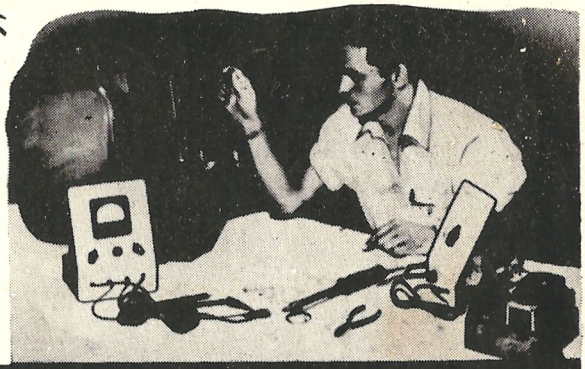

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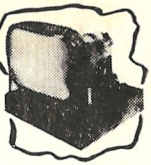
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AN EDITORIAL ON

THINGS THAT GO FOOMP

Fantasy is the hardest thing in the world to define, because every definition leaves over half of it out. Actually, every piece of fiction ever written is fantasy—it has to be, since the events didn't really happen. Most definitions apply to only one section of it at a time, such as fairy tales or tales of eldritch horror.

We don't have any definition, either, but we want our fantasy adult —which most fairy tales are not; and we want it to be a lot more fun than tales of purely horrible old ghosts can be.

The things that go "boomp i' the nicht" leave us slightly cold, though not with a spine-tingling chill. We ask you—what could be more ridiculous than a ghost hanging around in a drafty old castle, supposedly doomed to atone for some sin, and then scaring people out of their wits. Is that atonement? And if he's so darned cold, why doesn't he go where there's steam heat?

Not that we don't like ghosts. We've been looking for a pet one for years, but the last one up for auction went to some millionaire—they threw a castle in free, it seems. He was a dull old ghost, anyhow, carrying his head under his arm. He could just as well have gotten a sling for it and left both arms free, but he wasn't very bright.

Frankly, what we want are things that go FOOMP. Now a ghost who lisped, was afraid of children, and couldn't pull his chains down a flight of stairs without stumbling would be better. Or a kobald who was allergic to cobalt. A werewolf might be nice, if he'd just stop being so darned monotonous. A drunken one, who hiccupped and kept changing shape every time he got ready to do the grisly act which was demanded of him by tradition.

Our favorite story deals with a ghost who had false teeth, and kept forgetting to levitate them properly. It seems he left them in the darnedest places. And being ghostly teeth, they were cold and chattered. Very disconcerting.

Frankly, for a quick definition of what we mean by fantasy, take a look at Sheckley's THE DEMONS, or FEEDING TIME by O'Donnevan, with a singularly similar approach to folklore and myth. Or, for that matter, take a look at any of the stories, with the possible exception of our lead novel. That's something special, since it involves Conan, and nobody else can write quite like Robert E. Howard.

We've always been fond of Conan, and when Howard died over fifteen years ago, our lives were just a bit poorer for it. It was quite an event to discover that a full novelette by him had never been published, and we finally got it. It isn't the sort of a tale you'll usually find in this magazine—because nobody else can quite recapture the pre-mythical past.

We've been happy to find the old Howard stories—some of the very best of them, too—in the two books that Gnome Press has recently issued: CONAN THE CONQUEROR and THE SWORD OF CONAN. But whether you have them or are still going to buy them, we hope you'll find the Conan yarn here the same return to the good old days of the Hyperborean age we did.

You can't form a simple definition that will include a Conan story and something like Poul Anderson's ASHTARU THE TERRIBLE—or at least we can't. We aren't particularly interested in looking for such definitions, since we don't want to put limits on what should appear in this magazine.

That's why we'd prefer to have stories simply about things that go FOOMP! That word can just as well be something to scare you as to amuse you—but at least it isn't one that has become a time-worn cliche. And it isn't one with a simple, everyday explanation.

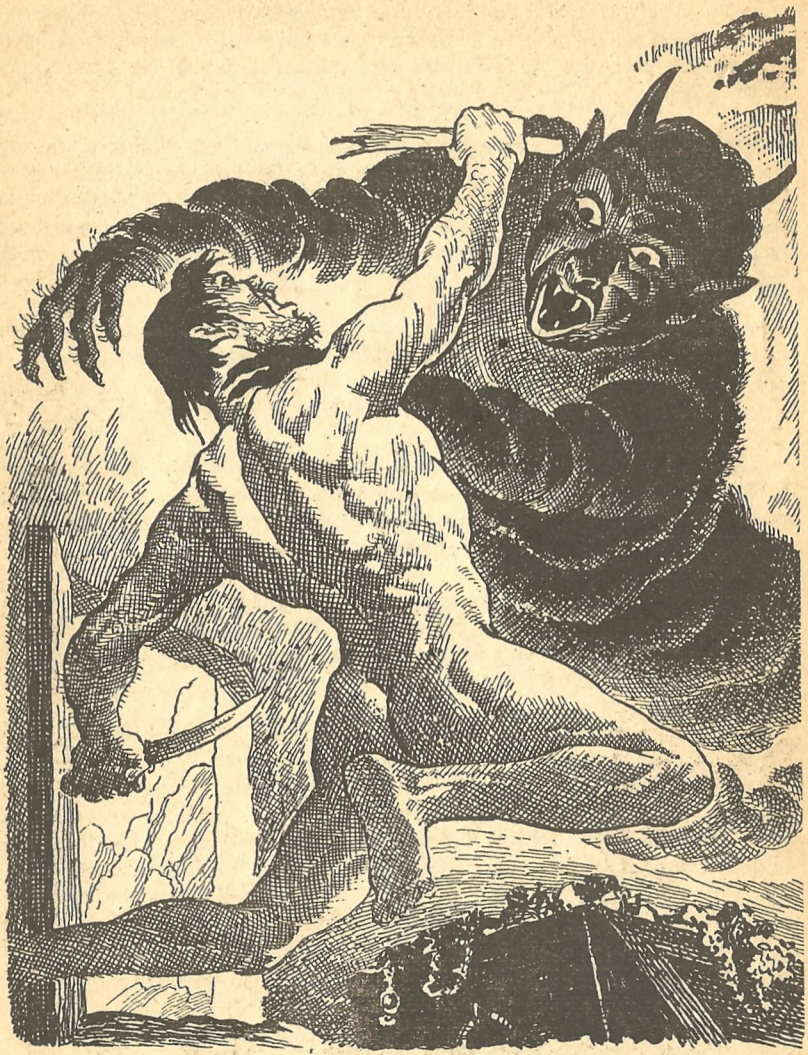
We're interested in anything that we can get a kick out of, provided it's real fantasy—with a good-sized FOOMP in it. You know what fantasy is—and what isn't fantasy—when you see it, so what's the use of defining it, anyhow?

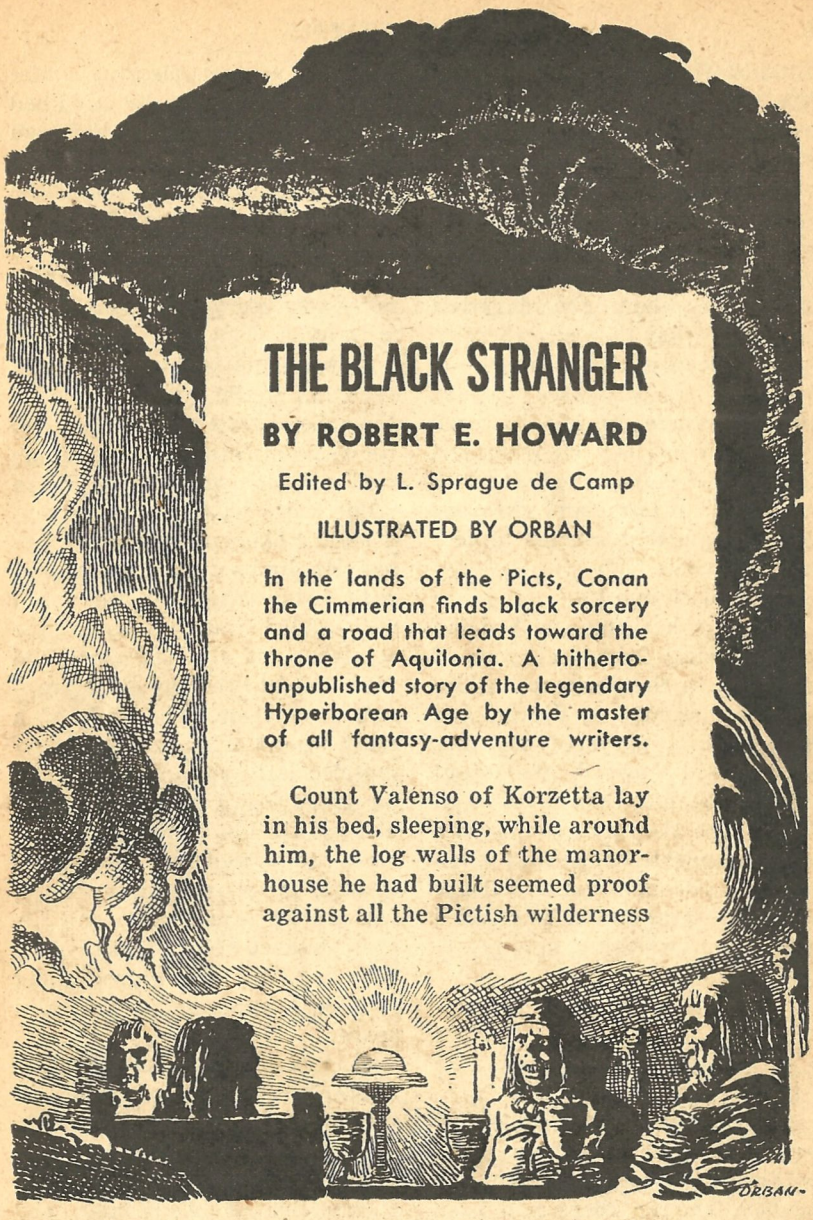
And for once, we're going to form a policy of not giving you just what you want. If you all want stories with horror in them, you'll get them—but you'll also get light yarns with a chuckle buried behind them. Just what you want might get monotonous after awhile—so we'll keep balancing the books to suit our feeling that fantasy is a wide field, and a good story is a gem, no matter what type of fantasy it may be.

We'll be happy to listen to your wants, and we'll be delighted to receive your reaction to this issue. But we just happen to love fantasy enough so that this time we're going to get more pleasure out of reading stories for the future than even your letters.

In other words, FOOMP to us, too!

Lester del Rey





THE BLACK STRANGER

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

Edited by L. Sprague de Camp

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

In the lands of the Picts, Conan the Cimmerian finds black sorcery and a road that leads toward the throne of Aquilonia. A hitherto-unpublished story of the legendary Hyperborean Age by the master of all fantasy-adventure writers.

Count Valenso of Korzetta lay in his bed, sleeping, while around him, the log walls of the manor-house he had built seemed proof against all the Pictish wilderness

outside. He should have slept in the peace of his hard-earned security. But now he moaned and tossed wildly. His eyes opened stiffly in the darkness, his mouth fought for the breath that rasped harshly in his throat, and his head turned toward a corner of the room where the darkness seemed thicker than elsewhere.

The sleep still lay heavy on Valenso, yet his eyes carried their message to his tortured brain. The pupils grew wide, and the breath caught and grew in his chest, to burst and rush out in a scream that seemed to contort his whole body.

"The black man!"

Then he lay limp, with damp sweat oozing from each pore of his skin. In the darkness, a bluish glow seemed to flicker, and the shadows gathered together and flowed toward the stout oaken door, and then through it. There was the faint sound of a ghastly chuckle left behind. Even in his swoon, Count Valenso seemed to hear it and he moaned and began writhing again.

I

The Painted Ones

One moment the glade lay empty; the next, a man stood poised warily on the edge of the bushes. Though there had been no sound to warn the gray squirrels of his coming, the gay-hued birds that flitted about the open space now rose in a clamoring cloud. The man scowled back the way he had come, as if fearing that the birds' flight had betrayed him. Then he stalked across the glade, placing his feet with care.

Despite his gigantic size and muscular build he moved with the subtle certitude of a leopard. He was completely naked and carried no tool or weapon but a crude knife with a wooden handle and a blade of hammered copper. His limbs were criss-crossed with briar-scratches and caked with dried mud. Beneath the scratches and dirt he was marked from head to foot by old scars—scores of them. The scab of a fresh wound clung to his thickly-muscled left arm and another to his right leg. Under his matted black mane his scarred, swarthy face, shadowed by a week's growth of sparse black beard, was drawn and gaunt, and his eyes burned like those of a wounded wolf. He limped along the faint path across the open space.

Such was Conan of Cimmeria, barbarian, adventurer, thief, pirate, mercenary, warrior, lately General of the Bossonian March under his Maggot-pated Majesty, Namedides of Aquilonia; and

now, by another turn of fate's wheel, a wounded and destitute fugitive from the jealousy of King Namedides and the implacable hatred of the wild Picts whom, short weeks before, he had driven in mad flight from the Aquilonian frontier.

Halfway across the glade he stopped and whirled catlike as a long-drawn call quavered out across the forest. The Cimmerian knew that this was not, as one less accustomed to the wilderness might have thought, the howl of a wolf.

Rage burned redly in his bloodshot eyes as he turned once more and hurried along the path which, as it left the glade, ran along the edge of a dense thicket among the trees. A massive log, embedded in the earth, paralleled the fringe of the thicket, lying between it and the path. Conan looked at the log and back across the glade. To his wilderness-sharpened eyes there was evidence, however faint, of his passage, and therefore visible to the equally keen eyes of those who pursued him.

He walked with deliberate carelessness down the trail, here and there crushing a grass-blade. At the farther end of the great log he sprang upon it and ran lightly back along it. As the bark had long been worn away by the elements, he left no sign to show that he had doubled on his trail. When he came opposite the densest part of the thicket he faded into it like a shadow.

The minutes dragged. Then three more men appeared at the eastern edge of the clearing: short, dark-skinned, heavily-muscled, in beaded buckskin loincloths, with an eagle's feather thrust through each black topknot. Their bodies were painted in intricate designs, and they were heavily armed wtih crude weapons of hammered copper.

They moved slowly across the glade in single file, bending down to stare at the path. One of them stiffened, grunted, and pointed with his broad-bladed stabbing-spear at some crushed grass-blades where the path entered the forest again. All halted instantly, their beady black eyes questing the forst walls. Seeing nothing to awaken suspicion, they presently moved on, more rapidly now.

They had just passed the spot where the thicket crowded closest to the old trail when the Cimmerian bounded into the path behind them and plunged his knife between the shoulders of the last man. The Pict fell forward, dying, before he knew what had struck him.

The other two whirled with the steel-trap quickness of savages,

but even as Conan wrenched the knife out of his first victim's back he struck a tremendous blow with his fist at the next one. The Pict was just turning as the fist smote the side of his head like a maul and hurled him half-stunned into the bushes.

The remaining Pict, a chief by the scarlet tip of his eagle-feather, came savagely in to the attack. He was stabbing at the Cimmerian's breast even as the latter straightened up, holding in his left hand the ax that the first Pict had dropped as he fell. As the spear-head flashed redly out, Conan knocked it aside with the hatchet, and the knife in his right hand ripped upward into the painted belly.

A howl of fury and pain burst from the disemboweled Pict's lips as he crumpled. A wild chorus of yells from east of the glade answered it. Conan wheeled, crouching, shaking the sweat from his face. Blood trickled down his forearm from his reopened wound.

With a gasping, incoherent imprecation he turned and fled westward. He did not pick his way now, but ran with all the speed of his long legs, calling upon his deep reserves of endurance. Behind him for a space the woods were silent. Then a demoniac howling burst out, and he knew his pursuers had found the bodies. He had no breath for cursing the drops of blood that fell to the ground from his arm-wound, leaving a trail a child could follow.

It would be futile to leave the trail for the tangled depths on either hand. Conan ran on while the blood pounded louder and louder in his ears and each breath was a racking, dry-mouthed gulp. Behind, a mad baying broke out, token that the Picts were close upon his heels and expected to overhaul their prey swiftly.

Abruptly he burst from the densest of the trees and saw, ahead of him, the face of a cliff that rose almost straight from the ground without any intermediate slope. Glances to right and left showed that he faced a solitary dome or crag of rock that rose like a tower from the depths of the forest. As a boy Conan had scaled the steep hills of his native Cimmeria but, while he might have attempted the near side of this crag had he been in prime condition, he knew that he would have little chance with it in his present wounded and weakened state. By the time he had struggled up twenty or thirty feet the Picts would be bursting from the woods to fill him with arrows.

But perhaps the crag's other

faces would prove less inhospitable. The trail curved around the crag to the right. He followed it and found that at the west side of the crag it wound up rocky ledges between jagged boulders, to a broad ledge near the summit.

That ledge would be as good a place to die as any. Conan limped up the trail, the world swimming in a dizzy red mist before him. In the steeper places he went on hands and knees, holding the haft of his hatchet between his teeth.

He had not yet reached the jutting ledge when some forty painted savages raced around from the far side of the crag, howling. At the sight of their prey their screams rose to a fearful crescendo, and they ran to the foot of the crag, loosing arrows as they ran. The shafts showered about the climbing Cimmerian and one stuck in the calf of his leg. Without pausing in his climb he tore out the sharpened stone point and threw the arrow aside, heedles of the less accurate missiles that cracked against the rocks about him. Grimly he hauled himself over the ledge and turned about. He lay glaring down at his pursuers over the rim, only his hair and eyes visible. His chest heaved as he drank in the air with great laboring, shuddering gasps.

A few more arrows whistled up as the warriors came on yelping, leaping over the rocks at the foot of the hill. The first to reach the steep part of the crag was a brawny brave, another chief from his scarlet-stained feather. He halted briefly, one foot on the sloping trail, arrow nocked and half drawn. But the shaft was never loosed. He froze as the blood-lust in his black eyes gave way to startled recognition. Then he turned with a whoop, throwing his arms wide to check the rush of the howling braves. Though Conan understood the Pictish tongue, he was too far away to catch the staccato phrases snapped out by the red-feathered chief.

They all ceased yelping and stood mutely staring up—not, it seemed to the Cimmerian, at him, but at the hill itself. Then they unstrung their bows, turned their backs, and trotted back along the trail by which they had come, to disapepar around the curve of the cliff without a backward look.

Conan stared in amazement. He knew that they had gone for good heading for their villages a hundred miles to the east. But why? Why should they abandon a chase that they had followed so long and wolfishly when they had finally cornered their prey? True,

the different tribes had sanctuaries in which a fugitive of their own tribe might be safe from his fellow-tribesmen. But the different tribes seldom respected each other's sanctuaries, and the men who had pursued him certainly maintained no sacred spots hereabouts. They were men of the Eagle and lived far to the east of this country of the Wolf-Picts, having originally captured Conan when he had plunged into the wilderness in his flight from Aquilonia.

He shook his head, uncomprehending, and rose dizzily. His limbs were stiff and his wounds ached. He spat dryly, rubbing his reddened eyes with the back of his thick wrist, blinked, and took stock of his surroundings. Below him the green wilderness waved and billowed away to westward, and above the horizon rose a steel-blue haze which hung over the ocean. The wind stirred his black mane as the salt tang of the atmosphere revived him. He expanded his huge chest and drank it in.

He turned stiffly and painfully, growling at the twinge in his bleeding calf, and investigated the ledge on which he stood. Behind it rose a sheer rocky cliff to the crest of the crag thirty feet above. A narrow ladder-like stair of hand-holds had been niched into the rock, and a few feet from the foot of this ascent a cleft opened in the wall, big enough for a man to enter.

He limped to the cleft, peered in, and grunted. The sun, above the western forest, threw a shaft down the cleft, revealing a tunnel-like cavern with an arch at its end. In that arch, illuminated by the beam, was set a heavy iron-bound oaken door!

This was amazing. In this howling wilderness, the nearest outposts of civilization were the Aquilonian settlements hundreds of miles to the east; the western coast ran for two thousand miles, from the fertile valleys of Zingara to the cold plains of Vanaheim, bare and empty of human life save for the villages of the fierce sea-land tribes, even ruder than their forest-dwelling brethran. Yet that door was no Pictish work.

Suspiciously Conan approached it, knife and ax ready. As his bloodshot eyes became accustomed to the gloom on either side of the narrow shaft of sunlight he noticed something else. The tunnel widened out before it came to the door, and along the sides were ranged massive iron-bound chests. A blaze of comprehension came into his eyes. He bent over one, but the lid resisted his efforts. He lifted his hatchet to smash the ancient lock; then changed his mind and

limped toward the arched door. It swung inward to his push.

Conan recoiled with a startled curse, knife and hatchet flashing up to positions of defense. He stood poised, glaring through the door.

He was looking into a cave, darker than the tunnel, but meagerly illuminated by a dim glow that came from the great jewel that stood on a tiny ivory pedistal in the center of the great ebony table about which sat those silent shapes whose appearance had so startled the Cimmerian. These did not move, but the bluish mist that overhung the chamber seemed to move like a living thing.

"Well," said Conan harshly, "are you all drunk?"

There was no reply. Though not easily abashed, the Cimmerian felt disconcerted.

"You might offer me a glass of that wine you're swigging," he growled, his natural truculence aroused. "By Crom, you show scant courtesy to one of your own brotherhood. Will you—"

His voice trailed off, and in silence he stared at those bizarre figures.

"They're not drunk," he muttered. "They are not even drinking. What devil's game is this?"

He stepped across the threshold. Instantly the movement of the blue mist quickened. The stuff flowed together and solified, and Conan found himself facing a monster twice his size with huge black hands that darted instantly for his throat.

II

Men from the Sea

Dawn was now past, but the early sun had not yet dispelled the light pearly clouds that drifted over the waters to westward.

Belesa, nice of Count Valenso, lifted her finely-shaped head and stared out over a scene alien and repellant to her, yet drearily familiar in every detail. She was standing on the northern curve of a wide bay; south of her the land sloped up to the low ridge that formed one horn of that bay. From that ridge, she could look southward across the bare waters into infinities of distance as absolute as the view to the westward and northward.

Glancing listlessly landward, she scanned the fortress which had been her home for the past year and a half. Against the pearl-and-blue morning sky floated the golden and scarlet flag of Korzetta. But the red falcon on its golden field awakened no enthusiasm in her youthful bosom, though it had flown over many a bloody field in the far South. She

made out the figures of men toiling in the gardens and fields that huddled near the fort, seeming to shrink from the gloomy rampart of forest that fringed the wide clearing, from which, with fire and steel and infinite labor, her uncle's folk had stripped the stubborn oaks. To north and west the forest stretched as far as eye could see. Death lurked in those whispering depths, death slow and hideous, hidden, painted, tireless, unrelenting.

She sighed and moved toward the water's edge, with no set purpose in mind. The dragging days were all of one color, and the world of cities and courts and gaiety seemed thousands of miles and ages of time away. Again she sought in vain for the reason that had caused a Count of Zingara to flee with his retainers to this wild coast, hundreds of miles from the land that bore him, exchanging the castle of his ancestors for a hut of logs.

Belesa's eyes softened at the patter of small feet across the sands. A young girl came running over the sandy ridge, naked and dripping, with her flaxen hair plastered to her head. Her eyes were wide.

"Lady Belesa!" she cried, rendering Zingaran words with a soft Ophirian accent. "Oh, Lady Belesa! Look! I saw. . ."

Breathless, the child stammered and gestured. Belesa put an arm about her, not minding the dampness of the child's body against her dress. In her lonely life Belesa had bestowed the tenderness of an affectionate nature on the waif she had bought from a brutal master on the long voyage from the South.

"What are you trying to tell me, Tina? Get your breath, child!"

"A ship!" cried the girl, pointing southward. "I was swimming in a pool left by the tide and I saw it!"

She tugged timidly at Belesa's hand. Belesa felt her own heart beat faster at the thought of an unknown visitor. They had seen no sail since coming to that barren shore.

Tina flitted ahead of her over the yellow sands and up the ridge. At the top she halted, an ivory figure against the clearing sky, with an arm outstretched.

"Look, my lady!"

Belesa had already seen it—a billowing white sail, filled with the freshening south wind, beating up along the coast, a few miles from the point. Her heart skipped a beat, as she felt a premonition of strange and violent events. Surely this sail was not wafting up this lonely coast by chance! There as no harbor town known to the north, though

one sailed to the ultimate shores of ice, and the nearest port to the south must be nearly a thousand miles away. What brought this stranger to this lonely place her uncle had named Korvela Bay?

"Who can it be, my lady?" said Tina, pressing close. "Is it the man the Count fears?"

"Why do you say that? How do you know my uncle fears anyone?"

"He must," returned Tina naïvely, "or he would never have hidden in this lonely spot. Look how fast it comes!"

"We must tell my uncle," murmured Belesa. "The fishing-boats have not gone out yet, so none of the men has seen that sail. Get your clothes, Tina. Hasten!"

The child ran down the slope to the pool where she had been swimming, snatched up her slippers, tunic, and girdle, and skipped back up the ridge, hopping as she dressed on the run. Belesa caught her hand and hurried her toward the fort. A few minutes after they had entered the gate of the log palisade, the blare of a trumpet rang out over field and beach.

Every man outside the fort—the farmers in the gardens and the fishermen opening the boathouse doors—dropped what he was doing to run for the stockade. As the straggling lines converged on the open gate, the running men glanced fearfully toward the dark line of woodland to the east; not one looked seaward.

They thronged through the gate, shouting questions at the sentries on the parapet. "What is it? Why are we called in? Are the Picts coming?"

One taciturn sergeant in worn leather and rusty steel pointed southward to where the sail was now visible from the parapet. Men began to climb up to stare over the pointed ends of the logs.

On a small lookout tower on the roof of the manor-house, which was built of logs like the other buildings in the enclosure, Count Valenso watched the sail as it rounded the point of the southern horn. The count was a lean, wiry man of medium height and late middle age; dark, and somber of expression. He was dressed in black, the only color about his costume being the jewels that twinkled on his sword-hilt and the wine-red cloak thrown over his shoulders. He twisted his thin black mustache and turned gloomy eyes on his seneschal, a leather-featured man in steel and satin.

"What make you of it, Galbro?"

"A carack, sir. A carack trimmed and rigged like a craft

of the Barachan pirates—look there!"

Cries below echoed his exclamation. The ship was slanting inward across the bay, and all saw the flag that suddenly broke forth from the masthead—a black flag with the outline of a scarlet hand.

"A Barachan, all right," grunted Galbro. "And unless I'm mad, it's Strombanni's *Red Hand*. What does he want on this naked coast?"

"He can mean us no good," growled the count. A glance below showed him that the massive gate had been closed and that the captain of his men-at-arms, gleaming in steel, was directing his men to their stations, massing most of his strength along the western wall which contained the gate.

A hundred men had followed Valenso into exile. Of these, forty were men-at-arms in helms and suits of mail, armed with swords, axes, and crossbows. The rest were peasants and artisans, armored only in shirts of toughened leather; but they were brawny toilers, skilled in the use of their hunting bows, woodsmen's axes, and boar-spears. They took their places, scowling at their hereditary foes. For more than a century the pirates of the Barachan Isles, a tiny archipelago off the southwestern coast of Zingara, had preyed upon the people of Zingara and the weak monarchy had been unable to put them down.

The man on the stockade stared somberly at the carack as it swung inshore, its gilt and brasswork flashing. They could see the figures swarming on the deck and hear the yells of the seamen. Steel twinkled along the rail.

The count had retired from the tower, shooing his niece and Tina before him. Having donned helmet and cuirass, he betook himself to the palisade. His subjects watched him with moody fatalism. Though they meant to sell their lives dearly, they had scant hope of victory. A year on that naked coast had shadowed their souls with a conviction of doom. Their women stood silently in the doorways of their huts and quieted the clamor of their children.

Belesa and Tina watched tensely from an upper window in the manor-house, and Belesa felt the child's body quiver in the crook of her arm.

"They will drop anchor near the boathouse," murmured Belesa. "There it goes! Do not tremble so, child! They cannot take the fort. Perhaps they were blown hither by a storm, and wish only for food and water."

"They are coming ashore in the long-boat!" said the child. "Oh, my lady, I am afraid! Look how the sun strikes fire from their armor! And so many! Will they eat us?"

Belesa laughed despite her apprehension. "Of course not! Who put that idea into your head?"

"Zorgelitas told me the Barachans eat women."

"He was teasing you. The Barachans are cruel, but they are no worse than the Zingaran renegades who call themselves buccaneers. Zorgelitas was a buccaneer once."

"He was cruel," muttered the child. "I'm glad the Picts cut his head off."

"Hush, Tina! You must not speak thus. Look, the pirates have reached the shore. They line the beach, and one of them is coming toward the fort. That must be Strombanni."

"Ahoy, the fort there!" came a hail in a voice as gusty as the wind. "I come under a flag of truce!"

The count's helmeted head appeared over the points of the palisade. His stern face, framed in steel, surveyed the pirate somberly. Strombanni had halted just within earshot, a big man, bare-headed, with hair of the tawny hue sometimes found in Argos. Of all the Barachan sea-rovers none was more famed for deviltry.

"Speak!" said Valenso. "I have scant desire to converse with one of your breed."

Strombanni laughed. "When you escaped me in that squall off the Trallibes last year I never thought to meet you again on the Pictish coast, Valenso! Had I known your destination, by Mitra, I should have followed you then! I got the start of my life when I saw your scarlet falcon where I had thought to see nothing but bare beach. You've found it, of course?"

"Found what?" barked the count.

"Do not try to fool me! I have come here for the same reason you have, and I'll not be balked. Where's your ship?"

"None of your affair!"

"You've lost it," asserted the pirate confidently. "I see pieces of mast in that stockade. If you'd had a ship you'd have sailed away with your plunder long ago."

"What are you talking about, damn you?" yelled the count. "My plunder? Am I a Barachan, to burn and loot? And what should I loot on this bare coast?"

"That which you came for, and which I have come for too," answered Strombanni. "I shall be easy to deal with; just give me the stuff and I'll willingly go."

"You're mad! I came here to find solitude and seclusion, which I enjoyed until you crawled out of the sea, you yellow-headed cur! Begone! I did not ask for a parley, and I weary of empty talk. Take your rogues and go your way."

"When I go, I'll leave that hovel in ashes!" roared the pirate. "For the last time, will you give me the loot in return for your lives? I have a hundred and fifty men ready to cut your throats."

The count made a quick gesture, and a shaft hummed through a loophole and splintered on Strombanni's breastplate. The pirate yelled and bounded back toward the beach with arrows whistling about him. His men roared and came on like a wave, blades gleaming.

"Curse you, dog!" raved the count, felling the offending archer with his fist. "Why did you not strike him above the gorget? Ready with your bows, men! Here they come!"

Strombanni checked his men's rush. They deployed in a long line that overlapped the ends of the western wall, advancing warily and loosing their shafts as they came. Though their archery was considered superior to that of the Zingarans, they had to rise to loose their longbows, and the Zingarans, protected by their barrier, sent bolts and hunting-arows back with careful aim.

The long arrows arched over the stockade and quivered upright in the earth. One struck the windowsill over which Belesa watched. Tina cried out and flinched, staring at the vibrating shaft.

The Barachans crept forward in their widespread formation, taking advantage of the cover—which was little, for the ground had been cleared on all sides against Pictish attacks. As they got nearer to the fort, the defenders' archery became more effective. Here and there a body fell prone, its back-piece glinting in the sun and a quarrel-shaft standing up from armpit or neck. Wounded men thrashed and moaned.

At this rate the fight was all in favor of the Zingarans. But down at the boathouse men were at work with axes. The count cursed as he saw the havoc they were making among his boats, which had been laboriously built of planks sawn from solid logs.

"They make a mantlet!" he raged. "A sally now, before they complete it—while they are scattered—"

Galbro shook his head, indicating the unarmored workers with their awkward pikes. "They'd riddle us, and we should be no match for them in close fighting.

We must keep behind our walls and trust to our luck and our archery."

"Well enough," growled Valenso, "if we can keep *them* outside."

Time passed while the inconclusive archery-duel continued. Then a group of thirty men advanced, pushing a great shield made of the planks from the boats and the timbers of the boathouse itself. They had found an ox-cart and mounted the mantlet on the wheels, great solid disks of oak. As they rolled it squealing before them, it hid all but their feet from the sight of the defenders.

It rolled toward the gate, and the straggling line of archers converged upon it, shooting as they ran.

"Shoot!" yelled Valenso. "Stop them ere they reach the gate!"

A storm of arrows whistled across the palisade. Some feathered themselves harmlessly in the thick wood. Some struck the running archers; here and there a man fell or reeled back wounded toward the beach. Many went wild altogether as the defenders, despite the closing of the range, became careless with excitement. As the pirates drew nearer their long shafts began to find the loopholes; a soldier reeled and fell choking from the parapet with an arrow through his throat.

"Shoot at their feet!" screamed Valenso. "And forty men at the gate with pikes and swords! The rest hold the wall!"

Bolts ripped into the sand before the moving shield. A howl told that one had found its mark, and a man hopped into view, cursing as he strove to withdraw the quarrel that had skewered his foot. In an instant he was hurled to the ground by the impact of a dozen bolts and arrows.

But with a deep-throated shout the pirates pushed the mantlet against the gate. Through a hole in the middle of the shield they thrust the heavy ridge-pole of the boathouse which they had converted into a ram. Arms, knotted with brawny muscles, sent the ram thundering against the gate, which groaned and shook.

With deep shouts the seamen swung the ram while from all sides the others closed in. Though there was no more room behind the shield for them to take cover, they braved the steady but weakened fire from the walls, shooting back fast and hard.

Cursing like a madman, the count sprang from the wall and ran to the gate, drawing his sword. A clump of mailed sergeants closed in about him with

spears. In another moment the gate would give and they must stop the gap with their bodies.

Then a new note entered the clamor. A trumpet blared from the ship. On the cross-tree a figure waved wildly.

The thunder of the ram ceased and Strombanni's bellow rose above the racket. "Wait! Wait, damn you! Listen!"

The sound of the trumpet and an unintelligible voice came across the water. Strombanni's voice was lifted again, and the mantlet began to recede from the gate as swiftly as it had advanced. Pirates who had been trading shafts with the defenders began picking up their wounded fellows and helping them hastily back toward the beach.

"Look!" cried Tina at her window, jumping up and down. "They flee! All of them! They run to the beach! Look! They have abandoned the shield! They leap into the longboat and pull for the ship! My lady, have we won?"

"I think not," said Belesa. She leaned out and called down to the count. "Uncle! Look yonder!"

The defenders set up a yell as they saw another ship wallowing around the southern point. As they watched, she broke out the royal flag of Zingara.

Strombanni's pirates were swarming up the sides of their carack and heaving up the anchor. Before the stranger had come halfway across the bay, the *Red Hand* was vanishing around the northern horn.

III

The Demon in the Cave

The blue mist had condensed into a monstrous black figure, dimly seen and not quite definite, that filled the hither end of the cave, blotting out the still seated figures behind. There was an impression of shagginess, pointed ears, and close-set horns on a grotesque head.

Even as the great arms shot out like tentacles towards his throat, Conan, quick as a flash, struck at them with his Pictish ax. It was like chopping at a trunk of the ebony tree. The force of the blow broke the handle of the tomahawk and sent the copper head flying with a clank against the side of the tunnel, but so far as the Cimmerian could tell the blade had not bitten into the flesh of his foe at all. It took more than an ordinary edge to pierce a demon's hide. And then the great fingers closed upon his throat, to break his neck as if it were a reed. Not since he had fought Baal-pteor, hand to hand in the temple of Hanu-

man in Zamboula, had Conan felt such a grip upon him.

As the hairy fingers touched his skin, the barbarian tensed the thickly-corded muscles of his massive neck, drawing his head down between his shoulders to give his unnatural foe the least possible purchase. He dropped the knife and the broken hatchet-handle, seized the huge black wrists, swung his legs upward and forward, and drove both bare heels with all his might against the chest of the thing, straightening out his long body.

The tremendous impulse of Conan's mighty back and legs tore his neck loose from that lethal grip and sent him shooting like an arrow back up the tunnel down which he had come. He landed on the stone floor on his back and flipped over in a back-somersault on his feet, ready to flee or fight as occasion required.

But as he stood there, glaring with bared teeth at the door to the inner cave, no black monstrous form shambled out after him. Almost as soon as Conan had wrenched himself loose the form had begun to dissolve back into the blue mist from which it had condensed. Now it was all gone.

Conan stood poised, ready to whirl and bound completely out of the tunnel. The superstitious fears of the barbarian whirled through his mind. Though he was fearless to the point of rashness toward men and beasts, the supernatural he had learned was not to be challenged lightly.

So this was why the Picts had gone! He should have suspected some such danger. He remembered such demonological lore as he had picked up in his youth in cloudy Cimmeria and later in his wanderings over most of the civilized world. Fire and silver were said to be deadly to devils, but he had neither at the moment. Still, if they took gross material form, they were in some measure subject to the limitations of that form. This lumbering monster, for instance, could run no faster than a beast of its general shape, and Conan thought that he could outdistance it in short order if need be.

But braggadocio was as strong in the Cimmerian as fear. He mustered his courage for a shout. "Ho, there, ugly-face, come out if you're coming!"

There was no reply. The blue mist swirled in the chamber, but remained in its diffused form. Fingering his bruised neck, Conan tried to remember a Pictish tale he had heard before. Then as he stared into the dim place beyond, something about the figures there fitted with another tale he had been told by the pi-

rates of the South, until the two legends became one.

