridden through K'hauls. But there was this difference: then his horsemen and their beasts had been fresh and flushed with victory; now their strength and ardor were spent, and nearly all the horses were suffering from wounds. The field was a swamp of purple blood.

Thaxas was re-forming. We far outnumbered him, but by this time, what with our own broken ranks and stragglers from K'hauls' men, it was impossible to present any sort of front to the Avians. Yet we surrounded them.

I saw the victory was ours. For the body at the bridge had held victoriously, and now the old veteran, Nohaddyi, was coming up to our support. I saw the gleam of his helmets, and heard the shouting of his fresh troops.

Then I saw Thafti among the soldiers of Thaxas, wearing a long veil, flying in the air. She was pointing toward us and inciting her men to the charge, while Thaxas seemed to sulk beside her.

Once more there came the thunder of the charge. Once more the savage horses were upon us, straining with outstretched necks and snapping jaws. Again the play of sword and spear, again the dreaded Avian war-cry. Again the dust, and once again I found Thaxas and lost him, found him, lost him finally, and found myself with dripping sword standing alone in a sort of center of the dust-storm, while the roar of the battle raged unseen about me.

Suddenly I was aware of Sewell at my side. He was dismounted, clutching at the bridle of a spent horse, on which was Thafti.

"Take her, Gowani!" he shrieked. "I have made her prisoner for you. And take me, too. That was my game. Don't you see, Gowani? I was helping you—"

Thafti raised her veil, and her hideous face was stern, and almost beautiful with command and spirit.

Now men came running up. They knew them and, shouting eagerly at such prizes, surrounded them. I called one of my captains and ordered him to convey the prisoners with a strong guard to Ellaborta.

Then I turned to the battle, which was dwindling into the distance. Nohaddyi was at my side, and pointing with his sword. "The day is ours, my lord!" he shouted.

As the dust settled I saw Thaxas retiring with the remnant of his forces.

"Now, my lord, let us charge their camp, and they are beaten beyond hope!" old Nohaddyi cried.

But even as he spoke there came a renewed tumult from our right wing, and to my dismay I saw the Avian horsemen swarming over the bridge, and Hamul's troops borne backward, fighting bravely but impotently against overwhelming numbers.

If the Avians could hold our communications at their central point, the day was not won, but lost.

I at once despatched Nohaddyi with his reinforcements to retake the bridge. But as his men attacked they became mingled with the dispersing remnants of Hamul's men, and, in their confusion, the Avians rode them down easily.

Simultaneously Thaxas launched forth a last attack upon us. But seeing that we formed front to receive him, he declined the shock and spread fanwise along our front and toward our left, seeking to roll up our flank with an enveloping movement. Meanwhile Nohaddyi's men were in full flight back toward Ellaborta. I saw the brave old warrior, scorning to flee, turn, face the victorious enemy alone, and receive his death-thrust.

There was nothing to do but give the order to retire, for now our communications were cut by the loss of the bridge. The Avians, swarming across, had already joined Thaxas, and we were completely encircled by the savage horsemen, who made desperate rushes to throw us into confusion, and so complete their victory.

In this they were disappointed, for my men held steadily. And yard by yard we fought our passage back toward the capital, seeing clearly the ramparts packed with spectators and encouraged by their cries. We left a bloody trail behind us, and at the last, seeing that we were unshakable, the Avian cavalry sullenly withdrew a little more than bowshot range from the walls.

The gates opened to receive us. In the entrance stood Hita among her counselors. And, to my amazement, instead of reproaches for a lost fight, we were received with thunderous applause.

"Bravely fought, my lord Gowani!" Hita

cried. "Assuredly one never thought our Ellabortan swordsmen would make so brave a show against invincible Thaxas."

And after all the battle had been in no sense a defeat save one. Thaxas had left nine thousand men upon the field; our own losses were a little more than half as many. But for the forcing of the bridge we had won the day completely. And that, as we learned afterward, was by the disaffection of a small body of Fendek auxiliaries, men from another city, who had broken before the first charge of the Avian horsemen.

Yet in one respect Thaxas had won the day. For now the lines of communication between our forces were obliterated, and we had been driven back within the shelter of the walls. And on the next day, Thaxas advanced his camp until almost within bowshot of us.

But we had Thafti. The princess was already lodged, with Sewell, her captor, in the dungeon beneath the inner gate, and was to be brought, after the rest *psus*, before Hita and her council.

So our return to the inner city was more a march of triumph than an acknowledgment of failure. Thaxas had won a victory of the Pyrrhic kind; another such and his army would exist no longer. Already half his men were dismounted and resolved into infantry.

But what was Ptuth doing? How soon might we expect his dreaded fire-bombs to come into play, and his winged warriors to scatter destruction over Ellaborta?

Would they come before Sar, Prince of the Aonorians, arrived to aid us?

The answer was to be supplied sooner than any of us dreamed.

CHAPTER VI

THE EYE OF BALAMOK

AT THE end of the rest *psus* we assembled in the council hall, which was packed with a multitude. The scarlet cloak of Thafti gleamed in the midst of all.

Beside her stood Sewell, and even those who hated Thafti most, pitied her, to have been made prisoner by such an act of baseness.

And I could see that Sewell's treacherous act lessened my own prestige among the Fendeks, for the man had been my comrade, and I saw doubtful looks cast at me, and realized by how slender a thread I held my place—and that thread but a woman's love and faith in me.

Mnur arose. "It is the custom to interrogate the captives," he said. "Therefore let the Lord Seoul explain how he comes here with the Princess Thafti and claims to be her captor."

Sewell spoke boldly, apparently without the consciousness of shame committed. "Listen, then, O queen, and lords of the council—and you, Gowani, who came into this land with me in friendship," he began.

"Not many *psus* since my Lord Gowani was betrothed to Thafti, Queen of the Fendeks—aye, and protested not at all, though his heart had already turned toward you, O queen. Therefore, seeing that we are equals in our own country, I sought the hand of your sister, O Thafti, who was then merely a princess. And this, too, was accorded me. Then in the temple the Prince Thaxas claimed you, Thafti, and his honor was accorded him. And then, seeing that treachery surrounded us everywhere, I, too, resolved to play a part. Therefore, to save my life, and place it at your service, Queen Hita, whose hand was given me, I feigned to ally myself with Thafti here. And I knew that by this means I should be able to deliver her into your hands. So, having proved myself a loyal servant, I ask that my service may be rewarded."

At this a great hubbub broke out among the populace, and the council, too, some protesting that Sewell was a double-dyed traitor, and others that he had been hardly treated, and had acted loyally. And one by one we gave our opinion, some favoring Sewell's release and reward, and others demanding that he be put to death or driven from the city. Finally came my turn to speak, and I was silent some time, for I did not know how to answer.

I knew Sewell to be a coward, traitor, and murderer, but this knowledge of mine had no bearing upon present circumstances; and then, despite all this, we had come into Annoryii together.

"O queen!" I said at last. "He has performed a service and come of his free will into Ellaborta. Therefore no punishment can befall him. But place no trust in him."

Hita arose. "It shall be as you say, my Lord Gowani," she answered. And at that black looks were cast at me by all, for it was seen that Hita's judgment favored mine.

"Soon," whispered one of the priests of Mnur, "we shall be altogether under the foot of this stranger."

Hita turned to Thafti. "Greetings to you,

sister," she said. "Not many *psus ama* since, I stood before you in this place; therefore my heart inclines to pity for you."

"I seek no pity." She turned to Thafti haughtily.

"Nevertheless," said Hita proudly, "you are a captive and in my hands. What have you to say, sister, concerning the lie that Ptuth, the magician, put into Ros Marra's mouth concerning your birth and mine, usurper?"

With that Thafti stiffened herself with that characteristic gesture of contempt and pride that I had observed before. She stood erect before the queen and flung her veil aside. And there was hardly a man present but winced at the sight of her. And Thafti turned her eyes on each in turn, as if she wished to drain the cup of humiliation to the dregs.

"O queen! O Hita! O sister!" she began in a melodious voice that gradually increased in tension and in volume until it filled the hall with melody. "Sister, we two were born under different moods of our Lord Balamok. For I go veiled, like him, because my face is hideous in the sight of men, while you are fair and good to look upon. And yet I have a heart—strangely, for it should have been seared, like my face, by suffering and the contempt of men.

"Many times it has been sought to give me in betrothal to some prince, and each time he has scorned me. Aye, and did not the blind prince of the Lassayil send word that, though his eyes were sightless, his ears were open to the repute in which men held each other? A delicate hint to send his liege, truly.

"Therefore, sister, because the love of man was denied me, I sought power. I sought to rule this realm. Worthily I ruled it."

Here, to our consternation, a voice among the spectators in the vast council hall called, "Aye!" And two or three more took up the shout before it was drowned by the disapprobation of the rest. And then a storm of cheers broke out for Hita. And again two or three called for Thafti. Thafti listened and bowed ironically toward the spectators.

"I thank the few of my former subjects who remember their past faith and loyalty," she said. "But I speak to you, sister. When it was proposed that you should be put to death, I forbade it, though I knew, in accordance with the old prophecy, that you should supplant me, and

that my death should come through you in some measure.

"I have shown you clemency in my day of power, but were I queen in Ellaborta now, I swear that you should die under torture, and your carcass should be cast to the serpents."

There was a sudden tremulous stir, then breathless silence in the council hall at these bold words. The seamed face of Thafti looked steadily into that of Hita. And I saw that Hita's gentleness masked a no less indomitable will.

For Hita's face was red with anger, and her mien was now no less haughty than Thafti's.

"It is ill for you, a captive, to threaten me, a queen," said Hita. "Perchance I may forget the appeal for pity that you have made; also, that we had the same father."

"I do not ask your pity, sister," returned Thafti steadily. "Yet you shall know that even I, who veil my face because of its abomination—I have a heart and loved. Once I loved—one man whom I shall love all the short remainder of my life—even my Lord Gowani here!"

She paused, and in that dramatic moment she held the assembly spellbound. And, with her woman's heart, even Hita was softening into pity—that pity that Thafti scorned.

As for myself, I felt unutterably foolish.

Suddenly, without a word, Thafti caught a little hidden dagger out of her robes and thrust it into her body. The gush of blood was dark upon her crimson cloak.

For another moment she stood, looking defiantly upon her sister. And then her eyes sought mine. And it seemed to me in that moment that love made Thafti almost beautiful.

Then, as the counselors rushed toward her, Thafti sank to the floor, sobbed, and lay still. The blade had pierced her heart.

Hita cried out, and then, forgetting their enmity, forgetting that she was queen, she kneeled at Thafti's side, holding her head upon her knees. She looked up at me with anguish in her eyes.

Suddenly shouts from without stirred us to other action. The crowd was fleeing in panic from the assembly chamber. As some of the counselors clutched at me, reluctantly I left Hita beside her sister and went out.

High overhead appeared one of the flying Serpent Priests, and as he swooped toward us it could be seen that the llama flag of truce, upon a long stick, hung from his breastplate.

Lower he dropped; and now we saw that he held something in his left hand. He raised and hurled it, and we saw it curve through the air and smash upon the stones of the quadrangle.

It was a man's severed head. It was the head of the Wallaby Priest, our messenger to Sar.

Hamul came up to me. "This means the end of all unless—" he said, and led me to the ramparts. Looking down I saw the warriors of Thaxas encamped all about the walls.

"Unless some other messenger fly swiftly," I interrupted. "Whom can we trust?"

And, seeing his eyes bent in silent deference on mine, I understood.

"How long will it take to reach the Aonorian border?" I inquired.

"With wings, *psus hak*, if one fly steadily."

"I will go," I returned. "Inform the council."

And without hesitation I made my way to the palace and strapped my wings upon me.

HARDLY five minutes elapsed between my leaving the council hall and my flight toward Aonoria. And fortunately I had started during the beginning of the rest *psus*. Already an apathy was falling upon the mob below. They dropped down where they stood, and lay in dreamy, careless meditation. Inside the council hall I knew Hita would recline beside her sister's body, and the councilors in their seats until the rest *psus* ended.

As for myself, I was not yet so acclimated to this custom but that I could shake off the languor stealing over me. And I knew that this time would render me safe from pursuit by any of the Serpent Priests. I rose high into the air, and then directed my course, straight as an arrow, and al-

most as swift, over the horsemen of Thaxas, encamped beneath me, winging my course toward the Aonorian border.

Soon Ellaborta was but a blur in the distance, and in a little while it disappeared. For hours I flew over the tops of the great fern-trees, suffering no fatigue, since the action of the wings was automatic. Resolutely I fought back the sleep that weighed upon my eyelids. Hours passed—days, perhaps; I dozed in the air, waking with a start to find myself falling, orientating myself by a strange instinct which, in the absence of any stars or visible sun, seemed common to all of us in Annoryii.

At last I discerned through my bleared eyelids the fires of a great host spread out over a level plain beneath me. I dropped into Sar's camp.

The sight of those thousands of spearmen, young, vigorous and disciplined, revived my courage. I was conducted to Sar, who crossed his hands on his breast and then took mine, and listened while I recounted briefly the events of the past days.

"Rumors of this have already reached me," Sar answered, "and I was but awaiting the summons to lead my troops across the border, as Queen Hita commanded me. They shall start within an hour. Do you, my Lord Gowani, rest and accompany us then?"

But I shook my head, and told him that I must return immediately. Weary and worn though I was, I felt that I could not close my eyes until I had carried back news of my success to Hita.

At that Sar looked at me very strangely. And this is a curious thing, for which I cannot account: as he looked at me I seemed to see in him the lineaments of a young prospector whom I had known in Kalgoorlie a year or two before—a young man who had gone on a prospecting trip and never returned. Some had thought



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him lost in the desert, others that he had gone out by another route.

It was the merest fancy, of course, and next moment Sar was saying:

"My Lord Gowani, what came you into this country for, and why do you linger? Ethnabasca is no further from here than Ellaborta. If you flew there resolutely and made your way up the mountain, and so emerged into the world without, none would hinder you.

"My father, who was versed in much wise lore, told me that it is a secret known to the Priests of the Sun, who rule in Zelryii, my capital, that every man has two lives: a waking one, and one of his *psus* rest. And in the *psus* rest the waking life seems but a dream. And in the waking life the *psus* rest seems but a dream. And which is the dream, and which the reality, none but the gods know.

"Nevertheless, if one tarry too long in either state, the gods who attend the man, waking or dreaming, may seize him utterly, so that his alternate life is lost. Oh, my Lord Gowani, if I were you I would leave Annoryii, where all these combats, battles, rivalries and treacheries may be no more than a dream of your *psus* rest, and seek the land of your birth."

A strange philosophy. And he went on to say something which I do not wholly recall; something to the effect that the whole drama of life is but illusion, staged for the benefit of the individual soul in its progress from life to life. I think he tried to convey the impression that all that had happened in Annoryii was a sort of play for my benefit, a sort of morality play for the soul. I listened with impatient, listless interest.

For Heavens, how real it all was!—Hita and the traitor Sewell, Ptuth, Thaxas, and that great host of his spread out beside the camp-fires.

So I bade him adieu, and rose into the

air to wing my weary course back to Ellaborta. Now this was at the end of the working *psus*; the instinct common to us all told me that the rest *psus* was at hand, and that it was doubtful whether I could pass through another.

And suddenly unutterable weariness came over me. I could no longer even guide my course. Softly I let myself fall to earth, and slept almost before I touched the ground beneath the giant fern-tree.

I awoke as suddenly as if I had been hauled out of sleep by some invisible hand. A presentiment of danger was growing stronger every moment. I did not know how long I had slept, but I felt that many *psus* must have passed while I lay unconscious.

I rose hastily, started the mechanism, and began my flight once more. But as I flew my uneasiness increased. For there was a strange heat in the air, such as I had never known in that land of clouds, and lurid luminosity about the zenith, like a great halo of light. And there was also the undefinable sense of danger to Hita.

Hours passed. At last the forest ended, and the great Ellabortan plain lay extended beneath me. That distant blur was the capital. But the plain was filled with legions of armed men—men of Sar who had preceded me while I lay days in a stupor. And the walls were packed with fighting warriors.

I heard the din of battle raised, and, as I neared the ramparts, I saw the Avians swarming up the streets of Ellborta driving our men before them.

Other bodies, having gained the walls, were holding Sar at bay. The Avians must have been hugely reinforced, and only a miracle could save the city before Sar could storm the outer defenses.

As I circled above the keep I saw that Thaxas was already master of the inner city. The palace was on fire. The council

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hall was flaming furiously, and bodies of horsemen were driving our men like sheep to massacre.

I swept to the ground in the middle of the quadrangle, where a small force of Ellabortans still disputed supremacy with the Avians. I snatched a sword from a dead man and, placing myself at the head of the defenders, led them against the advancing horsemen.

Then out of the press Thaxas leaped at me, dismounted, his eyes shooting fire. "Well, met, my Lord Gowani!" he cried. "Here and now do I fulfil my promise made to you in the council hall, impostor from the upper earth!"

In a moment we were in the center of a ring of warriors, who ceased their combat in order to see the singular duel between the two leaders. Thaxas dealt terrific blows at me with his huge sword, but his armor encumbered him, and I was able to parry them or leap aside, always watching for my opening. He aimed a fierce stroke at my head, and as I sprang to one side the point of his blade caught my cheek, laying it open from ear to chin. Next instant my point had gone through corselet and breastbone, and stood out three inches or more behind him.

He coughed, whirled, snatched at the blade and tried to draw it forth; then, sinking upon his face, his eyes upturned in hate to mine, he died.

FOR an instant the Avians remained stupefied at the death of their great leader, and, seizing the advantage, the Fendeks drove them back toward the smoking palace. All was not lost, although our situation was a desperate one. But suddenly one of the Wallaby Priests came running to me, clutching at me.

"Treachery, my Lord Gowani!" he screamed in my ear. "The Lord Seoul, the traitor, came here for no good purpose, for, being pardoned, he conspired with Mnur, the double traitor, according to the plan which they had made, and opened the inner gate to the Avian forces during the rest *psus*, so that, the moment the *psus* was ended, the Avians stormed our defenses."

"Hita?" I cried.

"She is in the Eagle Temple, where a bodyguard defends her. But, my lord, there is worse work afoot. Mnur has been in conspiracy with Ptuth, and has wrought evil in the Room of the Light. I know not what, but something impends worse for Fendika than anything that has—"

I shook him off and raced toward the

Eagle Temple, over a ground littered with dead and dying. Upon the steps I saw a swarm of Avians, dismounted, but fully armed, running forward, their swords in their hands, their shields raised above their heads. Inside, I saw the blue cloaks of Hita's defenders, now reduced to a handful, with a ring of slain about them.

But Hita was not there. I ran past the blue cloaks, who, recognizing me, turned toward me for an instant and then resumed their battle. None regarded me, so fierce was the fray, so mad the hate.

In the interior of the temple I saw a very aged man standing by the low altar in an attitude of contemplation. It was the Eagle Priest, the last attendant left after the massacre of the Eagle males; but in the few *psus* that had passed since I had seen him he seemed to have passed from hale old age to utter senility.

"The queen!" I gasped.

He looked at me, and recognition slowly dawned on his wrinkled face.

"Was it not you who came to me to demand the secret in the queen's name?" he babbled.

"No, fool!" I shouted, seeing Ptuth's trickery in this. For of course Ptuth had known; nothing escaped the knowledge of the magician whose hold upon Fendika appeared unshakable.

"Then it must have been the other lord from afar," he mumbled.

I caught his shoulders and shook him violently. "Which way?" I howled in his ear.

He staggered to the altar and, pressing a knob, swung around a great block of stone, disclosing a secret stairway.

I rushed down into utter darkness. But at the end there was a gleam of light. Before me lay a courtyard, concealed from view from the quadrangle by the high walls that rose on all sides of it.

The center of this yard was filled by an enormous, hideous monster. It was a pterodactyl, a great lizard, twenty feet in length, with short, stout limbs and a curving undulating back, on which was strapped a softpad saddle.

Beside it Hita was struggling in Sewell's arms. He was holding her tightly, and striving to mount the enormous beast with her, though how it could escape from that enclosure I could not divine.

Seeing me, he stopped and gaped in fear and astonishment. And I was struck in that instant by a singular change in him, even as in the Eagle Priest. For he seemed to have aged, too; he had left Kalgoorlie

with me as a young man; now he looked in middle life.

But I ran at him with my sword raised, and he dropped Hita and fled. Unarmed though he was, to all appearances, I would have struck him down even in flight. But suddenly he turned and pulled from his cloak the automatic which he had told me he had lost in the encounter with the savages at the entrance to the underworld.

Six shots followed in rapid succession before I could close with him. I heard them hiss about me, and I was conscious of a vicious pain in the breast, over the heart. Next instant I had sliced his right arm from his body with a blow of my sword.

The little court was swinging round me. I turned to Hita; I saw a band of Avians burst into the place. They had overcome the last resistance of Hita's followers and surged forward, yelling with triumph.

Half swooning, I felt Hita drag me to the pterodactyl. With all her strength she dragged me upon the monster's back, and sat behind me, holding me.

And, even as the Avians were within sword's reach of me, the winged lizard rose into the air.

It rose; it cleared the temple roofs. Beneath me the quadrangle was filled with a confused clamor, and little groups were fighting to the death. The outer city was now in the possession of Sar's men, who were advancing with locked shields toward the keep. And all the capital was aflame. Ruin and destruction everywhere.

Then suddenly the clouds above were rent, and there appeared a huge, fiery sun that seemed to fill all the zenith. Mnur's treachery had succeeded. The removal of the cones that concentrated the rays had permitted the interior luminary to disperse the clouds. Men had spoken truly when they ascribed this power to Ptuth.

A fearful cry arose: "The Eye of Balamok! The Eye of Balamok!"

I drew Hita's cloak over her head and mine above that. I placed my face beside hers. I heard her whisper:

"With thee, my lord, to the dark lands beyond Balamok!"

CHAPTER VII

THE PROPHECY OF OLD

HERE the manuscript was torn, as if intentionally. It ended, and the young Englishman, who had read all day in utter absorption, looked up for the first time.

The sun was dipping toward the west, the afternoon mirage still danced on the horizon of the Great Victoria, but there was the cool breath of night in the air. He rose and paced the little house of stone.

He was consumed with eagerness to learn the remainder of Gowani's adventures. He scooped the sand away about the table legs, without much hope of finding anything more, and it was with a cry of delight that he came upon another piece of the manuscript, apparently written and then flung away. He smoothed out the wrinkles in the brittle sheet and read, as well as he could decipher:

... that earthly paradise, where ripe fruits hung from the trees and never a soul but Hita and myself. Cool water from crystal springs—... was the origin of the story of creation, the lost Garden of Eden ... and of passing time, seeing each other's faces dimly in the darkness.

... sadness that I could not but notice. For a long time she turned a smiling face to mine and professed her happiness. Yet at last the time came when I prevailed on her to tell me what troubled her.

"My Lord Gowani," she answered "said I not to you in the Temple of the Eagle that Ptuth the magician cannot be overthrown, and that I must be renewed unto eternal life when I grow old, according to the command laid upon me, until the prophecy be fulfilled?"

"Many long *psus ama* must pass before you grow old, Hita," I answered. "And as for the prophecy, has it not been fulfilled?"

"No, my lord," she answered softly. "For we have not ruled in Ellaborta, as it decreed. Therefore I must be renewed unto youth by Ptuth, who doubtless rules there still."

I strangled down the cry that choked my throat. "Do you mean that—that I am not he who shall rule with you?" I cried.

"I do not know, my lord," she answered simply. "But take me in your arms once more and look upon me."

I did so, and as I looked into her face a cry of terror broke from me. I was looking at an aged woman. The hair that hung formerly in great clustering curls about her head was thinned and white, her eyes were dimmed, and her face lined and puckered.

Then it was that I knew the fearful lot that had been laid upon me. I have said how Hita expressed the thought, when first she saw me sleep, that my life must be half wasted unless it were immeasur-

ably longer than her own. I have written of old Nasmaxa's death from old age, of the senility of the Eagle Priest. And yet it had not occurred to me that, living without real sleep, the inhabitants of Annoryll must needs have a shorter span of life than we.

How long had we dwelt there? Where there is no sun to measure days, no seasons to tell the passage of the years, the sense of time soon vanishes. I tried to think. One year? Two years? Hardly two weeks, as my own senses spoke.

Hita had grown old, and I was still a young man. A cry burst from me; I flung myself upon the ground. When I arose I saw Hita watching me with infinite compassion in her eyes.

"Let my lord order me," she said.

"If the old prophecy must be fulfilled, so be it," I returned. "Let us go back to Ptuth and bid him renew you too unto eternal life. And once again I shall attempt to rule Fendika, that I may show you I am he whose coming was foretold."

She smiled very wistfully, but made no answer. And so she veiled her head once more, and we mounted the winged lizard and made our way toward the light.

But this precaution was needless, for the Eye of Balamok slumbered beneath his eyelids of cloud. Long afterward we came into the Fendek land, and halting the winged monster, looked down on Ellaborta.

But this was a city such as I had not known before. The inner walls were gone. The capital extended far beyond the outer ones, and in the heart of all a huge structure towered into the skies, apparently palace and council hall and temple all in one.

As we descended and came to rest in the great enclosure, a big crowd came round about us, shouting in wonder. And, to my

astonishment, they dressed differently from the Fendeks. Even their speech, though recognizable, was different.

A chant was raised. Through their midst came a band of priests, dressed, not in yellow, but red. At their head, unchanged, his smooth face wrinkled as of yore, was Ptuth.

Hita and I were conducted into the great temple set within a groove of flowering trees. But the interior was different, the altar stood low toward the ground, and there was no longer the electrum serpent, nor any sign of serpent worship.

And Ptuth, eyeing me strangely, seemed only to have some vague remembrance of me.

"Who are you, strangers?" he asked in his curious Fendek, which I could hardly understand.

At that my anger flamed out, as if some scurvy trick had been played on me. "You know me, O Ptuth!" I cried. "Aye, and the princess here, Hita, Queen of Fendika!"

At that a gasp of astonishment ran through the temple, and men put their heads together and whispered.

"You know us both," I cried. "I came to this land, O Fendeks," I continued, turning from Ptuth to the assembly, "to restore Queen Hita here to her own throne, against the usurper, Thafti, and Thaxas, chief of the Avians. And what I could do I did; but at the last, to save the queen, being sorely wounded, I left the country with her. That is known to all of you, and not least to Ptuth the magician."

There was a constrained silence for a minute before Ptuth answered me.

"I am not Ptuth, but Lokas, Priest of the Unknown God," he answered. "All that you say is well known to us, as you have claimed, but surely you and this old woman are bewildered with age, to come here with such a story. For the events of which you



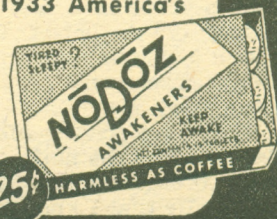
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speak happened *psus* uncountable ago, at the time of the last unveiling of the dreaded Eye of Balamok, and even our records admit them to be dim legends of the past. The Priest Ptuth died long ago, and the Serpent Worship is banished forever as a relic of our barbarous ancestors, and the descendants of Sar, legendary chief of the Aonorians, rule this land from Zelryi, the capital of the Aonorian Empire."

I gazed about me in a frantic bewilderment. It was true, everything was strange; and yet this old man before me was either Ptuth, or Ptuth reincarnated.

And I wondered whether the "renewal unto eternal youth" meant birth in a new body, with hardly a memory of the past.

"Nevertheless, O Gowani, if indeed by any possibility you can be he whom you claim to be," Lokas continued, "our ancient prophecies foretell the coming of a stranger, an old man, and of an aged woman, whose appearance shall be the forerunner of a queen named Hita, who shall rule this land. And the wisdom of our fathers tells us, furthermore, that this old woman, dying, shall pass into the body of a babe about to be born, who shall be she. But as for you, Gowani, our prophecies are silent."

I caught Hita in my arms. "Tell him that I am yours," I cried out. "Tell him that if you die I shall die to be reborn with you. Am I not he of whom the prophecy spoke?"

"I do not know, my Lord Gowani," she answered wistfully. "Fair was our love while this body was mine, but whether—whether you—be he—"

She trembled, and suddenly collapsing, sank down upon the temple floor.

And it was only that which had contained Hita's dear, loyal and loving spirit that I held in my arms.

THEY took me many days' journey across the desert, telling me that when they had deliberated they would summon me. And so I wait here until the call comes.

What gives me cause for hope is this: I am a young man, and hardly a year will pass before the babe that is Hita will have grown to young womanhood. Surely, if she be queen, she will remember me and bid them recall me.

They have given me food, and every few days some of the natives appear with supplies brought from Ethnabasca underneath. By that I know that they have not forgotten me.

Surely in a few weeks, or months, they will recall me. Meanwhile I wait, and sometimes all seems like a dream to me, but for my memory of that surpassing love which I dare to dream is destined to be mine again. I have employed the time in drawing up this memoir, for my relief, rather than in the hope that—

Here the fragment of manuscript ended abruptly, as if the writer had suddenly been surprised, for there was the scrawl of the implement with which the manuscript had been written, terminating in a blot.

The reader rose, stretched himself and went outside. In the glancing rays of the sun, now almost on the horizon, he saw something among the salt crystals beside the pool. Approaching it, he found it to be the skeleton of a man.

The right arm lay a little distance from the body, but whether it had been severed after death it was impossible to say, for even the bones had been corroded by the salt crystals. Nor was it, for the same reason, possible to determine whether it was the skeleton of Sewell or of the native man, Peter.

If the traveler had found a second skeleton, he might have believed that Gowan's scream was the product of delirium, induced by the sufferings of the Great Victoria. But though the tale seemed unbelievable the fleece upon the water-bag was like a llama's. And Gowan had not brought a camel from Kalgoorlie.

Had the priests come for Gowan at last and summoned him back to the underworld to meet Queen Hita, rearisen, lovely and radiant, from death?

He, too, had heard legends of a white queen across the Great Victoria. If the story was true, Gowan had not known that he had grown old with Hita in that earthly paradise whose description had been torn from the parchment.

At least the story seemed symbolical of life—the quest of the heart's desire; always unattainable, the lure that beckons across the deserts of life to those who watch.

Gowan, old Joe, the prospector—what were these but symbols of those who seek, attain and ever lose the paradise of the soul, only to hope with hope unquenchable?

The traveler looked wistfully about him. Almost he was tempted to seek for the hidden entrance into the city below. Then, shrugging his shoulders at his folly, he filled his waterskin, swung it upon his shoulder, and set out on his long journey eastward.

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Ted Palmer Picks:

For Mystery: "Homicide" with Robert Douglas, Helen Westcott, Robert Alda (Warner Brothers).



A transient worker, looking for a job, finds murder and murderers on a citrus ranch in California. After being threatened, he testifies that the ranch owner's death was accidental. His isn't, a few hours later, and Lieutenant Landers (Robert Douglas) has a hunch and some clues that lead him to an out-of-town hotel. Questioning the bartender (Robert Alda) the hat-check girl (Helen Westcott), he gets a lead and returns to the citrus ranch where he finds a piece of telephone cable wound up on the plow of the tractor.

This is the tip-off on an illegal racing wire service scheme, masterminded by—yep—the bartender. *The sleuthing is better than average.*

* * *

For A Western: "The Streets of Laredo" with Macdonald Carey, William Holden, William Bendix, Mona Freeman (Paramount). Technicolor.

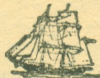


When three badmen split up and two get into the Texas Rangers by mistake, there's trouble a foot, pard. William Holden and William Bendix are the hombres who turn good and refuse to tip off their former partner, Macdonald Carey on big jobs.

This leads to complications when Holden refuses to bring in Carey—a source of irritation to the Rangers. Bendix, however, goes after him and gets shot (dead) for his efforts. Holden, stirred to action, mixes it up and has a showdown. For a twist, the bad guy is shot by Mona Freeman as the love interest. *There's plenty of chase, shooting and blood in full color.*

* * *

For Adventure: "Down to the Sea In Ships" with Richard Widmark, Lionel Barrymore, Dean Stockwell (20th Century-Fox).



Although they finally lower the boom on Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore), the old whaling master, he still has time to indoctrinate his young grandson (Dean Stockwell) into the ways of the sea and whaling. Before the old man dies, however, he tussles with his first mate (Richard Widmark), an 1887 ninety day wonder, with an ill-fated whaling attempt, storms and icebergs. *For those that like some salt—in their pictures and their eyes.*

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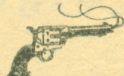
For Sports: "Interference" with Victor Mature, Lucille Ball, Elizabeth Scott, Sonny Tufts (RKO).



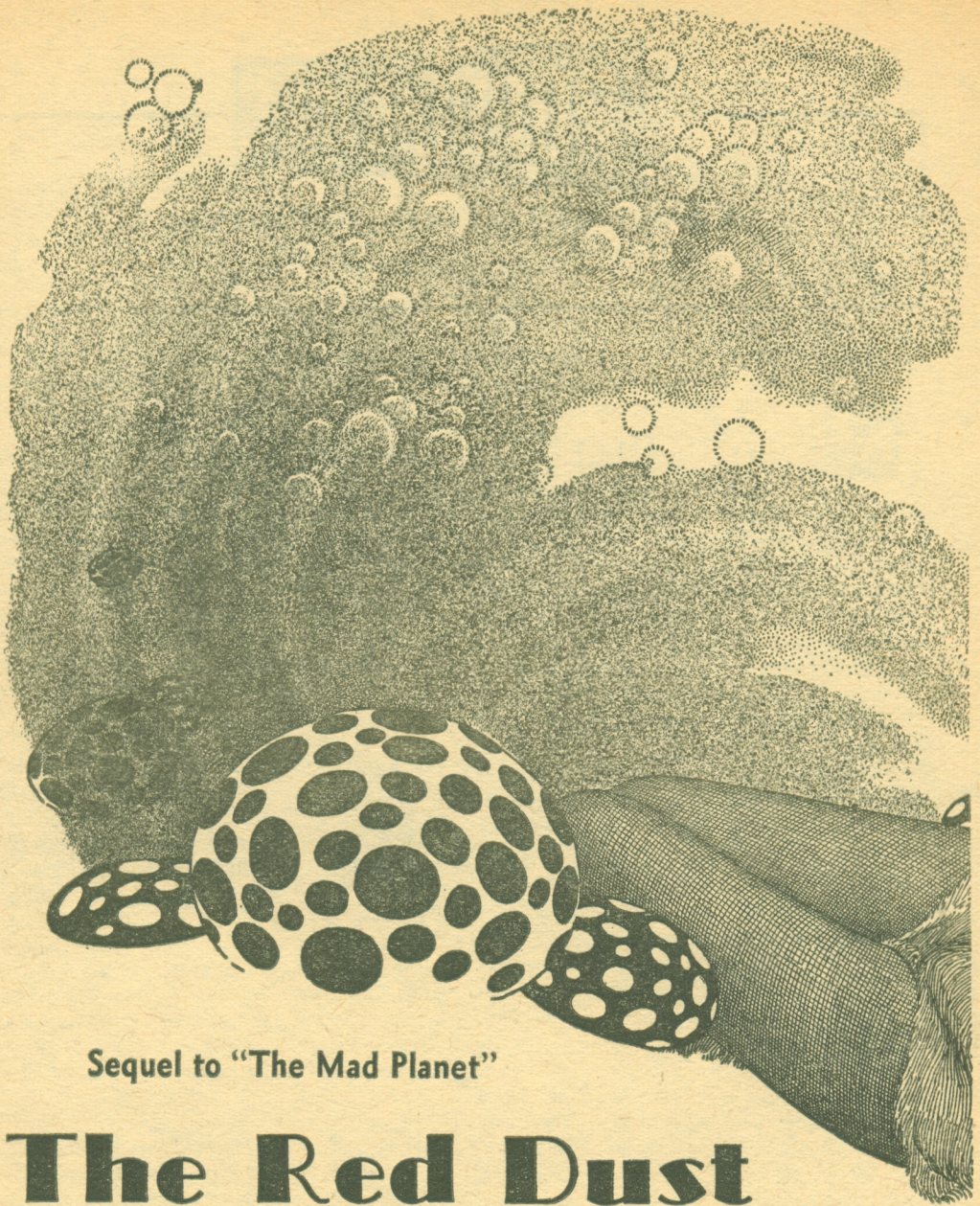
A high-salaried professional football player, Pete Wilson (Victor Mature) has mingled woes with an expensive wife (Elizabeth Scott) and an unsuspected heart condition. Turning down an offer to coach at his old alma mater, he decides to play in the big game—despite his heart—to win back his wife. *Training camp pictures, practice sessions and scenes from actual pro-games add interest.*

* * *

For Drama: "Knock On Any Door" with Humphrey Bogart and John Derek (Columbia).