This must be the hiding place of Tranicos, who had fled with a fabled treasure to the North.

There had been eleven with him, and the Pictish legends spoke of twelve strange men who came out of the sea. They fell on a Pictish village, and put all the folk to the sword, except a few who fled in time. Then they found a cave and heaped it with gold and jewels. But a shaman of the Picts—one who had escaped—made magic and evoked a demon from one of the lower hells, and by his sorcerous powers he forced this demon to enter the cavern and strangle the men as they sat at wine. And, lest the demon thereafter molest the Picts themselves, the shaman confined it by his magic to the inner cavern. The tale spread from tribe to tribe, until all the clans shunned the accursed spot.

It fitted. Yet according to the tale, the demon was all of blackness, in keeping with Pictish magic. The blueness of the glow was wrong. Conan shuddered, remembering the things in the crypts of haunted Stygia, far to the south. If by some chance a Stygian influence touched the demon, the old spell might not still apply—and Stygians were said to dabble at times in the magic of others, riding the night as spirits to practice their foul sorcery.

Conan considered. But the pull of the wine still lying in bottles at the table, still corked safely and waiting to be opened, drew him. He licked his lips, but common sense finally overcame the urge to beard the demon again.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Conan turned to the outer cavern where the other chests lay, which might contain something he could use. His hopes rose as it proved a tough nut to crack with the knife he still had, but all he found inside when it finally opened were silks and fine raiment. Near the bottom, he came on men's clothing of ancient cut and manner, but apparently well-preserved by the chest. He found even boots to fit him, with the well-oiled leather still in good condition.

He passed down the chests, loaded mostly with golden coins and baubles of little use to him, until he came to one that was filled with jeweled swords. Then he grinned in satisfaction and began looking until he found one that pleased him—a broadsword of fine steel, heavy enough for his use, yet with a fine jewel in the hilt, which seemed to be of solid silver. He buckled it on with more enthusiasm than he had shown for days, and slapped

his hand on the hilt, nodding at the feel.

The thought of the silver of the hilt brought his mind back to the demon. Now he grunted and began searching the chests he had opened until he found a strip of silver-worked cloth, which he bound around his neck; the silver might be false—the shops of Ophir had held cloth that seemed all gold and silver, yet proved worthless. But it might be worth a try.

The blue mist still coiled in the inner cavern as Conan's eyes passed over the seated corpses to a chest that lay half-open near the entrance. Even in the smoky light, the sparkle of rubies caught his eyes. He decided reluctantly against the wine, which would be too hard to reach, but the gems would be useful, if ever he escaped this forsaken coast. And it rankled his spirit to leave without giving the demon another try.

With a sudden tigerish leap, he was inside the cavern, his hand outstretched to the sack of jewels. The demon began gathering, swirled up quickly, and was suddenly at him.

With a snarl, the Cimmerian drew back, but he did not drop the sack of jewels. He twisted them into his girdle, before his hand darted to his sword and wrenched it out of its scabbard. Something struck him on the throat, knocking him further into the cavern, but he kept his feet, and turned to meet the charge, with the heavy sword already whining through the air toward the gross form of blackness that was charging toward him.

It struck again, throwing him aside, but he lit cat-like on his feet and one hand, keeping his grasp on the hilt of the sword. He rebounded to his feet as a lynx springs back with bared, snarling fangs, glaring at the demon from under his tousled mane. Fear left him for its demoniacal powers, and a wave of murderous fury washed over him. In a crimson mist, he struck out at the demon.

The sword rebounded with a clang of good steel, and the demon came on, its great hands spread toward his throat. Conan cursed as the hands met the silver cloth and went on; it was truly an Ophirian fakery, since there was no cry from the monster as should have been when it first touched silver.

He jerked his head down, and tossed the sword, catching it in reverse. His hand brought the hilt down against the inky chest that was pulling him closer. This time, there was a scream of hellish anguish from the thing. It

dropped him from its squeezing hands, while he followed up the blow with a rain of others, driven with all the strength of his terrible muscles.

But the demon came in again, writhing and moaning, yet unable to resist its compulsion to kill all that was of human flesh. Conan went to his knees under a lashing blow. As he bounded up, the demon was on him, towering over him, and again lashing down with its gross hands. He was tossed to and fro in the violence of the attack. He felt his brain reel with the punishment he was taking, and his breath came in whistling gasps between his teeth. High above, he saw the great, ugly face, outlined in the bluish glow that still emanated from it. With a hoarse cry that was half fury and half agony, he lunged upwards, driving the hilt of the sword toward the face, until it sank into the bulk above him.

With a volcanic burst, it gathered itself together and screamed. Now it was battering him aside, trying to escape the punishment his blows were inflicting. One great arm caught him wildly, and lifted him up, to toss him like a chip in a raging storm out through the entrance. His head scraped against rock of the dome of the outer cavern, and then he was landing, barely doubling himself to take the blow on his rounded shoulder. His lips tightened at the agony, but no bones snapped, and he darted to his feet and swung to face his enemy.

Only the blue mist met his eyes, but it began to lift itself, moaning weakly, as he moved forward beyond the line that restrained it. Conan drew back. For the moment, he was too weak to risk it again, and the rubies in the sack would have to satisfy him.

He found another tunic to replace the torn one he wore and clothed himself again. His senses were clearing now, though his muscles still ached from the pounding he had taken. He closed the massive door behind him and staggered out, where the fresh air and the smell of the sea could revive him.

Then his breath caught. From the direction of the sea, there came the beating of a drum, the hollow, carrying sound of a stretched-skin drum, unlike any hollowed log of the Picts. Conan felt the hair at the nape of his neck rise with old memories of that sound.

"Crom!" he muttered, stirring uneasily. "I thought I smelled a Stygian taint on that Pictish demon!"

However, he wasted no more time, but began heading out

from the cavern. At the moment, he wanted distance from the demon, and a great deal of it. Then he grinned wolfishly.

Even a Stygian priest would mean people and boats that might be stolen to carry him back to the worlds of the South. He headed straight for the sound of the drum, and even when it stopped, he continued steadily onward.

IV

The Dark Stranger

Back at the fort, the count snapped out orders. "Out, quick! Drag that mantlet in before these strangers can land!"

"But Strombanni has fled," said Galbro, "and yonder ship is Zingaran."

"Do as I command!" shouted Valenso. "My enemies are not all foreigners. Out, dogs, thirty of you, and fetch the mantlet into the stockade!"

Before the Zingaran ship had dropped anchor, about where the pirate ship had docked, Valenso's thirty stalwarts had trundled the device back to the gate and manhandled it sidewise through an opening.

Up in the window of the manor-house, Tina asked wonderingly, "Why does not the count open the gate and go to meet them? Is he afraid that the man he fears might be on that ship?"

"What do you mean, Tina?" asked Belesa uneasily. Though no man to run from an enemy, the count had never vouchsafed a reason for his self-exile. Belesa found this conviction of Tina's disquieting; but Tina seemed not to have heard.

"The men are back in the stockade," she said. "The gate is closed again and barred, and they are bracing it with boards from the mantlet. The men still keep their places along the wall. My lady, if that ship was chasing Strombanni, why did it not keep on after him? It is not a war-galley, but a carack like the other. Look, a boat is coming ashore. I see a man in the bow, wrapped in a dark cloak."

When the boat grounded, this man paced in leisurely fashion up the sands, followed by three others. He was a tall, wiry man in black silk and polished steel.

"Halt!" roared the count. "I will parley with your leader, alone!"

The tall stranger removed his helmet and made a sweeping bow. His companions halted, drawing their cloaks about them, and behind them the sailors leaned upon their oars and stared at the flag floating over the palisade in the quiet breeze.

When the leader came within easy vocal distance of the gate he called: "Surely there should be no suspicion between gentlemen on these naked seas and bleak shores!"

Valenso stared at him warily. The stranger was dark, with a lean predatory face and a thin black mustache.

"You are Black Zarrono, the buccaneer," Valenso accused him.

Again the stranger bowed with stately elegance. "And none could fail to know the red falcon of the Korzettas!"

"It seems this coast has become the rendezvous of all the rogues of the southern seas," growled Valenso. "What do you wish?"

"Come, sir!" remonstrated Zarrono. "This is a churlish greeting to one who has just rendered you a service. Was not that Argossean dog, Strombanni, but now thundering at your gate? And did he not take to his sea-heels when he saw me round the point?"

"True, but there is little to chose between a pirate and a renegade."

Zarrono laughed without resentment and twirled his mustache. "You're blunt in speech, my lord. No renegade I; I do but prey upon the legitimate foes of the crown of Zingara, in accordance with the letter of marque granted me by our liege lord the late king."

"Ha," said Valenso. "And upon any others too weak to defend themselves. What would you?"

"I desire only leave to anchor in your bay, to let my men hunt for meat and water in your woods and, perhaps, to drink a goblet of wine myself at your board."

"I see not how I can stop you," said Valenso. "But understand this, Zarrono: no man of your crew comes within this palisade. If one approaches closer than thirty paces, he shall presently find an arrow through his gizzard. And I charge you to do no harm to my gardens or the cattle in the pens. One steer you may have for fresh meat, but no more. And do not think we cannot hold this fort against your ruffians."

"You were not holding it very successfully against Strombanni," said the buccaneer with a smile.

"You'll find no planks for mantlets this time," assured the count grimly, "and your men are not Barachans and so no better archers than mine. Besides, the little loot in this place would not be worth the price."

"Who speaks of loot and battle?" protested Zarrono. "Nay, my lads are sick to stretch their legs ashore, and nigh to scurvy for want of fresh food. May they

come ashore? I guarantee their good conduct."

Valenso signified a grudging consent. Zarrono bowed and retired with a tread as stately as if he trod the polished crystal floor of the Kordovan royal court, where it was said he had once been a familiar figure.

Valenso ordered Galbro: "Let no man leave the stockade. I trust not that renegade cur. The fact that he drove Strombanni from our gate is no guarantee that he too would not cut our throats."

So nobody stirred from the palisade while the buccaneers came ashore, dark-faced men in flaming silk and shining steel, with scarves around their heads and golden hoops in their ears. They looked smaller and less ferocious than the Barachans, who were mainly Argossean sailors turned outlaw; but on the other hand, they were better clad, armed, and disciplined. Belesa, watching from her window, knew of the enmity between the pirates and the Zingaran buccaneers. To the ancient feud between Argos and Zingara, and the rivalry of opposing interests, was added the rancor aroused by the quasi-legal status of the buccaneers, who operated with the connivance of their own government, while the Barachans were the enemies of all men.

The buccaneers camped on the beach, a hundred and seventy-odd of them, having posted lookouts at the points of the horns that inclosed the bay. The steer designated by Valenso was driven forth and slaughtered, but otherwise the buccaneers did not molest the gardens. Fires were kindled on the strand, and a cask of ale was brought ashore and broached.

Other kegs were filled with water from the spring that rose a short distance south of the fort. Several men, crossbows in their hands, began to straggle toward the woods. Seeing this, Valenso sent a shout to Zarrono.

"Keep your men from the forest! If you lack meat, take another steer. If the men go tramping into the woods they'll fall foul of the Picts. Whole tribes of the painted devils live back there; they attacked us when we landed, and since then they've murdered six of my men at one time or another. Our peace with them hangs by a thread, so risk not stirirng them up!"

Zarrono shot a startled glance at the woods, then bowed and shouted for his men to come back.

As evening drew on, a thin skim of gray crawled up from the sea-rim and overcast the sky. The sun sank in a wallow of crimson, touching the tips of the

black waves with blood. Fog crawled out of the sea and lapped at the feet of the forest, curling around the stockade in smoky wisps. The fires on the beach shone dull crimson through the mist, and the singing of the buccaneers seemed far away. They had made shelters along the strand of old canvas from the carack. The beef was roasting and the ale was doled out sparingly.

The great gate was shut and barred. Soldiers tramped the ledges of the palisade, pike on shoulder, beads of moisture glistening on their iron caps. They glanced uneasily toward the fires on the beach and the vague dark line of the forest. The compound lay bare and dark save where candles gleamed feebly through the cracks of the huts, and light streamed from the windows of the manor. There was silence save for the tread of the sentries, the drip of water from the eaves, and the distant singing of the buccaneers.

Some faint echo of this singing penetrated into the great hall where Valenso sat at wine with his self-invited guest.

Impassive attendants ranged the walls: sergeants with pikes and helmets, servants in satin tunics. Valenso's household in this wild land was a shadowy reflection of the court that he had kept in Kordava. While the manor-house was devoid of ornamentation outside, within it was as nearly a copy of Korzetta castle as possible. The count had driven his folk night and day for months. The logs that composed the walls were hidden under heavy gold-worked silken tapestries. Ship's beams, stained and polished, formed the ceiling. The floor and the broad staircase were covered with rich carpets. A fire in the wide stone fireplace dispelled the damp. Candles in the great silver candelabrum in the center of the broad table, which could have accommodated fifty guests, lit the hall and threw long shadows on the stairs. Count Valenso sat at the head of the table, presiding over a company composed of his niece, his piratical guest, Galbro the seneschal, and the captain of the guard.

"What could tempt a pirate to this naked land?" mused Valenso staring into his goblet.

"What could tempt a Count of Zingara?" retorted Zarrono, an avid light in his eyes.

"The rottenness of the royal court might sicken a man of honor."

"Korzettas of honor have endured its rottenness with tranquility for generations. My lord, indulge my curiosity: Why did

you sell your lands, load your galleon with the furnishings of your castle, and sail over the horizon out of the knowledge of the regent and the nobles of Zingara? And why settle here, when your sword and your name might win a place for you in any civilized land?"

Valenso toyed with the golden seal-chain about his neck. "As to why I left Zingara, that is my own affair. But chance stranded me here. I had brought my people and much of the furnishings you mentioned ashore, meaning to build a temporary habitation wherein to winter. But a sudden storm from the west drove my ship on the rocks of the northern point and wrecked it. After that we could but make the best of it."

"Then you'd return to civilization if you could?"

"Not to Kordava. Perhaps to some far clime—Hyrkania, or fabled Vendhya . . ."

Zarrono addressed himself to Belesa: "Do you not find it tedious here, my lady?"

Hunger to see a new face and hear a new voice had brought the girl to the great hall that night, but now she wished that she had remained in her chamber with Tina. There was no mistaking the meaning of Zarrono's glance. Though his speech was decorous and his expression respectful, the man's violent and sinister spirit gleamed through the mask.

"There is little diversity," she answered in a low voice.

Zarrono bluntly asked his host, "If you had a ship, sir, would you abandon this settlement?"

"Perhaps."

"I have a ship. Could we reach an agreement—"

"What sort of agreement?" Valenso lifted his head to stare suspiciously at his guest.

"Share and share alike," said Zarrono, laying his hand on the board with the fingers spread wide, like the legs of a giant spider. The fingers quivered with tension.

"Share what?" Valenso stared in evident bewilderment. "My gold went down with my ship and, unlike the broken timbers, did not wash ashore."

"Not that!" Zarrono made an impatient gesture. "Let's be frank, my lord. Can you pretend that chance landed you at this spot, with two thousand miles of coast to choose from?"

"There is no need for me to pretend," answered Valenso coldly. "My ship's master was one Zorgelitas, formerly a buccaneer. He had sailed this coast and persuaded me to land here, telling me he had a reason he would later disclose. But this reason he never divulged because the day

after we landed he disappeared into the woods, and his headless body was found later by a hunting party. Obviously he had been slain by Picts."

Zarrono stared at Valenso for a space. "Sink me! I believe you, my lord. A Korzetta has no skill at lying, whatever his other accomplishments. I'll make you a proposal. I will admit I anchored in the bay with other plans in mind; but circumstances have caused me to change my mind . . ." He cast a glance at Belesa that brought color to her face, and continued. "I have a ship to carry you out of exile, with your household and such of your retainers as you choose. The rest can fend for themselves."

The attendants along the walls shot uneasy sidelong glances at each other. Zarrono went on, too brutally cynical to hide his intentions. "But first you must help me secure the treasure for which I've sailed a thousand miles."

"What treasure, in Mitra's name?" cried the count. "Now you're yammering like that dog Strombanni."

"Have you ever heard of Bloody Tranicos, the greatest of the Barachan pirates?"

"Who has not! He stormed the island castle of the exiled prince, Maatneb of Stygia, put the people to the sword, and bore off the treasure the prince had brought with him when he fled from Khemi," Valenso said.

"Aye! And the tale of that treasure brought the men of the Red Brotherhood swarming like vultures for carrion—pirates, buccaneers, and even the wild black corsairs from the South. Fearing betrayal, Tranicos fled northward with one ship and vanished from the knowledge of men, a hundred years ago. But the tale persists that one man survived that last voyage and returned to the Barachas, only to be captured by a Zingaran war-galley. Before he was hanged he told his story and drew a map in his own blood, on parchment, which he somehow smuggled out of his captor's reach." Zarrono nodded, then went on.

"Tranicos had sailed far beyond the paths of shipping until he came to a bay on a lonely coast, and there he anchored. He went ashore, taking his treasure and eleven of his most trusted captains. Following his orders the ship sailed away, to return in a week and pick up their admiral and his captains. The ship returned at the appointed time, but there was no trace of Tranicos and his eleven except the shelter they had built on the beach.

"This had been demolished, and there were tracks of naked feet about it, but no sign of fight-

ing. Nor was there any trace of treasure. The pirates plunged into the forest to search for their chief. They sent one of their number up a tree to spy, and this one reported that not far ahead a great steep-sided crag or dome rose like a tower from the forest. They started forward again, but then were attacked by a party of Picts and driven back to their ship. In despair they heaved anchor and sailed away, but before they raised the Barachas a terrific storm wrecked the ship, and only that one man survived."

"That then is the tale of the Treasure of Tranicos, which men have sought in vain for nearly a century. That the map exists is known, but its whereabouts remains a mystery," Zarrono said. "I have had one glimpse of that map. Strombanni and Zorgelitas were with me, and a Nemedian who sailed with the Barachans. We looked upon it in a hovel in Messantia, where we were skulking in disguise. Somebody knocked over the lamp, and somebody howled in the dark, and when we got the light on again the old miser who owned the map was dead from a stab, and the map was gone, and the watch was clattering down the street with their pikes to investigate the clamor. We scattered and all went our respective ways.

"For years Strombanni and I watched one another, each supposing the other to have the chart. Well, as it turned out, neither had it, but lately word came to me that Strombanni had departed northward, so I followed. You saw the end of that chase.

"I had but a glimpse of the map in the miser's hut, but Strombanni's actions show that he knows this is the bay where Tranicos anchored. I believe they hid the treasure on or near that great rocky hill the scout reported and were slain by the Picts then or while returning.

"This is my proposal: Let us combine forces. We can leave enough men to hold the fort against Strombanni, locate this hill, find the treasure, load it upon my ship, and sail for some foreign port where I can cover my past with gold. I'm sick of this life, and would go back to civilization and live like a man of quality, with wealth and slaves and a castle—and a wife of noble blood."

"Well?" demanded the count, slit-eyed wtih suspicion.

"Give me your niece for my wife," demanded the buccaneer.

Belesa cried out sharply and started to her feet. Valenso likewise rose, his fingers knotting about his goblet as if he meant to hurl it at his guest. Zarrono

sat still, his eyes smoldering with passion and menace.

"You dare?" cried Valenso.

Zarrono rasped, "You forget you have fallen from your high estate, Count Valenso. We are not at the Kordavan court, my lord. Here nobility is measured by armed might, and there I rank you. Strangers tread Korzetta Castle, and the Korzetta fortune is at the bottom of the sea. Without my ship you will die here in exile. You shall not regret the union of our houses. With a new name and a new fortune you will find that Black Zarrono can take his place among the aristocrats of the world."

"You are mad to dream of it!" exclaimed the count violently. "You—who is that?"

A patter of small feet distracted his attention. Tina hurried into the hall, hesitated when she saw the count's eyes fixed angrily upon her, curtseyed, and sidled around the table to seize Belesa's hands. She was panting, her slippers were damp, and her flaxen hair was plastered down on her head.

"Tina!" exclaimed Belesa. "Where have you been? I thought you were in your chamber hours ago."

"I was, but I missed the coral necklace you gave me and I was afraid you wouldn't let me go if you knew, and a soldier's wife helped me out of the stockade and back, and please, my lady, do not make me tell who it was, and I found the necklace where I bathed this morning. Please punish me if I have done anything wrong."

"Tina!" groaned Belesa, embracing her. "I'll not punish you, but you should never have gone outside with the buccaneers on the beach and the Picts in the woods. Let me take you to your chamber—"

"Yes, my lady, but first let me tell you about the black man—"

"What?" Valenso's goblet clattered to the floor. He caught the table with both hands, his face livid and his eyes popping. "What, wench?" he panted, glaring wildly.

"A b-black man, my lord," stammered Tina, shrinking back against Belesa while the others stared in amazement at the horrifying change in the count's manner. "When—when I went down to the pool to get my necklace I saw him. I was afraid and hid behind a ridge of sand. He came from the sea in a strange black boat with blue fire playing all about it, but there was no torch. He drew his boat up on the sands below the south point and strode into the forest, looking like a giant in the fog—a

great tall man, dark like a Kushite—"

Valenso reeled, clutched at his throat, and snapped the golden chain about his neck in his violence. With the face of a madman he lurched around the table and tore the screaming child from Belesa's arms.

"You little slut," he panted. "You lie! You've heard me mumbling in my sleep and have told this lie to torment me! Say you lie before I tear the skin from your back!"

"Uncle!" cried Belesa, trying to free Tina from his grasp. "Are you mad? What are you about?"

With a snarl he tore her hand from his arm and spun her into the arms of Galbro, who clutched her to him with a leer.

"Mercy, my lord!" sobbed Tina. "I did not lie!"

"I say you lied!" roared Valenso. "Gebellez!"

A serving-man seized the trembling youngster and stripped her with one wrench. Wheeling, he drew her slender arms over his shoulders, lifting her kicking feet clear off the floor.

"Uncle!" shrieked Belesa, writhing vainly in Galbro's lustful grasp. "You are mad! you cannot—"

Her voice choked as Valenso brought a jewel-handled riding-whip down across the child's body with a force that left a red weal. Belesa moaned in anguish. Valenso lashed away with the staring eyes of a madman, panting.

"You lie! You lie! Curse you, you lie! Admit your guilt, or I will flay your stubborn body. *He* could not have followed me here . . ."

"Have mercy, my lord!" screamed the child, too frantic with fear to save herself by a lie. "I saw him! Mercy!"

Some shred of sanity seemed to return to Count Valenso of Korzetta. Dropping the whip, he reeled against the table, clutching at its edge. He shook as with an ague, his hair plastered across his forehead in dark strands, and sweat dripping from his livid countenance. Tina, released by Gebellez, slipped to the floor in a whimpering heap. Belesa tore free from Galbro, rushed to her, and gathered the waif into her arms. She lifted her face to her uncle to pour her wrath upon him—but he was not looking at her; he seemed to have forgotten the two girls.

"I accept your offer, Zarrono. In Mitra's name, let us find this accursed treasure and be gone from this damned coast!"

In stunned silence Belesa carried the sobbing child up the stairs. A glance backward

showed Valenso crouching at the table, gulping wine from a goblet which he gripped in both shaking hands, while Zarrono towered over him like a somber bird of prey, talking in a low, decisive voice. Valenso was nodding in mute agreement; Galbro stood back in the shadows, chin in hand, and the attendants along the walls glanced at each other with furtive alarm.

In her chamber Belesa, feeling sick and bewildered, laid Tina on the bed and set herself to wash and annoint the weals and cuts in the girl's skin. Tina moaned faintly. Fear of and hatred toward her uncle grew in Belesa's soul. She had never loved him, for he was a harsh and grasping man, apparently without natural affection. But at least she had deemed him just and fearless. Now, however, roused to frenzy by some terrible dread, he had brutalized the only creature she loved, and proposed to sell her, his own niece, to this infamous outlaw. What lay behind this madness?

The child muttered. "I never lied, my lady! Indeed, I did not! A black man in a black boat that burned like blue fire on the water! A tall man almost as dark as a Negro, wrapped in a black cloak! He left his boat and went into the forest. Why did the count whip me for seeing him?"

"Hush," Belesa said. "Lie still; the hurt will soon pass."

The door opened behind her and she whirled and snatched up her jeweled dagger. The count stood in the door, his face gray and drawn, his eyes staring in a way that made her flesh crawl. He seemed an utter stranger to her. She raised the dagger.

"If you touch her again," she whispered from dry lips, "I swear before Mitra that I will sheathe this blade in your breast."

He did not heed her. "I have posted a strong guard about the manor," he said. "Zarrono brings his men into the stockade tomorrow. When he has found the treasure we shall sail."

"And you will sell me to him?"

He fixed her with a gloomy gaze from which all considerations but his own self-interest had been crowded out. "You shall do as I command." There was no human feeling in his voice.

He turned and left the chamber. Blinded by a rush of horror, Belesa sank sobbing beside the couch.

Tina lifted a tear-stained face and whispered, "We must go, my lady! Zarrono shall not have you. Let's flee into the forest,

and when we can go no further we can lie down and die together."

It seemed to Belesa the only escape from the shadows that had been closing in upon her ever since she had left Zingara. "We will go, child."

She rose and was fumbling for a cloak when an exclamation from Tina caused her to turn. The girl was on her feet, a finger at her lips, her eyes wide with terror.

Belesa whispered: "What is it?"

"Somebody in the hall outside. He stopped at our door, then went on toward the count's chamber."

"Perchance it was the count himself, or Galbro."

Belesa moved to open the door, but Tina clutched her frantically. "No, no, my lady! Not the door! I fear some evil thing is out there!"

Belesa patted her and reached for the little metal disk that covered the peep-hole.

"He is coming back!" quavered Tina. "I hear him!"

Belesa heard a curious stealthy pad of feet. Who could it be? She remembered the sergeants on guard below, and if Zarrono had stayed the night there would be a man-at-arms before his door too.

She extinguished the candle so that it should not shine through the peep-hole and pushed aside the copper disk. Someone was moving along the darkened corridor; she sensed rather than saw a dim bulk moving past her doorway. A cold wave of terror swept over her.

The figure passed on to the head of the stairs, where it was limned momentarily against the faint glow from below. It was a man, but not any man such as Belesa was familiar with. She had an impression of a shaven head with aloof aquiline features, and a glossy brown skin, lighter than that of a Negro but darker than that of her swarthy countrymen. The head towered on broad massive shoulders swathed in a black cloak. Then the intruder was gone.

Belesa crouched in darkness, awaiting the outcry that would arouse the soldiers. But the manor remained silent. This was no ordinary skulker, she thought, realizing that the sight had robbed her of her recent resolution.

She fumbled with flint and steel to relight the candle. The flame flared up, illuminating Tina's white face.

"It was the black man!" whispered Tina. "My blood turned cold, just as it did when I saw him on the beach. Why did not

the sergeants see him? Shall we rouse the count?"

Belesa shook her head. She did not care to repeat the scene that had followed Tina's first mention of the dark stranger. In any event she dared not venture out into the hallway.

"We cannot go into the forest!" shuddered Tina. "He will be lurking there."

The same thought had struck Belesa; the determination that had earlier faced almost certain death now faltered at the thought of traversing those black woods haunted by this dark sinister creature.

Tina slept presently on the couch, whimpering occasionally in her sleep. Belesa watched. Toward dawn she became aware of a stifling quality in the air, and heard a low rumble of thunder. Extinguishing the candle, she opened the shutters and looked out. From her window, facing south, she could see both the ocean and a belt of forest behind the fort.

Along the eastern horizon ran a pale streak that presaged dawn. The fog had disappeared, and out to sea a dark mass was rising from the horizon. Lightning flickered from it and low thunder growled. An answering rumble came from the woods.

Startled, Belesa stared at that brooding black rampart. A strange rhythmic pulsing came to her ears—a deep droning reverberation that was not at all like the hollow clack of a Pictish log-drum.

"A drum!" muttered Tina, wakening. "The black man—beating on a black drum—in the black woods—Mitra save us . . ."

Belesa shuddered. The black cloud of the western horizon was swelling and expanding, writhing and billowing. She stared in amazement, for the previous summer there had been no storms on this coast at this time of year, and she had never seen a cloud like this.

It came pouring up over the world-rim in great boiling masses of blackness veined with blue fire. The inky horizon was torn with lightning-flashes. Afar to sea Belesa saw white-capped waves racing before the wind and heard its droning roar mingled with the reverberations of the thunder and the boom of the drum from the forest. The air about the fort still hung hot and breathless. Somewhere a shutter slammed and a woman's voice was lifted in alarm.

Belesa looked toward the forest, her flesh crawling as she visualized a dark ominous figure squatting under black branches and beating out a nameless incantation on a drum of exotic

design. Then she looked seaward again as a blaze of lightning split the sky. Against its glare she saw the mast of Zarrono's ship, the tents of the buccaneers, and the ridges of the south point as plainly as by sunlight. Louder and louder rose the roar of the wind, and now the manor awoke. Feet pounded up the stairs; Zarrono's voice yelled and was answered by that of the count. Doors slammed.

"Why did you not warn me of the weather?" howled the buccaneer. "If the anchor fails to hold—"

"A storm has never come from the west before at this time of year!" shrieked Valenso, rushing from his chamber barefooted, in his furred nightrobe, his hair standing on end. "This is the work of—"

Thunder drowned his words as he raced up the ladder to the lookout tower, followed by the cursing Zarrono.

Belesa crouched at her window, awed and deafened. Louder and louder rose the wind until it drowned all other sound but the crash of thunder and the roll of the drum which now rose like an inhuman chant of triumph. The storm swooped inshore, driving before it a foaming league-long crest of white. The surf roared over the sands, drowning the coals of the fires that the seamen had built. The wind hit like a thunder-clap, whipping the tents of the buccaneers to ribbons and whirling them away; rain swept the beach in a driving torrent.

Just before she got the shutters closed, as the first drops whipped past her window, Belesa saw the buccaneers run staggering toward the fort, almost beaten to the sands by the fury of the blast; and against the blue glare she saw Zarrono's ship, ripped loose from her mooring, driven headlong against the jagged rocks that jutted up to receive her.

V

A Man from the Wilds

The sun rose in a blaze of fresh gold, into a clear blue rain-washed sky. Bright birds sang from trees whose leaves bore beads of rain-water sparkling like diamonds.

Beyond the fringe of trees and bushes, Galaccus the Kothian bent to wash his hands and face. In the midst of the big pirate's gruntings and splashings, he lifted his head suddenly, his hair dripping and water running over his shoulders. He listened, then in one swift motion was on his feet, sword in hand.

A man even bigger than him-

self was striding toward him over the sands, a heavy broadsword in one hand and a haunch of wild boar in the other. The pirate's eyes widened as he stared at the long loose tunic ornamented with semi-precious stones, the wide-topped boots, and the broad-brimmed black felt hat such as had been worn by Zingaran grandees of a century ago, before the tighter-fitting Hyborian fashions had invaded the land. The pirate paled with recognition.

"Conan! By Mitra, not *you!*" Oaths streamed from his lips as he heaved up his sword.

Conan's blue eyes were as cold as the seas beyond Vanaheim, but there was a feral grin on his dark, scarred face as he tossed his haunch of meat aside and stepped forward. "It seems the storm brought me luck," he said. "First the boar—and now you, Galaccus!"

The birds rose like flaming rockets from the trees as the clang of steel interrupted their song. Blue sparks flew from the hacking blades, and the sand ground under stamping boot-heels. Galaccus was a veteran brawler, skilled in every foul trick of the pirates and polished in his swordcraft by a thousand fights by sea and land. He came in with a rush, but there was already fear in his vitals as he pitted his blade against the other, wielded by muscles hardened in the harsh lands beyond the last edges of civilization. Against him, Conan's blade flashed with a speed and strength that no civilized man could match, and the heavy blade seemed but a toy in his hands. Skill was useless against the fury of his answering charge, and to his natural wolfish force he had added the skill of the long nights of practice among mercenaries from countless lands and the professional warriors of Aquilonia.

Galaccus fought with the fear of death already heavy on him, and with an answering desperation that drove him to strain every last ounce of effort to parry the heavy blade that danced like a thing alive around his head. He lunged and parried, then caught a sweeping stroke near his hilt, and the terrific impact turned his arm numb from fingers to elbow. Without pause, the stroke was followed by a thrust with such smashing power behind it that the heavy blade ripped through his shoulder, sheering off his arm, and drove down into his ribs like a knife through soft tallow.

The pirate went to his knees with a rattling gasp, while blood pumped from his severed arteries. The hilt dropped from his

nerveless hand and fell prone upon the reddening sand. With a dying effort, he fumbled at his girdle and drew something from it. He tried to lift the object to his mouth, but died before he could do so.

Conan shook the red drops from his sword, grinned with unaffected pleasure, and stretched himself like a panther after a full meal. The he bent to study the paper that was crumpled in Galaccus' death grasp. He grinned again, bent and tore the fingers from the object that had seemed more important than death to the pirate.

Zarrono and Valenso stood on the beach, starring at the driftwood that their men were gathering—spars, pieces of mast, broken timbers. So savagely had the storm hammered Zarrono's ship against the rocks that most of the salvage was matchwood.

Zarrono cursed venemously, but Valenso seemed dazed. "It is not the time of the year for storms from the west," he muttered, staring with haggard eyes. "We had none last summer. It was not chance that brought that one out of the deep to balk my escape. I am caught like a mouse in a trap, as are we all. . ."

"I know nothing of what you speak," snarled Zarrono, yanking his mustache. "I have been unable to get any sense out of you since that flaxen-haired brat so roiled you last night with her tale of black men from the sea. But I'll not spend my life here. Ten of my men went to hell on the ship, but I have a hundred and sixty left. You have a hundred, and tools, and there are plenty of trees. I'll set men to felling them as soon as they complete their present task, and we'll build a ship."

"It will take months," muttered Valenso.

"How better occupy our time? The sooner begun the sooner completed, and whilst building we'll hunt for Tranicos' treasure. I hope the storm smashed that Argossean dog to bits."

"We shall never complete this ship," said Valenso somberly.

"You fear the Picts? We have men enough to defy them."

"I do not speak of Picts, but of the black one."

Zarrono turned on him angrily. "Will you speak sense? Who is this accursed black man?"

"Accursed indeed." Valenso stared seaward. "A shadow of mine own red-stained past risen up to hound me to hell. Because of him I fled Zingara, hoping to lose my trail in the great ocean. But I should have known he would smell me out at last."

"If such a man came ashore

he must be hiding in the forest," growled Zarrono. "We'll rake the woods and hunt him out."

Valenso laughed harshly. "Seek rather the shadow of a cloud in the moonlight; grope in the dark for an asp; follow the mist that rises from a swamp at midnight."

Zarrono cast him an uncertain look, as if doubting his sanity. "Who is this man? Have done with ambiguity."

"The shadow of my own mad cruelty and ambition; no man of common flesh and blood, but a—"

"Sail ho!" bawled the lookout on the northern point.

Zarrono wheeled and his voice slashed the wind. "D'you know her?"

"Aye! It's the *Red Haand!*"

Zarrono cursed like a wild man. "Strombanni! The demons take care of their own! How could he ride out that blow?" The buccaneer's voice rose to a yell. "Back to the fort, dogs!"

Before the *Red Hand*, somewhat battered in appearance, nosed around the point, the beach was bare of human life and the palisade bristled with steel. Zarrono ground his teeth as a longboat swung in to the beach and he sighted the tawny head of his rival in the bow. The boat grounded, and Strombanni started toward the fort alone.

Some distance away he halted and bellowed, "Ahoy the fort! I would parley!"

"Well, why do you not?" snarled Zarrono.

"The last time I approached under a flag of truce an arrow broke on my brisket!"

"You asked for it," said Valenso. "I gave you fair warning to get away from us."

"Well, I want a promise it shan't happen again."

"You have my promise!" called Zarrono with a sardonic smile.

"Damn your promise! I want Valenso's word!"

The count, with some remaining air of dignified authority, called, "Advance, but keep your men back. You shall not be shot at."

"That's enough for me," said Strombanni. "Whatever a Korzetta's sins, you can trust his word."

He strode forward and halted under the gate, laughing at the hate-darkened visage that Zarrono thrust over at him.

"Well, Zarrono," he taunted, "you're a ship shorter than when I last saw you. But you Zingarans were never sailors."

"How did you save your ship, you Messantian gutter-scum?"

"There's a cove some miles to the north, guarded by an arm of


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land that broke the force of the gale. I anchored behind it, My anchors dragged, but they held me off the shore."

Zarrono scowled; Valenso said nothing. The count had not known of this cove, for he had done scant exploring of his new domain. Fear of the Picts, lack of curiosity, and the need constantly to drive his people to build and repair and to grow and gather food had kept him and his men near the fort.

"I come to trade," said Strombanni.

"We've nothing to trade with you save sword-strokes," growled Zarrono.

"I think otherwise. You showed your intentions when you murdered and robbed Galaccus, my first mate. Until this morning I supposed that Valenso had the treasure of Tranicos. But if either of you had it, you'd never have gone to the trouble of following me and slaying my mate for the map."

"The map?" cried Zarrono.

"Oh, don't try to dissemble with me! I know you have it. Picts do not wear boots!"

"But," began the count, who then fell silent as Zarrono nudged him.

"If we do have it," said Zarrono, "what have you to trade that we might require?"

"We can talk better within."

A wave of speculation ran along the palisade. Everbody there understood that, however the deal worked out, there was but one ship which could carry only so many.

"Your men shall stay where they are," warned Zarrono.

"Aye. But don't think to seize me for a hostage!" Strombanni laughed grimly. "I demand Valenso's word that I shall be allowed to leave alive and unhurt within the hour, whether we come to terms or not."

"You have my pledge," answered the count.

"Very well, then, open that gate."

The gate opened to admit Strombanni and closed again. The three leaders disappeared into the manor-house while the common men of the various parties resumed their silent surveillance of each other.

On the broad stair, above the great hall, Belesa and Tina crouched, ignored by the men below. Valenso, Galbro, Zarrono, and Strombanni sat about the long table; but for them the hall was empty.

Strombanni gulped wine and set down the empty goblet and began. "We all want the treasure that old Tranicos hid near this bay. Each has something the others need. Valenso has

workers, supplies, and a stockade to shelter us from the Picts. You, Zarrono, have my map. I have a ship."

"What I should like to know," remarked Zarrono, "is this: if you have had that map all these years, why didn't you come sooner after the plunder?"

"I never had it. It was that dog Zorgelitas, who knifed the old miser in the dark and stole the map. But he had neither ship nor crew, and it took him more than a year to get them. When he did come after the treasure the Picts prevented his landing, and his men mutinied and made him sail back to Zingara. One of them stole the map from him and recently sold it to me."

"That was why Zorgelitas recognized the bay," muttered Valenso.

"Did that dog lead you here, Count? I might have guessed it. Where is he?"

"Doubtless in hell, since he was once a buccaneer. The Picts slew him while he was prowling the woods."

"Good!" said Strombanni. "Well, I know nothing of how you knew my mate Galaccus carried the map. I trusted him, and the men trusted him more than they did me, so I let him keep it. This morning he wandered inland, and we found him sworded to death near the beach, and the map gone. The men were ready to accuse me of slaying him, but I showed the fools that neither my feet nor those of any others of the crew would fit the tracks of boots around the corpse; and Picts wear no boots.

"Now, you have the map, but not the treasure; nor could you hunt it without my leave, nor escape without my ship. Here's my proposal: Zarrono, give me the map; and Valenso, give me fresh meat and other supplies. In return I'll take you three and the Lady Belesa and her girl and set you ashore wherever you like, and give you each a handsome share in the treasure."

The buccaneer looked at Strombanni with a skeptical smile; tugging his mustache. "A fair offer—could one depend upon you to carry it out. What's to prevent us from holding you captive and forcing your men to give us your ship in exchange for you?"

Strombanni laughed. "Do you think I'm such a fool? My men have orders to sail away at the first whiff of treachery. They would never give you the ship if you flayed me alive on the beach. Besides, I have the count's word."

"My pledge is not straw," said

Valenso somberly. "Have done with threats, Zarrono."

Zarrono sat in thought, then said: "Let me take my men on your ship when we sail. I cannot desert my faithful followers—"

Strombanni snorted. "Why not ask for my brand to slit my gullet with? Desert your faithful—bah! You'd desert your mother if you could gain by it. No! You shall not bring enough men aboard to give you a chance to seize my ship."

"Give us a day to think on the matter," urged Zarrono.

Strombanni smote the table, making the wine dance in the goblets. "By Mitra, no! Give me my answer now!"

Zarrono was on his feet, rage submerging his craft. "You Barachan dog! I'll give you your answer—in your guts!"

He threw back his cloak and caught at his sword-hilt. Strombanni heaved up with a roar, his chair crashing over backwards. Valenso sprang up, spreading his arms between the two men as they glowered at one another across the table, blades half drawn. "Gentlemen, have done! Zarrono, he has my pledge—"

"The fiends gnaw your pledge!" snarled Zarrono.

"Stand from between us, my lord," growled the pirate, his voice thick with blood-lust. "You swore I should not be treacherously intreated. It's no violation thereof for this swine and me to cross swords in equal play."

"Well said, Strom!" They all wheeled open-mouthed at the deep, powerful voice behind them, vibrant with grim amusement. Up on the stair Belesa started with an exclamation.

A tall, powerful man strode out from the hangings that masked a chamber door and advanced upon the table without haste or hesitation. Instantly he dominated the group. For all his size he moved with pantherish suppleness in the high flopping boots that formed part of a curiously old-fashioned Zingaran costume.

"Conan!" cried the freebooters together. Valenso and Galbro caught their breath at that name, though they had never before seen the owner of it.

"Who else?" The giant strode up to the table, laughing sardonically at their amazement.

"What—what do you want here?" stuttered the seneschal. "How did you get here uninvited and unannounced?"

"I climbed the palisade on the east side while you fools were arguing at the gate," the Cimmerian answered, speaking Zingaran with a barbarous accent.

"Every man in the fort was craning his neck westward. I entered the manor while Strombanni was coming in at the gate, and ever since then I've been in yonder chamber, eavesdropping."

"I thought you dead," said Zarrono slowly. "Three years ago the wreck of your ship was seen on a reef off the coast of Shem, and you were heard of on the Main no more."

" 'Twill take a bigger ocean that that to drown me," answered Conan. "I swam ashore and tried a spell of mercenarying among the black kingdoms; and since then I've been soldiering for the King of Aquilonia. You might say I have become respectable." He grinned wolfishly. "Or at least that I had until a recent difference with that ass Namedides. And now to business, fellow-thieves."

Up on the stair Tina was clutching Belesa in her excitement. "My lady, it is Conan! Look!"

Belesa was looking, as though she beheld a mythical character in the flesh. Who of all the sea-folk had not heard the wild-bloody tales told of Conan, the rover, who had once captained the Barachan pirates and who was known as one of the greatest scourges of the sea? A score of ballads celebrated his exploits.

Valenso was recovering from the shock of finding a stranger in his hall. "What would you here?" he demanded. "You came from the sea?"

"From the woods." The Cimmerian jerked his head eastward.

"You have been living with the Picts?"

Conan retorted angrily, "Even an effeminate Zingaran should know there's never been peace between Picts and Cimmerians, and never will be. But I've lived among you civilized men long enough to understand your ignorance, and the discourtesy that demands his business of a man who appears at your door out of thousand-mile wilderness. Never mind that." He turned to the glumly staring freebooters. "From what I overheard, I gather there is some dissention over a map."

"None of your affair," said Strombanni.

"Would this be it?" Conan grinned in amusement as he drew from his girdle a crumpled square of parchment, marked with crimson lines.

Strombanni started violently. "My map! Where did you get it?"

"From your mate, Galaccus, the Kothian, when I slew him," answered Conan with grim enjoyment.

"You dog!" raved Stromban-

ni, turning on Zarrono. "You never had the map! You lied—"

"I never said I had it," replied Zarrono. "You deceived yourself. Don't be a fool. Conan is alone; if he had a crew he would already have cut our throats. We'll take the map from him."

"You'll never touch it!" Conan's grin deepened. Stepping back, he crumpled the parchment and cast it into the glowing coals of the fireplace. Both men sprang at him, cursing. Strombanni was met by a buffet under the ear that stretched him half-senseless upon the floor. Zarrono whipped out his sword, but before he could thrust, Conan's own blade beat it out of his hand and sent it spinning across the carpet.

Zarrono staggered against the table, hell in his eyes. Strombanni dragged himself erect, eyes glazed and blood dripping from his bruised ear. Conan leaned across the table, his outstretched broadsword touching Valenso's breast.

"Don't call for your soldiers, Count," said the Cimmerian softly. "Not a sound from you—or from you either, dog-face!" he said to Galbro, who showed no intention of braving his wrath. "The map's ashes and 'twill do no good to spill blood. Sit down, all of you. Or I'll seat you!"

They sank into their chairs sullenly. Conan remained standing, towering over the table.

"You were bargaining," he said. "That's all I've come to do."

"And what have you to trade?" sneered Zarrono.

"Only the treasure of Tranicos."

"What?" All four were on their feet again.

"Sit down!" roared Conan, banging the table with his blade.

They sank back, tense and white with excitement. Conan grinned in huge enjoyment of the sensation that his words had caused. He continued.

"Yes, I found the treasure before I got the map. That's why I burned the thing. I don't need it, and no one shall ever find the treasure unless I show him where it is."

They stared at him with murder in their eyes.

"You lie," said Zarrono. "For one thing, you came from the woods, yet you say you have not been living with the Picts. But where else could you have been? The nearest outposts of civilization are the Aquilonian settlements hundreds of miles to the east."

"That's where I came from," said Conan imperturbably. "I believe I'm the first white man to cross the Pictish Wilderness.

When I fled from Aquilonia into Pictland I blundered into a party of Picts and slew one, but a stone from a sling knocked me senseless during the mêlée and the dogs took me alive. They were Wolfmen and traded me to the Eagle clan for a captured chief of theirs. The Eagles carried me slung from a pole a hundred miles westward to burn me in their chief village, but I slew a few and broke away.

"They kept herding me westward until I shook them off a few days ago, and, by Crom and Ymir, the place where I took refuge turned out to be the treasure cave of old Tranicos! Old Tranicos and his eleven captains sitting about an ebon table and staring at the hoard, as they've stared for a hundred years! They've shriveled a bit, but otherwise are in fine preservation."

"An uncanny thing," muttered Strombanni.

"What boots it?" said Zarrono. "It is the treasure we want. Go on, Conan."

Conan seated himself, filled a goblet, and drank it down. "The first wine since I left Aquilonia, by Crom! Those cursed Eagles hunted me so closely I hardly had time to munch the nuts and roots I found. Sometimes I ate frogs raw, not daring to kindle a fire. I drank only water!"

His impatient hearers informed him profanely that they were not interested in his dietary adventures prior to finding the treasure.

He grinned insolently and resumed. "Well, I was lucky enough to come upon an old boar who disputed the trail with me, and by the time I had eaten him I felt like a whole man again. I saw smoke against the western sky and set out westward, meaning to strike the beach north of where I'd seen the smoke. I was not far from the shore when that storm struck."

Conan looked curiously from face to face. "Do any of you know of the strange drumming sound which began shortly before the storm, seeming to come from somewhere near this fort? A real hide drum, such as the sorcerers of Stygia use to summon—"

Valenso dropped his goblet to the floor suddenly and clutched at his throat, his face livid. Then he caught himself. "N-no," he gasped. "I know nothing of any drum. Continue, Conan."

"Well then, I took shelter in the lee of a rock and waited until it had blown itself out. Then I climbed a tree to look for Picts, and spied your carack, Strombanni and your men pulling in to shore. I was making my way toward your camp on the beach

when I met Galaccus. Well, I had an old score to settle with him, and I settled it."

"What had he done to you?" demanded Strombanni.

"Oh, years ago when I sailed with the Zingaran buccaneers, this Galaccus was one of the company, and had the gall to steal a wench of mine. One Sancha. I should never have known he had a map, had he not tried to eat it ere he died.

"I recognized it for what it was and was considering what use to make of it when you and the rest of your dogs came up and found the body. I was lying in a thicket not a dozen yards from you while you were arguing with your men over the matter. I judged the time was not ripe for me to show myself!" He laughed at the rage in Strombanni's face. "Well, when I heard you say that Zarrono must have done the deed and taken the chart, and that you meant to go parley with him, seeking a chance to murder him and get it back—"

"Cur!" snarled Zarrono.

Strombanni laughed mirthlessly. "D'you think I'd play fair wtih a treacherous dog like you? Go on, Conan."

The Cimmerian grinned. "Nothing much, then. I came through the woods while you tacked along the coast, and raised the fort ere you did. Your guess that the storm had wrecked Zarrono's ship was a good one. So there's the tale. I have the treasure, Strombanni has a ship, Valenso has supplies. By Crom, Zarrono, I don't see where you fit the scheme, but to avoid strife I'll include you. My proposal is this: We'll split the treasure four ways. Strombanni and I shall sail away with our shares aboard the *Red Hand*. You and Valenso take yours and remain lords of the wilderness, or build a ship out of tree-trunks, as you wish."

Valenso blanched and Zarrono swore. The latter said: "Are you fool enough to go aboard the *Red Hand* alone with Strombanni? He'll cut your throat ere you're out of sight of land!"

Conan laughed heartily. "This is like the problem of how to get the sheep, the wolf, and the cabbage across the river without their devouring each other!"

"And that appeals to your Cimmerian sense of humor?" said Zarrono.

"I will not stay here!" cried Valenso, a wild gleam in his dark eyes. "Treausre or no treasure, I must go!"

Conan gave him a slit-eyed glance. "Well then, how about this plan? We divide the loot as I suggested. Then Strombanni

sails away with Zarrono, Valenso, and such members of the count's household as he may select, leaving me in command of the fort, the rest of Valenso's men, and all of Zarrono's. I'll build my own ship."

Zarrono looked sick. "I have the choice of remaining here in exile, or abandoning my crew and going aboard the *Red Hand* to be murdered?"

Conan's laughter rang gustily through the hall as he smoke Zarrono jovially on the back, ignoring the black murder in the buccaneer's glare. "That's it, Zarrono! Stay here while Strombanni and I sail away, or sail away with Strombanni, leaving your men with me."

"I had rather have Zarrono," said Strombanni. "You'd turn my own men against me, Conan, and feed me to the fish ere I raised the Barachas."

Sweat dripped from Zarrono's face. "Neither I nor the count nor his niece will reach land alive if we ship with that devil. You are both in my power; my men surround this hall. What's to prevent my cutting you both down?"

"Not a thing," Conan admitted cheerfully, "except that if you do, Strombanni's men will sail away leaving you here where the Picts will presently cut all your throats. With me dead you'll never find the treasure; and finally if you try to summon your men I'll split your skull down to the chin."

Conan laughed as he spoke, but Belesa sensed that he meant what he said. His naked sword lay across his knees, and Zarrono's sword lay across the room out of the buccaneer's reach. Galbro was not a fighter, and Valenso seemed incapable of decision.

"Aye!" said Strombanni. "You would find the two of us no easy prey. I'm agreeable to Conan's proposal. What say you, Valenso?"

"I must leave this coast!" whispered the count. "I must go —go far—and quickly!"

Strombanni frowned, puzzled at the count's manner, then turned to Zarrono. "And you, Zarrono?"

"What can I say? Let me take my three officers and forty men aboard the *Red Hand,* and the bargain's made."

"The officers and thirty men!"

"Very well."

"Done!"

There was no handshaking or drinking of toasts to seal the bargain. The two captains glared at each other like hungry wolves. The count plucked at his mustache with a trembling hand, rapt in his own somber thoughts.

Conan stretched, drank, and grinned on the group with a grin like that of a stalking tiger.

"Lead us to the treasure!" demanded Zarrono.

"Wait a bit," answered Conan. "We must keep our power evenly balanced, so one cannot take advantage of the other. We'll work it thus: Strombanni's men shall come ashore, all but a half-dozen who shall take the ship out of reach of either party, and camp on the beach. Zarrono's men shall come out of the fort and likewise camp on the strand, so that each crew can watch the other. Valenso's men shall stay in the fort but leave the gate open. Will you come with us, Count?"

"Go into that forest?" Valenso shuddered and drew his cloak about him. "Not for all the gold of Tranicos!"

"Very well. 'Twill take about thirty men to carry the loot, so let us take fifteen from each crew and start forthwith."

Belesa saw Zarrono and Strombanni shoot furtive glances at one another, and wondered how Conan could have overlooked the fatal weakness in his plan. Perhaps he was too arrogantly confident in his personal prowess. But she knew that he would never come out of the forest alive. Once the treasure was in their grasp, the others would form a rogue's alliance long enough to rid themselves of the man they both hated. She shuddered, staring morbidly at the man whom she knew to be already doomed.

The whole situation was pregnant with bloody portents. Zarrono would trick and kill Strombanni if he could, and Strombanni had already marked Zarrono and her uncle for death, and no doubt herself for a fate hardly better. If Zarrono won the battle of wits the Korzettas' lives were safe, but looking at the buccaneer she could hardly decide whether death would be more abhorrent than he.

"How far is it?" asked Strombanni.

"If we start within the hour we can be back before midnight." Conan emptied his goblet, rose, and glanced at the count. "Valenso, are you mad, to kill a Pict in his hunting paint?"

Valenso started. "What do you mean?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know your men slew a Pict hunter in the woods last night?"

The count shook his head. "Not one of my men was in the woods last night."

"Well, somebody was," grunted the Cimmerian, fumbling in his girdle. "I saw the head nailed to a tree at the edge of the for-

est. He wasn't painted for war. I found no boot-tracks, from which I judged that it had been fastened up before the storm. But there were moccasin-tracks, so Picts had seen it. They were men of some other clan or they'd have taken it down. If they're at peace with the dead man's clan, they'll make tracks to his village to tell his tribe."

"Perhaps they slew him," suggested Valenso.

"No; but they know who did, for the same reason I do. This chain was knotted about the stump of the neck. You must have been utterly mad, to identify your work like that." He tossed on to the table the gold seal-chain that the count had worn about his neck. "I know the Korzetta seal. That chain would tell any Pict it was the work of a foreigner."

Valenso lurched up, choking, as his hand flew to his throat, then sank back speechless, staring at the chain as if it were a venomous serpent.

Conan scowled at him and glanced questioningly at the others. Zarrono made a quick gesture to indicate that the count was not quite right in the head. Conan sheathed his sword and picked up his hat.

"Let's go," he said.

The captains gulped their wine and rose. Zarrono laid a hand on Valenso's arm and shook him slightly. The count started and stared about him, then followed the others out like a man in a daze, the chain dangling from his fingers. But not all left the hall.

Belesa and Tina, peeping between the bannisters, saw Galbro fall behind the others, loitering until the door closed behind them. Then he hurried to the fireplace, sank to his knees, and peered for a long space. At last he got up and stole out of the hall by another door.

Tina whispered: "What did Galbro find in the fire?"

Belesa shook her head, then rose and went down to the empty hall. An instant later she was kneeling where the seneschal had knelt.

She saw the charred remnant of the map that Conan had thrown into the fire. It was ready to crumble at a touch, but faint lines and bits of writing were still discernible upon it. Though she could not read the writing, she could trace the outlines of what seemed to be a picture of a steep hill or crag, surrounded by marks evidently representing a forest through which wound trails and streams. From Galbro's actions she believed that he recognized the topographical features represented; the seneschal had explored in-

land farther than any man in the settlement.

She shrugged. Let him follow after the treasure. One more would make no difference.

VI

The Plunder of the Dead

The fortress stood quiet in the noonday heat. Voices within the stockade sounded muffled. The same drowsy stillness reigned on the beach where the rival crews camped in armed suspicion a few hundred yards apart. Far out in the bay the *Red Hand* rode gently at anchor with a handful of men aboard, ready to snatch her out of reach at the first sign of treachery.

Belesa came down the stairs and paused at the sight of Count Valenso seated at the table, fingering the broken chain. He seemed to be locked up in a grim world all his own, with a fear that flogged all human characteristics out of him.

She spoke in a harsh, strained voice. "The barbarian has led the captains into the forest. When they have the gold they'll slay him. But when they return with the treasure, what then? Are we to board the ship? Can we trust Strombanni?"

Valenso shook his head. "He would murder us all for our shares of the loot. But Zarrono whispered his intentions to me. He will see that night overtakes the treasure-hunters so they shall be forced to camp in the forest. He will find a way to kill Strombanni and his men in their sleep. Then the buccaneers will come stealthily to the beach. Before dawn I will send some of my fishermen to swim secretly out to the ship and seize her. Zarrono will come out of the forest, and he will lead his men and I mine to fall upon the pirates in the dark, who without their captain will be easy prey. Then we shall sail in Strombanni's ship with all the treasure."

"And what of me?"

"I have promised you to Zarrono. But for my promise he would not take us off."

"I will never wed him," she cried fiercely.

"You shall," he responded gloomily and without sympathy. "You have no choice."

"I'll murder him in his bed some night."

"That is your affair, so that you wait until we are out of this trap." He lifted the chain. "I must have dropped it on the sand. *He* has been that near—on the beach . . ."

"You did not drop it on the sand," said Belesa in a voice as merciless as his own. "You tore it from your throat last night in

the hall when you flogged Tina. I saw it gleaming on the floor before I left the hall."

He looked up gray-faced. Belesa laughed bitterly. "Yes! The black man was here! In this hall! He must have found the chain on the floor. The guardsmen did not see him, but I did, padding along the upper hallway past your door."

For an instant she thought that he would drop dead of sheer terror. He sank back in his chair, the chain slipping from his fingers and jingling to the floor.

"In the manor!" he whispered. "I thought bolts and bars and armed guards could keep him out, fool that I was! At my very door!" he shrieked, tearing at the collar of his doublet as if it strangled him. "Why does he not end it? I dream of waking in my darkened chamber to see him crouching over me . . . I understand; he plays with me, as a cat with a mouse. To have slain me last night were too merciful. So he destroyed the ship wherein I might have fled; he slew the wretched Pict and left my chain upon him, that the savages might blame me . . ."

The paroxysm passed, leaving him faint and trembling like a storm-tossed leaf.

"Who is this dark man?" asked Belesa, fear crawling along her spine.

"A demon loosed by my greed and lust to plague me throughout eternity!" he whispered, spreading his long thin fingers on the table and staring at her with hollow eyes that seemed not to see her at all, but to look through her to some dim distant doom.

"In my youth I had an enemy at court," he said, as if speaking more to himself than to her. "A powerful man who stood between me and my ambition. In my avidity for wealth and power I sought aid from the people of the black arts—a sorcerer who, at my desire, raised up a fiend from the outer gulfs of existence. It crushed and slew my enemy; I grew great and wealthy and none could stand before me. But I sought to cheat the wizard of his price.

"He was Thoth-Amon of the Ring, in exile from his native Stygia. He had fled in the reign of King Mentupherra, and when Mentupherra died and Ctesphon ascended the ivory throne of Luxur, Thoth-Amon lingered in Kordava though he might have returned home, dunning me for the debt I owed him. But instead of paying him the moiety of my gains as I had promised, I denounced him to my own monarch, so that Thoth-Amon must

needs willy-nilly return to Stygia in haste and stealth. There he found favor and waxed in wealth and magical might until he was the virtual ruler of the land.

"Two years ago in Kordava, word came to me that Thoth-Amon had vanished from his accustomed haunts in Stygia. And then one night I saw his brown devil's face leering at me from the shadows in my castle hall.

"It was not his material body, but his spirit sent to plague me. This time I had no king to protect me, for upon the death of Ferdrugo and the setting up of the regency the land, as you know, had fallen into factional strife. Before Thoth-Amon could reach Kordava in the flesh, I sailed to put broad seas between me and him. But now this fiend has tracked me down by his uncanny powers even here in this vast wilderness.

"He is too crafty to be trapped or slain as one would do with a common man. When he hides, no man can find him. He steals like a shadow through the night, making nothing of bolts and bars. He blinds the eyes of guardsmen with sleep. He can command the spirits of the air, the serpents of the deep, and the fiends of the night; he can raise storms to sink ships and throw down the finest castles . . ."

The weird eyes lit palely as Valenso gazed beyond the tapestried walls to far invisible horizons. "I'll trick him yet," he whispered. "Let him delay to strike this night, and dawn shall find me with a ship under my heels, and again I'll cast an ocean between me and his vengeance."

"Hell's fire!" Conan stopped, glaring upward. Behind him the seamen halted in two compact clumps, bows in their hands and suspicion in their faces. They were following an old Pictish trail eastward, and though they had progressed but thirty yards the beach was no longer visible.

"Why do you stop?" demanded Strombanni.

"Are you blind? Look there!"

From a thick branch that overhung the trail a bodiless head leered down at them—a dark painted face framed in thick black hair, a hornbill feather drooping over the left ear.

"I hid that head in the bushes," stated Conan, scanning the woods. "What fool could have stuck it back up? Somebody is fiendishly intent on bringing the Picts down upon the settlement."

Men glanced at each other darkly, a new element of suspicion added to the already seethe

ing cauldron. Conan climbed the tree, brought down the head, and carried it into the woods where he threw it into a stream.

"If I read those moccasin-prints aright," he explained, returning, "those were Cormorants about the tree. Unless they're having a war with the Hornbills they'll run to the Hornbill village, and there'll be trouble. That's the worst insult possible to a Pict—slay a man not in war-paint and stick his head up in a tree for the crows to eat."

Men uneasily loosened blades in their scabbards and shafts in their quivers as they strode deeper into the forest. The path wound and twisted until most of them lost their sense of direction. Conan kept scanning the trail and finally grunted.

"Who's this fellow hurrying ahead of us in boots? Has either of you wolves sent a man on ahead of us?"

Both Strombanni and Zarrono vehemently disclaimed any such act, glaring at each other with mutual disbelief. Conan quickened his pace and they hurried after him. When the path veered northward Conan left it and began threading his way through the trees in a southeasterly direction. The afternoon wore on as the sweating men plowed through bushes and climbed over logs along the rude trail.

Strombanni, falling behind momentarily with Zarrono, murmured, "D'you think he is leading us into ambush?"

"He might," retorted the buccaneer. "In any case we shall never safely find our way back to the sea without his guidance." And Zarrono gave Strombanni a meaningful look.

"I see your point. This may force a change in our plans."

Time passed and suspicion almost reached the panic-point. Then the party emerged from the thick woods and saw just ahead of them a gaunt crag that jutted up from the forest floor. A path from the east ran through a cluster of boulders and wound up the crag on a ladder of stony shelves to a flat ledge near the summit of the cliff.

Conan halted. "That is the trail I followed; it leads up to a cave behind that ledge. In that cave are the bodies of Tranicos and his captains, and the treasure he plundered from Maatneb. But a word before we go up after it: No treachery, or you will never find your way back to the beach alive. You're lost in these deep woods, and it would take you days to fight your way back to the shore steering by the sun. And I don't think that these woods will be very safe for

white men when the Hornbills learn about their hunter."

He laughed at the momentary consternation with which they greeted his recognition of their intentions toward him. "All of you stay here save Strombanni and Zarrono," he continued. "We three are enough to pack the treasure down from the cave."

Strombanni said, "Go up there alone with you and Zarrono? Do you take me for a fool? One man at least comes with me!"

He designated his boatswain, a brawny, hard-faced giant, naked to his broad leather belt, with gold hoops in his ears and a crimson scarf around his head.

"And my executioner comes with me!" growled Zarrono, beckoning to a lean sea-thief with a face like a parchment-covered skull, who carried a two-handed scimitar naked over his shoulder.

Conan shrugged. "Very well. Follow me."

They followed close on his heels as he strode up the winding path and scrambled up to the ledge. They crowded behind as he passed into the cleft and down the tunnel, their breath sucking in greedily as he called their attention to the iron-bound chests on either side.

"A rich cargo here," he said carelessly. "Silks, laces, garments, ornaments, weapons—the loot of the southern seas. But the real treasure lies beyond that door."

Conan frowned upon seeing the massive door partly open. He did not say so, but he distinctly remembered closing it before he left the cavern.

They looked into a wide chamber, lit by a strange blue glow that glimmered through a smoky haze. A great ebony table stood in the midst of the cavern, and in a carven chair with a high back and broad arms, that might once have stood in the castle of some Zingaran baron, sat a giant figure, fabulous and fantastic. There sat Bloody Tranicos, his great head sunk on his bosom, in his gilt-embroidered tunic from which precious stones winked in the blue flame, his flaring boots and the gold-worked baldric that upheld a jewel-hilted sword in a golden sheath.

Ranging the board sat the eleven captains, their lips shriveled away to expose their teeth in fixed, ghastly grins. The blue fire played weirdly upon them and upon their giant admiral as it flowed from the enormous jewel on the tiny ivory pedestal, striking glints of frozen fire from the heaps of fantastically-cut gems that shone before the place of Tranicos—the plunder

of Khemi, the jewels of Maatneb! The stones whose value was greater than the value of all the rest of the known jewels in the world put together!

The faces of Zarrono and Strombanni showed pallid in the blue glow. Over their shoulders their men gaped.

"Go in and take them," invited Conan, drawing aside.

Zarrono and Strombanni jostled past him, their followers close behind. Zarrono kicked the door wide open—and halted with one foot on the threshold at the sight of a figure on the floor, previously hidden by the partly closed door. It was a man, prone and contorted, his head drawn back between his shoulders at an unnatural angle.

"Galbro!" exclaimed Zarrono. "Dead! What—" With sudden suspicion he thrust his head over the threshold, then jerked back, shouting: "There's death within!"

Even as he yelled, the blue mist swirled and condensed. At the same time Conan hurled his weight against the four men bunched in the doorway, sending them staggering—but not headlong into the misty cavern as he had planned. Suspecting a trap, they were recoiling from the sight of the dead man and the materializing demon, and his violent shove, while it threw them off their feet, yet failed of its intent. Strombanni and Zarronno sprawled half over the threshold on their knees, the boatswain tumbled over their legs, and the executioner caromed against the wall.

Before Conan could follow up his intention of kicking the fallen men into the cavern and holding the door against them until the supernatural horror within had done its work, he had to turn and defend himself against the fronting onslaught of the executioner who was the first to regain his balance and his wits.

The buccaneer made a tremendous swipe with his headsman's sword. Conan ducked and the great blade banged against the stone wall, spattering blue sparks. The next instant the executioner's skull-faced head rolled on the cavern floor under the bite of Conan's broadsword.

In the seconds consumed by this swift action, the boatswain regained his feet and fell upon the Cimmerian, raining blows. Sword met sword with a deafening ring of steel. Meanwhile the two captains, terrified of they knew not what in the cavern, scuttled back out of the doorway so quickly that the demon had not fully materialized before they were withdrawn

over the magical boundary and out of its reach. By the time they rose to their feet, reaching for their swords, the monster had diffused again into blue mist.

Meanwhile Conan, hotly engaged with the boatswain, slashed and thrust in a furious effort to cut the man down before help came to him. But though wounded in half a dozen places the pirate beat off the Cimmerian's attack, bellowing for his companions. Before Conan could finish him, the two chiefs came murderously at the Cimmerian with their swords.

Conan bounded back and leaped onto the ledge. Though he felt himself a match for all three men, he did not wish to be trapped by the crews which would come charging up the path at the sound of the battle.

These were not coming as fast as he had expected, however. Though aroused by the muffled sounds from the cavern, none dared start up the path for fear of a blade in his back. Each band faced the other tensely, hands on weapons. When they saw the Cimmerian bound out on to the ledge they still hesitated. While they stood, Conan ran up the ladder of handholds niched in the rock near the cleft and himself prone on the summit of the crag out of their sight.

The captains stormed out upon the ledge, raving and waving their swords. "Dog!" screamed Zarrono. "You planned to trap and slay us! Traitor."

Conan mocked them from above. "What did you expect? You two planned to slit my weasand as soon as I had got the plunder for you. Had it not been for that fool Galbro I should have trapped the four of you, and explained to your men how you rushed in heedlessly to your doom."

"And with us both dead, you'd have taken my ship and all the loot too!" frothed Strombanni.

"Why not? It was Galbro's prints I saw on the trail, though I don't understand how the ass learned of the cave, or how he expected to bear away the loot by himself."

"But for the sight of his body we should have walked into that death-trap," said Zarrono, his swarthy face still ashy.

"What was it?" said Strombanni. "Some poisnous mist?"

"Nay, it writhed like a live thing and came together in some fiendish form ere we backed out. It was some evil bound to the cave by a spell."

"Well, what are you going to do?" yelled their unseen tormentor.

"What *shall* we do? Zarrono

asked Strombanni. "The cavern cannot be entered."

"You cannot get the treasure," Conan assured them from his eyrie. "The demon will strangle you. It nearly slew me when I stepped in there."

"Summon up the men!" yelled Strombanni. "We'll climb up and hew him down!"

"Don't be a fool!" snarled Zarrono. "Do you think any man on earth could climb those handholds against his sword? We'll have the men up here, right enough, to feather him with arrows if he shows himself. But we'll get those gems yet. He has some plan for obtaining the loot or he'd never have brought thirty men to bear it back. We'll bend a pike-head to make a hook, thrust it into the room, and drag the table up to the door."

"Well thought, Zarrono!" came Conan's voice. "Just what I had in mind. But how will you get back to the beach? 'Twill be dark long before you can feel your way through the woods, and I'll follow you and slay you one by one in the dark."

"That's no empty boast," said Strombanni. "He can move and strike in the dark like a ghost."

"Then we'll slay him here," said Zarrono. "Some of us shall shoot to keep him back from the edge while others climb the crag. Listen! Why does he laugh?"

"To hear dead men plotting," said Conan.

"Forget him," said Zaronno, and shouted for the men below to come on up.

The sailors started up the trail. There came a hum like that of an angry bee, ending in a sharp thud. A man gasped and blood gushed from his mouth. He sank to his knees, a black-feathered shaft protruding from his back. A yell of alarm went up from his companions.

"Picts!" bawled a pirate, lifting his bow and loosing blindly. More arrows whizzed.

"Take cover, fools!" shrieked Zarrono, who had glimpsed painted figures moving in the bushes.

Another man on the path fell, tumbling over and over down the steep slope with an arrow through his body. The rest scrambled hastily down among the rocks at the foot of the crag. Those on the ledge above lay prone.

"We're trapped!" said Strombanni, pale. Bold enough with a deck under his feet, he was shaken by this silent half-seen warfare.

"Conan said they feared this crag," said Zarrono. "When night falls the men must climb up here. The Picts will not rush us." He sounded not too sure.

"Nay," mocked Conan above them. "They'll not climb the crag to get you; they'll just surround it and keep you here until you die of thirst!"

"He speaks truth," said Zarrono. "What now?"

"Make a truce with him," muttered Strombanni. "If any can save us he can. Time enough to cut his throat later." Lifting his voice he called, "Conan, let's bury our feud for the nonce. You're in this as much as we; come down and help us out before we all perish."

"How so? I have only to wait till dark, climb down the other side of this crag, and melt into the forest. I can crawl through the Pict's line, return to the fort, and report you all slain by savages—which will soon be the truth!"

Zarrono and Strombanni stared at one another mutely.

"But I won't do that!" Conan roared. "Not for love of you dogs, but because I hate Picts too bitterly to give them the pleasure of slaughtering any band of white men, even my enemies!" The Cimmerian's head appeared over the crest of the crag. "Now attend. That's only a small band down there, probably a group of fleet young bucks sent on ahead of a main war-party. They've thrown a line around the west side of the crag, but I think there is none on the east side. I shall go down that side, get into the forest, and work around behind them. Meanwhile you crawl down the path and join your men among the rocks. Tell them to unstring their bows and draw their swords. When you hear me yell, rush the trees on the west side of the clearing."

"What of the treasure?"

"To hell with the treasure! We shall be lucky to get out with our heads on our shoulders!"

The black-maned head vanished. The men on the ledge listened for sounds of Conan's movements, but heard nothing. At last Strombanni, Zarrono, and the boatswain started down the path. The boatswain, already half dead from his wounds, moved slowly and with pain. Halfway down the black shafts began to whisper up. The boatswain groaned and toppled limply down the slope, an arrow through his heart; other arrows shivered on the helmets and breastplates of the men as they bounded down the remaining distance in frantic haste. They reached the foot and lay panting among the boulders.

"Is this more of Conan's trickery?" wondered Zarrono.

"We can trust him in this matter,' asserted Strombanni.

"He lives by his own peculiar code of honor, and he'll help us against the Picts even though he plans to murder us himself—hark!"

A blood-freezing yell came from the woods to the west, and an object arched out of the trees, struck the ground, and rolled towards the rocks—a human head, its hideously painted face relaxed in death.

"Conan's signal!" roared Strombanni, and the desperate freebooters rose like a wave from the rocks and rushed headlong towards the woods. Arrows whirred out of the bushes, but their flight was erratic and only one man fell.

Then the wild men of the sea plunged through the fringe of foliage and fell upon the naked painted figures that rose out of the gloom before them. There was a murderous instant of panting, hand-to-hand effort as swords beat down war-hatchets and booted feet trampled naked bodies. Then the surviors of the Picts fled headlong, leaving seven of their number stretched out among the blood-stained leaves.

Conan strode into view, hat gone, tunic torn, and sword dripping. Zarrono exploded into curses as the Cimmerian passed his sword through a buccaneer who writhed on the ground with a broken hip.

"We cannot carry him," explained Conan, "and it would be no kindness to leave him for the Picts to take alive. Come on!"

He trotted through the trees, leading them as unerringly as if he followed a blazed trail. Some time later the rovers shouted with relief as they burst upon the trail to the beach. One of them broke into a run, but Conan seized him by the shoulder and hurled him back among his companions.

"Fool!" he growled. "Save your breath; we may have to sprint the last mile." And he set off down the trail at a steady jog-trot.

The sun touched the waves of the Western Ocean. Tina stood at the window from which Belesa had watched the storm.

"Look!" shrilled the girl. "Men are running out of the forest!"

Figures, small in the distance, were streaming out of the woods.

"The sailors!" gasped Belesa. "And empty-handed! I see Zarrono—and Strombanni—"

"Where is Conan?" whispered Tina. "And listen! The Picts!"

A vast ululation of blood-lust rose from the dark woods. The sound spurred on the panting men reeling toward the palisade.

The sailors on the strand, grasping the significance of that wild howling, abandoned their suppers and fled for the gate of the stockade. A heaving mob flowed through the opening, and then the gate was slammed and barred. The sailors climbed up to the parapet to join the men-at-arms already there.

Belesa, who had hurried down from the manor, asked Zarrono, "Where is Conan?"

The buccaneer jerked a thumb toward the blackening woods. His chest heaved and sweat poured from his face. "Their scouts were at our heels before we gained the beach. He paused to slay a few to give us time to get away."

He staggered away to take his place on the parapet, whither Strombanni had already mounted. Valenso stood there, a somber, cloak-wrapped figure, silent and aloof.