Ex-Skid Row lawyer, Andrew Morton (Humphrey Bogart), unintentionally causes Nick Romano (John Derek) to become one of the more undesirable citizens on the wrong side of the tracks. Although marriage temporarily halts Nick's career of gambling and small-time thieving, he returns to his bad ways when he can't make the grade on an honest job. *A bit grim but often powerful picture.*



Sequel to "The Mad Planet"

The Red Dust

*Lost and lonely monarch of an ill-fated race, he
waged his all-but-hopeless battle . . . for he alone
could save mankind's last pitiful remnant on a
planet driven mad.*

CHAPTER I

PREY

THE sky grew gray and then almost white. The ever-hanging banks of clouds seemed to withdraw a little from the steaming earth. Haze that hung always among the mushroom forests and above the fungus hills grew more tenuous, and the slow and sodden rain that dripped the whole night long ceased reluctantly.

As far as the eye could see a mad world stretched out, a world of insensate cruelties and strange, fierce maternal solicitudes. The insects of the night—the great moths whose wings spread for yards upon

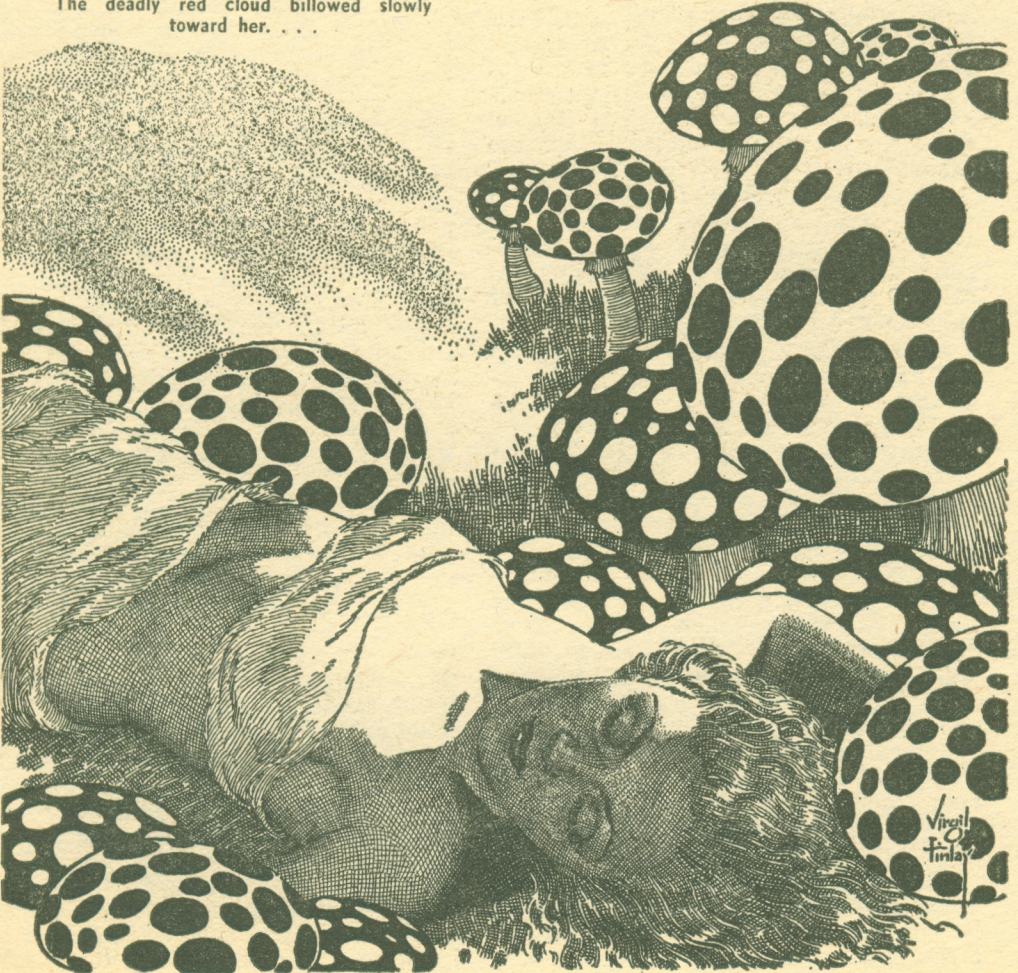
yards in the dimness, and the huge fire-flies, four feet in length, whose beacons made the earth glow in their pale, weird light—the insects of the night had sought their hiding-places.

Now the creatures of the day ventured forth. A great ant-hill towered a hundred feet into the air. Upon its gravel and boulder-strewn side a commotion became visible.

The earth crumbled, and fell into an invisible opening, then a dark chasm appeared, and two slender, threadlike antennae peered out.

A warrior ant emerged, and stood for an instant in the daylight, looking all about for signs of danger to the ant-city. He was

The deadly red cloud billowed slowly toward her. . . .



all of ten inches long, this ant, and his mandibles were fierce and strong. A second and a third warrior came from the inside of the ant-hill, and ran with tiny clickings about the hillock, waving their antennae restlessly, searching, ever searching for a menace to their city.

They returned to the gateway from which they had made their appearance, evidently bearing reassuring messages, because shortly after they had reentered the gateway of the ant-city, a flood of black, ill-smelling workers poured out of the opening and dispersed upon their businesses. The clickings of their limbs and an occasional whining stridulation made an incessant sound as they scattered over the earth, foraging among the mushrooms and giant cabbages, among the rubbish-heaps of the gigantic beehives and wasp colonies, and among the remains of the tragedies of the night for food for their city.

The city of the ants had begun its daily toil, toil in which everyone shared without supervision or coercion. Deep in the recesses of the pyramid galleries were hollowed out and winding passages that led down an unguessable distance into the earth below.

Somewhere in the maze of tunnels there was a royal apartment, in which the queen-ant reposed, waited upon by assiduous courtiers, fed by royal stewards, and combed and rubbed by the hands of her subjects and children.

But even the huge monarch of the city had her constant and pressing duty of maternity. A dozen times the size of her largest loyal servant, she was no less bound by the unwritten but imperative laws of the city than they. From the time of waking to the time of rest, she was ordained to be the queen-mother in the strictest and most literal sense of the word, for at intervals to be measured only in terms of minutes she brought forth a tiny egg, perhaps three inches in length, which was instantly seized by one of her eager attendants and carried in haste to the municipal nursery.

There it was placed in a tiny cell a foot or more in length until a sac-shaped grub appeared, all soft, white body save for a tiny mouth. Then the nurses took it in charge and fed it with curious, tender gestures until it had waxed large and fat and slept the sleep of metamorphosis.

When it emerged from its rudimentary cocoon it took the places of its nurses until its soft skin had hardened into the horny armor of the workers and soldiers, and then it joined the throngs of workers that

poured out from the city at dawn to forage for food, to bring back its finds and to share with the warriors and the nurses, the drone males and the young queens, and all the other members of its communities with duties in the city itself.

That was the life of the social insect. Absolute devotion to the cause of its city, utter abnegation of self-interest for the sake of its fellows—and death at their hands when its usefulness was past. It neither knew nor expected more nor less.

It is a strange instinct that prompts these creatures to devote their lives to their city, taking no smallest thought for their individual good, without even the call of maternity or love to guide them. Only the queen knows motherhood. The others know nothing but toil, for purposes they do not understand, and to an end of which they cannot dream.

At intervals all over the world of Burl's time these ant-cities rose above the surrounding ground, some small and barely begun, and others ancient colonies which were truly the continuation of cities first built when the ants were insects to be crushed beneath the feet of men. These ancient strongholds towered two, three, and even four hundred feet above the plains, and their inhabitants would have had to be numbered in millions if not in billions.

NOT all the earth was subject to the ants, however. Bees and wasps and more deadly creatures crawled and flew above its surface. The bees were four feet and more in length. And slender-waisted wasps darted here and there, preying upon the colossal crickets that sang deep bass music to their mates—and the length of the crickets was that of a man, and more.

Spiders with bloated bellies waited, motionless, in their snares, whose threads were the size of small cables, waiting for some luckless giant insect to be entangled in the gummy traps. And butterflies fluttered over the festering plains of this new world, tremendous creatures whose wings could only be measured in terms of yards.

An outcropping or rock jutted up abruptly from a fungus-covered plain. Shelf-fungi and strangely colored molds stained the stone until the shining quartz was hidden almost completely from view, but the whole glistened like tinted crystal from the dank wetness of the night. Little wisps of vapor curled away from the slopes as the moisture was taken up by the already moisture-laden air.

Seen from a distance, the outcropping of rock looked innocent and still, but a nearer view showed many things.

Here a hunting wasp had come upon a gray worm, and was methodically inserting its sting into each of the twelve segments of the faintly writhing creature. Presently the worm would be completely paralyzed, and would be carried to the burrow of the wasp, where an egg would be laid upon it, from which a tiny maggot would presently hatch. Then weeks of agony for the great gray worm, conscious, but unable to move, while the maggot fed upon its living flesh—

There a tiny spider, youngest of hatchlings, barely four inches across, stealthily stalked some other still tinier mite, the little, many-legged larva of the oil-beetle, known as the bee-louse. The almost infinitely small bee-louse was barely two inches long, and could easily hide in the thick fur of a great bumble-bee.

This one small creature would never fulfill its destiny, however. The hatchling spider sprang—it was a combat of midgits which was soon over. When the spider had grown and was feared as a huge, black-bellied tarantula, it would slay monster crickets with the same ease and the same implacable ferocity.

The outcropping of rock looked still and innocent. There was one point where it overhung, forming a shelf, beneath which the stone fell away in a sheer drop. Many colored fungus growths covered the rock, making it a riot of tints and shades. But hanging from the rooflike projection of the stone there was a strange, drab-white object. It was in the shape of half a globe, perhaps six feet by six feet at its largest. A number of little semicircular doors were fixed about its sides, like inverted arches, each closed by a blank wall. One of them would open, but only one.

The house was like the half of a pallid orange, fastened to the roof of rock. Thick cables stretched in every direction for yards upon yards, anchoring the habitation firmly, but the most striking of the things about the house—still and quiet and innocent, like all the rest of the rock outcropping—were the ghastly trophies fastened to the outer walls and hanging from long silken chains below.

Here was the hind leg of one of the smaller beetles. There was the wing-case of a flying creature. Here a snail-shell, two feet in diameter, hanging at the end of an inch-thick cable. There a boulder that must have weighed thirty or forty pounds, dangling in similar fashion.

But fastened here and there, haphazard and irregularly, were other more repulsive remnants. The shrunken head-armor of a beetle, the fierce jaws of a cricket—the pitiful shreds of a hundred creatures that had formed forgotten meals for the bloated insect within the home.

Comparatively small was the nest of the Clotho spider; it was decorated as no ogre's castle had even been adorned. Legs sucked dry of their contents, corselets of horny armor forever to be unused by any creature, a wing of this insect, the head of that. And dangling by the longest cord of all, with a silken cable wrapped carefully about it to keep the parts together, was the shrunken, shriveled, dried-up body of a long-dead man!

Outside, the nest was a place of gruesome relics. Within, it was a place of luxury and ease. A cushion of softest down filled all the bulging bottom of the hemisphere. A canopy of similarly luxurious texture interposed itself between the rocky roof and the dark, hideous body of the resting spider.

The eyes of the hairy creature glittered like diamonds, even in the darkness, but the loathsome, attenuated legs were tucked under the round-bellied body, and the spider was at rest. It had fed.

It waited, motionless, without desires or aversions, without emotions or perplexities, in comfortable, placid, machinelike contentment until time should bring the need to feed again.

A fresh carcass had been added to the decorations of the nest only the night before.

For many days the spider would repose in motionless splendor within the silken castle. When hunger came again, a nocturnal foray, a creature pounced upon and slain, brought bodily to the nest, and feasted upon, its body festooned upon the exterior, and another half-sleeping, half-waking period of dreamful idleness within the sybaritic charnel-house.

SLOWLY and timidly, half a dozen pink-skinned creatures made their way through the mushroom forest that led to the upcroppings of rock under which the Clotho spider's nest was slung. They were men, degraded remnants of the once dominant race.

Burl was their leader, and was distinguished solely by two three-foot stumps of the feathery, golden antennae of a night-flying moth he had bound to his forehead. In his hand was a horny, chitinous spear,

taken from the body of an unknown flying creature killed by the flames of the burning purple hills.

Since Burl's return from his solitary—and involuntary—journey, he had been greatly revered by his tribe. Hitherto it had been but a leaderless, formless group of people, creeping to the same hiding-place at nightfall to share in the food of the fortunate, and shuddering at the fate of those who might not appear.

Now Burl had walked boldly to them, bearing upon his back the gray bulk of a labyrinth spider he had slain with his own hands, and clad in wonderful garments of a gorgeousness they envied and admired. They hung upon his words as he struggled to tell them of his adventures, and slowly and dimly they began to look to him for leadership. He was wonderful. For days they had listened breathlessly to the tale of his adventures, but when he demanded that they follow him in another and more perilous affair, they were appalled.

A peculiar strength of will had come to Burl. He had seen and done things that no man in the memory of his tribe had seen or done. He had stood by when the purple hills burned and formed a funeral pyre for the horde of army ants, and for uncounted thousands of flying creatures. He had caught a leaping tarantula upon the point of his spear, and had escaped from the web of a banded web-spider by oiling his body so that the sticky threads of the snare refused to hold him fast. He had attacked and killed a great gray labyrinth spider.

But most potent of all, he had returned and had been welcomed by Saya—Saya of the swift feet and slender limbs, whose smile roused strange emotions in Burl's breast.

It was the adoring gaze of Saya that had roused Burl to this last pitch of rashness. Months before, the Clotho spider in the hemispherical silk castle of the gruesome decorations had killed and eaten one of the men of the tribe. Burl and the spider's victim had been together when the spider appeared, and the first faint gray light of morning barely silhouetted the shaggy, horrible creature as it leaped from ambush behind a toadstool toward the fear-stricken pair.

Its attenuated legs were outstretched, its mandibles gaped wide, and its jaws clashed horribly as it formed a black blotch in mid-air against the lightening sky.

Burl had fled, screaming, when the other man was seized. Now, however, he was

leading half a dozen trembling men toward the inverted dome in which the spider dozed. Two or three of them bore spears like Burl himself, but they bore them awkwardly and timorously. Burl himself was possessed by a strange, fictitious courage. It was the utter recklessness of youth, coupled with the eternal masculine desire to display prowess before a chosen female.

The wavering advance came to a halt. Most of the nearly naked men stopped from fear, but Burl stopped to invoke his newly discovered inner self that had furnished him with such marvelous plans. Quite accidentally he had found that if he persistently asked himself a question, some sort of answer came from within.

Now he gazed up from a safe distance and asked himself how he and the others were to slay the Clotho spider. The nest was some forty feet from the ground, on the undersurface of a shelf of rock. There was sheer open space beneath it, but it was firmly held to its support by long, silken cables that curled to the upper side of the rock-shelf, clinging to the stone.

Burl gazed, and presently an idea came to him. He beckoned to the others to follow him, and they did so, their knees knocking together from their fright. At the slightest alarm they would flee, screaming in fear, but Burl did not plan that there should be any alarm.

He led them to the rear of the singular rock formation, up the gently sloping side, and toward the precipitous edge. He drew near the point where the rock fell away. A long, tentaclelike silk cable curled up over the edge of a little promontory of stone that jutted out into nothingness.

Burl began to feel oddly cold, and something of the panic of the other men communicated itself to him. This was one of the anchoring cables that held the spider's castle secure. He looked and found others, six or seven in all, which performed the task of keeping the shaggy, beastly ogre's home from falling to the ground below.

His idea did not desert him, however, and he drew back, to whisper orders to his followers. They obeyed him solely because they were afraid, and he spoke in an authoritative tone, but they did obey, and brought a dozen heavy boulders of perhaps forty pounds weight each.

Burl grasped one of the silken cables at its end and tore it loose from the rock for a space of perhaps two yards. His flesh crawled as he did so, but something within him drove him on. Then, while beads of

perspiration stood out on his forehead—induced by nothing less than cold, physical fear—he tied the boulder to the cable. The first one done, he felt emboldened, and made a second fast, and a third.

One of his men stood near the edge of the rock, listening in agonized apprehension. Burl had soon tied a heavy stone to each of the cables he saw, and as a matter of fact, there was but one of them he failed to notice. That one had been covered by the flaking mold that took the place of grass upon the rocky eminence.

There were several of the boulders for which there was no use left upon the promontory, but Burl did not attempt to double the weights on the cables. He took his followers aside and explained his plan in whispers. Quaking, they agreed, and, trembling, they prepared to carry it out.

One of them stationed himself beside each of the boulders, Burl at the largest. He gave a signal, and half a dozen ripping, tearing sounds broke the sullen silence of the day. The boulders clashed and clattered down the rocky side of the precipice, tearing—perhaps “peeling”—the cables from their adhesion to the stone. They shot into open space and jerked violently at the half-globular nest, which was wrenched from its place by the combined impetus of the six heavy weights.

BURL had flung himself upon his face to watch what he was sure would be the death of the spider as it fell forty feet and more, imprisoned in its heavily weighted home. His eyes sparkled with triumph as he saw the ghastly, trophy-laden house swing out from the cliff. Then he gasped in terror.

One of the cables had not been discovered. That single cable held the spider's castle from a fall, though it had been torn from its anchorage, and now dangled heav-

ily on its side in mid air. A convulsive struggle seemed to be going on within.

Then one of the archlike doors opened, and the spider emerged, evidently in terror, and confused by the light of day, but still venomous and still deadly. It found but a single of its anchoring cables intact, that leading to the clifftop hard by Burl's head.

The spider sprang for this single cable, and its legs grasped the slender thread eagerly while it began to climb rapidly up toward the clifftop.

As with all the creatures of Burl's time, its first thought was of battle, not flight, and it came up the thin cord with its poison fangs unsheathed and its mandibles clashing in rage. The shaggy hair upon its body seemed to bristle with insane ferocity, and the horrible, thin legs moved with desperate haste as it advanced to meet and wreak vengeance upon the cause of its sudden alarm.

Burl's followers fled, uttering shrieks of fear, and Burl started to his feet, in the grip of a terrible panic. Then his hand struck one of the heavy boulders. Exerting every ounce of his strength, he pushed it over the cliff just where the cable appeared above the edge. For the fraction of a second there was silence, and then the indescribable sound of an impact against a soft body.

There was a gasping cry, and a moment later the curiously muffled clatter of the boulder striking the earth below. Somehow, the sound suggested that the boulder had struck first upon some soft object.

A faint cry came from the bottom of the hill. The last of Burl's men was leaping to a hiding-place among the mushrooms of the forest, and had seen the sheen of shining armor just before him. He cried out and waited for death, but only a delicately formed wasp rose heavily into the air,

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bearing beneath it the more and more feebly struggling body of a giant cricket.

Burl had stood paralyzed, deprived of the power of movement, after casting the boulder over the cliff. That one action had taken the last ounce of his initiative, and if the spider had hauled itself over the rocky edge and darted toward him, slavering its thick spittle and uttering sounds of mad fury, Burl would not even have screamed as it seized him. He was like a dead thing. But the oddly muffled sound of the boulder striking the ground below brought back hope of life and power of movement.

He peered over the cliff. The nest still dangled at the end of the single cable, still freighted with its gruesome trophies, but on the ground below a crushed and horribly writhing form was moving in convulsions of rage and agony.

Long, hairy legs worked desperately from a body that was no more than a mass of pulped flesh. A ferocious jaw tried to clamp upon something—and there was no other jaw to meet it. An evil-smelling, sticky liquid exuded from the mangled thing upon the earth, writhing, moving in terrible contortions of torment.

Presently an ant drew near and extended inquisitive antennae at the helpless monster wounded to death. A shrill stridulation sounded out, and three or four other foot-long ants hastened up to wait patiently just outside the spider's reach until its struggles should have lessened enough to make possible the salvage of flesh from the perhaps still-living creature for the ant city a mile away.

And Burl, up on the cliff-top, danced and gesticulated in triumph. He had killed the Clotho spider, which had slain one of the tribes-men four months before. Glory was his. All the tribes-men had seen the spider living. Now he would show them the spider dead. He stopped his dance of triumph and walked down the hill in haughty grandeur. He would reproach his timid followers for fleeing from the spider, leaving him to kill it alone.

Quite naively Burl assumed that it was his place to give orders and that of the others to obey. True, no one had attempted to give orders before, or to enforce their execution, but Burl had reached the eminently wholesome conclusion that he was a wonderful person whose wishes should be respected.

Burl, filled with fresh notions of his own importance, strutted on toward the hiding-place of the tribe, growing more and more

angry with the other men for having deserted him. He would reproach them, would probably beat them. They would be afraid to protest, and in the future would undoubtedly be afraid to run away.

Burl was quite convinced that running away was something he could not tolerate in his followers. Obscurely—and conveniently in the extreme back of his mind—he reasoned that not only did a larger number of men present at a scene of peril increase the chances of coping with the danger, but they also increased the chances that the victim selected by the dangerous creature would be another than himself.

Burl's reasoning was unsophisticated, but sound; perhaps unconscious, but none the less effective. He grew quite furious with the deserters. They had run away! They had fled from a mere spider.

A shrill whine filled the air, and a ten-inch ant dashed at Burl with its mandibles extended threateningly. Burl's path had promised to interrupt the salvaging work of the insect, engaged in scraping shreds of flesh from the corselet of one of the smaller beetles slain the previous night. The ant dashed at Burl like an infuriated fox-terrier, and Burl scurried away in undignified retreat. The ant might not be dangerous, but bites from its formic-acid-poisoned mandibles were no trifles.

Burl came to the tangled thicket of mushrooms in which his tribes-folk hid. The entrance was tortuous and difficult to penetrate, and could be blocked on occasion with stones and toadstool pulp. Burl made his way toward the central clearing, and heard as he went the sound of weeping, and the excited chatter of the tribes-people.

Those who had fled from the rocky cliff had returned with the news that Burl was dead, and Saya lay weeping beneath an overshadowing toadstool. She was not yet the mate of Burl, but the time would come when all the tribe would recognize a status dimly different from the usual tribal relationship.

Burl stepped into the clearing, and straightway cuffed the first man he came upon, then the next and the next. There was a cry of astonishment, and the next second instinctive, fearful glances at the entrance to the hiding-place.

Had Burl fled from the spider, and was it following? Burl spoke loftily, saying that the spider was dead, that its legs, each one the length of a man, were still, and its fierce jaws and deadly poison-fangs harmless forevermore.

Ten minutes later he was leading an incredulous, awed little group, of pink-skinned people to the spot below the cliff where the spider actually lay dead, with the ants busily at work upon its remains.

And when he went back to the hiding-place he donned again his great cloak that was made from the wing of a magnificent moth, slain by the flames of the purple hills, and sat down in splendor upon a crumbling toadstool, to feast upon the glances of admiration and awe that were sent toward him. Only Saya held back shyly, until he motioned for her to draw near, when she seated herself at his feet and gazed up at him with unutterable adoration in her eyes.

But while Burl basked in the radiance of his tribe's admiration, danger was drawing near them all. For many months there had been strange red mushrooms growing slowly here and there all over the earth, they knew. The tribes-folk had speculated about them, but forebore tasting them because they were strange, and strange things were usually dangerous and often fatal.

Now those red growths had ripened and grown ready to emit their spores. Their rounded tops had grown fat, and the tough skin grew taut as if a strange pressure were being applied from within. And today, while Burl luxuriated in his position of feared and admired great man of his tribe, at a spot a long distance away, upon a hilltop, one of the red mushrooms burst. The spores inside the taut, tough skin shot all about as if scattered by an explosion, and made a little cloud of reddish, impalpable dust, which hung in the air and moved slowly with the sluggish breeze.

A bee droned into the thin red cloud of dust, lazily and heavily flying back toward the hive. But barely had she entered the tinted atmosphere when her movements became awkward and convulsive, effortful and excited. She trembled and twisted in midair in a peculiar fashion, then drooped to the earth, while her abdomen moved violently.

Bees, like almost all insects, breathe through spiracles on the under surfaces of their abdomens. This bee had breathed in some of the red mushroom's spores. She thrashed about desperately upon the toadstools on which she had fallen, struggling for breath, for life.

After a long time she was still. The cloud of red mushroom spores had strangled or poisoned her. And everywhere the red fringe grew, such explosions were taking

place, one by one, and everywhere the red clouds hung in the air; creatures were breathing them in and dying in convulsions of strangulation.

CHAPTER II

THE JOURNEY

DARKNESS. The soft, blanketing night of the age of fungoids had fallen over the earth, and there was blackness everywhere that was not good to see. Here and there, however, dim, bluish lights glowed near the ground. There an intermittent glow showed that a firefly had wandered far from the rivers and swamps above which most of his kind now congregated. Now a faintly luminous ball of fire drifted above the steaming, moisture-sodden earth. It was a will-o'-the-wisp, grown to a yard in diameter.

From the low-hanging banks of clouds that hung perpetually overhead, large, warm raindrops fell ceaselessly. A drop, a pause, and then another drop, adding to the already dank moisture of the ground below.

The world of fungus growths flourished on just such dampness and humidity. It seemed as if the toadstools and mushrooms could be heard, swelling and growing large in the darkness. Rustlings and stealthy movements sounded furtively through the night, and from above the heavy throb of mighty wing-beats was continuous.

The tribe was hidden in the midst of a tangled copse of toadstools too thickly interwoven for the larger insects to penetrate. Only the little midgets hid in its recesses during the night-time, and the smaller moths during the day.

About and among the bases of the toadstools, however, where their spongy stalks rose from the humid earth, small beetles roamed, singing cheerfully to themselves in deep bass notes. They were small and round, some six or eight inches long, and their bellies were pale gray.

And as they went about they emitted sounds which would have been chirps had they been other than low as the lowest tone of a harp. They were truffle-beetles, in search of the dainty tidbits on which epicures once had feasted.

Some strange sense seemed to tell them when one of half a dozen varieties of truffle was beneath them, and they paused in their wandering to dig a tunnel straight down. A foot, two feet, or two yards, all

was the same to them. In time they would come upon the morsel they sought and would remain at the bottom of their temporary home until it was consumed. Then another period of wandering, singing their cheerful song, until another likely spot was reached and another tunnel begun.

In a tiny, open space in the center of the toadstool thicket the tribes-folk slept with the deep notes of the truffle beetles in their ears. A new danger had come to them, but they had passed it on to Burl with a new and childlike confidence and considered the matter settled. They slept, while beneath a glowing mushroom at one side of the clearing Burl struggled with his new problem. He squatted upon the ground in the dim radiance of the shining toadstool, his moth-wing cloak wrapped about him, his spear in his hand, and his twin golden plumes of the moth's antennae bound to his forehead. But his face was downcast as a child's.

The red mushrooms had begun to burst. Only that day, one of the women, seeking edible fungus for the tribal larder, had seen the fat, distended globule of the red mushroom. Its skin was stretched taut, and glistened in the light.

The woman paid little or no attention to the red growth. Her ears were attuned to catch sounds that would warn her of danger while her eyes searched for tidbits that would make a meal for the tribe, and more particularly for her small son, left behind at the hiding-place.

A ripping noise made her start up, alert on the instant. The red envelope of the mushroom had split across the top, and a thick cloud of brownish-red dust was spurting in every direction. It formed a pyramidal cloud some thirty feet in height, which enlarged and grew thinner with minor eddies within itself.

A little yellow butterfly with wings barely a yard from tip to tip, flapped lazily above the mushroom-covered plain. Its wings beat the air with strokes that seemed like playful taps upon a friendly element. The butterfly was literally intoxicated with the sheer joy of living. It had emerged from its cocoon barely two hours before, and was making its maiden flight above the strange and wonderful world. It fluttered carelessly into the red-brown cloud of mushroom spores.

The woman was watching the slowly changing form of the spore-mist. She saw the butterfly enter the brownish dust, and then her eyes became greedy. There was something the matter with the but-

terfly. Its wings no longer moved lazily and gently. They struck out in frenzied, hysterical blows that were erratic and wild. The little yellow creature no longer floated lightly and easily, but dashed here and there, wildly and without purpose, seeming to be in its death-throes.

It crashed helplessly against the ground and lay there, moving feebly. The woman hurried forward. The wings would be new fabric with which to adorn herself, and the fragile legs of the butterfly contained choice meat. She entered the dust-cloud.

A stream of intolerable fire—though the woman had never seen or known of fire—burned her nostrils and seared her lungs. She gasped in pain, and the agony was redoubled. Her eyes smarted as if burning from their sockets, and tears blinded her.

The woman instinctively turned about to flee, but before she had gone a dozen yards—blinded as she was—she stumbled and fell to the ground. She lay there, gasping, and uttering moans of pain, until one of the men of the tribe who had been engaged in foraging nearby saw her and tried to find what injured her.

She could not speak, and he was about to leave her and tell the other tribes-folk about her when he heard the clicking of an ant's limbs, and rather than have the ant pick her to pieces bit by bit—and leave his curiosity ungratified—the man put her across his shoulders and bore her back to the hiding-place of the tribe.

It was the tale the woman had told when she partly recovered that caused Burl to sit alone all that night beneath the shining toadstool in the little clearing, puzzling his just-awakened brain to know what to do.

The year before there had been no red mushrooms. They had appeared only recently, but Burl dimly remembered that one day, a long time before, there had been a strange breeze which blew for three days and nights, and that during the time of its blowing all the tribe had been sick and had wept continually.

Burl had not yet reached the point of mental development when he would associate that breeze with a storm at a distance, or reason that the spores of the red mushrooms had been borne upon the wind to the present resting-places of the deadly fungus growths. Still less could he decide that the breeze had not been deadly only because lightly laden with the fatal dust.

He knew simply that unknown red

mushrooms had appeared, that they were everywhere about, and that they would burst, and that to breathe the red dust they gave out was grievous sickness or death.

THE tribe slept while the bravely attired figure of Burl squatted under the glowing disk of the luminous mushroom, his face a picture of querulous perplexity, and his heart full of sadness.

He had consulted his strange inner self, and no plan had come to him. He knew the red mushrooms were all about. They would fill the air with their poison. He struggled with his problem while his people slumbered, and the woman who had breathed the mushroom-dust sobbed softly in her troubled sleep.

Presently a figure stirred on the farther side of the clearing. Saya awoke and raised her head. She saw Burl crouching by the shining toadstool, his gay attire draggled and unnoticed. She watched him for a little, and the desolation of his pose awoke her pity.

She rose and went to his side, taking his hand between her two while she spoke his name softly. When he turned and looked at her, confusion smote her, but the misery in his face brought confidence again.

Burl's sorrow was inarticulate—he could not explain this new responsibility for his people that had come to him—but he was comforted by her presence, and she sat down beside him. After a long time she slept, with her head resting against his side, but he continued to question himself, continued to demand an escape for his people from the suffering and danger he saw ahead. With the day an answer came.

When Burl had been carried down the river on his fungus raft, and had landed in the country of the army ants, he had seen great forests of edible mushrooms, and had said to himself that he would bring Saya to that place. He remembered, now, that the red mushrooms were there also, but the idea of a journey remained.

The hunting-ground of his tribe had been free of the red fungoids until recently. If he traveled far enough he would come to a place where there were still no red toadstools. Then came the decision. He would lead his tribe to a far country.

He spoke with stern authority when the tribesmen woke, talking in few words and in a loud voice, and holding up his spear.

The timid, pink-skinned people obeyed him meekly. They had seen the body of the Clotho spider he had slain, and he had thrown down before them the gray bulk of the Labyrinth spider he had thrust through with his spear. Now he was to take them through unknown dangers to an unknown haven, but they feared to displease him.

They made light loads of their mushrooms and such meat-stuffs as they had, and parceled out what little fabric they still possessed. Three men bore spears, in addition to Burl's long shaft, and he had persuaded the other three to carry clubs, showing them how the weapon should be wielded.

The indefinitely brighter spot in the cloud-banks above them meant the shining sun had barely gone a quarter of the way across the sky when the trembling band of timid creatures made their way from their hiding-place and set out upon their journey. For their course, Burl depended entirely upon chance. He avoided the direction of the river, however, and the path along which he had returned to his people. He knew the red mushrooms grew there. Purely by accident he set his march toward the west, and walked cautiously on, his tribes-folk following him fearfully.

Burl walked ahead, his spear held always ready.

He made a figure at once brave and pathetic, venturing forth in a world of monstrous ferocity and incredible malignance, armed only with a horny spear borrowed from a dead insect. His velvety cloak, made from a moth's wing, hung about his figure in graceful folds, however, and twin golden plumes nodded jauntily from his forehead.

Behind him the nearly naked people followed reluctantly. Here a woman with a baby in her arms. There children of nine or ten, unable to resist the instinct to play even in the presence of the manifold dangers of the march. They ate hungrily of the lumps of mushroom they had been ordered to carry. Then a long-legged boy, his eyes roving anxiously about in search of danger.

Thirty thousand years of flight from every peril had deeply submerged the combative nature of humanity. After the boy came two men, one with a short spear, and the other with a club, each with a huge mass of edible mushroom under his free arm, and both badly frightened at the idea of fleeing from dangers they knew and feared to dangers they did not

know and consequently feared much more.

So was the caravan spread out. It made its way across the country with many deviations from a fixed line, and with many halts and pauses. Once a shrill stridulation filled all the air before them, a monster sound compounded of innumerable clickings and high-pitched cries.

They came to the tip of an eminence and saw a great space of ground covered with tiny black bodies locked in combat. For quite half a mile in either direction the earth was black with ants, snapping and biting at each other, locked in vise-like embraces, each combatant couple trampled under the feet of the contending armies, with no thought of surrender or quarter.

The sound of the clashing of fierce jaws upon horny armor, the cries of the maimed, and strange sounds made by the dying, and above all, the whining battle-cry of each of the fighting hordes, made a sustained uproar that was almost deafening.

From either side of the battleground a pathway led back to separate ant-cities, a pathway marked by the hurrying groups of reinforcements rushing to the fight. Tiny as the ants were, for once no lumbering beetle swaggered insolently in their path, nor did the hunting-spiders mark them out for prey. Only little creatures smaller than the combatants themselves made use of the insect war for purposes of their own.

These were little gray ants barely more than four inches long, who scurried about in and among the fighting creatures with marvelous dexterity, carrying off, piece-meal, the bodies of the dead, and slaying the wounded for the same fate.

They hung about the edges of the battle, and invaded the abandoned areas when the tide of battle shifted, insect guerillas, fighting for their own ends, careless of the origin of the quarrel, espousing no cause, simply salvaging the dead and living débris of the combat.

BURL and his little group of followers had to make a wide detour to avoid the battle itself, and the passage between bodies of reinforcements hurrying to the scene of strife was a matter of some difficulty. The ants running rapidly toward the battlefield were hugely excited. Their antennae waved wildly, and the infrequent wounded one, limping back toward the city, was instantly and repeatedly challenged by the advancing insects.

They crossed their antennae upon his, and required thorough evidence that he was of the proper city before allowing him to proceed. Once they arrived at the battle-field they flung themselves into the fray, becoming lost and indistinguishable in the tide of straining, fighting black bodies.

Men in such a battle, without distinguishing marks or battle-cries, would have fought among themselves as often as against their foes, but the ants had a much simpler method of identification. Each ant-city possesses its individual odor—a variant on the scent of formic acid—and each individual of that city is recognized in his world quite simply and surely by the way he smells.

The little tribe of human beings passed precariously behind a group of a hundred excited insect warriors, and before the following group of forty equally excited black insects. Burl hurried on with his following, putting many miles of perilous territory behind before nightfall. Many times during the day they saw the sudden billowing of a red-brown dust-cloud from the earth, and more than once they came upon the empty skin and drooping stalk of one of the red mushrooms, and more often still they came upon the mushrooms themselves, grown fat and taut, prepared to send their deadly spores into the air when the pressure from within became more than the leathery skin could stand.

That night the tribe hid among the bases of giant puff-balls, which at touch shot out a puff of white powder resembling smoke. The powder was precisely the same in nature as that cast out by the red mushrooms, but its effects were marvelously—and mercifully—different.

Burl slept soundly this night, having been two days and a night without rest, but the remainder of his tribe, and even Saya, were fearful and afraid, listening ceaselessly all through the dark hours for the menacing sounds of creatures coming to prey upon them.

And so for a week the march kept on. Burl would not allow his tribe to stop to forage for food. The red mushrooms were all about. Once one of the little children was caught in a whirling eddy of red dust, and its mother rushed into the deadly stuff to seize it and bring it out. Then the tribe had to hide for three days while the two of them recovered from the debilitating poison.

Once, too, they found a half-acre patch of the giant cabbages—there were six of

them full grown, and a dozen or more smaller ones—and Burl took two men and speared two of the huge, twelve-foot slugs that fed upon the leaves. When the tribe passed on, it was gorged on the fat meat of the slugs, and there was much soft fur, so that all the tribe folk wore loin cloths of the yellow stuff.

There were perils, too, in the journey. On the fourth day of the tribe's traveling, Burl froze suddenly into stillness. One of the hairy tarantulas—a trap-door spider with a black belly—had fallen upon a scaraboeus beetle, and was devouring it only a hundred yards ahead.

The tribe-folk, trembling, went back for half a mile or more in panic-stricken silence, and refused to advance until he had led them a detour of two or three miles to one side of the dangerous spot.

A new trick of the deadly dust became apparent now. Toward the end of a day in which they had traveled a long distance, one of the little children ran a little to the left of the route its elders were following. The earth had taken on a brownish hue, and the child stirred up the surface mould with its feet.

The brownish dust that had settled there was raised again, and the child ran, crying and choking, to its mother, its lungs burning as with fire, and its eyes like hot coals. Another day would pass before the child could walk.

In a strange country, knowing nothing of the dangers that might assail the tribe while waiting for the child to recover, Burl

looked about for a hiding-place. Far over to the right a low cliff, perhaps twenty or thirty feet high, showed sides of crumbling yellow clay, and from where Burl stood he could see the dark openings of burrows scattered here and there upon its face.

He watched for a time, to see if any bee or wasp inhabited them, knowing that many kinds of both insects dig burrows for their young, and do not occupy them themselves. No dark forms appeared, however, and he led his people toward the openings.

Burl stationed himself near the outer end of one of the little caves to watch for signs of danger. While waiting he poked curiously with his spear at a little pile of white and sticky parchment-like stuff he saw just within the mouth of the tunnel.

Instantly movement became visible. Fifty, sixty, or a hundred tiny creatures, no more than half an inch in length, tumbled pell-mell from the dirty-white heap. Awkward legs, tiny, greenish-black bodies, and bristles protruding in every direction made them strange to look upon.

They had tumbled from the whitish heap and now they made haste to hide themselves in it again, moving slowly and clumsily, with immense effort and laborious contortions of their bodies.

Burl had never seen any insect progress in such a slow and ineffective fashion before. He drew one little insect back with the point of his spear and examined it from a safe distance. Tiny jaws before



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the head met like twin sickles, and the whole body was shaped like a rounded diamond lozenge.

Burl knew that no insect of such small size could be dangerous, and leaned over, then took one creature in his hand. It wriggled frantically and slipped from his fingers, dropping upon the soft yellow caterpillar-fur he had about his middle. Instantly, as if it were a conjuring trick, the little insect vanished, and Burl searched for a matter of minutes before he found it hidden deep in the long, soft hairs of the fur, resting motionless, and evidently at ease.

IT WAS a bee-louse, the first larval form of a beetle whose horny armor could be seen in fragments for yards before the clayey cliffside. Hidden in the openings of the bee's tunnel, it waited until the bee-grubs farther back in their separate cells should complete their changes of form and emerge into the open air, passing over the cluster of tiny creatures at the doorway. As the bees passed over, the little bee-lice would clamber in eager haste up their hairy legs and come to rest in the fur about their thoraxes. Then, weeks later, when the bees in turn made other cells and stocked them with honey for the eggs they would lay, the tiny creatures would slip from their resting-places and be left behind in the fully provisioned cell, to eat not only the honey the bee had so laboriously acquired, but the very grub hatched from the bee's egg.

Burl had no difficulty in detaching the small insect and casting it away, but in doing so discovered three more that had hidden themselves in his furry garment, no doubt thinking it the coat of their natural though unwilling hosts. He plucked them away, and discovered more, and more. His garment was the hiding-place for dozens of the creatures.

Disgusted and annoyed, he went out of the cavern and to a spot some distance away, where he took off his robe and pounded it with the flat side of his spear to dislodge the visitors. They dropped out one by one, reluctantly, and finally the garment was clean of them. Then Burl heard a shout from the direction of the mining-bee caves, and hastened toward the sound.

It was then drawing toward the time of darkness, but one of the tribes-men had ventured out and found no less than three of the great imperial mushrooms. Of the

three, one had been attacked by a parasitic purple mold, but the gorgeous yellow of the other two was undimmed, and the people were soon feasting upon the firm flesh.

Burl felt a little pang of jealousy, though he joined in the consumption of the find as readily as the others, and presently drew a little to one side.

He cast his eyes across the country, level and unbroken as far as the eye could see. The small clay cliff was the only inequality visible, and its height cut off all vision on one side. But the view toward the horizon was unobstructed on three sides, and here and there the black speck of a monster bee could be seen, droning homeward to its hive or burrow, and sometimes the slender form of a wasp passed overheard, its translucent wings invisible from the rapidity of their vibrations.

These flew high in the air, but lower down, barely skimming the tops of the many-colored mushrooms and toadstools, fluttering lightly above the swollen fungoids, and touching their dainty proboscises to unspeakable things in default of the fragrant flowers that were normal food for their races—lower down flew the multitudes of butterflies the age of mushrooms had produced.

White and yellow and red and brown, pink and blue and purple and green, every shade and every color, every size and almost every shape, they flitted gaily in the air. There were some so tiny that they would barely have shaded Burl's face, and some beneath whose slender bodies he could have hidden himself. They flew in a riot of colors and tints above a world of foul mushroom growths, and turgid, slime-covered ponds.

Burl, temporarily out of the limelight because of the discovery of a store of food by another member of the tribe, be-thought himself of an idea. Soon night would come on, the cloud-bank would turn red in the west, and then darkness would lean downward from the sky. With the coming of that time these creatures of the day would seek hiding-places, and the air would be given over to the furry moths that flew by night. He, Burl, would mark the spot where one of the larger creatures alighted, and would creep up upon it, with his spear held fast.

His wide blue eyes brightened at the thought, and he sat himself to watch. After a long time the soft, down-reaching fingers of night touched the shaded aisles

of the mushroom forests, and a gentle haze arose above the golden glades. One by one the gorgeous fliers of the daytime dipped down and furled their painted wings. The overhanging clouds became darker—finally black, and the slow, deliberate rainfall that lasted all through the night began. Burl rose and crept away into the darkness, his spear held in readiness.

Through the black night, beneath deeper blacknesses which were the dark undersides of huge toadstools, creeping silently, with every sense alert for sign of danger or hope of giant prey, Burl made his slow advance.

A glorious butterfly of purple and yellow markings, whose wings spread out for three yards on either side of its delicately formed body, had hidden itself barely two hundred yards away. Burl could imagine it, now, preening its slender limbs and combing from its long and slender proboscis any trace of the delectable food-stuffs on which it had fed during the day. Burl moved slowly and cautiously forward, all eyes and ears.

He heard an indescribable sound in a thicket a little to his left, and shifted his course. The sound was the faint whistling of air through the breathing-holes along an insect's abdomen. Then came the delicate rustling of filmy wings being stretched and closed again, and the movement of sharply barbed feet upon the soft earth. Burl moved in breathless silence, holding his spear before him in readiness to plunge it into the gigantic butterfly's soft body.

The mushrooms here were grown thickly together, so there was no room for Burl's body to pass between their stalks, and the rounded heads were deformed and misshapen from their crowdings. Burl spent precious moments in trying to force a silent passage, but had to own himself beaten. Then he clambered up upon the spongy mass of mushroom heads, trusting to luck that they would sustain the weight.

The blackness was intense, so that even the forms of objects before him were lost in obscurity. He moved forward for some ten yards, however, walking gingerly over his precarious foothold. Then he felt rather than saw the opening before him. A body moved below him.

Burl raised his spear, and with a yell plunged down on the back of the moving thing, thrusting his spear with all the force he could command. He landed on a shifting form, but his yell of triumph turned to a scream of terror.

This was not the yielding body of a slender butterfly that he had come upon, nor had his spear penetrated the creature's soft flesh. He had fallen upon the shining back of one of the huge, meat-eating beetles, and his spear had slid across the horny armor and then stuck fast, having pierced only the leathery tissue between segments of the insect's thorax.

Burl's terror was pitiable at the realization, but as nothing to the ultimate panic which possessed him when the creature beneath him uttered a grunt of fright and pain, and, spreading its stiff wing-cases wide, shot upward in a crazy, panic-stricken, rocket-like flight toward the sky.

CHAPTER III

THE SEXTON-BEETLES

BURL fell headforemost upon the spongy top of a huge toadstool that split with the impact and let him through to the ground beneath, powdering him with its fine spores. He came to rest with his naked shoulder half-way through the yielding flesh of a mushroom-stalk, and lay there for a second, catching his breath to scream again.

Then he heard the whining buzz of his attempted prey. There was something wrong with the beetle. Burl's spear had struck it in an awkward spot, and it was rocketing upward in erratic flight that ended in a crash two or three hundred yards away.

Burl sprang up in an instant. Perhaps, despite his mistake, he had slain this infinitely more worthy victim. He rushed toward the spot where it had fallen.

His wide blue eyes pierced the darkness well enough to enable him to sheer off from masses of toadstools, but he could distinguish no details—nothing but forms. He heard the beetle floundering upon the ground; then heard it mount again into the air, more clumsily than before.

Its wing-beats no longer kept up a sustained note. They thrashed the air irregularly and wildly. The flight was zig-zag and uncertain, and though longer than the first had been, it ended similarly, in a heavy fall. Another period of floundering, and the beetle took to the air again just before Burl arrived at the spot.

It was obviously seriously hurt, and Burl forgot the dangers of the night in his absorption in the chase. He darted after his prey, fleet-footed and agile, tak-

ing chances that in cold blood he would never have thought of.

Twice, in the pain-racked struggles of the monster beetle, he arrived at the spot where the gigantic insect flung itself about madly, insanely, fighting it knew not what, striking out with colossal wings and legs, dazed and drunk with agony. And each time it managed to get aloft in flight that was weaker and more purposeless.

Crazy, fleeing from the torturing spear that pierced its very vitals, the beetle blundered here and there, floundering among the mushroom thickets in spasms that were constantly more prolonged and more agonized, but nevertheless flying heavily, lurching drunkenly, managing to graze the tops of the toadstools in one more despairing, tormented flight.

And Burl followed, aflame with the fire of the chase, arriving at the scene of each successive, panic-stricken struggle on the ground just after the beetle had taken flight again, but constantly more closely on the heels of the weakening monster.

At last he came, panting, and found the giant lying upon the earth, moving feebly, apparently unable to rise. How far he was from the tribe, Burl did not know, nor did the question occur to him at the moment. He waited for the beetle to be still, trembling with excitement and eagerness. The struggles of the huge form grew more feeble, and at last ceased. Burl moved forward and grasped his spear. He wrenched at it to thrust again.

In an instant the beetle had roused itself, and was exerting its last atom of strength, galvanized into action by the agony caused by Burl's seizure of the spear. A great wing-cover knocked Burl twenty feet, and flung him against the base of a mushroom, where he lay, half stunned. But then a strangely pungent scent came to his nostrils—the scent of the red mushrooms!

He staggered to his feet and fled, while behind him the gigantic beetle crashed and floundered—Burl heard a tearing and ripping sound. The insect had torn the covering of one of the red mushrooms, tightly packed with the fatal red dust. At the noise, Burl's speed was doubled, but he could still hear the frantic struggles of the dying beetle grow to a very crescendo of desperation.

The creature broke free and managed to rise in a final flight, fighting for breath and life, weakened and tortured by the spear and the horrible spores of the red mushrooms. Then it crashed suddenly to

the earth and was still. The red dust had killed it.

In time to come, Burl might learn to use the red dust as poison gas had been used by his ancestors of thirty thousand years before, but now he was frightened and alone, lost from his tribe, and with no faintest notion of how to find them. He crouched beneath a huge toadstool and waited for dawn, listening with terrified apprehension for the ripping sound that would mean the bursting of another of the red mushrooms.

Only the wing-beats of night-flying creatures came to his ears, however, and the discordant noises of the four-foot truffle-beetles as they roamed the aisles of the mushroom forests, seeking the places beneath which their instinct told them fungoid dainties awaited the courageous miner. The eternal dripping of the raindrops falling at long intervals from the overhanging clouds formed a soft obligato to the whole.

Burl listened, knowing there were red toadstools all about, but not once during the whole of the long, dark hours did the rending noise tell of a bursting fungus casting loose its freight of deadly dust upon the air. Only when day came again, and the chill dampness of the night was succeeded by the steaming humidity of the morning, did a tall pyramid of brownish-red stuff leap suddenly into the air from a ripped mushroom covering.

Then Burl stood up and looked around. Here and there, all over the whole countryside, slowly and at intervals, the cones of fatal red sprang into the air. Had Burl lived thirty thousand years earlier, he might have likened the effect to that of shells bursting from a leisurely bombardment, but as it was he saw in them only fresh and inexorable dangers added to an already peril-ridden existence.

A hundred yards from where he had hidden during the night the body of his victim lay, crumpled up and limp. Burl approached speculatively. He had come even before the ants appeared to take their toll of the carcass, and not even a buzzing flesh-fly had placed its maggots on the unresisting form.

The long, whiplike antennae lay upon the carpet of mold and rust, and the fiercely toothed legs were drawn close against the body. The many-faceted eyes stared unseeingly, and the stiff and horny wing-cases were rent and torn.

When Burl went to the other side of the dead beetle he saw something that

filled him with elation. His spear had been held between his body and the beetle's during that mad flight, and at the final crash, when Burl shot away from the fear-crazed insect, the weight of his body had forced the spear-point between the joints of the corselet and the neck. Even if the red dust had not finished the creature, the spear wound in time would have ended its life.

Burl was thrilled once more by his superlative greatness, and conveniently forgot that it was the red dust that had actually administered the *coup de grace*. It was so much more pleasant to look upon himself as the mighty slayer that he hacked off one of the barb-edged limbs to carry back to his tribe in evidence of his feat. He took the long antennae, too, as further proof.

Then he remembered that he did not know where his tribe was to be found. He had no faintest idea of the direction in which the beetle had flown. As a matter of fact, the course of the beetle had been in turn directed toward every point of the compass, and there was no possible way of telling the relation of its final landing-place to the point from which it had started.

Burl wrestled with his problem for an hour, and then gave up in disgust. He set off at random, with the leg of the huge insect flung over his shoulder and the long antennae clasped in his hand with his spear. He turned to look at his victim of the night before just before plunging into the near-by mushroom forest, and saw that it was already the center of a mass of tiny black bodies, pulling and hacking at the tough armor, and carving out great lumps of the succulent flesh to be carried to the near-by ant city.

IN THE teeming life of the insect world death is an opportunity for the survivors. There is a strangely tense and fearful competition for the bodies of the slain. There had been barely an hour of daylight in which the ants might seek for provender, yet in that little time the freshly killed beetle had been found and was being skilfully and carefully exploited. When the body of one of the larger insects fell to the ground, there was a mighty rush, a fierce race, among all the tribes of scavengers, to see who should be first.

Usually the ants had come upon the scene and were inquisitively exploring the carcass long before even the flesh-flies had arrived, who dropped their living maggots

upon the creature. The blue-bottles came still later, to daub their masses of white eggs about the delicate membranes of the eye.

And while all the preceding scavengers were at work, furtive beetles and tiny insects burrowed below the reeking body to attack the highly scented flesh from a fresh angle.

Each working independently of the others, they commonly appeared in the order of the delicacy of the sense which could lead them to a source of food, though accident could and sometimes did afford one group of workers in putrescence an advantage over the others.

Thus, sometimes a blue-bottle anticipated even the eager ants, and again the very flesh-flies dropped their squirming offspring upon a limp form that was already being undermined by white-bellied things, working in the darkness below the body.

Burl grimaced at the busy ants and buzzing flies, and disappeared into the mushroom wood. Here for a long time he moved cautiously and silently through the aisles of tangled stalks and the spongy, round heads of the fungoids. Now and then he saw one of the red toadstools, and made a wide detour around it. Twice they burst within his sight, circumscribed as his vision was by the toadstools among which he was traveling.

Each time he ran hastily to put as much distance as possible between himself and the deadly red dust. He traveled for an hour or more, looking constantly for familiar landmarks that might guide him to his tribe. He knew that if he came upon any place he had seen while with his tribe he could follow the path they had traveled and in time rejoin them.

For many hours he went on, alert for signs of danger. He was quite ignorant of the fact that there were such things as points of the compass, and though he had a distinct notion that he was not moving in a straight line, he did not realize that he was actually moving in a colossal half-circle. After walking steadily for nearly four hours he was no more than three miles in a direct line from his starting point. As it happened, his uncertainty of direction was fortunate.

The night before, the tribe had been feeding happily upon one of the immense edible mushrooms, when they heard Burl's abruptly changing cry. It had begun as a shout of triumph, and ended as a scream of fear. Then they heard hurried wing-

beats as a creature rose into the air in a scurry of desperation. The throbbing of huge wings ended in a heavy fall, followed by another flight.

Velvety darkness masked the sky, and the tribes-men could only stare off into the blackness, where their leader had vanished, and begin to tremble, wondering what they should do in a strange country with no bold chief to guide them.

He was the first man to whom the tribe had ever offered allegiance, but their submission had been all the more complete for that fact, and his loss was the more appalling.

Burl had mistaken their lack of timidity. He had thought it independence, and indifference to him. As a matter of fact, it was security because the tribe felt safe under his tutelage. Now that he had vanished, and in a fashion that seemed to mean his death, their old fears returned to them reenforced by the strangeness of their surroundings.

They huddled together and whispered their fright to one another, listening the while in panic-stricken apprehension for signs of danger. The tribes-men visualized Burl caught in fiercely toothed limbs, being rent and torn in mid air by horny, insatiable jaws, his blood falling in great spurts toward the earth below. They caught a faint, reedy cry, and shuddered, pressing closer together.

And so through the long night they waited in trembling silence. Had a hunting spider appeared among them they would not have lifted a hand to defend themselves, but would have fled despairingly, would probably have scattered and lost touch with one another, and spent the remainder of their lives as solitary fugitives, snatching fear-ridden rest in strange hiding-places.

But day came again, and they looked into each other's eyes, reading in each the selfsame panic and fear. Saya was probably the most pitiful of all the group. Burl was to have been her mate, and her face was white and drawn beyond that of any of the rest of the tribes-folk.

With the day, they did not move, but remained clustered about the huge mushroom on which they had been feeding the night before. They spoke in hushed and fearful tones, huddled together, searching all the horizon for insect enemies. Saya would not eat, but sat still, staring before her in unseeing indifference. Burl was dead.

A hundred yards from where they

crouched a red mushroom glistened in the pale light of the new day. Its tough skin was taut and bulging, resisting the pressure of the spores within. But slowly, as the morning wore on, some of the moisture that had kept the skin soft and flaccid during the night evaporated.

The skin had a strong tendency to contract, like green leather when drying. The spores within it strove to expand. The opposing forces produced a tension that grew greater and greater as more and more of the moisture was absorbed by the air. At last the skin could hold no longer.

With a ripping sound that could be heard for hundreds of feet, the tough wrapping split and tore across its top, and with a hollow, booming noise the compressed mass of deadly spores rushed into the air, making a pyramidal cloud of brown-red dust some sixty feet in height.

THE tribes-men quivered at the noise and faced the dust cloud for a fleeting instant, then ran pell-mell to escape the slowly moving tide of death as the almost imperceptible breeze wafted it slowly toward them. Men and women, boys and girls, they fled in a mad rush from the deadly stuff, not pausing to see that even as it advanced it settled slowly to the ground, nor stopping to observe its path that they might step aside and let it go safely by.

Saya fled with the rest, but without their extreme panic. She fled because the others had done so, and ran more carelessly, struggling with a half-formed idea that it did not particularly matter whether she were caught or not.

She fell slightly behind the others, without being noticed. Then quite abruptly a stone turned under her foot, and she fell headlong, striking her head violently against a second stone. Then she lay quite still while the red cloud billowed slowly toward her, drifting gently in the faint, hardly perceptible breeze.

It drew nearer and nearer, settling slowly, but still a huge and menacing mass of deadly dust. It gradually flattened out, too, so that though it had been a rounded cone at first, it flowed over the minor inequalities of the ground as a huge and tenuous leech might have crawled, sucking from all breathing creatures the life they had within them.

A hundred and fifty yards away, a hundred yards away, then only fifty yards away. From where Saya lay unconscious on the earth, eddies within the moving



The Clotho spider's nest was decorated as
no ogre's castle had ever been adorned—

mass could be seen, and the edges took on a striated appearance, telling of the curling of the dust wreaths in the larger mass of deadly powder.

The deliberate advance kept on, seeming almost purposeful. It would have seemed inevitable to draw from the unhurried, menacing movement of the poisonous stuff that some malign intelligence was concealed in it, that it was, in fact, a living creature. But when the misty edges of the cloud were no more than twenty-five yards from Saya's prostrate body a breeze from one side sprang up—a vagrant, fitful little breeze, that first halted the red cloud and threw it into confusion, and then drove it to one side, so that it passed Saya without harming her, though a single trailing wisp of dark-red mist floated very close to her.

Then for a time Saya lay still indeed, only her breast rising and falling gently with faint and irregular breaths. Her head had struck a sharp-edged stone in her fall, and a tiny pool of sticky red had gathered from the wound.

Perhaps thirty feet from where she lay, three small toadstools grew in a little clump, their bases so close together that they seemed but one. From between two of them, however, just where they parted, twin tufts of reddish threads appeared, twinkling back and forth, and in and out. As if they had given some reassuring sign, two slender antennae followed, then bulging eyes, and then a small black body which had bright-red scalloped markings upon the wing cases.

It was a tiny beetle no more than eight inches long—a burying beetle. It drew near Saya's body and clambered upon her, explored the ground by her side, moving all the time in feverish haste, and at last dived into the ground beneath her shoulder, casting back a little shower of hastily dug earth as it disappeared.

Ten minutes later another similar insect appeared, and upon the heels of the second a third. Each of them made the same hasty examination, and each dived under the still form. Presently the earth seemed to billow at a spot along Saya's side, then at another. Perhaps ten minutes after the arrival of the third beetle a little rampart had reared itself all about Saya's body, precisely following the outline of her form. Then her body moved slightly, in a number of tiny jerks, and seemed to settle perhaps half an inch from the ground.

The burying beetles were of those who

exploited the bodies of the fallen. Working from below, they excavated the earth from the under side of such prizes as they came upon, then turned upon their backs and thrust with their legs, jerking the body so it sank into the shallow excavation they had prepared.

The process would be repeated until at last the whole of the gift of fortune had sunk below the surrounding surface and the loosened earth fell in upon the top, thus completing the inhumation.

Then in the darkness the beetles would feast and rear their young, gorging upon the plentiful supply of succulent foodstuff they had hidden from jealous fellow scavengers above them.

But Saya was alive. Thirty thousand years before, when scientists examined into the habits of the burying-beetles or the sexton-beetles, they had declared that fresh meat or living meat would not be touched. They based their statement solely upon the fact that the insects (then tiny creatures indeed) did not appear until the trap-meat placed by the investigators had remained untouched for days.

Conditions had changed in thirty thousand years. The ever-present ants and the sharp-eyed flies were keen rivals of the brightly arrayed beetles. Usually the tribes of creatures who worked in the darkness below ground came after the ants had taken their toll, and the flies sipped daintily.

When Saya fell unconscious upon the ground, however it was the one accident that caused the burying-beetle to find her first, before the ants had come to tear the flesh from her slender, soft-skinned body. She breathed gently and irregularly, her face drawn with the sorrow of the night before, while desperately hurrying beetles swarmed beneath her body, channeling away the earth so that she would sink lower and lower into the ground.

An inch, and a long wait. Then she sank slowly a second inch. The bright red tufts of thread appeared again, and a beetle made his way to the open air. He moved hastily about, inspecting the progress of the work. He dived below again. Another inch, and after a long time another.

BURL stepped out from a group of overshadowing toadstools and halted. He cast his eyes over the landscape, and was struck by its familiarity. It was, in point of fact, very near the spot he had left the night before, in pursuit of a colossal wounded beetle.

Burl moved back and forth, trying to account for the sensation of recognition, and then trying to approximate the place from which he had last seen it.

He passed within fifty feet of the spot where Saya lay, now half buried in the ground. The loose earth cast up about her body had begun to fall in little rivulets upon her. One of her shoulders was already screened from view.

Burl passed on, unseeing. He was puzzling over the direction from which he had seen the particular section of countryside before him. Perhaps a little farther on he would come to the place. He hurried a little. In a moment he recognized his location. There was the great edible mushroom, half broken away, from which the tribe had been feeding. There were the mining-bee burrows.

His feet stirred up a fine dust, and he stopped short. A red mushroom had covered the earth with a thin layer of its impalpable, deadly powder. Burl understood why the tribe had gone, and a cold sweat came upon his body. Was Saya safe, or had the whole tribe succumbed to the poisonous stuff? Had they all, men and women and children, died in convulsions of gasping strangulation?

He hurried to retrace his footsteps. There was a fragment of mushroom on the ground. There was a spear, cast away by one of the tribes-men in his flight. Burl broke into a run.

The little excavation into which Saya was sinking, inch by inch, was all of twenty-five feet to the right of the path. Burl dashed on, frantic with anxiety about the tribe, but most of all about Saya. Saya's body quivered and sank a fraction more into the earth.

Half a dozen little rivulets of dirt were tumbling upon her body now. In a matter of minutes she would be hidden from view.

Burl ran madly past her, too busy searching the mushroom thickets before him with his eyes to dream of looking upon the ground.

Twenty yards from a huge toadstool thicket a noise arrested him sharply. There was a crashing and breaking of the brittle, spongy growths. Twin tapering antennae appeared, and then a monster beetle lurched into the open space, its horrible, gaping jaws stretched wide.

It was all of eight feet long, and its body was held up from the ground by six crooked, saw-toothed limbs. Its huge multiple eyes stared with machinelike preoccupation at the world.

It advanced deliberately, with a clanking and clashing as of a hideous machine. Burl fled on the instant, running as madly away from the beetle as he had a moment before been running toward it.

A little depression in the earth was before him. He did not swerve, but made to leap it. As he shot over it, however, the glint of pink skin caught his eye, and there was impressed upon his brain with photographic completeness the picture of Saya, lying limp and helpless, sinking slowly into the ground, with tiny rills of earth falling down the sides of the excavation upon her. It seemed to Burl's eye that she quivered slightly as he looked.

There was a terrific struggle within Burl. Behind him the colossal meat-eating beetle. Below him Saya, whom he loved. There was certain death lurching toward him on evilly glittering legs, and there was life for his race and tribe lying in the shallow pit.

He turned, aware with a sudden reckless glow that he was throwing away his life, aware that he was deliberately giving himself over to death, and stood on the side of the little pit nearest the great beetle, his puny spear held defiantly at the ready.

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In his left hand he held just such a leg as those which bore the living creature toward him. He had torn it from the body of just such a monster but a few hours ago, a monster in whose death he had had a share. With a yell of insane defiance, he flung the fiercely toothed limb at his advancing opponent.

The sharp teeth cut into the base of one of the beetle's antennae, and it ducked clumsily, then seized the missile in its fierce jaws and crushed it in a frenzy of rage. There was meat within it, sweet and juicy meat that pleased the beetle's palate.

It forgot the man, standing there, waiting for death. It crunched the missile that had attacked it, eating the palatable contents of the horny armor, confusing the blow with the object that had delivered it, and evidently satisfied that an enemy had been conquered and was being devoured. A moment later it turned and lumbered off to investigate another mushroom thicket.

And Burl turned quickly and dragged Saya's limp form from the grave that had been prepared for it by the busy insect scavengers. Earth fell from her shoulders, from her hair, and from the mass of yellow fur about her middle, and three little beetles with black and red markings scurried in terrific haste for cover, while Burl bore Saya to a resting-place of soft mold.

Burl was an ignorant savage, and to him Saya's deathlike unconsciousness was like death itself, but dumb misery smote him, and he laid her down gently, while tears came to his eyes and he called her name again and again in an agony of grief.

For an hour he sat there beside her, a man so lately pleased with himself above all creatures for having slain one huge beetle and put another to flight, as he would have looked upon it, a broken-hearted, little pink-skinned man, weeping like a child, hunched up and bowed over with sorrow.

Then Saya slowly opened her eyes and stirred weakly.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOREST OF DEATH

THEY were oblivious to everything but each other, Saya resting in still half-incredulous happiness against Burl's shoulder while he told her in little, jerky sentences of his pursuit of the colossal flying-beetle, of his search for the tribe,

and then his discovery of her apparently lifeless body.

When he spoke of the monster that had lurched from the mushroom thicket, and of the desperation with which he had faced it, Saya pressed close and looked at him with wondering and wonderful eyes. She could understand his willingness to die, believing her dead. But a little while before, she had felt the same indifference to life.

A timid, frightened whisper roused them from their absorption, and they looked up. One of their tribes-men stood upon one foot some distance away, staring at them, almost convinced that he looked upon the living dead. A sudden movement on the part of either of them would have sent him in a panic back into the mushroom forest. Two or three blond heads bobbed and vanished among the tangled stalks. Wide and astonished eyes gazed at the two they had believed prey of malignant creatures.

The tribe had come slowly back to the mushroom they had been eating, leaderless, and convinced that Saya had fallen a victim to the deadly dust. Instead, they found her sitting by the side of their chief, apparently restored to them in some miraculous fashion.

Burl spoke, and the pink-skinned people came timorously from their hiding-places. They approached warily and formed a half-circle before the seated pair. Burl spoke again, and presently one of the bravest dared approach and touch him. Instantly a babble of the crude and labial language spoken by the tribe broke out. Awed questions and exclamations of thankfulness, then curious interrogations filled the air.

Burl, for once, showed some common sense. Instead of telling them now in his usual vainglorious fashion of the adventures he had undergone, he merely cast down the two long and tapering antennae from the flying beetle that he had torn from its dead body. They looked at them, and recognized their origin. Amazement and admiration showed upon their faces. Then Burl rose and abruptly ordered two of the men to make a chair of their hands for Saya. She was weak from the effects of the blow she had received. The two men humbly advanced and did as they were bid.

Then the march was taken up again, more slowly than before, because of Saya as a burden, but none the less steadily. Burl led his people across the country,

marching in advance and with every nerve alert for signs of danger, but with more confidence and less timidity than he had ever displayed before.

All that noontime and that afternoon they filed steadily along, the tribes-folk keeping in a compact group close behind Burl. The man who had thrown away his spear had recovered it on an order from Burl, and the little party fairly bristled with weapons, though Burl knew well that they were liable to be cast away as impedimenta if flight should be necessary.

He was determined that his people should learn to fight the great creatures about them, instead of depending upon their legs for escape. He had led them in an attack upon great slugs, but they were defenseless creatures, incapable of more dangerous maneuvers than spasmodic jerkings of their great bodies.

The next time danger should threaten them, and especially if it came while their new awe of him held good, he was resolved to force them to join him in fighting it.

He had not long to wait for an opportunity to strengthen the spirit of his followers by a successful battle. The clouds toward the west were taking on a dull red hue, which was the nearest to a sunset that was ever seen in the world of Burl's experience, when a bumblebee droned over their heads, making for its hive.

The little group of people on the ground looked up and saw a scanty load of pollen packed in the stiff bristles of the insect's hind legs. The bees of the world had a hard time securing food upon the nearly flowerless planet, but this one had evidently made a find. Its crop was nearly filled with hard-gathered, viscous honey designed for the hival store.

It sped onward, heavily, its almost transparent wings mere blurs in the air from the rapidity of their vibration. Burl saw its many-faceted eyes staring before it in worried preoccupation as it soared in laborious speed over his head, some fifty feet up.

He dropped his glance, and then his eyes lighted with excitement. A slender-bodied wasp was shooting upward from an ambush it had found in a thicket of toadstools. It darted swiftly and gracefully upon the bee, which swerved and tried to flee. The droning buzz of the bee's wings rose to a higher note as it strove to increase its speed. The more delicately formed wasp headed the clumsier insect back.