"Look!" cried a pirate above the howling of the unseen horde approaching.

A man emerged from the forest and raced across the clearing.

"Conan!" Zarrono grinned wolfishly. "We're safe and we know where the treasure is. Why not riddle him with arrows now?"

"Nay!" Strombanni caught his arm. "We shall need every blade. Look!"

Behind the fleet Cimmerian a wild howling horde of naked Picts burst from the forest, hundreds and hundreds of them. Their arrows rained about the Cimmerian. A few strides more and Conan reached the eastern wall of the stockade, bounded high, seized the points of the logs, and heaved himself up and over, his sword in his teeth. Arrows thudded into the logs where his body had been.

"Stop them!" he roared as his feet struck the ledge inside. "If they get to the wall we're lost!"

The defenders responded instantly, and a storm of arrows and quarrels tore into the oncoming horde. Conan saw Belesa with Tina clinging to her hand. His language was picturesque.

"Get back in the manor," he commanded finally. "Their arrows will arch over the wall—like that!" A black shaft struck the earth at Belesa's feet. Conan caught up a longbow and mounted the parapet. "Some of you men prepare torches!" he roared. "We cannot fight them in the dark!"

The sun had sunk in a welter of blood. Out in the bay the men aboard the carack had hoisted anchor, and the *Red Hand* was fast receding toward the crimson of the horizon.

VII

Men Of The Woods

Night had fallen, but torches cast their light across the strand, throwing the mad scene into lurid clarity. Naked men in paint swarmed the beach. Like waves they came against the palisade, bared teeth and blazing eyes gleamed in the glare of torches along the wall. Hornbill feathers waved in black topknots, together with the feathers of the cormorant and the osprey. A few warriors, the wildest of them all, wore sharks' teeth woven into their tangled locks. The sea-land tribes had gathered from up and down the coast to rid their country of the civilized invaders.

They surged against the palisade, driving a storm of arrows before them, fighting into the teeth of the shafts and bolts that tore into their masses from the stockade. Sometimes they came so close to the wall that they were hewing at the gate with their axes, thrusting their spears through the loopholes, and setting the trunks of small trees against the wall for scaling-ladders. But each time the tide ebbed without overflowing the barrier, leaving its drift of dead and wounded. At this kind of fighting the free-booters of the sea were at their stoutest. Their missiles tore holes in the charging hordes, and their swords hewed the wild men from the palisade that they strove to scale.

Yet again and again the men of the woods returned to the onslaught with all the stubborn ferocity that had been aroused in their fierce hearts.

"They are like mad dogs!" gasped Zarrono, hacking down at dark hands that grasped at the palisade points and the dark faces that snarled up at him.

"If we can hold out till dawn they'll lose heart," grunted Conan, splitting a feathered skull with professional skill. "These savages have no guts for a long siege. Look, they fall back now."

The last charge rolled back. The men on the wall shook the sweat out of their eyes, counted their dead, and took a fresh grip on the blood-slippery hilts of their swords. Like blood-hungry wolves the Picts skulked beyond the ring of torchlight; only the bodies of the slain lay before the palisade.

"Have they gone?" said Strombanni, shaking his tawny locks. The sword in his hand was notched and red, and his brawny bare arm was splashed with blood, some of it his.

"They're still out yonder." Conan nodded toward the outer darkness where he glimpsed movements and the glitter of eyes and the red glint of copper weapons. "They've drawn off for a bit, though. Put a sentry on each of the walls, and let the rest eat and drink. 'Tis past midnight, and we've been fighting for hours without respite. Ha, Valenso, how goes the battle with you?"

The count, in dented, blood-splashed helm and cuirass, with his left arm bandaged, moved somberly up to where Conan and the captains stood. For answer he muttered something inaudible under his breath. And then out of the darkness a voice spoke—a loud clear voice that rang through the entire fort.

"Count Valenso! Count Valenso of Korzetta! Do you hear me?" It spoke with a Stygian accent.

Conan heard the count gasp as if he had been stricken by a mortal wound. Valenso reeled and grasped the tops of the logs of the stockade, his face pale in the torchlight. The voice resumed:

"It is I, Thoth-Amon of the Ring! Did you think to flee me once more? It is too late for that! All your schemes shall avail you naught, for tonight I shall send a messenger to you. It is the demon that guarded the treasure of Tranicos, whom I have released from his cave and bound to my service. He will inflict upon you the doom that you, you dog, have earned: a death at once slow, hard, and disgraceful. Let us see you mulct your way out of that!"

The speech ended in a peal of musical laughter. Valenso gave a scream of terror, jumped down from the parapet and ran staggering up the slope toward the manor.

There was a lull in the fighting as Tina watched from Belesa's window. Belesa, going over beside her to look out, shuddered at the sight.

"I am afraid," murmured Tina. "I hope Strombanni and Zarrono are slain."

"And not Conan?"

"*He* would not hurt us."

"You are wise beyond your years, Tina."

"Look!" Tina pointed. "The sentry is gone from the south wall! He was there a moment ago; now he has vanished."

From their window the points of the south side of the palisade were just visible over the roofs of a row of huts which paralleled that wall for most of its length. The huts, occupied by peasants, left a four-foot-wide

corridor between their backs and the palisade.

"Where could the sentry have gone?" whispered Tina uneasily, and her fears were communicated to Belesa.

"Where is the count?" asked the latter.

"In the great hall, my lady. He sits alone at the table, wrapped in his cloak and drinking wine." Tina paused. "We ought to tell him about the sentry, ought we not?"

Before Belesa could reply, Tina scampered out the door.

"Tina—" began Belesa. She rose, hearing the patter of Tina's slippered feet receding down the stair. Then abruptly there rang a scream of such terror that Belesa's heart almost stopped.

She was out of the chamber and flying down the corridor before she was aware that her limbs were in motion. She ran down the stair—and halted as if turned to stone.

She did not scream as Tina had; she could not. She saw Tina and was aware of small hands grasping her frantically. These were the only sane realities in a scene of black nightmare and lunacy and death, dominated by the monstrous anthropomorphic shadow that spread awful arms against the smoke and the lurid glare.

Out in the stockade Strombanni shook his head at Conan's question. "I heard nothing."

"I did!" Conan's suspicions were aroused; he stood tensely. "It came from the south wall, behind those huts!"

Drawing his broadsword, he strode in the direction that he had indicated. From the compound, the south wall and the sentry posted there were not visible, being hidden behind the huts. Strombanni followed.

At the mouth of the open space between the huts and the wall Conan halted warily. The space was dimly lighted by torches flaring at either corner of the stockade. About midway down that corridor a shape sprawled.

"Ottandro!" swore Strombanni, running forward and dropping to one knee beside the figure. "By Mitra, his throat's been cut from ear to ear."

Conan swept the space with a quick glance, finding it empty save for himself, Strombanni, and the corpse. He peered through a loophole. No living man moved within the ring of torchlight outside the fort.

"Who could have done this?" he wondered.

"Zarrono!" Strombanni sprang up, spitting fury, his face convulsed. "He has set his thieves to stabbing my men in

the back! He plans to wipe me out by treachery! Devils! I am leagued within and without!"

"Wait!" Conan reached a restraining hand. "I do not believe Zarrono has done this! the Picts—"

The maddened pirate jerked away and rushed around the end of the hut-row. Conan ran after him, swearing. Strombanni made straight for the fire by which Zarrono's tall lean form was visible as the buccaneer chief quaffed a jack of ale.

Strombanni violently dashed the jack from his hand, spattering his breastplate with foam, and jerked him around to confront the passion-twisted face of the pirate captain.

"You murdering dog!" yelled Strombanni. "Will you slay my men behind my back while they fight for your filthy hide as well as mine?"

Conan was hurrying toward them. On all sides men ceased eating and drinking to stare in amazement.

"What do you mean?" sputtered Zarrono.

"You've set your men to stabbing mine at their posts!" screamed the maddened Barachan.

"You lie!" Smoldering hate burst into flame.

With a howl Strombanni heaved up his sword to cut at the buccaneer's unhelmeted head. Zarrono caught the blow on his armored left arm, and sparks flew as he staggered back, ripping out his own sword.

In an instant the captains were fighting like madmen, their blades flaming and flashing in the firelight. Their crews reacted instantly; a deep roar went up as pirates and buccaneers drew their swords and fell upon one another. The men left on the walls abandoned their posts and leaped down into the stockade, blades in hand. In an instant the compound was a battleground where writhing knots of men smote and slew in a blind frenzy. Some of Valenso's men-at-arms and toilers were drawn into the mêlée, and the soldiers at the gate turned and stared in amazement, forgetting the foe outside.

It had all happened so quickly that men were fighting all over the compound before Conan could separate the maddened chiefs. Ignoring their swords, he tore them apart with such violence that they staggered backward. Zarrono caught his heel and fell.

"You cursed fools, would you throw away all our lives?"

Strombanni was frothing and Zarrono was bawling for assistance. A buccaneer ran at Conan

from behind and cut at his head. The Cimmerian half turned and caught his arm, checking the stroke in midair.

"Look, you fools!" he roared, pointing with his sword.

Something in his tone caught the attention of the battlecrazed mob. Men froze in their places and twisted their heads to stare. Conan was pointing to a soldier on the firing-ledge. The sergeant was reeling, clawing the air, and choking as he tried to shout. He pitched headlong to the ground, and all saw the black arrow standing out from between his shoulders.

A cry of alarm rose from the compound. On the heels of the shout came a clamor of blood-freezing screams and the impact of axes on the gate. Flaming arrows arched over the wall and stuck in logs, whence thin wisps of blue smoke curled upward. Then from behind the huts that ranged the south wall came swift and furtive figures racing across the compound.

"The Picts are in!" shouted Conan.

Bedlam followed his shout. The freebooters ceased their feud. Some turned to meet the savages; some sprang back to the wall. Picts poured from behind the huts and over the compound; their axes clashed against the swords of the sailors and the bucklers of the sergeants.

Zarrono was struggling to his feet when a painted savage brained him from behind with a war-ax.

Conan, with a clump of sailors behind him, was battling with the Picts inside the stockade, and Strombanni with most of his men was climbing up on the parapet, slashing at the dark figures already swarming over the wall. The Picts, who had crept up while the defenders were fighting among themselves, were attacking from all sides. Valenso's soldiers clustered at the gate, trying to hold it against a howling swarm of demons who thundered against it from outside with a tree-trunk.

More and more savages streamed from behind the huts, having scaled the undefended south wall. Strombanni and his pirates were beaten back from the other sides of the palisade, and in an instant the compound was swarming with naked warriors. They dragged down the defenders like wolves; the battle resolved into whirlpools of painted figures surging about small groups of desperate whites. Bodies littered the earth. Blood-smeared braves dived into huts, whence shrieks rose above

the din of battle as women and children died beneath the red axes. The men-at-arms, hearing those pitiful cries, abandoned the gate, and in an instant the Picts had burst in and were pouring into the enclosure there also. Huts began to burn.

"Make for the manor!" roared Conan, and a dozen men surged in behind him as he hewed his way through the pack.

Strombanni was at his side, wielding his broadsword like a flail. "We cannot hold the manor," grunted the pirate.

"Why not?" Conan was too busy with his crimson work to spare a glance.

"Because—uh!" A stabbing-spear in a dark hand had sunk deep into the Barachan's back. "Devil eat you, bastard!" Strombanni turned and split the Pict's head to his teeth, then reeled and fell to his knees, blood starting from his lips.

"The manor burns!" he croaked, and died.

Conan cast a swift look about him. The men who had followed him were all down in their blood. The Pict gasping out his life under the Cimmerian's feet was the last of the group which had barred his way. All about him the battle swirled and surged, but for the moment he stood alone. He was not far from the south wall. A few strides and he could leap to the ledge, swing over, and be gone into the night. But he remembered the two helpless girls in the manor, from which smoke now billowed. He ran toward the manor.

A feathered chief wheeled from the door, lifting a war-ax, and behind the racing Cimmerian lines of fleet braves converged upon him. He did not pause, but a sweeping slash bit through the haft of the chief's ax and a second took off the man's head. An instant later Conan was through the door and had slammed and bolted it against the axes that thudded into the wood.

The great hall was full of drifting wisps of smoke through which he groped, half-blinded. Somewhere a woman was whimpering, little sobs of horror. He emerged from a whorl of smoke and stopped, staring.

The hall was dim and shadowy with drifting smoke. The great silver candelabrum was overturned, the candles extinguished, and the only illumination came from the great fireplace and the wall in which it was set. Somebody or something had raked some of the burning logs out into the room, so that the floor was burning and the wall and roof-beams smoking and smoldering. Limned against that lurid

glare Conan saw a human form doubled bonelessly across a table. The dead face was turned toward him with an expression on it that belonged only to the lowest depths of hell. Conan recognized Count Valenso, and a rasping curse came from his startled lips. The count had paid slowly for all his sins before his death had released him.

But there was something else in the hall. Conan saw it through the drifting smoke — a monstrous black figure, outlined against the hellish glare. That outline was vaguely human, but the shadow thrown on the wall was not human at all.

"Crom!" muttered Conan, paralyzed by the realization that he was confronted by a being against whom his sword was useless. He saw Belesa and Tina crouching in each other's arms at the bottom of the stair.

The black monster reared up, looming gigantic against the flame, great arms spread wide. A dim face leered through the smoke, half-human, demoniac, terrible. Conan glimpsed the close-set horns, the gaping mouth, the peaked ears—it lumbered toward him—and memory awoke with desperation. Great hands were clutching for his throat as he leaped backward.

Near the Cimmerian lay the great overturned candelabrum once the pride of Korzetta Castle —fifty pounds of massy silver, intricately worked with fingers of gods and heroes. Conan grasped it and heaved it high above his head.

"Silver and fire!" he roared, and hurled the candelabrum with all the power of his iron muscles. Full on the great black breast it crashed, fifty pounds of silver winged with terrific velocity. Not even the black one could stand before such a missile. The demon was carried off its feet and hurled back into the fireplace and the roaring flame within and around it.

A horrible scream shook the hall, the cry of an unearthly thing gripped by earthly death. The mantlepiece cracked and stones showered down from the great chimney, half burying the black writhing limbs at which the flames ate in elemental fury. A burning beam crashed down upon the stones, and the whole heap was enveloped in a roaring burst of fire. Hell seemed to open to reclaim its own—there was a monstrous face in the flames—

Conan dragged his eyes from it, caught up the child under one arm and with the other dragged Belesa to her feet. Through the crackle and snap of the fire sounded the splinter-

ing of the front door under the war-axes.

Conan sighted a door opposite the stair-landing and shoved through it, dragging the dazed Belesa. As they came into the chamber beyond, a crash behind them announced that the roof was falling in the hall. Through a strangling wall of smoke Conan saw an open, outer door on the other side of the chamber. As he lugged his charges through it he saw that it sagged on broken hinges, lock and bolt snapped and splintered as if by some terrific force.

"The devil came in by this door!" Belesa sobbed hysterically. "I saw him—but I did not know—"

They emerged into the compound a few feet from the row of huts that lined the south wall. A Pict was skulking towards the door, eyes red in the firelight, ax raised. Dropping Tina and swinging Belesa away from the blow, Conan snatched out his broadsword and drove it through the chest of the onrushing savage. Then, sweeping both girls off their feet, he ran carrying them toward the south wall.

The compound was full of billowing smoke-clouds that half hid the red work going on there, but the fugitives had been seen. Naked figures, black against the glare, pranced out of the smoke. They were still yards behind when Conan ducked into the space between the huts and the wall. At the far end of the corridor he saw other howling shapes, running in to cut him off.

Halting, he tossed the two girls, one at a time, bodily onto the parapet and leaped after them. Swinging Belesa over the palisade, he dropped her on to the sand outside and then dropped Tina after her. A thrown ax crashed into a log by his shoulder, and then he too was over the wall gathering up his dazed charges. When the Picts reached the wall the space before the palisade was empty of all except the dead.

VIII

Swords Of Aquilonia

Dawn was tingeing the dim waters old rose as far out across the sea a fleck of white grew out of the mist—a sail hanging suspended in the pearly sky. On a bushy headland Conan the Cimmerian held a ragged cloak over a fire of green wood. As he manipulated the cloak, puffs of smoke rose, hanging in the dawn sky until they dissipated.

Belesa crouched near him, one arm about Tina. She asked:

"Will they see it and understand?"

"They'll see it right enough, and 'tis the code of the sea whereby castaways cry for rescue. They've been hanging off the coast all night, hoping to sight surviors. There's only a half-dozen of them, and none can navigate the craft from here to the Barachas, so they'll be glad of a live captain to ship under."

"Suppose the Picts see the smoke?" She shuddered, glancing back over the misty dunes to where, miles to the north, a column of smoke hung in the still air.

"Not likely. After I hid you in the woods I crept back and saw them dragging barrels of wine and ale out of the storehouse. By this time they'll be too drunk to move. With a hundred men I could wipe out the horde—Crom and Mitra!" he cried suddenly. "That's not the *Red Hand* after all, but a wargalley! What civilized state would send a unit of its fleet hither? Unless somebody would have words with your uncle, in which case they'll need a spae-woman to raise his ghost."

He scowled out to sea in an effort to make out the details of the craft through the mist. The approaching ship was bow-on so that all he could see was a gilded bow-ornament, a small sail bellying in the faint onshore breeze, and the bank of oars on each side rising and falling like a single pair.

"Well," said Conan, "at least they're coming to take us off. It would be a long walk back to Zingara. Until we find out who they are and whether they're friendly, say nothing of who I am. I'll think of a proper tale by the time they get here."

He stamped out the fire, handed the cloak back to Belesa, and yawned and stretched. Belesa watched him in wonder. The night of fire and blood and slaughter and the flight through the black woods afterward had left his nerves untouched; he was as calm as if he had spent the night feasting. Bandages torn from the hem of Belesa's gown covered a few minor wounds that he had received fighting without armor.

"Do you think it is dead?" she asked.

"I believe so," he replied without asking to whom she referred. "Silver and fire are both deadly to evil spirits, and he got a bellyful of both."

"How about his master?"

"Thoth-Amon? Gone back to lurk in some Stygian tomb, I suppose. It would never have occurred to the fellow to offer us a ride; these wizards are an unfriendly lot. All of them."

The ship was larger, but some time would yet elapse before it made shore. Conan grinned and resumed the tale he had begun during the night to keep the girl's mind from dwelling on the grim things she had seen in the manor-house.

"So Namedides made me general because of some small successes against the Picts, and then when I'd scattered five times my own number of savages in a battle at Velitrium and broken their confederacy, I was called back to Tarantia for an official triumph. All very tickling to the vanity, riding beside the king while girls scatter rose-petals before you; but then at the banquet the bastard plied me with drugged wine, and I woke up in chains in the Iron Tower awaiting execution."

"Whatever for?"

He shrugged. "How should I know what goes on in what that numb-wit calls his brain? Perhaps some of the other Aquilonian generals, had worked upon his suspicions. Or perhaps he took offense at some of my frank remarks about his policy of spending the royal treasury to adorn Tarantia with gilded statues of himself instead of on the defense of his frontiers.

"However, I had friends with whose aid I was smuggled out of the Iron Tower, given a horse and a sword, and turned loose. I rode back to Bossonia with the idea of raising a revolt, beginning with my own troops. But when I got there I found my sturdy Bossonians gone, sent to another province, and in their place a brigade of ox-eyed yokels from the Tauran, most of whom had never heard of me. They insisted on trying to arrest me, so I had to split a few skulls in cutting my way out. I swam Thunder River with arrows whizzing past my ears . . . and the rest of the tale you know."

He frowned out toward the approaching ship again. "By Crom, I'd swear yonder ensign bore the leopard of Poitain, if I didn't know it impossible. Come."

He led the girls down to the beach as the chant of the coxswain became audible. With a final heave on the oars the crew drove the galley's bow with a rush up on the sand. As men tumbled off the bow, Conan yelled.

"Publius! Trocero! What in the name of all gods are you doing. . ."

"Conan!" they roared, and closed in on him, pounding his back and wringing his hands. The first was Trocero, Count of Poitain, a broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man who moved with the grace of a panther

despite the gray in his black hair.

"What are you seeking here?" persisted Conan.

"We came for you," said Prospero, the slim elegantly-clad one.

"How did you know where I was?"

The stout bald man addressed as Publius gestured toward another man in the black robe of a priest of Mitra. "Dexitheus found you by his occult arts. He swore you still lived and promised to lead us to you."

The black-robed man bowed gravely. "Your destiny is linked with that of Aquilonia, Conan of Cimmeria," he said. "I am but one small link in the chain of your fate."

"Well, what's this all about?" said Conan. "Crom knows I'm glad to be rescued from this forsaken sand-spit, but why did you come after me?"

Trocero spoke. "We have broken with Namedides, being unable longer to endure his follies and oppressions, and seek a general to lead the forces of revolt. You're our man!"

Conan laughed gustily and stuck his thumbs into his girdle. "It's good to find that there are those who understand true merit. Lead me to the fray, my friends!" He glanced around and his eyes caught Belesa, standing timidly apart from the group. He gestured her forward with rough gallantry. "Gentlemen, the Lady Belesa of Korzetta." Then he spoke to the girl in her own language again. "We can take you back to Zingara, but what will you do then?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I have neither fortune nor friends, and I am not trained to earn my living. Perhaps it would have been better had one of those arrows pierced my heart."

"Not so, my lady!" begged Tina. "I'll work for us both!"

Conan drew a small leather bag from his girdle. "I didn't get all of Maatneb's jewels," he rumbled. He spilled a handful of flaming rubies into his palm, showed them to Belesa, then dumped them back into the bag and handed the bag to the girl. "But these should prove ample for your needs."

"But I cannot take these—" she began.

"Of course you shall take them! I might as well leave you here for the Picts to take your head as leave you in Zingara to starve. I know what it is to be penniless in a Hyborian land. In my country people go hungry only when there's no food at all, but in civilized countries I've seen folk dying of hunger against the walls of storehouses crammed with victuals. So take these gems, sell them, and buy

a castle and slaves and fine clothes. Then you'll easily get a husband, for civilized men all desire wives with these possessions."

"But what of you?"

Conan grinned and indicated the circle of Aquilonians. "Here is my fortune. With these true friends I shall have all the wealth in Aquilonia at my feet."

The stout Publius spoke up. "Your generosity does you credit, Conan, but I wish you had consulted with me first. For revolutions are made not only by wrongs, but also by gold; and Namedides's publicans have so beggared Aquilonia that we shall be hard put to find the money to hire mercenaries."

"Ha!" laughed Conan. "I'll get you gold enough to set every blade in Aquilonia swinging!" In a few words he told of the treasure of Tranicos and of the destruction of Valenso's settlement. "Now the demon's gone from the cave, released by Thoth-Amon and slain by me; the Picts will be scattering to their villages. With a detail of well-armed men we can make a quick march to the cavern and back before they realize we're in Pictland. Are you with me?"

They cheered until Belesa feared their noise would draw the attention of the Picts. Conan cast her a sly grin and muttered in Zingaran, under the cover of the racket:

"How d'you like 'King Conan'? Sounds not bad, eh?"

Fans of Conan and those who have never read the stories should be happy to learn that the best of Robert E. Howard's stories will now be available in hard covers. Two volumes are already on sale, and more are coming, to make the whole Conan series available. The first of these books, CONAN THE CONQUEROR ($2.75, Gnome Press, New York), contains some of the finest writing Howard ever did. It's a story of Conan as ruler of the kingdom of Aquilonia, beset by every conceivable form of wizardry from the ancient tombs of Stygia. It's also a story of gorgeous battle and terrific conflicts, with a steady pace that makes it impossible to put the book down, once you start. The second volume, THE SWORD OF CONAN ($2.75, Gnome Press) contains two short novels and two long novelettes, and deals with the adventures of Conan as a wandering fighter around the Southern and Eastern lands of this fabulous age. *The People of the Black Circle, The Slithering Shadow, The Pool of the Black One,* and *Red Nails* are stories that make the book a must. Both volumes are heartily recommended for anyone who enjoys a good, rousing adventure story with excellent fantasy as a bonus. Don't miss them.

TOO GLOOMY FOR PRIVATE PUSHKIN

BY RICHARD DEMING

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Private Pushkin had never seen a ghost, but he knew he could see one. All his family was gifted that way. Yet being able to sense such things didn't make him any fonder of them!

The patrol approached the castle warily, employing what army field manuals coyly refer to as the buddy system. Working in two teams of two each, they advanced in short dashes from bush to bush, only one member of each pair being in motion at any given moment. The other, covering for his partner, crouched motionless, his eyes probing possible places of enemy concealment and his trigger finger ready to spray bullets at the first sign of an enemy presence. After each dash across open space the respective roles of the partners reversed.

"Hold it a minute," Sergeant Spoda whispered without looking around, when a soggy splash to his immediate rear informed him Private Pushkin had just completed his latest advance.

When the patrol had first spied the castle, at a distance through drizzling rain which obscured its decrepitness and made it seem majestic and somehow formidable, Sergeant Spoda had taken for granted it was occupied, for Italy was studded with medieval castles converted to summer estates. And apparently Lieutenant Grant had agreed with him or he would never have ordered such a stealthy approach. But now the sergeant was near enough to detect great gaps in the encircling wall, and through

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one of the gaps could be seen a huge pile of broken stone, where part of a tower had fallen.

"It's deserted, for crise-sakes," Spoda said disgustedly. "We been crawling through muck for a ruin." Raising himself on one elbow, he peered back at his fat companion. "Can you see Bisby and Lieutenant Grant?"

"I heard them a minute ago. About fifty yards left, I think."

"Oh fine!" the sergeant said bitterly. "If I yell for instructions, I'll get ate out for making noise. And if we stand up and walk the rest of the way to meet him at the drawbridge, instead of crawling to the goddam thing, he'll have my hide for ignoring orders." He eyed the castle broodingly. "By now the sonovagun knows it's a deserted wreck as well as we do, but you think he'll walk over and say so? He'll wait till we crawl the last fifty yards, then stroll over and make some crack about being scared of empty buildings."

"Why don't we just wait here?" Pushkin asked hopefully.

"Because the lieutenant said crawl, stupid. When you been in this outfit as long as me, you'll crawl when Lieutenant Grant says crawl, or wish you'd never been born."

Their last spurt had carried them to within thirty yards of the moat, which heavily edged by scrubs. Screened from possible observation by anything that might be in the castle, now they could wriggle on their stomachs from bush to bush instead of having to dash across open areas. Resignedly the sergeant began to crawl.

"Come on," he ordered.

"Listen," Private Pushkin whispered. "Even if nobody lives there, it could be a Kraut observation post, couldn't it?"

Without stopping his wriggling motion, Spoda said, "To observe what? A couple of bare mountains? You can't see our lines from here."

Then both men instinctively pressed flat as the short scream of an eighty-eight—too short to give proper warning—ended in an air burst a hundred yards to their right. Immediately another exploded on the far side of the castle.

"Interdiction fire," Sergeant Spoda muttered. "Popping at nothing." He scowled back at the fat private. "That answer your question? The Krauts ain't in the habit of shelling their own OP's."

Again he cautiously began to move forward, but stopped to glance an irritated inquiry at his companion when the latter failed to follow.

"I don't like the looks of that

castle," said Private Pushkin. "It's awfully gloomy-looking."

"For crisesakes!" The sergeant's tone took on a sarcastic edge. "We'll send a letter in triplicate to Eisenhower complaining the castles in this goddamed war is too gloomy for Private Pushkin. What the hell you want? Jack-o-lanterns over the drawbridge?"

"I mean it looks . . . well . . . haunted."

Sergeant Spoda emitted a snort. "Three divisions of Krauts within five miles of here, and you got to worry about haunts!"

"Well, there are such things," Pushkin said defensively.

"You ever see one?"

"A haunt? Well . . . not exactly."

"Not exactly," the sergeant repeated sarcastically. "You ever see one approximately?"

The fat private said in a petulant voice, "You can laugh if you want. But I've talked to people who saw haunts. My father saw one once. He was raised in the old country and knows all about haunts."

A mild razzberry indicated what Sergeant Spoda thought of his companion's father. "I never seen one yet, and never expect to."

"You won't," Pushkin assured him. "My father says only people who believe in haunts can see them."

Sergeant Spoda resumed crawling. "Personally I'd rather meet haunts in that castle than Krauts. And I'd rather meet both together than get to the drawbridge after the lieutenant does. Get the lead out."

Breathing hoarsely, Private Pushkin began to wriggle in the sergeant's wake.

When they reached the edge of the moat at a point about twenty yards from the drawbridge, Spoda again called a halt. Resting on his elbows, he pushed up his helmet to wipe muddy sweat from his eyes with a khaki sleeve, and craned his neck to peer at the point he expected Lieutenant Grant and Corporal Bisby to show. He was gratified to see a netted helmet at the edge of the moat equi-distant beyond the drawbridge to his own position. Apparently he and Pushkin were on schedule.

Motioning Pushkin forward, he crawled the remaining distance to the drawbridge, which he could now see permanently spanned the moat, for the heavy twin chains which once raised it lay rusted and broken in the center of the bridge. Still lying flat, Spoda dubiously eyed the huge stone arch forming the entrance to the castle, in which rotting

wooden doors gaped wide in gloomy invitation. An aversion for the place sympathetic to that of Private Pushkin's touched him momentarily, and for once he was glad to await the lieutenant's instructions.

Lieutenant Grant, a thin, bitter-eyed young man of rawhide and muscle, rose from his own place of concealment, sauntered to the corner of the bridge opposite Spoda and sank to a squat behind a low bush. Like a tame shadow Corporal Bisby followed.

"What's the matter, Sergeant?" the lieutenant inquired with mock partonage. "Scared of empty houses?"

"No sir." Sergeant Spoda rose to his knees. "Didn't know it was empty."

"Heard the air-bursts, didn't you?" Lieutenant Grant asked in a sharp tone which did not quite cover his sadistic pleasure in getting under the sergeant's skin. "They wouldn't shell their own position."

As though bent on emphasizing the lieutenant's point, a series of short screams followed by dull explosions split the air. Left, right, behind them, air-bursts rained jagged metal on the ground.

With his cheek pressed into the mud, mechanically Spoda counted the bursts. Five . . . eight . . . twelve. A pause, then . . . five . . . eight . . . eleven this time.

"Inside, before they throw another salvo," Lieutenant Grant called crisply.

Immediately Sergeant Spoda was on his knees again. "That means you, stupid," he growled at Pushkin, motioning the fat private to his feet. "Scram, and I'll cover."

With his left hand he whacked Pushkin on the seat of the pants as he lumbered by, then trained his tommygun on the doorway until it swallowed the fat private.

Then he was on his feet, racing across the rotting timbers of the bridge himself. Vaguely he was conscious of the lieutenant and the corporal coming erect behind him.

Belatedly the twelfth shell of the second salvo arrived just as Spoda reached the archway. High over the bridge it exploded, perhaps fifty yards in the air. A poor air-burst.

As he dived head-first between the gaping doors, Spoda felt a shell fragment clink against his helmet. On his stomach he slid across dusty flag-stone, bounced to his feet and swung his tommygun in a menacing arc at nothing but Private Pushkin.

They were in a large, oak-beamed and narrow-windowed

room containing a single crude wooden bench and one table. Great open fireplaces, in one of which hung an ancient cooking pot, yawned at either end of the room, and directly opposite the entrance was a doorless arch leading into the interior of the castle. Pushkin crouched in this, his back to the sergeant, levelling his rifle at the gloom of the next room.

His quick leap erect caused a wave of giddiness to sweep over Spoda, momentarily making his body seem light and weightless. He shook his head, then missing the lieutenant and Corporal Bisby, glanced back at the entrance. Shrouded in shadow, half in and half out of the doorway sprawled a khaki-clad figure. The helmet had rolled clear, and from the distance of a half-dozen paces the sergeant could see that too little remained of the head to make first aid anything but a waste of time.

Slightly sickened, he avoided going any closer to the body, choosing one of the high, narrow windows for observation rather than using the door. From it he saw racing away through the underbrush the stocky figure of Corporal Bisby. As he watched, the corporal threw away his rifle and disappeared in a burst of speed.

"Blew his top," Sergeant Spoda muttered disgustedly. "Thought he was beginning to look fishy around the eyes."

When he turned, Pushkin was looking askance at the motionless figure in the doorway. "Bisby or Lieutenant Grant?" he asked huskily.

"The lieutenant. Bisby just blew his lid and took off like a scared rabbit."

Spoda advanced to peer into the dimness beyond Pushkin. For some reason he felt uncomfortable. Light and almost giddy-minded. Unwilling to attribute the feeling to the gloom of the surroundings, now intensified by the corpse in the doorway, he blamed it on the shell fragment which had dented his helmet. At the same time he was guiltily aware that his head did not ache, as it almost certainly would had the blow been sufficient to cause his peculiar feeling.

"There's something funny about this place," Pushkin said uneasily. "Do you feel sort of . . . well . . . strange?"

With unnecessary loudness the sergeant said, "No!" He summoned a sardonic smile and added, "Let's case the joint for haunts."

"My God!" Pushkin said. "You don't think there really are any, do you?"

Spoda frowned at him irritably. "There sure ain't any

Krauts here, or we'd be keeping the lieutenant company by now."

Striding into the next room, he found it even larger than the first. Apparently used by the original occupants as a banquet hall, long rough-hewn tables ringed the center, and above them hung massive iron candelabra. As in the first room cobwebs sagged from the ceiling and a thick layer of dust covered everything, testifying to the number of years since any living person had set foot in the hall.

Behind him Pushkin complained, "You might have warned me about the cobwebs in the doorway. They're all over me." Pettishly he brushed at his muddy uniform.

"Didn't notice them. What's a few cobwebs on top of all that mud anyway?"

Opposite the doorway by which they had entered was a similar arch leading still farther into the castle, and on either side of the room was another arch. Through these latter could be seen stone stairways leading upward.

"Those stairs must lead to the towers," Spoda said. "Let's start by checking the left one, since it's still in one piece. You noticed from outside the right tower was half caved in, didn't you? In real bad shape."

"Yeah. Maybe the other one's getting ready to cave in too. Let's get out of the joint and leave it to the haunts."

With his hand on the stone balustrade, Sergeant Spoda glared over his shoulder. "Will you get your mind off haunts? There ain't no such animal."

"I got a funny feeling about this place," Pushkin insisted. "There's a feeling in the air. Let's get out of here."

The sergeant turned to face his fat companion, slung his tommygun and placed both hands on hips.

"Listen, stupid," he said distinctly. "Ghosts and goblins and haunts is for kids—like Santa Claus. What you feel in the air is the goddam never-ending winter rain. Now shut up about haunts."

Doing an about face, he unslung his gun from his shoulder and poked it ahead as he began to mount the stairs. After a dozen steps they turned sharply right, then began to spiral.

At the second spiral Pushkin said, "Wait a minute, Sarge."

Spoda stopped his upward advance. "Now what?"

"I got that feeling stronger. There's something here that's not natural."

"Oh, for crisesakes!"

"I can tell," Pushkin said stubbornly. "I'm sensitive to

that kind of thing. My dad told me all my family is."

"Well, I don't feel nothing."

"You wouldn't, Sarge. I told you you can't see haunts unless you really believe in them."

Sergeant Spoda's expression became mildly exasperated. "You seen any haunts here, stupid?"

Dumbly, the fat private shook his head.

"Then there ain't any!" Spoda yelled. "You said yourself you'd see them if there was."

Pushkin's voice remained stubborn. "I can feel them. That's almost the same thing. I *know* something's here. Please, Sarge. Let's get out of here."

The sergeant's eyes narrowed in studied imitation of Lieutenant Grant. "One more crack about haunts, Pushkin, and I'll clip you right between the horns with a gun barrel, so help me! Now shut up while we case this joint!"

The fat private shut up, and for the next half hour followed Spoda stoically as they covered every inch of the castle, apparently deciding the remote possibility of encountering a haunt was less dangerous than the certainty of the sergeant's wrath if aroused any further. The exploration should have caused Pushkin's trepidation to subside, for they searched every nook and cranny of the rambling edifice without uncovering any evidence of either German or supernatural occupation. But strangely, his uneasiness seemed to grow, for he was trembling violently by the time they returned to the room they had first entered.

"Satisfied the place is haunt-less now?" Sergeant Spoda asked with an air of triumph.

"No," Pushkin said in a cracked voice. "I get the feeling stronger all the time. Let's get out of here before something awful happens."

"The feeling is stronger because it's getting darker," Spoda said impatiently. "You just got an overworked imagination."

"Maybe dark is when they begin to appear," Pushkin said miserably.

He flicked fearful eyes at the doorway, which was now so shrouded in shadow only the dim outline of the corpse could be seen.

Sardonically Spoda suggested, "Maybe it's the lieutenant's ghost you feel."

Then the sergeant's mouth slowly gaped open, for out from the shadow near the corpse stepped the figure of Lieutenant Grant.

As the lieutenant purposefully approached them, Sergeant Spoda felt a return of the light-headed giddiness he had expe-

rienced when first entering the castle. Wildly he looked at Pushkin, who gazed bug-eyed at the apparition.

"You see it too," Spoda muttered huskily, backing until the lone wooden bench separated him from the lieutenant.

"What are you looking so popeyed about, Pushkin?" snapped Lieutenant Grant.

Pushkin simply closed his eyes.

"Listen, Lieutenant," Spoda said in a voice which sounded hollow to his ears. "You're real, ain't you?"

Ignoring him, Lieutenant Grant continued to glare puzzledly at Pushkin.