The bee turned again and fled in terror. Each of the insects was slightly more than four feet in length, but the bee was very much the heavier, and it could not attain the speed of which the wasp was capable.

The graceful form of the hunting insect rapidly overhauled its fleeing prey, and the wasp dashed in and closed with the bee at a point almost over the heads of the tribes-men. In a clawing, biting tangle of thrashing, transparent wings and black bodies, the two creatures tumbled to the earth. They fell perhaps thirty yards from where Burl stood watching.

Over and over the two insects rolled, now one uppermost, and then the other. The bee was struggling desperately to insert her sting in the more supple body of her adversary. She writhed and twisted, fighting with jaw and mandible, wing and claw.

The wasp was uppermost, and the bee lay on her back, fighting in panic-stricken desperation. The wasp saw an opening, her jaws darted in, and there was an instant of confusion. Then suddenly the bee, dazed, was upright with the wasp upon her. A movement too quick for the eye to follow—and the bee collapsed. The wasp had bitten her in the neck where all the nerve-cords passed, and the bee suddenly was dead.

Burl waited a moment more, aflame with excitement. He knew, as did all the tribes-folk, what might happen next. When he saw the second act of the tragedy well begun, Burl snapped quick and harsh orders to his spear-armed men, and they followed him in a wavering line, their weapons tightly clutched.

Knowing the habits of the insects as they were forced to know them, they knew that the venture was one of the least dangerous they could undertake with fighting creatures the size of the wasp, but the idea of attacking the great creatures whose sharp stings could annihilate any of them with a touch, the mere thought of taking the initiative was appalling. Had their awe of Burl been less complete they would not have dreamed of following him.

THE second act of the tragedy had begun. The bee had been slain by the wasp, a carnivorous insect normally, but the wasp knew that sweet honey was concealed in the half-filled crop of the bee. Had the bee arrived safely at the hive, the sweet and sticky liquid would have been disgorged and added to the hival store. Now, though the bee's journey was ended

and his flesh was to be crunched and devoured by the wasp, the honey was the first object of the pirate's solicitude.* The dead insect was rolled over upon its back, and with eager haste the slayer began to exploit the body.

Burl and his men were creeping nearer, but with a gesture Burl bade them halt for a moment. The wasp's first move was to force the disgorgement of the honey from the bee's crop, and with feverish eagerness it pressed upon the limp body until the shining, sticky liquid appeared. Then the wasp began in ghoulis ecstasy to lick up the sweet stuff, utterly absorbed in the feast.

Many thousands of years before, the absorption of the then tiny insect had been noticed when engaged in a similar feat, and it was recorded in books moldered into dust long ages before Burl's birth that its rapture was so great that it had been known to fall a victim to a second bandit while engaged in the horrible banquet.

Burl had never read the book, but he had been told that the pirate would continue its feast even though seized by a greater enemy, unable to tear itself from the nectar gathered by the creature it had slain.

The tribes-men waited until the wasp had begun its orgy, licking up the toothsome stuff disgorged by its dead prey. It ate in gluttonous haste, blind to all sights, deaf to all sounds, able to think of nothing, conceive of nothing, but the delights of the liquid it was devouring.

At a signal the tribes-men darted forward. They wavered when near the slender-waisted gourmet, however, and Burl was the first to thrust his spear with all his strength into the thinly armored body.

Then the others took courage. A short, horny spear penetrated the very vitals of the wasp. A club fell with terrific impact upon the slender waist. There was a crackling, and the long, spidery limbs quivered and writhed, while the tribes-men fell back in fear, but without cause.

Burl struck again, and the wasp fell into two writhing halves, helpless for harm. The pink-skinned men danced in triumph, and the women and children ventured near, delighted.

Only Burl noticed that even as the wasp was dying, sundered and pierced with spears, its slender tongue licked out in one last, ecstatic taste of the nectar that had been its undoing.

Burdened with the pollen-covered legs of the giant bee, and filled with the meat from choice portions of the wasp's muscular limbs, the tribe resumed its journey. This time Burl had men behind him, still timid, still prone to flee at the slightest alarm, but infinitely more dependable than they had been before.

They had attacked and slain a wasp whose sting would have killed any of them. They had done battle under the leadership of Burl, whose spear had struck the first blow. Henceforth, they were sharers, in a mild way, of his transcendent glory, and henceforth, they were more like followers of a mighty chief and less like spineless worshipers of a demigod whose feats they were too timid to emulate.

That night they hid among a group of giant puffballs, feasting on the loads of meat they had carried thus far with them. Burl watched them now without jealousy of their good spirits. He and Saya sat a little apart, happy to be near each other, speaking in low tones. After a time darkness fell, and the tribes-folk were shapeless bodies speaking in voices that grew drowsy and were silent. The black forms of the toadstool heads and huge puffballs were but darker against a dark sky.

The nightly rain began to fall, drop by drop, drop by drop, upon the damp and humid earth. Only Burl remained awake for a little while, and his last waking thought was of pride, disinterested pride. He had the first reward of the ruler, gratification in the greatness of his people.

The red mushrooms had continued to show their glistening heads, though Burl thought they were less numerous than in the territory from which the tribe had fled. All along the route now to the right, now to the left, they had burst and sent their masses of deadly dust into the air.

Many times the tribes-folk had been forced to make a detour to avoid a slowly spreading cloud of death-dealing spores. Once or twice their escapes had been narrow indeed, but so far there had been no deaths.

BURL had observed that the mushrooms normally burst only in the daytime, and for a while had thought of causing his followers to do their journeying in the night. Only the obvious disadvantages of such a course—the difficulty of discovering food, and the prowling spiders that roamed in the darkness—had prevented him. The idea still stayed with him, however, and

* The pirate is the *philanthus Apivorus*.

two days after the fight with the hunting wasp he put it in practise.

The tribe came to the top of a small rise in the ground. For an hour they had been marching and counter-marching to avoid the suddenly appearing clouds of dust. Once they had been nearly hemmed in, and only by mad sprinting did they escape when three of the dull red clouds seemed to flow together, closing three sides of a circle.

They came to the little hillock and halted. Before them stretched a plain all of four miles wide, colored a brownish brick-red by masses of mushrooms. They had seen mushroom forests before, and knew of the dangers they presented, but there was none so deadly as the plain before them. To right and left it stretched as far as the eye could see, but far away on its farther edge Burl caught a glimpse of flowing water.

Over the plain itself a dull red haze seemed to float. It was nothing more or less than a cloud of the deadly spores, dispersed and indefinite, constantly replenished by the freshly bursting red mushrooms.

While the people stood and watched a dozen thick columns of dust rose into the air from scattered points here and there upon the plain, settling slowly again, but leaving behind them enough of their finely divided substance to keep the thin red haze over the whole plain in its original, deadly state.

Burl had seen single red mushrooms before, and even small thickets of two and three, but here was a plain of millions, literally millions upon millions of the malignant growths. Here was one fungoid forest through whose aisles no monster beetles stalked, and above whose shadowed depths no brightly colored butterflies fluttered in joyous abandon. There were no loud-voiced crickets singing in its hiding-places, nor bodies of eagerly foraging ants searching inquisitively for bits of food. It was a forest of death, still and silent, quiet and motionless save for the sullen columns of red dust that ever and again shot upward from the torn and ragged envelope of a bursting mushroom.

Burl and his people watched in wonderment and dismay, but presently a high resolve came to Burl. The mushrooms never burst at night, and the deadly dust from a subsided cloud was not deadly in the morning. As a matter of fact the rain that fell every night made it no more than a sodden, thin film of reddish mud by

daybreak, mud which dried and caked.

Burl did not know what occurred, but knew the result. At night or in early morning, the danger from the red mushrooms was slight. Therefore he would lead his people through the very jaws of death that night. He would lead them through the deadly aisles of this, the forest of malignant growths, the place of lurking annihilation.

It was an act of desperation, and the resolution to carry it through left Burl in a state of mind that kept him from observing one thing that would have ended all the struggles of his tribe at once. Perhaps a quarter-mile from the edge of the red forest three or four giant cabbages grew, thrusting their colossal leaves upward toward the sky.

And on the cabbages a dozen lazy slugs fed leisurely, ignoring completely the red haze that was never far from them and sometimes covered them. Burl saw them, but the oddity of their immunity from the effects of the red dust did not strike him. He was fighting to keep his resolution intact. If he had only realized the significance of what he saw, however—

The slugs were covered with a thick, soft fur. The tribes-people wore garments of that same material. The fur protected the slugs, and could have made the tribe immune to the deadly red dust if they had only known. The slugs breathed through a row of tiny holes upon their backs, as the mature insects breathed through holes upon the bottom of their abdomens, and the soft fur formed a mat of felt which arrested the fine particles of deadly dust, while allowing the pure air to pass through. It formed, in effect, a natural gas-mask which the tribes-men should have adopted, but which they did not discover or invent.

* * *

The remainder of that day they waited in a curious mixture of resolve and fear. The tribe was rapidly reaching a point where it would follow Burl over a thousand-foot cliff, and it needed some such blind confidence to make them prepare to go through the forest of the million deadly mushrooms.

The waiting was a strain, but the actual journey was a nightmare. Burl knew that the toadstools did not burst of themselves during the night, but he knew that the beetle on which he had taken his involuntary ride had crashed against one in the darkness, and that the fatal dust had

poured out. He warned his people to be cautious, and led them down the slope of the hill through the blackness.

For hours they stumbled on in utter darkness, with the pungent, acrid odor of the red growths constantly in their nostrils. They put out their hands and touched the flabby, damp stalks of the monstrous things. They stumbled and staggered against the leathery skins of the malignant fungoids.

Death was all about them. At no time during all the dark hours of the night was there a moment when they could not reach out their hands and touch a fungus growth that might burst at their touch and fill the air with poisonous dust, so that all of them would die in gasping, choking agony.

And worst of all, before half an hour was past they had lost all sense of direction, so that they stumbled on blindly through the utter blackness, not knowing whether they were headed toward the river that might be their salvation or were wandering hopelessly deeper and deeper into the silent depths of the forest of strangled things.

When day came again and the mushrooms sent their columns of fatal dust into the air would they gasp and fight for breath in the red haze that would float like a tenuous cloud above the forest? Would they breathe in flames of firelike torment and die slowly, or would the red dust be merciful and slay them quickly?

They felt their way like blind folk, devoid of hope and curiously unafraid. Only their hearts were like heavy, cold weights in their breasts, and they shouldered aside the swollen sacs of the red mushrooms with a singular apathy as they followed Burl slowly through the midst of death.

MANY times in their journeying they knew that dead creatures were near by—moths, perhaps, that had blundered into a distended growth which had burst upon the impact and killed the thing that had touched it.

No busy insect scavengers ventured into this plain of silence to salvage the bodies, however. The red haze preserved the sanctuary of malignance inviolate. During the day no creature might hope to approach its red aisles and dust-carpeted clearings, and at night the slow-dropping rain fell only upon the rounded heads of the mushrooms.

In all the space of the forest, only the little band of hopeless people, plodding on behind Burl in the velvet blackness, cal-

lously rubbed shoulders with death in the form of the red and glistening mushrooms. Over all the dank expanse of the forest, the only sound was the dripping of the slow and sodden rainfall that began at nightfall and lasted until day came again.

The sky began to grow faintly gray as the sun rose behind the banks of overhanging clouds. Burl stopped short and uttered what was no more than a groan. He was in a little circular clearing, and the twisted, monstrous forms of the deadly mushrooms were all about. There was not yet enough light for colors to appear, and the hideous, almost obscene shapes of the loathsome growths on every side showed only as mocking, leering silhouettes as of malicious demons rejoicing at the coming doom of the gray-faced huddled tribesfolk.

Burl stood still, drooping in discouragement upon his spear, the feathery moth's antennae bound upon his forehead shadowed darkly against the graying sky. Soon the mushrooms would begin to burst—

Then, suddenly, he lifted his head, encouragement and delight upon his features. He had heard the ripple of running water. His followers looked at him with dawning hope. Without a word, Burl began to run, and they followed him more slowly. His voice came back to them, in a shout of delight.

Then they, too, broke into a jog-trot. In a moment they had emerged from the thick tangle of brownish red stalks and were upon the banks of a wide and swiftly running river, the same river whose gleam Burl had caught the day before from the farther side of the mushroom forest.

Once before Burl had floated down a river upon a mushroom raft. Then his journey had been involuntary and unlooked for. He had been carried far from his tribe and far from Saya, and his heart had been filled with desolation.

Now he viewed the swiftly running current with eager delight. He cast his eyes up and down the bank. Here and there the river-bank rose in a low bluff, and thick shelf-growths stretched out above the water.

Burl was busy in an instant, stabbing the hard growths with his spear and striving to wrench them free. The tribesmen stared at him, uncomprehending, but at an order from him they did likewise.

Soon a dozen thick masses of firm, light fungus lay upon the shore where it shelved gently into the water. Burl began to explain what they were to do, but one or

two of the men dared remonstrate, saying humbly that they were afraid to part from him. If they might embark upon the same thing with him, they would be safe, but otherwise they were afraid.

Burl cast an apprehensive glance at the sky. Day was coming rapidly on. Soon the red mushrooms would begin to shoot their columns of deadly dust into the air. This was no time to pause and deliberate. Then Saya spoke softly.

Burl listened, and made a mighty sacrifice. He took his gorgerous velvet cloak from his shoulders—it was made from the wing of a great moth—and tore it into a dozen long, irregular pieces, tearing it along the lines of the sinews that reinforced it. He planted his spear upright in the largest piece of shelf-fungus and caused his followers to do likewise, then fastened the strips of sinew and velvet to his spear-shaft, and ordered them to do the same to the other spears.

In a matter of minutes the dozen tiny rafts were bobbing on the water, clustered about the larger, central bit. Then, one by one, the tribes-folk took their places, and Burl shoved off.

The agglomeration of unseaworthy bits of shelf-fungus moved slowly out from the shore until the current caught it. Burl and Saya sat upon the central bit, with the other trustful but somewhat frightened pink-skinned people all about them. And, as they began to move between the mushroom-lined banks of the river and the mist of the night began to lift from its surface, far in the interior of the forest of the red fungoids a column of sullen red leaped into the air. The first of the malignant growths had cast its cargo of poisonous dust into the still humid atmosphere.

The conelike column spread out and grew thin, but even after it had sunk into the earth, a reddish taint remained in the air about the place where it had been. The deadly red haze that hung all through the day over the red forest was in process of formation.

But by that time the unstable fungus rafts were far down the river, bobbing and twirling in the current, with the wide-eyed people upon them gazing in wonderment at the shores as they glided by. The red mushrooms grew less numerous upon the banks. Other growths took their places. Molds and rusts covered the ground as grass had done in ages past. Toadstools showed their creamy rounded heads. Malformed things with swollen

trunks and branches in strange mockery of the trees they had superseded made their appearance, and once the tribes-men saw the dark bulk of a hunting spider outlined for a moment upon the bank.

ALL the long day they rode upon the current, while the insect life that had been absent in the neighborhood of the forest of death made its appearance again. Bees once more droned overhead, and wasps and dragon-flies. Four-inch mosquitoes made their appearance, to be fought off by the tribes-folk with lusty blows, and glittering beetles and shining flies, whose bodies glittered with a metallic luster buzzed and flew above the water.

Huge butterflies once more were seen, dancing above the steaming, festering earth in an apparent ecstasy from the mere fact of existence, and all the thousand and one forms of insect life that flew and crawled, and swam and dived, showed themselves to the tribes-men on the raft.

Water-beetles came lazily to the surface, to snap with sudden energy at mosquitoes busily laying their eggs in the nearly stagnant water by the river-banks. Burl pointed out to Saya, with some excitement, their silver breast-plates that shone as they darted under the water again. And the shell-covered boats of a thousand caddis-worms floated in the eddies and back-waters of the stream. Water-boatmen and whirligigs—almost alone among insects in not having shared in the general increase of size—danced upon the oily waves.

The day wore on as the shores flowed by. The tribes-folk ate of their burdens of mushroom and meat, and drank from the fresh water of the river. Then, when afternoon came, the character of the country about the stream changed. The banks fell away, and the current slackened. The shores became indefinite, and the river merged into a swamp, a vast swamp from which a continual muttering came which the tribes-men heard for a long time before they saw the swamp itself.

The water seemed to turn dark, as black mud took the place of the clay that had formed its bed, and slowly, here and there, then more frequently, floating green things that were stationary, and did not move with the current, appeared. They were the leaves of water-lilies, that had remained with the giant cabbages and a very few other plants in the midst of a fungoid world. The green leaves were twelve feet across, and any one of them

would have floated the whole of Burl's tribe.

Presently they grew numerous so that the channel was made narrow, and the mushroom rafts passed between rows of the great leaves, with here and there a colossal, waxen blossom in which three men might have hidden, and which exhaled an almost overpowering fragrance into the air.

And the muttering that had been heard far away grew in volume to an intermittent, incredibly deep bass roar. It seemed to come from the banks on either side, and actually was the discordant croaking of the giant frogs, grown to eight feet in length, which lived and loved in the huge swamp, above which golden butterflies danced in ecstasy, and which the transcendently beautiful blossoms of the water-lilies filled with fragrance.

The swamp was a place of riotous life. The green bodies of the colossal frogs—perched upon the banks in strange immobility and only opening their huge mouths to emit their thunderous croakings blended queerly with the vivid color of the water-lily leaves. Dragon-flies fluttered in their swift and angular flight above the black and reeking mud. Green-bottles and bluebottles and a hundred other species of flies buzzed busily in the misty air, now and then falling prey to the licking tongues of the frogs.

Bees droned overhead in flight less preoccupied and worried than elsewhere, flitting from blossom to blossom of the tremendous water-lilies, loading their crops with honey and the bristles of their legs with yellow pollen.

Everywhere over the mushroom-covered world the air was never quite free from mist, and the steaming exhalations of the pools, but here in the swamp the atmosphere was so heavily laden with moisture that the bodies of the tribes-folk were covered with glistening droplets, while the wide, flat water-lily leaves glittered like platters of jewels from the "steam" that had condensed upon their upper surfaces.

The air was full of shining bodies and iridescent wings. Myriads of tiny midges—no more than three or four inches across their wings—danced above the slow-flowing water. And butterflies of every imaginable shade and color, from the most delicate lavender to the most vivid carmine, danced and fluttered, alighting upon the white water-lilies to sip daintily of their nectar, skimming the surface of the

water, enamored of their brightly tinted reflections.

And the pink-skinned tribes-folk, floating through this fairy-land on their mushroom rafts, gazed with wide eyes at the beauty about them, and drew in great breaths of the intoxicating fragrance of the great white flowers that floated like elfin boats upon the dark water.

CHAUTER V

OUT OF BONDAGE

THE mist was heavy and thick, and through it the flying creatures darted upon their innumerable businesses, visible for an instant in all their colorful beauty, then melting slowly into indefiniteness as they sped away. The tribes-folk on the clustered rafts watched them as they darted overhead, and for hours the little squadron of fungoid vessels floated slowly through the central channel of the marsh.

The river had split into innumerable currents which meandered purposefully through the glistening black mud of the swamp, but after a long time they seemed to reassemble, and Burl could see what had caused the vast morass.

Hills appeared on either side of the stream, which grew higher and steeper, as if the foothills of a mountain chain. Then Burl turned and peered before him.

Rising straight from the low hills, a wall of high mountains rose toward the sky, and the low-hanging clouds met their rugged flanks but half-way toward the peaks. To right and left the mountains melted into the tenuous haze, but ahead they were firm and stalwart, rising and losing their heights in the cloud-banks.

They formed a rampart which might have guarded the edge of the world, and the river flowed more and more rapidly in a deeper and narrower current toward a cleft between two rugged giants that promised to swallow the water and all that might swim in its depths or float upon its surface.

Tall, steep hills rose from either side of the swift current, their sides covered with flaking molds of an exotic shade of rose-pink, mingled here and there with lavender and purple. Rocks, not hidden beneath a coating of fungus, protruded their angular heads from the hillsides. The river valley became a gorge, and then little more than a canyon, with beetling sides that frowned down upon the swift current beneath.

The small flotilla passed beneath an overhanging cliff, and then shot out to where the cliffsides drew apart and formed a deep amphitheater, whose top was hidden in the clouds.

And across this open space, on cables all of five hundred feet long, a banded spider had flung its web. It was a monster of its tribe. Its belly was swollen to a diameter of no less than two yards, and its outstretched legs would have touched eight points of a ten-yard circle.

It was hanging motionless in the center of the colossal snare as the little group of tribes-folk passed underneath, and they saw the broad bands of yellow and black and silver upon its abdomen. They shivered as their little craft were swept below.

Then they came to a little valley, where yellow sand bordered the river and there was a level space of a hundred yards on either side before the steep sides of the mountains began their rise. Here the cluster of mushroom rafts were caught in a little eddy and drawn out of the swiftly flowing current.

Soon there was a soft and yielding jar. The rafts had grounded.

Led by Burl, the tribes-men waded ashore, wonderment and excitement in their hearts. Burl searched all about with his eyes. Toadstools and mushrooms, rusts and molds, even giant puff-balls grew in the little valley, but of the deadly red mushrooms he saw none.

A single bee was buzzing slowly over the tangled thickets of fungoids, and the loud voice of a cricket came in a deafening burst of sound, reechoed from the hillsides, but save for the farflung web of the banded spider a mile or more away, there was no sign of the deadly creatures that preyed upon men.

Burl began to climb the hillside with his tribes-folk after him. For an hour they toiled upward, through confused masses of fungus of almost every species. Twice they stopped to seize upon edible fungi and break them into masses they could carry, and once they paused and made a wide detour around a thicket from which there came a stealthy rustling.

Burl believed that the rustling was merely the sound of a moth or butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, but was willing to take no chances. He and his people circled the mushroom thicket and mounted higher.

And at last, perhaps six or seven hundred feet above the level of the river, they

came upon a little plateau, going back into a small pocket in the mountainside. Here they found many of the edible fungoids, and no less than a dozen of the giant cabbages, on whose broad leaves many furry grubs were feeding steadily in placid contentment with themselves and all the world.

A small stream bubbled up from a tiny basin and ran swiftly across the plateau, and there were dense thickets of toadstools in which the tribes-men might find secure hiding-places. The tribe would make itself a new home here.

That night they hid among inextricably tangled masses of mushrooms, and saw with amazement the multitude of creatures that ventured forth in the darkness. All the valley and the plateau was illumined by the shining beacons of huge but graceful fireflies, who darted here and there in delight and—apparently—in security.

Upon the earth below, also, many tiny lights glowed. The larvae of the fireflies crawled slowly but happily over the fungus-covered mountainside, and great glow-worms clambered upon the shining tops of the toadstools and rested there, twin broad bands of bluish fire burning brightly within their translucent bodies.

They were the females of the firefly race, which never attain to legs and wings, but crawl always upon the earth, merely enlarged creatures in the forms of their own larvae. Moths soared overhead with mighty, throbbing wing-beats, and all the world seemed a paradise which no evil creatures roamed in search of prey.

And a strange thing came to pass. Soon after darkness fell upon the earth and the steady drip-drip of the rain began, a musical tinkling sound was heard which grew in volume, and became a deep-toned roar, which reechoed and reverberated from the opposite hillsides until it was like melodious and long-continued thunder. For a long time the people were puzzled and a little afraid, but Burl took courage and investigated.

He emerged from the concealing thicket and peered cautiously about, seeing nothing. Then he dared move in the direction of the sound, and the gleam from a dozen fireflies showed him a sheet of water pouring over a vertical cliff to the river far below.

The rainfall, gentle as it was, when gathered from all the broad expanse of the mountainside, made a river of its own, which had scoured out a bed, and poured

down each night to plunge in a smother of spray and foam through six hundred feet of empty space to the swiftly flowing river in the center of the valley. It was this sound that had puzzled the tribes-folk, and this sound that lulled them to sleep when Burl at last came back to allay their fears.

The next day they explored their new territory with a boldness of which they would not have been capable a month before. They found a single great trap-door in the earth, sure sign of the burrow of a monster spider, and Burl resolved that before many days the spider would be dealt with. He told his tribes-men so, and they nodded their heads solemnly instead of shrinking back in terror as they would have done not long since.

THE tribe was rapidly becoming a group of men, capable of taking the aggressive. They needed Burl's rash leadership, and for many generations they would need bold leaders, but they were infinitely superior to the timid, rabbitlike creatures they had been. They bore spears, and they had used them. They had seen danger, and had blindly followed Burl through the forest of strangled things instead of fleeing weakly from the peril.

The exploration of their new domain yielded many wonders and a few advantages. The tribes-folk found that the nearest ant-city was miles away, and that the small insects would trouble them but rarely. (The nightly rush of water down the sloping sides of the mountain made it undesirable for the site of an ant colony.)

And best of all, back in the little pocket in the mountainside, they found old and disused cells of hunting wasps. The walls of the pocket were made of soft sandstone with alternate layers of clay, and the wasps had found digging easy.

There were a dozen or more burrows, the shaft of each some four feet in diameter and going back into the cliff for nearly thirty feet, where they branched out into a number of cells. Each of the cells had once held a grub which had grown fat and large upon its hoard of paralyzed crickets, and then had broken a way to the outer world to emerge as a full-grown wasp.

Now, however, the laboriously tunneled caverns would furnish a hiding-place for the tribe of men, a far more secure hiding-place than the center of the mushroom thickets. And furthermore, a hiding-place which, because more permanent, would gradually become a possession for which the men would fight.

It is a curious thing that the advancement of a people from a state of savagery and continual warfare to civilization and continual peace is not made by the elimination of the causes of strife, but by the addition of new objects and ideals, in defense of which people will offer battle.

A single chrysalis was found securely anchored to the underside of a rock-shelf, and Burl detached it with great labor and carried it into one of the burrows, though the task was one that was almost beyond his strength. He desired the butterfly that would emerge for his own use.

He preempted, too, a solitary burrow a little distant from the others, and made preparations for an event that was destined to make his plans wiser and more far-reaching than before.

His followers were equally busy with their various burrows, gathering stores of soft growth for their couches.

The tribe had been upon the plateau for nearly a week when Burl found that stirrings and strugglings were going on within the huge cocoon he had laid close beside the burrow he had chosen for his own. He cast aside all other work, and waited patiently for the thing he knew was about to happen. He squatted on his haunches beside the huge, oblong cylinder, his spear in his hand, waiting patiently. From time to time he nibbled a bit of edible mushroom.

The sound of scrapings came from the closed cocoon, caked upon its outer side with dirt and mold. The scraping and scratching continued, and presently a tiny hole showed, which rapidly enlarged. Tiny jaws and a dry, glazed skin became visible, the skin looking as if it had been varnished with many coats of brown shellac. Then a malformed head forced its way through and stopped.

All motion ceased for a matter of perhaps half an hour, and then the strange, blind head seemed to become distended, to be swelling. A crack appeared along its upper part, which lengthened and grew wide. And then a second head appeared from within the first.

This head was soft and downy, and a slender proboscis was coiled beneath its lower edge like the trunk of one of the elephants that had been extinct for many thousand years. Soft scales and fine hairs alternated to cover it, and two immense, many-faceted eyes gazed mildly at the world on which it was looking for the first time. The color of the whole was purest milky-white.

Slowly and painfully, assisting itself by slender, colorless legs that seemed strangely feeble and trembling, a butterfly crawled from the cocoon. Its wings were folded and lifeless, without substance or color, but the body was a perfect white. The butterfly moved a little distance from its cocoon and slowly unfurled its wings. With the action, life seemed to be pumped into them from some hidden spring in the insect's body. The slender antennae spread out and wavered gently in the warm air. The wings were becoming broad expanses of snowy velvet.

A trace of eagerness seemed to come into the butterfly's actions. Somewhere there in the valley sweet food and joyous companions awaited it. Fluttering above the fungoids of the hillsides, surely there was a mate, surely upon those gigantic patches of green, half hidden in the haze, there would be laid tiny golden eggs that in time would hatch into small, fat grubs.

Strength came to the butterfly's limbs. Its wings were spread and closed with a new assurance. It spread them once more, and raised them to make the first flight of this new existence in a marvelous world—Burl struck home with his spear.

The delicate limbs struggled in agony, the wings fluttered helplessly, and in a little while the butterfly lay still upon the fungus-carpeted earth, and Burl leaned over to strip away the great wings of snow-white velvet, to sever the long and slender antennae, and then to call his tribes-men and bid them share in the food he had for them.

AND there was a feast that afternoon. The tribes-men sat about the white carcass, cracking open the delicate limbs for the meat within them, and Burl made sure that Saya secured the choicest bits. The tribes-men were happy. Then one of the children of the tribe stretched a hand aloft and pointed up the mountainside.

Coming slowly down the slanting earth was a long, narrow file of living animals. For a time the file seemed to be but one creature, but Burl's keen eyes soon saw that there were many. They were caterpillars, each one perhaps ten feet long, each with a tiny black head armed with sharp jaws, and with dull red fur upon their backs. The rear of the procession was lost in the mist of the low-hanging cloud-banks that covered the mountainside some two thousand feet above the plateau, but the foremost was no more than three hundred yards away.

Slowly and solemnly the procession came on, the black head of the second touching the rear of the first, and the head of the third touching the rear of the second. In faultless alignment, without intervals, they moved steadily down the slanting side of the mountain.

Save the first, they seemed absorbed in maintaining their perfect formation, but the leader constantly rose upon his hinder half and waved the fore part of his body in the air, first to the right and then to the left, as if searching out the path he would follow.

The tribes-folk watched in amazement mingled with terror. Only Burl was calm. He had never seen a slug that meant danger to man, and he reasoned that these were at any rate moving slowly so that they could be distanced by the fleet-footed human beings, but he also meant to be cautious.

The slow march kept on. The rear of the procession of caterpillars emerged from the cloud-bank, and Burl saw that a shining white line was left behind them. No less than eighty great caterpillars clad in white and dingy red were solemnly moving down the mountainside, leaving a path of shining silk behind them. Head to tail, in single file, they had no eyes or ears for anything but their procession.

The leader reached the plateau, and turned. He came to the cluster of giant cabbages, and ignored them. He came to a thicket of mushrooms, and passed through it, followed by his devoted band. Then he came to an open space where the earth was soft and sandy, where sandstone had weathered and made a great heap of easily moved earth.

The leading caterpillar halted, and began to burrow experimentally in the ground. The result pleased him, and some signal seemed to pass along the eight-hundred-foot line of creatures. The leader began to dig with feet and jaws, working furiously to cover himself completely with the soft earth. Those immediately behind him abandoned their formation, and pressed forward in haste. Those still farther back moved more hurriedly.

All, when they reached the spot selected by the leader, abandoned any attempt to keep to their line, and hastened to find an unoccupied spot in the open space in which to bury themselves.

For perhaps half an hour the clearing was the scene of intense activity, incredible activity. Huge, ten-foot bodies burrowed desperately in the whitish earth,

diggings frantically to cover themselves.

After the half-hour, however, the last of the caterpillars had vanished. Only an occasional movement of the earth from the struggle of a buried creature to bury itself still deeper, and the freshly turned surface showed that beneath the clearing on the plateau eighty great slugs were preparing themselves for the sleep of metamorphosis. The piled-up earth and the broad, white band of silk, leading back up the hillside until it became lost in the clouds, alone remained to tell of the visitation.

The tribes-men had watched in amazement. They had never seen these creatures before, but they knew, of course, why they had entombed themselves. Had they known what the scientists of thirty thousand years before had written in weighty and dull books, they would have deduced from the appearance of the processionary caterpillars—or pine-caterpillars—that somewhere above the banks of clouds there were growing trees and sunlight, that a moon shone down, and stars twinkled from the blue vault of a cloudless sky.

But the tribes-men did not know. They only knew that there, beneath the soft earth, was a mighty store of food for them when they cared to dig for it, that their provisions for many months were secure, and that Burl, their leader, was a great and mighty man for having led them to this land of safety and plenty.

Burl read their emotions in their eyes, but better than their amazement and wonderment was a glance that Saya sent to him, a glance that had nothing whatever to do with his leadership of the tribe. And then Burl rose, and took the two snowy-white velvet cloaks from the wings of the white butterfly. One of them he flung about his own shoulders, and the other he flung about Saya. And then those two stood up before the wide-eyed tribes-men, and Burl spoke:

"This is my mate, and my food is her food, and her wrath is my wrath. My burrow is her burrow, and her sorrow, my sorrow.

"Men whom I have led to this land of plenty, hear me. As ye obey my words, see to it that the words of Saya are obeyed likewise, for my spear will loose the life from any man who angers her. Know that as I am great beyond all other men, so Saya is great beyond all other women, for I say it, and it is so."

And he drew Saya toward him, trembling slightly, and put his arm about her

waist before all the tribe, and the tribes-men muttered in acquiescent whispers that what Burl said was true, as they had already known.

Then, while the pink-skinned men feasted on the meal Burl had provided for them, he and Saya went toward the burrow Burl had made ready. It was not like the other burrows, being set apart from them, and its entrance was bordered on either side by mushrooms as black as night. All about the entrance the black mushrooms clustered, a strange species that grew large and scattered its spores abroad and then of its own accord melted into an inky liquid that flowed away, sinking slowly into the ground.

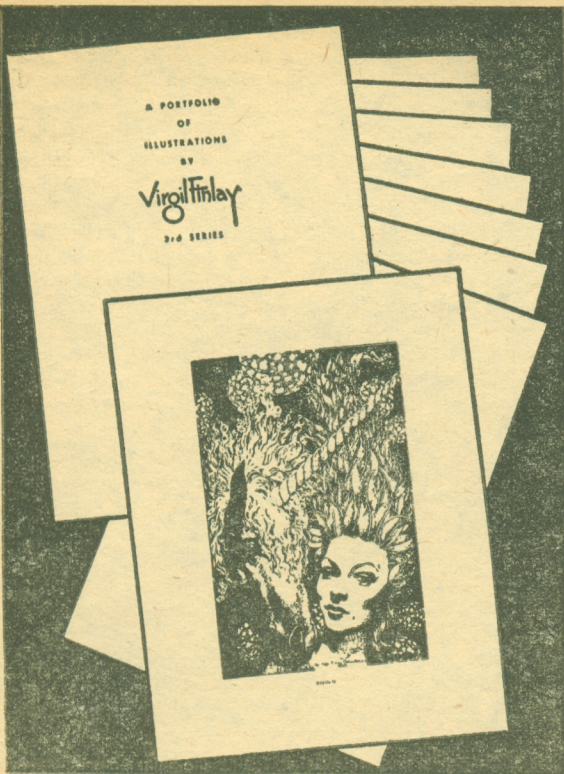
In a little hollow below the opening of the burrow an inky pool had gathered, which reflected the gray clouds above and the shapes of the mushrooms that overhung its edges.

Burl and Saya made their way toward the burrow in silence, a picturesque couple against the black background of the sable mushrooms and the earth made dark by the inky liquid. Both of their figures were swathed in cloaks of unsmirched whiteness and wondrous softness, and bound to Burl's forehead were the feathery, lacelike antennae of a great moth, making flowing plumes of purest gold. His spear seemed cast from bronze, and he was a proud figure as he led Saya past the pool and to the doorway of their home.

They sat there, watching, while the darkness came on and the moths and fireflies emerged to dance in the night, and listened when the rain began its slow, deliberate dripping from the heavy clouds above. Presently a gentle rumbling began—the accumulation of the rain from all the mountainside forming a torrent that would pour in a six-hundred-foot drop to the river far below.

The sound of the rushing water grew louder, and was echoed back from the cliffs on the other side of the valley. The fireflies danced like fairy lights in the chasm, and all the creatures of the night winged their way aloft to join in the ecstasy of life and love.

And then, when darkness was complete, and only the fitful gleams of the huge fireflies were reflected from the still surface of the black pool beneath their feet, Burl reached out his hand to Saya, sitting beside him in the darkness. She yielded shyly, and her soft, warm hand found his in the obscurity. Then Burl bent over and kissed her on the lips.



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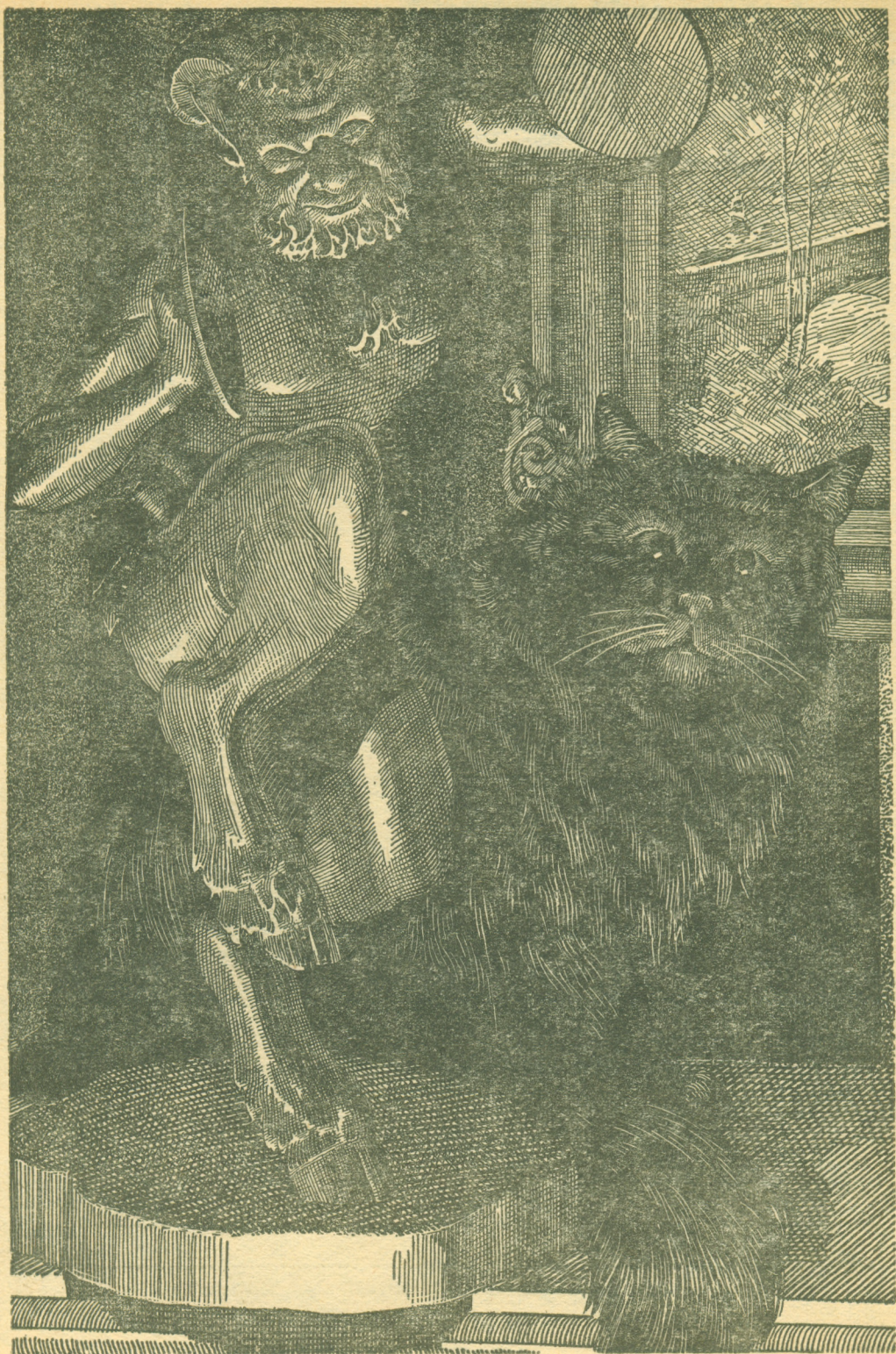
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Abdallah covered behind
the bric-a-brac, safe, at
least, from the eyes of Devil
Ritter. . . .

DEVIL RITTER

CHAPTER I

ABDALLAH

WHEN a man is stretched out in a comfortable chair with his feet propped on the back of another, a good book in his hands and silver drifts of smoke rising from his pipe to tangle under the shade of a reading-lamp, it requires nothing less than a catastrophe to recall his attention and make him change his position.

Jim Crawley did not change his position, but he looked up from his book with a scowl and stared at the ceiling. A soft,

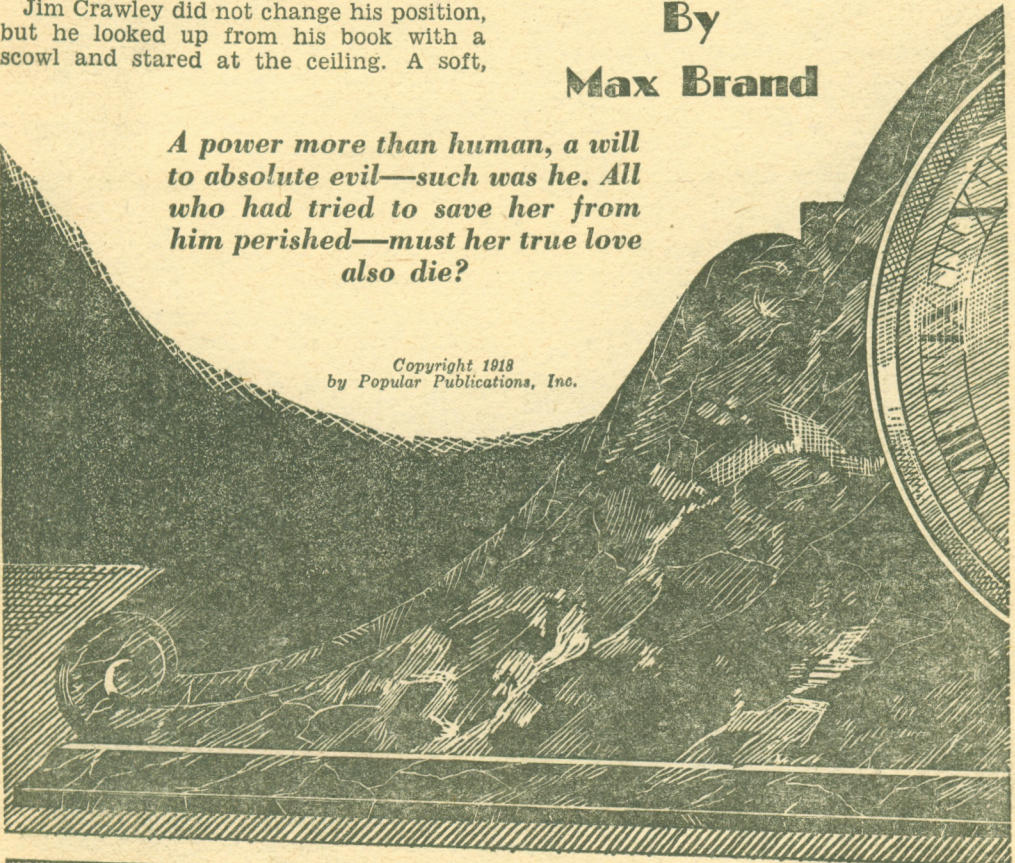
hurried footfall sounded from the room above, a continuous padding sound like the tread of a cat. All that evening, the night before, the night before that, for a week he had heard this ceaseless walking with a slight creak at regular intervals as the man turned at either end of the room. Crawley removed his pipe, blew a thin stream of smoke into the air and decided gravely: "Insomnia or plain nerves."

In spite of this solution the continued

By
Max Brand

*A power more than human, a will
to absolute evil—such was he. All
who had tried to save her from
him perished—must her true love
also die?*

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sound troubled him. He was glad when it broke off, a door closed overhead, and the stairs of the old lodging-house groaned under a descending step. He glanced a comfortable eye over his room where the spoils of his many wanderings lay here and there, and then went back to his reading.

For perhaps half an hour his peace was unbroken, then the door flew open and a man jumped into the room, shutting the door quickly but noiselessly behind him.

Crawley sprang up from his chair with an exclamation.

The other stared at him with an odd expression, half fear and half horror, and whirled back to the door with a cry. Before he could open it Crawley had him by the shoulder; under his ample grip he seemed to feel the shoulder of a skeleton—there was no suggestion of flesh to his touch. The slightest motion of his arm sufficed to jerk the stranger back against the wall where he flattened himself, one hand clutching at the smooth surface for support, the other hand clutching at an inside pocket of his coat. Crawley seized that hand and yanked it out. It came bearing a heavy automatic. He tore it easily from the nerveless fingers of the owner.

"Now what in hell—" he began, and stopped short.

The other man was trying to speak, but only a faint whisper came from his white lips.

"Out with it!" said Crawley.

"I seem—I seem," stammered the man, "to have come to the wrong room."

"With a gun," finished Crawley.

The other reeled where he stood, and a sudden pity took hold of Crawley. He half carried the man to a chair, propped him up in it, and forced him to swallow a stiff drink of brandy.

"What is it?" he went on in a gentler voice. "Were you up against it, my friend, and decided to get the price of a meal at the point of a gun? I'm not very flush myself, but I have enough to—"

He stopped short, for he had taken another glance at the gun. It was of the most expensive make, and the handle was heavily chased with gold. Any pawnbroker would give fifty dollars for such a weapon. He looked curiously at the thin face of the stranger, now not quite so colorless.

"It has been simply a childish mistake on my part," said the man, making a visible effort to seem at ease. "Here is my card. I have the room just above this on the third floor. I—I simply mistook the

rooms in—in a fit of absent-mindedness. And then at the shock—I mean the surprise of seeing someone in the room—"

He had to break off, for his voice was as unsteady as the hand which extended a card to Crawley. It bore the name of Vincent Cadmon Noyes. Crawley hesitated a single instant. Then he reached out his large brown hand and shook with the stranger.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Noyes. My name is Crawley—Jim Crawley."

The cold, slender hand pressed his slightly. Noyes rose.

"You'll forgive my foolishness?" he said with an uncertain smile.

"If you'll pardon my roughness," answered Crawley, "we'll call quits. Will you stay awhile?"

Noyes dropped back into the chair. There was a strange thankfulness in his eyes as he accepted the invitation.

"I'm very glad to," he said. And then by way of explanation, "it's hard to leave such a comfortable chair when one's fagged. And I'm worn out."

"No wonder," said Crawley, with a touch of irritation, "you walk such a lot."

A question flashed in the eyes of Noyes, but he attempted to laugh.

"Have I bothered you with my tramping up and down?"

"A little," confessed Crawley. "What is it? Insomnia?"

"No," said Noyes, and then hesitated; "yes, I think it's as much insomnia as anything else."

He shifted his eyes about the room, evidently intent on finding some new subject for conversation. For an hour he maintained a broken talk about little or nothing. Nevertheless Crawley was not bored. There was a singular atmosphere about Noyes which fascinated him. It lay in nothing that he said—it was rather an indefinable and sinister emotion which the lean, white face and the haunted eyes inspired. One detail of his actions peculiarly caught the attention of Crawley. His visitor had moved the chair until it directly faced the door. By so doing he brought his face in the full glare of the electric light, but when Crawley suggested another position, he shook his head and insisted that he was too comfortable to move. It was quite late before he rose.

"Good night, Mr. Crawley," he said. "You've given me the first pleasant evening I've had in—" He stopped short, and then went on, "May I come down to see you again?"

"Glad to have you," said Crawley heartily. "Hope you get rid of that—er—insomnia."

"Thanks," responded Noyes, "I think—"

He broke off with a sharp gasp and clutched Crawley frantically by the arm while he stared up at the ceiling.

"In the name of Heaven, man—" began Crawley angrily.

"Hush! Hush!" whispered the other.

"Didn't you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"The footstep in my room!"

"Look here, Mr. Noyes, you let your imagination run away with you. There wasn't any sound from the room above us."

"I tell you there was! There was! I heard it! They're in my room waiting—"

"Who are in your room? Come, come; this is childish!"

Noyes relaxed his hold on Crawley's arm, but he had to lean his weight a moment against the back of a chair. He drew out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"You are—are sure you heard nothing?" he asked, stammering.

"Not a thing in the world."

Noyes turned to him with a sick smile.

"Perhaps you are right. It was just my imagination. Good night again."

"Good night."

He went to the door and hesitated, with his hand upon the knob.

"I say, Noyes," said Crawley, a little more gently than he had spoken before, "do you wish to have me go up to your room with you—just to make sure that *they* are not up there waiting for you?"

Noyes turned to him with an almost ludicrous gratitude.

"God bless you," he said "If you will—"

"Of course," said Crawley, and he started out up the stairs after the younger man, muttering to himself, "plain neurasthenia—have to be gentle with such a fellow!"

AT THE door of Noyes' room he paused and banged loudly. An instant of silence followed, and then a peculiar spitting sound. Crawley set his square fighting jaw and reached a hand toward the trembling Noyes.

"Give me that revolver," he said.

"Is there—is there anyone there?" asked Noyes in a shaken voice.

"I don't know," said Crawley, "but I'll find out in half a second."

He flung the door open and made a single crouching step, the revolver poised. A great, black Persian cat stood in the center of the floor, with back bowed and hair bristling. Perhaps it was the green shade of the

lamp which made the animal's eyes seem of that color.

The big cat spat at him.

"Nothing but a fool cat," said Crawley, drawing a long breath. "Noyes, I must have caught some of your nerves from you."

"Abdallah!" said Noyes. "No one but Abdallah!"

He entered the room with a cautious manner.

"You say that as if the cat were a human being," Crawley said, smiling.

The other made no answer. His hand was at the knob of a closet door. He threw it open with a quick gesture and stepped back hastily from before the dark opening, into which he peered.

"What's the matter?" asked Crawley, with a contempt which he could not entirely keep out of his voice.

"I—I merely want to put my hat away," said Noyes, and accordingly he tossed his hat upon the shelf inside the closet. When he turned he cast a shrewd glance at the bed. Something told Crawley that as soon as Noyes was alone he would take a careful look under that bed.

"Now, my friend," said Crawley, "better trust in me. Tell me, who are 'they' you mentioned awhile ago?"

Noyes started, but made a strong effort to pretend he did not hear the question. Instead he pointed.

"Well, well!" he said. "Abdallah has started to make friends with you already!"

The big Persian was rubbing affectionately against Crawley's knees.

"Sure," said the latter. "I always get along well with animals."

"Yes, but Abdallah is a little different. Quite a lot different from other animals. Won't you sit down awhile? Here's a box of rather good Havanas"—he lighted one as he spoke—"there's a siphon and a bottle of Scotch at your elbow and if there's anything else you want to be comfortable, perhaps I can get it for you."

"Thanks," said Crawley, sitting down and selecting a cigar from the box beside him. "I won't drink just now. What makes the cat different from other animals, Noyes?"

His host laughed a little constrainedly.

"Some people in India have an idea," he said, "that when a human soul transmigrates into an animal, once in a million times it carries some of the human qualities of mind and thought with it—along with other weird powers."

"Transmigration of the soul?" queried Crawley dryly "Bunk, my dear fellow."

Who's managed to fill you up with that sort of rot?"

The other man shrugged his shoulders, but his face remained serious.

"Rot? Yes, it may be all rot. I don't know. I'm merely telling you what has been told me. The original owner of Abdallah declared that the cat was one of those peculiar freaks which possessed human qualities."

"Humph!" grunted Crawley, and he stretched his muscular hand toward the Persian. "Come here, Ab, and help me enjoy a laugh at that theory of your master."

The cat, which up to that time had remained fawning about the feet of Crawley, now turned its back and walked toward Noyes, who regarded Crawley with a quiet smile of triumph.

"I suppose," said the big man, "that you take that as a sign that the cat understood what I said?"

"No, no! Not that—entirely. Even the queer chap who used to own this cat didn't think that of him. What he did claim was that the cat caught a very vivid impression of—how shall I call it?—of psychic states."

"That so?" said Crawley, totally disinterested. "Just what do you mean by that?"

Noyes regarded him with cautious eyes, as if seeing how far he might bare his soul to this stranger.

"Some people think," he said at last, "that the soul is more or less divorced from the body even during life, do you see?"

"Go ahead," smiled Crawley, "it sounds interesting anyway."

"Exactly. Well, they go on to maintain that when the mind thinks it actually goes in *presence* to the object of which it thinks."

"Do you mean to say," said Crawley, irritated, "that they mean that when I think of the Philippine Islands one second and of the city of London in the next instant, my mind has actually gone to those places?"

"You laugh, of course," said Noyes, in a tone of slight disappointment; "but that's exactly what they mean. Of course it's an absurd idea, isn't it? For instance, they hold that if you think of a person in London, that person, if he be peculiarly gifted in his perception, will know you are thinking of him, for he will feel the actual presence of your aura. In fact, they go so far as to say that quite exact thoughts can be read at a great distance."

"Nonsense!"

"Of course it's nonsense. But after all,

Mr. Crawley, there's really nothing more wonderful in this than there is in wireless telegraphy."

"Well, let's get back to this wonderful cat."

"To be sure, Abdallah."

The cat had curled up at his master's feet and lay watching Crawley with steady eyes.

"That's what the owner claimed for this cat. He swore that Abdallah could distinguish the presence of the thoughts of others. By the way, I've never seen him take such a fancy to anyone as he takes to you."

"Come here, Ab," said Crawley, by way of a test.

The big cat rose like a trained dog and walked to him, jumped up to his lap, and lay curled there, purring like a small buzz-saw and digging his claws carefully into the trousers leg.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exploded Crawley.

The cat turned and looked him in the face with uncanny gravity. It gave Crawley an immense desire to change the subject.

"You've been in India?" he asked.

"Most of my life."

"I've roamed about a good deal, but never landed there. Hope to some day. What part do you come from?"

"Burma. Here, I'll show you a picture of my place. My eye, how I'd like to see it!"

HE WENT to a trunk in the corner of the room, opened it hastily, and from an upper rack pulled out a handful of papers. Of these he selected one and turned to Crawley. As he did so one of the papers fell from the trunk to the floor. It was the photograph of a remarkably beautiful young girl, whose grave eyes stared directly up at the big man.

"Here's the house," said Noyes; "one of the coolest places in Burma, on my word."

"Humph," said Crawley, "I'm more interested in the picture of that girl. Will you tell me who she is?"

He pointed toward the photograph. Noyes turned to the picture, then with a low cry picked it up and threw it back in the trunk. When Crawley saw his host's face again, it was deathly pale. The Persian jumped from his lap and stood in front of its master, staring up to him and switching its tail slowly from side to side. Noyes crossed to the table and poured a stiff drink of the Scotch, but Crawley paid little attention to him. He was too busy trying

to decipher to his own satisfaction that low cry of Noyes. It had sounded like the word "Ires." He decided that it must be "Iris," for that was a girl's name. He rose.

"I won't bother you any longer this evening," he said. "Good night, Noyes."

The other came to him and took his hand. His face was still white.

"You'll think me an awful rotter, won't you? These frights of mine— At least, I wish you'd come up to see me once in a while. I grow devilish—lonesome!"

Crawley muttered a nondescript answer and passed through the door. He was wondering if "Ires" or "Iris" was one of "they."

That night and the next day the face of Ires or Iris, whichever it was, stayed constantly in the thoughts of Crawley. For the first time in many months he felt a deep discontent with his wandering life in which periods of action were like rare oases in a vast desert of inactivity. When the evening came he had to fight against the temptation of going up to Noyes' room. The memory of the horror Noyes showed at the sight of the picture helped to keep him away. It was not likely that the man from India could be induced to speak of the girl.

Crawley stayed in his room, filled with an unreasoning, sullen anger against his own weakness. His book could not interest him. He tried three pipes in succession and found them all tasteless. Finally he went to bed early to escape from the oppressive loneliness. In the morning he would make plans for leaving New York.

A dream of women's faces and a voice repeating "Ires, Ires," over and over, pursued him in his sleep. He woke in the middle of the night with a choking in his throat, and a faint cry in his ears. He could not make out exactly whether the cry were a part of his dream or a reality. He was quite sure, however, that it came from Noyes' room, and he knew that whether a dream or a reality it was such a cry as had never before come from the lips of a human being. Some disembodied soul in torture might have wailed in such a manner.

He lay back in bed and found himself so excited that he started to count sheep in order to call back his sleepiness. His nerves grew more and more on edge. In the black silence of the room his imagination repeated that faint, horrible cry, until his nerves were so aroused that he could almost hear the dull beating of his heart. In five minutes he was up and in a dressing-gown, for he could stand the suspense

no longer. He went up to Noyes' room and knocked heavily at the door.

After a breathless interval a faint voice said, "Who's there?"

"Crawley."

"Come in!" The words came in a great relaxing breath from the room. He threw open the door. All was pitch-dark save for two phosphorescent points of light. He stepped to the center of the room, fumbled a moment, and then switched on the lamp. The light developed into Abdallah, who stood beside the bed, and in the bed Noyes was hunched up under the clothes like a frightened child. His black shadowed eyes stared across with a peculiar hopelessness at Crawley.

"What was it?" asked Crawley.

"What do you mean?"

"The sound—the damnable cry—did it come from this room?"

Noyes shuddered under the twisted clothes and extended a slim arm toward the cat. Abdallah was creeping toward the door after the unmistakable manner of a cat stalking prey. Yet he seemed alive with fear, his hair bristling and his tail switching in slow curves from side to side. At the door he crouched flat an instant and then passed his claw under the edge along the crack. After a moment he turned and fixed his round green eyes steadily upon Noyes.

"Oh, God!" moaned the man from India, and covered his face with his hands.

Crawley stepped softly to the door, threw it open, and stared into the utter dark. A breath of cool air struck his face. It was almost as if an invisible presence stood before him. He closed the door and went back to the bed.

"Noyes!" he said, and shook the man by his skeleton shoulder.

"Yes."

"Look up at me."

Slowly the haunted eyes rose to meet his inquiry.

"I can't stand this any longer. Tell me what is happening or what is going to happen here."

"You can't stand it any longer? I tell you, I've stood it for a year!"

He laughed, and Crawley felt as if someone had knifed him in the back.

"What have you stood?"

He waved his hand to the four quarters of the compass.

"This!"

Crawley understood. That was the horrible part of it. He understood, though he knew not what.

"Do you think I've been like this always?" went on Noyes. "I tell you, a year ago if I'd seen a man act like this I'd have thought what you now think of me. I can't help it! I can't help it!"

His voice rose to a wail. Crawley wiped his forehead and found it cold to his touch. He sat down on the bed beside Noyes.

"What has happened?"

"I have seen it again!"

"What?"

"Ires!"

"What does that mean? Is it a name?"

"I don't know. God or the devil understands—I don't. If I knew, do you think I'd be like this? I know I'd give a thousand pounds if Abdallah had a human voice for ten seconds!"

"There's some danger threatening you. Come, come, Noyes, be frank with me. I mean the best in the world to you."

"I don't doubt that. But what can you do? If I am helpless, you are blind. What can you do?"

Crawley opened and closed his sinewy fingers once or twice.

"I can do a good deal, my friend. I can do a surprising lot. What is Ires?"

"I have seen her again! She was clearer than ever."

"Who, Ires?"

"No, no, no!"

"In the name of God, Noyes, are you mad?"

The terror did not leave Noyes, but a certain dignity came to him. His lean hand touched the brawny fist of Crawley.

"My dear fellow," he said, "your heart is big enough for a thousand, but you cannot help me. I am doomed beyond help or hope."

"By Ires?"

"I don't know."

Crawley ground his teeth. It seemed impossible to make any headway.

"Tell me one thing, Noyes, and I'll ask no more."

"Aye, ask a thousand things, so long as you'll stay here and talk. But in the name of mercy, don't leave me!"

At the very thought of such a catastrophe Noyes was a shaking wreck again.

"Is that girl whose picture I saw last night named Ires?"

NOYES regarded him with a pity which for a moment conquered his terror.

"Are you interested in her, Crawley?" he asked.

"I am!"

"Then God help you!"

"Don't look at me as if I had one foot in the grave, Noyes. I tell you I'm interested in her. What of that?"

The man from India clutched the shoulder of the big fellow in both hands.

"Cut the thought of her out of your heart. Take a ship and go to sea. At least she will not follow you!"

"Tell me seriously, Noyes. Is she the leader of some crew of cutthroats?"

"No, no! Crawley, she's the loveliest, the purest-hearted girl in the world."

"I believe you," said Crawley with tremendous earnestness.

"But you must shun even a thought of her as you would shun the thought of the devil. There's ruin in it, Crawley; horrible ruin—like mine!"

He jumped out of his bed with one of his spasmodic bursts of activity, crossed the room in his pajamas, and took a picture from a bureau drawer. He handed it to Crawley, who saw a handsome boy of twenty-two or three with big smiling eyes.

"Guess who it is?"

"Some friend of yours, Noyes?"

"Yes. Myself."

"Tut, tut! My dear fellow—look—the picture is dated a year ago or a little over. You're ten years older than this boy."

"It was the girl—the girl of the picture, Crawley. She changed me. Yes, I'm a hundred years older than that boy, but one year ago I was he!"

Crawley stared at him for a long moment and saw that he spoke the truth.

"At least tell me who she is."

"I don't dare. I tell you, if a hundred armed men were around me all sworn to protect my life, I wouldn't dare to tell you who and what she is."

Crawley got up to pace the room. His brain was so confused that no two thoughts followed in consecutive order. Even admitting that this poor fellow's mind was badly disarranged, there was still a certain earnestness which made his words convincing.

"If you will not tell me of her," he said, at last, "tell me of Ires."

"It is a dream. Five nights—seven nights I have dreamed it, more and more clearly. This night it was a sunshine reality. Therefore I know that I am about to die."

Crawley shivered, started to speak, and then decided to hold his comments till the end.

"It begins with her—the girl of the picture," said Noyes. "She leans over my bed and smiles and beckons to me. I rise and

follow her. We go down to the street. Then the dream goes blank. When it brightens again we stand in front of a house. I see it very clearly. I can almost make out the number over the door. Above the house are the burning letters: "I-R-E-S." Mr.—ah—Crawley, the horror, the cold, fearful horror that comes over me when I see those letters—those yellow letters of fire! I stand there for a long time. I look down to the girl. She is gone—she has vanished from my side—I know that I am left alone in the power of—I know that in this house I shall die. Somewhere in that house my dead body shall be found. And at that point I wake from my dream!"

He sank down upon the bed, his head drooping.

"If you are afraid—" began Crawley.

"I do not fear death. Death is merciful. One touch, and there is the end. But this fearful expectancy—this horrible, long-drawn delay. It is that which maddens me. It is that which had changed me from the boy of that picture to—to this nameless thing you see, Crawley. Once, I was strong, almost as you. But the dropping of the water day by day, a drop an hour, will drive a man mad in time."

"If the danger approaches you," cried Crawley, "pack up your trunk and flee. Take the ship you recommended to me. Take a train. Get away from that power you speak of!"

Noyes smiled faintly.

"I have fled all the way from India, and she has followed me."

"Who?"

"The girl—the girl of the picture."

"Go to the police. Tell them. They will see that you are protected."

"I told the police in London. They laughed at me. If I had persisted in my story, they would have had me locked up as insane. Crawley, there is not a soul between heaven and hell who will believe my story. A year ago I would have laughed at it myself!"

"Noyes, there comes the morning in at the window. I am going back to my room. Do you mind? If you wish I shall stay here and talk longer with you."

"Go if you wish, Crawley."

"In the name of Heaven, man! Don't say it that way. Buck up. Put out your jaw. Fight! In a month you'll—you'll laugh at yourself!"

The daylight seemed to have restored some of Noyes' courage. He looked at Crawley with merely a weary despair.

"Adieu, my dear fellow," he said.

Crawley crushed his hand in a strong grip and went to the door. There Noyes overtook him and touched him on the shoulder.

"On second thoughts," he said with his faded smile, "I think we had better say 'Good-by!'"

"Rot!" exclaimed Crawley. "I'm going out today, and this evening I'll be at the theater. After that I'll come home and we'll have a Scotch and soda together."

He went down to his room, not to attempt to sleep, but to sit with his head in his hands thinking, thinking, thinking. One by one he added up the details Noyes told him. Sometimes in this way it was possible to draw a conclusion which would not occur at the first moment. The beautiful girl, the word Ires, the strange powers of Abdallah, the uncanny power which pursued Noyes—what was that power? Obviously it could not consist of the girl alone, for Noyes had referred to that power on several occasions as "they." Perhaps there were men associated. There must be men. If so, what was their nature, and how many were there? He should have many questions to ask Noyes that night. Granted half an hour of frank conversation and he vowed that the mystery would be a mystery no longer. What made him doubt his ability to solve the puzzle was the picture of Noyes as he had been only a year before; a strong, cheerful face now turned to the hollow-eyed wreck he knew. No dream of fear could accomplish such a change in such a man. All day the queer affair haunted his mind.

At the theater that night he saw the figures on the stage through a haze, while the forms of Noyes and the girl of the photograph played before his mind. He could not rid himself, in particular, of the voice of Noyes as he said good-by.

He tried to convince himself that it was merely the causeless melancholy of a neurasthenic, but an unreasoning depression filled him with the memory. After the theater he was in such haste to return to Noyes and shake hands to be sure that the man from India was still in the flesh, that he took a taxicab.

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE OF FEAR

SO MANY thoughts occupied his brain, so many weird conjectures, that he fell into that peculiar mood in which man's senses grow acutely aware of all

that passes around him, but the facts are telegraphed slowly to the mind. In this absent-minded way he saw two men help a third from the door of a limousine which stood at a curb, and then walk up the stairs with him. The man in the center was evidently very drunk, for his head tilted loosely forward, and his whole body hung helplessly on the arms of those who assisted him. Two pedestrians who passed at the moment turned their heads and laughed at the spectacle.

Crawley smiled to himself, but he had noted the incident rather with the mind than with the intelligence. The car ran on for a couple of blocks when Crawley, glancing again out of the window of the taxi, suddenly called out to the chauffeur to stop.

Far away, looking down a side street, he saw the great electric sign, "United States Tires." It shocked him back into vivid consciousness. He remained for an instant in the mental confusion of a man waked from a profound slumber. The chauffeur had drawn up to the curb and now opened the door in some alarm to find out what was the trouble.

Crawley descended to the street in a daze and paid the driver of the machine. In his confusion he hardly knew why he left the car. It was because he felt a startling connection between that electric sign, "United States Tires," and the drunken man who was carried up the steps by his two friends. He shrugged his shoulders and when the taxicab started down the street he almost called out to it to stop and take him in again. He resisted the impulse. The chauffeur would have thought him mad.

He stood a moment on the street corner puzzling out the queer sense of horror which possessed him. He looked about and found the street very dark and seemingly narrow. Still he could not determine what cause there was for that depression. In some obscure way it was connected with the sign, "United States Tires," and the sight of the drunkard. It was one of those subconscious impulses which torture the brain. Something was required of him, something which must be done at once. What was it? He gripped his hands and set his teeth, but the acts only increased his nervousness and did not clear his mind.

He walked out in the middle of the street and scrutinized the big sign, flaming far away. That brought nothing to him. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize

the picture of the drunkard being carried up the steps. The house was one of those common affairs with brown fronts, of which there were countless thousands in New York. There was nothing by which he could identify it. He remembered that as the three men reached the top of the steps the helpless man's foot struck against the stone and his whole body swayed back. He must have been totally unconscious.

Finally he knew what he must do, and that was to find the house if possible. The thought of going to it filled him with dread for what reason he could not tell. Perhaps the limousine was still in front of the house. In that way he would be able to identify it. Yet, why should he be curious about the affairs of an intoxicated man?

He could not help it. He turned and started back down the street at a brisk pace. The street was empty of limousines or of any other machines. The houses with brown fronts were innumerable on either side. He went on, scanning each house as he passed in a vague hope that he might remember something when he saw the right one. In the distance flamed the sign, "United States Tires," blotted out wholly or partially by each building as he walked along.

He came to an abrupt stop; he felt his blood run coldly back to his heart.

Over this house all the distant sign was blotted out except the letters at the very end: IRES. Ires! That was the word which young Noyes had seen over the house of his dream. Yet this place was uninhabited. The windows were blank of shades or curtains. Across one glass was affixed a rental sign. Nevertheless he found himself involuntarily climbing up the steps. It was rather unearthly, but it also had an element of the ridiculous. He would not have believed such a freak of a hard-headed man like himself. With a smile he tried the door, and then started, for it gave way readily to his touch.

A dark, empty hall confronted him. He lighted a match and held it above his head. As far as he could see into the gloom the hall was barren of furniture and everywhere the floor was gray with dust. A thrill of nameless horror caught him with a great desire to turn about and run down the steps to the open streets. Under the emotion his hand trembled violently and the shaken light of the match filled the hall with turbulent seas of shadow. The sight of that touched him with shame and set his blood in circulation again. He

closed the door with a slam, cleared his throat loudly as if to warn of his coming, and lighting another match, he started a progress through the rooms.

They were all empty on the first floor. Dust was everywhere. The boards creaked under his heavy step again and again, and each time he started and looked behind him. There were closets to be opened. It was very unpleasant. He found his forehead cold and damp. In the end, having gone through each room, he heaved a breath of relief. There was nothing there, and of course, he could now leave this place.

Yet, the sinister whisper of conscience called him back and drove him with hard-set jaw up the stairs to the second story. He threw the first door open with a jerk and stood tense, with his fist tight, ready to strike. The room was empty, and the pallid moonlight slipped along the floor. The sight restored more courage to Crawley. His tremors reminded him unpleasantly of the way in which Vincent Noyes had thrown open the door of his closet as if he expected an animated skeleton to fall out against him.

He was smiling at this thought when he threw open the door of the second room. The smile froze on his lips into a meaningless grin. There sat Noyes beside the window with the moon full upon his white face. He was grinning back at Crawley in a ghastly manner and his eyes looked directly into the big man's face.

"Look here!" broke out Crawley. "Don't be a damned ass, Noyes. You gave me no end of a start. What's your idea in coming to a deserted house like this? What do you—"

He stopped. It was hard to talk in the face of that unchanging grimace. Noyes must have a queer sense of humor. He approached the man and dropped a hand on his shoulder. Even through the clothes he was aware of the stiff coldness of lifeless flesh.