With caution Spoda sidled around the bench, reached out an exploratory finger and prodded the lieutenant's shoulder. It felt reassuringly solid.

"Geeze, Lieutenant," he said. "For a minute you scared my pants off. I thought you was a ghost."

He might have been talking to empty space, for Lieutenant Grant gave no indication of having either heard or seen him. Instead he was shaking Pushkin by both arms.

"Snap out of it, soldier!" he said tartly, and when Pushkin opened his eyes to gape at him, "You cracking up like Bisby?"

Impatiently the lieutenant glanced around the rapidly darkening room. "You explore the whole building, Pushkin?"

"Yes sir," Pushkin managed weakly.

"Sorry I left you alone so long. Chased that damn Bisby halfway back to our lines." He frowned suddenly. "Too bad about Spoda. He was a good man."

An onslaught of giddiness again hit the sergeant, for all at once he remembered the sprawled body in the doorway. Quickly he crossed to it, knelt and stared down with a strange tautness in his throat.

On the sleeve of each outstretched arm was sewn the insignia of a sergeant.

Rising numbly, he began to walk back toward the lieutenant and Pushkin.

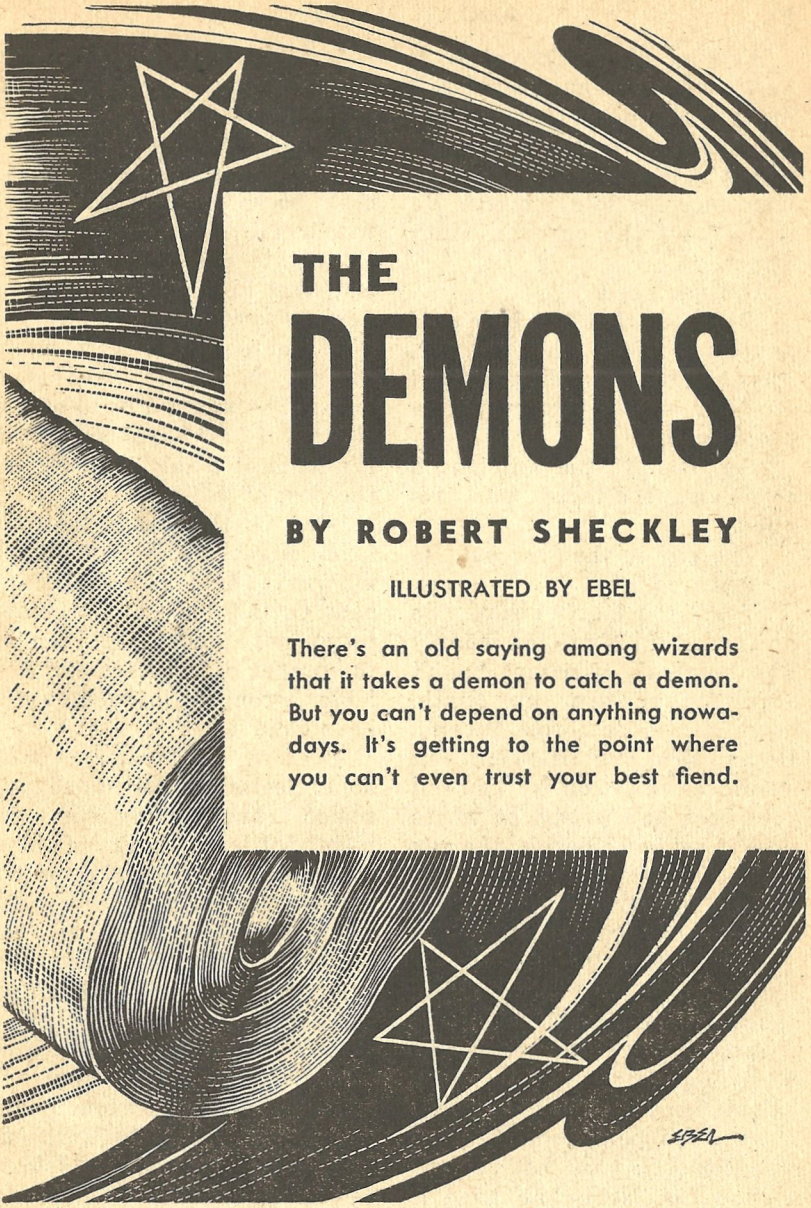
"We can't very well carry him clear back to the lines," the lieutenant was saying. "Guess we better just clip one dog tag and report the location to Graves Registration."

He turned and strode briskly toward the body. Rooted to the floor, Spoda stood spread-legged exactly in the lieutenant's path.

Without faltering, Lieutenant Grant walked *directly through him.*

Sergeant Spoda stared at Private Pushkin, and the expression of horror on the fat private's face duplicated that on his own.





THE DEMONS

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

There's an old saying among wizards that it takes a demon to catch a demon. But you can't depend on anything nowadays. It's getting to the point where you can't even trust your best fiend.

Walking along Second Avenue, Arthur Gammet decided it was a rather nice spring day. Not too cold, just brisk and invigorating. A perfect day for selling insurance, he told himself. He stepped off the curb at Ninth Street.

And vanished.

"Didja see that?" A butcher's assistant asked the butcher. They had been standing in front of their store, idly watching people go by.

"See what?" the butcher, a corpulent, red-faced man, replied.

"The guy in the overcoat. He disappeared."

"Yeh," the butcher said. "So he turned up Ninth, so what?" The butcher's assistant hadn't seen Arthur turn up Ninth, down Ninth, or across Second. He had seen him disappear. But should he insist on it? You tell your boss he's wrong, so where does it get you? Beside, the guy in the overcoat probably *had* turned up Ninth. Where else could he have gone?

But Arthur Gammet was no longer in New York. He had thoroughly vanished.

Somewhere else, not necessarily on Earth, a being who called himself Neelsebub was staring at a pentagon. Within it was something he hadn't bargained for. Neelsebub fixed it with a bitter stare, knowing he had good cause for anger. He'd spent years digging out magic formulas, experimenting with herbs and essences, reading the best books on wizardry and witchcraft. He'd thrown everything into one gigantic effort, and what happened? The wrong demon appeared.

Of course, there were many things that might have gone amiss. The severed hand of the corpse—it just *might* have been the hand of a suicide, for even the best of dealers aren't to be trusted. Or the line of the pentagon might have been the least bit wavy; that was very significant. Or the words of the incantation might not have been in the proper order. Even one syllable wrongly intoned could have done it.

Anyhow, the damage was done. Neelsebub leaned one red-scaled shoulder against the huge bottle in back of him, scratching the other shoulder with a dagger-like fingernail. As usual when perplexed, his barbed tail flicked uncertainly.

At least he had a demon of some sort.

But the thing inside the pentagon didn't look like any conventional kind of demon. Those loose folds of gray flesh, for example . . . But then, the historical accounts were notoriously

inaccurate. Whatever kind of supernatural being it was, it would have to come across. Of that he was certain. Neelsebub folded his hooved feet under him more comfortably, waiting for the strange being to speak.

Arthur Gammet was still too stunned to speak. One moment he had been walking to the insurance office, minding his own business, enjoying the fine air of an early spring morning. He had stepped off the curb at Second and Ninth—and landed here. Wherever *here* was.

Swaying slightly, he made out, through the deep mist that filled the room, a huge red-scaled monster squatting on its haunches. Beside it was what looked like a bottle, but a bottle fully ten feet high. The creature had a barbed tail and was now scratching his head with it, glaring at Arthur out of little piggish eyes. Hastily, Arthur tried to step back, but was unable to move more than a step. He was inside a chalked area, he noticed, and for some reason was unable to step over the white lines.

"So," the red creature said, finally breaking the silence. "I've finally got you." These weren't the words he was saying; the sounds were utterly foreign. But somehow, Arthur was able to understand the thought behind the words. It wasn't telepathy, but rather as though he were translating a foreign language, automatically, colloquially.

"I must say I'm rather disappointed," Neelsebub continued when the captured demon in the pentagon didn't answer. "All our legends say that demons are fearful things, fifteen feet high, with wings and tiny heads and a hole in the chest that throws out jets of cold water."

Arthur Gammet peeled off his overcoat, letting it fall in a sodden heap at his feet. Dimly, he could appreciate the idea of demons being able to produce jets of cold water. The room was like a furnace. Already his gray tweed suit was a soggy, wrinkled mass of cloth and perspiration.

And with that thought came acceptance—of the red creature, the chalk lines he was unable to cross, the sweltering room—everything.

He had noticed in books, magazine and motion-pictures that a man, confronted by an odd situation, usually mouthed lines such as, "Pinch me, this can't be true," or, "Good God, I'm either dreaming, drunk or crazy." Arthur had no intention of saying anything so palpably absurd. For one thing, he was sure the huge red creature wouldn't appreciate it; and for another, he knew he wasn't dreaming, drunk or crazy.

There were no words in Arthur Gammet's vocabulary for it, but he knew. A dream was one thing; this was another.

"The legends never mentioned being able to peel off your skin," Neelsebub said thoughtfully, looking at the overcoat at Arthur's feet. "Interesting."

"This is a mistake," Arthur said firmly. The experience he had had as an insurance agent stood him in good stead now. He was used to meeting all kinds of people, unraveling all kinds of snarled situations. This creature had, evidently, tried to raise a demon. Through nobody's fault he had gotten Arthur Gammet, and was under the impression that *he* was a demon. The error must be rectified at once.

"I am an insurance agent," he said. The creature shook its tremendous horned head. Its tail swished from side to side unpleasantly.

"Your other-world functions don't concern me in the slightest," Neelsebub growled. "I don't care, really, what species of demon you are."

"But I tell you I'm not a—"

"Won't work!" Neelsebub howled, glaring angrily at Arthur from the edge of the pentagon. "I know you're a demon. And I want *drast!*"

"Drast? I don't think—"

"I'm up to all your demoniac tricks," Neelsebub said, calming himself with obvious effort. "I know—and you know—that when a demon is conjured, he must grant one wish. I conjured you, and I want drast. Ten thousand pounds of it."

"Drast . . ." Arthur began uncomfortably, standing in the corner of the pentagon furthest from the tail-lashing monster.

"Drast, or voot, or hakatinny, or sup-der-oop. It's all the same thing."

It was speaking of money, Arthur Gammet realized. The slang terms had been unfamiliar, but there was no mistaking the sense behind them. Undoubtedly, drast was what passed for currency in its country.

"Ten thousand pounds isn't much," Neelsebub said with a cunning little smile. "Not for *you.* You ought to be glad I'm not one of those fools who ask for immortality."

Arthur was.

"And if I don't?" he asked.

"In that case," Neelsebub replied, a frown replacing the little smile, "I'll be forced to conjure you again—inside the bottle." Arthur looked at the green bottle, towering over Neelsebub's head. It was wide at its misty base, tapering to a slim neck. If the thing ever got him in, he would never be able to squeeze

out through that neck. *If* the thing could get him in. And Arthur was fairly sure it could.

"Of course," Neelsebub said, his smile returning, more cunning than ever, "There's no reason for heroic measures. Ten thousand pounds of the old supder-oop isn't much for you. It'll make me rich, but all you have to do is wave your hand." He paused, his smile becoming ingratiating.

"You know," he went on softly, "I've really spent a long time on this. Read a lot of books, spent a pile of voot." His tail lashed the floor suddenly, like a bullet glancing off granite. "Don't try to put something over on me!" he shouted.

Arthur found that the force rising from the chalk extended as high as he could reach. Gingerly, he leaned against the invisible wall, and, finding that it supported his weight, rested against it.

Ten thousand pounds of drast, he thought. Evidently the creature was a sorcerer, from God-knows-where. Some other planet, perhaps. The creature had tried to conjure a wish-granting demon, and had gotten him. It wanted something from him—or else the bottle. All very unreasonable, but Arthur Gammet was beginning to suspect that most wizards were unreasonable people.

"I'll try to get your drast," Arthur said, feeling that he had to say something. "But I'll have to go back to the—ah—underworld to get it. That handwaving stuff is out."

"All right," the monster said to him, standing at the edge of the pentagon and leering in. "I trust you. But remember, I can call you any time I want. You can't get away, you know, so don't even try. By the way, my name is Neelsebub."

"Any relation to Beelzebub?" Arthur asked.

"Great-grandfather," Neelsebub replied, looking suspiciously at Arthur. "He was an army man. Unfortunately, he—" Neelsebub stopped abruptly, glaring angrily at Arthur. "But you demons know all about that! Begone! *And bring that drast!*"

Arthur Gammet vanished again.

He materialized on the corner of Second Avenue and Ninth Street, where he had first vanished. His overcoat was at his feet, his clothes filled with perspiration. He staggered for a moment to hold his balance—since he had been leaning against the wall of force when Neelsebub had vanished him—picked up his overcoat and hurried to his apartment. Luckily, there had

been only a few people around. Two housewives gulped and walked quickly away. A nattily dressed man blinked four or five times, took a step forward as though he wanted to ask something, changed his mind and hurried off toward Eighth Street. The rest of the people either hadn't seen him or just didn't give a damn.

In his two-room apartment Arthur made one feeble attempt to dismiss the whole thing as a dream. Failing miserably, he began to outline his possibilities.

He could produce the drast. That is, perhaps he could if he found out what it was. The stuff Neelsebub considered valuable might be just about anything. Lead, perhaps, or iron. Even that would stretch his meagre earnings to the breaking-point.

He could notify the police. And be locked up in an asylum. Forget that one.

Or, he could not produce the drast—and spend the rest of his life in a bottle. Forget that one, too.

All he could do was wait until Neelsebub conjured him again, and find out then what drast was. Perhaps it was common dirt. He could get that from his uncle's farm in New Jersey, if Neelsebub could manage the transportation.

Arthur Gammet telephoned the office and told them he was ill, and that he expected to be ill for several days. After that he fixed a bite of food in his kitchenette, feeling quite proud of his good appetite. Not everyone faced with the strong possibility of being shut up in a bottle could have tucked away a meal that well. He tidied up the place, and changed into a light Palm Beach suit. It was four-thirty in the afternoon. He stretched out on the bed and waited. Along about nine-thirty he disappeared.

"Changed your skin again," Neelsebub commented. "Where's the drast?" His tail twitched eagerly as he hurried around the pentagon.

"It's not hidden behind me," Arthur said, turning to look at Neelsebub. "I'll have to have more information." He adopted a nonchalant pose, leaning against the invisible lines tha radiated from the chalk. "And I'll have to have your promise that once I produce it you'll leave me alone."

"Of course," Neelsebub answered cheerfully. "I can only ask for one wish anyhow. Tell you what, I'll swear the great oath of Satanas. That's absolutely binding, you know."

"Satanas?"

"One of our early presidents," Neelsebub said with a reverential air. "My great grandfather Beelzebub served under him. Un-

fortunately—oh, well, you know all that."

Neelsebub swore the great oath of Satanas, and very impressive it was. The blue mists in the room were edged in red when he was done, and the outlines of the huge bottle shifted eerily in the dim light. Arthur was perspiring freely, even in his summer suit. He wished he were a cold-producing demon.

"That's it," Neelsebub said, standing erectly in the middle of the room, his tail looped around his wrist. There was a strange look in his eyes, a look of one recalling past glories.

"Now what sort of information do you want?" Neelsebub began pacing the floor in front of the pentagon, his tail dragging.

"Describe this drast to me."

"Well, it's soft, heavy—"

That could be lead.

"And yellow."

Gold.

"Hmm," Arthur said, staring at the bottle. "I don't suppose it's ever gray, is it? Or dark brown?"

"No. It's always yellow. With sometimes a reddish hue."

He was positive.

Still gold. Arthur contemplated the red-scaled monster in front of him, pacing up and down with ill-concealed eagerness. Ten thousand pounds of gold. That would come to . . . No, better not think of it. Impossible.

"I'll need a little time," Arthur said. "Perhaps sixty or seventy years. Tell you what, I'll call you as soon as—"

Neelsebub interrupted him with a huge roar of laughter. Arthur had tickled his rudimentary sense of humor, evidently, because Neelsebub was hugging his haunches, screaming with mirth.

"Sixty or seventy years!" Neelsebub shouted, and the bottle shook, and even the lines of the pentagon seemed to waver. "I'll give you sixty or seventy minutes! Or the bottle!"

"Now just a minute," Arthur said, from the far side of the pentagon. "I'll need a little—hold it!" He had just had an idea, and it was undeniably the best idea he had ever had. More, it was his own idea.

"I'll have to have the exact formula you used to get me," Arthur said. "Must check with the main office to be sure everything is in order."

The monster raved and swore, and the air turned black and purple; the bottle rang in sympathetic vibration with Neelsebub's voice, and the very room seemed to sway. But Arthur Gammet stood firm. He explained to Neelsebub, patiently, seven or eight times, that it would do no good

to bottle him, since he would never get his gold that way. All he wanted was the formula, and certainly that wouldn't—

Finally he got it.

"And no tricks!" Neelsebub thundered finally, gesturing at the bottle with both hands and his tail. Arthur nodded feebly and reappeared in his room.

The next few days he spent in a frenzied search around New York. Some of the ingredients of the incantation were easy to fill —the sprig of mistletoe, for example, from a florist, and the sulphur. Graveyard mold was more difficult, as was a bat's left wing. What really had him stumped for a while was the severed hand of the murdered man. He finally procured one from a store that specialized in filling orders for medical students. He had the dealer's guarantee that the body to which the hand belonged had died a violent death. Arthur suspected that the dealer was trying to humor him, but there was really very little he could do about it.

Among other things, he bought a large bottle. It was surprisingly inexpensive. There were really compensations for living in New York, he decided. There seemed to be nothing—literally *nothing* one couldn't buy.

In three days he had all his materials, and at midnight of the third night he aranged them on the floor of his apartment. The light of a three-quarters full moon was shining in the window —the incantation had been vague as to what phase it should be— and everything seemed to be in order. Arthur drew the pentagon, lighted the candles, burned the incense, and started the chant. He figured that, by following directions carefully, he should be able to conjure Neelsebub. His one wish would be that Neelsebub leave him strictly alone. He couldn't see how that would fail.

The blue mists spread through the room as he mumbled the formula, and soon he could see something growing in the center of the pentagon.

"Neelsebub!" he cried. But it wasn't.

The thing in the pentatgon was about fifteen feet high when the incantation was finished. It had to stoop almost to the ground to fit under Arthur's ceiling. It was a fearful-looking thing, with wings and a tiny head and a hole in its chest.

Arthur Gammet had conjured the wrong demon.

"What's all this?" the demon asked, shooting a jet of ice water out of his chest. The water splashed against the invisible

walls of the pentagon and rolled to the floor. It must have been pure reflex, because Arthur's room was pleasantly cool.

"I want my one wish," Arthur said. The demon was blue and impossibly thin; his wings were vestigial stumps. They flapped once or twice against his bony chest before he answered.

"I don't know what you are or how you got me here," the demon said. "But it's clever. It's undeniably clever."

"Let's not chatter," Arthur replied nervously, wondering how soon Neelsebub was going to conjure him again. "I want ten thousand pounds of gold. Also known as drast, hakatinny, and the old sup-der-oop." At any moment, he thought, he might find himself inside a bottle.

"Well," the cold-producing demon said. "You seem to be laboring under the mistaken impression that I'm—"

"You have twenty-four hours."

"I'm not a rich man," the cold-producing demon said. "Small businessman. But perhaps if you give me time—"

"Or the bottle," Arthur said. He pointed to the large bottle in one corner, then realized it would never hold fifteen feet of cold-producing demon.

"The next time I conjure you I'll have a bottle big enough," Arthur said. "I didn't think you'd be so awkwardly tall."

"We have stories about people disappearing," the demon mused. "So *this* is what happens to them. The underworld. Don't suppose anyone would believe me, though."

"Get that drast," Arthur said. "Begone!"

The cold-producing demon was gone.

Arthur Gammet knew he could not afford more than twenty-four hours. Even that was probably cutting it too thin, he thought, because one could never tell when Neelsebub would decide he had had enough time. There was no telling what the red-scaled monster would do, if he were disappointed a third time. Arthur found that, toward the end of the day, he was clutching the steam pipe. A fine lot of good that would do if he were conjured! But it was nice to have something solid to grasp.

It was a shame also, he thought, to have to impose on the cold-producing demon that way. It was pretty obvious that the demon wasn't a real demon, any more than Arthur was. Well, he would never use the bottle on him. It would do no good if Neelsebub weren't satisfied.

Finally he mumbled the incantation again.

"You'll have to make your pen-

tagon wider," the cold-producing demon said, stooping uncomfortably inside. "I haven't got room for—"

"Begone!" Arthur said, and feverishly rubbed out the pentagon. He sketched it again, this time using the area of the whole room. He lugged the bottle—the same one, since he hadn't found one fifteen feet high—into the kitchen, stationed himself in the closet, and went through the formula again. Once more the thick, twisting blue mists gathered.

"Now don't be hasty," the cold-producing demon said, from within the pentagon. "I haven't got the old sup-der-oop yet. There's a tie-up, and I can explain everything." He beat his wings to part the mist. Beside him was a bottle, fully ten feet high. Within it, green with rage, was Neelsebub. He seemed to be shouting, but the bottle was stoppered. No sound came through.

"Got the formula," the demon said, "out of the library. Could have knocked me over when the thing worked. Always been a hard-headed businessman, you know. Don't like this supernatural stuff. But, you have to face facts. Anyhow, I got hold of this demon here—" He jerked a spidery arm at the bottle— "But he wouldn't come across. So I bottled him." The cold-producing demon heaved a deep sigh when Arthur smiled. It was like a reprieve.

"Now, I don't want you to bottle me," the cold-producing demon went on, "because I've got a wife and three kids. You know how it is. Insurance slump and all that, I couldn't raise ten thousand pounds of drast with an army. But as soon as I persuade this demon here—"

"Never mind about the drast," Arthur said. "Just take the demon with you. Keep him in storage. Inside the bottle, of course."

"I'll do that," the blue-winged insurance man said. "And about that drast—"

"Forget it," Arthur said warmly. After all, insurance men have to stick together. "Handle fire and theft?"

"General accident is more my line," the insurance man said. "But you know, I've been thinking—"

Neelsebub raved and swore inside the bottle while the two insurance men discussed the intricacies of their profession.

ASHTARU THE TERRIBLE

BY POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY EMSH

Ashtaru was a terrible god who could work mighty miracles—as he was the first to admit. But his wants were simple — a temple, five thousand slaves, and all the bourbon whiskey he could drink.

"Burlap! Cotton wool! Bah!" said the god.

Henry Martinmas dropped him as if he had suddenly turned red-hot.

"I'll have you know there was a time when they wrapped me in silk," went on the god, pulling strings of excelsior off himself. He was about a foot high in his cross-legged sitting posture and looked rather like a bearded and petulant Buddha. "Excelsior!"

Henry Martinmas thought wildly about banners with strange devices and said in feeble tones, "This won't do. It won't do at all. You've got no business talking."

"And why not?" asked the god truculently.

"Because you're just a terra-cotta image buried in Mesopotamia for the last twenty-six hundred years, that's why," said Henry indignantly. "You've got no business claiming to be alive. Stop it this instant."

"If you'd been buried in the sand for the last twenty-six centuries, I'll wager you'd want to say a few words too," answered

the god. "I'm not going to stop, because I am a wrathful god and ruler of heaven and earth, so there!"

He stood up in the packing case, balancing his pot-bellied form on spindly legs, and glared at the archeologist.

"You're nothing of the sort," insisted Henry, grabbing for sanity with both hands. "You're a typical minor local deity, and you know it. If you don't shut up, I—I'll tell Marduk on you."

"Marduk!" sneered the god. "That big lout!" Nevertheless, he abandoned his aggressive stance.

The knowledge began seeping slowly through Henry's gibbering brain that he was actually having an argument with a Babylonian idol. "No!" he moaned. "As if I didn't have troubles enough."

"Why, what's the matter?" asked the god, suddenly sympathetic. He had a rusty bass foghorn of a voice.

"I'm going insane, that's what," said Henry. He sat down on the floor and buried his face in his hands.

The god walked over to the edge of the packing case, jumped up, and sat there swinging his legs. "That's too bad," he murmured. "When did it start?"

"Just now," said Henry. "I thought a statuette sat up and spoke to me."

"Hmmmm." The god stroked his beard. "Odd symptom."

"I didn't like it," babbled Henry. "It scared me silly."

"Delusions of persecution," nodded the idol. "Tell me, when you were a child did you hate your father?"

"No. I liked my mother, too. I've always liked everybody except . . . well, I don't care for Richard Macalester."

"Ah. Symbolism." The god rubbed his hands together. "Was there a statue in your home when you were young? Maybe you spoke to it once and it didn't answer. That could be traumatic."

"I don't remember—HEY!" The man realized to whom he was talking and scrambled to his feet.

"By gosh, that's right," agreed the idol, surprised.

He sprang to the floor and waddled over and patted Henry on the shin. "There, there, don't be frightened. I know I am a very terrible god, but believe me, I won't hurt you."

Henry tottered to his desk, extracted a bottle of bourbon, and raised it to his lips.

"Aren't you going to pour me a libation?" whined the deity.

"I suppose so," shuddered Henry, and splashed a few drops


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of whiskey on the floor.

"Not that way!" The god hopped with rage, shaking his fists. "In a glass, you idiot!"

Dumbly, the man found a tumbler and poured out a finger or two. The god swallowed it and sighed. "Aaaahhhh! That's more like it! Fellow gets awfully thirsty, lying in the sand for twenty-six hundred years."

Henry began to accept the situation. There wasn't much else he could do, and the initial shock had worn off a little. The whiskey helped. He sat back in his chair, put his feet on the desk, and looked down at the idol.

"Okay," he said a bit shakily. "How did it happen, anyway? I'll accept your reality, provisionally at least—"

"You'd darn well better," grumbled the god, "or I'll blast you with lightning."

Henry sighed. He was a tall and lean young man, with rimless glasses on a face rather like that of a scholarly horse. "All I know," he said, "is that the college—this is Barron College in Southmeadow, Minnesota—the college has a man, Craigie, the head of our archeology department, with the Rupert expedition in Mesopotomia. I'm acting head while he's away, so he sent me a crate of specimens. You were in it. When I began unpacking you, you sat up and spoke to me. That's all." He shivered. "That's enough, too!"

"My name," said the god in a formal tone, "is Ashtarulalekbenetil - Torglatannesarmishkidu the Terrible. But you may call me Ashtaru," he added graciously. "I was a mighty god in holy Babylon. They trembled at the mention of my name."

For fear of breaking a jaw, thought Henry.

"Nobody dared affront me," went on Ashtaru. "They brought me the treasures of the land. They danced before my shrine and burned incense and implored my condescension that I would reveal unto them my will. When my voice of thunder spoke, Tigris and Euphrates shook. People worshipped other gods only because I was kind enough to permit it."

"Nice of you," said Henry.

Sarcasm was lost on Ashtaru, who droned on. "Oh, they sent from afar to bedeck my fane, cedar of Lebanon and sandalwood of Punt and spices of mystic eastern lands, gold and elephants and the fairest maidens in the world. Princesses rejoiced to serve me, for I was the ruler of the lightning and the earthquake, the dreadful master of armed men and brazen char-

iots, shaker of the land and toppler of cities, glorious in strength and beauty, Ashtaru the Terrible!"

"And then what happened?" interrupted Henry.

"When Babylon rose against the yoke of Sennacherib, the Assyrian hosts came down like a —like a—"

"A wolf on the fold?"

"Thank you. Like a wolf on the fold. Their armies darkened the land. Their arrows nighted the sky. They went as a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. Men trembled to see the fist of Assur crashing down on them. But then I rose in my wrath, I unleashed my lightnings against the blasphemous invaders, I smote them hip and thigh—"

"What happened?" asked Henry, interested.

"Nobody paid any attention," sighed Ashtaru. "The Assyrians razed the city. I was buried under a falling wall. Later the desert came in and covered me." He bristled with indignation. "Fine way to treat a god!"

"Didn't you get bored, lying there for twenty-six hundred years?" asked Henry, tilting the bottle again.

"It was kind of dull," admitted Ashtaru. "How about another libation?"

Henry gave him one. "Then when Craigie dug you up—why didn't you speak to him?"

"There was nothing but desert ground. No chance for me to get proper treatment. But I sensed he was from the richest land on earth, the new Babylon, so I bided my time. Now I'm here." Ashtaru looked at his terra-cotta body and sighed again, heart-rendingly. A tear dropped from one obsidian eye. "All my lovely paint, all that gilt and silken raiment—gone! Why, I'm naked!"

Henry shook his head, marvelling. A real god! A genuine live simon-pure hundred-per cent Babylonian god! Even if Ashtaru was a very minor god, so small that there was no record of him, it was quite a find. He wondered how to write it up for the journals.

"Well, don't just sit there!" boomed Ashtaru. "Worship me!"

"Sorry," said Henry. "You're a graven image."

The god clucked woefully. "No respect," he said. "No feeling for the finer things. This younger generation!"

Henry scratched his head. It wouldn't be easy to report his discovery. How the devil do you convince the editor of a scholarly journal that you have a living god in your office?

"Can you really work miracles?" he asked with a sudden

rush of crazy hopefulness.

"It depends," said Ashtaru cautiously. "What do you want?"

"Look, I've got troubles," said Henry. "It'll take a miracle to solve them, too."

Ashtaru resumed his cross-legged position. "Tell me all about it," he invited genially. "I can read your mind, but that's too much trouble."

Henry took off his glasses and rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. "It's like this," he said. "Barron College isn't so terribly large. It has an archeology department simply because of Craigie. Distinguished man, you know, greatest living authority on ancient Mesopotomia."

"Bah! No man who wraps me —*me*—in burlap is an authority on anything. But go on."

"The president, Muttonhead —um, I mean Dr. Wilkes—established the department just so Craigie would come here. Which he did. I joined him as assistant professor a little over a year ago, after getting my own Ph.D. They do say my thesis on the origins of the Havasupai was a good job."

"Who on earth," wondered Ashtaru, "wants to write about a bunch of Indians when they can write about me?"

"I didn't know about you then," said Henry diplomatically. "Well, anyway, I like it here. I have—um—apart from the fact that archeologists don't have too easy a time finding jobs, I—" He blushed. "I've got personal reasons for wanting to stay in Southmeadow."

"A woman," nodded Ashtaru. "It always is."

"More like an angel," said Henry reverently. "Eileen Wilkes, the president's daughter. She's divine. She's so beautiful it hurts me to look at her."

"You haven't a chance," said Ashtaru. "Nobody who takes that attitude ever does. Never mind, you have me. I'm also divine and beautiful."

Henry ignored the remark. "She doesn't seem to be—approachable, if that's what you mean," he admitted. "Oh, she's nice and friendly, but she goes pretty steady with Richard Macalester. He's assistant professor of physics. The husky extroverted type. Star halfback in his undergraduate days. Handsome. Personable. Energetic. He'll go far. I hate his guts."

"I need another libation," said Ashtaru.

Henry poured it for him. The god hiccoughed. "Strong stuff," he rumbled, rubbing his stomach. "But good, good. Wouldn't Marduk like to be swilling some of this now? The big lout!"

"Craigie's contract, like mine,

expires in a couple of months," said Henry. "He could renew it, of course, but he wrote that he isn't going to. Has a better offer from the University of Istanbul. Therefore, no Craigie. Therefore, I'm the whole archeology department, if it lasts. If Wilkes—he runs everything, the trustees are just his yes-men—if Wilkes renews my contract, I'll be the new head, at a higher salary of course. Salary enough to get married on."

"Hiccup!" said Ashtaru.

"If she'd marry me, that is," said Henry morosely. "But to go on. Wilkes isn't very enthusiastic about continuing the department, now that he won't have a Big Name to list in the catalogues. He as good as told me, when Craigie's letter arrived, that I'd better start looking for a new job. There's an added influence pushing him in that direction. Macalester is around the house all the time, squiring Eileen and buttering up the old man. He wants Wilkes to discontinue my department and apply the money to the physics section. Especially to giving everybody over there a raise, so that an assistant physics professor will have enough to get married on."

He spread his hands. "Okay, that's my problem. If you're a god, go on, solve it for me."

"Brother," said Ashtaru, "it's insoluble. You're licked before you start."

"Fine god you are!" snorted Henry.

"Never mind," said Ashtaru consolingly. "There are plenty of women. I can furnish you as many slave girls as you want. Pull 'em out of time, you know. Forty fabulous Phoenicianettes!" He leered and hiccoughed again.

"It's illegal," said Henry. "Anyway, I only want one girl. *The* girl."

"Whaddaya wanna stick in this crummy job for, anyway?" bellowed Ashtaru. "I been reading minds on the way here. I learned about, um, town further west called Ellay. We'll go to Ellay and start my cult going again. You can be high priest. Sacrifices! Offerings! Fertility ceremonies! Whoops! Gimme another libation."

"You've had too many already," said Henry. He got up and picked Ashtaru off the floor.

"Let me down!" bawled the god, kicking in the air and hammering the man's arm with his tiny fists. "Let me down before I smite you with lightnings, you—you—blasphemer!"

"Now you listen to me," said Henry. It was as if the frustration and resentment in him came to a sudden focus. He shook the

idol till the bass trumpetings quieted. "You shut up and listen to me! You may be a god, I don't know. I'm ready to believe anything now. Only you've got to prove it. This is a skeptical era. People don't just take things on faith anymore. You've got to show them.

"Okay, so you're a god. So you can work miracles. Prove it! Work me a miracle."

There was a cunning glitter in Ashtaru's beady eyes. "I can do it, all right," he said. "I can make this girl fall all over you. I can blast this Macalaster character into a greasy ash-heap."

"No, no, that's illegal," said Henry hastily.

"I can pull any damn miracle you want out of thin air," said the god. "Only I don't work for nothing, you know. I'll stop the earth in its course—for the right price."

"What do you want?" asked Henry resignedly. "No human sacrifices, now."

"You get me a temple," said Ashtaru. "You get me a temple such as I had in holy Babylon. I was an important god, I was."

"Then how come nobody's ever heard of you?"

"I was so important they were afraid to write my name down. But I had a temple, and I want one like it. A terraced courtyard, with gardens and singing birds and fountains. Fountains of whiskey. The temple had columns of malachite and walls of jade and beams of cedar covered with beaten gold. My altar was crusted with diamonds. I had five hundred—no, five thousand priests and slaves, fifty elephants, a thousand horses. A ton of incense was burned to me every year, a ram was sacrificed daily—"

"If I could do all that," said Henry wearily, "I wouldn't need you."

"No temple, no miracles," said Ashtaru smugly.

Henry set the idol on his desk. "Look, I've got to go out for awhile," he said. "Be a good god and wait here for me, will you? Don't go running around outside. We—we'll say this is your temple till I can get a better one. Okay?"

"Oh, all right." Ashtaru toddled over to the edge and lay on his belly to slide open the drawer below. He reached down and pulled out one of the Havana cigars which were Henry's only expensive vice. "Ah, incense!"

"Hey!" yelped Henry.

Ashtaru bit the end off the cigar. An almost invisibly small jag of lightning crackled out of nowhere and lit it. Another needle-thin thunderbolt brought a passing fly to earth. He inhaled luxuriously and leaned

back against the inkwell.

"All right," he repeated. "Now that my temple has been duly sanctified with incense and a sacrifice, it will be suitable for the time being. You may go, priest."

"Thanks," snarled Henry. He strode from the office and slammed the door after him.

Ashtaru grinned fatly and gestured with the cigar. The forgotten bottle of bourbon floated up and settled in his hands.

It was one of those incredible mid-April days with which, on alternate years, Minnesota tries to atone for its climate. The early afternoon sky was soft and clear overhead, feathery clouds sailing lazily on a whisper of breeze, a sweet drunkenness of spring in the sunny air. The campus was broad and green and gracious, a sweep of grass and arbors between mellowed brick walls down toward the small lakes where a few canoes drifted. Undergraduates littered the grounds, a few making some pretense of study, most simply lapping up sunshine and the sight of passing coeds. Barron is a rich man's college and as such draws more than its share of good-looking female students, which in turn, some cynics maintain, accounts for the touching loyalty that brings old grads back year after repetitive year.

Henry slouched along the walks, hands in pockets, head down, unaware of the greetings of his colleagues as they went by. He'd come out to think, an operation which seemed impossible in Ashtaru's presence.

So he had a god on his hands. An authentic, live, honest-to-Marduk Babylonian god. What in hell was he going to do about it?

He couldn't have drawn Shamash or Nabu or any of the other big ones whose habits were known to be reliable, he thought bitterly. Oh, no, not he! He had to get Ashtaru, the most incompetent blabbermouth this side of Elysium. A cheapskate who bummed cigars and refused to work even a little miracle without payment in advance. A lecher who wanted to hold public fertility ceremonies. It hadn't helped his troubles a bit, simply added an extra one.

It isn't bad enough that I'll be fired, he thought. I have to be Ashtaru's high priest too! Well, my father always wanted me to enter the ministry, though I doubt if this is quite what he had in mind.

He grinned at the reflection, paused, and fished a cigar from his coat pocket. The smoke soothed him, blended with the faint murmur of whiskey in his veins and brought a certain

calm. Ashtaru had irritated him beyond rationality, but now he began to see possibilities.

He sat down under a tree and smoked out the cigar, turning his thoughts over in his mind. After all, even if Ashtaru was of no intrinsic use he was still a major discovery. The very fact of his existence as a living entity would bring big changes in archeological theory—and for that matter, he supposed vaguely, the physical sciences. The person who extracted all the information which Ashtaru implied would be famous.