Crawley jumped back. Still the eyes stared at him, but it was the filmed glance of one who has looked on death, and the grin was the mirth of one who smiles at the end of the world. All his courage deserted him. It seemed as if the corners of the room were filled with invisible but watching presences. He ran out into the hall, and then down the stairs. The moment he started to flee, wild terror possessed him. The stairs seemed infinitely long. When he reached the door of the house he was ready to yell for help.

OUTSIDE, the fresh air gave him new life, but it could not wipe from his memory that gaping smile, that idiotic and horrible grimace. When he rushed into the police-station ten minutes later, men jumped up and stared at him, for the image of death still looked from his face. It was not until he had given his story to the sergeant in charge that his self-possession in a measure returned. Even then he had not the courage to go with them to the house. He described it by locating the street and naming the house which had over its front the four fatal letters: "IRES."

In half an hour the sergeant returned. The body had been taken to the morgue. The doctor stated that he believed death to be caused by shock. There was no sign of a wound in any part of Noyes' person. The police lieutenant now appeared and made Crawley rehearse the details of his story over and over again.

Crawley began with the fact that Noyes was a fellow lodger at his address. From that point he went on to describe the three men whom he had seen walk up the front steps of the house. Here, he had to lie. He had to say that the face of Noyes was visible to him in profile and that at first he wondered why he should be in such a part of the city in such a condition. They would never have believed the queer process by which he came to stop his taxicab and go back down the street inspired by an electric sign!

The rest of Noyes' story, as far as he knew it, he left untouched, for he was beginning to understand why the London police had laughed at the tale. As far as he told the tale of the discovery, the police believed him absolutely without suspicion that he might have a hand in the murder—if it were a murder. His sincerity was pointed by the still horror which lingered behind his eyes. At last they let him return home.

He went immediately to Noyes' room. It was, of course, empty, save for the cat. Abdallah came and fawned upon him, and when he left the room, after noting that there was no sign of disorder or a struggle there, the big cat followed him downstairs. When he sat down in his chair the Persian sat down on the floor in front of him and watched him with steady yellow-green eyes. He could not refrain from returning the stare.

"What is it, Abdallah?" he said at last. "Are you going to be happy staying with me?"

The cat rose and rubbed against his leg.

"That means yes, eh? All right, old fellow. Tell me when I can do anything to make you comfortable."

Abdallah rose and commenced to walk up and down the room, pausing to turn his head now and then and stare at Crawley.

"What's the main idea?" asked the man. "Do you want me to get busy—get on the job? What job? Find the men who did away with your old master?"

The cat meowed plaintively, and Crawley started in his chair.

"My God!" he muttered. "There I am talking to a cat—talking to myself! In six months I'll be in the condition of poor Noyes! No, Noyes was only a nervous boy, and I'm—" He arose and stood before his mirror. A scowling face looked back at him, a lean, weather-hardened face, with a square-cut fighting jaw. The sight comforted him. At least it would be a fight, and if they did not fight hard enough he would land them in the end. The resolution calmed him, and when he went to bed he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The jangle of the telephone roused him the next morning. It was the police, who wanted him that day for testimony before the coroner's jury. He faced the prospect without a qualm. Even when he rehearsed the story he must tell, he felt no thrill. After breakfast he came back to his room for a quiet half hour to think over the case and for the hundredth time muster one by one all the facts as he knew them or as Noyes had told them. The scratching of Abdallah at the door interrupted his musing. A light footfall was going up the stairs. Perhaps it was the police, come so tardily to examine Noyes' room. Abdallah mewed softly, eagerly. He opened the door and looked up the stairs. Someone was in the very act of entering Noyes' room above.

Abdallah whisked into the hall and up the stairs. Crawley followed at a stealthy pace, but before he was half-way up the stairs, the low cry of a woman started him to a run. He flung the door open and saw within the room a woman kneeling, with big Abdallah in her arms, covering the cat with a thousand caresses. She turned her head with a little start toward Crawley, and he found himself looking into the face of Ires, or whatever her name was, whose picture Noyes had accidentally allowed him to see—the sight of whose face had so mortally terrified the man from India. Moved by the stern silence

of Crawley, the girl dropped the cat and rose to her feet. In reply he closed the door behind him and set his broad shoulders against it.

"So, my dear," he said, "you've walked right into my hands."

The dark eyes widened a little, but otherwise there was no sign of shock or fear.

"And may I ask who you are?" she said.

"You may," he answered. "I'm Jim Crawley, and I'm a friend of the dead man."

"Dead!" she repeated with a heavy inflection.

"My dear Lady Mystery," he said, "large eyes won't serve you now!"

If it were acting it was very well done. She stared at him in that stupid manner of one who hears a disaster too great for comprehension. That white-faced horror called back a vivid image of poor Vincent Noyes—how he had frozen with terror when he saw the picture of this girl.

"Come, come!" he said, frowning to call up his tardy anger. "Now that this damnable business is consummated, do you think to make me blind and shuffle your way out of it?"

"Dead?" she said again.

"Aye, dead, dead, dead! Vincent Noyes is dead and you'll suffer for your part in it or—"

She caught a hand up before her face and swayed. Crawley laughed.

"Sit down in that chair and talk reasonably," he said. "Maybe you'll find it easier to talk with me than to the police."

She sank into the chair immediately behind her, sank heavily and lay there with her head fallen back as if all the strength had slipped from her. Crawley walked to her, dropped a hand on her wrist, and feeling the faint flutter of the pulse, he jerked open a window and stood over her with folded arms, waiting for the cold air to bring her back to life. Her lips stirred before her eyes opened: "Vincent!"

He leaned close to her. Before her senses returned she might murmur some confession which would damn her in the eyes of the law.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes—dear!"

"I—have prayed—prayed for you—but I was helpless—against them!"

Her eyes opened. She sat up with a moan and caught his hand in both of hers.

"You didn't mean it!" she pleaded. "They haven't hunted him down at last!"

Crawley stood back with a scowl. He wanted to believe this merely clever acting, but grief has a way of its own. Her eyes wandered.

"It is better that it is done," she said. "He is at rest at last, and I—"

She ran to Crawley and closed her hands on his coat.

"Were you his friend?"

"Yes," he answered, deeply troubled.

"Then you will be my friend, too. You will not let them take me back."

She caught his hand and placed her slender white one inside it.

"You are strong! See, how strong you are and how weak I am! Keep them away from me; I am afraid; I am afraid! No, no! Such strength as yours cannot help me!"

SHE broke into convulsive sobbing, a childish wail in her voice, and a tremor passed through Crawley. For an instant longer he fought against the surging pity which beat like waves against his colder judgment, then he gave way. The sense of her delicate femininity was stronger than a man's hand to disarm his suspicions. With one arm about her, he led her back to the chair and as she sat down again he kneeled close to her and caught a faint odor of violets, an ethereal fragrance which added a touch of poignant melancholy to his compassion.

"What is this trouble?" he asked earnestly. "Who are 'they'?"

She shuddered and shook her head.

"How can you expect me to help if you will not tell me?"

"I don't expect you to help me—now."

"They are too strong?" he suggested.

Her eyes wandered past him again with that singular expression of waiting which he had noticed in Vincent Noyes' face many a time.

"Yes, they are too strong." She rose with a start. "I must go back."

"To them?"

She hesitated, as if deciding whether or not she could risk confiding in him so great a secret.

"Yes, to them."

"By God!" said Crawley with a sudden outpouring of rage. "You shall not go—or if you do, I'll go with you!"

She smiled sadly on him.

"You must not," she said. "I know you are strong. I guess you are brave. But bravery and strength are useless against them. You would throw yourself away, and in a way so terrible that if you were only to guess at it now, your face would grow as pale—as mine!"

The feeling of impotence maddened him. "Here's a lot of fol-de-rol and nonsense,"

he said, "and if you give a real man a chance to work for you, you'll find these devils, whoever they are, will fade away into a puff of mist—a little sulfurous, maybe. Will you give me the chance?"

She opened her purse to take out a handkerchief and a tiny square of colored cardboard fluttered to the floor.

"I dare not tell you more about it," she said. "I have already talked too much. I must go."

In a daze he watched her go to the door and then turn, holding out her hand in farewell. Suddenly he realized that he must not let her go. It grew vastly important that she stay with him if only for two minutes longer. He took her hand and did not relinquish it for a moment.

"Tell me only this," he said, keeping his voice gentle. "Why did Vincent Noyes, if he was dear to you, fear you like—"

"Like death," she said, without a tremor in her voice, though she was very pale. "He feared me so because—because I meant that to him, and I—"

"Hush, hush!" he broke in. "If it tortures you so, you shall not speak of it. I shall find some way to search out the heart of this horrible affair, but I shall not suspect you—"

"My name is Beatrice," she said.

"Only Beatrice?"

"I dare not tell you more of it."

"I shall not suspect you, Beatrice. I only ask you to give me one clue—say one word—which will help me to find them. Will you say it?"

"Don't you see?" she cried with a sudden passion which transfigured her in spite of her sorrow. "It is for your sake that I refuse to let you know. If you were not his friend"—and here she made a sweeping gesture about the room as if the presence of the dead man were still palpable there—"if you were not his friend, I should tell you everything and pray for your success; but I cannot see you thrown away."

She lowered her voice to a sad solemnity which checked his protest.

"You cannot help me, any more than you could help him. You would be lost as he was lost, in trying to save me. Good-by."

He followed her hastily through the door, but she turned to him gravely.

"You will not follow me? I do not wish it!"

He stared at her an instant, then bowed and returned to Noyes' room. For some time he stood with his back against the door, his hands clenched. Something had changed in him, though he scarcely knew

what. He felt like one awakened from a vivid dream, or rather like a cynic who has seen base metal transmuted into gold.

Finally the glamour wore away a little and he remembered with a start that he had allowed this girl to leave him without obtaining the least clue from her of either her address or her name. The idea made him flush with shame. Perhaps she was even then laughing at him. If it were acting, he finally decided, she had deserved to escape.

He began to pace up and down the room, thinking first of Vincent Noyes, then of the girl, Beatrice, and lastly, strange to say, of himself. For he began to feel alone, bitterly alone. He felt like one who sits in a drearily familiar room and hears voices below, vague voices of many people, and he cannot tell whether they speak in anger or in happiness; but he wishes to be among them, for they seem to be living, and he seems to have no share in the world.

So it was with Jim Crawley. Tragedy had passed him in the form of Vincent Noyes; romance had looked on him from the eyes of Beatrice; and now that they were both gone, he wished to be in the heart of the mystery more than ever, for that seemed the one reality in the world. He paused in his walking and raised from the floor the little square of thin cardboard which she had dropped from her purse. It was the seat-check of an opera-ticket.

Only this flimsy thing remained to connect him with the girl. This was all he had through which to trace her. Abdallah rubbed against his leg, meowing loudly. He glanced down with a muttered curse, and then hurried to his own room, where he sat down and buried his face in his hands to ponder over all the details of the strange case.

THE more he thought the more he regretted having allowed the girl to go without forcing her to tell him frankly all that she knew. Nevertheless, if what she said was the truth, he had advanced somewhat. Noyes had feared the girl and she admitted that he feared her with deep reason. How she could unwillingly be a danger to the man from India, he could not dream. Nevertheless, this was her statement.

Furthermore, the same power which killed Noyes now threatened her. If it did not threaten her, at least it controlled her in the most sinister manner, kept a seal upon her lips, bounded her actions, and kept her under such an omnipotent dread

that she dared not even appeal for aid.

If such a thing had happened five centuries before, he might have attributed it to religious superstition which forced people to do strange and terrible things in the name of a creed.

If he could not find religion here, at least there was something more than earthly in that which had threatened Noyes from afar and wasted him to a shadow with the constant dread of death. It was on the girl in a scarcely less perceptible degree. It was like an unseen hand which dragged her away from him at the moment she was on the verge of telling him something which he could use as a clue.

He defined this thing then as a criminal force operated by men or women or by both; but probably by a great many, since they were so ever present.

But this supposition was far from satisfactory. There was big Abdallah, whose brute soul had sensed the danger before its coming.

In spite of himself Crawley was forced back on the belief that there were something more than earthly in the affair—some terrible control of mind over mind—a spiritual tyranny which was greater than the force of body, which could even extend its authority to the mute beasts.

He crossed to the window and jerked it up, for his cynical, practical mind revolted against this sense of mystery. With a great relief he felt the fresh air. He glanced down to the little slip of cardboard which he still held. That at least was tangible reality. It occurred to him that the little torn seat-check might be the means of bridging the gap between himself and this affair of the other world, for as such he could not help considering it.

Certainly, to make any progress, he must see the girl again, and this clue might lead him to her. If she had gone once to the opera she might go again, particularly since this sorrow had come to her and any diversion might be welcome. She might even sit in the same seat.

The opera bored Crawley, with its impossible attempt to combine the artistic elements of decoration, music and drama. Moreover, it strained his pocketbook; so he seldom went. Nevertheless, he decided to attend the next three performances and for that purpose resurrected an old pair of field-glasses from his baggage. Twice he sat in his seat straining his eyes or turning his glasses in all directions, but without

seeing a face which, in the slightest degree, resembled Beatrice.

The third occasion, as in the fairy-tale, brought him better fortune.

She sat in a box in the grand tier to the right of the house. Immediately after the first act he spied her in a black gown, and his glasses showed a notable string of pearls around her throat. The dress changed her greatly, but he could not be mistaken in her face. What made his heart fall was the gaiety with which she conversed with a thin-faced man beside her, a fellow in early middle age. Crawley could see nothing but her profile, for she was continually turning her head and laughing with her friend. If she had truly been struck with sorrow for the death of Vincent Noyes, nothing could recall her to such good cheer.

Shame for his gullibility made his face hot and he bit his lip. In the anger which immediately followed he vowed silently and devoutly never to leave the trail of the mystery until he had brought down justice on the criminals.

Toward the end of the intermission her companion left the box, and the third person in the box came from the rear. He was a tall, leonine figure with a rather square cut, tawny beard. Crawley trained the glasses on him with sudden interest. It seemed to him that he had never seen a man who suggested more indomitable strength. Even through the beard he guessed at the powerful set of the jaw. The hand which rested on the back of Beatrice's chair as he leaned over was white and massive. Such a hand in the stormy middle ages would have chosen for a weapon the shattering mace, rather than the trenchant sword.

She looked up to him as he bowed, and what a change came over her face! Her smile grew fixed, her eyes widened, and she altered as if powder were sifted over her skin. It was not the expression of a moment. It lingered while he stayed there smiling, speaking apparently very slowly and without emphasis. He withdrew to the rear of the box and almost immediately the slender man entered and took his former place at the side and slightly to the rear of Beatrice.

As the lights grew dim, Crawley saw that she was laughing once more, but now his heart beat more easily, for he guessed at some compulsion behind that mirth.

During the second act he heard nothing of what passed on the stage, for he was laboring to decipher the meaning of the

three figures in that box. He came to a conclusion that the leonine figure had some connection with that power which controlled Beatrice and which had struck down Vincent Noyes. Otherwise there was no explanation of the change which came over her when he stood behind her chair. As for the slender man, perhaps he was a stranger or a chance acquaintance. Perhaps he was the renter of the box and had invited Beatrice and the big man. At least it seemed that for some purpose of him of the tawny beard she was forced to be pleasant to the other man.

This conclusion solved no mystery, decided nothing. But the very hope that he had seen one of those who represented "they" set the blood tingling in Crawley's veins.

His field-glasses never moved during the next intermission, and when he saw the tall man rise, murmur a word to Beatrice and the other, and then leave the box, Crawley rose from his seat with a thundering heart. He had located the box carefully before starting; in the corridor of the grand tier he located it without difficulty and entered. She was leaning very close to the slender man, and just as Crawley entered, they broke into laughter. He waited a moment to enjoy the music of her voice.

CHAPTER III

THE SMILE OF THE SPHINX

"PARDON me," he said, and advanced upon them smiling. The laughter died suddenly from her face as she turned to him, hesitated, and then: "Mr. Helder, this is Mr. Crawley."

"You remember that secret?" said Crawley, his head turned toward Beatrice as he shook hands with Helder.

"Of course I do," she said calmly, and he blessed her inwardly for her poise.

"Well, I have a clue!"

"Really?"

"In fact, I can show you the very man!" He turned to Helder gaily. "If you will excuse us a single moment."

"Surely," nodded the other, his eyes brightening in sympathy with the mysterious jest.

Beatrice shook her head and a slight frown warned him.

"Are you positive?" she said reluctantly.

"You will be astonished when you see—and hear," he said confidently.

"Very well." She rose.

Crawley picked up her coat.

"Quite a draft in the corridor," he suggested. "Don't know where it comes from, but perhaps you'd better take this."

He read in swift succession her surprise, doubt, worry, and finally acceptance. At the entrance she turned a little.

"In a moment, Mr. Helder." And then she was with Crawley in the bustling corridor where men and women hurried up and down and the air was filled with a dozen faint and ensnaring perfumes.

"Now tell me quickly," she said, "What madness has brought you here? How were you able to follow me?"

"I haven't time to answer either question," he said calmly, taking her arm.

"Where are we going?"

"Down to the street."

"The street?" She stopped abruptly.

"Please don't do that. People will be noticing us in a moment. That fleshy gentleman is staring already."

"Mr. Crawley, you are only embarrassing us both."

"Beatrice—" She started a little. "It is the only name by which I know you."

She stopped again determinedly.

"We must go back to the box instantly. Leave me and I shall go back alone."

"Have you no trust in me?"

"I tell you I have no trust in anyone. All I know—all you must know—is that I dare not be seen with you. Mr. Crawley, I swear I am thinking of your own welfare!"

There was a thrilling seriousness in her tone. She took his hand in both of hers.

"To please me—for my sake—go now—at once—forget me forever. For my sake and for our own!"

"Do you think I have come to you on some trifling matter?"

"No, no, no! It is because of a—of a man's death. You still hope—"

"It is because of no dead man," and then seeing her lips part in her wonder: "I have come for the welfare of a man who is alive—very much alive."

"Who can it be?"

"Can you think of no one?"

She caught her hands together and in her murmur there was a despair which stirred Crawley more than if she cried aloud: "Yes, yes. Oh, why was I ever born!"

"If you will come with me I will bring you face to face with him within five minutes."

"I dare not go! Who is it?"

"You will know him well enough when he speaks to you."

"No. You see that I cannot! I am watched. I shall be missed—and if I am suspected of having—"

"There is nothing in this man for you to fear. He merely wishes to speak with you for five or ten seconds—merely to see you. He would trade all his hopes of happiness for that."

Her eyes, pitifully misted, dwelt on his.

"Does he care so much? And I—may I trust you? Will you give me your word to bring me back?"

"I will take you wherever you wish after you have heard this man. We could be back by the time that the third act commences."

"Mr. Crawley—"

"We waste time—and all your moments are precious, you say."

"Yes, for he might come back sooner than he said, and—let us go, quick! quick!"

He hurried her down the stairs, stopped for his hat and coat, joined her again, and led her to the street. As the taxi-driver opened the door of his cab, she hesitated again and her hand closed nervously on his arm.

"It is not far?" she said, half pleading.

"In five minutes," he murmured, and then in a low voice to the driver: "Go straight ahead; turn in a few blocks; keep traveling in a circle and never get more than five blocks away from the opera-house until I tell you where to go."

When he took his seat and the machine started, she huddled far away against the side of the car, staring straight before her. He watched her for a moment in silence, until she turned impulsively toward him.

"I have never done so wild and thoughtless a thing," she said. "Pardon me. I do trust you, Mr. Crawley; but some force in you seemed to make me come whether I would or no."

He answered nothing, but sat with his head bowed, thinking desperately, but making no progress in his thoughts. Her coat slipped away a little from her shoulders and as they passed a street-lamp the light gleamed on the white skin.

"It is almost five minutes," she said anxiously. "Are we almost there?"

"We are there," he answered. "It is a cheap subterfuge, but I had to see you alone."

All of her face was in shadow, but her eyes grew strangely luminous.

"Mr. Crawley!"

He said gently. "There is no danger. I have told the driver to keep within five

blocks of the opera-house. He will travel in a circle and when I give the word he will take you straight back."

"Then start him back at once!"

"I will if you wish, but you promised to hear this man speak."

"But you said—"

"That ten seconds of speech with you meant the world to me, and I did not lie. I could not talk in the opera-house. I knew you would not listen while that tawny-haired man was near you. Tell me, is he one of 'they'—one of those forces which control you?"

She was silent.

"You need not speak."

"I WILL speak," she said at last. "Yes, he is one of them, but he is the least. You saw him. You can judge if he is a trifling man to cross in even the smallest thing—but he is the least of them. That is your warning! See, I read your mind, in part, and I know that you are planning how you can tear me away from that power which you vaguely guess at! If you had the slightest knowledge of it, you would flee from me as if from the worst plague and you would cross continents to place a distance between yourself and me."

"Nevertheless, I shall not leave you."

"You *shall* not?"

"If you insist on going back to the opera-house I will go with you. I will take that leonine fellow aside and tell him my suspicions to his face."

"No, no! That would be utter ruin."

A hush fell on them as they stared at each other through the cessation of a sound, but like a light that is blown out.

"Why have you followed me?" she asked at last, and the strength was slipping from her voice.

"I couldn't stay away. I tried."

The light at a crossing flared into the car and showed his face set in stern lines. She shrank and whispered as though someone might overhear, "I am afraid!"

"If there were no one waiting for your return in the opera-house, would you be afraid?"

"I don't know. I dare not think."

"Have they a right on you?"

She shook her head.

"But I have a claim—the claim of love."

She raised her arm as if to ward him off.

"You look as if you hate me," she murmured but he saw belief go flushing up her throat and shine in her eyes.

"You do believe?" he said. "If you will

trust me I can fight for you against the devils in legion."

"I try to understand."

"Is it hard to do?"

"It is like music, is it not?" she whispered.

He said, "For three days I have been alone, even in crowds I have been alone. And now perhaps I have only this moment to see you, but I am as happy as if eternity were in a second."

Her eyes looked past him.

"Beatrice, do you care at all? Have I the ghost of a chance?"

He could not tell whether it was only a drawn breath or a whispered "Yes." And still her eyes dreamed.

"Beatrice!"

"Yes?"

"Do you think you could learn to care for me?"

"I dare not think!"

"Answer me!"

"I think—perhaps!"

"You care already?" He leaned still closer, and suddenly she clung to him, and in a broken voice: "I do care. Oh, I do care. It is mad and rash and cruel to you, but this moment is mine and yours, and they have all my life!"

A sob stopped her, and his heart rose into his throat and made him dumb. She spoke.

"They are strong, but their power is that of devils—and yours is the strength of a man. I am not shamed. I am too starved for happiness—and you can give it to me. Oh, my dear, your voice to me is like sunshine in a room that has been dark for ages—come closer—see, something unfolds in my heart like the petals of a flower touched by the light. Take me, and hold me, and kiss me."

And after that, time stopped. The street-lights shone over pavements newly wet with rain and pointed a thousand diamond lances at them as they whirled past. They saw nothing. The traffic reared about them, thousands of voices, bursts of laughter, chatter of words, the whirl of starting automobiles, the sudden screaming of horns—they heard nothing.

But Time claims its own, however far they may wander. It found Beatrice, and with its cold touch froze her smile.

"It is late!" she cried. "It is hours and hours late! Turn back for the opera-house—quickly, Jim!"

Her accent, lingering over that new-learned word, made him catch his breath.

"Do you dream that I will let you go back to them?"

"You gave me your word!" she pleaded. "You gave me your word to turn back when I asked. It's for your sake, Jim!"

"Will you hold me to my promise?"

"I must!"

He groaned, but leaning forward gave the order to the driver.

"YOU know that I am not thinking of myself?" she asked tremulously.

"But how can I help you, Beatrice, if you will not give me a chance to fight against them?"

"Jim, Jim, you must never fight against them. Promise me!"

"Do you think they can cow me as they frighten a timid girl?"

"Dear, even strong men are afraid of devils and have no shame of their fear."

"What are they? What is their power? I shall go mad unless I know."

"Jim, as long as you don't know what that power is, you will have a chance of happiness, but if you know—"

"What then?"

"The thing which haunted Vincent Noyes to his grave was his knowledge of that power."

Crawley shuddered. He would never forget the dull-eyed despair of the man from India—that nerveless grip on life—that deep and hopeless foreboding of death.

"Promise me you will never ask me again, Jim?"

"I shall wait until you come to me of your own will."

"We are almost there. You will find a way to come to me again?"

"In spite of hell," he answered quite fervently.

As the machine turned the last corner, she cried out in fear. He looked out the window of the car and saw the street black with people and full of automobiles starting away from the entrance of the opera-house.

He could feel her trembling as she shrank against him for protection.

"Look!" she moaned and pointed a wavering arm.

He saw the tawny-haired man, a head above the crowd, standing near the door of a waiting automobile and scanning the pavement up and down with a last searching glance. Then he stepped into the machine which instantly moved off.

"Shall we follow him?" asked Crawley.

"I am afraid. If he knows I have been with you, he will—"

"How will he find that out?"

"His devil will whisper it in his ear—

describe your face—even give him your name."

The cold sweat was on Crawley's forehead.

"What fiend could tell him that?"

"The fiend is I!"

He caught her by the arms and made her face him.

"Beatrice, what madness is making you rave?"

"Jim, dear Jim, it is the horrible truth. I could not keep it from him."

"Why?"

"You have promised not to ask."

He ground his teeth.

"You shall not go back to him," he said firmly.

"If I fled a thousand miles from him he would bring me back. Take me to his house. It will be terrible to face him, but easier now than later."

Crawley leaned forward and spoke to the taxicab driver.

That is not the address!" exclaimed Beatrice.

"It is the place to which we are going."

"What is it?"

"My lodgings."

"Jim!"

"I gave you my word to bring you back to the opera-house when you wished," he said, "and I did it. Now you are going to do what I say."

"No; no! no! Don't you understand? Jim, think of Vincent Noyes! Let me go from the machine or I shall cry out!"

"If you try to, I'll stifle you with my hand. I mean it."

"Dear—"

"I won't listen."

"It means death."

"Perhaps. In the meantime there's only one thing that I fully understand about this whole affair, which is that the longer you stay with 'they' the more hopelessly you fall into the toils. The time's coming to break away. If I can't see my way against them, then I'll simply fight blindly."

"Jim, it's for your sake that I wish to—"

Her voice trailed away. He sensed rather than saw her settle back against the cushions. Her hand found his and relaxed there.

"I'm tired—deadly tired, Jim," she whispered.

The taxicab drew up in front of his lodging. He paid the driver and then helped Beatrice up the dingy stairs to his room, where Abdallah forgot his dignity to welcome her. Beatrice held the big Persian in her lap. They both seemed to watch

Crawley with a half-sleepy and a half-expectant interest.

"And now?" she asked.

"It's very late," said Crawley, "so we'll stay here tonight. Early tomorrow morning we start for the country. I know a place up in the Connecticut hills. It will be very beautiful at this time of year—the old inn—we shall go there."

She closed her eyes, smiling faintly.

"It is so pleasant," she murmured, "to do without fear what another commands. I have been armed with suspicion, and now I can lay my armor aside. I feel—like a cat beside a warm hearth, Jim!"

Her low laughter died away suddenly. She started erect in the chair.

"Jim! How can I go gadding about the country like this with you—and here in your room tonight—"

She started to rise, but his gesture stopped her.

"It's all right, my dear," he said calmly, "you needn't worry about that."

She regarded him with a puzzled frown, as if she strove to believe him but found it a hard task.

Her lips framed a word but made no sound. Crawley crouched in front of her and gathered her hands into his.

"If I am to fight for you I must have a legal right to do so," he explained.

The wide frightened eyes made him wince.

"You will trust me even in that, Beatrice?"

She sighed. It was as if all her cares went from her in that breath.

"You have said you love me, Jim?"

"God knows I do, dear!"

"Then if I love you it must be right, mustn't it? I am so tired, all at once, that I can't think."

He was very grave and his jaw set to a grim fighting line.

"I shall make it right. I'll ask nothing of you now except to fight for you. If I win, then in time, perhaps we will be truly man and wife."

SHE smiled, a dim obsolete smile like that of an ancient woman encouraging the rash optimism of a child. A new, choking emotion made him turn sharply away and begin pacing the room. She watched him in absolute silence. Finally, he glanced and saw that she slept with the same faint, sad smile as if depreciating her happiness. Very vaguely he guessed at the utter weariness of soul which allowed her to sleep at such a time.

He raised her gently in his arms. She did not waken. Her breath came regularly, softly, against his cheek. He laid her on the bed. She sighed and her lips moved. Crawley leaned over until he could hear the word. Once, twice it was repeated. He straightened up suddenly, his eyes deep with awe. After that he pulled a cover over her, watched her pale beauty for a moment, and then went to the open window.

Outside was the holy night. Looking up between two lofty, stern walls, he could see the sky and guess that it was blue. The red flare of the city dimmed the stars, but slowly he grew aware of them. He had forgotten that they shone over New York.

They called him back to the sacred moments of his life, to his boyhood, to all things of reverence which had gone into his nature. There was something very like to a silent singing in the heart of Crawley, and behind his lips a vow like that of the crusaders.

Here a low moan from the sleeper made him turn suddenly. Her face was flushed. She was frowning. One arm was thrown above her head and the hand was clenched. Evidently she was dreaming unpleasantly, and whatever that nightmare was it seemed to have a meaning for Abdallah. Even as Crawley turned, the big Persian uncured himself on the chair where he slept and crouched with rising hair and switching tail, suddenly roused to a fighting watchfulness. Something of what Noyes had said of the cat came back to Crawley and made a coldness around his heart.

Abdallah leaped from the chair and padded swiftly to the door where he sniffed at the crack along the floor. Instantly, however, he turned, and with bristling hair and eyes like yellow points of hell-fire, he ran back and leaped upon the bed.

Beatrice still stirred in her sleep; her hand remained clenched; her lips moved. Abdallah stole from her feet toward her head with the manner of a wild animal stalking a prey. Then he crouched, his tail still switching angrily from side to side, and fixed his blazing eyes upon the face of the sleeper. The unearthliness of it turned Crawley's soul to water. He had seen the cat fawn about Beatrice only a few moments before. Evidently she had known the cat of old, but now Abdallah acted toward her with all the singular mixture of hatred and fear which Crawley had observed in him on that night when he had said good-by to ill-fated Vincent Noyes.

He crossed the room hurriedly and leaned over Beatrice. She still struggled in her nightmare and from her whisper he gathered only the word: "No, no, no!" repeated over and over again. She was fighting against something in her sleep, fighting bitterly. Under the faint light her forehead gleamed with moisture, and at the sight of her mute suffering a tremendous wave of pity and tenderness swept over Crawley.

Instantly there was a change! Her whispering ceased. The flush died down. Something in her face *went out* like a snuffed candle. A weary smile touched her lips. Her hand moved until it encountered Crawley's by chance and closed about it. The soft touch thrilled the big man. Her smile died; slowly her fingers relaxed; she was sunk again in a profound and dreamless sleep.

Crawley straightened up, feeling as if he had performed some wearisome physical labor. Abdallah was curling himself up at Beatrice's shoulder and purring loudly. Crawley crossed to a chair and sank into it, his face buried in his hands.

No matter what the odds, if it had been an affair in which he could use his physical strength he would have wagered on success in the end, but against the sinister power which reckoned nothing of space or time and which crept into the sleep of its victims he felt utterly helpless. Between that power and the sleeping woman he loved, he was the only barrier. How slight for all his experience and all his strength! He walked in the night while a thousand hands reached out after her, invisible, deadly hands. Crawley interlaced his powerful fingers behind his head and groaned in an agony of impotence.

The gray dawn came at last, and in the opposite mirror his face showed lined and set like that of a sick man. Once more, with a falling heart, he thought of Vincent Noyes.

SHE woke at last into another personality. It seemed as if her sleep had brushed from her mind all the thoughts of the preceding day. In the face of this fresh, radiant beauty he found it impossible to mention his plans until she came to him and dropped her hands on his shoulders.

"And now?" she asked.

"And now?" he repeated dully.

"Don't we go to the country today?"

"I—" he began, and found it impossible to go on.

"Have you changed your mind, Jim?" And her voice went low with anxiety.

"No, no!"

With a great effort he managed to meet her eyes. It seemed to him that he could look an unfathomable distance into their clear depths.

"We have three things to do," he said mechanically. "First, to buy you some clothes—you can't go in an evening gown, you know; then to get two tickets for the country, and last, to be married. . . . Beatrice, am I right to let you sacrifice yourself because of your need to a man you do not know, and—"

"Oh, my dear!" she cried, and her voice, with a hint of both tears and laughter, sent a thrill of tenderness through Crawley. "I have known you always; I've been waiting for you all my life!"

Yet when they left his room she seemed aloof again, for there is a native strangeness in all things of beauty. All day she was humming and singing softly, and there was almost a dancing cadence in her step. And how full of changes!

She was like a butterfly, dressed in clinging filmy stuffs, when he left her at a Fifth Avenue shop and went out to get the ring and the license. When he returned he found his butterfly transformed by a walking-suit into an almost Puritan drab, saved only by a soft touch of color at the throat.

The wedding was an affair of the other world, even though it took place in the City Hall. Some one droned words before them to which they returned answers. He was told to put a ring upon her finger, and then they were man and wife. It meant nothing. Her forehead was cold when he touched it with his lips. Even at the last moment, when they entered the Grand Central Station with Abdallah in a basket, he expected her to break suddenly into mocking laughter and leave him there with a heart filled only by a dream. Not until they sat in the train, not until the train itself had started, could he look on her and feel that she was really his.

They got off at New Haven and hired and automobile to drive out to Willowdale Tavern. It was really more of a private dwelling than a hostelry. An atmosphere of domestic privacy could never be quite divorced from the old colonial house even by modern commercialism. It lingered about the old prints on the walls. It faced one in the dignity of the white columns of the porch. It creaked in the antique furniture.

Their rooms occupied a corner of the second floor. They were spacious apartments, eternally cool, and eternally peaceful. Abdallah signified his approval by curling up to sleep in the spot of sunlight on the flowered carpet. There was only one touch of modernity or art, and that was a bronze statuette of a satyr. This stood upon the mantelpiece, a roomy shelf, which, by the size of the fireplace, was forced up some six feet from the floor. All the rest of the room was softly old-fashioned. And as a final touch to complete the spell, against the window brushed the limb of a great maple-tree, bright with small new leaves.

Its movement seemed to beckon them out into the spring evening, and Beatrice could not remain inside. So they took a generously winding road fenced with thin-topped poplars on either side, so that as they looked up they found the sky always patterned in a different manner by the delicate tracery of the branches. She was infinitely gay and interested in all that she saw.

The New England landscape was a new world to her and he was kept busy telling the names of birds and trees and flowers. And then he had to talk about the country, as far as they could see it. It was a favorite place with him on week-ends, and he knew all the lore—what old colonial families had lived on such and such a place—and where the early settlers had built a blockhouse for security against the Indians, and how they held it, too, on more than one occasion against great odds.

Suddenly he was aware that she no longer listened, and turned to find her staring fixedly up into the sky. He followed the direction of her gaze. For a moment he made out nothing, but, then, against the darkening sky he saw a broad-winged hawk circling low and lower as if about to pounce upon them. The joy went out of Crawley's heart.