And I, he thought with a rising tingle of excitement, I'm in on the ground floor!

By Nergal! He slammed a fist into his open palm. Why was he sitting here feeling sorry for himself? All he had to do was show old Muttonhead the god. A talking Babylonian idol was spectacular enough to get anybody's contract renewed.

He glanced at his watch. Been gone over an hour—so long? Maybe he'd better hunt up Wilkes now. He rose, dusted off his pants, and went with hurried stork-strides toward the administration building.

Someone else was coming the other way, approaching him, a party of three— He halted and stood with his heart beginning to race hotly in his breast.

Eileen Wilkes was tall, but the print dress clung to a figure which was the envy of every coed on campus. Her hair, beneath a broad white hat, was the color of tarnished gold, and her eyes were deeper and brighter blue than the heaven of April, and her voice was a low laughing melody. She walked with the gallantry of a young dryad in the first morning of the world, her chin lifted pridefully; she had a stubborn will but humor and compassion and intelligence to temper it. Of course, Henry was somewhat prejudiced.

As is often the case, her family was a bit of a drawback. President Wilkes was on her left, a rotund pompousness with a florid look and manner that years of commencement addresses and after-dinner speeches had developed almost beyond human endurance. Eileen could tell him what to do, but she was the only living being who was able.

Henry's joy was a little cooled by the spectacle of Richard Macalester. The young physicist looked disgustingly breezy and distinguished in a vibrant, intense way. He was clad in white flannels, and Eileen was on his arm.

"Hi, Hank!" he boomed. The archeologist shuddered. "What's new in ancient Rome?"

"Ah, Dr. Martinmas," said

Wilkes rather stiffly to him.

"Hello, Henry," said Eileen. She smiled at him, leaving his knees boneless, but her cool voice was heartbreakingly friendly—merely friendly. He shifted from one foot to another, acutely aware of his own gauntness and rumpled clothing.

When he first came here, he remembered wistfully, Eileen had been more companionable than simple politeness required. She'd come around to his office and sat on the desk, swinging one trim leg and listening with interest to his accounts of the evolution of Havasupai stonework. She'd gone to dances and movies with him, had him over for dinner—Oh, he'd had his hopes, he'd laid his careful plans. Never done a thing or said a word to offend her, always the perfect gentleman—asked her what she'd like to do, deferred to her whims—even after that magic night dancing on the pavilion by the lake, drunk with moonlight and her, he'd carefully shaken her hand at her door, venturing only to hold it somewhat longer than necessary.

Well, she was going about with Macalester now and there wasn't much he could do. Unless somehow, through Ashtaru—

"Dr. Wilkes," he said, forcing steadiness into his tones, "I've been going through Craigie's last shipment and made a really astonishing discovery. I wonder if you'd care to come have a look at it."

"Well, thank you, thank you, but I am a little busy now," answered the president. "If you wish to make an appointment with my secretary—"

"Oh, let's go and see it, Dad," said Eileen. "It'll only take a minute, and I've always been interested in the old remnants."

"Sure," said Macalester. He grinned at Henry, with a frank and manly smile. "Can't take too long, old fellow. Eileen and I are going out on the lake, you know. Really, Martinmas, if you don't have classes you shouldn't waste a day like this dusting off broken pottery."

Henry clenched his teeth. "I thought you were doing important research," he said. "You were telling us about it all afternoon at Mrs. Wilkes' tea last week."

"Of course, of course." Macalester waved an airy hand. "Field theory applied to atomic nuclei. I really think I've latched onto something big. May change all history once it's put to engineering use. But we're human too, aren't we, Eileen?"

They were walking toward Henry's office now. The girl turned to the archeologist: "What is this thing you've

suddenly found?" she asked.

He smiled, stretching the moment out, savoring his triumph. "Wait and see," he chortled. "Wait and see. It'll change a lot of ideas in a lot of fields. Better hold up on that, uh, nuclear theory till you have the information on this, Macalester."

The physicist laughed and squeezed Eileen's arm in humorous intimacy. "So now you find the Chaldeans knew more about the atom than we do, eh?" he chuckled. "I suppose they got their knowledge from Atlantis."

"Atlantis," said Henry stiffly, "was invented by Plato in his *Critias*. I have some observable facts to show you."

"Um—it is really revolutionary, eh?" Wilkes stroked his ample chin. "Hm, most interesting if you're right, most interesting. Ah—might it be possible to get a preliminary report out soon? The catalogues will be going to press and it doesn't hurt a bit, you know, it doesn't hurt a bit, hah, hah, hah!" He laughed in Henry's direction as one man of the world at another.

"Hah, hah, hah!" echoed Henry dutifully.

They entered the cool dimness of Stockton Hall and went down the inside stairs for the basement level to which Henry had been relegated.

"Be prepared for a surprise," he said hastily. "You won't believe it at first."

"We trust our own senses, Dr. Martinmas," said Wilkes. It was not clear whether he was using the plural or the regal *we*.

"Even if you see a live Babylonian god?" challenged Henry.

"Certainly! I know when—*what?*"

They stopped dead still, looking at him with uncomprehending eyes. "I knew you wouldn't believe it," laughed Henry. "You think I'm seventeen kinds of polka-dotted liar, don't you?" Confidence swelled in him. "Eileen and gentlemen, I am the high priest of Ashtaru the Terrible!"

"You are not!" fumed Wilkes. "Members of the faculty can't hold outside posts without permission."

"Look, old man," said Macalester in an offensively soothing voice, "you feel all right, don't you?" He pushed Eileen back with one arm, muttering dramatically, "Better get behind me."

"Come on in, folks, and meet a god," Henry bowed. He was a little lightheaded.

Eileen thrust Macalester aside and came up to the archeologist. There was a shining look about her which he had never seen. "Henry," she whispered, "Henry, is it *true?* It *can't* be."

"Come see for yourself," he invited grandly.

She backed away a step, a tiny frown between her brows, and he realized that a sensitive nose could probably catch a whiff of bourbon on his breath. Oh, well —just wait!

They went down the hall toward his office door. Wilkes was puffing. "This is most irregular," he said, "Most irregular! How does one address a god? Where does he sit at table? To whom does one say grace then? Must he register as an alien?" He caught himself and harrumphed. "Dr. Martinmas, we appreciate your little joke, but I am a busy man and—*what's that?*"

Henry stopped dead in front of his door. Then they all heard it, drifting out of the office and the storeroom behind the office.

Somebody was whanging a gong. Someody else was playing a whole orchestra of flutes, and it was the most lascivious, abandoned music which had been heard since Nero. Tambourines were rattling, bells were jingling, lyres were plunking, and lusty drum-thumps beat a suggestive undertone to the *teedle-eedle-eedle* of the flutes. And there was a chorus of female giggling, and a masculine voice like a drunken foghorn was singing the unprintably vile *Cathusalem* in tones that shook the walls.

"Oh, God, no!" screamed Henry. "I forgot that whiskey! He's blotto!"

He opened the door and peered in with a hideous premonition. The reality was worse. Ashtaru was throwing a Babylonian orgy.

He sat on the desk, crowned with vine leaves and melted butter, waving the fatal bottle in one hand while the other explored the person of a dancing girl. Casks of wine were heaped on the floor, many overturned and spilling their contents. A swarm of slaves was playing the music, stopping occasionally to refresh themselves with a drink or a girl. The dancers had by now shed almost everything except a few beads and were going into contortions which Henry would have sworn were physically impossible. It was like a fever dream by DeMille.

"Come in, come in!" roared Ashtaru. "I been savin' one f' you!"

"You bloody bum!" howled the archeologist. "You bungler! You sot!"

The god stiffened with wrath. "A bum, am I?" he shouted. "All right, then! You take care o' this 'f you so smart!" He grew rigid. The assorted male and female slaves shrank back in mute terror from his displeasure.

Macalester pushed Henry aside and thrust himself into the room. There he stood in frozen awe while the other two entered behind him. Eileen screamed. Wilkes clutched his heart.

"It's that damned god!" wailed Henry. "He's responsible!" He rushed over to the idol. "Ashtaru, put this mess back where it came from!"

"Won't," said the god without moving his lips.

Macalester whistled and shook his head. "Man, oh, man," he breathed, "when these quiet ones break loose they sure go all the way, don't they?"

Wilkes found a gasping breath. "Martinmas," he bellowed, "take those creatures away this instant!"

"I can't," cried Henry desperately. "Ashtaru brought them here. If I'd known, sir—"

"Henry," sobbed Eileen, "Henry, how could you?"

"It was easy," said Ashtaru behind the archeologist's back.

"Shut up!" yelled Henry.

"Oh!" Eileen shrank back against the wall.

"No, not you!" Henry danced in his torment. "You!"

Wilkes lifted his pince-nez to his eyes. "This is the most reprehensible spectacle I have ever imagined a depraved mind could even dream," he choked. He still managed somehow to be sonorous. "That anyone should even wish to look at something so revolting—" He riveted his gaze on the most lissome of the dancers. "Incredible!"

"Ah, dry up, Muttonhead, grab one an' le's get on with the party," said Ashtaru impatiently.

"Martinmas!" Wilkes' voice rose to a howl. "You dare cap your insolence by addressing *me* as—as—"

"Muttonhead," supplied Ashtaru helpfully.

"Thank you. As Muttonhead—*What am I saying?*" Wilkes stormed over to Henry and shook his fists in the young man's agonized face. "This settles it!" he shouted. With an effort, he added more calmly, "Needless to say, the police will be here as soon as I can summon them." He looked back at the dancers and readjusted his pince-nez. "Revolting!"

"Come, Eileen," said Macalester, taking her about the waist. "Let me bring you out of all this."

She turned those glorious eyes back on the petrified Henry. Ashtaru must have made some signal, because a dark-haired Babylonian wench was just in the process of throwing herself into the archeologist's arms. With a little cry, Eileen turned and ran out of the door.

Wilkes went last, going backward and keeping his eyes on the dancers, presumably lest they attack him. "Good-bye, Martinmas!" he snapped, and stamped out. A moment later he stuck his head back in the door and swept the room with a final look. "Disgusting!" he said.

Henry slumped in his chair before the desk and buried his face in his arms.

"Now d'you see I c'n work miracles?" said Ashtaru belligerently.

"I see you can ruin my career and my life," groaned Henry.

"I'm uh god!" Ashtaru thumped his chest. "I'm Ashtaru the Terrible, an' I do what I wanna!"

He coughed sharply.

Henry sat up, pushing the insistent Babylonian dancer away. "You're a fake!" he snarled bitterly. "All you're good for is lousing things up. You should'a stayed buried. Ashtaru the Ass!"

The god drew himself up to his full eighteen-inch height. "Be careful," he boomed. "Guard you' tongue, mortal, lessh you bring the ligh'nin's o' Ashtaru down to consume you wi' fire."

Henry grabbed the bottle from his hands. "Gimme that!" screamed Ashtaru.

"Fake." Henry took a long drag. "Bazaar-god! Pot-god! Bungle-god! If you were fighting for Babylon, it's not strange Sennacherib won."

The amorous slave-girl sidled up on his left. He pushed her back. "Go 'way," he said petulantly. "Don't bother me now."

"Have a care, mortal," growled Ashtaru. "The patience o' me ish great, but the wrath ish terrible."

"If you're so smart, why didn't you conjure things like this up in the desert to while away the time?" asked Henry.

Ashtaru looked embarrassed. "Well, I do need uh shrine an' uh high priesh or I got a'mosh no power," he admitted. Then, ominously: "But there's no reason now why I can' slay muh priesh 'n' fin' me 'nother."

"Go ahead," jeered Henry. "I dare you."

"I might conshume all thish town," hedged Ashtaru. "I mi' make the earth shwallow up thish whole nation. When I get angry I don' know m' own shtrength."

"Horse maneuvers!"

"All right!" bellowed Ashtaru in a drunken boiling of rage. He stamped his feet. "All right, you ashed for it! Now shall the unleashed wrath o' Ashtaru the Terrible ut-ter-ly conshume you wi' fire an' bring all the worksh o' you' days down about you' ashes. Come ligh'nin'! Come

rain an' wind! Come earshquake! Deshtroy him!"

A miniature thunderclap pattered overhead, and Henry felt a mild electric shock as small blue bolts leaped crackling about the room. The floor trembled just the tiniest bit. A little black cloud formed over the desk and poured about half a bucketful of rain down.

The slaves screamed in panic and crowded into the farthest corner. Henry grinned mirthlessly and upended the bottle again. "Go ahead," he invited. "Bring on your lightning."

"Tha'sh it ri' there!" chattered Ashtaru. "Can' you *see?*"

"Sure. A few volts, maybe. I could do better with an automobile battery. I told you, Ashtaru, you're a very small god."

Suddenly the idol collapsed on the desktop, screaming and beating it with his fists and kicking it with his feet. Henry took another long luxurious swallow of bourbon.

"It was obvious enough," he said. "The ancient world was full of little local gods like you. Gods of a town, a street, a house, mildly helpful or harmful and therefore to be humored with an occasional short ritual or cheap offering. No wonder your name hasn't been recorded. Nobody outside your owner's house ever heard anything about you!"

"That isn' so," gulped Ashtaru, rubbing the tears from his eyes. "I had uh whole street, I did."

"Pot-god!" said Henry bitterly. "Alley-god! All you could do was get me in trouble, you—you—you idol of the marketplace!"

Ashtaru burst into fresh weeping. "Go ahead," he sobbed. "Beat me. Abuse me. I'm jus' a li'l bazaar-god. I haven' anythin' t' shay. Ever'body picks on me. You might ash well."

"You're drunk," said Henry. "You're a drunken swine." He took another long pull.

The girl came behind him and threw her arms about his neck. He shuddered. "Ashtaru, get this evidence out of here before the cops come!"

"You're a hell of a party-pooper," snuffled Ashtaru.

"Well, save some wine," said Henry. "We'll need that."

Ashtaru waved his hands and with small cracks of displaced air the slaves were gone. A few scattered veils, flutes, and blossoms lay among the wine-puddles.

"And now," said Henry, "you've prevented my arrest, I suppose. But that's not going to give me my job back. It's not going to convince the girl I love I'm not a rounder. What'll you do about that, huh? What?"

"I can' do anythin'," sobbed Ashtaru. "Go on, bawl me out. Kick me. I got it coming. An' I'm helplessh. You're free to bully me."

He blew his nose. "I'd hoped f' sho mush," he whimpered. "I didn' really expec' to get that temple, Dr. Martinmas. Honest I didn'. I jush' thought there wouldn' be no harm in tryin'. But it's cold an' lonesome out in the deshert, Mr. High Priesh, sir. All I really want is uh li'l shrine, an' maybe some offers now 'n' then, jush' flowers 'n' things. I don' need mush. But a god's got to have uh home the same as anybody elshe."

Henry was beginning to feel the alcohol. What the devil—he'd never had a chance with Eileen anyway. And Southmeadow was a hole, he'd be glad to shake its dust off his feet. Sure, what the heck, Ashtaru was a stranger in a strange land, lonely, scared, he'd wanted to give a party for his only friend and it wasn't his fault that notions of propriety had changed.

He patted the god on the shoulder. "Cheer up," he said. "It's not that bad. We'll make out."

"My friend," blubbered Ashtaru sentimentally. "My dear ol' pal."

Sirens wailed outside. The entire Southmeadow police force, accompanied by the sheriff and the fire department, poured into the office.

"Where are they?" barked the chief.

"Where are who?" asked Henry innocently.

"Where are those dancing girls?" cried the sheriff.

"Dancing girls?" Henry raised his eyebrows. "Dancing girls?" He looked at the idol. "Do we know any dancing girls, Ashtaru?"

"The very thought!" Ashtaru lifted his hands in pious horror.

"You've hidden them, you selfish rat!" accused the fire chief.

"Any dancing girls you find, you can have," said Henry.

"That's better," said the sheriff. "Start looking, boys!"

Half an hour later, they had to leave. A few scraps of transparent silk are not evidence.

"Poor Dr. Wilkes," sighed Henry to the police chief. "But these brilliant men always seem to crack early." He extended one of the several clay wine-jugs which Ashtaru had kept. "Have a nip."

They had several nips before departing. Then man and god settled down to some serious sorrow-drowning.

Hours later, the party was going good. Henry still firmly declined dancing girls, but there

was no harm in pulling a few congenial Babylonians, Egyptians, and Minoans out of the past, swapping stories and song with them—Henry confirmed a suspicion that the standard dirty jokes are of prehistoric origin—and forgetting that there ever had been an outside world and a girl named Eileen.

He was teaching *Sam Hall* to Pharaoh Amenhotep III when a thought struck him. He leaned over and shook Ashtaru.

"Hey!" he said.

"Oh, my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall," boomed Ashtaru.

"Hey! Wake up! Listen!"

"Yes, my name it is Sam Hall, it is Sam Hall."

"Ashtaru!"

"Oh, my name it is Sam Hall,

"And I hate you one and all—

Hugh, whuzzat? Whassamattuh?"

"Ashtaru, these men 're from diff'nt ages—diff'nt languages—howinell we talkin' t' each other?"

"Yes, I hate you one all and all, damn your eyes."

"Ashtaru!"

"Hm? Oh, uh, wuzzamuzza—Taught you, 'course. Ain't I uh god? I'm Ashtaru the Terrible. I c'n do anything. *Oh, I killed a man, they say, so they say—"*

"You taught us? How? How?"

"Mazhic, son, mazhic." Ashtaru bowed unsteadily and shook his hands together above his head. I know all'a lang'ages ever spoke, I do. Didn' have nothin' t' do f' twenty-six hundred years but lie—lay—lie in 'at al' desh-ert, readin' minds—learned ever' lang'age ever was spoke—" Ashtaru blinked owlishly at the man. "How y' think I knew English, huh?"

"Their alphabets, Ashtaru? *Their alphabets?"*

He picked up the idol. "Ashtaru," he shouted, "Ashtaru, we're on our way!"

"Party-pooper," grumbled the god, but dismissed their guests.

Henry shook his head. The vision was clear, he was suddenly quite sobered by excitement though the exaltation remained.

"Archeology," he whispered. "The puzzles no one has ever solved. The whole lore of the past! Why, I can crack the Cretan alphabet, the Etruscan, the Mayan—"

"Would 'ey b'lieve you?" mumbled Ashtaru.

"Certainly. I'll publish the key, they'll try it, see that it works—and I'll always know where to dig—Ashtaru, I'm famous! I'm rich!" Henry kissed the terracotta face.

The god wiped himself with distaste. "Dancin' girls do better," he said grumpily.

"Come on, Ashtaru, let's go!"

Henry tucked the god under one arm and raced out of the building, babbling happily.

Eileen was sitting on the little wharf with Macalester. They looked up in some confusion as the wild-eyed figure bounded up to them, and rose uncertainly.

"Eileen!" cried Henry. "Eileen, I've done it!"

"I'll say you have," snapped Macalester. "Now see here, Martinmas—"

Henry thrust him aside and grabbed the girl and kissed her with enormous heartiness. "Eileen," he chattered, "Eileen, my darling, I've cracked every unknown alphabet in the world! I'm the new Champollion!"

"You're the new maniac!" Macalester seized him by the shoulder and whirled him around. "Look here, Martinmas—"

Macalester was picked up by an invisible force, shaken thoroughly, and dropped ungently on the grass.

"He's insane!" screamed Macalester and began to run.

"When I don't waste power on earthquakes," said Ashtaru, who seemed a little sobered by his wild ride, "I sling a pretty mean thunderbolt. Let's see now—"

A long, thin, jagged blue streak reached out and singed Macalester in the seat of the pants. He howled and doubled his speed. A small rainstorm formed over his head and followed him out of sight.

Henry turned back to the shrinking Eileen and held her with a sudden firm gentleness. Ashtaru climbed down his trousers to the wharf.

"I'm not crazy, Eileen," said the man earnestly. "I wouldn't hurt you for—oh, darling, I've just made the discovery of the ages and it's excited me, that's all. If your father won't reinstate me, it doesn't matter. I'll be getting offers from Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, Istanbul. And I love you. Will you marry me?"

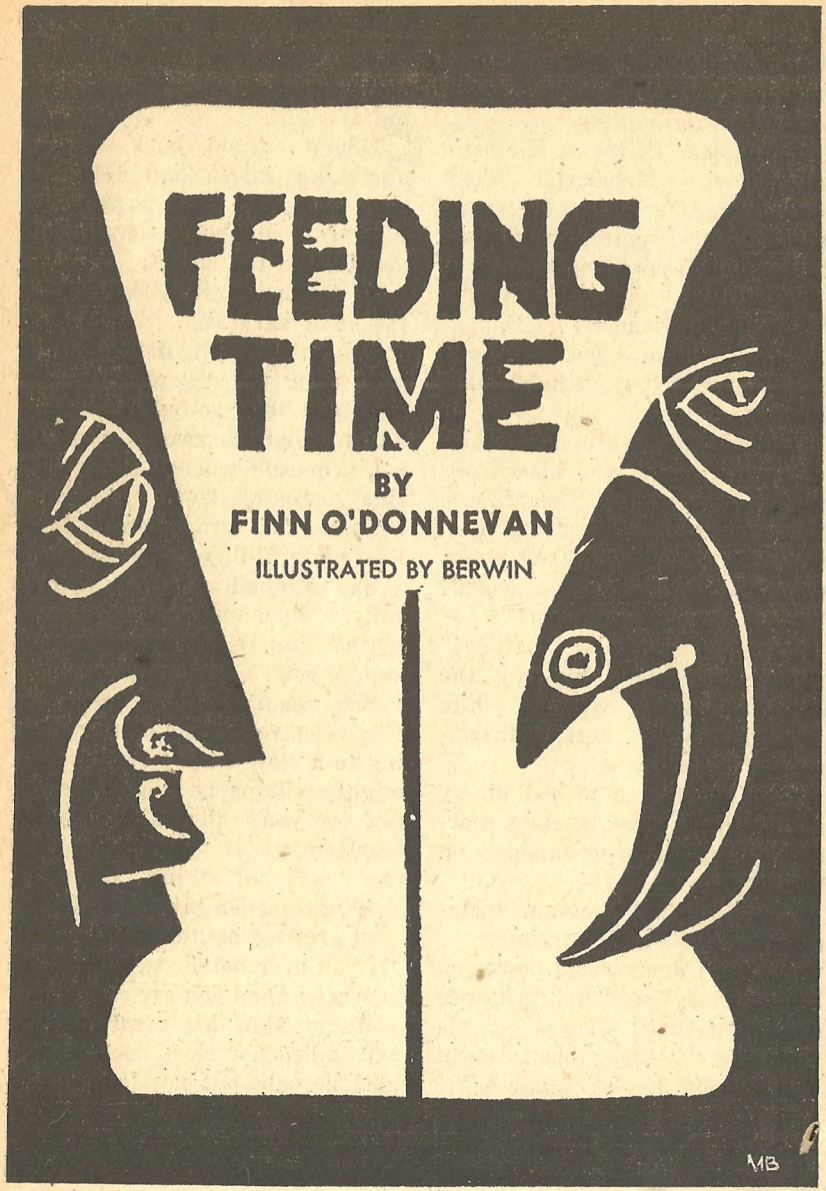
She studied Ashtaru doubtfully. "You mean it was the truth? You really have a Babylonian god?"

She regarded him narrowly. Her voice began doubtfully, rising to a slow fury. "That was a mighty wild party he was throwing for you," she said. "Henry Martinmas, if you ever try that sort of thing again—"

Henry opened his mouth. Ashtaru growled at him in Minoan: "If you ever bother to explain to her, man, then you *are* crazy!"

Henry shut his mouth again and pulled her close. She struggled fiercely but not long.

Ashtaru politely turned his back. He was sure now of a mantelpiece shrine, with incense and plenty of libations.


FEEDING
TIME
BY
FINN O'DONNEVAN
ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN
MB

The book wasn't quite what Treggis wanted, but it was too good a bargain to miss. Excitement, escape, a unique occupation, and free transportation—all for $1.50! It was out of this world....

Treggis felt considerably relieved when the owner of the bookstore went front to wait upon another customer. After all, it was essentially nerve-racking, to have a stooped, bespectacled, fawning old man constantly at one's shoulder, peering at the page one was glancing at, pointing here and there with a gnarled, dirty finger, obsequiously wiping dust from the shelves with a tobacco-stained handkerchief. To say nothing of the exquisite boredom of listening to the fellow's cackling, high-pitched reminiscences.

Undoubtedly he meant well, but really, there was a limit. One couldn't do much except smile politely and hope that the little bell over the front of the store would tinkle—as it had done.

Treggis moved towards the back of the store, hoping the disgusting little man wouldn't try to search him out. He passed half a hundred Greek titles, then the popular sciences section. Next, in a strange jumble of titles and authors, he passed Edgar Rice Burroughs, Anthony Trollope, Theosophy, and the poems of Longfellow. The further back he went the deeper the dust became, the fewer the naked light bulbs suspended above the corridor, the higher the piles of moldy, dog-eared books.

It was really a splendid old place, and for the life of him Treggis couldn't understand how he had missed it before. Bookstores were his sole pleasure in life. He spent all his free hours in them, wandering happily through the stacks.

Of course, he was just interested in certain types of books.

At the end of the high ramp of books there were three more corridors, branching off at absurd, weaving angles. Treggis followed the center path, reflecting that the bookstore hadn't seemed so large from the outside; just a door half-hidden between two buildings, with an old hand-lettered sign in its upper panel. But then, these old stores were deceptive, often extending to nearly half a block in depth.

At the end of this corridor two more book-trails split off. Choosing the one on the left, Treggis started reading titles, casually scanning them up and down with a practiced glance. He was in no hurry; he could, if he wished, spend the rest of the day here—to say nothing of the night.

He had shuffled eight or ten feet down the corridor before one title struck him. He went back to it.

It was a small, black-covered book, old, but with that ageless look that some books have. Its edges were worn, and the print on the cover was faded.

"Well, what do you know," Treggis murmured softly.

The cover read: *Care and Feeding of the Gryphon.* And beneath it, in smaller print: *Advice to the Keeper.*

A Gryphon, he knew, was a mythological monster, half lion and half eagle.

"Well now," Treggis mumbled to himself. "Let's see now." He opened the book and began reading the table of contents.

The headings went: 1. *Species of Gryphon.* 2. *A Short History of Gryphonology.* 3. *Subspecies of Gryphon.* 4. *Food for the Gryphon.* 5. *Constructing a Natural Habitat for the Gryphon.* 6. *The Gryphon During Moulting Season.* 7. *The Gryphon and . . .*

He closed the book.

"This," he told himself, "is decidedly—well, unusual." He flipped through the book, reading a sentence here and there. His first thought, that the book was one of the "unnatural" natural history compilations, so dear to the Elizabethan heart, was clearly wrong. The book wasn't old enough; and there was nothing euphemistic in the writing, no balanced sentence structure, ingenious antithesis and the like. It was straightforward, clean-cut, concise. Treggis flipped through a few more pages and came upon this:

"The sole diet of the Gryphon is young virgins. Feeding time is once a month, and care should be exercised—"

He closed the book again. The sentence set up a train of thought all its own. He banished it with a blush and looked again at the shelf, hoping to find more books of the same type. Something like *A Short History of the Affairs of The Sirens,* or perhaps, *The Proper Breeding of Minotaurs.* But there was nothing even remotely like it. Not on that shelf nor any other, as far as he could tell.

"Find anything?" a voice at his shoulder asked. Treggis gulped, smiled, and held out the black-covered, ancient book.

"Oh yes," the old man said, wiping dust from the cover of the book. "Quite a rare book, this."

"Oh, is it?" murmured Treggis.

"Gryphons," the old man mused, flipping through the book, "are quite rare. Quite a rare species of—animal," he finished, after a moment's thought. "A dollar-fifty for this book, sir."

Treggis left with his possession clutched under his thin right arm. He made straight for his room. It wasn't every day that one bought a book on the *Care and Feeding of the Gryphon.*

Treggis' room bore a striking resemblance to the second-hand bookstore. There was the same lack of space, the same film of gray dust over everything, the same vaguely arranged chaos of titles, authors and types. This evening Treggis didn't stop to gloat over his treasures. His faded *Libidinous Verses* passed unnoticed. Quite unceremoniously he pushed the *Psychopathia Sexualis* from the armchair, sat down and began to read.

There was quite a lot to the care and feeding of the Gryphon. One wouldn't think that a creature half lion and half eagle would be so touchy. There was also an interesting amplification of the eating habits of the Gryphon. And other data. For pure enjoyment, the Gryphon book was easily as good as the Havelock Ellis lectures on sex, formerly his favorite.

Towards the end, there were full instructions on how to get to the Zoo. The instructions were, to say the least, unique.

It was a good ways past midnight when Treggis closed the book. What a deal of strange information there was, between those two black covers! One sentence in particular he couldn't get out of his head.

"The sole diet of the Gryphon is young virgins." That bothered him. It didn't seem fair, somehow.

After an hour or so he opened the book again to the *Instructions for Getting to the Zoo.*

Decidedly strange, they were. And yet, not too difficult. Not requiring, certainly, too much physical exertion. Just a few words, a few motions. Treggis realized, suddenly, how onerous his bank-clerk job was. A stupid waste of eight good hours a day, no matter how one looked at it. How much more interesting to be a Keeper, in charge of the Gryphon. To use the special ointments during moulting season, to answer questions about Gryphonology. To be in charge of feeding. "The sole diet . . ."

"Yes-yes-yes-yes," Treggis mumbled rapidly, pacing the floor of his narrow room. "A hoax—but might as well try out the Instructions. For a laugh." He laughed hollowly.

There was no blinding flash, no clap of thunder, but Treggis was nevertheless transported, instantaneously so it seemed, to a place. He staggered for a moment, then regained his balance and opened his eyes. The sunlight was blinding. Looking around, he could see that someone had done a very good job of constructing *The Natural Habitat of the Gryphon.*

Treggis walked forward, holding himself quite well, considering the trembling in his ankles, knees and stomach. Then he saw the Gryphon.

At the same time the Gryphon saw him.

Slowly at first, then with ever-gaining momentum, the Gryphon advanced on him. The great eagle's wings opened, the talons extended, and the Gryphon leaped, or sailed, forward.

Treggis tried to jump out of the way in a single uncontrollable shudder. The Gryphon came at him, huge and golden in the sun, and Treggis screamed desperately, "No, no! The sole diet of the Gryphon is young—"

Then he screamed again in full realization as the talons seized him.

THE CRYSTAL BALL

Next issue brings a story by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt that has been requested for years. To anyone who has read *The Incomplete Enchanter* or *Castle of Iron* the mention of Harold Shea is inducement enough. The slightly wacky laws of the mathematics of magic discovered by Shea, added to a certain casual ineptitude—in spite of theory, he played by ear—have delighted readers for years.

Now, equipped with a wife—of all things!—he can't let well enough alone, but has to go traipsing back into the places where he left his old friends, saving them from fates sweeter than death! When he winds up in the land of the Finnish *Kalevala,* he discovers that magic depends on singing—and he never could carry a tune!

There'll also be stories by John Wyndham, Peter Phillips, Algis Budrys, and others. The Budrys story, incidentally, is one of those rare things—a science-fiction story which has to be considered as fantasy, and which is a little bit different from either!

Watch for it at your newsstand—or be sure not to miss it by sending $2.00 for six issues to Future Publications, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

THE NIGHT SHIFT

BY FRANK ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

Werewolves are supposed to haunt lonely, back-country roads. That seems a little silly, when you consider that most beasts of prey go where the game is thickest. Now at night, in the larger cities. . . .

I sat there letting the smoke drift out of my nostrils and running my fingers idly over the typewriter keys. The ideas weren't coming tonight; I couldn't concentrate. I'd start to think and my mind would twist away, as if it was tired of working and wanted to relax and think about the movies or what was on TV or what I had for supper that night.

The paper in my typewriter was discouragingly blank except for the heading: *The Night Shift, by Nick Golata.* There wasn't anything underneath it and I didn't have any idea of what should go there.

I took another drag on my cigarette, opened the window a little, and flicked it out, watching the tiny red ember fall through the night to the empty streets twenty stories down. The column was usually a natural for ideas. What goes on in Chicago after dark, when all the eight-to-fivers have gone to bed and the rest of humanity congregates in small, neighborhood bars or the big movie palaces downtown or scrubs its lonely way down the miles of corridors in deserted office buildings.

I filled my lungs with the cold, clean air and looked out over the city at night, a sea of blackness spotted here and there with the glare of neon and threaded with shining catwalks of strings of street-lamps. The city grows on you, like an old typewriter or a faithful automobile. You fall in

love with the bright lights and the rumble of the ancient elevated and the characters who work the night shift downtown.

It was mine, I thought, all mine. The darkness and the shadows and the few people on the deserted sidewalks.

I took one last look and then closed the window. This was going to be one of those nights when I had to call Sammy Baxa for material. I dialed his number and listened for the whirr and the clicks and the tinny silence when he picked up the receiver at his end.

"Hello, Sammy?" I said. "Got any news for the big city's Boswell?" His voice crackled back and I reached for a pencil and wrote down an address. It sounded like it was going to be serious business this time. "Sure thing, Sammy," I said soberly. "I'll meet you there, then."

I got my hat and coat and locked up the office for the night. That was one of the nice things about the column. If I ran out of items, people like Sammy could always furnish me with some.

I didn't even mind going to the city morgue to follow them up.

There were two of them waiting for me outside the ugly, brown structure on Chicago's west side. Big, blunt Sammy Baxa, captain of the downtown district, and a sharp-faced detective lieutenant named Rezabek.

We shook hands all around. "What happened?" I asked.

"A girl," Sammy said shortly. "Killed on her way home from work."

We went in to look at her. She was cold and hard as alabaster, lying on a slab in a room that smelled of formaldehyde and Lysol.

"She had her throat torn open," Sammy said.

"Knife or razor?"

"I said it was *torn*," Sammy repeated. I leaned closer. It didn't look neat, as a razor job usually does.

"Any relatives?"

Sammy shook his head. "None that we can trace. Just one of the anonymous army of file clerks, Nick. She lived in a cheap walk-up by the University, complete with hot-plate and bathroom-down-the-hall. Apparently she belonged to nobody and nobody belonged to her."

The thin and angular type, I thought, who keeps the confession magazines in business and writes fan letters and dreams of a home and husband in suburbia. One of the eager, pathetic, homely girls who are never noticed—and never missed.

"How did it happen?"

"Like you would expect. She

was working late at the office. She left it a little before midnight and Ed here found her about half an hour ago. She was really working, too, Nick."

I nodded. She wasn't pretty enough to be anything but a work-horse. "How about her boss?"

"Claims he knows nothing about it. He's staying downtown and the night clerk at his hotel has alibied for him. He'd checked in at the time she's supposed to have been killed."

"You don't have any idea who did it?"

"I'm not so sure it's a *who*," Sammy said. "Take another look."

I took a closer look at the body. There were teeth marks in the cold, firm flesh under the chin. Animal teeth marks.

"I think I get it," I said. "A public indignation piece. People shouldn't let their dogs roam Jackson Park or the University midway at night."

"She wasn't found in Jackson Park or on the midway," Rezabek cut in softly. "She was found downtown, in the heart of the Loop. Huddled in a doorway near the corner of LaSalle and Adams."

I had heard that Sammy had added a new man to the force but I hadn't really noticed Rezabek until now. He was a gaunt, thin man, with a chisel-shaped face, and I sized him up as being coldly competent. I resolved to get to know him better.

"I thought you ought to know about her first," Sammy said. "She should be good material for your column."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll use it as Chicago at night stuff—a killer with a trained dog stalking the canyons of LaSalle Street after dark."

Sammy jerked his thumb towards Rezabek. "You can prowl the Loop tonight with the Hungarian here, if you want to. She didn't have any relatives to push us, but we have to put a man on it for a little while anyways."

"Okay, Sammy," I said casually. "And thanks a lot for the information."

It was snowing out—the light, soft kind of snow that sifts inside your collar and freezes the back of your neck—when I met Rezabek about half an hour later. He was standing under one of the street lamps in front of the Board of Trade building, the light making unpleasant shadows on his feral face.

"Hope you weren't waiting long," I said. "I had to call my editor and tell him the column will be late."

"How much play do you think the papers will give all this?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "She was nobody. If it had happened any place but downtown, she wouldn't be worth a six-point notice in one edition. As it is, I suppose she'll rate a brief on the front page, but it won't amount to much."

We walked up LaSalle Street a little ways and he stopped in front of a shoe store where the doorway was set back from the street.

"She was found in there," he said, "crumpled against the door. You could see little drops of blood spattered on the snow all the way from the walk to where she lay."

I struck a match to look but the snow had sifted in and covered any marks.

"It's hard to think of vicious dogs roaming downtown," I said, "though I suppose it could happen. They could hide in the alleys or Grant Park during the day and come out at night."

"From the teeth marks, it must have been an awfully big dog," Rezabek said, "but I don't think it was. And I don't think it was anybody with a trained pooch that he could sic on people, either."

"Look," I encouraged, "you found the body. Why not tell me what you know about it? I'll work in a mention of you in the column. A personal plug."

He showed his teeth in a humorless grin. "All right, but it has its fantastic angles. It started snowing a little earlier this evening and we could follow her footsteps from the office building where she worked to here. Not many people were on the streets, you see, and since I found her just after it happened, we could still see her prints. She waited on the corner for a couple of minutes—apparently waiting for someone to meet her. A little later a car drove up and a man got out. He must have scared the girl for she started to run, with him following her."

"He followed her here?" I asked. "And tore her throat out?"