"We have walked too far," said Beatrice, trembling as if with cold. "And it is late. Let's turn back to the tavern."

"Yes," he agreed sadly, "it's very late."

And as they walked back in silence, now and then she started into a more hurried pace and glanced sharply behind her. He asked no questions. He acknowledged miserably to himself that there was no question he could ask. The shadow of the hawk had fallen upon them.

Crawley had supper served in their rooms, marvelous fried chicken, and afterward great cups of coffee with cream in it,

for no one would suggest black coffee in such a place. They had scarcely finished eating when her eyes began to grow filmy.

"Not that I'm tired in body, Jim," she explained, "but, oh, my mind has never rested before for years and years, it seems!"

"Before I go there's one thing I want to do," he said. "You remember that hawk, Beatrice, which we saw—"

She made a sudden gesture, half fear and half repulsion.

"Yes, yes! I remember."

He drew out a pocket automatic and handed it to her.

"It may be that you'll see that hawk again," he said, and she accepted the weapon in silent understanding.

He said good night almost as formally as if they had been strangers, and she thanked him for it with a timid glance; but when he stood with his hand resting on the door to his own room, she ran to intercept him and threw her arms around his neck.

"God bless you, Jim," she whispered. And when he was alone in his room he muttered, "God help us, she should have said, for I think that nothing else can!"

He turned to see Abdallah daintily washing his face, and the movements made the cat seem to nod his head in agreement. Yet in spite of his forebodings, his sleeplessness of the night before made Crawley go to bed early, and the swishing of the maple branch against the window pane lulled him at last into oblivion.

It seemed ages later that a peculiar spitting sound roused him. He sat straight up in bed, with a cold sense of disaster in his heart. There was the hissing sound again. It required a mighty resolution for him to scratch a match and light the candle which stood on the small table beside his bed. Abdallah, with switching tail and fur erect, crouched close to the door which led to Beatrice's room.

"Abdallah!" called Crawley softly.

The Persian turned his head and showed two evil, gleaming eyes, and immediately turned back to his vigil. He passed a tentative claw under the edge of the door. Crawley stepped close.

"Beatrice!" he called.

There was no answer from the next room, and then he realized that his call had been merely a whisper. He moistened his dry lips and was about to call again when he caught the sound of a light foot-fall from her room. He threw the door wide.

SHE was fully dressed, leaning above the open traveling bag which he had bought for her the day before.

"Beatrice!" he cried. "What's the trouble?"

She should have started at the nameless fear which was in his voice. Instead, she turned slowly and the light in her eyes was cold as the mysterious smile of the sphinx.

"You!" she said, and Crawley did not recognize her voice.

"For God's sake, Beatrice!" he said, shrinking back a pace.

Her hand darted into the traveling bag and came out again bearing the automatic. She faced him with a smile that stopped his heart; and then, with the weapon leveled at him, started for the door.

"What has happened? Are you leaving? Have you—"

He stopped. He might as well have spoken to a sleep-walker. It seemed as if he could still feel around his neck the pressure of her arms when she bade him good night the evening before. Now she was a creature of another world. A new soul was in that body. It was that new soul which the cat stalked.

Closer and closer she stepped. He did not move. And then, as he had hoped, her eyes left his and flashed toward the door. At that instant he leaped and wrenched the gun from her hand.

She cried out softly. It was like the snarl of an animal. As she sprang for the door he grappled with her. She writhed away, twisting from his grip. Once more he closed with her. She fought him silently. Her clenched hands beat against his face. Her eyes blazed close to his and her breath came panting, but she made no outcry. That was the chief horror of the thing—the silence of the girl and the spitting of Abdallah.

He crushed her close, and suddenly she went limp in his arms. Her face tilted back like a white rose on a broken stalk. He carried her to a chair and sat holding her. He dared not let her go. It seemed to him that the yearning in his heart was calling back her real self to her body, but that unless he held that body firm, it would slip away and flee to the ends of the world. She had fainted, but life was coming slowly back. In his grief he wondered whether the old or the new self would look at him when at last she opened her eyes again.

Around and around glided Abdallah, with his luminous, yellow-green eyes. Once

he stopped and struck at the foot of Beatrice with his claw. Crawley had to drive the cat away. Yet still Abdallah would not leave off his stalking, as if he recognized the alien spirit in the girl, and his actions were those which Crawley had observed when he sat in the room of Vincent Noyes. At last the cat paused in front of them and straightened from his crouch. To the astonishment of Crawley Abdallah suddenly arched his back and rubbed in the most friendly manner against the foot which he had struck at the moment before.

He had no time to wonder, for now Beatrice caught her breath with a half-moan, and then her eyelids fluttered wide. She was trembling violently, and her glance wandered wildly until it rested on his countenance.

"Jim!" she cried, and pressed close to him.

The warm blood returned to his heart at that.

"What has happened?" she asked in that faint, complaining monotone of a person long sick.

"Nothing. It's all right now."

She drew a great breath and was passive a moment, then: "Jim?"

"Yes."

"I thought—I dreamed—"

"It was only a dream. You mustn't think of it now."

She started up.

"But if it is a dream, why am I dressed and why are you here, and why—"

She broke off with a suppressed scream of horror, pointing toward the automatic, which glittered on the floor.

"It was not a dream! You stood there—there in that door—and I held that weapon pointed at you; and—oh, my God, they have had my soul in their power once again!"

She whirled on him in a panic of grief and terror, and clung blindly, desperately, to him.

"You won't let them take me, Jim—never again? Once more and it will kill me, Jim!"

He drew her into the chair and knelt beside her.

"Now is the time when you must break the silence," he commanded. "You see I can do nothing for you until I know?"

"Don't ask me!" she pleaded. "This ignorance is terrible, but the truth is far more awful. It would drive you mad with the sense of your helplessness against them."

"You must tell me," he repeated calmly. "I shall know."

"I'll never tell you, in mercy to yourself, Jim," she answered, her excitement going and sadness taking its place. "Never as long as—"

She broke off with a cry, and he knew that she had seen the automatic again. She covered her eyes.

"Begin now," he urged. "There is plenty of time. Tell me slowly and tell me all, Beatrice."

"Oh, Jim!" she moaned, "before I told him the truth Vincent Noyes was a man almost as strong and brave as you are. But if you force me to tell—yes, yes! I'll tell it all. It's like washing sin from my soul to share the secret with only one person. But where shall I begin?"

"With Noyes!"

She trembled violently.

Wherever you wish. But first I must try to tell you of another world, which lies altogether outside your world of fact, Jim. Will you try to follow me, and understand and believe as much as you possibly can of my story?"

She knit her forehead in the effort to muster her facts.

"After all," she said, "I suppose this is no more a miracle than wireless telegraphy. Only that it has to do with human souls, Jim. I don't know all about it, but Devil Ritter, in his one moment of weakness during his whole life, explained the thing."

"And 'Devil' Ritter?" queried Crawley softly.

"Yes, he is the man. Even his friends—if he has any—call him Devil Ritter. But I think he was a good man until he discovered this terrible thing. It is the thought wave."

CHAPTER IV

DEVIL RITTER

"THE thought wave?" repeated Crawley.

"It's so hard for me to explain. I know nothing of the science of the thing. I'll begin with Ritter. He is a cripple, and the weakness of his body he has made up for by training of his mind. He told me that even as a boy he possessed a peculiar ability to influence others. I suppose that you and I and everyone have noticed that when we are thinking hard, the subjects of our thoughts will be often mentioned by someone who is near us. It must be more

than mere coincidence. At least it seemed so to Ritter. He noticed also that this mental telepathy has nothing to do with space or situation. Now and then he received letters from friends, who practically answered questions of which he had thought, but not expressed.

"He decided that if he could perfect his powers of concentration, he could in time actually steal into the brain of another and give the other man his thoughts. But that wasn't all that he desired and hoped. He thought it was possible for him to establish so absolute a connection with another mind that at any distance he could read the mind with some degree of accuracy. As nearly as I understand Ritter, he bases his belief on some such scientific doctrine as this: He says that all forms of energy are expressed in vibration; that is to say, in waves. Supposing that the vibrations of the universe were so arranged, in a great scale, then each of these forms of energy occupies a fixed number of octaves on the scale. In sound, for instance, the musical note, middle C, has two hundred and fifty-six vibrations to the second, and the C above it has just double the number, five hundred and twelve. Do you understand?"

"I begin to," said Crawley eagerly. "I begin to see how he worked out his theory."

"Well then, you know of the various sorts of energy each one has a fixed place on the universal scale. Sound has more vibrations than heat and travels faster; the Hertzian waves of wireless telegraphy travel far more rapidly and with more vibrations than sound; and between the Hertzian wave and the light wave there is another great gap. Whereas sound travels in air as a medium, the medium through which light travels is not air at all, but ether, a thing about which no one knows."

"Of course not," nodded Crawley; "otherwise light could not travel through a vacuum."

"Well," said Beatrice, "this thing is far too abstract for me to explain in all its details as Ritter explained it to me; but you know that many scientists, even the most conservative, admit the probability or the possibility of mental telepathy; that is to say, communication between minds without any physical connection. Ritter, therefore, claims in the first place that thought is merely a form of energy. It is produced, as physicians know, by the destruction and rebuilding of the molecules of the brain. Now, if it is a form of en-

ergy, and is capable of being projected from one mind into space to act upon another mind at a great distance, it must travel, like light, through such a medium as ether and in waves. Secretly, Ritter thinks that the thought wave travels in a medium even rarer than ether; and, after all, ether is only a name, of which scientists know nothing except that it fills all space. Why should not thought actually travel in waves and through ether or some other medium? The miracle of it is not more strange than the traveling of light.

"To begin with, Ritter started with the assumption that thought, since it was merely a form of energy, could be controlled and projected over vast distances. For years he practised this projection of the thought wave. He did it by concentrating, painfully, absolutely, upon one person and upon one idea. In time he was sure to hear from the person of whom he had thought and of the idea which he had been striving to project toward the consciousness of the other man. If he had stopped here, he might have given to the world a great scientific discovery, which could have been put to good use; but Ritter is evil, all evil. He has the malevolence of certain cripples toward the whole world.

"He could, to a certain degree, force his thoughts into the minds of others; but this was not what he wanted. He wished to read the thoughts of other people when he was far away from them. Can you imagine anything more terrible than the power to tell what other men were thinking, at any time?

"But here he found his great stumbling block. The strength of his mind was perfect for projecting his own thoughts into the consciousness of others, but it was not at all attuned to receiving *their* thoughts. The difference between him and what he desired to be was the difference between the wireless apparatus which sends and that which receives a message. No matter how he fought to do this, he could not place himself at the receiving end of those impalpable lines of mental telepathy.

"It was a terrible disappointment to his keen, bitter nature. Then he thought of an alternative. It was natural that the instrument which sent could not receive. But it was possible that just as Ritter was able to project his thought into the mind of any person he knew, at least to a degree, so some other mind might be so delicately attuned that it could receive the thought waves of other mentalities.

To a certain extent, you know, this is what spiritualist mediums claim to do.

"He tried a number of these mediums. He practised hypnosis so as to place these mediums more perfectly under his control. And he had some measure of success. To another man, what Ritter was then able to do would have been perfectly satisfying; but he had no sooner accomplished this end than he desired something more. He was now able, by placing a fine medium in a trance, to put her in communication with the thought waves of any person the medium knew, and then made the medium repeat to him what she learned. What Ritter desired was a medium so perfect and delicate that he could control her, even at a distance and without the use of hypnosis."

"Good God!" broke out Crawley, wiping his damp forehead. "What this fiend wanted was an ear through which he could hear the thoughts of the world."

"No," said Beatrice, "he cared nothing about the heart of the world. All he wanted was to read the minds of those whom he selected as victims. But if he could find a medium so delicate, then at any time Ritter could concentrate on the medium, and through her collect whatever messages he wished. In his own tremendous mind, you see, he had the sending instrument with which he projected thoughts. What he now desired was the mind of a second person which would be to him like the receiving apparatus of a wireless plant. And this second mind was to be attuned to Ritter alone, so as to send him information of all the world. For years he hunted through the world in hopes of finding such a medium. Finally he went to India, and it was there he found his medium.

She stopped and made a little gesture of appeal. "And now you know?" she asked.

CRAWLEY was sickly white.

"Beatrice!" he whispered faintly.

"Yes, it was I that he found, and I am the ear through which he catches the thought waves of everyone I know."

Crawley sprang to his feet, desperate.

"My God!" he cried. "Do you know what that means? It means that the mind of Ritter at this very moment knows of what we talk. He is here. He is in this room; not his body, but the immortal, the immortally damned part of him—his mind is here. He knows what we think of, what we plan, what we hope to do, what we have done!"

She was as pale as Crawley now.

"He does," she said, and her voice was without emotion.

"It can't be!" groaned Crawley. "It isn't possible. I will not—I dare not—believe it!"

"I've had too many proofs that it is no more than the truth," she answered. "And you have had a proof as well. It was the dead body of Vincent Noyes which you saw!"

Crawley whirled as if someone behind had spoken to him. Then he snatched up the automatic and stared at the door. It was as if he expected that door to swing open and Devil Ritter to appear. He was trembling when he faced Beatrice again. She ran to him.

"Jim," she pleaded, "will you hate me now that you know this?"

"Hate you?" he answered, his breath coming hard. "No, no! But God help us both! Tell me—after Ritter found you—and Noyes? Tell me everything!"

"I was helpless against him at first. There was something about him that filled me with fear the moment I saw him. Yes, all men fear Ritter when they see him. He seems as if—as if he knew all the thoughts of the world—all the evil thoughts—and rejoiced in his knowledge. Yet he had a fascination for me. It lay partly in his expressionless gray eyes, and partly—ah, it's too horrible!—partly in his withered, white, clawlike left hand. His whole left side is afflicted with a sort of muscular paralysis. His left leg is withered, too, and he has to walk with a cane, a revolting hobble.

"I met him at the house of a mutual friend, and he talked with me for a long time. And I remember that toward the close of that conversation I was saying nothing except in answer to questions which he put. And that night I dreamed of him."

She covered her face with her hands, but rallied to continue with the weird story:

"I was an orphan, living with an old grand-uncle, an invalid, whom we expected to die at any time. He did die, and then, since I had no money, Ritter—Devil Ritter—gave me a position as his secretary. It was an easy place. He dictated a letter now and then or had me read to him; but mostly I was simply asked to sit near him—without talking. That was the point, though of course I didn't know it. He would sit in his chair, leaning back with his eyes half closed and his forehead

puckered. And then I would begin to think more vividly than I ever did at other times.

"I would think of people I knew. Their faces would come before me as distinctly as if they were in the room. I would almost hear their voices and know what they said. They said all sorts of queer things in my imaginings of them. I thought that I was only imagining. How could I know that Ritter was directing my mind toward these people, and that what I seemed to hear the many say was actually what they were thinking at that time? And how could I dream—most horrible of all!—that in me Ritter had found the victim whose thoughts he could read without even the aid of a hypnotic trance?"

"But how could he harm people by merely reading their thoughts?" asked Crawley, though he guessed the answer.

"Don't you see, it placed them in his hands. He knew what they would do and even where they would go. He knew their likes and dislikes, their plans and their desires. It has been easy for men to like me. They seek me out very often, and every man who met me was in the power of Ritter, for I was in tune with the thought waves of any man I knew at all, and the thought waves which reached me were transmitted to my—my master!"

"I never guessed it until the first tragedy, and then—"

"What was that?" asked Crawley; but her face showed so much pain that he immediately added: "Never mind. Leave out everything that hurts you too much remembering."

"I'll tell you all that I can, Jim," she answered. "That first man was ruined—ruined utterly—and the profit was Ritter's. There was money in it, in the first place; but above all there was revenge, for that man had made some cruel remark about Devil Ritter. After the catastrophe I began to guess, very dimly, what part I played in the affair. I left Ritter. I went to him and accused him to his face. He merely smiled and said, 'By all means go, my dear. I'll see you tomorrow when you get over your tantrum!'

"I laughed in his face and told him how I loathed him. Then I went away. But that night I found myself thinking more and more of him. He would not go out of my thoughts. I was on the verge of going back to him a dozen times before morning. I had to fight against the impulse almost as if I were struggling against

physical hands which drew me back to Devil Ritter. The next morning I almost ran to his house.

"He wasn't at all surprised to see me, and treated me as if we had no bitter scene together the day before. Twice in the next week I broke away from him. The first time I decided to leave the city. I bought a ticket for a town three hundred miles away. In the middle of the trip I found that I must return. I could not help it. Something like a voice within me, an irresistible voice of command was repeating over and over again: 'Return to Ritter—Devil Ritter—return to Devil Ritter!'

"I got off the train at the next station and bought a return ticket. When I got back I went to Ritter in utter desperation and told him all my suspicions. And then—for the fiend inspired him to it—he told me the truth about himself just as I've told it to you, and he showed me how hopelessly I was in his power. He proved to me that no matter where I went I could never escape his power, for his relentless mind would follow and make me his slave even at the distance of a thousand miles, and that eventually I must return to the nameless horror of my master's presence.

"Oh, Jim, in the terror and the disgust which overmastered me I defied him again, and left for the third time. Then I committed a great sin. There was a young man in that city who had loved me for a long time. Yes, you have guessed his name. It was Vincent Noyes. I fled to Vincent and told him a little—as much as his dazed brain could grasp—of the terrible bondage in which I was held. He laughed away my fears—swore the whole affair was a matter of a girl's imagination. He offered, if I wished, to leave the city with me and take care of me. He offered to marry me on the spot.

"I couldn't do that. I didn't love him. But I accepted his protection, and we left together. For two days we traveled together, and all that time the haunting, still voice was calling within me, 'Return to Devil Ritter! He waits for you! Return to Devil Ritter!' If I fought against that silent command before, I struggled with ten times more desperation then. I wanted to confide that terrific urging to Vincent; but when I tried to do so I found that I could not open my lips, or if I did, I talked of something else. You see, the control of Ritter was on me. I knew that he was sitting in his chair, leaning back with the pucker in his forehead and con-

centrating mightily upon me, sending his influence after me with a power upon my soul greater than that of a magnet upon iron.

"At last, without a word of warning to Vincent, I slipped out of the train at a small station and, as I had done before, bought a return ticket. And once more Ritter smiled his welcome on me and put out his cold, white hand, and I had to take it in mine, shuddering with horror.

"The next day Vincent Noyes came to Ritter's house after me. I heard his voice and went down into the room where Ritter sat with his two confederates, Jordan and Boone—Boone is the tawny-haired man you have seen.

"When I came in, there was a terrible scene. Vincent sprang beside me and swore that he would take me away. Ritter leaned back in his chair, smiling, and told him to do it. But Jordan, a big, dark-faced man, said there had been enough foolishness and that it had to stop right there. He blocked the door with his great body. And then—"

She stopped, closed her eyes, and then went on in a low, hurried voice, "Then Vincent whipped out a revolver and fired pointblank at Jordan. The big man dropped to the floor without a sound. I remember he seemed more surprised than hurt, and before Vincent could use his weapon again, Boone, raging like a demon, was on him; and all the while Devil Ritter was laughing in a way that made my blood run cold.

"I don't know how—I can't imagine how—any man could break away from Boone, but Vincent managed to do it. He saw the upturned face of Jordan; a single glance was enough to show that the man was dead, and ran from the house.

"Vincent was accused of murder and had to flee from India. He would never have been brought to trial by Ritter, though. No, Ritter had no use for the law. His own methods extracted far more torture from a victim. He started out on the trail of Vincent. Yes, you will say that Vincent had left no trail if he could elude the law. It was through me that Ritter followed him. I knew what he was after then, and I could fight him effectually by simply shutting the thought of Vincent from my mind. But when I did that, Ritter used his demoniac power of hypnosis, and when I was in the trance I was powerless, and he literally sent my thoughts flying after Vincent, and what I knew, he read, yes, or actually forced me to utter."

Crawley groaned and turned his head toward the door.

"So we followed Vincent half-way around the world," she went on. "It took a long time, for you see when Ritter directed my thoughts after Vincent, it was done so powerfully that Vincent must have received some warning, perhaps in a dream, perhaps a vague foreboding, for he always fled when we approached him. That was part of Ritter's plan. He had no desire to take Vincent and turn him over to the law. He knew that the long horror of pursuit, the never-ending apprehension, was far more a perfect torture. And think of poor Vincent, fleeing from place to place, dogged by a terror which he could not even confide to a mortal man in all the world, and with no companion but his Persian cat, Abdallah there, who knows strange things, if he could speak them!

"And so we came to New York at last. I remember one night as we were out riding in an automobile Ritter stopped the machine before a house, a common place, with a brownstone front and a 'To Rent' placard on the window, and said, 'Look at that house carefully.' I did, wondering what he meant. After we had driven on he said, 'That's the house in which Vincent Noyes will be found dead.' And he laughed—Devil Ritter!

"Ah, if I only had the strength to kill him then—a man's strength! But even if I had been a man, what could I have done—what could I ever have done to harm him? For great, leonine Boone is always with him, and it would require a score of men to overcome that giant. Yes, and I cannot hate him as much as I should, for—"

She stopped, and her eyes appealed to Crawley for help.

"Because," she went on at last, "incredible as you will think it, I am sure that this monster loves me. He has never said so, but I am sure he does. All the time I have been with him there has been that still, insistent voice within him, repeating the thought of Ritter in all of its appealing forms—his loneliness, his great need for human tenderness, and his capacity for boundless and passionate love. Yes, he has that capacity, Jim. I have guessed it vaguely. Its whole extent I could never know, for he is far too grim and great a power for me to define him in all his possibilities. And if I were still to be with him and in his power, who knows what might happen to me? That voice is always speaking when I think of him,

and how can the stone resist the steady dropping of the water? So far, the constant knowledge of his fiendishness has been the cure to that thing which keeps recurring to me—a pity for him, Jim, who could have been so great a power for good, and who has been made by his deformity—Devil Ritter in name and in fact!"

"Still in his power?" repeated Crawley, a deep ring of despair in his voice. "Don't you see that you were never more in his power than you are now? The pity you speak of is now in your voice. Tonight you held a pistol leveled against me; it was his hand that pressed the trigger! He is here now! His presence is like the air we breathe, and we can only avoid him by death."

He ceased. A strange light came in his eyes, and leaning over he said gently, "Tell me where he lives, Beatrice."

She guessed his thought, and for answer she laid her hand over his lips, her eyes wide with horror.

"No, no!" she whispered. "Not his death! That would be his crowning triumph, for in his death he would ruin both you and me."

"I shall learn sooner or later," said Crawley quietly, "where he lives."

"And?"

He shrugged his shoulders as if the matter were ended.

"There is no choice. Death is a little thing compared with our love!"

"You shall never discover where he lives," she answered—"never, at least, from me!"

He glanced at her, a deep suspicion gradually dawning on his face.

"By Heavens, Beatrice," he said suddenly, "I think it is his power which keeps you from speaking—or that pity you spoke of!"

She stared at him with parted lips for an instant and then slipped into his arms and sobbed bitterly.

"Tell me," he commanded, "which is it—pity or that devil's power?"

"Jim," she whispered, "God help me! I don't know!"

And so they waited for the dawn—she trembling and weeping in his arms and Crawley with his despairing eyes fixed upon the door—for beyond the door lay the world, and somewhere in that world brooded the spirit of Devil Ritter. Yes, it was as Crawley had said, in the very air which they breathed. It worked even now, perhaps, in the mind of the girl whose head lay upon his shoulder.

WHEN the light of the sun came at last—that yellow, honest light—it brought a deep comfort to Crawley. The helplessness which possessed him in the night died away. When the dark veiled the world it seemed the proper domain of Devil Ritter, but in the day, for no reason whatever, hope returned to Crawley.

After breakfast he left Beatrice asleep—worn out by the unearthly vigil of the night—and walked out to think, to plan. The freshness of the air, the playing of the light west wind about his face, increased his cheer. His self-confidence, never before shaken, flooded back upon him. In the first place, though Beatrice declared that distance made no difference, he could not help feeling that some thousands of miles would be a barrier even to Ritter. Where should they flee? Perhaps South—perhaps West? Yes, that would be the thing—the mountains of California. He walked on, now fast and now slow, scarcely heeding where he went, and always revolving new plans, new details.

Finally he was conscious with a start that he must be far from the tavern. He felt like a man awaking from a sleep. He glanced at his watch and found that it was half past ten. He must hurry back in order to wake Beatrice for lunch.

Yet in spite of his hurry it was almost noon before he reached the old colonial house. As he started to run up the stairs, humming a song, the proprietor called to him. He turned back.

"Mrs. Crawley left a message for you, sir," said the man.

Crawley's hand contracted on the railing of the stairs.

"Left a message?" he repeated dully. "Where has she gone?"

"She asked me to tell you that she has gone into New Haven, Mr. Crawley. You must have walked too far, sir. Your color has quite left you."

"New Haven," said Crawley. "Gone to New Haven!"

He laughed for the utter hopelessness of the thing. Perhaps it was better that it should have happened so soon.

"What time did she leave the tavern?" he asked.

"Half past ten—exactly," said the proprietor, and Crawley turned sick. It was at that moment that he had roused himself from his plans for their flight and had turned back to the tavern—at the instant when she was starting for Devil Ritter!

"Thank you," he said, and turned back up the stairs.

"Shall I serve you in your room?" asked the proprietor, and, receiving no answer, he muttered, "These city folk they overdo when they get out into the open!"

There was still the ghost of a hope left to Crawley that she had merely gone on some errand into New Haven, and would return, for in her room he found her traveling bag; but as the afternoon wore on that slender hope disappeared. Evening came—and still no Beatrice. As the dark began he could no longer remain within the room. The very air breathed memories of her. It was too late to leave the tavern that day. Moreover, when he did go, where should he search for her? She had refused him Devil Ritter's address—through pity or what?

As he went downstairs he passed a new-comer at the tavern—a dark, squat, heavily built fellow. He went on out into the deepening gloom and took the path down the road between the solemn poplars where he and Beatrice had walked the evening before. He could not have made a sadder choice. When he came to the place where she had stopped short and stared up at the circling hawk, he also paused and looked up. It seemed to him that the same hawk circled there again. To make sure and get a better view of the sky through the poplar tops he stepped to one side.

The movement saved his life, for something swished past his head, fanning his cheek. He whirled and struck out with all his might. The blow went wild, but it served to make the assailant dodge and miss the second blow with his bit of lead pipe. For a moment they faced each other, crouched, panting, silent—for it was too far from the inn for an outcry to bring help to Crawley. In the dim light he could make out that the other was the new-comer at the inn. He leaped in again, dodging like a boxer the blow of his enemy, and struck again with all his might. The blow thudded home against the jaw-bone and the man crumpled up on the ground.

Before he could recover his senses Crawley ran his hand over the fellow's pockets but found no weapon. Evidently the thug had relied upon the lead pipe alone. In a moment he recovered consciousness, and Crawley jerked him to his feet, holding him with one hand at the throat and with the other drawn back ready for a blow. But the other had tasted the bone-breaking power of that good right hand before, and now he stood sullenly, making no effort to escape.

"Now, my friend," said Crawley, "there's

an easy way for you to get out of this little scrape. I don't want you. I want your employer. Will you tell me the way to find Ritter?"

The fellow moistened his lips, hesitated, and then remained silent.

"Out with it and save your hide!"

Evidently the man feared Devil Ritter even more than the hard fist of Crawley. He would not speak.

"I'll have that out of you or break your head like a rotten egg," said Crawley, and smashed his fist into the man's face again.

It was brutal work, but red rage was blinding him. He jerked the half-conscious thug to his feet again.

"Will you speak now, or—"

The fellow sputtered blood, then, "Damn you! His house is in Long Island, on the road to—"

"Wait," said Crawley. "No general directions. Give me details."

He made his victim rehearse his description again and again, but the man clung to each detail with the persistency of truth, telling how the house lay by itself surrounded by extensive grounds, and descending finally to the personnel of Ritter's staff of servants. If the man had wished to lie he could not have invented so much with so great an accuracy.

"One thing more," said Crawley. "And if you answer me honestly I'll turn you loose, perhaps. How much were you to get from Devil Ritter?"

"Five thousand—and be damned to you!"

Crawley whistled softly.

"Five thousand!" he repeated. "For a swine like you, that's overpay! Ritter's extravagant. Now get out, and get fast—and don't go back to Devil Ritter!"

The man faded quickly into the night, and Crawley turned back toward the tavern. He was almost happy now that he had definite work to do. A moment before he had not a clue to follow. Now he could, at least, beard the lion, the lion and the devil living together in one den—Boone and Ritter!

He reached New Haven in the nick of time to catch an express to New York. It was nine o'clock when he stepped out at Grand Central. It was well after ten when his automobile stopped in front of the gate to Ritter's house. He told the driver to wait there—for an hour, at least—and if he did not return in that time to go back to New York—for he knew that if he did not return within that time eternity could not bring him back.

Then he went up to the house. With his

hand on the electric button he remembered that he had brought no weapon—yet he felt no desire to give up the adventure. A revolver, after all, would be a trivial thing against Devil Ritter.

THE door was opened by a slender, gray-haired servitor who squinted up inquisitively at the big stranger. Crawley stepped confidently in and commenced drawing off his gloves.

"Mr. Ormsby," he announced. "Mr. Ritter is expecting me?"

"Ormsby?" repeated the old man with gentle surprise. "I don't recall that he has mentioned the name."

"No?" said Crawley carelessly, and slipped off his overcoat. "That's odd!"

He drew out his card-case, opened and shut it quickly.

"Haven't a card with me, but just take him my name—Ormsby. He'll understand."

The servant nodded and turned away to go up the stairs.

"Better still!" called Crawley hastily. "If he's forgotten me, I'll go with you and take him by surprise."

The man hesitated.

"Are you quite sure, sir, that Mr. Ritter *likes* to be surprised?"

"Nonsense! Of course he does—by a friend!" said Crawley, adding hastily, "Just show me up to him."

His breezy good nature overwhelmed rather than convinced the servant, who turned away again, reluctantly shaking his head, and led the way up the stairs to the second floor. Voices came very faintly from one of the rooms.

"He's in here with Mr. Boone, I believe," said the man.

"All right," chuckled Crawley. "Now you just trot along back and I'll treat him to a surprise!"

The other turned a look of open objection upon him, but Crawley's cheerful smile, and the still more cheerful rustle of a bill in his hand turned the tide. He grinned in sympathy and hobbled off down the hall, chuckling as loudly as a perfect servant may. When he was out of sight down the stairs, Crawley tried the door-knob carefully, softly. It was locked! He ground his teeth at the thought of being balked at the last moment. Then he dropped to his knees and put his ear to the keyhole. He could make out the voices—not very distinctly, to be sure, but as his ear grew accustomed to the faintness of the sounds he gathered more and more.

"She fights the thought of you out of her

mind?" a deep, rich voice was querying.

"Yes, but when she sleeps she'll be helpless," answered a second man, and his tone sent a chill through Crawley. He knew as well as if he had heard the name pronounced that this was Devil Ritter. And that mellow bass must belong to Boone.

"It'll be a long time before she lets herself sleep," said Boone.

The other laughed, a soft low sound.

"She'll sleep after she eats," he said.

"But will she eat?"

"She has already."

"Then—"

"Yes, go take a look at her. She's locked her door, but you can open it with this key. If she's unconscious bring her in. No, don't raise your eyebrows at me. It's merely a sleep—no more!"

Footsteps sounded. Crawley crouched low, ready for the door to open, but apparently Boone went out by another way. Presently his step returned—this time heavier and more deliberate.

"Ah," said Ritter, "put her in that chair—so! And now push my chair over till I face her. I don't feel like walking today."

A little silence followed, but Crawley, listening to the thunder of his heart, guessed at the cripple leaning forward and fixing his keen, solemn eyes upon Beatrice.

"Speak!" said the voice of Ritter.

"Be careful," warned Boone, "or you'll wake her!"

"Boone," answered the master, "you're a fool, and if it weren't for your great body you'd be useless. She's in my power, I tell you, as absolutely as if her mind were now part of my own. Speak to me, Beatrice!"

A low voice replied. Crawley strained his ears, but the thundering of his heart drowned the sound.

"Has he seen Stanislaus yet?" asked Ritter.

Crawley never dreamed that the soft music of Beatrice's voice could make him tremble, but now he shuddered as she answered like one half-awake, half-asleep:

"Yes, he has seen Stanislaus."

"And what happened?"

"Stanislaus is gone."

"Yes, but what did he do before he went?"

"I don't know. He is hurt."

"Damnation!" said Ritter. "Stanislaus hurt? Then this job will be for you, Boone."

"I'm ready for it," rumbled the giant. "I'll break him between my hands like a biscuit!"

Crawley tightened his right fist.

"And the man—Crawley?" asked Ritter.

She cried out as if she had been hurt.

"Crawley?" repeated Ritter.

"Devil Ritter!" whispered Crawley to himself.

"He has learned—" began the girl uncertainly.

"What? What has he learned?" asked Ritter.

"Where you are—where he can find you," she said.

And Ritter laughed again. The laughter died into a prolonged chuckle.

"And now?" he asked.

"He is coming," said Beatrice.

"Good!" said Ritter. "If Stanislaus failed, Boone will not!"

"He is here!" said Beatrice.

"Here? Where?"

"Very close!"

"Almost to the house? Boone, take any sort of a weapon and run down to the garden. Perhaps the fellow is lurking there. Wait a minute, she's speaking again. This Crawley must have the nerve of the devil!"

"He is not in the garden—he's in the house," she said in the same dull, mechanical voice.

"In the house?" bellowed Boone. "By God, Ritter, the girl is tricking us!"

There was a brief pause.

"Nonsense!" said Ritter. "I know her perfectly. This is eating her soul out, but she can't lie to me! Where is he in the house, Beatrice?"

"Very close."

"Boone, are you armed?"

"No, I don't need a gun."

"How close, Beatrice?" repeated Ritter.

"He hears what I am saying."

"Boone, try that door!"

A quick but heavy step, as though some giant cat were running, crossed the floor, the lock clicked, the heavy door swung open, and a shaft of light smote Crawley in the face, where he crouched.

"Here—he's here!" thundered Boone, and leaped forward, but as he moved Crawley lunged out like a football player and drove his shoulder with all his power against the knees of the giant.

THEY spilled back into the room in a growling heap of struggling arms and legs. The knowledge that he was fighting for both Beatrice and his life trebled Crawley's strength, but even then he knew that he had met his master. A hand clasped his ankle. It was as if a band of hot steel had been clamped against his flesh. It

threatened to tear the ligaments loose from the bone. He writhed, and kicked out with his other foot. There was an audible, dull snap as his heel drove home against Boone's forearm. The giant relaxed his grip with a bellow of pain and rage, and Crawley staggered to his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed Beatrice lying in a chair with her head fallen wearily to one side and her eyes closed in sleep. Beside her was the thin figure of Devil Ritter who smiled calmly at the struggle as if he were disinterested.

He had no time for a second glance, for great Boone rushed at him snarling like a dog. His left arm dangled, but one blow of his monstrous right hand would end the fight. Crawley's ankle still burned where the grip had been fastened—such a grip on his throat—

He leaped to one side, crouching, and smashed both hands into the big body as it swept past. His fists rebounded. He might as well have struck the ribs of an ox.

And now Boone, roaring like a beast that had missed its spring, caught up a massive chair and swung it around his head. He would not be dodged this time. Crawley danced back. Boone's roar was half-laughter of triumph, half-bellow of pain from his broken left arm.

There was one possible shelter for Crawley—the table, broad and heavily made. He dropped behind it at the very moment that the chair hurtled toward him. It shattered with a crash against the table, and one leg of the chair, battered loose from the rest of the frame, dropped beside Crawley. His hand closed around it instinctively. The roar of Boone, rushing upon him, filled his ears like the sound of the sea when he rose.

The eyes of the giant burned yellow as fire. Crawley struck with all his force. The blow beat down the upreared arm of Boone and knocked him to his knees. As he struggled yelling to his feet, Crawley swung the heavy stick again. It thudded against the skull, and Boone pitched to his face with his arms thrown in a loose circle around Crawley's feet. The latter stooped and slipped his hand under the breast of the fallen man. The heart still beat, though faintly. Then Crawley rose and faced the mirthless smile of Ritter. The will to kill shot from his heart to his brain like a flare of red fire.

There was the great enemy crippled, too helpless even to fly. He still had his demoniac power, but what could that avail him now? Crawley advanced a step at a

time, his hands stretched out and the fingers stiffly clutching as if already they were settling around his victim's throat. The rage of the fight had burned all human emotions from his soul. And like an animal, when close to his prey, he crouched for the leap.

Yet he hesitated. It may have been the unfaltering steadiness of those bright eyes which checked him with a burst of unwilling admiration for the man's courage. It might have been a thousand things, but suddenly he found himself forgetting all of that white face, even the smile. All he saw now was the staring eyes. He straightened and struck his hand across his forehead.

But when he looked again the glance only confirmed what he had guessed before—he could not kill the man, it was not in his heart to find cold cruelty enough for that. In place of the blood-lust there grew up an unreasoning desire to be gone away—far away from those all-seeing eyes which looked through flesh and bone and reached the heart. He stopped, caught up the limp form of Beatrice, and started for the door.

The moment he began to retreat a hysterical fear overwhelmed him. If a gun had lain in the white, thin hand of Devil Ritter, the big man could not have feared the cripple more. He turned and faced the smile and the eyes again.

And so he left the room, stealing back step by step, and sometimes throwing a frightened glance over his shoulder, for now the danger seemed to surround him from all sides. At the door he whirled and ran down the hall, gathering Beatrice closer.

In the lower hall the same old servant saw him pass and ran at him, crying out. Crawley freed one arm and swept the gray-haired servitor back. Someone called from the upper part of the house. He wrenched open the door, and in another moment was running down the path toward the road.

A fear dogged him that the driver of the automobile might have gone back to New York without waiting out the full hour, but as he turned the last corner he caught the welcome flare of the headlights. Taxi drivers are wise in many ways, and, above all, wise in never asking questions. This one had been liberally fed, and now he opened the door of his machine without a word, and when Crawley was settled inside with Beatrice, nodded his head in understanding to the order which sent him back to New York and then out again

over the long road to New Haven and the Willowdale Tavern.

CHAPTER V

DEVIL AND SATYR

ALL during the ride she slept, and when he managed to waken her a mile or so from the tavern, she was still more than half-asleep. She followed him without apparently knowing what she was doing after they dismounted in the early morning at the Willowdale. When she reached her room she instantly fell asleep again on the bed, and Crawley, haggard of eye and trembling now from the reaction of his night's work, sat beside her and watched.

The effort proved too great at last, and he dropped asleep in his chair. He awoke with a start at midday to find Beatrice sitting up on the edge of the bed, white of face and dark of eye. For a moment they stared at each other almost stupidly.

"Jim?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Was it all a dream? I thought—"

She stopped as the memories, too vivid for any dream, poured back upon her. She slipped from the bed and ran to him, took his face between her hands.

"Jim, it is true—I went back to Devil Ritter!"

"Yes."

She caught her breath.

"But how—"

"Don't ask me, dear! All I know myself is that you are back again and far away from him. And he is truly a devil!"

Amazement, fear, and then slow conviction slowly filled her eyes.

"Jim, you went to that house alone?"

"Yes."

"But no one could face great Boone!"

"I did face him, Beatrice, and at the crisis the devil deserted his own. So here we are."

"But Devil Ritter—no, you did not harm him!"

"How do you know?" he asked rather curiously.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It is more than an intuition," she said sadly.

"Whatever it is," he agreed, "you are right. I didn't lay a hand on him. I can't believe now that I let him go. There he sat. I was as close to him—almost—as I am to you. I had merely to put out my hands and take him by the throat—"

"Don't, Jim! I understand—you couldn't

do it. Sometimes I think that nothing human can kill him!"

"Then he'll live forever?" queried Crawley, but there was no mirth in his smile.

"I can't explain the riddle. I only know that if he dies it will be by—"

"We are not beaten yet?" she queried faintly.

He shook his head in despair.

"I think we are," he said. "I am wrecked! My nerve is gone! Beatrice, his will—his iron will—was stronger than my whole body. If I had stayed with him for another minute he would have quelled me with his eye as I—as I would quell a pet dog!"

"I know," she whispered. "Ah, how well I know! The strength of Boone is a giant's strength—but it is like the feebleness of a child compared with the power of Devil Ritter. Jim, what shall we do? Shall we flee away?"

"I had as soon try to flee away from—from God or the devil! No, we will wait here."

And they waited there. As if in sympathy with their mood the bright day overcast in the afternoon—the sky grew dark as evening in autumn and a chill wind whistled about the corners of the house and sighed and rushed through the maple beyond the window.

In the evening, to bring what cheer they could into the room, they had a bright fire kindled on the great hearth and then sat down, not to talk but to wait—wait—wait. Sometimes they strove to begin an idle conversation, but something kept their voices low and made them trail away in the middle of sentences; and then they would tilt back their heads as if they listened.

And all the while the bronze satyr on the edge of the high mantelpiece mocked them with his sinister grin. And Abdallah, curled up beside the fire, never moved his round, yellow eyes from the face of Beatrice.

He began to show positive discontent at last, and, rising, he commenced to slink up and down the room. Sometimes he leaped up to the window-sill and stared out into the blank darkness. Sometimes he crept up to the door and sniffed at the crack along the floor. In the end he contented himself with passing around and around Beatrice, his hair growing more and more erect, his eyes yellower.

They knew what it meant. Finally, when the suspense was greater than he could stand in silence, Crawley went to her and placed his trembling hand over hers.

"He is near?" he asked hoarsely. She nodded. She could not move her eyes from the door.

"Beatrice, shall I lock the door?"

And then he smiled at the childish folly of the thought, and the bronze satyr on the mantelpiece repeated the smile.

"Hush!" she said. "Listen!"

Down the hall came a step, the unmistakable sound of a cripple walking with crutch or cane. A light hand tapped at the door. Crawley straightened, stepped back.

"Come in!" he said.

His voice was merely a gibbering whisper. "Come in!" he repeated aloud.

The door swung slowly open.

"Ah," said Devil Ritter, "this is truly a domestic scene!"

And he stepped into the room. On the floor in front of him Abdallah crouched, switching his tail from side to side slowly, while his yellow eyes fixed full on the face of Ritter; then, as if in sudden panic, the big Persian darted away, leaped up to the window-sill and scratched at the pane; leaped down again and climbed a short distance up the heavy curtain; down again, and with the wondering eyes of the three following him, he sprang at last to the mantelpiece and cowered behind the bric-a-brac which littered it—safe, at least, from the eyes of Devil Ritter.

"I have come," he said in his soft voice, "for an entirely amicable talk. Am I right in presuming that you may care to listen to me?"

CRAWLEY tried to speak, but could only wave Ritter to the chair beneath the mantelpiece. He hobbled to it—every motion evidently costing him exquisite pain—and sank into its soft depths with a quiet breath of relief. Abdallah, slinking out from behind the old clock, peered over the edge at Ritter and immediately drew back into shelter.

"You will agree with me," he began, "that in coming to talk this over you have made quite a concession—as a matter of fact there's something about it that makes me uncomfortable. Perhaps it's merely the atmosphere of this absurd old room. Perhaps it's the actions of that—most unusual cat."

And he smiled, first upon Crawley and then upon Beatrice. It seemed to the excited brain of Crawley that his smile was an exact duplicate of the grin on the face of the antique satyr which stood exactly above Ritter's chair. There was, at least, something uncannily fascinating in the idea, as if the artist had modeled his bronze after a demoniac of his own day, and now that same spirit of hell sat incarnated in the chair with the shadow of his ancestor's image falling upon him.

"As you know," said Ritter, apparently taking the silence of his hosts for granted, "as you know, Beatrice, I am always brief. I have come for you, and I shall not leave without you, I hope. That I have called for you in person rather than—let us say—in spirit, is a concession wrung from me entirely by Mr. Crawley's bravery."



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

BETWEEN WORLDS



By Garret Smith

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He turned his smile upon the big man, who could not keep from wincing under it. His very soul was turning to water within him.

"I admire bravery," said Ritter, "and your handling of Boone was admirable. He is quite a wreck. The doctor says that he can never be patched up again. Well, well! He was quite a spectacle while he lasted, and very useful in his stupid way."

His cold brutality evidently freed Beatrice momentarily from his spell.

"And, of course, you know," she said calmly, "that I had rather die than return to you?"

"Of course I do," smiled Ritter.

"And I shall not. My—my husband will keep me from you!"

A spasm of pain made Ritter's face ghastly for an instant, and though he was smiling again almost at once, Crawley knew that the torture was still working within him. There was a slight stir on the mantelpiece as Abdallah writhed his way slowly forward, pushing the bric-a-brac out of the way as he hugged the wall—to keep further from Devil Ritter.

"It is for his sake, my dear," said Ritter, "that I am sure you will go home with me."

"His sake?" echoed Beatrice dully.

"A woman's memory," sighed Ritter, and he waved his hand in graceful appeal to Crawley, "is very short indeed. Have you already forgotten Vincent Noyes—and others? Ah, I see you have not!"

"By God," said Crawley fiercely, "if I have to die now, and die horribly, you shall not have her!"

Ritter turned those cold eyes upon him.

"You are brave, indeed," he said gently. Beatrice rose.

"If you will just lend me your arm to rise, Beatrice," said Ritter, "you know I'm not very active!"

"Beatrice!" cried Crawley, "you *cannot* leave me!"

"You fool!" said Ritter, suddenly savage and trembling with his pent bitterness. "Do you think it's an easy thing for me to let you go? Am I not paying price enough for her? Ah, I could take your great, strong brain and body and wring the power from them, little by little, drop by drop—for days and days, for months and months, for years and years! It was so with Noyes. What—have you forgotten him? Do you remember how he grinned at you in the moonlight? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, God!" groaned Crawley, and Beatrice dropped to her knees and caught in her warm ones, the cold hands of Ritter.

"Let me stay," she pleaded. "I have served you long enough. I have bought my release with my years of horror! And I love him so, Ritter. Even the devil you serve would keep his hand back from our happiness. What more can you wish from me? Tell me that I have earned my liberty, for the sake of mercy!"

"All your life could not buy your liberty," he said in a strange voice, "for you have given me nothing of what you could give."

"What?" asked the motion of her lips.

"Love!" he answered, and the traveler in the desert names water in the same manner that Ritter named love. "Do you think this petty fellow—this creature of blood and brawn—can need you or can serve you as my soul can need and serve you, Beatrice? What is he? What is his strength? Look! I keep him chained with a glance!"

And his sneering glance moved to the desperate face of Crawley, then back to Beatrice; but her look now left his face and wandered above his head, her eyes wide with horror. Abdallah, slinking along the mantelpiece close to the wall, had come at last behind the bronze satyr. The statuette stood on the very verge of the mantelpiece, and now, as the big cat crowded further and further between the pedestal and the wall, the bronze slipped forward under the pressure and now tottered on the very verge. Crawley saw also, but, like Beatrice, his lips were chained by the uncanny horror of the thing. The statuette slid a fraction of an inch forward.

"What is wrong?" asked Ritter sharply, staring intently into the face of Beatrice. "Do you see the handwriting on the wall?"

He laughed, and laughing leaned back his head to look up. The heavy bronze falling struck him fairly on the forehead and then crashed to the floor. Ritter lay limp in the chair, without a sound, his face still upturned with a little mark of blood upon the forehead. Abdallah peered over the edge of the mantelpiece and down into the dead eyes.

Beatrice ran to the door, calling for help, but Crawley, who knew that no help could come, carried the body to the bed and laid it there with the hands religiously folded across the breast. The smile of death seemed more than ever like the grin of the bronze satyr.

When he turned again, as several of the tavern servants ran into the room, he saw Abdallah curled up on the most comfortable corner of the fireplace and evidently asleep.

(Continued from page 6)

"Jason, Son of Jason," was great. But the story in the May issue to take high honors was "The Moon Pool". What about the other two Jason stories? Are they available in any form? Would like to read them.

The July issue contained the top story for the year. "The Second Deluge" really hit the bell with me. Oh, yes, I know it's an old theme, but presented in such good form that it can't be compared with the others.

"The Conquest of the Moon Pool" so far is my favorite by Merritt. Maybe when I have read some of the others that haven't appeared as yet I will change my mind. And that cover—just can't be beat.

"The Mad Planet" proved to be very good. But how on earth did "The Terrible Three" get into your magazine? Not that I didn't like the story. I did. But what is its connection with fantasy? That I want to know.

"Seven Footprints to Satan"—the first Merrittale I ever read, and a good one. I wasn't at all unhappy to be able to read it again. Good material.

As a whole the covers have been pretty good this year. The best being for "Conquest". The worst for "Deluge". The cover that embodies the idea of the story the most, though, is the one for "Seven Footprints to Satan". The only thing wrong with that is that the eyes are wrong. Satan was blind. Was also glad to see the change in the lightning flash on the cover. Is that to be a permanent change?

I've just recently got hold of F.N. Vol. 1, No. 4. Now I want the other four issues that came out before you went off the market for a time. If anyone has F.N. Vol. 1, Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 5 that they want to get rid of, please write me. They contain some work by Merritt that I need to go in my collection of his works. Would appreciate any correspondence on this matter, even if someone will just drop a card to tell me where I might be able to pick them up.

The last two things to bring up in the first year are the illustrations, and "What Do You Think?" Can't complain about the pictures, they're just plain good.

"What Do You Think?" is about the best letter section of any magazine. In fact, it is the best. Keep it going strong, but don't cut the story just to put in a few more letters.

Guess I've carried on enough, so will close asking again for information on the previous F.N.s. Oh, yes! F.F.M. is a great magazine, too, though it isn't as good as F.N.

GUY E. TERWILGER, JR.
P.O. Box 194 University Station,
Moscow, Idaho.

Editor's Note: The first two Jason stories are available from second hand dealers, or by asking other readers for them in the letter columns of F.F.M. or F.N.

JANUARY COVER A HONEY

Thanks a million for "Seven Footprints to Satan". I started to read a library book of this novel nearly three years ago but was forced to return it before I had finished. Now I know what I missed. "Seven Footprints" wasn't my

favorite Merrittale, but it was a swell story. The article and short were good, too.

Now for a few pleas and demands. How about "Heu-Heu, or The Monster", by H. Rider Haggard? I would also like to see something by Talbot Mundy and any of Jack Williamson's earlier work. Stories by Stapledon, Lovecraft, van Vogt, England, Coblenz and Ray Cummings would be appreciated. How 'bout "Girl in the Golden Atom", and "The Man Who Mastered Time" by Cummings, "Sirius" by Stapledon, and "After 12,000 Years" by Coblenz?

Glad to see a story by England.

Let me plead again for something—anything—by the late Howard Phillips Lovecraft! His work is altogether too limited (because of his untimely death) and altogether too rare for us H.P.L. fans, who form quite an impressive percentage of fandom. When Lovecraft does make his appearance, let's have Finlay on the illustrations, please! Lawrence is great—swell—wonderful—but I prefer Finlay for the Lovecraft mood. Let's continue with Lawrence covers, with an occasional one by Finlay and Hannes Bok. By the way, the January cover was a honey.

The January issue was not only graced by a swell cover, novel, etc. but also contained a fairly ample letter section and a good new feature! "Fantasy Book Reviews" will prove to be a great help to collectors. Three cheers for F.N.!!!

BILL CALABRESE.

52 Pacific St.,
Stamford, Conn.

FOR FOREIGN FANS

Attention all fans and readers of this magazine in Asia, Africa, South America and all U.S. possessions!

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THE ASFCC

I have just finished reading a copy of the January, '49, F.N., and I thought that it was excellent! Naturally, I thought that the lead novel was the best. "Seven Footprints to Satan", by Abraham Merritt, was superb! It's the best story of Merritt's that I have ever read. I have only one thing to complain about—don't you think that, in this story, Merritt is stretching the idea of fantasy just a little bit too far? Now, "The Wrath of Amen-Ra" by William Holloway was more like it. However, I didn't like it as well as "Seven Footprints." Holloway just doesn't have the punch that Merritt does.

I would like to extend an invitation for all

the readers of FA to join the American Science Fiction Correspondence Club (ASFCC). It's free! So come on you, readers of F.N., just write me and get in on all the fun! You'll never regret it! After all, all you do is correspond with some of the members. Let's go!

RICHARD ABBOTT,
FOUNDER, ASFCC.

Route 1, Box # 57,
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio.

ANY EGYPTOLOGISTS AROUND?

Although I was rather tardy in tracking down your Jan. issue of F.N., after much hunting and bribery I finally captured that gold-dug precious gem of fantasy. It seems that your rag—oops! pardon me, mag—sells quicker than butter can melt in boiling water. Let me further add that, as usual, it lived up to my highest expectations.

I am pleased to say that Merritt's "Seven Footprints to Satan" showed his usual standard of superb writing, the plot being a very unusual one, exuding suspense and intrigue throughout. However, I am sure that it is a good example of one of the few faults that I credit Merritt with. Namely, his explanations are somewhat sketchy and incomplete. As a matter of fact he didn't give the slightest clue as to "Satan's" real identity or how he amassed such wealth and power that he could deserve the name of that great Prince of Darkness.

Your short, "The Wrath of Amen-Ra", was an exciting, fast moving bit of Fantasy that made enjoyable reading. However, of all the seventy-seven "Great Gods" of Egypt, I have never come across the name of "Aton" in connection with the deities or deification of the sun.

JAMES E. R. LA NIER.

5518 Indiana Ave.,
Chicago 37, Ill.

HAVE YOU THESE ADDRESSES?

You've done it again. Hit the high mark, that is, with the superb Merrittale, "Seven Footprints to Satan". This is the first time I have read this, and I believe it is the best I have run across by Abraham Merritt. In fact, I sat up the biggest part of the night reading it. Had it been possible, I would have liked to try my luck on the stair, myself, until James Kirkham and the little Cockney discovered the footprints for what they really were. Are there any more of these little circulated Merrittales? If so, I would like to see them in your magazine.

"Teh Wrath of Amen-Ra" by William Holloway was fairly interesting and had a good ending, but after reading a Merrittale, my appetite for fantasy is a bit dulled and I'm sorry to say that I did not enjoy the story as much as I should have.

Lawrence did an excellent job on the cover and Finlay was good on the inside, but he didn't come up to the cover illustration.

During the past summer I have been moving around quite a bit (housing shortage, you know) and have lost the addresses of most of my pen pals. Among those I have lost are

Don Hutchison of Ontario somewhere. He was co-editor of a fanzine called *Macabre*. Another is K. Martin Carlson and the N.F.F.F. address (I don't know where to send my dues) and the third is a crippled girl—I don't even recall the name, but she was quite an artist, and I believe she wrote some, too. Now that I am more or less stationary again, will some kind friend please send me these addresses? I would like, if possible, to resume my former correspondence. Any other lover of fantasy and science-fiction who wishes to correspond, let me know.

ORA E. HOLMES, JR.

RR # 1,
Ellis, Kansas.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Although I had previously read most of the stories in your first six issues, I bought all of them, and have been somewhat surprised by your choice of stories. Many of them have appeared before.

So much for criticism. Now, how about giving the fans some of the other stories they really want, such as the last two "Polaris" novels, Rousseau's "Sea Demons," Savage's "Courtship Superlative," Flint's novels and novelets, Rousseau's "Draft of Eternity," Cummings' novels, Smith's "After a Million Years," "Treasures of Tantalus," etc.?

My entire collection of fantasy, accumulated over a period of 20 years or more, and including *Argosys* back to 1897, back issues of F.F.M.-F.N., *Amazing*, *Astounding*, and other fantasy magazines, and hundreds of books, many in mint condition, by Merritt, Burroughs, Haggard, Taine, Kline, etc., is for sale or trade, and I will be glad to have lists of items wanted, with cash or trade offers. I must dispose of this material, as I expect to move to Calif., and can't take it with me, but if I can't sell for cash I will trade for canceled stamps, or for other goods that I can use, which will be shipped to my brother's place in Calif.

CARL W. SWANSON.

Velva, North Dakota.

ADMIRER HOLLOWAY'S STORY

About the most important thing on my mind is to fully agree with Donald L. Fox. I refer to his notice as to twelve readers wanting reprints of the last two novels of the "Polaris" trilogy. I mean "Mines of Sardanes", and "Polaris and the Goddess Glorian", by Stilson. I am number thirteen on the list.

Many may think "Seven Footprints to Satan" the best of the two stories in the January issue. I agree with those in the minority who place "The Wrath of Amen-Ra", by William Holloway, at the top. This story is most satisfying. The Finlay illo, though abstract, is superb.

My only pal who reads fantasy and science-fiction has moved away. I would like pen pals. Male or female.

The cover of January F.N. is impressive, but I don't think Lawrence chose the right colors.

BOB BARNETT.

1107 Lyon,
Carthage, Mo.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? "MAD PLANET" ENTERTAINING

The revival of *Fantastic Novels* is an accomplishment in the field of fantasy that is almost too good to be true; for again in the splendid, imagination-wrought works of such authors as A. Merritt, Ray Cummings, Otis A. Kline, George A. England, and Charles Stilson are presented to the reader of fantastic fiction literally on a silver platter. All that one has to do in order to read and enjoy these classics is to go to his favorite newsstand and purchase a copy of F.N.

If one were obliged to buy these authors' works in book form, he would have to pay anywhere from \$2.50 to \$10.00 for each one. Moreover, there are plenty of beautiful illustrations, an interesting readers' department, and always a unique cover. And the reader has the pleasure of paying only a small quarter for such a treat!

The Nov. issue of F.N. was as good as any yet. "The Terrible Three" by Tod Robbins and "The Mad Planet" by Murray Leinster are two superb yarns that will remain in my memory for a long time, along with Merritt's "Ship of Ishtar" and "Moon Pool."

"The Terrible Three" was right down my alley, for generally I prefer the horror story. But I don't want anyone to think that I don't relish good pure fantasy and good stf, for definitely I do. Robbins' story was a suspenseful, horrifying one, written in a simple, fascinating manner.

"The Mad Planet" was an entertaining piece, and graphically written, like most of Leinster's prophetic narratives. A humid, steamy world, uninhabitable except on elevated sites and mountains, overgrown with giant fungus growths, and inhabited by colossal butterflies, spiders, and beetles, served as a setting on which could be built an excellent stf tale; and an excellent stf story was built, by a capable and masterful constructor. In my book, Leinster is the dean of stf authors, just as Merritt was dean of fantasy and Lovecraft was of horror.

Finlay's cover was very good, but certainly he has done better. Both his and Lawrence's inside drawings were above average, my favorite being on page 43.

I have a few old magazines that I will sell for 50¢ each. All are in good condition. First come, first served. They are: *Unknown*—Aug. 1941, *Astonishing*—June 1940, Feb. 1943, Apr. 1943, *Science-Fiction*—Aug. 1939, *Super-Science*—Mar. 1940.

I have "The Killer and The Slain" by Hugh Walpole and "The Song of the Sirens" by Edward Lucas White which I will swap for "The Lurker at the Threshold" by Lovecraft and Derleth (Arkham House). Both have dust-wrappers and are in very good shape. I would like for my desired item to be in similar condition.

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"SEVEN FOOTPRINTS" GREAT

Well, this month I nearly overlooked F.N., but when I saw that Lawrence cover with those mysterious, brooding eyes—well, I was literally hypnotized into purchasing it. And with good results, too.

Up until now, I had regarded "Ship of Ish-tar" as the greatest Merrittale, although even it was sadly dull in places. But "Seven Footprints to Satan" enthralled me as never another Merrittale has. I read it right through, never bored at all, and even, I must confess, glanced cautiously at the ending in order to be sure it was happy, a thing that I refrain from doing usually. The old worn-out phrase of "classic" certainly describes this as does no other word. Usually I do not particularly like Merritt, and as for the poor, misguided people who indulge in Merritt-worship; well, I put up with them as much as is possible though not without annoyance at times.

Nevertheless, but, and in spite of the merits of Merritt (and this is not meant to be a pun, though it is a bad one), I would enjoy seeing some other authors in these pages, particularly Burroughs. And speaking of Burroughs:

Although most of his stories are obtainable, some other letter writer mentioned the "Red Star of Tarzan" which he said appeared in a magazine and not in any book. This would pacify those who beg for Burroughs, no doubt,

at least for a few months, and you would have peace. Also, for F.F.M., how about the "Bandit of Hell's Bend"?

Tell those misguided few who insistently and incessantly demand new shorts for F.N. and F.F.M., to shut up. This short was a very good one, and, if you will take note, its copyright is 1921.

By the law of averages, if by nothing else, at least a few very good shorts must needs have been written, and these are the ones to use. I like Leinster, too, but he wrote stories years ago, too, you know. As a matter of fact, I think Leinster is the second best writer in all of sf-Fantasy, the leader being E. R. Burroughs.

If your readers like the new stuff, let them buy the now revived *Super Science* for which I have been haunting the newsstands all this November. Congrats on reviving two of your publications within a year.

To James E. R. Lanier: A. E. van Vogt will doubtless be greatly astonished at being credited for the writing of E. E. Smith's "Children of the Lens." And to C. Corrigan: try Vernell Coriell of the *Burroughs Bulletin* for those Burroughs stories if you can't get any; he'll probably have some or can tell you where to obtain some.

W. PAUL GANLEY.

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North Tonawanda, N. Y.

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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

CAN YOU HELP HIM?

I have been a reader of Science-Fiction for over seven years, and I have noticed that whenever the subject of great Science-Fiction or Fantasy classics comes up, A. Merritt's "The Moon Pool" is mentioned. I have wanted to read it ever since I heard about it, but I was never able to obtain a copy. Recently I saw your magazine on the stands, bought it, (enjoyed it very much, I might say) and noticed in the readers' column, that you had recently printed this work. If it is possible for me to obtain the issue that contained "The Moon Pool", and also the issues that ran "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" and "The Ship of Ishtar", from you, I wish you would let me know.

I think that your magazine is rendering an incalculable service to the new readers of Science-Fiction who have never had the opportunity to read most of the really great classics in this field of fiction.

WM. H. REGAN, JR.

Box 632
Villanova College
Villanova, Pa.

"MUSTS!"

Now that you have printed "Seven Footprints to Satan" and completed the A. Merritt stories, I trust this will be all of the re-printing of stories from the early days of F.F.M.

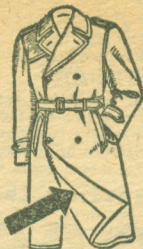
The most urgent "musts" on your list for early issues are surely Stilson's "Minos of Sardanians," and "Polaris and the Goddess Glorian," to complete the unfinished Polaris trilogy. And then almost as soon, I hope you can give us Garret Smith's "After a Million Years," and "Treasures of Tantalus," the latter being sort of a sequel to "On the Brink of 2000" which you printed in an early F.F.M.

After these I hope to see Homer Eon Flint's "The Planeteer," "King of Converse Island," "The Queen of Life," "The Man in the Moon," "The Devolutionist," "The Emancipatrix," etc. Maybe you could fill an entire issue with several of these short novels. And how about Ray Cummings' "The Fire People," "Man Who Mastered Time," "Princess of the Atom," "The Snow Girl," "The Sea Girl," and many others; Ralph Milne Farley's "The Radio Flyers," "The Radio Menace," "The Radio Pirates," etc; Otis Adelbert Kline's "The Planet of Peril," "Maza of the Moon," "Prince of Peril," "The Swordsman of Mars," "The Outlaws of Mars," and if you can get it, "Buccaneers of Venus," from another magazine, but belongs in this Kline series.

Of course there are many others, but as long as F.N. is a bi-monthly, you can not get in everyone's wants with much haste, so guess we will have to sit and watch the sheets tear off the calendar waiting for issues.

C. W. WOLFE.

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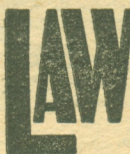
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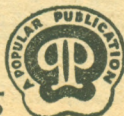
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FANTASTIC NOVELS

NEW READER

Congratulations on bringing back *Fantastic Novels*. I had heard about it but had never seen a copy. Your two issues containing "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" and "Seven Footprints to Satan" made me both an F.N. fan and an A. Merritt fan. The illustrations were extremely well done. As long as you print such stories in F.N. and F.F.M. with such good illustrations, you will never have to resort to using lurid covers to sell your magazines as some of your competitors do. Keep up the good work.

I am interested in buying back copies of either F.N. or F.F.M.

ROBERT WM. MARTIN.

Box 14,
Iroquois, Ontario, Canada.

CORRECTION

I too would like to see both mags go on a monthly basis. I echo the sentiment for Kline, Stilson, Fisher, and Austin Hall.

It would be silly to reprint Burroughs' books, when you can buy them by the thousands in second-hand bookshops.

Above all I would like to see the sequel to "The Lion's Way" published.

If you publish my last letter, please delete the part that said I would sell the two Lovecraft books for the best offer received; namely, "The Outsider" and, "The Wall of Sleep." On second thought, I could never part with those two books.

HAROLD F. KEATING.

7 Arnold St.,
Quincy 69, Mass.

HURRAY FOR SUPER-SCIENCE!

Just got the January '49 F.N., and hasten to write once again to bitterly complain against this re-printing of the Merritt yarns. If they weren't available in another format, I'd not complain, but as "7 Footprints to Satan" is available—how's about coming to a full stop? With fifty years of the finest fantasy material ever written at your disposal, why this preoccupation with Merritt? Certainly there's no shortage of fine fantasy in the vast Munsey Treasure House. How about digging some of them out?

This issue is good, although the bulging-eye-background is getting a bit monotonous. Can't Lawrence dream up something else? The book review section is welcome. The short outstanding. But the big news is that *Super Science Stories* is coming back. Hurra! Judicious editorial supervision can make it the top science fiction magazine. And apropos of that, roses, orchids, and all nice things to Mary Gnaedinger of F.F.M.

Incidentally, I'd like to tell all my friends and fellow readers of F.N. with whom I've lost contact, that my first novel (not fantasy) will be published by Harper and Bros. next year.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I'm still begging for book-swaps, and will swap cloth-bound books for the four issues of F.N. I lack. Who'll part with 'em? I've promised my right arm to a chap for "Darkness and Dawn," but aside from that, no limit to the swap!

SAMUEL A. PEEPLES.

P. O. Box 4223,
San Francisco, Calif.

LAWRENCE AND FINLAY PERFECT

The January issue of F.N. is superb. The cover by Lawrence was just right, and the interiors by Finlay are perfect, and exactly suited to the story. The new feature, "Book Reviews", is a welcome addition, and no one is more qualified to review them than Sam Moskowitz. The reviewer's comments are rather impartial, seems to me. Short stories are okay, but I'd much prefer a fan department. Glad to see *Super Science* is coming back. I have all the old issues (for trade for F.F.M., pre '46), and intend to buy every issue that comes out.

Yours in Fantasy,

J. T. OLIVER.

712 32nd St.,
Columbus, Ga.

"MOON POOL" GREATEST

Though this is my first letter to your wonderful magazine, I'm still going to give my praise. I can't begin to tell you how much I've enjoyed the few copies I have. I got out of the service about the first of this year and only started reading your fine publications then. I missed the first of the "Moon Pool" stories, also "The Ship of Ishtar". I would like to hear from anyone having extra copies containing these stories. I have the June 1948 issue and am interested in any prior issues. I have kept all since then and have bound them.

I got the January issue of F.N. today and "Seven Footprints to Satan" is truly a masterpiece. "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" is the greatest story I have ever read. I wasn't able to put it down until I had finished.

Eagerly awaiting letters from readers.

BILL STEER.

11th floor, 101 Marietta St.,
Atlanta, Ga.

WANTS "METAL MONSTER"

I have been reading Science Fiction for some time, and in my opinion your magazine is one of the best. Since you have been publishing quite a few of A. Merritt's Fantasy Classics, I don't see why you don't publish his great story, "The Metal Monster". This story came out a few years back and although I already have a copy I would very much like to see it as there are probably many who have not seen and enjoyed this great novel.

"Seven Footprints to Satan" was so engross-



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FANTASTIC NOVELS

ing that from the time I started reading it till I laid it down, it had me completely under its spell.

Merritt is the greatest fantasy or Science Fiction writer that has ever picked up a pen.

RAY RELAFORD.

4433 Euclid,
Kansas City, Mo.

UNDER MERRITT'S SPELL

Even though I had previously read Abraham Merritt's "Seven Footprints to Satan", I couldn't resist the urge to repeat and reread it again.

For, when my eyes rested upon Lawrence's superbly executed front cover I quickly fell under its hypnotic impetus and read, read—(Someone wake me up!)

We Merritt admirers will make a slow bow of thankfulness towards your 43rd St. editorial offices for having selected the story for this issue.

Your new feature, "Fantasy Book Review" is very ingratiating, especially to us S.F. worms.

For the fans I have the following: (All mint) "Oahspe" (Deluxe), James Churchwood's 3 books about "Mu", "The Black Wheel", "Sky-lark of Space" (1st edition, 1st printing), "Space Hounds of the I.P.C.", "Metal Monster" and "Face in the Abyss" (pocket books).

Can any fan help me by contacting me if they have the following books for sale? They must be in fine condition, all by Philip Wylie. "The Savage Gentlemen", "The Big Ones Get Away", "Salt Water Daffy", "The Other Horseman", "Fish & TinFish", and (Wylie & Balmer) "The Shield of Silence".

I close this epistle while in anticipation of "The Golden Blight", G. A. England's classic.

MILTON REICH.

2139 Grand Ave.,
New York 53, N. Y.

THANKS FOR SWELL YARN

Thank you very much for "Seven Footprints to Satan". Like many others, A. Merritt is my favorite author. Of all his stories "Ship of Ishtar" is the one I like best.

My copy of "Ishtar" is one of the things I miss most here. I would like to obtain a hard cover copy of it if it is available.

I appreciate your magazine more than ever since I joined the Air Force. At times copies are hard to so next pay day I plan on subscribing.

I'm only 17 and I haven't been a reader of Fantasy & Science Fiction for too long, about five years, but *Fantastic Novels* and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* are tops as far as I'm concerned.

Thanks again for a swell magazine.

LYLE PAINTER.

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