"There's more to it," he said. "Six steps from the curb the man's footprints stopped and the marks changed to *pad* prints."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "It's an unusual pitch but straight off the cob. All the little kids will write in and want to know what happened to his shoes and his clothes when he changed into a werewolf."

"He didn't have his shoes on. He was in his bare feet."

"You're kidding," I said. "Bare feet—in winter?" I stared at him. "The modern version, eh? Our modernized werewolf strips and waits inside his warm

car until he's ready to—change."

"Don't be stupid," he said. "I don't know how it was done but I doubt that it was supernatural. He was probably some whack with an iron claw set with animal teeth of some sort, like leopard men over in Africa, or something. As far as his bare feet go, that just convinces me he's a crackpot."

I felt a little better. For a moment I had begun to wonder.

We had walked over to the entertainment district, Chicago's Great White Way where the restaurants and movies and glittering bars are jammed together along Randolph and State Streets. Most of the shows had let out and the signs were dark, except for those on the all-night cafeterias.

"Just for the sake of argument," he mused, "what would be wrong with a twentieth century version of a werewolf?"

"Nothing," I said reluctantly. "If they existed a couple of hundred years ago, I suppose they'd be around today as well. The point is, they probably never existed in the first place."

"You could develop a case for them," he said. "A few hundred years ago, stories of werewolves and witches and the like were too widespread, too well rooted in the lives of the people to be just—stories. With all the smoke, there must have been a few small fires at the bottom of it."

"Modern psychologists would have an explanation for it," I said. "Simple-minded peasants who let the stories prey on their minds until they went off their rocker, thought *they* were werewolves and vampires, and tried to do somebody in, in the best werewolf or vampire tradition."

We got to Van Buren and started walking west, into a cold and snowbound no-man's-land of deserted streets and vacant buildings. Even the street lamps look cold and frosted and lonely.

"Besides," I said, my breath coming in little spurts of fog, "the main reasons we have for thinking that they existed at all in the past is the folklore, the stories that have been handed down about them. But you don't hear anybody running around yelling werewolf now."

He paused a moment to shoot a flashlight beam up a deserted alley. "A few hundred years ago," he said, "towns were small, families were well-knit, everybody knew everybody else. The whole community knew who died, when, and how. But take modern cities and consider the number of floaters and drifters and people who have no ties; the anonymous city public where nobody knows anybody. Have you

followed the statistics, the number of people who are murdered during the year? The unidentified and the unknown? They're forgotten within a day. Nobody knows who they are, nobody cares how they died."

A streetcar clanged its doleful way past us, tired faces looking blankly out of the frosted windows. It turned a corner and the noise of its wheels died, leaving only the creak of signs and the sound of our feet in the crisp snow.

It was turning colder, the air was acquiring a certain snap to it.

"I've got a room in an apartment hotel a few blocks down," he said. "You want to join me in some coffee and doughnuts? Get something warm to last us the rest of the night."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm not particularly hungry but I could go for some java."

The snow was gradually covering the sidewalks and the streets and outlining the windows in the buildings.

"You know," he said quietly, "the circumstances were just right for it tonight, though. The moon was full, for a brief period the weather was clear, and the girl died sometime around midnight."

It was just a sleeping room, with a small single bed and a stove and icebox. A bureau was against one wall, along with a couple of dirty, paper covered shelves that served as a pantry. A little closet opened off the room.

"You know," he said, "I haven't got a morbid mind but thinking about something like that keeps your imagination in trim. You take old myths and put them in modern dress, bring them up to date. Like imagining, for example, that all the werewolves and vampires immigrated to the city and settled there."

He put a pot of water on to boil and got out a little jar of powdered coffee. I preferred fresh brewed but when you live out of one room, I could see where things would be reduced to their essentials.

"I suppose," I said, "that they'd hide during the day and come out at night."

"I imagine so. The city at night would belong to them, naturally."

I took the cup he offered and added a little sugar.

"Of course, it's got flaws in it," I said. "For one thing, people would start finding too many spare bodies with two little holes in the throat or else looking like they had been mangled by wolves; messy little details like that. It would be awkward."

"I don't think you'd ever hear about them," he said. "They'd have enough of an organization so they could cover up, wipe out their tracks. For instance, like the girl tonight. If Sammy wanted to, he could cover on her—see that no information got out, that nobody knew anything about it. He would never report it, nobody would ever hear about it. The only loose end would be a room on the south side whose occupant had disappeared, leaving behind a few cheap dresses, a half loaf of bread, and an empty peanut butter jar."

It was warm in the room. I took off my suit-coat and unbuttoned the neck of my shirt.

"I like the peanut butter jar, it adds a certain touch. To finish it off, you should say that the landlady would confiscate the clothing for unpaid rent, throw out the bread and the empty jar, and rent it to somebody else. No traces left, no indication that the girl had ever existed. Her boss would hire somebody else to take her place—someone who was prettier, no doubt—and that would be that."

I loosened my belt a little. "Only it wouldn't work like that. It's a reporter's job to snoop around and find out things like that. Sammy wouldn't dare to hide it. If he did, he'd find himself smeared all over the papers next day."

"It was just a straw man," he said. "You carry any idea like that far enough and it would break down—heaven help us if it didn't. More coffee?"

I shoved my cup forward. "I don't think they'd be organized at all anyways," I said. "I think they'd all be lone wolves."

He laughed. "Good pun, though I don't agree with you. I think they'd be organized into something like mobs. You know, cut up the nation into territories so a different gang would control each territory, the werewolves controlling Chicago and suburbs and vampires New York, for instance."

"Witches would probably have the franchise in Providence and Salem," I said. "They'd want to get even with Cotton Mather."

I loosened my collar still more and unbuttoned the next button down on my shirt.

"Say," he said suddenly, "I meant to show you something when we came up here. Just a minute." He went into the closet and came back with a few photographs. "I took these earlier this evening."

They were very clear. They showed the body lying in the doorway, the crimson splotches on the snow, and the footprints that led up to her and then

abruptly weren't footprints any more.

"I thought you'd be interested," he said.

"They're nice shots," I said. "Develop them yourself?"

He nodded and pointed to the clothes closet. "My darkroom."

"Very nice," I murmured. I stared at them for a moment more, then gave them back to him. I yawned, bent down, and started to fumble with my shoes.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just loosening my shoelaces."

The city was cold and quiet, with just a faint hint of dawn in the east. Nobody was on the streets, except maybe a few early paper boys and the milk men.

I could hear Sammy behind me, sniping the end off a cigar, then scratching a match with his thumbnail and lighting up.

"What's the column going to be about today?" he asked.

"Something simple," I said. "How elevator operators while away the night in the big buildings downtown. It was a column I had in reserve; I called the editor earlier this evening and told him to run it. I didn't feel like writing a new one."

I turned and slowly shredded a letter into a steel ashtray and lit a match to it.

"Let me guess," Sammy said. "A fan letter from a celebrity-struck file clerk who wanted to meet you some night."

I didn't say anything. I watched it burn, then added a couple of crumpled negatives. They poofed into flame and died, powdery cinders.

"You should be more careful whom you hire, Sammy," I said.

"I see you got the photographs, though."

"Not without a struggle; he thought he was going to blackmail us with them."

"What happened to him?"

I grinned wolfishly. "He's lying in his room with his throat torn out."

I turned back to the window and looked at the frozen city. The nice people, the good people, the eight-to-fivers ran it during the day. But Sammy and I handled it on the night shift. We—and the others.

"That lousy vampire!" I said coldly. "He certainly should have known better than to try and muscle in on our territory!"

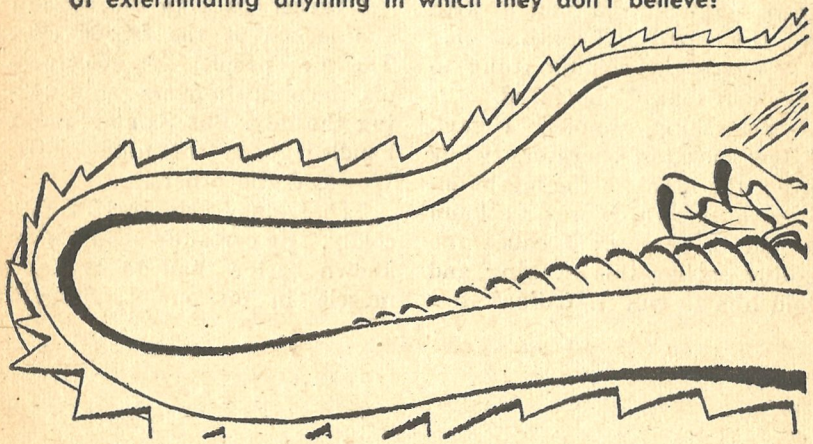


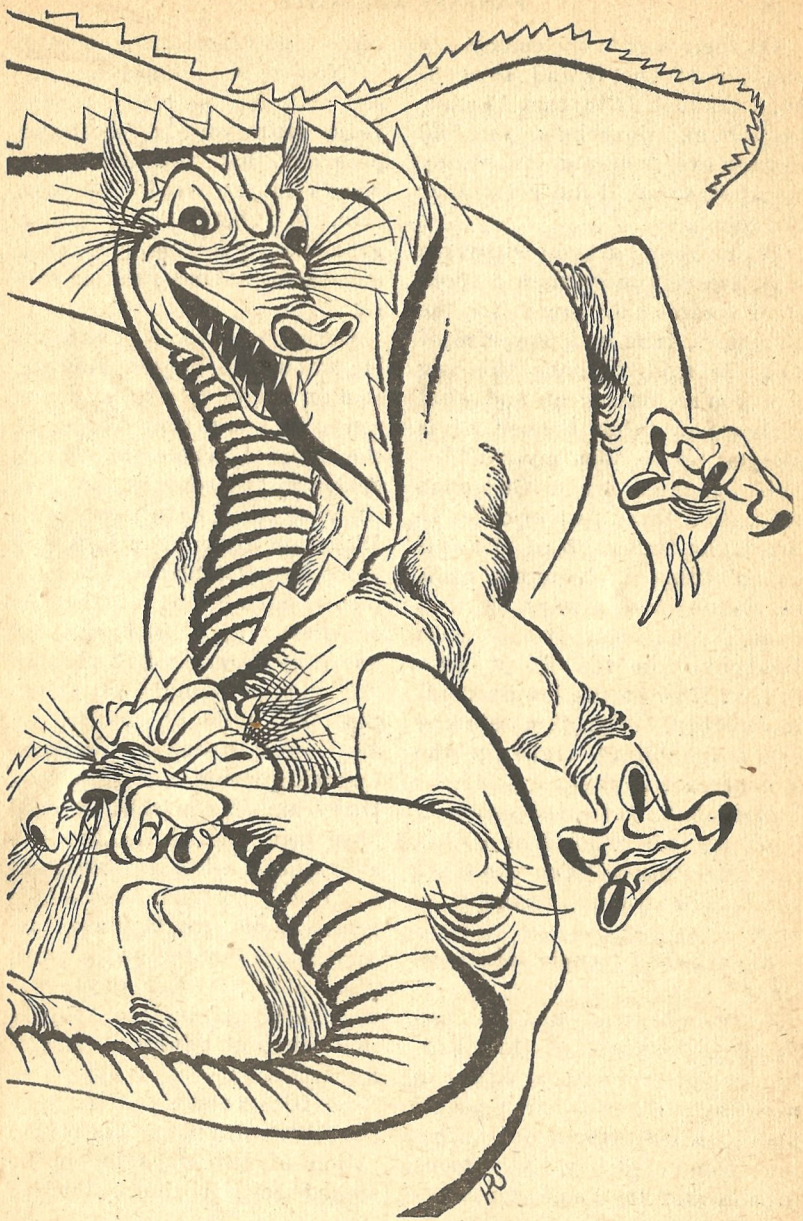
Dragonfires

BY STEVE FRAZEE

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

The dragons were desperate for fuel and considering their old enemies, who had a wonderful new substitute for charcoal. Unfortunately, men have a bad habit of exterminating anything in which they don't believe!





On their way to the emergency meeting of the Grand Dragonhood Council, Dithyram 14 gave his chum, Gorgobub, the old narrow eye. A deep green, steady eye it was, but it did not bother Gorgobub.

A fine young dragon Dithyram was, scarcely more than a thousand years old, broad in the shoulders, trim and powerful of tail. He said, "What's this big plot you're hinting at, and what makes you think Coober 13 is stoking up to burn my tail?"

He grunted when Gorgobub walked on three feet in order to brush the tiniest bit of Beowulf pollen from a gleaming scale. Gorgobub had always been a dandy, but now—what with Dragonvia in the fix it was, dragon fires at the lowest point in history, extinction staring every inhabitant right in the stomach . . .

Gorgobub gave the scale a final pat and grinned at Dithyram's irritation. "You can't tell what new young dragonettes may—"

"I asked a couple of questions!"

Gorgobub, who had a good thing as manager of the filtration plant, minced a little in avoiding a dust-laden Beowulf plant, named after a human being conquered by a famous dragon warrior some years before in honorable combat.

"You've been knocking yourself out for so many hundred years with your reforestration program that you don't know what's in the wind," Gorgobub said. "I'd better wise you up gradually by letting you *start* to answer the second question yourself."

Gorgobub was a sharp one. He knew the angles. However, it didn't require a great deal of sense to know that Coober 13, the biggest wholesale charcoal dealer in the country, had been chewing his fat tail ever since Dithyram took Francipip away from him at a charcoal burners' picnic during one of the rare occasions when Dithyram had got away from his tree planting.

The very thought of Francipip, only child of old Bellapop 48, Grand Master of the Grand Council, brought a sigh from Dithyram. He wished it could have been one of the pre-Move sighs that used to curl blue flame from both nostrils. Even a little green flame would have been something, but the way charcoal was rationed these days there was barely enough to keep the inner fires at minimum level for existence.

So Dithyram sighed air, only slightly warm from his meager ration of two days before. He sighed several times, thinking

about Francipip. She had the most luscious angles of any dragonette in the land, trim pear-shaped scales, a tapering little tail with the cutest spine projections—and when she looked at him with her soft lavender eyes . . .

Watching from the corner of his eye. Gorgobub smiled and stroked his burnished flame-testers, antennae that would have been mustaches on the old foe, man. "Not in the least discounting the charms of Francipip—If I were the roaring type I might do a little tail-whomping for her favor myself—"

"Let's hear about this awful plot," Dithyram said.

"I was merely trying to say that your thinking must extend beyond Francipip. Charming though she is, she is a relatively minor prize in the coup that Coober 13 is planning—"

"Be careful how you make accusations against a Numbered One," Dithyram warned.

"Nuts!" Gorgobub said. "This is no time for musty tradition. Let's face facts, Dithy: we're starving to death and you know it. Coober saw it coming three hundred years ago and he's been laying plans all that time."

Gorgobub definitely did not look starved. His scales were shiny, his nostrils had a hard, gleaming sheen, and his well groomed flame-testers had a used look. The managership of the filtration plant always carried with it a knockdown on charcoal consigned to the filter beds, which was just one of the lesser evils that had seeped into dragon ethics since the Move eight hundred years before.

"I'll give you credit, Dithyram. If the Council hadn't hamstrung you with half enough dragonpower for your long-term reforestration plan, we might have pulled through. But it's too late now. This emergency session today isn't going to be the usual *yak-yak* deal that winds up with every dragon grumbling and going home to listen to his stomach growling until the next session."

Gorgobub was so deadly serious his rough spine extensions were erect instead of flopping in their usual devil-may-care fashion. But he wasn't so serious that he forgot to let Dithyram go ahead to break trail through a mass of thorny Sigurd vines, named after a man whom Dithyram's father had bested in fair fight in pre-Move days.

The way cleared, Gorgobub resumed his place at Dithyram's shoulder. "At this meeting one of Coober's henchdragons, probably Bendar, is going to propose that we move away at once."

Dithyram ploughed to a stop and shook the earth with a tremendous tail whomp. Gorgobub leaped ahead lightly, one foot over his nose. "No use to get my scales all dusty," he complained. "Besides, my sinus has been bothering—"

"We can't move!" Dithyram bellowed. "Any direction is Outside. In the last eight hundred years men have got so they don't believe in us any more. This is our last refuge!"

Gorgobub blew dust off his left front foot and polished the claws against his stomach. "You think Coober doesn't know that?"

Dithyram snorted. Merely warm air again, although he felt like hurling flame ten dragon-lengths (approximately two hundred and fifty-two feet). "You talk in circles!"

"We try to move Outside," Gorgobub said. "You know what men do to things they don't believe in. How many of us would get back after man-trouble started?"

"Darned few!" Dithyram scowled.

"Guess who would be one?"

"You!"

Gorgobub blinked his scarlet eyes and then smiled. "That's not what I was getting at, but since you mentioned it in your tactful way, you're draggone right I'd get back. I'll take care of Number One."

"You haven't any number. You lost it over that affair with the Fourth Councilor's wife."

"Are you going to be stuffy, as well as technical? And as stupid as you were when you let Coober nominate you for Grand Master of the Advance Detail During Moves?"

"That was four hundred years ago," Dithyram said. "I didn't even know Francipip then, and besides, the title is only an honorary one. I haven't even drawn the extra bit of charcoal it allows me."

"It was honorary then," Gorgobub said patiently. "But Coober was looking way ahead to this very deal he's about to pull right now. The fact that you took Francipip away from him only speeded up things a little bit." He looked at Dithyram keenly. Dithy wasn't stupid, but he was so steeped in honor and tradition, and had been so absorbed in his futile efforts to produce trees faster than dragons needed charcoal that it took him a long time to get his thinking in gear.

"What will happen to the Advance Detail if we do try to move Outside?" Gorgobub asked.

Dithyram didn't like to dwell on that thought. He started down the tailway abruptly,

scowling all the way back to the second row of reinforced cervicular scales on his neck. Gorgobub stood aside politely, not because Dithyram was a Numbered One, but because there would be more Sigurd vines ahead.

They clicked along rapidly. Now that Gorgobub had got a thought wound up he said nothing and let it tick.

It ticked a very unpleasant pattern in Dithyram's mind. If what Gorgobub had just said was true, the most terrible thing in dragon history was about to happen, worse than the time men had declared an all-out war on dragons after Dithyram's cousin (twice removed) had knocked off some character named St. Michael.

Coober was too smart to think that dragons could exist Outside these days; but there was a bare chance, Dithyram thought, that Coober might master-mind a majority vote on a Move proposal. Hungry dragons were not thinking dragons, but by law a hundred million years old even those who opposed an issue were bound to abide by the decision of the majority.

Men would knock the very wattles right off the whole nation if they went Outside in force, and the Advance Detail would be the first to get it. As Grand Master, Bellapop 48 could not retreat until the last dragon was safe. That would eliminate 14 and 48, and the next high number was 13, Coober's.

To Dithyram, numbering was a glorious part of dragon history. Every thousand years the oldest male member of a family could add one number to his title —if the family maintained a record unblemished by any violation of dragon ethics, such as losing one's temper and scorching another dragon's tail in a whomping match, or stealing, or cheating in any manner. Just one little fracture of ancient law by *any* member of a family and the number went *pff!* And then you had to start from scratch.

Since the Move, and then the charcoal shortage, numbers had fallen rapidly. The great gap between 14 and 48 indicated the terrible extent of wrecked honor caused by the pinch of hunger and a shocking moral laxity among members of the younger generation.

Dithyram was carrying fourteen thousand years of family integrity, and he was proud of the heritage; but sometimes the honor rested heavily. He was obliged by the code not to believe anything wrong of any dragon until it was proved three times. In spite of his own thoughts engendered by what

Gorgobub had told him, he really ought not to believe Coober guilty of a vile plot.

But he did.

Come to think of it, Coober had been the one who had always blocked Dithyram's efforts to get more dragonpower for reforestration. And now he was sore about Francipip.

"Old Bellapop gone, you wiped out in the first brush, Coober taking a quick sneak back when the fighting starts, forcing Francipip to go with him . . ." Gorgobub let that picture sink in. "Maybe one-third of us will get back. Coober will be the Grand Master then because of Number Seniority. There's about enough trees here now to take care of one-third of the present population. Of course, Coober will really go to work on your reforestration program then, and in a few years time the lunkheads will say it was *his* idea in the first place."

"Shut up!" Dithyram said. Worst of all was thinking about Francipip in Coober's clutches.

Dithyram 14 clicked along rapidly. His scowl was terrible to see, more fierce than his grandfather's had been when the old warrior heard that some jerk of a man named St. George was making threats and boasting about what he was going to do to all the dragon population.

The problem wasn't simple because the evidence of Coober's intentions was circumstantial. Charges against any dragon had to be presented before the Grand Council—and proved the first time by factual evidence before the Master-at-Arms could finish counting three hundred with his tail.

Coober's plot, if it really existed, seemed incredible to Dithyram, not because it didn't have a good chance of working, but because Dithyram couldn't understand how anyone could be so undragonly as to do a thing like that. Of course, Coober *was* a feculent-eyed character, and he'd been mighty close to losing his number in two or three brushes with the Council during a black-goods investigation.

Naturally, as the biggest charcoal dealer in the country he would be subject to attack as a black-goods operator. His name had been whispered over that latest crime, the theft of ten tons of food from a government stockpile less than two months ago. Of course, there hadn't been any evidence that he had been involved.

Dithyram began to wonder how Gorgobub knew so much. He studied his companion's condition carefully. Pretty good it was for just an average knock-

down of charcoal from the filtration plant; and nothing had been wrong with the water during Gorgobub's term of office.

"How come you know about this alleged plot?" Dithyram asked.

Gorgobub looked innocent. "A lot of things go through the water department—besides water. I have quite a Tristram vine of information."

Dithyram broke a dust-loaded Beowulf leaf from the stalk. "Did your Tristram vine ever give you any hint as to who swiped the ten tons of charcoal recently?"

Gorgobub shook his head. "Not a thing," he said guilelessly.

With a quick motion of his left foot Dithyram slapped the dusty leaf against Gorgobub's face. Gorgobub fell back on his tail. His scarlet eyes fluttered and his nose began to twitch. He seemed to swell and swell.

And then it came, a series of tremendous sneezes that caused his tail to thump the ground with each burst. Blue fire gushed from his nostrils. His flame-testers lit up green, additional proof that the fire was from charcoal.

"You don't know a thing about it, huh!" Dithyram bellowed. "You *couldn't* have knocked down enough charcoal from the plant to produce a flame like that. Come clean Gorgobub!"

Gorgobub looked at his friend from streaming eyes. "I had nothing to do with stealing that stockpile."

"You've been buying on the black-goods market then!"

"No."

Dithyram turned sidewise and poised his tail. "I ought to whomp you until your legs stick out sidewise and you're flat on your belly!"

"Save your energy. You're going to need it for a bigger job than whomping a friend who's trying to help you."

And that was the truth, Dithyram began to realize after reaching the meeting grounds of the Grand Council. Not a councilor himself because he already held an important post as chief of the Reforestration Program, at every session during the last two centuries he had been so intent on securing larger appropriations of dragonpower for his own department that he hadn't observed what had been growing among the citizens.

He began to circulate, whomping aside a few immature dragons who were cavorting and biting each other's tails in the manner of adolescents. Now that his eyes were open it didn't take him long to observe an undercurrent of disrespect for the

High Councilors. There were a great many characters, well fueled in appearance, smooth in their manner, who were moving among the crowd and talking. They weren't loud but they were effective, leaving in their wake dragons who were beginning to chip their teeth and complain freely that the present High Council was the worst in history.

"How much longer is that doddering old fool of a Bellapop going to give us that things-will-improve line?"

"You can bet the councilors are getting theirs!"

"Something has got to be done."

"My stomach's been rolling something awful for a hundred and fifty years—ever since that last ration cut!"

"Look at Dithyram 14. Dithy is right! Reforestration, he's always yelling. By the time our inner fires are all out and we're dead he'll have four or five little meta-sequoias big enough to eat."

Then one of the shady, well fueled agents spoke a little too loudly. "I've always suspected that Dithyram was a tree-eater."

Dithyram shouldered his way through to the speaker. It was Bendar, one of Coober's key employees, whose exact duties with the charcoal firm had never been quite clear to Dithyram—now that he gave the matter thought. He was a lumpy-tailed, dark-eyed dragon. He eyed Dithyram without fear.

"When you call me that, smile," Dithyram said coldly.

Bendar did smile, a sort of sneering grimace. "Start trouble, Big Shot. Go ahead, and see what happens to that wonderful number of yours!"

Dithyram was breathing hard, just warm air of course, and that added to his feeling of futility. One of the most stringent of dragon regulations was that unauthorized violence at the Council Grounds automatically stripped the belligerents of their numbers. And Bendar had no number.

Dithyram turned away.

"Tree-eater!" someone called after him.

"You see what I was getting at?" Gorgobub was at his shoulder. "That propaganda didn't spring up unaided."

"I'm beginning to see," Dithyram said bitterly. "While some of us have been wearing our tails down to the bone trying to help the country—" He saw Coober talking to Francipip a short distance ahead.

"Coober's got some kind of terrific surprise to swing the Move vote his way, and I'm try-

ing to find out exactly—" Gorgobub saw that Dithyram wasn't listening. "Don't lose your head—and your number. Play it smart, Dithy."

A young dragonette bumped against Gorgobub, and he turned his head quickly. "Well, strike me up a meta-sequoia tree!" he cried, stroking his flame-testers. "If it isn't gorgeous little Fifimum!"

And that took care of Gorgobub for the moment.

Coober tipped his head back and smiled when Dithyram came close. "Well, well! My old friend Dithyram." He stuck out his right foot like a councilor running for reelection. He was a big dragon, pale-eyed, heavy in the shoulders and perhaps a little too heavy in the tail; but he was fast and powerful.

"You're looking a little grim about something." Coober turned to Francipip. "Isn't he, Pippy?"

Francipip gave Dithyram an odd look and said that he *was* a bit harsh in the teeth.

She certainly was a beautiful dragonette, even when standing so close to a louse like Coober, Dithyram thought. He mumbled a greeting to both of them and let go of Coober's foot as soon as he could, but he didn't take his eyes from Coober's face.

"I detect a little discontent among the citizens," Dithyram said.

Coober seemed concerned. He bit his lower lip and nodded. "I'm beginning to wonder just what's up. Frankly, I'm worried about what could happen if some idiot proposes that we move. What with the attitude you've mentioned, I shudder to think what might happen."

He shuddered all the way down to the three-pound diamond on the end of his tail. Dithyram could scarcely conceal his disgust. Legitimate shuddering was all right, say when talking or thinking about something horrible—like a man; but at other times shuddering was a trick of vain dragons, because all it did was stir up the fires and make the scales gleam brightly.

Francipip seemed impressed, and Coober pretended not to notice how she was admiring him.

"An attempt to move would result in national suicide," Dithyram said flatly.

"Why, of course!" Coober said. "We'll have to prevent it if we can . . . but of course, if the vote goes that way . . ."

"You seem to think the matter will come to a vote," Francipip said.

Coober laughed indulgently and put one foot around her shoulder. She didn't try to move

away, Dithyram noticed. "Now, now! Don't you worry, little draggy. Perhaps Dithyram and I are prone to take things too seriously." He patted her shoulder in a possessive sort of way. "A sweet little Tristram flower like you shouldn't bother her pretty head about matters of state."

Dithyram wanted to whomp him right in the big, fat, syrupy mouth.

Up on the dais where Bellapop 48 and the council sat the Master-at-Arms began to pound his tail on a rock drum. The meeting came to order with a smoothness that seemed ominous to Dithyram. Winklecup 10, the chaplain, gave the customary prayer for the soul of Winklecup 9, a famous warrior who had gobbled up a weakling man named Tristram.

Stern and impressive with his gray flame-testers drooping below his mouth, Bellapop 48 explained that the session had been called to discuss the charcoal situation.

"What, again?" a heckler yelled. "Let's have less teeth-chipping and more action!"

One of the Master-at-Arms contingent had the heckler by the tail in a flash; but he had to let him go, since the dragon had no number.

Old Bellapop's face was a sight to see. "There was a day, not many thousand years ago, when such outrageous behavior was unheard of!" he bellowed angrily.

"There was a day when we had charcoal to burn too!" someone shouted.

From the first the trend was apparent to Dithyram. Coober's agents had been planted well, and they did their work well, inciting the crowd to shout insults and demand action instead of deliberation. The uproar was at a high point when Bendar introduced a proposal to migrate Outside.

That brought a quick hush over the crowd. Bellapop's flame-testers stood straight up for an instant and his eyes bulged. Coober looked at Dithyram. "Great dragonstars!" he said. "That was one of my employees who did that!" And then he added, "*Was* I correct. Bendar is no longer with me as of the time he made that idiotic motion."

Dithyram watched Coober and said nothing.

Someone seconded the motion. The stooges began to clamor and the matter had to go to discussion, which generated more heat than sanity. And then Bendar yelled, "Ask Coober about the Outside! He's been out there!"

Coober looked distressed and reluctant to speak.

"It's true, I've been Outside," Coober said. "But not very far. I wouldn't want to influence a decision on the meager basis of what—"

"Tell us what you saw!" a stooge demanded.

"Well . . . there were metasequoia trees higher than four long dragons, side by side over acre after acre, and—"

"They were that way here when we first came!" Dithyram shouted. "If I'd had any cooperation—"

"Silence!" Bellapop roared, looking curiously at Dithyram. "You, a 14 dragon, acting like any of these denumbered ruffians!" He nodded at Coober. "Proceed."

"As I said, I didn't get very far, so I can't say how safe it may be Outside," Coober said.

"But you saw tall trees!" someone yelled.

"Just think, trees as tall as four long dragons! Trees to make charcoal by the basket for everyone!" another stooge roared.

The crowd began to go wild at the thought of so much food just waiting to be reduced to edible condition. Even the Number Three Councilor was carried away. He forgot he was sitting on a stone seat instead of traditional dragon wood, and took a big bite out of the chair, chewing vigorously.

Even in the excitement some ancient thought about stone stirred in Dithyram's mind as he watched the councilor, but the impression didn't quite jell.

Someone demanded a vote on Bendar's motion. Dithyram got the floor and began to plead for a postponement of the vote, offering to lead a detail Outside to scout. The crowd listened but they were too excited to hear. He kept trying; he wanted time for that unformed hunch in his mind to come into the open, that thought about stone.

Dithyram was a strong believer in hunches, like his seafaring grandfather, who had got a hot flash about learning to strike with his feet just two days before going against St. George. The hunch had worked too, as dragon history proved, although men were said to have a different version.

Observing the reaction of his words on sober, reliable dragons, Dithyram began to hope he might get a postponement. He was vaguely disturbed when he saw that Francipip was watching him without expression. Coober was listening intently, nodding as if in complete agreement.

Even the shady, well fueled

characters quit heckling as Dithyram began to gain power with each new thought. He outlined the terrible dangers that lay Outside, quoting from the last quarterly report (every twenty-five years) of the Dragonfly Intelligence Bureau and Courier Service, which had stressed the fact that men had developed much better swords than the ones St. George and St. Michael had found so ineffective.

"We'll have to stay right here and develop new foods," he said. "With the cooperation of every able-bodied dragon we can avert starvation. To move would be sure death."

Old Bellapop was looking at Dithyram with pride.

They didn't cheer when the speech was over; they were too busy thinking. Hunger was a driving thing that robbed reason, but some details of the DIB's report had been pretty gruesome and shocking.

Bellapop 48 asked if there was anyone who cared for further discussion. For several moments no one raised his tail to get the floor. Dithyram began to hope that he might do better than secure a postponement; he might get a vote to defeat the Move proposal.

"Brother Grand Master . . ." Gorgobub was speaking. "This is undeniably a weighty matter, not to be decided hastily. On the other hand, hunger is a weighty matter too, and some decision must be forthcoming." He went on and on with masterly double-talk from which little jets of wit sparkled brightly. The crowd began to chuckle deep in their fire-boxes, and soon they were forgetting the awesome things Dithyram had mentioned.

". . . reluctant as I know Coober 13 is to endanger this nation by giving further evidence that may cause us to embark on a course fraught with dangers and uncertainty, in my humble opinion as an unnumbered dragon—" Gorgobub gave them time to consider why he had no number. The Fourth Councilor, the cuckold in the case, turned crimson and studied his front claws. The crowd laughed, and Gorgobub raised his flame-testers in innocent surprise. ". . . In my humble opinion I think Coober should give us a demonstration of the new food he discovered while exploring outside."

"New food? What's this?" The crowd began to buzz. New food talk had been old hat for a half million years. Dithyram had just mentioned it, in an academic sort of way, but nothing ever had come of new food talk.

"Well, I hesitate . . ." Coober had to be ordered by Bellapop.

But watching closely, Dithyram saw how pleased Coober was, and how sure of himself he was.

Coober took his stance at the lower end of a wide lane cleared of dragons. A lumpy-tailed, fat-jowled dragon with a fatuous smirk suddenly appeared beside Coober carrying a stoppered length of Beowulf stalk. Coober removed the plug and drank from the hollow stem.

Dithyram frowned. What sort of trickery was this? That Beowulf stalk could only hold a small amount of anything, and *liquid* was no good for food, except to wet down the fires and make a little steam.

"Keep your eye on yonder Tristram plant, the one in full bloom," Coober said.

He gave a few preliminary bellows motions of his diaphragm and cut loose. The terrific gush of orange flame that he emitted was the likes of which no dragon ever had seen. A great many spectators crowding their heads into the lane to get a better view fell back on their tails clutching their big noses.

The Fourth Councilor went chin over tail off his stone seat. Bellapop's gray flame-testers stood straight up, the ends spinning in tight circles. He showed the reds of his underlids in pure amazement at the sight.

The full-blooming Tristram plant, at least the length of ten long dragons removed from Coober, was stripped of foliage. Nothing remained but smouldering fragments of the larger stems.

Choking from dense black smoke that had edged the blast, Dithyram clawed at his eyes and looked at Coober's flame-testers. They were glowing purple, a color no food ever had produced in any testers before.

"By the wattles of that old dragon of a mother-in-law of mine!" someone near Dithyram swore.

"By the beard of Typhon!" someone said. Typhon had created earthquakes all over the world, but nothing like this.

Coober smiled and wiped his chin. "I did this only because the Grand Master so ordered it," he said.

Bellapop reached up to steady his spinning flame-testers. "You found this food Outside, Coober 13?"

"Yes, but I didn't have time to make a complete survey. There may be no more—and of course, there may be a great deal more of it."

Sniffing hungrily at the delicious black smoke, the crowd went wild. "Vote! Vote!" hundreds shouted.

Dithyram knew defeat when

it scorched the end of his nose, but he tried to get the floor to propose that voting be deferred until he could lead a patrol Outside to make a complete investigation of the extent of Coober's find.

He didn't get the floor. Three to one they voted to migrate. Little dragons were already eating the blackened remains of the Tristram plant. An admiring crowd was clamoring around Coober, and Francipip was right at his side.

Dithyram looked toward old Bellapop, who had just got his flame-testers under control. They shook their heads sadly at each other.

"Some blast, eh, Dithy?" Gorgobub had come up beside Dithyram.

"You traitorous sonofaman! You—!"

"Take it easy," Gorgobub said. "Don't burn the lining out of your nose. You don't think the Move proposal would have gone to vote before *someone* asked Coober to give that clinching demonstration, do you? It was bound to come, but now I'm still solid with Coober—I think."

"I'm wondering just *how* solid," Dithyram said suspiciously. "How did you know he had that new food?" He glared toward Coober, who was holding Francipip's right foot and smiling graciously at the bedazzled lunkheads. "What *is* that strange liquid anyway?"

Gorgobub shrugged. "Beats me. Something he got Outside no doubt. I found that much out from Bendar," Gorgobub frowned slightly. "I got Bendar fooled, but I'm not so sure about Coober. He's a smooth one."

Dithyram took his eyes off Francipip and tried to forget her. "New food or not, we can't go Outside and face men and their new swords that don't break so easily as they used to."

"You know how long you've got to do something," Gorgobub said, referring to the ancient custom of allowing a three-day cooling period for every decision that affected the entire nation. Only once in all dragon history had a decision been changed by the necessary unanimous vote, rendered three times by secret ballot.

Dithyram stared thoughtfully at the stone seat the councilor had nipped. Bellapop was on the dais alone, all the other High Councilors having rushed over to Coober without even waiting for the formality of adjournment. The old Grand Master was staring sadly at his tail.

"Of course, there's still the *Challenge,*" Gorgobub said.

Dithyram's spine projections

went rigid. The Challenge! He hated the very sound of the word. By law so ancient the history of it had been lost, any numbered dragon could challenge another in the presence of the Grand Council to fight to the death to prove which one was right. Dithyram was not afraid of Coober or any other dragon. What galled him was that the entire nation would be obliged by law to follow a decision established on the basis of brute force.

No dragon, not even old Bellapop, knew when the Challenge had last been used to replace reason; if there were any other way out Dithyram did not intend to fall back to methods a hundred million years old. He took another look at the nipped chair.

There might be another way to beat Coober.

"Of course, if you *want* me to take charge of the migration . . ." Coober was saying modestly as Dithyram passed on his way to have a talk with Bellapop 48. Francipip was still beside the Big Gush. She barely glanced at Dithyram when he went by. Well, if she were *that* kind of dragonette . . .

Two afternoons later, his tail aching, his feet worn down until they hurt at every step, Dithyram was scrambling over rocks at the upper end of a little valley where even small metasequoias would not grow.

His teeth were sore and his jaws felt as if they couldn't crush another rock. For two days he'd tried them all, soft ones, hard ones, every color of stone in Dragonvia. He had a heavy feeling in his fire-box and a harsh taste in his mouth. He longed for even a few bites of charcoal to take the grit from his teeth and warm his stomach.

He stopped to rest a few minutes on an outcrop of blue shale, thinking bitterly that he was a fool. No other dragon was giving a hoot, besides Bellapop. They were all talking about moving, getting ready, and some elements were starting a campaign to make Coober a Strong Dragon and dispense with the Grand Council entirely. For a moment or two Dithyram was tempted to say to heck with the whole impossible quest he was on.

Tomorrow, after the vote was affirmed, a mere formality, he would take his place as Master of the Advance Detail and go forth to be killed. He didn't mind getting knocked off by men for the good of the nation, but he was quite sour about being chopped up for the good of Coober 13.

But unless he found what he

was after—or used the Challenge—death was sure, not only for him but for most of the nation. And still he couldn't bring himself to use the Challenge. Fourteen thousand years of honorable family history stood between him and wanton brute force.

He got up with a groan, the expelled air barely warmer than the temperature around him. Tail dragging wearily he went on, sampling rocks here and there. Each bite hurt his teeth and made his stomach more sour but he kept trying.

Coober had found a new food, and surely it couldn't have been that liquid that he pulled the mumbo-jumbo with. If there had been a new food close Outside why not also in Dragonvia? Bellapop 48 had said that Bellapop 45 once had talked of a sustaining food that served as emergency rations when a small party of raiding dragons from the old flying days had been grounded by bad weather on an island somewhere off the coast of Gaul. Bellapop said that his ancestor had brought home a few pieces of the rock as a curiosity. He thought it had been black, but he wasn't sure.

Dithyram tried another piece of shale. It was just like all the rest. A little later he tried another piece of obsidian. It was shiny black and looked just like all the other pieces of obsidian he had eaten.

This one was no different. He ran his tongue along his aching teeth and rubbed one foot on his abused stomach.

At midnight, sore and weary, his quest still a failure, pulling his tail behind him like a dead thing, he followed the dragonstar back to his cavern shaded by Beowulf plants. On the way he passed through a little grove of trees his crews had planted a hundred years before. Some vandal had eaten three of them. Well, it didn't matter now.

Tree-eater was he? He remembered Bendar's jeering smile. Dithyram had never been a tree-eater, and even now when faint with hunger and nearly exhausted he wouldn't touch a tree. He dragged on. Well, maybe he *had* licked the pitch off a few trees, but that hadn't been much of a crime; and the time he and Gorgobub had got the fire-box ache from munching young trees was so long ago . . .

Tired as he was his flame-testers warned him with a gentle vibration when he approached his cavern. Someone was inside, waiting in the dark for him. Any dragon's home was free to another, but one who entered another's cavern during the

owner's absence was obliged to send a message to the owner immediately by dragonfly courier. No one had sent Dithyram a message, and he had seen any number of oriental dragonflies winging about on their night-shift duties.

Dithyram straightened his tired shoulders; he tipped first right and then left as he flexed the muscles of his front legs. And then he went straight for the door to confront the intruder. So intent was he that he did not hear the faint rustle in the Beowulf plants on his left.

The next instant his head was full of dragonstars. He heard a dragonette scream. He felt his legs going sidewise. His chin hit the ground with a thump. And then no more.

He came to on his own bed of shredded Beowulf leaves with a taste in his mouth like all the rocks he'd eaten for two days.

"Are you all right, Dithy? Are you all right?" The words came from a long distance away, threading their way through spinning stars and exploding spheres that gradually settled into the dim outlines of the cavern ceiling.

He tried to sit up and a cool claw pressed against his nose, forcing him back. "Drink this." Someone poured dew from a Beowulf cup into his mouth.

Dithyram blinked his eyes. "Francipip!" He tried again to sit up and fell back with a moan that knocked small chips from the ceiling.

"Easy, Dithy, dear. Your head isn't as thick as even I thought it was."

"Don't call me that silly name." Dithyram rested for several minutes, and then a new thought struck him. He sat up. "This is highly irregular!" he cried.

Francipip laughed a tinkling little sound that ran along the rock walls like music from a Siegmund vine flute. "Don't be stuffy," she said. "If my being here is irregular, so are the times." She took another curled leaf of dew from a stone table.

Dithyram drank and considered somewhat hazily. Being caught in such improper circumstances with Francipip would lose him and Bellapop their numbers; but all he could think of was what would happen to Francipip. He could see all the gimlet-eyed old unmarried dragonoras whispering behind their front claws.

Well, she was here.

"What hit me?" he asked.

"A rock. He was raising it in both front feet to let you have another when I yelled and threw your flame-tester brush at him and scared him off. From the

looks of your flame-testers I'd say breaking the brush on his head was no great loss."

"I haven't had time for primping," Dithyram said grumpily. "Who was raising a rock?" he added suddenly.

"Bendar. Everybody in Dragonvia knows what you've been trying to do the last two days, including Coober."

Dithyram touched his aching head and stared at a large leaf basket on the floor. "What were *you* doing here?"

"Waiting to talk to you, when I heard you coming and looked out just in time to see Bendar crown you."

"Why didn't you send a dragonfly?"

"The courier division of the DIB has been corrupted by Coober for over a hundred years. Bellapop has been able to keep the intelligence division out of Coober's control only by a tough fight. I supposed you knew all that," she said.

There was a lot of things he hadn't paid much attention to, Dithyram thought. His next brain wrinkle was the one that finally cleared his head. "Did Bendar see *you?*"

Francipip nodded. "I'm afraid so. That sort of complicates things, doesn't it?"

"I'll tail-whomp him into a pulp. I'll annihilate him!"

Francipip watched him calmly. "My Pop always says, 'When making charcoal, don't bother with the small limbs.'"

"But there's no evidence against *Coober!*"

"Not Grand Council evidence, no; but why do you think I've been shining up to the loathsome brute?"

In spite of his throbbing head and the rock-heavy feeling in his stomach, Dithyram felt his heart give a great leap. He felt strong enough to rush out immediately and resume his search for the black food. Not only that, he had a hot flash about finding it.

He stood up. And then he fell flat on his chin with a crash that knocked more chips of rock off the ceiling.

"Poor dear, you're famished." Francipip began to open the leaf basket. It was filled to the brim with choice charcoal, the smell of which was enough to get Dithyram's chin off the floor a little.

"Not—not black-goods?" he muttered.

"Of course not. It's rations from a good many honest dragons who know what you're trying to do. Gorgobub contributed a triple ration."

That last would be black-goods stuff for sure, Dithyram

thought. "I couldn't touch a bite of it."

When the basket was half gone and his rising fires were making him feel like a new dragon, Dithyram asked through a mouthful of food, "What kind of rock did Bendar hit me with?"

"Not a black one like you're trying to find. I tested it myself." Francipip's lavender eyes were soft and luminous in the dusk. "Dithy, dear, do you think there's a possible chance of finding a new food before we have to move?"

Dithyram took another mouthful of charcoal. "If I only knew exactly what it was that Coober had—"

"It was good-smelling water in a funny container made of something tougher than a rock, although it bent easily. In a weak moment Coober told me it fell from a huge, huge dragonfly like none he'd ever seen. The big dragonfly seemed to be having trouble, Coober said; its wings wouldn't move. And then it dropped the funny container full of good-smelling water."

Dithyram munched thoughtfully. Water had made that amazing fiery gush from Coober? It seemed incredible and yet it must be so. If he had some of the GS water he could have Gorgobub check it, since Gorgobub knew water if anyone did. Maybe there was more of it in Dragonvia, dropped by big dragonflies.

"Coober left it open for the citizens to think that the woods Outside are full of water food like that," Francipip said. "But they aren't. I checked that myself."

"You went Outside!" Dithyram almost strangled on the last mouthful of charcoal.

"I had to know," Francipip said. "You were busy, and Gorgobub was the only other one I could trust, but he was afraid to go Outside." She leaned close to Dithyram, her soft eyes full of fear. "Dithyram, there's men not two hundred dragon-lengths from where the GS water was. If we have to move you'll be the first to run into them. I know you're strong and brave, but . . . but . . . I just couldn't stand it without you, Dithy."

Dithyram did the only thing he could. His fires glowing from the basketful of food, he put his face close to hers and warmed her with a sigh that curled wonderful blue flame over both their heads.

"Oh, Dithy!" she murmured.

Shamelessly he shuddered a little to make his scales gleam brightly.

In a few moments she pushed

him away with one dainty foot. "Coober thinks I'm going to scram back here with him as soon as the men-fighting starts. He's got it all worked out so that he and his gang will form the rear guard. They're not only going to run out but they're not going to let more than one-fourth of the population back into Dragonvia."

Dithyram paced around the room, rapping the walls with savage thumps of his tail.

"Dithy, you've simply got to find that black food. It's the only thing that will reverse the vote when it comes up for final approval tomorrow."

"By the tail of Typhon the Quake-maker, I'll find it!" And then a long heritage of behavior that scorned boasting asserted itself. "If it's here. If I can. I'll do my best."

No honorable dragon could have promised more.

Dawn was breaking when Dithyram came wearily up the dragway toward the water filtration plant. He'd looked half the night for the container of GS water. He'd covered every claw-length of the territory Outside that Francipip had described. But the GS water was gone.

Discouragement rode heavily on his spine extensions, making them wag limply. He had about a half day to find the wonderful black rock that old Bellapop's gramps had mentioned. If it were black . . . if the story hadn't been just another dragontale.

He stopped to drink below the lower filtration pond. The water was very good, although it didn't carry the tiny bits of charcoal from the filter beds like it used to. Probably Gorgobub had been cutting down on charcoal all the time, selling it on the BG market or eating most of it himself.

Well, that didn't matter much now.

Gorgobub was Gorgobub, honest as long as it served his ends, a strong friend when he had nothing to lose. He'd always been that way, a likeable dragon in spite of his faults. Dithyram would never forget the time when they were quite young and out on a prowling expedition near a colony of blue-winged dragons, the females of which . . .

Dithyram smiled a little at the memory.

He was surprised to find Gorgobub at this early hour pacing on the dam at the upper pond. His flame-testers were uncombed and he had an untidy look about him, but it was the depth of brooding sadness in Gorgobub's scarlet eyes that struck Dithyram hardest.

"Gooddragonmorn," Gorgobub

said breezily. "Any luck?"

Dithyram shook his head.

Gorgobub flipped a pebble toward the gleaming surface of the pond. "I'm going with you and the Advance Detail this afternoon," he said gloomily.

"What!"

"Oh, I know it sounds heroic—shady but charming pal repents and goes out to die with his dragonhood chum in final, glorious combat. I'd like to believe that myself, only it isn't so."

"Then why—"

"Simple, Dithy. Coober suspects I tipped you off. Last night he sent one of his plug-uglies here to give me the works, but I was a little too fast. I busted the character's tail and sent him back to his boss."

Dithyram considered. After all, if Gorgobub were as selfish as he tried to make out, and as most dragons believed him to be, he never would have warned Dithyram in the first place, for he knew how foully the cards had been stacked. Dithyram realized he had been neglecting one of the important obligations of a Numbered One: to search deeply at all times for the best in any dragon.

The thought went a great deal further than that. Sure as he was of Coober's evil plans, he had no moral right to believe him guilty. And yet he knew that Coober was guilty.

"Bub—" Using a nickname was considered beneath the dignity of a numbered adult male, but Dithyram didn't care now. "I wasn't quite so fast myself when Bendar gave me a lump." He told Gorgobub all about it.

"How do you like that!" Gorgobub shook his head. "You can't get at Coober by having Francipip testify that Bendar attacked you, because the fact that she was at your house alone is enough to denumber Bellapop and you—and that would leave Coober right smack in the GM's seat." He stared at his tail. "Well, the way it stacks he's going to get there anyway. I can't think of a thing to stop him besides the Challenge. I even went Outside last night and got that new food of his in the hope—"

"*You* got the GS water!"

"Well, I sent a foredragon from the plant, a gee named Grafto."

"Let's have a look at this new food!" Dithyram cried. "Maybe we can find more like it right here in Dragonvia."

Gorgobub shook his head. "Not a chance, brother. I know water and I can say for sure there's nothing in the country like this GS stuff."

In Gorgobub's quarters Dithy-

ram examined the container curiously. It was made of a hard, though yielding material that defied description. The smell of the contents made him drool.

"Easy!" Gorgobub warned. "A very little swallow is about all you can handle. I took two big drinks and like to blew my teeth out when I belched—just a normal belch, mind you, not a genuine fire-box blast."

Dithyram took a tiny swallow. Immediately he felt his fires surging hotter than they ever had before from such a small amount of food. Walking over to the dam he trained toward a distant flock of archaeopteryx birds on the water. He let go. The recoil knocked him back against Gorgobub. Orange flame and black smoke shot across the pond. His flame-testers turned deep purple.

The archaeopteryx birds rose squawking, their tail feathers scorched to a crisp.

"By Typhon!" Dithyram said, looking sidewise at his quivering flame-testers.

"It's powerful," Gorgobub said. "But outside of a few small shots that I suspect Coober has, there isn't any more besides what we have here."

Dithyram tried another blast. It just wouldn't come. "Doesn't stick to your fire-box very well, does it? Not like charcoal."

Gorgobub shook his head. "No, it'll take something more sustaining than GS water to save the country."

Gorgobub was thinking in broader terms than himself now, Dithyram thought.

"Maybe if we took the GS water before the Council and demonstrated that it's no more than flash-in-the-fire-box stuff, very delicious, but just fluff . . ." Gorgobub said.

"That one gush Coober showed has got everybody dazzled. Then there's the trees he described outside. No, Gorgobub, I've got to find a new food —and fast."

"There's just one other way —the Challenge. You give it to Coober and if the scrap starts to go against you, I'll be standing by with a load of GS water and burn his tail off," Gorgobub suggested.

Dithyram shook his head slowly.

"The trouble with me," Gorgobub said, "is that I can't think in honorable terms."

Dithyram started off to resume his hopeless search. "You'd better dump that GS water before it gets you into trouble."

"Before you go—" Gorgobub seemed oddly hesitant. "Well, I may not have another chance to talk to you alone before the

Move, and I just want you to know that I had nothing to do with swiping that ten tons of charcoal from the government stockpile. Coober and Bendar did that."

Dithyram came back. "How do you know?"

"Grafto, my foredragon, saw them."

"Why didn't you say so before? That's enough evidence right there to take care of Coober. Grafto can testify before the Grand Council this afternoon."

Gorgobub looked down at his tail. "He can't."

"Why not? An eye witness to the crime—"

"You may as well know," Gorgobub said. "I haven't used any charcoal in the filter beds for almost two hundred years. Grafto and I have been eating all the charcoal consigned to the plant—and Coober knows it." He shrugged. "You can see what kind of a mess it would be, all us crooks trying to testify against each other before the Grand Council."

"Yeah. I can see. A little knockdown on charcoal was to be expected, but to endanger the health of the whole nation—"

"That's where you're wrong," Gorgobub said. "The inspectors have been passing the water as pure all the time, so the black rock we've been substituting in the filter beds must have been—"

"Black rock?" Dithyram cried. "Soft, black rock?"

"Sure. Breaks up easily. Sometimes you can see where fern leaves have been in it. Grafto and I—"

"Did you ever eat any of this black rock?"

"Are you nuts? Hey! Quit shaking me!" When Dithyram let go Gorgobub said, "With plenty of high-class charcoal around we should be eating black rock?"

Dithyram grabbed Gorgobub by the front legs and hurled him into the pond. Then he jumped in after him.

Later, when there were two large baskets of soft black rock on the dam, and both dragons were covered with mud and sand, Gorgobub grinned and said. "You might at least have said what you were after. I could have opened the valves and drained the pond."

"Watch!" Dithyram's fire-box was beautifully aglow, maybe not with the sudden, intense heat of GS water, but with a solid and wonderful feeling. He pumped his diaphragm and sent a burst of red flame and dense black smoke across the pond. He did it again and again. His

flame-testers turned bright blue and twanged loudly.

"That black rock sticks with you!" he bellowed happily.

"A trifle smoky," Gorgobub said.

"Complete mastication will result in better carburetion." Dithyram pounded Gorgobub on the shoulder. "Dragon alive! You did it! You found the new food!"

"Speak for yourself, Dithy," Gorgobub said modestly.

"Now you're sure about the extent of it?"

Gorgobub was sure. "A whole swamp of it and a mountain behind. We'll have to dig a little but my conservative estimate is that there's enough to supply the country for three or four hundred thousand years."

"By that time I'll have my reforestration program so well in hand that you won't be able to move for trees. I'll have metasequoias higher than a dragonfly can go! I'll—"

They grinned and beat each other on the back until they both fell into the pond. Dithyram scrambled out first. "Come on! We've got a big job ahead."

It was then he saw Bendar peering at him from the edge of a Beowulf patch on the hillside. Even while he was setting himself for a charge, Dithyram heard Gorgobub yell, "Run, Bendar! Run for your tail! He sees you!"

Gorgobub reached up and got Dithyram by the left rear leg and dragged him into the pond. They struggled fiercely, sending great geysers of sand and water into the air, breathing fire into each other's teeth.

When Dithyram broke free Bendar was gone.

Heaving with rage Dithyram poised his tail for a whomp to knock Gorgobub clear into the Outside.

"Hold it!" Gorgobub said. "You manhead, you! I thought all the time you were hep to the act." He rubbed his neck. "Who ever heard of a quadruple-nelson before? That is before I realized you weren't kidding and my back was nearly broken."

He rose, hunching his shoulders and making a wry face. "Didn't you see him talking to the dragonflies just before you got ready to blow your top?"

Dithyram didn't whomp, but he held his tail ready.

"Those dragonflies will be telling Coober all about what we've found in less time than it would have taken for you to catch Bendar." Gorgobub brushed sand off his stomach. "On top of that Bendar is no Tristram flower. Even if you *had* caught him you would have had

a terrible time of it—and you, my glowering friend, need your energy for Coober."

Gorgobub still didn't relax.

"Maybe I have preserved my in with Coober, or at least Bendar, and that may prove very useful," Gorgobub said. "You know, of course, you *forced* me to help look for black rock."

Dithyram's tail was still poised. "You're overlooking the character you sent back to Coober with a busted tail."

Gorgobub sighed. "So I am. I told you that before I began to come clean. The truth is I didn't bust his tail. I broke his head and had Grafto dispose of the body. And now, even if Coober doesn't trust me, I may still gain some advantage from Bendar, who may."

Such devious thinking left Dithyram confused. He relaxed slowly. "You could save yourself lots of trouble if you'd tell the truth the first time."

Gorgobub sighed. "I know. I used to try it, but I just never had any fun that way."

"Let's get busy," Dithyram said. "The worst is ahead."

They loaded all the black food they could into First Move surplus knapsacks, and roused out Grafto to do the same. Grafto was not in very good condition, having tried three large swallows of GS water the night before. The resultant blast had given him a bad shaking up and some scale separation and it was evident that he wouldn't be able to keep up with them on the march to the Grand Council place. Gorgobub insisted on taking along a Beowulf leaf canteen of GS water.

Grafto fell behind from the first. He was far behind when Gorgobub and Dithyram got warning of an ambush. Dithyram's flame-testers, although covered with a black deposit from the new food, seemed extra sensitive. They twanged a warning when he and Gorgobub were still some distance from a very narrow place where the tailway ran between cliffs.

As much as he disliked the loss of time necessary to scale the cliff on one side and come in behind the spot where his flame-testers warned him three dragons were waiting above the tailway, Dithyram knew they had to do it. They couldn't take a chance on the narrow place. Too much depended on their getting before the Grand Council in time to avert the Move.

It took them a great deal longer than they had expected to climb the cliff on their left. Halfway up a sharp rock tore a hole in Dithyram's knapsack and his precious burden of black

food went spilling down the cliff. More misfortune struck a few minutes later. Gorgobub slipped and almost tumbled from the heights. In bracing against him to keep him from falling, Dithyram ripped a gash in the second knapsack. They lost almost half of it.

They reached the top of the cliff with their fires low, and held a brief consultation. In order to properly blast the three lying in ambush and still have enough fuel to make up for the time lost they would have to eat what was left of Gorgobub's cargo.

They ate it, telling each other that Grafto would arrive at the meeting with his food in time to show it around. And they both knew that Grafto, as slow as he had been when they left him, would be lucky if he got to the meeting place at all.

They came in above and behind three of the worst-looking plug-uglies in all Dragonvia. Dithyram scorched the tails of two and Gorgobub got the other, using just one tiny swallow of GS water. "It's a crime," he said, "that this stuff has no more body to it than it does. We wouldn't have had to use all our black food."

Gorgobub wanted to finish off the three. Groaning and in great pain as they wrapped their tails in healing Beowulf leaves, the trio admitted readily that Coober had sent them.

"And a lot of good it's going to do you to know that!" one of them snarled. "There's nothing you can do to stop the Move plans now."

"We should have scorched their tails off," Gorgobub said. He tapped the canteen and said to Dithyram. "Let me work that pock-marked, push-faced one over with a little of this."

"We haven't time."

They swung down toward the tailway, Dithyram fretting at the fearful loss of time, even more than at the loss of black food.

All the dragons in the land were gathered at the meeting place when Gorgobub and Dithyram arrived. Some of the older females were weeping quietly into Beowulf leaf handkerchiefs; Numbered Ones and other responsible citizens stood in small groups, talking little. But like the rest they had their knapsacks on, their flame-tester combs tied to their left ears in the traditional manner for Moves.

Only once in history had a decision been reversed; there was no reason to believe this one would be changed.

"I'll see you later," Gorgobub said. "I'm going to circulate."

Coober came pushing toward Dithyram, who thought sourly that Coober must have done a full hour of shuddering to put his scales in such gleaming condition.

"Didn't I say he'd be here?" Coober asked the crowd loudly. "Good old Dithyram, Master of the Advance Detail. I'd give my right front leg to be with you today, but I must guard the rear." In a low voice he said, "Some of them thought you were going to take a run out, old friend."

"I'll be here from start to finish," Dithyram said.

"Ah, yes . . ." Coober smiled. He stood on his tail and waved his front legs at the crowd. "Well, I guess there's nothing to hold us up. The sooner—"

"We haven't gone through the ceremony of final consideration!" Bellapop 48 roared.

"Formality, formality," Coober muttered under his breath. "My apologies, Grand Master!" he shouted.

While the Master-at-Arms was beating his tail for order, someone rubbed against Dithyram. It was the little flippertygibbet Fifimum. Dithyram moved aside as far as he could, one eye on Francipip, who was watching from near the dais.

"Gorgobub sent me to tell you that you-know-who has bribed the Clerk of the Muster to show five dragons as scouting the border where we're to cross. Grafto is one of them," Fifimum whispered.

Coober was playing it very tight, Dithyram thought. Four of the names entered falsely on the rolls would belong to the dragon Gorgobub had killed, and to the three with burnt tails. It would be almost impossible to delay the Move by proving that five men were improperly accounted for.

Dithyram saw Coober watching with an amused smile. Then he looked above bobbing flame-tester combs and saw Gorgobub talking and laughing beside Bendar.

The Master-at-Arms finally gained order. Winklecup 10 gave the customary prayer for the soul of Winklecup 9; the clerk began to read in a rapid mumble the matter that needed final consideration. Then Bellapop rose and intoned the familiar words: "Three days have fled and each and every dragon here assembled has had time to weigh, to consider, and to reflect upon the decision here rendered by the democratic processes of free dragons in free voting."

"Final vote! Let's get to votting!" Gorgobub made the demand. The others nodded.

Bellapop looked sad and majestic as he raised both front feet. "If there be among us one with conclusive evidence that we have made a wrong decision, let him speak now or forevermore . . ."

Dithyram didn't hear the rest. He was standing in a cold sweat and Coober was grinning at him evilly. Three large, powerful dragons had Dithyram by the tail, not biting, just holding firmly and ready to ruin him. Their treacherous act was concealed by others of Coober's gang standing solidly around them. Coober had edged back toward Dithyram's left shoulder, out of line of a direct blast.

"One little peep," he said softly, "and you get the works."

"You *are* guilty, you scummy sonofaman!" Dithyram tried to move and the three large dragons clamped down hard enough to make him wince.

"Honorable sucker!" Coober jeered. "Keep your big yap shut and I'll give you the honor of dying at the head of the Advance Detail." He laughed softly. "I'll even see that a grove of trees is dedicated to your memory as a hero—after Francipip and I return. Make one little protest—" He smiled and clicked his big teeth twice.

". . . Then, since no dragon has raised his voice—" Bellapop looked in appeal toward the part of the crowd where he had been able to see Dithyram a few moments before "—to introduce factual evidence . . . I hereby declare that the decision of three days now past is sust—"

Bellows of pain broke out behind Dithyram. He felt his tail released. Dust rose from an earth-shaking scramble and the roaring of outraged dragons was terrible. Dithyram did something most unorthodox. He swung a left hook smack under Coober's ear, and then a right hook to the nose as Coober was sagging. Coober went flat on his belly, shaking his head weakly.

Then Dithyram had time to look around.

Francipip was standing behind him. He saw her emit a little dragonette-like jet of orange flame that seared the tail of one of the outlaws who had been holding Dithyram. The character already had a scorched tail tip, but in his eagerness to escape he had let all four feet fly sidewise and was momentarily helpless on his belly. But he sure could bellow.

The gangsters who had been screening were trying to get away fast. One was tangled up in the crowd and an old dragonora was belaboring him with a Beowulf leaf umbrella, having

mistaken his frenzied bumping against her for something other than a desire to escape.

Francipip emitted another tiny jet at a tail sticking out of a tangle of legs and other tails. A dragonette yelled shrilly and Fifimum disengaged herself from the mass.

"Ooops!" Francipip said. "I mistook you for a dragon."

"Like fun you did!" Fifimum rubbed her tail.

"Order! Order! Master-at-Arms!" Bellapop was bellowing like sixty. "What's going on over there?"

"I protest the decision!" Dithyram yelled. "I have evidence!"

Coober staggered up, recovering fast. "I have evidence that he attacked me foully and without provocation!"

"Shut up, you!" Francipip tried another little blast but her fuel was gone. "Gorgobub should have given me more GS water," she said to Dithyram. "He saw what was happening and knew he couldn't get past that bunch of plug-uglies."

"Address the chair!" Bellapop shouted.

It took sometime to restore order, and then Dithyram began to tell what he had found. At the moment he had no time to accuse Coober, because the important thing was to convince the assembly that there actually was a new food right in Dragonvia.

Coober got the floor while Dithyram was taking a deep breath. "Where is this new food? Let him demonstrate this black stuff he talks about!"

"Watch it, Dithy," Francipip said. "He wants you to use up all your fires and then he'll throw the Challenge."

Dithyram had been thinking the same thing. He looked over in appeal to Gorgobub, still standing beside Bendar. But Gorgobub shook his head. Apparently he was still trying to deceive Bendar.

Gorgobub's complicated behavior had better start paying off soon, Dithyram thought grimly.

"Make Dithyram 14 demonstrate this imaginary food—if he can!" Coober shouted.

The last thing Dithyram wanted to do was run his fires so low he wouldn't be at top strength for whatever was to come. The Challenge was imminent, he was sure. He looked toward the tailway down which he hoped weakly to see Grafto coming with his burden of black food. No Grafto. He glanced at Gorgobub again. No dice.

Dithyram demonstrated. He gave blast after blast of red

flame and black smoke, and they shouted for him to continue until he could throw a flame no longer than a small dragon-length.

"By ancient law I Challenge Dithyram 14!" Coober roared.

A stunned silence smote the crowd. It was law, but no dragon could remember the last time anyone had fallen so low as to invoke it.

Bellapop choked a little when he said. "It is law. It is so. Prepare to observe the ancient law and abide by the outcome of the Challenge."

That an issue of life or death for an entire nation depended on the outcome of brute force hurt Dithyram to the soul. But he was a Numbered One and had to fight. At least *he* hadn't invoked the stupid law.

Strangely he didn't feel as hungry as he had expected to be after demonstrating. He knew he couldn't throw much of a flame, but even so, his fire-box had a comfortable feeling. The black food was really something.

The nation fell back in an immense circle and the contestants were made ready. Their flame-testers were tied back; their claws examined; their tails were inspected; and seconds looked each over to see if sharp rocks had been wedged between spine extensions. They were clean.

Dithyram's second, a Seven dragon appointed by Bellapop, came back from Coober's corner with a worried look. "I'm morally certain that Bendar slipped him a drink of that strange water food just before I got there," he said.

The contestants came out of their corners, Coober rolling from side to side in a confident swagger. Dithyram smelled GS water on his breath while the referee was giving instructions. Coober's big diamond was still on the end of his tail, but since he had worn it for more than two hundred years it was considered legal equipment, and the Seven dragon second had been unable to make him remove it.

"Anything goes except tail burning," the referee said.

He wasn't quite out of the way when Coober reached across him and knocked Dithyram flat with a short chop to the base of the brain. Sliding back to let his head clear, Dithyram reflected that Coober might prove more than somewhat handy with his front feet—and here Dithyram had been thinking that *he* had discovered the left hook.

For all his heavy tail, Coober was fast. He pivoted so quickly that Dithyram barely had time to slide back another fifteen feet to avoid having his teeth

knocked out from a smoking tail-whomp just a foot or two above the ground.

They grappled in the center of the ring, and Dithyram knew he was facing the most powerful dragon in the land when he failed to budge Coober. He shifted tactics. Two quick left hooks to the nose and then Dithyram leaped on Coober's back while the latter's eyes were watering.

He tried the quadruple-Nelson he'd used on Gorgobub. Down, down, closer to the ground went Coober's ugly face, his thick neck bowing. Coober relaxed suddenly, arching his back, curling his tail under him for added power.

Too late Dithyram felt his feet slipping. He was thrown into the air. Coober caught him two solid, jarring tail-whomps in the long ribs while he was coming down. He lit heavily and Coober kicked him in the head with both hind feet. Quick as a dragonfly Dithyram went under his heavier adversary, raking his rough spine extensions across Coober's belly.

It was an ancient trick, familiar to even very young dragons. Coober bellowed mightily in pain and snapped an instant too late at Dithyram's tail.

They squared off and sparred in the center of the ring, taking a little breather. Then they mixed head-on in a teeth-jarring collision that made the earth tremble. For several moments they stood up and slugged it out tail to tail, their clenched claws rattling like thunder on each other's body.

If he hadn't known Coober was a dirty fighter Dithyram soon found out. Coober jabbed his claws into Dithyram's eyes; he kneed with one hind foot in a clinch; he brought up the heel of his right front foot in an uppercut that made Dithyram's teeth click shut. And then he breathed fire in Dithyram's eyes. Ordinary flame wouldn't have bothered, but this GS water stung like the very devil.

Blind for an instant Dithyram backed off and hooked futiley with both front feet. Coober laughed and swung the three-pound diamond on his tail. It knocked sparks off Dithyram's head and knocked him flat on his belly. The diamond shattered and flew through the air in a thousand flashing arcs.

Spectators snapped greedily at the pieces, for it was elementary that diamonds were somehow related to charcoal.

Coober paused an instant too long as he poised his tail for a killing blow. Groggy as he was, Dithyram went under Coober and raked his spine extensions

the whole length of the lump-tailed dragon's body. In going out he hooked one front leg around Coober's left hind leg and spilled Coober right on his nose.

Then they started to fight.

Side by side they stood, slugging it out with their tails. For a while Coober's heavier tail had the advantage in the thunderous exchange; but Dithyram, lean though his rations had been for several hundred years, had hardened his tail by patting the earth around newly planted trees. Little by little he gained the upper tail.

And then he was meeting Coober's blows halfway, getting in one himself, and instead of bracing for the return, sending a smoking one right back to block Coober's tail in mid-stroke.

Restrained by law from cheering, spectators began to express their appreciation by vibrating their flame-testers. The air was filled with twanging and the awful sounds of Dithyram whomping Coober limp.

But the pace was telling. Giving all the blows was wearing Dithyram down fast. Coober knew that, and for some time had been covering up and saving himself, for all the fearful beating he was absorbing.

Suddenly he pivoted away, timing the move just as Dithyram swung a terrific whomp. Dithyram went off balance, fell on his side. Before he could recover Coober was on him, all four feet clamped tight. His breath was hot on Dithyram's tail, and the tell-tale sounds of diaphragm pumping came loudly.

Coober was going to use GS water to burn the very tail right off Dithyram.

Dithyram did something no dragon ever had done before. He put everything he had into a rear-foot left hook. It exploded against Coober's nose and knocked him sliding on his belly fifteen feet away.

The twanging of flame-testers was the loudest ever heard in dragon history.

Dithyram staggered up. For a moment his tail was broadside to Coober. The evil, enraged face was trained squarely on it, and Coober was repumping his diaphragm.

Dithyram risked all in feinting a charge. Then he threw himself sidewise.

The terrific gush of flame that spouted from Coober missed Dithyram's tail just by the length of a baby dragon's flame-testers. Coober tried again, but GS water could produce only one enormous blast like that. He had shot his bolt. He knew it. Death was the penalty for breaking the

no-scorching code in the Challenge.

Coober broke as Dithyram charged. With remarkable speed the villain galloped for the hills that bordered the Outside. Tired as he was Dithyram could not overtake him. Then the Master-at-Arms and his assistants passed Dithyram, thundering fiercely after Coober.

Suddenly they ploughed to a stop and scattered. When he caught up Dithyram saw that Coober had gained the edge of a Siegmund vine thicket and was facing toward his pursuers defiantly, sides heaving. Beside him was Bendar, and Bendar was loaded for dragons.

His dark eyes were glinting with murderous lights; little puffs of smoke and flame came from his nostrils, and his sides were glowing. He held aloft the canteen Gorgobub had carried from the filtration plant. "Stand back!" he roared. "I'm loaded with the new food Coober found Outside. The first dragon to make a move will get his old tail blasted to a crisp!"

The Master-at-Arms and his assistants were brave dragons, but they had seen a demonstration of the GS water. They didn't look at each other as they began to move back, especially back from Dithyram, who soon was facing the murderous pair alone.

"We're going Outside!" Bendar yelled. "We'll sign an appeasement pact with men, and when we come back we'll see who runs this country!"

Bendar and Coober wouldn't come back, Dithyram knew; but men would, after they had disposed of the pair . . . and men, not believing even when they saw the inhabitants of Dragonvia . . .

Coober snatched the canteen from Bendar and took a big drink. He pumped his diaphragm and smiled evilly, his pale eyes looking directly at Dithyram's tail. Dithyram couldn't retreat. His code, his numbered heritage would not let him.

He charged.

He hadn't gone more than two leaps when someone tackled him from behind. "Down!" came Gorgobub's voice. "Hug the ground!"

Too long Coober savored the revenge he was about to take. The tick of time passed. There came a terrible explosion. The ground bumped hard against Dithyram's chin. He saw parts of Coober and Bendar floating high above the Siegmund vines and heard Gorgobub laugh.

"I conned Bendar into drinking almost a whole canteen of GS water. Dragon plumbing just

wasn't built for a charge like that!"

On a hillside above a swamp Dithyram stood two days later, holding Francipip's little right foot. Below, under the harsh drive of Grafto's voice (the itching from his scale separation had made him very mean), the survivors of Coober's gang were doing the dirty work of removing the mucky overburden from a thick blanket vein of black food.

Just one little item was bothering Dithyram. During the explanations before the Grand Council Gorgobub had said that he and Grafto had saved ten tons of charcoal from the filtration plant by substituting the black food—and that they had intended to turn it over to the proper authorities.

Bellapop had swallowed that story and had made the rest of the Council swallow it. Dithyram looked at the dragons Grafto was directing below. They wouldn't talk—even if they knew where that ten tons of charcoal had really come from. They had been very lucky to get off with ten thousand year sentences to the black food mines.

Still Dithyram was troubled. As a Numbered One it was his duty to tell the truth. But he didn't want to do it. Francipip knew the truth, and she had told Dithyram to keep his mouth shut, or else she would make his life miserable after they were married next week. Still . . . he was a Numbered One . . .

"What would you say was the most remarkable thing of all that's happened in the last few days?" Bellapop asked Gorgobub. "Excepting, of course, that story you told about filtration charcoal."

Dithyram swung around. Old Bellapop 48 was grinning from ear to ear. He winked at Dithyram, then cleared his throat and said, "Shall we take a closer look at operations below, Gorgobub 5?"

Gorgobub 5! Of course the Grand Council could, in most extraordinary cases, restore five thousand years to a denumbered dragon, but Dithyram hadn't heard a thing about the action.

"By all means, let's stroll down, Bellapop 48," Gorgobub said blandly.

Francipip and Dithyram watched them go. Then Dithyram sighed. Francipip sighed. Jowl to jowl they sighed. Rich red fire curled around them and a wonderfully scented cloud of black smoke rose above them.

"Oh, Dithy 14!" Francipip murmured.

"Pippy!" Dithyram said, a silly look on his face.

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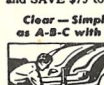
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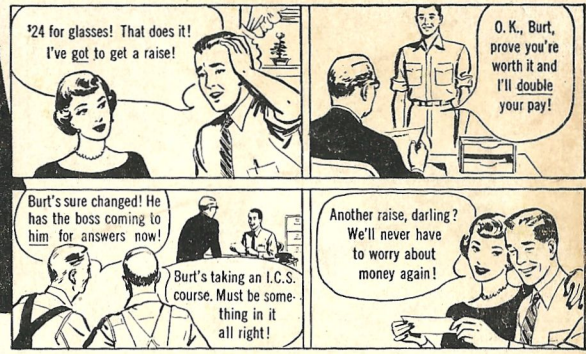
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